

The Rooftop of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin:
Wallis Spencer's Peking World & Those Who Went Up
on the Roof (1924)



*The Grand Hotel de Peking (Pei ching ta fan tien) – Estd: 1920
Chang An Chieh – Peking – Tels: 3151, 3152 & 3153
Cable “Pekinotel” & “Grandhotel” – Facing the Legation Quarter*⁹

Truly a Grand Hôtel

It is fitting to start this collection with an essay about the Grand Hôtel de Pékin. From the moment it opened its doors in 1915 just about everybody who was an established member of the city's foreign colony, as well as anybody sojourning in Peking temporarily, passed through the doors of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin – certainly nearly everybody in this book. That trio of English aesthetes, Harold Acton, Desmond Parsons and Robert Byron, drank cocktails as they watched swallows arc and dive over the Forbidden City. The American socialite and traveller Adelaide Hooker, her new beau the established novelist of Bostonian manners JP Marquand, and the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi all attended tea-dances in the hotel's ballroom. Freelance journalists and left-wing activists Edgar and Helen Foster Snow, aspiring Hollywood screenwriter Harry Hervey, the Prince Mdivani and his new wife the Woolworth's heiress Barbara Hutton, her cousin the playboy Jimmy Donahue, as well as the anti-opium activists Ellen Newbold La Motte and Emily Crane Chadbourne, all stayed in suites at the Grand Hôtel. The first Bolshevik ambassador to China, Lev Karakhan, the Italian fascist Count Gian Galeazzo Ciano, and the senior Nazi party members Eugen and Helma Ott, all attended functions in the hotel. Bertha Lum sold her art from The Camel's Bell shop on the third floor; Olga Fischer-Togo performed



Postcard of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin, 1920

light operetta there at charity concerts to help Chinese flood victims. Even that most notorious recluse Sir Edmund Backhouse visited to see his good friend Henri Vetch, who ran the French Bookshop in the lobby. The Grand Hôtel de Pékin was Grand Central Station, Times Square and Piccadilly Circus all rolled into one; it was the Ritz and the Savoy, the Algonquin and the Waldorf Astoria, Paris's Hôtel de Crillon and the Hôtel Lutetia, the Adlon of Berlin, the Metropol of Moscow – in Peking. In 1915 the Grand Hôtel de Pékin was smarter and more modern than any hotel in Shanghai or Hong Kong. Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, the Peninsula in Kowloon, and Sir Victor Sassoon's Cathay on the Shanghai Bund would all come later.¹⁰ In 1915 the two grandest hotels in all Asia were undoubtedly the Sarkie Brothers' Raffles Hotel in Singapore and the Grand Hôtel de Pékin.

The Grand Hôtel was where, for nearly half a century, the milieu that populates this collection of essays – the foreign colony of Peking – the old timers and China Hands; the tourists and sojourners; the diplomats and journalists; the super-wealthy and those just able to afford the basic *tiffin* all congregated. It was where struggling Russian émigrés spent their last Chinese dollars to eat and drink alongside Americans with Mexican silver dollars to burn. And, of course, it was where the infamous 'Peking gossips' of the Legation Quarter met and whispered poison in each other's ears.¹¹ Many who came to the Grand Hôtel were famous and regularly appeared on the front pages of newspapers around the world – perhaps most famously the movie star Anna May Wong who drew crowds of film fans to the hotel's doors seeking a glimpse of her. Other guests were not so famous at the time – but one day would eclipse even Hollywood movie stars...

A navy wife checks in

Bessie Wallis Warfield-Spencer knew virtually nobody when she arrived at the Grand Hôtel. She had long dropped the Bessie and was known simply

10 Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel replaced the original building designed by Yuzuru Watanabe, which was destroyed in 1922 by fire. The Kadoorie family-owned Peninsula in Hong Kong opened for business in 1928. Sir Victor Sassoon's Cathay Hotel on the Bund was not completed until 1929.

11 Damien de Martel & Léon de Hoyer, *Silhouettes of Peking* (Peking: China Booksellers, 1926), p.6.

as Wallis from a relatively young age. Then the Warfield got lost somewhere along the way, and when she did finally divorce her first husband, the name Spencer too. She remarried and became Wallis Simpson and finally, after another rather mundane and provincial divorce and a spectacular and unprecedented abdication, she became Wallis, Duchess of Windsor. She was to marry a king, acquire a grand title and an enviable jewellery collection, but be forced to live in exile for the rest of her life – in Portugal, Barbados, France. As the world saw it then, forcing a king to abdicate, to choose between her and his crown, a twice-divorced American and his country, between a random love and the duties of his birth right, was a heinous crime. Wallis became “that woman”. It was a bitter time that has lingered in the public imagination through prurient rumour, baseless innuendo, countless bad television movies and Penny Dreadful hagiographies by openly declared enemies and supposed friends turned gossips. The cheap tabloid character assassinations regularly continue still in our time.

But that was all later, many years after Wallis’s Peking adventure; a sojourn that began on a crisp, cold, star-filled night just before Christmas 1924. A shivering Wallis Spencer arrived late in the cavernous lobby to check in at the Grand Hôtel de Pékin on the city’s wide Chang An Chieh, the Avenue of Eternal Peace.

Passport proffered, room key issued, she immediately went to the roof to take in the best possible view of the city. Wallis was to spend the next eight months or so in Peking. She arrived as the abused ex-wife of a drunk and violent American naval officer, Earl Winfield “Win” Spencer Jr. She’d felt compelled to leave him behind in Hong Kong, where he was posted with the US Navy’s South China Patrol, after the beatings got too bad and she was hospitalised. Win had showed no particular inclination to stop her going and had promptly sunk back into the bottle. Wallis desperately wanted a divorce and her freedom back.

Wallis wasn’t exactly unknowing about the world. She had spent brief amounts of time among the diplomatic crowds of Washington DC and Paris already, as well as some time in Hong Kong, Canton and most recently, after ditching Spencer, a few weeks in the International Settlement of Shanghai. But this sojourn in Peking was to change Wallis fundamentally. She was to emerge from the cocoon of the Baltimore girl married to a disappointed and frustrated naval commander who



Earl Winfield "Win" Spencer Jr.

drank too much and was a little too quick with his fists where women were concerned, into a sophisticated and cosmopolitan woman, fashionable and stylish, able to move in any social circles and command attention in any room, up to and including those of the British monarchy.

It was to be on the rooftop of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin that Wallis Spencer began her journey to become the woman the world would become obsessed with just over a decade later. As she climbed the stairs to the top of the hotel, Wallis was following a well-worn trail already. There were other rooftops – both the Grand Hôtel des Wagons-Lits and the Hotel du Nord opened up their rooftops, though after the Grand Hôtel de Pékin, and neither were ever to be as grand or as popular. The Grand Hôtel's was the Peking rooftop sojourners invariably visited soon after their arrival – to drink cocktails and dance to the band, but also to gaze across the ancient city from just about its highest accessible point.

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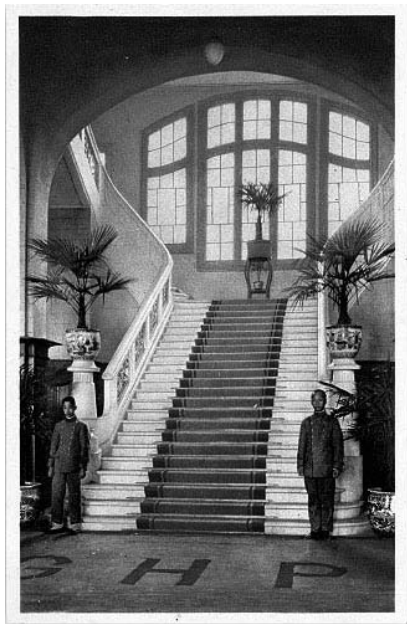
But in the winter of 1924 things looked bleak for Wallis as her freezing cold and long-delayed train, "The International", departed from Tientsin, and finally pulled into Peking at the Chienmen Railway Station. The journey had taken a gruelling thirty-eight hours to cover

the barely seventy miles between the two northern Chinese cities thanks to a typhoid outbreak in Tientsin, marauding bandits and skirmishing warlords. One traveller on the train at that time, the American art collector Gertrude Bass Warner, wrote that (even in First Class where Wallis, as a white woman, automatically sat) the seats had no springs, making for a rough ride, especially hard on the spine as the padding was all removed from behind the leather of the seats. The heating was not working thanks to coal shortages, and the train was as cold inside as out. Bass Warner recalled that passengers could see each other's breath as if everyone was constantly smoking, which they were too, only adding to the foggy atmosphere in the carriages where opening a window would have caused a riot.¹² Chinese waiters and porters constantly served weak green tea. There was a plush First-Class dining car serving beer, whisky soda (invariably known as a "*stengah*" in China) and pots of coffee. The dining car had tables for informal games of poker with other passengers, or patience by yourself. The Chinese dining car stewards in their white uniforms ensured nobody's cup ever completely emptied and small dishes of *dianxin* – Chinese snacks – were always refilled. Passengers marvelled at how the stewards were able to keep the dining car clean and maintain the constant supply of these provisions despite the chaos that surrounded them and the train. Soldiers stood on guard on the steel platforms between carriages to prevent bandits boarding the train.

Arriving in Peking Wallis was exhausted and decidedly uncertain about what fate her immediate future held. But she was also excited. This was her first visit to a real Chinese city – Hong Kong had been a British colony, her brief time in Canton was spent entirely cooped up in her hotel room on the foreign enclave of Shameen Island, while the Shanghai International Settlement was of course a treaty port. Peking was really China – camel trains still arrived and departed from the nearby Chienmen Gate; the Forbidden City was close by; Chinese policemen patrolled Chinese streets; Peking was the capital. For sure 1924 was a particularly cold December - snow on the ground, vicious cold winds sweeping down from the Gobi Desert that chilled the alighting passengers to the bone – but the excitement of arriving in Peking was still palpable.

12 Gertrude Bass Warner, *Escape from Peking/Three Japanese Letters*, The Gertrude Bass Warner Papers, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections & Digital Archives, Box 10, Folder 10.

To the best of her knowledge Wallis knew just one person in Peking – Colonel Louis Little, the Commander of the Military Guard at the American Legation. Wallis had met Colonel Little before, several years previously, when he was stationed at the American Embassy in Paris. He was a friend of her Baltimore relations. Colonel Little was waiting for the train from Tientsin. He escorted Wallis from the station, through the city's Legation Quarter, past the American Legation, and then the Soviet, before turning left and passing the Japanese and British Legations that faced each other across the street, down to the broad expanse of Chang An Chieh and the Grand Hôtel. It seems that Louis Little, a man with some sway due to being America's most senior military commander in the city in 1924, had secured these rather sumptuous and expensive digs for Wallis. She was by no means a woman of independent means. She had no trust fund or monthly cheque from back home in Baltimore beyond a small inheritance from her grandmother. Her husband, Win, had upon their separation earlier that year agreed to a US\$225 a month stipend to be deducted and sent to Wallis from his US Navy pay – what the Navy termed an “allotment”.



The lobby of the Grand Hôtel in 1920

As well as the financial question of being able to afford to stay at the Grand Hôtel de Pékin, it was also the case that getting a room in the hotel, or indeed any half-decent hotel in Peking, was problematic in December 1924. The Northern Chinese warlord Chang Tso-lin's troops were surrounding Peking ready to take the city by force from rival warlord Feng Yu-Hsiang if he refused to surrender.¹³ Chang dubbed himself the “Tiger of Mukden”; Feng was dubbed the “Betrayal General” as,

13 The warlords Zhang Zuolin and Feng Yuxiang respectively.

unsurprisingly given his sobriquet, he had betrayed everyone he had ever done a deal with. Peking was effectively under siege by warlord armies.

Into this maelstrom arrived Wallis, met at the station by a Colonel of the US Marines who had high-level access to a suite at the Grand Hôtel. Which begs a question about why a single woman would make this journey at such a perilous time. Wallis wasn't simply coming on holiday. She had brought official American government documents from Shanghai and Tientsin to Peking and, it appears, the US Legation was willing to stand Wallis a short stay at the Grand Hôtel in return for services rendered to the US Government.

And so, despite the cold, the smattering of snow and the late hour, Wallis climbed the staircase to the famous roof and looked out across Peking that December evening for the first time. The hotel was to be her home for the next month, through Christmas 1924 and into the New Year of 1925. She got to know the city's best hotel, and its roof, extremely well.

Up on the roof...

Without doubt in the interwar years the Grand Hôtel de Pékin was the city's oldest and most splendid hotel establishment. Situated just north of the Foreign Legation Quarter and just to the east of the Forbidden City it was perfectly situated at the epicentre of Peking foreign colony life. Its rooftop bar and open-air dancing were the stuff of legend – wealthy sojourners, royalty, celebrities all took suites there, the young blades and beauties flocked to the rooftop tea dances, while Peking's mid-ranking foreign colony dropped their parcels and packages after a hard day's shopping at the department stores, curio shops and jewellers of Morrison Street, and the nearby Tung An Shih Chang, known to the foreign colony as the Morrison Street Bazaar¹⁴), and took *tiffin* (high tea –

14 Now the Dong An Market. After a fire in 1912 the market was a more permanent structure of steel, glass and iron with skylights, similar to a European *grand magasin*, or arcade. Arlington and Lewisohn in their classic *In Search of Old Peking*, first published in 1935, described the market as 'a kind of covered-in miniature town of its own, crammed with small shops and stalls, where you can buy anything from a cent's worth of melon seeds to the latest in radio sets, and everything at very reasonable prices.' It was demolished around 2008.

or as the famous China Coast pidgin-English poet Shamus A'Rabbit once described it, 'A midday meal of such proportions as to induce sleep'¹⁵).

The Beaux Arts style seven-storey steel and concrete fireproof hotel had two hundred rooms, all with en-suite bathrooms, flush toilets and steam heating. Each room had a telephone, though in 1924 you could only make calls to other rooms in the hotel and within Peking to the few people with telephones. There was a tearoom for *tiffin* on the ground floor with dancing every night on a sprung wood floor. The hotel had its own orchestra composed originally of mainly Italians, and after 1917 as they appeared in the city in greater numbers, Russian émigré musicians, who performed a programme of light classical music during dinner with the emphasis on waltzes. Later, jazz bands would become a staple. The mirrored ballroom was supposed to imitate the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. French chefs created dishes that were complemented by the finest and largest wine cellar in China. Autobuses, manned by liveried porters, met all arriving trains at the Chienmen Station to collect passengers and their often-voluminous luggage – Barbara Hutton arrived a decade later in 1934 with fifteen Louis Vuitton trunks.¹⁶ Each train seemed to bring more “*Malalo*” (the name the Chinese gave to tourists from the round-the-world cruise ships who came to town on the train from Tientsin as a side trip to their holiday). The wealthiest *malalo* checked into the Grand Hôtel de Pékin.



15 Shamus A'Rabbit, *Ballads of the East* (Shanghai: AR Hager, 1937), p.52.

16 It should be noted that Hutton was travelling extremely light on that trip – she often travelled with fifty-five trunks, eclipsing Marlene Dietrich's usual twenty-three that shocked the press at the same time. For Hutton, fifteen cases was effectively backpacking!

In the lobby was a branch of the Thomas Cook Travel Agency, American Helen Burton's famous The Camel's Bell store (which also had a showroom on the third floor), and the bookshop of Frenchman Henri Vetch who bought up the libraries of any members of the Peking colony leaving and sold new libraries to any 'griffins' arriving.¹⁷ The lobby also had a number of smaller shops selling antiques, curios, carpets, embroidery, jewellery and jade.

But the rooftop of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin was its most famous attribute. It was reached by one of two American-made Otis elevators, the first to be installed in Peking. The spacious roof garden included a bar, bamboo tables and chairs, a bandstand and a dance floor. During dances a local radio station would often broadcast live. The summer was dedicated to open-air dancing, but visitors went up to the roof year-round for the unparalleled views across what was then a decidedly low-rise city. Only the radio communications mast in the American Legation compound was higher. From the top of the Grand Hôtel one could look out across the Forbidden City, the Legation Quarter and, so it was claimed, on a good day you could see for fifty miles in every direction surrounding the city – out to the Western Hills and beyond.

Anyone who was anyone in foreign Peking visited the roof – certainly visiting wealthy Americans. In 1921 oil magnate John D Rockefeller Jr. looked across eastwards to see the green saddleback roofs and traditional floating swallowtail eaves of the new Peking Union Medical College (PUMC), the city's most modern medical facility and the best in China (outside Shanghai).¹⁸ PUMC had just been built with Rockefeller family money.¹⁹ As a young man between the wars Rockefeller's fellow American Thomas Watson Jr., who was to follow his own millionaire father into the IBM corporation, visited Peking and recalled his visit to the rooftop bar in the company of some English friends, a girl they'd met who was

17 A griffin being the China coast slang for any new arrivals – greenhorns.

18 What Rockefeller didn't know was that these adornments had been added after a suggestion by one of the members of the committee that established the college, a man who was an expert on Chinese architecture and who believed deeply in preserving Peking's traditional skyline, the British diplomat-scholar ETC Werner. See Paul French, *Midnight in Peking* (Beijing: Penguin China, 2012).

19 Mary Brown Bullock, *An American Transplant: The Rockefeller Foundation and Peking Union Medical College* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

(immensely shocking to the young men back then) openly living “in sin” with a US Marine stationed at the Legation, a New York debutante, and a French heroin addict. They ordered gin gimlets and sat back to look out over the city at night.²⁰ The fantastically named Halbert Kellogg Hitchcock was a well-travelled engineer and inventor from Ohio who visited Peking shortly before Wallis arrived in 1923. He took a map of the city up to the roof of the hotel, spread it out and, looking across Peking, tried to identify every point of interest.²¹

The extremely well-travelled Washington DC-born artist Helen Wells Seymour checked into the Grand Hôtel de Pékin in 1924 having experienced much the same as Wallis while travelling up from Shanghai – searchlights on the front and rear of the train, armed guards in every carriage, constant unscheduled stops, fears of bandit attack all the way. Helen was there in the July before Wallis arrived, the rainy season, such as Peking has one. She found it slightly annoying that nobody in the foreign colony dined before 8.30pm and she was constantly hungry in the afternoons and early evenings. On the dry and warm night of Monday July 21, 1924, Helen dined with friends on the roof of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin arriving for the *thé dansant*. She thought the orchestra marvellous and the very notion of dancing under the enormous sky and million stars above Peking thrilling. She noted that many Chinese had come up to the *thé dansant* and that ‘there were many lovely Chinese girls dancing.’²²

In 1933 the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw arrived at Peking Railway Station on the famous Shanghai Express and immediately took his wife Charlotte to dinner on the roof. Shaw was fascinated by the temple music he could hear on the wind and in a letter recommended Peking to his friend, the composer Edward Elgar, if he wanted to better understand Asian harmonies.²³

20 Thomas J Watson Jr. & Peter Petre, *Father, Son & Co.: My life at IBM and Beyond* (New York: Bantam, 1990). Incidentally, a 1928 description of a gin gimlet in Peking was, ‘gin, and just a spot of lime’.

21 Halbert K Hitchcock, *Trailing the Sun Around the Earth* (New York: GP Putnam’s Sons, 1925), p.52.

22 Helen Wells Seymour, *A Japanese Diary* (New Haven, Connecticut: Self Published, 1956), p.136.

23 Letter from Shaw to Elgar, May 30, 1933. Contained in Ed. Dan H Laurence, *Bernard Shaw: Collected Letters, 1926-1950* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1988), pp.341-342.



Soong Ching-ling and George Bernard Shaw, 1933

The Bostonian author JP Marquand checked in in 1934, headed straight to the top floor and also gazed across to the Forbidden City. The view became a fascination for him with repeated visits. He contrasted the quiet and darkness of the Forbidden City with the invasive clanks and screams of the ungreased wheels of the tramcars down below on Chang An Chieh. In 1936 Marquand recreated the rooftop scene, and how easy it was for a newly arrived European or American to slip into Peking foreign colony life, in one of his *Mr Moto* novels (which are far superior to the movie versions): ‘The Chinese bar boys were hurrying from table to table with trays weighted with soda bottles and whisky. There was a

sound of shaking dice. “Boy,” the voices were shouting. “Boy,” with the same assurance as the Anglo-Saxon was still the dominant race in the Orient. Several people called to me when I came in. Greenway waved an arm to me. Clough pointed to a chair and I joined them. “Boy,” I found myself calling. “Scotch and soda, Boy.”²⁴

With darting swallows, the Forbidden City and temple bells on the wind, the Grand Hôtel’s roof was always going to be a magnet for the city’s community of foreign aesthetes. Around the same time as Marquand was visiting, Harold Acton took his visiting friend, the writer Osbert Sitwell, for cocktails on the roof with others in his aesthete (and largely gay) circle including Desmond Parsons and Acton’s first real friends in Peking, the American illustrator Thomas Handforth and Laurence Sickman, an American Sinologist and art historian. Sitwell initially stayed at the Grand Hôtel, requesting a room on the uppermost floor to have the best view possible. The two aesthetes and Acton’s friends would spend long evenings looking out over the Forbidden City just after the Chinese New

24 JP Marquand, *Thank You, Mr Moto* (London: Fontana Books, 1937), p.67.

Year in 1934.²⁵ Sitwell eventually found a courtyard hutong home on Kanyu Hutong (which he translated as Alley of the Sweet Rain²⁶) where he worked mornings on his planned book about Brighton and then spent his afternoons exploring the hutongs and temples of the city.²⁷ Evenings though, if not accompanying Acton to a performance of Peking opera, were often spent back up on the roof of the Grand Hôtel. Sitwell enjoyed Peking, though disliked the occasional dust storms. He described his Peking sojourn in his memoir of his travels in the Far East, *Escape with Me!*²⁸ Though he only sojourned for a few months and left in the early summer of 1934, Sitwell, like his friend Acton, found Peking a relief from hyper-competitive and busy London. Among his many fond memories of Peking was an encounter with one of the former Imperial Palace eunuchs, a wrinkled and hairless man with a piping voice who enquired of Sitwell: ‘Tell me, young man, do you have no group of people (*eunuchs*) like us where you come from?’ Sitwell considered the eunuch’s question and then replied, ‘Yes, indeed we have. We call it Bloomsbury.’²⁹



Osbert Sitwell (left); Laurence Sickman

Edgar Snow and his wife Helen moved from Shanghai to Peking in 1933 and stayed in the Grand Hôtel when they first arrived.³⁰ They were

25 Sitwell recalls his fascination with the Forbidden City in *The Four Continents: Being Discursions on Travel, Art and Life* (London: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 85-91.

26 Now Ganyu Hutong that runs west to east from Wangfujing to Dengshikou subway station.

27 Osbert Sitwell & Margaret Barton, *Brighton* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).

28 Osbert Sitwell, *Escape with Me! An Oriental Sketch-Book* (London: Macmillan, 1939). *Escape with Me!* is jointly dedicated to Acton and Sickman.

29 John Pearson, *The Sitwells: A Family's Biography* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p.293.

30 Helen Snow, née Foster, and whose writing pseudonym was often Nym Wales.

given the palatial bridal suite and were amazed by the high ceilings and the views across the Forbidden City. It was an immense extravagance for the young couple and they soon moved out and into a series of courtyard houses close by. They then spent some time living in the then rather remote village of Hait'ien (Haidian), near where Edgar was teaching at Yenching University. Wherever they lived in Peking the pair always returned to the Grand Hôtel for drinks and celebrations on the popular Saturday nights – the major night for rooftop dances. Helen spent many hours working in the showroom of Helen Burton's The Camel's Bell as a mannequin for the store's furs, silk gowns and wraps. Edgar would meet her after her modelling sessions and they would head up to the roof for cocktails. After the autumn of 1935, the Snows lived in the sumptuous courtyard house owned by Dr ET Nystrom, a wealthy Swedish geologist. Nystrom was very fond of Helen and would always go to the Saturday night parties on the Grand Hôtel's roof, asking Helen if, after she finished work downstairs, she'd join him. He was obviously a little infatuated with her:

“Wear your apple-green dress with the court train,” he would beg me, and would ask the orchestra for a Viennese waltz as soon as I arrived in the long red-velvet opera cape that was one of Helen Burton's gifts to her local fashion model (*i.e. Helen*).³¹

Helen loved to dance on the rooftop – an activity Edgar was distinctly less keen on, and so she had to seek out dance partners. However, the number of German and Italian fascists that made the roof their weekend spot rather put her off. Though admitting that the two best dance partners she ever had at the Grand Hôtel were the leading Italian fascist in Peking and a dedicated young Nazi Junker recently posted to China, she felt enough was enough and her dislike of fascism was more important than her love of waltzing.

Edgar Snow was yet to become a well-known name – *Red Star Over China*, the book that would make him, was still a year or two in the future. Anna May Wong arrived in Peking already a celebrity, though a contentious one. The Nationalist government disapproved of her portrayals of Chinese women on screen, but her fans in China were legion

31 Helen Foster Snow, *My China Years: A Memoir* (New York: Morrow, 1984), p.149.



Anna May Wong by Carl van Vechten, 1935

and devoted. She had hoped to rent Desmond Parsons's sumptuous Tsui Hua Hutong courtyard home while sojourning in Peking in 1936.³² But the travel writer Robert Byron, who was housesitting at the time, thought Parsons would be returning from Europe soon and didn't agree to let it to her. So, Wong moved into a suite at the Grand Hôtel where she met a steady stream of reporters eager to interview the Hollywood star on the roof. She also had cocktails and dined there with friends – the Peking-based artist, writer and, later, aide to General Joseph “Vinegar” Stilwell, Frank “Pinky” Dorn, as well as the cameraman HS “Newsreel” Wong, who was working for Hearst Metrotone News and was yet to become internationally famous for his images of a terrified and abandoned baby

32 Now Cui Hua Hutong.



Frank Dorn and Anna May Wong



Anna May Wong in Peiping, 1936

on the railway tracks in Shanghai the following summer when war came to China.

Also bringing a whiff of Hollywood and fresh from a sojourn in Bali where she stayed with the German artist Walter Spies, the Austrian writer Vicki Baum came in 1936 to see the rooftop and experience the

Grand Hôtel de Pékin. She thought that perhaps the Grand Hôtel could be the model for the hotel novel she was planning to set in China in a bid to repeat the success of her 1929 novel *Grand Hotel*, which had taken her to Hollywood when it became an Academy Award-winning movie.³³ Baum was travelling on her Hollywood earnings looking for inspiration. Eventually she opted for Sir Victor Sassoon's more recently opened Cathay Hotel in Shanghai, but she still loved the Grand Hôtel de Pékin.

Wallis moves on...

And it was on the same rooftop that Wallis Spencer, wrapped up warm against the Peking cold, celebrating

33 *Grand Hotel* is of course set in Berlin. Persecuted in Germany as a Jew and having spent time in Los Angeles, Baum wanted to recreate her successful hotel novel in the Far East. Eventually she did in *Hotel Shanghai* (1937 – sometimes alternatively called in English *Shanghai '37* or *Nanking Road*).

the strangest and perhaps loneliest Christmas of her life, had met an old friend, Katherine 'Kitty' Bigelow. It was a completely chance encounter. Wallis had known Kitty back in America when she was also married to a navy airman. That marriage failed and Kitty had gone on to marry a genuine American millionaire, Herman Rogers. Rogers, whose family money was from railway speculation, had a fascination with China. He wanted to write a book about the country, and so had moved the couple to Peking. They lived in high style and had taken a lease on a large and elegant courtyard property on the prestigious Shih-Chia Hutong. As well as being one of the best addresses in the city, Shih-Chia Hutong was not far from the Grand Hôtel, less than a mile east along Chang An Chieh.³⁴

Kitty, perhaps a little lonely in a strange city and with her husband working on his book all day, was sympathetic to her old friend's personal circumstances. She immediately invited Wallis to come and stay with her and Herman in their spacious hutong. Wallis's time at the Grand Hôtel de Pékin was running out – the American Legation's largesse had limits; her "allotment" from Win wouldn't stretch to staying any longer in such opulence. Kitty Rogers's kind offer came as a Godsend to Wallis. She packed up and, in January 1925, moved up the road to Kitty and Herman's courtyard home. It wasn't to be the last time she visited the Grand Hôtel de Pékin, but she was no longer a paying guest. Wallis was now a full member of the city's foreign colony – living on a hutong, flagging down rickshaws to the jade markets, attending the race meetings out at Paomachang, taking *tiffin* at the Grand Hôtel. It was to be a glorious six months. She was destined to become one of its most famous legends ever.

By the summer of 1925 Wallis was ready to move on. She'd come to Hong Kong in 1923 as a Navy wife accompanying her husband to his new posting and hoping to restart their unhappy and failing marriage. That hadn't happened. After a brief reconciliation Win Spencer's binge drinking and physical abuse had simply escalated to an impossible level. Wallis had fled to Shanghai in the belief, erroneous as it turned out, that the American Court for China there could grant her a quickie divorce. They couldn't; neither could the Embassy in Peking. Wallis wanted that divorce. There was no going back to Win and no future in remaining

34 Now Shijia Hutong.

married to the man. It was also the case that the political situation in Peking was increasingly chaotic.

Sun Yat-sen had died in March and his funeral cortège passing through the streets of Peking had been the largest since the death of the Empress Dowager Ci Xi in 1909. Without Dr Sun, China's republican revolution appeared rudderless and imperilled. Then the so-called May Thirtieth Movement had led to demonstrations and anger after the Shanghai Municipal Police opened fire on Chinese protesters on May 30, 1925. The shootings sparked international censure and nationwide anti-foreign demonstrations and riots that focussed on Britain and the British. The demonstrations soon spread to Peking. Wallis's rickshaw puller added a Stars and Stripes flag to the back of his vehicle to deter angry protestors from attacking her. It was a real threat. Wallis was in a taxi one day shortly after May 30th when a young protestor attacked the car thinking she was British, smearing his own blood on the windshield. Massive anti-foreign strikes and boycotts broke out in both Hong Kong and Canton, and some merchants in Peking supported them. One day while Wallis was in a curio shop she regularly visited, some protesting students wrote anti-British slogans on her rickshaw in chalk, despite her puller trying to tell them that Wallis was a "Melican lady". As Wallis exited the shop the students stared at her rather harshly but decided against any more direct action.³⁵

It was also the case that Wallis would be twenty-nine years old in June and she felt time and age weighing upon her. She wanted the divorce dealt with and to start life over back in the United States. In her memoirs Wallis wrote simply that, 'in early summer, somewhat in the mood of a female Ulysses, I left for Japan to take a ship to the West Coast.'³⁶ And so Wallis left Peking and then left China. She took with her a new sense of style that was to define her look in the decades to come – the *Chinois*-inspired dresses, knotwork decorative elements, her trademark chignon hair style. She also took with her quite a few pieces of jade, some Chinese screens, jewellery and various *objets* that stayed with her forever – first at her homes with Ernest Simpson in London, and then at her various homes with the Duke of Windsor through to their final house of exile, 4

35 Wallis, Duchess of Windsor, *The Heart has its Reasons: The Memoirs of the Duchess of Windsor* (London: Michael Joseph, 1956).

36 Ibid.

route du Champ d'Entraînement in Paris's Bois de Boulogne, where she died in 1986.

The time she spent in Peking was Wallis's self-declared 'lotus year'.³⁷ And her first view of the city was from the roof of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin.

The end of the roof

After the Japanese occupation of Peking in the summer of 1937 the Grand Hôtel's rooftop remained only intermittently open – accessible solely to the Japanese and their permitted hotel guests. However, it was often closed by order of the *Kempeitai* military police who suffered from repeated bouts of "spy mania" and fears of assassination attempts on senior Japanese commanders and collaborationist Chinese leaders. After Pearl Harbor in December 1941 it seemed likely the rooftop would be permanently closed. It was also the case that there were few non-military guests at the hotel and, of course, the city's foreign colony had dwindled to a small fraction of its size just a year or two before.

Still, it did continue in rather reduced circumstances. Laurance "Laurie" Tipton was a formerly Tientsin-based tobacco executive kept under arrest (albeit at Peking's second-best hotel, the Grand Hôtel des Wagons-Lits, rather than an internment camp) during 1942. Billy Christian was a well-known member of the Peking colony who was appointed Chairman of the Relief Committee for Allied Nationals that worked closely with the Swiss Consulate in Peking to represent the interests of British, Americans and other Allied nationals whose diplomatic representatives had had to leave the city. Tipton and Christian were instructed to go to the rooftop of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin in 1942 to meet a Mr Suzuki of the "Japanese Special Police" in Peking. Suzuki was keen to learn English, had plenty of money, access to seemingly limitless bottles of Scotch whisky, and liked to go dancing in what remained of Peking's western-style nightlife.

Amazingly (though this was shortly before full internment for the last Allied nationals remaining in the city) African-American Earl West's band were still playing on the rooftop. Earl Kilgore West had come to China with Earl Whaley's African-American jazz band the Red Hot Syncopators some years before. They had played a lengthy engagement in Shanghai.

37 Ibid.

The Syncopators eventually broke up and split to form several new bands. Earl West, a guitarist, led one group of musicians who all headed north, first to Tientsin's Villa West Lake Hotel, and then to Peking and a contract to play on the rooftop of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin. In Peking, Earl West's band featured both black and white musicians, a Hawaiian-born singer, and a Filipino trumpeter.³⁸ He was playing the night Tipton and Christian were summoned. Mr Suzuki got drunk that evening and forced Christian and Tipton (at gunpoint) to dance, technically an illegal activity for any Allied national wearing the regulation red armband identifying them as the enemy.

After the war the rooftop re-opened for a short while. Mao is said to have visited it on October 1, 1949 not long after he had just declared the formation of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen below. But after 1949 it was rarely used. During the Maoist years the hotel was reserved for state guests only – Nikita Khrushchev, Ho Chi Minh, and later Richard Nixon, among them. Since then the hotel has been almost continuously remodelled, refurbished, added to, subtracted from, and now stands amid several new wings on either side that are of no particular architectural or aesthetic merit. False ceilings on the ground floor have rather ruined the impression upon entry and only brides and grooms taking wedding photos seem to use the grand staircase these days. The long corridors still hark back to the enormity of the hotel when it was first built, but the rooms have been repeatedly remodelled with little inspiration.

The rooftop is closed and has been now for several decades. It seems unlikely to ever reopen. Yet once, from 1915 to the dark days of the Japanese occupation, the rooftop of the Grand Hôtel de Pékin was perhaps the most famous location in Peking for both sojourners and the city's foreign colony. It was where so many Peking adventures began.

38 Eventually, as also was the case for Laurance Tipton, Earl West and his band were interned at the Weihsien Allied Civilians Internment Camp in Shandong.