Modernists Passing the Buck: "Orientals," Middlebrows, and *The Good Earth*

Jamie Harker

Pearl S. Buck, that most maligned and neglected of American Nobel prize winners, is enjoying renewed academic attentions, thanks in large part to Peter Conn's 1996 "cultural biography." But in terms of literary and cultural history, Buck remains inscrutable. Enormously influential in the Thirties, Buck inspired serious reviews in "modern" publications like the *New Republic*, dominated the best-seller lists, and argued against imperialism and for racial and gender equality. Yet she isn't part of the critical canon which modernism, feminism, or Asian American studies have constructed, despite her relationship to all three of these traditions. Like Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, Buck has been hiding in plain sight.

Pearl Buck destabilizes the neat binaries which modernism posits—genteel and modern, progressive and mainstream, American and foreign, middlebrow and avant-garde. She was a thoroughly mainstream writer enamored with aesthetic, political, racial, and cultural others. But by current critical paradigms, Buck's very mainstreamness makes *her* marginal. Such contemporary assumptions need to be rethought, for no literary or cultural history can be either complete or adequate without coming to terms with Pearl S. Buck.

Modernist Orientialism and Modern China

There is no doubt that modernism has dominated discussions of the interwar period, even as definitions of "modernism" have become increasing varied and chaotic; no term is more slippery or all-encompassing. Most critical schools agree, however, that the modern era—from the turn of the century until World War II, in its most generous time span—was marked by tumultuous cultural, aesthetic, and economic upheaval. Cultural mores and beliefs which had been enforced as natural and inevitable were openly flaunted, even

ridiculed, by successive younger generations, who turned away from Christianity, chastity, patriotism, politics, social hierarchy, and family values. World War I was, of course, a defining factor in the moderns' sense of radical disjunction with all preceding generations, but so too were the scientific method, psychoanalysis, the rise of big business, and political bosses. Many artists expressed their alienation and isolation through innovative, alienating form. Critical modernism has subsequently identified formal innovation as a necessary condition for art, and this requirement dominates discussions of interwar literature.

Of course, such simple generalities cannot account for the variety and complexity of literary production between the wars. This is particularly true in America, where writers like Sinclair Lewis were more offensive thematically than formally. Furthermore, American moderns had cultural insecurities which complicated their relationship to modern revolt. European moderns felt that their culture had devolved and disintegrated, and many wished to hasten the process. American moderns, by contrast, were beset with doubts about whether America had a "culture" at all. Van Wyck Brooks' "America's Coming of Age," for example, critiques the ways in which materialism has eradicated any possibility of true culture. American moderns' relationship to other countries was, consequently, two-tiered. Obsessed with what they perceived as crucial inadequacies in American culture which precluded the possibility of art or civilization, they looked to Europeans a source of culture, making expatriatism their mantra. At the same time, following Europe's lead, they turned to non-European nations and marginal cultures like African-American culture as their source for the primitive, a virile, essential humanity which decayed over-civilization had lost. Thus, ironically, American moderns felt both under- and over-civilized. After prostrating themselves before a (dying) European civilization, they patronized "primitive" cultures whenever they got the chance. However inferior they felt to European culture, they could feel superior to all others.

"Orientalism" played a small but important role in this larger quest for the primitive by American modernists. In the oft-discussed "translation" of Chinese poetry, *Cathay*, for example, Pound invoked "Chinese" literary qualities to challenge what he saw as a Victorian stranglehold over poetry. Because images of Asia denoted, in an American context, a vague sense of revolution, foreignness, and danger, these became tropes for a newly emerging

modernist poetics. Wanting poetry which used direct treatment (rejecting abstractions for the concrete, particularly natural objects), economy of words, and the sequence of musical phrase, Pound argued that the Chinese language is the natural medium for such a poetry, because Chinese ideographs "follow natural suggestion" (Fenollosa 363). That is, Chinese characters visually represent the concepts they symbolize. The relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary, in Saussurian terms, but causal. In fact, Pound claimed that an artist friend was able to read Chinese after studying only for a week, because "the pictorial values . . . were to him perfectly obvious and apparent" (385). In Pound's poetical lexicon, the natural sign system of Chinese makes its literature imagistic and essential, qualities which Western artists would do well to imitate; Europeans must learn "to consider all life and nature in the terms of planes and of bounding lines." Pound's appreciative advocacy of Chinese language and culture differed from the more negative orientalist stereotypes of American fiction writers of the same period like Jack London and Frank Norris. For Pound, the Chinese are superior to Europeans because they are closer to essential humanity.

Underneath this apparent celebration of Chinese culture, however, are some disturbing assumptions. The Chinese language, he maintained, "throw[s] light upon our forgotten mental processes" (375) by showing the primitive one-to-one correspondence between meaning and sign. Pound's understanding of Chinese, unhindered by actual knowledge of the language, is, of course, patently false; Chinese writing is just as arbitrary as European writing systems. Indeed, language reformists in China found Chinese characters more arbitrary and difficult, a fact which contributed to the high illiteracy rate; they advocated a simplification, if not an abolishment, of the characters. And political and literary radicals in China would have been shocked to learn that Chinese poetry was primitive, immediate, and imagistic. To them, the classical Chinese poetic tradition was outdated, elaborate, and oppressive, more formalized and artificial than the more overwrought Victorian poem. Even Pound's understanding of China as a charmingly preserved museum of primitive humanity was nostalgic and inaccurate, for as he was publishing "The Chinese Language as a Medium for Poetry" in 1920, China was having its own crisis of modernity.

China's experience of modernity paralleled that of the West but went in the opposite direction. If Europe and America recoiled from the modern,

Chinese intellectuals desperately journeyed towards it and away from feudalism. Their desire for modernization was inspired and aided by external events. Politically, China was in perpetual turmoil. The 1911 revolution took away the power of the Emperor and established a republic. The May Fourth Uprising of 1919, which protested the Versailles treaty, inspired nationalist sentiments among the students and led to soapbox preaching and political involvement with peasants and workers. The 1925-1927 revolution, a coalition of the Nationalist party and the Communists, aimed to establish democracy but soon devolved into fascist oppression and civil war, as Chiang Kai-shek tried to exterminate the communists and disregarded repeated Japanese aggression in the process. Amidst this political tumult, many students embraced science and rejected the feudal family system which included deference to elders, arranged marriages, and female inequality, bringing great emotional turbulence to both incredulous families and rebellious students. Warlords, intrigue, instability, massive cultural transformation, and generational warfare marked the period.[1]

Concomitant with this political and cultural transformation was a literary renaissance. Young scholars repudiated the rules and formality of classical Confucian literature and advocated a new literature—nationalist, political, and relevant to modern conditions. The midwife of this literary movement was the legendary Lu Hsun. The son of a scholarly, monied family, Lu Hsun observed the breakdown of Confucian feudalism through foreign imperialism and the Revolution of 1911. Appalled by the political excesses of his age, especially the fragile "democracy" which amounted to little more than a free-for-all of the strong over the weak, Lu Hsun retreated into scholarship until the May Fourth uprising, when he was enticed to return to public life through literature. What was needed most, he believed, was not political or social revolution but a fundamental change in the minds and hearts of the people. Democracy imported from the West was useless without re-education and massive thought transformation. Since "the most important task that lay ahead . . . was to change them in spirit," Lu Hsun explained, " I thought that literature might serve this purpose" (Kowallis 21). Literature, for Lu Hsun and for the young intellectuals who rallied behind him, became a political and cultural tool to modernize and invigorate China.

In their quest to modernize China, intellectuals embraced a variety of strategies. Some of the writers for the periodical *New Youth* embraced a

non-classical literary tradition of the people, praising folk novels like *Shui Hu Chuan* (named in Pearl Buck's translation *All Men Are Brothers*), *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Journey to the West*, and *Three Kingdoms.* Many also advocated a rejection of archaic Confucian language for more colloquial language. But as influential were literary translations by European artists as diverse as Gogol, Ibsen, and Tolstoi. By importing the tools necessary for China's regeneration, many May Fourth intellectuals laid themselves open to the charge of being un-Chinese and covertly maintaining their highbrow privilege. A significant percentage, however, attacked the class bias of China and sought her rejuvenation in the people; two such intellectuals, at Peking University, formed the Communist party in the Twenties.

Even this thumbnail sketch of Chinese cultural and literary upheaval in the early twentieth century suggests that modern Chinese history and culture could greatly enhance the constructed literary tradition of modernism which so dominates the interwar period. By and large, however, Chinese writers and Chinese experiences of modernity have not been integrated into modernism, perhaps because so many modernist writers used China as a symbol of pre-industrial, primitive life which European civilization needed to recapture. Despite their disdain for the American mainstream, for example, American modernists contributed to a larger cultural transformation of Asians to "orientals"—when they considered them at all.

What might it suggest about modernism, then, to realize that it has completely failed to notice Chinese modernity or see Chinese culture as anything but a useful "oriental" symbol? The question isn't trivial when one considers that the hegemony of critical modernism depends largely on its alleged aesthetic and political superiority. Writers like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse provided a Marxist justification for experimental aesthetics, arguing that capitalism insidiously uses "accessibility" to naturalize economic inequality and spiritual bankruptcy as "reality." Only writers who radically destabilize this naturalized reality have motives and politics which are pure. In recent years, devastating critiques of modernism's fascist and primitivist tendencies have undermined these easy assumptions. Yet modernism retains its naturalized status as *the* metanarrative of the interwar period, perhaps because of the assumption, easily supported by anecdotal evidence, that no matter how racist, sexist, and fascist many modernist may have been, "mainstream" writers were undoubtedly worse.

The writing career of Pearl Buck provides an excellent case study for testing this modernist assumption. Buck has always been a mystifying presence on the American literary scene, for reasons only exacerbated by her 1936 Nobel Prize. A popular woman writer who proselytized for liberalism, a Christian who wrote frankly of sex, an American who identified, "by sympathy and feeling," as Chinese ("Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" 155), Buck fits none of the dominant literary paradigms. Of course, Buck had affinities with American moderns. After *The Good Earth* was published in 1931, reviewers in the *New Republic* and the *Nation* praised its unabashed sexuality and its lack of sentimentality; many Christian groups condemned Buck's earthy realism for its degenerate modern morals. In 1932, she publicly critiqued missionary work as arrogant and imperialist, which precipitated a public debate and her resignation from the Presbyterian mission board.[2] Buck's personal life was equally "modern." Buck's affair with her publisher, Richard Walsh, became public knowledge in 1935, when the *New York Times* reported her Reno divorce and her immediate marriage to Walsh (a union demonstrating not only Buck's sexual liberation but her financial acumen). But in other crucial ways, Buck's career, particularly her importation of the Chinese vernacular tradition and her liberalism, aligned her most closely with what American moderns derisively dismissed as the middlebrow.

Janice Radway explains that the term "middlebrow" emerged in the Twenties as a reaction to the "developments, fears, and concerns" surrounding immigration and the rise of mass culture (*A Feeling for Books* 708). Critics attacked book clubs like the Book-of-the-Month club as middlebrow bastardizations which led to the standardization of American culture and the demise of intellectual individualism and "the public sphere." From its first usage, the middlebrow was already deeply implicated in consumerism and consumerism's low aesthetic standards. By contrast, Radway describes the middlebrow as an alternative aesthetic based on feeling and identification which provides its readers with a "sentimental education." Middlebrow readers, she argues, value books "because they are seeking a model for contemporary living and even practical advice about appropriate behavior in a changing world" ("The Book-of-the-Month Club" 535). The emphasis on identification and feeling of middlebrow fiction seemed to provide such a model.

The middlebrow's emphasis on practical advice made it irresistible to many writers with a progressive political agenda. The middlebrow reading experience seemed to produce a quasi- religious experience, with the same potential to heal, create community, and save the nation. While conforming to readers' expectations for easy readability and fluency, middlebrow encourages identification with different experiences and belief systems from what is commonly perceived to be the mainstream. That is to say, a progressive middlebrow text disrupts on the level of ideology precisely because it conforms on the level of form, encouraging identification with the other. Or it challenges certain aspects of ideology even as it conforms (or perhaps because it conforms) to other ideological tropes. An exemplary progressive middlebrow text tenuously balances the strange and the familiar, the artistic and the popular, the profound and the commonplace. Always, its goal is transformation; progressive middlebrow believes in the power of fiction to effect social change in the public sphere.

Progressive middlebrow provides the most intelligible context for reading Pearl Buck, especially her liberalism and her Chinese folk aesthetic. When Buck left behind her parents' orthodox Christianity, she transformed herself into a secular missionary, proselytizing for racial equality, feminism, and a liberal humanist Christianity. Her "missionary beginnings," she explained, made her feel "responsible at least for what I can personally do about a given situation which needs mending" (*My Several Worlds* 371). Buck simply shifted allegiances, with the same passion for causes and national salvation. She remained fiercely patriotic and defiantly bourgeois, in defiance of moderns' horror of the American middle class and its embrace of radicalism in the Thirties. Her choice of fiction as one of her means of reform aligned her with other progressive middlebrows and against cultural and political moderns.

Using fiction for political purposes was only one factor of Buck's progressive middlebrow, of course, for by the early Thirties many moderns had embraced proletarian literature. The *kind* of fiction Buck wrote irrevocably aligned her with the middlebrow. Buck's fiction was more plot-driven than character-driven, and she wrote in a pared-down simple style which many reviewers termed Biblical. To highbrows, her work seemed like the melodramatic shoddy craftsmanship characteristic of the popular. Buck, however, raised in China, wrote from a Chinese folk aesthetic, and she used

her considerable cultural capital to combat the emerging hegemony of what would become the modernist aesthetic.

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Buck gave a mini-history of vernacular Chinese literature to establish her "popular" aesthetic as a legitimate art form. "In China," she explained, "art and the novel have always been widely separated" (*The Chinese Novel* 12). Scholars, "kept . . . too busy with memorizing and copying the dead and classical past," (13), considered novels unworthy of their attention. Consequently, the Chinese novel "grew as if like out of its own soil, the common people, nurtured by that heartiest of sunshine, popular approval, and untouched by the cold and frosty winds of scholar's art" (17). Drawing on her interpretation of the Chinese vernacular, Buck enshrines plot and accessible language as the crucial components of literature. Most essential, though, is to explore "human life as he finds it in himself or outside himself" (57). As such, "a novelist must not think of pure literature as his goal," because "people, who are his material, are not there" (59). "Pure literature," or an obsessive interest in form for its own sake, draws a writer away from the humanist values which make literature matter in Buck's lexicon.

Peter Conn cites this vernacular Chinese influence as the root of Buck's artistic defects. This critical assessment of Buck's inadequacies, standard in literary criticism, avoids the strong challenge her importation of Chinese folk culture brings to Western highbrow assumptions. For Buck, focusing on ordinary people brings "reality" and hence validity to writing, for the most artistic is the most truly human. Buck's secularized Protestantism merged with her Chinese identification to establish a unique strand of progressive middlebrow.

One can see Buck presents such a problem for critical modernism, and why she has been so easy to dismiss. But could it be possible that Pearl Buck, liberal, mainstream, and middlebrow, produced a rhetoric less "orientalist" than modernism? For twenty years, Buck was the voice of the "Orient" in the United States, with a committed and loyal readership. Just what she was able to do with this bully-pulpit, despite its limitations, is what made the middlebrow, as a progressive voice in the public sphere, so irresistible to so many writers in the Twenties and Thirties.

"To draw aside the veil from one common man": *The Good Earth*

Question #6—Do you feel that a book like THE GOOD EARTH brought its readers closer to the Chinese people?

Answer—I don't believe there can be the slightest doubt of that, for it shows the Chinese to be a people different only in custom, color and speech—yet living their life emotionally in much the same way as you and I. And speaking of that, I am sure that you would like to know that though I have never asked Mrs. Buck, I am sure that the tribute she values most is not the critical acclaim of her works—nor their great sales—but the realization that THE GOOD EARTH and its sequel SONS have helped to bring to the American people a deeper understanding of the Chinese people.

—Richard Walsh, Radio Broadcast, 1932

The Good Earth's publication history was one of the great publishing successes of the Thirties, the runaway bestseller about which every publisher dreamed. Fortuitous circumstances helped to catapult the novel into fame. Popular novelist and Book-of-the Month Club judge Dorothy Canfield Fisher read the novel and was immediately riveted by the prose and the revelatory portrayal of life in Asia. Her spirited advocacy inspired the rest of the selection committee to choose *The Good Earth* in 1931.

The Book of the Month Club first introduced the novel to the reading public (providing a sale of 40,000 copies) but it cannot entirely account for the novel's phenomenal success. *The Good Earth* was the best-selling novel of the first half of the 1930s; by June 1932, not a year and a half after its publication, it had sold nearly 180,000 copies. It was eventually made into a movie, with the highest advance to date paid for the movie rights. As book-promoter and *New Yorker* editor Alexander Woolcott characterized it, *The Good Earth* made a "quiet and inevitable conquest of the American people" (22).

Certainly, skillful advertising and promotion aided the novel's success. The John Day Company not only advertised extensively but changed its advertising frequently to extend run of the novel. Since such advertising strategies were commonplace in the Thirties, however, Richard Walsh's advertising acumen cannot entirely explain the novel's extraordinary appeal. Pearl Buck's own comments on best sellers may provide the key. Buck suggested that best sellers are both born and made—that is, they sell both because of their literary merit and because something in the "life" they construct "responds to a need of the moment, so that the two uniting create a vogue" ("Bestsellers" 9). The "need of the moment" which *The Good Earth* satisfied

may have been the vicarious experience it provided of a seemingly inscrutable culture. Buck wanted the novel to encourage understanding and sympathy between two vastly different cultures; it was, in effect, a fictional act of diplomacy. She wrote that *The Good Earth*'s characters "are very living for me, at least, and since they live for me, I hope they are alive for others, and that the Americans will see them primarily as people and not as Chinese, and so strange" (Letter to Richard Walsh 25 June 1930). Buck wanted *The Good Earth* to transcend the formidable American barriers of stereotype, cultural difference, and misinformation that made China such a perfect modernist trope for "making strange."

That misinformed stereotypes were commonplace is evident in reviews of the novel, which easily identified the Asian stereotypes that *The Good Earth* avoided. Buck, in many reviewers' estimation, constructed a China which had never been seen in America before, without cherry blossoms, opium, or courtesans. A reviewer for *The New Statesman* succinctly articulated the commonplace tropes and their notable absence: "Here no flutes of jade sound delicately across the moonlit courts, no meditative general sets brush to paper to catch for ever the susurration of dead leaves outside his door, no intricacy of self-abasing compliment unwinds itself from the lips of beggar or mandarin" (430). In short, what was missing were the very details which decisively mark *Cathay*; understatement, exotic images, static tableaus of beauty and grace. The reviewers considered such tropes the "screens and veils and mirrors of artistic and poetic convention" which have constructed the Chinese, "to the Western reader's eye, [as] a flat and unsubstantial figure of a pale-coloured ballet." Buck, reviewers believed, had provided an authentic portrait of "the ordinary, flesh-and-blood, everyday Chinaman" (430).

Just how seriously, literally, and lyrically many readers took *The Good Earth* is evident in a remarkable review in *The Bookman*. Nancy Evans writes powerfully of an almost mystical communion with the "real" China, in a passage which deserves to be quoted at length.

> If the purpose of the novel is to affect the emotions by revealing human life, then *The Good Earth* may be called great. To read this story of Wang Lung, Chinese farmer, is to be slowly and deeply purified; and when the last page is finished it is as if some significant part of one's own days

> were over. Though I may never see a rice-field, I shall always feel that I have lived for a long time in China. The strange power of a western woman to make an alien civilization seem as casual, as close, as the happenings of the morning is surprising; but it is less amazing than her power to illuminate the destiny of man as it is in all countries and at all times by quietly telling the story of one poor Wang Lung. It is true that religion, clothing, tradition, food and even the skies themselves are different from the things we know; and yet these differences are of no consequence. (324)

Evans describes a reading experience which seems very like a religious conversion, and indeed it is a secular, middlebrow conversion. Buck is a kind of conjure woman or a prophet, one with the "strange power" of progressive middlebrow "to make an alien civilization seem as casual, as close, as the happenings of the morning." The emotional effect of reading *The Good Earth* is sanctification, for she is "slowly and deeply purified." But *The Good Earth* goes beyond what it makes Evans feel; it provides her with actual, authentic *experience*, practical and immediate, the experience of years of immersion and knowledge: she "shall always feel that I have lived for a long time in China." Evans must be seen as an ideal reader for Buck, who wanted Americans to see the Chinese "for the human beings that they are, differing only in non-essentials from the Americans themselves and all other humankind" (Letter to Richard Walsh 28 April 1931). To do so, Buck must both portray cultural difference, to establish her narrative's authenticity, and establish that difference as "non-essential" to affirm common, unequivocal kinship.

To respect alterity with objectification, to affirm difference and sameness simultaneously—this all-but-impossible task continues to challenge multiculturalists, and all strategies are flawed. Buck's solution was to imbue her main character, Wang Lung, with qualities consistent with American culture and ideology. These she terms his universal qualities. Although examples of cultural difference abound, including differences in religion, clothing, and cultural mores, they are both unexplained and unimportant. At heart, Wang Lung is no different from the American bourgeoisie.

A masterful example of this strategy is Buck's treatment of sexuality in *The Good Earth.* In terms of sex, *The Good Earth* is even more primitive

than *Cathay*. Wang Lung is, first and foremost, a sensual creature. He satisfies his desires—hunger, lust, companionship—in as direct a way as possible. His joy in marriage is not only the ease of having someone else serve him, but simple lust. In "exultation" on his wedding night, he simply "seized her" (*The Good Earth* 18). Later, when he becomes enamored of a prostitute, his desire becomes more stylized; her smallness and helplessness, "her pointed little feet and her curling helpless hands" (144), keep him "fevered and thirsty" (131). Despite his wife O-lan's devotion and loyalty, he cannot love her because she is not beautiful. And even as an old man, he still feels desire and takes a young girl as a concubine. Sex is a basic impulse for Wang Lung, and he satisfies it frankly. This "liberated" notion of sex is an integral aspect of orientalism, and Buck satisfies her readers' expectations of Chinese sexual mores.

And yet, Wang Lung is also sympathetic to American readers because he feels guilty about his behavior. Wang Lung, though raised in a culture which ostensibly places women last, is too kind to treat women badly and feel justified. When he first marries O-lan, he "desired suddenly that she should like him as her husband and then he was ashamed" (19), ashamed because culturally he should only care that "she fulfilled her duty" (21). Buck carefully juxtaposes the cultural—a wife is to serve—with the universal—marriage and sex are about more than simple obligation. Wang Lung, because of his innate goodness, cares about O-lan as a person, not just as a servant, but his cultural inheritance inhibits that goodness: "He was ashamed of his own curiosity and of his interest in her. She was, after all, only a woman" (21). Beneath an incomprehensible attitude toward women, Buck reveals, are human reactions which American readers can understand.

Buck further indicates that guilt over infidelity is a universal human emotion—as universal as the desire for someone other than a spouse. When O-lan reproaches him for sleeping with Lotus, he feels ashamed, and then "he was rough because he was ashamed and would not acknowledge his shame in his heart" (134). Though his shame doesn't make him change his behavior, his acknowledgment of O-lan's feelings and his own guilt allow Buck to portray Wang Lung's taking of a second wife as cruel *and* understandable. The evil Fu Manchu becomes the self-indulgent, kind, and very human Wang Lung, who gives way to rages but also lovingly protects his simple-minded daughter; who beats his son from jealousy but for whom family obligations are

paramount; who remains, in poverty or wealth, what he always was, a man who acts from impulse and instinct. Even when Wang Lung behaves in morally reprehensible ways, his feelings and reactions are perfectly comprehensible through American moral codes. He may behave badly, but he always feels what he should. Because he is, at heart, an American bourgeoisie, Wang Lung's sexual behavior is simply an example of "non-essential" cultural differences.

It is in her focus on Wang Lung as a farmer, however, that Buck's rhetorical prowess becomes clear. Wang Lung inspired such sympathetic identification from American readers, I believe, because he was the living embodiment of the agrarian myth and the American dream. Buck believed that the Chinese and American people had much in common because of "the fundamental democracy that has always been here—men rising out of the common mass, who are yet earthy and common themselves. . . . A poor man has always a chance at rough justice—if he watches his chance. Masses of common people can rise—do rise—and put down a government in their own crude way" (Letter to Richard Walsh 25 June 1930). *The Good Earth* was perfectly oriented towards an American culture which was both committed to the idea of personal effort and upward mobility and to a nostalgic embrace of the farmer as the receptacle of virtue and the bulwark of democracy. Although America was no longer a nation of farmers, the belief in that myth, and its connection to town meetings and ideal democracy, was a strong impulse in Thirties' American culture. *The Good Earth*'s unequivocal commitment to the land as the ultimate virtue connected easily to American nostalgia for farming and further established the novel's "universality."

Wang Lung is guided and purified by the land; Buck includes numerous paeans to the virtue and beauty of the farmer's communion with nature. Wang Lung's purest and most satisfying connection with his land is in his early days of his marriage to O-lan. When she works in the fields with him, he feels the joy of perfect communion.

> 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. . . . Some time, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried there, houses had stood there, had

> fallen, and gone back into the earth, their bodies also. Each had his turn at this earth. They worked on, moving together—together—producing the fruit of this earth—speechless in their movement together. (*The Good Earth* 22)

Working with O-lan in the fields provides Wang Lung with a mystical communion, the closest thing to religious abstraction which this very sensual man would ever encounter. In fact, O-lan is a more immediate counterpart, an earth mother who shows the properties of the land herself. After their communion, O-lan is transfigured: "Her face was wet and streaked with the earth. She was as brown as the very soil itself" (22). And after the child's birth, O-lan provides her own fecund, Madonna-like image:

> The child lay on an old torn quilt on the ground, asleep. When it cried the woman stopped and uncovered her bosom to the child's mouth, sitting flat upon the ground, and the sun beat down upon them both. . . . The woman and the child were as brown as the soil and they sat there like figures made of earth. There was the dust of fields upon the woman's hair and upon the child's soft black head. (29)

The moments of deepest significance—contentment, friendship, children—are all bound up with the land itself.

So profound and intimate is Wang Lung's connection with the land that his religion is directly from the soil. On their land, Wang Lung's grandfather had built a temple to the earth, in which "sat two small, solemn figures, earthen, for they were formed from the earth of the fields about the temple" (15). The very earth gods are made of earth and, when neglected, return to the earth, just like all people will eventually return to the earth. Their gods that feed and clothe them, that decide whether they live or die, are literally the land itself. For Wang Lung, the earth itself is holy and omnipresent, and all virtue comes from direct connection with the soil.

When Wang Lung is close to the soil, he is at his most virtuous, and when he is separated from it, he is led into "sin." The narrator makes it clear, for example, that Wang Lung never would have gone to the teahouses if he had not been idle because of his wealth and the floods. Wang Lung's father is

horrified by the presence of a "harlot" in his house, self-righteously proclaiming, "I had one woman and my father had one woman and we farmed the land" (150). When Wang Lung is cured of his "sickness" of lust, is it through the land; when he returns to labor, Buck explains, he overcomes his obsession.

Wang Lung's devotion to the earth, no matter what his failings as a husband or a father, is absolute. When facing starvation, he is faithful to his land and refuses to sell. He shrieks at the profiteering men, "I will never sell the land! . . . Bit by bit I will dig up the fields and feed the earth itself to the children and when they die I will bury them in the land, and I and my wife and my old father, even he, we will die on the land that has given us birth!" (61). And when suffering as a poor man in the city, "the memory of his land . . . lying back there, far away, it is true, but waiting and his own, filled him with peace" (74).

Wang Lung's brief urban interlude is crucial to the agrarian myth which his story exemplifies, for his traumatizing experience in the city contrasts sharply with his fulfilling agricultural labor. The city is a place of danger because people are so radically separated from the land. Wang Lung's children steal in order to supplement their diet, and Wang Lung "is angry and afraid in his heart because his sons were growing into thieves here in this city" (80). Only when influences alien to a life of the soil enter (like city thieving and teahouse concubines) does Wang Lung beat his children, and in the city, after beating his second son, he proclaims, "We must get back to the land" (80). The very richness of the city, he learns, is laid on "the foundation of poverty" (80). The city poor have faces permanently set in scowls from "straining at loads too heavy for them" (81), and through street preaching and growing dissatisfaction, a class consciousness emerges. Only in cities does the stratification between rich and poor becomes so acute that only revolution can solve it.

Wang Lung participates in one such revolutionary outbreak. The poor in the Southern city riot and loot the homes of the rich. Wang Lung himself seizes money from a rich man in the house which pays for their journey back, a man with "great yellow rolls of his flesh doubled over his breasts and over his belly," with eyes "small and sunken as a pig's eyes" (98). But the solution to this class stratification is not revolution but agrarianism, at least in Buck's rhetorical lexicon. Wang Lung understands the essentials of life through

farming, and rejectes a Marxist analysis of poverty; misfortune, to him, comes from nature and the gods, not from the rich. *The Good Earth*, to be sure, contain hints of a more radical agenda. At the end of his life, Wang Lung becomes a rich man himself, and his tenants "mutter," much as the poor in the city did, "that one day they would come back even as the poor do come back when the rich are too rich" (224). But these remain in embryo. Wang Lung is saved from communism and revolution through agrarianism; many readers in the Thirties could identify their own resistance to radical solutions in him. Despite unsentimental portrayals of the desperate poverty of Chinese peasants (the scenes of famine, starvation, and implied cannibalism are particularly harrowing), Buck affirms the mythic value of agrarian life.

Buck's rhetorical strategy brilliantly assimilates China to American cultural mores, and so combats American racism. But one may legitimately question her approach. Buck's images could easily, to a reader who knows nothing of China, replace one set of stereotypes with another—if taken as typical of China, they would distort just as much. It is likely that many American readers similarly left *The Good Earth* impressed as much by its strangeness than by its commonality. Furthermore, by using Wang Lung to satisfy American nostalgia for farm life, by focusing on an already-disappearing agricultural life, isn't Buck ignoring the modernity of China? Isn't she, in fact, as orientalist in her way as Ezra Pound?

Perhaps no non-Chinese writer can avoid the cultural pervasiveness of orientalism. But Buck's intimate knowledge of Chinese culture and language gives *The Good Earth* a complexity and historical accuracy which challenge simplified images of the "Orient." Wang Lung may be a simple farmer, but a panorama of Chinese culture marches through the pages of *The Good Earth*—warlords and money-lenders, magistrates and merchants, wealthy landowners and poverty-stricken tenant farmers. Wang Lung's virtuous agrarianism is rare even in traditional Chinese culture. The fermenting cultural turmoil is also evident amidst Buck's rhapsody to the land. Foreign merchants, Christian missionaries, Communist agitators, and working-class revolutionaries all signal the future; by the end of his life, Wang Lung can't understand the world of his own grandchildren. In the final scene, Buck shows the future transformation of the Wang family into soldiers and intellectuals—a transformation she pursues in *Sons* and *A House Divided.* If Buck creates a fictional symbol of the agrarian myth, she also indicates the complexity and dynamics of China.

Even Buck's unexplained cultural images—like the dressing of the earth gods and the elaborate dress of the bride—may mitigate the dangers of Buck's assimilative strategy. If, after so strongly emphasizing Wang Lung's common humanity, Buck could still leave readers with a respect for the difference—the otherness—of Chinese culture, then she may have walked the tightrope between sameness and difference better than most. Buck, for her part, was satisfied by the Chinese reviews, which were nearly all positive. The reviews, she claimed, "go to prove what I have always felt true, that the Chinese . . . know what human nature is, having had the deepest experience of any race now in the world. They do ask no more than to be held what they truly are, an essential part of the human family" (Letter to John Day 22 July 1931). Whatever its limitations, *The Good Earth* made China became an interest and a focus in American culture in the Thirties in an unprecedented way.

Multicultural Middlebrow: the Transformation of the "Orient" to Asia

To determine whether progressive middlebrow allowed for more varied images of Asia in the public sphere than modernism, one must look beyond *The Good Earth*. Looking at Buck's various activities in the Thirties, multicultural middlebrow seems not only plausible but, often, exemplary. Pearl Buck's resolve to explain the East to the West went beyond her own widely read and highly publicized novels of China (which included two sequels to *The Good Earth*, two biographies of her missionary parents, and several other novels in the Thirties). She used her fame to introduce more radical political viewpoints of and many writers from China.

Perhaps the most significant cultural intervention Buck made for Chinese culture in America was her mammoth translation of the 13th century Chinese novel *Shui Hu Chuan*. Buck spent more than five years translating *Shui An Chuan*, an enormous sprawling novel which, in the English translation, was over 1200 pages of episodic adventure, warfare, and drinking. The novel details the development of a group of "righteous robbers," outlaws who because of unfair treatment eventually band together in a mountain stronghold. As Buck describes it in a translator's preface, *Shui An Chuan* is a pageant of Chinese life, in which every type and character makes its appearance. It is most similar to the picaresque novel in the European tradition, but it is much longer and infinitely broader in scope. It provides an unparalleled image of

Chinese culture which in its overwhelming diversity shatters any simple stereotypes of the "Orient." It also strongly challenges common Western narratives about the history of the novel by showing a much older tradition on the other side of the world. Buck insisted that the novel be kept "unabridged, because it is a classic" (Letter to Richard Walsh 3 May 1932).

Richard Walsh, anxious, I think, to please his best-selling author, was committed to publishing and promoting the novel at a loss. He titled the novel, in an appropriately middlebrow strategy, *All Men Are Brothers*, because, as Walsh wrote to Buck, "It has the quality I have been reaching for, a largeness, suggesting an epic, and it seems to me justified (even though the robbers killed a good many thousands of men) by the spirit of the book and the fact that it is accepted as Communist literature" (Letter to Pearl Buck 27 February 1933). He actively lobbied for a Book-of-the-Month club selection so that the novel would be both inexpensive and well-known. Henry Canby, however, eventually decided that the novel didn't have enough mainstream appeal for a primary selection, although it was favorably mentioned in the *Book-of-the-Month Club News*. *All Men Are Brothers* was published in both a two volume set with a much more expensive smaller run. Its sales were modest, though respectable for an academic publication, and both Buck and the John Day company shared the loss. But *All Men Are Brothers*' cultural influence extended far beyond its sales. John Day promoted the novel as a "book that has to be read because it ranks with the great folk tales and epics of all nations and all time—we have had the classics of this type from many other languages—now for the first time we have the great Chinese epic of folklore" (John Day 27 February 1933). Walsh's points of comparison were varied and far-reaching: *Robin Hood, Arabian Nights, Don Quixote, the Iliad, the Odyssey, Gulliver's Travels, Canterbury Tales, King Arthur, Paul Bunyan, Les Miserables, Marco Polo.* American literary culture became aware of the Chinese literary tradition, and the novel, under Buck's distinctive title, entered the popular lexicon in the Thirties. The two most famous journalists of communist China in the Thirties, Edgar Snow and Agnes Smedley, referred to *All Men Are Brothers* without any explanation, which indicates that they could assume a cultural familiarity which no longer exists today. Many moderns, and the ultra-modern press Alfred A. Knopf epitomizes this trend, tried to influence American culture through the translation of European highbrow literature. Pearl Buck attempted a radically different cultural

intervention in American culture by introducing Chinese folk culture into the American literary lexicon. The Chinese writer Lin Yutang, in an adulatory review, articulated the cultural challenge of Buck's translation. "Will this [translation]," he concluded his piece, "be her most successful attempt to make the Americans uncomfortable and to a certain extent change their fashion of reading?" (np). *All Men Are Brothers* may not have changed American reading patterns, but it certainly challenged common assumptions about the novel, form, and culture through Chinese art forms.

Buck's Asian intervention in American culture didn't end with her own translation. After the success of *The Good Earth*, the John Day company became thoroughly identified with Asian subjects, both fiction and history. Married to Richard Walsh and serving as an editor in her own right, Buck helped the John Day company introduce many Asian writers to the American public. Perhaps the most successful of these authors was Lin Yutang, a Chinese intellectual whose novel *A Moment in Peking* was a Book-of-the-Month club selection in 1939. Pearl Buck and Richard Walsh also took over the journal *Asia* and transformed it from a tourist magazine into an influential policy journal which published the leading voices on Asia of its day. And the journal encouraged a range of political perspectives, including explicitly communist writers. *Asia* published articles by Yin Yutang, Bertrand Russell, Charles Beard, Agnes Smedley, Helen Foster Snow, Margaret Mead, Anna Louise Strong, and Rabindranath Tagore, the 1913 Nobel Prize winner from India.

Buck, then, used her fame to promote American understanding of Asia. In her own very difficult role of serving as a mediator for China, she attempted to bypass American "oriental" stereotypes for more authentic depictions, even as she respected the many significant cultural differences within Chinese culture. So outspoken were her attacks on the hypocrisy of American racism, and the outrage of British imperialism in China, that liberal crusader Dorothy Canfield Fisher gently chastised her for not considering her audience's desire to feel hopeful and virtuous in her rhetoric. Kang Liao gives Buck credit for transforming American attitudes towards China, leading to the repeal of the Chinese exclusion act and to American support for China against Japanese invasion in the late Thirties. Liao explains, "[Americans] thought the Japanese were invading the homeland of Wang Lung and O-lan, killing their children. . . . The Chinese were no longer just an abstract concept for them but had taken concrete shapes in their minds as the characters created

by Pearl Buck" (81). Though such larger cultural shifts are difficult to trace, it seems plausible to say that Pearl Buck's influence played a large part in whatever cultural transformation occurred. In the Thirties, China, while still exotic, was also surprisingly familiar for a generation of middle class readers.

The career of Pearl S. Buck provides a crucial counterpoint to standard modernist narratives of the interwar period, and a compelling argument for rethinking our monochromatic understanding of the "mainstream." Despite its exoticizing and limitations, Buck's progressive middlebrow intervention persuaded a generation of readers to look beyond the eurocentrism and the "inscrutable Oriental" to a more knowledgeable and sophisticated understanding of China. That a middlebrow text can be progressive, even brave, is a possibility rarely entertained by modernists; that a middlebrow text can be more progressive than modernist texts has been heretofore inconceivable. *The Good Earth* makes the case: the "mainstream," a nebulous entity in which literary moderns participated, is varied, interesting, and complex. Taking Pearl Buck seriously could be much more innovative and alienating than the most difficult modernist text. It could transform literary study of the interwar period. Modernism would take its proper place as one interesting manifestation of a larger, chaotic, mainstream literary culture.

Notes

[1] For more information, see Chow Tse-tsung's *The May Fourth Movement* and Vera Schwarcz's *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919.*

[2] Peter Conn compared the furor over Buck's "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" with the Scores "monkey trial" (151).

Works Cited

Adorno, Theodor. "Commitment." Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds. *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader.* New York: Urizen Books, 1978. 300-318.

Buck, Pearl, trans. *All Men Are Brothers.* New York: John Day Company, 1933.

—. "Bestsellers." League of American Writers 29 Nov 1939. John Day Publishers, Pearl Buck Collection. Princeton University.

—. *The Chinese Novel: Nobel lecture delivered before the Swedish academy at Stockholm, December 12, 1938.* New York: John Day Company, 1939.

—. *The Good Earth.* New York: Pocket Books, 1969.

—. "Is There a Case for Chinese Missions?" *Harper's Monthly* Jan 1933: 143-155.

—. Letter to John Day. 22 July 1931. John Day Publishers, Pearl Buck Collection. Princeton University.

—. Letter to Richard Walsh. 25 June 1930. John Day Publishers, Pearl Buck Collection. Princeton University.

—. Letter to Richard Walsh. 28 Apr 1931. John Day Publishers, Pearl Buck Collection. Princeton University.

—. Letter to Richard Walsh. 3 May 1932. John Day Publishers, Pearl Buck Collection. Princeton University.

—. *My Several Worlds: a Personal Record.* New York: John Day and Company, 1954.

Chow Tse-tsung. *The May Fourth Movement.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1960.

Conn, Peter. *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Evans, Nancy. Rev. of *The Good Earth,* by Pearl Buck. *The Bookman* 73 (May 1931): 324.

Fenollosa, Ernest. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry.* Ed. Ezra Pound. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1936.

John Day Company. Advertisement for *The Good Earth.* 27 Feb. 1933.

Kowallis, Jon Eugene. *The Lyrical Lu Xun: a Study of his Classical-Style Verse.* Honolulu, Hawaii: U of Hawai'i P, 1996.

Liao, Kang. *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Bridge Across the Pacific.* Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1997.

Marcuse, Herbert. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics.* Boston: Beacon P, 1977.

Radway, Janice. "The Book-of-the-Month Club and the General Reader: On the Uses of 'Serious' Fiction." *Critical Inquiry* (1988): 516-538.

—. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997.

Rev. of *The Good Earth,* by Pearl Buck. *New Statesman and Nation* 16 May 1931: 430.

Schwarcz, Vera. *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1986.

Walsh, Richard. Letter to Pearl Buck. 27 Feb. 1933. John Day Publishers, Pearl Buck Collection. Princeton University.

—. Walsh Radio Broadcast. Nov. 1932. John Day Publishers, Pearl Buck Collection. Princeton University.

Woollcott, Alexander. "Shouts and Murmurs: The Vanishing Lady." *New Yorker* 13 Aug. 1932: 22.

Yutang, Lin. Rev. of *All Men Are Brothers*, trans. by Pearl Buck. *China Critic* 4 Jan. 1934."