Wise Daughters From Foreign Lands

EUROPEAN WOMEN WRITERS IN CHINA

ELISABETH CROLL

PANDORA

Wise Daughters from Foreign Lands

European Women Writers in China

Elisabeth Croll

PANDORA

London Winchester Sydney Wellington

First published by **Pandora Press**, an imprint of the
Trade Division of Unwin Hyman, in 1989

PANDORA PRESS

Unwin Hyman Limited
15/17 Broadwick Street, London W1V 1FP

Unwin Hyman Inc
8 Winchester Place, Winchester, MA 01890

Allen & Unwin Australia Pty Ltd
P.O. Box 764, 8 Napier Street, North Sydney, NSW 2060

Allen & Unwin NZ (in association with the Port Nicholson Press)
Compusales Building, 75 Ghuznee Street, Wellington, New Zealand

---

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Croll, Elizabeth, *1944 –*
Wise daughters from foreign lands : European women writers in China.
1. English literature. Women writers. Special subjects. China
I. Title
820.9'3251

ISBN 0–04–440414–X

Typeset in 11/12.5 point Times
Printed by Billings & Sons, Worcester

To my mother, Joan, and my father, Bob, whose lives and ideals in a Presbyterian manse have aided me in the understanding and appreciation of the lives and works documented in this book

Now there are happily certain benevolent gentlemen and virtuous daughters of ability, wise daughters from foreign lands, *who have initiated a truly noble experience. They have addressed our women in animated exhortations. . .*

Kung Hui-cheng, lineal descendant of Confucius, 1895

Preface

I can remember the exact moment that this book was conceived. Lost in a fictional world of Beijing (Peking) at the turn of the century which had been unusually but faithfully depicted by an American woman writer, I reluctantly closed the last chapter late one Saturday night with the question: who was this woman that she could write like this? I decided to find out, and so was born a new hobby, discovering the persons and works of European women writers on China. The six women writers presented here were selected because of the inherent interest of their writings, their diverse but complementary experiences and their influence on contemporary and international images of China. Their biographies are based mainly on a study of their books, which are more non-fiction than fiction, their published articles, and for some their autobiographies. Their writings have revealed six vibrant and curious women who not only depicted many of the customs and practices affecting domestic and social life in Chinese society earlier this century, but also inadvertently left a record of their own attempt to pursue somewhat unconventional and independent lives in still-circumscribed times. Although there is a remarkable story behind each of these women, this book is more than a series of biographies of six women European authors who resided and travelled in China from the turn of the century. It is also about the China which they observed, their images, impressions and interpretations of Chinese domestic and social life and of the lifestyle of Europeans residing in China.

My acquaintance with the six European writers featured in this book began more than ten years ago when I was writing

a history of the women's movement in China. During that study, it was frequently necessary to rely on the less formal of historical sources, and in particular to consult eye-witness accounts and interviews recorded in diaries, autobiographies, letters, magazine articles and books written by both Chinese and European women. Often they alone had documented the attitudes, responses and the experiences of the women who had either participated in or observed important movements, events and trends affecting the role and status of Chinese women in the twentieth century. Several of the books written by European women from the end of the nineteenth century to the mid-1930s proved to be especially interesting in that either they had better documented the domestic and social roles of Chinese women or because they had become best sellers in Europe and North America and were thus responsible for creating and nurturing many of the popular contemporary European images of Chinese society and Chinese women. As a result of my later training as an anthropologist, my initial interest in the books developed into a curiosity about the experience and perceptions of the European women writers and their own multiple roles in China as Europeans, as women and as writers akin to ethnographers.

British and American writers in China usually referred to themselves in their writings as Europeans, a practice to which this book adheres. Although European women in China as a social category might be made up of many different nationalities including American, they largely shared language, meanings, symbols, values and sacred and secular rituals. These reference points were important in providing them with a sense of common European identity in a strange and unfamiliar environment. Indeed it was the very novelty and strangeness of China which defined anew and strengthened their contrasting experience not only as Europeans but as Europeans with a definite interest in China. Following the conventions of their day they largely divided the world into the dual, separate but uneven halves of East and West (or sometimes Orient and Occident), a usage this book has followed. In writing of European women and allowing them to speak for and

represent China and Chinese women, this study recognises that it is European rather than Chinese women who at this time had the greater capacity to write about Chinese culture for an international audience. It can only be said that the choice of writers, topics and incidents included here takes images and representations which reflect as accurately as is possible Chinese customs and practices as verified over long periods of anthropological study. The production of this book, a long-term hobby, has been accompanied alongside my publications of Chinese women's own stories and views of themselves and hopefully will be followed some time in the future by a companion volume which takes as its starting-point the autobiographies of six Chinese women writers.

Many people have helped me further my knowledge of these European women writers. I would particularly like to thank Mrs Wigan of Hallaton, Leicestershire, Lady Little and Mrs Little of Wheatley, Oxfordshire, for sharing their memories of their aunt, Mrs Archibald Little. Ms Linda Wrigglesworth generously allowed me to see the scrapbooks of Mrs Archibald Little which had passed into her possession. Mrs Mary Clarke, of the British Embassy in Beijing, and Vanessa and Ken Whinney provided helpful information on Sarah Pyke Conger, as did Carol Becker of the United States Department of State in Washington DC. Many libraries helped in procuring the works of each of the women writers and I would especially like to thank Frances Wood of the British Library and the staff of the School of Oriental and African Studies Library. Many friends have taken an interest in this project and passed on interesting and relevant materials. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank Helen Callaway, Peter Carey, Delia Davin, Ray Dawson, Felicity Edholm, Mark Elvin, Hilary Laurie and Maxine Molyneux. My thanks also to Philippa Brewster who as publisher and friend has given more than the usual encouragement to this long-term project, and to Marilyn Mastrandrea, Marcia Eedle, Anne Aggersburg, Gertrude Booty and Sharon Lewis, who have patiently deciphered and typed the various drafts of the manuscript.

In thinking about the ways and means by which these European women writers depicted Chinese society and its women and mediated their own and Chinese culture, I am particularly indebted to my colleague David Parkin for his timely suggestions, to Felicity Edholm for her comments on Chapter 1 and to Jane Hunter's very fine book *The Gospel of Gentility* which, taking European women missionaries in China as its focus, set an exacting precedent. As a long-time hobby the research and writings of this book have required more than the usual understanding and co-operation from Jim, Nicolas and Katherine Croll – for which I thank them. I would also like to mention my friend Jenny Mark who was tragically killed in the summer of 1988. With unfailing generosity, she always took a special interest in 'my ladies'.

In a very real sense these women writers are my own forebears in that I too have devoted the major part of my professional life to studying and writing on Chinese domestic and social life, albeit as a trained anthropologist. These women, their writings and persons, have contributed much to my own professional and personal interests over the past few years. I hope therefore that I have managed to convey some of this interest and most of all the pleasure and sometimes excitement that have accompanied the discovery of each of these women writers: be it the individual details surrounding the personal circumstances of their arrival and stay in China, their first impressions and longer-term depictions of Chinese domestic and social life, Chinese culture and European culture in China or their own and others' expectations of themselves as women and as writers.

Elisabeth Croll
London 1988

Contents

1

Depicting Domestic and Social Life in China: *Six European Women Writers*

It was not until the later decades of the nineteenth century that European women began to reside in large or significant numbers in China although the first treaty ports had been open to European residence since the 1840s. Indeed the early treaty port centres of commercial and consular activities could be likened to the trading posts and mining camps or transient stations of other continents which followed a predominantly masculine routine. Company days were punctuated by flurries of feverish activity attendant upon the arrivals and departures of mail, and vessels bearing consignments and diplomatic negotiations between Chinese and foreign representatives were interrupted by intermittent periods of sporting or shooting centred on the Club. Community life might make periodic allowance for the few European consular, company or mission wives, but outside of Shanghai their numbers were few until the foreign treaty port settlements themselves expanded as China's markets and China's millions became the object of European commercial hopes and missionary aspirations. As the number of concessions permitting the establishment of foreign settlements and foreign traders and missionaries to travel, trade and preach individually in the interior regions of China multiplied so did the numbers of European women resident in the country. Most commonly they came to China as wives accompanying

their missionary, merchant and diplomatic husbands but they came also in smaller numbers as mission nurses, teachers or preachers and even as travellers in search of themselves and of adventure.

For each of the brides and wives newly resident in China there was usually an initial degree of culture shock during the period shortly after her arrival when she had to adjust the images and expectations which she had brought with her to China. Most had come with expectations shaped by romantic images of the exotic East. China was popularly thought to be a land of pagodas and pavilions, of fans and lanterns, of silks, satins and pigtails and other distinctive oriental material and cultural objects. Indeed their picture of a Chinese landscape was very much based on the blue and white willow-patterned plates with their delicately curved arch-bridges, streams and drooping willows – landscapes which in the traditional style of Chinese brush paintings dwarfed the tiny human figures as if the latter's presence was almost incidental. First time visitors then, as today, admired the curve of the roof, the grace of the pagoda and the artistry of the gardens, but they had been also less prepared for the endless brown of mud, waters and earth, the equally common dust, dirt and disease and the swiftness of a typhoid or cholera death. They were frequently unprepared for the endlessly crowded village and city streets where, as members of a small intrusive and privileged European minority, 'superior' in their Christian beings and secure in their European heritage, they were not always welcome. They were frequently unprepared for the violence of a divided nation that was also the China they inhabited. Indeed the century of European settlements in China was marked by periodic outbursts or bouts of violent xenophobia and there were few resident European women who did not at some time experience fear. During their stay many were forced to flee their homes for the very safety of their lives. It was these factors as much as the strange, romantic and aesthetic which shaped the lives of European women in China in the first decades of the century.

Most European women in China had to come to terms not only with a strange culture, with unfamiliar languages,

gestures and meanings, but they usually had to come to terms also with leaving the comfortable homes and life patterns for which their socialisation had invariably prepared them and with the absence of familiar and significant others. Mothers, sisters, friends and very often their own school-age children were absent in far North America and Europe, so that they were several months away from even the fastest return letter or packet. For some, their newly-married lives of loneliness and isolation in a different and strange land, away from all things familiar, initially – or even permanently – assumed a quality of 'exile' and sent them rushing to recreate familiar domestic rituals in a foreign environment. For so many resident women, homemaking and the arrangements of familiar objects within a company, legation or mission house assumed greater proportions than they might have done 'back home'. Gardens too came in for an inordinate amount of loving care and attention partly to fill new-found leisured hours and partly as a reminder of 'home'. The retreat into the domestic refuge by most European women in China was not only a practical gesture embracing or clinging to the familiar, but also a symbolic gesture consciously or unconsciously signalling their retreat into an inviolate private domain protected from things Chinese. The same defensive attitude towards the strange, the unfamiliar and the alien might be displayed by the small foreign communities established in the city treaty ports from the turn of the century.

Many European women, faced with the strange, appropriated anew their own culture and sought the company of others with like backgrounds within the small foreign communities. These foreign enclaves were usually located in small land concessions set aside for the purpose of European settlement alongside ocean or river anchorages with a bund and promenade for evening walks, a church, a club and a race course. Set among these might be several houses of assorted but recognisable national architectural styles, and indeed it is still a fascinating exercise today to identify the boundaries of the concessions and the nationalities of their inhabitants by their distinctive styles of architecture – at least

of those that have survived the planning rigours of the last thirty-five years. Within a treaty port, much of the social life of the community centred around a strenuous regime of male sports such as rowing, rackets, fives, cricket, bowling, riding and pheasant shooting, but women were permitted to join in the tennis and the bridge and they were delegated to organise the numerous social occasions celebrating the various national festivals of the calendar year. They had their own entertainments with elaborate rules detailing the rituals of 'calling cards', receiving 'at home' and entertaining. Despite the tensions inherent within them, these taut foreign communities were nevertheless close-knit enclaves whose members tended to seek reassurance in their cultural heritage and 'superiority' during times of peace and mutual protection when under threat from Chinese anti-foreign outbursts.

Although several of the women writers featured in this book were also conspicuous for their loving recreation of a succession of European homes and a European environment, they looked beyond the boundaries of home and treaty port communities and took a novel interest in Chinese culture and Sino-European relations. Indeed what distinguishes the women writers featured in this book is their relative detachment from their own domestic and foreign community affairs especially when compared to other European women of their acquaintance. It is true that the six women writers were frequently physically located in scattered homes or in towns without foreign concessions, but when they resided within and did participate in the affairs of treaty port communities, they did not allow themselves to be fully encompassed by the smallness of enclave affairs, preferring instead to observe them with a slightly humorous air. A constant theme in many of their novels and books was the fatigue and spiritual ennui of European women who, longing for the familiar in home and children and custom and entirely encompassed by the affairs of their heart, home and foreign community, neglected almost entirely the world of Chinese culture and society of which they were also part.

What equally distinguished the women writers presented here was their curiosity about Chinese domestic and social

customs and especially the life patterns of Chinese women. It is in their depiction of these that they have left valuable ethnographic records of their time in China. It was and is still fashionable for foreign travellers and residents in China to write of their travels and experiences in that country, however brief, and a number of European women have left records of their stay in China. Out of these I have selected six women and whether their writings took the form of fiction, personal narrative or letters, they frequently wrote in comprehensive detail of both Chinese and Sino-European domestic and social life. Once published, many of them contributed to the accumulating public knowledge of China and the more popular images of the China of their times. Although all of the six women writers in this book played a full and wide-ranging role in mediating, observing and depicting Chinese culture in Europe and North America, each of the six women's experience in China and of Chinese culture was also different and in some cases unique.

The British Mrs Archibald Little, who lived for several years in a Chinese town in the far western interior province of Szechwan (Sichuan), is best known for her founding of one of the first anti-footbinding societies in China and for her record of the campaign to 'stand the women of China on their feet'. Sara Pike Conger, wife of the American minister in Peking at the turn of the century, befriended the Empress Dowager and a number of noble ladies of the court. As one of the first and frequent visitors to their homes, she made the most of every opportunity to record their customs. Grace Seton Thompson, traveller and journalist, has left a unique written and photographic record of her interviews with the first generation of Chinese women to acquire new public roles in the professions, commerce and industry. Chicago-born Alice Tisdale Hobart first wrote of her travels and homesteading experiences as a young company wife in China and then a number of novels which thoughtfully explained the experience of young European traders, missionaries and company men and women in China throughout the turbulent twentieth century. Young Nora Waln, an American student of Chinese in Philadelphia, had the good fortune to be invited to live as an 'adopted daughter'

within a large and extended gentry household. *The House of Exile* which closely documents the daily and domestic arrangements and practices of the household has long since informed and given enjoyment to students of Chinese domestic and social life. Finally Pearl Buck, the daughter of missionary parents in China, wrote the best-selling novel *The Good Earth* about peasant life in China. She also wrote numerous other novels, her own autobiography, the biographies of her missionary mother and father in China and several works of non-fiction and translations so that for a generation of Europeans it was she who almost single-handedly depicted Chinese domestic and social life. In a recent study of American attitudes towards China, it was her writings which were designated one of the most important sources of American images and expectations of China in the twentieth century.

Although each woman writer's experience of China was very different, they had a common curiosity which caused them to take advantage of every opportunity to travel in China. Their books reveal a fund of experiences and adventures from the relatively advantageous position, if not always the comfort, of the sledge, mule cart, litter or sedan chair in environments ranging from far-flung Tibet or the northeastern frozen waste to a Chinese coal mine. Mrs Archibald Little, smothered in a large fur coat to look like any Mandarin, ventured as the first European woman to travel in far-western China and in unknown parts of Tibet. Alice Tisdale Hobart set off on sledge trips in the frozen north of China for weeks on end in so many layers of clothes that she could barely move. Others were less ambitious, but all contrasted the day-time sights and the gentle swaying of the sedan chair with the nightly indignities of the dirt-ridden, bedbugged Chinese inns when fearful of being objects of curiosity or sometimes hostility they could not undress to reveal their foreign identity let alone their sex. Away from the crowds and inns, however, they explored the mountain tracks and farmed parts of the Chinese countryside, observing a China quite unlike that of the treaty ports and cities and towns. They saw the coolie woman bearing heavy baskets hung from her shoulders; they stopped to stare at

the neatly dressed mothers sitting on their low stools in the narrow alleyways patching clothes, fondling their children or preparing foodstuffs; and they saw and heard the boatwomen as they wove their sanpans in and out of the crowded canal and river traffic. In China at this time though, even the most imaginative travellers were constrained. However much the travellers might glimpse and observe, to foreign eyes in the early decades of the twentieth century, the lives of Chinese peasant and gentry women still lay hidden from all but the most privileged, curious and determined. There were few opportunities for foreigners to observe informally the daily life of gentry and village women for their activities largely took place within enclosed family compounds behind high solid brick, adobe or stone walls. Consequently, there were few occasions for informal contact between European women, largely confined to public spaces, and Chinese women, largely confined to their domestic affairs.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Chinese social life generally was the segregation of the sexes and the domestic seclusion of women. From earliest times all women had been taught that they should not concern themselves with public affairs: 'A wife's words should not travel beyond her apartments' and 'a woman does not discuss affairs outside the home'. Women were denied any formal participation in any of the government or local community institutions and all the significant Confucian ceremonial roles in society could only be fulfilled by men. Even within family and kinship units all the leadership and ceremonial roles had been reserved for men. Only they could perform the ancestral rites of such importance in the clan or lineage. The absence of women in public spaces and their confinement to the domestic sphere was further reinforced by the concern for and almost obsession with the preservation of their virtue and honour. The practice of binding feet, which could devastatingly restrict mobility, the cult of feminine chastity and ideal of segregation had led to the virtual isolation of women within their own households. Indeed the very word for *woman* was *neiren* which literally meant 'inside person'. Within the confines of the women's apartments in