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The Proximity Effect: Agency and Isolation in Eileen Chang's "Love in a Fallen City"

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Abstract

This paper offers a new way of understanding how Eileen Chang represents the experience of gender by means of material objects and details in her fiction. Chang deploys the logic of metonymy to direct narrative attention at concrete details which are spatially adjacent to her characters. With Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* as a theoretical touchstone, I show that Chang does this in order to demonstrate that only by means of oblique descriptions can the author or the characters themselves communicate the subtleties of subjective experience, in particular the modern predicaments of alienated isolation and limited agency. I call this descriptive technique *the proximity effect*, for Chang uses that which is physically proximate to illustrate interiority, and these objects become like proxies for the characters themselves. In Chang's fiction, when a woman is unable to wrestle with world-historical forces, she attempts to regain some control by acting upon small, graspable objects in her immediate surroundings; and when subjective experience cannot be directly conveyed from one mind to another, the individual relies upon proximate objects to mediate interpersonal connection. This difficulty and obliqueness in communicating interiority apply both to her characters and to Chang herself as a Benjaminian storyteller figure.

Keywords

Eileen Chang, Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, interiority, detail, metonymy

> The vehicle of the times drives inexorably forward. We ride along, passing through thoroughfares that are perhaps already quite familiar. Against a sky lit by flames, they are capable nevertheless of shaking us to the core. What a shame that we occupy ourselves instead searching for shadows of ourselves in the shop windows that flit so quickly by—we see only our own faces, pallid and trivial. In our selfishness and emptiness, in our smug and shameless ignorance, every one of us is like all the others. And each of us is alone.
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> —Eileen Chang
> "From the Ashes"

In an early scene of "Love in a Fallen City" (1943), Bai Liusu remembers a moment from her childhood when she was lost and caught in the rain: "She stood alone on the sidewalk staring at people, the people staring back at her, and beyond the dripping bus windows, on the other side of those blank glass shields, were strangers, an endless number of them, all locked inside their own little worlds, against which she could slam her head till it split—and still she'd never manage to break through" (Chang 118). Eileen Chang (1920-95) begins her story with an image of isolation, a glass barrier, a figure that concretizes the obstructions that a lone, intrepid woman must face in this post-May Fourth moment of partial female emancipation, historical rupture, Westernization, and warfare. A beautiful divorcée from Shanghai, Liusu accompanies a friend to Hong Kong, hoping by means of an intricately choreographed battle of wills and sidestepped seduction to elicit an offer of marriage from Fan Liuyuan, son of a wealthy overseas Chinese businessman. Liuyuan's playboy ways seem unlikely to change, however, and he lays siege to Liusu's social and psychological resources until she becomes his mistress. But in a stroke of cataclysmic irony, the outbreak of war fundamentally alters the nature of their relationship: they marry, and Liusu has won her high-stakes gamble.[1]

The story valorizes an aesthetic focus on the individual woman and the intimate spaces of her subjectivity, relating major historical events only as they pertain to her personal experience.[2] Chang first rose to prominence in Shanghai during the Sino-

[1] Scholars vary in pessimism about this outcome. See Hsia 414; Sang 771; S.-h. Chen; Yuan; W. Wang; Guo 33; Meng and Dai 333-38; and Gunn 214.

[2] Scholarship on Chang's story has scrutinized these and related issues: the story's emphasis on the individual vis-à-vis the master narrative of history (see B. Wang; Lee; and N. Huang, "Narratives"); its characterizations of Liusu and Liuyuan (see Louie 15-32; B.-l. Chen 97-116; and Shui); and its aesthetics of desolation (see Zou 29-51; Mei; and Xu).

Japanese war for stories like this, collected in *Chuanqi* (*Romances*), that were popular for their focus on love and courtship, but that elicited critique for their lack of political engagement. At the end of "Love in a Fallen City," the narrator (using free indirect discourse to express Liusu's thoughts) wonders if world-historical events may be subservient to the needs of the private individual: "But in this unreasonable world, who can distinguish cause from effect? Who knows which is which? Did a great city fall so that she could be vindicated? Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, after that an earth-shaking revolution . . . Liusu didn't feel there was anything special about her place in history" (167).[3] The ellipsis following the daring inversion in logic indicates Liusu's awareness of its implausibility. She may not consider her role in history to be extraordinary, but the narrative indulges for a moment in the contemplation that its protagonist, who has been persistently marginalized by her society, may occupy a position of cosmic importance (which she does indeed occupy as the focal consciousness of this story).

Nevertheless, in Chang's story the "lost and lonely" (Lukács 67) individual taking up arms against the outer world in this modern state of alienation and disenchantment is stranded in a state of isolation and limited agency.[4] By examining these symptomatic quandaries of modernity in "Love in a Fallen City," this article offers a new way of understanding the narrative logic of details, mediation, and interiority in Chang's fiction throughout her *Romances*. Georg Lukács, like Chang a victim of exile and violent geopolitical upheaval,[5] wrote about these conditions of modernity and how they relate to novelistic interiority in his 1916 *Theory of the Novel*: "the soul's loneliness, its lack of any support or tie, is intensified until it becomes immeasurable" (118). Unlike the epic with its immanence of meaning, the novel for Lukács shows its hero's "estrangement" (66) from the world, such that being and action have become a problem. The author, too, feels the loss of totality and writes with an ironic stance toward her characters (Lukács 90). The novelistic hero's out-of-jointness produces the richness of inner life from which she seeks to grapple with the impediments and riddles of the outer world. As a result, the novel "tells of the adventure of interiority" (89). The modern narrative's interest in a private individual's inner life, then, arises from the rift between private and public, a rift that also plays a central thematic role in Eileen Chang's "Love in a Fallen City," as we have seen.[6]

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[3] I have slightly altered the translation.

[4] Lee has noted Chang's "deep-seated ambiguity toward modernity" (275). See also Luo 147.

[5] See R. B. Chan 7. Moving to Hong Kong in 1952 and then to the United States in 1955, Chang lived out her life in seclusion, dying alone in her Los Angeles apartment in 1995.

[6] R. B. Chan contrasts the later Lukács's "conviction that realism's interest in narrative form was

Moreover, for Lukács as for Chang, it is not just that the individual is futilely at odds with the outside world; at the same time, each individual is estranged from every other in these circumstances of modernity. In the world of the novel, individuals overreach themselves:

> Then, suddenly, the God-forsakenness of the world reveals itself as a lack of substance, as an irrational mixture of density and permeability. What previously seemed to be very solid crumbles like dry clay . . . and the empty transparence behind which attractive landscapes were previously to be seen is suddenly transformed into a glass wall against which men beat in vain, like bees against a window, incapable of breaking through, incapable of understanding that the way is barred. (Lukács 90)

I want to dwell on this astonishing congruence in imagery: Liusu realizes that even if she knocks her head until it bleeds against the glass barrier between self and other, she will never penetrate the partition between subjectivities. Lukács is articulating the same symptoms of modern alienation: the glass wall is illustrative of both separation and limitations to personal agency (the hero strives to penetrate the barrier "in vain"). The transparency of glass means that the individual can peer at and yearn for the rest of the world, even if she can never join or grasp it fully.[7] What I want to emphasize by juxtaposing *Theory of the Novel* and Chang's story is that due to the modern chasm between private individual and external world, Chang's narrative peers into the conditions of that individual's interiority, and this focus on a single, intimately illustrated consciousness lends itself to an account of limited agency and insurmountable isolation.

For Chang's story is almost entirely focalized through the lone and limited perspective of Liusu. The idea that each person is shut in her own private world, such that individuals can only look at one another mutely through glass windows, establishes the form and content of much of the story. Yet though Chang professes, elsewhere, that all she really cares to write about are "some of the trivial things that

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uniquely capable of revealing the otherwise hidden mediations of a complex social totality" (15) with Chang's "insistence against trying to make reason of the world" (24). Chan here refers to Lukács's thinking after his conversion to Marxism. I propose to linger longer on the earlier Lukács's account of the world's loss of totality in *Theory of the Novel*, as that is when his thought resonates most with Chang's work.

[7] And as a fragile, brittle medium, glass's surprising resistance to shattering suggests the impotence of these characters in Chang's story, as we shall see.

happen between men and women" (Chang, "Writing" 18), her stories spend a surprising amount of time describing domestic objects and mundane details that are external to the man and woman whose interactions and feelings are supposed to be at the center of the narrative.[8]

Critics have marveled and puzzled at this loving attention to detail, but we need a finer-grained account of how the objects and details embedded within Chang's fiction constitute its thematic and formal fabric. The play of light and shadow upon a surface, the colorful textiles and ornaments adorning persons and settings: Leo Ou-fan Lee has called these types of concrete details "extra" (295) or "decorative" (300).[9] For instance, in one early scene of "Love in a Fallen City," the narrator describes two hanging scrolls: "In the dim light, each word seemed to float in emptiness, far from the paper's surface. Liusu felt like one of those words, drifting and unconnected" ("Love" 120). Liusu's name literally means "tassel," a feminine, trivial, ornamental domestic object or detail that can only flutter helplessly. This is the first of many images that associate her with unanchored floating. Her sense of drifting like the painted word, untethered to solid ground or reality, evokes the narrative's own dreamlike cadences, its written words floating from one indeterminate image to the next in evocation of Liusu's mental states. This passage can serve as a model of how Chang's descriptions work: to get at a character's interiority and sense of helplessness, Chang first describes the objects in her immediate vicinity with painstaking attention to material detail, and then only by means of these external objects and details does Chang hint at interior experience. Even more obliquely, Chang sometimes elides articulating characters' emotions altogether, opting instead to describe the textures or surfaces of their surroundings. In other words, Chang's evocations of subjective experience and alienation are mediated by descriptions of mute, insentient things,

[8] Chow describes the function of the feminine detail in Chang's oeuvre generally but does not include a reading of "Love in a Fallen City." See also N. Huang, *Women* and "Eileen Chang and Things Japanese" 49-72; Z. Huang; Xu; and Cheung 73.

[9] Chow defines details as "the sensuous, trivial, and superfluous textual presences that exist in an ambiguous relation with some larger 'vision' such as reform and revolution, which seeks to subordinate them but which is displaced by their surprising returns" (85). Not only do Chang's concrete details seem to be out of place in a historical narrative of reform and revolution, but they even seem to be irrelevant to the basic plot of the story as well: they "block the lucid flow of narration" (Chow 113). In a 1944 essay entitled "The Religion of the Chinese," Chang postulates that Chinese literature is essentially tragic because of cultural skepticism about spirituality and religion: in novels such as *Plum in a Golden Vase* or *Dream of the Red Chamber*, it is details (about the dishes laid out on a table, for instance) that lend a sense of cheer and harmony to the scene, while the text's major themes are always pessimistic (114). Concrete details are, in this account, an antidote to spiritual bleakness. In "Love in a Fallen City," however, they are inseparable from Chang's aesthetics of loneliness and helplessness.

which provide reflective surfaces for interiority. Chang seems to hint that when an individual is objectified and deprived of agency, only descriptions of inanimate objects can get at this sense of impotence.

I contend that Chang relies upon the logic of metonymy to direct narrative attention at concrete details that are spatially adjacent to her characters.[10] Thus, she demonstrates that only by means of this sidestepping or obliqueness of description can the author, the narrator, or the characters themselves communicate the manifold complexities of subjective experience, in particular the modern experience of alienated isolation and limited agency. I call this descriptive technique *the proximity effect*, for Chang uses that which is physically proximate to illustrate interiority, and these proximate objects become like proxies for the characters themselves.[11] This is after Barthes's *l'effet de réel* (reality effect), which holds that an extraneous detail in realist fiction signifies "*we are the real*" (148). I make the case that Chang's concrete details (which, like Flaubert's barometer, may seem irrelevant to development of plot or theme) are used to signify something hidden or inarticulable in a proximate character's interiority. Personal possessions, described with painstaking attention to their fabrics, colors, and ornamentations, are key loci for the proximity effect, as are the spatial layout of rooms; the human hand (as the locus of interface between self and world) becomes the limit case for this kind of metonymic logic.

The first part of my argument concerns the proximity effect and agency: when the individual is unable to grasp or wrestle with sweeping world-historical forces, she attempts to regain some control by acting upon small, graspable objects in her immediate, metonymic surroundings. The second part of my argument concerns the proximity effect and loneliness: when experience cannot be directly conveyed from one mind to another, the individual relies upon proximate mute objects to mediate interpersonal connection, however imperfectly. So too does the author rely upon material details to hint at her characters' interiority, implying that a more straightforward exposition would not do justice to the complexity of an individual's

[10] Jakobson stresses the metonymic process in the genre of realism: "Following the path of contiguous relationships, the Realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details" (115). Without slotting Chang's text into this or another "ism," we can see that she too moves from character to setting and concrete detail in the metonymic fashion that Jakobson outlines. De Man has stated that metonymy arises from "random contingency" (31), but Chang makes these instances of random, accidental contiguity speak on behalf of her characters.

[11] The proximity is here important because the story takes place on a grand geographic scale, shuttling between Shanghai and Hong Kong and touching upon global affairs such as world war, but characters like Liusu are hemmed in by circumstance and can only interact with the objects and persons directly proximate to them.

psyche. These two topics, agency and isolation, are so delicately intertwined in the story by means of the proximity effect that my account will accordingly weave between the two.

Personal Possessions and Domestic Objects

In the beginning of the story, when Liusu's family castigates her initial flirtation with Liuyuan, Liusu kneels alone in her room and weeps into a proximate object, her "moon-white silk gauze cheongsam" (Chang, "Love" 127-28). Liusu has an affinity for the shadowy indeterminacy of moonlight and its feminine associations of *yin* (a word which appears frequently in connection with her), in contrast to the bright light of day, a *yang* which is later associated with Liuyuan.[12] This is the first time we witness Liusu mutely expressing an affective state by interacting with a symbolically pregnant personal possession. Rather than verbalizing her sense of limited agency and frustration, Liusu demonstrates it by acting helplessly upon an object metonymically associated with her: the proximity effect. This happens again when she contemplates the possible conquest of Liuyuan; to strengthen her resolve, she acts upon a proximate object:

> She struck the match and watched it burn, the little three-cornered pennant of flaming red flickering in its own draft, coming closer and closer toward her fingers. With a puff of her lips, she blew it out, leaving only the glowing red flagpole. The pole twisted and shrank into a curly gray fiendish shape. She tossed the dead match into the incense pan.
>
> She hadn't planned the evening's events, but in any case she'd shown them a thing or two [*geile tamen yidian yanse kankan*]. (127)

A flag of flame waving in the wind: a prefiguration in miniature of a battlefield, which is precisely how Chang will characterize their courtship in Hong Kong until the actual battle erupts. Liusu craves light, enlightenment, clarity of knowledge and purpose, but the fragile light of the match offers her little illumination. Yet briefly it waves a triumphant red flag, just as Liusu has launched a private rebellion against her family—she has shown them some *yanse* (color), even if her flag (her color, her remaining youthful beauty and energy) might eventually fade to the dead ash of the

[12] This is somewhat against Tsao's reading of moonlight as playing the role of a "romantic seducer" in this story (138).

spent match. Liusu begins to weep: "Puff after steady puff, the green smoke of the mosquito-repellant incense floated up, seeping into her brain. Her eyes gleamed with tears" (128).[13] Smoke and all it evokes (indeterminacy, obscurity, obfuscation) seep into her mind, such that the narrative that follows the workings of her consciousness is similarly hazy, trance-like. By means of the proximity effect, these images of smoke and fire physically contiguous to Liusu's hand indicate her attempts to wrest some control over her own fate, while also hinting at the ultimate futility of her quest for agency. Smoke is a sign that trouble is on the way; it is moreover a semi-transparent barrier to visibility, like glass and others we will explore; and it is an image of floating wispiness, one of many in the story, that evokes Liusu's feeling of impotence.

Liusu burns incense one last time when, triumphantly married to Liuyuan, she returns to the Bai household. This is the final passage in which the narrator, perhaps occupying Liusu's consciousness via free indirect discourse, muses that the city had to fall for her sake. Right after this contemplation, Liusu "stood up, smiling, and kicked the pan of mosquito-repellant incense under the table" (167). The first time we saw her lighting this incense, she was crouching down, prostrate, defenseless, and in tears. Now, she performs this gesture of defiance and agency, knocking away the source of smoke, flouting the need to shield or hide herself from the stinging bites of those around her. She knows that the idea of her personal primacy over the great stage of the battlefields is mere illusion, but she can enjoy this moment of delusive agency by acting upon a proximate object.

This final moment of triumph has been hard won, because Liuyuan has been an elusive target. Throughout their courtship, Liusu's personal possessions are used to hint at her unarticulated and helpless reactions to his ploys. During Liusu's first stay in Hong Kong, after Liuyuan casts her aside to make her jealous, he spots her sitting behind an umbrella: "She opened her shiny oil-paper umbrella and set it out on the railing, blocking her face from view. The umbrella was pink and painted with malachite-green lotus leaves, and the raindrops slipped along its ribs" (146). By means of the proximity effect, Liusu's metonymic object, the umbrella, hints at the psychological barrier between the two characters, and mutely expresses the disapproval that she cannot verbalize directly to him. The narrative repeatedly offers languid images of light and water at play on some diaphanous or semi-transparent

[13] Mosquito-repellant incense is an important detail in this scene because mosquitoes are associated with the biting, stinging nuisance of her family members: in the opening scene, one of her brothers slaps mosquitoes from his thighs as the family discusses Liusu's undesirable situation at home. In a later beach scene, sand flies are a figure for Liuyuan's bloodsucking demands on her body (145).

material (as in the rainwater flowing down glass car windows, or the moonlight twinkling in Liusu's teardrops), experimenting with the visuality of occlusion and impenetrable isolation. As a result, the story is filled with images of glass and gauzy materials (such as curtains) that serve as alienating partitions, varying in transparency, through which characters try to look at and understand one another, since verbal communication is almost always hazily unclear.[14]

Windows and Frames

The logical extension of Chang's metonymic focus on personal possessions is a keen narrative attention to the rooms that frame and enclose these objects and individuals. When Liusu first arrives at her hotel room in Hong Kong, she sees the window as though framed by the room: "Liusu walked in and was immediately drawn to the window. The whole room seemed to be a dark picture frame around the big ocean painting there" (132-33).[15] For the room to be nothing but a frame for the prospect captured by the window is to hint at the inconsequentiality and insubstantiality of everything taking place in this shadowy feminine space. It is fitting that her room be shrouded in shadow, and that Liusu—who craves light, freedom of movement, and agency—be drawn to the window, the vista onto a vast outer world. The proximity effect uses Liusu's relationship to her spatial surroundings to indicate her unspoken wishes. The walls of the room (like those of the Bai home in Shanghai and the house that Liuyuan will later rent for her) imprison her: Liuyuan has made sure that her room lies between his own and that of the friends who are in league with him. After all, physical partitions in this story are not only a barrier between persons but also a barrier to freedom of motion: "Liuyuan leaned against the window with one hand stretched along the frame, blocking her line of vision and smiling as he gazed at her" (133). If Liusu is always trying to look out her window to see others clearly or plan her escape, then Liuyuan is the one just as doggedly blocking her view.

Chang's proximity effect is predicated upon the principle that characters are defined and hemmed in by the objects, spaces, and rooms physically adjacent to them,

[14] The muted siege warfare of their courtship, in which each tries to gain the upper hand over the other, is conducted by means of confounding, carefully plotted ploys in language; see also Geng 82-83 for examples of indeterminacy in their interactions and Mei 178-79 for an account of the courtship battle resulting from their gaps of understanding and purpose. Since they refrain from communicating clearly with words, the characters rely upon proximate objects to mediate their interactions.

[15] For a discussion of Chang's essayistic depiction of the modern apartment interior as a frame, see N. Huang, *Women* 148.

and the extension of this logic implies that individuals are defined by their social and historical contexts. The image of the window as picture frame is crucial here because the narrative is fascinated with the idea of persons framed, delimited, and limited by their surroundings. The story features several carefully wrought images of individuals standing against the backdrop of something solid and unmoving. Most prominent is the retaining wall near their hotel that Liuyuan predicts will remain standing forever: "Someday, when human civilization has been completely destroyed, when everything is burned, burst, utterly collapsed and ruined, maybe this wall will still be here. If, at that time, we can meet at this wall, then maybe, Liusu, you will honestly care about me, and I will honestly care about you" (139). He speaks in riddles but cannot guess the accuracy of his own presaging. The proximity effect allows the courting lovers to dance carefully around their true feelings and intentions, and instead converse abstrusely about an inanimate thing proximate to them. As in almost all of their interactions, the lovers hint obliquely at their desires and intentions by means of a metonymic object, for fear that speaking in a more straightforward fashion would render them vulnerable to the other's machinations. Therefore the narrative slows down to describe the object, which mediates their interaction, in painstaking detail.

The symbolic resonance of this wall is not simple. It stands in for the wall of misunderstanding between them. Liuyuan sniffs at his enigmatic philosophizing: "So you admit you like to play games" (139). The wall represents, moreover, the historical background against which the characters can be silhouetted and made visible (as we have seen, Chang is concerned with how precisely her intimate portrayals of individual subjectivity are to relate to the public, the historical, the national). By extension it stands in for eternity, the passage of time and destruction of the living: "The wall was cool and rough, the color of death. Pressed against that wall, her face bloomed with the opposite hues: red lips, shining eyes—a face of flesh and blood, alive with thought and feeling" (139). It is a retaining wall, "built to prevent erosion from the sea" (B. Chen 109), so it stands as the sole barrier between the characters and the avalanche of history and time that threatens to engulf and obliterate them. Here Chang implies that against a backdrop of inexorable and impassive death there is a warm, living, flesh-and-blood individual worthy of being framed, looked at, and read about. So the wall stands in for Chang's narrative, which likewise frames and foregrounds the flesh-and-blood Liusu against the gray oblivion of history that is her unfeeling backdrop.

The image of a person framed by a proximate background evokes the idea that individuals are hemmed in by or at the mercy of circumstance, and this is most

pointedly illustrated in the image of the Persian carpet. During the battle, Liusu and Liuyuan are trapped in the hotel, backed against the wall as they dodge artillery fire:

> It was a dark scene, like an ancient Persian carpet covered with woven figures of many people—old lords, princesses, scholars, beauties. Draped over a bamboo pole, the carpet was being beaten, dust flying in the wind. Blow after blow, it was being beaten till the people had nowhere to hide, nowhere to go. The shells flew this way, and the people ran over there; the shells flew that way, and the people all ran back . . . . They sat on the ground, awaiting their fate. (161)

Like the retaining wall, the carpet frames and acts as backdrop for the figures featured upon it. Chang makes it a metaphor for deprivation of personal agency. The carpet is being beaten, but it is unclear by whom: people are at the mercy of impersonal circumstance, dashing this way and that to dodge the blows of fate, but ultimately they must capitulate. As with every intricate conceit in the narrative, this one is multivalently symbolic. The carpet is old and dusty, featuring figures no longer extant in the modern day: lords and princesses, scholars and beauties. This is a metafictional image. In Chang's stories we find figures of the dusty past, scions of crumbling feudal families enshrouded in opium smoke, and Chang's writing style itself makes use of outdated turns of phrase and allusions to traditional literature. Chang is beating the dust from the "old," finding a way for these stylistic elements to persist in a modern medium.

The Red and the Green

In framing her characters against a background such as a window or a gray wall, Chang is attentive to the colors in the environment that shed light on the individual psyche. This is a recurrent characteristic of the proximity effect. In this particular story, red and green are the dominant shades: as we have seen, Liusu's match burns red; the smoke of her incense is green. In the essay "From the Mouths of Babes," Chang discusses her interest in color, in particular the "equivocal" contrast between subtle shades of red and green (7). In "Love in a Fallen City," Chang uses shades of red and green to comment, by means of the proximity effect, upon the contrasts we have already discussed: the private individual versus the public, agency versus impotence, emotional communion versus solipsism.

Red in this story comes in many shades: flame-red (*huohong*), orange-red

(*juhong*), reddish-pink (*fenhong*), peach-red (*taohong*), lychee-red (*lizhi hong*), and so on. The palate is subtly varied, but taken together the elements of red come to be associated with passion and Liusu's personal struggle to make her fragile identity felt in the world. Her lips, set against the dead grayness of the retaining wall, are red (139), emphasizing her aliveness and the imperatives of her aliveness. Accordingly, the proximate sites of her struggles are shaded in red: the lights in the Hong Kong harbor are flaming red; so too are its cliffs (131); the ballroom where she and Liuyuan dance is colored red (134); when angered, her face becomes crimson (149, 154). The instances of red culminate in the description of the "flame of the forest" flower, which Liuyuan takes Liusu to see. This is a symbol for their mutual desire; it is another object through which they hint obliquely at their feelings by means of the proximity effect:

> "Is it red?" asked Liusu.
> "Red, red, red!"
> In the darkness, Liusu couldn't see the red, but she knew instinctively that it was the reddest red, red beyond belief. Great masses of little red flowers, nestled in a huge tree that reached up to the sky, a riotous welter burning all the way up, staining the indigo sky with red. (138)

Hong (red) is repeated seven times, as though their desire (their physical desire, as well as Liusu's metaphysical desire to attain independence, understanding, and self-determination) has intensified to a fever pitch. Ironically, however, neither of the characters can actually *see* the color of the flowers in the darkness. This oversaturated redness is invisible, a figment of their imaginations.

Little wonder, then, that the mental image of the flower appears again when Liusu finally succumbs to Liuyuan's seduction. It is an illusory image, a promise of color and passion and love that remains intangible, indicating the equivocalness of their emotional understanding: "Liusu's head was spinning. She fell back against the mirror, her back tightly pressed to its icy surface. His mouth did not leave hers. He pushed her into the mirror and they seemed to fall into it, into another shadowy world—freezing cold, searing hot, flame of the forest flowers burning them all over" (155). This is perhaps the most pregnant moment of dream-like disorientation in the story, as Liusu feels herself falling into a mirror—another instantiation of the proximity effect: the mirror hints at her unspoken sense of helplessness in this moment of surrender. This glass surface, unlike the windows that the narrative has described before, is not only completely opaque, but so reflective of light as to

conjure an illusion, a false upside-down world into which they fall (*dian*) and which, until the city itself falls (*qingcheng*), will not be able to right itself. If glass represents the barrier of subjectivity that Liusu has striven to shatter, here the glass eludes shattering by its permeability as a portal to illusion.

This is a scene of primal physical union, ornamented by the fiery wild flowers, but heat is tempered by coldness, and their bond is anything but straightforward. This has been prefigured by the description of moonlight in the room: "The late-November crescent moon was a mere hook of white; its pale light made the window look like a pane of ice. But moonbeams reached the sea and were reflected from the water through the window and then into the mirror, so that even though the beams were faint, they made the mirror glow" (154). The moonlight is weak, and on the window its light seems to form frost flowers, a cool counterpoint to the flame of the forest flower (the story continues to play with light shining on water in all its states, vapor, ice, or liquid). The light in the room is so elusive that it has been reflected or refracted by three surfaces: first reflected on the ocean, then filtered through the window, then reflected on the mirror. Thus it can only arrive as a thin ray (*bobo de guang*). If light brings enlightenment of the other, then the illumination Liusu finds here is more equivocal than ever. And if moonlight is associated with the subtlety and restraint of her femininity (*yin*), then its beam has been acted upon and bent by a series of interfering surfaces, denying its true course. Once again these proximate details within their spatial surroundings hint at unspoken interpersonal dynamics and internal states.

Even the loudest red of the flower, then, comes with a hint of equivocalness; in fact, throughout the story, many elements of burning red appear in tandem with cooling notes of green. The riotous reds reflected in Hong Kong's harbor are "mirrored in the lush green water"; the reddish cliffs are juxtaposed with "dense green forest or aquamarine sea" (131). The pinkish-red flowers on Liusu's umbrella are accompanied by green leaves. Green is the color of uncertainty, the low temperature of impotence that snuffs the flame of individual ardor and struggle: the incense smoke that brings Liusu to helpless tears is greenish; the stuffy, old-fashioned study in her family's Shanghai house is painted a green hue (120); the moon shines in a greenish light through her silver tears when she feels trapped (150). When Liusu returns to Hong Kong, unable to resist Liuyuan's summons or her family's bullying, she wears a green jacket: "He said that her green rain slicker looked like a bottle. 'A medicine bottle,' he explained. She thought he was teasing her because she'd grown so frail" (154). The original text likens her coat to a green glass bottle. The glass that acts elsewhere as an impenetrable partition is here another instantiation of the proximity

effect: Chang uses this metonymic garment to hint not only at Liusu's entrapment and brittle emotional alienation, but also at her physical frailty or the fragility of her will against opposing powers.

The story's play of colors reflects Liusu's sense of impotence, often in capitulation to Liuyuan. But the greenery of vegetation hints at Liuyuan's limited scope of agency as well. At one point Liuyuan is fascinated by a glass of tea leaves, drained of fluid:

> When the glass was tilted, a hatching of green tea leaves stuck to one side; held up to the light, they became a waving plantain tree, while the tangled swirl of tea leaves clumped at the bottom looked like knee-high grass and undergrowth. Liusu peered up at the glass, and Liuyuan leaned over, pointing all this out. Through the dusky green glass, Liusu suddenly saw him watching her with eyes that seemed to laugh, yet didn't. (143)

Here again is the motif of looking into a world of glass, as in the scene when a young Liusu peers forlornly into the impenetrable glass of car windows passing by. Just as characters in this story peer through glass to try to gain access into the interiority of other people, so too is this story inviting us to peer into Liusu's world of glass to try to understand her. Therefore, that something as prosaic as a glass of tea leaves can hold within it a whole ecosystem, an exotic forest teeming with flora, is a veiled metafictional assertion that even a story like this one about the seemingly prosaic can open up a fecund secret world to those who peer in and read thoughtfully.

Liusu and Liuyuan look through the glass of tea leaves, their gazes partially occluded by its duskiness; his facial expression is rendered enigmatic by the barrier, representing the psychological gulf between them. The proximity effect evokes, by means of this mundane object held in Liuyuan's hand, unspoken complexities in their interpersonal dynamics. The tea leaves and the glass are green, bespeaking the indeterminacy that is elsewhere associated with this color. Liuyuan claims that the leaves remind him of the Malayan forest, where he wants to take Liusu in order to see her in a freer context: "To go back to nature" (Lukács 143). The green tea in this green glass echoes the green tea that is mentioned in the story's first scene: Liusu's mother orders a "green tin cannister" of Dragon Well tea to be served ("Love" 116). Here the tea is associated with Chinese, domestic, civilized sophistication. But in showing Liusu his glass of tea leaves, Liuyuan implies that he wants to strip away her societally imposed inhibitions by making her his mistress.

His wishes come to fruition. Yet the hand of fate intervenes, shattering the illusion that Liuyuan will have the final say. War erupts, and Liuyuan finds himself surrounded by vegetation even greener and more uncivilized than he bargained for. With the onset of battle, they are stripped of social niceties, and when the fighting is over, they scrounge together a bag of rice and cook, clean, sweep, and mop together (163). Since the water line has been cut, Liuyuan must carry water from a mountain spring for their use, and he teaches Liusu to make Malayan food. In an ironically displaced way, he has fulfilled his ambition to take her to the green Malayan forest. To trace the recurring images of red and green in the proximate details throughout the text is to find, then, that while the story begins with more elements of redness (indicating the will to fight, to strive for agency), as it draws to a close, elements of green start to take over (indicating the sobering awareness that the passionate redness of personal struggle inevitably comes up against a limit). Even though Liuyuan has schemed about taking Liusu back to nature, it is really the war that most effectively strips away the trappings of civilization, overwhelming Liuyuan's best-laid plans and tricking him into pledging the troth he had hitherto withheld.

The Hand of Fate

Liuyuan had justified withholding his troth by quoting from the *Book of Songs*: "Facing life, death, distance / Here is my promise to thee— / I take thy hand in mine: / We will grow old together . . . . Compared to the great forces in the world, we people are so very, very small. But still we say 'I will stay with you forever, we will never, in this lifetime, leave each other'—as if we really could decide these things!" (149). The hand in the poem represents the will to love faithfully, even in the face of sweeping forces beyond personal control. However, Liuyuan twists the lines to suit his purpose, insisting that any attempt to take one's own fate in hand would be pointless. The story's logic of metonymy culminates in repeated images of the hand,[16] the physical point of contact between the self and the outside world: the hand comes to symbolize not only Liusu but also Liuyuan's attempts, largely futile, to wrest some control over external circumstance by acting upon proximate objects.

[16] After all, it is the synecdochic hand which reaches out to touch that which is physically proximate to a person. Woloch, too, has described the image of hands (which appears over 450 times in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*) as "the end point of the novel's metonymic logic, the most common way in which narrative attention is deflected from an entire person to an exterior aspect of the person" (247): the hand is that limit point at which self makes contact with other.

Liusu's hand is often described as trembling and helpless. In the first scene, as her brothers loudly discuss her fate without consulting her wishes, "She went on sewing her slipper, apparently unperturbed, but her palms were clammy and her needle stuck—she couldn't draw it through anymore" (112). This is the proximity effect: the impediment to her sewing needle mirrors the larger impediments to her wishes; the object that she holds in her hand betrays emotions that she tries to hide. Later in the scene, Liusu kneels by her mother's bed, and finding neither succor nor sympathy there, "she crushed the embroidered slipper against her chest. The needle that was stuck in the slipper pierced her hand, but she didn't feel any pain" (117). Her hand is a synecdoche for her physical person as well as her psychological state, and via her hand, Liusu feels by means of domestic objects proximate to her. If the hand is the instrument of individual agency, then hers is helpless: she laments to Mrs. Xu that she has received very little education and can find no remunerative employment, not even manual labor (*jian buneng tiao, shou buneng ti*) (119).

Nevertheless, she bravely makes the effort to take her fate in hand. Listening to the music of the *huqin*, Liusu is prompted to see what she can do with the assets at her disposal: "The tune rose and fell, and Liusu's head tilted to one side as her eyes and hands started moving through dance poses" (121). Her eyes and hands are prefiguring the ploys she will later use to ensnare a husband. In anticipation of these stratagems, as if to test her own will, she lights a match and watches it burn "closer and closer toward her fingers" (127). But Liuyuan is a worthy adversary in hand-to-hand combat. He recites the poem about the hand when he telephones her hotel room in Hong Kong, and by this time it is clear to Liusu that he has entrapped her: "She pressed her hands against her cheeks: her palms were ice-cold" (149). Chang thus depicts subjectivity and interpersonal struggle through the proximate image of the hand and all that it touches. In the same scene, Liusu picks up the receiver with trembling hands (150). Liuyuan, on the other hand, "was sure she couldn't escape him now, sure that he had her in the palm of his hand" (152).

Yet even after Liuyuan has caught Liusu, she contemplates resistance. This is when she explores the brightly lit house he has rented for her: "The green paint on the sitting room door and window was still wet. She touched it with her index finger, then pressed her sticky finger against the wall, leaving a green mark each time. Why not? Was it against the law? This was her house! Laughing, she put a fresh green handprint on the dandelion white of the plaster wall" (156). There are laws of convention governing the larger social world, but in the limited confines of her own home she can make and defy the law. Her handprint gestures at a desire to make her wishes and identity known. By means of the proximity effect, Liusu attempts to

express and overcome her isolation and limited agency—symbolized by the color green—by acting upon the material structures that surround her. Tellingly, the paint she touches is on the door and window, proximate liminal spaces of potential escape from the walls that cage her.

Liusu's hand-printing cannot rewrite her fate, but at this moment the cogs and wheels of world-historical happenstance click into place for her and allow Liuyuan's poem about hands to come to fruition. The bombing begins, and he comes to rescue her. At that moment, "She grabbed his hand and clutched his arm" (160). Liuyuan previously claimed that the promise to "take thy hand in mine" and "grow old together" would be futile in the face of "life, death, distance" (149). But as a result of precisely those external circumstances beyond their control, he fulfills the promise, counter to his original intentions. One night after the bombardment ends, the lovers look at one another in the dark: "He reached out from the bedding and grasped her hand" (164). Chang has been quite deliberate in weaving this motif of the hand throughout her story, in order to suggest that the exertion of individual agency is limited: Liuyuan may recite a poem about hands to insinuate his stratagems for ensnaring Liusu as his mistress, but thanks to the superior power of external circumstance, he ends up grasping her hand in marriage anyway.

Eileen Chang as Storyteller

Physical barriers and the light that penetrates them; the colors of fabrics, fire, and light; the hand that pushes against the barrier or kindles a flame: all indications of the individual's impotence when hemmed in and isolated by the looming, unyielding surfaces of the outside world. Chang painstakingly describes the material details of these surfaces proximate to her characters, from clothing to umbrellas, tapestries, or walls. I wish to show that these motifs and details are interwoven in such a way that the threads intersect: the shades of green (which appear in leaves, sea water, raincoat, and house paint) intersect with the motif of smoke and fire in the image of the incense-burner's greenish smoke. The motif of glass (which appears in windows and teacups) intersects with the mention of green in the image of Liusu's rain jacket. Chang has carefully woven together her details like the threads of a Persian carpet.

But just as her characters press up against impenetrable surfaces in search for depth of understanding, so too does Chang demonstrate a sense of personal aesthetic limitations in trying to give depth to the textual surface she weaves. When multi-dimensional psyches are rendered in textual form, does a writer's language merely

flatten them like the two-dimensional figures in a Persian carpet? In the narrative frame of "Love in a Fallen City," Chang's narrator voices doubt about the adequacy of language: she likens the story to the wails of a *huqin*, "too desolate for words" (*shuo bu jin de cangliang*) (111). When Chang uses paralepsis ("oh! why go into it?" [*Buwen ye ba!*]) (111, 167) at the beginning and end of her narrative, she casts doubt upon her own ability to tell these sad, private stories. To end the story with these words seems to negate the entire preceding narrative. Just as Chang's characters seem inhibited when they attempt to communicate with one another, so too does Chang feel these obstructions as an author attempting to convey her characters' ideas and emotions.

Walter Benjamin, another victim of exile and geopolitical upheaval, wrote about the changing parameters of conveying experience in 1936, less than a decade before Chang's story was published. "It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences," Benjamin laments in "The Storyteller" (83). Like Lukács, Benjamin elegizes the loneliness inherent in the modern novel, whose reader "is isolated" (100) and whose solitary writer has lost the wisdom of the oral tradition: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself" (87). Aware that "everything that falls from our hands must always be incomplete" (Lukács 34) in the age of transcendental homelessness, Chang tries to position herself not as a writer but as a storyteller. In her attempt to shatter the silence of readerly or writerly isolation in her stories, in many of her stories Chang conjures a simulated context of oral storytelling in which she directly addresses an interlocutor, as though her story were part of a face-to-face conversation.[17] In this narrative frame Chang not only addresses the reader but also comments upon the story ("Love" 111). She constructs the frame narrative of many stories similarly, including *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, *Aloeswood Incense: The Second Brazier, The Golden Cangue,* and *Jasmine Tea*. Some use the conceit of a household object which reflects upon the themes in the story (the *huqin,* incense brazier, or cup

[17] Hanan defines this as "the context of situation in which a piece of fiction claims to be transmitted. In Chinese vernacular fiction, of course, the simulacrum is that of the oral storyteller addressing his audience, a pretense in which the author and reader happily acquiesce" (87). Leung has noticed that in Chang's *Romances* the "narrator usually sets up a narrative frame (following similar devices used in traditional Chinese oral storytelling) that leads into and sometimes heightens the strange and exotic events narrated, creating a distance from which the audience can reflect on the unfamiliar" (87). Yet Chang's storytelling frames also attempt to close the distance between herself and the audience.

of tea). The narrator's voice is idiosyncratic and emotional in these frames, as though Chang "evokes a gathering of a reading circle in which we are told the events that [s]he reproduces for us . . . . Thus [her] tracks are frequently evident in [her] narratives, if not as those of the one who experienced it, then as those of the one who reports it" (Benjamin 92). The fact that Chang names her story collection after the *chuanqi* drama of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and also after the *chuanqi* tales from the Tang, implies that she wants to evoke the transmissibility (*chuan*) of orality.[18]

If, as we have explored, Chang's characters find themselves impotent and alone in their enclosed glass worlds, then Chang takes up the role of communicator on their behalf. She presents herself at the beginning and end of this narrative as the storyteller figure in conversation with her audience. There is an exquisite craftsmanship in her storytelling, in its attention to finely woven details and strands of images or ideas, which Benjamin would commend. Quoting Paul Valéry, Benjamin speaks of the "atmosphere of craftsmanship" involved in storytelling:

> "This patient process of Nature," Valéry continues, "was once imitated by men. Miniatures, ivory carvings, elaborated to the point of greatest perfection, stones that are perfect in polish and engraving, lacquer work or paintings in which a series of thin, transparent layers are placed one on top of the other—all these products of sustained, sacrificing effort are vanishing, and the time is past in which time did not matter. Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated."
> In point of fact, he has succeeded in abbreviating even storytelling. We have witnessed the evolution of the "short story," which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings. (92-93).

Chang the artisan of images and words has twined together her motifs, themes, and images, such that not only does *"*Love in a Fallen City*"* resemble a work of physical craftsmanship, a tapestry or a painting with the mark of the maker's hand still upon it, but within the story itself Chang painstakingly describes products of craftsmanship as well (Persian rug, clothing, fabrics, and so on). As a result her writing often

[18] The genre of Tang *chuanqi* was fiction, *xiaoshuo*, meaning "small talk," gossip and oral reports beyond the pale of official historiography (see Plaks, "Towards" 310). Tang *chuanqi* were written but retain roots to oral storytelling (T.-h. L. Chan 45).

becomes ekphrastically frozen in time. Benjamin stresses the need to take time, to proceed "slowly" in storytelling. In Chang's story, events involving vast geographic scales, such as Liusu's boat voyages between Shanghai and Hong Kong, are narrated quickly, and we may jump over the course of weeks or months in a paragraph. But Chang pauses to linger on particular objects of craftsmanship. As I have noted, quotidian objects, such as the incense, are described in exquisite, lingering detail, slowing down the flow of narration almost to a standstill.

The craftsman-like quality of Chang's narrative, as well as the craftsmanship of the objects that her characters own and contemplate, thus defines Chang's attempt at lovingly, finely rendered storytelling, but I think the presence of these objects and details in the story also draws attention to the modern incommunicability of experience that both Chang's characters and Chang the storyteller herself ultimately cannot overcome. In these vivid still-lives are crystallized the affective reactions that Liusu cannot put into words but can feel by means of objects external and metonymic to herself. The slipper that she embroiders and then crushes to her chin is one such object. Her hairpins are another example (154). Liusu and Liuyuan avoid explicit conversations about their feelings for one another, and instead hold enigmatic, indeterminate conversations about a gray wall, a glass of tea leaves, or a view of the moon. Only by projecting interiority onto external things can they hint at what they really think: the proximity effect. Chang shows that as a craftsman of words she also relies upon the proximity effect to translate her characters' indeterminate psychological states into language.[19] When emotions are multifaceted and many-layered, the craftsman of words must rely upon multifaceted, many-layered depictions of material things to represent them. A story focalized through Liusu's interiority therefore spends a curiously large amount of narrative space commenting upon objects and details external to her because Chang the storyteller is demonstrating that communicating a private individual's experience is very, very hard, and often can only be reflected or bounced off a proximate external surface.

Ban Wang has observed that in Chang's narratives "language and narration seem to be helpless moves" (95); hence her elusive and vague style. Her obsession with details and fragments is a search for "assurance in aesthetic contemplation" in

[19] Chow contends, "The dramatization—the cinematic blowing up—of details is a kind of destruction; what it destroys is the centrality of humanity that the rhetoric of Chinese modernity often naively adopts as an ideal and a moral principle. In 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). I think that Chang's reliance upon details to divulge emotion and consciousness is not so much "nonanthropocentric" or indifferent as indicative of the storyteller's difficulty in earnestly attempting to communicate human ideas and feelings.

the midst of the senselessness of history and reality. I would add that she relies upon details not only for "solace" in her awareness of the "crisis of representation" (B. Wang 99), but also for their useful narrative function of reflecting and refracting her characters' feelings, which would otherwise be linguistically incommunicable. The proximity effect is the roundabout aesthetic stratagem that she employs to try to communicate with readers, with a success that her narrator deems equivocal, just as her characters must develop strategies for conveying meaning to one another in the circumstances of their mutual alienation.

Conclusion: Estranged Persons and Defamiliarized Objects

"Love in a Fallen City" plays out a tension between the importance of the individual vis-à-vis her context, the public versus the private. If told in slow, lingering detail, the private moments of an individual life encompass a world of importance (history might even seem to fall into place for one person's sake). If we peer into this intimate glass world, we may behold an entire ecosystem within it. Yet framed differently, this individual experience may seem barely worthy of notice, a mere two-dimensional, ornamental figure framed in a Persian rug, covered with dust. Caught between these two possibilities, Chang's characters try to tip the scales in their favor, and when they are powerless to do little else, at least they can act upon the physical objects and surfaces proximate to them (and which then become their proxies). Liusu can make a handprint on the wall in a quiet moment of defiance; she can kick the incense burner even when she admits to herself that the city did not really topple for her sake. When she is unable to break down Liuyuan's glass wall to read his motivations, at least she can enact the disapproval she feels toward him by obscuring her face with her umbrella. By describing the way characters interact with mundane objects, Chang depicts the contrivances of individuals (especially—but not only—women) hemmed in by external circumstances and the inescapability of isolation.

But in spite of the story's championing of the (feminine) individual's private needs over the (masculine) public narrative, "Love in a Fallen City" remains achingly aware of the limitations to human agency and subjectivity. Details deployed by the proximity effect illustrate these symptoms of modern uncertainty. Spatial layout and partitions are a physical manifestation of the separations between individual subjectivities. The passage or occlusion of light and visibility between these spaces represents the limitation of understanding between subjectivities. If light cannot penetrate a physical barrier, then the hand—synecdoche for human will—can try to press against these proximate confining surfaces: but images of the hand demonstrate

that human agency must give way to the hand of fate. Bold strokes of red, signifying the passion of individual wills and needs, are tempered by a cooling, sobering hue of green, indicative of indeterminacy and the frailty of human effort.

The proximity effect allows Chang to express the storyteller's challenge in communicating experience. At one point Chang's narrator writes of Liusu, "She didn't know why, but suddenly she was sobbing" (150). Liusu's emotions are illegible to herself, and Chang respects the infinite complexity within each individual's little glass world by instead illustrating proximate external objects to approximate what her characters are feeling. Lee claims that Chang's almost omniscient narratorial voice "moves inside and outside the character's thinking process" (286); often, though, the narrator is content with far less than omniscient access into a character's mind and merely hints at these profoundly unknowable and inarticulable processes by means of the proximity effect.

Chang's lengthy, craftsman-like descriptions often defamiliarize objects, in the sense of Viktor Shklovsky's principle of *ostranenie* (6): in Liusu's dazed stupor, the calligraphic characters on a scroll seem to float; a simple glass of tea resembles an exotic forest. As a storyteller, Chang implies that it is not necessary to transport us to the Malayan jungle to reveal a world of thrilling beauty; rather, the beauty can be found in the prosaic proximate objects that surround and enclose the characters in their everyday lives. By means of storytelling, the stone can be made to "feel stony" (Shklovsky 6) again. The defamiliarization of mundane objects in this story demonstrates that the experience of the lone individual is as fascinatingly worthy of narrative attention as world-historical affairs, and illuminates how the individual attempts to gain purchase upon her place in world history. Chang was critiqued for her stories that focused upon the relationships between men and women rather than the politically weighty events unfolding around them, yet it is through the defamiliarizing descriptions of domestic objects, personal possessions, and feminine details that her stories explore how historically insignificant individuals attempt to push back against or attain self-realization from the politically significant events that act upon them. These seemingly trivial details of individual experience deserve closer attention, Chang implies. The technique of *ostranenie* or estrangement urges us to look more closely, just as the characters are always looking at one another or at the objects around them in hopes of deciphering the mysteries of their experiences. At the same time, Chang's aesthetic tactic of estrangement also demonstrates that individuals are estranged from one another, and that this modern world is strange to them.

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