

# THE BUCKS STOPPED HERE FROM YEOMAN LUNG TO KONGJIAN YU

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I cross paths often with the spirit of Pearl S. Buck, whose parable of greed and sustainability in China, *The Good Earth*, was one of the most memorable novels I read as a teenager. Buck penned the book in an attic room on the campus of Nanjing University, where she lived for more than a decade and where I often visit. (My wife teaches architecture at the school.) Buck also lived briefly in Ithaca, New York on two occasions, residing both times no more than a ten-minute walk from my office at Cornell University. She came with her husband, John Lossing Buck, a 1914 graduate of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell who returned for a master's degree in 1925 and a doctorate in 1933. Lossing, as he was known, was a pioneering agronomist who developed a keen interest in China as an undergraduate thanks to his classmate and friend Hu Shih, the scholarly reformer who helped launch the May Fourth Movement and served as the Republic of China's ambassador to the United States on the eve of World War II.

In 1916 Lossing was on his way to an experimental farm in Anhui Province when he met Pearl Sydenstricker at Kuling, an expatriate resort on Mount Shan where Pearl's parents summered. Within a year, the two would marry. Upon reaching Lossing's original destination in Nanxuzhou, they developed an extraordinary partnership: Pearl helped Lossing interview the farmers, yielding mountains of data that would later be tabulated in survey form. Although born in West Virginia and schooled at Randolph-Macon College, Pearl had spent most of her life in China and considered the country her home. Farm women and villagers trusted her warm personality and native fluency in Chinese. They told Pearl of their daily lives and struggles. Away now from the sheltered Presbyterian world of her parents, she was exposed to rural Chinese life in all its harsh and calloused splendor—an experience that would bear fruit in the pages of her novels in the years to come. Without Pearl, who urged her husband to learn about local farm practices before imposing American techniques, it is unlikely Lossing would have begun his monumental survey of Chinese agricultural conditions—still the most extensive ever done. Without Lossing, Pearl Buck would never have written *The Good Earth*.

In 1920 Lossing was invited to join the faculty of Nanjing University as a professor and acting dean of the College of



In 1932 Pearl and John Lossing Buck rented the second-floor apartment in this Ithaca house at 614 Wyckoff Road, where she began writing *A House Divided*. Photograph by Thomas J. Campanella, 2017.



Central campus of Nanjing University. Lossing's College of Agriculture and Forestry, modeled closely on the College of Agriculture at Cornell, was based in the building on left. Photograph by Thomas J. Campanella, 2006.

Agriculture and Forestry—a school closely modeled on Cornell's College of Agriculture, complete with an experimental farm on the slopes of Purple Mountain. Using a syllabus that included Cornell professor George Warren's 1913 classic text *Farm Management*, he taught China's first courses in agricultural economics and rural sociology.<sup>1</sup> The couple took

up residence in a house on campus, where Pearl soon gave birth to a baby girl—a child tragically afflicted with a severe mental disability. When it became evident that Lossing needed additional training himself, he returned to Cornell. The family found lodging at the chapel parsonage in Forest Home, a cozy mill village at the edge of campus. Pearl studied writing with Martin W. Sampson, winning a campus essay contest and earning a master's degree of her own. Thus encouraged—and needful of money to help pay for her daughter's increasingly costly medical care—she began writing professionally. She penned a draft of her first novel, *East Wind, West Wind*, in 1929. The book barely made a ripple. She then wrote *The Good Earth*. It was a publishing sensation that made her a household name almost overnight. When the couple make a second trip to Cornell in 1932, Pearl was one of the most celebrated writers in the United States.

1. Paul B. Trescott, *Jingji Xue: The History of the Introduction of Western Economic Ideas into China, 1850–1950* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2007), 167–168; Randall E. Stross, *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898–1937* (University of California Press, 1989); Eric N. Danielson, “Nanjing's Historic Universities,” <http://yangziman.blog.com/2012/10/26/nanjings-historic-universities>. Ironically, agricultural economics has undergone a Cinderella-like transformation at Cornell in recent years, thanks largely to surging numbers of applicants from China. Once considered a lowly “cow college” major, it has been rebranded Applied Economics and Management and its undergraduate business program is the hottest, most competitive major in the university today.

I mention all this as it draws me closer, in odd and illuminating ways, to my real subject, Kongjian Yu. Andrew Buck—Lossing's grandson from a later marriage—was a student of mine at Cornell, and worked for several years at Turenscape in Beijing, Yu's large landscape design and planning practice. This is an especially delightful coincidence given the frequency with which Yu refers to *The Good Earth* in articles and interviews in English as well as Chinese. He is passionate about the book, and in China he's increasingly not alone; after effectively being banned by the Chinese Communist Party for decades, it has undergone a remarkable resurgence there in recent years. Its American trajectory is another story. Buck was excluded from a roundup review of homecoming expatriate novelists—Hemingway, Dos Passos, Fitzgerald—published the very year Buck returned to the States from China. Certainly sexism played a role. As biographer Peter Conn puts it, “Pearl was a woman who wrote mainly about the unglamorous daily lives of women,” and her “prose style, her gender and her tremendous popularity offended virtually every one of the constituencies that divided up the literary 1930's.”<sup>2</sup> But the simple fact was that the book was about agriculture and rural life, something most Americans were on intimate terms with in the 1930s. They understood the struggles of farm life and could identify with Buck's characters, however foreign.

If *The Good Earth* were published today, its didactic tenor and bare prose would probably land the title on a young adult list. Indeed, the novel is mostly read by high school students in the United States, and only rarely appears in college course syllabi. Just as intellectuals rejected Buck in the 1930s, modern academe's preoccupation with identity politics has made her persona non grata all over again. Scholars of a Marxist or critical-theory bent invariably regard Buck as an agent of Western hegemony whose Orientalist gaze colonized the bodies of subaltern Asians. After all, what could a blue-eyed WASP—daughter of Christian missionaries, no less!—possibly tell us about China's rural peasantry? Not much, according to critics like Edmund White. In a 1993 *New York Times* piece, White claimed that “Readers are naturally attracted to versions of an experience that are more detailed, more convincing and shaded,” positing that Maxine Hong Kingston “knows more about China than did Pearl Buck.” Evidently the fact checker was off that day: for Kingston never lived in China, and has not only praised Buck's empathetic portrayal of ordinary Chinese in *The Good Earth*, but credited the book with “translating my parents to me and . . . giving me our ancestry and our habitation.”<sup>3</sup>

2. Richard Bernstein, “Duly Neglected but Still Fascinating,” *New York Times*, December 25, 1996.

3. Edmund White, “The Politics of Identity,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1993; Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiii.

Ironically, Marxists of a different sort—Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party—branded Buck a foreign *bête noire* for telling precisely the truths that Western critics now demonize her as being too white to see. Buck made China “lose face” by revealing too much about plough-bound laborers in the countryside. Party officials—principally the slick and treacherous Zhou Enlai—repeatedly rejected her requests to come home, as it were. It was a crushing blow for a woman whose books did more to humanize China in the eyes of Americans than all the country’s emissaries, diplomats, and ambassadors combined. But Pearl Buck is being rehabilitated in China, even if often for self-serving reasons, and it’s possible more people read *The Good Earth* there now than in the United States. The house at Nanjing University where she and Lossing spent more than a decade has been restored; her parents’ summer cottage at Kuling is now a small museum. In Zhenjiang, where Pearl spent most of her childhood, officials have embraced the author (“World Famous Master of Literature—Loving American Mother on the Good Earth—A Beautiful Daughter of China”) as the city’s most distinguished native. They turned the old Sydenstriker home into a cultural heritage site, and established a Zhenjiang Pearl S. Buck Research Association in a building nearby.<sup>4</sup>

Kongjian Yu certainly did not need a seventy-five-year-old American novel about rural China to seed his philosophy of ecological infrastructure and sustainable design, but it’s been rich compost all the same. Nor did Yu need anyone—American or otherwise—to tell him about the rhythms and struggles of life down on the farm. Like Buck’s fated protagonist in *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung, Yu is a child of the same agrarian landscape that provides the book’s setting. He grew up in the small farming village of Dongyu, on the outskirts of Jinhua, Zhejiang Province—the province just south of Anhui, where Pearl and Lossing Buck first lived, and which inspired *The Good Earth*. Yu’s forebears had been landowners for generations, but after 1949 the family was stripped of its wealth and subjected to ridicule and outright abuse—especially during the Cultural Revolution. Yu himself was academically bright and a star athlete, and adversity seemed only to make him more determined to succeed. He was the only one of six hundred students in his high school class to pass the national university entrance exam—a triumph that lifted him out of rural obscurity and launched his career. He gained admission to the Beijing Forestry University, where

he studied forestry and landscape design. In a flash of luck, he was asked to translate a series of lectures by the landscape ecologist Carl Steinitz, then on the faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Steinitz was impressed

4. Zhenjiang Pearl S. Buck Research Association, “About Us,” accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.pearlsbcn.org/e/>.

by the ambitious youth, and helped get him into Harvard’s then-new Doctor of Design program.<sup>5</sup>

But Yu’s real schooling had taken place years before as a boy. A pine forest just beyond his home became a realm of imagined mythic beasts. “Before long he would go regularly...to gather mushrooms, grass for his rabbits and sheep, wood for fires, water weeds for his pigs, and weasels for the family dinner.” The land, he discovered, was resilient and bountiful, and would “provide more than enough food for human survival as long as it was not abused.” Nearby White Sand Creek, loaded with fish, had been partly diverted to flood rice fields and ponds used for aquaculture and drinking water. These bodies detained spring deluges, allowing excess water to drain slowly back into the soil and aquifer. During times of drought those same ponds were tapped to irrigate fields. Yu’s childhood bicycle was a water buffalo.

Mao Zedong died the year Yu entered his teens. Deng Xiaoping came to power soon after, opening China to the world and stoking its entrepreneurial engines. Before long “there were no more fish in the creek; the increasing use of DDT had killed them...the long grasses were eradicated, and at the same time the water became heavily polluted from a new town and factory upstream.”<sup>6</sup> White Sand Creek was encased with a concrete channel. Yu’s pine forest was cut and sold for timber. Dongyu was left a polluted, treeless shadow of what it had been just a few years before.

The ruination of Yu’s boyhood landscape—a humble but vibrant place where humanity and nature had struck a tender equilibrium—has become a call to arms for him. It is no exaggeration to say that in China, his voice is matched only by that of his kindred skeptic and friend Ai Weiwei. In their zeal to build, he argues, Chinese designers—and starchitect foreigners handpicked from abroad like Rem Koolhaas—have created buildings and landscapes wholly dismissive of context, preoccupied



Kongjian Yu’s childhood home in Dongyu village, Zhejiang Province. He raised fish in the clay basin on right.



Kongjian Yu as a high school honors student, c. 1981. Photographs courtesy of Kongjian Yu.

5. William S. Saunders, “The Boy Who Read Books Riding a Water Buffalo,” in Ed. W. S. Saunders, *Designed Ecologies: The Landscape Architecture of Kongjian Yu* (Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 61; 62–64.

6. *Ibid.*, 61–62.



White Sand Creek in 1987 (top) and 2003.  
Courtesy of Kongjian Yu.

with superficial aesthetics, tone-deaf to the needs and aspirations of users, wasteful of resources, and fatally unsustainable. In his spirited philippic “Beautiful Big Feet,” first published in *Harvard Design Magazine* in 2009, he uses the traditional practice of foot binding as a master metaphor for the decadence and depravity of contemporary Chinese place-making.<sup>7</sup> The origins of foot binding have been lost to the fog of time, but the practice became widespread during the Song dynasty. It lasted well into the modern era: my wife well remembers her grandmother’s feet, crushed into tiny hooves by tight silk wraps that had been applied in childhood. Even today, elderly women with bound feet can still be found in rural Yunnan Province and other remote corners of China.<sup>8</sup>

The peculiar erotics of the bound foot have been scrutinized from a variety of psychosocial perspectives. To Freud, foot binding symbolized female castration; to Veblen, it was a mark of social status. The bound foot—like the pinched waists of Victorian ladies—signaled a man’s wealth, for it meant he could afford to render his mate unfit for labor and to keep her as a kind of ornament. The crippled feet made a woman “useless and expensive,” wrote Veblen, and thus provided “evidence of pecuniary strength.”<sup>9</sup> In certain parts of China foot binding had an economic rationale—foot-bound women could not labor in the fields, forcing them instead toward more profitable indoor work like spinning

7. Kongjian Yu, “Beautiful Big Feet: Toward a New Landscape Aesthetic,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 31 (Fall/Winter 2009/10).

8. Simon Montlake, “Bound by History,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 2009; Kit Gillet, “In China, Foot Binding Slowly Slips into History,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2012.

9. Quoted in Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (University of California Press, 2005), 2.



and weaving. Whatever its origins, the bound foot gradually evolved into an eroticized mark of beauty and status, and became a prerequisite for any woman hoping to marry up the food chain. Even peasant families adopted the practice, binding the feet of an eldest daughter to attract a suitor from the gentry. As feminist historian Dorothy Ko writes, to cripple a girl in this way was a “ticket to a brighter future for the bride and her family.”<sup>10</sup>

To Yu, the showy and unsustainable built landscapes of the post-Mao era—urban-architectural grand projects that have changed the face of China’s cities over the last thirty years—are akin to a foot-bound woman: seedless, sterile fruit of a culture preoccupied with consumerism, social climbing, and the outward signs of wealth. Chinese place-making today, he argues, traffics in a misbegotten aesthetics meant only to dazzle and awe, one wholly removed from the land and its systems, or from the needs of actual users. In “Beautiful Big Feet,” Yu traces a moral arc bounded on either side by the two principal female characters in *The Good Earth*. At one end is long-suffering O-Lan, the plain and earthy former slave with natural feet who marries Wang Lung and bears him three sons. At the other end is Lotus Blossom, the preening foot-bound concubine for whom Wang Lung dumps O-Lan. One is a hothouse flower, the other a roadside weed. One is temptress city, the other dewy countryside, basking in the morning light.

Yu adapts this moral antimony to Chinese place-making, drawing parallels between the central moral failure in *The Good Earth* and the forces that threaten both the environment and

10. Ko, *Cinderella’s Sisters*, 3.



**Little-foot urbanism:** Workers cleaning the immense Wild Goose pagoda music fountain in Xi'an. Opened in 2003, the extravagant "water plaza" outraged residents of this drought-prone city on the edge of the Gobi Desert.

Photograph by Thomas J. Campanella, 2004.

society in China today. Once an impoverished farmer, Wang Lung is so seduced by his growing wealth that he becomes alienated from the very land that has made him rich—the good earth, mother and wellspring of life. Buck frames this original sin in terms as unambiguous as Eve's fatal apple-eating adventure in the Book of Genesis: in leaving O-Lan and his farmstead, Wang Lung trades the wholesome sustenance of agricultural space for the enervated, opium-addled city. It is a calamity Buck foreshadows earlier in the book: facing famine, the protagonist flees with his family to a large city in

the south (perhaps Nanjing), only to find poverty, suffering, and vice there. This trope—the city as a scheming temptress, a spoiler of innocent rubes—continues throughout Buck's tale. Later in the novel, Wang Lung falls under Lotus Blossom's spell in one of the town's teashops, revealing himself to be an extravagant fool. The moral of the story is clear: stray from the good earth and ye shall be damned.

In America, *The Good Earth* won Buck a Pulitzer, put her on the cover of *Time*, and outsold every other book in the twentieth century save for *Gone with the Wind*. The book clearly resonated with America's long tradition of anti-urbanism and rustic triumphalism. From the earliest days of the republic, pastoral landscape—the gentle realm of cultivation and husbandry—has been framed as the germinal space of democracy. Thomas Jefferson was its most eloquent spokesman, famously declaiming in *Notes on Virginia* that "those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people." The city, on the other hand, was filled with oppressed and suffering hordes on the verge of anarchy—"the mobs of great cities," he wrote, "add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body."<sup>11</sup> Nature itself was framed in exceptionalist terms, presented as evidence of divine blessing. Even as the country's great forests were leveled and its animals hunted to extinction, Americans

envisioned theirs as nature's nation. Who needed the cultural riches of the Old World when you had Niagara Falls, the Grand Canyon, and the California redwoods? As A. J. Downing put it, "If we have neither old castles nor old associations, we have at least, here and there,

old trees that can teach us lessons of antiquity, not less instructive and poetical than the ruins of a past age."<sup>12</sup>

Throughout *The Good Earth*, Buck never refers to Wang Lung and his family as *peasants*. They are always *farmers*. This was a noteworthy break from convention, and one that signals her Jeffersonian sympathies. By the 1930s, Chinese agrarians were almost universally referred to in the United States and the greater West as peasants—a term traditionally applied to the poor, rural working classes of England, Europe, and Russia. The distinction is a crucial one, and hardly a matter of mere semantics. Farmers have freedom, agency, and individual identity; peasants are downtrodden rustics crushed by a despotic gentry. As Charles W. Hayford puts it, "Old World despotism was based on landless peasants who did not have the independent means to stand up to the dukes, lords, barons, and kings." Peasants labored under "medieval" or "feudal" conditions, notes Hayford, "while a propertied 'farmer' produced free or democratic rule."<sup>13</sup> Put another way, the peasantry was just a rural version of Jefferson's dreaded "mobs of great cities."

But the urban-rural dialectic in China is far more fluid. Until very recently, China was a predominantly agrarian society, and Frederick W. Mote notes that "the rural component of Chinese civilization"—not the cities—"defined the Chinese way of life." Rural landscape was the universal medium of culture and civilization—"the net," according to Mote, "in which the cities and towns of China were suspended."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, city and country were part of a shifting continuum, and not the binary opposites they became in the West and America. As Robin Visser puts it, "Chinese cities were never separate and discrete from the rural areas that supported them. Both rich people and poor often moved to the city and later returned to villages." Elements of rurality—trees, gardens, vernacular forms such as the courtyard house (*siheyuan*)—could be found both within and outside a city's walls.<sup>15</sup> It was Western imperialism that disrupted this rural-urban continuum and precipitated a whole new conception of the city in China. The treaty ports opened up and down the Chinese coast following the Opium Wars were motors of exploitation, shrewdly deployed to spirit off China's wealth. With city turned against countryside, the urban-rural continuum gave way to polarization. "In the wake of Western infiltration," writes Visser, "the concept of the city became increasingly problematic in China, acquiring a number of

12. Andrew Jackson Downing, *Rural Essays*, Ed. George W. Curtis (New York: George A. Leavitt, 1869); quoted in Jeanne Goode, "Andrew Jackson Downing on Trees," *Arboricultural Journal* 12 (1988), 191.

13. Charles W. Hayford, "When is a Farmer Not a Farmer?" *Frog in a Well*, February 25, 2007, accessed November 14, 2015, <http://www.froginawell.net/china/2007/02/when-is-a-farmer-not-a-farmer-when-he-s-chinese-then-he-s-a-peasant/>.

14. Mote quoted in Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside* (Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

15. Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China* (Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

11. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, query 19, reprinted in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb, vol. 2 (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1904), 230.



"My aspirations lie in the countryside." Cultural Revolution poster, c. 1973. Collection of Thomas J. Campanella.

predominantly negative qualities." This dynamic eventually "cast the urban as inauthentic, implying that rural China was a metaphor for genuine Chinese society."<sup>16</sup>

These tensions shaped Mao Zedong's infamous view of the city as parasitic entity. For Mao, the countryside was both the wellspring and strategic base for revolution. The rural proletariat would rise up and surround the cities, cutting off vital flows of food and raw materials from the hinterland. And though the Chinese Communist Party was founded in Shanghai and came to power in Beijing, its ideological identity "was planted firmly in the countryside," writes Visser, with "its cultural values fundamentally informed by the customs of rural society."<sup>17</sup> But for all his professed empathy for the *nongmin* (a word meaning either country people or rubes), Mao's policies both diminished the status of China's rural population and exacerbated the very divisions between the city and countryside that he sought to do away with (by, among other things, forcing urban elites to be "rusticated" on farms). From late imperial times until 1949, China was hardly the "feudal" society Mao accused it of being. Even after the treaty ports were established, there were few legal barriers to movement between the country and cities, and they shared a good deal of exchange. "Poor villagers could and did leave their communities in droves to seek their fortunes in the cities or frontier areas, or even overseas," writes Martin King Whyte, and "a rural migrant who succeeded

in finding employment and income in a city could readily submit to registration, rent or buy housing, and in general become a settled urbanite."<sup>18</sup> As a result, the status rift between urban and rural people was minimal. If anything, it was often the rustic who enjoyed a slightly higher standing.

What destroyed this was a series of initiatives in the 1950s that made migration from country to city nearly impossible.<sup>19</sup> Mao may have razed the great walls of Beijing, but in his zeal to limit the power of China's urban centers, he erected more formidable legal walls around every city. This was accomplished via a draconian new system of household registration known as *hukou*. Laxly enforced until after the Great Leap Forward, it created a kind of semi-permeable barrier between countryside and city, allowing goods and produce to flow into urban centers, but barring the rural people who produced them. No longer could China's peasants leave the farm for a better life in the city, as Wang Lung had attempted to do in *The Good Earth*. A person inherited the *hukou* status of his mother, which categorized him as either agricultural or non-agricultural (and if the latter, by the city's administrative level). You could only move down or sideways on the *hukou* scale, not upwards. Rural people were now locked in place, "bound to the soil much like serfs in medieval Europe."<sup>20</sup> Rather than eliminate the feudalism he claimed existed prior to 1949, Mao created a new state of "socialist serfdom." Worse, *hukou* produced a rigid new kind of caste system with urban elites on top and the *nongmin* on bottom. A gamut of social policies further heightened the favored status of city dwellers. As Whyte explained, "urban residents were provided with secure jobs, heavily subsidized housing, education, and medical care," while rural people "received no such guarantees, were outside of the state budget, and generally only received such compensation and benefits as their own labors and their local communities could provide."<sup>21</sup>

The yawning urban-rural status gap has been alternately reduced and exacerbated in the post-Mao era. The earliest of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms allowed farmers to grow crops to sell at local markets, enabling many to escape poverty and some to become rich. (A hallmark of the early Deng era were fancy new houses erected by once-poor farmers in Guangdong Province.) At the same time, the de-collectivization of agriculture idled millions of rural laborers, many of whom took advantage of loosened mobility restrictions to find work in booming coastal cities. Laborers were desperately needed there to build construction and manufacturing plants. This set into motion

18. Martin King Whyte, "The Paradox of Rural-Urban Inequality in Contemporary China," in Ed. M. K. Whyte, *One Country, Two Societies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 7.

19. Martin King Whyte, "Social Change and the Urban-Rural Divide in China," in Eds. Fan Hong and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, *The Irish Asia Strategy and Its China Relations* (Rozenberg, 2010), 49.

20. *Ibid.*, 49.

21. Martin King Whyte, "Social Change and the Urban-Rural Divide in China," in eds. Fan Hong and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, *The Irish Asia Strategy and Its China Relations* (Rozenberg, 2010), 49.

16. *Ibid.*, 14.

17. *Ibid.*, 16.

the largest wave of rural-urban migration in human history. But however essential to the Chinese economic miracle it may have been, this “floating population” was hardly received with open arms. Lacking proper hukou status, migrants had access to few of the sinecures of urban residency. Even today most are ineligible for municipal jobs. They are often barred from basic healthcare, and their children—who cannot enroll in public schools—are forced into cheap, typically substandard private academies. And though this population is able to secure housing, it is often the worst available. Many migrants are forced to squat in empty or unfinished buildings, even in old tunnels and bomb shelters. Conditions have improved somewhat in recent years, but the rural migrant is still a third-class citizen in his own country—scorned by locals, mistreated by authorities, and blamed for nearly every urban ill.

Given this background, it is evident that Kongjian Yu is no mere landscape architect, but an insurgent resisting not just the wasteful “bound-foot” aesthetics of contemporary urbanism in China, but the rural-urban caste system that has dominated society for sixty years now. To him, the good path, the path of redemption—environmental, cultural, even national—lies in the direction of nature and away from the city—in reversing Wang Lung’s fated town-bound trajectory. It moves forward by recovering the lost continuum of city and country that prevailed before the arrival of corrupting foreign forces and philosophies—whether of Marxism or capitalist imperialism. It also aligns Yu with canonical American themes of rural superiority and the fundamental depravity of the urban. Indeed, there is a note of anti-urbanist, pro-rural populism in his writing. He blames parvenu elites for the “little-feet” culture that is ruining China’s natural environment and contributing to the aesthetic debasement of its cities. He explains that the dissolution of ancient bonds to the land has precipitated a moral fall from grace in China—the same fall symbolized by Wang Lung. In the city, nature is potted, clipped, stunted; the vernacular “big-feet” beauty of working rural landscapes—terraced, tilled, and irrigated for centuries—is bastardized to yield a contrived, corrupted aesthetic. To Yu, even the classical gardens of Suzhou, with their intricate rockeries, pools, and moon gates, are but “landscapes defined by the privileged urban minority” that foster an “aesthetic of uselessness, leisure, and adornment.” As Chinese society exchanged O-lan for Lotus Blossom,

Irrigation ditches and ponds were turned into ornamental water features. Fish farms were stocked with mutant ornamental goldfish. Green plants were replaced with golden- or yellow-leafed ones; vegetables and herbs were ousted

by ostentatious peonies and roses. Healthy trees were pruned, twisted, dwarfed, and damaged to make bonsai... Peach trees unable to bear fruit were planted. Like tiny-footed women, these urbane ornaments produced little and survived only with constant human upkeep. They were watered, pruned, weeded, and artificially reproduced.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, denigrating artifice and insisting on earthy fecundity will quickly invite charges of populist anti-intellectualism. Right after the paragraph cited above, Yu slows himself, allowing that “in one sense all art, music, and dance is...useless for sustaining biological life,” and stressing that he “is not arguing for the end of all this or for any demeaning of the value of beauty and pleasure in our lives.” Nonetheless, “in our resource-depleted and ecologically damaged and threatened era,” he presses, “the built environment must and will adapt a new aesthetic grounded in appreciation of the beauty of productive, ecology-supporting things. Our desire for beauty detached from utility is weakening, and it should be. In our new world, survival is at stake. Wastefulness becomes viscerally unattractive, if not immoral.”<sup>23</sup>

However compelling a touchstone Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* has been for Yu Kongjian, it is the other, lesser-known Buck—that is, John Lossing—whose work relates even more powerfully to Yu’s evolving practice of grounded, ecologically informed design. Lossing’s great survey of Chinese agriculture, launched in early 1921, was the first systematic study of farming practices ever undertaken in China. It was born out of necessity: there was virtually no reliable data on Chinese agricultural practices or productivity at the time, confounding Lossing’s best efforts to instruct his young agronomists. Mindful of George Warren’s preference for survey research—and of Pearl’s urging that indigenous farming practices should be studied and understood before anyone attempted to reform them—Lossing dispatched his College of Agriculture and Forestry students to rural Zhejiang and Anhui provinces to interview farmers and learn firsthand about Chinese pastoral life. They inquired about tenancy, crop yields, and income using a nine-page survey form.<sup>24</sup> This work helped bridge the urban-rural rift in its own way, by exposing Lossing’s university students, nearly all sons of urban elites, to their rural counterparts. As Pearl Buck later recalled, the students “knew nothing about their own country people,” and treated them scornfully. “The contempt of the intellectual for the man who worked with his hands,” she wrote, “was far stronger in our young Chinese intellectuals and radicals than it had been in the days of their fathers.”<sup>25</sup>

22. Kongjian Yu, “Beautiful Big Feet: Toward a New Landscape Aesthetic,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 31 (Fall/Winter 2009/10), 3.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Paul B. Trescott, *Jingji Xue: The History of the Introduction of Western Economic Ideas into China, 1850–1950* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2007), 169–177.

25. Pearl S. Buck, *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record* (John Day Company, 1954), 214.



Rice and wheat region overlay map, page 92 of *Land Utilization in China* (1937).  
Collection of Thomas J. Campanella.

Lossing's project expanded quickly, and by 1925 it had canvassed 2,866 farms in seven provinces. The survey data was tabulated, analyzed, and written up as *Chinese Farm Economy*, published in 1930. His next undertaking was an order of magnitude more ambitious. Effectively China's first national land survey, it would cover nearly 17,000 farms and 38,256 rural families in 170 counties and 22 provinces, using not one survey form, but a suite of ten. The result was *Land Utilization in China*, a three-volume masterpiece published jointly in 1937 by Nanjing University and the University of Chicago. Its very first footnote cites *The Good Earth*. Writing in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Maurice T. Price described Lossing's trifecta as "the culmination of an almost revolutionary attempt to initiate rural land-use planning in China"—one that

"no social scientist... no government official reckoning with the Far East, no intelligent persons desiring to place China realistically among the peoples of the world, should overlook."<sup>26</sup> The work is a major reference source even today, and for many parts of China it remains the only comprehensive study of rural land and life ever undertaken. So rich was the data harvested by Lossing's superbly-crafted research instruments that it has recently been tapped—using computers now instead of abacuses—to yield yet more treasure.<sup>27</sup>

It is the second volume of *Land Utilization in China* that comes closest in spirit to the work of Yu Kongjian. With a dizzying array of maps, charts, and aerial photographs, the book catalogs the configurations, flows, and fundamental structures of China's rural landscapes—soils, topography and landform, forest cover, climatic regimes, seasonal precipitation levels, proneness to flooding, irrigation infrastructure, crop type and extent, even the relative amount of prime agricultural land in each region occupied by graves. One especially powerful map, with a single bold line across it, fixes a boundary of immense cultural significance: the division of China into the rice-growing south and the wheat-growing north. It is a kind of agricultural Mason-Dixon line with profound social and political (not to mention culinary) implications even today. As a recent study published in *Science* put it, "large-scale psychological differences within China" might well be a legacy of the different agricultural regimes of the north and south, suggesting that "a history of farming rice makes cultures more interdependent, whereas farming wheat makes cultures more independent."<sup>28</sup> The plethora of maps prepared by Lossing and his team mirror at the national scale Yu's similar process of systems analysis and mapping that he has refined in his practice of place-making. As he has said, truly sustainable design cannot occur until the full continuum of systems and flows in a place have been "strategically identified... to safeguard the various natural, biological, cultural and recreational processes across the landscape, securing natural assets and ecosystems services." For these, in the end, are not only vital to sustain a place, but are "essential for sustaining human society." The spirit of Wang Lung would surely be pleased.<sup>29</sup>

26. Maurice T. Price, "Review of Land Utilization in China," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 200, no. 1 (November 1938), 343.

27. See Hisatoshi Hoken, "Restoration of Micro Data of John Lossing Buck's Survey and Analysis of the Inverse Relationship between Yield and Farm Size in Rural China in the 1930's," *Institute of Developing Economies Discussion Paper No. 248* (August 2010).

28. Thomas Talhelm, et al., "Large-Scale Psychological Differences Within China Explained by Rice Versus Wheat Agriculture," *Science* 9 (May 2014).