

Biography

Sacha Su-ling Welland

A THOUSAND MILES OF DREAMS

The journeys of two Chinese sisters

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This fascinating book describes the lives of two sisters, born in China at the beginning of the twentieth century into the family of a high official who served for a time as Mayor of Peking. One sister became a painter and writer, whom Julian Bell described as China's Katherine Mansfield; the other studied medicine in America and became a respected medical researcher. The latter was Sacha Su-ling Welland's grandmother. Welland set out to research her grandmother's life from childhood in Peking to her life in Indianapolis, where she and her husband, also a Chinese doctor, both worked for the pharmacist Eli Lilly. But Welland soon encountered complications, particularly when Grandmother Amy's version of events was set against that published by Great Aunt Ling Shuhua in *Ancestral Melodies* in 1953.

Ling Shuhua usurped Amy's position, claiming that she was the youngest child in an extended family. She also said that her father had four wives, though there appear to have been six. Amy, perhaps pandering to

American sensibilities, mentioned only her own mother. The second generation was caught up in these retellings, which caused considerable bitterness between the two sisters, long separated in Indianapolis and London.

Despite strong prejudices against her, Welland's grandmother adapted to life in the US, ending up as an ornament to Indianapolis society, where she addressed women's clubs on "Chinese jade", "Chinese medicine" and "Chinese customs", as well as advising Eli Lilly on the decoration of his "Chinese house". Ling Shuhua betrayed her quiet and scholarly husband through her affair with Julian Bell, who was then teaching English literature at Wuhan University. She seems to have been unsettled and unhappy; she irritated Vanessa Bell, who tried hard to introduce her to various inhabitants of Bloomsbury. Marjorie Strachey was "horri-fied by her emotionalism". Arthur Waley simply fled.

Sacha Welland has produced a wonderful book from the lives of these two strong sisters, who lost four siblings (absent from Grandmother Amy's family tree) in a drowning accident under a Japanese waterfall in 1913. *A Thousand Miles of Dreams* illuminates twentieth-century Chinese intellectual life and feminism, as well as the tragedies of the Japanese invasion and the diaspora created by the Communist takeover in 1949. As Welland weaves her way through the compromises, inconsistencies and "continual reinventions" of her grandmother and great aunt, we wonder whether Ling Shuhua's husband was perhaps right when he wrote, rather sadly, "Chinese people have only a sense of loss and gain, not one of right and wrong".

FRANCES WOOD