



Vanessa Künnemann

Middlebrow Mission: Pearl S. Buck's American China

[transcript] Lettre

From:

Vanessa Künnemann

Middlebrow Mission: Pearl S. Buck's American China

November 2015, 284 p., 34,99 €, ISBN 978-3-8376-3108-1

Nobel Prize winner Pearl S. Buck's engagement with (neo-)missionary cultures in the United States and China was unique. Against the backdrop of her missionary upbringing, Buck developed a fictional project which both revised and reaffirmed American foreign missionary activity in the Pacific rim during the 20th century. Vanessa Künnemann accurately traces this project from America's number one expert on China – as Buck came to be known – from a variety of disciplinary angles, placing her work squarely in Middlebrow Studies and New American Studies.

Vanessa Künnemann (PhD) works as Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of Göttingen, Germany.

For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-3108-1

Contents

Acknowledgments | 7

**An Aromatic Blend of America and China:
Introducing Pearl Buck's Middlebrow Mission** | 11

Pearl Buck and the Missionary Theme | 15

Pearl Buck in the Context of Middlebrow Literature | 21

The Critical Dismissal of Pearl Buck | 28

**1. The Sentimental Imperialism of American Women
Missionaries in China** | 41

American Missionaries as Cultural Imperialists | 43

Women Missionaries – Competing Concepts of

Womanhood Abroad? | 48

Women Missionaries and their Home Audiences | 59

‘The Work of Women for Women’: Ambiguities in
the Social Gospel | 65

Missionary Marriages and the ‘Burden
of Motherhood’ | 71

The Missionary Home as Empire | 78

**2. *The Exile and Fighting Angel*: Pearl Buck's Gendered
Critique of Missions** | 89

The Parents' Representativeness: Introducing Pearl Buck's
Recovery Project | 94

Between Fact and Fiction: Pearl Buck as a ‘New’ Biographer | 97

The American Mother and the Sainly Prophet: The Biographies
of Pearl Buck's Missionary Parents | 103

Rethinking the Biographies – Pearl Buck's *My Several Worlds* | 119

“Is there a Case for Foreign Missions?” Pearl Buck's Official
Break with the Missionary Movement | 123

‘Making Use of Missionary Pamphlets’? The Missionary Theme
in Buck's Fiction | 130

- 3. Pearl Buck's Coming of Age: *East Wind, West Wind* | 133**
Pearl Buck's Rise on the American Literary Scene and the Publication Background of *East Wind, West Wind* | 136
The Style and Narrative Perspective of *East Wind, West Wind* | 144
The Missionary Husband and the Practice of Footbinding | 150
- 4. Reversing the Middlebrow: *The Good Earth* | 163**
The Marketing and Reception of *The Good Earth* | 167
The Good Earth as a Depression Novel | 177
The Iconicity of O-lan | 183
- 5. China/Town Hybridity and (Neo-) Missionary Nostalgia: "His Own Country" and *Kinfolk* | 199**
"His Own Country" – The Return to One's 'Roots'? | 202
'Showing what it is to be Chinese': Staging China/Town in *Kinfolk* | 210
The 'Elegant Fake': Enter Dr Liang | 213
"We must show this vast new country what it is to be Chinese": Dr Liang as an 'Old' Missionary | 216
'Dissolving the Beautiful Cloud of Confucianism': The Neo-Missionaries in China | 222
'Belonging to all of them': Mrs Liang and the Promise of Hybridity? | 229
- 6. Coda: "We haven't deserted Him exactly, we just haven't known how to fit Him in." The Missionary Legacy in Pearl Buck and her Fiction | 231**

Works Cited | 265

An Aromatic Blend of America and China: Introducing Pearl Buck's Middlebrow Mission

When reviewer Stirling North discussed Pearl Buck's novel *God's Men* for a local paper, the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, on 01 April 1951, he made use of a vivid – and rather tasty – imagery to describe not only Buck's latest publication, but her fiction as a whole:

Pearl Buck's prose has many of the qualities of tea. Though blended in America, it still retains a faint aroma of China. It is non-intoxicating, mildly stimulating, and needs lemon to make it potable. There is usually sugar left in the bottom of the cup. [...]

This statement provides an appropriate point of departure to introduce some major concerns which are central to this book. For one, North's assessment of Buck's fiction as “non-intoxicating” and “mildly stimulating” is representative of the widespread views held vis-à-vis the oeuvre of one of America's most successful writers of the twentieth century: Pearl Buck's work was often seen as harmless, trivial, but at the same time appealing, entertaining, and informative. Furthermore, North's idea of the lemon which needs to be added to the tea as well as his reference to the remaining sugar in the cup indicate that there is something ‘missing’ or not altogether ‘perfect’ about this tea: read as an analogy to the quality of Buck's fiction and her skill as a writer, this image suggests that Buck did not exhaust the full potential of her material.

Perhaps most importantly, the mixture of America and China mentioned in this review introduces the motivation and objective that lie at the heart of Pearl Buck's project. Predominantly carried out in the realm of fiction but

extending to a wide array of other areas (such as cultural commentary, journalistic pieces, political essays, and even reaching to Asian cook books), this project was fundamentally concerned with a discussion of the relationship between the United States and Asia (and China in particular). Although “images of China [had] populated the American imagination” for much longer, the fascination with China and the Chinese reached unprecedented heights towards the middle of the twentieth century (Leong 2005: 1; see also Klein 2003; Yoshihara 2003). Pearl Buck can be credited as one of the leading figures responsible for this increase in Americans’ – and more generally Westerners’ – interest in China at the time. Following Buck’s lead, her audience started to invest in China – as an imagined idea and concept, as a geographical place, and as a concrete political entity. This happened to the extent that Pearl Buck and her work frequently came to be seen as synonymous with China. When *The Good Earth*, the most renowned of Buck’s novels, was published in 1931, critic Henry Seidel Canby stated that “*The Good Earth is China*” (Canby 1931; qtd. in Qian 2005: 162; my emphasis). For more than a generation of Americans, Buck defined and shaped the concept of China. To them, what Buck said and wrote about China, was perceived as ‘true.’

Thus, there was a discrepancy between the success which Buck had among her audience and critical views of her work, as North’s ambivalent review indicates. While I will discuss the critical dismissal of Buck later on in this introduction, I would first like to focus on the reasons for her popularity.

Why and in what sense exactly, then, was this woman writer more successful and effective in changing people’s awareness and perception of China than other groups or individuals – ranging from politicians to intellectuals, merchants, missionaries, and other writers of fiction – before her? It was predominantly on the grounds of her biography that Pearl Buck, née Sydenstricker (1892-1973) – or Pearl S. Buck, as she officially made her entry into literary and cultural history – became America’s “best-known authority on Asia” (Conn 1996: 257) and most important “popular expert” on China (Hunt 1977: 39), especially in the 1930s and 40s. As the daughter of American Presbyterian missionaries, Absalom and Carolyn Sydenstricker, she grew up in China where she spent the first half of her life before she relocated to the United States in the early 1930s for good. As a result, she had an in-depth knowledge of the Chinese way of life, China’s customs, and its

people. Throughout her career, the American public at large, her audience, and many of her other supporters as well as opponents perceived her as a ‘quasi Chinese.’ This image helped propel Buck to fame when *The Good Earth*, her second novel, was published. It became a bestseller and Buck’s biggest success, winning her the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and constituting a major factor in her being awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938.

For much of her career, Buck herself embraced this image of her public persona and in fact helped to amplify her status as an authority on China further when she consciously and strategically fashioned herself as a cultural insider. Looking back on her childhood in her autobiography, published in 1954 and appropriately titled *My Several Worlds*, Buck recalled her Sinification of these years:

[...] But I did not consider myself a white person [as a girl aged 7]. Even though I knew I was not altogether Chinese, still I was Chinese enough to eat [Chinese] sweets from the market place [...].

Thus I grew up in a double world, the small white clean Presbyterian American world of my parents and the big loving merry not-too-clean Chinese world, and there was no communication between them. When I was in the Chinese world I was Chinese, I spoke Chinese and behaved as a Chinese and ate as the Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts and feelings. When I was in the American world, I shut the door between. (*My Several Worlds* 10)

It is already in this statement that some of the many contradictions, breaks, ambivalences, and tensions which can be found in Pearl Buck’s project are first indicated. When she writes of the strict separation of American and Chinese influences in her upbringing in this passage, she leaves unmentioned the fact that the Sydenstricker family – by contrast to many other missionaries who lived on special compounds comparable to today’s gated communities – had lived among the (poor) Chinese for most of their stay in China. Thus, there was, in fact, contact between these two worlds, as scholars like Buck’s biographer Peter Conn have shown (1996). If Buck remained silent about this aspect in her autobiography, this silence served an agenda and can be seen as an example of the manipulation of biographical facts which should become a part of Buck’s project, as I will show in chapter 2. When Buck describes her switching between worlds and cultural co-

des in this episode, this attests to a certain skill, flexibility, and adaptability – and hence it implies a set of characteristics at the disposal of a cultural go-between. In this sense, Buck's self-proclaimed childhood practice of shutting doors between the American and the Chinese world is more than the coping mechanism of a child seeking to come to terms with life in foreign surroundings and desiring to become one of the Chinese rather than remaining a *yang kwei-tse*, the foreign devil with the blue eyes, as Chinese children had dubbed the young Pearl Sydenstricker (see Conn 1996). Rather, it becomes a component of Buck's strategic self-enactment as a "cultural mediator," to take up the term which Conn has famously used with reference to Buck throughout his cultural biography.

To understand Buck's project and her idea of herself as a cultural mediator it is helpful to once again refer back to Stirling North's idea of Buck as a 'tea maker' who blends America and China. By blending I understand Buck's complicated position as a broker between the East and the West: in her fiction, as well as through her various political and humanitarian activities and offices, she pleaded for the universalism of human experience, promoted interracial understanding and tolerance and thus aimed to open the very doors of communication between the American and the Chinese world which she claimed to have kept shut in her childhood. Most prominently, in *The Good Earth* she introduced her Western audience to ordinary Chinese characters – peasants – and depicted these figures from their own perspective and not from some detached Western stance. Through Buck, the marginalized, the unheard – often female figures – ethnic 'Other' gained a voice. At the same time, she still maintained a certain repertoire of 'Orientalist' exoticism in her fiction, catering to her readership's expectations about the subject matter.

Additionally, despite her marked self-Sinification, Buck was, after all, the offspring of *American* missionaries and did not altogether cast off her heritage. In fact, in many respects Buck's very upbringing in the foreign missionary context triggered her quest for a distinct American self-awareness and identity. Her project, then, became one of constructing 'her' America, a country which she had known largely through the teachings of her missionary parents, Western books, and schools in China. In accordance with Karen Leong and Mari Yoshihara, who have both argued that Buck retained a Western perspective in spite of her close attachment and identification with the Chinese (see Leong 2005; Yoshihara 2003), I have

chosen to address this important point in the subtitle of my study: it is a distinctly *American China* that we encounter when engaging with Buck's work. Sometimes successfully, sometimes ending in failure, Buck walked this tightrope to construct her American China – in order to educate her American readership about China and, simultaneously, to negotiate her own identity as a cultural go-between.

I call this project the middlebrow mission of Pearl S. Buck. By this title, I wish to put emphasis on the two aspects which I regard as most influential in a discussion of the (cultural) work performed by this writer. The first part, middlebrow, pertains to the mode and aesthetics inherent in Buck's writing and to her situatedness in the context of middlebrow studies. This part of the title approximates Buck's construction of an American China in terms of genre and writing style. The title's second part, mission, is meant to draw attention to Buck's dominant fictional theme and her underlying (biographical) motivations for choosing her topic. The middlebrow and mission in Buck's work, I argue throughout this book, are negotiated in close conjunction and reciprocally inform and reinforce each other.

PEARL BUCK AND THE MISSIONARY THEME

In the following paragraphs, I would first like to elaborate a bit more closely on the 'mission' part of the title. While I do not seek to follow the lead by scholars like Nora Stirling (1983), Beverly Rizzon (1989), Peter Conn (1996), Kang Liao (1997), or, most recently, Hilary Spurling (2010) and write yet another biography of Pearl Buck, it is inevitable to consider her *vita* in order to understand her project. As mentioned above, Buck was exposed to the realities of missionary life from her earliest childhood. Her parents had taken her to China as a three-months-old baby in 1892 and – apart from the hiatus of her college years in Virginia from 1910 to 1914 and her graduate studies at Cornell University in the 1920s – she lived in China throughout her adolescence and young adulthood before her permanent return to the United States in the 1930s. Above all, to live in China as a missionary meant experiencing the many ups and downs which the foreign mission movement and its members underwent in China in what should prove to be a crucial period of American-Chinese relations. Ranging from Chinese tolerance and occasional benevolence to opposition, xenophobia,

or even overt violence directed at Westerners (such as during the Boxer rebellion from 1899 to 1901 or, later, the Nanking Incident in 1927), missionaries had met with a wide spectrum of sentiments in China over the years, as the young Buck had witnessed. Yet, from fairly early on, she realized that time and again, missionaries had to take their fair share of responsibility in the Chinese attitudes toward them, as they had too often been ignorant, inconsiderate, arrogant, and ruthlessly imperialist in their contacts with the locals. In the years to come, Buck's stance vis-à-vis the foreign missionary movement should be deeply informed by these insights.

What is more, Buck also criticized what she diagnosed as fundamental deficiencies and injustices within the missionary movement. According to her, there was a clear gender imbalance: male missionaries ruled supreme and behaved in misogynist and arrogant ways, while the female missionary experience in China was characterized by exilic passivity and victimization. What might at first sound like a rather abstract charge was, in fact, based on Buck's personal observations: the situation in her own family and the gender allocation as she had traced it in the marriage of her missionary parents, Absalom and Carolyn, made her question the overall outlook, structures, and motivations of the foreign missionary movement. To Buck, her father was a generic representative of the male missionary enterprise and embodied old approaches to missionary work which she felt needed to be overcome. While she admired his commitment on the one hand, she still despised his stubborn, self-righteous, and misogynist attitude on the other hand. These traits, as Buck believed, were the cause of her mother's unhappiness: Carolyn Sydenstricker – in her daughter's eyes – was exemplary of many female missionaries of the first generation who were treated as secondary in the movement, who suffered from homesickness and insularity and a lack of scope outside of the domestic realm. Out of these personal observations, Buck developed a concern with the recovery of voices which became pivotal in her entire project. The use of voices – both as a form of self-expression and as a literary motif – was a central means for Buck to lay bare the misogyny of the male missionary project; in her fiction, she reclaimed the voices of female missionaries – especially her mother's – and time and again expanded her project to her fictional characters.

As I will show in chapter 2, Pearl Buck used her family biography as a springboard for what turned out to be her vehement critique of the overall missionary movement which she expressed from the mid-1920s on. In this

critique – expressed in a heterogeneous body of texts which encompassed fiction, speeches, and journalistic articles – she initially relied on an understanding of missions that is both static and uncompromisingly gendered. With this, I contend, she strategically distorted the complexity of a missionary project which was far more dynamic and at times also transgressing the boundaries of gender, as my discussion of women missionaries to China in chapter 1 will reveal. For the foreign missionary enterprise rightfully can be called “feminized” (see Thorne 1999: 40; Brouwer 1990: 13): it was couched in an ideology and language of sentimentalism and domesticity which relied on women as its agents – especially in the wake of a transformative process called the ‘social gospel’ which emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century. Women’s active – and ambivalent – roles in the missionary movement can be understood as ‘sentimental imperialism,’ a concept on which I will elaborate in detail in the first chapter.

Pearl Buck should not simply be seen in contrast to this background but she was, in fact, also very much influenced by it. After all, it was not only the missionary movement as such which underwent transformations, but also the people who practiced in and were affected by it. The missionary enterprise in China increasingly became a story of “cultural exchange and interaction, of borrowings back and forth across a selectively permeable cultural border,” as Gael Graham, a historian working on missionary cultures, has observed (1995: 1). In a similar vein, Ruth Brouwer asserts that

[m]issionaries often emerge [...] as men and women incapable of change, too rigid or obtuse to learn from new circumstances. That some of them *were* like that is unlikely to be disputed by anyone who has spent much time in mission archives. But the same records also reveal individuals who changed considerably in the course of their careers and provide evidence of significant generational differences in missionaries’ attitudes to their cultural environment. (Brouwer 2002: 6, emphasis in original)

When she mentions generational differences in this passage, Brouwer raises a crucial aspect of the missionary movement’s transformation. Indeed, important changes can be observed if we compare the older generation of missionaries to a younger one: within this second generation, there tended to be less insistence on the parental culture; viewed as a group, younger missionaries were more willing to become involved with Chinese life and engage

in processes of cultural “transplantation and adaptation,” as Leslie Fleming put it (1989: 3).¹

In his insightful monograph *The Conversion of Missionaries* (1997) historian Xi Lian has called this group “liberal missionaries.” Rather than completely abandoning missions, these modern missionaries of the 1920s and 30s – like Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* and *Life* magazines, Edward Hicks Hume, a doctor, or Frank J. Rawlinson, the editor of *The Chinese Recorder*² – worked themselves through the parental missionary projects and turned them into something of their own.³ I argue that Pearl Buck should be placed in line with this younger generation, instead of being seen as an “embittered child of Presbyterian missionaries” (Welter 1993: 205) who in her own career became an “ex-missionary” and barely “revisited the subject” (Wacker 2003: 199). Like the ventures of most other second generation missionaries, Buck’s project, too, can be read as a direct response and renegotiation of the hierarchical and patriarchal missionary projects of the parental generation. In order to better understand Buck’s approach and self-conception, it is once again helpful to consider her own statements about her role, as she reflected upon it in her autobiography:

I have never been an evangelical missionary, and indeed abhor the general notion, and yet I know very well that my missionary beginnings have shaped me to the extent of feeling responsible at least for what I can personally do about a given situation which needs mending. What then could I do, I asked myself, to help my countrymen, even a few of them and even on a small scale, to know something of the lives and thoughts of the peoples with whom they must inevitably deal, either as friends or enemies, in the future and that very near? The one gift I had brought with me to my own country was the knowledge of Asia and especially of China and Ja-

1 On the specific differences between first and second generation missionaries, see also Dana Robert 1997, Xi Lian 1997, or Thoralf Klein 2009.

2 For an in-depth discussion of these three ‘liberal missionaries,’ see Xi Lian’s *The Conversion of Missionaries* (1997). In the coda chapter of this book, I will focus on the career of Henry Luce and Pearl Buck’s fictionalization of him in her novel *God’s Men*.

3 On the missionary commitment of these second generation missionaries, see also Barbara Welter (1993: 197) and Patricia Grimshaw (1993: 276).

pan, gained not only through years of living there but through years of concentrated study, travel and observation. (*My Several Worlds* 371-372)

We can see here that Buck understands herself as a secular missionary who is endowed with the special gift of intercultural competence. This missionary figure is powerful (she even sees herself as capable of healing – “mending” – the American-Asian relations in the post-war context in the 1950s), because she has an in-depth knowledge of the Chinese, their customs, and their feelings after “years of concentrated study, travel and observation.”⁴ As such an insider, she has an authority which, in the eyes of her readers, turns her into an ethnographer of China and the Chinese.⁵ In my discussions of her novels, I shall repeatedly refer back to the concatenation of Buck’s roles as missionary, ethnographer, and “cultural expositor” (Liao 1997: 40). These combined roles put Buck in a position to educate Americans about China – a mission “in reverse,” as Karen Leong has put it (2005: 33). Seen

4 Widely seen as the first Westerner to depict the lives and lifestyles of ordinary Chinese in a ‘genuine,’ ‘authentic’ manner, Buck as a missionary-ethnographer could easily claim a degree of representativeness, universal knowledge, and larger ‘truth’ when she crafted her fictional characters and their fates. On this aspect, see Conn 1996, or Liao 1997.

5 The close entanglement of foreign missions and ethnography has been explored by Dominika Ferens in her study on the Eaton sisters, *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (2002). Going ‘into the field,’ carefully observing and taking notes of their surroundings and communicating these observations and ‘findings’ to their home constituency, missionaries to Asia also acted as ethnographers, as Ferens has shown (2002: see especially chapter 1). In fact, missionaries can be seen as geographically expanding the principles and practices of ethnography to Asia, for, upon the rise of the discipline “in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, China and Japan fell outside [academic ethnography’s] purview. Professional ethnographers were interested in cultures that had little or no contact with the West, and neither China nor Japan qualified as ‘primitive.’ Consequently, most of the ethnographic writings we have on China and Japan from that period are those by Protestant missionaries, diplomats, and tourists,” as Ferens has explained in a later essay (Ferens 2009: 186).

from the perspective of liberal missionaries, this mission is more humanitarian, cushioned, or tempered if compared to the evangelical project of the older generation. If assessed from other perspectives (such as that of the Chinese), this mission is, of course, still problematic as it relies on cultural and racial hierarchies.

Buck's self-fashioning and understanding of missionary activity was characteristic of the approaches of the second generation of missionaries. Yet, even within this group, Pearl Buck's position was unique. By contrast to most other members of this group, she became much more popular and closely covered by the media of her day. To a certain extent, this was due to her colorful personality and the fact that she was never shy to fight her battles in public. More than that, however, Buck was arguably more successful than any other second-generation missionary in her work because her project unfolded at the threshold between biography and fiction. Her mission took place in the realm of a fiction which enthralled a large – mostly female – readership for a long time in the twentieth century. In this fiction, Buck made ample use of the missionary theme and sought to overthrow the old generation's missionary project and rectify her parents' roles in retrospect.

Buck's middlebrow mission is transported by neo-missionary figures, as I call her fictional characters in this book. These figures – to be discussed from chapter 3 onwards – are missionaries of the second generation and represent a more 'modern,' secular, and humanitarian approach to missionary activity than the first generation. Sometimes, Buck still conceives them as religious men; but most often, these figures are placed in secular professions, ranging from physicians, to philanthropists, and on to social workers, as we shall see. Buck's neo-missionaries can be seen as hybrid characters, as they represent complicated, ambivalent fictional fusions of her father and mother – they are male and sometimes display the stubbornness and sense of vocation of Buck's father, but many of them also carry traits which Buck associated with her mother: warmth, benevolence, and humanity. Comparable to Buck's own self-fashioning as a cultural mediator, her fictional neo-missionaries time and again try to act as brokers between cultures, but importantly, they do not always fare well, as we will see. Through these figures, Buck takes a distance from the parental missionary project and calls for its revision. At the same time, she still continues her missionary activity or, to be more precise, appropriates 'mission' as a trope for her own purposes – to sketch a 'better' version of the world.

PEARL BUCK IN THE CONTEXT OF MIDDLEBROW LITERATURE

Pearl Buck's project can be placed squarely in the logic of the phenomenon called 'middlebrow,' to take up the first part of my study's title. As a body of literature which is neither exactly high nor completely low (read: trivial or even debased), the middlebrow is a space 'in-between' and characterized by a certain openness.

It is in this openness, as I will argue in what follows, that we can observe how the logic of the middlebrow and of mission complement each other in general and how they conflate in Pearl Buck's project in particular. Both in the middlebrow and in (secular) missions we find a clear theme or a 'cause' which addresses the reader, or, more generally, some kind of target audience. Already on this level, the middlebrow with its in-betweenness or existence on the fringes can be seen as an appropriate mode and style for Buck to carry out her fictional mission, craft her characters, and develop her themes. The nexus of (neo-) missionary topics and concerns, middlebrow aesthetics, and author/readership relations, then, proved central to the success of Buck's fictional project, as I will show.

Pearl Buck belonged to a popular and broad literary scene of the day. This is worth mentioning, because the 1920s and 30s are often presented as an exclusive project of a masculine (high) modernism with its intellectual elitism and 'highbrow' audiences. For example, in literary histories and anthologies, we often look in vain for references to writers who published their works of fiction in the same time span as their modernist counterparts, who were frequently more widely read and 'accessible' than modernist writers, and who were actually still much higher in numbers. Writers like Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Zona Gale, or Pearl Buck are representatives of what might be called 'modernism's opposite,' a branch of commercially successful fiction of the early twentieth century reaching into the 1950s: the middlebrow.⁶

6 The term and the concept of the 'middlebrow' have been problematic since their inception in the early twentieth century, as Joan Shelley Rubin has stressed: "The reference to the height of the brow originally derived from phrenology and carried overtones of racial differentiation. Transformed into a description of in-

Writers of this type of fiction had been persistently marginalized (or in some cases even completely ignored) by literary criticism until the project of middlebrow studies started in the 1990s. The publication of Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992), in particular, got the – to date rather small – field of middlebrow studies going. Following Rubin's lead, most middlebrow scholars have engaged with what can be described as revisionist or recovery projects.⁷ Janice Radway's study *A Feeling for*

tellectual caliber, 'highbrow' was, in the 1880s, already synonymous with 're-fined'; twenty years later, 'lowbrow' came to denote a lack of cultivation" (Rubin 1992: xii). Perhaps most prominently, Virginia Woolf – thus, a female spokesperson of highbrow modernism – in her 1942 essay of the same title first systematically used the term middlebrow, and she did so in a mocking fashion. To her, the middlebrow was a "mixture of geniality and sentiment struck together with a sticky slime of calf's-foot jelly" (Woolf 1942: 200). In this essay, which should become programmatic for most ensuing assessments of the phenomenon, Woolf addresses an uneasiness and discomfort with the middlebrow as a cultural category or genre, as well as with middlebrow people (whose "brows are betwixt and between," Woolf 1942: 199) as representatives of a certain lifestyle. Similar critical views on the middlebrow in the mid-twentieth century are expressed in Russell Lynes's article "Highbrow, Lowbrow, Middlebrow" (1949), Leslie Fiedler's "The Middle Against Both Ends" (1955), and – perhaps most widely known – Dwight MacDonal's "Masscult and Midcult" (1960).

- 7 One could argue that Tania Modleski's *Loving with a Vengeance. Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982) or Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (1984) initiated a more serious academic engagement with commercial (and among them also middlebrow) texts already in the 1980s. Yet, it was Radway's 1991 revised edition of *Reading the Romance* – which more or less coincided with the turn to New American Studies in the 1990s – that triggered a broader and sustained interest in (female) popular culture. In the wake of Rubin's pioneering study of 1992, a wave of works on middlebrow literature emerged in the 1990s: examples are Christopher Wilson's *White Collar Fictions. Class and Social Representation in American Literature, 1885-1925* (1992); Ruth Pirsig Wood's *Lolita in Peyton Place: Highbrow, Middlebrow, and Lowbrow Novels of the 1950s* (1995) or, on the British side, Rosa Maria Bracco's *Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow*

Books (1997), which traces the history and dynamics of the Book-of-the-Month Club as a hallmark of middlebrow fiction, is part of this context. Her book is especially important because of its focus on middlebrow market dynamics and the institutions which were pivotal for middlebrow literature. Founded by Harry Sherman in 1926, the club soon became the leading channel of distribution of middlebrow literature and a shaper of literary taste. The club's literary judges compiled bestseller lists, recommended to its subscribers the texts they considered 'good reads,' and with their criteria created a counter-canon to the avant-garde modernist literature of the day. As a disseminator of public taste, the Book-of-the-Month Club hyped certain books and was thus in a powerful position to promote the careers of many writers, as Radway has shown.

Middlebrow periodicals such as *Collier's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, or *Harper's Magazine* had boomed on the market since the 1910s. Like the Book-of-the-Month Club, they, too, printed bestseller lists and became influential multipliers of middlebrow literature. Moreover, these magazines often printed (preliminary versions of) novels in serial form before publishing houses released the final novels, making them significant media for middlebrow writers.

Pearl Buck clearly benefited from these institutions of middlebrow culture. A great number of her books, among them *The Good Earth*, but interestingly also her two biographies about her parents, became selections of the Book-of-the-Month Club (see, for example, Conn 1996: 188).⁸ Similarly, many of her novels gained higher publicity because of their pre-publication in serial form in middlebrow periodicals. The commercialization revolving around the middlebrow became a crucial factor in Buck's fictional mission: although it was a major reason for her exclusion from the canon and her critical dismissal, commercial success meant access to her readers.

These two aspects – commercial success and accessibility – can be regarded as criteria that help to define middlebrow literature. This is impor-

Writers of the First World War, 1919-1939 (1993). One of the most recent (and comprehensive) studies in the field is Gordon Hutner's monograph *What America Read: Taste, Class, and the Novel, 1920-1960* (2009).

8 I will revisit the importance of the Book-of-the-Month Club for Buck when I focus on *The Good Earth* in chapter 4.

tant to note given the fact that it has always been difficult to determine distinguishing characteristics of the middlebrow. The considerable degree of fuzziness which surrounds the term and concept as well as middlebrow's overall openness have made the field rather diffuse: "Middlebrow studies has not produced a coherent account of a distinct middlebrow aesthetics" or found an agreement on "a shared distinct aesthetics" and "specific subject matters," as Birte Christ has put it (Christ 2010: 23).

Despite the heterogeneity of the field, however, there are certain features and strategies which provide a common ground among many middlebrow texts. Most of the texts are situated in an overall conventional framework: they display straight forward plots which typically have a happy ending; they are set in the domestic realm and often focus on female protagonists (see Christ 2010: 23); and many of them present large social issues as personal stories and thus discuss complex realities by means of strategies of reduction and simplification (see Klein 2003: 65).

Middlebrow's conventionality also manifests itself in the texts' immediate, didactic, and sentimental style which is clearly opposed to the irony, cynicism, and detachment of the modernist project (see Radway 1997). This is hardly surprising given that the sentimental fiction of the nineteenth century is generally seen as the model for middlebrow fiction as it emerged in the years after World War I. Building on Nina Baym's study *Woman's Fiction* (1978), Jaime Harker, for example, linearly traces middlebrow writing back to the sentimental novel. She draws direct parallels between the two, referring to the readership of sentimental fiction as "primarily middle-class white women,"⁹ its plot pattern as clearly constructed and recognizable, its heroine standing in triumph at the end of the novel, its writer as being professional and in "obligation to their audience," and to the readers' identification with the heroine (Harker 2007: 5).¹⁰

The central focus on the female reader in sentimental literature, which Harker introduces here, can also be found in middlebrow literature. As a

9 Conversely, Jennifer Parchesky has identified the typical middlebrow reader as white, female, middle-class, and often originating from the American heartland, the mid-west (see Parchesky 2002: 229-258).

10 For a detailed definition of the sentimental mode, see also Nina Baym (1978: esp. 16-18); or Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* (1985: esp. 145).

distinctly feminized phenomenon,¹¹ the middlebrow revolves around a close-knit female triad of writer, reader, and text. The reader needs to be willing to engage with the text and enter into the communication process with the author so that the middlebrow agenda can come into its own. In the middlebrow, author and reader become “partners” who have an exchange based on emotion, as Jaime Harker has suggested (2007: 10). Harker also calls this bond a “sympathetic communion between reader and writer” (2007: 19). In the case of Buck, her readers often reciprocated in this communication process and – in typical middlebrow fashion – ‘replied’ to her by means of fan letters.¹² Buck herself praised these letters and stressed the ‘power of sentiment’ which they established between her readers and herself: “A person so secluded as a writer must not lose touch with them [the readers]. I value their letters, often so foolish. I *feel* them. Their minds reach mine, and I try to make mine reach theirs” (Harris 1969: 259, emphasis in original; see also Stirling 1983: 265).

The readers’ emotional involvement, which comes to the fore here, became a crucial element of Buck’s project. In this project, she sought to entertain her readers and evoke their sentiments, empathy, and identification. On top of this, however, Buck also wanted to teach her audience. With this, she followed an important middlebrow principle which Janice Radway has famously called the “sentimental education” of the reader (1997: 17; 263).

11 Middlebrow studies has “over-proportionately turned to female writers of middlebrow fiction,” as Christ has stated (2010: 23). The domination of female writers of middlebrow fiction neglects the fact that there are important male contributions as well: for instance, Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) can be seen as the male counterpart to Grace Metalious’s novel *Peyton Place*, which was *the* middlebrow success of the 1950s. Similarly, John Cheever sketched American suburbia of the 1950s and 60s in middlebrow aesthetics in his short stories. Jonathan Franzen serves as a contemporary example of a male writer who has – controversially – been associated with the middlebrow. On the problematic case of Franzen and the reconsideration of the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘middle’ art, see, for example, June Dwyer, “Canon-Openers, Book Clubs, and Middlebrow Culture” (2006).

12 On the importance of fan letters for middlebrow authors, see, for instance, Jennifer Parchesky (2002: 229-58).

This pedagogical impulse of the text is fundamentally dependent on its interlinkage of personalism and universalism: Exploring

large social, political, or historical issues [through] the experiences of a single individual, [...] middlebrow texts strived to produce an emotional and emphatic response: they encouraged their readers to feel intensely about other people. In doing so, [...] they facilitated a 'social habit of mind' in which the reader entered into a state of identification and connection with a text's subject. By enabling this imaginative communion, middlebrow texts facilitated the *transgressing of boundaries* and the *bridging of differences* through the workings of sympathy. *Readers learned about the world beyond themselves by emotionally entering into a universe somehow foreign to their own.* The defenders of middlebrow understood this aesthetic as an alternative to the reigning modernist one, that, in their eyes, produced primarily alienation, cynicism, and despair. Middlebrow purveyors kept an eye on the social implications of culture: they believed that by enabling a sense of imaginative community, their texts could encourage *a sense of engagement and commitment* with the world that had utopian possibilities. (Klein 2003: 65; my emphases)¹³

I added italics to Christina Klein's explanation of the middlebrow's universalism in and through personalism, because her vocabulary here perfectly captures the roles and positions which middlebrow readers (should) assume: with a "sense of engagement and commitment," they enter a foreign world, carefully observe it with sympathy,¹⁴ and become initiated and transformed in the process.

13 Christina Klein expands on Janice Radway's term of the "middlebrow personalism" in this passage. For Radway's term, see her *A Feeling for Books* (1997: 283-284).

14 Birte Christ argues against an ongoing importance of the discourse of sympathy in middlebrow texts from the 1920s onwards, claiming that "these middlebrow texts [...] replace the imperative of sympathy with the imperative of success and individualism, which warrants different kinds of remediations of poverty" (Christ 2010: 26). Christ uses Joseph Fichtelberg's *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870* (2003) as a back-up to her claim, stating that he shows that the discourse of sympathy "already begins to lose its pervasiveness before and during the Civil War" (Christ 2010:26). I contradict this argument and suggest that sympathy was not replaced, but at best complemented

These dynamics are clearly at work in Pearl Buck's novels: at first glance, the experiences of Buck's female characters could not be more different from those of her (female) American middle-class readers. In this sense, the racialized, poor 'Other' is the binary opposite of a white, privileged middle-class Western audience. At the same time, however, Buck's discussions of race frequently work with strategies of identification and alignment between these two groups and strongly draw on a universalism of their experiences and emotional closeness on the part of the reader, the process which Radway has called "sentimental education:" Buck's Chinese characters – and her female protagonists such as feet-bound Kwei-lan in *East Wind, West Wind* (chapter 3) and poor farmer's wife O-lan in *The Good Earth* (chapter 4) – often serve her readership as role models and projection surfaces as they represent an integrity, honesty, and hard-working ethos and embody traditional values and morality. In these texts, then, Buck juxtaposes East and West with the seemingly paradoxical aim to bring them together. In her study *Pearl S. Buck's Chinese Women Characters*, Xiongya Gao summarizes this important aspect: "The individuality of Buck's characters has had a strong universal appeal to readers. English-speaking readers find themselves able to relate to Buck's characters even though these characters belong to a people foreign to them" (Gao 2000: 21).

With her approach, Buck on the one hand draws on the strategies of alignment between reader and character that many other middlebrow authors employ. Yet on the other hand, she deviates markedly from most other writers of her day. We can find the explanation of this deviation in the very nature of Buck's project. There were other middlebrow writers of the time who – if not discussing mission as a theme *per se* – made use of missionary strategies in their fiction. This is owed to middlebrow's overall affinity to missionary cultures, as I have explained. However, Buck's middlebrow mission was still exceptional: Buck politicized a genre widely per-

by individualism in middlebrow texts of the 1920s and 30s. Especially during the Great Depression, this discourse loomed large in middlebrow fiction, as I will show by illustration of Buck's *The Good Earth* and (general) literary trends of the 1930s in chapter 4. I am in line with scholars like Christina Klein on this aspect, who has equally observed a persistent power of sympathy in middlebrow texts and musicals of the mid-century (see, for instance, the quote by Klein above).

ceived as apolitical and she appropriated it for her own purposes. Different from most others, this political project operated in a close-knit triad of middlebrow, mission, and ethnic 'Other.'¹⁵ With this missionary ethnicization of the middlebrow, as this project can be called, Buck gave this body of literature a unique and important twist and in many respects complicated the processes of categorization, the dynamics and cultural assumptions generally revolving around middlebrow fiction, as I will discuss in this book.

THE CRITICAL DISMISSAL OF PEARL BUCK

In this last part of my introduction, I am concerned with the critical dismissal of Pearl Buck. This dismissal is, after all, responsible for the long academic neglect of her, a circumstance which triggered my interest in Buck and her oeuvre in the first place. In what follows, my intention is not

15 Among the few other examples of middlebrow writers that come to mind in this context are the Eaton sisters, whose projects – like Buck's – were similarly built on a concatenation of the strands mission, middlebrow, and ethnic 'Other.' For an in-depth discussion of Edith and Winnifred Eaton's work, see Dominika Ferens's *Edith and Winnifred Eaton: Chinatown Missions and Japanese Romances* (2002). Ferens's monograph can be placed in a more recent phase of middlebrow studies in the new millennium. In this phase critics have begun to focus more closely on questions of ethnicity/race in middlebrow texts. Books that exemplify this trend in middlebrow studies are, next to Ferens's study, Christina Klein's *Coldwar Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-1961* (2003), and the volume *Middlebrow Moderns. Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*, edited by Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith (2003). As different and diversified as these studies are in approaching middlebrow literature and culture, they share the basic assumption of the middle(brow) as a feminized sphere in-between the often diffuse categories of 'high' and 'low' art. The middlebrow here features in the form of texts and films for middle-class women which negotiate the (middle-class) fates of female characters as (exoticized) racial 'Others' who become projection surfaces or figures of identification for a white middle-class audience.

to reclaim Buck as a ‘serious’ writer or vindicate her writing. Rather, a closer analysis of why she was rejected by critics further helps to explain in what sense the concatenation of the middlebrow, mission, and the oscillation between Americanness and Chineseness in Buck’s project became problematic in her reception.

These critical views, in turn, affected the course of Buck’s project. It is interesting to trace how Buck responded to the reproach that there was “usually sugar left in the bottom of the cup [her fiction],” to recall Stirling North’s imagery one last time. Buck’s reactions to the dismissal of her skills as a writer are intricately intertwined with the missionary context. For one, the criticism, resistance, or occasional ignorance that she met with on various levels ran analogous to the endeavors of missionaries to China: they, too, were not always well received, heard, and consequently not as effective in their missionary work as they sought to be. The strategies of responding to this rejection are again something that Buck shared with religious missionaries: being pushed into a position of defense, she insisted more urgently on her style and theme, and her missionary quest became even more intense. While her approach to ‘mission’ as a fictional topic was rather intuitive in the first stages of her career (as my discussion of her debut novel *East Wind, West Wind* in chapter 3 will show), her missionary topic and style became much more strategic later on. In fact, this style became distinct to an extent that it turned into Buck’s trademark. This trademark was much appreciated by her readers and followers, but rejected by those who set the academic and critical agenda.

The most frequent explanation for Buck’s dismissal – both in her own days and in contemporary criticism – has been found in her belonging to the framework of the feminized middlebrow. To an extent, the (male-dominated) distrust of women writers and the middlebrow in general explains the rejection of Buck’s fiction by fellow writers and critics of her time. For example, William Faulkner’s notorious indignation at being placed in the same “pigeon hole [...] with Mrs. Chinahand Buck” upon learning of his own Nobel Prize in 1950 (cited in Conn 1996: 210)¹⁶ can be read as an expression of a more widespread discomfort of male writers with the success of their female counterparts – a suspicion or resentment which

16 For the original print of Faulkner’s letter (dated 22 February, 1950), see Joseph Blotner, ed., *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (1977: 299).

can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century and the context of sentimental writing (see Baym 1978; Douglas 1977; Tompkins 1985) and which is informed by commercial factors: “[W]omen authors have been active since the earliest days of settlement. Commercially and numerically they have probably dominated American literature since the middle of the nineteenth century,” as Nina Baym stated (1981: 124), only to observe that in the late 1970s the canon of major writers still did not really include women novelists (1981: 123). The fact that Buck took recourse to a male pseudonym, John Sedges, in the 1940s and 50s, might attest to her own perception of being discriminated against on the basis of her gender.¹⁷ Explaining the use of her male pseudonym in the preface of *American Triptych*, Buck

17 A woman writer’s recourse to a male pen name, was, of course, not a new strategy at the time when Pearl Buck used it. With this move, she followed a long tradition of writers like George Eliot, Henry Wood, or – in some version – the modernist writer Hilda Doolittle, who used the mere abbreviation H.D. By contrast to these writers, however, Buck’s use of the male pen name was somewhat differently employed. The novels she published under the pseudonym ‘John Sedges’ are: *The Townsman* (1945), *Angry Wife* (1947), *A Long Love* (1949), *Voices in the House* (1953), and *American Triptych* (1958, a trilogy volume which includes *The Townsman*, *The Long Love*, and *Voices in the House*). These novels are decidedly ‘American’ in that they depict American characters in American settings and do not treat the Chinese/Asian subject matter at all. Thus, they were experimental testing grounds for Buck. I would agree with Peter Conn, who has argued that “[t]he pen name gave her a measure of artistic freedom – and the chance to test her talent in the marketplace as an unknown writer” (Conn 1996: 288). A number of other novels of the same time span – such as *Peony* (1948), *Kinfolk* (1949), *God’s Men* (1951), or *The Hidden Flower* (1952) – were published under Buck’s real name. Not accidentally, these latter novels revolve around her ‘usual’ Asian topics and themes, and hence the set of styles and modes which both Buck and her readership were familiar with. She could rest assured that these novels would sell and be commercially successful once her name was associated with them. Thus, she relied on her well-established status as an ethnic middlebrow writer for the publication purposes of those novels. Purchasing a novel from the author Buck, readers knew what to expect, and were not disappointed – these are, of course, precisely the dynamics of how the middlebrow works.

stressed that the reason was “a simple one, and [that the pseudonym was] masculine because men have fewer handicaps in our society than women have in writing as well as in other professions” (1958: viii). On another occasion, she again addressed the gender inequality among writers and artists, interestingly referring to the aspect of (commercial) popularity, this one pillar of the middlebrow: “[W]omen artists in any field are not taken as seriously as men, however serious their work. It is true that they often achieve high popular success. But this counts against them as artists,” she summarized her views in her collection of feminist essays, *Of Men and Women* (1941: 67).

However, Buck’s status as a woman writer can only partly account for her scholarly neglect. As Kang Liao reminds us in the chapter “A Neglected Laureate” of his 1997 monograph on Buck, “[t]o say simply she was a woman would not answer the question [of why she has such a low position in American literature] completely, for women writers including Emily Dickinson, Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow are often studied in American universities” (1997: 33).¹⁸ What distinguished Buck from most other writers of her time and even set her apart *within* the group of middlebrow writers like Canfield or Gale was her biographical background and the circumstance that her works dealt with “Chinese and Asiatic materials” (Doyle 1965: 8). Thus, Buck’s status as an ‘in-between’ author who wrote about a different subject matter and who used foreign and ‘exotic’ settings ran counter to the “nationalistic orientation” in American literary criticism (Baym 1981: 125-126; see also Liao 1997: 33), which can be found in both modernist/highbrow and middlebrow fiction of the day. At some point, she was even “charged with not being an American writer since her subject matter and even her places of residence were almost completely Chinese” (Doyle 1965: 82).

18 To be sure, Liao here gives the names of women writers who do not count among the middlebrow tradition, but whose works are generally characterized by modernist, sometimes experimental techniques, and/or ‘serious’ realism/naturalism, and thus the boundary markers against which middlebrow fiction is placed. Note that Joan Shelley Rubin uses the example of Willa Cather to point to the fact that these boundaries and classifications can be in flux: Cather, she writes, “can be called popular – or even middlebrow [...]” (Rubin 2003: xiii).

It can be argued that this very subject matter – the foreignness, ‘exoticism,’ or difference which China/Asia represented at the time – was a promising topic which held out the prospect of bringing critical acclaim to writers concerned with it. Especially in Buck’s case, her upbringing in China and her expert status as an ethnographer or teacher which emerged out of it might suggest that her fiction carried a huge potential to overthrow the perception of China as a “minor Other” and turn it into a respectable literary and cultural subject. Yet, this potential was not always fully exploited. This was, in particular, due to the way in which Buck enacted her theme – her missionary style and manner. As a result of her upbringing in a missionary environment in China, Dody W. Thompson argued, Buck’s mold

was irrevocably set a generation behind what would have been her normal one. If later she exchanged the rickshaw for jet planes, if the deep peace of her childhood gave way to revolution, and she both read and traveled widely, her deepest roots nevertheless were locked away in time, as she herself had been in space. (Thompson 1968: 89)

This biographically motivated backwardness, Thompson claimed, shaped the nature of Buck’s fictional work significantly and set it apart from the writing of the day. According to Thompson, since the topics and problems Buck addressed were different from those of other authors and because she told them in a tone of missionary optimism, her fiction was “too simple for adults” and “convincing only to the young” and “unsophisticated” readers who needed authorial guidance and uncomplicated plots (Thompson 1968: 108-109). Buck’s missionary style, admired by her audience, also became her ‘trap:’ it was regarded as too urgent, old-fashioned, didactic, simple, schematic, dull, or even obtrusive.

Typical of Buck, she did not remain silent, but replied eloquently to the critique of her work. Interestingly, in these responses she resorted to the Chinese tradition of story-telling. With this strategy, she referred back to her status as a cultural insider and fashioned herself as a ‘stranger’ who was unfamiliar with American traditions. For example, Buck sketched her literary credo in the alumnae address “On the Writing of Novels,” which she delivered at her *alma mater*, Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, Vir-

ginia,¹⁹ in June 1933. In this speech, Buck stressed that she followed the so-called *tse ran* principle in her fiction:

A good novelist, so I have been taught in China, should be above all else *tse ran*, that is, natural, unaffected, and so flexible and variable as to be wholly at the command of the material that flows through him. His whole duty is only to sort life as it flows through him, and in the vast fragmentariness of time and space and event to discover essential and inherent order and rhythm. (Buck 1933: 8)

As a ‘good novelist,’ Buck merely chronicles the flow of ‘real’ life and brings it into the right order, rearranges it, and communicates it to her readers. She is in command of her text, but she does not distort, or make things up. The actual material, ‘real’ life as it were, is already there for the ethnographer-novelist to pick up, record, and then translate to the readers. According to this understanding, the novelist “should not be a preacher, [but still,] didacticism is acceptable so long as the novel portrays life faithfully and forcefully,” as Gao has summarized this aspect (2000: 26). It is a harmonious imagery which Buck evokes here when she speaks of the ‘natural flow’ which runs through the novelist. In this flow, the medium, the novel, has to remain transparent and constitute a dialogue with the reader. Different from modernist aesthetics, the writer of this text must get involved with the audience. Again, this aspiration is very much consistent with the middlebrow.

The phrase “so I have been taught in China,” which Buck uses in her alumnae address, became a favored strategy of hers whenever she defended herself against criticism of her writing in the following years. Most prominently, she made ample use of this phrase in the lecture “The Chinese Novel,” which she gave upon being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature on 12 December 1938. The speech, which also repeated the passage on the *tse ran* principle of her earlier alumnae address, was published as a booklet one year later. After the announcement had been made that Buck had won this literary prize of high acclaim, a big controversy emerged over whether

19 Subsequent references to the college in my study are given as Randolph College.

This is not out of inattentiveness or meant as an abbreviation, but owed to the fact that Randolph-Macon Woman’s College was renamed Randolph College in 2007.

she had deserved the award or not.²⁰ The Nobel committee awarded Buck the prize, giving “her rich and truly epic descriptions of peasant life in China and [...] her biographical masterpieces” as the major reason (Hallström 1938: n. p.).²¹ This decision caused a stir with a number of people who were vehemently opposed to Buck’s winning of the award. The modernist establishment in the United States, in particular, objected to the fact that Buck was awarded with a prize they felt should have gone to Theodore Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson instead. On the American side of the critique, there was a considerable amount of polemics involved.²² In addition, Buck was also criticized on the other side of the Pacific: Asian critics had started to question her project ever since the publication of *The Good Earth* and now saw their critique even more justified. These critics took issue with the fact that a white woman had become the ‘insider voice’ of Asia; thus it was a

20 The extent of public critique or controversy was considerably lower when Buck had won the Pulitzer Prize for her most successful novel *The Good Earth* in 1932. Although critical voices had already existed back then, these were not really widely publicized at the time. I would offer several explanations for this lack of controversy in 1932: the sweeping celebrations of *The Good Earth* (see my discussion of the novel in chapter 4 of this book); the overall lower prestige of the Pulitzer Prize in comparison with the Nobel Prize; the fact that Buck was still living in China at the time and was thus far away from the public limelight; and the circumstance that in spring 1932 – when the announcement of her Pulitzer was made – she had not yet caused much political indignation and had not really been seen as a controversial person in the United States (see chapter 2 for the speech “Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?,” which represents a turning point in the perception of Buck). On Buck’s Nobel Prize and the controversy around it, see, for example, Wendy Larson and Richard Kraus, “China’s Writers, the Nobel Prize, and the International Politics of Literature” (1989: 148), or Dody W. Thompson (1968: 85-110).

21 For the complete reasoning of the committee, see the presentation speech by Per Hallström, secretary of the Swedish academy at the time (“Presentation Speech” 1938; for the URL of the online print of the speech, see the Works Cited list at the end of the book).

22 For example, Robert Frost declared in a mocking-sarcastic fashion: “If she can get it, anybody can” (qtd. in Liao 1997: 29). For an in-depth discussion of these reactions, see Conn 1996: chapter 5 and especially chapter 6.

complex network of problems revolving around questions of usurpation, authority, access, and status which stood at the center of this debate.²³

Faced with this array of criticism, Pearl Buck took even greater recourse in her status as an insider of China and insisted that she told her stories just ‘as she had been taught in China.’ The Nobel Prize lecture of 1938 epitomizes her defense, spelling out her stance towards fiction and the role of the novelist. Buck starts out this lecture by clearly positioning herself in the Chinese tradition of writing and claims the Chinese novel²⁴ as a model for herself and for Western writers in general:

[...] But it is the Chinese and not the American novel which has shaped my own efforts in writing. My earliest knowledge of story, of how to tell and write stories, came to me in China. It would be ingratitude on my part not to recognize this today. And yet it would be presumptuous to speak before you on the subject of the Chinese novel for a reason wholly personal. There is another reason why I feel that I may properly do so. It is that I believe the Chinese novel has an illumination for the Western novel and for the Western novelist. [...]

In this tradition of the novel have I been born and reared as a writer. My ambition, therefore, has not been trained toward the beauty of letters or the grace of art. It is, I believe, a sound teaching and, as I have said, illuminating for the novels of the West. (Buck, “The Chinese Novel” 1938: n. p.)

In this opening of her lecture, Buck plays off the American tradition of novel writing against the Chinese tradition and, by extension, her own agenda of writing. When she takes her distance from the “grace of art” which Western writers are expected to possess and display in their fiction, she implicitly evokes the concept of ‘highbrow’ literature and sets it against the more down-to-earth ideal of the Chinese novel. This ideal or norm, which Buck

23 For the controversy between Buck and Asian critics, see my discussion of *The Good Earth* in chapter 4.

24 Buck specifies her understanding of “the Chinese novel” as follows: “When I say Chinese novel, I mean the indigenous Chinese novel, and not that hybrid product, the novels of modern Chinese writers who have been too strongly under foreign influence while they were yet ignorant of the riches of their own country” (Buck, “The Chinese Novel” 1938: n. p.). As we shall see again in chapter 5, Buck is highly wary of anything too hybrid, mixed, or modern.

explains more closely a bit further on in her lecture, calls to mind some crucial principles of the middlebrow:

For the Chinese novel was written primarily to amuse the common people. And when I say amuse I do not mean only to make them laugh, though laughter is also one of the aims of the Chinese novel. I mean *amusement in the sense of absorbing and occupying the whole attention of the mind*. I mean enlightening that mind by pictures of life and what that life means. I mean encouraging the spirit not by rule-of-thumb talk about art, but by stories about the people in every age, and thus presenting to people simply themselves. (Buck, "The Chinese Novel" 1938: n. p.; my emphasis)

The Chinese novel's tasks, as Buck outlines them here, are reminiscent of the middlebrow's mandate to entertain and captivate its readers and to get them involved with the text and its characters.

The constructedness of this concept of literature, which comes to the fore in Buck's description, is taken up again at the end of the lecture. Importantly, Buck establishes a rhetorical triangle in which her own Sinification, the middlebrow, and mission conflate:

And like the Chinese novelist, I have been taught to want to write for these people. If they are reading their magazines by the million, then I want my stories there rather than in magazines read only by a few. For story belongs to the people. They are sounder judges of it than anyone else, for their senses are unspoiled and their emotions are free. No, a novelist must not think of pure literature as his goal. [...] He must be satisfied if the common people hear him gladly. At least, so I have been taught in China. (Buck, "The Chinese Novel" 1938: n. p.)

When she associates herself with the Chinese novelist, she stresses that she, too, has a democratic understanding of literature: it has to be accessible for many people and "belong" to them. Emphasizing that the "common people" have to "hear [the novelist] gladly," she points to the important communication between writer and audience and thus makes clear that she is aware of her dependence on the reader. This dependence is particularly given because "pure literature" is not and cannot be her goal as a writer. Her goal as writer is to teach, to educate, and to inform her readers in the

best possible – read: entertaining – way. This approach and goal, then, becomes Pearl Buck’s American Chinese middlebrow mission.

Before I discuss Pearl Buck’s middlebrow mission in the following chapters, I would like to round off my introductory considerations by way of focusing on the existing research on Buck in order to properly place my own project in this framework. Overall, the body of studies on Pearl Buck is rather limited in size to date.

As I have explained in this introduction, Buck was long almost completely ignored by the academia – irrespective of the discipline. Apart from some early studies, such as Paul Doyle’s overview of Buck’s fiction in a 1965 study, which offers summaries rather than in-depth analyses of her novels, and a journal article from 1977 by Michael Hunt, which is concerned with Buck’s role as a China expert, there is hardly any scholarly material at all until the 1980s.

In the wake of second-wave feminism, some female scholars then ‘discovered’ Pearl Buck in the 1980s. As an outcome of this interest, Nora Stirling (1983) and Beverly Rizzon (1989) published biographies about Buck, which added to Buck’s own autobiography of 1954 and her (semi)autobiographical *Pearl S. Buck*, which she wrote “in consultation” with Theodore Harris in two volumes in 1969 and 1971. Similar to Stirling and Rizzon, Jane Rabb, whose preparatory notes are archived in the library of Buck’s *alma mater*, Randolph College in Virginia, had planned to write a biography of Buck around 1980, but never finished her project. Belonging to these feminist studies of the 1980s, Jane Hunter’s monograph on women missionaries to China, *The Gospel of Gentility* (1984), briefly focuses on Buck in the context of (mission) history and discusses Buck’s biographies of her parents as part of a chapter on “Married Women and Missionary Vocation.”

A more serious, widely covered and somewhat more systematic interest in Pearl Buck was then initiated by Elizabeth Lipscomb, Frances Webb, and Peter Conn, who organized the “Pearl S. Buck Centennial Symposium” at Randolph College on the occasion of what would have been Buck’s 100th birthday in 1992. The immediate outcome of the symposium was a collection of the essays presented at the conference – *The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck* (1994) – which is interesting in its own right because of its interdisciplinary contributions. Even more importantly, however, the conference seems to have helped for good to overcome the long silence – or

existence of only scattered pieces – on Buck. Most prominently, Peter Conn, one of the co-organizers of the 1992 conference, engaged in a book-length project on Buck at the time. This book, published as *Pearl S. Buck. A Cultural Biography* in 1996, is impressive in many respects: because of its comprehensiveness and simultaneous close attention to (literary, cultural, and historical) detail, it has proven indispensable for all studies that followed Conn – including my own. However, Conn's biography also displays a clear bias for Buck which I consider at times problematic, as my discussion will show.

After Conn, two further studies of the later 1990s are worthwhile to be mentioned here: Kang Liao's monograph *Pearl S. Buck, A Cultural Bridge Across the Pacific* (1997), which, too, has an overview character; and Xi Lian's seminal revisionist study of missions, *The Conversion of Missionaries* (published in 1997, as well). Written from a historian's perspective, this book includes a chapter on Buck which assesses her in the light of second-generation missionaries.

If we turn to the last decade, Xiongya Gao's *Pearl S. Buck's Chinese Women Characters* (2000) is noticeable: this book sparked the academic interest in Pearl Buck in the new millennium, and significantly, it represents the first book-length literary study on Buck by a Chinese American woman. Ten years later, in her 2010 article on Buck's debut novel *East Wind, West Wind*, Haipeng Zhou would follow Gao's lead. The field of Asian American studies has primarily discovered Buck through the studies of Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East* (2003), and Karen Leong, *The China Mystique* (2005). Both Yoshihara and Leong devote a chapter to Buck in their respective monographs which investigate the roles which (Asian) American women played in the formation of American Orientalism in the early to mid twentieth century. These two books are multi-faceted studies which are exceptionally well written – especially in their arguments of Buck's construction of an American China. As far as studies on Buck in the 2000s are concerned, Alexa Weik's dissertation "Beyond the Nation: American Expatriate Writers and the Process of Cosmopolitanism" (2008), which includes a chapter on Buck, and Hilary Spurling's *Burying the Bones. Pearl Buck in China* (2010), a literary biography, complete the picture.

Surprisingly enough, middlebrow studies has almost completely bypassed Pearl Buck. Scholars like Joan Shelley Rubin and Janice Radway hardly ever mention her in their comprehensive studies of the field. It took

until 2003 when Christina Klein's monograph *Cold War Orientalism* was published that Buck (although not in the form of a full chapter) was first included in the middlebrow canon. Published in the same year as Klein's book, Jaime Harker's chapter "Multicultural Middlebrow: Pearl Buck and the Liberal Iconography of *The Good Earth*" in her *America the Middlebrow* further helped to establish Buck in middlebrow studies.

In line with the books by Harker, Klein, Yoshihara, and Leong, I situate my own study in the context of the revisionist projects of New American Studies. At the same time, in "Middlebrow Mission: Pearl S. Buck's American China" I expand on these previous studies and bring together Pearl Buck's positioning in the middlebrow *and* the missionary contexts for the first time.