

# The Unexpurgated Diary of a Shanghai Baby

by Elsie McCormick



With a Foreword by Graham Earnshaw

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## FOREWORD

by Graham Earnshaw

THE WORLD of the Shanghailanders, the foreigner residents of Shanghai in the years up to the Japanese invasion of central China in 1937, and somewhat beyond, is no better illustrated than in this wonderful little book, the diary of a baby, aged perhaps around twelve months old. It was not actually written by the baby, at least I reluctantly assume that it was not, but rather by a lady named Elsie McCormick.

Ms McCormick was an American and in 1916, while studying at the University of California in Berkeley, she wrote out a list etiquette rules for female students wishing to live up to man's ideal of a perfect college woman, which included the following:

Rule 11. Do not study anything useful. Coeds should specialize in English and a diluted form of art history.

Rule 12. Always look and act as silly as

possible. If you can't think of anything else to do, giggle.

It was already clear that she was capable of producing delightful satirical barbs, a skill she was to make full use of in the *Unexpurgated Diary of a Shanghai Baby*.

In 1923, Elsie published a book called *Audacious Angles on China*, which sold well and included the first version of the *Unexpurgated Diary of a Shanghai baby*. A third edition of the *Unexpurgated Diary* was subsequently published as a stand-alone in Shanghai by the Chinese American Publishing Co in 1927. By the 1930s, Elsie was writing from the United States for the *New Yorker* magazine, which is all the confirmation that anyone needs of the quality of a writer's work.

What is depicted in this book is a foreigner family living in Shanghai in the 1920s. It was a city that was by then famous for being cosmopolitan and free-wheeling, where people lived hard, and either made a lot of money or crashed spectacularly.

Father works for a foreign company, and

clearly enjoys the nightlife entertainment opportunities provided by the city. Mother is freed from household chores, and even from looking after the baby, by the network of servants who run everything. The baby, meanwhile, sits on the floor and listens to the squabbles between his parents, while also enjoying another world – of which the American parents are blissfully unaware – of the Chinese maids and gardeners and drivers.

This idea of foreign children in Shanghai being brought up more by the servants than by the parents is well-documented, and old foreign residents who spent their younger years in the city often had experiences similar to those of the baby. J.G. Ballard, who wrote *Empire of the Sun* and other books about his experiences of growing up in Shanghai fifteen or twenty years after the baby in this book, is just one of many.

The foreigners in this Shanghailanders world were spoiled rotten, of course. And this master/servant, Foreigner/Chinese culture, fueled by money on one side

and poverty on the other, was created in Shanghai and transplanted after 1949 to Hong Kong. However, there appears to have been less fraternization between the Chinese servants and the children in Hong Kong than in the old Shanghai of the 1920s and 1930s.

The foreigners used to complain at their dinner parties about the servants, but it was the servants who actually kept the life of their households moving. A lot of the gentle jokes in the book involve the baby observing things the servants are doing which would appall the parents if they only knew. Like the room boy stealing the socks and the amah taking the baby to have an afternoon nap “with Chinese baby getting over mumps”.

Shanghai in the 1920s was entering a phenomenal growth spurt, and there was a big influx of foreigners of all nationalities, white nationalities anyway, to take advantage of the opportunities. Most of the central city was built in those years. The mansions for the foreigners and rich Chinese and the vast swathes of two-storey jerry-built alleyway tenements, now being torn down

to make way for the Shanghai of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to house the hundreds of thousands of workers pouring in from the countryside to work in factories owned by people like the baby's father.

The foreigners spent their time at home or the club, where they could sign for everything. Cash did not change hands. They went to afternoon tea dances at the Palace Hotel or the Astor. They attended race meets at the race track which is now the People's Park in the center of the city. They got drunk a lot.

There are some references in the book which need to be explained.

On the first page, the baby refers to Opal Whitely and Daisy Ashford, names that mean nothing to us today but would have been instantly recognizable to Elsie's readers in the 1920s. Opal Whitely was a woman who published a book in 1920 called *Opal, the Journal of an Understanding Heart*, which she claimed was her diary written when she was a child, growing up in Oregon. It was a best-seller for a time, and then Opal was



accused of making it up, and she spent most of the rest of her life in a mental institution in England.

Daisy Ashford, meanwhile, was an English writer who published a book in 1919 called *The Young Visitors*. She had written it at the age of nine, and it took digs at upper-class English society in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a big success, and remains in print today.

The baby and Elsie were obviously inspired by these two books by young writers, and decided to go one better.

We never find out the name of the baby, but it is male. We also know that the baby takes a definite dislike to a Japanese baby he meets in Hongkew Park. This piece of geographical information is useful because it indicates where the family was living – in the Hongkou district north of the Bund, beyond the Garden Bridge over the Soochow Creek, in what had once been the American Settlement.

The baby conducts his own little war against the Japanese baby, which is not

*precisely* how the baby refers to its rival, reflecting the geopolitical situation of the times. Japan was on the rise through the 1920s and 1930s, leading in the end of the horrors of the China and Pacific theaters of the Second World War. Even in the early 1920s, westerners were mostly uncomfortable with this aggressive, militaristic and focused Oriental power, a sharp contrast to the messy, lovable and totally unfocused world of China where westerners seemed to feel very much at home.

Many of the foreigners of old Shanghai used to communicate with the swirling mass of Chinese people around them with pidgin English, a quite ridiculous mish-mash of words in which chop-chop meant “hurry” and “Ningbo more far” meant “a long way away”. Carl Crow, the pioneer of the advertising industry in China in those years and author of *Foreign Devils in the Flowery Kingdom*, actually wrote some children’s books in the dialect. He would have known Elsie McCormick for sure. Elsie thoughtfully

provided a glossary of pidgin terms used in the book at the end.

Towards the end of the first chapter, one of the Chinese servants playing his *erhu* in the basement of the family's house inspires a reference to Mischa Elman, who was a very famous classical violinist who had just moved from Germany to the United States when this book was first published in 1923.

In Chapter Three, there is a reference to Jack Dempsey, a boxing champion and a sports superstar of his day, and a few chapters on to another famous boxer of the day, Jess Willard.

The roads of old Shanghai mostly had foreign names. Today's Huaihai Lu was Avenue Joffre, the main thoroughfare through the French Concession. Edinburgh Rd is now called Jiangsu Lu. Dongdaming Lu, in the area of Hongkou in which the family lived, was then called Broadway for a portion of its length and Seward Road beyond. Nanjing Rd West, as it is today, was then called Bubbling Well. Dixwell Rd, which gets a mention in Chapter 3, was another

important road in the Hongkou area; it is today called Liyang Lu. Jessfield Park, where there was once a small zoo, is now called Zhongshan Park.

In Chapter 4, there is a reference to *the Empress of Asia*, one of the great passenger liners of that age, owned by Canadian Pacific Steamships Ltd and launched in 1912. The ship transported British troops to Shanghai in 1937 to bolster the garrison of the International Settlement and was finally sunk by the Japanese near Singapore in February 1942.

This book is all about a world that has gone. But the feeling of that golden world of the Shanghailanders between the two great wars of the 20th century is here to be savored.

Graham Earnshaw  
Shanghai  
December 2007

# CONTENTS

Foreword by Graham Earnshaw	vi
Chapter I	1
Chapter II	12
Chapter III	22
Chapter IV	32
Chapter V	40
Chapter VI	47
Chapter VII	55
Chapter VIII	65
Chapter IX	75
Chapter X	83
Chapter XI	94
Chapter XII	104
Epilogue	111
Glossary	113

## Chapter I

*In Which the Baby Decides that "Home, Sweet Home" Must Have Been Written by Orphan . . . The Charms of Calling Sinza Road . . . Amah Stages a Funeral . . . The Strange Vagaries of Silk Host in Shanghai.*

### March 29

The family has been raving about somebody called Opal Whitely and somebody else called Daisy Ashford that they said were infant prodigies. I guess I'm as smart as they are, even if a lot younger, so am going to keep a diary myself.

The family can't read it, of course. They're awfully stupid. Heard mama say just now that the amah had better take me out, as I'm making marks all over a piece of paper on the dining-room floor. Will continue diary in kitchen. That's where I spend most of my time anyway.

I live in a nice brick house with my

family but though I have been introduced to the others, I am not well-acquainted with anybody except the amah. She speaks a nice, easy language and not the funny kind of foreign talk the others use. Am learning to understand them, though. This morning I heard them wondering where all last night's chicken went. But when I started to tell them about the cook's two cousins who are boarding in the kitchen, mama said, "Listen to the little dear. He's trying to say 'Daddy.'"

Have decided that the family is quite hopeless. Will learn to read the Want Ads as soon as possible so as to find a new home.

### **March 30**

There are lots of things about grown-up talk that I don't understand yet. Today papa told my auntie that if she didn't make good pretty soon, he would send her back to America. Auntie cried and said that if papa would be decent to poor Bertie, she would soon have a man to care for her.

"Bertie!" said papa, "He isn't a man; he's a lap-dog." "He comes from a very good

family!" Auntie said, crying some more.

"He must have come a long way," papa said.

"And he knows some of the best people in town," auntie replied.

"Perhaps. I always said myself that the night watchman was a pretty good fellow," papa remarked.

It's too deep for me. Am going to take a nap.

### **March 31**

Went out today with the amah. Mama thought we went to the Public Gardens, but we didn't. Amah took me calling on Sinza Road where all her family live in a nifty two roomed house. They were very much interested in my new back tooth. First amah put her finger in my mouth. Then her brother, Lo Shing, First Rate Lady Best Style Tailor, put his finger in my mouth. Then her cousin, Ah See, who runs High Class Christian Gambling Parlor, put his finger in my mouth. Then Liou Zung, Stylish Maker of Ancient Chinese Ornament, put his finger



in my mouth. Wish amah's family wasn't so fond of garlic.

### **April second**

Went out with amah again this morning and a fresh Jap baby made a face at me in Hongkew Park. Will get even someday. When I was enjoying bottle at home later, mama said, "He's getting to be such a big baby that pretty soon we can give him solid food." If she only knew what I had this morning - piece of meat dumpling that amah chewed for me and a water chestnut. Amah is a good sport.

### **April third**

Had colic. Squalled.

### **April fourth**

Didn't sleep well last night, as father came home late and made lots of noise. Mama hasn't had much to say this morning. Very unusual. Looks like rain.

### **April fifth**

Not much doing today. Papa asked mama