

Traveler and Stranger: The Juxtaposed Identity in Eileen Chang's An Account of an Alien Land

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Abstract. Eileen Chang's fictional works are mostly contained within the stable urban interior of Shanghai and Hong Kong, so her unfinished travelogue *An Account of an Alien Land* (2010) stands out as a rare work structured around spatial movement. Through close reading of selected passages, recurrent imagery, and tonal shifts in the narration, this paper examines the protagonist, Mrs. Shen, who embodies two distinct identities during her journey from Shanghai to rural Wenzhou in search of her lover. She is both a traveler and a stranger, moving with linear purpose toward a destination that promises a hoped-for sense of belonging; unable to be at home culturally or mentally anywhere. It is this strangeness that the paper argues the trip does not dispel but confirms: physical movement itself is evidence of her rootlessness and the two identities remain side by side without cancelling each other out. This unfinished, partial nature of the manuscript also reflects this unsettledness, suggesting that for the modern subject estrangement cannot simply be corrected by embarking on the road.

Keywords: Eileen Chang, *An Account of an Alien Land*, traveler and stranger, modern displacement

1. Introduction

Here, travelogues are not a typical genre in Eileen Chang's oeuvre, as her main works are generally set in the familiar, fixed locations of Shanghai and Hong Kong [1]. One such exception is *An Account of an Alien Land* (*Yixiang Ji*), published posthumously in 2010, which remains unfinished, breaking off mid-sentence [2].

This journey is obviously a difficult one for the woman, who is called "Mrs. Shen" in the first two chapters but switches to "I" thereafter: she changes conveyances several times, arrives at strange villages, and meets various strangers. The book is not a typical travelogue as a journey of discovery or self-enrichment, but is permeated by unease and disorientation, by a constant foreignness.

In this paper, it will be suggested that the protagonist's identity is best viewed as a superimposition of two types: traveler and stranger. The traveler is characterized by his or her physical movement, visible sub-goal and the desire to attain a future location where a sense of emotional anchorage is provided. The stranger, on the other hand, is penetrated by cultural and psychological displacement, by her inability to feel at home wherever she may be. This paper argues that her journey to Wenzhou never solves the issue of her estrangement; rather I would argue, the

journey itself is testament to the fact that she will stay an outsider. A close reading of the salient episodes and the narrative voice demonstrates how the movement can reveal rather than resolve the "stubbornness" of contemporary dislocation. This kind of sense of unfinishedness is reinforced by the fact that this manuscript is incomplete.

2. She as a traveler

From the beginning, Mrs. Shen's traveler identity is not a given and does not manifest itself as a label. Instead, it forms slowly, through small physical changes as she moves, through time, and through the emotional ups and downs along the way. Here, "traveler" is a term that refers to a mobile subject who leaves with a clear purpose but keeps bumping into indecision throughout the journey. From her journey as described in *An Account of an Alien Land*, she exhibits three intertwining traits. As to direction, she has a very linear and focused movement, which points to a relatively clear end. Spatially, her traveler status is fleeting and tentative because of her constant changing of conveyances and scenery. On the level of motivation, she is constantly going back to the need to belong, which leads her to leave but also produces her constant frustration. Thus, when the traveler chooses to traverse the world, her "traveler identity" is not just her physical state of being "travel" but, more, the subjective will to mend an emotional breach by means of mobility.

Her path, from Shanghai to Wenzhou, is clear, linear, relentless, vivid in detail: but, at the level of the text, the reader never knows if she actually arrives at her destination.

Mrs. Shen is a woman in movement already, from the first pages. The fact that she's leaving is communicated with a sense of urgency:

Borrowed my second aunt's alarm clock, and got on the road before daylight. I went to my aunt's room before I went to bed because my aunt was awake all night to my noises. So all at once it was a scene of chaos... [3] (Chapter 1)

This is no easy sailing. The haste and resolution are indicated by the borrowed alarm clock, the pre-dawn hour, the disruption of the aunt's sleep and the "scene of chaos." The trip is described as one she has always wanted to take.

The sense of a sort of ballistic, directed trajectory is reinforced as well by the other line: "I was heading toward him in a straight line, like a rocket shooting out, racing toward the moon in the dark night" [3] (Chapter 2). The rocket simile is telling; it not only encapsulates the speed of her leaving but also the one-directional nature of her trajectory, focused on her target. Mrs. Shen's travel is not a wandering or a drifting; it has a target: "him." Although the moon is unreachable and remote, it is targeted by a rocket on a fixed trajectory. In this case the journey is literally turned into a quest of the heart.

But doubts creep in early on: "The night was so long that halfway through, I could hardly tell that I had set out on the road" [3] (Chapter 2). This exposes the inner friction within the traveler. Despite her efforts, doubt hovers about her, and sometimes she wonders if she is on the right track. This uncertainty permeates throughout the narrative. The traveler's identity, then, can never be completely assured; she is haunted by the very strangeness that she seeks to put behind her.

The place names and the modes of transportation are some of the most noticeable in *An Account of an Alien Land*. Mrs. Shen starts from Shanghai and travels through Jiaxun, Hangzhou and Yongli and several other smaller stations, the names of which are barely legible. She endlessly alternates her conveyances: ordinary trains, makeshift trains that are converted from freight cars, wheelbarrows, even walking. This constant switching not only dramatizes the journey on the level of the narrative, but also helps to create Mrs. Shen's identity as a traveler. She is a perpetual "traveler," each arrival is followed by another departure.

"Most stations seemed to have nothing but a place name" [3] (Chapter 1) – these stations are just points of transit with no real meaning, whereas certainty is what she is looking for. "they said 'Jiaxun,' but there was no sign of any 'Jiaxun' anywhere" [3] (Chapter 1), the place name 'Jiaxun' is an empty name, not a real place. The traveler cometh, the traveler goeth, he never abideth. The strange treatment of space results in her never really gaining a foothold as she continues to "arrive."

The vehicles she rides are continually downgrading:

This little train to Yongli was once a freight train and people used to squat on the floor. The unicycle twisted its way, step by step, bound footed like a woman, feeling its way along walls as it traveled a whole day through the strangely beautiful landscape [3]. (Chapters 3 and 13)

It is her travel story, and it also represents the vital way in which she strives for what she wants. The road is much more difficult than she expected, and her modes of travel break down, one by one. She leaves Shanghai on an ordinary train, then changes trains onto the little train "originally a freight car" where she spends the night in households that are "halfway between village and town" and lastly rides a unicycle, "twisted step by step, like a woman with bound feet, slow and jolting" [3] (Chapters 2–13). The change of Mrs. Shen's own words from "lodging" (Tousu) to "staying overnight" (Jiesu) regularly reminds the reader that Mrs. Shen is never at home. The names of places become metaphorical, the deeds become less refined and the lodgings become provisional. All of this contributes to the disassembly and ephemerality of her traveling self.

How does Mrs. Shen come to make this long journey? She is going to find 'him' on the surface, but there is an emotional impetus. Eileen Chang's essay "Pleasures in Apartment Life" ("Gongyu Shenghuo Jiqu") notes:

Many people who live in the city enjoy the quiet and tranquility of the country. They dream of someday retiring to a pastoral existence tending bees, cultivating vegetables and living the simple life [4].

This is a common urban psychology: the noise of the great city is not enough to fill one's inner emptiness and rather sustains a fantasized desire for a rural, simple place elsewhere [5].

Chang then goes on to say that "the apartment is the most ideal place to escape from the world" [4]. The comment might sound like a contradiction, but it is the quintessence of the life in the city today — an apartment is a kind of filter for the outer world, and it is also a filter between people.

This feeling of alienation is echoed in the beginning of *An Account of an Alien Land*, where Mrs. Shen's Shanghai home is painted. Shadows fall as she leaves; it reads:

However the master switch to the stairway lights had been switched off. We couldn't see a thing as we left the house. We three wandered around, along the walls, calling to each other. No one was afraid of losing one another, just bumping into one another, we were polite and not that well acquainted [3] (Chapter 1)

This passage tells us that even in a familiar urban home, there are formalities and distances in interpersonal relationships. The night after the lights go out is not only dark, but also symbolic of the coldness and isolation of urban existence. They are less afraid of "losing each other" than of "bumping into each other"; they are more likely to stay away from each other than to risk an awkward collision. This distance makes each metropolitane more or less an island.

With physical movement she attempts to move out of this cocoon to experience a real emotional connection. Thus the travel in *An Account of an Alien Land* is not a spontaneous impulse, but an overall movement through such a lonely, alienated life as is to be found in the urban life of Shanghai. She hopes there's a place that she can "anchor her feelings" and with which she can correct the spiritual void of being polite but not very familiar.

3. She as a stranger

After analyzing her corporeal displacement as a 'traveler' and her continued 'search for belonging,' this paper will now focus on her interiorized sense of alienation. This paper finds that, no matter where she goes, she remains a stranger, living with a mixture of alienation and loneliness that is an integral part of the culture.

When travel is the essence of the traveler, being a stranger is the essence of the stranger. In the course of her journey, in *An Account of an Alien Land*, she traverses a series of unfamiliar landscapes, and she also discovers that these scenes are inaccessible to her both aesthetically and culturally.

That blue, there is no such a color in the Chinese porcelain; the blue-green of "green-blue landscape painting" is darker, and the "blue stream" in "The peach blossom spring" is lighter. Even in the dreams of the Chinese it has never appeared. So it runs coldly, away from China [3] (Chapter 2)

Here she doesn't just say that the river is beautiful or strangely attractive. This is not a world of strange customs; it's a more radical predicament: "coldly outside China," she perceives this scenery as lying outside the entire frame of reference of Chinese culture, from porcelain, from landscape painting, from literary myth, even from dreams. She is faced with a world that is outside her cultural imagination, and thus she becomes a stranger to her own culture [6].

One other curious detail is noticed at a country wedding feast: "One near this side, pale and watery, was a large piece of bean curd with many flies stuck on it" [3] (Chapter 8). The pale watery tofu, with flies on it, contrasts with the refinement of the metropolis she has lived in. These are the little details, spread out on the trip, that make her an outsider, one who cannot come to terms with the coarseness of rural living; she responds like a stranger, viscerally and without assimilation.

It seems only logical, then, that her experiences with others are tinged with cultural dissonance as well. She has a sense of alienation on several occasions, in relation to the people she encounters on her journey.

"But I suddenly became an Englishman and it was as though there was no way that I could speak without introducing myself" [3] (Chapter 2). She's in China, but she feels like she's become a stranger, and the only way to talk to anyone is to first be introduced properly. This line conveys the profound social disorientation of the stranger: She cannot spontaneously relate even to those who speak her language and are her own countrymen.

When Mr. Min, who travels with them, catches up by rickshaw to return a towel she had left behind, which is wet and pink, he and she become awkward (Chapter 10). Being one of her own possessions, the pink towel stands out among the rustic hues of the countryside environment and its sudden re-emergence makes both Mr. Min and Mrs. Shen feel uneasy, revealing her alienation from her friends. She is not outright rejected, but she is always the one who does not really fit in, and thus she feels like a stranger.

The ultimate motivation for Mrs. Shen's departure from Shanghai was a desire for a sense of "belonging," to overcome the island-like quality of urban life, where people are "polite but not very familiar," by moving around [7]. However, this yearning is never satisfied on the way, and in fact is intensified again and again in *An Account of an Alien Land*. But it is not the trip that makes Mrs. Shen lonely. It is a loneliness that continues throughout and is even intensified by the trip.

My two feet are less than three inches from the ground but yet forever are in the air [1]. (Chapter 13)

This line is about the way travel physically affects her, as she is always moving, never letting her feet hit solid ground on trains, freight cars or unicycles. But this "less than three inches" is a highly symbolic phenomenon. When her feet cannot reach the ground, it is as if they are floating. She is not in Shanghai, but not yet at an imagined place of belonging, somewhere along the road, attached to no end. This hanging up results in a loneliness that is all the more profound: she is without a base, she is a traveler on the surface.

This loneliness is echoed in another sentence from the same chapter on a more cosmic level:

The sky is wide everywhere, the earth is open. There is only a hundred and eight thousand miles away a burning, basin size sun, facing me cheek to cheek, blushing and red, confronting me from such great distance [3]. (Chapter 13)

At first glance this suggests an open scene which is very evocative of the countryside. The sky is big and the land is free, implying the possibility of limitless space and freedom. Yet, in this vast space, the only "thing that truly exists" is that sun that is "facing me cheek to cheek" and "confronting me from a great distance," which is "blushing red" and "hot." The heat and "blushing red" of the sun create a tension: the wider the scope of vision and the more blinding the sun, the more the narrator's smallness and loneliness are revealed. Her relationship with the only "real" thing in the world is neither intimate nor integrated, but one of alienated confrontation. This captures precisely the outsider's experience: stranded in the wilderness with no one to rely on, exposed only to a blazing, remote and even menacing sun.

In sum, the loneliness of *An Account of an Alien Land* is not one that travel can "cure." Indeed, the physical pleasures of traveling only remind Mrs. Shen again and again of her estrangement, which she already carried within her: feet dangling, the smallness of the self in a wide world, and so on. Her quest for belonging not only goes unfulfilled through her journey, but is made impossible. Loneliness is not the first nor the last step on the trip, but rather the undercurrent and backdrop through which it all passes.

4. The juxtaposition: traveler and stranger

Now as a traveler, she always yearns to get to the other side and find her home. But she can never settle down, wherever she goes, since she is a stranger. This study compares these seemingly contradictory identities and examines their interplay.

On the surface it may appear that "traveler" and "stranger" are two sides of the same coin. But with *An Account of an Alien Land*, readers are forced to view them as mutually exclusive or even opposed.

As a traveler, she is active and physical, looking towards a future destination and believing that moving can fulfill her primary purpose and end her strangeness by bringing her to a place of belonging. By contrast, as a stranger, she is passive and mental; that is, she feels she cannot belong anywhere and that every move is like another confirmation of the fact that none of them is her home. The traveler proceeds; the stranger stays stuck in a never-ending present of solitude.

The goal itself thus remains unattainable. The journey is supposed to put an end to her feeling out of place, but each step reinforces her homelessness; she travels toward a destination, yet that destination only confirms her homelessness. Mrs. Shen is the narrator and uses the first person, but she tends to stand back from herself and her own world from a certain objective point of view. She is at the same time a participant (the traveler) and an observer (the stranger). Even when she talks about things that she didn't enjoy, she is cool, analytical, almost clinical. Such a narrative voice enables the smart juxtaposition of the two identities to be naturalized.

An Account of an Alien Land is, to an extent, tinged with a certain sadness, as it is unfinished as a travelogue. In it, the alienation and loneliness that the female protagonist has always felt cannot be dispelled by traveling. This is similar to the real-life Eileen Chang, who is the prototype of "Mrs. Shen" and who was expressing her own loneliness and lack of belonging by creating this character. In a world like this, where travel is more common and further than ever, people's paths are overlapping more than ever, and yet, strangely enough, their sense of belonging is becoming more tenuous. But for Mrs. Shen, this one trip cannot help her "find herself," cannot help her eliminate "strangeness." The stranger's plight and her loss of belonging become a permanent condition.

An Account of an Alien Land was originally an unfinished manuscript, which ends abruptly in the middle of the journey and in the middle of the narrative. The reader does not know whether the narrator reaches him, or whether their meeting can assuage her loneliness and alienation. This unfinished ending, as it were, is an indication of the disjointed identity of the protagonist, a traveler who never fully arrives, a stranger who never fully departs.

The binary opposition between traveler and stranger is not a binary opposition, but a co-existence of both identities, which merge into each other. Mrs. Shen is not a traveler first and stranger later, nor does she fluctuate between the two. At every moment of the journey she is both. The "stranger" is the shadow of the traveler; the "traveler" is the stranger's attempt to become something else.

5. Conclusion

An Account of an Alien Land is a unique piece from Eileen Chang's oeuvre. The mostly unpolished prose examines and mirrors modern displacement in twentieth-century Chinese literature. Chang's use of traveler and stranger in juxtaposing these two identities questions the notion of comfort in mobility and belonging. The protagonist starts with hope but does not get rid of her cultural and emotional displacement; it is intensified.

How does this relate to the larger issues that Eileen Chang deals with? In her career she has been writing works of trapped characters trapped in marriage, trapped in families, trapped at certain historical moments. *An Account of an Alien Land* is a different kind of trap: the trap of movement itself. It is the very mobility of the traveler that is the evidence of the stranger's homelessness. In Chang's later novels, a similar phenomenon occurs and many protagonists translate themselves from one language and one location to another and rewrite their own stories, but the stranger within does not vanish.

At best, Mrs. Shen is a traveler and she is a stranger. There is no conflict here; they coexist in tension. She goes from Shanghai to Wenzhou, but her travel does not help to ease the strangeness she already experienced in the city, and only adds to her loneliness. *An Account of an Alien Land* rejects the comforting tale of the journey to belonging. What it does indicate, however, is that for the modern subject, being a stranger is not a condition that can be overcome through traveling itself, but a condition one has to learn to live with.

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