

Original Paper

The Construction of the Chinese Image in Spatial Writing: A Case Study of Pearl S. Buck's *East Wind, West Wind*

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Received: April 8, 2026

Accepted: April 22, 2026

Online Published: May 11, 2026

doi:10.22158/csm.v9n1p85

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/csm.v9n1p85>

Abstract

*Pearl S. Buck roamed between China and the West and was deeply familiar with Chinese culture. Through the realistic portrayal of Chinese society and the Chinese people, she not only eliminating the Western stereotype on China to some extent, but also exerted great influence on the comparative studies of Chinese and Western cultures. The background of *East Wind: West Wind* (1930) is primarily set in China from the late 19th century to the 1920s and 1930s. During this period, China faced aggression and cultural impact from Western powers, while Western concepts of science, democracy, and equality were gradually introducing to China, colliding fiercely with traditional Chinese culture and values. In *East Wind: West Wind* (1930), Pearl S. Buck, through the unique perspective of Kwei-lan's resistance, hesitation, and acceptance of Western culture, reflects the historical context and social changes of the time, providing a true portrayal of Chinese society and its people during that era. While the shaping of character traits and era characteristics is achieved through spatial settings (Long, D. Y.), study the spatial writing strategies of *East Wind: West Wind* (1930) for constructing the image of China is of great significance. This article, based on Lefebvre's spatial theory, takes Pearl S. Buck's *East Wind: West Wind* (1930) as the study object, examines the physical and social spaces within the text, and analyzes how such spatial writing patterns contribute to the construction of China's image.*

Keywords

Pearl S. Buck, East Wind: West Wind (1930), Image of China

Introduction

Pearl S. Buck, known for her Chinese-themed works, was the first American female writer to win both the Nobel Prize in Literature and the Pulitzer Prize. Born in the U.S., she moved to China at three months old and lived there for nearly 40 years. Influenced by Confucian culture and Western literature,

she fostered a “dual-focus” perspective. Her representative novel *East Wind: West Wind* (1930) tells the story of Kwei-lan, a traditional Chinese woman influenced by her husband’s return from abroad. Set in 1949, the novel depicts cultural exchanges and contradictions between East and West, presenting a realistic image of China through physical, social, and psychological spaces.

Just as Franz Boas, in the nineteenth century, advanced cultural relativism to counter racial supremacism—refusing to force diverse cultures into a hierarchical “unilinear evolution” framework and insisting that every culture can only be understood within its own total context—Pearl S. Buck’s narrative stance in *East Wind: West Wind* embodies a vivid enactment of this theory in the literary realm (Lui & Tang, 2024, pp. 43-50). The image of China depicted by Buck seems to be objective, and multi-dimensional, as a matter of fact. Throughout the novel, Buck does not make a strong contrast between east culture and west culture for she does not emphasize “the West wind overcoming the East wind” or “the East wind overcoming the West wind”. Her cultural relativism ensures that her narrative remains objective, acknowledging the differences in cultures, their rationality, and the necessity of their coexistence. Simultaneously, she advocates recognizing cultural differences while transcending them. As a matter of fact, Buck does not pit Chinese culture against Western culture to determine superiority but rather objectively presents their respective strengths and weaknesses. She emphasizes the subjectivity of individuals, endowing her protagonists the right to hesitate, judge, and think in the face of cultural conflicts, thereby portraying their true mental activities and presenting a more realistic image of the Chinese people within the context of social change (Liu, 2024, pp. 146-151). Therefore, it is of great significance to study Pearl S. Buck’s multi-level spatial writing strategies in *East Wind, West Wind* for the construction of the image of China.

1. Definition of Spatial Writing

In the late 20th century, the focus on spatial features in narratology gradually intensified, a trend particularly notable in literary criticism. American literary critic Joseph Frank was among the first to theorize the spatial form in the novel, examining the value of literary works from a spatial perspective and thereby opening a new chapter in spatial narrative studies.

The physical space of story, according to Joseph Frank’s theoretical scheme, refers not only to the geographical and material settings where events occur but also to the intricate network of spatial relationships embedded within the narrative structure itself. Through adopting certain key techniques including cross-cutting between multiple locations and spatial interweaving of different plot threads, writers construct a spatialized structure that breaks away from traditional linear narration. Instead of following a chronological sequence, the narrative organizes itself around spatial juxtapositions—switching back and forth among different scenes, perspectives, or storylines that coexist simultaneously in the readers’ consciousness. This structural arrangement demands that the

readers are supposed to hold disparate narrative fragments together in a unified, synchronic mental image, thereby transforming the act of reading from a purely temporal progression into a spatial configuration of meaning. Frank's theoretical breakthrough enabled literary works to be understood not merely as linear temporal unfoldings but as richly dimensional spatial constructs. With Frank's influence, the western intellectual sphere and literary criticism experienced what was known as the "spatial turn". This shift has not only transformed the readers' comprehension of literary works but also prompted scholars to re-examine the concept of space from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Against this backdrop, French philosopher Henri Lefebvre linked space with production and proposed a theory of spatial complexity. Lefebvre argued that space is not merely a physical entity but also encompasses social and psychological dimensions. He subdivided spatial forms into three dimensions: physical space, social space, and psychological space under the influence of social space (Feng, Y. 2024, pp. 36-38). Physical space refers to the concrete, perceptible natural and artificial environment; social space is formed through social activities, reflecting social relations and power structures; psychological space encompasses individual psychological experiences and cognition influenced by social space. This multi-dimensional division of space makes the concept of "space" more concrete and provides a richer theoretical basis for the spatial analysis of literary works.

Based on Lefebvre's spatial theory, this article analyzes *East Wind: West Wind* from two spatial dimensions. In physical space, Buck contrasts the Chinese courtyard—rich in ritual order, family values, and nature-human harmony—with the Western-style garden, perceived by the protagonist Kwei-lan as crude and disorderly, reflecting cultural conflict and Eastern aesthetic appreciation. From the perspective of social space, through "mirror" writing between conservative elders and progressive returnees, Buck presents cognitive clashes and generational tensions in Republican China. These spatial strategies jointly construct a multi-dimensional, realistic image of China, highlighting both its traditional depth and its transformation amid East-West encounters.

2. Physical Space: The Image of China Shaped in the Aesthetic Writing of the External Space

The concept of physical space varies between Western and Chinese philosophies. Seen from the view of western philosophy, space functions as a static component of concrete entities, a medium for motion and objects (Luo, F. Y. 2024). In contrast, ancient Chinese philosophy sees space as a dynamic entity intertwined with human activities and emotions, serving as a spiritual home and a place for emotional expression. Pearl S. Buck's *East Wind: West Wind* (1930) vividly illustrates these differences through architectural descriptions (Tai, Z. J. 2022, pp. 169-171). She contrasts Chinese and Western architectural styles, highlighting Chinese aesthetics like harmony and delicacy. Through the protagonist Kwei-lan, Buck presents Chinese perspectives on both Chinese aesthetics and Chinese people's true view towards western style of aesthetics, shaping a realistic image of China. This article will analyze Buck's spatial

writing strategies in depicting Chinese and Western architectural spaces and the image of China she constructs.

2.1 *The Writing Strategies of Spatial Composition*

From the architectural perspective, spatial composition involves organizing and arranging spaces within buildings to meet functional, aesthetic, and cultural demands. This reflects cultural differences in philosophical thoughts, aesthetics, and social structures (Peng, Y. G., 1998, p. 22).

From a literary perspective, architectural space depiction goes beyond physical representation. It uses language, scene changes, narrative sequence, and emotional expression to highlight cultural differences in buildings, reveal inner worlds and social status of characters as well as reflect the spatial perspectives of the authors. In view of language usage, here goes with the word choice, imagery, and figurative language convey cultural values (e.g., “harmonious courtyard” vs. “crude, irregular garden”). In terms of scene changes: shifts between different architectural settings create spatial juxtaposition, highlighting cultural contrasts or character transitions. When it comes to the narrative sequence: the order in which spaces are revealed (outer to inner, public to private) mirrors social hierarchy, ritual order, or psychological depth. Here comes the emotional expression that goes as follows: Characters’ feelings—nostalgia, alienation, comfort—color the description, transforming objective space into subjective lived experience.

Whether in the East or the West, garden design has always been an indispensable topic in the integration of exterior spaces with building design (Meng, Z. Z., 2023). In China, terms differ from each other like “yuan”, “ting” and “yuan” while in western they have the differences among “yard”, “garden” and “courtyard”, thus demonstrating the unique cultural insights. In *East Wind: West Wind* (Peng, Y. G., 1986, p. 20), the vivid depiction of Kwei-lan’s traditional quadrangle courtyard home reveals Chinese architectural aesthetics, etiquette, relationships, and social order. Buck’s spatial writing gives these elements cultural and historical depth, providing insights into traditional Chinese society and values.

In contrast, her descriptions of Western-style courtyards are brief, emphasizing functionality and reflecting a building-centered western design concept. From the Chinese perspective, Buck’s depictions present distinct eastern and western aesthetic images and reveal differing Chinese aesthetic perceptions at the time, highlighting the Chinese aesthetic image in the process.

2.2 *The Spatial Writing of Chinese Courtyards: The Representation of Extraordinary Chinese Aesthetics*

2.2.1 Using Traditional Chinese Image to Realize the Construction of Chinese Image

The following is a relevant excerpt from *East Wind, West Wind* that describe Chinese imagery.

“O my beloved home! My childhood passes before me in pictures illumined as by firelight. The court-yards, where I watched the lotus-buds burst into flower in the pool at dawn, and the peonies bloom in, their terraces; the family rooms, where the children, tumbled on the

tilled floor, and the candles flared before the house-gods. (Buck, P. S., 1998)

In this excerpt, the author meticulously describes natural elements like “courtyards”, “ponds”, “lotus flowers” and “peonies” capturing the essential features of Chinese garden design and conveying the philosophy of harmonious coexistence with nature. These elements embody the Chinese cultural concept of “the unity of heaven and humanity”, reflecting the integration of humans and nature.

Pearl S. Buck also links the real life with spiritual beliefs through material elements such as “candles” and “portraits of the house-gods”. The candles and flames in front of the God of Wealth shrine create a warm, mysterious atmosphere, symbolizing light, hope, and the traditional Chinese family’s aspirations for a better life and prosperity. As a matter of fact, her writing integrates nature, human beings, and deities as a unified whole, showcasing the harmonious ideology in Chinese culture (Tai, Z. J. 2022, pp. 169-171). When describing Chinese images, she follows a sequence from the angle of Kwei-lan: from courtyards to halls then to room and finally to house-gods, Pearl S. Buck reserves the most significant element for the final reveal.

She adopts a writing sequence that indicates Chinese habit of space observing from exterior to interior. In traditional Chinese homes, the house God is not merely the symbolic “master of the house”, but also the living link between the mortal and the divine. There is an old saying in China that depicts the house God: On the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month he “ascends to Heaven to report the good”, and on the fourth day of the first lunar month he “returns to the palace bringing blessings”. In this case, Buck follows the sequence of observing: from the outer to the inner by letting her narrative gaze come to rest last upon the house-God. Through this progressive narrative of spatial depths, she highlights traditional Chinese culture’s emphasis on family, wealth, harmony, and order, and how these values are manifested and passed down in daily life.

In conclusion, Buck’s depiction of Kwei-lan’s former residence not only captures the external features of Chinese architectural aesthetics but also delves into the philosophical implications and cultural values behind the architecture (Zhang, F., 2013). Her writing style vividly brings the image of China to readers, offering a unique perspective to understand and appreciate traditional Chinese culture.

2.2.2 Indicating the Ritual System through the Writing of Spatial Composition

Buck also adopts the narration of spatial combination and the following excerpt is an example of demonstrating the ritual system through a hierarchical description of spatial combinations.

“I, Of course, I was never allowed in the courts where the men lived. When first they separated my brother from the women I crept once in the dusk of the evening to the round moon-gate that opened into the men’s apartments; and I caning against the wall opposite it, I peered into the courts beyond, hoping to see my brother perhaps in the garden. But I saw only men-servants, hurrying to and fro with bowls (Buck, P. S., 1998).

This excerpt highlights numerous details of the ritual system inherent in many traditional Chinese families. Firstly, the division of the quadrangle courtyard into “men’s quarters” and “women’s quarters” not only reflects the principle of “separate roles for men and women” in traditional Chinese ethics but also ensures appropriate separation among family members through spatial isolation, aiming to maintain the purity and order of the family. This design is particularly common in large families with extensive clan systems, typically constructed in a three- or four-courtyard layout. Such arrangements also allude to the family background and status of the protagonist Kwei-lan.

The transfer of the elder brother from the girls’ quarters to the boys’ illustrates the cultivation of gender awareness, a key aspect of family education and Confucian rites. The “father’s quarters” further imply the hierarchical division of the courtyard, with the father residing in the main room, symbolizing his authority and the family’s hierarchical order.

The sentence “The heavy door closed, and silence once again enveloped the garden” depicts the physical separation of rooms and reflects the Chinese concept of harmony. According to traditional Chinese family values, it is advocated that family members live under the same roof, maintaining harmony which is believed that such living ways can bring prosperity and preserve the family’s unity and the continuation of traditions. Through this detailed description, the author ingeniously showcases the details of the concept of “living in harmony”—“unity within division” in the quadrangle courtyard—within the large compound, each functional area maintains a certain degree of independence and privacy. This design respects individual needs while maintaining the overall harmony of the family since this design respects the individual needs of different family members. Women can manage domestic affairs without intrusion. Men discuss scholarly or business matters in their own quarters. Children have spaces for entertainment and learning. Elders enjoy privacy and dignity in their designated rooms. However, such division does not lead to isolation or fragmentation. Instead, it maintains the overall harmony of the family by: minimizing daily conflicts that might arise from constant close contact; clarifying roles and responsibilities through spatial order; preserving ritual propriety and fostering collective identity.

In conclusion, the quadrangle courtyard represents traditional Chinese architecture and the family values and ritualistic thoughts behind it. Through the spatial writing of courtyard’s layout and design, Pearl S. Buck effectively portrays China’s image of paying high tribute on family values, order, and harmony.

2.3 Western-style Courtyard Space Writing: The Image of China from the Perspective of Cultural Conflict

Unlike the China’s courtyard-centered external spatial composition style, the western architectural concept of external spatial composition is centered on the building itself. Pearl S. Buck demonstrates of such difference by showing her different distribution on the length, and in such a comparison, directly

presents the beauty of the Chinese courtyard and Chinese aesthetics. The following excerpt is the Western-style courtyard that depicted in *East Wind: West Wind*

“And so on that same day we went, and we entered into a garden with grass and trees and flowers. I was surprised that it was so beautiful and that westerners understood the value of nature. Of course, the arrangement of all was very crude-no courts or gold-fish ponds, but trees planted in any way and growing irregularly as they pleased. I must confess that when at last we stood before the door of the house, I should have run away had not my husband been there with me. (Buck, P. S., 1998)

Compared with Chinese Garden that pictured by Pearl S. Buck, The western-style garden in the excerpt belongs to the protagonist’s husband’s foreign friend. Kwei-lan actually does not occupied a garden in her new home and she also finds her friend’s garden seemingly unplanned, which emphasize the dominance of Western-style gardens.

Kwei-lan’s makes a comparison between Chinese Gardening and Western one at first. Compared with Chinese garden, western garden dose not seemed that beautiful and well-organized as Chinese garden, as it depicted by Kwei-lan “the arrangement of all was very crude-no courts or gold-fish ponds”. Such a contrast reflects Kwei-lan’s inner appreciation and admiration of the garden designing style in Chinese aesthetic: a traditional pond with golden fishes, and the well-ordered courtyard; in her eyes, the western garden appears disorderly and unruly. In the end, Buck made Kwei-lan herself voice her judgment, thereby clarifying her own attitude toward the Western mode of garden design: “I must confess that when at last we stood before the door of the house, I should have run away had not my husband been there with me”. In the description of this paragraph, the author does not hesitate to express his appreciation for eastern aesthetics and his criticism of the chaotic forms of Western gardens. It indirectly reveals the 19th-century Western Romanticism’s yearning for Eastern aesthetics.

Pearl S. Buck does not avoid writing this cultural conflict, presenting Kwei-lan’s view of the Western garden through her cultural lens, demonstrating an objective perspective. Firstly, it demonstrates the philosophical difference: the harmony with nature contrasting the domination over nature.

In conclusion, through Kwei-lan’s perspective, Buck highlights the differences between Eastern and Western garden designing style and natural concepts, presenting the true reactions of the Chinese people in the face of cultural conflicts.

3. Social Space

The Portrayal of Coexistence of Conservatism and Cdvancement of China’s Image

Social space usually act as a “humanized” space filled with human practices. It is itself a spatial product of human production activities, thereby generating spatial forms and spatial orders. Therefore, social space is a space that is continuously produced, possessing historicity, abstraction, and

contradiction (Lefebvre, H., 1991).

Pearl S. Buck's novels also abound in depicting the social space in that era. During the Republic China era, Western ideas and the changing political situation influenced every aspect of the lives of the Chinese people. It was not only a superficial change in lifestyle such as clothing, food, housing and transportation, it also had a subtle influence on people's cognition and their thoughts on various issues arising from the cultural conflicts between China and the West. Pearl S. Buck centered on the portrayal of a group of characters, depicting the different life choices of Chinese people influenced by western ideas against the backdrop of the Republic of China era. Through the different choices of various individuals and the "mirror-like observation" among different groups, she presented the conflicts and contradictions that exist in the society and explained the true social image of China to the west. This part will focus on Pearl S. Buck's writing strategies regarding social space and analyze the image of Chinese society and the Chinese that depicted by such strategy.

3.1 The Image of China Written in the Mirror-Gazing of the Progressive and Conservative Groups

Mirror writing in literature extends beyond mere symmetry of words or images; it functions as a narrative technique that reflects characters' internal perspectives on different social groups through mutual observation and introspection (Zhang, Z. J., 2020). This method is frequently utilized to highlight perceptual and understanding disparities among various cultural or social groups, revealing deeper social and cultural issues. In Pearl S. Buck's works, mirror writing illustrates the cognitive differences between two social groups: conservative family elders and progressive overseas returnees, set against the backdrop of China and the West, as well as tradition and modernity. Through this technique, Buck effectively portrays the collision and integration of different cognitive groups, adding richer narrative layers and deeper reflective spaces to her works.

3.1.1 The Perspective of the Old Generation on the New Generation: The Root of the Conflict Lies in Superficial Understanding

Pearl S. Buck uses a chronological narrative to depict her brother's experience studying abroad, presenting the true state of Chinese students during that era from a third-person perspective. These students, eager to learn and well-versed in both ancient and modern knowledge, sought to study cutting-edge technologies abroad with their parents' permission and assistance. Feudal elders, representing the conservative faction, were willing to send their descendants abroad, but their primary concern was whether the children could achieve fame and fortune, aligning with their high expectations.

However, when these students returned back to China, they had been influenced by westernization from the following aspects: clothing, behavior, and speech, the elders reacted with rejection etc. as their children did not match their preconceived image. This response reflects the conservative group's real views towards the progressive group, embodying the conflicts in Sino-Western exchanges.

Buck narrates these conflicts objectively through Kwei-lan's perspective, highlighting the conservatives' superficial understanding of the progressives. The conservatives' rejection primarily focused on visible elements like dress and behavior, while ideological differences were secondary. The text initially discusses the relatively underestimated ideological contradictions, such as the mother's view of her son's study of science as "unfortunate", reflecting a refusal to accept new knowledge. This attitude separates true scientific cognition from the conservative masses. When Kwei-lan mentions her husband's medical knowledge, her mother dismisses it as "Western witchcraft". Through this portrayal, Buck illustrates the conservative Chinese people's perception of the progressive faction during that era, visually demonstrating China's image through depicting the impact of cultural exchange on Chinese society.

3.1.2 The Perspective of the New Generation on the Old Generation: The Root of the Conflict Lies in Superficial Understanding

The observation of the old era group by the new era group occurs after they embrace new ideas. As representatives of the advanced group, overseas students were born into the context of the old era in China and received education in traditional etiquette and old morality. However, as they delved deeper into Western cultural knowledge and scientific technology, the authority of traditional concepts in their cognition gradually disintegrated. They gradually realized that China's backwardness was not just caused by the techniques, but the stubborn ideas among the conservative groups. In the view of the advanced group, cognitive conflict is the true source of friction. Therefore, upon returning to China, they used their own actions to challenge the various concepts of the old era. Consequently, the author focuses on depicting the conceptual opposition between the advanced and conservative groups, presenting these contradictions primarily through direct confrontation.

When the text mentioned that Kwei-lan's husband and his father were discussing life plans, Kwei-lan's father-in-law believed that his son's plan should be to manage the family business honestly and steadily.

"My son, remain in my house. What is mine is yours. Here is plenty of food and space. You need never waste your body in physical labor. Spend your days in dignified leisure and in study that suits your pleasure, Allow that one, the daughter-in-law of your honored mother, to produce sons. Three generations of men under one roof is a sight pleasing to Heaven."

But Kwei-lan's husband immediately and straightforwardly refuted her father's opinion without any embellishment.

"But I wish to work, my father! I am trained in a scientific profession-the noblest in the western world. As for sons, they are not my first desire. I wish to produce the fruit of my brain for my country's good, A mere dog may fill the earth with the fruit of his body!" (Buck, P. S., 1998)

In this excerpt, Pearl S. Buck highlights the contrasting life perspectives between the father and the husband. The father, influenced by traditional society, desires his son to maintain ancestral lifestyles, valuing stability and family continuity over individual pursuits. He wishes for his son to uphold family traditions and avoid risky ventures, emphasizing contentment with the status quo.

Conversely, the husband, educated in modern ideas and western knowledge, seeks to apply his learning to the contribution to the nation. He questions traditional lifestyles, believing that personal value lies in societal contribution rather than family confinement. He aspires to realize his life's value through hard work and personal ambition.

This cognitive divergence reflects broader societal tensions in China at the time. Traditional concepts still dominated, with many clinging to ancestral ways and resisting change. However, with the introduction of new education and western ideas, more people began embracing new thoughts, pursuing personal development and value realization. Unlike the conservative group's subtle portrayal of progressives, Pearl S. Buck utilize a more direct way to write the progressive group's observation of conservatives, which also indicates the influence of Western independent thought that exerted on the progressives.

3.1.3 The Shaping of China's Image through Mirror Writing

In *East Wind: West Wind* (1930), Pearl S. Buck skillfully portrays the cultural conflict between conservative and progressive groups through detailed descriptions and context-sensitive narrative techniques. The key to shaping the Chinese social space lies in presenting the contradictions between the two sides and finding an appropriate "mirror" to reflect them. Through the above analysis, it could be discovered that Kwei-lan serves as this mirror, objectively presenting the Chinese social space and showcasing the blend of old and new elements in that era.

Simultaneously, the social space acts as a mirror for Kwei-lan. Amid the interplay of conservative and progressive elements, she reflects on herself (Ding, H. G. & Zha, R. L., 2024) comparing her own identity with society. Through hesitations and identifications, Kwei-lan seeks her cultural and social positioning. Her growth and inner journey reflect an individual's struggle and exploration within the broader social environment, mirroring the societal transformation under the cultural collisions. Through the interaction between Kwei-lan and the social space, Buck reveals the humanistic reflections prompted by cultural conflicts.

Conclusion

This essay conducts an in-depth analysis of Pearl S. Buck's *East Wind: West Wind* (1930) from the perspective of spatial writing, revealing its significant role in shaping the image of China. By examining the physical space and social space in the novel, we find that Buck skillfully employs spatial writing strategies to vividly present the true image of Chinese society to readers. Through the

interweaving of these spaces, Buck showcases the conflicts and fusions between tradition and modernity, as well as between East and West in Chinese society. This not only provides a unique perspective for understanding the social changes in early 20th-century China but also offers valuable insights for contemporary strategies in shaping China's image in literary works.

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