

Introduction

Edith Maude Eaton, known by various pen-names such as Sui Sin Far and Sue Seen Far, was a transnational short story author, journalist, and stenographer in the late nineteenth century. In 1865, Eaton was one of two daughters born to English silk merchant Edward Eaton and his Chinese wife, Achuen “Grace” Amoy. Edward, while working in the silk trade in China, met his wife, Grace, who was training to be a missionary (White-Parks 10). Over the next fifty years, Eaton moved between port towns and thriving cities in England, the U.S., Canada, and the Caribbean, experiencing the rich racial and ethnic diversity of these cultural hubs (*Becoming* xviii). Edith Eaton, as a budding author, began her literary career in Montreal and Ontario, but eventually left Canada to pursue her writing career in the United States. Self-identifying as “Eurasian” with the pen-name “Sui Sin Far,” Eaton worked as a journalist, stenographer, and fiction author. During her career, Eaton often emphasized her biculturality despite her physical separation from China, frequenting Chinatowns and learning Mandarin (“Revolution” 981). Eaton once famously declared that “[i]ndividuality is more than nationality” (“Leaves from the Mental Portfolio” 252).

Eaton’s cosmopolitan oeuvre is as complex and diverse as her transnational identity and interests. She wrote in multiple genres and

forms over the course of her twenty-six year writing career: sensation fiction; ethnographic and Chinatown journalism; children's stories; letters to the editor; travel writing; poetry, a short story collection titled *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*; and much more (*Becoming* xx-xxi). Between 1896 and 1897, for example, Eaton wrote 31 articles for Jamaica's *Gall's Daily Newsletter* (*Becoming* xix). She later wrote short sketches of the Chinese experience in North America for a number of nineteenth-century magazines, as well, including the *Overland Monthly*, *New England Magazine*, and *Out West* (White-Parks 9). In 1909, she published "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian," which is a short autobiographical essay detailing her childhood and life experiences with racism. Her published 1912 short story collection, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, in contrast, is a collection of romantic, tragic, and satirical narratives that illustrate the nuances and tensions of the Chinese community in North America at the turn of the twentieth century. The short story that serves as the namesake of the collection, "Mrs. Spring Fragrance," depicts the misadventures of first-generation Chinese American, Jade Spring Fragrance, who plays matchmaker to her second-generation Chinese American friends, Laura Chin Yuen (or Mai Gwi Far) and Kai Tzu. Eaton also dedicated a section in the collection to just short stories for children, such as "Pat and Pan" and "A Chinese Boy-Girl," which explore the childhood experience of being influenced by two cultural worlds: Chinese and American cultures.

Eaton's work achieved a substantial readership during her lifetime. She faced discrimination in the late nineteenth-century publishing industry as a mixed-race woman but successfully published dozens of works that were syndicated in newspapers across the U.S. and in other countries. Eaton even famously sent her autograph to a seventeen year old boy in New England who had queried a magazine editor about it (Eaton to Rugg, 18 Jan. 1900). Eaton's one and only short story collection, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, was reviewed by *the New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Independent*, and the *Montreal Weekly*, among others (White-Parks 200-2). Considering Eaton's repeated portrayal of diverse characters, perspectives, and class conflicts in the Chinese community, Eaton intends to revise for her readers the early twentieth-century stereotypes of the Chinese and other marginalized communities. After all, in her sketch, "The Chinese in America," Eaton claims that, "[F]iction writers seem to be so imbued with [these] ideas that you scarcely ever read about a Chinese person who is not a wooden peg" (234). ^[1]

Eaton never married and died April 7, 1914. She is buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Montreal. The local Chinese community, in recognition of her writing for the Chinese, crafted a special headstone inscribed with the characters "Yi bu wang hua" ("The righteous one does not forget China").

References

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