

Pearl Buck in China: Journey to The Good Earth

By Hilary Spurling

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One of the twentieth century's most extraordinary Americans, Pearl Buck was the first person to make China accessible to the West.


She recreated the lives of ordinary Chinese people in *The Good Earth*, an overnight worldwide bestseller in 1932, later a blockbuster movie. Buck went on to become the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Long before anyone else, she foresaw China's future as a superpower, and she recognized the crucial importance for both countries of China's building a relationship with the United States. As a teenager she had witnessed the first stirrings of Chinese revolution, and as a young woman she narrowly escaped being killed in the deadly struggle between Chinese Nationalists and the newly formed Communist Party.

Pearl grew up in an imperial China unchanged for thousands of years. She was the child of American missionaries, but she spoke Chinese before she learned English, and her friends were the children of Chinese farmers. She took it for granted that she was Chinese herself until she was eight years old, when the terrorist uprising known as the Boxer Rebellion forced her family to flee for their lives. It was the first of many desperate flights. Flood, famine, drought, bandits, and war formed the background of Pearl's life in China. "Asia was the real, the actual world," she said, "and my own country became the dreamworld."

Pearl wrote about the realities of the only world she knew in *The Good Earth*. It was one of the last things she did before being finally forced out of China to settle for the first time in the United States. She was unknown and penniless with a failed marriage behind her, a disabled child to support, no prospects, and no way of telling that *The Good Earth* would sell tens of millions of copies. It transfixed a whole generation of readers just as Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* would do more than half a century later. No Westerner had ever written anything like this before, and no Chinese had either.

Buck was the forerunner of a wave of Chinese Americans from Maxine Hong

Kingston to Amy Tan. Until their books began coming out in the last few decades, her novels were unique in that they spoke for ordinary Asian people—"translating my parents to me," said Hong Kingston, "and giving me our ancestry and our habitation." As a phenomenally successful writer and civil-rights campaigner, Buck did more than anyone else in her lifetime to change Western perceptions of China. In a world with its eyes trained on China today, she has much to tell us about what lies behind its astonishing reawakening.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. Weaving a colorful tapestry of Pearl Buck's life (1892–1973) with strands of Chinese history and literature, Spurling, winner of the Whitbread Book of the Year Prize for *Matisse the Master*—vividly correlates Buck's experiences of China's turbulent times to her novels. Growing up in a missionary family in China, Buck lived through the upheavals of the Boxer Rebellion and China's civil war, two marriages, and a daughter with a degenerative disease; her closeup view of the horrors of China's extreme rural poverty made her an American literary celebrity as well as a Pulitzer and a Nobel Prize winner when she enshrined her observations of China in the Good Earth trilogy. Back in the United States, having opened America's eyes to China, Buck worked to repeal America's discriminatory laws against the Chinese and established an adoption agency for minority and mixed race children. For her support of racial equality, Buck was blacklisted as a Communist sympathizer even as her books were banned in Communist China for spreading reactionary, imperialist lies; Spurling's fast-paced and compassionate portrait of a writer who described the truth before her eyes without ideological bias, whose personal life was as tumultuous as the times she lived in, will grip readers who, unlike Spurling, didn't grow up reading Buck's work. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

One of the challenges of writing about a great author, particularly one who has elegantly written about her own life, is deciding when to use one's own words and when to let the writer speak for herself. A similar challenge faces the reviewer, and critics reading *Pearl Buck in China* mostly used their articles as occasions to celebrate the subject rather than the biography. Still, if reviewers were not effusive in their praise, they had few complaints about Spurling's book and clearly admired her thorough research and elegant prose. But as the *New York Times* pointed out, "Ms. Spurling's book isn't a full-dress biography"; instead, it focuses mostly on Buck's formative years as a writer. For a more comprehensive biography, readers may wish to turn to Peter Conn's 1996 study, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*.

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Pearl Buck, the controversial, best-selling author of *The Good Earth* (1931) and a trailblazing Nobel laureate, was a quasar-bright celebrity, but her fame quickly dimmed after her death in 1973. Now, by some strange force, her radiance is resurgent. Anchee Min fictionalized Buck's dramatic life in *Pearl of China* (2010), and Spurling, Matisse's splendid biographer, adeptly matches factual rigor with enthralling insights in this brilliantly contextualized and beautifully crafted portrait of a unique cultural interpreter. Born in 1892 to beleaguered American missionaries, intrepid and book-loving Pearl Sydenstricker was shaped by the miseries of Chinese rural life, from floods to disease, famine, and war. Sadly, her marriage to John Lossing Buck, a pioneering agricultural economist, was oppressive; her concern for their mentally disabled daughter wrenching; and her grief over the Chinese people's epic suffering and her own exile was devastating. But, as Spurling chronicles so sensitively, Buck boldly channeled her profound knowledge of China into novels of mass appeal meant to incinerate Western prejudices. Lauded and condemned in America and banned in China, Buck, a pivotal player in U.S.-Chinese relations and a dauntless champion for universal human rights, lived a life of staggering traumas and triumphs. --Donna Seaman

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ashley Davis:

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