



# Pearl S. Buck's Novels of China and America

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## The Battle of Life

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*To the memory of my American Methodist missionary grandparents  
Murray and Olive Titus: intended for China but at the last moment  
diverted to India.*

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## INTRODUCTION

She was born in 1892 in West Virginia, named Pearl Comfort, and a few months later taken to China by her parents. They, Absalom and Caroline Sydenstricker, had left the United States immediately after their wedding twelve years earlier to make the long journey to China as missionaries; when they arrived at the station, Buck's American biographer reports, it emerged that Absalom Sydenstricker had forgotten to buy his new wife a ticket, and he cites Buck's later comment that her father had married but 'could never quite remember it' (Conn, p. 9). In 1899 the little girl, aged six, gave some brief biographical details about herself in a letter to an American newspaper: telling its readers that she lived in China, and that her big brother would shortly be coming from college in America 'to help our father tell the Chinese about Jesus', she added

I have two little brothers in heaven. Maudie went first, then Artie, then Edith, and on the tenth of last month, my little brave brother, Clyde, left us to go to our real home in heaven. Clyde said he was a Christian Soldier, and that heaven was his bestest home. (Conn, p. 1)

Peter Conn reports this letter as coming from the child's own pen; Hilary Spurling suggests it must have been largely composed by her mother (Spurling, loc. 487), a fruitful disagreement between biographers since it highlights how far the child's and her mother's lives were intertwined in grief. A few events which shaped her life thereafter included hopeless yearning as a small girl for a doll in an American mail order catalogue;

formal tuition in Chinese philosophy and language by a Confucian tutor, saturation in her parents' set of the novels of Charles Dickens which she read from the age of seven, as well as in Chinese life and common speech; threat of death as a child during the Yihetuan ('Boxer') uprising; attending boarding school in Shanghai as a teenager during which she attempted pastoral work with despised and rejected women; four years' undergraduate study in a college in Virginia; return to China to nurse her sick mother; marriage to John Lossing Buck; the birth of her daughter who as she grew developed a severe learning disability; her own and her family's mortal danger during the 'Nanjing incident' in 1927; her return to live in America in 1934; her divorce from Buck and marriage to her publisher; her adoption of seven children during the course of her life; her foundation of an adoption agency for unadoptable children; her unsuccessful attempt to revisit China in 1972. These events also shaped her writing life, which included the 1938 award of the Nobel Prize for Literature and the publication, according to Conn, of over seventy books in different genres, including a translation of a major Chinese novel and five novels set in America under a male pseudonym. Pearl Sydenstricker Buck died in Vermont in 1973 having never returned to China, the country where she had spent most of the first half of her life. She never fully recovered from this loss, just as her mother had never recovered from the loss of America when she crossed the Pacific Ocean as a young woman for the first time all those years before.

Charles Dickens told his biographer that he really did 'not know what this story is worth' (Douglas-Fairhurst, loc. 365)—the story being his fourth Christmas book, *The Battle of Life*, published in 1846. Critics of Pearl Buck, whose first novel was published sixty-odd years after Dickens' death, have asked themselves a similar question. What, really, are her stories worth? Their answers have ranged from admiration to contempt to attempts at measured evaluation and reveal as much about their own views of the world as they do about Pearl Buck's. In China, where most of Pearl Buck's books of the 1930s and 1940s were translated into Chinese (Liu, in Lipscomb et al. 1994, p. 58), at least fifty articles on Pearl Buck in Chinese journals or as prefaces to translations of her books were published between 1930 and 1934. Some Chinese critics cited as a reason for Buck's excellence her seeing the world as a Chinese might see it. The influential publisher Zhao Jiabi, despite reservations, wrote of her Nobel prize-winning novel *The Good Earth* that

the reason it has won praises the world over, including in China, is that it not only draws the appearance of the Chinese, but also shows part of their soul. Except for its medium of writing, everything else, such as the subject matter, the characterization, the milieu and the mood, is Chinese. The book, on the whole, is very authentic, and one can hardly believe it was written by a foreign hand. (Liu 1994, p. 60)

Another reviewer suggested that ‘Pearl Buck’s body was no doubt born of her American parents, but it was China that endowed her with spirit and soul. That was why she calls America her motherland and China her fatherland’ (Liu 1994, p. 58). One critic suggested that Buck’s writings ‘could easily pass for works of Chinese authorship’ (Yu Chu 1934). Another article—of its time in its angry conceptualization of the relation between China and the West—drew attention to the pain suffered by a Chinese man or woman contemplating their image overseas: it suggested that Buck might have deserved praise for her ‘sincere and objective approach in her portrayal of Chinese life’, but only in comparison with the prevalent Western archetype of Chinese ‘men with long pigtaileds and women with bound feet, all skinny with running noses and dirty, ugly faces’ (Liu 1994, p. 59). Other readers, decreasingly interested in Western misperceptions of their country, were more dismissive. Lu Xun, China’s most revered twentieth-century writer, influentially condemned Buck for having attempted a task beyond any foreigner: ‘it is always better for the Chinese to write about Chinese subject matter, as that is the only way to get near the truth’ (Liu 1994, p. 63). Subsequent reviews were straightforwardly hostile. Liu summarizes three which unexpectedly appeared in 1960, reactions to Buck’s 1950s writings about China after the founding of The People’s Republic in 1949. Their charges against Buck are reminiscent of those brought by George Orwell against Dickens. They included: Buck’s attribution of China’s pre-Communist misery to ‘poverty, famine, diseases and ignorance’ while ignoring its structural cause—native feudal oppression aided by foreign imperialism; secondly, they attributed what they described as Buck’s proposed solution to this misery—the fusion through intermarriage of Chinese feudalism and Western liberalism—to her ignorance of the only real solution: proletarian revolution; thirdly, they argued that Buck unfairly portrayed Chinese Communists as cruel

and heartless, particularly in comparison with members of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party). All these charges against Buck were summarized succinctly in the 1972 letter refusing her application to enter China:

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. (Liu 1994, p. 57)

—the most contemptuous if not the final word on Buck by a Chinese reader.

It is not known whether the author of this letter, a minor official in the Chinese Embassy in Canada, had in fact read anything by Pearl Buck. It is unlikely. Conn suggests that Buck's erasure from Chinese intellectual life was assisted by the personal enmity of Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Zedong (Conn, p. 374) who promoted a simple message about Buck to any Chinese who might have wanted to read her. The novelist Anchee Min records that

I was ordered to denounce Pearl Buck in China. The year was 1971. I was a teenager attending the Shanghai 51 Middle School. Trying to gain international support for rejecting Buck's China entry visa (to accompany President Nixon on his visit), Madame Mao organized a national campaign to criticize Buck as an "American cultural imperialist." I followed the order and never questioned whether Madame Mao was being truthful. (Min 2010, p. 277)

What is known is that only with the introduction of the Chinese government's open-door policy in the late 1980s (Yao in Cole and Haddad 2019a, p. 245) did Buck's writings become available again in China and the subject of study by new generations of Chinese readers and critics. Yao, who offers a post-graduate course on Pearl Buck at Nanjing Normal University, taking up the story of Buck's reception in China where Liu left off, cites recent translations of Buck's work into Chinese as evidence of her increasing reputation in his country:

No longer labelled as "an owl" or "a vanguard of the cultural invasion of American imperialism," as she was accused of being in the 1960s, she is regarded as a supportive friend of the Chinese people, a great novelist who

treats Chinese subjects well, a scholar of the Chinese novel, a committed social activist, and a cultural “bridge” who devoted her entire life to intercultural understanding and ultimately the well-being of humankind. (Yao 2019a, p. 249)

—a reaction which might have touched Pearl Buck greatly, signalling as it does her affectionate and admiring welcome home to the country of her heart—at last. She might also have been touched by the efflorescence of twenty-first Chinese scholarship about her. Yao’s important review of this scholarship (Yao 2019b) suggests that it has continued to facilitate Buck’s growing reputation in China in three main ways. The scholarship has: (a) identified Buck as a writer with greater breadth than previously thought; (b) suggested that all Buck’s writings, non-fiction as well as fiction, deserve study through emerging methods of critical inquiry; and (c) continued to restore Buck’s image from under the deformations imposed by the compliant organs of the Mao-era CCP. Examples of (a), Yao suggests, include the suggestion (2009) of Zhang Ziqing (who refers to Buck as ‘our beloved friend’) that all Buck’s work should be translated into Chinese including two novels critical of the People’s Republic—*Letter from Peking* (1957) and *The Three Daughters of Madame Liang* (1969) since only with all her work in view can a just estimate of it—from a Chinese perspective—be made (Yao 2019b). In 2015 (the seventieth anniversary of the end of Chinese war of resistance against Japan) Yao himself highlighted another previously unappreciated aspect of Buck’s breadth. Yao’s international academic conference in Zhenjiang entitled ‘Pearl Buck and the Anti-Japanese War’ focussed on Buck’s support for China, exemplified in her novel *Dragon Seed*; after the conference Yao also hosted the ‘Pearl S. Buck Column’ of *The Journal of Jiangsu University* with additional contributions by Lu Jiande and Guo Yingjian: their discussion topics included Buck’s firm support of wartime China and her narrative approaches to the anti-Japanese war (Yao 2019b). In this context Yao has also emphasized the research carried out by Chinese scholars into Buck’s writing about countries other than China—*The Living Reed* (1963), for example, which Yao describes as ‘an epic’ about Korea (Yao 2019b). Continuing the theme of Buck’s previously unidentified breadth of subject, Yao cites Zhang Chunlei’s (2005) research into Buck’s large corpus of short stories which Yao praises for their profundity: Zhang’s paper describes the careful structural patterns of these stories, such as the conflict between old and new ideas, between love and hate, and between

everyday ordinary life and the intrusion into it of the extraordinary. Zhang also argues, according to Yao, that beneath these surface patterns we can glimpse Buck's own deep psychological structure, her cultural position in transitional times, her love for Chinese people and her admiration of the Chinese novel (Yao 2019b).

Continuing to produce evidence for Chinese scholarship's exploration of the breadth of Buck's work Yao (2019b) cites the interest of scholars like Tang Yangfang in Buck's non-fictional explorations (as in *China Past and Present*) of Chinese culture and history, plus research into Buck's writings about Chinese fiction (Yao 2011), especially her translations—which brings Yao to his next two themes: the expansion of Chinese critical enquiry, enabling new insights into Buck from approaches such as feminist, post-colonial and comparative literature; plus, lastly, the importance of Pearl S. Buck as a figure in recent and contemporary Chinese history. From an English-speaking Sinophile perspective the question raised by Wang Yingguo (2003)—whether or not Buck should be included in the history of twentieth-century Chinese literature—is heart-warming, as is Yao's point that Buck has now been compared with important modern Chinese writers such as Lu Xun, Bing Xin, Lao She and Shen Congwen, as well as Mo Yan, the 2012 Nobel Laureate. The overall impression of a reader even only casually acquainted with modern Chinese literary scholarship about Pearl Buck is that she has acquired something approaching revered status in at least parts of the Chinese academy.

Yao suggests (2019b) that the efflorescence of twenty-first Chinese research into Buck marks the fourth stage of her reception in that country. The first three stages of Buck's critical reception in the United States—from admiration to contempt to measured evaluation—were not so different from the first three stages of her reception in China; the fourth stage, if it can be so described, I will mention shortly. An early review (signed 'E.G.') in an American journal described the experience of reading Buck's first novel, *East Wind, West Wind* as one of the most moving experiences in one's life (E.G. 1930, p. 506)—a view given weight five years later by the English novelist Phyllis Bentley who, reviewing Buck's output to date, including 'that miniature masterpiece, *The Mother*', asserted that

for the interest of her chosen material, the sustained high level of her technical skill, and the frequent universality of her conceptions, Mrs. Buck is entitled to take rank as a considerable artist. To read her novels is to

gain not merely knowledge of China but wisdom about life. (Bentley 1935, p. 800)

E.G.'s admiring early view of Buck, reinforced by Bentley's article in Britain, was joined by the responses of common readers—those 'private people', as Virginia Woolf described them, with whom Samuel Johnson had

rejoice[d] to concur - for by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to [literary] honours. (quoted Woolf 1925, p. 1)

The recommendation of Dorothy Canfield Fisher (that highly uncommon reader) to other Book of the Month Club judges that they choose *The Good Earth*—'I was just electrified by the quality of it' (Conn, p. 123)—resulted in *The Good Earth*'s becoming the bestselling book in the United States in both 1931 and 1932 (Conn, p. 123). Buck's further prestigious accolades in the 1930s included the 1938 Nobel Prize for Literature (and before that the Pulitzer prize and Dean Howells medal (Spurling, loc. 3286)). Her detractors, however, were not far behind. Conn reports that Buck's

Asian subjects, her prose style, her gender, and her tremendous popularity offended virtually every one of the constituencies that divided up the [American] literary 1930s. Marxists, Agrarians, Chicago formalists, New York intellectuals, literary nationalists, and New Humanists had little enough in common, but they could all agree that Pearl Buck had no place in any of their creeds and canons. (Conn, p. 210)

and Conn cites William Faulkner's 1949 comment on the Nobel prize: 'I don't want it', since he would rather not find himself in the same company as 'Mrs Chinahand Buck' (Conn, p. 210). The Cold War, impacting every area of American life, did not bypass Buck. Spurling summarizes: 'in the 1950s she was stigmatized as a suspected Communist in the United States at the same time as her books were banned in Communist China' (p. 255). However, before her death she was to have had her books selected by the Book of the Month Club fifteen times in total (Conn in Lipscomb et al. 1994, p. 1), a sign of the pleasing indifference of American common readers to critical orthodoxy or political pressure.

The first single-authored, critically orthodox (in its time), book-length attempt in the United States to evaluate Buck seriously as a writer appeared in 1963, ten years before her death, marking the beginning of her critical reevaluation in the country of her birth. (A second edition appeared in 1980.) Paul A. Doyle presented himself as one giving an evaluatively measured view of Buck—‘her work does not deserve the disdain that many literary pundits have heaped upon it. On the other hand, her books do not merit the uncritical adulation that they have often received’ (Doyle 1980, p. 8)—and he emphasized the seriousness of his approach by discussing her ‘Naturalism’ (or was it ‘Realism?’) together with that of Zola, Hemingway and Dreiser (40). He also paid Buck the high compliment of applying to *The Good Earth* Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*:

The principal object...was to choose incidents and situations from common life...to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature (quoted Doyle, p. 37)

—arguing that ‘the faraway coloring of *The Good Earth* lights the familiar elements with new freshness and appeal. Realism and romanticism blend in just the right proportions’ (Doyle, p. 37)—a view at odds with that of Peter Conn, who remarks that while Buck possesses ‘a gift for making the strange seem familiar’ she lacked the gift possessed by the strongest writers, ‘of making the familiar seem strange’ (Conn 1996, p. 380). Both Doyle and Conn agree, however, that Buck’s work declined over the decades. ‘In the 1930s she produced several fine books, after this decade she never again reached the same level of achievement’ (Doyle, p. 92); ‘I will argue...that a dozen or so of her books, mostly from the 1930s and 1940s...ought to be valued more highly than they are’ (Conn xvii). Conn’s indispensable ‘cultural biography’ of Buck was published in 1996 and continued Doyle’s quest: to provide a measured response to Buck’s huge output seen (in Conn’s case) against the detailed background of her extraordinary life. And, although Conn’s book remains key in encouraging the rehabilitation of Pearl Buck’s reputation as an American writer, it emerged as part of the growing consensus among some Chinese and American academics that Buck deserved a new approach acknowledging

her important role in building bridges between the country of her birth and the country of her heart: that she was in some sense a transnational writer, and it is this which might be described as the fourth stage of Buck's critical reception in the United States. Conn had contributed a paper—'Pearl S. Buck and American Literary Culture'—to a centennial symposium in 1992 at Buck's old college discussing her work (published two years later as *The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck: Essays Presented at a Centennial Symposium, Randolph-Macon Woman's College, March 26–28, 1992*), and that event, featuring presentations by Chinese and American scholars, was succeeded not only by Conn's biography but also by the international scholar Kang Liao's 1997 book *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Bridge across the Pacific*. This study was an important multi-cultural indicator of the future turn English language Pearl S. Buck studies would take and was followed by other books and articles focussing on Buck as a transnational writer, one of the most important of which was Richard Jean So's 2010 article arguing for the importance of Buck as a facilitator of the emergence of the Asian-American subject both in her work towards the repeal of the 1943 Chinese Exclusion Acts and in her writing. (So's revelation of Buck's reasons for choosing to translate *Shui Hu Zhuan* rather than other classic Chinese novels was an essential part of his argument.) By working 'at the interstices of U.S. and Chinese cultures in order to redefine democracy's meaning Buck would write this concept into existence [...] in *The Good Earth*, which constituted the basis of an emerging, trans-Pacific literary sphere' (So, p. 87) So contrasted his argument with that proposed by Karen Leong which 'situate[d] Buck within the tradition of U.S. Orientalism' (So, p. 88). Other work resonating with So's transnational approach to Buck included Stuart Christie's article describing Buck

as both the outsider - inside a particular Chinese cultural tradition as well as an insider - outside the tradition of Chinese fictionalized historiography (the modern *xiaoshuo*) which allowed for the birth of a globalized 'China' in the English-language novel (Christie 2010)

as well as three 2018 articles emerging from a forum held at Nanjing University. King-Kok Cheung compared 'the intellectual and political affinit[ies]' of Pearl Buck and the Chinese writer Bing Xin, suggesting that both were 'precursors of Chinese American subjectivity'; Guo Yingjian explored 'the relationship between Buck and Asia from an inter-Asian

and transpacific perspective to better understand Buck's global perspective in her writing'; and, thirdly, Yao Junwei discussed Buck's non-fiction in order to 'affirm her "spirit of cultural dialogism" in her presentation of Chinese people and culture, a laudable alternative to the Orientalist epistemology denounced by Edward Said' (Cheung et al. 2018). These three articles were succeeded a year later by a book with contributions by several Buck scholars of Asian/American provenance, enlarging the transpacific, transnational and transdisciplinary focus of Buck studies. *Beyond the Good Earth: Transnational Perspectives on Pearl S. Buck* (Cole and Haddad 2019) included chapters by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, in one of which—'Gateways into *The Good Earth*: Myth, Archetype and Symbol in Pearl S. Buck's Classic Novel'—Carol Breslin returned to Doyle's early critique of Buck, quoting with approval his assertion that '*The Good Earth* gives to its readers the sense of being "shaped by eternities"' (quoted Breslin p. 228). This theme Breslin discusses in her ground breaking exploration of the dimensions represented by O-Lan in that novel: ground breaking but also building on the work of earlier writers on the subject of women in Buck's fiction, notably by Gao Xiongya (2000), Zhou Haipeng (2010) and Gayreen Lyngdoh (2015), the last an illuminating study of the uses to which Pearl Buck and Amy Tan put their women characters. The amount of critical work generated by Pearl Buck's writing goes some way to answering the question with which I started: what, after all, are Pearl Buck's stories worth? Well, commanding the attention of many people across the world, both professional critics and 'common readers' indicates that they are worth something, to put it no more highly than that.

In this book I have not asked what Pearl Buck's stories are worth. 'Literature is transmitted being', Philip Davis states, and in what follows I have tried to learn from the being Pearl Buck transmitted into her fiction, by trying to see 'with her eyes [and] feel with her heart [and] think with her mind' (Davis, p. 2.). I have done so because, as Peter Conn and Hilary Spurling have vividly shown, Pearl Buck's was an extraordinary life. In what follows I emphasize that this is not only because of where it was lived but because of how. Spurling, without appearing to disagree, quotes Helen Foster Snow's comment that 'Pearl had a very good mind but she didn't use it' (loc. 4050). In this book I argue that, on the contrary, Buck's use of her magnificent mind to illuminate what she saw and felt resulted in her transmitting a being into her writing by which readers (at least those 'uncontaminated by literary prejudices') can be guided, from

which they can learn and in whose presence they may find delight. This book traces the transmission of Buck's being—primarily as recorded in her fiction—into her struggle with Christianity (Chapter 1), into her meditations on Chinese life and thought during tumultuous times (Chapter 2); into the uses to which she put her voluminous reading (Chapter 3); into her battle to adjust to life in America (Chapter 4); and into the final phase of her life after the death of her second husband (Chapter 5.) This book is a work of literary criticism not biography, and I use the latter only to facilitate the former. I have said that I have not asked what Pearl Buck's stories are worth. But by the end of the book it should be clear that I think they are worth a great deal, especially when read to mute for a while the current moronic xenophobic roars from both sides of the Atlantic.

A word on the title. Two words recur in Buck's fiction: life and death, used both literally and metaphorically. *The Battle of Life* seems apt because (a) it was chosen by her beloved Charles Dickens for one of his own stories; (b) because for Pearl Buck her own life was indeed a battle; and (c) because both Dickens' story of that name and Pearl Buck's childhood share an archetypal image: a subterranean horror zone. In Dickens' story, the buried physical fragments left by a terrible battle fought long before sometimes erupt into the green living English countryside above them; in Spurling's biography we first encounter the child Pearl Comfort Sydenstricker among the tiny graves she has made for fragments of unwanted children:

sometimes, as I wandered alone over the Chinese hills, I came upon strange and tragic fragments of[...] little bodies – most often of little girls, but sometimes of very small boys who had died of some illness in families too poor for funerals, or of babies who had been born dead. [...] Sometimes I buried only a bit of a hand or a skull or even only a bone, but sometimes it was more. They were always children and always very little ones, and I buried them with flowers, or if it were winter with a twig of evergreen or a bit of bright tile or a pretty pebble. (Harris vol. 2 pp 74, 75, quoted Spurling [loc. 4392])

Spurling argues that this image—of the child burying bone fragments—is a powerful visual metaphor for Buck's burying other memories too painful to be resurrected, although at times these too surface in her writing 'like a dismembered hand or leg' (p. xii). In what follows I imply that Buck's control over her buried life was greater than that: that her 'memories,

ideas, imaginative transformations' (Davis, p. 2) emerged in more bodily shape; that, for example, the completed character Ran Colfax in Buck's last novel, *The Eternal Wonder*, emerged as the result of her long meditation on how even a desperately sorrowful life might reconstitute itself creatively. Such a life was also Pearl Buck's.

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