Classics Revisited

Oil For the Lamps of China: Alice Tisdale Hobart’s Dark Novel of American Capitalism and Chinese Revolution

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Abstract
Among American works of fiction about China before World War II, Alice Tisdale Hobart’s Oil for the Lamps of China (1933) was second only to Pearl S. Buck’s The Good Earth (1931) in influence and sales. Hobart’s novel, evidently set during the Northern Expedition of 1926-28, also inspired a Warner Brothers film by the same name in 1935. Unlike the film, Hobart’s novel did not give a boosterish picture of American capitalism. In portraying the leading character, Steven Chase, a field agent for an American oil firm in China, Hobart drew on the experience of her husband, a field agent for Standard Oil Company. Her husband, like Chase, was callously fired after loyally serving the company and adapting to Chinese culture and protecting company property from anti-imperialist mobs. The novel is memorable for its vivid characterizations of Americans and Chinese working for an American corporation in China and for its dark view of American capitalism and Chinese revolution.

Keywords
American views of China; American fiction about China; Standard Oil Company; Nationalist Revolution; Northern Expedition; American business in China

“Oil for the lamps of China” is a phrase that has been widely used since the early twentieth century to pay tribute to the benevolent contribution that American business has made to the modernization of China. In common usage, it conveys an image of an enterprising American oil company efficiently exporting kerosene to China so that every home and public space throughout the country would be well lit. In other words, it gave American business credit for physically, if not philosophically, enlightening China.

Alice Tisdale Hobart popularized the phrase by using it as the title for her novel Oil for the Lamps of China (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1933),
which became a best seller second in sales only to Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* (New York: John Day, 1931) among American works of fiction on China published in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1935, Warner Brothers gave the expression still wider currency by making a film also called “Oil for the Lamps of China.” While the film used the phrase with conventional positive overtones, hailing the pioneering achievements of an American oil company in China, Hobart’s novel (on which the film was supposedly based) gave it a very different meaning. She used it ironically to criticize the company for overstating its claims as a benevolent institution. In fact, as portrayed in her novel, the company was anything but benevolent, especially in its heartless mistreatment of the individuals with whom it dealt most directly in China.

Today, as at the time of its publication, Hobart’s *Oil for the Lamps of China* captures her readers’ attention because of its unforgettable characters, especially Stephen, Hester, Kin, Ho, and the company that dominates their lives. Stephen Chase, the hero of Hobart’s novel, is a young American who lives up to his name by chasing success with great determination and ambition. He works in China for American Oil Company (or “the Company” as it is more commonly called in the novel), and he remains loyal to it. Chase even risks his life to protect its property despite the fact that the Company fails to reward him for his understanding of Chinese language and culture and for his individual initiatives such as his invention of a small oil-burning lamp which the Company produces and widely distributes to enlarge the market for its goods. (In fact, the Standard Oil Company distributed just such a lamp.) Hester, a young American who meets and marries Stephen early in the novel, discovers the depth of his commitment to the Company and becomes committed too, appreciating her husband’s effectiveness in dealing with Chinese, swooning over whatever praise the Company gives him, and suffering from its unwillingness to recognize his contributions. Kin, Stephen’s Chinese servant, becomes the key intermediary between the Chases on the one hand and Chinese society on the other. Although he does not speak English, he finds ways to practice “squeeze” (taking from as well as giving to Stephen and Hester), and although hailing from North China’s Shandong province, he accompanies Stephen for sixteen years, going wherever the Company posts him in China. Ho is the shrewd and powerful Chinese merchant who presides over an extensive social and commercial network in the Company’s “Central China district”

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(apparently based at the city of Changsha in Hunan province) where most of the novel is set. He keeps the scope of his commercial influence a secret from Stephen's arrogant American predecessors in this district, but when Stephen shows his respect for Chinese culture, Ho dares to reach across a cultural chasm to make him not only a business associate but a friend.

Why was Alice Tisdale Hobart able to produce these memorable characters? As the Chinese historian H. F. MacNair pointed out to Hobart's editor in 1933, Pearl Buck had recently drawn compelling portraits of Chinese village life in her classic novel, *The Good Earth* (1931), and "Mrs. Buck might have created Kin and Ho but only Mrs. Hobart out of her tragically intimate knowledge could have created Stephen and oiled the portrait of 'the Company.'" If so, then what was the "tragically intimate knowledge" that inspired these literary creations?

Before writing *Oil for the Lamps of China*, Hobart underwent a kind of conversion experience that transformed her from an ardent admirer of big business into a trenchant critic of it. Up to that time, she had shown no sign of antipathy toward business corporations. In fact, she had been uncritical of them for most of her life and had expressed more and more admiration for them in the years immediately before she wrote this book.

As a girl growing up in Chicago, she came from a family that showed little interest in big business. Her mother, Harriett Beaman Nourse, was an elementary school principal and her father, Edwin Nourse, was a music teacher and music textbook writer, and they raised her, as she later recalled, in an atmosphere remote from the world of business, "a story-making and story-telling age, full of wonder and legend." As a child, she had some awareness that big corporations and workers came into conflict because of the famous Haymarket Riots of 1886 and the Pullman Strike of 1896 which both occurred in Chicago, but she was only four years old in 1886 and fourteen in 1896, and as she later candidly admitted, "I understood nothing of the bitterness felt by the 'good people' which the hay market riots had engendered." Insofar as she took any political position, she was a

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2 MacNair to D. L. Chambers, 3 Sept. 1933, Alice Tisdale Hobart Papers, Division of Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Library System, Eugene, Oregon. On Hobart's association with Chambers at Bobbs-Merrill, her publisher, see Alice Tisdale Hobart, *Gusty's Child* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1959), 271.

3 Alice Tisdale Hobart, "Fifty Years of Writing," 2, Hobart Papers. In 1964, when Hobart deposited her papers at University of Oregon, she wrote this sixty-seventy-page unpublished manuscript "to bridge the gaps left by lost manuscripts, destroyed reviews and correspondence." On her parents, see Hobart, *Gusty's Child*, chaps. 1-9. In this autobiography, Hobart characterized herself as the lifelong daughter of her mother whose nickname was Gusty.
conservative “possibly because my father was conservative in his thinking and I shared in these early years of my life his viewpoint.”

In June 1914, at the age of thirty-two, she took a step toward allying herself with big business by marrying Earle Tisdale Hobart, an American from a Boston family who held a job in China with an American-owned business, John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company. She had gone to China in 1910 to join her sister who was a teacher at a mission school in the city of Hangzhou, and when Alice first met her husband-to-be in China, he had just then resigned from a teaching job in Beijing to accept a position with Standard Oil. For the first fourteen years of their marriage, 1914-28, they lived and worked in China. He (not unlike Stephen Chase) was a representative of a big American oil company and she (not unlike Hester) was the wife of an oil company’s representative and “wholly a company woman” as she later described herself in this phase of her life.

In these years, Alice Tisdale Hobart became a published writer, and she lavished praise, not criticism, on her nonfictional and fictional characterizations of Standard Oil Company. She wrote her first published pieces in the form of letters from Manchuria, and initially she made no mention of her husband’s employer. But in one of her first exchanges with Ellery Sedgwick, the owner and editor-in-chief of the *Atlantic Monthly*, he suggested that she should take up the subject of American business in China. “I do not know your husband’s business,” he wrote to her from the *Atlantic Monthly*’s New York office in 1916, “but his business adventures – the methods of selling to Manchurians, the competition of other nations as exemplified in individual Germans and Englishmen, the Chinese, or Manchurian, versions of human nature displayed in the transactions – all these are quite obviously made to your hand.” From then on, Hobart began describing American businessmen in China and casting the big businesses that employed them in a favorable light.

In her first two books, Hobart gave increasingly positive assessments of Standard Oil Company. In *Pioneering Where the World Is Old* (1917), she sympathetically discussed her husband’s struggle as an American businessman to overcome loneliness in Manchuria, and in *By the City of the Long Sand* (1927) – “long sand” being the literal translation of “Changsha” – her praise for his employer reached its peak. She acknowledged that she as an individual had acquiesced to the Company, and she expressed admiration for

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4 Hobart, “Fifty Years,” 8.
5 Ibid., 9-10; Hobart, *Gusty’s Child*, chap. 14, quotation from 172.
6 Sedgwick to Hobart, 2 Apr. 1916, Hobart Papers.
those who subordinated their individual identities to its corporate identity as new frontiersmen. In her reading of history,

The old frontiersman was an individualist and his own master. The foreign trade pioneering of today can be done only under the auspices of the mighty business corporation, which demands of us that we blend with the fearlessness of the old pioneer the subtle and exacting discipline of a new pioneering. In the eight years of my married life I have felt myself being shaped by this great corporation influence. Compliance with its policies, acceptance of its esprit de corps, learning its lessons of emphasis on the whole and not on the individual, all these have molded me. In it all I see a challenge to the modern American man and, not less, to the modern American woman. From the stuff of the old frontiersman must grow the new frontiersman – a commercial citizen of the world.7

Looking back on By the City of the Long Sand in the 1960s, Hobart observed, without exaggeration, “In this second book I gave expression to a blind allegiance to the Company.”8

Hobart’s allegiance to the Company won recognition from the top executives at Standard Oil. Once By the City of the Long Sand was in print, the Company’s public relations department sent copies to its branches all over the world. Henry C. Folger, chairman of the board of Standard Oil Company of New York, personally asked Hobart to inscribe three copies of her book: one to John D. Rockefeller, Sr., the retired founder of Standard Oil; one to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., his successor as its head; and one to John D. Rockefeller III, a student at the time in Princeton University. After she complied, Folger sent the books to all three. In his cover note to Rockefeller senior, he expressed his approval for the book by saying, “I have tried to tell you at different times that the spirit you inculcated still dominates Standard Oil. This is shown so much better than by anything I could say, through a well-written book, just published, that I am sending you a copy. The author is the wife of one of our managers in China.” In reply, Rockefeller senior and junior both expressed thanks. In his letter of appreciation to Hobart, Rockefeller junior applauded Standard Oil’s men and their wives in China for “the genuineness of their loyalty to and enthusiasm for the Company,” and he assured her that he fully appreciated how much “the success of the Standard Oil Company is due to the fine courageous women who share the hardships as well as the triumphs of their husbands’ lives.”

7 Alice Tisdale Hobart, By the City of the Long Sand (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 19.
8 Hobart, “Fifty Years,” 17.
Not surprisingly, Hobart was delighted. “I basked in such approval,” she later recalled.⁹

Then came the shocking experience that converted Hobart into a critic of American corporations in general and Standard Oil Company in particular. Within a year after Hobart had received the reassuring personal letter from Rockefeller junior, her husband was out of a job.

The decision to leave Standard Oil was agonizing for Hobart as well as her husband. Like Stephen Chase, the hero of Oil for the Lamps of China, he gave his company years of faithful service, culminating in a heroic defense of its personnel and property when they were threatened by Chinese Nationalist troops in Nanjing during Chiang Kai-shek’s Northern Expedition in 1927.¹⁰ In the so-called “Nanjing Incident,” elements of Chiang’s Nationalist Army terrorized foreigners in the name of anti-imperialism, killing a vice-president of Nanjing University in the process of stealing his watch. Again like Stephen, before he had recovered from injuries resulting from his heroic acts, Earle Hobart was told by his boss in China that he would not be given the high-level Shanghai position that he had been promised and would instead be assigned to a relatively minor post. Later Alice Hobart recalled this life-changing moment:

I saw Earle sitting there erect and pale.
“What’s happened?” I asked.
“We’re to be sent to Tsingtao [Qingdao].” I was still standing by the door. I felt powerless to move. Tsingtao would be in the path of the troops as they marched north.¹¹

Like Stephen and Hester Chase, Earle and Alice Hobart faced the dilemma of whether to accept a humiliating demotion and an assignment to another dangerous post. Drawing on their “combined strength” (in Alice Hobart’s words), the Hobarts made the decision that he would resign from the company.¹²

In 1928, Hobart and her husband returned from China to the United States feeling that Standard Oil had betrayed them. As she bitterly recalled: “For twenty years we had been corporation people accepting the security the corporation offered us. The great organization had always stood behind

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⁹ Folger to Hobart, 3 Nov. 1926; Folger to Rockefeller, Sr., 3 Jan. 1927; Rockefeller, Sr., to Folger, 15 Jan. 1927; Rockefeller, Jr., to Hobart, 24 Jan. 1927; Hobart, “Fifty Years,” 17-18, all in Hobart Papers.

¹⁰ Hobart celebrated her husband’s heroism of March 1927 in a nonfictional book of reportage, Within the Walls of Nanking (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928).

¹¹ Hobart, Gusty’s Child, 240-241.

¹² Ibid., 243.
us. What did a person do by himself? How did he find his own place in society, how did he earn his living." Haunted by these questions, Hobart first conceived her idea for a novel and came up with its title, *Oil for the Lamps of China*, soon after she and her husband left China in 1928. In anticipation of writing it, she asked her husband for his consent to base it on his experiences, and he replied, "Use what you want. I trust you."

It is worth noting that Hobart had the idea and title of her novel in mind before the stock market crash of 1929 which led to the great economic depression of the 1930s, but she did not begin to write until 1931. As she subsequently recalled:

> Now [in 1931] at last I accepted the challenge: the characters seen with compassion and detachment, the organization they served delineated with honesty and detachment. I was no longer the woman who had spoken in *By the City of the Long Sand* of the corporation as having the right to demand that its members comply with its policies, learn its lesson of emphasis on the whole, surrender this individuality; neither was I any longer the frightened and disillusioned woman who had returned from China.

Once she had accepted this challenge, she wrote intensively for two years, publishing her new book in 1933.

Alice Tisdale Hobart’s *Oil for the Lamps of China* created an immediate sensation. Critics gave it rave reviews: “A fine novel of amazing scope” (*New York Times*), “An exciting story” (*New York Post*), “A grand novel” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*), “What a story!” (*Chicago Daily News*). The Readers League of America selected and promoted it, and it soon became a best seller – one of the very first best sellers because the idea of a best seller list was introduced in 1931. Radio stations began reading it aloud over the air, and, as noted earlier, Warner Brothers Studios snapped it up and made it into a motion picture which was released in 1935. Hobart was inundated with invitations to speak about the book including an invitation to dinner from Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House.

Why did the book make this spectacular take-off? Looking back, Hobart modestly attributed it to lucky timing:

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14 Hobart, *Gusty’s Child*, 270.
15 Ibid.
16 Bruce E. Mahan to Hobart, 13 Feb. 1934; Edith Helm (secretary to Eleanor Roosevelt) to Hobart, 21 Apr. 1934; Annie Laurie Williams to Hobart, 8 Jan. 1933; Hobart to Williams, 9 Jan. 1934, all in Hobart Papers. Hobart was paid $15,000 for the rights to her story, and Laird Doyle wrote the screenplay based on her book. Doyle’s screenplay was published under the title *Oil for the Lamps of China* (Burbank, 1935).
Its success was to some extent a matter of luck. To gain popularity a novel must strike some answering experience in many readers. Had *Oil for the Lamps of China* been published at the height of America’s prosperity, I believe it might well have failed. Who, then, would have wished to identify himself with the insecurity? Coming out at the depth of the depression men by the thousands could identify themselves with Stephen Chase squeezed out after years of service. Letters came to me from all over America, South America and Europe, from men using almost an identical statement: “If you changed the name to mine it would by my story. It *is* my story.”

It is undeniable that the timing of the book’s publication was partially “a matter of luck.” Hobart was not exaggerating when she claimed that men suffering at the depth of the depression fully identified with the hero of *Oil for the Lamps of China*. For example, F. M. Sterling of Minneapolis, Minnesota, wrote to her:

> Your book was particularly interesting to me as I spent ten years with Socony [Standard Oil Company of New York] Organization in South China and the Malay Peninsula ... I found my position at the end of ten years identical almost to the hero of your book.... Fortunately I was able to get out of Asia with a fairly good amount of self initiative and confidence left in me. It is too bad that more of the boys out there did not do the same thing.

Moreover, Hobart heard from former employees of other corporations besides Standard Oil. Laurance J. Harwood of South Bend, Indiana, accused his former employer, Aluminum Company of America, of putting the same psychological pressure on its employees as the American Oil Company put on Stephen Chase. He wrote to Hobart that the “poor chaps” who worked for Aluminum Company of America “were made into automatons who had one constant fear. This was fear of failure in the eyes of The Company.” When Harwood told Hobart that he wanted to confirm “the truthfulness of your book,” he undoubtedly spoke for many of her readers who had lost their jobs at big corporations during the great depression of the 1930s.

And yet, even if Hobart was right about the timeliness of *Oil for the Lamps of China* for victims of the depression in the 1930s, she was almost certainly wrong to believe that the book “might well have failed” if it had been published “at the height of America’s prosperity.” One reason for doubting her speculation is that the book continued to be popular after the depression ended. In 1943 during World War II, it was republished in a special edition for the American armed forces, and after the war, teachers

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19 Harwood to Hobart, 30 Nov. 1933, ibid.
in American high schools and professors in American universities assigned it in their courses. By then it had been translated into French, Spanish, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Polish, Hungarian, and Czech.\footnote{Howard B. Gotlieb to Hobart, September 3, 1947; J. Frederic Knecht to Hobart, 1 Dec. 1949, both in Hobart Papers. For references to translations, see American Library Association, comp., *The National Union Catalogue Pre-1956 Imprints* (London: Mansell, 1973), 248:539-40; and *Alice Tisdale Hobart: Portrait of a Novelist* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1945), 24.} Not until the 1950s, after the Cold War had begun and Westerners (including American representatives of Standard Oil Company) had been ousted from the People's Republic of China, did *Oil for the Lamps of China* cease to attract a following.

Now, some eighty years after it was originally published, *Oil for the Lamps of China* again seems timely. Once again ambitious young Americans like Stephen Chase are working for big corporations in China (and these young employees now include women as well as men); and middle-aged executives are prematurely losing jobs (in a process that companies now euphemistically call “downsizing”). Once again sensitive young spouses like Hester are coping with the rigors of living simultaneously in American corporate culture and Chinese culture. Once again shrewd Chinese intermediaries like Kin are bridging and exploiting social and cultural gaps between foreigners and locals in China. And once again well-connected Chinese like Ho are deciding how much to give foreigners access to their Chinese social and commercial networks. As these parallels suggest, if *Oil for the Lamps of China* was timely in the 1930s, then it also seems timely today.

Why is Alice Tisdale Hobart’s voice able to reach across time and speak to us in the twenty-first century? Part of the answer lies in an authoritative-ness derived from her use of history. In her historical references, she is particularly persuasive on the subject of corporate hierarchies and social networks (as I have called them in my history of Standard Oil Company and other big businesses in China).\footnote{Sherman Cochran, *Encountering Chinese Networks: Western, Japanese, and Chinese Corporations in China, 1880-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).} Her allusions to the Company’s levels of authority accurately reflect the elaborate and far-reaching hierarchy that Standard Oil extended into China in the early twentieth century, which included its New York office at the top, its Shanghai manager at the next level in the Company’s headquarters for China, the heads of China’s regions below him, and the American agents below them.

Similarly, Hobart’s observations about the dependency of Chinese merchants’ networks on family ties and informal connections have been borne out by historical research on Chinese social networks that were
encountered by other big businesses – Japanese and Chinese corporations as well as Western ones.

As a novelist, Hobart does not attempt to compare the Company’s corporate hierarchy and Ho’s social network with other corporate hierarchies or social networks, nor does she place them in any historical perspective. Instead, she draws on history for her own fictional purposes: to show how the Company used its corporate hierarchy to control and ultimately discard Stephen, and to dramatize how he was caught as a pivotal figure between the Company’s American management and Chinese merchants’ social networks.

Perhaps the most compelling explanation for the appeal of *Oil for the Lamps of China* may be found in the personal tone that Hobart sets. When it was first published, the distinguished American historian Mary Beard noted this connection between general issues and Hobart’s own experience in the book. Congratulating Hobart on its publication, Beard wrote that she was “fascinated by your magnificent canvas of big business as a whole with its stresses and strains involving races, sexes, and historic ages all in one,” and she found Hobart’s book convincing because of “the superb mastery it reveals of the facts in the case through first-hand intimacy.” 22 Beard’s comment singles out a feature of *Oil for the Lamps of China* that helps to explain why it remains relevant in our own time. Hobart’s most lasting insights are traceable to her ability to frame her “magnificent canvas” so that it can be viewed closely and personally. Today, as in the 1930s, she draws her readers into the world of big business and its deep internal tensions through her “first-hand intimacy.”

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