

Beyond the Stereotypes: Redefining Chinese Women in “Mrs. Spring Fragrance”

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ABSTRACT

Sui Sin Far (Edith Maud Eaton), the “grandmother” of Chinese American literature challenges the traditional submissive, voiceless, obedient, and dependent stereotypes of Chinese women in her short story “Mrs. Spring Fragrance”. She redefines Chinese immigrant women as independent, emotionally intelligent, culturally adaptive and domestically authoritative with Mrs. Spring Fragrance as the embodiment of these qualities. Through her daily actions, Mrs. Spring Fragrance demonstrates a soft yet powerful female image in the anti-Chinese era. By portraying such a character, Sui Sin Far seeks to restore visibility to Chinese women who had long been marginalized or misrepresented in dominant narratives. In presenting the figure of Mrs. Spring Fragrance, she invites readers to see Chinese femininity as thoughtful, active and emotionally aware. This character construction reflects her deeper intention to reclaim a place for Chinese women in both literature and cultural understanding.

Keywords: *Sui Sin Far, Chinese American women, Stereotype, Femininity.*

1. INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND

In the early twentieth century, Chinese immigrants in the United States were hugely marginalized. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 severely limited Chinese immigration. Further, it reinforced negative attitudes of American mainstream toward Chinese communities. In particular, Chinese women suffered more from discrimination, both internally and externally. Their presence in American society was heavily restricted and stigmatized as they faced multiple layers of discrimination from both mainstream white society and within Chinese patriarchal communities. They were often exoticized, exiled, or regarded with suspicion.

At the same time, the first wave of the feminist movement was gaining momentum. However, this early feminist activism was largely centered on the needs and voices of white, middle-class women, often excluding women of color from its discourse and objectives. “Chinese-American women are the “other” among “others” compared to “others”[2]. As a result, Chinese women were still rendered invisible, taking the role as the silent background.

In both mainstream Western literature and early Asian American writings, Chinese and East Asian women were often confined to a narrow set of stereotypes—submissive, voiceless, emotionally passive, and dependent[3]. These depictions formed what scholars have called the “Lotus Blossom” stereotype: an Orientalist construction of femininity that is gentle, exotic, and ripe for possession, yet lacking agency or narrative autonomy. This framework catered to the gaze and desires of dominant white masculinity, while simultaneously erasing the complexity of real Chinese women's experiences. In *A Japanese Nightingale* (1901), the main character Yuki embodies the soft-spoken, self-sacrificing ideal shaped by Orientalist romance. Mr. Wu (1918) presents a Chinese daughter as voiceless and dutiful, reduced to a vessel of patriarchal values. By *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957), the stereotype persists: Suzie is a sexualized yet obedient figure whose value centers on her attachment to a white man. These portrayals shaped a literary and cultural imagination in which Chinese and East Asian women were seen as either ornamental or submissive figures, rather than full participants in their own stories.

Against this backdrop, Sui Sin Far's "Mrs. Spring Fragrance" provides a meaningful departure, depicting a Chinese female character who is emotionally intelligent, socially perceptive, and quietly assertive[4]. Rather than engaging in open resistance, she demonstrates a gentle yet powerful womanhood through everyday actions, emotional insight, and quiet influence within her domestic sphere. Her independent behavior in daily life, her emotional intelligence, her cultural adaptability, and her domestic role as the genuine center of the household all demonstrate her qualities as a new Chinese woman.

2. INDEPENDENT BEHAVIOR

In a time when Chinese women were expected to remain confined to the private sphere, Mrs. Spring Fragrance's independent actions in everyday life disobey traditional gender norms. She has ability to move freely, she is able to interact with different cultural environments on her own, she can influence outcomes without any male's supervision.

One of the clearest examples of Mrs. Spring Fragrance's independence is her decision to travel alone to San Francisco and visit her cousin[1]. In the cultural context of conventional Chinese communities, it was rare and socially controversial for a married woman to travel without her husband. Yet Mrs. Spring Fragrance does so with confidence and purpose, demonstrating that she is not bound by the passive, domestic role traditionally assigned to women. What's more, she even asks to stay until Fifth Moon Festival[1]. Though Mr. Spring Fragrance pretends that it is he who allows his wife to stay longer, the truth is that the delay is due to Mrs. Spring Fragrance's own will[1]. During the journey, she also secretly arranges the marriage of Ah Oi and Man You for the sake of Laura[1]. Her action can be read as a quiet act of rebellion against both patriarchal marriage arrangements and rigid gender expectations. It reflects her autonomy and her ability to act on her beliefs without needing male permission or validation.

Moreover, her actions are not impulsive; they are purposeful and strategic. By intervening in a Laura's love life, Mrs. Spring Fragrance takes on the role of emotional counselor and cultural mediator[1]. Her intervention helps the couple pursue love over obligation, promoting individual choice and emotional fulfillment over duty. This not only empowers the young woman involved, but also affirms Mrs. Spring Fragrance's own

understanding of cultural transformation, as she balances Chinese traditions with American ideals.

Mr. Spring Fragrance's confusion and insecurity during his wife's absence also speak volumes[1]. His exaggerated fears about her similarity with American woman reflect his discomfort with her growing independence. These concerns are not grounded in his wife's behavior but rather in his own assumptions about female courtesy and male authority. His anxiety mirrors the broader patriarchal discomfort with women stepping beyond their expected roles. However, instead of punishing or restraining his wife, the story allows his fears to unravel and evolve into respect.

By the end of the story, Mrs. Spring Fragrance's independence is well accepted after solving the misunderstanding. This moment marks a shift in perception and expresses Sui Sin Far's expectation: the qualities that once unsettled the man —her autonomy, emotional resilience, and leadership— become the very traits that a woman should possess. This resolution underscores the idea that independence and domestic harmony are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they reinforce one another.

More than just being free in practical action, Mrs. Spring Fragrance also breaks gender stereotypes through her emotional wisdom, which reshapes how she handles interpersonal relationship.

3. EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Traditionally, Chinese women in literature were often portrayed as lacking initiative, overly reliant on others, easily overwhelmed by emotions rather than thoughtful, and incapable of handling complex social dynamics. In contrast, Mrs. Spring Fragrance displays emotional intelligence and female softness that enable her to gracefully and effectively navigate complex social situations. She does not confront authority directly; instead, she employs her great empathy to understand individual struggle and wisdom to arrange better outcomes.

One key example of the emotional intelligence is how she resolves the oncoming crisis between Laura and Kai Tzu. Despite being in an arranged marriage herself, Mrs. Spring Fragrance does not impose that model on Laura. She honors Laura's wish to marry for love, showing a deep respect for individual autonomy and freedom. What's more, she is willing to help. Instead of openly siding with Laura, Mrs. Spring Fragrance takes a clever

detour—she intervenes through Man You, Laura's fiancé, to bring about a resolution [1]. Her method is emotionally intelligent: she considers the feelings of all parties involved, respects cultural sensibilities, and quietly promotes individual choice.

Her emotional intelligence is further revealed in her delicate handling of her husband's frustration after she returns from San Francisco. Sensing his sudden coldness, Mrs. Spring Fragrance feels hurt and confused, she even cries in secret. However, when speaking with Laura, she hides her own emotional pain so as not to burden others [1]. This self-restraint shows her ability to prioritize the feelings of those around her. As for her husband, she avoids direct confrontation and patiently waits for the right moment. Once the misunderstanding is cleared, she quickly shifts the emotional atmosphere by enthusiastically sharing the good news of two young couple. Her capacity to shift feelings in a short period highlights her emotional maturity. Her emotional intelligence lies in her ability to consider all members' feelings and use female softness to overcome hardness.

Through Mrs. Spring Fragrance, Sui Sin Far presents a model of Chinese femininity grounded in emotional strength, restraint, and interpersonal wisdom. Her intelligence is not displayed through direct rebellion or assertive dominance, but rather through a quiet resilience and relational insight that subverts gendered expectations from within.

Her emotional wisdom not only help her get along with others, but also highlights her unique ability to reconcile between Chinese and American cultures, which is further illustrated in her cultural adaptability.

4. CULTURAL ADAPTABILITY

Traditionally, Chinese women were perceived as culturally insular—lacking the ability to navigate foreign cultural systems and serving merely as passive bearers of tradition rather than active negotiators. But in this story, Mrs. Spring Fragrance adapts two cultures in a highly fluent way. She does not abandon her heritage. Instead, she exercises selective adaptation, integrating ideas that align with her bicultural identity.

A notable example is her use of English poetry to comfort Laura. When Laura expresses sadness about her arranged marriage, Mrs. Spring Fragrance quotes, “‘Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all”[1]. This shows that Mrs. Spring Fragrance is not simply borrowing from

American culture—she is capable of judging what makes emotional and moral sense, regardless of its origin. In contrast, her husband holds the belief: “Is it not better to have what you do not love than to love what you do not have?”, which is more rigid and duty-centered[1]. By comparison, Mrs. Spring Fragrance's flexible use of cultural references reflects understanding and true adaptability. She absorbs meaningful knowledge and civilizations—whether Eastern or Western—and applies it with confidence and purpose.

Despite her strong cultural adaptability, Mrs. Spring Fragrance does not blindly accept everything American society offers. Her engagement with American culture is not a process of simple assimilation, but a wise selection—she knows when to adopt, when to translate, and when to resist.

In a letter to her husband, Mrs. Spring Fragrance mentions the lecture “America, the Protector of China!”. She recounts the event in seemingly admiring terms, yet her tone quickly shifts into biting irony: “I beg of you to forget to remember that the barber charges you one dollar for a shave while he humbly submits to the American man a bill of fifteen cents”[1]. Her elaborate phrasing and sarcastic humor make it clear that she sees through the contradictions between American self-praise and the everyday discrimination Chinese people face. Her critical consciousness surpasses that of her husband and many Chinese male characters in the text. Her ability to decode the language of colonial benevolence and unveil the racial hierarchy reflects political insight.

Her cultural flexibility extends into her role at home, where she employs new value, such as autonomy and freedom, to navigates her domestic life and marital relationship.

5. DOMESTIC ROLE

Traditionally, Chinese women were confined within the boundaries of Sancongside(三从四德), meaning the obedience to one's father before marriage, one's husband during marriage, and one's son in widowhood while upholding virtues of morality, modesty and diligent work. Under such ideology, women were expected to serve as a quiet and submissive housewives. On the contrary, Mrs. Spring Fragrance establishes herself as the emotional and psychological core of her household. While her husband bears the title of authority, it is she who maintains the balance, uplifts the

atmosphere, and ultimately guides the direction of their marriage life.

Through the contrast between her and her husband's attitudes, it can be clearly seen that the difference in how each partner handles conflict, and ultimately, who truly sustains the family's stability. When Mr. Spring Fragrance becomes suspicious after his wife's extended trip to San Francisco, he retreats into further speculation rather than expressing his emotions directly. Alone at home, he recalls anxiously, worrying about her independence, her interactions with American customs, and her growing confidence—but all his thoughts lead only to a restrained telegram: "Remain as you wish". He even includes the line, "'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all," as a vague confession of his insecurity. However, Mrs. Spring Fragrance decodes this message with joy. She believes her husband has finally begun to understand both poetry and Laura's secret love story. She becomes genuinely delighted, anticipating their reunion. Her reaction reveals a deep emotional steadiness—rather than being thrown off by her husband's uncertain message, she focuses on the positive side.

It is this very optimism, the ability to see the good and maintain warmth even in ambiguity, that makes Mrs. Spring Fragrance the emotional center of the home. While her husband hesitates with multiple speculation, she actively shapes the family's emotional landscape with clarity, empathy, and quiet strength.

6. CONCLUSION

Mrs. Spring Fragrance, a prominent figure depicted by Sui Sin Far, redefines the image of the Chinese woman through quiet, consistent assertion of self. Her independence in daily life actions, her emotional intelligence, her cultural adaptability, and her central role in the family all contribute to a portrait of womanhood that is gentle yet assertive, traditional yet progressive. Rather than rejecting the identity of Chinese culture, she reinterprets and applies them in American life, representing unconventional feminine strength.

Through the story of Mrs. Spring Fragrance, Sui Sin Far introduces a cultural vision of Chinese womanhood that is both gentle and strong, deeply rooted in tradition while embracing the possibilities of change. This portrayal directly challenges the fixed stereotypes imposed by both Western discrimination and patriarchal Chinese norms.

As a pioneering voice in Chinese American literature, Sui Sin Far challenges both male dominance and white cultural supremacy through her delicate narration. By describing the lives of Chinese women, she tries to reclaim their visibility and raises the awareness of the emerging female authority. As the Sui Sin Far's most important protagonist, Mrs. Spring Fragrance thus stands as more than a short story—it is a foundational act of cultural resistance and literary empowerment, setting the stage for generations of voices that would follow.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The author solely conceived the study, conducted the analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

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