

## **“Noblesse Oblige”: Pearl Buck’s Platonic Conception of Self**

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“The novelist has a noble function.”

----Sinclair Lewis

“Elizabeth Taylor is not my Imperial Woman.”

----Pearl Buck

### **Abstract**

If the Nobel Prize was her crown, after her rise to fame, Pearl Buck did not fail her “*noblesse oblige*”—her social responsibility and public duty, as a writer and public figure on the world stage, guest of the White House, speaker on public mass media, editor and publisher in literary circles, and philanthropist in social welfare. She was recognized as a political activist, a strong supporter of the Civil Rights movement and the feminist movement. She toured 238 cities in 1960s, appeared on radio and television programs as a public speaker, and lobbied successfully to change American attitudes and policies in the areas of immigration, adoption, minority rights and mental health.

In 1950s, she was particularly concerned with “the inferior position of women in U.S. society,” which did not “justify the American claim to world leadership” (Buck). In writing *Imperial Woman*, a fictional biography of the Chinese Empress Dowager (Cixi 1835-1908), she undertook “a study of the character of a woman,” a woman in power, from a historical point of view. What does it take to be a woman in power? How does she rule in a court of mandarins? How does she position herself as a wife, mother, sister, beloved, and a supreme ruler? Drawn from her personal experience, transnational imagination, and remarkably, a postcolonial historical vision, Buck created a fictional, Romantic, idealized model of a woman in power. It is her Platonic conception of Self, I presume, as her biographers all agree, that transforms a powerful, classical model of Chinese women into American feminist consciousness and American literature, while she subverts the Orientalist stereotypes of Chinese women from a feminist point of view.

### **I**

#### **Introduction**

On Pearl S. Buck, a considerable amount of literary criticism exists exclusively on *The Good Earth* and *Dragon Seed*, which constitutes a popular and academic myth that the merit of this Nobel Prize winner might only lie in the presentation of Chinese peasants in pre-modern China. What happened to her career and accomplishments after her repatriation to the United

States? As the first woman writer in America who won the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1938, why has she no place and placement in the history of American Literature?<sup>1</sup>

As far as I know, Buck had an extraordinary long and productive literary career, which lasted almost half a century, before and after the publication of *The Good Earth* (1931), or *Dragon Seed* (1941); even the film production thereof. According to the Harris biography (1969), which was composed in close collaboration with Buck when she was still alive, Buck had already published some 40 novels, 6 fiction collections, 22 nonfictions, 15 translations of Chinese and Japanese novels. Most of these works were published not only in English and in the United States, but also in many countries in Europe and Asia, and in so many world languages—Arabic, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Hebrew, Icelandic, Indonesian, India, Italian, Japanese, Norwegian, Persian, Serbo-Croat, Slovene, Spanish, Swedish, Portuguese. A 1970 UNESCO survey finds Buck’s work translated into 145 different languages and dialects, more frequently translated than any other American writer.

The Harris bibliography does not include her letters and lectures, public speeches and private correspondence that I came across from other sources. In fact, a huge amount of bibliographical and biographical material is available for Buck study and worthy of scholarly attention. For example, Professor Peter Conn at University of Pennsylvania in 1990s organized conferences and did exhaustive research on Buck, published a substantial, award-winning biography in 1996. Another biography came out recently—Hilary Spurling’s *Pearl Buck in China: Journey to the Good Earth* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

Fortunately, Buck remains to be the subject of doctoral dissertations throughout the decades. The most remarkable study on Pearl Buck’s role as a political activist after her repatriation, I must mention, is Robert Shaffer’s “*Pearl S. Buck and the American Internationalist Tradition*,” a nine hundred page long doctoral dissertation—the longest dissertation I have ever read—done at Rutgers State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick, 2003. The work claims that Pearl Buck played an important role in the 1930s-1950s in trying to shape US government policy toward Asia and toward other parts of the non-white world, and shaping the attitudes of the American public toward the Asians. Buck criticized American unilateralism, racism, and complicity with imperialism, which alienated Asia from America. She functioned as a political activist through public speaking, publishing, and networking with other writers and activists.

A broad network of writers and activists coalesced around Buck and her husband Richard Walsh on such diverse concerns as the status of women, the politics of famine and hunger in Asia, the struggle for decolonization, and alternatives to US Cold War policy. One of the alternatives Buck advocated was “global education,” which she held as a necessity for the “understanding and eradication of sheer ignorant prejudice” in policy making, beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 1, “Place and Placement” in Jennie Wang, *The Iron Curtain of Language*, Fudan UP, Shanghai, 2007.

sentimental belief of humanism.<sup>2</sup> I believe she was not speaking of “political correctness,” but political “wisdom,” or what we call “well-informed strategic planning.” She thought that simple ignorance, combined with immaturity, kept Americans from understanding their proper role. She meant to correct the deficiencies through her writing, her prominence, and her public speaking. She worked through organizations, such as the East and West Association, and through publishing ventures with Richard Walsh, especially the John Day Company and the magazine *Asia and the Americas*.

### **Richard Wash**

The ownership of a respectable publishing company in New York and the strong support of her husband, who served diligently as her editor and publisher, created a gigantic power in her life, a power of free speech, enabled her to write and publish what she believed was true and just in fiction and journalism. More significantly, Richard Wash shared her visions and beliefs on every account (except concerning life after death).<sup>3</sup> It was rare, it was divine, an ideal relationship between a man and a woman in modern society, which lasted for over twenty five years, till death did they part.

Although she was devoted to missionary work, a professional working woman, liberated from the middle class status quo, and progressive in her world view, Buck’s concept of gender relationship challenges contemporary Western feminist theories, as well as orthodox Christian humanism. It was deep rooted in the Chinese philosophy of natural harmony, quite balanced and truly equal by itself:

Most men will say that there has always been a woman behind them. I can say there has always been a man behind me...I don’t think I would have written the books I have, or have grown into the person that I think I am, or reached the success in my life that I have reached, or have the sense of vitality and potential growth that I still have if it were not for the affection, love, or whatever one wants to call it, that has been given to me from men. I am grateful, for I think these friendships bring something new into my life and have contributed a great deal to my growth. And I hope I have contributed something, too to them. (Harris 173)

On another occasion, she told Harris: “My father felt that women were naturally inferior to men—not true, of course, for we complement each other in a most remarkable way. I am always comforted by the number of stupid men that I discover. I am sure that there are just as

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<sup>2</sup> See Robert Schaffer, *Pearl S. Buck and the American Internationalist Tradition*. Diss. 3092989. Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey—New Brunswick, 2003. Advisor: Gardner Lloyd.

<sup>3</sup> “She[Buck] has told me that her second husband was always steadfast in his loyalty to her and his love of her in all ways possible to him. He had a good mind; he was a creative editor, appreciative of talent, and discovering authors was his great pleasure. The result was that he numbered many famous firsts in his career” (Harris 272).

many stupid men as women” (Harris 206). Her generous use of the word “stupid” is idiomatically Chinese. So is her idea of men and women “complement each other,” as natural as the harmony of yin and yang.

This conception of gender relation, drawn from both classical philosophy and modern Chinese tradition, that I won’t elaborate here, might suggest a hopeful alternative, a healing remedy for the “gender trouble” we have in contemporary society. What is known in the West as the Chinese gender philosophy—“Women Hold Up Half of the Sky”—transcends the binary oppositional limitations of contemporary Western feminist theories as well as Christian orthodoxy. In effect, it transforms a complementary, progressive, international model into American life, as Buck herself lived her life in America.

Victimized by the hostility of male chauvinism and patriarchal power, blast of sexism and racism, she was firm and fearless.<sup>4</sup> She was not afraid, never lost her courage and independence, her vision and idealism, her determination to fight for the just cause, to succeed, to defend the country and people she loved. She was above prejudices, above criticisms left and right, above the jealousy of her male rivals, possessed with the sovereign dignity of an “Imperial Woman.”

She always remembered Sinclair Lewis for what he said to her in person: “A novelist has a noble function” (MSW 78; Harris 248). It was at a P. E. N. dinner when Buck made a critical comment that in the Chinese classical tradition, as she was taught, the novel was not literature, (not for scholarly pursuit), but meant to amuse the idle and the illiterate. What she implied was that the novel had always belonged to the democratic tradition in letters; it was meant to address the common people, the grass-roots audience, not written for the pedantic taste of elite critics, or the formalist aesthetics of the new critics, who did not know how to appreciate the subject of her novels, dismissed her work easily as popular fiction. She had made that point at her Nobel Prize Banquet speech.<sup>5</sup> But Lewis must not have paid attention to her theory of aesthetics, or treated her as an equally important novelist. “With an animation sparkling with anger,” he said to her: “You must not minimize yourself. Neither must you minimize your profession. A novelist has a noble function” (MSW 78). Being simple minded and condescending, Lewis took her gentle criticism for Oriental female modesty, completely missed the point. Yet Buck took it with a sense of good humor, since it was the kindest response she received among her fellow American P.E.N. writers, her male counterparts, who never paid her due respect.

It is in America that “a novelist has a noble function”—confirmed by Sinclair Lewis, seems to carry more weight than from her own mouth. So she tells the story. Did she know not that she had a mission, a noble course, and “noble” in the sense that she was obligated to

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Robert Frost said if Pearl Buck could have the Nobel Prize, anyone could have it. A group of writers even protested for the award given to her in 1938. Faulkner called her the bad name of “Mrs. Chinahand Buck” (Conn 210).

<sup>5</sup> See Pearl Buck, speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm. December 10, 1938.

her nation, to the White House, to the American Empire in Asia, as well as to her people—the people in Asia? “A mere teller of tales is not to be considered a literary figure” as she was taught by her Chinese tutor Mr. Kung long ago (MSW 78). She was schooled in Chinese classics. She wrote with a good intention to inform, educate, shape and change the mind of the common people; and she was successful in doing so. She pursued her goals in her novels and short stories, to provide, I think, a “global education” to a popular audience in America. Harris is convinced that everything Buck has accomplished in her life has been her answer to the world on a subject that concerns her. She acts or writes out of her indignation, not just on personal account, but more frequently on domestic and global issues of importance (Harris 297).

If the Nobel Prize was her crown, after her rise to fame, Pearl Buck did not fail her “noblesse oblige,” her social responsibility and public duty, as a writer and public figure on the world stage, guest of the White House, speaker on public mass media, editor and publisher in literary circles, and philanthropist in social welfare. After her repatriation she became a strong supporter of the Civil Rights movement and the women’s liberation movement. She toured 238 cities in 1960s, appeared on radio and television programs as a public speaker, and lobbied successfully to change American attitudes and policies in the areas of immigration, adoption, minority rights and mental health.

She was seen as “a sophisticated activist supremely confident in the correctness of her own opinions.”<sup>6</sup> She is entitled to her opinions, I presume, having gone through so much, seen so much, travelled so much, in her “several worlds,” so much more than most of the China experts, diplomats, and decision makers in her time. Her wisdom and vision were based on a classical education, first-hand knowledge and experience; her judgments by principle and justice; her voice the voice of a soothsayer. Only in a decade or two, beginning in 1960s, the Presidents of U.S. would see the truth value of her opinions. Much of her criticism would make sense to a new generation of people, policy makers and civil leaders. What she advocated, such as world peace, racial and gender equality in a global context, remains a challenge, tough issues in our hands.

### **Role Models**

As for a “sophisticated” activist, indeed, Buck had her own ideas and models for women in power, in a leadership position. She admired Eleanor Roosevelt for instance.

I think we Americans, being so young and unsophisticated, have a completely wrong idea of what true sophistication is. According to Asian definition, which I myself believe to be correct, a sophisticated person is one who has experienced everything, knows everything and has reduced everything to its

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<sup>6</sup> Wes Pedersen, “*Imperial Woman*,” book review, *The New York Times*, section 7, col. 2, December 8, 1996.

essence. Sophistication is the final simplicity. And of course that was Mrs. Roosevelt....I don't think anybody has yet grasped the full importance of her life in human terms, the hundreds and thousands of people whom she helped through what she did in practical ways. (Harris 293-94)

Conceivably, for women's leadership, her role models are women in a supreme position of power, such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Queen Victoria, whom she mentions frequently in her novel *Imperial Woman* (1956), though she constantly reminds her reader that the Chinese Empress Dowager did not have the kind of power and privilege, freedom in choosing a husband she loved, as Queen Victoria did. In her conception, the Chinese Empress was a "commoner," self-made and self-educated, not a princess from the royal family.<sup>7</sup>

She was alert to the power China's first lady had during WWII— "Madame Chiang was imperious and beautiful and expensive as usual" (Harris 292).<sup>8</sup> The role and transnational activities of Madame Chiang Kai-shek during war time, the power and influence she had, which lasted throughout the 1950s, spoke by itself Buck's ideas about woman's status in the old country. Madam Chiang Kai-shek was not a princess either; she was born in China, grew up and educated in America. During the war, she functioned as a liaison between US and China, an eloquent spokeswoman to the English speaking world on behalf of her country and government.

Eleanor Roosevelt once told Buck that one evening when she had to be away, Franklin Roosevelt did not wish to have dinner with Madam Chiang Kai-shek alone. Buck asked Eleanor why, the answer was that "I don't think that Franklin likes women who thinks they are as good as he is" (Harris 293).

Only with this kind of scenario and historical background in view, could we possibly understand why Buck was long dissatisfied with the status of women in America. She had not hesitated to express a sense of inferiority before the Swedish Academy when she received the Nobel Prize—"You who have already so recognized your own Selma Lagerlöf, and have long recognized women in other fields, cannot perhaps wholly understand what it means in many countries that it is a woman who stands here at this moment" (December 10, 1938). What she had in mind she spoke out later –

There was no woman writer in the United States who was really ranked with men by the male critics—not while she was alive. The exception was Willa Cather. Even after she was dead I always have thought the acceptance was more or less a token, as a business firm or college takes in one or two Negroes just to show that they aren't prejudiced, when they really are prejudiced because they don't take in others. Even Willa Cather was too often mentioned

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<sup>7</sup> This is, of course, a middle class English or modern American idea. In Chinese history, Tz'u-hsi was selected for the power of her family; and she ruled to protect the power of her family.

<sup>8</sup> The word "imperious" seems to be her favorite word to characterize the powerful manner of women in Chinese culture, as she used it to describe the Empress Dowager too; see below.

as a “woman writer.”

Schooled in the Chinese and British literary traditions, Buck was ill-prepared for the criticism of men against women which she found in America; where even writers, critics and reviewers—educated men still have a medieval, misogynistic, peasant mind about women. She had heard it said of herself many times that “she is just a woman. She will never do anything really great” (Harris 210).

In 1941, Buck argued that women played a more important role in modern Chinese society than they did in American society (Shaffer 158). As we see in the movie *The Dragon Seeds*, in 1930s China, even peasant women were engaged in social and political movements, not to mention the educated. Perhaps that was what she remembered when she left China and came to America.

In 1949, Buck wrote in *New York* magazine that she preferred the Chinese creation myth over the Judeo Christian myth of Adam’s rib, which she deemed to be “almost an insuperable obstacle in woman’s advancement in the West.” She even declared that “the idea of the Chinese women have been so much suppressed was a Western myth.” She used the concept of “myth” long before Roland Barthes invented the French theory of popular myth; and she stated a paradoxical truth long before Maxine Hong Kingston was to question that myth in 1970s.

In early 1950s, she warned against U.S. military actions in Asia, having witnessed the harm done to women both in the United States and in Asian countries. She made it clear that the United States was not in a position of providing moral leadership to the world, in large part because of the inferior position of women in American society. “Mine is not a very good country for women,” she asserted in *American Argument*. “The inferior position of women in U.S. society,” she argued, “did not justify the American claim to world leadership.” So she pursued the theme of women and international relations in her fiction, speeches, articles and organizational work.<sup>9</sup> Hilary Clinton would have benefited a great deal from Buck’s premonitions when, as the First Lady in 1995, she went to Beijing to attend that international women’s conference, to take the leadership of women’s liberation in the global village. Unfortunately, Buck found that American women in domestic society were not interested in other worlds and other cultures. During her four years of stay in an American college, few of her peers and friends ever asked her about her life in China.

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert Shaffer, “Women and International Relations: Pearl S. Buck’s Critique of the Cold War,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 11.3 (Autumn 1999): 151- 75.

### **Harassment and Alienation**

When the Iron Curtain dropped between the East and West, Buck realized that “there was no way to bring about human understanding in our dangerous age”; and she closed the East and West Association. She was brave and honest in her statement, determined even in her disillusionment:

Had I been able to foresee the strange atmosphere that has pervaded my country since 1946, where good men and true scholars have lost their jobs and their reputations because of their knowledge and their understanding of areas which, without American leadership, have gone over to Communism, I should have been confirmed in my decision [to close the magazine and the association]...Today it is dangerous even to declare belief in the brotherhood of peoples, in the equality of the races, in the necessity for human understanding, in the common sense of peace—all those principles in which I have been reared, in which I do believe and must believe fearlessly until I die.  
(MSW 376)

Like many writers, Buck was “indexed,” meaning profiled under FBI investigation. Her profile lasted three hundred pages long. Writers under investigation included—Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Dos Passos, Langston Hughes, Robert Lowell, Thomas Wolfe, Kay Boyle, William Faulkner, Theodore Dreiser, Dorothy Parker, Earnest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Tennessee Williams, Thornton Wilder, T.S. Eliot, Louise Bogan, James Baldwin, Marianne Moore, Sinclair Lewis, John Cheever, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Richard Right, Robert Frost, and Arthur Miller, among dozens of others. Jack London, Edith Wharton, and William Dean Howells were investigated years after they died (Conn 261). Almost all of them are recovered today in American literary history; and most of them included in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* now; but Pearl Buck was never recovered even in the reconstruction of U.S. literary history, nor by feminist literary criticism.

As we know, many of these writers above mentioned suffered from harassment and alienation, nervous breakdown and spiritual deprivation; some committed suicides, or destroyed by alcoholism and drug. “The best mind of my generation is destroyed”—as Allen Ginsburg “howled” in early 1950s. But Pearl Buck survived, continued to write her novels, more serious, historical fictions about China, Korea, and Japan, addressing central critical issues in international relations. Passed the age of sixty, she was still active, preoccupied with her work, busy as usual. She opened the Welcome House to take in refugees, children from Asia, and devoted much of her philanthropy to the caring of war victims by giving them a home in America. As mentioned before, in 1960s, she toured 238 cities, and frequently appeared on radio and television programs as a public speaker; and she spoke with an undaunted spirit and faith.



What saved her from the Cold War depression and devastation, from death and defeat, especially, the prolonged illness of her husband and his death in 1959, and the decline of fame and power? Was it personal strength or public commitment—her “*noblesse oblige*”? For a noble woman, death or suicide is not an option. Depression does not become a woman of her status. One does not survive for oneself, one lives to protect the honor of what one stands for.

“I commend the mood,” as she states in a queenly manner, identifying herself with her ancestors in America, who were “nobles” in the British sense of the word:

My kinsmen had fought bravely in three wars, the War of Independence of 1775, the Civil War of 1861, the First World War of 1914. In each of these wars the purpose had been the same, an idealistic one, to make and keep the United States a united and a free nation. In peacetime my kin were professional men—preachers and teachers and lawyers and landowners. Culture was our family tradition, and education was taken as a matter of course. Parents held their children’s noses to the grindstone of school, whether or no until the young ones learned to like it, and excellence was expected.

Then to claim her independency from her heredity and class privilege, she conceives herself as an immigrant woman, a modern individual, hard working and independent:

All this simply meant that I came to my country without the burden of the individual in a classless society. I had no reason to worry about myself. I had always been able to do what I wanted to do, and this meant freedom from self—that is, freedom from fear of failure and also from conceit. (MSW 311)

She was writing in the language of 1950s, which valued “freedom and responsibility,” “character and individuality,” to succeed in society. Her claim of “free from self”—a quality that transcends the individual self, is certainly heroic and noble.

Was it character? What kind of character that was able to endure the nightmares and perils of hard times? I assume that a novelist is in a position to create her own character, her favorite characters or imaginary characters. In a novel, “character is fate.” By commanding the fate of her character, or characters, the novelist is possessed with a divine power to recreate life and death, past and present, historical events and circumstances, including her own vision and destination. *The writing of Imperial Woman (1956), I presume, might have internalized the supreme power of an imaginary woman in history, given Buck the inner strength to cope with her ordeals. To say the least, the book was her Platonic conception of self, which sustained her spirit, endured to the end of her life.*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Spurling’s biography described her last moment in the image on an imperial woman on her throne.

### **The Empress Dowager**

In 1954, she told a friend she was planning a big book “on Woman” (Conn 338). She read Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Sophie Drinker’s *Music and Women*, and (in typescript) Mary Milbank Brown on *Joan of Arc*. She studied Ashley Montagu’s *The Natural Superiority of Woman*. “Almost inevitably,” ascertains Professor Conn, “Pearl’s mediations on gender, status, and authority led her back to the Empress Dowager, Tz’u-hsi, one of history’s most powerful women, who had ruled over China throughout Pearl’s first sixteen years” (Conn 338). From a modern feminist point of view, hers was a story of “female achievement on unprecedented scale. Seldom had a woman risen so high, against such great odds, and endured so long” (Conn 340).

Professor Conn was right that Pearl had never lost her childhood fascination with the Chinese Empress Dowager (Conn 339). Buck referred to the Empress Dowager from time to time in her letters and essays, occasionally even linking her with Mu-lan, the woman warrior of Chinese folklore. Mu-lan was the Chinese legendary heroine Kingston later staged in *The Woman Warrior* (1976). A powerful feminist tradition Chinese American women writers were to recover and transform into the women’s liberation movement in America in 1970s.

In writing *Imperial Woman*, Buck said that she wanted to study “the character of a woman,” a woman’s life. She had already drawn some sketches of the heroine that she was to create in this “big book.” She had produced her first full-length play, entitled *The Empress* (1937), in which Tz’u-hsi (Cixi) was the main character. In her autobiography *My Several Worlds*, the Empress Dowager appeared to be “an alluring, half-mythical figure” (Conn 339). *My Several Worlds* was a personal memoir, published in 1954, two years before *Imperial Woman*. The numerous references to the Empress Dowager can be read as sort of a preliminary. The book is composed with a series of recollections of Buck’s life in China, yet juxtaposed against the sceneries of American countryside, written during many trips across the country from Vermont to Wyoming. Buck’s writing self-consciously recasts the Chinese stories into an American landscape, bridging the two countries across time and space in a transnational framework. The author repeatedly reminds the reader that she was born in America, and America is “my own country,” lest her national allegiance be questioned. While she emphatically claims her American identity, she does not negate her past, her Chinese heritage, and her avowed love for the Chinese people and Chinese civilization.

The Empress Dowager appears at the onset of this book in an “establishing shot.” From her earliest childhood memory, Buck recalls not her beloved mother, nor her grandmother in America, but the Empress Dowager. Surprisingly, she claims her to be her imaginary ancestor:

The Venerable Ancestor, and I suppose she was my Venerable Ancestor too.  
When I think of that world of my early childhood, I remember the Empress Dowager was the central figure, and one as familiar to me as though I had seen

her myself. Everybody knew how she looked, and every little Chinese girl, in our games, was proud to represent her...I did not realize, then, that the Empress was not Chinese, but Manchu. (MSW 8).

The fact that the identity of the Chinese Empress as non-Chinese, not born a queen, was important to Buck: “She was the more fascinating to me because she had not been born a queen, but a commoner. Her father had been a small military official and the family was almost poor” (MSW 11). Possibly, the Empress’ obscure origin appeals to her American democratic values. She thinks of her as though she were thinking of herself “as an American”:

She had worked hard as a child, the eldest daughter compelled to take care of younger children. Yet she had one advantage as a Manchu, and one that I had, too, as an American. Her feet were never bound...and she grew up with a free and imperious air. (MSW 11)

This explains why she named the opening chapter of *Imperial woman* “Yehonala,” a non-Chinese, exotic, individual first name. It sounds half Japanese, and half native-American to me. But it was true that she was a minority Chinese, a tribal woman and had a tribal maiden name passed down from history. The following chapters were all named by her identities in various stages of her power—the Empress; the Empress Mother, the Empress Dowager, and finally, Old Buddha.

The novel was developed from her various biographies.<sup>11</sup> Tz’u-hsi’s life span (1835-1908) covers the vicissitude of a long period in Chinese history, a period when the Qing Dynasty was faced with the challenges of modern reform, nationalism, and mob violence on the one hand, and the “encroachment” (Buck’s word) of Western powers, negotiation for peace and survival on the other. How does a female ruler rule and resist colonization? Buck reveals many effective feminine strategies that I have not come across in history books. As a novel, the plot centers on the love story of Tz’u-hsi and Jung Lu, which weaves historical facts, diplomatic treaties and political treatises with bedroom scenes. “Novelistic Love” turns military confrontations and cultural conflicts between the Chinese court and Western Imperialists into a postcolonial discourse. The author’s postcolonial historical visions and revisions are embedded in those “love stories.”<sup>12</sup>

“It was a romantic success story,” she had speculated in writing *My Several Worlds*; “the Chinese admired the woman for it and forgave her many sins that she later committed against them, and which in the end brought the walls of empire crashing down” (MSW

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<sup>11</sup> Conn believes that Buck’s source was Edmund Backhouse’s most popular book in the West, *China under the Empress Dowager* (1910). I doubt that it was her only source since Buck was versed in Chinese, wouldn’t have to rely on existing versions in English.

<sup>12</sup> “Novelistic Love” is a postmodern narrative theory that I invented in my earlier work. See Jennie Wang, *Novelistic Love in the Platonic Tradition*, Rowman and Littlefield, Oxford and Maryland, 1997.

11-12).<sup>13</sup> She must have changed her mind on this account; later she argued that the fall of the Ts'ing dynasty was *delayed by "the strong personality"* of the old Empress Dowager (Harris 349). "She was born to power, she moved toward it by the very strength of her own nature until she ruled the greatest kingdom in the world, the Middle Kingdom, which the West called China" (MSW 11-12).

For Buck, the writing of this novel might be a wish fulfillment for the kind of enabling power and wisdom women had in China. "Perhaps women were once so powerful in China, that they had to have their feet bound," as Kingston speculates in *The Woman Warrior* (1976). Interesting enough, Buck is also seeking her "ancestral help," as Kingston calls it, in search for female power, the kind of enabling power to take personal control, as well as the control of a family, a community and a nation. She was not greedy for power, but capable of it; conscious of family responsibility, she braved the man's role when men were ailing or dying, and the heir was too young to rule, or live up to her standards.

"Pearl probably felt a sense of symbolic affiliation with Tz'u-hsi, but she harbored no imperial delusions," apologetically comments Professor Conn (Conn 341). Today from a historical view, I do not think we need to apologize for Buck's "Imperial" ambitions, as one would have in 1970s. We ought to admit that by mid 1950s, America has arisen a world power, an Imperial power; American foreign policy was geared towards building an American Empire. It is in that historical context, Buck explores the model of an "Imperial Woman," who might "provide moral leadership to the world," as becoming the status of the American Empire. As above mentioned, she was afraid that "the inferior position of women in U.S. society did not justify the American claim to world leadership."

I believe she was most concerned with woman's status in the public sphere, on world stage, especially when it comes to decision-making regarding arms race, foreign policies and international relations. She herself was known as a China expert, "the most influential Westerner to write about China since 13<sup>th</sup> century Marcopolo," as recognized by historian James C. Thomson Jr.. She would gladly serve her country as ambassador to China. Yet she was disillusioned and frustrated with some of the "stupid" decisions men made in public media and in the White House in 1950s; whereas, her sophisticated, far-sighted and well informed recommendations were ignored and discounted. The novels she wrote with serious messages failed to reach the ears of Presidents and decision makers.

Just as she wrote *The Living Reed* (1963), a historical novel of Korea, to address the war and situation in Korea, so she wrote *Imperial Woman* to address a central question—"the Loss of China"—which was a fevered debate in the White House at that time. The novel

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<sup>13</sup> On this account, I think Buck exposes a fundamental difference between the punitive nature in a Puritan culture and the tolerance in Chinese civilization towards women. As I mentioned elsewhere, this kind of indulgence is best exemplified in the myth of the Moon Lady. The woman stole the elixir from the man, but was forgiven for her transcendence. For cultural difference in gender construction, see Jennie Wang, *The Iron Curtain of Language*, Fudan UP, Shanghai, 2007.

details the process of China's confrontation with Western powers under the reign of the Empress Dowager (1856-1908), focusing on China's diplomatic dilemma. (This could be the topic of another paper.)

### **Conclusion**

As her biographers all agree, there is much a self-projection and feminist desire in her portrayal of the Imperial Woman,. "You could see Pearl all through that book, the way she pictured herself anyhow," said her personal attendant. "Onwardly Pearl grew more and more to resemble the last Empress, China's Venerable Ancestor, from whom, as a child, she had believed herself to be descended" (Spurling 246). Through writing, she internalized the power and character of an Imperial Woman, to endure, survive, and overcome the trials of circumstances.

On a personal note, beginning in 1952, her husband Richard got cancer, lay seriously ill for seven years till he died. In addition to taking care of her ill husband, Buck had to take on too many responsibilities, that of her family, business, foundations, the publishing company, and public duties, that used to be shared by her husband.

Had he been with me, it would have been the best part of the day. It always was the best part. Much of our life had to be sent in separation during the hours of day, for each of us had a profession, a work. But how eagerly we looked forward to the evening, and to what lengths we went in order to spend it together! We went together wherever we had to go, I yielding to his necessity, he to mine, depending upon the importance we attached to the specific occasion. And in the twenty-five years of our married life we did not spend a night apart, until it became necessary for him to live and work entirely at home. Even then I refused all invitations that kept me away for a night, until he ceased to know where I was there or not. And when he ceased to know, everything was different, except memory....(Harris 317)

It was the most touching and ideal description of a married life, that a novelist could create, a perfect model for professional men and women in modern American society.

When the moment of death came, Buck must have been prepared through imagination years before, when she had envisioned such moments in writing *Imperial Woman*:

At the burial of the Emperor, she was melancholy but not sorrowful, for she felt no grief. Her spirit dwelt in loneliness, but to this she was accustomed. It was the price of greatness, and she paid it day after day, and night after night. (IW 221)

The Empress Mother had endured and survived not only her husband, but also her sons, two sons on the throne. At the death of her son the Emperor T'ung-chih (Tong- zhi 1856-75), the

Empress Dowager was obligated to go back to the throne after retirement: “She thought first of herself and how once more she was supreme in power. Alone she stood above the earth, transcending womanhood, a height unknown before to any human being” (*IW* 274). This kind of mythic sentiments and transcendental feminine spirit can be identified with, and conceivably from the Chinese myth of the Lady on the Moon.

Later the Empress Dowager had to remove her adopted son from the throne, after she learned his temptations and intrigues to yield to foreign powers. Before she died herself, she made sure that her heir would not come back to the throne to change immediately the policies and reverse the agenda she had established for the future. What historians interpreted as a woman’s sheer greed for power, the novelist reveals to us, to my surprise, rational decisions and a long range historical vision at the cost of love between a mother and son. The unbearable heaviness of being a woman in power in reality transcends womanhood, motherhood, and even humanity itself. Ultimately, the Imperial Woman even transcends the distinction of gender—in her last stage in power she was called “the Old Buddha.”

The novelist explores the psychological depth of an Imperial Woman, and she reached the height of her mind and spirit, far above and beyond what a popular audience expected to see as in Hollywood movies during this period—“the Dragon Lady,” or the stereotype of a royal “concubine” in an Oriental harem. When asked why she had rejected a bid to film her *Imperial Woman*, she snapped, “Elizabeth Taylor is not my Imperial Woman.”<sup>14</sup>

I see the inner strength of an “Imperial Woman” at work, an enduring classic feminine spirit that transcends modernity, transcends the small sense of self, what I call the “middle class syndrome.” She was empowered by her Platonic conception of Self, cultivated from a classical Confucius education and missionary upbringing, which placed on her shoulder a heavy burden—noble obligations—her obligations to a nation, an empire, a people, family and humanity, men and women kind alike. In effect, Buck translated a classical model of Chinese women into modern American fiction, and transformed a classical tradition of Chinese women into a post-modernist, postcolonial American feminine consciousness. To empower American feminist movement, she dramatized a woman’s place in a patriarchal society, before the White House was open to female rulers, or “Imperial Women.”

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<sup>14</sup> Wes Pedersen, “*Imperial Woman*,” book review, *The New York Times*, section 7, col. 2, December 8, 1996.

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