

# 'THE TIMES HAVE CHANGED': AMERICAN SELF-DISCOVERY IN PEARL S BUCK'S *EAST WIND WEST WIND*

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## ABSTRACT

*East Wind West Wind* registers the coming of age of Chinese women as seen with Western eyes. Buck's novel deals with the clash of two ideologies: the Chinese tradition, which assigned a specific and very limited role to women in society and promoted submission, and the Western world, which is epitomized in multiple ways in the story. The image of 1920s American society as a liberating force is perceived in the relationship with the husband and the daughter-in-law representing alterity and sorority at the same time. Buck makes her political allegiance to the West explicit and *East Wind West Wind* showcases how the Western world helps the protagonist to know herself better and to accept herself.

KEYWORDS: Pearl S. Buck, *East Wind West Wind*, Chinese women, gender studies, American literature.

'LOS TIEMPOS HAN CAMBIADO': EL AUTODESCUBRIMIENTO AMERICANO  
EN *VIENTO DEL ESTE, VIENTO DEL OESTE* DE PEARL S. BUCK

## RESUMEN

*Viento del este, viento del oeste* revela cómo las mujeres chinas han llegado a su mayoría de edad y lo hace desde su mirada occidental. La novela de Buck se centra en el choque de dos ideologías: la tradición china, que asignó un papel específico y muy limitado a las mujeres en la sociedad y promovió su sumisión, y el mundo occidental, que se personifica de múltiples formas en la historia. La imagen de la sociedad americana de la década de 1920 como fuerza liberadora se percibe en la relación con el marido y la nuera que representan la alteridad y la hermandad de mujeres al mismo tiempo. Buck es muy clara al hacer explícito su credo político y *Viento del este viento del oeste* muestra cómo el mundo occidental ayuda a la protagonista a conocerse mejor y aceptarse a sí misma.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Pearl S. Buck, *Viento del este, viento del oeste*, mujeres chinas, estudios de género, literatura americana.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

American writer Pearl S. Buck (1882-1973) enjoyed literary success in the 1930s and 1940s. Her condition as the daughter of American missionaries to China and the years she spent there herself as a missionary made her acquainted with the life of Chinese women. Buck was a prolific writer who became politically engaged as an activist fighting for civil rights. Her writings dealt with women's rights, China, immigration, the family, missionary work, war and violence. Encapsulating the careers of wife, mother, author, editor, international spokesperson, and political activist, Buck approached topics like racism, sex discrimination and the plight of Asian war children. Her corpus includes autobiographies, biographies, short stories, children's books and a good deal of novels. In comparison with other works by Buck, *The Good Earth* (1932), which gave her the Nobel Prize in 1938, is the subject of a great deal of research though, *East Wind West Wind* (1930) was her first work and would be followed by others, like *Son* (1933), *The House of Earth* (1935), *The Mother* (1933) and *Pavilion of Women* (1946), to name just a few.

*East Wind West Wind* has to be examined within the framework of several political and cultural events that paved the modernization of China, a fact that Buck knew well. Hao Gao (2018) analyzes how the 1910 had witnessed the birth of the New Culture Movement led by scholars like Chen Duxiu, Cai Yuanpei, Chen Hengzhe, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun, among others. It aimed to promote a new society based on unconstrained individuals rather than the traditional society. Also, on 4 May 1919 a group of students protested against the German occupation rights in Shandong Province to Japan granted by the Versailles Treaty of April 1919. With a populist base and away from traditional intellectual and political elites, this movement triggered the consolidation of Chinese nationalism and a political mobilization away from cultural activities. Yuhui Li (2000) points out that this movement walked hand in hand with May Fourth Feminist movement that concluded that the problems within the Chinese family structure were among the main reasons for China's underdevelopment and weak status. Women's lack of education and bound feet, the activists argued, prevented them from bearing and raising a healthy and strong future Chinese population. Consequently, women's liberation had to be achieved in order to save China from disarray and humiliation (Li 2000, 31). Nevertheless, May Fourth Feminist movement had its own limits. As Jin Feng points out, intellectuals "invoked traditional female roles in their discussion of women's liberation, if only for the alleged purpose of promoting their own version of Chinese modernity" and they assumed their right to speak for Chinese women (2004, 30-31). Another point to bear in mind is that Western missionaries, like Buck's parents themselves, spent a long time in China trying to understand the country from within and even to help its progression towards modernity. Missionary educators established universities and schools according to the Western model in major cities and cultural centres such as Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai. Some Chinese intellectuals received education in the West and were influenced by Western thinking. These winds of change are reflected in Buck's novels and the view of woman as presented in the novel.



In this paper I argue that *East Wind West Wind* is basically about communication between the sexes, cultures and generations. The lesson that the protagonist learns is self-knowledge and self-acceptance in a process where America is the liberating force or the West wind. When Xiongya Gao analyzes Pearl S. Buck's Chinese woman characters, he highlights that the protagonist's typicality shows "how the Chinese people strived to adapt to the change of time and to survive the conflict between the East wind and the West; with it, Buck reveals her conviction that the two cultures can embrace each other rather than one completely obliterating the other" (2000, 58). Another scholar, Robert Shaffer, maintains that Buck's approach to Chinese women is neither optimistic nor restricted to that country: "[Buck] increasingly used her position as an expert on Asia, not to show that women's roles in the US were better than women's roles or status in China, but to critique women's status in American society itself" (2016, 2). Buck was aware that the Roaring Twenties meant a break with tradition, but she did not hold that westernization would lead directly to the improvement of women's status. Shaffer also sees a paradox in Buck: "... over time, Buck became more accepting of a sexual division of labor for Asian women and men, but she consistently portrayed her American heroines in her fiction and in her essays as struggling against relegation to a private, or women's sphere" (2). I assume that feminism is not oriented to the defense of women, but to social reform and that Buck saw that neither men nor women could feel comfortable in a society that impedes communication.

## 2. THE WESTERN TONGUE

*East Wind West Wind* hinges on the relationship between an upper class Chinese girl, Kwei-lan, and her husband, who has never met her until their marriage. Both have been brought up in traditional families, but Kwei-lan has been trained in the art of pleasing and her values greatly differ from her husband's. He has lived in America where he trained to become a doctor and his foreign ways are criticized now that he has just arrived in China. Kwei-lan tries unsuccessfully to attract her husband's attention, which she finally manages to do after allowing him to unbind her tiny feet. Once Kwei-lan has given birth to a boy, the couple decides to leave Kwei-lan's parents' house and welcome Kwei-lan's older brother and his wife Mary, an American woman whom he has married disobeying his parents. Kwei-lan's family rejects Mary, who feels miserable and misunderstood in China. Towards the end of the novel Kwei-lan's mother dies and the brother is disinherited as he refuses to marry his Chinese betrothed.

From the narrative point of view, Buck puts into practice several strategies that make *East Wind West Wind* a highly attractive story. What grips the reader is Buck's choice to tell the story of a Chinese woman though Buck did not actually experience living as such. Buck makes us accept the imposture that we are actually reading the story from an Eastern point of view. Some scholars, like Lydia de Tienda, westernize Buck's novel. De Tienda interprets that what we have is a representation and not a testimony and that the objects and practices that puzzle Kwei-lan would



have the same effect on a Western person (157). Nevertheless, no matter how we examine it, the story is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Another feature is the very poetic language that she uses throughout the narrative, like when she describes the maternal home: “I would walk among the flowers and examine the lotus-pods to see if the seeds were ripe within. It was late summer and nearly time for them. Perhaps, as the moon rose, my mother would bid me fetch my harps to play the music she loves: the right hand singing the air, and the left hand drifting into a minor accompaniment” (1941, 32).

Besides, Buck aims to give the impression of closeness and Kwei-lan restricts her scope to a limited audience, her sister from America to whom she opens her heart: “You have lived among us all your years. Although you belong to those other lands where my husband studied his Western books, you will understand. I speak the truth. I have named you My Sister. I will tell you everything” (1941, 1). Buck makes clear her political allegiances: she supports American culture and is very critical with tradition. And it is her privileged point of view as an American woman that makes Kwei-lan’s awakening possible. In fact, in *East Wind West Wind* there is not one single positive image about China and the necessity to make changes can be seen registered at different levels, as I show.

### 3. WITHIN THE PATRIARCHAL HOME

The novel’s setting is very specific from the geographical and social perspective. Even though patriarchy is assimilated to the oldest generation and Kwei-lan’s parents, a distinction has to be made regarding their attitude. Thus, Kwei-lan’s mother is a victim more than a victimizer and she sees herself represented in her alterity, the concubines. A rigid mother and the prey of an old ideology which cannot accept changes either, she feels in a subservient position but she keeps an imposing façade as the bearer of tradition. This attitude changes when Kwei-lan confesses to her the desperate situation she lives in and the matriarch tells her to submit to her husband’s desires and let him unbind her feet in order to please him:

‘Nevertheless. My child, there is only one path in this world for a woman –only one path to follow at all costs. She must please her husband. It is more than I can bear that all my care for you must be undone. But you no longer belong to my family. You are your husband’s. There is no choice left you save to be what he desires. Yet, stay! Put forth once more every effort to beguile him. Clothe yourself in the jade green and black. Use the perfume of water lilies. Smile –not boldly, but with the shyness that promises all. You may even touch his hand– cling to it for an instant. If he laughs, be gay. If he is still unmoved, then there is nothing left but to bend yourself to his will.’ (42-43)

The mother-daughter relationship is affected and Kwei-lan’s mother has to fight against love and duty. She is an oppressor that feels oppressed. Rather than enjoying her privileged position as Kwei-lan’s oppressor, she knows Kwei-lan is suffering and tells her to comply to her husband’s wishes even if this means



unbinding her feet. She thinks as a woman and puts herself in Kwei-lan's shoes. The moment Kwei-lan's mother gives up means the patriarchal collapse and the defeat of maternal pride. Later, Kwei-lan's mother sees her son rebelling and marrying an American woman without their consent. In a way, she has to put on a face, but she feels as a woman too and her tragedy lies here:

For several days I was troubled for my mother because of my brother's disobedience. But she never spoke of it to me. She buried this sadness, like all others, in the unseen places of her spirit. It has always been her way, when she perceived suffering to be inevitable, to close her lips upon it for ever [sic]. Therefore I, surrounded by the familiar faces and walls, and accustomed to my mother's silences, gradually thought no more of my brother. (38)

Most analyses pay attention to the contrast between the East and the West, but another point has to be borne in mind. Social class plays a remarkable role in *East Wind West Wind* and it is linked with patriarchal oppression. Kwei-lan's mother is a haughty upper class matron who rejects the concubines as women of lesser category, her alterity in the novel, and she has transmitted this bias to her daughter. Kwei-lan's mother may seem a woman rejecting her own sex, but her attitude reflects the patriarchal system she has been brought up in and class is just a tool that makes her hate other women. In fact, female communities only exist through blood relationships until the middle of the novel, when they are superseded by affective ones, the Western values imposing themselves over the East.

As in traditional China, Kwei-lan's parents arranged her marriage when Kwei-lan was only a baby. Despite the parallelism we could draw with Western society, this comparison does not work. Kwei-lan and her fiancé have not seen each other and Kwei-lan feels the prey of a rigid education that allowed no criticism but consolidated censorship and not progress at that time in China. Kwei-lan anxiously awaits their meeting from the beginning of the narrative: "My lord, did you mark this day how the dawn began? It was as if the dull earth leaped to meet the sun. Darkness. Then a mighty life like a burst of music! My dear lord, I am thy dull earth, waiting" (1941, 2). Revealing her story to her sister works as a therapy and will facilitate the realization that things must change.

#### 4. BREATHING THE WEST WIND

America is the Otherness in the novel and becomes more important than it seems, not only because the author is an American woman, but because America alternatively becomes an uncomfortable source of suffering and suspicion or reconciliation (rather than liberation) that Kwei-lan experiences at the end. Kwei-lan's husband has been educated in America to become a doctor and comes back to his birthplace to marry Kwei-lan. Though a man, he is simultaneously respected for his position and despised for his American ways. Kwei-lan's American-educated-husband faces as much incomprehension as the American woman that Kwei-lan's brother marries.



Few authors could have included in a book such beautiful images as Buck does in *East Wind*. The most powerful symbol is Kwei-lan's feet standing for the oppression Chinese women endured for generations. The East is reproduced through the violence against the female body. Footbinding was a tool for social control aiming to enforce chastity and gain the respect of the in-laws, as Fan Hong highlights: "The bound foot transformed a woman into a fetish but it also enforced a social morality, established sexual boundaries and expressed social relations" (1997, 48). For de Tienda, when the protagonist's husband unbinds Kwei-lan's feet, a physical and psychological aggression takes place: "su mayor virtud, su belleza, está despreciada y se le impone un canon nuevo para el que ella no tiene sensibilidad, y, por ello, simplemente, no puede comprenderlo. Se ha visto mutilada: espiritualmente y físicamente mutilada" (2018, 164).<sup>1</sup> Recovery is achieved thanks to her husband.

Apart from the fetishistic interpretation of feet, it cannot be ignored that it was women themselves who were in charge of perpetuating it. Just as Kwei-lan has been educated to become the perfect submissive Chinese wife and please her husband, Kwei-lan's mother prides herself that Kwei-lan's feet are so small. For her, this achievement represents social order, but it really reproduces repression—Chinese women cannot voice their thoughts and behave as they would want to—and oppression—social control on women is accepted and sanctioned. Though performed in the private milieu, the removal of the bandages is a conscious political act of rebellion for Kwei-lan's husband. For her, it means a psychic breach. Had the writer actually been a Chinese woman, she would have certainly gone deeper into this point: "I bowed my head to hide my tears. I thought of all those restless nights and the days when I could not eat and had no desire to play—when I sat on the edge of my bed and let my poor swing to ease them of their weight of blood. And now after enduring until the pain had ceased for only a short year, to know he thought them ugly!" (Buck 1941, 33-34)

The story that her husband tells her about the anonymous woman who tried to commit suicide to avoid her mother-in-law makes her realize that times have changed and her values have little meaning: "That night I laid the jade ornaments sorrowfully in their silver case and put the satin garments away. I had been taught all wrong, I began to realize. My husband was not one of those men to whom a woman is as distinctly an appeal to the sense as a perfumed flower or a pipe of opium. The refinement of beauty in body was not enough. I must study to please him in other ways" (46).

The rejection of Kwei-lan's values comes hand in hand with her husband's contact with the West. His American education has opened his eyes to a life where men and women are equal and superstition has been replaced by science. When he comes back to China, he marries Kwei-lan because their families have previously

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<sup>1</sup> "her greatest virtue, her beauty, is despised and a new canon is imposed on her for which she has no sensitivity, and therefore simply cannot understand it. She has been mutilated: spiritually and physically mutilated" (my translation).



arranged it without courtship or romantic relationship between them. Kwei-lan's husband rebels against this when he unbinds her feet, which do not only stand for femininity, but the old world. Also, in his attempt to Westernize Kwei-lan, her husband condemns make-up in women –which both Asian and American women put on their faces– and plans to buy Kwei-lan a piano and teach her to play like a Western woman. Buck's conservative stance is shown here: it is the man, not the woman who decides what and how to do it:

'We will endure this together, Kwei-lan' he said. 'It is hard to see you suffer so. Try to think that it is not only for us but for others, too –a protest against an old and wicked thing.'

'No!' I sobbed. 'I do it only for you –to be a modern woman for you!'

He laughed and his face lighted a little, as it had when he talked to that other woman. This was my reward for pain. Nothing seemed quite so hard afterwards. (1941, 51)

The removal implies a reversal of Kwei-lan's idea of a Chinese wife. Kwei-lan's husband rejects her assuming the traditional role of a Chinese wife. For him, Kwei-lan is an equal and a friend, while in traditional Chinese society the wife is voiceless. The kind of relationship that the husband wants to establish between them is based on confidence and closeness, so when Kwei-lan pours some water at her mother in law's, her husband supports her. In this regard, narrative technique goes hand in hand with the story. Kwei-lan confesses her thoughts to her sister, but she never dares to act on her own:

'It is not to be supposed that you would be drawn to me whom you behold for the first time, as I behold you also. You have been forced into this marriage as much as I have. We have been helpless in this matter until now. Yet now that we are alone we may create our life according to our own desires. For myself, I wish to follow the new ways. I wish to regard you in all things as my equal. I shall never force you to anything. You are not my possession –my chattel. You may be my friend, if you will' (21)

If Kwei-lan suffers in the novel, both her husband and her brother experience incomprehension too. Despite Kwei-lan's brother's position as a man, he is the victim of oppression too and reacts against tradition. Not only does he have as many problems with his parents as Kwei-lan, but he wants to have a profession in China, earn his living as a doctor and be independent. Science is seen as opposed to tradition and in chapter six his vivid account about the evils of superstition in woman represents an accusation against patriarchy from patriarchy itself. Kwei-lan's husband explains to her how hard he has fought against superstition and the unsuccessful results he obtained: "I beg that you will not mind me. I am truly glad that you have returned. But this whole day I have been fighting against superstition and sheer stupidity, and I have lost. I can think of nothing else but that I have lost. I keep asking myself, did I do all that could be done? Was there an argument that I did not bring forward to save that life? But I think –I am sure– that I did everything –and still I lost!" (45)



Men and women face a common enemy in the novel and that is prejudice, which handicaps the fulfillment of happiness and professional realization regardless of the sex. Thus men feels as much pressure on themselves as women and leaving the patriarchal home is a problem for Kwei-lan's brother who must have children as soon as possible to honour the ancestors. The individual will is subservient to social needs. The thirst for culture is not welcome, even in men. Like Kwei-lan's husband, her brother wants to increase his culture and faces an obstacle: "I have no desire for marriage. I wish only to study more science and learn all concerning it. Nothing will happen to me, my mother. When I return –but not now– not now!" (37-38)

The contact with the Western world means abandoning a typical role. The separation of the sexes becomes diffuse and this happens when they visit the wife of a foreign teacher. Kwei-lan sees a new role model when she speaks confidently and in a relaxed way, as if she were a man. It is her husband's reaction to that woman's demeanor that triggers Kwei-lan's change of behavior: "She talked a great deal with my husband, and I sat listening with drooping head. They spoke of things of which I have never heard. Foreign words flew back and forth between them. I understood nothing except the pleasure on my husband's face" (48). The communication between the sexes is not only possible, but desirable.

## 5. THE NEW CHINESE WOMAN

*East Wind West Wind* deals with human relationships in a very particular setting and culture, China at the beginning of the twentieth century. One of Buck's merits is that the protagonist, Kwei-lan, a Chinese woman of the upper class, identifies herself with other characters and experiences an awakening moment. The fact that both the husband and her mother say that times have changed makes Kwei-lan realize her mistake. The core of the novel lies here and Pearl S. Buck denounced the situation of woman, even though hers was definitely not a revolutionary feminism.

Buck relates conjugal love to communication between husband and wife and the first step to start a dialogue of the sexes is when her husband talks to Kwei-lan about science. Joy and mutual understanding are established in the couple and poetically expressed:

How may I put into words the beginning of my husband's favour [sic] towards me, My Sister? How did I know it myself when his heart stirred?  
Ah, how does the cold earth know when the sun at spring-tide draws out her heart into blossoming? How does the sea feel the moon compelling to her? (56)

In a way, the Western world penetrates Kwei-lan and pregnancy takes place immediately afterwards, but the West wind brings changes in the family too. Following tradition, Kwei-lan wants to take care of her son herself and is surprised by her husband's reaction, which implies a new patriarchy:



I took my son, and I placed him in his father's arms. I presented him with these words:

'My dear lord, behold thy first-born son. Take him. Thy wife gives him to thee.' He gazed into my eyes. I was faint with the ardent light of his regard. He bent nearer to me. He spoke:

'I give him back to thee. He is ours' His voice was low and his words fell through the air like drops of silver.

'I share him with thee. I am thy husband who loved thee!' (71)

*East Wind West Wind* is full of sufferers. Kwei-lan's brother sees how his wife is looked down on by his family for the fact of being an American woman while Kwei-lan's husband explains about the charm of American women: "We Chinese men have been kept so separate. Our women are reserved, demure. They reveal nothing. And to a young man –and your brother is young– these others, these foreign women, with their beautiful, swan-white flesh, their exquisite bodies offering themselves in the dance" (92). The prejudices against the sexually liberated woman, who flourished in 1920s American literature are filtered through Kwei-lan's rejection of her and her change of attitude happens when her husband makes her think about the American woman and herself:

'And what if she loves your brother thus? Her nature does not differ from the nature of all women because she happens to be born over the Western seas. You are women, and you are alike in your spirit and desires.'

I had not thought of her like this. I see that I have understood nothing clearly. It is ever my husband who teaches me.

'Oh, I am afraid –afraid! I begin to understand a little now. What shall we do if there is love between the foreign one and my brother?' (98-99)

Sisterly affections battle against daughterly duty as Kwei-lan beautifully explains: "Yet I cannot forget either my brother and that one whom he loves. I am torn hither and thither like a frail plum tree in a wind too passionate for its resistance" (102). The American woman wants to be accepted as she is and Kwei-lan pays attention to her voice ("It has the rich note of the harvest thrush in spring, when the rice is waiting to be cut into sheaves" [106]) and her attitude ("This foreign one has no fear of anything in her, although she is not beautiful as the Fourth Lady was beautiful. She does not trouble herself. She accepts as her right the interest of men. She makes no effort to win their glances. She seems to say, 'This is I. I am as you see me. I do not care to be otherwise'" [107]). Kwei-lan finds it difficult to understand that the foreigner shows affection to her husband:

I do not understand this freedom of hers. And yet, most strangely, when I ponder it I do not discern any evil insinuation in it. She avows her love for my brother as simply as a child may seek its playmate. There is nothing hidden or subtle in her. How strange this is! It is not like our women.

She is like the blossom of the wild orange tree, pure and pungent, but without fragrance. (110)



The American woman is human and feels somewhat alone, but she seeks the company of others and her American sociability is condemned: “she returned full of talk about the streets, wondering at sights which others would not notice and seeing her beauty in strange places. I remember one day she came back smiling her quick smile, as though she had some inner amusement which others had not” (119-120). Seeing her daughter-in-law makes Kwei-lan supports her after talking with her: “my anger was wholly for my brother’s wife, and no longer against her!” (141). The body makes communication between people possible: “Kwei-lan acepta a su cuñada americana por la forma en que ella adora al hijo de Kwei-lan, la maternidad las une a las dos y no entiende de culturas porque el hecho fenomenológico es transversal. Este hecho biológico hace surgir el sentimiento de ternura al visionar a un otro que se siente como parte de sí, al que se respeta y cuida porque se le considera esencia constitutiva de uno mismo y no alternativa” (De Tienda 2018, 166).<sup>2</sup> The protagonist has an awakening moment even though there is no divorce or break with tradition. However, unlike what feminist scholars would expect, they stay in China and their child is brought up as a Western boy.

## 6. CONCLUSION

*East Wind West Wind* showcases the fight against tradition, against a world that has no meaning since times have changed, not only for women, but also for men, and the winds of change are Western. Buck’s feminism is not restricted to the defense of women, but to men since male characters in *East Wind West Wind* are as victimized as women. Kwei-lan has many communication problems. She masters the Chinese language, but no one has taught her to reveal her feelings since she lives oppressed. The novel contains a political reading of Kwei-lan transiting from her mother (China) to her husband (the West) and her subsequent coming of age. Likewise, it is easy to see Kwei-lan as the mother-oppressed daughter who is unable to free herself from Chinese precepts on female roles, but, in a more general way, both her husband and her brother face incomprehension too, so dichotomies do not fit well in *East Wind West Wind*.

Needless to say, Buck’s feminist stance cannot compare to other male and female authors (like Julia Kristeva, for instance, and later Chinese and American feminists) that would attack the situation of women later. Despite her lack of radicalism, she paved the way to some awareness of the situation of Chinese women in the American public. Her merit was to give a voice to the problems that Chinese women were facing in a text where neither America nor men are idealized: American

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<sup>2</sup> “Kwei-lan accepts her American sister-in-law because of the way she adores Kwei-lan’s son, motherhood unites the two and does not understand cultures because the phenomenological fact is transversal. This biological fact gives rise to the feeling of tenderness when envisioning another who feels like part of himself, who is respected and cared for because he is considered a constitutive essence of oneself and not an alternative” (my translation).



women are simply in a better (not perfect) position in comparison with Chinese and men have a more comfortable social position in some regards, but they can suffer as much as women.

Reviews sent to the author 10/01/2022  
Revised paper accepted for publication 15/01/2022



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