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Pearl S. Buck's FBI File, 1938– 1945

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Abstract

This article analyses data selected from declassified, public-access FBI files on American writer Pearl S. Buck compiled before and during the Second World War. The argument establishes a crux between literary production and Cold War ideology, such that the FBI, backed by emerging technologies of surveillance, sought to create near-evidentiary “realities” out of what were merely literary tastes and ideological propensities. I call this powerful, period curtailment of literary interpretive range, in the context of the Second



Red Scare, evidentiary realism. As privileged readers who constructed their own canons out of published materials, deemed acceptable or unacceptable, FBI case managers “close-read” literary materials for evidence of political subversion. Where they could not locate direct and actionable evidence of subversion in Buck's literary texts or pronouncements, case managers activated otherwise latent data by providing crucial interpretive links joining disparate signifying chains. Likewise buoyed by the ad hoc submission of data delivered along networks of enthusiastic volunteer informants nationwide, such government-backed interpretive communities, formal and informal, imposed strikingly narrow (statist) regimes of literary preference. At the same time, officials at the FBI enforced modes of censorship—alternating between the selective suppression of pertinent information and its opportune release—when delivering classified, confidential, or otherwise inaccessible information to the public.

Keywords: Pearl S. Buck / FBI / the Cold War / evidentiary realism / data latency

Before a mass of general opinions can eventuate in executive action, the choice is narrowed down to a few alternatives. The victorious alternative is executed not by the mass but by individuals in control of its energy.

—Walter Lippman, *The Phantom Public* (38)

In early September 1938, Pearl Sydenstricker Buck received a missive in New York City where she was then conducting business. The Director of the recently re-named Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, had written Buck an admiring letter directly.¹ He wrote not, as might have been supposed, to recognize Buck's increasing global recognition and achievement as a writer—only two months later, on 10 December 1938, Buck would become the first female recipient of the Swedish Academy's Nobel Prize for Literature, as well as the first American woman ever to have received the Prize. Instead, Hoover wrote to Buck as a reader. In particular, he appreciated Buck's short story, “Ransom,” which had been published the previous year in the October 1937 issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Hoover wrote:

[The story] immediately impressed me with your keen understanding of human nature, as did your book, The Good Earth...As I read the story of the young people and their children, I again lived the horrors of kidnap[p]ing as I have on innumerable occasions in the past through actual cases and while the story, of course, was fictional, nevertheless I suffered with the young parents....[Each new kidnapping] case brings a new experience, one that almost tests one's faith in human nature....I feel the moral of your story is particularly good.²

With his best wishes and kind regards, the Director of the FBI signed off, but not before inviting Buck for a visit and tour of the Bureau as his personal guest the next time she was through Washington D. C. In only four paragraphs, the overall tone of the letter conveys a notable synthesis of world weariness, the moral rectitude derived from it, and an almost dutiful skepticism about “human nature,” a term Hoover repeats three times.

A copy of Hoover's letter constitutes the very first document in Buck's multi-volume FBI case file. As such, it offers a remarkable opening gesture from one who made his fame, at least in part, on bringing the kidnapper of the Lindbergh baby, Bruno Hauptmann, to justice in 1932. In defense of kidnapped children and the ethical issues arising when deliberating whether or not to pay ransom for them, the world-famous fiction writer about China and the mastermind behind the relatively recent killings of Bonnie and Clyde and the John Dillinger gang had, for one brief moment, found common cause.

That Hoover was an avid profiler of human nature, and presumably of the criminal mentality in particular, should come as little surprise. A more interesting aspect of the FBI Director's letter to Buck, perhaps, is the privilege it accords to quality fiction as mimetic of reality. In the letter, Hoover readily accepts the premise that fiction operates most effectively when linking readerly identification (“I again lived the horrors”; “I suffered”) to the swaying of opinion by means of a specific authorial intent. Indeed, Hoover's initial appreciation of Buck's fiction rests precisely upon according to literature the power to impose such “real” effects of identification. As an admiring reader, Hoover's respect for Buck's craft embeds the very same premise upon which he would subsequently base, and authorize, several more “updatings” of her case file on a far less friendly basis: the power of literature to persuade, to provoke, and even to subvert. For the Director, good literature should not only persuade the reader of reality and its

diverse effects; it also constitutes what Hoover readily conceded as an effective “test of faith” for human nature; or, more precisely, the test of human nature as loyally American. Buck replied to Hoover the following day, cheerfully accepting his invitation for a meeting to be held on a future, unspecified date.

Drawing from previously unpublished materials, I shall argue in what follows that J. Edgar Hoover’s letter to Pearl S. Buck, while certainly exceptional, constituted an early and possibly foundational example of a reading practice which subsequently became a commonplace of the American surveillance state during wartime (1942-45). Backed by emerging technologies, literary-minded interpretive communities of authority sought to create near evidentiary “realities” out of what were merely literary tastes and ideological propensities. As privileged readers who constructed their own canons out of published materials, deemed acceptable or unacceptable, FBI case managers “close-read” literary materials for evidence of political subversion. Buoyed by the ad hoc submission of data delivered along networks of enthusiastic volunteer informants nationwide, such interpretive communities, formal and informal, imposed strikingly narrow (statist) regimes of literary preference. At the same time, officials at the FBI enforced modes of censorship. The agency thus alternated between the selective suppression of pertinent information and its opportune release when delivering classified, confidential, or otherwise inaccessible information to the public. The FBI archive was accordingly purpose-built to serve preferred regimes of interpretation—even, or especially, prior to the moment of lawful investigation.

Shielded from the necessity of judicial due process, FBI reader-censors constructed, and subsequently regulated, operative norms of acceptability when determining the *pretexts* for subsequent investigations using literary materials. They did so with the specific objective of meeting a minimum legal (or quasi-legal) threshold needed to justify further investigation or inquiry of a more formal sort. And, of course, as constructions, those pretexts for subversion in the case file, were themselves texts. They were now open, once again, to (re)interpretative tautologies in the interests of prevailing popular norms as they pertained to citizenship, duty, and *amor patria*.

Buck’s case file, officially named “Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, also known as Mrs. Richard J. Walsh, Security Matter C,” was declassified in several succeeding stages after 1984 under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).³ By act of Congress, the FOIA stipulates specific conditions under which restrictions placed upon formerly classified information

gathered by government agencies may be relaxed as they pertain to persons whose case files have been closed or contain information no longer considered sensitive to national security. Under the provisions of the FOIA, the contents of Buck's redacted FBI case file are currently made accessible to the public in four downloadable .pdf files via the agency's public access website for public reference and inspection.⁴ The declassified case file (a considerable fraction of which still remains confidential) consists of 221 pages of total content, easily half of which comprises material excerpted from Buck's own published writings (or typewritten summaries of them) which appeared in the file originally as photostatic copies, or subsequently, as photocopies of original documents. The overall extent of the file is capacious and inclusive; it is, at the same time, selective. The data it contains were deemed worthy of note and hence suitable for reproduction and dissemination by agents in the field, as well as for longer term storage and retention by FBI archivists.

The nature of the file consists of an interesting assemblage and variety of discourse types including: newspaper clippings [see FOIPA 1:15]; shorter pamphlets and flyers produced by Buck directly (or endorsed indirectly) via the East and West Association (EWA) on current issues of topical interest;⁵ copies of ad hoc letters mailed from citizen-informants; internal (Bureau) memoranda containing brief summaries of agent "technical" surveillance reports; summaries of informants' testimonies, routine "name check" requests against the database, as well as the handling of administrative matters arising requiring endorsement among the FBI hierarchy at different levels. These latter are worthy of note because, as was his practice, J. Edgar Hoover reviewed and usually wrote brief, pithy comments on many of these internal memoranda personally. Many pages in Buck's case file also bear evidence of redaction, whether at the name, phrasal, or paragraph level.

For all their apparent variety, the diverse constituents of the case file may be considered as notionally pretextual in their entirety; by which I mean that any quasi-factual data contained by the diverse genres represented, however seemingly ordinary or unremarkable, were not (yet) legally actionable but could nevertheless be "developed" in the direction of more formalized narratives attempting to describe treasonous or subversive actions and behaviors. Ultimately, the development of such subversion narratives could and did subsequently trigger formal investigation: by the FBI proper and, as often happened after this period, by Congressional committees empowered by the weak construction of the separation of powers doctrine using data the FBI had

provided.^o

Such “development” or working through of any case subject’s file data in the effort to establish patterns of association and cogency imbued FBI analysts with what Andrew N. Rubin has described as the authority of the archive. Despite this authority, however, file data are substantively “empty” because all recorded data must be recontextualized in order to become meaningful after the fact. The data populating the FBI archive, any archive, must be shaped and reinterpreted in real time to serve specific requirements demanded by specific contexts. It lacks the immediacy of context on its own, apart from its presence of being housed in a dusty box in a filing cabinet, or when appearing as an image in an old grainy photograph, or on an ancient betamax videotape, or as an assembly of bits and bytes encoded on a flash drive to be uploaded to a data cloud in a foreign country. All data, on their own, are inert, awaiting the resupplying of context from interpreters who are secondary, or at least external to, the initial act of recording. As such, what one may think of as the latency of data emerges prior to the act of (re)interpretation, a latency the plausibility of which is readily deniable insofar as its existential forms can neither be confirmed nor attributed prior to the expressive act of bureaucratic (re)interpretation itself.

In *Espionage and Exile*, Phyllis Lassner highlights the force and verity period espionage fictions drew from an increasing variety of cross-genre sources, which served to “construct a multivocal form of cultural production that commingles propaganda, popular entertainment and cultural history” (3). I would want to add the raw data found in the now declassified FBI case files to Lassner’s list. Much as discourse analysts, forensic linguists, and data managers researching in specialized fields do today, FBI close-readers interpreted case files using then-advanced data processing methodologies, performed gap analyses, and cross-read different discourse types when integrating fictional as well as non-fictional genres in order to arrive at an overall analysis and summative conclusion. As the subjects of such operations, Buck’s life story and personal associations were reduced to the status of what one may call the *interpretand* of proliferating texts of period subversion and espionage. That is, FBI auditors imposed a kind of privileged reading practice upon the entire corpus of Buck’s published works and, when providing additional “technical” surveillance (observation) and informant data, supplemented the published corpus with even newer data of a more interpretive sort. The resulting composite presented a broad spectrum of data types accorded greater or lesser degrees of veracity and interpretability under the general category of “fact”: ranging from actual facts, to contrived (fake) facts, to outright lies worthy of mention

and hence of retention. In addition, these data types were assessed according to the patterning and interpreting of the array of the case subject's personal friends and associations and their networks. Criteria for assessment included the extent to which particular associations did or did not constitute clear and present danger to the existing social order: the specific test the FBI regularly applies in its case files is "the violent overthrow of the United States government." These practices by and large constituted the primary function of the massive FBI data collection apparatus and its handling of period metadata. All of these data management practices, interpretive as well as operational, were housed under the broad and concealing shelter afforded by the authority of the archive.⁷

The FBI archive served particularly well when housing data about subjects whose loyalties to any particular country or nation were held to be dubious. Buck, for example, was an exile two times over. She was exiled, first, from her country of birth, the United States, as the daughter of Christian missionaries in China where she spent the first forty years of her life. In what she hoped would be merely a temporary retour, she returned to the United States in 1934 where she spent much of the rest of the next forty years advocating on behalf of China and "Asian" causes. A leading expert on China, Buck never was to return to the Chinese home where she had been raised, an absence which shaped her identity and activism profoundly. Accordingly, Buck's embrace of the exilic was neither biologically Chinese, nor during the first half of her life had it been experientially or culturally American. Yet she claimed to speak authoritatively, in a populist and humanizing voice, on behalf of both as each and each as both. This strangely displaced and duplicating self-identification marked her as a ubiquitous, if not yet legally subversive, presence in the widening contact zone of international literary culture.

And, certainly, such a unique prominence accorded Buck some considerable degree of suspicion too. Her life story and experience, bilingual and transcultural as they were, served as the exemplum for a newer kind of fictionalizing presently available to the popular imagination, a tropological doubling of the exilic with period espionage Lassner describes as the "interweav[ing of] spy fiction and exile to show how each is a political discourse and critically heuristic perspective that illuminates the other" (2). Lassner's conjoining of espionage with the exilic applies well to our understanding of Buck's FBI file as an artifact, as the monument built to contain or to encase potential internationalist subversion in abeyance of the neutrality of an otherwise officially disinterested, national bureaucracy. Archives are designed to gather, to sort, and to store the seed scattered by diaspora (*Gr*: διασπορά, "across" + "to sow") by exiles, displaced

persons, and refugees forced to move in order to stay alive.⁸ Carrying the Bureau's mission forward by such means of a putative, yet false procedural objectivity, Pearl S. Buck's case file remains shot through with fictionalized pretexts awaiting the catalytic function of subversive intent subsequently read by official close-readers back into an otherwise inert body of data post hoc:

*Whether enforced or voluntary, exile is endemic to the secret worlds of espionage and to the character of spies. These spy fictions **fuse context and content**, representing contemporaneous international crises as the foundation of plots, characters, imaginative analyses and polemical positions. The significance of this thematic and structural amalgam is that it [. . .] enters debates about the relationship between the remits of art and political polemics and deploys the genre's conventions to perform as both entertainment and political analysis. (Lassner 3; emphasis added)*

As yet unremediated by the righteous and organizing forces of anti-Communist law and order, the inert pseudo-facts inhabiting Buck's FBI case file never did constitute a sufficiently tailored or stylized basis for a polished or free standing piece of spy fiction like those Lassner analyzes. Just as clearly, however, the proto-fictions of Buck's case file invited the fusion and sometimes the confusion of the "context and content" of espionage, much as J. Edgar Hoover did in his letter to Buck when he rhetorically collapsed the difference between fictional and real kidnappings.

Negotiating such an interpretive drift, from fact to fancy and back again, espionage narratives like those Lassner analyzes in her *Espionage and Exile* (in works by Ambler, Frankau, MacInnes, Howard, and le Carré) were informed every bit as much by the "actual" life stories culled from FBI case files as the made-up life stories derived from the latest Graham Greene novel. Both data types, slanderous hearsay about the so-called subversive activities of real life personages and the stock tropes used by expressly fictional approaches to espionage narrative, were interfacing. Both data types readily informed the assumptions and interpretive practices of FBI interpreters who, backed by emplaced pretexts for subversion manufactured for whichever occasion, conflated the factual with the fictional in the effort to achieve an evidentiary realism.

Put simply, evidentiary realism is the practice whereby fictionalized narratives acquire the status of a seeming truth, whether by virtue of achieving latency at the level of archival data (“look at what we have here”) or of a putative “fact”, ready for discovery before auditors in a formal proceeding, which meets a threshold sufficient to be considered actionably legal (“we can develop this to an evidentiary standard”). It does not matter whether or not the datum at hand is truthful or not; it may even be a slanderous lie. What matters is its latency, given subsequent development in interpretation, to meet a legal or near legal standard as seemingly truthful. The very notion of evidentiary realism may seem, if not facile outright, then at least redundant. Yet, given that all reality claims are necessarily putative, evidence itself became increasingly contested by virtue of the increasing array of technologies (scriptural, medial, and in more recent decades, digital) available to the surveillance state designed to capture it. Such, then, is the creative and expressly literary power of the (non)secret: to motivate and, if successful, to align a succession of proliferating subplots in service to the mother-clause—the mother-secret—which serves as the foundational metonym of a larger collective, slandering process. Once unleashed, this process may spiral outwards, uncontrollably, at scale and with little correlation to truth.

In this context, one understands how and why governmental agencies might want to retain and manage massive data files for future use. Slumbering case files may be awoken and aroused—reinterpreted—by the daylight revolving political exigencies emit. The more vivid or imaginative re-combination of otherwise inert data may also, with the right kind of circumstantial prodding, emerge in storylines or profiles of an actionable type. Absent such re-interpretive motivation, however, random facts accumulating in archives can mean very little or even nothing at all. In the meantime, however, matter accumulates, gathers mass and latency awaiting the organizing energy of the bureaucracy’s leadership as in the Lippmann epigram above. Full analysis of the marshaling of ideological forces that eventually culminated in the Second Red Scare (1949-1954) falls outside the scope of this essay. Yet, by 1949, the perception among influential members of American society that a subversive lobby within the country had betrayed Nationalist China to the Communists after 1945 was fully established. Actors within branches of the US government and outside it accordingly sought to wrest powers of interpretation away from courts of law in the effort to invent newer, more aggressive, evidentiary standards for subversion.

After Pearl Harbor, and no doubt heedless of the increased scrutiny her public activities were receiving from the FBI, Pearl S. Buck began to rally her many worldwide readers to

those causes she held most dear, donning her own particularly persuasive kind of “polemical armature” on behalf of the disempowered and stateless (Lassner 4). In doing so, she characteristically sought the common touch athwart governmentality, proclaiming, in a clarion, evangelizing voice stripped of its original Christian dogmatism, that the judgment of Western, colonizing powers was at hand.⁹ Grant Wacker highlights Buck’s disillusionment with the evangelical tradition as determining; her critique of the Christian foreign missions in China, Wacker argues, provided a powerful, forward impetus for the ameliorating of human suffering universally beyond the Christian context (860). Likewise, Peter Conn has described Buck’s indefatigable efforts in support of international charitable causes throughout the 1940s and 1950s as the work of a “secular[ized] missionary” (50). Such a heartfelt approach nonetheless masked geopolitical stances of a far sturdier kind. Buck was only too ready to proclaim the double standard British and American imperialism presented to a global audience, especially when these countries assumed the mantle of democracy and freedom in wartime. That she did so capably, and often, was face-shaming to the American government, which was itself belated in its entry upon the scene of the wartime, counter-propaganda effort. Buck achieved very much in a relatively short time, by virtue of her crusading temperament, a truly remarkable life’s experience, charisma, the lack of fear, as well as the ability to correlate otherwise diverse struggles collectively in terms more recently theorized as intersectionality. Indeed, Buck’s life story and identity offer a classic instance of the “outsider within”; that is, of a complex subjectivity able to integrate and compound differing perspectives usefully and creatively in the effort to build and sustain wider notions of community and activism.¹⁰

It was this latter potential, viewed subversively, that generated increased FBI scrutiny after December 1941. With increasing intensity, Buck effectively and vociferously leveraged her celebrity status to advocate racial desegregation domestically which, like anti-colonialism internationally, must attend the eventual defeat of the Axis powers. She viewed both as necessary and correlating outcomes. Advocating tirelessly on behalf of “Asian” peoples abroad and African American citizens, Buck persisted in rankling the sensibilities of an increasing number of critics. Moving well beyond the standard Left (Marxist) critiques of Anglo-American imperialism, she also propounded an entirely new global imaginary, one which dared not only to imagine a world without colonialism but legitimate self-determination for all colonized peoples. She never stated precisely how these just goals might be achieved, even while proudly declaring her “culturally bifocal” perspective (qtd. in Conn, “Buck” 49). Inherited temperamentally from her upbringing in China, Buck’s bifocality, her ability to read a given subject or idea via compounding lenses, was capable of encompassing and integrating differently hemispheric viewpoints

at once universalizing and multidirectional. Her voice was similarly multivalent: she spoke authoritatively about two nations or, when deploying humanist rhetoric, on behalf of all nations. Even worse from the strictly nationalist point of view, Buck often addressed the peoples of the earth without reference to any particular nation at all. As a feminist and children's advocate, moreover, she fought for women and children everywhere. In so doing, and across a very broad slate of contemporary issues, Buck propagandized most effectively on an international stage against Anglo-American privilege, all the while owning, honorably, that she herself had been the scion of such privilege.

For these diverse reasons, Buck's willingness to propagandize well beyond the eventuality of the war's end, in support of oppressed peoples, triggered the surveillancing establishment's fear of the contagion such a "sympathetic" subversion might produce across diverse sectors of American society. We should recall Buck's own track record here: it was the global impact of her *The Good Earth*, published in 1931, that had rallied global consciousness against the predations of imperial Japan so effectively in the first place. Buck's wartime advocacy and propagandizing were accordingly viewed, by Hoover and many others within the bureaucratic establishment, as not only effective but potentially subversive insofar as they might popularize pretexts for disloyalty on a massive scale. Buck remained oblivious of the threat these emerging pretexts presented to herself personally and to those who shared her views. The fact remains, moreover, that she had denounced Communism, Soviet as well as Maoist, consistently throughout her public career: she always remained a loyal citizen of the United States of America. Even so, she emerged rapidly after 1942 as one of the most capable mouthpieces of a non-aligned, anti-imperialist viewpoint justly suspicious of the longer term motives and interests of American wartime policy armed with its own muscular, postwar vision.

In a remarkable convergence, Buck's increasing prominence as an anti-imperialist intellectual occurred alongside the competing and contemporaneous construction of the transatlantic literary alliance. This alliance, fashioned by prominent actors and intellectuals in Britain and the United States, sought to assert the globalization of Anglo-American culture in the effort to "contain" the threat of international Communism.¹¹ Much as Buck's own wartime activism had, the latter formation presumed the eventual defeat of the Axis powers as well as anticipated ideological competition with the Soviet Union once the war had ended. Unlike the progressive platform Buck championed, however, the transatlantic literary alliance was largely conservative in outlook, primarily interested in shoring up nativist constructions of Anglophone literary traditions for

export, and deployed high Modernist (Eliotic) idioms of the hollow, male, and patriarchal.¹²

The largely literary contents of the Buck case file, moreover, only highlight the extent to which Buck's credentials as a free-thinking writer of international standing, in few ways beholden to any particular government, competed directly with attempts by the United States to globalize its preferred view of "democratic" literary culture and when "reconstitut[ing] the conditions of humanist practice" as a function of the projection of soft power abroad (Rubin 17). In entering the fray of ideological and cultural competition after 1942, and when advocating on behalf of her own discrepant vision for the postwar world, Buck nevertheless refused to cede any ground. She did so all the while avoiding any endorsement of, or practical alliance with, the official political program of the Stalinist Left. And although, admittedly, Buck would likely have embraced specific desiderata the Communists also supported at the level of policy outcomes, their methods were decidedly different. Crucially, Buck stood apart from the Communist Party USA in much the same way as she had stood apart from the Maoist insurgency in China prior to 1934 because she refused to propound or to distinguish the discourse of social class. Humanist universalism in support of charitable causes, and not a revolutionary class discourse, was her preferred line. This fact, combined with her inherent grasp of the mechanisms and organizational structures needed to transform literary celebrity into meaningful public advocacy work on an international stage, made her, for a time, a most potent force. Almost singlehandedly, Pearl S. Buck's activism occasioned a shift in period rhetorics of literary progressivism away from *belle lettres* toward internationalist humanism.¹³

In the meantime, an ever-larger community of national readers began to read Buck's public pronouncements for evidence of wartime subversion. These ranged, as we have seen, from the Director himself to an anonymous citizen-informant from as far away as San Antonio, Texas, who in 1942 colorfully annotated one of Buck's pamphlets ("Sabotage!"). Some of her readers truly believed Buck's works to be subversive; their "close-readings" of Buck's publications, along with accusatory cover letters, were dutifully filed and catalogued back in Washington (FOIPA 1:14-15; 18).¹⁴ Buck's case files are intermittently populated by such documents containing the hearsay upon which, through the mere act of archival retention, the Bureau conferred a monumentality, legitimacy, and authority it most assuredly did not deserve. Still, the slanderous contagion spread.

Writing of the average American citizen in 1927, Walter Lippman asserted that the symbolic significance of an individual exercising his or her right to citizenship (such as the right to vote) does not necessarily translate into his or her access to, or understanding of, a labyrinthine bureaucracy:

[The voter] has not made the complicated machine with its five hundred thousand federal officers and its uncounted local offices. He has not seen much of it. He is bound by contracts, by debts, by treaties, by laws, made before he was aware of them. He does not from day to day decide who shall do what in the business of government. Only some small fraction of it comes intermittently to his notice....The actual governing is made up of a multitude of arrangements on specific questions by particular individuals. These rarely become visible to the private citizen. (30-31)

We recall how J. Edgar Hoover accorded himself the privilege of being the very first agent of governmentality to interpret Buck's fiction by writing her a letter on official Bureau letterhead. At one and the same instant, his apparently isolated, even idiosyncratic, act of readerly response elevated Buck's present and future work to the status of an *interpretand* of espionage meriting scrutiny by the state apparatus for decades.

Once subjected by the archive, otherwise unique creative acts of readerly interpretation militate against the massive processes of data management at scale and in bulk. Such processes necessarily reduce discrepant readings toward the residuum of a firmer, less sensitive ideological bolus, much like seawater evaporating on the boil. Archives do not house discrepancies in the service of creative emergence; they entomb data, however just, however invidious, potentially serviceable to ideological reductions of a baser kind. It is this unseen archive which circumscribes a "zone of [creative] indifference" to which few outside the archive ever attend (Rubin 15). Its anonymous agency, at once individualized and massive, offers the synecdoche of "fact-gathering" processes invisible to the public interest they claim to serve. As such, the archive's strangely obscure and shadowed operation motivates energies elsewhere, atop the FBI hierarchy, where individual decisions made by powerful people bring the latency of specific data to life.

As we have seen, by virtue of temperament and background, Buck would never have been sympathetic to bureaucratic Marxism, whether Stalinist or Maoist, even as she shared their profound disillusionment with British and American postwar motives. Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, Buck's wartime critics on the Marxist Left were incensed by her refusal to tow the Stalinist line. She had strayed too far, and altogether too resolutely, from belletrism when daring to criticize the aims and objectives, so far as "Asia" was concerned, of the new-found Soviet "alliance" with the United States and Great Britain which had burst into being after Hitler's invasion of the Ukraine in June 1941.¹⁵ Even prior to Pearl Harbor, Buck had declared her reservations about the Allies' postwar intentions powerfully, and without any reference to Comintern orthodoxy. Her repeated attempts to transcend class discourse in the name of "Asian" peoples (or other universals apart) was viewed by Communists as soft-headed and naive, if not counterrevolutionary.

Excerpted from his three-part polemic entitled "The Case of Pearl S. Buck," published throughout December 1942, James Allen of the *Daily Worker* wrote:

Because of [Buck's] public activity she has won respect not only among her own countrymen, especially in progressive circles, but throughout the colonial and semi-dependent world....It therefore becomes important to understand the motives and the root causes that led her to assert before a gathering of Nobel Prize winners that this [Second World War] was no longer a war for freedom and that it would still be followed by another war which would be the "real liberation war." Miss [sic] Buck could not have failed to realize the serious implication of her remarks and their possible effect upon the political morale of liberal and petty bourgeois circles at home and abroad....And it is unfortunate, as she has evidently failed to take into consideration that her speech provides heavy ammunition for the Axis propagandists. (clipping dated 16 December 1942; FOIPA 1:4)

For several reasons, Allen's polemic against Buck, while remarkably well-written, is fatuous.

First among these reasons, obviously, is that Allen conveniently deflects attention away from his own propagandistic purpose as a writer for the *Daily Worker*, which was the official organ for the Communist Party USA. Second, and more subversively, Allen purposefully misdirects the substance of Buck's critique toward the appearance of sedition. By warning her readers that defeating Germany and Japan alone was insufficient without liberating colonized peoples, Buck certainly is propagandizing. She does so, however, not to serve the wartime policies of the American or British or Soviet governments, but the purpose of peacetime justice on behalf of the oppressed and colonized everywhere. Her adherence to the critique of Western imperialism does apparently hew to the Japanese propagandist line: the Japanese imperial army had claimed their occupation of Asian territory as "liberation" from Western empires under the guise of a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (大東亞共榮圈). Still, Buck's argument attends an entirely different outcome, one advocating the defeat of imperial Japan; hence it is specious to claim that it mitigates the importance of the war effort. Finally, I encountered Allen's article in Buck's case file thanks to the careful filing of FBI archivists of the period. That Stalinist and reactionary American viewpoints found elsewhere in Buck's FBI file should so closely align against the virtue of Buck's broader wartime purpose speaks volumes about Buck's diffidence towards statism of any kind.

Buck was no pacifist. Still, she refused to let the importance of the present anti-fascist struggle supersede the anti-colonial one, by rather inconveniently reminding her readers, in a wartime pamphlet also copied and included in her FBI file, that if the war were to be fought on behalf of securing the eventual objectives of Euro-American postwar imperialism, then the Allies would likely lose the battle to win over the hearts and minds of as-yet-colonized peoples in the Asian theatre ("Freedom for All", rpt. in FOIPA 1: 5-7). In this, both radical Marxists and Hoover's G-Men viewed Buck's stances similarly, contrarian as they were, as subversive.¹⁶ Consequently, she took heat from both sides. And I suspect that it was from 1942 forward that the FBI sought more proactively to research the viability of the bogus "secret" about Buck's subversion. If they could not prove her positive sympathy for the global cause of Communism with direct evidence, then they could nevertheless rehearse viable pretexts for subversion associatively, given that she held very many acquaintances among those more likely to be indicted for domestic subversion. Within the realm of public and philanthropic advocacy work, in particular, the reach of Buck's relationships was very wide. On behalf of her namesake foundation, Buck possessed tremendous range of access, from grassroots organizations nationwide to the office of the President of the United States. Additionally, she was well-regarded in progressive circles for having founded Welcome House, the nation's first adoption agency for "mixed-race" children. (Both organizations remain

active today.) Throughout the Second World War, Buck had also served as the Vice-Chairman of the National Committee of the American Civil Liberties Union (1943-1954), the Chairman of the Committee Against Race Discrimination in the War Effort (1943-1951), and supported a great variety of other causes which the FBI linked, in many cases, to Communist front organizations.¹⁷

As might have been expected in this context of a rapidly cooling Cold War, J. Edgar Hoover's admiration for Buck cooled rapidly as well—as the scope, effectiveness, and urgency of her political activism increased. His increasing disregard for Buck did not immediately translate, however, into a more aggressive investigative posture on the part of the Bureau. Buck's case file nevertheless confirms—in support of the argument I have been making here—that she was formally and subsequently investigated in 1952, at the height of the Second Red Scare. Upon conclusion of the formal investigation, however, the Bureau's findings (based upon renewed surveillance and reassessment of archival data) were inconclusive:

No interview is contemplated at this time since it is felt that such an interview of a person of Miss [sic] BUCK's prominence might result in repercussions [sic] and adverse publicity for the Bureau. It is noted that Miss [sic] BUCK has in the past been outspoken in her beliefs and has not hesitated to lend her support to controversial issues. UACB [Unless advised to the contrary by the Bureau], this case is being considered closed. (dated 27 February 1952; FOIPA 2:45)

As above, that Buck was not formally indicted had as much to do with the Bureau's fear of "controversy" as the particular merits of any potential case against her. In the meantime, her name and reputation had already been smeared by virtue of guilt by association.

Pearl S. Buck's case file reveals that FBI analysts played powerful roles as interpreters and implied readers within a rapidly unfurling, globalized domain of espionage culture. Servants of an increasingly globalized anti-Communist political orthodoxy, the FBI served as the data-collection arm of the American government as it sought to render normative ideological content deemed acceptable and unacceptable for its citizens, at home as well as abroad. When seeking to meet an evidentiary realism standard, the archival corpora FBI interpreters compiled upon tens of thousands of individuals could

be developed in the interests of any opportune, political exigency.

I have tried to demonstrate, if only at a preliminary level, that the not-quite evidentiary data populating Pearl S. Buck's FBI file were themselves exiles from the broader, more wholesome narratives of her life as an internationally-minded writer of ability. She was a compassionate and committed public intellectual who sought, as far as any one flawed individual can, to ameliorate the suffering of others. Excised from those public discourses of Buck's life story that really did matter, the belittling FBI case file remains woefully incomplete, vitiated, and unfulfilled, abandoned by the premise of its own founding epistemology: the establishing of effective pretexts, whether in literary narratives or by association with others, for subversion. The pettiness of this file is now part of the historical record for all to see. By the light of day, the half-truths and innuendoes the FBI file contains are themselves subversive. Lacking inherent truth or substance apart from acts of invidious (re)interpretation, the data authorized by the FBI archive caused considerable harm to Buck and to countless others precisely because they could be disseminated without any legal recourse or access to anyone who might be held responsible for them. No one agent owns a case file; only the archive knows. Nor does the story of Buck's wartime FBI file succeed, after all, as a good spy story. It is far more successful, rather, as evidence of administrative over-reach and of the hubris of governmentality at the height of the Red Scare.

Notes

¹The FBI's parent organization, the Bureau of Investigation, was originally a division of the Department of Justice which had been founded in 1908. Armed by the wartime suspension of civil liberties (1914-1918), the Bureau was subsequently tasked with monitoring and deporting alien "subversives" during the First Red Scare following the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

²Letter, dated 8 September 1938 (FOIPA, Buck 1:1). I cite data from Buck's FBI case file in-text and parenthetically using, first, the combined acronym the FBI used in its own period documentation when implementing declassification protocols mandated by the Freedom of Information Act of 1966 and the Privacy Act of 1974: "FOIPA". The acronym is followed by the volume and specific page number(s) of the digital (.pdf) file provided online. I am indebted to Rebecca Sy for having annotated the contents of this lengthy file

in the first instance, as well as to the Hong Kong Research Grants Council (GRF No. HKBU 12668516) for providing funding in support of this research.

³The Freedom of Information Act of 1966 (5 U.S.C. § 552) stipulates that each government agency must “make available to the public” information deemed public, including all “agency rules, opinions, orders, records, and proceedings.”

⁴See the “vault (<https://vault.fbi.gov/Pearl%20Buck>)” of declassified documents, arranged by subject surname, via the FBI website (accessed 27 January 2017).

⁵Buck co-founded the East and West Association along with her husband, the publisher Richard J. Walsh, as a not-for-profit tax-exempt entity on 30 June 1941. She served as the organization’s first president, and used it as a platform for public advocacy via the quarterly magazine, *Asia*, published by Walsh’s The John Day Company after 1934. See Shaffer.

⁶Theoharis highlights the covert relationship FBI staff shared with Congressional committees investigating subversion, a collaborative relationship which peaked during the Second Red Scare, 1949-1954 (157-58).

⁷Rubin considers the FBI’s gradualist adherence to the release of only partially declassified materials to be evidence, in a legal discourse, for Giorgio Agamben’s “state of exception”: “[H]ow can information that belongs to the realm of ‘nonexistence’ be protected? What kind of power can claim authority over both the non-existent and the existent?...[H]ow can the [D]irector prevent the disclosure of nothing at all?” (15). The series of rhetorical questions Rubin poses is pertinent to my purpose here, with the overarching claims of the struggle against Communism being superseded by a more aggressive, administrative strain of governmentality which sought to elevate putatively fictional standards of subversion to the level of evidence in legally enforceable contexts.

⁸See Rubin, Chapter 5, for a cogent analysis of the FBI file of Theodor Adorno.

⁹Wacker correctly notes that Buck’s commitment to Christian orthodoxy waned even as her criticism of the missionary “impulse” in China gathered force (856). Buck’s corresponding faith in the bravery and determination of the Chinese people likewise increased in amplitude the longer she remained in the United States. Popular tastes informed her selection of literature, too: as a child, Buck preferred the popular fiction of

Dickens to poetry; she preferred Chinese folk tales (and eventually its vernacular literature, the *xiaoshuo*) to the classical traditionalism of her Chinese tutors (Spurling 60-61). See also Christie.

¹⁰ See Collins.

¹¹ As work by Paul Giles and, more recently, Genevieve Abrevanel has demonstrated, the long history of geopolitical entente between the United States and Britain—at least arguably since Waterloo—offered a structure readily adaptable to the globalization of Anglophone culture, language and social values after 1945, and ripe for the hardening of ideological struggle with the Soviet Union and, after 1949, Maoist China.

¹² Mandating the “separation of art and politics” (Lassner 4-5), the Anglo-American literary alliance sought to reorient the global appetite for literature toward the “containment” of political change via CIA front organizations such as the Congress of Cultural Freedom (CCF). See Iber.

¹³ See Shaffer (2-3). Buck’s determination to activate American philanthropy in the direction of “Asian” causes before and after the Second World War was provoked by specific humanitarian crises—notably drought and famine—which she had witnessed directly as a Christian missionary during the Chinese Republican era and that continued to affect the rural populace in China. See Myers.

¹⁴ Gennero and Langer each assume that it was a Bureau employee-reader who scrawled marginalia objecting to Buck’s viewpoints as found in her wartime pamphlet, “Freedom for All.” It was not: the FBI simply received and filed the annotated pamphlet mailed to them by a citizen-informant.

¹⁵ All too clearly, Operation Barbarossa made the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (23 August 1939) an inconvenient truth, one that had done so much to drive the old Marxist Left into disillusionment with Stalin’s broader commitment to the international workers’ struggle.

¹⁶ See Gennero: “[Buck’s] attempt to remap world geography from an anticolonial viewpoint...challenged the traditional meaning of words like ‘democracy’ and ‘patriotism.’ [and] highlighted the aporias at the heart of American democracy and exposed the transnational reach of fascist ideology” (n.p.).

¹⁷ Eric Hayot highlights Buck as an exemplar of the categorical attribution of sentiment in modernist letters to an otherwise occulted signifier, “China” (209). Notably lacking in Hayot’s treatment, however, is Buck’s strong purposefulness and life-long commitment to political praxis, alongside her impressive ability to motivate, organize, and guide public opinion in the direction of global advocacy on behalf of women and children from all backgrounds.

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