

VANESSA KÜNNEMANN, *Middlebrow Mission: Pearl Buck's American China* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015), 283 pp.

In an age when academic research suffers from information overload and attention deficit, we welcome studies that offer bird's-eye-view perspectives of the present moment, or that make bold theoretical interventions. Yet we cannot do without projects that are the result of prolonged attention focused on a carefully chosen subject. Neither can we do without projects that revisit cultural phenomena that once held the attention of millions, yet are ignored by today's scholars—often for ideological reasons. Vanessa Künnemann's *Middlebrow Mission: Pearl Buck's American China* is just such a project.

Vanessa Künnemann has given her full attention to two overlapping cultural phenomena: the China mission movement at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century (supported by millions of people in the entire English-speaking world at a time when women's suffrage drew mere thousands) and the fiction of Pearl Buck (which, read by millions, reassessed the mission movement). Continuing the tradition of feminist scholarship that once shifted Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* out of the academic freezer and into the nineteenth-century canon, alongside Melville's *Moby Dick*, Künnemann in her meticulously researched new historicist project carves out a place for Buck in the expanded canon of twentieth-century American literature. The reinstatement of Buck, dismissed by critics as an unambitious writer of middlebrow women's fiction, is no easy task. Künnemann has examined a wide range of aesthetic, ideological, and geopolitical factors that might explain Buck's phenomenal success as well as the reasons for her dwindling popularity after she received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938.

Künnemann's book is not a literary biography; it critically examines only those works by Buck (fictional biographies, articles, novels, short stories, and an autobiography) that foreground various religious and secular notions of the word "mission" in a trans-Pacific context, and that involve Americans and Chinese as both agents and objects of missions. The book's overarching thesis is that Buck's literary project was a secular extension of the religious mission to China embraced by her parents—a mission she challenged as fundamentally misguided and imperialist. Refusing

to follow in her parents' footsteps, Buck returned to the U.S. where she enacted the role of a self-appointed cultural go-between. Her mission was to convert the American reading public to a vision of China that did not need to be Christianized in order to enter modernity on a par with other nations. In order to be accepted in this role, Künnemann argues, Buck had to build her authority as a cultural insider in China and, at the same time, as thoroughly American. Responding to the reception of her works and the geopolitical situation, she strategically shifted the accent from one to the other (for instance during the Cold War when her Americanness was called into question).

In the introduction, Künnemann provides an overview of Buck's career, positioning her in the context of American overseas missions and middlebrow fiction, and, drawing on feminist critical theory, examines the gender dynamics in the writings themselves and in their reception. The opening section also examines the key words used in the title, thus constructing the thematic backbone of the entire project. Chapter one, which expands on the introduction, offers a detailed historical account of Protestant overseas missions and, specifically, the role played by women in this movement. While missions have been well documented by means of archival materials and historical studies, Künnemann is one of very few literary critics to effectively draw on this wealth of materials.

Chapter two is an interpretation of Buck's 1920s biographies of her mother and father as early attempts to distance herself from the masculinist model of missionary work represented by her father, and to side with the ostensibly more humane cultural-relativist model embraced by her mother. Interestingly, the artificiality of the gender binary set up by the biographies is exposed when Künnemann examines Buck's later works, which show her parents working side by side and sharing the same value system. Künnemann, therefore, persuasively argues that Buck needed to build the binary opposition in order to invent and bolster her own secular mission as a writer on Chinese issues for American audiences.

Chapters three and four focus on Buck's 1930s novels set in China, while chapter five introduces her narratives about Chinese Americans raised in New York's Chinatown who know China from hearsay before they experience it first-hand. Finally, the coda takes on a 1951 novel in which two white Ameri-

can men, a businessman and a social activist, embark on very different neo-missionary projects to China, partially re-enacting the dichotomy set up by Buck in the biographies of her parents but falling short of their goals.

Throughout the study, Künnemann demonstrates her ability to deftly enter into ongoing scholarly debates and speak with a confident and clear voice. Her close readings are strengthened by discussions of Buck's use of narrative voice and structure. Because the argumentation is complex, the text is carefully signposted for the benefit of the reader. Künnemann's prose is consistently lucid and intellectually engaging. The frame of reference she constructs around the work of this writer is magisterial. She also has an unerring sense as to what should be foregrounded in the body of the text and what the reader may want to know but is best supplied in the form of footnotes.

I find Künnemann's discussion of middlebrow fiction, which begins in the introduction and unfolds in the subsequent chapters, especially useful. It relates the notion of the

middlebrow to various other literary phenomena, including the Victorian sentimental tradition and melodrama, nostalgia and concern for a "usable past," and even the Depression Era "proletarian novel." There exist a number of single-author and group publications on American middlebrow fiction (by Botshon and Goldsmith, Bracco, Heimer, Klein, Wood), but none exclusively focused on Pearl Buck. In each of the analytical chapters, Künnemann carefully shows how Buck exploited middlebrow conventions yet managed to invert or violate the set patterns in order to produce innovative effects.

*Middlebrow Mission: Pearl Buck's American China* is an important and long overdue contribution to the research on Pearl Buck and on Western missions to China in general. Künnemann manages to position herself within a densely populated academic field, taking stock of her forerunners' work. The depth of the primary and secondary research will make future work on Buck much easier.

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