

# Dynamic Equilibrium: Exploring the Golden Mean in Pearl S. Buck's Life and Works

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## ABSTRACT

Based on Tu's interpretation of the Confucian Doctrine of the Mean, this paper explores how Pearl S. Buck, a distinguished American writer, embodied the doctrine in her life and literary works. By analyzing Buck's autobiography and her life trajectory, it is found that she realized the reconciliation of cultural conflicts, empathetic understanding of "the other", and spiritual transcendence amid the tensions between Chinese and American cultures. The study reveals that Buck's cultivation of virtue ("sincerity to achieve virtue"), life practices ("attaining harmony"), and literary creation all resonate with the doctrine of the Mean: she resolved the tension of cultural identity through dynamic balance, integrated Chinese and Western wisdom via daily ethical practices, and ultimately verified the universality of the Mean as "a universal way" in her cross-cultural writings. This "wisdom resonance" not only uncovers the ideological foundation of Buck's cross-cultural practice but also offers a new perspective for understanding the value of the doctrine of the Mean in modern pluralistic societies.

*The Doctrine of the Mean* is one of the four Confucian classics. According to Tu (1976), its core idea is not simply "compromise and reconciliation" but constructs a system of Confucian moral metaphysics that integrates the way of universe, human nature, and moral practice. This classic has a profound historical accumulation, starting from the origin of the universe (the way of heaven), demonstrating the essence of human nature and the ultimate basis of morality, and ultimately pointing to how humans can achieve the ideal state of "Harmony Between Humans and Nature" through practice.

As the core of Confucian thought, the theoretical construction of the Doctrine of the Mean can be traced back to the statement "going too far is as bad as not going far enough" in the *Analects*. After systematic interpretation by the great Confucian scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200 CE) in

the Northern Song Dynasty, it formed the practical wisdom of "Not leaning to either side, neither going too far nor falling short". It can be considered that the Doctrine of the Mean was the first to elevate Confucian moral thought to the level of "metaphysics". Sun (2025) introduces that since the mid-Northern Song Dynasty, Confucian scholars have tried to expand the scope of application of the doctrine of the Mean from ethics to a broader context.<sup>1</sup> The famous contemporary Confucian scholar Tu (1989) expanded it into a philosophy characterized by "Dynamic Equilibrium" in *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, emphasizing that the Mean is not eclecticism but seeking the optimal balance between ethics and practice in specific situations.<sup>2</sup> Zhang et al. (2001) proposed that the Mean is a concept with strong theoretical nature in Confucian thought, and it is also an

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action orientation in modern society with diversified value standards, which has universal enlightenment significance.<sup>3</sup> Yang (2009) empirically tested the influence of the traditional cultural concept of “the Mean” using modern psychological research procedures in a sample of people, and found that the thought of “the Mean” occupies an important position in the way modern Chinese people conduct themselves.<sup>4</sup>

American writer Pearl S. Buck was born in the United States but spent her childhood in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province. The Chinese language and traditional Chinese culture accompanied her growth experience. In her early years, Pearl S. Buck’s father hired Mr. Kung, a learned Confucian scholar who was well-versed in Confucian thought and American history, to teach her. Pearl S. Buck mentioned Mr. Kung 36 times in her autobiography *My Several Worlds*, a frequency far higher than that of most characters. In Pearl S. Buck’s eyes, Mr. Kung was a philosopher, a wise man, and a prophet, who taught her many principles of how to conduct herself and handle things. Therefore, it can be considered that Pearl S. Buck’s growth process was deeply influenced by Mr. Kung and Confucian principles, and she subtly embodied the doctrine of the Mean in her life practice. Her spiritual world was early infiltrated by Chinese agricultural civilization and Confucian ethics. She loved the earth with the virtue of tolerance and the diligence and tenacity of Chinese farmers. When she grew up, she returned to American society and strived to correct Western prejudices and misunderstandings about the East, making great contributions to shaping a positive image of the Chinese people in the West, safeguarding the interests of Chinese Americans, and promoting humanitarianism. In her autobiography and life practice, she neither denied the value of Chinese culture because of Western “modernity” nor rejected Western civilization because of her emotional identification with China. Instead, she tried to find a just right middle ground in the tension between the two cultures.

### Dynamic Balance: Buck's Echo with the Thought of the Mean

The opening paragraphs of *My Several Worlds* present a literary creation mood of integrating Chinese and Western elements and dynamic balance: “I looked at sunrise upon a scene so Chinese that did I not know I live on the other side of the globe, I might have believed it was from my childhood” (1).<sup>①</sup> At this moment on Green Hills Farm, in Pearl S. Buck’s creative thoughts, China and the United States, the two different countries; and the present and

childhood, the two different periods, are balanced as two ends. Buck then began to write her autobiography with a peaceful attitude, narrating her colorful changing life experience and expressing her spiritual insights, “I remember, though I was only eight years old, that long moment I stood on the veranda, gazing upon the scene that was home to me because I knew no other. It was the same and yet I knew, child though I was, that it could never be the same again” (39).<sup>②</sup>

Buck spent most of her life traveling between China and the United States, so she called China her “fatherland” and the United States her “motherland”. She received education in Chinese culture with Confucianism as the core since childhood. And she became familiar with American culture through her family and other channels, and after growing up. Later, she went back to the United States to study in university, gaining a deeper understanding of American society and experiencing strong cultural differences. Therefore, Buck had different cultural identities in different periods. There is no doubt that Buck was an identifier of traditional Chinese cultural values and had a strong sense of belonging. “I did not consider myself a white person in those days. Even though I knew I was not altogether Chinese, still I was Chinese enough”. (10)<sup>③</sup> After returning to the United States to settle down, Buck’s sense of belonging to her American identity took the upper hand, “It was in the last few months of this long rest that I was born, and thereby became an American citizen by birth as well as by two centuries of ancestry”. (3)<sup>④</sup> With the accumulation of life experience and the maturity of her thoughts and political awareness, Buck was well aware of the differences between China and the United States in race, culture, and development paths. The transcendence brought by the doctrine of the Mean enabled Buck to transcend the perspective of the “two ends” of China and the United States, and shape characters with a more “neutral” style, and express strong concerns about potential conflicts in the future.

### Sincerity to Achieve Virtue: Buck's Way of Self-Cultivation

Virtue is one of the core pursuits of Confucianism. *The Doctrine of the Mean* mentions the “Three Approaches to Virtues”, which are wisdom, benevolence, and courage. Tu (2025) also pointed out that in the Confucian concept, individuals can obtain benevolence through spiritual cultivation, and the primary virtue is benevolence or humanity, which means goodness and beauty.<sup>5</sup> Buck was not only

① Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 1.

② Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 39.

③ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 10.

④ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 3.

constrained by Western religious values but also had empathy for local culture due to her life experience in China. Her parents were calm and gentle, treating all ethnic groups equally. When evaluating people, they paid more attention to their character and intelligence rather than race and religious factors. Therefore, Buck's open-minded parents hired Mr. Kung, a learned scholar with the same surname as Confucius, to teach her Chinese. Mr. Kung was well-versed in both Chinese and Western learning, not only familiar with Confucian classics but also knowledgeable about American history. Perhaps because President Lincoln also has the characteristics of benevolence, Pearl S. Buck once mentioned that Mr. Kung highly respected President Lincoln, who emancipated the slaves.<sup>①</sup> Such extensive knowledge and attention to the emancipation trend were rather rare among Confucian scholars at that time.

*The Doctrine of the Mean* puts forward the concept of sincerity in human way, believing that people need to achieve "sincerity" through cultivation, that is, to return to the true nature consistent with the way of heaven. The practice of "sincerity" includes "choosing the good and persisting in it", "learning extensively, inquiring carefully, thinking thoroughly, distinguishing clearly, and practicing earnestly" (Chapter 20). In the process of Buck's growth and self-cultivation, Mr. Kung undoubtedly played an important role. His teaching combining the inheritance of Confucian thought with the background of the times had a profound impact on Buck. "He instilled into me Confucian ethics while he taught me Chinese reading and writing, and I listened and learned".(50-51) So much so that Buck "supposed that Confucius was the same as her Father in Heaven".(51) Buck considered herself a disciple of Mr. Kung. After Mr. Kung passed away in 1905, Buck "wept at his funeral and wore a white band of mourning on my sleeve and bowed before his coffin with the lesser members of his family"<sup>②</sup> according to Chinese traditions.

Under the guidance and inspiration of Mr. Kung, Buck loved reading. The Doctrine of the Mean endowed her a wide range of reading interests. She had a strong interest in both Chinese classical literature and European literature, and was able to skillfully use various narrative techniques for literary creation at an early age. She knew that Chinese novelists had skillfully used various writing and narrative techniques 500 years ago. Although Mr. Kung looked down on novel creation, thinking that novels were not elegant and could not be regarded as real literature. But Buck repeatedly lamented that her path as a writer may have a lot to do with the kind Mr. Kung. When she encountered continuous rejections in the United

States, Buck thought of Mr. Kung's Confucian teachings in the face of life's adversities and setbacks, so she did not feel overly depressed. When she achieved success and fame, Buck recalled her childhood experiences and the influence of Mr. Kung before the dinner held to celebrate her winning the 1938 Nobel Prize in Literature, "This mood went back to my childhood and perhaps partly to good Mr.Kung, who could not possibly know that even then I had intended to be a teller of tales, a writer of novels, though how that end was to be achieved I did not know."(83)<sup>③</sup>

Mr. Kung often taught Buck to view problems from both historical and present perspectives with historical allusions, and once quoted the famous sentence from Song Yu (298-222 BC)'s *Ode to the Wind* in the Warring States Period, "The wind rises at the tip of the duckweed and stops among the grass", to illustrate that everything has a cause, there is no accidental event or effect without a cause, and one should observe surrounding problems with a connected mind. Buck gradually realized the importance of learning historical knowledge, If we want to "understand what happens now one must find the cause, which may be very long ago in its beginning, but is surely there, and therefore a knowledge of history as detailed as possible is essential if we are to comprehend the present and be prepared for the future." (57) In addition, under the teaching of Mr. Kung, Buck also learned to view the fate of characters and countries from the perspective of the Mean, "Fate is is not the blind superstition or helplessness that waits stupidly for what may happen. Fate is unalterable only in the sense that given a cause, a certain result must follow, a certain result must follow, but no cause is inevitable in itself, and man can shape his world if he does not resign himself to ignorance."<sup>④</sup>

Mr. Kung also endowed Buck with a broad international perspective through the doctrine of the Mean. Therefore, during the some forty years she spent in China, Buck always consciously kept herself aware of "what was going on in the rest of the world, and especially in my own country. I had learned from childhood to recognize the peoples of the earth as members of one family, known or unknown, and had realized the practical meaning of this Chinese view of the globe".<sup>⑤</sup> Buck admired the Confucian ideal of a great unity world in her heart, believing that if Westerners could better understand the character of the Chinese and Asian people, they could communicate better and achieve peace between the two countries and the world. When establishing the East and West Association,

① Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day. 50.

② Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day. 66.

③ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day. 83.

④ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day. 57.

⑤ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day. 381.

Buck mentioned that she had long received the teaching of the unity of all people from Mr. Kung: "If average Americans could see themselves as part of the human race, they might be stimulated to curiosity and thus to interest and thus to understanding. It was the usual technique of learning."<sup>①</sup>

### Attaining Harmony: The Doctrine of the Mean in Buck's Life

The life experience of cross-cultural communication allowed Buck to pay attention to many fields of the two countries from the perspective of "the Mean" and find similar views. For example, in early childhood education, Buck mentioned that the Chinese believed that it was important to allow a child to cry all his tempers and humors while he was small, for "if these were restrained and suppressed by force or fright, then anger entered into the blood and poisoned the heart, and would surely come forth later to make adult trouble".<sup>②</sup> This is a thousand-year-old Chinese maxim and also a philosophical thought. Buck mentioned that nowadays this philosophical view is regarded as the most modern thing in Western society.

Buck also continuously practiced the doctrine of the Mean in her life, playing different roles: "In my home I was a housewife and nothing more, or so I felt. To my father I was only his daughter, as much as I had been when I was a child myself, while to my children I was mother. Among the white community I tried to take my place as neighbour and friend."<sup>③</sup> When Buck was in China, her family often moved between the north and the south, and she also traveled to many countries after marriage, so she could taste various local delicacies with different flavors. She could quickly adapt to both Chinese and Western styles of food as well as north and south flavors. Due to family reasons, Buck's family usually had solid American-style breakfast with good quality food; but for lunch and dinner, Pearl S. Buck's favorite was Chinese food that wins with taste. Buck often thought that "the servants' food was plain but delicious. Indeed the diet of the poor in China was remarkable for its flavour, if not for the variety which richer people had. Even their breakfast I liked much better than my own".<sup>④</sup> She could easily adapt to southern rice porridge and rice, northern steamed buns, pancakes, noodles, and dumplings. Buck also had a special preference for seasonal fruits and vegetables, and felt "disgusting" about products that are not in line with natural laws.

Tu (1986) emphasized that "Zhong" in "the Mean" is

not simply a "middle path", but "the creative transformation of conflicting parties in specific situations", which is a dynamic equilibrium that neither clings to one end nor eliminates differences. This is particularly prominent in the construction of Buck's cultural identity. When eating, her mother required her to keep her shoulders straight, and her father reminded her to hold her knife and fork like him. The difference between British and American styles in the use of knife and fork made Buck's head divided. Because "my mother ate her food as Americans do, cutting her meat and then putting down the knife to take up her fork, but my father ate as English people do, holding the fork in his left hand and the knife in his right, and piling the chopped food against his fork. Each gave me directions and sometimes I obeyed one and sometimes the other".<sup>⑤</sup> With different instructions from her parents, Buck had to use the middle way of the doctrine of the Mean again, sometimes listening to her mother, sometimes to her father, and then unconsciously accepted her parents' habits, deciding how to use the knife and fork according to specific situations at each meal. But compared with Western knives and forks, Buck's private choice was chopsticks.<sup>⑥</sup> Of course, the Mean does not mean mechanical compromise and tolerance. Buck realized the importance of counterattack or retort at an early age. Whenever she was called "a little foreign devil" by naughty children, she did not hesitate to fight back with curses, like "children of turtles".<sup>⑦</sup>

### Resonance of Wisdom: The Doctrine of the Mean in Buck's Literary Creation

Buck criticized the Western centralist stereotype of China as a huge pagan empire in urgent need of salvation, but she also did not avoid the limitations of Chinese traditions, profoundly exposing the constraints of feudal ethics on individuals. She praised the land ethics of Chinese farmers with reverence for nature and family responsibility as the core, and observed the collective predicament of Chinese society in the early 20th century from the Western perspective of "individual freedom". This "not clinging to both ends" of culture is exactly what Tu referred to as "Zhong" (the Mean), which is not a "compromise" between the two cultures, but a creative absorption of the values of both sides in a specific context, forming a cultural vision of a "third space". As the Doctrine of the Mean says, "grasping both ends and using the middle for the people", Buck's cultural identity was always in dynamic adjustment, but she always maintained the interactive experience and cognitive

① Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 428.

② Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 14.

③ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 218.

④ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 23.

⑤ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 17.

⑥ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 18.

⑦ Buck, P. (1954). *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record*. John Day, 36.

processing of the way of cross-culture.

Tu believes that the thought of “harmony” in the Doctrine of the Mean is reflected in the ethical level as “the appropriate expression of emotions and behaviors” (“The state before joy, anger, sorrow, and joy are expressed is called Zhong; when they are expressed and all hit the mark, it is called harmony”), that is, being sensitive to the situation of others and responding to differences with “empathy” rather than “opposition”. This is particularly prominent in Buck’s attitude towards “the other”, that is, the Chinese grassroots people. In her autobiography, Pearl S. Buck detailed her daily interactions with Wang Ma, her Chinese nanny, and farmers in rural northern Anhui: she did not look down on them with Western superiority, but observed their work, listened to their sufferings, and even shared hunger with them during the famine years. This acceptance of “the other” is not out of the condescension of “charity”, but derived from the recognition of “people having the same heart”. As she expressed: It is the friendship and warmth between people that make life meaningful.

When Buck returned to the United States, facing social problems such as racial discrimination and gender prejudice, she neither radically denied American civilization nor silently compromised, but appealed through writing. This way of response is also expressing and hitting the mark, neither suppressing anger at injustice nor intensifying conflicts with extreme confrontation, but promoting understanding with “just right” actions. This is exactly what Tu emphasized: “The ethical practice of the Mean is to achieve ‘harmony’ in specific relationships; it is not to eliminate differences, but to let differences show their value in coexistence”.

## Conclusion

Pearl S. Buck was not a Confucian scholar, but the life practice in her life and works unexpectedly echoed the “thought of the Mean” interpreted by Tu. She maintained dynamic balance in cultural conflicts (Zhong), pursued appropriate responses in ethical practice (harmony), and achieved spiritual transcendence in daily writing (Yong). This precisely shows that the doctrine of the Mean is not a unique dogma of Confucianism, but a universal wisdom for human beings when facing “differences and coexistence”, and it is the universal way of the world.

The influence of Confucian thought of the Mean on Pearl S. Buck is not a linear relationship of “theoretical inheritance”, but a cross-cultural encounter of “resonance of wisdom”. The former provides deep methodological and value support for the latter’s cross-cultural writing by interpreting Confucianism’s “Dynamic Equilibrium”, “In-

ternal Transcendence”, and “Global Vision”; while Pearl S. Buck’s creation, with literary practice, confirms the universality of Confucian wisdom revealed by Tu, seeking balance in differences, recognizing the sacred in daily life, and achieving transcendence in dialogue. This echo is exactly a vivid proof of the thought of the Mean as “the universal way of the world”.

Pearl S. Buck’s creation has always been rooted in the concept of “daily life of human relations”. In *The Good Earth*, she described the cultivation and harvest of Chinese farmers; in *The Mother*, she showed the disputes and reconciliations between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in traditional Chinese families; in *Dragon Seed*, she praised the fighting spirit of the Chinese people. These are all specific and ordinary life scenes. But in these daily narratives, she always explored the core of human nature. By recording specific “human stories”, she let Western readers see the “dignity” of Chinese farmers and let Chinese readers understand the “struggle” of Western individuals in cultural conflicts. This continuous “cross-cultural dialogue” in daily writing is exactly the embodiment of Pearl S. Buck’s “Yong” (the common). She carried the constant way of common human nature with her constant writing practice. When Buck’s works attracted widespread attention and rethinking of the image of China, this daily practice transcended the limitations of personal creation and reached a height of “internal transcendence”, that is, achieving the spiritual height of “participating with heaven and earth” in specific affairs.

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