

FROM THE LAB TO THE LOTUS POND

Interactions between Orientalism and Ideals of Domestic Science

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"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."

-Camilla Mills, an American home economist, reflecting upon the condition of China in 1925

At a time when America had only just begun its journey away from the discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Acts of the 1880s and toward its eventual alliance with China during World War II, a group of home economists from Oregon began to contemplate sending one of their own to China. Ava B. Milam, head of the Department of Home Economics at the University of Oregon, left for Yenching University in 1922 to design a home economics program uniquely tailored to Chinese culture. In the 1920s, ideas of western superiority flourished, and work in China was largely considered as valuable in reflecting the promise of American society.¹

While Milam, and others like her, showed influences of American orientalism, they veered significantly from the masses by expressing a scientific appreciation for many Chinese customs. As leaders in a progressive and highly scientific field, the home economists emphasized their scientific focus on the domestic sphere. Unlike the majority of Americans at this time, they felt that Chinese culture held scientific value apart from the West, and they considered the West to be far from perfect.

The aim of this paper is to examine the letters and memoirs the home economists left behind against the backdrop of American orientalism. American orientalism was a complex and multi-faceted ideology that remained

1. Jespersen, T. Christopher, *American Images of China: 1931-1949*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 24.



wide-spread throughout early American history and into the 1900s. It involved imperialistic and often negative western stereotypes of the East. While scholars have advanced a variety of definitions of American orientalism, there is a general consensus that it resulted from modernity becoming synonymous with the West, meaning that "Asia embodied what historian Jackson Lears calls 'anti-modernism.'"² A thorough examination of the divergence of the home economists' ideas from those of American society in general produces an image of the unique form of American orientalism expressed by American home economists who travelled to China. In this paper, I present a historical case-study of a group of women often overlooked, especially in discussions of orientalism. In conducting this research, I find that the unique interaction between American orientalism and the values of the home economists produce a remarkable ideology for its time. This essay shows that home economists who moved back and forth from the United States to China between the 1920s and 1940s maintained elements of orientalism in their ideologies but diverged from the

norm by prioritizing scientific ideas about home economics over the cultural practices of both Chinese and American societies. Furthermore, these women sometimes elevated Chinese culture over Western culture based on its level of congruence with scientific principles. In doing so, they countered the popular orientalist attitude in America that Chinese tradition was incapable of producing modernization.

Milam, Mills, Mabel Wood, and Martha Kramer, the four home economists around whom this discussion is centered, all spent significant time in China between the 1920s and the 1940s while involved in the Yenching home economics program. While they spent most of their time in China, the home economists also frequently visited Japan and occasionally other parts of Asia on excursions. After returning home from their time abroad, some even went as far as to advocate the adoption of certain Chinese practices in America, and all four branched from the orientalist norm by finding value in the culture of China beyond mere fascination. Additionally, Wood and Kramer, who travelled to China after Milam and Mills in the mid to late 1930s, showed even more appreciation for Chinese customs. This shift fits with current research trends that show a transition to a more favorable view of an Americanizing China post-1931. That said, even the most negative of the home economists complimented Chinese culture for its scientific value at a time when complimenting the Chinese

2. Yoshihara, Mari, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 26. For further discussions of American orientalism, see Leong, Karen J., *The China Mystique*, Jespersen, Christopher T., *American Images of China, 1931-1949*, Yoshihara, Mari, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, and Tchen, John Kuo, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882*.

typically meant praising them for becoming more like Americans.

American Orientalism

Orientalist attitudes held a long tradition in American thought. Although very early Americans thought they might learn from China, these attitudes quickly disappeared, replaced with ideas of eastern ignorance and western superiority.³ With the influx of missionary letters beginning in the 1840s describing “heathen, uncivilized, barbaric people,” and with 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.⁴ This exaggerated perception of Asian immigrants led to what came to be known as the “Exclusion Acts.” By 1882 the Chinese were almost completely prevented from migrating to the United States and these laws remained in effect until 1943.⁵ John Kuo Wei Tchen argued that “the closer Americans got to the real Chinese, dispelling their imagined ‘Orient,’ the more their respect for and emulation of Chinese civilization diminished.”⁶

Despite this negative perception, Americans possessed a clear fascination with the East that stood the tests of time and growing knowledge. “Exoticism,” an idea within orientalism, represented this captivation with the “exotic” East.⁷ This fascination was not necessarily positive, and even when it was, it did not represent a preference for eastern culture over western culture. 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.

A few key events situated American attitudes about China during the time the home economists were travelling to China. In 1920, American citizen Pearl Buck published *Good Earth*. Her book presented a favorable (albeit unavoidably biased) view of a modernizing China. While Buck considered herself an advocate for China, she still identified ideas of modernity with the West and confirmed many orientalist stereotypes in her presentation of Asian characters as simple, primitive, and slow, among other things.⁹ The compromise she represented, a favorable view of Americanizing China, “facilitated America’s embrace” of the East.¹⁰

3. Tchen, John Kuo Wei, *New York Before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture 1776-1882*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 16-17.

4. Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 8-9. Warren I. Cohen, *America’s Response to China: A History of Sino-American Relations*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000), 30.

5. Jespersen, *American Images of China*, 2.

6. Tchen, *New York Before Chinatown*, 25.

7. Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 9-10.

8. *Ibid.*, 42.

9. Leong, Karen J., *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 28-29.

10. Leong, *The China Mystique*, 12.

Around the same time, Chiang Kai-shek, who managed to unify China under his rule much to the delight of those in America, converted to Christianity. Changes such as these solidified China's place in the eyes of Americans as a country capable of demonstrating the promise of American society by westernizing and modernizing in accordance with American virtues and expectations.¹¹ Leong described American attitudes in the 1930s by arguing that they saw China as "a demonstration of the promise held by American democracy and culture to transform other nations."¹² The decade was characterized by a positive view of an Americanizing China, with the understanding that China remained favored only because it was beginning to look more like America. The home economists, writing during this time, were exceptional for valuing the ways in which Chinese culture was more in line with their scientific values than American culture. In certain realms, they advocated for America to become more like China.

American Women and Orientalism

During the time period the home economists worked, women reacted to China in a variety of ways including sympathy, emulation, exploitation, and even a combination of all of them.¹³ Still, any scientific or modern

virtues found in China, they believed, necessarily came from the West, and little suggestion seems to have been made by most American women around this time period that China had anything with modern value to offer the West.¹⁴ In Yoshihara's discussion of American women and their relation to orientalism, she presents American Orientalist ideologies as comparisons between the feminized east and the modern west. For example, American actress Geraldine Farrar played the character of Japanese Cio-Cio-San in *Madama Butterfly*. Yoshihara notes that, "for those who praised Farrar's performance, the very difference between the modern American womanhood the singer embodied...and the quaint Japanese femininity she impersonated on stage served to validate her performance power."¹⁵ References to the West were seen as synonymous with "modernity." Mari Yoshihara illustrated the growing connotation in her discussion of a writer who described Japanese art, "the writer of this passage saw "truth and simplicity, grace and harmony" in Japanese art...the antithesis of the art of the modern, industrial, civilized West."¹⁶ The motivations and views of different American Orientalist discourses were a mixed lot that transformed throughout history, but they primarily rested on ideas of American superiority in which the West was scientifically superior to the East. This attitude

11. Jespersen, *American Images of China*, 25.

12. Leong, *The China Mystique*, 1.

13. Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 3-197.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 98.

16. Ibid., 28

was in contrast, of course, to the perspective brought back to America by the home economists around this time. While the home economists did at times express preferences for western culture, they also saw a great deal of modern value in Chinese domestic practice.

The Four Home Economists

According to Helen Schneider, Ava B. Milam began her career at the University of Chicago where she adopted many ideas from her mentor Marian Talbot, learning to value home economics and its ability to advance women professionally while simultaneously bettering society. Upon graduation, she accepted a teaching position at Oregon State College – now Oregon State University. Six years later, she was promoted to dean of the Home Economics Department and “tried to eliminate much of the older ‘domestic arts’ classes”¹⁷ in order to focus on more scientific classes. In 1922, she left for China, visiting four times between 1922 and 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 1924.¹⁸

17. Schneider, Helen, *Keeping the Nation's House: Domestic Management and the Making of Modern China*, (Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2011) 122.

18. *Ibid.*, 121-123.

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 1949.¹⁹ Of the letters she left behind, most are from her earlier years. 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.

Wood resided in China for only a year, but during that year she spent extensive time with the locals engaging with Chinese culture. She intended to take leadership of the home economics department, but instead felt it was wiser to allow Caroline Chen, one of Milam's former students and a native of China, to lead the department. Wood instead opted to provide her with support and advice. Judging by her actions, Wood elevated the position of the Chinese higher than her predecessors. When Wood left in 1937, Martha Kramer took her place.

Martha Kramer spent around six of her eighty-seven years living in China.²⁰ In 1937 she left the United States to work at Yenching University and did

19. *Ibid.*, 122-123.

20. Kramer, J.T., *Aunt Martha's China*, (Decatur, IL: Abbott & Foran Inc., 1998), Introduction.

not return from China until 1943. As the author of a paper claiming that, “many and many an idea could be brought right over [from China] to food preparation in this country,” Kramer was perhaps the strongest advocate for the adoption of Chinese customs in America. While in China during World War II, she was placed under house arrest and was later interned at Weih sien until American soldiers liberated the camp and she was able to return home. Despite her internment, she went on to write many favorable articles about China.

American Orientalism and the Ideologies of the Home Economists

Each woman possessed a clear fascination with China, a fascination admittedly influenced by elements of exoticism in the American orientalist rhetoric. Exoticism had both positive and negative connotations. A broad category, exoticism in American Orientalist ideologies included ideas of “otherness”, ideas of the “heathen” East vs. the “civilized” or “modernized” West, and an aura of curiosity and fascination surrounding “exotic” eastern cultures.²¹ The representations of exoticism in the writings of the home economists, however, proved to be overwhelmingly positive.

All four women expressed some criticisms of China, but their objections were almost exclusively based in scientific ideals, not cultural preference.

In fact, many of the most heavily criticized areas of Chinese domestic life were also the most heavily criticized areas of domestic life in America. Any arbitrary preferences for American culture that could be seen in the letters and memoirs of earlier home economists (Mills-Biggerstaff and Milam) were essentially absent by the time Wood and Kramer were writing in the mid-1930s. This shift was unsurprising, considering that recent scholarship reveals increasingly positive American attitudes about China post-1931.²²

What was surprising, however, was that, at times, all four home economists believed Chinese culture to be more in line with their own scientific ideals than American culture. Dr. Helen Schneider argues that home economists began to adhere to a kind of “home economics superiority” which explains their distance from widespread ideas of cultural superiority.²³ Therefore, while not altogether exempt from the influences of orientalism, the home economists were exceptional in their acceptance and appreciation of many aspects of Chinese domestic culture for their scientific advantages.

Home Economics in America

American home economists saw their field as a progressive and scientific movement and believed they could advance the role women played in America by

22. Jespersen, *American Images of China*, 24-26.

23. Working paper by Helen Schneider presented at Virginia Tech in October, 2014.

21. Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 8.

modernizing the domestic sphere.²⁴ They took on a variety of roles within society including teaching in universities, advising politicians, and founding programs to educate the rural population on nutrition, sanitation, thrifty living, and childcare. Through their work in the field, they realized authority and influence and used scientific ideals to critique both American and Chinese society.²⁵

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. Additionally, while many other American women exploited the East to gain spheres of influence for themselves, the home economists had already found a niche of power within the American domestic sphere.²⁶ With an avenue for gaining influence already available in American society, they experienced less need to use their connections to the East as an avenue for power. Many factors set the home economists apart from other American women in relation to orientalism, but the context in which they lived still impacted their ideologies.

Exoticism in the Writings of the Home Economists

The ideology of the home economists branched from traditional orientalism, but their writings still showed expressions of it, especially ideas of exoticism. In order for something to be considered “exotic” it must be compared to a standard. Their writings showed a clear image of China as an “other” to the West. Wang Ning elaborated on the idea of “otherness” in her work “Orientalism versus Occidentalism?” Wang described 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.”²⁷ Therefore, the notion of eastern “otherness” serves as a prerequisite for expressions of exoticism. An internal idea, “otherness” often manifested itself outwardly in the practice of making comparisons between the East and the West and thereby separating them.

The home economists repeatedly compared China to the United States, noting things that appeared both similar and foreign to them. The separation of China and America in the minds of the home economists is evident in their ready acceptance of things that appeared unusual combined with their surprise at things that appeared familiar. Milam, for instance, compared and noted differences between many things

24. Schneider, Helen, “The Professionalization of Chinese Domesticity: Ava B. Milam and Home Economics at Yenching University,” in *China's Christian Colleges*, ed. Daniel H. Bays and Ellen Widmer, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 127.

25. Elias, Megan, *Stir It Up* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 63.

26. Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 6.

27. Wang Ning, “Orientalism versus Occidentalism,” *New Literary History* 28, no. 1 (1997): 58-59.

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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ She even declared many things to be surprisingly similar by comparing the Chinese Moon Festival to Thanksgiving and Chinese houses to certain types of Western houses.³⁰ During the middle of her trip, she investigated the differences between the problems in the East and in the West in supervising dormitory food. Expecting more differences, she marveled at the extent of the similarity. Kramer also made comparisons between the East and West. In one instance she noted how interesting the holidays seemed 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 proved to be their fascination with the beauty and intricacy of traditional Chinese architecture,

sights, art, and culture, especially weddings and funerals. They described many intriguing shops, fascinating cities, and beautiful sights.³¹ 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.”³² Likewise, Mills admired the temple she toured on her trip from Shanghai to Soochow writing, “I had one of the grandest experiences of my young life.”³³ Wood, in particular, delighted in the different temples found in China, although she thought it a bit odd to sleep next to a mummy.³⁴ She related elaborate descriptions of the Ti'en T'ai Su Temple and the Temple of Ten Thousand Buddhas and described what she called “the temple of the year” as “unbelievably beautiful.”³⁵ Many other notably “foreign” things also caught her interest, like a “delightful” trip to the Ming tombs, the “lovely” Seventeen Arched and camelback bridges, the Garden of Moonlight

28. Milam, Ava B. & Munford, Kenneth, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, (n.p.: Oregon State University Press, 1969).

29. Wood, Mabel, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, (n.p.: H. J. F. Townsend, 1986), 56, 57, 110.

30. *Ibid.*, 20, 34.

31. *Ibid.*, 48, 13. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 155, 156, 187, 217, 220.

Knight Biggerstaff papers, Letter, Camilla Mills to Family, March 4, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library. Kramer, Martha, *Aunt Martha's China*, (Decatur, IL: Abbott & Foran Inc., 1998), 5, 6, 7, 13.

32. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 187.

33. Knight Biggerstaff papers, Letter, Camilla Mills to Thelma, February, 3, 1924, box 25, #14-17-629.

34. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 25, 28, 49, 102.

35. *Ibid.*, 15, 25, 107.

Fertility, the “magnificence and beauty” of the Forbidden City, and the Summer Palace.³⁶ 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.³⁷

In addition to illustrating exoticism in their descriptions of China, the home economists also demonstrated a penchant for exoticism 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.³⁸ Mills purchased a variety of things as well, including many gifts such as embroidery, fabric, and a luncheon set.³⁹ Wood also bought gifts to bring home and discussed all the “junk” she had bought.⁴⁰ In accordance with her fascination with both weddings and funerals, she purchased tiny figurines of Chinese wedding and funeral processions.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.”⁴³ The home economists clearly saw China as an “other” and were influenced by the exotic orientalist discourse. However, they tended to view exotic things in a positive light, and, as we will see later, found scientific merit beyond mere fascination in many other aspects of Chinese culture.

Arbitrary Cultural Preferences in the Writings of the Home Economists

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 absolutely so. Milam and Mills, both writing mostly during the 1920s, expressed this

36. *Ibid.*, 14-15, 23, 49, 50.

37. Kramer, *Aunt Martha’s China*, 10.

38. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 157.

39. Knight *Biggerstaff papers*, Letter, Camilla Mills to Family, January 14, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629.; March 2, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629.

40. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 87.

41. *Ibid.*, 63.

42. *Ibid.*, 13, 42, 84, 99. Wood’s suggestions of emulating eastern women is reminiscent of some orientalist expressions as discussed by Mari Yoshihara. Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 10, 99, 195.

43. Kramer, *Aunt Martha’s China*, 12.

type of favoritism more frequently than Wood and Kramer who wrote a decade or two later. For example, Helen Schneider noted a sarcastic note from Milam in one of her 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."⁴⁴ This quote indicated that even though Milam knew that the West did not always have the best cultural habits, she still did not want to appear to prefer 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 objecting.⁴⁵ Her comments certainly do not prove that she agreed, but it does seem likely that she would have mentioned any disagreements she may have had. In addition, Mills also compared Chinese trains to American trains, much preferring American trains.⁴⁶ Milam and Mills seem to have shared a similar outlook, the West was generally preferable, but, as we will see later, 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. Travelling post-1931, an even more favorable view toward China

was not unexpected given the increasing negative American opinion of China. Kramer was almost entirely complimentary of Chinese culture. Wood, even when she did express a preference, did so in a way that showed a good deal of cultural awareness. 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."⁴⁷ 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."⁴⁸ 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 had anticipated and complimented a traditional Chinese instrument for its beautiful tone.⁴⁹ At one point, she also seemed to look down on Taoism, calling it a "queer belief."⁵⁰ Just a few days earlier, however, she described how impressed she was by the martyr-like faith of those who meditated.⁵¹ Even if she found the belief odd, she maintained a

44. Schneider, "The Professionalization of Chinese Domesticity," p. 137.

45. *Knight Biggerstaff papers*, Letter, Camilla Mills to Family, January 14, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629.

46. *Knight Biggerstaff papers*, Letter, Camilla Mills to Family, April 2, 1929, box 25, #14-17-629.

47. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 25.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 26.

50. *Ibid.*, 100.

51. *Ibid.*, 95.

respect for it. Kramer made a few critical comments in her letters, but they were few and far between and were backed by a scientific reasoning. Besides these few comments, the home economists tended to look to their own ideals, rather than to American ideals, as the standard, especially in domestic realms. This line of thinking likely related to the relatively small amount of pure cultural preference found in their writings as compared to the standard American orientalist rhetoric.

Criticisms of American Culture in the Writings of the Home Economists and Others

Generally, the home economists' criticisms of China tied directly into the nature of home economics itself. According to Fleischmann, the home economics movement "aimed to modernize, professionalize, and make scientific female domesticity."⁵² Isabel Bevier, a home economist, defended the professional nature of her field by implying that home economists studied bread, they did not merely bake it.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ Home economists were not only tasked with teaching the optimal methods of household management, but also with opposing old traditions that hampered progress.⁵⁶

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 farmwomen why they needed to keep their dishcloths sanitary.⁵⁷ Home economists complained that Americans were not economical, but instead produced a great deal of waste.⁵⁸ They also tried to reeducate women to decorate in ways primarily concerned with function.⁵⁹ Another school of thought that emerged from American society was the idea of scientific motherhood, a movement that became deeply intertwined with

54. Ibid., 21.

55. Fleischmann, "At Home in the World," 176.

56. Ibid., 179. Additionally, while home economists generally tried to eliminate tradition in favor of more modern methods, the home economists who went to China endeavored to preserve many Chinese traditions, claiming that they were scientifically beneficial in the modern world.

57. Elias, *Stir It Up*, 20.

58. Ibid., 32-33.

59. Ibid., 40.

52. Fleischmann, Ellen, "At Home in the World: Globalizing Domesticity Through Home Economics in the Interwar Years," in *Transnational and Historical Perspectives on Global Health, Welfare and Humanitarianism*, ed. Ellen Fleischmann, Sonya Grypma, Michael Marten Kristiansand, and Inger Marie Okkenhaug, (Kristiansand, Norway: Portal Books, 2013), 161.

53. Elias, *Stir It Up*, 18.

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.⁶⁰

The home economists who traveled to China also criticized 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.⁶¹ No matter what culture they were researching, the home economists wanted to find scientific solutions to domestic problems.

Scientific Criticisms of American Culture in the Writings of the Home Economists

During Milam's time at Yenching, she conducted a survey to determine the specific needs of China for domestic science. What she found to be the four strongest categories of need coincided with the four most frustrating aspects of Chinese culture for the home economists as reflected in their letters. 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."⁶² The agreement between Milam's study and the problems with China that the home economists noticed first hand served 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 for the home economists proved to be health and nutrition. The home economists criticized American diets in a variety of ways, urging Americans to eat more vegetables and less sugar, but they also complained about many aspects of Chinese diets and health habits. Milam particularly was concerned with the ways in which the Chinese took care of their bodies physically. She commented on how the Chinese custom of flat chest binding made it difficult to breathe and contributed to tuberculosis.⁶³ She also made several mentions of how she was "particularly distressed" by

60. Apple, Rima, "Constructing Mothers: Scientific Motherhood in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," *Social History of Medicine* 8, no. 9 (1995): 161-162, 177.

61. Kramer, *Aunt Martha's China*, 2-3. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 159.

62. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 159.

63. *Ibid.*, 154.

foot binding.⁶⁴ 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.”⁶⁵ This statement showed both her distaste for foot binding as well as the scientific nature of her objection to it. Like Milam, Wood also commented a few times on foot binding.⁶⁶ Presumably, Wood protested 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. 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.”⁶⁷ 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. Mills also commented on both the health of animals and the health system, noting her concern for a skinny pony and 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.⁶⁸ Milam also subtly commented on the health care system when she described the high mortality rates of children in China.⁶⁹

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 eaten some duckling that had been mistreated in its preparation.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

The home economists also felt that China needed improvement in the area of childcare. However, the idea of scientific motherhood that circulated in the United States at the time 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

64. Ibid., 152.

65. Ibid., 150.

66. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 24, 123.

67. Ibid., 33.

68. *Knight Biggerstaff papers*, Letter, Camilla Mills to Family, June 17, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629; June 17, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629.

69. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 152.

70. Kramer, *Aunt Martha’s China*, 1.

71. Ibid., 25-26, 124-126.

by putting them to bed early; we thought them unkind to rob their children of sleep.”⁷² Mills proved far more critical, complaining about the “ignorance” of the Chinese who fed a baby both cake and a meat dumpling.⁷³ Wood also complained about 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.⁷⁴

Another area in need of improvement, according to the home economists, was sanitation. They wrote about a variety of complaints concerning unsanitary practices in China, some similar to complaints about America and all based strictly on scientific principles. For instance, Milam said, “while some homes were clean and attractive, many needed the application of sanitary science.”⁷⁵ 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.”⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ Later she mentioned it as one of the few pure springs in China.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ She 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.”⁸⁰ This quote showed 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.⁸¹

Poor home management and a lack of thrift and efficiency were other re-occurring themes in the frustrations expressed by the home economists. For the classroom at Yenching,

72. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 187.

73. Knight *Biggerstaff papers*, Letter, Camilla Mills to Thelma, February 3, 1924, box 25, #14-17-629.

74. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 113.

75. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 156.

76. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 116.

77. *Ibid.*, 123.

78. *Ibid.*, 128.

79. *Ibid.*, 117.

80. *Ibid.*, 95.

81. Kramer, *Aunt Martha's China*, 12, 22-23.

Milam designed classes in home management. Kramer advocated for an educational effort to convince families to keep some of their homegrown goods, another attempt to improve home management in China.⁸² The home economists also noted the lack of the same skills such as efficiency and thrift among Asians in other areas of daily life as well. During her time in Korea, for instance, Milam commented on the custom of ripping apart skirts to clean them and then sewing them back together writing, "What a time-consuming activity!"⁸³ 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."⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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 also they were similar in nature to other complaints of home economists about American culture, indicating that their biases were largely not cultural.

82. Ibid., 133-134.

83. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 157.

84. Knight Biggerstaff papers, Letter, Camilla Mills to Family, April 17, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629.

85. Kramer, *Aunt Martha's China*, 123.

Scientific Praise of Chinese Culture in the Writings of the Home Economists

Despite some criticisms, the home economists wrote positively about many aspects of Chinese culture. During her year in China, Wood encountered a peasant taken with the idea of living in America. To the best of her ability, Mills replied in Chinese, "America is nice, but China is nice too."⁸⁶ 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 suggested that they could share a lot with them, indicating that she found value in what the Chinese had to share with the West.⁸⁷ Kramer also felt that the Chinese had things to share with the West, praising the unique college schedule of China.⁸⁸ She even saw "much to commend" in the celebration of the Chinese New Year.⁸⁹

Not only did the home economists respect Chinese culture, they also had great respect for the Chinese people. For instance, Milam complimented the Chinese on a plethora of characteristics, such as service, courtesy, humor, thoughtfulness, energy, thrift, modesty, respect, graciousness, and more. Milam suggested that Americans should be more like

86. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 121.

87. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 154.

88. Kramer, *Aunt Martha's China*, 13.

89. Ibid., 15.

China in a variety of ways.⁹⁰ She then went on to compare the Chinese to Americans and concluded that she was concerned about the well-being of America, not China.⁹¹ 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.”⁹²

In addition to the people, the home economists had great things to say about Chinese food. Not only did they compliment Chinese meals, they also gave “scientific” compliments about things like utility, thrift, nutrition, and presentation. The home economists all praised meals in a variety of ways including calling them “delicious” or “simple but good-tasting” or by describing all of the new foods that they tried and ended up loving.⁹³ They also intentionally

illustrated their appreciation of Chinese cooking by discussing their weight gain.⁹⁴

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. Among the praised attributes included the 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 water⁹⁵, believing it had evil spirits in it.” Kramer echoed some of the same ideas as Milam, praising Chinese diets for being low on sugar and, therefore,

90. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 149, 163.

91. *Ibid.*, 163-164.

92. *Knight Biggerstaff papers*, Letter, Camilla Mills to Thelma, November 23, 1924, box 25, #14-17-629. This quote was copied from Helen Schneider’s notes taken in March of 2008. Note: Hu Shih was a Chinese leader who was largely influential in the establishment of the vernacular as the official written language of China.

93. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 156, 214. *Knight Biggerstaff papers*, Letter, Camilla Mills to Family, January 14, 1923, box 25, #14-17-629. *Knight Biggerstaff*

papers, 1949 Journal of Camilla Mills, box 35, #14-17-629. Kramer, *Aunt Martha’s China*, 13, 20, 25, 51, 65, 118, 132. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 20, 22, 35, 53, 72, 66, 88, 91, 122. 94. Kramer, *Aunt Martha’s China*, 1. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 47. 95. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 153.

better for one's health.⁹⁶ In an article she published on China, Kramer complimented the same cooking method that Milam did for vitamin preservation in vegetables.⁹⁷ Kramer also praised China for traditionally balancing fruit and vegetables in their diets.⁹⁸

Besides food, one of the key focuses of home economics centered on the idea of thrifty, 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. The home economists were at times critical of large extravagances, funerals for example, but over-archingly complimentary about the way the Chinese lived their lives on a daily basis. 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 people should act in using leftovers, preventing waste, and living with less instead of more.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ 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 practices concerning farming saying, "no place is too tiny to cultivate and every blade of dry grass is used for something."¹⁰¹

Kramer expressed a similar feeling stating that the U.S. soil conservation "folk" could learn some things from the Chinese farmers.¹⁰² She also commended the Chinese for their ability to find many good uses for things such as soy bean and lotus plants. In an article written about Chinese diets, Kramer wrote, "Americans could learn much from the Chinese about preparation of tasty and nutritious bean products."¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴ She even praised the use of peanuts in Shanghai as a "thrifty, nutritious, and pleasing addition."¹⁰⁵ All of her praises were high compliments coming from a home economist who prioritized those values above most others.

96. Kramer, *Aunt Martha's China*, Prologue.

97. *Ibid.*, 133.

98. *Ibid.*

99. Milam & Munford, *Adventures of a Home Economist*, 163.

100. *Ibid.*, 153.

101. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 117.

102. Kramer, *Aunt Martha's China*, 28.

103. *Ibid.*, 132.

104. *Ibid.*, 8, 21.

105. *Ibid.*, 132.

Conclusion

American orientalism contained within it many different facets of thought and types of attitudes. Throughout all of them, however, ran 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 predominant strain of orientalism 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 domestic 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."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶. Wood, *The China Letters of Mabel Wood*, 59.

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