Chang, Eileen or Zhang, Ailing (1920-2005)



Eileen Chang was one of the most unique and distinguished voices in early twentieth century China. Focusing mostly on intricate family and romantic relations in the colonial and urban settings, her early works bridge the divide between tradition and modernity by infusing the Chinese vernacular fiction tradition with modern sensibilities. Her bilingual writings in English and Chinese present a fascinating case study for cross-cultural translation in the context of immigration and Chinese diaspora.

Eileen Chang grew up in a distinguished family of prominent politicians and military leaders during the last dynasty of imperial China. Many myths and memories about her famous ancestors would find their way into Chang’s essays, short stories, and novels. But the part of the family history that most affected Chang was the discord between her parents due to the divergent paths they had chosen between tradition and modernity. Her mother, a prototypical New Woman, left China when Eileen was two years old, and sojourned in Europe for a number of years. Her father was old-fashioned scholar and opium addict. Influenced by both parents, Chang as a writer had a bicultural and bilingual persona from the very beginning. Some of her earliest published work, an English essay (“What a Life! What a Girl’s Life,” 1938) and two Chinese short stories (“The Unfortunate Her,” 1932, and “Dream of Genius,” 1940), revolve around her own unhappy childhood, the abuse from her father and stepmother, and her eventual escape from her father’s house. Closely related to her personal experience, the theme of dysfunction family would preoccupy Chang in her later and better-known works.

In 1939, Chang left Shanghai to study at the University of Hong Kong with the hope of proceeding onto Oxford for further study. But the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong interrupted her plans and forced her to return to Shanghai in 1941. In the next two years following her return, she wrote a number of essays in English for the newspaper *Shanghai Times* and the magazine *The XXth Century*. Even though these essays were intended to introduce Anglophone readers to Chinese culture and customs, Chang conveyed her unique insights about Chinese culture and cross-cultural communication along the way. Chang later translated and rewrote a number of her English essays in Chinese and published them in the essay collection *Liu Yan* (*Written on Water*, 1945).

Chang’s stories, serialized in literary magazines *Zi Luo Lan* (Lilacs) and *Wan Xiang* (Panorama) between 1943 and 1944, made her a rising literary star in the Chinese-language literary circle in Shanghai. The ten works later published in her first and only collection of short stories, *Chuan Qi* (Romances, 1944), along with the five more in the expanded second edition (1947), constitute the bulk of her work that has received the most critical attention.

All the stories depict complex romantic entanglements and intricate familial relationships, set against the modern history of China’s transition from tradition to modernity and the Asia-Pacific War. A representative piece “The Golden Cangue,” for instance, tells of the oppression and power struggles in an aristocratic family, seen through the gradual transformation of the protagonist Cao Qiqiao, who turned from an innocent bride into an embittered widow and sadistic mother. Under the collective label “Chuan Qi” or romance, Chang’s stories harken back to the vernacular classic *Hong Lou Meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber).

Even though a romantic relation is at the center of these tales, they cannot be considered as simply love stories or sentimental fiction. Chang authored these works as realist depictions of “ordinary people who can serve more accurately than heroes as a measure of the times.” (Chang, “Writing of One’s Own”). Critics received Chang’s early works with ambivalence. While her attentiveness to formal techniques and language won much praise, she was criticized for not overtly engaging with major political themes and social issues.

Chang had a short-lived marriage with Hu Lancheng, a scholar and writer who collaborated with the Wang Jingwei puppet government during the war. This affiliation, compounded by her ostensibly “apolitical” literary stance, made Chang unwelcome in Communist China after 1949. She left China for Hong Kong in 1952 and then immigrated to the U.S., where she remained until her death in 2005.

During her Hong Kong period, Chang worked as a freelance writer and translator for the United States Information Agency (USIA) and wrote two novels in both Chinese and English: *The Rice-Sprout Song* (1954) and *Love in Redland* (1954, later published under *Naked Earth* in English). Both novels are social exposé of the material hardship and political oppression of peasants under Communist rule and, as such, were explicitly propagandistic. At the same time, they demonstrate Chang’s sustained interest in realism and her implicit critique of socialist realism as the officially sanctioned aesthetic.

After emigrating to the U.S., Chang took up short-term research positions in several American universities. Her research resulted in the English translation of *The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai* and a study of *Dream of the Red Chamber*, two representative vernacular fictions of the romance genre. She was married to the American writer Ferdinand Reyher in 1956 until his death in 1967.

Chang’s late novels, completed in a state of recurring mental illness, are quasi-autobiographical and revolve around her early life in Shanghai and Hong Kong with a focus on her relationship with her mother. The English and Chinese versions of these novels had overlapping sections and were published posthumously in 2009 and 2010.

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