

УДК 821.111(73)9 «19»

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PEARL S. BUCK'S COMPARATIVE POETICS: THE CHINESE NOVEL VERSUS THE WESTERN CANON

Розглянуто одна з перших спроб у галузі трансквілізаційної компаративної поетики жанру роману, яка належить американській письменниці Перл С. Бак. Вона не тільки теоретично в дослідженні «The Chinese Novel», але й поетикально в своїх китайських романах обґрунтувала особливості китайського жанру по відношенню до західних класичних взірців.

Рассматривается один из первых опытов в области трансквилизационной компаративной поэтики жанра романа, который принадлежит американской писательнице Перл С. Бак. Она не только теоретически в исследовании «Китайский роман», но и поэтологически в своих китайских романах продемонстрировала особенности китайского жанра по сравнению с западными классическими образцами.

The paper presents one of the earliest approaches to the study of the novel genre from the point of view of transcivilisational comparative poetics. The American writer Pearl S. Buck theoretically in the study “The Chinese Novel”, as well as artistically in her Chinese novels demonstrates the specificity of the Chinese genre with reference to the Western canon.

The name of the first-ever female American recipient of the Nobel Prize in literature, Pearl Sydenstricker Buck (1892–1973), who is often viewed to be “the most Chinese American writer” [9, p. 43], is familiar to most with serious interest in literature East and West. In my previous paper I have analyzed her place in the history of American letters [1] and her belonging both to China and the United States. The aim of this paper is to analyze her theoretical approach to the genre of the Chinese novel viewed in comparison to the Western classics, as well as to clarify the literary values of her Chinese writings.

I would like to stress that by Pearl Buck’s ‘Chinese novel’ I mean *not* the novel thematically centered on exotic China and written from a Western-centered perspective, I mean the one that is, so to speak, “sinocentric” both in form and matter. In form it is what Andrew H. Plaks rightly terms “anglophone xiaoshuo” [11, p. 200]. In her Nobel Prize lecture “The Chinese Novel” Pearl Buck, demonstrates the surprising critical insightfulness of a trained comparative literature scholar when she explains her vision of the difference between Western notion of what fiction is and the Chinese *xiaoshuo*. She was transforming the Chinese *xiaoshuo* to her own artistic purposes. Being a trained philologist with degrees in literature she discovered in Chinese classical writings other artistic accomplishments – an enormous vitality of life-literature. She views *xiaoshuo* as life-generating narrative, not a contrived art. Pearl Buck applies the term “novel” to Chinese literature only with an adjective “indigenous” [2, p. 361], underlining its inborn artistic quality, free from contrived Western aestheticism. She declares: “My earliest knowledge of story, of how to tell and write stories, came to me in China... The Chinese novel was free. It grew, as it liked out of its own soil... A good novelist...should be above all else *tse ran*, that is, natural, unaffected, ...as to be wholly at the command of the material that flows through him [2, p. 361–369]. Pearl Buck’s novels give us not only a valuable historical record (Conn xix), but also represent “a product of Chinese

culture” [7, p. 57]. However, the textual analysis of this aspect of her Chinese novels still attracts little critical attention.

There is a tendency in literary criticism to analyze her Chinese novels either as the documents (or pseudo-documents) on pre-modern Chinese history or as progressive feminist literature, gendering American Orientalism (Karen Leong, Hilary Spurling, Peter Conn, Theodore Harris among others).

In Russian and Ukrainian literary studies the writings of Pearl Buck do not receive the response they deserve, though the translation of her novel “The Good Earth,” which made her famous, appeared in Russian shortly after its publication (Gosliizdat, 1935).

Instead of pigeonholing her writings within the field of ethnographic and feminist discourse, my task is to unveil by what artistic resources and by resorting to what literary tradition in China and in the West Pearl Buck created the persuading image of a previously much exoticized and alienated country and its people, challenging prevailing Western canon. The majority of books on Pearl Buck centers on her social activist endeavors, charity work, on her promoting cultural understanding between peoples (Deshpande, Conn, Leong) whereas her artistic discoveries remain either unnoticed or undervalued.

In her celebrated trilogy “The Good Earth” (1931), “Sons” (1932), “A House Divided” (1935), and the novels “China Sky” (1941) and “Dragon Seed” (1942), Pearl Buck introduced to America a new and moving image of China and its people in the period when the knowledge of *real* China was extremely limited. Pearl Buck’s sensitivity and understanding of Chinese culture is distinctly opposite to what Edward Said includes in his concept of cognitive imperialism and scientific appropriation of the Orient [12, p. 170]. The scholar repeatedly stated that Western writers have never adequately represented Asian people and cultures. The case with Pearl Buck’s literary endeavors gives grounds to think otherwise. The main hero of the novel, Wang Lung, is represented as defenseless in the face of social and natural cataclysms. However, it is his moral purity in his attitude to his land, his family, his fellow countrymen, and his moral strength that become a strong argument of the author in surmounting the stereotypes that existed in America. Pearl Buck shows that such people as Wang and his wife O-lan represent the essence of real, not “fake” China.

Her heroes’ spiritual tie with their Earth that is depicted indirectly through overcoming death and despair becomes epiphanic in the moments of great and sudden revelation of their connection with China. In hard times, when Wang is forced to be cut off from his land, he goes through a spiritual crisis: “... there arose within him a mighty longing for his fields” [3, p. 48]. This devotion to his land is a leitmotiv of the book. The climax of the drama is revealed in the episode when he and his wife discuss the necessity to sell their beloved girl. O’lan says: “...if it were only I... , she would be killed... [but] I would sell this girl for you to take you back to the land” [3, p. 48]. But Wang does not agree to sell, choosing starvation and death, and truly comes back to life only when he is united with his earth. Love, sacrifice, moral strength and sharp pain permeate the description of their struggle to survive. This connection between humanity and earth is the dominant aesthetic aptitude of the novel. The narrative renders this desperate struggle not through direct author’s speech, but indirectly, by tiny shades of psychological reactions, by “occasional” words of the hero as in the situation with his son who “stared until his eyes hung out of his head” [3, p. 111]. The structure of the Chinese phraseological collocation (“stared till the pupils of his eyes hung out”) should not be overlooked. This is not a quasi-translation, but the translation *per se*, for Pearl Buck translated herself directly from Chinese into English and always stressed that her first language is Chinese and she is mentally bifocal [4 p. 52]. That is why her English texts look aesthetically and linguistically “foreign” and Chinese in linguistic structure and semantics: “other-

my-son”, “electric shades”, “firewagon” instead of “train” [3, p. 38] etc. All these add to the aesthetic dimension of her novel in creating an unmistakable feeling of reality.

The studies of the art of her novels are quite scanty, though the biographies and cultural biographies among them are not (Spurling, Leong, Harris), as well as the translations of her books in Chinese and other languages. What these works have not explored is the artistic peculiarity of her best novels, which are really difficult to measure by traditional critical matrices. There are no specific meta-narrative techniques, no intertextual inclusions, allusions, subject disappearance, epistemological uncertainty. In fact, no nourishing soil for modern critical exploration. However these, the so called, “minus devices” [10, p. 51]), give her art aesthetic supremacy of human matters, thus catching the flow of everyday life of a common man, of Everyman. This strangeness of simplified beauty is the quality that assimilates the reader with the book, even a contemporary sophisticated reader. It has nothing to do with primitive plainmindedness or childish simplicity (besides, the image of simplicity is even much more difficult to reproduce than rhetorical exuberance). That is why Pearl Buck does not need a patronizing condescension in the evaluation of her writings exclusively as an important humanitarian event in American literary history. They have distinct artistic values, manifesting a new tendency in art connected with a recuperation of an appeal to real life which has so far been left unnoticed by her critics. Pearl Buck gives artistically a very detailed and realistic description of everydayness of peasant’s life and these descriptions are permeated with spiritual light, revealing the highest humanity in ordinary things, – a new meaning and a new moral value is thus disclosed. The heroics of everydayness is revealed un-heroically in matter-of-fact descriptions, devoid of any sentimentality and pathos that lends dignity to the events described.

Her novels demonstrate that the heart of Chinese culture lies inside it not outside (not in “*Chinoiserie*”). In her Chinese novels there is no need of exoticized “China”, because “in china china is not china it is an earthen ware. In China there is no need of China because china is china”, as Gertrude Stein quibblingly observed [14, p. 64]. In Buck’s writings the dichotomy of West – East disappears, the subject – an American writer who was brought up and educated by Confucian scholars in China – and the object – China itself – are inseparable.

She wrote not only with a good intention to inform, educate, shape and change the mind of common people, but also to infuse new attitudes to judging and writing literature, having the same urge “to make it new” as Ezra Pound with his famous and ground-breaking “*Cathay*”. Like Japanese haiku or classical Chinese *Shī Jīng* that were aesthetically appropriated by Ezra Pound, Pearl Buck’s Chinese novel was even more unexpected for the Western world. She created not an ideological construct, but the moving image of China as good earth that feeds and saves, physically and spiritually.

Literary criticism on Buck’s writings that deals exclusively with the problem whether the writer created a true- to- life portrait of China unfortunately multiplies the academic myth: the merit of this Nobel Prize winner lies in the presentation of Chinese peasants in pre-modern China. Buck is still treated only as an eminent and progressive personality but not as an American writer. She is not thought of as an American by many American critics. Pearl Buck confessed: “It is true that the American critics ignore me. They do not know what to do with me. I don’t mind” [8, p. 249].

Though she was not Chinese by birth, she nevertheless felt herself more Chinese than American and continued to speak as an artist for the Chinese, espousing universal transcultural humanhood. That is why the problem of verisimilitude, or whether she domesticated the foreignness of her desires about China, are hardly relevant to characterize the works of the writer who felt herself belonging to China to the end of her life.

She has a perfect command for feeling rural existence, for sounds of Chinese daily life. Having been brought up and lived most of her life until 1934 in China, Pearl Buck has more extensive personal knowledge of Chinese life and its problems than any Western writer before or since. For her “orient” was not a “free floating” [12, p. 119] signifier as for many whom Said includes in the list of intellectual and aesthetic colonizers of the East.

In her lecture Pearl Buck accentuated her vision of the writer’s task to register life in depth as it goes before her. She places her hero Wang Lung in situations that are universally human, which allows her to represent him not only as a person of a certain nationality, but as simply a man – Everyman, transnational in fact. Pearl Buck created the gallery of noble Chinese peasants that euro-atlantic literature never had. Most obviously, she was ahead of her time in many ways but first and foremost as a progressive and talented writer with an anti-orientalist, anti-colonial agenda.

In decentering the idea of the Western novel’s supremacy in the history of literature she attacks cultural nationalism, which according to Edward Said is the cornerstone of cultural discrimination.

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Надійшла до редколегії 17.10.2013