Films on Paper: Adaptation of Eileen Chang's Novels

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

FILMS ON PAPER:
ADAPTATION OF EILEEN CHANG’S NOVELS

By

Funing Tang

A THESIS

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of the University of Miami
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Films on Paper: Adaptation of Eileen Chang’s Novels

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Eileen Chang (1920-1995), a legendary female writer in Chinese literature history, lived in the most turbulent time of contemporary China. Her works are all about love. Her characters are all insignificant people, unrealistically invested with illusory dreams of life, but meanwhile, absorbed by worldly pursuits and pleasures. And her tone is desolate. People worship her, both as a great writer and as a mysterious woman. From 1980s, the fascination with her and her literature overtly announces itself in Chinese language cinema. Several critically acclaimed directors have intended to adapt her aura and charisma through adapting her literature. But, the result of their efforts is not optimistic; the disparity between the films and the novels still has been widely sensed. My thesis focuses on the film adaptations of her novels. I intend to explore this woman’s world through cinema; precisely, through the unexpected gap between her novels and their film versions, in order to explore the reality and moods in her mind that are hard to visualize. The same events, moments and situations presented in both the novels and the films also offer great opportunities for the comparison of two different ways of storytelling.
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Chapter 1 Introduction: Development of the Eileen Chang Fascination

To appropriately describe Eileen Chang (1920-1995), mere words seem a little feeble and too common. For such a distinguished novelist and screenwriter living in the most turbulent time of contemporary China, her works are as legendary as her life. Famous for her great talent and bold manner, and remarkable for her lifetime dedication to love, this iconic woman of the 19th century China is said to be ahead of her time. Her remoteness and stubbornness adds to her mystery. The desolate overtone of her works enchants people, lingering over her composed narration without finding a relief from the ineffable pain it causes.

She launched her career in 1940s Shanghai. During the historical period, because of the Anti-Japan War, contemporary Chinese literature was mostly considered to be one of the political weapons against Japan. Under the circumstances, Chang, as a purely literary writer with no other social title like politician or thinker, swiftly became one of the most popular writers in the city. People treated her like a movie star during the time.

The first formal academic criticism on her works was published on the magazine Wan Xiang in May, 1944, by the famous translator and art critic Fu Lei (1908-1966). He was amazed by Chang’s fresh style, artistic and realistic concerns, and in his essay “About Eileen Chang’s Novels” (Lun Zhang Ailing de xiaoshuo), he considers her as a miracle under the overwhelming pressure of the time. He highly values Chang’s concerns about writing techniques and about the subjects of daily life and people’s emotions (especially desire between men and women) which evoke Chinese literature’s artistic and realistic traditions that had been neglected by many other writers of her time.
Meanwhile, Chang’s novels also drew the attention of another famous scholar at Mainland China, Tan Zheng-Bi (1901-1991), who is specialized in Female Literature of the time. While also in great appreciation of Chang’s language style and writing techniques, in his essay “About Su Qing and Eileen Chang” (Lun Su Qing yu Zhang Ailing), he argues against what Fu Lei values the most (Ling). He points out, Chang’s emphasis of people’s desire, which is only an aspect of humanity, is partial. By comparing her with other patriotic writers, he disapproves of Chang’s indifference to social reforms and historical events, which is, at best, debatable.

From 1950s to the early 1980s, because of the Cultural Revolution (and also because of her absence) from Mainland China, like many other writers, she was ignored. The research literature on her works during these three decades is mostly from Taiwan and abroad. In 1961, the Chinese literature Professor, Dr. Hsia Chih-tsing (1921), at Columbia University published his influential book *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (in English). In this book, Chang is written into the Chinese literature history for the first time and is given the most prominent length. Hsia’s admiration of her workers exceeds other critics’. Not only does he claims that she is the most significant and the best Chinese writers in the history of contemporary Chinese literature, he also compares her to the best female writers in modern western literature, for example, Eudora Welty (1909-2001) and Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980).

In the aspects of constructing dialogues and presenting Chinese customs, Hsia suggests that Chang’s works are deeply influenced by classical Chinese literature, for example, *The Golden Lotus* (from the 17th century during the latter Ming Dynasty) and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (from the mid 18th century during Qing Dynasty, by author
Cao Xuqing). But he considers her wording to be less casual and more precise, which, he further suggests, benefits from her education of western literature. Hsia is the first person who attempts to put Chang in a broader, international context. However, regardless of his overall brilliant discovery, his evidence does not seem enough to support his assertions (Ling). It actually exposes the disadvantage and pain in the research of Chang’s literature during that time: the lack of first hand materials about her. (Actually, the problem is still haunting the studies of her and her works today).

However, the search for her related materials has never been stopped. In 1984, Tang Wenbiao (1936-1985), a Taiwanese mathematician, poet and critic, attracted people’s attention by his edited book *Eileen Chang: A Chronology (Zhang Ailing ziliao da quanjì)*. It gathers a great quantity of precious pictures, reviews about Chang, and a meticulous bibliography of her. It contributes greatly to the later research on Chang’s literature.

During the mid 1980s, the gradual libration of ideology at Mainland China recalls Chang and many other writers who had been forgotten for decades. They were sent back to the focus of the Chinese Literature Studies. In 1987, 26 years after Hsia book *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, Chang is edited into the mainland Chinese literature history for the first time, by Qian Liqun (1939), a literature professor at Peking University, in his co-edited book *The Three decades of Modern Chinese Literature History (Zhongguo xiandai wenxue sanshi nian)*. And since the mid 1980s, more and more scholars and critics have been drawn to Chang and her works. They find the clue and direction for their research from Fu Lei’s criticism 40 years ago. The discussion about Chang’s lingering on love, desire and humanity has been revived.
In Rao Lanzi and Huang Zhongnian’s co-written paper “The Artistic Discourse about Eileen Chang’s Novels” (Zhang Ailing xiashuo yishu lun) and Wang Jiancong’s essay “Combing the Delicacy and Popularity” (Ya su gong shang de ning xin er) arrive at the similar conclusions that her works point at the evil or dark side of humanity. Although they notice the fact in Chang’s novels, the protagonists’ dreams about love are more than often distorted and destroyed by the obstacles from harsh surroundings, they fail to realize Chang’s transcendence over the stereotyped right-wrong or virtue-evil distinction, which was often seen in Chinese literature during Anti-Japan war in 1940s and the Cultural Revolution from 1960s to 1970s.

From 1980s, the fascination with her and her literary works more overtly announces itself in Chinese language cinema, television and theater. Several major Chinese language directors have directed the film versions of her novels, (the films all have the same names as the novels that they are adapted from). To name a few, Ann Hui, the iconic female director in Hong Kong New Wave, directed Love in a Fallen City and Eighteen Springs in 1984 and 1997 respectively. Stanley Kwan, the critically acclaimed and the only openly gay director in China, put Chang’s novel Red Rose, White Rose on the big screen in 1994. The enthusiasm for her novels and their adaptations, which shows no sign of dwindling in today’s China, reached a crescendo in 2007, because of Ang Lee’s internationally co-produced film, Lust Caution.

No matter how these films were received internationally, in China, criticism overwhelmed approval. Several years later, even Ann Hui, who started the adaptation heat since 1980s, admitted that the two adaptations she directed were flops, and some film critics in Hong Kong even claimed that Love in Fallen City exposed her declining
artistic career. Stanly Kwan’s *Red Rose, White Rose*, although with its visually arresting representation and amazingly appropriate fidelity to the original in the first half of the film, is said to turn into confusing mumbling in the second half. Ang Lee’s *Lust Caution* is no doubt the best of the adaptations so far, yet some Chinese film critics’ discontent derives from their feeling that it is a particular Ang Lee story rather than an Eileen Chang one. However, the fact is, no matter how any of the the films turns out to be in the end, it has never been a box office flop in China, or at least never short of social attention, since people would always like to see what Eileen Chang’s novels “look” like. This fascination echoes what Antony Burgess once says about the adaptation of popular novels, “the assumption being that the book itself whets an appetite for the true fulfillment – verbal shadow turned into light, the word made flesh” (15).

In the adaptation of Chang’s novels, the filmmakers have never been right. The phenomenon recalls an agreement floating around among Chinese filmmakers for many years; that is, the adaptation of Chang’s works is a dangerous zone where you can never do anything appropriate, so think twice before you take the risk. The irony is, for decades in the literature field, people call Chang’s works “films on papers”, because of their vividness and intimacy to daily life and also their universal topic about men and women.

This is an embarrassment to both beliefs in Chang’s works and in Chinese language films. If her concerns are realistic as Fu Lei says and her language is as precise as Hsia thinks, hypothetically, her works should be more intimate to film, an art form born for representing vivid reality. But the situation is quite the opposite. My thesis will focus on three adaptations of her novels; these films are *Love in a Fallen City, Red Rose, White Rose* and *Lust Caution*. I intend to explore this mysterious woman’s world through
cinema, precisely, through the unexpected gap between her novels and their film versions, in order to explore the reality in her mind that is hard to visualize.

However, this gap is by no means clear-cut. Apparently, in all of three films mentioned above, the directors, in different ways, show their loyalty to Chang’s novels. Ann Hui, the director of *Love in the Fallen City*, adopts exactly the same events and dialogues in the same sequence as the novel. Stanley Kwan creates two distinctive sets of stunning mise-en-scène in order to render the paradoxical dichotomy that Chang conveys in *Red Rose, White Rose*. His film also covers all the plots in the original, and he actually goes further than this, because he repeats some similar themes and events in emphasis of Chang’s intention. Ang Lee is by far the boldest. His adaptation, *Lust Caution*, chooses to follow several clues that are not completely told by Chang. He inserts into the original story a fleshed out love affair. His film is plausible, deeply structured in the way that Chang juxtaposes love and sex, truth and deception. His loyalty to the original is suggested by his genuine exploration of Chang’s undertone.

In short, all of the three critical acclaimed directors have proved to be working towards the same goal, which is to faithfully restore the novels’ original state in cinematic language. They show no attempt to challenge or question Chang’s way of unfolding the stories, first because of Chang is a worship figure and secondly because of her works’ highly esteemed position in Chinese literature. And thirdly, Chang’s literature is generally considered to be deep and rich enough for any adaptation. In conclusion of the three points, it is made clear that in the phenomenon of the Eileen Chang fascination, the directors have intended to adapt the aura and charisma of Chang through adapting her literature.
But, the result of their efforts is not optimistic, as already mentioned; the disparity between the films and the novels still has been widely sensed. In this regard, one is reminded of Brian McFarlane’s critical view, as he respectfully questions the possibility of adaptation fidelity, “there is also a curious sense that the verbal account of the people, places, and ideas that make up much of the appeal of novels is simply one rendering of a set of existents which might just as easily be rendered in another” (7). As such, he hints an essential difference between language and cinema in exhibiting “existents”, which he points out as the difference between the conceptual images and perceptual ones.

Regardless of Chang’s realistic concerns, the ideas that she drew from life and the way she expresses her ideas are indeed as intricate as the work of many great writers in the world, the assumption being that her concerns of reality and human emotion are not the kinds that are highly transferrable to film. And even if they are copied directly from the novels, they would end up in different effect as we see in the film adaptations.

Accordingly, my thesis will start from a selective review of Chang’s significant life experiences, including the fascination of her origins, and goes on to the analysis of the prominent features of her novels, which paves the way for the case studies of the film adaptations. In order to delineate the clear contour of the gap between her novels and the films, I will generally follow the seemingly similar storylines of the two versions and seek for the films’ possible departures from the novels; the analysis of the novel and that of the corresponding film will go side by side in every case study. The same events, moments and situations presented in both the novels and the films offer great opportunities for the comparison of two different ways of story-telling. Above all, the
question that I try to settle is what are the unusual human emotions and moods Chang
tries to deliver through literature, especially those that are not easily visualized.
Chapter 2 Chang’s Life and Style

The first reason for the enthusiasm in the adaptation of her literature is because of the person herself, who is considered a myth in China, given the twists and turns in her life experiences. She was born to a renowned family at the end of Qing Dynasty, her grandfather Zhang Peilun (1848-1903) and great-grandfather Li Hongzhang (1871-1895) are two of the most significant historical celebrities, who had assisted writing the contemporary Chinese history in the turn of the 19th century. However, she felt aversion to her family. Not only did she address it herself, but she also strongly implies it in her novels, as she frequently satirizes and mocks the ideas of the old-style family. She missed her family’s prosperity and witnessed only its collapse, down with the hopeless late Qing Dynasty.

Her mother, an open-minded woman, divorced her opium-addicted father after he married his concubine and she left for England when Chang was little. She did not get along with her father, who once threatened to kill her for her rebellion. Thus her childhood was trapped in a broken family without parents’ care, except that, according to herself, the only happiness occurred before her mother’s leaving, when they went to the opera house in Tianjin. The experience is referenced in the beginning scene of Ann Hui’s Love in a Fallen City; a little girl stares at two opera singers performing on stage, with her eyes full of curiosity and joy. Her childhood trauma reemerges in the main characters in both her novels and screenplays; most of these characters either have no parents or have unreasonable and irresponsible parents, and they are left all by themselves, facing the world alone.
The only benefit that her parents, both educated and knowledgeable, gave her must have been interests and the gift in literature, and it began her dream of a genius. She realized that she was a genius, and maybe it is from this recognition that her composure and aloofness grew. But even this seeming haughtiness was blended with a gloomy tone. She writes in one of her short essays “Dream of a Genius” (Tian cai meng):

I am a strange girl, considered as a genius since very little. So except developing my genius, I have no other life goals. But, when childhood craziness gradually faded away, I find out that except for the dream of a genius, I have nothing else; all that I have is a genius’s uneasy shortcomings and peculiarity. People have forgiven Wagner’s (Richard Wagner, 1813-1883, a German composer and conductor) wildness, but they will never forgive me.

The essay was published in 1939 in a magazine called West Wind (Xi Feng). That year she was only 19, about to launch her career as a writer. In the essay, she sounds like a prophetess. Her intuition and incisiveness produce an impression of pessimism, which frequently emerges in her novels.

Her family had cast a shadow over her life, but compared with the pain she suffered from her relationship with Hu Lancheng (1906-1981), it was not as fatal. He was considered a national traitor during the war against Japan. He is also a talented writer. She met him in 1943 and recklessly began a love affair with him that once shocked the whole country. They married in 1944. But the marriage lasted only four years. Sadly, he was notorious for his playfulness and disloyalty. She divorced him in 1947, after years of
torture because of his involvement with other two women. In her last letter to him written in June 10th, 1947, she included in the letter the money that she earned from her new screenplays *Endless Love* and *Wife Banzai*. In fact, she financially supported him during their relationship, especially after Japan lost the war and he was on escape.

The critics’ consensus has been that Chang wrote her best novels, like *Love in the Fallen City*, *Jin Suo Ji* and *Red Rose, White Rose*, during the years when she was with Hu; after they broke up, she was not as productive and as sharp. It recalls that once she told him (according to his critically acclaimed autobiography *Jing Sheng Jing Shi*, recounting his love affair with several women during his lifetime): “If I’m to leave you, I won’t die, neither will I love. I will just fade.” (Translated from Hu 2003, 246) Chang might not have faded during the rest of her life, but just sadder, exemplified in her later works, which are equally brilliant as her former ones. For instance, *Eighteen Springs*, first published in 1948 as a serial story in the newspaper. It is the original of Ann Hui’s 1994 film of the same name. In this novel, she seems to stubbornly work against happiness and banish the protagonists to despair and lifelessness. In another famed novel *Lust Caution*, which she wrote in 1950 in Shanghai and published only 30 years later, the doomed story between a national traitor and a young student cannot help but evoke people’s curious inquiry about her desolate encounter with Hu Lancheng.

Just as stirring as her love story were the social and political conditions in China. After the Second World War, she received denunciation because of her marriage to Hu. Although Chang did not seem to care about revolution and politics, and her works never focus on them, they influenced her, as they did everybody else. Thus, she left for Hong Kong in 1952 and it was no less than an expedient escape. In 1955, she immigrated to
the U.S and became an American citizen. Her life in America seems out of focus, because of her ever-growing remoteness and unsociability. In her later years, she turned down all the interviews and lived in seclusion in L.A. since 1972 until found dead on 1995’s Mid-Autumn Day. There exist rumors saying, she was imitating her favorite movie star Greta Garbo (1905-1990). However, it is just a rumor, like a lot of others, only refracting people’s eagerness to understand her.

According to her executor Mr. Lin Shitong, from 1984 to 1988, Chang moved from one motel to another in L.A., only to avoid cleaning her own house and also the fleas. It recalls one of her famous sayings also included in “Dream of a Genius”: “Life is like a dazzlingly gown, only full of fleas”. Her later life, also in loneliness, might not be as miserable as several of her biographies suggest and as most audience imagine. Within the pessimistic overtone exists such a sarcastic humor in her personality, which might have helped her survive the isolation. As a person who got used to loneliness and actually preferred it, it was not hard for her to sustain the tranquility and noble aloofness, even though life had inflicted suffering on her.

Many of her later works were lost during her years in the States and hence it has left a gap in the academic research, regarding her works during this period. The loss of her later works might be the real reason that most critics think she truly faded as she foretold. The truth is her life, with magnificent moments but tragic as a whole, was too dramatic for any history or biographic book to fully register. The history book is usually too objective and the biography’s credibility is always up in the air. Above all, they are both too common and not sensitive enough to record her real feelings. The only trustworthy way to explore her real world, paradoxically, is from the available fictional works that she left
behind. As transcendental as her works are, she is still far beyond them. Therefore, one of the most significant meanings of adapting her works, which have drawn so many filmmakers and audience, is to approach her, as closely as possible.

Chang was dedicated to only love stories, even though she lived in the war time of China and of the world. In her widely quoted essay “My Own Writing” (Ziji de wenzhang), she says, “I would rather write nothing except the trivial matters between a man and a woman. There is neither war nor revolution in my work, for I believe that when people are in love they become more innocent and more abandoned than in war and revolution” (qtd. in Lee 282). Even in Lust Caution, which is set in the war time and whose core events are motivated by political reasons, shadows of politics and wars are smoothed away by her brief and casual portrayal, as if they are no more than some wicked pranks not worthy of any more ink.

Her works always assume a desolate and bleak tone, according to her when she explains for her characters: “Although they are not absolute they are serious. They have no tragic grandeur, they have only desolation. Tragic grandeur is a form of closure, but desolation is revelation” (qtd. in Lee 282). It is her devotion to revelation that yields the charms of her works.

In Lust Caution, a young college student Wang Chia-chih is involved in an assassination plan of a Japanese collaborator, Mr. Yee. She is supposed to seduce him and lead him to the trap of the patriots, but she saves him in the last minute and the story ends with her own death. The story could easily become a sensational and maudlin thriller in praise of the grand love affair. But in Chang’s wording, the protagonists’ emotion is revealed to be indefinable, because Chang’s portrayal of it lingers on the
detailed gestures and irrelevant conversations, but hesitates to go any further and come to a conclusion.

Just before Chia-chih changes her mind and hints to Yee to escape, they are in a jewelry shop and she just puts on the splendor ring he buys her. Chang describes the crucial moment:

..there was, she noted again, no cynicism in his smile just then; only sadness. He sat in silhouette against the lamp, seemingly sunk into an attitude of tenderly affectionate contemplation, his downcast eyelashes tinged the dull cream of moths’ wings as they rested on his gaunt cheeks. He really loves me, she (Chia-chih) thought. Inside, she felt a raw tremor of shock – then a vague sense of loss. It was too late… “Run,” she said softly. (39)

The way Chang considers this emotion between the two protagonists as “love” is uncertain, almost irrational, likes a best guess in gambling, only that the bargaining chip is Chia-chih’s life. Thus it is hardly convincing. And Chang might not intend to convince anyone here either, since Chia-chih is revealed to be making similar guessings all through the narrative, but none of them seems decisive and final. Similarly, according to Yee, she loves him too, for she saves his life. But without her justification, his thought is also a surmise. Therefore, their emotion is not very much qualified to be called love, given the uncertainty of both of them.

Chang leaves an undefined emotion in this story. Her explanation of this emotion is through Yee’s mental activities: “Because of its fierceness, it does not matter what kind of emotion she had for him before death, as long as it is emotion, just emotion. And now he possessed her utterly, primitively – as a hunter does his quarry, a tiger his kill. Alive,
her body belonged to him; dead, she was his ghost” (Chang 46). The saying is a typical Eileen Chang revelation, with confidence but without a settled assertion. It reminds one of what Hu once said about his relationship with her, “every emotion and thought was just fine; this ‘fineness’ actually had been existing before any emotion and thought, and it is beyond them. It did have meanings, but not absolute. All the happiness, craziness and sorrow just came along without a name” (Translated from Hu 2003, 246).

Because of this “no name” feature of her works, the themes of them are sometimes questioned. Again in “My Own Writing”, she defends herself, “I only require my writing to be authentic…it sometimes lacks clarity. But I think…a novel has to be a story. Better than making up a story based on a theme, it is to let the story tell itself….My purpose is very simple: I will present the story, as long as it stands” (qtd. in Lee 282). However, her work is by no means a faithful record of social phenomenon, as she is not as sensitive and vulnerable to social changes as to individual emotions. Her authenticity and loyalty to realism, indicated in the citation above, do not apply to the specific content of her stories, but rather to the way she presents her understandings: she avoids and suppresses the articulation of certain emotions, but contains or reveals them within a trope, like “a chilling premonition of failure, like a long snag in a silk stocking, silently, creeping up her body” (Chang 17). She expresses her subjectivity in an objective way, as if she wants to let the readers see it. In this trope cited above, the feeling she conveys could be sadness, disappointment, helplessness, or anything resembling what she describes and what you can imagine. But since she does not name it, it has flexibility and contains the potential for change. It is consequently a living being. As such, Chang weaves her interpretation of life into her stories.
Chapter 3 Challenge for Adaptation

Chang’s de-emphasis on theme allows a broader space for the story itself. The development of the story is thus able to break the restriction of a specific theme and it carries on freely and boldly, only confined to the key decisions of the characters. The strength of narrative her story possesses announces its great possibility for film adaptation, but the elusiveness of the theme and the complexity of the characters pose great challenges for it.

Chang’s casualness about the theme does not make her story loose and discursive in structure. The meaning of theme for her, given her sole writing interest in the trifle stories between men and women, is more of an emotional issue (mostly about love) than of a subject or topic (for instance, war or revolution). Or one can say that her subject is all about the relationships that her characters are involved in. These relationships are tangled like a crisscrossed web and as such hold her narrative together. But she does not take a stand between love and hatred, and between right and wrong. She intentionally blurs the boundaries between them. Her frequent doubt, usually acted out by the characters’ self-doubt, tends to interrupt the development of the relations between her characters. In other words, no matter how seemingly a man and woman are in love, after subtly implying the existence of their affection, Chang questions it soon after. And the result is that everything that happens between the lovers resembles a dream. Love cannot be assured of; as Chang once addresses in her script of Wife Baizan, it is like “moonlight in the lake, a flower in the mirror”, both refracting true existence, and “both emptiness.”

In George Bluestone’s revealing book Novels to Film, he argues for the limits of the novel by quoting A. A. Mendilow’s claim: “Language cannot convey non-verbal
experiences…reality cannot be expressed or conveyed—only the illusion of it” (12). While Mendilow is obviously complaining about the language’s illusionary quality, Chang’s novels actually act on it by embracing illusion and its uncertainties.

Based on literature’s limitation in expressing reality or so-called non-verbal experiences that film feels at ease with, Bluestone further points out that where the 19th century writers “could stake out their claims with a certain confidence…the modern novelist is riddled with doubts…Not only does he doubt his ability to stake out claims; he also doubts the existence of what he is claiming” (20). Thus, the modern novelist’s “emphasis has shifted from elucidating a fixed and unchanging reality to arresting a transient one” (Bluestone 20). Similarly, Chang challenges the limitation of the language by exploring its elusiveness and avoiding fixed claims. In doing so, she makes use of language’s illusionary quality to serve her purpose of revealing truth. In short, how to represent such illusion is the first challenge Chang’s works leave for film adaptation. Through images “always at once real and ontological” (Bluestone 20), the film version of her novels should first address the problem of how to convey the aura of illusion and not to make it too real.

The second challenge Chang poses for film adaptation lies in the characters. Since no concrete theme dominates the story, it leaves the task to the characters. Chang’s main characters share some common personalities, which helps sustain the tone of the story and pave the way for its development.

They all have the gift of romance. They are sentimental and susceptible to even the most minor trace of moving vibration, and they can moved by a slight wind and perceive a depressing world from a puddle full of mud and water. Everything around them is
bright and colorful when he is in joy; dark and dull when he is in sorrow. It seems that whatever object they touch or see, it is given life and feels what they feel. When Zhengbao in *Red Rose, White Rose* first meets Jiaorui, she is washing her hair. The bubble she carelessly splashes on his hand arouses his first sensation for her. Chang writes, “instead of rubbing it off, he let it dry there. The skin puckered up slightly, as if a mouth were lightly sucking at the spot” (263). In *Love in a Fallen City*, Fan Liuyuan is no less romantic and imaginative, as a tumbledown wall reminds him of the end of the world, “when human civilization has been completely destroyed, and everything is burnt, burst, collapsed and ruined” (Chang 139); maybe this wall still stands against the desolation, witnessing his love with Liusu, he thinks. They are the prisoners of romance and try to force the whole world to stay in love as they do. The filmic versions of them would be easier to present if the objects around them were not as sentimental, as erotic, and as personified as Chang portrays.

They also like to overuse their sharpness and enjoy the superiority it gives them. But the incisiveness only leads to characters’ cynicism and pessimism. They thus cannot help but be sarcastic about hypocrisy, phoniness, dullness and clichés. But ironically, they are somehow overcome by what they are sarcastic about and end up laughing at themselves.

Shijun, in *Eighteen Springs*, is from an old-money family that he hates and escapes from. He intentionally avoids involvement in its affairs in order to earn a different life with Manzheng whom he loves. But fate separates them and he ends up marrying Cuizhi, a woman from another snobbish family that he feels aversion to for a long time. Yet, his life carries on like everybody else’s. For the sake of her child, Manzheng gets married to her brother-in-law, the man who once raped her, and then she divorces him. When Shijun
and Manzheng meet again fourteen years later, except for the agony of having lost her, he cannot even tell if he is happy with his family life. They both realize the obstacle between them is time. When they look back, their affection for each other looks fragile under the crushing power of fate that they used to fight but end up obeying.

Zhengbao’s life in *Red Rose, White Rose* might not be as miserable, since he has the chance to be happy, or at least feel less pain. But in the “right” world that he, “the ideal modern Chinese man”, creates for himself, he is swallowed by uneasiness. The right world is so wrong as to make him corrupt. It is so obvious to him that it is in terms of social norms, which do not accommodate his yearning for pleasure and real life. But he has no courage to break away from it under the overwhelming pressure from his surroundings. His sudden encounter with his old lover releases his oppressed regrets and he is shocked by how wrong he has been. However, the ending perpetuates his wrong right world by claiming he goes back “to being a good man” (Chang 312), which is still not in terms of his own happiness. In brief, these characters have clear minds in realizing what they have been through, but their hesitation and weakness in action require their film versions to appropriately present the conflicts between their inner world and the outside world. “The film, by arranging external signs for our visual perception, or by presenting us with dialogue, can lead us to infer thought. But it cannot show us thought directly. It can show us characters thinking, feeling and speaking, but it cannot show us their thoughts and feelings. A film is not thought; it is perceived” (Mendilow 12). The question becomes what if what they talk about and do is not their real thoughts, how are we supposed to infer reality based on what we see and hear on screen.
These characters are presented to be active in thoughts but passive in words. While this highlights their subjectivities in the novels, it does not help much in building them on screen. Remoteness seems to separate them from the rest of the world, and they do not mind gazing on it and giving an interpretation, not necessarily an answer, because of Chang’s respect for truth. As they are able to detect resemblance and connections among differences, the ineffability of hidden life is materialized, and entanglements are unraveled. Meanwhile the complexity of life is not simplified. For instance, this is the beginning of *Love in a Fallen City*, in which Liusu’s family is introduced: “Shanghai’s clocks were set an hour ahead so the city could ‘save light,’ but the Bai family said: ‘we go by the old clock.’ Ten o’clock to them was eleven to everyone else. Their singing was behind the beat; they couldn’t keep up with the *huqin* (a Chinese instrument) of life” (Chang 111). The description suggests a feeling of being dragged backwards by the weight of life. Weariness is mingled with impatience, predicting eruption of conflicts. But later in the novel, when Liusu dances to the *huqin*, Chang writes: “She took a few paces to the right, then a few to the left. Her steps seemed to trace the lost rhythms of an ancient melody. Suddenly, she smiled – a private, malevolent smile; the music came to a discordant halt” (121). Compared to the Bai family in the beginning introduction, Liusu seems compatible with the times, as if her dance can follow the beat of music; she is clearly aware of it, conveyed in her actions and expressions, but not words.

The similarity between life and music is subtly exerted in the novel to present and analyze Liusu’s living conditions and her uniqueness. As George Bluestone points out, “the linguistic trope is the novel’s special way of rendering the shock of resemblance. By juxtaposing similar qualities in violently dissimilar things, language gets its revenge on
the apparent disorder of life” (21). Additionally, “not only does the power of the (linguistic) trope inhere in its figurative character but in its ability to compound itself without damage to intended meanings” (Bluestone 21). Evidently, in the novel’s linguistic trope that mentioned above, a new situation is created which resides neither in music and life nor in Liusu’s dance and smile; these objects, actions and their connections in linguistic context only make up the concept of it. As a result, if these items are merely placed faithfully side by side in a cinematic context, without elucidation, their subtlety is endangered and the inference they lead to is problematic. In the film version, a melody in the soundtrack, a delayed clock and a dancing woman’s smile are not enough to fully convey the chaos of Liusu’s life and her awareness of her difference. The intended meanings are at risk if the film directly copies the way that language does, because “there is a photographic literalness in the film which is inescapable and which makes metaphor impossible except in a highly restricted sense” (Bluestone 20). One more problem left for the film adaptation to settle is how to construct such a highly restricted sense using its grammar.
Chapter 4 Case Study One: Love in a Fallen City

Adapted from Chang’s 1943 novel, the 1984 film of the same name, directed by the Hong Kong New Wave director Ann Hui, fits into the new wave fondness of dramatizing unpredictable fate during changing times. The film version shows great faithfulness to the novel and has almost no alteration in terms of the storyline and sequence. It is a love story between a divorced woman Liusu (Cora Miao) and an English-born Chinese Liuyuan (Chow Yun Fat). Her malicious family members push her towards him and the sudden eruption of the Anti-Japanese war topples the whole city but brings them together in marriage. Chang sighs at the end of the novel:

Hong Kong’s defeat had brought Liusu victory. But in this unreasonable world, who can distinguish cause from effect? Who knows which is which? Did a great city fall so that she could be vindicated? Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, after that an earth-shaking revolution…Liusu didn’t feel there was anything subtle about her place in history. (167)

The exact same lines are shown in an inter-title at the end of the film, following a close-up of the couple hugging and accompanied by a high angle long shot in the background; the shot sweeps across a shelter with many injured people lying on the ground, none of whom has a clear face on-screen. The comparison between this private love affair and a national war shows Chang’s emphasis on personal emotion. Liuyuan and Liusu end up together, and it is a rare ending in Chang’s stories, because her characters mostly end up alone. However, since Liuyuan always feels that they cannot be the masters of themselves but are manipulated by some unseen hands, their relationship is still
shadowed by a feeling of instability and vulnerability, paralleled with the chaotic world. It makes them cherish their moments even more.

In brief, the story depicts an unlikely and uncertain love affair that somehow develops into a genuine and deep connection promoted by unforeseen external powers. The story should be considered as happy, but it cannot help conveying human’s helplessness and weakness in front of fate. The story is more from the perspective of the female character Liusu. In order to represent the novel’s meaning, the film probably has to indicate this female character’s subjectivity in reflecting on the conflicts around her. These conflicts influence her affection for him. They complicate her feelings for him and decide its direction in development.

The opening opera scene of the film is added to the original story. It is a Kunqu opera *The Peony Pavilion/Mudan Ting*, written by Tang Xianzu (1550-1616), a Chinese playwright of Ming Dynasty. This ancient story, performed in opera for hundreds of years, portrays a surrealistic love affair beyond life and death. It goes against feudalism in the old China and considered a revolutionary masterpiece in women’s liberation. Ann Hui introduces it to Chang’s story, and it spontaneously assumes significant implication.

The opera sequence emphasizes the female protagonist’s central position in the film, and reveals the strength of her subjectivity. As mentioned, the opera story is in praise of the female character’s courage to brave old ideas and pursue love, its historical meaning lies more in her than in her partner. As it is in Chang’s story, the fight that Liusu has against the slanders from her snobbish family members requires her to be no less brave than the character in the opera, and thus her fight also takes on a certain revolutionary
meaning. Through this well-constructed opera tale, the director indicates certain similarities between the two female characters in different times and different stories.

Even if the audiences are not familiar with this opera, the camera cannot hide its emphasis on the female character in the opera. It diligently records her dramatic expressions and actions in close shots as it foregrounds, move towards or centers her in the limited representation of this brilliant ancient play. And at a point, the camera zooms in, from the stage to a little girl (the child Liusu) sitting among the audiences, with a smile on her face and her eyes closely following the performers’ movements. The movement of the camera in this shot implies the correspondence between Liusu and the female character in opera. The child Liusu’s curious gaze (at the female opera singer) suggests her awakening subjectivity.

Another shot later in the narrative corresponds to this one, as the adult Liusu gazes herself in the mirror and spontaneously dances like an opera singer. The two gazes, connected by the opera performance, recall each other and support each other. They are from the same person, but not the same gaze. From the expression of a child to that of an adult, not only time has passed, but more importantly, her subjectivity has proved to develop. She first gazes on the opera character without knowing in the future she might have to fight a similar fight; her second gaze is on herself, having experienced and become aware of the darkness in her life. Especially when she freezes her dance movement, a smile gradually settles on her face. It shows her confidence along with a little sophistication, in sharp contrast to her appearance in the earlier scenes, in which she is helpless and overwhelmed by her brothers and sister-in-law’s accusation. This
enchanting smile thus suggests that she actually realizes her superiority over the rest of her family and is capable of changing her disadvantages.

By introducing a classical Kunqu opera in the beginning, the film reveals a crucial aspect of the original story, which is the struggle of the female character. It emphasizes Liusu’s subjectivity that threads the whole story, but it does not impair the unpredictability of fate that Chang tries to convey. Because the stunning play is manipulated by an unseen power out of the camera focus and behind the stage, so the characters onstage is not totally in control of themselves. Neither is Liusu in her real life, facing the power of fate. In short, the opening opera sequence appropriately sets the tone of the story, and is followed by sequences of a conventional family farce, which is the real start of the novel.

Chang’s description of the conflict between Liusu and her family is mostly in people’s dialogue. Her origin from an old-style family gave her ease and skillfulness in portraying its absurdity. Liusu’s relatives, outmoded and noisy, pressed down by dullness, utter unreasonable, poignant words in certainty and confidence, which are made ridiculous and pathetic at the same time.

Chang suggests a comedy-like effect in composing Liusu’s messed-up family condition. In the novel, one can read a conceited brother of hers (her third brother, the head of the big family), behaving as if he is the justice, urges Liusu to attend her ex-husband’s funeral as his loyal widow. When Liusu defends herself by law, this man, obviously thinking he is correct, warns her: “Don’t try to scare me with the law…The law is one thing today and another tomorrow. What I’m talking about is the law of family relations, and that never changes” (Chang 113)! For all of a sudden, this man’s words,
although clichés, would seem a little wise, given his times. If his logic is only because of
the education he has received in the old society, he would seem only obsolete, and the
conflict between Liusu and him would be the one between different moral standards in
different times. But afterwards, Liusu’s complaining of him using up her money and her
sister-in-law’s interruption in their conversation peel off his mask of a hypocrite. The
conclusion they arrive at is Liusu is bad luck to their family; if they had not let Liusu into
their stock deals, they never would had lost so much. The farce carries on by Liusu’s
furious refutation: “Yes, yes, everything is my fault…. Your son dies? I’ve done it to
you. I’ve ruined your fate” (Chang 114). After hearing this, her sister-in-law grasps her
son’s collar and ram the poor boy’s head into Liusu. The family is just a mess in Chang’s
description.

Such family internal problems are typical of Chang’s stories. They confuse the
protagonist and influence his or her judgments and decisions. One can get a general idea
of what it looks like based on Chang’s own screenplays, for example, Wife Banzai
(1947). Directed by Hu Sung (1916-2004), the film is said to suggest Chang’s fondness
of Hollywood’s screwball comedy. The female protagonist (the wife hailed in the title)
has an absurd father, comic-looking with ridiculous behavior. He is the most entertaining
character, with no fixed principle, but only thinking of taking advantages. In the film, one
scene about him is very memorable and reveals his absurdity. He is supposed to give his
son-in-law a lesson because this young man is disloyal to his daughter. So he goes to him
and his mistress with justice and dignity of a father-in-law, but he ends up being seduced
by another woman presented on the occasion. In the end, he becomes his son-in-law’s
accomplice and teaches him how to cheat on wife. Also, in Endless Love (1947), the
female protagonist has an equally hilarious and ridiculous father who always shows just in time in order to ruin her life and career. He even educates her to be a concubine, because the concubine is always favored more by the husband according to his own experiences.

One can perceive how Chang pictures Liusu’s family members, especially her third brother. She is proves to joke about those characters, so she does not hesitate to make their behavior laughable, as a good piece for entertaining. But underneath this kind of humor is a hideous power able to crush a person’s life. Ann Hui’s film does not show as much humor as heaviness in representing Liusu’s family, although all that is told in the novel is shown in the film.

The surrounded settings offset the sense of humor in dialogue and action. The settings are not wrong. On the contrary, they are well created and highlight the dull and stuffy atmosphere that Chang depicts in the novel. According to her description:

The Bai household was a fairyland where a single day, creeping slowly by, was a thousand years in the outside world. But if you spent a thousand years here, all the days would be the same, each one as flat and dull as the last one…Are you still young? (Liusu question herself) Don’t worry, in another few years you’ll be old, and anyway youth isn’t worth much here. They’ve got youth everywhere – children born one after another, with their bright new eyes, their tender new mouths, their quick new wits. Time grinds on, year after year, and the eyes grow dull, the minds grow dull, and then another round of children is born. (Chang 121)
In order to visualize this linguistic trope about the gravity of time and weariness of life circles, the family’s lounge is decorated with old pictures of the family’s ancestors and significant old events, as if the past time is frozen and brought to the time being.

Time seems to be concentrated in this confined space. The lounge, where most family conflicts are acted out, is immediately and directly rendered in the very first shot after the opera sequence, before the farce staged. The shot zooms out from a mid-shot of Liusu, tilts a little bit to fully include all the pictures high up on the wall, and then sweeps across the lounge, where the boys are playing on the ground and the girls are sewing at the table. The camera moves across the lounge, as if it travels across different times; the old generation has become the history in the pictures hanging up on the wall; the young one follows their steps and repeats the same circle of life in front of the old generation’s pictures, as if the old ones bear witness. The camera does not stop at the end of the lounge but keeps going until it totally enters the balcony, where Liusu’s fourth brother is playing the *Huqin* (a Chinese two string fiddle) in the darkness. The two spaces are separated by a wall. One is in light, with normal family activities, and the other is in darkness, with a lonely man playing a sorrowful melody. However, the continuous sound of the *Huqin* proves the spatial continuity of the two spaces, and so the darkness outside on the balcony is brought into the bright lounge by the melancholy tune.

Every time the characters fight, the camera cannot help but include at least a little bit of this lounge within its focus. The gravity, weariness and darkness also keep being recalled from the shot earlier. These impressions break the attempted humor into pieces and pressing down the sense of comedy. But for Chang, she does not have to include the
environment into her portrayal of the fights and the characters; she takes advantage of the linearity of language, and the audiences have no choice but to follow her lead linearly.

In a novel, spatiality is dismantled and arranged in horizontal rows, and “the reading of a novel favors the gradual accretion of information about action, characters, atmosphere, and ideas, and this mode of presentation” (MacFarlane 27); these elements are never synchronized as they should be in reality and the synchronization can be achieved through film’s spatiality. Additionally, A.A. Mendilow suggests, “language cannot convey non-verbal experiences; being successive and linear, it cannot express simultaneous experiences; being composed of separate and divisible unites, it cannot reveal the unbroken flown of the process of living” (81). But regardless of these claims about the language’s limitation of being linear, Chang seems to be at ease with it. Through the language’s linearity, she is able to cast away the dreariness of the lounge from the farce (but only articulate it in details afterwards) and her good humor is thus spared between lines. Ann Hui does not seem to have the choice, but “cannot help including a great deal else as well” (MacFarlane 18) in the farce and letting the depressive mise-en-scene impair the comedic sense.

Obviously, the impression and signification that can be received from the mise-en-scene run ahead of Liusu’s awareness. In other words, the atmosphere exists before Liusu notices it and enables the audiences to realize it earlier than she does. She only proves to reflect on her surroundings (both in the novel and in the film) after the family fight is appeased. Looking at her ancestor’s portraits on the wall, she starts to feel her passing youth and abruptly runs back to her room to check herself in the mirror. And then she
starts to dance the opera dance that is mentioned before, (recalling the Kunqu opera scenes in the beginning).

Not until this scene do we see a different woman in her. She is far different from the trembling woman who confronts her malicious brother with few words and also distinguished from the miserable one who cries out for help in front of her mother. From her dance steps, one can discern composure and confidence, hidden beneath her docile appearance. The sudden change of her expression, from confusion to narcissism is mysterious, given that just a moment ago she is in madness and depression. Chang articulates in the novels that it is because her image in the mirror smoothes away her worries of getting old, but the film tells more than that. Her eyes contain not only self-certainty but also irony, the kind of irony that proves she knows she is beautiful and she realizes that the others do her wrong.

Her sudden change of appearance exposes a paradox rooted in her characteristics. Just a sequence before this scene, she has been desperate, when weeping and talking to Mrs. Xu about her difficulties in life, (a divorced woman without any skills of earning a life, discriminated by her family members and ignored by her own mother). It was as if she really believed she was hopeless, without a way out. But a moment later, she cheers herself up in front of the mirror, seeing her beauty and feeling her wisdom. In brief, she has doubt. But he doubt is more likely caused by the external pressure than internal self-contempt. And her sensitivity makes her susceptible to the outside power. When she has time to reflect on herself patiently and quietly, she becomes to be aware of her capability, and that a good, new life might have been waiting for her somewhere.
In the novel, this revelation of Liusu’s conflicting characteristics is not as sudden as in the film. The way that Ann Hui represents this character during the family conflict is slightly strayed away from Chang’s idea in the novel, and the disparity is sustained throughout the rest of the film. The reason is because the film fails to adapt two details in the novel that can give hint to Liusu’s hidden self-acknowledgement.

The first one is when Liusu turns to her mother for help. The old woman, unwieldy and absentminded, is obviously not on her side. On screen, her silence in front of her mother is simply and clear on her inexpressive face. That is the kind of silence because of obedience and grievance; she, behaving like a good daughter, listens to her mother’s suggestion of life. But Chang explains Liusu’s silence in the novel, “when Liusu heard her mother’s tone and the way she played things down, she felt that her point had been completely overlooked; she couldn’t find any reply to make” (115). In her phrasing, Liusu seems to be shrewder than she actually behaves. However, there is no way to tell from the images that she actually realizes her mother’s attitude and that the old lady avoids the key point of her entreaty. According to the novel, one can even have reasons to doubt if Liusu’s purpose of crying and complaining in front of her mother is a pretense or a strategy, in order to win support and sympathy.

Another moment in the novel that is dismissed by the film is when Liusu is touched by Mrs. Xu’s warmness and support. Both in the novel and in the adaptation, Liusu is thankful for this woman, who tries to mother her. But Chang makes her gratitude less sincere: “Liusu rarely heard such a decent remark (Mr. Xu’s remark). Without pausing to weigh its sincerity, she let her heart well up and her tears rain down” (118). Obviously, Chang implies a message that Liusu is not a credulous person; if it is not on this very
occasion, would she have weight her sincerity first? Considering that she grows up in a family full of intrigues, it is not surprising if she is skeptical. Then her self-contempt when she confesses in Xu is made less believable, but seemingly rather a relief of depression. And it leads up to her composed dances and that mysterious smile in front of the mirror afterwards.

Given the shrewdness and rationality Liusu proves to have at the two moments above, her sudden change of gesture and expression when standing in front of the mirror is not a surprise. However, in the film, the change seems a little vague and surprising; because the two moments that can prepare the audiences for the emergence of her hidden characteristics are missing. Nonetheless, Liusu’s tricky dancing moment in the film is still charming. It is still worth recording and thinking. Or at least, one can get a different impression of her and realize that she is not always docile and miserable.

After a dazzlingly opera opening and a faithful presentation of the family conflicts, the film begins to depart from the novel from the two moments when Liusu first gives away her subjectivity. Her characteristics in the film are simplified, because of her subtle and transient mental activities that are not transferable to film. It is hard to infer them based on the images. Chang’s Liusu is stronger and more sophisticated. Not only does she know her advantages, but she also knows how to use her disadvantages for sympathy and support. It is only reasonable, because in Chang’s world, female characters usually have the strength and toughness in her. In the hostile surroundings, these qualities sustain her going through all the hardships. In the film, Liusu seems gentler and more obedient. The disparity is not just maintained throughout the film, but becomes clearer when the story is further unfolded.
Liusu’s encounter with Liuyuan begins from her sixth sister’s blind date with him. Mrs. Xu sets them up. But almost the whole snobbish family goes with her. As long as the family is involved, it is a mess of a situation. Her fourth sister-in-law tries her best to squeeze her two daughters into this occasion, because she wants to see if her two little girls could get a chance to marry this rich young man who just came back from aboard. Liusu is dragged there by her sixth sister, who wants Liusu to occupy the two girls’ positions in the crammed car. But all of them do not suspect that Liusu will draw the man’s attention. Both in the novel and in the film, the event is not shown directly, but we know it from the family’s gossiping after they come back. They blame Liusu’s inappropriate behavior, because she dances with Liuyuan all night and she is a good dancer as Chang tells us. It is by no means that her family can stand such immorality and frivolity in their eyes. More precisely, it is Liusu’s success over the rest of them that they feel hard to accept.

What does Liusu do during the date? Does she really seduce Liuyuan in order to get revenge on her family? In the novel, the more powerful and shrewder Liusu might have done that, but in the film, it is doubtful. And what does she think when overhearing her sister-in-laws’ insult? In the film, she lights up an incense, and blows off the match. The firmness of her gesture and the emptiness on her face are enlarged by a series of close-ups and turned into indifference. In the gentle yellow light, she stands up, and camera cuts to her mid-shot. A kerosene lamp flicks in the foreground of the frame and she stands in the background. It reminds of her debut, sitting in the chair and sewing an embroidered shoe; a similar kerosene lamp burns by her side on the table. The two lamps are both in bright and warm colors. They are the only decorations that break the
bleakness of the surroundings. Always shown up beside Liusu, the lamp adds to her liveliness.

Her sister-in-laws haven’t stopped insulting her, and her expression has not stopped being empty. She leans on the wall. Her shadow on the wall adds to her figure a dark contour outline. When she moves, the dark shadow walks ahead of her; its darkness emits a little bit gravity. The camera gazes on her for a long time, but captures only her lonely figure. And she finally moves, walking up to her silk gauze cheongsam (she might have worn it during the date) and pressing her face against it. Her loneliness is ever exaggerated. Correspondently, as Chang describes this moment in the novel, “no one to turn to – she was on her own” (129). But many questions about her first encounter with Liuyuan are still unanswered.

The novel tells more about her thoughts besides loneliness. Therefore, she is not as elusive as in the film. As Chang narrates:

She (Liusu) hadn’t planned the evening’s events, but in any case she’d shown them a thing or two. So they thought she was finished, that her life was already over? The game was just beginning! She smiled. Baolu (her sixth sister, whose date she ruins) must be cursing her silently…But she knew that that as much as Baolu hated her, the younger woman’s heart was also full of respect and admiration. No matter how amazing a woman is, she won’t be respected by her own sex unless she’s loved by a member of the opposite one. Women are petty this way. Was it really true that Liuyuan liked her? Not certain in the least. All those things he’d said – she did not
believe a word of it. She could tell that he was used to lying to women, she’d have to be very careful. (127)

The incisiveness and causticity in her thoughts maintain and deepen her cunningness and capability suggested from the earlier part of Chang’s portrayal. It is not convincing that the weaker and gentler Liusu in the film also thinks in such intensity and sophistication. Even if she does, her expression and gesture do not deliver the feelings.

A similar situation happens in the very next scene. When Mrs. Xu comes back to invite Liusu to go to Hong Kong with her and her husband, Liusu accepts the invitation in a plain approval. Her ever-lasting obedience and shyness do not arouse any suspect of her other possible choice. Based on the earlier plots of the film, the possible motivation for her decision to leave, which can be thought of first, is to get rid of her hostile family. And also, Mrs. Xu, shining with a light of motherhood, is more like her mother than her real one; she always tries to marry Liusu off. Therefore, Liusu approval of Xu’s suggestion is in expectation. When Liusu arrives in Hong Kong afterwards, she runs into Liuyuan living in the same hotel. It looks like a perfect coincidence. Fate holds them together.

But Chang has another version. First, Liusu still have reservations about Mrs. Xu’s sincerity. So she starts to suspect that for Xu to bring her to Hong Kong is Liuyuan’s trap (she proves to be right later on). Second, she accepts the invitation to Hong Kong is because that “she decided to wager her future...if she lost, her reputation would be ruined…if she won, she’d get the prize the whole crowd was eyeing like so many greedy tigers – Fan Liuyuan – and all her stifled rancor would be swept clean away” (Chang 130). Her motivation is not innocent at all, and he is just a straw that she clutches at. He is a part of her expedient choice, or a result of her “rapid calculation” (Chang 130). From
her thoughtful plan, we have more reasons to suspect that in the novel she really must
have intended to seduce him the first time they meet.

Compared to her counterpart in the novel, in the film, Liusu has a less sophisticated
motive for going to Hong Kong. The difference furthers the film’s essential divergence
from the novel, although the following cinematic plotline is still faithful to Chang’s story.
Briefly, Chang’s Liusu plans and struggles for her future; Ann Hui’s Liusu might as well
struggle. More likely, though, her determination, if she has any, is not given enough
contour, so it seems too fragile to balance the power of fate.

Chang presents a tortuous bet with a woman’s future as the stake. Ann Hui represents
a homely Cinderella story during war-time. The reason that makes them two separate
stories is because of Liusu’s inner world that images cannot convey. In the novel, till the
eruption of the war, she has a clear mind of what goes on between her and Liuyuan. She
is right that it is him who invites her to Hong Kong. He thinks he successfully brings her
to his trap, but he is not aware that she knows it is his trick. She knows more than
Liuyuan will possibly imagine and film can possibly visualize. Except for war, she is
alerted and prepared for his pursuit, flattery and provocation. Her deception is above his.
Although she cannot stop his pursuit of her and she seems to play a passive role in action,
she is the interpreter and commenter of their relationship. Chang highlights his activity in
action, but hers in subjectivity. However, the film seems to lose its way to her inner
world, and the camera just gazes on the surface of it. Liuyuan’s pursuit of her is perfectly
rendered, in both gestures and expressions, with both decency and accuracy; Liusu’s
active role in this relation in terms of her subjectivity is concerned, but far from settled.
The film does attempt to articulate or capture her thoughts through certain ways. The most noticeable way is through Mrs. Xu’s words. This amiable woman plays a crucial role in both the story and even more so in the film. She is the one who introduces Liuyuan to Liusu’s family and takes her out of her family. In the film, this character also assumes the function of a narrator at some key points regarding Liusu’s involvement in the romance. She interprets two significant moments in the development of Liusu’s relationship with Liuyuan.

On the first night they arrive at Hong Kong, Mrs. Xu inadvertently questions her husband if Liusu’s relationship with Liuyuan is spiritual or physical. When dancing joyfully, she explains to him that “spiritual love always leads to marriage, while physical love tends to reach a certain and then stop, leaving little hope of marriage”. She continues, “there is one small problem with spiritual love: while courting, the man always says things that the woman doesn’t understand”. What Xu says, in the novel, is supposed to be Liusu’s reflection on Liuyuan’s affection for her. What more, “it turned out that what Liuyuan cared about was spiritual love” (Chang 141), as the Liusu in the novel settles the question that Xu poses in the film. Liusu comes to the conclusion based on her conversation with Liuyuan at a gray brick retaining wall which reminds him of “the end of the world” (Chang 139).

This plot is beautifully rendered in the film. Under the moonlight, two soft, lively figures press against a coarse, lifeless old wall. The prosperity and uproar of the urban life are left behind and only two or three streetlights prove the city’s existence. At one moment, a bird-eye shot rises from their top along the wall, but fails to find its upper edge. In this scene, one can only see him, her and the wall, as if at the moment, three of
them make up the whole world. Compared to the wall, they look young and small. This moment of their life looks transitory in the history that the wall might have witnessed.

Liuyuan shows his romantic quality, as he says, “Someday, when human civilization has been completely destroyed, and everything is burnt, burst, collapsed and ruined”, if the wall still stands there, and if they “can meet at the wall”, they might be sincere to each other.

He explains to her that his disappointment at his motherland is the reason that he sinks into despair and corruption. But Liusu considers the explanation as his excuse for his misbehavior. She reutes him in a solid tone, which is rare for her in the film. At this point, her sharp refutation tends to threaten his domination in their conversation. Her close-up over his shoulder emphasizes the firmness in her eyes. We know that she stares at him directly, with such composure that once emerges when she dances and looks at herself in the mirror. But this composure is ephemeral. When Liuyuan pleads like a spoiled child, “I want you to understand me” (almost like an order), she even has trouble making eye contact with him; she lowers her head and avoids his eyes. Liuyuan never misses any good chance like this to flirt, and he does. His domination is regained.

Ironically, Ann Hui does what exactly the novel tells in this scene, but ends up with a different effect. Liusu does lower her voice and consent to his request in tenderness. And also, she does lower her beautiful head. However, Chang has a totally different explanation for her actions; as she narrates, “while comforting him, she (Liusu) suddenly thought of her moonlit face. That delicate profile, the eyes, the brow – beautiful beyond reason; misty, ethereal. Slowly she bowed her head” (140). Chang shows us how powerful and dangerous this woman is. Her understanding of her situation and herself is
not confined to her self-awareness, but she can penetrate the man’s thought and perceive herself in his eyes. And different from Liuyuan, she does not even bother to behave dominantly. Her feminine appearance helps her disguise her subjectivity, which actually proves to be superior over his.

Compared to Chang’s version of this plot happening at the wall, Ann Hui’s rendering is no more than a romantic conversation between a man and a woman; indeed an excellent one, with the sense of vicissitude because of the witness of the old wall, the tension of eroticism coming out of their bickering and the aftertaste generated by the characters’ charisma. Liusu in this scene is charming, due to her innocence, sympathy and nervousness when gazed by the man she feels attracted to. The following scene jumps to the Dancing square, back to the urban life. A bright and gaudy world suddenly pops back to the screen, and releases the tension that accumulates in the scene before. People wiggle their bodies to the jumpy tune. Among them is Mrs. Xu. She light-heartedly chatting away the issue about the spiritual and physical love, which, in the novel, Chang lets Liusu think by herself.

In the novel, Liusu is evidently strong and sophisticated enough to think and fight, and to be clear-minded in this bet for her future. But in the film, her power in subjectivity is partly distributed to Mrs. Xu. Since Ann Hui presents her as a reticent woman, more elusive than her counterpart in the novel, it is not fair to claim that she does not do the thinking at all, merely based on the fact that she does not talk much. However, since she is not given much voice in the film, her subjectivity is up in the air.

The same process of adaptation happens again when Liusu and Liuyuan’s conflict becomes intensified, and Mrs. Xu again plays the revealing part. In the novel, as already
mentioned, Liusu’s motive for coming to Hong Kong is not innocent and her emotion for Liuyuan is in some sense distorted under the pressure of her family. But she is unquestionably prudent and self-respected (, so is the Liusu in the film). The contradiction between her original intention and her personality makes her feelings (for him) inconsistent and conflicting. It is evident in the fact that she surely wants to capture him, but she does not seem to enjoy his occasional flirtation and offenses. She hopes their emotion can develop in a respectable way. So when Liuyuan somehow offends her on the beach, she runs away at once.

And later on, when she sees him stick together with another woman and intentionally “cool her heels” (Chang 146), she realizes that “stirring up her jealousy was his way of taunting her so that she’d run into his arms of her own accord” (Chang 147). As discreet and smart as Liusu is in the novel, she thinks the whole event through:

If she softened toward him at this point, she’d be sacrificed for nothing. He wouldn’t really feel obliged; he’d just think that she’d fallen for a trick…Clearly, he wanted her, but he didn’t want t marry her…he was worried about getting a reputation as a seducer. That was why he put on that open and aboveboard manner. Now she knew that his innocence was fake. He didn’t want to be held responsible. If he abandoned her, no one would listen to her side of things. (147)

Since Chang does not give Liuyuan any opportunity to defend himself, one may have the feeling that Liusu is paranoid. But she definitely has to be thoughtful, given the significance of her decision in terms of her future. The intermezzo ends up with his surrender. Correspondingly, in the film, the difference is that the thorough analysis of
Liuyuan’s motive and the rational supposition about the consequences of their love affair are delivered by Mrs. Xu in an underplayed private chat with her husband during tea time. Liusu’s inner turmoil, if she has any in the film, is suppressed and her conflict with Liuyuan seems like a regular fuss between a dating couple.

In the film, Mrs. Xu does effectively and accurately highlights the key points of Liusu’s love affair. She fastens our attention to the issues she raises and guides us to search and think in the direction planned out by the filmmaker. It is truly important that the audience can receive the following massages from the film: first, marriage is very important to Liusu; secondly, Liusu puts herself at risk in her relationship with Liuyuan. Meanwhile, it is equally important who conveys these messages. In the film, Mrs. Xu delivers them. However, as the third person who is not very much involved in Liusu’s emotional struggle, her opinions are revealing in exposing the entanglements, but if she tries to unravel them, she can hardly be as capable and convincing as Chang or Liusu.

Obviously, Mrs. Xu’s function in the film partly overlaps with that of Chang in the novel. Xu introduces Liuyuan’s background to Liusu, and she comments on Liusu’s relationship with Liuyuan in an immediate and direct way. But even so, she can never equal Chang, who is able to provide a “consistent psychological viewpoint derived from one character” (MacFarlane 16). The novel almost exclusively develops from the viewpoint of Liusu. The power of her subjectivity is constantly accumulated and her recognition is gradually deepened with the development of the story. Mrs. Xu, an onlooker who is able to maintain the continuity of the storyline, can hardly sustain the continuity of the protagonist’s stream of consciousness or thought.
As a result, in the novel, when Liusu suddenly decides to go back to her family in Shanghai, her decision is unquestionable. One can tell that her decision is not impulsive, and not because of any particular, decisive incident, but because of a series of big or small events that lead up to it. Her recognition of the situation develops in a gradual manner to reach the decision of leaving him. From her constant subjective viewpoint, the novel shows how she starts the bet with the stake of her future, struggles for it and then loses it.

To be precise, after she makes up her mind to revenge on her family by getting close to Liuyuan, four major events in the novel mark her progressing recognition and decide how far she would like to go with him. First, based on his long speech beside the bricking wall, she feels willing to carry on her relation with him, because she thinks his affection for her is spiritual and has the chance to develop into a serious commitment, which is marriage. Secondly, because of his offense on the beach and his involvement with another woman, her recognition experiences a change. She realizes she might have mistaken him, and she starts to rethink their relationship and suspects that marriage is not what he wants with her. According to Chang, although she still maintains her apparent hospitality to him after they reconcile, she feels she reaches a deadlock. And she needs an occasion to break it. It thus foretells a change of their relationship, either a breakdown or uplift.

Thirdly, when Liuyuan’s confesses his love to her over the phone and suggests his opinion on life’s unpredictability, she can no longer suppress the anxiety that haunts her for a long time; she stubbornly confirms (either accurately or mistakenly) her suspicion
that he has no intention to marry her. Chang, again, keeps Liusu’s desperation underneath and they keep their dating routine on the next day.

At last, when Liusu notices many people already mistake her for Liuyuan’s wife, she suddenly realizes, she is trapped. As Chang reveals:

*Liusu stared at him in shock, suddenly seeing how wicked this man was.*

Whenever they were in public, he made sure to give the impression of affectionate intimacy, so that now she had now way to prove that they had not slept together. She was riding a tiger now, no way to go home, no way to rejoin her family; she had no option except to become his mistress. But if she relented at this point, all her efforts would have been wasted, with no hope of recovery. She wouldn’t do it! Even if she was trapped by appearances, he’d taken advantage of her in name only. The real truth was that he had not gotten her. And since he hadn’t, he might come back someday, ready to make peace on better terms. (151)

Therefore, she rather goes back home, into the vehement contempt and accusation again, in hopes of another chance. It is salient that at this point, under her reticence and tenderness, Liusu’s conflicts with both her family and Liuyuan reach a crescendo. She does not only lose the battle with Liuyuan, but she loses the one with her family as well.

Following the clues of Liusu’s concerns, one can perceive that Liusu’s continuous reflection on her relation with Liuyuan generates another narration other than the actual plotline that the film chooses to follow. In appearance, Liusu maintains her mildness and willingness, but beneath her composed mask, the obstacles and conflicts, intense and entangled, overwhelm her determination.
In the film, the conflicts are not as entangled as in the novel, because Liusu’s constant meditation is underplayed or deprived of by other characters. Without the elucidation of her motivation and intention, her conflicts with her family and the ones with Liuyuan fall apart from each other. One can tell that her first leaving home for Hong Kong ceases her struggle with her family, and her coming back home restarts it but leaves her conflicts with Liuyuan behind. As mentioned earlier, the film does not explain that the motive for her going to Hong Kong is to bet her future; neither does it show that she realizes Xu’s invitation to Hong Kong might be Liuyuan’s trick. As a result, her relationship with him does not start from her desperate bet with her family as it is in the novel and she seems to be under his manipulation. Then naturally, during her staying in Hong Kong, her conflicts with her family cease to torture her and are replaced by her emotional turmoil regarding him. Therefore, in the film, when she announces her decision of leaving him and going back home, the most direct reason that can be first though of is that she can no longer bear his pursuit; in this case, different from that in the novel, the influence of her family is too far away to be connected.

In short, the film shows that her conflicts come and go one after another, first aroused and then appeased. She is stranded in his tenderness and flirtation, and he in her resistance, as if they ride a merry-go-round, without making any progress. Her decision of going home in the film is revealed to be a temporary break from him, not less painful but more simply arrived at than that in the novel. In the novel, for Liusu, the conflicts are always aroused but never really appeased. Although she maintains her warmth and hospitality in appearance, underneath, she has anger and hatred. She proves to progress, as she keeps gaining newer and deeper recognition of Liuyuan and of their relationship.
Both in the novel and in the film, although Liusu’s decision of leaving Liuyuan is caused by different emotions, she does leave him and go home in both versions. And later on, still in both versions, she comes back to Hong Kong again to meet him. But different causes of her choice to leave him lead to different emotions about her return to him. In the novel, Chang writes:

For the second time she left home and went to Hong Kong. This time, she felt none of her earlier eagerness for adventure. She had lost. Of course, everyone likes to be vanquished, but only within bounds. To have been vanquished solely by Fan Liuyuan’s charms, that was one thing. But mixed with that was the pressure from her family – the most painful factor in her defeat. (153)

She bursts into tears when her mother says in a sigh, “since he’s sent for you, you should go” (Chang 153). For her, her coming back to him is more or less a humiliation.

In the film, Liusu is not in such a dilemma, as she is hardly involved in one from the beginning. Liusu’s emotion of coming back to him is optimistic, with a relief of the pain aroused by their long separation. Their reunion is not grave. For her, it ends her involvement with her family for good. When Liuyuan’s telegram arrives and sends for her, Liusu’s response implies the filmmaker’s awareness that the film has departed from the novel. Instead of faithfully representing that she cries, when reading the telegram, she imagines him waiting for her at the dock in the rain. It is visualized by a smooth and comparatively quick zooming in shot, indicating her eagerness of going back to him. It pushes from the edge of water towards Liuyuan, as if she stares at him on a boat which gradually approaches the shore. In a caramel dustcoat, with a black umbrella in hand, he waits for her patiently in such gentility. The atmosphere is made romantic by the violin
soundtrack and the rain in time. Her subjective shot gives away that she has fallen for him, and his telegram saves her away from her family.

In the film, Liusu and Liuyuan fall in love with each other earlier than their counterparts in the novel. In the novel, she comes back to him in humiliation not in optimism. Even after she officially becomes his mistress, she still has uncertainty about his loyalty. When it comes to her affection for him, she never seems to reflect on it, just as Chang writes, “he was just a selfish man; she was a selfish woman” (165). (And since the novel is not told from Liuyuan’s viewpoint, while it is possible that he loves her from the very beginning, it is equally possible that he has not been serious until the war starts). It is not specified exactly when she falls for him. It is not until the war erupts when they drag each other to avoid the bullets that she starts to realize that “here in this uncertain world, money, property, the permanent things – they’re all unreliable. The only thing she could rely on was the breath in her lungs, and this person who lay sleeping beside her” (Chang 164).

It must be love that Chang tries to reveal; they don’t know how it starts, nor do they know how it will end. It is like anxiety of loss, or fear of change. Chang tells it through the intrigue, deception, suspicions and even war which have little to do with true love but can destroy it. She conveys that love cannot be planned and life cannot be predicted. The war, both in the film and in the novel, keeps Liuyuan from leaving Liusu for England and thus offers them a chance to uplift their bonding to a new level. However, while in the film the war completes the last step of the protagonists’ love, which is marriage, in the novel it marks the beginning of their love. For them, marriage is not as crucial as their recognition of their meanings in each other’s life. His flirtation and playfulness, and her
resentment and strategies are all blown away by the fierceness of war. And from the fallen city rises their new life; a life of “an ordinary married couple” (Chang 165). As Chang reveals, “in this age of chaos and disorder, there is no place for those who stand on their own, but for an ordinary married couple, room can always be found” (165).

The film adapts the novel’s contour outline. Just as Liusu’s habit of bowing her head suggests her shyness of her beauty rather than her humbleness, the novel, filters through Liusu’s constant consciousness, takes off her disguise and reveals the true story underneath her appearance. The film is trapped in the inconsistency between the characters’ actions and thoughts, the story’s narrative and meanings. However, although it is less entangled and less grave, the film shows that people’s lives shake under the force of external power, as Chang tries to convey through the novel. Although Liusu’s subjectivity in struggling is impaired in the film, paradoxically, it turns out that she cannot override the power of fate anyway, so the original story might have to confront the question: what is the use for her to struggle and fight against fate in the first place, if she can hardly win? It is no use; therefore, Chang’s story is after all a sorrowful one. It delivers the desolation that all of her novels embrace. The film definitely makes up for her and her characters’ melancholy and concludes with a satisfying happy ending.
Chapter 5 Case Study Two: Red Rose, White Rose

Stanley Kwan, a major art director in Hong Kong, started his directing career as an assistant director of many critical acclaimed Hong Kong New Wave directors. He was Ann Hui’s assistant director in Love in a Fallen City in 1984. And ten years later, in 1994, he directed Red Rose, White Rose, another film adapted from Chang’s 1944 novel with the same title.

The novel is about an “ideal modern Chinese man” (Chang 255), Zhenbao and his two women: “One he called his white rose, the other his red rose. One was a spotless wife, the other a passionate mistress” (Chang 255). His red rose or passionate mistress he refers to is Jiaorui, his friend’s wife. They have an affair when he lodges at the couple’s home. It is immoral as he is aware of, but he cannot help being obsessed with her and she is deeply in love with him. He secretly enjoys her affection, partly because of its wrongness. However, as a generally acknowledged good man, his conscience and sense of responsibly torture him and force him to straighten his wrong deed. He gives her up and marries Yanli, his white rose. But he is soon overwhelmed by the tedious marital life and sinks into corruption. On one of those days, his unexpected encounter with Jiaorui on a city bus makes him realize his regret; he confronts his anguish oppressed in his heart for the many years since she has left. In the life that he has chosen, there is no turning back. He either suffers or gets used to the world that he has built up as a “right” one(Chang 259).

The title gives away the story in terms of its dichotomy and implies the importance of the protagonist’s choice. Zhengbao has a clear mind about right and wrong. It is paradoxical to see how he makes (Chang indulges him in) the supposedly right choice,
but he is immersed in the feeling of loss or anything else that is barely right. It is somewhat of a sarcastic treatment that he is a better and more truthful person in the immoral relationship than in his legal marriage. In short, his right world does not seem that right and the wrong one that wrong.

In the film version, with thoughtful alteration of the novel and creative arrangement of the plot sequence, one can tell the director’s ambition to properly understand Chang’s intention and represent her acute examination on right and wrong. Kwan perceives multiple conflicts in the narrative and in the protagonist. In the film, he sorts out these conflicts and visualizes their contrasts through his skillful execution of the mise-en-scene. His attentive management of the details, like shadows, mirrors, or window frames, constructs a spontaneously emotional atmosphere. The difference of the settings separates the right world from the wrong one. The appearance of the surroundings closely corresponds to the characters’ feelings. In order to further expose the characters’ thought, Kwan boldly uses well designed inter-titles to reveal their mental activities, which are tough for the images to fully render. Put differently, he puts Chang’s original description on-screen and combines his film with the charms of Chang’s language. In short, the film emits an enchanting artistic quality.

Zhenbao’s (Winston Chao) love affair with Jiaorui (Joan Chen) is portrayed in a world visualized like an underworld. Shanghai, where his immoral love affair happens, is alienated and deformed. There is no distinction between day and night in the city. The tone is set from the opening scene, which is about his encounter with a French prostitute in Paris. She is one of the women before his two roses. In the very first shot, the camera reluctantly pulls down from the top of the houses, which are crowded alongside the
shabby street that he passes by. When the camera is up above the roof, it looks like daytime but with a cloudy, misty weather, but when it gets down on the street, it is more like night time. The orange red light of the street lamps gulps down the limited daylight and covers the whole street including him in an erotic radiance. In a supposedly continuous dimension, one can have the impression of two different spaces with different times. The debut of Shanghai city occurs in an even worse weather, with rain pouring. In a high angle long shot, a black car, carrying Zhenbao and his brother Dubao, drives down the street, across the shadows of the buildings along the side. The Street is empty and everything is grey and bleak, except the orange light coming from the buildings’ windows. The light sets off some warmth and a sense of night. However, the buildings’ shadows pressing against the street prove that there is dim daylight coming down from above. Time is again confusing and such confusion maintains throughout Zhenbao’s affair with Jiaorui: it always seems at nightfall or later.

The prosperous Shanghai that Chang portrays by no means looks like what we see in this shot. But we hardly have a chance to see the landscape of Shanghai; even such a shot is the most generous. The city is mostly seen in the margin of the characters’ shots, from the limited space within the window frame and the reflection flashed on the window glass. The whole city is cut into fragments, which are ghostly rendered piece by piece: several corners of the buildings that look like a drawing, trees with bare branches, and pitch-dark lampposts standing solemnly. The most unusual is the city bus. It can only be sensed through the brief bus frame seen from the edge of the characters’ close shots. The interior of it looks like that of a car going through a dark tunnel, its exterior is dismissed, and the surroundings that it passes by are blurred on purpose. On the whole, the city is
not a realistic one. Wrapped in endless darkness and white smoke from nowhere, it is perhaps not a place that can possibly be found on earth. Kwan dramatizes the place where Zhenbao has the love affair with the married woman. This place is made obscure and haunting, as if it is in a dream. In its darkness lie the wrong world that Zhenbao gives up, and also the source of his deep anguish in his later life. This world is not so much a physical existence as a mental one, acting out Zhenbao’s inner feelings.

Kwan generates a whole set of symbols to visualize this world and to create counterparts of Chang’s language. The repetition of each of these symbols on certain occasion emphasizes their special meanings within the film’s context. The most evident elements are light and shadows. Except for confusing the time and darkening the atmosphere of the city, in details, they actually participate in the acting and help generate meanings of the actors’ expressions and gestures. Their change is in accord with the characters’ mood. On his first night at the couple’s home, Zhenbao borrows their bathroom for a shower. Jiaorui just finishes combing her hair. In the novel, Chang describes: “Clusters of fallen hair swirled about like ghostly figures…drifting across the floor. He (Zhenbao) felt quite agitated…Look at that hair! It was everywhere. She was everywhere, tugging and pulling at him…Zehnbao crouched down and started picking up stray hairs from the floor tiles and twisting them together” (264). Kwan represents the erotic moment in the film. The light in the bathroom is orange red, recalling the day in Paris; the street where he meets the French prostitute is immersed in the same kind of light streaming out of the streetlamps. Now at Jiaorui’s bathroom, under the same light, verbal explanation, if there is any, would seem redundant. The orange red light emerges
again in their first love scene. Therefore, this color of light is connected to eroticism. When it overflows the frame, the protagonist’ thoughts are exposed.

When it comes to Kwan’s creative use of shadow, it shades the light and also the characters’ mood. The night they have sex for the first time, Jiaorui hears the elevator coming up. Suspecting it is Zhenbao, she stops playing piano and sits quietly, listening with her eyes nervously blinking. The camera zooms in on her, accompanied by the sound of the elevator rising up. Her figure is tightly wrapped in darkness and the shadow of the branches outside the window creeps up her delicate face. Before this scene, a high angle shot shows that on the street under Jiaorui’s building, Zhenbao stands alone and looks up towards her window. The streetlamp beside him again emits the orange red light, illuminating his yearn for her. But both the streetlamp and Zhenbao are in the background of the screen, on the foreground, a tree’s bare branches creep along the screen, shading the background, as if the branch-shaped shadow does on her face. It implies an empathy between them, and the similar shadow is the carrier of this empathy. Afterwards, when Zhenbao gets out of the elevator, the iron railings cast a shadow over his face. And his face is divided by several raw, pitch-dark strips. It makes his face look like the piano keyboard that she touches. A sense of sexuality is conveyed, and an intimate contact is impending in the mood. He looks towards her direction and a mysterious smile emerges on his face.

The subtle connection between them achieved by the shadows not only bonds their bodies but also their thoughts. It visualizes Chang’s revelation of their erupted passion at the moment: “Standing in the doorway, he (Zhenbao) watched Jiaorui for a long time, tears welling up in his eyes, because he and she were really in the same place now, two
people together, body and soul” (280). Kwan finds the protagonists’ intangible connection an equally intangible entity: the shadow. Only that the latter is visible, and thus it can be captured by the camera eye.

The change of the light and the shadow further exposes their inner feelings when they get closer in this scene. She starts to play piano again, and pretends not to care about his presence. Zhenbao gets a little irritated. He comes closer and turns her music score randomly, intending to distract her. But she does not even look at the music, because she knows the melody all by heart. Both of their figures, in black clothes, are almost fused into the dark surroundings, except for their faces, now both covered in the shadow of branches. As they move, the shadow flows on their faces and seems to form them into different shapes. Because of the shadow’s flexibility and mobility, it actually performs with the actors and adds to their expressions. Precisely, the shadow’s instability and illusiveness generate a feeling of doubt, pressing against the protagonists’ face and blended with the tension of an imminent passion. The protagonists’ doubt about this relationship is then concretely proved in their hesitation; first, she pauses when he runs out of patience and boldly holds her hand on keyboard; then, after she gives in, he pushes her down onto the keyboard, but all of a sudden, he turns his head away from her face and his smile disappears for a second before he turns back and kisses her again.

Except for their struggle (with each other and with themselves) in gesture, the light and shadows noticeably experience dramatic change. The dark surrounding is lightened up by the familiar orange red light when Jiaorui stops teasing and avoiding Zhenbao’s kiss. There is no transition or fade-in before the scene cuts to a warm and bright close-up
of them. And as they kiss, the shadow on their faces fades until it totally disappears, as if doubt and boundary between them vanish.

The light and shadows give life to the characters’ surroundings, as if they can feel whatever the characters feel and they show it boldly. In the film, the dramatic change of light and shadow in the surroundings in some sense adapts Chang’s sensitivity to the atmosphere of the novel. She frequently lets her characters gaze on the world around, and she enables them to invest it with their feelings, as if the world is also an emotional being and poses according to their preference. As she depicts Zhenbao’s loneliness when he stands on her balcony watching the street: “Two leaves skittered by in the wind like ragged shoes not worn by anyone, just walking along by themselves. So many people in the world – but they won’t be coming home with you” (Chang 270). The two leaves carry Zhenbao’s desolate feelings. They are personified according to his emotion. And similarly, Chang describes Jiaorui’s attraction to him when they accidentally run into each other in the dark hallway: “The dim lamp-lit hallway felt like a train car traveling from one strange place to another. On the train you meet a woman quite by accident – a woman who could be a friend” (277). This analogy makes the still hallway roving, and the place’s vividness in his eyes is because of her presence. If this kind of linguistic beauty is not transferable to film because it is conceptual but not concrete, at least the message hidden in it is clear that the emotion Chang conveys needs a malleable environment, acting and responding to the characters’ mental activities.

Briefly, Kwan’s exertion of light and shadow is active and alive. At this point, the film catches a part of Chang’s subtlety. Kwan intentionally repeats and emphasizes the connection between a certain occasion and a corresponding tone of light and shadows.
Hence, the connection creates a comparatively fixed meaning to each kind of light and shadows.

Another prominent pair of objects that actively assist in creating an emotional environment are the building where the lovers live and its elevator. It is an apartment building installed with an old Shanghai style elevator. (Jiaorui and her husband live in one of the apartments. Zhenbao lodges at one of the rooms in the couple’s apartment as mentioned). Every time the elevator moves up or down, a rumbling sound echoes in the whole building. Every time it sounds, one of Jiaorui’s lovers arrives or leaves. The camera is not curious about the building’s entire appearance and physical structure, except for the trivial items and sights in the building that the protagonists pass and touch. The casual way that the camera closely follows the protagonists and wanders back and forth through doors, hallways, bedrooms and the living room confuses the apartment’s inner structure and makes it seem like a labyrinth. In the novel, one of the protagonists’ flirtations is responsible for this idea in the film. The flirtatious plot is also truthfully rendered in the film. It is their first time staying alone after Zhenbao moves in and Jiaorui’s husband leaves for Singapore. Both of them are on the balcony, she explains that her carelessness about her playmates is because her hear is an apartment. By such explanation, she must mean her affairs always come and go; one goes out, one comes on. Zhenbao finds a great opportunity to flirt as he says, “well, is there an empty room for rent?” But he continues, “I’m not used to living in an apartment building. I want a single-family house”. Jiaorui responds, “let’s see if you can tear one down and build the other”! And she confesses to him later in the novel and also in the film: “Every day, when I sit here waiting for you to come back. I hear the elevator slowly clacking its way up. When
it goes past our floor without stopping, it feels like my own heart’s gone up, that it’s just hanging in midair. But when the elevator stops before it reaches out floor, it seems like my breath’s been cut off” (Chang 281). In the film, the building especially Jiaorui’s apartment where most events happen is created according to her description. It is the counterpart of her inner world as she analogizes, with the elevator coming up and down like her heart-beating. The building’s (the apartment’s) befuddling inner structure corresponds to her sophistication. Zhenbao accidentally steps in, trapped in this labyrinth. The wall and floor in her apartment are mottled, like a mosaic, capable of wearing out one’s sensitivity of perception. The gowns that she wears are always in the same tone as the wall. Thus for some moments, her figure is indistinguishable from the surroundings, which seem like spreading out from her gown. It recalls Chang’s description in the novel, “she (Jiaorui) was wearing a long dress that trailed on the floor, a dress of such intense, fresh, and wet green that anything it touched turned the same color. When she moved a little, the air was streaked with green” (271). In the film, she never wears green but given the compatibility between her gowns and the wall around her, her connection to her surroundings is salient.

She and her apartment including everything in it become one in Zhenbao’s eyes. The film reveals that whatever she touches and sees becomes a part of her, distracting and luring him. The shampoo bubbles she carelessly splashes on his hand, her fallen hair in the bathroom tube, her bathrobe on the couch, and the milk bottle she leaves on the table, her piano, and even the music she plays are all her in his eyes. One of the long takes shows him sitting beside her bathrobe on the couch and listening to her playing the piano in the next room. With a troubled frown, he turns his head and gazes at the milk bottle
and everything else she leaves around. They spread out and besiege him. When he tries to stretch out a little, his right hand accidentally touches the robe. He holds his hand back in hesitation and rubs it uneasily. Then, as if he gives up struggling, he suddenly, hopelessly leans his head back on the couch and closes his eyes. But the music she plays still haunts him. For Zhenbao, she is everywhere in the apartment and leaves him no place to hide.

Both in the novel and in the film, Zhenbao tries to resist her and fight her seduction in the beginning, thinking of his idea of building up a right world. But his effort is not promising in the place where she is the master, not him. The film’s emphasis of his sensation for every item related to her paves the way for his collapse of resistance. It happens when he accidentally sees her secretly wearing his raincoat and smelling his cigarette butt. (In the novel, Jiaorui hooks Zhenbao’s raincoat on the frame of an oil painting and stare at it, rather than wear it). For Jiaorui, Zhenbao’s belongings must have the same effect on her as hers on him. Their attraction to each other is conveyed and communicated through the building, the apartment, the objects and everything else that their figures sweep over.

For several moments, their bodies and poses are so compatible to the surroundings that they become a part of the decoration of the apartment. In one striking long shot, the camera smoothly skims over a bunch of roses, the mottled wall bricks, an ashtray, her night gown, milk bottles, and her piano, all of which are in the foreground. Meanwhile, deep down in the blurring background behind the frosted glasses is an obscure shadow of their hugging together, looming. The shot is accompanied by the ever-changing light that the camera travels through. Their figures are merged into their surroundings and their passion is parallel to the objects which once fill the empty distance between them. Then
the film cuts to their love scene, including a close-up first and then a long shot. Their figures cast clear-cut shadows on the wall, more explicit than their real bodies besieged by the darkness on the other half of the frame. The camera zooms in to their shadows rather than the authentic bodies in bed. For a second, their shadows on the wall is no less than an erotic fresco, adding to the building a fresh, living decoration. It echoes what Jiaorui says to Zhenbao in the novel and also included by the film, “the house that you wanted has been built” (Chang 281).

The characters’ sensitivity makes the objective surroundings emotional, but the influence is reversible in the way that the surroundings swallow their figures, lists and highlights their physical existence as one of the concrete items in the building. Through the creative rendering of the building and arrangement of the trivial items, Kwan suggests that the protagonists’ emotion contains a great deal of physical desire which makes their relationship ever intense. Their bodies and souls are almost inseparable. In the novel, Chang’s portrayal of Zhenbao’s affection for Jiaorui indeed has great emphasis on physical pleasure and also on his guilty feelings. (Although Chang does not spend much length describing sex as Kwan does in the film, the message is made quite explicit regardless of her conciseness.) When it comes to the spiritual aspect of Zhenbao’s emotion, the clue becomes elusive.

Chang reveals that Zhenbao, for several times, meditates on his feelings for Jiaorui. The first time, after their flirtation on the balcony (about the apartment and the single-family house), Chang exposes his mind:

She (Jiaorui) seemed smart and straightforward, but with the emotions of a still-maturing girl – even though she was a wife already. That, for him, was
her most appealing feature. There was a danger here, a danger much greater than simple lust…Maybe…maybe it was just her body after all. When a man yearns for a woman’s body, then starts to care about her mind, he fools himself into believing that he’s in love. Only after possessing her body can he forget her soul. This may be the only way to free himself…Suddenly, Zhenbao realized that he was digging for reasons to justify sleeping with this woman. (276)

At this moment, his physical desire overpowers his spirit and deeply confuses his feelings. For the sake of his reputation, he avoids her in the beginning.

But then his attitude experiences a certain change, when he sees her childishly stares at his raincoat and smell his cigarette stub. Chang reveals that according to Zhenbao’s aesthetics, “the mind of a child and the beauty of a grown woman” is “the most tempting of combinations” (280). And later on, he looks at her playing the piano with “tears welling up in his eyes” (Chang 280). He is softened up by her. His thoughts and facial expression almost confirm that his affection for her is a perfect combination of both physical and spiritual love.

However, Chang starts to refute it soon after. After Zhenbao is sexually involved with Jiaorui and she flirtatiously tells him that the house he likes has been built, Chang writes: “He couldn’t really say that he was pleased. The thrill of pleasure had made his whole body sing, but all at once it was quite. Now there was only a desolate calm; he felt sated and empty at the same time” (281). His feelings are both surprising and bewildering at this moment, as they seem that after possessing Jiaorui’s body, Zhenbao forgets her soul and almost everything between them. It reverses the development of their relationship,
and responds to his first self-analysis on his impulse for her; he must be right about the discourse that his care about her soul is only because he yearns for her body, and if his desolate calm means anything other than satisfaction, it might be a relief from his obsession with her. The only problem is that if his love for her is only physical, the glistening tears once welling up in his eyes (when he looks at her) would be left inexplicably.

It is unsettled when exactly Zhenbao falls in love, or if he has even been in love. Through the protagonists’ physical contact, Chang is in search of concrete evidence of their spiritual love, but the sexual experience is transient and the passion can hardly be maintained and analyzed. When they are having sex, Jiaorui once asks Zhenbao if there is any difference from sex without love. Zhenbao replies positively. But in fact, Chang reveals he actually cannot tell at all. It is neither yes nor no. Chang implicates, when the sex is over, the emptiness emerges. She embraces the confusion and the sudden emptiness after passion. Such emptiness generates the “desolate calm” that she refers to. It is rather a disappointing feeling after desire is gone.

If Chang’s description about Zhenbao’s feelings for Jiaorui haunts the audiences, Kwan’s representation assures them. One reason is because that sexuality is much stronger and more impressive in images than in words. Kwan surely dramatizes it in a striking manner, although not as bold as Ang Lee does in Lust Caution. The graphical rendering of sex is always staged with the camera’s emphasis of the surroundings, including light, shadow, walls and other trivial items. Therefore, the surroundings become sexy themselves and they fill in every corner of the frame. In this way, the tension maintains continuity without leaving any intermezzo, any opportunity for
emptiness. Another reason is because, in the film, when Jiaorui asks if their sex is different from that of no love, Zhenbao confirms it. Kwan does not reveal it otherwise as Chang does in the novel; instead, he lets the protagonists’ passion grow without any setback (except for Zhenbao’s worries about her husband’s coming back). In brief, Zhenbao and Jiaorui’s relationship develops in a more explicit and flamboyant manner in the film. Their intimacy conveyed by their flirtation and sex is immediate and unquestionable. And their pleasure is provocative and concrete. The frankness of the images does not leave much space for the doubt of their spiritual involvement. Kwan makes Zhenbao’s relationship with the married woman almost a complete one, body and soul. As such, he simplifies Zhenbao’s worries; his worry becomes all about her as a married woman and his friend’s wife. Put differently, his concern is that the love affair is not supposed to happen, but not love itself. Kwan thus darkens the whole world to respond to the absurdity and immorality that haunt Zhenbao. The world does not look right in both the audiences’ eyes and his eyes, regardless of the immense pleasure he seems to have.

In contrast to the darkness which occupies the screen throughout the first half of the film, in the second half, the brightness takes over. A dramatic change of settings and lightening happens at the moment when Zhenbao rushes away from Jiaorui in anger, because she tells his husband about their adultery without consulting him first. Zhenbao has not been prepared for such event and walks out on her at once. The elevator takes him down the building and she chases after him. The moment when the elevator passes two big windows back in the wall, a remarkable contradiction is exposed. As one can see, the elevator descends, brimming over with an orange red light. It recalls both the erotic
theme in the earlier part, and also the analogy between the elevator and Jiaorui’s heart-beating. Thus, the elevator goes down, as if he takes her breath away, and the passion that they have also declines. At the same time, from the windows up in the wall, a brighter and whiter sunlight is filtered through. The different, raw brightness implies a different world outside; it used to be ghostly dark and ambiguous.

Another change in the environment is also impressive. She chases after him to the outside of the building. A long shot shows her standing alone and facing the empty street that he just leaves. All the branches are still bare as they always have been from the beginning till this moment. But soon after, when he painfully walks towards the bus station, behind his back, the shadow of swaying leaves proves that the trees are flourishing. And his face and hands glister under the golden daylight which is long absent in the first half of the film. For all of a sudden, the city becomes real.

In correspondence with the abrupt change of environment, Zhenbao also endures mental disturbance. He rants at her and criticizes her imprudence and carelessness about his future. The toughness and anguish that he mentally goes through is delivered by a seemingly car accident inflicting on his physical body. But meanwhile, some bystanders say that he just collapses himself. It confuses the pain in his body with that in his soul. (In the novel, it is food poisoning.)

His illness foretells his rebirth. Lying in the hospital bed, his mind is occupied with distorted, ridiculous dreams. In this sequence, it is hard to tell the dreams from reality. For one moment, Jiaorui cries by his side and he explains to her his predicament, but for another moment, they make love in a flowing blue background, which looks like they swiftly fall from high up. After he wakes up, he finds her hair on his pillow. The
boundary between his dreams and reality is further confused. With a teardrop coming down his cheek, an inter-title emerges: “When he wakes up the next day, Zhenbao makes up his mind to start all over again. He is once again a decent, responsible person.” It sounds as if all that happen between him and Jiaorui is indeed an unrealistic nightmare, and finally he wakes up from it. The morning light spreads all over his face, as if it tries to overcome the darkness left by the nightmare. However, it only highlights his tears and his sadness.

In constant bright sunlight, the second half of the film starts Zhenbao’s story all over again. Like the beginning of the film, a voice over starts to introduce him, as if we never know him and nothing has ever happened in the earlier part. Chang is comparatively concise in the rest part of the novel. Zhenbao gets married to Yanli, his white rose, a pure and innocent woman. But he is soon worn out by the dreariness of his marital life. Consequently, his torment corrupts him.

The film’s difference from the novel, if it is not obvious in the first half, is more explicitly shown in the second half. At first glance, Kwan is not as concise in this half as Chang is in the novel. He tries to balance two halves of the story by adding a great length to the second one. His main purpose is to emphasize Zhenbao’s good quality as “an ideal modern Chinese man” (Chang 255). Kwan also tries to highlight the rightness in Zhenbao’s ideal world, in contrast to the wrong one that he left behind. For instance, in the first scene of the second half, Zhenbao is shown as a guest speaker on stage, with hundreds of people looking at him. Then his wedding scene follows; Yanli (Veronica Yip), his “spotless wife” (Chang 255), is in white wedding dress and he is still under hundreds of people’s attention. Kwan frequently emphasizes the aboveboard and realistic
tone of Zhenbao’s activities, compared to his secret immoral life once in Jiaorui’s private apartment. From the two scenes, the right world that he is devoted proves to be made up of a respectful career and a legitimate marriage. And above all, people consider him as a successful man, an excellent example.

However, the essential difference does not lie in such scenes that are added to the story, but in the way that the original sequence of the novel is arranged. There are two significant moments. The first one is ironic and absurd. After his wedding scene, or one can say, as soon as his perfect image is set up, the very next scene immediately shows, he walks out of a prostitute’s house and goes on to a quite alley. According to the novel, some time after marriage, Zhenbao gets used to everything. Hence, in his eyes, Yanli just turns into “a very dull wife” (Chang 295). Then his uneasiness emerges and he starts going to prostitutes “once every three weeks” (Chang 295). But in the film, his corruption happens too soon after his marriage that Chang’s explanation does not seem applicable to such behavior. And the sex scene (an embarrassing one) which shows her dullness and his disappointment is even after the scene that shows his visit to the prostitute. Therefore, in the film, it will be more convincing that the reason for his abrupt corruption lies in his relationship with Jiaorui. He loves her, as Kwan proves without any reserve that Chang has; although he leaves her, their emotion still haunts him that he can hardly love his wife. His corruption is an evidence of his sadness because of losing his true love. It is a consistent clue maintained from the first half of the film to the second.

But in the novel, the clue is different. Because as mentioned before, in the first half of the film, Chang never really confirms that Zhenbao’s love for Jiaorui is so sincere and deep that it is capable of ruining his later marriage. As a matter of fact, in the introduction
paragraph of the novel, Chang comes straight to the point and puts forward Zhenbao’s
dilemma (the same content is heard in a voice-over in the film):

> Maybe every man has had two such women – at least two. Marry a red rose
> and eventually she’ll be a mosquito-blood streak smeared on the wall, while
> the white one is ‘moonlight in front of my bed’. Marry a white rose, and
> before long she’ll be a grain of sticky rice that’s gotten stuck to your clothes;
> the red one, by then, is a scarlet beauty mark just over your heart. (255)

As a result, the cause of Zhenbao’s broken marriage is rather because he is never satisfied
with either of his two roses and his wife eventually becomes that “grain of sticky rice”.
For him, the one he cannot get always seems better than the one he has already possessed.
In short, the reason lies in himself rather than his love for others.

The impression is stressed in another significant moment when he accidentally runs
into Jiaorui years after they broke up. In the novel, it is one of the moments that
aggravate his torment and precipitate his further corruption. She is married again, to a
person she loves and they have a son. She tells Zhenbao, “starting from you…I
learned…how to love…to really love” (Chang 299). He sees with his owns eyes her
happiness, and Chang reveals that Zhenbao’s heart, “at that moment, was aching with
jealousy” (299). He cries, although he thinks on the occasion, “she should be weeping, he
should be comforting her” (Chang 299). The feeling that hits him most is not the reunion
after a long separation, but it is his jealousy of her happiness without him. Again, it is
himself that he thinks about.

In the film, the same reunion is arranged at the end of the story. They meet in a city
bus. The sunlight disappears; the murkiness that we used to see in the first half of the film
comes back. The camera shows their faces in a series of close-ups. A beam of orange red
light shines on their face and adds to them a gleam of tenderness, echoing the old days
and all the pleasure that they used to have. They seem to avoid talking about their past,
however, the familiar lightening and settings that once last the first half of the film keep
recalling it. His jealousy, as Chang says in the novel, can hardly stand in the nostalgia
and melancholy atmosphere. Given his deep affection for her in the film, this unexpected
meeting is more like a relief from the mental burden, imposed on him by the facts that he
abandons her for his bright future and leaves her in misery. The occasion is like a closure
of their love affair. Afterwards, Zhenbao suddenly changes its attitude towards his daily
life. This occasion does not let him sink any lower, but on the contrary, he again decides
to “become a decent, responsible person”, as the inter-title shows at the end of the film.

The mise-en-scene achieves the best part of the adaptation. It creatively constructs the
two conflicting worlds and vividly clarifies Chang’s intention of comparing them. At this
point, the graphical image is handier and striking than the linguistic presentation. It
makes the tension and passion between Zhenbao and Jiaorui even more provocative and
appealing than these in Chang’s novel. Chang is too pessimistic to let her characters’
totally fall in love with no reserve and no hesitation. But Kwan has such warmth and
enthusiasm as he shows in this film and also in his other films. Although both the
Zhenbao characters are tied down by the right way of living that he chooses and they both
give up struggling in the end, in the film, his suffering is because that he loves Jiaorui so
much that he is not able to love anybody else. But in the novel, it is himself that he is
deeply in love with that he actually has never been in love with anyone body and soul. At
least, in the film, he has been in love once. Again, Chang exposes her preference to desolation.
Chapter 6 Case Study Three: Lust Caution

As already mentioned, the first draft of Lust Caution is said to be written by Chang in 1950, but she spent 28 years editing and rewriting it, while also attending to her other works. On April 11th, 1978, it was first published by Chinese Times, an influential Taiwan newspaper and created a great sensation because of its freshness and boldness in handling the subject involving love, sexuality, patriotism and betrayal. Soon after this short story (only about 10,000 characters) came out, the response swiftly turned from regular literary academic discussion to a personal and political issue. On October 1st, 1978, a person under the pen name Yu Wai Ren published his/her comment also in Chinese Times, criticizing Lust Caution a worthless and tortuous work in praise of national traitors. In response to the attack, Chang wrote a brief essay named “About Lust Caution” (“Tan” Se Jie) and asked in reply if the portrayal of negative characters has to be superficial criticism and demonization, without entering their inner worlds. Her sharp question indicates her decreased emphasis on the political and social standards for identifying and judging a person, but emphasizes her lifetime meditation on humanity and love.

In Lust Caution, Chang shocks the Chinese literature world by having emotional bonding develop and flourish under deception and killing during the Anti-Japanese War. This emotional bonding is definitely related to love, but not exactly what it is. It is a failed assassination of a Japanese collaborator, Mr. Yee. Wang Chia-chih, a young, attractive woman, is assigned the mission to seduce him and lead him to the patriots’ trap, but she lets go of him at the last moment. With no introduction about characters, history and social conditions, the story comes straight to the assassination event. It lets the short
several hours last throughout the narrative. But one might have the feeling that it actually goes on for the protagonists’ lifetime.

The main storyline is meticulous but concise. Chia-Chih finishes playing Mahjong at 3 o’clock one day in the afternoon at Yee’s house (with his wife and other two government officials’ wives). She goes to a café and waits for him. When he arrives, she asks him to go to a jewel shop with her to repair one of her earrings. The jewel shop is actually the place where the patriots plan to carry out the assassination. Throughout the narrative, Chia-chih constantly observes her surroundings and guesses how exactly Yee is going to be killed. In the shop, he decides to buy her a diamond ring. The tenderness that she perceives in his eyes when he looks at her suddenly softens her up and leads to her fatal whisper beside his ear, “Run” (Chang 39). Shortly after he reaches safety, he immediately telephones “to get the whole area sealed off” (Chang 45). Before 10 o’clock on the same day, she and her colleagues are all executed. Chang directly reveals Yee’s emotion only in the very end, “she must have hated him at the end. But real men have to be ruthless. She wouldn’t have loved him if he’d been the sentimental type…..now that had enjoyed the love of a beautiful woman, he could die happy – without regret. He could feel her shadow forever near him, comforting him” (45). Paradoxically, in order to test love’s possible existence, Chang tells a brutal story about death.

Under the apparent storyline, a secondary clue, about how Chia-Chih gets involved in this assassination and what her relation with Yee looks like, is indicated through her memories and thoughts. The information, about what happened before the time period covered by the novel, occupies only a limited length (no more than 1000 characters). It is told in several brief and quick flashes of Chang’s linguistic wisdom. And because of the
eroticism the information contained, it creates a surge every time it emerges from the brutal narration of the assassination.

With this clue flowing under the main plotline, the novel is striking and shocking in the way that it juxtaposes two extremely opposite situations: while Chia-chih is figuring how Yee is going to be killed, she is also reflecting on their intense bonding felt in their physical contact. As Chang reveals Chia-chih suspicion, “surely she hadn’t fallen in love with Yee? Despite her fierce skepticism toward the idea, she found her self unable to refute the notion entirely; since she had never been in love, she had no idea what it might feel like” (37). Her meditation on her feelings for him is able to generate an abnormal and chilly sense, because she might be in love with the man who she is sending to death.

More than often, love between two is not thought and analyzed under such circumstance.

The conflict produces an uneasy, cruel effect, as if one sees a warm, soft body presses against a sharp blade. In the film, Ang Lee highlights this “body” and intensely represents the development of the protagonists’ fatal relationship through the bold graphical rendering of their sexuality. Ang Lee’s film makes his argument about what Chang actually intends to stress between the lines: the assassination along with the related history and politics is shown but not the concentration; the story rather focuses on the emotional and physical bonding between the two protagonists staged and caged in the middle of the conspiracy. Therefore, in the film, the novel’s secondary clue (as mentioned, hinted through Chia-Chih’s reflections on her sexual relationship with Yee since the assassination plan comes into being) is sorted out, and developed into the dominating part, over the apparent, main storyline (the final assassination) of the novel.

In the film, when Chia-chih (Wei Tang) waits for Yee (Tony Leung) at the café before
they go to the jewel shop (the patriots’ trap), a two hour long flash back takes over and fully constructs and represents both the cause of the assassination and the details of the seduction plan from the very beginning when Chia-chih was still a college student and the anti-Japanese war just erupted.

In the novel, Chang’s prudence about the subject of sexuality is self-evident. The deceptive relation between her and Yee is not completely presented. The disturbance of their sexuality is told in highly selective pieces of information through Chia-chih’s mental activities. All that we know from the novel is that she and her body are a part of the assassination plan. Chang provides us with very succinct but provocative erotic sketches to give out the message that Chia-chih’s relationship with Yee is immensely occupied by physical pleasure. We have no access to the information about how exactly it develops, except that Chia-chih at several moments tries to analyze their sexuality as it stands, in hopes of penetrating it. The novel, therefore, leaves many questions about their emotion. They haunt the narrative and make it heavy and mysterious. The most prominent and compelling questions must be that what makes her suddenly confirm that he loves her, and if she is right, how come his love can be so meaningful to her that she can give up patriotism, her dignity and life to save his, regardless of his identity as a national traitor, a villain and a killer.

In pursuit of possible answers to these questions, Ang Lee presents his version of the story,. His way is not necessarily the only way, but it proves to be an effective way of discovering the undertone of Chang’s story and interpreting the emotion between the protagonists. The film adds to details about the planning of the assassination, and especially the confrontation between Chia-chih and Yee. Respectively, the conspiracy
and sexuality are emphasized and generate two main momentums in the film. They highlight the soul of the film, and indicate Ang Lee’s best guess of the disguised story hidden in Chang’s wording.

Apparently, the original story is structured in the conspiracy of killing a living being. But it only concentrates on the closure or the crescendo of this conspiracy (when the final assassination is carried out). When Chia-chih and Yee are together at the jewel shop, Chang suggests, “at this moment, it is as if only two of them are together” (36), and she further describes that this moment is “prolonged to eternity because of its tension” (38). Chang only selects this vital moment and tries to make it both longer and bigger than the protagonists’ lives.

But at the same time, Chang sighs over the transience of this moment. When Chia-chih puts on the diamond ring, she feels “a twinge of regret”, because as precious as the ring is, it is only for temporary use, no more than “a prop in the short, penultimate scene of the drama unfolding around it” (Chang 34). If the ring is a prop, the assassination conspiracy is supposedly the drama. The analogy is directly or indirectly stressed several times in the novel. It actually launches a guideline: mixed with truth and deception, the seduction-assassination plan is like a dramatic play. Based on this guideline, Chang organizes and develops her thought about the entire conspiracy. The protagonists on stage, precisely Chia-chih and Yee, wear various masks and have different concerns. Their actions and conversations are manipulated, traced and watched by the people behind the curtain. But this play has one and only opening which cannot be rehearsed and is irrevocable. Hence, the final moment that costs Chang an entire novel is both transient and eternal.
In constructing and structuring its version of the story, the film seizes and makes creative use of this comparison between the manipulated conspiracy and a scripted play. In the novel, Chang only briefly sketches the cause of the assassination plan, dating back to the time when Chia-chih was a college student and the leading actress of the college’s theatrical troupe. Chang writes:

While at college in Canton she’d starred in a string of rousingly patriotic history plays. Before the city fell to the Japanese, her university had relocated to Hong Kong, where the drama troupe had given one last public performance. Over-excited, unable to wind down after the curtain had fallen, she had gone out for a bite to eat with the rest of the cast. (17)

Chang implies that Chia-chih has this addiction to the role that she plays and seems to bring it to her real life. Later on, several students form a small, radical clique and plan the assassination: “To seduce him (Mr. Yee), with the help of one of their female classmates, towards an assassin’s bullet…the group decided to make her the young wife of a local businessman…. Enter the female star of the college drama troupe” (Chang 18). Clearly, these naïve college students treat the assassination as one of their stage-plays. Chia-chih’s position in the troupe sends her to the central stage, and she is doomed to be trapped in this dangerous performance because of her likely obsession with her roles.

Her risk of losing herself to her role in the assassination announces itself for the first time when she progresses a big step towards Mr. Yee. That day, she recommends a tailor to the Yees and seizes the occasion to give them her phone number. According to Chia-chih, if he is attracted to her, he will peep at the number and call her. After she goes back to her college-mates, Chang describes this “performance” as a “triumph”, and
“resplendent in the high-society costume in which she (Chia-chih) had performed so supremely, she wanted everyone to stay on to celebrate with her” (20). Chia-chih proves to love her role and starts to confuse the boundary between herself and this dangerous role she plays. The confusion is further evident in her sacrifice of herself, when she, almost ridiculously, agrees to lose her virginity to one of her friends in their clique. The purpose is to prepare herself for Yee’s pursuit. Chang’s description after Chia-chih agrees to the strategy is surprisingly calm, as if it is really a play. “And so the show went on.” She writes (21). But at this point, Chia-chih has already been absorbed much deeper than a play would require her. She launches too much of herself into this performance.

Correspondingly, the film fully develops the planning part. It adds to two aspects of the brief description in the original, and tries to emphasize the sense of a fatal play. First of all, the film attentively introduces us to the patriotic group of college students who comes up with the original idea of assassination and Chia-chih’s relation with them is also stressed. While Chang refers to these students occasionally without meticulous portrayal, the film tries to fully construct these characters. Each of them is given enough attention by the camera so that they can impress the audiences with their gestures, manners and voices. Compared to their counterparts in the novel, the characters in the film are given distinctive personalities and they stand out as an integral part of the film.

These characters’ potential for narrative is remarkable. Although Chang does not fully unfold the story about this group of college students, she gives out enough clues for Ang Lee’s film. She does not present them one by one; neither does she generalizes them as a group. For this group of energetic, naïve, young people, she focuses on their relations with each other during their cooperation on their unlikely plan. Using just a few casual
lines, she effectively complicates their relations and smoothes away the risk of turning these secondary characters into unnecessary redundancy. As already mentioned, in order to further seduce Yee, Chia-chih loses her virginity to Liang Jun-sheng, one of her male college-mates in the group. And Chang reveals, “for a time, she had thought she might be falling for K’uang Yu-min” (37), the leader of their group. The two male students are capable of distracting at least some of Chia-chih’s attention from Mr. Yee and her mission. One can discern more than one possible love triangles in their relations with each other. Although both of these two intermezzos are told in no more than two quick sentences, they are actually significant to the entire story. The film embraces and makes full use of the two clues, like it does a lot of others. Their significance is enlarged by the film, since the film gives more attention to the group of students than the novel does. The two guys, along with their influence on Chia-chih, mark her borderline between reality and the play which she acts in. They, representing their group, are the planners of the assassination, or the directors of this dangerous play. They bring Chia-chih into her role, but evidently, they do not leave her a way out of it.

Both in the film and in the novel, Chia-chih is no doubt the most crucial person in the group, but she is quite different from the others in position. On one hand, she is directed rather than directing others. In the novel, Chang suggests her difference by a series of comparatively direct expression. First, Chia-chih realizes that “they (their group) had been talking about it (her virginity) over behind her back for some time” (Chang 21). Then, after their first attempt of assassination is aborted because of Yee’s sudden leaving, she regrets losing her virginity. As Chang suggests, Chia-chih considers herself as “such an idiot” (22) in the event, and she wonders: “Had she been set up…from the very
beginning of this dead-end drama” (23)? As a result, “from this point on, she kept her distance not only from Liang Jun-sheng (the guy she has sex with), but also from their entire little group. All the time she was with them, she felt they were eyeing her curiously– as if she were some kind of freak, or grotesque” (23). Her suspicion might be paranoia, but since Chang does not confirm it, neither does she deny it, one can either believe it, or at least tell that Chia-chih’s colleagues treat her as a part or a step of the plan, which they can arrange and schedule. And they attend to her issue without her notice and presence.

In short, both the way and the content that they discuss about her do not respect her as an equal member of their group. Therefore, later in the narrative, Chang suddenly says, “she (Chia-chih) ended up hating him (K’uang Yu-min, the leader of their group and the one who she thought she would love) – for turning out just like the others” (37).

In the film, Ang Lee does not fasten the audiences’ attention to their rudeness and Chia-chih’s regret, although the corresponding actions are either directly included or indirectly implied by the film. Through framing, he has a different, milder way of stressing Chia-chih’s position of being directed. The scene, which shows she is first recruited to the group’s secret gathering, is seen twice in the film. The first time is after the successful opening night of a patriotic stage-play they have prepared. On the second day, she shows up in the auditorium and walks onto the stage. Two long shots show that she strolls among the bare tree props placed on stage, very relaxed. She seems to believe that nobody is around. But the following shot proves she is wrong; someone suddenly calls her from somewhere. As she turns back, the film cuts to a long shot of her colleagues, sitting or standing in the audience section on the second floor. They all face and gaze at her from afar. Only after she climbs up the floor and joins them does K’uang
Yu-ming first proposes his suggestion of assassination. But one also has a reason to believe that only after she joins in the group does Ang Lee first show Kuang’s proposal of assassination.

Similar to what Chang does in the novel, Ang Lee does not articulate what the group of people talk before they see Chia-chih strolling on the empty stage. Later in the film, when they send the other girl in the group to talk with her about sex, Chia-chih, without complaining or saying anything else, first utters, “you’ve already discussed it…” The question she leaves untouched is when they discussed it. This question gets back to the scene mentioned before. It is possible they have the sex issue in mind or even have it planned out before they notice Chia-chih walks onto the stage. Although it is only an unjustified suspicion, Ang Lee reminds the audiences of the possible existence of some untold events, besides the story directly seen on screen. He also has drawn an invisible line between Chia-chih and the other people in the group. She is watched on stage in the middle of the props, and they are altogether at the audiences section, watching her. They know more than she does, and also more than the audiences do.

The same scene emerges again near the end of the film after Yee escapes from the assassination. When Chia-chih takes a rickshaw and gets caught in the enemies’ road closure, she takes out the poison sewed in her collar and intends to commit suicide, but she pauses and thinks of the day when she is caught by her colleagues wandering on the empty stage. The corresponding scene is inserted as a flashback. The minor difference from the first time (the same scene is shown) is that this time, the camera lingers longer on their expressions in closer shots. Since the shots are all from the characters’ subjective viewpoints, she looks as if she is able to see them clearer and vice versa. Their
confrontation in a distance is emphasized. When they call her to go upstairs and join
them, the sequence ends at the moment she turns back and stares at them. Without the
shot of her running to them, their confrontation is actually frozen at this very point.

However, although she is on one hand directed by the rest of them, on the other hand,
she escapes from their manipulation by entering a real emotional world. It is the second
aspect of the novel, from which Ang Lee develops his own version, and it is the core
issue and gravest part of the film. Both in the novel and in the film, the cause that Chia-
chih plunges into is first defined to be a deceit in essence. For her, it is a performance, a
mission and duty when it starts.

In the novel, even when the final assassination is impending, she still seems to be
devoted to the patriotic cause, although her mind is occasionally occupied by the
memories of when she and Yee were together. While observing her surroundings and
guessing how Yee is going to be killed, she takes a break here and there to think about
their relation. For five times, Chang implies Yee’s lingering on Chia-chih’s body. All of
the sentences are short, casual and even comical, as if Chang tries to smooth away the
uneasiness (if it ever exists). For instance, when Chia-chih waits for him in the café, she
recalls once they are in their private apartment; they have sex and she seems to be
running out of patience on him, but as Chang describes, “she wouldn’t be able to hurry
him along, like a prostitute with a customer” (16).

The fact is that the sentences like this prominently protrude from the overall sullen
atmosphere. The eroticism they suggest sounds less bleak and also less grave compared
with the upcoming assassination. One cannot tell how serious and rational Chia-chih is
when she indulges her thought in this way, expecting that a bullet suddenly comes from
somewhere and the man, whom she might be in love with, falls dead in front of her immediately. Her mind goes back and forth between the upcoming assassination and the man by her side, put differently, between killing and sex. It perpetuates the tension and fierceness. But meanwhile, Chia-chih is revealed to be composed and even cold as Chang’s language enables her to be. Her underplayed manner in contrast to the homicidal situation generates sharp brutality, which prevails over the brutality coming directly from the assassination itself.

The way that Chang places killing and sex side by side finds its application in Ang Lee’s adaptation. In the film, the character Mr. Yee is fleshed out. His violence in sex is closely related to the nature of his job (he is the head of the secret service): killing. This connection is particularly evident in one of the sex scenes in his car. Her complaint of his being late irritates him. In a fury, he explains why he has been late. It is because he has to interrogate two patriots (one of whom is his classmate in Military Academy) and see them be tortured to death. While explaining, he aggressively offends her and sexually abuses her. Another sex scene that follows includes a menacing shot in which she notices the pistol hanging on the closet. Corresponding to her change of attention, the focus of the camera, which is first on her and Yee, changes to the pistol in the foreground of the frame and leaves them in the blurring background. The camera again overtly emphasizes the connection between killing and their violent sex.

Both of the subjects look inhuman in the film, carried out by two human beings. It suggests what James Schamus, the screenwriter of the film, once said in an interview, “it is an almost inhuman idea of what it means to be human beings.” In the film, Chia-chih once addresses Yee, “you must be very lonely”, he responds, “but I’m still alive.” She
later uses his words to explain his violence: through the violence, almost resembling a killing, “he can feel alive”. It is the same paradox Schamus reveals. Chia-Chih and Yee seem to test their life and humanity on the edge of death and inhumanity. Ang Lee shows us that the two sets of opposite concepts can be so close that for the two protagonists, they are almost inseparable.

But it is only a part of the film and of their relationship. In the other part of it, Ang Lee presents a conventional love story between two lonely people, who for some reason run into each other. Although the reason that they meet is because of the assassination, Ang Lee shows that this reason is good enough for two people to fall in love. The corresponding part in the novel is missing. Chang’s story is only about the final assassination moment, and when Chia-chih thinks about her relationship with Yee, it is based on sexuality but not directly on their emotion (love) for each other. Therefore, in the film, the emotional part regarding the development of the protagonists’ relationship is almost a pure Ang Lee story; purer than any other part (including the plots of the group of patriotic students and the killing-sexuality comparison) that he creates, following the clues sorted out from the novel. Through the part, Ang Lee tries to explain and rationalize Chia-chih’s sudden change of decision at the last minute. He lets the protagonists’ spiritual bonding keeps up with their physical desire.

In the film, Ang Lee’s handling of the protagonists’ emotional development is subtle, as it always is in his other acclaimed films. No small expression is trivial. A fugitive glance can hide a big world. The first time Chia-chih and Yee are together by themselves, they are at a tailor’s shop. She tries on a new cheong-sam. Because it fits too well, she complains she can hardly breathe. He stands in a distance, quietly watching her and
listening to her grumbles. But when she is about to change it, he firmly and suddenly speaks up, “leave it on.” It surprises her. Correspondingly, the film cuts to their close-up shots. A hint of smile settles on each of their faces. The chemistry between them is evoked by his sudden utterance and the sudden silence that follows. At the moment, it is hard to tell if she is faking. At least, he is not. The fact is that she does leave the cheongsam on all day long.

This moment is the only one in the film. Their reunion is another memorable moment. (After the first assassination attempt fails, Chia-chih leaves Hong Kong for Japanese-occupied Shanghai. Meanwhile, the other students of the group get contact with an underground party member Old Wu. They restart the assassination plan in Shanghai and Chia-chih is invited to continue her role of a seducer). That day, he steps into his house with an extremely gloomy face. His eyes, as he once says about his colleagues, are full of fear. But when he sees her in the living room, the tension on her face is wiped away and replaced by a more relaxing expression, a smile. This smile is in sharp contrast to his expression a second ago. It makes him look more pleased than the smile originally suggests. Later on, in her bedroom, it is the second moment in the film that they face each other alone. She says to him, “it’s been three years, the war is still not over…for us, both to be here, still alive, is enough.” It is touching, whether she means it or just performs.

Again, with gentleness in his eyes, he does not fake his pleasure over seeing her. (He does not have to under the circumstance). When it comes to her, one still cannot tell the truth from the pretense. Given her role in the assassination plan, it is easier to assume that she makes a pretense rather than she has already been dawn to him. However, another moment that follows is going to shake one’s belief of her pretense, although it is still not
an assurance of her sincerity to Yee. In their first sex scene, which is no less than a rape scene, there is one shot, after he leaves, capturing a suddenly emerged smile on her face. It is quite mysterious and disturbing. The camera, pushed down from almost a bird’s eye angle and rotating almost 180 degree, approaches and zooms in on her face. Her face is up-side-down in the frame when the smile rises. If the smile is another pretense, who is the audience since he has already gone? Is she experiencing any turmoil in her mind at this very moment? At least, the camera movement implies it.

A safe explanation for the smile is that she feels a certain attachment to him. And the impression is stressed shortly after their first sex scene and her problematic pretense is once again questioned. She suddenly decides to go back to Hong Kong. We do not know from the film if it is a strategy of the assassination or her own decision of withdrawing from it. If it is a strategy, it does not fit into the nature of her role in the plan, because her leaving does not seem to help her seduce him. If she means to draw herself out of the plan, is it because she realizes she has gone too far under her role and she feels threatened by her feeling for him? In other words, is she in love with him?

But she tells him she hates him. (The reason is because he leaves for Nanjing without sending her any message. The hatred she says sounds like love. But it is debatable whether she means what she says.) We see in the film, Yee rushes back to her and tries to prevent her from leaving. Their conversation is very unusual. He does not feel offended by her frank expression of hatred. On the contrary, he says in a trembling voice that he likes to listen to her hatred. As already mentioned earlier, she immediately replies, “you must be very lonely”. Her logic is revealed to be: since even hatred will make him feel better, his loneliness must be tremendous; in other words, he is so lonely that even hatred
will make him feel less lonely. After the closely following sex scene (their second sex scene in the film), she asks him for a private apartment in Shanghai, which means she would like to stay. If she hates him as much as she says and if her logic about loneliness and hatred applies to him, this logic must also apply to her, because she cancels her trip to Hong Kong, but rather stays with the person who she just says she hates. Her change of mind indicates that she is also lonely, no less than him.

Actually her loneliness does not have to be deduced from what she says. The film makes very clear that she has nobody. Her relatives, including her father, leave her by herself. Her friends make use of her. Before she sets out for the mission, she hands in a letter for her father, but her boss, the underground party member Old Wu, burns it as soon as she steps out. She is devoted to the patriotic cause and a group of patriots, but at the same time, surrounded by coldness. Compared with the so-called good people, the national traitor and the villain Mr. Yee is warmer and more emotional, with fear, violence and love. In the film, unquestionably, Yee is her sole, firm attachment, regardless of the way that she captures him and he attracts her.

Her attachment to him proves to develop and goes deeper. She begins to generate other concerns about their relationship as the story unfolds and the final assassination approaches. Her anxiety further confuses the boundary between her role and herself. Evidently, in her second secret meeting with K’uang Yu-min, (it is after she changes her mind of going to Hong Kong, and they meet in a movie theater during a movie screening), she seems to be on the edge of collapse. Compared with her composure and professional during their first meeting in a city bus, this time she trembles, mumbles and paranoids. She confesses her worries, not about the process of their assassination plan,
but about Yee, because she is afraid that he might have other lovers. The person presented on screen is no longer a composed and trained agent with a lofty cause, but an exhausted, jealousy woman. Again, similar to the mysterious smile she once has behind Yee’s back, if she puts on an act this time, who is the audience since he is absent? The only logical explanation is that it is not an act. After the meeting, one night, she confronts Yee with the same worries in the same grumbles, jealousy and paranoia.

From the beginning to this moment, if any criterion is absolutely safe to estimate how real and sincere she is, it is the occasion. Precisely and reasonably, when she meets the planners of the assassination, she does not pretend her emotion and does not have to. But when she is with Yee, she has to. Back and forth between the two occasions, she goes in and out of the dramatic play which she acts in. However, her consistent discomposure in the second meeting with K’uang and later in her confrontation with Yee shatters the boundary between the two occasions and denies the safe criterion. To distinguish the truth from the pretense becomes even harder. Only one claim remains true: under the role she plays, she cares very much about him. Considering her loneliness in reality and her attachment to Yee in the manipulated plan, the question becomes what she has left out of the role; put differently, what she has saved for her real life. If the answer is nothing, then the role assumes her real life, even though she performs what she is told and does it in the way that she is directed.

Chia-chih confirms her falling for Yee and also her reckless devotion to the role. She tells Old Wu, “he (Yee) warms his way into my heart, deeper and deeper, all the way in. And I let him in like a slave.” To use her own words to appease the doubt that her mission and her actions have raised all along the film, “the play is not true, but the love
is” (says she to Old Wu). She further explains the meaning of her words through a performance. In the following scene in a Japanese restaurant, she looks into his eyes, and sings “only love that lasts through hard times is true”. It is an old Chinese love song. The tears are welled up in his eyes, when she is only half through the song. The scene resembles a miniature of their distorted love story: she does not play the role, but she is the role she plays; she puts her real emotion into her performance, which touches him deeply.

The film is not over yet at this point, but Ang Lee has finished reasoning why Chia-chih saves Yee’s life at the last moment. Their relationship is doomed and her saving him is expected. As already mentioned, Ang Lee has conventionalized and rationalized Chang’s story. The novel is both an introduction that he starts from and a conclusion that he arrives at. What bridges the two is a film of Ang Lee style.

Chang presents a result, an ever-lasting moment of the protagonists’ lives. Without reasoning its possibility and rationality, her story possesses a stubbornness and coldness that the adaptation does not have. Chia-chih’s sudden betrayal of the patriotic cause is dramatized like a whim. Looking at “his silhouette against the lamp, seemingly sunk into an attitude of tenderly affectionate contemplation” (Chang 39), she abruptly thinks: “He really loves me” (Chang 39). It is a fact that in the novel, the information about Chia-chih’s relationship to Yee is all about their sexuality, but the decisive reason for her to let him go is not their physical bonding, but her sudden acknowledge of his love, even though his love is just her presumption and no plot about their past supports it. Through this novel, Chang powerfully stresses her constant principle: while war, revolution, politics and patriotism need reasons to occur and words to record and explain, beyond all
of them, human love does not have so many requirements before it can prove its
decisiveness and fierceness.
Chapter 7 Conclusion

Three films all achieve certain aspects of the novels, but fail in other aspects. Regardless of the seemingly similar storylines, the gaps between the novels and the films become conspicuous after comparison. In the film Love in a Fallen City, while the filmmaker accurately reflects the unconquerable power of fate in the original, she fails to represent the equally powerful characteristics under the female protagonist’s docile appearance. In Red Rose, White Rose, Kwan incisively visualizes two distinctive worlds that the protagonist struggles between, but he inadvertently misses the decisive element that influences the protagonist’s choice; that is narcissism. Ang Lee has made a wise adaptation by avoiding confronting Chang’s work word by word. He develops an unsettled part of Chang’s story and gives it a satisfying explanation. However, the rationality and warmth of his reasoning process replaces a considerable amount of the original story’s gravity and brutality. While Chang’s story seems like a triumph of an eccentric human emotion, the film turns it into a conventional romantic tragedy.

From the comparison, the moments that make the adaptations depart from the novels are the tricky ones when, in the novels, truth has to sneak underneath the appearance. The camera performs its duty; it captures the appearance as Chang instructs in her novels and faithfully presents it to us. But from the mere appearance, are we supposed to arrive at its meaning that Chang also points out? For instance, as mentioned in the first case study, according to Chang, Liusu bows her head to avoid Liuyuan’s gaze, because she knows she is too beautiful to watch under the moonlight. But when she does the gesture on screen, without enunciation, it could be because of fear, prudence, or any other emotion that may make one lower his or her head. At best, Chang’s interpretation of Liusu’s
gesture is one of the possibilities. In the film’s context, the appearance that the camera captures is literal and concrete in terms of the images directly seen. But such appearance is also flexible because its inference can be directed to complete a logic cause-effect argument.

As one can discover in each of the film adaptations, many moments like the one about the bowing head can add up to more than one outcome from the same storyline. Evidently, one can find in each of the films an idealistic love affair, which is unfolded under different circumstances and revealed to be somewhat sublime towards the end. But Chang’s interpretation of the likely love affair between man and woman is not as transfigured as any of the films shows us.

The most prominent reason for the difference is because Chang’s characters all wear deceptive masks that can cover their thoughts and real feelings. In other words, Chang’s words are devoted to the emotion dusted by earthly deception and suspicion. The camera gazes at these masks without finding an effective way to peel them off. For instance, Chang exposes that the sincerity of Liusu’s emotion for Liuyuan is up in the air from the beginning to the end of the novel, since Liusu considers him as a prize of the battle against the other women; her original intention on Liuyuan tends to make her one of the “greedy tigers” (Chang 130) who are all eyeing him and she proves to be the strongest one. But the camera only highlights the vulnerable, obedient appearance of her. The way she talks and moves can hardly infer her strong determination and characteristics deep down. One can be amazed how a woman can be so sophisticated and powerful yet can look so innocent and helpless. The double characteristics naturally co-exist in Chang’s wording, but not so much on screen.
The directors have proved to be trying hard to draw out the characters’ subjectivities underneath and to sustain the mood that Chang creates in the novels. Stanley Kwan’s stunning mise-en-scène is almost surreal. As a whole, it responds to Zhenbao’s inner feelings. The fact that his success in recreating the believable atmosphere of the novel is through a rather unrealistic way gives out a message that Chang’s realistic concerns may not necessarily come across as vivid daily life, which refracts people’s living statement in her times. Ironically, she has been highly celebrated by Fu Lei and many other scholars in this regard.

However, the irony does not truly conflict with the fact that she has the realistic concerns. It is just that the highly intricate ideas she delivers tend to stress an impression that the reality, which she cares about, is first filtered through her consciousness and has already been either idealized, or deformed. As it is in Lust Caution, the emotion between two human beings that she describes is on one hand idealized to be a pure emotion, and on the other is deformed or stripped down to an uncivilized statement between “hunter” and “his quarry” (Chang 46). Ang Lee has tried so hard to let sex emphasize the pure, fierce emotion, yet the camera eye cannot lie about the genuine, ordinary chemistry between the lovers no more than it can in the other two films. He, in the end, does not idealize the emotion, neither does he deform it; as mentioned in the third case studies, he has rationalized and conventionalized it through the camera. In short, reality is more of an issue about how a person perceives and then expresses it. Chang just approaches reality differently. Filter through her mind and then settled down on the pages, the reality she portrays is familiar but by no means ordinary.
Chang’s consciousness is omnipresent in her novels in form of her characters’ self-awareness, which, as mentioned in the first case studies, offers the novels, a “consistent psychological viewpoint derived from one character” (MacFarlane 16) that the films lack. The self-awareness is presented in two aspects in Chang’s novels. Not only do the protagonists directly, frequently introspect themselves, they are also sensitively aware of their surroundings, especially other people’s gaze on them. For example, Liusu is deceptive and she is aware of it. And her self-awareness does not stop at this level, but goes further because she even knows how she is perceived in other people’s eyes, especially Liuyuan’s. In a more dramatic way, Zhenbao feels “a fuzzy intimation of the warm welcome awaiting him--not just from his own mother but from a whole world of mothers, tearful, and with eyes only for him” (Chang 289). At least in the three film adaptations, the camera is not capable of assuming Chang’s prevailing consciousness, because it has trouble penetrating characters’ mind; it acts more as a great recorder or a listener than an incisive analyzer.

From the way that her main characters think to themselves, Chang proves to consciously select the elements or facts that she wants to write. Interestingly, in each of these love affairs, one person is picked to talk and argue, but the other is not given so much freedom to do these. In Love in a Fallen City, Liusu’s sole subjectivity establishes a steady undertone of the whole story and Liuyuan is her object in her “calculation” (Chang 130). Even more so, Lust Caution contributes the whole story to Chia-chih’s self-awareness and the novel is almost her solo monologue. Clearly, Chang does not present a whole picture of each of the love affairs. She can make a person, like Liuyuan or Mr.
Yee, to merely present on certain occasions without exhibiting how he looks and if he feels the same way as his partner does.

Therefore, as mentioned or suggested in all of the case studies, it is often a problem when exactly the protagonists fall in love with each other in the novels, because there are some parts sophisticatedly left untold in the portrayal of their relationships. This kind of elusiveness actually helps generate new impressions in terms of love. As we can see, in a relationship, a person can be deceptive like Liusu, and narcissistic as Zhenbao. If these two are still within the normal reach, Chia-chih, thinking of killing and love, has far crossed the boundary. But when it comes to the films, Chang’s selective way does not work. Liuyuan and Mr. Yee are never simply presented as mere existence; their expressions and gestures add meanings and attitudes to their presence. If they receive messages, they respond, even if they respond by wordless or an empty face and even if one still has trouble figuring out their real thoughts. Film has this integrity that it does not miss any crucial moment like the one when the two people look attracted to each other. However, when that happens in each of the adaptations, it does not leave much space for the film to develop into a fresh love affair, except pointing out that the man and the woman are going to end up in love, a conventional outcome which does not seem appealing to Chang.

She prefers one person’s love story. The ending is unpredictable. It leaves space for her characters to think, or maybe even overuse their self-awareness. The protagonists are spiritual loners; they keep their thoughts to themselves. Although they show great eagerness to reach out for company; meanwhile, much more enthusiastically, they cautiously protect the integrity and independence of their self-awareness through
retreating to their exclusive inner world, which intensively recalls Chang’s remoteness and seclusion during her life time. Each of the films tries to enter her secluded life through her literature, but ultimately goes on to tell a different story which naturally belongs to the director. Chang’s world therefore stays mysterious and elusive, giving momentum to all kinds of scrutiny and waiting for any possible way of deciphering.
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