

# Fashioning Chinese History and Culture --A Comparison Analysis of Eileen Chang's "Chinese Life and Fashions" and "Geng Yi Ji" 1943

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on two articles by the Shanghai-born writer Eileen Chang. Written in January and December 1943 respectively, "Chinese Life and Fashions" was created for the English language, Shanghai-based magazine *The XXth Century*, "Geng Yi Ji" was produced for the Chinese Magazine *Gu Jin* (Past and present). Both the English and Chinese articles outlined the history of traditional Chinese fashion, and the English article "Chinese Life and Fashions" contained hand-drawn illustrations by Chang. Both articles were for some time thought by academics to contain largely the same content and were considered as a single unit. Further evaluation of the content has demonstrated that these articles are far more complex and nuanced and therefore are considerably different in character; rather than providing a straightforward historical narrative "Geng Yi Ji" aims to demonstrate the evolution of Chinese fashions and then uses this to argue for the abandonment of traditional fashions. It provides a comparison in order to demonstrate how Chang's writing on fashion for two popular magazines gave her an ideal opportunity to set out her argument for two entirely separate audiences in this paper. It also highlights how the two articles have continued to affect popular approaches (in China and in the West) to traditional Chinese fashion.

## The Introduction of "Chinese life and fashions" and "Geng Yi Ji"

Eileen Chang published her article "Chinese Life and Fashions" in the English-language magazine *The XXth Century* in January 1943. [1] She published three articles on this magazine, all of them were published in 1943, and "Chinese Life and Fashions" was Chang's first article in this magazine. *The XXth Century* magazine was supported by the German Foreign Office, and ran from 1941 to 1945. It was born under the condition of war in summer 1941, as the spreading of the European war isolated East Asia from the west world. And also, it was ended with the end of the war.

"Chinese Life and Fashions" talked about Chinese fashion and culture in different period, such as the Republic Period, Qing dynasty, Song dynasty, Tang dynasty, Han dynasty, even Qin dynasty. It should be clarified that Eileen Chang only mentioned hairstyles of Song dynasty, Tang dynasty, Han dynasty and Qin dynasty, no fashion. The main content of this article was Chinese women's fashion revolution from Qing dynasty to the Republic Period.

For "Geng Yi Ji", almost every reference indicated that "Chinese Life and Fashions" is the original copy of "Geng Yi Ji", which was published on the magazine *Gu Ji*, December 1943. [2] In 1940s, Eileen Chang was very famous. Zhou Li'an, the editor of *Gu Jin*, asked Eileen Chang to write an article for *Gu Jin*. Thus, Eileen Chang rewrote "Chinese Life and Fashions" to "Geng Yi Ji" and published it in *Gu Jin*. It didn't mean that Eileen Chang paid little attention to "Geng Yi Ji" than "Chinese Life and Fashions". Through she described fashion more detailed in "Chinese Life and Fashions" than "Geng Yi Ji". It was reasonable, firstly, Eileen Chang already described Chinese fashion in "Chinese Life and Fashions" very significant, when she described the fashion again in "Geng Yi Ji", she paid more attention on the fashion culture and explored Chinese personality through fashion. Secondly, Chinese people were more familiar with Chinese fashion than western people, so Eileen Chang needn't to describe it very detailed.

“Geng Yi Ji” briefly expressed the changes of Chinese clothes within three hundred years with strong epochal character and subjectivity. Chinese fashion expert Bao Mingxin indicated that “Geng Yi Ji” was the classic Fashion Review of the Republic Period, and the Fashion Reviews from literary intellectuals could enrich the Fashion Review content with the beautiful and sharp writing style. [3]

Eileen Chang didn’t explain the relationship between these two articles by herself officially, so it is difficult to know the exact relationship between “Geng Yi Ji” and “Chinese Life and Fashions”. But from the similar content and contemporary literatures, we can mostly speculate that these two articles are the same articles in two different languages, although the content was not totally same. For example, Yuan Ze and Hu Yue quoted the words content from “Geng Yi Ji”, but used the sketches from “Chinese Life and Fashions” in their book *A Century of Fashion*. [4] Andrew F. Jones also thought that Eileen Chang translated and revised “Chinese Life and Fashions” to “Geng Yi Ji”. When he translated “Geng Yi Ji” to English, named “A Chronicle of Changing Clothes”, he also used Eileen Chang’s sketches in “Chinese Life and Fashions”. [5]

In a forward to his translation of “Geng Yi Ji”, Andrew F Jones comments on Chang’s subtle changes of authorial voice noting it:

“represents the rigorous application of a set of theoretical hypotheses concerning the homology between the social body and its apparel to the study of historical process. Therefore, Chang forges not only an expansive theory of the „fashion system“ in modern China but also a strikingly novel mode for the writing of cultural history and social theory in modern Chinese”. [5]

### **The Difference between “Chinese life and fashions” and “Geng Yi Ji”**

The two articles were written in the same year, respectively in January and December of 1943. The English article has 4500 words, which are 800 words less than “Geng Yi Ji”. When Andrew F. Jones translated “Geng Yi Ji” to “A Chronicle of Changing Clothes”, it is about 4500 words. It would seem from word length that “Chinese Life and Fashions” and “Geng Yi Ji” are the same article. That’s why Chinese authors used these two articles together, while, the differences between these two articles are never considered.

If the content ignored and the structure of these two articles is analyzed. We can see that “Chinese Life and Fashions” was more structured and logical than “Geng Yi Ji”. “Chinese Life and Fashions” including thirteen parts and forty paragraphs, it is a long and complex article, especially for the readers who are not familiar with the content. Fortunately, Eileen Chang gave each part a title, which was very easy to read and get the main idea of each part. While, “Geng Yi Ji” is a little bit rough in this point. It is a whole article without separated parts or subtitles. Eileen Chang considered English-language readers’ limited knowledge of Chinese fashion. The logical structure and subtitles made them easily to get the information, while, Chinese-language readers who lived in China, knew China fashion very much. So, “Geng Yi Ji” is a more flowing prose, expressing Eileen Chang’s beautiful words and talent as a female writer. Her thoughtful consideration also reveals that she has feminine characteristic, careful and sensitive. In fact, these personalities also helped her to be a wonderful female writer.

One of the biggest differences between these two articles is that “Chinese Life and Fashions” contains Chinese ancient hairstyles content that are absent in “Geng Yi Ji”. In the title of “Chinese Life and Fashions”, “Fashion” means a style accepted by large group of people at a particular time, which can include hairstyles. [6] In the title of “Geng Yi Ji”, Chinese character “Yi” means only clothe, not including hairstyles. Just like Andrew F. Jones’s translation of “Geng Yi Ji” --“A Chronicle of Changing Clothes”. So, Eileen Chang only focused on the clothes part in “Geng Yi Ji”, without the hairstyles. The other difference is that “Chinese Life and Fashions” has six sketches of Chinese fashion by Eileen Chang, which give a direct image to English-language readers. Actually, Eileen Chang was not only a famous writer, she was also an artist. She can draw, design and make clothes. She also leaded fashion trend sometimes in her time, with her fashionable clothes made by herself. Her interest in fashion helped her wrote great reviews about women’s fashion from female’s

view. She can deeply understand women's pressure from mental and body that was given by male-dominated society.

Meanwhile, "Chinese Life and Fashions" also missed some content that "Geng Yi Ji" had. In the end of the article, Eileen Chang expanded men's clothing in China. It is very hard to know the real reason of the absence of men's clothing in "Chinese Life and Fashions". But we can analyze the situation to give some reasonable possibilities. Firstly, Eileen Chang pretended the target readers of "Chinese Life and Fashions" were women. So, she just focused on women's fashion, and gave some sketches of women's clothes and hairstyles in this article. It can be known from the editor Klaus Mehnert's review of this article: "This article needs no recommendation to the ladies among our readers..." Here, Klaus Mehnert only mentioned ladies, it was very clearly that this article mainly for female readers. Secondly, from anthropology view, women's appearance is far more important than men in man-dominated society. Human beings often pay much more attention to female fashion than male fashion. And female paid much more attention on appearance than male. [6] So, Eileen Chang focused on female's fashion, and as a female, she did had lots of criticism toward Chinese women's clothes. Thirdly, Eileen Chang wrote men's fashion in "Chinese Life and Fashions" in her original draft which could not be seen by us. As men's clothes were very simple and less eventful, Eileen Chang only wrote a little content of it. During the discussion with the editor Klaus Mehnert, they decided to delete the men's clothes part. Fourthly, as an article about "A Chronicle of Changing Clothes", it should conclude men's clothing as well as women's clothing. So, Eileen Chang added men's clothing information. Fifthly, as typical male-dominated society in ancient China, males' opinion influenced females' every part in their life, including women's clothing. Meanwhile, women were not as educated as men, so the main readers of "Geng Yi Ji" were men. Considering of the target readers, Eileen Chang added men's clothing in Chinese article to enrich the content and attracted male readers. Although the men's clothes were very simple, Eileen Chang also mentioned it in Chinese article. Her main purpose might be to let men realize that Chinese women's clothes should be change; men should not disturb women's freedom. Finally, the very audacious suppose is that Eileen Chang wrote Chinese article "Geng Yi Ji" first and then rewrote to English article "Chinese Life and Fashions", so she adjusted the content and sketches. After all, Chinese is Eileen Chang's mother language. It's possible for her to write Chinese first, and translated it to English. While, there is no exact evidence to judge this suppose is right or wrong. Eileen Chang's English was very good; she wrote lots of English novels, and translated lots of books, so that it was very easy for her to write article in English directly.

From the obvious difference between these two articles, we can see that when Eileen Chang wrote articles, she considered the readers, the cultures, the social context and the purpose of the articles, which were efficiently send message to readers. When she rewrote the Chinese article, she thought much more than just simply translation work. Andrew F. Jones also thinks that "Chang translated, revised, and expanded the piece for publication in a Chinese-language journal, retitled it „Geng Yi Ji“." [5] As a result, two language articles totally made sense to everyone.

### **Eileen Chang's writing Methods to Explain Chinese Costume Culture to Readers of Different Languages**

Shifting to the details of these two articles to find out how Eileen Chang send message to readers of two different languages, we can find the difference from paragraphs, sentences, even a single word. Eileen Chang used three main kinds of different ways to send messages to different-language readers.

The first method is using the familiar words or culture theme to let English-language readers easily understand Chinese fashion, culture, and politics. For example, in the beginning of these two articles, Eileen Chang talked about the unchanged and boring clothes for Manchu women in Qing dynasty. In fact, Eileen Chang not only blamed the boring clothes for women, she also talked about politics and society rather than women's clothes here. Eileen Chang was a very famous writer and a very independent female who pursuit freedom and equality to men. She was good at attacking the real society through fashion or other part of people's life. She said that the clothes never changed, not

really indicated the unchanged clothes, but show her aversion of Qing dynasty government and the backward society. It was rarely for a woman to express her dissatisfaction to the society and government at that time, that's why she was very controversial and famous. In "Chinese Life and Fashions", Eileen Chang gave an equal politics example in Western society, she set "Queen Victoria" period as an example, to let English readers imagine that for such a long time, women's clothes never changed, it was a really boring thing for women. If she just said Qing dynasty, English readers would be puzzled or need a long thinking to understand or realize how boring it was. Just one word "Queen Victoria", Eileen Chang made this situation much easier for English readers to understand.

Later, Eileen Chang used "Gothic cathedral" instead of "Da Guan Yuan" in Chinese article. Actually, "Da Guan Yuan" is totally different with "Gothic cathedral". One is a huge garden, and the other one is a big church. The common feature is that they are all big and heavily decorated. Da Guan Yuan is very famous in China, so as Gothic cathedral in the west. When Eileen Chang gave her opinion that woman was not a "Gothic cathedral" or "Da Guan Yuan", the heaping together of details would diffuse interest and result in a loss of focus, these two words were undisputed make sense for both Chinese and English readers. As a female, she also expressed her fashion aesthetics that to be simple and free; and expressed her opposing attitude toward the man-dominated society that gave women too heavy decoration to control them. She also tried to appeal Chinese women to fight for their rights.

The other point is that Eileen Chang used "society girls" and "professional beauties" instead of hookers or prostitute girls in "Geng Yi Ji". There may be some reason for it. Firstly, she wanted to use civilized words rather than the rude or too strange words to express her high education manner. Secondly, she was a woman, so she tried to be more elegant to use more civilized words. Because it was very good morality to be a gentle girl in Chinese culture. Thirdly, she would like to protect China's reputation in front of English readers. So, she chose the soft and more legend word. After all, she was Chinese, although she didn't like Chinese feudal thought. Fourthly, the hookers she mentioned in these two articles were high-class hookers, not the common hookers. In order to let English readers know the difference between high-class hookers and common hookers, she used "society girls" and "professional beauties", who were also high-class hookers in western society. Because in Qing dynasty, hookers had different levels, such as the famous "Eight Lanes" in Beijing, which was a Red-Light District in China. The hookers had different levels, and the officers of the Manchu government also went there frequently. Eileen Chang, as a woman, maybe she was shamed to talk too much about this topic. Therefore, she used the civilized words instead of the explicit phrases.

The second method is adding some illustration and example to let English-speaking readers understand Chinese history and clothes styles, which has the same function of her sketches. For example, Eileen Chang explained that the classical jacket in Qing dynasty was corresponded to the swagger coat, which gave a significant image to English-language readers. Also, Eileen Chang used western length unit instead of Chinese length unit in English article. She used "inch" in English article, but used "cun" (a traditional Chinese length unit) for Chinese-language readers. In "Chinese Life and Fashions", Eileen Chang used lot of this kind of way to illustrate Chinese fashion to English readers. What's more, Eileen Chang gave explanation of some Chinese terms. For example, Eileen Chang explained what "gold-and-silver fox" was (an inexpensive patchwork of the white and yellow parts on the belly and back, who was "Wang Zhao Jun" and what happened with her. The English-language readers who had no Chinese life background were very hard to image what was "gold-and-silver fox" fur look like, as well as why the hat had a human being's name or why used her name, Zhao Jun Hood. As a professional writer, sensitive and considerate woman, as well as she was very familiar with Chinese and Western cultures, Eileen Chang explained Wang Zhao Jun's story to English-language readers. While, in "Geng Yi Ji", Eileen Chang didn't mention who was Wang Zhaojun, as she is very famous in China history, almost everyone knows her as one of the most four beauties in ancient China. Eileen Chang did lots of this kind illustration in "Chinese Life and Fashions", such as she illustrated "Pu Yi", who was the last emperor of China, and only reigned for



three years. This history background can give English readers clearly information that the turbulence of society influences fashion style.

The third method is changing, adding or deleting some content to make English-language readers understand Chinese society easily, meanwhile, to express her attitude toward fashion and society to Chinese-language people successfully with her talented writing skills. For example, Eileen Chang emphasized women's virtues in this part in "Chinese Life and Fashions". She said if a woman's arm was seen by a stranger, she will hack off her arm, while, in "Geng Yi Ji", it said that a woman hacking off her arm after having been touched by a strange man. The gender of the stranger is very important in this situation. To analyze the difference of this point, firstly, Eileen Chang forgot to declare the stranger's gender, or she did mean it. Secondly, she deliberately didn't declare the stranger's gender in English article, just want to emphasize Chinese women's virtues were awful, strict and ridiculous. Or Eileen Chang wanted to warn English readers that please don't touch Chinese women if you were a stranger for her, no matter you were a male or female, it would give Chinese women a big disaster. So, Eileen Chang expanded the gender limits to protect Chinese women, and reduce English-language readers' troubles. Because the article published in Shanghai, and the English-language readers in Shanghai had lots of chance to get touch with Chinese women.

Content is that Eileen Chang explained the pointless ornament of Chinese fashion in English article much more than in "Geng Yi Ji". She talked about the western artists would never add some details on fashion which could not been seen by people, for example on the soles of women's shoes. Here, Eileen Chang used "artists", but there was no "artists" in Chinese article, the reason is very simple that in ancient China, there were very few artists, and people were not familiar with this kind of people. As fashion, in the Republic Period, the customers always decided what kind of clothes they wanted, and then the tailors would make it out. There were no fashion designers in ancient China, as the fashion systems were very strict. People must wear the clothes according to the law. Eileen Chang considered the different society context deeply. It's also showed her western knowledge background.

In the last part of "Chinese Life and Fashions", Eileen Chang gave some conclusion of Chinese current fashion, such as pre-Revolution and post-Revolution. While in "Geng Yi Ji", Eileen Chang didn't mention the revolution. During the turbulence time, talking about revolution publicly was not a clever action for a writer in China, especially for a female writer. Instead, Eileen Chang added some landscape descriptions in the end of the article. Actually, this kind of ending was the typical prose in China, which echoes the beginning of "Geng Yi Ji", described the society phenomenon with beautiful sentences too. This kind of description of common Chinese life did expressed Eileen Chang's emotion of the life and cultures, and also expressed her inner graceful characteristics as an educated and romantic woman.

## Summary

This paper focused on two articles "Chinese Life and Fashions" and "Geng Yi Ji" by female author Eileen Chang. The English article "Chinese Life and Fashions" is the original copy of Chinese article "Geng Yi Ji". Both the English and Chinese articles outlined the history of traditional Chinese fashion, and the English article "Chinese Life and Fashions" contained hand-drawn illustrations by Chang, which expressed that Eileen Chang was very talented and sensitive in art. Generally speaking, these two articles are same, but Eileen Chang was so skillful and thoughtful that she used different ways to send Chinese Fashion information to readers, who are based in different language and culture. This purpose coursed tiny difference between these two articles, which partly due to her femaleness, circumspection and sensitivity. Through analyze, it can be seen that Eileen Chang used four ways to send exact message to different languages readers: firstly, Eileen Chang used the familiar words or culture to let English-language readers understand Chinese fashion, culture, even politics very easily. Secondly, Eileen Chang added some illustration and example to let English-speaking readers understand Chinese history and clothes styles, which has the same function of her sketches. Thirdly, Eileen Chang changed, added or deleted some content to make English-language people understand Chinese society easily and deeply, meanwhile, to express her attitude toward fashion and society to

Chinese-language people successfully with her talented writing skills. To think deeply, some of the methods are very familiar with translation theory, and Eileen Chang used them very flexibly.

The analysis of this paper also proved Eileen Chang sent Chinese Fashion messages to different languages reader very successfully. The articles are very famous and important literatures in fashion history research field, both in China and Western countries. She was definitely a very great woman, who was so talent and sensitive in art, literature and even politics in China history.

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