

PEARL S. BUCK

and the Forgotten Holocaust of the Two-Ocean War

When the United States entered World War II, Pearl S. Buck was at the peak of her success. During the previous decade she had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize (1932), the Howells Medal for the best novel (1930–1935), and the Nobel Prize for Literature (1938). Most of her books published in the 1930s had become international bestsellers, selling millions of copies and proving that critics were not alone in their appreciation of ‘the daughter of pious missionaries on a journey from obscurity and poverty to world fame’ (Conn, 1996: 381). In 1939 Buck had published to widespread acclaim one of the first American novels to describe the Communists’ Long March and the Japanese invasion of China; its title was *The Patriot*, yet it contained an indictment of the conflation of patriotism and imperialism that Buck detected both in Japan *and* in the United States. Pearl S. Buck—who was born in West Virginia in 1892 but had been raised in China by her missionary parents—was keenly aware from the beginning that World War II was ‘a two-ocean war’ that could only be grasped in the light of the legacy of European colonialism. During the summer of 1941, she wrote *Dragon Seed*, a novel which depicted the Japanese sack of Nanking in 1937 and engaged issues of nationalism and male violence from a gendered perspective. Buck hoped to promote American awareness of the Chinese fight for freedom with this novel, knowing that the tragic events that took place in Nanking after the fall of the city were virtually unknown in the United States. Despite its original propagandistic intent, I would argue that

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Dragon Seed succeeds—as Buck’s novels often do—in problematizing the notion of national identity, foregrounding the sexual politics of war.

With timely foresight, *Dragon Seed* was published one month after the Pearl Harbor attack, in January 1942, and was met with the same critical success Buck had enjoyed when she had published *The Good Earth* ten years earlier. The story told in *Dragon Seed* starts in 1937 and follows the inexorable advance of the Japanese army into Chinese territory, until the capture of the former capital of the Chinese Republic, the city of Nanking, scene of one of the most vicious massacres of the World War II. The novel centers upon a family of farmers in a small town a few miles from Nanking. Ling Tan, a man of almost sixty, is the family’s patriarch. He has survived unscathed through the revolts that shook China in the first decades of the twentieth century. Ling Tan’s world is a timeless agricultural utopia, where customs and values are passed on seamlessly across generations. A large family surrounds him: his wife Ling Sao, his children, two daughters-in-law, and a son-in-law, as well as a much wider community comprising uncles, cousins, and neighbors. Ling Tan’s world comes to an end on December 13, 1937, when the Japanese army occupies Nanking.

The central section of the novel chronicles the six weeks of massacres that annihilated the civilian population. Instead, the final part describes the gradual setup of a Chinese Resistance, hindered by internal conflict between the Communists and the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek. The account of the Rape of Nanking allows Buck to add one more piece to her own portrayal of the devastation brought about by any form of nationalism. What comes to the surface with unmatched intensity in the pages of *Dragon Seed* is the urgent need to consider the implications of gender-related violence carefully.

What happened in Nanking in the last weeks of 1937 is still very much an object of historiographical contention between scholars who dispute the alleged extent of the death toll and those who estimate that there were between 260,000 and 350,000 civilian casualties in the massacre that Japanese soldiers inflicted on Nanking after the city had already surrendered to the invaders, following the Chinese retreat (Hu, 2000: 82). In 1937, news

of the event was barely covered by the US media, all wrapped up in assessing the possible European outcome of the World Crisis: 'the depth of Japanese barbarity seemed so extraordinary that many readers were inclined to doubt the report' (Brook, 1999: 11). Sixty years were to elapse before Iris Chang's influential study—entitled *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (1997)—would bring the atrocities of Nanking to international attention.

Pearl Buck was keenly aware of the massacre from the start. She had worked in Nanking—capital of the Chinese Republic between 1928 and 1937—as an English literature professor for more than ten years, and she was still in touch with a number of correspondents. Mounting evidence on the Nanking events, together with her own awareness of Western indifference (it was an act of war that many observers in the West blithely continued to disregard until Pearl Harbor), led Buck to write a novel with a definite agenda. She intended to attract public opinion on the events of the war in China and to call for much stronger diplomatic effort on the part of the United States. The Nanking events led her to abandon—in part, at least—her deconstructive study of national identities present throughout her production, from *East Wind: West Wind* to *The Patriot*. It was now time for her to insist on the ruthlessness of Japanese violence and on the need for prompt international intervention in support of the Chinese Resistance. This is the first occasion in which Buck seemed willing to offer a positive, or at least not wholly negative, account of Western presence in China. Yet she never allowed her readers to forget that the roots of the conflicts which agitated the world were to be found 'in the old evil of empire and colonization' (Buck, 1954: 106). She wrote about it even in *My Several Worlds*, her autobiography published in the 1950s, a challenging decade in which—after the 'loss of China' and the beginning of the most virulent phase of McCarthyism—Buck's activities were closely monitored by the FBI (Mitgang, 1996). In *My Several Worlds*, Buck frames the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor with the description of a meeting with a Japanese friend of hers, Mr. Yamamoto, who lived in the United States and supported Japanese expansion in Asia, arguing that 'every Asian country has either been seized by a Western power, as India has been, or it has been despoiled

and weakened by excessive demands and the Unequal Treaties and frightful indemnities as China has been' (Buck, 1954: 107). Buck had met Yamamoto after she relocated to New York in 1934. Her reading of Pearl Harbor is thus immediately set in the wider context of the transoceanic routes of Western imperialism:

Many years later, on a bright Sunday afternoon in December in Pennsylvania I heard that Japanese bombs had fallen upon Pearl Harbor. I remembered instantly the words of Mr. Yamamoto, spoken so long ago, and again I saw the path of history clear from the very first Portuguese vessel that sailed the seas to maraud on the coasts of Asia to the Japanese ships of the air flying to destroy as much as they could of the strongest Western power in the world. Step by step, cause always preceding result, history marches on. (Buck, 1954: 107)

Even scholars who, like Karen J. Leong, are not always persuaded by Buck's ability to deconstruct the tropes of American orientalism, admit that 'Buck's willingness to negotiate the difficult landscape of race relations, and her demand that race relations be understood within the context of Western imperialism and colonization, pushed Americans to reflect on their own national community [...]' (Leong, 2005: 56). As we shall see, in *Dragon Seed* Buck does more than this and becomes one of the first American writers to explore the intimate connection between gender and imperialism.

1. *DRAGON SEED* (1942)

In the first part of the novel, war is but faint background noise. Two generations are set on stage, one beside the other: a couple of old farmers, Ling Tang and Ling Sao, and their five children. Together, they share the family home and work in the fields. In 1937, Ling Tan and his wife are almost sixty. They have grown up during the long reign of Empress Ci-Xi, from 1861 to 1908, and have resignedly witnessed the decades of political turmoil that ensued. Yet the new war will turn out to be wholly unlike others. Its impact on civilians is disastrous. In the fall of 1937, alarmed at the advance of the Japanese, Chiang Kai-Shek's national government abandoned Nanking, together with almost all the foreigners and many Chinese residents. In a few days, the number of inhabitants dropped from one million to less than half a million. The flight of Westerners fueled fear among the villagers, since it forebode

bloody confrontations of the kind that had occurred under similar circumstances in the past: '[A]ny news he heard was not good, and the worst of all was that at last even the white foreigners were leaving the city. Now Ling Tan knew [...] that when foreigners left the city it was as though rats leave a ship' (Buck, 1943: 94). For days, a relentless flow of refugees traversed the countryside around Nanking. Many were young students resolved to join a rebel group whose description seems to match the fourth Communist army. Troubled by reports of the Japanese army's brutality, Lao Er and his wife Jade joined one of these groups.

The rest of the family decided to stay behind. Ling Tang would rather face the risk of plunder than leave behind the only land he knows and cherishes. With other farmers from the village, he decides to face the enemy on friendly terms. He is not afraid of different nationalities. He still remembers the persecution he was subjected to in the past by soldiers of his own country: 'he knew that when a man becomes a soldier he ceases to be a man and goes back to the beast he was in some other life' (Buck, 1943: 103). However, Ling Tan soon realizes that what is going on has no precedents in his own experience. The most horrific type of warfare innovation is the systematic recourse to rape and torture against tens of thousands of unarmed civilians. After Japanese soldiers have reached the village, it becomes obvious that it is the women they are after. The first rape Buck depicts is inflicted on Ling Tan's daughter's mother-in-law, who is too slow to take flight with the rest of the family. From their hiding place, Ling Tan and his wife can hear what is going on: 'It was a scream, which at first they thought was one of the two pigs, for it sounded like a pig stuck for butchering. Then they heard a word or two and a gurgle and a long moan, and they knew what it was' (Buck, 1943: 118).

Women can escape aggression in one place only: behind the walls of an American university turned into a shelter under the protection of the international community. Ling Sao and his daughters are given a warm reception by a female missionary whom Buck leaves unnamed. To the refugees, she is 'the white woman', an odd creature who speaks fluent Chinese but often refers to a mysterious Lord she professes to worship. Her attachment to this Lord remains utterly incomprehensible to Chinese

women. Here Buck does not voice her conviction, often expressed in her essays instead, that missionary presence in China was useless and counterproductive. In the pages of *Dragon Seed*, we come across a character whose evangelizing zeal turns out, for once, to be valuable to the Chinese.

As a matter of fact, Buck was thinking of a real person: Minnie Vautrin, a missionary born in Illinois in 1886 who had lived in Nanking between 1919 and 1940. After most of the university population had left the city, Vautrin had turned the buildings of the *Ginling Women's Arts and Science College*, which she managed, into the main shelter area within the Safety Zone. She had negotiated with the Japanese command to ensure the protection of the more than 10,000 women who had taken refuge there. During the weeks in which the Safety Zone remained in operation, Buck kept a diary, large extracts of which she used to send to her American correspondents. Undoubtedly, Buck's reconstruction of occupied Nanking is indebted to Vautrin's chronicles. In one of the episodes described both in Vautrin's letters and in Buck's novel, the Japanese threaten to break into the college unless one hundred 'prostitutes' chosen among the Ginling women are handed over to them. Vautrin agreed to their request, in the vain hope that this would protect the women who remained. In the novel, the number of women involved is in fact cut down: in the fictional retelling of the event, some real prostitutes, who had survived the first mass rape where most of their companions had been murdered, offer themselves to martyrdom. As they leave, to the missionary who salutes them saying 'God take you into Heaven for this!', they reply 'Your God does not know us' (Buck, 1943: 113), a comment very much in line with Buck's own thinking. Buck's novel is thus intended partly as a tribute to Minnie Vautrin, who was in China for the wrong reason (a missionary ideal Buck had by then publicly rejected), and yet succeeded in protecting thousands of women while helplessly watching the violence to which tens of thousands of other women were subjected. What Vautrin saw in those weeks devastated her. She committed suicide in the spring of 1941, while Buck was working on the draft of *Dragon Seed*. Also in Buck's novel, the nameless white foreigner who directs the shelter decides to take her own life, annihilated by a sense of failure that

the international community's indifference towards the events at Nanking greatly exacerbates.

2. MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE

As she depicts more and more episodes of rape in the central section of her novel, Buck interestingly eschews either extreme: she does not omit information—which would weaken our perception of the massacre—and yet avoids detailed descriptions of the mutilations and the torture inflicted on civilians, even though violence of this kind had been amply recorded in many photographs Japanese soldiers had taken and sent back home as war trophies (Chang, 1997: 143–157). Buck uses a form of descriptive economy whose impact builds up episode after episode, rape after rape, so that, paradoxically, horror is amplified by virtue of the subdued tone in which it is told. The death of Ling Tan's elder daughter, who leaves the Safety Zone stealthily thinking the worse is over and is gang-raped by a group of soldiers, gives us an example of this type of writing:

When one after the other those men took their will on her, and no passer-by dared to come into that public place to save her when once they had stared in and seen five soldiers with their guns against the wall, then she was like a rabbit fallen upon by wolfish dogs, and she was helpless. She screamed and then they beat her, and one held his hand over her nose and mouth, and she struggled only a little and then her life went out as easily as a little rabbit's does, and the last man had to use her dead. (Buck, 1943: 157)

The young mother raped by thirty soldiers after her baby is killed before her very eyes; the young girls raped and dismembered; the men tortured and shot for no reason; Ling Tan's own younger son raped by soldiers while family members are forced to watch helplessly: episodes of violence against unarmed and powerless people recur. Moved by the wish to remember what has been named the 'forgotten holocaust' of World War II and to attract public opinion in the United States to support the Chinese cause, Buck is nonetheless forced to stage the very clash of national identities she had endeavored to disprove in all her previous works. The brutality of what happened to Nanking's people under Japanese rule in the first six tragic weeks cannot be played down. However,

what Buck sets out to do in the pages of *Dragon Seed* is to place such brutality within the much wider context of gendered violence, which goes far beyond national identities. Such elaborate reconfiguration of what lies deep beneath the man-woman relationship is achieved through the character of Ling Tan. To his dismay, he realizes that some of his fellow-citizens take accounts of violence against women as a source of curiosity and thrill:

... he looked about him and he found that the men he knew were of two kinds, and some were like him and his son, and there were others who were stirred to greater lust because of all the evil they heard, and so he knew that men are good or evil in their hearts, whatever others think they are, and such times show them out. (Buck, 1943: 142)

Male fascination with violence does not seem to know national or political boundaries. Buck is bold enough to highlight this fact even in a book that largely centers upon the conflict between nations and value systems. To Buck, the plunder that goes with the passage of armies led by the many war lords was a painfully familiar sight. She had witnessed this ever since she was a child and had grown sensitive to the different responses violence triggers in men and women. In a book entitled *Of Men and Women* (1941), she had already written of how, at a deeper, core level, men love war. There she had provided an analysis of gendered identity construction in the United States, combining themes from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938)—a constant watermark in her text—with keen observations on American culture, its rites, and its contradictions. In fact, one of the chapters is dedicated to 'Women and War', on the assumption that it is necessary to build and to spread a culture of peace to contrast the prevailing male view, which is rooted in the cult of conflict and abuse.

Habituated to war, conditioned to it as an inevitability, trained to consider it an opportunity for his highest heroism, man can scarcely be expected to look cold-bloodedly at what has for so long been his best chance for excitement, freedom and glory. The Nazi belief of catharsis of war for men may be partly true. It is a human necessity to find a certain release of self in sacrifice of self. Anyone is happier who does not live for himself alone. (Buck, 1941: 152)

In this passage Buck exposes the cultural roots of male love of violence: men are *habituated* to war, they are *conditioned* and *trained* to consider aggressivity one of the attributes of proper masculine behaviour. *Of Men and Women* offers a cogent critique of traditional paradigms of masculinity (and femininity). At the same time it is undeniable that at times Buck seems to assume that the two sexes have intrinsically different psychological attitudes, and she implies that all men belong to the same category and that their maleness is shaped by universal values and desires. She discusses 'what *men* like' and writes that 'the habit of men's minds is toward war' (141). It would thus be possible to associate her with an essentialist view of identity, but it would be largely inaccurate. In 1941 Buck was developing her own feminist vocabulary in a political context in which she detected a deadly combination of racism and sexism—'the ripples of the wave of fascist thinking already to be found here' (167)—which represented in her eyes the real menace to Western democracies. One of her priorities was thus to contribute to an alternative, antiracist representation of 'American personality', a project that was deeply influenced by cultural anthropology.

Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934)—with its explorations of cultures in search of the 'ideal' personality types—provided Buck with a relativistic and anti-essentialist paradigm defined by the analysis of the way in which cultures set up parameters and encourage certain personality traits, yet are never uniform nor static. While she was writing *Of Men and Women*, Buck reviewed Benedict's *Race: Science and Politics* and praised its relentless debunking of 'the fallacious belief that one race can prove itself superior to another on any scientific ground' (Buck, 1940: 613). The same demystifying approach is applied to the categories of what we would now call *gender* (but Buck would probably have defined, following Benedict and Mead, *temperament* or *character*). The unequivocal anti-essentialist stance which characterizes Buck's descriptions of racial, ethnic, or national features is less clear-cut when it comes to gender differences, but if we read her work in the context of the theories of sex developed in the 1930s (Margaret Mead's influential *Sex and Temperament* had been published

in 1935), we can appreciate her awareness of the impact of social prescriptions on individual interpretations of gender.

It is in the context of the dominant theories of masculinity of her times that Buck recognizes in the carnage of war a double function for male subjectivity: warfare endows men with a power unknown to most in a time of peace and enables them to approach their own sense of finitude by putting their lives at risk. Men are made to experience the erotic intoxication of self-destruction at the very time they are chosen to judge the life of others: 'It is as though in the dark places of his being there hides always the awareness of his end, and that awareness leads him, as moth to candle, to approach death again and again' (Buck, 1941: 153). In terms that recall *Horrorism*, Adriana Cavarero's recent study in which the Italian philosopher tackles the issue of contemporary wars from a feminist perspective, in *Dragon Seed* Buck adopts the point of view of the helpless victims and deconstructs the rhetoric of the warrior that even today informs the representation of war (Cavarero, 2011: 2). Following on the gender analysis developed in *Of Men and Women*, Buck ascribes the cruelty of collective episodes of violence of the kind experienced in Nanking to the need for self-sacrifice, a person's need to momentarily abdicate the illusion of an autonomous self. Such illusion comes from a failure to acknowledge dependency and relationship as constitutive features of identity. Like Cavarero, Buck refuses to adopt 'the warrior's point of view' and offers a gendered analysis of the embodied experience of violence and fear. In her nonfiction Buck argues that women are made to encounter the fragile materiality of existence in those 'dark places' where the self is dissolved to become 'other' through maternity:

... when she has a child she goes down into a simple and elemental experience which drives self away, which divides that self into another and brings all life into its simplest primeval terms [...] She goes down to the gates of death and she comes back triumphant over death. But man has no equivalent of this experience, and his being craves it and he devises it out of war. (Buck, 1941: 153)

We could of course read this passage simply as an essentialist statement, and point out the theoretical contradictions in Buck's argument. There are many. Yet here the writer is also striving

toward a reevaluation of the political potentiality of women's experience. Buck hesitates between her awareness of the cultural roots of gender roles and the attempt to offer a definition of womanhood that emphasizes strength and success ('she comes back triumphant over death'). At the same time, the vulnerable body of an infant forces women to question 'the philosophical postulate of an autonomous sovereign subject that, like the State to which it corresponds, thinks of itself as closed and self-sufficient' (Cavarero, 2011: 21). By doing this, Buck avoids the pitfall of ascribing violence and self-destruction to the 'natural' sphere of death drives. Instead, she ties them firmly to culture. The male gender is enjoined to acknowledge the ruthlessness of war and to endeavor to create a nonviolent model of identitarian affirmation, able to erase and supplant the delight of butchery (Buck, 1941: 153). The possibility of setting up new models of masculinity and femininity, together with a renewed relationship between genders, is the hope Buck embraces in the wake of the Nanking massacre. To her, it is the only way to break the vicious circle of violence that nationalism and the various strains of nationalist-inspired imperialism—including American imperialism—inevitably beget.

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