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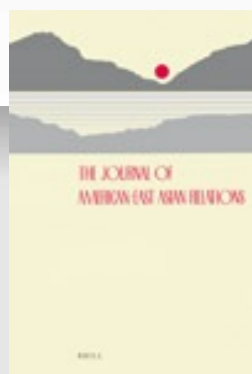
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China by the Book: China Hands and China Stories,
1848–1949

Charles W. Hayford

From the Opium Wars down to the revolution of 1949, American missionaries, diplomats, businessmen, and novelists who lived in China Hands—wrote a series of popular books which construed not just as a geographical space but as a virtual fable of modernity and proving ground of the American way of life. These men and women based their authority on personal experience—“forty years in a Chinese village,” “dateline Shanghai”—and formed what Paul Cohen calls the “amateur phase” of American writing about China; only after World War II was there a “true professional field.” Cogent scholars such as Harold Isaacs and T. Christopher Jespersen argue that Fu Ma, Charlie Chan, or the Dragon Lady often drowned out the voices of the China Hands and that Americans viewed China with “images” informed by racism, fears of Chinese immigration, Orientalist fantasies, historical mythology, diplomatic strategizing, and wholesale ignorance. Americans had come, in Jonathan Spence’s now obligatory phrase, “to change China” and Michael Adas has recently described “technological imperatives” and “America’s civilizing mission,” including the mission in China.¹

In spite of all, these China Hands worked to find the words, metaphors, and stories to grasp and explain China, though the public sought to comprehend their stories and policy-makers mostly ignored them. True, like their British cousins who established the Raj in India, Americans in China took up the “White Man’s Burden” and like their colonial men on the North American frontier used military violence to establish their right to do so. But even careful scholars like Adas miss the pe-

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1. Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing and the Recent Chinese Past* (New York; London: Columbia University Press, 1984); T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931–1949* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), xv; Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: America and China and India* (New York: John Day, 1958; White Plains, N.Y.: Sharpe, 1987; reprint with new preface); Jonathan Spence, *To Change China: Western Adaptation and China, 1620–1960* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969); Michael Adas, *Dominance and Power: Technological Imperatives and America’s Civilizing Mission* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).



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