3-21-1920

Letter from May-ling Soong Chiang, 1920-03-21, Shanghai, China, to Emma Mills

May-ling Soong Chiang

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30 Seymour Road,
Shanghai,
21 March, 1920-

Dearest Dada:

Such a long time since I wrote you!
And yet time has flown so rapidly that I hardly have realized that fully six weeks have elapsed since I wrote you last.

And the cause of this neglect?
Well, Mrs. Kung, my oldest sister left for Peking over a month ago, and left all five of her children down here for me to look after. I am now living at Mrs. Kung’s house, but come home every day to have my Chinese lesson. I have an excellent teacher, but terribly strict, and expects me to accomplish the “almost impossible”. He is my brother’s Chinese secretary, and is an excellent old-fashioned scholar who at the same time understands all the modern trends of thought, and understands new forms of expressions.

As you know probably, within the last ten years, since Western civilization and scientific discoveries have been introduced in China, the growth of New Chinese expressions and the enrichment of vocabulary has been enormous. And [page break] even the best of the old-school scholars are at a lose to understand the significance of the new terms etc. unless they make an effort to keep up with the present.

I am studying old Chinese Literature and have to memorize long passages every day. We have no rules of grammar for composition yet a great deal of the effectiveness of an essay depends upon the
manner in which the thoughts are
clothed. This being the case, how then
is one to write elegantly and easily?
By memorizing the works of our best
authors, and acquire by instinct almost
the "feel" that this and this are correct,
while expressed in some other way would
lose the finish and effectiveness one
desires to acquire. The difficult part
is that slavish imitation and repetition
of even the best literature would not
necessarily produce a good essay. Much
depends upon to what degree the
student has assimilated the idea and
the atmosphere of good literature. Good
writing in Chinese is practically un-
conscious writing. I have expressed this so crudely that I doubt whether I have
made my meaning clear-

At any rate, the study of Chinese
is fascinating if one really means to be
a Chinese scholar, and knows that
the elementary period is necessary before
one reaches the really artistic forms.
To the average foreigner, the study of
Chinese is tedious and difficult because
she does not expect to go beyond the
reading of easy books and newspapers.
I wish you were here with me. I
write one composition every day and
have found that the colloquial and
the literary Chinese are widely different.
The colloquial we call 土白, ("tu bai")
and the written the ("wen-li"). If I
were to read of piece of "wen-li" to
my amah, she would not understand
one single word of it whereas she knows
("tu bai") better than I.

Helen [Tailor] wrote that she is
expecting to come to China this August to
teach in "Qin Ling College" at Nanking.
I shall be very glad to see her. I [page break]
think that in all probability altho she
expects to teach Botany etc. She will

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have to teach Elementary English as Qinling has very little English. Their strong department in Chinese. I think Tailor would enjoy coming to China, al-tho she won't see many people in Nanking outside of the College people. But don't tell her what I say, for I may be mistaken and do not want to dis-courage her.

I certainly am going to have my picture taken soon- you may not believe this as I have said this so often, but I really truly mean this.

When Mrs. Kung returns, I shall be free of the children and shall have time to "[get]" [around] a bit. Now I am tied on one hand to the children and on the other hand to my studies.

By the way, your speaking of turning down a good $25.00 job for the purpose of writing etc. seems to be foolish! Not because I am such a materialistic sort of mercenary, but because I feel that since you are feeling restless, you had better try to get a "cub" reporter's job, and really be working on a newspaper regularly. If you have real talent, the positive work of writing and drudgery will bring it out. If you have not real talent, then you would have the satisfaction of knowing that you gave yourself a chance to try out.

I believe that as long as your family looks upon you as a "problem" and as long as you are merely writing "on your own", you would not make much progress. Get
out and get a $10.00 job as a cub reporter, and have your articles battered up, torn to pieces, and mutilated. By that time you will be so darned tired that if you really have the divine fire, the fire will roar; if not it will splutter and go out.

I sound ruthless, and cold hearted, an unsympathetic brute! But Dada, I really believe that you could be a good writer if you had to work like a dog and have a regular job.

Write about myself next time--
Daughter

P.S. Has Percy Kwok taken the package to you yet?
M.
20 Seymour Road, Shanghai
21 March, 1920

Dearest Dada:

Such a long time since I wrote you; and yet time has flown so rapidly that hardly have realized that fully six months have elapsed since I wrote you last.

And the cause of this neglect? Well, dear, I must pay a visit to my eldest sister, aged for more, Mrs. King, and go out and bring over a month ago, and keep all her children down here for my uncle's house, and come home every day to have my Chinese lesson. I have an excellent teacher, but firmly, strict, and strict, and expects me to accomplish the "almost impossible." He is my brother's Chinese Secretary, and is an excellent old-fashioned scholar, but at the same time understands all the modern trend of thought, and understands new forms of expressions.

As you know, probably, within the last ten years, since Western civilization and scientific discoveries have been introduced, the growth of expressions and the enlargement of vocabulary have been enormous. And
even the best of the old-school scholars are at a loss to understand the significance of the new terms etc., unless they make an effort to keep up with the present.

I am studying old Chinese literature and have to memorize long passages every day. We have no rules of grammar for composition, yet a great deal of the effectiveness of an essay depends upon the manner in which the thoughts are clothed. This being the case, how then is one to write elegantly and easily?

By memorizing the works of our best authors, and acquiring by instinct almost the "feel" that this and this are correct, one can begin to write elegantly. But the difficult point is that plainest imitation and repetition of even the best literature would not necessarily produce a good essay. Much depends upon to what degree the student has assimilated the idea and the atmosphere of good literature. Good writing in Chinese is practically unconscious writing. I have expressed this...
to cruelly think I don’t know whether I have
made any meaning clean.

At any rate, the study of Chinese is fascinating if one really means to be a Chinese scholar, and know a lot. The elementary period is necessary before one reaches the really artistic forms. To the average foreigner, the study of Chinese is tedious and difficult because he does not expect to go beyond the reading of easy books and newspapers. I wish you were here with me. I would propose that the colloquial and the literary Chinese are widely different. The colloquial we call ‘too bah’ ("too bah") and the written the ("wen-li") if I were to read a piece of "wen-li" to my aunts, she would not understand a single word of it whereas she knows ("too bah") better than I.

Helen Hoffman wrote that she is to arrive in China this August to teach in "Peking College" at Nanking. I shall be very glad to see her.
...think that in one probability of the effects to teach Botany, etc. She will have to teach Elementary English as well due to her English. Their class is Clinic. I think a sailor would enjoy coming to Clinic. He's very much an English-speaking student. The people in hunting are the only ones who speak many people in hunting. But don't keep her what I say, for I may be mistaken, and do not want to dis...

...Courage, her...

...Certainly are going to have my picture taken soon. You may not believe this, as I have posted this so often, but I really truly mean this. When Mrs. Knapp returns, I shall be free of the children, and shall have time to "see" and "spend" a bit. Now I am married. I had to see children tied on one head to the children and on the other head to any other. By the way, you speaking...
of turning down a good $25.00 job for the purpose of writing at all. Never the foolish! Not because I am such a materialist, not because I feel that
mercenary, but because I feel that since you are feeling restless, you had better try to get a "cub" "reporter" job, and really be working on a newspaper regularly. If you have real talent, the routine work of writing and doing any kind of it out. If you have not real
talent, then you would have the satisfaction of knowing that you gave yourself a chance to try
out.
I believe that as long as you "fanily looks upon you as a "Problem" and as long as you are merely writing "on your own," you would not make much progress. Get
out and get a $6.00 job as a cub reporter, and have your articles
By that time you will be damn'd tried, that if you really have the divine fire, the fire will roar; if not it will splutter and go out.

I found ruthless and cold hearted, an unsympathetic brute. But I really believe that in a good world, if you had to work like a dog and have a regular job.

More about my self next time.

Daughter

Has Percy Buck taken the package to you yet?