Pearl S. Buck Beyond *The Good Earth*: Her Missionary Father and an Answer to the Question: "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?"

As part of my research for *The Missionary Factory*, I felt it my duty to read *The Good Earth*, since its author, Pearl S. Buck, was the child of a missionary father, and the book, published in 1932, has been so influential in the United States and throughout many parts of the world. And it continues to be here, to some extent, in popular-reading circles, despite the fact that, as Hilary Spurling wrote in *Pearl Buck in China: Journey to* The Good Earth, published in 2010, "her novels have been effectively eliminated from the American literary map."[1] There is no place for her in the feminist canon, for example, Spurling observed. And as if to cement Buck's place in the sea-level portion of the literary firmament, in 2004, *The Good Earth* was an Oprah's Book Club pick.

For those who need a gloss of its narrative line, the book tells the life story of Wang Lung, a Chinese peasant who is born poor at the end of the nineteenth century and has grown rich as a farmer by the time of the Japanese invasion in the 1920s. In the end, as he lies dying, his sons promise they will never sell that good earth of his, but, it is understood, they are cunningly planning to do exactly that. A movie version of the book was released in 1937, but I have never seen it, and will have to brace myself if I choose to see it now. I have learned how far from the novel it strays and that all the main characters are played by non-Asian actors.

For myself, I found the novel workmanlike, or perhaps I should say work*woman*like. She begins with her ground situation and then plows ahead (no pun intended), hitting all the cultural markers (polygamy, opium) that she wants to represent. I imagine that when it was published it was a tour de force. Readers weren't used to reading about the life of Chinese peasants and were largely ignorant of it. Occasionally, I tired of the book, but I continued not only because, again, I felt it my duty to read it, but because, it being a good "yarn," I did "want to see what happened next."

I was disappointed that there was only one brief mention of a missionary, described as a tall foreigner in Western clothing. In 1936, however, Buck published *Fighting Angel: Portrait of a Soul,* a memoir of her father, Absalom Andrew Sydenstricker (1852-1931), and that's where I found some useful information relevant to my project, even though he was not educated at the seminary here in Andover.

As a sixteen-year-old, Andrew (as he is called in the book, although he wasn't in his lifetime) heard the preaching of a missionary from China at a church in West Virginia, where he was born and raised, and determined, against his parents' wishes, that he, too, would become a missionary. Eventually, in 1879, just before his graduation from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, he was accepted by the Southern Presbyterian Mission Board. His trial sermon, "The Necessity of Proclaiming the Gospel to the Heathen, with Especial Reference to the Doctrine of Predestination," had been published in a church newspaper; he may have gained a leg up from that. A month later, after an arranged marriage, he and his wife, Caroline (in the book, called Carie), were on their way to China. He was, in Buck's telling, a charming but arrogant and blatantly misogynistic man who, for instance, believed his new wife would not have suffered her seasickness for long on that first voyage if she had only tried hard enough to overcome it. "But in her case," he told Buck, "she allowed seasickness to become aggravated so that she never really

recovered."[2] As for Andrew, he "was never ill in any way," she claimed.[3] Surely, a miracle for a missionary in a foreign land.

Buck also claimed that he was intolerant of "race superiority."[4] Again, a rarity. And that's why, she says, he was treated poorly by other missionaries and considered them his enemies. In any event, he was out in the field for many weeks at a time, leaving alone Carie and their eventual children, including Buck, to fend for themselves. (The ones who survived, that is.) To them he was a stranger.

He was also a hero; at least he was to Buck. "To be a missionary is an acute test of integrity," she wrote. "For a missionary has no supervision. He lives among a few equals, the other missionaries, and a great many whom he feels his inferiors, the natives. His governing board is thousands of miles away—there is no one to see how many hours he works or whether he is lazy and self-indulgent. And the climate, the small but absolute security of salary, the plentiful number of cheaply paid servants, all make laziness easy, and a man's fellows are loath to tell of him even if they see, and the Chinese converts are helpless for they do not know to whom to complain. There is no one beyond the missionary for them. These stand next to God and are supreme in authority, having the right to give or withhold funds which mean life."[5]

Despite its hagiographic tendencies, the memoir is candid. Buck does not deny the hardships of a missionary's life: "In that hot foreign climate, in the storms of wind and dust, in the floods and wars and risings of mobs against them, in such uneasiness of life, in such impossibility of achieving what they have set themselves, in bitter isolation from their kind, in the inward oppression of their own souls, that oppression which looks out of their somber eyes and sounds in their voices, apathetic if they are not angry, the wonder is not that men of God quarrel with each other so often, but that they do not kill each other or themselves more often than they do." There are stories, she opines, "but nobody wants them told, for the Work must go on."[6]

By the mid 1930s, however, the "Work" was being done differently: "I have not seen anywhere the like of Andrew and his generation. They were no mild stay-at-homes, no soft-living landsmen. If they had not gone as daring missionaries, they would have gone to the gold fields or explored the poles or sailed on pirate ships. They would have ruled the natives of foreign lands in other ways of power if God had not caught their souls so young... Ah, well, they are all gone now. There are no more left like them. Those who take their place in our modern times are shot through with doubt and distrust of themselves and their message... They see good in all religions and they no longer wage any more wars and they serve their lives out for a small security... The giants are gone."[7]

Those so-called giants were often translators. I have often wondered how accurate those translations were. Buck has this to say about her father's translations: "Early in his career Andrew decided that the Chinese translation of the Bible was balderdash. There were all sorts of absurdities in it because, he said, the translators had not sufficiently understood Chinese idioms." He decided, therefore, that as soon as he had time he would make a new translation straight from the Hebrew and Greek into Chinese. It was about this time that the missionaries themselves became convinced that they should have a new translation and chose a committee to make it… Appointed to be on the committee, Andrew threw himself into the work, choosing to use "not the classical Chinese beloved of old scholars but the strong vernacular mandarin of the people."[8]

As I continue to complete chapters of *The Missionary Factory*, I'll be on the lookout for other judgments about those translations, some of which were printed in Andover. I'll also, as usual, be following the money. On his periodical visits home to America, Buck writes, her father "was almost always away," just as he was when the family was in China. But he wasn't collecting souls. He was "collecting money."[9]

In the January 1933 issue of Harper's magazine, Buck published an essay titled "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" It was a reprint of a speech she delivered the same year that she published *The Good Earth.*[10] Her answer was yes, but it was a very qualified one. In her introduction, in the form of a litany of other questions, she lays out all the reasons why people have traditionally objected to supporting missions. It is a series derived from a decade or more of questioning the idea of missions herself. "'Don't you think it is really an insult to send out missionaries to foreign countries when we cannot live what we preach ourselves?' ... 'Don't you think we had better stay at home and attend to our own affairs and our own starving people before we give to other peoples?' ... 'I hear that missionaries are the ones who have stirred up all the trouble in the Orient.'... 'Frankly I cannot give my money to a group of people to propagate religious and denominational ideas I no longer hold myself.' ... 'I am at sea in my own thinking about Christianity, and I prefer not to propagate what I am not sure about. Christianity has not worked very well in our own land.'... 'I admire Jesus Christ, but I see nothing even of the idealism of Christianity any more in my own country, America. I cannot, therefore, believe in missions.'"

Of course, most readers do not have missionaries much on their mind today, except perhaps to dismiss them. (I know this from the look on most people's faces when I tell them I am writing about missionaries.) In Lucy Sante's "Models for Being," her review of Hua Hsu's recent memoir, *Stay True*, she writes of Hsu's first book, *A Floating Chinaman* (2016), which tells the story of H.T. Tsiang (d. 1971), a Chinese immigrant to America whose novels were continually rejected by publishers. Tsiang failed not because Americans weren't interested in the Chinese, Sante states, noting that Buck was at the time a best-selling author. The American readership of the period, Sante claims, could accept only Buck's view of the Chinese, which was "missionary."[11]

Missionary? What does that one word mean to Sante and her readers? It's a reductive statement, to be sure. Like every one of us, Buck was a complicated human being, and so were the missionaries she had come to know in China, including, of course, her father. Unfortunately, the good ones far outnumbered the bad, Buck acknowledged in her speech. Why? One reason she cited was lack of support by sponsoring agencies or the wrong kind of support from them. Nonetheless, they expected to see high numbers of converts and were disappointed and disapproving when those numbers didn't materialize. As Buck saw it, the problem was that "neither the messenger nor the message [had] been suited to the needs of the people."

And what would suit those needs? "I should like to see every missionary sent to satisfy a special need of a community — not the artificial need of a mission station for a clerical man or a woman evangelist or what not, nay a real need of the people... It seems to me this is the only basis for missions. It removes from us the insufferable stigma of moral arrogance, and it gives us besides a test of our own worth. Before we can share anything with benefit we must have tried it ourselves." In other words: "Above all, then, let the spirit of Christ be manifested by modes of

life rather than by preaching... Let us cease our talk for a time... and let us try to express our religion in terms of life."

In her concluding remarks, Buck goes out on a great big limb, at least by today's standards of wokeness. Speaking neither as an American nor even as a Christian, but, by virtue of the years she had spent in China, she spoke as a Chinese person. And in that persona, she, who strongly objected to the non-Asians[12] cast in the leading roles of the movie version of her most famous novel, delivers her challenge: "Come to us no more in arrogance of spirit. Come to us as brothers and fellowmen. Let us see in you how your religion works. Preach to us no more, but share with us that better and more abundant life which your Christ lived." Venturing out on that limb with her, I say: Amen.

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[1] Hilary Spurling, *Pearl Buck in China: Journey to* The Good Earth (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 9.

[2] Pearl S. Buck, *Fighting Angel: Portrait of a Soul* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1936), 58.

[3] Ibid., 59.

[4] Ibid., 129.

[5] Ibid., 220-221.

[6] Ibid., 80-81.

[7] Ibid., 75-76.

[8] Ibid., 181, 177, 196.

[9] Ibid., 176.

[10] See *Harper's*, January 1933, 143-155.

[11] *New York Review of Books*, November 24, 2022.

[12] The male lead, Paul Muni, was born Frederich Meshilem Meier Weisenfreund in the Ukraine. The female lead, Luise Rainer, was born in Düsseldorf, of a German mother and German-American father.