Pearl S. Buck was one of the most renowned, interesting, and controversial figures ever to influence American and Chinese cultural and literary history – and yet she remains one of the least studied, honored, or remembered. Peter Conn’s *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* sets out to reconstruct Buck’s life and significance, and to restore this remarkable woman to visibility.

Born into a missionary family, Pearl Buck lived the first half of her life in China and was bilingual from childhood. Although she is best known, perhaps, as the prolific author of *The Good Earth* and as a winner of the Nobel and Pulitzer prizes, Buck in fact led a career that extended well beyond her eighty works of fiction and nonfiction and deep into the public sphere. Passionately committed to the cause of social justice, she was active in the American civil rights and women’s rights movements; she also founded the first international adoption agency. She was an outspoken advocate of racial understanding, vital as a cultural ambassador between the United States and China at a time when East and West were at once suspicious and deeply ignorant of each other.

In this richly illustrated and meticulously crafted narrative, Conn recounts Buck’s life in absorbing detail, tracing the parallel course of American and Chinese history and politics through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This “cultural biography” thus offers a dual portrait: of Pearl Buck, a figure greater than history cares to remember, and of the era she helped to shape.
Pearl S. Buck
Pearl S. Buck

A CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY

Peter Conn
For Jennifer Kyung
and the five thousand other Welcome House children

For David, Alison, and Steven, too

And for Terry
with gratitude
for thirty years of love and friendship, loyalty and passion
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Preface: Rediscovering Pearl Buck

This book began at a picnic.

Every year, on the first Saturday in June, hundreds of the families who have adopted children through an agency called Welcome House gather in a state park north of Philadelphia for a day of games and barbecues and annual reunions. The families look different from most. The children come from all over the world: from Asia and Eastern Europe, from Central and South America, from every region of the United States. Tonic Park becomes, for a day, a pint-sized United Nations, exploding with children – from two weeks old to teenagers, white, black, and every color in between. It is an unforgettable sight.

My wife, Terry, and I attended our first Welcome House picnic in 1973, when we had begun to think about adopting a child. After three biological children, we had decided that we had some obligation to find room for one of the world’s homeless boys or girls. We had also found much joy in the children we had, and we thought (quite accurately, as it turned out) that another child would add to our joy. We started the process, and after the usual months of waiting and anxiety, we met our new two-year-old Korean daughter, Jennifer Kyoung, when her plane arrived at Kennedy Airport on February 4, 1975.

The rest, as they say, is history; or her story. But it is not the story in this book. This book is about Pearl Buck, the woman who in 1949 founded Welcome House, the first international, interracial adoption agency in the United States.

When Terry and I first approached Welcome House, I could have written everything I knew about Pearl Buck on a three-by-five index card. I knew that Buck was the author of The Good Earth, a book I had read in high school, though I had trouble recalling many of the details. (I dimly remembered a scene in which a peasant woman gave birth over a bucket and then went back to work.) I also knew that Buck had won the Nobel Prize for literature, though I didn’t know exactly when, and I had traveled long enough in advanced literary circles to know that Buck’s prize was not at all respectable. Finally, I had a vague
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impression that Buck was the daughter of Protestant missionaries, but I had no idea what that might actually mean.

Over the years that followed, Terry and I kept in close touch with Welcome House, working as volunteers and even serving on the board. In spite of myself, I was tempted by an increasing interest in Pearl Buck. I met a number of people who had known her, and who had obviously been changed for the better by the relationship. I discovered that Welcome House was only one of a dozen major projects Buck had initiated in support of children’s welfare and interracial understanding. Frankly, Terry and I were touched by the extraordinary effort Buck had made to combine a literary life with a commitment to human service. After all, how many successful writers or intellectuals ever go beyond the occasional painless gesture, the sanctimonious petition or letter, and actually spend their time and money trying to do some social good?

Still, I kept my distance from Buck as a possible subject; she seemed too risky an investment. A smug consensus has reduced Pearl Buck to a footnote – a judgment, I hasten to add, in which I had routinely concurred. As recently as 1989, I published a 600-page history of American literature, in which I found room for everyone from the seventeenth-century Puritan preacher Uriah Oakes to the twentieth-century proletarian propagandist Giacomo Patri, but I never mentioned Pearl Buck. Then, as I learned more about Buck’s prodigious productivity, both as writer and humanitarian, I was less convinced by the received wisdom. Pearl Buck’s disappearance from the American cultural scene was not self-explanatory.

To begin with, this was a woman who had written over seventy books, many of them best-sellers, including fifteen Book-of-the-Month Club selections. She had worked in virtually every genre of writing: novels, short stories, plays, biography, autobiography, translations (from the Chinese), children’s literature, essays, journalism, poetry. However steeply she had fallen from critical favor, she had in fact won the Nobel Prize in literature (with Toni Morrison, she is one of only two American women ever to do so), and a Pulitzer, and the Howells Medal, and election to the National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a dozen honorary degrees.

Her novels continue to be read around the world, in English and in scores of translations. Buck’s novels can still be found in villages and isolated farmhouses in Tanzania, New Guinea, India, Colombia. A friend of mine who served in the Peace Corps read her first Pearl Buck story, a disintegrating paperback copy of Imperial Woman, while she was living in a hut in Malawi.

In a word, Pearl Buck was one of the most popular novelists of the twentieth century. This in itself would be reason enough to look at her life and work more closely. Not long ago, critic Cary Nelson usefully observed: “We should
take it as axiomatic that texts that were widely read or influential need to retain an active place in our sense of literary history, whether or not we happen, at present, to judge them to be of high quality.” Pearl Buck perfectly exemplifies a writer who once loomed large on our cultural landscape, and whose disappearance has damaged our historical understanding.

Discussing the 1930s, one of Buck’s most productive decades, historian Lawrence Levine has made a similar point. Levine reminds us that a study of popular arts is necessary to any cultural history that would presume to fullness. “One does not have to believe,” Levine writes, “that aesthetically Superwoman rivals Hamlet or that Grant Wood compares to Michelangelo to maintain that Superwoman and Wood potentially have much to tell us about the Great Depression, that they therefore merit the closest examination, and that they won’t necessarily be simple to fathom.”

Ironically, if predictably, neither Cary Nelson nor Lawrence Levine, despite their enthusiasm for searching out the forgotten places of American culture, ever mentions Pearl Buck. Nonetheless, her career abundantly confirms the validity of their thesis. Whatever the aesthetic claims of Buck’s novels and stories, her once-remarkable prominence makes her indispensable to any account of America’s twentieth-century intellectual and imaginative life. Beyond that, however, I will argue in the following chapters that quite a lot of Buck’s fiction and nonfiction is strong enough to command a fresh appraisal on its own merits. The biographies she wrote of her mother and father, for example, are unparalleled accounts of the strange and terrible vocations pursued by generations of missionaries in China. Not long before he died, I asked John Hersey, also a missionary child, for his opinion of Buck’s writing. Hersey wrote me: “As a China ‘mishkid,’ I still, to this day, reverberate with pity and horror to the memory of some of the images” in those books.

Buck’s fiction broke new ground in subject matter, especially in her representations of Asia, and above all in her portraits of Asian women. In 1992, I attended a conference at which the Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston saluted Buck for making Asian voices heard, for the first time, in Western literature. By representing Chinese characters with “such empathy and compassion,” Kingston said, Buck “was translating my parents to me and she was giving me our ancestry and our habitation.” More recently, Toni Morrison looked back on her early reading of Buck’s novels and said, with affectionate irony: “She misled me . . . and made me feel that all writers wrote sympathetically, empathetically, honestly and forthrightly about other cultures.”

Pearl Buck was, as historian James Thomson has recently reminded us, “the most influential Westerner to write about China since thirteenth-century Marco Polo.” Thomson’s assessment is at once indisputable, familiar, and yet, upon
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reflection, astonishing. Never before or since has one writer so personally shaped the imaginative terms in which America addresses a foreign culture. For two generations of Americans, Buck invented China.

Americans have fought three Asian wars in the last fifty years. More recently, armed combat has been followed by economic competition: since the late 1970s, half-a-dozen Asian nations have been the sites of unprecedented development in manufacturing and trade. In addition, within the United States itself, Asians make up the fastest-growing ethnic populations; Asian and Asian-American immigrants and native-born citizens now number over six million people, a doubling in ten years. Americans are beginning to realize that their future is entangled with Asia.

Nevertheless, amid pious invocations of multiculturalism, a shrinking world, and the imminent arrival of the Pacific Century, the peoples of Asia and the West continue to view each other through veils of cliché and misunderstanding. At such a moment in political and cultural history, Pearl Buck’s stories should be a subject of increasing relevance and even urgency. Whatever the strengths or limits of her Asian images, she was a pioneer, introducing American readers to landscapes and people they had long ignored.

Her stories of China were based on her own experiences and observations as a missionary daughter. Her parents were an ill-matched pair of Southern Presbyterians named Absalom and Carrie Sydenstricker. Pearl was born in West Virginia, while her parents were on a home leave, but she was taken to China at three months old and lived there most of the next forty years. She grew up bilingual, speaking and reading both English and Chinese. In her own favorite metaphor, she described herself as “culturally bifocal.” At the same time, from her earliest days, she felt herself homeless in both her countries, an outsider among people different from herself.

Unlike almost every other American of her generation, Pearl Buck grew up knowing China as her actual, day-to-day world, while America was the place of conjecture and simplified images. Furthermore, almost uniquely among white American writers, she spent the first half of her life as a minority person, an experience that had much to do with her lifelong passion for interracial understanding.

She went to college in the United States, at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College in Virginia, but returned to China immediately after graduation. Shortly after going back to China, she married her first husband, the agricultural economist J. Lossing Buck, and began a family. For several years, the couple lived in the town of Nanhsuchou (Nanxuzhou) in rural Anhwei (Anhui) province. Buck
published her first stories and novels, including *The Good Earth*, while still living in China.*

In the early 1930s, with China torn by civil war, Japanese invasion, and mounting anti-foreign violence, she moved to the United States, buying a dilapidated eighteenth-century farmhouse in Bucks County, north of Philadelphia. The place was called Green Hills Farm, and it served as home and headquarters for several decades of activity. Here she continued to write, to raise the seven children she adopted, and to manage the various organizations she founded to address the problems of ethnic hatred and to help displaced and disadvantaged children.

Throughout her American years, Pearl Buck was one of the leading figures in the effort to promote cross-cultural understanding between Asia and the United States. In 1941, for example, she and her second husband, Richard Walsh, founded the East and West Association as a vehicle of educational exchange. The association became a target of McCarthyism and expired in the early 1950s. In addition, for over a decade Buck and her husband published the magazine *Asia*, which had a substantial influence on American opinion about East Asia. In the early 1940s, Buck and Walsh led the national campaign to repeal the notorious Chinese exclusion laws. Finally, throughout World War II, despite her close association with Chinese resistance to Japanese aggression, Buck was one of the few Americans who spoke out strongly against the U.S. internment of Japanese-Americans.

Both in Asia and the United States, Buck devoted much of her time and money to the welfare of children. In particular, she worked for children who were mentally or physically disabled or were disadvantaged because of their race. She founded Welcome House because existing adoption agencies considered Asian and Amerasian children to be unadoptable. In forty-five years, Welcome House has placed over five thousand of these children in American homes.

In 1950, the year after she created Welcome House, Buck published a book called *The Child Who Never Grew*, a story about her retarded daughter, Carol. The book was a landmark. Specifically, it encouraged Rose Kennedy to talk publicly about her retarded child, Rosemary. More generally, it helped to change American attitudes toward mental illness. In 1964, Buck set up a foundation in her own name, which has provided medical care and education for over twenty-five thousand Amerasian children in a dozen Asian countries.

In terms of the invidious sexual division of labor in our society, Pearl Buck’s special concern for children may have been labeled as characteristically female. It was, more accurately, humane, and it was sadly prophetic. The World Health

*For a note on the spelling of Chinese proper names, see page xxi.
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Organization recently estimated that ten million children under the age of five die each year – thirty thousand every day, more than one thousand every hour – from disease, violence, or hunger. What most of these children have in common is poverty: whether they are born in Somalia, Bangladesh, Brazil, or Pennsylvania. These were the lives that Pearl Buck tried to save.

Along with her efforts in children’s welfare, Buck was also active throughout her adult life in the American civil rights movement. From the day she moved to the United States in 1934, she was a regular contributor to Crisis, the magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and to Opportunity, published by the National Urban League. Walter White, longtime executive secretary of the NAACP, said at a 1942 Madison Square Garden rally that only two white Americans understood the reality of black life, and both were women: Eleanor Roosevelt and Pearl Buck.

Buck served on the Urban League board and was an active trustee of Howard University for many years. She received an honorary degree from Howard in 1942, and responded with an important address on the complex issue of black patriotism in the early days of World War II. Throughout the 1940s, Buck associated herself with such writers as W. E. B. Du Bois in opposing British colonialism. Buck’s friendships in the 1930s and 1940s included Paul and Eslanda Robeson. In 1949, Buck and Eslanda co-authored a book called American Argument, a dialogue on American racism. Years and even decades before most white intellectuals had even noticed racial injustice, Pearl Buck made major contributions to the American struggle for civil rights.

Buck’s efforts on behalf of equality included tireless support for women’s rights. She promoted modern birth control and called her friend Margaret Sanger “one of the most courageous women of our times,” a person whose name “would go down in history” as a modern crusader for justice. In the 1930s and 1940s, Buck also spoke out repeatedly in support of an Equal Rights Amendment for women, at a time when opposition to it included the majority of organized women’s groups.

As a highly visible proponent of international understanding and of civil rights for women and African-Americans, Pearl Buck inevitably attracted the hostile curiosity of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Buck’s FBI file, which was initiated as early as 1937, reaches nearly three hundred pages, of which a little over two-thirds has been declassified. (I am still appealing for release of the other material.) The paltry gossip and innuendo in these pages would be amusing if it were not outrageous, a sad reminder of the paranoia that has infected America’s domestic politics for over half a century.
HOW DOES A WOMAN of this magnitude and range slip away from our national consciousness? She has not exactly disappeared. Rather, as one reader of an earlier draft of this book shrewdly put it, she has been “hidden in plain sight,” obscured beneath a caricature that belies her complexity and her achievement. She has become a dour, one-woman punch line, trapped in some version or other of the old joke, “If Pearl Buck is the answer, then what is the question?”

In the years after World War II, Buck’s literary reputation shrank to the vanishing point. She stood on the wrong side of virtually every line drawn by those who constructed the lists of required reading in the 1950s and 1960s. To begin with, her principal subjects were women and China, both of which were regarded as peripheral and even frivolous in the early postwar years. Furthermore, she preferred episodic plots to complex structures and had little interest in psychological analysis. In addition to all that, she was not a felicitous stylist, and she even displayed a taste for formulaic phrases. Needless to say, none of this endeared her to that vast cultural heartland stretching from the East River to the Hudson.

On the other hand, she told exciting stories, she created a gallery of memorable characters, and her vivid images of Asia in war and peace broadened the reach of American fiction. Many of her books contain narrative and descriptive passages of considerable drama, powerful scenes of work, warfare, ceremony, childbirth, and poverty that manage to transcend the often commonplace prose in which they are presented. And, whatever their literary merits and defects, her novels, short stories, and essays regularly raised unsettling questions about the racial and sexual status quo.

In the pages that follow, I will not claim that Pearl Buck was the author of unjustly suppressed masterpieces. I will argue, on the other hand, that a dozen or so of her books, mostly from the 1930s and 1940s – I am thinking of the biographies of her parents, The Exile and Fighting Angel; her autobiography, My Several Worlds; a number of the China books, including The Mother, First Wife and Other Stories, Sons, Dragon Seed, Imperial Woman, and Kinfolk; and one or two of the books she wrote about America, including This Proud Heart – ought to be valued more highly than they are. In addition, her collection of feminist essays, Of Men and Women, which was once compared to the work of Virginia Woolf, should be part of contemporary discussions of gender in America.

A list such as that – note that I did not mention The Good Earth, which is quite a special case – makes up a considerable achievement. To be sure, she wrote too much, and too quickly. Her later work, in general, is consistently less interesting. Buck has been damaged by a kind of aesthetic Gresham’s law, in which her bad books have driven her entire body of work out of circulation.

She was also the victim of political hostility, attacked by the right for her
active civil rights efforts, distrusted by the left because of her vocal anti-Communism. Beyond that, she undoubtedly suffered because of her gender: more often than not, it was her male rivals and critics who declared that her gigantic success only demonstrated the bad judgment of American readers—especially women readers, who have always made up the majority of Buck’s audience. (In the course of gathering material for this book, I have corresponded with upwards of 150 librarians and archivists around the country. Fully a dozen of them have told me that Pearl Buck was their mother’s favorite writer. Fathers are never mentioned.)

Given the influence of her writing and the sheer breadth of her accomplishments, it seems reasonably clear that some reconsideration is past due. Yet, in spite of the assorted renovations and second thoughts that have restored other writers to a measure of academic respectability and public attention, Pearl Buck remains largely neglected. This book—based in part on documents and manuscripts that have not previously been available—represents an effort to reclaim Buck’s life and work.

I have called this book a cultural biography, and I should explain what that term means. I have tried to situate Pearl Buck’s career in the many contexts that are needed to understand her development and her significance. This has involved a continuous act of negotiation between her life and the social and political circumstances that surrounded her. Consequently, along with Buck’s biography and writing, readers will find in these pages a good deal of information about both Chinese and American history and literature.

Since she lived for so many years in China, and spoke and read Chinese, Buck had a unique vantage point as a witness to the making of the modern Chinese nation. She was caught up in the Boxer Uprising of 1900, the 1911 Revolution, and the civil wars of the 1920s and 1930s. She knew personally some of the men and women who participated in the “science and democracy” movement and the May Fourth movement. She took part in the debates over Confucianism, and was a sympathetic observer of the Chinese struggle to emancipate women. All of these subjects are described in the following pages.

Similarly, Buck’s American years, from the mid-1930s to her death in 1973, can only be illuminated by reference to a further list of cultural subjects: the history of American attitudes toward China; the controversy over imperialism and the debate over immigration; the problematic status of popular culture; the American civil rights and women’s rights movements; the witch-hunts of the McCarthy period.

Finally, a large cast of characters appears in this book. At one time or another in the course of her eighty years, Buck’s friends and adversaries included Sinclair Lewis, Margaret Mead, James T. Farrell, Chiang Kai-shek and Mme. Chiang, Theodore Dreiser, Margaret Sanger, Edgar Snow and Helen Foster Snow, Lin...
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James Michener, who served on the original Welcome House board of directors, recently recalled his long association with Pearl Buck: “She was a spokesman on all sorts of issues: freedom of the press, freedom of religion, the adoptability of disadvantaged children, the future of China, especially the battle for women’s rights, for education. If you followed in her trail, as I did, you were put in touch with almost every major movement in the United States – intellectual, social, and political.”

In writing this biography, I, too, have been following in Pearl Buck’s trail. I have spent several days roaming through the Virginia and West Virginia countryside where her parents grew up and where she was born. I have talked with dozens of people who knew her, among them her younger sister, the late Grace Yaukey, several of her children, some of her neighbors in Nanking (Nanjing) in the 1920s and 1930s, a number of missionaries who worked in the China field, and a variety of Chinese and American scholars.

In the summer of 1993, my wife and I traveled to China as the guests of Nanjing University, where Buck taught in the 1920s. Terry and I visited Buck’s childhood home in Chinkiang (Zhenjiang), and we made a trip into Anhwei province, to the town of Nanhsuchou, the setting of The Good Earth.

In Nanhsuchou, Terry and I spent an afternoon with a dozen aging Chinese Presbyterians, men and women in their seventies and eighties, all of whom were quite familiar with the name Pearl Buck. In the exchange of gifts that followed tea, one elderly woman gave us a clipping from the local newspaper. It was a story about Pearl Buck that had appeared in June, 1992, on the hundredth anniversary of Buck’s birth.

On several occasions during our visit, Terry and I were told that Chinese scholars and students are exhibiting a renewed interest in Pearl Buck. When we came back from Anhwei province to Nanking, for example, we spent several evenings with Liu Haiping, the distinguished dean of the School of Foreign Studies at the University of Nanjing. During one dinner, Liu argued provocatively that Buck is the only American writer whose work is, in part at least, a product of Chinese culture. As such, she provides an almost unique case study in the complexity of cultural identity.

Beyond that, many young Chinese regard Buck’s novels as a valuable historical record – a “treasure trove,” in Liu Haiping’s phrase – of China’s rural life in the early twentieth century. I have recently received a letter from a group of scholars in Chengdu, in Szechuen (Sichuan) province, which confirms Liu’s opinion. These men and women, a group called De Heng Fan, are translating Buck’s
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novels into Chinese. “Through [these books],” they write, “we understand the Chinese farmers’ hardship, struggle and happiness before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.”

In the past couple of years, there have also been a few signs of renewed interest in Pearl Buck in the United States and Europe. In the spring of 1992, Buck’s hundredth birthday was marked by a major symposium at Randolph-Macon Woman’s College, and the papers from that event have recently been published. In 1993, public television broadcast a widely applauded biography of Buck, called “East Wind, West Wind.” More recently, Buck was the subject of a documentary on Belgian national radio. Perhaps, somewhat belatedly, this remarkable woman is being restored to a measure of greater visibility on both sides of the world. This biography is another step in that restoration.

As I have tried to suggest in these prefatory pages, Pearl Buck has several claims on our interest. She lived a richly eventful life on two continents, through years that spanned the remaking of culture and society in both Asia and America. Her career traced a path from late imperial China to the Nobel Prize to America’s mid-century struggles for civil rights. Sometimes by choice and sometimes involuntarily, she took part in a number of military and ideological revolutions.

Her life and writing helped to redefine the idea of a woman’s place in modern society. She was a major public figure, independent and often pugnacious, who was also the mother of eight children, all but one adopted and including several of mixed race. Beginning in poverty, she earned millions of dollars and spent lavishly on herself, her family, her friends, and her causes. She lobbied successfully to change American attitudes and policies in the areas of immigration, adoption, minority rights, and mental health.

While I happen to agree with many of the cultural and political positions Pearl Buck defended, this book is an essay in historiography, not advocacy. Consequently, I have made a scrupulous effort to tell Buck’s story within the thickly detailed context of her own settings and circumstances, not to measure her value by the ideological calipers of a later historical moment. I have tried, in other words, to re-create her own world as she experienced and judged it.

Pearl Buck meets the only three criteria I can think of applying to a biographical subject: her life was uncommonly eventful and interesting; she was a woman of conspicuous significance; and her story provides access to a whole catalogue of social and cultural issues. Any one of these would be reason enough to reconstruct Buck’s life and work. Taken together, they make her story compelling.

I have not written a saint’s life. Pearl Buck, as I have gotten to know her, was a troubled, conflicted, often limited woman, capable of cruelty as well as kindness. At the same time, this book is not a “pathography,” to use Joyce Carol Oates’s term for the current fashion of biographical debunking. Whatever my reservations about her commitments or her accomplishments, I have grown to
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admire Pearl Buck, and I have learned a great deal from her. Her engagement in the major issues of her time is a rare and instructive example of a writer accepting her responsibilities to the larger society and dedicating her energy and influence to serve a vision of the common good.

A note on Chinese proper names

For nearly a century, the most widely used system for romanizing Chinese characters was Wade-Giles. An early form of this system was devised by Sir Thomas Wade in 1859; a modified version served as the basis for H. A. Giles’s Chinese–English dictionary of 1912. Wade–Giles and all other systems use Northern (Mandarin) Chinese as the standard language. In 1958, the Chinese government approved the romanization system known as pinyin zimu (phonetic alphabet). Pinyin is now accepted as the official method for romanizing Chinese names. Because Wade–Giles was the standard system throughout Pearl Buck’s years in China, I have used it fairly consistently throughout this book. For the reader’s information, the first time a Chinese name is used, the pinyin version is given in parentheses following the Wade–Giles version.

A note on proper names in English

Readers will note that Pearl Buck is called “Pearl” throughout this biography. This sometimes creates a tone of dubious familiarity, but no form of address would be fully satisfactory. Pearl Buck did not become “Pearl Buck” until she was in her mid-twenties; she disliked the name “Buck”; and in any case “Buck” would bump up repeatedly against the book’s other major “Buck,” her first husband, Losing Buck. My practice has been to call all of Pearl’s immediate family and her closest friends — male and female — by their first names, and all others — male and female — by their surnames.
Acknowledgments

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