From novella to film: advantages and deficiencies in *Love after Love*

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Abstract. *Love after Love*, a film directed by Xu Anhua based on “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, became a contentious adaptation of Eileen Chang’s novella soon after its wide release. Many audiences contend that the adaptation is not a faithful one while omitting the inherent features of a film medium and the successful addition of newly invented plots. This essay thus commits itself to analyzing the film’s merits and demerits through a detailed comparison between the movie and Chang’s original text. The analysis is carried out respectively in the aspects of scene settings, characterization and the revelation of the theme. The essay concludes by maintaining that the film succeeds in restoring and making full use of the scenes in the novella, as well as constructing one major figure, while it bears its weaknesses in building another character of equal importance and revealing the ultimate theme of “the fall of sobriety” in Chang’s work. Overall, *Love after Love* is admittedly not a faultless cross-media adaptation, yet it should not be totally repudiated, either.

1. Introduction

“Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier” is one of the most renowned novellas written by Eileen Chang, a legendary figure in the history of modern Chinese fiction. Adapted from “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, the movie *Love after Love* was first released in 2020. This movie is also Anhua Xu’s third film adaptation of Chang’s literary works. *Love after Love* engendered controversy soon after coming out. Many audiences point out the disappointing gap between the movie and its original text, while some critics examine the strategies of adaptation which lead to the inconsistency. These negative comments prove that the cross-media adaptation of Chang’s works is generally difficult. To study these adaptations, it is worthwhile to analyze how specific events and scenes are represented in the movie, on the one hand, and to focus on the inherent characteristics of the movie medium, which directly result in the differences, on the other.

This essay intends to compare the movie *Love after Love* with Chang’s novella in terms of scene settings, characterization and the revelation of theme in order to further elaborate on the advantages and deficiencies of Xu’s film adaptation from various perspectives. The three aspects of analysis can be divided into more specific parts. In the first place, the scene settings in the movie are successful. They can be analyzed from two angles: the specific settings mentioned in the text and the symbolic technique realized through the arrangement of enclosed spaces. In the aspect of characterization, the film fails to capture the characteristics of Ge Weilong, yet the construction of Mrs. Liang’s figure is comparatively much more successful. The last part of the essay will further reveal the shortcomings of the film in its theme presentation. The inherent deficiency of camera language aside, the movie presents Weilong’s “fall of sobriety” with frequent omission and multiple modifications of significant plots, which directly leads to the incoherence of the character’s mentality.

2. The success of scene settings

As mentioned above, scenes in the movie can be observed through specific settings and symbolic techniques. The film successfully restores the concrete details in each scene. One protruding example is the movie’s portrayal of Mrs. Liang’s mansion, a mixture of Chinese and Western architectures catering to a stereotyped orientalist interpretation, maintaining that the film’s restoration of Mrs. Liang’s mansion portrayed in the novella fulfills the Westerner’s expectation of the Oriental world, which in this way forms a sharp satire. In the meantime, the use of enclosed space to represent the protagonists’, especially Weilong’s critical psychological states, also well exemplifies the proper restoration of scenes in the movie.

2.1 Realization of specific settings

It is reasonable to say that the film well interprets and presents the scenes in the novella. This can be best illustrated by the representation of Mrs. Liang’s mansion, the major background of the story. Chang’s novella depicts the mansion at the beginning of her work, which indicates its significance: the mansion is a white Western-style house decorated with traditional Chinese ornaments, where “all kinds of discordant settings and jumbled

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periods have been jammed together, making a strange, illusory domain” [1]. According to Xu Zidong in his Xu Zidong’s Close Reading of Eileen Chang, the depiction of a mixture of Western and Chinese styles derives either from the curiosity of Weilong as a young student or from the narrator’s own criticism of the landscape of the colony [2].

Love after Love accurately captures such ambiguity proposed by Xu Zidong. On the one hand, the audiences observe Mrs. Liang’s house through the protagonist’s eyes; the mansion is built with white stones with a front yard where several small fountains scatter around, showing that the whole scene is, in general, “Western”. In the meantime, curled iron fences are inlaid into the windows on the front door, which is doubtlessly a traditional Chinese design. Furnishings within the mansion also reflect the combination of two styles. In Liang’s banquet hall, for example, a chandelier is hung from the ceiling, while not far from it is a small redwood cupboard with carved flowers on it. As a student from mainland China, Weilong is apparently stunned by the colonial-style mansion. When first entering the yard, she wanders at a slow pace and carefully observes the environment--first, a stone fountain decorated with statues of angels, and then, with a swift turn of the camera, a Chinese-styled pavilion with four red pillars. Both the settings and camera language highlight the Chinese-Western contrast while simultaneously revealing to the audience the utter confusion of the protagonist alienated from the surroundings.

On the other hand, the movie also inherits the anonymous narrator’s criticism of the unique design style of the mansion. Edward Said, in his Orientalism, refers to Raymond Schwab’s view that “Oriental” denotes “an amateur or professional enthusiasm for everything Asiatic, which was wonderfully synonymous with the exotic, the mysterious, the profound, the seminal” [3]. Correspondingly, Chang, in her novella, mentions that “The English come from so far to see China--one has to give them something of China to see” [1]. Just like the ironic descriptions in the text, the movie also creates a space catering to Westerners’ expectations of Chinese culture. To exemplify, in the first half of the movie, some foreigners attend a party held by Mrs. Liang in her front yard, and the camera captures these Western figures several times as if to emphasize the mixture of races among the guests. In terms of the scene setting, several huge red lanterns are hung on the trees even though the party is generally held in western style. The reason why Mrs. Liang decorates her yard in this way is obvious that she hopes to entertain her Western guests and build her own social network. In this sense, such scene settings endow the film with Chang’s sarcastic criticism of both Mrs. Liang’s choice of awkward architectural style and the Westerner’s imagination fulfilled by such a banal and stereotypical “Chinese” environment.

2.2 Enclosed space and symbolism

Besides the mansion’s architectural style adhering to the original text, the film’s symbolic use of enclosed space also adds to the expressiveness of the scenes. For example, Weilong’s bedroom in the attic is designed to be narrow and dark, and most of the time, only a bed can be seen. The dim and quiet room where Weilong often stays alone can be interpreted as a symbol of her inner world. To elaborate, as is shown in the story, Weilong is at first reluctant and, in a sense, contemptuous of entering Mrs. Liang’s social sphere, while the two central figures who intrude into her inner world and promote her transformation, George Qiao and Mrs. Liang, are also the two who physically break into her bedroom. George Qiao sleeps with Weilong, which marks the latter’s full indulgence in their relationship, which later becomes an important factor that makes Weilong stay with her aunt in Hong Kong. More interestingly, after hearing about Weilong’s having sex with George from Ni’er, Mrs. Liang goes to Weilong’s bedroom but finds that the door is locked from the inside. It is particularly noteworthy that the locked door is not mentioned in Chang’s novella but is a later design of the movie. Mrs. Liang uses her key to open the bedroom door, which symbolizes her breaking into Weilong’s mental world and gradually persuades Weilong to socialize with her acquaintances. The movie, in this way, symbolizes Weilong’s gradual change of mind through its tactical use of enclosed space.

Another well-designed enclosed space is the taxi, where a friend of Mrs. Liang’s, Situ Xie, gives Weilong a golden bracelet. In the movie, Weilong, Mrs Liang and Situ Xie sit together in the backseat of the taxi. The rainy night renders the inner part of the taxi dark, confined and humid, forming an enclosed space where Weilong is physically and spiritually under the control of the other two figures—the narrow space functions in line with the bracelet offered by Situ Xie. In the film, Situ suddenly buckles the bracelet on Weilong’s wrist in the midst of their conversation. The parallel between the bracelet and a handcuff is clearly manifested in the film, foreshadowing that Weilong will eventually step into her aunt’s social circle. The enclosed taxi, also as a symbol of Weilong’s fate subject to her aunt, functions together with the metaphor of the bracelet and reinforces the expressiveness of the scene. From the two instances above, the film’s use of enclosed space successfully symbolizes both the mental state of the protagonist and her predicament, namely being confined in social occasions and taken advantage of by the people around her.

3. Advantages and deficiencies of characterization

Compared with the successful restoration of settings and effective use of enclosed spaces, the film shows both its advantages and disadvantages, particularly in the building of two major characters, Ge Weilong and her aunt, Mrs. Liang. In order to evaluate the film’s characterization, this part of the essay analyzes the two figures in the aspects of the choice of actresses and how the characters’ temperaments are manifested in the film.

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3.1 Unbefitting casting and modification of Ge Weilong’s figure

In the original text, Eileen Chang offers a clear and thorough depiction of Ge Weilong’s appearance, from her “powder-puff face” to her “little mouth plump and round” [1]. It is necessary to note that the anonymous narrator then comments on Weilong’s facial features, stating that “[her] face may have been somewhat lacking in expression, but vacuousness of that sort does impart the gentle sincerity that one associate with Old China” [1]. The narrator’s comment is especially noteworthy in that it straightforwardly points out the association between Ge Weilong’s appearance and “Old China”, which implicitly indicates Weilong’s identity as a girl from a once respectable family conforming to old traditions. In this regard, Ge Weilong’s appearance is further linked with her personality as being conservative, prudent and docile under the influence of her original family. However, Xu Anhua chooses Ma Sichun to play Weilong’s role in her film adaptation. Ma’s appearance, admittedly, does not match Weilong’s facial features portrayed in Chang’s work—one major difference between the two lies in the shape of their eyes. Weilong’s eyes are said to be “long and lovely”, while Ma has round eyes, which are by no means as “old-fashioned” as that of Weilong [1]. The mismatch between appearances leads to the inconsistency between personalities. Since Weilong’s features foreshadow her conservativeness and prudence, Ma’s appearance naturally risks misleading the audience into wrongly interpreting the character’s disposition in the movie.

Apart from the inconsistency between the appearances of the character and the actress, certain plots which are newly added to the movie also lead to its failure in characterization. In the novella, Weilong appears timid and submissive in the face of George Qiao and Mrs. Liang, which echoes her traditional family background and lack of life experience. Weilong, in the film, nonetheless, seems much more rebellious than her figure in the novella. At a garden party held by Mrs. Liang, George Qiao flirts with Weilong by regretting not knowing her earlier [1], while Weilong’s responses to the flirtation are completely different in the novella and its film adaptation. In the novella, she quite honestly answers George’s question, explaining that “[you] haven’t come around much, not since I moved in with my aunt, and I seldom go out” [1]. Weilong’s response reflects her humble and prudent personality, on the one hand, and implicitly indicates her lack of talking skills in line with her immaturity, on the other. In the film, however, she answers George’s question by saying, “You should save your sweet talk for my aunt”. The line shows not only Weilong’s skill of evading the flirtation with George but also the demarcation between her and Mrs. Liang in her mind. Even though in Chang’s work, Weilong indeed feels it hard to identify with her aunt at the beginning, it still seems almost impossible that she should reveal her feelings in the face of a young man whom she has only known for a few minutes. In this regard, Weilong’s words in the film apparently contradict her personality formed in a traditional family environment, shaping the character into an unreasonably mature and sociable figure rebellious against her aunt. This discrepancy between the personalities of the two Weilongs in the novella and in the film reflects its failure in terms of characterization.

3.2 The successfully constructed image of Mrs. Liang

The other main character, Mrs. Liang, is played by Yu Feihong, a renowned Chinese actress. Arguably, Yu’s appearance can, to a large extent, fulfill the audience’s expectations of Mrs. Liang. In the meantime, the manifestation of this figure’s tragic fate also appears satisfactory due to its faithful adaptation from the novella with delicately added plots. To elaborate, Mrs. Liang in the movie appears most of the time as a wealthy lady apt at socializing with people of good social standing. In the meantime, the core characteristic of her as a tragic woman oppressed by the old society can be detected both in the details of her interaction with people around her and the two flashbacks in which Mrs. Liang recalls her own wedding.

Arguably, Mrs. Liang’s indulgence in wealth and sexual desire is successfully portrayed in the film. For example, in Mrs. Liang’s Garden banquet, the plot concerning the relationship between Mrs. Liang and Lu Zhaolin in the novella mainly functions as the catalyst behind the first acquaintance of the two young protagonists. Comparatively, Xu Anhua’s film adaptation apparently lays more emphasis on Lu Zhaolin and Mrs. Liang since it arranges an erotic scene between the two. This scene effectively highlights Mrs. Liang’s sexual appeal, which both effectively builds the character’s indulgent disposition and draws the audience’s attention echoing the film’s nature as a commodified product.

Moreover, Mrs. Liang’s disposition depicted through the scenes seemingly forms a strong contrast with her past self, a traditional Chinese woman inferior in the social hierarchy. More profoundly, the later parts of the movie will reveal that Mrs. Liang can never be fully detached from her past experience despite her wealth and social status. As Wang Xinxin argues in his essay, what lies underneath Mrs. Liang’s extravagant life is her anxiety about getting old and appearing no longer attractive to men, which explains why she gathers young girls around her to socialize with upper-class people [4]. This view reflects that the influence of Mrs. Liang’s past experience as a woman relying on men lingers around her throughout her life. This can be easily detected both in the original novella and in the movie. When Mrs. Liang first encounters Weilong, she warns the latter, though with an ironic tone, not to step into her mansion, which implies that even though she seemingly cares nothing about women’s chastity, she still cannot get rid of the influence of traditions [5] and shows her compassion for her niece. The plot is clearly restored in the movie and reveals Mrs. Liang’s ambivalent attitude towards her life, namely that she enjoys her enormous wealth, on the one hand, while pities herself for her fate of being dependent on men in her social circle on the other.

More importantly, the film adds two flashbacks to
further consolidate Mrs. Liang’s tragic figure, both of which are shot through a gray filter and center on Mrs. Liang’s memories of her wedding. The flashbacks efficiently show her inferior status in her husband’s family, where the female relatives on the wedding day refuse to accept the tea that she offers until she kneels down before them. Through the direct presentation of Mrs. Liang’s memories, the film invites the audience into Mrs. Liang’s mental world and straightforwardly shows that she has been constantly under the influence of her own tragic life. Mrs. Liang’s figure here can be interpreted with reference to Yu Bin’s *Biography of Eileen Chang*, in which the scholar maintains that Eileen Chang’s focus point falls on women’s fate in an era when the old culture and old-fashioned lifestyle are waning rapidly, and when what these women have learned from their families can all be viewed as preparations for their marriages [6]. Meanwhile, Xia Zhiqing, in his A History of Modern Fiction, also contends that Chang’s study of fiction “has led her to stress the strong persistence of traditional sensibility even in an apparently uprooted and cosmopolitan set” [7]. Both views explain why even though Mrs. Liang rebelliously breaks away from her original family, she still has to find a husband to maintain her life. It can thus be further concluded that Mrs. Liang’s rebellion is proved to be a failure. The film, through its adaptation of the original story and its addition of flashbacks, both implicitly and explicitly presents the bitter life experience of Mrs. Liang and reveals the fact that even though it seems that Mrs. Liang can effortlessly socialize among the rich class, the social norms on women which leads to their lack of freedom are imposed on her as well. In this regard, the film’s characterization of Mrs. Liang deserves to be called a conspicuous success.

4. Failed revelation of the theme: the fall of sobriety

Shi Honghua summarizes the theme of Chang’s novella as “the fall of sobriety”, meaning that the protagonist, Ge Weilong, is always aware of her being used by her husband George and her aunt and accepts her fate [8]. Shi Honghua’s view marks the significance of Ge Weilong’s mental activity. In the meantime, the theme of the novella reveals the inevitability of Weilong’s transformation in the face of the transition from the old era to the new one. The revelation of the theme, however, appears far from satisfactory in the film. Even though the movie is shot from a third-person perspective which accounts for the difficulties in showing Weilong’s mentality, changes in the storyline itself are a more important factor that ruins the representation of Weilong’s gradual psychological change and distorts the original meaning of Chang’s work. This part of the essay commits itself to analyzing how the changes in plots negatively affect the revelation of themes in Xu Anhua’s adaptation.

One important detail in Chang’s novella is that after gaining Mrs. Liang’s consent, Weilong moves to Mrs. Liang’s mansion accompanied by Amah Chen, the maid hired by her family. In front of the Liang house, Weilong urges Amah Chen to leave before anybody answers the door because facing the magnificently decorated mansion, she feels that “this longtime servant [is] not at all presentable” [1]. Cai Jingyi stresses the significance of this plot, for it reveals Weilong’s vanity as well as her changed attitude towards her life [9]. To put it further, since Weilong consciously makes the choice of living with her aunt, the plot resonates with and foreshadows the theme of Weilong’s “fall of sobriety” proposed by Shi. Unfortunately, the film adaptation completely omits this important detail. When Weilong, in the movie, goes to live with her aunt, she has no companion. Without the presence of Anah Chen, this significant point of the protagonist’s psychological change cannot be clearly presented, which further leads to the incoherence of Weilong’s transformation and hence impedes the representation of the theme in the original text.

Another inadequately presented element in the movie is Weilong’s wardrobe. In the original text, Chang uses a long passage to describe the wardrobe and the fancy clothes inside it, as well as Weilong’s being obsessed with trying on the clothes. Weilong, again, is aware that the clothes are but a part of her aunt’s trap, for she bitterly compares offering the clothes to a bordello buying girls [1]. However, Weilong cannot resist the temptation, as she finally persuade herself that it would not be a big deal to simply “give it a try” [1]. Deng Rubing, in her analytical essay, states that the plot built around the wardrobe marks a significant moment in her transformation, describing it as “a fierce battle between her ideal of personal striving and the reality that she has to sell her body” [10]. In the meantime, it can be interpreted from the plot that Weilong is conscious of her choice yet fails to realize its danger, which again echoes the theme of “the fall of sobriety”.

Compared with the thorough depiction of the wardrobe in Chang’s work, Xu Anhua’s film adaptation fails to emphasize the importance of the plot. The movie only presents the scene as two fragments, one about Weilong opening the door of the wardrobe and feeling amazed by the clothes, the other showing her turning around in front of the mirror holding a delicate dress. The film adopts the structural method of montage and inserts the two pieces into the larger background of Mrs. Liang’s banquet. Such a design, admittedly, relates Weilong’s trying on the clothes with her doomed fate of stepping into Mrs. Liang’s social network. However, it at the same time fails to capture Weilong’s mental struggle and eventual change of mind as presented in the novella. In this sense, Weilong in the movie becomes simply an innocent girl unaware of what is waiting ahead of her, and thus the theme of her conscious transformation remains ambiguous behind the plot.

More significantly, a huge difference lies in the reason why Weilong eventually decides to stay in Hong Kong and get married to George Qiao. In Chang’s work, the long psychological depiction of Weilong again emphasizes her clear awareness of her predicament. What she is grappling with in her mind is whether to stay in Hong Kong, and it more profoundly points to her hesitation about whether to continue to live under the control of George Qiao and Aunt Liu. Her final decision is directly triggered by George Qiao, who drives his car slowly following her steps, which
arouses her compassion and love. Comparatively, even though George’s driving scene is retained in the film, what eventually makes Weilong stay with him and her aunt, however, is the event of her being humiliated by a stranger on the ship to Shanghai, a completely new plot invented by the filmmaker. After Weilong hears the stranger’s humiliating words calling her “a stuck-up bitch”, it dawns on her that she has to, to a large extent, become a prostitute working for her aunt. This sudden awakening indicates that Weilong eventually realizes that she can never escape the shadow of her past experience in her aunt’s house and has to accept her fate. However, this “sudden awakening” itself is contradictory to the theme of “the fall of sobriety”. It is noteworthy that Weilong, in the novella, never needs anybody to remind her of her tragedy. Even though she is clearly aware of her future, she definitely has no strength to change it, and it is in this sense that Chang reveals the inescapability of her fate, which resonates with the equally unfair fate of the women in her generation. The film’s adaptation, though attempting to offer an explanation of Weilong’s decision, has nevertheless broken the coherence of the revelation of themes at a significant point.

5. Conclusion

The essay compares Love after Love and its original text “Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier”, from three aspects: scene settings, characterization and revelation of the theme. In terms of scene settings, the film not only faithfully restores the important scenes in Chang’s work but also tactically uses enclosed spaces to represent the protagonist Weilong’s mental activity and to foreshadow her doomed fate. Meanwhile, from the analysis of characterization, it can be concluded that the film’s failure in constructing Weilong’s figure can be accounted for by its unbefitting casting and unreasonable changes in the character’s personality. Comparatively, the characterization of Mrs. Liang is a rather successful one since the tragedy of women is well incarnated in this figure, especially with the two elaborate flashbacks that invite the audience into Liang’s spiritual world. Additionally, through presenting three major discrepancies between the novella and its film adaptation, it is clear that the theme of Weilong’s “fall of sobriety” is not properly presented, mainly due to the tampering of the storyline. From the three aspects above, it is reasonable to say that Love after Love has both its advantages and disadvantages of adapting the novella with a film medium.

This essay contributes to the comparison between Love after Love and Aloeswood Incense: The First Brazier by presenting various details from three different aspects and relating them to the major motifs in the novella. In the meantime, it bears noting that this essay emphasizes Chang’s intentions behind her work and evaluates the film’s degree of completion by analyzing whether the adaptation is consistent with the original novella. In this regard, the will of the director Anhua Xu is inevitably understated, and the analysis does not put the film adaptation into the contemporary context. Future studies on the film adaptation, therefore, can emphasize more the contemporary background of the film, through which the reason for the discrepancies between the movie and the novella may well be explained.

References