1-13-1918

Letter from May-ling Soong Chiang, 1918-01-13, Shanghai, China, to Emma Mills

May-ling Soong Chiang

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Dearest Dada:

Your 21st letter came a couple of days ago. I am sorry to hear of your illness - I guess you have been over-working trying to do your work along with the War Relief.

The New Republic is a singularly clarifying periodical. I enjoy the articles very much - especially the two by William Hard. You may think that I am exaggerating; however, I am beginning to feel that since my return home, my English vocabulary has become stunted. The ease and facility of expressing my thoughts, which perhaps to a measure I had while in college, have deserted me. I can only express now in general terms rather than in the specific or concrete. Of course you understand that the class discussions and lectures kept my mind on the alert and constantly gave me opportunities to use new words. The conversation at home is at best general: and half the time I speak in Chinese. I am deathly afraid that within a few years, my knowledge of English will degenerate into three hundred words.

You cannot exactly imagine how I miss your companionship and those of my other friends with whom I had semi-intellectual [con-fabs.] You remember my saying that the average conversation between the average man and his wife would drive me to distraction. At present, well, I am wondering whether I could sustain even a semi-intelligent discussion. My brain seems terribly full of cobwebs.

Since I last wrote you, my uncle who was ill has died. Auntie is prostrated with grief. Under such gloomy atmosphere, I am feeling more than ever the futility of living, and oh
the eternal emptiness of life! And also the
awful, awful loneliness of existence. I recall
a quotation from [Leibing] which goes some-
ting like this
"Each of us is a monad, separate, different
and alone, each in its separate cell utterly
unique, and cannot either experience or feel
the experience of other monads."

Just think what life means, Dada - If one
does not marry, then think of the long stretch of life
ahead that has to be lived by oneself alone, for of course [page break]
within a few years, the other members of the family
will have interests of their own. Again if one
does marry, then think of the awful awful respon-
sibilities of bringing up the children - especially if
one should happen to marry a man without
great resources. At the same time if one marries
for wealth and ambition, think what it would
amount to if after a short time, the man should
lose his fortune. Such accidents often happen:
and then there would not even be a particle of
affection to keep up one's courage!

All in all, life is a pretty serious problem!
My aunt considers her widowhood in such a
disheartening spirit that even I am affected.
In America, a widow has a pretty good time:
in China the fate of a widow is pitable.
In America, death is beautiful: people consider
it in such a beautifully reverential spirit. There
I felt that it was a transfiguration, and
a natural transition from this life to the
world eternal. You remember, how I used to long
but for death?

In China, however, death is something considered
terrible. The mystery of entering into the [page break]
Great Unknown is full of superstitious dread. And
a Chinese funeral - even a Xian one is more
like a ceremony carefully staged than the
voluntary offering of respect to the departed.
I have described to you every conceivable form of
ceremony in Chinese life except a funeral. Now
I suppose I might as well enter into a discussion
of that.
First, the widow is dressed in coarse flax with a thick rope for a sash. On her head is a large three cornered hat also made of flax. The hat is large enough to pull over her entire face, and looks very much like the “witch hat” one sees in fairy stories. If the deceased has sons and unmarried daughters, they too are dressed in coarse flax. However if the daughters are married, they wear fine flax. The other relatives wear long white gowns, and white shoes. As all my uncles’ children are abroad, I wore fine flax for him. As a rule, I should have worn white, but of course as I was in the carriage with Auntie, I wore heavier mourning than I would have otherwise. In China, if a daughter is married, she is considered to belong to her husband’s family, and she wears heavier mourning for her father-in-law and mother-in-law than she does for her own father & mother.

At my uncle’s funeral there were over fifty carriages. The coffin is now in a guild as he cannot be buried until his sons return. We want Auntie to cable the children: but she refuses to do so. Now as she is so ill, we may cable without letting her know anything about it.

I received about fifty letters from the last year TZE juniors and the new members. Among them was one from Louie. She spoke about her great disappointment in not going to the Army-Navy game.

My little brother takes the St. Johns’ Entrance Examination next week. I am tutoring him very assiduously, and I hope he will pass.

Dada, I don’t know what is the matter with me - I feel so terribly moody and lonesome, - as though I were the sole surviving mortal in this world! I wish you were here with me, - and let me just have a one-big hula hula cry!
I’ve told you that I am taking music, haven’t I? I practice about three hours every day.

H.K. is coming to Shanghai next month. His father
is the Manager of the [Kiagnan] docks in Shanghai - one of
the most important National Arsenals. My uncle
who died was the Secretary of the Arsenal. Now
H.K. is going to take that position, which is a
very important one. My aunt, of course, resents
anyone taking her dead husband's place -
unreasonably resentful: at the same time the
whole affair puts me in a difficult position.
H.K. wants me to marry him, - more than
ever now, as he sees quite a future
opening up for him. For a man of his age,
this position as Secretary is unusual, especially as
it is semi-political in nature, and has great
possibilities. And as you know, H.K. is cut
out for politics. My family is quite amused over the
fact that he writes almost as much to my
brother, my married sister and to my brother-in-law
as he does to me. But clearly Dad & Mother do not [page break]
want me to marry for a couple more years. And
my brother-in-law says that I am too much
of a kid to think of marriage. My sisters, how-
ever, both being married, are crazy to marry me
off too!

You ask why some of my letters to you are
censored. Well, if my letters go by way by
Vancouver, they are censored, as that is
British territory: if by San Francisco or
Seattle, they are not censored. Your letters
to me are censored most of the time.

But goodnight - I must go to bed, as I have
a music lesson tomorrow.

As Ever
Daughter
Dear Papa:

Your 21st letter came a couple of days ago. I am sorry to hear of your illness—evidently you have been over-working trying to do your work along with the war effort.

The New Republic is a surprisingly clarifying periodical. I enjoy its articles very much, especially the two by William Rider. You may think that I am exaggerating; however, I am beginning to feel that since my return home, my English vocabulary has become limited. The ease and facility of expressing my thoughts, which perhaps at a measure had while in college, have deserted me. I can only express them in general terms rather than in the specific or concrete. Of course you understand that the class discussions and lectures kept my mind on the alert and constant, gave me opportunities to use new words. The conversation at home is at best general; and half the time I speak in Chinese. I am deathly afraid that within a few years, my knowledge of my list will degenerate into three hundred words.

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thing like this:

"Each of us is a monad, separate, different, and alone, each in its separate cell, utterly and unique, and cannot enter experiences or feel the experiences of other monads."

Just think what life means, Dada— If one does not marry, then think of the long stretch of life that has to be lived by oneself alone, for one
within a few years. Not other members of the family will have interests of their own. Again, if one does marry, then think of the awful, awful responsi-
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Great unknown is free from superstition, and China's funeral—now a Christian one is more like a ceremony carefully shaped than the voluntary offering I respect to the departed. I have described to you every conceivable form I support, though as well enter into a discussion of that.

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My sister, I don’t know what is the matter with me—I feel so terribly moody and lonesome, as though it was the sole surviving member in this world! Don’t you—I miss you—were here with me—and let me just have
a scouring brush brush cry.

I've told you that I am taking music, honest.

I practice about three hours every day.

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But good night - I must go to bed, as I have
a music lesson tomorrow.

As Queen
Liang Lin