

it is to know. On the other hand, Chinese hermeneutics is not disinterested and detached dissection of reality as object. Rather, with our mind's power of feeling and response (*ganying*), we come to know and realize the fundamental reason for, and the reasonableness of, the triadic integration of heaven, earth and humanity (to wit, reality as a whole). In the Confucian case, knowledge of the text through reading is not underpinned by a positive theory of epistemology, according to which knowledge is pursued for knowledge's sake. For the Confucian readers, ontological and cosmological being is fully integrated with epistemological and experiential becoming in the act of reading and writing. While Gu makes a point in the preface to acknowledge his debt to Chung-ying Cheng, his bibliography does not include those works by Cheng on "onto-hermeneutics," which might have led him to consider the crucial fact of the interlarding of ontology and hermeneutics in the Chinese world of reading.

To so voice my dissatisfaction is not to undermine my overall admiration for Gu's book, which represents a notable step forward in our effort to better understand reading and writing in a culture renowned for its veneration of words. Ming Dong Gu, in comparative and theoretical terms, has reformulated and re-asked significant hermeneutic questions to which the Chinese act of reading and writing is the right answer. To that extent, he has succeeded in initiating a meaningful cross-cultural dialogue, an open hermeneutic space unto itself.

ON-CHO NG

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The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism. By Karen J. Leong. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. x + 236. \$55.00/£35.95 cloth, \$21.95/£13.95 paper.

This book attempts to show how three women contributed to the American popular images of China from the 1930s to the end of the Second World War. They were Pearl Buck, a missionary and writer who spent many years in China with first-hand knowledge of the lives of ordinary Chinese; Anna May Wong, a Chinese American who played Asian roles in American movies; and Mayling Soong, the first lady who appeared to speak on behalf of the Chinese people. As Karen J. Leong argues, they formed part of the China mystique which emerged and developed since the 1930s as a result of changing international relations.

Leong believes that the 1930s marked a turning point, as the American public began to view China differently, and popular images seemed to produce a "new China," which Americans thought would be readily receptive to American culture and democracy. As Leong writes, "the China mystique was an American ideology that incorporated notions of 'modern women.'" These three women—Buck, Wong, and Soong—"embodied the China mystique for Americans during the 1930s and 1940s" (p. 2). Why was the China mystique a "feminine" concept? Leong gives a reason which can be further explained and developed—she thinks that American orientalism focused on the exportation of American

values and culture to Asian nations, and thus led to the “feminization of Asian nations and their cultures” (p. 2). There was the idea “to ‘protect’ China and to convert it into something more Christian, modern, and American” (p. 8).

While the “feminine nature” of the China mystique requires further explanation, Leong argues that American orientalism manifested itself in the American foreign missionary experience, the migration of Chinese to the United States, and the increasing contacts of some Chinese with Americans. Buck represented the missionary experience in China, Wong belonged to the second generation of Chinese immigrants to the United States, and Soong came from a family who established close ties with American individuals and groups. Since these three women had some or much cross-cultural experience, Leong says they had their “transnational identification with both China and the United States” (p. 4), and became China experts to the American public.

Leong first talks about Pearl Buck, who she describes as a perfect example of American orientalism. Buck grew up in China; she lived in the interior and was among the ethnic minority in Chinese society. Buck did not return to the United States until she was seventeen, and as Leong says, Buck initially embraced much of American orientalism and compared China unfavourably to the United States, but after returning to her home country, she began to see China more favourably. Living among the missionaries—“the protected elite” (p. 15)—Buck nevertheless had some negative experiences in China, such as the anti-foreign incidents during the Boxer Uprising. As Leong stresses, Buck was a stranger to her home country; she chose to return to China after finishing college, and later became a missionary’s wife in the countryside. Leong shares some familiar criticism of foreign missionaries, that they relied on the protection of their own governments, and enjoyed privileged status in China. In sum, Buck was an American who knew very little about her country, but found more respect in China as a member of the privileged class of foreign missionaries. Here, Leong repeats what some critics have said before—that missionaries were outsiders in their own country, but found satisfaction in foreign mission fields.

The early twentieth century witnessed the growing emphasis on mission in China. China was the dream of Christian churches in the United States, which were eager to send their missionaries to convert the vast number of Chinese people. As a missionary’s wife, Buck recognized the tremendous opportunities available in Chinese villages. Leong says that Buck served as a go-between who spoke Chinese and at the same time provided detailed accounts of Chinese people and society for the American people. As a foreigner who knew the Chinese language and was familiar with Chinese people and culture, Buck became the spokesperson for China. According to Leong, Buck was indispensable at the time when American churches were reassessing their foreign mission fields, and those in China in particular. In the 1930s, Buck’s role as a writer with her bestseller *The Good Earth* made her an instant authority on China. As Leong argues, Buck projected an image of being more Chinese than American, and of knowing the “real China.” Buck offered a new perspective of understanding China, as she focused on the lives of peasant families in the countryside. She was able to do so as few Americans had such experience of hers living in rural China. According to Leong, the success of *The Good Earth* “brought readers not only an ‘authentic’ China, but also a new and unlikely ‘American success story’” (p. 26). It seems Leong is hinting that this “new perspective” of looking at China was not that “new.” Americans were

comparing to their own history—“Chinese were now likened to neighbors, their struggle to live off the land paralleled to the struggle of the American heartland” (p. 27). Buck’s description of Chinese, her criticism of Christian missions in China, and her image of being “less American” found huge audience in the United States. Her identification with the ordinary Chinese people appealed to many readers; in 1938, she won the Nobel Prize in literature.

Leong describes Buck as “a missionary in reverse” (p. 37), as the writer was able to make use of her status and popularity to tell Americans how she felt about the United States and China. Buck founded the China Emergency Relief Committee in 1938 after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. At the same time, Buck “located herself on the margins as a somewhat distanced and objective observer of American culture” (pp. 43–44). Leong thinks that Buck succeeded because American society and government knew very little, if not nothing, about China, and Buck enjoyed the credibility of being American (though less American) and having lived in China for a long time. While she aptly describes Buck as portraying “the real China” to the American audience, who did not know much about the Chinese to start with, Leong does not tell how far Buck’s depiction was from the reality, and looking back how “Chinese” Buck was.

Leong introduces a less-known figure, Anna May Wong who grew up outside Chinatown in Los Angeles and belonged to the second generation of Chinese Americans. Leong sees the difference between Wong and the other two women—“Unlike Pearl Buck or Mayling Soong, who could reside in each other’s countries without losing claim to their national status, Wong confronted ambivalence in both the United States and China because of the seeming ambiguity of her identity; her U.S. citizenship was always in question because of her racial heritage” (p. 57).

Wong was among the Chinese minority in the United States; she and her siblings experienced incidents of racial discrimination and even hostility. Eventually, her parents transferred her and her sister to China Mission School, a Chinatown school where all students were Chinese and she could find some assurance of security. Ethnically, Wong was Chinese, but legally and mentally, she was American. She became fascinated with the movie industry, took up the career of an actress, and attributed her devotion to movies to being American. Her family thought that her becoming an actress was “un-Chinese.” As Chinese American, Wong could only “portray an assortment of Hollywood’s ‘Oriental’ female characters, including an Indian and an Eskimo” (p. 64). She played at most supporting roles, and often less desirable characters. In those days, American movies depicted whites dating whites, and American society considered only those whites, the less desirable ones, would date non-whites.

Restricted to only Asian or oriental roles, Wong found that even these characters were often assigned to Euro-American actresses. Wong only auditioned for the role of Lotus in *The Good Earth* movie; Lotus was a despicable character while the leading female character O-lan was played by a white actress. Chinese officials and newspapers bombarded American movies for degrading the Chinese, and criticized Wong for accepting such humiliating roles despite the fact that she was Chinese. Demonstrations against American movies took place in school campuses, theaters, and on the streets in China. Leong describes—“As a Chinese American woman performing American orientalism, Wong was caught in crosscurrents of

nationalism, racism, and sexism” (p. 75). While the Chinese government and media accused Wong of “losing face” in American circles, Chinese American communities did not regard her as speaking for their interests in the United States. Wong played her part, though limited, in the American movie industry. Nevertheless, she suffered from poor reputation among Chinese communities both in the United States and China.

Although Wong prided herself on “her unique status of ‘being Oriental’ and American at the same time” (p. 83), her double identity gave her more problems than opportunities. In 1936, Wong visited China; this was the time when many Chinese Americans returned to China looking for opportunities. Her visit was “understandably uneasy” (p. 89), resulting from her “alienation from the Chinese American community and Chinese culture” (p. 90). Wong spoke Cantonese but not Mandarin, and had to depend on the translator while traveling in China. The China she knew before her visit was similar to the popular images of Americans. It was after her visit to China that Wong took effort to look “even more Chinese”—in her outfit and behaviour—to the American public. According to Leong, Wong “contributed to the China mystique by humanizing Chinese Americans for American audiences throughout her career” (p. 104). Leong says that Wong challenged the impossibility of being Chinese American, and proved the possibility of the simultaneous existence of the two cultures in American society.

Wong was among the earliest Chinese American actresses to appear in American movies. Nevertheless, she seemed to play minor supporting roles, and the depiction of the Chinese in the movies was far from satisfactory. Wong, like the roles she played, did not represent Chinese life or culture. Wong was subject to the racial bias of the time, and she herself knew very little about Chinese society. Different from Buck or Soong, Wong was in no position to offer fresh perspectives of understanding China. Readers are left wondering how significant Wong was, and how much she contributed to Leong’s “China mystique.”

Mayling Soong (or Madame Chiang Kai-shek) was known to the American public during the Second World War, when she toured the United States, spoke before the Congress, and solicited support for the Chinese war effort. It was a significant period of Sino-American relations, and as Leong says, Soong became a symbol of the “new China” to the American people. Soong also represented the “new womanhood” of modern China. According to Leong, Soong’s image of “an Americanized Chinese” was rather surprising to the Americans. Thus, Soong captured the attention of Americans who were ready to believe that their culture and values had much impact on other peoples, and in this case, the Chinese. Leong describes Soong’s influence—“an embodiment of the China mystique, she demonstrated the power of American values to influence individuals and national communities” (p. 107). In 1914, Soong transferred from Wesleyan to Wellesley College; soon her upbringing and education enabled her to reach out to the Americans, to impress them, and to create a lingering impact. Leong gives us a glimpse of Soong’s college life, which was typical of some overseas students—“Chinese students provided each other with security and community. Soong for example apparently socialized with other Chinese students in the Boston area . . .” (p. 110). As Leong points out, despite her Americanized outlook, Soong at times felt alienated by her American schoolmates.

While Soong experienced alienation in the United States, she considered herself an outsider when she returned to China, her home country. Leong says, Soong “now confronted

the foreignness of her homeland” (p. 112). Soong was more fluent in English than in Chinese, and was more knowledgeable about American culture than Chinese culture. Back in China, Soong missed her college life in the United States and became “homesick for Wellesley” (p. 112). Soong admitted that she had not appreciated what she had until she returned to China. While Pearl Buck was among the “protected elite,” the same could be said of Mayling Soong. Soong lived in the American settlement in Shanghai, and enjoyed more protection against the turmoil in China. Yet, Soong recognized the growing nationalistic sentiments, the student movements, and the anti-foreign demonstrations. The early twentieth century witnessed the rise of modern China.

China was in the time of great challenges. Modernization, nationalism, and democracy were among the common vocabulary. Modern China also offered tremendous opportunities for many who dared to risk, to gamble, and to fight. Soong was one of those opportunity-seekers. As Leong says, the marriage of Chiang Kai-shek and Mayling Soong was “a political event in China and internationally” (p. 117). Anyone interested in modern Chinese history would agree that the marriage was one of convenience, and was advantageous to the career of both Chiang and Soong. With her Americanized outlook and Christian background, Soong represented a willingness to convert to Western (or American to be precise) values, culture, and religion. Her marriage to the leader of the Chinese government seemed to suggest to Americans that China was moving the same direction—to be converted to American democracy and culture.

To the Americans, Soong symbolized China’s “potential for modernization” (p. 118). While she started some “American-style, middle-class reforms” and piecemeal changes, Chiang continued to rule the country in a high-handed manner. The positive images of Soong—American educated, Protestant, and embracing new womanhood—were beneficial to Chiang’s government. Americans stressed the Americanism of Soong, and overlooked the dictatorial rule of her husband. Leong states—“The American media’s positive coverage of Soong’s activities helped counter any news of the generalissimo’s dictatorial leadership” (p. 119). Soong was very careful of how Chinese officials appeared before European and American visitors, and was concerned about superficial things such as table manners. Indeed, Soong was well aware of the influence of the media, the importance of public appearances, and codes of behaviour. After all, no one will dispute the fact that Soong was superb in public relations. When average Americans knew very little about China, and had to depend on the media for information, Soong seemed to represent the “real China” and provided a convenient source of reference.

In Leong’s words, Soong became “an American celebrity” (p. 125) in the 1940s. Leong writes—“When Mayling Soong visited the United States in 1943, the China mystique was at its height. Major newspapers throughout the nation covered Soong’s activities, statements, and wardrobe, . . .” (p. 131). Perhaps it was the superficial and the obvious that Americans were interested in. It was these things that Soong was skilful in—her refined manners, the stylish outlook, and her way of talking—all catered for the American audience. Her tour in the United States, her stay with the Roosevelts, and her speech at the Congress caught public attention. Some were fascinated, and many were curious. Soong also called for equal rights for Chinese women; her visit coincided with the time when American women thought they could contribute more to society and to the needs of the war. Leong writes: “Soong’s blurred

roles as an informal diplomat and international celebrity further demonstrate how the rhetoric of wartime activism extended traditional boundaries for white middle-class women” (p. 137). Indeed, Soong’s ascendance in American public circles could be attributed to the improved Sino-American relations, war concerns, and the changing status of American women. She went to the United States at the right time.

As Leong argues, Soong helped cultivate Sino-American relations, but her visit also confirmed “the subordinate position of China and her advocacy” (p. 139). Americans chose to see “in Mayling Soong the relevance and affirmation of American values in an international context” (p. 140). Leong thinks that Soong’s feminine qualities made her approachable to the American public. Soong represented a modern and Americanized China.

Leong states her reason for studying these three women—they “enjoyed greater visibility because of their participation in American popular culture as interpreters of China” (p. 158). Readers should be quite familiar with Buck and Soong before reading Leong’s book; it seems Leong confirms what has already been known about the two women. It is difficult, if not impossible, to provide new information about Buck and Soong. While readers learn about Anna May Wong, it is doubtful whether she exerted much impact on American popular culture. Wong gave in to the racial bias, and in her movie roles, she reinforced the distorted images of the Chinese people. Wong knew little about China, and saw from the American perspective. She certainly did not enjoy the same status of Pearl Buck or Mayling Soong. Readers can learn more about the American movie industry, but Wong’s significance is doubtful.

Leong argues that “American nationalism and Chinese nationalism relied on women to communicate and embody nationhood” (p. 163). According to Leong, the three women shaped the American popular images of China, though they had to work within certain confines. Leong’s “China mystique” was supposedly a feminine concept, and depended on women to propagate the ideas, images, and values. Leong still needs to prove to what extent women helped in influencing Sino-American relations. Buck, Wong, and Soong are individual cases; they might have their role to play, but readers may still puzzle how American or Chinese women, as a collective force, were important in the public and political circles in the early twenty century. Women’s status rose in the 1930s and 1940s, but that cannot be compared to women’s liberation in the 1960s. Readers are trying to understand why the “China mystique” was a feminine concept; whether women as a collective force were as significant as Leong suggests; and the differences between the “China mystique” and the changing “American orientalism in the 1930s and 1940s.”

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