

# IN SEARCH OF OUR MOTHER'S GARDEN : THE PIONEERS OF ASIAN AMERICAN WRITERS

## การค้นหานักเขียนชาวอเมริกันที่มีเชื้อสายเอเชียในยุคเริ่มต้น

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### บทคัดย่อ

ในกลางศตวรรษที่ 20 มีนักเขียนชาวอเมริกันที่มีเชื้อสายเอเชียมากมาย ใครคือนักเขียนชาวอเมริกันที่มีเชื้อสายเอเชียในยุคเริ่มต้น การเขียนของพวกเขาเป็นอย่างไร บทความนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อตอบคำถามเหล่านี้จากการสืบค้นประวัติศาสตร์การเขียนของนักเขียนชาวอเมริกันที่มีเชื้อสายเอเชีย พบนักเขียนอเมริกันเชื้อสายเอเชียในยุคต้น 2 คน คือ Edith Eaton and Winnifred Eaton ทั้งสองคนเป็นพี่น้องกัน Edith Eaton ประกาศว่าเป็นลูกครึ่งอังกฤษและจีน และใช้นามปากกาว่า Sui Sin Far แต่ Winnifred Eaton อ้างว่าเป็นลูกครึ่งอังกฤษและญี่ปุ่น และใช้นามปากกาว่า Onoto Watanna แม้ว่าทั้งคู่จะเลือกทางเดินที่ต่างกัน แต่ทั้งคู่ก็มีจุดประสงค์ร่วมกันคือในยุคที่คนขาวในอเมริกาพยายามกีดกันชาวเอเชีย Sui Sin Far และ Watanna ใช้ปากกาเป็นอาวุธโดยการเขียนให้คนในประเทศสหรัฐอเมริกาเข้าใจชาวเอเชียมากขึ้น สรุปได้ชัดเจนว่าการเขียนของนักเขียนชาวอเมริกันที่มีเชื้อสายเอเชียในยุคต้นมีความงดงามเช่นเดียวกับงานเขียนของนักเขียนในยุคปัจจุบัน

**คำสำคัญ** นักเขียนชาวอเมริกันเชื้อสายจีน, ชุย ซิน ฟาร์ และโอโนโต วาตันนา

### Abstract

*By the mid-twentieth century, Asian American writers were increasing in number and were widely recognized. Who were the early pioneers of Asian American writers? How was their writing? The purpose of this paper was to answer these two questions. In tracing the history of Asian American writing, it was found that the line of Asian American writing extended back to the nineteenth century. Two pioneer writers were found, Edith Eaton and Winnifred Eaton. Edith Eaton acknowledged her Chinese heritage and employed a Chinese pen name, Sui Sin Far. In contrast, Winnifred Eaton claimed a Japanese heritage and adopted a Japanese pen*

name, *Onoto Watanna*. Although they chose the different paths, they undertook parallel projects, challenging the Anglo-American discourse which attempted to subjugate and to exclude the Asians. It was clear that Asian American writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indeed blossomed and flourished, as it continues to do so today.

**Keywords** Asian American writers, *Sui Sin Far*, and *Onoto Watana*

By the mid-twentieth century, Asian American writers were increasing in number and were widely recognized. In the early 1970s, Lawson Fusao Inada's *Before the War: Poems as They Happened* (1971) was published by William Morrow, a major New York publisher (Inada. 1971). Frank Chin's two plays, *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1972) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1974) were produced at New York's American Place Theatre (Chin. 1982). In 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* won the National Book Critic's Circle Award for the year's best work of nonfiction. In 1981, the Obie Award for the Best New Play went to David Henry Hwang's "F. O. B." (Hwang. 1980). At the same time, critical works of contemporary Asian American writing were increasing, such as Kai Yu Hsu's *Asian American Authors* (Hsu. 1872) and David Wand's *Asian American Heritage* (Wand. 1974). However, surprisingly, the early pioneers of Asian American literature rarely received attention from these critics. Walker (2000), in her essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," traces African American writing history and explains the hardships that black women in the past had and how they still managed to use their creativity. Like Walker (2000), the researcher aims at searching for our mother's garden. That is studying the history of the Asian American writing and finding out the pioneers of Asian American writers. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explain the obstacles these pioneers had to go through and the means by which they persevered and maintained their creativity.

In tracing Asian American writing, two pioneer writers were found, Edith Eaton and Winnifred Eaton.<sup>1</sup> Edith Eaton acknowledged her Chinese heritage and identified with Chinese America; she employed a Chinese pen name, *Sui Sin Far*. In contrast, Winnifred Eaton claimed a Japanese heritage and adopted a Japanese pen name, *Onoto Watanna*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Professor Dr. Jean Pfaelzer, an instructor at the University of Delaware, U.S.A., who introduced me to these two authors.

<sup>2</sup> In my study, I use their pen names to identify them because these pen names are the names by which they were well known. The full name "Sui Sin Far" is used throughout because its meaning (Water Lily) depends upon the sequence "Sui Sin Far," and so the syllables cannot be separated.

Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna were the daughters of a Chinese mother and an English father. Their father, Edward Eaton, was from a family of considerable wealth. As a young man, he went to China to take care of his family's silk business, and it was there he met his future wife, the mother of Sui Sin Far and Watanna, Grace Trefusius. She had been born in China but was abducted from home at age three or four, presumably by circus performers, and later adopted by an English missionary couple who gave her an English education. She returned to China, where she met Edward Eaton; eventually, they married. The Eatons originally set up house in England, and then migrated to the United States, living briefly in Hudson, New York, before moving to stay in Montreal. According to Sui Sin Far's biographer, White-Parks (1995), the family was poor and the children often felt ostracized for their mixed race heritage. In Montreal, the Eaton children grew up having little contact with Chinese people or Chinese culture other than through their mother.

Born in 1865 in England and named Edith Maud Eaton, Sui Sin Far immigrated in 1873 with her parents to Montreal, where she grew up in genteel poverty in a family that eventually numbered fourteen children. As an adult, Sui Sin Far supported herself by working as a stenographer, a reporter, and a fiction writer. She traveled and lived in the northern United States, Canada, and the Caribbean, settling for ten years in Seattle.

In the time that American people had bad attitudes toward Chinese people, Sui Sin Far identified with her mother and Chinese people. To some extent, her ethnic consciousness is a result of her close relationship with her mother, whose love and nostalgia for her homeland left a strong impact on Sui Sin Far's mind: "She tells us tales of China. Though a child when she left her native land, she remembers it well" (Sui Sin Far. 1909: 128). As the eldest daughter and second child in an unusually large family, there is no doubt that Sui Sin Far helped her mother take care of the family. And this made her particularly close to her mother.

In addition, Sui Sin Far developed her acknowledgement of her Chinese heritage when she had more opportunity to contact the Chinese people. According to White-Parks, none of the Eaton children learned their mother's native language, and most of them rarely encountered Chinese people. In early 1890, Sui Sin Far worked in a Montreal Chinese community. This was a significant juncture in her life: "From that time I began to go among my mother's people, and it did me a world of good to discover how akin I was to them" (Sui Sin Far. 1909: p. 128). Clearly, this job was the first door inviting Sui Sin Far to step over the threshold from "outsider" to "insider." With a letter of introduction from the Montreal Chinese community, she was accepted into the Seattle Chinese community where she lived for a decade. She worked at a Baptist mission for a period, teaching English to Chinese immigrants (Ling. 1990: 28). I suggest that Sui Sin Far's frequent contacts with Chinese immigrants

not only enabled her to learn about their lives first-hand and to gather materials for her stories but also helped her to develop what she called her “Chinese instincts” and even to become part of the Chinese American community:

My Chinese instincts develop. I am no longer the little girl who shrunk against my brother at the first sight of a Chinaman. Many and many a time, when alone in a strange place, has the appearance of even an humble laundryman given me a sense of protection and made me feel quite at home. This fact of itself proves to me that prejudice can be eradicated by association. (Sui Sin Far. 1909: 131)

Sui Sin Far was acknowledging her Chinese ancestry and was ceasing to see Chinese North Americans as “other” in relation to whites. Her statement implies a new found affinity for Chinese North Americans as individuals, including the “Chinaman” inside herself.

The development of her “Chinese instinct” is shown by the selection of her pseudonym. Sui Sin Far’s earliest published literary efforts were impressionistic semi-fictional prose sketches written for the Montreal *Dominion Illustrated* magazine between 1888 and 1890. Although these sketches, signed with her European name, give no hint of her interest in Chinese subjects, they suggest her growing awareness of poverty and social alienation. For example, in “A Trip in a Horse Car” (1880), the narrator expresses concern for such problems while describing her journey through the Montreal streets. During the ride in the horse car, the narrator observes what she sees: two French Canadian seamstresses taking coats to “some shop in the city,” “a poor beggar girl,” and “two rich ladies, good church members who collect contribution for some mission but feel disgust at the beggar girl.” (Sui Sin Far. 1880: 235)

Sui Sin Far began writing articles and short stories about the Chinese in the 1890s, while still living in Montreal. On 21 September 1896, the *Montreal Daily Star* published her “Plea for the Chinaman,” a long letter to the editor denouncing recent government proposals to increase sanctions against Chinese immigration to Canada, and defending the Chinese as hard-working, honest citizens of their adopted country. In the same year she placed a short story, “Chinese Stories,” signed “Sui Seen Far” with a small Boston magazine entitled the *Fly Leaf*, edited by Walter Blackburn Harte, the English-born husband of her sister Grace. With the further help of her brother-in-law, Sui Sin Far published more stories, first in *Lotus*, edited by Brete Harte in New York, then in a California magazine,

the *Land of Sunshine*, edited by an acquaintance of Harte's, Charles F. Loomis. Over the next dozen years her stories and articles appeared in such American magazine as the *Overland Monthly*, *The Century*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *the New England Magazine*. The final article Sui Sin Far (1913) wrote was "The Chinese Workmen in America." It was a plea for acceptance not only of diplomats and prominent visitors from China but of the ordinary Chinese Americans.

Sui Sin Far never married. Sui Sin Far found her happiness not in marriage life but in writing career as Ling (1990: 30) writes:

So for Sui Sin Far, integrity in the question of her ethnicity and her personal independence took precedence over everything else in life, including the role of wife and mother to which women are generally conditioned to give the highest priority.

She died on April 7, 1914 in Montreal. The Chinese, even during her lifetime, recognized her effort on their behalf. To memorize their gratitude after her death, Chinese community in Montreal and Boston placed on her tomb in the Protestant cemetery in Montreal a special headstone inscribed with the Chinese characters which mean "The righteous or loyal one does not forget China."

A self-supporting journalist and short story writer, from the 1890s until her death, Sui Sin Far published her work in popular American periodicals: *Out West*, *The Delineator*, *The Independent*, *New England Magazine*, *Hampton*, *The Century*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Designer*, *New Idea*, *Short Stories Traveler*, *Good House-Keeping*, *New York Evening Post*, *Gentlewoman*, and *The Chautauquan*. In addition, thirty-seven of these stories were collected into a volume named after the first story, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, in 1912.

Early twentieth century reviews of Sui Sin Far's writing were generally positive. One of her editors, Harte (1986: 216-217), realized the unique approach of Sui Sin Far's earliest writings: "Sui Sin Far has struck into a field with a new view of quiet character drawing and humor . . . compressed into a small compass with the natural tact of a born story-teller . . ." In 1900 Lummis (1900: 336), her editor at *Land of Sunshine*, wrote:

[Her stories are] all of Chinese characters in California or on the Pacific Coast; and they have an insight and sympathy which are probably unique. To others the alien Celestial is at best mere "literary material"; in [Sui Sin Far's] stories he (or she) is a human being.

A review in the *New York Times* complimented her pioneering technique when describing Chinese American family life, "Miss Eaton has struck a new note in American fiction . . . she has tried to . . .

. portray for the readers of the white race the lives, feelings, sentiments of the Americanized Chinese” (*Edith Eaton Dead: Author of Chinese Stories Under the Name of Sui Sin Far*. 1914: 11).

Today, rediscovered and recognized as the Asian-American author writing about Chinese in the period of Chinese Exclusion, her work has been included in *The Big Aiiieeeee: An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (Inada. 1991) and in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1995). In addition, her writing is being widely taught at American universities.

While Sui Sin Far chose to employ a Chinese pen name, Onoto Watanna claimed to be Japanese and published highly successful popular novels, many with Japanese characters and settings. Born in 1875 and named Winnifred Eaton, she was the eighth of fourteen surviving children. Like her sister, Watanna began her literary career by writing for magazines and newspapers, and later turned to writing fiction. Whereas Sui Sin Far’s autobiography repeatedly details the racial discrimination she encountered throughout her life, Watanna’s blames poverty for the hardships in her life. In *Me*, Watanna (1915: 273) writes, “I came from a large, poor family” and could “never remember a Christmas when we had a tree!” (Watanna. 1915: 320) After she left for Jamaica, “there remained a hungry, crushing brood of little ones younger than I. With what fierce joy did I not now look forward to getting away at last from that same noisy, tormented brood, for whom it had been my particular and detested task to care!” (Watanna. 1915: 6). Commenting about the difficulties of life as a poor working girl, Watanna claims it was natural “for poor girls to slip along the path of least resistance . . . we seized what was nearest to our hand” (Watanna. 1915: 69). In this way, I suggest, Watanna’s childhood experience of poverty led her to choose a route that would bring her economic success.

According to her autobiography, she left her family and Canada at seventeen to become a reporter and general writer for a Canadian-owned newspaper in Jamaica, West Indies. After that, she went to Chicago, where she worked as a typist for the stockyards and wrote her first Japanese novel, *Miss Nume of Japan: A Japanese-American Romance* (Watanna. 1899), signed with her Japanese pen name, Onoto Watanna. It appears that Watanna’s choice of her pen name is a response to the greater prejudices of Euro-Americans against the Chinese when compared to their attitudes toward the Japanese. By employing the Japanese persona, she had a greater chance for literary success. In order to increase her public image and promote her fiction, she always used her pen name in all public appearances, wore Japanese kimono, and insisted to interviewers that she had been born in Japan. After the success of her first novel, she produced several more best-selling Japanese romances, with titles often evoking the flora and fauna of the American popular image of Japan: *Miss Nume of Japan: A Japanese-American Romance* (Watanna. 1899), *A Japanese Nightingale* (Watanna.

1901), *The Wooing of Wisteria* (Watanna. 1902), *The Heart of Hyacinth* (Watanna. 1903), *The Love of Azalea* (Watanna. 1904), and *A Japanese Blossom* (Watanna. 1906).

In 1901, Watanna married Bertrand W. Babcock, whom she met when they were both reporters on the *Brooklyn Eagle*. After bearing four children, Watanna divorced the alcoholic Babcock in 1916, and managed to support her children for sixteen years solely by income from her writing. Between 1901 and 1916, Watanna published eleven novels which were so popular that she received as much as \$15,000 in advance royalty payments per novel (Ling. 1990: 49). In 1917, Watanna and her second husband, Francis F. Reeve, returned to Canada, the country of her birth, where they purchased a cattle ranch. For several years, Watanna lived as Mrs. Winnifred Reeve and did little professional writing.

At this point, she wrote two novels about cattle-ranching in Alberta: *Cattle* (Watanna. 1924) and *His Royal Nibs* (Watanna. 1925). When the ranch did not do well, Watanna returned to live in the United States, and from 1924 to 1931 she edited and wrote Hollywood movie scripts. Her work consisted primarily of editing the work of other writers including *The Mississippi Gambler*, *The Road to Honor*, *Movie Madness*, *Belle of the Bowery*, *What Men Want*, *Five Thousand Dollars Reward!*, *The Hold Up*, *Barbary Coast*, *Ropes*, *Shanghai Lady*, *Showboat*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*. According to Ling in *Between Worlds*, she was making \$500 per week an amazing salary for a woman during the 1920s at Universal studios as head of the scenario department in 1924. After Canada joined the war against Japan in the late 1930s, Watanna revealed to interviewers that “She is herself partly Chinese on her mother’s side” (Doyle. 1994: 57). Although she did not produce any novels after *His Royal Nibs*, she enjoyed considerable financial comfort. She died on April 8, 1954 in Butte, Montana.

Critics at the turn of the century who reviewed Watanna’s novels were generally positive. Her first novel, *Miss Nume of Japan: A Japanese-American Romance* (Watanna. 1899), was called “charming,” “entertaining,” “a well-done piece of writing” (“A Charming Japanese Tale.” 1899: 559). Her second novel, *A Japanese Nightingale* (Watanna. 1901), was so successful that it was translated into French, German, Swedish, and Hungarian and adapted as a Broadway play. Eighteen years later, it was made into a Hollywood film. The fact that her novel was translated into several Asian and European languages confirms Onoto Watanna’s appeal to a diverse array of readers.

Today, unfortunately, Watanna’s fiction attracts little attention. One reason is that her decision to employ a Japanese pen name may appear disloyal to her heritage. Also, some critics believe that Watanna’s writings lack value because they are romance novels. For example, in *Between Worlds*, Ling studied eighteen women authors of Chinese ancestry, ranging from the turn-of-the-century

pioneers such as the Eaton sisters to present-day writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. What unites them is their place between worlds that claim and reject them, render them visible and invisible. Ling dedicates a chapter to Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna. She discusses their biographies and the significant themes in their writings and focuses on their choices. She admires Sui Sin Far's courage to take the Chinese pen name and to write about Chinese people. However, Ling (1990: 49) suggests that Watanna chose a political escape route in order to secure her fame and fortune and asserts, "her personal integrity did not measure up to Edith's."

Contrary to Ling's idea, I argue that Watanna is not an opportunist and that she is not a lightweight novelist. Watanna needed to support herself financially and to defend Asian people. Therefore, she employed a trickster strategy. In order to understand her strategies, we need to know the historical climate in which they were writing. American intercourse with China began in 1784 when a group of New York and Philadelphia financiers sent the *Empress of China* to trade ginseng in Canton. The China trade that followed brought full employment to a generation of New England seamen as well as teas and silks to the American market. In return, American captains delivered furs, silver, and later opium into the hands of the Chinese. These American traders gave the American public its first detailed picture of Asian people. The images of the Chinese that they sent back in letters and books were hardly flattering. The images of Chinese were even worse after the Opium Wars (1839-1840) which created in the American mind a new stereotype of the Chinese as dope-smokers. Therefore, on the eve of the first Asian immigration to America, many white Americans saw Chinese as a faceless mass of sensual, idolatrous, cruel, deceitful beings who were either so hopelessly addicted to opium or so craven and stupid as to be unable to resist either their own government's despotism or the imperial designs of the European powers.

The arrival of Chinese in California in the second half of the nineteenth century did nothing to elevate Chinese people in the eyes of white Americans. The Chinese were attracted to California by news of the "Gold Mountain" and arrived with the hope that they would make their fortune (Kristeva, 1977: 75). In addition, in the late nineteenth-century, American industries were in need of workers to perform menial labor. Thus, the Chinese came to America to work on the railroad and to perform the tasks of unskilled laborers (Wu, 1972: 2). At first, Americans embraced these Chinese immigrants with open arms, deeming them hardworking and tractable people. Unfortunately, when they no longer filled an economic need, when they began to compete with American laborers for a limited number



of jobs, the Chinese immigrants became, in Edward Said's words, "problems to be solved." In other words, the harsh attitudes toward the Chinese immigrants in the later decades were grounded in the growing number of the Chinese in the United States which created the fear that Chinese would unite and conquer the United States.

What made the Chinese unwelcome next was that they were perceived as too industrious and too efficient; they took up whatever jobs were most available. Chinese men were perceived as unwelcome competition for deserving, American-born, white laborers. With the end of gold rush, the completion of the transcontinental railroad, and the economic depression of the 1870s, Chinese workers became scapegoats for the economic downturn and social problems of the country. Then the anti-Chinese movement began.

In contrast to the anti-Chinese sentiment, Japanese immigrants to the United States encountered less menacing racial attitudes. As Solberg (1981: 229) points out, the more favorable image of the Japanese was enhanced by the few contacts between the Japanese and Americans. Because Japan had had very little contact with people from other countries before the 1850s, the "distance" from Anglo-American society made the Japanese people appear less threatening than the Chinese. For over two centuries, the Japanese people had been forbidden by law from travelling to foreign lands. While in the United States, the Chinese, large in number, were mainly laborers, the Japanese, few in number, were diplomats or students. Therefore, they posed no economic threat to American working people. The strong negative images that American whites had of the Chinese were not immediately transferred to the Japanese.

In the period that the attitudes of Americans toward the Japanese were more positive than toward the Chinese, Watanna adopted a Japanese pseudonym and claimed to be a half-Japanese writer. Unlike many critics who believe that Watanna was an escapist, I believe that claiming to be a half-Japanese writer was her trickster strategy to subvert the color line to fool white people. She chose to compromise with and, at the same time, resist the Anglo-American discourse. As Palumbo-Liu (1994: 89) suggests, the minority subject constructs the self within a preexisting symbolic economy and functions in that realm by seeking strategies of both accommodation and resistance. Under the guise of Japanese persona, Watanna was able to publish her writings and to become one of the best-selling writers of her time. However, Watanna's commercialization was an essential aspect of her politics. Her trickster strategy helped her enter the fictional space and then adventure into the taboo subjects such as interracial marriage and racial discrimination. Through her romance novels, such as *Miss Nume of Japan: A Japanese-American Romance*, she could create the world in which

the Japanese and Americans were romantically attracted to each other and intermarry. Moreover, she could criticize racial and gender prejudices in the American society.

Onoto Watanna was an author who needed to support herself financially and who wanted to defend the Asians. Watanna passed as Japanese at a time when the Japanese were less vilified than the Chinese in the United States. With these strategies, she was able to subvert the color line, to fool the whites and. Watanna assumed, in a sense, the role of mediator between the dominant and nondominant races and cultures. As Dearborn (1986: 23) observes in *Pocahontas's Daughters*: "If the ethnic woman is a mediator or ambassador, her writing is legitimized but also to some extent defused."

Searching in our mother's garden, it was found that the line of Asian American writing extended back to the nineteenth century. Asian American writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indeed blossomed and flourished, as it continues to do so today. Both two pioneer Asian American writers, Sui Sin Far and Watanna, undertook parallel projects which challenged the Anglo-American discourse which attempted to subjugate and to exclude the Asians. They both use their pen as a sword to defend Asian people. Looking at Sui Sin Far and Watanna, we can learn the lessons on the experiences of persons who lived at the margin of a society and who attempted to cross boundaries and reach out to others. Although Sui Sin Far and Watanna were born and lived in the nineteenth century, their lives and experiences can benefit us who live in the contemporary. Prejudice still exists in every corner of the World. As Barnet and Cain (2005: 125) suggests, readers can see the world through literature. The study of these two pioneer Asian American writers will be one key to awakening my readers to the vitality of differences, religion, and culture in particular. The researcher believes that seeing the world through literature, people will have open minds and will understand other people better. As Ling (1990: 20) suggests, "Ignorance and fear, the roots of prejudice, can only be dispelled by knowledge and understanding." Like Sui Sin Far and Watanna, the researcher has an ideal vision: "only when the whole world becomes one family will human beings able to see and hear distinctly."

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