

Disability and Modernity in Buck's Works

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Abstract

The early twentieth century's prevailing stigma against disability—particularly mental impairment—was reinforced by the rise of Social Darwinism and the eugenics movement. This paper examines the relationship between disability and modernity in Pearl S. Buck's works, arguing that her experience as a mother of a disabled child and her concern for disability shaped her understanding of modernity. As the mother of a severely mentally impaired child, disability became an important influence on her literary career, beginning with her breakthrough novel *The Good Earth*. Buck's bicultural experiences of disability culture in China and America further informed her unique perspective, allowing her to challenge rigid narratives of modern progress. In Buck's works, disability is not a static condition but a dynamic force that reveals her complex attitudes toward modernity. This paper categorizes Buck's representations of disability into three modes. The humanistic mode portrays disabled individuals as cared for within traditional Chinese family structures, as seen in Wang Lung's mentally impaired daughter and elderly father in *The Good Earth*. The resilient mode depicts disabled characters who navigate society despite their impairments, such as the half-blind land dealer and the deaf rickshaw passenger in *The Good Earth* and the hare-lipped servant in *Sons*. Lastly, the tragic mode presents disability as a source of suffering and marginalization, exemplified by the hunchbacked young man in *Sons* and the blind girl in *The Mother*. By analyzing these portrayals, this paper explores how Buck's depictions of disability reflect her struggles, "inner rebellion," and a broader critique of Chinese traditions and modernity.

Keywords: humanistic mode, resilient mode, tragic mode, modernity, inner rebellion

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Introduction

Pearl S. Buck's portrayals of Chinese rural life and modernity have long drawn scholarly interest. Since the publication of her most acclaimed novel, *The Good Earth* (1931), critics have interpreted her work through a range of ideological lenses, including Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial frameworks. Much of this scholarship has focused on Buck's representations of peasant life, the agrarian economy, and gender roles, often evaluating her narratives in terms of cultural politics and orientalist critique.

While these ideological lenses shed their light on Buck's works, they tend to overlook a personal and emotional influence that shaped her literary legacy: her experience as the mother of a child with an intellectual disability. As believed by her daughter Janice Walsh, if not for her mother's experiences as a mother of disabled children, her legacy in literature probably would be very different. Disabled characters in Buck's novels, especially the unnamed daughter in *The Good Earth*, are not merely narrative devices but reflect her intimate confrontation with the emotional, cultural, and ethical dilemmas of disability and modernity in her time.

In contrast to dominant early twentieth-century ideologies shaped by social Darwinism and eugenics, which often cast disabled individuals as burdens and threats to progress, Buck's work offers a radically humanizing counter-narrative. Her fiction disrupts the binary between tradition and modernity by embedding disability within broader moral and cultural inquiries. Scholars in disability studies, such as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Lennard Davis, have emphasized literature's power to either reinforce or resist stigma. Buck's writing does the latter: informed by her bicultural upbringing in China and her disillusionment with Western ideologies of progress and normalcy, she constructs an ethical landscape that foregrounds compassion, interdependence, and the inherent dignity of disabled lives.

This paper argues that Buck's treatment of disability reveals a complex and often ambivalent critique of modernity. Through a close analysis of *The Good Earth*, *Sons*, and *The Mother*, the study traces how disability functions not as a symbol of lack or failure but as a lens through which to reconsider familial ethics, cultural identity, and societal values. Drawing on biographical sources, disability theory, and cross-cultural analysis, the paper positions Buck's disability narratives as a form of ethical resistance—personal, spiritual, and ideological—to the modernizing discourses of her age.

The Humanistic Mode: Wang Lung's Mentally Impaired Daughter and Aged and Disabled Father

In this mode, Buck portrays disabled characters not as marginal or burdensome but as integral members of the traditional family. It emphasizes traditional ethical responsibilities, particularly within the family, where disability is not pathologized but rather treated as a natural part of life. *The Good Earth* offers two emblematic figures within this framework: Wang Lung's intellectually disabled daughter and his aged, infirm father. Though both are vulnerable and dependent, the responses they evoke reflect a cultural logic of inclusion grounded in acceptance of fate and Confucian filial duty. This analysis examines how such portrayals resist modern utilitarian norms and subtly express Buck's "inner rebellion," especially through the emotionally charged depiction of Wang Lung's relationship with his mentally disabled daughter, often interpreted as a literary tribute to Buck's child.

The Contradiction Between Wang Lung's Gender Bias and His Unconditional Love Towards His Mentally Impaired Daughter in *The Good Earth*

The contradiction between the widespread patriarchal ideology of valuing sons over daughters and Wang Lung's love for his intellectually disabled daughter is one important feature of the father-daughter relationship in *The Good Earth*. This paradox becomes even more complex when viewed through the lens of Buck's personal experiences prior to writing the novel. Why does Buck choose Wang Lung—an Oriental male figure shaped by a patriarchal society, to embody such profound care for a daughter with a disability? Traditionally, such tenderness and unconditional nurturing are more commonly associated with maternal figures like O-lan.

This subversion of traditional gender role expectations becomes even more striking when we consider Buck's own life experiences as both a daughter and a mother, which reflect a stronger emotional bond between mother and daughter rather than between father and daughter. Situating those questions simply in the Chinese context did not provide sufficient and convincing answers. It wasn't until I turned to the disability culture in Western societies that a more complete picture began to emerge. I argue that Buck's depiction of disability in *The Good Earth* is profoundly shaped by Buck's responses to the disability culture in Western society. Buck transforms her private pain into a form of rebellion/resistance.

Buck's disability narratives in *The Good Earth* embody three interconnected forms of rebellion/resistance: personal, religious, and societal. First, Buck's depiction of Wang Lung as a compassionate and attentive father can be interpreted as a personal rebellion against her own husband's emotional and parental failures. Drawing from Buck's memoir *The Child Who Never Grew* and her semi-autobiographical novel *The Time Is Noon*, this section will explore how her experience of raising a disabled child without the emotional support of her husband influenced her literary construction of an idealized father figure. Wang Lung's quiet acceptance of his daughter's disability and unconditional love for her functions as a therapeutic outlet for Buck during a time of frustration and isolation.

Second, Buck's resistance extends into the religious sphere, particularly against Christian gospels on disability, which fail to offer her any spiritual solace, be it divine punishment for sin or healing narratives. Buck, raised in a missionary family and being a missionary herself, struggled with these theological contradictions, and her eventual disillusionment with Christian doctrine contributed to the fading of her missionary zeal (Wacker, pp. 852–74). This spiritual conflict is reflected in her literary choice to depict Wang Lung as an authentic Chinese figure, firmly rooted in traditional belief systems and entirely untouched by Christian ideology.

Third, Buck's work stages a resistance against the dominant ideologies of Western modernity, particularly those shaped by early twentieth-century Social Darwinism and eugenics. These ideologies promoted the notion of "survival of the fittest," casting disability as a deviation from social and biological norms that must be corrected or eliminated. In contrast, Buck offers a vision of pre-modern Chinese family life in which disabled individuals are not stigmatized or pathologized but are accepted and cared for as part of the natural order of familial life. This depiction shows a very different culture with the stigmatizing attitudes she encountered in both American society and the American expatriate community in China. Buck's portrayal of such inclusive familial structures not only reflects her nostalgia for a more humane world but also serves as a form of personal healing. At the same time, Buck

does not romanticize Chinese tradition uncritically; she is deeply aware of the threats posed by modernization in China, especially when modeled on Western values. This anxiety surfaces in *The Good Earth* and becomes even more pronounced in her later novels, where disabled characters increasingly reflect the cultural and ideological tensions of a society in transition.

Non-utilitarian Ethics of Care — Filial Piety and the Aging Disabled Elder in the Confucian Household

In *The Good Earth*, Buck adopts a realist narrative style to depict the endurance and adaptability of traditional Chinese family ethics amid social and economic upheaval. Through Wang Lung's care for his aging father, Buck presents a version of filial piety without sentimentality and idealization. This portrayal demonstrates how filial piety, as a culturally embedded ethical practice, continues to operate even under the harshest conditions.

When drought devastates the land and famine grips the countryside, Wang Lung continues to prioritize feeding his frail father, even over his hungry children. This choice stems not only from personal feelings but also from deeply ingrained cultural expectations. As Wang Lung says to himself proudly that “none should say in the hour of death he had forgotten his father. Even if his own flesh went to feed him the old man should eat” (p. 65). This desperate internal monologue shows how failing to care for one's father wasn't just a personal failing—it was an offense against the entire community's values. In a society where filial piety was sacred, abandoning an elder in hard times would bring both deep personal guilt and public disgrace.

During the family's journey south to escape starvation, Wang Lung's frail father is too weak to walk on his own and thus becomes a heavy burden. Yet Wang Lung never considers leaving him behind. Instead, he carries his father on his back all the way to the train station. In the southern city, the family survives by pulling rickshaws and begging. Even the old man is given a role as a beggar, though he often just naps by the roadside. Wang Lung and his wife accept this without complaint, recognizing that he is no longer able to contribute. The old man, in turn, rests peacefully, confident that his family will not abandon him. Beneath this quiet mutual understanding lies a rich cultural ethic that is produced through a long process of civilizational evolution, tested and validated by countless generations—filial piety.

As the family returns to their village and becomes wealthy, the old man's physical condition deteriorates—he grows nearly deaf and blind, completely reliant on others. Yet he continues to wield symbolic authority within the household, rooted in traditional values. He serves as the family's “line of defense” in upholding ethical order.

Buck's portrayal of Wang Lung's aged, disabled father highlights a compelling aspect of Chinese family ethics: as a person's physical abilities fail, their status within the family does not decline. On the contrary, age equals experiences, contribution and respect. This reverence is not based on the elder's continued productivity or capacity to care for others but rather on the symbolic authority that comes with the role of “father.” Buck insightfully captures how this ethical relationship—rooted in identity rather than function—acts as a key stabilizing force in traditional Chinese society. It is precisely this deeply embedded norm of filial piety, which transcends physical condition that enables families to preserve moral structure even in times of material scarcity or personal frailty.

Buck neither romanticizes filial piety as an exotic curiosity nor dismisses it as a feudal relic. Instead, she presents it as a culturally rooted survival strategy—an ethic forged through lived experience and adapted to endure crises. Although Wang Lung exists in a pre-modern world, largely untouched by the ideological upheavals of modernization, Buck uses his instinctive reverence for his aging father to illustrate a traditional ethic grounded not in abstract principles but in tangible, bodily care. This “embodied tradition” allows her to critique the alienating tendencies of Western modernity while reclaiming filial piety as one of the most profound sources of moral meaning in her literary imagination.

The Resilient Mode: Functional Inclusion, Disability, Social Pragmatism, and the Pre-modern Public Sphere

In this mode, Buck broadens her focus from the family unit to the wider social structure. She moves from the domestic sphere to the public sphere by portraying characters such as a half-blind merchant, a deaf rickshaw customer, and a soldier with a cleft lip. These individuals are not hidden or sidelined. Instead, they are active participants in public spaces, realms such as land deals, urban marketplaces, and military service that are typically associated with full social agency. Their presence challenges the traditional portrayal of disabled people as dependent or marginal.

Importantly, Buck adopts a “deproblematizing” narrative strategy. While these characters are identified by their conditions as “one-eyed man” or “the hare-lipped,” these terms function more as neutral descriptors than as stigmatizing labels. Through the craftiness of the half-blind merchant, the assertiveness of the deaf passenger, and the competence of the cleft-lipped soldier, Buck shows that people with disabilities can and do participate in the world around them as a matter of course, without the need for extraordinary achievements or dramatic personal transformations to justify their inclusion.

This normalization is different from the popular Western “overcoming narrative,” epitomized by figures like Helen Keller. In the popular Western imagination, Keller's story is framed as one of heroic triumph over adversity, with disability cast as a barrier to be conquered through discipline, determination, and the interventions of modern education (Nielsen, 2012). While Keller's life has undeniably inspired and advanced the disability rights movement, her story also reinforces the notion that disability must be overcome to gain social value. As Kim E. Nielsen observes in *A Disability History of the United States*, such narratives can be alienating, particularly for those with severe cognitive or physical impairments who may not be able to “overcome” their condition in socially visible ways. The emphasis on personal achievement risks marginalizing those who cannot fit that mold (Nielsen, p. 11).

Buck's approach, by contrast, portrays disabled individuals as part of society simply because they exist. Their presence is not exceptional; it is accepted. This view is deeply rooted in Buck's personal experience with Chinese culture. In her memoir *The Child Who Never Grew*, she writes:

I had grown up among the Chinese, who take any human infirmity for what it is. Blind people, the lame, the halt, the tongue-tied, the deformed—during my life in China, I had seen that all came and went among others and were accepted for themselves. Their infirmities were not ignored. Sometimes, they were even made the cause of nicknames... But the Chinese did not mean it so. That was the way he was, literally, and his twisted legs were part of himself... The sufferer did not feel any need

to hide himself. There he was, as he was, and everybody knew him. It was better than any sweet pretending that he was like everybody else. (Buck, pp. 12–13)

She further explains that the traditional Chinese belief in fate fosters a culture of acceptance: physical impairments are not treated as personal or familial failings but as natural occurrences—acts of “heaven.” Sometimes, disability is even endowed with spiritual significance.

This cultural framework plays out in multiple aspects of Buck’s fiction. Her disabled characters are shown taking part in economic, cultural, and military life, embodying a representation of disability that is neither heroic nor compensatory. Rather than emphasizing personal triumph over impairment, Buck highlights the roles these individuals fulfill and how their physical differences can be reinterpreted as forms of social or cultural capital. Her depiction reflects a more localized and inclusive understanding of disability, one that diverges significantly from Western modernity’s focus on achievement, normalization, and productivity.

Tragic Mode: The Fragmentation of Kinship — Disability and the Collapse of Familial Ethics in the Face of Modernity

This section explores the changing roles and fates of disabled characters within the domestic sphere in Buck’s works, focusing on two interrelated narratives: the hunchbacked grandson in *Sons* and the blind daughter in *The Mother*. These stories reveal how traditional ethical frameworks begin to unravel and distort under the pressures of modernity—but with a key difference. In *Sons*, the collapse unfolds from within the story itself, while in *The Mother*, the alienation is largely imposed by external forces.

Temples in Religious Culture: The Last Sanctuary for Disabled People

In *Sons*, the hunchbacked grandson—abandoned by a family that has embraced modern values—embarks on a symbolic journey from the city to the countryside and finally to a temple. This spatial movement reflects the disintegration of kinship as a protective system and presents religious space as the last sanctuary for those cast aside by modernized society.

As Buck turns her attention to increasingly modernized families, how traditional society once accommodated disabled individuals begins to narrow. This transformation does not just alter family structures but also recalibrates how societies assess human worth. For example, a person’s worth is reduced to a checklist of functions: intact physical abilities, economic productivity, and conformity to social norms. The inclusive ethics of traditional rural life, grounded in kinship and agrarian interdependence, give way to a stricter modernist logic of exclusion. The hunchbacked grandson in *Sons* offers a striking illustration of this shift.

His disability stems from a preventable accident: as a baby, he was dropped by a careless wet nurse onto a brick courtyard, permanently damaging his spine. Though the injury was accidental, its consequences mark him for life. In his modernizing family, he is stripped of his name and referred to only by the degrading label “the hunchback.” Even his immediate family—parents and siblings—view him as a source of shame, a burden in contrast to his healthy siblings, who are seen as carriers of the family’s future. He is systematically excluded from education, household responsibilities, and even ordinary family interaction. His dehumanization is so complete that even servants regard him with indifference.

From a young age, the hunchbacked grandson suffered from the cruel mockery and bullying of his peers. His loneliness drove him into the shadows of cities and the hidden trails of the countryside, yet his awkward, misshapen body never quite belonged anywhere. What he endured went far beyond physical discomfort—it was a deep emotional trauma. Over time, his heart is filled with hatred. Unable to express his pain directly, he turned to mischief and pranks—distorted behaviors that reflected the alienating social environment around him.

But a flicker of hope arrived when he secretly followed his father to the countryside where his grandfather once lived. There, he met Pear Blossom, whose warmth pierced through his emotional darkness. Instead of scolding him for his misbehavior, she offered him sweet pastries and spoke to him with gentle kindness. Her compassion soothed his wary, wounded heart. In her embrace, the boy trembled and burst into tears: “I wish you would not make me weep so—I do not know why I weep so—.” As she gently stroked his curved back, he felt, for the first time in his life, the healing warmth of human connection.

Eventually, the hunchback chose to remain in his grandfather's old rural home, living with Pear Blossom and his intellectually disabled aunt. On the land, which is not yet fully consumed by modernity, his spirit began a quiet transformation. He no longer played mischief and found purpose in caring for his aunt alongside Pear Blossom. Helping others gave him a sense of fulfillment he had never known. Although he is not the central character of the novel, we learn through a conversation between the hunchback and his uncle Wang the Tiger that after the aunt's death and Pear Blossom's ordination as a nun, he too would enter into the monastery, seeking solace in the temple.

The journey of Wang Lung's hunchbacked grandson traces a symbolical spatial transformation: urban exile – rural healing – spiritual refuge. This physical movement and psychological change reflect not only an individual's survival strategy amid modernization but also the broader ethical and societal shifts in early 20th-century China.

Spatially, this path maps a full civilizational transition. The city represents a cold, alienating modern space, where, shaped by Western ideals and Darwinian competition, the hunchback's body is deemed “unfit.” The countryside—especially his grandfather's old home—becomes the last fragile bastion of traditional warmth, its protection weakened but not yet erased. Finally, the temple emerges as a transcendent space of spiritual peace, where the sound of bells and drums offers sanctuary beyond worldly judgment. These three stages echo the gradual erosion of traditional Chinese society under the pressures of modernity and the slow disappearance of humanistic care from both private and public life.

Ultimately, this spatial-psychological journey reflects a deeper civilizational dilemma: as kinship's traditional protective role erodes under modernity, where can those deemed “unfit” by dominant standards find refuge? Through the hunchback's quiet decision to enter religious life, Buck suggests that the temple—perhaps the last inclusive space in traditional Chinese culture—can still offer dignity to the marginalized. This poignant ending becomes a kind of elegy for a vanishing civilization. And yet, it also carries a quiet note of resignation: religion can soothe individual souls, but it cannot change the structural forces that cast people out. In this light, the hunchback's curved spine becomes more than a physical trait—it becomes a haunting measure of a society's moral depth and a silent question about the cost of modern progress.

Eugenic Nightmare of Degeneration: The Blind Daughter in *The Mother*

If we examine the plot developments that lead to the blind daughter's tragic fate in *The Mother*, we can identify two crucial turning points. One aspect is the traditional Chinese culture of “a grown man should marry, and a grown woman should be married off.” This results in their increasingly marginalized and awkward position within their original families. However, Buck's critique of this traditional culture is significantly weakened by other plot developments. Even though the blind girl's brother and sister-in-law want to marry her off, they do not have a time urgency. Rather, it is the mother's impatient temperament and her hasty decision, made unilaterally, that ultimately leads to the daughter's tragedy. Later, when the mother blames her son and daughter-in-law for not accommodating the daughter, they defend themselves, saying they have no objection to taking time to find a suitable match for the sister; it is the mother, without consulting anyone or understanding the nature of the family the daughter is to marry into, who hastily allows them to take her away.

For a mother who deeply loves her daughter, Buck's unconvincing plot arrangement in *The Mother* not only weakens her critique of certain aspects of the traditional Chinese family system but also leaves the reader confused. At the critical juncture of the blind girl's fate, why did Buck not choose to introduce a more positive narrative, such as enabling the blind girl to be married into a kind-hearted family or overcome her physical limitations through special education, to become self-sufficient and an inspirational figure like Helen Keller? Especially since the blind girl has already shown a strong desire for independence in the story and has made efforts to help the family, this character trait could have been a powerful force to turn her fate around. Or, the plot could also have included a turning point where the girl's fate changes through seeking treatment from Western modern medicine, particularly since the girl's disability was not congenital but developed over time, with a lack of timely intervention leading to her eventual blindness. However, Buck leaves these possibilities unexplored, instead consigning the blind daughter to a grotesque familial archetype—impoverished, regressive in behavior, and ostensibly intellectually deficient. This representational strategy proves deeply problematic, as it not only uncritically reproduces period-specific eugenic paradigms but, more disturbingly, implicates the author herself in their ideological perpetuation.

What is even more perplexing is that the arrangement of the blind girl being brought to the remote mountain family blurs the boundaries of identity between her and them. Her agency is entirely dissolved in this process, and her hopes as an individual are completely stripped away. Her fate seems to be reduced to two extreme possibilities: either the blind girl's demise or the total eradication of the mountain family in the harsh natural and social environment. Buck's portrayal of the mountain family is also intriguing. The impoverished, degraded and animalistic family embodies the eugenic nightmare. They are not only marginalized members of society but also seem to carry a symbolic implication of being “meant to be eliminated.”

Another problem is that, in Buck's narrative, the distinctions between the blind girl and her “witless” husband, as well as between her birth family and the family she marries, are not effectively explained. After the blind girl's fate is sealed by marriage into the mountain family, it seems to be consumed by an invisible narrative logic—she is no longer a subject in need of rescue but has become part of the mountain family's fate, even to some extent “assimilating” with them. As for the girl's birth family and husband's family, aside from their geographical difference, both belong to rural households, and economically, they are at the

bottom of society. What exactly distinguishes the two and prevents the former from descending into the latter's state?

Buck does not provide a clear answer. She does not give any background information on the migration of the family from the northern region to the mountain household. Whether it is culture, religious beliefs, or specific reasons for migration—war, famine, or others—the reader is left in the dark. The lack of backstory for the mountain family undermines their characterization, leaving readers with little basis for connection or empathy. Reduced to vague outlines, they become less fully realized individuals than symbols—embodiments of a eugenicist's “undesirable” population, deemed unworthy of survival.

The blind girl's tragic fate exposes the unsettling tension in Buck's work: her apparent internalization of Social Darwinist rhetoric clashes with her lived experience as the mother of a disabled child. While Buck critiques how modernity weaponizes eugenics to marginalize people with disabilities, her narrative choices—consciously or not—replicate the very logic she seeks to challenge. This contradiction forces us to grapple with the uncomfortable duality of her position: a critic of American modernity who nevertheless reproduces its dehumanizing frameworks.

Conclusion

The above three modes of disability narratives in Buck's works trace a shift from ethical embeddedness in traditional kinship structures to the frank atmosphere in the public sphere to the alienation and moral displacement engendered by modernity. Buck's rural Chinese settings serve not as nostalgic backdrops but as ethical testing grounds, where the fate of disabled individuals reveals broader societal transformations. Through her nuanced portrayals of care, abandonment, and survival, Buck critiques both the strengths and limitations of Confucian patriarchy as well as the rationalism of modernization, suggesting that neither tradition nor progress guarantees sufficient moral protection for the vulnerable. This ethical ambiguity, central to Buck's literary vision, emerges from her unique position as an American author raised in China, shaped by yet not fully belonging to either cultural system. In contrast to the iconoclastic fervor of many May fourth intellectuals, who often rejected Confucian tradition in favor of Westernization, Buck adopts a more ambivalent, human-centered perspective. She navigates the ethical ambiguities embedded in both traditional and modern worldviews, foregrounding the precarious realities faced by the vulnerable across cultural, temporal, and ideological boundaries.

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