Pearl S. Buck

A Cultural Biography

Peter Conn

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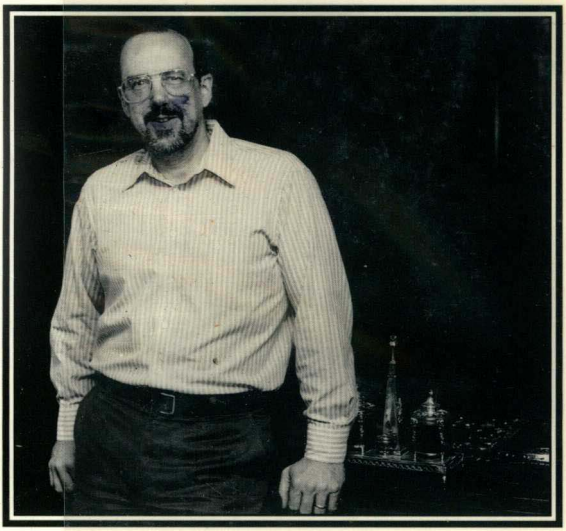
Born into a missionary family, Pearl Buck lived the first half of her life in China and was bilingual from childhood. Although she is best known, perhaps, as the prolific author of *The Good Earth* and as a winner of the Nobel and Pulitzer prizes, Buck in fact led a career that extended well beyond her eighty works of fiction and nonfiction and deep into the public sphere. Passionately committed to the cause of social justice, she was active in the American civil rights and women's rights movements; she also founded the first international adoption agency. She was an outspoken advocate of racial understanding, vital as a cultural ambassador between the United States and China at a time when East and West were at once suspicious and deeply ignorant of each other.

In this richly illustrated and meticulously crafted narrative, Conn recounts Buck's life in absorbing detail, tracing the parallel course of American and Chinese history and politics through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This "cultural biography" thus offers a dual portrait: of Buck, a figure greater than history cares to remember, and of the era she helped to shape.



Roland Thau

Peter Conn in front of the *"Good Earth"* desk at Green Hills Farm, Pearl Buck's Pennsylvania home. Conn holds the Andrea Mitchell Chair in English at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Front: Pearl Buck in one of the libraries she added to Green Hills Farm.
Back: Pearl Buck and one of the children adopted through Welcome House in the late 1960s.

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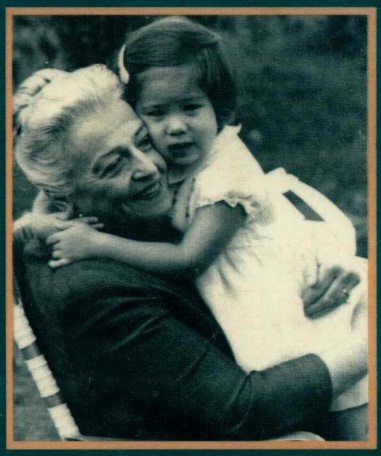
"At last! A fascinating biography of Pearl S. Buck, vividly written, vigorously researched. Using previously unknown correspondence as well as Pearl Buck's FBI files, Peter Conn has given us all a very great gift. This full-bodied portrait ends decades of mystery concerning this elusive woman and her passionate work for justice and human rights worldwide. This is a wonderful book – nuanced, textured, surprising; a gripping, stunning read."

– Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of *Eleanor Roosevelt*



"Profound and illuminating: it is a landmark in the study of Pearl Buck as a woman, a writer, a humanitarian, a fighter for equality. I truly admire the book's intimate and shrewd understanding of the society and culture of China in Pearl Buck's time. Peter Conn uses a broad canvas for his unequaled portrait of the life and work of American missionaries in China, and of the eventful history of Sino–U.S. relations."

– Liu Haiping, Dean, School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University, PRC

"Peter Conn's spacious and scholarly study of Pearl Buck is in part, as one would expect, a book about the many faces of the American missionary world in China, and of a remarkable woman's attempt to draw creative sustenance from her experiences in that world. It is also a moving study of families under pressure, and of loss and love inside those families. But perhaps most importantly, it is a book about good intentions in both China and the West, and about the tragic suddenness with which such good intentions become irrelevant to those they were meant to benefit the most....A considerable achievement."

– Jonathan Spence, author of *The Search for Modern China*

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Pearl S. Buck

For Jennifer Kyung
and the five thousand other Welcome House children

For David, Alison, and Steven, too

And for Terry
with gratitude
for thirty years of love and friendship, loyalty and passion

Preface: Rediscovering Pearl Buck

THIS BOOK BEGAN at a picnic.

Every year, on the first Saturday in June, hundreds of the families who have adopted children through an agency called Welcome House gather in a state park north of Philadelphia for a day of games and barbecues and annual reunions. The families look different from most. The children come from all over the world: from Asia and Eastern Europe, from Central and South America, from every region of the United States. Tinicum Park becomes, for a day, a pint-sized United Nations, exploding with children – from two weeks old to teenagers, white, black, and every color in between. It is an unforgettable sight.

My wife, Terry, and I attended our first Welcome House picnic in 1973, when we had begun to think about adopting a child. After three biological children, we had decided that we had some obligation to find room for one of the world's homeless boys or girls. We had also found much joy in the children we had, and we thought (quite accurately, as it turned out) that another child would add to our joy. We started the process, and after the usual months of waiting and anxiety, we met our new two-year-old Korean daughter, Jennifer Kyung, when her plane arrived at Kennedy Airport on February 4, 1975.

The rest, as they say, is history; or her story. But it is not the story in this book. This book is about Pearl Buck, the woman who in 1949 founded Welcome House, the first international, interracial adoption agency in the United States.

When Terry and I first approached Welcome House, I could have written everything I knew about Pearl Buck on a three-by-five index card. I knew that Buck was the author of *The Good Earth,* a book I had read in high school, though I had trouble recalling many of the details. (I dimly remembered a scene in which a peasant woman gave birth over a bucket and then went back to work.) I also knew that Buck had won the Nobel Prize for literature, though I didn't know exactly when, and I had traveled long enough in advanced literary circles to know that Buck's prize was not at all respectable. Finally, I had a vague

impression that Buck was the daughter of Protestant missionaries, but I had no idea what that might actually mean.

Over the years that followed, Terry and I kept in close touch with Welcome House, working as volunteers and even serving on the board. In spite of myself, I was tempted by an increasing interest in Pearl Buck. I met a number of people who had known her, and who had obviously been changed for the better by the relationship. I discovered that Welcome House was only one of a dozen major projects Buck had initiated in support of children's welfare and interracial understanding. Frankly, Terry and I were touched by the extraordinary effort Buck had made to combine a literary life with a commitment to human service. After all, how many successful writers or intellectuals ever go beyond the occasional painless gesture, the sanctimonious petition or letter, and actually spend their time and money trying to do some social good?

Still, I kept my distance from Buck as a possible subject; she seemed too risky an investment. A smug consensus has reduced Pearl Buck to a footnote – a judgment, I hasten to add, in which I had routinely concurred. As recently as 1989, I published a 600-page history of American literature, in which I found room for everyone from the seventeenth-century Puritan preacher Urian Oakes to the twentieth-century proletarian propagandist Giacomo Patri, but I never mentioned Pearl Buck. Then, as I learned more about Buck's prodigious productivity, both as writer and humanitarian, I was less convinced by the received wisdom. Pearl Buck's disappearance from the American cultural scene was not self-explanatory.

To begin with, this was a woman who had written over seventy books, many of them best-sellers, including fifteen Book-of-the-Month Club selections. She had worked in virtually every genre of writing: novels, short stories, plays, biography, autobiography, translations (from the Chinese), children's literature, essays, journalism, poetry. However steeply she had fallen from critical favor, she had in fact won the Nobel Prize in literature (with Toni Morrison, she is one of only two American women ever to do so), and a Pulitzer, and the Howells Medal, and election to the National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a dozen honorary degrees.

Her novels continue to be read around the world, in English and in scores of translations. Buck's novels can still be found in villages and isolated farmhouses in Tanzania, New Guinea, India, Colombia. A friend of mine who served in the Peace Corps read her first Pearl Buck story, a disintegrating paperback copy of *Imperial Woman,* while she was living in a hut in Malawi.

In a word, Pearl Buck was one of the most popular novelists of the twentieth century. This in itself would be reason enough to look at her life and work more closely. Not long ago, critic Cary Nelson usefully observed: "We should

take it as axiomatic that texts that were widely read or influential need to retain an active place in our sense of literary history, whether or not we happen, at present, to judge them to be of high quality."[1] Pearl Buck perfectly exemplifies a writer who once loomed large on our cultural landscape, and whose disappearance has damaged our historical understanding.

Discussing the 1930s, one of Buck's most productive decades, historian Lawrence Levine has made a similar point. Levine reminds us that a study of popular arts is necessary to any cultural history that would presume to fullness. "One does not have to believe," Levine writes, "that aesthetically Superman rivals Hamlet or that Grant Wood compares to Michelangelo to maintain that Superman and Wood potentially have much to tell us about the Great Depression, that they therefore merit the closest examination, and that they won't necessarily be simple to fathom."[2]

Ironically, if predictably, neither Cary Nelson nor Lawrence Levine, despite their enthusiasm for searching out the forgotten places of American culture, ever mentions Pearl Buck. Nonetheless, her career abundantly confirms the validity of their thesis. Whatever the aesthetic claims of Buck's novels and stories, her once-remarkable prominence makes her indispensable to any account of America's twentieth-century intellectual and imaginative life. Beyond that, however, I will argue in the following chapters that quite a lot of Buck's fiction and nonfiction is strong enough to command a fresh appraisal on its own merits. The biographies she wrote of her mother and father, for example, are unparalleled accounts of the strange and terrible vocations pursued by generations of missionaries in China. Not long before he died, I asked John Hersey, also a missionary child, for his opinion of Buck's writing. Hersey wrote me: "As a China 'mishkid,' I still, to this day, reverberate with pity and horror to the memory of some of the images" in those books.[3]

Buck's fiction broke new ground in subject matter, especially in her representations of Asia, and above all in her portraits of Asian women. In 1992, I attended a conference at which the Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston saluted Buck for making Asian voices heard, for the first time, in Western literature. By representing Chinese characters with "such empathy and compassion," Kingston said, Buck "was translating my parents to me and she was giving me our ancestry and our habitation."[4] More recently, Toni Morrison looked back on her early reading of Buck's novels and said, with affectionate irony: "she misled me . . . and made me feel that all writers wrote sympathetically, empathetically, honestly and forthrightly about other cultures."[5]

Pearl Buck was, as historian James Thomson has recently reminded us, "the most influential Westerner to write about China since thirteenth-century Marco Polo."[6] Thomson's assessment is at once indisputable, familiar, and yet, upon

reflection, astonishing. Never before or since has one writer so personally shaped the imaginative terms in which America addresses a foreign culture. For two generations of Americans, Buck invented China.

AMERICANS HAVE FOUGHT three Asian wars in the last fifty years. More recently, armed combat has been followed by economic competition: since the late 1970s, half-a-dozen Asian nations have been the sites of unprecedented development in manufacturing and trade. In addition, within the United States itself, Asians make up the fastest-growing ethnic populations; Asian and Asian-American immigrants and native-born citizens now number over six million people, a doubling in ten years. Americans are beginning to realize that their future is entangled with Asia.

Nevertheless, amid pious invocations of multiculturalism, a shrinking world, and the imminent arrival of the Pacific Century, the peoples of Asia and the West continue to view each other through veils of cliché and misunderstanding. At such a moment in political and cultural history, Pearl Buck's stories should be a subject of increasing relevance and even urgency. Whatever the strengths or limits of her Asian images, she was a pioneer, introducing American readers to landscapes and people they had long ignored.

Her stories of China were based on her own experiences and observations as a missionary daughter. Her parents were an ill-matched pair of Southern Presbyterians named Absalom and Carie Sydenstricker. Pearl was born in West Virginia, while her parents were on a home leave, but she was taken to China at three months old and lived there most of the next forty years. She grew up bilingual, speaking and reading both English and Chinese. In her own favorite metaphor, she described herself as "culturally bifocal." At the same time, from her earliest days, she felt herself homeless in both her countries, an outsider among people different from herself.

Unlike almost every other American of her generation, Pearl Buck grew up knowing China as her actual, day-to-day world, while America was the place of conjecture and simplified images. Furthermore, almost uniquely among white American writers, she spent the first half of her life as a minority person, an experience that had much to do with her lifelong passion for interracial understanding.

She went to college in the United States, at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia, but returned to China immediately after graduation. Shortly after going back to China, she married her first husband, the agricultural economist J. Lossing Buck, and began a family. For several years, the couple lived in the town of Nanhsuchou (Nanxuzhou) in rural Anhwei (Anhui) province. Buck

published her first stories and novels, including *The Good Earth,* while still living in China.*

In the early 1930s, with China torn by civil war, Japanese invasion, and mounting anti-foreign violence, she moved to the United States, buying a dilapidated eighteenth-century farmhouse in Bucks County, north of Philadelphia. The place was called Green Hills Farm, and it served as home and headquarters for several decades of activity. Here she continued to write, to raise the seven children she adopted, and to manage the various organizations she founded to address the problems of ethnic hatred and to help displaced and disadvantaged children.

Throughout her American years, Pearl Buck was one of the leading figures in the effort to promote cross-cultural understanding between Asia and the United States. In 1941, for example, she and her second husband, Richard Walsh, founded the East and West Association as a vehicle of educational exchange. The association became a target of McCarthyism and expired in the early 1950s. In addition, for over a decade Buck and her husband published the magazine *Asia,* which had a substantial influence on American opinion about East Asia. In the early 1940s, Buck and Walsh led the national campaign to repeal the notorious Chinese exclusion laws. Finally, throughout World War II, despite her close association with Chinese resistance to Japanese aggression, Buck was one of the few Americans who spoke out strongly against the U.S. internment of Japanese-Americans.

Both in Asia and the United States, Buck devoted much of her time and money to the welfare of children. In particular, she worked for children who were mentally or physically disabled or were disadvantaged because of their race. She founded Welcome House because existing adoption agencies considered Asian and Amerasian children to be unadoptable. In forty-five years, Welcome House has placed over five thousand of these children in American homes.

In 1950, the year after she created Welcome House, Buck published a book called *The Child Who Never Grew,* a story about her retarded daughter, Carol. The book was a landmark. Specifically, it encouraged Rose Kennedy to talk publicly about her retarded child, Rosemary. More generally, it helped to change American attitudes toward mental illness. In 1964, Buck set up a foundation in her own name, which has provided medical care and education for over twenty-five thousand Amerasian children in a dozen Asian countries.

In terms of the invidious sexual division of labor in our society, Pearl Buck's special concern for children may have been labeled as characteristically female. It was, more accurately, humane, and it was sadly prophetic. The World Health

*For a note on the spelling of Chinese proper names, see page xxi.