INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE: POPULAR WRITINGS ON CHINA BY EUROPEAN WOMEN

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There is a long tradition of texts about China - both fiction and non-fiction, both popular and erudite. Some have been written after only the briefest of stays yet purport to explain the closed, hidden, invisible, exotic and inscrutable and to mediate the cultures by creating participants in a cultural exchange. The very presence of observers within China has been sufficiently remarkable to give authority to textual representations. At times of particularly restricted access it has been enough to report from ‘inside China’, when metropolitan China has been open, the theme of closure has applied to the observation and study of the less accessible spaces within China, be they remote geographically, walled institutionally, or the domestic and secluded spaces the penetration of which underlay claims to privileged knowledge and the authoritative text.

Anthropologists have long derived their authority for uniquely ‘making sense of what they observe’, and the textual transaction of meanings, from their direct and prolonged first-hand observation, from ‘being there’. This claim is not restricted to anthropologists; from outside the academic world it also underlies other genres of writings including travellers’ tales, eye-witness news reports and expatriate fiction. In the days before rapid and mass travel, claims based on ‘presence’ were restricted to the privileged few. For China, the production of ethnographic texts, travellers’ tales and fiction based on first-hand knowledge had acquired unusual status, for this society had remained especially closed or restricted in entry and access to the spatially and ideationally remote. In these circumstances, writers credentialized their writings by representing their own privileged access. In claiming their unique penetration of domestic and secluded spaces, European women writers derived exclusive authority for constructing what they referred to as ‘intimate’ knowledge.

This paper analyses popular depictions of domestic and social life written by European women resident and travelling in China in the first decades of the twentieth century. Many of their writings became best-sellers in Europe and North America and created and nurtured the popular European images of Chinese society of their times. These novels, biographies, autobiographies, magazine articles and letters
bequeathed a first and unique set of ethnographic records of the beliefs, rituals and practices constituting Chinese domestic and social life which are still consulted by students of Chinese society today. While the explicit intention of their writings was to acquaint Europeans with the details of Chinese domestic and social life, they can also be read as texts about the way European female eyes envisaged and represented Chinese domestic and social life in the early twentieth century. Texts are personal creations as well as dependent on the culture, personality, values and choices of both the observer or writer/ethnographer, and those observed or interviewed. It is fortunate that these books incorporated, as was fashionable at the time, a personal narrative in addition to the descriptive. The authors wrote their European selves into their books, the circumstances of their investigation and interaction with their chosen informants and the conditions in which they, as ethnographers and self-styled cultural mediators, produced their texts. In their writings they each reiterated several times their unique claims to represent domestic and secluded social domains by utilizing tropes of access, intimacy and illumination.

Many of these authors said that they took up writing as a means of preserving their very selves in the face of enforced leisure, loneliness or adverse personal circumstances including ill-health, a disappointing marriage or the tragedy of child retardation and death; they all also began to write of China because they felt they had something unique to relate to their readers. In their books they frequently claimed new and unusual knowledge of the ‘hidden’ or ‘inner’ spaces, the ‘dark’ or ‘secluded’ corners of China – interestingly all adjectives used to describe the Chinese cosmologically defined private, dark, hidden, female ‘yin’ as opposed to the light, public, open, male ‘yang’ domain. ‘Intimate’ was the word most often chosen by them precisely because they felt that they had access to and viewed families in the privacy or ‘intimacy’ of their homes, and could therefore claim to observe and record the domestic and private for their readers.

One, Mrs Archibald Little, chose *Intimate China* as the title of the book in which she explicitly aimed to use anecdote and description to enable her reader to ‘feel the sights, sounds and smells’, and to become aquainted with the people whom she ‘had the good fortune to observe intimately in their own homes’. Sarah Pike Conger wrote that she had been placed in the privileged role of being able to relay first-hand the ‘intimacies’ or ‘heart stories’ in which she was able to illustrate the ‘real’ character of her Chinese informants. Grace Seton Thompson exhorted her readers to listen to ‘the talking of hearts’ of women

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1 This paper is based on a reading of some forty to fifty personal writings of six authors who wrote about China between the 1890s and the 1950s: Mrs Archibald Little, Sarah Pike Conger, Grace Seton Thompson, Alice Tisdale Hobart, Nora Wain and Pearl Buck.


interviewed in their own homes, and in her book entitled *Chinese lanterns* she represented herself as lighting for her readers the dark corners of home, street, town and village. Years later Nora Walne, and Pearl Buck, from their respective vantage points as 'adopted' daughter and girl neighbour, argued that such sustained and familiar access gave them status as 'insiders' who could uniquely draw for their readers the intimate and domestic details they had personally observed and experienced within Chinese households.

Primarily it was their access to the domestic, be it the Imperial, gentry or peasant household, and the unique claims to intimate interaction and privileged knowledge that this access permitted, which commonly underlay their self-authorization to represent for European readers Chinese domestic and social life. These claims to privileged and intimate knowledge of the domestic had acquired a 'unique' status because of the cultural and socio-political barriers to both formal and informal interaction between observer and observed, and the segregation and seclusion of both European and Chinese women in their own 'domestic' spaces.

**EUROPEAN DOMESTIC SPACES**

The authors of our texts were among the increasing numbers of European women who travelled to China from the end of the nineteenth century, as China's markets and China's millions became the object of European commercial hopes and missionary aspirations. As the number of concessions permitting foreign traders and missionaries to settle, travel, trade and preach increased in the interior regions of China, so did the number of European women resident in the country. Most commonly they came to China as wives accompanying their missionary, merchant and diplomat husbands, but they came also in small numbers as mission nurses, teachers or preachers and even as travellers in search of adventure. The majority of European women resident in China were secluded within their own homes, which in turn were enclosed within European treaty port communities. They found few opportunities for contact, acquaintance or friendship with their Chinese counterparts. The constraints were both of their own and Chinese making.

With the exception of the very few who were born or spent their childhood in China, most European women arrived in China with images and expectations shaped by preceding representations consisting of popular romantic images of the exotic East. In Europe, China was thought to be a land of pagodas and pavilions, of fans and lanterns, of silks, satins and pigtails and other distinctive oriental features. Indeed images of the Chinese landscape were very much

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based on the blue and white willow-patterned plates with their delicately curved arch bridges, streams and drooping willows in the landscapes which, in the traditional style of Chinese brush paintings, dwarfed the tiny human figures as if they were almost incidental to nature. Those coming to China had been less prepared for the endless brown of mud, waters and earth, and equally common dust, dirt and disease and the swiftness of a typhoid or cholera death. They were unprepared for, and avoided, the endlessly crowded 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 the objects of an unrelenting and not always welcome gaze. They were frequently unprepared for the violence of a divided nation that was also the China they inhabited. Indeed the century of European settlement in China was marked by periodic outbursts and bouts of violent xenophobia.

Most European women in China not only inhabited a strange physical and cultural landscape, but also had to come to terms both with leaving the comfortable homes and life patterns in which they had been brought up, and with the prolonged absence from familiar and significant others. Mothers, sisters, friends and very often their own school-age children were several months away from contact even by the fastest return letter or packet. Some reacted to the exilic quality of lives of loneliness and isolation in a strange land by rushing to recreate familiar domestic rituals. Homemaking and the arrangements of familiar objects within a company, legation or mission house assumed greater significance 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 embellishment of their domestic refuges by most European women was not only a practical gesture embracing or clinging to the familiar, but also a symbolic gesture, consciously or unconsciously, signalling their defence of an inviolate private domain protected from influences Chinese. Mothers in particular, almost exclusively responsible for socializing their young children, not only created Eurocentric homes in the interests of preserving the European cultural identity of the young, but also assumed an increasingly active attitude towards isolating and protecting their children from the vicissitudes of the encompassing Chinese environment, which was replete with physical dangers and cultural encroachments. Their domestic embrace extended as far as the boundaries of the small foreign treaty-port communities.

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7 Most of the writers give full accounts of European domestic life in China, especially in their novels. See particularly, Alice Tisdale Hobart's *By the city of the Long Sand* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1927) which was written as a manual for European women establishing households in China.
Many European women, faced with the 'otherness' of China, acquired a fresh appreciation of their own culture to demarcate themselves from the encompassing unfamiliar and the strange. Cultural markers bound the exclusive European population of the small foreign communities which had been established in the city treaty ports from the turn of the century. These communities were usually located in bounded land concessions, set aside for the exclusive purpose of European settlement, alongside ocean or river anchorages with a bund and promenade for evening walks, a church, a club and a racecourse. They elaborated their diversions with intricate rules detailing the rituals of 'calling cards', receiving at home, entertaining, and celebrating the various national festivals of the calendar year. Despite the tensions within them, these taut foreign communities were close-knit enclaves, whose members tended to seek reassurance in both their cultural heritage and 'superiority' during times of peace, and mutual protection when under threat from Chinese anti-foreign outbursts.

Although European women in China were of different nationalities, they largely shared common languages, meanings, symbols, values and sacred and secular rituals. These European reference points provided them with a sense of common identity in a strange environment. Many European women never ventured outside their 'domestic' spaces into the unfamiliar environment that was China. The minority who were writers seem to have expressed the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. While they lovingly created a succession of European homes and gardens, they yet remained relatively detached from their own foreign community affairs and shared a common curiosity about the Chinese, which often took some tenacity to satisfy. Their curiosity took them on to the streets of Chinese cities and on distant travels, but there remained endless obstacles and barriers to both formal and informal observation and interaction with Chinese women in public spaces.

CHINA'S PUBLIC SPACES
The women authors were unusual for the extent of their travel to near and distant places. Their books relate 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, and in environments ranging from far-flung Tibet to the northeastern frozen wastes. In endless villages in the interior of China, they explored the mountain tracks and farms of the Chinese countryside, observing a Chinese landscape quite unlike that of the treaty ports and cities and towns. However, few European women could travel openly in China at this time unless they concealed their foreignness and gender. Few could take advantage of the nightly male convivialities of a Chinese inn. Many described how, as foreign objects of curiosity and sometimes hostility and as taboo female intruders, they could not appear or
undress and so reveal their foreign identity, let alone their sex. Others in the cities, less ambitious but conspicuously few, confined themselves to walking on the crowded streets of the ‘native’ cities; but even here the crowds and stares prevented free movement, and the language barrier inhibited freedom of intercourse. In both city and countryside, however much foreign travellers or residents might seek to observe, the lives of peasant, artisan and gentry women still lay hidden from all but the most privileged, curious and determined foreign eyes.

Around the turn of the century public appearances by either European or Chinese women were rare. Peking was described as ‘a city of men’ by Sarah Pike Conger. There were few occasions for informal contact with or observations of gentry and village women, for their lives were almost exclusively lived within enclosed family compounds, behind high, solid brick, adobe and stone walls. Perhaps the most striking features of Chinese social life at this time were the segregation of the sexes and the domestic seclusion of all but the poorest women. Women were denied any formal participation in any of the government or local community institutions, and all the significant ceremonial roles in society could be fulfilled only by men. Even in celebration and recreation, when European and Chinese men interacted socially in tea houses and restaurants, wives were rarely included. The practice of binding feet, the cult of feminine chastity and rules of segregation had given rise to the virtual isolation of Chinese women within their own households. Indeed the very word for women was neiren which literally meant ‘inside person’. Within the confines of the women’s apartments in gentry households, women were occupied with their toilet, embroidery, the management of household affairs and recreational amusements. In peasant households, which afforded women less seclusion than in gentry and richer dwellings, working women frequently laboured in their doorways on the village or city street, gathered water from the well and shopped and marketed – but even so the movements of most village women were restricted.

It was frequently observed in early ethnographic studies that peasant women had rarely travelled beyond their village except on their marriage day, and they were reported to refer to themselves as ‘frogs in a well’. There were numerous common folk sayings which contrasted the wide movements and travels of men with the binding of women to their cooking stoves and households, precisely because appearances of women outside their household yards were restricted. One working woman recalled that the greatest compliment a woman could receive from her neighbours was that they ‘had never seen

8 See for example the works of Mrs Archibald Little and Alice Tisdale Hobart for full accounts of travel in China.
9 Letters from Peking, 2.
If European women were to observe and interact with Chinese women they would have to enter China's domestic spaces.

**CHINA'S DOMESTIC SPACES**

It was perhaps the initial difficulties of establishing contact with Chinese women in public spaces that commonly turned the concentrated attention of the curious to the one group, their servants, who were available and accessible within their own European homes and might be closely observed and befriended. No European household in China was without a goodly number of servants to take charge of the cooking, cleaning, clothes, garments and other needs of European employers. As their books, diaries and novels reveal, the daily and life-cycle activities of servants offered a wonderfully direct opportunity for observation and learning, if the European mistress had a mind. Even within the European household, however, the division into spaces for the European and Chinese inhabitants was very well defined, as were the rules and regulations governing their interaction. Any lengthy intrusion by the European mistress away from the front living rooms and into the back rooms, kitchens or activities of the servants was resented, and the Chinese servants employed many devices to preserve the boundaries.

Frequently the European mistress felt herself to be 'on stage' and, separated as she was from the 'wings', initially failed to realize that her unwelcome intrusion into servant affairs aroused domestic dissent and rebellion, the symptoms and symbols of which she might not recognize. Any attempt by a new European mistress of the household to intervene or to adjust the rules of interaction usually failed, with almost all differences of opinion resolved by masters in favour of the servants. The ability of the woman of the house to take charge of domestic affairs or occupy a room of her own was symbolically crucial, and on several occasions women writers reported that their interventions and plans were entirely thwarted by their servants, or delayed until husbands returned home and the master of the house gave his permission. However, segregated and fraught as relations between interested mistress and servant might sometimes be, the domestic affairs of the servants provided an opportunity for observation and explanation, and mistress-servant relations were frequently very warm, affectionate and marked by a degree of loyalty and intimacy which placed them centre stage in the writings of the European mistress. Indeed many of the texts in manuscript form might have been lost forever but for the presence of mind and care of a long employed, trusted servant.

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12 The writings, fiction and non-fiction, all give full accounts of servant life.
European women found it much more difficult to breach the physical and cultural barriers that would allow them to observe Chinese domestic and social life within Chinese households. For most of the women writers any interaction in Chinese homes was preceded by a long gestation. To glimpse behind the walls of a family compound required a formal invitation and, in the ordinary course of events, it was not customary for the heads of Chinese families to receive visitors into their own homes, who were neither kin-related nor of long-standing friendship. Foreign males were more usually treated to receptions or meals in restaurants or tea houses by their Chinese hosts, acquaintances or friends. For these women writers the high walls surrounding courtyards and households came to symbolize the less visible, cultural barriers impeding more intimate interaction between themselves and Chinese women, and these invisible barriers seemed as formidable as walls of brick and mortar. 13

Eventually most of the persistently curious did receive the longed-for invitations to visit Chinese homes, usually thanks to pre-existing diplomatic relations or commercial transactions between the male heads of their respective households. Despite the promptings of curious European women, the extension of these relations to include women of both households was not easily won for a variety of reasons. There was the perennial problem of communication given the absence of a common language. Moreover, many a Chinese conservative household head did not want the women of his household to be unduly influenced by European women whom he considered wanting in decorum, manners and subservience. Even when there was the promise of rapport, culturally-derived misunderstandings could beguile the unsuspecting foreign women. For instance, several thought quite incorrectly that they had been privileged to meet the wives of their husband's business or official acquaintances only later to find out that a courtesan had been especially hired to take the place of a wife. Moreover, by taking his own wife, the European husband had advertised to the assembled company how little respect he had for her! 14

Given the rituals which surrounded visits to Chinese homes, it was quite difficult for the European women, at least in the first instance, to engage in more than the politest niceties of enquiry and reply. European women, in turn, found themselves to be the novel objects of curiosity and polite attention, and it was quite often difficult to move the conversation beyond formalities and persistent enquiry about themselves. To reverse the roles and to observe and learn for themselves, these European observers, according to their own accounts, placed themselves in the 'polite' role of pupil or student in

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13 See in particular Conger's *Letters from Peking*.
14 See in particular Hobart, *By the city of the Long Sand*, and *Oil for the lamps of China* (London: Cassell, 1933).
relation to their informants, in itself a distancing device. According to Chinese women’s accounts of these same visits, they also felt there to be a degree of stilted politeness, during which they interpreted the European women’s directness of curiosity as a form of impropriety and intrusion and certainly wanting in ‘good manners’. They were not always sure what a European woman ‘wanted’ when she visited, and apparently the quality of the Chinese language of the missionary interpreters whom they brought with them did not always clarify the matter. It was well known in Peking that the Empress Dowager had the colours and furnishings of her rooms constantly altered to mislead her European women visitors. In her verbal and gift exchanges she often played upon the double meanings of Chinese objects and words, which caused much amusement at the expense of the foreigners. However, from the early years of the twentieth century, a few privileged European women began to be invited into Chinese homes and personally to observe rituals marking life-cycle events, such as weddings and funerals. Two to three decades later a very few privileged European young women were formally invited to enter Chinese domestic spaces and to interview Chinese women, or to reside with Chinese people, or to come and go more informally between their own and Chinese homes.

The opportunities to observe Chinese social and domestic life within Chinese homes were often hard won. Having won them, the very novelty of their experiences, and the recognition that they had stepped beyond the formalized and polite conventions normally governing such interactions, permitted the women to claim for themselves unusual experiences and also, in one particular respect, to claim unique authority in observation, experience and text. Privileged access to the domestic domain underlay their claims to unique intimacy, for the few European women writers had an advantage over their more numerous European male counterparts, in that once admitted to Chinese households, they had exclusive access to the domestic spaces, inner courtyards and female domains. If at the beginning of the century the claims to privileged intimacy rested on formal visits and direct but spasmodic observation, by the 1920s and 1930s it was more informal prolonged domestic residence and familiarity which underlay many of their unique claims to greater and unusual intimacy. Their very sex, so often a grave disadvantage, had in these instances created a privileged space for female observers and ethnographers.

**INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE**

In constructing intimate knowledge of the hidden domestic and social life of Chinese households, these women writers had much in common

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with professional ethnographers. Although personal narrative plays a much larger part in their writing than is usual in conventional ethnographies, their observations were based on informal conversations and on formal interviews and were acquired on the basis of their own direct first-hand experiences. At the beginning of the twentieth century these first-hand experiences were largely based on intermittent formal enquiry and long-term acquaintance with servants. Within a few decades, however, their first-hand experiences increasingly derived from long-term periods of personal involvement or co-residence with informants and respondents. While many of their writings were more descriptive than analytical, the descriptions of the domestic or the uniquely ‘intimate’ were unusually latticed, and the meanings underlying the symbolic were interpreted.

It is in these books which claim intimate knowledge that European writers first related the intricate details of the domestic, including the daily or annual footbinding and bathing rituals, dress and attire and the seasonal cycles of food production, preparation and consumption, the recording of time, the household accounts and family genealogies and the nurturing and socialization of the younger generation. Here, too, the intricate details of life-cycle transitions were reported, including the practical and ceremonial preparation for conception and birth, the rituals of betrothal and marriage, and the anticipation and preparation for, or even rehearsal of, death and the subsequent promotion to ancestor. Their writings also gave first-hand descriptions of the experiences of the bound footed, the prostitute, the slave girl and the concubine, together with fragments of women’s rich and various relationships in secluded and domestic domains. Their texts provided insights into the interpersonal relations between women of the same generation and across generations, the intimate messages that were transmitted from mothers to daughters, and the strategies by which women acquired a degree of personal influence and power despite the old adages of obedience, virtue and submission.

The European reader first became acquainted with a variety of Chinese beliefs, rituals and practices as observed and understood by European women; but these writers of the domestic and social also gave examples of Chinese women’s own reactions and responses to European beliefs, rituals and practices which were often recounted as part of the observer’s perceptions and reflections. Most often the richness and layers of meanings attached to objects, gestures and rituals were what intrigued the observers. No gift seemed to be without its symbolic content, no object spatially placed without a rationale and no ceremony seemed to be without its layers of meaning. These experiences all opened new areas of enquiry and interest for the curious. Many a modern ethnographer would sympathize with one of the women writers who, aiming to render intelligible to her reader the social behaviour which she observed and participated in, felt initially overwhelmed in that all she could see was ‘confusion, lack of method.
and lack of meaning'.

Only as they struggled to make sense of the puzzles around them did the women writers begin to realize that the customs and rituals were made up of rich symbolism of continuity and depth of meaning and intricacy, so that they developed, not only a greater curiosity, but also a greater respect for the domestic and social customs and rituals themselves. They became conscious of the social and political context, which was that of the much maligned, 'backward', 'colonized' and 'crumbling' China. They claimed that it was their knowledge, understanding and respect for the 'intimate' which permitted them their claim to understand and represent authoritatively the public and political in China, and to mediate the cultures.

TEXT AND CONTEXT
In common the authors argued that it was important, indeed imperative, to develop a European understanding of and respect for China. This, they thought, could only be based on an increasing knowledge and holistic appreciation of Chinese culture and, in this regard, they each quite consciously adopted the role of cultural mediator. Any European in China in the early decades of this century could not but be affected by the complexities of a smouldering political and cultural revolution, as late nineteenth- and twentieth-century China struggled to come to terms with its semi-colonial encounter with European and North American nations. The decades before and after the turn of the century were marked by the questioning of, and challenges to, the old and traditional ways and a search for new and modern social and political institutions. Europeans arriving and residing in China from the turn of the century regularly found themselves part of an uncertain and turbulent sequence of events, as central and regional leaders struggled for power. In this age of foreign privilege, penetration and aggression, foreign reports of the decline and convulsions of a once great civilization lent credibility to the European cause in China, be it to save souls or expand commercial and trading interests, and reinforced the Europeans' enormous confidence in their own culture. As a result a lamentably large number of Europeans thought of China as little more than an ancient nation irretrievably sunk in an outworn culture and cause. Such sentiments in the representations of the other can certainly be detected in the writings of the women authors and, although not one of them was entirely immune from the prevailing attitudes of confidence in the superiority of their own culture, they also aimed to represent the public and political context of the 'intimate' China of their acquaintance.

16 Conger, *Letters from Peking*.
17 In this age of foreign privilege, penetration and partition – in which China was frequently depicted as an enticing cake, melon or other treat available and ready for portioning between the foreign powers – these women writers all wrote letters in the media explaining China's response and defending her sovereignty in relation to the foreign powers.
At this time China’s culture was not only reported as outworn and inappropriate to the modern age, but it was also represented as a puzzle, and an inscrutable one at that, dominated as it was by images that were alien in some exotic and mysterious manner unique to the Oriental or the East. To make the hidden visible and the strange familiar and comprehensible to their European reader, these women writers not only sought to explain meanings behind customs and practices, but also to interpret the apparently exotic within its social context. However, despite these laudable aims, they frequently, although not always, tended to employ their own culturally constructed frames as the context and substitute images of similarity for images of difference. To reduce the distance between things represented in the text and the reader, they sometimes tended to minimize the differences by denying cultural specifications. Alice Tisdale Hobart found it difficult to get her novels published because she had not depicted a sufficiently novel or unique oriental world which subscribed to American fantasy. On the basis of their common experience as daughters, wives and mothers, they were tempted to universalize the ‘domestic experience’. Pearl Buck’s descriptions of the peasant world of China, in her famous Nobel prize-winning novel The good earth, were frequently accused of attributing familiar American attitudes, motivations and responses to Chinese peasants. Alike, these women writers, in refusing to subscribe to European stereotypical images and fantasies about China, substituted new popular stereotypes and images centred on the hardworking and upwardly mobile peasant struggling against all odds to wrench a living from the earth.

Despite these problems, which are generally inherent in constructing representations of another culture, their books were greatly welcomed by reviewers; they frequently became best-sellers precisely because, in very readable non-fiction and fiction forms, they presented a ‘different’ China from that popularly perceived. Based on the ‘intimacy’ of their lens and the cross-cultural empathy of their reportage, they created entirely comprehensible ‘moving and talking individuals of another culture’. However, in creating interest, understanding and empathy in Europe, for China’s culture and inhabitants they simultaneously become increasingly sceptical and pessimistic that there was a role for Europeans or a place for European culture in China. They often observed in their writings that it was not so surprising that China should turn against the Europeans, who had not only come to China unbidden, but had also forced their presence, their customs, their habits and their guns on the Chinese.

19 Buck, My several worlds (London: Methuen, 1955) and T.F. Harris, Pearl S. Buck: a biography (London: Methuen, 1971).
Sarah Pike Conger, expressing such sentiments in her writings at the turn of the century, forecast that China and the European nations were on a collision course in a war of ideas in which the Chinese were striving to sustain their own cultural identity. In the early 1900s Conger was uncertain what the outcome of this conflict would be. Not so Alice Tisdale Hobart whose pessimistic conclusions, twenty years later, suggested the impossibility of an equitable reconciliation and resolution of the cultural differences on Chinese soil. In all her novels, relationships and friendships, initially based on mutual regard and respect in which individual Europeans and Chinese struggled to substitute new customs for old, reconcile East and West and bring about a new China of their combined dreams, ended in conflict, violence and tragedy. Her novels also sensitively and sympathetically depicted the struggle within idealistic Europeans aiming to ‘help’ China, within individual Chinese influenced by Europe and dreaming of a modern China, and within Eurasian families attempting to combine the two cultures within the one domestic unit. In reflecting on the struggles of each to reconcile the two cultures she was one of the first to question seriously, in fictional form, and for a wider audience, the assumed superiority of the offerings of America and Europe for China. As Pearl Buck finally departed from her girlhood China, she described how she was both relieved to be escaping the accumulated guilt which her European heritage had laid upon her in China and pessimistic that any form of equitable Sino-European relations could be worked out in the near future. The women writers, most of whom experienced some form of anti-foreign xenophobia, seem to have shared an unusual sensitivity to the hierarchical nature of the power relations between China and Europe, and to the nuances of cross-cultural tensions and conflict in China. They attributed this empathy to the respect born of their direct and first-hand observations of, and understanding of, the intimate.

If it was these writers’ claims to intimate knowledge which underlay their authority to represent Chinese culture in Europe, it is also interesting to conjecture that it might have been their own experience, as women in a peculiar male colonial or semi-colonial world, which contributed towards their sensitivity to cross-cultural tensions and their political empathy for China in the asymmetric power relationship. In their writings they all frequently referred to the constraints and circumscriptions which surrounded European female persons which were exaggerated by their residence in China. Alice Tisdale Hobart likened their existence to ‘islands’ in the ‘seas’ or

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21 Conger, Letters from Peking, and the works of Hobart.
22 See especially Alice Tisdale’s fictional trilogy: Pidgin cargo (1929); Oil for the lamps of China (1933); and Yang and Yin (1936).
23 Buck, My several worlds (London: Methuen, 1955).
24 Hobart, By the city of the Long Sand, and Oil for the lamps of China.
‘rivers’ of men’s affairs, or as ‘oil’ confined in flow and expression within the ‘lamps of China’. As the female ‘yin’ to the male ‘yang’ of China, they perceived themselves to be different, muted and powerless in a socially-constructed framework, not unlike that which they constructed for ‘yin’ China to ‘yang’ Europe. By explicitly challenging, in their books, their own positions as females within a gender hierarchy, they also challenged colonial conventions and gave voice to, and ascribed value to, the culture and persons of China. In so doing they left behind them a body of writings which, widely read in their time, still constitute unique ethnographic records of domestic and social life in China. Their books can be read today as texts incorporating images, representations and interpretations of Chinese domestic and social life as mediated through European female eyes shaped by their experience of both Chinese culture and European culture in China.