

## AMERICAN ORIENTALISM: CULTURE AND CRISES, IN PEARL S BUCK'S, "EAST WIND: WEST WIND & KINFOLK"

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### ABSTRACT

Pearl S Buck wrote more than eighty five novels. Her most of the works contain an interaction or clash between two different cultures. Two novels, *East Wind: West Wind and Kinfolk*, both depicting the crises and culture, have been chosen for this paper.

During seventeen century, American missionaries brought to China a belief in the cultural and racial superiority of American civilization, and orientalist lens through which to view China. Buck's novels highlight the impact of American culture on Chinese people.

The paper tries to analyze

- The two major female characters in *East Wind: West Wind*, one Chinese and other American, and how both are in conflict with two different cultures.
- The dilemma faced by many Asian – Americans who are involved in attempt to craft an identity out of their unusual hybrid experience in *Kinfolk*

**KEYWORDS:** America, China, Culture, Identity

### INTRODUCTION

American Orientalism from the turn of the century through the 1920s projects a distorted image of Chinese as primitive, slavish, exotic, manipulative, and amoral while American nationalism views its own population as modern, free, civilized, and trustworthy.

Though, Arthur H Smith's, *Chinese Characteristics* (1894), was the most widely read and influential work written about China by any American in the nineteenth century, Pearl s Buck, was the first American woman who had known China so well, her perspective was based on her intimate understanding of China. Her firsthand knowledge of China promised American readers a glimpse into "real" China.

#### The Sense of Superiority

China's relationship with the rest of the world, witnessed a dramatic change with the beginning of nineteenth century. China was one of the oldest continuous civilizations on earth: for most of its history, it dominated nearby nations ignored the rest of the world. It did not seek foreign contacts either in trade or diplomacy, and it rarely welcomed visitors. In words of Ch'ien – Lung Emperor "Our celestial empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufacturers of outside barbarians." We also get to know

the same sense of belief from the characters of Pearl s Buck. The protagonist of the novel East Wind: West Wind, Kwei Lan says,

“You know that for five hundred years my revered ancestors have lived in this age old city of Middle Kingdom. Not one of the august ones was modern; nor did he have a desire to change himself. They all lived in quietness and dignity, confident of their rectitude. Thus did my parents rear me in all honored traditions. I never dreamed I could wish to be different.” (Buck, EW: WW3,4)

Chinese hostility to the west was based on an ancient and durable conviction of superiority. The language itself supported this view. The expression hua and huaxia, meaning Chinese, connotes culture and civilization. Those who lived in China proper were inter alia, cultured and civilized, clearly differentiable from those barbarians on the periphery who had yet to learn the proper way of dressing, eating, dwelling and traveling. The people not exposed to the modern world used to have the notion that China is the only civilized nation and had an old culture, and so was the perspective of Kwei lan

“This was very astonishing to me. I did not know that there were people except ours, that is civilized people. But it seems that foreigners also have a history and a culture. They are therefore not wholly barbarians.” (87)

For many centuries, China had stood aloof from the West, complacent in its own self- sufficiency. The isolation was finally broken when the British defeated China in the opium war (1839-1842), forcing China to open its international trade and exposing China in the next 100 years to Western domination. This western domination has been shown in Bucks novel through her fictional character. Though fictional yet they portrays the actual image of contradicting situations, emotional conflicts, when two people from different culture meet, and where both of them think themselves to be superior to other. The unequal treaty of 1860 opened the gate of China for Christian missionaries, which actually exposed Chinese people to developed western civilization the effect of its influence on Chinese people is reflected in Buck’s work.

**East Wind:** West Wind is the first published novel of Pearl S Buck in 1930.

This is in first person narrative told by Kwei-lan and is divided into two parts; one is where Kwei-lan marries a person who studied in America, and her struggles and even acceptance of Western customs, while the second half covered the period of when her brother returned with a foreign bride named Mary, as well as Kwei-lan's struggles to look beyond Mary's exterior into why the brother fell in love with her and had done everything for her. Kwei lan describes her confusing encounter with the modern world in the figure of her progressive husband. Through this novel Buck bring readers attention to the issues like, contest between tradition and modernity and the risk and possibilities of human connection across racial and cultural lines.

In China the Christian missionaries contributed substantially to the process of modernization – sometimes inadvertently, sometimes by design. As they pursued their evangelical objectives, they frequently addressed questions of literacy, health, women’s rights and agriculture. Kwei lans mother was not exposed to such things, she brought up her daughter in traditional Chinese customs and cultures, which could help her to be a better Chinese wife. Kwei lans mother taught and trained her very well as a traditional Chinese betrothed is done.

But it went all in vain as it was not good enough to impress her modern doctor husband. Education has a major responsibility for widening horizons and advancing understanding among people. As Kwei Lans husband was a doctor trained under western education he was able to judge the difference between tradition, modernity and knowledge. He was

acting like bridge to kwei lan, connecting tradition and modernity.

"A woman before men should maintain flower like silence and should withdraw herself at the earliest moment that is possible without confusion.".... "I answered him, nothing when he spoke to me. But oh, I fear he finds my silence dull!" (5)

Kwei lans husband expresses his view on marriage and how the two should treat each other.

"Yet now that we are alone we may create our life according to our own desires. For myself, I wish to follow the new ways. I wish to regard you in all things as my equal. I shall never force you to anything. You are not my possession my chattel. You may be friend, if you will"

But his views are astonishing to kwei lan, and she is unable to make any sense from his talk.

"I equal to him? But why? Was I not his wife? If he did not tell me what to do, then who would? Was he not my masters by law? No one had forced me to marry him- what else could I do if I did not marry? And how could I marry except as my parents arranged it? Whom could I marry if not the man to whom I had been betrothed all my life? It was all according to our custom. I did not see wherein lay any force."(37)

The novel very well portrays the desire of newly wedded wife and her emotions. The novel has also depicted the unjustified practices which prevailed in China till early twentieth century. The ancient custom of foot binding was practiced in China from about 10<sup>th</sup> century and ended in 1911. In Chinese society it is said that women are ruled by their fathers when they are young, then by their husbands and finally by their sons. This foot binding was a way to ensure that women did not travel away from that control because the pain was too great and debilitating to allow them the freedom to be free. Foot binding was considered a component of female attire. Correct attire was regarded as the ultimate expression of Chinese culture and identity, differentiating them from "inferior" foreign neighbors while marking social and gender distinction within the society. "Kwei-lan", he said.

My heart leaped. It was the first time he had called me by my name...I lifted my eyes timidly to him. He continued,

"I have wished ever since our marriage to ask you if you will not unbind your feet. It is unhealthful for you whole body. See, your bones look like this"

He took a pencil and sketched hastily upon the leaf of his book a dreadful, bare, cramped foot.

How did he know? I had never dressed my feet in his presence. We Chinese women never expose our feet to the sight of others. Even at night we wear stockings of white cloth.

"How do you know?" I gasped.

"Because I am a doctor trained in the West," he replied, "And then, I wish you to unbind them because they are not beautiful. Besides, foot binding is no longer in fashion. Does that move you? He smiled slightly and looked at me not unkindly.

But I drew my feet hastily under my chair. I was stricken at his words. Not beautiful? I had always been proud of my tiny feet! (56)

Through novel we see that the western education, which was brought through Kwei lan's husband in her life was a breakthrough a change and betterment of the Chinese society. Though Kwei lan was changing to impress her husband and was trying to be acceptable to him.

"I had been taught all wrong, I began to realize. My husband was not one of those men to whom a woman is as distinctly an appeal to the sense as perfumed flower or a pipe of opium. The refinement of beauty in body was not enough. I must study to please him in other ways". (77)

When foreign missionaries began to gain footholds in China after Opium War, foot binding began to be a symbol of something other than beauty. The bound feet of women began to symbolize their oppression. It was a practice of old china and it was seen as barbaric act to rest of the world. The modern education brought with it the understanding of the advantage of natural feet and disadvantage of bound feet.

"When I look back now, I realize that my husband's interest began in me that evening. It seemed as though before this we had nothing to talk about. Our thought never met."(82)

"Indeed the unbinding process was almost as painful as the binding had been. My feet, accustomed to constriction, gradually stretched a little, and the blood began to circulate." (84)

"We will endure this together, Kwei-lan," he said. It is hard to see you suffer so. Try to think that it is not only for us but for others, too – a protest against an old and wicked thing" (85)

It was during Manchu Dynasty the protest against foot binding was started and the revolution of Sun Yat Sen, the foot binding was outlawed in 1911.

As soon as Kwei lan get acquainted to westerners through her husband, she came to know a totally different culture which she found inferior to her own.

"I have to say, however, that these foreigners were as polite as they knew how to be. They made mistakes and at every turn betrayed their lack of breeding. They presented the bowls of tea with one hand and habitually served me before my husband. The man actually addressed me to my face! I felt it an insult. He should have courteously ignored my presence, leaving his wife to entertain me." (105)

Though breast feeding was consider important for baby rearing but the high society women in China would not do it for their own child, rather the would hire someone to do this job

"One of the surprising things I discovered was that the foreign woman nursed her own child at the breast. I had not thought of nursing mine. It is not customary among women of any wealth or position, since slaves are abundant for this task."(107)

The second part of the novel deals with kwei lan's brother and his wedding to a westerner. The exposure to modern western education made Chinese residing in America reject their age old customs and traditions.

"Nevertheless he wished to say clearly that he could not marry the one to whom he had been betrothed according to Chinese custom, because the times had changed; he was a modern man, and he had decided to adopt the modern, independent, free method of marriage."(139)

As Kwei lan has developed a special bond with her husband she is able to understand her brother, as she is also aware of her mother's pain she found herself to be in anxious condition, helpless and torn.

"I am like a fragile bridge, spanning the infinity between past and present. I clasp my mother's hand; my husband's hand holds mine; his hand holds mine fast. I can never love let go! (167)

But Kwei Lan is still torn between the two loyalties

"Yet I cannot forget either my brother and that one whom he loves. I am torn hither and thither like a frail plume tree in a wind passionate for its resistance."(169)

With the entrance of her brother and his westerner wife, kwei lan found herself secluded.

"I and my son, we are the only Chinese among us, I think. They stand therein our home, wrapped in their strange dress, talking their strange tongue to each other. I and my son, we do not understand them."(174)

Kwei lan founds everything about this westerners as weird and absurd, which she is hardly able to understand or relate with.

"This foreign one has no fear of anything in her, although she is not beautiful as the Fourth Lady was beautiful. She does not trouble herself. She accepts as her right the interest of men. She makes no effort to win their glances. She seems to say," this is I. I am as you see me. I do not care to be otherwise."(178)

But the traditions are so deeply ingrained that accepting the new is not easy for the psychology of a Chinese person . Kwei Lan is appalled by the bold and straightforwardness of American Women

"I do not understand this freedom of hers. And yet, most strangely, when I ponder it I do not discern any evil insinuation in it. She avows her love for my brother as simply as a child may seek its playmate. There is nothing hidden or subtle in her. How strange this is! It is not like our women. (182)

To her everything seems changed, she found every near person affected by this western culture, which is in difference with her own culture. For them even the fast life of westerners is very difficult to accept and adopt.

"He has learned the impatience of the west, and he demands that his wishes come immediately to pass. He has forgotten that in our country time is nothing, and fates may remain unknown even when death has come. There is no haste which can hurry time here."(194)

"Since Marry is in love with her husband she is ready to do everything which could please Kwie lan's mother and could able to make her acceptable in their family.

"If it is your custom, of course I will do it, although I think it a little foolish, perhaps, to bow like that before anyone" (195)

Mary is very inquisitive about everything about her.

"But she sees everything with strange eyes, although she seldom comments on anything, only asking questions and storing our answers away into her thoughts."(198)

While living in the ancient society of China Mary finds herself stifled with all bondages, restrictions, and rules, that prohibit everything to a woman>Marry expresses herself and opens up to Kwei lan.

“Oh, I do not know how to express it! I have always been used to frankness and cheerfulness and speaking straight out. And here it is all silence and bowing and sliding eyes at me. I could bear being cut off from my freedom like this if I knew what was behind it all. But – do you know, I told him over there at home that I could be a Chinese or a Hottentot or anything for him- but I cannot, I cannot! I am forever American!”(229)

With the birth of a new child, a hope comes, hope of a new world where the two winds can blow together, the child born to a western mother and eastern father.

“It is this little person who will teach me everything. I learn from him how to belong to my husband’s country and race. He will show me what his father is like- what he was from the time he was a baby until manhood. I can never be separate and alone anymore.”(256)

The novel ends with a positive note. A positive future for both the worlds, East and the West enters with the child. A modern and civilized one in real sense which is not bounded with racial discrimination, or with the sense of racial superiority.

“As for their child, I am moved in two ways. He will have his own world to make. Being of neither East nor West purely, he will be rejected of each, for none will understand him. But I think, if he has the strength of both his parents, he will understand both worlds, and so overcome.”(271)

“See what thou hast done, my sister! Into this tiny knot hast thou tied two worlds!”(275)

“Think only of this- with what joy of union he came into the world! He has tied together the two hearts of his parents into one. Those two hearts with all their differences in birth and rearing – differences existing centuries ago! What union!” (277)

### **Rediscovering China through Liangs**

Buck through her fiction captures the romanticized view of China as “home”. Buck’s story did not represent new information to those already familiar with data from social sciences on immigrants or those acquainted with Chinese American community. Proportionally smaller in number, those Chinese Americans who were exposed to a segregated but American education very quickly became aware of their inferior status. Many became ashamed of their appearance, status, and culture. Self hatred and the need to be accepted by the white society became their primary obsession. In practice this meant the rejection of their cultural and linguistic heritage and the pursuit of thoroughgoing Americanization: adoption of American values, personality traits and social behaviors and conversion to Christianity. However, Buck was able to disseminate this knowledge more widely through popular fiction.

Kinfolk’s principal character, Dr.Liang, is an expatriate Chinese philosopher who lives in New York and earns a comfortable living by expounding Confucianism and classic Chinese culture in books and lectures. Liang is an elegant fake. He retails a roseate, fairy tale view of China, a wispy amalgam of ancient texts and stereotype, in which a changeless serenity absorbs all turmoil. Liang’s charming fables seduces his American audiences but have no connection to contemporary China, the turbulence of the late 1940’s, or the final bitter months of the civil war.

Liang and his wife live in spacious New York apartments with their four adult children, two sons and two daughters, all of whom have grown up in the United States. Liang’s wife, a sturdy, uneducated peasant woman, is terrified of him. Halfway through the novel, the liang children return to China. Two of them go voluntarily, to put their medical

skills at the service of the people; the other two are more banished by Dr. Liang to save them from further Western contamination. The professor himself remains behind in the safety of his American affluence.

In a sequence of dramatic scenes set in Peking and the countryside, the children are swept up in China's political and military struggles. The younger daughter, unable to face hardship, soon returns to New York and marries a white American. The younger son, taking up a revolutionary cause he only half understands, is shot by the Kuomintang's secret police. The older son and daughter, on the other hand, settle down in their ancestral village, marry local people, and dedicate themselves to improving the lot of peasants.

Kinfolk is one of Pearl's strongest novels, a splendid combination of achieved satire and shrewd cultural analysis. The plight of four Liang's children brings a new theme into Pearl's fiction, the dilemma faced by many Asian Americans, attempting to craft an identity out of their unusual hybrid experience. At the end of 'Kinfolk', the outcome of China's civil war remains doubtful.

"Their children went to American schools, spoke the American language, and acted like American children. The fathers and mothers were not highly educated people and they could not express to the children what China was, except that it was their own country, which must not be forgotten"(Buck,Kinfolk,1)

They still have the longing and connection with their homeland.

"He was warmed by their pride in him and he took the opportunity to remark that it was the duty of every Chinese to represent his country in the most favorable light to Americans who were, after all, only foreigners."(Kinfolk, 4)

The elder son of Liang, the protagonist of Kinfolk was not able to feel connected to America and has a longing for China.

"He loved and feared his father, and it had taken all his strength to decide that the day had come to tell him finally that he wanted to go back to China."(Kinfolk, 8)

Buck states clearly through her common themes that one must make one's country wherever one is, that one's present location and cultural knowledge are more significant than one's place of birth or racial identity. Some of the characters in Kinfolk elaborate the same.

"The family always ate American breakfast, and unless his mother felt inclined to cook, they ate American food altogether. His two sisters could not cook, and his younger brother Peter did not like Chinese food. The younger two children had been born in America and were therefore American citizens."(Kinfolk, 9)

Yet they took pride in the antiquity and richness of their own culture and background.

"... Dr Liang always said, he had been useful in explaining to Americans the real China, the great civilization which today was obscured but which would assuredly shine forth again when peace was established in the world. It was no small mission to bring East and West together."(Kinfolk, 11)

China represents the homeland – a place of belonging – for the Chinese American immigrant's community.

"All of them were sick to get to China, all except Louise, and she dared not say she was not. Alone sometimes she was frightened at the thought of China. She loved America."(Kinfolk, 34)

“he tried to think of his father and mother, of his life in America, the hospital, of plans when he landed in his own country, as new and foreign to him as though he had no Chinese blood in his veins”(Kinfolk,49)

The most ambivalent reaction is shown by the family’s oldest son, James. The first of the Liang children to arrive, James initially comes to Shanghai, which is introduced as the epitome of Chinese modernity, a hybrid space that is made out as Westernized, yet still genuinely Chinese

“As the ship edged to the pier, James looked down into a crowd of his own people. Their brown faces were upturned, curious, gay, and patient. Here and there a white face was lifted startlingly clear against the universal brown. It was a reversal of New York where the crowd was white, and the brown face startling. He had grown up immunizing himself to the stares of white people as he walked along the streets, but here it would be comforting to belong to the crowd. In a few minutes he would be lost in it, and no one would look at him twice. Here was where he belonged.”(Kinfolk, 53)

“One knew the blood was the same, but to have grown up in America and in China made two different beings.”(Kinfolk, 79)

This story about identification and belonging thus incorporates Buck’s critical views about gender and power with China’s growing popularity, Chinese American’s alienation and search for inclusion, and American nationalism.

“Anyway, I somehow feel I have no home in the world.”(Kinfolk,96)

Creating a character like James, who is deeply affected by the traditional values with which his missionary father raised him, but who still cannot fully abandon modernity either. Buck points to the dilemma of neo – missionaries – their disunity between tradition and innovation.

Exposed to a modern, complex reality, these neo missionaries have to become aware that Chinese rural society needs to be reformed and improved. Eventually this is what happened in Kinfolk, when James and his sister Mary realize that the rural paradise is lost.

“We exiles coming home seem to take two directions. Some of us, like Su and Peng and Kang and those fellows and their wives and girls and all that, want to ignore and escape. Then there are those like us. We are stunned, because nothing is like what we thought it was, yet we can’t separate ourselves.”(Kinfolk,208)

James penetrates further and further into the rural countryside and finally arrives in the village of his ancestors. Together with, Mary, who has come to China to join forces with him and work as a nurse, he decides to go native and live in barren, primitive hut.

“There was a world of difference between themselves and these Kinfolk, centuries of difference, space and time crowded together into a single generation.” (Kinfolk, 209)

Those who went out had a different vision and mission in their lives, whereas those who did not get any external exposure were stuck with their age old thinking.

“The twentieth century was their atmosphere. But Uncle Tao belonged in the eighteenth century and he kept the village there with him. His mother, James, saw was the bridge between these centuries.”(Kinfolk, 392)

James and Mary are eligible to accept these challenges, and start as neo missionary. He carries out a successful medical mission – once he manages to leave behind the ideologies of his father and tackles the real problem of rural China.

Similarly, his sister Mary engages herself as an assistant missionary, involved in finding out the solutions to women problems. Once they overcome the old ways and adapt, James and Marry turn into true representative of a second generation of missionaries.

## CONCLUSIONS

The influence of Chinese culture upon the literature of United States is known through the writings of two noble prize winning authors, Eugene O'Neill and Pearl S Buck. Both were able to produce works that represent literary monuments in the history of Chinese American Cultural interactions. Each however, had a unique story to tell about how he or she came under the influence of Chinese culture and how the image of China took shape and transformed in their successive plays or novel.

Pearl Buck was nourished by both Chinese and American cultures, but she also learned from there tensions and clashes. Her consciousness of being a white minority living among the overwhelming Chinese majority was intensified by two historical events in modern Chinese history. The first was the boxer rebellion in 1900 and the second event took place in March 1927, when the Kuomintang troops of the Northern Expedition army attacked foreign consulates and missionaries homes. These two experiences contributed greatly to her lifelong passion for interracial understanding and friendship especially between Chinese and Americans. Pearl s Buck wrote her Chinese novels mainly to promote her cross cultural understanding and communication. The two novel discussed above are the examples of her such works and acted as a bridge between two cultures.

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