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HELEN DEPASS DAHLIN  
ORAL HISTORY ABSTRACT

LIFE IN CHINA: brief description of housing and education in Peking and Tientsin; memories of beggars and amahs; relations between the military, business and missionary communities.

INTERVIEWER: Jane Baker Koons

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## INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: Mrs. Dahlin, we have some information on your father's work in China and now may we ask some questions about your experiences. Were you born in China?

DAHLIN: No. I wasn't. I was two when I went there in 1921.

I: Would you describe your residential setup during your childhood in China?

DAHLIN: In Tientsin we lived in the British Concession. The Americans had troops in Tientsin but did not have a concession the way that the British did. So we shared a concession with the British. We had very nice housing.

In Peking we lived in housing that had been provided for the Rockefeller Foundation medical people at the Peking Union Medical School. These were called North Compound and South Compound, which were a group of 15 to 20 houses. Very nice brick houses, with gardens, surrounded by a wall with only one entrance past the gatekeeper, and this sort of thing. Rather isolated, but very nice. In Peking the Rockefeller Foundation would rent a few of these houses to the Americans who were at the language school.

I: How did the British and Americans get along in the Tientsin concession?

DAHLIN: Oh, very well. When we went back to Tientsin the second time, I went to a British school and there was a good deal of good-natured rivalry between the British and American students.

I: Would you go into a little more detail about your educational experiences in both Tientsin and Peking?

DAHLIN: In Peking, there was a Peking-American school run by American teachers and mostly American students. In Tientsin I went to what would be the equivalent of the sixth or seventh grade, to the Tientsin Grammar School, run by the British and under the auspices of Cambridge University.

I: Did you have any difficulties adapting to the British educational system?

DAHLIN: Not too much, except that they put a strong emphasis on languages at an earlier age and I hadn't had Latin or French. Then, of course, having to learn their money system--pounds, shillings and pence--that was a little bit different. So it was a very good opportunity, it really was. It was two years of better schooling than I would have had in the States, I am sure. I think it would have been the equivalent in the States of a very elite private school, with uniforms and all of that. Very structured, very strict.

I: How much of China did you see beyond the city limits of Peking and Tientsin?

DAHLIN: Since we were children, unfortunately not a great deal. The adults traveled quite a bit. I do remember a trip to the Great Wall, and we did go to the ocean at Peitaho every summer, and Chinwangtao, where the army had summer camp there for the personnel.

I: As a child, how were situations like beggars and poverty explained to you?

DAHLIN: When you grow up with that as a child, when you see that in your earliest recollections, you certainly are aware of two worlds: the world of the Chinese, that doesn't touch us, and the world of the comfortable foreigners. One of my father's very first experiences when he went to Tientsin was the very first day on the way to his office he passed this old beggar, lying beside the road shivering. He took off his nice heavy army overcoat and laid it over the beggar. When he passed by there on his way home, the beggar was there but without the coat. His colleagues took him aside and told him, after my mother had already had her few words, that you just cannot do these things. You just have to ignore this type of thing. In other words, close your eyes and your heart.

I: What about your own contact with the Chinese?

DAHLIN: We had some Chinese children who were friends, but they were from very well western-educated Chinese families who were in business there. Other than that, we had our servants. They loved us and we loved them; there was no question about that. One of the sad scenes in China was when the American family was leaving at the railroad station when the amahs would have to be giving up their little charges. There were a lot of tears; that was sad.

Now just with my mother's and father's attitudes: My father was very sympathetic and had a great deal of respect and

admiration for Chinese of all levels. He could relate to people of all levels. Whereas my mother, well, she never bothered to learn the language, and she was interested in the social life. Interested in the parties and all of the entertaining, the shopping and all of this type of thing. Really, I am sorry to say, I don't think she made good use of an opportunity to learn the history, the culture and the language. But then, that was more or less symptomatic of the time. Today people are much more aware and would recognize the opportunity.

It was my father who had the respect and the sympathy. The other day when I was in Miami, my sisters and I were sitting around talking about my father--he is not well now--and about how kind he is. We were talking about how in Chungking during the war there was a time of rather heavy bombardment by the Japanese. When the air raid sirens would go, there was a little blind Chinese boy that my father would always go looking for and lead him to safety in the shelters. One time when the sirens went off, this boy wasn't particularly frantic or anything. Somebody said to him, "Hadn't you better start scurrying for cover?" He said, "I am all right. I know the colonel will come for me."

I: What kinds of things do you recall learning from your amah and the servants?

DAHLIN: There were always the charming little sayings and superstitions and folk tales, which I can't remember. Such

things like when you are peeling an orange and you peel that white veining off, amah would always say, "Oh, no, don't throw that away. You must eat that because that is what keeps the whites of your eyes white." Things of that type. At certain times of the year we would take a bucket of water and would float a hair or a broom straw on it and look for the shadow on the bottom of the pail. There would be all sorts of things that they would read into that. Sort of like reading tea leaves.

We were really raised by the servants in China. My two younger sisters and I had supper early. Our parents were so busy with their social life that I could go two and three days and not even see my mother.

As to other foreigners, I remember my French tutor who was a White Russian refugee. She told me some harrowing stories about her escape and trek across Siberia. One of her children starved to death on the way.

I: Did you have certain experiences because of your facility with the Chinese language that perhaps even your parents didn't have?

DAHLIN: My mother would quite often take me when she went shopping because I could interpret for her. When we were living in the compound in Peking, my girlfriend and I would consider it something really devilish to slip out of the compound and go off exploring on our own. I'm sure that our parents would have been

quite distressed and disturbed if they had known that we were doing this. We would wander into a Chinese school and just stand there and watch the students. But in general, we really lived a rather sheltered life.

I: How did the military community relate with the foreign business community and the missionaries?

DAHLIN: There was quite a busy international community with a good deal of camaraderie and socializing, because the social life was so important. The visits of military or diplomatic personages was always another occasion for a party or reception. I remember I often heard my parents say they were going to a "reception" and I always wondered to myself what in the world that was. In Tientsin horse racing was very popular. In fact, one of the main thoroughfares of the city was named Race Course Road. Also the game of "jai alai," which was played in the Italian Concession, was a great favorite.

As to relations with missionaries, I would say with respect and a degree of friendliness. However, from a social point of view, the two groups maintained a different lifestyle. The big dinner and cocktail party type of thing was probably a little too rich for the missionaries' taste, as well as not in keeping with their attitudes and purpose. For the most part, the missionaries that my parents knew were the medical missionaries as they had close contact with the doctors of the Peking Union Medical College. For the most part, as I remember, a spirit of cooperation prevailed among the foreign community. There were many times when one group could be of very special help to another.



I: What did you know of the political situation as a child in China?

DAHLIN: There were three or four of the names that were very common like Chang Tso-lin and Feng Yu-hsiang and a few others that were more or less household words. One amah's threat was always, "If you don't be good, the tuchuns are going to get you. The warlords are going to get you." There was that kind of threat with tuchuns instead of boogeymen that was used to scare little children.

I: Do you recall your parents commenting on the Nationalists and the Communists?

DAHLIN: I don't recall my father ever saying derogatory or negative things about Chiang Kai-shek. The Communists were always sort of a shadowy threat on the horizon. But as children, not being politically aware, we never knew whether this was good or bad.

Now the servants really had no love at all for the Japanese. Negative comments about the Japanese were very, very common. They really were fearful of the Japanese. As I recall, the only thing the amah would give the Japanese credit for was for being so clean.

I: Did you know or hear about military officers like Joseph Stilwell?

DAHLIN: I know that my father and General Stilwell had been friends back to the days of Fort Benning, Georgia, and, for some reason or other, came to a parting of the ways in China. It may have had to do with the fact that Stilwell wanted my father to bring one or two of his (Stilwell's) servants home, which was illegal. My father, as a lower ranking officer, didn't feel that it was right--that he should be asked to do something that was illegal. He refused. This, of course, angered Stilwell. Now, I don't know if that was the sole reason or if there were other reasons because Stilwell, in his way, was rather an abrasive person.

I: You mentioned to me, that your father would sometimes go out on missions to countryside on his own. What kinds of things would he tell you about his trips?

DAHLIN: I remember his telling when he was way out in the hinterland, about the problem of where to spend the night. At first he would take accommodations in a Chinese home or inn, but since they sealed up the windows so tight at night it would become very stuffy and uncomfortable. He finally found that the best thing to do was to go out in the fields to a burial plot. He would spread his sleeping bag between two grave mounds to be protected from the wind. He was actually quite safe and cozy because that was one area where you didn't have to worry about anyone bothering you.

I: What adjustments in returning to the U.S. were there for you?

DAHLIN: Being an "army brat" I had no particular problems in readjusting. Regular army people, particularly children, were always adaptable because we had to be. I did find it frustrating that most of the Chinese in America did not speak Mandarin, which was the only dialect I knew. When we went back to China the second time in 1934, I remember my mother tried to discourage the servants from waiting on me too much since she knew our situation there was a temporary one and things would certainly be different when we came back to the States.

I: What do you feel has been the impact of your spending eight years of your childhood in China?

DAHLIN: Certainly an interest in the Chinese and in China, Chinese philosophy, and a feeling of not being wasteful. Anybody who has lived in China has seen how nothing is thrown away. If a sack of grain or something falls off a cart, even on a very busy thoroughfare, in just a very short time every grain is picked up by people. Nothing is thrown away. I think this is a philosophy Americans are now starting to come around to appreciate.

As far as impressions go, there was the very definite awareness of being an American because we were on foreign soil surrounded by, not only Chinese, but many other nationalities. Then there was the contrast between two worlds: the comfortable, affluent, international world, and the dreadful poverty of the everyday Chinese. You were constantly aware of these two worlds. And also aware of the differences in cultures--a clash of cultures.

I: Mrs. Dahlin, we appreciate having both your and your father's perceptions in the collection. Thank you.