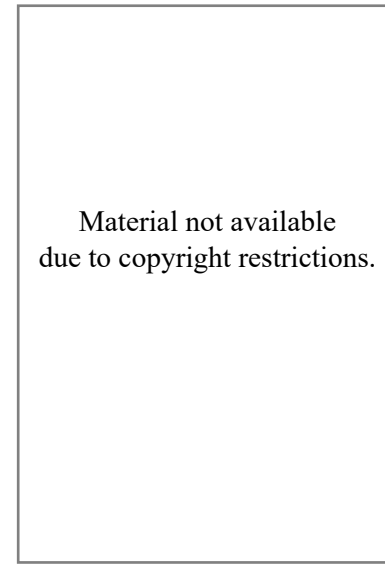
張愛玲：五四遺事

Stale Mates

By Eileen Chang



Eileen Chang: Self-portrait.

Introductory Note

Eileen Chang is one of the few twentieth-century Chinese authors who writes in both Chinese and English, and who translates her own works between the two languages. Besides "Stale Mates", her works written originally in English include *The Rice Sprout Song* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1955) translated as *Yang'ge* 秧歌 (Hong Kong: Jinri shijie she, 1954) and *The Rouge of the North* (London: Cassell & Co., 1967) translated as *Yuan nü* 怨女 (Taibei: Crown, 1968). Works written originally in Chinese include *Chidi zhi lian* 赤地之戀 (Hong Kong: Tianfeng, 1955), translated as *The Naked Earth* (Hong Kong: The Union Press, 1956) and *Jin suoji* 金鎖記 (1943), translated as "The Golden Cangue", in *Twentieth Century Chinese Stories*, C.T. Hsia, ed., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

"Stale Mates" was written in English and published in the biweekly magazine *The Reporter*, 12 September 1956. The author then translated it into Chinese for publication in *Wenxue zazhi* 文學雜誌 (20 January 1957) edited by T.A. Hsia.

TWO MEN and two girls in a boat sat facing each other on wicker seats under the flat blue awning. Cups of tea stood on the low table between them. They were eating *ling*, water chestnuts about the size and shape of a Cupid's-bow mouth. The shells were dark purplish red and the kernels white.

"Missu Zhou is very stylish today," one of the men said. It was also stylish to address girls as "Miss".

Miss Zhou glared at him through her new spectacles and threw a *ling* shell at him. Her glasses had round black rims and perfectly flat lenses, as she was not nearsighted. The year was 1924, when eyeglasses were fashionable. Society girls wore them. Even streetwalkers affected glasses in order to look like girl students.

Each of the men sat with his own girl because the little boat balanced better this way than if the two girls sat side by side. The pale green water looked thick and just a little scummy, and yet had a suggestion of lingering fragrance like a basin of water in which a famous courtesan had washed her painted face.

The girls were around twenty—young for high school in those days when progressive women of all ages flocked to the primary schools. Miss Zhou was much admired for her vivacity and boldness as being typical of the New Woman, while Miss Fan's was the beauty of a still life. She sat smiling a little, her face a slim pointed oval, her long hair done in two round glossy black side knobs. She wore little make-up and no ornaments except a gold fountain pen tucked in her light mauve tunic. Her trumpet sleeves ended flaring just under the elbow.

The young men were Luo and Wen. Luo was tall and thin. His pale turquoise long gown hung well on him in a more literal sense than when the phrase was applied to Westerner's clothes. He taught in the same school as Wen. They both owned land in their home village and taught school in Hangzhou merely as an excuse to live by the West Lake, where every scenic spot was associated with the memory of some poet or reigning beauty.

The four had been meeting almost daily for more than a year. They would go out on the lake, have dinner at one of the restaurants along the shore, and go boating again if there was a moon. Somebody would read Shelley aloud and the girls held hands with each other when they felt moved. Always there were four of them, sometimes six but never two. The men were already married—a universal predicament. Practically everybody was married and had children before ever hearing of love. Wen and Luo had to be content with discussing the girls interminably between themselves, showing each other the girls' carefully worded letters, admiring their calligraphy, analyzing their personalities from the handwriting. Love was such a new experience in China that a little of it went a long way.

They sailed into a patch of yellowing lotus leaves, the large green plates crunching noisily against the boat. Then there was silence. The boatman and his little daughter were resting on their oars, letting the boat drift. Now and then the water made a small swallowing sound as if it had a piece of candy in its mouth.

"Going home this weekend?" Miss Fan asked.

"I suppose I can't get out of it this time," Luo answered smiling. "My mother has been complaining."

She smiled. The mention of his mother did not alter the fact that he was going back to his wife.

Lately Luo had been feeling increasingly guilty about going home, while Miss Fan had allowed her resentment to become more manifest before and after each visit.

"I have made a decision," he said in a low voice, looking at her. Then, when she did not ask him what it was, he said, "Missu Fan, will you wait for me? It might take years."

She had turned away, her head bent. Her hands played with the lower left corner of her slitted blouse, furling and unfurling it.

Actually she did not agree to his getting a divorce until days later. But that evening, when the four of them dined at a restaurant famous for its lake fish, Luo already felt pledged and dedicated. All the wine he drank tasted like the last cup before setting out on a long hard journey on a cold night.

The restaurant was called the Tower Beyond Towers. It leaned over the lake on three sides. Despite the view and its poetic name it was a nonchalantly ugly place with greasy old furniture. The waiter shouted orders to the kitchen in a singsong chant. When the glass dome was lifted from the plate of live shrimp, some of the shrimp jumped across the table, in and out of the sauce dish, and landed on Miss Fan, trailing soya sauce down the front of her blouse. Miss Zhou squealed. In the dingy yellow electric light Miss Fan looked flushed and happy and did not seem to mind at all.

Luo did not go home until the Saturday after that. The journey took two hours by train and wheelbarrow. His wife looked sheepish as her mother-in-law loudly and ostentatiously excused her from various duties because her husband was home. She was wearing a short blue overall with the red satin binding of a silk tunic showing underneath it. She had not been sure that he would be coming.

He spoke to her that night about divorce. She cried all night. It was terrible, almost as if a judge were to sleep in the same bed with a condemned man. Say what he might, he knew he was consigning her to dishonourable widowhood for the rest of her life.

"Which of the Seven Out Rules have I violated?" she kept asking through angry sobs. Ancient scholars had named the seven conditions under which a wife might justifiably be evicted from her husband's house.

His mother flew into a rage on being told. She would not hear of it. Luo went back to Hangzhou and stopped coming home altogether. His mother got his uncle to go up to Hangzhou and talk him out of his foolishness. He in turn managed to persuade a cousin to go and talk to his family. It took infernally long to negotiate through relatives who were, furthermore, unreliable transmitters of harsh words, being peacemakers at heart, especially where matrimony was concerned. To break up a marriage is a cardinal sin that automatically takes ten years off a man's given life span.

Luo got a lawyer to write his wife an alarmingly worded request for divorce. His wife's family, the Zhangs, boiled over with rage. Did he think his wife was an

orphan? Not all the Zhangs were dead. True, they could not revenge themselves on the faithless man unless his wife were to hang herself on his lintel. That would place his life and property entirely at their mercy. But it was not for them to recommend such a step to her.

The head of the Luo clan was moved to speak. The old man threatened to invite the Family Law out of its niche and beat the young rascal in the ancestral temple. "Family Law" was a euphemism for the plank used for flogging.

Miss Fan and Luo continued to see each other in the company of Wen and Miss Zhou. Their friends were delighted and exhilarated by the courage of this undertaking—though it did put Wen in a difficult position, even if Miss Zhou was never openly reproachful. It now appeared as though the wistfulness that was part of the beauty of their relationship was not one of those things that couldn't be helped.

Luo was only home once in two years. They were difficult years for both the mother and daughter-in-law. They began to get on each other's nerves. There was an unwritten law that a wife could never be divorced once she had worn mourning white and the ramie scarf of mourning for a parent-in-law. So the old lady got the idea that her daughter-in-law wished for her death. It would certainly settle the divorce problem. But the old lady swore she would see the younger woman out of the house vertically before she made her own exit horizontally.

Outwardly the divorce negotiations had not gained much ground in six years. Miss Fan's family never did approve. Now they kept reminding her that at twenty-six she was becoming an old maid. Soon she would not even qualify for *tianfang*—room filler, a wife to fill up a widower's empty room. It seemed to her family that Luo was only waiting to have her on his own terms. It was doubtful whether he was seriously trying to get a divorce. Possibly alimony was the stumbling block. There were those who said he was actually quite poor. What little he had must have dwindled away through his long absence from home, with his estate left in the hands of an estranged wife. There had been some unpleasantness over the divorce question at the school where he was teaching. If he didn't depend on his job for a living, why didn't he resign?

Miss Zhou told Wen confidentially that Miss Fan had been out to dinner with a pawnbroker, chaperoned by members of her family and a lady matchmaker. Wen was not to tell Luo.

In his indignation Wen told Luo anyway, though of course he added, "It's all her family's doing."

"They didn't tie her up with a rope and drag her to the restaurant, did they?" Luo said sardonically. He promised not to take up the matter with her immediately as that would betray the source of his information.

But that evening Luo drank too much rice wine when they dined at the Tower Beyond Towers which had the lake on three sides. "Congratulations, Missu Fan!" he said. "I hear you are going to invite us to your wedding feast." He drained his cup and strode off angrily.

Miss Fan refused to join them that next day. Luo's letters were returned

unopened. A week later Miss Zhou reported that Miss Fan had again been dining with the pawnbroker. Everything was settled; the man had given her a big diamond engagement ring.

Luo's divorce action had reached the point where it began to move through its own momentum. There were signs that his wife's side was now more ready to listen to reason. He would be a laughing-stock for the rest of his life if he were to return to his wife at this stage. So he went ahead with the divorce, giving his wife a generous settlement as he had promised. As soon as the decree was final he got a professional matchmaker to approach the Wangs of the dye works on his behalf. The eldest Wang girl was reported to be the prettiest girl in town.

After an exchange of photographs and due investigation, the Wangs accepted him. Luo sold a great part of his land and bought Miss Wang a diamond ring even bigger than the one Miss Fan was said to have got. He was married after three months.

For some reason, Miss Fan's match did not come off. Maybe the pawnbroker had his doubts about modern girls and had heard something of Miss Fan's long attachment to Luo. According to the Fans it was because they had found out that the pawnbroker had falsified his age. Some malicious tongues had it that it was the other way around.

In the natural course of things Luo would have run into Miss Fan sooner or later, living in the same town. But their friends were not content to leave it to chance. Somehow they felt it was important for them to meet again. It could not be that they wanted Luo to savour fully his revenge; they had disapproved of the way he had hit back at her at the expense of his own ideals. Maybe they wanted him to realize the mistake he had made and feel sorry. But perhaps the most likely explanation would be that they just thought it would be sad and beautiful—and therefore a good thing—for the two to meet once again on the lake under the moon.

It was arranged without the knowledge of either of them. One night Luo was out on a boat with Wen—Miss Zhou was now married and not seeing them any more. Some people shouted at them from another boat. It was a couple they used to know. Miss Fan was with them.

When the two boats drew near, Wen stepped over to the other boat, urging Luo to come with him. Luo found himself sitting across the small table from Miss Fan. The tea in the cups shone faintly, in each cup a floating silver disk swaying slightly with the movement of the boat. Her face and white-clad shoulders were blue-rimmed with moonlight. It stunned him how she could look just the same when so much had happened.

They went through the amenities as if there were nothing amiss, but without directly addressing a single remark to each other. No reference was made to Luo's new marriage. The talk was mostly about the government-sponsored West Lake Exhibition and its ugly memorial that dominated the vista along the bank.

"It's an eyesore. Spoils everything," Luo said. "It will never be the same again."

Her eyes met his, wavered a little, and looked away.

After going round the lake they landed and separated. The day after, Luo received a letter addressed to him in Miss Fan's handwriting. He tore it open, his heart pounding, and found a sheet of blank paper inside. He knew instantly what she meant. She had wanted to write him but what could she say?

Soon it was no secret among their friends that they were again seeing a lot of each other. Luo again started divorce proceedings. This time he had very few sympathizers. He now looked like a scoundrel where he had once been a pioneer. It was another long struggle. On her part Miss Fan was also engaged in a struggle. Hers was against the forces of the years, against men's very nature which tires so easily. And in her struggle she had nobody to stand by her side as she stood by Luo. She remained quietly pretty. Her coiffure and clothes were masterpieces of subtle compromise between fashion and memory. He never wanted her to look any different from the way she did when he had first known her. Yet he would have been distressed if it had suddenly occurred to him that she looked dated. She fell in with all his moods without being monotonously pliant. She read all the books he gave her and was devoted to Shelley.

He finally had to fight it out in the courts with his wife's family. The Wangs were adamant against divorce. Lawsuits were expensive, especially when judges proved to be tractable. Luo got his divorce at the end of five years. Though in reduced circumstances, he had built a small white house exactly the way Miss Fan and he had planned it, on a site they had chosen long ago. He had closed down his old house in the country after his mother's death. Their new home was on stilts, leaning out of the green hills right over the lake. Climbing roses and wisteria trailed over the moon window.

The newlyweds paid routine visits to relatives. They were usually pressed to stay for dinner and play mahjong. Luo had never known her to be fond of the game. He told his wife it was good of her to comply but there was no need to keep it up all night and promise to come back for more the next day. She answered that people teased her into it, saying she could not bear to be away from her bridegroom a single minute.

She complained of living so far out. When she came back late from her mahjong parties she often had difficulty finding a rickshaw puller willing to take her home. When she was not out playing mahjong she lounged about in soiled old gowns with torn slits and frayed frogs. Half the time she lay in bed cracking watermelon seeds, spitting the shells over the bedclothes and into her slippers on the floor. His hints at taking more interest in her appearance were at first ignored. Then she flared up and said his fussiness was unmanly. "No wonder you never get anywhere."

Luo did his best to keep up a good front. Still he supposed that news of their quarrels got about, because one day a relative mentioned casually to him that Miss Wang had not yet remarried. "Why don't you ask her to come back?"

Luo shook his head sadly. He needed some persuasion, but of course he knew that the Wangs would agree that this was the best way out, much as they hated him. The family's good name would suffer if their daughter took a second husband.

His wife, the former Miss Fan, did not hear of the matter until all arrangements had been made. Despite scenes and threats of suicide, the day Miss Wang returned to him escorted by members of the Wang family she was there to receive them and play hostess at the small informal celebration. She addressed Miss Wang's brother and sister-in-law as "Brother" and "Sister-in-law". She apologized for the dinner. "It's difficult for us to get a good cook, living so far away from the market. Terribly inconvenient. Else I would have made him fetch back your young lady long ago. Of course she ought to come and live here. One can't be staying with parents all the time." Miss Wang did not speak, since she was almost a bride.

No agreement had been reached as to the mode of address between the two women, who were understood to be of equal status. They were merely referred to as "That of the House of Fan" and "That of the House of Wang" behind each other's back.

Not long afterward an elder of Luo's clan spoke to him. "I see no reason why you shouldn't ask your first wife to come back. It would only be fair."

Luo could not think of any valid objection either. He went down to the country where she was living with her family, and brought her back to the rose-covered little house by the lake.

Both of his ex-wives were much richer than he was after the divorce settlements. But they never helped him out, no matter what straits he got into from providing for three women and their squabbling servants and later their children. He could not really blame them, taking everything into consideration. He would not have minded it so much if "That of the House of Fan" did not taunt him continually about the others' lack of feeling for him.

And now that he had lived down the scandal and ridicule, people envied him his *yan fu*, glamorous blessings—extraordinary in an age that was at least nominally monogamous, for it was already 1936—living with three wives in a rose-covered little house by the lake. On the rare occasions when he tried to tell somebody he was unhappy, the listener would guffaw. "Anyhow," the friend would say, "there are four of you—just right for a nice game of mahjong."