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Through Western Eyes:

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Images of Chinese Women

in Anglo-American Literature

by Mimi Chan

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For my family

About the Author

Mimi Chan was born in Hong Kong during the Second World War. Indeed the War - and not human choice - dictated the place of birth since her family had for generations lived in Southern China.

After the War Mimi Chan's father took up a diplomatic post with the Chinese government and the family went to live in New York where the author began to learn English and started elementary school in Public School 117 in the borough of Queen's. Life as a child in the United States came to an end not long after 1949. Mimi Chan returned with her family to Hong Kong, there to learn to read and write Chinese, a language which she had virtually forgotten in her American years. She completed her primary and secondary education at Maryknoll Convent School in Hong Kong and then went on study at the University of Hong Kong. She read English language and literature and was appointed Tutor in the Department of English after graduation. During her two-year tenure as Tutor she completed research for a M.A. degree on Chaucer. Mimi Chan then went on a Commonwealth Scholarship and did research on Shakespeare at University College, London.

She returned to the Department of English Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Hong Kong after completing her studies in London and was appointed to her present post of Senior Lecturer in 1976. She has published articles on Shakespeare, Chaucer, English-Chinese translation and on bilingualism. Her published work includes two monographs on lexical borrowing, the first from

English into Chinese and the second from Chinese to English.

Mimi Chan is married with two children.

Acknowledgements

Whatever reception this volume receives I can say with conviction that I shall not have any regrets about the time and effort I have spent on it. In the first place it represents the fulfilment, partially at least, of an academic ambition I have cherished virtually from the beginning of my career as a university teacher. Secondly in the course of my study I have had the opportunity to experience the genuine kindness of so many fellow academics, who have given unstintingly of their time and knowledge. The topic of the representation or, more often, of the misrepresentation, of Chinese women in literature written in English was first suggested by a colleague, Amelia Sun - truly a paragon of Chinese womanhood. To her I am very grateful. Although other research interests diverted my attention from this fascinating subject for many years I shall never forget the absorbing discussions Amelia Sun, another colleague, Helen Kwok, and I had about the topic, and how indignant we waxed over what we felt to be gross injustices done to Chinese women by Western writers. For her stimulating and insightful contributions to these early discussions and for her subsequent unfaltering interest in my project I also owe Helen Kwok a debt of affectionate gratitude.

In 1985, another colleague, Wong Tak-wai, urged me to present a paper at a conference on Hong Kong Literature which he was helping to organize. I agreed and the result was, in an unrevised form, my present Chapter V. For rekindling my interest in the literary presentation of Chinese women at a time when my research interests were almost exclusively linguistic I am very grateful to Wong Tak-wai,

and to Leung Ping-kwan, another of the conference organizers. Leung Ping-kwan encouraged me to expand my research and incorporate my findings in a book. He also put me in touch with the Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Joint Publications, Poon Yiu-ming. I wish also to thank most sincerely yet another colleague, Kingsley Bolton, who gave many useful suggestions as well as unfailing moral support. He introduced me to Judy Young, *South China Morning Post* librarian, who very kindly gave me access to the newspaper's files of photographs. I am grateful to L.Y. Chiu and C.Y. Sin of the Department of Chinese, who provided respectively much-needed information on Chinese History and Chinese Etymology. I was truly impressed by the promptness and thoroughness of their responses. I must also acknowledge the assistance of the Department of Comparative Literature, Pennsylvania State University, under whose auspices I gave a seminar on my work in progress in 1986. I was able to gauge popular response to my work. I am particularly grateful to Earl Moser of Penn. State's Department of Spanish for his charming and vocal appreciation of my early efforts and for his information about Spanish writers. Grateful thanks are also due to T.L. Tsim, Publisher, Chinese University of Hong Kong, for drawing my attention to the very pertinent and interesting work of Hsiao Ch'ien. I am deeply grateful to Ada Lee, who typed the early drafts of my manuscript and Susanna Lew, who laboured over a wordprocessor for weeks on weeks, typing and re-typing the final drafts, Beryl McKenzie, the best and most conscientious proof-reader that any writer could ask for, Samantha Chan and J.C. Lai, who undertook the arduous task of making my manuscript camera-ready. If mistakes are still present they are the result of my own carelessness, not theirs.

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Mimi Chan

Department of English Studies
and Comparative Literature
July, 1988

Foreword

I was introduced to the Chinese language and the academic study of China without the benefit of prior education in popular works on that country and its people, and the first images of Chinese women I can now recall with any sharpness of definition were derived from ocular observation in Hong Kong in the late 1950s. Both the pampered sylph-like beauties and the wicked empresses, in which guise Chinese womanhood, as I learn from these pages, had been represented to the West for generations and even centuries, had simply passed me by, or had not seemed real enough to leave any trace on my memory. The Hollywood 'vamp', Anna May Wong, might have made an impression, but, alas, I was born at the wrong time, and she was only a name to me. In the light of this book's matter, how Anna May went about her vamping would have been of interest. The activity itself is practised the world over, but *modi operandi* differ, and one hopes for the sake of those who did get to see her that Hollywood did not require her to be too obvious and heavy-handed. I suppose from the word *yaojing* that the Chinese did have their "come up and see me sometime" model, but the combination of "apparent delicacy and fragility on the one hand, and knowing coquetry on the other", as Mimi Chan puts it, has culturally been more typical. Native Chinese fiction suggests that seclusion and reticence also help make attraction fatal: what sets the man's heart fluttering is usually a glimpse fleeting of a woman at a window or behind the curtains of a sedan chair; and bashfulness is pretended even by courtesans. It is questionable how

far foreign representations of Chinese seductresses, however richly adorned and admiringly described, could prove seductive when shorn of this dimension of bearing and behaviour.

However, whatever sins of commission or omission Western writers have perpetrated in portraying Chinese women, in general the Chinese literati were there ahead of them. When they were not picturing lonely wives fading away while waiting for their men's return, they were revelling in dressing up the famous women of their history in finery and exciting themselves by extravagantly picturing their allure, while at the same time enjoying the luxury of condemning them - for it was the bad girls, self-destructive and destructive of great men and mansions, who most appealed to the Chinese male imagination. At the same time, there was no doubt a sound factual basis for presuming conquering charm:if only matrons were accorded a legitimate sphere of authority, lesser-women had to cultivate the arts of seduction in order to secure a position of influence for themselves. For those who made it to the top, and became ruling empresses, again it was China's own scholars who supplied the makings of scurrilous stories for the Westerners to elaborate and retail - with what relish this book describes.

Both Mimi Chan's personal interest and the relative weight of material have determined that the twentieth century should dominate her study, especially the period since the Second World War, which destroyed Western "master race" notions and put an end to seeing the East simply as a source of curiosities, human and otherwise. Though of course fantasies of female submission to male domination survive, the meeting of Chinese woman and Western man has since then been more and more based on the presumption of equal relationships, which nevertheless does not lessen the power of refashioned old models such as

Richard Mason's Suzie Wong, who in her film portrayal was responsible, so I am informed, for attracting more than one young man into Chinese studies.

But I should not give the impression that this book is all about the fate of Chinese women at the hands of male writers. Indeed, on balance women writers probably come in for more attention, from Americans like Pearl Buck through half-Chinese like Han Suyin to wholly Chinese like Bette Bao Lord and Nien Cheng (though the last two were still educated abroad). With them and their writing, since more or less intimate knowledge did not lack, the emphasis is on literary presentation.

Particularly in regard to the "Hong Kong novel", Mimi Chan's reactions to the works she discusses are as interesting and often more interesting than the works themselves, for implicity she represents the real woman against whom the images in literature are measured. Fortunately she does not relentlessly maintain academic detachment. But wisely she does not roundly assert what the reality is, either. Plainly that would be impossible to describe in all its variety. Present-day Chinese women can freely pick and choose their own cultural models. The hypersensitive Lin Daiyu of *The Story of the Stone* does not seem to have entirely lost her grip, but any number of other, including Western, models have crowded in to contend for domination. And there is the added complication that the same person can assume a different personality according to whether she is speaking Cantonese, Mandarin, or English. But then the same is true of men, and to try to develop this line of thought would lead me into greater and greater confusion, so I should at this point pass the reader into the safe hands of the author, who

as adumbrated above is not only an interested party, but also an experienced teacher of English literature, and is used to dealing with subtleties.

David E. Pollard

Professor of Chinese School
of Oriental and African Studies
University of London
January, 1988

Note on the Chinese Names

I have used the Wade-Giles system of Romanization in the case of names which have to some extent, however small, gained currency in the West in that form, for instance *T'zu-hsi*. With names which came to the attention of the English-speaking world only after 1949, as in the case of *Jiang Qing*, I have used the pinyin forms.

Preface

I. A Chinese Woman Speaks

This book 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. Until the early years of the twentieth century few writers of literature in English attempted portraits, or even cameo sketches, of Chinese women. And for this reason the main focus of my research will be on twentieth century works. In my essays I bring in sociological and historical information, but my approach is principally literary. I want, and, to lend credibility to my research, *need* to grapple with the whole question of "accuracy" of portrayal. This question is beset by 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 actual 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, 1978), a rare case study in English of a peasant woman in seventeenth century China, 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 have on occasion fallen back on my own powers of perception and interpretation.

But the whole concept of verisimilitude in art is fraught with imponderables, and "images" are unstable and changing. And the same object can be seen as different images according to perspective. When I was young, two Western journalists, unbeknown to me, took photographs of me to illustrate stories about glimpses of Hong Kong women printed in two separate journals. In one I presented the image of the young mother, with two toddlers at the beach; in another, replete with business suit and brief case in the Central District, I represented "the Hong Kong Career woman".

I have tried to "anchor" my discussion by the more tangible analyses of the literary techniques used by the writers in their portrayal of Chinese women: their use of narration, description, comment and dialogue. Dialogue is particularly interesting in this context. The conventions used by an author in formulating the dialogue of his Chinese women characters can be very illuminating in terms of his/her intentions and of the reader's response to the characters. With this brief preamble let me now begin, as it were, from the beginning.

II. Brief Historical Survey of Contacts between the West and China

(i) The West Comes to China

Marco Polo: The activities of navigators, travellers and missionaries of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought the West into contact with China. The name which immediately comes to mind when one thinks of early East-West contact is that of Marco Polo (1254-1324). Marco Polo was the son of Niccoli Polo, a Venetian merchant. His father and uncle had already made one visit to

China in 1260 when Marco joined them for the second journey in 1271. They spent the next twenty years travelling in the service of Kubilai Khan. He was allowed to return home to Venice in 1295. In 1298/9 Marco was a prisoner of war at Genoa. It was probably in prison that he met Rustichello of Pisa, a Romance-writer. Together they wrote *The Travels*. *The Travels* is the product of an observant merchant and a professional romancer. In *The Travels* Marco Polo described an area from the Polar Sea to Java and from Zanzibar to Japan and in so doing revealed a world almost wholly unknown to western civilization. In particular the West was enthralled by the splendours of the Mongol court. Certainly the earliest presentations of Eastern women of any widespread currency appear in *The Travels*. There is no doubt that Polo was not immune to feminine pulchritude. In *The Travels* there are no less than ten specific references to the beauty - and in one case (of the women of Zanzibar) lack of beauty - of women. It was he who brought to the attention of the West the beauty of Chinese women. As Polo travels east on the road to Cathay he keeps up a continuous commentary on the appearance of the women he encounters. He also includes "exotic" accounts of Middle Eastern and Eastern customs and mores in connection with 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 (Hang-chau)

> As for the merchants they are so many and so rich and handle such quantities of merchandise that no one could give a true account of the matter: it is so utterly beyond reckoning. And I assure you that the great men and their wives and all the heads of the workshops of which I have spoken, never soil their hands with work at all, but live a life of as much refinement as if they were kings. And their