

**Narrating the Wound, Recreating the Self:
Trauma and Recovery in
Eileen Chang's *Affinity of Half a Lifetime***

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Eileen Chang's relationship with her father and its influence on her later work, *Affinity of Half a Lifetime*. Focusing on Chang's traumatic experience of being locked up by her father at an early age, I will argue that the tragic scene of the female protagonist's imprisonment in *Affinity* is a retelling of the author's own painful past. By adopting the trauma theories of Heinz Kohut, Judith Herman, and Jonathan Shay, and referring also to Kristeva's theory of abjection, I point out that the traumatized subject, Chang, may have suffered an irrecoverable internal wound, and show how this injury became a powerful force in shaping her later writing. By examining Chang's own familial background, her male and female protagonists and the imprisonment episode in *Affinity*, I will try to show that the author's retelling of her own traumatic experience in her narrative writing was a way of releasing or liberating her from her long confinement, indeed, that this therapeutic retelling was necessary to the trauma victim's very survival.

KEY WORDS

abjection
father-daughter relationship
Julia Kristeva
Oedipal daughter
trauma theory

Affinity of Half a Lifetime
female rage
Heinz Kohut
self-object

and empathy, Chang creates for her readers a world void of light and life, characters mentally distorted and deformed, themes of alienation, loss, and decay. The linking of the father figure with the desolate past, darkness and death, and of the mother figure with a valuing of wealth above (maternal) love—all this is poured into Chang's language of mourning. Confronted with the irrecoverable psychic injuries of her childhood and adolescence, the author chooses to present herself to readers through the narration of a traumatized subjectivity, the story of a vulnerable and powerless modern subject in the face of traditional cultural and social codes that exclude autonomy.

Traumatic Writing: *Affinity of Half a Lifetime*

Indeed, *Affinity* is the drama of Chang's internal pain, recording the darkest experience she ever underwent, alone and desolate and on the verge of death. Behind the locked door is the deserted and despairing daughter, trying to fight against the cruelty of a father who confines her only to claim his authority over her. This confinement threatens Chang's self-construction, for her self will now forever be inflicted with a sense of desolation and despair, leaving her in a state of existence without family and friends, as all relationships now become to her null and void.

Affinity sets forth as narrative Chang's accusation of the patriarchal authority, the dominant force manipulating social and familial structures and relationships: here, its cruelty and destructiveness are brought into a clear light. In this work the author weaves her own traumatic experience of imprisonment into the life of the female protagonist, Gu Mancheng, who survives terrible treatment at the hands of her elder sister, Gu Manlu, and her sister's husband, Chu Hongchai. Sexually assaulted by her sister's husband and then imprisoned by the couple until she bears a child for her barren sister so that husband's family line may be carried on, Mancheng is imprisoned and dehumanized, treated as a kind of child-bearing machine. She is forced to abandon her plans to marry her lover, Shen Shijun, due to her sudden disappearance; her situation remains unknown to him until the last few pages. Though Mancheng escapes from the control of her sister and

sister's husband immediately after delivering a baby boy in the hospital, she ultimately chooses to raise the child after her sister's death by marrying the man who had raped her. This turn to wifely domesticity is an unexpected change for the protagonist: at the beginning of the novel Mancheng, the second daughter of a poor family in Shanghai, is an educated woman, one who is able to support her family while also enjoying her freedom outside of the traditional limitations placed upon Chinese women. By contrast, her barren elder sister Manlu, having become a prostitute to support the family, dies young.

At first *Affinity* may seem to be a tragically unfulfilled "romance"; however, the work unleashes Chang's repressed anger and pain in her portrayal of the heroine. This is a woman who attempts to reintegrate her fragmented self; the (female) autonomy she seeks to regain is denied by a social and cultural code that esteems the cult of domesticity and the traditional ideal of womanhood. Chang reserves her most scathing attacks for the figures of patriarchal authority, including the brother-in-law, which we might think represents her own abusive father. Yet by not providing an actual father for Mancheng, Chang aims to deprive her text of the voice of the authorial father, to "silence" her own father's voice, an act of "textual patricide."¹⁰ With this fatherless narrative Chang attempts to banish the oppressive father-figure (father-memory) from her literary territory, her fictional world.

The Two Sides of the Father

Though Chang tries to remove the father figure from *Affinity* and to a degree from her other works as well, her emotional attachment to the father is still evident, as is shown in her lingering over the role of fathers generally in this and other novels, and in her concern with the general effect of fathers on daughters in the society. This obsession with the oppressive father-image could suggest Freud's Electra complex: the Oedipal daughter has been trapped in a scenario of seduction by the father. The young Eileen Chang adored her knowledgeable father; she also felt a deep hostility toward him for his violent acts. Later, she expresses these ambivalent feelings of passionate attachment and rage in the pages of her literary works.¹¹ For Chang, the influence of a

None of us, as women, has yet,
precisely, an autobiography.

Shoshana Felman

In the Beginning Was the Wound

In 1939 Eileen Chang, still an adolescent, received her first creative writing award for the short story "Tiancai meng" ("The Dream of A Genius Girl"),¹ which later became her first published work. In the last paragraph of this story, Chang writes: "Life is but a splendid gown, crawling with fleas."² To Chang, those "fleas" are a metaphor for the inevitable encounter with the corrosive forces of darkness and evil in one's life journey. Those "fleas" may also refer to a tragic and traumatic event that happened to her three years earlier in 1936, when at the age of seventeen she was imprisoned by her own father for half a year. As noted by several critics, this experience is retold in her later work, *Bansheng yuan* 半生緣 (*Affinity of Half a Lifetime*).³

Although *Affinity* has not been seen as an autobiographical work, the female protagonist's imprisonment episode is clearly a re-writing of the traumatic event experienced by Chang herself. This writing of the wound is for Chang, the sufferer, an act of reestablishing the injured self, an attempt to bring the experience to light by giving meaning to the pain. Retelling the past is a necessity if the trauma victim is to survive the psychic torment of despair and displacement. Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay indicates how narratives reconstruct the victim's damaged consciousness: "Severe trauma explodes the cohesion of consciousness. When a survivor creates [a] fully realized narrative that

brings together the shattered knowledge of what happened, the emotions that were aroused by the meanings of the events, and the bodily sensations that the physical events created, the survivor pieces back together the fragmentation of consciousness that trauma has caused" (188). That is, by narrating her adolescent confinement in *Affinity*, Chang is able to reintegrate her shattered and fragmented psyche.

There have been several commentaries on Chang's works. Researches focusing on the investigation of her familial ties have paid much attention to her relationship with her mother; among these are two brilliant Chinese essays, "Shangshi de zhouqi" ("The Mourning Cycle") by Ping Lu 平路 and "Muqin ni zai hefang?" ("Mother, Where Are You?") by Hu jingyuan 胡錦媛, in *Reading Zhang Ailing: A Collection of International Conference Papers* (1999).⁴ The earlier critics, like Shui Jing 水晶 in his *Zhang Ailing de xiaoshuo* (*The Art of Zhang Ailing's Novels*) (1973) and Tang Wenbiao 唐文標 in *Zhang Ailing yanjiu* (*A Study on Zhang Ailing*) (1976), probe into the author's themes and structures. Shui Jing compares Chang's works with western novels, while Tang tries to analyze the patterns of her fictional worlds and characters. Moreover, the recent Hongkong scholar Lin Xingqian, in his gigantic study, *Zhang Ailing lunshu* (*On Zhang Ailing: Female Subjectivity and the Writing of Castration*, 2000), examines the feminist issues of sexual politics, power, gender, female subjectivity and narrative technique. Another enormous research work is *Yuedu Zhang Ailing: guoji yantao hui lunwen ji* (*Reading Eileen Chang: A Collection of International Conference Papers*, 1999), edited by Yang Ze, which comprises essays on such diverse aspects as the relation of the author's works to history, gender politics, postcolonialism, and Taiwanese literature.

Surprisingly, in the critical writing on Chang's works, the link between the author's traumatic adolescent experience and *Affinity* has not yet been directly confronted. In this paper I will argue that, for Eileen Chang, the writing of *Affinity* was a way of liberating herself from the traumatic memory of imprisonment, her terrible suffering at the hands of her own father. Through an examination of Chang's familial background, her presentation of the female and male characters

in *Affinity*, and her description of the imprisonment episode, both in her memoirs and in the novel, I will attempt to see how Chang interprets her relationship with her father, and especially how the tormented memory of adolescent imprisonment shapes her sense of self and her work.

The Dark Father and the Absent Mother

One of the key themes in *Affinity* is Chang's concern with parental authority and its effect on the childhood experience of an individual. The restricting power of the family that she depicts here is, as in most of her writing, forever associated with desolation, displacement, and despair; this sense of restriction, based on her own childhood experience, is what she sees throughout the whole society. In 1920 Eileen Chang was born into a family with famous ancestors, so that she had a special kind of nostalgic feeling for the mystery of her family history. For Chang, the knowledge of being a child biologically linked to a splendid family line was something to be proud of, and her sense of pride provided her with a strong sense of self. However, this feeling of nostalgia for the long-lost past has inevitably given the author's works an air of clinging to the worlds of the remote and unattainable.

Although descended from an aristocratic Chinese line, Chang and her immediate family found themselves in a deteriorated situation. Chang's father was an opium-eater; though endowed with a profound knowledge of the Chinese classics he gave himself up to a death-in-life state. For the young Eileen, her father was always linked to opium smoke, to the deserted and lifeless, like a living antique. She remembers her childhood home:

I look down on everything there, including the opium. . . . I see the world as binary oppositions, as light and dark, good and evil, god and devil. Everything associated with my father is on the negative side. . . . My father's room seems forever emerging from the afternoon air; the feeling of going down and down haunts one with a sense of sitting there too long.⁵ (Chang, *Liu yang* 162)

Paradoxically, while Chang may see her father "negatively," her classical literary knowledge and gift for literary creation at an early age were clearly fruits of the father's encouragement. Chang was able to access the Chinese classics in her father's study, where she read several works of fiction before she was eight: among others, *Journey to the West*, *The Golden Lotus*, and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Thus her father's impact was crucial during her early adolescence. Nancy Chodorow points out that "[t]he two periods when a father is most crucial to his daughter's development are the Oedipal period and early adolescence—both times when a girl is supposed to be negotiating her transition to heterosexuality" (139). This early literary knowledge thus nurtured a highly sensitive mind that later could perfectly articulate its vision of the world; this mind, however, failed to cope with the father's threat of physical and verbal violence, which came largely with her father's remarriage.

Chang's parents divorced and her father remarried in 1934, when she was fourteen. Chang seemed unable to accommodate herself to her new family, especially to her stepmother, who seemed to be responsible for several family fights which later drove young Eileen out of the house. The most serious fight occurred when Chang confronted her stepmother: she was violently beaten by her father and later imprisoned for half a year, an event that traumatized the seventeen-year-old girl. In her memoir she writes:

My father threatened to kill me with a pistol. I was imprisoned in an empty room. The house where I was born became a strange place, like pale walls on a dark night under the moon, walls broken into pieces, gone mad. . . . Outside in the garden, there were two white geese, chasing and biting people whenever there was a chance. The orchid tree was the only tall one, blooming with the big white flowers, like a filthy handkerchief or waste paper, deserted and neglected. No other flowers can look as foul and depressed as those year-round white blooms. While looking for a way out, I suffered from a serious bout of diarrhea which almost end-

ed my life. My father did not send for a doctor or provide any medicine. After being ill like this for half a year, one time I was lying on my sick bed and gazing into the blue sky in the late fall and noticed the gray stone antlers standing on another roof opposite my window, with two rows of small stone Buddha images underneath. . . . I was wondering which dynasty I was living in. . . . Existing in this obscurity, I could die unknown and be buried here in this garden.

(Chang, *Liu yan* 165-66)

Confined and overwhelmed by her dreadful environment and fatal disease, Chang seemed to be undergoing a journey to hell, feeling the touch of death and madness. This traumatic memory is repeated in a major scene in *Affinity*, where the female protagonist's imprisonment episode is similarly described.⁶

After this traumatic event Chang chose to leave her family, more specifically her father. She began to view human relationships negatively, as may be observed from works primarily presenting the theme of degeneration, ultimate despair and death.⁷ Confronted with the negativities that abound in Chang's works, Judith Herman observes that a trauma victim's perception "may be numbed or distorted, with partial anesthesia or the loss of particular sensations. . . . These perceptual changes combine with a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle" (43). Thus her distrust of human ties turned Chang into the very image she created for herself in her earliest work, "The Dream of a Genius Girl": a creature of indifference, self-control, and self-abnegation.

Significantly, the episode of being jailed by her father could only be revealed in detail years later, long after Chang was able to face the traumatic memory. In *Affinity*, Chang returned imaginatively to the "scene of the crime," that is, of imprisonment, expressing in more coherent form in narrative fiction what she could only recount fragmentarily in autobiographical writing. In her fictional writing Chang is an elusive author: behind her texts hides the powerful force of female

repression, anger and inner violence. This feminine rage is expressed through a narrative pattern that deprives the male dominance of its authority and control; we are given a father figure or image that is "negative" in the (photographic) sense of being "absent."

On the other hand, Chang's relationship with her natural mother was quite ambivalent. Refusing the confinement of marriage to an opium-addicted husband, the mother, model of the "new woman," left the family to study abroad when Eileen was four, and returned four years later. Soon the mother left for Europe again and returned when Eileen, now seventeen, had just managed to escape her imprisonment. However, Chang's mother even then failed her in her inability to express the expected maternal love that could have helped the daughter to recover from her psychic wounds. Chang felt a suffocating silent pressure from the reluctance of her mother, herself suffering extreme financial hardship at that time, to pay her living expenses. The young Eileen had adored her mother; she was very grateful when the mother encouraged her to enter a Western school and gave her the westernized name "Eileen." Yet the daughter's image of a loving mother, the fantasy of an idealized maternal love, was now destroyed by the test of reality. Therefore, in her writing Chang rarely sees the mother-daughter relationship as a positive experience in the construction of the daughter's subjectivity, though it is also less negative than the father-daughter relationship.⁸ Chang's mother is usually absent, a distant and inaccessible mother-figure who nonetheless paradoxically remains the child's primary love object. Rather than outrage, the daughter seems to feel toward the mother an ambivalence, a mixture of indifference and (unfulfilled) desire.

With this family romance containing an oppressive father and an absent mother, Chang expresses through her literary writing her anger toward the father and her mood or attitude of mourning toward the mother, in order to cope with the memory of being an abused and neglected child. It would be reasonable to assume, of course, that the child's preoccupation with an "absolute solitude"⁹ would be her most conspicuous psychic trait or "mark." Writing with (or from) and about a crippled sense of self and a family history lacking in parental support

father, whether positive or negative, on his daughter, particularly for a sensitive girl like herself, is more than that of a mother on her daughter.¹² In *Affinity* she admits that the father rather than the mother dominates and controls the culture and the daughter's access to it. She sees fathers as being more powerful than mothers in shaping the way society defines and regards its women. Accordingly, in the textual space of Eileen Chang's novels, literary fathers may also symbolize cultural fathers, and she uses her stories to examine and explore the authorial fathers' relation to their daughters.

Avoiding confrontation with the father who brings back her traumatic memories, Chang in *Affinity* has replaced her destructive father-image with two contrasting male characters: Shen Shijun, adorable and associated with light, love and life, and Chu Hongchai, detestable and linked to devils, decay, and destruction. These two young men indeed represent the two opposite characteristics embodied by the father image in Chang's mind. The son of a wealthy man in the leather business, Shen Shijun seems able to give the fatherless Mancheng a promising future: by respecting, encouraging, protecting and caring for her, all of these being the positive functions of a man and a father in a patriarchal society, he becomes Chang's surrogate-father image, and/or the embodiment of the "knight on a white horse" who rescues his beloved lady from her predicament. The heroine is here imprisoned both by her practical situation as the only family member struggling to support her large and poor family after her prostitute sister's marriage and by her obsession with the expected role of a woman in a culture that demands the virtue of self-sacrifice. Though fixed in her social position as a filial daughter, Mancheng is spiritually encouraged by her relationship with Shijun, whose love may provide for her the possibility of articulating herself. The romance remains largely Platonic and develops, like Shijun's personality, silently and slowly. However, it is hurt by their poor communication and the fact that Mancheng's sister is a prostitute, and the engagement is finally broken off by the horrible rape. For Chang, the failure of this union of two lovers demystifies the fantasy of a caring fatherly love. The inaccessibility of the loving image of this father-surrogate implies that any totally positive connection between

father and daughter must remain only a distant, remote, unattainable mirage.

The pattern of this implied father-daughter relationship is then interrupted, ruptured by male violence with the intrusion of the rapist Hongchai: the development goes from constructive to destructive, from love to rage, and from heaven to hell. Though there is no clear suggestion of a link between the monstrous Hongchai and Chang's father, the former embodies the irresistible, abusive and violent force of the latter, a destructive and death-like force. The experience of being raped and imprisoned is, to the heroine Mancheng, a catastrophe forever without catharsis, to use Kristeva's term.¹³ Locked up by her sister and her sister's husband, Mancheng is completely disconnected from her fiancé Shijun. She is entirely under the control of the monstrous couple. To the rapist, Mancheng is the mere object of his gaze and his desire, the female body he desires to taste and devour out of sexual craving. The devilish Hongchai thus can represent the dominant male cultural gaze that imprisons and oppresses female subjectivity. Thus, by subjecting her heroine to the male gaze, making her the male's sexual object, Chang lets her fictional imprisonment episode give voice to her female protagonist's and her own unspeakable pain in a culture that refuses to let her give meaning to that pain. The retelling of the trauma reactivates the subjectivity of the sufferer.

With these opposed male characters standing for two sides of her fatherimage (or fatherfigure), Eileen Chang has inevitably revealed her ambivalent attitude toward her own father. This ambivalent relationship is often interpreted in her narratives as an eternal dialectic between two conflicting worlds: life and death, love and hatred, protector and persecutor. This emotional attachment to her father (or father-image) on the part of the writer-daughter leads her to disclose her rage in the text through a kind of "melancholic" writing. Nevertheless, the daughter's psychological negation of the father diminishes in the face of the reminiscence of a once-loving father who encouraged his daughter to enter the literary world. Chang's language of sadness becomes a sign of holding onto her (repressed) hatred and fear of the father's violence. As Kristeva notes:

That sadness is the final filter of aggressiveness, the narcissistic restraint of a hatred that is unacknowledged not because of simple moral or superego decency, but because in sadness the self is yet joined with the other, it carries it within, it introjects its own omnipotent projection—and joys in it. (*Black Sun* 64)

On one level, Chang's preoccupation with both her loved and hated father-figures in the text is not an issue of mere biographical importance; these figures, from the beginning, represent the allegorical symbols of authority. The shadow of this authority, whether seen as traditional Chinese patriarchal power with its demand for "feminine virtue" or as a more specific parental power, has fallen upon the daughter. Chang's fictional fathers thus become symbolic of fatherhood itself and of the exercise of paternal power and authority in the daughter's life. The father's supreme and fearful influence, as Chang asserts, places daughterhood in an unacceptable and insecure state. The father's abusive violence—and in particular his locking-up of his own daughter—has damaged the writer-daughter's psychic health and wholeness, and her powers of identity-construction, leading to a state of abjection.

The Trope of Abjection

Abjection, according to Kristeva, is a process and effect (or affect) which is both physical and psychical. Its underlying model or trope is that of giving birth: the baby, actually part of the mother's body, is "expelled" and yet also not fully expelled; in a sense the maternal body is being turned inside-out, or "abjected." Kristeva's condition of physical abjection then occurs with, for example, a fatal disease: the body can neither assimilate nor eject the thing that enters into it (a lethal virus); an indefensible situation results, and the body deteriorates irreversibly. The psyche's construction of identity follows an analogous pattern. In order to keep a firm and healthy identity, one takes in positive ideas and expels negative notions about oneself. However, if

this interchange mechanism collapses, then as one receives into one's psyche ideas that are unable to be either assimilated or ejected, one undergoes psychological abjection and suffers a breakdown of identity. Kristeva elaborates:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. (*Power* 1)

The imprisonment scene in *Affinity* is then a trope of abjection: here, purity is excluded (or perhaps expelled) and pollution dominates (and proliferates like a virus). Even before the actual rape and imprisonment, Mancheng is situated in a polluted site, with the plotting sister and her husband, and the bribed mother who flees away. The family itself is marked as irredeemably polluted, a recurrent theme in Chang's fiction. Trapped within an unhealthy or corrupt family, Mancheng seeks to escape by appealing to her fiancé, Shijun, the symbol of love and purity, but finally there is no escape. Hongchai's rape symbolically subjects and imprisons the already-polluted psyche or self-identity of the victim, Mancheng, further polluting or fragmenting it. The following literal imprisonment by the sister and her husband only intensifies this process: it is a further extension of the rape. As for the author herself, imprisonment by patriarchal power means a kind of corruption or fragmentation: the daughter's identity that would have defined or integrated itself through love of the father figure (father ideal) can neither fully accept (integrate) or fully reject (expel) this figure (ideal), and thus is left in a disintegrated state.

The inescapable situation—psychic imprisonment, a state of abjection (where in terms of self-identity one's ego hovers "inbetween") of both the author and her protagonist—thus is determined ("delim-

ited”) by the irresistible, controlling force of violence, a force that lets us neither escape from ourselves (redefine ourselves) or fully integrate the self that we already are. The proximity of this abject state to death is clear in Chang’s depiction of Mancheng’s entrapment:

Outside of the window was the garden. . . . In the garden there was an old tree, with the withered branches blowing in the winter night. She suddenly recalled being told as a child that the tree was haunted. . . . Because of this old story she always felt the tree’s uncanniness. She was thinking: would she herself become a tree-ghost if she really died in here? No. She would not have an easy death here. Even death couldn’t end her rage. . . . Suddenly she heard noises from outside the door. It was a carpenter working out there. . . . Mancheng did not know what was going on, she guessed they were nailing down the door as tightly as they could in case a madwoman might try to escape. The frenzy of the hammer’s sound struck her like the sound of *nailing down a coffin*; it was just *heart-drilling*. (AF 223-24, my emphasis)

In this almost Gothic passage the image of imprisonment in a room is echoed by that of imprisonment in a coffin. Imprisonment may be symbolic death for Mancheng—the death of her free, autonomous, independent self. But this could also represent the death of the other, of the powerful fatherfigure which has imprisoned her in his/her own coffin. While according to the model of abjection the polluting, disintegrating force of the father (“heart-drilling”) can be neither fully rejected nor fully absorbed and reintegrated into the psyche, perhaps this sound of “nailing down a coffin” (where the coffin is also her heart) can also announce the death of the father and thus too of the weakness, confusion, madness within herself. For Chang as author the sounds of “nailing down a coffin” (“heart-drilling”) are painful echoes of being confined by her father to a little room (a box) at an early age; yet now the writer-daughter attempts to reverse the past by using this text, these words, these lines to *nail down* her abusive father-image into the

wooden box. The proximity of this passage to Chang’s personal memoir about her adolescent imprisonment testifies to a mind (psyche, self) that passionately desires to be freed from its own traumatic past.

The Irrecoverable Wound/The Failed Search for the Mother

The (not-so-hidden) voice of female rage in this “heart-drilling” passage suggests Kohut’s definition of narcissistic rage:

Narcissistic rage occurs in many forms; they all share, however, a specific psychological flavor which gives them a distinct position within the wide realm of human aggressions. The need for revenge, for righting a wrong, for undoing a hurt by whatever means, and a deeply anchored, unrelenting compulsion in the pursuit of all these aims which gives no rest to those who have suffered a narcissistic injury. (“Thoughts” 380)

For Mancheng in *Affinity*, the act of revenge will be a total break with her family, even with her newborn baby boy who serves as a reminder of her brother-in-law’s unpardonable act. Leaving home is necessary to psychic healing; it means searching for a more integrated self. Mancheng, and through her the author, needs to get past her imprisonment episode (seal it off, bury it), which means getting beyond her deep emotional attachment to father/husband and his/their family, moving toward a free and autonomous subjectivity. For Mancheng, however, the attempted break with family is not a successful one; as always in Chang’s works, the protagonist, even if physically free and independent, remains mentally still captive to her past traumatic experience, unable to completely nail down the coffin lid on her past. Thus Mancheng ultimately chooses to return and marry her rapist, both to keep her promise to her dying sister—this coffin lid cannot quite be nailed down all the way—and, more importantly, to take care of her boy child. Kristeva’s notion of abjection as the “incompletion” of giving birth may suggest itself here. Just before returning to “her family,” Mancheng dreams of holding her baby son in the hospital. He had been

sent to her by the nurse so that the natural mother might breast-feed him, but his body was deadly cold; he was already dead and was taken away by her sister's servant; suddenly the child was struggling, though wrapped in a bamboo mat, and was crying for her help (AF 286). This dream drives Mancheng to contact Hongchai, for she needs to see her child. Near Hongchai's house there really is a funeral going on, and a little coffin passes by, but later the dead infant proves to be her son's older stepsister. Her child is then "saved" by her in time, though he is suffering from a serious contagious disease. In order to hold onto the last hope in her life after the disappointing romance with the now-married Shijun, Mancheng decides to stay with the child, even though this means living with her rapist, with humiliating and painful memories. She sees herself as one "with scarcely any importance, able to be subjected to any kind of treatment, as if dead already" (AF 299).

Mancheng's self-sacrificing maternal love reveals her desire to become what her own mother, who prefers the power of wealth to familial relationships, could never be. It also embodies for her author the maternal ideal, a perfect representation of mothering. Eileen Chang is creating for herself, through Mancheng, an idealized mother image to compensate, perhaps, for her own awareness of having been neglected and abandoned by a not-very-maternal mother, one who was also more concerned with wealth and fashion than with mothering. Here the motherideal may be serving a quite different function from that of the overpowering father figure: it nourishes the traumatized psyche of the daughter, offers reparation and compensation. The psychoanalyst Kohut argues that when a child suffers the inevitable deficiencies of parental care, he or she will experience an intense desire to regain the lost integrity of a blissful childhood. The child will create first a grandiose (idealized) self-image and then a perfect and omnipotent "selfobject," the "idealized parent imago" ("Reflections" 478). This self-object is crucial for the child's preservation of a sound and stable sense of self: "[h]e needs selfobjects for his psychological survival, just as he needs oxygen in his environment throughout his life for physiological survival" (478). Mancheng's insistence upon raising her own child may then reflect her wish—and/or her *author's* wish—to

create and preserve the perfect mother-image (or maternalized selfobject) which had been somehow lacking in her life.

The fantasy of a reunion with her child drives Mancheng to return to a site marked with pain. This return, however, is necessary to her psychic survival: after learning that her fiancé Shijun married another woman during the same year that she was locked up, Mancheng feels her child now embodies the only life endowed with love and truth, the only connection back to genuine love and truth. The house where she must live with the child and her sister's husband (who is now her husband) seems to her a desolate tomb, a place in which the deep darkness threatens her: "In the dark room, only the mirror on the wardrobe glimmered. . . . Surrounded by the oppressive air, the obscure furniture looked extraordinarily crowded. She felt suffocated. This was the pit she had dug to bury herself in. She lay on the bed and began to cry" (AF 307). She cries because she has been driven to live in this dark corner and now there is no going back, no escape; she wishes she could express her sorrow to her lost lover, Shijun, whom she has not seen or heard from for ten years, though she has just narrowly missed a chance encounter with him.

Mancheng's self-sacrifice and suffering thus turn out to be somehow as empty as the house she now inhabits, which remains a tomb to her. Thus she escapes the place, knowing that reconciliation with the rapist Hongchai (and through him the memory of her sister) would be a kind of suicide; she must once again get free from confinement, get away from "the pit she had dug to bury herself in" (AF 307). Bringing her child with her, Mancheng tries once again to turn the nightmare of her life into a dream, turn her suffering into triumph. The child, indeed, arouses Mancheng's inner sense of empathy, the "power that counteracts man's tendency toward seeing meaninglessness and feeling despair" (Kohut 1978, 713). With this newfound flow of maternal empathy, Mancheng finds her final salvation.

Telling as Surviving

Chang ends her *Affinity* with Mancheng telling Shijun, as both finally meet, about her imprisonment experience. She is resigned to her fate; there is no way to complete or consummate their unsuccessful romance, and she concludes mournfully, “we can never be just like what we were” (AF 355). The novel’s closing scene, where the two separate, has an almost elegiac feeling: “Going out this door means parting forever; it is a cold reality, like death itself” (AF 358). Though this final farewell is not an easy one, Shijun’s appearance at the novel’s end does save Mancheng from her psychic confinement. His function in the narrative is crucial: he is above all the one who listens to Mancheng as she pours out her painful story. Mancheng tries to free herself from her monstrous past by telling him about it, but there can only be tellers of tales when there are listeners, or readers; by listening Shijun can share the unbearable frustration and pain that has confined and isolated Mancheng for so many years, and perhaps as reader’s of Chang’s own story, hidden behind the story of Mancheng, we serve a function akin to that of Shijun.

Through her female protagonist’s telling of her pain, then, Eileen Chang is revealing her own story of a traumatic past, trying to get it all out of her, nail it down, overcome it through this act of retelling or rewriting. While the Kristevan dynamic of abjection suggests that a final “overcoming” may not be possible, that this is rather an always-ongoing, never-completed process, still the telling of the experience of her imprisonment, the bringing back in writing of this memory can in theory allow Chang to survive its traumatic effects. Roberta Culbertson claims that “[t]elling . . . is a process of disembodied memory, demystifying it, a process which can only begin after memories have been remembered and the mystical touched by a buried self seeking its own healing” (179). In the first place, then, the act of narration enables the psychically wounded Chang herself to come to terms with her half-buried memories of domestic violence, to disembody and demystify, recover and reintegrate them. Yet again the role of the listeners, of the readers here, also seems crucial: the writer remembers, reintegrates and then (hopefully) unburdens herself of painful memories by sharing

them with her readers.

These readers also serve a more sociocultural and indeed political function: Mancheng’s/Chang’s suffering at the hands of a patriarchal and violently abusive fatherfigure (and, in a different way and to a lesser degree, at the hands of a nonmaternal motherfigure) now becomes the collective experience of her readers, it becomes “public knowledge.” Chang is sensitive to the fact that telling openly the story of her suffering here may help to prevent such suffering (of submissive daughters at the hands of abusive fathers) from being further perpetrated and becoming more widespread in the society. She recognizes what Shoshana Felman calls the importance of *testifying*: “To testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others; to take responsibility—in speech—for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences” (204). Eileen Chang turns the unspeakable into what now can be spoken by all.

If Chang in *Affinity of Half a Lifetime* was “telling her story to the world,” at the end of her own life she gave herself to the whole earth. Her funeral was held on the Pacific Ocean in 1995. Her ashes were scattered, as she put it, in a “desolate spot” of the great sea, from which they must have spread far and wide. The once-imprisoned author chose to embrace this tremendous, muted realm as the final but still-unfinished page of a mysterious and still-surviving life.

NOTES

¹ The Chinese title for this short story is “Tiancai meng 天才夢,” which is collected in *Zhang Ailing sanwen quanbian (Selected Writings by Zhang Ailing)*.

² *Zhang Ailing sanwen quanbian*, 3. (My translation, as in all subsequent quoted passages from Chang’s works.)

³ Chang’s modern critics like Sung Mingwei and Ping Lu point out that Chang’s autobiographical description of her being locked by her father at an early age is a retelling of the episode of the female

protagonist's imprisonment in *Affinity of Half a Lifetime*. See Sung, pp. 77-78 and Ping Lu 225. The title of *Affinity* will be abbreviated as *AF* in all subsequent textual citations.

⁴ For both papers, see Yang Ze, 211-56.

⁵ Chang, "Si yu" ("Small Talks") in *Liu yan*, 156-60.

⁶ See the latter parallel textual citation, a description of the imprisonment of Chang's female protagonist, Gu Mancheng, and compare it with Chang's memoir here. The similarity of both narrations are obvious.

⁷ As pointed out by Rey Chow, "[i]n Chang's language, feelings of indifference dominate, giving rise to a nonanthropocentric affective structure that is often expressed through the figures of ruin and desolation" (114).

⁸ See Ping Lu, "Shangshi de zhouqi" ("The Mourning Cycle" 220-26). Also, in "Mother, Where Are You?" Hu examines the mother-daughter relationship with a focus on the daughter and her lover by applying Freud's theories of sadism and masochism. Hu's analyzed mother figure is, instead of the daughter-protagonist's mother, the lover's mother, who is considered by Hu an "Oedipus mother" for her exercising of the patriarchal law by intruding on her son's marriage to the heroine daughter.

⁹ Yang Ze has termed Chang's obsession with the wilderness as a kind of "absolute solitude," a highly self-conscious indulgence in it. See Yang Ze, 11.

¹⁰ See Lin, 144-45, 159-62. Lin considers that the absence of the father figure in most of Chang's works is one of her narrative skills which aims to castrate patriarchal power. Lin observes that Chang's presentation of the male characters in her works includes two main features: first, is the "patricide narrative," in which the male/father characters are excluded and banished while the matriarchy is in charge; second, Chang tends to castrate the patriarchal power in order to devalue the male image as the dominating and controlling symbol.

¹¹ Yang Ze indicates that Chang painfully "rehearsed" her ambivalent attitude toward the father in works like *The Golden Cangue*, *Affinity of Half a Lifetime*, and *The Lamented Woman*. See Yang Ze 24.

¹² As Yang Ze, Chang saw her relationship with her father in the "primal scene," a result of the loss of the father's love. Yang Ze also indicates that Chang seems unable to release herself from the emotional attachment to her father, as the men she married were close to her father's age. See Yang Ze 24.

¹³ In describing Marguerite Duras's works, Kristeva writes, "Lacking catharsis, such a literature encounters, recognizes, but also spreads the pain that summons it" (229). Chang's work *Affinity* shares a similar quality with Kristeva's, that "neither tragedy nor enthusiasms, with clarity, in the frigid insignificance of a psychic numbness, both the minimal and also ultimate sign of grief and ravishment" (228).

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The Cost of Living Up to the Demand of Autobiographical Fiction: An Analysis of the Interaction between Yu Dafu's Fiction and His Life

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ABSTRACT

Yu Dafu's subscription to the notion that "all literary work is nothing but the author's autobiography" is well-known, but the impact of this conviction on his fiction and, more importantly, his personal life has not been adequately researched. By analyzing the influence of the self-image Yu Dafu came to adopt through his exposure to the Japanese "I-novel" and the Russian works about the "superfluous man," a self-image that emphasizes social alienation, mental crises and exhibitionist behavior, the present essay studies how the dictates of self-exposure and Yu Dafu's attempts, as a professional writer depending on his pen for a living, to satisfy his readers' interest in scandals, shaped the course of his private life.

KEY WORDS

scholar-beauty (<i>caizi-jiaren</i>)	effeminacy
Yu Dafu	autobiographical fiction
sincerity	self-exposure