

# H-Net Reviews

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Kang Liao. *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Bridge Across the Pacific*. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1997. xii + 179 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-30146-9.

Reviewed by Xi Lian (Hanover College)

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Kang Liao's study of Pearl Buck comes at a time when the once-celebrated American Nobel laureate is being re-discovered. The title chosen by Liao echoes a remark made by Richard Nixon at the time of Buck's death in 1973, when the former president called her "a human bridge between the civilizations of the East and West." The significance of the subject is apparent. Pearl Buck was, in the words of the historian James Thomson, "the most influential Westerner to write about China since thirteenth-century Marco Polo." Forty years ago Harold Isaacs, in his *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India*, argued that Pearl Buck had "created" the Chinese for a whole generation of Americans in the same way that Charles Dickens created the people who lived in the slums of Victorian England.

It is the neglect under which Buck and her works have fallen in recent decades which justifies, in the eyes of scholars eager to restore her to deserved visibility, a critical reevaluation. What has happened, especially since the one hundredth anniversary of her birth in 1992, is a surge of academic interest in the life and works of this controversial writer, not only in the United States but also in China, where she grew up and where during the Mao era her works fell into even greater oblivion than in this country. In 1996 Peter J. Conn published *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), a rich and textured account of her eventful life. Conn tells the story in the context of America's evolving views of, and involvement with, China, both of which Buck helped to shape. Liao, on the other hand, places "particular emphasis on the ... evaluation of the cognitive value" (p. 12) of Buck's literary works, which explains her significance as a writer and her unique role in East-West cultural interchange.

Liao begins by considering the "paradoxical enigma" of Buck's phenomenal rise to fame in the 1930s and her quick fall from critical favor until she became "a neglected laureate." Echoing the views of some of Buck's earlier detractors, Liao argues that the award of the Nobel

Prize for Literature to Buck in 1938 was in part politically motivated. The critics' snub of her supposedly unmerited fame was followed by a conspicuous decline in the general quality of Buck's works after the award even as her literary output surged (not the least in order to generate income for her retarded daughter, as Buck confided to her lifetime friend Emma Edmunds White). However, Liao contends quite compellingly, the fall of Buck's literary stock had as much to do with the seemingly naive optimism and the lesser quality of her later novels as with the fact that "she wrote mainly about China, which was a minor Other" (p. 33).

Liao defends Buck and the historic role she played in changing America's traditionally uncomplimentary image of China. He tellingly samples a century of American disdain for China beginning with the frustrated traders and indignant missionaries of the early nineteenth century. One of his most revealing examples comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whom China was "Reverend dullness! Hoary idiot! All she can say at the convocation of nations must be—'I made the tea'" (p. 53). According to Liao, *The Good Earth* and several of Buck's later works helped break down those prejudices. However, Liao's claim that Buck was "A Single-Handed Crusader" (title of Chapter Three) is problematic. One cannot dismiss other crusaders like Henry Luce; publisher of *Time* and *Life*, the China hands in the U.S. government; and thousands of Christian missionaries who as a whole grew more sympathetic with and appreciative of China in the twentieth century and who influenced their constituencies in the United States. It is clear that Buck humanized the Chinese in her works, and one is inclined to believe that would change American public perceptions of them. Still, to "historicize" Buck's role (p. ix), the author could go beyond the kind of literary criticism he engages in here and use historical evidence like the surveys Harold Isaacs conducted for *Scratches on Our Minds*. Those surveys indicated that many Americans were introduced to the real Chinese through Pearl Buck, and with *The Good Earth* and other works Buck created, in Isaacs' words, "a

new stereotype," a more favorable one, of the Chinese.

According to Liao, that new image was the result of Buck's role as a "multicultural mediator." Because of the open-mindedness with which she approached Chinese life and tradition, including concubinage and the subordination of romantic love to other demands in family life, she helped prevent moral judgment of another culture. Buck enabled Western readers to see, Liao writes, that it is not necessarily worse for a woman who falls in love with a married man to become his concubine than to chase the other woman out of the relationship (p. 109)! Such mediation extends also to one of the most emotional issues in U.S.-China contact, namely Christian missions as cultural imperialism. For the Americans, the stories of the troubled lives of Buck's parents, told in *The Fighting Angel* and *The Exile*, would also help exorcise the smug feeling of being on "the giving end," to borrow John Fairbank's words, of the relationship.

Finally, Liao contends that Buck provided a more truthful "historic mirror" of the life of Chinese peasants than even her contemporary Chinese writers, and that her success with *The Good Earth* must have stimulated Chinese writers into embracing rural life, which had traditionally been slighted by intellectuals, in their literary works. Liao admits, however, that such an assumption remains to be proved by historical evidence (p. 123).

Liao's study contributes to the recent rediscovery of Pearl Buck by discussing Buck's works in the context of modern Chinese literature, which has not been attempted in other English-language studies. It offers a useful introduction to some of the major themes in Buck's writings. Yet it remains uncertain that the book "historicizes the significance of [Buck's] unique function in changing the American image of the Chinese people" (p. ix) as Liao

had intended. It appears to do more in explaining what Buck's message seems to have been and how it *could* help Americans understand China than in documenting how her works were received by—and therefore influenced—the American public. Also, the clearest example of Liao's "multicultural approach" (p. ix) comes in a brief discussion in Chapter Two, when he uses Lu Xun's dismissal of Buck to demonstrate how the reception of Buck's work in China had been swayed by nationalist feelings. One cannot help wishing for more research along that line.

One finds in this work a tendency which often takes the author beyond the purported scope of this work into bewildering generalizations and didacticism. For instance he asserts in connection with his discussion of *The Pavilion of Women* that in China "marriage and family have been stable, and the divorce rate has been low. On the whole, children have been brought up in healthy environments, and old people have been well looked after at home" (p. 108). Buck's readers will recognize that this is precisely the kind of myth that she sought to debunk. While the author is critical of Buck's didacticism in some of her works (p. x), he apparently concludes that some moralizing of his own fits in this study, and the discussion of Buck's treatment of marriage customs in China leads to the following: "Don't we all have strong points as well as weak points? Human nature is imperfect, and so are our institutions, Eastern or Western" (p. 109). Those who are unprepared for such words will likely agree with Liao, nevertheless, that there is "no reason not to anthologize Pearl Buck" (p. 136).

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