

Pearl Buck and Ourselves

It is a significant fact, worthy of the attention of all thinking people in China, that Pearl Buck, the author of "Good Earth," has in the course of the past year supplemented her imaginative writings on China with criticisms of the first order of importance. While the "Good Earth" definitely establishes her name as a novelist with a fine style and artistic sincerity, her more recent pronouncements on the missionary movement and the intellectuals in China compel our notice as from a writer who thinks with equal sincerity and uncommon lucidity on some problems of modern China.

Her attitude concerning the missionaries, although unusually refreshing, is to us the less important issue. It is less important, because, unlike the poor, the missionaries will not always be with us. That many of them are often ignorant, narrow-minded and bigoted, as Pearl Buck has the good sense to point out, is perhaps a fact as well-known to us as it is to the better educated Christians in the missionaries' country of origin. That many of them are often perpetrating sixteen-century theology and dogmas upon the Chinese people which they cannot perpetrate upon their more educated home compatriots is also quite evident. It has perhaps pained Mrs. Buck to say the unkind things she has said about them, and in the face of the manifest educational and medical contributions of the Christian missionaries to China, we would feel diffident about heaping more adjectives upon some evangelists. But there is one big difference between Pearl Buck and the missionaries, and that is, while Pearl Buck genuinely loves the Chinese people, the missionaries love only their God. While the missionaries come avowedly to save heathen souls for the glory of God and as an obligation they owe to some one in heaven, Pearl Buck can look a Chinese boy in his face and love him without remembering that he is her cousin by virtue of a theological myth.

What concerns us most is her interpretation of the Chinese people, in which she has a very definite message to us. Faced with the apparent corruption and anarchy of modern China, Chinese writers often give themselves up to an indiscriminate deprecation of their own people and advocate wholesale adoption of western culture, or else try to hide that inner consciousness under the cloak of a cheap brand of patriotism by referring to our long history or by putting the whole blame on the foreigners. This confusion of thought is due to the lack of a real understanding of the Chinese, and Pearl Buck has cleared it. She has pointed out that the real greatness of the Chinese people lies in the coolies and the amahs of whom we the intellectuals are often ashamed. This point she made in an article, entitled "The New Patriotism," published about three years ago in the *China Critic*, and this point she again emphasizes in her recent reply in the *New York Times* to Prof. Kiang Kang-hu of McGill University, who criticised her for depicting the "low-bred" Chinese who, according to

Prof. Kiang, "certainly are not representative of the Chinese people." This statement is so important that we are quoting passages from it as perhaps the most valuable contribution from a missionary to Chinese thought.

"The point that some of China's intellectuals cannot seem to grasp is that they ought to be proud of their common people, that the common people are China's strength and glory. The time is past now for thinking the west can be deceived into believing that China's people look like ancestral portraits. Newspapers and travelers tell all about China's bandits and famines and civil wars. There is no incident in 'Sons' which has not been paralleled within my own knowledge in the last 15 years. The mitigating thing in the whole picture is the quality of the common people, who bear with such noble fortitude the vicissitudes of their times.

"And these people are what the ignorant intellectuals would conceal! Two or three years ago a certain European prince came to visit a Chinese city, and the governing intellectuals were ashamed for him to see the huts of the many poor, and they built walls of matting so that the prince's motor car passed between walls and he saw nothing. Then was I moved to such a point that I wrote to a Chinese journal protesting against this false shame, for behind those walls, which could, after all deceive no one, were hidden, not the huts, but the patience, the frugality, the industry, the indomitable good humor of the suffering people!"

"But I know what Professor Kiang would have: there are others like him. *They want the Chinese people represented by the little handful of her intellectuals, and they want the vast, rich, somber, joyous Chinese life represented solely by history that is long past, by paintings of the dead, by a literature that is ancient and classic.* These are valuable and assuredly a part of Chinese civilization but they form only the official buttons. *For shall the people be counted as nothing, the splendid common people of China, living their tremendous lusty life against the odds of a calamitous nature, a war-torn government, a small indifferent aristocracy of intellectuals?* For truth's sake I can never agree to it.

"I know from a thousand experiences this attitude which is manifest again in this article by Professor Kiang. I have seen it manifest in cruel acts against the working man, in contempt for the honest, illiterate farmer, in a total neglect of the interests of the proletariat, so that no common people in the world have suffered more at the hands of their own civil, military and intellectual leaders than have the Chinese people. The cleavage between the common people and the intellectuals in China is portentous, a gulf that seems impassable, I have lived with the common people, and for the past 15 years I have lived among the intellectuals, and I know whereof I speak."