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PEARL S. BUCK

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THE GOOD EARTH



Pearl S. Buck

*Supplementary material written
by Stephanie Reents*

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THE GOOD EARTH

To the Pearl
Buck Research
Institute, with
good wishes that
even more can
read the Good
Earth in English! June 15,
2007

James Roberts
(Former) Fed. Director
CASH (2004)
PSBI

INTRODUCTION

The Good Earth: DEMYSTIFYING THE EAST



In *The Good Earth* (1931), Pearl Buck tells a timeless story about a farmer struggling to eke out a living from the earth. Hardworking and wildly ambitious, Wang Lung and his wife, O-lan, pull themselves out of poverty, bring children into the world, survive famines and floods, and toil relentlessly to build a fortune without ever losing faith in the restorative power of the land. But their work is not the novel's only story. Marriages and conniving family members, natural disasters and wars, births and adolescent rebellions, concubines and opium addiction make *The Good Earth* a rich and dramatic tapestry of life in early-twentieth-century China.

At the time *The Good Earth* appeared in the United States, Chinese citizens had been barred from immigrating there for four decades, and Americans' understanding of the largest nation of the world was extremely distorted. Most Americans thought of China as a mystical

place. They considered the Chinese exotic and mysterious and thought of their customs as savage and inscrutable. *The Good Earth* changed all that. Early readers of the novel recognized something familiar in it and responded enthusiastically. Wang Lung's indefatigable spirit and O-lan's stoicism and extreme industry resonated with the American readers' belief in self-determinism. *The Good Earth* also provided early-twentieth-century readers with a framework for understanding Chinese practices that Americans viewed as peculiar. Infanticide, foot-binding, and concubinage, while still unsettling, were demystified by being presented in context.

While its themes are universal, *The Good Earth's* subject, the life of a rural Chinese farmer and his wife, had been largely ignored in both English and Chinese literature at the time of its publication. Wang Lung and O-lan are unforgettable characters—sympathetic, flawed, and most important, not reducible to a stock “type.” Just when we think we fully know Wang Lung and O-lan, Buck shows us yet another side of them, making them seem more real and deepening our appreciation for their humanity.

The Good Earth is a historically important novel because it demystified China for America and the countless other countries where the book appeared, either in English or in translation. But beyond its historical significance, *The Good Earth* endures because it reminds us, once again, that despite our differences—in language, culture, and religion—there are certain qualities that we share as humans. In our increasingly fractured world, this is a lesson worth remembering.

The Life and Work of Pearl Buck

Pearl Buck was a woman of two worlds. Born Pearl Comfort Sydenstricker on June 26, 1892, in Hillsboro, West Virginia, while her parents were on leave from their missionary work in China, she returned to China as an infant and lived there on and off for the next forty years. Her father, Absalom, was a severe, dogmatic missionary. Her mother, Caroline, called Carie, was a lively woman, neglected by her patriarchal husband and devastated by the death of four of her seven children, who nevertheless tried to create a sanctuary at each new missionary post. By the end of her life, Carie renounced her faith.

In 1896 the family moved to Chinkiang, a small port city in Kiangsu province, where Buck spent her childhood roaming the narrow streets of the city. Her Chinese nurse fed her a diet of Buddhist and Taoist legends populated by fantastical creatures, while her Chinese tutor, Mr. Kung, taught her classical Chinese. Her mother, meanwhile, introduced her to English literature and encouraged her love of writing.

The Sydenstrickers' security was shattered by the Boxer Uprising in 1900, an attack upon foreigners and missionaries by Chinese nationalists. After living for a time in Shanghai and the U.S., the family returned to China despite the country's political instability and the growing Chinese resentment of westerners.

Buck attended Miss Jewell's School in Shanghai in 1909, but the education she received there paled compared to what she learned volunteering at the Door of Hope, a shelter for girls who had been sold into slavery and prostitution. This indelible experience shaped her future. In 1910 Buck began college at Randolph-Macon's

Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. She excelled but felt estranged from her fellow students as the "freak who could speak Chinese." In 1914 she returned to China to care for her sick mother.

In the summer of 1917 Buck married John Lossing Buck, a recent Cornell graduate and agricultural expert. The newlyweds struck out for Nanhshüchou in the Anhwei province in northern China. The bleak lives Buck saw there initially depressed and repelled her, but gradually she understood the hardships faced by the poor Chinese farmers. Her experience in Anhwei would later become the basis for her novel *The Good Earth*.

In 1919 the Bucks moved to bustling Nanking. John Lossing Buck taught agriculture while Buck taught English. In 1920 Buck gave birth to a daughter, Carol. It was a bittersweet event: Carol was diagnosed with a rare metabolic disease that led to severe retardation. Soon after, Buck was forced to have a hysterectomy. Meanwhile her marriage had faltered.

In 1921 her mother's death prompted Buck to write *The Exile*, her first full-length work. For the next decade she and John Buck lived in Nanking with a brief stint at Cornell University (1924–25) where they completed graduate work and adopted the first of seven adopted children. The Bucks returned to a China on the brink of civil war. Buck had been struggling with her marriage (which ultimately ended in divorce in 1935) and with decisions about what was best for her daughter. In 1929 she placed Carol in a school in New Jersey, a decision with which she never felt entirely comfortable. In 1930 a small New York publishing house rewarded her writing efforts by agreeing to bring out *East Wind: West Wind*.

The publisher, Richard Walsh, became Pearl's husband in 1935 and published every work she wrote until his death in 1960.

Although Pearl Buck's first novel was not a critical success, it convinced her that there was an audience for her work. In 1931 *The Good Earth* was published and became an immediate sensation. It remained on the best-seller list for two years and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1932. *Sons* (1932) and *A House Divided* (1935) quickly followed, and all three were published as a trilogy, *The House of Earth*, in 1935.

Buck received the Dean Howells Medal for Distinguished Fiction in 1935 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. For the rest of her long career, she published nearly a novel a year. She also campaigned tirelessly for civil rights, women's rights, and intellectual freedom. In 1949 she and her husband founded Welcome House, an adoption agency for children of Asian-American descent. She raised awareness about mental illness and retardation with *The Child Who Never Grew* (1950), a book about Carol. After her husband's death, Buck continued to work on issues related to children's welfare and to write. She died in Vermont in 1973 at the age of eighty.

Historical and Literary Context of *The Good Earth*

China in Transition

The Good Earth is set in the early twentieth century, a tumultuous time in Chinese history. Although China had

been historically closed to westerners and suspicious of western ideas, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century it became increasingly difficult for the country to remain immune to western influence. As a result of the Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), a series of treaties, known as the Unequal Treaties, had given western powers access to Chinese waterways and exempted western foreigners living in China from abiding by Chinese laws. Missionaries had also started streaming into the country to attempt to convert the Chinese to Christianity. Distrust of western intruders grew and culminated with the Boxer Uprising of 1898–1900, during which scores of westerners were murdered, and the United States, joined by Japan, Russia, Britain, and France, sent troops to squelch the unrest. The resulting treaty gave western countries the right to station troops in China indefinitely.

In 1911 the Qing dynasty, which had ruled China since the seventeenth century, was overthrown, and China descended into turmoil. For the next thirty-eight years, until Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China, different political groups, including the Nationalists and the Communists, competed for dominance while outside nations, most notably Japan, fought to control different parts of the enormous country. Some historians have estimated that as many as 20 million people died in fighting immediately after the fall of the Qing dynasty. Even if this number is greatly exaggerated, the death toll was immense during this period of upheaval. To try to cement their power and wrest control from local leaders, the Nationalist Party was forging an alliance with the small Chinese Communist Party and accepting assistance from the So-

viet Union. In 1926 and 1927, the Nationalist Party launched its Northern Expedition; troops marched north, conquering local warlords along the way.

In the world of *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung hears rumors of war but shows little concern for them, except when they touch his life directly. He fears being conscripted into the army by the soldiers who are roaming the streets of the Great City; he benefits financially from the exodus of the wealthy with the coming of the war; and he must suffer the presence of soldiers in his own outer courtyards near the end of the novel. Wang Lung's view is typical of the experience of the vast majority of Chinese living in rural areas during this period. Lacking a stable central government, China was ruled de facto by local governments—even during the Qing dynasty. The rural population, in particular, had very little connection to the central powers. Instead, each province was ruled by local lords, to whom the rural population paid taxes. But the rural population was beginning to feel the efforts of competing groups—most notably the Nationalists and the Communists—to unite the country under one government.

Realism, Naturalism, and the Chinese Literary Tradition

Although *The Good Earth* cannot be considered a wholly American novel, because Buck was bilingual and equally well versed in Chinese and English literary traditions, the novel is generally categorized as literary realism. A reaction to romanticism, realistic novels present accurate, detailed representations of ordinary people's lives. The characters are complex and three-dimensional, and

their complexity stems from who they are as individuals rather than from their social positions. The plots of realistic novels are believable, their momentum driven by the choices that characters make rather than by fate or coincidence. Stylistically, realism is characterized by clarity and the use of ordinary language, giving the reader a sense of experiencing the events as the characters experience them. Other American realists include Mark Twain, whose works include *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), and Henry James, author of *Daisy Miller* (1879) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), among other books.

Buck often remarked that naturalism was a large influence on her work; she called her novels naturalistic. Naturalism, as a literary movement, is characterized by an objective, almost scientific point of view, a focus on how socioeconomic, historical, and environmental factors determine people's fates, and an interest in the lowest classes of society. In realistic novels, the characters can overcome their backgrounds to succeed. In naturalistic novels, the characters are often crippled by factors beyond their control, pawns in whatever life their social standing dictates. While *The Good Earth* objectively renders the social and economic milieu of its protagonist, a poor farmer, it is not a pessimistic novel. Ultimately Buck believed too much in self-reliance and self-determinism to be a naturalist. What she might have meant when she spoke of naturalism was the openness she observed in rural China. Compared to America's Puritanism, the Chinese's frankness about such matters as birth, death, and sexual relations struck Buck as more "natural."

Buck's style was also influenced by the years she had

spent in China. When she received the Nobel Prize in 1938, she delivered a speech entitled, "The Chinese Novel." Part of it focused on the characteristics of Chinese storytelling, a tradition that had influenced her sensibilities as a writer. The stories people loved best, she noted, "flowed along, clearly and simply, in the short words which they themselves used every day, with no other technique than occasional bits of description, only enough to give vividness to a place or a person, and never enough to delay the story. Nothing must delay the story." At the same time, the Chinese placed great value on chance events, which is why in some of Buck's work, like *The Good Earth*, she relied upon fortuitous events to advance the plot.

