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In a minor skirmish in the history wars, or what might be called “ashes diplomacy,” Chinese authorities finally allowed the ashes of America’s last ambassador to China before 1949, John Leighton Stuart (1876-1964), to be [interred next to the graves of his parents in Hangzhou](#), the southern Chinese city where he was born.

Earlier this fall, local authorities in Zhenjiang, a city on the Yangzi known for its vinegar, opened a [Pearl Buck Museum](#) in the house where Buck (1892-1973) spent most of her first eighteen years. The ashes of another historic figure, Edgar Snow (1905-1971), are divided between the Hudson River and a spot by the Nameless Lake on the campus of Beijing University, which had been the campus of Yenching University. Leighton Stuart was president when Snow taught there in the 1930s.



Buck at home in Zhenxiang as a child

Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931) and Snow’s *Red Star Over China* (1937) were the two most influential American books on China before the war, but Stuart was the most eminent American in China in these years. He built Yenching from a parochial missionary seminary in 1919 into China’s most illustrious private university, spent the war years in a Japanese internment camp, and became American ambassador to China in 1946.



Buck Museum Zhenjiang

Stuart and Buck had much in common. Both were both raised in provincial Yangzi valley cities by missionary parents; both learned Chinese before English; both returned to China as missionaries but declined to follow the proselytizing strategies of their fathers; both felt that they were at least as much Chinese as American; and both were devastated when their two countries went to war in 1950. Snow came to Shanghai 1929 and soon decided to make China his career.

All three played roles in an informal but real American Raj in China partly modeled on the British Raj in India and partly reacting against its imperial arrogance and racism.

This Raj developed in the early twentieth century after the Boxer Rebellion provoked not only a ruthless allied intervention but also the Open Door

notes. Diplomatically, the Open Door asked the other great powers to maintain free trade in their zones of influence; culturally, the Open Door echoed the famous goals President McKinley set for colonial rule in the Philippines: "To uplift, civilize, and Christianize." The Open Door Raj assumed that when the doors were open and restraints removed, China would naturally follow the American path to democracy, prosperity and Christianity.

By the 1920s diplomats, missionaries, soldiers, and entrepreneurs had developed a Sino-American web of America-in-China schools, colleges, missions, hospitals, newspapers, businesses, and government advisers protected by extraterritoriality and gunboats. Many "mishkids" went to the States for college before coming home to China for their careers, as did Chinese "returned students" recruited through American schools or businesses.

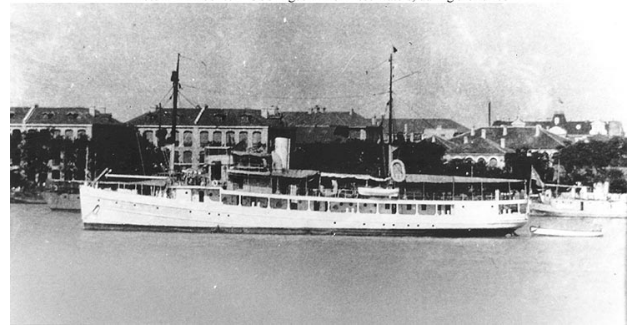
Both Chinese and Americans of the Raj were interpreters who presented or maybe created China for Americans. Henry Luce grew up in a mission compound in Shandong, but after graduating from Yale in 1918 stayed on to found Time Magazine, a major support for Chiang Kai-shek. Starting with Yung Wing, who graduated from Yale in 1854, Chinese students recruited through mission schools came to American colleges (though the country soon put an end to Chinese immigration). Owen Lattimore, raised in Tianjin, saw from his

travels in Central Asia that frontier interactions were basic, not peripheral, in the historical formation of China. The diplomats John Paton Davies and John S. Service, both raised in Sichuan, returned to China in the 1920s to join the Foreign Service and eventually take the blame for “the loss of China.” [1]

Buck and Stuart returned after college in spite of doubts. Stuart later wrote that it was “difficult to exaggerate the aversion I had developed against going to China as a missionary.” Unlike the missionaries he grew up with (one of whom was Pearl Buck’s father), he had no tolerance for “haranguing crowds of idle, curious people in street chapels or temple fairs, selling tracts for almost nothing, being regarded with amused or angry contempt by the native population, physical discomforts or hardships, etc.” [2]

China’s nationalism after World War I transformed the Open Door Raj. Chiang Kai-shek’s 1926-1927 Northern Expedition sparked anti-imperialist violence which many westerners saw as the return of Boxer xenophobia. Pearl Buck and her family were rescued from Nanjing on a U.S. Navy ship left over from the Spanish-American War, and then spent a year in Japan. Because of this first hand view, during the war she opposed demonizing the Japanese as a people. Many missionaries never returned to their China posts after the war, but those who chose to stay had to come to terms with the new Nationalist government.

Photo # NH 68209 USS Pigeon in Chinese waters, during the 1920s



USS Pigeon

Yenching, in Stuart’s vision, was to be a Western liberal arts university with Chinese characteristics, that is, not a missionary school but a Christian one. Christianity, after all, was universal, not American. In the 1920s the university stayed independent of the government but established its nationalist credentials by recruiting the finest Chinese scholars, innovating the study of China’s classics with modern scholarly techniques, and engaging students in patriotic service to produce a cosmopolitan middle class with responsibility for the new nation. In fact, however, perhaps the nation in Stuart’s imagining resembled the architecture of the Yenching library, a western structure with Chinese touches.



Yenching Library

The vision in the writing that Buck produced in China was remarkably similar to Yenching's vision. Both embraced China's cultural autonomy and claimed a right to participate in China's nationalism; both opposed revolution, which they neutralized by defining it as violence and destruction; both justified gradual change by rooting it in tradition.

The Good Earth is a more political novel than readers at home realized. Wang Lung "the farmer," as Buck calls her protagonist, dramatized her skepticism about the missions of three men who each wanted to change China. The first was her father's evangelical mission; the second was the scientific uplift mission of her agronomist husband, John Lossing Buck; and the third was the peasant revolutionary mission of Mao Zedong, whose 1927 Autumn Harvest Uprising took place only a few hundred miles from where she wrote.

A committed feminist, Buck does present the farm family as oppressively patriarchal, but she does not preach. China had to change on its own, with no mention of Christianity. What is more striking is that even in the face of mass starvation and political chaos, Buck refused to entertain the need for technology, land reform, or breaking the power of rural elites. Her construction of a key turning point in the plot is a major failure of intellectual responsibility. After drought has driven the family to the big city, Wang finally regains his land by luck, not by solving structural problems: Wang is just fine using the wisdom and hoes of his ancestors. [3]

Home on furlough in 1932, Buck asked a luncheon of mission supporters at New York's Astor Hotel "is there a place for foreign missions?" She was nearly put on trial for heresy when she complained that America had sent missionaries "so coarse and insensitive among a sensitive and cultivated people that my heart has fairly bled with shame. I can never have done with my apologies to the Chinese people that in the name of a gentle Christ we have sent such people to them." She soon left China and her husband to return permanently to the States. [4]

The invasions of the 1930s transformed China's patriotic agenda from one of fighting western imperialism to one of resisting Japan. Americans in China were now allies not imperialists. Edgar Snow moved to Beijing, where he taught journalism part time at Yenching.

President Stuart asked him to prepare lectures on fascism in the world and he also edited an anthology of short stories which Buck arranged to have published by her new husband, Richard Walsh. *Red Star Over China* (1937) fit into the new patriotic agenda by reconceptualizing China as a country where popular nationalism, even revolution, were essential in order to fight Japan. Neither Yenching nor Buck is mentioned in the book, perhaps because neither promoted this agenda.

Buck's anti-imperialism is dramatized in twin biography-memoirs of her parents published in 1936. These are among the most deeply thoughtful and arresting books written about the American experience in China, and I am mystified that they have been out of print for so long. *The Exile*, drafted just after her mother died in 1921, tells her mother's story. In this version, her father, dedicated to "the Work," scarcely recognized the existence of his wife or family and failed to understand a perilous, unyielding China which yielded him few converts for a lifetime of proselytizing. Her mother, with her humanistic religion based in the arts of everyday life, changed the hearts of her neighbors and Chinese friends. She learned from China yet regretted coming as a missionary, wishing she had instead stayed at home to civilize her own people. *Fighting Angel*, written in 1936, told her father's story but condemned his mission as "imperialism of the spirit" and as part of the "astounding imperialisms of the West." These two stories explain her

withdrawal from China to become a missionary who tackled the racism, sexism, and imperialism of her own country. [5]

The Pacific War destroyed the Open Door Raj; Japan's defeat changed China's agenda back to what it had been in the 1920s: nationalism and anti-imperialism. When he was named Ambassador to China, he could speak Chiang Kai-shek's Zhejiang patois but Stuart could not get the Nationalists to reform or negotiate a settlement with the Communists, a number of whose leaders were Yenching graduates. In the end, his insider status and American power were irrelevant.



John Leighton Stuart and Zhou Enlai, 1945

Mao wrote famously and unfairly in 1949

Leighton Stuart is a symbol of the complete defeat of U.S. policy of aggression. Leighton Stuart is an American born in China; he has fairly wide social connections and

spent many years running missionary schools in China; he once sat in a Japanese gaol during the War of Resistance; he used to pretend to love both the United States and China and was able to deceive quite a number of Chinese.... [6]

When Stuart returned to the US, Cold War America, like Mao, was hostile to the idea that someone could love both countries. Almost forgotten, Stuart died in 1964 without seeing China again.

Edgar Snow and Pearl Buck did not fare much better. Snow moved to Switzerland and continued to write about China, returning to China in 1960 and then for the last time in 1970. Buck was suspect because of her racial liberalism and anti-imperialism but generally moved on to less provocative (and more lucrative) topics. With the Korean War in mind, she wrote in her 1954 memoir, *My Several Worlds*: "Over and over again in recent years Americans have said to me with real sadness that they cannot understand why the Chinese hate us 'when we have done so much for them.' Actually, of course, we have done nothing for them. They did not ask us to send missionaries nor did they seek our trade." [7]



Snow and Mao Zedong in 1936

When Snow was dying of pancreatic cancer, just before Richard Nixon's 1972 trip to China, Zhou Enlai dispatched a team of doctors to his Swiss home, but when Buck applied for a visa to China, she received a letter explaining that "in view of the fact that for a long time you have in your works taken an attitude of distortion, smear, and vilification towards the people of China and its leaders, I am authorized to inform you that we cannot accept your request for a visit to China." Buck directed that her gravestone have no English, only her name in Chinese characters. [8]



Buck grave

The return of Stuart's ashes and the opening of the Pearl Buck Museum have something to do with local autonomy and tourist dollars, but they also are part of a new nationalism which, at least when it is not in panic mode, is more relaxed and eclectic. China's patriotic hall of fame now includes strange team-mates: Confucius, Buddha, the Qianlong Emperor, and the basketball player Yao Ming. Once the American Raj in China followed the British Raj in India onto the [ash heap of history](#), this nationalism could eventually accept not only Edgar Snow, who favored Mao's revolution, but also Pearl Buck and John Leighton Stuart, who doubted Mao but loved China.

The experiences of Buck, Stuart, and Snow suggest pointers for understanding today's frustrated nationalism in South Asia and the Middle East: national self-determination comes before all else; the need for flexibility in dealing with insults and outrages; the futility of enforcing liberal values militarily; and the benefits

of allowing time to pass.

NOTES

[1] "The Open Door Raj: Chinese-American Cultural Relations, 1900-1945," in Warren I. Cohen, ed., *Pacific Passages* (Columbia University Press, 1995): 139-162; William T. Rowe, "Owen, Lattimore, Asia, and Comparative History," *Journal of Asian Studies* 66.3 (2007): 759-786.

[2] Quoted in Philip West, *Yenching University and Sino-Western Relations, 1916-1972* (Harvard University Press 1976): 24, from John Leighton Stuart, *Fifty Years in China: The Memoirs of John Leighton Stuart, Missionary and Ambassador* (New York: Random House, 1954).

[3] Charles W. Hayford, "What's So Bad About The Good Earth?" *Education About Asia* 3.3 (December 1998): 4-7. www.aasianst.org/EAA/hayford.htm

[4] Pearl S. Buck, "Is There a Case for Foreign Missions?" *Harper's* 166 (1933): 144.

[5] *Fighting Angel* (New York: John Day, 1936; reprinted, Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2008): 76, 302.

[6] "Farewell, Leighton Stuart!" *Selected*

Works Volume IV (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1969): 433-440

[7] Pearl S. Buck, *My Several Worlds* (John Day, 1954): 199-200.

[8] Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1996): 373

forthcoming) and *Fighting Angel* (New York: John Day, 1936; reprinted Norwalk, CT: EastBridge Press, *forthcoming*).

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