

# *Author Agency in Non-mother-tongue Writing: A Case Study of Eileen Chang's Chinese Life and Fashions*

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**Abstract.** Non-mother-tongue writing is a unique phenomenon in literary creation. During the creative process, the translator's cultural perspective and choice of translation strategies can directly influence the expressive effect of the work. Eileen Chang's *Geng Yi Ji* is an essay on clothing culture, available in both Chinese and English editions, that documents the evolution of Chinese fashion over the past three centuries. This study uses the English version of *Chinese Life and Fashions* as the research object and the Chinese back-translated text, *Geng Yi Ji*, as a reference. Combining non-native language writing theory and a feminist perspective, it conducts an in-depth analysis of the relationship between the author's cross-linguistic creative subjectivity and cultural representation. Through detailed textual analysis, the Western influence in the semi-colonial Shanghai in the late 19th century, along with the author's feminist perspective, function as two major factors shaping the voice of this article. Meanwhile, the shifting editorial review systems of journals between different eras have also influenced their style. Employing a cross-cultural perspective, this paper reexamines *Chinese Life and Fashions* through post-colonialism and feminist criticism, aiming to deepen public understanding of Eileen Chang's creative style and to provide a reference for the translation of other Chinese literary works.

**Keywords:** non-mother-tongue writing, post-colonialism, *Chinese Life and Fashions*

## 1. Introduction

Non-mother-tongue writing, a special category in literary creation, is first introduced by the Chinese scholar Yao Shen in 2001. The word itself denotes literary creation by non-Western writers of non-Western descent and ethnicity in post-colonial contexts, using a non-native language (a dominant Western language) in both Western and indigenous contexts [1]. Kellman had previously pointed out that bilingual writers, by rewriting the same material in another language, complete a deliberate renewal of their individual identity in the literary field with the birth of the new text [2]. One of the representatives of this group is the Chinese-American writer Ha Jin, whose work deliberately deviates from standard English and hence presents a clear sense of "otherness". Similarly, Eileen Chang, as a Chinese writer herself, published her English essay *Chinese Life and Fashions* in 1942 along with its Chinese version *Geng Yi Ji* in 1943, both reflecting a distinctive personal style. In this paper, the original English text is classified as non-native writing, and its style will be analyzed in the following chapters [3].

Also, non-mother-tongue writing can be seen as a special form of self-translation. Due to the primacy of language in literary writing, the alterity of language in non-native-language writing inevitably leads to literary alterity, thus giving rise to states of diaspora, difference, heterogeneity, hybridization, and migration [4]. This sense of displacement in both language and culture precisely determines its essence as a form of translation. Although the traditional way of translation refers to the process of language-shifting of literary works, expressing culture-loaded subjects and concepts with foreign languages also belongs to translation in a broader sense. Here, this study further extends this theory, arguing that in the process of cross-cultural literary creation, the author realized a metaphorical self-translation by the re-coding of cultural elements. Besides, when gender-transcending writers move to another country or switch languages, they reshape themselves in terms of gender and art, regardless of whether they translate their own works [5]. Based on this, Eileen Chang's *Chinese Life and Fashions*, introducing the Chinese chronicle of the shifting clothing styles in English, represents a dual translation in both culture and language.

Lastly, the text itself demonstrates influences not only from the colonial gaze of Western readers and the gendered gaze of patriarchal society, but also the varying degrees of resistance to both. Written in a postcolonial context, the text creates a third space that deconstructs Orientalism through parody while retaining certain remnants of the colonial influence. Also, this third space itself carries feminist criticism, which constitutes the other side of its style. Due to the author's inherent female perspective, the author's agency is inevitably colored by feminism. Through culture simplification under a postcolonial context, her cross-language creation in essence realizes the transgression of traditional female images. Combined with the author's life experiences and her unique style of writing, this paper aims to reveal how the chosen text comes into shape under the dual influence of Western ideology and feminism. Here, such personal style in non-native language writing will be examined from two aspects—cross-language creation and cultural self-translation—in the following sections.

## 2. Literature review

This paper borrows the analytical framework of cultural hybridity and negotiability from third space theory, as well as Shih Shu-mei's theory of Sinitic languages [6, 7]. The third space refers to an interstitial zone of cultural negotiation where identities and meanings are continuously reconstructed through colonial encounters through ambivalence and hybridization, whereas Shih Shu-mei's theory unveils the prevailing paradigm of the contradictory relationship between gender and nationalism, where the women involved were often further oppressed by their Third World nationalist patriarchies under colonial or neocolonial control. Based on this, she further argues that the authorship of female writers is always negotiated within a double marginality and hence demonstrates dual resistances against both their home countries' patriarchal aesthetics as well as the gendered consumption of their works by Western academia [7]. This dual marginality provides a crucial context for understanding the power struggle involved in both creation and self-translation. It should be noted that the second theory is intertwined with postcolonial theory. For the sake of clarity, this paper cites it independently, hoping to reveal its shaping effect on the text clearly.

Under the keyword of "Geng Yi Ji translation", six related journal essays on CNKI and one conference paper on Google Scholar are discovered, which can be divided into three categories: (1) Comparing Chang's self-translated text with its original text based on Mona Baker's narrative construction theory; (2) Based on the Chinese version, analyze how foreign translators re-code Chinese color words and clothing culture through language, theme, and interpersonal purposes with discourse translation perspective; (3) Revealing author's personal style, translation strategies and

agency in English-Chinese translation as an translator [8-14]. All the above-mentioned studies contribute to further understanding of Eileen Chang's works, yet further analysis of "authorship" through the third space theory and feminism perspective is yet to be conducted. Also, six essays non-native writing are found on CNKI and can be roughly divided into two categories: one focuses on the conceptual definition of the term "non-native language writing" itself, while the other conducts case studies based on this concept with only one available journal article [1, 4, 15-18]. Meanwhile, no non-mother-tongue writing studies have focused their attention on Eileen Chang's literary creation. Due to the limited number of related essays and the lack of research attention on this theme, the text *Chinese Life and Fashions* warrants further analysis.

This study aims to examine how Eileen Chang's English essay, *Chinese Life and Fashions*, exemplifies her negotiation of cultural identity between Chinese tradition and Western modernity using both Third Space theory and Feminism perspective. For deeper insight into the interrelationship between power, identity and culture reconstruction, this paper attempts to answer three central questions:

- 1.How is the translator's subjectivity reflected in Eileen Chang's self-translations?
- 2.Whether/How is such subjectivity influenced by the colonial background and the author's feminist perspective at the time?
- 3.Whether/How is such subjectivity influenced by social factors such as date of publication and contemporary editorial review mechanisms?

### 3. Background of the work

*Chinese Life and Fashions* was born during the stalemate period of the War of Resistance Against Japan. At this time, Shanghai's literary circles were predominantly occupied by the Wang Jingwei regime's "peace literature" and soft literature that lacked the refined tastes of urban life [19]. Eileen Chang's literary creation right fills in this severe shortage in pure literary creation. The writing inspiration is also quite coincidental. On December 8th, 1941, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong. Eileen Chang, who was studying at the University of Hong Kong, was forced to interrupt her studies and started to pursue a career in writing, advised by her younger brother Zijing Zhang. In fact, her first step as a professional writer started with essays for English journals in Shanghai. Not long after, the journal, *The XXth Century* received a long essay named *Chinese Life and Fashions* that introduced the Chinese chronicle of changing clothes. Its elegant English style, interesting content, and vivid illustrations of hairstyles and clothing won the praise of the chief editor and the essay was soon published in the magazine in January of the following year [19]. The unexpected success of this article greatly inspired her to keep composing and self-translating English essays, five of which correspond to Chinese self-translations re-published in Chinese journals. Among them, the self-translated version of *Chinese Life and Fashions*, *Geng Yi Ji*, was published in December of the following year in the bimonthly magazine *Gu Jin* volume 34th and then included in the collection *Written on Water* in 1944. According to Klaus Mehnert, the chief editor of *The XXth Century*, what sets Chang apart from many of her Chinese compatriots is that she never takes Chinese things for granted and that her deep curiosity about her own people enables her to explain Chinese culture to foreigners [19]. This trait was interrelated with her educational background as well as the cultural environment in contemporary Shanghai.

Back then, Shanghai was under the control of Wang's illegitimate regime, Western colonizers, as well as Japanese forces. From 1852 to 1949, the population in Shanghai grew to 9 times its original size, most of which came from immigration [20]. During this process, western fashion and ideology were also brought to China, renewing Shanghai's condition with western modernity. Such radical

renewal of societal environment, cultural value and traditional morality, together with the author's international viewpoint, inevitably puts China in a global context. In other words, the text naturally refers to the historical evolution of human civilization to describe the past China, which consequently leads to a tendency towards self-orientalism in the English text. Also during this period of time, many western journals, including *The XXth century*, surfaced in the Chinese literary world, so as to serve the needs of both foreign residents in China and those in the western world. Well-aware of the identity of targeted readers, the author successfully created an oriental image that corresponds with western expectations through foreignization in translation, cultural simplification and critical narration. Yet despite the reader-oriented writing style, Eileen Chang also attempts to balance such foreignization by preserving Chinese elements and employing intentional euphemism, through which readers can glimpse the fluidity and complexity of her cultural identity.

#### **4. An exploration of author subjectivity through comparison**

In the former chapter, Eileen Chang's author agency immensely shaped her writing style. Structurally, the text consists of the preface and main text, with the former one added by the editor and the latter by Eileen Chang herself; whereas in terms of content, it briefly introduces the evolution of Chinese women's clothing, hairstyles, and headwear from the Mid-17th century to the 1940s, reflecting broader national shift from social, cultural to the psychological level. In the following chapter, an in-depth exploration of the English text will be carried out from two perspectives.

##### **4.1. The third space: the birth of cultural hybridity**

As mentioned before, the third space theory reveals how cultural intermingling generates in-between niches that destabilize colonial binaries, a conceptual framework particularly employed to analyze diasporic literature, postcolonial translations, and transcultural narratives. For non-mother-tongue writing, the text is culturally hybrid in nature, as it involves both cultures as well as their interrelationship.

Instead of constructing texts within the standard vocabulary of one certain language, non-native writers try to create literary works using a language that borders on both their mother tongue and the targeted language [15]. Owing to their support, cross-cultural writing hence officially enters the literature scope with an uplifted degree of recognition. Similarly, though written in English, *Chinese Life and Fashions* essentially evolved around Chinese themes and styles and was highly commended in the West. In the meantime, the author skilfully bends her chosen language for her own purpose, which in turn deconstructs Western cultural hegemony. According to postcolonialism, Western literary values and traditions are historically seen as superior, while Third World or Eastern cultures are either pushed to the margins or just seen as "others" far from the Western centre [1]. The success of non-mother-tongue writing, can thus be regarded as a purposeful deviation from the dominant Western discursive regime in a particular context.

Firstly, the text conveys a sheer Chinese theme and social reformation. Compared with native speakers' works, it is in essence a process of recoding and renovation between two culture-loaded semiotic systems. In terms of topic, this essay is comprised of twelve subdivisions that explain the changing lifestyle, social customs and clothing trends from Chinese early Republican Era to modern times. Stylistically, the article not only imitates the structure of Chinese classical chapter-based novels, but also follows Western customary practices for legal documents, writing each subtitle with all letters capitalized and centrally distributed. Such an ingenious way of writing mixes clothing

ethnography into global historical accounts, endowing a sense of history to the narration and indicates a dual perspective throughout the whole text.

In fact, such a dual narrative perspective can be further attributed to Chang's multilingual education. Herself living in the gap between Chinese and Western culture, she can assess Chinese people and culture with a perspective closer to that of "the other" [21]. On the one hand, she inherited the western ideology of individuality from her mother, while her church school background and HKU's education, colored by British colonialism, reinforced her detachment towards national identity. On the other hand, as she herself was deeply influenced by Chinese traditional classics and eminent scholars, especially Xu Dishan, she herself possessed unparalleled insight into indigenous Chinese culture that guarantees her analysis both local depth and a cross-cultural comparative dimension. Her explanation of Chinese culture went way beyond satisfying western fantasy or curiosity, but to reveal the inner complexity of Chinese values through her criticism, deconstruction and reconstruction. For example, when describing foot binding, the English text reduced its essence as a feudal residue with euphemism "tiny shoes", forming "creative betrayal" towards the original cultural phenomenon. Such indirect address purposefully protects national esteem from the judging and entertaining gaze of the West. While in the Chinese translation, Chang's cultural stance showed a clear shift towards criticism and irony, the primary objective of which is to delve deep into the national character underlying traditional culture and expose social issues [11]. Also, English culture-loaded words like "Gothic cathedral" "Byzantine severity" "Pre-Raphaelite", accompanied by featured illustrations, were employed to explain the archetypal image of Chinese females. Such differences between the two versions illuminate how intercultural context determines the text's hybrid nature, where Chang strives to harmonise the unique characteristics of the two cultures.

Generally, *Chinese Life and Fashions* effectively resists Western discourse hegemony through employing foreignization. Yet still some scholars point out that although such writing style often reflects Zhang's own emotional judgements and historical criticism, there still exists a tendency towards a distorted image of China when combined with the magazine context [22]. The first is the invisible comparison between East and West throughout the text. The author utilizes the western stereotype towards China, then provides her own comments through elucidating detailed historical information. For instance, when portraying Chinese females, Chang wrote "petite and slender, with sloping shoulders and a hollow chest", "hacking off an arm when it was accidentally seen by a stranger in its entirety", where old China's backwardness and inhuman brutality is reiterated. Admittedly, Chang did emphasize the inner dichotomy of the Chinese Nation. Yet by quoting the explanation of the intelligentsia—"women should not attract too much attention or get her name tarnished in the steamy breath of men"—the author completed her critique towards male suppression, albeit with the unintended consequence of reinforcing feudal characteristics [3]. Another example is the comparison between Chow Kwuen Hood and modern Eskimo variety. Through amplification of Hollywood influence on this trend, a fashion philosophy that emulates Western aesthetics is established, which can be seen as an overture towards western readers. In a deeper sense, such a strategy can be attributed to the intranslatability of culture. In situations where there is no corresponding expression in the target language, some Chinese elements are inevitably replaced by expressions from the foreign language culture during the process of trans-coding. As a result, what is presented to Western readers is a cultural space that has Chinese cultural characteristics but is not entirely Sinicised.

Lastly, *Chinese Life and Fashions* was also shaped by the contemporary editorial review mechanism. In the preface, the chief editor briefly summarized that this passage "offers an amusing

psychoanalysis of modern China”, and the subtitle on the content page reads “essay on fashion and amusing psychoanalysis of ‘modern’ China”. Despite its non-malicious intention, the word “amusing” and the quoted “modern” in this context inevitably turn China into a heterogeneous “other”. This way, Chinese social transformation was trivialized as an entertaining cultural spectacle, reinforcing existing stereotypes. Noticeably, the attitude of *Mehment*, or *The XXth Century*, was not necessarily one of endless disparagement and exoticisation, but rather one that was constrained by the ideological dichotomy between East and West [22]. Yet through the different styles between the main text, subtitle and subtext, readers can detect a trace of Chang’s personal style in bilingual writing as well as her cross-cultural perspective.

## 4.2. Against orientalism and the male gaze

In Chang’s process of non-mother-tongue writing, a three-fold author agency can be observed, combining the national stance, western influences as well as female subjectivity. Specifically, here the social image of Chinese females forms the mainstay of the aforementioned Oriental spectacle, leading to an inseparable interdependent relationship between feminist overtones and Orientalism. But for the sake of clarity, the following chapter will delineate the author’s hidden emotional preferences through these two aspects, respectively.

### 4.2.1. Competition for cultural primacy: self-orientalism

Scholar Liu Wei once pointed out that cross-cultural writing texts are filtered by the target culture, weakening their ethnic authenticity and making them prone to becoming a kind of ‘scenic’ display [4]. This can be further proved by the lexical choices in *Chinese Life and Fashions*. To elaborate on the ancient and unique characteristics of Chinese clothing customs, even the modern Shanghai fashion style, which is a mixture of both Chinese and Western cultures, has become a subject of description. For instance, haunting scenes like “white silk stockings with black embroideries crawling up the ankles” send shivers down the reader’s spine. Her disapproval of such clumsy mimicry inadvertently leads to the dilution of the cruel colonial politics behind the self-deprecating humour. When explaining the philosophical concept of “sense of moderation”, she boldly borrows the word “oriental”, greatly fulfilling the Western predetermined expectations of the East. Besides, among all the illustrations Chang drew, ten out of twelve focused on females dressed in traditional clothes or headwear with a submissive look on their faces, acting as a scenic display to some degree.

Yet Chang also tried to turn such side effects into a strategic expression of contemporary China’s modernity, cultural identity and aesthetic values. With respect to details, tons of culture-loaded words are either created or endowed with new references, for example, using “piping” and “binding” respectively to denote certain types of Chinese traditional clothing handicraft. Also, the size designations in jackets and furs were not mechanically translated as large, medium or small, but rather semantically rendered as “great, intermediate and small”. This translation strategy preserves the original Chinese lexical etymology while accurately conveying Chinese clothes’ three-tiered functionality in formal, casual, and intimate contexts. In Andrew F. Jones’s version, these three types of furs are translated as “short-haired furs” “intermediate furs” and “long-haired furs”, retaining fewer Chinese elements [23]. It is also worth noting that by creatively employing Chinese English and Translatorese, Chang successfully transplanted Chinese-characteristic color words like “lake blue” and “liquid red” into the English text. Through these novel expressions, the author established a unique semiotic system of colors to reenact Eastern aesthetics.



Lastly, Chang's personal style can also be assessed through her use of metaphorical devices. As a way of understanding the world, metaphors in essence reflect certain social and cultural contexts [15]. In *Chinese Life and Fashions*, metaphors are primarily reflected in the relationship between imagery and cultural projection. In China, bright yellow has long symbolized imperial authority. In the opening paragraph, the author deliberately wrote "yellow sun" instead of more natural collocations like "golden sunlight", establishing a referential relationship between the receding kingdom and the setting sun. The sensory shift of the gold embroideries from sun-warmed to cold further indicates the recession of the old, fragile empire, showcasing differences with Western spectrum of colour symbolism. Despite such indirect semantic association, several cultural images are also directly related and compared through metaphor. In the latter chapter, Chang directly cited the Gothic cathedral to explain the concept of Chinese "Daguan yuan (Prospect Garden)", where the ornate architectural features of both constructions convey the meaning that women are not complex landscapes piled up from trivial details [14].

#### 4.2.2. Feminist perspective

As a modern Female writer, Chang's works inherently bear a feminist viewpoint. For example, through the clear contrast between 'most men' and 'all women,' such intentional accuracy in vocabulary selection directly uncovers systemic gender inequalities as females are further suppressed by dress codes than men are. Besides, she jokingly referred to male actors as "the darling of wealthy concubines". By deliberately positioning wealthy, powerful concubines as the sentence subject, she subverts patriarchal discourse, which underscores her distinct feminist consciousness.

Crucially, the color words throughout the text also carry implications of gender norms. Despite the contextual absence of male clothing description, she skilfully contextualizes the colour-coded system exclusively for women within Chinese traditions, which itself forms a reflection and critique towards male dominance. Complying with the feudal hierarchy, the colors 'red' 'pink' 'liquid red' and 'black' constitute a strict spectrum hierarchy, each symbolizing wifedom, concubinage, prostitution, and widowhood. Additionally, Chang further noted that widows might wear lavender or "lake blue" provided that her parents-in-law were still alive, implying the disempowerment of women behind such social norm of colors. Conversely, the color restrictions for males seem to be intentionally omitted, which forms a sharp contradistinction with women's chromatically regimented bodies and the accompanying patriarchal confinement woven by color. Through a meticulous stratification of the chromatic regime, the author laid bare the patriarchal violence embedded within color politics. Through such "color stylitics", Chang managed to deconstruct the gendered ritual hegemony in her non-native creation, opening up a unique space for criticism in the gaps of language translation.

Beyond the lexical level, Chang's ample addition of historical background also merits attention. When introducing Chow Kwuen, Chang specially emphasized that this tributary alliance princess "is always pictured on horseback, with a fur hood and a despondent expression, on her way north to marry the king of the Huns, whom it was China's policy to pacify" [3]. Through explaining state-mandated matrimonial allocation, she thereby links clothing with ethnic history and political marriage alliances. Yet in the 19th century, "Chow Kwuen Hood" became a comical outfit for men, where the dignified image of Chow Kwuen in the illustration contrasts sharply with the male figure wearing a weird low-crowned hat. Not only does she emanate compassionate melancholy towards female victims of patriarchal politics, but she also exposes the absurdity of classical Chinese men dominating women's destinies by reversing gender roles through clothing. Thus far, Chang, with her calm description, achieved the two-fold critique towards history, mourning the misfortune of women

and resenting the hypocrisy of politics. Furthermore, Shih once pointed out that self-translation by Sinophone women often exhibits characteristics of self-fragmentation [7]. In other words, females have to exchange the complexity of gendered experience for discursive power in cross-cultural writing through self-translation. One typical example is that when describing the agonizing fracture and reconstruction of bones in foot binding, the English text simplified collective female suffering into “podiatric customs” [3]. On the one hand, it confirms the dilemma of simplified gender experiences in cultural translation as well as the western expectation of a “quiet oriental female”. On the other hand, such elliptical narration also conceals misconduct to avoid the dual gaze towards the Chinese female from both the privileged West and the advantaged male.

## 5. Conclusion

As Eileen Chang’s first introductory essay, *Chinese Life and Fashions* embodies high aesthetic value. Through close reexamination of the interrelationship between the English language and writer, this paper argues that her writing demonstrates not only dual translatability both linguistically and culturally, but also a two-fold contrast in culture and gender. When narrating the Chinese chronicle of changing clothing styles, her national stance was occasionally deviated from by western perspective and female subjectivity. When fighting against the postcolonial structure that empowers Western ideology, she creates a third space that mixes both cultures’ features and narrating habits. Seen this way, the author agency is in constant fluidity and sometimes even sinks into contradiction. On the one hand, her exaggerated lexical choices, culture simplification as well as self-deprecating narrative, successfully create an eastern image that suits western expectations, and hence an inclination of self-orientalism. On the other hand, through the use of culture-loaded words, adjustment of certain texts and retaining several typical Chinese similes, she also tries to balance such foreignization and reconstruct culture characteristics under the influence of colonialism discourse. This not only demonstrates her complex identity as a bilingual writer, but also deconstructs the potential Orientalism to some degree. Additionally, Chang’s unique female perspective also established a distinct feminist poetics. Together, the inclination of self-orientalism, active foreignization in cultural translation and her unique feminist perspective constitute the three crucial aspects of her author agency in this text. Studying Eileen Chang’s English works will provide valuable reference for both contemporary Chinese-to-English translation teaching practices and bilingual scholars in China who write in a non-native language.

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