

Chinese “Face” concept in *The Good Earth*

Are Pearl Buck’s works stereotypes or not?

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1. Introduction

Pearl Buck, the American author who was raised in China and wrote mostly about Chinese people’s lives, received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938 for her “notable works which pave the way to a human sympathy passing over widely separated racial boundaries”.¹ Bertil Lindblad remarked that Pearl Buck’s works revealed to western readers “those qualities of thought and feeling which bind us all together as human beings on this earth”.² Destruction of stereotypes and confirmation of similarities are the key contributions of Pearl Buck’s works in promoting western understanding of China and Chinese people.

However, in her novels, Pearl still portrayed certain characteristics of Chinese people which are not equally shared by people from different cultural backgrounds. Those are the characteristics that are typical only among Chinese people and during the time the story was wrote. Among them is the Chinese concept of “face”. In Pearl’s prize-winning novel *The Good Earth*, the idea of “face” and people’s pursuing of it are reflected in many plots and contributed greatly to the development of the story. It’s reasonable to infer that Pearl have designed the plot in this way for some intention, or in other words, those plots with the idea of “face” in their core serve certain purpose of revealing special aspects of Chinese culture.

But why are those typical Chinese characteristics portrayed by Buck not the origin of new stereotypes imposed upon Chinese people? A closer look into the plots concerning “face” as well as the nature of Chinese “face” concept would give us the answer. By vividly portraying protagonists’ mental activities behind their enthusiastic preservation of “face”, Buck unveiled to her readers the strange yet understandable mindset behind Chinese people’s protection of “face” and its consequences on people’s lives. Also, by comparing Buck’s work with Arthur Smith’s description of “face” in *Chinese Characteristics*, we’ll be able to see that Buck’s portraits were based on an attempt to build understanding between different cultures. It is this attitude of sympathy and humanism behind the novel that makes her book a satisfying cross-culture communication.

2. Literature review

Studies on the Chinese word “face” have discussed meaning and cultural origins of the “face” concept. The idea of “face” was first brought up by Hsien Chin Hu. She believed that there are two distinctive Chinese concepts of “face”, *lien* and *mien-zi*, which, although both symbolize the judgement of the group on individuals, are based on different criteria of judgment.³ She believed that *lien* is “the respect of the group for a man with a good moral reputation” and “represents the confidence of the society in one’s moral character”. On the other hand, *mien-zi* is merely related to amoral aspects such as one’s wealth, social status and success. As a result, *lien* is both “a social sanction for enforcing moral standards” and “an internalized sanction”, while *mien-zi* is completely based on people’s external environment.

¹ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1938/buck/facts/>

² <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1938/buck/speech>

³ Hsien Chin Hu. The Chinese Concepts of "Face"[J]. American Anthropologist, 1944, 46(1): 45-64.

Later, Erving Goffman defined “face” as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular social contact”.⁴ He regarded “face” as situational based respect people gain from specific social encounters.⁵ He also brought up the word “face-work” to describe a subtle interpersonal encounter, found in all societies, to avoid social embarrassment and to help others maintain an image of self-respect.

All of these works, although explained “face” from quite different perspectives, are attempts to make “face” understandable to westerners with completely different cultural backgrounds. However, their explanations of “face” are mostly based on reasoning and argumentation, while adding some detailed examples will surely make these arguments more convincing. We’re glad to notice that Pearl Buck’s works are just vivid examples to prove these arguments and to help explain various Chinese cultural phenomena such as “face”.

It’s also worth noticing that Pearl Buck’s works and the works on “face” made by scholars listed above have one thing in common, which is the wish to break the stereotypes that make Chinese people “unhuman” and to make Chinese culture understandable to westerners. This shared good intention unites them inherently despite their distinct literary forms and techniques.

3. Analysis

3.1 Plots showing Chinese “face” concepts in *The Good Earth*

There are several plots in *The Good Earth* that showed “face” as a deeply rooted concept in Chinese people’s thoughts. The words and actions of protagonists, as well as some key decisions they made, were all resulted from the simple yet unyielding wish to protect their “faces”.

3.1.1 O-lan’s desire of earning back “face”

When Wang Lung suggested that O-lan may need to ask a woman from the great house to help her with the delivery of their first child, O-lan, for the first time, spoke a lot of words and let out her secret plan of taking her child back to the house and show off to all the people there. Here’s O-lan’s plan:

*“When I return to that house it will be with my son in my arms. I shall have a red coat on him and red-flowered trousers and on his head a hat with a small gilded Buddha sewn on the front and on his feet tiger-faced shoes. And I will wear new shoes and a new coat of black sateen and I will go into the kitchen where I spent my days and I will go into the great hall where the Old One sits with her opium, and I will show myself and my son to all of them.”*⁶

On hearing these words, Wang Lung was surprised. Because he realized O-lan had been planning this out all the time since her pregnancy. Being aware that this was an importance plan for O-lan, he supported her by giving O-lan the money to buy the cloth for dressing up their baby.

Wang Lung was astonished because O-lan, though obedient in her actions and reserved in her words, had plan and thoughts of herself. But westerners may also be impressed by

⁴ Erving Goffman. On Face-Work[J]. Psychiatry, 2016, 18(3) : 213-231.

⁵ David Yau-fai Ho. On the Concept of Face[J]. American Journal of Sociology, 1976, 81(4) : 867-884.

⁶ The Good Earth, Chapter 3, page 35 of the PDF version.

O-lan's plan because there seemed to be no practical use of this plan. Instead, it was born out of O-lan's desire to earn back her "face" in front of the people that she used to live with. On returning the house, she will dress her child in "red coat", "red-flowered trousers", "hat with a small gilded Buddha sewn on the front" and "tiger-faced shoes", while she will also be wearing "new shoes and a new coat of black sateen" herself. These new clothes were bought not because she liked their look and design, but for this special occasion of showing off to others. O-lan wanted to earn the respect or even jealousy of her old workmates, to convince them that she had started a good life on her marriage. She must have kept imagining the scene of her walking into the great house with decent clothes on, as well as the look of surprise and jealousy on people's faces.

In comparison, O-lan refused Wang Lung's repeating advice of bringing a woman from that house to help with the birth fiercely. She wanted all of the people in that house to look up upon her, to see her as living a happy and affluent life. As a result, the last thing she wanted them to see was her real life without deliberate selection and decoration. Under this wish, she replied with strong emotions on hearing Wang Lung's proposal:

She turned on him as he had never seen her, her narrow eyes widened, her face stirred with dull anger.

"None in that house!" she cried out at him.⁷

Triggered by the thought of other maids from the old house seeing their real life and her sufferings in delivering the child, O-lan was unable to hold back her emotions and expressed her anger overtly. This reply also embodied O-lan's strong eagerness of earning back her "face".

3.1.2 Wang Lung's eagerness in gaining "face"

After coming back from the great house, O-lan brought back the news that the family is going to sell their land. Wang Lung immediately came up with the idea that he was going to buy a land from the great family. Although the land was far away from their house and they would have to "walk half the morning to reach it", the couple agreed on buying the land. When Wang Lung thought of buying the land from the great family, he pictured himself going to the house, buying the land with dignity:

He would be more than equal to these people in the foolish, great, wasteful house, He would go with the silver in his hand and he would say plainly, "I have money. What is the price of the earth you wish to sell?" Before the Old Lord he heard himself saying and to the Old Lord's agent, "Count me as anyone else. What is the fair price? I have it in my hand."⁸

This time, not the clothes they wear nor the appearance they bear gave the couple "face" and dignity in front of the old royal family, instead, the money they possessed gave them the power to have equal ability of purchasing a piece of their property. This purchase of land signified the rise of their social status. Just as Wang Lung thought, O-lan, who was once "a slave in the kitchens of the proud family", was now "wife to a man who owned a piece of the land that for generations had made the family great". The eagerness of gaining *mien-zi* made Wang Lung determined to purchase the land from the great family and afterwards, continue to buy more lands even in the time when they were not that affluent, which partly leads to the breakdown of the family in the famine.

⁷ The Good Earth, Chapter 3, page 35 of the PDF version.

⁸ The Good Earth, Chapter 5, page 47 of the PDF version.

3.1.3 Wang Lung's uncle threatened Wang Lung of ruining his "face"

In the novel, Wang Lung and his family not only cared about the gaining of "face", but also shared the risk that they may "lose face". If bad rumor spread in the village, the family will lose the confidence of their community, which is the thing they hoped to avoid at all costs. Wang Lung was once threatened by his uncle in the name of "face". The day before, after witnessing disgraceful acts of his girl cousin, Wang Lung came to his uncle's house and spoke out words of disrespect to his aunt in front of their neighbors. Wang Lung's uncle this to threaten Wang Lung into lending him money:

*"I will tell your words to the whole village!" screamed his uncle in a high cracked voice of fury. "Yesterday you attack my house and call aloud in the streets that my daughter is not a virgin; today you reproach me, who is your father passes on, must not from one of them would I hear such talk!"*⁹

On hearing these threatening words, Wang Lung knew that such accusation of his character will let his family lose the respect and trust of the whole village, for showing respect to old people was considered an important virtue by Chinese people. Wang Lung compromised and gave the money to his uncle, although he knew that those hard-earned money would be wasted in gambling.

3.2 Are these embodiment of "face" stereotypes or not?

From the analysis above, we could see that "face", a deeply rooted concept of Chinese culture, has played a unignorable role in people's lives. "Face" influences people's way of thinking and the choices they make. The next question is, are Buck's portraits of "face" the origin of new stereotypes imposed upon China? The answer should be no. Buck was able to lift the exotic, misty veil covered on Chinese people and reveal the human part of them. She done this firstly by dissecting the mindset behind Chinese people's protection of "face" through vivid depiction of mental activities, and secondly by showing us the influences of "face" on ordinary people's lives.

3.2.2 Dissecting the mindset behind "face"

Through exquisite description of the characters' words, thoughts and actions, Pearl Buck vividly dissected the mental activities of Chinese people behind their actions of protecting "face" and earning "face". When O-lan spoke loudly, fluently about her plan of going back to the great house, we could see from the detailedness of her plan that she had attached importance meaning to this visit. The brand-new clothes on her baby and herself, the special cakes she prepared as gifts but never let her own family have a taste of, were all important symbols that gave her "mien-zi" in front of the people in that house. They implied that she had live a happy and affluent life after leaving the house. In O-lan's mind, this visit is really important. If she could receive a glimpse of respect, admiration, or jealousy from those people, all these preparations would have been worth it.

Similarly, Wang Lung bought land again and again from the great family not just because buying land is a good investment to accumulate wealth, but also because he gained a feeling of "equality" when he was able to buy land from the great family. He earned his "face" and dignity from the great family that used to laugh at him on the day he got O-lan to his

⁹ The Good Earth, Chapter 7, page 53 of the PDF version.

house. To him, *mien-zi* was more important than other practical considerations like the location of the land. Earning “face” has a high priority. And when Wang Lung was threatened by his uncle, Buck wrote that “it touched his pride that this matter might indeed be called out before the village”. “Pride”, the feeling of having “face” and receiving respect from the community, is the key consideration behind his compromise to his uncle.

3.2.3 Revealing the influences of “face” on people’s lives

Buck not only dissected the mindset behind Chinese people’s protection of “face” in vivid descriptions, but also showed us the influences of “face” on people’s lives. “Face” is not just the abstract concept in Chinese people’s thoughts, but also an invisible power that constantly influences people’s decisions. It could lead to actions with little practical value, such as buying new clothes and making delicate cakes whose only purpose is to show off. It also leads to decisions that lack rational consideration and may not be the best choice. If Wang Lung chose to buy land near their house, he could save the energy of walking to his farmland. And if he bought less land after harvest started to decrease, he may save his family from suffering in the famine.

3.2.1 Comparative analysis with *Chinese Characteristics*

Arthur Smith, the missionary spreading Christian doctrines in China during the late 19th century and early 20th century, also wrote about “face” in the first chapter of *Chinese Characteristic*. Smith described “face” as a central part of Chinese culture and “the combination lock of many of the most important characteristics of the Chinese”. However, his explanation of “face” is based on the impression that “as a race the Chinese have a strong dramatic instinct”, and that the matter of “face” is “never of facts but always of forms”.¹⁰ For him, “face” is the Chinese way of action conducted merely in the consideration of forms, which makes it completely useless and impossible for westerners to understand.

We couldn’t deny the fact that Chinese people indeed attach too much importance to their external images in other people’s eyes, which could lead to negative influences on their lives. But I believe that to classify something you couldn’t fully understand as “dramatical” and believe it to be “unreasonable” would not be the best way to understand another race of human beings. Arthur Smith’s explanation of “face” is intended to build distinction between people of different cultural backgrounds, instead of finding the similarities in thought and feelings that unite us altogether as human beings.

On the contrary, Pearl Buck showed us in her depiction of “face” an attempt to understand Chinese people’s thoughts and cultural backgrounds. She understood those concerns of “pride”, “sense of equality” and “showing off”, although they are insignificant in her own culture. She didn’t exoticized Chinese people but explained to westerners where those cultural differences come from. I believe it is these different ways of thinking that lead to Buck and Smith’s different understanding of Chinese “face” concept.

4. Conclusion

Pearl Buck described Chinese people’s emotions and considerations behind their actions of “protecting face” and “earning face” and showed us the influences of “face” on ordinary people’s lives. Similar to other scholars’ attempt to better understand Chinese culture, Buck

¹⁰ Chinese Characteristics, Chapter 1, page 16-18.

successfully portrayed the human part of Chinese people's characters and built a way of communication between China and western cultures.

Through her vivid description of Chinese people's thoughts and actions, Buck revealed to us what "face" is in Chinese culture and how it influenced Chinese people's decisions. But we couldn't deny that the influences of "face", a strong power that has governed Chinese people's thoughts and choices for centuries, is almost impossible to remove at that time in Chinese society. It's understandable that the characters in the novel take actions under the consideration of "face". However, discovering the motives concerning "face" behind Chinese people's actions would be meaningful if we want to help Chinese nation amplify the good side of "face" and minimize its unreasonable components. In a word, having better understanding of "face" may help our society move forward, even in today's world.