

# Chinese Influences on Pearl S. Buck

*Yü Yüh-chao*

[I]f the novelist may have a creed it should be this, "I believe only in life, tragic, gay, glorious, incomprehensible life. I believe in human beings, and in the good and evil mingled in us all. I believe in art, that it is to be kept to its one holy use, which is to portray faithfully, as only the purest art can, life itself and life only.

— Pearl S. Buck<sup>1</sup>

Pearl Comfort Sydenstricker was born on June 26, 1892, in Hillsboro, West Virginia. A few months after her birth, she was taken to China by her missionary parents, Absalom and Caroline Sydenstricker. She spent her childhood entirely in China, living in a bungalow in Chinkiang, a port city on the Yangtze River, and she did not get a chance to visit her birthplace until she was ten years old. After a one-year stay with her relatives in West Virginia, she came back to her "home" in Chinkiang. When she was seventeen years old, she went back to America for the second time in her life. This time she stayed for four years (1910-1914), attending Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. After her graduation in 1914, she came back to China again. Then in 1925, she went with her husband, John Lossing Buck (1890-1975), to Cornell University to pursue her Master's degree in English literature. The following year she returned to China with the degree. From then until 1934, when she settled permanently in America, she made two more trips there, one in 1929 when she took her mentally retarded daughter, Carol, to the Training School in Vineland, N.J., and the other in 1932 when she went to Yale University to receive an honorary

degree of Master of Arts. These dates are recorded here to show that during her most important formative years the young Sydenstricker resided in China almost completely and that after she became a grown woman with abundant Chinese experience she was exposed, for six years, to American culture while receiving a higher education. The fact that she was moulded by two cultures is very important to bear in mind because it is the key factor contributing to her cross-cultural perspective. To better appreciate this perspective, it is necessary to investigate the major cross-cultural influences she received. In the present study I will pay special attention to China's influences on her.

During her childhood Pearl Sydenstricker mingled often with Chinese children in her neighborhood, and at the same time she often saw white people visiting her home, mostly missionaries, businessmen and sailors. She learned to speak Chinese before English, although she studied English first when it came to reading and writing. She had unconsciously identified herself as Chinese until she was called one day a "foreign devil," to her sadness and amazement. Her consciousness of being a white person among a brown people became very strong only after the Boxer Uprising of 1900. Later she described the mental effect of such antiwesternism on her:

My worlds no longer interwove. They were sharply clear, one from the other. I was American, not Chinese, and although China was as dear to me as my native land, I knew it was not my land. Mine was the country across the sea, the land of my forefathers, alien to China and indifferent to the Chinese people.<sup>2</sup>

Her childish impression that she was living in two worlds in harmony was thus shattered. This made her become more and more concerned with relationships among peoples. In 1927, when another anti-foreign movement erupted in Nanking, she made a very narrow escape only because some Chinese friends provided her with a hiding place. Of that escape she wrote later:

I have had that strange and terrible experience of facing death because of my color. At that time nothing I might have done could have saved me. I could not hide my race. The only reason I was not killed was because some of those in that other race knew me, under my skin, and risked their own lives for me and mine.<sup>3</sup>

Because of this experience, she came to realize profoundly that mutual understanding and friendship between peoples are of great importance. This realization helps to explain her lifelong preoccupation with her self-imposed task of promoting racial equality and improving cross-cultural communication for the sake of world peace.

Pearl Sydenstricker began to receive intercultural education when she was only a small child. In an article, "The Old Chinese Nurse," she acknowledged with gratitude that the first literary influence she ever had was from her tender-hearted and wise Chinese nurse, who told her many Chinese tales, including Buddhist and Taoist stories.<sup>4</sup> Being a child with an insatiable appetite for all sorts of stories, she was immensely fascinated by those Chinese tales. Her young and animated imagination was greatly stimulated by them, and consequently she developed a special interest in studying the Chinese novel. Later, in tracing the sources of the early Chinese novel, she found that the religions of China had played a remarkable role in introducing such elements as the supernatural, allegory, parable, and animism.<sup>5</sup> In a sense, her study of the Chinese novel was initiated by her Chinese nurse.

Another Chinese also exerted heavy influence upon her. This was her tutor, Mr. Kung, a typical Confucian scholar. For a number of years, he taught her many things, including Confucian ethics, Chinese reading and writing, and Chinese history. She was deeply indebted to his teachings. When he died in 1905, she felt very sad. She acknowledged that she learned from him "the first axiom of human life," that is, "every event has had its cause, and nothing, not the least wind that blows, is accident or causeless."<sup>6</sup> After the Boxers were defeated by Western guns and cannons, she recalled, Mr. Kung predicted that more anti-foreign storms would surely rise unless Western powers did justice to the Chinese. He even warned her, "You must go to America and not come back, lest next time you be killed with all your kind."<sup>7</sup> His prediction came true, and, as mentioned earlier, she was nearly killed by antiwestern revolutionaries in 1927. Under his tutelage, her knowledge of Chinese culture began to take root and her resentment against Western imperialism deepened.

Usually her tutor came to teach her in the afternoon, and she took lessons from her mother in the morning. The mother taught her many things too, including American history and geography, arithmetic, English, and music. Mrs. Sydenstricker was a very graceful woman with a highly

artistic disposition. She instilled in her daughter a deep love of art and nature. She taught her how to put down her feelings and thoughts in words. Following her mother's instructions, the young Sydenstricker wrote at least a composition every week. For a number of years, she frequently published her pieces in the children's weekly edition of the *Shanghai Mercury*, an English-language newspaper. Those childish works, published under the pseudonym "Novice," not only became the main source of her pocket money but also paved the way for her future writing career.

As a result of the intercultural education, Pearl Buck declared that she became "mentally bifocal."<sup>8</sup> She was able to see both sides of anything or any question, thinking that "there is no such condition in human affairs as absolute truth."<sup>9</sup> This bifocal mentality was also expressed in her cross-cultural perspective, for she was habitually inclined to approach things from both Eastern and Western points of view.

Miss Sydenstricker did not receive any formal school education until she attended Miss Jewell's School in Shanghai in 1908. She had a rather unhappy experience at this school primarily because her tolerant attitude toward other religions than Christianity was unacceptable to her schoolmates and Miss Jewell. To their horror, she insisted that Chinese civilization was fully worthy of serious study and that there were similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. Taken virtually as a heretic, she was ordered by Miss Jewell to receive extra theological instruction and to do "good works" for the Chinese slave girls and the white prostitutes who were sheltered in a place called the Door of Hope. This episode was very meaningful because it revealed her respect for Chinese culture and also her religious tolerance. Her cross-cultural perspective began to manifest itself when she "supposed that Confucius was the same as Our Father in Heaven, that is, God the Father. . . ." <sup>10</sup> and when she considered the Virgin Mary as the "younger sister" of her favorite Goddess of Mercy, the Kwanyin. <sup>11</sup>

When she first came to Randolph-Macon Woman's College, Miss Sydenstricker found herself an object of ridicule because of her old-fashioned dresses and hair-styles. Besides, she was dismayed at her schoolmates' lack of curiosity about other parts of the world. However, she was soon able to get used to the new environment. She proved herself an outstanding student, and she became president of her graduating class in 1914. The most memorable thing about her college life was her winning two top literary prizes offered by the college for the best story and the best poem in her

senior year. She continued serving her writing apprenticeship by contributing frequently to the college paper, *The Tattler*. Looking back on her college education in 1942, however, Pearl Buck did not feel completely satisfied with it. She said, "The culture I got in college was good but it was no deeper than what I had acquired as a child."<sup>12</sup> This statement can be seen as further evidence that Chinese culture remained the most important cultural influence upon her.

During her college years a great revolution under the leadership of Dr. Sun Yat-sen had taken place and transformed the Middle Kingdom into the first republic in Asia. After her return to Chinkiang in 1914, she was naturally amazed at the many changes going on in the country. With a fresh American point of view which she had just learned from her college life, she became even more observant than before about what was happening in China. This partly explains why years later she was able to capture in many of her works the spirit of change in modern Chinese society.

After her return from the college, she devoted herself to nursing her sick mother and also to teaching at a missionary school in Chinkiang. Then in 1917, she married John Lossing Buck, an agricultural missionary. Soon after her wedding, she accompanied him to the town of Nanhsuchou in the province of Anhwei, where he undertook a research project on Chinese farm economy. They stayed there for nearly five years, and it was a rare opportunity for Pearl Buck further to observe Chinese life in the countryside. Her close involvement in the lives of the local farming folk led her to her profound knowledge of Chinese peasant life. Of the farmers she came to know well she wrote later:

They were the ones who bore the brunt of life, who made the least money and did the most work. They were the most real, the closest to the earth, to birth and death, to laughter and to weeping. To visit the farm families became my search for reality, and among them I found the human being as he most nearly is.<sup>13</sup>

Judging from what she wrote in *The Good Earth* and other peasant novels, the importance of her experiences of living among Chinese peasants in North China was not in the least exaggerated in the above passage.

At the end of those years in North China, both she and her husband joined the faculty at the University of Nanking. She taught English literature while John taught rural economics and sociology. Later she taught at

Southeastern University from 1925 to 1927 and then at Chung Yang University from 1928 to 1930. These teaching positions led her to a deep involvement in the intellectual life in modern China. Just like her years of living in North China, these years of teaching in the Chinese universities proved crucial to her writing career. The effect of the teaching experience on her was well reflected in her first article, "In China, Too," in which she described how the young Chinese intellectuals reacted to certain new trends from the West. Many more articles, such as "The Chinese Student Mind," "China and the Foreign Chinese," "Creative Spirit in Modern China," "China the Eternal," and "Young Chinese Discovers China," are all indicative of her careful observations of Chinese intellectuals. More importantly, she was enabled by her "bifocal mentality" to give vivid and objective descriptions of how Chinese youth felt about the confrontation between the traditional and the modern ways or between China and the West. The following paragraph is a good example of how her cross-cultural perspective affected her analysis of the changing China:

In this atmosphere of change, of idealism, of things modern and therefore western and foreign, the present youth of China has grown up. Where the fathers imbibed the doctrines of Confucius and learned the classics and revolted against them, these young people have been battered by many forces of the new times. They have been taught some things of science, something of Christianity, something of atheism, something of free love, something of communism, something of western philosophy, something of modern militarism, something, in fact, of everything. In the study medievalism of the masses of their countrymen, the young intellectuals have been taught the most extreme of every culture.<sup>14</sup>

There are many more passages like this one in which Pearl Buck showed a great interest in investigating the numerous factors of change brought about essentially by the contact of China with the West. The same interest also found an eloquent expression in an essay, "China and the West," which won for her the Laura Messenger Prize in a writing contest at Cornell University.

Pearl Buck's cross-cultural experiences were not confined to China and America. By travel or through friendships, she became interested in many other countries and peoples, including India, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia in the East, as well as England, Russia, France, Germany, and Italy in the West. As a result of firsthand observations of various nations

and peoples over a long period of time, it seems hardly surprising that she became very much concerned about the whole world. This concern was manifested in not only many of her novels but numerous articles and books about countries other than her own, such as *Friend to Friend, How It Happens: Talk About the German People 1914-1933, Talk About Russia,* and *The People of Japan*. She said that she first learned from her tutor Kung the Chinese view of the world which recognizes all the peoples "as members of one family."<sup>15</sup> Inspired by this concept of universal brotherhood, she established the East and West Association in 1941 for the purpose of promoting mutual understanding and friendship among peoples. Among many other things, this organization embodied her strong aspiration for improving cross-cultural relationships.

Interestingly enough, Pearl Buck's cross-cultural interest was also reflected in her experience with Asian cookery, which she considered the best in the world. She was insightful enough to perceive the relation between cuisine and the culture which produced it. In her "Introduction" to *Pearl S. Buck's Oriental Cookbook*, for example, she accurately compares Chinese and Japanese cuisine in terms of its cultural meanings. She stated:

Japanese dishes, for example, reflect faithfully the nature of the Japanese people. Artistic to the point of spareness, their recipes produce the effect of the people who created them. Japanese dishes consider texture as well as taste. Taste is emphasized in the singular. It is pure and undiluted and not changed by much seasoning. The simplicity of soy sauce, the auxiliary of decorations and arrangement for the eye rather than for the enrichment of blending or contrasting flavors follow the Japanese emphasis upon the same elements in art, house decoration and architecture — simplicity, purity and exquisite arrangement.

Chinese dishes, on the other hand, exhibit the fullness, the richness, the variety of Chinese culture. A great continental people, individualistic and complete, their cookery reflects all of these traits. Each locality, each province, has its own specialities. . . .<sup>16</sup>

This is a typical cross-cultural comparison which Pearl Buck liked to make. As a matter of fact, her work abounds in such comparisons, which are primarily based on her personal experiences with various cultures.

So far we have seen that Pearl Buck was reared and educated mainly in two cultures. In many respects she was very well assimilated into Chinese society. Once Lin Yutang said to her, commenting on the Chinese-styled dinner prepared by herself, "Exactly right! Perfect! The only real Chinese

food I've had in America except what my wife cooks! But then you *are* Chinese. I insist you *are* Chinese. Your way of sitting, of walking, the angle of your head, the way you think, your philosophy, your expression."<sup>17</sup> This remark by the well-known critic of Chinese culture is an interesting footnote to Pearl Buck's close identification with China. She acknowledged this herself in a speech in 1932, "By birth and ancestry I am American; by choice and belief I am a Christian; but by the years of my life, by sympathy and feeling, I am Chinese."<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, this Chinese identity of hers has been well demonstrated by the very fact that the bulk of her work uses China and the Chinese people as a background.

As for her mother country, it became her "dreamworld, fantastically beautiful . . ." during her childhood.<sup>19</sup> Having been separated from America for too long physically, if not so much spiritually, she seemed to have difficulty throughout her life in completely overcoming a feeling of remoteness and unreality toward it. Her knowledge of America was obviously less profound than that of China. The fact that she published five novels with American settings under the pseudonym "John Sedges" may be taken as a sign of her lack of confidence in dealing with American subject matter. After she returned to America, she explained in her "Foreword" to *The Long Love*, there emerged in her "a new American self"; therefore, she began to write about America. "To provide freedom for this American me," she chose this masculine pen name "because men have fewer handicaps in our society than women have, in writing as well as in other professions."<sup>20</sup> Since *The Townsman* turned out to be a bestseller in 1945, she began to realize that the shield of pseudonymity was no longer necessary. In consequence, her two selves — Asian and American — merged, and she began to feel at home in America. In a sense, she did not get "assimilated" into American society until she decided to discard "John Sedges," with her self-confidence as an "American writer" fully established.

However, the fact remains that the general response to her "American novels" has been far less enthusiastic or favorable than to her "Asian novels." The reasons are not far to seek. As mentioned earlier, she knew Asia, especially China, much more intimately than America. Hence, she was at her best when she wrote about Asia from her East vs. West perspective. In fact, ever since she began to write about America, she continued to draw upon her Asian experiences for her fiction. This is another sign of her preoccupation with her familiar cross-cultural subject matter. When she

approached America mainly from a one-sided American perspective, she was actually embarking on a new adventure, courageous, conscientious, but somehow not dynamic enough. Her American novels, except for a very few such as *The Townsman* and *Other Gods*, do not possess the sort of moving power that can be felt in many of her Asian works. Besides, her Western readers, with a long-established image of her as a Western interpreter of the East, were inclined to be skeptical about her newly self-imposed role of interpreting America, while her Eastern readers who were used to finding themselves in her former works became less interested in her because she had left them behind seeking her new ground in America. To account for her declining fame since she turned to America for inspiration, her relatively unfamiliar subject and her skeptical or uninterested audience are certainly important factors to consider.

Having briefly surveyed Pearl Buck's cross-cultural experiences throughout her life, we may now further discuss the literary influences upon her. If her experiences with the various cultures determine the main themes of her work, her adopted aesthetic criteria must determine the ways of expressing her chosen themes. For this reason we need to dwell more on the literary standards which she learned from both Chinese and Western literature.

When she was only a small girl, she began to interest herself in not only Chinese tales but also English fiction. She traced her earliest exposure to Western literature to Charles Dickens. In an article, "A Debt to Dickens," she made a special acknowledgement of Dickens' influence on her. *Oliver Twist* was her first Dickens novel, which she read when she was a little past seven years old. After that, she read, volume by volume, all the books by him. Then, she said, she reread the whole set of Dickens each year for ten years. Dickens not only made her love England, but also instructed her how to live a rich life and become a good writer. She wrote:

Today I have for him a feeling which I have for no other human soul. He opened my eyes to people, he taught me to love all sorts of people, high and low, rich and poor, the old and little children. He taught me to hate hypocrisy and pious mouthing of unctuous words. He taught me that beneath gruffness there may be kindness, and that kindness is the sweetest thing in the world, and goodness is the best thing in the world.<sup>21</sup>

These moral ideals she inherited from Dickens obviously laid foundation of the humanitarianism prevailing in her work. She added, "He gave me that

zest, that immense joy in life and in people, and in their variety."<sup>22</sup> Time and again she elaborated on this point that a real writer is he who lives actively among the people and who writes about real people.

In addition to Dickens, she was also exposed to works by many other Western writers, including Shakespeare, Thackeray, Walter Scott, Mark Twain, Zola, Thoreau, Hemingway, Ellen Glasgow, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis. She admired these last three authors particularly for their skill in portraying American scenes and characters. But she held Dreiser in highest esteem. When she first heard that she was chosen for the Nobel prize she exclaimed, "Oh, I wish that it could have been given to Theodore Dreiser instead!"<sup>23</sup> She did not explain how these authors had influenced her; but her appreciation of them shows that she was well aware of literary developments in the West during the last century. Besides, her writing of an M.A. thesis entitled "The Personal Essay" might have deepened her interest in writing essays.<sup>24</sup>

Despite her immense interest in reading novels, she was led, since her early formative years, by her tutor Kung and her parents to doubt the importance of the novel as a work of art. Assuming the same confucian attitude toward "hsiao-shou" or small talk, Kung told her that novels were not literature and had no worth except for their morals.<sup>25</sup> Her parents did not take the novel seriously either. According to Mr. Sydenstricker, novels "were worthless, a waste of God's time even to read, much less write."<sup>26</sup> Hence, he would not let his children read story books. His wife was also taught by her religion that "novels were evil and must be put with dancing and card-playing. . . ."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, she hid novels from her daughter.

The impact of such doctrines on Pearl Buck was also shown in a speech she gave at a P.E.N. dinner in her honor upon the occasion of the award of the Nobel prize in 1938. She stated that "mere teller of tales is not to be considered a literary figure, and that my novels were only stories to amuse people and make a heavy hour pass a little more easily. . . ."<sup>28</sup> Sinclair Lewis, a guest in the party too, expressed his disagreement with Pearl Buck: "You must not minimize yourself. Neither must you minimize your profession."<sup>29</sup> Pearl Buck was greatly encouraged and consoled by Lewis' words. This episode epitomized the conflict between the traditional Chinese attitude toward the novel as assumed by Kung and the modern Western view of the novel as expressed by Lewis.

On several other occasions, most notably in her Nobel lecture, Pearl

Buck admitted that she had been heavily influenced by the Chinese novel. In that lecture she gave a compact analysis of the development of the Chinese novel, and then she said, "In this tradition of the novel have I been born and reared as a writer. My ambition, therefore, has not been trained toward the beauty of letters or the grace of art. It is, I believe, a sound teaching and . . . illuminating for the novels of the west."<sup>30</sup> Here she made clear that she frowned upon those whose main concern is "the grace of art." She accepted the doctrine of most Chinese novelists who place great emphasis on portraying the life of the people. She was convinced that the realities of human life are the most important subject for novelists, and that the fundamental measure of a novel is whether the characters in it are alive or not. With a firm belief in human reality both as important material for the novel and as an essential test of its success, she went on to declare her goal as a writer, "No, a novelist must not think of pure literature as his goal. . . . He must be satisfied if the common people hear him gladly. At least, so I have been taught in China."<sup>31</sup> Her determination to write about real people for the sake of the people, instead of writing "pure literature" for a small audience, found another expression when she spoke in defense of her writing for popular magazines: "One cannot dismiss lightly a magazine bought and read by three million people."<sup>32</sup> She said this out of her conviction that the common people "are sounder judges of it than anyone else, for their senses are unspoiled and their emotions are free."<sup>33</sup> Her trust in the mass audience as judges of novels is perhaps an important reason for the general critical indifference toward her work.

Thus, from both Dickens and Chinese novelists she learned to write about the people and for the people. She wrote about the common people in their actual social milieu not only because of her sympathy with them but because of her belief in the basic goodness of human nature. Under the influence of the environment in which she grew up, she emphasized moral and spiritual, rather than aesthetic, values.

It is clear, then, that her goal was reality-based, people-centered, and audience-oriented. The best way to carry out this goal, she said, is to abide by the principle of naturalness, which requires basically freedom from consciousness of techniques. When a writer becomes known for "a particular style or technique," she argued, he is not a good writer but only "a literary technician."<sup>34</sup> She further explained this principle:

A good novelist, or so I have been taught in China, should be above all else "tse ran," that is, natural, unaffected, and so flexible and variable as to be wholly at the command of the material that flows through him. His whole duty is only to sort life as it flows through him, and in the vast fragmentariness of time and space and event to discover essential and inherent order and rhythm and shape.<sup>35</sup>

From this passage we see that by "tse ran" (自然) she did not mean disregard for artistry. Instead, she emphasized the novelist's task to grapple with "order and rhythm and shape" inherent in reality. To emphasize this task is actually to recognize the novelist as an artist. As required by the "tse ran" principle, the material must be presented spontaneously and meaningfully. In other words, the genuine art as perceived by Pearl Buck is the realization of the "tse ran" principle through a faithful portrayal of life.

Although her discussions of the Chinese novel in the Nobel lecture and elsewhere are relatively superficial,<sup>36</sup> Pearl Buck was indeed perceptive enough to have grasped the lesson of "tse ran" from the Chinese novel. More specifically, she adopted the following aesthetic rules generally based on what she had learned from the traditions of Chinese fiction.

First, she put the greatest emphasis on characterization, rather than style, plot, or purpose. Like the Chinese author, she preferred to use an omniscient point of view, and she chose to portray the character more by presenting his behavior and dialogue than by describing the state of his mind. His motivations are usually explained, but, more often than not, only to the extent that the story can be carried on smoothly. According to Western standards, one of the major limitations of the classic Chinese novel is a lack of profound psychological analysis. But a study of such major works as *Shui Hu Chuan* (水滸傳, *The Water Margin*, or *All Men Are Brothers*), *San Kuo* (三國, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), and *Hung Lou Meng* (紅樓夢, *Dream of the Red Chamber*) convinced Pearl Buck that they achieved superb characterization despite this "limitation."<sup>37</sup> She considered that so long as characters come out real and alive, "there will be plot and action enough in spite of the author," because "a novelist's materials are his characters."<sup>38</sup> In her opinion, "Style is only a method of using his material and plot is only a shape it takes. Neither will be of value if the material is valueless."<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, she subordinated style and plot to character revelation.

Secondly, she considered loose coordination in plot not necessarily a defect. Unlike the English novel, she said, the Chinese novel often gives one the impression of having no strictly planned beginning and ending. She observed, "There is no climax nor denouement. There is often not even a main plot, except as one may call the events which circle about the main character, if there is a main character, events in a plot. There is no formal subordination of sub-plot."<sup>40</sup> She regarded this structural feature as a virtue because, she said, this formlessness is just like life. "This lack of coherence in the plot of the Chinese novel, therefore, may be a technique, which if not deliberately planned, is yet unconsciously modeled after the incoherence of life itself."<sup>41</sup> In view of her acceptance of a loose structure in plot as a useful technique, it seems hardly surprising that in some of her novels, such as *Voices in the House*, and *The Goddess Abides*, the plots are composed of loosely connected episodes or events, without clear-cut climaxes or denouement.

Thirdly, she tried to adapt the style flexibly to the themes. She stressed that a novelist should avoid being imprisoned by a fixed style. She said, "The Chinese novelists varied their writing to accompany like music their chosen themes."<sup>42</sup> When she began to write of America, she deliberately adopted a new style to suit her new subject matter. She explained, "If I write of Chinese things, I will write in my usual Chinese style, which is really Chinese translated, and if I write of a western subject, it will be in western style."<sup>43</sup> The style in her American novels is generally more complicated than that in most of her Asian novels. But her simple, flowing style seems to prevail in most of her novels, most notably in *The Good Earth* and *The Mother*.

Fourthly, she considered moral teaching through a novel acceptable so long as the novel portrays life faithfully and forcefully. She believed that only life, instead of the novelist, can teach us anything. At the same time, she agreed that the genuine artist should avoid didacticism because it tends to distort life to suit the moral. She approved of only artistic didacticism as displayed by Eugene O'Neill. She explained this sort of didacticism by saying:

Art, then, can be didactic, perhaps even purposefully so, if it portrays life whole and steadfastly. But it takes the highest genius so to use didacticism. And highest genius never so uses it, for highest genius has

always that strong cosmic awareness which prevents obsession with a theory and preserves proportion, that proportion which is an essential to art.<sup>44</sup>

Needless to say, it is very important to maintain a proper proportion between art and didacticism. Sometimes Pearl Buck had some difficulty in preserving that crucial proportion in her fiction.

Finally, she accepted romantic realism as exemplified in the humane treatment of supernatural elements in the Chinese novel. To a certain extent, realism and romanticism are both present in some of her works, such as *The Good Earth*, *Mandala*, and *The Living Reed*. When she treated legendary, remote, or supernatural matter in a realistic manner, she generally modeled herself after the Chinese novelist. As to naturalism, she did not accept it as usually conceived in the West because she rejected the pessimism of the Western naturalists. In her analysis of Chinese belief in fate or destiny, she observed that the Chinese novelist did not consider fate coming from within a man. So she deplored the doctrines of behaviorism and materialism as seen in the English novel. In her opinion, the Western acceptance of a fate determined by materialism is "the saddest and most depressing phase of literature through which the English novel has passed."<sup>45</sup> As demonstrated in *The Mother*, she modified Western naturalism by stressing the role of free will in shaping one's fate. This abhorrence of materialism and behaviorism reveals her exaltation of human dignity. To her, free will is the indispensable foundation of the spiritual values she upheld.

In order to further understand the extent to which Mrs. Buck followed these aesthetic principles as she claimed, we may conveniently take *Sons* as an example because it is most expressive of the Chinese literary influence on her. In her own words, *Sons* "is a purely Chinese book, the material is purely Chinese, the characters are less like ourselves than in the first book [*The Good Earth*], and the situations are medieval to the American mind."<sup>46</sup> As a matter of fact, this novel is in many respects an imitation of *Shui Hu Chuan* and *San Kuo*.

The hero in *Sons*, Wang the Tiger, consciously models himself after the heroes in his favorite classic novels which "he had loved as a lad and which had first turned his mind to soldiering, the stories of three kingdoms and of the robbers that bordered a great lake. . . ."<sup>47</sup> There is no doubt that Wang the Tiger is a devout admirer of the heroes in *Shui Hu Chuan*

who profess to correct a corrupt officialdom and to punish the wicked rich for the sake of the poor. That he loves these and other stories of brave warriors sheds light on his character as a warlord.

In the beginning of his career, Wang the Tiger has as many as one hundred and eight sworn followers. This number reminds one of those 108 heroes in *Shui Hu Chuan*. Apparently, this is no mere coincidence. Besides, in both novels the main characters are given nicknames which are highly suggestive of the most distinct features of their personalities. In *Sons*, such characters as Wang the Tiger, the harelipped man, the Hawk, the Pig Butcher (these three being Wang the Tiger's trusty men), and the Leopard (the chief of a robber gang) all go by their nicknames. In *Shui Hu Chuan*, similarly, almost every hero is given a nickname. For instance, Ch'ai Chin is nicknamed "Small Hurricane" (小旋風柴進), Lin Ch'ung "Leopard-headed" (豹子頭林冲), and Sung Chiang "Beneficial Rain" (及時雨宋江). Only in *Sons* did Mrs. Buck follow this practice of nicknaming her characters to such a considerable degree. Furthermore, the nicknames she used have much to do with animals. If viewed together with the similes and metaphors which are also related to animals, these nicknames are significant in that they suggest strongly such things as bravery, savagery, chaos, bloody killing, and the crude primitive life of the poor.<sup>48</sup> The animal imagery is perfectly fitting to both picaresque novels.

In an article comparing *Sons* with *Shui Hu Chuan* and *San Kuo*, Olga Surh points out many more parallels between these novels. Surh observes that Mrs. Buck closely reproduced many happenings in the Chinese novels, such as the guerrilla warfare, the numerous guiles, frequent use of old temples as places of refuge, eating of human flesh, and the chaotic conditions of the time. "The main difference is," writes Surh, "that Mrs. Buck has used one hero and has a plot while the Chinese novel has hundreds of heroes and is a formless narration."<sup>49</sup>

While no attempt will be made here to compare these novels in great detail, these parallels may be enough to establish the case that *Sons* closely follows the patterns set forth in the Chinese novels. Thematically and artistically, it is thus deprived of originality. But it serves as a typical example of Mrs. Buck's conformity with many conventional standards of the Chinese novel. Incidentally, her translation of *Shui Hu Chuan* into *All Men Are Brothers* may account for her great interest in copying it in *Sons*.<sup>50</sup>

Having been so greatly influenced by the traditional Chinese novel,

it seems almost inevitable that Pearl Buck would not interest herself in the ideological and formalistic ferment of the contemporary literature in the West. Speaking in 1932 on the English novel and the Chinese novel, she excluded the extremely modern novel from her discussion because it "has been in a state of great flux, I might almost say, confusion, in the last few years."<sup>51</sup> She was aware of the experiments some Western writers were undertaking then, such as the experiments with "slice of life and stream of consciousness,"<sup>52</sup> but regarding the experiments as confusing, she chose not to discuss them. In her vehement defense of the traditional novel form, she said in the midforties, she completely disagreed with those young novelists such as Thomas Wolfe and William Saroyan who, thinking the novel outmoded and outworn, tried to replace it with "that personalized, half-autobiographical patternless pattern, shapeless shape. . . ."<sup>53</sup> All these remarks indicate her bias against modern literary experiments in form and ideology.

In short, intellectually, spiritually, and aesthetically, Pearl Buck was shaped and inspired by the medley of influences from her "several worlds," particularly from China. As a result, she took a profound interest in dramatizing cross-cultural relationships from her acquired "bifocal perspective." Besides, as the present study has tried to demonstrate, the Chinese influences on her turn out to be much greater than those of other sources. Therefore, Pearl Buck became a highly Chinese American writer.

## Notes

1. Pearl Buck, "On the Writing of Novels," *Randolph-Macon Woman's College Alumnae Bulletin*, 26 (June, 1933), 10.
2. ————. *My Several Worlds* (New York: John Day, 1954), p. 55.
3. Cited by Cornelia Spencer, *The Exile's Daughter: A Biography of Pearl S. Buck* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1944), p. 162.
4. Pearl Buck, "The Old Chinese Nurse," *Fortnightly Review*, 137 (June, 1932), 757-70.
5. ————. *Sources of the Early Chinese Novel* (Peking: North China Union Language School Cooperating with California College in China, February, 1932), p. 29.
6. *My Several Worlds*, p. 58.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 52.
11. Ibid.
12. Kyle Crichton, "Preacher's Daughter," *Collier's* (February 7, 1942), p. 37.
13. *My Several Worlds*, p. 161.
14. Pearl Buck, "The Young Chinese Discovers China," *English Review*, 61 (December, 1935), 726.
15. *My Several Worlds*, p. 372.
16. "Introduction" to *Pearl S. Buck's Oriental Cookbook* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 10.
17. Cited by Cornelia Spencer, p. 225.
18. Pearl Buck, "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" *Harper's Magazine*, 166 (January, 1933), 155.
19. *My Several Worlds*, p. 5.
20. "Foreword" to *The Long Love* (New York: John Day, 1968).
21. "A Debt to Dickens," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 13 (April 4, 1936), 11.
22. Ibid., p. 20.
23. *My Several Worlds*, p. 85.
24. The study of eighteen essayists in this thesis led Pearl Buck to the conclusion: "Under their hands the personal essay has developed into a permanent form of expression; as permanent an expression of personality as the poetry of emotion, and as finished. Montaigne gave his point of view, that of the keen, objective minded observer; Cowley gave delicacy of expression; Bacon, profundity of thought; Steele a new perception of humanity; Addison, a new didacticism; Fielding, a new robustness of outlook; Hazlitt, a sombre, introspective power of thought and a blazing fire of words; Lamb, a sweet, sad, child-like love of men and all their faults, and a new pathos; Carlyle, the spirit of the prophet; Ruskin, the ideal of beauty and men's share therein; Pater, the clear, cold loveliness of the stars, and Wilde the hot, earthy odor of passion flowers; Andrew Lang, a restless, darting keenness of observation; Lafcadio Hearn, a dreamy breath of Oriental romance; Stevenson, the clear, child-like mind; Birrell, the mild and genial atmosphere of Old Age, the Spectator; Chesterton, the warm, overpowering brilliance of the noon-day sun, and Bernard Shaw the tremendous strength of a penetrating intellect." See "The Personal Essay" (Cornell University, 1925), pp. 172-73.
25. *My Several Worlds*, p. 84.
26. *Fighting Angel* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1936), p. 72.
27. *The Exile* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1936), p. 128.
28. *My Several Worlds*, p. 86.
29. Ibid., p. 87.
30. *The Chinese Novel* (New York: John Day, 1939), p. 55.
31. Ibid., p. 59.
32. Cited by Cornelia Spencer, p. 193.
33. *The Chinese Novel*, pp. 58-59.

34. Ibid., p. 31.
35. Ibid.
36. For an excellent criticism of traditional Chinese novels, see C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
37. As a matter of fact, *Hung Lou Meng* contains, as pointed out by C. T. Hsia, very profound and vivid psychological descriptions of the characters. Hsia states, "In view of the traditional Chinese indifference to the subconscious mind, it is most remarkable that in this dream as in other crucial dreams in the book Ts'ao Hsueh-ch'in should have anticipated the findings of modern psychology." See his *The Classic Chinese Novel*, p. 275.
38. Pearl Buck, "Characters in Fact and Fiction," in Theodore F. Harris, *Pearl S. Buck: A Biography*, vol. II (New York: John Day, 1971), 191.
39. Ibid.
40. ————. *East and West and the Novel* (Peking: North China Union Language School Cooperating with California College in China, 1932), p. 10.
41. *Sources of the Early Chinese Novel*, p. 38.
42. *The Chinese Novel*, p. 32.
43. Cited by Cornelia Spencer, p. 193.
44. "On the Writing of Novels," p. 9.
45. *East and West and the Novel*, p. 15.
46. Pearl Buck, "Advice to the Unborn Novelists," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 11 (March 2, 1935), 514.
47. *Sons* (New York: John Day, 1932), p. 296.
48. In *Sons* animal imagery is coherently presented in many similes and metaphors. For instance, Wang the Tiger's men "eat like wolves" (p. 204). When he decides to avoid a battle with the Leopard, Wang the Tiger thinks, "The thing to do when one kills a centipede is to crush its head and then its hundred legs are in confusion and they run, hither and thither against each other and they are harmless" (p. 174). Upon hearing the uproar of fury from Wang the Tiger, the wicked userer runs away "with a squeak like a rat that barely escapes" (p. 232). The robbers gather in the lair, "like ants in a mound" (p. 285). Wang the Tiger notices the kneeling farmer's "two bare feet, knotted and gnarled in the toes, and the soles like the dried hide of a water buffalo" (p. 230).
49. Olga Surh, "'Sons,' 'Shui Hu' (水滸) and 'San Kuo' (三國)," *The China Critic*, 11 (October 31, 1935), 108.
50. Arthur Waley points out that Pearl Buck made some mistakes in her translation. See his "A Tale of Righteous Bandits," *The New Republic*, 77 (November 22, 1933), 51. Lin Yutang gives a more favorable review of the translation. He writes, "I have compared the first chapter line by line with the original and have found the translation throughout conscientious and adequate." See "All Men are Brothers," *The China Critic*, 7 (January 4, 1934), 18. Another Chinese critic, Tai Jen, does not like the English title chosen by Pearl Buck. In his opinion, the original spirit of this novel "would have been more accurately conveyed by a

title like *The Righteous Brigand, A Brotherhood of Righteous Robbers*, or simply *Liang Shan Po, The Robbers' Lair*." See "A Chinese Classic," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 10 (October 7, 1933), 162.

51. *East and West and the Novel*, p. 1.
52. Ibid.
53. "Characters in Fact and Fiction," p. 189.

