The Presentation of Chinese Women in Literature Written in English: From Literary Criticism to Literary Creation

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Although I did my formal postgraduate research in Chaucer and Shakespeare, almost from the beginning of my career as a university teacher I have been fascinated by the literary portrayal of Chinese women in Anglo-American literature. I felt that I knew something about both areas and had something interesting to say. But it was not until the late 1980s that I began to do serious research into the whole issue of the literary presentation of Chinese women. The result was the publication in 1989 of a book entitled *Through Western Eyes: Images of Chinese Women in Anglo-American Literature* by Joint Publishing Company. It contains a number of essays on the delineation of Chinese women in Western literature, primarily in literature written in English. Together they give a picture of the evolving image of Chinese women up to around 1990. Since that date many important developments have taken place which have had a tremendous impact on the presentation of Chinese women in

literature written in English, and I have tried to keep abreast of these developments and will discuss them also in this article.

Until the early years of the 20th century, few writers of literature in English attempted portraits, or even cameo sketches, of Chinese women, and looking at these portrayals one is inevitably struck by the almost total lack of knowledge and of understanding about China and the Chinese up to very recent times. In my study of the evolution of the images of Chinese women, in order to lend credibility to my research, I have attempted to grapple with the whole issue of "accuracy" of portrayal. Needless to say, the question is fraught with dangers and difficulties. How does one safely assess "accuracy" in literary characterization? When one is dealing with portraits of Chinese women of the past, historical documents and case studies throw light at least on general conditions and the plight of women at given periods of time. For example, Jonathan Spence's *The Death of Woman Wang* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978) is a rare case study in English of a peasant woman in 17th century China and it is an invaluable work. Comparisons with women delineated in Chinese literature dealing with a comparable period are also of great value. And as a Chinese woman, though one is inevitably bound to a particular time and environment, I occasionally fall back on my own powers of perception and interpretation.

Certainly the earliest presentations of Eastern women of any widespread currency appear in *The Travels of Marco Polo*. It was he who brought to the attention of the West the beauty of Chinese women. One description may well be seen as encapsulating for future Western readers all the beguiling qualities associated with Chinese women in her stereotypical representation. Polo describes the genteel life of rich merchants of Kinsai (Hangzhou):

> As for the merchants they are so many and so rich...that no one could give an account of the matter...And their wives ...are most

> refined and angelic creatures and so adorned with silks and jewelry that the value of their finery is past compute...Men as women are fair-skinned and good-looking. Most of them wear silk all the time...

He also gives a detailed account of the polygamous habits of Kublai Khan and, without comment, relates at once the splendors of his harem and the servitude of the women. We can see how his detailed account of how concubines were chosen would certainly have satisfied the fantasies of the most chauvinistic Western male.

Polo's *Travels* was and is widely read. Penguin Books, for example, published its first English translation in 1958, and since then it has been reprinted over ten times. For some five hundred years or so after Marco Polo's travels, China and its women remained essentially remote and mysterious to the West, though the continued activities of navigators, travelers and missionaries of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries brought the West into contact with China. Until after the mid 18th century the Jesuits were an important bond between the East and West. By the latter part of the 17th century they held first place as authorities on China. They were also China's best apologists, and gave favorable reports of the Chinese, markedly different from some of the unfavorable reports of traders.

Through the 18th and 19th centuries China and Chinese women as seen through English eyes appeared in the literature of the time. Interest in China was increased by the Macartney embassy, which set sail in 1792 and was largely for trade purposes. In spite of its failure to achieve concrete commercial objectives, it had tremendous influence in that it generated a great deal of interest in China. Macartney wrote an account of his travels, in which he showed he had been impressed by certain aspects of Chinese civilization. His work appeared in 1807, a year after his death. Macartney's man servant, Aeneas Anderson, had

already published details of the embassy in 1795. The popularity of these accounts generated more publications on the subject.

Vague and romantic notions of China prevailed, and China and Chinese themes appeared not infrequently in English literature of the 18th and first half of the 19th century. On a material level, tea was becoming more and more popular as a drink. The bulk of the cargo of the East India Company was tea. Samuel Pepys relates in his *Diary* how he drank tea for the first time in September 1661 (London, 1906, p.101). With tea came porcelain ware. The vogue of hoarding porcelain began in the late 17th century. Also imported from China and much desired were paintings, wall paper, lacquer ware and *objets d'art.* But this superficial fascination with China and things Chinese did not include any real attempt to know about and understand the country and its people. Pre-20th century works show very unfair, unreal and inaccurate portrayals of China and the Chinese. And what is particularly exasperating is the apparent complacent refusal to find out more.

Examining the English literature of the 18th and 19th centuries we can hardly find any attempt to delineate the Chinese as a race of human beings, let alone an individual Chinese man or woman as a human being. John Milton's geographical imagination roves over "the Chineses" (*Paradise Lost*, III, l.438).

In the 18th century Samuel Johnson used China to denote the farthest reaches of humanity: observation was to view humanity from "China to Peru". ("The Vanity of Human Wishes," l. 2) Daniel Defoe included a "Chinese" part in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), but his knowledge of China seemed to be based on no more than hearsay and prejudice as well as a smug chauvinism. One passage in particular is interesting from my point of view in that it relates to the servile status of Chinese women and the hateful male chauvinism of gross Chinese men. This is a Western view, which seems to have been perpetuated in works like *The World of Susie Wong.*

> [This gentleman was] under a tree...under the tree also was placed a large umbrella...he sat lolling back in a great elbow-chair, being a heavy opulent man, and his meat being brought by two women slaves; he had two more, whose office, I think few gentlemen in Europe would accept of their service in, viz., one fed the squire with a spoon and the other held the dish with one hand and scraped off what he let fall upon his worship's beard and taffety vest, with the other...

In *Citizen of the World* (1762) Oliver Goldsmith tried to satirize Europe through a puppet Chinaman, but there is no attempt to characterize the instrument of satire: the letters are essentially satires directed at human foibles in general. Accuracy in matters of detail does not worry him. In spite of Letter XVIII being entitled "The Story of a Chinese Matron" he unabashedly introduces the matron and her husband as the "fondest husband ...and the most endearing wife in all the Kingdom of *Korea*." In describing how the Chinese matron tricked herself out for her second marriage he writes that she "wore in her nose a jewel of immense price," clearly mixing up Indian customs with Chinese ones. In an outrageous passage in Letter XCIV Goldsmith makes reference to the open polygamy practiced then by Eastern men. The little beau in that letter sings the praises of seraglios, and comments,

> A seraglio, a seraglio...wipes off every inconvenience in the world. Besides I am told... Asiatic beauties are the most convenient women alive, for they have no souls; positively there is nothing in Nature I should like so much as ladies without souls...

Indeed there is much in the whole piece to disturb feminists but with its total disrespect for the truth and anything-for-a-laugh cavalier attitude to Chinese women and Chinese customs there is much more to disturb Chinese feminists.

Ignorance of China and its customs is freely acknowledged. Leigh Hunt in a letter to *Tait's Magazine* in 1833 (Collected in *The World of Books)* underlines this ignorance—

> China, sir, is a very unknown place to us...

but he goes on to tell of the stereotypical generalizations about the Chinese held by Westerners

> But who is not intimate with it as the land of tea, and China and ko-tous and pagodas, and mandarines, and Confucius, and conical caps, and people with little names, little eyes, and little feet, who sit in little bowers, drinking little cups of tea and writing little odes?

Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) engages in a lengthy and relentless diatribe against the Chinese—"this vilest and silliest amongst nations"—in his essay on China. His comment is directed against the whole Chinese race, as is J.S. Mill's (1806-1873) criticism of the conformity of Chinese people to fixed norms and conventions of behavior, which has resulted in total stagnation, and lack of progress. ("On Liberty") As far as Chinese women are concerned, what allusions we have to them largely have to do with their being sex objects and sources of pleasure for men rather than as individuals. Marco Polo describes Chinese women as having fair skins and wearing silken garments. The willowy and exotic Chinese beauty as a stereotype has persisted in Western literature to this day. Western readers have been intrigued for centuries by S.T. Coleridge's portrayal in "Kublai Khan" of the mysterious woman "wailing for her demon lover."

Although Great Britain's contact with China in the 19th century was mainly concerned with trade, there were also some missionary activities. Much scholarly and useful work was done by missionary scholars like Robert Morrison to make the Chinese language and Chinese culture more accessible to the Europeans. This was part of the effort to convert the Chinese. Morrison thought that learning the language was not enough and his

dictionary of the Chinese language is supplemented by his *Views of the Chinese*, and introduction to Chinese history, geography and other aspects of Chinese culture. But in spite of his work and that of other missionaries Europeans rarely went beyond a superficial acquaintance with the Chinese language and with Chinese culture. The Chinese in general were not considered in human terms.

The work, which perhaps comes closest to interpreting the mind of the Chinese people to the West, is that of James Legge, who tried to make accessible to English readers the rich heritage of the Chinese classics. For those interested it became possible to understand women's lack of status in Chinese society through reading Legge's translation of *The Book* of *Rites*:

> Man is the representative of Heaven, and is supreme over all things. Woman yields obedience to the instructions of man, and helps to carry out his principles. On this account, she can determine nothing of herself and is subject to the rule of the three obediences. When young, she must obey her father and elder brother; when married, she must obey her husband; when her husband is dead, she must obey her son...

One Chinese woman figure that forced her way into the consciousness of many Westerners seemed to contradict the general picture of subservience and lack of status. This was the very formidable Empress Dowager Tz'u-hsi (Cixi), who reigned as regent over the declining Manchu empire, the power behind the throne in China from 1861 to 1908. In 1943 Mauris Collis's play about the exploits of the Empress Dowager, *The Motherly and Auspicious*, was acted on the London stage. Cixi holds center stage and must have contributed towards creating a new concept of individualistic Chinese womanhood. The characterization, though stylized in places, is more distinctive than what we find in Hsiung Shi-i's *Lady Precious Stream*, a play that was very popular in Britain in the 1930s. Although written by a Chinese scholar it does little but pander to the expectations of Westerners who

tended to think of the Chinese as a quaint and backward race given to arranged marriages and aphorisms.

A new type of literature about the Chinese appeared at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century in the United States. The large migration to the United States of Chinese people, mostly men, as laborers meant Americans had the opportunity to observe the ways of Chinese people, mainly of the laboring classes, disadvantaged as they were by being aliens in an alien country. The immigrants were regarded with suspicion, fear and contempt. In an admirable study, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India* (New York, 1958), Harold Isaacs traces all these attitudes. Men tended to go to "the gold mountain" by themselves, leaving their womenfolk in China. Afterwards the American Exclusion Act (1882-1943) restricted entry to women. As a result the only Chinese women Americans saw were saloon hostesses and women of ill repute. The work of Bret Harte and Mark Twain and others from the second half of the 19th century on gives only examples of evil and/or ridiculous Chinese men. The stereotypical image of Chinese women was that of a sultry siren. Chinese "dragon ladies" became popularized in American culture through books like Sax Rohmer's about the evil, manipulative Fu Man Chu and his be-jeweled, be-fringed, slanty-eyed henchwomen.

The turning point in the depiction of Chinese people in general and of Chinese women in particular came with the arrival in China of a number of Western—mostly Americans—journalists and missionaries in the early years of the 20th century. They observed China and its people at first hand and saw a China, which was on the brink of tremendous changes, a land torn by civil war, student unrest and military oppression. Women writers like Pearl Buck, Agnes Smedley and Helen Foster Snow were acutely conscious of the situation of Chinese women, many of whom were taking vast strides from their feudal past into the present. During the 1920s and 30s and into the 40s during the Sino-Japanese War portraits of Chinese woman, historical,

fictional, historical-fictional appeared in the work of such writers who won varying popularity in the West. Pearl Buck, for example, had a vast readership in the United States and Europe, her *Good Earth* reaching millions of people all over the world. She won a Nobel Prize for her achievements. Agnes Smedley, on the other hand, had a small readership, and still does. Only her autobiographical novel, *Daughter of Earth* has a limited circulation in the United States and is included in a few women's studies curricula.

Throughout the late 1920s translations of Chinese poetry, especially poetry of the T'ang Dynasty, came into vogue through the work of translators like Arthur Waley, Ezra Pound, Witter Bynner, Amy Lowell and Florence Ayscough. Images of beautiful women, gorgeously adorned, like Yang Kuei-fei of the Po Chu-i poem, began to make an impression on a small circle of the cognoscenti. Han palace poetry also gave images of woman in love and under oppression, women as aesthetic objects. During the period of the Second World War China became the ally of the West and the Soong sisters (Ai-ling, Ching-ling and Meiling, and Meiling in particular) became legends in the West, especially the United States.

The Year 1949 saw the beginning of what can be called "Hong Kong Literature" in English, with few exceptions written by Anglo-American men. One of the first "Hong Kong" novels to achieve international reputation is probably Han Suyin's *A Many-splendoured Thing* (London 1952) which gives the West a carefully delineated portrait of a Eurasian woman. Han Suyin insists on her Chinese consciousness and attitude. Many more "Hong Kong novels" have appeared since the publication of *A Many-splendoured Thing*, including James Clavell's *Taipan* and *Noble House*, Robert Elegant's *Dynasty*, Christopher New's *Shanghai* and *Change of Flag*. They are of varying degrees of merit and include many portrayals of Chinese women from many walks of life, with a broadening of the slanty-eyed *femme fatale* stereotype.

Meanwhile in the United States Chinese Americans usually of the second and third generation became more and more vocal in expressing themselves in literary writings: short stories, novels and plays. Their works tend to focus on themes relating to alienation or integration and on their ethnic "roots." Exponents of what has become recognized as a separate genre—"Chinese American Literature"—include some widely read writers like David Henry Hwang, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Gish Jen. There is no doubt these writers exert much greater effort to create three-dimensional Chinese characters, but critical opinion is not unanimous in judging the portraitures to be "just" and "accurate." Some critics, and not a few Chinese readers and viewers of films made from such works, find them exploitative in that they deliberately emphasize the "quaint" aspects of their Chinese characters, creating new stereotypes such as the fiercely ambitious "Chinese mother" with her "endearingly" embarrassing fractured English.

Another category of writing about China and the Chinese has emerged. Many are overtly autobiographical and tell the story of Chinese women growing up in China, suffering through tumultuous historical and cultural changes, then often settling ultimately in the West. Works like Nien Cheng's *Life and Death in Shanghai* and Jung Chang's *The Wild Swans* come readily to mind. In works of this type the Cultural Revolution in China tends to be brought out in all its terror. The stories are told with intensity and passion and evoke strong emotions. We have come a long way from the one-dimensional caricatures of Chinese women encountered in many earlier works.

It is clear that a number of factors have been and are working together to bring about more optimistic prospects for a sharper focusing of images of Chinese women in literature written in English. Firstly there is the generally more enlightened, liberal tenor of the times. Secondly the world is truly becoming more and more of a global village. International travel, the increase in the number of popular books on China and the development of the

mass media and the internet mean that more and more people have contact with the reality from which the portraits of Chinese women are drawn. We still have some way to go but once a large percentage of the world ceases to regard China and the Chinese as mysterious and totally out of reach, then writers of even potboilers will have to aim for multidimensional portrayal, and only fall short through lack of skill or knowledge rather than lack of caring. A third factor has to do with the feminist movement. Feminism as a militant movement may be a spent force, but one very commendable by-product is the interest it has generated in women in literature, women as writers and as literary creations. Because of the wish to understand and give a sympathetic hearing to women of all races, nationalities and persuasions, works of Chinese women writers are more and more available in translation, and more Chinese women have the opportunity to "speak" to Western writers, if only through their translators. A fourth factor I have already just referred to. The increasing number of writers—like Jung Chang and Adeline Yen Mah (*Falling Leaves*, 1997)—who write, and write successfully in English have helped make Chinese women less chimerical in the Western mind.

Having spent over two decades in the analyses and criticism of literary presentations of Chinese women, I decided it was high time for me to try my hand at the process of literary creation rather than of literary criticism. My first work of historical fiction—*All the King's Women*—was published in May 2000 by the Hong Kong University Press. It gives an insider's view of life inside the household of a very wealthy man in the early decades of the 20th century. Lee Pak Hung, nicknamed "the King" because of his wealth and power, flees to Hong Kong in 1924 in the aftermath of "the Merchant Corps" debacle in Guangzhou and takes up residence on the Peak, an area which was out-of-bounds for Chinese at that time. The King lives in a huge mansion with his growing number of concubines, three sisters and 48 servants not including the *muitsai* or bondmaids, innumerable

poor relations and hangers-on and a remarkably small number of children. I had married into a similarly complex family and I drew my inspiration from real-life characters and situations. Though the work focuses on eight women in the King's life, it gives a historical perspective of what life was like for a wide spectrum of Chinese women. The narratives of the eight women are tied together by the overall narrative of the King and his immediate forebears, but each story can be read as an independent entity.

I set out with two specific goals. I wanted to try my best to present the women as human beings, not caricatures, and I was guided in this difficult task by certain criteria that I had adopted in my writing of literary criticism. Generally these principles were: (1) that the character has a normal range of emotions and motives which are realistically shaped by his/her environment; (2) the character is clearly an individual who has personal concerns that are realistic and convincing within the context of the story; and (3) all the descriptions and values of Chinese culture and history are accurate and used appropriately with regard to the character. (Based on William F. Wu, *The Yellow Peril,* Archon, Hamden, Conn. 1982).

In addition to making every effort to do justice to my Chinese women characters and to the milieu in which they lived, I was anxious to create a mood, which is not often found in fiction about China's feudal past. In such fiction the mood is usually somber, one of oppression and intensity. Ferocious mothers-in-law, tyrannical masters and mistresses, murderous rival concubines and a general atmosphere of suffering and despair are the order of the day. While totally aware that life for most women in those times was no laughing matter, I try to leaven the mood with humor and a more light-hearted approach. The women are for the most part gutsy and street-smart, and within the constraints of the social and cultural mores of the day, able to fend for themselves. In writing my novel I was anxious to adhere to the third criterion named above, viz. fidelity to the values of Chinese culture and history. As any good academic should, I did quite a lot

of research into certain areas. A number of topics of historical and sociological interest are brought into the narrative, for instance the importance of male offspring, the significance of bound feet, the institution of concubinage, bondmaids or *muitsai*, different marriage patterns in southern China, such as the delayed marriage, the "substitute" bride and sworn spinsterhood. I try to bring in these topics in human, new and refreshing ways—as any good storywriter should.