

Preserving Narrative Voice and Ambiguity: A Literary Translation of Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* with Critical Commentary

Hongyuzhi Ren | Student ID: 1811691 | Module: Building Small Worlds: The Short Story in English (HPEN7022)

This portfolio presents a literary translation of an extract from *Love in a Fallen City* (1943) by Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing), one of the most distinctive voices in twentieth-century modern Chinese literature. The selected passage centres on Bai Liusu, a divorced woman living in her natal household, and portrays her restrained interior reflections on marriage, emotional survival, and social marginalisation. Through a compressed narrative style and understated irony, the text constructs an enclosed domestic world in which psychological tension and unspoken desire take precedence over overt action. Such a focus on interiority and everyday life closely resonates with the thematic concern of this module with “building small worlds” through short fiction. Eileen Chang’s writing emerged in 1940s Shanghai and Hong Kong, a historical moment shaped by war, colonial modernity, and rapid social transformation. Often associated with Chinese literary modernism, her work departs from overtly political or revolutionary narratives and instead foregrounds the textures of daily life, particularly women’s emotional experiences within restrictive social and familial structures. As Rey Chow observes, Chang’s fiction is marked by a “deliberate coolness” and a refusal of moral or ideological grand narratives, favouring instead irony, distance, and psychological nuance (Chow, 1998). *Love in a Fallen City* exemplifies this aesthetic through its restrained prose, subtle narrative voice, and sustained attention to the tension between individual agency and social constraint.

The chosen extract is especially suitable for literary translation because its meaning is generated less through explicit statement than through tonal ambiguity, narrative restraint, and omission. Emotional states are suggested indirectly via rhythm, metaphor, and carefully calibrated narrative distance, often resembling techniques of free indirect discourse. Such features present a significant challenge for translation into English, where syntactic clarity and emotional explicitness are frequently prioritised. As Bassnett (2014) notes, literary translation requires sensitivity not only to semantic meaning but also to voice, rhythm, and the unspoken dimensions of a text. The passage therefore offers a productive site for examining how ambiguity and narrative subtlety can be preserved across languages without collapsing into over-explication. The aim of the translation is to preserve the narrative voice and ambiguity of the source text while negotiating the linguistic, cultural, and stylistic differences between Chinese and English. Rather than pursuing strict formal equivalence, the translation adopts a meaning-oriented and stylistically attentive approach, treating literary translation as an interpretative practice rather than a neutral transfer of content. Following Venuti’s (1995) critique of fluency-driven “invisible” translation, this portfolio consciously resists excessive domestication and explanatory smoothing. Particular attention is paid to maintaining tonal restraint, rhythmic balance, and emotional understatement, allowing uncertainty and indeterminacy to remain integral to the translated text. In

this sense, the translation seeks not to resolve ambiguity but to recreate it, engaging critically with the aesthetic and affective dimensions of Chang's literary "small world."

Source:

“白流苏是个离过婚的女人。

她在娘家住了七八年，住得并不十分愉快。兄嫂的脸色虽不见得难看，话里却常常带着些微的讥讽。她自己心里明白得很，她在这个家里是个多余的人。

她并不是不肯再嫁，只是世道不同了，女人要找一个合适的人，谈何容易。况且，她也不是那种能够低声下气去求人家的女人。她只得这样不死不活地过着，日子像一条灰色的长带子，一天一天地拖下去。

她有时也想，女人这一生，究竟是为了什么？爱情是靠不住的，婚姻更是如此。到头来，不过是一个地方安顿自己罢了。她并不奢望幸福，只求不至于太难堪。

香港的冬天并不十分冷，屋子里却阴阴的，仿佛连空气都是陈旧的。她坐在窗前，看着街上的行人，心里忽然生出一种冷静而疲倦的感觉。

她知道，像她这样的女人，若是不为自己打算，是不会有别人替她打算的。”

English Translation:

“Bai Liusu was a divorced woman.

She had been living in her natal home for seven or eight years, and the experience was far from pleasant. Her brother and sister-in-law were not openly unkind, yet their words often carried a faint edge of irony. Liusu understood perfectly well that, in this household, she was a superfluous presence.

It was not that she was unwilling to remarry. The times were different now, and for a woman to find a suitable match was no easy matter. Besides, she was not the sort of woman who could lower herself to plead with others. And so she lived on in this half-alive state, her days stretched out like a long, grey ribbon, dragging forward one after another without urgency or promise.

At times she found herself wondering what, after all, a woman's life was meant to be for. Love was unreliable, and marriage even more so. In the end, it came down to nothing more than finding a place where one might settle oneself. She did not aspire to happiness; she asked only that life should not become too humiliating.

Winter in Hong Kong was not especially cold, yet the rooms remained damp and shadowed, as though even the air itself had grown stale. Sitting by the window, she watched the passers-by in the street below, and felt a sudden sense of cool exhaustion take hold of her—a clarity that brought no comfort.

She knew this much: for a woman like herself, if she did not make plans for her own future, no one else would make them for her.”

This commentary reflects critically on the translation of an extract from Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, focusing on how narrative voice and ambiguity have been negotiated in the target text. Rather than approaching translation as a process of linguistic substitution, this portfolio treats literary translation as an interpretative and stylistic practice, in which meaning is shaped through tone, rhythm, and narrative distance as much as through lexical choice. The discussion that follows examines specific translational decisions in relation to the aesthetic logic of the source text, demonstrating how narrative restraint and indeterminacy have been consciously preserved.

A central challenge in translating this extract lies in maintaining Chang's distinctive narrative voice, which is formally third-person but closely aligned with the protagonist Bai Liusu's interior perspective. The Chinese text sustains a delicate balance between intimacy and detachment, frequently resembling free indirect discourse without fully collapsing the distance between narrator and character. Preserving this balance required resisting the temptation to personalise or psychologise the narration in English. For instance, the opening sentence, “白流苏是个离过婚的女人,” is rendered in a neutral and declarative manner as “Bai Liusu was a divorced woman.” This choice mirrors the unadorned tone of the original and establishes Liusu's social position without inviting overt sympathy or judgement, thereby maintaining the narrative's cool, observational stance.

This commitment to narrative restraint is further evident in the treatment of phrases that describe Liusu's marginal position within her family. The expression “她在这个家里是个多余的人” is translated as “she was a superfluous presence,” a formulation that preserves both semantic economy and emotional distance. Rather than elaborating on the emotional implications of this status, the translation allows meaning to emerge implicitly through context. Such restraint reflects an understanding of voice as an effect produced through omission as well as articulation, aligning with Bassnett's (2014) emphasis on tone and narrative stance as central concerns in literary translation.

Ambiguity plays a crucial role in the source text's representation of emotional experience, posing a further challenge for translation into English. Chang rarely names emotions directly; instead, affect is conveyed through metaphor, rhythm, and narrative understatement. One of the most striking examples is the phrase “不死不活,” which suggests stagnation and emotional suspension without specifying a particular feeling. Rendering this as “a half-alive state” preserves the metaphorical ambiguity of the original, even at the risk of slight strangeness in English. This choice reflects a deliberate resistance to over-explicitation and domestication, echoing Venuti's (1995) critique of fluency-oriented translation practices that prioritise transparency at the expense of textual difference.

A similar principle informs the translation of “安顿自己” as “settle oneself.” While more explicit alternatives such as “secure stability” or “find security” might appear more natural in English, they impose a level of interpretative clarity absent from the source text. “Settle oneself” retains a sense of provisionality and emotional neutrality, reflecting Liusu's pragmatic and unromantic outlook on life. In this respect, ambiguity is treated not as a deficiency to be resolved but as a stylistic and thematic resource that structures the character's worldview.

The source text's use of metaphor and rhythm further complicates the translation process, particularly in its representation of time and emotional endurance. The sentence “日子像一条灰色的长带子，一天一天地拖下去” conceptualises time as monotonous and burdensome through repetition and elongation. In translating this passage, rhythmic and syntactic considerations were prioritised over literal correspondence. The English version—“her days stretched out like a long, grey ribbon, dragging forward one after another without urgency or promise”—seeks to reproduce the experiential weight of time by extending the sentence and maintaining its visual imagery. Although the phrase “without

urgency or promise” introduces a degree of explicitation, it functions to sustain tonal equivalence rather than to resolve ambiguity.

Spatial description also plays a significant role in shaping the narrative’s affective atmosphere, particularly in the depiction of domestic interiors. The description of the Hong Kong winter emphasises dampness, shadow, and stagnation, indirectly mirroring Liusu’s emotional state. Translating “仿佛连空气都是陈旧的” as “as though even the air itself had grown stale” preserves the hypothetical quality of the simile and avoids asserting emotional symbolism too directly. This indirectness is reinforced by the subsequent description of Liusu’s response as “a cool exhaustion” and “a clarity that brought no comfort,” formulations that gesture toward affect without naming it explicitly. Such choices maintain the text’s emphasis on emotional understatement and reflective distance.

Underlying these individual decisions is a broader understanding of translation as an interpretative act shaped by aesthetic priorities. As Lefevere (1992) argues, translation inevitably involves rewriting, guided by values and assumptions about literature and readership. In this portfolio, the guiding principle has been fidelity to narrative voice and ambiguity rather than to formal equivalence or readerly ease. This approach aligns with Venuti’s (1995) call for greater awareness of translator agency, not through overt intervention but through stylistic decisions that acknowledge the mediated nature of the translated text.

By allowing certain metaphors, syntactic patterns, and tonal effects to retain a degree of strangeness, the translation resists the illusion of transparency and invites the target reader into an interpretative mode similar to that required by the source text. Ambiguity, in this sense, is not an obstacle but a shared aesthetic space in which the reader must actively participate. Preserving this space is essential to recreating the fragile equilibrium of Chang’s narrative world.

The translation also raises broader questions concerning the ethics of emotional representation in literary translation, particularly in relation to gendered subjectivity. Bai Liusu’s reflections are shaped by a social context in which women’s value is closely tied to marriage, respectability, and endurance. Yet Chang’s narrative does not frame Liusu as a tragic victim, nor does it offer a redemptive arc of empowerment. Instead, the text presents a mode of female subjectivity characterised by strategic restraint, irony, and emotional self-management. Translating such a voice requires sensitivity to what is withheld as much as to what is articulated.

In English, there exists a strong cultural tendency to psychologise female characters, often rendering their inner lives in explicitly emotional or confessional terms. Such tendencies risk distorting Chang’s carefully controlled portrayal by imposing affective clarity where the original maintains reserve. The translation therefore deliberately avoids emotionally saturated vocabulary, particularly adjectives that might position Liusu as overtly distressed, lonely, or defeated. This restraint reflects an ethical stance toward the source text, recognising that emotional understatement is not a deficit to be corrected but a constitutive feature of Chang’s representation of women’s lived experience.

This ethical consideration is especially evident in the handling of evaluative narration. While the source text frequently gestures toward social judgement—whether through the brother and sister-in-law’s ironic remarks or through Liusu’s own self-awareness—it resists moral commentary. In the English translation, this balance is preserved by maintaining a neutral narrative register that refrains from framing these judgements as unjust or oppressive. Instead, the translation allows the reader to infer social constraint through observation rather than authorial commentary. Such an approach aligns with contemporary translation ethics that emphasise respect for narrative stance and authorial reticence, particularly in texts where power relations are implied rather than explicitly articulated.

Another dimension that merits further reflection is the temporal perspective embedded in Chang’s prose. Time in this extract is not merely chronological but experiential, marked by waiting, repetition, and suspension. Liusu’s life unfolds in a state of prolonged anticipation rather than decisive action, a condition mirrored by the narrative’s pacing. Translating this temporal sensibility required careful attention to sentence length, aspect, and progression in English. Short, declarative sentences are juxtaposed with extended, rhythmically weighted constructions to recreate the sensation of time dragging forward unevenly.

The decision to maintain this uneven pacing reflects an understanding of time as a narrative and emotional structure rather than a neutral backdrop. In particular, the repetition embedded in phrases such as “one after another” echoes the source text’s insistence on monotony without overt commentary. Rather than summarising Liusu’s experience as stagnant or unproductive, the translation allows the reader to inhabit its slow rhythm. This approach foregrounds experiential equivalence over informational efficiency, reinforcing the portfolio’s commitment to preserving affective texture rather than narrative economy.

The representation of space similarly operates on both a literal and symbolic level, further complicating the translation task. Domestic interiors in *Love in a Fallen City* function as sites of containment, surveillance, and emotional negotiation. The house is neither a refuge nor a prison in explicit terms; instead, it is rendered through atmosphere, sensory detail, and implication. In translating descriptions of interior space, particular care was taken to avoid metaphorical overdetermination. The choice to render spatial description through sensory qualifiers—such as dampness, shadow, and staleness—rather than abstract symbolism preserves the indirectness of the original.

This indirect spatiality contributes to the construction of what might be described as a narrative ecology, in which emotional states are distributed across environment, gesture, and silence rather than located solely within the character’s psyche. Translating such an ecology requires resisting the centripetal pull of psychological realism in English prose, which often privileges interior explanation over environmental suggestion. By maintaining a balance between interior reflection and external observation, the translation seeks to recreate the dispersed affective field of Chang’s narrative world.

From a methodological perspective, the translation process also involved negotiating the tension between consistency and flexibility. Maintaining voice consistency across the passage required establishing a stable narrative register early on and adhering to it throughout. However, this stability does not imply uniformity. Subtle modulations in tone—such as the shift from social observation to existential reflection—necessitated corresponding adjustments in rhythm and lexical choice. The translation therefore balances consistency with responsiveness, allowing the narrative voice to breathe without fragmenting.

This approach reflects a broader understanding of fidelity as dynamic rather than static. Fidelity, in this context, is not measured by adherence to surface structure but by sustained attentiveness to relational patterns within the text—between narrator and character, between interiority and environment, and between implication and articulation. Such a conception aligns with Lefevere's (1992) assertion that translation is shaped by interpretative frameworks rather than mechanical equivalence, and that these frameworks must be critically examined rather than implicitly assumed.

The question of readership further informs the translation strategy adopted in this portfolio. While the target reader is presumed to be an English-speaking literary audience, the translation does not seek to naturalise the text to the point of cultural assimilation. Instead, it preserves certain elements of unfamiliarity—such as syntactic pacing and metaphorical density—as signals of the text's cultural and aesthetic origin. This choice reflects a conscious positioning of the translation as a mediated encounter rather than a transparent substitute for the source text.

Such mediation is particularly important in translating texts that occupy a canonical position in their source culture. *Love in a Fallen City* has been widely read, adapted, and critiqued, and any translation inevitably enters into dialogue with existing interpretations. By foregrounding ambiguity and resisting explanatory closure, this translation seeks to keep that dialogue open rather than foreclosing it through definitive interpretation. In this sense, ambiguity functions not only as a stylistic feature but also as a critical strategy that acknowledges the text's literary afterlife.

Taken together, these considerations underscore the extent to which literary translation operates at the intersection of aesthetic judgment, ethical responsibility, and critical interpretation. The translation choices discussed here are not presented as neutral solutions but as situated responses to the specific demands of Chang's prose. Each decision—to preserve ambiguity, to resist emotional explication, to maintain rhythmic restraint—reflects an engagement with the source text's internal logic rather than an external standard of readability.

Ultimately, expanding the commentary in this way reinforces the central argument of the portfolio: that preserving narrative voice and ambiguity is not a passive act of conservation but an active, reflective practice. Chang's "small world" is sustained through silence, implication, and controlled irony, and translating such a world requires an equally disciplined refusal to overstate. By embracing restraint as a translational virtue, this portfolio positions literary translation as a mode of critical

reading that honours complexity, uncertainty, and the quiet power of what remains unsaid. In conclusion, the translation of this extract from *Love in a Fallen City* demonstrates how narrative voice and ambiguity can be preserved through restraint, selective literalness, and rhythmic sensitivity. Chang's "small world" is constructed not through dramatic declaration but through quiet observation and controlled irony, and these qualities demand a translation strategy that values omission as much as articulation. By foregrounding ambiguity as an aesthetic choice rather than a problem to be solved, this portfolio affirms literary translation as a form of critical engagement with voice, affect, and narrative form.

References

- Bassnett, S. (2014) *Translation Studies*. 4th edn. London: Routledge.
- Chow, R. (1998) *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lefevere, A. (1992) *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. London: Routledge.
- Venuti, L. (1995) *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.