

Review Article

On the image of Shanghai in Zhang Ailing's novels

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Abstract: The urban image created by Zhang Ailing is impressive. Look at all her novels, almost all of them are based in Shanghai. Through her novels, readers can experience the traditional and modern interwoven urban culture, and understand the unique urban things, as well as ordinary and tragic figures in Shanghai. The image created by Zhang Ailing is not only the living place of the characters, but also the human nature of the city.

Keywords: Zhang Ailing's novels; Shanghai; urban things; urban characters

Zhang Ailing was born in Shanghai in 1920 and has lived in the city for a long time, although she has been to other cities since then. So, Zhang Ailing has a deep passion for Shanghai and it provides the backdrop for her novels. Zhang Ailing said that "I am writing many Hong Kong legends for Shanghai people, including *Incense Chips*, *Blockade*, *Glazed Tiles*, and *Jasmine Pieces*. When I wrote it, I think of Shanghai all the time, because I saw Hong Kong with the eyes of Shanghai people. I like Shanghai people, also expect the people to prefer my novels."^[1] It can be seen that although she is not physically in Shanghai, she is still be there in spirit.

1. Those urban things

As a manifestation of the visible image of Shanghai, those urban things in Shanghai have a significant change since modern times. Zhang Ailing makes full use of urban landscape that is contrastable on a visual level. "I am fond of staggered writing, because this is closer to the truth."^[1] It shows readers an intricate image of Shanghai city.

1.1 Urban "modern" things

The urban is increasingly developed, as a result, Shanghai has become a commercial city, and what followed is modern things. The emergency of a large number of commercial streets and billboards have rendered the atmosphere of the business society, and newspapers as one of the mass media also frequently appear in Zhang Ailing's novels. The novel *Blockade* described the situation of the people sitting on the tram. "People who have newspapers read them, those without newspapers read invoices, and there are also some people who look at charters and business cards. People who do not have any printed matter, look at the street tricks then."^[3]

However, in Zhang Ailing's urban landscape, while new things brought by the business society are constantly appearing, what followed were the noisy living environment and space, and the irritable living state. *Apartment Life Memories* has mentioned that although living in an apartment is relatively simple, bitterness comes sometimes. All the people who are extremely boring in the apartment spend too much time together and contribute to some easy things tend to be the subject of gossip and the crowded space ,which is always inexplicable.

1.2 Urban "daily" things

Zhang Ailing said, "I find that people who devote to literature always pay more attention to spiritual world, but ignore the martial life. In fact, the latter is the foundation of the former."^[1] Therefore, in the novel, Zhang Ailing carefully described Shanghai people's daily life such as "clothing, food, housing, and transportation" with a lot of words, and told the stories that happened to us.

Shanghai has gradually entered the stage of capitalism, leading people's clothing or living places, even daily travel to a new pattern. At that time, although everybody got the same swag now, they all wore cheongsam. Different personality traits hidden deep inside are reflected in the different colors and patterns. Zhang Ailing once said, "For people with poor expression skills, clothes can be used as a language."^[4] When Wu Cuiyuan first appeared in the novel *Blockade*, "She wore a white voile cheongsam with a narrow blue laces. The combination of dark blue and white has a style of obituary. She was carrying a small blue and white checkered umbrella. The hair is combed in the ordinary style, as if she is afraid of drawing the attention of public."^[3] With a few concise and clear words, the image of a well-behaved woman was constructed. Besides, in the novel *Jasmine Piece*, Yan Danzhu wore "a white velvet skinny vest, her thick chest and small waist is shaped into a plaster image." With only a few words, the image of a confident and optimistic woman appears. Readers can tell from the clothing that Wu Cuiyuan and Yan Danzhu are two completely different individuals.

Zhang Ailing not only expresses the character by describing the clothing, but also their status by describing the places where they live. In the novel *Lord, Dunfeng* lives in a small bungalow after remarrying while his aunt lives in an old-fashion alley. To compare these two places of residence, the status of the two families are obvious. Alleys are residences where ordinary people live. Nevertheless, small bungalows are beyond ordinary people's economic level. By comparing the two traditional and modern places of residence, the disparity in character status is obviously seen.

2. Those urban people

2.1 Alienation of human nature

Under the impact of the process of urbanization in Shanghai, urban people who are already pursuing money and fame by all means become more selfish and indifferent. The flow of desire leads to distortion of human nature, alienation of family, and hypocrisy of love. The nature of women is distorted because their material desires, human desires, and emotional desires are not satisfied. What they do after losing their humanity makes everyone feel scared.

Zhang Ailing is trying to reveal the selfish hypocrisy of human beings, and the abnormalities when the desire is not satisfied. Cao Qiqiao in *The Story of Gold Lock* is a typical example. There are multiple reasons for the distortion of the nature of Cao Qiqiao, including the humble inside, the contempt of the Jiang family and so on. Cao Qiqiao was a daughter of a sesame oil shop owner. It would be hard to find two individuals more different in background and status than the daughter of a sesame oil shop owner and a rich master. Therefore, she was actually humble, but when the inferiority was touched by someone, she seemed to be tricky and shrewish. For instance, when slave girl told her that the uncle had arrived, Qiqiao cursed, "That uncle come here is not an ashamed thing. What's the matter of your throat? Why are you tinny-voiced?"^[6] She also knew that the Jiang family looked down on her, so she always expressed her dissatisfaction with sharp words. For example, when she was late, instead of apologizing, she said "How can I not be late? I comb hair early without any sun! Why is my house in a remote location? Anyhow my husband wouldn't live long. We just wait to be orphans and widows. Everyone will come to bully us."^[6] At the Jiang family, not only did the master look down on her, but even the slave was ashamed of her and counted her privately. For example, when the slave girl was asked if she was her dowry, she answered that in disdain, "She doesn't deserve it!" Cao Qiqiao's husband was disabled, and she had nowhere to place her emotions. In order to find comfort in her marriage, she always cantankerously got involved in someone else's marriage. She told the old lady to marry Yunze earlier, because the girls now were different from ancient; she said to Ji Ze that you would thank me because you could marry such an outstanding bride so quickly due to my urge. The lack of emotion made her material desires soaring and she wasted

money constantly, which didn't satisfy her, but inspired her inner demons. So she began to desperately destroy everything, even her children became the victims of her revenge. She interfered in the marriage life of her son Changan and constantly denigrated Shouzhi with words like Shouzhi couldn't live without her son, just to prove that there were people who were worse off than her. She constantly asked Changbai to say that his wife was bad, and constantly instructed Changbai to do things for her, just to get the pleasure of revenge. Not only that, Qiqiao was perverted to destroy the happiness of his daughter, in order to vent her feelings. Qiqiao forced her daughter to make foot-binding. In order to compare with other families, she sent Changan to Foreign College to study. But when she saw that Changan was out of her control, she let Changan drop out of college inelegantly. Even when Changan finally readied to get married, she tried to destroy her daughter's marriage by all means in a bloody way. Qiqiao was pathetic, but hateful as well. In order to pursue money and fame, she ruined her life step by step; for revenge, She destroyed the children's life too. As it says in the book, "In the past thirty years, she has carried a heavy shackle. She killed a few people with that heavy shackle, who did not die lost half of the life."^[6]

2.2 The tragic characters

In the social background of Shanghai at that time, human emotions were based on material, or the vassal of money. It was these material desires that are not easily satisfied and emotions that broken badly, which made Zhang Ailing's novel permeate a sense of desolation.

When Zhang Ailing creates characters, she not only tried to reveal the ugliness of human nature, but her novels are full of a desolate sense of tragedy. Zhang Ailing has shaped a series of tragic females' images. Ge Weilong in *Incense Chips* is willing to be a party girl for accumulating wealth by unfair means because of sinking in a materialistic world. Wang Jiazhi in *Lust, Caution* is lost because of the vain love. In order to assassinate secret agent, Wang Jiazhi not only had sex with Liang Runsheng but also became a mistress of Yi Mocheng. Wang Jiazhi was a hero who punished the traitor, but she did not gain the same respect as her sacrifice. Instead, she became laughing stock of everyone at the end. When Wang Jiazhi felt that Mr. Yi was in love with herself, Mr. Yi did not hesitate to kill her. Although he was also some heartache, this did not affect his cruelty and ruthlessness. In *Lust, Caution*, Wang Jiazhi's life was controlled. There was no meaning of her own, and the only love she hoped for was just a phantom, which made her whole life full of tragedy.

Unlike women whose lives are miserable for a variety of reasons, the male characters in Zhang Ailing's novels are a bit redundant, most of whom are disabled and negative. Jiang Erye in *The Story of Gold Lock* is a patient with chondropathy. Zhang Ailing did not describe too much of Jiang Erye, who was only occasionally mentioned by others. In the eyes of Cao Qiqiao, her husband, Jiang Erye was a burden. Every time she talked about Jiang Erye, she felt disgusted. She said to Jiang Jize, "Have you ever touched his body? It is soft and heavy, like a person's feet-numbing, and it feels like ..."^[6] The disdain has showed in there. In the eyes of other people in the Jiang family, Jiang Erye seemed to be a dispensable person. In the novel, other people rarely mentioned him. In fact, if Jiang Erye was a normal person, he could also marry a famous lady like Jiang Jize and live a superb life. However, the reality was that Jiang Erye was despised and there was no place for him to express his sadness. Such a tragic character makes the sense of desolation of the novel even heavier.

3. Conclusion

Shanghai, under Zhang Ailing's description is a complex city. On the one hand, it is a hotbed of modern evolution, on the other hand, it is a feudal grave. The urban objects are inconsistent. On the surface, there is a new pattern of clothing, food, and transportation. In fact, the shackles of society are even heavier. Those people in the city are lost. Their emotions are based on material, their human nature is distorted, and their entire lives are tragic. The experiences of these characters in the novel are inseparable with the urban life experience of the author, and it is also closely linked to the background of Shanghai at that time.

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