

SLOVENE CRITICAL RESPONSES TO THE WORKS OF PEARL S. BUCK

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Abstract

At the beginning of her writing career, in the 1930's and 40's, Pearl S. Buck achieved great success that reached its pinnacle with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. Her works were admired among readers around the world, including Slovene readers. It seems that the Slovenes did not lag behind the world's literary trends of the time. The first translation of *The Good Earth*, probably the writer's most prominent novel, in 1934 – only three years after the original was written. The subject matter that the writer introduced in her works, China in interaction with the West, attracted many readers and soon resulted in a number of works being translated into Slovene. Consequently the amount of critical material in Slovene newspapers and magazines also began to rise. This article provides an overview of and assesses the Slovene critical material on Pearl S. Buck, while evaluating the literary quality of that material.

The Nobel Prize winning author Pearl Sydenstricker Buck is best known for her Chinese peasant novel *The Good Earth*. She was, however, an author of several places and 'several worlds'. Indeed, the title of her autobiography is *My Several Worlds*. Buck saw herself as a citizen of the world, but one influenced most strongly by two countries, China and America. In Xiongya Gao's assessment, "[s]he knew both countries, loved both, but belonged to neither. Although two worlds met, interacted and mixed in her, she frequently found herself in between rather than having both" (27). Being 'in between' is a typical position of an expatriate, which Peter Conn, the author's biographer, for this case extends into "involuntary expatriate" (163). By emphasising the involuntariness Conn is referring to the year 1892 and the fact that Pearl S. Buck was born into an American missionary family and was taken by her parents in a shopping basket to China when only three months old. Buck believed that this shopping basket marked her whole life. Since the day she was brought to China she lived a life of detachment and division, and her two worlds, China and America, were never unified into one. As an expatriate she had access to both worlds yet she felt at times separated from them, not belonging to either of them. It was precisely the sort of existence for which Homi Bhabha produced the neologism "unhomely", meaning "the relocation of the home" (141). This position of 'relocation', displacement, and 'unhomeliness' provided for her a unique experience of life, making Buck well-situated to become "a western interpreter of the East" (Yü 31). This has been particularly

acknowledged by Chinese Americans, and it was Maxine Hong Kingston, a colleague in letters, who in 1992 praised the writing of Pearl S. Buck "for making Asian voices heard, for the first time, in Western literature" (Lipscomb et al. 2).

Today, thirty years after her death, Pearl S. Buck survives as an author who dedicated her life to writing about China. American by origin and by university degree, she spent her formative years in China, though unsettled political circumstances forced her to leave in 1934. By that time she had already written her most celebrated work *The Good Earth*, which belonged to the oeuvre that won her the Nobel Prize for literature in 1938. Though the Prize was hers, universal acceptance was not, for many American writers of the time argued and protested against Pearl S. Buck's receiving the prize. Still, this was not the only literary prize the author won. Pearl S. Buck was not just a prolific writer, having produced over ninety works of literature, but also a prolific prize winner. In addition to the Nobel Prize and many other more minor distinctions she also won the Pulitzer Prize and the Dean Howells Medal. Her books were very often best sellers in America and they were consequently translated into many other languages. According to Paul Doyle she was in the 1960s the most translated American author (7). Among other foreign languages many works have been translated into Slovene. Consequently many Slovene critics responded to the translated works. Until now no one has looked into this material on the writer as a whole. My present interest lies therefore in the evaluation of the Slovene criticism and the reception of Pearl S. Buck's works in Slovenia.

The Slovenes seemed to be following popular Western literary tastes in the first half of the twentieth century. Almost with no delay the first translation of Pearl S. Buck's most famous work appeared. Already in 1934, three years after the original English version had been published, Stanko Leben translated *The Good Earth* into *Dobra zemlja*. He accomplished his task with a lot of thought and with great responsibility to the original. While translating Leben focused on what he deems the translator's basic responsibilities such as careful and appropriate choice of words, richness of vocabulary and inventiveness in word formation (Leben 241). However, he adds that he does not forget about the most important characteristic, meticulously following the writer's rhythm. In order to do so one has to translate from the original which enables the translator to dive into the depths of the writer's own process of creation and is thus the first necessary step towards producing a good translation. In the magazine *Modra ptica*, where Leben's thoughts on translating appear, he points out another particularity specific to this translation. Leben emphasises that *The Good Earth* was the first book written by a woman and translated by him. In those times the Slovene literary scene was dominated and led by male writers. It was believed, as Leben describes, that women were not capable of creative imagination, flexible intellect and viewing matters with a critical eye (ibid.). Despite this seemingly limited patriarchal viewpoint, Leben does not hesitate to acknowledge the quality of Buck's *The Good Earth* and to praise the author's ability to create and effectively render her heroes.

The few Slovene female critics of the time equally endorsed Pearl S. Buck's writing. Among the first women to focus on and respond to Pearl S. Buck as a female writer was Silva Trdina. In her article in the magazine *Mentor* she not only applauded one of the world's greatest writers, but also a female writer who gained respect and

acknowledgement among her male colleagues (Trdina 198). In the same year, 1939, Zlata Pirnat declared that Buck had surpassed the rest of the American writers and is qualitatively the first among them (11). Both comments stress that the author is a woman who can compete with her male colleagues. In Slovenia Pearl S. Buck became a role model to many women because she was thought to be the best at presenting the female life and soul (Grahor 279). This foregrounding among critics of the fact that Buck was a woman surely affected her Slovene readership. In fact, that the writer was read particularly by female readers in Slovenia was so evident it found mention in the daily *Večer* in 1975 (Šrimpf 5). What appealed to women in the writer's books were the stories which often presented a fight for women's rights. Such an example is the book *East Wind: West Wind* where Kwei-lan the main heroine develops from a shy woman into her husband's friend and equal. Primarily due to examples like this, in the Slovene critical arena Buck was thought to be a feminist writer. Yet despite the fact that Slovene critics persistently focused on Pearl S. Buck's being a woman, and despite the fact that her writings had quite an influence on Slovene female readers, none of Buck's feminist treatises have ever been translated into Slovene. With this I am referring specifically to a collection of essays *Of Men and Women* which the *New York Times* compared with the works of Virginia Woolf (Conn xvii). In Slovenia this collection was mentioned for the first time by Janko Moder in his preface to the novel *Dobra zemlja* in 1980, which is almost forty years after the essay collection appeared in the original. Judging by the numerous translations of the author's works into Slovene one can surmise that translators preferred Buck's fiction to her non-fiction.

From the given examples one can conclude that the Slovene critics spoke favourably of Pearl S. Buck and her fiction. In contrast the critics in the writer's home country were not always so positive when evaluating her works. What is more, there was less consistency even among individual American critics, as their opinions sometimes changed over the years. This we can see with J. Donald Adams, who spoke well of the writer in the 1930s and 1940s and later on changed his mind. Kang Liao reflects on this incident by stating: "Even the comments of her once favorite reviewers were much less enthusiastic, as evidenced by J. Donald Adams's unfavorable remark on Pearl Buck in the *New York Times* article 'Speaking of Books' on 22 September 1963" (4). J. Donald Adams wrote in the *New York Times* in 1934, at the beginning of the writer's career: "*The Mother* is Mrs. Buck's best book up to this time, [...]" ("The True Epitome" 1). Thirty-nine years later the critic wrote: "*The Good Earth* was an excellent novel, but it seems likely to remain Miss Buck's best performance [...]" ("Speaking of" 2). Adams' first statement, about the novel *The Mother* being the writer's best book, was written three years after *The Good Earth* was published. With his first statement Adams praises *The Mother* above *The Good Earth*, and in his second statement he calls *The Good Earth* the only good book by Pearl S. Buck. This sort of criticism can not be found among the Slovene critics, probably due to the fact that none of the Slovene critics really followed fully the author's writing career. What we can find though with the Slovene critics is the striking similarity and uniformity of critical opinion. This can be illustrated with the following examples:

Zlasti stranske osebe in popisi krajev dihajo nekaj pravljičnega, brezčasnega in ta brezčasna pravljičnost le še močneje podčrtava glavne osebe

in njihove strasti, ki so občečloveške, žive enako v vseh ljudeh in pod *vsemi podnebji*. (my emphasis, *Leben* 247)

Neprisiljeno in povsem vsakdanje razkriva pisateljica posebnosti kitajskega življenja, [...], ki hrani v bistvu vendarle občečloveške prvine, ki veljajo za vse ljudi pod *vsemi podnebji*. (my emphasis, *Trdina* 199)

It is the similarity of phrasing – that her heroes are so universal that they could live ‘in all climates’ (‘pod vsemi podnebji’) – at the end of both comments on the book *The Good Earth* that is most evident. *Leben*’s comment appeared first, in 1934, whereas the second one appeared as a response to the Nobel Prize in 1939. One of the reasons for the similarity may lie in the fact that the Slovenes did not have much information on the writer and had to rely solely on their own colleagues. This is not necessarily a handicap as long as the reviewer reflects on the borrowed idea and expresses his/her own critical opinion. Speculating on this apparent copying of another critic’s words leads one to regard the Slovene critics as being dependent, shy and reserved instead of sovereign and decisive in their opinions. Therefore it is not surprising that in 1980 a critique on Slovene criticism on Pearl S. Buck was written. With a short statement which followed the preface of Janko Moder to the novel *Dobra zemlja* Jože Munda characterised the Slovene writing on Pearl S. Buck as relatively modest and without tendency to surpass popular presentations (“[Naše pisanje o Backovi je bilo] razmeroma skromno in skoraj prez težnje, da bi se dvignilo nad poljudno seznanjanje”); in other words, the critical writing was intended for the layman (376). In addition to this Jože Munda wrote a list of the works by Pearl S. Buck translated into Slovene as well as a list of the Slovene secondary literature on the author. When collecting the Slovene bibliography on the writer Munda realised that the Slovene critiques could be divided into three categories, namely into 1) articles written for occasions like winning the Nobel Prize, 2) reviews and 3) prefaces (*ibid.*). One would expect that Munda’s critical opinion would influence and motivate the critics in their manner of writing. Interestingly enough the situation in this field did not change after Munda’s findings. From 1980 to the present one can see the continuation of the past situation in that the critics continue to write for the general public.

It seems that the primary purpose of the Slovene critics was a commercial one. The objective of the critical material appears to lie in attracting and appealing to a general reading public. To support this, one has to take a look into the structure and layout of the reviews. The critics usually present the writer’s work, a few words are dedicated to the writer’s life and finally general information like translator, publisher and sometimes the price of the book are mentioned. In other words, it is less a critical evaluation than a description of, or simple report on, the work. One also has to consider the fact that none of the reviews of Pearl S. Buck’s works appeared in any of the literary magazines. Most of the reviews were written either for daily newspapers like *Jutro*, *Slovenec*, *Primorski dnevnik*, *Večer* and *Delo*, or general interest magazines like *Dom in svet*, *Mentor*, *Ženski svet*, *Prijatelj*, *Socialistična misel* and *Otrok in družina*. In keeping with their medium the critics were clearly addressing a general public. When writing about a book they did not go deeper into interpreting the book and aimed at readers from various walks of life and of diverse occupation. It is perhaps

due to this that the Slovene reviews contain some mistakes to which no one has paid any attention up till now. Some of the mistakes might result from the lack of material on Pearl S. Buck at the beginning of her career. From Stanko Leben we know that even the translators sometimes did not have the original to translate from and Slovene reviewers probably also relied on informational sources that were not original. No matter what the reasons for the inaccurate writing on Pearl S. Buck, the mistakes can be classified either as minor, which do not greatly disturb the correct comprehension of Pearl S. Buck's life and work, and major, which can lead to a distorted picture of the writer in the readers' minds.

To start with one should take a look at the minor mistakes:

- In the magazine *Mentor* Silva Trdina writes about Pearl S. Buck's life which also includes the writer's academic life. Trdina wrote though that in order to study the writer travelled to the USA on her own (198). Unfortunately this assertion of young independence is not correct. In actuality Buck's parents decided to travel with her through Russia and Europe to America. This journey was a "pre-college gift to Pearl" from her parents (Conn 44).

- After obtaining her degree Pearl S. Buck moved back to China owing to her mother's illness. She stayed in the country until 1934, when she permanently settled in the USA. Jakob Šilc was misinformed about the year of the writer's moving to America. In his review in 1936 he wrote that the writer was still residing in China (Šilc, "Mati" 442).

- There were also some misinterpretations concerning the year of the writer's first marriage. Silva Trdina wrote in 1939 that the writer got married in 1916 (198). In the same year Zlata Pirnat wrote that the event happened in 1917 (11). Here it is most evident that the critics used different sources, with Zlata Pirnat opting for the correct one.

- Silva Trdina was not only mistaken when writing about the writer's first marriage, she was also wrong by a year when reporting on Buck's second marriage, which happened in Reno, Nevada in 1935. Silva Trdina wrote the following: "Sedaj živi [pisateljica] v New Yorku, kjer se je leta 1934. drugič poročila z založnikom *Walschen* [...]" (my emphasis, 198). From the statement we can see that the critic wrote the husband's surname incorrectly, since the correct spelling is Walsh. That was not the only example of spelling mistakes. A misprint can be noticed in the review of the novel *The Rainbow* written by Gema Hafner where instead of 'Harvard' the name Harward appears. The German-like orthography in these two examples might suggest either the usage of German language sources, or merely an unsettled Slovene orthography.

These minor mistakes individually do not seem to be worth mentioning, but if we look at them as a whole we realise that the Slovene reviews contained many inaccuracies. This can also be backed up by Jože Munda who believed that the aim of the Slovene critics was a 'popular introduction' ("poljudno seznanjanje") to the works of Pearl S. Buck (376). All the mentioned mistakes together definitely contribute to a somewhat deformed portrayal of the writer on Slovene ground. A Slovene reader concerned with accuracy and more than a superficial view is therefore bound to foreign sources and foreign countries to acquire a more precise view on Pearl S. Buck. At

present the only foreign work of criticism about the writer in Slovenia is a book written by Paul Doyle with the title *Pearl S. Buck*.

In addition to reflecting on minor mistakes in the Slovene criticism one should also highlight and classify the major mistakes. Within this division we can talk about one particularly prominent mistake. It was believed, not only in Slovenia, that Pearl S. Buck received the Nobel Prize for her novel *The Good Earth*. In Slovene criticism we come across this conviction several times. Critics like Zlata Pirnat, Marija Švajncer and Janez Švajncer claimed in their reviews that Pearl S. Buck received the Nobel Prize for her novel *The Good Earth*. This misconception was brought to light in 1992 at the symposium dedicated to the writer which took place at Randolph-Macomb Woman's College, the college from which the writer graduated. Two years after the event a collection of essays presented at the symposium with the title *The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck* was published. In the introduction to the collection Peter Conn wrote: "She survives only in caricature: as the author of a single book, *The Good Earth* [...]" (Lipscomb et al. 1). To acknowledge the importance of other books her biographer wrote:

Despite a durable misconception, Pearl did not receive the Nobel Prize for *The Good Earth*. Like all laureates in literature, she was honored for the body of her work. The Academy's citation referred collectively to Pearl's Chinese novels as pioneering stories, but it specifically identified the biographies of her parents as the finest "literary work of art" she has written. (Conn 212)

It seems that the writer herself became aware of her problematic situation. In an interview with S. J. Woolf for the *New York Times* she emphasises: "But now that I won the prize – not for one book but for all my work – I feel that the responsibility [to continue writing well] rests upon me" (4). It is interesting that none of the Slovene critics mention the importance of the author's biographies *The Exile* and *Fighting Angel* for winning the Nobel Prize. Janko Moder even wrote that the biographies were generally not received with excitement, though people continued to praise *The Good Earth* (369). This statement appears to be only half true, since Pearl S. Buck wrote the second biography *Fighting Angel* after *The Exile* "earned such a stunning success that Pearl immediately wrote a sequel, a biography of her father called *Fighting Angel*" (Conn 187f). It looks like the Slovene readers were not allured by the biographies. The translation of the first one by Janez Meglič did not appear until 1971, whereas the second biography has yet to be translated into Slovene. It is difficult to speculate about the reasons for such a demeanour towards the biographies in Slovenia, especially since the critics themselves do not mention them. Many American critics on the other hand treated the biographies as "monuments to the story of Protestant evangelism in China, a vital but neglected chapter in American cultural history" (188). Whereas the biographies definitely show a key part of American and Chinese history, Slovene history unfolded in different ways, and one should therefore not be taken aback by the different attitude to this thematic. Such an attitude can be also noticed in the review of the translation of *The Exile*, which appeared in the daily *Večer* and was written by Marija Švajncer. The critic does not dedicate much reflection to missionaries and evangelisa-

tion, as a matter of fact the critic only mentions that the writer's mother was married to a missionary. The rest of the review focuses on the life of the writer's mother, who never yielded to the most severe circumstances in China and was always ready to offer her helping hand to the poor Chinese ("Pisateljica o svoji materi" 10).

It was primarily on the basis of the biographies, together with other works written by 1938, that Buck became the first female American writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature. By that time the Slovenes were acquainted with the novels *The Good Earth*, *The Mother* and with a short abstract from *East Wind: West Wind* that had been translated by Olga Grahor and published in the woman's magazine *Ženski svet*. Although many of the works for which Buck won the Nobel Prize were not known in Slovenia, Slovene critics responded to the occasion in a very positive way. Tine Debeljak reports favourably on the fact in the daily *Slovenec*, but nevertheless mentions that the prize was a sort of surprise, which came at the right time, for China was beginning to increasingly attract the world's attention (5). Tine Debeljak not only hints at possible negative responses to the prize, although he believes the writer deserved it, but also mentions one of the reasons why Pearl S. Buck won the prize, namely her thematic interest in China. Debeljak does not mention the two main reasons for winning the prize, the aesthetic value of the writer's work and the subject matter, rather he claims it was the current political interest in China and Buck's belief in a humanity that does not distinguish between races and nations which made her books attractive to readers and Nobel Prize jury alike. There was of course nothing wrong with this fact, because according to the will of Alfred Nobel the prize should go to those "who, during the preceding years, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind, [...] who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency" (Liao 26). The works of Pearl S. Buck were in keeping with the Nobel Prize's purposes, but many believed that awarding the prize to Pearl S. Buck was a political step on the part of the Swedish Academy because the writer presented a "powerful voice against the rising tide of international violence and totalitarianism" (Conn 211). Unfortunately the Slovene critics only reported on the award and never really examined the problematic position of Pearl S. Buck in the field of American literature. The criticism that the writer received from other American writers was a continuation of her dual position of being 'in between' China and America. Not Chinese, Buck found that though living in the USA since 1934 she could not entirely belong to America either, since her writing was often not accepted by her contemporaries. The writer herself "became aware that she was not considered an American at all" (Harris 256). William Faulkner for example commented on Buck's Nobel Prize with the following words:

I don't know anything about the Nobel matter. Been hearing rumors for about three years, have been a little fearful. It's not the sort of thing to decline; a gratuitous insult to do so but I don't want it. I had rather be in the same pigeon hole with Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson, than Sinclair Lewis and Mrs. Chinahand Buck. (Conn 210)

The writer herself was hurt by such responses and later in her life wrote: "I was oversensitive to this American criticism which did fall upon me too soon. And it must

be confessed that I have never quite recovered, though years have passed [...]” (Buck, *My Several* 87).

Pearl S. Buck might not have been liked by some of her American critics but the readers gave her the support she needed to keep on writing. What made her works interesting to the readers was the universalism and humanity, that is to say that her Chinese heroes were presented as human beings facing the same problems in their lives that any Westerner had to face. It is an interesting parallel that it was the same novel, *The Mother*, that made the critics in the USA and in Slovenia recognise these qualities of the writer. J. Donald Adams uses in connection with the novel the phrase “universal human values” (“A true Epitome” 1); Marija Cvetko, in the same vein, points out in *Tedenska tribuna* that Buck’s heroes could live anywhere else in any remote village, and only their names would vary (7). A similar view is noticed in the comments on the same novel by Silva Trdina, though in her critique one realises that China was still an exotic country in the eyes of the Slovenes at that time (Trdina 199). That was a particularly Western point of view, where everything that deviated from the norms set and adopted by Westerners was exotic and agitated the imagination of the West. But according to Stanko Leben such thinking can only spring from a self-centred European (245). Indeed, the Eurocentric point of view was the reality through which the Slovenes saw the Orient, and this way of seeing is also prevalent among the Slovene critics. Tine Debeljak, for example, strikes us with his contrasting the Chinese to the civilised (5). With the last he is referring to the Westerners, against whose reflection the Chinese were deemed uncivilised. In addition to these, there are other Slovene critics who do not fail to recognise that the Chinese culture was rooted in a tradition which was different from ours, even when not speaking poorly of the other civilisation. Jakob Šilc stresses that the intentions of the writer were to draw near a foreign mentality and a foreign culture (“Dobra zemlja” 102), and Marija Cvetko believes that the writer excited many readers with such subject matter (7). Echoing the words of Debeljak, who highlighted the contemporary interest in China, Cvetko does not forget to mention that the writer was lucky in her choice of themes.

If Buck was fortunate to be writing about China just as China was becoming popular in the West, one may add though that the writer was also lucky when choosing the manner of writing. Because of her style, which did not follow the modern trends in writing, her books were “a preferable choice compared with the works of Dreiser, T. S. Eliot, or Faulkner [...]” (Liao 36). The style of writing seems to be one of the most controversial aspects of the writer’s works. Critics very often fell into extreme camps by either praising or condemning outright Pearl S. Buck’s writing. There were few neutral opinions. Will Rogers for example was convinced that *The Good Earth* was “the greatest book about people ever written [...]” (Liao 21). Isidore Schneider on the other hand labels *East Wind: West Wind* as an “ordinary, quite mechanical novel, full of plot and sentiment, but empty of any lifelikeness in its characters or significance in the thesis – the clash between modern and traditional China” (17). With the Slovene critics one cannot see such a gap and variety in the criticism. Indeed, they almost unanimously praised the writer’s style. Debeljak for example compares the tragedy in *The Mother* with the tragedy of the Greek dramatists, which, he says, proves the writer’s immense stylistic talent (5). This comparison is especially interesting because it

can not be found with any other Slovene or American critic. Debeljak's statement is as unique as it is exaggerated, or at least unsubstantiated, for he does not provide any arguments to support his claims. Other Slovene critics want to catalogue Buck's writing into established literary headings. Tine Debeljak later on in his article on *The Mother* realises that the writer's style is naturalistic. He calls this naturalism "poduhovljeni naturalizen" (ibid.) or "spiritual naturalism", which is not quite in accord with Zola's naturalism as described by Paul Doyle:

In Zola's world, people are oppressed by social and economic forces which overwhelm the human individual and render him almost helpless. Zola's characters are caught in a deterministic world, shaped by heredity and environment. [... in Pearl S. Buck's], on the other hand, free will exerts considerable influence. (47)

What critics fail to mention is the optimism of Pearl S. Buck's heroes. These heroes may suffer under determinism, however they know that there is a way out if only they are motivated enough. It is interesting that Debeljak classifies Buck among the naturalists on the basis of the novel *The Mother*. The American critics see naturalism in Buck's novel *The Good Earth*, in which Wan Lung manages to change his life of a pauper into a rich man's life. Stanko Leben is convinced that *The Good Earth* belongs to realism which from time to time sounds like a fairytale ("In vendar zazveni [Dobra zemlja] marsikdaj kot čudovita pravljica") (247). A similar statement can be found with Kang Liao who calls Buck's writing "realistic with some romantic tinge" (35). Yet another parallel in the Slovene reception: This sort of romanticism is achieved according to Franc Šrimpf by a suggestive writing ("sugestionov pisanje"), which makes the readers sentimental (5). Šrimpf, it should be pointed out, was somewhat less positive in his observations. He wrote the review of the novel *Portrait of the Marriage* in 1975 and concluded that this sort of suggestive writing might be a bit dated (*ibid.*).

Franc Šrimpf and Marija Cvetko are the only examples of the Slovene critics that responded to the writing of Pearl S. Buck negatively. While Franc Šrimpf only expresses his doubt, Marija Cvetko puts down some arguments for her criticism. According to Marija Cvetko it is most difficult to objectively express the critical opinion because the writer is very much liked by the readers. It often happens that Buck's works are so quickly translated that by the time the critics manage to respond to her work the work has already been accepted by the readers with excitement and fascination (Cvetko 7). Cvetko is also surprised that Buck manages to assert herself among other writers who write about the problematic position of modern man's inner psychological situation. We can see the same expression of surprise arising from criticism with Kang Liao, who states that the writer's "college majors, psychology and philosophy, do not emerge prominently in her literary creation, nor do her graduate studies of English literature at Cornell show much impact" (39). If Liao and Cvetko's comments seem similar – and Cvetko's well justified negative response unique among Slovene critics – one must keep in mind that each appeared several decades after Buck began writing. Cvetko's critique appeared in 1963, and at that time the critic was already detached from the times that brought Pearl S. Buck the fame accompanying the Nobel Prize and other awards. That is why Cvetko was able to speak about Buck in a more

objective manner, which of course does not only mean exposing negative points of the writer's writing but at the same time acknowledging the good things in her works. Cvetko does not neglect some of the qualities that the writings of Pearl S. Buck possess. Such qualities include the themes and style that always attract many readers (Cvetko 7). Though typically a virtue in a writer, in the case of Pearl S. Buck this can be seen as a deficiency because it was her way of writing that is "the reason for her present low status [...]" (Liao 33). For this reason many critics classify Buck's writing as "potrošna literatura" or 'consumer literature' (Inkret 20), with its suggestion of pulp or popular fiction. Among such works is according to Andrej Inkret the book *Kennedy Women*. Inkret wrote the review of this book in the daily *Delo* in 1972. He believes that the purpose of this book was to bring closer and reconstruct the lives of celebrities and their families. Inkret attaches Buck to 'consumer literature' because of her popular sociological digressions and feuilletonistic style (ibid.). With this he believes the writer influenced the Slovenes and through Buck the style became popular in Slovenia.

Inkret was not the first Slovene critic to notice these aspects of Buck's writing. Jakob Šilc remarked on its documentary style in 1935 when reviewing *The Good Earth*, and Janko Moder in 1980 in his preface to the translation of *The Good Earth*. It is surprising though that none of the Slovene critics mention the autobiography *My Several Worlds* as being documentary in style. Peter Conn comments thus on this style: "She frequently used her novels as political and educational instruments, exchanging the challenges of novelistic art for the easier satisfactions of melodrama, propaganda, and protest" (380). Pearl S. Buck used her works as a medium through which she educated her readers and spread her humanitarian messages. Marija Švajncer adds to this the fact that the writer not only wrote about humanitarianism, but also lived it ("Predvsem človečnost" 5). In the event, Pearl S. Buck established many humanitarian organisations, such as Welcome House and the East West Association (mentioned in Moder's preface). Moder also adds that Buck wrote copious amounts as a means of financing her humanitarian work (372). Pearl S. Buck was a humanitarian in a broad sense of the word. She fought for the rights of the Chinese and Japanese in the USA, for the rights of African Americans, for women's rights, rights of abandoned children, handicapped children and many more. Out of her own experience with her mentally disabled daughter she wrote a booklet with the title *The Child Who Never Grew*. The book was very well accepted by Slovene readers since it was translated twice and suggested as a reading, not only for parents with similar problems but everybody, by Zoran Jelenc in 1969 in the magazine *Otrok in družina* and by Metka Klevišar in 1981 in the magazine *Cerkev v sedanjem času*.

If one reads the many glowing Slovene reviews of Pearl S. Buck's works, it is not surprising that the author won so many prizes. The critics themselves do not fail to mention such approbation. As mentioned above, the writer Jože Munda included articles written in response to particular awards as one of the three categories of Slovene considerations of Buck. The high point came when the writer won the Nobel Prize, as many articles were published in 1938 and 1939 in honour of the occasion. Marija Cvetko sees this as the most successful time in Buck's career, but notes that recognition has waned in the decades since the Nobel Prize (7). The decline can also be seen

in the field of the Slovene critical material. Since 1978, after the bibliography on Pearl S. Buck in Slovenia written by Jože Munda appeared, until today Slovene Buck criticism has increased by only four reviews. One of them is Metka Klevišar's above mentioned review of *The Child Who Never Grew*. Continuing from there, Gema Hafner wrote a review of *The Rainbow* and *Dragon Seed*, while Janez Švajncer reviewed the novel *This Proud Heart* in 1988. Each of the last two critics published their writings in the daily *Večer*, and the reviews themselves consist of little more than a description of the novels' content.

In conclusion one can summarise the analyses of the secondary material on Pearl S. Buck by saying that there was little real critical response in Slovenia. The critiques contained many mistakes and the reviewers mostly reported only superficially on works by Pearl S. Buck. The conclusions to which the critics came were rarely supported and sustained by argument. As the above examples indicate, the critics often retreated to very general and vague terminology to satisfy the populist nature of their critical writings. This however was not only the case in Slovenia. Xiongya Gao, who published the book *Pearl S. Buck's Chinese Women Characters* in 2000, comes to the following conclusion:

The numerous reviewers of her work [...] are disappointing in this regard [treating her works as works of art] because, when they talk about the artistry of Buck, they tend to use vague and general terms without detailed explanation of what they actually mean. (19)

When talking about inaccurate and general terminology in Slovene one need only look at the following examples from the reviews:

Njena prva dela – članki, novele, pozneje tudi romani – se odlikujejo po vroči ljubezni do kitajskega naroda. (Pirnat 11)

Označitve njenih romanov so močne in prepričevalne. (Trdina 199)

Majhna in krasna stvarica je “Vzhod in Zapad”. (Grahor 279)

While the interest in Pearl S. Buck is rising again in her home country this can not be noticed in Slovenia. Pearl S. Buck was a pioneer in bringing together the Americans and the Chinese. According to Carl van Doren: “*The Good Earth* for the first time made the Chinese seem as familiar neighbors. Pearl Buck had added to American fiction one of its large provinces” (Liao 21). The influence that Pearl S. Buck exercised on the Slovenes was a similar one. The writer definitely introduced the Chinese to the Slovenes as a familiar neighbour, but in the context of Slovenia we cannot agree with the second half of van Doren's statement. Pearl S. Buck brought new thematic territory into American literature, provided a literary motivation especially to all the Chinese Americans living in the USA and contributed to the prosperity of one of the most multicultural countries in the world. In response to my e-mail enquiry on Pearl S. Buck's current status, Peter Conn, the leading Buck scholar, had the following to say:

Buck is not studied widely in university literature departments. The interest in her is focused more (as was mine in the book I wrote [*Pearl S. Buck – A Cultural Biography*]) on her broader cultural significance. She

remains fairly popular with general readers (sales of her books, especially THE GOOD EARTH, remain strong) and her work still appears frequently on high school reading lists. ("Re: Question about")

Today Pearl S. Buck is believed to be "one of the few lamps that shed light from her age of Eurocentrism upon our age of multiculturalism" (Liao 14). The Slovenes, in contrast, have never been affected by multiculturalism in the way the USA has been and never really had a direct connection with the Chinese. Consequently, China remains a far away culture in Slovene minds, a culture we can nevertheless comprehend a little better today through the books written by Pearl S. Buck.

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