Ziyi Lu

Jonathan Rowan

XCOMLIT R1A - LEC 002

8 Oct 2017

Society Cut Up in "Sealed Off" by Aileen Chang

Aileen Chang is sometimes criticised for being too “effete”, focusing on romance and familial issues in her works, but that is not a just accusation. In fact, her “Sealed Off” is one of the archetypes of her works weaving comprehensive social commentary into a romantic narrative. True to its title, it quietly sets up a society cut up by cutting its own narrative structure in half, utilising two subjective points of view for the intellectual main characters, depicting their nature, and an objective point of view for everyone else.

The title literally refers to the sealing off of Shanghai in an air raid, but the air raid is never directly mentioned in the original version of the text, as well as the enemies’ identity, and the only notion of war is the passing soldiers whom the main characters glimpse before they start to look at each other and blush (504). Thus, the details of the history of the War are overlooked, and the story becomes almost nothing more than a snapshot of civilians in Shanghai. The setting is more social than it is historical; more about civilians than about those in charge.

The air-raid alarm bell “[added] up to a dotted line, cutting across space and time” (499). It cuts through space indeed - “All the shops... rattled down their metal gates. Matrons tugged madly at the railings… But the gates stayed tightly shut” (499), and “in a single sweep” (499) descends a division between the lucky and the not, as shelter is only granted to the former. “Those inside the metal gates and those outside the metal gates stood glaring at each other, fearing each other.” (499) That divide goes beyond its meaning at the surface, as

two types of characters appear in the story: the fortunate “modern intellectuals” and the less fortunate masses, and the two types ignore or misunderstand each other at times.

Before the main characters Zongzhen and Cuiyuan are introduced, Chang introduces an objective montage of the life of various people. Apart from the unlucky ones left shelterless in the streets, three types of the people in the tram are depicted: singing or silent beggars, office workers with fans in hand, and a middle aged couple in suits. Three of the four types display minimal passion toward others: the couple show no love for each other as they “very cautiously [and] very gingerly” (499) protect the man’s expensive trousers from their own fish; traditional intellectuals (i.e. office workers, probably wearing Cheongsams), as they shake their Chinese fans (probably with calligraphy on it), bitterly gossip about their colleague with “a grunt followed by a cold smile” (499); shop owners unnecessarily shut matrons, children, and elders out of shelter in crisis to keep themselves safe or at least comfortably alone. They exemplify the stereotypical ordinary Shanghainese, selfish and overly nervous about trivial benefits, even being hostile at times.

The objective point of view re-emerges after paragraphs of Zongzhen’s thoughts and commentaries. The wife stays fastidious about the pants, as the husband as well as the traditional intellectuals comment on the new character -- the medical student, probably one of few able to afford such a curriculum in that age. They clearly cannot comprehend the student’s drawings, the man regarding it as “this cubism, this impressionism” which he “cannot get used to” while the traditional intellectuals understand it as a drawing accompanied by a poem in “Eastern ways” (502). Neither failed to grasp it at all with their sadly limited knowledge. Being a modern student or even buying books was a luxury in 1940s China, after all, especially amid a failing war. Though the tram seats were “rather plain”, they still were “better, for most of them, than what they had at home”! (499) In that

hard blank life, the masses hardly had a way to really learn about college life or Western art to understand the medical student.

The tram driver seems to be the only silver lining in the objective narrative, who resonates with the Shandong beggar in singing the "old, old song" "Sad, sad, sad! No money do I have!" (499) even shortly before the story ends (506). Nevertheless, the illusion breaks as he violently "bellowed" at an "thoroughly dazed" "old beggar" "You Swine!" with no sympathy at all. (506) Also, no donation went to any of the beggars, one of whom stopped chanting "scared silent by the eerie quiet", brought not only by the tension of war but also the fact that no one bothers to respond with any kindness. Selfishness prevails in the masses.

The masses are despised by Zongzhen in his own third-person subjective point of view, but not for their excessive self-interest. He is a typical "modern intellectual" of the Chinese Republic, a precious college graduate and an accountant "neatly dressed in suit and tie, with tortoiseshell eyeglasses and a leather briefcase" (500), well-off enough to not worry about staining his suit with food, unlike the man with the fish even though the liquefied steam from the dumplings may drip through the paper wrapping on Zongzhen's suit as he reads it. He is the genteel type, feeling 'ludicrous' for pairing dumplings, the standard Shanghainese snack, with his suit, tie, etc., choosing to read reversed words on his dumplings laboriously rather than eating them in public like an ordinary fellow even when hungry, and refusing to laugh while dubbing himself "the straightforward kind" (500). He can be quite pretentious.

No wonder he disgusts the less fortunate ones at first glance. The story discusses thoughts and thoughtlessness after starting his subjective point of view, so the discussion is probably in his mind as indirect quotation. The discussion suggests others' brains never "start to work" (500), and even the possibly Taoist old man with walnuts has thoughts that are "empty-tasting". Cuiyuan clearly thinks more deeply than Zongzhen does, but all he can see

from her outside is that she looks "bland, slack, [and] lacking definition" (500). Though there may be some truth in his accusations, his comments are, after all, arrogant and not very thoughtful. Moreover, long before he meets the beautiful Cuiyuan, he stops noting others, and has never mentioned the less fortunate ones any more in his third-person subjective narrative. Indeed, his thoughts are arguably "smooth and sweet, but in the end, empty-tasting" (500) at times like the old man's in his view. He feels he and Cuiyuan "[are] *seeing* each other for the first time" way later, yet all he sees is "the spare, simple peony of a watercolour sketch" and "strands of her hair"(504), depictions with a special literary beauty and yet a specific superficiality. Zongzhen probably did the same when he regrettably married his troublesome wife. Cuiyuan knows that "once a man really understands a woman he'll stop loving her" (505), and he probably does not understand her (before the end) as he was obviously in love.

Cuiyuan does think more than he does, as shown in the aforementioned sentence on love and in other words in her subjective point of view. Another college graduate, she exemplifies another "modern intellectual" and notices better the abuses of her world of "modern intellectuals", including her families' kitschy rejection of (totally high-brow) Chinese folk opera and almost everyone's disrespect to her as a female scholar (501), just as Zongzhen is aware of Peizhi's selfishness and faked decency to some degree.

However, she shares his arrogance to some degree. How can Cuiyuan be sure that her family does not understand Wagner, the composer of a famously sensuous style that should appeal to any audience? Furthermore, her arrogance resides the most in her division of people into the "good people" and "real people", the latter of which is the favourable opposite (honest to his humanity) of the pretentious former that acts only to gain benefit within social norms, be it Peizhi's profitable marriage or the Wus' respectable image. That does show her understanding of drawbacks of her kind, but both of the types of people she knows probably

also belong to the “modern intellectuals”, or at least the elites, those who can luxuriously “[take] baths everyday” like her family members amid a losing total war. (501) She can hardly see the masses except the cute child next to her, yet the child is one with the privilege of being cared by an employed nanny. (501) After the ordinary people grow up to be adults, “one by one they [die] away” because they will never meet or be seen by her, or appear in her subjective narrative. (506) “They only [live] for that one moment”(506), or in her students’ papers railing against “painted prostitutes… cruising the Cosmo” (501). Cosmo was the fanciest nightclub of China, so even that vision is limited to the wealthy. When the tram driver bellows “You swine”(506) as “fearlessly and forthrightly” as her A-student (501), Cuiyuan probably would not call him a “real person”, but simply a low-brow phantom. Indeed, “life was like the Bible”, translated from base reality to newspapers to the intellectuals, and “gaps were unavoidable” (501).

The two subjective narratives have shown what and how the two lucky “modern intellectual” protagonists see and do not see, with commentary underneath on the downsides. Meanwhile, the objective point of view adds a sharp depiction of the grotesque masses to the setting, and the split between the objective and subjective narratives, as well as certain characters' comments, suggest how the “modern intellectuals” and the others misinterpret or overlook each other. Yet, the whole narrative system is not flawlessly omniscient, and may reveal limitations of Chang herself. To the main characters and probably her, after all, the deadly seal-off looks like an intermission of their blessed life, as “the whole of Shanghai... had dreamed an unreasonable dream” (506). The crying matrons in the streets have never appeared in any narrative, objective or subjective, ever again.

# Works Cited

Zhang, Aileen. “Sealed Off”. 1943. Print. 8 Oct 2017.