

Western Characters in Eileen Chang's 1940s Novels

Haoyi Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Journalism and Communication, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, 510000, China*

a. wanghy368@mail2.sysu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The 1940s was the early stage of Eileen Chang's creative career. During this period, she created many Western characters in her novels, especially seven works, namely *Shame*, *Amah!*, *Cycle of Traps*, *When I was Young*, *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, *Aloeswood Incense: The Second Brazier*, *Red Rose*, *White Rose*, and *The Creation of a Century*. Adopting the theory of comparative literary figurativism and post-colonialism, this paper is based on these seven fictional texts involving Western characters and analyses them in terms of writing tendency, generative mechanism and double entailment. The study reveals that the Western characters in Eileen Chang's novels show the characteristics of "de-familiarisation" and "decolonisation" in terms of writing tendency and are generated under the influence of Eileen Chang's personal experience and collective imagination, of which the personal experience includes the living environment and reading experience. These exotic images have the double connotation of speaking of "self" and "other", which can reflect the homogeneity of self and other and the dissimilarity with some post-colonial characteristics.

Keywords: Eileen Chang, western characterisation, writing tendencies, generative mechanisms, self and other

1. Introduction

Many Western characters appeared in the texts of Eileen Chang's novels written in the 1940s. Her traditional and modern family background, educational experiences in Chinese private and Western-style schools, and long experience of living in a colonial and semi-colonial life endowed her with a unique perspective of observing Western culture, making the Western characters in her novels present distinctive features.

At present, there are fewer studies on the Western image in Eileen Chang's novels. Most of them analyse the identity of the Other and the Self from a figurative point of view; almost all are in Chinese [1-3]. Thus, there is a problem with a few studies and a single theoretical perspective. To break this limitation, this paper takes comparative literary figuratology and post-colonialism theory as the research perspectives, based on seven texts: *Shame*, *Amah!*, *Cycle of Traps*, *When I was Young*, *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, *Aloeswood Incense: The Second Brazier*, *Red Rose*, *White Rose*, and *The Creation of a Century*, and analyses the Western characters in Eileen Chang's novels in terms of the tendency of writing, the mechanism of generating, and the double implication.

Comparative literary image theory studies the image of a foreign country in the literature of a country, believing that the image of a foreign country implies the imagination of different peoples

towards each other, influenced by the personal and collective imagination of the writers and the society, and has the double implication of self and other. In China, this kind of research studies the image of the Chinese in the writings of foreign writers. Post-colonial theory holds that Western thought, culture and literature are permeated by a strong sense of national superiority and are considered to dominate world culture, while non-Western Third World or Eastern cultures are relegated to the periphery, playing the role of the West's "other" in contrast.

The 1940s belonged to the early stage of Eileen Chang's creative period, and the examination of the Western characters in her novels at this stage not only enriches and supplements the study of Eileen Chang but also has important comparative and reference significance for analysing the works of other writers whose creations have involved the Western image in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature since the May Fourth Movement.

2. Writing Tendencies: "De-familiarisation" and "Decolonisation"

Taking an overview of the Western characters in the seven texts, especially the Caucasian characters, whether it is Gerda in *Shame, Amah!*, Thomson in *The Chain of Circles*, Cynthia in *When I was Young*, or Mrs. Ash in *The Red Rose and the White Rose*, they are not fundamentally different from the Chinese men and women of the urban cities that Eileen Chang is used to portraying, except for the depiction of their appearance which highlights their exotic features. Most male characters are shrewd, selfish, penny-pinching, and irresponsible, while the female characters are the bearers of tragic fates with varying degrees of psychopathology. In the context of modern Western-centred theories, Eileen Chang's "de-familiarisation" of the human flaws of Westerners is undoubtedly a kind of dismantling of colonial discourse and a rebellion against the idealised image of the "Yang Daren (Westerner)" that is found in many novels of the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican era. It is also a rebellion against the idealised image of the "Yang Daren" in the novels of the late Qing and early Republican period.

Using Gerda's example in *Shame, Amah!*, Eileen Chang describes him as a handsome and beautiful Caucasian male but intentionally adds some irony in portraying his appearance. Firstly, Eileen Chang highlights the red bloodlines on his skin, compares his face to uncooked meat, and then describes his face as a kind of especially nourishing egg that has not fully hatched its chicks [4]. Eileen Chang's use of half-cooked and muddy food as a look metaphor gives people a sense of discomfort and disgust, implicitly deconstructing Golda's aesthetic superiority as a beautiful man. In terms of character, Golda is hypocritical and stingy, suspicious and suspicious, lewd and debauched. Although on the surface he is friendly and enthusiastic about his maid, A Xiao, he is afraid that he will be taken advantage of by her, and if he has something to do on the previous day and lets her go off work early, he will make up for it the next day; when he sees the bread left over by his son, he suspects that it is stolen from him; he is afraid that if A Xiao does not finish washing his clothes on the same day, he will soak all the sheets and pillows, shirts, trousers, and so on, into the bathtub. In addition, he was not selective and irresponsible towards women. Whenever he invited his lover to dinner, he had a piece of beef stewed in soup and then fried, which was counted as two dishes, and if his lover came for the first time, there was also a sweet pancake, but there was none for the second time. These bad characters make Golda present a great similarity with some Chinese feudal male characters portrayed by Eileen Chang in other works, such as Jize Jiang in *The Golden Lock*, which breaks the impression of decency and superiority of Westerners in the eyes of the Chinese in recent times.

It is worth noting that a special category of exotic characters, namely, mixed-race characters, appeared in Eileen Chang's novels, such as Qiqiao Qiao and Jijie Zhou in *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, and Miss Aish in *The Red Rose and the White Rose*. In the social scene of Shanghai and Hong Kong in the 1930s and 1940s, mixed-race children were marginal characters, unable to

integrate into the racially distinctive group of pure-blooded foreigners and having difficulty mingling with traditional Chinese people. They had difficulties confirming their cultural identities and thus developed a complex cultural psychology. Zhang Eileen directly presents their uncertain and dilemmatic state of existence and completes her writing on the de-familiarisation of mixed-race children.

3. Double Implications: Speaking of “Self” and “Other”

The figurative theory of comparative literature suggests that “all images originate in a conscious awareness of the relationship between the self and the ‘other’, the native and the ‘foreign’” [5]. The exotic image in the writer’s writing is the speech of the Other and the refraction of the self, and the Western characters in Eileen Chang’s novels also have such a double implication, which is analysed in terms of the identity and dissimilarity between the self and the Other embodied in them.

3.1. Identity of Self and Other

As mentioned, Eileen Chang tended to de-familiarise and decolonise when writing about Western characters, making the image of the exotic Other and the nation’s self-image show homogeneity.

Taking Roger Ann Baeden in *The Second Fragrance of Sunken Fragrance* as an example, although he is British, he is not much different from other middle-class intellectuals in his native Hong Kong. Roger’s living environment is not tolerant and open because he is white, but becomes more and more ignorant and conservative because everyone lives by the book and sets in their ways. Therefore, he has obviously done nothing wrong. However, he is criticised and ostracised because of his wife’s sexual ignorance, and he has no choice but to commit suicide after realising that he is desperate for his present situation. In Eileen Chang’s novel text, the survival pressure caused by the harsh public opinion environment and social morality that kills people’s hope for life and love is very common. The victims are not only foreigners like Roger but also natives like Qiqiao Cao in *The Golden Lock*, Shijun Shen in *Half a Life*, and Nixi in *The Chain of Events*. All these characters, regardless of their nationalities, suffer from the heavy pressure of life on the body and mind and are in a long period of pain and depression, showing the same state of existence in their lives. They show homogeneity in their state of existence.

It is worth noting that the homogeneity between the Western characters and the local images in Eileen Chang’s writing is so prominent that it sometimes even arouses the dissatisfaction of critics. For example, under the pseudonym “Xunyu”, Fu Lei criticised *The Chain of Events*, arguing that the Spanish nuns in it were too similar to the old Chinese nuns in old China and did not conform to reality [6]! This can also be taken as circumstantial evidence of the homogeneity of the image of the self and the other in the text of Eileen Chang’s novels.

3.2. The Dissimilarity of the Self and the Other

Apart from sameness, the Western characters in Eileen Chang’s novels can also reflect the dissimilarity between the self and the other, which is mainly expressed through the potential contrast between the native characters and the Western characters. In *When I was Young*, although Ruliang Pan is a patriotic student, he does not have good feelings towards Chinese people and fanatically worships everything foreign, showing some Orientalist tendencies. For example, he considers it vulgar to pour warm wine from a tin pot into a teacup with no handle, as his own father does, yet walking into a bar and sitting on a high stool to drink whisky without soda, as foreigners do, is taken for granted. This subconscious contrast sharply highlights the dissimilarity between the self and the other. In his book *Orientalism*, Said points out that the rhetorical strategies associated

with the East are commensurate with their European counterparts but at an absolute disadvantage [7]. The foreign country is a utopian existence in the eyes of Pan Rulian, which is why he falls in love with the Russian girl Cynthia. It is not Cynthia herself that he loves, but rather the projection of his inner fantasy of the beauty of a foreign culture, which is shattered when Cynthia tells him about her family's predicament and eventually marries a lower-ranking Russian inspector, and Pan Ruliang realises that Cynthia, as a woman, is essentially the same as his mother and sister and that the dissimilarities of the self and the other are ultimately subsumed by the homogeneity. This is also characteristic of all Western images in Eileen Chang's novels.

4. Generative Mechanisms: Individual Experience and Collective Imagination

4.1. Personal Experience

First, Eileen Chang's living environment gave her the vision to observe Western culture equally. Born in Shanghai, Eileen Chang received Western education from primary school and later studied at the University of Hong Kong. Most of her novels with Western characters were written in Shanghai and Hong Kong. At that time, Hong Kong, as a leasehold territory under British colonial rule, was very open and developed. Shanghai opened in 1843 and was one of China's leading port cities in the 19th and 20th centuries. The invasion of Shanghai by imperialist forces also led to the development of the local economy. Growing up in such an environment, Eileen Chang was able to look at Western culture from a cooler and more objective point of view. Compared to most of the cultural elites of her time, she was more rational in her attitude towards Western culture, recognising its advanced and scientific aspects, but also being able to identify its flaws. This makes her writing about Western characters as poignant as her portrayal of local characters. She can analyse the weaknesses in the human nature of foreign characters, and grasp and understand their psychology in the same way as she does with her local characters. This creates a tendency of "de-familiarisation" in her writing. Compared with most of the "May Fourth" cultural elites of the same period, she was more rational in her attitude towards Western culture, recognising its advanced and scientific aspects but also being able to discern its flaws. This makes her as sharp in writing about Western characters as she is in portraying local characters, able to grasp their human weaknesses and analyse them and to grasp and understand the psychology of foreign characters in the same way as she does with her own, forming a tendency to "de-familiarise" her writing.

Second, Eileen Chang's experience in reading foreign literature also influenced her portrayal of Western characters. During her studies at the University of Hong Kong, Eileen Chang read a large number of foreign literary classics, among which the works of writers such as George Bernard Shaw, Maugham, and Huxley had a great influence on her, which can be evidenced by the writings of people close to her, as Lancheng Hu mentions in *This Life, This World*, that Eileen read the works of George Bernard Shaw, Huxley, Maugham, and Lawrence [8]. In the book, Eileen Chang's younger brother, Zijin Chang, also recounted in *My Sister Eileen Chang* that Eileen Chang recommended foreign literature to him, saying that she recommended him the novels of Maugham and O. Henry so that he could learn from their writing methods [9]. Maugham, for example, was passionate about writing about human nature, "finding the hidden peculiarities of man under all the most commonplace appearances" [9]. The works of similar writers made Eileen Chang aware of the universality of certain human qualities, eliminated her sense of alienation in portraying Western characters, and enabled her to grasp and understand the psychology of foreign characters in the same way as she did with her own, forming a tendency to "de-familiarise" her writing.

4.2. Collective Imagination

French scholar Pageaux argues that “exotic images should be studied as part of a broad and complex whole: the imaginary object.” [10]. Collective social imaginaries are formed by the nation’s historical and cultural traditions and social realities, and they contain the deep psychological structure of the nation. Although Eileen Chang was able to observe Western culture in a more equal and objective manner, she could not completely transcend the limitations of her time and society, and her Western characters were inevitably influenced by the collective imagination of modern Chinese people.

Since modern times, Chinese society had an ambivalent mentality in the face of Westerners, both hatred and yearning, contempt and inferiority. This mentality formed under the influence of national historical and cultural traditions and social realities. The image of Westerners in Eileen Chang’s novels also contains the components of the collective imagination of modern Chinese people, mixed with positive and negative emotional tendencies, the former, such as Mrs Liang’s disdain and disgust for the British officers in *The First Fragrance of Sunken Fragrance*, saying that they are unhelpful and not in order, the latter, such as Yingzhu in *The Creation of a Century*, explains to her relatives and friends that she works in a foreigner’s place, where she can practise her English and learn to type, and takes foreigner as a symbol of decency.

In addition, the Western characters that appeared in the works of Eileen Chang’s contemporaries, as an important part of society’s collective imagination, also influenced Eileen Chang’s creation. Eileen Chang’s prose often involves contemporaneous writers, such as Lao She, Zhang Ziping, and Su Qing. Her younger brother Zijing Chang also said in his memoirs that he remembers that she often talked about the works of some modern Chinese writers, such as Lu Xun’s *The True Story of Ah Q*, Mao Dun’s *Midnight*, and Lao She’s *Mr. Ma and Son* [9]. Many of these works contain Western characters, such as Mrs. Wedderburn and her daughter Mary in Lao She’s *Mr. Ma and Son*, who look down on the Chinese and are proud of their British heritage. From this trait, they are very similar to the mother and daughter Ash in Eileen Chang’s *The Red Rose and The White Rose*, in which Mrs. Ash, a white woman, is married to a mixed-race husband. She feels so inferior to the fact that she married a mixed-race husband that she maintains her superiority by showing herself to be purely English at all times. Miss Ash is influenced by her mother to acquiesce in this behaviour [11]. Miss Ash, influenced by her mother, tacitly approved of this behaviour [11]. Although it cannot be conclusively argued that Eileen Chang borrowed from Lao She’s *The Two Mas* in her portrayal of Ash and her daughter, and there are undoubtedly some similarities between the two sets of characters.

5. Conclusions

To sum up, the Western characters in Eileen Chang’s writing tend to show the characteristics of “de-familiarisation” and “decolonisation”, and these exotic images have the double connotations of “self” and “other”, which can reflect the identity of self and other as well as the dissimilarity. These exotic images have the double connotation of speaking of “self” and “other”, which shows that the characteristics of post-colonialism can reflect both the identity of self and other and the dissimilarity. After research, such a result is generated by the influence of the writer’s personal experience and collective imagination, and the personal experience includes both the living environment and reading experience. This paper is conducive to enriching and supplementing the study of Eileen Chang and is also of great comparative and informative significance for analysing the works of other writers in the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature whose creations involve Western images. Due to the limitations of the data and the researcher’s academic knowledge, this paper only analyses Eileen Chang’s novels of the 1940s, and future research can include all of

Eileen Chang's works in the scope of the study, conduct a holistic research on the exotic images in Zhang Eileen's novels, and compare the differences in the images of each character in different periods, and analyse the process of change.

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