

Resource:

Life Story: Edith Maude Eaton, aka Sui Sin Far (1865-1914)



Edith Maude Eaton (aka Sui Sin Far)

Edith Maude Eaton. Courtesy of Simon Fraser University, image from the private collection of Diana Birchall, granddaughter of Winnifred Eaton.

Edith Maude Eaton was born on March 15, 1865 in Cheshire, England. She was the second of her parents' fourteen children. Her father was British and her mother was Chinese. They met when her father traveled to China for business.

As a child, Edith moved several times as her father sought work. When she was less than one year old, her family immigrated to the United States. They lived in New Jersey for two years before returning to England. Edith made her third trip across the Atlantic Ocean when she was seven. After passing through New York City, the Eaton family settled in Montreal, Canada.

Edith attended school until she was 11, when her parents decided she should be educated at home, where she could also help care for her younger siblings and assist her father in his work. When she was 14, she survived a severe case of rheumatic fever that resulted in lifelong breathing complications.

At the age of 18, Edith took a job as a stenographer for the *Montreal Daily Star* newspaper. Although her work was mostly clerical, she used the opportunity to launch a writing career. Edith proved she could write in a variety of formats. Local papers published her humorous essays, short stories, investigative articles, and more.

In 1890, the *Montreal Witness* hired her to report on the Chinese in Montreal. Although Edith was half Chinese, she had rarely interacted with the Chinese community. While reporting, she developed a deeper understanding of the culture and heritage she shared with the people she met. By 1895, Edith used her position to promote the fair and equal treatment of Chinese immigrants through articles and letters in local, national, and international publications.

In addition to journalism, Edith also enjoyed fiction writing. The people she met while working as a reporter informed her short stories. While she published some work under the name Edith Maude Eaton, she also frequently used pen names. One of her

most famous was Sui Sin Far, a childhood nickname that means “water lily” in Cantonese.

Edith was fascinated with travel and believed that individuals should not be defined by the country in which they were born or lived. In 1896, she traveled to Jamaica to work as a journalist. After publishing over thirty articles in six months, she contracted malaria, which was particularly dangerous given her chronic breathing problems. She left Jamaica and moved to San Francisco instead. Edith called the United States home for over fifteen years. During that time, she lived in California, Washington, and Massachusetts, and traveled across the continent by train at least twice.

Edith continued to support herself as a stenographer and journalist while completing bigger writing projects. She frequently visited Chinatowns to observe daily life and report on what she saw. Edith brought a distinctive perspective to the Chinese American story. Because she was half Chinese, she could develop relationships within Chinese communities and observe daily life. Because she was half white, she could publish her ideas in notable newspapers and magazines, and easily immigrate to the United States and cross the border many times, a privilege denied most Chinese people in this era.

Edith wrote about the challenges Chinese immigrants faced in the United States and the ways in which the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and other laws shaped daily life. Edith went to great lengths to humanize her fictional characters, who were typically inspired by real people. She regularly highlighted the experiences of women, who had even fewer rights and opportunities than their male counterparts.

In the story “In the Land of the Free,” a Chinese immigrant is separated from her toddler son when she does not have the proper paperwork upon arrival in San Francisco. In “Sweet Sin: A Chinese-American Story,” a teenage girl in California with a

white mother and Chinese immigrant father commits suicide after realizing that she will never truly belong to either culture. In “The Daughter of a Slave,” a young woman escapes poverty in China by agreeing to an arranged marriage in America. But when she arrives, she learns her new husband has deceived her family and that she will be just as poor in her new life. Through such stories, Edith gave voice to immigrant women, criticized the bureaucracy that tore families apart, and explored the horrific impact of anti-immigrant racism on individuals’ lives. Although much of her writing focused on Chinese culture, she covered other topics related to identity, nationalism, and race

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Edith was also interested in the parallels between white and Chinese culture—two worlds of which she was a member. She believed that the two were more similar than different, and that a shared fear of the other kept them apart. She publicly identified as a woman of mixed-race heritage, and wrote, “After all, I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any. Individuality is more than nationality.”

By her early forties, Edith was an established writer in the United States. Many of her essays and stories were published in national magazines like *Good Housekeeping*. She received fan mail from admirers of her work. In 1909, she published her favorite short stories about Chinese Americans in a book named after one of her characters, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*. It was the first fiction book published by a woman of Chinese descent in English, and one of the earliest popular books to present a sympathetic view of the Chinese American community.

Health complications forced Edith to return to Montreal in 1913. She died of heart disease less than a year later, on April 7, 1914. *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* went out of print shortly after her death. However, it was republished in 1995, and scholars who study Chinese American history consider it to still be an important resource today.

Vocabulary

- **bureaucracy:** A set of systems of structures within a government or other large organization.
- **chronic:** A permanent or ongoing condition.
- **fiction:** Something that is imagined or made up.
- **humanize:** To present as relatable and sympathetic.
- **humorous:** Funny
- **investigative:** Closely studying and researching.
- **penname:** A fake name used by a writer to keep his or her real name a secret.
- **stenographer:** An office worker who takes notes in shorthand.

Discussion Questions

- How did Edith's heritage as half white British and half Chinese shape her view of the world and her work?
- Edith chose to publish much of her work under a Chinese pen name, not her European birth name. Why do you think she made this choice? What might this tell us about her own relationship with her mixed heritage?
- Edith made the United States her home for over a decade and focused the bulk of her writing on Chinese Americans. Why do you think she did this? What might have been attractive about this particular country and topic?

Suggested Activities

- **Lesson Plan:** In this lesson designed for fourth grade, students will learn about the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. They will also consider the life story of Edith Maude Eaton, and how she raised awareness about the unfair treatment of Chinese Americans in the era of Exclusion.
- Combine Edith’s life story with the life stories of Ida B. Wells, Elizabeth Cochrane (aka Nellie Bly), and Jovita Idar Juárez, all of whom used a career in journalism to advocate for social reform.
- Read this life story and that of Zitkala-Sa. Both women had white fathers and non-white mothers. How were their views of the world and the opportunities afforded to them shaped by their mixed-race heritage?
- Connect this life story to the life story of Soto Shee in the *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion* curriculum, a Chinese immigrant mother who experienced the very challenges Edith described in her writing. How did each woman experience life in the United States as a person of Chinese descent? How were their lives shaped by immigration policy?
- Combine Edith’s life story with a reading of one of her most famous works, “In the Land of the Free.” Explore Edith’s depiction of a Chinese immigrant mother and the way in which she criticizes the American government’s policies through this short narrative.

Themes

ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE; AMERICAN IDENTITY AND CITIZENSHIP

New-York Historical Society Curriculum Library Connections

- For more about the Chinese American experience, see *Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion*.