

Pearl's Great Price

Pearl Buck's chronicles of everyday life in China won her millions of readers and a Nobel Prize. They also won her the scorn of highbrow Western critics and the venom of China's Communist leaders. Now her adopted land is rediscovering the work of this woman once denounced as a cultural enemy.

BY SHEILA MELVIN

AS PEARL BUCK NEARED HER 80TH BIRTHDAY, SHE became obsessed by the idea of returning to China. It was the early 1970s, and Buck, the American author who had won the Nobel Prize for her books set in China, had not set foot there herself in nearly four decades, as the country was transformed by the Japanese invasion, civil war, and the triumph of communism.

Although she had been born in West Virginia in 1892 while her missionary parents were home on leave, China was the country where she had grown up, first married, and written her most famous novel, *The Good Earth* (1931). Chinese was her first language, the one in which she mentally composed sentences before putting them to paper in English. China had provided much of the material for many of her 70-odd books, mostly novels but also plays, short fiction, children's stories, biographies of her parents, essays, and poetry. China had inspired her humanitarian work. And it was in China that her adored mother, her father, two brothers, and two sisters lay buried.

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"I grew up in a double world," Buck recalled in her 1954 memoir, *My Several Worlds*, in which she described her early years with affection. "The small white clean Presbyterian American world of my parents and the big loving merry not-too-clean Chinese world. . . . When I was in the Chinese world I was Chinese, I spoke Chinese and behaved as a Chinese and ate as the Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts and feelings."

As a child in this Chinese world, the blonde, blue-eyed Pearl Sydenstricker roamed the countryside visiting peasant neighbors, eating foods forbidden by her mother, and burying the dead babies she found discarded on hillsides (she carried a specially sharpened stick to beat off the dogs that fed on the tiny corpses). The family had to flee the 1900 Boxer Rebellion, in which numerous missionaries were killed, but Buck recalled her childhood as a happy time despite her sternly religious father's long absences and her mother's sorrow at living in "exile" so far from home. As an adult, she taught English at Nanjing University from 1920 to 1933 (she had to leave for a year in 1927 when foreigners were again attacked). During these years, she mingled with China's top intellectuals; the

renowned romantic poet Xu Zhimo was a close friend, and some suspect the two were lovers.

Buck journeyed to the United States in 1934 assuming that she would soon return to China, but life turned out differently. She divorced her missionary husband of 17 years, John Lossing Buck, and rather scandalously married her publisher, Richard Walsh, in Reno on the same day. Her new marriage and her desire to be close to her severely retarded daughter, Carol, who was in a special-education institution in New Jersey, led Buck to settle on a sprawling farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. It became all but impossible for Americans to visit China after the Communist victory in 1949, but the thaw in U.S.–Chinese relations

that began with the ping-pong diplomacy of 1971 gave her hope that she not only would be allowed to return but would be welcomed back.

Because the United States and China still did not have formal diplomatic ties, she wrote letters to anyone who might conceivably help her wangle an invitation back, including President Richard Nixon. Finally, in May 1972, she received a response from the Chinese government through the intercession of a former State Department official:

Dear Miss Pearl Buck:

Your letters have been duly received.

In view of the fact that for a long time you have in your works taken an attitude of distortion, smear, and vilification towards the people of new China and its leaders, I am authorized to inform you that we cannot accept your request for a visit to China.

Sincerely yours,

H. L. Yuan
Second Secretary



For the final half of her life, Nobel laureate Pearl Buck, shown here in a 1950s photograph, was not permitted to return to China. Her books' frank portrayal of the country embarrassed its image-conscious officials.

Buck was stunned.

"The letter—the letter!" she wrote. "It lies there like a living snake on my desk—a poisonous snake. . . . [It] threatens me now and refuses to allow my return to the country where I have lived most of my life . . . [it] is an attack, not a letter. It is violent, it is uninformed, it is untruthful."

The letter was indeed all those things. Buck had devoted most of her life to writing about China, promoting its culture, and supporting China-related causes, largely because she was "appalled and oppressed by the discovery that American people are almost totally ignorant of China, nor have they any great desire to learn more about this ancient and mighty nation who will and must affect our own nation and people in the future more than any other."

Her most popular work, *The Good Earth*, was the

The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck

In the first chapter of The Good Earth (1931), Chinese peasant Wang Lung awakes on his wedding day and performs his morning regimen.

HE HURRIED OUT INTO the middle room, drawing on his blue outer trousers as he went, and knotting about the fullness at his waist his girdle of blue cotton cloth. He left his upper body bare until he had heated water to bathe himself. He went into the shed which was the kitchen, leaning against the house, and out of its dusk an ox twisted its head from behind the corner next the door and lowed at him deeply. The kitchen was made of earthen bricks as the house was; great squares of earth dug from their own fields and thatched with straw from their own wheat. Out of their own earth had his grandfather in his youth fashioned also the oven, baked and black with many years of meal preparing. On top of this earthen structure stood a deep round iron cauldron.

This cauldron he filled partly full of water, dipping it with a half-gourd from an earthen jar that stood near, but he dipped cautiously, for water was precious. Then, after a hesitation, he suddenly lifted the jar and emptied all the water into the cauldron. This day he would bathe his whole body. Not since he was a child upon his mother's knee had anyone looked upon his body. Today one would, and he would have it clean.

He went around the oven to the rear and, selecting a handful of the dry grass and stalks standing in the corner of the kitchen, he arranged it delicately in the mouth of the oven, making the most of every leaf. Then from an old flint and iron he caught a flame and thrust it into the straw and there was a blaze.

This was the last morning he would have to light the fire.

In My Several Worlds (1954), Buck describes her first home after her marriage to John Lossing Buck, in a remote town in Anhui province.

AND YET I WAS NEVER really lonely. The Chinese were delightful and of a kind new to me. Their language fortunately was still Mandarin, and I had only to make a few changes of pronunciation and tone to understand and be understood perfectly, and soon I was rich in friends. As usual the people were ready to be friends, intensely curious about our ways, and since my little house was so accessible a fairly steady stream of visitors came and went, and I was pressed with invitations to birthday feasts and weddings and family affairs. I enjoyed it all and soon was deep in the lives of my neighbors, as they were in mine. I played with their babies and talked with the young women of my own generation and they told me their problems with their mothers-in-law and

other relatives and as usual I felt profoundly the currents of human life. . . .

Nothing was demanded of me, or almost nothing, and so I busied myself in house and garden, I began to keep bees for their honey, and I experimented with jams and jellies made from the abundant dates of our region and the dark red haws that are a cross between damson plums and crab apples. I was in and out of neighbors' houses, as they were in and out of mine, and I enjoyed again the wonderful deep sense of the richness of friendships. More than once I almost began to write, but each time I put it off, deciding to wait yet a little longer until mind and soul were fully grown.

Strangest of all, the vivid intellectual and political turmoil of the country did not reach us here. We lived as serenely as though the nation were not in revolution. Without exception none of my friends knew how to read or write and felt no need of either accomplishment. Yet so learned were they in the way of life that I loved to listen to their talk. An ancient people stores its wisdom in succeeding generations, and when families live together, young and old, each understands the other. Moreover, I delighted especially in the humor of my Chinese friends and in their freedom from inhibitions. These made life a comedy, for one never knew what the day might bring forth.

best-selling novel of both 1931 and 1932. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932, was made into an acclaimed Hollywood movie in 1937, and was instrumental in leading the Swedish Academy to award her the Nobel Prize for literature in 1938, making her the first American woman to be so honored. The book became so influential in the United States that some scholars credit it with contributing to the 1943 repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which had barred virtually all Chinese emigration to the United States since 1882.

Other scholars go even further, claiming that Buck's writings so changed the average American's impression of Chinese people in the years before World War II that Americans became eager supporters of China in its war against Japan. As the Chinese scholar Kang Liao wrote in 1997, Pearl Buck "single-handedly changed the distorted image of the Chinese people in the American mind through literature. Chinese people were no longer seen as cheap, dirty, ridiculous coolies or sneaky, vicious, insidious devils. The majority of Chinese were seen for the first time in literature as honest, kindhearted, frugal-living, hard-working, gods-fearing peasants who are much the same as American farmers." In 1992, historian James C. Thomson Jr. called Buck "the most influential Westerner to write about China since 13th-century Marco Polo."

Although she was an intellectual educated in both the Chinese and Western classics, Buck took up her pen with a populist approach, one that was phenomenally successful with the public even as it earned her the derision of the literary elite, many of whom considered her writing too lacking in stylistic complexity and irony, too didactic and moralistic, and—perhaps most important—too extraordinarily popular to be awarded the Nobel Prize. William Faulkner, who won the Nobel himself 11 years after she did, wrote to a friend that he would rather not win it than be in the company of "Mrs. Chinahand Buck."

Buck's writing is simple and vivid, full of telling details and minute observations that bring her subjects to life. Some scholars compare her style to that of the Bible—which she studied under the rigorous tutelage of her father. Others note that its narrative arc is similar to that of the Chinese novels she so loved. The prose sometimes seems stilted, but this is likely a result of her internal translating from Chinese to English, and in any case



Paul Muni and Luise Rainer starred in MGM's 1937 big-screen version of *The Good Earth*. Most of the movie had to be shot again in the United States after the film was damaged—by Chinese government agents, Pearl Buck suspected—at the conclusion of filming on location in China.

conveys a sense of the linguistic universe inhabited by her characters.

I first read *The Good Earth* during the 1980s as a sophomore in an all-girls high school run by cloistered nuns. The book was racy, at least by our standards, and riveting, and we were instantly caught up in the struggle of the peasant farmer Wang Lung and his big-footed wife O-lan, whose lives are intertwined with the "good earth" from which they struggle to eke out a living. Endless natural calamities are visited upon them, but none are so destructive as the greed, lust, and idleness that are the byproducts of their eventual wealth. At school, one of my best friends was soon nicknamed O-lan because of her size-nine shoes, and the name of the concubine Lotus became a slur we used to refer to girls who cared too much about boys.

Before I read *The Good Earth*, I had given little thought to China, but the book brought the country alive for me and made me want to learn more. After graduating from college a few years later, I got a job in a bar and saved enough money to travel to China with O-lan and another best friend from that *Good Earth*

class. One thing led to another, and I lived in China off and on for years to learn the language, work, write, and ultimately marry a man who is Chinese.

Pearl Buck did more than write books that influenced people like me. She used her celebrity status to raise money for war-relief efforts in China in the 1930s and '40s, fight racial stereotypes in the United States, and promote cultural understanding. She publicly opposed the American decision to isolate China after the Communist victory in 1949 and warned that "there is not the slightest chance" that China would ever let Taiwan be independent.

Earlier, she had devoted her Nobel Prize lecture to a passionate discussion of the Chinese novel, arguing that edu-

"foreign" philosophy that had no place in China. In 1950, just one year after the Communist victory, a Chinese literary journal published a translation of a Soviet article called "Pearl Buck: An Old China Hand Gone Bankrupt," which condemned her family background and erroneous political viewpoint. Her books disappeared from shelves in China and her name from public discourse, except for a brief period in 1960 when several literary journals labeled her a "reactionary writer" and a "vanguard of United States imperialist cultural aggression."

Buck was aware of these attacks but apparently assumed that they were just politics and would easily be forgotten. That the Chinese government did not relent—as it had when Richard Nixon was permitted to visit—probably had less to do with anger over her politics than with the general dismay

with which Chinese of all political persuasions regarded her writing. For Buck wrote about China as she saw it, not as it wanted to be seen, and her unflinching honesty angered and embarrassed many in the nation's intellectual and political elite.

One of *The Good Earth's* first Chinese translators—at least eight translations were made in the 1930s and

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cated people everywhere should know such classics as *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Three Kingdoms*. To help make that possible, she spent five years translating into English the centuries-old novel *Shui Hu Zhuan*—one of Mao Zedong's favorites—which was published in 1933 under the title *All Men Are Brothers*. Angry that Amerasian children (a term she coined) were deemed unadoptable, in 1949 she established Welcome House, the first international and interracial adoption agency in this country, an organization that prospers to this day as a part of Pearl S. Buck International. She also adopted seven children herself. And she became closely associated with American social causes, especially equal rights for women and blacks. All this public activity brought her acclaim, criticism, and—because J. Edgar Hoover suspected she might have Communist sympathies—an FBI file almost 300 pages long.

The Chinese government never had any such suspicions. Officials knew that Buck opposed communism as a

'40s—prefaced his work with a lengthy essay in which he faulted Buck for making China look bad and asked rhetorically whether she had a feeling of "white supremacy." The much-esteemed writer Lu Xun was more subtly damning, commenting that it was always better for Chinese to write about China. Other intellectuals later echoed Lu, sniping that the Nobel Prize for writing about China should have been given to a Chinese (someone like Lu Xun, for instance).

Politicians in the image-conscious Nationalist government that ruled China from 1911 to 1949 were infuriated by *The Good Earth's* depiction of starving peasants, concubines, and banditry. When MGM began filming the movie version in China in 1934, government officials were determined to prevent the portrayal of anything they considered embarrassing. According to Buck, they "allotted one village to the motion picture company, and they insisted that the women all wear clean jackets and flowers in their hair. They also objected to the water buffalo, which they thought would make China appear



Pearl Buck and former Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie stand in front of a portrait of Madame Chiang Kai-shek in 1941 at the launch of a fundraising campaign by the United China Relief, aimed at aiding Chinese civilians during wartime. Until her death in 1973, Buck devoted herself to humanitarian work for China.

medieval, and they wanted to substitute a tractor, although at this time there were only two tractors in the whole of China.” In the end, even these face-saving measures weren’t sufficient, and someone—Buck blamed government agents—burned down the director’s Shanghai studio and poured acid into the film containers as the crew departed China. The film had to be almost entirely reshot in the United States before it was finally released in 1937.

Early antipathy of critics in the United States toward Buck has had a lasting influence, as have Buck’s prolific output and her popularity with readers, either of which is often reason enough within the American academy to regard an author with slight contempt. Perhaps more critical to her legacy is that as a consequence of her rejection by the critical establishment, she has not been included in college syllabuses, though she remains a perennial favorite on high school reading lists. And at a time when critics and academics seek to add diverse authors writing

about their own cultures to the literary canon, a white American writing about China can’t compete with the likes of Chinese author Maxine Hong Kingston, as critic Edmund White maintained in *The New York Times* in 1993. But while Buck remains largely ignored in America, she is finally finding a home in China.

As China has grown stronger and more confident during the past two decades, the old sensitivities have gradually receded. “The Party has done a 180-degree turn on Pearl Buck,” says the author’s son, Edgar Walsh. “They now see her as a friend of China and someone who has always been supportive of the Chinese people.”

The rehabilitation dates from the late 1980s, when an odd assortment of Chinese scholars and local government officials realized that Buck’s work had both intellectual and commercial value. One of the first to do so was Professor Liu Haiping, of Nanjing University, who is now an internationally recognized Pearl Buck scholar. “I went to the United States in 1984 and everyone asked me about Pearl Buck,” he explains. “But I didn’t know who she was. I didn’t even know

she had taught at my university for 12 years! So I decided to find out about her.”

Liu was fascinated by the intimate details of ordinary Chinese life that Buck revealed in her books, the very same details that had once mortified intellectuals and bureaucrats alike. “More and more I realized the relevance of Pearl S. Buck to China. The kind of society Pearl S. Buck was describing is no more. Her writing is like a storehouse of what Chinese culture was once like.” To illustrate his point, Professor Liu cites the first few pages of *The Good Earth*, in which Buck describes the morning regimen of the peasant Wang Lung on his wedding day. The near-photographic precision of her description—the tasseled black cord that he weaves into his long braid, the care he takes not to waste a single leaf as he kindles the fire—are telling details that most Chinese authors of the era did not record because they would have seemed obvious or inconsequential.

Liu was equally drawn to Buck’s determination to make Americans understand China and the other nations she wrote about, including Korea, India, and Japan. “Especially now when China is strong and there is a growing sense of national pride and xenophobia, I think it is very important that China be aware of other cultures,” he says.

Other scholars have expressed similar views, and in the late 1990s new Chinese-language editions of *The Good Earth* and half a dozen of Buck’s other novels were published, replete with scholarly essays on her life and work. A number of doctoral students at Chinese universities are currently writing dissertations about her, and international conferences on her writings and humanitarian work are held regularly in China.

Another powerful source of interest in the rehabilitation of Pearl Buck’s reputation in China is the local elites in the places where she once lived. Foremost among these former homes is her childhood home of Zhenjiang, a city on the Yangtze River about an hour’s drive from Shanghai, where she is now regarded as something of a patron saint, or at least as the city’s best hope for enticing foreigners to visit and invest. Buck lived in Zhenjiang for nearly 20 years as a girl and young woman, mostly in her family’s nondescript Western-style house in the city’s rural outskirts.

In 1992, the Zhenjiang government renovated the house, which miraculously had survived the chaos of the 20th century, and opened it to the public, with financial assistance from Zhenjiang’s sister city of Tempe, Arizona. In 2002, Zhenjiang marked the 110th anniversary of Buck’s birth by convincing the provincial government to declare

her former residence a historic landmark. And in 2004, it unveiled a monument to Buck and even renamed a city park “Pearl Square” in her honor, a rare distinction in a nation of “People’s Squares.”

Other locales have followed Zhenjiang’s lead. The mountain resort of Lushan has renovated Buck’s summer home and the church where her father preached. The house in Anhui where she lived in the first years of her unhappy marriage to John Lossing Buck is long gone, but the county where it stood is nonetheless planning to build a Pearl Buck museum. Nanjing University has for some time had plans to renovate the house where Buck wrote *The Good Earth* in the attic study.

Buck’s rehabilitation in Chinese academic circles and at the grass-roots level finally led to a reevaluation of her work by the government. In the early 1990s, cultural officials refused to let a PBS affiliate from Buck’s home state of West Virginia film a documentary about her, but in 1999, when the U.S.-based Chinese actress Luo Yan sought permission to film an adaptation of Buck’s novel *Pavilion of Women*, it was easily granted. The script—about an unhappily married Chinese woman who falls in love with a Western priest—raised no hackles, and the makers were allowed to film in protected historic sites. The movie attracted large crowds and considerable publicity in China, where it fared much better than in the United States.

Since then, China’s Central Television network has produced several documentaries and docudramas about Buck, including one that aired this past summer in which she is played, rather fittingly, by an American expatriate named Aly Rose who learned fluent Chinese while living among Chinese peasants. And events related to Buck are regularly covered in the national press. When Oprah Winfrey chose *The Good Earth* for her book club in autumn 2004, the English-language newspaper *China Daily* reported on the selection, noting that “the Pearl S. Buck phenomenon used to be controversial and rejected by both the Chinese and American literary worlds,” but that it has recently become “a friendly cultural bridge between the East and the West.”

Unfortunately, Pearl Buck was unable to cross back over this bridge she had devoted her life to building. She died in 1973, less than a year after the Chinese government denied her request to visit. But her Confucian education had taught her to see things from a different perspective. In the months that passed between her receipt of the letter and her death, she wrote: “Are you going back to China?” people ask me. ‘I have never left China,’ I reply. ‘I belong to China, as a child, as a young girl, as a woman, until I die.’” ■