

Exploring the Evolution in Gender Values in the Works of Modern Chinese Female Writers: A Comparative Study of Ling Shuhua’s “Embroidered Pillow” and Eileen Chang’s “Love in a Fallen City”

Sitong Song¹, and
Mengyan Zhou^{2,*}

¹School of Journalism and Cultural
Communication, Hebei University
of Economics and Business, Hebei,
China.

²School of Chinese Language and
Literature, Soowchow University,
Suzhou, China

*Corresponding author:
2203405001@stu.suda.edu.cn

Abstract:

Scholarly research on the novel collections “Embroidered Pillow” and “Love in a Fallen City” primarily focused on the portrayal of female characters and the reflection of marital perspectives, while lacking comparative studies on the changes in gender value orientations in the works of female writers from different periods. Through the comparative analysis of the two works, this study identified the evolution from the pursuit of women’s liberation under the constraints of traditional gender norms during the era of Ling Shuhua to the awakening and reshaping of gender roles in the period of Eileen Chang. It demonstrates the increasing attention paid by female writers to women’s self-space, continually moving towards a conscious gender awareness. This study explored the Evolution of gender value orientations in the works of modern Chinese female writers. This also contributes to a deeper understanding of the development trajectory of female literature and provides a literary perspective for the construction of contemporary gender equality concepts.

Keywords: Women’s writing; gender value orientation; Eileen Chang; Ling Shuhua; feminism.

1. Introduction

Western Feminism has been introduced to China since the beginning of the 20th century. After the May Fourth Movement, with the introduction of Marxism, Marxist feminism has been developed. In the field of literature, gender issues were thought

with literary issues. Many great female writers and works started appearing, showing a special aspect of the gender value of women. Ling Shuhua is a female writer born below Women’s Liberation in the 20th. There is strong female consciousness in her works. Ling Shuhua’s works not only show the life situation and reality dilemma of women of different identities,

but also reveal their mental tragedy [1]. Her collection of short stories "Embroidered Pillow" includes her works of excellent, such as "The Temple of Flowers" and "After Drinking". Eileen Chang is a representative figure of Shanghai style in the 1940s and one of the most important female writers in Chinese contemporary literature history. Through the description of a series of the tragic of women, Eileen Chang's work reveals the devastation of women in a patriarchal society. At the same time, she begins to think about and criticize the weakness of women's personalities [2]. The novel collection "Love in a Fallen City" includes nine works created by Eileen Chang, including "The First Incense" "Love in a Fallen City" and "Jasmine Tea". Although scholars have conducted extensive research on the two works from a feminist perspective, such as analyzing and studying the female image, female fate, female marriage and love relationship, female liberation, and women's psychological narrative, there are not many papers that choose to analyze the changes in gender values behind them through their works. This paper fills in this gap by comparing the works of Ling Shuhua and Eileen Chang. This study will adopt a general structure, starting with Ling Shuhua's "Embroidered Pillow" and Eileen Chang's "Love in a Fallen City", studying the female value orientation in the two works, and summarizing the changes in female value orientation and women's thinking, as well as the causes and effects of these changes, to understand the evolution of modern and contemporary Chinese women's writing and women's concepts.

2. The Gender Value Orientation of Female Writers during the May Fourth Period in the Novel Collection „Embroidered Pillow“

In the novel "Embroidered Pillow", the author created a typical image of a "graceful woman in the old family [3]". First, the limitation of narrative space reflects the feudal society's bondage to women. The narration takes place inside the young lady's room. For traditional women, their Event venue is only a room. They are difficult to contact and know something outside. For love and marriage, they are completely in a state of ignorance. They can connect with the outside world through their parents and family. In this passage, the embroidered pillow is the medium that the young lady connects with outside. Because her father let her embroider the pillow, she starts to look forward to her marriage. Later she knows that the pillow has been broken, so her expectation of a happy marriage is dashed. Bound by feudal society, she always keeps her distance from the outside world. She also can't control her fate.

Second, the comparison of the front and the back of the pillow reveals women's weak position in marriage and love. The young lady is extremely meticulous and serious when embroidering the pillow. She spends more than half a year to do this. When embroidering birds, she uses thirty or forty different threads. The crest takes three times to complete. The length of time and the deep heart of the young lady can be seen from the details. The young lady attaches the importance of the embroidered pillow and her longing for future marriage. She places her future on this embroidered pillow. It means she places her future on men. The pillow is trampled at will in Chief Bai's home intimates that, men's contempt for women in marriage and love. The pillow is vomited dirty, and is used as a footrest by someone. From start to finish, hosts and guests in Chief Bai's home have no attention or concern for the pillow. It indirectly demonstrates that women are insignificant from a male perspective. From cherishing to trampling, the fate of the pillow reveals women's disadvantage in marriage and love, then shows the author's attention to women's marriage and love relationships and status.

In the novel "Mid Autumn Festival Evening", the author shapes the image of a wife bound by feudal ideology. On the first Mid Autumn Festival night after their wedding, which is supposed to be a peaceful reunion, it is disrupted by the news of Jingren's god-sister's critical illness. The wife, who is deeply bound by feudal ideology, insists that her husband eat a bunch of ducks before leaving. Although she fails to do so, it results in her husband not being able to see his god-sister for the last time. The husband's complaint sparks an argument between the couple, during which Jingren breaks a vase. In the eyes of this conservative lady, the duck that symbolizes reunion is not eaten, and the vase that symbolizes good luck is broken. They will not be able to live a good life in the future. This kind of fear accompanies her all the time until the real tragedy arrives. The couple has a rift in their lifetime, but after reconciling, there is always an invisible barrier between them, making it difficult for them to return to their original state. Since then, Mrs. Jingren has always played the role of a qualified traditional wife, but her life has not been satisfactory. Her husband is good at treating travel, her mother-in-law complains and preaches, and she has lost her kids multiple times, but gradually loses their family's wealth. In the end, she only believes that she was the one who suffered. During this period, women were deeply influenced by social culture, seeing themselves as appendages to men and committed to maintaining these relationships. They believe that gaining their husband's approval is the greatest success [4]. In the marriage between Jingren and his wife, the wife is an accessory, existing as a wife rather than an independent person. In this family, women

are evaluated and scrutinized as wives. Jingren believes that she is beautiful or ugly, while the wife herself has no right to evaluate her. She did not have the right to speak and never expected to have it. In her perspective, her husband and family are her everything, and when the marital relationship breaks down and the family comes to an end, she attributes all problems to herself, considering it her own failure. She doesn't consider herself an independent individual, but rather an object. She sees her family as a collection of affiliations with her husband [4]. This is the shackles bestowed upon her by feudal society. She spends her entire life only to end up with a tragic outcome, reflecting the tragic fate of traditional wives in a patriarchal society. Ling Shuhua's depiction of women's tragic fate reveals the disadvantaged position of women in the family, marriage, and even society. These women, who have been forgotten in the tide of social progress, have long been imprisoned in their image, ideology, and status by the feudal society that has lasted for thousands of years. They are a microcosm of feudal women for thousands of years, presenting a backward, outdated yet extremely real world of women to the society at that time.

By exploring the tragic female characters in Ling Shuhua's novel "Embroidered Pillows", it can be seen what Ling Shuhua's gender value orientation is. By depicting the neglected and objectified living conditions of women in marriage and family during the progress of the times, raise social awareness of Chinese women who are in an awkward situation. She criticizes the feudal constraints imposed on women by the patriarchal society for a long time, and also implies the hope for women to find their own value and achieve individual liberation.

3. The Gender Value Orientation of Female Writers after the 1930s in the Novel Collection „Love in a Fallen City“

"Jasmine Tea" challenges the traditional gender stereotypes through the gender ambiguity of the male character Nie Chuanqing and the "masculinization" of the female character Yan Danzhu. It reveals Eileen Chang's gender value orientation, which is to deconstruct and reconstruct the gender roles to negate the patriarchal society and strive for women's liberation and the right to speak. This is an individual case among Eileen Chang's novels, presenting a natural contradiction with the feminist tendencies inherent in Chang's writing as a female author. This contradiction is resolved by the gender ambiguity of the male character Nie Chuanqing. He is not a traditionally strong male. Instead, he exhibits the characteristics that lean towards

femininity in appearance, personality, and physique. He possesses a delicate beauty akin to a woman's, with a "Mongolian oval face, thin eyebrows, and upslanting eyes [5]." His body is frail, his stature is petite, his spirit is fragile, and his character is weak. Furthermore, the main female character, Yan Danzhu, is a "sound and beautiful" woman. She has shown strong spiritual power, which further dissolves this contradiction. She once told Nie Chuanqing that the reason why she treats him like a woman is rooted in his tendency to exhibit emotional vulnerability, often resorting to tears [5]. Through this way, the contradiction of female writers using a male perspective to narrate and express feminism is completely resolved, and Eileen Chang's gender value orientation is also revealed. In the narrative unfolding, despite the biological gender assignment of male to Nie Chuanqing and female to Yan Danzhu, the prominence of the male narrative voice progressively diminishes, giving way to a resurgence of feminine traits that ultimately dominate the entire article [6]. The stereotypical concepts of gender gradually blur. With the "feminization" of the male and the "masculinization" of the female, the "gender inversion" displayed a continuous negation of the patriarchal society and a continuous struggle for women's liberation and the right to speak.

Eileen Chang reveals the struggle between the traditional "good girl" image and the inner authentic desires of the female characters in "The First Incense" and "Sealed Off", as well as their process of choosing self-destruction with a clear self-awareness. This reflects the helplessness and contradiction of women under the oppression of traditional society, and their pursuit of individual liberation and gender equality. In "The First Incense," Ge Weilong presents as a proud and good girl at first. However, when she moves into the Liang family and sees a wardrobe full of clothes, her unconscious desire for wealth begins to emerge, and the aspect of the "good girl" begins to crumble. Yet, this desire for wealth is inherent in her character. She used to yearn to maintain the image of a "good girl" and looked down on becoming like her aunt, who supports a decadent lifestyle by seducing men, thus suppressing her desire for wealth. As her relationship with Qiao Qijiao deepens, Weilong reveals her longing for sexual desire. She is aware that Qiao Qijiao does not love her, and even if he does, it is only for "a split second." However, it was in this "split second" that Ge Weilong felt she had acquired "a fresh sense of security, a newfound power, and an unprecedented liberty [7]. In the end, she realizes that no matter how diligently she studies, how cleverly she navigates, or how hard she tries to be a "good girl," she cannot satisfy both her desire for wealth and her sexual desires, nor can she escape the oppression of this society and avoid becoming a pawn in others' games. Thus, she

deliberately gave in to the pleasure of attaching to men and indulging herself in the exhilaration of self-gratification and abandonment [8]. Likewise, Wu Cuiyuan in "Blockade" also represents the image of a "good girl." She is a young female university teacher, a typical figure of a progressive woman who has benefited from higher education. Yet, she is not happy, and her method of dealing with this oppression and unhappiness is to give an "A" to a male student's poorly written and arrogant essay solely because "he treats her as someone with extensive knowledge, someone he respects [5]." In the male student's filthy language, she senses the equality and respect that society has failed to grant her, marking her initial act of rebellion. Subsequently, when the accountant Lu Zongzhen, a stranger, initiates a conversation with her, Wu Cuiyuan agrees with everything Lu Zongzhen says, and tears flow uncontrollably because he promises her marriage. It is because this "simple man" shows no interest in the "good" world constructed by Wu Cuiyuan's good family background, upbringing, knowledge, and profession, but instead sees her merely as "a lovely woman [8]." The equality, respect, and subjectivity she yearns for are not given to her because of her progressiveness, nor because she is a "good girl," but rather, it is through the sexual objectification and the process of self-commodification that she finds this genuine perception, respect, and even love. Behind Eileen Chang's sharp portrayal of women lies a deeper sentiment of compassion and sympathy. She does not write about outright progress nor absolute regression; instead, she writes about a struggle—the irreconcilable conflict between superficially "good" progressiveness and the inner "true" desires and aspirations. The female characters she creates in her novels often have the appearance of progressive women on the surface, yet inside, they are corrupted by traditional constraints. Trapped in the fissure between ideal and reality, they struggle in pain. They alleviate this painful struggle, turmoil, and confusion through acts of rebellion, self-objectification, and self-destruction. At the same time, they are lucid, consciously walking towards self-destruction and judiciously self-adjudicating. This distinction from traditionally degenerate women is where their significance and progressiveness lie, and it is also where Chang's gender value orientation is most pronounced.

By exploring the contradictory portrayal of female characters and the special male narrative perspective presented in Eileen Chang's novel collection "Love in a Fallen City," the "gender inversion" in her writing can be observed. This reflects the gender value orientation in the works of female writers after the 1930s, represented by Chang, who depicts women struggling between the superficial "good" progressiveness and the inner "true" desires and aspira-

tions, along with acts of rebellion and degradation. This is accompanied by a lucid self-examination and a perspective of gender ambiguity and inversion. This portrayal expresses Chang's sympathy for the difficult situation of women seeking individual liberation and independence at that time, as well as her concern for the existence of women and their life experiences.

4. The Reasons for the Evolution in Gender Value Orientation among Modern Female Writers

The fundamental reason for the change in gender value orientation among modern female writers is the liberation of women's thinking. There are two main reasons for women's ideological liberation: the development of socio-political economy and the struggle of women themselves.

4.1 The Impact of the Development of Social Political Economy on the Liberation of Women's Thinking

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, China was in a state of turmoil and chaos. The collision of Eastern and Western cultures has brought opportunities for the development of feminism in China. Some books about Western feminist theory were introduced to China. "The natural economy gradually disintegrated after being impacted by capitalism, and advanced intellectuals called for women's liberation and reshaping of their subjectivity. Female intellectuals actively promoted the development of the women's liberation movement. Against this backdrop, the ideological liberation of Chinese women has made unprecedented progress [9]. The New Culture Movement held high the banner of democracy and science. Various ideologies such as Marxism, socialism, feminism, etc. have flooded into the country, bringing the trend of women's liberation to China. At the same time, it also gave birth to a group of female writers who wrote. They hoped to break free from the constraints of feudal society and family, no longer willing to be trapped in the oppression and confinement of patriarchy and patriarchy. They pursued personal liberation and gender equality, pursued freedom of love and marriage, started to link personal destiny with women's liberation and national destiny, and hoped to become an independent individual in society. At the same time, society has also given them difficulties and challenges that are difficult to overcome. Despite the continuous efforts of progressive women, the enlightenment of female consciousness is still dominated by men. Only complete independence can

truly liberate women [10]. New ideas have brought them new prospects and futures, but traditional feudal women's ideas still hinder their progress. Even this is an insurmountable gap. Overall, female writers during this period tend to examine society from their own perspective and begin to seek the value and meaning of their own existence at the societal level.

4.2 The Impact of the Reflection of Women Themselves on the Liberation of Women's Thinking

When women exist as independent individuals rather than as appendages or manipulated persons under patriarchy, they gain a certain degree of freedom and rights. This is not only an objective result of social, political, and economic development, but also a phased victory in the struggle of women themselves. After completing the purpose of examining the social stage, they began to analyze the difficulties faced by women themselves. At the same time, they also examine men's behavior. This is a conscious reflection of women's "feminine nature". This is because, in the process of deepening female consciousness, they perceive the importance and uniqueness of women outside of male-female public spaces. Their attention shifts from women in society to women themselves. They truly distinguish between men and women, instead of looking at the difference between their social status and influence. So female writers during this period mainly describe women's pursuit of desire and love to show the difficulties and weaknesses of women in their own space, as well as an analysis of self-awareness. During the same period in Shanghai, female writers presented different characteristics in their writing. Since modern times, as an open coastal city, Shanghai shaped a unique city culture. It not only has a prosperous modern economy, but also has a profound colonial imprint. Under the special urban background where modernity and tradition coexist, women characters created by female writers in Shanghai examine themselves so deeply that they realize that the main reason for the low status of women was their own willingness to be slaves [11].

5. Conclusion

Ling Shuhua is a representative female writer during the May Fourth Period. She bridges the gap between the new and the old. Her novels often reflect the living conditions and tragic endings of women in contemporary society, expressing sympathy for the situation and marital status of women at that time. The narrative space shifted from the public space to the female self-space, with Eileen Chang as a typical example. Her works depict the difficult reality

of women seeking individual liberation and independence at that time, as well as their concern for the self-space and life experiences of women. From Ling Shuhua to Eileen Chang, from depicting the complete silence and suffering of women to focusing on their subtle resistance to falling into decline in the struggle, the attention to women's self-space has been increasing, moving towards a more conscious gender awareness and the ultimate goal of "gender inclusivity."

Literature is an internal force for societal change. As the gender value orientation of modern female writers continues to evolve, it will inevitably have a profound impact on the construction of China's spiritual civilization. More research on feminist literary works by female writers, along with reflection, criticism of traditional male-centric literary perspectives, and increased attention to women's self-space, will propel Chinese women's literature to greater heights and further advance the realization of genuine gender equality.

This paper takes the novels of Ling Shuhua and Eileen Chang as examples to explore the changes in gender value orientations in the works of Chinese female writers from the early 20th century to after the 1930s. However, the sample size is insufficient, and the supporting evidence is lacking. The future study will study a wider range of female writers' works to investigate the evolution of gender value orientations in female writers' works over a longer time span. The future study will use a larger number of female writers' works to further enrich and perfect this research.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Su Wenlan. Ling Shuhua's Interrogation with Marriage and Women's Liberation. *Journal of Xiangtan University(Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2017, 41(01): 111-114+127.
- [2] Huang Lingqing, Li Huaping. On the Literary Achievements and Influence of Eileen's Novels. *Modern Chinese(Literary Research Edition)*, 2009, (06): 89-90.
- [3] Lu Xun. Introduction to the Second Collection of Novels in the Chinese New Literature Series. Tianjin People's Publishing House, 2009, page 88.
- [4] Zeng Wenxin. A Brief Analysis of the "Old Style Wise Wife" Image in Ling Shuhua's Novels-Taking "Mid Autumn Festival Evening" as an Example. *Modern Communication*, 2020, (12): 109-110.
- [5] Zhang Eileen. *Love in a Fallen City*. Beijing October Literature and Art Publishing House, 2019, page112.
- [6] Bao Changbao, Wu Danfeng. *The Construction and*

Deconstruction of Gender: An Analysis of Eileen's "Jasmine Fragrant Film". Journal of Chuxiong Normal University, 05(2006): 7-12.

[7] Huangjing. Writing the Theme of Female Decadence in the Joyful Scene Under the Gender Position-A Comparison Among "Crescent Moon""People and Women" and "Crumbs of Agalloch Eaglewood-the First Incense Burner". Masterpieces Appreciation, 2011, (26): 154-156.

[8] Xin Qianer. Beyond Feminism: A New Exploration of Eileen's Female Consciousness. Journal of Shantou University(Humanities and Social Sciences Edition), 2008, (02):

21-24+43+94.

[9] Xinxin. Research on the Women's Liberation Movement during the May Fourth Movement from a Gender Perspective. Northeast Normal University, 2019.

[10] Wang Dongjie. Exploration of Awakening of Female Consciousness During the May Fourth Period. Journal of the Zhengzhou Municipal Party School of the Communist Party of China, 2019, (06): 98-101.

[11] Lin Shuming. Feminist Literary Criticism In Multidimensional Perspective. Sichuan University, PhD dissertation, 2003.