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PEARL BUCK REVISITED

by Andrea Kempf, Professor/Librarian Emeritus

Editor's Note: This article will be published later this year in *US-China Today*.

In 2002, I published a column in the *Library Journal* entitled, "After Pearl Buck: Modern Chinese Fiction." Now almost 10 years later, it seems appropriate to revisit Pearl Sydenstricker Buck herself. In the last two years, two major works have been published about the Nobel Laureate. The first book, *Pearl of China* by Anchee Min, is a novel imagining the author's early life, narrated by Willow, an imagined close Chinese childhood friend. The other book, *Pearl Buck in China: Journey to the Good Earth*, is a biographical study by Hilary Spurling. Both books focus on the author's first 40 years before she left China, a country she was unable to return to for the remainder of her life.

More than 70 years after she published *The Good Earth*, Pearl S. Buck's books remain popular throughout the world. She was the first American author to dispel the stereotypes of the Chinese opium den, Dr. Fu Manchu and the master Chinese criminals. After *The Good Earth* was published, readers throughout the Western world were given an image of the Chinese as people just like everyone else, who struggled against poverty, who loved their children – people no better and no worse than their next-door neighbors.

Buck won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Good Earth*. She was the first American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. She established Welcome House, the first successful international/interracial adoption agency which specialized in the placement of unwanted children from Asia, who were the result, for the most part, of relationships between American or European soldiers and Asian women. Pearl S. Buck was an advocate for women's rights long before the feminist movement and an active supporter of racial equality.

Knowing that she was the daughter and wife of Presbyterian missionaries, I was surprised to learn that after she returned from China, Buck spoke at a meeting to celebrate the Presbyterian missionary effort where she criticized the intolerance and rigidity of missionaries who fail to understand that all people have belief systems.

Rereading some of Pearl Buck's novels after a hiatus of more than 40 years is revealing. Yes, the prose is overheated and Victorian. After all, she was raised on Dickens, not Hemingway. However, her portrait of Wang Lung and his family in *The Good Earth* is as engaging and moving as it was the first time. In fact the novel has the same resonance as *Grapes of Wrath*,

portraying a farmer's family caught up in the disasters of the 1930s Great Depression. The novel *Pavilion of Women* portrays Madam Wu, who on her 40th birthday informs her husband that he needs to get a concubine because she is finished with the physical aspects of marital life. Madam Wu then begins to educate herself with the assistance of a itinerate teacher, Father Andre, who was actually hired to educate her youngest son. This novel portrays a powerful woman, working within the confines of her culture to make great changes in her family and the world within her reach.

Peony was another novel that entered new territory. It portrays the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, which was established in the 10th century, perhaps earlier. Buck describes the disintegration of the community in the early 19th century when the son of a respected elder eventually marries out of the community. When the author wrote about Kaifeng, the Western world knew little about the existence of the Chinese Jewish community. In time, as scholars have explored Kaifeng's heritage, Pearl Buck's fictional account has been found to be amazingly accurate, particularly given the sparse knowledge available at the time. *Imperial Woman* introduced the last Empress of China, Tsu-Hsi, to the Western world. Now, there are certainly more accurate accounts of the empress. However, at the time, this readable novel brought late 19th century and early 20th century Chinese history to life.

In 1996, University of Pennsylvania Professor Peter Conn published *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*, which was a scholarly and very readable study of the author. Reading the new biography by Hilary Spurling, one question immediately comes to mind. Do readers need another biography? One major difference between the two biographies is that Conn alleges that Buck, when her marriage to Lossing Buck was deteriorating, had an affair with a young Chinese poet named Xu Zhimo, who died in a plane crash in 1931. Spurling categorically denies the affair. Anchee Min, in her novelistic treatment of the same period, makes the physical affair an important part of her book. Other than that divergence, both biographies seem to present the same information. Spurling's biography is detailed only until 1938 when Buck won the Nobel Prize. She rapidly sketches in the final 35 years of her life in a brief final chapter. Conn's book continues in great detail until the author's death in 1973.

Anchee Min's novel *Pearl of China* is most enjoyable during her depiction of the author's

early life, when Min imagines a best friend, Willow, who will believe in Pearl no matter what she suffers during the government of Mao. Anchee Min was herself forced to denounce Pearl Buck during the Cultural Revolution. At that time she had never heard of the author and had no idea who Pearl Buck was. In many ways, *Pearl of China* is her atonement for this denunciation. The novel also describes the kinds of torture and degradation that the Chinese people endured during the Cultural Revolution. It ends with a 90-year-old Willow receiving permission to travel to the United States to visit Pearl Buck's grave. It should also be noted that this author also wrote two fine fictional biographies of Tzu-Hsi: *Empress Orchid*, which describes her early life as a concubine to the Emperor, and *The Last Empress*, covering the period when Tzu-Hsi reigned supreme.

Pearl S. Buck was an iconic figure in the 20th century, and it is good to see her reputation being restored in the 21st century by authors like Hilary Spurling and Anchee Min. Her accomplishments as a woman, as a writer and as a social activist cannot be underestimated. Read one of the biographies, reread some of her novels. You will not be disappointed.

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE BOOKS

BIOGRAPHIES:

Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography
by Peter Conn, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Pearl of China by Anchee Min,
Bloomsbury USA, 2010. (fiction)

Pearl Buck in China: Journey to the Good Earth by
Hilary Spurling, Simon and Schuster, 2010.

SELECTED NOVELS:

By Pearl S. Buck:

This House of Earth Trilogy including:

The Good Earth, 1931

Sons, 1932

A House Divided, 1935

Imperial Woman, 1956

Pavilion of Women, 1946

Peony, 1948

By Anchee Min:

Empress Orchid, Mariner, 2005

The Last Empress, Mariner, 2008