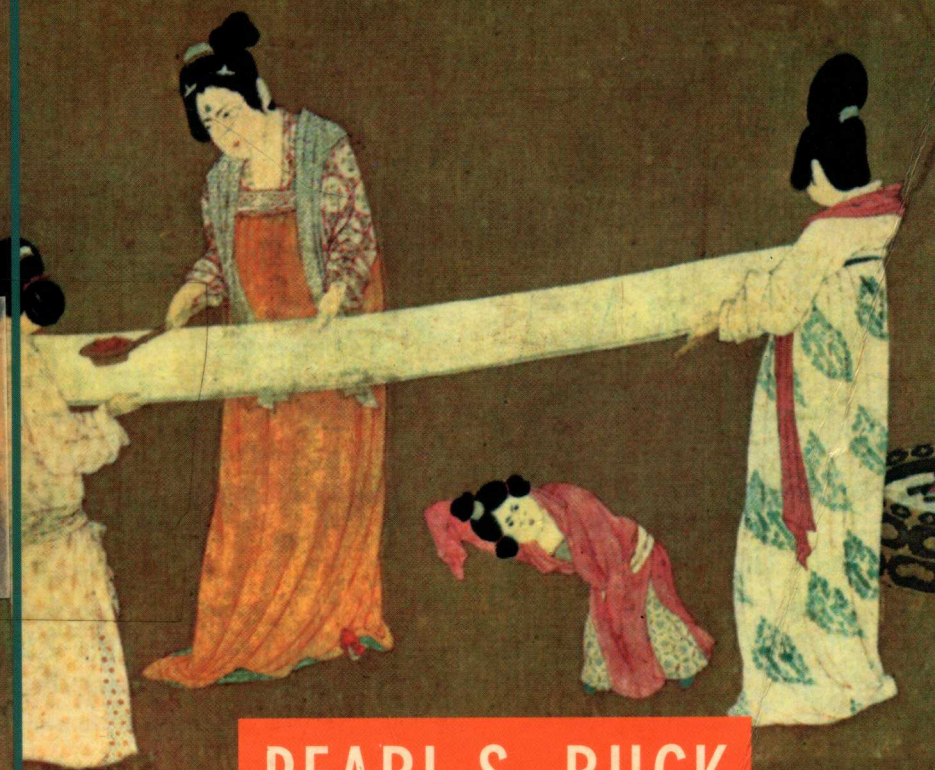


# PEONY

A Novel of China

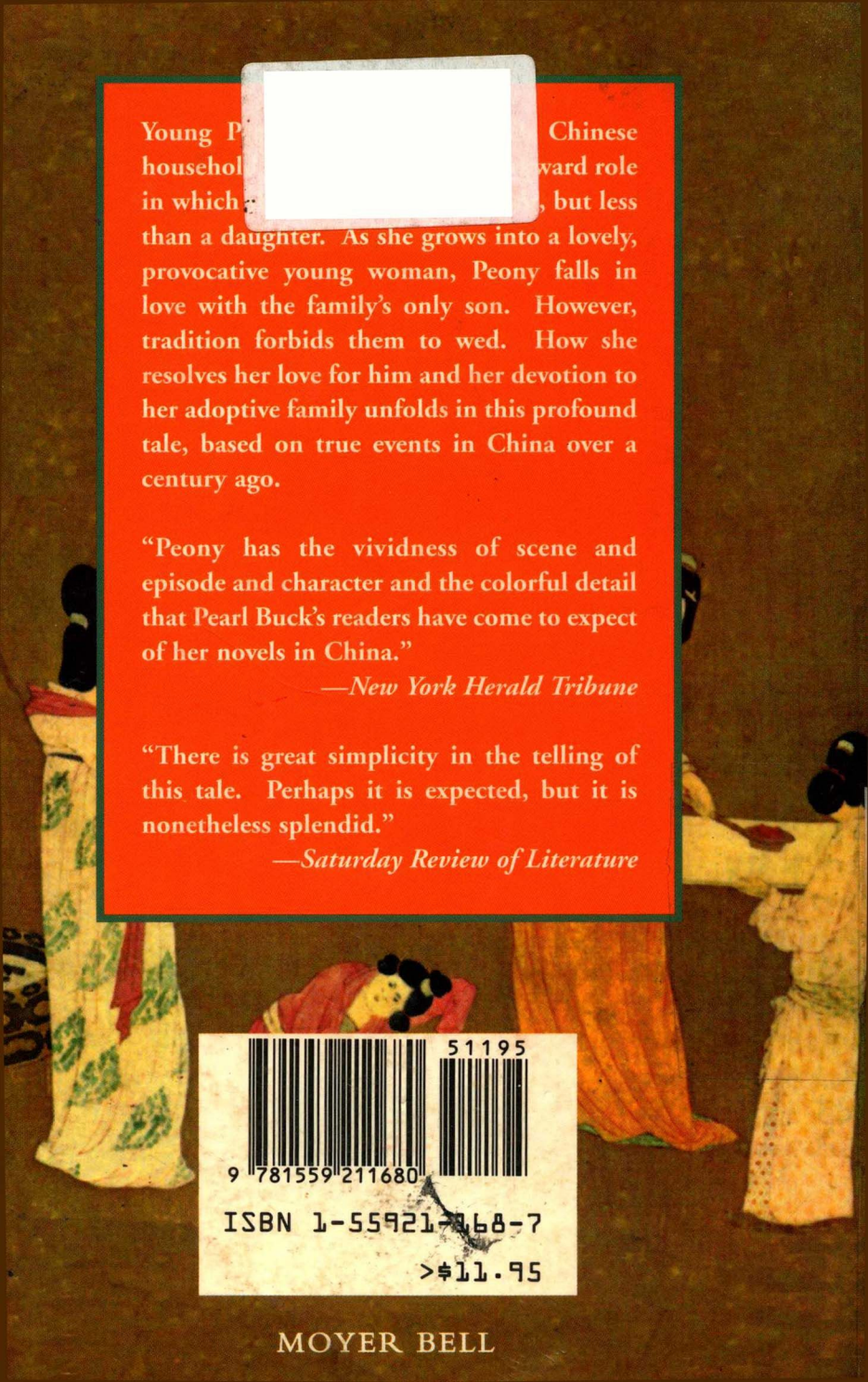


PEARL S. BUCK









Young Peony is a Chinese household, a forward role in which she is, but less than a daughter. As she grows into a lovely, provocative young woman, Peony falls in love with the family's only son. However, tradition forbids them to wed. How she resolves her love for him and her devotion to her adoptive family unfolds in this profound tale, based on true events in China over a century ago.

"Peony has the vividness of scene and episode and character and the colorful detail that Pearl Buck's readers have come to expect of her novels in China."

—*New York Herald Tribune*

"There is great simplicity in the telling of this tale. Perhaps it is expected, but it is nonetheless splendid."

—*Saturday Review of Literature*



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MOYER BELL

Pearl S. Buck

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# PEONY

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## Pearl S. Buck

Pearl Sydenstricker Buck was born in West Virginia and taken to China as an infant before the turn of the century. The daughter of Presbyterian missionaries, she lived with her family in a town in the interior instead of the traditional missionary compound. Buck grew up speaking Chinese as well as English and received most of her education from her mother. She received an M.A. from Cornell and taught English literature in several Chinese universities before she was forced to leave the country in 1932 because of the revolution.

She wrote eighty-five books and is the most widely translated American author to this day. She has been awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the William Dean Howells Award, and the Nobel Prize for Literature. She died in 1973.

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Good reading and a new field.

—*Kirkus*

The conflicts inherent in the Chinese and Jewish temperament are delicately and intricately traced with profound wisdom and compassionate understanding in this tale . . . This is an enchanting story, the theme of which is tolerance. Highly recommended.

—*Library Journal*

[Ms. Buck's] zealous study has enabled her to give vivid impressions of a 4,000-year-old culture through carefully drawn minor characters and much colorful detail about such things as burial and marriage rites, and court etiquette.

—*The New York Times Book Review*

PEONY



Other Novels by Pearl S. Buck

Dragon Seed  
East Wind: West Wind  
A House Divided  
House of Earth  
Imperial Woman  
Kinfolk  
Living Reed  
Mandala  
The Mother  
The Pavilion of Women  
Sons

**A**T VARIOUS times in history colonies of Jews have gone to China and lived there. The city of K'aifeng, in the province of Honan, was a center for them. In China they have never been persecuted, and if they have suffered hardships, these were only the hardships of life in the community where they were.

In its basis, therefore, this novel may be said to be historically true, although the characters, with unimportant exceptions, are the creatures of my imagination. The story takes place at the period, about a century ago, when the Chinese had accepted the Jews, and when, indeed, most Jews had come to think of themselves as Chinese. Today even the memory of their origin is gone. They are Chinese.



PEONY

# THE JEWS OF CHINA 1000-1932

Tun-huang

Between 200 and 1000 A.D. many Jewish traders from Turkestan and refugees from Persia had settled in China.

In 1286 Marco Polo wrote of the strong commercial and political influence of the Jews in China.

"During the past 40 or 50 years our religion has been but imperfectly transmitted, and although its religious writings still exists, there is none who understands as much as one word of them... It has been our desire to repair the synagogue, and again to procure ministers to serve in it; but poverty prevented us."

LETTER FROM THE JEWS OF KAIFENG TO THE BRITISH CONSUL AT AMOY 1850

Towns which probably had small Jewish communities by 1200 A.D. Many of these had certainly been founded over 500 years earlier. All but Kaifeng had disappeared by 1650.

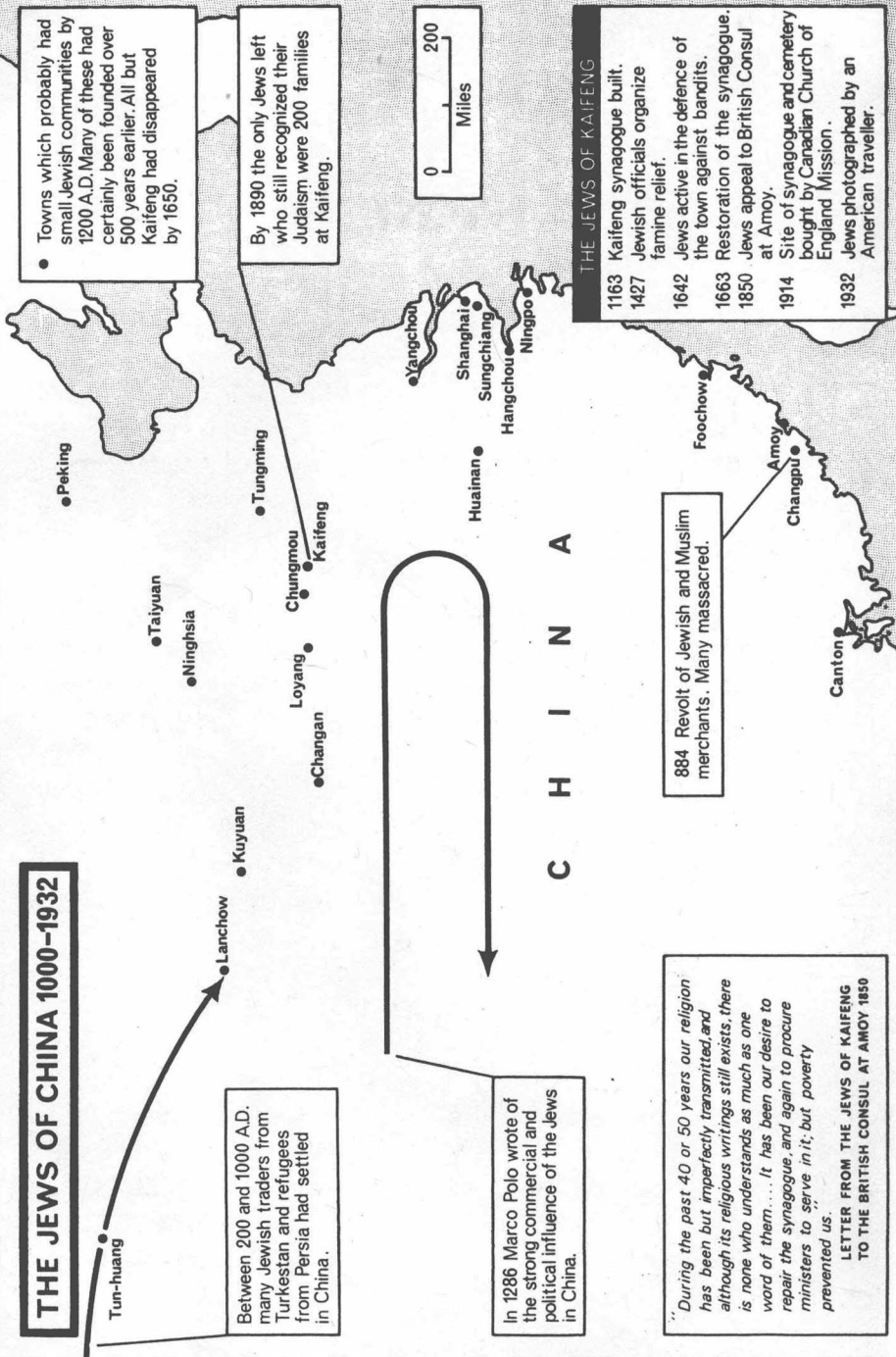
By 1890 the only Jews left who still recognized their Judaism were 200 families at Kaifeng.

0 200 Miles

## THE JEWS OF KAIFENG

- 1163 Kaifeng synagogue built.
- 1427 Jewish officials organize famine relief.
- 1642 Jews active in the defence of the town against bandits.
- 1663 Restoration of the synagogue.
- 1850 Jews appeal to British Consul at Amoy.
- 1914 Site of synagogue and cemetery bought by Canadian Church of England Mission.
- 1932 Jews photographed by an American traveller.

884 Revolt of Jewish and Muslim merchants. Many massacred.



## 挑筋教

### I

IT WAS spring in the city of K'aifeng, a late spring in the northern Chinese province of Honan. Behind the high city walls the peach trees, planted in courtyards, bloomed earlier than they did upon the farms spreading over the level plains around the moat. Yet even in such shelter the peach blossoms were still only rosy buds at Passover. 逾越节

Within the courts of the house of Ezra ben Israel the peach blossoms had been cut several days early and had been forced to bloom in time for the feast. Each spring Peony, the Chinese bondmaid, made it her task to provide thus for the branches of flowers that stood against the walls of the great hall. Each year Ezra, her master, and Madame Ezra, her mistress, took notice of what she had done. Knowing how cold the spring had been this year and how long the dusty northwest winds had blown upon the city, they had given her special praise when they entered the great hall this night for the feast.

"See what magic our little Peony has wrought this Passover," Ezra had said, his plump hand gesturing toward the flowers.

Madame Ezra had paused to admire. Her impetuous look grew kind. "Very pretty, my child," she had said to Peony.

Peony had remained properly silent, her small hands folded above her flowing sleeves. David's eyes she met and avoided as he smiled, but Leah's warm smile she accepted, answering it with a small quiver of her lips. The old rabbi had given no sign. He was blind and so he saw nothing. As for Aaron, his son, Peony did not look at him.



They took their seats at the ample round table that had been placed in the middle of the hall, and Peony began to direct the serving of the food in her noiseless graceful fashion. Four menservants obeyed her, and Wang Ma, the elder woman servant, poured the tea.

As long as she could remember, Peony had watched this evening feast in early spring in the house of Ezra. She had directed the placing of every dish and utensil upon the table and the servants had obeyed her because she knew, as well as though she had been a daughter in the house, exactly where each dish was to be found and each placed. The dishes were kept the year round, unused except for this night before Passover. The silver spoons and chopsticks, the great seven-branched candlesticks, all were shining in the light of the lanterns hung from the high red beams. Upon a vast silver tray she herself had placed the symbols she did not understand, but which each year she prepared, a roasted egg, bitter herbs, apples, nuts, and wine. They were curiosities of a foreign religion.

But the whole day was a strange one in this unheeding Chinese city. Although Peony knew the rites well, each spring she wondered at them again. The search through the house for bits of leavened bread! Ezra, the master, had made the search this morning as he always did, laughing as he went carelessly from spot to spot, and asking her if that were all. Madame Ezra used always to hide the bits of leavened bread for him to find, but now for several years she had let Peony do it, and Ezra had commanded her to count the bits so that he would know when he was finished. He made a joke of it, as though he were somewhat ashamed before the servants. When Peony and David were children, they had laughed immoderately at the search and had joined in it with merriment, pointing out each crumb of the forbidden bread. But then she had not known that she was only a bondmaid.

Now she knew. She stood quietly watchful, as the feast proceeded. Each person at the table was known to her in some fashion. David she knew best. For David's sake she had been bought in a year of famine, when the Yellow River had burst its dikes and had swept over the low-lying land. She had been too young to remember that sale of herself. Try as she might, she could remember no face before

David's face. He was her first memory, a gay boy, two years older than she, always much taller, much stronger, so that instinctively she turned to him and depended upon him. In those days she had told him all her little thoughts and sorrows, and it had been a habit hard to break. Yet her own wisdom had taught her that it must be broken. It was not sensible to think that the bond between two children could continue beyond childhood, not when one was master and the other bondmaid.

She did not <sup>regret</sup>repine, knowing herself fortunate in this kindly Jewish household. Ezra ben Israel, the head of the house, was a cheerful, stout-bodied merchant. Did he cut his full beard, Peony often thought, he would have looked Chinese, for he had had a Chinese mother. This was a grief to Madame Ezra, and so none spoke of it. She took comfort in the knowledge that David, her son, looked like her rather than his father, and she was fond of declaring, indeed, that David was most like her own father, for whom she had named him. All the house feared Madame Ezra not a little, even while each depended upon her for some private good, for her great kindness was likely to be undone at any moment by a sudden temper. She was a woman nearing fifty years of age, tall and large, handsome if one did not dislike a high nose and bright color. With all her warmth, she had also certain rigidities of belief and habit that could not be shaken. Thus, as usual on the Passover feast, Madame Ezra had invited the Rabbi and his two children, Aaron and Leah. Aaron was a pale secretive youth of seventeen, whom Peony despised for his pale splotched face and his corruption. Whether his family or Ezra's house knew of his evil deeds she did not know, and it was beneath her to inquire. Perhaps none of the Seven Surnames and Eight Families, as the Jews were called in K'aifeng, knew all that the Rabbi's son did, and the Chinese were too kind to tell them.

Leah was different. Leah was good, one of those rare creatures born beautiful and good together. From her waiting place near the table Peony watched Leah with a sad pleasure that she would not allow to become envy. Tonight in her wine-red robe girdled at the waist with a gold band, Leah was wholly beautiful, except perhaps that she was too tall. The Chinese did not like tall women. Yet

against this defect, Leah had a cream-pale skin and large dark eyes glowing between long curled lashes, and her lips were red and full. The nose, again, was too high for Chinese beauty, although it was not large as Madame Ezra's was.

Leah was more than beautiful. She was filled with some spirit, a high quality, which Peony admired and did not understand. The Chinese said of her, "She is heaven-good." They meant that her goodness was natural and that it flowed from a fountain within herself. As she sat beside her father, quick to help him when he moved his head, she illuminated the feast with joy, even though she seldom spoke.

Something of this, perhaps, came from her father, the Rabbi. A man of great height and spare frame, he was clothed with saintliness as with a robe of light. Years ago he had caught a disease of the eyes from which many Chinese suffered, and since no cure was known, he had become blind. Being foreign, he had no immunity, and upon him blindness fell quickly. He had not seen his dead wife's face after she was thirty years of age, and Leah and Aaron he had seen only as little children. Whether, not able to see these human faces, he was compelled to look only upon the face of God, or whether from his natural goodness, he appeared now to be all spirit and no more flesh. His hair, which had grown white soon after he became blind, framed his white and beautiful face. Above his long white beard his high nose and sunken eyes were proud and calm.

Thus they sat at the feast table and Peony saw every movement and smile. She saw David look at Leah across the table and look away again, and she repressed the pang this gave her. He was Leah's equal in height, and Peony thought him even more beautiful. At nineteen David ben Ezra was nearing the fullness of his young manhood. His Jewish garments became him; this Peony had to admit, although she did not like them because they made him strange to her. On usual days he wore Chinese robes because he said they were more comfortable. But tonight he wore a blue and gold robe, and on his head his blue silk Jewish cap pressed down his dark short curls. She could not keep from looking at him, and then he caught her eyes and smiled at her. Instantly she bowed her head,