

Back from Extremity: Eileen Chang's Literary Return

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the recent reprints of the English translations of Chinese novelist Eileen Chang's two major works, *The Rice-Sprout Song* (1955) and *The Rouge of the North* (1967). When examined without the distortions of politics, these two novels reveal themselves to be major works of Twentieth-Century literature. Disappointingly, as this article points out, the editors of this reprinted edition have failed to properly emend a number of outstanding errors that were present in the original translation, thereby denying these texts the fluidity and subtlety that they deserve in their English versions.

KEY WORDS

Eileen Chang
The Rouge of the North
Chinese literary studies
Satire
Anti-Communist novel
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The Rice Sprout Song
Great Leap Forward
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Introduction

Modern Chinese novel aficionados will find much to celebrate in the University of California Press's 1998 reprints of the English versions of two major novels by Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920-1995), *The Rice-Sprout Song* (*Yang ge*, 秧歌 1955) and *The Rouge of the North* (*Yuan nü*, 怨女 1967).¹ Original Chinese-language editions of these novels have been available and quite enthusiastically received in Taiwan and Hong Kong ever since their inaugural publication; *The Rouge of the North* was even made into a movie in 1991.² However, Chang's own English translations of the novels had long since gone out of print, and could seldom be found outside of academic library collections in the West. Nor had any other translator stepped forward to undertake a new English rendering of either novel.

The Rice-Sprout Song is representative of Chang's temporary mid-1950s turn towards socio-political issues and scenarios of extremity, such as a village food riot (Wang, 1998a viii). In contrast, *The Rouge of the North* represents the author's subsequent return to the finely textured and restive domesticity of the urban novel of manners (Wang, 1998b ix). David Wang's informative prefaces situate these novels within the context of Chang's overall writing career, and help explain why both of them are significant novels by one of Twentieth Century China's most distinguished writers. Finally, the attractive paperback format promises accessibility to the sort of broad readership in English that Chang has enjoyed among Chinese-speaking readers since first emerging as a major figure on the early 1940s Shanghai literary scene (Zhang Yingjin 242).

Chang's Stature as a Major Modern Chinese Writer

The 1990s witnessed a growing consensus in Chinese literary studies about the importance and quality of Eileen Chang's oeuvre. Unlike previous generations of PRC literary historians who had dismissed or simply not mentioned Chang due to political factors, recently prominent literary historians like Yang Yi 楊義 (1991: 452-73) have usually given Chang's oeuvre the serious consideration it deserves. Among scholars outside of China, Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie give very high marks to *The Rice-Sprout Song* and *Love in Redland*, describing them as "prophetic critiques of Communism" (251). Dominic Cheung 張錯 goes so far as to argue that Eileen Chang "would have almost certainly won a Nobel Prize" in literature in the absence of the protracted political rivalry between the Communist and Nationalist Chinese (Thomas B11). Amidst the general recognition of Chang's stature as a writer, a few voices seem to defend the old Maoist approach of writing her out of literary history. Some neo-Marxist postists [houxuepai de 後學派的] who insist upon a purely leftist canon, such as Liu Kang 劉康, have continued to excoriate C.T. Hsia's *History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961) for having favored Chang and other non-leftist writers at the expense of canonical leftists praised in traditional PRC histories of modern fiction (Zhang Longxi 140). A more widely-read leftist scholar of modern Chinese fiction from an earlier generation, Jaroslav Prušek (d. 1980), expressed a similar if more informed skepticism about the quality of Chang's fiction and the soundness of Hsia's decision to pen a much longer chapter about Chang than about any other modern Chinese writer, even Lu Xun (198, 206). The left-leaning Taiwanese literary scholar and political activist Wang Tuo 王拓 likewise voiced doubts about Chang's literary importance even while highlighting her in the title of one of his books (Wang 1976). In any case, Chang's literary reputation still remains as firmly established as ever.

Unfortunately, Chang's uneven performance as a translator neither does justice to her fine Chinese prose style, nor meets contemporary standards of literary translation. These problems with translation especially plague *The Rouge of the North*, which came out during the difficult final stage of her second husband's long terminal illness, as well as some years after her stint as a professional translator in Hong Kong—by which time her skills as a translator seem to have declined through lack of practice. Yet before outlining the types of shortcomings in Chang's translations and citing some examples, it is necessary to summarize the literary achievement of the novels themselves.

The Rice-Sprout Song

The title of this work refers to a vigorous rural song and dance routine that Mao's new Communist government promulgated to celebrate abundant harvests—and to express fealty to the new regime for its role in allegedly making dramatic improvements in the material conditions of life for ordinary Chinese.³ The well-meaning but self-deceiving head village cadre, Wang Lin 王霖, has ordered the local People's Militia to shoot and kill a number of famished but able-bodied food rioters in their village outside of Shanghai. Later, in order to convey the impression that the villagers are still happy with their lot under the government, Wang Lin has little choice but to fill the decimated ranks of the rice-sprout dancers with elderly villagers who had been too frail or cautious to join in with the demands for relief grain from the local government. The old dancers' stiff movements and facial expressions of contrived enthusiasm provide an appropriately eerie backdrop to Wang Lin's far-fetched official explanation of the food riot as an insidious provocation by infiltrating enemy agents.

The novel concludes with the procession snaking along a winding path, accompanied by a cacophony of cymbals and gongs that is "muffled and strangely faint . . . under the immense open sky" (1998a: 182). The local leaders and surviving villagers may temporarily be able to deceive themselves into imagining that abundance is their destiny, but nature is not impressed by such a spectacle, and cannot

protect anyone from the consequences of terribly misguided decisions. The death toll of over 30 million from the disastrous man-made famine after the late-1950s Great Leap Forward would drive this hard lesson home—and helps explain why some scholars have viewed this novel as “prophetic.”⁴

This violent climax and unsettling dénouement actually together comprise less than a third of the novel, which for the most part follows Eileen Chang's typical approach of focusing on the intricacies of human relationships, particularly within the family (Tang 24-35). Like most of Chang's protagonists, Tan Yuexiang 譚月香 does not quite fit in with the family into which she has married. Her relative worldliness and resourcefulness derive in part from the years she has spent working for wages as a servant in Shanghai, where she was exposed to a far broader range of personalities and ideas than she could have encountered in the countryside.

Yuexiang's husband, Tan Jin'gen 譚金根, was unable to earn enough money in Shanghai to make it worthwhile staying there, and thus has mostly remained in the village along with his younger sister Jinhua 金花 and young daughter Azhao 阿招. The extended separation between Yuexiang and Jin'gen leads to many subtly portrayed misunderstandings between them upon Yuexiang's final return to the village. For instance, Jin'gen becomes angry with Yuexiang after she cooks and dishes out some overly thick gruel for Wang Lin, since the hearty gruel reinforces the inquisitive cadre's suspicion that the Tan family is hoarding grain instead of donating their surplus to the army in Korea. Jin'gen even administers a beating to Yuexiang for having concealed some of her hard-earned savings and donated them in Wang Lin's fund drive (1998a: 120-21). Yuexiang understandably feels wronged by Jin'gen at such times, and is also unhappy with him for having given her mirror away to Jinhua without even consulting her beforehand.

When the married couple's devotion to each other is really put to the test, however, each proves loyal, especially if compared with the behavior of other relatives in the Tan family. Yuexiang first tries to call Jin'gen away from the dangerous confrontation with Wang Lin

and the militia at the granary, and subsequently risks her safety to help Jin'gen hobble away from the scene after he suffers a serious gunshot wound during the food riot. None of the Tan family members steps forward to help, not even her sister-in-law Jinhua, who cravenly rejects Yuexiang's entreaties by insisting that her new mother-in-law must be the one to decide whether or not to help Jin'gen nurse his wounds and go into hiding. Afraid of guilt by association, Jinhua's mother-in-law is unmoved by Yuexiang's kowtowing, and merely gives the desperate woman a bundle of food, along with vague and impractical advice to escape the area by boat.

After Yuexiang returns to the wooded area where she had left the wounded Jin'gen to wait, she discovers that he has placed his warm padded clothing in a neat bundle for his wife, and has committed suicide by drowning himself in the river; he had realized that he was too seriously wounded to escape, and that his wife would be more likely to escape and survive the whole ordeal if he were simply to end his life. Instead of escaping the area, she uses the cover of night to avenge her husband's demise by burning down the village granary, where she is trapped and burns to death. It is symbolically significant that her charred corpse is found in a Buddhist sitting posture, for the determination and courage of her final act bespeak a traditional sort of piety beyond the understanding of cadres like Wang Lin and Gu Gang 顧岡, a visiting writer and Party propagandist.

The author reserves her most withering satire for Gu Gang's mental gyrations that transport the famished farmers' food riot back in time to the Nationalist period, in which case this harrowing incident could make Gu's new story please his superiors by foreshadowing the inevitability of the coming Communist victory (1998a: 170). However flawed a character Wang Lin may be, the author treats this cadre with comparative sympathy and nuanced understanding during episodes like the search for his missing wife. All in all, this novel reads more like the better anti-Nationalist fiction of the late 1930s than some fiery anti-Communist polemical novel of the McCarthy Era (McDougall 251).

The Rouge of the North

In terms of setting and general scenario, this novel is a reworking of Chang's famous 1943 novella *Jin suo ji* 金鎖記 [The Golden Cangue]. The older brother of an shopkeeping orphan close to 20 marries her into a wealthy Shanghai extended family, where she endures a very frustrating life with her blind, crippled husband and condescending female in-laws and servants. After both her husband and the grand matriarch (her mother-in-law) die, the family property is divided and she sets up another unhappy household with her progeny and their mates. However, *Rouge* offers a milder and less vindictive protagonist, Chai Yindi 柴銀娣, in place of the decidedly "extreme" heroine of "Cangue," Cao Qiqiao 曹七巧 (Chang, "My Writing" 438).

Rouge goes into much more detail about both the heroine's life before her marriage into the wealthy extended family, as well as her dangerous and unfulfilling romantic flirtation with her philandering younger brother-in-law. While working the counter at her elder brother Bingfa's 炳發 sesame-oil shop, the gorgeous Yindi must fend off unwanted advances from aggressive lechers while trying to attract the interest of the presentable but shy bachelor, Young Liu 小劉, from the pharmacy across the street. Yindi's grandmother in the countryside tries to make arrangements for Yindi to get acquainted with Young Liu there, but Bingfa delays their New Year's trip to the countryside so many days that Young Liu has already returned to his job in Shanghai by the time Bingfa's family and Yindi arrive at her grandmother's rural home. Yindi strongly protests Bingfa's negotiations with matchmakers and servants from the wealthy Yao 姚 family, especially after she learns that the original plan is to make her the concubine of a blind man. Yet Bingfa and his wife go on with the negotiations, and Yindi's future position is upgraded from concubine to wife. More importantly, the Yaos agree that they are waiving the traditional bride-price, which the financially strapped Bingfa had long felt was unaffordable.

After Yindi has lived in the Yao mansion for some years and given birth to a baby boy, she engineers an amorous encounter with her willing but unready brother-in-law in a dark corner of a temple (1998b: 80-81). The passionate couple get little further than groping and heavy petting before the brother-in-law breaks off in fear that the couple's scandalous behavior might be discovered. They avoid each other's company for years thereafter; Yindi even makes a failed suicide attempt due to her intense marital frustration and nagging fear that rumors of the abortive tryst will eventually spread and lead to her disinheritance and utter ruin.

In contrast with Qiqiao, who brutally pesters her daughter-in-law and intimidates her daughter's suitor into breaking their engagement, Yindi is high-handed but relatively humane toward her son and his wife and concubine, provided that the latter stay in her son's good graces. Although Yindi is fading in and out of an opium stupor by the end of the novel, her episodes of dementia seem much less severe and destructive than Qiqiao's (1998b: 184-185).

Chang's Translations

As the translator of these two novels, Chang's flair for English is sometimes impressive. However, she very much needs an aggressive bilingual editor or co-translator, because her translations often read more like rough-hewn early drafts than polished final drafts ready for the typesetter. While there are very good reasons for publishers to preserve the original wording of literary works, such as Chang's fiction in her native language of Chinese, translations out of one's native tongue would seem another matter altogether. Chang's two out-of-print translations should have been taken as a good starting place—not the finished product—of the contemporary English editions of these works.

Responsible translators inform the reader when and where they are either excising material from the original version or adding material that was not present in the original version. When Chang excises approximately a hundred characters in the middle of Chapter One of

Yuan nü (10) from the English translation (1998b: 6), she does not indicate where or why she is withholding some significant information about Yindi's matchmakers. Nor can the reader guess why Chang has added a couple of lines of the old aunt's complaints about new words like "feudalism" in *The Rice-Sprout Song* (1998a: 7) when these lines do not appear in the original *Yang ge* (12). Since Chang's original versions were in Chinese, it stands to reason that the translator should inform the reader whenever departures from the original version occur in the translation—and should keep these departures to a minimum.

Sloppy and inaccurate renderings mar both novels, especially *The Rouge of the North*. At one point, the narrator recounts Yindi's suspicion of the visiting matchmakers: "Ta zao jiu yixin le" 她早就疑心了 [She had long since been suspicious] (11). Yet the English translation greatly distorts this quite straightforward line: "She didn't like it" (1998b: 7). Later in the novel, the line "Da taitai dao fang xin" 太太太倒放心 [Elder Mistress actually isn't worried] (1987: 156) is mistranslated as "I wonder Big Mistress is not worried" (1998b: 152).

Run-on sentences with missing punctuation occur with depressing frequency in Chang's English renderings. The following sentence from *The Rouge of the North* is missing four punctuation marks: "Of course Third Master's death made her think of herself and she was ill too but illness is just a thing people have to carry around with them as they get on in life" (1998b: 184).

Chang commonly transliterates words in an ad hoc, idiosyncratic fashion. She misspells the common surname "Wang" 王 as "Wong," which is easily confused with the Cantonese pronunciation of "Huang" 黃 (1998a: 117-121). Expressions like "shengchan fajia" (*Yang ge* 95) become garbled into "sun-chang-fa chia" 生產發家 (1998a: 90). It would not require a great deal of effort for an editor or co-translator to standardize all of Chang's ad hoc transliterations into either pinyin or Wade-Giles, and readers would henceforth be spared much confusion.

Conclusion

The Rice-Sprout Song and *The Rouge of the North* are Twentieth Century Chinese novels of imaginative breadth and enduring value. They deserve more polished English versions than the second-draft renderings that Chang produced some decades ago. Instead of simply adding an updated preface or afterword to the reprint edition of a translated novel, publishers and editors should ensure that the translation itself gets checked against the original, as well as carefully updated and polished.

NOTES

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¹ Full review citations for the English versions will be followed by publication information about the Chinese originals. I. *The Rice-Sprout Song*. By Eileen Chang, with a new foreword by David Der-wei Wang. 1955 rpt., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xxv, 182 pp. US\$14.95 (paper), ISBN 21088-3 (cited as 1998a). The 1954 Chinese version upon which Chang based her English translation, *Yang ge*, was first serialized in the journal *Jinri shijie* 今日世界 [The World Today], and was first published as a book later that year in Hong Kong; the first edition published by Huangguan in Taipei came out in 1968. II. *The Rouge of the North*. By Eileen Chang, with a new forward by David Der-wei Wang. 1967 rpt., Berkeley: U of California P, 1998. xxx, 185 pp. US\$14.95 (paper), ISBN 21087-5 (cited as 1998b). The Chinese version upon which Chang based her translation, *Yuan nü* [An Embittered Woman], was first serialized by Hong Kong's *Xingdao wanbao* 星島晚報 [Star Island Evening News] in 1966, but seems not to have been published in book form by Huangguan in Taipei until 1968. The PRC literary scholar Liu Xian-biao (1987: 199) has classified both works as *zhongpian* [novellas], but "novels" would be more accurate, since each bulks to nearly 200

pages in both the English and Chinese (Huangguan) editions.

² According to Thomas (1995: B11), the two other prominent non-PRC Chinese films based on Zhang Ailing's fiction were *Love in a Fallen City* (1990) and *Red Rose, White Rose* (1995).

³ In fact, China's average per capita caloric intake remained essentially stagnant from the 1930s to the 1970s, and started its dramatic rise in the 1980s only because of the government's belated decision to reverse the most unworkable features of rigid Maoist agricultural economics—especially the overextended unit of accounting and the denigration of material incentives.

⁴ For an accessible study of the unprecedentedly deadly famine after the Great Leap Forward and the factors that led to its occurrence, see Becker (1996).

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