

Urban Space, War, and the "Legend" of Women: A Study on Spatial Politics and Female Survival Strategies in *Love in a Fallen City*

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Abstract

The tension between the "legendary" reputation of **Love in a Fallen City** and its "anti-legendary" reality has long been a focal point in academic research. Centered on spatial politics, this article explores the interplay among urban space, wartime violence, and women's survival strategies. Before the war, the feudal ethics of Bai Gongguan and the colonial desires of Shallow Water Bay formed mechanisms of discipline, while Hong Kong's occupation reconfigured spatial order. Within this transformation, Bai Liusu develops a survival strategy encompassing bodily management, emotional control, spatial mobility, and timing. The story of *"Love in a fallen city"* is not a triumph of romantic love, but rather a pragmatic narrative of self-preservation by a divorced woman navigating dual crises through careful negotiation and compromise.

Keywords

Spatial Politics; Women's Survival Strategies; War Narratives; Urban Space; *"Love in a Fallen City"*.

1. Introduction

Published in 1943, during the height of the War of Resistance against Japan, Zhang Ailing's *"Love in a Fallen City"* tells a love and marriage story set in Hong Kong under the title "fallen city." Yet beneath its "legendary" facade lies a strikingly different substance—no grand sacrifices, no unwavering loyalty, but rather a pragmatic marriage forged by two shrewd adults amid the ruins of war. This "anti-legendary" quality has thus become the fundamental interpretive framework for scholars studying this novel.

Existing research has accumulated substantial achievements around this interpretation. Studies on female representation have focused on Bai Liusu's inner strength and calculating nature beneath her fragile exterior, portraying her as a new archetype of women transitioning from "departure" to "calculation." Urban cultural studies have mapped the colonial and modern contexts of Shanghai and Hong Kong, imbuing concepts such as the "folk world" and the "Shanghai-Hong Kong rivalry" with cultural symbolic meanings. War narratives, meanwhile, interpret Hong Kong's occupation as a plot device that drives emotional transformation. Yet while these studies have made significant contributions, they also leave several gaps: although space is endowed with cultural significance, it often remains relegated to a background setting, with its role as a narrative force and site of power left underexplored; war is reduced to an external catalyst, with its deeper impact—reconfiguring spatial order and reshaping interpersonal relations—remaining inadequately systematized; and Bai Liusu's actions are broadly labeled as "calculations," yet this everyday-language judgment has not been elevated into a theoretical framework for understanding women's strategic logic within structural constraints.

It is precisely this triple absence that necessitates the introduction of a "spatial politics" perspective. The theoretical resources for spatial politics primarily stem from Lefebvre and

Foucault. In **The Production of Space**, Lefebvre argues that space is not a neutral container, but rather a product and a tool for reproducing social relations—shaped by power while simultaneously shaping it. Foucault directly links space to the exercise of power, revealing how spaces such as prisons and barracks function as sites for disciplinary technologies that regulate individuals. Translating these two theoretical perspectives into tools for literary analysis means moving beyond asking "where does the story take place?" to examining "how space participates in narrative"—how different spaces produce and sustain specific power relations, how these relations influence characters' choices of action, and how characters develop strategies to navigate within spatial constraints.

Based on the above problem awareness and theoretical resources, this article places *"Love in a Fallen City"* within the framework of the "urban - war" dual spatial politics for examination, establishing an analytical path mainly based on text close reading and supplemented by theoretical dialogue. The entire article is divided into three chapters: The first chapter focuses on the two core spaces, Bai Gongguan and Shallow Water Bay Hotel, analyzing the political logic of the pre-war urban space and its positioning mechanism for women; the second chapter examines how war as spatial violence reconstructs the physical order and social relations, and discusses the narrative functions of bombings, air-raid shelters, and dilapidated apartments; the third chapter systematically sorts out the survival strategy system developed by Bai Liusu in the spatial gap, including four dimensions: body management, emotional control, spatial migration, and timing control. Thus, this article attempts to reveal the truth of the "legend" - *"Love in a Fallen City"* is not the victory of romantic love, but a pragmatic narrative of a divorced woman completing self-preservation in the dual gap of the city and war, which is also the deep meaning of Zhang Ailing's "anti-legend" writing.

2. Literature review

2.1. The "Anti-Myth" Consensus and the Lack of Spatial Political Perspective

"The anti-legend" is the most widely accepted judgment in the study of *"Love in a Fallen City"*. Ai Xiaoming first pointed out in "Anti-Legend - Re-reading Zhang Ailing's *'Love in a Fallen City'*" that Zhang Ailing used the traditional shell of love narrative *"Love in a Fallen City"*, but filled it with the substantive content of practical marriage - without sacrifice and loyalty, only astute bargaining [1]. This judgment reveals Zhang Ailing's deconstruction stance towards romantic love narratives and laid the basic direction for subsequent research.

However, during the formation of the consensus of "anti-legend", an equally important issue was long left unresolved: How did Zhang Ailing achieve this "anti-legend" through a narrative mechanism? Space is the key link here. In existing studies, space is mostly treated as the background for characters' activities or the carrier of cultural symbols. Urban culture studies provide historical coordinates of Shanghai and Hong Kong, and concepts such as "folk world" and "Shanghai-Hong Kong opposition" give space cultural significance, but space itself has not been regarded as a dynamic narrative force. The closure of Bai Gongguan, the calculation of Shanghai's isolated island, and the projection of desires in Shallow Water Bay are not only the "locations" where the story takes place, but also shape, limit, and even create the action logic of Bai Liusu at different stages. Reading space merely as a background underestimates its narrative productivity.

2.2. The Absence of Agency in the Study of Bai Liusu's Image

Under the "counter-legendary" consensus, the image of Bai Liusu has been repeatedly discussed, and three main interpretations have emerged. The first is to emphasize her "passivity" and "tragedy", arguing that she remains a victim within the power structure in the end. The second is to reveal her "strong" aspect, focusing on the calculating ability beneath her vulnerable

appearance [2]. The third is to position her within the literary history framework, viewing her as a new type of female figure who undergoes a transformation from "emigration" to "calculation" [3]. Liu Chengbao, from a feminist perspective, defined her ending as a "love tragedy", emphasizing that her marriage is still fundamentally a structural failure [4].

The above research shares a common limitation: the analysis focuses on critical examinations of psychological motivations or gender structures, but lacks a detailed investigation into the organizational methods of Bai Liusu's specific actions. The term "calculating" is frequently used, but rarely theorized, easily sliding into mundane moral judgments. "Calculating" is merely a general summary of behavioral motivations, far from revealing how these behaviors are organized, implemented, and adjusted in specific spatial conditions. When "calculating" stops being an analytical tool and becomes merely a label, Bai Liusu's agency can only be acknowledged but not explained.

2.3. The Static Limitations of Urban Cultural Writing and Spatial Research

The above research shares a common limitation: the analysis focuses on critical examinations of psychological motivations or gender structures, but lacks a detailed investigation into the organizational methods of Bai Liusu's specific actions. The term "calculating" is frequently used, but rarely theorized, easily sliding into mundane moral judgments. "Calculating" is merely a general summary of behavioral motivations, far from revealing how these behaviors are organized, implemented, and adjusted under specific spatial conditions. When "calculating" stops at labels rather than as an analytical tool, Bai Liusu's agency can only be acknowledged but not explained. Urban culture studies provide an important historical framework for understanding *"Love in a Fallen City"*. Li Ouwen in *"Shanghai Modern"* depicted the coloniality, modernity, and cultural atmosphere of Shanghai and Hong Kong, revealing the urban background of the consumption space, social venues, and residential layout in the novel [5]. Chen Sihe proposed the "folk world" theory, introducing the perspective into the family ethical space within the urban area [6]. Kwong Kuiyi clearly placed Shanghai and Hong Kong in an "opposed" interpretive framework, emphasizing the significance of Hong Kong as an "other" space [7].

However, although the above research has advanced the cultural interpretation of space, in most analyses, space still remains in a background position. Space is regarded as the established framework for human activities rather than a dynamic force that drives the plot, shapes characters, and produces power relations. How the enclosed structure of the White Mansion restricts Bai Liusu's choices of actions, how the calculating ethics of the "island" in Shanghai shape her behavioral logic, and how the desire projection of the Shallow Water Bay Hotel becomes the battlefield she must navigate – these questions have not yet received systematic answers. Space is read as "where it occurs", rather than "how it functions".

2.4. The Simplified Trend in War Writing and Gender Politics

In previous studies, the fall of Hong Kong was mostly treated as a narrative device. Zhai Minling et al. regarded it as a key event that triggered the emotional transformation of Fan Liuyuan and Bai Liusu in their character analysis - the war, through unexpected violence, disrupted the original balance and forced the two to shift from a game-like state to a cooperative one [8]. Thus, the war was interpreted as "the matchmaker", an external force that pushed the male and female protagonists towards marriage.

This interpretation overly narrows the narrative function of war, neglecting its more fundamental meaning in Zhang Ailing's narrative - the large-scale reconfiguration of spatial order. Bombing turned streets into ruins, air-raid shelters forced bodies to get close, and colonial hotels transformed into shelters. The war destroyed the existing gender and class boundaries before the war, generating new power relations in the ruins. Associated with the

instrumentalization of war, the survival strategies of women in the war are often simplified to "passive adaptation" or "tragic endings" [4], with less attention paid to the potential agency that women might display in crises. Simply positioning women as "victims" or "tragic characters" instead obscures the more complex survival scenarios depicted by Zhang Ailing.

2.5. Summary: The three breakpoints and the analytical framework of this article

In conclusion, the existing studies have achieved significant results in three different fields, but there are obvious gaps between them. First, spatial analysis and gender analysis are separated from each other, with space being regarded merely as a background rather than a generating field for women's strategies. Second, war is simplified as an episodic tool, and its significance as a force for reconfiguring spatial order has not been fully explored. Third, the behavior of White Louise is generally summarized as "calculations", lacking theoretical organization of her strategic system. These three fractures indicate that it is necessary to establish an integrated analytical framework with spatial politics as the core thread, and to examine urban space, war violence, and women's survival strategies within the same perspective. This is precisely the direction that this article intends to advance.

3. Core Concepts, Research Methods and Framework

3.1. Definition of Core Concepts

The first concept is spatial politics. Drawing on the theoretical resources of Lefebvre and Foucault, space is regarded as a product of social relations and a venue for the operation of power. This study examines how different spaces in *"Love in a Fallen City"* produce and maintain specific power relations.

The second concept is the survival strategy of women. The behavioral logic of Bai Liuxu is examined from the perspective of "calculation" to "strategy", referring to the entire set of logical and adjustable practical systems adopted by actors under specific spatial political conditions.

The third concept is the ironic connotation of "legend". It refers to the narrative strategy of Zhang Ailing under the guise of "legend" but in reality as "counter-legend". Bai Liuxu's "legend" is not a romantic love story, but a pragmatic narrative of a divorced woman completing self-preservation in the urban and war-ridden gap through calculation.

3.2. Explanation of Research Methods and Framework

This article primarily employs close reading, supplemented by theoretical dialogue and historical-cultural contextualization. Close reading focuses on the details of spatial settings, character movement, bodily descriptions, and dialogic exchanges in **Love in a Fallen City**, serving as the foundational material for analysis. The restoration of historical and cultural context situates the text within the specific historical circumstances of Shanghai's "island" during the War of Resistance and colonial Hong Kong, thereby uncovering the historical and cultural connotations embedded in spatial imagery. In terms of theoretical engagement, the study incorporates spatial theory and gender criticism into literary analysis to examine the social, power-laden, and productive dimensions of space.

Chapter One Introduction: The narrative of *"Love in a Fallen City"* begins with space. The clock in Bai Gongguan is one hour slower than the outside world, which implies that this space follows a rhythm different from that of modern urban life, but rather a lagging family ethical time. Bai Liuxu divorced and stayed in Bai Gongguan, and later moved to Shallow Water Bay Hotel in Hong Kong. These two space transitions represent two power structures. The former is the closed discipline of family ethics, while the latter is the game within the colonial desire field. The two spaces together constitute Bai Liuxu's pre-war survival situation.

Chapter Two Introduction: The spatial politics of the White Mansion and the Shallow Bay Hotel before the war operated within the framework of a normalized social order. However, the war changed all of this. The fall of Hong Kong was not an accidental plot twist but a large-scale violent reconfiguration of the existing spatial order. The bombing turned the urban landscape into ruins, air-raid shelters forced bodies to get close, and dilapidated apartments transformed from a place of enjoyment to a survival space. Zhang Ailing was not concerned with the justice of the war, but rather with how the war reconfigured the relationship between people and space, and how this reconfiguration was exploited by others.

Chapter Three Introduction: The dual pressures of prewar urban space and wartime violence drive Bai Liusu's actions. Her only available capital is her body and limited agency. Under these conditions, she develops a tightly interwoven system of survival strategies—from self-management of her body to control over emotional rhythms, from decisive spatial mobility to seizing marital opportunities—each emerging within specific spatial contexts and serving the overarching goal of survival.

4. Politics of Urban Space and the Positioning of Women

(1). Bai Gongguan: Exclusion and Discipline within the Context of Feudal Ethics

Although Bai Gongguan is located in modern-day Shanghai, its internal operation follows traditional family ethics.

The layout of the residence implies a hierarchical order. The elder brother and his wife occupied the more private and dominant rooms, while Bai Liusu, as a divorced daughter returning home, could only live in a relatively narrow bedroom, at the periphery of the family space. As a Chinese proverb regarding divorced women states, "returning from divorce meant an offense to the family order. The marginalization of residence was both the result of the offense and a continuous disciplinary method. The bedroom, as her only temporary refuge, never truly belonged to her and could be invaded by family discourse at any time.

Daily conversations were a symbolic form of discipline. The conversations between the elder brother and his wife repeatedly appeared in the family's public space. They controlled Bai Liusu through expressions of concern or admonition in a moral way, making her accept their viewpoints. She was depicted as a burden to the family, a divorced person still living with her parents, and regarded as unconventional. Bai Liusu responded in silence, but the operation of the discourse power did not depend on her response. The label of divorced woman continued to be attached to her, becoming an unshakable identity mark. Stigmatization denied Bai Liusu's moral legitimacy, while living on the periphery compressed her living space.

The special context of the "island" period in Shanghai further magnified this predicament. In the marriage market during the war, divorced women's remarriage faced double resistance. The elder brother and his wife of Bai Gongguan neither wanted to bear her living expenses nor actively arranged a way out for her. And the appearance of Fan Liuyuan became a turning point precisely because there was no way out within Bai Gongguan, and going to Hong Kong became the only exit to break the deadlock.

(2). Shallow Bay Hotel: The Struggle and Performance in the Colonial Desire Field

From Bai Gong Mansion to Shallow Bay Hotel, the essence of the space has undergone a fundamental transformation. If Bai Gong Mansion was a closed space of family ethics, then Shallow Bay Hotel became an open venue for colonial desires. The disciplinary mechanism that Liu Su faced shifted from family morality to gaze politics and social rules.

The spatial grammar of Shallow Bay Hotel was determined by colonial modernity. The hotel, the beach, and the dance hall formed a chain of desire consumption. As Hong Kong, an "other space" in the novel, it carried the colonial imagination and desire projection that Shanghai

lacked. The social rules of Shallow Bay Hotel centered on ambiguity, probing, and face games, which were quite different from the moral judgment of Bai Gong Mansion, but still filled with power games.

The situation of Liu Su here was very tense. On the surface, she seemed like a tourist on a relaxing vacation, but in her heart, she was constantly calculating the possibility of marriage. The temporariness of the hotel room intensified this sense of unease. She was neither the owner of this place nor a long-term resident, but merely a traveler who needed to complete transactions within a limited time. The uncertainty of her spatial identity forced Liu Su to act cautiously in every conversation. Her position on the beach, the movements around the table, and the distance between bodies in the dance hall - every detail became the focus of male gazes. Fan Liuyuan controlled the direction of the situation. Where to go, who to meet, and what to say were all decided by him. Liu Su's strategy was to take the initiative and break free from the passive position. Her response to probing was to retreat and advance, not easily revealing her intentions, maintaining a balance between acceptance and rejection. Night crying, sudden return to Shanghai, etc., seemingly like emotional venting or passive retreat, were actually strategic means aimed at forcing the other party to make a statement. And the ambiguous response of "I won't tell you" also partially regained the right to speak.

The contrast between these two spaces reveals the characteristics of Liu Su's situation. Whether in the closed space of family ethics or in the open colonial desire field, she was always in a position of being defined and scrutinized. The only difference was that the family ethics space used moral discourse as a tool, while the open colonial desire field used gazes and desires as the medium. Liu Su's survival strategy gradually formed in the gaps between these political spaces and underwent fundamental reorganization under the subsequent influence of the war.

5. The Narrative Shift of War as Spatial Violence

(1). Bombing and Ruins: The Reconstruction of Spatial Order

The bombing first affected the physical space. Streets were destroyed, houses collapsed, and the Shallow Bay Hotel transformed from a place of consumption into a refuge. The urban landscape that had been the object of desire before the war became ruins in the fire. The "collapse" of "tipping the city" was not a testament to love, but the collapse of the spatial order. The destruction of space led to a reshuffling of social relations. During peacetime, power hierarchies maintained through wealth, status, and gender were temporarily suspended in the face of a common threat to survival. The fall of Hong Kong cut off the mobility between Shanghai and Hong Kong, preventing Bai Liusu from returning and Fan Liuyuan from withdrawing at any time. The closure of external outlets became the prerequisite for a relationship shift: when external outlets were blocked, internal relationships needed to be re-adjusted. War created a situation where there was nowhere to escape, and it was precisely this situation that pushed the two from "individualists calculating their own destinies" towards mutual reliance as survival partners.

The gender power structure in the ruins began to loosen. Before the war, Fan Liuyuan held a dominant position in the space. Facing the bombing, money and status could not buy safety, and the gentlemanly demeanor of men lost its effectiveness. Like Bai Liusu, he also faced the possibility of death, and their shared vulnerability to some extent narrowed the power gap. The advantages established by men through wealth and status failed in the bombing. The ability that women had accumulated over time for observing expressions and managing emotions was demonstrated in the ruins environment. Bai Liusu's genuine reaction in the air-raid shelter, contrasting with her carefully staged performance in the Shallow Bay Hotel, indicates that the change in spatial nature released a new possibility suppressed by the conventional order.

(2). Air-raid Shelters and Damaged Apartments: Relationship Reconstruction in Heterogeneous Spaces during the War

The air-raid shelters forcibly reset the physical distance between bodies. In the peaceful Shallow Bay Hotel, social etiquette regulated the physical contact between men and women, dance had fixed intervals, and conversations required appropriate pauses. In the crowded space of the air-raid shelter, strangers were forced to get close to each other, and the social defense mechanism thus failed. Darkness blurred the boundaries of identity, and when expressions could not be recognized, the disguise of speech also became difficult. Bai Liusu's genuine response in this space, "Do you love me?", was not a romantic expression but a real revelation under the pressure of the spatial situation. The air-raid shelter eliminated the conditions for performative social interaction, allowing the two to temporarily remove their masks.

The dilapidated apartment offered her another possibility. Before the war, Bai Liusu lived in the Shallow Bay Hotel, occupying a room that did not belong to her. After the war, she and Fan Liuyuan moved into a building that was bombed, with only a rice pot, bed sheets, and some basic household items. The appearance of these items turned the temporary residence into an alternative choice for "family space". Ironically, the "normal life" illusion created by the war was closer to the real state of life than the social games during peacetime. Bai Liusu cooked in the apartment and waited for Fan Liuyuan to return, seemingly regressing to the traditional female role, but the background of reality was quite different. This is not a marriage arranged by the family; rather, it is a self-constructed survival alliance in the ruins. The temporary family space provided by this dilapidated apartment is completely different from the White Mansion and the Shallow Water Bay Hotel. There is no family scrutiny, no social performance, only two survivors facing the most basic survival issues.

(3). "The Fall of the City" and "The Making of Marriage": The Paradoxical Logic of War Narratives

War grants Bai Liusu the marriage contract she has long pursued. Yet the causal relationship itself is deeply ironic: the destruction of a city enables a woman's marriage. The equation between "the fall of the city" and "the making of marriage" represents Zhang Ailing's most radical deconstruction of traditional narrative. The paradox lies in war both facilitating marriage and exposing its non-romantic essence. Fan Liuyuan's reluctance to marry before the war stemmed from his desire for freedom; after the war, his willingness to marry arises precisely because the war has made him acutely aware of life's brevity and the futility of continuing his games. This shift is not an elevation of love but a strategic recalibration—marriage does not result from falling in love, but from the realization that, in a world where death may come at any moment, having someone by one's side is more advantageous than being alone.

Zhang Ailing does not portray war as genuine redemption. At the novel's conclusion, Fan Liuyuan remains unchanged, continuing his reckless and uncommitted lifestyle. The intimacy forged during wartime rapidly deteriorates once peace returns. Bai Liusu gains only a marriage proposal, not a fundamental transformation in Fan Liuyuan. While war disrupts old orders and gives rise to new patterns, it fails to alter the underlying gender power structure. Bai Liusu's "victory" is real—she does marry—but it is profoundly limited. The content of her marriage remains no different from what she had planned before the war. Chang neither romanticizes war nor glorifies marriage; instead, she reveals the struggle of women who, amid spatial violence, strive for what they perceive as victory. The interaction between urban collapse and the institution of marriage exposes not a miracle of love, but a pragmatic survival instinct under extreme conditions. After the war, the transactional nature persists—Bai Liusu's situation merely shifts from one form of constraint to another.

6. Bai Liusu's Survival Strategy System

(1). Body Strategy: Self-Management in the Visual Economy

Bai Liusu's most direct resource is her body. During her time at the Bai household, her plain, widowlike appearance reflected familial ethics toward divorced women. Before heading to Hong Kong, she deliberately transformed her look—donning qipaos and applying makeup. This shift signified her transition from being "neglected" to being "observed," marking her acceptance of the basic rules of Shallow Water where women's value is primarily realized through visual presentation.

At Shallow Water Bay, Bai Liusu begins managing her body with greater precision. Whether on the beach, at the dinner table, or on the dance floor, Fan Liuyuan and other men consistently fix their gaze upon her. Her strategy is not to avoid attention, but to control how she is seen—when to lower her head, when to raise it, when to smile, when to remain silent—all designed to stimulate male desire. Thus, her body becomes a strategically significant presence: both an object of consumption and her sole resource capable of active manipulation. The risk of commodification always looms, yet within the spatial dynamics of Shallow Water Bay, entering the visual economy and taking control is the most viable option when no other capital exists.

(2). Emotional Strategy: "Retreating to Advance" Discourse and Rhythm Control

While bodily strategy focuses on "how to be noticed," emotional strategy concerns "how to be taken seriously." Fan Liuyuan's speech is marked by inquiry and reserve, while Bai Liusu's responses emphasize emotional control. She rarely reveals her true thoughts and never takes the initiative in advancing a relationship. When someone draws near, she steps back; when they distance themselves, she does not rush to follow.

"Retreating to advance" is the core of this strategy. Her return to Shanghai is a classic example. On the surface, Bai Liusu abandons her game in Hong Kong, but in reality, she forces Fan Liuyuan to confront the possibility of losing her, thereby shifting the dynamics of their power struggle. Crying at night is another tactical expression—displaying vulnerability within the other's sight not only helps maintain an image of fragility but also subtly signals emotional consequences. At its heart, Bai Liusu's emotional strategy is about rhythm control: deciding when to move forward, when to retreat, and when to hold defensive ground, thus seizing the initiative within the game dominated by Fan Liuyuan.

(3). Spatial Migration Strategy: Movement as the Only Active Choice

The agency Bai Liusu truly possesses is extremely limited, with spatial movement being the most substantial form. She has the choice of where to go, where to stay, and where to leave. Her first trip to Hong Kong was a gamble—a geographical shift aimed at breaking through a stalemate. The risk lay in the fact that if marriage wasn't secured during her time in Hong Kong, her situation upon returning to the Bai household would worsen even further.

After the war, instead of accompanying Fan Liuyuan to Britain, she chose to remain in Hong Kong and wait. This marked her second spatial decision. On the surface, it appeared passive waiting; in reality, it was an active effort to seize the right moment to fulfill the marital contract. Leaving Hong Kong meant losing direct contact with the outside world and possibly missing the chance for marriage negotiations; staying put maintained spatial proximity, accelerating the realization of the relationship's outcome. With little economic or social capital, she adopted the most proactive approach available—strategically choosing where to move and where to stay.

(4). Timing Strategy for the Marriage Contract: Seizing the Window Amid Crisis

All three strategies ultimately converge on one goal: securing the marriage contract. From beginning to end, Bai Liusu clearly understood that what she sought was not love, but the social status and financial security marriage could provide. The challenge lay in Fan Liuyuan's long-

term reluctance to commit to marriage, making the timing of the contract the most critical—and difficult—element in her entire strategic framework.

War created this opportunity. The fall of Hong Kong transformed Fan Liuyuan's perception of life and relationships. In a context where death loomed constantly, maintaining a playful attitude became more costly than practical choices. Bai Liusu's mastery of this moment manifested as "active passivity"—neither urging nor pressuring, neither leaving nor withdrawing, simply waiting for him to make the first move amid the urgency brought by war. When the marriage document was finally handed over, the entire strategic chain closed successfully.

Yet the limitations of this achievement must also be acknowledged. After marriage, Fan Liuyuan remained unchanged—his behavior stayed the same—and the marriage contract did not alter the fundamental structure of gender power. Bai Liusu's strategy moved her from one predicament into another. However, success should not be measured by "complete liberation," but rather by how much one can achieve within given constraints. Under the historical and spatial conditions she faced, Bai Liusu indeed secured the maximum possible gain.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Research Conclusion: The Truth Behind the "Legend"—Pragmatic Survival through Compromise and Calculation

This study, centered on spatial politics, explores the interplay among urban space, wartime violence, and women's survival strategies in **Love in a Fallen City**. The enclosed environment of Bai Gongguan, the power struggles over desire at Shallow Water Bay, and the spatial reconfiguration brought about by war collectively form the structural conditions shaping Bai Liusu's actions. Her strategic choices—such as bodily management, emotional control, spatial mobility, and timing manipulation—are not arbitrary or instinctive responses but rather a practical system designed to maximize survival within limited freedom.

Thus, the true nature of the "legend" is revealed. Bai Liusu's *"Love in a fallen city"* is not a triumph of romantic love, but rather a pragmatic narrative of self-preservation by a divorced woman navigating the dual crises of urban life and war, achieved through rational calculation and compromise. Zhang Ailing neither glorifies war nor celebrates marriage. Instead, she presents the possibilities and limitations of modern women's agency under structural constraints. Bai Liusu's strategies lead her from one predicament to another, yet within the given historical and spatial conditions, she achieves the maximum possible survival. This is precisely the profound meaning behind Zhang Ailing's "anti-legendary" writing—it is not a deconstruction of love itself, but a sobering revelation of the realities facing modern women.

7.2. Limitations and Future Directions

This article analyzes Bai Liusu's survival strategies from the perspective of spatial politics. However, this perspective also has its limitations. Firstly, pure textual analysis focuses on the spatial mechanisms within the narrative and the logic of characters' actions, while paying relatively less attention to the historical context in which the text was generated - such as Zhang Ailing's publishing environment, reader reception, and the wartime literary field, etc. Secondly, the spatial theories of Lefebvre and Foucault, rooted in Western social experience, when applied to Chinese modern literary texts, provide effective analytical tools but also carry the risk of contextual mismatch. The interweaving of colonialism, patriarchy, and modernity in Chinese urban space cannot be fully covered by Western theories. Moreover, the spatial political perspective tends to highlight the shaping role of space on actions, which may to some extent weaken the attention paid to the depth of characters' psychology, the self-sufficiency of the narrative form, and other dimensions. Specifically, this article pays limited attention to Fan

Liuyuan's spatial strategy and the interaction between it and Bai Liushu's strategy, and does not compare the similarities and differences of female survival strategies in Zhang Ailing's other novels. Future research can compare texts such as "City of Love" and "The Golden Lock" and "Red Rose and White Rose", to examine the types and variations of female strategies in Zhang Ailing's works; it can also place them within the context of Chinese women's writing during the war period, to explore the commonalities of spatial narration and gender writing in the era; and it can maintain a critical distance when applying Western theories, to explore analytical paths that are in line with the experience of modern Chinese literature.

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