

# On the Description of Cityscape in Novels Written by Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang)

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**Abstract.** Zhang Ailing captures and describes various cityscapes with fierce and exquisite style. These “-scapes” not only exist as the carrier of urban civilization, but also demonstrate the looks of Shanghai’s people from all walks of life. The “-scapes” represented by apparels entail pessimistic life philosophy and connote the emotional experience and fate of characters. Architectures, as time-markers, are shaped in the macro background of the era sensitively and organically. As for sounds, they can not only strengthen the daily space constructed by Zhang Ailing because of their inherent natural attributes, but also vividly depict the living things in the form of hearing. All kinds of “-scapes”, such as apparels, architectures, and sounds, whether fleeting or continuous, have been polished into an indispensable form in Zhang Ailing’s urban writing. They are scattered all over the city and bear the unique literary significance organically and completely.

**Keywords:** Zhang Ailing; City; -Scape.

## 1. Introduction

David Der-wei Wang once commented on Zhang Ailing: Cities are her most important writing background. In her works, the enchanting and colorful Shanghai in the 1940s seems to be a 'paradise in hell', showing the most splendid grandeur before falling forever." [1] Zhang Ailing's novels are mostly narrated in the urban background. Her early works were mostly seen in the tabloids of *the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School*, and then attracted the attention of academic criticism. Zhang Ailing draws landscape pictures of urban life in her novels by paying attention to various images such as movies, photos, stage, public images and so on. It is true that some of these landscapes are described "as landscapes without plot", [2] but more than that, they are spiritual symbols of urban life. They share common characteristics and enrich the whole city in Zhang Ailing's novels. The reason why the daily trivial urban scenery has great aesthetic feeling and attraction is that Zhang Ailing can "examine and understand from a rational perspective, [3] that is, to discover and outline the scenery as an 'inner person' [4] who has no concern for the surrounding and external things.

Around the 1930s, the new sensation school set its sights on bars, restaurants, horse farms and other images. From Hollywood movies to Paris Spring clothes, from cars to perfumes, the modern consumption symbols written by Shi Zhecun, Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiyong and others all reflect their keen capture of real life. The difference between Zhang Ailing's cities lies in her ability to depict the familiar and unfamiliar “-scapes” in the vulgar and chaotic cities. All kinds of clothes, architectures, the jingling sound of trams and so on shine with the unique luster of Shanghai, a city mingling Chinese elements with foreign ones, and novelty with tradition. Zhang Ailing's inexhaustible literary source is from apartments, houses, Shanghai Lane halls, and both innocent and sophisticated people living in Shanghai. This paper will cut into the landscape writing in Zhang Ailing's novels from three perspectives of apparels, architecture, and sound, trying to explore how Zhang Ailing weaves one bright and desolate legend after another in these confused and gorgeous urban scenery.

## 2. Apparels: Aesthetic Image, Spiritual Symbol, and Figures in the Times

Zhang Ailing once said, "for those ineloquent people, apparels are a kind of speech and an epitomized drama. "[5] Zhang Ailing loved apparels from an early age. "When I was eight, I would comb my hair in finger waves style, and when I was ten, I would wear high heels." [6] Her mother liked to make clothes, but her father mocked her. In high school, she lived with her stepmother, but

had to wear her stepmother's clothes. Suppression of her beauty-loving nature since an early age, to a great extent, led to Zhang Ailing's obsession with clothing beyond ordinary people, and she even claimed to be "clothing-holic". Xia Zhiqing pointed out that almost all the apparels the female characters wore in Zhang Ailing's novels have been described in detail. The apparels of the characters in Zhang Ailing's novels are not only the existence of material, but also the fusion of pessimistic philosophy of life, which has evolved into a spiritual symbol and cultural symbol in the depth of the text. Not only the glamorous heroine, but also the costumes of maids, aunts, mothers, and men are described in detail. In *Little Reunion*, Jiuli first met her uncles on paternal side. She caught a glimpse from the glass door: "he is slim and tall, only wearing a half-old blue silk bunt. Under the jacket exposes a blue-gray band cassock, which is like two pieces of black plaster stuck on the forehead." [7]. Zhang Ailing, with her wording "greasy", "oil dirt", "black plaster" and so on as metaphorical devices, revealed the depravity, hypocrisy and darkness of human nature hidden behind. She captured the soul of the character to the point. It is very common in Zhang Ailing's works to describe characters from dressing together with word containing hues of instinctive praise or disgust, which directly leaves a preconceived impression on readers. In *The First Furnace Incense* (《第一炉香》), Ge Weilong was attracted to Hong Kong for the first time because of the various kinds of clothes her aunt made for her. Besides, as described in *Tulips* (《郁金香》), the molested maid Jin Xiang, in Baoyu's eyes, wore a floral cloth short shirt and trousers, light blue cloth piled with small white jasmine flowers with green hearts." [8] Different from the gorgeous and eye-catching color collocation of young ladies from noble families, light blue and green are in a cold tone. The two colors appear low-key, simple and elegant and fresh and natural. The incense lovely and pitiful image comes alive. This plain tone is permeated with a sad and even sad spirit. In Zhang Ailing's *The Apparel Language*, the figure and life of that era can be examined. The desolate atmosphere of the era and the sad fate of the characters in the historical tunnel at the boundary between life and death can be felt.[9]

The apparels have their inherent aesthetic function in Zhang Ailing's novels. Zhang Ailing's perception of apparels' color is very sharp. She always loves to use gorgeous and distinct contrast colors, such as callistemon, apricot yellow, amber, jade green, peacock blue, azure, deep purple, etc. These colors will bring compelling attraction. This sensitivity is also linked to childhood experiences. She "could never forget a thin, dark red cotton-padded gown. The color of ground beef seems that the body is covered with frostbite".[10] Zhang Ailing always finds a remedy for this kind of shame and pain in her creation. In her *On Music*, she frankly states: "Somehow, color and smell often make me happy... Color is such a thing, only when there is no color is sad; It is always gratifying to be noticed, and makes the world seem more real." [11]

Shen Congwen once said, "Apparels are a continuous expression of inner thoughts, a language and a symbol." [12] The apparels in the novel are a cultural symbol of meaning. The cloth, style and color of the clothing represent the identity, personality and economic status of the characters, and also reflect the connotations of the characters' emotions, wills, desires and living conditions. "*Lust, Caution*" opens with rich women at a table playing mahjong. They wear black-tweed cloaks and heavy gold chains under their lapels, suggesting that they are wealthy, noble, idle and perhaps ostentatious. [13] Wang Jiazhi only set with broken diamond earrings and a jade bracelet. By contrast, her deliberate disguised was naive and ridiculous. It no wonder that she was seen through by Mr. Yi. In the *Half a Lifelong Romance*, Manlu died of illness. Liang Hongcai, who was frustrated in business, looked down and out of style. "He was wearing an old silk long shirt mixed with yellow and white and an old straw. The hat was always on his head, and he did not take off." [14] This was really different from the image of his arrogant and bossy before.

No matter as direct "symbols" or indirect reflection of the mentality of the characters, the characters' apparels in Zhang Ailing's works contain some symbolic reference, implying infinite sentiment of life, living state and lifestyle. Take the scene that Zhenbao and Wang Jiaorui met for the first time in the *Red Rose, White Rose* as an example. She had just taken a bath but did not change into a formal dress. "She was still wearing bathrobe she wore just now. Her hair was not dry enough,

and a white towel was wrapped around her head." [15] Such a disheveled dressing was exactly the embodiment of Wang Jiaorui's enthusiasm and unrestrained style. Her usual attire is gorgeous and eye-catching, ranging from bright green with deep pink, to ebony with orange-green, and to dark purple blue with golden heart-shaped accessories. While these outfits highlight her bold and innocent character, they also serve as a driving force for the plot and hint at the fate of the characters, so it is not surprising that she finally decided to divorce regardless of the consequences. "Life is a gorgeous robe, covered with flea" [16] The costumes described in detail or briefly in the novel, either gorgeous or worn out, are transformed into ideographic symbols to show the world and rise to images to interpret the fate of characters in Zhang Ailing's works.

Rey Chow believes that there is a metaphor about social ideology in the description of apparels in Zhang Ailing's novels, that is, "the ideological residue hidden in the narrative". [17] Zhang Ailing herself said: "all creativity flows into the area of apparels." In times of political chaos, people are incapable of improving their living conditions. They can only create their intimate environment, which is their clothes. We all live in our own apparels." Zhang Ailing had a deep understanding of urban life and had a profound understanding of the world and human feelings of different times. She played up the atmosphere of the times and expressed her philosophy of life through her clothes. Taking the description of wedding dress as an example, most of the wedding dress in the novel is a combination of Chinese and Western styles. In *The Golden Lock* (《金锁记》), Zhishou did not wear a red bridal veil. Instead, she dressed herself in pink embroidered skirt, together with her glasses. Moreover, in *The Rouge of The North*, the bride dressed in a blue jacket and red pleated skirt. In *The Mating Season* (《鸿鸾禧》), the bride was in a white dress and the groom in black. At that time, whether in Shanghai or Hong Kong, people's apparels were always biased towards the western modern world, but they could not get rid of the ideology of traditional Chinese society, so apparels had a broader social meaning. Zhang Ailing's novels contain historical and cultural details and the content of the ideology of the times. She depicted urban scenery one by one through apparels, showing the harmonious mixture of ancient China and modern China. [18]

### 3. Architecture: Modern Connotation, Life and Public Space

In the 1930s and 1940s, Shanghai's architectural complexes were teemed with colonialism and displayed the connotation of modernity. The architectural images in Zhang Ailing's novels convey the urban feeling of "the combination of China and the West", which not only reflects the real Shanghai, but also constructs a literary urban landscape line at the imagination level. The more common images are coffee shops, dance halls, cinemas, restaurants, buildings of western and Chinese style, old-fashioned lanes, and other places for entertainment in the concession district. They do not embody the modern civilization expansion as Mu described – "Jazz, machinery, speed, urban culture, Americanism, beauty of the times... A collection of the products." [19] On the contrary, "Foreign concessions are not as rigid as 'another world' for Chinese residents." [20] On the one hand, most people living in the concession were Chinese. In addition, the "elites" who had finished their study in abroad and then came back drove the modern trend of thought in the whole city. It is better to say that the modern world is their appeal. These architectural symbols can not only serve as the "public space" in the city, providing places for the characters to live and relax, but also constitute the displacement of events, space and the development trend of the plot as the place where the story takes place. Sometimes they also play the role of foil rendering, that is, in addition to practical functions, these buildings are also the conscious and purposeful writing objects of Eileen Chang and have their potential discourse connotations in the novel.

First of all, the practical function of the building is worth noticing. "Providing a large living space for the building is the premise for the existence of entertainment places such as coffee shops, department stores and cinemas." [21] In *Lust, Caution*, Wang Jiazhi chose to check signals with his accomplices in the coffee shop and waited for Mr. Yi's car to pick her up. The coffee shop here is for parties and promotes the plot. In the *Half a Lifelong Romance*, after Shijun and Manzhen expressed

their feelings to each other, Shijun proposed to sit for a while in a cafe. When he really found one along the music, he did not want to go to the crowd, so he walked happily along the street. At this time, the cafe not only created a nerve-stimulating atmosphere, but also witnessed the hero and heroine's love confession. In "Coffee & Conversation(《咖啡座谈》)", Zhang Ruogu explicated the fun of cafés: talking with friends for long, the stimulating effect of coffee itself, and at the same time, the gorgeous waitresses. He regarded coffee shops as one of the important symbols of modernity.

There are only a few lines describing the waitresses in the coffee shop in Zhang Ailing's novels, while the dancers, who share many similarities with waitresses, appear more often and play an important role in her novels. There are only a few direct descriptions of dance halls in the novel. More lines are about the introduction of "dancing girl", or the depiction of various details in life such as dress, makeup, social status, and predicament of dancing girl Manlu in the *Half a Lifelong Romance*, or just as a symbol of the infidelity of male characters in the novel. In short, dance halls also have the same status as coffee shops in urban buildings. Leo Lee once said: "the popularity of dance halls in Shanghai's urban life actually provides a necessary background for the emergence of new women in the Republic, although the background is negative." [22] Despite those dancers are abhorrent existence that destroyed other people's families according to common sense, dancers were indeed an ignominious profession, but Zhang Ailing's works did not bring this view in advance. Some of them were forced to be kept under the pressure of livelihood, but they had their own independent thoughts. For example, Manlu gave up the marriage with her first love, Zhang Yujin, to support her mother and provide for her younger brothers and sisters to go to school. Some are symbols of male infidelity. For example, Shijun's father was involved with a dancer when he was young. Some are as an excuse, to hide the eyes and ears, such as Wang Jiazhi to "revenge on her husband to play dance girl" on the grounds of close to Mr. Yi.

As a real cinephile, Zhang Ailing often used the cinema as an architectural image in her novels. Similarly, as a "public space" in a city, cinemas are also the most common places of entertainment. Cinemas own a practical function like that of a coffee shop, that is, to provide a place for leisure and entertainment for the activities of characters. Zhang Ailing always described the cinema as a reflection of the modern world." [23] The modern cinemas are the most popular palaces well-constructed with glass, velvet, imitation mica stone". Most of the cinema is the story of encounter or date between men and women. In *Regrets(多少恨)*, Jiayin and Zongyu were bound up because of movie tickets, and the novel was also launched by coincidence. Zhang Ailing's love for movies can be seen more than her expression in the direct description, or the need of plot development. Cinema sometimes does not constitute the specific situation of the novel but creates a sense of substitution of the film. Zhang Ailing skillfully adopted the scene switching and audio-visual techniques of the film in her writing. She excavated human nature and depicted family relations through the opening and closing, panoramic and close-up shots, and the change of long and short focal lengths. Her works show the characteristics of the city --the mixture of both Chinese and foreign elements.

People and buildings remained changed, but only the geographical space. Whether it is architectural style, aesthetic features, or practical functions, whether it is public space or private space – all kinds of private buildings combining Chinese and Western elements, whether it is Shanghai or Hong Kong. Yet, if a series of architectural symbols that test Shanghai's conformity to the standards of a modern metropolis are required, rigidity and fragmentation then come around. It is difficult to judge that Shanghai in the 1930s and 1940s was perfectly integrated with western modern civilization. In fact, even those who had returned from studying abroad were not really integrated modern culture into themselves. Instead, they regarded going to public places such as coffee shops, dance halls and cinemas as symbols of elegant and noble taste. In other words, it seemed that going to these places was in line with their status. As an urban miniature in the process of Chinese modernization, Shanghai has retained traditional living habits on the one hand and accommodated western architectural styles on the other. Different writers prefer different ways of narrating Shanghai. In modern Chinese literature, it is easy to find "Shanghai of ordinary citizens, Shanghai of colony, Shanghai of revolution and Shanghai of returning to the era of market and material desire." [24] The architectural images in

Zhang Ailing's novels, interwoven with traditional and modern cultural factors, show the strong collision between new and old culture. Shanghai was like "the Window of Shanghai, Hong Kong and foreign market society".[25] Moreover, Zhang's novels display the conflicts between western social ideology in and the psychological state and ideological changes of people at that time. "The exchange of deformed products of old and new cultures may not turn out to be very healthy, but there is a subtle wisdom here." [26]

#### 4. Voice: Narrative Texture, Inner Secrecy and Life Trajectory

Zhang Ailing, who has been tossing and turning in modern cities all her life, is especially fond of listening to and capturing the soundscape in the city. Her works contain a large number of exquisite, profound, complex and thought-provoking auditory experience, including the novel *Love in a Fallen City*, *Red Rose*, *White Rose*, the prose *Eye Contacts Only* (《道路以目》), *Life in an Apartment* (《公寓生活记趣》), and her dramas. Zhang Ailing once admitted frankly in *On Music* that she did not like music. She was forced to learn playing the piano by her mother, so she also hated the symphony. Neither did she like concerts. "Even sitting in a park on a summer night, she would not enjoy the symphony of an open-air concert hall without buying tickets." [27] However, she loved to listen to the daily trivial sounds. For example, the babbling *huqin* at the beginning and the end of *Love in the Fallen City* is not only a filling of sound, but also a concentration of the fate of the characters. Even the daily trivial sounds have desolated and plaintive aesthetic characteristics in Zhang Ailing's works. She wrote in *Life in an Apartment* (《公寓生活记趣》): "I love the sounds in cities. People who are more poetic than me listen to the whistling of the wind in the pines and the tsunami on their pillows. However, I must hear the tram to sleep. I can only find the tram sound on the Hong Kong mountains in winter when the north wind blowing evergreen trees all night long." [28] Despite her hatred towards elegant music, Zhang Ailing, due to her explosion with music at an early age, was influenced to some extent. She always keenly captured the sound around and turned her own perception of sound into her works. In her novels, the sound images of modern equipment often appear, such as gramophone, radio, car sound, car horn sound, telephone ring, etc. But what she prefers is the man-made noise, that is, "the city sound", such as the sound of Mahjong, the noise on the balcony, and the human voice on the street. They serve as a supplement to the narration and enrich the soundscape in the novels.

Hegel once said that the way the human ear grasps sound movement is the same as the way the human eye grasps shape or color, and it is also cognitive. He believes that vision and hearing are equally important, and the two are interrelated with each other, together constructing complex emotions and diverse experiences. These trivial auditory symbols and visual images in Zhang Ailing's novels interweave and complement each other. Sound elements are integrated into visual narration, rendering bleak or luxurious atmosphere, thus presenting the changing inner world of characters and various human nature. In *Love Impression* (留情), when Mr. Mi went to visit his principal wife who got sick, Dunfeng was lonely sitting alone in the room, only to hear the phone next door "ring...ring...ring..." [29] repeatedly, but no one answered. The eager bell was like her restless heart, and she was violently shocked by it. Zhang Ailing skillfully interweaved auditory language to vividly express the emotions implied in the visual picture which is difficult to describe simply with visual symbols. For example, in *When We Were Young* (年轻的时候), Ruliang listened to the voice from a Shaoxing opera house while riding his bike, and the Shaoxing girl on the radio sang, "The more I think, the more I miss, the more I regret!" [30] All at once a mood of infinite vexation arose. Another example is from *The New Century* (《创世纪》). Yaoqiu used the gramophone to play *The Blue Danube* to Yingzhu. The waltz tune loudly swung out, epitomizing the two people's heartbeat.

At the same time, these auditory images related to vision, including the "city sound" made by modern technology and man-made, together construct the urban sound landscape in Zhang Ailing's novels. The *Half a Lifelong Romance* describes the sound scene on the street outside the balcony. The air is teemed with soft and beautiful voice of women singing for living singing, babbling *huqin*, and

the noise in the room. In "Little Ai" (《小艾》), the Fifth master's new car horned 'bang', and the sound is very short." [31] The streets are filled with modern western cars and traditional Chinese buskers, and the collision between the old and new cultures is one of the intriguing sights. In *The first furnace Incense* (《第一炉香》), on her first night at her aunt's house, Weilong heard a dance music playing on the gramophone downstairs. Half of the people were dancing, while the other half playing cards. Then, she heard the sound of sparrows on the lawn in front of her bedroom. This interweaving of human voice, city voice and natural sound is another scene.

The sounds of the city in Zhang Ailing's novels are vivid, and the soundscape she pays attention to is the evidence that a city is growing and changing constantly. The most typical is the tram in the city. "If we don't hit the blockade, the tram will never stop. ... The tram stops, but people on the road start to run." [32] In *Blockade* (《封锁》), the tram stops or goes, which represents the life track of a city, and the encounter on the tram is also so full of vitality. All forms of sound – loud, silent; modern, traditional; human voice, "city voice" and natural sound reflect the vibrant soundscape of the city. Zhang Ailing has a good mastery of capturing the sound landscape in the city. With her delicate wording, she depicted a desolate and gorgeous vision of the end of the world in the noise of all living beings. The description of soundscape not only faithfully reflects the old and new mingling background of the city, but also connects people and things, time, and space in narrative, and derives the tragic poetry of depression and desolation from the strategy of metaphor and symbol.

## 5. Conclusion

Zhang Ailing constructed a powerful inner landscape by virtue of her existing urban experience, literary experience, and artistic historical view. The cityscapes in her work are not only closely related to the era and society in which the work was born, but also bears important significance on the narrative level, constructing the spiritual meaning of the city together with other elements. René Wellek and Austin Warren pointed out in *Theory of Literature* that "Primarily, we think, in the recurrence and persistence of the 'symbol'. An 'image' may be invoked once as a metaphor, but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol, may even become part of a symbolic (or mythic) system." As a unique entry point, the dress scape in the city presents Zhang Ailing's insight into the city. She holds a special feeling and finds literary sustenance in the troubled-times philosophy. Under the projection of the cityscape represented by architecture, the familiar things in Zhang Ailing's works also appear abnormal. The whirl and interruption of the voice, the abrupt stop and the lingering sound show Zhang Ailing's acute insight in history.

Although these cityscapes cannot be seen by those who are "blind to the 'outside'" as Raymond Williams says in *Country and City*, the consciousness of the landscape is internal. When the spirit, culture and civilization develop forward, a confused and unknown cityscape space is also presented. Under the literary appearance of reality or illusion, we can see Zhang Ailing's observation of trivial life with urban scenery as the entry point. The urban world created by Zhang Ailing's landscape is mixed with flourishing mediocrity and noisy desolation, attached to the old atmosphere under the ruins of the times, and flowing with incomplete aesthetic experience mixed with the old and the new. The apparels reveal the bleak and gorgeous vision of the end of the century; the architecture reflects the cultural atmosphere under the vision of modernity; and the sound reveals the vanity in the desolation and the transcendence in the decadence. The literary world constructed by Zhang Ailing with scenery embodies her unique inspiration, reveals the essence of human nature, and radiates unique artistic charm.

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