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Concepts of Chinese Culture

(From Selected Works of Pearl Buck)

By Blanton E. Black

This brief monograph relates to facets of Chinese culture expressed in the writings of Pearl Buck. Her's is a singular attainment as an interpreter of oriental ideology. Although, she does not establish herself as an authoritarian analyst of problems of psychology, nor a social reformer obsessed with the idea of a crusading mission; yet, her's is a clear and positive preoccupation with problems of social justice.

In a letter to **New York Times**, January 15, 1933, she expressed herself thus: "As to whether I am doing China a service or not in my books only time can tell. . . . For myself I have no sense of mission or of doing any service. I write because it is my nature to do so, and I can only write what I know and I know nothing but China. . . ."

Her initial fame has emanated from the peculiar charm and extraordinary popularity of her novels of oriental setting. These works of fiction, however, represent a twilight ground of literary fringe wherein fact and imagination are intimately interwoven. Thus, with reference to her **Good Earth**,¹ she explains: "Indeed, it has shaped itself firmly and swiftly from the events of my life, and its energy was the anger I felt for the sake of the peasants and the common folk of China, whom I loved and admired, and still do."² Again, when asked if her characters are real people her reply is, "A thousand times and again I am asked that question and of course they are real people, created from the dust of memory and breathed up by love."³ Indeed, it well appears that her fiction is but a skeletal framework upon which hangs an elaborate tapestry of oriental description and exotic fact; a clear exposure wherein the diversities of life, love, and labor are presented in all their perplexing inconsistencies and disquieting elaborations.

Thus, Pearl Buck emphasizes the plight of the peasant, the pitiless status of women, the vagrancies of flood and the ravages of famine; as well as the misery of migrations, the decadence of agrarianism, and the irresolvable conflicts of old versus new philosophies. Her's, too, is a solicitude for the care of children, as well as a clear critique of racism and social stratification; and an interpretation of that nation's dissolution with and defection from the ideology of the West and its tragic alliance with Russian communism.

¹*The Good Earth* (New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1931).

²*My Several Worlds* (New York: John Day, 1954), p. 250.

³*Ibid.*

Moreover, the shifting scenes of Pearl Buck's maturity have so fated her to intimately witness the subtle transitions and profound transformations within the fabric of China's life and customs. Nevertheless, during peaceful childhood years, we see her completely a part of Old Empire serenity and stability, speaking Chinese prior to her learning English, the darling of her beloved **amah** and the studious desciple of a venerable and elderly Confucian tutor. Yet, she is rudely thrown into the role of a fugitive from the fury of the Manchus, and a sojourner among the peasants. Later she is a student in an American college, then professor in a Chinese University. In all and through all, however, she is a sincere friend of China, an ardent student of its culture, and an astute interpreter of its ideology.

Uniformity of Chinese Culture

The culture of China is peculiarly naturalistic and strikingly uniform. This is due to innate psyche as well as to influences of history and geography.⁴ Throughout the long span of China's cultural development its people have continued to inhabit, basically, without evident desire for expansion, the same land area of the earth's surface. One's understanding then of the Chinese cannot be based on a recognition of divergencies neither of racial origins, and religious beliefs, nor of political sectionalism. Basically, they are of one racial type. On one occasion a Chinese mother expressed herself thus to Pearl Buck: "How sorry I am for American women, because they never know what color eyes and hair their children will have."⁵ Their religion they take with an amazing amount of equanimity and compromise. A Chinese citizen may intermix his religious concepts and still meet community approval. One at the same time may with perfect aplomb be Buddhist, Confucian and Javist. It is common to find in one family the scholarly father being Confucianist, the mother adhering to Buddhism and a son being a desciple of Lao Tzu, the prophet of Taoism.⁶

Moreover, the Chinese are a continental people geographically conditioned by a sufficiency of space and plentitude of areal expanse. This engenders a feeling of naturalism and complacency, namely, an unquestioned freedom to migrate onward or to move elsewhere, yet still remaining within the confines of the homeland. Such internal migration within the boundaries of China depreciates the importance of geopolitical diversification, and this in spite of a long coast line and high mountains. This has been due to several factors eminently potent and frequently

⁴*What America Means To Me* (New York: John Day, 1943), p. 18.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 68.

⁶*Several Worlds*, p. 317.

recurring such as floods and famines with their resultant mass exodus with accentuated inter-regional mingling of the people. With regards to the latter, military activity, too, plays its peculiar role, whether due to rampant war lords from within, or to foreign conquest from without.⁷

Changing Patterns of Intellectualism

In spite of its cultural heritage of uniformity, there exists in China today a ferment of reaction toward the established patterns of the past. This is particularly expressed in attitudes of resentment directed against classical Confucian intellectuality. To Pearl Buck, the selection of the most qualified and able to be national leaders is a distinguishing feature of Chinese culture. The homage and respect given to the noble and able individual has been fostered by Confucian ideology extolling the superior man or princely being whose moral integrity is irreproachable and impeccable.⁸ The Chinese Imperial Examinations for long were designed to select the administrators and governors of the country. The applicants were tested in the fields of poetry, literature, and history. Pure memory as well as ability to correlate were emphasized. Those who demonstrated superior attainment became the actual rulers of the people. Such was the forerunner of the Civil Service Examinations of England and the United States.⁹

Classifical scholasticism has developed an aristocracy of the educated, whose learning emphasized knowledge of literature and lore of the past. Miserable failure has faced such leadership, for it has been ill equipped to meet the pressing problems of contemporary China. Thorough knowledge of techniques of antiquity does not fit one to adequately cope with the problems of modern technocracy in a dynamic order of social and political transition.

One witnesses, therefore in modern China a tragic resentment and revolt on the part of many against the ideology of Confucians considered by many to be outmoded and decadent in modern society. Many of the disillusioned youth of China express their frustration in a refusal of all pretense at being moral primarily because of the hypocrisy of their extremely moralistic parents. Pearl Buck interprets such disillusionment thus, "For the soul of man is born fresh in every child, and there is an age in every creature, unless he is debased too young, when for a time he sees clearly the difference between truth and falsehood, and hypocrisy infuriates him."¹⁰ Indeed, to many there is the tragic belief that the ethics of Confucius after the lapse of

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*What American Means*, pp. 74-77.

⁹*Op. Cit.*, p. 16.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 180.

centuries has become superficial, its morals a pretense, and its ideals corrupt.

This tragic conflict of generations is shown, too, in the revolt against the Confucian concept of filial piety extolling the idea of veneration for the aged, especially elders of the family. Traditionally this power has been that of both court and legislature when any of the family needed discipline or had brought dishonor thereto. This attitude is demonstrated in the **Good Earth** where the hero, Wang Lung is a traditionalist maintaining respect for his father's and uncle's wishes, though the former is a half-wit, and the latter is a shiftless shyster.¹¹ Entirely different are the sons of Wang Lung, who show but a pretense of respectful tolerance while they calmly proceed to discount their father's wishes in disposal of the family lands.¹² The Communists have sown well the seed of discontent in such fertile soils of reactionism; and ". . .wishing to establish their political theory, have made their main attack upon the family system, and the measure of the length of their stay will be the degree to which they are able to separate the members of the family from each other and thus to destroy the fabric which has kept China alive, functioning and vital for centuries after her contemporaries in history were dead."¹³

Patterns of Love and Marriage

The arranged marriage—"Any healthy young woman may marry any healthy young man and both can fulfill their duty to life. . . . Older persons can certainly choose better for the race than the young ones can for themselves."¹⁴ The traditional concept of marriage in China is that the man does not expect his wife to be his romantic companion.¹⁵ One looks to one's male friends for intellectual companionship and to the "singing girls" of the tea houses for romantic interludes. Thus under the traditional pattern there is a threefold division of a man's emotional life: a wife for the home, a concubine for passionate response, and a friend, normally made to share ideas, dreams, and hopes. Two dramatic illustrations of the above are presented in the private life of Dr. Liang of Pearl Buck's **Kinfolk** and an analogous situation in the private life of the intellectual Madam Wu in **Pavilion of Women**.

Marriage is an imperative coercion for every Chinese woman whether she chooses or not; and child bearing is

¹¹*Good Earth*, p. 222.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹³*Several Worlds*, p. 123.

¹⁴*The Pavilion of Women* (New York: John Day, 1946), p. 339.

¹⁵*The Man Who Changed China* (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. 147 ff.

her chief function, and has been for thousands of years. Biology comes first, problems of emotional response and economic stability are secondary. Courtship is not necessary, neither is there any competitive winning of a beau and possible future husband. The unmarried woman is taught to keep herself attractive and presentable, beyond that, the necessary provision of a husband is the responsibility of the family.¹⁶ The bride belongs to the husband as well as to the husband's family who commonly bears the expense of the bride's upkeep, for normally, marriage is consummated before the man is able to support himself and his wife. The Chinese woman is secure, the ward of her husband's family. Should her husband leave her a widow, as daughter-in-law, she still has a fixed place, being assured food and shelter for herself and children in addition to the defraying of expenses of the childrens' education.¹⁷

Fidelity in marriage—There is rather an elastic concept of marital fidelity in China. Poverty, however, is an asset to monogamy when the average husband barely earns enough to support one wife. The hero of *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung, exemplifies the extreme poverty of the monogamous peasant. He barely is able to pay the purchase price of a homely kitchen slave woman. His father comforts him thus: "It is better to be first with an ugly woman than the hundredth with a beauty. . . . Only men of leisure have the need for beautiful women to divert them."¹⁸ Should fortune smile, however, a concubine is to be expected. So, too, does Wang Lung take to himself a concubine after attaining sudden wealth.¹⁹ Possible exceptions are cases where the husband loves the wife inordinately. According to Pearl Buck: "The Chinese have their hypocracies but the nature of man is not one of them. . . . Only the control of an almost unique quality of love in the man for the woman can keep him from behaving as does the male of any other species."²⁰

Yet, such romantic love existing between man and wife is in general disapproved of. The Chinese concept of romance is that it results in the establishment of false values which are based not on a high level of altruism but on a lower and less desirable plane of selfishness. Madam Wu disparages the romantic affection of her son and daughter-in-law thus, "Life is too short for such love. . . . Divide your love from your passion and let there be no confusion between the two. Some day when the division is clear and established by habit, when your children are born and growing and your bodies are old, and passion gone, as

¹⁶*American Argument* (New York: John Day, 1949), pp. 28, 29, 60.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁸*Good Earth*, pp. 7, 16.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 170.

²⁰*American Argument*, p. 60.

mercifully, it does go, you will know the best love of all.”²¹ Indeed, there is tragedy in man and woman being free to love and choosing each other merely because of that love without regard for individual personalities, nor for children, nor for family. The sphere of the psychic response of such love is thus too self centered and restricted; whereupon all the various activities of living together, of coming in and going out becomes hampered having an insufficiency of space to breathe and grow. As a result romance tragically deteriorates to resentment and thence degenerates to hate.²²

Rationalization of concubinage.—C o n c u b i n e s are brought into the home as a regulatory approach to the problem of extra marital contacts.²³ The philosophic rationalization is based on the concept that the bearing of children should ever be paramount in the affairs of men lest perchance the race perish. In this fateful activity woman is like earth, passive and receptive to the seed of man within whom there is an impelling urgency necessitating that even the last seeds of a man’s loins be planted, even though he has well neigh reached the stage of senility when his seed is weakened. Thus, it is necessary to plant such seed in better and stronger soil. Moreover, the wife who reaches her middle years is immoral in monopolizing and forcible clinging to a man beyond the period of her fertility.²⁴ Philosophically Mrs. Wu laments:

Why had heaven not made women twice as long-lived as men, so that their beauty and fertility might last as long as man lived and fade only with the generation? Why should a man’s need to plant his seed continue too long for fulfillment in one woman?”²⁵

This pitiless status of women, the outgrowth of Confucian philosophy though widespread and ancient, is no guarantee of domestic felicity. Frustrations are inevitable in all man-woman relationships due to the irresolvable difference in innate goals and objectives of male and female, man believing in his own individual meaning; whereas, consciously or unconsciously, there is in woman’s breast the realization that she means nothing for herself except in fulfilling the call to create more life. Or, as Madam Wu expresses it, “Yet the man was never enough. In himself he was never enough. She must conceive by him and feel a child take life and hope within her.”²⁶ This for woman is

²¹*Pavilion of Women*, p. 339.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 45.

²³*The First Wife* (New York: John Day, 1933), p. 97.

²⁴*Op. Cit.*, p. 46.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 111.

her eternal obsession, and for man his eternal frustration. Inevitably, the husband awakens to the crude realization that that which he considered he possessed for his own is prior possessed by a force even greater than his own desire.

Patterns of Racism

The exploitation of the Orient by the Western Powers has been a factor extending over centuries sufficiently potent to build up a deep-seated, though latent, resentment on the part of Eastern people, particularly the Chinese, against a truly cooperative attitude toward Caucasian civilization. Moreover, the facts of history emphasize the continuation of a sordid recital of oppressions and robberies of a culture which deliberately by inherent philosophy of pacifism had rejected warfare as a national policy. According to the teaching of Confucius, the superior man does not resort to fighting or warfare, and the military as a profession is utterly contemptible. Pearl Buck's thinking has been conditioned by this traditional oriental philosophy of pacifism. "There can be no moral equivalent of so immoral a thing as war. . . . I have seen wars again and again, and every time I am filled with the same wonder at the incredible folly of man."²⁷

Nevertheless, the conquering Carcasians did come and by virtue of superior weapons attained a dominance which was interpreted by themselves as inherent superiority. Especially did their peculiar policy of extraterritoriality, which gave any white man freedom from arrest by a Chinese authority, engender over the years hatred and racial misunderstanding. With reference to extraterritoriality and the white man Pearl Buck comments "He could commit murder and rape and sometimes did and yet he could not be arrested for all white people had what amounted to diplomatic immunity."²⁸

In **The Promise** there occurs this conversation between hero Sheng and heroine Mayli:

"So now we go to ally ourselves with white men," Sheng said.

"Why is your general against this?" she asked.

"My general has seen the pride of the white man in Shanghai and Hongkong and he has seen them on the pieces of land they took from our ancestors and made into their own cities. He says they have always considered us as dogs at their gates, and he says wherever they have lived among the people near us, whom they have ruled, they have so held them as dogs, and that now those people will join even with the enemy they hate, because more than

²⁷*American Argument*, p. 18.

²⁸*Several Worlds*, p. 103 f.

they hate the enemy they hate the pride of the white man who has despised them and their ancestors."²⁹

Thus, Pearl Buck's interpretation of East-West misunderstanding hinges on the unwillingness of the West to abandon its concept of superiority and the colored man's unwillingness to endure the established status of inferiority.³⁰ Significantly, she stated in a commencement address at Howard University, June 5, 1942:

There are nations in the world, and great peoples, who may be our friends or our enemies in years soon to come depending upon whether or not we can believe in human equality. . . . They have suffered . . . from the effects of race prejudice. In a world where these nations will have power, and that is already today, they will not tolerate discrimination between peoples. It is essential that these nations be friends with us, and not enemies. But they cannot be wholly our friends if within our own people we are divided by prejudice, one group against another.³¹

What then is the measure of the white man's racial arrogance in Asia? And for how long has his sowing of seeds of resentment there, by bigoted priest as well as rapacious tradesmen engendered a harvest of hostility and hate? Shall it be called merchantilism, or the white man's burden, or the inevitable expansion of the commercial world, or the consequence of diverse culture contacts within the inexorable framework of history? Irrespective of the specific answer to the foregoing questions, what remains is that today we face reaction and resentment wherein an antecedent oriental philosophy of fatalism and placid receptivity is giving way to occidental militarism and strident revenge.

Conclusion

The writer has specifically elaborated on the social philosophy expressed in the writings of Pearl Buck wherein her realistic picturesquization of peasants' plight, woman's woes, youth's frustrations, as well as resentment toward imperialism, and a negation of racism are presented as causative factors in engendering antagonism toward Western ideology and American alliance. Normally, it would be expected that in the case of China, readjustments of political leanings and ideologies would accompany any shift from an economy of agrarian self-sufficiency to one of

²⁹*The Promise* (New York: John Day, 1943), p. 30 f.

³⁰*What America Means*, p. 18.

³¹*What America Means*, p. 29.

modified industrialism. Such readjustments affect changes in attitudes as well as in behavior, none of which are overt, complete or an immediate **fait accompli**.

In view of the antiquity of China's culture and the deep-rooted characteristics of its antecedent traditions, well might one expect, on the basis of logical reasoning, that should change and transition occur, it would be characterized by a prolonged and complex transition. The facts of the nation's history support such a conclusion. For two thousand years preceding the downfall of the Manchu Dynasty in 1911 China's political organization has been patterned after that of an absolute monarchy. The parliamentary regime of Sun Yatsen was abortive and short lived followed by military and party dictatorship under the leadership of the strong man type of **war lord**. Most outstanding of such military leaders was Chiang Kai-shek whose position was favored by support of the western powers, i. e., England and the United States. Nevertheless, the combined circumstance of Japanese aggression, internal dissention, and Soviet organized opposition mitigated to the expulsion of Chiang as national leader. His opponents, the Communist War Lords were accepted not because of their peculiar political ideology but because they were the strongest opponents of a hated regime which long had been in disfavor with the populace. Thus, the transition continues and the revolution prolonged. In spite of boastful cries heard from the Communist camp, normalcy is not yet attained. There has not yet emerged a stable leadership based on patterns of the past which is revered though pacifist, respected and yet not feared, yet reverent and scholarly, emulating thus the sublime ideals of Buddhist and Confucist attainment. Until such leadership evolves, the days of the transitional War Lord, autocratic, impetuous, and unscholarly are numbered, irrespective of his particularistic identity, though it be that of Marxian communist, neo-facist, or provincial aspirant. The philosophic trends of political revolt within the framework of China's pattern of progress remain the same.

Thus the logic of history bespeaks not a contemporary but a future climax of China's political readjustment. There still remains to be attained a satisfactory equilibrium of political stability such as is found in the characterizations of justice and moderation of a parliamentary democracy. Moreover, the pages of history suggest that the latent psyche of China is still the Confucian doctrine of the golden mean and of reasonable balance ever tempered by realism and flexibility; namely: "Respectfulness beyond measure (without the rules of propriety) become laborious hustle, carefulness beyond measure becomes timidity, boldness beyond measure becomes insubordination, straightforwardness beyond measure becomes rudeness (**Confucian Analects**, "Chinese Classics," I, Part 2, p. 72)."