



An Analysis of the Construction of Shanghai's Urban Consumer Public Sphere in the Works of Eileen Chang

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Abstract. Throughout the history of Modern Chinese Literature, Eileen Chang is a prominent female. In the 1940s, she observed the cultural form of Shanghai as an urban woman, depicting the daily life and humanity during the city's prosperity and desolation. Shanghai's urban culture provides a constant source of nourishment for Eileen Chang's novels, and Eileen Chang also uses her unique aesthetic perspective to interpret Shanghai. This article takes a text analysis approach from the field of Shanghai's urban public space to analyze the impact of Shanghai's urbanization development on Eileen Chang's own conceptions, selecting cinemas, dance halls, and other consumer places as research objects. It investigates the urban life of Shanghai depicted by Eileen Chang, which both shapes the city's spatial culture and represents the symbols of consumption in literary creation. Chang's literary also works embody a quality different from those of enemy-occupied areas.

Keywords: Eileen Chang · City Literature · Public Sphere · Consumerism

1 Introduction

Shanghai was the earliest “modern city” in China. Since its opening to foreign trade in the late Qing Dynasty, Western civilization was introduced to Shanghai and penetrates traditional lifestyles and ideologies. Shanghai appeared as a major object in many authors' literary works. For instance, Mao Dun uses a realistic tone to provide a holistic sketch of urban Shanghai with specific attention to politics and class society; Neo-sensualism, represented by Mu Shiying, focused on the glamour of the city, exaggerating the consumerization of urban space and emphasizing the materialistic desires and revelry of the city's inhabitants. Nevertheless, Eileen Chang moved beyond the restrictions of “the New Sensation School” and depicts the joys and sorrows of Shanghai citizens, and restores their urban living conditions as realistically as possible.

The process of urbanization and the writer's personal experience of the city are two reasons influencing the depiction of public spheres in their work. In the 1940s, the urban sphere in literature gradually shifted from that of the Neo-Sensibility School's “high-rise buildings” and “street scenery” to the closed private space of “apartments”

and “public houses” described by Chang Eileen. Her works transcend the meaning of mere consumption and reveal the desolation of people’s hearts under the appearance of urban prosperity. Meanwhile, unlike the early Shanghai literature and Neo-sensualism, which regarded Shanghai as the “Shanghai of the world” rather than the “Shanghai of China,” the Shanghai of Eileen Chang is a mixture of Chinese and Western cultures. She emphasizes Shanghai as a Chinese city rather than a mere Western imagination. Since the 1990s, foreign spatial theories have been introduced into China, and local spatial research has made significant progress in many fields of social science. However, the current literature does not cover the spatial imagery in her works comprehensively. They focus on spaces such as public houses and apartments, ignoring other spaces.

This article takes spatial imagery as the starting point to analyze the consumer public sphere in Eileen Chang’s classic works as a typical representative of urban life and analyzes the inner activities of the main character in such public space.

2 Eileen Chang’s “Modern” Shanghai

2.1 Eileen Chang and Shanghai’s Urban Life

Although some of these works were written in the “twin cities” of Shanghai and Hong Kong, and Chang Eiling herself moved across the ocean in her later years, her identity can be argued as a Shanghai female writer. In her prose *Shanghaiense, After All*, she wrote: “I wrote a Hong Kong saga for Shanghaiense..... I tried to look at Hong Kong from a Shanghaiense point of view” [1]. Therefore, although the story does not take place in Shanghai, the reader can still discover the strong elements of Shanghai culture.

Born and raised in Shanghai, Eileen Chang had a keen sense and observation of urban life, and Shanghai was the space and object of her writing, which provided the prototype and material for her works. Unlike other writers of her time, who focused on the grand theme of nation and state in turbulent times, highlighting the national consciousness and revolutionary spirit, but focused on emotional entanglement in the chaotic world, integrating life perception into the exploration of the hearts of small people in the city.

2.2 The Emergence of the Public Sphere and the Development of Consumerism

In her book *The Chinese Way of Life: From Tradition to Modernity*, Li Changli introduced the concept of the “public sphere of life” to explain the social transformation and lifestyle changes in China since modern times [2]. As the small-peasant economy gradually broke down and the family could not satisfy the needs of the “individual,” industry and commerce grew rapidly, and the city in the modern sense gradually developed, the “individual” moved away from the “private sphere of life” to the “public sphere of life”. In *Modernity and Urban Culture Theory*, Bao Yaming also defines “urban public sphere” and “private sphere”. He argues that in addition to the difference between public space and private space in terms of whether they are open or enclosed, there is also an important psychological difference - people enjoy more privacy when they are in private space [3].

In the 1830s, Shanghai became the cosmopolitan city in China most in tandem with the world, and the American scholar Lucien White once said, “Between the two world

wars, Shanghai was the most prosperous cosmopolitan city in Asia" [4]. With the modernization in Shanghai, consumerism gradually prevailed, promoting the emergence of leisure and entertainment, the construction of cinemas, dance halls, and other urban buildings not only added to Shanghai's urban functions but also greatly satisfied people's desire for spiritual enjoyment and self-satisfaction. Mao Dun once summarized it highly as "Dance halls, department stores, coffee shops.....Shanghai got its way of entertainment" [5].

Whether, in fiction or real life, Chang Eiling's love of modern life can be traced back to every aspect of Shanghai's material culture. Her protagonists emerge from semi-public spaces in the alleyways and enter the public sphere. Through material consumption, we can discover the significance of Shanghai's modernity as a "cosmopolitan city".

3 Consumer Public Space and Its Cultural Implications

3.1 Cinema: Imagination and Reality

In the late 1930s, cinema became a new entertainment venue in the bustling city, and watching movies was a fashionable form of leisure. Cinema was an important place of cultural entertainment and relaxation for Shanghai people. Eileen Chang herself was also a movie lover, writing many movie reviews and even screenplays.

Chang's novel *How Much Hate* was adapted from her movie *Unending Love*. It tells the story of Yu Jiayin, a young schoolteacher, and Xia Zongyu, a wealthy businessman, who develop feelings for each other but are unable to get together because of traditional marriage restrictions. "How Much Hate" begins by writing: "The modern movie hall is supposed to be the cheapest palace, all glass, velvet, imitating the great structure of lunar stone, this one, once you enter the door underground is milky yellow..... Movie has been on for a long time, through the hall is empty, cold, it becomes a palace resentment scene, distantly heard the xiao drums of other halls." Li Oufan points out that this wonderful description is just like a movie scene - it becomes a clever self-reference in the novel's narrative. [6] In the novel, from the depiction of the opulent appearance of modern cinema to the empty scenes in the hall, it is always accompanied by the changing emotions of the protagonists. With the help of cinema imagery, Chang Eiling creates a pale and empty life, a depressing and lonely reality.

The cinema here also appears as a bleak and obscure image in Chang's book *Fated for Half a Lifetime*. Shi Jun invites Uncle Hui out for a movie. Watching a movie at midnight on New Year's Eve is inevitable "a little bleak amid the bustle", and the cinema here also appears as a bleak image.

In "Faded Flowers", Cheng Chuansheung is a woman with lung disease, the neglected one in her family, and because there is no hope for her to be cured, her parents no longer give her money to cure her disease, and they even have a plan to get some benefits from her marriage. In her short 21 years of life, she has not been truly loved and is always waiting for death. The novel opens and closes with a scene of theater, and the story begins and ends in the imagination of the movie. The last trip of Chuansheung's life is to the cinema. For two hours in the cinema, she escapes from reality in the movie, and the frames of the movie make her forget her pain for a short time as if the life of the movie is her life. However, the lively surface cannot hide the indifference of human nature,

the ineradicable desolation, and sorrow, the flower can only wither alone. As a place of entertainment where dreams and reality collide, where light and shadow communicate, the cinema is supposed to be full of liveliness. But in Chang's novels, the cinema as a kind of social space imagery is obscure, lonely, and desolate, bringing people a sense of distance. In Chang Eileen's writing, the cinema is the place where all dreams begin and the place where dreams are most unlikely to come true.

In addition to the loneliness and despair of life reflected on the movie screen, the cinema itself, as a new type of place introduced by Western civilization, also has the role of enlightening the public and shaping new ideas.

3.2 Dance Hall: Indulgence and Interest

In Shanghai Modern, Li Oufan argues that from the 1930s, the dance hall became famous, or rather discredited as a marker of Shanghai's urban environment. . . . It initiated another literary tradition of women's presence in public. The dance hall, as a public entertainment space and social venue with modern connotations, where young men and women openly socialized and sought companionship, was also a tragic place for some women to fall into the dust.

In "Love in a Fallen City," Fan Liuyuan's first contact with Bai Liusu is a blind date with Bai Liusu's sister, who invites the entire Bai family to a dance hall. Fan Liuyuan was attracted by Bai Liusu's unique oriental beauty and invited her to dance three times. The second time they danced was at the Hong Kong Hotel, where Bai Liu and Fan Liuyuan danced while testing each other and talking about marriage and women. "As a typical traditional Chinese woman who learned to dance after her last "failed marriage", Liu was able to appear in modern, Westernized places of socializing such as dance halls without constraint. The "dancing" makes Bai Liu, a traditional woman, more or less tainted with "modernity" and adds a unique charm to her. It not only satisfies the imagination of Fan Liuyuan, a "Chinese foreigner" to the traditional Chinese women but also allows Bai Liusu to get out of the White House and escape the confinement of the traditional family. The significance of the ballroom as a place to indulge in sex fades, and as a metaphor for modernity, it becomes more of a way for men and women to meet, fall in love, and eventually enter into marriage.

Furthermore, the dance hall also implies the meaning of deals, interests, and indulgence. In Chang's novel *The First Hearth*, Ge Weilong was originally a student who came to Hong Kong to study but defected to her aunt Mrs. Leung because of the war and financial reasons. To win her over, Mrs. Leung prepares a closet of fancy clothes for her and takes her to social gatherings, hosting many balls, dinners, and concerts at the Leung Mansion. Ge Wei Long eventually loses herself in the exquisite life and gives up her studies to become a socialite like her aunt. Unlike the dancers who are forced to fall into the dust, Ge Wei Long willingly chooses to become her aunt's social tool and a tool for men to make money for Jorge and to find a new girl to replace herself. The dance hall, as the place where Ge Weilong sinks from passive engagement to active strategy, embodies the bleakness of Eileen Chang's style.

The image of dancers in Eileen Chang's novel is different from the erotic dancers portrayed by writers of Neo-sensualism as she writes about the sadness and desolation of the life behind the dancers who have no choice. In *Fated For Half a Lifetime*, Gu Manlu

is forced to be a dancer for her family's livelihood, selling her body to bear the pressure of her family, while her family finds it disgraceful. This "betrayal" makes Gu Manlu gradually become a woman full of hostility, and when she "married" Zhu Hongcai, her life is still far from satisfactory, and falls into the difficulty of marriage. Gu Manlu and her husband jointly planned to have a child through her sister, Gu Manzhen's belly, which pushed Manzhen into tragedy. When confronted with the criticism of her family, Manlu responds with her sacrifice as a dancer: "If I were such an honored woman like you back then, all of you would be starving!" The imagery of the dance hall deepens the tragic meaning of the character Manlu.

3.3 Coffee House: Modernity and Daily Life

Coffee is closely related to Western food culture, which was introduced to Shanghai after the opening of the city and influenced the eating habits and social style of the Chinese. In addition to the entertainment and commerciality of a consumer place, Shanghai cafes, as a recreational public sphere, also displays elegance and literariness. Cafes and authors are mutually attracted to each other. Meanwhile, as a cultural symbol, the depiction of coffee houses to some extent expresses the spirituality of the authors.

In Chang Eileen's works, coffee is undoubtedly a symbol of Western culture and modern life. In Chang Eileen's short story "When I was young", Pan Ruliang is not used to the traditional city life of his fathers and is full of fantasies about the romantic life of the West. He believes that if he is less busy and if he has more coffee, he would be able to write moving articles. "His belief in coffee is not so much because of its aroma, but because of the intricately constructed, scientific silver pot with its shiny glass lid." Coffee at this time, like China, represents Pan Ruliang's romantic fantasy of the Western world.

As a consumer place, the café tends to entertain and is associated with urban life. In the short novel "The Glazed Tile, Qu Qu, who has an open personality and pursues the freedom of marriage, casually sits on the dance floor of the café" when she and Wang Junye are in love. She is often seen shaking hands with Wang Junye in the cafe for hours. Wang Jiazhi, the highly educated college girl in the story "The Ring", also choose the cafe as the location for her date with Mr. Yi.

Eileen Chang herself also liked cafes. In "Double Voices", Chang once said that no matter what she and her friends did when they went out. The final destination was usually a café, reflecting the casual urban daily life: "In a café, each person would have a piece of cream cake and an additional cream; a cup of hot chocolate with cream and additional cream. Hot chocolate with cream, another cream. The romantic atmosphere of Shanghai's urban cafes and the casual tone of Eileen Chang's own life were vividly portrayed.

4 Conclusions

This article combines the theories of consumerism and the public sphere, examining three typical venues: cinema, dance hall, and coffee house. These venues not only bear the marks of Western civilization but also are linked to ancient memories. The characters

in Eileen Chang's works wander between Chinese tradition and Western modernity. Therefore, Shanghai carries a heavy historical quality.

As outlined by Zhao Yuan: "Change Eileen's novel collection *The Legend* is a window into the urban society of Shanghai and Hong Kong, especially the Yang Chang Society. It has western modern civilization' nourishing and winging over the oldest and most feudal way of life and culture....." [7]. The article describes that in consumer public space, Eileen Chang's characters do not indulge in extravagance, but demonstrate different scenes of human existence in urban life. Through her narrative of the "legend" of Shanghai, we can discover the contrast between modernity and tradition in the city, the contradictions in a time of change, and the unique urban culture and civic temperament of Shanghai.

Authors' Contributions. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript. Deng Xihan carried out research on Eileen Chang's life and collected literature. Gang Yirou analyzed the depiction of public sphere and consumer place. Both authors devised the coding and classifying system of literature, and commented on the final manuscript.

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