

Soundscapes and the Urban Imagination of Hong Kong in the Works of Eileen Chang

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Abstract

This article discusses how Eileen Chang's works express the soundscape of Hong Kong and the significance of Hong Kong to her creation from the perspective of hearing. Chang's construction of Hong Kong's image took sound and acoustic senses as important media, linking "sound" with "memory". Significant soundscapes can be divided into three categories, including the 'city sounds' of Hong Kong, the sounds of bombing in war, and the incomplete silence. The construction of soundscape implied the author's psychological trauma and historical memory, and the aural experience ultimately fitted the "bleakness" theme of Eileen Chang's creation, reflecting her personal view and understanding of the troubled world and life when she started writing in Hong Kong, a threshold space between civilization and barbarism, where cultures mingle.

Keywords

Eileen Chang; Hong Kong; Sound.

1. Introduction

Eileen Chang was educated in Hong Kong from 1939 to 1941, and her writing mainly started after she dropped out of school. Therefore, Hong Kong can be regarded as the starting point of Eileen Chang's literary creation. She mentioned Hong Kong many times in her works. It's worth examining what characteristics Hong Kong has in Eileen Chang's writing, and what significance the Hong Kong experience had for her life and writing. Sensory experiences were often paid attention to in the urban experience in Chang's works, and the text was full of sound narration. However, relative to the content about vision, hearing has not been systematically valued. Therefore, from the perspective of sound, this article attempts to explore how Eileen Chang used hearing to rebuild her memory and explore the image of Hong Kong in her works.

Researchers have now evaluated the sounds in Eileen Chang's works. Some scholars assert that there is an important relationship between voice narration and theme style. Liu examined sound in Eileen Chang's novels from the perspective of acoustic narrative. Tan categorized the depiction of voices in Eileen Chang's novels, arguing that behind them is a bleakness that reaches deep into the bones. Wang used the soundscape of the modern city as a framework to deconstruct various texts and explore the sources of technologized sound narratives. Most of these studies can not be separated from the analysis of emotions in the context of sensory experience. The construction space of soundscapes discussed mainly focused on Shanghai, and the researches mainly focused on novels, and rarely involved other genres such as prose.

Studies on the image of the city in Eileen Chang's works have mostly focused on Shanghai. Liu placed Chang's work within the history of Shanghai writing and argued that his depiction of the city touches on the dilemmas of human existence. Most of the few articles on Hong Kong see it as a comparison to Shanghai. For example, Lee started with the plot of the text, and analyzed the double gaze of Hong Kong from colonists and China people.

To sum up, there is a relative lack of scholarly inquiry into the urban imagination of Hong Kong in Eileen Chang's works. However, as researches on this issue covers a variety of areas, it may not be possible to fully understand Hong Kong's position in this work from a single angle. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between Chang and Hong Kong through her acoustic experience.

2. Sound Memory in Hong Kong: An Unforgettable Distance

The Hong Kong experience was a turning point in the life of Eileen Chang. Hong Kong was a diverse colonial city that gave this schoolgirl from a legacy family an extraordinary sense. On 8 December 1941, the Japanese attacked Hong Kong. During the 18 days of the battle, she joined the air defense regiment and later worked as a nurse in a hospital. She returned to Shanghai in 1943 and began to write, referring to Hong Kong in many of her works as having an influence of "cut too close to the bone, affecting me in an altogether drastic fashion" [1] on her.

Chang used sound and hearing as important media in the construction of Hong Kong. In the article *From the Ashes*, she used the metaphors of sound to express her feelings about Hong Kong during the war. "This thing we call reality is unsystematic, like seven or eight talking machines playing all at once in a chaos of sound, each singing its own song.[1]" In fact, she often used a variety of sounds to create dynamic urban soundscapes - urban sound forms that were happening and shifting every moment and entering the human ear.

Eileen Chang loved the sound of the city, and she mentioned her memories of Hong Kong in relevant texts. In *Notes on Apartment Life*, she wrote: "...while I can't fall asleep until I hear the sound of streetcars. On the hills in Hong Kong, it was only in the winter when the north wind blew all night long through the evergreens that I was reminded of the charming cadence of a streetcar." [2] She preferred artificial mechanical sounds to natural sounds, but found the charm of a streetcar in the natural sounds of Hong Kong. As a writer with strong sense of urban identity, she thought that Hong Kong had only trees but no trams, and understood Hong Kong as the other side of the city. Also in this article, Chang established an analogy between sound and memory: The further the distance, the clearer the sound, the longer the time, the clearer the memory. Combined with this relationship, it can be linked to the beginning of *From the Ashes*: "There's already a considerable distance between myself and Hong Kong" [1], This leads to a conjecture about the relationship between Hong Kong and sound: some of the sounds of Hong Kong have survived in Eileen Chang's memory.

This can be verified in the words of Eileen Chang. In June, 1977, she wrote to Song Qi and his wife: "I was walking in the nearby street the other days ... Every summer I think of when I first arrived in Hong Kong Mountain in 1939. It was a sunny downhill day, and nothing happened in between, it was blank and light." [3] The daily moments overlapped with the memories of Hong Kong, and the silence in the scene became a special sound. This was what Eileen Chang expected of Hong Kong when she first came to the city. However, after many years in a foreign country, she remembered this experience every year. Is it possible, then, to find some representative Hong Kong soundscapes in her texts to explore what Hong Kong meant to Eileen Chang's writing?

3. Wartime Bomb Sound: A Realistic Alienation

The Battle of Hong Kong was another important experience in the life of Eileen Chang. Her works were also full of depictions of wartime soundscapes, notably the sound of bombing and air alarms. As the representative voices in the war, their penetrating power can stimulate people's emotional experience and make Hong Kong appear as a carrier of war and fear. During the 18 days of the war, Hong Kong was frequently bombed by the Japanese, which caused severe destruction to facilities and civilian life. Although the bombers were generally aimed at specific

areas, the air alarms and bombing sounds pierced the eardrums of the public and had a considerable psychological impact on them. In *Notes on Apartment Life*, Chang heard the buzz and two blasting sounds of a water pipe and immediately thought of bombs in Hong Kong, which was also a reflection of this mentality. We can also find relevant descriptions in Chang's novels about Hong Kong. The war of *Love in a Fallen City* was extremely faithful in reconstructing the auditory experience. The novel used a large number of onomatopoeia words to describe all kinds of horrible sounds on the first day of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, and distinguished the length, height and types of sounds. At the same time, the text's perception of wartime sound began indoors, in order to highlight wartime experiences from the perspective of women. Unable to escape because of her status and situation, Liusu could only hear the desperate sound of stray bullets from her home. It shows that Eileen Chang's auditory reconstruction of wartime soundscape was not groundless, but a reflection of the characters' detailed experience.

Chang's later works also mentioned bombing many times. In the face of the war, she or the characters in the text showed unusual calmness. In the novel *Little Reunions*, Bebe went to the movies: "And halfway through the movie, the air-raid siren went off but the show continued regardless. It was like something extra added to spice up the movie." [4] In the essay *Remembering Hu Shizhi*, she found a book to read when she was an air defense officer: "Bombs came crashing down, getting closer and closer. I just thought: at least wait until I finish reading it.[5]" When her life was threatened, all she could think was that it was too late to read, which reflected her helplessness during the war. Life and death are unpredictable, and the next second she may lose her life, so she shouted "it will be too late "[6] and wanted to finish it as soon as possible. With the continuation of the war, the abnormal state has become a daily life, and people's fears have gradually turned into habits and fatigue, accompanied by strangeness and detachment in troubled times. This mentality seemed to be in contradiction with nervousness, which may be regarded as the concrete embodiment of "time anxiety" in Eileen Chang's works. [7] When real events seriously disturbed people's lives, the anxiety of life and time suffered by the mind would be strong and specific. In above texts, the wartime scene and the character's calmness appeared at the same time, and the characters always kept a distance from the scene and other characters. And Chang herself was "nowhere to go" during the war. She just joined the air defense regiment and served as a nurse, but she did not take the initiative to face the war with others, which was contrary to general war experience. This also reflects the characteristics of alienation in Chang's works.

Eileen Chang's memories of the Battle of Hong Kong, in the form of listening to soundscapes, formed the writing style. Then, apart from the sounds of a specific environment, what other features of the Hong Kong soundscape have inadvertently influenced Eileen Chang's creation?

4. Incomplete Silence: Desolation in Time Gaps

The exploration can be made from a kind of sound landscape. "Silence" is a special sound landscape, and there will be silence in war or daily life. Eileen Chang's description of Hong Kong's quiet environment also presents an objective feature, and promotes this silence into a vague voice. An example is the description of the "silence" in the city in *Love in a Fallen City*: ".....only the strong winter wind, wailing on and on in three long tones-oooh, aaah ,eeei. When it stopped here, it started up there, like bodies trailing on and on, tails never coming into sight. Here, everything had ended. There were only some broken bits of leveled wall and, stumbling and fumbling about, a civilized man who had lost his memory; he seemed to be searching for something, but there was nothing left." [8].

In quiet Hong Kong, even the wind had three different tunes. The sudden disappearance of the sounds of the city and the fall of civilization into the void, while the sounds of nature reappeared,

was a concrete expression of the 'bleakness' style of Eileen Chang's work in the post-war scene. Eileen Chang once said that she had felt staggering threat in the back of mind. As a woman who has gone through decline, facing the strangeness of the colony, she felt the pressure of time. The voices of civilization faded away abruptly, and the cold wind restored the helplessness of man in the face of history.

Leo Oufan Lee once suggested that there are three kinds of time in Eileen Chang's works, corresponding to the three sounds in the text ("civilized time", "wild time" and "forced, interrupted, static and dynamic time" in between) [9]. The sound of civilization masked the sound of nature in modern cities, but in war civilization was destroyed and the sound of nature reappeared. Two kinds of times reinforced each other, resulting in multiple time cracks. In such a transitional space-time, civilization had been destroyed and not completely returned to the wild world, forming a kind of incomplete silence. Eileen Chang had a personal insight into life and humanity in the incomplete silence of Hong Kong. Depictions of the blue sky of Hong Kong - where all was silent but a little savage sound was faintly heard - are often found in the works. At this time, Chang or her characters began to think about life. As in *From the Ashes*:

"Looking above their heads, I saw a brilliantly clear pale blue sky. The emptied tram ast in the middle of the street. The space outside the tram was full of pale sunlight; the tram, too, was filled with sunlight, and that lone tram possessed at that moment a sort of primitive desolation all its own.

I felt terribly uncomfortable-would I die amid a crowd of strangers? Yet what would be the good of being blown to bits and scraps alongside my own flesh and blood?" [10].

Eileen Chang couldn't choose who to die with, which echoed melancholy and desolate loneliness. Such loneliness or reflection on human nature is also strongly reflected in the back of the article. She recorded the soundscape of a Hong Kong hospital in which a patient screamed in pain the silent night. She, the caretaker, was annoyed and told him that his needs cannot be met as if nothing had happened. The hospital was a space of experience between life and death. The patient's howling with brutal struggle was in uneven contrast with the dead silence at night. This incomplete silence reflected the desolation of life between the destruction of civilization and the return of wildness. Furthermore, Eileen Chang realized that although the war is unforgettable for people born in troubled times when history goes by or struggles, the desolation in troubled times was actually negligible.

Such a "sound of silence" was mentioned in Chang's letters to Song Qi and his wife during her stay in the US. She wrote on June 24, 1969 "The shadows of the trees in the small square formatted all over the ground and I thought about Hong Kong and wondering what time it is...A day and a half apart in between was like a lifetime ago, and never before had I felt so acutely connected to time and space, so chilling that even I could never forget it.[11]" This scene was mentioned again in another letter of hers in 1985, which left a deep imprint on her memory. At the end of 1960, Eileen Chang came to Hong Kong for the last time. Years later, she described her farewell to Hong Kong in her essay *A Return to The Frontier*. She wrote about the depression of returning to school in the 1950s only to turn around and walk away. She wrote about her parting with the memory of Hong Kong when she smells a foul odour in the market, using sharp senses instead of words. Hong Kong implied a campus under war, an isolated island in the colonial era, always a space where civilization and barbarism are juxtaposed, where the whole soundscape is built on a silence that has nowhere to be placed. The positioning of Hong Kong is reflected in the "incomplete silence".

5. Conclusion

Eileen Chang reconstructed her experience in Hong Kong in her writing, in which her auditory experience is outstanding, including faithfully recording the sounds she heard, imaginary

sounds and highly abstract sounds, showing a three-dimensional and emotional world. The soundscape she expressed in Hong Kong is a kind of “everyday life in an unusual state”, and under the destruction of civilization, she explained her lonely and desolate personal life experience and pessimistic feelings about life with soundscape. When she first came to school in Hong Kong, the city left room for her imagination, and the modern history expressed in wartime soundscapes, struck her strongly. The experience of facing war and vagrancy deeply influenced her later writing, not only about Hong Kong, but also reflected in her writing style. Combined with Hong Kong's cultural orientation, an abstract “incomplete silence” can best correspond to it and best reflect the meaning of Hong Kong. Eileen Chang started her writing career with the memory of Hong Kong. After a series of imaginations, she returned to Hong Kong to say goodbye and returned to the state of “silence all around, as if nothing had happened”, but the silence was full of sounds.

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