

Space from Geographical and Psychological Perspectives: An Exploration of Urban Cultural Space in Eileen Chang's Works

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Abstract: This paper delves into the impact of urban cultural spaces on the works of Eileen Chang, analyzing from three aspects: the background of creation and cultural environment, the shaping of individual psychology and emotions, and the influence on literary style and narrative structure. Through a detailed interpretation of Chang's works, it reveals the significant role of urban cultural spaces in her creative process, enriching the understanding of her literary achievements.

Keywords: Eileen Chang, Geography, Psychology, Urban, Cultural Space

1. Introduction

The city, as a major geographical space depicted in Eileen Chang's literary works, serves not only as the primary setting for character activities but also carries unique cultural connotations. This spatial configuration influences not only the individual psychology and emotions depicted in Chang's works but also profoundly affects her literary style and narrative structure. This paper aims to deeply explore the impact of urban cultural spaces on Chang's creative process, providing new perspectives and insights into the study of Eileen Chang's literature.

2. Geographical Space: Perspectives from Macro and Micro Views

2.1. Macro: Creative Background and Cultural Environment

Eileen Chang's creative background is closely connected to the cultural environment of early 20th century Shanghai. As the most modern city in China at the time, Shanghai was a melting pot of various cultural trends and social ideas, providing a rich repository of materials and inspiration for Chang's writing. During the Republican era, a flood of foreign cultures entered Shanghai, turning the city into a fusion of Eastern and Western cultures—from Western movies, literature, and music to Eastern traditional culture, all were disseminated and integrated in this unique cultural hub. This cultural atmosphere not only broadened Chang's creative horizons but also infused her works with exotic charm and cultural tension.

Furthermore, the social stratification and temporal changes in Shanghai profoundly influenced Chang's writing. Shanghai was a city of stark contradictions and oppositions, with both the bustling

riverside scenery and the desolation of slums; it housed both wealthy merchants and impoverished commoners [1]. This division of social classes and class conflicts provided Chang with a wide range of social themes, infusing her works with the power of social critique and a concern for human nature.

2.2. Micro: The Refraction of the Inner World through the Mirror of Private Spaces

In Eileen Chang's novels, private spaces are not just physical entities, but also repositories of characters' emotions and inner worlds. Her writing is exquisitely detailed, often vividly and richly depicting these private spaces, which become vivid microcosms of the characters' lives. These environments, whether the luxurious apartments in Shanghai or the secluded villas in large courtyards in Hong Kong, are not merely places of residence. They serve as stages for the characters' emotional fluctuations, desires, and conflicts.

In Chang's portrayal, private spaces are often imbued with specific historical, cultural, and social contexts. A Shanghai apartment may carry the prosperity and vicissitudes of old Shanghai, while a villa in Hong Kong might witness the splendor and changes of the colonial era. The historical and cultural sediment behind these spaces provides rich soil for the characters' emotional conflicts and internal struggles. For instance, in *Love in a Fallen City* [2], Chang meticulously depicts the old-style Bai mansion, where the furniture, character traits, and the atmosphere are steeped in conservatism—such as a clock that runs an hour slow, the third master who adheres to Confucian ethics over law, the harsh fourth mistress, the biased old Mrs. Bai, and societal norms that regard women's social interactions and widow remarriage with disdain. This reveals the oppressive, closed, and painful environment in which Bai Liusu grew up, setting the stage for her later journey to Hong Kong and her encounter with Fan Liuyuan.

Private spaces are not only settings for the characters' lives but also reflectors of emotional and conflictual interplay. Within these private spaces, characters' emotional entanglements and desires are fully displayed. It might be in a quiet bedroom where a character experiences loneliness and struggle, or in a spacious living room where family conflicts and pressures confront them [3]. These private spaces carry the dreams and hopes of the characters, and they also mirror their inner worlds.

Through meticulous depiction of private spaces, Eileen Chang immerses readers in worlds rich with emotion and narrative. Private spaces in her works carry significant symbolic meaning and cultural connotations, serving not only as crucial vehicles for plot development but also as profound reflections and refractions of the characters' inner worlds.

Simultaneously, with her unique and delicate narrative style, Chang vividly portrays the complex emotional relationships between characters. Her novels are filled with love and hatred, desires and losses, all tangled up, vividly displayed within the urban spaces. In her works, the individual emotional conflicts are given vivid imagery, becoming the core and allure of the stories.

In her narratives, the emotional entanglements between characters are often intricate, interweaving love and hatred, desire and loss into moving scenes. These chaotic and colliding emotions are not just necessary for plot development but are true portrayals of the characters' inner worlds [4]. Through the revelation of characters' inner worlds and the delicate depiction of their emotions, Chang showcases the complexity of human nature and the rich tapestry of emotional life.

These interwoven and tangled emotions do not exist in isolation; they intertwine with urban cultural spaces. The hustle and bustle of the city provide a rich soil for these emotions, injecting more possibilities into their fervor. In Chang's works, the individual emotional grudges and the ambiance of urban cultural spaces complement each other, together constructing a literary world rich with tension and depth. Her works are not just narrative stories; they are deep explorations of humanity, emotions, and urban life, bringing profound reflections and insights to the readers.

2.3. Domestic Space: A Special Form of Private Space

In Eileen Chang's novels, domestic spaces are not only the main setting for characters' lives but also crucial stages for emotional entanglements. Through her descriptions of domestic spaces, Chang displays the delicacy and complexity of her characters' inner worlds, while also revealing the impact of societal backgrounds on individual lives [5].

The arrangement and atmosphere of domestic spaces are not merely physical environments; they are projections of characters' emotions and psychological states. For instance, in *The Golden Cangue* [2], Chang depicts the psychological struggles of the protagonist, Ch'i-ch'iao, under family and societal pressures through detailed descriptions of the family's internal spaces. These meticulous descriptions allow readers to delve deeper into the characters' backgrounds, inner worlds, and complex emotional relationships, thus appreciating the depth and richness of emotional entanglements in Chang's works.

On the other hand, influenced by the historical context, the domestic spaces in Chang's writings also possess a controlling attribute, serving as a metaphorical function to reveal the oppressive situations faced by women. Many women in her novels, especially married women, find themselves in a dilemma—unable to venture into society and carve out a career like men, nor able to have 'a room of one's own' at home, constantly prepared to be under their husbands' surveillance. They are confined within the small sphere of the family, forced to play the role of the 'angel in the house', serving as attendants and accessories to men. For example, in *Red Rose and White Rose* [2], Meng Yanli is swept into a loveless marriage by Zhen Bao's selfishness, cowardice, and irresponsibility, forced to endure her husband's indifference and play the role of a dutiful wife and good mother, even finding solace in an affair with a tailor to alleviate her loneliness and sorrow. These works are not only critiques of the social realities of the time but also explorations of human nature and family relationships, presenting readers with a series of profound and thought-provoking literary worlds.

3. Psychological Space: The Dual Refraction of Urban Impressions

3.1. Dependence on the Inner World

Throughout Eileen Chang's life and works, one can sense a distinct urban temperament—"I like to listen to the city's sounds. While more poetic souls may prefer listening to pine waves or tsunamis from their pillows, I cannot sleep without the noise of the tram" [6]. Chang's fondness for the city is partly due to the convenience of life, such as easily taking elevators and trams, and accessing food and newspapers. However, more importantly, as depicted more frequently in her works, is the setting of urban apartments.

In such vast urban settings, apartments provide both a sense of security and privacy: "Apartments are the ideal places for escapism... In the countryside, buying an extra half-pound of cured meat can lead to much gossip, but on the top floor of an apartment building, you can change clothes by the window without concern" [6], while also fostering a sense of close connection with others: "In summer, every household's doors are wide open, and people move their wicker chairs to sit in the draft" [6]. Thus, the apartment becomes a significant support for Chang's spirit, with sights and experiences within providing unique material and inspiration for her writing. Many of her novels are set in apartments, closely related to her rich experiences of apartment living.

3.2. Reflection and Critique

However, Chang did not indulge in the glitz and superficiality of urban life; she was even careful to insulate herself from its disturbances, choosing a reclusive life after moving to the United States. This attitude is also evident in her portrayal of characters in her novels.

In many of her stories, Chang portrays the protagonists as "fallen girls" who compromise with reality due to life's pressures, often interpreted by researchers as a way to expose societal ills and speak for oppressed women, but also serving as a warning. The *First Incense Burner* features Ge Weilong as a typical example. Initially focused on her studies, she is gradually seduced by the luxurious clothes sent by Mrs. Liang, and her once simple life is slowly eroded by an excessively wealthy lifestyle, transforming her from a pure student to a successful socialite. She has moments of clarity, realizing that "this is no different from buying a person in the Long San Tang market," [2] and that her object of affection is nothing but a faithless rogue. But transitioning from luxury to austerity is difficult after tasting the sweetness of effortless gain, making it hard to consider engaging in societal work again. "She is addicted to this lifestyle here. If she were to leave, she would have to marry a wealthy man" [2]. What led to her downfall was not just the human tendency to shirk work and desire for material goods, but also the urban societal environment that objectifies women and glorifies materialism and consumerism.

Chang's brilliance lies in making readers feel pity rather than criticism for Weilong after reading her story, thereby invoking deeper reflective thoughts. The real pity is not that Weilong lost her chastity as a professional but that a potential "new woman" fell back into the rut of being a "marriageable woman," reflecting the difficulties of intellectual enlightenment, the dual nature of rapid urban development, and the manipulation of human desires by a capitalist society. Thus, through Weilong's experiences, Chang accomplishes a reflective critique of the tempting urban lifestyle.

4. Regional Emotional Perspectives: The Impact of Urban Cultural Spaces on Eileen Chang's Creativity

4.1. Eileen Chang's Urban Emotional Impressions

Eileen Chang, as a keen observer, deeply integrates her emotional impressions of the city into her works. Her delicate touch captures and portrays the ambiance and characteristics of the city. Her view of Shanghai is described as "traditional Chinese people under the strain of modern high-pressure life. The interaction of old and new cultural elements may produce somewhat unhealthy outcomes, but there is a strange wisdom here" [6]. For this city full of contradictions and charm, Chang presents the true human conditions: the bustling streets and alleys, the romantic teahouses and restaurants; the secluded, high-walled mansions, and the open, inclusive institutions of higher education. Nanjing, on the other hand, is portrayed with more rustic and conservative traits, even somewhat old-fashioned. The train from Nanjing to Shanghai is metaphorically described as "...blazing through an era. The old-time atmosphere at Shi Jun's home, those tragic characters, those insurmountable events, all left behind" [7]. The contrast between the old and the new is striking, forming a rich tapestry of urban scenery in Chang's works.

In Chang's literature, the city is not merely a backdrop but a vibrant and emotionally charged stage. Through detailed descriptions of urban landscapes, streets, and characters' lives within the city, she immerses readers in a real and rich urban world. In this world, the city is not just a backdrop for characters' lives, but a nexus of emotions and destinies.

4.2. Echo of Urban Emotions and Character Traits

Projecting her emotional impressions of different cities onto the styles of her novel's characters is a hallmark of Chang's works. She skillfully integrates her feelings about the city into character development, endowing them with rich personalities and emotions. Through an in-depth analysis of characters in Chang's works, we can see the author's emotional stance towards the city and her insights into life.

In Chang's novels, characters living in specific cities often share similarities with the city's

temperament. For example, some characters in Shanghai display the city's opulence and vanity, pursuing fame and indulging in urban noise and dreams. Wang Jiazhi in *Lust, Caution* [8] is a typical example; she is enchanted by Shanghai's prosperity but also troubled by the city's superficiality and complex social interactions. Other characters, like Gu Manzhen in *Half Life Fate*, reflect Shanghai's progressive and open-minded nature. In an era when the optimal path for women was typically marriage, she chooses to be self-reliant and respects her sister, who supports their family by dancing, not with condescension or pity but with equal respect and gratitude. When Shi Jun hides Manzhen's sister's identity from their parents, Manzhen sharply criticizes the oppressive nature of the old society: "I don't know who is more immoral, the client or the prostitute" [7], showing her awareness of gender equality. In contrast, Shi Cuizhi in Nanjing is depicted as a typical traditional woman, with more conservative lifestyle and views: "Always living in a small circle, the only way out is to marry into a family of equal status and become a young mistress" [7]. Although such portrayals may verge on stereotypes and be somewhat biased, they vividly convey the distinct personalities of these two cities.

This emotional projection enriches the characters, showcasing the diversity and complexity of urban life and reflecting the author's deep contemplation of urban life and sensitive insight into human nature.

4.3. Impact on Character Development and Narrative Art

Urban cultural spaces provide Chang with a rich array of emotional scenes and psychological conflicts. Through her depiction of characters' lives and emotional experiences in urban environments, she profoundly showcases the complexity and contradiction of individual inner worlds. Amidst the urban hustle and bustle, the characters' love, hatred, desires, and losses are fully displayed. Chang delves deep into the characters' inner worlds, presenting the various challenges and dilemmas they face in urban life, naturally shaping their images in the narrative, making her works more emotionally resonant and concerned with human nature.

Urban cultural spaces also have a profound impact on Chang's literary style and narrative structure. With a smooth and delicate touch, she portrays the prosperity and decay of the city, desire and confusion, exhibiting unique literary charm. In her narrative structure, she often uses techniques such as flashbacks and retrospection, interweaving the characters' inner worlds with their external environments, adding layers and tension to her works. The uniqueness and complexity of urban cultural spaces provide her with a diverse array of narrative materials, making her works both emotionally resonant and of high literary and aesthetic value.

5. Conclusion

As a significant figure in 20th-century Chinese literature, Eileen Chang's works possess not only unique artistic charm but also have had a profound impact on the development of modern Chinese literature. Through her keen observations and delicate depictions of urban cultural spaces, she created a series of literary works filled with emotional tension and human concern, injecting unique vitality and meaning into modern Chinese literature. By studying the urban cultural spaces and regional emotions in Chang's novels, one can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural content and emotional intensity presented in her works. This also helps to expand the knowledge of contemporary Chinese literature and urban culture.

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