

The Ideology of American Home Economists in China between the 1920s and the 1940s: Interactions between Orientalism and Ideals of Domestic Science

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Abstract

This work is building on recent scholarship that shows how home economics was an important area of professional development for American women. This paper will compare the Orientalist opinion circulating in America during the 1920s and the 1940s to the impressions of a small group of four American home economists who worked in China during that time. I have based my discussions of American Orientalism on the works of Karen Leong, John Kuo Wei Tchen, Mari Yoshihara, Wang Ning, Warren I. Cohen, and T. Christopher Jespersen. The motivations and views of different American Orientalist discourses were a mixed lot that underwent many shifts and transitions, but, despite their differences, they all primarily rested on ideas of American superiority in which the west was scientifically superior to the east. The home economists were writing during a brand of Orientalism favoring an “Americanizing” China with the caveat that China’s favor came from its American qualities, not its Chinese qualities. Megan Elias has shown that home economists found authority and influence through the field and used their scientific ideals to critique American society. Helen Schneider has shown how American home economists travelling to China through the 1920s and the 1940s also saw their field as a progressive and scientific movement and believed they could develop women’s roles in society by modernizing the domestic sphere. Unlike the majority of America, home economists saw domestic science, not American culture, as the ideal. By reading the letters and memoirs of four home economists living in China during this time (Ava Milam, Camilla Mills-Biggerstaff, Mabel Wood, and Martha Kramer), I compared their collective opinion to American Orientalist attitude more broadly in order to show how home economists were unique in their expressions of American Orientalist culture. Home Economists who moved to China between the 1920s and 1940s maintained elements of Orientalist exoticism in their ideologies, but they diverged from the norm by prioritizing science over both Chinese and American societies. They criticized both societies and sometimes even elevated Chinese culture over Western culture based on its level of congruence with scientific principles. Some of the home economists even returned home to advocate the adoption of some Chinese traditions in the western world based on scientific reasoning. In this way, the home economists were an early example of a group of women who began to challenge the Orientalist norm of their time by looking toward ideals of science, not ideals of American society, for direction.

Keywords: Home Economics, Orientalism, China

1. Body of Paper

American home economists travelling to China between the 1920s and 40s saw their field as a progressive and scientific movement and believed they could develop women’s roles in society by modernizing the domestic sphere.

¹ They found authority and influence through the field and used their scientific ideals to critique both American and Chinese society.² The nature of their role in American society put them in a unique position relative to their peers. They had less cause to over-idealize America, having found so many flaws within American domestic culture. Four American home economists, who were in China during the 1920s, ‘30s, and ‘40s, wrote memoirs and letters detailing

their experiences and impressions of China. By comparing the opinions of these home economists to the American orientalist opinion more broadly, it becomes apparent that the home economists were unique in their expression of American orientalist culture. Orientalist opinion in America during the early 20th century had a variety of expressions including exploitation (both economic and as a source of influence), fascination, exoticism, sympathy, paternalism, love, racism, fear, and repulsion. Absent the variety of responses, was the idea that modernity could exist within Chinese tradition apart from Western influence. Even more absent was the idea that America could take lessons from China to further its own scientific progress. Home economists who moved to China between the 1920s and 1940s maintained elements of orientalist exoticism in their ideologies, but they diverged from the norm by prioritizing science over both Chinese and American societies, sometimes even elevating Chinese culture over Western culture based on its level of congruence with scientific principles. In doing so, they countered the orientalist attitude that Chinese tradition was incapable of producing modernization.

Early American settlers brought European orientalist ideas with them, and these ideas served as the starting point for the development of a unique American orientalism. Imported ideas about China were paradoxical. On one hand, Europe saw China as a “decadent, exotic, and immoral” land.³ On the other hand, it admired the Confucian tradition and sought to learn wisdom from China’s rich history. These ideas surfaced in the American ideologies of men such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Franklin thought that China had “useful” types of plants, technologies, industries, practices, and knowledge. He believed that following China’s example in a variety of ways could help America grow. Likewise, Jefferson believed parts of the Confucian tradition would be valuable for every American to possess.⁴ While this American orientalist opinion appears overly positive, and even filled with admiration, it did not last. John Kuo Wei Tchen argued that “the closer Americans got to real Chinese, dispelling their imagined ‘Orient,’ the more their respect for and emulation of Chinese civilization diminished.”⁵ In other words, as American knowledge about the orient increased throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, its opinion of China steadily decreased, leading to a notion of American superiority over the ignorant Chinese.

A new type of Orientalism, identified by Tchen as “patrician orientalism”, emerged in the late 1700s as a social form of orientalism bestowing elitist status through the possession of oriental luxuries like silk and porcelain. As trade with the east increased, “commercial orientalism” emerged by the early 1800s and certain Asian goods became available to the middle classes.⁶ These two types of orientalism coexisted in the early 19th century, both feeding off of American curiosities and fascinations.⁷ Even though Americans readily consumed oriental commodities, they were at times instructed to do so in moderation. For example, common literature advised women decorating with oriental fashions to only use them as accent pieces.⁸ After all, the east was exotic and fascinating, but it was not meant to become the new norm.

With the increase in trade, came an increase in knowledge about China. As Americans began to assume a dominant role over China by the mid-1800s, curiosity and fascination turned to distaste. The change in attitudes changed the nature of both patrician and commercial orientalism.⁹ With the influx of missionary letters beginning in the 1840s describing “heathen, uncivilized, barbaric people,” and the emergence of caricaturized Chinatowns, which became havens for “opium smoking, gambling and prostitution,” a new, much more negative, orientalism emerged in the late 1800s.¹⁰ Tchen dubbed this new orientalism “political orientalism.”¹¹ This exaggerated negative perception of Asian immigrants led to what came to be known as the exclusion acts. By 1882 the Chinese were almost completely prevented from emigrating to the United States and these laws remained in effect until 1943.¹²

During this time of exclusion, the commercial appeal of exotic goods remained and trade with the east continued to flourish. Between 1882 and 1920 knowledge about China really began to grow beyond the limited scope of the 1800s. During this time period, Americans adopted two main attitudes toward the Chinese. They desired to uplift them spiritually and to exploit them economically, both viewpoints asserting American superiority over the helpless east.¹³ Starting in 1920, however, a few key events began to shift American attitudes about China. In 1920, American citizen Pearl Buck published *Good Earth*. Her book presented a favorable (albeit unavoidably biased) view of a modernizing China. Pearl Buck claimed to have presented an accurate picture of China, but her image was more likely colored with details aimed to appeal to American values. Around the same time, Chiang Kai-shek was managing to unify China under his rule and, much to the delight of those in America, converted to Christianity. Finally, in 1931, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria solidified China’s place in American views as a country capable of demonstrating the promise of American society by westernizing and modernizing in accordance with American virtues and expectations.¹⁴ In 1941, ties between America and China were strengthened by the events at Pearl Harbor and the two became Allies.¹⁵ The new, hopeful attitude toward a quickly “Americanizing” China lasted until the Communist victory in China was solidified in 1949.¹⁶ Integral to this positive view of China, however, was the caveat that China was favored because it was becoming more like America.

Positive relations between the United States and China during this time fostered a variety of personal reactions to China. Mari Yoshihara illustrated the role orientalism played in the lives of American women during this time.

According to Yoshihara, women reacted to China in a spectrum of ways including sympathy, emulation, exploitation, and even a combination of all of them. In almost all cases, however, no matter how deep the love these women had for China, they seem to have had an underlying understanding that modernity, with all of its positive connotations, originated in the West. Any scientific or modern virtues found in China necessarily came from the West, and little suggestion seems to have been made since the early days of Jefferson and Franklin that the West could learn something of science from China.¹⁷ Karen Leong, writing during the same time period, examined China's reputation from multiple perspectives, including Pearl Buck's. Leong brought to life the image of a progressive, yet exotic, China.¹⁸ Its ideas of modernity were, of course, adopted from the West. Leong, like Yoshihara, seemed to indicate that the dominant American view portrayed modernity as a Western concept. The motivations and views of different American orientalist discourses were a mixed lot, but they primarily rested on ideas of American superiority in which the west was scientifically superior to the east.

Each of the four home economists kept extensive records of their time in China between the 1920s and the 1940s through letters and memoirs. Ava B. Milam went to China four times, first for a period of 20 months in 1922, again in 1931 for nine months, a third time in the summer of 1937, and one last time in 1948. On her first trip to China, she endeavored to start a home economics program at Yenching University, the first of its kind. In order to do so, she spent her time conducting a survey of the domestic conditions in China before handing the project off to her successor Camilla Mills when she returned home in 1924. Mills was a student of Milam's at Oregon State College and she travelled to China with Milam in 1922. She spent her first year in China learning Chinese and then took over the development of the home economics program at Yenching University. Mills was in China from 1922 until 1931 and then returned again after her marriage to Knight Biggerstaff as Camilla Biggerstaff from 1934 to 1936 and from 1944 to 1949. A few years after Mills left Yenching University in 1931, Mabel Wood came to the university in 1936 and stayed for a year to assist the head of the home economics department. When Wood left in 1937, Martha Kramer took her place and stayed until 1944. Each of these women was clearly fascinated by China and was probably influenced by exoticism in the orientalist rhetoric. Exoticism in America had both positive and negative connotations, but the representations of exoticism in the writings of the home economists were overwhelmingly positive. All four women also expressed some criticisms of China, but their objections to certain Chinese practices were almost exclusively based on science. They made judgments comparable to those they and other home economists had already made about American domestic practices. Any arbitrary preferences for American culture that could be seen in the letters of earlier home economists (Mills-Biggerstaff and Milam) were essentially absent by the time Wood and Kramer were writing in the mid-1930s. Moreover, the home economists also praised Chinese culture over American culture in a number of ways, based on its congruence with science. They certainly felt that China was capable and believed America was far from perfect. Mills, reflecting upon the condition of China in 1925, wrote that "It makes one wonder if perhaps China could get straightened out more quickly if she got rid of her uninvited "guests" (meaning us foreigners!) and was allowed to clean house by herself."¹⁹ Some of these women moved on to advocate the adoption of certain Chinese habits in America, and all branched from the orientalist norm by finding value beyond mere fascination in the culture of China.

Even though the ideology of the home economists branched from traditional orientalism, their writings still showed expressions of orientalism, especially exoticism. In America, notations of exoticism were often expressed both negatively and positively; the home economists tended to reside in the positive camp. In order for something to be considered "exotic" it must be compared to a standard. Wang Ning elaborated on the idea of "otherness" in her work "Orientalism versus Occidentalism?" describing a notion of "otherness" as a condition for orientalist thought and as the means by which westerners reflected on their own identity, as the "other" of the "other."²⁰ Therefore, the notion of eastern "otherness" served as a prerequisite for expressions of exoticism. This internal idea of "otherness" often manifested itself outwardly in the practice of making comparisons between the east and the west. The home economists repeatedly compared China to the United States, noting things that appeared both similar and foreign to them. Milam, for instance, compared and noted differences between many things such as open freight cars, which transported men, and western cattle cars. She also compared the lengths of time that women nursed their babies in the east and in the west. Similarly, Wood noted many "foreign" things about China such as the camel trains that woke her up, the pigeon whistles, the water carts, and the "funny" rickshaw system.²¹ She even declared many things to be very similar, such as when she compared the Chinese Moon Festival to Thanksgiving, or Chinese houses to certain types of western houses.²² During the middle of her trip, she investigated the differences between the problems of the east and the west in supervising dormitory food. Expecting more differences, she was amazed at the extent of the similarity. Her surprise indicates that she saw the east as an "other" and did not expect much similarity between such different worlds. Kramer also made comparisons between the east and west. In one instance she noted how interesting the holidays were to her "foreign" eyes. These women used their knowledge of the west as a vantage point to cope

with the new experiences found in the east. This line of thinking paved the way for the emergence of exoticism in their ideologies.

One of the most obvious expressions of exoticism in the writings of the home economists was their fascination with the beauty and intricacy of traditional Chinese architecture, sights, art, and culture, especially weddings and funerals. They described many intriguing shops, the fascinating cities, and the beautiful sights.²³ For instance, Milam described the “lovely” new campus of Yenching by discussing its camelback bridges, its “peaceful” lotus ponds, and its exteriors displaying the “graceful curves and gorgeous coloring of the finest in Chinese architecture.”²⁴ Likewise, Mills was amazed by the temple she toured on her trip from Shanghai to Soochow writing, “I had one of the grandest experiences of my young life.”²⁵ Wood, in particular, delighted in the different temples found in China, although she thought it a bit odd to sleep next to a mummy.²⁶ She related elaborate descriptions of the Ti'en T'ai Su Temple and the Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas and described the temple of the year as “unbelievably beautiful.”²⁷ Many other notably “foreign” things also caught her interest, like a “delightful” trip to the Ming tombs, the “lovely” Seventeen Arched and Camel’s back bridges, the Garden of Moonlight Fertility, the “magnificence and beauty” of the Forbidden City, and the Summer palace.²⁸ Kramer, like the others, also noticed the “beautiful” lotus ponds and “delightful” restored ancient Chinese buildings. She also appreciated some unique aspects of Chinese culture like the “beautiful” and “wonderful” act of Chinese boxing and sword dancing.²⁹

In addition to illustrating exoticism in their descriptions of China, the home economists also did so in their purchases. Indulging the common American interest in exotic oriental goods, they bought a variety of Asian trinkets and clothing. Milam, for instance, bought a ceremonial kimono to send home during an excursion to Japan.³⁰ Mills purchased a variety of things as well, including many gifts such as embroidery, fabric, and a luncheon set.³¹ Wood also bought gifts to bring home and discussed all the “junk” she had bought.³² In accordance with her fascination with both weddings and funerals, she purchased tiny figurines of Chinese wedding and funeral processions.³³ Wood also bought a fair amount of Asian clothing. She got her mother a silk gown, sent home a Kimono, obtained a modern Chinese dress, and bought most of a Chinese man’s outfit. She also talked about wanting a traditional Chinese dress and a complete Japanese costume for fun. Wood even considered dying her hair to go with her outfits, which was reminiscent of some orientalist expressions as discussed by Mari Yoshihara.³⁴ On one shopping trip in particular, Kramer described her desire to buy “all kinds of intriguing things” such as rugs, temple objects, porcelains, pewter wine jugs, bronzes, and glass snuff bottles. She ended up restraining herself and purchased only one “set of red lacquer wine cups, lined with silver.”³⁵ The home economists clearly saw China as an “other” and were influenced by the exotic orientalist discourse. However, they still tended to view exotic things in a positive light.

For the most part, the home economists did not appear to favor American culture over eastern culture arbitrarily. Occasionally, however, they did make some statements that seemed to show they still believed the west to be generally superior, although not exclusively so. Milam and Mills, both writing around the 1920s, expressed this type of favoritism more frequently than Wood and Kramer who wrote a decade or two later. For example, Helen Schneider noted a quote from one of Milam’s letters: “That nice habit [of smoking] our Western civilization has given China too. Don’t think I’m cynical, please. I still prefer Western civilization.”³⁶ This quote indicates that even though Milam knew that the west did not always have the best cultural habits, she still found it to be generally superior to the east. Similarly, Mills wrote to her friend about a political advisor and repeated his assertions that it was a bad thing for the Chinese to drift away from American and French without objecting³⁷. Her comments certainly do not prove that she agreed, but it does seem as though she would have mentioned any disagreements she may have had. Mills also compared Chinese trains to American trains, much preferring American trains.³⁸ She seems to have felt the same way Milam did: the west was generally superior, but not always.

Wood and Kramer, writing about 10-20 years after Milam and Mills, expressed even fewer arbitrary preferences for the United States over China. Kramer was almost entirely complimentary. Even when Wood did express a preference, she did so in a way that showed the utmost respect for Chinese culture. For instance, on one occasion she planned to go with some of her friends to a concert of real Chinese music. She suspected she would not like it because it was monotonous “to one that doesn’t know what it is all about.”³⁹ Still, she defended the Chinese against someone who declared that they were not musical saying, “I don’t see how you can say that just because it doesn’t sound good to us. Bach and Beethoven wrote some pretty awful things to my way of thinking. So we’ll go and be educated.”⁴⁰ She even used the word “educated”, which implied that she found value in the Chinese perspective. Then, after the concert, she wrote that she found it much more interesting than she thought and complimented a traditional Chinese instrument for its beautiful tone.⁴¹ At one point she also seemed to look down on Taoism, calling it a queer belief.⁴² Just a few days earlier, however, she had described how impressed she was by the martyr-like faith of those who meditated.⁴³ Clearly, even if she found the belief odd, she maintained a respect for it. Kramer made a few critical comments in her letters, but they were few and far between and none of them appeared arbitrary. Based on the writings of these four women, there appears to have been a shift in the orientalist discourse between 1920 and 1940. This shift fits with

current research trends that show a shift to a favorable view of an Americanizing China post-1931. Even so, even the most negative of the home economists appears to have been highly complementary for her time.

Generally, criticisms of China by the home economists tied directly into the nature of home economics itself. The home economics movement “aimed to modernize, professionalize, and make scientific female domesticity.”⁴⁴ Isabel Bevier, a home economist, defended the professional nature her field by implying that home economists studied bread, they did not merely bake it.⁴⁵ The courses she taught, which were scientific in nature and “not watered down,” also say a great deal about the goals of the movement pointing toward a progressive and scientific focus.⁴⁶ In a description of a home economists’ ideal modern woman, Fleischmann listed qualities such as scientific, efficient, clean, a shrewd consumer, and a resourceful manager.⁴⁷ Home economists were not only tasked with teaching the optimal methods of household management, but also with opposing old traditions that hampered progress.⁴⁸ Interestingly enough, the home economists who went to China endeavored to preserve many Chinese traditions, claiming that they were scientifically beneficial in the modern world.

Home economists were certainly critical of American culture, and they saw many flaws in the west that hindered scientific progress in the home. For instance, home economist Martha Van Rensselaer desired to know bacteriology to teach the farm women why they needed to keep their dishcloths sanitary.⁴⁹ Home economists also complained that Americans were not economical, but instead produced a great deal of waste.⁵⁰ They also tried to reeducate women to decorate in ways primarily concerned with function.⁵¹ Another school of thought that emerged from American society was the idea of scientific motherhood, a movement that became deeply intertwined with home economics. The goal of this movement was to help educate women on how to care for their children, assuming that they would not know how on their own.⁵² The home economists who traveled to China also had things to criticize about Western culture. For instance, Kramer criticized English eating habits, and Milam admired a leader in the movement of scientific motherhood, likely prescribing to some of the same ideas in relation to American childcare.⁵³

During Milam’s time at Yenching, she conducted a survey to determine the specific needs China had for domestic science. What she found to be the four strongest categories of need coincide with the four most frustrating aspects of Chinese culture for the home economists. In a statement reflecting the results of her survey, Milam wrote, “Camilla and I felt that we could give the greatest help by teaching the fundamentals of nutrition, child care and development, household sanitation, and home management. In our teaching we emphasized proper diet for resistance to disease and for general good health.”⁵⁴ The agreement between Milam’s study and the problems with China that the home economists noticed first hand serves to support the notion that the grievances expressed by the home economists came more from violations of scientific principles and less from notions of cultural superiority. In fact, home economists had complained about and criticized the same four types of problems in America as discussed above in the examples of sugar in American diets, scientific motherhood, the sanitation of the farmwoman’s dishcloth, and the wastefulness of Americans.

One of the most important causes that the home economists stood for was that of health and nutrition. Home economists criticized American diets in a variety of ways, urging Americans to eat more vegetables and less sugar, but they had plenty of things to complain about in Chinese diets and other health habits too. Milam was particularly concerned with the Chinese taking care of their bodies physically. She commented on how the Chinese custom of flat chest binding made it difficult to breath and contributed to tuberculosis.⁵⁵ She also made several mentions of how she was “particularly distressed” by foot binding.⁵⁶ While in China, Milam gave a poster presentation on foot binding. She wrote about the experience saying, “It was gratifying to see obviously wealthy women with stylishly tiny feet eagerly studying the health charts showing why feet should not be bound.”⁵⁷ This statement shows both her distaste for foot binding as well as the scientific nature of her objection to it. Milam subtly commented on the health care system when she described the high mortality rates of children in China.⁵⁸ Mills also commented on the health system, stating that a conversation with a man named Dr. Yao made her feel hopeful for the future of public health in China, indicating that she had a low opinion of the present condition.⁵⁹ Mills commented on the health of animals too, noting her concern for a skinny pony.⁶⁰ Like Mills, Wood also noted and worried about the condition of animals in China, sending a letter to her father, who presumably treated animals, saying, “This is no place for Papa, for the Chinese are no better to their animals than they are to themselves and that isn’t very good. And I’m sure that Papa couldn’t take care of all the horses and pigs and dogs that need care.”⁶¹ She said the Chinese were not very good to their animals, or to themselves, indicating that she was concerned for the health of animals as well as people. Like Milam, Wood also commented a few times on foot binding like Milam.⁶² Presumably, Wood was protesting based upon the same logic as Milam: foot binding was scientifically bad. Far from being repulsed, when Wood mentioned women with bound feet, she seemed impressed at how well they were able to get around. In Kramer’s discussions of health, she focused more on the nutritional aspect. On her boat ride over to China, she claimed that the Japanese “cooked all of the vitamins out of the vegetables” and also claimed to have had some duckling that had been mistreated in its preparation.⁶³ She also repeatedly emphasized her frustrations that the Chinese used white flour and rice because it

was a symbol of wealth, harping on the fact that whole grains contained much better nutrition. Even her students used white grains, much to her dismay.⁶⁴

Home economists also felt that China needed improvement in the area of childcare. However, the idea of scientific motherhood that was circulating in the United States showed that not only the Chinese, but also the Americans, were being criticized for their childrearing. Milam made one comment that was not terribly critical about the differences between Japan and America: "They thought we were robbing our children by putting them to bed early; we thought them unkind to rob their children of sleep."⁶⁵ Mills was far more critical, complaining about the "ignorance" of the Chinese who fed a baby both cake and a meat dumpling.⁶⁶ Wood also complained about their how the Chinese fed their babies, describing how they chewed their food up and took it out of their mouths, with no spoon, and fed it to their babies.⁶⁷

Another area in need of improvement according to the home economists was sanitation. They had a variety of complaints about unsanitary things that went on in China, some similar to complaints about America and all based strictly on scientific principles. For instance, Milam said that "while some homes were clean and attractive, many needed the application of sanitary science."⁶⁸ Wood, frustrated by the lack of sanitation on an enclosed train of all places, described her experience quite bluntly: "The Chinese have no idea of sanitation and so spitting, blowing noses, and wee-weeing may be done anywhere."⁶⁹ She claimed that others told her it could be worse, but she found it very hard to believe. The train was not the only place Wood felt the Chinese lacked proper sanitation. One area of contamination was the water supply. When traveling through China at the very end of her time there, Mills took note of the only clear stream that she had seen in China.⁷⁰ Later she mentioned one of the few pure springs in China.⁷¹ She also discussed the dirt of the country side claiming that it was comprised of dust and the invisible variety that exists when there is no proper sanitation.⁷² She also talked about tempting traditional Chinese fair foods saying, "but in spite of the fascination appearance and tempting odor, it is easy to forego the pleasure for the same reason that you think twice before buying a good American hamburger in the middle of a hot dusty fairground."⁷³ This quote shows two things; first that sanitation was a problem in China, but also that there were some comparable problems in America, as Elias alluded to in her statement about the bacteriology of the dishcloth. Kramer also expressed displeasure at some unsanitary practices she observed. She criticized unsanitary apple candy and the unsanitary process of drying noodles in the backyard or on the sidewalks where dust could blow on them.⁷⁴

For the classroom at Yenching, Milam designed classes in home management. However, the home economists noted the lack of the same skill sets such as efficiency and thrift among the Asians in other areas of daily life as well. During her time in Korea, for instance, Milam commented on the custom of ripping apart waists and skirts to clean them and then putting them back together writing, "What a time-consuming activity!"⁷⁵ Just as Milam found Korean laundry habits to be a waste of time, Mills found Chinese funeral costs, which could be upwards of ten-thousand dollars for the rich, to be "rather a waste of good money."⁷⁶ Kramer discussed a few grievances that dealt particularly with matters of the home. She told one story proudly of a student who taught country dwellers to buy dried skim milk cheaply in bulk to supplement their diets, indicating a need for thrifty nutrition.⁷⁷ Kramer also advocated for an educational effort to convince families to keep some of their homegrown goods, another effort to improve home management in China.⁷⁸ While the home economists expressed a variety of criticisms of China, they did so on a scientific basis. Not only were their complaints scientifically minded, but they were similar in nature to other complaints of home economists about American culture, indicating that their biases were largely not cultural.

Despite some criticisms, the home economists were very positive about many aspects of Chinese culture. During her year in China, Wood encountered a peasant that was taken with the idea of living in America. To the best of her ability, Mills replied in Chinese that "America is nice, but China is nice too."⁷⁹ They appreciated many aspects of Chinese culture, both ancient and modern. Milam stated that she was impressed with the amount of empirical knowledge the Chinese had accumulated and suggests that they could share a lot with them, indicating that she found value in what the Chinese had to share with the west.⁸⁰ Kramer also felt that the Chinese had things to share with the west, praising the unique college schedule of modern China.⁸¹ She also saw "much to commend" in the celebration of Chinese New Year.⁸²

Not only did the home economists respect Chinese culture, they also had great respect for the Chinese people. In addition to admiring many general qualities about the Chinese, they also complimented the Chinese on their intelligence, declaring some Chinese to be more intelligent than they. Milam even suggested that Americans should be more like China in a variety of ways. For instance, Milam complimented the Chinese on a plethora of characteristics such as service, courtesy, humor, thoughtfulness, energy, thrift, modesty, respect, graciousness, and more.⁸³ She then went on to compare the Chinese to Americans and concluded that she was concerned about the well-being of America, not China.⁸⁴ Mills also elevated a Chinese girl above an American, in a way, by writing about her fear of going to a group discussion because a Chinese girl who Mills felt she just could not match was in her group.⁸⁵ Mills also made a profound statement in a letter defending the Chinese against orientalist ideas and highlighting their intelligence:

“They are no longer content to be considered ‘heathens, lost in the darkness’ for they aren’t! It surely makes one sit up and take notice when a man like Hu Shih talks for he is a thinker and a scholar and you have to take his conclusion into consideration whether you want to or not for there are so many thinking as he does.”⁸⁶

In addition to the people, the home economists had many, many great things to say about Chinese food. Not only did they compliment Chinese meals, however, they also gave more scientific compliments about things like utility, thrift, nutrition, and presentation. They praised meals in a variety of ways including calling them “delicious” or “simple but good-tasting” and by describing all of the new foods that they tried and ended up loving.⁸⁷ They also intentionally illustrated their appreciation of Chinese cooking by discussing their weight gain.⁸⁸ More importantly, the home economists praised aspects of Chinese food culture that they considered modern and progressive, at times elevating China above the West. For example, Milam praised multiple aspects of Chinese cooking, claiming no other country could surpass them. She praised a variety of aspects about Chinese cooking, including their ability to prepare food for the table, the art of seasoning, the skill of preparing a variety of dishes with a minimum of utensils, and getting food to the table piping hot. She also complimented a Chinese vegetable cooking method that was able to preserve the color, minerals, and vitamins in the vegetables. Furthermore, she claimed that the Chinese used less sugar than the Japanese and Americans, and therefore had better teeth. Milam gave another example of progressive ideas tucked away in ancient culture, noting the superstitious stigmas: “Some health practices, although surrounded by superstitions, had a valid scientific basis. For example, they would not drink unboiled water, believing it had evil spirits in it.”⁸⁹ Kramer echoed some of the same ideas as Milam, praising Chinese diets for being low on sugar and, therefore, better for one’s health.⁹⁰ In an article she published on China, she commended the same cooking method that Milam did for vitamin preservation in vegetables.⁹¹ Kramer also praised China for traditionally balancing fruit and vegetables in their diets.⁹²

Besides food, one of the key focuses of home economics was on the idea of thrifty and simple living. Home economists saw simplicity and thrift as the way of the future and believed that just by living simply, one could increase one’s station in life. Therefore, the fact that the home economists were repeatedly impressed by Chinese thrift says a great deal. Milam, on her way home from her first trip to China, began to lament the fate of America in comparison to the Chinese. She saw the Chinese as a great example of how a people should act in using leftovers, preventing waste, and living with less instead of more.⁹³ She discussed how the Chinese used every tiny piece of cloth. They did so in one method of shoe-making that, according to Milam, produced beautiful shoes.⁹⁴ Wood was similarly impressed by traditional methods of heat conservation employed by the Chinese. When applied to train travel, heat conservation meant that they heated their trains with engine heat so as not to waste any heat. Wood found Chinese heated trains very economical. She also praised the Chinese practice of farming saying that “no place is too tiny to cultivate and every blade of dry grass is used for something.”⁹⁵ Kramer expressed a similar feeling stating that the U.S. soil conservation “folk” could learn some things from the Chinese farmers.⁹⁶ Kramer also commended the Chinese for their ability to find many good uses for things such as soy beans and lotus plants. She stated in an article written about Chinese diets that “Americans could learn much from the Chinese about preparation of tasty and nutritious bean products.”⁹⁷ In a discussion of lotus plants, she listed the various uses for the plant in Chinese culture including using the leaves for wrapping meat and covering jugs, making food from the roots and seeds, and even making sweets out of it.⁹⁸ She even praised the use of peanuts in Shanghai as a “thrifty, nutritious, and pleasing addition.”⁹⁹ All of her praises were high compliments coming from a home economist who prioritized those values above most others.

American orientalism contained within it many different facets of thought and types of attitudes. Throughout all of them, however, was the idea that modernity was a western concept that the east had to learn from the west. Even though the home economists subscribed to some elements of orientalism and had their fair share of criticisms of China, they veered from the beaten path by promoting aspects of Chinese tradition as progressive, even praising Chinese culture over American culture. Kramer and Milam in particular urged America to be more open to adopting foreign ways to further its own progress. The home economists were an early example of a group of women who challenged the orientalist norm of their time by looking toward ideals of science, not ideals of American society, for direction. Wood, almost as if writing to cause others to question notions they had simply taken for granted, wrote to assure her parents that she was safe saying, “Maybe China is a safer place than Oregon.”¹⁰⁰

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