

Urban Writing in Eileen Chang's Novels

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Abstract:

Most of Eileen Chang's works are set in the metropolis, describing the daily trifles of urban groups and showing the daily life, life fate and human tragedy of ordinary urban people. On the one hand, her works show the heavy traffic and blooming flowers of metropolises such as Shanghai and Hong Kong; on the other hand, she depicts the numbness, indifference and anxiety of urban people behind the prosperity, exposing the urban diseases brought by the fast-paced and high-pressure life. Eileen Chang incorporated the daily life of urban people into the field of literature, and left the memory of urban life of an era through the detailed depiction of daily life. She improves, enriches and strengthens the expressive force of the novel, and forms a unique aesthetic style based on daily narrative. By analyzing the urban culture in Eileen Chang's works, this paper explores the urban people's outlook on life, love and marriage and values shown in Eileen Chang's works, as well as the era changes and social transformation between the old and new reflected in the works. The pain and confusion caused by this transformation still exist, which is of great reference significance.

Keywords: Eileen Chang; Urban culture; social transformation.

1. Introduction

In the history of modern Chinese literature, Eileen Chang is a legendary female writer. Xia Zhiqing gave high recognition to Eileen Chang in *The History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, and praised her as "the best and most important writer in China today. [1]" This talented female writer grew up in the bustling metropolis of Shanghai. She once said bluntly in *Apartment Life Fun*: "I like listening to the city's sound. People who are more poetic than me listen to the pine waves and tsunamis on their pillows, and I have to hear the sound of the tram to fall asleep [2]." This is enough to show her love for city life.

Eileen Chang's family background and life experiences make her works full of urban sense and consciousness. She truly "views the city with the attitude of a modern citizen [3]." Urbanity is the biggest characteristic of her works. Eileen Chang's novels take daily trifles as the subject matter, and show all aspects of urban life through detailed description. Her novels not only truly reproduce the urban style of the metropolis, but also expose the distortion and alienation of human nature caused by the fast-paced life of the city and the rampant desire. Many scholars have seized on Eileen Chang's urban consciousness and studied the urbanity in her works from aspects

such as urban spatial narrative, urban female image and urban folk customs. For example, Li Youyuan's *Narrative Study of Space in Zhang Ailing's Works* and Zhang Ruolin's *Urban Space in Zhang Ailing's Novels* both study from the perspective of spatial narrative, Yang Yingying's *On the Urban marginal Women in Eileen Chang's novels* is analyzed from the perspective of female image, *Description of the Shanghai Urban Folklore in Zhang Ailing's Novels* by Xie Mili and Yao Zhouhui explores "the unique folk customs of Shanghai in the 1930s" through Eileen Chang's works [4]. However, most of the existing studies are single papers, which are not deep and comprehensive enough.

This paper will analyze and discuss the urban consciousness in Eileen Chang's works and the thinking on the survival predicament of urban people through the method of close reading of the text, and the reference significance in today. Next, this paper will discuss in detail from three aspects: the daily life of men and women, the urban culture that integrates tradition and modernity, and the survival predicament of urban people.

2. The Daily Life of Urban Men and Women

"Eileen Chang's novels have a clear sense of life, and the texture of her novels is rooted in daily life [5]." Through the description of trivial daily life, she presents a picture of urban family life in the early 20th century. Eileen Chang's works have always kept a certain distance from the grand narrative, she prefers to focus on ordinary life, with her unique perspective, a keen and cold review of urban life. The main contents of her novels are food, clothing, housing, transportation, marriage, the natural instincts of man and social interactions. The true and false love of men and women, the trivial trifles between family members and the joys and sorrows between people are all with secular interests. The daily life of men and women is the entry point for Eileen Chang to observe the world of citizens.

2.1 Modern Life in Old Shanghai

Eileen Chang grew up in Shanghai, a metropolis with a unique cultural heritage, and she is too familiar with the prosperity and extravagance of old Shanghai. Therefore, Eileen Chang's works became a mirror of Shanghai at that time, a true portrayal of the clothing, food, housing and transportation of old Shanghai, showing the cultural fashion and lifestyle of that era.

Shanghai, as the "Paris of the East", had already become a fashion capital at that time, leading the trend of the

times. In her works, Eileen Chang used meticulous and realistic brushstrokes to record the clothing characteristics of Shanghai in the early 20th century, giving everyone a clear understanding of the dressing up at that time. The different characters in Eileen Chang's works have different dresses, which reflects the different identities and personalities of the characters. For example, in *The Golden Lock story*, Cao Qiqiao "wears a blue and gray dragon palace woven satin robe, holding a bright red hot water bag in both hands", which shows that the old customs of Qing Dynasty clothing did not disappear at that time [6]. In *Fragrant Jasmine Tablets*, the healthy, lively and beautiful Yan Danzhu usually wears either a tight white woolen vest or a white gauze coat with long sleeves on her cheongsam, which is elegant and fashionable. In addition, there is a narrow blue edged white gauze cheongsam worn by Wu Cuiyuan in *Blockade*; There is Wang Jiazhi's knee-length cheongsam with a small rounded collar resembling a western-style dress in *Lust, Caution*; There is a green robe worn by Wang Jiaorui in *The Red Rose and the White Rose*. The costumes of these characters perfectly presented the colorful and varied styles of Shanghai clothing at that time, while also showcasing the aesthetic value orientation of the coexistence of tradition and modernity at that time.

In addition to clothing, there is no lack of description of delicious food in Eileen Chang's works. For example, in *The Red Rose and the White Rose*, Jiao Rui drinks milk calcium, drinks afternoon tea, and eats bread slices with peanut butter. In *Ashes of Incense: The Second Incense*, Mrs. Michelle entertained the wedding guests with sparkling champagne glasses and sandwiches covered in Irish linen. In *Ashes of Incense: The First Incense*, Mrs. Liang cut cold cow tongue is impressive. After Mrs. Liang used Weilong as bait to attract Lu Zhaolin at a garden meeting, the aunt and the nephew had dinner together. "Mrs. Liang cut the knife into the cold tongue, just smiled at the tongue [7]." Mrs. Liang smiled and cut the cow's tongue, implying that Weilong could not have any complaints, reflecting Mrs. Liang's arbitrary and cold. In *How Much Hate*, Xia Zongyu praises the pot of soup rice cake cooked by Yu Jiayin: "There was a pot of something cooking on the oil stove. Zong Yu smelt it in the air and said, 'It smells so good! 'Jia Yin had to laugh and said, "Do you want to try something, but it's not really tasty [7]." Seemingly talking about food, in fact, is just a hint of the character's emotional expression. The food in Eileen Chang's works not only becomes a code word for characters or plot progression in some details, but also shows readers the life scenes of that era.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Shanghai was synonymous with prosperity and modernity. Cafes, cinemas and dance halls

could be seen everywhere on the streets of Shanghai. At that time, dancing and watching movies had become the most fashionable entertainment enjoyment for Shanghai citizens, and movie theaters and dance halls became the most eye-catching scenery line in Shanghai Beach. Scenes such as dance parties often appear in Eileen Chang's works. For example, in *Love in a Fallen City*, a dance party creates a dramatic love story between Bai Liusu and Fan Liuyuan. The reason why Bai Liusu can attract the attention of Fan Liuyuan is because she can dance. The connection between Chuan Chang and Zhang Yunfan in *Flower Withered* is also due to dancing. The dance party was an important scene to promote the plot, which reflected that dancing was an indispensable social activity for urbanites at the time.

2.2 The Relationship between Men and Women in the City

Most of Eileen Chang's works are based on family life, love and marriage between men and women, and focus on the emotional stories of ordinary people in daily life. For example, *Half Life Fate* revolves around the decades long joys and sorrows of white-collar workers Gu Manzhen and Shen Shijun in Shanghai during the 1930s, telling the tragic love story of urban youth such as Gu Manzhen, Shen Shijun, Xu Shuhui, Shi Cuizhi, and other women in turbulent times; *Blockade* is about an encounter between a strange man and woman, Lv Zongzhen and Wu Cuiyuan, in a tram that has been suddenly turned into isolation by a blockade. *The Red Rose and the White Rose* tells the story of Tong Zhenbao's emotional entanglements with two women. Mistress "Red Rose" Jiaorui, and wife "White Rose" Yanli, both poured a lot of emotions into Zhenbao, compromising humbly in their relationship. Zhenbao loved himself more than others, and ultimately had disappointed the two ladies. The three of them were imprisoned for love and had an unhappy ending. The novel vividly presents the emotional life and marital status of people during the period of transition from old to new, reflecting the marriage and love views of urban men and women at that time. The novel *Love in a Fallen City* depicts the marriage game between Bai Liusu, a divorced young lady from a declining wealthy family, and Fan Liuyuan, a playboy, using her remaining youth as a bet. For Bai Liusu, marrying Fan Liuyuan not only ended her embarrassing situation in her family, but also ensured her stable and rich life throughout her life. Therefore, she tried her best to attract Fan Liuyuan, in order to lure him into the hall of marriage with her. However, Fan Liuyuan was a playboy who longed for Bai Liusu but did not want to marry her. This is exactly what the wealthy lady Bai Liusu finds dif-

ficult to accept. So two selfish people are attracted to each other, while also suspecting, guarding, and calculating against each other. It seems difficult for such a relationship to have a good outcome. However, a sudden war has changed the emotional concept of the two. In the cruel war, the two people who relied on each other for survival finally reached an understanding and became an ordinary couple. In Eileen Chang's works, the love stories between men and women are not as sweet and romantic as in other romance novels, but rather filled with suspicion and calculation. As the saying goes, "The desire for food and love is part of human nature." The love in Eileen Chang's works is just a part of the secular life of the characters, and it is people's instinctive life needs, so it will not be so pure, but more real and cruel. "Eileen Chang observed people and things in daily life at the essential level, and what she reflected in her novels was not only the people and things of her time, but also the shadows of people and things across the eras [8]." In the exquisite daily life depicted by Eileen Chang, behind her carefully arranged and convoluted plot, readers can always see the cruel nature of marriage and love, and discover the coldness, selfishness, and greed of human nature.

3. Urban Culture Integrating Tradition and Modernity

3.1 Urban Landscape Blended with Tradition and Modernity

The city depicted by Eileen Chang embodies a mixture of tradition and modernity everywhere. On the one hand, there are western-style houses, dance halls, cafes, cinemas, cheongsam and western-style dresses, as well as very modern facilities such as telephones, gramophones, and trolleybuses. On the other hand, they are typical old style objects such as alleys, charcoal pots, and screens in old Shanghai. This combination of Chinese and Western styles, ancient and modern, can be seen everywhere in Eileen Chang's works.

The mansion of Mrs. Liang in *Ashes of Incense - The First Incense* is a blend of Chinese and Western styles. It is a relic of early Southern American architecture. The corridor is surrounded by a three-dimensional western layout. But the interior furnishings are Chinese snuff bottles and ivory Guanyin. "That towering white house, covered with green glazed tiles, looks a bit like an ancient imperial tomb [7]." The garden is planted with Chinese and Western flowers, and in the distance are the dark blue sea and white boats, "All kinds of incongruous local backgrounds and the atmosphere of times are forcibly mixed together

to create a magical realm [7].” This blend of Chinese and western styles is also a unique mark of that era.

In *The Golden Lock Story*, before going on a blind date, Chang’an first “went to a hair salon and used pliers to perm her hair, with small hair rings densely attached from her forehead to temples. She wore a two-inch long glass jade pagoda pendant on her ears, and changed into an apple green georgette cheongsam with a high collar, ruffled sleeves, and a semi-western pleated skirt below her waist [6].” Perm hair and ruffled sleeves are a clear western-style design, while glass turquoise pagoda pendants are typical traditional Chinese earrings. Cheongsam paired with a pleated skirt is a concrete manifestation of westernization. In *The Joy of Honglun*, Yuqing wore a white formal dress during her wedding ceremony and then changed into a rose-red cheongsam after the ceremony, which is full of a combination of Chinese and western styles, showcasing the urban wedding customs of China at that time.

The necessities of life in Eileen Chang’s works reflect the collision and integration of Chinese and western cultures, depicting a life scene of an international metropolis under the impact of western modern civilization, and reflecting the transformation of Chinese society from tradition to modernity at that time. The reason why Eileen Chang’s works exhibit such characteristics cannot be separated from the influence of the social environment at that time. The era in which Eileen Chang lived was a period of transition between the old and the new. At that time, Shanghai was rooted in traditional Chinese culture and absorbed some Western cultural factors, forming a unique cultural style that was inclusive. Diversification and openness have become the most typical characteristics of Shanghai. Eileen Chang grew up in Shanghai, and naturally reflects this unique cultural heritage in her works.

3.2 Collision of Old and New Ideas

The transformation from tradition to modernity is not only reflected on the material level, but also on the ideological level. After the May Fourth Movement, advanced Western ideas influenced more and more young people, and there was a fierce collision between traditional and emerging ideas. Eileen Chang shows the conflict and iteration of old and new ideas in her works. From her novels, one can experience “the transformation of the urban class and the awakening of female consciousness under the influence of the ideas of individual liberation, freedom, and equality; one can also clearly and vaguely see the driving force of desire on people and their indulgence in desire in the city [9].”

The female protagonist Bai Liusu in *Love in a Fallen*

City, as the daughter of an aristocratic family, follows her parents’ arrangement to get married and appears to be a typical traditional woman. However, after suffering domestic violence from her husband and facing an unhappy marriage, she did not choose silence and patience like most women at that time. Instead, she bravely walked out of this besieged city and used legal means to defend her interests, demonstrating her resistance to traditional feudal thinking and pursuit of independence. In *Half Life Fate*, Gu Manzhen is a rare independent woman who is strong and uncompromising. After graduation, she consciously took on the livelihood of the family, tirelessly working several jobs at the same time. Even in the face of misfortune, she never bowed down and fought against fate with all her strength, independent and strong. “Gu Manzhen embodies contemporary women’s sense of independence and their struggle against traditional constraints [10].”

From these characters, readers can see that in the social environment of the transition from old to new, the independent consciousness of urban women is beginning to awaken, presenting the image of modern new women. This also reflects the changes in the ideological concepts of the whole society at that time, and the ideas of young people are more and more progressive.

4. The Living Dilemma of Urbanites

4.1 The Expansion and Distortion of Material Desires

With the evolution of modern civilization, capitalist culture first stimulated and awakened the senses of the city, arousing people’s desires for material and money. In a materialistic society, only money is the symbol of happiness. Everyone calculates, suspects, and even hates in order to protect their own pitiful interests, even the closest family members exhibit selfish, indifferent, and even cold condition driven by money. Many people have caused painful tragedies in pursuit of wealth and money. Through her works, Eileen Chang reveals the distortion and alienation of human nature caused by expanding material desire.

In *Ashes of Incense: The First Incense*, the female student Ge Weilong goes to her aunt Mrs. Liang for shelter, but Mrs. Liang only regards her own niece as an investment tool. “She looked at the utilitarian value of Ge Weilong like she was looking at a commodity. She gradually led her niece into a trap for money, and finally used Ge Weilong’s love for Qiao Qiqiao to tie her to make money for her [11].” The temptation of unearned income and the parasitic survival make Weilong gradually sink, and eventually fall sober.

In *The Golden Lock Story*, Cao Qiqiao almost sacrificed

her entire life of happiness for money. Cao Qiqiao was discriminated against by her husband's family because of her humble background, and her marriage was very unfortunate. Her only hope is to successfully obtain the property of the Jiang family in the future, and only money can make up for the damage she has suffered. In order to keep the money, she was anxious all day, with a very strong vigilance, always suspected that others were greedy for her money. In order to preserve her wealth, she was willing to directly destroy her daughter's happiness. "For thirty years, she has been wearing the shackles of gold. She used those heavy shackles to kill several people, and those who did not die also lost half of their lives [6]." Cao Qiqiao became a complete slave to money, gradually transforming from a victim to a perpetrator. Eileen Chang reveals how material desire distorts and alienates human nature so that people fight each other.

4.2 Apathetic Human Nature

With the alienation of money from people, interpersonal relations are becoming more and more distorted, and the whole society is becoming more and more indifferent. Eileen Chang deeply analyzes the numbness, indifference and selfishness of modern urbanites, and reveals the survival predicament of urbanites. For example, *Flower Withered* tells the story of a young girl named Zheng Chuanchang who, in a seemingly ostentatious but actually chaotic and selfish big family, experiences her dream shattered and ultimately withers at a flower like age. Parents never care about Zheng Chuan Chang, selfish and indifferent family is the cause of Zheng Chuan Chang's tragic fate. The symbolism of *Blockade* is obvious. On the surface, it refers to the blockade of the city during the war, but in fact, it symbolizes the blockade and barrier between people's inner worlds.

The opening paragraph of the *Blockade* reads: "Under the sun, the tram track is like two earthworms coming out of the water, lengthening and shortening... Never finished, never finished... The tram driver kept his eyes fixed on the creeping tracks, but he did not go mad [12]." "Here, trams reflect the fast-paced life of the city. Like trams, they mechanically repeat the boring life according to the trend of the times [13]." The most significant is the ending of the novel: "A black shell worm crawled halfway from one end of the room to the other... Zong Zhen turned out the light and pressed his hand on the machine. His palms were sweating and his body was dripping with sweat, like a small worm crawling. He turned on the light again, and the black shell worm disappeared and crept back into the case [12]." The ending is reminiscent of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, "Black shell worm" means that people lock

up their hearts and return to their own sets to stay, which is the portrayal of modern people's living conditions. The pace of life is getting faster and faster, and people are repeating the boring life mechanically along with the trend of the times, which is becoming more and more empty and numb. The fast pace and high pressure of the city bring people confusion, anxiety and helplessness.

5. Conclusion

Eileen Chang's writing on the city is very comprehensive and detailed. She shows the mixed urban life of tradition and modernity in the 1930s and 1940s, revealing the survival dilemma of urban people. Through her keen observation and delicate depiction of urban life, she reveals the various forms of living beings in the metropolis. The fast-paced, high-pressure life and the rampant desire lead to the distortion and alienation of human nature, and bring people confusion, anxiety and helplessness. Eileen Chang's works reflect the changes of the times and the transformation of Chinese society from tradition to modernity at that time. This kind of thinking about the survival difficulties of urban people still has reference significance today.

Eileen Chang's novels inherit the daily narrative tradition in classical Chinese literature, inspire the expression techniques and modern artistic spirit of modern literature. With her own artistic practice, Eileen Chang's novels broaden the expression field of modern Chinese novels, integrate her preference and love for urban culture into her works, and incorporate the daily life of citizens into the literary field. Through her meticulous depiction of daily life, she left the memory of urban life of an era, improved, enriched and strengthened the expressive force of the novel, and her aesthetic style based on daily narrative has become one of her important contributions to Chinese fiction.

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