

Comparative Study of Spatial Narratives in the Works of Eileen Chang and Jane Austen from a Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Although Chinese writer Eileen Chang (1920-1995) and British writer Jane Austen (1775-1817) belong to different cultural systems and lived in different historical times and spaces, their works share many commonalities. This paper aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the works of these two female writers from China and the West using the theory of spatial narrative from a feminist perspective. It seeks to explore the shared patterns and differences in their resistance to patriarchal societies, thereby capturing the feminist spirit behind their spatial narratives.

Keywords

Eileen Chang; Jane Austen; Feminism; Spatial Narrative.

1. Introduction

Eileen Chang and Jane Austen belong to different cultural systems and lived in different historical times and spaces, their works share many commonalities. By comparing the classic works of these two female writers from the East and West, their writings possess certain artistic research value or educational significance. Despite the differences in their views on women due to the variations in era, country, and cultural background, both writers demonstrate a commonality in their self-reflection and reconstruction of female subjectivity under the male-dominated cultural traditions of the East and West. They both explore the pursuit of gender relationships, aiming to achieve true self-redemption, thus reflecting a shared female psychological awareness across different regions and ethnicities.

According to data from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), nearly 40 articles and papers comparing Eileen Chang's and Jane Austen's works have been published in China. These include 7 master's theses and approximately 30 academic papers. Among them, some studies have focused on their views on family and marriage, character images, and the absence of the father figure. In recent years, researchers have broadened their perspectives, employing diverse approaches such as typology, sociology, psychology, and archetypal criticism for comparative research. However, there is a lack of studies that use spatial narrative theory to compare the works of these two female writers from the East and West. Such research would not only provide a reference for scholars studying the literary works of Eileen Chang and Jane Austen, filling a gap, but also enhance readers' understanding of Chinese and English novels and cultures.

2. Cultural Space: Urban and Rural

The living conditions of women are always closely related to the spaces they inhabit. In the works of Eileen Chang and Jane Austen, the different geographical spaces of Chinese cities and British countryside play subtle narrative roles, adding cultural significance to reality. Feminist scholar Elaine Showalter believes that cultural models of femininity are more effective than theories of physiological, psychological, and linguistic analysis. This is because the way women view their bodies, as well as their perspectives on sex and reproductive functions, are closely

related to the cultural environments they inhabit. Therefore, situating the literary works of Eileen Chang and Jane Austen within the broader context of cultural and historical layers enables a deeper uncovering of the underlying factors contributing to the feminine cultural implications in their texts.

In Eileen Chang's novels, urban space is a significant portion of the spatial narrative. Shanghai and Hong Kong are undoubtedly the focal points of this narrative, as seen in works such as *The First Incense*, *The Second Incense*, *Love in a Fallen City*, and *The Rouge of the North*. The symbiotic relationship between the city of Shanghai and urban literature provided Eileen Chang with rich life experiences and insights. Her unique "Shanghai woman" perspective is shaped by her unique life experiences and the life of modern women in the urban society during the transition from old to new. Eileen Chang's successful use of the "rumor-style" narrative technique in her Shanghai city writing reveals different female attitudes in the mainstream male narrative process, transforming from being narrated to self-narration, thus offering a new perspective for the study of women's literature and Shanghai urban literature. In her works set in Hong Kong, Eileen Chang also demonstrates a macro view of Hong Kong's century-long history and the changing fates of women. Whether in Shanghai or Hong Kong, Eileen Chang consistently explores the survival difficulties of women under the constraints of urban society and feudal patriarchal thought, highlighting the survival consciousness of a generation of urban women.

Unlike Eileen Chang's urban spaces, Jane Austen's works are primarily set in the British countryside, portraying women of marriageable age residing in rural. As American writer Washington Irving once said, "If a foreigner wishes to gain a correct understanding of the character of the English people, he must not confine his view to the cities; he must go into the countryside, linger in the villages large and small." In Austen's works, the countryside is not merely a typical living space for women but also a cultural ecosystem that houses women of marriageable age, bearing their expectations for love and marriage. Compared to the bustling and glamorous city, rural life is relatively quiet, monotonous, and even boring. However, once a wealthy, unmarried man suitable for a match enters the scene, the quiet countryside suddenly becomes lively, revealing the low economic status and miserable situation of middle-class women.

The Chinese cities and British countryside depicted by Eileen Chang and Jane Austen are not just geographical spaces but also cultural symbols well-known to readers. They simultaneously dissolve grand narratives by portraying mundane life and showcase how women in patriarchal societies are subjected to cultural discipline imposed by their respective societies.

3. Living Space: Marriage and Family

Marriage and love have always been unavoidable topics in human life, regardless of time or place. Both Jane Austen and Eileen Chang focused their gaze on the internal dynamics of women's groups, depicting the relationships between men and women with unique insight. They extended this focus to women's traditional living spaces—marriage and family.

With their unique sensitivity and thorough understanding of marriage and love, both Jane Austen and Eileen Chang recognized the significant roles women play in marriage and family life. They made the deep exploration of women's survival status in these living spaces the focus of their work. In Austen's works, love and marriage are the central themes, with all other related topics revolving around this core. Marriage, according to Austen, is the only means by which women can obtain wealth and social status. She believed that love should be based on mutual respect and reason, with a solid material foundation being necessary for a perfect marriage, as depicted in her novels *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Additionally, in her novel *Emma*, she mentions: "It is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse

an offer of marriage.” (Jane Austen, 2008: 48) This clearly reflects the feminist consciousness that runs through Austen’s thinking. Most of the couples depicted in Jane Austen’s works live in harmony, and the warm, harmonious family atmosphere creates an idealized picture of domestic life.

In contrast to Jane Austen’s idealized depiction of marriage and family, Eileen Chang presents a world filled with flaws. From the perspective of marriage and love, she scrutinizes the tragic and tumultuous fate of women living within a male-dominated society. Eileen Chang keenly observes the various states of human existence, vividly and dynamically portraying the everyday lives of women in her novels. The majority of female characters in her stories view love and marriage as their ultimate life goal, using love as a means to acquire money and material wealth, often resorting to unscrupulous methods to secure the most beneficial marriage. In their view, the only value of marriage lies in the exchange of money and material goods. Eileen Chang reveals their spiritual weaknesses and psychological maladies, reflecting the awakening of female subjectivity and showcasing her unique female aesthetic perspective. For example, in her novel *Love in a Fallen City* (also known as *The Golden Cangue*), Eileen Chang describes the life and emotional state of Ni Xi, a lower-class woman who spends most of her life moving between different men in an attempt to change her fate. However, Eileen Chang does not disdain people like Ni Xi. She writes: “What moves me about Ni Xi’s story is her simple love for material life, a life that she must grasp with all her might at every moment. She desires a man’s love, but she also wants security. However, she cannot have both, and often ends up losing both love and money.” (Eileen Chang, 1991:175) Through Ni Xi’s twisted love and marriage, Eileen Chang reveals the sorrow of women’s fate in a patriarchal society. At the same time, she points out that a woman’s destiny should not depend on men; women should have a clear understanding of themselves and engage in rational reflection.

It is worth noting that both Jane Austen and Eileen Chang agree on the importance of money, believing that it is indispensable in marriage and family. This perspective should be viewed dialectically by readers, considering the cultural and real-life conditions of patriarchal society, where women are troubled by economic oppression. Their pursuit of a balance between economics and morality is clearly the result of rational consideration rather than materialism. In the survival space represented by marriage and family, both authors employ a technique of alternation between the heavy and the light, using a highly refined and often playful tone to distill the essence of daily life, thereby exploring the deeper realities of women’s lives.

4. Mental Space: Self-Reflection and Rebuilding of Female Consciousness

While the patriarchal social environment and mainstream ideology are crucial factors in women’s low social status and unfortunate fates, women’s own ignorance and numbness in thought also significantly hinder their liberation. The greatest tragedy for women often stems from internal factors—a lack of awareness of their right to discourse, which effectively aids the suppression and deprivation of their rights by external forces. The awakening of self-awareness and the development of female subjectivity have made women realize that to achieve true freedom, they must pursue independent personalities and improve their intrinsic qualities; otherwise, their social value cannot be realized.

The self-reflection and reconstruction of female consciousness in the literature of Jane Austen and Eileen Chang are their unique experiences and understandings of the essence and value of female existence. Both writers share a common focus on the exploration of mature thoughts and independent character in women, particularly in how they navigate the relationship between reason and emotion when faced with love. Additionally, they both examine the spatial positions of female roles within the family and society, as well as the spiritual breakthroughs and expressions of independent consciousness women achieve under the constraints of social

norms and moral ethics. However, there are differences due to the distinct cultural spaces they inhabited. Eileen Chang's writing consistently adopts a realistic attitude, using a cold and sharp style to either mock reality or satirize patriarchal figures, exposing the contradictions of traditional culture as both a restrictive force and the root of life's meaning. Moreover, Eileen Chang's works illustrate how the integration of urban culture as a progressive force simultaneously acts as a reflective object against traditional feudal consciousness. In the Chinese society, where feudal consciousness has invisibly persisted for thousands of years, women could only appear as subordinate figures, making them products of the collective consciousness of feudal society. The integration of progressive urban culture highlighted the confrontation between feudal consciousness and modern civilized awareness, underscoring the anxiety and confusion of women caught in the tide of the times. This reflects Eileen Chang's profound understanding of women's consciousness. The women in Eileen Chang's works, even those who received a good education, find it difficult to escape the fate of being oppressed by men. Examples include Bai Liusu in *Love in a Fallen City* and Gu Manzhen in *Half a Lifelong Romance*. In contrast, Jane Austen, within the class-patriarchal system, established gender equality on the basis of respecting women's intellectual capabilities. Through self-education and mutual education, her characters come to correctly understand each other's value, expressing Austen's feminist consciousness and giving voice to women. Examples of this include Elinor Dashwood and Elizabeth Bennet.

Due to the different cultural spaces in which Eileen Chang and Jane Austen lived, the social economic foundations and conditions they depicted inevitably differ. However, it is important to note that the challenges posed by cultural and survival spaces prompted both Eastern and Western female writers to seek the value and meaning of female self-worth within the spiritual space. This pursuit demonstrates a self-reflection and reconstruction of women's independent consciousness, resonating as a collective feminist awareness.

5. Conclusion

When examining how Eileen Chang and Jane Austen explored female consciousness within their respective historical contexts, there are clear differences in how the two authors depicted the establishment and evolution of female discourse across multiple spatial representations. However, both broke away from the literary tradition of male-dominated language under patriarchy, using their own language to develop a unique female writing style imbued with their gender-specific characteristics. They expressed and interpreted women's unique and authentic experiences to liberate women from the male-dominated literary tradition. This fundamentally awakened female self-awareness, guiding women to reflect on the deep connections between the individual, family, and society, thereby establishing an effective bridge for communication.

Acknowledgments

Project: 1) Heilongjiang Province Philosophy and Social Sciences Research Planning.

Project: Research on the Organization of English Short Story Discourse under the Perspective of Logical Grammar Metaphor (20YYC140).

2) Heilongjiang Educational Science Planning Project (GJB1423130).

3) Higher Education Research Project of Heilongjiang Higher Education Association (23GJYBB195).

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