ABSTRACT

Although the works of Eileen Chang (1920-1995) are universal in their appeal, they are deeply rooted in the tradition and culture of Shanghai. She understands the cynicism, cosmopolitanism and sense of superiority of the Shanghai people, and this enriches many of her works.

This dissertation strives to examine the "Shanghainese Theme" of Chang from different points of view. The relationship between Chang's works and Shanghai is analysed from social, cultural and linguistic perspectives respectively.

Chang concentrates on the everyday and the mundane in her novels and short stories. Unlike most of her contemporaries, wars and social changes featured very little in her works. This is typically Shanghainese. The people of Shanghai are a race of practical city-dwellers. They are cynical onlookers, not fervent participants of historical events. Like her fellow Shanghainese, Chang has an eye for details, a keen sense of observation and a wry sense of humour. All these shape the novelistic style of Chang as an author.

Chang's intimate relationship with Shanghai (of the bygone era) is evident in the fact that despite spending many years in the States, her works still have a distinct Shanghai flavour. Shanghai is not only her hometown, it also shape her outlook as a person and author and her literary vocabulary, in short, her person.

She is also a sort of linguistic genius, mastering English, the Northern dialects and Southern dialects (inclusive of Shanghainese). However it is Shanghainese that brings the dialogues between her characters to life.

Shanghai of the early part of the century is the backdrop to many of her novels and short stories. Many critics have described her literary style as splendid and decadent. This was the mood of the Shanghai of yesteryears. The motto of the people then was "carpe diem", hence the obsession about material wealth which gave instant gratification. Chang's works are filled with detailed description of interior décor, fashion and even cuisine. These are an extension of the Shanghainese spirit in her, relishing the materialistic.

Her dwelling on objects and elaborate descriptions of them belies a kind of shallowness. On close scrutiny, these descriptions are part of a moment, a sort of pensive calm, an oasis among the carnage and destruction of wars that were rampant in China at that time in history. However, this glimpse of everyday life and opulence of prosperous Shanghai conveys a sense of melancholy, stemming from the fact that she is reminiscing a bygone era, the "moment" has passed in a flash.

In order to understand better the complexity and intricacy behind Chang's works, it is important to delve into the urban and commercial culture that typify Shanghai. On one hand, Shanghai is the source of inspirations for Chang: its people, their attitudes towards life and the language have left a permanent mark on her. On the other, Chang as an author rises above Shanghai, the ultimate observer of the mannerisms, follies and triumphs of the Shanghainese, with a hint of nostalgia and affection.