



# Midnight in Peking: How the Murder of a Young Englishwoman Haunted the Last Days of Old China

By Paul French

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**Winner of the both the Edgar Award for Best Fact Crime and the CWA Non-Fiction Dagger**

Chronicling an incredible unsolved murder, *Midnight in Peking* captures the aftermath of the brutal killing of a British schoolgirl in January 1937. The mutilated body of Pamela Werner was found at the base of the Fox Tower, which, according to local superstition, is home to the maliciously seductive fox spirits. As British detective Dennis and Chinese detective Han investigate, the mystery only deepens and, in a city on the verge of invasion, rumor and superstition run rampant. Based on seven years of research by historian and China expert Paul French, this true-crime thriller presents readers with a rare and unique portrait of the last days of colonial Peking.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

“This is a good murder story, well told, with all the additional pleasures that a knowledgeable tour guide to old China can provide. Grateful readers could scarcely ask for more.” – Joseph Kanon, author of *Istanbul Passage*, in *The Washington Post*

“Never less than fascinating... one of the best portraits of between-the-wars China that has yet been written.” – *The Wall Street Journal*

“Midnight in Peking is both a detective story and a social history, and therefore – as it should – always keeps the hunt for Pamela’s killers somewhere near the center of the narrative. [Paul French] is a wonderfully dexterous guide” – Jonathan Spence in *The New York Review of Books*

“A crime story set among sweeping events is reminiscent of Graham Greene, particularly *The Third Man*, while French's terse, tightly-focussed style has rightly been compared to Chandler. *Midnight in Peking* deserves a place alongside both these masters.” – *The Independent*

“A page-turning and fascinating true crime book. This is a genre-breaker that captures the atmosphere of 1930s Peking.” – *The Bookseller* [selected as One to Watch]

“...the most talked-about read in town this year.” – *The New Yorker's Page-Turner Blog*

“Midnight in Peking is true-crime writing at its best, full of vivid characters, an exotic locale, secrets galore, and a truly bewildering mystery.” – *The Christian Science Monitor*

“...A compulsively readable true crime work in the tradition of *Devil in the White City*.” – *The Atlantic.com*

“Not only does Mr. French succeed in solving the crime, he resurrects a period that was filled with glitter as well as evil, but was never, as readers will appreciate, known for being dull.” – *The Economist*

“An engrossing read” – *Oprah.com*

“In today’s Beijing, French’s portrait feels surprisingly germane.” – *The Los Angeles Times*

“Part historical docudrama, part tragic opera... [French] tells this sorry tale with the skill of an Agatha Christie.” – *The Financial Times*

#### About the Author

**Paul French** lives in Shanghai, where he is a business advisor and analyst. He frequently comments on China for the English-speaking press around the world. French studied history, economics, and Mandarin at university and has an M.Phil in economics from the University of Glasgow.

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The eastern section of old Peking has been dominated since the fifteenth century by a looming watchtower, built as part of the Tartar Wall to protect the city from invaders. Known as the Fox Tower, it was believed to

be haunted by fox spirits, a superstition that meant the place was deserted at night.

After dark the area became the preserve of thousands of bats, which lived in the eaves of the Fox Tower and flitted across the moonlight like giant shadows. The only other living presence was the wild dogs, whose howling kept the locals awake. On winter mornings the wind stung exposed hands and eyes, carrying dust from the nearby Gobi Desert. Few people ventured out early at this time of year, opting instead for the warmth of their beds.

But just before dawn on 8 January 1937, rickshaw pullers passing along the top of the Tartar Wall, which was wide enough to walk or cycle on, noticed lantern lights near the base of the Fox Tower, and indistinct figures moving about. With neither the time nor the inclination to stop, they went about their business, heads down, one foot in front of the other, avoiding the fox spirits.

When daylight broke on another freezing day, the tower was deserted once more. The colony of bats circled one last time before the creeping sun sent them back to their eaves. But in the icy wasteland between the road and the tower, the wild dogs—the *huang gou*—were prowling curiously, sniffing at something alongside a ditch.

It was the body of a young woman, lying at an odd angle and covered by a layer of frost. Her clothing was dishevelled, her body badly mutilated. On her wrist was an expensive watch that had stopped just after midnight.

It was the morning after the Russian Christmas, thirteen days after the Western Christmas by the old Julian calendar.

Peking at that time had a population of some one and a half million, of which only two thousand, perhaps three, were foreigners. They were a disparate group, ranging from stiff-backed consuls and their diplomatic staff to destitute White Russians. In between were journalists, a few businessmen, some old China hands who'd lived in Peking since the days of the Qing dynasty and felt they could never leave. And there was no shortage of foreign criminals, dope fiends and prostitutes who'd somehow washed up in northern China.

Peking's foreigners clustered in and around a small enclave known as the Legation Quarter, where the great powers of Europe, America and Japan had their embassies and consulates—institutions that were always referred to as legations. Just two square acres in size, the strictly demarcated Legation Quarter was guarded by imposing gates and armed sentries, with signs ordering rickshaw pullers to slow down for inspection as they passed through. Inside was a haven of Western architecture, commerce and entertainment—a profusion of clubs, hotels and bars that could just as easily have been in London, Paris or Washington.

Both the Chinese and foreigners of Peking had been living with chaos and uncertainty for a long time. Ever since the downfall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, the city had been at the mercy of one marauding warlord after another. Nominally China was ruled by the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, but the government competed for power with the warlords and their private armies, who controlled swathes of territory as large as western Europe. Peking and most of northern China was a region in flux.

Whatever the ferocity of the storm building outside—in Chinese Peking, in the Japanese-occupied north, across China and its 400 million people to the south—the privileged foreigners in the Legation Quarter

sought to maintain their European face at all costs.

More than a few foreign residents of the Legation Quarter in its heyday described themselves as inmates, but if this gated and guarded section was indeed a cage then it was a gilded one, with endless games of bridge to pass the time. Sandwiched between the legations were exclusive clubs, grand hotels and department stores.

It was Europe in miniature, with European road names and electric streetlights. But lately the once-packed hotels and clubs had been a little somber, and sometimes they were half empty. In truth, the Wagons Lits and other night spots were out of date. Shanghai had better bars, had much better everything. Peking was a relic, a one-time capital that was now far too close to the Japanese war machine. The city, its foreigners and their clubs were victims of history and geography.

To make matters worse, rumour had it that Chiang Kai-shek was about to cut a deal with Tokyo. Chiang had fought a long and bitter internecine battle to become leader of the Kuomintang and his position was still precarious; he had political challengers to stave off as well as the Japanese, the warlords and the Communists. Many people believed he would sacrifice Peking in order to save his own skin.

The city's inhabitants felt betrayed, expendable. The mood on the streets, of both foreign and Chinese Peking—in the crowded *hutong*, or alleyways, in the teeming markets where prices were rising and supplies of essentials were dwindling—was one of fear mixed with resignation.

When the catastrophe did finally hit, China would be thrown into a struggle for its very survival, in what would be the opening act of the Second World War. For now foreign Peking was in an uneasy lull, on the edge of panic at times, although an alcohol-fuelled denial and the strength of the silver dollar made life more bearable for many. An American or a European could still live like a king in this city, with a life of servants, golf, races, champagne-fuelled weekend retreats in the Western Hills. The storm might be coming, but the last foreigners in Peking had battened down the hatches very comfortably.

The hunt for a young woman's killer was about to consume, and in some ways define, the cold and final days of old Peking.

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