

## Ethical Assimilation in Pearl S. Buck's *Peony*. An Early Example of Identity and Globalization

Although the eighteenth-century concept of the citizen of the world is quite different from the present notion of globalization, neither attitude has succeeded in establishing a solid basis of international understanding. Despite the ubiquitousness of the corporate web and lure of highly-advertised brand names, individuals in all parts of the world continue to oppose unifying and leveling tendencies on grounds of divergences in culture, class, religion and ethnicity. A recent issue of the PMLA gives a startling example of this resistance to ethnic assimilation growing out of civil strife in Bosnia. "Whereas students in Sarajevo were formerly taught out of a single textbook, no doubt full of Titoist lies, they are now asked to declare whether they are Serb, Muslim, or Croat and are then divided into separate ethnic classes, each of which is taught a radically distinct version of history out of a different textbook" (PMLA 56).

In the early years of the twentieth century, literary portrayals sought to reconcile social homogeneity with individual identity through the concept of the melting pot, and later in the century this emphasis gave way to multiculturalism. Pearl S. Buck toward the middle of the century, however, offered a unique compromise based upon Chinese traditionalism that strongly advocates the surrender of the individual to the social norm.

In the introduction to her novel *Peony*, 1948, Pearl Buck tells her readers that the narrative is based on the true history of Jewish immigrants in K'aifeng, China in the mid-nineteenth century. Later in a private letter she explains her major reason for writing *Peony*. Right after World War II, she wants to show people "that continued kindness and justice toward all people makes all cause of war disappear." In another letter, she affirms, "I myself, of course, with my Eastern background, must believe in the mercy of all people,

not by force but by kindness. For this is the meaning of *Peony*" (Yu 84). The theme of the novel is that Jewish assimilation into Chinese society is beneficial to both groups. Jews have lived in China for a long period of time and a number of them intermarried with Chinese. This mingling brings both cultures more good than bad, and Mrs. Buck in her book encourages this ethnic process.

*Peony* portrays how a Jewish family which has lived in China for four generations eventually assimilates into Chinese society. On the way to this adaptation, the protagonist of the novel, David, has to choose between his Jewish cultural identity and the Chinese cultural mainstream. The outstanding representative of Jewish culture in the novel is David's mother — Madame Naomi Ezra. She is of pure Jewish stock and adheres to the orthodox tradition of her ancestors so strictly that she celebrates all the religious festivals, including the Sabbath, Passover, Purim, and Yom Kippur. She dreams and speaks of going back to the promised land with all her family in the near future. She, therefore, wants her only son David to marry Leah, the daughter of a blind Rabbi in order to preserve the pure Jewish bloodline. Naomi, the Rabbi, and his daughter Leah are faithful defenders of Jewish culture.

David's father, Ezra Ben Israel, on the other hand, is not as enthusiastic as his wife in the matter of supporting Jewish values. Son of a Jewish father and a Chinese mother, he is so used to Chinese customs that he never even considers leaving China. As a successful merchant in the city, Ezra leads a comfortable life, which strengthens his will to stay where he is, an attitude that makes it difficult for the family to maintain its Jewish cultural identity. In addition to Ezra Ben Israel, there are a few other important representatives of Chinese culture, for instance, the figure of one of his friends Kung Chen, a Chinese merchant, who consents to give his daughter in marriage to David, and, most important, Peony, David's highly intelligent and beautiful bondmaid. It is hard for David to make up his mind to give up either his Jewish or his Chinese heritage. If he chooses the former, he has to abandon thoughts of marrying Kueilan, a Chinese girl he loves. If he accepts Chinese culture, it means he has to grieve his mother by rejecting his inherited religion. After confrontations with representatives of both cultures, David finally realizes that the Jewish are narrow-minded and exclusive. With the encouragement of Peony, David willingly accepts Chinese cultural identity. The recognition of this new identity is high-lighted through the marriage with Kung Chen's daughter. This mixed marriage is a significant symbol of assimilation into Chinese culture.

Peony actually has much to do with his decision to enter into the marriage. She encourages it for two reasons, her admitted love for David and her position in the household as bondmaid. Sold when she was eight years of age to this Jewish family as a bondmaid, she had grown up with David and developed a strong attachment toward him. She keeps telling herself "I have no one" as an excuse for her devotion to David. She knows that she "was lying to herself. She wanted to stay in the house of Ezra because she could never bear to leave David. ... I love him, she thought. I would not go, no matter what was given me in exchange for him" (34). Apart from her love for David, she has nowhere to go. Were he to marry a Jewish girl, her position in the household would be endangered. With a Chinese, however, no obstacles would exist to her remaining. "The house was Peony's world, where she lived with the family to which she belonged" (41) She also realizes that "Outside the house of Ezra she knew no one, she had not a friend. All were strangers to her as were these passers on the street. ... Where could she ever go to find friends or family? Therefore she must stay where she was and cling to the only house she knew" (34). When warned by Madame Naomi to keep a distance from David since they are now grown ups, Peony affirms her innocence. She emphasizes her neutrality by telling her mistress, "I know my place in this house. I want only to serve you, my lady. What you bid me do, I will do. What home have I except this house? Can I dare to disobey you?" (32). There are only two ways to stay in the house—to marry the young master or to keep her own identity as the bondmaid as long as she lives. She knows very well that it is impossible for her to marry her young master. In fact, Madame Naomi has already found a bride, Leah, the rabbi's daughter, for her son. Nor is there even a chance for her to be David's concubine since Judaism forbids such a relationship. If Leah becomes the mistress of the house, what will become of her? Can she still stay there and serve David as she wishes? Pouring out her doubts to Wang Ma, an elderly bondmaid who had gone through the same situation, Peony knows right away what to do. Wang Ma tells her "You, Peony, must consider yourself. If it is your wish to spend your years in this house, then inquire into what woman is to be our young master's wife. A man's wife is his ruler, whether he likes her or not. She has the power of her place in his bed. Choose his wife, therefore" (83). At once, Peony makes up her mind to arrange for David to marry a Chinese girl instead of his Jewish betrothed. Chinese mistress is more likely to accept her existence in the house. Furthermore, it is easier to win the heart of a Chinese mistress than a foreigner's. She must be the matchmaker to bring

about the marriage and she knows that from then on "she must stand between husband and wife, and bring them together" (224). With this in mind, she proceeds to secure her position in the house.

The second and more important reason why Peony tries her best to induce David to marry a Chinese girl is that she loves him. She cannot marry him herself but she wants him to marry someone he loves. David has more than once announced he does not love Leah. In addition, if he marries Leah, it is not only a wife he takes. Peony knows that "Leah was more than a woman — she was a people and a tradition and a past, and did David marry her he espoused the whole, and to that he must return. He could not be himself or free, were he to return, for then must he become part of the ancient whole and bear upon himself the weight of their old sorrow"(183). Peony loves him and she cannot tolerate seeing him suffer the burdens from the past. Adhering to the Chinese society, David can be cut "away from the dark, sorrowful people to whom he had been born ... He would forget death and learn to love life" (103). Peony is sure that "it was within her reach to make David love her. His heart denied Leah, and he had not yet accepted Kueilan, and into that emptiness she might have stepped, and his heart might have enclosed her. But she was too wise. Never would she be given the place of a wife, and even if she were, David's life could have no peace. She loved him too well to see him wretched" (185). The only thing she can do is to induce him to marry a Chinese girl. Kueilan, daughter of the wealthy Chinese merchant, will be the best candidate. Peony helps David finish a poem dedicated to Kueilan and delivers it herself to the latter's maid. She even bribes the maid with her own savings in order to be sure that Kueilan gets the poem. She further arranges several meetings between the two young people. When David makes sure that he loves Kueilan instead of Leah, Peony offers herself to "be the marriage maker for you!" (183).

David is of course the center figure of the novel and his decision is significant in the process of the shifting of identity. His assimilation into the Chinese society comprises three elements. Physical attraction towards the tiny little Chinese girl is the first. He admits to Peony that he likes small women and Leah is apparently too tall and big for him. Even worse than Leah's hugeness is the burden he will have if he does fall in love with her. He tells Peony that Leah is "... so good. For her own sake — not my mother's — I wish with all my heart that I could love her. ... I could have loved her, perhaps - had she simply been a woman. But she is much more" (183). Though he knows his love by heart, he still has to face a dilemma in choosing

his bride. He confesses his hesitation to Peony that "I cannot marry as ordinary man do. If I choose her (Kueilan) for my bride and not Leah, I must wound my mother and the Rabbi and perhaps even my father" (182). When Leah realizes that David is looking elsewhere, she commits suicide, leaving a clear field to the Chinese girl. After the marriage, it is obvious that David will raise his family in China. He will become a real Chinese and forget all his Jewish cultural ties. The dream that his mother once cherished of going back to their promised land will never come true.

The second element consists in the confrontation between the Jewish cultural background and the Chinese. One day David meets his father-in-law Kung Chen unexpectedly on the street after his visit to the synagogue. Out of curiosity, Kung Chen asks David to take him to see the Jewish temple, where they have a heated argument with the old Rabbi. The debate reflects the basic differences between Chinese and Jewish philosophy concerning man and religion. The Rabbi insists "There is only one true God" (152) and only the Jews are sons of God while "the heathen people are all sons of Adam" (151). "It is for this that God has chosen my people, that we may eternally remind mankind of Him, Who alone rules." Kung Chen disagrees with this doctrine and claims that "God — if there is a God — would not choose one man above another or one people above another. Under heaven we are all one family" (152). This comparison makes David realize that his religion is intolerant while the Chinese is tolerant. The Chinese philosophy affirms universal brotherhood while the Jewish philosophy denies human equality by means of the exclusiveness of its religion. This discovery weakens David's faith in his cultural tradition. In order to make sure what he should do, he goes to talk to his father's friend and business partner, Kao Lien, a mixed Jew living in China. Kao Lien tells him the truth about their people and the reason why they are hated and killed. "They were hated because they separated themselves from the rest of mankind. They called themselves chosen of God. ... We are a proud people. We lost our country. Our only hope for return was to keep ourselves a people. The only hope to keep ourselves a people was to keep our common faith in one God, a God of our own. That God has been our country and our nation" (163). He points out that he does not encourage David to forget his heritage, but "to forget the past and separate ourselves no more. We are to live now, wherever we are, and we are to pour the strength of our souls into the people of the world" (164). This gives David a new direction to take when choosing his identity.

The third element consists of his father's understanding and consideration. Half Jewish and half Chinese, David's father has himself experienced David's dilemma in choosing an identity. Wang Ma reminds the father that "When you remember your father was a Jew you are unhappy and sad, and when you remember your mother was Chinese you are happy and life is good" (123). When Peony expresses her love towards David in front of him, Ezra Ben Israel recalls his own youth. He was then in love with his bondmaid, Wang Ma. But his father shouted at Ezra "My son cannot marry a servant!" and made him marry Naomi instead. Now it will be David's mother who rejects the idea of David marrying anybody except Leah. When Peony predicts "David will be very unhappy if he marries Leah" (157), Ezra goes to see his only son. What he sees frightens him, making him realize that he should not force David to follow his mother's will by marrying Leah. "As Ezra came near to his son's room he saw that a single candle burned, and without letting David see him, he peered through the lattice. He was appalled by what he saw. David sat in thought and his young face looked so pale, so sad, that Ezra was frightened. This was what came of letting old men and women have their way! What if he lost this darling only child, his one son, his heart's core, the hope of his life and his business?" (165). He immediately resolves "that his son might marry whom he pleased and for his happiness" (185). Realizing David loves Kueilan, he accepts the situation. "Had David said he loved Peony, he would have chided and forbade, as his father had done in his own youth. But a daughter of the great Chinese house of Kung could not be despised. She was David's equal in all — except in faith. Yet many Jews had married Chinese wives and they had not ceased altogether to be Jews. He would put it so to Naomi" (185). With this positive attitude, the marriage between David and Kueilan is settled.

Kung Chen's or, generally speaking, the Chinese philosophy of "All Men Are Brothers" helps to accomplish this union. When asked by Peony whether he will give his daughter to a foreign house, his direct response is "why not?" (102). He further explains his attitude "When foreigners come into a nation, the best way is to make them no longer foreign. That is to say, let us marry our young together and let there be children" (102).

After the marriage, nothing has changed on the surface in the house of Ezra. All the traditional rites are performed on appropriate festivals. Yet none of the less than two hundred Jews residing in the city now go to the synagogue since the old, blind Rabbi becomes mad after Leah's death. There is no Rabbi to stand before the Chair of Moses to read the sacred Torah.

With his death the Jewish tradition fades away gradually. David, on the other hand, lives harmoniously with the Chinese. He is granted an audience by Empress Tzu XL He becomes more and more deeply involved with Chinese tradition. At last with the death of Madame Naomi and the ruins of the synagogue, the Jewish cultural background has come to an end in this part of China. Jewish identity has been lost completely. There is nothing that is not Chinese in David's house now. His eldest daughter marries young into a Chinese house, and all his sons' wives are Chinese. For David, the most important result is that he and his family are content.

As I have previously mentioned, Buck presents the novel as a true history of the Jews in K'aifeng. In addition, she wants to promote racial tolerance and equality. When foreigners come to China, the Chinese treat them with an open-minded and easygoing attitude. They consider Jews as a clever people, full of energy and wit, and often some Chinese, indolent with years of good living, employ a Jew to manage their business. Almost as often a Chinese will give a second or third daughter to a Jew for his wife, and subsequent generations become more Chinese than Jewish. It seems natural that the Jewish identity should be absorbed by the Chinese community.

*Soochow University/ Shih Hsin University, Taipei*

#### Works Cited

- Buck, Pearl S. *Peony*. New York: The John Day Company, 1948.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Racial Memory and Literary History." *PMLA* 116.1 (2001): 48- 63.
- Yu, Yuh-chao. *Pearl S Buck's Fiction: A Cross-cultural Interpretation*. Taipei: Institute of America Culture Academia Sinica, 1981.