

The Evolution and Cause Analysis of the Core of the novel in the Process of Film and TV Adaptation and its Causes: A Case Study of *Lust, Caution*

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Abstract:

Lust, Caution, an Ang Lee film, was adapted from the novel *The Spy Ring* by Eileen Chang. This paper expounds on how the film successfully captures the original storyline, the object image, the deconstruction of the imaginary national community, and other novel elements, and how it deviates from the novel's core. Through the analysis of the content of the film adaptation, this article argues that the film does not focus on the disillusionment of love in the novel. Still, it highlights the entanglement between reason and emotion. The reasons for this difference include the differences in the aesthetic standards of creators between the authors and directors of novels, the differences in the perspectives of female and male creators, and the commercial nature of the film itself. From the case of the film adaptation of "Spy Ring", the audience can see that gender positioning is crucial in the film and television adaptation process of the novels of female writers.

Keywords: *Lust, Caution*; film and TV adaptation; ideological core; feminism

1. Introduction

As one of the major authors in the modern literary history of China, Eileen Chang has been drawing extensive attention from researchers of Chinese literature. Eileen Chang, who was a film lover, has written several film screenplays. Her novels are also popular among film and TV workers for their fascinating plots and vivid scene descriptions. Many of her novels have been made into films and TV plays. In particular, the Ang Lee film *Lust, Caution* released in 2007, was adapted from Eileen Chang's novel *The*

Spy Ring. The film has invited protracted controversy since its release. Despite the many awards and impressive box office, the film has won for its high quality, many readers of the novel say they are not quite impressed. Specifically, the ideological core of the novel *The Spy Ring* is somewhat distorted and partly missing in the film adaptation. In this paper, the success of the film adaptation of *The Spy Ring*, and the deviation of the film from the ideological core of the novel are both discussed, to help workers in the film and TV sector learn lessons and contribute to the further success of film and TV adaptation of

other novels.

2. Faithfulness and Deviation in Film Adaptation of *The Spy Ring*

The novel-based film *Lust, Caution* directed by Ang Lee is the second text stemming from the first text [1]. The film *Lust, Caution* successfully captures the main plots, the object image, and part of the ideological implication presented in the novel, and deconstructs nationalism as an imaginary community. Furthermore, the film also includes an extensional adaptation of the novel, which is manifested by the role shaping and internal monologue of the film hero Mr. Yee, as well as the narration of the romance between Mr. Yee and the heroin Wong Chia Chi.

2.1 Faithfulness in the Film Adaptation

When it comes to the details of the adaptation, the film *Lust, Caution* is faithful to the novel in terms of the object image. "Image" is an interior unified integration of subjective emotions and objective images, which aims at the "out-of-image" transcendence. The image transcends the simple image itself, and takes in the rich thoughts, emotions, and life experiences of the subject, to achieve a meaningful, realistic capture of the real world [2]. The novels of Eileen Chang are known for their vivid metaphors and aesthetic object images. In the film *Lust, Caution*, Ang Lee used specific images to depict key characters in a way that's faithful to the film. For example, the mahjong scenes at the beginning and the end of the novel imply the erotic game the film heroin Wong Chia Chi played with her life as the stake, for mahjong is a traditional Chinese gambling game. The subtle changes in the mahjong scenes also symbolize the fierce undercurrent in which Wong Chia Chi is entangled. When it comes to the plots, the image of mahjong serves as a transition of the environment, which makes the scene change smoother, and ensures a tight-knit, rhythmic plot. In the film *Lust, Caution*, the image of mahjong is presented vividly to reflect the inner turmoils of the characters. As another critical image of the novel *The Spy Ring*, the word "ring" appears in the names of both the film and the novel. The ring also serves as an object that touches off the tragic ending. In her novel, Eileen Chang uses the ring as a metaphor for delusive materials and erotic feelings. The heroin Wong Chia Chi feels self-abased for the "embarrassing" emerald ring she has on her finger when other rich ladies are showing off their expensive rings and mistake the pink diamond ring Mr. Yee gives her as the expression of love. This later leads to her betrayal of colleagues and loss of life. In the film, Ang Lee also uses the ring to express emotions vividly given the ring image. Furthermore, some trivial objects, such as the three-color pinwheel on the

rickshaw Wong Chia Chi rides on, imply the mood and situation of the characters. The successful capturing of the images in the novel by Ang Lee reflects his observation accuracy and his insights into the novel *The Spy Ring*. In the film *Lust, Caution*, "imaginary images" give a direct sensory shock to the audience through sound, pictures, and colorful object images [2]. This allows the audience to appreciate the desolate and rich "imaginary space" created by Eileen Chang, and get deeper feelings.

In terms of the main storyline, the film *Lust, Caution*, follows the main plot of the novel. Out of her enthusiasm for performance and admiration for a young patriot named Kuang, colleague girl Wong Chia Chi dresses up as a young married woman "Mrs. Mee", who then establishes secret communication with Mr. Yee to assassinate the latter. Unfortunately, Wong falls in love with Mr. Yee and decides to spare him, which later fails the assassination plan. Eventually, Wong and other revolutionaries are killed, whereas the negative character Mr. Yee finally "triumphs". Unlike other common revolutionary stories, the novel *The Spy Ring* does not end with a happy reunion, and the death of the heroin is somewhat undignified, leaving readers lamenting her stupidity and naivete. As described in both the novel and the film, the revolution is like a farce that has been provoked by young men on the spur of the moment, and those involved have differing intentions, refusing to trust each other. Romance is doubtful as well. At the end of the story, Wong Chia Chi is killed for nothing in a search for an unreal sense of belonging. The story also ends this way in the film and an explanation is given about the complicated relations between the grandiose narration of a nation and the life experience of individuals, and the tragic death of an individual female covered by the nationalist narration [3].

In terms of the ideological core, nationalism is deconstructed in the film to reflect the humanistic spirit of the novel. When it comes to the choice between individuality and grandiose narration, Ang Lee and Eileen Chang have adopted similar approaches. They both focus on the life experience of ordinary individuals against the greater context. The works of Ang Lee attach great importance to "people", and consider the responsibility on their shoulders in a tolerant way. This is similar to Eileen Chang. Unlike the "liberty" writing style that had been gaining popularity since the May Fourth Movement, Eileen Chang looked straight into the vulnerability of humans. In addition, she also deconstructed the image of traditional Chinese females. Eileen Chang focused on the few who had been left behind by the waves of the May Fourth Movement and depicted how female citizens were repressed and ignored. Sticking to her "desolate" aesthetic standard, Eileen Chang initiated the modern writing style in modern Chinese literature. Since the May Fourth Movement, the

national concept had been taking shape in China and was consolidated in the war. However, attaching great importance to life experience, Eileen Chang holds a different concept of nationalism from other writers of the same period. In her autobiographical novel *The Fall of the Pagoda*, Chang wrote: "What is China like?... China is not prosperous and strong...Pipa knows nothing about this and feels nothing but annoyed." "The nation gives all these to her because she was born to a noble family. If she was a daughter of He Gan, is she expected to be grateful for suffering starvation at the age of 8?" [4]. Eileen Chang shows no blind worship of the concept of the nation. She is smart enough to see the suffering of individuals as a part of the imagined community of the nation. In this regard, the film adaptation partly follows the novel. In the film *Lust, Caution*, Director Ang Lee does not criticize Wong Chia Chi for betraying the revolution from the perspective of a nation, and he even forgave "Mr. Yee" as a traitor. This was done by deconstructing the nationalism.

2.2 Deviation in the Film Adaptation

In the process of film adaptation, an extension was made to the original novel. In particular, the most prominent change is the increased fullness of the image of Mr. Yee. In Eileen Chang's novel, Mr. Yee is silent, and is mostly "being told about". In the beginning part of the novel, Mr. Yee is represented with symbol images. This representation remains until the fall and death of Wong Chia Chi, after which the author starts to write about the inner activity of Mr. Yee ironically. By doing so, the author reveals how cowardly and selfish this seemingly mysterious man actually is, portrays the self-satisfied, ugly face of Mr. Yee after a narrow escape from death, and completely denies the illusion of Wong Chia Chi "that this man loves me" [5]. On the contrary, in the film, Ang Lee shows sympathy toward Mr. Yee and creates a sympathetic living environment for Mr. Yee. In the three much-debated sex scenes of the film, Ang Lee used sadistic acts to show the repression of mood and outbursts of emotions of Mr. Yee. In a Japanese-style tea house, Mr. Yee was moved to tears when singing a song named *The Wandering Songstress* with Wong Chia Chi, and then went to the jewelry store with Wong with all his guard put down. Such intimate acts reveal the vulnerability of Mr. Yee to the audience, fooling them into believing that he "really loves" Wong Chia Chi as Wong believes. The narration about the dilemma of male characters is sentimental throughout the film. Unlike in the novel where in the end Mr. Yee seems hopelessly heartless, the film ends with Mr. Yee sitting beside the old bed of Wong Chia Chi, as if he is mourning for her death. The image of Mr. Yee is transferred from a flimsy, evil one into an ordinary one that is helpless in a repressing environment. The extension of the image of Mr. Yee blurs

the romantic relationship between the two leading characters which is completely denied in the novel. On one hand, such a change makes the image of the hero and heroin more vivid and profound, leaving the audience some space to mull over and ponder on the film. Unlike the straightforward and cruel narration in the original novel, the story in the film is more of a tragic, romantic one that leaves the audience lamenting. However, the film leaves a much-discussed question as to "whether Mr. Yee loved Wong Chia Chi", and this does not accord with the ideological core of the novel.

3. Causes of the Deviation

3.1 Differences in Esthetic Standards of the Creators

Ang Lee's differentiating interpretation of the novel *The Spy Ring* is intentional, rather than a result of his insufficient understanding of Eileen Chang. Talking about the deviations from the novel in the film, Ang Lee once said: "I think that Eileen Chang needs a little bit of extra love...She has been writing about the vicissitudes of China in the past 100 years and is still writing tragic, cruel stories. I cannot do this with my films. I want to show her a little bit of love." [6].

The deviation in the film adaptation is also partly a result of the aesthetic orientation of Ang Lee. Eileen Chang is sarcastic about the encounters of characters, which is attributable to her "desolate" esthetic standard, whereas Ang Lee tends to soften the conflict with great sympathy. In the film, as an extension to the novel, Wong Chia Chi played a role in a sensational patriotic drama in her college, which showed the patriotism of Wong Chia Chi and her school-fellows. However, the Survey and Statistics Bureau of the Central Executive Committee of the Kuomintang took advantage of the students' patriotism, which caused physical and mental injury to Wong and resulted in her death. For Wong Chia Chi, "nation" is something that keeps exploiting and exhausting her without offering any feedback or reward. Instead, Mr. Yee, who is on the opposite side of overall national interest, gives her spiritual, physical, and material comfort. He even makes lonely Wong Chia Chi believe she "is loved". Following the perspective of Wong Chia Chi, the film aims to provide the audience with a complete emotional experience when they watch the film, hoping that they understand that the life experience of individuals is more important than empty values, sympathize with her, and forgive her for her choice.

However, this is exactly the cause of distortion of the ideological core of the novel in the film adaptation. At the ending part of the novel *Lust, Caution*, the upset Wong Chia Chi "is kept out of the door, in a dither", whereas

Mr. Yee, who has just had a narrow escape from assassination, doesn't feel sorry for Wong's death at all [7]. Ironically, Mr. Yee looks quite self-satisfied. In contrast to the sympathy for Wong shown by Ang Lee, Eileen Chang shows calm introspection from the perspective of Wong Chia Chi. This is where the tolerance of Ang Lee for human nature contrasts with the "desolate" esthetic standard of Eileen Chang. This contrast is specifically reflected by the intentional or unintentional downplay of the idea of self-criticism and introspective deconstruction in the novel [8].

3.2 Difference in Perspectives between Female and Male Creators

The difference in perspectives between male and female creators is also a cause of the deviation of the film adaptation from the novel in terms of ideological core. The climax of the novel is the moment when Wong Chia Chi mistakes the ring Mr. Yee gives her as the expression of his love for her, and spares him. She makes this final choice out of a very apparent motive. However, in the novel, Eileen Chang makes clear the absence of love in a somewhat cruel manner. After Wong Chia Chi fails and is captured, Mr. Yee turns out to be a coward and selfish man, rather than the warm, mysterious man he pretends to be. Here, the sentimental image of the male character is an emotional projection of females. The moral anxiety resulting from her loss of virginity pushes Wong Chia Chi to the fringes of the male-dominated society, and makes her eager to participate in the grandiose national morality as part of the male-dominated narration, in the hope that she can regain her identity by "eliminating traitors". At the end of the story, Wong comes to realize the emptiness of the grandiose narration of a male-dominated society and decides to resort to the short-lasting, emotional appeal of individuals. At the end of the novel, the author shifts her perspective and tells the readers that the love perceived by Wong Chia Chi is an illusion. During the May Fourth movement, free love was regarded as the opposite of arranged marriage, and love was described by male revolutionaries as part of the sacred life revolution of individuals. The "myth of revolution plus love" soon became a popular topic among writers [9]. In the novel *The Spy Ring*, the overall national interest that encourages Wong Chia Chi to participate in the revolution is empty, and the perceived love that causes her to betray the revolution and lose her life is false as well. Wong Chia Chi, a once believer in revolution and love, dies at a young age. This is real. From a female perspective, Eileen Chang reflects on the wrong choice Wong Chia Chi has made and deconstructs the two grandiose topics since the May Fourth Movement, revolution and love.

Eileen Chang narrates affections from a female perspec-

tive, under which Mr. Yee is a flimsy character [10]. In the film *Lust, Caution*, Director Lee attempts to abandon the gender position and express his opinions on human nature. The film depicts the living environment of males in a male-dominated society and shows the greatest sympathy toward Mr. Yee as a negative character in the novel. In the film *Lust, Caution*, the image of Mr. Yee becomes fuller, and the tragic narration of the dilemma for males is seen throughout the film. At the end of the film, the image of Mr. Yee as a wretched, self-satisfied vile character celebrating his narrow escape from a tragedy is depicted as a man who sits beside the bed of Wong, moaning her death. Besides, the film includes a great amount of sympathetic narration about Mr. Yee, whose image is changed from "being told about" to the center of the story. As a man at the center of power, Mr. Yee is forced to decide between sensation and sense. From the end of the film, this choice hurts her personal feelings. This change deviates from one of the ideological cores of the novel, which is the disillusion of love.

3.3 The Commercial Purpose of Film Adaptation

The commercial purpose of film adaptation is also a cause of the deviation from the ideological core of the novel. As a short story, the novel *The Spy Ring* is brief even though it's no less complicated and dramatic than a full-length novel. Such briefness inevitably leads to the briefness of plots. The extension to the character image and plots made by Director Ang Lee allows the audience to better read the exquisite emotion and change of human nature, and understand the contradiction and choice of characters through the grandiose historical events [11]. On one hand, the extension to and expansion of a flimsy character image easily leads to misunderstanding of the leading characters. The extension to the character Mr. Yee poses a certain impact on the psychological logic of Wong Chia Chi, and leads to a deviating interpretation of the ideological core of the novel. On the other hand, the extension to the image of Mr. Yee and the romantic narration is to the market demand for commercial films. The "desolate" esthetic standard of Eileen Chang is seen throughout the novel *The Spy Ring*, and the tragic ending is like a ruthless, self-mocking lament that Wong Chia Chi is stupid, and allegorically reveals the empty, false appearance covered by the grandiose significance in a male-dominated society. Such narration is not universally readable, and the adaptation by Director Ang Lee accords with the commercial nature of films. The sympathetic description of the male and female leading characters evokes empathy in the audience. The sublimation of pure lust to love in the film leaves the audience lamenting the pureness and genuineness of love and thinking about the choice between sense and sensa-

tion as complicated by human nature. Such thoughts are not about sex position and cater to the psychology of a greater audience population. As such, despite its deviation from the ideological core of the novel, the film accords with the commercial demand for film and TV adaptations of novels.

4. Inspiration from the Film Adaptation of the Novel *The Spy Ring*

As lessons learned from the case of the film adaptation of the novel *The Spy Ring*, film and TV workers are expected to while keeping the commercial nature of films, make adaptations that are in line with the ideological core of the novel. Undoubtedly, as one of Ang Lee's masterpieces, the film *Lust, Caution* has been highly recognized for its elaborate production and remarkable narration and is among the best films adapted from the novels of Eileen Chang. However, the deviation in the film adaptation from the novel's ideological core shall never be ignored. Understandably, the director modifies part of the novel text based on their aesthetic standard. However, the change in gender position serves as a barrier to the interpretation of the novel's ideology. Roland Soong, a friend of Eileen Chang, once pointed out that the heroin of *The Spy Ring* did not have an archetypal character as made up in Internet rumors [12]. Considering the life story of Eileen Chang and her overall creation thoughts, the character Wong Chia Chi reflects her self-criticism in her later years. Eileen Chang had some bad relationships when she was young, and she placed her personal feelings on the characters and plots of the film *Lust, Caution*. In her later years, Eileen Chang resorted to writing stories as a way to vent emotions. In a male-dominated society, incited by the grandiose narration of revolution and love, females hurt themselves or even lost their lives in vain. Eileen Chang gained such an understanding through her life experience. It is unarguable to say that gender position undoubtedly plays a critical role in the film and TV adaptation of novels (particularly those by female writers) and that the film and TV sector needs more directors who can tell stories about females from a female perspective.

5. Conclusion

The film *Lust, Caution*, adapted from the novel *The Spy Ring*, successfully captures the original storyline, the object image, and the deconstruction of the imaginary national community of the novel, but still includes some deviations. The disenchantment of love in the novel is re-

placed by the entanglement between rationality and emotion, which deviates from the ideological core of the novel. The reasons for such differences include the differences in the aesthetic standards of the creators, the differences in perspectives between female and male creators, and the commercial purpose of the film itself. From the case of the film adaptation of *The Spy Ring*, it can be seen that gender position plays a key role in the film and TV adaptation of female writers' novels and that creators should be encouraged to respect the life experience and body writing of females.

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