



Eileen Chang's Polyphonic Narrative in *The Little Reunion*

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Abstract. As Eileen Chang's most summarising and generalising novel, *The Little Reunion* is a re-creation of her previous autobiographical works, but compared with her previous works, the narrator's narration of similar events in *The Little Reunion* is diametrically opposed; at the same time, within the text, there is a contradiction between the narrator's voice and the characters' voices, which is a manifestation of the narrative polyphony of the work. In this paper, the author will compare and analyse the differences between *The Fall of the Pagoda* and *The Little Reunion* and conduct a detailed textual analysis of *The Little Reunion* to elaborate on the polyphonic narrative features of the text. Moreover, on this basis, this paper explains the reason for the great divergence in the research results of *The Little Reunion* about the characters' relationship, i.e., being blinded by the characters' seemingly single emotion and unable to comprehensively explain the limitations of the emergence of double emotions in the narrative.

Keywords: Eileen Chang; *The Little Reunion*; Polyphonic Narrative; *The Fall of the Pagoda*.

1 Introduction

Since the 1940s, scholars have never stopped studying Zhang Eileen's works. Among them, *The Little Reunion*, as Zhang Eileen's last work, was published after two other autobiographical novels of a similar nature, *The Fall of the Pagoda* and *The Book of Changes*, which recounted the life of the autobiographical character Sheng Jiu-Li before the age of thirty, and was a continuation and re-creation of the first two works.

The Little Reunion, unlike *The Fall of the Pagoda*, has a critical attitude, suppressed emotions, and more psychological descriptions, weakened her resentment towards her father and his extended family, and wrote more about her mother's wounds, and even completely modified the original emotional attitude in some places [1], which is very different from the previous narration with a purpose, and makes the text of *The Little Reunion* present a strong ambivalence.

It also makes the research results of *The Little Reunion* show more prominent "differences" than Zhang's other works, especially the analysis of the characters' relationship in the book—for example, the understanding of the mother-daughter relationship shows two extreme trends: "alienated hatred" and "extreme oedipalism" [2, 3]. In

particular, the analysis of the relationship between the characters in the book, such as the understanding of the relationship between mother and daughter, shows the trend of "alienated hatred" and "extreme oedipalism" [2, 3]. However, this kind of contradiction is not absolute opposition but can be explained by Bakhtin Michael's theory of polyphony, i.e., the narrator's "voice" clashes with the characters' "voices" [4]. That is to say, the author Eileen Chang's own wishes are in conflict with the behaviour and psychology of the novel's character, Sheng Julie. This conflict is the reason why scholars' analyses of *The Little Reunion* are so different and also the reason for the contradictions in the characters' behaviour and psychology in Eileen Chang's text.

Moreover, the current research focuses on showing the polyphony of Zhang Eiling's earlier works, i.e., *Sealed Off*, and *The Golden Cangue* [5], or focuses on the polyphony of the politics of Zhang Eiling's novels [6]. The narrative research of Zhang Eiling's autobiographical trilogy, *The Fall of Pagoda*, *The Book of Change*, and *The Little Reunion*, is more often seen as a fragmentary study of the repetitive rewritings of the narratives of the trilogy with the flashbacks of memories [7] as well as their narrative similarities, or be thought as a confusion of narrative perspectives drawn by comparing the arbitrary third-person choice of the late narrative perspective with the multiple shifts in narrative perspective of the early period [8], rather than a complete study and report on the specificity of the narrative of *The Little Reunion*. If the narrative analysis of *The Little Reunion* is concerned, the current research shows a lack of systematic summarisation, and a focus on the memory itself, rather than digging into the deeper meaning of the memory through the messy choice of content and the complicated emotional orientation behind it.

This paper will compare the similar plots of *The Fall of the Pagoda* and *The Little Reunion* to analyse the real emotion of Sheng Julie, the author's "spokesperson" in *The Little Reunion*, and compare the narrator's voice and the characters' voices in *The Little Reunion* with the way of textual close reading, so as to further elaborate the polyphony of Eileen Chang's *The Little Reunion*, and with a neutral attitude, to explore the deep meaning behind Zhang Eileen's *The Little Reunion* through its messy content selection and complicated emotional orientation. In order to further elaborate the polyphony of Zhang Eileen's *The Little Reunion*, we will explore the deeper writing habits behind Zhang Eileen's mixed emotions of love and hate with a neutral attitude.

2 Compare and analyse *The Little Reunion* and *The Fall of the Pagoda*

In contrast to *The Fall of the Pagoda*, which recalls and analyses the past for the first time, *The Little Reunion* results from the author's many recollections of his own past [9, 10]. In *The Little Reunion*, by rejecting the initial emotions and the plot closest to the initial facts of life, the narrator aims to create an image of an individual who is indifferent because of the bleakness of the world, i.e., Julie. However, this is precisely the uniqueness of *The Little Reunion*, which is the author's third attempt to write about his own life - even similar plots and similar autobiographical characters produce completely different emotions because of the "narrator's" repression and control and the

contrast between the two sides of the story is not only a unique one, it is also a unique one, as the author has written about his own life for the third time. The contrast between the different discourses of the similar characters better reflects the specificity of the narrative of *The Little Reunion*, i.e. the polyphony of the narrative due to the conflict with the original facts.

Firstly, there is a difference in the length of psychological descriptions of the main characters. Unlike *The Little Reunion*, which has a lot of psychological descriptions of Julie and her personal thoughts, *The Fall of the Pagoda* does not have a lot of straightforward psychological descriptions of its counterpart, Pipa. For example, both *The Little Reunion* and *The Fall of the Pagoda* mention the mother's comment that her daughter's strength is her "round head", but *The Fall of the Pagoda* does not mention the specific psychology of the character "Pipa". On the other hand, *The Little Reunion* repeatedly emphasises Julie's psychological dynamics - as her mother keeps changing her answer to the question "which is better?", her psychological changes from renewed hope to repeated disappointment are exceptionally subtle. This narrative is purposeful and is reflected in the emotional choices that follow, i.e., both *The Fall of the Pagoda* and *The Little Reunion* recount in the same chapter the episode of crossing the road holding hands with her mother, but the emotions are completely opposite.

"The round head 'I' has" and "Cross the road with mum", two things in *The Fall of the Pagoda*, are also interspersed with detailed wonderful gossip stories, happy shopping experiences, the length of far more than the joy of holding hands across the road, seemingly insignificant, but warm and intimate. *The Little Reunion*, on the other hand, passes over the so-called boring shopping experience and instead immediately describes in detail Julie's thoughts: not realising that her mother's fingers were so thin and feeling her mother's momentary inner struggle. This is all summarised as the mother "feeling sick too". This plotting and choice of mood in *The Little Reunion* clearly shows the pathological estrangement between mother and daughter.

Similarly, in the incident where she is asked whether she prefers her mother or her mother's girlfriend, "Pipa" in *The Fall of the Pagoda* does not feel any obvious emotional change after both sides hear her answer. She has no psychological description but simply states why she prefers her aunt Coral: her mother is beautiful and popular, so she does not lack likes, and her mother likes Coral, so she has to prefer her aunt Coral, she has to like her aunt Coral more to achieve her aim of pleasing both of them. In *The Little Reunion*, however, Julie's mother, "Rachel," is clearly "unhappy," and before and after this development, the narrator describes in detail Julie's psychological dynamics that led her to make this choice, which stems from the reflection of whether she likes her sister Chun or her sister Yum, and combines it with the consideration of her mother's special relationship with her aunt to reach a conclusion that is careful, and which still makes the mother she treated so well angry—the mother who treated herself so angrily. Therefore, the mother could not understand the child's "good intentions" explanation, and the child's anger was "evil".

Secondly, there is a difference between the two psychological descriptions. In the writing of "The Fall of the Pagoda", the narrator expresses Pipa's psychology, which is a kind of invisible technique, i.e., naturally and without any hints are mixed in the narration, and the narration of the fine plot is far more than the delicate and complicated

psychological description. However, the psychological performance of "The Little Reunion" is complex and obvious and is the narrator's deliberate "obviousness". The narrator often introduces what kind of attitude and what kind of thoughts Julie should show at this moment through "Julie thought" and after a large number of sentences, which obviously implies that the main character, i.e. Julie, should be psychologically depicted next, it is often the embodiment of the work's polyphonic narration, that is to say, the beginning of the contradictory conflict between the character and the narrator. The impact of this narrative style on the development of the text can also be seen in the comparison of similar works and the analysis of the next close reading of the text.

However, in fact, the character Julie, who is under the control of the narrator, does not want her mother to be angry, nor does she want her mother to feel disgusted by "holding hands with her", nor does she want her mother to be an "evil person". In *The Little Reunion*, the narrator intentionally sets up the plot so that Julie makes a fool out of herself. Everything is done with a certain purpose to show the thinness and abnormality of the relationship between mother and daughter or to accuse her mother, which in itself goes against the expectation of Julie, her own incarnation. As a result, it is not surprising that Julie suddenly reveals her true feelings with an inward-focused perspective instead of describing everything indifferently with an outward-focused perspective, and this part of the heresy forms a polyphony together with the main tone of the book, "Judging the Mother"[11].

3 Mother-daughter Relationship in *The Little Reunion*

Take the narrative polyphony of the mother-daughter relationship as an example. For the narrator, she desperately wants to portray the indifference between mother and daughter. Whether she is accusing an "irresponsible" new mother or portraying an "indifferent" daughter who tries her best to break away from her mother's control but is still helplessly affected, the author wants to highlight the thinness of emotions under the cool state of affairs. However, for the character "Sheng Julie", it seems that she can never let go of her attachment to her mother, and if anything, she displays a resentment that grows from love to hate.

In the context of the narrative sequence leading up to Rachel's final letter on her deathbed, the narrator introduces numerous fragmented events. Rachel's primary objective is to repay the money owed to her mother, with the intention of severing their relationship entirely. However, she cries and refuses and "should feel confused". Nevertheless, "she searched as hard as she could, and still felt nothing at all"; not only did her mother misunderstand her about paying back the money, but she also thought that she was confused about her sexual relationship, so Julie angrily thinks "she's completely misunderstood"; similarly, not only did her mother misunderstand Julie's behaviour, but she also Similarly, the mother not only misunderstands Julie's behaviour, but also conceives in her mind a non-existent rivalry, i.e., the mother watches a film about a mother-daughter rivalry, and even substitutes herself and her in the film. The narrator uses these three events to show the estrangement of the relationship between the two of them, and then, as a matter of course, they lead to her refusal to go to see her mother

for the last time, i.e., the indifference to state the fact of the matter with three words, "She didn't go".

By all accounts, the narrative is perfect at this point, and the coldness of the relationship between the two of them has already jumped off the page, only to have a sudden narrative starting point of "On the occasions when mother and daughter were together". Many researchers have argued that "maternal alienation" in *The Little Reunion* would analyse the narrative after this point as Julie's complaints or simply skim over them - but this arbitrary viewpoint fails to explain Rachel's heartache when she cuts her daughter's blisters and fails to explain Julie's warmth and tenderness in the three events. Three distinct events, each reminiscent of heartwarming memories, serve as confessions: she never had the chance to bid her final farewell to her mother, and even in the chilliest of circumstances, she couldn't find the words to explain why she failed to repay her mother the money or present her with the roses she had promised. Moreover, these instances also serve as prime illustrations of Julie's maternal devotion. However, suppose people only focus on these few warm deeds. In that case, it is impossible to explain the specific "aversive" modification of her memories of her mother above, and it is also impossible to explain Julie's repeated complaints about the painful experience of being with her mother. If it is "love but not love", then it does not explain Rachel's obvious rejection of Julie's daughter when she shows her few moments of deep affection for her. The inability to analyse the two emotions together is the reason for the great divergence in their findings and reveals certain limitations. However, the narrative after "the time when they were together" can be regarded as Julie's inner monologue, while the three events before it are all about another person directing and arranging the movement between them from a higher perspective, which is full of uncertainty. Words such as "it sounded like" and "it seemed" permeate the narrative tone of the previous three events, as well as a plethora of sentences that are clearly third-party manipulation and show Julie's psychological portrayal- "Julie's mind wondered," "Julie thought," "She said to herself," and so on, are the narrator's attempts to figure out the character's psyche: if a character needs to hate, how does she do it? If a character needs to love, how should she show it? At this point, the character's psyche is the weapon the author uses to express the demands of her narrative.

However, in the subsequent narrative, specifically after the phrase "when they were together," there are events that lack implicit psychological characterization of the characters. Instead, the narration primarily focuses on their behaviors - the "facts" witnessed by the character Julie herself. These events include her mother's remarkable packing skills, her mother's trembling hands as she tended to her blisters, and Julie's conversation with Yanshan about her perceived lack of conscience. However, the "greyness" of Yanshan's belief that he is right and the strong sense of God's perspective is hidden in any text that reflects warmth. Suddenly, the reader is put into Julie's point of view to feel the real emotional exchange between the two. At this point, perhaps it is the death of her mother that makes "Julie" suffer, and for a moment, she is free from the narrator's intentional narrative purpose. Thus, in a trance, she gives up the vilification of her past experiences and abandons the accusation and scrutiny of the original image of her own mother that she is most familiar with because of her pursuit of the ideal mother in her heart.

This narrative method is distributed in all aspects of the psychological description of the characters' conflicts. After all, when mentioning the incident of "the round head 'I' has" above, the narrator leads to the idea that Julie "should" through "Julie's mind", and that Julie "should" be "more interested in her mother, Rachel". "Angry at her mother Rachel's flippant answer: "What's not round?" Even though this line is spoken by the aunt in "The Fall of the Pagoda".

In *The Fall of the Pagoda*, Zhang Eileen also describes holding hands with her mother as a matter of "joy", but in *The Little Reunion*, it becomes disgusting and strange. It is hard not to suspect that when she created *The Little Reunion*, she forced the character, who had similar experiences, to instinctively loathe her mother. However, in the narrative, the author is unable to restrain the emotional tendency of the character, who is "her" own image, which leads to contradictions and conflicts in the relationship between the characters. This implicit narrative feature has been ignored because of the researchers' expectation or reading purpose, which means that the analysis of the characters' emotions has produced a strong divergence. By combining the two kinds of emotions, we can not only find Eileen Chang's tendency to try to objectively "judge her mother" in *The Little Reunion* but also find that compared to the other two autobiographical novels, *The Little Reunion* has a much higher degree of "mother-examination". Compared to the other two autobiographical novels, the text of *The Little Reunion* returns to the polyphonic narrative character of Eileen Chang's early writing. In addition, *The Little Reunion* combines a variety of memories that seem to be objective and true but are, in fact, completely rewritten - this is a kind of self-emotional cover-up by the "narrator", which needs to be experienced through the meticulous excavation of the text and substitution into the characters' perspectives in order to see her true emotional tendencies. The real emotional tendency can only be seen through meticulous excavation of the text and experience from the characters' perspective. This kind of suppressed emotional expression and the skilful selection and rewriting of events better demonstrate the gradual calmness and indifference of Eileen Chang's narrative attitude in her later years of writing.

4 Conclusion

Through the comparative analysis with *The Fall of the Pagoda*, this paper finds the intentional emotional orientation of *The Little Reunion* and the great influence this emotional orientation has on the narrative, i.e. the polyphony of the narrative. This paper presents the contradictions between the narrator and the characters' voices through the interpretation of the fragments of *The Little Reunion* and the summary of "explicit" and "invisible" psychological descriptions and discovers the struggle of "Julie", which can be felt by Eileen Chang. In this way, we can feel the ambivalence of Eileen Chang's choice of fragments and emotions to achieve the narrative purpose. This "contradiction" explains why researchers' analyses of Julie's psychology are so different because this is the result of the polyphony of the work.

However, again, this paper focuses on the study of polyphony in the narrative structure of the characters' relationship in *The Little Reunion* because the structure of

polyphonic narrative is the most obvious here. Thus, there is a lack of polyphonic study and comparison of the political or other aspects of *The Little Reunion*. If there is an analysis of the polyphony of the political narrative of *The Little Reunion*, it will supplement and complete the special narrative structure of *The Little Reunion*.

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