

# *The Absence of Color in the Film Adaptation of Eileen Chang's Novels*

## *- Take "Crumbs of Ligumaloes - The First Incense Burnt" as a Case Study*

Ma Xinjia<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Foreign Language, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China,  
Chengdu, Sichuan Province, China

a. maxinjia2002@163.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** There are many picture elements in Eileen Chang's novel that are suitable for filming, and her works have always enjoyed the title of "film on paper". One of the most important elements is the use of color. Over the years, several directors have adapted Eileen Chang's novels into film and television adaptations, but most of them have been controversial. As a hidden narrative method of film, color narration plays an extremely important auxiliary role in the overall presentation of the work. This paper will take the latest film adaptation of Eileen Chang's novel, "Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt" directed by Ann Hui as an example, combining color narrative theory and film color theory to deal with the absence of color in film and television adaptations, and the strategy for film adaptations of great literature.

**Keywords:** Eileen Chang, "Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt", color narration, film and television adaptation

## 1. Introduction

Color, as a pivotal tool in film and television, significantly shapes the overall impact of a work. Consequently, exploring and researching the use of color in film adaptations holds paramount importance. Eileen Chang's novels have been favored by many directors over the years due to the strong mirror sense and rich picture presentation elements that readers can perceive in the narrative. However, restoring Eileen Chang's words in picture and sound is not easy, so most of the adapted works have been controversial. In Eileen Chang's novels, color plays a vital role in character development, environment depiction, and thematic undertones. Color is the key to understand Eileen Chang and her novel.

At present, the research on Eileen Chang and the film mainly consists of four aspects: the study of her film review, the study of her screenplays, the study of film adaptations of her novels, and the study of film elements in her novels, but there is little comparative analysis of the use of color in novels and films. Taking the latest film adaptation of Eileen Chang's novels – "Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt" as an example, this paper will use color narrative theory and

film color science to explore the important role of color in Eileen Chang's novels and the shortcomings of color in film adaptation.

## 2. Reinventing the Image: Color for Character

Eileen Chang's text is concise, but she is always willing to give a detailed description of the color of the characters' clothes. On her first night at Liang's house, Ge Weilong dived into the wardrobe that her aunt had built for her. There are hundreds of words about this magical wardrobe in the novel, "When she opened the closet, Ge Weilong saw that it was full of clothes, golden and brilliant... The household tapestry robe, gauze, silk, satin, short coat, long coat, beach cape, nightgown, long dress for cocktail, semi-formal dinner dress for guests at home..." [1]. In the novel, Ge Weilong fell in love with this wardrobe at first sight, but she tried to resist it, closing the closet door and thinking, "What's the difference between this and buying a prostitute?" [1]. However, lying in bed, she could not ignore the wardrobe and in her dream, she still thought about it: "she found herself trying on clothes, one after another. Woolen clothes is fuzzy like provocative jazz; Thick and heavy velvet is like a melancholy classical opera; Soft satin is like the 'Blue Danube'" "people were playing an exciting rumba downstairs, and Ge Weilong could not help but thought of that purple silk long skirt in the wardrobe" [1]. In the collision of rationality and irrationality, such beautiful things and luxurious life completely satisfied the girl's fantasy and vanity, but also gradually crushed her reason and self-esteem, becoming the beginning of her destruction. However, the wardrobe is only shown in one or two scenes in the film, this exquisite portrayal is diluted, and the rich colors fade.

Another example is the description of Ge Weilong and Qiao Qiqiao when they met for the first time. In the description of Qiao Qiqiao, Eileen Chang employs "green" to evoke a sense of mystery around him, amplifying the protagonists' mutual indulgence in desire. Under his dark eyebrows and eyelashes, his eyes were like waseda fields blown by the wind, sometimes revealing the green light of the water under the rice, flickering and then dark. He was a complete libertine, being indifference to anything, but he is fully aware of the sordid of upper society. Ge Weilong has already fallen into the vortexes of desire, attracted by money, fashion, banquet and dance. Their first acquaintance hinted that their encounter is not the game of love, but the lingering desire. In contrast, the film's color palette steers toward subtlety, undermining the narrative's depth. The saturation tone, the hazy background, the yellow and green cheongsam and the white gown, all these elements in the film make the two people seem to be pure young boy and girl in the warm spring day at first sight.

In the novel, Ge Weilong was not devoted to love, but chose to compromise her desire under the temptation of luxurious life represented by her aunt. Ge Weilong has always had a very clear understanding of her situation since the beginning and tried to resist it on a rational level but finally failed. In contrast, director Ann Hui's portrayal of Ge Weilong is a girl who fall for love, and she said: "If we want to shoot her degeneration and the dark of the society at that time, it will be very difficult and old-fashioned. But if we take the initiative and show her falling for love, we can have a clearer story line, with other things attached." [2]. Looking back at the absence of color in the film with this setting, it ultimately points to weakening the "voluntary" and strengthening the "forced".

## 3. Reconstructing the Atmosphere: Color in the Environment

Eileen Chang's upbringing in a tumultuous household imprinted a somber theme in her works. Therefore, her novels always depict a gloomy and hopeless world of declining families in the changing times, and its charm lies in creating a gorgeous and corrupt atmosphere with complex images [3]. In order to produce the charm of Eileen Chang's novels, the director should not only copy the plot, dialogue and details to the screen, but also create the atmosphere through the screen image, shooting not only the real plot, but also the virtual feeling.

Eileen Chang is very good at creating the atmosphere of the environment through color. For example, when she first came out of her aunt's house, Ge Weilong "felt like the scholar in 'Liaozhai Zhiyi', who went up the mountain to visit his relatives and in the blink of an eye that the family mansion has turned into a big grave mountain. If the white house suddenly turned into a grave, she might not be surprised [1]. Ge Weilong saw the house again in the evening before she saw her parents off, carrying her suitcase to her aunt, Mrs. Liang's house. When she looked at it from a distance on that humid spring night, she saw "the white house melting stickily into the white mist, and only the green glass windows shaking with lights, green, side by side, like ice cubes in mint wine." [1]. If Ge Weilong was envious of this at dusk, at this time she was like "ice in mint wine", almost intoxicated. The colors and feelings in Eileen Chang's writing are already like white salt in water, mingling with each other and indistinguishable. The Liang family and Ge Weilong's aunt in the novel are the embodiment of humanity's degradation, so the atmosphere is strange and cold, exuding the breath of death.

The color of Liang's family in the film is too harmonious, light and full of vitality: the "lifeless red cuckoo" in the novel has become a delicate pink on the screen, resulting in the overall deviation from the character to the environment description at the beginning of the film. For another example, the orange-red color of the Hong Kong style is used in the mansion dinner party scene in the movie, but the color is too warm and the color saturation is too high, which is not consistent with the luxurious party with no vitality in the novel. However, the film's use of different shades offers a sense of layering which can be rarely seen in mainstream films: At the party, the colors are bright, and then the camera turns to the room of Ge Weilong with a faint blue light. The strong color contrast implies the huge difference in material life between the upper class represented by Mrs. Liang and the students represented by Ge Weilong. At the same time, the change of color alleviates the visual fatigue brought by a large number of warm colors. Because of the collective artistic creation characteristics of film, its authorship is not exclusively owned by a single creative member, but "an abstract etymology that is both multiple (the sum of the contributions of the collaborators) and dispersed (the creative activities of each collaborator's conscious and intuitive)." [4]. In the context of literary adaptation films, the film ideogram is generated in the "vision integration" of the original writer, adapted scriptwriter/director and actor as the main body. In addition to the above three, photographers, artists, costumers and other members of the film's main creators are also more or less involved. The difference between the film and the novel in terms of environment construction is precisely due to the difference in the understanding and expression of the love theme of the novel by the artistic collaborators. Before it hit the screen, the film "Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt" is not Eileen Chang's single voice solo, but a love variation under multiple voices.

#### **4. Dispelling the Desolation: Color on the Theme**

According to statistics, there are a total of 166 color words used to describe appearance, clothing, environment and architecture in the story, including 116 cool color words (mainly green, blue, purple) and neutral color words (black, white, gray) mirroring the overarching tragic theme. "Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt" is set in Hong Kong during the August 17 Incident. Eileen Chang believes that for women at that time, marriage is not the crystallization of love, but is closely entangled with social reality and economic relations. Therefore, her "Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt" does not take the love between men and women as the theme, but is about people being kidnapped by desire, lucid fall, and painful happiness. Modern tragedy has the connotation of "true sadness" in aesthetics, which arouses people's rational thinking [5]. Under the influence of family decline, parents' divorce, the turbulence of the times, and a Dream of the Red Chamber, which she deeply love when she was a child, the main aesthetic feature of Eileen Chang's aesthetic is tragic beauty with modern significance. She is good at describing the love between men and women mixed

with the vicissitudes of the times. All human efforts seem so small that they will eventually fall silent. Just as Professor Ofan Li of Harvard University said, “materialization and desolation” are the two major themes and characteristics of Eileen Chang’s literature. Even in the ecstatic moment of finding herself suddenly at the pinnacle of literature, Eileen Chang was haunted by a depressing, almost apocalyptic vision of the destruction of all civilizations [6]. What Eileen Chang really wants to express has always been the depression of anxious individuals when they face the absurd world. Based on such a highly tragic aesthetic tone, no matter how bright the colors and how strong the contrast, the colors in Eileen Chang’s works always have a bleak background, through the lively or cold colors, readers can see her splendid, bitter and desolate soul.

In the film directed by Ann Hui, this is a story of love fall, so the overall tone of the film is not like the novel which are permeated with a tragic atmosphere from beginning to end. The color in the film shows the process from warm to cold, corresponding to the gradual decline of Ge Weilong because of love. “If this story is not a love story, it has no backbone, no plot. It does have a part of criticizing the old society or saying that the human nature is unfamiliar, and the final result is not to tell a love story, but it is expressed through a love story.” Film critic Mei Xuefeng said : “Ann Hui is a director who is not willing to really touch the evil of human nature, while Eileen Chang is characterized by her ruthlessness.” [7]. If Eileen Chang is, as she puts it, a “bleak gesture,” then Ann Hui is a pair of “compassionate eyes.” [8].

All along, Ann Hui’s works have been running through her concern and compassion for life, the world, especially individual life. In “All about Love”, when the two women met again, they remembered their love in the university, and the old love is rekindled on the elevator in Mid-levels in Central. Along with the elevator going up and down the hill, they enjoyed a moment of peace. “A Thousand Words” is a film that show the political landscape, but there is also a soft undertone behind the loud voice. When unease, restlessness, and the collapse of ideals meet with various misfortunes in life, the only thing that can be obtained in the tragedy is the memory of people. Ann Hui does not fail to see the indifference of human nature, but she chooses to focus the lens on the tenderness and the reconstruction of association that occur in the sink, which is both moving and intriguing. By focusing on the purest details and using the lens to soothe each individual at the edge of society, Ann Hui brings social reality and women’s life experience into her works from a unique feminist perspective. Ann Hui has always watched the ups and downs of the world with a compassionate eye, so she will not reproduce Eileen Chang’s “Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt” in Eileen Chang’s way. At the opening ceremony of the 2018 Ann Hui Film Week, Professor Dai Jinhua of Peking University expressed the following views on Ann Hui and Wang Anyi’s joint adaptation of Eiling Chang’s works: “What separates you two from Eiling Chang is not a sense of morality, but a certain kind of love. Maybe you have a love in your heart that you can’t give up. However, for Eileen Chang, I cannot say she doesn’t have love, but she doesn’t have your kind of love.” Eileen Chang writes desire and her woks are full of nihilistic sadness; And Hui focuses on the expression of love, with a romantic tendency, so the lack of color in the adapted film is reasonable.

## 5. Conclusion

It can be said that director Ann Hui’s film adaptation of the First Incense is a bold attempt. In what sense this attempt can be called a success is not the question that this thesis wants to explore. As Ann Hui herself said: “A film is like a painting, there are various colors, everyone’s perception is different. Some say she’s unsuccessful while some say she’s great, and I don’t want to attach any labels on anything.” [9]. What this thesis wants to discuss is that Ann Hui may not intend to completely preserve and copy “Crumbs of Ligumaloes - the First Incense Burnt” in Eiling Chang’s world, but she uses the tension between the original work and the film adaptation to outline a war-torn Hong Kong exclusively owned by Ann Hui’s director. In this world, Ge Weilong is a girl who gambles on

love and is dragged down by the sinking society and degenerate people. Hui Ann look at this love farce with a compassionate eye.

No matter the bleak color in Eileen Chang's novels or the bleak life of Eileen Chang herself or the characters in the novels read by the readers can be hardly found in the film. The movie is destined to be different from the "Eileen Chang context" given by the text. Therefore, in the face of film and television adaptation, it is difficult for us to criticize another "expression of Eileen Chang" with color, picture and even sound perception by exploring Eileen Chang's self-expression appeal and corresponding writing style skills from the outside. If we only regard Eileen Chang as a representative of an era and a cultural symbol to consider her commercial value, or criticize whether film and television adaptations are loyal to the original works with conservative literary concepts, it will not provide a more potential research perspective. From Roland Barthes' point of view of "the author is gone", the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author's death and the text itself is free, which means both the author and the reader have the right and space to interpret the text [10]. Therefore, how to find a common artistic experience through the mutual learning of different art forms, that is, whether the director can find a balance between the two identities of readers and creators in the process of film and television adaptation is the decisive factor in the quality of film and television adaptation works.

## References

- [1] Eileen Chang. *Love in a Fallen City*. Beijing October Arts and Literature Publishing House, 2019: 2-50.
- [2] Liu Yang. "Artistic Appeal of Cross-media Circulation: the Image Presentation of Eileen Chang's Literary Resources From a Comparative Perspective." *New Films*. 05(2021):94-102+1.
- [3] Wu Jin. "A Study of the Color Language in Eileen Chang's Novels." *Journal of Yangzhou University(Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*.03(1999): doi:10.19411/j.cnki.1007-7030.1999.03.010.
- [4] Jong Guk Kim. "The Style and Cultural Significance of Film Color White." *Journal of the Korea Entertainment Industry Association*. 14.4(2020):187-198. doi:10.21184/jkeia.2020.6.14.4.187.
- [5] Richard Jean So. "Eileen Chang: Romancing Languages, Cultures and Genres." *The Journal of Asian Studies*. 73.2(2014): 531-532. doi:10.1017/S0021911814000102.
- [6] Wu Qiao. "The Meaning of Color: the Color Narrative in the Film." *Movie Literature*.05(2014):152-153.
- [7] Yang Can. "Incomplete Color : A Study of Eileen Chang's Color Language." *Journal of Social Science of Human Normal University*. 04(2008):113-115.
- [8] Peng Ke and Li Dongmei. "Writing Light and Shadow with Passionate Soul : a Study of the Pursuit of Authorship in Ann Hui's Adaptation of Eileen Chang's Works." *Journal of Guizhou University(Art)*. 35.01(2021):31-36. doi:10.15958/j.cnki.gdxbyzb.2021.01.006.
- [9] Bu Yiwen. "The Resolution of "Desolation" : the Lack of Film and Television Adaptation of Eileen Chang's Novels" *Contemporary TV*. 05(2018):79-85. doi:10.16531/j.cnki.1000-8977.2018.05.040.
- [10] Fu Jing. "Exploring the Trace of Color : A Study of the Imagistic Narration of Dress in Eileen Chang's Novels." *Novel Review*. S2(2009):70-72.