

Slow Catastrophe

Eileen Chang's “Blossoms Afloat, Flowers Adrift” and the Archive

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ON A RECENT RESEARCH TRIP TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN California Special Collections Library, while browsing the papers of Eileen Chang, a major Chinese writer who spent her last days living in exile in Los Angeles, I came across a curious artifact. Tucked away in a folder of ephemera from the author's final years, a single-page document issued by the Immigration and Naturalization Service contained a Freedom of Information Act request initiated by Chang on May 5, 1991. Two sets of handwriting fill the page. The first consists of neat block letters in all caps belonging to Eileen Chang Reyher, identifying Chang by the married name she had adopted after wedding her second husband, the writer Ferdinand Reyher.

In contrast, the other set of handwriting is a loose cursive script belonging to an official who verified Chang's request to replace her lost naturalization certificate. Below their brief explanations, filled-in boxes provide a shorthand account of Chang's earlier life: she was born in China on September 30, 1920, and was living in Hong Kong when she boarded the *SS President Cleveland* to cross the Pacific Ocean, disembarking in Honolulu on October 22, 1955. By the time she became a naturalized U.S. citizen in June 1960, she and Reyher were living together in an apartment in San Francisco, but all she remembers about the naturalization process is that it took place in a “law court in the city.” There is no mention of why Chang lost the original proof of her American citizenship, nor why she needed the replacement copy.

Based on my archival research, it seems likely to me that Chang's frequent moves around Los Angeles and her advanced age caused her to misplace the vital records she needed to prove she really was who she claimed to be. While Chang was living alone in an apartment located at 454 S. Bentley Street at the time she filed the FOIA request, she had already moved to her final apartment at 10911 Rochester Avenue by the summer of 1992, when she wrote to the New York office of the city clerk searching for her marriage license to Reyher. The deputy city clerk wrote back suggesting that Chang may have misremembered where she got married: "We find no record in the borough of Brooklyn for the abovementioned names." The correspondence led to a dead end, just as many of Chang's earlier efforts to establish a stable new personal and professional identity in the U.S. had ended in tragedy and disappointment.

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In many ways, Chang's life as an immigrant with no fixed address was defined by her ability to endure one crisis after another. The monumental losses piled up: the death of Reyher in 1967, her stalled writing career after failing to find critical and commercial acclaim for her English-language novels, and her declining health in her final years. Chang's transpacific journey had led her to a precarious life, one that bore very little resemblance to the one she must have been hoping to find when she boarded the passenger ship that would take her away from mainland China for good (she only returned to Asia once in the early 1960s to visit Hong Kong and Taiwan). Yet Chang continued writing about China, even as much of the work she produced in her final decades remained unpublished in her lifetime.

The recent publication of *Chang's Time Tunnel* (New York Review Books, 2025), which features short stories originally written in Chinese translated into English for the first time, reveals an urgency behind her lifelong commitment to exploring how war and displacement impact ordinary individuals. In her late semi-autobiographical fiction, Chang carried insights with her from her firsthand experience of the Japanese occupation of Shanghai and the Chinese civil war. Many of these crises unfolded not as singular events but rather as prolonged conflicts of indefinite duration, leading to tremendous psychological uncertainty for every class of citizen: men and women, rich and poor, soldiers and civilians.

Chang recognizes this phenomenon and explores its ramifications for people who kept following the rhythms of everyday life, eating and drinking and falling in love and moving houses even as atrocities unfolded by their doorstep. Violence—particularly when it happened to others—became so routine it could be overlooked, and even dead bodies on the streets could be ignored. Chinese citizens who experienced history as a series of slow catastrophes punctuated by intermittent wars learned how to avert their gaze when it was convenient to do so. The reckoning, if it came at all, was deferred until a later date. Those who lived long enough to survive the conflicts sometimes became refugees and immigrants who, like Chang herself, could only access their homelands through memory, and by then the past often appeared in a different light.

In the translators' afterword to *Time Tunnel*, we learn that Chang penned one of the short stories from the collection, "Blossoms Afloat, Flowers Adrift," in the 1970s, when she was already living in seclusion in Los Angeles. The story follows the contours of Chang's own life as a writer who lived in exile for most of her adulthood. Chang deploys frequent flashbacks in a retrospective narrative that follows the trials of its young female protagonist, Luozen, who has fled her family home in Shanghai to seek refuge in Hong Kong before setting sail for a ten-day journey to Japan on a cargo ship. Luozen experiences the aftermath of the Chinese civil war as a descent into solitude, and she remains aware of her vulnerable position as a woman traveling alone.

Early in the story, Luozen takes the train to Canton (modern day Guangzhou) en route to Hong Kong, and finds herself being followed by a stranger who insists that she resembles a beautiful woman whose photograph he keeps in his pocket. After the man finally disappears, Luozen concludes that "this was an old game for him; it was clear that he'd used the photograph ruse many times before. But others who had no strategy like his still went out stalking, it had become a trend." Instead of condemning the stranger for his despicable behavior, Chang's idiosyncratic protagonist connects his crime to a broader societal phenomenon of men stalking women out of a keen sense that their actions may no longer incur any consequences. The historical moment they are living in encourages reckless, impulsive behavior, since old norms have broken down, and it is unclear when a new set of rules will take their place. Surprisingly, Luozen attributes the abundance of stalkers on the streets to a general "sense of looming apocalypse" in the cities following the Communist victory. No one knows how the CCP regime will change their lives, least of all the men who have decided to indulge their worst fantasies: "Having handed their fate over, they now felt a hand's grip at the nape of the neck and were squirming around, trying to get away with whatever they could, while they still could."

These lines reveal how Luozen manages to adopt the perspective of the men, and she detects how their only remaining freedom lies in their ability to pursue weaker targets. In a sense, they are victims of history turned into perpetrators of petty crimes. While Luozen is careful to

disassociate from them, she also recognizes their shared fate as Chinese citizens who are equally vulnerable to running afoul of the Party. Chang elevates her protagonist above the ranks of the men she will never know by allowing her to glimpse what they do not seem to understand about themselves: faced with ongoing political turmoil, they are motivated by fear more than lust. As the narrator wryly notes, “terror does not have one face only; it can have a thousand faces.” The story depicts Luozhen as an isolated figure who must learn to cope with her own fears after facing random acts of harassment during her travels. No one comes to her rescue, and she does not ponder the feasibility of returning home to Shanghai, where she was living with her older sister. Once a journey has begun, Chang tells us, there is no going back to one’s point of origin.

Even after Luozhen arrives in Hong Kong, she fails to find lasting solidarity among the displaced. Her main contact is a friend of her sister who has adopted the English name of Fannie, but Fannie has no space to host her for longer than one night. Like many formerly wealthy Chinese from the mainland, Fannie has been forced to economize, filling her makeshift quarters with “plain and paltry” furniture that matches the “watery and tasteless” food Luozhen is served as her welcome dinner. Through her compact descriptions of domestic spaces, Chang captures the downward mobility of these women’s lives, detailing how individuals build barriers between themselves and others in order to preserve the dwindling resources at their disposal. Fannie is not a surrogate mother to Luozhen, nor even a particularly welcoming hostess, and Luozhen soon rents an unfurnished room in a nearby apartment building. For the first time, she lives alone, and she soon discovers that the other inhabitants pass judgement on her:

Everyone looked in through the open doorway when they went by, and there they saw Luozhen sitting on her grass mat with all the things she needed for the day spread out, like a peddler’s stall. This really was a refugee who’d moved in, diminishing the value of the place. She herself, sitting on the floor, was quite content: She’d successfully simplified her life...Still, the disdain in the eyes of all these Shanghainese was a little hard to take.

Luozhen’s descent into the underclass of poor refugees has been swift and irreversible. Unlike Fannie, who has maintained her privacy, Luozhen lives under conditions of extreme impoverishment made visible by the fact that her paltry possessions are laid out for the public to scrutinize. Reduced to the lowest level of society through her resemblance to the street peddlers, Luozhen is held in contempt by the other displaced Shanghainese who occupy more fortunate positions, even as she feels liberated by her lack of material encumbrances. The subtle class distinctions between those who have managed to rent larger rooms and those who can only afford the cheapest units have not disappeared under a shared recognition of their statelessness; in fact, these differences have only sharpened. Chang withholds any easy form of consolation for Luozhen—in the hands

of a lesser writer, it is easy to imagine how the story would default to a depiction of how the protagonist seeks refuge with a family friend or forges new alliances with others from her hometown. Such friendships remain unavailable to Luozhen, because Chang understands how easy it is to place the pursuit of one’s own survival above all else when one is already living under duress. It is a lesson that Luozhen also ends up learning once she boards the cargo ship to leave Hong Kong.

Perhaps like Chang herself, Luozhen finally finds solace in solitude. The ocean voyage to Japan becomes a metaphor for the only kind of relief available to the displaced: the illusion of safety generated by the sense of being away from one’s fellow citizens, whose acts of betrayal and complicity can more easily be forgotten at sea. The journey offers relief from the trials of urban life because it allows Luozhen to temporarily live in a state of suspension. Reflecting on her tendency to avoid the other passengers, Luozhen realizes her reclusive behavior stems from how she “just too greatly prized this vacuum-tube passage, this being untethered and untied, floating along at ease, like someone discovering, after finally sitting down, how bone-tired and exhausted she was.”

Chang stacks one metaphor on top of another in her depiction of the contradictory emotions that accompany Luozhen on board the ship. She is at once exhilarated by the lack of constraints—even the passage of time itself seems to be inconsequential—and beginning to register how much she has undergone involuntarily. Luozhen is no longer trapped in China and not yet a newcomer in Japan, where she is choosing to emigrate despite the radical uncertainty surrounding her decision. Towards the end of the story, Luozhen chooses solitude as a form of self-protection in her quest to forget the traumas of the past and her worries about the future. Chang reminds us that a safe harbor remains elusive for her protagonist. Luozhen has no idea what will happen to her next, but she knows she must prepare herself for the next crisis waiting to unfold on distant shores. A