

1-1-2016

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Repository Citation

Xiao, Jiwei, "Book Review: “Eileen Chang’s Journey to Darkness: A Review of Naked Earth,” Naked Earth by Eileen Chang” (2016). *Modern Languages & Literature Faculty Publications*. 34.
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/modernlanguagesandliterature-facultypubs/34>

Published Citation

Xiao, Jiwei. Book Review: “Eileen Chang’s Journey to Darkness: A Review of Naked Earth,” Naked Earth by Eileen Chang. MCLC Resource Center, February 26, 2016.

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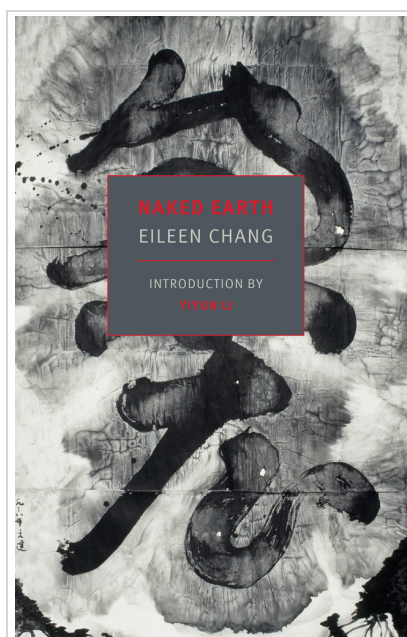
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Eileen Chang's Journey into Darkness: A Review of *Naked Earth*

Reviewed by Jiwei Xiao

MCLC Resource Center Publication (Copyright February, 2015)



NAKED EARTH
EILEEN CHANG

INTRODUCTION BY
PERRY LINK

Eileen Chang,

Naked Earth

Introduction by Perry Link. New York: New York Review Books, 2015. 400 pp. ISBN:

9781590178348 (paper).

Pages: 400.

In letters and interviews, Eileen Chang 張愛玲 (1920-1995) complained that when she was writing *Chidi zhi lian* 赤地之戀 (1954)—the original Chinese version of *Naked Earth* (1956/2015), she had to follow an outline formulated by “someone else” (別人).^[1] This *someone else* is no other than the USIS (the United States Information Service) Hong Kong. Recent archival research on the USIS's classified documents shows that *Chidi zhi lian* was a project of their anti-Communist “China Reporting Program” and the agency was deeply involved at various stages of the publishing of *Chidi zhi lian*.^[2] As a rewrite, *Naked Earth* refined away some minor characters and reorganized certain parts and passages but kept the major characters and the main plot intact.^[3] It was not clear whether an English version was in the USIS plan right from the start or was Chang's own initiative in the wake of her recent success with *Rice Sprout Song*, her other USIS commissioned English novel published by Charles Scribner in 1955 to critical acclaim.^[4] But Chang's agent failed to sell *Naked Earth* to any American publisher; a poorly designed edition was released by a Hong Kong press in 1956, to Chang's great disappointment. Chang of course could never have imagined that one day—twenty years after she passed away—*Naked Earth* would be reissued by a prestigious American

publisher as part of its classic series.^[5] Will Chang's cold war novel gain a new life under the aegis of New York

Review of Books and find its niche in the English-speaking literary world today?

Those who are drawn to the Eileen Chang legend and decide to acquaint themselves with her work might find *Naked Earth* not such a great choice to start with. For those who look for enticing drama, this could even be a challenging book. There is no page-turning plot. As common in her fictional work, the basic structure of *Naked Earth* is “biographical”—it starts and ends at certain crucial moments in the main character’s life. But *Naked Earth* looks much more episodic than most of her major fictions. Another potential difficulty is Chang’s use of an inordinate number of Chinese idioms and political neologisms. Whether intended or not, the words often look out of place and off-putting, disrupting the narrative flow and realistic effects. When, for example, a communist cadre berates a poor peasant for harboring sympathies for his former employer—“He’s bought your heart with this bit of *Hsiao en*, *Hsiao hui*, petty favor, petty boon” (38)—one has the odd feeling that someone is teaching a Chinese expression to an English speaker there in the book. Still one has to admit that, imprudent as it may be, Chang’s insertion of Chinese phrases is not a fatal flaw: there are many examples, enough examples, in the novel that convince us of Chang’s enviable talent to write precise and pellucid prose in English.

Neither tracing the back-story about the novel’s connection with the USIS nor measuring it against conventional standards of storytelling and readability, however, seem adequate in our critical consideration of *Naked Earth*. The idiosyncratic political fiction is haunted by a profound indecision, as if it were being pulled this way and that way by different forces and ideas. One can also sense a tug between its attempted realism and the assertion of its political beliefs. Descriptions of impressions and perceptions can look magnificent in themselves; yet often they are like pieces of drift ice bumping in the sea against each other, with nothing underneath to support them and hold them together, because the characters remain abstractions. In the end, while it abounds in cinematic details, intelligent analyses, and remarkable perceptions, the novel struggles to take on a life of its own. It is bewildering to see that at its most exquisite moments, Chang’s doom-and-gloom paranoia and prescience resonate with Orwell’s *1984* (1949), and yet this literary echo turns out to be a hollow one as we go down with the main character Liu Ch’üan on his journey into darkness, his voyage to the end of the night.

Whereas the desire to disclose the intricacies of the human heart dominate Chang’s earlier works, in *Naked Earth* historical events take center stage. Several key overlapping events—the Land Reform (1950-1953), the Three-Anti and Five-Anti campaigns (1951-1952), and the Korean War (1950-1953)—shape the tragic love story between college graduates Liu Ch’üan and Su Nan and bear upon the novel’s internal landscape. Chang’s vision is grim: it gives us a China where night dominates and the sun rises only to make characters feel colder, more disconnected from hope and tomorrow. Very seldom have we seen such a desolate picture of the country in the early 1950s and such a pitiful group of characters falling victims to the early shocks of Mao’s mass-mobilized economic and political movements.

Among the three sections of the novel, the one that involves the Land Reform is the most harrowing: it is rife with grotesque spectacles of physical torture. In the midst of a stormy struggle meeting, Chang thus observes one of the victims, a middling peasant (中农) who is reclassified as a landlord and must now face the full wrath of the masses:

T’ang bent forward as much as he could, tucking his head under him to shield it from the rain of spittle, mixed with

blows. His face was set in a mulish calm, at once guarded and remote, as if thinking that all they could do was wet his feathers, while the real him was wrapped into a small package tucked in the bosom of his blouse. (60)

Words such as “mulish,” “tuck,” “feathers,” “wrap,” and “package” echo each other and accentuate the abjectly dehumanized state that T'ang is reduced to. But the horror of becoming a “thing” is contaminating, and it haunts the spectators as well. The knowledge gained from witnessing such cruelty is silently deposited in Liu Ch'üan's mind, gradually reforming him, and eventually turning him into a rebel. In the immediate aftermath, however, it only precipitates his fierce impulse to protect himself, to pledge his loyalty to the party. His identity as a party insider is confirmed by his participation in the executions of landlords and his attempt to justify to himself the brutalities he has witnessed: “But there had to be excesses during a Revolution” (89).

After displaying the abominable abuse of power against peasants in the Land Reform, Chang plunges her dagger deeper in the Shanghai section by showing how authoritarian rule and political fervency corrupts the entire system and how conscience can be twisted. At a Three-Anti struggle meeting, as soon as he feels he has escaped the worst, Liu joins “the chorus of charges” “hooting and jeering” at the other person on the spot (191). Terror turns a thinking individual into a member of the mob. Everyone is for himself; nobody is safe. Liu's supervisor Ts'ui P'ing, a veteran soldier and high-ranking party-member, is betrayed by no other than his best friend who has gone through thick and thin with him during the war; Ts'ui's wife, who tries hard to save him when he is in prison, denounces him immediately after he is executed; and Liu finds that he himself has played an unwitting role triggering events leading to Ts'ui's death.

The only thing that offers hope and redemption is love. Liu Ch'üan and Su Nan are brought together by their immediate attraction to each other and their shared loathing for cruelty. They have their first “date” after fleeing from a torture scene they can't bear to witness. Love helps them cope with the cruel reality, enabling them “to squeeze out all the sights and sounds of the world outside” (88); they cling to each other for trust and sanity in a world gone mad. The plot takes a dramatic turn after Liu is arrested as a result of his connection with his now disgraced supervisor T'sui P'ing. Desperate to save Liu, Su Nan goes to Ko Shan, an older, sexy woman and a veteran Communist cadre Liu was previously involved with, for help. The latter, out of jealousy and malice, delivers the little white lamb right into the mouth of the big bad wolf—Shen K'ai-fu, the head of the Communist Hsin Hua News Agency who likes young women. Su succumbs to Shen's lust and dies in a botched abortion before Liu's release from prison.

With Chang's track record of creating impressively strong female characters, it is disappointing to see the female characters in *Naked Earth* struggle to come alive. The author's pen hovers and flutters over them but can't seem to find their souls. Could this have something to do with the lopsided way Chang leans on Liu Ch'üan for observation and perception? It is almost entirely through him we get to know every other character, who flicker across his eyes and mind.

In fact, without any distinguishing personal features and moral characteristics himself, Liu becomes more of a fictional

device than a real character in the end. He does not seem to have the inner strength and capacity to hold together the disparate, sometimes contradictory, ideas and impressions generated by his eyes and mind. His earlier, decisively condemning view of the Land Reform, for example, does not prepare us well for the following contemplations when the novel reaches its mid-point:

No, the Land Reform was a thing quite unprecedented in Chinese history. Good or bad, the fact remained that the landless farmers been given land. And land talks to them as money talks to other people. Then this was the first time anything had ever been done that affected the great stone heart of the peasantry. (133)

The character who seems a bit bland at the beginning is here showing greater intellectual acuity. He obviously has grasped something profound about Chinese peasantry, something hidden beneath propaganda images:

He had seen Li Hsiu-chung, a woman labor model from the old Communist areas, in a newsreel. ... A close-up showed her startled, shyly laughing face. Lu could never forget the happiness on that face. Who had ever made a fuss over her in all her life? What if this sort of thing was just an empty gesture, as Liu knew it to be, the pat on the back which had proved to be so effective when it went with the whip hand, and was extracting superhuman efforts from an exhausted people? The thing was: who had ever bothered before? He found himself asking the questions angrily, helplessly furious with the people who had been here before the Communists for landing his generation in the present fix. And once again he was back miserably at where he had started. (133)

But is Liu's perspicacity a result of his stepping back from his previous Land Reform experience or is this just Chang thinking out loud? Here, as in many other places, we are staggered by Chang's intelligence and insightfulness but are not sure if these qualities are transferred to her character well.

The void in Liu is deep. We know almost nothing about him or, more precisely, his past. He and other characters carry so little of their older selves into the present. Nothing is really known about their family backgrounds, for example. Never before have we met a group of Eileen Chang characters so unburdened and unaffected by where they come from. This is in contrast with Chang's earlier works, as well as *Rice Sprout Song*, where things and people are invariably shadowed by history—by ghosts from the past. And what about their memory, private or collective, about the life before 1949? In Liu's cogitations cited above, one catches a euphemistic reference to the KMT government—"the people who had been here before the Communists." Chang's swipe at the latter's role in "landing his generation in the present fix" is so quick it is almost unnoticeable; but it reminds us of what is acutely missing in the novel. If the story of *Naked Earth* takes place soon after 1949, it does not make sense that Liu Ch'üan and other characters so rarely think about their recent past.

Does Chang's evasiveness have anything to do with the USIS outline she had to abide by? Or is she herself ambivalent about this part of history? For whatever reason, political or otherwise, Chang in *Naked Earth* seems to be deliberately reducing the historical dimension and repressing her characters' memories of pre-1949 China. Except for

a few chinks with faint glimmers of historical consciousness showing through, the novel is wrapped in the unbroken darkness of the early 1950s' here and now. But if Chang is unable or unwilling to reach back to the pre-1949 past as much as she could or should have done, she is sagacious to discern portents that predicted catastrophic socio-political changes that were soon to sweep over Communist China. The ominous feeling that shrouds *Naked Earth* turns out to be politically prescient.

Chang apparently is using her alter ego Liu to recoup and channel her dark knowledge and fear of Red China. It is also understandable that by sending Liu to work in Shanghai, Chang let herself return to familiar territory. There is a lot of classic Eileen Chang in the middle section; the language is witty, detailed, and exuberantly metaphorical. Chang's detailed depiction of Liu's dabbling in erotic pleasure reminds us of Orwell's description of Winston Smith's sexual indulgence in *1984*. While Smith regards any instinctive human behavior and aberration as an act of defiance against "the Party," Liu's triumphant feeling about his love affair has a similar political undertone. But there is an ironic twist: Liu's bedfellow is a female Communist cadre who has more political capital and cache than he. Making love with Ko Shan is thus Liu's secret way of getting back at the Communist Party; it also fills him with a vainglorious sense of potency: "he would have a sense of immense wealth and power, going about incognito, a modest or overcautious millionaire wearing a plain blue cloth gown lined with rare fur" (151).

"Going incognito" indeed. Liu is keenly aware of the watchful eyes of others and the Party. He adapts himself to the perilous environment by using only his eyes to see but never his mouth to speak in public places. Yet seeing is ultimately too passive. After Su Nan's death, Liu volunteers to fight in the Korean War, hoping it would numb his pain of loss and guilt. The ending of the novel is surprising and strange. Now a POW, Liu is given three options of where to spend the rest of his life: mainland, Taiwan, or a third country. Liu chooses to go back to China as a saboteur. But on what grounds does our hero think he could accomplish such a mission by himself? If he has known the danger of living in a "Big-Brother-is-watching-you" government full well before leaving for Korean battlefields, and if Liu and his anti-Communist comrades are under the scrutiny of Communist sympathizers and spies at POW camps, then how could Chang let him make such a rash and unsound decision? This plot twist is as baffling and unconvincing as can be.

Chang herself left the mainland for Hong Kong in 1952. Three years later, in 1955, she departed for the United States on a refugee visa. Chang virtually had the same three options her character has. But she chose the third country; she neither went to live in Taiwan, nor did she ever ever return to the mainland. Dispatching Liu back to China as a rebel fighter looks like Chang's fictional fantasy. But there is a better explanation: this implausible ending could just be the result of Chang's attempt to accommodate a pre-assembled storyline, as the title of the original fictional project —*Farewell to the Korean Front* (告別朝鮮前線)—she took over to write for USIS suggests. The literary awkwardness is symptomatic of the quandary that Chang had to countenance in reality. Taking note of how, in a few short years, Chang switched from a pro-Communist stance in two earlier works of fiction written right after 1949 to her anti-Communist position in *Rice Sprout Song* and *Naked Earth*, David Der-wei Wang 王德威 astutely observes, using Chang's own words, that like many of her contemporary writers and intellectuals, Chang also lived "in the cracks of

history” (歷史的夾縫中).[6]

Compromise was necessary to survival. Yet it must be also impossible for a writer like Chang to perfectly align her own vision and insights about China with those of her American collaborators, who were fighting a hot cultural Cold War in Asia at the time—hence the contradictions and equivocations in the book. *Naked Earth* is then not just a fiction about a Communist soldier bidding farewell to revolution after going through hell; behind it is Eileen Chang's own journey into darkness—a story filled with her own knowing of the violent past and her own fearful foreseeing of larger terrors to come, and a story of her own ordeal of becoming a foot soldier, fighting, half-heartedly and resentfully, in the front line of a new “war.”

Notes:

[1] For Chang's complaints about the USIS outline, see *Private Words of Eileen Chang* (張愛玲私語錄), ed. Roland Soong (Taipei: Huangguan, 2010): 30, 51, 57-58. For discussions about the Cold War context of Chang's writing during this period, see Xiaojue Wang's *Modernity with a Cold War Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013) and Su Weizheng's 蘇偉貞 *The Lonely Island of Eileen Chang* (孤島張愛玲) (Taipei: Sanmin shuju, 2002). I use *Naked Earth* to refer to the English version and *Chidi zhi lian* the Chinese version throughout this review.

[2] Wang Mei-hsiang 王梅香, “Eileen Chang—The Unknown Story: *The Rice-Sprout Song* and *the Naked Earth* under the USIS Book Translation Program,” 歐美研究 *EurAmerica*, 45, no. 1 (Mar., 2015). According to Wang, *Chidi zhi lian* evolved from a book project entitled *Farewell to the Korean Front* (告別朝鮮前線) that Chang took over.

[3] Chuan Chih Kao's 高全之 *Eileen Chang Reconsidered* (張愛玲學) (Taipei: Maitian, 2008) has two chapters on *Chidi zhi lian*, including one comparing the differences between the Chinese and English versions.

[4] Although *Rice Sprout Song* was also called a “commissioned” work, it didn't go into the commission process until after Chang had already finished a few chapters.

[5] In 2007, NYRB released an English collection of Chang's earlier fictional works, *Love in a Fallen City*, translated by Karen Kingsbury.

[6] Wang Dewei 王德威, *1949: Scar Writing and National Literature* (一九四九：傷痕書寫與國家文學) (Hong Kong: Sanlian, 2008), 78.

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