

MY MEMORIES OF PEARL BUCK

by

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I first met Pearl S. Buck on February 5, 1962, a few days after my seventeenth birthday. The occasion was a Chinese New Year's banquet in Philadelphia in America, and Pearl Buck was the guest of honour. During the meal I did not talk to her because she was sitting at the table for distinguished guests and I was not. I was also very busy trying to learn for the first time how to eat with chopsticks. I had never used them before but I decided I would not eat any food which did not enter my mouth by means of chopsticks. My intention was to force myself to learn quickly, because I was motivated by hunger. In English we would call this a 'sink or swim' method, because sometimes people are taught how to swim by being thrown into the water, the alternative to swimming being that they drown.

There were 24 courses in the banquet and I became increasingly desperate because fourteen courses came and went and I still had not had one bite to eat. One problem was that there was no one at my table to teach me. But at last by the fifteenth course I managed to get some food into my mouth and after that I ate like a pig. After I had filled my belly, I began to take an interest in Pearl Buck. I gazed at her in admiration because she was such an elegant and beautiful woman, even though she was 69 years old by that time. She had soft, dreamy eyes, soft pale skin, and the most genteel voice. She always looked as if she were thinking of some faraway land, and later when I got to know her I realised that that was true, - she was always thinking of China, every day of her life.

At the end of the banquet, the guests did not leave immediately like they do in China. It is the habit of Westerners to linger after an evening meal and talk. But on this occasion the Mayor of Philadelphia's Chinatown rose to his feet and introduced Pearl Buck. Then she stood and gave a speech, which

was so emotional and passionate, but spoken in such a quiet and dreamy voice, that I was completely amazed. I later wrote an account of her speech in a local newspaper. It was published on February 15, 1962, and I still have it, so that I can quote from it and tell you exactly what Pearl Buck said that evening:

‘We must open the doors which we have shut on China. We cannot afford, for our own sakes, to ignore or exclude anyone or any country. And this applies, in my opinion, to Cuba. If you dislike a neighbour, you do not ignore him or not speak to him. No one with any breeding or with any maturity will do a thing like that. Because if you do this, you have not only lost the chance of possibly renewing a friendship with this person, but you have created an enemy.

‘You merely make enemies by not speaking to people or by ignoring them. And the same thing holds true for China today. We cannot ignore the Chinese. They are too important a people. We must deal with them straightforwardly.

‘I myself am convinced that a reconciliation will come about between now-Communist China and the West. I do not know exactly how this will come about, but I have faith that it will.

‘I know the Chinese people. They are a proud people and they are a superior people. I lived in China for many years, And part of the time that I was there, I taught there. [That was in Nanjing.] I remember the students whom I taught, how brilliant many of them were, and I remember their seemingly unquenchable thirst for knowledge.

‘I have often debated as to why the Chinese people have such a high percentage of brilliant - absolutely brilliant - people. Well, this is the Chinese year 4660. And for all this time the Chinese people have been undergoing a constant selectivity. The weak die and the strong survive. The strongest of the Chinese people now inhabit Chinese soil. I am convinced that this is one of the reasons the Chinese people are a great people. It has been greatly a matter of gradual selectivity.

‘The Chinese people are a superior people and I knew that when the people of China decided to adapt themselves to modern life as the rest of the world now knows it, that they would do so with lightning speed. And they are doing this now. Whether they do this now under a Communist government is not as important as it may seem. The important thing is that we in this country begin immediately to try to open the doors that we have shut on China, and to establish friendly relations with that country while we still can.

‘Because I am confident as far as the apparent menace of Communist control is concerned, that China will eventually - not immediately,

but after long and tedious struggle, - shape a government for itself that really fits its needs, as our own government fits our needs. And China will someday soon take its place in the world as one of the greatest and proudest of all the nations in the world.'

I was deeply impressed by this passionate vision of Pearl Buck, and I agreed with her. She was right in foreseeing that a long struggle still lay ahead for China, since she was speaking four years before the events of 1966. It would be fourteen years before her vision of a reformed China would begin to be realised, with Deng Xiaoping's rise to power and the important agricultural reforms which he instituted. Today, China is 'shaping a government that really fits its needs', just as Pearl Buck predicted in 1962.

No other record of this talk by Pearl Buck exists, so I am pleased to be able to present it to the Conference, so the participants can learn for themselves exactly what Pearl Buck thought in February, 1962, about their country and the political situation at that time. Pearl Buck was never a supporter of the Kuomintang Government, and she severely criticised the Kuomintang throughout her life, for nearly ruining China by incompetence and corruption. She always hated the Kuomintang.

At the end of the evening, I met Pearl Buck and two of her daughters who were with her. She was very charming and urged me to keep in contact with her, for she liked young people, and she said she was glad to see a young Westerner taking an interest in China. I sent her my article and she was so impressed that I remembered her words so accurately and had written such a full account of her speech entirely from memory (I had taken no notes and in those days small tape recorders did not exist) that her opinion of me was higher. It was because of that that she began to favour me with her friendship.

I was in contact with her until the end of 1966, when I left America where I had been born and moved to England, where I have lived since that time. But between 1962 and 1966 I had a number of adventures concerning Pearl Buck. She lived in a large house in the countryside and on one occasion I drove out to see her and found her sitting on a sofa staring at the floor, unable to speak. At that time it was the autumn of 1963 and I was 18 years old. Suddenly I found myself alone with one of the most famous women in America who was in a state of such deep psychological depression that she could not even raise her eyes to look at me. Later I discovered that it was because of a terrible disagreement with one of her daughters about a personal matter.

At first I sat opposite her on another small sofa, and was completely silent, hoping that she would soon recover and begin to speak to me. But about fifteen minutes passed and she was still staring at the floor and although I cleared my throat a few times, she showed no sign of acknowledging my presence, nor did her eyes move from their fixed stare. There was no one

else anywhere nearby, and we were completely alone. I realised that nobody could help me and I would have to deal with this situation alone. It would be rude to get up and leave, so I had no choice but to stay. But what should I do? I decided to try and bring her out of her depression by indirect and gentle means.

So I began to talk quietly out loud as if talking to myself, on the theme: Which was the greater poet, Du Fu (Tu Fu) or Li Bai (Li Po)? I said that many people thought that Du Fu was greater because he told the sad story of his life in his poems, with great dignity and compassion. But other people thought that Li Bai was greater, because his poems were more joyful and he was always drinking rice wine and enjoying life, and his poems have a greater lyrical force individually, whereas Du Fu's poems have a greater cumulative effect when read together. I talked like this for some time, and announced that I was inclined to think that Du Fu was the greater poet. Then I quietly said to Pearl Buck: 'I wonder whether you agree with me on that choice?'

She could not resist this subject, and she softly answered: 'No, I think that Li Bai was greater. I like his poems better than Du Fu's because they are so wonderfully lyrical and expressive of the beauty of the moment.' And then she looked up and met my eyes, and came out of her depression suddenly and completely, and was entirely normal. Then we had a long talk about other matters as if nothing had been wrong at all. But after this incident, our friendship was closer, and had ceased to be a mere acquaintance. We had truly communicated in a moment of crisis and that is what creates true friendships.

In 1963 I also met Ida Pruitt, who was the closest Western friend of Chou Enlai and his wife Deng Yingchao. In the 1930s, Ida Pruitt had saved Deng Yingchao's life when the Japanese almost captured her. She disguised her as her housegirl and pretended she was her servant as they travelled through a Japanese-occupied zone on their way to a hospital in Beijing (since Deng was seriously ill and had to be taken to hospital or she would die) to avoid capture and execution by the enemy. Because of that, Chou afterwards showed great favour to Ida Pruitt, to whom his wife owed her life. And she always told me that Deng Yingchao was her best friend in the whole world. Ida Pruitt met me because she came to the lectures on Chinese literature which I attended at my university. She was a charming and fascinating, and somewhat mysterious, small old woman with white hair. I believe she was in her 70s at that time. I was very flattered and delighted when she began to show interest in me and invited me to her house for dinner alone with her. I went many times, because she was within walking distance of my university. My favourite dish which she used to cook for me was chicken wings in Beijing style. She would show me her books about the Shang Dynasty, in which I was greatly interested, and most wonderful of all, she would let me inspect and feel her gigantic collection of Chinese jade miniatures, of which she had several thousand. Most of them had been given to her by Chou Enlai, who knew that old jade was her greatest love

of all. She taught me how to tell the age of jade, and how to appreciate unusual colours like violet and brown and not only to like the green ones. She would put a tray of twenty old jades in front of me and ask me to choose the oldest and most interesting. I always chose objects from the Tang period, and she was delighted at my instinct and the fact that I loved the brown jades as she also did.

Ida Pruitt was very involved with the politics of modern China, and assisted the Chinese Government abroad in ways which were very important, although not publicised of course. She wanted me to get involved with such matters, and was frustrated that I was not political at all. To her politics was extremely important. To me it was very boring. She was very gentle and patient with me, but at last she realised it was useless to try and persuade me to take an interest in those kind of things.

However, I was very enthusiastic about Lao She, and she was one of his translators. And I was equally enthusiastic about her other books about China. She told me that she had several unpublished manuscripts about the Chinese people which no American publisher would publish because she was too sympathetic to the Chinese Government. I said that politics should not interfere with such matters, and that the American people needed to know more about the Chinese people, especially the Chinese peasants. Pearl Buck had persuaded me to care about the Chinese peasants, as she loved them so much. I had lived amongst country people as a child and I appreciated such things. So I began to try and help Ida Pruitt get her works published in America by contacting a publisher who was the friend of a fellow-student at the university, and in other ways.

And in connection with this I said that Pearl Buck would probably help. There was an awkward silence. Then Ida Pruitt tried to explain to me that she and Pearl Buck were not in political agreement and had not met for many years. I protested that Pearl Buck was one of the most delightful people I had ever met, and Ida Pruitt completely agreed with me. She said she was certainly charming and delightful and she wished they could cooperate because they both loved China so much. But she didn't think that Pearl Buck would want to see her. So I volunteered to approach Pearl Buck and try to arrange a reunion.

Thus I became the bridge between these two women, who passed messages to each other through me for some time. They both assured each other, through me, of their mutual admiration and personal regard for one another, and slowly the ice began to melt. But later I realised that Pearl Buck was afraid to enter into direct contact with Ida Pruitt because Ida Pruitt's phone was tapped by security officials, and she did not want the American Government to think that she had suddenly become a Communist, and start persecuting her. Ida Pruitt was, of course, a Communist. But Pearl Buck wished to remain separate from the cause of the Chinese Government as it existed at that time, for her remarks urging direct contact with China and Cuba were

already considered very politically provocative and dangerous in America in 1962, and she had enough trouble without inviting more by meeting with Ida Pruitt. And for Pearl Buck to advocate direct American relations with Cuba shortly before the Cuban Missile Crisis was sufficiently daring! In other words, Pearl Buck was in enough political trouble already and did not need more trouble.

I don't believe that Pearl Buck and Ida Pruitt ever did actually meet each other, but eventually they began to exchange letters and my relaying of verbal messages became less necessary. I believe that at least one of Ida Pruitt's manuscripts was published partly as a result of my efforts, but I am not certain. I know that Pearl Buck read at least one of them at my suggestion.

Pearl Buck wanted to involve me with a film production company which she owned at that time, and there are several stories I could tell about that. But it is not of sufficient interest for this conference to hear about such things. I want, however, to emphasize that Pearl Buck suffered from terrible sadness for the second half of her life because she could not return to China for political reasons. She was also sad when I knew her because her second husband, Richard Walsh, whom she loved very deeply, had died, and she was emotionally desolate and alone. But the deepest sadness was because she missed China. Chinese was her first language, and she lived there from the time she was a baby. Outside she was white and Western, but inside she was a Chinese. To be deprived of China was for her a terrible daily torture.

Pearl Buck carried a rare virus, which few Westerners get. But I got it from her. It is called 'the love of China virus'. I got it when I was young, and it is incurable.