CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION
As James C. Thomson rightly observes, Pearl Buck “remains the most influential Westerner to write about China since thirteenth-century Marco Polo.”¹ In no other case in America’s cultural history has one novelist had such a great influence on the imaginative terms in which the entire nation addresses a foreign culture. It is appropriate that we examine Chinese criticism of Pearl Buck. Chinese response to Pearl Buck’s novels can be divided into three categories: positive, negative, and mixed. Many Chinese critics express pride that Chinese culture made her a successful American writer: “Pearl Buck’s body was no doubt born of her American parents, but it was China that endowed her with spirit and soul. That was why she calls America her motherland and China her fatherland.”²

Many Chinese critics consider Pearl Buck the Chinese people’s national friend. Zhuang Xinzai observes, “The literature of a nation is an invisible and effective weapon for eradicating stupid misunderstandings by other countries without shedding blood or making bodily sacrifices.”³ A good writer can touch foreign hearts and minds in ways no politician or diplomat can ever do. About China Zhuang Xinzai says,

Because of differences in race, language, customs, and geography, the Chinese are often misunderstood, distorted and vilified. Whenever Chinese appear in Western travelogues, novels, pictorials or movies, they
are always dirty, mean and cunning. They are depicted as an archetype: men with long pigtails and women with bound feet, all skinny with running noses and dirty, ugly faces. Their deeds are always connected with theft, burglary, raping, plotting and assassinations. For centuries, this has been the image the Western mind had of the Chinese....Once formed, the misunderstanding is very difficult to dispel, and it always stands in the way of international friendships and cooperation.⁴

Pearl Buck took a sincere and objective approach in her portrayal of Chinese life. Many Chinese critics find Pearl Buck’s style simple, straightforward, natural, and unaffected as that of the classical Chinese novels and most appropriate for her novels’ subjects. Her style may be dry and uninteresting, but it matches her content perfectly, and “some of her works could easily pass for works of Chinese authorship.”⁵

In his article entitle “Mrs. Buck and Wang Lung,” Zhao Jiabi observes,

Inspired by Marco Polo’s travelogue and encouraged by the recent gains of Western aggression, many people have written books about China. On the covers of these books is usually drawn a “Chinaman” grotesquely
attired, flanked by some lopsided, incomplete and unintelligible Chinese calligraphy. None of these, of course, can be considered works of literature. The one book that has changed the whole situation is Mrs. Buck's *The Good Earth*. The reason it has won praises the world over, including in China, is that it not only draws the appearance of the Chinese, but also shows part of their soul. Except for its medium of writing, everything else, such as the subject matter, the characterization, the milieu and the mood, is Chinese. The book, on the whole, is very authentic, and one can hardly believe it was written by a foreign hand.\(^6\)

Chinese criticism of the negative variety challenges the basic qualities of Pearl Buck's books about China:

It is always better for the Chinese to write about Chinese subject matter, as that is the only way to get near the truth. Even with Mrs. Buck, who was given a warm welcome in Shanghai, what her books reveal is no more than her stand as an American woman missionary who happens to have grown up in China. It is no surprise that she should praise such a
book as *The House of Exile*, because what she knows about China is superficial. Only when we Chinese come and do it, can we expect to reveal some truth.  

Some of the charges that the Chinese critics level against Pearl Buck are as follows: First, ignoring or concealing China’s intense class struggle and its victimization by Western powers. Her novels never mention the foreign powers that backed the warlords over the period they cover. The novels attribute China’s low standing in the world order to poverty, famine, disease, and ignorance, rather than to feudal landlords’ oppression and exploitation. For example, *The Good Earth* and *Sons*. Second, advocating the fusion of Chinese feudalism and Western liberalism as the solution to China’s problems. For example, *East Wind: West Wind*, *A House Divided*, and *Kinfolk*. Third, portraying revolutionaries as weak, treacherous, ignorant, and good-for-nothing cowards. For example, *The Mother*. Fourth, beautifying foreign imperialists and covering up their crimes in China. For example, *The Good Earth* and *Sons*.

Inspite of these charges, Pearl Buck is a novelist who emphasizes the fundamental emotions and rhythms of life. She wrote of people’s struggles, dreams, and disappointments. Her descriptions of people are straightforward, but deeply coloured by her humanism, and show a great tolerance for differing notions of how life should be lead. Through her
novels she tries to speak openly and directly to millions of readers about typical human concerns.

It is perhaps because of her concern for fellow human beings that the characterizations in all her novels are exceedingly well drawn and convincing. For example in *East Wind: West Wind* the parents’ attitude and veneration of traditional customs and patterns of behaviour give many insights into the China of the past. Kwei-lan’s amazement at her husband’s suggestions and her attempts to adjust to the new modes of Western life are persuasive and arouse considerable sympathy for her plight. The inflexible views of Kwei-lan’s brother appears true, and his stubbornness, contrasted with that of his parents, never appears exaggerated.

Furthermore, *East Wind: West Wind* exemplifies two qualities that became hallmarks of Pearl Buck’s writing. The novel features a strong narrative drive; it is compelling and agreeable to read. Second, there is an authentic flavour of time and place. The locale, customs, and attitudes of the characters are perceived from a firsthand viewpoint, and this quality furnishes decidedly effective verisimilitude.

*The Good Earth* demonstrates that Pearl Buck has a thorough knowledge of Chinese peasant life. As Elizabeth Janeway observers, “Mrs. Buck has enabled us to witness and appreciate the patience, frugality, industry and indomitable good humour of a suffering people, whose homes
the governing intellectuals would hide from the sight of the world." Most of the success of *The Good Earth* is the result of the universal appeal of the two main characters, Wang Lung and O-lan. Wang Lung is a personification of human nature in all its vagaries. In his early life he works with particular diligence, and his attitudes parallel the qualities of the soil he tends. He bears his burdens with a pragmatic stoicism and opportunistically snatches fortune's favour when it is briefly up for the taking. As he grows more prosperous and successful, the pitfalls of wealth enmesh him in indolence, promiscuity, and cruelly indifferent egoism, especially in areas where poverty and family concerns had prevented such irresponsibility and thoughtlessness. He is a paradigm of mankind's admirable aspects as well as its despicable tendencies.

O-lan is less complex. She knows and suffers the pain of existence, but her stoicism is much more complete than Wang Lung's. She requires only a husband and family to care for. She gives her family self-sacrificing devotion, and centres all her strength on day-to-day necessities. She endures repression, poverty, neglect, disloyalty, disappointment, and emotional injury, yet she remains undefeated. In all most all her novels, especially in *The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck stresses the importance of free will. Her characters are not overwhelmed in a deterministic world, totally oppressed by the forces of heredity and environment. They realize that through the
exercise of choices, through hard work and human initiative, difficulties and problems can be overcome and despair subdued.

Although many of Pearl Buck’s novels focus on the themes of marriage and family, *Pavilion of Women* was a radical approach to the subject of men and women in the 1940’s. Women’s liberation was in its initial stages; and the sexual revolution hadn’t yet begin. Yet Pearl Buck tackles these issues through the story of Madame Wu. Pearl Buck masterfully brings important ideas to fruition in both dialogue and plot, provoking critical questions on the nature of love and the polarity of men and women. She explores the institution of marriage from every angle, broaching topics of feudality, compatibility, and expectations in relationships. Although these issues are clouded somewhat by the customs indicative of the Chinese culture, the ultimate problems are universal.

To conclude, as Elizabeth Janeway rightly observes, “Her readership is secure. She has something to say and says it with lucid ease. If she lacks the warmth of humor she makes up for it by the warmth of sympathy. If she has a mission she can also tell a story. She writes consistently and successfully to be read; she writes consistently; and she writes successfully.”