

# A Note on Christina Stead and China

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There has been no scholarly attention directed to Christina Stead's representation in her novels of China and the Chinese.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the poet and scholar Ouyang Yu, translator of *The Man Who Loved Children* into Chinese, admits that such matters "even escaped my scrutiny in a full-length phd [sic] thesis and a subsequently published book, which in itself would make an interesting point."<sup>2</sup> Yet there are representations of China and the Chinese in Stead's novels, at least in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Man Who Loved Children*.

Stead never visited China. There is no evidence of her reading about China and the Chinese, and her facility in learning languages does not seem to have extended to Chinese. But she indicated an affinity with China and the Chinese when she remarked in a 1981 interview with Ann Chisholm from the *National Times* that she "enjoys talking about anything from the quality of East German caviar to Chinese art" (qtd. in Rowley 551). She appreciated Chinese food. After her return to live in Sydney in 1974, she would meet her brother David once a week or so at the Green Jade Restaurant in Chinatown (Rowley 515), where she half-jokingly complained, "I get nothing much to eat" (*Talking* 133).

Christina Stead's first published novel was *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* (1934). Stead was working on it in 1928, soon after her arrival in London. The setting of the novel is Sydney in the 1920s. Further research would be needed to establish the extent of interest in Chinese affairs in Sydney then. Shirley Fitzgerald suggests that "[t]he constant travelling, the desire to see a weakened and internationally insulated China raised to the status of a great power, and the good lines of communication between Australia and China ensured that local politics and discussion in Sydney were often about China" (111–12). The time of composition of the novel is significant because China was in a state of unrest in the 1920s and

early 1930s. It is notable that Stead has Baruch Mendelssohn, one of the seven poor men, tell Catherine Baguenault that the function of the Kuo-min-tang (Kuomintang, Guomindang or the Nationalist Party) in young China was to “impede the path of revolution” (150). Stead might well have heard of Kuomintang activities in Sydney, since Kuomintang branches were founded around the world about 1920. In the same year the Nationalists held a week-long convention in Sydney with delegates from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and China, reported daily in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In 1921, the Nationalists in Sydney were registered as the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party), and in May 1922 its new headquarters was opened in Ultimo Road (Fitzgerald 113–14).

About April 1927, the Kuomintang, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, started to persecute the Communists. Even if Stead heard nothing about this persecution before she left Australia, her arrival in London in 1928 and her meeting with Wilhelm Blech, a Marxist and her future husband, provided her with more chances to witness the Communist movement. Blech (later William Blake) was the model for Baruch Mendelssohn, and formidably well informed about international events. An important reference for understanding the history of the Kuomintang appeared in London in 1928, though it is not known whether either Stead or Blake read it. The author, T.C. Woo, was a former Kuomintang official who became disillusioned by the split in the party in 1927, and left China soon after. In *The Kuomintang and the Future of the Chinese Revolution*, Woo gave English readers a timely and fairly objective contemporary picture of the Kuomintang: its history, its reorganisation under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen, its fundamental principles, its relationship with the Soviet Union, the cooperation between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party, the split of the Kuomintang, and the persecution of the Communists by the Kuomintang.

In 1922 the Kuomintang was well known as a revolutionary party not only in China but also among overseas Chinese, particularly in South-East Asian regions where Sun Yat-sen enjoyed tremendous support (see Ku; Leong; and Yong and McKenna). Critics have failed to notice that in her masterpiece, *The Man Who Loved Children* (1940), Christina Stead alludes to the Kuomintang in the sequence set in Malaya, in which Lai Wan Hoe, a Singapore-born Chinese, is presented as a Kuomintang revolutionary (249). The central character of Sam Pollit is closely based on Stead’s father, David, whose letters home from Singapore where he was stationed as Special Fisheries Commissioner in British Malaya during 1922 are reproduced almost word-for-word in the novel (Rowley 48).

Generally, the fictional Sam Pollit’s comments reflect an Australian paranoia about the Chinese embodied in the White Australian Policy, and reveal his hypocritical imperialist and racist attitudes. While in British Malaya, Sam “had become wholly enamoured of all things Chinese, Chinese manners, intellects, polish, capacity for work and for living in the heat” (242). He admired the Chinese

and made good Chinese friends, saying that he never had better friends, and “[n]o one understands friendship like the wise, the good and ancient People of the Middle Kingdom” (248). Sam also claims that “[i]n the Chinese are great treasures of wisdom and good subtlety, craftsmanship and labour that we could do with in our country” (248). Moreover, he declares, the Chinese are “the most wonderful people in the world” (248); “[t]he Chinese are almost white, too, for the most part” (241). Despite these protestations, he treats the Chinese as inferiors.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius (550–478 B. C.) is referred to both in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* and *The Man Who Loved Children*. Catherine in *Seven Poor Men* stands “like a statue in the shaded front-room of the villa, smelling of red roses, with a book of Confucius’ poems in her hand, gazing at a head of Eros in pastels which hung on the wall” (58). The reference is to Confucius’ earliest collection of poems, *The Book of Songs*: the character’s complexities are indicated by the associated reference to Eros, the Greek god of love.

Louisa Pollit in *The Man Who Loved Children* is also acquainted with Confucius. Louie and her friend Leslie recite a poem, acknowledged to be after Confucius, when Sam displays the Chinese things he has brought from Malaya (290–1). Readers familiar with *The Book of Songs* (also known in English as *The Confucian Odes* and *The Book of Poetry*, a collection used by Confucius and his followers as texts for moral instruction) will recognize the stanzas recited by the two girls as in the style of a poem from “The Songs of Wei” (Wei Feng) in *The Book of Songs*.

Louie begins:

A yellow plum was given me and in return a topaz fair I gave,  
No mere return for courtesy but that our friendship might outlast  
the grave.

Then another girl Leslie follows:

A simple peach was given me, and in return a ruby gem I gave,  
No mere return for courtesy, but that our friendship might outlast  
the grave!

And Louie concludes:

A loquat branch was given me and in return an emerald I gave,  
No mere return for courtesy, but that our friendship might outlast  
the grave!

I conjecture that Stead has modified an English translation, though I have not been able to identify which one.

She may have had access to James Legge’s five volumes of *The Chinese Classics*, published in 1861–72, which includes one of the earliest translations of *The Book of Songs* into English. Legge’s translations and commentary have become a standard reference. Here is his version of the poem that Louie adapts:

There was presented to me a papaya,  
 And I returned for it a beautiful *keu*-gem;  
 Not as a return for it,  
 But that our friendship might be lasting.  
 There was presented to me a peach,  
 And I returned for it a beautiful *yaou*-gem;  
 Not as a return for it,  
 But that our friendship might be lasting.  
 There was presented to me a plum,  
 And I returned for it a beautiful *kew*-stone;  
 Not as a return for it,  
 But that our friendship might be lasting. (107–8)

The translation of *The Book of Songs* by Arthur Waley is more likely to have been available to Stead. His version of the poem in question differs from Legge's:

She threw a quince to me;  
 In requital I gave a bright girdle-gem.  
 No, not just as requital;  
 But meaning I would love her for ever.  
 She threw a tree-peach to me;  
 In requital I gave a bright greenstone.  
 No, not just as requital;  
 But meaning I would love her for ever.  
 She threw a tree-plum to me;  
 In requital I gave a bright jet-stone.  
 No, not just as requital;  
 But meaning I would love her for ever. (31)

Louie's rendering of the poem is in some aspects more accurate and more like a Chinese poem than James Legge's or Arthur Waley's. Legge's *keu*-gem, *yaou*-gem and *kew*-stone leave readers at a loss as to what these things are. Readers might also feel puzzled by Waley's tree-peach and tree-plum. Stead made clear that her version was not an exact translation of the original poem, though true to the original in spirit.

There are further Chinese allusions in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, over twenty in all. Some refer to Shanghai and its status as a world-famous sea city (2, 237 and 246). Others describe beautiful Chinese artefacts (e.g. 104, 106, 303). Others still are historical. These may reward more intensive critical discussions. At this point, however, I suggest that my observations on two of Stead's novels establish that further research into her references to China and the Chinese is likely to prove fruitful.

## Endnotes

1. One exception is Shirley Walker, who mentions the poem after Confucius in her “Language, Art and Ideas in *The Man Who Loved Children*” (126–27).
2. In an e-mail to me on 11 October, 2002. Ouyang Yu wrote his MA thesis on Stead, and his PhD on representations of Chinese in Australian fiction, 1888–1988.

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