

Viewing Eileen Chang's 1940s Shanghai lit through reception lens

Zhao Qiyuan^{1, a}, He Li^{2, b, *}

¹Nankai University, No. 38 Tong Yan Road, Hai He Education Park, Tianjin, 300350, China

²Tianjin University, No. 135 Ya Guan Road, Jin nan District, Tianjin, 300354, China

a.zhangqiyuan_024600@126.com, b.lihe.jan@sina.com

***Corresponding Author**

Abstract: Eileen Chang's literature miracle is a special case to the literary circle of Shanghai during the Japanese occupation period. It had found a balanced supporting point among the social political cultural atmosphere, the consumer's need from the market, the readers' reading expectation and the writer's hope for innovation. From the angle of literary reception, this paper analyzes how a real conspiracy relation was formed among the author, the readers and the literature periodicals, and promoted the Eileen Chang literary miracle in the 1940s together.

Keywords: Eileen Chang, literary reception, reading expectation, innovation expectation

1. Introduction

This article delves into the literary career of Eileen Chang, which began in the spring of 1943, and how she rapidly became a popular writer amidst the unique political and cultural environment of Shanghai during the occupation period by collaborating with literary publications. The article analyzes the distinctive style of Chang's works and how she skillfully merged tradition with modernity, the popular with the refined, to meet the reading expectations of a broad audience while also demonstrating her pursuit of literary innovation. By examining the interactions between Chang and the literary publications of her time, as well as an aesthetic reception analysis of her works, the article reveals a conspiratorial relationship formed between the author, readers, and literary publications. This relationship not only propelled Chang's literary success but also reflected the demands and aesthetic tastes of the Shanghai cultural market at the time. Furthermore, the article discusses the impact of Chang's works on the society and culture of that era, and how she engaged in extensive discussions on women's issues and everyday life through her literary creations. Overall, this article provides a comprehensive review of Eileen Chang's literary achievements and her status in the cultural environment of occupied Shanghai.

2. Chang's literary ascent in occupied Shanghai

In the spring of 1943, Eileen Chang brought her manuscripts of "The First Incense Burner" and "The Second Incense Burner" to meet Zhou Shou Juan. They had a delightful conversation, and Chang did not hide her fondness for traditional novels and her sincere respect for Zhou. After reading the works, Zhou immediately decided to publish them in "Violet Magazine" and wrote a grand introduction to invite readers to appreciate this "work with a special sentiment"—"The style is very similar to that of the famous British writer Somerset Maugham, and it is also influenced by 'Dream of the Red Chamber'." Subsequently, Ke Ling "miraculously discovered" Eileen Chang and "sincerely hoped that she would often contribute to 'The World'." [1] The literary editor of "The Magazine" also noticed that Chang's novels had "an unparalleled style," and since July 1943, almost every issue of "The Magazine" has featured Chang's articles, either novels or essays. The "Editor's Postscript" often includes brief introductions and comments on her works, with many praises. Both "The World" and "The Magazine" are comprehensive periodicals with a wide influence and a large number of readers in Shanghai. They worked together to push Eileen Chang to the forefront of the literary world, with single editions of "Legend" and "Rumors" being reprinted again and

again. By the end of 1943, Eileen Chang was called "one of the most beautiful gains in the literary world" [2], becoming a hot writer in Shanghai and the object of readers' pursuit.

For the literary world during the occupation of Shanghai, Eileen Chang's literary legend was a unique case—she found a balance between the social political and cultural atmosphere, market consumer demand, readers' reading expectations, and the author's pursuit of innovation. This article will elucidate how authors, readers, and literary publications formed a genuine conspiracy from the perspective of reception aesthetics, jointly creating the literary legend of Eileen Chang in the 1940s.

In the modern cultural context, writers engage in literary creation, and literary works enter the market in the form of books, newspapers, and periodicals, realizing their aesthetic value through readers' selective purchase and reading. At the same time, the public nature of mass media and its functions of intervention and guidance increasingly influence readers' aesthetic concepts and appreciation abilities. It is worth noting that in this interlocking chain, there is not only a one-way transmission from the writer, work to the reader, but also a reverse demand, that is, readers actively seek certain types of works to satisfy their aesthetic pleasure, reflecting as readers' reading expectations.

Reading expectations refer to the latent aesthetic anticipation of literary works formed by the intersection of readers' life experiences, aesthetic tastes, cultural literacy, and ideals, a kind of habitual psychological force in the activity of literary acceptance. At the same time, the cultural vision and level of individual readers are subject to the degree of civilization of the era, and the cultural habits and aesthetic standards of society are inevitably internalized into the psychological mechanisms of individuals. Since the Opium War, Shanghai has been invaded by foreign powers, with the British and American public concessions and the adjacent French concession fragmenting the city of Shanghai. At the same time, Shanghai quickly embraced the material aspects of Western modern civilization, surpassing the slow development of most areas of China and achieving an early transformation into modernity, becoming synonymous with "modern" and acquiring the characteristics of consumption, secularism, and utilitarianism of a modern city. Even under the occupation and bombardment of the Japanese army, its economy and culture continued to develop on the basis of inertia and history. In terms of Shanghai's literary production, its dissemination has long been organically combined with the publication and printing culture, achieving full commercialization, and the cultural consumption psychology of the public has gradually matured. Eileen Chang once said that the ordinary citizens of Shanghai have developed a "strange wisdom" [3] under the experience of high-pressure modern life, accustomed to a mentality of seeking peace in a corner. The full occupation by the Japanese and the direct isolation of the war have obtained a kind of tenacious vitality. In such a political and cultural context, the development of new literature was blocked, and readers' demand for literature was more urgently to obtain entertainment for emotional venting and the comfort of supporting life from literary works, demanding "to use literature to help pass the time." Literature needs to meet their "perceptual set forged by experience, needs, emotions, values, and other orientations" [4] as much as possible.

In this situation, some writers and literary publications in 1940s Shanghai tended to repeatedly use the stereotypical motifs already familiar to the general readers, such as marriage novels and detective stories, to ensure habitual acceptance. For example, Zhou Shou Juan, a representative writer of the "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School," founded the "Violet" monthly in 1943, which was purely a popular literary field, obsessed with the old emotional affairs and romantic and mournful literary style. Chen Die Yi also adapted to the times, launching the "Popular Literature Movement" in "The World," guiding literary creation with theory. After Ke Ling took over the editorship of "The World," although he tried to change its focus on interest, he wanted to inspire the people's wisdom with deep and heavy new literature, but he still compromised to some extent with the public, choosing a compromise between meaning and interest. All commercial literary publications were more clearly aware of the spiritual products needed by the cultural market, aiming at the life tastes and standards of the citizens.

3. Chang's literary fusion: reader and innovation

The reason why Eileen Chang's works were simultaneously spotted and vigorously recommended by the most influential literary publications in Shanghai is precisely because they could meet the reading expectations of the vast number of Shanghai readers. Chang once recalled her mindset when creating "Love in a Fallen City": "In addition to the desolate sentiments of life that I wanted to express, I also wanted to give

the audience everything they wanted: gorgeous romances, dialogues, colors, and poetry..." [5] Chang's straightforward and simple awareness of her readers allowed her to unhesitatingly adopt the themes of old traditional novels and the beloved narrative style, depicting an era that was both new and old, traditional yet fashionable. In her "legendary" stories, there are decaying and corrupt old families' concubines and prodigal sons, such as Cao Qi Qiao and Jiang Ji ze in "The Golden Cangue," bright and beautiful social butterflies enjoying the revelry, such as Ge Wei long in "The First Incense Burner of the Fragrant Sandalwood," unmarried noblewomen who are eager to marry, such as Bai Liu Su in "Love in a Fallen City," and ordinary women in a desolate era, such as Wu Cui yuan in "Sealed Off." Chang skillfully respected the reading tastes of the masses in the stereotypical plot and character settings, writing out exquisite, absurd, and comical secular stories one by one, outlining love and desire with fascinating plots, and even the sentences were soaked in the flavor of "Jin Ping Mei" and "Dream of the Red Chamber." Words like "the rustling of the wind at the end of the forest, the fine fragrance of dust," "parting the flowers and brushing the willows," and "holding a grudge in the heart" are naturally "not to be left unsaid." Readers warmly accepted these "ancient memories," appreciating the floating life's fun created by Chang for them in the ambiguous sentiment of the old novels. At that time, Fu Lei wrote a review article specifically to affirm the miraculous artistic achievement of "The Golden Cangue," but also seriously pointed out that Chang's memory of "literary heritage was too clear," and that "using the style of old novels in creation, although it is not without interest within the appropriate limits, is ultimately close to playing with fire" [6].

However, many literary critics believe that she is "different from the common writers." In an era when book sales were extremely sluggish, the "Magazine" publishing house was still willing to help Eileen Chang publish the single-volume "Legend" unconditionally, hoping to "make a difference in the lonely literary world." When the first edition of "Legend" sold out in just four days, the "Magazine" held a special "Legend Collective Review Tea Party" to accurately grasp the readers' reactions, inviting many literati to express their opinions. High praise such as "able to use the strengths of old novels for new creations," "the depiction technique is very mature," and "the psychological and color descriptions are very special, similar to painting Western paintings with Chinese painting techniques" are not uncommon. It is believed that Eileen Chang, by using the shell of the old popular literary style and integrating Western writing skills, has achieved a convergence with modern experience. This "integration of tradition and innovation" is precisely the "endearing soul" of Eileen Chang's works [8], making both the intellectual class and the general public equally interested in her works. This phenomenon corresponds exactly with Iser's explanation of "repertoire" in the theory of reception aesthetics, which not only meets the readers' expectations but also the author's expectations for innovation.

4. Exploring Chang's "Repertoire" innovation

The term "repertoire" encompasses two meanings: one refers to the text meeting the customary conventions of literature, similar in meaning to "tradition," ensuring the precondition for its encounter and communication with readers; the other is to rearrange and organize these customary conventions to create new rules that clash with the established norms. This dual function of preserving the old and innovating is the "making the familiar strange" textual strategy adopted by the "repertoire," enabling readers to break through old perspectives and "see things they cannot see in their daily lives" [9], thus promoting the development of the meaning of literary works. Jonathan Culler also points out in "Literary Competence" that "literary effects depend on customary conventions, and the evolution of literature is achieved by replacing old reading habits with the development of new ones." Therefore, the production and dissemination of literature that caters solely to readers' tastes is incomplete and unhealthy, suppressing and hindering the development and evolution of literature. In the Shanghai cultural market, driven by political forces and commercial profits, literature cannot directly intervene in social and political life but should benefit individual aesthetic and spiritual activities.

Eileen Chang never concealed her fondness for old-style novels, nor did she hide her affection for works like "Xie Pu Chao" and "Jin Ping Mei". She acknowledged that she indeed put effort into catering to the readers' tastes, but her "expectation for innovation" in her writing was a conscious one. In her articles such as "Borrowing a Silver Lamp" and "Studying in the Silver Palace," she discussed several popular domestic films of the time: "Peach and Plum Strive for Spring" completely ignored the inner processes of the wife and

the mistress, as if everything was taken for granted, yet it should have used this complex process to "skirt around and analyze many significant issues in life, but it let the opportunity slip by gently" [10]; "The Song of Mei Niang" also had a great chance to rise but was oblivious, only driving a light carriage along a familiar road, rushing into the tragedy of the abandoned woman that we never tire of watching [10]. Such criticism clearly highlights Chang's desire to transcend the "popular"; what she accepted and recognized was merely the external form of the popular, to attract readers; what she truly valued was the profound content hidden under the veil of "popularity." This explains why Chang never submitted any more manuscripts to Zhou Shou Juan after "The Fragrant Sandalwood" was published, nor to popular literary magazines like "Spring and Autumn," "The Public," and "The Novel Monthly," as she did not wish to be categorized by readers as a "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School" writer. The "opportunity" Chang often mentioned in her articles refers to the opportunity in her narrative strategy to transcend the "popular," and "skirting around" also warns that one cannot completely abandon the cover of the popular form; one can only use these opportunities to seek a "rising" breakthrough, so as not to fall into the trap of mediocrity.

Firstly, Chang meticulously designed an "anti-climax" structure that makes the simple plot suddenly change and become profound, such as in "Love in a Fallen City," where the fall of Hong Kong fulfills Bai Liu Su's "love," and she becomes a wife from a mistress amidst the ruins, and suddenly begins to support each other with Fan Liu yuan. "Sealed Off" is a thoroughly small character's story, where L v Zong Zhen and Wu Cui yuan had a subtle yet passionate love affair in a sealed tram. When readers were immersed in the habitual guess of "a perfect match," the seal was lifted, and all emotions disappeared without a trace. "The whole of Shanghai dozed off and had an unreasonable dream." These endings have become a fate, an inevitable experience of survival during the war. Chang used several twists and bizarre stories to tell about the phenomena of life, "as for 'why' and 'what happened,' let the readers depict it themselves." [11] This "indeterminacy" and "blank space" are important features of modernist texts.

Secondly, Chang integrated the characters' actions, words, and psychology with realistic details, emphasizing an inherent tragedy. In "The Golden Cangue," the two seemingly flirtatious encounters between Cao Qi Qiao and Jiang Ji ze vividly express the intense desire, subtle ambiguity, simple boldness, and rational restraint, and it is this uncontrollable desire that makes the novel "touch the bloody reality." In "Flower withers," Zheng Chuan Chuan is a true representative of the Shanghai lady, with a frivolous father, an incompetent mother, and she herself is honest and weak, with a bit of poignant sentiment. Originally, she had found a suitable fiancé and was waiting to marry, but she got lung disease and became a consumptive, and her fiancé found a new girlfriend two years later. When her mother wanted to comfort her, although she answered with a smile, she "pressed the small pointed head of the button hard into her palm, trying to nail through the palm." In Chang's unobtrusive narrative, the depiction of psychology and the flow of consciousness are shown, which contains the twists of human nature and the expansion of material desires often seen in Western modernist novels. What she tried to express is actually the bewilderment of the small citizens living in the colonial city to the whole era - the uncertainty of ordinary life and emotions, the despair for the flaws of human nature, the doubt and negation of the prospect of Westernized China, and the reminiscence of traditional national culture, etc.

5. Chang: Shanghai's literary legend & collective creation

Eileen Chang's rapid rise to fame during the full-scale occupation of Shanghai was certainly influenced by the Japanese invaders and the Wang Jingwei regime's desire to embellish the peace. The content expressed through a female perspective was relatively soft and emotional, making it easier to blur political boundaries during a period when publishing culture was under strict control. More importantly, Chang not only reorganized the familiar patterns in the "popular system" in her creations to attract widespread attention but also used modern interests and techniques to generate a sense of strangeness in readers, thereby stimulating new contemplation about their own situations and enabling them to see through the superficial trivialities of reality to the essence of life. Shanghai's important literary magazines played a role in this regard by introducing Chang to readers, facilitating the exchange between text and reader. They not only attracted a wide range of readers, expanding the commercial interests of the periodicals but also guided the public to discover the intrinsic value and meaning of the novels through independent reading, ultimately harmonizing the contradictions between old and new literature beyond the distinction of refined and popular

tastes. Authors and literary publications, by providing works that appear to align with readers' "expected horizons" but actually contain "innovative expectations," subtly changed readers' aesthetic tastes and reading perspectives.

We can say that not only was Eileen Chang creating "Legend," but the readers and mass media of occupied Shanghai in the 1940s were also participating in the "creation" of Eileen Chang's literary legend. When Zhou Shou Juan and Ke Ling first read Chang's manuscripts, they greatly appreciated them and were eager to introduce her works to readers. "Violet" and "The World" serialized Chang's early five novels in installments and highly recommended them, becoming her initial literary stage. From July 1943 to June 1945, "The Magazine" almost always published Chang's works in each issue, with several articles in a single issue also occurring from time to time. Among the many female writers at the time, Chang was selected by the media and shaped into one of the most important cultural figures in urban Shanghai. Between 1944 and 1945, the "New China Daily" held events such as "Women Writers' Gathering," "Legend Collective Review Tea Party," "Su Qing and Eileen Chang's Conversation Record," and "Cui Cheng xi and Shanghai Women Writers' Gathering," which made her frequently appear in public view. "The Magazine" then promptly published records of the events, showcasing the women writers' ways of thinking, styles of action, likes and dislikes through interviews, comments, photos, and cartoons, thereby helping readers to outline their personal life scenes. Although "star-fied" Eileen Chang inevitably became the object of urban mass entertainment and consumption, it also brought about a widespread social concern for a series of issues related to women, returning to the discussions on women's social status, gender roles, and other issues since the "May Fourth" movement. The guiding role of mass media has made rational elite culture gradually step down from the altar and shake hands with the secular, and daily, perceptual mass culture has made great progress.

6. Conclusion

The literary field is a form of daily resistance, opposing all submission to power or the market. The appreciation of both refined and popular literature should naturally be the trend and independent choice of the literary field during the period of Shanghai's occupation. As a professional writer, Eileen Chang regarded the general readers as her "bread and butter," and she was not stingy with her praise, calling them the "most lovable employers," saying, "whatever they want, give it to them." At the same time, because of the readers' "sincerity," the author also gave her all, "giving them a little more," such as the desolation and modernity in Eileen Chang's articles. Of course, not all readers can appreciate Eileen Chang's "expectation for innovation" during the reading process. The depth of understanding depends on the reader's cultural horizon, aesthetic taste, and life experience, but this is not crucial. Eileen Chang had already provided a standard answer in "My Own Articles": "Let the story itself give what it can, and let the readers take what they can." [12]

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