TRADITIONAL CULTURE CONFRONTED BY MODERN WESTERN LIFE STYLE IN EAST WIND: WEST WIND

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Abstract:

Following the old Chinese custom, Kwei-lan's family had betrothed her to her future husband even before she was born. Kwei-lan and her family believe in the ancient traditions and ways, but her husband, who has been educated abroad for twelve years, believes in equality and in the modern trends and democratic practices of the West. From this division of allegiance comes the basic conflict of the story. This conflict was a vital problem in twentieth century, China and was especially perplexing in the 1920's and 1930's. Kwei-lan also has an older brother who has been studying and living in the United States. He has married an American woman (Mary) without the approval of his parents. Since they will not approve of her, Kwei-lan's brother brings Mary to her house, where the two of them can live while waiting for their parents to come around. So Kwei-lan is surrounded on all sides by those who are opening to the modern world. Meanwhile, Mary must adapt herself to life in what is still a very traditional society.

Key Words: Tradition, Culture, Ancient, Modern, Chinese Customs, Society etc.

Introduction:

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Pearl Sydenstricker Buck was born in June 26, 1892, Hillsboro, West Virginia, U.S, was an American writer and novelist. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. Pearl S. Buck was truly a pioneer in appreciating the People's Republic of China and its emergence as a world power. Through her writings and humanitarian activities, she often made attempts to reduce the cultures of China and the United States to their lowest common denominator in order to bridge the two worlds in which she lived. In all, she was the author of over sixty books, touching sympathetically on many subjects. Pearl S. Buck died March 6, 1973, in Danby, Vermont.

In 1925 Pearl Buck wrote a short story which was published in *Asia Magazine* under the title "A Chinese Woman Speaks."[1] After this story appeared, she received an unsolicited offer from an American publisher to issue this story provided it was enlarged into a full-length novel. Pearl Buck wrote another short story as a sequel to the first narrative, but she felt the frame work of "A Chinese Woman Speaks" was too slight and delicate to bear further narrative development. On April 10, 1930, *East Wind: West Wind* was issued; the first of Pearl Buck's many books of fiction. *East Wind: West Wind* deals with fifteen percent of the population consisting of upper class Chinese.[2] Pearl Buck gave a talk called "East and West and the Novel,"[3] a historical survey that compares the development and structure of Asian and Western fiction. Pearl Buck describes *East Wind: West Wind*, as an attempt "to help ordinary people on one side of the world to know and understand ordinary people on the other side."[4]

Theodore F. Harris, focusing the importance of the *East Wind: West Wind,* says,

> Only one who, like the author, has lived all her life in China, yet being American still holds to western concepts of romantic love, marriage and the scope of filial duty -- only a lover of China, but

> no convert to her code of family and clan supremacy over the individual, could have written. This beautiful novel . . . This is Mrs. Buck's first novel, a striking piece of work; indeed it does not suffer in comparison with the best of Lafcodio Heaven.[5]

Kwei-lan writes her story in the form of a long epistolary monologue to a woman friend who came from a foreign land but who has lived in China for a long time. Kwei-lan chooses this unnamed woman as a listener because the woman knows both the ways of the West and the practices of the East, and Kwei-lan addresses her as "Sister". The narrative is initiated because Kwei-lan is unhappy in her marriage and she needs to relate her unfortunate plight to a sympathetic ear.

Kwei-lan's husband does not find her fair because he has crossed the four seas to the other and outer countries, and has learned in those remote places to love new things and new ways. On her bridal night Kwei-lan's husband tells her that he regards her as an equal, as a companion, and not as a slave or as a piece of property. He explains that he wants to follow the new modes of Western life, and he agrees to give her time to adjust to this situation. Kwei-lan is astounded, for in the ancient manner, she regards herself as a mere subordinate to her husband, and she cannot understand his wishes. Kwei-lan runs to the door, thinking in her wildness that she may escape and return to her mother's home. Her mother will be there waiting to send her back to her duty. Kwei-lan can see her, inexorable, sorrowful, commanding her instant return to her husband's house.

Her life is confused with strange events. She is further bewildered when her husband refuses to allow her to perform the standard duties and services to his mother. Although it was

customary for a married couple to live with the husband's parents. Kwei-lan's husband says that his honoured mother is autocratic and that he will not have his wife as a servant in the home and he insists that they live in a Western-style house.

His parents even command him to remain, according to the ancient custom, within the ancestral home. His father is a scholar, small and slight and stooped with learning. When Kwei-lan meets some of her husband's occidental friends, she appears uncomfortable, finds western ways strange, and worries about the aloofness of her husband, who absorbs himself completely in his medical interests. Although his family is extremely wealthy, and he can choose to live a life of idleness and ease, he does not wish to do so. He develops an active practice as a doctor. Kwei-lan can only sit and think and dream how to seize hold of his heart. Kwei-lan's husband cares for nothing except his books. There is nothing that her husband desires of her. He has no need of anything she can give him. She has pondered everything that her mother taught her concerning her husband's pleasure.

Her husband becomes persistently very insistent that she unbind her feet. This custom of tightly wrapping a young girl's foot in cloth so that her feet will be small and dainty and her walk very graceful is one of the most ancient and widely practised Chinese customs. But Kwei-lan's physician husband realizes that it is an unhealthy practice that leads to broken bones and deformed limbs. Kwei-lan is shocked by her husband's suggestion. She has always regarded dainty feet as an important feature of beauty. When she was younger and had suffered the continual soaking in warm water and the tight bandaging, she had been consoled by her mother's conviction that her future husband would admire the beauty of her tiny feet. She now learns that her husband is vehemently opposed to this practice. Two weeks later Kwei-lan leaves for her first visit to her mother's home, according to Chinese custom. Now,

although she has come back a married woman, with her braid wrapped into a coil and her forehead bare of its girlhood fringe, still she knows that, after all, she is the same girl, only more afraid and more lonely and far less hopeful.

Kwei-lan's brother is determined to go abroad, to America, for further study. Her father laughs at his son's new ideas but in the end gives his consent to his going because it has become fashionable to send one's sons abroad for study, and his friends are doing it. At last seeing that he will go at any cost across the peaceful sea, she begs him to be married first to his betrothed, so that she may bear a son. But her brother replies obstinately that he has no desire for marriage and wish only to study more science and learn all concerning it. Kwei-lan does not want anyone to know that her husband did not care for her. And yet she cannot deceive her mother. Kwei-lan carries this problem to her own mother, who is astounded by her daughter's story, although she has reared Kwei-lan properly in the old ways. Her mother tells Kwei-lan that she must obey her husband and is told that to unbind the feet. The times are changed. Thus Kwei-lan returns to her husband. Still Kwei-lan cannot bring herself easily to the unbinding of her feet. It is really Mrs.Liu who helps her. Mrs. Liu is the wife of a teacher in a new foreign school.

On the last day of the eleventh moon she knows that when the rice harvest comes, in the fullness of the year, her child will be born. When she tells her husband that she has fulfilled her duty towards him in conception, he feels very happy. He gives formal notice to his parents first and then to his brothers. Kwei-lan is in a triumphant mood and is sure that nothing can come near to make her sorrowful again and she is thinking of her brother who is the only son of her mother, who has been these three years in America, and it adds the problem of interracial marriage to the basic conflict between the ways of the East and those of the West.

He writes to his parents for permission to marry an American girl, called only Mary in the story, and to break his childhood betrothal to the daughter of Li, which has always made him unhappy. He wishes to say clearly that he cannot marry the one to whom he has been betrothed according to Chinese custom, because the times have changed. He is a modern man, and he has decided to adopt the modern, independent, free method of marriage. His parents refuse to grant his request; they order him to return and to perform his proper family duty.

Kwei-lan cannot decide what her brother will do. It is shameful that he does not remember his duty. He is bringing her home. Kwei-lan prepares herself to enter her mother's presence with humbleness. Eventually, Kwei-lan's brother dresses his wife in Chinese garb and manages to present her and teaches her the proper way to bow in their presence. The foreigner enters erect and haughty, her head thrown back. Her eyes meet Kwei-lan's mother's eyes without fear or smiling. She enters as the reigning queen enters the presence of the imperial dowager. Her mother fixes her eyes upon the foreigner. Their eyes meet, and instantly they declare themselves enemies. Her brother begins to speak:

Kwei-lan's brother has learned the impatience of the West, and he demands that his wishes come immediately to pass. He has forgotten that in their country time is nothing, and fates may remain unknown even when death has come. But there comes a day at last -- Kwei-lan thinks it is the twenty-second after the presentation, when her mother sends for her brother, desiring him to come alone to her. He goes immediately, and Kwei-lan waits with the foreigner for his return. In an hour he is back. He is angry and his face is sullen, and he keeps saying over and over that he will separate himself from his parents for ever because she urged him to marry his betrothed and give her a grandson before she died. He said that he was already married. She said in anger to this that she would never accept the foreigner as his wife.

It must be decided by his father and by the male heads of the clan. But meanwhile, she says, he can bring the foreigner home with him and she can live in the outer court. They were all astonished at the change in her mother's mind. Her brother was at once altogether hopeful. Kwei-lan says nothing then, since she does not wish to discourage him. But in her heart she knows that the Chinese women do not love others so easily. It is more likely that the women will remember the daughter of Li who waits for the consummation of her marriage. Seeing death approach her, Kwei-lan's mother feared that her son would never return to his home and his duty, and at that moment she vowed that she would summon him if the gods would spare her life. Kwei-lan urges him to have patience, before he decides to break away. It is great that their mother has allowed the foreigner to come into the court, and a year is not long. To add to the confusion, the foreigner becomes pregnant. The request of legal recognition of the marriage is refused. The son is again informed that he must marry the daughter of Li and, thereby, uphold the family pledge. The marriage can no longer be postponed. Kwei-lan exclaims the sacrifice of love of his my brother loved this foreigner. But he tells his wife nothing of the sacrifice and says and leaves his ancestral home. There is not even one to bid him farewell. He starts living in a little two-story house in the Street of the Bridges. He grows older and quieter. For the first time in his life he has to think where food and clothes must come from. He goes every day early in the morning to teach in the government school. He who has lived in ease all his life on his father's wealth has now become poor. But he has learned how to make his wife happy. As for him, now that he has done what he decided to do, he is quiet and grave and content. He is a man.

When Kwei-lan thinks that these two have left, each of them, a world for the other's sake, she feels humbled before such love. As for their child, Kwei-lan is moved in two ways.

He will have his own world to make. Being of neither East nor West purely, he will be rejected of each, for none will understand him. But Kwei-lan thinks, if he has the strength of both his parents, he will understand both worlds. He will belong to both sides of the world. He has the great bones and the lusty vigour of the West. Kwei-lan sees it with a mingling of pain and gladness.

Conclusion:

The child's mother has been separated from her country and her people, and his father has broken ancestral ties. Yet, at the same time, the child has brought about a union of the old and new, of the East and the West. She concludes that the newly born child will come to understand both worlds and become much stronger and wiser on that account. Kwei-lan thinks of the little new-born child, and how already he looks like her mother, whose life went out as his began.

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