

PEARL BUCK AND THE CHINESE NOVEL

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ON DECEMBER 11, 1938 PEARL BUCK WAS FORMALLY awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The citation read: "For rich and truly epic descriptions of Chinese peasant life, and masterpieces of biography." In the Academy's judgment, the decisive factor was not only the admirable biographies of her parents, but her depiction of the Chinese peasantry. Her Chinese novels are authentic in wealth of detail and rare insight. They recreate a region, a time, a people then little known and barely understood by Western readers. Today Pearl Buck is eminently famous the world over for her vivid accounts of China and its people.

Appropriately, in her formal acceptance speech, Mrs. Buck spoke of the Chinese novel and its influence upon her own philosophy of composition. There was no doubt that the term "Chinese novel" for her meant the traditional Chinese works of fiction, not the novels of contemporary Oriental writers strongly under foreign influence and somewhat ignorant of the riches of their own indigenous literature. She had selected the subject of the traditional Chinese novel for two reasons: first, her own concept of the novel is wholly Chinese; and, secondly, her belief that the Chinese novel possesses an illumination for the Western novel and for the Western novelist.

Her lecture was well received by the Nobel Committee. Direct, unassuming, convincing, it explored a lively and delightful subject. Indirectly, the lecture was an apology for the novels she had written. Devotees of Oriental literature read¹ her words with understanding and appreciation. Most literary critics and cultural historians found her lecture informative and memorable. A few critics, those who felt she was not quite worthy of the Nobel Prize and all it implies, turned a deaf ear. They were too busy grumbling that she was not equal to such international recognition to listen to what she had to say about the traditional Chinese novel and her own literary aspirations.

¹The lecture was delivered on December 12, 1938 before the Swedish Academy and was repeated as a Phi Beta Kappa address at Randolph-Macon College, Lynchburg, Virginia on April 22, 1939. Shortly thereafter it was published under the imprint of the John Day Company, New York.

Some of these same critics had complained, in 1930, that Sinclair Lewis was also undeserving of the Swedish Academy's award. At least he was truly an American writer, they now agreed; but Pearl Buck — the only American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature — was American in name only. Her subject matter and even her places of residence were so completely Chinese. Then the pendulum swung the other way. True, she had written of Chinese life, but had she really caught the reality of the Orient, its people and their way of life?

Too many captious critics chewed on Pearl Buck. Certain adverse judgments maintained that she had written too few significant works, that even the best of what she had accomplished was not worthy of worldwide acclaim. Despite the hearty commendation of such well-known literary figures as Sinclair Lewis, Carl Van Doren, and Malcolm Cowley,² Mrs. Buck almost came to regard her own novels as aesthetically wanting. The many regrettable attacks upon the corpus of her writings, however, did produce interesting side effects.

Attack prompted defense. To understand the wellsprings of her own art, her creativity, she had to examine in depth and to explain at length the scope and the limits of her work within the tradition of the Chinese novel. Now that more than twenty-five years have elapsed since her lecture on the Chinese novel before the Nobel Committee, her judgments can be dispassionately reconsidered, objectively commented upon, and critically evaluated. Her conception of the Chinese novel, moreover, can be utilized as a yardstick in an estimation of what Pearl Buck has attempted to do in her fiction, how well she has succeeded, and what value should be placed upon her literary endeavors.

II

During a long and productive life, Pearl Buck has written over seventy books, more than 200 articles, and numerous short stories.³ Ten of her novels deal with America, one with Japan, one with India, and one with Korea. For the most part, her fiction treats of China and the Chinese.⁴

² Malcolm Cowley, for example, maintains that the Swedish Academy and the general reading public are right in their appraisal of Pearl Buck's works and that her supercilious critics are wrong. He suggests, moreover, that her popular appeal disturbs too many critics who prefer to believe that art is only for the fortunate few. Cowley has stated such views in his "Wang Lung's Children," *New Republic*, vol. 99 (May 10, 1939), pp. 24-25.

³ Paul A. Doyle's *Pearl S. Buck* (New York, 1965), a critical study accompanied by and related to the major events in her life, is the best treatment of her work. The only thing missing from Professor Doyle's excellent study is a consideration of Pearl Buck's short stories, but this he has covered in his "Pearl S. Buck's Short Stories: A Survey," *English Journal*, vol. 55 (January 1966), pp. 62-68.

⁴ The most complete bibliography of Pearl Buck's Chinese novels is that of Tung-Li Yuan. See his *China in Western Literature* (New Haven, 1958), pp. 441-443.

Her proclivity for the East rather than the West is mainly a consequence of her many years in China and her love and understanding of its people.

Although born in the United States, she was taken to China by her missionary parents, Absolom and Caroline Sydenstricker, when she was but a few months old. She spent most of her early years in a small bungalow situated atop a hill which overlooked the crowded city of Chinkiang and the Yangtse River. Her mother taught her to read and write, and managed to instill in her daughter-pupil a lasting affection for words. Her father provided an important stimulus to her youthful imagination. Upon his return home after a trip to some remote missionary station, he would often relate his adventures. His experiences beguiled her. So, too, did the Taoist and the Buddhist legends she heard from her amah. The old nurse also spun tales of the Tai-Ping Rebellion, through which she had lived.

In her childhood, Pearl Buck determined to become a writer, the roots of her literary career being nourished by her mother, her father, and her amah. When she was ten, she began to write her first stories. Several of these juvenalia were published in the *Shanghai Mercury*, an English-language newspaper. Their inspiration was wholly Chinese; for in her youth Pearl Buck knew far more about China than she knew about the country of her birth. "I lived with Chinese people," she relates in one of her autobiographies, "and spoke their tongue before I spoke my own, and their children were my first friends."⁵ She would daily roam the hills and valleys of Chinkiang, talking with anyone and everyone she met, learning about a way of life possibly never experienced before by a Western child. The beauty of the countryside, the individuality of its people, the day-by-day routine of their lives became a part of her youth that indelibly printed itself upon her memory.

At fifteen she was sent by her parents to a boarding school in Shanghai for her formal education; here she still loved to converse with anyone on any worth-while subject. One of her chief pleasures and interests, Mrs. Buck readily states, has always been people; and since she spent so many years among them, she still delights in the Chinese. At times, she identifies so closely with them that her Sinophilia is not difficult to understand. She speaks the Chinese language and fathoms the Oriental ethos. She has seen myriad aspects of Chinese life, having lived in large cities in China and in towns so small that she and her family were the only Occidentals. She has first-hand knowledge of famines, floods, and the battles of the warlords, as well as a familiarity with the everyday existence of the ordinary Chinese family. From such a background, Pearl Buck was well equipped to draw time after time for the substance of her fiction.

⁵ *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record* (New York, 1954), p. 20.

There is so much of China in her books that students of Oriental literature have established different classifications of her Chinese novels. One of the best⁶ divides her work into three categories: (1) China at home, (2) China in the intellectual conflict with the West, and (3) China at war with Japan.

Despite the limitations of such a classification, Pearl Buck's Chinese novels can be subsumed under these three divisions. Such novels as *The Good Earth* (1931), *Sons* (1932), *The Mother* (1933), *Pavilion of Women* (1947), and *The Bondmaid* (1949) conveniently fall within the first category. *East Wind: West Wind* (1930), *The First Wife* (1933), *The Young Revolutionist* (1934), *A House Divided* (1935), *The Exile* (1936), *Fighting Angel* (1937), and *Kinfolk* (1949) fit the second division. The best known novels of the third category are *The Patriot* (1939), *Dragon Seed* (1941), *The Promise* (1943), and *China Flight* (1943).

Although the above-named titles are probably Pearl Buck's finest novels, they have received scant attention — with the exception of *The Good Earth* — from critics. Some consolation, perhaps, can be taken from the fact that neither has the traditional Chinese novel been the recipient of critical acclaim. In China, art and the novel have been dichotomous subjects. The novel was hardly ever considered *belles lettres*, nor did the novelist look upon himself as an artist.

Even the term for story — “hsiao shuo” — denotes something slight and lacking in value. The term for novel — “ts'ang p'ien hsiao shuo” — roughly designating something longer than a story, still connotes something unimportant, insignificant, and useless. The pejorative connotations of the Chinese term for novel extend beyond its etymology. Historically, this literary genre has also fared poorly. The *Ssu Ku Chuen Shu*, for example, makes not a single reference to the novel. This vast compilation of Chinese literature, which was drawn up in 1772 by the order of the emperor Ch'ien Lung, does not list the novel in the encyclopedia of its literature proper. Yao Hai, too, ignored the novel when, in 1776, he enumerated the various divisions of literary art. This great scholar categorized essays, government commentaries, biographies, poetry, history, epigrams, even funeral eulogies and epitaphs — but no novels.

Many are the reasons for the ignoble history of the indigenous Chinese novel. One important consideration, undoubtedly, lies in the interdiction of Confucius: fiction was supposed to have an immoral influence, especially in turning the mind away from philosophy and virtue. Pearl Buck, incidentally, was first introduced to this Confucian view of fiction early in her youth.

⁶ Peter Venne, *China und die Chinesen in der neuen und amerikanischen Literatur* (Zurich, 1951), p. 32.

One of her tutors, a Confucianist himself, often expressed unfavorable comments about fiction. Pearl Buck's missionary parents seconded the Confucian view that novel reading or writing was hardly a worth-while endeavor.

The influence of Confucius on the writing of fictional prose narratives cannot be overemphasized, a consequence of which can be found in the supercilious attitude of some scholars. They felt that the genre had a too common origin, that its chief appeal was to the non-scholarly mind. The tide, however, has changed. Today most modern Chinese intellectuals, under the influence of Western literature,⁷ no longer regard the writing of novels as a trifling pastime, although they may still have slight regard for their own indigenous works of fiction.

Many Chinese intellectuals probably have a greater interest in Western fiction than in their own. Pearl Buck, on the other hand, has often expressed a greater interest in Oriental fiction. Her understanding and appreciation of the Chinese novel is a consequence of both scholarship and general familiarity. Her scholarship was first made evident in an address she delivered to the Convocation of the North China Union Language School in 1933. In an erudite lecture on "The Sources of the Chinese Novel," she ranged over the development of the novel, East and West, and their differences in meaning and purpose. Several key aspects of this lecture nucleated portions of her acceptance speech before the Noble Academy in 1938.

One theme Mrs. Buck emphasized before the Academy was relative to the natural growth of Chinese fiction. "Happily for the Chinese novel," she noted, "it was not considered by the scholars as literature."⁸ It did remain unfettered by pedantic norms. "The Chinese novel was free," she continued. "It grew as it liked out of its own soil, the common people, nurtured by that heartiest of sunshine, popular approval, and untouched by the cold and frosty winds of the scholar's art."⁹

The excessive freedom of growth enjoyed by the Chinese novel accounts for its popular appeal, but lack of critical, scholarly direction may be responsible for some of its deficiencies. Chinese novels, according to Western standards, suffer from obvious defects. Chief among the shortcomings are those which also prevailed in the writings of many eighteenth-century English works of fiction. The traditional Chinese novel, like many of the inferior English novels of the late Neo-Classical period, was seldom planned from beginning to end: it just grew and grew with incident added to incident, necessitating the introduction of one new character after another.

⁷ Western influence upon Chinese literature is covered succinctly by Lai Ming in his *History of Chinese Literature* (New York, 1964), pp. 346-400.

⁸ *The Chinese Novel* (New York, 1939), p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

Unlike the English novel, which literary historians like to date as beginning in 1740 with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, the beginnings of the Chinese novel are difficult to trace. Precisely when and how it arose remains unknown. There are, fortunately, a few extant manuscripts for scholars to study. These scripts, the "hua-pen" or *story-texts*, indicate that the roots of the Chinese novel extend back to tenth-century story tellers. During the Northern Sung dynasty (960-1127), storytelling reached the proportions of a vogue with recitations in tea houses and on lowly city streets.

Professional storytellers spun tales, recorded some, and delivered them to available audiences. Legends, myths, romance, intrigue, and war formed the framework of their narratives. Characters were etched in. Fascinating individuals were created and made to run the gamut of various experiences. Their motivation was wholly external; they lacked interior causation. The English novel, however, even in its embryonic development delved into the minds of its chief characters. This the Chinese novel failed to do. The writer of the typical Chinese saga seldom thought it necessary to probe the internal struggles of his protagonists.¹⁰

Psychological penetration of character and detailed analyses were not considered important by the Oriental teller of tales. Their audience did not expect it, and the storyteller was most concerned with pleasing his audience. If they were not pleased, they would hardly remain to listen, nor feel disposed to contribute a general collection which invariably accompanied a recitation. To please an audience was most important, and this required definite techniques. Technique merely for technique's sake was not indulged in, however, for there was no desire on the part of the novelist to be recognized as a stylist or a literary technician. Story was more important than style per se, and external motivating forces were preferred to character analyses.

The professional storyteller would usually forego anything that did not embellish the framework of his tale, while yet adding certain touches and flourishes in his characterization in order to make each major character more appealing and unique. As for plot development, the author was omniscient, never allowing his presence to intrude upon the narrative. Above all, he desired "tse ran" — that is, a naturalness, a flexibility, a seemingly effortless presentation of material. The Chinese novelist sought to be, in Pearl Buck's words, "wholly at the command of the material flowing through him."¹¹

Of the hundred upon hundreds of narratives that were written over the centuries, most have been lost, discarded, or simply forgotten. Three

¹⁰ Cf. John Bishop, "Some Limitations of Chinese Fiction," *Far Eastern Quarterly*, vol. 15 (February 1956), pp. 239-47.

¹¹ *The Chinese Novel*, p. 31.

Chinese novels, in particular, have never been forgotten. The average Chinese, according to Mrs. Buck, usually responds to the term "ts'ang p'ien hsiao shuo" by thinking of *Shui Hu Chuan*,¹² *San Kuo*, and *Hung Lou Meng*. Quite early in her life Mrs. Buck read these three novels. They impressed and delighted her, and influenced her own concepts of fiction. "It is the Chinese and not the American novel which has shaped my own efforts in writing," she has always maintained. "My earliest knowledge of story, of how to tell and write stories came to me in China."¹³

So imbued was Pearl Buck with the Chinese novel that she even employed a large number of clichés in the writing of her first novel. As she explains in a short article entitled, "The Writing of *East Wind: West Wind*,"¹⁴ the hackneyed phrases had been culled from English novels she was especially fond of; and since she knew that in Chinese literature it was considered a mark of rhetorical elegance to employ the same beautiful diction and phraseology of great writers, the over-used and devitalized English expressions found their way into *East Wind: West Wind*. Upon the advice of an American publisher she consented to revise her manuscript, to replace all bromides with original expressions.

The cliché-problem was quickly taken care of, but other more serious shortcomings in her fiction attributable to the Chinese novel could not be so easily discerned and remedied. To hold the Chinese novel culpable for the defects in Pearl Buck's fiction serves no purpose; however, the converse is also true: since it was the influence and the inspiration of the Chinese novel that helped her reach her greatest literary achievements.

III

Pearl Buck may be somewhat too melodramatic and pollyannish for some readers and too didactic and socially-minded for others, yet most readers are forced to agree that several of her novels are minor masterpieces. Mainly because she is an "insider" rather than an "outsider" in the writing of her Chinese fiction, her Oriental characters seem real and her settings authentic. "It would be hard for me to declare which side of the world is more my own," she once wrote. "I am loyal to Asia as I am loyal to my own land."¹⁵ To this day, more than thirty years after having taken up permanent residence in the United States, she still thinks occasionally

¹² The best translation of this novel is Pearl Buck's *All Men are Brothers* (London, 1933). Typical of the reviews her translation merited is that of Mark Van Doren, who wrote: "Mrs. Buck . . . has performed her gigantic labor with felicity, intelligence, and a never failing power, and has added to English literature one of the classic translations." *Nation*, vol. 137 (Nov. 1933), p. 542.

¹³ *The Chinese Novel*, p. 11.

¹⁴ *The Colophon*, Part 12, No. 6 (December 1932), pp. 1-4.

¹⁵ Pearl Buck and Carlos Romulo, *Friend to Friend* (New York, 1958), p. 126

in Chinese and admits to having a slight difficulty now and again with English idiomatic usage.

The Chinese reality in her fiction cannot be over-emphasized. Without it, she would be just another Western writer exploiting Oriental themes in her books. With it, her narratives, her characters, her locales are so completely Chinese that the reader feels convinced he is experiencing life in ancient China. For literary critics, this Chinese reality is important only if it is fictionalized successfully by a novelist. The sights, the smells, the joys and the sorrows of the Chinese people, their customs, their traditions — all give reality to Pearl Buck's fiction and delight to her devotees.

Of the more than 250 Western novelists who have used China as backdrop, she is quantitatively and qualitatively the most outstanding. Although Maugham's *On a Chinese Screen*, Hobart's *Oil for the Lamps of China*, Hilton's *Lost Horizon*, and Cronin's *The Keys of the Kingdom* are all significant literary achievements, even taken collectively these leading British and American novels of China and her people do not surpass the works of Pearl Buck. Most Western writers, moreover, seem to exhaust their knowledge and interest in the Orient with a single book, but not Pearl Buck. She has written almost fifty volumes that treat exclusively of China and the Chinese.

The Good Earth is undisputably Pearl Buck's best Chinese novel and one of her outstanding literary achievements. Published on March 2, 1931, this novel became an immediate success. For almost two full years, it remained on best-seller lists. Of universal appeal, it attracted translators and soon was available in over thirty languages. Within one year of its publication it was dramatized and made into a first-rate motion picture.

This story of Chinese peasant life is a powerful epic of the soil, in particular of one man's pride in and love for his land. The narrative is simple and is easily recalled by anyone who has read the novel. Especially memorable, perhaps, is its beginning when the earth is good to Wang Lung, a young farmer who is married to O-Lan, an honest, faithful, though plain woman who shares his life and bears him sons. There is no forgetting how Wang enjoys peace and prosperity on his hard-worked land. Then, with a crop failure, comes dire poverty. Famine forces him to take his family south to beg for food.

Disaster follows disaster, but Wang Lung never relinquishes his land or his dreams. Eventually he can return to his good earth. From assiduous labor he reaps prosperity. He builds a great manor, obtains servants and slaves, hoards silver, and brings concubines into his household. His every dream is fulfilled. Only his sons prove a tragic disappointment. He has given them life, care, an education; supplied them with wealth and wives;

but not one of them has his father's love for the soil. No one who has read *The Good Earth* is likely to forget the poignant scene at the end of the novel when, over the dying body of their father, Wang Lung's sons make plans to sell his land and move as rich men to the city.

Virtually all critics greeted *The Good Earth* with praise. They commented particularly upon the novel's Oriental quality. There had been many melodramatic stories about Shanghai, but *The Good Earth* was the first sympathetic novel to reveal the interior of China to the West. "This is China as it has never before been portrayed in fiction," explained one critic, "the China that Chinese live in and as the Chinese live."¹⁶ Another reviewer wrote: "Though I may never see a rice-field, I shall always feel that I have lived for a long time in China."¹⁷ A critic for the *London Times* stated, "*The Good Earth* never fails to hold the attention, and conveys a convincing effect of presenting a true picture of Chinese life."¹⁸

It almost seemed as if the critics were echoing one another on the essential Orientalism of the novel. Florence Ayscough perhaps expressed it best when she added: "A beautiful, beautiful book. At last we read, in the pages of a novel, of the real people of China. They seem to spring from their roots, to develop and mature even as their own rice springs from a jade green seed bed and comes to its golden harvest."¹⁹ Drawing upon her own experiences in China, she continued: "I have lived for many years in such a country and among such people as Mrs. Buck describes, and as I read her pages I smell once more the sweet scent of bean flowers opening in the spring, the acrid odor of nightsoil poured lavishly on the soil during the growing season, and I feel again the blazing sunshine of the harvest months; all as it was . . . in the Yangtze Valley."²⁰

An occasional critic was not so ebullient as the majority. One or two even had harsh words about Mrs. Buck's treatment of persons, places, and things Oriental. "None of her major descriptions is correct," complained Younghill Kang, "except in minor details."²¹ Kang found little in the work to admire other than "technique and much artistic sincerity." The novel struck him as "discouraging" because it "works toward confusion, not clarification. Its implied comparison between Western and Eastern ways is unjust to the latter."²²

Kang could not find fault with the clear, effective story line of *The Good Earth*, nor with its appropriate prose style. Instead, hypercritical of

¹⁶ Nathaniel Peffer, *New York Herald-Tribune Books* (March 1, 1931), p. 1.

¹⁷ Nancy Evans, *Bookman*, vol. 73 (May 1931), p. 324.

¹⁸ *London Times Literary Supplement*, April 30, 1931, p. 344.

¹⁹ *Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 7 (March 21, 1931), p. 676.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *New Republic*, vol. 67 (July 1, 1931), p. 185.

²² *Ibid.*

what he believed was an unfavorable depiction of Oriental life, he questioned the reality of a Wang Lung. A peasant such as Wang Lung, Kang complained, could not improve his social standing through farming and dedication to his land. Born a peasant, Wang would have to die a peasant, since there was no way he could reasonably rise above his milieu.²³ Kang also maintained that Wang and his family behave without propriety and with a frankness abhorrent to the Oriental. At the core of Kang's animadversion to *The Good Earth*, perhaps, was his refusal to accept Wang Lung, a peasant, as the hero of the work. Had Wang been a philosopher or intellectual, Kang's reaction to him might have been different; but, then so too would have been the entire novel.

Kang's criticism of *The Good Earth* was wide off the mark but could readily be accepted by Pearl Buck as a minority opinion. She was, however, somewhat disturbed by the caustic and thoroughly unreasonable views of another Oriental intellectual, Kiang Kang-Hu, who attacked her novels in an article published in *New York Times*.²⁴ Believing that Westerners should not write about Chinese life, Kang-Hu excoriated Pearl Buck for doing so. Her not being Chinese would necessarily mean that she would misrepresent and distort all things. Accordingly, he scrutinized *The Good Earth* for errors in fact and judgment. Oblivious of the fact that he was judging works of fiction, he read her novels as though they were socio-historical tomes.

In his article, Kang-Hu caviled at such incidentals in *The Good Earth* as the slaughter of cows for food, the making of tea by sprinkling leaves upon water, the likelihood of medicines being made from a tiger's heart or a dog's tooth. He carped over questions of suicide and religious matters. To point out what a critic believes to be errors is one thing, but to conclude that Mrs. Buck was guilty of an offence against the Chinese people is another. Obviously, Kiang Kang-Hu read things into and out of Pearl Buck's novels that are simply not there.

The *New York Times*, sensing the injustice of Kang-Hu's views, graciously allowed Pearl Buck to defend herself.²⁵ In her rebuttal she considered each of Kang-Hu's charges carefully and objectively. She defended herself brilliantly. Where he generalized, she gave specific references to local customs and peasant practices that she herself witnessed and which could easily be substantiated. Mrs. Buck acknowledged her fallibility: as

²³ Doan-Cao-Ly, on the contrary, in his *The Image of the Chinese Family in Pearl Buck's Novels* (Saigon, 1964), suggests that Wang Lung's family in *The Good Earth* and in the next two books of the same trilogy, namely *Sons* and *A House Divided*, constitute "a history of the rise and fall of many a family in China" (p. 28).

²⁴ "A Chinese Scholar's View of Mrs. Buck's Novels," *New York Times* (January 15, 1933), Section 5, pp. 2 and 19.

²⁵ "Mrs. Buck Replies to Her Chinese Critic," *New York Times* (January 15, 1933), Section 5, pp. 2 and 19.

a novelist she could easily be guilty of certain factual details, but she should not be reproved for the chimeras Kang-Hu claimed destroyed the fabric of all she had written. What possibly disturbed Kang-Hu most was that Pearl Buck had too realistically depicted the Chinese peasantry, and he preferred to think of peasants as non-existent in China. Could non-existent peasants really be worth all the attention expended upon them in *The Good Earth* and in Pearl Buck's other novels?

Younghill Kang and Kiang Kang-Hu are representative of certain Oriental intellectuals who prefer to think less than objectively of some of the reprehensible conditions existent in the China Pearl Buck chose to write about. Lin Yutang and the majority of Chinese intellectuals, however, defend the accuracy of *The Good Earth*.²⁶ If the novel is to be judged harshly, it cannot be condemned on the grounds that it lacks a true Chinese reality.

Possibly *The Good Earth* should be criticized because of poor characterization or faulty style. Characterization, after all, is an acid test for any novelist; yet Pearl Buck's characters, with the exceptions of a few subsidiary ones in her minor works, have been ingeniously created, carefully differentiated, and effectively dramatized in all sorts of conflicts. Her characters are embodied with both good and bad — but always credible — human qualities. True to life, they are neither idealized nor intrinsically evil. They behave the way they do not because they are moved in puppet-like fashion by their literary creator; their actions are a consequence of their inner nature reacting to and upon external forces. Wang Lung and his family are as real as any flesh and blood individuals who have ever lived in China.

Critics have not squabbled over Pearl Buck's characterization, and they cannot legitimately do so. In a study of Mrs. Buck's effectiveness as a novelist, Phyllis Bentley discusses the author's ability to create and manipulate characters. Pearl Buck, states Phyllis Bentley, is "equally successful with characters of every age, sex, type, and in the indication of differences between these various types. The war lord, the merchant, the decadent poet, the kitchen slave, the teahouse girl, the village mother, the learned lady, the petted child, the stormy adolescent, the farmer in his healthy prime, the dying old man — all these figures in her pages, and all have life and truth."²⁷

Miss Bentley even questions Pearl Buck's ability to handle congenital characterization. Does the novelist portray children as mechanical duplicates

²⁶ A thesis written at the University of Montreal in 1953 investigates in depth the Chinese reality in her fiction. See Jean Tong's *The China of Pearl Buck*, which confirms the majority opinion.

²⁷ "The Art of Pearl Buck," *English Journal*, vol. 24 (December 1935), pp. 794-95.

of their parents, or do they have no reasonable resemblance to them at all? The author of *The Good Earth* has managed to avoid both pitfalls; for her, each child is "an individual character . . . yet possessing the flesh of his parents' flesh and blood of their blood."²⁸ Pearl Buck's characters proved equal to every critical norm Miss Bentley devised. She maintains that unlike the majority of modern novelists Pearl Buck has a "Christ-like-all-embracing compassion for her characters."²⁹ Such a judgment may strike those unfamiliar with Mrs. Buck's ability to characterize as hyperbole. Zealous readers of Pearl Buck's fiction will tend to concur with most of Phyllis Bentley's adulatory remarks.

As for Pearl Buck's style, it has been designated biblical by some critics, Chinese by others. A biblical flavor can be found in her easy-flowing, dignified, and graceful narratives mainly because of her frequent use of conjunctive elements to link simple sentences. The Testament has undoubtedly had some influence upon her writing, but she once commented that her style "is not biblical, it is Chinese."³⁰ What she meant by her Chinese style she made clear by stating, "When I wrote in China of Chinese things about Chinese, I used the Chinese tongue. . . . The consequence is that when . . . writing about Chinese people the story spins itself in my mind entirely in the Chinese idioms, and I literally translate as I go."³¹

The more important question is not whether Mrs. Buck's style is biblical or Chinese, but whether it is effective. That her Chinese style is appropriate for her Chinese novels has been acknowledged by most critics. They concur that her style is an excellent vehicle for rich and genuine sentiments expressed in poignant terms. Her prose is unmarked by labored passages and rhetorical flourishes: it is always clear and central to her characterization. Only on occasion does her Chinese style fail her. One penetrating critic, for example, has remarked that *Sons* is not equal to *The Good Earth* because in its greater length and wordiness *Sons* "exposes the shortcomings of Mrs. Buck's workmanship as the stretching of a piece of cloth shows up defects in the weave. . . ."³²

Pearl Buck's supreme success with *The Good Earth* has given critics the opportunity to measure all her other novels against this one work. Virtually everything else she has written has been measured against her magnum opus — and usually found wanting. In one way, *The Good Earth* was written too early in her career, for she has not been able to surpass this brilliant achievement with any of the more than fifty books that have

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 797.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 795.

³⁰ "Advice to Unborn Novelists," *Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 11 (March 2, 1935), p. 520.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Isador Schneider, *Nation*, vol. 135 (November 16, 1932), p. 481.

followed. Regrettably, the more facility she displayed in plotting, character creation, invention of incident, and dialogue after writing *The Good Earth* the less impression her books seemed to make upon contemporary critics, most of whom were caught up with such avant-garde considerations as archetypes, symbolism, the subconscious, the unconscious, interior monologues, and stream-of-consciousness techniques to be interested in the quintessential element of the novel — its narrative quality.

Experimentation in the novel, however, has just about come to an end. When it ultimately does, Pearl Buck's reputation is bound to grow. After being virtually ignored for so many years by critics, she will be "re-discovered." When this general reevaluation does take place, it will undoubtedly become increasingly proper to say that her Oriental novels display a full measure of greatness.

What can be definitely posited now is that of all she has written, her best works are her Chinese novels. According to their overall quality they should be ranked after *The Good Earth* as *Sons*, *Imperial Woman*, *Mothers*, *The Patriot*, *East Wind: West Wind*, and *Dragon Seed*.³³ Mainly because they conform to the norms of Chinese fiction, these novels are her very best. In writing them she has tried to entertain and delight, to reach a large audience, to follow the traditional Chinese practice of emphasizing event and characterization. It is likewise true that conformation to the norms of traditional Chinese fiction is responsible for some of the shortcomings American critics detect in her work, although it may be somewhat uncritical of them to judge her fictional efforts according to artistic dogmas and aesthetic criteria she herself does not accept or attempt to emulate.

A good critic, Pearl Buck once wrote, judged a writer "on how well he had accomplished the goal he had set for himself".³⁴ It is plainly obvious that her goal has been to model her novels on the plan of the orthodox Chinese novel,³⁵ that she always wanted to be a storyteller, not a literary innovator extending the bounds of the novel. It is also quite obvious that her novels, short stories, translations, and non-fictional works interpreting China and her people that were written after *The Good Earth* have fully justified the early award to her of the Nobel Prize in Literature. That her books on China are still being devoured by readers the world

³³ Until recently, Pearl Buck has avoided judging any one of her works as superior or inferior to another. In a letter (dated February 27, 1967) to the author of this article, however, she stated: "In my own opinion, my best Chinese novel is *Imperial Woman*." She also added: ". . . I place *The Townsman* as my best American novel, and *The Living Reed* as the best of my Asian Books."

³⁴ *A Bridge for Passing* (New York, 1962), p. 153.

³⁵ In writing about *Sons*, for example, she once noted that the work "is modelled on the plan of the orthodox Chinese novel, the material is purely Chinese" *Saturday Review of Literature*, vol. 11 (March 2, 1935), p. 514.

over is evidence of good judgment on the part of the Swedish Academy in their bestowing the Nobel Prize upon Pearl Buck in 1938. Few recipients of the Academy's award can rival her staying power or equal her universal acceptance.

Pearl Buck's popularity is proof of her storytelling ability. There is no question that she reaches a far greater reading public than all the esthetes and experimenters working in contemporary fiction combined.³⁶ Universal acclaim may not always be indicative of literary excellence, but Pearl Buck's continuous appeal over some thirty years gives indisputable testimony to the fact that she has what every great novelist must have — "tse ran."

³⁶ The John Day Publishing Company of New York continually re-issues her books in hard covers. Paperback editions of her best known works run into the millions. The Unesco publication *Index Translationum* lists the annual translations of her books into various foreign languages. Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* (New York, 1948) notes that Pearl Buck is one of the most widely read American authors throughout the world. And the *Writer's Yearbook* in 1963 estimated that she is the most popular American writer in Europe and Asia.