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Source: *Representations*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (Fall 2010), pp. 87-111

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2010.112.1.87>

Accessed: 31-03-2016 12:48 UTC

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Fictions of Natural Democracy: Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*, and the Asian American Subject

ON MAY 20, 1943, AMERICAN AUTHOR PEARL BUCK, recent winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, was testifying before Congress on the subject of Chinese Exclusion, a set of laws passed in 1882 to restrict Chinese immigration to the United States. Earlier that year, Buck, her husband Richard Walsh, and a circle of friends organized a campaign to repeal Exclusion, culminating in the hearings at which she now testified. In accordance with emerging forms of U.S. civil rights discourse, Buck argued that Chinese Exclusion constructed pro-white hierarchies of racial difference that denied basic rights to Chinese immigrants, and thus contradicted the core tenets of American democracy. She based her argument on a startling claim: 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.¹ To deny Chinese immigrants membership into American democracy would be, paradoxically, to deny them their most basic nature. Although Buck’s vision of natural democracy has since become lost to U.S. cultural history, most educated Americans in the 1940s were familiar with its meaning. Buck first popularized this concept in *The Good Earth* (1931), one of the bestselling novels of the 1930s, and later in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, as well as in countless magazine articles. In a testament to its prevalence, six other speakers at the congressional hearings each directly referenced Buck’s concept of natural democracy, while two others, including a congressman, explicitly evoked *The Good Earth* in their statements. Four months later, Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Acts, no doubt in large part due to Buck’s influence, thus facilitating the emergence of the postwar Asian American subject.²

ABSTRACT This essay offers a new reading of the American author Pearl Buck, focusing on her cultural concept of “natural democracy.” It does so by critically reconstructing and examining this concept through three linked contexts: 1930s China, the novel *The Good Earth*, and the 1943 Chinese Exclusion Acts Repeal hearings. The essay argues that natural democracy enabled the emergence of a U.S.-China, trans-Pacific cultural sphere that helped to facilitate the rise of the postwar Asian American subject. / REPRESENTATIONS 112, Fall 2010 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 87-111. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI:10.1525/rep.2010.112.1.87.

Natural democracy represented an attempt to reconstruct Western democracy in a trans-Pacific context through a synthesis of U.S. and Chinese cultural concepts. Buck, a daughter of American missionaries, spent her formative years in China in the 1920s, returning to America in the 1930s as a distinguished author. In theorizing this concept, she drew from both contexts by seizing on each of their specific cultural energies: natural democracy emerged at the intersection of the Chinese May Fourth movement of the 1920s, and the U.S. Cultural Front reform movement of the 1930s. In particular, Buck based her vision of natural democracy on a fusion of Jeffersonian agrarianism and a perceived indigenous tradition of Chinese democracy found in the classic late Ming novel *The Water Margin*. She located compatible notions of political equality and human identity in both American and Chinese literary traditions, particularly literary realism. As such, natural democracy embodied a powerful linkage between American and Chinese literary histories, as well as forms of politics and social knowledge. Against perhaps reflexive expectations of Orientalism, natural democracy represented not an attempt to impose a U.S. vision of democracy onto China, but rather an effort to work at the interstices of U.S. and Chinese cultures in order to redefine democracy's meaning. Buck would write this concept into existence most clearly in *The Good Earth*, which constituted the basis of an emerging, trans-Pacific literary sphere.

My attempt to resituate Buck in a trans-Pacific cultural context is influenced by recent reevaluations of the trans-Pacific and Asia/Pacific region in the fields of Asian American studies, transnational U.S. literature, and modern China studies. In the 1970s and 1980s, during the height of the Cold War, it was commonplace to interpret the United States and China as possessing utterly discrete cultures—a formation that accounts for today's lack of reciprocity between American and China Studies fields. At the same time, the space between, the trans-Pacific, was interpreted as a zone of American ideological and cultural hegemony, as well as inevitable U.S. economic expansion.³ Scholarly works by Rob Wilson, Arif Dirlik, and David Palumbo-Liu have been useful in critiquing this view by recovering a number of counterarticulations of the Pacific by Japanese, Chinese, and local indigenous Pacific Islander writers. The virtue of this approach is that it reveals the modern trans-Pacific as constituted by “shifting centers,” “borderless geographies,” and “circulating selves and social motions,” which, despite Cold War visions of a totalizing U.S. hegemony, impinge on otherwise stable notions of identity, place, and region.⁴ Nonetheless, although such work aspires to create a counter-Orientalist interpretation of the Pacific, several recent studies still situate Buck within the tradition of U.S. Orientalism, and thus as enabling a Euro-American vision of the Pacific, rather than generating a more complex vision of this region and how it operates.⁵

In this essay, I seek to situate Buck in an alternative genealogy of the trans-Pacific, one that emphasizes American-Chinese encounters and dialogue, and that places Buck's vision of natural democracy at its center. New work on the Pacific allows us to discern non-American, counterhegemonic cultural formations, but it also facilitates new insights into how U.S. and Chinese cultures operated, often contentiously, within a shared literary and political space that I call a trans-Pacific cultural sphere. Central to a new imagining of the trans-Pacific is renewed attention to the forms of political, social, and aesthetic practice it foments through East-West cultural encounters. In an excellent recent study, Yunte Huang draws attention to the "discursive terrain of the Pacific" (or, quoting Herman Melville, "the deadly space between") that is characterized by multiple, uneven contact zones across different nations and "epistemological battle."⁶ Huang interprets the trans-Pacific as a place where people and ideas meet, new concepts emerge, and poetics and counterpoetics coexist and struggle against each other. Such "crossings," Huang writes, encourage new cultural practices and a "reterritorialization" of political ideas.⁷ In this light, I read natural democracy as an enabling discursive space in which Chinese and American cultures met, hybridized, and mutually transformed each other.

This essay, however, also explores the outcome of the practices Huang mentions. In her study of American Orientalism, Colleen Lye interprets Buck's *The Good Earth*, its protagonist Wang Lung in particular, as embodying an early or "proto" model of Asian American subjectivity in its "democratizing" of the Chinese rural subject.⁸ I also view Wang as figuring an incipient form of the Asian American, yet I deviate from Lye's account in how I trace the significance of both American and Chinese materials for *The Good Earth*. Whereas Lye reads Wang Lung as the discursive effect of American neocolonial relations in East Asia, I see Wang as representing a syncretic figure: the result of U.S.–China transcultural encounter in the 1930s. The significance of this argument, which I elaborate in my conclusion, is that it reimagines the Asian American subject of democracy—what is now often referred to as "the model minority"—as intrinsically hybrid and, indeed, indebted to cultural forces inseparable from East Asia and located well beyond the domestic scale of American culture.

Discovering Natural Democracy: *The Water Margin*

In the beginning, Buck felt little affection for China. She was born in West Virginia to Presbyterian missionaries and raised in Zhenjiang, a city near Nanjing, within a generally all-white community. An entrenched missionary worldview, one instilled by her parents, keenly informed her formative

years. Between 1917 and 1928, Buck lived in northern Anhui Province with her husband, John Lossing Buck, an American agriculturalist, and during this time she formed a strong dislike of China. This distaste was conveyed in letters to friends and family, which contained largely predictable criticisms: Buck attacks China's unsanitary living conditions and the "backwardness" of its people; she rails against the "common" practice of infanticide and a perceived general state of chaos in Chinese society.⁹ In a letter to her friend Emma White in 1919, she appears to explode with a pent-up, intense fury: "Knowing these people as I do, it makes me most and thoroughly angry to have China considered as even a semi-civilized country. She is a country given to the devil, as anyone who comes into close contact with its people know."¹⁰

Yet, what is interesting about Buck's Orientalism is not its development, but its dissolution and reconstruction. Starting in early 1926, a major shift in rhetoric begins to overtake Buck's letters to Emma White: while in her original letters to friends in the 1910s she posits an "emptiness" of social form in China ("It is a mess"), later, she starts to identify a distinct "pattern of life" in the countryside, a coherent "essential unity" of the people and their land.¹¹ For example, in one letter, she observes the rising tide of Chinese radicalism sweeping the nation in the late 1920s and excitedly praises this social movement as "such social order! The masses of common people rising up!"¹² Here, in a reversal of her earlier descriptions, Buck illuminates formerly invisible forms of popular will and identity: a "pattern of life" rather than social chaos. This shift in rhetoric from "chaos" to "pattern" amounts to a major reconstruction of worldview. More than merely indicating a reformed positive view of China, it articulates the emergence of a coherent, structured interpretation of China, one reliant on a discourse of form. Central to this shift in perception was a reformed view of the Chinese peasant (or "coolie") and his relationship to the land.¹³ Several letters to White in early 1927 reveal a probing exploration of social inequality in rural Anhui. While Buck initially despised what she perceived to be the lowly peasant figure, in these letters she begins to discern a complex field of foreign imperialism and Nationalist repression that subjects the Chinese peasant. In a rather abrupt turnabout, Buck identifies the peasant, who works and develops the land, as the basis and organizing force of Chinese society. It is the coolie who remains close to the land and builds society from the ground up. Further, more than just valorizing this figure as a key social determinant, Buck also argues that the Chinese peasant reveals a uniquely harmonious vision of social life, one founded on principles of cooperation, equality, and order. Buck recalls this vision in her diary:

The longer I lived in our northern city, the more I was impressed by the farmers and their families, who lived in the villages outside the city wall. They were the ones

who bore the brunt of life. They were the most real, the closest to the earth, to birth and death. To visit the farm families became my own search for reality and among them I found the human as he most nearly is.¹⁴

This scene models an ideal relationship between self, community, and environment. Each individual works and lives “close to the earth,” forming strong bonds between one’s self and the natural world. Each belongs to an organic community (“outside the city wall”) that displaces the role of government, and sovereignty emanates from a collective will. An idyllic, stylized image of a naturally made society slides into view. Indeed, Buck would later name this community of farmers and coolies a natural democracy. It is a form of social life that appears to predate formal state governance, yet articulates a vision of seemingly unfettered self-rule: “the human as he most nearly is.”

Buck’s conversion, though, was not rooted in some newfound sympathy for the Chinese peasant or willful critique of Orientalism. Rather, it was based on a systematic reconception of Chinese reality animated by the discovery of what Buck perceived to be its indigenous aesthetic forms and structures. Take for example the diary entry I have quoted: Buck’s revelation of natural democracy is guided by an aesthetic gesture, her “search” for Chinese “reality” through a more enlightened reimagining of its forms. In her emphasis on the real as a representable object as well as a form of discourse, Buck reorders Chinese social reality through patterns culled from literary genres. For example, Buck’s letters during this time reveal an increasing literary referentiality: more than one draw an analogy between the crisis in Nanjing and her favorite novel, *The Water Margin*.¹⁵

Looking back on her life, Buck recollected that the year 1927 enabled her profound change in cultural perception. Ironically, 1927 marked the onset of civil war between Communist and Nationalist factions, a time of social chaos, but for Buck, it marked an intellectual turning point due to her enrollment in Chinese literature courses at Nanjing University. Buck’s area of focus was the rise of the Chinese vernacular novel during the Song and Ming dynasties, specializing in the popular late Ming novel *The Water Margin* (水滸傳). Buck attained both speaking and reading fluency in modern and classical Chinese as a teenager, and had carefully read and studied the novel since childhood. Her current studies, however, emphasized its various political and sociological qualities, such as its relationship to Chinese society and the emergence of new cultural forms and reading publics. *The Water Margin*, while omnipresent in Chinese culture since the 1700s, assumed a renewed importance in the 1920s, and Buck aimed to engage directly with this new field of debate. Buck’s vision of natural democracy in the Chinese rural countryside developed directly out of her engagement with the novel.

The Water Margin figures prominently in Buck’s 1937 Nobel acceptance speech, for which she chose the history of the vernacular Chinese novel as her

topic. According to Buck, the history of the vernacular novel, which dates back to the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), must be distinguished from the history of Chinese classical or literary writing, which, in its elevated language, had long been the exclusive provenance of Chinese scholars and elites. In direct opposition to Chinese classical literature, a rich countertradition of Chinese vernacular stories emerged that took as its foundation oral storytelling, songs, and folklore.¹⁶ In her speech, Buck imagines the vernacular Chinese novel as addressing a counterpublic in which common Chinese could communicate and socialize outside the rigid confines of elite social discourse characterized by literary writing. She explains, “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.”¹⁷

Importantly, she also links the development of the vernacular Chinese novel, which she views as an inherently Chinese and indigenous cultural formation, to the rise of natural democracy in China, with the two being mutually constitutive of each other. For example, two formal qualities organize the novel: “naturalness” and “formlessness.”¹⁸ Both facilitate an “open” narrative structure that emphasizes flexibility and displaces first-person authority.¹⁹ Buck calls this a form of “democratic literature,” whereby authorial governance in the text derives from multiple voices rather than emanating from above.²⁰ In terms of its social basis, Buck links this reading of the novel’s form to an analysis of politics:

The emperor sent “imperial ears” to observe his subjects and they told him the strange and interesting things the common people did, who were free. And I do not doubt that if the messages between the emperor and the people carried stories in one direction, they carried them in the other, and to the people they told stories about the emperor and what he said and did . . . all of which delighted the Chinese, because it proved to them, the most democratic of peoples, that their emperor was after all a common fellow like themselves. There began the important source for the novel that was to develop with such form and force.²¹

In this passage, Buck imagines a horizontal, democratic form of social relations in China that affects a natural state of civic equality for all. The culture furnishes an open or free form of vernacular dialogue that democratizes the flow of knowledge between ruler and ruled, while the text itself bears within its aesthetic form this vision of equality.

Minor differences aside, Buck’s interpretation of the vernacular Chinese novel is strikingly close to present-day accounts.²² Indeed, what appears to distinguish Buck from scholars such as Patrick Hanan is merely her insistence on describing the novel’s formal and sociological qualities as democratic. Thus what is of particular interest here is not Buck’s history and reading of *The Water Margin*, but her attempts to reframe and reinterpret its significance for the China of the 1930s.

In the 1920s and 1930s, *The Water Margin* was widely discussed, interpreted, and debated within Chinese intellectual circles. As Hongyuan Yu has outlined, a number of Chinese reformers, such as Hu Shi and Lu Xun, perceived the text as articulating a native Chinese tradition of “democracy” and “civil rights” and valorized it in order to legitimate a broader project of Chinese social and cultural reform.²³ The text itself first appeared in China during the late Ming (1600s) as a collection of popular vernacular tales. China scholars trace its origins to an oral storytelling tradition originating in Northern China in the late Song period (960–1276); gradually, the story took shape as it passed down through a number of generations and circulated across the nation.²⁴ Finally, by the late 1600s, scholars such as Shi Nai’an and Li Zhi took to publishing the novel in cogent form, releasing seventy-, one-hundred-twenty-, and one-hundred-chapter versions. In the 1700s, the literary critic Jin Shengtan published what is now considered the text’s most definitive and modern seventy-chapter version. Over time, though, while the physical form of the text has altered and evolved, *The Water Margin*’s essential story has remained the same: the novel tells the tale of 108 outlaws who band together to combat the corrupt Song government. Focusing on themes of brotherhood and social justice, it portrays the people as heroic while representing the social elite as corrupt and repugnant. The text’s call for constant political reform and, when necessary, revolution, accounts for its popularity in China, particularly in the 1930s.²⁵

The novel represented an ideal text for Chinese reformers to construct a radical, progressive politics for the present for two reasons. First, the novel appeared to articulate a latent, yet intrinsic, vision of Chinese equality within an indigenous cultural form. And second, the novel was ripe for reinterpretation and, in fact, revision, due to its very long textual history. Indeed, as early as the early 1900s, late Qing reformers such as Liang Qichao developed “democratic” (民主) readings of the text, that could be deployed in the service of reform efforts at the turn of the century.²⁶

This focus on *The Water Margin* within Chinese intellectual discourse, as Hongyuan Yu has argued, reached its apex in the 1930s. Reflecting a widening divide between Marxist and liberal intellectual factions in the post-May Fourth era, critics posited two visions of *The Water Margin*: the text as proto-democratic and the text as protosocialist. While earlier in the late Qing, intellectuals appeared to agree that the novel documented a vision of Chinese progressive politics, readers in the 1930s were divided over whether those politics espoused outright revolution or a gentler version of gradual reform.

Buck followed these debates closely and sought to intervene in them by producing a new U.S. English-language translation of *The Water Margin* (retitled *All Men Are Brothers*).²⁷ Yet, rather than merely transliterate the text into English in rote fashion, she took a rather liberal approach to translation: she aimed to

produce a version of the text that highlighted its inherent democratic ethos in order to counter a rising Communist reinterpretation of the novel. Buck, as Peter Conn has noted, was a self-described good liberal and devoted anti-Communist, and the spread of Communism in China disturbed her as much as the socialist turn in the United States in the 1930s.²⁸ In her preface to her new translation, as well as in her later Nobel Prize speech, Buck condemned Chen Duxiu, the well-known Communist intellectual, and his attempt to reread *The Water Margin* as a proto-Marxist text. She wrote that “communist ideas” are totally foreign to China, while democracy was “natural” to its form.²⁹ Buck’s imagining of the text was an effort to translate back into existence that which was threatened by Chinese Communist literary revisionism.

Two moments stand out in Buck’s democratic rendering and repossession of *The Water Margin*. First, as Hongyuan Yu argues, Chen Duxiu’s reclamation of the novel as a Marxist text hinged on a reading of one key passage that galvanized the creation of a Chinese socialist aesthetic in the 1950s. In a preface to a new version of the text in 1928, Chen focuses on a specific poem from the text:

赤日炎炎似火烧，田中禾黍半枯焦。
农夫心内如汤煮，公子王孙把扇摇。³⁰

A standard translation of the poem reads:

Beneath a red sun that burns like fire
Half scorched in the fields is the grain.
Poor peasant hearts with worry are scalded
While the rich idly fan themselves.³¹

Chen famously interprets this passage as evincing an early form of class-consciousness in China, one aligned against the landowning ruling class. Peasants in China have always struggled against landlords and, thus, socialism is as natural as peasant life to China. Following Liang Qichao, Chen Duxiu uses the novel to read urgent, modern ideologies into Chinese history as a way of fomenting political dissent in his own time. Yet he deviates from Liang by pushing a more overt Marxist position, one indebted to a class analysis of history, in his reconstruction of the novel’s aesthetic form. Buck would take a hard stand against Chen’s explication. In her version of the text, the last two lines of the poem are dubiously translated as: “the farmers’ hearts are hot with grief / But idle princes must be fanned.”³² Buck eliminates class difference, or at least class tension, by replacing the “poor peasant/rich” dyad with a declassed and archaic binary of “farmer/prince.” Buck also significantly altered the novel’s finale. In the text’s final pages, the outlaws gather heroically at their home base to celebrate a recent

victory against the tyrannical local officials. In a gesture Buck discerns as innately democratic, they hold a great feast in which they all sit equally at a large table regardless of rank or age. However, despite the celebration, the text curiously ends with a violent sequence in which Song Jiang, the main outlaw, after a night of libations, dreams of being violently executed by the emperor. Chih-tsing Hsia has noted that this ending exposes a serious ideological tension inherent in the text: given its historical context, the novel is not able to conclude definitively whether the bandits represented a force of progress and right or a mere gang of violent hoodlums.³³ Ironically, both Buck and Chen agreed that this ending required revision, but they disagreed in method. While Chen altered the ending to intensify the image of a class tension, Buck chose to excise the nightmare sequence entirely in order to highlight the final image of the outlaws living as equals:

On that day, Song Jiang had finished his commands and when he had appointed every chieftain to his own place, each took his own dispatch and when they had finished feasting everyone was in a mighty drunkenness, he called them together and said to them: "Today we are no longer as we have been . . . we must all have one heart and trust each other." Then were all who heard this filled with great joy and they all joined voices together and they answered, "So be it!" . . . When Song Jiang had thus vowed, all the host together shouted assent and they said, "We would but meet again, life after life, generation after generation, forever undivided, even as we are this day!"³⁴

Thus, in sum, Buck's translation of *The Water Margin* reacts against Chen's version by eliding scenes and images of class tension in order to accentuate the idea of a natural democracy enabled by a united, homogenous Chinese peasantry. Her invention of this concept was no doubt fraught, but it did not mark an effort to dominate China. Rather, it signaled Buck's desire to resist the rising influence of Chinese Marxism by preserving the word *democracy* within the context of social reform. Her reading of *The Water Margin* mediates between the liberalism of Liang Qichao's interpretation and Chen's more radical Marxist vision of the novel. Buck's discovery of natural democracy therefore represented a re-imagining of China's political forms through its literary forms.

Synthetic Literary Realism: *The Good Earth*

Despite popular success in America, Buck's rendition of *The Water Margin* failed to make a visible impact on Chinese literary discourse in the 1930s. One obvious explanation is that the text was produced in English, and intellectual discourse in China typically relied on Chinese for expression. Yet, this explanation overlooks the fact that Chinese writers, such as

Mao Dun, diligently kept up with the Anglo-American literary scene, and in fact looked forward to reading Buck's translation in English of the novel. A more accurate reason for Buck's failure to make an impact on Chinese thought was that her democratic-liberal reading of *The Water Margin* widely diverged from what at the time appeared to be a drift toward Chinese socialist aesthetics.³⁵ Buck observed in her diaries that a different tack was required to make a difference. In the late 1920s, Buck began writing a series of short stories, such as "Wang Lung," that attempted to embody natural democracy within the frame of English-language fiction.³⁶ Rather than merely translating a Chinese text into English, this method allowed Buck to take a more generative approach to advancing her vision of democracy in China, and, moreover, to shift the debate into the realm of the trans-Pacific: an intermediate and more flexible discursive space between American and Chinese cultures.

Buck's short story "Wang Lung," first published in 1926, would evolve into the novel *The Good Earth*, published in 1932, which became one of the most popular and highly acclaimed American novels of the twentieth century.³⁷ A number of critics, such as Karen Leong, have correctly described the novel as Buck's attempt to write a novel about 1930s America in the context of China. In their readings, Buck sought to "universalize" the idea of class struggle across the Pacific and at the same time to produce sympathetic analogies between American and Chinese working classes by "Americanizing" the Chinese peasant figure.³⁸ The popularity of *The Good Earth* thus consisted of its reimagining of 1930s American poverty as a universal global condition, a literary rendering that deeply moved and resonated with U.S. readers during the Depression. Such readings of the novel are largely accurate, yet *The Good Earth* also appears as a text simultaneously engaged with both American and Chinese cultural contexts. One can approach Buck's writing as not only a form of American Orientalism, but also a kind of cultural synthesis that exceeds the limitations of merely projecting U.S. fantasies onto a Chinese Other. The novel therefore evinces two forms of hybridity: first, on the level of theme or content, the inflection of Jeffersonian democracy by *The Water Margin*, and second, on the level of form, the uniting of American and Chinese models of literary realism.

The Good Earth narrates the story of Wang Lung, a Chinese farmer, who, through luck and hard work, rises from poor peasant to landlord. Divided into three sections, the novel recounts Wang Lung's fortunes as a hard-working farmer living in the rural North, his travels to the city to work as a coolie rickshaw puller after famine strikes the land, and, finally, his triumphant return to the North as a wealthy landowner. What unites the story is Wang's devotion to the land, a figure that marks man's natural relationship to work, community, and livelihood. From its first page, the

novel valorizes this image of the land inspired by Buck's earlier explication of *The Water Margin*:

The sun beat down upon [Wang and O-Lan] for it was early summer. Wang had his coat off and his back bare, but she worked with her thin garment covering her shoulders. . . . Moving together in a perfect rhythm, without a word, hour after hour, he fell into a union with her. He had no articulate thought of anything: there was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over. . . . Some time ago, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried here, houses had stood there, had fallen, and gone back into the earth. They worked on, moving together producing the fruit of this earth.³⁹

Several key themes from *The Water Margin*'s geography of natural democracy appear in this passage: man's organic bonds to the earth and his closeness to the real; the spread and, thus, displacement of authority across time and space, "bodies of men and women" connected across history; and the idea of social order as flexible and developed through organic social growth, "this perfect sympathy of movement." As we have seen, Buck's reading of *The Water Margin* emphasizes total social homogeneity and harmony, even at the cost of eliding difficult realities of class and social difference, in order to advance her vision of a natural democracy in the countryside. There are no landlords or upper or lower classes in this passage—only a unified "moving together."

Buck inscribes her democratic reading of *The Water Margin* in the form of the American novel, but she also enriches this reading by focusing on the image of the land that the peasant works and the democracy that results from this relationship. In her fine study of *The Good Earth*, Colleen Lye notes that Buck derived her image of Wang Lung, the noble peasant, from her longstanding interest in Jeffersonian democracy, an ideology she had absorbed during youth.⁴⁰ Here, though, Wang emerges at the intersection, or rather, the fusion of both *The Water Margin* and Jeffersonian thought. As Merrill Patterson has shown, Jeffersonian democracy, much like *The Water Margin* in China in the 1930s, represented a "flexible symbol" of basic equality in America starting in the late 1920s and, thus, was appropriated by a host of contending political groups: Marxists, liberals, nativists.⁴¹ Both Jefferson and *The Water Margin* came to embody highly elastic forms of discourse. Buck's own reading of Jefferson focused on his basic principle of the fair and equal distribution of land by arguing that dividing up the land equally, and allowing each man to work his own land in order to sustain himself, providing the conditions for a naturally occurring democracy.⁴² As such, Buck's reading of Jefferson inflects her original explication of *The Water Margin* by socializing the latter's abstract rendering of democracy as a kind of grounded social and cultural practice.

The use of the term *democracy* within early twentieth-century Chinese intellectual discourse represented a deliberate paradox, however, an effort to

import Western ideology into China. In seizing upon this trend, and discovering natural democracy, Buck knowingly contributes to this work. Yet, in writing this figure into American fiction, she skirts an absurd contradiction: how can Wang Lung, a Chinese farmer, inhabit a form of Jeffersonian democracy when obviously his context disorients the reader from familiar landmarks of U.S. culture? For Buck, this was a serious question. The idea of merging American and Chinese indigenous visions of democracy appealed to Buck, but what ultimately authorized their fusion? Buck responded to this dilemma by generating a larger framework of U.S.–China equivalence in *The Good Earth* through her synthetic use of American and Chinese realisms, which she believed converged in their shared democratic ethos. Her novel hybridizes American and Chinese cultures at the level of form as well as content.

Buck delineates the nature of this framework in her 1937 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which she describes *The Water Margin's* influence on her writing and the Chinese novel's laudable use of an early form of realism. What the text teaches, she says, is that the novelist's true work is to search for and then portray social reality as accurately as possible. In Buck's view, *The Water Margin* models a conception of realism, echoing György Lukács's well-known formulation, that mediates between subjective and objective experience. Only through this mode of narration, she continues, can reality be truly known and depicted: "It is a process proceeding from within. It is the heightened activity of every cell of his being, which sweeps not only himself, but all of human life about him, or in him, into the circle of its activity."⁴³ Buck concludes her speech by linking the novel's realism to its perceived democratic character: in bringing together a vast "circle of activity" into its textual fold, *The Water Margin* constructs a social world in which different people, from all corners of society, speak to each other. It is a society that appears, more than ever, interconnected and interdependent.

Interestingly, Buck's analysis of *The Water Margin's* realism resembles several by now canonical accounts of American literary realism, particularly readings of William Dean Howells.⁴⁴ In her study of literary realism, Amy Kaplan characterizes Howells's realism as a version of "democracy in literature."⁴⁵ Rather than merely "reflect" reality, "Howellsian realism" actively constructs a "cohesive social world" as part of an effort to represent all of society as "organic."⁴⁶ American realism, as imagined by Howells, served an important democratizing function by making different types of people known to each other, binding each to a cogently defined "literary commons" or public sphere.⁴⁷ In one scene, Wang Lung travels with O-Lan and his sons and a group of strangers by train:

"Up, my sons! We will go on the fire wagon and sit while we walk south." But whether or not they could have moved none knows, had there not come thundering out of the darkness a noise like a dragon's voice and two great eyes puffing

fire out, so that everyone screamed and ran. And pressing forward in the confusion they were pushed hither and thither, but always clinging desperately together . . . Until they were pushed somehow in the darkness and in the yelling and crying of many voices into a small open door and into a box-like room, then with an incessant roaring in which they tore forth into the darkness, bearing them in its vital. (*GE*, 92)

While initially the text focuses entirely on Wang and O-Lan, his wife, it slowly begins to draw a broader “circle of activity” into its narrative fold. Here, it narrates the shock of the modern to a group of farmers riding a train for the first time. Although compelled by terror, the farmers, who come from different backgrounds, are bound together by a shared encounter with modernity. The novel creates a common ground for different groups of people to confront modernity as a unit: for example, all of the riders perceive the train as “a dragon,” which effectively unites them to a shared metaphorical language of experience. Physically and mentally, each stranger must “cling together” and press forward as one single front against the train’s terrifying modernity.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese writers such as Mao Dun also drew from *The Water Margin* to create a Chinese literary realism. As Marston Anderson argues, Chinese writers during this period were drawn to realism’s democratic “ethos.”⁴⁸ In the lingering spirit of the May Fourth movement, they found its focus on uniting disparate groups of individuals to a shared literary commons most appealing. Further, although realism first entered China largely through foreign influence, namely, the translation of key Western novels in the early twentieth century, Chinese writers would soon seek to rediscover indigenous forms of realism, like *The Water Margin*’s, to enrich their absorption of Western realism. Anderson rightly notes that “realism” in the 1930s in China represented a rather dynamic genre, one constantly debated and redefined for different ends.⁴⁹ Here, Buck’s synthetic vision of realism appears somewhat close to the Chinese imagining: in reverse fashion, Buck aims to inflect American Howellsian realism through *The Water Margin*, identifying strong links between the latter and former’s intrinsic articulation of democracy.

Still, despite their similarities, Buck’s synthetic realism differs from the Chinese variety by collapsing all other forms of the social, such as race and class, under democracy. For Chinese novelists in the 1930s, realism embodied an attractive vision of democracy, yet at the same time this vision would eventually reveal its limits within the Chinese context.⁵⁰ Chinese realists, not unlike American realists in the 1930s, would refocus their use of realism to engage more pressing economic issues, such as imperialism, and thus push it more in the direction of socialist aesthetics. In this way, Buck’s use of realism deviated from both U.S. and Chinese realisms of the 1930s.

Buck's novel is impressive in its earnest attempt to synthesize Chinese and American genres of writing to create a cross-cultural vision of democracy. However, at the same time, Buck's fixation on positing commensurable ideas of democracy in American and Chinese realisms forces her to elide other, more vexing issues of racial and class difference, thus rendering her synthesis uneven. In particular, the outcome of this fusion, a kind of democratized Chinaman, Wang Lung, would bear the full weight of such contradictions. Buck's singular form of a hybridized U.S.–Chinese realism can be best discerned in two scenes found in the middle and concluding sections of the story.

The middle section of *The Good Earth* narrates Wang Lung's life in the city. After a great famine strikes the land, Wang, along with countless other peasants, is forced to migrate to the city to work as a coolie rickshaw puller. Although the first part of the text focuses on images of Wang and his land, this section interrupts the nominal coherence of the first by widening Wang's circle of human encounters. In one important scene, Wang meets a white foreign woman while pulling his rickshaw for money:

And on this day someone did come out on him suddenly, a creature the like of whom he had never seen before. He had no idea of whether it was male or female, but it was tall and dressed in a straight black robe of some rough harsh material. . . . He called to another puller: "Look at this—what is this I pull?" The man shouted back at him, "A foreigner—a female from America—you are rich—" Wang Lung ran as fast as he could. . . . This female stepped out then and said in the same broken accents, "You need not have run yourself to death," and left him with two silver pieces in his palm, which was double the usual fare. Then Wang knew that this was indeed a foreigner and more foreign than he in this city, and that after all people of black hair and black eyes are one sort and people of light hair and light eyes of another sort. (*GE*, 108)

Here the novel shifts into a discernable Howellsian realist mode by documenting the various social collisions that mark modernity: the proliferation of racial, class, and social difference that result from modern migration and industrialism. The novel describes a scene in which two entirely different subjects interact and thus occupy a kind of literary public sphere. Moreover, this passage uses this encounter to shore up its imagining of the Chinese as naturally constituting a homogenous, democratic society; in realizing he is not white, Wang discerns that he is part of a different, united society: "the people of black hair and black eyes." The passage thus transforms a scene of intense cultural clash—the kind of scene Amy Kaplan describes as fundamental to American literary realism—into a rearticulation of the unified and democratic society envisioned by *The Water Margin*.

Yet, the tension of this passage is that natural democracy works to erase completely a profound moment of cross-cultural racial recognition that encodes a number of broader questions. For example, in realizing he is not white but Chinese, Wang goes beyond discerning his connection to other

Chinese and thereby implicitly marks the colonial relations that structure white-Chinese encounters in the city. It is these kinds of encounters, in fact, that distance him from other Chinese by defining some subjects as coolies and others as middle or upper class. Further, for the white American woman of this passage, this scene is significant because it marks for her a moment of social recognition. In the instant that Wang realizes he is not white, the woman realizes that she in fact is, and thus a fundamental racial divide that separates them is exposed. The scene models a moment of mutual transformation of subjects. Yet, while the text aims to script this encounter as a form of democratic subject formation—Wang Lung taking a big step toward democratizing himself—what underwrites this scene is a broader field of contradiction: colonialism, class inequality, and racial difference.

In the third and final section of the novel, Wang returns to the village after several months in the city working as a coolie rickshaw puller. A stroke of luck enables his escape from the city: during a riot, he stumbles upon a stash of gold in an abandoned home. He flees the city, returns to his land in the North, and uses the gold to buy a large plot of land in his village. He then begins the slow process of converting this land into more land. As several critics have remarked, *The Good Earth* ultimately charts Wang's transformation into a good capitalist and landowner.⁵¹ This reading is largely correct, but the way in which the novel's capitalist, teleological narrative interacts with its broader structural frame of natural democracy is also of interest. We might view this interaction as an ongoing mix, or collision, of American realist and classical Chinese realist registers. That is, while the novel's final image of Wang and the land appears not to differ much from the novel's first scene—Wang and his wife still work the earth, and their movements connect them to a natural state of self-governance—the forces of capitalism inevitably evoked by American literary realism ultimately rupture this harmonious imagining of democracy.

Indeed, Buck's reading of the land's freedom and state of natural democracy overlooks a crucial factor: the forces of economic exploitation, such as feudalism and colonialism, that distribute the land in the first instance to different individuals. In the novel's final section, this contradiction achieves its greatest clarity through Wang's own anxieties about the land. The land, he observes, is free and yet it has also been paid for; as such, it requires additional payments to maintain. While originally Wang could enjoy his land without the stress of financial decisions, he must now worry about the constant replenishment of silver—a cycle that began when he first fled the city with the stolen loot—to preserve the freedom of his land. This new relationship to the land diminishes his enjoyment of it: "He kept his courts stuffed with silver and there was money owing to him at the grain markets and he had much money. . . . but he looked no more to see how the skies were over the land" (*GE*, 343). Buck never quite names the economic forces that underlie

natural democracy. Still, such tensions cannot be concealed by the novel's end, with Wang himself registering some strange and invisible alienation from his own land. He is only able to ponder and imagine the vast sums of money it brings.

Coolie Democrats, or Chinese Americans

The Good Earth manages such manifold contradictions in order to re-inscribe Chinese natural democracy in the form of American literary realism, ultimately envisioning a democratized Chinese subject. Indeed, as one very astute critic from the 1940s remarks, what emerges in the novel's final pages is a striking image of a "coolie democrat": a fusion of American and Chinese traditions of equality.⁵² This vision of the coolie democrat interrupts previous American imaginings of the Chinese peasant as well as the Chinese immigrant figure. In her study of Asiatic racial form, Colleen Lye argues that, at the turn of the century, the coolie articulated a perilous form of "unassimilability" and a "discourse of alien invasion" that augured the imminent "decline of the modern West."⁵³ Lye notes that associations of the coolie with economic peril and a take-over of America by individuality-less Orientals has, and continues, to shape Asian American racial formation. Buck's literary rendering of the coolie, however, resituates this otherwise vexing figure within a narrative of democracy rather than, as Lye demonstrates, a dehumanizing economic modernity. That is, Buck's synthesis of Chinese ("coolie") and American ("democratic") notions of subjectivity facilitates the rise of a new trans-cultural social identity—what today we call the Asian American subject.

Specifically, Buck would advance this new conception of the Chinese through her participation in the Chinese Exclusion Acts hearings in May of 1943. It was in these hearings that she articulated most clearly the idea of the Chinese as essentially coolie democrats and thus entirely deserving of American citizenship.

Buck's star shone brightly after the success of *The Good Earth* in the 1930s. Not content merely to shine in the literary world, she used her celebrity to make an impact in the world of politics as well, particularly in the early 1940s. Two specific, related causes attracted her interest—African American civil rights and U.S.–China diplomacy—and by the 1940s she had emerged as a respected voice in both debates.⁵⁴ The question of Chinese American civil rights, however, provoked a specific interest because it melded these issues into one: repealing Chinese Exclusion was both good domestic politics, in that it served the cause of minority civil rights, and good global politics, in that it helped to smooth relations with the Chinese, who were vital allies against Japan. Scholars have pointed out the links between antiracist discourse in America in

the 1940s and the rise of World War II, and Buck's desire to repeal Chinese Exclusion fell squarely at that intersection.⁵⁵

On May 20, 1943, Buck delivered the second-longest and most-cited testimony at the hearings. Her appearance was strategic and had been carefully organized by the Citizens Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion. Buck, along with her husband Richard Walsh, had organized the committee earlier that year, and together they represented the committee's leaders.⁵⁶ From the onset, Buck and Walsh established a clear link between the argument for repeal and Buck's vision of natural democracy. In several well-placed editorials in the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *New York Times*, Walsh forcefully argued against Chinese Exclusion by invoking ideas and images culled directly from his wife's literary texts and political writings. For example, on November 11, 1942, Walsh wrote and published an important editorial in the *New Republic* titled, "Our Great Wall Against the Chinese," in which he writes: "The blunt truth is that we have a peculiar discriminatory attitude towards the Chinese. . . . Every true American can be heartily ashamed of this attitude of inequality," and ends, "The Chinese saying is 'All around the four seas all men are brothers.' Our saying is 'All men are created free and equal.' Let us prove by our acts that we mean it."⁵⁷ Buck, we recall, had translated *The Water Margin* with the title *All Men Are Brothers*, altering the original to match a sentiment more in line with natural democracy.

Buck's actual testimony, which runs more than ten pages in length, reads as a kind of synopsis of natural democracy, with its compressed rearticulation of a number of tropes and images drawn directly from *The Good Earth* and *The Water Margin*:

The Chinese people are democratic throughout their history. . . . I have lived in the most interesting period of Chinese life, when she has been changing from the Old Empire into the modern form. The people are democratic from the Old Empire. The center of rule was in the people of the villages. They are trained and ready because they have had for centuries the democratic idea. The Emperor, you know, was the servant of the people; he was the intermediary between the people and Heaven, and when anything went bad, the Emperor was blamed, and he listened to the people. . . . He had what is called his "ears" out among the people, representatives, and if his people were saying things about the Emperor that were bad, that report was carried back to the Emperor, and he took it very seriously.⁵⁸

Buck's reading of "the emperor's ears" links back to her original analysis of *The Water Margin* as illustrating China's cultural basis for a democratization of social relations, one that joins sovereignty to popular will. Moreover, Buck mediates the paradox of a Chinese peasant embodying democracy, first posed in *The Good Earth*, by refiguring democracy as a kind of transhistorical concept. American democracy is merely its modern incarnation, while China has had "the democratic idea" since its inception, and thus

inhabits democracy in a more pure and natural state. Thus, to deny the Chinese in America of their democratic rights is to deny them, paradoxically, their natural state of selfhood. Echoing the narrative structure of *The Good Earth*, she finishes her speech by arguing that Chinese integration into an American mode of democracy represents an inevitable cycle. They are simply returning to what they always have been: coolie democrats.

In the three days of testimony that followed, Buck, *The Good Earth*, and natural democracy would be regularly cited and invoked. For example, Congressman Frances Bolton of Ohio directly references Buck's statement to argue, "The Chinese . . . in almost every respect, are best fitted to what we interpret as democracy," while J. R. Farrington, an American diplomat in China, cites Buck's work to claim that "China's indigenous social and political forms" are compatible with the U.S. model of "republican democracy."⁵⁹ The force and presence of Buck's influence was so great that in one exchange, an opponent of repeal, a congressman from the South, aimed to deflate the appeal of natural democracy by directly challenging Buck's authority:

MR. ELMER [congressman]: Doctor, in this book *The Good Earth*, it is portrayed that the Chinese are devoted very strongly to the earth. Is that true?

DR. HUMMEL [China expert]: It is true. About 80 percent cultivate the soil and live on the land.

ELMER: Do they have a tendency to stay there and cultivate that soil and not take up other pursuits?

HUMMEL: The Chinese have been perhaps more tied to the soil than any other nation.⁶⁰

In this exchange, Elmer attempts to reread Buck's *The Good Earth* as delineating an image of the Chinese as clannish and thus unable to assimilate into American society. This interpretation aimed to disrupt *The Good Earth's* teleology of Chinese development that posits the coolie democrat as its endpoint. Yet, despite Dr. Hummel's inability to immediately counter Elmer's attack, subsequent testimonies quickly dismantled Elmer's effort at undermining the novel's message. Indeed, Buck's testimony appeared to pave the way for natural democracy's ideological triumph in the hearings. Attempts at linking the Chinese to a vision of Oriental despotism, a holdover of late nineteenth-century American Orientalism, were immediately shouted down and discounted. Rather, in place of this discourse, we discern the transformation of the coolie into a democratized, American Chinese subject: a coolie still, but the word *coolie* itself now signifying something new and improved. In one key moment, a pro-repeal advocate neatly distinguishes the "old coolies" of Chinatown, who because of Exclusion have lost their natural state of democracy, from the "new coolies" who, as a result of Exclusion's expected

repeal, will become the democrats they have always been by attaining citizenship rights.

Buck's idea of natural democracy carried the day, and within three short months the Chinese Exclusion laws were repealed. What appeared most effective in generating support for repeal was Buck's reimagining of the Chinese as, at heart, coolie democrats, or American democrats-in-waiting. It is in this sense that this figure enabled the emergence of the Asian American subject as Repeal's outcome: the former proved to be the latter's initial idealized proto-version. Yet, despite natural democracy's apparently seamless conquest, what of its tensions and contradictions? How did they, or did they not, figure into the congressional hearings? Much like the structure of *The Good Earth* itself, Buck's victorious conjuring of natural democracy relied upon a suppression of figures of race and class. For example, in practical terms, this meant not allowing actual Chinese individuals, such as Lin Yutang and Helena Kuo, good friends of Pearl Buck, to testify at the hearings despite their firsthand knowledge of the effects of Exclusion. In his study of Chinese Exclusion Repeal, Fred Riggs argues that Buck and Walsh chose to not have Kuo and others speak because they did not want to open them up to direct attacks by anti-Repeal advocates.⁶¹ More likely though, Lin and Kuo, as actual Chinese subjects, would have exposed some contradictory aspects about natural democracy, and would have perhaps undermined Buck and Walsh's otherwise airtight message.

What might those voices have sounded like, though? What is their importance? While Chinese voices of dissent were absent in the hearings, they thrived in China and helped to sustain an active trans-Pacific literary public sphere. They therefore serve to inflect our understanding of Chinese Exclusion Repeal's outcome, the Asian American subject. For example, if this subject arose in part from Buck's vision of the coolie democrat, it must also bear with it the paradoxes evoked by the latter; and if the two are thus inseparable, then Chinese critiques of natural democracy help shed light on the complexity of the emergence of the Asian American figure.

In March of 1932, *Eastern Miscellany* (東方雜誌), one of China's most popular literary journals, published a translation of *The Good Earth* (translated as 大地), sparking intense interest in the novel in China. Six more translations as well as countless pirated versions cropped up in the next nine years.⁶² The novel was a sensation, becoming the most translated American novel in China. Besides eliciting favorable reviews by leading Chinese writers, it also spawned dozens of imitations by actual Chinese novelists in the late 1930s and 1940s, and over time became a point of reference for political debates over the future of Chinese rural culture.⁶³ What was most interesting about this commentary was its imagined terms of debate. For the most part, against expectations of Orientalism, most Chinese writers *praised* Buck's

“realistic” depiction of rural China and in fact identified it as perhaps the first great “Chinese novel” about the peasant.⁶⁴ Certainly Chinese intellectuals found much to critique, as we shall see, yet what most animated their end of the debate was an interest in supplementing the novel’s meaning through a more indigenous reading of natural democracy.

Take, for example, Hu Feng’s (胡風) rich analysis of the novel. In 1937, Hu, the leading left-wing Chinese intellectual, published a long critical piece on *The Good Earth*, focusing primarily on its depiction of the land and natural democracy. Again, contrary to expectations of anti-Orientalism, Hu spends the first half of this essay praising Buck’s work for its accuracy in representing the Chinese peasant. Only by the essay’s final half does he launch into a systematic critique of the novel, probing the scene in which Wang encounters the white foreign woman while pulling his rickshaw. I read Wang’s embrace of his fellow Chinese, and, thus, democratization, as an elision of broader structures of class subjection and colonialism evoked by this encounter. In his reading, Hu advances this interpretation by drawing on late 1920s Chinese critiques of colonialism and by explicating the scene as narrating the conditions of foreign imperialism that produce coolies, not a community of Chinese equals. By the 1900s, Western political fixtures dominated coastal cities such as Shanghai and Nanjing, conjuring into existence a broader, “semicolonial” cultural landscape.⁶⁵ These colonial institutions determined social relations between whites, Chinese elites, and Chinese workers, and produced vast structures of social inequality between these groups. Buck, in Hu’s reading, erases these structures from narrative view by instead scripting the encounter as a moment of natural democracy in the making. Specifically, Hu correctly notes that this encounter, as well as later ones, hinge on a nonexistent “metal coin” (金洋), which did not exist in China at the time of the novel’s narrative present. Buck invents this object as an enabling literary trope to resolve more problematic contradictions of race and class in China under the sign of democracy.⁶⁶

Here, the tensions inherent in natural democracy erupt into full view. Hu Feng, challenging natural democracy’s presumably totalizing and socializing force, draws attention to the tensions of racial and class difference that not only rupture the perceived cogency of natural democracy, but in fact also articulate the basis of its very meaning. But again, the purpose of Hu’s critique is not to dismiss *The Good Earth* or its various images of rural democracy in China. Rather, he seeks to enrich its meaning through a constructive, trans-Pacific dialogue and indirectly to lend a voice to the various tensions and ruptures of meaning otherwise silenced in the congressional hearings. As Wu Lifu, another Chinese critic, argues, Buck’s natural democracy links China’s various “yellow people” and America’s “white people” to a common fate: “The Chinese peasant problem must be resolved; if it is not resolved

soon, the troubles of the Chinese people will come to affect the stability of the white people's world, and make peace in that world untenable."⁶⁷

The argument of this essay has been that Buck and her literary works, particularly *The Good Earth*, served to constitute a cogent trans-Pacific cultural sphere, which in turn helped to enable the rise of the Asian American subject in the 1940s. Earlier readings of Buck's novel have stressed its perceived Orientalist qualities, and the theorization of its relationship to Asian Americans has often meant a stern critique of such qualities. My reading of the text, however, emphasizes its staging of a broader transcultural encounter, one that facilitates a syncretic rather than domestic conception of the Asian American. What ultimately appears in the novel, and later in the Exclusion hearings, is the image of a "coolie democrat." This figure, I believe, captures well the hybrid nature of Buck's democratic rendering of the modern Chinese subject. It draws from an indigenous tradition of Chinese rural subjectivity while at the same time it inflects that imagined subjectivity with a distinctly American language of politics and culture.

The implications of the concept of the coolie democrat for theorizations of the democratized Asian American subject (or "model minority") are significant. Since the 1970s, scholars have been eager to undo earlier racist imaginings of Asian Americans as "heathen coolies." Yet in doing so, they have come to dissociate Asian American racial formation from what I have shown here to be its links to Chinese rural subjectivity. Discarding the coolie has in part meant eliding rural China. Buck's vision of the coolie democrat, though, returns our attention to the transcultural encounters that worked to generate a vision of the Asian American in the 1940s. Of course we rarely think of Pearl Buck as a major architect of Asian American identity. But without fair consideration of Buck and her writings, we lose both the trans-Pacific interactions that have enabled Asian American racial formation as well as the voices of Chinese dissent that underwrote that process. Lost to Asian American history are the voices of Hu Feng and Chen Duxiu and the figure of the Chinese peasant or coolie. In excavating Buck's natural democracy, we reverse this process and begin to discern the radical forms of globality—histories formerly foreclosed by the Cold War—that had animated Asian American culture long before the post-1965 era.

Notes

An early version of this essay was first presented at the Modern Language Association annual meeting in Chicago, in December 2008. I thank the audience members, especially Christine Hong, for their insightful questions and critiques. I am

also grateful to Jonathan Arac, Gauri Viswanathan, Lydia Liu, Rachel Adams, and Gary Okihiro for commenting on earlier drafts of this essay when it was still in dissertation chapter form. Finally, I thank the *Representations* editorial board for a set of extraordinarily precise and useful comments for revision. In particular, I am most indebted to Colleen Lye, who first saw the potential of this essay when it was still a conference paper, provided a number of excellent critiques, and facilitated its publication in this journal. All translations are my own.

1. House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts: Hearings on HR 1882 and HR 2309*, 78th Cong., 1st sess., May 19–June 3, 1943, 70.
2. See Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, 1996), 263–74, for an overview of Buck's role in the Chinese Exclusion Repeal hearings.
3. See Rob Wilson, *Reimagining the American Pacific: From South Pacific to Bamboo Ridge and Beyond* (Durham, 2000); Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, eds., *Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production* (Durham, 1995); and David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford, 1999). Also see, more recently, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim et al., eds., *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* (Philadelphia, 2006).
4. Wilson, *Reimagining the American Pacific*, 8–24.
5. See, for example, Karen Leong, *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism* (Berkeley, 2005) and Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford, 2003).
6. Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginings: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge, 2008), 2–8. Also, see Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley, 2007).
7. Huang, *Transpacific Imaginings*, 6.
8. Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton, 2005), 244.
9. Pearl Buck to Emma White, February 2, 1918, “Emma White Correspondence” Folder, Box 1, Nora Stirling Collection, Lipscomb Library, Special Collections, Randolph College, Lynchburg, VA.
10. Ibid. Buck, as Karen Leong has argued, most likely drew her early Orientalist perceptions from Arthur Smith's well-known Orientalist text, *Chinese Characteristics* (1901): Leong, *The China Mystique*, 55. Also see Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice* (Stanford, 1996), 20–45, for a good critique of Arthur Smith's specific form of cultural Orientalism.
11. Buck to White, January 4, 1929, “Emma White Correspondence” Folder, Nora Stirling Collection.
12. Ibid.
13. See, for example, Buck to White, January 4, 1928, which describes this changing perception. “Emma White Correspondence” Folder, Nora Stirling Collection. Regarding the use of the word *coolie*: the figure of the Chinese peasant and Chinese coolie generally represent distinct, individual categories of subjectivity. The coolie recently has become the subject of several academic studies in particular; see, for example, Moon-ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, 2006) and Lisa Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia, 2008). Here, however, Buck conflates the terms Chinese *peasant* and *coolie*, moving between the two

- without distinction. For Buck, both terms are more or less equivalent, as both indicate a form of subjected, subaltern Chinese subjectivity in the modern era. As such, I follow Buck in not drawing a hard distinction between *coolie* and *peasant* given what appears to be their consistent conflation in the specific 1930s and 1940s political and literary contexts and discourses I examine in this essay.
14. Pearl S. Buck, *My Several Worlds* (New York, 1954), 161.
 15. See, for example, Buck's letter to David Phelps in which she refers to the modern-day bandits of the early twentieth-century Nanjing area as a degraded form of the heroic, "good" bandits of *The Water Margin*; Buck to Phelps, November 13, 1933, "1933" Folder, Box 6, Nora Stirling Collection.
 16. See Patrick Hanan's definitive study of the vernacular novel, *The Chinese Vernacular Story* (Cambridge, 1981), 1–27.
 17. Pearl S. Buck, *The Chinese Novel*, Nobel Prize speech delivered in Stockholm on December 12, 1938 (New York, 1939), 47–48.
 18. *Ibid.*, 47. 19. *Ibid.*, 48. 20. *Ibid.* 21. *Ibid.*
 22. See Hanan, who concurs with Buck that the vernacular novel enabled a kind of democratization or fundamental leveling out of social relations by opening up new publics for non-elite readers in China; Hanan, *The Chinese Vernacular Story*, 12.
 23. Hongyuan Yu, "Shuihu Zhuan as Elite Cultural Discourse: Reading, Writing, and the Making of Meaning" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1995), 212–17.
 24. See C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction* (Bloomington, 1980), 75–84, and Ellen Widmer, *The Margins of Utopia: Shui-Hu Hou-Chuan and the Literature of Ming Loyalism* (Cambridge, 1987), 80–105.
 25. Yu, "Shuihu Zhuan as Elite Cultural Discourse," 212–24.
 26. *Ibid.*, 184. See also Liang Qichao (梁啟超), "文學叢抄" [Literary Talks] in 晚清文學叢抄 [*Late Qing-Era Collected Research Materials*] (Beijing, 1961), 351–52, for Liang's actual original textual criticism.
 27. *All Men Are Brothers*, trans. Pearl S. Buck (New York, 1931), hereafter referred to as "Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*."
 28. See Conn, *Pearl S. Buck*, 163–207. As Conn notes, Buck's resistance to American socialism was quite visceral and intense. Despite her left-leaning views and inclinations, she viewed 1930s Communism in America as a corruption of the liberalism that she believed animated the founding of the nation. Thus, her reading of Thomas Jefferson was distinctly liberal in orientation rather than Marxist, as Jefferson had become to be rescripted by U.S. radicals in the 1930s during the Great Depression.
 29. Buck, *The Chinese Novel*, 44, and *All Men Are Brothers*, introduction, ii.
 30. Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀), "水滸傳新序" [New Introduction to *The Water Margin*] in 水滸資料 [*Research Materials on The Water Margin*] (Beijing, 1976), 176–77.
 31. My own translation, but I have checked it against Sidney Shapiro's standard translation of the novel into English, *Outlaws of the Marsh* (Bloomington, 1971), 300.
 32. Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, 261.
 33. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel*, 107.
 34. Buck, *All Men Are Brothers*, 1278–79. I have not read any versions of the novel in Chinese that contain this scene, or anything like it, which leads me to believe that Buck completely fabricated this concluding paragraph in English.
 35. See Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley, 1990), 1–26. Also see Peter Button, *Configurations of the Real in Chinese Literary and Aesthetic Modernity* (Boston, 2009).

36. This story originally appeared in the English-language Chinese literary magazine *The Chinese Recorder* in April 1926. The story appears to be a proto-version of what would become *The Good Earth*—both stories feature a peasant named Wang Lung.
37. See Michael H. Hunt, “Pearl Buck: Popular Expert on China, 1931–1949,” *Modern China* 3, no. 1 (January 1977): 40–60.
38. Lye, *America’s Asia*, 204–30. Also see Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China: 1931–1945* (Stanford, 1996), 25–26.
39. Pearl S. Buck, *The Good Earth* (New York, 2004), 30. (Hereafter *GE*.)
40. Lye, *America’s Asia*, 139.
41. Merrill Patterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (Oxford, 1960), 330–50.
42. I am basing this argument on an article Buck wrote titled, “Thomas Jefferson,” in *What America Means to Me* (New York, 1943), 187. In this essay, Buck discerns the merits of Jeffersonian democracy to be its focus on the fair distribution of land, the focus on agrarianism and rural development and social relations organized around the land.
43. Buck, *The Chinese Novel*, 56–57.
44. Buck’s proximity to Howells should not surprise us: after all, her favorite authors of the modern period were Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and Theodore Dreiser.
45. Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago, 1988), 19. See also Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago, 1995).
46. Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, 11.
47. *Ibid.*, 12.
48. Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, 33.
49. *Ibid.*, 58. 50. *Ibid.*, 74.
51. See Lye, *America’s Asia*, 216.
52. *Ibid.*, 244.
53. Colleen Lye, “American Naturalism and Asiatic Racial Form: Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* and Moran of the *Lady Letty*,” *Representations* 84 (Fall 2004): 74.
54. See Conn, *Pearl S. Buck*, 253–96.
55. See for example Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000); Penny Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, 1997); and Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, 2003). For the link between domestic Asian American Civil Rights and U.S. military involvement in the Pacific during World War II, see K. Scott Wong, *Americans First: Chinese Americans and the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2005), 72–124.
56. See Frederick Riggs, *Pressures on Congress: A Study of the Repeal of Chinese Exclusion* (New York, 1950), for a thorough overview of this entire process.
57. Richard Walsh, “Our Great Wall Against the Chinese,” *New Republic* 23 (November, 1942): 671–72.
58. House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization, *Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts*, 70–72.
59. *Ibid.*, 59 and 205, respectively.
60. *Ibid.*, 28.

61. See Riggs, *Pressures on Congress*.
62. See Hunt, "Pearl Buck: Popular Expert on China," 47–48.
63. Ibid.
64. “自序” [Introduction], 大地 [*The Good Earth*] in 東方雜誌 [*Eastern Miscellany*], February 13, 1933, 2. Chinese translator not identified. The unnamed translator praises Buck’s novel as an authentic and superior piece of Chinese literary writing.
65. See Shu Mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley, 2001), for more on the relationship between semi-colonialism and culture in coastal Chinese cities in the 1930s.
66. Hu Feng (胡風), “大地裡的中國” [*The Good Earth’s China*] in 胡風評論集 [*The Collected Criticism of Hu Feng*], (Beijing, 1985), 299. See also Wu Lifu’s (伍蠡甫) critical introduction to his translation of *The Good Earth* (translated as 福地) in 1933 (publisher unknown), and the preface to a 1933 translation (as 大地) by an unknown translator, published by Zhiyuan Shudian Faxing (志遠書店發行). Both original texts are housed at the archives located at the National Library in Beijing, China (中國國家圖書館).
67. 中國農村問題是應改良而解決的；如果這解決不經漸變而竟走了激變的一條路；那末 黃色人種之為禍於白色人種的世界安寧，真是不可思議了。Wu (伍), 26.