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CHINESE RURAL REALISM

Rereading Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931)

Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth*, New York: John Day Company 1931; *The Good Earth*, New York: Washington Square Press 2012. All the quotations cited in the following text are taken from the 2012 edition. The cover of the first edition can be found here: <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:GoodEarthNovel.JPG>>.

In 1892, the year the American writer Pearl S. Buck was born, the US Congress renewed the Chinese Exclusion Act, initially passed in 1882, for another ten years. It sought to prevent all laborers of Chinese ethnicity from entering or reentering the US, with breaches punishable by law. Three months after her birth, Buck moved with her missionary parents to China and spent most of her life until her early forties there. During the global Cold War, Buck, already a Nobel Laureate (1938), sharply criticized US foreign policy and its racism, the ignorance of American diplomats about China, and the arrogant belief in solving conflicts in Asia through military means in her book *Friend to Friend* (1958).¹ While there is little doubt about Buck's official US nationality, her cultural belonging of choice – which decisively shaped her lifelong literary writing, in particular the novel *The Good Earth* (1931) that earned her the Nobel Prize – is inherently multivalent. In *The Good Earth*, Buck depicts the lives of Chinese peasants and their loyalty to the earth that nurtures humanity and provides all that lives on it with nutrition. In the following pages, I will discuss Buck's bicultural biography and several aspects of this extremely popular and influential novel and, rather than viewing

1 See Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck. A Cultural Biography*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 334-376.



it as a piece of classic American literature, I will propose re-reading it as a work in the Chinese tradition of literary realism and in the context of the emerging trend of rural realism in the early twentieth century. The purpose of my re-reading of *The Good Earth* is to highlight less apparent global connections in the tradition of rural nostalgia and to complicate the paradigm of national literature and national history. Indeed, the earth, ruralism, nutrition, and food, as the novel describes, constitute the very foundation of human existence across borders, political camps, language barriers, and cultural differences from antiquity to the present day.

Born in West Virginia, Pearl Sydenstricker Buck (1892–1973), also known as 赛珍珠 (Sai Zhenzhu), spent almost forty years in China until 1934, the only exceptions being her four years of college in America and other short stints abroad. While she was reared and educated almost entirely within a closed circle of Western missionaries, she had a Chinese nanny and became fluent in both spoken and written Chinese. When Buck returned to the United States to attend Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia at the age of eighteen, she found her alleged homeland to be a foreign country to her. She also became aware of her lower socioeconomic status in America as a child of missionaries. Buck immediately returned to China upon graduation, married the agricultural specialist John Lossing Buck in 1918, and moved to rural Anhui (安徽), a place that provided her with the materials for *The Good Earth*. While her husband's expertise in agriculture and his interest in improving the physical well-being of Chinese peasants impressed Pearl, her marriage life taught her the burden of being a subordinate wife, a mother, and a missionary all at the same time, without much care and understanding from her husband. The Bucks moved to the metropolitan city of Nanjing (南京) in 1919, where Lossing joined the faculty of the College of Agriculture and Forestry at Nanjing University. Pearl gradually began writing essays and novels to acquire more independence. In 1930, she finished *The Good Earth* and hoped for even greater success after her first novel *East Wind, West Wind* (1930) was well received. She also began criticizing the missionaries' arrogance and ignorance toward the Chinese people in the 1930s. Buck argued that the missionaries needed to interact with and learn from Chinese culture instead of imposing American standards on the Chinese. After moving back to America in 1934 (and getting a divorce one year later), Buck was actively engaged in civil rights activities against the discrimination toward African Americans and Asian Americans, promoted women's rights, and endeavored to help build a good relationship between China and the United States.

The Good Earth, published with John Day Company in 1931, immediately became the bestselling novel of the year in America.² It went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and the William Dean Howells Medal in 1935. In 1938, Buck received the Nobel Prize in Literature primarily because of the prominence of this novel. The historian Michael H. Hunt recounts that ›during Buck's heyday it [i.e. *The Good Earth*] sold more than a

2 The novel's first German translation by Ernst Simon, titled *Die gute Erde. Roman des chinesischen Menschen*, was published with Zinnen Verlag in 1933. Its Chinese translation, titled *Da Di* (大地), appeared in 1933 with Kai Ming Shu Dian (开明书店).

million and a half copies, a very impressive figure in those days before the economical paperback book. Translated into more than 30 foreign languages, it was known worldwide. By 1972 total sales had mounted to well over four million. *The Good Earth* reached the public in other versions – as a Broadway play in 1933 and as a movie in 1937 which [...] was seen by approximately 23 million Americans.³ The story of the Chinese peasant Wang Lung and his wife O-Lan made *The Good Earth* a household name. Originally, Buck's novel was titled *Wang Lung*, but her publisher Richard Walsh cautioned that it is ›unpronounceable and would be an irresistible target for ribald humor‹; he suggested that the title should have ›a good deal of sweep and romance‹: thus *The Good Earth*.⁴

The central theme in the novel is the couple's loyal devotion to the earth, even in times of famine and hunger. At the beginning of the story, Wang, a very poor farmer, is about to get married, and is also concerned that his harvest may be devastated by drought. On the morning of his wedding day, however, it rains, ›as if Heaven had chosen this day to wish him well. Earth would bear fruit‹ (p. 2). The latter phrase not only promises a good harvest but also symbolizes a good marriage: O-Lan would bear children for the family as important laborers to farm the fields, a tradition that is vital for the continuation of life in Chinese rural culture. The harmony in the relationship of the couple is closely tied to the earth and expressed through the synchrony of their movement as they work in the fields: ›Moving together in a perfect rhythm, without a word, hour after hour, he fell into a union with her which took the pain from his labor. He had no articulate thought of anything; there was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods‹ (p. 31). Then O-Lan, who ›was as brown as the very soil itself, became pregnant (ibid.). His worship of mother earth impels Wang Lung to spend almost all his money on more and more lands. But one day, the rain does not fall and ›the land was failing them‹ (p. 74). ›None asked anything except of himself, »How shall I be fed this day?« And parents asked themselves, »How shall we be fed, we and our children?« (p. 75). Even in such a desperate situation, when people from the city offer to buy Wang Lung's land, he refuses. ›They cannot take the land from me. The labor of my body and the fruit of the fields I have put into that which cannot be taken away. [...] I have the land still, and it is mine‹ (p. 79). Even though the earth does not always yield good harvests and causes hunger and famine due to natural conditions, Wang Lung remains faithful to the earth as the key source of life and nourishment.

When the famine grows worse and worse, the family flees to a nearby city. The narrator portrays the city life as a threat to Wang Lung's rural lifestyle of hard work and moral sincerity. Cheating, greed, stealing, and exploitation are prevalent in urban life. In the city, hard labor does not yield a harvest as it does in the countryside. Wang Lung

3 Michael H. Hunt, Pearl Buck – Popular Expert on China, 1931–1949, in: *Modern China* 3 (1977), pp. 33–64, here pp. 33–34.

4 Conn, *Pearl S. Buck* (fn 1), p. 119.

says to himself, ›We must get back to the land‹, and does so at the first opportunity when he accidentally receives gold during a collective robbery (p. 119). Wang Lung uses the money to buy seed and grains for his land. The narrator comments that it seems as if Wang Lung has ›never been away from his land, as indeed, in his heart he never had‹ (p. 148). Even though the land does not always produce food and causes famine and death, Wang Lung's dedication to the earth is a glorification of the rural life that is portrayed as being more natural and foundational to humanity than urbanity with its economic artificiality and political superficiality. In the city, Wang is disinterested in socialist propaganda and O-Lan only uses the political flyers to make soles for their shoes. Without the cultivation of land, an urban area does not promise life and its resources in food and nutrition. The loyal commitment to the earth, which is invested with an ethical and emotional quality with the adjective ›good‹ of the novel's title, embodies the selfhood and identity of Wang Lung and O-Lan, who represent not only Chinese peasants but also those worldwide. Indeed, Buck's novel echoes the sentiments of the American farmers during the Great Depression in the 1930s, a timing that contributed to the success of the novel. Karen J. Leong points out that ›Buck's subject matter [...] paralleled a prominent concept in depression America, that of returning to the land. Central to the concept of American nationhood were the role of the frontier and the heritage of those who worked the land.‹⁵

Indeed, the connection between China and America through land as the foundational source for food and survival is crucial to placing Buck in a trans-Pacific context instead of seeing her merely as an American writer in the American national and literary context.⁶ While Mari Yoshihara criticizes Buck for her use of skillful narrative strategies to propagate an Orientalism imbued with imperialist and racial prejudices and for producing a romantic colonial image of China that is neither true nor realistic, Richard Jean So argues for an alternative trans-Pacific context ›that emphasizes American-Chinese encounters and dialogue, and that places Buck's vision of natural democracy at its center.‹⁷ So understands Wang Lung as a ›syncretic figure‹ who represents Asian-American transculturation in the 1930s rather than American hegemony and exploitation in China.⁸ So's argument highlights the transcultural exchange and mutual understanding via the connecting factor of farmers' agricultural activities in China and America. Historian David A. Hollinger's study confirms this trans-Pacific

5 Karen J. Leong, *The China Mystique. Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*, Berkeley 2005, p. 29.

6 Xiongya Gao and Vanessa Künemann, for example, have paid attention to female characters in Buck's novels and the middlebrow status of this novel in American literature – an interpretive perspective from the social history of literature within one national context. See Xiongya Gao, *Pearl S. Buck's Chinese Women Characters*, Selinsgrove 2000; Vanessa Künemann, *Middlebrow Mission. Pearl S. Buck's American China*, Bielefeld 2015.

7 Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East. White Women and American Orientalism*, Oxford 2003; Richard Jean So, Fictions of Natural Democracy: Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*, and the Asian American Subject, in: *Representations* 112 (2010), pp. 87-111, here p. 89.

8 Ibid. See also Colleen Lye, *America's Asia. Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945*, Princeton 2005.

interpretive approach and makes it clear that Buck and others with missionary up-bringsings realized that ›the peoples of the world were much less in need of American Protestant supervision than had been supposed. The missionary encounter with peoples beyond the historically Christian North Atlantic West produced relatively generous dispositions toward the varieties of humankind.‹⁹ The word ›generous‹ here implies a pluralistic acceptance of cultural, religious, political, and intellectual diversity.

To take the argument for placing Buck in a trans-Pacific framework one step further, I venture to argue that we should in fact treat Buck's novel as a piece of Chinese literature, a Chinese novel written in English. I certainly don't mean to ignore Buck's American background. My reading aims to emphasize the influence of China's literary, cultural, and political movements on Buck's thinking and writing, which hasn't been emphasized in the other critical readings mentioned above. Indeed, unlike typical Western representations of China, which portray a Western traveler in China in the rich tradition that extends from Marco Polo to the present day (e.g., Christoph Ransmayr's *Cox oder Der Lauf der Zeit*, 2016), Buck's protagonist is not interested in mobility and travel; he is deeply rooted in his land. It is a story that is embedded in the time of China's tumultuous economic, political, and cultural transformations. In fact, Buck herself asserts her belonging to Chinese literature in her Nobel Prize lecture.

In this lecture, Buck says that ›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.‹¹⁰ Buck mentions the fact that the novel is not considered a high art in the classical literary tradition. Yet she sees it as ›the peculiar product of the common people‹ because it uses a vernacular language to enable ordinary people who can't read or write to understand the stories that are read out loud to them. She calls these illiterate ordinary people such as Wang Lung and O-Lan ›the most democratic of peoples‹. Buck also points out that novels in China can't be merely attributed to a few great writers, as it is customary in Western literary history, ›because it is the common people of China who keep alive the great novels, illiterate people who have passed the novel, not so often from hand to hand as from mouth to mouth‹. Buck is aware of the movement of vernacular literature and avers that the novel is ›what lives, to be part of what is to come, and all the formal literature, which was called art, is dead. Buck sees her writing in the tradition of the Chinese novel and claims that she feels an obligation to write for the common people: ›If they are reading their magazines by the million, then I want my stories there rather than in magazines read only by a few.‹ Indeed, plain and simple language and a realist kind of narration characterize her style in *The Good Earth* and her other novels.

9 David A. Hollinger, *The Missionary Children Who Taught Empathy to Americans*, 29 January 2018, URL: <<https://www.whatitmeanstobeamerican.org/encounters/the-missionary-children-who-taught-empathy-to-americans>>.

10 See Pearl S. Buck, *The Chinese Novel*. Nobel Lecture, 12 December 1938, URL: <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1938/buck/lecture>>. The following quotations are also taken from this lecture.

Buck's understanding of Chinese vernacular literature and her dedication to the common people or the peasants have to be seen in the context of two movements in China in the early twentieth century: the literary movement of New Novel and the rural education project. Liang Qichao (梁启超), the famous politician of the ›Hundred Days of Reform‹ (June 11 – September 21, 1898) that failed in a coup d'état by the conservatives, founded the journal *New Novel* (*Xin Xiaoshuo* 新小说) in his Japanese exile in 1902. Liang argues in his treatise *On the Relation between the Novel and the Governance of the Multitude* (*Lun Xiaoshuo Yu Qunzhi Zhi Guanxi* 论小说与群治之关系) that social reform has to start with the reform of the novel (*xiaoshuo* 小说).¹¹ Liang contends that the novel, a universal vernacular genre, has the unparalleled power to influence religion, politics, customs, education, and the human heart because of its easy language, its entertaining quality, and its emotional affects. Writing from his Japanese exile and disappointed by the failure to transform the late Qing Dynasty into a constitutional monarchy, Liang concludes that bad novels are responsible for the corruption, the lack of ethical behavior, the excessive sentimentalism, and the violent gangs in Chinese society. Liang articulates his social critique through a critique of the novel and hence calls for new novels as the new hope for China. Liang's promotion of the novel goes against the grain of the classical literary tradition focusing on poetry as the high art. The subsequent movement for plain-language literature (*Baihua Wen Yundong* 白话文运动), led by Hu Shi (胡适), Lu Xun (鲁迅), and Chen Duxiu (陈独秀) profoundly shook the roots of the centuries-long domination of classical language literature in the 1920s. Buck's literary writing, as she explicitly states in her Nobel Prize speech, is aligned with Liang Qichao's (梁启超) New Novel movement.

At the same time, Buck's commitment to the peasants corresponds to the Chinese philosopher Liang Shuming's (梁漱溟) rural education project, supported by his New Confucianism. In *Theory of Rural Construction* (*Xiangcun Jianshe Lilun* 乡村建设理论, 1937), Liang contends that the biggest problem in China is ›severe cultural imbalance‹.¹² The solution for this problem, he argues, lies in reformulating and reapplying Confucian ethics in the countryside, the very foundation of Chinese culture. Liang sees his project of rural reconstruction as significant not only for China but also for the entire world. Guy Alitto characterizes Liang as ›the century's foremost Confucian traditionalist‹, who legendarily braved the tirade from the Communist leader Mao Zedong in a public meeting of the Central People's Government Council in 1953 and, after his criticism of the government had been mercilessly rejected, insisted on speaking yet again.¹³ Alitto contrasts the clash between the chief Marxist in China and his long-time

11 See Qichao Liang (梁启超), *On the Relation between the Novel and the Governance of the Multitude* (*Lun Xiaoshuo Yu Qunzhi Zhi Guanxi* 论小说与群治之关系), in: *New Novel* (*Xin Xiaoshuo* 新小说) 1 (1902) issue 1, pp. 1-8.

12 Shuming Liang (梁漱溟), *Theory of Rural Construction* (*Xiangcun Jianshe Lilun* 乡村建设理论), in: *Collected Works of Liang Shuming* (*Liang Shuming Quanji* 梁漱溟全集), Jinan (济南) 1990, pp. 141-573, here p. 164.

13 Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian. Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity*, Berkeley 1979, p. 3.

friend Liang as the clash between modernization and its conservative critique. Mao's disagreement with Liang seems to commit the political categorization of Liang as a conservative New Confucianist thinker to perpetuity. Yet Liang's rural ›conservatism‹ belongs to a worldwide movement that seems ›to take, and then idealize, a traditional form of society as the touchstone for social excellence‹.¹⁴ Seeing China caught between the nationalist government and the Communist movement, Liang understood his rural position as a ›third way‹ toward an independent and socialist society.

Similarly, Buck sees the soul of China in its rurality. She writes: ›China has been made up ninety per cent of common people, scarcely literate at all, wholly lacking in scientific explanations of the ruthless forces of nature which have held them in a continual grip of famine and war and flood. High civilization has been the possession only of the few, and even these few have been inevitably shadowed by the fears, superstitions, and primitive emotions and imaginations of the overwhelming multitude.‹¹⁵ This multitude in China consists mostly of peasants and gives birth to Chinese fiction. Buck argues that the origin of Chinese fiction ›comes somehow out of the life of the people who can neither read nor write, who can only listen to the village story-tellers and give forth again by spoken word to their children the tales of magic and war and lust they hear.‹¹⁶ She tells her listeners: ›You may go into any village in China to-day and there they sit listening.‹¹⁷ This is something that Buck calls a folk-mindedness in the Chinese novel. ›This permeation of the folk mind even into the educated and cultured explains to the observant many of what we like to call the mysteries of the Oriental nature.‹¹⁸ Buck therefore considers fiction a mirror of the soul of China, a mirror reflecting the love and warrior mentality of the Chinese people, the peasants and the elites. Buck further claims that ›there is nothing there to praise or to blame. After all, one asks of a mirror only that it reflects the truth, and in this mirror there is faithfulness to the great original, the Chinese people.‹¹⁹ For all the seeming neutrality of this position, Buck's critique of industrialization and modernization in China is subtly audible. Wang Lung's intimate attachment to his lands and his wife's devotion to him and the children are contrasted with their sons' future hopes of living in the city and selling Wang's lands for money in order to invest in the export business. Buck's sentimental description of the aging Wang Lung's powerless clinging to his lands and the knowing smiles and intention of his sons indicts the technological modernization that destroys the countryside, the foundation of Chinese and human civilization. Wang Lung sadly predicts: ›It is the end of a family – when they begin to sell the land‹ (p. 385). The ending of the novel shows the problematic development of the divergence from agriculture toward industrialization that would eventually lead to the lack of food and nutrition. The generational conflict in early twentieth-century China reflects

14 Ibid., p. 10.

15 Pearl Buck, *The Soul of China*, in: *Living Age* 338 (1930), pp. 168-176, here p. 172.

16 Ibid., p. 171.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 173.

19 Ibid., p. 176.

a global transition from agricultural society to industrial nation. The logic of this development, however, does not necessarily yield the best result to meet the basic human need for food and nourishment.²⁰

Nevertheless, the central thrust of Buck's narrative does not express any clearly political or ideological position. She means to describe and understand the China she has experienced. Her perspective is not ethnologically or politically analytic but sympathetically nativist. Even though Buck might not necessarily have identified with the Chinese or considered herself Chinese (she once reported the xenophobic attitude of Chinese people and recounted that once a friendly rich Chinese woman ›deplored [...] [Buck's] misfortune in being a white-skinned, light-eyed race‹), her thinking and writing were strongly influenced by Chinese rural culture and she admired the Chinese way of life as it was.²¹ It is commonly known that modern Chinese writers, dismissing the classical Chinese literary tradition, have been tremendously influenced by the West and have translated and imitated Western literature. It is rarer to see how the Chinese literary reform movement in favor of the novel has influenced a literary work written in English, in particular one as successful as *The Good Earth*. If anyone still argues that Buck's gaze at China is orientalist or romanticizing, with her preference for the rural lifestyle expressed in Chinese novels that were considered low-status literature, then Liang Shuming's rural education project and Liang Qichao's New Novel movement show that Buck was indeed one of them. Any line drawn between the Chinese and the Westerner would probably be contrived. There is, however, a more discernible line between the rural and the urban and between the multitude and the elite in Buck's writings.

The success of Buck's Chinese story in America and more generally in the West thus also signifies the interconnectedness of rural lifestyles worldwide, whether in Nebraska or in Anhui. *The Good Earth* effectively redirects the critique of Western Orientalism toward a celebration of Chinese rural realism. Buck herself believes that ›the Chinese novel has an illumination for the Western novel and for the Western novelist‹.²² For Buck, China is like the earth that provides the young people with ›a sublime self-confidence which nothing can destroy, a firm belief that all will eventually be well, in spite of present flood and famine and banditry‹ (p. 330).

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20 Frank Dikötter's book *Mao's Great Famine* discusses the devastating results of the Chinese Communist Party's early policies of neglecting agriculture for the sake of industrialization. See Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine. The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–62*, London 2010.

21 Pearl S. Buck, China the Eternal, in: *Living Age* 324 (1925), pp. 324–330, here p. 327.

22 See Buck, The Chinese Novel (fn 10).