

NATIONAL SELF-CRITIQUE PROMPTED BY
IMMERSION IN (AN)OTHER CULTURE:
GOLDSWORTHY LOWES DICKINSON,
XU ZHIMO, AND PEARL BUCK

King-Kok Cheung

University of California, Los Angeles

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Three writers connected across the Atlantic and Pacific produced cogent critiques of their native countries in part as a result of their immersion in other cultures, which provided them with critical distance from which to observe domestic mores and policies. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (1862-1932) was a British historian, political philosopher, writer, and a Cambridge don. His idealization of China was proportional to his disillusionment with the British Empire, especially its imperialist policies in China. Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897-1931) was the most popular Chinese poet in the 1920s and 1930s. With the help of Dickinson, Xu enrolled as a special student at King's College, Cambridge University in 1925; he was fascinated by British Romantic poetry and by Cambridge itself. His belief in the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" championed by Wordsworth and other Romantic poets turned him against the Chinese "Golden Mean" and Confucian mores. Xu made a deep impression on Pearl Buck, the first female author to receive the Nobel Prize in literature. Her reproof of missionary condescension and lifelong advocacy on behalf of Chinese and Chinese Americans, including testifying before Congress against the Chinese Exclusion Acts, might be traced to her formative upbringing in China.

Dickinson, Xu, and Buck were not only intriguing public intellectuals, but were also members of prominent literary, philosophical, or religious circles. Dickinson and Xu were vanguards of international modernism: Dickinson was a close associate of the Bloomsbury coterie and an honorary president of the Heretics Club; along with

Arthur Waley, he facilitated connections between Bloomsbury and China (Laurence 129; Wood 191) and established an Anglo-Chinese Society in Cambridge (Harding 30). Xu founded the Crescent Moon society, which became known as the “Chinese Bloomsbury” (Laurence 4), and was the editor of its periodical *The Crescent Monthly*. Buck, the daughter and later wife of American missionaries in China during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s, was active in the missionary communities of both China and the United States.

It might seem surprising at first that the intimate connections among these three thinkers and their transnational legacies has not been more widely publicized. The answer lies in history and politics. Because of the Communist Revolution (1949), the Cultural Revolution (1965-75), and the Cold War (1970s-80s), works by these three authors were virtually banned in China for decades. Xu and Buck were anathema during the Mao era; Buck again in 1976, and Xu and Dickinson, as representatives of Modernism, again in 1983. Anchee Min relates how she, as a protégée of Mao’s wife Jiang Qing (1914-91), was forced to denounce Buck as an American cultural imperialist during the Cultural Revolution. Even though Min had not read anything by Buck at the time, she was pressed to write an essay berating the Nobel laureate in a campaign to orchestrate popular opposition against her 1972 visit to China with Richard Nixon (Min, “Q&A” 279, 280). Dickinson and Xu fared no better. According to Jeffrey C. Kinkley, China’s modernist works, mostly forgotten after 1949, were revived and celebrated after Mao’s death in 1976, but again came under attack in 1983: “International modernism is still prejudicially rendered in Mandarin not as ‘modern-ism,’ but as ‘the modern school,’ or ‘clique,’ as if it were by nature a decadent, bourgeois, political bloc in the service of foreigners” (Kinkley, “Forward” xvi).

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Patricia Laurence’s *Lily Briscoe’s Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China* (2003) was one of the first works to explore the remarkable exchange between Britain and China, especially the intellectual and personal relationship between Virginia Woolf, Julian Bell, and Ling Shuhua; E.M. Forster and Xiao Qian, and G.L. Dickinson and Xu. Xu, Laurence notes, belonged to a group of Chinese intellectuals who returned to China from sojourns in England around 1925, a group C.T. Hsia describes as “international in mind and spirit, at a time when China was not” (Laurence 100). Laurence observes that both the Bloomsbury and Crescent Moon literary groups contributed to a developing international modernism. She further notes the irony in a series of articles published during the period of the “anti-spiritual pollution” campaign in 1983, in which Chinese critic He Li attributes the decline of Chinese classical literature to the growing influence of British modernism which, in turn, is equated with “the demonic West,” for He Li neglects “the richness of the influence of Chinese and Japanese aesthetics, as well as other European and American movements, on the development of British modernism, as well as a growing international modernism” (Laurence 111). Even before 1983, Chinese critics made concerted attempts to check the flow of modernism into China. Nevertheless, the Crescent Moon group thrived from 1928 to 1931; after Xu’s death, this literary

society and its periodical also expired.

Just as Laurence reveals the intellectual symmetry between Dickinson and Xu, Anchee Min imagines a romantic liaison between Xu and Buck in *Pearl of China*, a biographical novel. “The possibility of a romantic relationship between the two has been rumored for years,” (“Q&A” 282), Min points out: “These were two great individuals who possessed both the Eastern and Western cultures and worlds—they were bound to admire and love each other” (Min, “Q&A” 282). Where Laurence emphasizes Dickinson and Xu as representatives of, respectively, the Bloomsbury and the Crescent Moon societies engaged with modernism, I focus on how the two mirror each other in their idealization of other cultures and in their scathing critiques of their own. Where Min depicts Xu and Pearl as soul mates for whom writing is their “rice and air” (*Pearl* 123), I draw from historical records to show how Buck parallels Dickinson in her appreciation of Chinese culture and in reflecting Xu.

All three writers were nonconformists in their own countries who identified acutely with overseas people and places. Dickinson was gay at a time when homosexuality was outlawed in England; Xu launched the first modern divorce in China; and Buck was subject to a witch hunt in 1933, “widely reported to be facing trial by the Church for heresy” (Spurling 210). Their appreciation of foreign cultures went beyond intellectual affinity: Dickinson so identified with the Chinese that he mystically believed he was “once a Chinaman” (qtd. in Laurence 135). Xu and Buck were thoroughly bilingual and were perhaps more “at home” on another shore. Buck translated *Water Margin*, the Chinese heroic classic, as *All Men are Brothers*, and Xu translated the works of authors such as Byron, Shelley, and Katherine Mansfield, whom he considered his soul mate; in Anchee Min’s *Pearl of China*, Buck and Xu are soul mates. In this Trumpean age, when alarming nationalist ideologies are on the rise in Asia, Europe, and the Americas, it might behoove us to revisit three generously open-minded writers whose sympathy and empathy for the “other” allowed them to become staunch critics of the ideologies of their own countries: Britain, China, and the United States, respectively.

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GOLDSWORTHY LOWES DICKINSON

As a close associate of Bloomsbury, Dickinson was a pivotal figure in the Cambridge-China connection. His vision of China, as Jason Harding points out, was “crucial in laying the foundations for the interchange between Chinese intellectuals and members of the Cambridge English faculty” (27). His views were received respectfully by “William Empson’s coterie” and his personal example galvanized “three generations of Kingsmen—Roger Fry, Arthur Waley, and Julian Bell—each of whom made a significant contribution to the reception of Chinese literature and art in Cambridge and beyond” (Harding 27, 28). In 1901, in the wake of the Boxer Uprising and the harsh reprisals from a multinational expeditionary force against China, Dickinson

published a series of articles in the *Saturday Review*, which were collected and published anonymously as *Letters from John Chinaman* in Britain in 1901 and as *Letters from a Chinese Official* in the United States in 1903. In these vignettes, he chastised England for the damage wrought by “both imperialist armies and Christian missionaries” (Dickinson, *Letters from a Chinese Official*; see also Harding 29; Laurence 167, 169). This “Chinese official” reminded the British that the first English traders in China were “little better than robbers and pirates,” selling opium that destroyed many Chinese, and that they were closely followed upon by Christian missionaries who “compelled” Confucian and Buddhist Chinese to convert to their religion in the 1840s (*Letters from John Chinaman* 42). He exclaims, under a Chinese guise, in the final letter:

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Irony of ironies—it is the nation of Christendom who have come to teach us by the sword and fire that Right in this world is powerless unless it be supported by Might! And woe to Europe when we have acquired [the lesson]! You are arming a nation of four hundred millions! A nation which, until you came, had no better wish than to live at peace with themselves and all the world. In the name of Christ you have sounded the call to arms! (Auden and Isherwood 197)

Dickinson, who might have adopted a Chinese persona for literary and political reasons, also identified with the Chinese personally. His critiques of his own country seemed inseparable from his affinity with Chinese culture, his voyages to China, and his daily interactions with Chinese students. In 1912, he was awarded an Albert Kahn Travelling Fellowship to promote international cooperation. After visiting E.M. Forster in India, Dickinson visited China in 1913-14 and penned his impressions in a number of “excitable, at times rhapsodic” traveler’s tales serialized in the *Manchester Guardian* (Harding 30). During his 1913-14 visit, he wrote to Roger Fry from a temple in Beijing: “I feel so at home. I think I must have been a Chinaman once [...] What a civilized people they have been. And how boundaries went in punishing them for it!” (10 May 1913; qtd. in Laurence 135). Despite his quixotic view of China, his anti-imperialist satire “exposes England’s ethical weakness as a nation” and anticipates postcolonial theory today (Laurence 167). Furthermore, his 1913 Kahn Report, a comparative essay on the civilizations of India, China, and Japan, is “a passionate testament of goodwill towards China” (Harding 31). In his memoir of Dickinson, Roger Fry noted that *Letters from John Chinaman* extolled the “dignity and beauty” of Chinese traditions, reflecting Dickinson’s belief that “the Chinese were redeemed by a capacity to discern beauty and order in nature” (qtd. in Harding 32).

After his return to England, Dickinson continued to engage the Chinese, and Chinese culture, by sponsoring scholars and students from China. Xu, who became a student at King’s College thanks to Dickinson, noted in a letter to Fry: “I have always thought it the greatest occasion in my life to meet Mr. Dickinson. It is due to him [...] that my interest in literature and arts began to shape and perpetuate itself” (qtd. in Laurence 154). In Dickinson’s living quarters at the top floor of Gibbs, Xu would often be seen chatting with his mentor (Laurence 132).

XU ZHIMO

Xu was the best known Chinese poet in the 1920s and 1930s thanks to his literary and romantic flamboyance. Nicknamed “Boy Wonder” since his teens, he married Chang Yu-i (1900-89) when he was eighteen, but soon left her to study law at Beiyang University and Peking University. Xu, being a favorite student of Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a leading public intellectual in China, was already steeped in Western ways before his sojourns abroad. In 1918, he went to the US to study banking and sociology at Clark University, graduated with high honours in 1919; he then went to Columbia University to study economics and political science, and earned his MA in 1920. In the fall of 1920, he left for King’s College, where he specialized in British Romantic poetry and French symbolist poetry. In 1922, Xu went back to China and became a leader of the modern poetry movement, founding the Crescent Moon Society—named after Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon*—a literary community consisting mostly of writers who had travelled in Europe and America. Xu worked as an editor and professor at several schools before his death at the age of 35, in a plane crash on November 19, 1931, while flying from Nanjing to Beijing. In 2008, a white marble memorial to Xu was installed at King’s College, on which is inscribed a verse from his best-known poem, “Farewell Again, Cambridge.”

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Xu anticipated many transnational intellectuals today in his vagrant identity and cultural hybridity, and his being at home in multiple places. During his years in Cambridge, Xu made a notable impression upon a wide range of English intellectuals at a time when racism was rampant in the West. He was a welcome Bloomsbury guest, according to a 1935 letter that David Garnett wrote to Julian Bell: “He came here once and won our hearts completely. Stayed with Roger” (qtd. in Laurence 132). According to Gaylord Leung, Xu remained lifelong friends with Dickinson, Dadie Rylands, H.G. Wells, Roger Fry, and Bertrand Russell, and was also introduced to Arthur Waley and Laurence Binyon (Laurence 129; Wood 191). Furthermore, Xu was probably the first Chinese intellectual who expressed a strong attachment to a place other than his native land. In his 1926 essay “The Cambridge I Know,” Xu uses the term *Sixiang* 思乡 [nostalgia] in recalling his Cambridge days (Hu; Ng and Tan 576). In I.A. Richards’s words, Xu’s picturesque nostalgia conjured “a place where you lay on the grass [...] while wise men came to talk to you and insensibly you became a poet” (qtd. in Harding 32).

One detects a certain chiasmus between Dickinson and Xu. Dickinson felt an atavistic connection when he visited Beijing during 1913-14. Xu was similarly enraptured by Cambridge a decade later: “My eyes were opened by Cambridge. My desire for knowledge was stirred by Cambridge. My self-consciousness took its embryonic form in Cambridge” (qtd. in Lee 132). Dickinson was as atypical an Englishman as Xu was an iconoclastic Chinese; their fascination with “other” civilizations provoked chastening introspections as “each looks at the other’s culture and art and then critiques his own” (Laurence 176). Just as Dickinson’s identification with China was

as deep as his alienation from the British Empire, so was Xu's enthrallment with Cambridge as intense as his estrangement from Confucian culture. His unsparing assessment of Confucian teaching diverged from Dickinson's rosy view of Cathay. Xu wrote in "Art and Life" that the Chinese are admired "by sincere friends like G. Lowes Dickinson and Bertrand Russell" for their "dispassionate attitude toward life, love of moderation" (Xu 172), but he could not help "feeling the poignancy of the irony that is behind it" (Xu 172). He summarized his impressions as follows: "For what is a dispassionate attitude toward life but a patent negation of life by smothering the divine flame of passions almost to extinction? What is love for moderation but an amiable excuse for cowardice in thought and action? Subtract the element of sexual passion and all that radiates from it and you will be shocked to see the irretrievable bankruptcy of European literature and arts" (Xu 172). He clinches his jeremiad on the suppression of the spirit and the senses in traditional Chinese culture with a mordant allegory:

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Had the tree of knowledge been planted in the middle of the Chinese Empire [...] Adam and Eve would have remained superb creatures, blind of heart as of eye and insensible to the life promptings within, and God Himself would have been spared all the indignations and troubles consequent of the snake's heroism and Eve's curiosity. (Xu 174)

Xu was one of the first Chinese writers to question a life of conventionality and social conformity. His reverence for the inner life makes his voice a refreshing one, both in the materialistic West and in a China roiled by nationalist, socialist, and communist ideologies. Nicknamed "the Chinese Byron" and "the Chinese Shelley" (Spurling 174), he infuses his Chinese lyrics with Western forms of rhymes and meter, and douses them with his romanticist spirit. His enduring literary influence in China speaks to the potential of intercultural poetics, to the way Western literature can be seeded in, and made to produce new strains on, Chinese soil. His spontaneous individual expression and keenness for literature have galvanized an entire literary community. Wilma Fairbank ascribes the success of the Crescent Moon Society to Xu's "uncanny ability to find and gather" like-minded people and to ignite in them "new concepts, new aspirations, and, not least, new friendships" (Fairbank 12). Nora Stirling, one of Pearl Buck's biographers, notes that his "international background and winning personality" made him much in demand as teacher and editor; that "his generous help to both students and writers made him almost a legend among his colleagues" (Stirling 88).

The narratives of Dickinson and Xu both present "new forms of consciousness in artistic communities that begin to break with older forms of belief and feeling and memory," Laurence observes (127-28). Both Dickinson and Xu were nonconformists in their personal life as well. Dickinson was gay, with a crush on Roger Fry, whom he described in his autobiography as his "first love" (Harding 32). During his stay in China, he conveyed embarrassment in being taken to a banquet of "sing-song girls," adding, "I wish they were boys!" (qtd. in Laurence 188). Xu initiated the first modern

divorce in China, and at his second wedding he was lambasted by his teacher, Liang Qichao. There might even have been some degree of homoerotic attraction between Xu and Dickinson, at least on the latter's part: "One of the most famous images of Dickinson is a photograph in which he wears the black satin Chinese hat given him by Xu Zhimo when the young Chinese poet visited Cambridge in 1923," Frances Wood observed (194). E.M. Forster, Dickinson's friend and biographer, who was also gay, described meeting Xu as "one of the most exciting things that ever happened" to him (Chang 110). The excitement of Dickinson and Forster over Xu could be more than purely intellectual.

In any case, the effusive Chinese poet established excellent rapport with many diverse Cambridge dons and Bloomsbury members. Pang-Mei Natasha Chang, grandniece of Xu's ex-wife Chang Youyi, reflects on him: "How exotic, quixotic [Xu] must have seemed to his Western friends: an intelligent, extravagantly romantic Chinese discovering kindred spirits and traditions in the West" (110). Chang believes that Xu's "journey to the West infused him with a desire to change his ways, to become "a living embodiment of those virtues and traits that he most admired in the West: love, passion, honesty" (94). The free rein Xu gave to his feelings and passions, in life as in poetry, was in keeping with the British Romantic spirit.

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Xu combined the individualism touted in the West with the communal or interdependent ethos inculcated in the East. His abilities to be true to himself and to innovate poetics were complemented by his propensity to appreciate, encourage, excite, and inspire people of like multicultural mind, a quality that endeared him to an array of intellectuals, such as Chinese female authors Zhang Youyi, Phyllis Lin Huiyin, Lu Xiaoman, and Ling Shuhua; American writers Pearl Buck and Agnes Smedley; Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore; Bloomsbury associates Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, Roger Fry, and E.M. Forster; and Chinese luminaries Hu Shi, Liang Qichao, Shen Congwen, and Lin Changmin, father of Lin Huiyin and director of the Chinese Association for the League of Nations.

Xu's regard for independent and talented women was inseparable from his own appeal. He differed from many traditional Chinese men who were wary of women who are their equals or betters. The significant women in Xu's life, whether lovers or platonic soul mates, were all formidable intellectuals or artists. Lin Huiyin was a poet and the first female professor of architecture in China. Lu Xiaoman, his second wife, was described by Hu Shi as "a painter, singer, writer, and a speaker of French and English" (Laurence 148). Ling Shuhua was a painter and writer, whose autobiography, *Ancient Melodies*, was published by the Hogarth Press in 1953 (Laurence 84). Agnes Smedley was a gritty journalist whose activism on behalf of the dispossessed led to "accusations of espionage, forcing her to flee America and die abroad" (Wood, 209). Xu also worshipped Katherine Mansfield, whose stories he translated (Laurence 203). The men who held Xu in high esteem—Shen Congwen, Hu Shi, Younghill Kang, G.L. Dickinson, E.M. Forster, I.A. Richards, and Rabindranath Tagore—were likewise pioneering figures and renowned authors. Most of these men and women were

also progressive thinkers, Pearl Buck being a particular example among them.

PEARL BUCK

The name Pearl Buck immediately evokes *The Good Earth*, which was published in 1931, sold 1.5 million copies, and translated into thirty languages. It received the Pulitzer Prize, became a Broadway play in 1933, and in 1937 was adapted into a movie that was seen in the US by an estimated 23 million people. However, Buck's relationship with Xu, her broadsides against American missionaries, and the role she played in the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, are much less publicized than her novel. Buck's biographers differ on whether she had a love affair with Xu, but all agree that the Chinese poet made a lasting impression on the American author, who admitted "she imagined herself [...] marrying a young man such as Xu Zhimo" (Spurling 175) when she wrote "A Chinese Woman Speaks." In Anchee Min's biographical fiction *Pearl of China*, Xu (spelled Hsu in the novel) is a foil to the men in Pearl's life: her father Absalom Sydenstricker and her husband Lossing Buck. Absalom is so preoccupied with saving Chinese heathens that he neglects his wife Carie and their daughters. The aggrieved wife forbids him from visiting her when she is dying: "You go and save your heathens" (Min, *Pearl* 97). Lossing, an agricultural expert who marries Pearl so she can be his translator for his field experiments, disparages Pearl's writing endeavor: "if Pearl has ambition, she has little skill or training. [...] she is bound to lose if she tries to make it as a writer" (Min, *Pearl* 107). When Pearl protests that he has no right to stop her from writing, Lossing counters: "without your help I can't do my job. You treat your writing as if it is a job, but [...] I am the one who earns the money" (Min, *Pearl* 107). Unlike Absalom, Hsu is always solicitous of the women in his life; in stark contrast to Lossing, who disparages her potential as a writer, Hsu constantly encourages her.

As with Dickinson and Xu, a chiasmic relationship exists between Buck and Xu, in both fiction and reality. Both were strong individuals who did not yield to the tide of politics, public opinion, or dogmatism. Edward Said notes that an exile's "contrapuntal" awareness can become highly gratifying "if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy" (148). People of such bent are likely to be drawn to one another. Min builds on this attraction of similarly contrapuntal minds in her novel, as she depicts these two writers admiring what is atypical in each other: "Hsu Chih-mo is the only Chinese man I know who was true to himself," Pearl confides in her Chinese friend Willow. "He was daring and almost impulsive. I couldn't help but love him" (155). Hsu, for his part, was "convinced that Pearl was more Chinese than he was. He was infatuated with her perspective, her Chinese habits [...] He loved 'the Chinese soul under the white skin'" (Min, *Pearl* 141). Min's fiction comes close to fact, in that both Xu and Buck found greater resonance with other cultures. Because of his adoration of

the British Romantic poets, and his valuing of spontaneous emotions and sexual intimacy, Xu could not abide by Confucian propriety. Buck, by virtue of her appreciation of Chinese culture, was a forthright critic of American missionaries and a staunch advocate for Chinese and Chinese Americans. Xu and Buck were kindred spirits capable of incisively critiquing their indigenous cultures as a result of their deep insight into other cultures. Like the exiles Said discusses, Xu's and Buck's plurality of vision gave rise to a contrapuntal awareness; both writers had lived "nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal" (Said 148) lives, "led outside habitual order" (Said 149).

Born in West Virginia to Presbyterian missionaries and raised in Zhenjiang, in Jiangsu Province, China, in a predominantly white community, Buck was intimately familiar with the missionary circles. Despite being a missionary child and wife, she spoke vehemently against missionary condescension toward the Chinese. Spurling notes that during a talk to missionary trainees in Nanjing in 1923, Buck urged her students never to operate "on anything less than an absolute equality [...] We simply cannot express the Gospel with any force if we have hidden within us a sense of racial superiority" (Spurling 204-05). In the 1930s, she expressed her disapproval of missionary Eurocentrism even more openly, for several reasons. First, Absalom, her devout father, died on August 31, 1931; thus, she was no longer concerned with repressing any displeasure with the missionaries in deference to her father. Second, the condition of her daughter Carol, who suffered from phenylketonuria, continued unabated: Buck "stopped going to church when it became clear that she could expect no answer to her passionate prayers for her daughter" (Spurling 199). Third, the missionary response to *The Good Earth* was rather dismissive. The first letter Buck received from a reader in the United States came from "the secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions in New York," whose tone was at once "so sanctimonious and so squeamish that she did not immediately realize that his main complaint was her sexual frankness" (Spurling 199). Buck responded defiantly: "I like [the Chinese peasants'] matter-of-fact attitude to all natural functions of life, including sex. I think it sane and wholesome" (Spurling 199). Buck's reply to her critics is reminiscent of Xu's dismay toward the Confucian disavowal of the body, demonstrating, in their own way, the similarities between Confucian and Presbyterian cultures.

Buck's essays "Is There a Place for the Foreign Missionary?" published in *The Chinese Recorder* in 1927, and "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" published in *Harper's Magazine* in December 1932, displayed her unflinching reprimands of missionary condescension. In the former, Buck asked "whether or not any one has the right to impress upon another the forms of his own civilization, whether those forms be religious or not" (Buck, "Place" 102). In November 1932, Buck delivered a speech to a Presbyterian gathering at the Astor Hotel, in which she related her "findings in four decades as a mission child, wife, and teacher" (Spurling 204) and deplored the conceited attitudes of missionaries who considered themselves dispensers of civilization charged with enlightening the people they regarded as backward Chinese heathens: "I have seen the missionary narrow, uncharitable, unappreciative, ignorant

[...] so filled with arrogance in his own beliefs [...] so scornful of any civilization but their own [...] so coarse and insensitive among a sensitive and cultivated people, that my heart has fairly bled with shame” (Buck, “Case” 144). She went on to point out the futility of sending out emissaries who were not only arrogant towards, but oblivious of, the people they were trying to convert: “I grew up among these and I know them” (“The Whole Christ” 450), she said bitterly, describing an entrenched white community that refused to look beyond its own rigid codes of conduct: “Very nearly was I moved to turn against all Christianity and all missionary work” (Buck, “The Whole Christ” 450). Buck laid bare the missionary community’s invidious assumptions: approaching foreign countries “not in the spirit in which Christ approached men” but “in lordliness and consciousness of race superiority”; bearing “the abominable attitude of one who confers a favor”; entangling “the simple, clear teachings and life of Christ with the trappings of our western civilization,” and “seeking to impress our civilization upon the civilization of another race” (Buck, “Place” 104, 105).

616 In addition to exhorting missionaries in China to treat Chinese people as equals, Buck also fought for racial equality and against the discrimination of African Americans and Chinese Americans after her return to the US. Richard Jean So points out that, although Buck herself was not well disposed toward the Chinese at first, a Chinese classic inspired a major shift in her attitude after 1926, as was evident in several letters to her friend Emma White in 1927: “While Buck initially despised what she perceived to be the lowly [Chinese] peasant figure, in these letters she begins to discern a complex field of foreign imperialism and a nationalist repression that subjects the Chinese peasant” (So 90). Thereafter, Buck’s diary entries identify the peasant as the basis and organizing force of Chinese society: “The longer I lived in our northern city [Anhui], the more I was impressed by the farmers and their families [...] They were the most real, the closest to the earth [...] and among them I found the human as he most nearly is” (Buck, *My Several Worlds* 161; cited in So 90-91). So contends that this scene “models an ideal relationship between self, community, and environment” and that Buck would later “name this community of farmers and coolies a natural democracy” (So 91).

The Chinese classic that changed Buck’s attitude toward China and its people was the late Ming novel *Water Margin*. According to So, 1927 marked an intellectual turning point for Buck, due to her enrollment in Chinese literature courses at Nanjing University, at which she studied this novel telling of 108 outlaws who band together to combat the corrupt Song government. Stressing themes of brotherhood, revenge, and social justice, *Water Margin* portrays the rebels as heroic and the government as degenerate. Though it had been a household text in China since the 1700s, this novel assumed a renewed importance in the 1920s and 1930s, owing to its “call for constant political reform and, when necessary, revolution” (So 93), issues that Buck engaged directly; indeed, “Buck’s vision of natural democracy in the Chinese rural countryside developed directly out of her engagement with the novel” (So 91). In her 1937 Nobel acceptance speech, Buck focused on the history of the vernacular

Chinese novel, which she sharply distinguished from the history of Chinese classical literature: “The novel in China was the product of the people, its very language was that of its people [...] The Chinese novel was thus free. It grew out of the soil and emerged from the people” (*The Chinese Novel* 47-48). Buck proceeded to link this vernacular literary development with “the rise of natural democracy in China, with the two being mutually constitutive of each other” (So 92). So not only traces Buck’s notion of “natural democracy” to *Water Margin*, but also points out how she used this concept to argue against the Chinese Exclusion Acts in her testimony before Congress on May 20, 1943. She averred that “the Chinese, in their devotion to kinship and rural life, articulated a form of ‘natural democracy’ that modeled a proto-Jeffersonian, Oriental mode of social collectivity” (So 87). Her argument must have carried the day, because Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Acts four months after her testimony.

As forthright critics of their countries of origin and lifelong advocates for the Other, Dickinson, Xu, and Buck left bountiful legacies in their native soil and overseas. They were foundational members of literary and political circles, part of a web of relationships between transnational literary communities. Both Dickinson and Xu nurtured young talents: Dickinson took not only Xu, but also many other Chinese intellectuals, under his wing, facilitating what was perhaps the most vibrant cultural encounter between China and Great Britain. He also kindled a passion for China in many of his fellow countrymen, including Arthur Waley, I.A. Richards, William Empson, and Julian Bell. Xu enabled many other people’s literary careers to grow; intrigued by the literary world of Cambridge, he was also drawn to mentors and friends who rivaled his own ability to appreciate an(other) world and to critique their own. He was remarkably prescient about exceptional literary talents, notably Shen Congwen and Pearl Buck, and extended a helping hand to both when they were still struggling writers. Shen was slated for the Nobel Prize in literature in 1988, but died before he could be given the award; Buck was the first American female to earn the prize. Literature had far-reaching effects on both Xu and Buck: Xu’s unbridled romances and advocacy of “feeling” in defiance of traditional Confucian culture were fueled by the British Romantic poets. Buck was galvanized by *Water Margin*, from which she derived the idea of “natural democracy”—the idea she presented before Congress to put an end to the Chinese Exclusion Acts—“facilitating the emergence of the postwar Asian American subject” (So 87). Through their contrapuntal visions, Dickinson, Xu, and Buck were early and prominent examples of migrant writers and scholars who believe in mingling with people of all stripes, in promoting a multicultural world heritage and, above all, in encouraging critical cultural and national introspection.

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