

Female Images in the Shanghai Culture Depicted by Eileen Chang—Take *Half a Lifelong Romance* as an Example

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Abstract:

Eileen Chang is a representative writer of Shanghai literature, playing an important role in the modernization process of 20th-century Chinese literature. This paper takes Eileen Chang's novel *Half a Lifelong Romance* as an example and focuses on the character analysis of the two main female characters, Gu Manzhi and Gu Manlu, to further explore the impact of Shanghai culture on female images in the 20th century. Shanghai culture is a unique culture that emerged after the opening of Shanghai to the West, and the taxi-dancer culture it produced led to the tragic origin of Manlu. The characteristics of Shanghai society such as gap of wealth, low status of women, and backward thinking all affect the fate and image of female characters in the novel. *Half a Lifelong Romance* provides a lot of writing possibilities for analyzing the female images in Eileen Chang's works, enriching the description of Shanghai in modern Chinese literature, and providing more perspectives for further analyzing Shanghai culture.

Keywords: Eileen Chang; Female Images; Shanghai culture.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there are several research results on the female image and female consciousness in Eileen Chang's works at home and abroad, among which the female image is mainly tragic. For example, Sheng Jiao's *Research on the Tragic Female Images in Eileen Chang's Works* divides the tragic female images in Eileen Chang's works into different types. It deeply discusses the causes of the tragic female images from multiple aspects, providing a new perspective for understanding Eileen Chang's works [1]. It fully exploits the unique value of portraying tragic female

images in Eileen Chang's works, enriches the connotation of the study of female literature, and provides an important reference for understanding Eileen Chang's works and the female images in her works. Most of the relevant papers start with the female image in a novel, and there are few studies on the embodiment of Shanghai culture and the combination of female images. This paper mainly uses the literature research method to deeply analyze the female images under the influence of Shanghai culture in Eileen Chang's novel *Half a Lifelong Romance*, so as to better understand the realistic significance of the female

images in Eileen Chang's works.

2. Eileen Chang and the Novel

2.1 Biography of Eileen Chang

After the establishment of Shanghai as a treaty port in 1843, the creation of foreign concessions positioned Shanghai as the earliest and most progressive area for modernization in China. The flourishing material life in Shanghai, frequent interactions between China and the West, and the coexistence of Eastern and Western cultures led to the formation of a distinct "Shanghai culture." As this cultural identity matured, it gave rise to a literary genre known as "Shanghai literature," with Eileen Chang emerging as one of the prominent writers.

Eileen Chang (1920-1995) came from a prominent family background, the breakdown of her parents' marriage deeply influenced Eileen's upbringing. Her father clung to old traditions despite living in a new era; meanwhile, her mother studied abroad which exposed Eileen Chang to various eccentric characters representing both old and new ways of life.

This familial background provided Eileen Chang with opportunities from an early age to closely observe and profoundly understand the intertwined social phenomena and character traits of different eras. It shaped her perceptive and profound inner world. Eileen Chang's writing style is both youthful and assertive, often stemming from profound personal experiences and direct observations.

In particular, during the 1940s, Eileen Chang's works vividly reflected the lifestyle, psychological state, and urban culture of Shanghai at that time—becoming an indispensable part of "Shanghai Literature."

2.2 Half a Lifelong Romance

Half a Lifelong Romance is a love story set in the social backdrop of 1930s Shanghai, portraying a narrative intertwined with sadness and helplessness. The novel revolves around the protagonist Gu Manzhen, who hails from a humble background but possesses a gentle yet resilient character. Following her father's demise, Gu Manlu, her sister, and a taxi-dancer, becomes the sole breadwinner for their family of seven siblings. After graduating from university, Gu Manzhen enters the workforce where she encounters Shen Shijun, belonging to an influential family. Their acquaintance leads to a blossoming romance as they overcome various societal barriers together. Shen Shijun deeply empathizes with Gu Manzhen's predicament and decides to marry her.

However, their emotional journey faces significant resis-

tance from both families. Particularly noteworthy is Gu Manlu's vehement opposition and Shen Shijun's family's adherence to traditional familial values that cast shadows on their relationship. As time passes by, Gu Manlu ages while becoming a socialite; however, she harbors deep unease and helplessness due to her inability to bear children along with her husband Zhu Hongtsai's extravagant and irresponsible behavior.

To secure her position within society, she resorts to manipulating circumstances by orchestrating Zhu Hongtsai's rape of Gu Manzhen followed by imprisoning her until childbirth. Meanwhile, after being cheated by Gu Manlu into believing that Gu Manzhen had married someone else, Shen Shijun experiences heartbreak and despair before eventually departing.

Under the pressure of family, Shen Shijun reluctantly married Shi Cuizhi, who did not love each other. Similarly, Gu Manzhen was compelled to marry Zhu Hongtsai for the sake of her child's future following Gu Manlu's demise. Over eighteen years, as seasons changed, these two individuals coincidentally reunited in Shanghai only to discover that their respective worlds had already undergone significant transformations. The once deeply engraved love between them could now only be expressed through a helpless sigh denoting irreversibility. Although this ending evokes sadness, it profoundly reflects the interplay between social reality and personal destiny while highlighting the helplessness and tragedy inherent in individual choices within a specific historical context.

3. Female Images in Half a Lifelong Romance

3.1 Gu Manzhen

3.1.1 Adamancy and Independent

Manzhen is strong and independent at heart. After her father died, her sister became a taxi-dancer. "She'd never worn bright, attractive colors before, not with her sister's friends traipsing in and out. Her plain blue tunic-dress helped keep expenses down and was a form of self-protection [2]." Like Zhu Hongtsai said "You know...she's got the looks – if she wanted to try this kind of thing, she'd be a big success [2]." This refers to being a taxi-dancer, which reflects that Manzhen's appearance is relatively outstanding. Girls at that age will have the passion of dressing up pretty but Manzhen chose to wear simple and plain clothes, is to protect herself, through continuing to go to school to find a job to earn money. She does not rely on men to live. After graduating from college, Manzhen entered the workplace to earn money and share the fami-

ly's financial burden. When her sister got married, the financial burden of the whole family was on her shoulders, "Ma, from now on our support the family.....Don't worry, something will turn up. I'll look for more work. After Manlu has moved out, we won't need a servant, and the extra rooms can be rented out. We'll have to scrimp a bit, but that doesn't matter [2]." Manzhen would rather earn more money by working part-time outside and lowering the family's living standard than let her family use her brother-in-law's money to save them from having no dignity under someone else's roof.

Manlu is unwilling to marry Shijun because of her family's financial burdens. She loves Shijun too much to drag him down. "I don't want to drag you into this... You're just getting started in your profession. Supporting a household would be a big distraction. Supporting two households could mean the end of your career [2]." This also reflects Manzhen's sense of independence; it's not that she refuses to rely on others, but her self-esteem prevents her from depending on Shen Shijun's wealthy family.

3.1.2 Outgoing, forthright and kind

From Gu Manzhen's appearance description "Her hair was ruffled and loose, falling over her shoulders in a casual style [2]." It can be seen that Manzhen is a very casual person [3]. When she eats with Shuhui and Shijun, she does not act introverted. Instead, she often jokes and talks forthright, and sometimes makes jokes to liven up the atmosphere: "And people in the north like to call it a 'coin-string warm', how's that for being money-crazy?" Another time Shuhui said: "Don't you think the price should be lower here, out on the edge of town? Are they cheating us?" Manzhen pointed with the umbrella at the shopkeeper's guarantee posted on the wall. "Look - it says right here: "We do not cheat children or the elderly [2]."

Because Manzhen's sister is a taxi driver, her family background is very shameful in the eyes of the world. Manzhen did not hide Shijun and told him her family background when they just knew each other, just as Shuhui's evaluation of her is that "she is very straightforward." Everyone was contemptuous of her sister, but she said: "In any case, once you go down that path, it's a downhill slope, unless you're good at the game. My sister - she's not that hype. She's a person with a loyal heart, really [2]." Manzhen is not willing to discriminate against her sister, even if taxi-dancer is the most despised profession, but her sister also has helplessness, if there is a choice who is willing to do inferior career to be looked down upon by others? Although Manzhen is a little afraid to talk about her family in front of others, she does not show obvious shame in front of her sister like her mother.

3.1.3 Brave and persistent women in the new era

Although Manzhen came from a humble background, she was brave and persistent in front of love. There was a huge gap between Shijun's illustrious family and her family, but Manzhen did not shrink back. On the contrary, Shuhui has a good feeling for Tsuizhi, but "... the marriage question would immediately be raised...since he was poor compared to her. He himself would never think of social climbing [2]." This leads to Shuhui did not expose his heart to Tsuizhi, Shuhui's psychology is the old society on the concept of the deep-rooted influence. From this point of view, Manzhen can be called a new era of women.

When Shijun's family knew that Manzhen's sister was a taxi-dancer, they felt that Manzhen was also very shameful. Shijun wanted Manzhen to hide her sister's identity, but Manzhen said: "I don't know who's more immoral: prostitutes, or the man who are their clients [2]!" In the society at that time, most people believed that clients were less shameless than prostitutes, indicating that women had a low status. Manzhen's questioning is the progress of women and the sublimation of her image.

She pursued exclusive love, unlike people such as Manlu, who, influenced by traditional social ideologies, could accept the existence of concubines. Manzhen was raped by Zhu Hongtsai under the conspiracy of her sister, she just comforted herself "A mad dog bite me, that's all." Manzhen understood deeply that her imprisoned by the old society mother will "Never call the police; she would not want any public airing of the family's dirty secrets... she was convinced that a woman is supposed to stick with one man, for life. In her eyes, the goose was already cooked: the one solution was for Manzhen to marry Hongtsai and settle into some sort of wifely role [2]." But Manzhen was imprisoned until she gave birth and escaped from the Zhu Mansion without compromise, she would rather choose to teach in school than marry Hongtsai to be a concubine. Although Shanghai has been influenced by Western advanced ideas, traditional ideas are still rooted in people's hearts, and a woman who has given birth to a child out of wedlock will still suffer social prejudice. Manzhen does not afraid of any rumors, she chose to leave alone, and portrayed her new era female image more deeply.

3.2 Gu Manlu

Looking back on Gu Manlu's life, she is a tragic female image who devoted herself to her family, but lost her humanity in the cruel real society. First, due to the early death of her father, she became a taxi-dancer in order to earn money to support her family. This kind of behavior shows her dedication to selling her body for her family. But the family does not understand Manlu's sacrifice, not

only ashamed of her profession, but also have a sense of distance to Manlu. In the face of these invisible discrimination, she can only suffer silently. At the same time, the inferiority in her heart is also intensifying.

Secondly, in order to get rid of her identity as a taxi-dancer and to have someone to rely on for the rest of her life, Manlu has no choice but to marry the businessman Zhu Hongtsai. In Manlu's heart only deep fatigue and helplessness, because Manlu recast herself as a second-tier escort with a reduced income. She has been being a taxi-dancer for too long and is also eager to find a home, which reflects her yearning and pursuit of love and a happy life. But the fact is on the contrary, after marriage, Hongtsai covets her sister's body, and he constantly quarreled with Manlu. Manlu regards marriage as the only way to get rid of the identity of a taxi driver, so she is still trying to save this twisted marriage. In this part, Eileen Chang used a lot of space to describe Manlu's heart and words, and made a long preparation for her evil change of human nature [4]. In the end, Manlu wanted to keep her position, let Hongtsai rape her sister and ruin her happy life because Manlu cannot have a baby, and her sister was imprisoned until childbirth. Instead of feeling regret in the process, she said when her sister rebelled: "I never realized we had such a brave martyr in our family! ... When you're a dance-hall girl, when you're a prostitute, people treat you like dirt and you just have to take it - you can't put on airs and graces. I'm no different from you. We are sisters, the same flesh and blood. So why am I beneath contempt, while you get to ride high in everyone's eyes [2]?" This verbal description of Manlu reveals her pent-up jealousy and resentment. She sacrificed everything for her family, and sold her youth, and now she has nothing and is eager to protect her marriage, but Manzhen can go to college, and even have a fiance and a happy life [5]. The contrast between their two lives makes Manlu intolerable, she thinks that her sister does these things for herself is nothing.

The inconceivable insidiousness and brutality in Manlu, reflect her cruelty, ignorance, selfishness and distortion of human nature, as well as the tragic nature of her life. "Her voice was just as rough on the ears as that radio song: saccharine screeches that made the room and the crockery shiver.... Her hips twisted back and forth.... That laugh had nothing attractive in it. It was old and empty [2]." The description of Manlu in the novel is ironic, she pretends to be charming, but she is twisted and contrived, and she wants to cover up her aging face with heavy makeup, but it is more and more aging. The novel establishes a tragic image for Manlu from the beginning of her appearance, and makes readers sympathize with the hardship and bitterness of Manlu's life under the satirical description in the text. In general, Gu Manlu has experienced a process

from selling her body to selling her soul, and she has evolved from thinking about her family to sacrificing her family for herself. Therefore, she is both the recipient of tragedy and the creator of tragedy.

4. The Influence of Shanghai Culture on Female Images

Although Shanghai in the 1930s had created the conditions for capitalist production and experienced economic development, the gap between the rich and the poor still existed. In the novel, the Gu family is a poor family in Shanghai, while the Shen family is much richer. It is precisely because of the huge wealth gap between the two families that Gu Manzhen and Shen Shijun cannot have their own autonomy in marriage, which creates a tragedy.

The emergence of dance halls is the result of the fusion of Chinese brothels and Western culture. In Shanghai at that time, dance halls and prostitution formed an industrial chain, and the dance hall industry was able to promote the development of the overall economy: "In terms of prostitution as a feature, Shanghai is at the forefront of cities in the world... Prostitution is indeed a major industry in Shanghai. The fact that so many people rely on it for their livelihood frustrates all attempts to eradicate and restrict prostitution [6]." Manlu was also one of the many taxi-dancers in Shanghai at the time, and her careful grooming of her appearance was closely related to her work as a taxi-dancer: "She'd put on that stage make-up of hers: blocks of bright red and solid black, with blue eyeshadow....The make-up on her face required constant attention....Great splashes of vivid color: hot-pink cheeks and crow-black eyeliner [2]." Her status as a taxi-dancer has created an image of her as ignorant and selfish, and has a large impact on her dependence on marriage and men.

Although Shanghai's economy and trade were more developed than other cities in China, it was also influenced by the spread of Western progressive ideas into coastal cities. However, its values on gender equality had not yet escaped the constraints of traditional Chinese male superiority ideology. The cheongsam dress worn by Shanghai women (especially taxi-dancer) in the novel *Half a Lifetime Romance* clearly reflects this, and the description of the cheongsam symbolizes the taxi-dancer culture: "her apple-green silk cheongsam was fairly new, but there was a darkened area at the waistline, a sweat stain left by a dance partner's hand [2,7]." This in turn reflects the social status of Shanghai women – at the lower end of society. This led to the tragic fate of Gu Manlu's family, highlighting the fact that Shanghai's economy was rapidly devel-

oping, while its ideas and cultural values were unable to keep pace.

In *Half a Lifelong Romance*, during the 1930s and 1940s, as Shanghai's economy was beginning to flourish, the city's architectural landscape was characterized by mansions and alleys, where cars and rickshaws coexisted on the streets. Manlu faced a choice between pursuing a career as a taxi driver or marrying Zhu Hongtsai, a philandering married man, in order to alleviate her family's financial pressures. This decision placed money at the forefront of her priorities. In her impoverished state, Manlu had limited freedom in choosing a spouse and ultimately felt compelled to marry Zhu Hongtsai for financial security.

As the Zhu family attained wealth, Manlu's thoughts were even more firmly limited, she even confined her sister Manzhi within the walls of their mansion to solidify her own position, depriving Manzhi of freedom. The year-long confinement left such an indelible mark on Manzhi that she harbored an intense aversion towards returning to that house—no matter how much time passed, haunting memories of the house and garden persisted in terrifying dreams. Within the bustling Shanghai metropolis existed women who were isolated within closed spaces without access to the outside world—a stark portrayal revealing capitalism's dark underbelly beneath its glossy exterior. This depiction poignantly underscored one of the city's core issues—the inability of spiritual development to keep pace with economic progress and its resulting problems.

The Gu sisters possessed contrasting personalities, yet both found themselves unable to achieve personal or spiritual freedom. This narrative unfolds in Shanghai, a city known for its modernity and progress, which adds an ironic layer to the story. Despite being portrayed as a modern, advanced, and rapidly developing metropolis in numerous literary works, Eileen Chang's *Half a Lifelong Romance* depicts the tragedy of the Gu sisters to reveal a Shanghai that hides decay beneath prosperity and conservatism alongside progress. While Eileen Chang's narrative tone is not overtly critical, it conveys an underlying sense of sadness and helplessness that gradually strips away the city's bright facade to expose its darker side while also delving into the human roots and social issues associated with urban modernization.

5. Conclusion

Eileen Chang based her works on her own tragic experi-

ences, drawing inspiration from both Chinese and Western literature, and sought out archetypes in the male-dominated society to create tragic female characters, highlighting the relationship between men and women, and emphasizing the helplessness of women in a male-dominated society. Therefore, in Eileen Chang's novels, secular women are portrayed as grappling with the changes in the era, family dynamics, and the challenges of life.

Sadness is a consistent style in Eileen Chang's works, and *Half a Lifelong Romance* specifically depicts and portrays the images of Gu Manzhi and Gu Manlu to show readers the cruelty of society in the background of feudal ethics, the betrayal of loved ones, the deep affection between lovers, the downfall of those who made sacrifices, and be neglected.

Half a Lifelong Romance also presents the social Shanghai culture, which struggles between progress and backwardness, with a rapidly developing economy, fashionable and modern culture, but also retaining traditional gender oppression, money-oriented conservative thoughts, further affecting the growth trajectory of the characters in the book. The urban culture of Shanghai has a long history and much to recall and explore, and *Half a Lifelong Romance* also enriches the content of "Shanghai literature".

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