

***“Only When the Whole World Becomes One Family”:  
The Ideal Vision of a Eurasian***

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**Abstract**

My paper benefits from Lowe's idea of heterogeneity and multiplicity and Gramsci's concept of hegemony. My ultimate aim is to challenge the binary axis of power by examining how Sui Sin Far, a pioneer of Asian American writers, enunciates to resist the mechanism of power which attempted to dominate and to exclude the Asians. In "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian," Sui Sin Far not only maps the difficulty of growing up as a Eurasian but also articulates her ideal vision, a racially harmonious world. What is more important is that the ideal "one family" becomes her common theme of writings both in her fiction and her journalist essays; one of these writings is "Pat and Pan." In "Pat and Pan," she attempts to imagine a more perfect social state, and illustrates how it is destroyed.

Keywords: Sui Sin Far, utopian vision, Asian American writer, Chinese American writer

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## **Introduction**

Lowe (1991) argues that the view that a dominant discourse produces and manages the nondominant underestimates the tensions and contradictions within any discursive terrain, the continual play of resistance, dissent, and accommodation. Most importantly, this view minimizes the significance of counterrepresentations and countercultures, and continues to subsume the resistance of a minority positions to apparently dominant formations. Gramsci's ideas help to explain this argument. According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony is the entire process of negotiation, dissent, and compromise whereby a particular group or ideological formation gains the consent of the larger body to lead. In this sense, hegemony does not refer exclusively to the process by which dominant groups exercise and maintain influence, but it denotes equally to the process through which other groups organize, contest, or accommodate any specific domination. Gramsci also suggests that popular literature attains its popularity by connecting with "the philosophy of epoch," that is, it offers collective representations of the sentiments and world-view flourishing among the "silent multitude." Drawing his examples from the work of Alexandre Dumas, Gramsci suggests that the source of the success of Dumas's work was that they permitted their readers to construct an idealized self in the character of the hero. More importantly, he suggests that Dumas tempts the petty-bourgeoisie and minor intellectuals with an "artificial paradise," which contrasts with "the narrowness and pinched circumstances of their real and immediate life." In general, then, Gramsci suggests that in societies where the subordinate people are not satisfied with their lives in the society, writing offers compensatory--images of action or society to contrast with the real one. These images can nourish wilting hopes. In this way, the experience of discontent can be shown in the form of writing.

Sui Sin Far,<sup>1</sup> a Eurasian writer, was born and grew up in the period of sinophobia of North America. It is no doubt that she experienced racial prejudice. As Gramsci thought, she dreamed of an ideal society which contrasted to her real life. In such a society, there were no racial boundaries. It is not surprising that she expressed her hope in her writings. This paper examines the ideal vision of Sui Sin Far, a pioneer of Asian-American writers. What led her to imagine the ideal vision? How did she create her ideal vision in her writing? What function does her imagining of ideal vision serve? Because Sui Sin Far's ideal vision related to the issue of miscegenation, to better understand, I would like to begin with the discussion of miscegenation.

## **Miscegenation**

Interracial union or "miscegenation" has long been a familiar phenomenon in American society. The issue of miscegenation was a debate in the nineteenth century. In fact, arguments against mixed race marriage and reproduction were reinforced by scientific discourse. Miscegenation became the threat because there was a belief that children of mixed marriages reverted to the "lower" type. Young (1995) notes that

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<sup>1</sup> Her real name is Edith Eaton. Her pen name is used to identify her in this paper because it is the name by which she is well known. The full name "Sui Sin Far" is used throughout because its meaning (Water Lily) depends upon the sequence, and so the syllables cannot be separated.

many nineteenth-century scientists believed that miscegenated reproduction produced weaker individuals and that “the mixing of races only brought about degeneration, infertility and barbarism” (p. 130). The offspring of horses and donkeys--the sterile mule, the inspiration for the word “mulatto” was commonly cited as proof of what would occur as a result of interracial mixing between human beings. Of course, sterility was discovered to be an inaccurate concern when applied to human interracial reproduction, but the idea of the mixed-race as degenerate lasted well into the twentieth century.

In the 1850s the French diplomat Count Gobineau (1855/1915) published his influential book, in which he proposed that there were differences among races. The white races of Europe were superior to others such as “Negros” and “Mongolians.” He believed “adulteration of blood is the basic cause of the fall of the nation. . .” (p. 106). Gobineau's warning points to the way in which “purity” of blood and culture were critical to the maintenance of the nation, for hybridity questions the very tenets of racial and cultural authority. In the United States, similar anxieties arose pertaining to what was seen as a dilution and corruption of the dominant white population. Concerns about miscegenation were expressed most forcefully about unions between blacks and whites and also between Native Americans and whites.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the specter of miscegenation and the mixed-race progeny became once again a focus of racial attention and anxiety. This was due to the unresolved dilemma of the social and economic roles of the emancipated black slaves, the perceived threat from the influx of Asian immigrants, and the United States' territorial expansions into Asia and central America. In seeking “scientific” explanations for the “behavior” of those of mixed race, natural and social scientists of the day often attributed the so-called “physical, emotional, and mental deformities” of such persons to “racial disharmony,” “the clash of blood,” or “unstable genetic constitution” (Young, 1995, p. 29).

During the 1890s, racial atavism, or the reversion-to-type theory, became the dominant viewpoint in anthropological and popular accounts of the mulatto. A perversion of Darwin's principle of reversion, this concept suggests that the mixed-race people who have attained a veneer of civilization can, at any time, “revert” to the “savage,” “primitivistic” behavior of the jungle from which their ancestors came and to which they were inextricably tied. Thus, in the Reconstruction South, the mulatto was frequently typed as the “Negro beast” who attacked white women and struck fear and terror in the hearts of white people. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the idea of Eurasian degeneracy also found its way into both academic and public discourses. Such claims were echoed by a California journalist who wrote, in response to the “Yellow Peril,” that the offspring [of Japanese-white unions] are neither Japanese nor American, but half-breed weaklings, whom doctors declare, have neither the intelligence nor healthfulness of either race (Takaki, 1979, p.102).

The fear of miscegenation also appeared in legislature discourse. Laws against miscegenation had existed in the American colonies since the early seventeenth century, when Virginia lawmakers decided that sex between a black man and a white woman should be illegal. By 1664, Maryland passed a law forbidding interracial marriage--stating that if a white woman were to marry a slave, she would become a slave herself for the lifetime of her husband. In 1691, Virginia passed another law,

which essentially forbade all interracial marriages. Not surprisingly, race continued to play a role in the state legislation of marriage in this country until 1967. Initially, legislation was concerned primarily with unions between blacks and whites, who, as late as the nineteenth century, were believed to be different species; as noted above, whites were understood to be biologically superior.

With the increase of immigration as well as with population shifts, American legislators worked to prohibit the mixing of “blood” between whites and other ethnic groups as well. From the very beginning of Chinese immigration to this country, legislators were aware of a growing discomfort with intermarriage between Asians and whites, and specifically Asian men and white women. Historian Takaki (1989) notes that the Chinese, the first large group of Asian immigrants to the United States, were perceived as threats to white racial purity (p. 101). In 1880 California amended Section 69 of the Civil Code which dealt with the issuance of marriage licenses. This legislation prohibited the issuance of a license authorizing the marriage of a white person with a “negro, mulatto, or mongolian” to prevent such amalgamation.

### **The Ideal Vision of a Eurasian**

Since its first appearance in *the Independent* in 1909, “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of a Eurasian,” Sui Sin Far's autobiography, has been reprinted in a number of anthologies and collections. *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, the journal of the Chinese Historical society of America, reprinted the essay in 1987. It later appeared in *The big Aiiieeeee!* (1991) and, most recently, in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings* (1995), edited by two of Sui Sin Far's dedicated scholars, Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks. Its most widespread exposure came from its inclusion in the *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990).

Although “Leaves” has been reprinted many times, the one published in *The Independent* is the most intriguing. The title identifies the author as a Eurasian, indicating that the issue of racial identity is the key to this article. The original piece is headed by a round-framed portrait of a middle-aged woman in a high-collared, respectable-looking shirtwaist, a calm and thoughtful expression on her face. Her hair is dark, and she has high cheekbones; it is worth noting that out of context her racial origins would be somewhat ambiguous. Underneath the photograph is printed her pseudonym “SUI SIN FAR.” What might be the purpose of adding this photograph?

The obvious answer is simple referentiality, to put a face to the story, as it were, thus defusing the readers’ natural suspicion of the autobiographical narrative: the photograph proves that the writer does exist. More importantly, it reveals the author's cognizance of the readers--and not just of their materiality, but of their condition as a social being within an established system of signification. The photograph, then, added another dimension to what Lejeune (1989) has called the “autobiographical pact”; it is a mode of reading as much as it is a type of writing (p. 30).

By itself, *The Independent's* photograph might tell the readers nothing: neither the woman's face nor her clothing signifies beyond doubt that she is Chinese or Eurasian. But when the photo and the name combined with the title, they evoke something much more immediate. Here is what a Eurasian woman looks like; she wears a Western dress, and maybe could pass as white, but there is something different about

her. She has a strange, non-Western name which brings out the question of her identity. It's a striking layout, a curious title, and easily draws readers in.

At the same time, Sui Sin Far's text itself contains a political message; she is interested in enlightening her readers about the insensibilities and racism she has encountered. "Leaves" opens with vignettes of white people's meanness and bigotry. Two English nannies whisper about Sui Sin Far's being Chinese. A school girl cries out to a friend, "I wouldn't speak to Sui if I were you. Her mamma is Chinese." A white-haired old man at a tea party studies her like a bug under glass: "Ah, indeed! Who would have thought it at first glance. Yet now I see the difference between her and other children. What a peculiar coloring! Her mother's eyes and hair and her father's features, I presume. Very interesting creature!" (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 126). This man produces the child's "difference," by implication, from all other children at the party. In the process, he reduces her to a specimen through the mechanically enhanced vision of his eyeglasses. His scrutiny is overt, a blatant demonstration of the power of his race, age, and sex to call attention to, to differentiate, to consume, to measure, and to classify. These anecdotes show not only racial prejudice but also the author's outrage and retaliation, even as a child. A boy in a street hurls slurs at her and her brother, "Chinky, Chinky, Chinaman, yellow-face, pig-tail, rat-eater," and on the heels of her brother's retort, "Better than you," she records her own screaming response (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 126). She recalls that in her childhood, "older persons pause and gaze upon us, very much in the same way that I have seen people gaze upon strange animals in a menagerie. Now and then we are stopped and plied with questions as to what we eat and drink, how we go to sleep, if my mother understands what my father says to her, if we sit on chairs or squat on floors, etc., etc., etc." (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 127).

In "Leaves," as an adult, Sui Sin Far relates an actual confrontation with racism and tells how she responds. It happens in "a little town away off on the north shore of a big lake" in the "Middle West," when she is lunching with her white American employer and colleagues who perceive her as being racially the same as themselves. Conversation turns to the "cars full of Chinamen that past [sic] that morning" by train, leading to her companions' observations that "I wouldn't have one in my house," and "A Chinaman is, in my eyes, more repulsive than a nigger," and "I cannot reconcile myself to the thought that the Chinese are human like ourselves . . . their faces seem to be so utterly devoid of expression that I cannot help but doubt" (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 129). Sui Sin Far recalls that "a miserable, cowardly feeling" keeps her silent, leading readers through the agony of her tension as she considers the strong prejudices against her mother's countrymen, knowing that, if she speaks, every person in the place will hear about it the next day. Then she lifts her eyes and addressed her employer, "The Chinese may have no souls, no expression on their faces, be altogether beyond the pale of civilization, but whatever they are, I want you to understand that I am--I am a Chinese" (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 129).

It would be difficult for readers to remain unaffected by this direct and articulate description of the process of being marked as different as a child. In fact, the simple but poignant message of this passage tends to counteract the somewhat sensationalized first page layout. It compels the reader to reconsider this picture. The reader may reconsider too the directness of the title; this woman is much too measured a writer and much too serious about her subject to highlight her identity

without reason. This piece finally registers not as sensationalist fluff, but as a focused exploration of a marginalized existence in the United States. Continuing in this serious vein, "Leaves" maps the difficulty of growing up half-Chinese in Eastern Canada, evokes the anguish of other Eurasian children. She mentions meeting a Chinese man who has a white wife and several children, "I am very much interested in these children, and when I meet them, my heart throbs in sympathetic tune with the tales they relate of their experiences as Eurasians. 'Why did papa and mamma born us?' asks one. 'Why?'" (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 128).

Because Sui Sin Far contended with the experiences of a Eurasian, she articulated her ideal vision "Only when the whole world becomes one family will human beings be able to see and hear distinctly" (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 129). Like Gramsci's idea discussed in the beginning, Sui Sin Far dreams of the world which is in contrast to her real society: the racially harmonious world. In this world, because there are no boundaries among races, people will understand other people clearly. Sui Sin Far also believes that "someday a great part of the world will be Eurasian. I cheer myself with the thought that I am but a pioneer" (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 129). The position of the Eurasian allows Sui Sin Far to imagine herself to be "beyond" race and to invoke an individuality. Sui Sin Far idealized multiraciality which denies race by taking the form of "pretty soon, . . . race doesn't matter" (Sui Sin Far, 1909, p. 4). What is more important is that the ideal "one family" becomes her common theme of writing both in her fiction and her journalist essays; one of these writings is "Pat and Pan" discussed in the next section.

### **The Loss of Eden**

"Pat and Pan" tells a story of an American boy raised in a Chinese household. A dying mother gives her baby, Pat, to a Chinese jeweler, Lum Yook, to raise. The Yooks have one daughter, Pan. Pat is inseparable from his sister, and Pan's mother loves both as her own. A white missionary, Anna Harrison, methodically works to remove Pat from his Chinese parents and later gives him to a white couple. When Pat meets Pan again, their friendship has been torn apart.

In reality, the idea that Chinese people adopted Americans is not merely a fantasy. In fact, in the late nineteenth century, while there were Chinese orphans raised by missionaries, there were also Caucasian children adopted by Chinese families. However, not all Caucasian children adopted by Chinese were so lucky as to stay on with their Chinese parents. While taking a Chinese child into an American family was considered as an act of Christian charity and no one questioned the legitimacy of the adoption, Chinese couples adopting American children often had them taken away by the authorities (McCunn, 1988, p. 34). Such is the fate of Pat in the story.

Sui Sin Far opens "Pat and Pan" with the innocence and racial harmony of Pat, a white boy, and Pan, a Chinese girl. This scene presents her ideal family: both white and Chinese live together with harmony and without racial boundaries. Nothing could be sweeter than the portrait in this scene, the White boy, Pat, and his Chinese sister, Pan, framed in the entry of a Chinatown house: "Her tiny face. . . hidden upon his bosom, and his white upturned chin rest[ing] upon her black rosetted head" (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p.160). They are asleep in each other's arm. This is a cameo of races in harmony: the children are blind to shades of "color," or racial differences; the Yooks

look at their two children the same and love them both equally. The situation is truly “one ideal family” that Sui Sin Far longs for in “Leaves.”

However, this harmony does not last long. Before the first page is finished, the snake enters the garden. The third sentence of the story reads, “It was that white chin which caused the passing missionary woman to pause and look again at the little pair” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p. 160). Shocked to see “a white boy” lying so intimately with a “little Chinese girl” in Chinatown, whose “heathen” strangeness is evoked by the joss house in front of her, Harrison questions the nearby lichi vendor: “Whose is that boy?” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p. 160). When told that he is the son of Lum Yook and his wife, she responds, “But he is white” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p. 160). Her statement threatens to rupture the harmonious world, in which the Chinese mother and father bestow upon the White child equal love and care with their little daughter. Readers see her shocked response when the children wake and chat, and she realizes Pat speak Chinese language: “wholly unintelligible” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p. 161). The lichi man rejects Harrison's racial fears, shrugging her off with the reply: “Yes, him white, but all same, China boy” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p.161).

Playing the role of the Edenic serpent, Harrison purchases lichis and offers to the children as a lure. Similar to the mythical Eve, Pan does not eat directly but feeds her companion until he is full. “Whereupon,” we are told in the language that imitates biblical cadences, “the little girl tasted herself of the fruit.” The loss of innocence is not immediately apparent as the first scene closes. We have had our eyes guided by Harrison's eyes toward the entrance of the house, with its suspected “heathen” rituals waiting unseen inside. The story continues with Ah Ma, Lum Yook's wife, running out and calling them in. The figure of the little girl that more seriously and slowly follows Pat, who merrily runs out to see “Ah Ma” in the street, suggests the missionary woman's insidious power and foreshadows the trouble soon to come.

Then Harrison determines to “save” Pat from his Chinese environment. The story confronts the taboo society most profoundly professes: incest because the brother, Pat, and the sister, Pan, sleep together. The underlying reason of Harrison's determination is that the relationship between the two children alludes to the danger of miscegenation, a point which is undoubtedly part of its threat. The missionary woman sees the two children “asleep in each other arm's” in what, if we do not know their ages, could be the pose of adults after lovemaking. In this way, readers can recognize what Harrison thinks: the potential of sexual relations, childbearing, and marriage lies between Pat and Pan. That is the union between Chinese and white. In other words, it is the miscegenation and a threat held by many western people in the late nineteenth century as discussed earlier. Harrison holds the belief of anti-miscegenation; she fears that the pure white population will be contaminated by the mixing of different races.

This story also addresses fears in the dominant white culture of loss of their “own” people to those they term “other.” Harrison's determination to “save” Pat becomes stronger when she sees him playing with some Chinese children while Pan cheers him on in vociferous, infantile Chinese. Her purpose is complicated: she wants not only to claim Pat as white but also to erase his Chineseness. Harrison fails to realize that she is judging Chinese people by her own Anglo-American standards: she assumes a patronizing air of superiority when dealing with the Chinese, and considers her own

values and customs the most desirable. Then, the ideal family, the harmony between races, gradually wavers.

First, Harrison brings Pat to her school. She opens her missionary school for white and Chinese children in Chinatown. She talks to Lum Yook, and he agrees that his adopted son should “learn the speech of his ancestors”; however, Harrison has to accept Pan to her school because Pat “could not be got without Pan” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p 162). This means that Pat and Pan are very close and they have never been separated. Because Harrison does not intend to educate Pan, she places Pan among “a number of baby toys” and expects that she will learn nothing. However, the story reverses Harrison's expectations. Contrary to Harrison's idea, Pan acquires a larger English vocabulary than Pat, the object of her schooling. Pan, who is not supposed to learn but just to play, can sing hymns and recite verses; Pat, on the other hand, cannot memorize even a sentence. The ambiguity of the value of the lessons taught at the missionary school is clear in the image of Pan's singing. While Pan is asked to recite the verse to Pat and says, “Yesu love me,” Pat mutters, “I hate you, Pan” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p 163). The ironic juxtaposition of Pan's adopted song of love and Pat's strongly felt words of hate suggests that in the name of Christian love, Harrison's mission has introduced disharmony and racial “difference” into this harmonious family.

In the next scene, the readers witness the disruption of the harmonious world. Three years later, Harrison wants to disconnect Pat from his Chinese family completely; she gets an American couple take Pat to raise as an “American boy.” When the news comes that Pat is being taken away, Ah Ma is very sad. Her heart moves from happiness to hang “heavy as the blackest of heavens.” The following scene is the portrayal of the parting between Pat and the Yooks. When Pat shouts that he won't leave Pan, Lum Yook says, “But you must! . . . You are white boy and Pan is Chinese” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p 164). Posed against the racial harmony in the first scene, Lum Yook's response suggests an introduction of racism into the children's awareness. “I am Chinese too!” insists Pat. “He Chinese! He Chinese!” the voice of Pan reinforces. However, “Pat was driven away” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p 164). That Lum Yook has to compel Pat, whom he loves as his son, implies the power of white cultural politics and the limitations of Chinese American resistance.

The ideal vision is completely destroyed in the last scene when Pat's permanent severance from his Chinese family and culture is made evident. The results of Harrison's efforts reveal themselves when Pat and Pan meet two times, outside of Chinatown, a year after their separation. At the first meeting, Pat dresses in new clothes “Mother” has bought him; they are not Chinese clothes but American. These clothes indicate that he assumes a new identity, “white.” Pat boasts, “I learn lots of things that you don't know anything about” (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p 165). Although he is glad to see Pan again, he refuses to revisit Chinatown and his Chinese parents. Furthermore, he admits that he has forgotten A-Toy, “the big gray meow.” The acquisition of new knowledge in one world is set against its loss in another. In other words, the new knowledge in white society makes Pat forget his Chineseness.

Subsequently, such gains and losses move from the material world into the deepest realms of the spirit: Pat becomes completely white. The change of environment proves significantly in altering Pat; living in a white world, he soon loses his Chinese consciousness. And even feels ashamed of his Chinese connection. Pat's ultimate

renunciation of his Chinese self occurs at his final meeting with Pan. When one of his schoolmates laughs at Pan, he turns to Pan and says, "Get away from me!" (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p 166). In the past, he pushed her aside to prevent her from Harrison's slapping; at that point, Pat shouts angrily, "You hurt my Pan again!" Now, he pushes her away to distance himself from her "Chineseness." The story ends with Pan's sorrow and saying, "Poor Pat! . . . He Chinese no more; he Chinese no more!" (Sui Sin Far, 1995, p 166). Mourning her loss of a brother, Pan's closing line resonates with the author's own lament over the impossibility of a natural, harmonious integration of races. Although Pan is the one left with sorrow, it is Pat for whom readers feel the most pity. Pan knows who her mother is and, even with a broken heart, can still think of Pat as a brother, while Pat has lost a sister, a family, a culture, and his moral base. The irony of Pan's concluding line offers the theme: it is society's intervention into this family, the separation of brother from sister and parents from child, that the author finds so "unthinkable."

It is noteworthy that Sui Sin Far's view of the roots of racism is unique, and her analysis of the complexity of the issue is insightful in light of the social background of her time. She believed that racial prejudice was largely a product of social and environmental factors and it was education rather than genetic elements that made a person racist. If human harmony could prevail, life would be as sweet as this story's opening picture. Clearly, the author does not shy away from positing the underlying reasons why the missionary woman believes she must "save" Pat from "Chinese" culture--reasons that highlight the racism of the dominant white culture to which most of Sui Sin Far's readers belonged.

## **Conclusion**

Sui Sin Far's writing suggests her desire, not for exclusion and segregation, but for continued cultural contact. Yet rather than offering a solution to the problem of culture clash, she raises many issues. For instance, on what grounds does acculturation work? What are the problems that make her ideal vision impossible? Thus, Sui Sin Far's stories often mourn the tragic reality of immigrant life. All of these suggest that although the ideological power of contemporary cultural forms is enormous, indeed sometimes even frightening, that power is not yet all-pervasive, totally vigilant, or complete. Interstices still exist within the social fabric where opposition is carried on by people who are not satisfied by their place within it or by the restrictions put on them. They, therefore, attempt to imagine a more perfect social state as a way of countering despair. It is absolutely essential that we should not overlook this minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest.

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