

THE CHINESE NOVEL



Nobel Lecture delivered before the Swedish
Academy at Stockholm, December 12, 1938, by

PEARL S. BUCK

THE CHINESE NOVEL

By Pearl S. Buck

THE PATRIOT
THIS PROUD HEART
FIGHTING ANGEL
THE EXILE
A HOUSE DIVIDED
THE MOTHER
THE FIRST WIFE AND OTHER STORIES
SONS
THE GOOD EARTH
EAST WIND: WEST WIND

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ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS
[SHUI HU CHUAN]
TRANSLATED FROM THE CHINESE

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THE SWEDISH ACADEMY AT STOCKHOLM
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PUBLISHERS' FOREWORD

THE NOBEL PRIZE for Literature was awarded to Pearl S. Buck on December 10, 1938, at Stockholm. The citation was as follows: "*For rich and genuine epic portrayals of Chinese peasant life, and for masterpieces of biography.*"

In his address in the Concert Hall before the presentation of the award, Dr. Per Hallstrom of the Swedish Academy discussed six of the works of the author, including in detail the biographies of her mother and father (THE EXILE and FIGHTING ANGEL) and in conclusion said: "When the Swedish Academy awards this year's prize to Pearl Buck for the notable works which pave the way to a human sympathy passing over widely separated racial boundaries, and for the studies of human ideals which have become a great and living art of portraiture, it feels that it acts in harmony and

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accord with the aim of Alfred Nobel's dreams for the future."

Earlier in his address Dr. Hallstrom said: "Pearl Buck once told how she had found her mission as interpreter to the Occident of the nature and being of China. She did not turn to it as a literary speciality at all; it came to her without her seeking.

" 'It is people that have always afforded me my greatest pleasure and interest,' she said, 'and as I live among the Chinese it has been the Chinese people in particular. When I am asked what sort of people they are, I cannot answer. They are not this or that, they are just people. I can no more define them than I can define my own relatives and kinsmen. I am too near to them and I have lived too intimately with them for that.'

"She has been right among the people of China in all their vicissitudes, in good years and famine years, in the bloody tumults of revolutions and the delirium of Utopias. She has associated with the leading classes with a modern education, and

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with primordially primitive peasants, who had hardly seen a western face before they saw hers. Often she has been a stranger in deadly peril, but has not felt herself a stranger; on the whole her outlook retained its profound and warm humanity. With pure objectivity she has breathed life into her knowledge and given us the peasant epic which has made her world-famous."

At the time of the award of the Nobel Prize, the author was asked to lecture on a literary subject. She had for many years been making a study of the indigenous Chinese novel, and chose this occasion to put some portions of it into form for the first time, since, she says, it is the Chinese rather than the western novel which has shaped her own efforts in writing.

This lecture, delivered before the Swedish Academy on December 12, 1938, was repeated as a Phi Beta Kappa address at Randolph-Macon College, Lynchburg, Virginia, on April 22, 1939, and is now printed in full in this volume.

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

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WHEN I came to consider what I should say today it seemed that it would be wrong not to speak of China. And this is none the less true because I am an American by birth and by ancestry and though I live now in my own country and shall live there, since there I belong. But it is the Chinese and not the American novel which has shaped my own efforts in writing. My earliest knowledge of story, of how to tell and write stories, came to me in China. It would be ingratitude on my part not to recognize this today. And yet it would be presumptuous to speak before you on the subject of the Chinese novel for a reason wholly personal. There is another reason why I feel that I may properly do so. It is that I believe the Chinese novel has an illumination for the western novel and for the western novelist.

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2 When I say Chinese novel, I mean the indigenous Chinese novel, and not that hybrid product, the novels of modern Chinese writers who have been too strongly under foreign influence while they were yet ignorant of the riches of their own country.

3 The novel in China was never an art and was never so considered, nor did any Chinese novelist think of himself as an artist. The Chinese novel, its history, its scope, its place in the life of the people, so vital a place, must be viewed in the strong light of this one fact. It is a fact no doubt strange to you, a company of modern western scholars who today so generously recognize the novel.

But in China, art and the novel have always been widely separated. There, literature as an art was the exclusive property of the scholars, an art they made, and made for each other, according to their own rules, and they found no place in it for the novel. And they held a powerful place, those Chinese scholars. Philosophy and religion

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and letters and literature, by arbitrary classical rules, they possessed them all, for they alone possessed the means of learning, since they alone knew how to read and write. They were powerful enough to be feared even by emperors, so that emperors devised a way of keeping them enslaved by their own learning, and made the official examinations the only means to political advancement, those incredibly difficult examinations which ate up a man's whole life and thought in preparing for them, and kept him too busy with memorizing and copying the dead and classical past to see the present and its wrongs. In that past the scholars found their rules of art. But the novel was not there, and they did not see it being created before their eyes, for the people created the novel and what living people were doing did not interest the scholars, who thought of literature as an art.

If scholars ignored the people, however, the people in turn laughed at the scholars. They made innumerable jokes about them, of which this is

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a fair sample: One day a company of wild beasts met on a hillside for a hunt. They bargained with each other to go out and hunt all day and meet again at the end of the day to share what they had killed. At the end of the day, only the tiger returned with nothing. When he was asked how this happened he replied very disconsolately, "At dawn I met a schoolboy, but he was, I feared, too callow for your tastes. I met no more until noon, when I found a priest. But I let him go, knowing him to be full of nothing but wind. The day went on and I grew desperate, for I passed no one. Then as dark came on I found a scholar. But I knew there was no use in bringing him back since he would be so dry and hard that he would break our teeth if we tried them on him."

5 The scholar, as a class, has long been a figure of fun for the Chinese people. He is frequently to be found in their novels, and always he is the same, as indeed he is in life, for a long study of the same dead classics and their formal composition has really made all Chinese scholars look alike, as

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well as think alike. We have no class to parallel him in the West—individuals, perhaps, only. But in China he was a class. Here he is, composite, as the people see him; a small shrunken figure with a bulging forehead, a pursed mouth, a nose at once snub and pointed, small inconspicuous eyes behind spectacles, a high pedantic voice, always announcing rules that do not matter to anyone but himself, a boundless self-conceit, a complete scorn not only of the common people but of all other scholars, a figure in long shabby robes, moving with a swaying haughty walk, when he moved at all. He was not to be seen except at literary gatherings, for most of the time he spent reading dead literature and trying to write more like it. He hated anything fresh or original, for he could not catalogue it into any of the styles he knew. If he could not catalogue it, he was sure it was not great, and he was confident that he only was right. If he said, "Here is art," he was convinced it was not to be found anywhere else, for what he did not recognize did not exist. And as he could never

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catalogue the novel into what he called literature, so for him it did not exist as literature.

6 Yao Nai, one of the greatest of Chinese literary critics, in 1776 enumerated the kinds of writing which comprise the whole of literature. They are essays, government commentaries, biographies, epitaphs, epigrams, poetry, funeral eulogies, and histories. No novels, you perceive, although by that date the Chinese novel had already reached its glorious height, after centuries of development among the common Chinese people. Nor does that vast compilation of Chinese literature, Ssŭ KU CHUEN SHU, made in 1772 by the order of the great emperor Ch'ien Lung, contain the novel in the encyclopedia of its literature proper.

7 No, happily for the Chinese novel, it was not considered by the scholars as literature. Happily, too, for the novelist! Man and book, they were free from the criticisms of those scholars and their requirements of art, their techniques of expression and their talk of literary significances and all that discussion of what is and is not art, as if