

**Civilian Diplomacy Inspired by Pearl S. Buck**

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## Introduction

Civilian diplomacy involves everyday citizens representing their country, often in lieu of official channels.<sup>1</sup> The Foreign Policy Centre notes that “building links with overseas publics will matter as much as talking to governments in the age of global communications” and acknowledges that government agencies cannot “reach millions through diplomatic channels.”<sup>2</sup> Citizens represent an untapped resource for restoring the United States’ “reputational credibility” (Mueller, et. al, 2020) and disrupting the current geopolitical status quo.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

Yet, “military alliances have now eclipsed the kind of civilian diplomacy that once counterbalanced them, with disastrous results” (Farrow, 2018).<sup>6</sup> “There is an overarching cultural force that privileges military might over diplomatic efforts” (Hyde, et. al, 2023).<sup>7</sup> Threats of force engender far more positive responses from the public than efforts at negotiated compromise, which hampers the United States’ ability to conduct effective diplomacy.

In particular, between the United States and China, dialogue of any sort is fraught.<sup>8</sup> Amid rising military and economic tensions, 21st century Sino-American relations have plummeted to

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<sup>1</sup> “What Is Citizen Diplomacy?” Boston World Affairs Council, [www.worldboston.org/what-is-citizen-diplomacy/](http://www.worldboston.org/what-is-citizen-diplomacy/).

<sup>2</sup> Leonard, Mark, and Vidhya Alakeson. “Going Public: Diplomacy for the Information Society - the Foreign Policy Centre.” The Foreign Policy Centre, 18 May 2000, [fpc.org.uk/publications/going-public-diplomacy-for-the-information-society/](http://fpc.org.uk/publications/going-public-diplomacy-for-the-information-society/).

<sup>3</sup> Mueller, Sherry Lee, and Hayley Pottle. “Uncle Sam Wants You to Be a Citizen Diplomat: Historic Highlights of U.S. Citizen Diplomacy.” USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 14 Dec. 2020, [uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/uncle-sam-wants-you-be-citizen-diplomat-historic-highlights-us-citizen-diplomacy](http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/uncle-sam-wants-you-be-citizen-diplomat-historic-highlights-us-citizen-diplomacy).

<sup>4</sup> Issues, Initiative for U. S.-China Dialogue on Global. “U.S.-China People-To-People Interactions and Public Diplomacy: A Historical Perspective.” Georgetown University, 7 Oct. 2021, [uschinadialogue.georgetown.edu/events/u-s-china-people-to-people-interactions-and-public-diplomacy-a-historical-perspective](http://uschinadialogue.georgetown.edu/events/u-s-china-people-to-people-interactions-and-public-diplomacy-a-historical-perspective).

<sup>5</sup> Sharp, Paul. “Making Sense of Citizen Diplomats: The People of Duluth, Minnesota, as International Actors.” *International Studies Perspectives* 2, no. 2 (May 2001): 131–50. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.00045>.

<sup>6</sup> Farrow, Ronan. *War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence*. W. W. Norton & Company, 24 Apr. 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Hyde, Andrew, et al. “US Diplomacy Is Weakening.” Inkstick, the Stimson Center, 22 May 2023, [inkstickmedia.com/us-diplomacy-is-weakening/](http://inkstickmedia.com/us-diplomacy-is-weakening/).

<sup>8</sup> Scobell, Andrew. “Three Troubling Takeaways on U.S.-China Relations from the Shangri La Dialogue.” United States Institute of Peace, June 12, 2024. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/06/three-troubling-takeaways-us-china-relations-shangri-la-dialogue>.

an all-time low.<sup>9</sup> Sino-American academic and literary exchanges have nosedived.<sup>10</sup> Chinese efforts at “people-to-people connections” are often infused with P.R.C. government propaganda and therefore deemed untrustworthy by American counterparts.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, escalating anti-China attitudes in Washington D.C. undermine efforts at dialogue between the two societies on the part of American entities.<sup>12</sup>

These dire straits, and the ensuing Sino-American gulf they create, make it important to understand how historical figures responded to similar challenges. American author Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973) is one of few successful Sino-American civilian diplomats throughout history who substantially altered how the two nations related to each other.<sup>13</sup> Her literature—particularly *The Good Earth* (1931)—and sociopolitical advocacy establish her as a pre-eminent civilian diplomat. Through *The Good Earth*, a novel read by Chinese intellectuals and the general American public, Buck began to close a Sino-American gap once thought insurmountable.<sup>14</sup> She set out to write a novel but ended up planting the first seeds of 20th century Sino-American bilateralism.<sup>15</sup> A pioneer for her time, Buck interpreted Chinese culture, influenced American government policy and ultimately changed the overall perceptions of the American public toward

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<sup>9</sup> Gertken, Matt. “The US Election’s Impact on US-China Relations and Trade | White Paper | Hinrich Foundation.” Hinrich Foundation, 17 Sept. 2024,

[www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/wp/us-china/why-us-china-ties-will-worsen-regardless-of-the-us-vote/](http://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/wp/us-china/why-us-china-ties-will-worsen-regardless-of-the-us-vote/).

<sup>10</sup> Guo, Wu. “Fewer Chinese Academics in the US Will Worsen US-China Disconnect.” ThinkChina, 12 Apr. 2022, [www.thinkchina.sg/society/fewer-chinese-academics-us-will-worsen-us-china-disconnect](http://www.thinkchina.sg/society/fewer-chinese-academics-us-will-worsen-us-china-disconnect).

<sup>11</sup> Zubair, Bilal. “Chinese Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in the United States.” Springer Nature, 23 Jan. 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Kine, Phelim. “The Barriers to ‘People-To-People Exchange.’” Politico, 29 Feb. 2024, [www.politico.eu/newsletter/china-watcher/the-barriers-to-people-to-people-exchange/](http://www.politico.eu/newsletter/china-watcher/the-barriers-to-people-to-people-exchange/).

<sup>13</sup> Liu, Zijun. “Pearl S. Buck: A Bridge between East and West - International Affairs Forum.” International Affairs Forum, 2024, [www.ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal\\_Document.cfm?contenttype\\_id=5&ContentID=9053](http://www.ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document.cfm?contenttype_id=5&ContentID=9053).

<sup>14</sup> Buck, Pearl S. *The Good Earth*. The John Day Company, 1931.

<sup>15</sup> Thomson, James C. “The Day Pearl Buck and the Nobel Committee Shocked the World.” The Washington Post, December 22, 1988.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1988/12/22/the-day-pearl-buck-and-the-nobel-committee-shocked-the-world/522b1763-7fe3-49c2-8d36-2e42131edb9b/>.

China.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, she demonstrated how individual citizens can successfully alter the geopolitical status quo.

This paper identifies the tenets that make civilian diplomacy successful, especially through literature, and examines how these principles can guide 21st century efforts. This topic is important to consider because revamped civilian diplomacy could build a path to peace between the two most powerful countries on Earth, who together are home to nearly two billion people and influence the entire world.

This paper answers the question: **How does the reception and impact of Pearl S. Buck across different societies illustrate the effectiveness of civilian diplomacy through literature and humanitarian efforts?** Specifically, this paper outlines a blueprint for 21st century civilian diplomacy inspired by Pearl S. Buck by exploring several areas, including:

- China's historical and social background relevant to Buck's background;
- Buck's understandings of Chinese society, driven by her education and childhood in China;
- Tenets and impact of Buck's civilian diplomacy; and
- How they collectively articulate a framework for 21st century civilian diplomacy.

### **Background: China and Pearl S. Buck**

It is important to first understand the origins that created the China in which Buck grew up. After nearly 5,000 years of history, China experienced a political earthquake in 1911. Led by Sun Yat-sen and his intellectual allies, the Xinhai Revolution toppled the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and replaced it with the Republic of China, founded on a constitution meant to

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<sup>16</sup> Kinney, Ranger. "Summer Research Focuses on Pearl S. Buck and U.S.-China Relations during World War II." Randolph College, June 15, 2022. <https://www.randolphcollege.edu/news/2022/06/summer-research-focuses-on-pearl-s-buck-and-u-s-china-relations-during-world-war-ii/>.

enshrine democratic values.<sup>17</sup> Sun’s “Three Principles of the People”—the basic tenets on which he sought to establish the new nation—emphasized the importance of national sovereignty, self-governance and social services,<sup>18</sup> values with which Buck sympathized in her writings.

In the Republic’s early years, China witnessed the development of a *literati* class that sought to articulate a new Chinese national identity and develop a China governed by the Han Chinese.<sup>19</sup> This was a marked shift from the nearly three-century long Qing Dynasty, during which ethnic Chinese were under the rule of the Manchus, an ethnic minority whose language, religious practices and way of life were largely different from those of the Han Chinese.<sup>20</sup> Yet, the Qing Dynasty’s claim to legitimacy rested on a system that had worked for many centuries: Confucianism, whereby Manchu leaders viewed themselves as virtuous insofar as they abided by Confucian principles, which Professor Kent Deng of London School of Economics dubbed “Sweet and Sour Confucianism.”<sup>21</sup>

Having identified the bygone systems of the past as their intellectual adversaries, a new generation of Chinese intellectuals sought to replace this Confucian-driven ideology with Sun’s contemporary nationalism. After centuries of humiliation by foreign powers under Qing rule, this new class of Chinese intellectuals comprising both Nationalists and Communists sought to advance their society in science and in principle by conforming to the practice of Western nations: building nations whose identities were at least in part defined by ethnic background.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Office of the Historian. “Milestones: 1899–1913 - Office of the Historian.” *State.gov*, United States Department of State, 2019, [history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/chinese-rev](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/chinese-rev).

<sup>18</sup> Cheng, Chu-yuan. “The Originality and Creativity of Sun Yat-Sen’s Doctrine and Its Relevancy to the Contemporary World.” *American Journal of Chinese Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, Oct. 2003, pp. 149–162, [www.jstor.org/stable/44289235](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44289235).

<sup>19</sup> Carol Lee Hamrin, and Timothy Cheek. *China’s Establishment Intellectuals*. Taylor & Francis, 28 July 2023.

<sup>20</sup> “Qing Dynasty | Definition, History, & Achievements.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 28 May 2018, [www.britannica.com/topic/Qing-dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Qing-dynasty).

<sup>21</sup> Deng, Kent. “Sweet and Sour Confucianism”. *The Impact of Culture on the Qing State and the Fate of the Qing Empire*. London School of Economics, 8 Sept. 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London, Verso, 1991.

In creating this new country from 1911 through the 1930s, Nationalist Chinese leaders and the Communist insurgents, both of whom were mainly led by Han Chinese, sought to impose a shared identity; Mandarin, the language of the learned class, became the *lingua franca*, even though Cantonese had been the dominant language spoken by the Chinese masses.<sup>23</sup> Through processes like this one, the Han Chinese created an ethnostate with a common culture; understanding that while people were mortal, the national identity they articulated should withstand the test of time.

One of the few Westerners to witness this period of cultural upheaval and political transformation was Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, a Caucasian woman who was born in the United States in June 1892 but moved to China just five months later with her parents, who were Christian missionaries. It was within this tumultuous and chaotic period in Chinese history that Buck grew up in Zhenjiang, a small city in Jiangsu province, where her parents spent their days faithfully attempting to spread Christianity to anyone willing to listen. Buck lived and learned English and Chinese in China for the first four decades of her life before returning to the United States in 1935.<sup>24</sup> Because of the unique circumstances of her formative years and experience as a young adult, Buck was culturally, but not ethnically, Chinese. Theorist Homi Bhabha describes such phenomena as an example of hybridity, which “commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization.”<sup>25</sup> The way that Buck embodied hybridity is unique because she embraced the cultures of both East and West, without viewing one as superior to the other; therefore, she disrupted the standard discourses among cultures at that time. Buck shared so much in common with each culture—East and West—in a

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<sup>23</sup> Weng, Jeffrey. “What Is Mandarin? The Social Project of Language Standardization in Early Republican China.” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 77, no. 3, Aug. 2018, pp. 611–633, [www.jstor.org/stable/26572530](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26572530).

<sup>24</sup> “Brief Biography of Pearl S. Buck | Department of English.” University of Pennsylvania, 2019, [www.english.upenn.edu/Projects/Buck/biography.html](http://www.english.upenn.edu/Projects/Buck/biography.html).

<sup>25</sup> Mambrol, Nasrullah. “Bodies: ‘Homi-Bhabha's Concept of Hybridity.’” *Bodies: A Digital Companion*, 8 Apr. 2016, [scalar.usc.edu/works/bodies/homi-bhabhas-concept-of-hybridity](http://scalar.usc.edu/works/bodies/homi-bhabhas-concept-of-hybridity).

way that was so rare that she represented a new cultural identity, one that enabled her to understand the cultures of both. As she remarked at her Nobel Lecture on December 12, 1938,

I am an American by birth and by ancestry ... But it is the Chinese and not the American novel which has shaped my own efforts in writing. My earliest knowledge of story, of how to tell and write stories, came to me in China. It would be ingratitude on my part not to recognize this today.<sup>26</sup>

Through the lens of her hybridity, Buck saw a China unknown to most Americans; consequently, she wrote about China differently than other Western authors of her time. Remarkably, “she wrote “The Good Earth” while thinking in Chinese, translating it as she went into clear, strong English.”<sup>27</sup> While other missionaries in China often looked down on the Chinese people<sup>28</sup>—as they viewed their purpose as partly saving the Chinese people from themselves—Buck revered and respected Chinese ways of life and saw herself as an equal, not a superior, in the country that had adopted her.

### **Buck’s Understandings of Chinese Society**

Buck read Chinese society through both literature and everyday life. Fluent in Chinese, she had the ability and motivation to read both newspapers chronicling day-to-day happenings and columns of contemporary political writings. She experienced her first taste of political volatility in China in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion, an anti-imperialist uprising by the

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<sup>26</sup> Buck, Pearl S. “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1938.” The Nobel Prize, 12 Dec. 1938, [www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1938/buck/lecture/](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1938/buck/lecture/).

<sup>27</sup> Garner, Dwight. “The Meteoric Rise, and Decline, of a Talented Young Writer.” The New York Times, 9 June 2010, [www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/books/09garner.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/09/books/09garner.html).

<sup>28</sup> Yue, Isaac. “Missionaries (MIS-)Representing China: Orientalism, Religion, and the Conceptualization of Victorian Cultural Identity.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 37, no. 1, Mar. 2009, pp. 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1060150309090019>.

Chinese that resulted in the quartering of foreign troops on Chinese soil and therefore amplified Chinese nationalist sentiment.<sup>29</sup>

After she returned to the United States and attended Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia from 1910 to 1914, she and her husband, John Lossing Buck, returned to live in Nanhsuchou, China, in 1917. In 1920, Buck assumed a teaching position at Nanking University; by this point, she had experienced life across China's different landscapes—from rural Nanhsuchou to urban Nanking, which would become the capital city of the Republic of China in 1927.<sup>30</sup> In these three decades, Buck had already lived a profound contradiction—she had lived with and learned from everyday Chinese people, yet these individuals had largely failed to meet the goals of missionaries such as her parents: conversion to Christianity. This phenomenon rejected the very premise of her parents' life in China and thus part of Buck as the daughter of American missionaries. Later in her life, she became a pioneering voice against the typical practices of missionaries, whom she viewed to be demeaning toward Chinese culture and ineffective in improving the lives of the Chinese people.<sup>31</sup> Instead, she wanted to meet the Chinese people on their terms and help them through humanitarian aid rather than devote her time to religious preaching.

The other side of China that Buck witnessed and in which she lived was a nation in profound crisis. Although the Xinhai Revolution had inaugurated a nation built on democratic principles, the Republic of China's formative years were anything but peaceful. Buck resided in Nanking during the 1931 floods, which caused 150,000 people to drown.<sup>32</sup> Instead of being only a bystander to this devastation, Buck advocated for the needs of refugees through her writing,

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<sup>29</sup> Palmowski, Jan. *A Dictionary of Contemporary World History : From 1900 to the Present Day*. Oxford ; New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> Pearl S. Buck. *Words of Love*. The John Day Company, 1974.

<sup>31</sup> Moskal, Jeanne. "The Unspoken in the Missionary Literature of Pearl Buck" Brigham Young University College of Humanities, 5 Nov. 2015, [humanities.byu.edu/the-unspeken-in-the-missionary-literature-of-pearl-buck/](http://humanities.byu.edu/the-unspeken-in-the-missionary-literature-of-pearl-buck/).

<sup>32</sup> Buck, John Lossing. *The 1931 Flood in China*. University of Nanking, 1932.



including in *The First Wife and Other Stories* (1933).<sup>33</sup> In addition to natural disasters, Buck experienced significant political upheaval in China. In *Dragon Seed: A Novel of China Today* (1942), Buck tells the story of civilians trapped in Nanking during the horrifying Nanking Massacre of 1937.<sup>34</sup> While she moved out of Nanking in 1933, she likely had an enduring bond with the community there, having lived through the Nanking Incident in 1927, a clash between Nationalist forces and Western armies in the city.<sup>35</sup> Buck and her family needed to seek refuge in the home of a Chinese friend when Chinese warlords were rampaging and attempting to kill Westerners, whom they viewed as invading foreigners.<sup>36</sup> This protection likely instilled in Buck both an appreciation for Chinese compassion and a respect for Chinese resilience in the face of Western imperialism.

While elements of Buck's experiences in China are present in many of her other books, *The Good Earth* is a shining example of her wielding these experiences to piece together a fictional story that served as a vehicle for her message to America: that the Chinese people were decent, hardworking and worth caring about. She expresses directly her admiration for the Chinese people in her 1972 book, *China, Past and Present*, where she writes,

Nothing and no one can destroy the Chinese people. They are relentless survivors. They are the oldest civilized people on earth. Their civilization passes through phases but its basic characteristics remain the same. They yield, they bend to the wind, but they do not break.<sup>37</sup>

This message of hers is clear in many passages of *The Good Earth*.

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<sup>33</sup> Buck, Pearl S. *The First Wife and Other Stories*. The John Day Company, 1933.

<sup>34</sup> Buck, Pearl S. *Dragon Seed: A Novel of China Today*. The John Day Company, Jan. 1942.

<sup>35</sup> "The Nanking Incident · the View from Ginling." Barnard College, 2020, [mct.barnard.edu/the-1927-incident/the-nanking-incident](https://mct.barnard.edu/the-1927-incident/the-nanking-incident).

<sup>36</sup> "Lipscomb Library: Special Collections & Archives: The Pearl S. Buck Collections." Randolph College, 2024, [library.randolphcollege.edu/archives/Buck](https://library.randolphcollege.edu/archives/Buck).

<sup>37</sup> Buck, Pearl S. *China Past and Present*. The John Day Company, 1972.

## Tenets of Buck's Civilian Diplomacy and 21st Century Relevance

### A Christian Message from China

An overwhelming majority of Americans were Christian in the early 1930s, yet church membership dipped following the onset of the Great Depression in 1929.<sup>38</sup> As many Americans faced disillusionment, Buck sought to uplift them by reaffirming their faith through *The Good Earth*, in which she sends clear messages about the importance of grounding oneself in the earth, carrying out good work and hard labor and rejecting idleness. In one section, Wang Lung, the primary protagonist, stumbles into a great deal of wealth and loses his deep connection with his land when he stops plowing and working his own fields. He experiences a moral decline that leads him to seize his wife's (O-lan) treasured pearls to give them to Lotus, his new concubine. The pearls symbolize O-lan's tears and the betrayal of her life partner, even though she helped him rebuild not only his house but also his family and way of life. Buck communicates that hope and a good life are found in the earth because when Wang Lung returns to the North, the only reason he is able to rebuild his life after a devastating famine is that he has held on to his land. American readers could see themselves in Wang Lung's shoes, providing them a sense of hope as the Great Depression evicted farmers from their land.

Buck demonstrates the importance of communication designed for audience relevance, which goes beyond any one religion or religious message. For Americans, Chinese or any other society to be convinced of another's plight, it is helpful for them to understand a shared moral, ethical or religious thread.

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<sup>38</sup> Rodgers, Darrin J. "Growing through the Great Depression: 8 Enduring Lessons for Difficult Times." AGNews, 3 July 2024, [news.ag.org/en/articles/news/2024/06/growing-through-the-great-depression-8-enduring-lessons-for-difficult-times#:~:text=Many%20churches%2C%20Christian%20schools%2C%20and.](https://www.news.ag.org/en/articles/news/2024/06/growing-through-the-great-depression-8-enduring-lessons-for-difficult-times#:~:text=Many%20churches%2C%20Christian%20schools%2C%20and.)

## A Compassionate Portrayal of China

In the 1930s, China was poorly understood by most Americans. While certain Americans knew about China's burgeoning political developments and advancements and "regard[ed] its people from a patronizing Orientalist viewpoint,"<sup>39</sup> Buck sought to humanize China in the eyes of the West not by painting a glorious yet unrealistic picture of Chinese reality. Instead, she defined the plight of the Chinese people as part of every people's story and every person's sinfulness. In *Wang Lung*, readers could envision the inherent debauchery of which all humans are capable. In *O-lan*, Americans could see the predicament of women globally, highly contributive yet often exploited. In the ebb and flow of wealth in the book, Americans literally saw their own lives—trapped in a dramatic economic downturn that followed a halcyon decade. Rather than focusing solely on educating the Chinese about America, she dedicated her efforts to educating America about the Chinese. Buck believed that missionary work in China did not fully convey the situation of the Chinese people to Americans, just as missionary work was irrelevant to the Chinese people.<sup>40</sup> The answer was to tell the Chinese story through a novel, allowing her to construct an East-West connection built on a good-faith attempt to understand the other side rather than solely to change—"civilize"—its people.

Buck's successful construction of an East-West bond based in equality and compassion is very relevant for contemporary Sino-American relations. Through such non-governmental activities as pen pal partnerships, generations of civilians can begin to discover that they are more similar than different to their counterparts in another society.

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<sup>39</sup> Pan, Alex. "Beyond the "Shanghaiander": China through the Eyes of Foreigners in the 1920s and 1930s." *Australian National University Student Journals*, vol. 10, no. 1, 24 Mar. 2020, pp. 56–67.

<sup>40</sup> Buck, Pearl S. "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" *Harper's Magazine*, 1933, [harpers.org/archive/1933/01/is-there-a-case-for-foreign-missions/](https://harpers.org/archive/1933/01/is-there-a-case-for-foreign-missions/).

## Impact of Buck's Civilian Diplomacy and 21st Century Relevance

### China: From Condemnation to Acknowledgement

When it was published, *The Good Earth* was met with significant and varied reactions from Chinese intellectuals—the only portion of the Chinese population literate and able to read her work—and the American public. Compared to other texts, Buck's book was known in China. “(T)he seven pirated translations of *The Good Earth* into Chinese sold more copies than any other foreign book had up to that point.”<sup>41</sup>

Eminent Chinese thinkers resented Buck for painting a portrait of China that they thought failed to appreciate Chinese greatness.<sup>42</sup> They took offense to Buck's showing the uglier aspects of Chinese society: debauchery, greed, selfishness, violence and betrayal. What they wanted was to present a facade of strength and unity to the West, as they were tired of being humiliated by Western powers. Specifically, they were angry that Buck had included images of a China they had sought to leave behind—such as the horrific practice of binding girls' feet, which had been outlawed in 1911 but continued in practice among certain Chinese villagers.<sup>43</sup> Later, in 1949, the year the Communists won control of the Chinese mainland, they banned all of Buck's books—a policy that would stay in place until 1994. Generations of children in the Chinese school system were taught to denounce Buck as a “cultural imperialist” who had sought to impose Western standards on Chinese society, damaging her legacy in Mainland China for decades.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Hayford, Charles W. “Getting “the Good Earth”’S Author Right: On Pearl S. Buck | Los Angeles Review of Books.” Los Angeles Review of Books, 13 Oct. 2013, [lareviewofbooks.org/article/getting-the-good-earths-author-right-on-pearl-s-buck/](http://lareviewofbooks.org/article/getting-the-good-earths-author-right-on-pearl-s-buck/).

<sup>42</sup> Shuyun, Sun. “Burying the Bones: Pearl Buck in China by Hilary Spurling.” *The Guardian*, *The Guardian*, 17 Apr. 2010, [www.theguardian.com/books/2010/apr/18/burying-bones-pearl-buck](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/apr/18/burying-bones-pearl-buck).

<sup>43</sup> Foreman, Amanda. “Why Footbinding Persisted in China for a Millennium.” *Smithsonian*, *Smithsonian.com*, 21 Jan. 2015, [www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-footbinding-persisted-china-millennium-180953971/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-footbinding-persisted-china-millennium-180953971/).

<sup>44</sup> Min, Anchee. “A Chinese Fan of Pearl S. Buck Returns the Favor.” *National Public Radio*, 7 Apr. 2010, [www.npr.org/2010/04/07/125682489/a-chinese-fan-of-pearl-s-buck-returns-the-favor](http://www.npr.org/2010/04/07/125682489/a-chinese-fan-of-pearl-s-buck-returns-the-favor).

Perhaps the best way to illuminate the sentiments of Chinese elites is found in how they handled the production of the eponymous film, originally set to be filmed in China in 1937.<sup>45</sup> They showed their disdain and distrust for Buck's portrayal of China by limiting the filming to a single pre-selected village. The Chinese women were dressed for the camera—neatly, with “clean jackets and flowers in their hair,” as Buck wrote. The Chinese government also opposed the usage of water buffalo in the film, seeking to replace them with tractors—a misleading endeavor, because tractors were few and far between in 1930s China. Additionally, an unidentified person, suspected by Buck of being an agent of the Nationalist government, burned the director's Shanghai studio to the ground and heavily damaged the filming equipment. The filming environment in China was so intolerant that nearly all scenes needed to be re-filmed in the United States for the film's release in 1937.

Buck never saw her views and writing about China accepted or lauded by Chinese leaders. In fact, in 1972, the year after U.S. President Richard Nixon embarked on his groundbreaking trip to China, then-Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai rejected Buck's request for a visa to return to China, angry that she had denounced communism and shown the West a version of China of which the Communists disapproved.<sup>46</sup> Ironically, few Chinese farmers in the Communist era ever lived a life as auspicious as Wang Lung did in the novel.

However, in the decades following her death at age 80 in 1973, Buck's legacy was gradually rehabilitated in the People's Republic of China. By 1997, the Chinese government had become at least modestly receptive to recognizing Buck's role in facilitating Sino-American ties and permitted a conference to discuss her work slyly named “Chinese-American Literary

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<sup>45</sup> Melvin, Sheila. “The Resurrection of Pearl Buck.” *The Wilson Quarterly*, 2006, [archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/resurrection-pearl-buck](http://archive.wilsonquarterly.com/essays/resurrection-pearl-buck).

<sup>46</sup> Melvin, Sheila. “China Gets Reacquainted with Pearl Buck.” *The New York Times*, 22 Dec. 2001, [www.nytimes.com/2001/12/22/style/IHT-china-gets-reacquainted-with-pearl-buck.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/22/style/IHT-china-gets-reacquainted-with-pearl-buck.html).

Relations.” This shift marked the increasing confidence China had in its growing strength as a nation and its reputation. In the ensuing two decades, her home in Zhenjiang and family cottage on Mount Lu were opened to the public to acknowledge Buck’s contributions. Nanjing University (Nanking University in Buck’s time), the public university where she worked, restored her old home and hosted a literary conference in her memory.<sup>47</sup> It is not a coincidence that the P.R.C.’s gradual embrace of Buck followed China’s economic liberalization and warmer relations with the United States.<sup>48</sup>

Buck’s legacy serves as a clarion reminder of the significance of literature—even with rapidly advancing technology and artificial intelligence—in changing people’s minds. Though she was initially shunned by Chinese intellectuals, the rehabilitation of her legacy demonstrates how the passage of time opens the doors to cultural understanding, so long as the seeds are planted.

### **United States: Buck Alters Trajectory of Sino-American Relations**

On the American side of the Pacific Ocean, Buck’s initial reception was far different. In just the first 18 months of the book’s release, Buck earned more than \$100,000—\$2,435,000 after adjusting for inflation in June 2024—from 1.8 million copies sold in the United States.<sup>49</sup> Evident from *The Good Earth*’s standing as the “best selling American novel of 1931 and 1932,” American readers fell in love with Buck’s portrayal of China—a departure from the exoticism of Orientalism yet a picture of a society with which the average American found significant

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<sup>47</sup> ---. “The Rehabilitation of Pearl Buck.” *Asia Society*, 7 Aug. 2012, [asiasociety.org/blog/asia/rehabilitation-pearl-buck](https://www.asiasociety.org/blog/asia/rehabilitation-pearl-buck).

<sup>48</sup> Dorn, James. “China’s Post-1978 Economic Development and Entry into the Global Trading System.” *CATO Institute*, 10 Oct. 2023, [www.cato.org/publications/chinas-post-1978-economic-development-entry-global-trading-system](https://www.cato.org/publications/chinas-post-1978-economic-development-entry-global-trading-system).

<sup>49</sup> Gammage, Jeff. ““The Good Earth” Manuscript to Go on Display.” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 24 Feb. 2009, [www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20090224\\_\\_The\\_Good\\_Earth\\_\\_manuscript\\_to\\_go\\_on\\_display.html](https://www.inquirer.com/philly/news/homepage/20090224__The_Good_Earth__manuscript_to_go_on_display.html).

commonalities.<sup>50</sup> Buck's ability to bridge the American people's lack of understanding in an intellectually compelling, socially acceptable way may be attributed to her cultural hybridity, because of which she knew intimately how both sides felt and therefore how to carry those feelings from one side to the other.

The impact of *The Good Earth* did not end at its publication. Using her status as a bestselling author, Buck sought to engage in political advocacy to repeal the discriminatory Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first law in American history to deny admission to members of one particular ethnic group. The images that Buck presented of China's "natural democracy"—its people's inclination to work hard and tend to the earth—stood firmly in the minds of Americans after they had flipped through the pages of Buck's literature. As Professor Richard Jean So of McGill University wrote, "six other speakers at the congressional hearings each directly referenced Buck's concept of natural democracy, while two others, including a congressman, explicitly evoked *The Good Earth* in their statements."<sup>51</sup> Just four months later, in December 1943, Congress passed the Magnuson Act, which repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act and ended decades of institutionalized discrimination against Chinese immigrants.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to pioneering reform in immigration policy, Buck assumed the role of a civilian diplomat by building a deep sense of compassion in the American psyche for the Chinese people suffering under the brutal Japanese invasion of China. *The Good Earth* changed Americans' perceptions; Americans had scant prior exposure to literature detailing life in Asia, but Buck's writing told a story they could not resist. This included American politicians, who

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<sup>50</sup> Spencer, Stephen. "The Discourse of Whiteness: Chinese-American History, Pearl S. Buck, and the Good Earth." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture (1900 - Present)*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2002, [www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring\\_2002/spencer.htm](http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2002/spencer.htm).

<sup>51</sup> Jean So, Richard. "Fictions of Natural Democracy: Pearl Buck, the Good Earth, and the Asian American Subject." *Representations*, vol. 112, no. 1, 2010, pp. 87–111, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2010.112.1.87>.

<sup>52</sup> Department of State. "Milestones: 1937–1945 - Office of the Historian." Department of State, 2019, [history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/chinese-exclusion-act-repeal](http://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/chinese-exclusion-act-repeal).

went from professing neutrality in the Sino-Japanese conflict to commencing the Flying Tigers program, through which American pilots joined Chinese air defenses and other initiatives.<sup>53</sup> Also of great consequence, Buck and her second husband, Richard Walsh, established the China Emergency Relief Committee in 1940, which raised \$1 million in just six months for medical supplies, food and clothing for China.<sup>54</sup> Buck understood that such efforts needed to be for the long term and sustained to have their desired impact on Chinese society, so she and Walsh built the East-West Association in 1941, which fostered additional Sino-American cultural connections.<sup>55</sup>

In 1964, Buck founded the Pearl S. Buck Foundation (now Pearl S. Buck International), a philanthropic organization that exists today. This organization, which operates from Buck's former home in Perkasio, Pennsylvania, has educated more than 15,000 people on intercultural topics and hosted more than 68,000 guests at its museum.<sup>56</sup>

At a juncture where more than eight in ten American adults view China unfavorably,<sup>57</sup> Buck reminds contemporary audiences of the importance of daring to tell untold stories as a mechanism for shifting public opinion and compelling government action.

### **Conclusion**

What does all this mean? In her 1933 essay, "China and the West," Buck opined about the sad state of East-West relations produced by decades of benightedness and bigotry.<sup>58</sup> She wrote,

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<sup>53</sup> Lloyd, Terry. "When America Defended China: The Influence of Author Pearl S. Buck." *We Are the Mighty*, 3 Aug. 2023, [www.wearethemighty.com/history/pearl-s-buck-america-china/](http://www.wearethemighty.com/history/pearl-s-buck-america-china/).

<sup>54</sup> Spring, Kelly A. "Pearl S. Buck." National Women's History Museum, 2017, [www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/pearl-buck](http://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/pearl-buck).

<sup>55</sup> Shaffer, Robert. "Pearl S. Buck and the East and West Association: The Trajectory and Fate of "Critical Internationalism," 1940-1950." *Peace Change*, vol. 28, no. 1, Jan. 2003, pp. 1-36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0130.00252>.

<sup>56</sup> "Our Impact." Pearl S. Buck International, 2024, [pearlsbuck.org/](http://pearlsbuck.org/).

<sup>57</sup> Clancy, Christine Huang, Laura Silver and Laura. "Americans Remain Critical of China." Pew Research Center, 1 May 2024, [www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/01/americans-remain-critical-of-china/](http://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/01/americans-remain-critical-of-china/).

<sup>58</sup> Buck, Pearl S. "China and the West." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 168, no. 1, July 1933, pp. 118-131, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271623316800116>.



“There is, however, in the Occident a vast ignorance of China ... It has been the ignorance not of willfulness, but rather of pleasant indifference, tinged with a distinct sense of superiority and of being busy with greater affairs.” Instead of waiting for others to change on their own, Buck changed them. As the famous Asian American author Maxine Hong Kingston stated, Buck represented the Chinese with “empathy and compassion” and “translat[ed] my parents to me and she was giving me our ancestry and our habitation.”<sup>59</sup> That millions of Americans read *The Good Earth*—to confront hundreds of pages recounting the life of a Chinese farmer—meant that Buck had successfully presented an enriching story about Chinese people and society, and thus an introduction to China, that Americans would not forget.

Sending his condolences upon Buck’s passing in 1973, then-U.S. President Richard Nixon opined, “Buck was a human bridge between the civilization of East and West.” Indeed she was, and she perpetuated a legacy important for understanding how to revitalize that bridge of civilian diplomacy in the 21st century, one necessary for economic development, political cooperation and—above all—human flourishing.

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<sup>59</sup> Conn, Peter. *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.