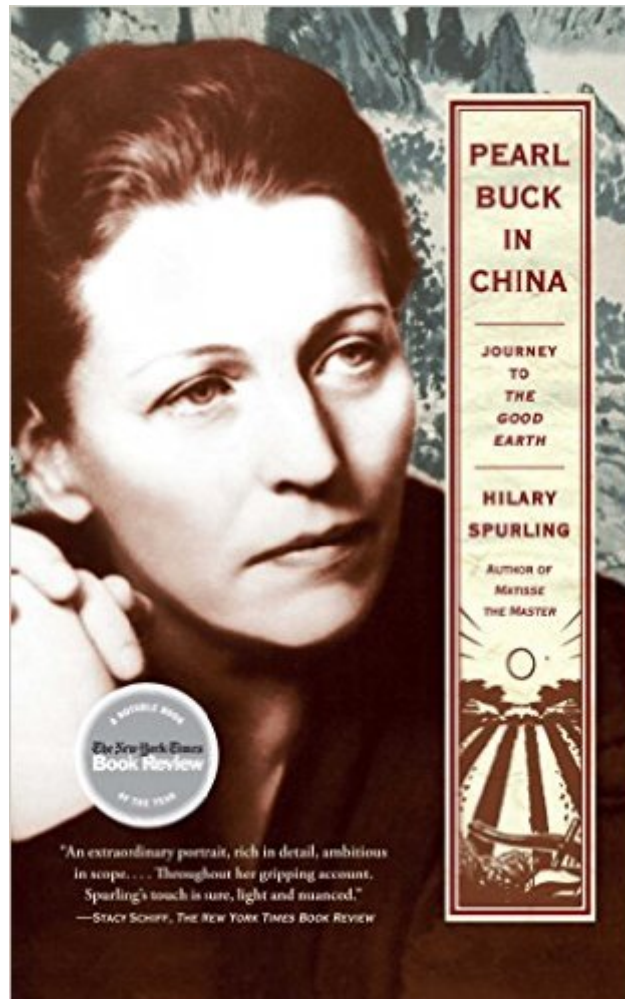


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Pearl Buck In China: Journey To The Good Earth



Synopsis

One of the twentieth century's most extraordinary Americans, Pearl Buck was the first person to make China accessible to the West. She recreated the lives of ordinary Chinese people in *The Good Earth*, an overnight worldwide bestseller in 1932, later a blockbuster movie. Buck went on to become the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Long before anyone else, she foresaw China's future as a superpower, and she recognized the crucial importance for both countries of China's building a relationship with the United States. As a teenager she had witnessed the first stirrings of Chinese revolution, and as a young woman she narrowly escaped being killed in the deadly struggle between Chinese Nationalists and the newly formed Communist Party. Pearl grew up in an imperial China unchanged for thousands of years. She was the child of American missionaries, but she spoke Chinese before she learned English, and her friends were the children of Chinese farmers. She took it for granted that she was Chinese herself until she was eight years old, when the terrorist uprising known as the Boxer Rebellion forced her family to flee for their lives. It was the first of many desperate flights. Flood, famine, drought, bandits, and war formed the background of Pearl's life in China. "Asia was the real, the actual world," she said, "and my own country became the dreamworld." Pearl wrote about the realities of the only world she knew in *The Good Earth*. It was one of the last things she did before being finally forced out of China to settle for the first time in the United States. She was unknown and penniless with a failed marriage behind her, a disabled child to support, no prospects, and no way of telling that *The Good Earth* would sell tens of millions of copies. It transfixed a whole generation of readers just as Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* would do more than half a century later. No Westerner had ever written anything like this before, and no Chinese had either. Buck was the forerunner of a wave of Chinese Americans from Maxine Hong Kingston to Amy Tan. Until their books began coming out in the last few decades, her novels were unique in that they spoke for ordinary Asian people. "translating my parents to me," said Hong Kingston, "and giving me our ancestry and our habitation." As a phenomenally successful writer and civil-rights campaigner, Buck did more than anyone else in her lifetime to change Western perceptions of China. In a world with its eyes trained on China today, she has much to tell us about what lies behind its astonishing reawakening.

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Customer Reviews

How many average American readers know that Pearl Buck won a Pulitzer Prize, or that she was the first American woman awarded a Nobel Prize for literature? How many realize she was read by Gandhi, Matisse, and Eleanor Roosevelt? In fact, how many even know of her at all? "The Good Earth" remains one of my all-time favorite novels, and Olan stands out as one of my favorite female characters in fiction. My own travels in China only enhanced my enjoyment of the book, and my experience as a child raised in multiple cultures gives me empathy for Ms. Buck's own upbringing as an American-born child raised in China as the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries. Imagine my excitement to see a modern biography of this fascinating woman. "Pearl Buck in China" gives a detailed and well-researched view into her upbringing, her struggles, and her influence as a novelist. Despite the slow first two chapters, much of which are devoted to her father's missionary zeal at the expense of his family, as well as his misogyny in the name of God, the book dives deeply into the psyche of young Pearl. By the age of ten, she had decided to be a novelist, finding escape in fiction from her parents' unrest, and enjoying connection with the Western world--particularly through Dickens' novels--which was still foreign to her. As we discover, she knew the street vernacular of the average Chinese, and grew to love them as her own. This familiarity caused a strain on her religious beliefs when fellow Westerners treated the Chinese with condescension. Later, she found a husband with a more practical approach to his missionary work, teaching the locals agricultural skills.

Decades from now, the biographer Hillary Spurling will surely rate as one of the best writers of our time. This latest effort adds to an excellent list of achievements and might be her most successful book, yet. Given her much lauded two-volume biography of Henri Matisse, that is saying a lot. In this book, Spurling brings to life a writer I had not much cared for. In fact, I knew Pearl Buck only for her

titles publishes in volumes of the Reader's Digest Condensed Books, which had pride of place on my parents' bookshelves. My mental appraisal of her was simply horrid: drab, old-fashioned, famous mostly for being exotic in her time. How's that for my ignorance? Pretty good. As a result, I have always passed on opportunities to read Buck's writing. It shocked me to see that Spurling had chosen to exert her considerable talents in the direction of Buck's life story -- a surprise that evaporated in the book's first engrossing paragraphs. One of Spurling's great strengths as a biographer is that she requires characters to speak for themselves; they tell their own story. She quotes liberally from primary sources with the result that Buck and others define themselves and each other. These individuals existed independent of the biographer, as is not always clear when a biographer attempts to "read" lives instead of writing about them. Spurling wraps history in the impressions and responses of the story's characters, and yet the difference between the historicity of events and people's recollections is plain. Recollections and impressions evolve, as she shows in the way Buck recasts autobiographical aspects throughout her works. When a biographer chooses this approach, the result can be a shapeless muddle of quotations and dates: not so here.

Raised in China by an over zealous missionary father and long suffering mother, Pearl Sydenstricker Buck had an extraordinary childhood. Her loving mother, Carrie, saw to her education and her stern misogynist father, Absalom, made a difficult life more difficult for the everyone around him. At a young age Pearl saw extreme poverty, disaster and death in rural China. Pearl lost four siblings in ways that could be attributed to her family's living conditions. At times the family lived without running water or electricity (as Pearl did later with her husband in Nanxuzhou and as a refugee). She learned Chinese and English simultaneously, making her fully bilingual. While most missionary children had sheltered lives in ex-pat communities with English language schools, Pearl spent her childhood with impoverished rural Chinese and at a very young age learned of their most intimate lives. Later, her husband's career in the study of Chinese agriculture connected her to China's academic/scientific communities and continued her connection with the rural poor. She worked these shared experiences with the Chinese people into thousands of pages of novels, speeches, articles and stories. Hillary Spurling has produced a highly readable book, in many places it's a page turner. Its problem, from my point of view, is that the narrative has some holes and presents incohesive portraits of its subject, Pearl, and her father who is a determining influence on her life. One narrative hole relates to finances. There is a big emphasis on the hand to mouth existence of the Sydenstrickers. Every penny Absalom can spare is going to his Bible translation or other projects.

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