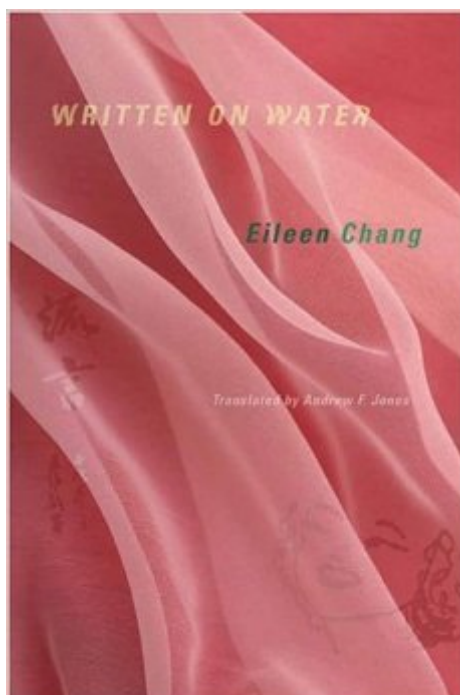


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Written On Water (Weatherhead Books On Asia)



Synopsis

Known as "the Garbo of Chinese letters" for her elegance and the aura of mystery that surrounded her, Eileen Chang is regarded as one of the greatest and most influential modern Chinese novelists and cultural critics of the twentieth century. In *Written on Water*, first published in 1945 and now available for the first time in English, Chang offers essays on art, literature, war, and urban life, as well as autobiographical reflections. Chang takes in the sights and sounds of wartime Shanghai and Hong Kong, with the tremors of national upheaval and the drone of warplanes in the background, and inventively fuses explorations of urban life, literary trends, domestic habits, and historic events. These evocative and moving firsthand accounts examine the subtle and not-so-subtle effects of the Japanese bombing and occupation of Shanghai and Hong Kong. Eileen Chang writes of friends, colleagues, and teachers turned soldiers or wartime volunteers, and her own experiences as a part-time nurse. Her nuanced depictions range from observations of how a woman's elegant dress affects morale to descriptions of hospital life. With a distinctive style that is at once meditative, vibrant, and humorous, Chang engages the reader through sly, ironic humor; an occasionally chatty tone; and an intense fascination with the subtleties of modern urban life. The collection vividly captures the sights and sounds of Shanghai, a city defined by its mix of tradition and modernity. Chang explores the city's food, fashions, shops, cultural life, and social mores; she reveals and upends prevalent attitudes toward women and in the process presents a portrait of a liberated, cosmopolitan woman, enjoying the opportunities, freedoms, and pleasures offered by urban life. In addition to her descriptions of daily life, Chang also reflects on a variety of artistic and literary issues, including contemporary films, the aims of the writer, the popularity of the Peking Opera, dance, and painting.

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Customer Reviews

I have to disagree with the two previous reviewers. These essays are simply wonderful -- sensuous, vivid, maybe trivial, but for a reason. Chang was writing in Shanghai during the time of the Japanese occupation, when censorship made it impossible to be political. Thus her focus on the everyday, the quotidian, the little pleasures and hardships of life. These essays, some of which are very personal, provide a wonderful backdrop to some of her fiction. Also, they present a picture of war-time Shanghai that does not quite match the image presented in history books. I loved every one of these essays and recommend this anthology to anybody interested in Eileen Chang, modern China, Shanghai or urban modernity.

Book was in great condition, as described. Eileen Chang is a wonderfully talented writer of fiction but these essays are by far my favorite of her works, particularly because many are semi or autobiographical and it is a wonderful peak into the mind of this fascinating woman.

I have read several books written by Eileen Chiang which I've enjoyed but this is not an easy book to understand. I believed it to be taken from her point of view on life in general. I will have to re-read it one day as I did not finish it.

I was absolutely disappointed by this book. I've read Eileen Chang's major novels and short stories and found her fiction extremely insightful. I expected similar quality from her essays and assumed that I would be getting wise quirky essays in the tradition of Linyu Tang. Unfortunately these essays are nothing more than badly written commercial rubbish that she churned out for popular magazines. None of them show the slightest thought or insight, and they aren't even well written. In fact, writing trivial articles about the history of dress collars while Shanghai was under cruel Japanese occupation even seems morally questionable. There is a good introduction by the translator/editor, which provides some useful context and argues for the significance of these essays. And to the historian interested in daily life of the period, the contents might have some interest. In general, however, these minor writings are nothing more than commercial ephemera.

The translation of this collection can only do harm to the reputation of one of modern China's great fiction writers.

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