

# The divine right of learning

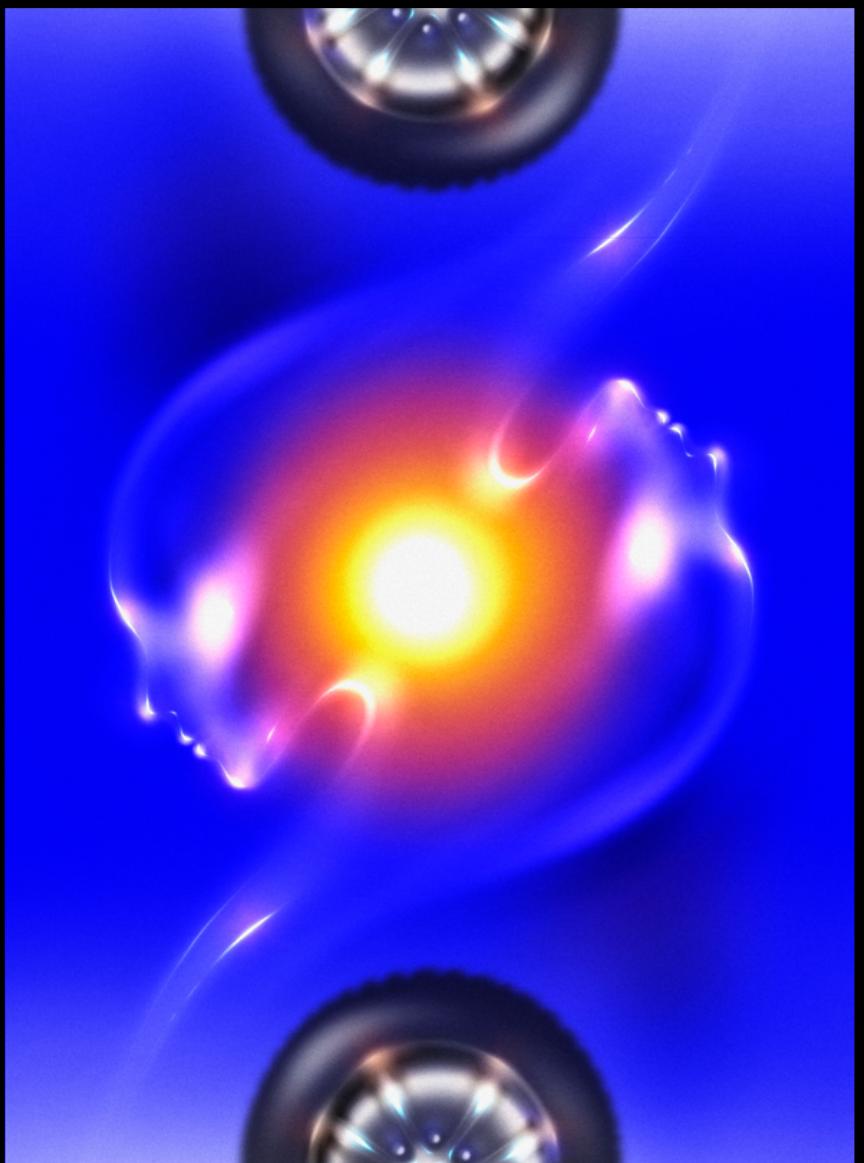
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A Reading  
Companion for  
*An Immortal  
Book: Selected  
Writings by Sui  
Sin Far*



This guide was created to provide context for and enhance the experience of readers of our open access collection of writing by Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton. We welcome its use and adaptation by educators, book clubs, and any non-commercial creative or educational projects.



# Table of Contents

- Biography / 2
- Historical Context / 6
  - Chinese Exclusion & “In the Land of the Free” / 6
  - The New Woman and “The Inferior Woman” / 10
- Sui Sin Far’s Feminist Themes / 13
- Bibliography & Credits / 16
- Appendix / 19
  - “Sui Sin Fah.” by Charles Fletcher Lummis, 1900
  - Reflections Behind the [Research] Scenes, 2024



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## Why read Sui Sin Far in the 21st century?

- Edith Maude Eaton/Sui Sin Far was one of the first Asian American authors published in North America.
- She wrote about the everyday lives of Chinese people—and proudly claimed her biracial identity—during a time of widespread racism and political exclusion.
- Her work explores themes and experiences that connect with many contemporary concerns: intersectional feminism, transnationalism, queer studies, anti-racism, disability studies.
- Her writing is compassionate, bold, and often quite funny!

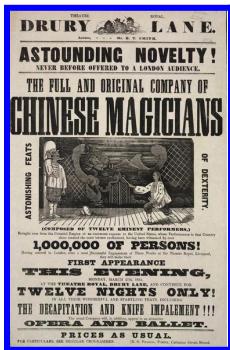
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# Biography

"Sui Sin Far's father overturned family expectations and traditions, first by pursuing a career in art and then by marrying a Chinese woman. [Her] mother, a Chinese woman who would have conventionally remained homebound while awaiting an arranged marriage, was independent enough to travel and to choose her own husband. The decision these two people made at this historical juncture profoundly affected their futures and those of their children." -**Annette White-Parks, *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography***



## The Mother: Achuen "Grace" Amoy Eaton



- ~1846: Born in China (probably Shanghai) and sold to Tuck Quy, an acrobat/knife-thrower.
- 1852-1855: Tours the US and Europe with the "Chinese Magicians" as a tightrope walker and human target for a knife-throwing act.
- 1855: Leaves the troupe in England to live with English missionaries, who baptize her as "Grace" before sending her on a mission to China.
- 1872: Becomes one of the first (if not the first) women of Chinese heritage in Montreal.
- 1906: Writes "Jade—A Chinese Missionary Romance", a fictionalized account of her marriage, which is published in a Montreal newspaper.

## The Father: Edward Eaton

- 1939: Born in Cheshire, England.
- Late 1850s: Studies painting—until his father sends him to China to become a merchant.
- 1863: Meets Grace on the voyage to China; they marry upon arrival in Shanghai.
- 1864-1872: Moves his family to and from England/North America; they settle in Montreal.
- 1872-1915: Pursues many careers, with little success: clerk, artist, smuggler, etc. (He is arrested at least twice for smuggling Chinese immigrants from Canada to the US.)
- 1915: His obituary calls him "the one honest white man" and "the trusted friend of many Chinese."

Images, from top to bottom: Achuen "Grace" Amoy; Poster for a Chinese Magicians show circa 1855.

# Biography

*"The family is a remarkable one, almost every member being skillful in some branch of science or art"*—New York Recorder, 1896.

## The Sisters

- Fourteen Eaton children were born between 1863 and 1887; two died in childhood.
- Edith Maude Eaton was the first daughter and second child in the family.
- Winnifred Eaton Babcock Reeve (1875-1954) also became a famous writer. For the first few decades of her career, she posed as a Japanese noblewoman and wrote under the invented name 'Onoto Watanna.'
- Grace Eaton Harte (1867-1957) was one of the first female Asian American attorneys. She helped her husband edit magazines that published stories by Edith.
- Sara Eaton Bosse (1868-1940) co-wrote the early Asian American cookbook *Chinese-Japanese Cookbook* with Winnifred.



Winnifred's serialized novel Marion is based on Sara's bohemian life.

## Edith's Life at a Glance

- **March 15, 1865:** Edith Maude Eaton is born in England.
- **1873:** The Eaton family moves to Montreal, where Edith will live until 1896.
- **1876:** The family's finances are dire, forcing the older Eaton children to leave school.
- **1883:** Edith becomes a typesetter for the *Montreal Daily Star* and teaches herself stenography. She supports herself and her family with this work for decades.
- **1896:** She takes over Winnifred's post writing for Jamaica's *Gall's Daily Newsletter*.
- **1898:** Edith moves to the US, where she will live (across states) until the end of her life.
- **1912:** Her first and only book, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, is published – a dream realized.
- **April 7, 1914:** Eaton dies at age 49 of heart disease.

# Biography



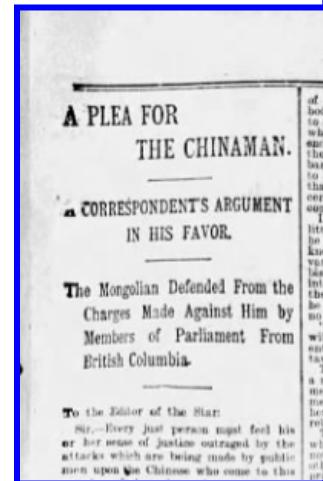
*"I thought of...the eldest, a girl with more real talent than I—who had been a pitiful invalid all her days. She is dead now, that dear big sister of mine, and a monument marks her grave in commemoration of work she did for my mother's country."* — Winnifred Eaton, from *Me: A Book of Remembrance* (1915)

*Edith's headstone, "Erected by her Chinese friends."*

## Edith Eaton → Sui Sin Far

*"My heart leaps for joy when I read one day an article by a New York Chinese in which he declares, "The Chinese in America owe an everlasting debt of gratitude to Sui Sin Far for the bold stand she has taken in their defense."* — Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian, 1909

- In the late 1880s, Edith began publishing articles, short stories, and "sketches," anonymously or under her own name.
- In 1896, Eaton started writing about the Chinese in the midst of growing discrimination.
  - ◆ "A Plea for the Chinaman," a letter to the editor arguing against a proposed raise to the head tax appeared in the *Montreal Star*, signed by "E.E."
  - ◆ Edith's first "Chinese stories" were published under the name "Sui Seen Far." This and its subsequent versions loosely translates to "narcissus," though Eaton used "Chinese lily."
- From there, her work mainly (but not exclusively) focused on the lives and political struggles of Chinese North Americans. "Sui Sin Far" became her regular pen name.
- She wrote personal essays and stories exploring biracial identity during a time when anti-miscegenation laws were in place in many states. (*One editor said, "Too many [of her stories] have to do with the mixed bloods."*)



# Biography

## Publication History

*“Certainly my life has been quite unlike that of any literary worker of whom I have read. I have never met any to know—save editors.”* – “Sui Sin Far, the Half Chinese Writer, Tells of Her Career,” 1912

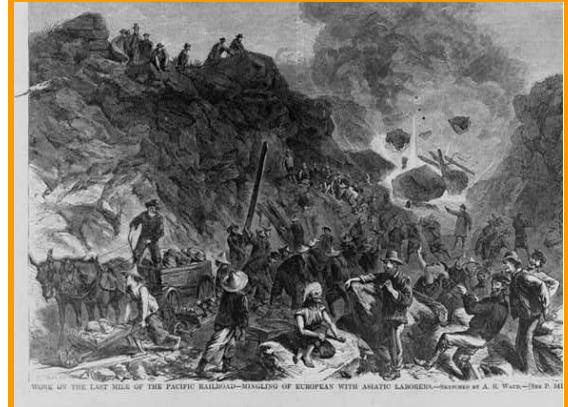


- Eaton's early editors promoted the author's "exotic" subjects as well as her realism. (See Appendix A.)
- From 1888-1914, 270+ works appeared in 60+ publications, including leading magazines that published writers like Willa Cather and Edith Wharton.
- Eaton submitted book manuscripts to a range of prominent publishing houses. She ultimately moved to Boston to focus on her writing career and to pursue East Coast publishers.
- Her first and only book, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, was published by A.C. McClurg, a small Chicago press known for publishing women and multiethnic literature.
- *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* edited by Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (came out in 1995—the first collection of Sui Sin Far's writing since 1912.
- Since then, scholars like Mary Chapman have uncovered many more works. Chapman's *Becoming Sui Sin Far* (2016) collected selected early fiction, journalism, and travel writing.
- In 2020, Project Gutenberg published a digital copy of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*.
- Cita Press published the first open access collection of some of Eaton's fiction and nonfiction, *An Immortal Book*, in 2023.

# Historical Context

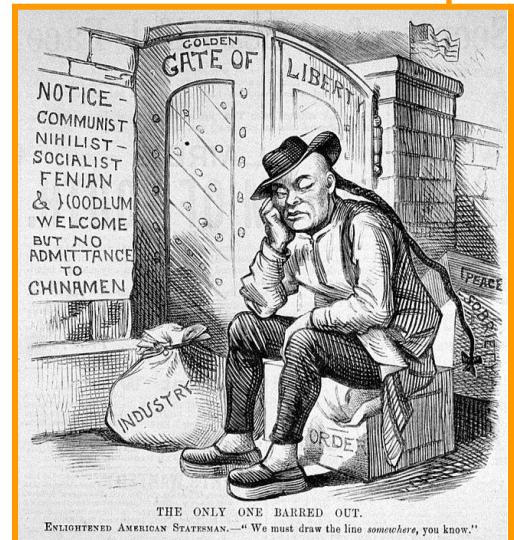
## Chinese Immigration to the US

- Immigration from China began in the early 1800s and expanded greatly by the 1850s.
- Chinese laborers built the Central Pacific Railroad, a key part of the first transcontinental railroad connecting the East Coast to California.
  - The railroad paid Chinese laborers a fraction of the wages of European workers, and refused to cover room and board.
  - The company recruited Chinese workers already in the country and imported many more.
- Labor leaders and politicians blamed Chinese immigrants for a nationwide depression, spurring intense, often violent waves of anti-Chinese sentiment.
- State and regional exclusion laws began popping up, inspiring federal legislation.



## The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882)

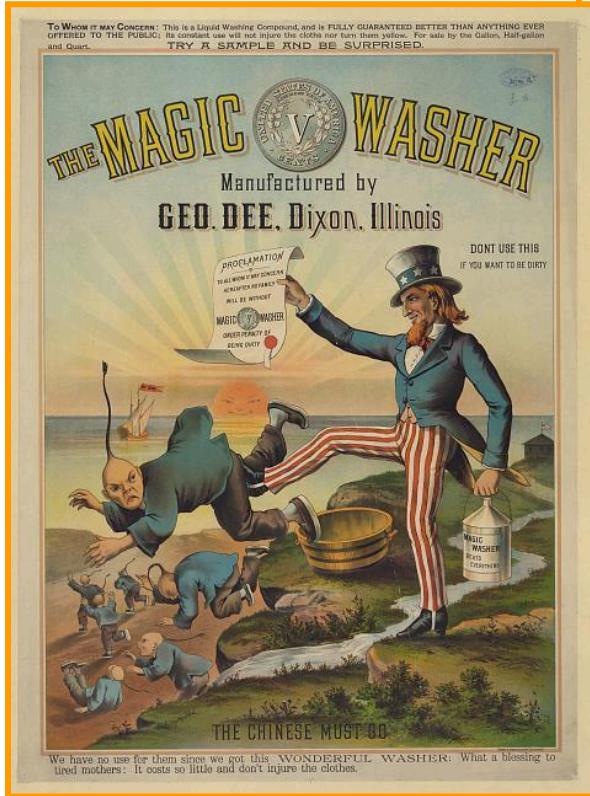
- Officially titled “An act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese,” the Act:
  - Prohibited immigration of all Chinese laborers for 10 years.
  - Explicitly blocked Chinese people from obtaining citizenship.
- It was the first significant law restricting immigration to the US and the only law to restrict on the basis of race.
- Its first extension, The Geary Act (1892), required Chinese immigrants to obtain residence permits – the precursor to today’s green cards.



Images, from top to bottom: “Work on the last mile of the Pacific Railroad—Mingling of European with Asiatic laborers” from Harper’s Weekly, May 1869. From Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, April 1882.

# Historical Context

## 8 Decades of Exclusion



8

**THE CHINAMEN MUST GO.**

Words by ALVAH PENDLETON. Music by H. B. PASMORE.

**Allegro.**

**PIANO.**

**With Spirit.**

1. The stir - ring times of For ty - nine, Called out a gal - lant  
 2. They plowed the fields and made the land, A boun - te -ous harvest  
 3. The time has come for ac - tion boys, We've had e - nough of

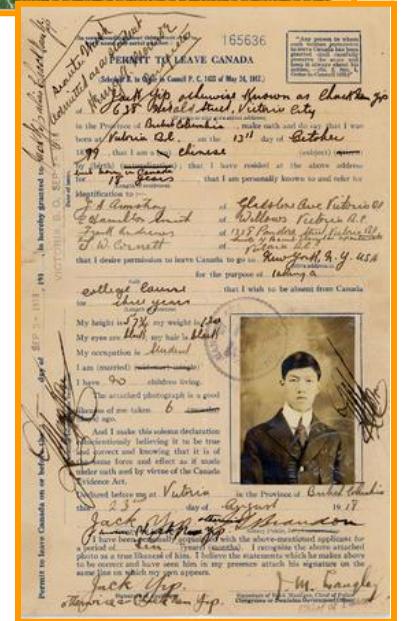
Images, from left to right: An 1886 advertisement for detergent that demonstrates prevalent stereotypes and hostile political winds. From the sheet music for 'The Chinamen Must Go,' a popular song (1880).

1882	1892	1902	1904	1943	1965
Passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act.	The Geary Act extends the immigration ban for 10 more years.	Immigration ban renewed for a second time.	Ban of Chinese immigration & naturalization made permanent.	Magnuson Act repeals Chinese Exclusion Act; allows for severely limited naturalization & new visas.	Passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act makes it illegal to grant or restrict visas based on race, nationality, or ancestry.

# Historical Context

## Chinese Exclusion in Canada

- Thousands of Chinese immigrants came to Canada (many from the US) in the early 1880s to work on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway.
- In 1885, Parliament passed the Chinese Immigration Act, severely restricting numbers and imposing a hefty “head tax” on Chinese immigrants.
- This was the first Canadian law to restrict immigration based on ethnicity.
- The *Chinese Immigration Act, 1923* banned all Chinese immigration. The Act was repealed in 1947, though restrictions remained into the 1960s.
- After decades of advocacy, an official redress to compensate people who had paid a head tax took place in 2006.



From top to bottom: A Chinese Immigration (C.I.) certificate issued to Canadian born residents. A C.I. 5 certificate, or receipt for head tax paid by a Chinese immigrant to the Canadian government. Permit to leave Canada (1818). Images from The Paper Trail collection (RBSC-ARC-1838), UBC Library Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

## Smuggling & Sui Sin Far

- Edward Eaton was a “kingpin” smuggler in Montreal, known for getting Chinese immigrants across the Canada/US border.
- There is evidence that Edith aided in these endeavors – or at least that her gleaned journalistic sources and story ideas from her father’s work.
- Stories like **The Smuggling of Tie Co** and **Tian Shah's Kindred Spirit** dramatize the smuggling community in Canada.

# Historical Context

## "In the Land of the Free"

"In the Land of the Free" depicts family separation, a byproduct of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Reuniting at customs as the wife returns from China with their son, a couple is forced to surrender their toddler. They navigate greedy white lawyers and impenetrable bureaucracy as they try to regain custody.

When the story was first published in *The Independent*, it led with an author's note: "**Tho the following article is cast in the form of fiction we are obliged to confess it is the fiction that is often less strange and cruel than the truth.**" [Read the full story.](#)

The first officer turned to Hom Hing and in an official tone of voice, said:

"Seeing that the boy has no certificate entitling him to admission to this country you will have to leave him with us."

"Leave my boy!" exclaimed Hom Hing.

"Yes; he will be well taken care of, and just as soon as we can hear from Washington he will be handed over to you."

"But," protested Hom Hing, "he is my son."

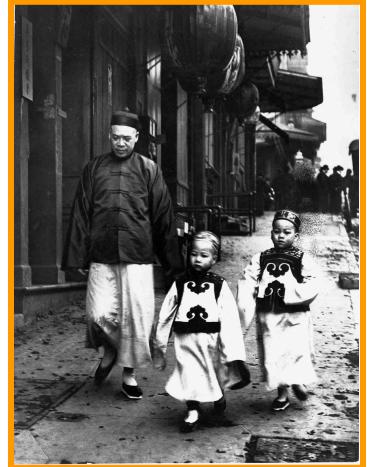
"We have no proof," answered the man with a shrug of his shoulders; "and even if so we cannot let him pass without orders from the Government."

"He is my son," reiterated Hom Hing, slowly and solemnly. "I am a Chinese merchant and have been in business in San Francisco for many years. When my wife told to me one morning that she dreamed of a green tree with spreading branches and one beautiful red flower growing thereon, I answered her that I wished my son to be born in our country, and for her to prepare to go to China. My wife complied with my wish...**I had no fear of trouble. I was a Chinese merchant and my son was my son.**"

"Very good, Hom Hing," replied the first officer. "Nevertheless, we take your son."

*A father and his sons leaving the Chinese consulate, San Francisco, 1904.*

*What parallels can we draw between the events of this story and things that happen today?*



# Historical Context

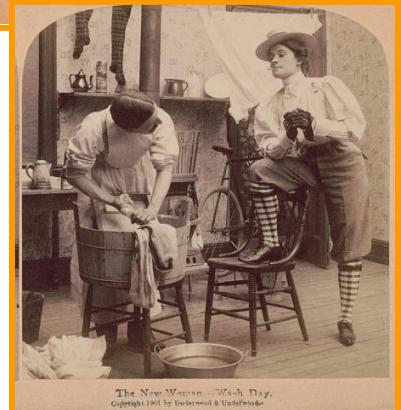
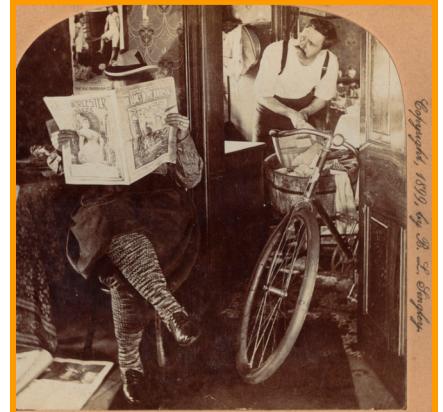
## “The New Woman”

“..the New Woman, when she wasn’t in the library or suffering from hysterical breakdown, was careering around on a bicycle...” –Lyn Pykett, *The New Woman in Fact and Fiction*

- A feminist ideal that emerged at a time of widespread social change, the “New Woman” was associated with educated women, women working outside the home, novelists, suffragists, and reformers.
- Novels by big writers like Henry James solidified the concept in popular imagination.
- There were many interpretations of the idea, but it was most often connected to upper middle class white women, including—contradictorily—both progressive radicals and those who advocated for reactionary or exclusionary ideologies (e.g. eugenics).
- The “New Woman” had expanded mobility (often literally, by way of the bicycle). She had choices when it came to her professional, social, and domestic life.
- As a professional woman who traveled the world, never settled for a marriage she didn’t want, and asserted her voice in male-dominated fields, Edith Eaton in many ways **was** “the New Woman.” However, her heritage and childhood complicates many of the stereotypes associated with the idea.
- Eaton’s writing shows an interest in the New Woman as an evolving, sometimes contradictory concept. Her stories often look at how the idea is interpreted by Chinese characters, drawing parallels and highlighting tensions.

“She who is called in China ‘The woman who talks too much’ is called by us ‘The new woman.’” –Sui Seen Far (Edith Eaton), “The Story of Iso,” 1896

Images from top to bottom: “The New Woman” takes a break from her bicycle while her husband does the wash, 1899. “The New Woman--Wash Day,” 1901.



# Historical Context



"The Inferior Woman" explores the contradictions and possibilities of the "New Woman" through characters that embody different qualities associated with the ideal.

Mrs. Spring Fragrance wants to write "an immortal book" for her Chinese friends. *"The American people were so interesting and mysterious."* This anthropological study is inspired by neighborhood gossip. Her neighbor, Mrs. Carman is upset that her son wants to marry a woman (Alice Winthrop) whom the older woman deems "uneducated" and from a "sordid" background.

Hoping to understand the difference between the "Inferior" and "Superior" woman (and perhaps with an ulterior, romantic motive), Mrs. Spring Fragrance goes to visit the latter: Miss Ethel Evebrook. She overhears Ethel's passionate defense of Alice, and her articulation of her own dreams:

"Pardon me, mother," interrupted Miss Evebrook, "but I have heard enough. Mrs. Carman is your friend and a well-meaning woman sometimes; but a woman suffragist, in the true sense, she certainly is not. Mark my words: If any young man had accomplished for himself what Alice Winthrop has accomplished, Mrs. Carman could not have said enough in his praise. It is women such as Alice Winthrop who, in spite of every drawback, have raised themselves to the level of those who have had every advantage, who are the pride and glory of America. There are thousands of them, all over this land: women who have been of service to others all their years and who have graduated from the university of life with honor. Women such as I, who are called the Superior Women of America, are after all nothing but schoolgirls in comparison."

Mrs. Evebrook eyed her daughter mutinously. "I don't see why you should feel like that," said she. "Alice is a dear bright child, and it is prejudice engendered by Mary Carman's disappointment about you and Will which is the real cause of poor Mary's bitterness towards her; but to my mind, Alice does not compare with my daughter. She would be frightened to death if she had to make a speech."

"You foolish mother!" rallied Miss Evebrook. "To stand upon a platform at woman suffrage meetings and exploit myself is certainly a great recompense to you and father for all the sacrifices you have made in my behalf. But since it pleases you, I do it with pleasure even on the nights when my beau should 'come a courting.'"

"There is many a one who would like to come, Ethel. You're the handsomest girl in this Western town—and you know it."

"Stop that, mother. **You know very well I have set my mind upon having ten years' freedom; ten years in which to love, live, suffer, see the world, and learn about men (not schoolboys) before I choose one.**"

# Historical Context

At the end "The Inferior Woman," Mr. Spring Fragrance asks a question that leads Mrs. Spring Fragrance to sum up her own ideas about the ideal American woman.

Interestingly, the ending from the version in Eaton's book, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, in 1912 differs in a key way from the ending as it originally appeared in *Hampton's* in 1910. [SPOILER BELOW!]

[Read the full story here](#)

## The Inferior Woman: Alternate Ending



### 1910, Hampton's magazine:

"I am so glad," said Mrs. Spring Fragrance.  
"Will Carman's bird is in his nest and his  
felicity is assured."

"What about the 'Superior Woman'?" asked  
Mr. Spring Fragrance.

"Ah, the 'Superior Woman'! Radiantly  
beautiful and gifted with the divine right  
of learning! I love well the 'Superior  
Woman,' but O Great Man, when we  
have a daughter, may heaven ordain that  
she walk in the groove of the **'Inferior  
Woman!'**"

### 1912, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (and 2023, An Immortal Book):

"I am so glad," said Mrs. Spring Fragrance, "that  
Will Carman's bird is in his nest and his felicity is  
assured."

"What about the Superior Woman?" asked Mr.  
Spring Fragrance.

"Ah, the Superior Woman! Radiantly beautiful, and  
gifted with the divine right of learning! I love well  
the Inferior Woman; but, O Great Man, when we  
have a daughter, may Heaven ordain that she walk in  
the groove of the **Superior Woman.**"

**Which ending do you prefer?**

# Sui Sin Far's Feminist Themes



"The 'new woman' and her bicycle - there will be several varieties of her," 1895.

*“...women to whom the things of the mind and the heart appealed; women who were individuals, not merely the daughters of their parents, the wives of the husbands...”*

## Solidarity between women:

- From her earliest “sketches,” Eaton is interested in how women of varying experience help each other, including across class and racial lines.
- Her characters’ solidarity facilitates romance, helps them emerge from economic precarity, to avoid danger, and to combat general misogyny.
- Friendship between women is a treasure, in both the stories and the personal essays.

## Gender performance:

- Cross-dressing and related forms of gender bending is a frequent narrative tool for Sui Sin Far.
- She also examines the differences in gender performance between white and Chinese women characters, and how they influence each other.

# Sui Sin Far's Feminist Themes

## Intersectional Feminism:

- Many stories engage with how women of different races experience the patriarchy differently, and how privilege plays a role in these experiences.
  - A white woman missionary/teacher who accidentally messes things up and (usually) learns a lesson is a frequent character type.
- Sui Sin Far often sees the fates of women as intertwined with one another—with other layers of marginalization (race, class, disability) impacting how those relationships play out.
  - Some recently recovered stories (like "Away Down in Jamaica" and "The Alaska Widow") more explicitly explore such ideas.

## "The New Woman":

- Women in the stories often resist traditional roles and expectations, pursuing marriage for love, careers, and independence.

## Ambition:

- Sui Sin Far is direct about her own career goals as a writer, and many of her characters claim a role in public in bold ways.
- Her writing reflects a belief in a sort of timeless, non-commercial longevity, rejecting easy or deceptive paths: "All my ambition is to make myself useful, known, heard and admired by the wise and the brave."

## Subverting patriarchy:

- Sui Sin Far's women characters do not always meet a happy end, but when it comes to paternal or romantic relationships, they tend to subvert the wills of domineering men.
- The idea that women can exercise independent thought and agency across cultures appears again and again.

"My writings might be imperfect, but they [bear] the impress of thoughts begotten in my own mind and clothed in my own words."

## *Solidarity between women*

"The Three Souls of Ah So Nan": Three women conspire to use a modern spin on tradition to help one of them choose her own life.

"The Heart's Desire": Two young girls find what they need in each other.

## *Gender performance*

"The Smuggling of Tie Co": A white smuggler's assumptions about his client are challenged.

"Tian Shan's Kindred Spirit": A spirited young woman takes dramatic action.

## *Intersectional Feminism vs. white feminism*

"A Chinese Boy-Girl": A white school teacher learns an important lesson from her student.

"The Inferior Woman": Women who differ across generation, experience, and race learn from each other.

## *"The New Woman"*

"Woo-Ma and I": Two sisters experience their biracial heritage and gendered expectations in different ways.

"Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of An Eurasian": Sui Sin Far describes her adventurous, independent life, including, indirectly, her avoidance of marriage.

"The Americanizing of Pau Tsu": Overcoming pressure from her husband and his missionary friend, Pau Tsu asserts herself.

# **Sui Sin Far's Feminist Themes: Mapping An Immortal Book**

## *Subverting male dominance*

"Misunderstood, Or the Story of a Young Man": A playful, dark fable reminiscent of Patricia Highsmith's *Little Tales of Misogyny*.

"Its Wavering Image": Pan undermines the cruel influence of condescending journalist Mark Carson.

## *Ambition*

Sui Sin Far, the Half-Chinese Writer, Tells of her Career": "I am myself quite excited...Would not any one be who had worked as hard as I have—and waited as long as I have—for a book?"

*This is a small sampling of how some stories from the collection connect to these themes. Mark this up and add your own connections!*

# Bibliography/Credits

## Further exploration

Are.na Channel: An Immortal Book: <https://www.are.na/cita-press/an-immortal-book>  
*Links and details on images and resources that went into this guide/the book.*

The Winnifred Eaton Archive: <https://winnifredeatonarchive.org/>  
*A project building a full survey of Winnifred Eaton's work, with biographical and scholarly resources, too.*

The Eatons in Montreal: ArcGIS StoryMap:  
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/926be66a44c8441eba0b66497d640e80>  
*Mapping the lives of the Eaton family in Montreal.*

Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom: <https://undiscipliningvc.org/index.html>  
*Flexible lesson plans for those interested in exploring Sui Sin Far's work in a global context, including the cluster "Transimperial Networks and East Asia".*

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These images and more are linked on the [Are.na channel](#) for this guide.

Page 2: [1] Achuen Amoy as an adult, from the collection of Elizabeth Rooney.

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Page 4: [1] Funeral monument of Canadian author Edith Eaton, Mount Royal Cemetery, Montreal.

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Page 6: [1] Waud, Alfred R. , Artist. Work on the last mile of the Pacific Railroad--Mingling of European with Asiatic laborers / sketched by A. R. Waud. , 1869. Photograph.

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Page 8: Images from The Paper Trail collection (RBSC-ARC-1838), UBC Library Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. [1] C.I.45 certificate of Mary Quan, June 27, 1924. <https://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/c-i-45-certificate-of-mary-quan> [2] C.I.5 certificate of Choy Lee, February 6, 1917.

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Page 9: Genthe, Arnold, photographer. "A family from the Consulate, San Francisco Chinatown.", 1904. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003663583/>.

Page 10: [1] Singley, B.L., photographer. "The 'new woman,'" 1899. Meadville, GA; St. Louis, MO. Photograph. <https://dp.la/item/630947bfae32c4072e9548167c56d41b>. [2] Underwood & Underwood. "The new woman--Wash day.", 1901. New York; London; Toronto-Canada; Ottawa-Kansas: Underwood & Underwood, Publishers. Photograph.

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Page 11, 12: Title illustration for "The Inferior Woman" from *Hampton's Magazine* v. 24, 1910.

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## Appendix A: “Our little ‘Chinese Contributor’”

Here Charles Fletcher Lummis, editor of California magazine Land of Sunshine, introduces “Sui Sin Fah” to readers in 1900. Lummis was one of the first to publish Edith Eaton’s Chinatown stories. Land of Sunshine (later Out West) also published work by West Coast superstars Jack London, Mary Austin, and John Muir.

Lummis was an enthusiastic champion of Eaton throughout her career, but this portrait of her demonstrates some of the attitudes, biases, and assumptions she had to navigate as she sought literary success. The idea that the contributions of women and writers of color are valuable because of their novelty and exoticism rather than their literary merit remains pervasive today. It is interesting to reflect on how early gatekeepers can shape lingering perceptions, and to counter that by engaging with scholars and writers who challenge such limited perspectives (see Appendix B).

**SUI SIN FAH.** [See the original via archive.org.](#)

So far as I know, the only Chinese woman in America who is writing fiction is the delicate little Sui Sin Fah, a "discovery" of this magazine three or four years ago. Her stories in these pages have been widely copied; and while they lack somewhat of literary finish, they merit the attention they have attracted. They are simple, unstudied, but dramatic and intensely human. The instinct of a story is in them all; and while the literary graces do count, and are entitled to count, the chief part of a story is — the story. Equally notable about them is their intimate comprehension. They are all of Chinese characters in California or on the Pacific Coast; and they have an insight and sympathy which are probably unique. To others the alien Celestial is at best mere "literary material"; in these stories he (or she) is a human being.

This "Chinese Lily" (for that is the translation of Sui Sin Fah) was born in 1868 in Macclesfield, Cheshire, England ; her father was an English merchant in Shanghai, and there married her mother, a Chinese lady of rank and beauty. Her education was limited by reverses before she was 12; and ever since she grew to woman's estate she has supported herself as a stenographer. What her other wanderings have been, I do not know, but her stories have come from Montreal, Seattle, San Francisco and the Island of Jamaica; and last year we had the pleasure of a visit from our little "Chinese Contributor." She is a wee, spiritual body, too frail to retain much strength for literature after the day's bread-winning; with the breeding that is a step beyond our strenuous Saxon blood, and a native perception as characteristic. For all her father, she is evidently her mother's daughter — a Chinawoman transplanted and graduated. And her work has a poignant intuition for her people that makes it good to all who understand that literature is, after all, something more than words. They are its skin-deep beauty — its birthright, indeed, but its minor organ. For, like woman, literature must have a heart. **C. F. L.**

## Appendix B: Reflections Behind the Research & Recovery of Sui Sin Far

Thanks to the labor of many scholars and writers whose work challenges dismissive or oversimplified narratives, Sui Sin Far's writing has become much more visible in the last few decades. We asked a few of the people whose research and advocacy are responsible for and contributing to the recovery of her work and legacy to share some thoughts for this guide. We're grateful to present the reflections of the following contributors:

[Mary Chapman](#) is Professor of English at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada. She specializes in American literature and transnational American Studies; suffrage literature and activism; women's poetry; periodicals; digital humanities; and public humanities. Her book *Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing by Edith Maude Eaton* was an invaluable resource for the book/this guide. Dr. Chapman is responsible for the recovery of hundreds of works by Sui Sin Far, including "Woo-Ma and I." She also directs [The Winnifred Eaton Archive](#). Her current project is a microhistory of Edith, Winnifred, and the Eaton family.

[Cherrie Kwok](#) grew up in Hong Kong and Vancouver and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Virginia. She specializes in global Anglophone literatures from the long nineteenth century to today, with a focus on race, imperialism, and Decadence. She is an Associate Editor for [Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom \(UVC\)](#) and a contributor to a range of other digital humanities projects.

[Victoria Namkung](#) is a Los Angeles-based author, journalist, and speaker whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Guardian*, and more. She's the author of the novels *The Things We Tell Ourselves* and *These Violent Delights*. She wrote the foreword for *An Immortal Book: Selected Writings by Sui Sin Far*.

[Anran Wang](#) is the author of the 2022 master's thesis "An Immortal Book: The Publishing History of the 1912 Edition of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*," which digs into the publication and physical production of Eaton's 1912 book. Originally from Sichuan, China, she completed an M.A. in English from the University of Virginia.

“Eaton’s publishing history—a tale of obstacles, compromises, and resilience—shows us just how easily unique voices and perspectives can be reduced to oblivion due to subjective judgements and biases. Her legacy encourages us to uncover and celebrate those hidden gems of our literary heritage, whose stories remain unheard.”—Anran Wang

## I: Discovering Sui Sin Far

### Mary Chapman: A fellow Canadian with uncanny range

I first stumbled on Sui Sin Far in graduate school in the late 1980s when the American literary canon was being diversified and she was identified as the “mother” of Asian American literature. Colleagues pointed her out to me because, technically, she was Canadian, and they thought I’d like to know. And then, when I was writing *Making Noise, Making News: Suffrage Print Culture and US Modernism*, I remembered that she had written several short stories critical of classist white suffragists. The more of her works I discover, the more impressed I am by her range, imagination, and intelligence. She has an uncanny ability to select the perfect detail to convey a feeling.

### Victoria Namkung: Personal parallels across eras

When I was an undergraduate at UC Santa Barbara in the late nineties, I was assigned Sui Sin Far’s essay, ‘Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian’ in an Asian American Literature class. I related deeply to her experiences as a biracial Asian woman in the US even though we were living in completely different eras. I went on to read *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* but didn’t discover some of her lesser-known works until recent years.

### Anran Wang: From mixed feelings to thesis deep dive

I first came across Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far in 2018 in an American literature course at Barnard College. I was caught off guard by the name “Sui Sin Far,” which I knew to be Cantonese for “narcissus,” on the syllabus. As the only Chinese student in the room, I instantly resonated with its unfamiliarity and seemingly “un-American” ring. Despite my initial welcome, I approached Eaton’s works with mixed feelings. Breathing life into the rich and poignant histories of early Chinese immigrants, Eaton’s voice served as a powerful antidote to the xenophobic narratives in the Asiatic Exclusion League documents we read in tandem with her work. However I found myself sometimes smiling at and sometimes frowning upon Eaton’s attempts to affect racial and cultural authenticity. Struggling to unpack my ambivalence, I hastened to flatten Eaton as a minor footnote to the canon of American literature. I underestimated her achievement and put her back to the dusty corner of my bookshelf after reading just a small selection of her short

stories.

Fast-forward to 2022, I was now a graduate student at the University of Virginia, with a budding interest in descriptive bibliography. This discipline examines books as artifacts and studies how the bookmaking process influences the text and the reading experience. While working on a bibliography project on Canadian poet E. Pauline Johnson/Tekahionwake, I kept thinking of Eaton. The striking parallels between these two contemporaneous authors led me to seek out the physical copy of the 1912 edition of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* in UVA's Special Collections Library.<sup>1</sup> The moment I laid my eyes on the book, questions bubbled in my head: How did Eaton secure the publisher for this book? What shaped its design? How was it received back in 1912?

This curiosity eventually evolved into a thesis exploring the publishing history of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. I took a deep dive into the archives to trace the life and afterlives of the book, piecing together key events and personal networks in Eaton's career that contributed to or complicated this long-awaited publication. Positioning Eaton in the early twentieth-century literary marketplace illuminated the challenges and prejudices she faced as a female author representing her Chinese heritage. Her strength in navigating and negotiating the tensions between market forces and the integrity of her own voice was especially inspiring.

Learning about Eaton's extraordinary life (and that of her entire family) filled me with awe at her tremendous resilience and ingenuity. Each story, essay, piece of journalism, and snippet of correspondence opened a window into the mind and spirit of this complex, vibrant, and tenacious writer. Beyond my thesis, I sought to reconstruct Eaton's reading history and identify the origins of the cultural references she captured and wove into her narratives. This allowed me to work around my initial ambivalence about authenticity. I came to see her not as a well-meaning writer superficially taking on a persona to defend a part of her lineage in which she was unversed. Instead, Eaton emerged as an earnest learner and astute observer deeply engaged in the realities of North American Chinatowns and dedicated to a life of cultural understanding and self-making.

## II: Favorite Works

### Mary Chapman: "A Visit to Chinatown"

My favorite work by Sui Sin Far is "A Visit to Chinatown," the interview she published in the *New York Recorder* in 1896 when she visited New York's Chinatown. We tend to think of Chinatowns

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<sup>1</sup>You can explore a [facsimile of a first edition of \*Mrs. Spring Fragrance\* held by the University of Toronto's archive.org](#).

as homogeneous spaces, but her observations really underline how diverse and lively these neighborhoods were. She describes a group of mixed race children—"half Black, half Chinese; half white, half Chinese; half white, half Black"—playing together, making "pandemonium." She writes: "Chinatown does not mean a colony of pure Chinese people." I think she was comforted to meet other mixed race individuals. I think she could see into the future, to when there would be many more people of mixed backgrounds and they would be enmeshed in their larger communities in a way that she and her siblings could not have imagined as children.

### [\*\*Cherrie Kwok: "Misunderstood, Or the Story of a Young Man"\*\*](#)

One of my favorite stories by Sui Sin Far in the Cita anthology is "Misunderstood; or, the Story of a Young Man." I love the story because it embodies her distinct talent for producing campy humor and racial irony on the page—a talent that, quite frankly, not many writers possess. It is far more difficult to make someone laugh through literature than an in-person comedy show where you have the advantage of body language and facial expressions. This is why the stories I most readily remember are the ones that have made me laugh out loud, and "Misunderstood" is one of them. I love how she seizes canonical British poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poetry (a poet which so many in the British Isles have, in the past and present, approached with such seriousness), and, like a campy court jester, breezily turns all of it upside down by conjuring up a poor man who romances so widely and deeply that he finds himself visiting 600 girls a week. "A hundred visits a day": it was upon reading this exact sentence where I laughed.

There is also something rather daring—even today—about the story's choice to depict a group of girls who, instead of wallowing in self-pity after romantic deceit, conspire together to take matters into their own hands. So much of contemporary western culture—from chick flicks to romance novels—still romanticizes the figure of the heartbroken heterosexual girl. She is often cast as a frail, delicate, and tender casualty in the wars of love who licks her wounds by eating ice-cream and gazing wistfully at old pictures and then emerges nobly from her heartbreak as a healed woman, ready to find another man. Although it may seem comforting, this type of romanticization has the patriarchal effect of safely establishing self-pity as the appropriate response to romantic deceit, rather than justifiable anger—or, as the girls in the story say to each other, "REVENGE."

To me, the story therefore embodies some of Far's most amusing and memorable writerly talents: her campy irreverence toward the white British canon, her clever ability to transform the serious into the comical, and, finally, her feminist bent. These are not necessarily elements that emerge in her journalistic writing, where she has to negotiate with a predominantly white audience of the nineteenth century. In her short stories, though, the guise of fictionality allows her to be more outspoken, more playful, and I very much enjoy this particular dimension of her work.

### [Victoria Namkung: "In the Land of the Free"](#)

"In the Land of the Free" is a visceral and heartbreaking story that illustrates the plight of Chinese immigrants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US, while humanizing a Chinese merchant and his family. I thought about the piece when Trump issued the Muslim travel ban and it's unfortunately too relevant when looking at the current southern border crisis. I believe Sui Sin Far wanted to change American hearts and minds regarding Chinese immigrants, who were vilified, scapegoated, and mistreated, and she was hugely successful here — the story has haunted me for years.

## **III. Depicting Chinese Language & Culture**

### [Cherrie Kwok: Anglicizing Cantonese – a diasporic dialect](#)

My first encounter with Sui Sin Far's work occurred when I was completing my doctoral research about writers of color in the long nineteenth century. Critics often position Sui Sin Far as an Asian-American, Asian-Canadian, Chinese-American, or Chinese-Canadian writer since she lived in North America for most of her life. What drew me to her, though, was how her self-chosen Anglicized name draws from the Cantonese dialect, not Mandarin (China's national language). Cantonese is a dialect specific to southern China, especially the Guangdong province as well as the former British colony of Hong Kong, where I was born and raised.

In the nineteenth century, many of the Chinese laborers who were brought to North America and the Caribbean to replace Black laborers after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire and the United States either came from, or passed through, Guangdong and Hong Kong. This is why it was initially Cantonese (rather than Mandarin Chinese) which circulated globally and shaped many of the Chinatowns that exist today. Given this history, Cantonese can be thought of as a diasporic, almost deviant dialect in comparison to Mandarin, so it was interesting to me that this apparently Chinese-American or Chinese-Canadian writer had, in fact, adopted a name from a dialect that was not very nationalistic at all.

This made even more sense when I delved into her oeuvre over time, since many of her short stories question nationalism (whether it be American or Chinese or something else). I am not sure whether she was aware of this difference between Cantonese and Mandarin, or whether the choice to use Cantonese was a self-conscious one. It is more likely that she heard Cantonese continuously in the Chinatowns and Chinese communities that she encountered,

which is why her name and the Chinese phrases in her oeuvre are primarily Anglicizations of Cantonese. Indeed, it is almost more intriguing to me that Cantonese may not have been a self-conscious choice on Far's part, because it exposes how, although Cantonese was a minority dialect in China, Cantonese became the primary language of the Chinese diaspora in the west due to the global circuits of imperialism and Chinese migration. Thus, Sui Sin Far and her oeuvre function, to me, as a rich trace of the history and the global reach of Cantonese—a trace that is now more important than ever given the Chinese Communist Party's rapid prioritization of Mandarin in Hong Kong's social, educational, and political spheres in recent years.

## Anran Wang: [Mis]Translating for Americans

*"Of fresh new silk,  
All snowy white,  
And round as a harvest moon,  
A pledge of purity and love,  
A small but welcome boon.  
  
While summer lasts,  
When borne in hand,  
Or folded on thy breast,  
Twill gently soothe thy burning brow,  
And charm thee to thy rest.  
  
But, oh, when Autumn winds blow chill,  
And days are bleak and cold,  
No longer sought, no longer loved,  
'Twill lie in dust and mould.  
  
This silken fan then deign accept,  
Sad emblem of my lot,  
Caressed and cherished for an hour,  
Then speedily forgot."*

—From “[The Americanizing of Pau Tsu](#)”

The poem in “Americanizing in Pau Tsu” is titled 怨歌行 (yuàn gē xíng, *Song of Bitterness*), and has traditionally been credited to 班婕妤 (bān jiéyú, *Lady Ban*; jieyu is a title for female officials or concubines), from the 1st century B.C., though this attribution has long been a topic of debate. The poem likely inspired the literary trope 秋扇 (qiū shàn, *autumn fan*), which symbolizes women who have lost their youthful beauty or fallen out of favor with their husbands. Eaton seemed to be particularly drawn to this trope.<sup>2</sup> The English translation of the poem is the work

<sup>2</sup> Other examples include a reference in “Children of Peace” (“Are you not ashamed to confess that you love a youth who is not yet your husband? . . . Before twelve moons go by, you will be an Autumn Fan.” p. 250 of the 1912 edition of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*) and a story titled “An Autumn Fan” from *New England Magazine* (1910).

of American missionary William Alexander Parsons Martin from *The Chinese: Their Education, Philosophy, and Letters* (Harper & Bros., 1881), preceding a translation of the *Ballad of Mulan*. It is also quoted in James Dyer Ball's *Things Chinese, Or, Notes Connected with China* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), where it concludes the section on "Fans." Eaton was very likely a reader of both Martin and Ball, and drew heavily from them for her references to Chinese history and culture.

*DEAR AND HONORED HUSBAND,—Your unworthy Pau Tsu lacks the courage to face the ordeal before her. She has, therefore, left you and prays you to obtain a divorce, as is the custom in America, so that you may be happy with the Beautiful One, who is so much your Pau Tsu's superior. This, she acknowledges, for she sees with your eyes, in which, like a star, the Beautiful One shineth. Else, why should you have your Pau Tsu follow in her footsteps? She has tried to obey your will and to be as an American woman; but now she is very weary, and the terror of what is before her has overcome.*

Your stupid thorn,  
PAU TSU

Another intriguing example of Eaton's cultural translation efforts comes from her attempt to mimic Chinese epistolary conventions. When I first read "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" and "The Americanizing of Pau Tsu," I noticed that the heroines in the stories refer to themselves as "your stupid thorn" in letters to their husbands, which struck me as odd. It took me a while to realize this was a (mis)translation of 拙荊 (zhuō jīng, *my humble wife*). This word is a classic example of Chinese honorifics, specifically 謙辭 (qiān cí, *humble language*), by which people refer to themselves and their family members self-deprecatingly to show deference to friends or guests. In this context, 拙 is a modest and self-deprecatory way of saying "my," and 荆, roughly translating to "brambles" or "thorn," is a synecdoche for "wife" with an implication of thrift and humility. This translation, "stupid thorn" for "wife," has popped up in Chinese-English dictionaries, missionary writings, and journals as early as the 1840s, though the exact source of Eaton's usage remains unclear. I don't want to pass judgment on whether her usage was a creative adaptation or a stark aberration—either way, Eaton's meticulousness as a reader and learner of Chinese culture and her attention to detail is compelling, and I invite readers to consider this nuance in her work.

## IV: Eaton's Legacy & Lingerig Questions

### Mary Chapman: A fascinating family

The Eatons are a pretty amazing family, when you think of it. Edith wrote journalism, poetry, fiction, travel writing, and memoir; her sister Winnifred wrote journalism, fiction, screenplays, poetry, and memoir, and was the first woman of Asian ancestry to run a Hollywood studio script department; another sister, Sarah, co-wrote with Winnifred one of the first English-language

Asian cookbooks published in North America; and their mother wrote a novella about her experiences in China. And yet another sister, Grace Helen, practiced law beginning in 1912 and worked on the Illinois suffrage campaign. They are all very inspiring!<sup>3</sup>

### Cherrie Kwok: Why haven't things changed?

When readers encounter Sui Sin Far's writing—particularly her writing about anti-Asian racism—I hope that they will consider how much of it resonates with on-going conversations about anti-Asian racism today. I hope that readers will ask why there has been so little social, cultural, and political change with respect to anti-Asian racism from the nineteenth century to today, as exemplified through events such as the 2021 murder of Asian immigrants in Atlanta to Harvard University's belief that Asian-American high school applicants lack personality. I hope that they will reflect on whether the nineteenth century, which can seem so far away from our political present, really is so far away after all. Moreover, I hope that readers will go on to examine Far's pieces about the Caribbean, which she wrote during her brief stint as a journalist in Jamaica. Far's journalistic work and stories about the Caribbean are not included in the Cita anthology, but they complement the stories included in the anthology beautifully and form an important opening for critical conversations about Afro-Asian exchanges in the past and present, particularly with respect to the similarities and differences that both communities face when it comes to the problem of white supremacy.

### Victoria Namkung: Stepping out of boxes

So many contemporary issues we grapple with as a society, from gender and race to sexuality, are present in older works by authors like Sui Sin Far. I often feel a kinship with authors of the past and wonder what they'd think of our societal progress or the lack thereof. I think Sui Sin Far in particular helped give me and others permission to step outside established reporting careers to publish fiction. She teaches people that they don't have to stay in neat little boxes, that life is not black and white, and that empathy, nuance, and humor are keys to understanding and helping others understand.

### Anran Wang: A "eureka!" moment in the archives

To trace Eaton's publishing history, I scoured every scrap of information online and set out on a series of archival visits. One such destination was Massachusetts, where I planned to explore archives regarding Plimpton Press, the binder of *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. This line of inquiry naturally steered me towards the archives at Harvard University. One night, as I was preparing for my trip to the northeast, I recalled that Eaton had been residing in Boston around the time *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* was released. Acting on a whim, I entered "Edith Eaton" and then "Sui Sin Far" in Harvard's archive catalog, little expecting what I would find.

<sup>3</sup> *Editor's note:* Mary Chapman's book-in-progress is a micro-history of the Eaton family.

This turned out to be my “eureka!” moment. To my utter surprise, the search yielded records of two Houghton Mifflin Company readers’ reports from 1909 on Eaton’s manuscripts, both flagged as “declined” in the description. This, I realized, was a chapter of Eaton’s career that seemed to have slipped the cracks of existing scholarship. Sitting in the quiet of Harvard’s Houghton Library, I felt the realities of Eaton’s struggles coming alive through the pages of the publisher’s reports. Her first submission, apparently a collection of children’s stories, was praised for its craftsmanship but ultimately rejected due to its brevity and questionable commercial viability. Undeterred, Eaton came back with another manuscript, titled “The Sing Song Woman and Other Stories of the Chinese in America,” only to be met with similar disappointment. Beyond a halfhearted nod to Eaton’s artistic merit, the editors took issue with the uneven quality of the manuscript and expressed unease with its emphasis on Chinese and mixed-race characters, which they found “not particularly pleasant.”

Blending with the known details of Eaton’s life, these reports tell more than just a story of closed doors—they are a witness to her incredible grit and resolve. After receiving the second “declined” notice from Houghton Mifflin in late 1909, Eaton uprooted her life in Seattle and moved to Boston, intent on concentrating on her writing and securing a book publisher. This period marked the twilight of her life, shadowed by immense challenges including the loss of a beloved sibling and her deteriorating health. Regardless, Eaton’s perseverance shone through; her Boston years were the most prolific of her career. Eventually, Chicago’s A.C. McClurg agreed to bring her stories to light, and *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* hit the shelves in 1912.

As a student of literature and book history, I am incredibly grateful for having stumbled upon this discovery. Eaton’s publishing history—a tale of obstacles, compromises, and resilience—shows just how easily unique voices and perspectives can be reduced to oblivion due to subjective judgements and biases. Her legacy encourages us to uncover and celebrate those hidden gems of our literary heritage, whose stories remain unheard.

“I hope that [contemporary readers of Sui Sin Far] will reflect on whether the nineteenth century, which can seem so far away from our political present, **really is so far away after all.**”

—Cherrie Kwok