Eileen Chang and the Chinese Diaspora

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Abstract

Eileen Chang, whom the great Chinese literary historian C. T. Hsia termed, in 1961, “the best and most important writer in Chinese today," is rarely considered a diasporic writer outside her Chinese-language works set in Hong Kong despite the fact that she spent more of her life in the United States than in anyplace considered primarily Chinese. And yet a consideration of her life and work outside China, Hong Kong or Taiwan presents intriguing challenges to predominant concepts of the Chinese diaspora and of "Chineseness" or "Chinesesnesses." Although she is nearly always referred to in studies of her work as "Chinese" rather than "Chinese-American" or "Asian-American," and despite her apparent sense of herself as unhyphenated Chinese, she wrote five novels originally in English, two while living in Hong Kong during the early 1950s and three more after emigrating to the United States in 1955. One might expect that, like other writers of the Chinese diaspora writing in the language(s) of their adopted countries, she dealt in her English-language works at least in part with the experiences of diasporic Chinese living outside their homeland. In fact, she did not. All five novels focus on Chinese living in China. This curious fact suggests questions of how Chang conceived of Chineseness and the extent to which she was attempting to write Chinese in English. We approach these questions in terms of changing concepts of Chineseness --and especially recent challenges to the essentialist, dialectical character of "traditional" uses of the term as an ethnic, racial, cultural qualifier--and current considerations of *Chineseness* as an "open and indeterminate signifier."

Key Words: Eileen Chang, Chinese diaspora, Chineseness.

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Eileen Chang, whom the great Chinese literary scholar C. T. Hsia declared, in 1961, “the best and most important writer in Chinese today” (389), is rarely considered in terms of Chinese diaspora studies outside her works set in Hong Kong, and originally written in Chinese, despite the fact that she spent more of her life in the United States (40 years) than in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan or any other place considered Chinese[1]. The prevailing attitude toward Chang's nationality and culture in scholarly studies of her life and work is that she is simply "Chinese" rather than "Chinese-American" or "Asian-American." Such an apparent anomaly is not surprising, however, given that, although she wrote short stories in Chinese about Mainland Chinese living in Hong Kong, she never wrote, in Chinese or English as far as we now know, about life in America or anywhere else outside China or Hong Kong.

Despite this general conception of Chang as unhyphenated Chinese, she wrote at least five English-language novels, two while living in Hong Kong during the 1950s, *The Rice-Sprout Song* (1955) and *Naked Earth* (1957)[2], two more after her removal to America in 1955, *The Fall of the Pagoda* (2010) and *The Book of* Change (2010),[3] and the fifth in the United States in the 1960s, *The Rouge of the North* (1967). Again, one might expect that, like other writers of the Chinese diaspora writing in the language(s) of their adopted countries, she had composed at least portions of her English-language works about life outside China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan, had made at least some literary attempt to deal with the experience of diasporic Chinese peoples living outside their putative homelands. In fact, she did not. All five focus exclusively on the lives of Chinese living in China. This curious fact suggests questions of how Chang conceived of Chineseness in these works as well as in herself, whether she thought of herself and her work as part of the Chinese diaspora, and to what extent she was trying to render Chineseness in a language so remote from Chinese as English.

The definition of "diaspora" upon which we will rely is the famous formulation developed by Robin Cohen in *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*: members of a human community living in a "new" country who "acknowledge that the 'old country'--a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom, or folklore [remains] their true country because it demands, and receives, their final loyalty, and is the geographical locale of their innermost emotions (ix). This definition works for Eileen Chang both as person and as writer since her obsession with the "old country" apparently never wavered despite her adoption of English as a literary medium in her attempts to make a living as a writer in both Hong Kong and the United States. In using English rather than Chinese she may have simply bowed to necessity, but it is also possible that she was using English, the

quintessentially "modern" language of the time, as a way to keep alive at least her own concepts of Chineseness even as it was being increasingly challenged in China itself. On the other hand, we can well believe that such a seemingly impossible task would also deepen the overwhelming sense of "desolation" for which her works have become famous throughout the Chinese diaspora and that has formed one of the most substantial bricks in the foundation of the "Eileen Chang myth."

Yet more important to our interrogation of Chang's conceptions and use of Chineseness are ideas developed by Ien Ang and Rey Chow on meanings of this term and how they are changing in response to continuing developments in the Chinese diaspora and to globalization in general. Ang declares, in "Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm," that the traditional, assumed, essentialist concept of Chineseness is no longer valid because the Chinese diaspora, rather than China itself, has had and continues to have, a powerful effect on global concepts and attitudes toward Chineseness:

> Chineseness is not a category with a fixed content--be it racial, cultural, or geographical--but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora. Being Chinese outside China cannot possibly mean the same thing as inside. . . .[4]

Thus the traditional binary, either you're Chinese or your not, can no longer be considered a valid reflection of reality. Chineseness, like any other term used to characterize a people in this contemporary world of constant movement and change, is always *becoming*, to adopt a Deleuzian concept of liminal reality, never simply *is*. Ang's thinking, largely predicated on a child's question, "Can I *be* Chinese if I don't *speak* Chinese?" raises similar questions concerning "Chineseness" and Eileen Chang: "Can Chinese literature be written in English? Can Chineseness be expressed in English? To what extent can a novel written in English express Chineseness? To what extent should Saussure's contention that "different languages create different worlds, discontinuous and incommensurable" be brought to bear on these questions?

In his marvelous introduction to *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field*, Rey Chow discusses "Chineseness as the distinguishing trait in what otherwise purport to be mobile, international practices" (2). His context is that of globalization in which, as Daphne Grace points out, "The sense of our national belonging is destabilised, and any sense of being 'at home' is undermined" (11). Anyone who defines one's self as Chinese, however, Rey argues, resists such

destabilization, insisting on attaching a Chinese identity label (one's own) to everything one does no matter how characteristic it may be of other nationalities or ethnic groupings. Rey goes on to assert that what it means to be Chinese has become a function of situating the self within the orbit of what it means to be Western. Naoki Sakai, quoted by Rey, refers to "The West" as "not merely a geographic particular: it is an ambiguous and ubiquitous presence of a certain global domination whose subject can hardly be identifiable. . . ." It is the phenomenon that "peoples in the so-called non-West have to refer to and rely on . . . so as to construct their own cultural and historical identity" (61). As a self-exiled Chinese living in America, then, Eileen Chang likely relied substantially, in defining herself as "Chinese," on her sense of not being American or Western despite having become an American citizen almost as soon as possible after establishing residency there.

Chow's question, ". . . what is Chinese about the Chinese language and Chinese literature?" (6) is also germane to our consideration of Eileen Chang and her work:

> If *Language* and *literature* in the narrow sense have been fundamentally dislocated in poststructuralist theory by way of the 'differences' inherent to signification, *Chinese* language and literature must now be seen as a further dislocation of this fundamental dislocation, requiring us to reassess 'ethnicity' (as a site of difference) not only in terms of struggle against the West but also, increasingly, in terms of the permanently evolving mutations internal to the invocation of ethnicity itself, in particular as such mutations bear upon the practices of writing.[5]

Chow's declaration that "it is antiquity that remains privileged as the site of the essence of Chineseness, which appears to be more bona fide when it is found among the dead, when it is apprehended to be part of an irretrievable past" (12) fits much of Chang's work very well, especially her recurring return to classic texts as models.

The first of Chang's English-language novels, *The Rice-Sprout Song* was commissioned by the United States Information Service during Chang's 1952-55 residence in Hong Kong. Its overt purpose is clearly propagandistic as it seeks to expose the horrors of the Communist Land Reform being imposed on Chinese peasants after the 1949 triumph of the Communist Party over the Nationalists in the Chinese Civil War. According to David Der-wei Wang, this work "was well-received by critics in the United Sates. Major media such as the *New York Times*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, and the *Saturday Review* all reviewed the novel favorably" (Foreword to *The Rice-Sprout Song* xvi), but it presented Chang with the problem of writing about

the Chinese people she knew the least about--the peasantry. Chang's second novel written initially in English, N*aked Earth*, fared considerably less well with critics than *The Rice-Sprout Song*, at least in part, likely, because it was written "on demand" according to a prescribed outline and the assumption "that the book would be published in "free China" (namely, Taiwan and Hong Kong) so that people [could] learn how horrible things were inside China".[6] Although Chang had been given at least some artistic leeway in the construction of the novel's events and characters, it was not enough to make the book a success. Once again the consummate Chinese writer of urban sophistication was being asked to deal with an aspect of Chineseness, that of rural peoples, that she knew very little about. Even today, after Chang's ascension to the pantheon of greatest Chinese writers, it remains out-of-print.

Chang's other 1950s English-language novels, both of which were written, by Wang's account, after Chang had taken up residence in the United States, and both of which remained unpublished at her 1995 death, are *The Fall of the Pagoda* and *The Book of Change.* "In many ways," Wang explains,

> they provide a missing link in Chang's (re)writing of her own life story, from English to Chinese and vice versa, from lecture to fiction and photo album, and from autobiographical 'whispers' to dramatized exposé. The titles of these two novels, one referring to the Leifeng Pagoda of the White Snake legend, and the other the esoteric classic *The Book of Change*, suggest Chang's effort to integrate her writings into a broader cycle of Chinese discourses and temporalities.[7]

These intriguing works fall neatly into Chang's wonted strategy of turning to canonical Chinese texts in order to achieve a transtextual narrative richness much like that she had employed in *Nightmare of the Red Chamber.* Both *The Fall of the Pagoda* and *The Book of Change* are partially based on Chang's early life experiences surrounded by drastic changes both within her family and her society, changes that would haunt her for the rest of her life as she grappled with the day-to-day manifestations of Chinese modernization and its overwhelming effects on what it meant to be Chinese. Perhaps more than anything else, these novels help us understand why Chang could never escape her obsession with Chinese canonical texts and why she chose to pin her final hopes for literary success in America, in English, on re-writing them.[8]

Chang's final attempt at writing a Chinese novel in English, *The Rouge of the North* (1967), would be her last attempt to establish herself as a successful writer of fiction on the American market. Unfortunately, it fared so poorly that she gave up and began her long, drawn-out decline toward the

total seclusion that left her to die tragically alone in a tiny Los Angeles flat nearly thirty years later. It seems particularly odd that she chose to rewrite her most successful Chinese work, *The Golden Cangue*, for this final attempt at American literary success. Perhaps she was thinking of Pearl Buck's great success with novels about China, and especially *The Good Earth* (1931), adapted into a highly successful Hollywood movie (1937). It seems more likely, however, that she was quite aware of how her work differed from Buck's, how much more truly Chinese it was, and how much more difficult it would be to adapt to American tastes. Surely she knew, as she put the final touches to her "twice-told" Chinese tale in English, that she had undertaken an impossible task. Perhaps it was exactly that impossibility that prompted her to the effort as a final testament to the passing of the Chineseness that had not been able to survive modernization, globalization, the whole business of diaspora.

As we reflect on Eileen Chang's final years of solitude in "the city of angels" that she could never love as she had Shanghai, which in her mind no longer existed as fully Chinese, we are struck with the overwhelming sense of loss she must have felt. Her desolation was finally so complete, so thorough as even she herself was no longer fully Chinese, having become American like so many other exiles from around the world fleeing the carnage of their post-war societies. And yet, for her, perhaps, either one was Chinese or one was not. Perhaps the idea of a hyphenated identity seemed impossible or somehow a horror. After all, how could Chinese and American coexist for the writer who had understood more than anyone else of her day what Chineseness was truly all about?

Notes

[1] She became a United States citizen in 1960.
[2] *Naked Earth* remains out-of-print.
[3] Both discovered in 2009 and currently in the process of publication (2010).
[4] I Ang. 'Can One Say No to Chineseness? Pushing the Limits of the Diasporic Paradigm', in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field.* R Chow (ed), Duke University Press, Durham, 2000. pp. 282-283.
[5] R Chow. Introduction, in *Modern Chinese Literary and Cultural Studies in the Age of Theory: Reimagining a Field.* R Chow (ed), Duke University Press, Durham, 2000, pp. 6-7.
[6] Eileen Chang Blog, www.zonaeuropa.com.
[7] ESWN Culture Blog, www.zonaeuropa.com.
[8] Many thanks to Craig Smith for his help in piecing together information about these two novels.

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