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Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

– a work of World Literature influenced by the Chinese Novel

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Abstract

In 1938, Pearl S. Buck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, thanks to her second book *The Good Earth* about a Chinese farmer. Blistering criticism came from the American cultural elite that claimed her style of writing did not reach the Nobel Prize standard. Buck responded by saying that her style of writing was influenced by the Chinese novel rather than the Western novel. This study will compare *The Good Earth* with the Chinese novel and discuss characteristics that support Buck's claim. Furthermore, it will analyse *The Good Earth* through the lens of a relatively new field of literary criticism – world literature – to analyse how the book is positioned in the literary world today. This study suggests that *The Good Earth* shares characteristics with the Chinese novel and that the book today would be classified as a world literary work.

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Introduction

The decision to award Pearl S. Buck the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938, is one of the most criticised decisions in the history of the prize (Wires 111). Pearl S. Buck had by then written ten books over the course of a decade, and was a winner of the Pulitzer Prize. Her second book, *The Good Earth*, is considered by many to be her most prominent book. It was also her first breakthrough as a recognised author. *The Good Earth* became a best-seller in America in 1931 and 1932. Later on, this book became the first in a trilogy about the Chinese farmer Wang Lung and his descendants. After receiving the Nobel Prize, Buck was openly and strongly criticised in the media by literary critics and established authors who did not think that her style of writing warranted such a reward. Criticism also came from Chinese scholars who said her knowledge about Chinese customs was not sufficient; moreover they did not like her choice to depict the Chinese peasantry.

When Pearl Buck in her Nobel lecture mentioned her style of writing, she defended herself against some of the criticism and said that “it is the Chinese and not the American novel which has shaped my own efforts in writing.” (Buck, “The Chinese”). The setting for *The Good Earth* trilogy and many of her early books was China. Pearl Buck was born into an American missionary family and moved to China when she was but a few months old. With the exception of four years of college education in America, her first 38 years were spent in China. During her early years she was bilingual. However, she was more fluent in the Chinese language. Furthermore, the Chinese culture was as familiar to her as the American culture inherited from her parents. Most of her life Pearl Buck devoted herself to improving relations between China and America. Writing her books was a way to introduce western readers to the Chinese people and their culture.

Many books and articles have been written about Pearl Buck. However, less attention has been paid to whether she was correct in her defence against the wave of critique. Was Buck right when she claimed that her style of writing was Chinese rather than Western and was her style of writing therefore misunderstood by contemporary western-minded critics? Furthermore, eighty years have passed since Pearl Buck wrote *The Good Earth* and was criticised. How does the modern literary field of criticism render *The Good Earth* through the lens of World Literature?

This study first will present what the criticism towards Pearl Buck looked like and discuss possible grounds for this criticism. Secondly, it will present five characteristics found in the Chinese novel and compare them with *The Good Earth* in order to discern whether Pearl Buck wrote the book in a Chinese style or not. Finally, from David Damrosch's and Pascale Casanova's new literary perspective, this study will discuss whether *The Good Earth* can be classified a work of World Literature. In this study, I will argue that there is a close similarity between *The Good Earth* and the Chinese novel, and that the book has a relevant place among today's works of World literature.

A criticised laureate

As previously mentioned, the announcement of Pearl Buck as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, “for her rich and truly epic descriptions of peasant life in China and for her biographical masterpieces” (“The Nobel Prize”), caused astonishment and controversy. The choice to honour Pearl Buck with the prize has been called one of “the least defensible choices” (Wires 240). Even today, many analysts consider Pearl Buck as being one of the worst laureate choices and declare it is a “standing embarrassment” (Farago). When Pearl Buck heard the news she also was surprised. Her first reaction was in Chinese: “Wo bu xing xin” – I don't believe it (“Pearl Buck Wins”). She had expected the prize should have been awarded to Theodore Dreiser, whom Buck considered one of the most well-reputed contemporary writers.

The most blistering criticism came from the American literati. One reason presumably has to do with the Swedish Academy's motivation for the prize. Critics said Pearl Buck's style of writing did not reach the Nobel standard, whilst the Swedish Academy considered Pearl Buck's books as biographical “masterpieces.” According to the 18th century poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who began compiling literary masterpieces from all over the world and was one of the first to use the term *Weltliteratur*, a masterpiece was a book in a highly selective category, and that “the world masterpiece can be recognised almost as soon as it is published to glowing reviews and begins to circulate in translation.” (Damrosch, “Frames for” 502). Literary critic Norman Holmes Pearson did not think *The Good Earth* was a masterpiece. He declared that the appointment of Pearl Buck devaluated the Nobel Prize in Literature (Conn 210). The American poet Robert Frost remarked “If she can get it anybody

can” (qtd in Liao, 29). Pearl Buck's books were criticised for being “simple, even scriptural” (“Nobel Prize Winner”). Buck's own explanation was that she thought “in the Chinese idiom and translate[d], that may be why the result occasionally resembles scriptural English” (“Pearl Buck Wins”). She began to write out of a desire to depict her Chinese world and promote cross-cultural understanding and communication (Liu). The plot was simple, the style realistic and the vivid characters had been inspired by the poor peasantry she had been surrounded by since childhood.

According to Conn, Pearl S. Buck's style demonstrates a strong realism with “no hint of mystery or exoticism” (126). She does not build up a tense atmosphere with emotional words and that can be classified as a simple style of writing. The following two excerpts from *The Good Earth* illustrate the strong realism and emphasize how Buck writes in the same manner irrespective of whether she describes the trivial or the deeply emotional. In the first example, the main character Wang Lung reflects over the fact that his new wife will change the routine chores in the household:

There was a woman coming to the house. Never again would Wang Lung have to rise summer and winter at dawn to light the fire. He could lie in his bed and wait, and he also would have a bowl of water brought to him, and if the earth were fruitful there would be tea leaves in the water. Once in some years it was so.” (3).

In the second example Wang Lung realizes that his wife O-lan has strangled their newborn child in a desperate act to give their other children and herself a chance to survive a severe famine:

He said nothing, but he took the dead child into the other room and laid it upon the earthen floor and searched until he found a bit of broken mat and this he wrapped about it. The round head dropped this way and that and upon the neck he saw two dark, bruised spots, but he finished what he had to do. Then he took the roll of matting, and going as far from the house as he had strength, he laid the burden against the hollowed side of an old grave (87).

Another reason for the wave of criticism, I suggest, has to do with competition between writers. In 1938 there were over thirty candidates for the Nobel Prize in Literature, among them Theodor Dreiser and Ernest Hemingway, authors who had been candidates for years. Buck was only a first-time candidate. Some of the candidates, such as Dreiser, made it no

secret that they desired the prize. He and Sherwood Andersson were both strong, contemporary contenders for the Nobel Prize yet never received it. William Faulkner, who received the Nobel Prize in 1954, wrote to his friend Joan Williams: "I had rather been in the same pigeon hole with Dreiser and Sherwood Andersson, than with Sinclair Lewis and Mrs. Chinaland Buck." (Blotner 299).

However, there might have been further reasons for the negative response. The American writer and editor Malcom Cowley argued that Pearl S. Buck's writing did not succeed in the proper way, she did not follow the standard procedure. New writers were usually discovered by younger critics who acted as scouts. Only when the reputation of the new writer was firstly spread among the critics, and secondly throughout the general status quo, could she or he be considered a renowned writer. This had been the formula for many renowned contemporary writers such as Faulkner and Hemingway. Buck turned this procedure inside out. She was first discovered by the public at large. According to Cowley, this is the underlying reason that affronted many intellectuals (24-25). In other words, Buck was a neophyte who did not follow traditional rules set by the cultural elite. Too much of what she did was too different to fit into their template:

Asian subjects, her prose style, her gender, and her tremendous popularity offended virtually every one of the constituencies that divided up the literary 1930s ... they could all agree that Pearl S. Buck had no place in any of their creeds and canons. (Conn 210).

Nevertheless, it was Pearl S. Buck who received the most prominent prize in literature rather than any of the most distinguished writers at that time. She was also, and still is, one of the youngest laureates ever. She had not been invited by one of their critics to the inner circle of the cultural elite. She did not follow the rules they had set, and therefore they criticised her. Considering all these factors, I suggest that one of the reasons for the criticism from the American literati was envy.

In discussions about the criticism towards Pearl S. Buck and the reason why the Swedish Academy chose her, there is one reason that has been brought forward which does not have to do with literature so much as it has to do with politics. In 1938, the political situation in Europe was tense. The European nations quivered under Hitler's threats and provocative advancement. Sweden had taken a neutral position in World War I and guarded its reputation as a neutral country. In fear of the fact that the choice of laureate could be seen

as a political statement, Wires suggests that the Swedish Academy saw Pearl Buck as an inoffensive choice of laureate (111). She was not a European and she wrote about human relations in a country far from the infected political situation. While there were also political issues about giving the prize to a Chinese writer, Buck stood out as an acceptable surrogate, and had authored a best-seller (Larson 148). In the light of the fact that no Nobel Prizes whatsoever were announced during 1940-1943, due to the political complications during the Second World War, the assertion that awarding Buck the Nobel Prize was a political decision seems to be well substantiated.

Criticism was also heard from Chinese intellectuals. According to Hua Hsu, Chinese scholars educated in the West disliked *The Good Earth* because they did not want a westerner to reveal unpleasant conditions in China (110). The poor peasantry was a subject avoided by the Chinese government and consequently ignored by Chinese writers. One of the critics, Kiang Kang Hu, criticised Buck for not being correct concerning a number of details that had to do with Chinese customs (“A Chinese Scholar's View”). Buck refuted every objection by responding that she, with her own eyes, had seen these things occur in China. She pointed out that China was a vast country and that traditions and customs were different in the northern and southern provinces. Pearl Buck might have discerned the same underlying disapproval as Hsu had, since she added to Kiang's criticism that her aim was not to represent the Chinese people by “the little handful of [its] intellectuals”. She wanted to depict the “splendid common people of China” (“A Chinese Scholar's”).

In summary, most of the criticism came from the cultural elite who did not see Buck's biographies as masterpieces. Underlying reasons for the criticism appear to relate to competition and envy between writers; moreover an irritation over the fact that Pearl Buck did not follow the rules set by the literati. She was young and female, as well as popular amongst the common readers, and in a time of political stability, the Swedish Academy would presumably have chosen another, more mainstream writer. Conn's argument that Buck's style of writing was characterised by a strong realism seems well-substantiated, but Pearl Buck also had her own explanation, namely that since childhood, the Chinese fashion of telling and writing stories had affected her. Was this claim only an attempt for her to defend herself against the tough criticism? In order to see whether her claim is true or not, this study will now approach the Chinese novel, its structure and characteristics, and further on compare these results with Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*.

The Chinese novel

Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* is a story about the peasant Wang Lung and his family. The book can be divided into three parts. The first part depicts a young Wang who marries O-lan, a slave house maid in the rich family Huang's household. In his encounter with Old Mistress Huang, Wang Lung is both humbled and impressed by the abundance and wealth in her house. He returns home with a desire to become rich. Together with his diligent wife he manages to prosper and buy some land from Old Lord Huang. In the second part of the book, a severe famine strikes the area. To be able to survive, Wang brings his family to a distant city. He works as a rickshaw runner, while the rest of the family beg on the streets. Wang and O-lan join a marauding gang of poor people plundering a rich man's house. They return home with their loot and buy more land. The last part of her book reveals Wang's insatiable desire for more land and also for women. In the end of the book, he has not only bought all the land from Old Lord Huang, but has also adopted Huang's lifestyle and acquired two concubines. He dies knowing that his sons intend to sell his land. This is the story in one of the books which, according to Buck, were strongly influenced by the Chinese novel.

The kind of Chinese novel which Pearl Buck referred to in her Nobel lecture, had its peak at the end of the 18th century. In this essay, the novel from this period of time will simply be defined as *Chinese novel*. The Chinese novel was preceded by the *classic Chinese novel* and was succeeded by the western influenced *modern Chinese novel*. The modern Chinese novel is traced to the late Ching period in the end of the 19th century and took off with the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s. (Starr 11).

The Chinese novel derives its origin from China's rich story-telling tradition. The fact that most of the Chinese were illiterate did not hinder them from sharing stories. This cultural Chinese story-telling culture extends at least a thousand years. Autodidact storytellers sat in the street corners, sharing stories to amuse audiences. In a time when there were no books, radio or cinema, this was a pleasant break from work and duties. As a child in China, Pearl S. Buck and her friends sometimes listened to street storytellers. If they were skilled, they found the "delicate balance between what is pleasurable and what is acceptable" (Crawford 38) which made people stop and listen for a while. Then the listeners gave a few coins before they left. The storytellers were influenced by, and derived their stories from, folklore and classic

novels, as well as stories about their own lives and things they had heard of. Sometimes they also picked up anecdotes from the Emperor's court. Storytellers copied each other's tales and added a personal touch to them. The stories were constantly refined, developed and modified. No one could ever say a story belonged to him or her (Conn 136).

After considerable time people began transcribing the stories, initially with the purpose of retaining them for storytellers and later on they were developed into books for the literate middle-class. The stories were written in the plain and uncomplicated vernacular language *pei-hua* and became the Chinese novel. As Pearl Buck said in her Nobel lecture, “the people created the novel” (Buck, “The Chinese”). The storytellers had no literary education. Consequently, they had not been taught about plot, pathos or narration. However, since their prime purpose was to amuse the listeners, the storytellers changed and refined their stories to fit the demand. Their character descriptions were often vivid. The scholar was often depicted as a fool and stories about war heroes, love and supernatural figures were popular. Confucianism and Buddhism also shaped the stories with their religious moral and virtuous implications.

Four Chinese novels are considered outstanding masterpieces (Hsia 5) and will in this study be compared with *The Good Earth*. These are *Dream of the Red Chamber*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin* and *Journey to the West*. Among these four, *Dream of the Red Chamber* is considered the most prominent. These novels play a central role representing the heart of the Chinese culture. *Dream of the Red Chamber* is an 18th century novel about the two houses of the aristocratic Jia family. The novel is psychological, relationship-focused and gives an insight into the Chinese culture, social structure and manners. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a 14th-century historical novel. It is set at intersection between the Han dynasty and the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period. The novel is a blend of history, myth and legend. *The Water Margin* contains stories of outlaws which became popular after a historic event during the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD), when Song Jiang had gathered 36 outlaws and attacked the Emperor. *The Water Margin* was later translated into English by Pearl Buck and she named it *All Men are Brothers*. *Journey to the West* is an adventurous story based on historical events. It is an extended version of the legendary pilgrimage of the Tang dynasty monk Xuanzang. Buddha gives a monk a task to make atonement for his sins and provides him with three protectors who help him. In the Chinese novel in general and in these four prominent novels in particular, there are six characteristics which now will be compared with

The Good Earth in order to discern whether Pearl Buck wrote the book in a Chinese style or not.

Chinese novel characteristics in *The Good Earth*

The first characteristic which occurs frequently in the Chinese novel is religious moral and religious edification. According to Crawford, both amusement and moral edification are parts of traditional Chinese fiction (31). The Confucian and Buddhist moral has for a thousand years been an essential and natural part of life in China and consequently, also that of the Chinese literature. *The Good Earth* has a number of references to Confucianism. Since the early Chinese texts, a recurring word that also appears in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, is “Heaven” – an omnipresent spiritual power which holds an eye on everything: a “backdrop of moral order against which to judge the deeds of mortal men” (Plaks 18). When a swarm of locusts come and Wang Lung tells the farmers to whisk them away, they are reluctant to act against heaven: “Heaven has ordained that this year we shall starve, and why should we waste ourselves in struggle against it?” (250).

Confucianism also contains the belief that virtue will reap its own rewards (Girardot 224). Wang Lung is a virtuous, hard-working peasant, a good example of *ren* – a Confucian term which includes diligence and fulfilment of one's responsibilities towards others. The rich Old Lord Huang, on the other hand, does not manage to keep his wealth due to carelessness, greed and amusements. Wang Lung's endeavours and ambition finally makes him richer than the Huang family and he purchases their land and property. However, Wang Lung buys most of the land with the loot from a rich man's house. He loses his contentment and covets new wives. Furthermore, although his wife O-lan has given him her youth, her strength and four children, Wang Lung forces her to give him the pearls which are her only possession, so that he can give them to his concubine Lotus Flower (199). The retribution from “Heaven” comes when Wang Lung overhears a conversation between his sons. He dies knowing that they will sell his land.

Another common topic amongst old Chinese tales is the “wishful notion for wealth” (Crawford 78), a theme which is always supported by the traditional Chinese idea that a man's prosperity, happiness, or longevity are determined by fate. Wang is full of striving and his goal is to get rich and buy Huang's land. However, he inherits Huang's lifestyle as

well. The diligent Wang becomes inert and pleasure-seeking. The Wang, Huang, (*The Good Earth*) and Jia families (*Dream of the Red Chamber*) suffer the same fate – all of them lose their riches. Thus, the occurrence of mainly Confucian moral and moral edification is palpable in *The Good Earth*, as well as in all the four great Chinese novels. The religious aspect, here named “Heaven”, is present, not always salient but underlying.

The third characteristic has to do with plot and structure. In her Nobel Prize lecture, Pearl Buck claimed that traditional scholars have not been allowed to coerce the Chinese novelist into a certain style, structure or pattern. The Chinese novel itself was not always planned from the beginning to the end, “they are often too long, too full of incident, too crowded with character, a medley of fact and fiction as to material, and a medley of romance and realism as to method” (Buck, “The Chinese”). Buck's claim is supported by Conn who states that the Chinese novel often lacks a main character or a coherent plot (136). According to him, this is the result of the fact that Chinese novels often were cobbled out of miscellaneous stories. In light of this, it is reasonable to believe that the plot and structure of *The Good Earth* would be likewise, but, that is not the case. *The Good Earth* has a main character and a coherent plot.

The structure and plot in *The Good Earth* corresponds to Aristotle's *mythos*, i.e. the plot in a tragedy (Aristotle). He divided the tragedy into three parts; a beginning, middle and an end. The three parts have to relate to one another as either being necessary or probable. The plot also needs a movement either from bad to good fortune or vice versa. Finally, the plot has to arouse emotions such as pity or fear. All these characteristics correspond well with the plot in *The Good Earth*. As mentioned above, *The Good Earth* is divided into three parts. The first part tells us the positive story about Wang Lung, his marriage and how his finances and his family prosper. The second part of the story is about the severe famine and how they hardly manage to survive. Finally, the end of *The Good Earth* depicts how Wang has acquired his land by non-virtuous methods. He paid for the land with stolen money and neglected his wife. Dissatisfaction and retribution comes as a result. Wang dies with the knowledge that his sons will sell all the land he has spent his whole life to acquire. *The Good Earth's* plot is strictly chronological and follows Aristotle's structure that the actions should follow a logical progression from previous events. The different parts of the story have a unity and relate to each other. The transition from famine to prosperity is in line with Aristotle's theory of a movement between bad and good fortune. These transitions also arouse emotions, such as pity and fear. Thus, *The Good Earth* has a coherent plot, which Conn claims Chinese novel often

does not have. There are exceptions, though. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, has no interruption in the continuity whilst the three other Chinese masterpieces do.

Furthermore, Buck said that the Chinese novel is often too long. That corresponds well with all the four great Chinese novels mentioned here. They are all extensive works with hundreds of chapters. They are all “full of incidents” and “crowded with characters”. One of them has nearly a thousand characters. Another contains 800 000 words. However, *The Good Earth* contains only 24 chapters on 416 pages (Buck, “The Good” 416). The novel is shaped by the author's intended reader. *The Good Earth's* language of origin is English and it was primarily written for the Western market. Pearl S. Buck's motive was to present the China she knew to change the American attitude towards China (Liu). Therefore, Buck adjusted the length, size, amount of incidents and number of characters to suit Western readers.

Another distinctive feature in the Chinese novel is lively characterisation (Crawford 39). Not only does it have an abundant number of characters but they are also rich and vivid in description. The storytellers use the sensation of recognition to amuse their listeners, often by depicting the characters like caricatures. For instance, in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* each of the 108 characters have such a unique way to express themselves that readers may discern which one of them is speaking. *The Good Earth* is full of vivid descriptions of the characters, but also of the landscape and of Chinese customs. Buck also creates contrasts, such as the one between O-lan, a faithful, plain, diligent and unobtrusive woman, and Wang's first concubine Lotus Flower, who is spoilt, outspoken and delicate. The following examples illustrate his first encounter with each of the women: “The voice [of O-lan] was a good enough voice, not loud, not soft, plain, and not ill-tempered. The woman's hair was neat and smooth and her coat clean” (18).

He looked at [Lotus Flower]... and he saw the figure slender as bamboo in its tight short upper coat; he saw the small pointed face set in its painted prettiness above the high collar lined with white fur; he saw the round eyes, the shape of apricots, so that now at last he understood what the storyteller meant when they sang of the apricot eyes of the beauties of old” (193).

In summary, I suggest that the lively characterisation, which is a distinctive feature in the Chinese novel, is also apparent in *The Good Earth*.

The fifth characteristic commonly used in the Chinese novel is ambiguity of names. The meaning of names is generally more important in the Chinese culture than in the Western culture, and even more prevalent in Chinese literature. The Chinese writing system does not have an alphabet. It consists of pictograms that do not denote how a word should be pronounced. Moreover, the Chinese language has many homophones, i.e. words that sound the same but are written differently. This is often used in novels to create underlying meanings. When stories were told and not read, this confusion could create a witty punch-line when the audience realises that the name of the person means something else. For example in the novel *The Oil Vender and the Courtesan*, the Jia family's name means "merchant", but a homophone for Jia could also mean "false" or "fictitious". This name is mirrored with another family's name, Zhen, which means "real", but has a homophone that means "dream". In other words, the underlying homophones create a contradiction between the families and, furthermore, reveal their true identities – false and real. Another effect is created in *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Chinese given names normally consist of two words, and the main character Bao-yu shares one word of his name with each of the two most important women in his life. This signals a deeper connection between the three of them.

Pearl Buck has been conscious of this aspect. Wang Lung's name means "king" and "dragon", although he is a poor farmer. However, his virtue makes him a king and helps him to prosper. His sons' names contain the word "Nong" which can be translated as "farmer". His concubines' names have been translated into English in the book – Lotus Flower and Pear Blossom. Women's names are often connected to flowers to depict beauty and fragility. O-lan, who is a slave and not considered beautiful, has a name that simply means blue. However, the "O" can be translated as "dear". In the beginning of the book Wang struggles with his affection for her. "He was ashamed of his own curiosity and of his interest in her. She was, after all, only a woman" (30). The tradition has taught him that because O-lan is ugly, a slave and a woman she must also be ignorant, but O-lan becomes dear to him, something he would never tell anyone. Finally, the name Huang means "yellow", a colour that correlates with "prestige" and "good luck". Huang was rich and had prestige. However, "yellow" can also be connected to pornography, which is interesting considering that the fall of the Huang family had to do with Huang's insatiable appetite for young girls. He gets himself a new concubine each year and eventually he cannot afford the maintenance of his growing household. Thus, Pearl S. Buck clearly demonstrated an awareness of the Chinese way of using names. It is not as obvious for English readers as for Chinese, though. *The Good*

Earth was immediately, illegally, copied into Chinese and copied again. Those readers understood the nuances of the names in the book.

Yet another distinctive feature in the Chinese novel is the social commentary (Crawford 39). As previously mentioned, Buck uses the same matter-of-fact style of writing irrespective of the subject at hand. Notwithstanding the fact that Buck neither glorifies nor vilifies the peasant life in China, the Chinese professor Kiang Kang-Hu criticises her for painting China “in black colours” (“A Chinese Scholar”). Thus, Kiang thinks Pearl S. Buck comments the social situation in China. In the book she does address some social concerns such as foot-binding, slavery and polygamy, but never openly comments on them. In the first chapter, Wang Lung is at first disappointed that O-lans feet are not bound (18). Later, Wang Lung can see what a great asset O-lan is to him, for the same reason. She can work together with him on the fields: “Moving together in a perfect rhythm, without a word, hour after hour, he fell into a union with her which took the pain from his labor” (31). This strengthens the argument that *The Good Earth* contains some implicit social commentary.

When taking all this into consideration, these discussions show that there are many characteristics that confirm Buck's claim that it was the Chinese and not the American novel which had shaped her style of writing in *The Good Earth* and her early biographies. *The Good Earth* contains Confucian moral, a wishful notion for wealth, vivid characterisation, ambiguity of names and social commentary. However, whilst most of the Chinese novels lack a coherent plot, *The Good Earth* has a plot that responds with Aristotle's *mythos*. Although a well-structured novel with continuity is not so common among the Chinese novels, they do occur. The most prominent novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, is an example of that. Buck adjusted the plot to suit Western readers. Hence I argue that there is evidence that substantiates Pearl Buck's claim.

The Good Earth: a work of World Literature?

From today's perspective, eighty years after Pearl S. Buck received the Nobel Prize, how do contemporary scholars evaluate Pearl S. Buck's works? A new field of literary criticism – world literature – classifies *The Good Earth* as a piece of World Literature and, interestingly enough, a new generation of Chinese scholars have shown a revived interest in the book.

The 18th century poet Wolfgang von Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur* – literature that is good enough to reach out into a broader world, beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. At the end of the 20th century David Damrosch began to develop these ideas and called his new literary field of criticism *World Literature*. This study will now demonstrate a few of these distinctions that Damrosch and Goethe use to classify whether a work is world literature or not. They will be discussed and compared with *The Good Earth*.

Firstly, Damrosch argues that books which have a “mode of circulation”, i.e. a wide circulation, can be classified as world literature. (Damrosch, “What is” 6). *The Good Earth* has had a wide circulation. First as a popular best-seller, later as a result of the interest a Nobel Prize winner created. Secondly, works of World Literature affect many people. Pearl S. Buck's underlying aim with her books was to create a bridge of understanding between China and the US. The American President Nixon called her “a bridge between the civilizations of East and West.” (Meyer). Her intention was to stir people's interest in China; and she did. *The Good Earth* spread knowledge about the Chinese people and their culture to the ends of the world and changed the opinion about China in America. Thanks to her knowledge and experience of China, Pearl S. Buck later served as a politic advisor for the American President Nixon.

According to Goethe's theories *The Good Earth* can also be seen as a window on the world. He categorised *Weltliteratur* into three sections: classics, masterpieces and windows on the world (Damrosch, *What is* 15). Classic works have “a foundational value”, such as the Greek and Roman literature which laid the foundation for the Western literature. *The Good Earth* has not affected the Western literature accordingly. Masterpieces are commonly judged as very good works (Damrosch, “Frames for” 502). As mentioned earlier, Buck's contemporary critics did not consider *The Good Earth* to be a masterpiece. Nevertheless, the Swedish Academy, in their motivation, classified *The Good Earth* and a couple of other of Pearl S. Buck's early biographies as “biographical masterpieces”. Finally, works that are windows on the world do not have to be considered masterpieces, but they give insight and understanding about ourselves and about the human race. As mentioned earlier, *The Good Earth* presented new insights and contributed to a changed opinion about China. Therefore, *The Good Earth* can be considered a window on the world.

Another example of what distinguishes a work of World Literature is universality. According to Bentley there is “frequent universality” in Buck's books that “gives wisdom of

life” (800). A work with universality is a work that operates along three dimensions: *difference*, *similarity* and *like-but-unlike*. (Damrosch, “What is” 12). The *similarity* is what makes the reader relate to the book. Marks of identification give the reader a sense of kinship. *The Good Earth* shows that western and Chinese people stand on common human ground. We share the same desire for a better life. We experience good times and bad times and have the same difficulties in family relations. A good illustration of this is when the middle-aged Wang Lung realises that he has neglected his wife O-lan. This could have been any man anywhere reflecting on his life:

And it seemed to him that with this thing and that he had been busy and without time to spare, and only now, when his children were settled and his fields cared for and quiet under the coming winter ... now it seemed to him he had time to think of what he would and he thought of O-lan. He looked at her, not because she was a woman this time, and not that she was ugly and gaunt and yellow-skinned. But he looked at her with some strange remorse” (269).

The *difference* is what the reader enjoys for its sheer novelty. It arouses curiosity and enriches our lives. In the range found between difference and similarity, we discover what is *like-but-unlike*. In other words, some parts are familiar, others are not. Within this range it is most likely for a reader to “make a productive change in his or her perceptions and practices” (Damrosch, “What is” 12). The like-but-unlike parts of *The Good Earth* offered opportunities for any reader to reevaluate his or her own opinions, and as mentioned earlier, Pearl S. Buck's novels changed the Americans' opinion about China. I suggest that the balance between similarity and difference is one of the major reasons why *The Good Earth* became a best-seller. The similarities made people read the book and the differences made it interesting. The plain language made the book readable and consequently it reached the masses and eventually affected them.

According to David Damrosch, a work of World Literature can come in and out of the sphere of World Literature, one or several times. That also includes works that are considered masterpieces (Damrosch, “What is” 6). Very few works immediately take a place in World Literature and thereafter remain at the same point permanently. Complex dynamics including politics, time and cultural changes, alter the way we value books. At the time of the announcement of the Nobel Prize in literature, *The Good Earth* took place as a work of World

Literature. However, affected by criticism and time the book has in certain geographic areas or certain periods of time faded into oblivion.

In China *The Good Earth* initially never reached the readers. It was banned by Chairman Mao Zedong. However, in recent years there has been a blossoming interest in Pearl S. Buck's books amongst a new generation of Chinese scholars. Today, the Chinese scholar Liu Ping says that Pearl S. Buck “was a revolutionary”. Her former Chinese house has been restored and turned into a museum. Her books have been translated into Chinese and have found a place on the Chinese market. Thus, *The Good Earth* has once again come in to the sphere of World Literature, in a new geographical area. One reason for the blossoming interest has to do with the fact that, as referred to earlier, hardly anyone had written about the Chinese peasantry at the beginning of the 20th century. Moreover, Chinese writers did not describe Chinese customs in detail as Buck did. Since, these customs were trivial parts of the Chinese readers' everyday life. However, by now these customs as well as many old Chinese traditions have been lost during the development of modern China. As a result, *The Good Earth* has become a cultural treasure and a memorial of the Chinese inheritance (Liao 43). The important value of the knowledge found in the book has taken *The Good Earth* back to the centre of Chinese literature. When the Chinese – American author Anchee Min, who was raised in China, read *The Good Earth* for the first time she “broke down and sobbed” because she had never seen anyone who wrote about Chinese peasants the way Pearl Buck did “with such love, affection and humanity” (National Public Radio). Thus today, *The Good Earth* has high emotional value for a new generation of Chinese.

Another World Literature scholar, Pascale Casanova, has developed a system that describes the phenomenon where literary works position themselves around a centre she calls the Greenwich Meridian of literature (Casanova 278). At this centre the current literary norm and what is considered modern is classified. Each new submission is positioned along this scale in relation to the sought-after centre. Outside the centre, writers compete to take over the central position, desiring to be acknowledged or to be considered capable of modifying the current aesthetic norm. When a modern work or author in the centre is replaced by a new work or norm, the old one is doomed to be placed in the semi-periphery or periphery. A work or a writer placed in the World Literature periphery can be invited by a writer, publishing house or organisation bearing high prestige that already has a place close to, or in the centre, and accordingly, enhances his or her prestige. A few replaced works become classics and are therefore placed above temporal competition. The Greenwich Meridian of literature is

deliberately positioned in the Western world. Until recently, literary studies had been unapologetically Eurocentric. Western scholars have been proud of their Greek, Roman, German and French inheritance and reluctant to include literature from other parts of the world.

Casanova's ideas illuminate what happened when Pearl Buck was awarded the Nobel Prize. Before she became a Nobel laureate, *The Good Earth* had become a best-seller, but due to her lack of literary prestige, she was placed in the periphery of the literary world. Her books were far from Eurocentric and far from the current norm. The Nobel Prize, which is considered one of the most prominent literary awards in the world, suddenly gave Buck prestige and invited her to a place in the very centre of Greenwich Meridian of literature. Acknowledged writers who at the time were positioned in the semi-periphery, and who had struggled for years to gain some prestige, had once again been conquered, this time by a neophyte. Furthermore, they also had to relate to and position themselves towards the new centre, this new norm. Would her style of writing change the norm? It is not hard to believe that they were afraid that Pearl S. Buck and *The Good Earth* would modify or even degenerate the current norm or standard. Pearl S. Buck's way to the literary centre was unusual and unexpected: her style of writing was new, the theme of her book was not Eurocentric and she was both a woman and relatively young. Consequently, that generated fear and was stirring the critics to protest.

Taken together, there are many World Literature distinctions which classify *The Good Earth* as belonging to this category. *The Good Earth* has had a wide circulation, affected numerous people and become recognised for its universality. Even though *The Good Earth* has changed its position in the realm of this new literary field over time, it is still considered to be a piece of World Literature.

Conclusion

When Pearl S. Buck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, her works were strongly criticised by the literati. Some of the criticism appeared to have been a result of Pearl S. Buck's unconventional path to success, or perhaps may have been caused by the Swedish Academy's desire to avoid a tense politic situation. However, the most blistering criticism pertained to her style of writing. It was considered too plain and to have fallen short of the

Nobel Prize standard. According to Conn, her plain style was a result of her stress on realism. Buck herself claimed that it was a result of her Chinese inheritance – she wrote as a Chinese, but in English. The discussion in this study shows that her claim is well-substantiated. Many of the characteristics in *The Good Earth* correspond well with the characteristics of the Chinese novel.

Although eighty years ago the cultural elite were reluctant to accept *The Good Earth* as an exceptional work, I argue that today, the book is regarded as a piece of World Literature. From a Damroschian perspective, *The Good Earth* is neither a classic nor an uncontested masterpiece, but it has a place among books with a clear world literary interest. It has had a wide circulation and furthermore, it is a window that has given the world new insights as well as been a contribution to the understanding of the human race.

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