

Pearl S. Buck on American Society: Towards a Multi-Racial (Post-Racial?) Future

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Pearl S. Buck was best known from the 1930s to the 1950s for her novels and non-fiction works explaining to Americans the cultures and perspectives of Asians. But she also grappled, in novels, short stories, essays, and organizational involvement, with the nature of American society itself. In a widely-read essay from 1937, “On Discovering America,” in *The Survey Graphic* magazine¹ Buck argued both that the United States (which then had an exceedingly restrictive immigration policy) must welcome immigrants to provide the continued diversity which had created the distinctive American society and that, in the (very) long run, a successful post-racial society could emerge from the contributions and mixing of these diverse groups. As immigration and a backlash against immigration have become major features of contemporary US life, along with associated controversy over assimilation and ethnic diversity, and promise to continue to do so for the foreseeable future, an examination of Buck’s observations about inter-group (or inter-cultural) relations can help us both look back and look forward. To be sure, the assimilation of immigrants and foreign visitors into American life would not be smooth or easy, she asserted, in the face of long-held prejudices and laws. And one of the enduring themes in the writing and thinking of this former missionary was that overcoming such prejudices would require a far more consistent application of Christian ideals than most American Christians were willing to accept. Moreover, in the hypothetical transition to a post-racial future, the obstacles were not only from American racism, but from the clinging to homogeneity by others, too.

I want first to describe that 1937 essay in the context of Pearl Buck’s prominence in the literary culture and intellectual life of the US at that time. Then I will look at two of her less-remembered novels to see how she explored the experiences of Chinese living in the US, and her grappling in a third novel with the limitations of American missionaries in their interactions with the people among whom they worked. The issues of interracial sexual relations and marriage, and multi-racial offspring, arise in each novel, which serve as a literary backdrop, as it were, for Buck’s well-documented concern with and activism on behalf of overseas adoptions, especially of multi-racial children.

Buck, of course, became a literary celebrity with the 1931 publication of *The Good Earth*, which remained on best-seller lists for months and for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in May 1932.² She was living in China at the time, but visited the US later that year before returning to Asia until moving to the US permanently in 1934, at age 42. With sequels to *The Good Earth*, book-length biographies of her parents, other publications, and the release of a Hollywood movie version of *The Good Earth* in early 1937³ keeping her in the public eye, Buck in the mid-1930s was a much-sought-after speaker, and her short stories and essays were easily placed in a wide variety of periodicals, ranging from – to give just a few examples – *Saturday Review of Literature* (March 1935), *Ladies Home Journal* (August 1935), *Yale Review* (March 1936), and the National Urban League magazine, *Opportunity* (January 1937).⁴ In the months before “On Discovering America,” appeared, Buck received press coverage as the main luncheon speaker at the annual conference of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures (where she criticized films as false to life), as a dinner speaker in Harlem for the National Urban League, as the inaugural lecturer on CBS radio for a series billed as writers talking about books, and as one of three keynote speakers at the International P.E.N. Congress which coincided with the New York City World’s Fair.⁵ And it is not coincidental that two published articles in 1937 had titles

similar to the one in *The Survey Graphic* – “Introduction to the United States,” in *Saturday Review of Literature* in May, and “An American Looks at America,” in *Opportunity* in December – nor that her first novel based almost entirely in the US, *This Proud Heart*, would come out the following year. Pearl Buck was using her reputation developed from her novels and other writings on China to become part of the intellectual – and particularly literary – conversation about American life and its problems.

So, given her prominence at the time (and this is all before the 1938 Nobel Prize, of course), it is not surprising that the editors of *The Survey Graphic* soon reported that Buck’s lead essay in their June issue, with the largest billing on the cover, elicited “such an enthusiastic response.” It was excerpted in *Reader’s Digest* and quoted in the daily press, and was recognized by the Library Service Bureau of the Mayfair Agency (affiliated with *Harper’s* magazine) as one of “10 Outstanding Articles of the Month.” Moreover, one “friend” of the magazine paid for 60,000 reprints of the article for wider distribution.⁶ *The Survey Graphic* began as a Progressive Era journal geared to social workers, and by the mid-1930s under the editorship of noted reformer Paul Kellogg, it was an important booster in intellectual and policy circles of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, as well as a zealous opponent of racial discrimination and proponent of civil liberties. (That June 1937 issue also included a photo essay on sit-down strikes, a profile of militant labor leader Sidney Hillman, and articles on coal industry troubles, new parks constructed with New Deal funds in New York City, and the Civilian Conservation Corps, among others.)⁷

Buck’s essay, as her biographer Peter Conn has pointed out, deviated from the usual empirically-based *Survey Graphic* article.⁸ It was heartfelt and not always consistent, with a fair amount of repetition. But, in the conceit of writing as a kind of immigrant herself, though one returning to her native land, and viewing the US from the standpoint of what she called the homogeneous Chinese culture and society in which she was steeped, Buck writes exuberantly of the strength-through-diversity of Americans, even as she assails the restrictive immigration laws and irrational prejudices against “aliens” that she observes all around her.⁹ Denying that there is such a thing as a “typical” American, Buck describes differences among Americans by region, religion, race, language and dialect, and background. She recognizes that these differences lead to hatreds and division – “The prejudices of all peoples on earth are now American prejudices,” she claims – but Buck celebrates the “restlessness” that brought so many different peoples to the US, with their optimism and creativity. Adopting the Chinese perspective of viewing society as the product of millenniums of development rather than decades or even centuries, she writes: “I find it ridiculous to hear a man whose great-grandfather came to this county look down on a man who comes in now, and call him ‘alien.’ For what is a hundred or two hundred years in the life of a nation?” She continues: “We all have a right to be here, for America from the very first has had her beginning in all peoples, and her strength is drawn from all peoples and her future depends on us all.” Buck concludes, in language that is strikingly contemporary in invoking the fluidity of identity: “We must teach our children, native-born and foreign-born alike, that there is no final America yet – that they are making America, too, by what they themselves are...” So, not just “becoming American,” but “America becoming,” we might say, with an eye on today’s (and undoubtedly tomorrow’s) controversies over immigration and multiculturalism.

Buck particularly criticizes the immigration restrictions which characterized US law and society in the 1930s, although she couched some of that critique in generalities. Chinese immigration, of course, had been severely limited since the 1880s, and the 1924 Immigration Act greatly reduced immigration from southern and eastern Europe and cut off immigration entirely from all of Asia. Moreover, during the Great Depression many Mexican immigrants faced deportation and there were angry demands that other non-citizens be returned to their native

lands – especially those who sent money back to their families elsewhere. Buck ridicules such laws and such demands, calling them “stupid,” “prejudiced,” and “irrational,” and linking “unjust treatment of aliens” to “such strange and violent open expressions as lynching” of racial minorities. As part of her rhetorical assault on narrow-minded, anti-immigrant Americans, Buck derides as hypocritical those “who are so generous to foreigners in their own lands, who rush relief to Belgium and Czechoslovakia and China and Japan, [but] are so ruthless to the same foreigners who find themselves aliens in our own country.” That particular line of attack had already appeared in her writings about American Christian attitudes toward racial diversity, and would continue to do so for years to come.

On a “policy” level – though this was not a sophisticated “policy” essay – Buck proposes jettisoning the national origins quota system for immigration in favor of one based on individual merit, opening the “doors wide to the intelligent and to the good, whatever their race and nation,” while closing them “to the criminal and feeble-minded.” (How to administer such a system, with its idealism mixed with a whiff of eugenics, is left unsaid.) Buck nods toward the empirical when she states (without citing actual data) that immigrants commit fewer crimes than the native-born, that they are “industrious workers” and “amazingly the stronger in the creative arts,” and that their presence creates jobs. More lyrically: “When we cease to allow people to come in from all over the world, we shall ourselves begin to die, as other nations are dying.”

Buck’s larger theme is by no means airtight in its argumentation. She proposes, based on China’s long history which produced a culturally unified society, that a similar process could proceed here, as over many centuries – “it can scarcely be less than a thousand years,” she suggests – the descendants of immigrants gradually lose their distinctive characteristics. This development could even lead to a post-racial and post-sectarian society. “There will be no Negro questions then, because there will be no Negroes, there will be no Jews and Christians, no foreign-born – nobody but that person nowhere to be found today, a pure American,” who will embody “the inheritance of all ages, all races, all cultures.” But how would this laboriously produced cultural unity (with its transcendence even of race and religion) square with Buck’s admonition that immigration continue apace for years and centuries to come, in order to inject new life into society to avoid stagnation? And if Buck’s assertions in the essay are correct that the divisions, even hatreds, which characterize American life arise from our divergent national origins, then immigration is clearly a bane as well as a boon to our national life. (She alludes to that problem at one point, referring to both “the stimulus and the irritation of immigrants.”)

Moreover, Buck overlooks here (although she is attentive to them in other writings and activism) what today we would call the “structural” or “systemic” roots of these divisions, hatreds, and inequalities: the fundamental difference between “immigration” and the African American experience of enslavement; persistent Jim Crow laws; denial of voting rights to most Blacks and of citizenship itself to all first-generation Asian immigrants. Buck was evidently straining to expand her scope beyond the immigration issue with which she was most familiar – Asian exclusion – and so she devotes literally only two words – “no Orientals” in the 1930s-era immigration laws – to that topic. She was somewhat more forthright on the issues of racial and religious discrimination in one of her subsequent essays with a similar title – written, not coincidentally – for a mainly Black publication, in which she urged readers to “realize that you are as good Americans as anybody else, whether you came from Europe or Africa or Asia.”¹⁰

There were other weaknesses in the essay, too. While Buck mentions that Indians (or, today, Indigenous peoples) differed from the rest of Americans who are immigrants or descended from them, she also perpetuates the “virgin land” trope which erased Indian experiences: “We come as races, as nations, as transmitters of the past to a country without a history, whose only past is that of forests and streams and mountains and plains...” And Buck’s assertions that the

US is more divided into hostile identity-based factions than the supposedly culturally-unified China may not be that convincing, despite her reputation as the China expert, considering that China had endured by 1937, since the fall of the Qing dynasty, two decades of virtual civil war, and that a tenuous (and ultimately temporary) Chinese unity was only beginning to reassert itself in the face of Japan's military encroachments.¹¹

Extensive comment on Buck's essay by a prominent and sympathetic American shows both the range and the ambiguity of its impact. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt devoted her popular syndicated column for July 27, 1937 to a laudatory overview of the essay, concluding, appropriately, that "the value of what Pearl Buck has done lies in giving us as a nation an ideal to work for." But in her summary and in the two paragraph-long excerpts from the essay in her "My Day" column, ER ignored entirely the persistent strife based on race and ethnicity which Buck had elaborated, as well as the essay's critique of immigration legislation. Instead, ER quoted Buck's optimistic hope that the future American, hundreds of years hence, "will be a true superman, standing on the shoulders of those from all nations and races of the earth."¹² Thus, the First Lady, in praising Pearl Buck, excised her essay's critical edge. (*Survey Graphic* editors, one may note, were not so myopic. They forthrightly introduced her essay by noting that Buck "finds Americans guilty of race prejudices and of alien-baiting and of downright ungratefulness to the men and women from the great wide world who have come here and helped build a nation," and they noted the particular importance of such an essay "[a]t a time in history when prejudices and intolerance have swept like a plague across the western world.")¹³

So the author best known for her writings on China, in this prominent essay from mid-1937, was making her mark as a commentator on American life, from what she considered to be a supportively critical perspective, extolling American demographic diversity while calling on her compatriots to be more open to immigration and to end the "fearful prejudices of race and creed which possess the feelings of the average American." Let's turn now to how Buck depicted those prejudices – and the potential to eliminate them – in several of her novels. I will pay particular attention here to an issue left tantalizing unresolved in "On Discovering America": whether the post-racial future Buck envisioned would result from intermarriage or simply from an end to discrimination and an end to the internalization of markers of difference. A year earlier, Buck had provocatively urged novelists to address issues of "miscegenation" despite its seemingly taboo status among the reading "Public,"¹⁴ and she herself assiduously pursued this theme in her novels and short stories.

We must keep in mind, however, that in the 1930s racial intermarriage was not only a cultural taboo but against the law in three-fourths of US states, with many banning white-Asian marriages as well as white-Black marriages. About half of the states retained such laws into the 1950s and sixteen still had them on the books when the Supreme Court finally ruled them unconstitutional in 1967.¹⁵ We should note, too, that Buck personally faced vituperation for her opposition to such laws, including by a member of Congress. In 1942, Mississippi arch-segregationist John Rankin, who believed any weakening of Jim Crow would lead inevitably to interracial sex and the "mongrelization" of the nation, attacked the allegedly Communist poet, Carl Sandburg, and "a few parlor pink, irresponsible women, such as Pearl Buck," for demanding that the Red Cross integrate blood supplies used for wounded soldiers. Rankin went on to accuse Buck of weakening the war effort against Japan by allowing "our white people [to] intermarry with the japs [sic]," in a speech provocatively titled "Communists Attempt to Pollute the Blood Stream of America," which Rankin inserted into the *Congressional Record*.¹⁶

The Good Earth, of course, had taken place entirely within China, and it contained only passing references to Westerners; the same is true of its sequel, *Sons*, published in 1932, which continued the story of Wang Lung's family through his male progeny. The third novel of the

trilogy, *A House Divided*, which appeared in 1935, widens the scope, as in the middle 80 pages of this 350 page book the main character Yuan, Wang Lung's grandson, lives in the US as a college student. His family sent him out of China both to avoid prison for alleged ties to the radical nationalist movement of the 1920s and to learn modern agronomy in order to help Chinese farmers upon his return.¹⁷ It is Buck's first sustained attention to Chinese living in the US (Yuan's cousin Sheng is also at university here), and these are not immigrants as such, both because their intention was to return to China and because US law made it all but impossible for Chinese to stay here indefinitely. One reviewer praised Buck for providing "what is probably the first revealing treatment in fiction of the situation faced by the foreign student of a totally different civilization set down on alien soil," adding that readers "feel [Yuan's and Sheng's] reactions to the attitude of those who treat them as members of an inferior race."¹⁸

But the first account in the novel of the fruits of interracial sexual relations takes place in China, and the opposition is by Yuan's radical nationalist schoolmate, Meng, who expostulates upon encountering a Eurasian: "If there is a thing I hate above another in this city, it is such men as these who are nothing wholly, but are mixed in blood and untrustworthy and divided in their hearts!...I would kill them all for traitors," along with any Chinese, "man or woman," who would "mix his blood with blood of foreigners." For Meng, such offspring exemplify the power imbalance in China, with the "cruel, unjust treaties" imposed by white men who are beyond the reach of Chinese law. The milder Yuan responds merely that mixed blood cannot make a person "evil"; moreover, "[h]e cannot help what his parents did."¹⁹ Buck also addresses this power imbalance between whites and Chinese when, in this book's only direct allusion to Chinese Exclusion, she has Sheng say that the whole Wang family cannot decamp to "foreign parts" because such travel is limited to "students or some such special thing," to which Sheng's father responds indignantly, assailing Western hypocrisy, "And are they not here upon our shores?"²⁰

When Yuan arrives in the US, he faces racism when he tries to rent a room – "We don't take any colored people here," one landlord says – and is even turned away from some stores. He has to endure stereotypes about China – where they allegedly eat mainly rats and dogs with their rice – from white Americans content with their ignorance of the outside world.²¹ But soon he befriends a family in which the parents seek unsuccessfully to convert him to a fundamentalist Christianity as he gradually almost falls in love with their free-thinking grown daughter, a librarian and admirer of China who admires Yuan precisely because he does not assimilate quickly to American ways. But the love is not consummated: Yuan recoils from the kiss Mary Wilson initiates as his "distaste of flesh for flesh that was not of its own kind" wins out over his otherwise strong desire to "press on and on, deeper and long." Thereafter, Yuan applies himself single-mindedly to his studies to prepare for his return to serve what he hopes will be a new China.²² Yuan's "distaste" for interracial sexual liaisons was less extreme than Meng's, but through both of them Buck makes clear that such opposition was not limited to white Americans. Of course, Buck was also playing with the conventions of romantic fiction (as in most of her novels after *The Good Earth*), with the unrequited love in this portion of the book – Yuan does get a worthy Chinese partner and wife in the end – getting close to, but not crossing, the boundary of miscegenation.

Moving ahead fourteen years – and skipping twelve intervening novels by Pearl Buck – we turn to *Kinfolk*, which toggles back and forth between New York City and China. Published in early 1949, as the US-backed Nationalist government was floundering in the Chinese Civil War which followed World War II, the novel on one level provides readers a reasonably good account of problems facing China in this period, with conflict arising on several axes: traditional vs. modern, rural vs. urban, Communist vs. Nationalist. And it includes a brief look at the vibrant, even exuberant, popular culture of New York City's Chinatown, with a Cantonese-

language theater performance which both reinforces community identification for the area's immigrant generation and provides for their US-born children and grandchildren a compelling picture of "what China was" and why it "must not be forgotten": "the only place in Chinatown which could compete with the movies." Stunningly, in light of subsequent real-world cultural developments, the play was "Mu Lan," depicting, Buck writes, "the heroine of a thousand years ago, who took her father's place when he fell in battle and so saved her nation from invaders" – a description which was probably necessary for her non-Chinese readers in 1949 but would hardly be needed today.²³ Buck thus unwittingly provides for today's readers a dramatic example of how Chinese and Chinese American culture becomes part of American – even global – culture.

Buck's narrative, however, centers around the family of a respected Confucian scholar-professor living on tony Riverside Drive – significantly, about as far from the traditional immigrant enclave of Chinatown as one can get in Manhattan. For various reasons the professor's four children end up returning to China, three permanently and one only temporarily. The upper-middle-class Liangs are atypical Chinese immigrants, and Buck's depiction of the out-of-touch, snobbishly intellectual Dr. Liang is deeply cutting. Nevertheless, even these children are tugged between assimilation to American life and ties to Chinese culture and their ancestral homeland. We see, too, that talk of interracial sex arises far more freely, and with more nuance, than in *A House Divided*.

The youngest daughter, Louise, still a teenager, is most important for our purposes, though not for a full discussion of the novel.²⁴ Born in the US, and with a fondness for Radio City Music Hall, she has not only kissed a white American boy, but had sex with him, which, she soon reflects, accentuates her difference from her upper middle class private school crowd: "Chastity for a woman, seemingly so lightly considered by her schoolmates, returned to what she had been taught by her Chinese family – the test of all that woman was."²⁵ "We cannot behave like American girls," Louise's older sister Mary had admonished, and Buck proposes that neither Louise's nor the boy's parents would countenance an interracial marriage. But conditions had changed, Mary reasons, about both pre-marital chastity in general and interracial sex in particular: "Young Chinese women since the war – well, there had been plenty of American G.I. babies with Chinese mothers."²⁶

So when her father, in an attempt to purge Louise of modern – and inferior – American values, sends her to China to live with her older brother, a physician, and absorb timeless Chinese values, events do not at all go according to plan. (We might observe tangentially that immigrant families today sometimes similarly send teenage children back "home" to try to "protect" them from negative influences in American life.)²⁷ Louise meets an ex-G.I. who has returned to China after learning that he had fathered a child with a Chinese girlfriend who died in childbirth. Louise and Alec fall in love (each having forgiven the other's past sexual transgression), retrieve the child, get married at the American consulate after overcoming initial resistance from Louise's brothers who act as *in loco parentis*, and return to the US as a happy family of three. Louise and Alec are in love, to be sure, but the marriage also resolves the problem of the interracial child born as a result of American troops stationed abroad, and Alec can be more prosaic – even obtuse – than romantic in his feelings: "I'll be happier with Louise than I would with any regular American girl. Besides, the baby will be easier to explain. And people aren't as old-fashioned as they used to be. You can't marry a Negro, but most people don't mind a Chinese."²⁸ Alec's and Louise's mothers accept the marriage pretty readily, but the fathers – each ethnocentric in his own way – do not, merely tolerating the arrangement. Louise's white former schoolmates continue to resent an American boy marrying a Chinese girl.

In this telling, the acceptance of racial intermarriage, begrudging or not, is a result of the American military role in the world, not simply a smooth consequence of immigrants and their

children mixing with other Americans. Buck would return to this theme of GI sexual relationships with Asian women, and the children who resulted, not only in her philanthropic work with orphanages in Asia and in transnational adoptions, but in *The Hidden Flower* (1952) and *The New Year* (1968), although the American soldiers in these novels acted far less honorably than did Alec. Two comments on *The Hidden Flower*, set in the postwar American occupation of Japan and then in the US, must be made. First, Buck – again in an uncanny coincidence – had the father, Allen, invoke the anti-miscegenation law of his home state, Virginia, as his reason for abandoning Josui; fifteen years later it would be that law which the Supreme Court struck down in its landmark decision, *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). Second, in the book's final passage, Buck harks back to her *Survey Graphic* essay on the future post-racial American, as she described Allen and Josui's baby – left for adoption and (improbably but significantly for Buck's message) in the care of a Holocaust survivor – as “so sensitive, so wise, [for] in his brain were garnered the gifts of all the world.”²⁹

It may seem out of place in an analysis focused on Pearl Buck's commentary on the US to take up next a novel which set almost entirely in India. However, as *Come, My Beloved*, published in 1953, follows four generations of an American family devoted as philanthropists, educators, and/or missionaries to and in India, its inclusion here makes sense. To be sure, Buck's depictions in this novel of India's ethnic and religious diversity of India, the vibrant street life in its cities and the charms and sorrows in its villages, her critique of British colonialism – at one point she upends conventions by deriding “the deep caste feelings” among the English³⁰ – and the embrace of the cause of independence from Britain, all deserve analysis, as does Buck's insistence here that similarities among the world's great religious and philosophical systems outweigh their differences. But for our purposes it is the gradual integration into Indian life by the MacArd family that is most significant.³¹ The soft white supremacism of David, Sr., the American railroad tycoon, for whom philanthropy is as much for his reputation as for Indians, gives way to the earnest missionary endeavors in an Indian city of David, Jr., who nevertheless hews closely to the British colonial rulers. Then Ted, in the third generation, embraces Gandhian nationalism and, against his father's wishes, moves his religious, educational, and medical work to an Indian village. He is more attuned to Indian sensibilities and rarely returns to the US.

But the biggest challenge comes from Livy, Ted's daughter, who has grown up entirely in India and has internalized Indian folkways, and who falls in love with Jatin, the young Indian village doctor. That is a bridge too far for her parents, who forbid the marriage. “I can't go so far as to think it right that a white American girl should marry an Indian,” Livy's mother wails, adding, “Jatin isn't even an Anglo-Indian.” And her father, the supporter of Gandhi, now sees Jatin – whom he had hired as the village doctor – as “alien,” as “too Indian,” as too dark-skinned; Ted “had given his life to India in Vhai [the village], but Livy he would not give.”³² Livy's parents cannot prevent the secret physical consummation of the young couple's love, but they arrange to exile her to the US, virtually a foreign land for her. Alert readers perhaps recognized this move as parallel to Dr. Liang's dispatch of Louise to China, in *Kinfolk*. (At least one contemporary alert reader noted that the first two generational turnovers involved sons' rebellions against fathers, while the third involved a daughter against both parents.)³³

Buck's conclusion is not subtle. She, the daughter of missionaries who gave up her own missionary status in the early 1930s, has no fewer than three characters – Jatin, Jehar (a Christian convert and confidant of Ted who was effectively a mendicant saint), and Livy – in essence rebuke Ted for contradicting his own Christian preaching. Jehar argues politely: “what I see, in my humility, is that you have lived so fully the life of a Christian in my country that you are now given the final invitation to accept an Indian for your own son, and his children as your grandchildren. It is possible now for you to take the step of complete brotherhood, in flesh as in

the spirit.” Lily is briefer and more biting: if her parents will not accept the marriage, “Then I shan’t believe they are Christian.”³⁴

While Jatin, with what Buck describes as Indian attachment to fate, does not challenge Livy’s parents’ decision, in this book it is clearly residual white American racism, even among supposed advocates of world brotherhood, which prevents intermarriage and delays that post-racial society Buck had envisioned almost twenty years earlier. But, of course, that vision was for long in the future – many centuries, not just a matter of years or decades, she had written – so *Come, My Beloved* could be seen as chronicling gradual steps on the path toward that future rather than simply its rejection. Reviewers John Frederick Muehl and Mary Johnson Tweedy, both of whom had lived in India, adopted that approach, with Muehl pointing to further progress by each younger generation as buttressing Buck’s “very plausible optimism.” Tweedy, for her part, quoting Jehar’s words, characterized the narrative as one of “repeated revolt as successive generations move closer to a realization of ‘complete brotherhood, in flesh as in the spirit.’”³⁵ *Time* magazine’s reviewer, meanwhile, while sympathetic to Buck’s endorsement of racial intermarriage, prudishly criticized the novel’s passages – mild as they were by today’s standards – which described Livy and Jatin’s pre-marital (or non-marital) sexual congress.³⁶

This presentation by no means exhausts the interventions which Pearl Buck made in her novels, short stories, and essays on the topics of immigration, racial and ethnic diversity, and the possible transcendence of such divisions and animosity in the US. Nor does it address the important political work of Buck and her second husband, Richard J. Walsh, in helping to end the Chinese Exclusion Act and the ban on immigration from India (1943 and 1946, respectively), and attempting (albeit unsuccessfully), in Congressional testimony in 1948, to allow renewed immigration from Japan and citizenship rights for earlier Japanese immigrants.

But with immigration policy currently generating extraordinary divisions in American life, with one powerful political faction echoing the nativist and restrictionist rhetoric prevalent in the 1930s, Pearl Buck’s commentary on such issues continues to be worth considering. And with over 33 million Americans characterizing themselves as “multiracial” in the 2020 US Census – more than a three-fold increase from a decade earlier³⁷ – and two recent Democratic candidates for President having multiracial origins and one or two immigrant parents, Buck’s attention to the origins and potential of multiracial Americans, and the obstacles they have faced, can help provide a literary and historical backstory to this increasingly important facet of American life. To be sure, attacks on the ancestry and racial self-identification of both Barack Obama and Kamala Harris show that we are far from the post-racial society which Pearl Buck envisioned, but their prominence and achievements exemplify Buck’s (surely overly-lyrical) formulation almost ninety years ago, in *The Survey Graphic*, that future Americans will be “standing on the shoulders of those from all nations and races of the earth.”³⁸

Endnotes

¹ Pearl S. Buck, “On Discovering America,” *Survey Graphic*, June 1937, 313-315, 353, 355.

² “Musical Play Gets the Pulitzer Award; Mrs. Buck, Pershing, Duranty Honored,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1932, 1.

³ Frank Nugent, “‘The Good Earth’ Opens at the Astor,” *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1937, 27. Nugent called the film “one of the finest things Hollywood has done this season or any other.”

⁴ Buck, “Advice to Unborn Novelists,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, March 2, 1935, 513-514, 520-521 (an adaptation of a talk delivered at Yale University in January 1935); Buck, “Hearts Come Home,”

Ladies Home Journal, August 1935, 5-6; Buck "Fiction and the Front Page," *Yale Review* 25 (March 1936): 477-487; Buck, "On the Cultivation of a Young Genius," *Opportunity*, Jan. 1937, 7.

⁵ "Pearl Buck Scores Falsity in Movies," *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1937, 16; "Negroes Hear Pearl Buck," *New York Times*, March 12, 1937, 48; Buck, "Take Time to Read Good Books," *Library Journal*, Apr. 15, 1937, 332 (transcript of the CBS radio speech); Buck, "Introduction to the United States," *Saturday Review of Literature*, May 27, 1937, 12-13 (International P.E.N. Congress speech).

⁶ "On Discovering America" (editorial comment), *Survey Graphic*, July 1937, 404; "The World We Live In" (editorial comment), *Survey Graphic*, Aug. 1937, 408; editorial comment, *Survey Graphic*, May 1938, 314, which also reported that the magazine had 21,000 paid subscribers at the end of 1937.

⁷ "The Gist of It" (Table of Contents), *Survey Graphic*, June 1937, 311.

⁸ Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 196-197.

⁹ All quotations in the next several paragraphs are from Buck, "On Discovering America," as cited above.

¹⁰ Buck, "An American Looks at America," *Opportunity*, Dec. 1937: 359-361, quotation at 361.

¹¹ One reader responded to Buck's essay by arguing that tensions and hostilities within the US were far less severe than those in Europe at the time, though he did not challenge her analysis of Chinese society; see Richard Bradley, letter to the editor, *Survey Graphic*, Aug. 1937, 408-409.

¹² Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, July 27, 1937," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017), accessed 8/28/2024, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1937&_f=md054704.

¹³ Editorial comment, *Survey Graphic*, June 1937, 311.

¹⁴ Buck, "Fiction and the Front Page," 478.

¹⁵ Bárbara Cruz and Michael Berson, "The American Melting Pot? Miscegenation Laws in the United States," *OAH Magazine of History* 15 (Summer 2001): 80-84; Rachel Moral, "Love with a Proper Stranger: What Anti-Miscegenation Laws Can Tell Us About the Meaning of Race, Sex, and Marriage," *Hofstra Law Review* 32:4 (2004) 1663-1679, at <https://scholarlycommons.law.hofstra.edu/hlr/vol32/iss4/22>, accessed 8/28/24.

¹⁶ Rep. John Rankin, "Communists Attempt to Pollute the Blood Stream of America," *Congressional Record*, vol. 88, pt. 9 (June 8, 1942), 77th Cong., 2nd Sess., A2336-A2338. For a defense of Buck against Rankin's attacks, see the editorial note in *Common Sense*, Sept. 1942, 323, which also asserted that "Since Pearl Harbor Mrs. Buck, more than any other single individual in America, has become the spokesman for the rights and aspirations of the non-Caucasian majority of this globe." *Common Sense* was a leftist but anti-Communist monthly.

¹⁷ Buck, *A House Divided* (New York: John Day Company, 1935). The decade of Yuan's sojourn to the US is not specified in the book, but the context of events in China described while he is here allow us to presume. The lack of specificity as to dates and places led to negative comments among reviewers, both those who panned the book (John Chamberlain, "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, Jan. 21, 1935, 13) and those who were otherwise quite favorable to it ("Mrs. Buck Concludes Her Trilogy of Chinese Life" [unsigned], *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 20, 1935, 3.) Pearl Buck's first husband, John Lossing Buck, was, of course, a specialist on Chinese agriculture, and he and Pearl, as graduate students at Cornell University in 1924-1925, would likely have known some Chinese students studying agronomy.

¹⁸ "Mrs. Buck Concludes Her Trilogy of Chinese Life"; cf. "A House Divided" (unsigned), *Times Literary Supplement* (London), Jan. 24, 1935, 46.

¹⁹ Buck, *A House Divided* (New York: John Day Company, 1935), 79.

²⁰ Buck, *A House Divided*, 126.

²¹ Buck, *A House Divided*, 146-147, 150-151.

²² Buck, *A House Divided*, 173-214, esp. 187, 194-195, 199, 201, 202, 206, 209.

²³ Buck, *Kinfolk* (New York: John Day Company, 1949), 1.

²⁴ *Kinfolk* received mixed reviews when it appeared, and none of the contemporary reviews I have seen discussed Buck's attention in it to interracial sex and interracial marriage. See: Mary Ross, "Pearl Buck's Wide Canvas: Her New Novel Stretches Across China and America," *New York Herald-Tribune Weekly Book Review*, Apr. 24, 1949, 6 (very favorable); Marion West Stoer, "With Patience, Labor, Charity and Faith," *Christian Science Monitor*, Apr. 21, 1949, 11 (favorable); Marjory Stoneman Douglas, "American-Chinese," *Saturday Review of Literature*, Apr. 23, 1949, 13 (mixed); unsigned and untitled

review, *New Yorker*, Apr. 23, 1949, 98-99 (mixed); Louise Lux, "East and West," *New York Times Book Review*, Apr. 24, 1949, 30 (negative).

²⁵ Buck, *Kinfolk*, 106.

²⁶ Buck, *Kinfolk*, 107.

²⁷ Barrie Thorne et al., "Raising Children, and Growing Up, across National Borders," in *Gender and U.S. Immigration: Contemporary Themes*, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 241-262, esp. 255.

²⁸ Buck, *Kinfolk*, 249-250.

²⁹ Buck, *The Hidden Flower* (New York: John Day Company, 1952), 302, 307. While *Time* magazine, long hostile to Buck, panned this book as a "preaching" novel ("Soapboxers," *Time*, June 2, 1952, 98, 100), other reviewers were more favorable and perceptive. Elizabeth Janeway, in "The Optimistic World of Miss Buck," *New York Times Book Review*, May 25, 1958, 4, expounds on Buck's critique of anti-miscegenation laws (and more generally on Buck's significance as a writer), and Rose Feld, in *New York Herald-Tribune Book Review*, May 25, 1952, 4, places the story in the context of US anti-Japanese racism. Harrison Smith, in "Sometime Innocence of Love," *Saturday Review of Literature*, May 31, 1952, 18, interprets Buck's enthusiasm for the new baby in religious terms, as a new Saviour.

³⁰ Buck, *Come, My Beloved* (New York: Pocket Books, 1954 [1953]), 271. The original publication was by the John Day Company in 1953; page numbers given here and subsequently are from the Pocket Books edition and differ slightly from the John Day edition.

³¹ Biographer Conn's four-paragraph summary of the book is both concise and perceptive, although he mistakenly calls the patriarch of the family "Thomas"; see Conn, *Pearl S. Buck*, 331-332.

³² Buck, *Come, My Beloved*, 277-278, 284.

³³ See Eleanor Breed, "Pearl Buck's India," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Aug. 25, 1953, 15.

³⁴ Buck, *Come, My Beloved*, 299, 273, and see 284 for Jatin's effort.

³⁵ J.F. Muehl, "Generations in Sind," *Saturday Review of Literature*, Aug. 15, 1953, 10; Mary Johnson Tweedy, "Beyond the Barriers," *New York Times Book Review*, Aug. 9, 1953, 5.

³⁶ "Wall Street to Mud Hut" (unsigned), *Time*, Aug. 19, 1953, 100-101.

³⁷ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html>, accessed 8/30/24.

³⁸ Buck, "On Discovering America," 315.