

The Cage of Desire under the Postcolonial Gaze: Taking the Gender Performance and Power Game in The First Incense Burner as an Example

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Abstract: Eileen Chang's debut work *The First Incense Burner* vividly depicts the tragic transformation of Ge Weilong from an innocent student into a socialite, exposing the alienation and degradation of human nature under the influence of materialism and desire. This novella not only serves as Chang's incisive dissection of her contemporary society, but also encapsulates her aesthetic of desolation and modern feminist thought. Ge Weilong's shift from "seeking self-salvation through education" to "falling into the abyss of desire" is essentially the outcome of a complex interplay among colonial modernity, patriarchy, and female survival strategies. The residence of Madame Liang acts as a "third space," a field of desire forged through the collusion of colonial capital and patriarchal power, as well as a power network where women transform from being objectified to becoming agents of objectification. The identity reconstruction achieved by colonial women through gender performance is, in essence, a strategic compromise with colonial disciplinary power. Their subjectivity remains trapped within the interlocking structures of oppression—capital, gender, and race. Chang's aesthetics of desolation not only deconstructs the mythologies of love and kinship, but also reveals the devouring mechanism of colonial modernity on individual fate, offering profound literary insights into the issue of women's liberation in the age of globalization.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, *The First Incense Burner*, Gender Performance, Power Struggles

1. Introduction

Hong Kong in the 1930s was not only a "hybrid" space shaped by the collision between Chinese and Western cultures, but also a micro-battleground where capital and desire intertwined. From this perspective, Ge Weilong's downfall in Eileen Chang's *The First Incense Burner* is far from a simple case of moral corruption. Rather, it is an inevitable outcome of the intricate power struggles between colonial modernity, patriarchy, and the survival strategies adopted by women. Previous scholarship on *The First Incense Burner* has largely focused on its deconstruction of female fate and the myth of romantic love, or has analyzed its aesthetic style of "asymmetrical contrast" from a narratological perspective. However, few studies have situated the text within a postcolonial context to reveal how the power structure of colonial Hong Kong systematically disciplines female subjectivity. This paper seeks to break through the limitations of conventional interpretations by adopting an interdisciplinary

lens that combines postcolonial theory with feminist criticism. It aims to explore a central question: Under the dual discipline of colonial and gendered power, how are women compelled to reconstruct their identities through the exchange of their bodies and desires?

2. Literature review

2.1. The colonial power structure and women's existential predicament

Homi Bhabha's theory of the "third space" posits that the colony constitutes a "liminal space" forged by the collision between indigenous traditions and colonial culture. This space is neither purely Eastern nor entirely Western, but rather an ambivalent and negotiated in-between zone.[1]

Hong Kong in the 1930s, under British colonial rule, was a real-life manifestation of this "liminal space"—a site marked by cultural hybridity and asymmetric power relations. Within this context, Chinese women in Hong Kong were caught in a dilemma of "double marginalization." On one hand, as "Oriental women," they were objectified under the colonial Western gaze, turned into symbols of exotic allure. On the other, the local patriarchal system further confined them within the domestic and matrimonial spheres, stripping them of their subjectivity.

2.2. The colonial nature and transformation of HongKong

In Eileen Chang's narrative, Ge Weilong initially flees from Shanghai to Hong Kong under the pretext of "seeking salvation through education." Ostensibly, she is in pursuit of the independence and dignity promised by modern education. However, this very decision exposes the hollow nature of the colonial educational system. As a British colony in the 1930s, Hong Kong's education was never designed to cultivate female subjectivity or equip women for social participation. Rather, it functioned as a cultural apparatus of colonial domination—indoctrinating Western values, social etiquette, and class ideology in order to mold colonial elites into a compliant "intermediary class," thereby sustaining the colonial order. Ge Weilong's faith in education essentially reflects the naïve belief in the "myth of modernity" held by colonial intellectuals. She imagines that knowledge can lift her out of the poverty and conservatism of her family background and grant her entry into high society. Yet, when Madame Liang offers to sponsor her studies and simultaneously ushers her into the world of social engagements, the so-called "pursuit of learning" is quickly supplanted by luxurious gowns, banquets, and romantic intrigues. This transition is far from incidental; it is the logical consequence of the colonial educational apparatus. In the eyes of the colonizers, women—especially middle-class women with cultural capital—are valued not for their intellect, but for their physical presence and social skills as instruments of capital circulation. According to Edward Said's theory of "Orientalism," the colonizer constructs the East as backward and passive, thereby legitimizing its own cultural hegemony.[2]

Ge Weilong's tragedy lies in her attempt to achieve social mobility through colonial education, only to find herself reconstituted by that very discourse into a living embodiment of "Oriental charm." Her Shanghai background, student identity, and delicate appearance render her, in the eyes of colonial elites, the ideal prey who seamlessly blends "traditional docility" with "modern sophistication." Ultimately, her quest for educational self-redemption turns into a bitter irony—she gains no real liberation through learning, but is instead transformed, through the collusion of colonial and patriarchal powers, from an "independent-minded student" into a "high-end commodity of the pleasure world." Through this portrayal, Chang lays bare the trap hidden within the promise of "progress" offered by colonial education. It is a mechanism of cultural discipline that ensnares women—particularly attractive young women from middle-class backgrounds—in a more insidious form of captivity.

2.3. A microcosm of colonial power

Foucault emphasized that power is not confined to macro-level political systems but instead infiltrates everyday life through spatial arrangements, bodily discipline, and social practices.[3]

The Liang residence serves as a literary embodiment of this theory: its ornate iron gates, lavish parlors, and hidden rooms form a hierarchical spatial structure that tightly confines the female body, rendering it a tangible space where colonial power and the economy of desire intersect. Madame Liang exercises control over the use of space—for instance, assigning Ge Weilong a street-facing guest room, which facilitates the voyeuristic gaze of male visitors and implies her commodified status as “available for purchase.” In doing so, Madame Liang imposes a comprehensive form of discipline upon the young woman—both physical and psychological. The frequent banquets held in the mansion are not merely social events, but rather performative arenas of power: amidst clinking glasses and flirtatious banter, women's appearances, speech, and even bodily curves are evaluated as indicators of “capital worth,” functioning as criteria for the colonial elite to select their prey.

This logic of commodifying the female body closely parallels what Marx critiques in *Das Kapital* as “commodity fetishism”: in capitalist societies, interpersonal relations are alienated and reduced to exchanges between things, and the value of commodities obscures the labor exploitation behind them.[4]

Within the Liang residence, Ge Weilong's youth and beauty are stripped of their human essence, reduced to a luxury item that is tradable and capable of appreciation. Madame Liang's “transformation project” on Ge Weilong is highly symbolic: she first outfits her in fine garments—silk qipaos and pearl necklaces—thereby packaging her niece into the perfect commodity blending “Oriental charm” with “Western modernity.” One passage from the novel reads: “She looked up at the piano and saw a cobalt porcelain plate holding a cactus about to bloom. Its thick green leaves stretched out like a cluster of green snakes, with a single touch of red at the tip like a snake flicking its tongue.” Although a cactus and a snake bear no real resemblance, this metaphor internalizes Weilong's fear and suggests the impending danger signaled by the snake's tongue. This eerie imagery further metaphorizes the dangers of such alienation: the cactus's seemingly beautiful thick green leaves and crimson bud conceal poisonous thorns—just as behind the opulence of the Liang household lies the violent absorption of individual subjectivity by colonial power. The more dazzling Ge Weilong appears at the banquets, the more her status as an object “to be viewed and consumed” is laid bare. Eventually, she becomes nothing more than a pawn in Madame Liang's game of capital.

Notably, Madame Liang herself is both a product and a collaborator of this power structure. In her youth, she capitalized on her beauty to marry a wealthy Hong Kong businessman as a concubine. Upon his death, she inherited a vast fortune, thus completing her own primitive accumulation of capital. Later in life, she “clutched the wheel of the times with one hand and, within her own small world, preserved the decadent air of late Qing sensuality, playing the role of a miniature Empress Dowager Cixi behind closed doors.” The upper-class society of 1930s Hong Kong was, in essence, a marketplace of transactional relationships involving wealth and sexual appeal. In this setting, Madame Liang had already achieved economic independence and switched roles to the side of “money.” However, this apparent reversal—from being objectified to becoming the objectifier—while seemingly a challenge to patriarchy, in fact entraps her deeper within the web of colonial modernity. The power network she constructed from her own body capital remains, at its core, a derivative of patriarchal and colonial order. The description of the residence as imbued with the “sensuality of late Qing decadence” implies the historical continuity of such power structures: whether through the concubinage system of feudal dynasties or the pleasure economy of the colonial era, women are persistently exchanged as “commodities” within power games. Through the prism of

the Liang residence, Eileen Chang reflects the absurd cycle of individual destiny in colonial society: the rebel ultimately becomes part of the chain of oppression, and what is touted as “free choice” is but a sophisticated illusion under systemic discipline.

2.4. Ge Weilong’s “voluntary surrender” and existential predicament

Lacan asserts that the subject’s desire is not inherently self-derived, but constructed through “the desire of the Other”—an individual affirms their existence by being desired by others.[5] This framework is particularly evident in *The First Incense Burner*, where Ge Weilong’s so-called “voluntary surrender” is less a personal choice than a strategic compromise under the dual pressures of external gaze and structural oppression. Upon first entering the Liang household, confronted by a wardrobe full of luxurious dresses, Weilong remains clear-headed, saying, “I’m just looking—I’ll never wear them anyway.” She is also well aware of George Qiao’s playboy nature upon their first meeting. Yet she still willingly steps into the marital trap set by Madame Liang and George Qiao, simply because his rakish charm evokes in her “an irrational and violent passion.” In my view, the logic of material desire embedded in colonial society had already been internalized as her survival strategy—one that is magnified within the colonial context. In Hong Kong’s upper-class circles, women’s bodies and emotions were treated as exchangeable resources. Weilong’s infatuation with George Qiao, in essence, reflects her implicit identification with the identity of a “high-end courtesan” bestowed by colonial power. Under the guise of “love,” she willingly steps into the marital trap, binding her sense of self-worth to the male gaze and material gratification. Lacan’s theory here reveals a cruel reality: the subjectivity of colonial women has long been predetermined by the structures of power, and their so-called “choices” are merely inevitable results of systematic conditioning.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, points out that women often internalize oppressive social norms as manifestations of free will through acts of “self-deception.” Ge Weilong’s tragedy serves as a literary annotation of this claim. Though fully aware of Madame Liang’s schemes and George Qiao’s insincerity, she convinces herself to romanticize these exploitative relationships. For instance, she says to George Qiao: “I love you—what’s that got to do with you?” This line appears to reflect emotional autonomy, but in truth, it betrays a deep-rooted self-deception: she attempts to mask her objectification through an illusion of unconditional love. This act of “self-deception” not only nullifies any possibility of resistance but also leads Weilong to actively participate in her own commodification. She willingly sells her beauty to support George Qiao and even views marriage as a “meal ticket” to maintain her upper-class identity. The “modern civilization” education she received during her studies did not equip her with the means for true independence, but rather taught her how to become a more refined object of male desire. Eileen Chang, with a cool and sharp narrative style, exposes the absurd loop in the colonial-patriarchal order: women’s attempts at self-salvation often devolve into cycles of alienation—the harder they strive to ascend the ladder of power, the deeper they sink into the mire of self-objectification.

3. Gender performativity and the landscape of female identity

According to Simone de Beauvoir, patriarchy reduces women to the role of the “Other,” whose value lies solely within the frameworks of marriage and motherhood.[6]

In *The First Incense Burner*, the image of Aunt Liang breaks free from such a framework, completely subverting the traditional literary paradigm of the “benevolent aunt” and instead becoming a complex exemplar of female power reversal in a colonial context. Her life is a parody and subversion of patriarchal logic: in her youth, she attached herself to a wealthy businessman as a concubine and traded her youth for capital; in her later years, she transformed her mansion into a

fortress, manipulating young women like Ge Weilong and turning their bodies into mediums of circulation within the economy of desire. However, this transformation from the “objectified” to the “objectifier” appears to be a rebellion against patriarchal oppression, but in truth it reveals the more insidious mechanisms of power inherent in colonial modernity—Madame Liang has never truly escaped the patriarchal structure that renders her an “Other.”

Foucault proposed the theory of “discipline and punishment”: power is not merely a relationship of oppression and obedience but one that achieves domination of the subject over the object through strategic practices.[7] Madame Liang is well-versed in this: in order to alleviate her inner loneliness and satisfy her own desire for love and men, she needs beautiful young women to “lure people in” for her. Ge Weilong, who willingly steps into the trap, becomes the perfect candidate. With the maids Tik-Tik and Ni-er already in the household, Ge Weilong joins them to form a web—once the prey is caught, Madame Liang, the lurking spider, unleashes her socialite charms to ensnare one handsome young man after another. To Madame Liang, Ge Weilong is nothing more than a tool.

3.1. Ge Weilong’s gender performativity

Judith Butler once proposed the theory of “gender performativity,” arguing that gender identity is not an innate essence but a form of “role-playing” constructed through social norms, repeated behavior, and cultural symbols.[8] Ge Weilong’s survival strategy is precisely a manifestation of gender performativity in a colonial context, exhibiting both complexity and tragedy. Upon her arrival at Madame Liang’s mansion, she integrates into the colonial elite circle through a series of carefully designed performances: wearing the elegant clothes provided by her aunt, imitating the speech and demeanor of upper-class socialites, and even utilizing her student identity as a label of “purity,” packaging herself as an ideal combination of intellect and seduction—a “high-end prey.” This performativity is initially tentative—she is testing the boundaries of her self-identity while attempting to find a foothold within the colonial hierarchy. For instance, when she first puts on the lavish attire, she shows resistance to material desires and hesitance toward performative identity. However, as she internalizes the rules of Madame Liang’s social world, her performance gradually evolves from a “forced choice” to a “survival necessity”: she must continuously adjust her appearance, language, and emotional expression to meet the expectations of the male gaze and the ideal woman image. Butler’s theory thus exposes the cruel logic of colonial society: the more perfect a woman’s performance, the more deeply her subjectivity has been shaped and disciplined by power. In my view, Ge Weilong’s transformation from a “gazed-upon object” to an “active performer” is rooted in Eileen Chang’s aesthetics of desolation and her compassion for women in the colonial setting. Chang’s aesthetic, at its core, is a form of “cold-eyed deconstruction”—it tears apart the sentimental façade of traditional female myths while exposing the engulfing machinery of colonial modernity on individual fates.

Ge Weilong’s “love” for George Qiao is perhaps the most ironic element in this gender performance. According to Freud’s theory of “transference,” individuals project unattainable emotional desires onto substitute objects to alleviate psychological conflicts.[9] Similarly, Ge Weilong, despite fully understanding George Qiao’s rakish nature, hypnotizes herself and internalizes the colonial society’s false promise of romantic love as a kind of redemptive fantasy. Her obsession with Qiao appears to be an assertion of emotional autonomy, but in essence it is a product of systemic power: the colonial playground commodifies female emotions into a “passionate” label, and by playing the role of a woman “sacrificing for love,” Ge Weilong not only justifies her own exploitation but also sustains her upper-class social identity. This performance ultimately results in a complete fracture of subjectivity—at social events, she shines as a glamorous “socialite,” masking her inner emptiness with smiles and dance; in solitude, she is confronted with “boundless desolation and terror,” clearly aware that she is merely a slave to Madame Liang and George Qiao. As the novel states: “But beyond the lights, the people, and the merchandise, there was the bleak sky and

sea—boundless desolation, boundless terror. Her future was the same—unimaginable, and the thought of it brought only horror. She had no plans for eternity. Only in the trivialities before her could her anxious heart find a moment of rest.” Ge Weilong, like that small orange-red blossom ignited by a cigarette, blooms briefly before falling into a gray void. Eileen Chang, with her cold pen, strips away the mask of performativity: Ge Weilong’s tragedy does not lie in her fall itself, but in her painfully lucid awareness of how she is being consumed by gender performance, all while being unable to escape the script orchestrated by colonial power and patriarchy. Gender performativity becomes both her armor and her prison.

3.2. Survival strategies of marginalized women

In colonial contexts, individual identity is fractured by cultural conflict—colonial subjects are unable to fully identify with native traditions, yet also find themselves excluded from the cultural system of the colonizers. The mixed-race identity of Zhou Jijie and the subaltern perspective of the maid Ni’er together construct a polyphonic narrative of female destiny in the colony, thoroughly deconstructing the oversimplified logic that “female tragedy stems from a singular form of oppression.”

As a Sino-Portuguese mestiza, Zhou Jijie is a concrete embodiment of hybridity. Her exotic features and foreign allure are consumed by colonial elites as commodities symbolizing “Oriental charm,” while within the Chinese community, she is subtly marginalized for her “impure” lineage. In the novel, her existence is marked by a strong symbolic quality: at social gatherings, male guests praise her for looking like a “Persian princess,” effectively reducing her to a spectacle of exotic curiosity. Yet when she attempts to escape her marginal status through marriage, she is rejected by a wealthy Chinese family precisely because of her mixed-race identity. This predicament of being a “double other” exposes the racial hierarchies embedded in colonial society—mixed-race women are simultaneously objects of desire and alienated outsiders.

Through this character, Eileen Chang reveals that the so-called “cultural fusion” promised by colonial modernity is merely a veneer masking violent assimilation. Hybridity, rather than bringing freedom, traps women in a more intricate web of oppression.

In contrast, the maid Ni’er presents a different picture of survival through her position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Resistance among marginalized groups often manifests not as grand revolutionary action, but as micropolitical practices. Her understated comment about Ge Weilong—“She’s a pitiful person”—carries sharp moral judgment beneath its seemingly casual tone. Ni’er clearly recognizes that Ge Weilong’s descent is not a matter of personal failure, but the inevitable consequence of a colonial pleasure economy that consumes the weak. Yet as a working-class woman, Ni’er possesses neither the capital to participate in power games nor the voice to alter the rules. Her survival depends on silence and passive observation. Her condition—clear-eyed but powerless—precisely exposes the structural violence of colonial society: class entrapment deprives women at the bottom of even the right to self-deception. They are forced to confront raw exploitation without ever having a platform to speak. The contrast between Zhou Jijie and Ni’er illustrates that under the intersecting oppressions of colonialism and patriarchy, women—regardless of class—cannot escape being disciplined or marginalized. Mixed-race women are caught in the fissures of cultural identity; lower-class women are imprisoned by the iron walls of class hierarchy; middle-class women like Ge Weilong become sacrificial offerings in the economy of desire. With her stark and unsentimental prose, Eileen Chang declares: in the cage of colonial modernity, women’s so-called “freedom of choice” is nothing more than a pre-scripted performance imposed by power. What is labeled as “fate” is in fact the aestheticized expression of systemic violence.

4. Desire economy and biopolitics

4.1. The economics of desire in colonial pleasure grounds

The pleasure culture of colonial Hong Kong is far from a mere surface spectacle of extravagance; rather, it is the ultimate manifestation of the capitalist economics of desire. In *Capital*, Karl Marx unveils how capitalism, through the “fetishism of commodities,” alienates human relationships into cold exchanges between things. Subjectivity is stripped away, and people become abstract symbols—quantifiable, exchangeable. This logic reaches its apex in Mrs. Liang’s manipulation of others: she commodifies Ge Weilong’s youth and beauty, meticulously packaging her body as a luxury good to be traded within the elite colonial marketplace. The novel’s recurring depictions of lavish clothing, jewelry, and banquet scenes function as ritualized performances of commodity fetishism—costumes are not merely markers of identity, but literal price tags denoting a woman’s “market value.” For instance, when Ge Weilong first arrives at Mrs. Liang’s residence and struggles with the temptation of a wardrobe full of fine dresses— “Just looking won’t hurt”—it foreshadows how material desire begins to erode her moral defenses. Mrs. Liang’s “transformation project” reshapes Weilong from a schoolgirl into a “bespoke commodity” through tailored qipaos and pearl necklaces. This commodification of the body is not incidental; it is an inevitable byproduct of colonial capitalism. In the eyes of colonizers, the value of an Oriental woman does not stem from her human dignity, but from her ability to circulate efficiently within the chain of economic desire.

The hedonism of the pleasure world represents capitalism in its ultimate, most decadent form. Max Weber noted that once capitalism sheds the cloak of religious asceticism, pleasure becomes its internal engine. The character of George Qiao (Qiao Qiqiao) embodies this logic: a playboy who thrives within the desire economy funded by women, cloaking exploitation in the guise of emotional play. He neither produces nor assumes moral responsibility, yet his charming looks and elusive demeanor render him a “scarce resource” in the pleasure arena. When he tells Ge Weilong, “I can’t promise you love, but I can promise you happiness,” the mechanics of the desire economy are laid bare: emotion is reduced to a transaction of instant gratification, while “love” becomes a rhetorical façade sustaining the deal. The colonial pleasure ground thus degenerates into a financial exchange of desire: women’s bodies are fragmented into marketable “shares” (beauty, eloquence, sexual skill), while men speculate using emotional capital. Within this fictitious romantic narrative, both parties complete a redistribution of capital.

This frenzy of desire inevitably leads to destruction, and the metaphor of “incense ashes” (chen xiang xie) reveals its fatal trajectory. Walter Benjamin’s theory of the “aura’s decay” argues that modernity reduces all sacredness to reproducible commodities, annihilating individuality on the assembly line of mass production. Ge Weilong’s fate mirrors this process: like a burning stick of incense, she sustains the glittering illusion of colonial grandeur by consuming herself, only to be left with “boundless desolation and horror.” The image of the “sapphire porcelain plate holding a cactus, like a nest of green snakes” in Mrs. Liang’s home foreshadows the toxicity of this transaction—beneath the beauty lies a venomous sting. When Ge Weilong ironically refers to herself as a “prostitute,” she is in fact acknowledging the ultimate alienation wrought by biopolitics: her value exists only within the shelf life of her youth; once her beauty fades, she will be ruthlessly discarded by the logic of capital. In the desire economy of colonial modernity, female subjectivity becomes nothing more than ash on the altar of commodity fetishism. The so-called “free market” is nothing but a brutal parable of power’s disciplinary mechanisms.

4.2. The power struggle in the marriage trap

Marriage in *The First Incense Burner* is far from a romantic contract; it is a power apparatus colluding between patriarchy and colonial capitalism. Power is not only embedded in macro systems but also seeps into the individual's life through private spheres such as family and marriage. The conspiracy between Mrs. Liang and George Qiao (Qiao Qiqiao) is a typical manifestation of this power mechanism: the former uses marriage as a tool to bind Ge Weilong as a long-term source of capital, while the latter, as a playboy, evades responsibility and enjoys the dual benefits of emotional and economic rewards. Mrs. Liang's marriage strategy—"Wait until she can't earn money to support the family, and you can divorce her then"—tears apart the emotional façade of marriage, exposing its essence as a "long-term contract of selling oneself." The legitimacy of this contract does not stem from love but from the institutionalized guarantee of male privilege under colonial law: British colonial divorce laws allowed men to easily dissolve marriages on the grounds of "adultery," while women had to endure both moral and economic sanctions. Thus, marriage becomes the legalized channel for the circulation of capital, with Ge Weilong's body and emotions segmented into "sexual resources" to be paid for in installments.

Ge Weilong's "voluntary sacrifice" to marriage exposes how ideology maintains the legitimacy of oppressive structures through false exaltation. According to Slavoj Žižek, the efficacy of ideology lies in its ability to imbue exploitative relationships with "sublime meaning," leading subjects to willingly participate in their own alienation. Ge Weilong, fully aware of George Qiao's playboy nature, convinces herself with the phrase, "I love you, what does it matter?" She thus reconstructs the exploitative logic of the colonial pleasure ground into a romantic narrative of "sacrificing for love." Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "self-deception" further illuminates how women often beautify oppressive choices as free will through self-deception. For instance, Ge Weilong claims "love is blind," which actually masks her fear of economic dependence and identity anxiety. This "complicit existence" marks the complete transformation of her identity: from a disciplined object to a tool for the reproduction of power structures—through marriage, she consolidates Mrs. Liang's social capital and provides financial support to George Qiao, becoming a crucial cog in the perpetuation of colonial patriarchy.

The violence of marriage reaches its peak in colonial modernity, and its essence lies in the systematic erasure of female subjectivity. Ge Weilong's marriage is a gendered reenactment of this logic: her body and emotions become raw materials for the reproduction of colonial capital, while the marriage relationship serves as the legalized shell of exploitation. At the end of the novel, Ge Weilong's self-deprecating remark, calling herself a "prostitute," actually acknowledges the commodified nature of marriage—her "wife" status is merely a rhetorical variant of high-class prostitution. In the order colluding between colonialism and patriarchy, marriage is not a haven for women but a battleground of power struggles: if a woman refuses to play the exploited role, she is cast outside societal norms; if she accepts the rules, she inevitably becomes a co-conspirator in the oppressive structure. This irresolvable contradiction is the deepest violence of colonial modernity against women—it casts shackles as golden rings in the name of "free choice."

4.3. The inevitability of destruction

The metaphor of "agarwood chips" runs throughout the text, indicating that the ultimate fate of the carnival of desire is a barren wasteland following self-consumption. Ge Weilong's fate is like a burning pile of agarwood chips: she fuels it with her youth and beauty, briefly illuminating the flashy illusions of the colonial pleasure ground, only to be left with "boundless desolation and terror." In the novel, she self-deprecates as a "prostitute," which in reality acknowledges the ultimate alienation of her body—her value as a person has been reduced to a tradeable commodity within her "youthful

shelf life," and once her beauty fades, she will be heartlessly discarded by the logic of power. Zhang Ailing uses the image of "agarwood chips" to reveal that the exploitation of women in colonial modernity is essentially a cycle of "burning—ashes": they maintain the system's operation through self-sacrifice, while the system offers only emptiness in return.

The "graveyard" metaphor in the Liang residence further deconstructs the false glamour of the pleasure ground. When Ge Weilong first leaves the Liang residence, she looks back and sees "the white house turned into a graveyard," a scene that intertextually references the ghostly mansion in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, implying that the luxurious lifestyle of colonial elites is merely a decoration for death. The ornate iron gates, secret rooms, and banquet halls of the Liang residence are death stages where colonial power and patriarchy conspire: women are disciplined into "beautiful corpses," their vibrant lives hollowed out, leaving only shells for public display. For instance, Mrs. Liang's residence is perpetually filled with the "decadent air of the late Qing dynasty," a sense of decay out of time, hinting that the pleasure economy is fundamentally a reincarnation of old power structures. Colonial modernity, under the guise of "progress," covers up violence, while the graveyard imagery of the Liang residence tears away this disguise, exposing its life-devouring essence.

The cyclical nature of destruction in colonial modernity presents an inescapable fate. Marx, in *Capital*, reveals that capitalism sustains its system by continually reproducing exploitative relationships, and Ge Weilong's tragedy is a gendered reenactment of this logic: when she grows old, loses her beauty, and her trade value fades, a new "Ge Weilong" will inevitably be thrust into the pleasure ground, perpetuating the chain of desire-driven economics. At the novel's conclusion, as Ge Weilong and Qiao Qiqiao drive through the market, they look out at "the desolate sky and sea—boundless desolation, boundless terror," a scene that suggests the insatiable consumption of colonial modernity is endless. Based on Zhang Ailing's bleak aesthetics, in the collusion of power discipline and capital logic, female subjectivity is nothing more than fuel for the system's operation—they briefly bloom only to illuminate deeper darkness. The so-called "freedom of choice" is, in fact, a delicate lie constructed by power to disguise oppression, while "fate" is the poetic mask colonial modernity places on systemic violence.

5. Conclusion

Ge Weilong's downfall appears to be the inevitable outcome of fate, yet within it, there remains a faint glimmer of resistance from female subjectivity. She is acutely aware of her own process of alienation, yet chooses to sustain her survival through "self-deception." This contradiction exposes the dual dilemma of women in postcolonial societies: they are unable to escape the disciplinary power structures, yet at the same time, they find it difficult to entirely relinquish their desire for subjectivity. Ge Weilong's "voluntary sacrifice" is a microcosm of this mechanism—her choice is both the result of oppression and a silent form of resistance to it.

In the context of modern society, the collusion between transnational capital, consumerism, and the new patriarchy continues to subject contemporary women to the discipline of "body politics." Zhang Ailing's bleak aesthetics remind us that any discussion of female liberation must confront the complexity of power structures, rather than simply resorting to moral critique or romantic ideals.

At the same time, did Zhang Ailing leave room for the possibility of resistance beyond deconstruction? At the novel's conclusion, when Ge Weilong self-deprecates as a "prostitute," this self-recognition may be the final flicker of subjectivity: she uses irony to expose the absurdity of the power logic, thereby opening a crack in the void. Although this resistance is as faint as ashes, it injects a potential for transcendence into the "cyclical deconstruction"—while acknowledging fate, it refuses to ascribe any sublime meaning to it. Therefore, although Ge Weilong has not escaped the fate that women have struggled against for millennia, she continues to cycle through control, constraint, damage, and humiliation. However, her faint resistance also suggests that, within the long history of

women questioning power structures, there are always those who follow, persistently battling fate and forming a “cyclical” questioning and deconstruction of traditional female destinies.

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