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An Appeal for Legitimacy: A Reflection on the Autobiographies of Pearl S. Buck and Han Suyin*

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Abstract: World renowned authors Pearl S Buck (1892-1973) and Han Suyin (1917-2012) were both raised in China and had written extensively about the people and events of the land. Their autobiographies thus served as valuable references for modern China history. Many scholars have taken an interest in their literature due to their unique background as well as their gender. The proponents of post-Colonialism and feminism may suggest that Pearl’s and Han’s autobiographies were making political appeals, which could be divisive in nature. However, a closer textual reading of their texts denotes that their literatures were actually advocating mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence between the East and the West. This paper will examine the legitimacy issue, which is closely tied with the dilemmas, choices and identities of the characters in their autobiographies via the Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC). The implications of their autobiographies pave the way towards exploration of critical questions such as whether there would be a legitimate place for individuals of “otherness,” whether a people has the right to choose their own destiny, and whether a developing nation could earn the right to self-determine her own modernisation.

Key Terms: Legitimacy, Ethical Literary Criticism, East-West conflicts, Pearl S. Buck, Han Suyin, 20th century China

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1. Introduction

The twentieth century was an era of tremendous socio-political change in the East. It was a century of revolutions, and a time when colonial countries in the Southeast Asia revolted against imperialism. Prior to that, China had begun exploring a new national trajectory. As the result of the Opium War, Arrow War and the Boxer Uprising, concessions and unequal treaties were signed with other countries. Foreign powers, namely the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan and Russia thus forced their rights upon China to divide this kingdom into slices of wealth that they could plunder. The foreign community occupied the respective concessions, living in exclusive comforts behind barred walls. They ran their respective legal and socio-economic systems in the newly “borrowed” land. The way of life of the common people in China, the once glorious “land of gold” in the eyes of Marco Polo, altered since that era. It turned into a unique land of East-West coexistence, but on the biased terms demanded by the West. Interesting issues of legitimacy surfaced, with the Chinese locals and the foreign occupants each holding firm to their own sets of presuppositions. In everyday interactions, ethnic and national conflicts occurred frequently. In some extreme cases, even lives were at stake. This paper draws attention to the dilemma, choice and identity issues pertaining to the struggle over legitimacy that are prevalent in the autobiographies of two important authors who lived and wrote about China during this era: Pearl S Buck (1892-1973) and Han Suyin (1917-2012).

Many read Buck’s and Han’s literature through the lenses of post-colonialism or feminism—approaches that are prone to intertwine with either implicit or explicit political agenda. The writers of this paper find those approaches divisive, as the polarisation between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed” (post-colonialism), or the “overpowering male” and the “marginalised females” (feminism), as well as the focus of the human rights issue are unnecessary at times. In fact, contrary to Post-Colonialism that creates disparity between oneself and the “Other,” both Pearl Buck and Han Suyin expressively present their aspired concept of a more harmonious and sensible global community. With regard to feminism, while Buck’s literature might be construed as feminist in nature, Han’s tone has leaned towards being more “matronly” than feminist in her literature. Hence, this article chooses to examine the autobiographies of both authors via the Ethical Literary Criticism.
Dilemma, choice and identity are categories that relate to the ethical relationship of an individual with his or her environment. An ethical dilemma refers to the unsettling situation whereby a certain individual is unable to resolve his/her problem without having to make a choice between two mutually exclusive options. An ethical choice is the decision that one has to make while exercising one’s natural or rational will over all considerable options in solving one’s problem. An idea closely related to a person’s ethnic identity namely, an identity that is viewed by an individual or the others as belonging to a certain ethnic group, is a person’s ethical identity. Ethical identity is a self-perceived and/or other-perceived identity that a person has in relation with other human beings. The ethical aspect of personal identity, and not the psychological nor the biological aspects, is the main focus in a narrative. It is said so because the “narrative criterion of personal identity” is concerned with the incorporated self-told story of a person’s life, which comprises the person’s actions, experiences and emotional states in the past, present and foreseeable future. The abovementioned, the ethical dilemma, ethical choice, as well as the ethical identity, are also core terms embedded within Ethical Literary Criticism.

Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC) is a refinement of the ethical criticism of the West by Professor Zhen Zhao Nie of China (Nie, 2012:33-48). This approach revisits and emphasizes ethics as an important yardstick in literary criticism, for ethics along with aesthetics form the essence of a timeless literature. Ethics without aesthetics makes a literature turgid and mundane. On the contrary, writing that is aesthetic without ethics gives the story little value. In other words, ethics may carry a weight that no other criteria could ever supersede in literary criticism. “The value of world literature is not its power to entertain, but its function to facilitate the understanding of human life and society in the light of social ethics” (Nie, 2012:3-15). Nie also contends that ethics is the mother of literature, on which the tradition of the Greco-European literature is based upon. Nie purports that even as the greatest world literature evokes the common experience of man’s desire for moral perfection, today’s literary critics prefer promoting literature with a positive social message, which could inspire better spiritual life for mankind. In brief, ELC seeks to discover and unfold timeless values in literature through close textual observation. Its method of analysis focuses on unravelling the intertwining ethical complexities within the simulated world of humans in literature.
2. Pearl S. Buck and Han Suyin

The backdrop of both Buck’s and Han’s autobiographies is the 20th century China, which is generally viewed as a time of great turbulence. Foreign powers revitalised the age-old complacent China, causing the rise of Chinese nationalism and rapid modernisation. The unique pattern of East-West coexistence of the era, which was biased on the terms demanded by the West upon China, resulted in some unprecedented issues pertaining to ethics, namely, the issues of legitimacy. Ethnic and national conflicts occurred frequently as the Chinese locals and the foreign occupants each held firm to their own sets of presuppositions. The mere presence of “foreign” women and foreign community in China during that time was in itself a social stigma.

Nobel-prize winner Pearl S Buck was the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries Absalom Sydenstricker and Caroline Stulting who had chosen to dedicate their life serving the Chinese people even after the Chinese repulsive revolts against the foreigners following the Boxer Uprising.Growing up in the interior area of Huai’an and Zhenjiang, China, Buck recollected that she was born “quite accidentally” in West Virginia (Buck, 1955:2). That was when her physically very weak mother took the doctor’s advice to recuperate in West Virginia after losing three of her children to tropical diseases. After three months of maternity leave, however, the mother and baby travelled back to China. China was the very land that Buck’s parents had chosen to dedicate their life to, and were eventually interred there too. While the majority of foreigners lived indifferently in luxurious homes in the concessions, Buck’s parents chose to live meagrely among the local Chinese. From a young age, Buck was taught by her parents to see the Chinese people as equals. Thus, Buck was raised in the Chinese neighbourhood, thinking and behaving just like her Chinese counterparts: “... I did not consider myself a white person in those days. Even though I knew I was not altogether Chinese” (Buck, 1955:10). Still, the dilemma was that Buck was fully aware of her two centuries of ancestry on the other side of the globe. When she was sent home to join Randolph-Macon Woman’s College in Lynchburg, Virginia, for her undergraduate studies, she realised that she was at her other “home” that her family originated from, yet it was unfamiliar to her, in particular, America.
Thus I grew up in a double world, the small white clean Presbyterian American world of my parents and the big loving merry not-too-clean Chinese world, and there was no communication between them. When I was in the Chinese world I ate as the Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts and feelings. When I was in the American world, I shut the door between. (Buck, 1955:10)

When Buck was sent to Virginia to attend college, it was the height of Chinese aggression against the foreigners. Upon the completion of college, Buck chose consciously to return to China for a teaching job. Rejoining her parents in China was the most sensible thing for her, as she did not have close relatives in America except her married brother and grandparents. In 1917, she married John Lossing Buck, who was an agricultural economist missionary. The couple first resided in Suzhou, Anhui Province, which is described in her book *The Good Earth and Sons*. They then became lecturers at University of Nanking and lived on the university campus. The Bucks had a daughter, Carol, who was afflicted with phenylketonuria. The demise of Buck’s mother in 1921, the pressure of securing long-term care for Carol, coupled with Buck’s relationship with her book publisher Richard Walsh resulted in the separation of Buck and her husband. Buck left China in 1921, officially divorced John in 1935, and later married Richard Walsh. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938, and was greatly praised by the awarding committee for paving the way to “a human sympathy passing over widely separated racial boundaries” as well as setting the ideals to “a great and living art of portraiture...” As a fan of Chinese classics and translator of *All Men Are Brothers*, Buck continued to lobby for appreciation of the Chinese culture and Chinese people in the West. She wrote extensively on Asian cultures, advocating the rights of women and minority groups. She was also vocal regarding the welfare of Asian and mixed race children. Buck’s autobiographies include *My Several Worlds* (1954) and *A Bridge of Passing* (1961). *My Several Worlds* depicted Buck’s dilemma as both an observer and resident in China. *A Bridge of Passing* was the “post-China” chapter of her life, depicting her grief while battling the sheer loneliness of her widowhood in Japan.

About two decades after Pearl S Buck won the Nobel Prize with her outstanding literary representation of livelihood in interior China, China-born Eurasian physician Dr Han Suyin seized the world’s attention with her popular semi-autobiographical novel *A Many
Splendoured Thing (1955). The storyline of the novel, which depicted an unprecedented romance between a Eurasian female doctor and a White male war-correspondent, inspired an Oscar-award winning film with an identical title, “Love is a Many-Splendoured Thing.” China’s close door policy during the 1949-1970 added a sheen of mysterious romanticism to the subject matter in Han’s work. Born and raised in Chengdu China by her Hakka father, a kindred daughter of China, Han published an extensive six-volume autobiography that entailed the story of her Eurasian family as well as her own accounts of modern China history from 1885 through 1991. The six volumes were: The Crippled Tree (1965), A Mortal Flower (1966), Birdless Summer (1968), My House has Two Doors (1980), Phoenix Harvest (1980), and Wind in My Sleeves (1992).

3. Legitimacy Defined

Legitimacy is a delicate terminology, especially in the post-modern age when relativism and subjectivity are more cherished. Questions regarding the criteria for judgment of legitimacy would always exist. Besides, there are also questions regarding the legitimacy of the very party or authority that determines the demarcation between the legitimate and the illegitimate on a subject matter. The discussion here is not about legitimacy in the legal sense. Instead, it is examined primarily from the socio-political aspects. Politically, legitimacy is defined as:

A moral bond between the citizen and the state: to the degree that this bond exists, most members of the polity see their political institutions as morally proper for their society and they feel that there is an obligation to obey the incumbents of those institutions. (Busch, 1974:1)

Socially and culturally, the idea of “norm” or “custom” defines the boundaries of one’s conduct and choices in a given community. Legitimacy could be affirmed when a person or a matter passed the validation by members of his or her community. On the other hand, illegitimacy occurs when a person or a matter violates the acceptable order of the world. When most individuals in the community feel morally obligated to comply with a certain
convention or a body of legitimacy, they will define and enforce their own sets of social imperatives. In doing so, some would assume the role of custodians of the shared cultures and values, thriving hard to empower certain codes of behaviour among members of the community. Besides, the entire community of legitimacy will knowingly or unknowingly form social stigmas against the unwelcome persons or behaviours amidst them. When there are cases of taboo-breaking or illegitimate practices, the misfits may face any form of punishment ranging from physical to emotional sanctions by the entire community where the person is from. Discrimination, hatred and rejection are common reactions against an individual who has accidentally or deliberately challenged the common way of life in his or her community. For instance, during the pre-World War era, single women or the "spinsters" were the odd ones who faced embarrassing social antagonism. Yet another example is the Anti-miscegenation Laws that were not officially executed, but morally and logically supported in order to warn violators throughout the United States before 1967. In extreme cases, people with identities or conduct that are clashing with the community may even face threats of death by their opponents in power. The history of man is unfortunately filled with such tragedies. Examples include the death decrees issued by Tokugawa Shogunate during the 17th century against a sizeable Japanese community that chose to be Christians despite the fact that their lives were at stake, the despicable killings of the African Americans by the Ku Klux Klan during the 19th century, and many other atrocities. In doing so, the custodians of cultures and society took the issues of legitimacy and justice into their own hands. They openly persecuted the convicted, and were impetuous in committing crimes that they could easily dismiss with justifiable arguments. The most logical defence they could give was their acts were done in fulfilling their role in maintaining or restoring the social order that they "all" have always been accustomed to.

Both authors in our discussion—Han Suyin and Pearl S Buck—experienced different issues related to the legitimacy or illegitimacy of their very existence, the raison d'être, as well as many dilemmas in their identity and choices. Members of their respective family suffered ridicules, alienation, revulsion and even death. Both Han and Buck asked soul-searching questions regarding the legitimacy of their existence, the prospect of their community life and their sense of belonging. Given who they were, had they lived in the right place at the right time? Culturally and physically, where would their roots be? While
reconciling themselves with their difficult past experience of being ill-treated by the environment they were in, both authors managed to express their acute observations and reflections over the destiny of the Chinese people. China was where they both thought they belonged, but they eventually lived in countries other than China. As a guest and felicitated personality, Han frequented China with short visits. Buck, however, was refused entry when China opened her doors to US President R. Nixon in 1971.

3.1. Ethical Dilemma: Where should my legitimate homeland be?

Where then is the legitimate homeland for a person who is confused about his or her identity and sense of belonging? Both Pearl Buck and Han Suyin developed a cognitive as well as ethical dilemma with regard to where their “homeland” is supposed to be. Or rather, were they even in a position to choose where their legitimate home could be?

For Buck, China was home, but there had always been another “dream” home at another side of the globe, namely the America. From childhood and through her adolescence, she had questions regarding where her legitimate home would be. It was not until 1934 when she left China for New York for good in order to care for her special needs child and to end her first marriage that Buck finally chose America as her permanent home. As for Han, a Eurasian and half-Chinese due to her Chinese Father, China had always been her birth country and the “fatherland” where she was raised. Though she finally resided in Switzerland, she had always perceived China as her home country. Rather than assuming the role of an observer of China’s socio-politics, Han spoke and wrote like a Chinese in diaspora. Han practically advocated a new perspective of global citizenship. She wanted her “roots” to extend and expand to the whole world so that the entire globe would be her “home.”

Let us first examine the possible place where Pearl S. Buck could call home. Buck was born in West Virginia, in her grandparents’ home, the Stultings. Interestingly, her parents Absalom and Caroline did not expect it to be so, for they had chosen China as their mission field and new homeland for the family. The two were ready to live the rest of their lives serving the Chinese people of China. They remained loyal to their vocation until their last breaths. Due to her parents’ unique choice of their new home, Buck who was born in West Virginia, was brought to China when she was only three months’ old. Hence, for Buck, China was the real or actual world, in comparison to her birth country America. Before her college
years, America was always a “dream world” for her—distant and unknown to her personal experience, probably “fantastically beautiful” and seemingly inhabited by a people who was entirely good (Buck, 1955:3). The dilemma was, however, that probably due to the content of her home-school curriculum, Buck consciously perceived America as her “own land” and the “land of her fathers” (Buck, 1955:36). In fact, probably during her adolescence, Buck started to accept the “alien” label that the Chinese people had given her. When it was so, China, the “home” for Buck then became the “alien China”:

When my parents took me back to China with them, I went back knowing where they had come from, and so where I had come from, and we were not a solitary little group lost in a vast and alien China, alien now because the Chinese did not love white people and had killed many of our kind. No, we were Americans, and I had a country of my own, and a big white house where my kinsfolk lived, and there were generations of us there, all belonging together. (Buck, 1955:49)

The alienation and discrimination by the local Chinese were instrumental in shaping Buck’s ethnic identity as an American, and a non-Chinese. Interestingly, after her college years, she was still consciously calling China her “home.” The dilemma was obvious. Where was home for Buck? Perhaps, home was where her heart was. The fact that her father and her ailing mom chose to remain in China made America a nominal “home,” but China was still perceived as the real home. “I was glad I had chosen to come home (to China) and I was sure that I had decided rightly to leave America. (But) It was not so much China that I chose. It was my mother’s life.” (Buck, 1955:113).

If socio-political upheavals were not in the way, Buck would have remained in China, as her parents did. However, due the evolving political events in China, it dawned on Buck that “the gates of Asia” would close quickly against her and her kind, and that there would be a day in the near future that she would need to “return” to America. With that, she asked herself how a person’s “home” should be defined.

There was always something tragic, though I did not know it then, in the word “home”, used by white men far from home. Wherever these lived, in whatever country of Asia, with or without their wives and children, they spoke of their
native lands as “home”. In India one would meet Englishmen who at eighteen had been sent there by their parents to seek a fortune, and had never once gone back, and though they were grey-headed and surely had established homes of some sort for themselves, yet they spoke of England as “home”. And saddest of all, if they had Indian wives or merely lived with Indian women, was to hear the little half-Indian children call England “home”, although they could never be at home there, or in India, either. There were such children in Chinkiang, too, and while my mother insisted that we never speak of them as anything but English or American, as their fathers were, yet I knew they knew that for them “home” was nowhere. I felt this plight so heartily sorrowful that I almost thought it wicked for me to be so lucky as to be wholly an American, my parents insuring all my blood. (Buck, 1955:69).

Besides analysing her idea of “home,” Buck also probed another closely related word—the word “root.” After her home in Shanghai was ransacked and torched by local attackers, the family had to flee for their lives. Buck said that her “roots were abruptly pulled up,” and never again she could put them down so deeply. “I cannot advise the deliberate wooing of such a mood... Anyone who has lost all his habitual environment by sudden violence will know what I mean...” (Buck, 1955:249). For Buck, China had always been more than a dwelling place. China is home, but a home that she would lose eventually. Before leaving Shanghai to seek refuge in Japan, she was extremely disorientated:

I wanted to go somewhere into high mountains, where there were few people, and if possible no one that I knew, and where I could review all that had happened to me and see what it meant that I had been pulled up by the roots. What did one do with roots that were no good any more, and were roots necessary, after all? If not, why put them down again? (Buck, 1955:250).

Being a victim of the Chinese aggression, and the target of expulsion exercises executed by members of the Communist then, Buck was forced to adopt a new idea of who she was in the context of the evolving new China. She was nothing more than a “foreigner,” a “bystander” or observer (Buck, 1955:289). She felt that she was ill-prepared for her “home-
going" to America, which her parents had left in 1880. Even though America was after all, where she originated from, it was debatable whether her presence in America would cause her a "reversed" cultural or simply a cultural shock for the first time, as China was her "home" since youth. Since there was no other option than leaving China, her dilemma was eventually solved—she would have to make America her home. She would live legitimately with no need to expel her from the land anymore: "In so large a land it would be easy merely to choose a pleasant spot to call my home and there to spend my life in various gentle interests... I wanted to be an American in the fullest sense of the word." (Buck, 1955:311). After 1934, Buck settled well in America. Her dream homeland became her permanent address. Her childhood years in China, her "real" home then, became a memory of the past. "Alien" China became the object of her concern throughout her life. As an observer, educator and novelist, Buck favoured the topic on China and the Chinese people. However, due to her pro-nationalist and anti-Communist fervour, she was not granted permission to visit China ever again by the Chinese government of New China—not even when President Nixon was invited to pay a visit to the post-Cold War era China in 1971. There was little possibility for her to get through the ethical dilemma regarding the illegitimacy of her attempt to re-enter China, especially as she considered China the motherland that she had grown up in and was still emotionally attached to.

Contrary to Buck, Eurasian Han Suyin whose father was Hakka Chinese, found it much easier to define her homeland. Han denoted "home" as the idea of one's "family." She said, "A man's life begins with his ancestors and is continued in his descendants. My father's life, and after my father my own life, begins with the Family..." (Han, The Crippled Tree, 1972:19) For her, the family, including the extended family, formed the eco-system for one to thrive in a certain environment. Though having the parentage of a Belgian mother, Han placed herself in the genealogy of her father and her extended Chinese kins. In The Crippled Tree, Han conveyed from the point of view of her father that it was a mistake of the family to have sent her elder brother to Europe during his early childhood. She claimed that "without the Family; there was no place for him in China." She reasoned that when one who had no strong sense of "the family," which referred to both one's biological and patriarchal family, one would have no sense of belonging to a "home." When it was so, one's next generation would also suffer the labyrinth of rootlessness. "...when we took him away, we did not know
we were condemning him and his children...” (Han, 277).

Though describing her family tree as “the crippled tree,” Han was fairly proud of her half-Chinese identity, the Hakkas in Szechuan. Han said, “The tree is known by its roots. I had to go back to the roots.” (Han, 17). “Root” was a term that she used frequently when discussing her idea of “home.” For her, “The future begins yesterday, for the tree as well as for man.” (Han, 17). One could build one’s life as far as one might want to go, but the reference point would always be one’s origin. Not being in good terms with her European mother, Han saw herself more as the daughter of her father, a descendant of the Hakkas. As a Eurasian who endured the awkwardness of being a displaced person in her own birth country, it was rather interesting that she saw a somewhat similar displacement in the origins of her father. She felt that her father’s clan, the Hakkas, were also “Guest People,” for they were but a sect of displaced peasants who were moving en masse, seeking “a roof” over their heads (Han, 17). According to Han, the Hakkas were migratory in nature, yet they preserved a strong sense of attachment to the land. For instance, they never failed to bury their ancestors on the land they dwelt in. When migrating, they would take along their ancestors’ bones, or ancestors’ clothes or belongings in cases where the bones could not be unearthed. The custom of taking along the ancestor’s bones, as Han delineated, was probably founded on the idea of land acquisition, so that one could make a claim to their new settlement. The deliberate reference to the etymology and the geographical movement of the Hakka clan reflected an ethical dilemma that Han faced meaning she would always remain a “guest,” never a host in her own country.

Still, Han had no doubt about her self-assurance of her “Chinese root.” Since the root was defined, Han would always regard China as her legitimate homeland even when she later married and dwelt abroad (Han, My House Has Two Doors, 1982:433, 37, 202 and 197). In this respect, Han is similar to Buck, in seeing the generations of “ancestral home” or the inherited land from their great grand-fathers as their legitimate “homeland.” Hence, when compared to Buck, Han had a clearer self-identification and disposition of where her “home” was. She thus expressed a clearer sense of being “homesick” when she felt that she was missing her locus of comfort. In A Mortal Flower, she resented the peaceful life she was enjoying while studying medicine in Belgium. Even the romance with her boyfriend Louis could not fill the vacuum in her heart. “Are you ill?” “Yes.” “What is it?” “I was homesick.” (Han, A Mortal Flower, 1972:338). She was debating whether to end her medical studies in
Belgium and return to China during the impending war with the Japanese:

The tranquil years in Belgium were at an end for me, I had to go back to China; to go back against all reason, against all logic... But going back meant giving up medicine, at least for a while, and I so much wanted to be a doctor; but I could not imagine staying six more years away from China. "I shall die here of homesickness." (Han, 1972:340)

Han finally left her ideal boyfriend Louis, withdrew herself from the medical school that she was very passionate about, and went on her "journey home." There was no doubt that at the thought of going "home," Han’s heart would leap like those Manchurian soldiers singing in their military school:

My home is on the Sungari river,
There are the most beautiful flowers and trees
The loveliest fields of golden wheat.
There is my home ... (Han, 274).

Many years later, when Han became an overseas "Chinese," she proposed the idea of a "spiritual home." She started to see clearly that she might have become a citizen of another country, but China could remain as her homeland, and her spiritual home (Han, My House Has Two Doors, 1982:75). In fact, during her few years in Hong Kong, she saw Hong Kong as her "asylum" and temporary home. For her, Hong Kong was the gateway to China. She wanted to go back to China when the political situation allowed her to. That was also one of the unresolved hurdles between her and her lover, Australian war correspondent Ian Morrison. Given the constraint of the time, he would not be able to build a home with Han once she had a chance to return to China for good. Life, however, took a different turn than what Han anticipated. Her lover, Ian, died while reporting at the war front in Korea. She remarried twice, left the medical profession and turned into an author and international speaker for the rest of her life. China was undoubtedly Han’s first love, her "only religion" and spiritual reference. At the same time, a notion of global citizenship blossomed in her. Han started to call the whole world her home. Her larger-than-life international presence made her roots extend beyond herself. Her tenacity and will power helped to triumph over
life challenges, and Han was able to attain closure to her ethical dilemma regarding homeland:

I have pursued my beautiful chimera with Chinese obstinacy; yet I have not ignored or cast away other gifts of living, other lands and peoples... Neither do I forget how much Europe and America, Australia and India, Southeast Asia and so many other lands gave me, enlarging my horizons, until the whole world became my home, until my roots extended and broadened to encompass the round earth. (Han, Phoenix Harvest, 1985:313).

3.2. Ethical Choice: What if our own way of modernisation is legitimate?

In Buck's observation, the highly structured dynastic bureaucracy of Old China was breaking down. She purported that the Chinese people would eventually demand some form of modern government (Buck, 1955:139). She also suggested that in the psyche of the people, the image of a “new China” was gradually being formed. Having resided in China since young, she witnessed the rise of Chinese nationalism as a result of the daunting national shame after the Opium Wars. Buck saw the escalation of “a new force”—the choice of the people—in China to garner her own version of modernisation (Buck, 1955:143). To her chagrin, China seemed inadequate in many ways. Poverty was rampant. Considering the poor physical infrastructure, dysfunctional socio-political superstructure and almost non-existent marine troops at that time, it was clear that China would not be able to modernise without drastic change. Furthermore, the accumulated wealth of China was not helpful in securing fair play in the international politics during the era. On the other hand, it had only made the nation more prone to fall victim to the devouring Colonial powers. Buck lamented, “China has no battle ships, no trained army (navy) that could defend her from the Western powers.” (Buck, 1955:34)

Time was changing rapidly. A somewhat different socio-political climax was forming. Even as a youngster, Buck could tell the difference between those carefree days when she played without inhibition with her Chinese neighbour in comparison to the current embarrassment she had to endure when labelled as a member of the White “invaders.” “Even then, young as I was, I felt a fearful premonition of a world to come, when many innocent
would suffer because of the anger of an outraged people.” (Buck, 1955:93). The uneasiness
was initially subtle, but the message of rejection by the local Chinese became a reality that
she could not dismiss. She said, “I always knew that I was a mere leaf in the gathering storm
so come” (Buck, 1955:67). Consequently, many white men and women, mostly missionaries,
lost their lives during the various chaotic local uprisings. Even white babies were not spared.
Buck lamented greatly over it as her family was severely affected during the expulsion of
foreigners. She felt that Americans should not be seen and treated like the British, the French,
or the immigrants from other Colonial countries, because Americans had no part in
Colonialism. However, the “legitimate” presence of Americans in China had eventually been
defied. Due to the strong will of the local Chinese to expel all foreigners, the “Yang kwei-
se” (foreign devils), no hospitality would be extended to the American missionaries. Buck’s
family had to leave China for America. It was an experience of being uprooted altogether:
“For when the strange year of 1900 was over, the year in which I saw in my American
mother’s eyes the fear of a Chinese, so that from that day on I too had that fear, all mingled
with love and friendship as it was, we came to the United States, my own country.” (Buck,
1955:44). The Chinese people had determined the way the country should or could
modemise. Now, Buck had become an outsider. She was no longer an in-group member
among the people of the land that she was raised in. She was going to continue her life’s
journey as an American who had lived in China. She could be bitter, but she would have to
acknowledge the choice of the Chinese people over their own destiny. In fact, she made
herself more than a sympathiser of the nationalism movement of the Asians. In fact, she was
an advocate for such understanding:

But Asia was my primary concern, naturally, because it was the field of the most
profound American ignorance... It was too late, and so I had feared even as early
as 1946, when our chief American representative announced at the San Francisco
conference in the presence of many distinguished Asians, that American policy
for the future would not concern itself with the independence of colonial peoples
in Asia... I knew instantly the words were spoken that nothing anyone could do
now could prevent the inevitable future. China at least would be lost to our
(American) leadership, and perhaps the whole of Asia. It was incredible to me
that the words could have been uttered, that any man could be so incredibly naive and ignorant of the world, both historically and in the present, as to utter them at such a moment in such a place. (Buck, 1955:432)

A few decades later, Han Suyin picked up Buck’s language of concern over China’s modernisation. But Han sustained it with a different tone; a tone that affirmed the positive, self-energising power of the Chinese people in constructing a new, stronger China. Coached by her Chinese tutors to read local Chinese newspapers and study the literature of modern reformers like Liang Qichao, Han Suyin developed a grounded sense of patriotism. The spirit of the time was one that should offer oneself in any way that could help save the weakening country. “Save China.” “Patriotism comes first.” (Han, A Mortal Flower, 1972:350). Han Suyin’s autobiographies documented her numerous discussions with various elite groups regarding the future of China. She represented the ambitious Chinese youths of the era, who would uphold the well-being of the country before themselves. The daunting task of that time could be spelt out as: “redeem the land, save our people, build the railways, and pay our salaries…” (Han, A Mortal Flower, 1972: 40-41)

Contrary to Buck’s perception that the Americans should have saved China from falling into the Communist bloc, Han’s personal conclusion was that only “the Reds” (Communism) would work for China. In hindsight, one could possibly understand the overwhelming anxiety embedded in Buck’s literature as it was written during the Cold War era. Besides, the fact that Buck’s family and their circle of missionary friends had suffered at the hands of the China people due to the rise of Chinese nationalism added to Buck’s firm rejection of the development of Communism in China. Han, on the other hand, became the mouthpiece of the local elites during the changing times of China where her socio-political landscape evolved drastically from a newly established Republic without effective leadership to a modern nation with a strong, unifying ideology and supporting mechanism to thrive on. Quoting the words of Marshal Feng Yuxiang who predicted the defeat of Hitler during Nazi’s invasion of Russia, Han implied that the people’s will was the key to successful nation building, for it was also the pointer for the direction and manner of the emerging nation: “...for no one can vanquish (the legitimacy of) a people defending its own homeland.” (Han, A Mortal Flower, 1972:216) While there were continuous debates regarding whether certain developments of modern China were on the right or wrong side of history, Han noted her
valiant point regarding the legitimacy of a people making their ethical choice regarding the national trajectory of their own modernisation.

3.3. Ethical Identity: Who we are as a legitimate people of an emerging nation

"By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs. Our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ Psalms 137 of the Holy Bible captured vividly the soul of the Jews who were taken into custody in Babylon. Even as the long-suffering Jews set to songs their predicament as people in diaspora and captivity, the Chinese of millennium-old China throve through the aftermath of the Opium Wars as well as the unsettled civil upheavals in determining a fitting political structure for the country. A people might be displaced and disillusioned at a certain time, but their identity and vitality as a legitimate international group would remain distinct.

At the turn of the 20th century, China encountered foreign powers at her doorsteps. "To these one hundred and nine years (1840-1949) belonged the burden of unequal treaties, extraterritorial rights, war indemnities, the concessions, occupation by foreign troops, massacres, and the sacking of Chinese cities." (Han, China in the Year 2001, 1967:21). China lost her self-assumed position of being the Middle Kingdom of the world, and was forced to modernise rapidly. Her people were also finding new and progressive ways to express their changing inklings. Being a prolific author herself, Buck took notice of the modern literary movement of the vernacular Chinese language. She also witnessed the newly emerging recognition of Chinese fiction or the “wild writing” as formal literature (Buck, 1955:144). For her, literature originated from the people in their day-to-day language. It was the best representation of the real lives and real people of China. As for Han, she emphasised that the consciousness of a people’s national identity may manifest itself in their “novels, novellas, short stories, plays and poetry.” (Han, My House Has Two Doors, 1982:282). Being impartial towards the authors’ ideologies or political preferences, Han gave credit to Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Xia Yen, Ding Ling, Bingsin Heart of Ice, Lao Sheh, and others for their contribution to produce literature for the common people, and write about them in their literature (Han, Wind in My Sleeves, 1992:50-51). Besides, she also made a delicate mention of the “literature of the wounded.” (Han, Wind in My Sleeves, 1992:32). She disliked the sameness of narration.
and stale sense of agony in these works of the “wounded,” but she conceded to the necessity and legitimacy of such literature for those severely affected during the Cultural Revolution. Life could only go on when the inflicted ones found their own emotional outlet, namely the process of catharsis, via literary means (Han, *Wind in My Sleeves*, 1992:33).

Besides examining the ideas of an evolving modern China via the literature of the people, both Buck and Han also aptly presented the vitality of the Chinese people with vivid and interesting metaphors. Buck portrayed the Chinese nationals as peace-loving, very accommodating continental people (Buck, 1955:284). The attachment of the main character Wang Lung to the earth in Buck’s award-winning novel, *The Good Earth*, symbolised such characteristics. However, Buck also pointed out that such simple people could be provoked to anger when their simplicity was violated. For instance, when Article 156 of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 ruled that Shandong (Shantung) peninsula should be ceded to Japan, the Chinese nationals were outraged. It led to huge demonstrations as well as a fierce anti-imperialist revolution called the May Fourth Movement (Buck, 1955:211). The China that Han Suyin portrayed in her literature was a “fixed star” amidst the influx of changes (Han, *Phoenix Harvest*, 1985:313). Also, China was described as a born-again phoenix, a nation that finally transformed itself from ashes to beauty. This nation was a new from the old, one that had gone through downfalls and rebuilding over thousands of years of civilisation. The people of China as a nation were acquiescent, yet very progressive in their outlook. In Han’s opinion, China never gave up. As Han had coined it, the emergence of a “thinking generation” (Han, *Phoenix Harvest*, 1985:303) and the self-strengthening spirit of the Chinese youths were signs of a promising future for the nation.

Both Buck and Han were concerned about the soul of the Chinese. Buck hoped to dive into the “soul” of the Chinese, “Ah, when I think of Peking, my heart still dissolves, for the very soul of the Chinese people was there” (Buck, 1955:309). Han, on the other hand, asked the question, “What is the real Chinese?” and “What is the true soul of China?” (Han, *A Mortal Flower*, 1972:265). In other words, both were trying to capture the core of Chinese identity. Whatever that were represented in their literature, the moral of the autobiographies suggested that one should probably have an open mind with regard to the legitimacy of a certain people working out their own national history through all complexities of ethical dilemmas, ethical choices and yet-to-be crystalised ethical identity during the 20th century.
4. Conclusion

“When I was in the Chinese world I was Chinese, I spoke Chinese and behaved as a Chinese and ate as a Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts and feelings. When I was in the American world, I shut the door between.” (Buck, 1955:10). The issue of legitimacy would remain relative and not relevant when the different groups involved do not communicate with each other. But it need not be so. Pearl S. Buck and Han Suyin were among the very few who played active roles in bridging the gap between China and the Western world when China had “not one friend in the world” (Han, *My House Has Two Doors*, 1982:274).

In summary, whether regarded as foreigners or Chinese, both Buck and Han have consciously argued for their raison d'être in China. Their autobiographies present valid questions such as whether there would be a legitimate place where individuals of “otherness” could also feel at home, whether a people has the right to choose their own destiny, and whether a developing nation could earn the right to self-determine her own modernisation. As the autobiographies of Buck and Han in total covered the entirety of 20th century, the readers could gather a vantage point of view regarding the legitimacy issues affecting individuals and families of foreign descent in China during the century. At the time, any element of foreignness in one’s blood would make one stand out as an object of ridicule and rejection—as in the case of Eurasian Rosalie Chou and her brother Son of Spring narrated in the autobiographies of Han Suyin. Related characters in Buck’s and Han’s autobiographies continue to suffer the agony of the unsettling search for one’s authentic “home,” “root” and spiritual dreamed place where one’s soul could find solace. At the same time, both authors also presented the awkwardness and dilemma of China as a nation during her shaping century. Both authors embraced the waves of the awakening Chinese nationalism during the turn of 20th century in their literature, and commented on the challenges of whether China’s going left or right during the civil wars. Pearl lamented on the failure of America in influencing China’s political choice, while Han appraised the role of the winning Reds in stabilizing the economy of this newly modernised country despite several major setbacks. Finally, both authors also added a delicate treatment of the legitimacy issue by revealing the soul of the Chinese people through the inklings in their literature and the vigilance in their local activities.
Overall, the reading of Pearl's and Han's autobiographies collectively challenge any modern readers concerning the ethics of human coexistence. In light of the issues that both authors have raised, global citizens of the 21st century should probably reconsider giving up the absurdity of mutual exclusion and mutual elimination among each other. As Buck's and Han's autobiographies demonstrated, the world needs more sensible and responsible citizens who could set human history on the right path. The developments of the world today shows that mankind is desperately in need of a civilisation that is advancing in humanism and good will, rather than heading towards brutality and depravation.

References

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