

SAMPLE TEXT 1

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PEARL S. BUCK IN LITERARY HISTORY

Abstract: This essay addresses the shifts in Pearl S. Buck's literary reputation making the case for renewed consideration to Buck as a relevant figure for a transnational literary history. Her work is analyzed as an example of world literary study based on syncretic figures like Buck who cannot be easily extricated from one or another national tradition--conjoined literary figures, we might say, of Chinese and American literary history. By paying closer attention to figures such as Buck whose literary history forces us to consider her works in multi-lingual, multinational contexts the complex interactions of global literary systems can be made visible. In reworking this picture of global literary culture, this essay argues that Buck's literary/cultural importance was never exclusively textual (based on the intrinsic literary qualities of her works in a critical vacuum). Rather, it demands historicist and biographical contextualization in order to elucidate the ideological horizons, as Frederic Jameson might put it, intrinsic to her work. In particular, the transcultural feminism emergent in her work derives from a creative tension forged by her troubled marriage to Lossing Buck in the 1920s and 30s. What follows then, is an exploration of this in three sections. The first part will take a macroscopic vantage, tracing the rise and fall and re-emergence of Buck's literary reputation. The second part is microscopic, detailing the formative tensions of Buck's creative life and how those tensions fed into the formation of her literary and cultural identities, especially *The Good Earth* and *All Men Are Brothers*. The paper ends with brief discussion of *Dragon Seed*, and what in my view is the endpoint of Buck's transcultural political imaginary.

Keywords: Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, literary history, China, United States, *The Good Earth*, *All Men Are Brothers*, *Dragon Seed*, *East Wind*, *West Wind*, Gender roles, Nobel Prize.

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Where do we locate Pearl Sydenstricker Buck in American Literary History? Where do we locate her in Chinese Literary History? These two national literary histories are ultimately more entangled than we generally suppose as we employ the categories of nation and ethnicity

to define domains of authorship, and in posing these questions, the case of Pearl Buck in its aesthetic and cultural mutability provides a perspective and a set of tools through which we can approach the complexities of world literature and world literary history. Of course, the literary histories of the United States and China, taken in their own terms through other authors, deserve due consideration, but in the figure of Pearl Buck they have been intertwined. Since the literary shockwave set off in the United States by the publication of *The Good Earth* in 1931 reverberated through Chinese literary circles (and ultimately around the globe) China entered into American literary consciousness in an unprecedented form (a socially realistic filial saga of rural peasantry) and American literature—in the figure of Buck and the command her representations of China seemed to be holding over the Western imagination—became an unavoidable problem for Chinese authors and literary critics. As Buck's literary reputation has waxed and waned in the United States and China during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the connections between the literary histories of the two countries has shifted with other authors entering into and dominating the critical conversation but in Buck, the inherently comparative aspects of this shared history emerge with unprecedented clarity. In many respects, this newfound clarity has been predicated on a shift in Chinese literary history and the changes in Buck's position in China.

This essay will attend to these shifts as it makes the case for renewed consideration of Buck and her work but it is also offered as an example of world literary study based on syncretic figures like Buck who cannot be easily extricated from one or another national tradition--conjoined literary figures, we might say. By paying closer attention to figures whose literary histories force us to consider their works in multi-lingual, multinational contexts the complex interactions of global literary systems can be made visible. Also, in reworking this picture of global literary culture, this essay is burdened with the awareness that Buck's literary/cultural importance was never exclusively textual (based on the intrinsic literary qualities of her works in a critical vacuum). Rather, it demands historicist and biographical contextualization in order to elucidate the ideological horizons, as Frederic Jameson might put it, intrinsic to her work. In particular, the transcultural feminism emergent in her work derives from a creative tension forged by her troubled marriage to Lossing Buck in the 1920s and 30s. What follows then, is an exploration of this in three sections. The first part will take a macroscopic vantage, tracing the rise and fall and re-emergence of Buck's literary reputation. The second part is microscopic, detailing the formative tensions of Buck's creative life and how those tensions fed into the formation of her literary and cultural identities. The paper ends with brief discussion of *Dragon Seed*, and what in my view is the endpoint of Buck's transcultural political imaginary.

I. The Rehabilitation of Pearl Buck

A shift in China's official attitude toward Pearl Buck occurred in May 2012 at Nanjing University during an international symposium on her years in Nanjing. This symposium was convened in conjunction with the inauguration of the Pearl S. Buck Memorial House on the campus of the university. The house which had long been plastered over in nondescript stucco and existed in a kind of tolerated obscurity from the 1930s until the present, had, at considerable expense, been renovated and restored to the condition when Buck and her first husband, Lossing, their disabled daughter, Carol, and her widower father resided there in the 1920s and 30s. Period furniture had been acquired to supplement the wall text and biographical information on Buck to create a museum dedicated to her life and work. The upstairs room in which she wrote *The Good Earth* had been recreated based on photographic evidence and outfitted with a replica of the typewriter she had used. Once a reminder of the Western missionary presence in China and the residence of a persona non grata (hence stuccoing over the façade), the house has been remade as a monument to the origins of literary achievement. Just outside the entrance to the house, a large bust of Buck was commissioned and unveiled during the ceremonies (Figure 1). Media were in attendance and the events were publicized in the China Daily News among other outlets [Wenwei 2012, p. 4].

The conference and ceremonies marked a barometric shift in the climate of Buck's Chinese reputation. Buck's first wave of success in the 1930s, coming as it did during the turmoil of the nationalist era, was always greeted with a certain degree of caution, if not outright opposition, by Chinese literary critics and scholars. While some critics were encouraged by the example of *The Good Earth*, dealing as it did with Chinese rural life, achieving such popularity in the West (as well as in China, relatively speaking, where it went through multiple translated editions in this era), they were, as Julia Hovell, has observed, skeptical of its literary value in either Chinese or Western terms. Hu Feng questioned, the book's representational accuracy, the reasons for its success, and the expertise of its female author. A note of incredulity pervades his commentary. "How has this female writer... observed China?" he wondered. Had *The Good Earth* achieved its "astounding success" for its "artistic quality or for other reasons?" Perhaps most crucially for Buck's fate during the decades that would follow, "What kind of truthful reflection has been given of the peasant's fate and of the conditions that produced that fate?" The answers implied in Hu Feng's dismissive tone, were that he and other

influential Chinese critics found Buck's work to be generally lacking.

When in 1932, Professor Jiang Kinghu, a classical scholar and an official connected with the Manchu Ministry of Justice, dismissed *The Good Earth* in *The New York Times* as nothing more than an occidental grotesque, preoccupied with sex, and overly attentive to unflattering aspects of a numerous but nonetheless unrepresentative segment of Chinese society, Buck offered a powerful rebuttal. She called him out on the injustice and bias in his disparaging use of the term "coolie" to describe the likes of the novel's protagonists, O-lan and Wang Lung. "The point that some of China's intellectuals cannot seem to grasp is that they ought to be proud of their common people, that the common people are China's strength and glory" [Kang-hu 1933, p. 14]. The forcefulness of Buck's response, while wholly consistent with Buck's feelings for the Chinese and in keeping with contemporaneous New Deal--era rhetoric about ordinary people, actually evades the central issue for many of her Chinese critics. Even though she was right on point with respect to Kinghu's elitist polemic, it was not merely a question of taking pride in the common people but the modes in which the common people were represented and the explanatory models used to describe their condition, or "the conditions that produced their fate," as Hu Feng put it. In other words, because Buck was a woman and her social critique functioned in different ways, activated different rhetorical registers and resisted both Nationalist and Marxist explanations for the conditions of common people, it relegated her work in Chinese critical circles to a position of perceived superficiality. [...]

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