

HILARY SPURLING

賽紅珠

PEARL BUCK
IN CHINA



Burying the
Bones

Pearl Buck was the first person since Marco Polo to open China up to the West. She recreated the lives of ordinary Chinese people in *The Good Earth*, a worldwide bestseller in 1931 that won her the Nobel Prize for Literature. She foresaw China's future as a superpower long before anyone else. She witnessed the first stirrings of Chinese revolution as a teenager, and narrowly escaped being killed herself in the subsequent battles between Communists and Nationalists.



Pearl grew up in an imperial China unchanged for thousands of years. She was the child of American missionaries but she spoke Chinese before she learned English, and her friends were the children of Chinese farmers. She took it for granted she was Chinese herself until she was eight years old, when the Boxers' terrorist uprising forced her family to flee for their lives. Flood, famine, drought, bandits and war formed the background of Pearl's life in China. 'Asia was the real, the actual world,' she said, 'and my own country became the dreamworld.'

Pearl wrote about the realities of the only world she knew in *The Good Earth*. It sold tens of millions of copies, and transfixed a whole generation of readers. Spurling explores with elegance and insight the hair-raising family life, the traumatic disruptions and revolutionary ferment that shaped a powerful and prophetic imagination.



HILARY SPURLING is the author of *Matisse the Master*, the biography of Henri Matisse, which won the Whitbread Book of the Year in 2005. Her biography of Ivy Compton-Burnett won the Heinemann and Duff Cooper prizes. She has also written lives of Paul Scott, *La Grande Thérèse* (Profile) and Sonia Orwell. She has been theatre critic and literary editor of the *Spectator*, and a book reviewer for the *Observer* and *Telegraph*. She founded the Royal Literary Fund's Fellowship Scheme for writers, and lives in London.

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‘Pearl Buck is one of the greatest writers on China, and Hilary Spurling has brought her and the China of her time to life with amazing immediacy and perception.’

Jung Chang, author of *Wild Swans*

‘It is magnificent – a stunning story and virtuoso writing. All Spurling’s books are wonderful but this really takes her in new and strange and unfamiliar directions – boldly conceived, brilliantly executed.’

Elaine Showalter

‘From its wonderful opening sentence to its poignant close, this is a superb biography ... I couldn’t wait to turn the page.’

Peter Conn, Vartan Gregorian Professor of English, University of Pennsylvania

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Burying the
Bones



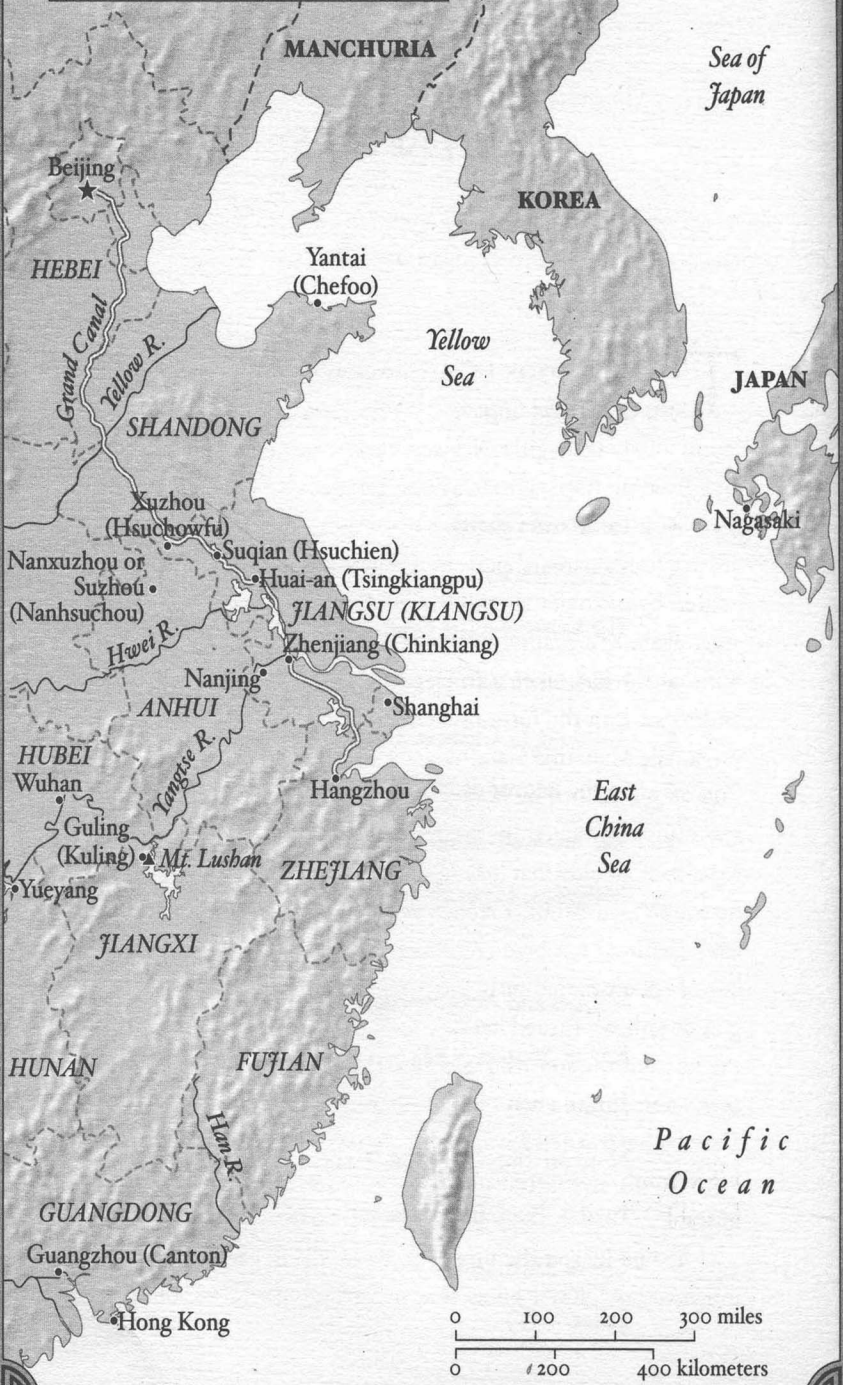
Pearl in 1938 when she won the Nobel Prize for literature

*To the memory of Diane Middlebrook,
who saw the point of this book from the beginning*

Fiction never lies; it reveals the writer totally.

V. S. NAIPAUL

Pearl Buck's China



FOREWORD

THE FIRST BOOK I REMEMBER from my early childhood was called *The Chinese Children Next Door*. It was about a family of six little girls with red cheeks and black pigtailed who had given up hope of ever having a baby brother when one day their wish came true: the family's seventh child was a boy, the answer to his parents' prayers, a plaything to be waited on and adored by his older sisters. Many years later I came across this story again as a chapter in Pearl Buck's reminiscences. It turned out that she had taken a true episode from her own early years, and recast it in the form of a children's fable. The story's absurdity made Mahatma Gandhi laugh out loud when it was read to him on his sickbed by Jawaharlal Nehru. Its fairytale charm is if anything heightened by the realities of poverty, misogyny, and female infanticide that lurk in the background. Reading it for the first time as an adult, I recognized echoes of stories my mother told me about her own childhood when she, too, had been the last of six unwanted girls. After she was born her mother—my grandmother—turned her face to the wall. Two years later came the birth of the son who was all either of my grandparents had ever wanted in the first place. I knew *The Chinese Children Next Door* by heart when I was little, presumably because its consoling warmth and optimism made my mother's past seem more bearable.

I had no idea at the time who wrote the book that meant so much to me. Now I know that it is based on the life of Pearl's

much older adopted sister, a Chinese girl abandoned by her own family and brought up as their own by Pearl's parents. The first two of this sister's six daughters were almost the same age as Pearl, who grew up seeing them count for nothing, and watching their mother publicly disgraced for bearing her husband six girls in succession. There is no hint of this sediment of suffering in Pearl's story. As a small child running free in a Chinese town where wild dogs foraged for babies routinely exposed to die on waste land, she often came across half-eaten remnants on the hillside outside her parents' gate. She tried hard to bury them just as she buried her memories of being sworn at as a foreign devil in the street, of fleeing for her life from marauding soldiers, of the young brides sold into slavery who hanged themselves at intervals in her neighbors' houses. Memories like these surface in her novels from time to time like a dismembered hand or leg. This ambivalence—the territory that lies between what is said, and what can be understood—is the nub of my book.