



# "Western Dreams" in Love

## ---Talking about Eileen Chang's "When I was Young" from the Perspective of Socio-historical Criticism

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**Abstract.** Eileen Chang wrote "When I Was Young" during a turbulent war period. Due to the unique circumstances of the times and her family, Chang left a lasting imprint in her works, developed archetypal characters, and expressed her inner voice through simple stories. The seemingly unremarkable tale of a meeting contains a depth that goes beyond love; beneath the surface of this tragic love affair lies the struggle for identity and cultural hegemony.

**Keywords:** Eileen Chang, Socio-historical Criticism, Cultural Hegemony, When I Was Young.

### 1 Introduction

"Literature is a constant time-reflector. Writers invariably incorporate the sound, light, and colour of the era into their works, The sound, light, and colour of the times are always present in writings, whether intentionally or inadvertently." Eileen Chang wrote "When I Was Young" during the turbulent war period. Due to the unique circumstances of the times and her family, Chang left this imprint in her works, developed archetypal characters, and expressed her inner voice through simple stories. When I Was Young is a typical literary and artistic work based on reality, with Chinese and Western characters' fates entwined and a tragic love story wrapped around it, according to socio-historical critique.

"When I Was Young" is associated with the fate of the encounter's commencement, just as the start of innumerable love stories cannot be avoided by accident. The main character Pan Ruliang "reading, is a bad temper, holds a pencil in his hand, refuses to be idle, always in the head of the book to draw a small person ..... but the pencil with paper, a curved and curved, cannot help but outline a person's face side shadow, always that a face, and always to the left." [1] The Russian heroine, the female typewriter, was sitting opposite the school headmaster's office in the student lounge when he caught an unintentional glance at her. Her side face and this little person silhouette are very similar to the contact and conversation between the two that gradually grew affection, and this transnational love in such an era of the environment is doomed to be no end! There's a recurring theme in this tale about an ordinary encounter. The question of cultural

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hegemony and identity lies beneath the surface of this love tragedy, which appears to be an average encounter narrative with a deeper meaning beyond love.

## 2 Literature Review

In recent years, international exchanges and collisions have been increasing, and the acceleration of the globalization process has brought about unprecedented cultural collisions and blending, and information transfer and communication have become more convenient. Western culture has a profound influence on the world, permeating every corner of life. Eastern culture is also rapidly emerging as an indispensable part of global multiculturalism. This import and export of cultures has injected vitality into the richness of cultural diversity and has also triggered a wide-ranging discussion on cultural hegemony and cultural identity - how to protect and pass on local cultures while accepting foreign cultures. Nearly half a century ago, Western countries, especially the United States and Europe, with their strong economic and technological advantages after the Second World War, promoted their cultural values and lifestyles through films, music, fashion and other means, creating a situation of cultural hegemony. Writer Eileen Chang lived in such an era, and her works, which seek to respond to real-life topics, have important research value.

Regarding the research and analysis of Eileen Chang's short story "When I Was Young", there is a lack of research both at home and abroad. In the Chinese literature collected on China Knowledge Network, the research perspectives involve the English-Chinese translation comparative perspective, philosophical perspective, cultural perspective, etc. Among them, the literature from the cultural perspective is very useful for this book. Among them, the literature from the cultural perspective is more meaningful for the study of this thesis, and the main points are as follows: Liu Yongli (2015) points out from the perspective of "colonial culture" that Western culture outputs signals that Western culture is superior to Oriental culture through a variety of propaganda means. Ping Lei (2021) argues that cultural differences affect the issue of identity. Qiu Yushuang (2023) focuses on the protagonist's change of attitude towards a foreign culture and explores the connection between Chinese and foreign images and cultures from the perspective of the construction of the other and the self-image.

As we can see from the above, there is a lack of studies that explore cultural hegemony and identity from the novels, and there is not much correlation between them. Therefore, this paper will focus on Zhang Ailing's short story, which is not famous, and analyse the deeper connotations and thoughts behind the novel in the context of the times and social conditions, from the perspective of the plot and changes in the characters' images and thoughts, in order to explore and think about the propositions of this particular era.

## 3 The Creation of the Time and Family

The famous French literary theorist Dana, by analysing a large number of historical facts, scientifically reveals in his book *The Philosophy of Art* the close relationship

between literature and art and the three factors of race, environment and era, which are considered to have a significant influence on the creation of writers.[2] Literature is a re-screening of social and historical life, and Eileen Chang's story is no exception, which is no different from other popular romance novels, except for its unique character construction, and the different but real background of the era also contributes to its deep meaning. Although still under the shadow of war, Shanghai's economic development, educational level and internationalisation were "incomparable" to those of other cities. As a semi-colony, Western colonial policies led to the invasion of Shanghai's sovereignty, but they also contributed to the city's modernisation. The number of foreigners in Shanghai exceeds 150,000, a record high, of which 100,000 are Japanese and the remaining 50,000 foreigners are of 50 nationalities. People of different countries and nationalities live together in this city, where East meets West, and the collision of old and new ideas causes many people to lose their direction, either to advocate Western ideas or to cling to the traditional Chinese culture. The city is an important witness to China's modernisation process. It is an important witness to China's modernisation process, an important point in Chinese history, and the backdrop against which countless stories are born.

In 1944, when the social situation was grim and difficult, Eileen Chang was 24 years old. She received a Western education at St Mary's Girls' School in Shanghai, was admitted to the University of London, entered the University of Hong Kong's Department of Literature because of the war, and failed to graduate because of the suspension of studies due to the outbreak of the Pacific War, returned to Shanghai from Hong Kong to write for English magazines, such as *The Times*, and both colonial Hong Kong and semi-colonial Shanghai were the main areas where Westerners settled in China and Western colonialism was rampant. At that time, both colonial Hong Kong and semi-colonial Shanghai were the main areas where Westerners came to settle in China and where Western colonialism was rampant. With her Western education, Eileen Chang was more advanced than the average person, had an extremely broad vision, understood the perspective and attitude of Westerners towards China, and was able to create her works in a rational and unbiased manner. Her divorced family - her father was a Qing dynasty relic and her mother was a free and independent intellectual woman - further deepened the shadow cast on her by the dual cultural conflict. Such a family background gave Eileen Chang a unique creative perspective, able to switch her identity towards different cultures, to examine and evaluate more objectively, not only to have the ability to look at a foreign country from a Chinese perspective, but also to consciously incorporate a foreigner's perspective into her view of China, and to deal with both the watcher's and the watched's cultures critically. Looking at the general environment, the special era made her immersed in the melting pot of the diverse and conflicting civilisations of the East and the West, and the phenomenon of cultural fusion occurred in every corner around her, which also became the material for the creator to be observed and dissected, and gave Eileen Chang the space to create, which was beneficial to improving the depth and breadth of her works.

## 4 The East-West Cultural Difference

Hungarian literary critic Lukács believes that literary art as an aesthetic reflection is a dialectical unity of reflecting reality and transcending reality, and that literary art anthropomorphises and aesthetically reflects reality by shaping typical characters.[3] Eileen Chang created a series of different images in her novel "When I Was Young", the hero Pan Ruliang is a typical representative of "worshipping foreign countries and pandering to foreigners", he "is a patriotic and good boy, but he doesn't have much goodwill towards Chinese people"[1], the reason for this is that the character and bad habits of the members of the family, and then extended to loathe the compatriots with whom he shares the same blood, dislike his father, who "obscenely poured some warm wine from a tin pot into a teacup with the handle knocked off"[1], and consider his mother "an uneducated, pathetic person who has sacrificed her life's happiness under the oppression of the old rites. "[1], did not want to see his sister as "a woman who is painted and powdered, who is not very beautiful and who refuses to be at peace"[1], and even more so did not like the group of siblings who were "dirty, tired, unintelligent, and very childish"[1], and his views on people close to him were influenced by his views on the Chinese people. His perception of those close to him influenced his view of the Chinese people. In Shanghai in the 1940s, the development of modern science and technology was driven by economic growth, and the impact of new ideas from the West was even greater. Under the influence of outside propaganda and cultivation, Pan Ruliang aspired to people and things in the West; he studied medicine and German, and believed that "modern science is the only good thing in this incomplete world that is not open to criticism"[1], and liked the idea of Scholarships, football matches, German bicycles and new literature. "The foreigners he knew were film stars and handsome models for cigarette and soap advertisements, while the Chinese he knew were his parents, brothers and sisters.[1] This contrast of perceptions created his initial attitude towards his own country and foreign cultures. People like Pan Ruliang abound in reality, and he is only a typical representative of some of the prominent features that have been magnified and exaggerated. In contrast, the novel has less to say about the female protagonist, Cynthia. Except for some dialogues, most of the novels are observed from the hero's point of view and narrated in his own words, but in these few words, the novel also outlines a typical example of a foreign woman living in China. Cynthia has lived in China since she was a child, in Harbin and then in Shanghai, which shows how long she has lived in China and how much contact she has had with the Chinese people, as a Russian, she is fluent in both German and English, which is a glimpse of her great ability to learn. But according to her, she has "forgotten all the Chinese I used to speak"[1]. Later on, when she talks to the hero about her marriage partner, she also shows her tendency to marry only a Westerner or a white man. This shows how little she identifies with Chinese culture, how she has not integrated into the Chinese environment because she has lived there for too long, and how she still retains a sense of closeness to the Western culture, while there is an insurmountable gap between her and the Eastern culture. Cynthia is also typical of a group of people who epitomise some of the foreigners of the time, who, despite living in China, do not communicate in Chinese and do not have a positive sense of identity.

However, during his several encounters with Cynthia, Pan Ruliang's dreamy imagination about the beauty of the West was eroded and his fervour faded away. He realised the gap between imagination and reality, and that the images in his mind were the result of the colonial invasion of Western culture. Gramsci, an Italian Marxist theorist, put forward the literary theory of cultural leadership in his Prison Notes: "Cultural leadership (hegemony) is the ideological leadership of a certain group in civil society, with cultural dynamics, non-coercion, and authority. .... Western capitalist societies, especially advanced capitalist societies with a high degree of democracy, have become more and more democratic. capitalist societies with a high degree of democracy, are no longer ruled through violence, but through propaganda, through their moral and spiritual leadership, so that the people at large accept their series of legal systems or worldviews to achieve the purpose of their rule".[4]Once the hero connects the noble modern life with the western lifestyle and the beautiful western The hero's imagination is based on the propaganda of the colonial culture, attracted by its superiority and advancement, which is exactly the embodiment of the Western cultural leadership in Shanghai as a semi-colony at that time. Through the media such as films, newspapers and TV, the hero promotes his cultural superiority, and at the same time, while he makes up for the Westerners and things, he also makes up for the appearance of the Oriental people and creates the superficial difference and occupies the high ground of the public opinion. When one does not have a deep understanding of Western culture, one is unconsciously deceived by the illusion.

The first one to break Pan Ruliang's fantasy is Cynthia, in the second time to see her, he feels "dissatisfied", "she seems to be a little different from the person he remembered", he thinks she is the stereotype of the Westerners as beautiful, with a head of "Madonna-like blonde" yellow hair, beautiful personality, however, "he knows her" after this illusory dream will be shattered like a bubble. He thought she was the stereotypical Westerner, with "Madonna's blonde" yellow hair, beautiful, sweet and capable, but after "he got to know her", this illusory dream was shattered like a bubble. Qincia also suffered from life's oppression, grubby temper, do not like clean, his dream woke up, only to force himself to pick her body a little "poetic" part to see, but also lost the proposal to her into the marriage quagmire of the idea. When Pan Ruliang walked into Qincia's marriage ceremony site, his heart still retained a trace of good thoughts of the ashes. "Cynthia was the only one who was beautiful in the whole marriage ceremony"[1], the Russian lower inspector, the other hero of the wedding, was uneasy, the priest was a drunkard, the choir leader was "hot with his hair down", and there was no banquet and no wedding ceremony. "There was no banquet and traditional customs, and when the Western rituals were over, everyone left in a huff, without the pomp and circumstance of a Western wedding in a film, and Pan Ruliang "slipped away". After that, all those beautiful hopes and desires about the West, which were built on illusions, disappeared. As written at the end of the story, "Ruliang never drew little people on the head of his books again. His books are now always clean."[1]This not only means the failure of the transnational love between Pan Ruliang and Qincia, but also symbolises the hero's change of attitude towards Western culture, and the destruction and shattering of this beautiful "dream" after he jumps out of the electronic screen, contact and understanding. The change in Pan Ruliang's attitude also conveys Eileen Chang's attitude

towards the dominance of Western culture in Shanghai and even in the wider city, that only by bursting the bubble and seeing the truth can we touch the real differences between different cultures.

## 5 Conclusion

Eileen Chang's *When I Was Young* is not only a love story, but also a profound exploration of cultural intermingling and conflict in that particular historical context, revealing the differences and contradictions between Eastern and Western cultures. Pan Ruliang's initial admiration and yearning for Western culture is eventually shattered in the collision of realities, a process that profoundly reflects Eileen Chang's critique of cultural hegemony and her complex thinking about identity. The story of Pan Ruliang is a microcosm of this cultural erosion. His fascination with Western culture is in fact a disidentification and escape from his own cultural identity, and his transformation is a reflection and an appeal to the public to remain rational. The figure of Cynthia, on the other hand, reveals another dilemma of surviving in a foreign culture. As a Russian woman living in China, she maintains her alienation and rejection of Chinese culture despite her multilingualism. This lack of cultural identity makes her life in China one of disconnection and loneliness. Her insistence on the Western model of marriage also reflects her fixation on her own cultural identity, which reveals another aspect of cultural intermingling: the challenge of multiculturalism to identity.

Eileen Chang maintains her unique perspective and deep insight, provoking readers to think about society and human nature. Her works are both a true portrayal of that era and a profound foresight of today's social and cultural phenomena. This ceaseless exploration and contemplation endowed her works with enduring vitality and far-reaching influence.

As she said in *Double Voices*, "They have many superficial feelings. For things they are not familiar with, they have no feelings ..... As for foreign countries, like us who were all brought up inside the air of Anglo-American thought, there are many chances to see their brokenness." [5] When leaving the bottom of the well, one can view the whole picture, and better understand the cultural field of the collision and competition between countries. For her, who grew up between the East and the West, describing the situation and life of the little people in the big time with rational and prudent eyes, and drawing out the roots buried under the phenomenon, revealing inner thoughts and attitudes, is also the hope and instinct of writing, and the most unique colour in Eileen Chang's gorgeous and fantastic writing.

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