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### Lust, Caution, Action



A book review by Sanaphay Rattanavong

Although banned for a long time from mainland China, Eileen Chang’s work remained popular in the Chinese-speaking world. By this month’s end, Chang’s short story, “Lust, Caution,” will have received a double shot of exposure to a global, English-speaking audience:

Anchor Books published on September 4, 2007, Chang’s short story as an Anchor Paperback Original (96 pp; \$9.00), translated into English for the first time by Julia Lovell; and on September 28, 2007, “Lust, Caution,” the major motion picture which the short story is the basis for, will be released. The film is directed by the award-winning Ang Lee, of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Brokeback Mountain* renown.

It is quite rare to be able to read a short story in English for the first time and immediately after watch the film trailer for it online. While this fact may be of particular academic interest to scholars of the culture industry and its movement toward globalization, it can be seen as a boon to reading advocates when filmgoers are drawn to the bound pages for the original stories. We note this phenomenon in the Harry Potter series of books/films. But “Lust, Caution,” was definitely not written for children.

“Lust, Caution” is a disillusioned love story told within a story of espionage, set in Shanghai during the World War II Japanese occupation of China. In this tense atmosphere, Wong Chia Chi, a student active in the resistance, who is also an actress, is chosen to play the

classic femme fatale in a plot to assassinate the collaborationist government's intelligence service head, Mr. Yee. Wong Chia Chi plays her part well and, after two years, gains the powerful Mr. Yee's trust—only to also gain something rather deadly as the plot finally comes to fruition. The final turn of the story is as unpredictable as the vacillations of the heart, which is Chang's point in writing the story.

Born in Shanghai in 1920, Eileen Chang came of age in a time of intense upheaval as China underwent a period of total reform. Many prominent Chinese writers of the time, in reaction to the preceding Sino-Japanese war and civil conflicts between ultra right-wing Nationalists and the Communist Party, turned radically leftward and subjugated their literary work to their political ideology. Chang's work, however, distanced itself from such rhetorical posturing. As translator Julia Lovell puts it in her forward to the story, "In the fiction of her prolific twenties, war is no more than an incidental backdrop, helping to create exceptional situations and circumstance in which bittersweet affairs of the heart are played out." And so Chang's work was criticized for its lack of interest in the grand themes extolled in the Communist Party's narrative of history.

"Lust, Caution" turned out to be the only story in which Chang made the main characters political operatives, in contrast to her other characters, who are usually just ordinary people dealing with the ground-level realities of life, love and loss. However, as Lovell notes, the characters themselves, as actors in wartime, are only there to play out "bittersweet affairs of the heart." What is more, the story forces us to consider the ticklish question of the differences between acting and performing. Wong Chia Chi is an actress playing a part; yet the decisions she makes in real life make up the performance of her life, which is a part she is simply playing. But this begs the question: Is not Mr. Yee also acting his part in the puppet government, performing his duty under Japanese authority?

Such questions of identity and acting, action (the exercise of free will, when the acts are deliberate) and performance are briefly discussed in an afterword by director Ang Lee and a short essay entitled "Why Did She Do It?" by screenwriter James Schamus. While this reviewer would have been happier with a more involved afterword and essay, it was stimulating to have some of Chang's story's implications drawn out, if only in brief.

It is rare to read a story that both moves you emotionally—and without the slightest trace of sentimentality—and leaves you thinking very hard about some of the basics of love and life. It is obvious that Chang thought very hard about these things: she began writing "Lust, Caution" in the early 1950's, and, after many revisions, completed it in 1979. Finally, in 2007, English language readers get their chance to ponder

such things with her. And then go catch the film.

Eileen Chang (1920-1995) was born in Shanghai. She studied literature in Hong Kong but returned to Shanghai in 1941 during the Japanese occupation, where she published two works, *Romances* (1944) and *Written on Water* (1945) that established her reputation as a literary star. She moved to America in 1955, where she continued to write. She died in Los Angeles in 1995.

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