The Sense of Bleakness in Eileen Chang’s Works: Taking “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” as examples

Shuyu Tan

School of Humanities, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, 510006, China
Email: 32112170008@e.gzhu.edu.cn

Abstract:
Eileen Chang is a famous modern female writer, and the study of the sense of bleakness in her works is one of the important topics. However, the author finds that there are fewer studies on this aspect, and there is a lack of comprehensive explanation on the various factors that constitute the sense of bleakness. Therefore, this paper takes Eileen Chang’s works “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” as examples to analyze how the sense of bleakness is manifested in various aspects. The research methods of this paper are as follows: by reading relevant literature, generalizing the issues under study, comparing and analyzing the similarities and differences in the embodiment of the sense of bleakness in the two texts, and searching for potential connections. It is found that the sense of bleakness in the two works is evident in the interpersonal relationship, the fate of the character and the environmental atmosphere of the story. The three factors are intertwined and interact with each other to create a strong sense of bleakness in Eileen Chang’s works.

Keywords: The sense of bleakness; Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier; The Golden Cangue.

1. Introduction
“Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” are two of Eileen Chang’s masterpieces. The stories take place in the modern metropolises of Hong Kong and Shanghai respectively, and the plots unfold with two women’s degradation and distortion process. The depictions share a similar emotional tone – amidst the glitz, bleakness is revealed. As Eileen Chang herself affirmed about the existence of bleakness: “I am fond of sadness, and even more fond of bleakness... Sadness is a kind of completion, while bleakness is a revelation” [1]. Scholars have done little research on the sense of bleakness presented in Eileen Chang’s works, and the discussion on the sense of bleakness in the existing research mostly focuses on a certain angle, which is not comprehensive. For example, Zidong Xu analyzes the sense of bleakness in Eileen Chang’s works from the perspective of imagery in “Materializing Bleakness: A Preliminary Exploration of Eileen Chang’s Imagery Technique” [2]; Yeping Li analyzes the sense of bleakness in terms of existential tragedy in “The Bleak Writing of Existential Tragedy: On the Tragic Consciousness of Eileen Chang’s Novels” [3]; In “The Miserable World of Sound and Color: On the Use of Sound and Color in Eileen Chang’s Novels”, Bingxue Tan explores descriptions of sound and color to find out the descriptions of bleakness [4].

This paper takes the two works “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” as examples and analyzes the sense of bleakness shown in Eileen Chang’s works from three angles in a more comprehensive way. They include the indifference and deformity of interpersonal relationship, the tragic destiny of the character, and the horrific and depressing ambience of the environment.

2. Indifference and Deformity in Interpersonal Relationship
The relationship between characters in Eileen Chang’s works is cold and tense, and people are often in a relationship of using and being used. Even the warmth, selflessness and dedication of kinship relationship constructed under the influence of Confucianism in historical literature are broken in Eileen Chang’s writing. The kinship relationship is reduced to a simple interpersonal relationship, in which the selfishness, hypocrisy and greed of human nature are revealed, and the relationship of money and interest holds people’s behaviors and emotions in check. In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Mrs. Liang is Weilong Ge’s aunt, but she is cold, shrewd and selfish, with no regard for family ties. When Weilong Ge first enters the Liang mansion, Mrs. Liang evaluates Weilong Ge whether she can be used as a “pawn”. During the con-
The relationship between the Jiang family and Qiqiao Cao is based on their respective interests: Cao is of humble birth, so she is not truly accepted by the Jiang family which only needs a woman who can be the wife to take care of the second young son and procreate offspring. For Cao, though life is lonely and depressing, she is well aware of the benefits of marrying into the Jiang family, so the relationship between the Jiang family and Qiqiao Cao is tense, cold and turbulent.

For her children, Cao’s twisted inside manifests in the form of horrific control and distorted love, making her an “unlikeable” mother. Cao leads her children to indulge in opium addiction so as to keep them under her control. She knows that foot-binding is no longer fashionable, so she stuffs cotton into her own shoes to make her feet seem civilized. However, in order to control her daughter, Cao forces Chang’an to endure the physical and psychological pain of foot-binding and being ridiculed by others. Cao’s frantic counting of tiny gains and losses causes Chang’an to lose face at school and is forced to drop out. Even when Chang’an has a wonderful love and gets a moment’s respite from it, Cao snuffs it out without mercy. Cao is not so worried about Shifang Tong coveting her wealth because of his good birth, the reason why she still separates them is her psychological distortion: Cao’s own unsatisfactory marriage leads her to feel jealous of the good love of the same sex, and even hostile to her daughter, unable to accept Chang’an’s attainment of happiness.

Cao is also an “unlikeable” mother-in-law, and her relationship with her son Changbai have a sense of incest. She leaves Changbai to burn cigarettes with her at night, leaving her daughter-in-law alone, and they have a conversation that resembles flirting, acting intimately, “She squinted at him. Throughout these years, he was the only man in her life. Only him, she was not afraid that he coveted her money—for all her wealth was rightfully his. Yet, because he was her son, he alone could not amount to even half... Now, she couldn’t even hold onto this half of a person—he had gotten married” [5]. Long-suppressed lust of Cao has no outlet, resulting in her serious “mother-love complex” and her unreasonable dependence on her son, Changbai [6]. Cao is very harsh and critical to her daughter-in-law, and she even snooped and talked about Zhishou’s sexual affairs and publicized it as a laughing stock, leading to the death of Zhishou.

3. The Tragic Fates of the Characters

Characters in Eileen Chang’s works, especially female characters, are often in a tragic situation of helplessness and self-degradation. Their tragic destinies arise out of the limitations of the times and all kinds of personal desires.
In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Mrs. Liang and Weilong Ge’s father turn against each other, but Ge has to ask her aunt for help and hide it from her father in order to stay in Hong Kong to continue her studies. She is faced with a dilemma between traditional family values and personal pursuit, but she chooses to conceal and compromise in the face of family conflicts in order to pursue her studies and the opportunity to stay in Hong Kong, which reflects her personal desire to survive and gain a foothold. And accepting her aunt’s financial support and becoming active in various social occasions is the first step of Ge’s approach to danger.

In “The Golden Cangue”, Cao’s marriage is a bare deal between her brother and sister-in-law and the Jiang family. Cao suffers from contempt and repression, and with full of grief and resentment, she confronts everyone with sharp and venomous words and behaviors, but she still does not dare to defy her old family’s decision and run away to a new family. According to scholar Ruixue Song, during the May Fourth Movement period, women who ran away to a new family had very limited choices, and if they did not return to their old families, there were often only two paths in front of them: to join a new family or to live by prostituting [7]. Therefore, even if Ge escapes from the Liang family and Cao defies her brother and sister-in-law and runs away from the Jiang family, there will still have a difficult future. Limited by social environment, they choose to compromise and surrender out of consideration for their personal survival.

The dominance of lust over the characters is also the key to their tragedy: drowning in lust and the inability to fulfill its lead Weilong Ge and Qiqiao Cao into the dark abyss respectively. In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Ge is an unsophisticated and innocent girl, and the playboy Qiqiao Qiao arouses her affection easily. Driven by her lust, Ge degrades herself. She knows that Qiqiao Qiao’s outlook on life is passive and he is addicted to pleasure, and he is frivolous and irresponsible, but she still has a relationship with him. After inadvertently witnessing Qiqiao Qiao’s despicable behavior, she is devastated and intends to leave Hong Kong, but Qiqiao Qiao’s simple retention makes her change her mind again. “Ah, Qiqiao! He’ll need her someday.” “Suddenly she decided not to go-no matter what” [5]. She chooses to stay in Hong Kong, marrying Qiqiao Qiao and getting money for him by working as a social butterfly, with “boundless desolation, boundless horror” looming over the future of her life [5].

In “The Golden Cangue”, because of her husband’s congenital disability, Qiqiao Cao’s erotic desire cannot be satisfied and it is in a state of long-term repression. According to Freud: “Man can never excrete his primitive desires. Male always seeks his first catharsis in substitute objects” [8]. As a result, Cao quenches her thirst for sexual desire with vulgar words, and tries to secure her husband’s brother, and even develops an irrational emotional attachment to her son.

“Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” depict a society infused with money, and the characters’ desire and even extreme madness for material wealth are shown to the fullest extent. Ge naively believed that she can remain true to herself and “come out of the mud without being stained” at first. In Liang mansion, she is dressed by beautiful clothes and in and out of social occasions glamorously, gaining the affection of many men, who willingly to offer expensive gifts to her in order to win her heart – Ge’s vanity was satisfied greatly. She gradually indulged in the high society and can no longer return to the plain and simple life. Ge’s decision to stay in Hong Kong not only involves the weighing of the pros and cons of survival and her reluctance to leave Qiqiao Qiao, but also her own attachment to gold and luxury life and her gradually expanding material desire.

In “The Golden Cangue”, Cao is forced to marry into the Jiang family, but actually she knows the benefit she can get from it very well: this marriage is a leap in class for her, and her personal material life can be greatly improved, what’s more, the Jiang family’s inheritance will surely be a part of her in the future – faced with the choice between money and love, Cao preferred the former, „Dreams are good, otherwise, money matters” [9]. Selfish families, empty marriage, humble status. Cao is lonely and empty inside, so she regards “money” as the only existence which can give her a sense of fulfillment and security, and she holds on to her fortune desperately. “For thirty years she wore a yoke of gold. She had a heavy heart. She daid cleaved several men with the horns of the heavy yoke, and those who were not dead had lost half their lives” [5].

The tragedies of Ge and Cao are influenced by the circumstance of the certain era, but Lei Fu once said, “The greatest tragedies of mankind are often internal” [10]. Their tragic endings are driven by the desires for survival, lust, and money from the depths of their heart, all these desires interact with each other.

4. Terrible and Depressing Environmental Atmospheres

The ambience in “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” is very grotesque. The Liang Mansion, centered on Mrs. Liang, and the family under
the control of Qiqiao Cao emit a ghastly aura, they like two bottomless, soul-sucking black holes.

In “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, Weilong Ge feels a sense of danger the first time she visits the Liang mansion. The elaborate design of the Liang Mansion is unusually abrupt in contrast to the barren mountains in which it is situated, “The garden seemed like a gold-lacquered pallet plucked out of the air in the midst of the chaotic mountains” [5]. The incongruity and unusualness of the external features of Liang’s mansion hints at the particularity of its interior. From the strong colors of “black” and “green” in her appearance, the “web” and “spider” decorations, and the “red fingernails”, Mrs. Liang’s image is reminiscent of a “witch”, which is in line with her complex and powerful inner self.

During the conversation with Ge, Liang’s demeanor appears to be casual incredibly, in fact, she is sizing up Ge shrewdly. “Her fan deflects a little, and a few threads of golden sunlight sifts into it, and brushes the edge of her mouth, just like the whiskers of a tiger cat, gusting to fly” [5]. “Tiger cat” is a symbol of her ruthlessness, power, and control, and like the “tiger cat”, she is calmly observing her “prey”. Leaving the Liang Mansion, looking at the white house at sunset, Ge thinks the house like an “ancient royal tomb”, and it is a “ghastly” world inside. On her first night in the Liang House, faced with many fancy clothes, Ge tries up them one by one, looking at the world of song and dance downstairs, she even imagines herself beautifully dressed and dancing. “She re-whispers: ‘It’s good to see!’ She smiles and falls asleep” [5]. Even though she feels dangerous clearly, she cannot help herself but look forward to future life. The world of Liang mansion has a terrifyingly hallucinogenic magic.

From the dispute between Mrs. Liang and Didi, Weilong Ge realizes the darkness of reality—in fact, it is a warning from Liang to Ge that disobedience to her will not end well. However, from enjoying the gold world, falling in love with Qiqiao Qiao, to being sent bracelet by Xie Situ—gradually, Ge can no longer get away from the control of Liang. “Mrs. Liang grins, and while laughing, she points at Wei Long with a blood-dripping index finger” [5]. Mrs. Liang seems to have predicted that Ge will plan to stay in Hongkong, and everything is in her calculations. The Liang Mansion is a cage that no one escape, a swamp-like the compelling song of the Siren in the ancient Greek mythology, which causes people to lose the power to resist, to surrender voluntarily, and sink step by step -- just as Ge says, “They had to, I volunteered” [5].

In “The Golden Cangue”, Cao’s extreme behavior manifests itself in the form of her strong control and frantic persecution of her family in many ways, which is depressing and suffocating. Years of “heart demons” make her an extremely sensitive, selfish, twisted and perverted “ghost”, who wanders around every corner of the house with a grudge, making her family a dark and deadly hell. Lei Fu commented on Qiqiao Cao: “When love is not satisfied in one person, it requires the happiness and lives of three or four people to offset it. Terrible revenge” [10].

5. Conclusion

This study finds that the relationships between people in “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” are cold and detached, full of hypocrisy and deformity: not only do they lack the warmth between loved ones in the traditional values, but they even do harm in the name of affection. The characters in the two stories, Weilong Ge and Qiqiao Cao, struggle with three kinds of desire, namely survival, love and materialism. They move towards the tragedy of their lives: Ge degenerates from a simple-minded student to a social butterfly who relies on the exchange of her body to make a living and maintain the so-called “marriage”, and she has gone from being full of aspirations for life to being numb to it; Cao has gone from being a young girl with beautiful sentiment to a sick and twisted woman, destroying the lives of her children with her own hands and plunging herself into despair.

The ambience of the two stories is filled with perversity: the bizarre and frightening Liang Mansion seems to be
a “man-eating” trap, and the perverted and twisted Cao family is like a powerful “devil’s claw”, capable of shattering people’s bones. The sadness, horror and helplessness shown in the interpersonal relationship, the fate of the character and the atmosphere of the environment give the readers an endless sense of bleakness.

The main contribution of this paper is to analyze the constituent factors of the sense of bleakness in Eileen Chang’s works in a more comprehensive way using “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” and “The Golden Cangue” as examples, which is conducive for other researchers to understand the sense of bleakness therein in a more concrete way. However, in the current study, the texts analyzed are limited and the perspectives are not complete. Future researches can explain the sense of bleakness from other texts of Eileen Chang and improve the theorization of studies.

References