

Legend and Fairy Tale: Research of the Urban Texts of Eileen Chang and Xi Xi

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Abstract:

As a category of literature springing up in a transition period, urban literature has more or less ingredients of modernity and territoriality. Hong Kong has unique urban characteristics thanks to its twisted fate and multiculturalism, which are the background of many writers' works. As a result, works about Hong Kong are excellent materials for research in urban literature. Eileen Chang and Xi Xi, both born in Shanghai and settled in Hong Kong for a long time, have complexes varying from cityscape, portrayal, and living habits, which were affected by colonialism at different times. The great changes in Hong Kong during the long period of colonization are obvious in the works of these two writers, leading to different emotions. This paper chooses one fiction by Eileen Chang and Xi Xi separately to feel the pulse of the city of Hong Kong in different periods, enquiring into the colonial evolution and adding new research ideas for Hong Kong literature. By implementing this study, it can be proven that the city culture of Hong Kong in literature has changed from conflicting to self-consistent under the influence of colonialism.

Keywords: Eileen Chang; Xi Xi; Hong Kong; urban literature.

1. Introduction

As modernization progresses, many cities are immortalized in the words of writers, capturing their appealing features and harmonizing with citizens' emotions to create exclusive memories, thus contributing to urban literature. Using the cityscape and citizens as a carrier, writers working on urban literature aim to present aspects of urban culture [1]. Hong Kong, an international metropolis with great economic prosperity and avant-garde style, serves as the stage for the dramas of Love and Hatred in the writings of authors. As the first piece of China's territory ceded in the 19th Century, Hong Kong has been in the shadow of colonialism since the beginning of modern development. The sudden attack subjected the city, which had always been dedicated to Chinese traditional culture, to a thoroughly arduous course in accepting Western culture. The author studied the cultural development and alterations of Hong Kong through a comparative analysis of two writers who lived at the beginning and the end of the colonial period in Hong Kong. The paper focuses on their works, „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier“ by Eileen Chang and „My City: A Hong Kong Story“ by Xi Xi, collecting minute details of the cityscape, portrayal, and living habits and adapting the method of comparative analysis to explore the complexities of two great Hong Kong writers

from the perspective of urban literature. Based on these clues, the author discovered reactions to Chinese traditional and foreign cultures. Hopefully, this paper can provide new ideas and insights to the two writers and thereby shed light on the entire body of Hong Kong literature. Furthermore, it aims to elevate the profile of urban scripts about Hong Kong, educating more writers to harmonize their emotions about the city with their words and record citizens' vicissitudes and shared memories.

2. Legend and Criticize

Eileen Chang, a talented writer who cannot be ignored in the history of Modern and Contemporary Literature, grew up in an Old-fashioned aristocratic family in Shanghai. The family did not give Chang much welfare but pain. The turning point for Chang to settle in Hong Kong was to study at the University of Hong Kong. The masterpiece of Chang, *The First Brazier*, tells a story about a teenage girl named Ge Weilong, who goes to Hong Kong to study as well, degenerating as a „goal man“ for the rich after relying on her aunt Madame Liang for help and becoming addicted to the luxurious life. The fiction depictions present Hong Kong's perception through a stranger's eyes.

2.1 The Cityscape

The buildings serve as a medium to vividly depict the

city's image, among which housing plays an important role. In Eileen Chang's fiction „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier,“ Hong Kong is portrayed as a city filled with a strong sense of Western style in its buildings, which also reflect the fate and characteristics of its inhabitants. The fiction mainly focuses on the extravagant lives of the rich. Housing is not merely a place for rest but also entertainment. A representative example is the townhouse of Ge's aunt, Madame Liang, where the main characters reside. The fiction begins with descriptions of this townhouse, which resembles „a gold-lacquered tray out of nowhere in the middle of a mountain of chaos“ [2]. The stone columns around it exhibit the style of „The Legacy of Early American Architecture“ [2]. The background features a yard planted with foreign plants, creating an arrangement around the house that is the opposite of the Chinese traditional grove style; instead, it resembles „faint brushstrokes on a lacquer plate“ [2]. The setting is characterized by bright and excessive colors, contrary to the „brevity and suggestiveness“ esteemed by Chinese traditional aesthetic habits. Meanwhile, the violent color contrast embodies deep connotations. The colorful yard reflects the character of Hong Kong, where extravagant styles promote bustling activity and pleasure-seeking. Furthermore, juxtaposed against the vibrant backdrop, Ge Weilong's fate is rather grim [3], and the stark contrast magnifies the tragic ending of Ge.

2.2 Figure Characters

The figures in „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier“ are fresh and lively, thanks to Eileen Chang's detailed description of ingenuity, especially the design for Character Clothing concerning figures' fate and character, with certain suggestibility. Ge Weilong's first look is very representative of quality. Her clothing is described as „It is from the late Qing Dynasty,“ „A bright blue bamboo shirt, knee-length, with narrow haka ma legs below.“ Chang points out that it „is part of the oriental coloring that characterizes the colony.“ Hong Kong authorities dress students up to make sure they look fabulous just to please foreigners. It can be seen that the slavery mindset poisons Hong Kong to a very serious degree. In such turbulent times, Hong Kong's transformation involves a contradiction between localization and exoticism caused by Colonialism. In other words, the student uniform stands for Ge's inner self, which is clean and honest. What differs is the clothing prepared by Madame Liang later. She buys a lot of gorgeous dresses for social intercourse, which symbolizes the material benefit that slowly drags Ge into an abyss. The clothing Ge wears at different times mirrors Ge's inner turmoil. Dissatisfied with her gentle and soft Chinese manners, Ge is determined to pursue the olive

skin owned by beauties from the eastern part of Guangdong province, but her rare style also attracts people's eyes. From this, we can see that facing the double whammy of modernism and colonialism leads to blindness in aesthetics.

Madame Liang's first look is worth deep research, too. „a suit of black cloth,“ „green face mesh,“ and „Green gemstone in the shape of a spider.“ She is a woman who persuades greatly in fashion and trendiness; every detail of her attire tells us she is rich. Moreover, that is not all we can analyze from her appearance. The cool coloration gives readers a feeling of betrayal, murder, and calculation. There is a fantastic analogy in „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier“; it says, „The jewel in Madame Liang's cheek. When it is bright, it looks like a teardrop; when it is dark, it looks like a mole.“ It is not hard to see that Madame Liang chooses a marriage with no love but only materialistic gain, regardless of Chinese traditional ethical and moral thinking. She is also unfortunate, so the diamond is her „tears.“ However, objectively speaking, she uses marriage as a tool to get money, a game to manipulate people's fate for her gain, by hook or by crook; she gives up her conscience. Madame Liang's conflicting views mirror a group portrait of citizens of Hong Kong in the 19th Century; people under the threat of war invariably prioritize profit for survival. Though colonists seemed to give opportunities for vigorous commercial development and increased urban consumption, citizens' inner struggles confronted a chaotic situation and cultural shock. It is easy to see that at the beginning of the colonial period, citizens in Hong Kong suffered from a double whammy of physical and emotional challenges. Martin Heidegger says, „Language is the House of Being.“ Characters' verbal dialogues have extraordinary research value. From citizens' conversation style, it is possible to gain insights into the distinctive urban characteristics of the times. The colonial overtone is fully saturated in „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier,“ from which Ge talks to Qiaoqiqiao in English, „There is a popular English proverb in Hong Kong,“ Ge talks to a Buddhist nun in French. From the dialogues, there are a lot of loanwords like „chocolate“ and „romantic,“ and it seems that Hong Kong diluted its local character after the fall; foreign languages replaced the native language. However, after scrutiny, researchers find out that the cultural roots of Chinese tradition still grow in the content and general tenor of their talks. Take Madame Liang as an example; she seems so forward-thinking that she has the bravery to fight against forced marriage, but she despises Qiaoqiqiao's mother for her international experience. The traditional Chinese ethical mindset still confines her. In Chang's words, Madame Liang's feudalistic mindset comes to light, mostly due to the times. What can

be surmised is that in the 19th Century, citizens in Hong Kong embraced the quick development of economics, racial discrimination, disparities between rich and poor, and so on. The modernization of Hong Kong is still at an immature stage of development.

2.3 Daily Routine

When Ge Weilong moved in with Madame Liang, servant Nier told her that she could ask for bread if she got hungry at night, a typical Western dim sum. At the potluck, people enjoy cocktails, juices, refreshments, and cold beef tongue sprinkled with black pepper, which are all completely different from Chinese cuisine. Madame Liang also advised Ge to drink some brandy after getting wet and to take aspirin after catching a cold, which are also Western habits. For the wealthy class in Hong Kong, banquets and parties are common occurrences, and the foods served at these events are important mediums to showcase social status and hospitality, indicating a high acceptance of foreign foods in Hong Kong.

In the book, the Ge family decides to move back to Shanghai because they cannot afford the expenses in Hong Kong, indicating that the consumption level had already diverged from that of the mainland. At the end of the work, Ge and Qiao visit Wan Chai after their marriage, a remote area away from the city center, bustling with all sorts of foreign and local goods, demonstrating the emotional trading of goods in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's opening up to foreign influences due to colonization and its rapid economic development under capitalism have had a significant impact, leading to a transformation marked by contradictions and the coexistence of Chinese and Western cultures.

„Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier“ is included in Eileen Chang's novel collection „Legends.“ Despite its brevity, it contains significant contrasts and vividly portrays human struggles against the backdrop of affection, hostility, and intrigue among the wealthy class in Hong Kong at that time, focusing on the survival state of women, presenting a typical „desire metropolis,“ and reflecting the „seductive“ and „dark“ aspects behind Hong Kong's prosperity. It dramatically showcases the legendary nature of the novel itself.

3. Fairy Tales and Reflections

Xi Xi, a writer born in Shanghai, also moved to Hong Kong with her family in 1950. Most of her books contain a deep love for the city of Hong Kong. „My City: A Hong Kong Story“ is an urban narrative written from the perspective of A Guo, a child of the young generation in Hong Kong. Xi Xi utilizes children's language and stretches the bounds of imagination to depict the image

of Hong Kong in the 1970s. The retro style present in her works serves as a means of recollecting her childhood. She writes about citizens and the city, citizens and their families; moreover, she delves deeper into the feelings of belonging to the nation and national fables [4].

3.1 The Cityscape

„My City: A Hong Kong Story“ has many details of modern city life, such as elevators and skyscrapers, which reflect the rapid pace of urban construction. However, despite the high level of economic development, there is still a sense of softness and fragility. It describes housing as „curl[ing] up,“ indicating the tight land prices in Hong Kong and the predominance of small and cramped buildings. For example, the description of someone being „Wrapped up in an incredibly thick tweed jacket, speckled fuzzy scarf, and gloves, and socks“ suggests the old and plain nature of Hong Kong at that time [5].

In Xi Xi's words, Hong Kong is portrayed as multidimensional, with well-established cities, high consumption levels, integrated cultural customs, good citizenship, and a warm family atmosphere. However, its inadequacies, including chaotic urban order and dirty sanitary conditions, cannot be ignored, as indicated by phrases such as „The rooftop is full of garbage“ [5]. Additionally, Xi Xi highlights uncivilized behavior, such as tomato-throwing fans at a soccer game and teams winning by bad tactics or means.

Xi Xi's portrayal of Hong Kong is both affectionate and objective. She acknowledges both the bright and dark sides of the city and chooses to embrace it with the hope of creating a beautiful new world. She maintains a sober and objective tone throughout her writing, connecting her heart to Hong Kong and inspiring fellow residents to work together to „create a beautiful new world,“ as she has already forged a deep connection between her emotions and the city in her words. Hong Kong has become „my city“ through her writing.

3.2 Figure Characters

The wearing style of the figures is close to modern: jeans, shirts, blazers, and simple dresses, along with chunky heels, are all commonly seen. It does not show distinctive regional characteristics but rather modernity. What should be stressed is the attitude of the figures, which is all active. A guo sees employment seeking as „doing something fun“ [5]; it is an important way to connect young people to the city [4]. In the face of everyone's prejudice against long hair, Maikuaile chose to chase away unhappiness by eating chili peppers. Most figures are kind and gentle, exuding the light of humanity. All of these reflect the good urban ethos of Hong Kong in the 1970s, where even

residuals of colonialism existed. Still, new generations of citizens accepted the mixed culture and regained a sense of belonging to the city.

3.3 Daily Routine

The daily diet in “My City: A Hong Kong Story: A Hong Kong Story” favors Western food, including steak, snails, and buttered bread. One exception: the characters like to drink coffee and soy milk, which shows that even though the national bloodline is not very obvious, it still exists. The comparison between Chinese and Western cultures is not the focus of the fiction. Instead, the mention of “paper-packed noodles,” a product of the fast pace of the city, indirectly reflects the good industrial development of Hong Kong.

What can be seen is that Xi Xi did not choose a grand historical background[6]. Instead, she used a children’s mindset to write about the small things in life, showing the rapid development of urban construction and the hidden implications of the economic crisis in Western countries. As a common citizen who shared a pulse with the city, Xi Xi accepted any part of Hong Kong and used children’s words to deconstruct and reconstruct a beautiful new city[7]. Xi Xi looked back on the history of Hong Kong, examined the status quo, and created a fairy tale for the future of Hong Kong.

4. Comparative Analysis

Eileen Chang and Xi Xi both moved from Shanghai to Hong Kong. The emotions towards Hong Kong, however, are different. The fundamental reason is that the power of colonialism changes with the times. From the point of view of the perspective, Chang did not integrate herself into the city. As a student who came to this city by accident because of the war, Chang’s heart belongs to her hometown, Shanghai. As a result, Chang’s words towards Hong Kong are full of criticism. On the contrary, Xi Xi came to Hong Kong peacefully; she knew and loved the city more. Not only did she feel the warmth of this city, but she also found a lot of dark sides of the city. Unlike Chang’s criticism, Xi Xi’s words are more like a reflection, with a great mission to perfect it.

From a stylistic point of view, Chang’s writing is sharper and more pointed with a touch of the legendary [8]. Most of her works revolve around the depraved lives of the rich. The period Chang lived in marked the beginning of the colonial era. We certainly can not say that her works in Hong Kong are a completely ugly image, even for the love of a prostitute, Vai Lung, to the material level, she also, through their efforts, access to the upper-class life, does not have to worry about food and clothing, her end of course not perfect, but compared to the same period of

the many escapees, she also has a fortunate place [9]. In this period, colonialism and individualism, hedonism, and money worship constituted a potent force. Hong Kong and its citizens grapple with the collapse of faith, the reconfiguration of culture, and the misfortunes of the individual. While Xi Xi lived near the end of the colonial period, stabilizing the international situation nurtured new generations of writers, including Xi Xi, who grew up loving the city and harboring hopes of its improvement.

What, indeed, is the image of Hong Kong? Is it a legend or a fairy tale? The answer may be that both belong to Hong Kong; each is a part of its narrative, telling the story of the city’s struggle against colonialism. Urban governance became increasingly organized, and a fusion of Western and Chinese traditional cultures healed the scars on the culture. Industrial development progressed rapidly. Chang and Xi Xi loved the city and empathized with those experiencing poverty, albeit in different styles. Modernity, in their words, is a precious treasure in urban and Chinese literature.

All along, Hong Kong’s urban writing has presented a very different state of development from that of other Chinese cities due to the influence of colonialism, which is concerned with structural issues such as expression of subjectivity, self-identity, cultural commonality, and hybridity, which objectively provides excellent first materials for writers’ creation and expression, and is destined to be the richness of Hong Kong’s literature.[10]

5. Conclusion

After focusing on analyzing many details in „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier“ and „My City: A Hong Kong Story,“ it is clear that the influence of colonialism presents different effects on a city in two times, which can be traced from writings. From the angle of the cityscape, the two have different focuses. Chang’s subjects are mostly urban men and women in the foreign world, which indirectly displays the prosperous cityscape of Hong Kong. Xi Xi’s ink was put into the daily lives of ordinary people more, which shows the beauty of humanity. From the angle of figure characters, most figures in „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier“ enjoy sufficient wealth but suffer from poverty in emotion, which unfolds citizens of Hong Kong at the beginning of the colonial period hesitate over the lure of foreign culture and the roots of national culture; that is why their humanity is alienated. The figures in „My City: A Hong Kong Story“ present good faith and their sense of belonging to the city. These are the clues to the awakening of their sense of identity and the improvement of their mentality. From the angle of daily routine, Hong Kong life in Chang and Xi Xi’s words mix West

and Chinese styles, but in „Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier,“ character behavior tends to be more deliberate, reflecting a strong tendency to pander to foreigners. It is not the same in „My City: A Hong Kong Story,“ which is a common life mixed with multiple cultures successfully, incarnating Hong Kong has adapted to the rhythm of modern civilization.

From a general point of view, at the beginning of colonial times, Hong Kong was at a more confused stage filled with obstacles such as existential hardship, a sudden and unfamiliar culture, and a drastic change in economic paradigm. The onslaught of colonialism has left the city with a dazzling development. When Hong Kong kept developing until the period in which Xi Xi lived, it created a culture of self-adaptation by extracting parts of foreign cultures in its way and combining them with its cultural roots. So, in the face of new challenges, residents were confident and relaxed. The obvious optimistic tone of her writing is an important reflection of the optimistic social mentality of Hong Kong people in the 1970s. These two urban texts are very different from each other due to the subjective reasons of the authors, but also due to Hong Kong's attempts at urban politics and changes in the international environment that have weakened the power of colonialism.

After discovering the commonalities between the urban migration experiences of the two writers, Eileen Chang and Xi Xi, this paper focuses on grasping their differences in their typical works. It arrives at the power of colonialism in different eras as a major influencing factor. It is worth noting that only two typical works, Eileen Chang's „The First Incense“ and Xi Xi's „My City: A Hong Kong Story,“ have been selected for analysis in this paper, which is not enough to summarize the whole landscape of Hong Kong literature, and therefore hope to inspire more writers to participate in the analysis of Hong Kong's urban texts. It is hoped that Hong Kong literature will be taken seri-

ously by the relevant research institutes of urban literature and will take on a new vitality in the future, shining with the glory uniquely to Hong Kong.

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