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Literature in a Fractured World

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Entering the House

Modernity is often regarded as unfolding in public places such as streets, factories, department stores, and universities. Yet in *The First Incense Burner*, Eileen Chang let modernity enter the domestic sphere. Set in colonial Hong Kong of the 1940s, the novella presents the home as one of modernity's primary states of operation, where space actively produces new forms of subjectivity of those who inhabit it.

The First Incense Burner follows Ge Weilong, a Shanghainese girl who moves into her wealthy aunt Liang Tai-tai's residence in colonial Hong Kong in hope of continuing her education. Liang Tai-tai, a former concubine of Mr. Liang, who has secured her social position through considerable wealth inherited from her late husband, lives a life devoted to luxury and pleasure, surrounding herself with wealthy admirers while also drawing young women into her household, using their youth and beauty to sustain the social world through she pursues her own pleasures—the company of young men. Gradually, Weilong is being drawn into Liang Tai-tai's social world. By the end of the novella, she marries George Qiao, gives up her education, and supports her husband and their extravagant lifestyle through her own social and sexual labour.

Recent scholarship has increasingly challenged the assumption that modernity operates primarily through the public sphere. Victoria Rosner, for instance, identifies the spaces of private life as a “generative site for literary modernism,” arguing that the built environment participates in shaping the categories through which individuals understand themselves (Rosner 13). This relationship between private space and subjectivity is perhaps most famously articulated in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, where the possession of a private room becomes a material condition for intellectual and creative autonomy.

Scholarship on Eileen Chang, meanwhile, has similarly located modernity from grand historical narratives to the intimate and everyday. Zairong Xiang and Caio Yurgel argue that Chang's fiction negotiates the contradictions of modernity through quotidian details and personal relationships, which shows that modernity does not simply liberate her female protagonists but

reconfigures the constraints surrounding them (Xiang and Yurgel 198). Yet while such scholarship establishes both domestic space as crucial to modernist subjectivity and Chang's representation of everyday life as a site in which modernity is negotiated, less attention has been paid to how the domestic environment itself acts upon the subject. This paper brings these conversations together by asking not simply what modernity makes possible within private life, but what modernity, once materialized in domestic space, does to the individual who inhabits it.

This paper argues that the Liang residence functions not merely as the setting of Weilong's transformation. Instead, it is the mechanism through which colonial modernity reshapes her subjectivity. First, its heterogeneous spatial arrangements and unstable boundaries construct a colonial environment in which incompatible cultural forms coexist as spectacle; within this environment, material excess reorganizes Weilong's desires until she gradually internalizes its logic of commodification. Ultimately, through Orientalist modes of representation and visual consumption, Weilong herself becomes incorporated into the spectacle she once observed, transforming from an inhabitant of colonial space into one of its consumable objects.

I. Heterogeneous Colonial Space

The Liang residence initiates the process of Weilong's transformation. At the beginning of the novella, Chang devotes nearly two pages to establishing the spatial environment before Weilong's actions properly begin. In this sense, the first presence readers encounter is not Weilong herself, but the Liang residence. Chang constructs this space as neither coherently Western and modern nor traditionally Chinese, but as an environment in which elements belonging to different cultural and historical orders are juxtaposed within a single physical realm. Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia," a real space capable of juxtaposing otherwise incompatible sites and orders, provides a useful framework for understanding this spatial arrangement.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia," Cao Zhengyang identifies Chang's garden spaces as heterotopic. Cao argues that these spaces bring Chinese and Western cultural traditions together. He observes that the Liang residence's garden inherits conventions of the garden in classical Chinese literature while simultaneously absorbing elements of Western garden culture, thereby embodying the cultural hybridity of colonial Hong Kong (Cao 80).

Building on Cao's reading, however, this section extends the heterotopic logic beyond the garden itself to the Liang residence as a whole. Throughout the Liang residence, Chang repeatedly juxtaposes incompatible architectural forms, landscapes, and spatial boundaries, constructing a

heterogeneous environment whose instability gradually becomes inseparable from Weilong's experience of colonial modernity.

姑母家里的花园不过是一个长方形的草坪，四周绕着矮矮的白石卐字阑干，阑干外就是一片荒山。这园子仿佛是乱山中凭空擎出的一只金漆托盘。(Chang 1)

Aunt's garden was nothing more than a rectangular lawn, bordered by a low balustrade of white stone carved with swastika patterns, beyond which stretches a vast expanse of barren hills. The garden looked as if it were a golden-lacquered tray thrust abruptly into midair from the midst of the wild, rugged mountains. (Chang 1)

In the quote, Chang describes the garden as “a golden-lacquered tray”, suggesting that this is a meticulously styled and tailored for display and observation, far removed from any natural garden. “Thrust abruptly into midair from the mid of the wild, rugged mountains” highlights its fabricated and unnatural quality, an enclave of civilization violently carved out from the natural surroundings. This garden is a microcosm of colonial modernity shaped through a series of dualities: the rectangular lawn embodies the western geometric tradition for landscape, emphasizing on the rationality, discipline, and control of nature. The balustrade represents the Eastern ornamental symbol, through which the motif is stripped from its religious depth, reducing to a mere ornament. The contrast between the barren hills and the organized garden visualizes modernity and colonialism's conquest and domestication of the savage wilderness. Yet the garden remains suspended within the very landscape it seeks to control, anticipating the unstable relationship between constructed order and its surroundings that recurs throughout the Liang residence.

园子里也有一排修剪得齐齐整整的长青树，疏疏落落两个花床，种着纤丽的英国玫瑰，都是布置谨严，一丝不乱，就像漆盘上淡淡的工笔彩绘。草坪的一角，栽了一棵小小的杜鹃花，正在开着，花朵儿粉红里略带些黄，是鲜亮的虾子红。墙里的春天，不过是虚应个景儿，谁知星星之火，可以燎原，墙里的春延烧到墙外去，满山轰轰烈烈开着野杜鹃，那灼灼的红色，一路摧枯拉朽烧下山坡子去了。杜鹃花外面，就是那浓蓝的海，海里泊着白色的大船。这里不单是色彩的强烈对照给予观者一种眩晕的不真实的感觉——处

处都是对照，各种不调和的地方背景，时代气氛，全是硬生生地给掺揉在一起，造成一种奇幻的境界。(Chang 1)

The garden featured a row of immaculately pruned evergreens and a few sparse flower beds filled with delicate English roses—all arranged with such rigid precision that it resembled a faint, fine-line gongbi painting executed on a lacquer tray. In a corner of the lawn grew a tiny azalea bush currently in bloom, its flowers a pale pink tinged with yellow, a vivid shrimp red. The spring trapped inside the walls was mere perfunctory window dressing; yet who could have guessed that a single spark could start a prairie fire? Spring inside the walls caught fire and spilled outward, ignited across the mountain in a riot of wild azaleas—a blazing red that swept down the slopes with overwhelming force. Beyond the azaleas lay the deep blue sea, where large white ships rode at anchor. It was more than just the violent contrast of colors that struck the viewer with a dizzying sense of illusion—contrast was everywhere. Incompatible cultural backdrops and conflicting historical eras were forcibly fused, creating a realm that was utterly surreal. (Chang 1)

The walled garden represents a regulated and artificially transplanted Western landscape. The English roses and meticulously trimmed evergreen trees reflect the aesthetics of European garden design. Echoing the golden-lacquered tray earlier in the text, the garden functions as an object of aesthetic display. The plants are stripped of their natural vitality and wildness and reshaped through human intervention into carefully composed forms resembling decorative motifs in a painting. Through such spatial imitation, colonial society reproduces the aesthetic ideals of the European upper class, creating an artificial fantasy of an “European pastoral landscape.”

Within the walls lies an artificial, false, restrained, and performative spring; beyond them, the wild azaleas bloom with an unbridled, explosive, and unmanageable vitality. The metaphors of violence in words like “overwhelming force” and “prairie fire” suggest that the wild natural world refuses to be domesticated by colonial aesthetics.

The boundary wall marks the frontier of colonial order, an attempt to divide “nature curated for aesthetic consumption” from “dangerous, chaotic, native nature.” Further, the visual perspective extends outward in successive layers: the artificial garden, the wild azalea-covered mountains, the sea, and eventually, the distant ocean liner.

Here, Chang directly reveals the collage-like quality of space. Different regions (British gardens and Southern Chinese mountains), different civilizations, and different historical periods are forcibly assembled together, forming a defining characteristic of colonial Hong Kong's spatial experience. The “dizzying sense of unreality” evokes the feeling of a heterotopia. This fantastical landscape is not naturally formed, but an artificially constructed stage designed for external observation.

Yet, the garden represents only the outermost layer of this constructed space. As Weilong's gaze moves from the surrounding landscape toward the house itself, the architectural structure further reveals how colonial modernity operates through the accumulation of incompatible cultural signs.

山腰里这座白房子是流线形的，几何图案式的构造，类似最摩登的电影院。然而屋顶上却盖了一层仿古的碧色琉璃瓦。(Chang 2)

The white house perched on the hillside featured a streamlined, geometrically designed structure, bearing the resemblance to the most avant-garde cinemas of the era. Yet, the roof was capped with an imitation antique tiles of green glaze. (Chang 2)

“Streamlined”, “geometrically designed”, “most avant-garde cinemas” (Chang 2) points to the modern architecture language, which represents the most newest forms of urban modernity. Conversely, “imitation antique tiles of green glaze” invoke elements of traditional Chinese palatial architecture. The juxtaposition of the two do not co-exist in harmony, rather forming a discordant overlay. The transition word “yet” explicitly exposes the irreconcilable tension within the space: a modern skeleton veneered with decorative symbols of eastern tradition.

玻璃窗也是绿的，配上鸡油黄嵌一道窄红的边框。窗上安着雕花铁栅栏，喷上鸡油黄的漆。(Chang 2)

The windows were made of green glass framed in chicken-fat yellow with a narrow strip of red. Ornamental iron grilles covered the windows painted in the same chicken-fat yellow. (Chang 2)

Chang employs a gustatory criticism to critique the architectural palette, implanting a sense of greasiness that betrays the over-decorated kitsch aesthetic. The iron grills, a western architectural element, is coated in a “chicken-fat yellow” lacquer, the combination triggering a

grotesque chemical reaction between the material and color, further transforming an elegant boundary into a visual culinary vulgarity.

Beyond its visual excess, the Liang residence also carries traces of larger histories of colonial power.

屋子四周绕着宽绰的走廊，地下铺着红砖，支着巍峨的两三丈高一排白石圆柱，那却是美国南部早期建筑的遗风。(Chang 2)

The house was encircled by a spacious veranda with a red-brick floor, supported by a majestic row of white stone columns standing some twenty to thirty feet high, which carried the vestigial style of early architecture from the American South. (Chang 2)

The sense of “majestic” brought by the “twenty to thirty feet high” white stone columns deviates from spatial experience of traditional Chinese architecture, instead operating as a naked display of colonial power. This adoption of the early American Southern plantation style carries historical trauma of slavery and colonial exploitation. The spatial genealogy of the Liang Residence is multilayered: the “most avant-garde cinemas” (Chang 2) points to urban modernity; glazed tiles are symbolic appropriations of traditional Chinese aesthetics; Southern American colonial architecture suggests spatial legacy of colonial power. The superimposition of these three layers of space within a single building together creates a compression and disjunction of time and space.

The heterogeneous logic of the residence does not end with its architectural exterior. Inside the house, the same accumulation of culturally disparate forms is reproduced through furniture and decoration.

里面是立体化的西式布置，但是也有几件雅俗共赏的中国摆设。炉台上陈列着翡翠鼻烟壶与象牙观音像，沙发前围着斑竹小屏风。(Chang 2)

Inside, the layout was a three-dimensional Western arrangement, interspersed with a few Chinese curios designed to appeal to both elite and popular tastes. Atop the mantelpiece stood jadeite snuff bottles and an ivory statue of Guanyin, while a small mottled-bamboo screen encloses the sofa. (Chang 2)

The juxtaposition of the fundamentally Western interior with scattered Chinese decorative objects continues the spatial hybridity already visible in the exterior architecture, compressing distinct cultural forms within the same domestic space.

Yet the instability of the Liang residence extends beyond the incompatible forms assembled within it. As Weilong begins to inhabit the house, even its physical boundaries and apparent solidity become increasingly uncertain.

那是个潮湿的春天的晚上，香港山上的雾是最有名的。梁家那白房子黏黏地融化在白雾里，只看见绿玻璃窗里晃动着灯光，绿幽幽地，一方一方，像薄荷酒里的冰块。渐渐的冰块也化了水——雾浓了，窗格子里的灯光也消失了。(Chang 14)

It was a damp spring night, the fog on the Hong Kong hills was the most celebrated thing of all. The Liangs' white house was melting, stickily, into the white fog, dissolving as if adhered; only the green glass windows still held their trembling lamplight, square by square, greenishly luminous—like ice cubes in a glass of mint liqueur. Gradually, even the ice cubes turned to water—the fog thickened, and the latticed lights inside the windowpanes were extinguished, one by one, into nothing. (Chang 14)

When Weilong officially moves into Liang Tai-tai's residence, the description of the house immediately establishes the distinctive spatial atmosphere of Liang's world.

The verb "melt" is crucial here. It blurs the boundary of the architecture, suggesting that the space is not solid or stable, but rather permeable and sticky. The mist becomes an extension of the Liang residence that allows the house's influence and control to diffuse outward into the surrounding environment. Modernity does not merely exist within this space; the space itself becomes the material embodiment of modernity.

Through this imagery, Chang presents Liang's house as a space where architecture and nature merge together. The house does not simply shelter its inhabitants, instead actively produces a particular mode of perception. For Weilong, entering the Liang residence means entering a carefully constructed world of colonial modernity, where even the natural landscape is transformed into an aesthetic object and where the boundaries between reality and artificial spectacle gradually dissolve.

This dissolution of architectural boundaries subsequently enters Weilong's own perception of the space.

薇龙上楼的时候，底下正入席吃饭，无线电里乐声悠扬。薇龙那间房，屋小如舟，被那音波推动着，那盏半旧红纱壁灯似乎摇摇晃晃，人在屋里，飘飘荡荡，心旷神怡。薇龙拉开了珍珠罗帘幕，倚着窗台望出去，外面是窄窄的阳台，铁阑干外浩浩荡荡的雾，一片濛濛乳白，很有从甲板上望海的情致。(Chang 16)

As Weilong went upstairs, the dinner party was just being seated below, with strains of music floating languidly from the radio. Her room was small as a boat, rocked by the sound waves, and the half-old red-shaded wall lamp seemed to sway with them—she herself, adrift in the room, felt light and disembodied, lost in a vague elation. Weilong drew aside the pearl-tinted voile curtains and leaned against the windowsill to look out. Beyond was a narrow balcony; beyond the iron railings, a vast and rolling sea of fog, a boundless milky white, giving one precisely the feeling of gazing out to sea from a ship's deck. (Chang 16)

Liang Tai-tai's house is hosting a banquet. Weilong ascends to her room while music flows from the radio downstairs and the guests are gathering for dinner. Her first night in the Liang residence is marked by a strange sense of instability and enchantment. Her room is "small as a boat," and pushed by the waves of sound coming from below, the half-old red shaded wall lamp appears to sway gently. Inside the room, she feels herself "drifting," as if floating in a dream. The description of the room as a boat is significant: rather than a stable domestic space, Weilong's room becomes a floating vessel, suggesting the rootlessness and uncertainty of the colonial modern subject. The space itself is unstable, suspended between land and sea, reality and fantasy.

This sense of suspension continues when Weilong opens the pearl curtain and looks outside. The narrow balcony, the vast white mist beyond the iron railing, and the sensation of looking at the sea from a ship's deck further transform the room into a space of movement rather than belonging. Instead of providing security and rootedness, the Liang residence places Weilong in a state of constant drifting.

The instability of the Liang residence is deliberately reproduced on a larger scale through the social spaces constructed within it:

次日便是那园会的日子。园会一举，还是英国十九世纪的遗风。英国难得天晴，到了夏季风和日暖的时候，爵爷爵夫人们往往喜欢在自己的田庄上举行这种半正式的集会，女人们戴了颤巍巍的宽帽沿的草帽，佩了过时的绢花，丝质手套长过肘际，斯斯文文，如同参与庙堂大典。乡下八十里圆周内略具身分的人们都到齐了，牧师和牧师太太也叨陪末座。大家衣冠楚楚，在堡垒遗迹，瓦砾场中踱来踱去，僵僵地交换谈话。用过茶点之后，免不了要请上几位小姐们，弹唱一曲《夏天最后的玫瑰》。香港人的园会，却是青出于蓝。香港社会处处模仿英国习惯，然而总喜欢画蛇添足，弄得全失本来面目。梁太太这园会，便渲染着浓厚的地方色彩。草地上遍植五尺来高福字大灯笼，黄昏时点上了火，影影绰绰的，正像好莱坞拍摄《清宫秘史》时不可少的道具。灯笼丛里却又歪歪斜斜插了几把海滩上用的遮阳伞，洋气十足，未免有点不伦不类。丫头老妈子们，一律拖着油松大辫，用银盘子颤巍巍托着鸡尾酒、果汁、茶点，弯着腰在伞柄林中穿来穿去。

(Chang 22)

The next day came the garden party—a custom surviving from the nineteenth-century English tradition. In England, where fine weather was a rarity, the lords and ladies of the gentry, when summer brought its mild and sunlit days, would often hold such semi-formal gatherings on their own estates. The ladies, wearing wide-brimmed straw hats that trembled with every movement, adorned themselves with outdated silk flowers, and drew long kid gloves well past their elbows—all with a prim and proper decorum, as though attending a solemn court ceremonial. Within a radius of eighty miles, all who laid claim to any standing would assemble, the vicar and his wife included, though seated at the lower end of the table. There they would stroll, in their immaculate finery, among the ruins of ancient fortresses and heaps of rubble, exchanging stiff, perfunctory pleasantries. After tea and refreshments, it was de rigueur to invite a few young ladies to perform, on piano or voice, that perennial favourite, *The Last Rose of Summer*. The garden parties of Hong Kong, however, outdid the original—bluer than blue, as the saying goes. Hong Kong society aped the English in everything, yet always felt compelled to gild the lily, until the original was quite lost in the travesty. Auntie Liang's

garden party, in particular, was steeped in a strong local colour. All over the lawn stood five-foot-tall lanterns emblazoned with the character *FU*—for good fortune—which, when lit at dusk, cast a mass of flickering, spectral shadows, looking for all the world like the indispensable props from a Hollywood production of *Secrets of the Qing Court*. Amid this thicket of lanterns, however, were stuck, at crooked angles, several beach parasols—thoroughly Western in style—lending the whole scene an incongruous, neither-here-nor-there air. The maids and older serving-women, all wearing their hair in glossy, oiled plaits, threaded their way through the forest of parasol poles, their silver trays trembling as they bore cocktails, fruit juices, and refreshments, bending low as they moved. (Chang 22)

The garden party held at Liang Tai-tai's residence represents the transformation of colonial imitation from private decoration into public performance. The narrator first provides an extended description of the original British garden party tradition: the nineteenth-century aristocratic legacy, the ladies with wide-brimmed hats and silk gloves, the gentlemen wandering among castle ruins, and the performance of "*The Last Rose of Summer*" after tea. This description presents the garden party as a complete social ritual embedded in British aristocratic history. However, the opinion on Hong Kong people's garden parties being more impressive is deeply ironic. Rather than genuine admiration, the phrase exposes the colonial subject's excessive imitation of the colonizer's culture. Colonial Hong Kong cannot reproduce the original tradition; instead, through unnecessary additions, it creates an artificial and distorted version of Britishness.

Liang Tai-tai's garden party embodies this "over-decoration." The five-foot red lanterns scattered across the lawn resemble props from Hollywood's *The Last Days of the Qing Dynasty*. The combination of traditional lanterns and beach umbrellas further intensifies this collage-like quality. Eastern symbols and Western leisure objects, historical nostalgia and modern entertainment, are forcibly assembled within the same landscape, just as Liang's house combines a modern exterior with antique Chinese architectural elements. The garden party, thus temporarily transforms the already heterogeneous garden into an explicitly staged space in which geographically and historically incompatible forms are made to coexist.

紧对着她的阳台，就是一片突出的山崖，仿佛是那山岭伸出舌头舐着那阳台呢。在黄梅雨中，满山醉醺醺的树木，发出一蓬一蓬的青叶子味；芭蕉、栀子花、玉兰花、香蕉

树、樟脑树、菖蒲、凤尾草、象牙红、棕榈、芦苇、淡芭蕉，生长繁殖得太快了，都有点杀气腾腾，吹进来的风也有点微微的腥气。空气里水分过于浓厚了，地板上、木器上全凝着小水珠儿。(Chang 34)

Directly opposite her balcony was a jutting cliff, looking as if the mountain ridge were sticking out its tongue to lick the balcony. In the plum rains, the drunken trees all over the mountain gave off billow after billow of green leaf scent; the plantains, gardenias, magnolias, banana trees, camphor trees, sweet flags, phoenix ferns, coral trees, palms, reeds, and tobacco plants grew and multiplied far too fast, taking on a somewhat murderous air, and the wind blowing in had a slightly fishy, damp tang to it. Moisture in the air was overly thick; tiny droplets of water clung to the floors and wooden furniture. (Chang 34)

The balcony should mark a boundary between Weilong's private interior and the landscape outside it, but Chang immediately destabilizes that boundary. The cliff does not remain at a distance: it appears to extend a "tongue" toward the balcony and "lick" it. By personifying the mountain through an intimate and faintly erotic bodily gesture, Chang turns the landscape into an active presence that reaches toward Weilong's room. The vegetation is similarly characterized not by peaceful natural abundance but by excess. The long accumulation of plant names overwhelms the sentence just as the plants themselves "grew and multiplied far too fast," until their fertility becomes "murderous." Growth, normally associated with vitality, becomes threatening precisely because it cannot be contained. This contrasts with the carefully cultivated garden elsewhere in the Liang residence: there, vegetation is arranged into a spectacle for observation, whereas here it exceeds human control and presses aggressively against the boundaries of domestic space.

More importantly, this landscape does not stop at the balcony. Chang describes the wind carrying a slightly "fishy" smell inward, while the excessive moisture in the air condenses into droplets on the floor and wooden furniture. The outside environment has therefore physically entered the room. The progression is almost tactile, the mountain reaches toward the balcony, the smell and wind cross it, and finally moisture settles upon the objects inside. Weilong's room cannot remain sealed from its surroundings; the distinction between exterior landscape and private interior becomes increasingly porous. The quote thus extends the novella's larger treatment of colonial space beyond the spectacular surfaces of the garden and residence. Even in the room that

appears to belong to Weilong alone, outside forces penetrate the boundary and alter the atmosphere within. Privacy does not provide withdrawal from the environment that is reshaping her; the environment follows her inside. The instability of the Liang residence ultimately extends beyond the permeability of its physical boundaries to the contradictory meanings attached to the house itself.

薇龙沿着路往山下走，太阳已经偏了西，山背后大红大紫，金丝交错，热闹非凡，倒像雪茄烟盒盖上的商标画。满山的棕榈、芭蕉，都被毒日头烘焙得干黄松髻，像雪茄烟丝。南方的日落是快的，黄昏只是一刹那，这边太阳还没有下去，那边，在山路的尽头，烟树迷离，青溶溶地，早有一撇月影儿。薇龙向东走，越走，那月亮越白，越晶亮，仿佛是一头肥胸脯的白凤凰，栖在路的转弯处，在树桠杈里做了窠。越走越觉得月亮就在前头树深处，走到了，月亮便没有了。薇龙站住了歇了一会儿脚，倒有点惘然。再回头看姑妈的家，依稀还见那黄地红边的窗棂，绿玻璃窗里映着海色。那巍巍的白房子，盖着绿色的琉璃瓦，很有点像古代的黄陵。(Chang 12)

Weilong made her way down the winding mountain path as the afternoon sun tilted west. Behind the peaks, the sky blazed in riotous reds and purples threaded with gold, taking on the gaudy, busy air of a cigar box label. All over the mountain, the palms and plantains had been baked by the scorching sun until dry, yellow, and curled, like cigar tobacco. In the south, sunsets come quickly, and twilight lasts only a fleeting moment. Before the sun had even dropped on this side, over there at the end of the mountain road, hazy beneath misty trees, a blue-tinged sliver of the moon had already emerged. As Weilong walked east, the moon grew whiter and more luminous, like a plump-breasted white phoenix roosting at the bend of the road, nesting amidst the tangled branches. The deeper she walked, the closer the moon seemed to lie within the dense foliage—yet when she arrived, it vanished. Weilong stopped to rest her feet for a moment, feeling somewhat lost. Looking back at her aunt's house, she could still faintly see those yellow window frames edged in red, their green glass reflecting the color of the sea. That imposing white mansion, topped with green glazed tiles, looked quite like an ancient imperial tomb. (Chang 12)

The scene begins with a vivid description of the sunset, but the atmosphere gradually shifts from beautiful to unsettling. Chang uses highly decorative and artificial images: the sky is compared to the design on a cigar box, and the dried tropical plants resemble tobacco leaves. These comparisons make the landscape appear almost like a carefully designed object rather than a natural environment. The beauty of the scene therefore carries a sense of artificiality and excess.

Finally, when Weilong looks back at her aunt's house, the mansion appears "like an ancient imperial tomb." This comparison introduces another layer of unease. A mansion is normally associated with wealth and life, but comparing it to a tomb connects the house with history, death, and something preserved from the past. The beautiful white mansion with green glazed tiles resembles a historical monument rather than a living home.

This association between the Liang residence and death becomes still more explicit through Weilong's subsequent allusion to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*.

薇龙自己觉得是《聊斋志异》里的书生，上山去探亲出来之后，转眼间那贵家宅第已经化成一座大坟山；如果梁家那白房子变了坟，她也许并不惊奇。她看她姑母是个有本领的女人，一手挽住了时代的巨轮，在她自己的小天地里，留住了满清末年的淫逸空气，关起门来做小型慈禧太后。(Chang 13)

Weilong felt like a scholar out of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*—after visiting relatives in the mountains, he turns around to find the grand estate vanished, replaced in an instant by a massive burial mound. If her aunt's white mansion were to suddenly morph into a tomb, she would hardly be surprised. In her eyes, her aunt was a capable woman who was capable of holding back the wheel of time, preserving the decadent aura of the late Qing Dynasty within her own small domain, playing a miniature Empress Dowager Cixi behind closed doors. (Chang 13)

Weilong compares herself to a character from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, a famous collection of Chinese supernatural stories written during the Qing Dynasty. A common pattern in these stories is that ordinary people enter beautiful or unusual places and later discover that these places are not what they seemed to be.

The phrase "the decadent aura of the late Qing Dynasty" refers to the atmosphere associated with the final years of the Qing Empire: excessive luxury, old traditions, political decline,

and a sense of a society unable to adapt to changing times. Chang describes the aunt as preserving this atmosphere inside her own private world, almost as if she has created a miniature version of the late imperial court within her mansion.

The allusion to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*) (Chang 13) deepens this uncanny quality of the space. Weilong compares herself to a scholar who enters a wealthy mansion only to discover later that it has become a graveyard. Within the logic of *Liaozhai*, the luxurious residence is not the reality but the illusion; the graveyard beneath it represents the hidden truth. Weilong's statement that she "would hardly be surprised" if the white mansion transformed into a graveyard suggests that she has already sensed the unnatural quality of the Liang residence. The house is not simply a home but an uncanny space, a place that appears familiar while remaining fundamentally foreign and threatening. Its modern architecture, Qing-era atmosphere, and colonial setting bring together different historical moments that should not coexist, creating a space where the past returns like a ghost. In this sense, the Liang residence embodies the haunting quality of colonial modernity itself: the promise of the new is built upon unresolved histories and concealed forms of decay.

Weilong's description of her aunt as a "small-scale Empress Dowager Cixi" further reveals how space allows time and power to be controlled. Liang Tai-tai appears to possess the ability to "hold back the wheel of time," preserving within her private world the atmosphere of the late Qing dynasty. Her power comes from her control over domestic space. Within the boundaries of the Liang residence, she creates her own isolated historical order, where old forms of pleasure and stern hierarchy continue despite the modern world outside. The irony lies in the fact that this frozen imperial atmosphere exists inside a house marked by colonial modern architecture. Rather than replacing older forms of power, modernity provides a new container in which they can survive. The Liang residence, as a result, becomes a miniature version of colonial modernity itself, a space where modern surfaces conceal older structures of domination and where the appearance of progress coexists with stagnation and decay.

Yet, the significance of the Liang residence lies in what these contradictions begin to produce in Weilong. Its material environment gradually turns spatial disorientation into desire, drawing her into the very logic of consumption that structures the world around her.

II. Commodifying Desire

The Liang residence reshapes Weilong's subjectivity by reorganizing what she learns to desire. Material objects, particularly clothing, first appear as external temptations, but gradually become embedded in the way Weilong imagines pleasure, social belonging, and eventually herself. Commodification therefore operates not only upon Weilong's body, but through her increasing internalization of the values that make such commodification possible.

This process begins almost immediately after Weilong moves into the Liang residence. On her first night, she opens the wardrobe in her room and discovers that Liang Tai-tai has already filled it with clothes purchased specifically for her:

薇龙打开了皮箱，预备把衣服腾到抽屉里，开了壁橱一看，里面却挂满了衣服，金翠辉煌；不觉咦了一声道：“这是谁的？想必是姑妈忘了把这橱腾空出来。”她到底不脱孩子气，忍不住锁上了房门，偷偷的一件一件试穿着，却都合身，她突然省悟，原来这都是姑妈特地为她置备的。家常的织锦袍子，纱的绸的、软缎的、短外套、长外套、海滩上用的披风、睡衣、浴衣、夜礼服、喝鸡尾酒的下午服、在家见客穿的半正式的晚餐服，色色俱全。一个女学生哪里用得了这么多？薇龙连忙把身上的一件晚餐服剥了下来，向床上一抛，人也就膝盖一软，在床上坐下了，脸上一阵一阵的发热，低声道：“这跟长三堂子里买进一个人，有什么分别？”坐了一会，又站起身来把衣服一件一件重新挂在衣架上，衣服的腋下原先挂着白缎子小荷包，装满了丁香花末子，薰得满橱香喷喷的。

(Chang 16)

She opened her trunk, meaning to transfer her clothes into the drawers, but when she slid open the wardrobe, it was already hung full of garments—brocades and satins blazing with gold and emerald. She could not help uttering a soft exclamation: "Whose are these? Auntie must have forgotten to clear this wardrobe out." Still childish at heart, she could not resist locking the door and trying them on, one by one, in secret—and every piece fitted her perfectly. Suddenly it dawned on her: these were all bought for her, specially, by her aunt.

There were everyday brocade gowns, gauze ones, silk ones, soft satin ones; short jackets, long coats, beach wraps, nightgowns, bathrobes, evening gowns, afternoon frocks for cocktail hours, semi-formal dinner dresses for receiving guests at home—

every conceivable variety. What use could a schoolgirl have for so many? Weilong hastily stripped off the dinner dress she had on, flung it onto the bed, and her knees gave way as she sank down on the edge of the mattress, her cheeks flushing in wave after wave of heat. She murmured under her breath: "How is this any different from buying a girl into a Changsan brothel?" She sat still for a while, then rose again and began hanging the dresses back, one by one, on their hangers. Beneath the arms of each garment hung little white-satin sachets, filled with powdered cloves, sending forth a dense, sweet perfume that filled the entire wardrobe. (Chang 16)

The wardrobe further reveals how the Liang residence operates through commodity culture. When Weilong opens the closet, she encounters a dazzling collection of clothes: evening dresses, cocktail dresses, beach capes, pajamas, and formal dinner clothes. This is not an ordinary wardrobe belonging to a young student; it is a complete set of costumes designed for different social performances. Each piece of clothing corresponds to a particular occasion. The wardrobe functions as a miniature display case, transforming clothing into instruments through which a person can be packaged and presented.

Weilong's realization that these clothes were specially prepared for her leads to the most direct moment of self-awareness in the passage. The "Changsan brothel" was not any ordinary brothel; it was an upscale traditional pleasure house in old Shanghai. The women there were highly trained courtesans whose roles extended beyond sexual services to include accompanying guests at banquets, performing music, and participating in elite social and cultural consumption. Therefore, Weilong's thought that "How is this any different from buying a girl into a Changsan brothel?" exposes the logic behind the seemingly generous gift. The clothes are not simply gifts but forms of packaging; she is not merely a guest entering the Liang household but an object being prepared for consumption. The wardrobe becomes a microcosm of the Liang residence itself: the house is a larger display cabinet, while the closet is a smaller one within it. Both spaces organize and present human bodies according to the desires of the colonial elite.

Even the scent of the clothes contributes to this process of sensory conditioning. The white satin sachets filled with clove powder make the entire wardrobe "fragrant." Commodification enters Weilong's experience through sensory pleasure: the very objects that prepare her for consumption are made attractive to her.

楼下吃完了饭，重新洗牌入局，却分了一半人开留声机跳舞。薇龙一夜也不曾阖眼，才阖眼便恍惚在那里试衣服，试了一件又一件；毛织品，毛茸茸的像富于挑拨性的爵士舞；厚沉沉的丝绒，像忧郁的古典化的歌剧主题曲；柔滑的软缎，像《蓝色的多瑙河》，凉阴阴地匝着人，流遍了全身。才迷迷糊糊盹了一会，音乐调子一变，又惊醒了。楼下正奏着气急吁吁的伦巴舞曲，薇龙不由想起壁橱里那条紫色电光绸的长裙子，跳起伦巴舞来，一踢一踢，淅沥沙啦响。想到这里，便细声对楼下的一切说道：“看看也好！”她说这话，只有嘴唇动着，并没有出声，然而她还是探出手来把毯子拉上来，蒙了头，这可没有人听见了。她重新悄悄说道：“看看也好！”便微笑着入睡。(Chang 17)

When the meal downstairs was over, the tables were reshuffled for another round of mah-jongg, but half the company had broken away to put on the gramophone and dance. Weilong did not close her eyes the whole night—and the moment she did, she was in a daze, trying on clothes there in her room, one after another: the woolen knits, fuzzy and teasing, like provocative jazz; the heavy, plush velvets, somber as the leitmotif of a classical opera; the sleek, fluid satins, like *The Blue Danube*, coolly winding about her, coursing through her entire being.

She had barely drifted into a hazy doze when the music changed key and jolted her awake again. Downstairs, they were now playing a breathless, panting rumba—and Weilong could not help thinking of that long dress of electric-purple rayon taffeta in the wardrobe, which would rustle and swish with every kick and flick of the rumba steps. At this thought, she whispered softly toward all the commotion below: "It wouldn't hurt just to look, would it?" She moved her lips only, making no sound—but even so, she reached out and pulled the blanket up over her head, so that no one could possibly hear. Then, in the muffled dark, she whispered again to herself: "It wouldn't hurt just to look." And with that, she smiled and fell asleep. (Chang 17)

After the banquet downstairs ends, the guests begin another round of entertainment, with half of them moving to dance to the phonograph. Unable to sleep because of the continuous music, Weilong finally closes her eyes only to find herself trying on clothes again and again in her dream. This transition from wakefulness to dreaming marks the internalization of the desires

produced by the Liang household. Earlier, when she first opens the wardrobe, she consciously recognizes the disturbing implication of the clothes and compares herself to someone “bought” from a Changsan brothel. However, in her dream, she no longer resists the wardrobe but actively participates in the act of trying on the clothes. The logic of commodification has moved beyond the external space of the wardrobe and entered her unconscious desire. At the same time, the Liang residence gradually produces her desire for that identity.

Chang further represents this process through the synesthetic connection between fabrics and Western music. The “woolen” fabric is described as “like provocative jazz dancing,” transforming a material object into an experience of urban excitement. The “heavy velvet” resembles “the leitmotif of a classical opera,” carrying associations of elegance. The “soft satin” recalls *The Blue Danube*, with its cool smoothness flowing across the body like a European waltz. These comparisons suggest that clothing is not merely a collection of physical materials; each fabric becomes an entrance into a particular Western cultural fantasy. Through the combination of commodities and cultural symbols, colonial modernity reshapes Weiling’s sensory perception, teaching her to experience modernity through consumption.

The phrase “It wouldn’t hurt just to look” reveals the beginning of Weiling’s active compromise. Significantly, she does not say this aloud; only her lips move, and she covers herself with the blanket so that no one can hear. The gesture of “covering her head” suggests that she understands the self-deception involved. She knows that this desire conflicts with her earlier recognition of commodification, yet she chooses to conceal this contradiction from herself. This moment is more complex than a simple narrative of forced corruption. Her frantic alternation, her conflict with herself in leaving or staying reveals a subject divided between resisting this process and surrendering to it. Here, colonial power operates not through direct coercion, but by making the identity offered by the Liang household increasingly desirable to Weiling herself. By the end of the quote, Weiling falls asleep smiling, indicating that the colonial modern space has begun to transform her from within.

The wardrobe soon becomes more than an object of temptation. As Weiling becomes increasingly exposed to the disturbing realities of the Liang household, it also begins to function as a space of retreat. After discovering that Didi has attempted to seduce George Qiao, Liang Tai-tai becomes furious.

梁太太趿上了鞋，把烟卷向一盆杜鹃花里一丢，站起身来便走。那杜鹃花开得密密层层的。烟卷儿窝在花瓣子里，一霎时就烧黄了一块。(Chang 19)

Liang Tai-tai slipped into her shoes, tossed her cigarette into a pot of azaleas, rose, and walked away. The azaleas were blooming in dense, layered clusters. The cigarette lay nestling among the petals, and in an instant it had scorched a sallow patch into them. (Chang 19)

The act of casually throwing the cigarette into the azalea plant becomes a display of power. The azalea, like the carefully arranged garden and the “golden-lacquered tray”, exists as a decorative object within Liang Tai-tai’s aesthetic world. Because beauty is created for her pleasure, she does not need to preserve it; she can destroy it casually. The azalea also echoes the earlier garden imagery, appearing both as an outdoor landscape and as an indoor ornament. Whether in nature or inside the house, it remains an object to be viewed and controlled. Weilong’s immediate response to this display of destruction is retreat:

薇龙突然不愿意看下去了，掉转身子，开了衣橱，人靠在橱门上。衣橱里黑沉沉的，丁香末子香得使人发晕。那里面还是悠久的过去的空气，温雅、幽闲、无所谓时间。衣橱里可没有窗外那爽朗的清晨，那板板的绿草地，那怕人的寂静的脸，嘴角那花生衣子……那肮脏、复杂，不可理喻的现实。(Chang 20)

Weilong suddenly could not bear to look any further. She turned away, opened the wardrobe, and leaned against its door. Inside, the wardrobe was dark and heavy, and the scent of powdered cloves was so dense it made her dizzy. In there lingered the air of a long-vanished past—gentle, leisurely, oblivious to time. But the wardrobe held none of that crisp, clear morning outside the window—none of that flat, stark green lawn, none of that terrifying silent face, with the peanut-skin crumbs at the corner of its mouth... that sordid, tangled, unaccountable reality. (Chang 20)

The wardrobe functions as a heterotopia of time. Inside the wardrobe, there is no present and no future; only the “distant past” remains. This mirrors Liang Tai-tai’s attempt to preserve an outdated world, holding onto the atmosphere of the late Qing period despite the unstoppable movement of history. In this sense, the entire Liang residence functions like an enlarged wardrobe:

a carefully maintained space that suspends time and protects an artificial fantasy from external reality.

The contrast between the inside and outside of the wardrobe reveals Weilong's changing relationship with colonial modernity. After witnessing the "sordid, tangled, unaccountable reality" outside, she actively chooses to retreat into the enclosed, fragrant, and nostalgic space of the wardrobe. Rather than confronting reality, she escapes into a constructed illusion. The wardrobe therefore becomes a psychological mechanism through which Weilong avoids confronting the reality of her own transformation.

The desires produced by the Liang residence do not immediately erase Weilong's attachment to an earlier domestic order. After discovering George with Ni'er, Weilong is overwhelmed by shame over their earlier intimacy and decides to return to her family. Before she can leave Hong Kong, however, she falls ill with a fever and is forced to remain at the Liang residence. It is during this illness, when her desire to return home becomes most urgent, that the narrative offers one of its few sustained descriptions of Weilong's former domestic life.

她发着烧，更是风急火急的想回家。在老家生了病，房里不会像这么堆满了朋友送的花，可是在她的回忆中，比花还美丽的，有一种玻璃球，是父亲书桌上用来镇纸的，家里人给她捏着，冰那火烫的手。扁扁的玻璃球里面嵌着细碎的红的蓝的紫的花，排出俗气的齐整的图案。那球抓在手里很沉。想起它，便使她想起人生中一切厚实的，靠得住的东西——她家里，她和妹妹合睡的那黑铁床，床上的褥子，白地红柳条；黄杨木的旧式梳妆台；在太阳光里红得可爱的桃子式的磁缸，盛着爽身粉；墙上钉着的美女月份牌，在美女的臂上，母亲用铅笔浓浓的加上了裁缝、荐头行、豆腐浆、舅母、三阿姨的电话号码……她把手揪着床单，只想回去，回去、回去……越急，病越好得慢。等到这病有了起色，香港那霪雨连绵的夏季早经结束，是萧爽的秋天了。(Chang 47)

She was running a fever and wanted to go home all the more urgently, like a whipping wind and a roaring fire. If she fell ill back home, the room would not be filled with flowers sent by friends like this, but in her memories, something even more beautiful than flowers was a glass ball her father used as a paperweight on his desk, which her family would let her hold to cool her burning hands. Embedded inside the flattened

glass ball were tiny red, blue, and purple flowers arranged in a tacky, neat pattern. The ball felt heavy in her hand. Thinking of it made her recall all the solid, reliable things in life—her home, the black iron bed she shared with her younger sister, the mattress on the bed with its white background and red stripes; the old-fashioned boxwood dressing table; the peach-shaped porcelain jar, endearingly red in the sunlight, holding talcum powder; the beauty calendar nailed to the wall, on whose arms her mother had heavily written with a pencil the phone numbers of the tailor, the employment agency, the soy milk vendor, her aunt, and her third aunt... Clutching the bedsheet with her hands, she wanted nothing but to go back, to go back, to go back... The more anxious she grew, the slower her recovery became. By the time her illness took a turn for the better, Hong Kong's endless, rainy summer had long since ended, yielding to a crisp, brisk autumn.

(Chang 47)

Chang gathers these objects under Weilong's memory of "all the solid, reliable things in life." Their value lies precisely in their ordinariness and material familiarity. Unlike the carefully cultivated flowers, elaborate clothing, and luxurious objects of the Liang residence, these things are old-fashioned, practical, even slightly tacky. Yet they carry the weight of repeated use and domestic routine. Weilong's memory consequently produces an alternative form of domestic space, one whose material objects offer stability rather than spectacle.

The glass paperweight concentrates Weilong's memory of home into a single object. Belong to her father's desk in Shanghai, Weilong remembers how her family would place it in her hands to cool them when she had a fever. Its significance is therefore both material and intimate: the glass is cool, the ball is "heavy" in her hand, and the memory of holding it recalls a form of domestic care absent from her present illness in Hong Kong. Chang contrasts this remembered object with the flowers now filling Weilong's room. Although the flowers sent by her friends are conventionally more beautiful, Weilong remembers the paperweight as "even more beautiful," despite the "tacky" and rigid arrangement of the tiny red, blue, and purple flowers embedded inside it. Its beauty comes not from refinement or spectacle but from familiarity, physical weight, and the family life attached to it. Significantly, Weilong does not actually possess the paperweight in this scene: she can only remember how it once felt in her hand. Its solidity therefore sharpens the spatial distance between her present room in Hong Kong and the Shanghai home she longs to

return to. The object is “solid” and “reliable,” but it belongs to a domestic space that is now accessible to her only through memory.

Yet Chang makes this alternative domestic space available to Weilong only through memory. The repeated “go back, go back, go back” expresses both the intensity of her desire and her inability to fulfill it. The ordinary Shanghai home may have been materially real, but in this moment Weilong can possess it only as a reconstructed image of the past. This creates an important contrast with the wardrobe that first tempted her into the Liang residence. The wardrobe directs her desire forward, toward a possible self fashioned through luxury, clothing, and participation in her aunt’s world; the remembered home directs her desire backward, toward a self associated with familiarity and security. Weilong is caught between these two temporal forms of desire: the seductive future offered by the wardrobe and the stable past preserved in memory. Her illness prevents her from returning before that choice can be acted upon. By the time she recovers, even the season has changed: Hong Kong’s “endless, rainy summer” has given way to autumn. The passage of time quietly suggests that returning home can no longer amount to simply reversing her transformation. Home remains “solid” and “reliable” in her memory, but it is no longer the space she inhabits.

While Weilong remains ill at the Liang residence, her desire to return home develops into an increasingly painful indecision. Looking out from her bed, she encounters a landscape strikingly different from the humid and overgrown environment of the preceding summer.

她躺在床上，看着窗子外面的天。中午的太阳煌煌地照着，天却是金属品的冷冷的白色，像刀子一般割痛了眼睛。秋深了，一只鸟向山巅飞去，黑鸟在白天上，飞到顶高，像在刀口上刮了一刮似的，惨叫了一声，翻过山那边去了。薇龙闭上了眼睛。啊，乔琪！有一天他会需要她的，那时候，她生活在另一个家庭的狭小的范围里太久了；为了适应环境，她新生的肌肉深深的嵌入了生活的栅栏里，拔也拔不出，那时候，他再要她回来，太晚了。她突然决定不走了——无论怎样不走。从这一刹那起，她五分钟换一个主意——走！不走！走！不走！在这两个极端之间，她躺在床上滚来滚去，心里像油煎似的。因为要早早结束这个痛苦，到得她可以出门了，就忙着去订船票。订了船票回家，天快晚了，风沙啦沙啦吹着矮竹子，很有些寒意。竹子外面的海，海外面的天，都已经

灰的灰、黄的黄，只有那丈来高的象牙红树，在暮色苍茫中，一路上高高下下开着碗口大的红花。(Chang 48)

She lay in bed, looking at the sky outside the window. The noon sun shone brilliantly, yet the sky was a metallic, cold white that cut and pained her eyes like a knife blade. Autumn had deepened. A bird flew toward the mountain peak; a black bird against the white sky, reaching the very top, gave a sharp, agonized cry as if scraped against the knife's edge, and tumbled over to the other side of the mountain. Weilong closed her eyes. Ah, George! One day he would need her, but by then she would have lived too long in the narrow confines of another household. To adapt to that environment, her newly grown flesh would be deeply wedged into the railings of life, impossible to pull free. When he wanted her back then, it would be too late. Suddenly, she decided not to leave—no matter what, she wouldn't leave. From that moment on, she changed her mind every five minutes: Leave! Don't leave! Leave! Don't leave! Between these two extremes, she tossed and turned in bed, her heart searing as if fried in oil. Wishing to end this agony quickly, as soon as she was well enough to go out, she rushed to book her boat ticket. When she returned home after booking the ticket, dusk was falling. The wind rustled coldly through the short bamboo. The sea beyond the bamboo and the sky beyond the sea were all fading shades of gray and yellow; only the ten-foot-tall coral trees, amid the gathering darkness, bloomed with bowl-sized red flowers all along the path, rising and falling in the twilight. (Chang 48)

The natural landscape is rendered through images of hardness and violence: the sky becomes “metallic,” then sharpens further into the edge of a knife. This violence is immediately repeated in the black bird that flies toward the mountain peak and seems to scrape against the “knife edge,” letting out an agonized cry before disappearing beyond the mountain. Its movement invites a parallel with Weilong's own desire to leave Hong Kong. The bird succeeds in crossing the mountain, but only through an image of injury; Weilong, meanwhile, remains confined to her bed, watching before finally closing her eyes. The landscape therefore gives visual form to the difficulty of escape: passage beyond this space remains imaginable, but it is represented as painful rather than effortless.

Weilong's subsequent thoughts make clear that what she fears is not simply remaining physically in Hong Kong, but becoming permanently incorporated into the life she has begun to lead there. Adaptation is imagined as a physical process: new flesh grows into the structure that confines it until separation would become impossible. Her frantic alternation between leaving or staying reveals a subject divided between resisting this process and surrendering to it. Significantly, Weilong can already imagine the future point at which leaving will become impossible, yet this awareness does not produce a stable decision.

When Weilong eventually becomes well enough to book a boat ticket, Chang again turns to the landscape. The sea and sky have faded into gray and yellow, while the coral trees alone remain vividly red, blooming with flowers "as large as bowls." Against the muted surroundings, their exaggerated size preserves the visual excess that has repeatedly characterized the landscape around the Liang residence. Here, the flowers are already unnaturally conspicuous, but Weilong has not yet abandoned the possibility of departure; she has even purchased her ticket. The later enlargement of the same flowers will therefore accompany a corresponding change in Weilong, after the possibility she still struggles to preserve here has been surrendered.

Immediately afterward, the coral blossoms expand further within Weilong's perception:

天完全黑了，整个的世界像一张灰色的圣诞卡片，一切都是影影绰绰的，真正存在的只有一朵一朵顶大的象牙红，简单、原始的、碗口大、桶口大。(Chang 49)

The sky had turned completely dark; the entire world resembled a gray Christmas card, where everything was hazy and indistinct. The only things truly existing were those enormous coral tree blossoms—simple, primitive, the size of bowls, the size of tubs.

(Chang 49)

The comparison of the world to a "gray Christmas card" once again converts the surrounding landscape into a flattened, manufactured image, recalling Chang's earlier tendency to render colonial Hong Kong through artificial and commodified visual surfaces. Yet against this indistinct world, the coral blossoms become the "only things truly existing." Their sudden enlargement is particularly striking: only a page earlier, they were "bowl-sized"; now Chang repeats the measurement and immediately intensifies it into "tub-sized." The expanding flowers parallel the expansion of Weilong's own desire. Although she has just attempted to resist the Liang residence by purchasing a ticket home, the desires cultivated within this space have not disappeared with

that decision. Instead, like the blossoms that increasingly dominate the landscape, they have grown more excessive and difficult to contain. The external landscape thus begins to register an internal change: as everything else recedes into a gray, indistinct image, the objects of desire become larger, more vivid, and increasingly difficult for Weilong to look beyond.

By the end of the novella, Weilong has married George and become fully incorporated into the social economy that she had once considered escaping, working as a high-class escort either to support George financially or to attract men for Liang Tai-tai. On Lunar New Year's Eve, she and George enter the crowded streets of Wan Chai, where the spatial logic previously concentrated within the Liang residence reappears on the scale of the colonial city.

她在人堆里挤着，有一种奇异的感觉。头上是紫黝黝的蓝天，天尽头是紫黝黝的冬天的海，但是海湾里有这么一个地方，有的是密密层层的人，密密层层的灯，密密层层的耀眼的货品——蓝磁双耳小花瓶、一卷一卷葱绿堆金丝绒、玻璃纸袋装着“巴岛虾片”、琥珀色的热带产的榴莲糕、拖着大红穗子的佛珠、鹅黄的香袋、乌银小十字架、宝塔顶的凉帽；然而在这灯与人与货之外，还有那凄清的天与海——无边的荒凉，无边的恐怖。她的未来，也是如此——不能想，想起来只有无边的恐怖。她没有天长地久的计画。只有在这眼前的琐碎的小东西里，她的畏缩不安的心，能够得到暂时的休息。(Chang 51)

Squeezing through the crowd, she had a strange sensation. Above was a deep purplish-blue sky, and at the edge of the sky was the deep purplish-blue winter sea; yet in this bay there was such a place, filled with dense layers of people, dense layers of lights, and dense layers of dazzling goods—small blue porcelain two-handled vases, rolls of onion-green velvet interwoven with gold thread, cellophane bags filled with "Baratan shrimp chips," amber-colored tropical durian cakes, Buddhist rosaries dragging big red tassels, goose-yellow sachet bags, dark-silver small crucifixes, and cool conical hats with pagoda tops. Yet beyond these lights, people, and goods, there was still that desolate sky and sea—endless desolation, endless terror. Her future was just like this—she couldn't think of it; thinking of it brought only endless terror. She had no plans for eternity. Only in these immediate, trivial little things could her shrinking, uneasy heart find temporary rest. (Chang 51)

Weilong finds herself surrounded by “dense layers of people, dense layers of lights, and dense layers of dazzling goods,” followed by an extended catalogue of blue porcelain vases, green velvet threaded with gold, shrimp chips, durian cakes, Buddhist rosaries, yellow sachets, silver crucifixes, and pagoda-shaped hats. The heterogeneous assortment of objects further recalls the aesthetic logic of the Liang residence, where culturally disparate objects and styles are similarly assembled into a single spectacular environment. What Weilong first encountered within the private domestic space of her aunt’s house has therefore expanded into public space. The residence and the marketplace are not opposites but different scales of the same colonial spectacle, both organized through visual excess, cultural juxtaposition, and consumption.

Yet Chang abruptly places this concentrated abundance against what exists beyond it: “beyond these lights, people, and goods, there was still that desolate sky and sea—endless desolation, endless terror.” The contrast is spatial as well as psychological. The crowded marketplace occupies only this one particular place while beyond its lights lies an apparently limitless sky and sea. Its abundance is therefore surrounded by emptiness. More importantly, Chang immediately collapses the distinction between this landscape and Weilong’s own consciousness: “Her future was just like this.” Earlier in the novella, Weilong still imagined alternative futures. The wardrobe offered the seductive possibility of the person she might become, while her memories of Shanghai allowed her to imagine returning to the stability of the person she had been. By this final scene, that temporal range has collapsed. She has “no plans for eternity” because imagining beyond the immediate present exposes only “endless terror.”

This is why the final sentence marks a crucial transformation in Weilong’s desire: “Only in these immediate, trivial little things could her shrinking, uneasy heart find temporary rest.” Earlier, desire drew Weilong further into the Liang residence through clothing, luxury, George, and the social life surrounding them; the enlarging coral blossoms—from “bowl-sized” to “tub-sized”—visually registered that growing excess. Here, however, desire has acquired a different function. Weilong no longer pursues commodities because they promise a larger or more glamorous future. She turns toward the “trivial little things” precisely because she can no longer bear to imagine the future at all. Consumption has shifted from aspiration to consolation. The spectacle that once seduced her now provides only temporary relief from the terror produced by the life into which she has been absorbed. In this sense, colonial space has reshaped not only what Weilong desires but

the very function of desire itself: what once drew her toward an imagined future now serves to prevent her from looking beyond the immediate present.

III. Orientalist Gaze

The commodification of Weilong's desire ultimately develops into the commodification of Weilong herself. Through Orientalist modes of representation and visual consumption, Weilong becomes incorporated into the spectacle she once observed, transforming from an inhabitant of colonial space into one of its consumable objects. This process begins with the representational logic already embedded within the Liang residence. This Orientalist mode of representation is most explicit in Chang's description of the Liang residence's interior:

里面是立体化的西式布置，但是也有几件雅俗共赏的中国摆设。炉台上陈列着翡翠鼻烟壶与象牙观音像，沙发前围着斑竹小屏风，可是这一点东方色彩的存在，显然是看在外国朋友们的面上。英国人老远的来看看中国，不能不给点中国给他们瞧瞧。但是这里的中国，是西方人心目中的中国，荒诞、精巧、滑稽。(Chang 2)

Inside, the layout was a three-dimensional Western arrangement, interspersed with a few Chinese curios designed to appeal to both elite and popular tastes. Atop the mantelpiece stood jadeite snuff bottles and an ivory statue of Guanyin, while a small mottled-bamboo screen encloses the sofa. Yet, the presence of this splash of Eastern color was transparently for the benefit of foreign guests. Since the British had traveled from afar to catch a glimpse of China, it was only fitting to put some 'China' on display for them. However, the China presented here was merely the China of the Western imagination—grotesque, exquisite, and ludicrous. (Chang 2)

Here, Chang unusually allows the narrator, herself, to step outside description and explicitly reveal the ideological nature of the space. The phrase “appealing to both elite and popular tastes” is deeply ironic: the Chinese decorative objects are not intended to affirm the cultural identity of the household, but to satisfy Western Orientalist expectations. The Chinese decorative objects are not intended to affirm the cultural identity of the household, but to satisfy Western Orientalist expectations. Here, Orientalism describes the construction of “the East” as exotic and fundamentally different for Western consumption.

Thus, the interior ceases to function as a domestic space and instead becomes a theatrical stage. The Chinese artifacts are reduced to props, carefully displayed for the consumption of foreign visitors. By remarking that this is “the China of the Western imagination,” Chang suggests that Orientalism has been materialized through architecture and interior design, where China no longer exists as a lived cultural reality but as an exotic other constructed through the colonial gaze —“grotesque, exquisite, and ludicrous.” The Liang residence, therefore, does not represent a harmonious fusion of East and West; rather, it materializes the unequal power relations of colonial modernity. Its hybridity is not the product of cultural exchange but of colonial representation.

葛薇龙在玻璃门里瞥见她自己的影子——她自身也是殖民地所特有的东方色彩的一部份，她穿着南英中学的别致的制服，翠蓝竹布衫，长齐膝盖，下面是窄窄裤脚管，还是满清末年的款式；把女学生打扮得像赛金花模样，那也是香港当局取悦于欧美游客的种种设施之一。然而薇龙和其他的女孩子一样的爱时髦，在竹布衫外面加上一件绒线背心，短背心底下，露出一大截衫子，越发觉得非驴非马。(Chang 2)

Weilong caught sight of her own reflection in the glass door—she herself was part of the Oriental color unique to the colony. She was dressed in the South English Academy's idiosyncratic uniform: a kingfisher-blue tunic falling to her knees over narrow-legged trousers, a throwback to the twilight of the Qing Dynasty. Dressing schoolgirls like Courtesan Sai Jinhua was just one of the Hong Kong authorities' many measures to please Western tourists. Even so, Weilong shared the typical girl's craving for style. She had layered a cropped knit vest over her tunic, letting a long swath of cloth trail underneath—a mismatched ensemble that looked decidedly awkward. (Chang 2)

Whereas the previous analysis framed the Liang residence as a stage for Orientalism, here the lens zooms inward—Weilong's body itself becomes an extension of the colonial space, a spectacle in motion. Just as the Liang residence functions as a heterogeneous colonial space assembled through bricolage, Weilong's dressed body is similarly the product of a crude patchwork of multiple eras and cultural styles.

The uniform participates in a colonial visual regime that transforms the female body into an image of an idealized and exoticized “Chineseness”. It is a manifestation of Orientalism penetrating

from architectural space directly onto female flesh. The significance becomes clearer when considered alongside the colonial gaze that surrounds female bodies in colonial Hong Kong. The colonial visual system actively produces the conditions through which they become legible as exotic objects of desire. Therefore, Weilong's uniform functions not only as clothing but also as a form of colonial representation, embedding the female body within a system of Orientalist meanings. Through this process, Orientalism moves beyond individual attitudes and becomes institutionalized through everyday structures such as education, urban design, and social expectations.

Meanwhile, Weilong's spontaneous addition of a Western-style knit vest symbolizes a colonized subject caught in the tug-of-war between modern fashion desires and traditional remnants. Unlike the school uniform, which reflects an externally imposed image of "Chineseness", the vest represents Weilong's own attraction toward modern urban fashion. Yet this desire for modernity does not provide her with complete liberation. The modernity available to Weilong is already shaped by colonial conditions; she can only access it through the very system that has categorized and objectified her. The combination of the traditional uniform and Western vest creates a visually "in-between" appearance, mirroring the broader condition of colonial modernity itself: a state in which different cultural and temporal elements are not harmoniously integrated, instead remain in tension with one another.

The glass doors and windows of the Liang residence further reinforce this transformation. As both barriers and reflective surfaces, they allow observation to operate in both directions: outsiders gaze upon the interior landscape, while those inside encounter their own reflections. At the moment Weilong sees herself reflected within this carefully constructed colonial space, she begins to recognize herself not merely as an individual, but as part of the spectacle produced by the house. The garden, glazed tiles, and ivory Guanyin statue previously functioned as static images of an imagined East; Weilong becomes their living counterpart—a mobile and embodied version of the same colonial aesthetic.

Once this Orientalist stage is constructed, it requires a central figure to occupy the gaze. When Weilong appears at the garden party wearing a blue silk cheongsam, she shifts from an inhabitant of Liang's house into an object displayed within its visual landscape.

薇龙那天穿着一件磁青薄绸旗袍，给他那双绿眼睛一看，她觉得她的手臂像热腾腾的牛奶似的，从青色的壶里倒了出来，管也管不住，整个的自己全泼出来了。(Chang 26)

Weilong was wearing that day a mauve-blue thin-silk cheongsam. When his green eyes fell upon her, she felt her arms were like hot steaming milk being poured from a blue pitcher—she could no more hold them back than she could hold back herself; her whole being came spilling out, beyond all control. (Chang 26)

George's gaze instantly transforms Weilong's body from subject into object. The metaphor of milk being poured from a vessel is significant because it separates the body into container and content. The dark blue qipao becomes the "blue vessel," a surface that contains and presents the body, while her arm becomes the "steaming milk," a substance exposed to another's consumption. Her body is no longer represented as a source of agency, but as something displayed, observed, and consumed.

The phrase "she could not control it, her entire self spilled out" further emphasizes the loss of bodily autonomy. Like liquid escaping from a container, Weilong's identity loses its boundaries under the pressure of the gaze. This is not a conscious performance of self-display; rather, her body becomes an object of display through another person's perception. George's green eyes therefore represent more than a personal romantic gaze.

This moment echoes Weilong's earlier reflection before the glass door, where she recognizes herself as "a part of the Oriental color unique to the colony." In front of the glass door, objectification occurs through self-recognition; before George's green eyes, it occurs through the direct gaze of the other.

The garden of the Liang residence becomes the setting for this social performance, bringing together the cultivated landscape, the guests who move through it, and the relationships Liang Tai-tai attempts to orchestrate within it. It is during this gathering that Weilong meets George Qiao for the first time. As the party continues into the evening, Chang briefly turns away from the interactions among the guests and describes the changing sky:

那时天色已经暗了，月亮才上来，黄黄的，像玉色缎子上，刺绣时弹落了一点香灰，烧糊了一小片。(Chang 27)

The dusk had deepened by then, and the moon was only just beginning to ascend—a hazy, jaundiced yellow, like a flake of incense ash fallen upon jade-green satin during embroidery, scorching a tiny patch. (Chang 27)

The immediate function of this sentence is straightforward: time has passed, the garden party has continued into the evening, and the moon is beginning to rise. Yet Chang could have communicated this transition simply by stating that the sky had darkened. Instead, she transforms the entire night sky into a piece of “jade-green satin” being embroidered, upon which a flake of incense ash accidentally falls and leaves a scorched mark.

Chang now extends this logic of construction upward into the sky itself. The evening landscape becomes a manufactured luxury surface (a piece of satin) and, more specifically, a surface in the process of being decorated through embroidery.

The phrase “during embroidery,” is especially important. The beauty of the satin is actively being produced. Embroidery implies deliberate arrangement, selection, and ornamentation, processes that parallel Liang Tai-tai’s construction of the garden party itself. Just as she assembles people within her residence and attempts to direct their encounters, the metaphor imagines an invisible hand arranging decorative patterns upon the satin surface of the sky.

This context makes the falling incense ash more disturbing. The burn does not occur after the embroidery has been completed, as though violence simply arrives later to destroy a previously perfect object. Instead, it occurs “during embroidery.” The construction of beauty and the production of damage take place within the same imaginative process. While the satin is being ornamented, the ash falls; while the spectacle is being constructed, its surface is already being scarred. Chang thus places violence inside the aesthetic logic of the scene.

In the garden-party passage, the same visual structure expands from the garden to the entire nightscape: a tiny piece of burnt residue falls onto another beautiful surface and leaves a permanent mark. The scale changes dramatically, from flower petals to the sky, but the structure remains remarkably similar. In both cases, a carefully aestheticized surface contains a small sign of destruction.

The textile imagery becomes more significant when read alongside the ending of the novella. Here, the damage remains metaphorical: the sky is imagined as satin scorched by incense ash.

Weilong's relationship with George reaches a new degree of intimacy when they spend the night together, only for the moment to be immediately unsettled by his departure to seek out Ni'er, one of Liang Tai-tai's maids. After discovering the two together, Weilong returns alone to her balcony. It is at this moment of disillusionment that Chang renders Weilong almost entirely as part of the surrounding visual composition.

虽然月亮已经落下去了，她的人已经在月光里浸了个透，淹得遍体通明。她静静的靠在百叶门上，那阳台如果是个乌漆小茶托，她就是茶托上镶嵌的罗钿的花。(Chang 40)

Although the moon had already set, her whole body was already thoroughly soaked in the moonlight, drenched to total transparency. She leaned quietly against the louvered door; if that balcony were a black-lacquered small saucer, she was the mother-of-pearl flower inlaid upon it. (Chang 40)

The image recalls Chang's earlier description of the Liang residence as "a gold-lacquered tray raised out of nowhere among the chaotic mountains." The repetition of the lacquered tray transforms the scale of the earlier image. The first tray contains the residence and its carefully arranged landscape; the later "black-lacquered small saucer" is reduced to the size of Weilong's balcony and now displays Weilong herself. What was initially a spatial spectacle has become a human one: the object placed on display is no longer the colonial landscape but Weilong.

The word "inlaid," makes this transformation especially striking. Mother-of-pearl inlay is a decorative technique in which pieces of shell are embedded into the surface of lacquerware to form ornamental patterns. Weilong therefore is the flower inlaid into it. The distinction removes the separation between the person and the space she inhabits. An inlaid flower cannot move independently from the lacquered surface and exists primarily as part of its decoration. Weilong, similarly, has moved from being an outsider who enters and observes the Liang residence to becoming one of the beautiful objects through which its spectacle is produced. The comparison also reduces her to a visual surface: like mother-of-pearl, she is luminous, decorative, and available to be looked at.

The description of moonlight reinforces this loss of distinction between Weilong and her surroundings. Chang does not say that moonlight merely falls upon or illuminates her. Weilong has been "soaked" and "drenched" in it until she becomes luminous throughout her entire body. Light behaves almost like a liquid that penetrates and saturates her rather than remaining on her

surface. This continues the novella's recurring erosion of boundaries between exterior space and private self. Earlier, moisture from the landscape crosses Weilong's balcony and condenses upon the furniture inside her room; here, the surrounding light similarly penetrates Weilong herself. Yet the result is now aesthetic rather than merely atmospheric. Once saturated by moonlight, Weilong shines like the mother-of-pearl ornament to which Chang immediately compares her. The colonial space no longer merely surrounds or influences Weilong: it has incorporated her into its own decorative composition, transforming the person who once entered the spectacle into one of the objects through which that spectacle is seen.

这里脏虽脏，的确有几分狂欢的劲儿。满街乱糟糟地花炮乱飞，她和乔琪一面走一面缩着身子躲避那红红绿绿的小扫帚星。乔琪突然带着笑喊道：“喂！你身上着了火了！”薇龙道：“又来骗人！”说着，扭过头去验看她的后襟。乔琪道：“我几时骗过你来！快蹲下身来，让我把它踩灭了。”薇龙果然屈膝蹲在地上，乔琪也顾不得鞋底有灰，两三脚把她的旗袍下摆的火踏灭了。那件品蓝小银寿字织锦缎的棉袍上已经烧了一个洞。(Chang 51)

Dirty as it was, there was indeed a bit of a carnival spirit here. Fireworks flew wildly all over the street, and she and George hunkered down as they walked to dodge those little red and green shooting stars. George suddenly laughed and shouted, "Hey! You're on fire!" Weilong said, "Tricking me again!" As she spoke, she turned her head to check the back of her skirt. George said, "When have I ever tricked you! Crouch down quick and let me stomp it out." Weilong did crouch down on the ground, and George, not caring about the dust on his soles, put out the fire on her qipao's hem with two or three steps. A hole had already been burned into that royal blue, small silver longevity-character brocade padded robe. (Chang 51)

The specificity with which Chang describes the damaged garment is significant. This is an elaborate blue brocade robe patterned with silver shou, or “longevity,” characters. The luxurious and carefully decorated textile makes the blackened hole especially conspicuous. Once again, Chang places a small but irreversible mark of destruction directly upon an object associated with beauty and ornamentation.

This moment materializes the imagery of burning that Chang has repeatedly associated with beautiful surfaces. Earlier, Liang Tai-tai's cigarette scorches the azaleas; later, the moon is compared to incense ash scorching a small patch of "jade-green satin" during embroidery. In this sense, the damaged azalea foreshadows Weilong's own fate: like the flower in Liang Tai-tai's garden, she has herself become an ornament within the spectacle. In the earlier moon quote, however, both the textile and its damage remain metaphorical: the night sky only resembles satin, and the moon only resembles a scorch. Here, the same combination of textile and fire becomes physical. The imagined satin is replaced by Weilong's actual brocade qipao, and the imagined incense ash by an actual firework that burns a hole into it. The repetition creates a movement from imagined scorch to material damage, and from landscape to Weilong's clothed body. This is particularly significant because clothing has been central to Weilong's transformation since the wardrobe first draws her toward the luxurious world of the Liang residence. The material through which Weilong has gradually been fashioned into part of this spectacle now becomes the material upon which its violence is inscribed. The earlier scorch upon the satin sky thus anticipates the movement of violence from the aestheticized colonial environment onto the subject who has become part of that environment.

The "carnival spirit" surrounding the accident makes this violence particularly ironic. The fireworks appear as colorful "shooting stars," turning the street into another dazzling spectacle, yet the same objects that produce its beauty also physically damage Weilong. Pleasure and destruction therefore arise from the same source, much as the incense ash scorches the satin precisely "during embroidery" in the earlier passage. George's reaction further diminishes the apparent seriousness of the danger: he laughs when he tells Weilong that she is on fire, and Weilong herself initially assumes that he is "tricking" her. Only after the fire has already caught does George intervene and stamp it out. He can extinguish the flame, but he cannot undo the hole it has left behind. The sequence closely parallels Weilong's larger trajectory in the novella: harm can remain disguised within pleasure and play until its effects have already become irreversible. The carnival therefore condenses the contradiction of the colonial world Chang has constructed throughout the novella. Its surfaces are colorful, luxurious, and pleasurable, but the spectacle that produces this beauty can simultaneously injure those contained within it. Through clothing, she becomes a living embodiment of colonial modernity's contradictions: she is shaped by external

colonial representations while simultaneously participating in and desiring the modern lifestyle those representations make possible.

In the closing scene, after being mistaken for a prostitute by drunken sailors, Weilong remarks,

本来嘛，我跟她们有什么分别？……怎么没有分别呢？她们是不得已的，我是自愿的！

(Chang 53)

After all, what difference is there between them and me? ... How can there be no difference? They have no choice; I did this to myself! (Chang 53)

In the end, she became fully absorbed into the world she had once warned herself never to sink into. She recognizes her similarity to women who have been reduced to commodities, yet she distinguishes herself through the belief that her participation was voluntary.

This moment is more complex than a simple narrative of forced corruption. The most effective form of colonial power does not operate through direct coercion, but through making the subject willingly desire the identity that the system offers. By the end of the novella, the colonial environment has reshaped Weilong's subjectivity by transforming the desires through which she exercises her agency.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that domestic space in *The First Incense Burner* is an active mechanism through which colonial modernity reshapes the main character Weilong's subjectivity. Through the Liang residence, colonial modernity moves from architecture and representation into Weilong's perception, desire, and ultimately her understanding of her own agency.

While existing scholarship has examined Chang's engagement with modernity, consumption, and domestic space, less attention has been paid to what the domestic environment itself does to the individual who inhabits it. The Liang residence does not simply represent the contradictions of colonial Hong Kong; its architecture, commodities, cultivated landscapes, and social performances create the material conditions through which Weilong experiences those contradictions. Her final insistence that her participation is "voluntary" therefore complicates any simple opposition between agency and coercion. Weilong recognizes the dangers of Liang Tai-tai's world, yet the recognition does not enable escape. Instead, the environment gradually reshapes

the desires through which she exercises her agency. Colonial modernity operates most effectively not by eliminating choice, but by transforming what the subject comes to desire and choose.

The First Incense Burner therefore challenges understandings of modernist domestic space as primarily a site of privacy, stability, or withdrawal from modern life. Chang instead presents the home as a space through which modernity enters and reorganizes private life itself. This opens further possibilities for studying Chang within broader discussions of modernism and domestic space, including comparative work with writers such as Virginia Woolf across metropolitan and colonial contexts. Ultimately, Chang shifts the question of modern space from where the modern subject lives to how the spaces she inhabits shape who she becomes.

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