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The Cinderella Stereotype: A Comparative Study of *Love in a Fallen City* and *Cinderella*

Estelle Ruoxing Nusbaumer 

Department of Philosophy, University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This study examines the Cinderella complex through a comparative analysis of Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* and Charles Perrault's *Cinderella*. The Cinderella complex, coined by Colette Dowling, describes women's hidden fear of independence and their desire for male rescue. Using Vladimir Propp's narratological framework, the study deconstructs both narratives, revealing common functions such as absentation, interdiction, complicity, and marriage. These functions underscore deep-seated patriarchal values where female characters are portrayed as passive and dependent on male saviors. Despite *Love in a Fallen City* being praised for its feminist themes, it replicates the Cinderella stereotype, illustrating women's fear of autonomy, romanticization of rescue, and subordination to men. This research is crucial for uncovering persistent gender stereotypes and contributes to feminist discourse by challenging traditional portrayals of women in the literature. It offers insights into the cultural and historical contexts of these stories and promotes critical thinking about the narratives that shape societal norms. Ultimately, this study advocates for greater gender equality by highlighting the need for literature that portrays women as autonomous and empowered. Through this comparative analysis, the research fosters a reevaluation of traditional gender roles and advances understanding of female empowerment in literary works.

本文通过比较分析张爱玲的《倾城之恋》和夏尔·佩罗的《灰姑娘》，探讨“灰姑娘情结”这一主题。灰姑娘情结由科莱特·道林提出，用以描述女性对独立的潜在恐惧以及对男性拯救的渴望。研究借助弗拉基米尔·普罗普的叙事功能理论，对两部作品的叙事结构进行解构，揭示了它们在缺席、禁令、共谋和婚姻等功能上的相似性。这些叙事功能反映了植根于父权制社会的价值观，将女性角色塑造为被动依赖、等待男性救世主的形象。尽管《倾城之恋》因其女性主义主题备受赞誉，它仍重复了灰姑娘的刻板印象，展现出女性对自主性的隐忧、对救赎的浪漫化以及对男性的屈从。本研究不仅揭示了这些叙事背后的文化与历史背景，还通过批判文学作品中女性的传统描绘，为女性主义话语提供了新的视角。研究提倡文学更加注重展现女性的自主性与赋权，为推动性别平等作出贡献。通过比较分析两部作品，该研究呼吁重新审视传统性别角色，并深化对文学作品中女性赋权内涵的理解。

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1. Introduction

Feminism is one of the most prominent topics in contemporary discourse, teasing out the inequality between men and women in both literature and everyday life. At times, despite the portrayal of certain female fictional characters as confident and autonomous, there are still implications that constantly suggest their lack of choice or resolution aside from becoming dependent on men. Indeed, there are celebrated and canonized books that consistently portray female characters as passive, powerless, and dependent, positioning them as the normative female “role model” for female readers. These compositions have been extensively circulated as folklore, books, films, and television. These works often depict women as subservient to men, underscoring the importance of financial resources in romantic relationships (Ke).

The female portraits and narrative tropes in these works of popular fiction are reoccurring in the literature, adopting evolving expression in different times. In this article, I will argue that Eileen Chang’s novel, *Love in a Fallen City*, provides an archetype for the female protagonist for the later romantic novels, closely associated with the Cinderella stereotype or complex, as famously illustrated in *Cinderella* folklore. The study of Eileen Chang’s fiction is, therefore, important for understanding the changing perspectives of feminism in contemporary China. I will discuss how the Cinderella complex pertains to the structure and the content of *Cinderella* and *Love in the Fallen City*.

2. Cinderella complex and gender stereotypes

The term Cinderella complex is derived from Collette Dowling’s eponymous book, *The Cinderella Complex: Women’s Hidden Fear of Independence*. In her work, Dowling examined women’s fantasy of being rescued by a man and their tendency to avoid challenges. Her hypothesis was named after the folk tale *Cinderella*, which was seen to exemplify stereotyped representations of female characters in both actual and fictional heteronormative interactions. According to Xu et al., two key characteristics can be derived from the Cinderella complex: (A) Men act and women appear, and (B) Men are women’s ways to happiness.

These two characteristics are stereotypical images of women in a patriarchal society. Noteworthy here is that there may have never been any true association between the Cinderella complex and the female sex or femininity. It is more likely that Cinderella complex is the constructed “gender” as per Judith Butler’s line of thought. According to Butler, whose idea was rooted in Simone de Beauvoir’s work *The Second Sex* and in the deconstruction of sex and gender binary, sex is biological while gender is socially constructed.¹ That is to say that these aforementioned stereotypes are merely social constructions and are not true to females. They are merely invented to appear true to trap the female into the role of women which has been determined by certain images, roles, or social responsibilities. Thus, Cinderella complex is, in no way, inherent to the female sex; but only imposed. To break this bias toward females, one has to be actively aware of the presence of the Cinderella complex in different cultural works.

The assertion (A), that men act while women merely appear, depicts women as passive. The expression was initially employed by John Berger (47) in his work *Ways of*

Seeing to articulate the objectification of women in art. By objectifying a woman, one is dehumanizing her and rendering her inferior to a man. Hence, (A) is heavily criticized by modern and contemporary feminists such as Griselda Pollock (*Vision and Difference*), Laura Mulvey (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*) and Linda Nochlin (*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*). Similar to (A), (B) likewise suggests the inferiority of women to men, portraying women as incapable of attaining happiness – an ability that is seen as inherent in men – independently. It is solely dependent on a man that a woman could be happy. This perspective constructs the stark power difference between men and women, a difference that has been repeatedly proved to be a conspiracy under patriarchal society. Hence, understanding both (A) and (B) is essential in determining whether a work genuinely addresses the inequality between men and women.

The story *Cinderella* is often seen as embodying a stereotypical female archetype, shaped by patriarchal expectations of women. Conversely, Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* has been celebrated as a work of female liberation (Di Muzio). Michel Hockx (221) recognizes Chang's substantial contributions to China's socio-cultural evolution, whereas scholars such as Wendy Larson (195) highlight the feminist aspects in her writing. According to proponents of the feminist interpretation of Chang, her works challenge oppressive gender norms and traditional family structures by portraying women's experiences and societal roles (Larson, 195). Her writing combines popular conventions to engage urban audiences while exposing the romantic, moral, and political failures of the modern girl, revealing her humanity and her entrapment within a male-dominated socio-economic system (Dooling 139; Sang 774–775).

As Chang's renowned story, *Love in a Fallen City* has been specifically regarded as a feminist work for its portrayal of a divorced woman – devalued by society – marrying a wealthy man.² This character challenges the traditional Chinese values that view divorced women as inferior to their unmarried counterparts. However, such feminist reading represents only one facet of the story. Xiaoping Wang, for instance, argues that *Love in a Fallen City* both subverts patriarchal historiography and highlights middle-class women's matrimonial anxieties yet remains entrenched in misogynistic portrayals by indulging in irrational desires and framing fulfillment through war and destruction. Agreeing with her, I believe that the overall structure and story development of *Love in a Fallen City* may suggest otherwise about its progressiveness. Through Vladimir Propp's narratological method, I will be delving into the feministic image of *Love in a Fallen City* by revealing its deep structure as similar to that of *Cinderella*, a work embodying and enhancing female stereotypes.

Therefore, I argue that the Cinderella complex is not a women's problem; instead, it is the problem of female stereotyping that has been fostered throughout literary history. While Dowling deals with actual psychological problems (one of the reasons why her theory was much challenged), I will focus on representation. Firstly, I will illustrate how the two texts are highly similar in their essential structure. Secondly, by examining the structure and content of both texts, I investigate what and how the characteristics of the Cinderella stereotype could be found in both of them, and how Eileen Chang, aspiring to be a new woman, still could not help but replicate another "Cinderella" in her story. I will concentrate on these specific points: (a) women's fear of independence and autonomy, (b) their subconscious desire to be taken care of, (c) the romanticization of rescue, and (d) women's subordinate role to men.

3. Comparison of *Love in a Fallen City* and *Cinderella*

In 1943, Eileen Chang (張愛玲) gained fame with *Love in a Fallen City* (《傾城之戀》), set in 1940s Shanghai and Hong Kong during the Pacific War. The story follows Bai Liusu, a divorced woman seeking to escape her family, who despised her for being divorced, and Fan Liuyuan, a wealthy businessman recently returned from London.

In this section, I will dissect *Cinderella* and *Love in a Fallen City*'s plot following Vladimir Propp's theoretical methodology, allowing me to further compare the female images in these two stories. Prior to this, I would like to provide some context on Propp's theory.

In *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, Propp made two observations concerning folklore: (a) The character's functions are consistent, immutable components, irrespective of their manifestation and the individual executing them. They constitute fundamental components of the narrative (Propp, 10). (b) These functions can be distinctly recognized and quantified independently (ibid). He delineates 31 fundamental narrative functions, categorizing them into four domains: the introduction (functions 1 to 7, from absentation to complicity), the body of the story (functions 8 to 11, from villainy to the departure of the hero), the donor sequence (functions 12 to 19, that is to say from the first function of donor to the Liquidation), and the hero's return (function 20–31, the return to the wedding).³ In the subsequent parts, I shall reference these functions numerically and concentrate on individual functions as illustrated in the accompanying table.

Table of the identified "Cinderella plotline" functions.

Function 1	Absentation	The absence of one of the family members of the protagonist.
Function 2	Interdiction	A forbidden command passed on the protagonist.
Function 7	Complicity	The protagonist being tricked by the villains.
Function 12	First Function of the Donor	The protagonist receives help after proving himself/herself.
Function 15	Spatial transference	The protagonist moves from a place to another.
Function 20	Return	The protagonist returned at his/her original place.
Function 27	Recognition	The protagonist is recognized.
Function 31	Marriage	The marriage of the protagonist.

Alongside from that, Propp recognized seven character archetypes: the villain, the helper, the provider, the princess or prince, the dispatcher, the false hero, and the hero or heroine. Combined with his narrative functions, Propp created a taxonomy that can help identify narrative patterns, tropes, and structures in and across folklore. The method of deconstructing a given narrative with this taxonomy, is thus Propp's decomposition. While his methodology has been criticized for its reductive approach to narratives – sometimes ignoring the language details and excessively prioritizing plot structure – it can serve as a foundational framework for cross-cultural literary studies rather than a restrictive conclusion that limits interpretation. Since this essay aims to briefly compare the two texts by highlighting their structural similarities, Propp's methodology should suffice.

I shall now identify what I refer to as the *Cinderella* plotline, which resonates with the previously discussed Cinderella complex. This narrative archetype is readily discernible in cultural works across diverse linguistic traditions, such as Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Disney princess films, and the Bossy President – a subgenre prevalent in 21st-century Chinese internet literature (Clarke; Xu). Campbell asserts, "*Cinderella*

narrative has clearly persisted over the course of centuries in a variety of different cultures, ranging from ancient China to African oral tradition, with its latest version being released less than a year ago in the United States, it is logical to assume that this fairy-tale possesses an element of importance which has been noted by each of the cultures that have perpetuated it throughout the course of history, even with the alteration of specific folkloric elements” (Campbell 2). *Cinderella*’s plotline could thus be understood as cross-cultural narrative phenomenon with different adaptations; it could be said that each nation possesses its own version of *Cinderella* (Friedman). Hence, there is significance in uncovering the deep structure of *Cinderella*.

According to Propp’s method, the folklore of *Cinderella* can be dissected into the characters of heroine, villain, helper, and prince. Cinderella is the heroine, her stepfamilies constitute the villains, the Fairy Godmother serve as the helper, and the prince is the prince. While there are no complications in identifying the characters and assigning them roles, the breakdown of the plot is more complex. The plot begins with what Propp calls the preparatory functions,⁴ which are: (i) the absention of a parent (function 1) resulting in (ii) an interdiction of Cinderella to be in an equal position as her stepsisters. She thus becomes a servant of the family (function 2). (iii) A complicity, in which Cinderella believes that she is able to attain the ball, hence the reason for her sorrow (function 7). (iv) Her Fairy Godmother showed up, providing the necessary support as the magic agent (function 14), (v) and directing her to the ball (function 15). (vi) Upon Cinderella’s timely return from the initial ball, the Fairy Godmother decides to assist her once more for the next ball (function 20), (vii) marking the emergence of the donor’s primary function (function 12). (viii) Following the second ball, the prince searches for Cinderella, with the slipper as the sole indication of her identity (function 21). (ix) She eventually gets the opportunity to put on the slipper, liberating herself from the control of her stepfamily (function 27) (x) by marrying the prince (function 31).

On the other hand, the plot of *Love in a Fallen City* can be similarly dissected: (i) the absention of a parent as non-physical yet emotional support (function 1), (ii) Liusu being spurned by her family following her divorce (function 2). (iii) Deception transpires when the Fourth Mistress attempts to deceive Liusu by asserting that she ought to wed a divorced man who is her senior, claiming that marriage is her sole choice (function 6). (iv) This initiates the phase of complicity, wherein Liusu perceives marriage as her only path to success (function 7). (v) Following Liusu’s dance with Seventh Sister Baolu’s initially arranged date, Mr. Fan, Liusu is helped by Mrs. Xu (the matchmaker) to leave Shanghai for Hong Kong. The primary function of the donor is likely found in that scenario (function 12). (vi) Liusu was “tested” and successfully made Mr. Fan (Liuyuan) fall in love after a dance, which granted her the ticket to Hong Kong, marking the event of spatial change (function 15). (vii) Nevertheless, her ticket to Hong Kong was not permanent. She had to return to Shanghai after a period of time with Liuyuan (function 20). (viii) Months later, Liuyuan “rescued” her from her family by sending her a telegraphic message inviting her to settle with him in Hong Kong (function 27). (ix) She then was presented with a challenge: the declaration of the Pacific War (function 25). Once again, in her near desperate state, with limited provisions remaining, Liuyuan came to her aid, rescuing her from his residence. He took her on a cruise, ensuring their survival during the war (function 27). (xi) Yet again, marriage is presented as the final

resolution of the challenge: as married couples are provided extra resources, it is marriage that allowed them to live out the war (function 31).

As illustrated above, the two stories share eight functions in common (function 1, 2, 7, 12, 15, 20, 27 and 31). To reiterate, these include absentation, interdiction, complicity, the first function of the donor, spatial transference, return, recognition, and marriage. In this part, I will provide an explanation of Propp's functions and align them with Dowling's four characteristics of the Cinderella complex: (a) women's fear of independence and autonomy, (b) their subconscious desire to be taken care of, (c) the romanticization of rescue, (d) being subordinate to men. Instead of discussing the functions in their original order as Popp placed them, I will rather group them in two categories, namely, (A) men act and women appear, and (B) men are women's ways to happiness.

4. Men act, women appear: the functional donor and spatial transference

The first function of the donor exemplifies the protagonist's (a) lack of autonomy, (b) subconscious inclination to depend on others, and (d) subordination. Common to both stories, is that the first function of the donor or the test occurs when the protagonist faces obstacles prior to the helper addressing their dilemma. In Perrault's tale, the role of the helper was played by the Fairy Godmother. Her help was offered on two occasions: prior to and after the initial ball. The Fairy Godmother's first challenge required Cinderella to find a pumpkin in the garden (Perrault 5). The second one demands she return home on time after the first ball. Both tests are straightforward and devoid of difficulties. These basic requirements closely mirror expectations parents have for their children, such as returning home before the curfew or bringing them specific objects. At this level, the Fairy Godmother can be interpreted as a mother figure.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Xu fulfills a similar role for Liusu. She acts as a maternal advisor to Liusu when she confronts problems such as turning down her marriage with Mr. Jiang and leaving the Bai household. She offers her the chance of moving to Hong Kong. However, Liusu must earn this opportunity by seducing Liuyuan. She successfully captivates Liuyuan during their dance, thereby securing Mrs. Xu's assistance. It's also important to note that both Cinderella and Liusu possess the stereotypical female seductive "power," which is the ability to captivate men after a dance.

Some may contend that this function offers justification for believing that Cinderella and Liusu "act;" however, assistance is present throughout their journey of love and liberation. In Cinderella's case, if the Fairy Godmother had intervened in her life, she would most likely have refrained from attempting to alter her circumstances by leaving the house and being self-sufficient. Nevertheless, it appears that being born into an era where women are subjugated by society and may lack self-sufficiency, Cinderella is perceived as having no choice. Consequently, her condition may be regarded as an alternative expression of feminine impotence. Engaging in mundane activities does not appear to demonstrate her capacity to surmount challenges and her bravery. This is further evidence to believe that Cinderella lacks independence or agency.

In addition, one should remember that Cinderella is a fictional character, not a real person, which means that her fate is dependent on the author, Charles Perrault, a man. A fictional character cannot actively choose to not be independent; she is represented as not being independent. Therefore, the limitation is not only on the women, but on the

heteronormative depiction coming from a male authorship ultimately. This again reveals the masculine dominance, as Perrault is in absolute control of Cinderella's destiny.

Throughout both stories, different forms of help were provided for the two heroines to gain autonomy and to escape their family. However, it appears to be contradictory that autonomy is "given" or "provided" since autonomy is more likely to be referring to the individual's ability to act for themselves. Such revelation of their passiveness, correlated to the view that (A) women appear and reinforce this stereotype. Nevertheless, it is likely that women in their positions are not given the choice to be free in the first place. As Liusu says while discussing with Mrs. Xu, there are many actual practical obstacles preventing her from doing so and given the social background of *Cinderella*, this is also true in her case (Chang, 112–114). It is not the case that Liusu actively wants to be a Cinderella stereotypical figure, but that she is placed into a Cinderella-like position with limited autonomy. Thus, the Cinderella complex is not unique to an actual woman or a fictional female character, but a general description of being "women" in a given time and social circumstance.

Both characters are unable to alter their circumstances, leading both narratives to align with the idea that (A) men act, and women appear. There is uncertainty regarding whether women are (a) "afraid of" independence or if their prolonged deprivation of autonomy has rendered them oblivious to the possibility of an alternative.

Spatial transference and return are present in both narratives: For Cinderella, it pertains to her conveyance to the ball and the subsequent moment when the enchantment dissipates, whereas for Liusu, it involves her relocation from Shanghai to Hong Kong and her subsequent return to Shanghai until Liuyuan dispatched a telegraph to extricate her a second time by requesting her to return to Hong Kong. The return of Cinderella and Liusu may seem redundant. In fact, it serves to reinforce the female stereotype, while the spatial transference prepared it. This creates a gender dichotomy described by John Berger (47) as "Men act, and women appear."

The two characters are each awaiting their princes' rescue at home. For Charles Perrault, in seventeenth-century France, it was a norm for presenting women as passively waiting to be rescued. At that time, feminism had not yet emerged, and women were still oppressed by the patriarchal society and were educated to be obedient, but this seems to be different for Eileen Chang, who was in the era of the rise of women's rights. As a pioneering woman, Chang's female characters still conformed to the "female stereotype" and had the desire to be redeemed.

Much of this can be attributed to the nascent state of women's rights at the time, as well as the absence of a father in her childhood (as in the case of Liusu), which led to her confusion about intimate relationships. Psychological research has found that females with missing and inconsistent father figures often experience poor romantic relationships due to discomfort with emotional intimacy (Del Priore and Hill). On that behalf, Chang's relationship with the famous writer, Hu Lancheng (胡蘭成), could also be attributed to her lack of fatherly responsibility (Jiang). She may have placed her hopes for fairy-tale love in this novel. It is evident that females growing with unhealthy attachment with their fathers are more likely to have attachment problem (Lucassen et al., 2018). Teenage girls diagnosed with depression are more likely to report to have been rejected and neglected by their fathers than non-depressed ones (Demidenko, Manion and Lee, 2015). In addition, the absence of the father during childhood could change females' mating

behavior. Females with unsecured attachment with their fathers were found to have a less long marriage and to be more interested in this fictitious male (Schreiber, 2017).

It seems that the spatial transference fails in “liberating” women, as they do not actively facilitate these transferences and merely serve as instruments for men to achieve other objectives. They are in fact just being transferred into a different location with similar status (for female). Hence, neither the spatial transference nor the return appears to depict women as (a) autonomous and (A) active.

5. Men being women’s ways to happiness: interdiction and absentation

When it comes to interdiction (when the hero is warned from a certain action), both Cinderella and Liusu are disfavored by their family or stepfamily members. The former was treated as a servant and prohibited from attending the ball. The text conveys this prohibition implicitly: Upon the arrival of the ball, Cinderella’s two stepsisters are all “set off in high spirit” (Perrault, 3). What Cinderella does is merely following them “with her eyes until the coach was out of sight” and “cry bitterly” while “all persons of quality were invited to it” (ibid).

The latter was warned that she could not have a better choice than marrying Mr. Jiang, the widower with five children (Chang, 125). The Bai household, namely Liusu’s family, perceived “Liusu’s remarriage as some kind of joke” and were in a hurry “to get her out of the house” (Chang, 124). After witnessing Liusu dance with Fan Liuyuan and suspecting his affection for her, the Fourth Mistress responds by disparaging Liusu, stating that she “got a heart smeared with pig fat” and comparing her to “a soiled flower” (Chang, 127). Moreover, the different attitude of the Bai household toward Liusu and Baolu is comparable to Cinderella and her stepsisters: Although the Bai family wishes for Liusu to leave and intends to marry her off, they “dressed Baolu in every last stitch of the family’s best finery” to prepare her for her encounter with Fan Liuyuan (Chang, 124–127). Correspondingly, Cinderella was also treated differently from her two stepsisters (e.g., Cinderella being treated as “a servant” and not being able to go to the ball as her stepsister) (Perrault, 3). As a result, both protagonists experienced interdiction in two aspects: interdiction to act in a certain way (to go to the ball for one and to marry “a better candidate” for the other) or to pursue a better life, and interdiction to be treated as equals to their sister (or as they are supposed to be treated).

While interdiction is not depicted as a manifestation of sexism in *Cinderella*, it largely reflects patriarchal values in *Love in a Fallen City*. Growing up with the values that “women are ‘devalued’ when they are over x age” and that women are “ashamed to be divorced,” Liusu’s decision-making is affected by it. The Bai household’s interdiction and unfair treatment of Liusu reinforces the values of a patriarchal society, which makes Liusu choose to be dependent on men and marriage as a way of escaping from her family. This dependence hints at her (a) fear of autonomy, which indirectly reveals her (b) subconscious desire to be taken care of. Her yearning for care may stem from a tacit agreement that women are subordinate to men, as illustrated in the dialogue between Liusu and Baolu: “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” (Chang, 127). This statement reflects that women are (d) subordinate to men, and their worth is dependent on them. The sole

criterion for evaluating a woman is her ability to satisfy a man. Thus (B), without a man, a woman will be unable to attain happiness. Even if the function of interdiction does not directly demonstrate this patriarchal value in *Cinderella*, it appears in other instances (e.g., Cinderella's salvation by the prince). Thereby, it is equally evident in both narratives that (B) women's happiness is entirely dependent on men.

The absence of autonomy in the two characters, namely, Cinderella and Liusu, coupled with their dependence on men, necessitates a reason. Thus, the initial function, absention, emerges, signifying the absence of a family member from the household. In the cases of both protagonists, it is the non-presence of both parents. In *Cinderella*, it states: "while she was still very young, her mamma died, to the grief of her husband and daughter" (Perrault, 3). This confirms the absence of her mother from her life. While her father is alive, he appears to be absent in his paternal role in primarily two respects:

1-Cinderella "bore all her troubles with patience, not even complaining to her father," and her father has neither noticed her being mistreated nor acted as a helper (Perrault, 3).

2-He is not present directly in the story itself but is referenced solely through the storyteller's narration.

Likewise, Liusu's father is mentioned only once by the narrator, characterized as "a famous gambler" who "gambled away the family's fortune and started its descent into the ranks of poor, declining households" (Chang, 130). At the same time, her mother was "lying on the big redwood bed, slowly waving a round white fan" and showing little sympathy to her by asking her "to make allowances" and expressing shame regarding her daughter's divorce (Chang, 115-117). When Liusu "heard these words," she barely recognized her mother and realized that "the mother she was praying to, and the mother she really had were two different people" (Chang, 117-118). This results in the emotional unavailability or absence of her mother, permitting the reader to conclude that both Liusu's father and mother were in different ways, but both were absent. Therefore, Cinderella's mother is physically absent, whereas her father is emotionally unavailable. In Liusu's situation, her father is absent, whereas her mother is present physically but lacks emotional presence. Each of them had one parent who was physically absent and another who was emotionally absent.

This function appears to elucidate, to a certain degree, Cinderella and Liusu's attachment to the opposite sex. Steinhilber et al. contended that adolescents with subpar parental relationships typically exhibit diminished self-esteem. Simultaneously, women with diminished self-esteem may exhibit reduced ambition and are prone to apprehension regarding independence or autonomy, stemming from a fear of rejection associated with excessive autonomy (Cowan and Kinder). They possess an unconscious yearning for affection and nurturing, a sentiment likely applicable to Cinderella and Liusu, despite the absence of direct evidence. Consequently, both female characters seek to replace the affection from their absent parents with the affection from men. This exacerbates an obsession with romantic love and affection in general. This may explicate why both female characters fear independence, as it would indicate their incapacity to earn love, which was characterized as the primary objective for women during their era. Thus, a legitimate rationale appears to be established for both characters: (A) dependence on a man and (a) deficiency in autonomy and courage for self-redemption.

6. The romanticization of rescue

From the preceding paragraph explaining the function of the interdiction, the heroines are evidently ensnared by the deceit of their respective “villains:” Cinderella by her stepfamily and in Liusu’s case, by the Bai household, particularly the Fourth Mistress. In addition to Cinderella’s deprivation from going to the ball, her stepfamily could have made her believe that she would never meet the prince or marry the prince, even though there is no direct evidence of such interpretation. Still, the villains have successfully held her back, hence the reason for her action of crying at home without confronting the problem, which reaffirms what has formally been proved: (A) men act, and women appear (Perrault, 3).

From the previous paragraph explaining the interdiction, the heroines clearly fall into the trickery of the stepfamily on Cinderella’s side and the Bai household (mainly the Fourth Mistress), who may be regarded as the antagonists. In addition to Cinderella’s exclusion from the ball, her stepfamily may have instilled in her the belief that she would never encounter or wed the prince, despite the absence of direct evidence for this interpretation. Still, the villains have effectively restrained her, hence her action of crying at home without addressing the issue, thereby reinforcing the previously established notion that (A) men act, and women appear (Perrault, 3).

In this section, I will argue that the marriage of the two protagonists symbolizes the reinforcement of patriarchal structures by presenting women’s happiness as dependent on male intervention and societal approval. I will demonstrate this by highlighting the passive portrayal of the female characters and their lack of independence, depicting them as reliant on “rescue” and positioned primarily as subjects to be saved. This self-limiting mind-set traps the female protagonists within a restrictive framework, confining their pursuit of “happiness” to dependence on men and marriage.

Signs of complicity are presented in a direct way in *Love in a Fallen City*. The Bai family seems to have successfully persuaded Liusu that matrimony is her sole avenue to fulfillment. In the passage where Liusu expresses her disappointment toward the Bai household to Mrs. Xu, she has been denying her own ability to be independent, believing that marriage is the only way to help her be independent of the Bai (Chang, 119). The statement “I’m already twenty-eight” illustrates her self-denial and implicit acceptance of the Bai family’s belief that marriage is her only path, leading her to believe she is too old to wed “a decent man”⁵ (Chang, 119). As a result, Liusu was misled by the villains and conformed to the antiquated principles of the Bai household.

As a stereotypical depiction of women in literary works, Liusu has internalized the belief that her salvation lies in being married to a man. Her happiness is portrayed as contingent on his willingness to marry her and provide a “home.” The man’s realm is vast and unrestricted, whereas the woman’s world is confined to the man and the “home” he provides. This exemplifies the traditional Chinese model of private patriarchy, deeply rooted in Confucian principles, which advocates the notion that “men manage external affairs, while women oversee internal matters” (男主外, 女主内) (Fang and Walker). This ideology is deeply ingrained in Liusu’s mind-set. Although she acknowledges that women can work and achieve self-sufficiency, she perceives herself as incapable of doing so. Her submission to patriarchal values is confirmed in her conversation with Mrs. Xu at the Bai household, which underscores a critical

point: when Mrs Xu offers her an alternative path to independence outside of marriage – namely, becoming a nun – Liusu dismisses the suggestion outright (Chang, 119). This reaction exposes the invalidity of her earlier claims that her refusal to work stems from a lack of skills or an inability to support herself. What Liusu is ultimately doing is clinging to men, passively waiting to be saved by them. This is further highlighted by the narrator’s commentary during her dialogue with Baolu, which reveals the shared values between Baolu and Liusu. These values emphasize Liusu’s (a) resistance to independence, (b) belief that men are women’s sole path to happiness, (c) dependency on male intervention, and (d) assumption of her subordination to men.

Previous analysis demonstrates that patriarchy operates as a covert force, instilling its values in both protagonists unconsciously. Therefore, even though Liusu may complain about the Bai family, she subconsciously believes she has been devalued because of her age. Cinderella and Liusu exhibit passivity in the face of challenges; the latter overtly demonstrates subservience to men and a fear of autonomy, while these traits are explicitly manifested in *Cinderella*. The disparity in presentation (one through narration, the other through action) arises from the shift in narrative corresponding to the era in which the two stories were composed. During Perrault’s era, narrative composition adhered to Aristotle’s principle that action shapes character. However, modernity movement has changed narration; writers have started focusing on the character’s psychological aspect. Since Perrault resided in the seventeenth century, the aforementioned writing style had not yet become fashionable. For Chang, a twentieth-century figure, emphasis was placed more on the character’s inner voice than merely their actions. Therefore, the distinction between Perrault and Chang’s narratives lies in the belief that Cinderella harbored Liusu’s aspiration of (c) being saved by a man (B), which represents their path to happiness.

Although complicity does provide ground for believing that the value of men is women’s path to happiness is central to *Cinderella* and *Love in the Fallen City*, (c) the romanticization of rescue is better demonstrated by the recognition and marriage. The resolution of the primary issue, specifically the protagonist’s escape from their family, is inextricably linked to marriage. Marriage is, in essence, the ultimate resolution.

Cinderella’s union with the prince has enabled her to leave her household. She has attained her happiness through men, thereby reinforcing the notion that (B) men are the pathway to women’s happiness. In Liusu’s case, she was rescued multiple times by a man. For instance, when Liuyuan’s telegram called her back to Hong Kong and when Liuyuan intervened to rescue her during the wartime (Chang, 153–160). All rescue scenarios are romanticized: Upon the arrival of Liuyuan’s telegram, he appears as a savior when he locates her in a state of food and storage. This scene implicitly portrays the female figure as passive and awaiting assistance from the male character, aligning with the assertions (A) “men act, women appear” and (B) “men are women’s pathway to happiness.” Although these two instances seem to address Liusu’s dilemma, the crucial factor in resolving her primary issue (escaping the Bai household) is her marriage to Liuyuan. This marriage not only permits her to prove herself to the Bai household, especially to the Fourth Mistress, who does not believe that as a divorced woman, Liusu could ever marry Liuyuan, but also permit her and Liuyuan to gain more resources in wartime (Chang, 126–165). Therefore, both characters were

rescued by their romantic relationship and marriage with their “prince,” leading one to conclude that both sorties (c) romanticized rescue shared the view that (B) men are women’s ways to happiness.

7. Conclusion

In summary, according to Propp’s functions, *Cinderella* and *Love in a Fallen City* exhibit similarities in their narratives. Eight out of ten functions in the two narratives are identical, rendering *Love in a Fallen City* a non-Western version of *Cinderella*. Sharing a similar plot, *Cinderella* and *Love in a Fallen City* both exhibit the characteristics of the Cinderella complex. This complex is defined by two primary characteristics: (A) men act, and women appear, and (B) men are perceived as the means to women’s happiness. These can be further categorized into: (a) women’s apprehension regarding independence and autonomy; (b) an unconscious yearning for caretaking; (c) the idealization of rescue; and (d) women’s subjugation to men. These sub-characteristics exemplify key issues in feminist studies. Females tend to grow up fantasizing about love and relationships, subordinating themselves to men, as exemplified by Liusu and Baolu in their dialogue (Chang, 127). While the first function of the donor, spatial transference, and return is symbolic in illustrating (A), the interdiction, absention, and complicity served as valid evidence to believe the existence of (B) in both works. The final two functions, recognition and marriage, integrate the two ideologies. Analysis of the similarities between the two works, alongside the application of the identified criteria of the Cinderella complex, suggests that this stereotype is present in both studied works.

Notes

1. Although gender and sex are sociologically distinct, I will interchange the term female with women, as I believe the term women should also be liberated from these stereotypes. Thus, no definitive distinction will be made between the two in this essay.
2. From the beginning until the end of the story Liusu has always been clear about her relationship with Liuyuan. What she desired was clearly not love, rather his wealth and status permitting her to prove her value to the Bai Household.
3. For more information see Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*
4. That is to say, functions which provide the background of the protagonist before her/his adventure.
5. By “decent man” I mean men other than a widower with five children such as Mr. Jiang. This is not to say that Mr. Jiang is not decent, but rather that in the eyes of the Bai family and Liusu, and in the values of the time, Mr. Jiang is not a preferred marriage partner for women.

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ORCID

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