

# The ROUGE of the NORTH

*by*

Eileen Chang

University of California Press  
*Berkeley Los Angeles London*

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## THE ROUGE OF THE NORTH



Eileen Chang, 1966

*Courtesy of Crown Publishing Company, Ltd., Taipei, Taiwan.*

he face powder of southern dynasties,  
he rouge of northern lands.

*Chinese expression for the beauties of the country,  
probably seventh century*

## FOREWORD

David Der-wei Wang

*The Rouge of the North* (1967) is the last of the three novels written in English by Eileen Chang (1920-95). Chang's two earlier English novels, *The Rice-Sprout Song* (1955) and *Naked Earth* (1957), were written during her sojourn in Hong Kong from 1952 to 1955, as part of an anti-Communist literary campaign sponsored by the United States Information Service. For all their compassionate inquiry into human frailty in an era of moral fanaticism, the two novels flaunt politics in ways Chang would not have chosen had she had any choice. Chang came to the United States in 1955, hoping to restart her career as a writer of English fiction, and *The Rouge of the North* came as the result of a long period of work towards that goal. Compared with the two earlier works, *The Rouge of the North* exhibits many more of the characteristics that made Chang the most popular writer in Shanghai during the 1940s. This is a novel not about national politics but about politics as a daily practice of life. It does not have the usual revolutionary "obsession with China," to use C. T. Hsia's term;<sup>1</sup> rather it probes the reactionary meaning of all such Chinese obsessiveness.

The story of *The Rouge of the North* revolves around the life of a woman named Yindi, from her coquettish youth to her shrewish and malevolent old age. Alongside Yindi's degeneration one sees the gradual breakdown of an old aristocratic family which Yindi marries into, against a backdrop of Chinese historical turmoil from the fall of the Qing dynasty to the last years of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Chang details the predicament of an old-fashioned household in a changing time, with moral and psychological

consequences that amount to a macabre spectacle. Yindi's life is ruined by the <sup>state</sup> environment which, ironically enough, she herself chooses. By agreeing to an arranged-marriage proposal from a richer family, she had intended to exchange her beauty and youth for a more affluent, respectable life, and when she finds out that her husband is a blind, puny invalid and his household a feudal dungeon, it is too late. After years of bitter experiences, Yindi is seen at the end of the novel as a rancorous widow, standing watch over her only son <sup>whom</sup> she has totally depraved, in a tomblike house enshrouded with opium smoke.

If this plot sounds familiar to readers of Chang's earlier works, it is because except for minor changes in characterization and episodes, the novel derives from Chang's novella *Jinsuo ji* (*The Golden Cangue*, 1943). The novella was very well received, and Chang later translated it into English under the title *The Golden Cangue*. Similarly in the 1960s, when Chang was working on *The Rouge of the North*, she derived its Chinese counterpart, entitled *Yuan-nü* (Embittered woman). *Rouge* was published by the Cassell Company of London in 1967, when *Yuan-nü* had already been serialized for a year in literary media in Hong Kong and Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> A bilingual writer, Chang enjoyed a reputation of being able to rewrite or translate her Chinese works into English or vice versa,<sup>3</sup> but no other translingual practice engaged her so much as *The Rouge of the North* (or its ancestor, *The Golden Cangue*). Thus, over a span of twenty-four years, in two languages, Chang wrote this story four times.

The year 1967 was the turning point of the last part of Chang's life. In that fall, her second husband, Ferdinand Reyher (1897-1967), died after a long illness in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she was writer-in-residence at Radcliffe College. Since their marriage in 1956, the couple had had a close but financially unstable relationship, and more



often than not Chang became the major source of family income, taking on chores such as script writer for the Voice of America and for a Hong Kong movie studio. Chang never ceased creative activity, however. After the disappointing outcome of the first two attempts, her entry into the English and American literary market had become all the more urgent; publication of *The Rouge of the North* was therefore a crucial step in her career.

But the novel came out at an emotionally difficult time in her life, and worse, it was received coldly by both reviewers and general readers. Ironically, the Chinese version of the novel was warmly welcomed in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and in overseas Chinese communities, thereby rekindling "Eileen Chang fever" among Chinese readers for years to come. Chang subsequently gave up hope of becoming a professional writer of English and turned instead to work on several other Chinese projects. In 1969, through friends' arrangements, she left the East Coast for good, to become a researcher at the Center for Chinese Studies of the University of California at Berkeley. Two years later she had lost this position, and she moved to Los Angeles, where she began the final twenty-five years of an increasingly reclusive life.



From Chinese to English, from *The Golden Cangue* to *The Rouge of the North*, why did Eileen Chang keep writing the same story? Circumstantial factors may provide some explanations. After two disappointing efforts, Chang needed a novel to bring her the much-expected breakthrough. To that end a story such as *The Golden Cangue* seemed to contain the most promising ingredients: a woman protagonist, <sup>2</sup> an orientalist allure<sup>1,2</sup>, and a family-saga <sup>1,2</sup> structure. More important, looking back at the success of *The Golden Cangue* among Chinese readers twenty years before, Chang must

have concluded that a work of a similar nature should also appeal to her prospective Western audience. I even suspect that C. T. Hsia's critical appraisal may have confirmed Chang's decision. In his *History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (1961), Hsia took a then most unorthodox stance by celebrating Chang as a major writer of modern Chinese fiction up to 1949. His chapter on her centers upon a favorable analysis of *The Golden Cangue*.<sup>4</sup> 金瓶梅

Beyond these contextual surmises, nevertheless, there must be something else that drove Chang to repeat herself, something more keenly felt that made the rewrite an artistic necessity. One can guess that years after leaving Shanghai, the ultimate source of her inspiration, Chang might have wanted to rescue her dimming memories of the beloved city by continually naming it. Thus Shanghai's meandering alleys, crowded, dilapidated bungalows, hybrid fashions, night cries of snack vendors, mixed smells of sesame oil, medicinal herbs, and opium, its festivities and rituals, courtesan culture . . . are fondly called up as the subtext of *The Rouge of the North*. Above all, Yindi's is a Shanghai woman's adventure; to write about her ups and downs is to recapitulate the changed morals and manners of the city during the first half of the twentieth century.

Or at a deeper, psychological level, one can draw on the Freudian model and view Chang's rewriting as a compulsive act that would overcome her own trauma by explaining it away. The four versions of *The Rouge of the North* (or *The Golden Cangue*) can be read as various accounts of her family romance, each revealing bits and pieces of a past from which Chang tried in vain to escape. The Yao family in *The Rouge of the North*, for example, easily reminds one of Chang's own, which enjoyed wealth and prestige in the late Qing days but underwent rapid decline after the founding of the Republic. Chang's father was a profligate consumed

by opium, women, and memories of bygone family splendor. He led a life estranged from Chang's mother, a free-spirited woman who found solace by traveling overseas. When the couple finally broke up, Chang and her brother were left in the custody of their father and new mother, an old-fashioned, peevish woman and opium addict. At the age of sixteen, after a quarrel with her stepmother, followed by her month-long imprisonment in her own room and a devastating attack of malaria, she ran away from home for good. For Chang, images such as the moribund household, dissipated male family members, absent mother, evil stepmother, and decayed aristocracy that fill *The Golden Cangue* and *The Rouge of the North* are not merely literary motifs; rather they are figures symptomatic of the uncanny "return of the repressed," continued linguistic approximations of an unspeakable trauma.

What concerns me here, however, is not the extent to which Chang has retrieved or revised her repressed memories through storytelling. Literature need not serve merely as reference to authorial turmoil. Instead of tracing out the apparent similarities between *The Golden Cangue* and *The Rouge of the North* and identifying in them the imprints of Chang's lived experience, I argue that the differences underlying the seemingly repetitive writings provide more clues to Chang's desire to retell her story. In other words, in her effort to reconstruct the master plot through various forms, Chang may also engage in a more subversive activity by proliferating and therefore undermining that master plot. The rewriting project becomes all the more intriguing when one considers the issue of language and translation. As if she could no longer trust her mother tongue, Chang seeks a substitute voice—in this case, English—in which to communicate. A foreign language was no more alien a medium than Chinese to transmit, or translate, her already alienated

existence in the Chinese environment. Insofar as mimetic realism was the most important format of modern Chinese fiction, Chang's repetitive and bilingual project has offered a special perspective from which to view such premises as thematic and linguistic authenticity. They point to her unique stance as a woman writer as well as her philosophy of writing.

When *The Golden Cangue* was published, Chang was a single woman writer of twenty-four. The novella brought her unexpected acclaim from critics such as Xunyu (pseudonym of Fu Lei) and Hu Lancheng (1905-81), the flamboyant literatus and collaborator during the Japanese occupation, and to a large extent it led to her romance and eventual marriage with Hu. A story about the transformation of a woman named Qiqiao from her frustrated youthful days to the moment when she has become a miserly widow and vampirish mother, the novella excels in its unsentimental exposé of women's fate in the traditional family system and in its intricate narrative skill, which superbly fulfills the standards of high realism. Next to Lu Xun's Madman in "The Diary of a Madman," Qiqiao must be the most memorable "madwoman" in modern Chinese fiction testifying to (what Lu Xun calls) the cannibalism of Chinese society. Suffice it for C. T. Hsia to say that "*The Golden Cangue* [is] the greatest novelette in the history of Chinese literature."<sup>5</sup>

While *The Rouge of the North* derives its story from *The Golden Cangue*, one finds interesting differences in the way Eileen Chang relates the plotline. Although she is a woman just as deeply disappointed by life as Qiqiao, Yindi appears a milder and therefore arguably more mediocre version of her counterpart. Where *The Golden Cangue* with its novella format highlights only the moments crucial to Qiqiao's life, *The Rouge of the North* traces every twist and turn of Yindi's

moral and psychological degeneration. The result is a prolonged account filled with details, details which discharge the intensity of the original story and as such make the characters fuller and yet less compelling creatures. In *The Golden Cangue*, for example, Qiqiao's desire for her brother-in-law, Third Master, is only suggested in a scene of mutual flirtation. In *The Rouge of the North*, one learns how Yindi once sang a ballad to Third Master in the dark at night, had a frustrated rendezvous with him at a Buddhist temple, and tried to kill herself afterward out of shame and fear. Qiqiao later schemes to ruin her son's and daughter's marriages, and toward the end of the novella she is seen confined to her opium couch, all by herself, awakening only momentarily to the horror of her perverted existence. Yindi has only one son. Like Qiqiao, she manipulates her son's life and is responsible for his wife's death, which is followed by an irony: she ends up having to live with her son's vulgar concubine and a group of totally unlikable grandchildren.

C. T. Hsia's analysis of Qiqiao would sound equally persuasive if applied to Yindi, a woman embittered to the point of perversion by her surroundings. But critics have pointed out that Yindi is lacking in the kind of vengeful determination and manic energy that make Qiqiao the most villainous mother in modern Chinese literature.<sup>6</sup> For a story whose power depends on its protagonist's irreconcilable resentment of the world and people around her, Yindi may indeed appear to be a less successful creation. Eileen Chang, however, would have argued differently, and her reasoning might very well have been based on her polemical concept of realism. Take a look at her famous statement in "My Own Writing," written in the 1940s:<sup>7</sup>

There aren't many people around who are either enlightened or perverse to an extreme. This is a trou-

bled era that does not allow for any easy enlightenment. In these years people have just gone on living and even though insanity is insanity, there are limits. So in my stories, with the exception of Cao Qiqiao in *The Golden Cangue*, none of the characters are extreme. . . . They have no tragedy, just desolation.

Chang wrote these remarks in response to charges that her works were not realistic enough to reflect the ethos of the time. As the mainstream discourse of the post-May Fourth movement, realism by the 1940s had become a codified dogma informed by various ideological and emotive imperatives. As Chang intimates in the above quotation, this realist discourse disguises both a high-strung sentimentality and a radically heroic call to arms. For Chang, realism lies instead in the territory where heroism is susceptible to compromise and revolutionary postures are struck for private, often trivial motives. Quite contrary to the common wisdom, she contends that realism can best exert its power by depicting not extremities but expediencies, not life as tragedy but life as desolation.

Qiqiao of *The Golden Cangue* harbors an extraordinary rage and delusion and shows no qualms inflicting these upon her closest family members; she induces our pity and fear, in the tragic vein, in that her fall shocks us to an understanding of her pain and vengefulness. A powerful figure she may be, nevertheless her portrait is one Chang's aesthetics of desolation would not endorse. It is Yindi, with her entanglement in the redundancy of life and her insufficient attempts in protest against that redundancy, who brings forward the vulnerability and mediocrity in us, flaws which are all too human. Such a view may raise some readers' eyebrows, and the debate over the *The Golden Cangue* versus *The Rouge of the North* will continue in the foreseeable

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future. My point is that between Qiqiao's malice and Yindi's bitterness there exists a whole range of emotional capacities, and that it took Chang more than two decades, to transform her Qiqiao into Yindi, or to turn a tragic monster into a desolate woman.

At a time when most Chinese writers engaged in a resolute rendition of typical characters and epic subjects, Chang's preference for the desolate aspect of life already bespoke a personal agenda. Her realistic project did not stop here, however. Insofar as modern Chinese realism was based on a mandate to reflect—duplicate without altering—the real, Chang's effort to double, nay, to quadruple, the reflection came as an intriguing critique of the conventionally simplified view. In view of her vivid assemblage of detail drawn from all aspects of life, one might easily conclude that Chang's rewriting of the prototype of Qiqiao/Yindi amounted ultimately to more fully re-representing the same reality, or to reflections of one reality from different distances and angles. This view would tend to overlook the deliberately unrealistic aspect of her project. Consider Chang's own observation:<sup>8</sup>

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In this era old things break apart and new ones emerge. But until the era reaches its apex, earth-shattering events will be the exception. People only sense, to the point of terror, that things are not quite right in all aspects of their daily lives. . . . In order to prove their existence and grasp something real and quite elemental, they have no choice but to draw from their ancient memories for help, memories lived by all humanity in all eras.

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In other words, when history has already crumbled and reality faltered, realism defined consensually has lost its legiti-

macy. In quest of alternatives, a conscientious writer can best express herself not by confronting or even prescribing actualities but by taking shelter in "ancient memories." Instead of proclaiming the irreversibility of time or the authenticity of action, as ~~most of her peers did~~, Chang turned to ~~involuntary~~ <sup>非本能的</sup> memories, and willed repetitions prevail over reflections of empirical reality.

Gilles Deleuze once differentiated two levels of literary representation: "The first exactly defines the world of copies or of representations; it establishes the world as icon." The second, against the first, defines the world of simulacra. It presents the world as phantasm.<sup>9</sup> Most readers will have no difficulty appreciating Eileen Chang's realism at the first, mimetic level; all her works bear witness to her talent in recapitulating the world in its utmost intricacy. But I argue that Chang distinguishes herself more for her realism at the second level. She shows that the world we so confidently inhabit may already be a phantasmagoric existence, devoid of any solid meaning, and that any textual representation of it ends up becoming part of a chain of ghostly reflections. Her favorite subjects always involve ghostlike figures inhabiting a reality which no longer is, or never was, true. More important, her style betrays a futile inquisition of the immemorial and the unrepresentable, all the while impressing with its spectacular grappling with sensory, tangible data. Thus, in her own words, "a strange feeling toward surrounding reality emerges, a suspicion that this is an absurd, ancient world, dark and shadowy, and yet bright and clear. Between memory and reality an awkward disharmony frequently arises, and because of this a disruption—at once heavy and light—and a struggle—serious, yet still nameless—are produced."<sup>10</sup>

It is in this light that Chang's rewriting of *The Golden Cangue* and *The Rouge of the North* came as a truly fascinat-



ing project. The two works, together with their Chinese versions, beget each other's causes and effects, and as such they break open multiple entry points onto the real within the mimetic closure of representationism. In Walter Benjamin's words, "the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory."<sup>11</sup> While the majority of Chinese writers from the 1940s to the 1960s were eager to carve out the lucid image of their time and its single future, to have their say about what reality is and will be, Eileen Chang took a wholly different direction, by returning to her past and by letting it repeat itself, unwoven and rewoven in memory. Instead of the bright and clear worlds of May Fourth enlightenment and revolution, her works describe the dark realms of memory and desire, realms where ghostly interchangeability and duplicity prevail. Unsurprisingly, her philosophy of the real had to be acted out as a lifelong task. In the mid-1960s, when Chang tried again to tell the story of *The Golden Cangue* two decades after its first publication, she had aligned herself with such masters of recapitulation as Tamizaki Junichiro of *The Bridge of Dreams*, Marcel Proust of *Remembrance of Things Past* and, above all, Cao Xueqin of *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.



For all her concern about an age in transformation and a city—Shanghai—in decline, Eileen Chang makes *woman* and her status in the Chinese family system the central issue of *The Rouge of the North*. Yindi appears at the first as a saucy and resourceful girl, determined against all odds to seek her own marriage. Her parents already dead, she lives with her brother's family, which makes a living selling sesame oil. Yindi falls in love with Young Liu, an apprentice of the herbal medicine store next door, but she is wary of the predictable, poor life ahead of her were she to marry him.