

Dear Alice

Letters Home from American Teachers Learning to Live in China

Edited by Phyllis L. Thompson
with letters collected by Alice Renouf
of the Colorado China Council

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Earl Herbert Cressy recalled his pre-World War I East Asian sojourn in the following terms: "He had come to the Far East with a message that he was on fire to give, but in the process of transmission the East had spoken its message to him. He had gone out to change the East and was returning himself a changed man . . . not only a missionary but an internationalist, an intermediary between the two great civilizations that inhabit the earth."¹

Writes a modern-day contributor to *Letters Home from American Teachers Learning to Live in China*, a collection of letters from thirty-six American teachers in China, 1990–95, to Alice Renouf, Director of the Colorado China Council, the sponsoring institution for many of the contributors: "Things that have semi-happened-by-mistake have turned out to be some of the best 'Things' in my life. Thanks for this gift. China has opened a new world to me—in many ways [emphasis in original]."

Cressy's "internationalist" perspective at the twentieth-century's beginning is plainly evident in *Dear Alice*, albeit in somewhat altered form. The missives of end-of-twentieth-century American sojourners in China provide, to use editor Thompson's metaphor, a tapestry woven around "the simple and impossible question 'How did you like China?'" The focus here is given to dimensions of cross-cultural adaptation rather than to the facets of service as intermediaries between the People's Republic of China and the United States. As Renouf states in her prescient Foreword, "the infectious fascination with China is as alive today as it ever was, and will be tomorrow." The veracity of that assertion is affirmed in the letters gathered here, a collection appropriately presented in thirteen substantive chapters.

Encounters of Americans with post-Mao China form the cultural milieu for the observations of "A Looking Glass World," the Carrollian title of chapter 1, gathered here. Metaphorically, Alice's Looking Glass captures misunderstandings and understandings of these *waigouren* (foreigners) as they participate in what Thompson terms "the drama of China": outside of Chinese university-established "Panda Lands," domiciles for foreign experts, life may not be what it seems. In a first chapter Thompson suggests that the composite portrait established in *Dear Alice* indicates what these thirty-

six individuals have gained from their experience in China and what shared qualities drew them to China, beyond "the comfortably reflective surface of the Looking Glass." *Dear Alice* does not disappoint in either instance.

Chapters 2 through 13 focus on a myriad of themes pivotal to exchanging a cultural milieu with which one is familiar for one unfamiliar: arrival; challenges of daily life in China, including "living with daily levels of uncertainty and novelty seldom experienced at home" and learning to be a *laoshi* (teacher), incorporating discussion (familarly present in my overseas teaching experience) of such ethical issues as cheating and cooperation in cross-cultural learning styles. Additionally, there is an excellent chapter, "Fame, Fortune, and Festivals," on the relative wealth, celebrity status, and social opportunities of American teachers in China.

Other chapter themes include: Chinese philosophy; "Great Adventures," inclusive of a primer on traditional Chinese medicine; culture shock; Chinese bureaucracy and friendship networks; Daoism; stereotyping; coming to terms with the realities of Chinese life, substantively discussed in an eleventh chapter, "Making Some Sense of It All"; last days in China; and returning to American culture, which Thompson likens to "walking out of the opera hall after a fine performance." Such is a brief overview of *Dear Alice's* content. What does the collective portrait assembled here of Americans teaching in China suggest for further reflection?

As I read this recent contribution to a growing literature on contemporary Western encounters with the People's Republic of China, a literature appropriately documented at book's end, two thoughts occurred: Letters included here are in theme not unlike the diaries and letters from Western diplomats, missionaries, and visitors to Qing China of the nineteenth century. Travelers to the so-called Middle Kingdom of that time also experienced what Zubin Emsley here terms a "sad and difficult good-by." A former

Congratulations

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We hope to publish an interview with Steven in a forthcoming issue of *Education About Asia.*

BOOK REVIEWS

president of the University of Michigan, James Burrill Angell, recalled his departure from Beijing in October, 1881, similarly: "It was not without deep emotion that we parted from those whose society had been so dear to us."² Secondly, now as then, for outlanders or foreigners China remains a formidable challenge, in terms expressed by one American teacher, a "precious insanity." Readers of *Dear Alice* will note how that challenge was met by thirty-six Americans and, as importantly, how that challenge impacted on the lives of thirty-six Americans.

Kudos to Phyllis L. Thompson, a former American teacher in China as well, for outstanding editorial work. Structurally, *Dear Alice* includes fourteen maps (thirteen focused on China, one indicating American urban sites of post-China correspondence to Alice Renouf by participants), chapter-by-chapter pinyin vocabulary lists of Chinese terms, and an end-of-book comprehensive word list of Chinese terms translated into English. Effective as these structured components of *Dear Alice* are, Thompson's chief editorial strength is her willingness to allow Alice Renouf's correspondents to speak for themselves. This they do and the result is all the more meaningful, including Thompson's brief commentary, with her 1992 "Cheating or Cooperating? a.k.a. The Individual vs. the Group."

Finally, a word about audiences for this latest University of California Institute of East Asian Studies China Research Monographs publication. Three come to mind: East Asian Studies majors, graduate and undergraduate, will find *Dear Alice* invaluable as a resource for exploring cross-cultural adaptation in East Asia, generally, and the People's Republic of China, specifically. Moreover, *Dear Alice* should appeal as background reading for the unfortu-

nately small but growing number of Americans interested in an extended living and working experience in East Asia. *Dear Alice* is appropriate reading as well for any university course which addresses issues implicit to end-of-century cultural and global diversity. At *Dear Alice*'s conclusion we are reminded that in *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, when Alice asked the Cheshire Cat where from here she ought to go, the Cat replied: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." Thanks to Alice Renouf, Phyllis L. Thompson and thirty-six American teachers in China, our vision of where we want to get to is profoundly broadened. ■

NOTES

1. Robert A. McCaughey, *International Studies and Academic Enterprise: A Chapter in the Enclosure of American Learning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 54.
2. James B. Angell, "Chapter VI: The Mission to China," 40. *James B. Angell Papers*, Box No. 11, Folder No. 504, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

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Transnational Chinese Cinemas

Identity, Nationhood, Gender

By Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu

HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 1997

Although this is not the only recent book which uses Chinese new cinema to analyze Chinese identity and politics, it is still a useful contribution to the limited literature in this field. A collection of fifteen loosely connected essays which are of various levels of theoretical sophistication and academic quality, this volume can serve as a reference book to academics. It can also be used as supplementary materials for undergraduate film teaching. The book is divided into three parts which deal respectively with (1) the films of mainland China; (2) films of Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas; and (3) gender issues.

Following the editor's introduction which outlines themes of the book, Zhiwei Xiao presents a historical study of film censorship by the Nanjing government during the period of 1927-37. The author

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