

The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck

Essays Presented at
a Centennial Symposium,
Randolph-Macon Woman's College,
March 26–28, 1992

Edited by
Elizabeth J. Lipscomb,
Frances E. Webb, and Peter Conn

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*The Several Worlds
of Pearl S. Buck*



Nobel Prize Portrait
Photograph made in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1938.
Credit: The Pearl S. Buck Foundation, Inc.

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*Dedicated
to the memory of*

Pearl Sydenstricker Buck

*Randolph-Macon Woman's College
Class of 1914*

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Senior College Portrait

Pearl Sydenstricker's senior photograph in the 1914

Helianthus, the Randolph-Macon Woman's College yearbook.

Credit: Herbert C. Lipscomb Library, Randolph-Macon Woman's
College

Preface

Pearl Sydenstricker arrived in Lynchburg, Virginia, in the fall of 1910 for her first extended stay in the United States since her family's furlough from China almost ten years earlier. She enrolled in Randolph-Macon Woman's College, an institution founded just nineteen years earlier by William Waugh Smith, a Methodist clergyman and president of Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia. Randolph-Macon Woman's College was to be "a college where our young women may obtain an education equal to that given in our best colleges for young men and under environments in harmony with the highest ideals of womanhood." In addition to its academic rigor, it appealed to her missionary parents for its location in the South, near her parents' families and her brother Edgar.

Pearl graduated in 1914 with majors in philosophy and psychology and was invited to return the following year as assistant in the psychology department, a position she was forced to leave when her mother became seriously ill in China. She retained ties to the college and her classmates for the rest of her life, however, returning for several reunions and delivering the commencement address in 1964. Therefore, as the hundredth anniversary of her birth approached, it seemed fitting that her alma mater recognize her wide-ranging accomplishments as writer, humanitarian, and advocate of international understanding.

The Pearl S. Buck Centennial Symposium began as the vision of two alumnae of Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Janet Otte Holbrook and Barbara Boyle Lemon. Through the efforts of many faculty members, students, administrators, and other alumnae of the college, as well as friends and admirers of Pearl Buck in the United States and China, their dream evolved into a fully packed three-day program in March 1992. Significant financial support came from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and Public Policy, the Inez Duff Bishop Annual Visiting Scholar Fund, the Sarah

and Pauline Maier Scholarship Foundation, Inc., the Randolph-Macon Woman's College Alumnae Association, and several anonymous friends.

The symposium mirrored Pearl S. Buck's broad appeal in the diversity of its events, which included, in addition to the scholarly presentations published in this volume, a range of activities directed to a varied audience. Personal reminiscences were provided by Louise White Walker, daughter of Emma Edmunds White, Buck's college classmate and lifelong friend; William F. Quillian, president of Randolph-Macon Woman's College from 1952 to 1978; and Robert Jacobson, a founder of the Pearl S. Buck Birthplace Foundation in Hillsboro, West Virginia. Betsy Sayre, Professor Emerita at the College of West Virginia, conducted a workshop for high school and college teachers interested in incorporating Buck's writing into their classes. Donn Rogosin provided a valuable preview of scenes from *East Wind, West Wind: Pearl Buck, the Woman Who Embraced the World*, a new film biography for which he served as coproducer.

Appropriately, there were contributions representing Buck's Chinese heritage as well. Hsu He-Ping of Zhenjiang, where she spent much of her early life, discussed the establishment of a cultural center in the Sydenstricker family home there. A special highlight was the lecture/reading by noted author Maxine Hong Kingston, like Pearl Buck a writer with roots in both Asian and American cultures.

Students, too, made substantial contributions to the program. Randolph-Macon senior history major Joy Abbot opened the symposium with a slide-lecture on Buck's student years and later associations with the college. Theatre students presented a dramatic reading based on selections from Buck's books. Six high school and college students from Virginia and West Virginia read their prize-winning entries for the Pearl S. Buck Centennial Symposium Essay Contest, conducted in the fall of 1991. All speakers were introduced by Randolph-Macon students.

Between sessions symposium participants were invited to view several exhibits. Joy Abbot's "Years around the Even Post: Pearl S. Buck and Her American Alma Mater" featured photographs and publications connected with Buck's years at the college. Other campus displays included art and artifacts from "The China of *The Good Earth*," manuscripts from the collection of Randolph-Macon's Lipscomb Library, and a selection of Pearl Buck's letters to Emma Edmunds White.

More than a thousand people attended the symposium, ranging from the director of the Institute of American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to Pearl Buck's daughter and two of her grandsons, from current students to Randolph-Macon alumnae of the 1930s, from graduate students writing dissertations on Buck's work to those who have turned to her novels for pleasure throughout the past five decades. The audience's interest and enthusiasm reinforced the conviction of the scholars whose essays are

included in this volume that Pearl S. Buck's contributions to American literature and life continue to be significant and worthy of study and analysis. It is our hope that the centennial symposium and this book will be part of a new focus of attention on an important and too-long-neglected woman.

We would like to thank all members of the Randolph-Macon Woman's College community and symposium participants who provided help and support for the symposium and the publication of this book. Our special gratitude for patience, many kinds of assistance, and tolerance of our long commitment to Pearl S. Buck goes to our husbands, Lloyd Lipscomb and John Webb.

Elizabeth J. Lipscomb
Frances E. Webb
Pearl S. Buck Centennial Symposium
Randolph-Macon Woman's College

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Introduction:

Rediscovering Pearl S. Buck

Peter Conn

Historian James C. Thomson, Jr., recently remarked that Pearl S. Buck "remains the most influential Westerner to write about China since thirteenth-century Marco Polo." Thomson's assessment is at once indisputable, commonplace, and yet, upon reflection, astonishing. In no other case in America's cultural history has one person had such a singular influence on the imaginative terms in which the entire nation addresses a foreign culture. In the late twentieth century, Pearl Buck's work would seem obviously to be a subject of increasing relevance and even urgency, as Asia and the West grope toward communication across the frontiers that separate them.

In such a context, it is clear that Pearl Buck, who defined the attitudes of two or three generations of Westerners toward Asia, would command our attention, even if she had done nothing more. And in fact, she did a great deal more. Inexplicably, however, her life and work have been nearly eradicated in both China and the West. She survives only in caricature: as the author of a single book, *The Good Earth*, and as the undeserving winner of the Nobel Prize. Beyond that, she barely exists. This volume is an effort to restore a woman of remarkable vitality and achievement to a position of greater visibility in cultural history.

What was the range of her accomplishment? It begins with her career as a writer, which extended over more than five decades. She was the author of over ninety books, many of them best-sellers, fifteen of them Book-of-the-Month Club selections. Her work encompasses virtually every genre of writing: novels, short stories, plays, translations (from the Chinese), biography, autobiography, children's literature, essays, poetry. Several of her books broke new ground in subject matter, especially in her representation of Asia, and above all in her portraits of Asian women.

It might be useful to recall some of the principal events in Buck's life as a writer. In 1931 she published *The Good Earth*, which was the best-selling

American novel of 1931 and 1932. The book won the Pulitzer Prize and, in 1935, the Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters as the best novel of the first five years of the 1930s. In 1933 Buck published *All Men Are Brothers*, her two-volume, thousand-page translation of the classic Chinese novel *Shui Hu Chuan* (*Shui hu zhuan*). This was the first complete translation of the novel into English.

In 1938 Buck won the Nobel Prize for Literature; she was the first American woman to be so honored. In 1941 Buck published a volume of pioneering feminist essays, collected under the title *Of Men and Women*; the reviewer for the *New York Times* compared the book to the work of Virginia Woolf. In 1958 Harold Isaacs published his influential study of American opinions about Asia, *Scratches on Our Mind*. By a substantial majority, the men and women Isaacs interviewed identified Buck's novels and stories as the sources of their opinions about Asia.

In 1970 a UNESCO survey reported that Pearl Buck's work had been translated into 145 different languages and dialects. According to this survey, Buck was more frequently translated than any other American writer.

In 1992 the Asian-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston saluted Buck for making Asian voices heard, for the first time, in Western literature.

Aside from her writing, Pearl Buck also lived a life of exceptional public activity. She was, to begin with, an active figure in the American civil rights movement for many years, from her return to the United States from China in the mid-1930s to the end of her life. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Buck was a regular contributor to *Crisis*, the magazine of the NAACP, and to *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League. Walter White, general secretary of the NAACP, said at a 1941 Madison Square Garden rally that only two white Americans understood the reality of black life, and both were women: Eleanor Roosevelt and Pearl Buck.

Buck served as a trustee of Howard University for many years. She received an honorary degree from Howard in 1942, and responded with an important address on the complex issue of black patriotism in the early days of World War II. Throughout the 1940s Buck associated herself with such writers as W. E. B. DuBois in opposing British colonialism. Buck's friendships in the 1930s and 1940s included Paul and Eslanda Robeson. In 1949 Buck and Eslanda Robeson coauthored *American Argument*, a dialogue on American racism. Buck's FBI file reaches nearly three hundred pages, of which a little over two-thirds has been declassified. It was Buck's civil rights work that attracted J. Edgar Hoover's hostile curiosity about her.

Pearl Buck was also a leader in the effort to promote cross-cultural understanding between Asia and the United States. In 1941 Buck 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. For over a decade, in the 1930s

and 1940s, Buck and her husband published the magazine *Asia*, which had a greater influence than any other journal on American opinion about the Far East. In the early 1940s Buck and her husband were leading figures in the national campaign that led to repeal of the notorious Chinese exclusion laws. 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 internment of Japanese-Americans.

Throughout her life Buck devoted much of her energy (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. In 1949 she founded Welcome House, the first agency in the country that specialized in international and interracial adoptions. In forty-three years over five thousand Asian and Amerasian children were placed in American homes. (Buck herself adopted nine children, several of them of mixed races.) In 1950 Buck published a book called *The Child Who Never Grew*, a story about her own retarded daughter. The book was a landmark which helped to change American attitudes toward mental illness. In 1964 Buck set up in her own name a foundation, which continues to provide medical care and education for over six thousand Amerasian children in a dozen Asian countries.

How does a woman of this magnitude and energy slip away from our national consciousness? In the years after World War II, Buck's critical reputation declined sharply. In part, she deserved her fate. Her novels became increasingly slipshod, and her prose became more pedestrian than it had been in her early work. Buck has been victimized by a kind of aesthetic Gresham's Law, in which her bad books have driven her entire body of work out of circulation. However, she was also the victim of political hostility, attacked by the right for her active civil rights efforts, distrusted by the left because of her vocal anticommunism.

In spite of the assorted reconstructions and revisions that have restored other writers to a measure of academic respectability, Buck remains largely neglected. The essays in this volume represent a collective effort to rediscover this remarkable woman and her work, to suggest something of the breadth of her accomplishment, and to define the significance of her career to twentieth-century culture.

These essays were originally presented as lectures at the Pearl S. Buck Centennial Symposium at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia, in March 1992. The keynote presentation, "Pearl S. Buck and the American Quest for China," by James C. Thomson, Jr., situates Buck's work in the long history of Western responses to China. Thomson was a neighbor of the Buck family in Nanjing in the 1920s and 1930s; his historical reflections alternate with his personal recollections of China's tumultuous prewar years.

The remaining essays are grouped into several categories, reflecting the wide range of Pearl Buck's activities. In the section called "Historical

Perspectives," three historians discuss Buck's life and work in the contexts of American and Chinese history. Charles W. Hayford's "*The Good Earth*, Revolution, and the American Raj in China" describes Orientalist and Progressive approaches to the relationship of China and the West as a way of measuring Buck's impact on the shaping of American views of Chinese society, particularly through *The Good Earth*.

David D. Buck (no relation to Pearl or her first husband), in "Pearl S. Buck in Search of America," focuses on Buck's efforts to communicate her own liberal humanist values to her American readers during the decades between her return to the United States in 1934 and the height of the Cold War in the 1950s. He sees both her later fiction and her humanitarian projects as deriving from a missionary spirit instilled in Buck by her parents, particularly her mother, Caroline Stulting Sydenstricker. John d'Entremont, in "Pearl S. Buck and American Women's History," places her life and work in the context of American women's centuries-long struggle to balance self-fulfillment against duty to others. He gives special attention to Buck's important collection of essays on women's roles, *Of Men and Women* (1941).

In the final essay in this section, "Pearl S. Buck's Reception in China Reconsidered," Liu Haiping of Nanjing University traces the history of Chinese critical responses to Buck's work from the 1930s to the present. His analysis cites a number of articles in Chinese publications largely inaccessible to Western readers.

The book's second section, "Humanitarian Perspectives," brings to the collection the reflections of those touched by her philanthropic work. In "East/West Ties: Amerasian Children and the Work of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation," Grace C. K. Sum, executive director of the foundation, discusses its establishment out of Buck's "righteous indignation" over the plight of half-American, half-Asian children and surveys its accomplishment over its thirty-year history of work with children in half-a-dozen countries. My "Welcome House: A Forty-Year History" outlines the work of the agency established to provide for the adoption of mixed-race children. Deborah Clement Raessler's essay, "Pearl S. Buck's Writings on Handicapped Children," draws upon Buck's private correspondence, as well as her published work, to show the lifelong effects of her sorrow over the retardation of her only biological child. Raessler explores the ways Buck transformed her own grief into help for other families with children who were physically or mentally impaired.

Part Three, "Literary Perspectives," presents several views on Buck's literary accomplishments. Jane M. Rabb's "Who's Afraid of Pearl S. Buck?" suggests that Buck's virtual exclusion from the literary canon may say as much about fashions in critical taste as about the quality of Buck's work. My own essay, "Pearl S. Buck and American Literary Culture," attempts to locate Buck's novels and their reception within the cultural contexts of the 1930s and 1940s. In "Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*: The Novel As Epic," Pradyumna