

The Rewriting of Eileen Chang's Female Characters and Its Significance in the Film Love After Love

Yueyue Song^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University, Beijing, 100080, China
a. songyueyue@pku.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: In November 2021, the film *Love After Love*, based on Eileen Chang's short story *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, was released, sparking widespread attention and controversy. Using the basic method of textual close reading, this paper compares and analyses the source text produced by Eileen Chang with the film text collectively interpreted by the film's screenwriter and director to discover the rewritings and changes in the image of her female characters from the short story to the film, and to interpret such rewritings in the theoretical field of feminist literary criticism, in order to answer the question of how Eileen Chang's portrayal of women can be adapted to and inspires the contemporary cultural context of China in the adaptation of contemporary creators. The film liberates the female characters in *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier* from the anxiety and pain of lack of desire and self-suppression and also gives them the possibility of reclaiming their dignity and selves, which, on the one hand, is adapted to the cultural context of the increasing call for women's emancipation in contemporary China, but on the other hand, it has not yet escaped from the phenomenon of masculine writing that has been prevalent in the Chinese cultural context since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Keywords: *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, *Love After Love*, film adaptation, image of female characters

1. Introduction

Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier is a short story written by Eileen Chang in April 1943, which was the debut of this talented female writer on the literary scene of Shanghai during the Japanese occupation. At its publication, the short story won the favour of both professional readers and the general public and laid an extraordinary beginning for her legendary literary path.

Set in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the first half of the twentieth century, Ge Weilong, a secondary school student from Shanghai, follows her family to Hong Kong to make a living to escape the war between China and Japan. As her family's financial situation makes it difficult for her to complete her studies, she turns to Madame Liang, a rich merchant's widow. Instead of concentrating on her studies and pursuing advancement, she tries to marry a rich husband but falls in love with a foppish and incompetent swinger, George Qiao. Eventually, with the combined coaxing of Madame Liang and George Qiao, she accepts a lifestyle as a high-class prostitute, earning money for her husband and scouting for potential lovers for her aunt.

Nearly eighty years later, Hong Kong female director Ann Hui invited another female writer, Wang Anyi, who is a specialist in Shanghai stories, to be the screenwriter and adapt this gorgeous but bleak tale into the film *Love After Love*, which was released in China in November 2021 to a wide range of mixed reviews and mixed accolades. Most professional film critics, film researchers, and literary researchers are keen to discuss the success or failure of the film's adaptation of Eileen Chang's original work, with "fine but offset" as the consensus and representative conclusion [1]: On the one hand, it is acknowledged that the film recreates the literary world of Eileen Chang's writing in an aesthetically pleasing and highly refined audio-visual form, while on the other hand, it is criticised that the characterisation of the film has deviated from the original.

Some critics have argued that the humanistic stance of screenwriter Wang Anyi and director Ann Hui has caused the characters to deviate from the logic of emotional development and behavioural choices established in the original text, which results in a characterisation that is different from the original one [2]. Some researchers also believe that in order to make up for the story details left blank in the short story and expand the plot capacity, the film had to destroy Eileen Chang's original delicate and implicit style in the field of characterisation, resulting in the deviation of the image from the original [3]. However, the significance of the deviations of the characters in the film from those in the original short story in terms of their echoes of the Chinese cultural context has not yet received sufficient attention.

This essay attempts to use textual close reading as a basic method to comparatively analyse how female characters have been rewritten from Eileen Chang's original work to the adapted film and how this rewriting affects their image-making to make the image of Chinese women in the first half of the twentieth century, which is metaphorically represented by the embroidered bird in Eileen Chang's writing, compatible with the cultural context of contemporary China.

2. Eileen Chang's Embroidered Bird

A scholar, Lin Xingqian, who specialises in interpreting Eileen Chang's literary works using feminist theories, has seen the metaphor of "the overall patriarchal oppression of women" in another Hong Kong story written by Eileen Chang, *Jasmine Tea* - "a bird embroidered onto a screen", which looks gorgeous and lovely and lifelike but is completely deprived of freedom from birth to death [4]. Even more paradoxical is that "embroidery" is precisely a kind of female autonomous behaviour, "patriarchal authority manages to make women 'embroider themselves onto the screen'" [4]. The modern Chinese women in Eileen Chang's writing do not hesitate to repress, distort, and transform themselves to adapt to and even cater for the patriarchal exploitation and discipline of women's bodies and minds. Eileen Chang's concern with this female situation is present throughout her literary works, which is why Lin Xingqian uses the term "repressed self" to describe the quality of Eileen Chang's writing about women: "Due to the scarcity of desire and the loss of female self-consciousness, this can only be regarded as a negative pattern of counter-reference: presenting the scarce desire and anxiety in the form of suppressed self" [4].

In fact, in the Chinese cultural context of the first half of the twentieth century, the "embroidered bird" written by Eileen Chang did not become a widely admired image of women in literature, while the mainstream culture more grandly welcomed another image of women with the opposite qualities. From the rebellious and isolated intellectual woman "Ms. Sophie" portrayed by Ding Ling, to revolutionary women actively engaged in the cause of salvation, the desires and self-awareness of Chinese women in the 20th century were awakened by the call of "Nora's departure" during the May Fourth era. However, they became blurred through the amalgamation with national myths and the discourse of salvation, even to the extent of disguising themselves as "quasi-masculine warriors" [5]. As Dai Jinhua puts it, "Between the two dominant ideological mirror images of the woman in the old days who suffered, was tormented, and was shamed, and the warrior as a quasi-male, the new woman,

the emancipated woman, is lost in an illusory historical gap and moment” [5], Eileen Chang’s literary portrayal of women at least retains the moment when they are about to slip through the gap of history. Her female characters cannot transcend the social environment, nor are they allowed by the social environment to metamorphose into idealised new warriors. In this sense, her literary world retains another possibility for the future of Sophie and Nora, who came from the May Fourth Movement.

According to Lin Xingqian, the portrayal and popularity of revolutionary women’s images in Chinese literature in the first half of the twentieth century illustrate the fact that “the suspicion of gender reversal, i.e., playing the role of a male, imitating a male, and worshipping the father’s authoritative image, as shown by female writers in their act of writing” [4], which may be the result of women’s complex phallus/penis envy and naturally, is a manifestation of the fact that women have been deeply assimilated and internalised by the patriarchal sense of power. The image of the “embroidered bird” written by Eileen Chang “is a reversal of the fictional myth of revolutionary women, giving a concrete historical face to the distorted, abused, repressed and destroyed women’s discourse in the era of transition” [6]. Eileen Chang’s unique literary personality is thus constructed as a kind of marginalised writing with more possibilities of authoritative reality. Also, it breaks free from the dangers of the patriarchal consciousness being internalised in the women themselves, and this is where Eileen’s unique value lies in the negative pattern of counter-reference in the writing of women’s stories and in portraying the women’s image.

3. Film Rewriting of the Embroidered Bird

There are many vivid female characters in the short story *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, such as the heroine, Ge Weilong, as well as Ge Weilong’s aunt, Madame Liang, Ge Weilong’s female friend of the same age, Zhou Jijie, whom Ge Weilong befriends socially, and Madame Liang’s maids, Glance and Glint, to name a few. Even though these female characters have different identities, come from different walks of life, and have very different personalities and experiences, they share the core qualities of Eileen Chang’s typical “embroidered birds” - their desires appear to be lacking due to excessive repression. They are always in danger of losing their self-consciousness altogether.

In the short story, the character of Madame Liang, the aunt, emerges as a direct and fervent representative of feminine desires for love. Upon their initial encounter, Ge Weilong was struck by Madame Liang’s eyes, leading to an exclamation that beauty might fade, yet not her eyes. These eyes serve as windows unveiling emotions. Eileen Chang employs them symbolically to signify the emergence of longing for love: The exchange of love between a man and a woman finds expression through their gaze - “their eyes beaded on a single string” [7]; playful exchanges between men and women manifest as “a thorn stuck in your eye” [7], serving as a means of mutual taunting; the female character endeavors to discern the authenticity of love within the male character’s gaze, striving “as hard as she could to find his eyes behind the dark lenses” [7]; however, Chang captures the female character’s disillusionment with love by meticulously detailing her demeanor as “her face bore the trace of a smile, but her eyes were dead” [7]. Even though Madame Liang is no longer in her prime, her eyes do not age and are definitely not dead, which symbolises that she has never really lost her desire to love as a woman.

However, Eileen Chang implicitly and subtly avoids the plot development path in which women’s desire for love may be fulfilled. She also focuses on the deprivation and suppression of women’s desire for love, which is always difficult to satisfy truly. In the short story, Madame Liang goes to great lengths to arrange her chance to meet her niece’s, Lu Zhaolin, a male university student, to get close to him. It often reveals her anxiety of suffering during her pursuit of this man. Ge Weilong looked on with cold eyes, even sympathetic to her aunt’s means of taking her intended from her side: “A woman is such a pitiful thing! A man is only a little bit nice, and see how happy she is!” [7]. The short story also fails to give a clear account of the extent to which Madame Liang’s relationship with

Lu Zhaolin has developed; she may have gained the love of this male, or she may have gained only sexual fulfilment, or she may have gained nothing at all. Eileen Chang, with the help of Ge Weilong, comments eloquently on Madame Liang's state of mind and behaviour, "Madame Liang was old now, with a hungry heart that she could not fill. She needed love from many people, but to a young person, her way of looking for love seemed ridiculous!" [7]. Women's desire for love is ultimately a famine that cannot be satiated, and they will always live in a situation where they have to suppress their desire for love because of a lack of love. Madame Liang has the ambition to break free from this self-suppressing situation, but this ambition can only be manifested as a temptation filled with anxiety and a sense of inferiority, which is scorned by the dominant vision of the young people Ge Weilong represents.

However, in the film *Love After Love*, the qualities of Madame Liang's image, which is both pathetic and ridiculous, are completely rewritten. She approaches Lu Zhaolin with a well-travelled, hunting-like demeanour, not as if she is in danger of wooing him, but very quickly striking some unspoken deal with him - she finances his studies in Canada, and he provides her with sexual pleasure. The film presents Madame Liang's control and efficiency in this game of amorous jockeying in a more straightforward manner than the text and no longer dwells on the original's whitewash of the relationship between the two. It can be clearly concluded that Madame Liang has gained tangible erotic fulfilment in her emotional relationship with Lu Zhaolin, a fulfilment which, it seems, can be easily exchanged for as long as a woman pays a material price.

Another female figure that undergoes similar alterations is Zhou Jijie. In the short story, she is also a female character full of desire, except that the nature of this desire differs from Madame Liang's endogenous love desire, and the attraction in her stems from the male gaze that Eileen Chang proposes: "Lu Zhaolin was looking at a mixed-race girl who was no more than fifteen or sixteen years old. The whiteness of her skin was not that of a Chinese; it was a flat white, altogether opaque. A snow-white face with large, pale-green eyes hinting of mischief, yet eyebrows and lashes, and full, luscious, scarlet lips-a face of almost forbidding beauty" [7]. Ge Weilong follows Lu Zhaolin's gaze and learns to look at Zhou Jijie from the perspective of a male gazing at a female, and what she discovers is the beauty of the female flesh that fills the male's desires. When Ge Weilong, as a woman, has a heart-to-heart talk with Zhou Jijie, it is only then that she realises that this outwardly radiant female figure is still mired in the mental anguish of a woman's desire for love that cannot be truly fulfilled: Zhou Jijie clearly realises that, as a mixed-blood girl, on the one hand, she is not able to "fit in with the pure Chinese types" [7], while on the other hand, she has not been able to find a romantic foreigner amongst the racially minded whites. This means that although Zhou Jijie is younger and more beautiful than Madame Liang and is more likely to be welcomed and adored by men, her real situation is not substantially different from that of Madame Liang - they always lack the love they need, and thus have to repress their real needs, living in a state of anxiety and misery due to self-repression.

In the film, the anxiety and pain of the female figure of Zhou Jijie is rewritten as a kind of smugness. For example, she brags to Ge Weilong that her sexual partners are "at my beck and call", and when her brother George worries that she will not be able to marry her English boyfriend, she replies dismissively, "What makes you think I'd marry that idiot". While the short story does not explain the end of Zhou Jijie, only hinting that she might leave Hong Kong to try her luck at marriage in a foreign country, the film clearly shows that her ultimate choice is to become a Catholic nun. Suppose Madame Liang in the film relies on the means of material benefits in exchange for the resources of erotic satisfaction. In that case, Zhou Jijie gives full play to her physical beauty, which is sufficient to fully please male desire, to reap the resources of erotic satisfaction, and ultimately puts aside the female yearning for spiritual love in the secular sense, and converts to another, more distant, kind of divine love.

Suppose the most significant change in the characteristics of Madame Liang and Zhou Jijie's images from the short story to the film lies in the fact that the anxiety and repression of women's unfulfilled desire for love is not adequately presented. In that case, the most important alteration undergone by the character of the heroine, Ge Weilong, is the return of women's self-consciousness, which is an ending that has not been arrived at by Ge Weilong, who has completely lost her self-consciousness in the original short story. Ge Weilong, at the end of the original story, makes this observation about the division of rights and duties between her and George Qiao: "I love you, so I'm not going to blame you for anything.Fair? There's no such thing as 'fair' in relationships between people" [7]. Obviously, she is fully aware of her inferior situation of being oppressed and exploited in the unfair power relations between men and women. However, she sadly accepts the reality that this situation has become irreversible and completely loses the will to change it.

The film expands on the narrative structure of *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier* which is "detailed at the front and abbreviated at the back" [8], adding more details to the love relationship between Ge Weilong and George Qiao that were not in the original text. In the expanded part of the film, Ge Weilong achieves a degree of subversion of her inferior, powerless situation in the power relationship between men and women by exacting revenge on George Qiao. On a spiritual level, she is even more perverse. She throws herself into the arms of another more wealthy and powerful male suitor, Situ Xie, and blatantly develops an extramarital affair and verbally taunts George Qiao many times for her laziness and uselessness for being a mixed-race man who is neither able to understand the habits of thought of the Chinese people nor to integrate into the white community, which greatly irritates and degrades George Qiao's self-esteem. On the physical level, she is not afraid to inflict physical violence on George Qiao, slapping him during quarrels. When the maid, who had previously deceived George Qiao, restrains herself due to the intimidation of Ge Weilong's authority and steadfastly resists his advances, she effectively carries out a retaliatory measure by suppressing and even confining George Qiao's body. The expansion of women's resentment and the implementation of retaliatory behaviours ultimately highlight Ge Weilong's attempts to reclaim her lost self-esteem and sense of self in the unfair power relations between men and women.

All in all, the "embroidered bird" type of female figures written by Eileen Chang is often trapped in the lack of love and repression, accompanied by the loss of personal dignity and even self-consciousness. The film's adaptation of the portrayals of Madame Liang, Zhou Jijie, and Ge Weilong, several important female characters, not only liberates the female characters in Eileen Chang's writing from the anxiety and pain of lack of desire and self-suppression but also endows them with the beautiful expectation of rediscovering their dignity and selves. However, it cannot be denied that such an alteration is hardly in line with Eileen Chang's understanding of Chinese women's real-life and spiritual situation in the first half of the twentieth century. It is an adaptation strategy that obviously echoes the cultural context of contemporary China - hoping that women's need for love can be viewed more openly and freely, transcending the age and racial limitations, and can be fulfilled more easily; and also hoping that women's personal dignity and self-consciousness can be more firmly upheld and promoted. As screenwriter Wang Anyi said in an exclusive interview related to the film about the differences between herself and Eileen Chang: "The change in my writing is different from hers, her change is a downhill change, my change happens to be in a brand new era, which is a very important difference" [9]. Wang Anyi seems to suggest that her generation of female literary creators is living in a "brand new era" that is not quite the same as the twentieth-century China that Eileen Chang saw, heard, and wrote about and that her own creations should adapt to the cultural needs of the era.

However, the expectations and constraints placed on women by the cultural context of contemporary China are equally worthy of vigilance on the part of female creators. Dai Jinhua, China's leading scholar of contemporary feminist film criticism, once pointed out that women are

facing an inescapable lure of image-making conventions: “A woman who is made up as a man and becomes a hero as a man becomes the most important (if not the only) mirror image of what it means to be a woman in mainstream culture.” [5] This image of a woman made up as a man was expressed as early as Eileen Chang’s contemporaries as the image of revolutionary women who “have high-aspiring minds, they love their battle array, not silks and satins” [10]. In the cultural context of contemporary China, the image of Mulan has returned and flourished, and is still profoundly influencing the ideas of female creators in portraying women’s images. In the film *Love After Love*, the female figures more or less show this tendency to make-up as male: Madame Liang’s handling of female love desire clearly learns from the male tradition, for example, by using money transactions as a means of obtaining sexual satisfaction; Zhou Jijie’s eventual shelving of female love desire goes against, or even denies her female situation; Ge Weilong’s revenge on George Qiao, in the final analysis, needs to be taken with the help of another male power, and her retaliation is similarly analogue to that of men, whether in terms of physical oppression or mental degradation; how men treat women is how women learn to treat them. From this, it can be seen that when Eileen Chang escaped from the masculine writing that was widely prevalent in her contemporaries’ cultural contexts with the help of a negative mode of counter-indication, it seems that contemporary Chinese female creators are once again in danger of stepping back into this trap.

4. Conclusions

The film *Love After Love* rewrites the female characters in Eileen Chang’s short story *Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*, a rewriting strategy that compensates for the short story’s plot white space, makes its plot richness adaptable to and supportive of the film adaptation and demonstrates the film creators’ understanding and interpretation of the cultural context of contemporary China. Bringing the story of Eileen Chang, written nearly eighty years ago, onto today’s cinema screen and aimed at today’s moviegoers, it is not wrong for the film to adapt the text to the context of the times. Blaming the film’s characterisation for not fitting Eileen Chang’s characters so well that they have deviated is, in fact, using fidelity as an absolute criterion overriding the ideological changes and realistic concerns that adaptations should be allowed to present. It is worth noting, however, that the act of adaptation itself is like a mirror reflecting the expectations and demands of the contemporary Chinese cultural context on the image of women, a mirror image that is not only emancipatory to a certain extent for the “embroidered bird”-style Chinese women of Eileen Chang’s time, but also perpetuate to a certain extent the Mulan-style predicament that Chinese women have not yet been able to escape from since that time. This issue of concern in this paper has not yet been given sufficient attention in the review and research articles related to the film *Love After Love*. This paper only analyses the three main female characters, Madame Liang, Zhou Jijie, and Ge Weilong, and the other female characters and male characters in the short story and the film have not been included in the scope of the analysis and research, which is the limitation of this paper, and also the direction of the study of the characters in Eileen Chang’s literature and its film and television adaptations to be further developed.

References

- [1] Shi Fengli. (2023) *Fine But Offset: A Film Adaptation of Eileen Chang’s Novel The First Incense*. *Journal of Hubei Industrial Polytechnic*, 36(1), 62-66.
- [2] Xing Shaoxuan, Liu Chuan’e. (2022) *The First Incense Burnt: From a Novel to a Film*. *Southern Cultural Forum*, 4, 163-168.
- [3] Zhang Xiaoling. (2022) *The Resolution of Bleakness: The First Incense from Novel to Film Adaptation*. *Movie Review*, 2, 75-78.
- [4] Lin Xingqian. (1996) *Eileen Chang: Texts of Repressed Situations and Hysterical Discourse*. *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, 1,90-103.

- [5] Dai Jinhua. (1994) *Invisible Women: Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Women's Film*. *Contemporary Cinema*, 6, 37-45.
- [6] Lin Xingqian. (2019) *Reverse Writing of Eileen Chang and the May 4th Female Literature*. *Journal of Lucheng*, 5, 1-10.
- [7] Eileen Chang. (2006). *Love in a Fallen City*. Trans. by Kingsbury, K.S. New York: New York Review Books Classics.
- [8] Xu Zidong. (1995) *Rereading Sunrise, A Tale of Laughter and Tears and Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier*. *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, 6, 29-39.
- [9] Yu Yaqin. (2021) *Interview with Wang Anyi: "Filling the Gaps" for Eileen Chang, Challenging Due to the Abundance of Hidden Elements*. Retrieved from <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?display=0&id=2309404695495284228429&retcode=6102&sudaref=www.baidu.com>.
- [10] Noth J. (2021) *Militiawomen, Red Guards, and Images of Female Militancy in Maoist China*. *Twentieth-Century China*, 46, 153-180.