



# A Sociological Reconstruction of Eileen Chang's Self-translation Practices from the Perspective of Actor-network Theory: A Case Study of *The Golden Cangue* to *The Rouge of the North*

Jingjing Cui<sup>1,\*</sup>, Ruixin Li<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Foreign Language Studies, Dezhou University, Dezhou 253000, Shandong, China.

<sup>2</sup>School of Foreign Language Studies, Liaoning Petrochemical University, Fushun 113001, Liaoning, China.

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**\*Corresponding author:** Jingjing Cui, School of Foreign Language Studies, Dezhou University, Dezhou 253000, Shandong, China.

## Abstract

Eileen Chang, one of the most representative bilingual writers in twentieth-century Chinese literary history, has long been regarded in self-translation studies as an author engaged in cross-linguistic rewriting of her own works. Traditional scholarship has predominantly focused on linguistic strategies, feminist perspectives, or postcolonial interpretations. This paper adopts Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as its analytical framework to reconceptualize Chang's self-translation practices as a project of "translation" (in the ANT sense) conducted within the cultural field of Cold War America—a dynamic process through which she strategically negotiated and constructed networks in an attempt to reconfigure her writerly identity and existential space. The study reveals that Chang's self-translation practices were not mere linguistic conversion but cultural productions embedded in specific social networks; her choice of translation strategies and the reconstruction of textual meanings, jointly shaped by multiple actors within the social field, have had profound sociological significance. This research offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding the social nature of literary translation and contributes to the advancement of translation sociology.

## Keywords

Eileen Chang; self-translation; Actor-Network Theory; translation; *The Rouge of the North*; Cold War literature

## 1. Introduction

Translation, as a bridge for cross-cultural communication, is a practice deeply embedded in social networks. Actor-Network Theory (ANT), developed by Bruno Latour and colleagues, conceptualizes the social as an ongoing product of interactions among diverse actors—both human and non-human—within dynamic networks, offering tools to reveal the sociality of translation practices. Self-translation, defined as "the act of translating one's own writings" (Baker, 2004, p. 17), ostensibly grants the author absolute control. Yet Eileen Chang's self-translations following her emigration to the United States—particularly the transformative process from *The Golden Cangue* to *The Rouge of*

<sup>a</sup> Jingjing Cui, was born in 1977. She is a professor at Dezhou University; her research field mainly focuses on foreign language teaching, translation, and intercultural communication.

*the North*—profoundly challenge this author-centered conception, constituting not merely linguistic transfer but a survival strategy and identity reconstruction under the dual pressures of Cold War cultural politics and economic necessity.

Employing ANT as its core analytical framework, this paper transcends traditional approaches that treat social forces as static “background” factors. Instead, it addresses Chang’s self-translation as a process of “translation” in Latour’s sense—a sociological practice wherein, through strategies of problematization, interessement, enrolment, and mobilization, she endeavored to construct and stabilize her literary network within a heterogeneous cultural field. This study attends not only to intratextual transformations but also to material forces beyond the text: the United States Information Agency’s political agendas, publishers’ commercial logic, readers’ Orientalist expectations, and even typewriters and royalty checks—all played pivotal roles in this network.

## 2. Paradigm Shift in Self-Translation Studies: From Authorial Centrism to Network Construction

The study of self-translation has long been dominated by an “authorial privilege” paradigm, which endows the self-translator with unique authority presumed to guarantee either exceptional fidelity or creative freedom. While this perspective acknowledges the distinctive position of the self-translator, it risks isolating the practice from its broader social determinants. Eileen Chang scholarship has traditionally mirrored this tendency, with studies focusing on her linguistic choices or feminist readings, often treating Chang as a sovereign agent and relegating social and material factors to mere context.

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) offers a fundamental reconceptualization. Developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law, ANT rejects the distinction between social context and textual content, proposing instead a flat ontology in which all entities—human and non-human, discursive and material—may act as participants in network formation. Within this framework, Chang emerges not as a sovereign creator but as one actor among many. Her self-translations constitute negotiated outcomes shaped by interactions with publishers, editors, readers, and institutional agendas, as well as with non-human actors such as the book as commodity, the typewriter as technology, and the royalty cheque as material necessity.

This approach aligns with recent developments in translation sociology, yet ANT’s distinctive contribution lies in its methodological insistence on tracing associations and refusing to privilege any single actor. For Chang, this means attending equally to Cold War geopolitics and to the specific material conditions of literary production in 1960s America.

## 3. Eileen Chang’s Actor-Network in America: A Cartography of Forces

Upon her arrival in the United States in 1955, Chang found herself in a complex cultural field densely populated with diverse actors whose interests intersected—and often collided—with her own. Mapping this network is essential for understanding the trajectory of her self-translation projects.

### 3.1 Human Actors: Institutional and Personal Mediators

The United States Information Agency (USIA) and its Hong Kong branch, the United States Information Service (USIS), constituted perhaps the most powerful institutional actors in Chang’s early American career. During the Cold War, American cultural diplomacy actively promoted translations of selected Chinese literary works that could serve anti-communist narratives. Chang’s employment with the USIS in Hong Kong before her emigration positioned her within this network; her two novels *The Rice-Sprout Song* and *Naked Earth* were produced and promoted through these channels, with the USIS acting as both patron and gatekeeper.

Academic institutions formed another crucial node. Chang’s residencies at the MacDowell Colony (1956), Miami University, the Radcliffe Institute, and the University of California, Berkeley, provided material support for her writing. At Berkeley, her relationship with Professor Ch’en Shih-hsiang exemplifies the dynamics of academic patronage. Chang’s inscribed copy of *The Rouge of the North*—“For Professor Shih-hsiang Ch’en, with respect, Eileen Chang, May 1969”—materializes this relationship, marking the book as both literary work and academic gift.

Commercial publishers, particularly in New York and London, operated according to distinct logics. The rejection of the early manuscript *Pink Tears* (the precursor to *The Rouge of the North*) by Charles Scribner’s Sons reflected not simply aesthetic judgment but market calculation. The eventual acceptance of *The Rouge of the North* by Cassell

& Company, London, in 1967 involved a different set of considerations, possibly Chang's growing reputation from prior publications.

Readers constituted another crucial set of human actors. Chang wrote for multiple audiences simultaneously: the English-language reader of translated literature, likely to possess Orientalist expectations; the Chinese diaspora reader accessing her work through publications such as Hong Kong's *Sing Tao Daily*, which serialized the Chinese version of *Yuan nü* in 1966; and the academic sinologist. These audiences exerted competing pressures, pulling her text in different directions.

### 3.2 Non-Human Actors: Material Mediators

ANT's distinctive contribution is its insistence on the agency of non-human actors. In Chang's network, several material entities played active roles. The manuscript itself, in its multiple incarnations—handwritten draft, typescript, galley proof—mediated between the author and the publisher, carrying not only the text but also the material traces of labor, correction, and negotiation. The typewriter, as a technology of literary production in mid-century America, shaped the very possibilities of writing, imposing its own rhythms and constraints.

Royalty checks and advances functioned as powerful non-human actors. Chang's correspondence reveals persistent financial anxiety; the need for income from writing was not merely a contextual backdrop but an active determinant influencing decisions regarding the subject matter of writing, the publication timing, and the contracting parties. The economic rationale of literary production was manifested in these documents, imposing constraints on aesthetic selections.

The physical book, regarded as a commodity, with its cover design, typography, binding, and pricing, played a role in meaning construction. The Cassell edition of *The Rouge of the North* presented on its back cover a photograph of the young Chang in traditional Chinese clothing, with a biographical text highlighting her lineage from Qing dynasty officials Li Hongzhang and Zhang Peilun. This paratextual framing actively established an authorial identity for English-speaking readers, positioning Chang as an authentic representative of China's imperial past—an identity construction that might have deviated from her self-perception.

Even the bibliographic facilities of libraries were involved in network construction. The inclusion of *The Rouge of the North* in university library catalogs converted the book from a commercial product into a scholarly resource, integrating it into academic networks of citation and interpretation that persist to the present day.

## 4. Translation and Negotiation from *The Golden Cangue* to *The Rouge of the North*

The textual transformation from the 1943 Chinese novella *The Golden Cangue* to the 1967 English novel *The Rouge of the North*, through the intermediate English manuscript *Pink Tears* and the concurrent Chinese version *Yuan nü*, forms a complex instance of “translation” in both linguistic and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) perspectives. Examining this trajectory reveals how Eileen Chang's network shaped the textual results.

### 4.1 Chronology of Transformations

The sequence is instructive: *The Golden Cangue* (1943, Shanghai) → *Pink Tears* (English manuscript, mid-1950s, rejected) → *The Rouge of the North* (English novel, completed by 1966, published 1967) → *Yuan nü* (Chinese novel, serialized 1966, book publication 1968) → *The Golden Cangue* (self-translated English story, published in *Twentieth Century Chinese Stories* anthology, 1971). This chronology reveals that Chang's self-translation was not a single event but an extended process of rewriting across languages, genres, and time. Each version represents a distinct negotiation with her network.

### 4.2 From Story to Novel: Genre Translation

The transition from novella to novel entailed not only linguistic transposition but also fundamental generic reconfiguration. *The Golden Cangue* is a highly concentrated narrative of approximately 30,000 Chinese characters, centered on the psychological decline of the protagonist Ts'ao Ch'i-ch'iao within the context of the Jiang household. In contrast, *The Rouge of the North* expands to the full length of a novel (185 pages in the Cassell edition), elaborating on the backstory, developing secondary characters, and extending the temporal range.

This general expansion was a response to network pressures. In the 1960s, the Anglo-American publishing markets preferred novels to story collections for commercial publication. A novel was more marketable, more likely to attract

review attention, and more effective in establishing an author's reputation. Therefore, Chang's negotiation with publishers involved not only language translation but also the translation of literary form itself.

### 4.3 Title Transformations: The Work of Problematization

The evolution of titles exemplifies what ANT calls "problematization"—the process by which an actor defines a problem and renders herself indispensable to its solution. *The Golden Cangue* names a specific object—the golden lock that symbolizes Ch'i-ch'iao's spiritual imprisonment—as the story's focal point. *Pink Tears* shifted to a more sentimental register, perhaps attempting to appeal to readers of mid-century women's fiction. *The Rouge of the North* effected a more radical transformation, invoking an exoticized Chinese idiom for feminine beauty.

Chang's exploration of the origin of the phrase indicates her active engagement in network construction. In her 1966 correspondence with scholar Chuang Hsin-cheng, she documented her consultation of the Library of Congress catalog, aiming to verify that the phrase originated in the seventh century. Although conclusive evidence could not be obtained, she still added a note in the published book, ascribing the phrase to "presumably the seventh century." This academic approach, encompassing the note, the visit to the Library of Congress, and the consultation with an expert in Chinese literature, enlisted academic authority to uphold the cultural authenticity of the book.

The phrase itself, "Southern Dynasties gold dust, Northern Lands rouge", carried connotations of feminine beauty across China's regional divides. For English readers, "rouge of the north" evoked exotic femininity while remaining accessible. For Chinese readers of the simultaneously published *Yuan nü*, the title invoked a literary register without requiring the scholarly apparatus. The title thus performed different work for different network constituencies.

### 4.4 Textual Negotiations: The Female Body

Jessica Tsui Yan Li's comparative analysis demonstrates how Chang's representations of the female body evolved across versions, simultaneously reinforcing and undermining Chinese and Western aesthetic ideals. This oscillation reflects negotiation with multiple audiences. For English-language readers potentially expecting Orientalist exoticism, Chang provided sufficient cultural specificity to satisfy expectations while maintaining critical distance. For Chinese readers familiar with the original, the revisions offered new perspectives without betraying the story's essential vision.

The endings differ significantly across versions—a finding documented in multiple studies. These variations cannot be attributed solely to aesthetic evolution but represent strategic responses to different publication contexts. The English novel, facing an audience unfamiliar with Chinese social structures, required different explanatory burdens than the Chinese versions addressing knowledgeable readers.

## 5. Sociological Reconstruction of Chang's Self-Translation Practices

Viewing Chang's self-translation through the ANT lens enables a fundamental sociological reconstruction. Her practices emerge not as the autonomous decisions of a bilingual genius but as negotiated outcomes shaped by heterogeneous networks.

### 5.1 Survival Strategy and Identity Reconstruction

Chang's American years were marked by chronic financial instability and the burden of caring for her paralyzed husband, Ferdinand Reyher. The need for income was not background context but an active force in her translation decisions. Self-translation represented a survival strategy—a means of extracting maximum value from existing literary capital by rendering Chinese-language work accessible to English-language markets. Meanwhile, these practices reconstructed her identity. The author who had been a literary celebrity in 1940s Shanghai became an obscure Chinese emigrant writer struggling for recognition in America. Self-translation offered a path to reconstructing authorial identity within new networks. The paratextual framing of *The Rouge of the North*—emphasizing descent from Qing officials, presenting the young Chang in traditional dress—actively constructed an identity calculated to appeal to English readers. This was not falsehood but strategic self-presentation, identity as network negotiation.

### 5.2 Cold War Cultural Politics

The Cold War context permeated Chang's network at multiple levels. The USIS patronage that supported her early English writing carried implicit expectations about acceptable narratives. While Chang never engaged in crude anti-

communist propaganda, the very fact of American institutional support positioned her within Cold War cultural diplomacy networks.

More subtly, the Cold War shaped what kinds of Chinese literature were publishable in English. Works emphasizing universal human themes—family conflict, psychological complexity, feminine experience—were more acceptable than those engaging explicitly with contemporary Chinese politics. Chang's focus on Republican-era Shanghai in *The Rouge of the North* positioned her work as safely historical, avoiding the contentious present.

### 5.3 Material Conditions and Textual Outcomes

The material circumstances of literary production in 1960s America influenced textual results in ways that conventional translation studies fail to consider. The economics of publishing, including advances, royalties, and production costs, determined the feasible scope. The technology of writing, such as typewriters, carbon paper, and international mail, influenced revision practices. The geography of literary production, encompassing New York publishing houses, London printers, and Hong Kong newspapers, established a spatial network through which Chang's texts circulated.

These material actors participated actively in shaping Chang's self-translations. The need to produce a manuscript that a typist could read affected revision practices. The costs of international postage influenced decisions about which versions to send to which publishers. The physical format of the published book—its size, binding, price—determined which readers could access it.

## 6. Conclusion

Eileen Chang's self-translation practices, examined through the lens of Actor-Network Theory, reveal dimensions invisible to traditional translation studies. The transformation from *The Golden Cangue* to *The Rouge of the North* was not merely a linguistic conversion but a complex process of network construction and negotiation. Chang engaged simultaneously with multiple actors—USIS patrons, commercial publishers, academic gatekeepers, diverse readerships, and material technologies—each exerting pressures that shaped textual outcomes.

This analysis demonstrates the productivity of ANT for translation sociology. By refusing to privilege any single type of actor—whether authorial intention, textual feature, or social context—ANT enables analysis of translation as heterogeneous network practice. Chang emerges not as a sovereign creator but as one actor among many, her translations representing negotiated settlements among competing interests.

The implications of this research transcend the realm of Chang scholarship. Conceptualizing self-translation as a network practice offers insights into the social construction of all forms of translation, thereby challenging the persistent Romantic notions of authorial autonomy. Translation, encompassing both self-translation and other-translation, is invariably a collective endeavor—a collaborative effort of networks that integrate human and non-human agents in specific configurations to generate texts.

For future research endeavors, Actor-Network Theory (ANT) advocates for a more meticulous consideration of material actors within translation networks, specifically the technologies, institutions, and objects that contribute to the shaping of translated texts. Comparative investigations of the networks of different self-translators would shed light on how configurations vary across diverse contexts. Moreover, a longitudinal analysis of the transformation of networks over time would unveil the dynamics of literary reputation and canon formation. Chang's *Rouge of the North*, published in London in 1967, inscribed for a Berkeley professor in 1969, and catalogued in university libraries across three continents, continues to be involved in networks that its author could not have envisioned. The sociological reconstruction of its production reveals translation as what Latour terms a “thing”—a convergence of forces that, through their assembly, establishes enduring associations. Comprehending these associations is the objective of a genuinely sociological approach to translation studies.

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