



# Pearl S. Buck

A Cultural  
Biography

Peter Conn



Pearl S. Buck was one of the most renowned, interesting, and controversial figures ever to influence American and Chinese cultural and literary history – and yet she remains one of the least studied, honored, or remembered. Peter Conn's *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* sets out to reconstruct Buck's life and significance, and to restore this remarkable woman to visibility.

Born into a missionary family, Pearl Buck lived the first half of her life in China and was bilingual from childhood. Although she is best known, perhaps, as the prolific author of *The Good Earth* and as a winner of the Nobel and Pulitzer prizes, Buck in fact led a career that extended well beyond her eighty works of fiction and nonfiction and deep into the public sphere. Passionately committed to the cause of social justice, she was active in the American civil rights and women's rights movements; she also founded the first international adoption agency. She was an outspoken advocate of racial understanding, vital as a cultural ambassador between the United States and China at a time when East and West were at once suspicious and deeply ignorant of each other.

In this richly illustrated and meticulously crafted narrative, Conn recounts Buck's life in absorbing detail, tracing the parallel course of American and Chinese history and politics through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This "cultural biography" thus offers a dual portrait: of Pearl Buck, a figure greater than history cares to remember, and of the era she helped to shape.





*Pearl S. Buck*



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A CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY

Peter Conn



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For Jennifer Kyung  
and the five thousand other Welcome House children

For David, Alison, and Steven, too

And for Terry  
with gratitude  
for thirty years of love and friendship, loyalty and passion



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## *Preface: Rediscovering Pearl Buck*

THIS BOOK BEGAN at a picnic.

Every year, on the first Saturday in June, hundreds of the families who have adopted children through an agency called Welcome House gather in a state park north of Philadelphia for a day of games and barbecues and annual reunions. The families look different from most. The children come from all over the world: from Asia and Eastern Europe, from Central and South America, from every region of the United States. Tinicum Park becomes, for a day, a pint-sized United Nations, exploding with children – from two weeks old to teenagers, white, black, and every color in between. It is an unforgettable sight.

My wife, Terry, and I attended our first Welcome House picnic in 1973, when we had begun to think about adopting a child. After three biological children, we had decided that we had some obligation to find room for one of the world's homeless boys or girls. We had also found much joy in the children we had, and we thought (quite accurately, as it turned out) that another child would add to our joy. We started the process, and after the usual months of waiting and anxiety, we met our new two-year-old Korean daughter, Jennifer Kyung, when her plane arrived at Kennedy Airport on February 4, 1975.

The rest, as they say, is history; or her story. But it is not the story in this book. This book is about Pearl Buck, the woman who in 1949 founded Welcome House, the first international, interracial adoption agency in the United States.

When Terry and I first approached Welcome House, I could have written everything I knew about Pearl Buck on a three-by-five index card. I knew that Buck was the author of *The Good Earth*, a book I had read in high school, though I had trouble recalling many of the details. (I dimly remembered a scene in which a peasant woman gave birth over a bucket and then went back to work.) I also knew that Buck had won the Nobel Prize for literature, though I didn't know exactly when, and I had traveled long enough in advanced literary circles to know that Buck's prize was not at all respectable. Finally, I had a vague

impression that Buck was the daughter of Protestant missionaries, but I had no idea what that might actually mean.

Over the years that followed, Terry and I kept in close touch with Welcome House, working as volunteers and even serving on the board. In spite of myself, I was tempted by an increasing interest in Pearl Buck. I met a number of people who had known her, and who had obviously been changed for the better by the relationship. I discovered that Welcome House was only one of a dozen major projects Buck had initiated in support of children's welfare and interracial understanding. Frankly, Terry and I were touched by the extraordinary effort Buck had made to combine a literary life with a commitment to human service. After all, how many successful writers or intellectuals ever go beyond the occasional painless gesture, the sanctimonious petition or letter, and actually spend their time and money trying to do some social good?

Still, I kept my distance from Buck as a possible subject; she seemed too risky an investment. A smug consensus has reduced Pearl Buck to a footnote – a judgment, I hasten to add, in which I had routinely concurred. As recently as 1989, I published a 600-page history of American literature, in which I found room for everyone from the seventeenth-century Puritan preacher Urian Oakes to the twentieth-century proletarian propagandist Giacomo Patri, but I never mentioned Pearl Buck. Then, as I learned more about Buck's prodigious productivity, both as writer and humanitarian, I was less convinced by the received wisdom. Pearl Buck's disappearance from the American cultural scene was not self-explanatory.

To begin with, this was a woman who had written over seventy books, many of them best-sellers, including fifteen Book-of-the-Month Club selections. She had worked in virtually every genre of writing: novels, short stories, plays, biography, autobiography, translations (from the Chinese), children's literature, essays, journalism, poetry. However steeply she had fallen from critical favor, she had in fact won the Nobel Prize in literature (with Toni Morrison, she is one of only two American women ever to do so), and a Pulitzer, and the Howells Medal, and election to the National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a dozen honorary degrees.

Her novels continue to be read around the world, in English and in scores of translations. Buck's novels can still be found in villages and isolated farmhouses in Tanzania, New Guinea, India, Colombia. A friend of mine who served in the Peace Corps read her first Pearl Buck story, a disintegrating paperback copy of *Imperial Woman*, while she was living in a hut in Malawi.

In a word, Pearl Buck was one of the most popular novelists of the twentieth century. This in itself would be reason enough to look at her life and work more closely. Not long ago, critic Cary Nelson usefully observed: "We should

take it as axiomatic that texts that were widely read or influential need to retain an active place in our sense of literary history, whether or not we happen, at present, to judge them to be of high quality.”<sup>1</sup> Pearl Buck perfectly exemplifies a writer who once loomed large on our cultural landscape, and whose disappearance has damaged our historical understanding.

Discussing the 1930s, one of Buck’s most productive decades, historian Lawrence Levine has made a similar point. Levine reminds us that a study of popular arts is necessary to any cultural history that would presume to fullness. “One does not have to believe,” Levine writes, “that aesthetically Superman rivals Hamlet or that Grant Wood compares to Michelangelo to maintain that Superman and Wood potentially have much to tell us about the Great Depression, that they therefore merit the closest examination, and that they won’t necessarily be simple to fathom.”<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, if predictably, neither Cary Nelson nor Lawrence Levine, despite their enthusiasm for searching out the forgotten places of American culture, ever mentions Pearl Buck. Nonetheless, her career abundantly confirms the validity of their thesis. Whatever the aesthetic claims of Buck’s novels and stories, her once-remarkable prominence makes her indispensable to any account of America’s twentieth-century intellectual and imaginative life. Beyond that, however, I will argue in the following chapters that quite a lot of Buck’s fiction and nonfiction is strong enough to command a fresh appraisal on its own merits. The biographies she wrote of her mother and father, for example, are unparalleled accounts of the strange and terrible vocations pursued by generations of missionaries in China. Not long before he died, I asked John Hersey, also a missionary child, for his opinion of Buck’s writing. Hersey wrote me: “As a China ‘mishkid,’ I still, to this day, reverberate with pity and horror to the memory of some of the images” in those books.<sup>3</sup>

Buck’s fiction broke new ground in subject matter, especially in her representations of Asia, and above all in her portraits of Asian women. In 1992, I attended a conference at which the Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston saluted Buck for making Asian voices heard, for the first time, in Western literature. By representing Chinese characters with “such empathy and compassion,” Kingston said, Buck “was translating my parents to me and she was giving me our ancestry and our habitation.”<sup>4</sup> More recently, Toni Morrison looked back on her early reading of Buck’s novels and said, with affectionate irony: “she misled me . . . and made me feel that all writers wrote sympathetically, empathetically, honestly and forthrightly about other cultures.”<sup>5</sup>

Pearl Buck was, as historian James Thomson has recently reminded us, “the most influential Westerner to write about China since thirteenth-century Marco Polo.”<sup>6</sup> Thomson’s assessment is at once indisputable, familiar, and yet, upon

reflection, astonishing. Never before or since has one writer so personally shaped the imaginative terms in which America addresses a foreign culture. For two generations of Americans, Buck invented China.

AMERICANS HAVE FOUGHT three Asian wars in the last fifty years. More recently, armed combat has been followed by economic competition: since the late 1970s, half-a-dozen Asian nations have been the sites of unprecedented development in manufacturing and trade. In addition, within the United States itself, Asians make up the fastest-growing ethnic populations; Asian and Asian-American immigrants and native-born citizens now number over six million people, a doubling in ten years. Americans are beginning to realize that their future is entangled with Asia.

Nevertheless, amid pious invocations of multiculturalism, a shrinking world, and the imminent arrival of the Pacific Century, the peoples of Asia and the West continue to view each other through veils of cliché and misunderstanding. At such a moment in political and cultural history, Pearl Buck's stories should be a subject of increasing relevance and even urgency. Whatever the strengths or limits of her Asian images, she was a pioneer, introducing American readers to landscapes and people they had long ignored.

Her stories of China were based on her own experiences and observations as a missionary daughter. Her parents were an ill-matched pair of Southern Presbyterians named Absalom and Carie Sydenstricker. Pearl was born in West Virginia, while her parents were on a home leave, but she was taken to China at three months old and lived there most of the next forty years. She grew up bilingual, speaking and reading both English and Chinese. In her own favorite metaphor, she described herself as "culturally bifocal." At the same time, from her earliest days, she felt herself homeless in both her countries, an outsider among people different from herself.

Unlike almost every other American of her generation, Pearl Buck grew up knowing China as her actual, day-to-day world, while America was the place of conjecture and simplified images. Furthermore, almost uniquely among white American writers, she spent the first half of her life as a minority person, an experience that had much to do with her lifelong passion for interracial understanding.

She went to college in the United States, at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia, but returned to China immediately after graduation. Shortly after going back to China, she married her first husband, the agricultural economist J. Lossing Buck, and began a family. For several years, the couple lived in the town of Nanhsuchou (Nanxuzhou) in rural Anhwei (Anhui) province. Buck

published her first stories and novels, including *The Good Earth*, while still living in China.\*

In the early 1930s, with China torn by civil war, Japanese invasion, and mounting anti-foreign violence, she moved to the United States, buying a dilapidated eighteenth-century farmhouse in Bucks County, north of Philadelphia. The place was called Green Hills Farm, and it served as home and headquarters for several decades of activity. Here she continued to write, to raise the seven children she adopted, and to manage the various organizations she founded to address the problems of ethnic hatred and to help displaced and disadvantaged children.

Throughout her American years, Pearl Buck was one of the leading figures in the effort to promote cross-cultural understanding between Asia and the United States. In 1941, for example, she and her second husband, Richard Walsh, founded the East and West Association as a vehicle of educational exchange. The association became a target of McCarthyism and expired in the early 1950s. In addition, for over a decade Buck and her husband published the magazine *Asia*, which had a substantial influence on American opinion about East Asia. In the early 1940s, Buck and Walsh led the national campaign to repeal the notorious Chinese exclusion laws. Finally, throughout World War II, despite her close association with Chinese resistance to Japanese aggression, Buck was one of the few Americans who spoke out strongly against the U.S. internment of Japanese-Americans.

Both in Asia and the United States, Buck devoted much of her time and money to the welfare of children. In particular, she worked for children who were mentally or physically disabled or were disadvantaged because of their race. She founded Welcome House because existing adoption agencies considered Asian and Amerasian children to be unadoptable. In forty-five years, Welcome House has placed over five thousand of these children in American homes.

In 1950, the year after she created Welcome House, Buck published a book called *The Child Who Never Grew*, a story about her retarded daughter, Carol. The book was a landmark. Specifically, it encouraged Rose Kennedy to talk publicly about her retarded child, Rosemary. More generally, it helped to change American attitudes toward mental illness. In 1964, Buck set up a foundation in her own name, which has provided medical care and education for over twenty-five thousand Amerasian children in a dozen Asian countries.

In terms of the invidious sexual division of labor in our society, Pearl Buck's special concern for children may have been labeled as characteristically female. It was, more accurately, humane, and it was sadly prophetic. The World Health

\*For a note on the spelling of Chinese proper names, see page xxi.

Organization recently estimated that ten million children under the age of five die each year – thirty thousand every day, more than one thousand every hour – from disease, violence, or hunger. What most of these children have in common is poverty: whether they are born in Somalia, Bangladesh, Brazil, or Pennsylvania. These were the lives that Pearl Buck tried to save.

Along with her efforts in children's welfare, Buck was also active throughout her adult life in the American civil rights movement. From the day she moved to the United States in 1934, she was a regular contributor to *Crisis*, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and to *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League. Walter White, longtime executive secretary of the NAACP, said at a 1942 Madison Square Garden rally that only two white Americans understood the reality of black life, and both were women: Eleanor Roosevelt and Pearl Buck.

Buck served on the Urban League board and was an active trustee of Howard University for many years. She received an honorary degree from Howard in 1942, and responded with an important address on the complex issue of black patriotism in the early days of World War II. Throughout the 1940s, Buck associated herself with such writers as W. E. B. Du Bois in opposing British colonialism. Buck's friendships in the 1930s and 1940s included Paul and Eslanda Robeson. In 1949, Buck and Eslanda co-authored a book called *American Argument*, a dialogue on American racism. Years and even decades before most white intellectuals had even noticed racial injustice, Pearl Buck made major contributions to the American struggle for civil rights.

Buck's efforts on behalf of equality included tireless support for women's rights. She promoted modern birth control and called her friend Margaret Sanger "one of the most courageous women of our times," a person whose name "would go down in history" as a modern crusader for justice. In the 1930s and 1940s, Buck also spoke out repeatedly in support of an Equal Rights Amendment for women, at a time when opposition to it included the majority of organized women's groups.

As a highly visible proponent of international understanding and of civil rights for women and African-Americans, Pearl Buck inevitably attracted the hostile curiosity of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Buck's FBI file, which was initiated as early as 1937, reaches nearly three hundred pages, of which a little over two-thirds has been declassified. (I am still appealing for release of the other material.) The paltry gossip and innuendo in these pages would be amusing if it were not outrageous, a sad reminder of the paranoia that has infected America's domestic politics for over half a century.



HOW DOES A WOMAN of this magnitude and range slip away from our national consciousness? She has not exactly disappeared. Rather, as one reader of an earlier draft of this book shrewdly put it, she has been “hidden in plain sight,” obscured beneath a caricature that belies her complexity and her achievement. She has become a durable, one-woman punch line, trapped in some version or other of the old joke, “If Pearl Buck is the answer, then what is the question?”

In the years after World War II, Buck’s literary reputation shrank to the vanishing point. She stood on the wrong side of virtually every line drawn by those who constructed the lists of required reading in the 1950s and 1960s. To begin with, her principal subjects were women and China, both of which were regarded as peripheral and even frivolous in the early postwar years. Furthermore, she preferred episodic plots to complex structures and had little interest in psychological analysis. In addition to all that, she was not a felicitous stylist, and she even displayed a taste for formulaic phrases. Needless to say, none of this endeared her to that vast cultural heartland stretching from the East River to the Hudson.

On the other hand, she told exciting stories, she created a gallery of memorable characters, and her vivid images of Asia in war and peace broadened the reach of American fiction. Many of her books contain narrative and descriptive passages of considerable drama, powerful scenes of work, warfare, ceremony, childbirth, and poverty that manage to transcend the often commonplace prose in which they are presented. And, whatever their literary merits and defects, her novels, short stories, and essays regularly raised unsettling questions about the racial and sexual status quo.

In the pages that follow, I will not claim that Pearl Buck was the author of unjustly suppressed masterpieces. I will argue, on the other hand, that a dozen or so of her books, mostly from the 1930s and 1940s – I am thinking of the biographies of her parents, *The Exile* and *Fighting Angel*; her autobiography, *My Several Worlds*; a number of the China books, including *The Mother*, *First Wife and Other Stories*, *Sons*, *Dragon Seed*, *Imperial Woman*, and *Kinfolk*; and one or two of the books she wrote about America, including *This Proud Heart* – ought to be valued more highly than they are. In addition, her collection of feminist essays, *Of Men and Women*, which was once compared to the work of Virginia Woolf, should be part of contemporary discussions of gender in America.

A list such as that – note that I did not mention *The Good Earth*, which is quite a special case – makes up a considerable achievement. To be sure, she wrote too much, and too quickly. Her later work, in general, is consistently less interesting. Buck has been damaged by a kind of aesthetic Gresham’s law, in which her bad books have driven her entire body of work out of circulation.

She was also the victim of political hostility, attacked by the right for her

active civil rights efforts, distrusted by the left because of her vocal anti-Communism. Beyond that, she undoubtedly suffered because of her gender: more often than not, it was her male rivals and critics who declared that her gigantic success only demonstrated the bad judgment of American readers – especially women readers, who have always made up the majority of Buck's audience. (In the course of gathering material for this book, I have corresponded with upwards of 150 librarians and archivists around the country. Fully a dozen of them have told me that Pearl Buck was their mother's favorite writer. Fathers are never mentioned.)

Given the influence of her writing and the sheer breadth of her accomplishments, it seems reasonably clear that some reconsideration is past due. Yet, in spite of the assorted renovations and second thoughts that have restored other writers to a measure of academic respectability and public attention, Pearl Buck remains largely neglected. This book – based in part on documents and manuscripts that have not previously been available – represents an effort to reclaim Buck's life and work.

I have called this book a cultural biography, and I should explain what that term means. I have tried to situate Pearl Buck's career in the many contexts that are needed to understand her development and her significance. This has involved a continuous act of negotiation between her life and the social and political circumstances that surrounded her. Consequently, along with Buck's biography and writing, readers will find in these pages a good deal of information about both Chinese and American history and literature.

Since she lived for so many years in China, and spoke and read Chinese, Buck had a unique vantage point as a witness to the making of the modern Chinese nation. She was caught up in the Boxer Uprising of 1900, the 1911 Revolution, and the civil wars of the 1920s and 1930s. She knew personally some of the men and women who participated in the "science and democracy" movement and the May Fourth movement. She took part in the debates over Confucianism, and was a sympathetic observer of the Chinese struggle to emancipate women. All of these subjects are described in the following pages.

Similarly, Buck's American years, from the mid-1930s to her death in 1973, can only be illuminated by reference to a further list of cultural subjects: the history of American attitudes toward China; the controversy over imperialism and the debate over immigration; the problematic status of popular culture; the American civil rights and women's rights movements; the witch-hunts of the McCarthy period.

Finally, a large cast of characters appears in this book. At one time or another in the course of her eighty years, Buck's friends and adversaries included Sinclair Lewis, Margaret Mead, James T. Farrell, Chiang Kai-shek and Mme. Chiang, Theodore Dreiser, Margaret Sanger, Edgar Snow and Helen Foster Snow, Lin

Yutang, Eleanor Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Elaine Locke, Will Rogers, Charles Lindbergh, Hu Shih, Rose Kennedy, John Kennedy, Oscar Hammerstein, II, Indira Gandhi, James Yen, Owen Lattimore, Henry Luce, Christopher Isherwood, and Jawaharlal Nehru, among many others.

James Michener, who served on the original Welcome House board of directors, recently recalled his long association with Pearl Buck: "She was a spokesman on all sorts of issues: freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the adoptability of disadvantaged children, the future of China, especially the battle for women's rights, for education. If you followed in her trail, as I did, you were put in touch with almost every major movement in the United States – intellectual, social, and political."<sup>7</sup>

In writing this biography, I, too, have been following in Pearl Buck's trail. I have spent several days roaming through the Virginia and West Virginia countryside where her parents grew up and where she was born. I have talked with dozens of people who knew her, among them her younger sister, the late Grace Yaukey, several of her children, some of her neighbors in Nanking (Nanjing) in the 1920s and 1930s, a number of missionaries who worked in the China field, and a variety of Chinese and American scholars.

In the summer of 1993, my wife and I traveled to China as the guests of Nanjing University, where Buck taught in the 1920s. Terry and I visited Buck's childhood home in Chinkiang (Zhenjiang), and we made a trip into Anhwei province, to the town of Nanhsuchou, the setting of *The Good Earth*.

In Nanhsuchou, Terry and I spent an afternoon with a dozen aging Chinese Presbyterians, men and women in their seventies and eighties, all of whom were quite familiar with the name Pearl Buck. In the exchange of gifts that followed tea, one elderly woman gave us a clipping from the local newspaper. It was a story about Pearl Buck that had appeared in June, 1992, on the hundredth anniversary of Buck's birth.

On several occasions during our visit, Terry and I were told that Chinese scholars and students are exhibiting a renewed interest in Pearl Buck. When we came back from Anhwei province to Nanking, for example, we spent several evenings with Liu Haiping, the distinguished dean of the School of Foreign Studies at the University of Nanjing. During one dinner, Liu argued provocatively that Buck is the only American writer whose work is, in part at least, a product of Chinese culture. As such, she provides an almost unique case study in the complexity of cultural identity.

Beyond that, many young Chinese regard Buck's novels as a valuable historical record – a "treasure trove," in Liu Haiping's phrase – of China's rural life in the early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> I have recently received a letter from a group of scholars in Chengdu, in Szechuen (Sichuan) province, which confirms Liu's opinion. These men and women, a group called De Heng Fan, are translating Buck's

novels into Chinese. "Through [these books]," they write, "we understand the Chinese farmers' hardship, struggle and happiness before the establishment of the People's Republic of China."

In the past couple of years, there have also been a few signs of renewed interest in Pearl Buck in the United States and Europe. In the spring of 1992, Buck's hundredth birthday was marked by a major symposium at Randolph-Macon Woman's College, and the papers from that event have recently been published. In 1993, public television broadcast a widely applauded biography of Buck, called "East Wind, West Wind." More recently, Buck was the subject of a documentary on Belgian national radio. Perhaps, somewhat belatedly, this remarkable woman is being restored to a measure of greater visibility on both sides of the world. This biography is another step in that restoration.

As I have tried to suggest in these prefatory pages, Pearl Buck has several claims on our interest. She lived a richly eventful life on two continents, through years that spanned the remaking of culture and society in both Asia and America. Her career traced a path from late imperial China to the Nobel Prize to America's mid-century struggles for civil rights. Sometimes by choice and sometimes involuntarily, she took part in a number of military and ideological revolutions.

Her life and writing helped to redefine the idea of a woman's place in modern society. She was a major public figure, independent and often pugnacious, who was also the mother of eight children, all but one adopted and including several of mixed race. Beginning in poverty, she earned millions of dollars and spent lavishly on herself, her family, her friends, and her causes. She lobbied successfully to change American attitudes and policies in the areas of immigration, adoption, minority rights, and mental health.

While I happen to agree with many of the cultural and political positions Pearl Buck defended, this book is an essay in historiography, not advocacy. Consequently, I have made a scrupulous effort to tell Buck's story within the thickly detailed context of her own settings and circumstances, not to measure her value by the ideological calipers of a later historical moment. I have tried, in other words, to re-create her own world as she experienced and judged it.

Pearl Buck meets the only three criteria I can think of applying to a biographical subject: her life was uncommonly eventful and interesting; she was a woman of conspicuous significance; and her story provides access to a whole catalogue of social and cultural issues. Any one of these would be reason enough to reconstruct Buck's life and work. Taken together, they make her story compelling.

I have not written a saint's life. Pearl Buck, as I have gotten to know her, was a troubled, conflicted, often limited woman, capable of cruelty as well as kindness. At the same time, this book is not a "pathography," to use Joyce Carol Oates's term for the current fashion of biographical debunking. Whatever my reservations about her commitments or her accomplishments, I have grown to

admire Pearl Buck, and I have learned a great deal from her. Her engagement in the major issues of her time is a rare and instructive example of a writer accepting her responsibilities to the larger society and dedicating her energy and influence to serve a vision of the common good.

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*A note on Chinese proper names*

For nearly a century, the most widely used system for romanizing Chinese characters was Wade-Giles. An early form of this system was devised by Sir Thomas Wade in 1859; a modified version served as the basis for H. A. Giles's Chinese-English dictionary of 1912. Wade-Giles and all other systems use Northern (Mandarin) Chinese as the standard language. In 1958, the Chinese government approved the romanization system known as pinyin zimu (phonetic alphabet). Pinyin is now accepted as the official method for romanizing Chinese names. Because Wade-Giles was the standard system throughout Pearl Buck's years in China, I have used it fairly consistently throughout this book. For the reader's information, the first time a Chinese name is used, the pinyin version is given in parentheses following the Wade-Giles version.

*A note on proper names in English*

Readers will note that Pearl Buck is called "Pearl" throughout this biography. This sometimes creates a tone of dubious familiarity, but no form of address would be fully satisfactory. Pearl Buck did not become "Pearl Buck" until she was in her mid-twenties; she disliked the name "Buck"; and in any case "Buck" would bump up repeatedly against the book's other major "Buck," her first husband, Lossing Buck. My practice has been to call all of Pearl's immediate family and her closest friends – male and female – by their first names, and all others – male and female – by their surnames.



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# I

## *Missionary Childhood*

**I**N APRIL, 1899, six-year-old Pearl Sydenstricker wrote a letter from Chinkiang, China, to the editor of the *Christian Observer*, in Louisville, Kentucky. It was her first published writing, and it appeared under the headline “Our Real Home in Heaven”:

I am a little girl, six years old. I live in China. I have a big brother in college who is coming to China to help our father tell the Chinese about Jesus. I have two little brothers in heaven. Maudie went first, then Artie, then Edith, and on the tenth of last month my little brave brother, Clyde left us to go to our real home in heaven. Clyde said he was a Christian Soldier, and that heaven was his bestest home. Clyde was four years old, and we both love the little letters in the Observer. I wrote this all myself, and my hand is tired, so goodbye.

Clyde, barely out of his infancy, was a brave soldier in Christ’s army, gathered into his “bestest” home. This sad little allegory came directly out of six-year-old Pearl’s fundamentalist upbringing. She may have written her letter all by herself, as she said, but she used the language she had been hearing every day of her brief life.

As an adult, she would completely reject the religion in which she was raised, but it was the source of everything she learned about values as a child. Living in a small Chinese city, she was separated from her own country and its culture almost from birth. She had heard Chinese children make fun of her blond hair and blue eyes, and call her *yang kwei-tse*, a “foreign devil.” Four of her brothers and sisters had died, and she had few companions of her own age. Like many lonely children, she depended on her parents for talk and friendship. Her childish Christianity was natural enough, but it had nothing to do with doctrine or belief; her pious enthusiasm brought her closer to her mother and father.

Absalom and Carie Sydenstricker had journeyed to China twenty years earlier as Presbyterian missionaries. Absalom came “to tell the Chinese about Jesus,” as Pearl rather sweetly phrases it; for over fifty years, he labored to spread his alien revelation among people he regarded as heathens. He was part of the missionary

enterprise, one of the strangest and most compelling episodes in the history of relations between China and the West.

In the nineteenth century, Americans knew almost nothing about China. It was a blank on the map – vast, distant, exotic. Only a handful of merchants, soldiers, and diplomats had set foot in China or in any other Asian country. If Americans thought about China at all, they relied on a cluster of stereotypes. Some were favorable, but most were generally insulting: the Chinese were dishonest, cruel, inscrutable; China was a place of strange costumes and customs. Literally and morally, China was at the opposite end of the earth.<sup>1</sup> Bret Harte's "The Heathen Chinee" (1870) may well have been "the worst poem that anybody ever wrote," as Harte himself said, but it was tremendously popular, and its sly comic hero, Ah Sin, was one of only two Chinese characters – real or fictional – that most Americans had ever heard of. The other was Confucius, who was "known," if that is the right word, only as the author of a number of fairly silly aphorisms.

Devout Christians were no better informed than other Americans, but China had a special importance for them. Because it was the most populous nation on earth, China offered the greatest scope for redemptive effort. Many Protestant Christians in fact believed that the decisive battle with infidelity would be fought in China.

Protestant missionaries began arriving in the 1830s and 1840s. They came, typically, from the small towns of the Middle West, equipped with little more than religious fervor and the degrees they had recently earned at the modest sectarian colleges of Ohio and Michigan and Illinois. They represented all the major Protestant denominations: Congregationalists, Methodists, hardshell and softshell Baptists, several conventions of Lutherans, Northern and Southern Presbyterians, a few Unitarians and Episcopalians, a handful of Christian Scientists.<sup>2</sup>

It is virtually impossible to reconstruct the mixture of attitudes that led thousands of young men and women to China, or even to imagine the unlikely combination of provincialism and daring that defined them. Many of them kept diaries and journals, all of them wrote letters home, some of them published autobiographies. The testimony of their various accounts constitutes an absorbing group portrait, in which piety, fatigue, ambition, illness, disillusion, hope, discovery, homesickness, fundamentalism, and secularism alternate by turns. They uprooted themselves, left behind everything they had known, and lived for years and decades in a society they found inhospitable and utterly incomprehensible.

For most evangelists, the missionary calling satisfied a deep personal need for significant action.<sup>3</sup> Some were attracted by the undeniable glamour of foreign adventuring, and the occasional but real dangers that lay in wait in the Chinese countryside. Many were humanitarians who believed they could improve the lives of the Chinese even as they saved them from damnation. There were un-

doubtedly opportunists and hypocrites among them, but most were driven by the conviction that they were bringing light to people in darkness. They believed that their exertions would ultimately defeat Chinese heathenism and usher in the Second Coming.

Absalom Sydenstricker embodied the best and worst in the missionary vocation. He was a man of high intelligence and unyielding commitment, indifferent to his own welfare, fearless in the face of danger. He had only one motive. For a half-century, he traveled across central China, from one village and market town to another, relentlessly trying to persuade Chinese men and women to accept Jesus. From his arrival at Hangchow (Hangzhou) in 1880 to his death in Nanking (Nanjing) in 1931, he remained steadfast in his calling. He made few converts among people who found his version of the truth bewildering and often absurd. Nonetheless, despite fifty years of frustration, he clung to the conviction that China was an immense heathen territory ripe for salvation.

When she was a child, Pearl tended to see her father in heroic terms. As she grew older, she decided that he was a simple fanatic, touched with an apocalyptic fever. He had exhausted himself in the service of a futile ambition. He had spent decades in an ancient, complex, and dignified civilization and had seen only a stronghold of Satan. Pearl came to believe that her father was an unfortunately representative figure: "If his life has any meaning . . . it is as a manifestation of a certain spirit in his country and his time. For he was a spirit, and a spirit made by that blind certainty, that pure intolerance, that zeal for mission, that contempt of man and earth, that high confidence in heaven, which our forefathers bequeathed to us."<sup>4</sup> He was insensitive to beauty, to human weakness, to the needs of his family, even to his own suffering. Pearl acknowledged that Absalom's tenacity and sense of purpose had a kind of grandeur. However, his great gifts, his energy and undeniable courage, his sincerity, merely made the waste of his life more poignant.

The person most wounded by Absalom's misdirected idealism was his wife Carie. She had accompanied her husband to China, where she was homesick for the remaining forty years of her life. Pearl regarded Carie as the generous victim of Absalom's commitments, a woman whose life was embittered and shortened by her husband's single-minded and ultimately destructive devotion to his evangelical Work. (When Pearl later wrote about her parents' lives, she often capitalized Absalom's Work, for ironic rather than reverent reasons.)<sup>5</sup> Carie's emotionally impoverished marriage and exile provided Pearl a tragic example of the price that women pay for loyalty to codes and customs that oppress them. It was the most important lesson Pearl would ever learn. Carie Sydenstricker had died in the knowledge that her lifetime of self-denial had brought only suffering; her daughter would not, as Carie had done, collaborate in her own defeat.

Wherever she lived in China, in Hangchow, Chinkiang, or Nanking, Carie

always made a flower garden. These were places of beauty and refuge, walled off from the Chinese streets that surrounded them. Carie's gardens, to which she was passionately devoted, and to which Absalom was utterly oblivious, stood for Pearl as a symbol of the distance between her parents. Significantly, throughout the biographies she wrote of both Absalom and Carie, Pearl referred to herself as "Carie's daughter."

In the end, Pearl was inevitably shaped by both her parents. She rejected her father's religious beliefs and his narrow-mindedness, but she inherited his evangelical zeal, his sense of rectitude, his passion for learning. Though she stopped believing in Christian ideas of salvation, she became, in effect, a secular missionary, bringing the gospels of civil rights and cross-cultural understanding to people on two continents. She adored her mother, and took from her a belief in compassion, a stubborn antagonism to abstract creeds, and a commitment to the supreme importance of the family. But she turned away from Carie's conventionally female habits of deference and self-sacrifice. For better and sometimes for worse, the adult Pearl would combine much that was distinctive in both her mother and her father.

LIKE MOST MISSIONARIES, Absalom Sydenstricker was a marginal man. Born in August, 1852, on a farm in western Virginia, he was the second youngest of nine children. The family's ancestors had come from Germany, settling first in Pennsylvania, then moving south at about the time of the Revolution. The homestead was large, though steep hills and thin soil made it difficult to cultivate and unprosperous. There was always enough food, but rarely any money.<sup>6</sup>

Absalom's mother was a quiet woman who became increasingly detached from her large family as she grew older. In her later years, she communed with ghosts. Her husband was a fiercely religious man, always lecturing his family about God and the Devil. He recited aloud from Scripture in all his spare moments, and boasted that he read the entire Bible through every year. He was violent and quarrelsome, with a dangerous temper that drove his children off the farm as soon as they were old enough to move out. After they left, he would curse them for ingratitude.

Absalom was one of seven sons, six of whom became preachers. As a boy, he did his farm work diligently – one of his chores was taking grain to the local mill – but he resented the daily labor and his father's discipline. He loved the Virginia landscape and the changes of season, but he was often lonely and unhappy. His childhood seemed to him mainly a time of fear, anger, and self-doubt.

His earliest memory was a scene of humiliation. When he was six or seven years old, he heard himself called exceptionally ugly by a neighbor woman. The

woman consoled his mother by cheerily reminding her that there is usually a runt in every family. This episode loomed over Absalom's life as a symbol of his isolation. He spent his life bitterly insisting that virtue was more important than beauty or talent. Even in old age, he recalled his father as a man who frightened him, and his mother as a woman who seemed to love him less than his brothers and sisters. He retreated into books, partly as a way of escaping from his family, but partly because he had a real talent for learning. His boyhood attachment to reading would eventually lead to a career of modest distinction as a scholar and linguist.

During Absalom's adolescence, the Sydenstricker family was swept up in the turmoil of the Civil War. Four of his brothers, David, Hiram, Isaac, and John, fought for the Confederacy; two were wounded and Isaac suffered for months in a Union prison. Absalom was too young to enlist, but he mourned the Confederacy's defeat, and he maintained sympathy with the South's lost cause throughout his life. Because he missed the great testing of the war, he had further reason to doubt his adequacy. Foreign evangelism allowed him the compensation of lifelong combat against an enemy even more implacable than the Yankees. Fundamentalist Christians have always luxuriated in a rhetoric of constant strife and bloody battle. During his years in China, as he struggled to free pagan souls from Satan's grasp, Absalom would find those images especially appealing.

Absalom's childhood also defined his attitudes toward race. Though his family was poor, they had owned a couple of slaves, and they were untroubled by the moral evil that slavery involved. Absalom was taught to regard racial hierarchy as part of the natural order, which may explain his assured sense of superiority to Asians. He had been made to feel outcast and unattractive among his own people; when he went to China, he knew that he was the agent of a higher civilization.

Aside from fighting with each other and ridiculing abolitionists, the Sydenstrickers apparently had few habits or rituals in common. Religion was their one bond. Each Sunday, they marched dutifully off to the Old Stone Church in Lewisburg to hear the gloomy wisdom of a provincial Presbyterian preacher. Sometimes the service was conducted by a visitor, occasionally a missionary on home leave from China. Following one such service, when he was sixteen years old, Absalom decided that he had heard the call. He kept his vocation secret for several years to avoid conflict with his family. He knew that their conventional Christianity would be affronted at the idea of his going to China. Piety was acceptable and even admirable, but foreign evangelism was considered a form of extremism.

Like his older brothers before him, Absalom was obliged to stay on the farm until his twenty-first birthday. Then he enrolled in Washington and Lee College,

in Lexington, Virginia. He was older than the other undergraduates and far more serious in his work than most of them. Tall, red-haired, and extremely thin, he was easily noticed. However, he felt physically and socially awkward, and his habitual reserve was accentuated by his poor eyesight. He was nearsighted, a condition that Pearl eventually decided was symbolic. In any case, in college he kept mostly to himself. He made no friends, but he won "a drawer full of honors," as Pearl later described them. He had no money, and supported himself through the four-year course by working at a series of part-time jobs and living on short rations of bread and cheese. By denying himself any social life at all, he was able to accumulate a small library of books, most of them in history and theology. These were virtually his only possessions. On the day after his graduation, during his last night in the dormitory, a fire destroyed every book he owned.

Absalom returned home penniless. He tried without success to earn a living selling Bibles door-to-door, then announced his missionary intentions. As he had expected, his father found the idea outrageous tomfoolery. His mother, on the other hand, was more conciliatory, in part, apparently, as a way of defying her husband. She promised Absalom her support, but only on the condition that he marry before leaving for Asia. As he later told the story, he had never until that moment thought of marriage, but he agreed to find a wife.<sup>7</sup>

He went about the business of courtship by methodically inspecting the religious convictions of each of the young women he knew. He assumed, sensibly enough, that he needed a wife who shared his beliefs. He was attracted to a woman named Jennie Husted, who had sent him a letter warmly applauding his first sermon, which was published under the title "The Necessity of Proclaiming the Gospel to the Heathen, with Especial Reference to the Doctrine of Predestination." Absalom eventually passed over Husted, in spite of her theological good taste, and proposed to twenty-two-year-old Carie Stulting.

Carie was the descendant of Dutch immigrants. Her grandparents had come to America in the early nineteenth century, refugees from a rare outburst of Dutch religious persecution. Johann Stulting had been a prosperous Utrecht merchant who sold his business and led a band of three hundred pilgrims to the New World in search of religious liberty. The group included Johann's youngest son, Hermanus, and his French wife – Carie's father and mother. After pausing for a season in Pennsylvania, the larger portion of the immigrants eventually settled in Virginia. City people from birth, they learned how to do farm work and eventually prospered.

Carie was born in 1857, and lived with her family in a large white three-story house in what is today Hillsboro, West Virginia, a little town set in the foothills of the Shenandoah Mountains. When she was older, she loved to recall the big



maple tree that stood in the front yard and the apple orchard in back, the shelves of round Dutch cheeses and homemade berry wines. The rooms of the house were furnished handsomely, and the walls were decorated with etchings and drawings that her father had made. Bookcases were filled with volumes of poetry, fiction, and biographies. A piano in the front parlor brought the family together for song and laughter in the evenings. Carie learned to play quite skillfully; years later, she lightened the burden of her Chinese exile by coaxing music out of a small organ.

Unlike Absalom, Carie remembered the first few years of her childhood as a time of almost uninterrupted happiness. She was once punished – unjustly in her opinion – for breaking a serving dish when she was three years old. Aside from that single unpleasant episode, however, her early years moved in an agreeable round of play and easy chores. She grew up secure in her parents' affection and confident in her own talents.

In fact, there was a deep flaw in the Stulting family arrangements, but Carie only recognized it after she had grown up. She had especially admired her artistically gifted father because of his attachment to beautiful objects and his scrupulous personal cleanliness. However, because he didn't do his share of the farm's hard work, he doubled the labor of his oldest son, Carie's brother Cornelius. He was, furthermore, the only man in his community who changed his white shirt and collar every day. When she was much older, Carie realized the hardship that Hermanus's fastidious habits had implied. She told Pearl: "It did not occur to me until years later that, after all, there was something cruel about those white collars. Someone – our mother as long as she could and then one of the older girls – always had that collar and shirt to wash and iron every day, no matter how much canning or churning there might be on hand."<sup>8</sup> Carie came to believe that her mother's poor health had been caused in some measure by the charming Hermanus's demands.

The Civil War brought an end to the family's prosperity. Their farm was perilously exposed, lying just a few miles from the border between secessionist Virginia and the new state of West Virginia, which remained loyal to the Union. In a hopeless effort to stay out of harm's way, Hermanus announced that his family would simply remain neutral. Cornelius, who was old enough to fight but refused, spent the war years hiding in a cabin on nearby Droop Mountain. The Stulting farm was ravaged by North and South alike, repeatedly stripped of its food and supplies by hungry soldiers. At one point, the family was reduced to eating a soup made of dandelion greens and a handful of dried beans. Carie acknowledged the violence on both sides, but she was convinced that the Yankee troops were particularly savage. Though she was only eight when the war ended, she never forgave Lincoln or his field commanders. Decades later, in 1900, when

the Boxers murdered several hundred foreigners in China, Carie likened them to the armies of General William T. Sherman, who had burned a wide avenue of destruction across the South.

In an important sense, Carie's childhood ended with the war. She had seen bloodshed, starvation, and hate sweep aside the security of her early years. She was old enough to share in the pain and deprivation that settled on her region, but too young to play a part in the task of rebuilding. In particular, she was frustrated by her lack of schooling. All the schools had closed for the duration of the war, and she had received little formal education. She could barely read, and she could not write at all. In the war's grim aftermath, her brother Cornelius began a small school in which she quickly became the best pupil. She read every book she could find, and she also did well in the rudimentary science that Cornelius made available to her.

In the end, the pinched circumstances of the postwar years did not subtract much from Carie's sense of well-being. She had grown into a dark-haired, handsome young woman, an inch or two over five feet tall, ready to laugh, admired by most of the other people in her small community. She enjoyed her studies and felt that poverty was teaching her valuable lessons in self-reliance. Her principal anxiety was for her soul.

Carie spent a good deal of time worrying about God and salvation, and in this she was typical of the young people of her time and place. Some version or other of Christianity was inescapable in nineteenth-century rural America. Children sat through long church services at least once on Sunday, and they recited prayers and heard the Bible read two or three times each day at home. They were subject to continuous interrogation by parents and ministers who probed the state of their souls. The social life in their small communities revolved around the church. In short, young Americans grew up in a culture of piety that reached into every corner of daily life.

Carie would never embrace Christianity with Absalom's immense and solemn finality, but she was an earnest seeker. She wrote in her diary: "During the years between twelve and fifteen I used many times a week to go out into the woods behind the barn and creep into a little hollow in a clump of elderberries and throw myself down and cry to God for a sign – anything to make me believe in Him." Carie thought the sign might have come when her mother died in 1875, at the end of a long illness; she was half-convinced that God had entered the sickroom and eased her mother's last moments. In gratitude, she vowed to devote her life to God's service. She began to think of the foreign missions simply because such a vocation would require the greatest self-denial. Like many ardent young people who experience transports of high religious excitement, Carie instinctively equated personal discomfort with theological perfection.

At this rather precarious emotional moment, she met Absalom Sydenstricker,

now an ordained minister of the Southern Presbyterian Church. He had come to Hillsboro with one of his older brothers, who had been installed as the town's new Presbyterian minister. Carie was immediately attracted to the shy, studious younger brother, who kept himself detached from the visiting and gossip that made up Hillsboro's modest social life. She noted that he lacked a sense of humor, but was undisturbed since she regarded her own tendency to laughter as a warning that she might be morally frivolous.

Despite her growing affection for Absalom, Carie did not at first alter her own plans. She wanted more education than her brother's school could provide and, in 1877, she left Hillsboro to spend two years at the Bellewood Female Seminary, near Louisville. Years later, Pearl found two of the essays Carie had written at Bellewood. One was a commentary on Queen Esther that applauded the heroism of self-sacrifice. The other, which won a prize, was a compendium of religious dogma called "The Moral Evidences of Christianity." The light-hearted girl was trying to turn herself into a pious woman.

Like Absalom, Carie had kept her dreams of foreign evangelism secret. Like him, she also met the unequivocal opposition of her father when she made her announcement after returning from Bellewood. Hermanus's resistance only stiffened her own resolve; within a few months, she and Absalom were engaged, mainly on the basis of their shared commitment to a missionary career. If Absalom was capable of passion, Carie never saw the evidence, not even in these early days of their relationship. For her own part, she deliberately suppressed her passion in order to prove her religious sincerity – to herself as much as to God. In place of the more domestic expectations that most nineteenth-century women brought to marriage, Carie was elevated by an apocalyptic vision: she looked forward to "a harvest of dark, white-clad heathen being baptized" as a result of the good work she and Absalom would do together.<sup>9</sup>

CARIE AND ABSALOM were married on July 8, 1880, and almost immediately began the journey west to California where they would board a steamer for China. There was a moment of confusion at the train station because Absalom had forgotten to buy a second ticket. The little episode was comic, but it foreshadowed Absalom's behavior over the next four decades. As Pearl later wrote, he had obeyed his mother and found a wife, but he could never quite remember it.

Absalom had been given no help in preparing for his great undertaking: "Not a word had been said about the importance of being vaccinated; nothing was said about the currency used in China; nothing had been done . . . to secure reduced rates on railways or steamer; no passage had been secured for us."<sup>10</sup> The young couple had to make their way on their own.



1. Carie Stulting and Absalom Sydenstricker at about the time of their marriage in 1880.  
(Reproduced with permission of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation.)

They traveled across the Pacific on the *City of Tokyo*, which docked in Japan in mid-September. From there they transferred to an old sidewheeler that carried them over the Inland Sea and East China Sea to Shanghai. Carie was seasick through the entire voyage, as she would be each time she crossed the ocean. Absalom spent the trip studying Chinese. The Sydenstrickers, who were the first Presbyterian reinforcements to arrive in China in seven years, received a warm greeting from the small Christian community. They were initially assigned to Hangchow, a hundred miles southwest of Shanghai. They remained here for less than a year, living in a single room. The first of their children, a boy they named Edgar, was born in Hangchow in 1881.

A few months later, they moved to Soochow (Suzhou), where Absalom replaced Rev. H. C. Du Bose, who had gone back to the United States on home leave. When Du Bose returned, the Sydenstrickers were reassigned to Hangchow, where they spent the next year or so. They lived on the upper floor of a small but fairly comfortable bungalow in the missionary compound.

Like most foreigners, the Christian evangelists kept themselves separate from the native populations.<sup>11</sup> They built their houses behind tall brick walls that also

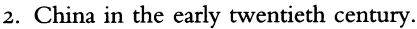
shielded their schools and clinics from the local people. Most of them seemed to fear and even despise the native population they had come to save. To his credit, Absalom always felt that the missionaries were too cloistered and prosperous. When he and Carie moved to Chinkiang in 1883, they chose to live outside the foreign settlement (though their house and garden, like those of Chinese gentry, were enclosed by a high wall). Beyond that, Absalom's endless itinerating brought him much closer to the experience of ordinary Chinese farmers and workers. When he wasn't traveling in search of souls, he conducted a boys' school and preached in a street chapel. Carie assisted in the work and tried to re-create as much of America as she could in a foreign land.

Years later, Pearl would write that "the real story of life in a mission station has never yet been told."<sup>12</sup> A small group of white men and women, living huddled together in an isolated compound amid thousands of indifferent or frankly suspicious Chinese, were reminded each day of their alienation.<sup>13</sup> Assigned without regard to their personalities or needs, the missionaries sometimes got along together in their strange, enforced intimacy, but often grew to loathe one another. Alcoholism, opium addiction, disease, incurable depression, and even madness were commonplace consequences of missionary duty, though they were seldom discussed openly. These were the risks that Absalom and Carie faced in China.

Reports about the Sydenstrickers appeared from time to time in the *Chinese Recorder*, a missionary magazine published in Shanghai beginning in the late 1860s. The *Recorder* was the most important of all the missionary publications, and its pages make up an indispensable source of information on the Western effort to evangelize China. It was published under slightly changing names, at first six times a year, then monthly until it expired in 1941.<sup>14</sup> The magazine's growth in the late nineteenth century reflected the expansion of the missionary enterprise; its termination marked the end of the Christian crusade in China.

The *Recorder's* articles range from ecclesiastical and bureaucratic arguments to studies of Chinese language, history, geography, politics, and culture. Almost every issue incorporates statistics: on conversions, baptisms, school enrollments, hospital beds. Essays on church organization and medical work as an evangelistic activity share space with lessons on etiquette and descriptions of Chinese flowers, even translations of *Poor Richard's Almanac* and Mother Goose rhymes into Chinese. The "Missionary News" provided personal information on the evangelists and their families: arrivals and departures, new assignments and furloughs, marriages, births and deaths. These unadorned, brief announcements summon a vanished world of struggle and faith.

The May-June 1881 issue of the *Recorder* announced the Sydenstrickers' assignment to Soochow. On the same page, the editors printed the following news story, also datelined Soochow: "A proclamation has lately been issued by the



District Governor warning the public not to molest the missionaries or the natives living at their chapels or school-houses. It has had the effect of stopping some of the abusive language so freely indulged in by the inhabitants of that city toward missionaries or their native assistants.”

Aside from suggesting the sorts of hostility the Sydenstrickers would face in their new home, this small item opens a window on an irreconcilable conflict. The curses that Chinese shouted against the missionaries were the consequence and symbol of frustrations that had been growing for generations. Absalom thought of the Chinese people as pagan “fields ripe for the harvest” who should be “gathered in”; in fact, it was revolution and not Christianity that was ripening across the Middle Kingdom.<sup>15</sup>

China in the second half of the nineteenth century was a deeply troubled country. Two centuries of Manchu rule had led to stagnation and a widespread conviction of national failure. The central government was notoriously corrupt. The imperial family lived in the splendid isolation of Peking’s Forbidden City, cut off from their own subjects by a gigantic, self-serving bureaucracy. Many in the small but influential group of Chinese intellectuals regarded Western science, technology, and politics with envious admiration, but there was no consensus on what should be done. Some wanted to abolish the monarchy, others to reform it; some continued to believe in the values of a modified Confucian teaching, while others insisted that Confucius must be replaced altogether. Whatever their disagreements, however, nearly all thoughtful Chinese accepted the proposition that broad changes were needed if China was to assume its proper place in the world.

Discontent had been catalyzed by the intrusions of Western economic and military forces. In a matter of decades, beginning in the early nineteenth century, China’s relationship with the rest of the world had been dramatically altered. China was one of the oldest continuous civilizations on earth; for most of its history, it dominated nearby nations and ignored the rest of the world. It did not seek foreign contacts either in trade or diplomacy, and it rarely welcomed visitors. The Ch’ien-lung Emperor (Qianlong), a contemporary of George Washington, declared in a famous edict: “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 manufactures of outside barbarians.”<sup>16</sup>

Chinese hostility to the West was based on an ancient and durable conviction of superiority. The language itself supported this view. The terms *hua* and *huaxia*, meaning “Chinese,” have overtones of culture and civilization; other societies were considered simply less human.<sup>17</sup> The Chinese believed that the Middle Kingdom was “the center of the universe”; consequently, in Warren Cohen’s words, they “regarded all cultural differences as signs of inferiority. All who were not Chinese were, obviously, barbarians.”

Since the barbarians were ignorant of Chinese values and norms, they were presumed to have “no values or norms at all. Logically, then, they could only be motivated by crude instinctive desires for food and sex, like animals. . . . [T]he Chinese saw them as quarrelsome, stubborn, greedy, and licentious, with little awareness of those finer human qualities, such as flexibility, moderation, kindness and consideration, which were so essential for the smooth functioning of human relationships.”<sup>18</sup>

Warren Cohen argues that the Chinese were “probably the most ethnocentric people in the world.”<sup>19</sup> Such an estimate is rather hard to dispute but even harder to verify: most societies seem to have adopted a view of themselves as occupying an especially blessed place in the scheme of things. Nonetheless, the general point remains clear. For many centuries, China had stood aloof from the West, complacent in its own self-sufficiency. Starting in the early 1600s, that situation was permanently changed, and by the nineteenth century merchants and traders began to arrive in greater numbers. In their wake appeared the diplomats who represented the power of Western governments, along with the armies and navies that protected commerce from Chinese resistance. China was being simultaneously opened and humbled.

The crisis came with the Opium War (1839–1842), which historian Jonathan Spence has called “the most decisive reversal the Manchus had ever received.”<sup>20</sup> British merchants demanded that the Chinese offer themselves as a market for the opium that was being grown and processed under British auspices in India. China’s refusal provoked a series of wars which ended in humiliating conquest by Western military forces. That defeat in turn led to the Treaty of Nanking, “the most important treaty settlement in China’s modern history.”<sup>21</sup>

The twelve main articles of this treaty secured far-reaching privileges and prerogatives for the British throughout Chinese territory. The United States and France quickly followed with their own demands, compelling China to accept similar agreements. Among other things, the unequal treaties, as they were called, forced China to submit to trading terms that ensured lopsided advantages for the West. Five coastal cities, Canton (Guangzhou), Foochow (Fuzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Ningpo (Ningbo), and Shanghai, were immediately opened to foreign residence and commerce; eventually, more than eighty cities were declared treaty ports. Even more significantly, the Chinese had to accept the concept of extra-territoriality. That is, Westerners were declared exempt from Chinese law; whatever crimes they committed on Chinese territory could only be prosecuted by Western authorities, according to Western laws and procedures.

Finally, the unequal treaties of 1860 guaranteed the right of Christian missionaries to teach their religion. Until this time, it had been illegal to preach the gospel in China; anyone caught doing so, whether Chinese or Western, risked punish-



ment and even execution. China's official attitude was based on its suspicion of foreign ideologies. Beyond that, the Chinese found Christianity especially offensive because of its universal and exclusive claims. Christians did not present their faith as one form of belief among many. Rather, they insisted that their god was the only one who actually existed; they ridiculed other gods, and demanded that other religions be exterminated. They also warned that only those who accepted their god would be saved; everyone else was condemned to eternal suffering. To most Chinese, such notions were bizarre at best, and probably dangerous.<sup>22</sup>

Every Christian sermon was an insult. Regardless of the preacher's motives, regardless of the respect and even affection he might have for the Chinese people, the doctrines he espoused were necessarily abusive to China's culture and traditions. George Santayana, one of Christianity's most strenuous Western critics, understood the demeaning implications of preaching: "A missionary sermon is an unprovoked attack; it seems to entice, to dictate, to browbeat, to disturb, and to terrify; it ends, if it can, by grafting into your heart, and leaving to fructify there, an alien impulse, the grounds of which you do not understand, and the consequences of which you never have desired."<sup>23</sup>

Suspicious Chinese asked missionaries why they had come. Perhaps understandably, they were not satisfied with the answer, "To preach the Gospel," since they had no idea what such a remark meant. Rumors surrounded the foreign evangelists, some of them grotesque: they had come to steal land or find slaves, or they worshiped a pig (a play on the word *chu* in *T'ien Chu*, Lord of Heaven), or they ate Chinese children, or they gouged out children's eyes to make sexual potions.<sup>24</sup>

When the Chinese did listen to Gospel stories, they often found them unpersuasive and even ridiculous. They were skeptical of the Virgin Birth both because it seemed absurd and because it undermined patriarchal authority. Also, since Christ couldn't identify the traitor in his group, was he a person of wise judgment? Since he couldn't protect even himself, could he protect others?<sup>25</sup>

The unequal treaties enabled missionaries to go about their evangelical business legally. Opposition continued, but it became local and often furtive, since Chinese who attacked preachers could now be arrested and punished. Because these new arrangements were enforced by threats of Western military action, missionaries were perceived as simply one part of the growing foreign presence that was reducing China to imperialist subjection.

Many missionaries tried to disentangle themselves from the gunboat diplomacy that was working the Western will on China, but others rationalized the use of force quite enthusiastically. According to historian Stuart Creighton Miller, missionary justification of armed force reflected a nineteenth-century "domino theory" about world religion:

China was the key to world-wide salvation. She was Satan's chief fortress, and the conversion of her huge population would topple pagan defenses elsewhere throughout the world and usher in the millennium. Scriptural warning that the devil's rout would involve turmoil and bloodshed made it that much easier to accept martyrdom as well as to convert the slaughter of countless thousands of "Satan's willing servants" by invading western armies into actions divinely inspired and directed.<sup>26</sup>

To be sure, not all missionaries held such bloodthirsty attitudes. The differences among them were in fact quite striking. Some embraced the idea of Western political supremacy in Asia, others rejected it; some served as agents for government and corporate officials, others refused; some held the whole of Asian culture in contempt, while others believed that – religion to one side – Asia had much to teach the West. Nonetheless, in spite of their particular disagreements, they could be accurately described as "cultural imperialists," since they endeavored to replace an indigenous system of values with their own religious and ethical ideas.

If the Chinese were powerless to resist Western religious incursions, they were able to protest, and they did so, in every available forum. In April, 1899, to give just one example, Wu T'ing-fang, the Chinese minister to the United States, gave a speech to a meeting of the American Academy of Political Science in Philadelphia. He successfully satirized the missionary invasion by reversing the national identities of the preachers and their prospective converts. He asked his audience to imagine that the Chinese had sent bands of Confucian evangelists to major American cities, and that these emissaries of Chinese beliefs had set up temples and schools, filled the afternoon air with their strange music, and converted as many Christians as they could to their Eastern beliefs. Minister Wu described the likely consequences:

If they were to begin their work by making vehement attacks on the doctrines of Christianity, denouncing the cherished institutions of the country, or going out of their way to ridicule the fashions of the day, and perhaps giving a learned discourse on the evil effects of corsets upon the general health of American women, it is most likely that they would be pelted with stones, dirt and rotten eggs for their pains.

Wu asked his audience to consider what would happen if these foreign missionaries demanded police protection and guarantees of safety from Washington. "I verily believe that such action would render the missionaries so obnoxious to the American people as to put an end to their usefulness, and that the American government would cause a law to be enacted against them as public nuisances."<sup>27</sup>

WHEN ABSALOM SYNDENSTRICKER came to China, he saw himself only as an agent of his god. To many Chinese, on the contrary, he was an agent of imperialism, a threat to civil order, a public nuisance. Like many zealots, he was

undaunted by the resistance his doctrines encountered. He even seemed to welcome hostility: after all, the struggle with darkness was supposed to be fierce. In any case, the more serious obstacle he and all the Christian missionaries faced was not Chinese hatred but Chinese indifference. The handful of those who accepted Christianity, and the larger handful of active opponents, were dwarfed by the great masses of people who simply ignored the odd-looking missionaries and their curious ideas.

Absalom's arrival in 1880 followed decades of proselytizing that had produced the most meager results. He joined upwards of one thousand missionaries, who had made probably fewer than ten thousand converts altogether. A somewhat more successful future lay ahead, but the numbers of converts would remain paltry.<sup>28</sup> In the first three decades of this century, during the high tide of missionary influence, the number of missionaries passed eight thousand, working under the auspices of several hundred separate missionary societies. The sheer number and variety of Protestant sects, each insisting on its exclusive possession of divine truth, led mainly "to the great confusion of the Chinese," as Pearl Buck herself pointed out.<sup>29</sup> There were never more than a million Chinese Christians in a population that was approaching a half-billion.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, many of the converts were undoubtedly "rice Christians," less interested in doctrine than in the health care, food, and jobs that baptism often brought in its wake.

Though the direct influence the missionaries had on Chinese beliefs was relatively slight, they played an important cultural role on both sides of the Pacific. In China, the 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.<sup>31</sup> Jerome Ch'en has claimed that the missionaries, for example, "were the first to draw Chinese attention to the irrational, traditional ways in which men treated women. Polygyny, infanticide, foot-binding and the exclusion of women from education all came under attack from the churches."<sup>32</sup> More generally, John King Fairbank argued that missionaries anticipated the Chinese Communist efforts at "the acquisition and Sinification of western knowledge for use in remaking Chinese life."<sup>33</sup> The somewhat ironic case can be made that the missionaries helped to ignite the revolution that would ultimately eradicate them from China.

The political implications of missionary activity were invisible to Absalom Sydenstricker. From the beginning of his long career to the end, he regarded the Chinese only as the object of his religious ministrations. Everything he did, including his rather impressive scholarly work, was propelled by his evangelical ambitions. He mastered the Chinese written language and several spoken dialects, solely as an aid to his preaching.

Even in the context of his fellow missionaries, Absalom represented a con-

servative point of view. He defended an older orthodoxy that was dogmatic and otherworldly. He was a biblical literalist, and showed almost no interest in the currents of modernism and liberalism that were reshaping Christianity in the late nineteenth century. Many Protestant evangelists tried to adjust their conceptions of Christianity to accommodate the new ideas of social science and Darwinian biology. Absalom remained contemptuous of all such compromises; he called evolution "devilution," and insisted that the Bible contained all the knowledge anyone needed.

He had no interest in the connections between biblical language and historical circumstance, which sometimes led to humorous standoffs. For example, China had few sheep, and Chinese considered sheep cowardly and stupid animals in any case. On the other hand, the dragon had long been regarded in China as an imperial and even divine creature. So, Bible passages that exalted sheep and disparaged dragons were met with disbelief and contempt.<sup>34</sup> Absalom refused to compromise with this sort of heathen ignorance.

He was, in addition, energetically opposed to any involvement in direct social action, an attitude that separated him from many of the missionaries who came to China in the years after he did. To his dying day, he scolded proponents of the Social Gospel for confusing their sacred obligations with such ephemeral activities as education and health care.

Though he was rigid and unyielding in his religious convictions, Absalom's personal manner was usually reserved and even mild. His Chinese audiences, and his children, were often startled by the change that came over him when he stood up to preach. Then he was transformed into a fiery prophet, demanding that the Chinese give up their superstitions and welcome Jesus Christ as their savior.

Most new missionaries spent two years in language study before preaching to the Chinese. Because of his linguistic gifts, Absalom preached his first Chinese sermon just six months after he arrived in the country. Within the English-speaking community, he quickly established himself as something of an authority on the language. Beginning in 1887, he published a series of articles on oral and written Chinese in the *Chinese Recorder*. His subjects included "Variations in the Spoken Language of Northern and Central China," "Southern Mandarin," and "The Dialect of the River and Grand Canal."<sup>35</sup> These are brief, reliable surveys of the major regional differences in Chinese pronunciation, derived from Absalom's own traveling in the countryside. "I have," he wrote, "made it a matter of some care to study the Chinese sounds and their variations from Ningpo to Kalgan, and have certainly convinced myself, if no one else, that the colloquial pronunciation changes more or less every few hundred *li*,<sup>\*</sup> and is of almost infinite variety. . . ."<sup>36</sup>

\*One *li* is about one-third of a mile.

Absalom's preoccupation with colloquial speech determined his opinion in the great debate over biblical translation. He vigorously opposed the use of *wen-yan*, or classical Chinese, on the pragmatic grounds that only a few people in the entire country could read it. In an April, 1888 article in the *Chinese Recorder*, in which he reviewed a new Mandarin version of the Gospel, Absalom wrote: "I am strongly of the opinion . . . that a Mandarin version [of the Gospel] ought to be *thoroughly colloquial* – one that, when read, as in public worship, could be understood as far as possible, even by the illiterate."<sup>37</sup>

Absalom's arguments were learned but completely utilitarian in their purposes. He wanted a Chinese Bible that could be read by more people than just the Confucian literati, and he wanted missionaries who could be understood. The mastery of colloquial and dialectal varieties of Chinese, he wrote, "is highly practical and useful to the missionary as he daily mixes among the people."<sup>38</sup> He would spend many hours over the next thirty years preparing his own translation of the New Testament.

Few American evangelists mixed among the people more energetically than Absalom Sydenstricker. He traveled the countryside, his hair in a long Chinese-style queue, riding a donkey so small that his feet barely cleared the ground. During several of his years in China, Absalom spent more days in the field than at home; he was sometimes gone for a month at a time. To him, these long absences were a signal of his high calling. To his wife, they counted as neglect.

Even when he was home, he was often unavailable to his wife and children. He needed time and privacy to work on his sermons and biblical translations. He also needed money, for books and paper, and grudged his family every dollar spent on clothing or birthday presents. Like other outlanders, on the American frontier and overseas, the Sydenstrickers had copies of the Montgomery Ward mail-order catalogues. For years, Pearl hoped for a baby doll pictured in the catalogue, but she was afraid to ask, and the doll never appeared.<sup>39</sup>

When Absalom went off itinerating, Carie was left alone with her children. The only adults she saw were her Chinese servants and an occasional missionary visitor. She had ample occasion to contemplate the strange outcome of her life. One summer, searching for relief from the heat, she spent several nights in a rented room in a hilltop Buddhist temple. Looking out of the small round window, she pondered the scene before her, the flagstone path and bamboo grove, the enormous incense urn and the chanting, gray-robed priests, and contrasted these alien images wearily with the open meadows and distant hills of her childhood home.<sup>40</sup>

The early years in China severely tested Carie's faith and her physical strength. In September, 1884, her second child, a daughter named Maude, died in infancy. Carie seems to have blamed her death on China and, indirectly at least, on Absalom and his religion. At about the same time, her own health was perma-

nently broken by malaria, dysentery, and a nearly fatal case of tuberculosis. These sorrows drew a line across Carie's spiritual life; from then on, her religious devotion was replaced by skepticism. She decided she had made a tragic mistake in leaving her family and country. She considered returning to America, but elected instead to honor her commitment to her marriage.<sup>41</sup> Her life became a mystery to her, and the world seemed darker. Nearly a century later, when her youngest daughter, Grace, was asked to describe Carie, she replied instantly that she remembered her as especially sad.<sup>42</sup> "I remember her . . . sitting at the piano, or the organ, playing and having to give up because she would begin to weep."<sup>43</sup>

Carie's pain was multiplied by her husband's contempt for her as a woman. Perhaps Absalom was no worse in his attitudes than many other nineteenth-century fundamentalists, but his wife felt the sting of his misogyny throughout her entire married life. He was a man who wished his daughters had been sons; who walked out of church if a woman spoke; who refused to let his wife write a check.

If he had been born in an earlier generation, Pearl later wrote, "he would have burned witches." He harbored "a deep unconscious sex antagonism in him, rooted in no one knows what childhood experiences and fostered, sad to say, by the presence of Carie, that flashing quick mind which he could never comprehend, but against which he struggled to maintain himself. For he could not bear better than another man a woman more clever than himself. Besides, Saint Paul justified him."<sup>44</sup>

Saint Paul ultimately became for Pearl the source and symbol of sexual inequality. Absalom was "imbued," she wrote later, "with the Pauline doctrine of the subjection of the woman to the man and to him it was enough if she kept his house and bore his children and waited on his needs."<sup>45</sup> Pearl's eventual rejection of Christianity had its deepest roots in her irreconcilable anger against traditional Christian views of women. She had watched Carie tormented by the continuous punishment of a theology that belittled her humanity. In one of the most bitter passages she ever wrote, Pearl declared: "Since those days when I saw all her nature dimmed I have hated Saint Paul with all my heart and so must all true women hate him, I think, because of what he has done in the past to women like Carie, proud free-born women, yet damned by their very womanhood."<sup>46</sup>

Carie's grief and doubt never threatened Absalom's serene sense of purpose. Indeed, the most striking and poignant reality of their marriage was the cruel distance that separated Absalom's unshakable tranquility from Carie's abiding regret. He knew that he had made the right choice; she knew with equal certainty that she had chosen badly.

Chinkiang, where the Sydenstrickers lived in the mid-1880s, was a strategically