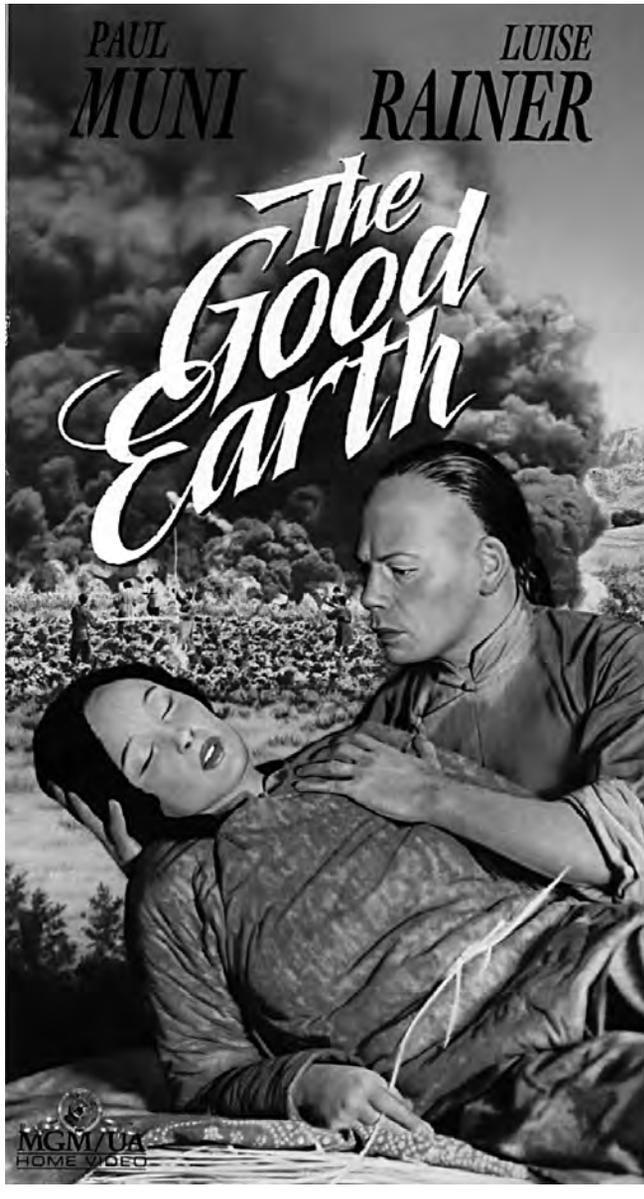


What's So Bad About THE GOOD EARTH?

By Charles W. Hayford



Poster and video box cover of the 1937 film.
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“I wish Pearl Buck was alive and walk into my restaurant so I can cut out her heart and liver. That’s how much I hate that movie,” says a character in Frank Chin’s otherwise delightful *Donald Duk*.¹ The 1937 movie to which Chin’s character objected did not feature any Chinese actors, but appeared to speak for China. Many in 1930s China objected to its unromantic description of village life and its inclusion of sex. Recently, Pulitzer award winning author Edmund White, following Frank Chin in bringing Buck into 1990s culture wars, argued in *The New York Times* that we should read only authentic cultural spokespersons; Pearl Buck, he said, though brought up in China speaking Chinese, couldn’t convey China as truly as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*. But Kingston herself, at a 1992 centennial conference on Buck, reported that when she, as a child born and raised in California, was puzzled about the land and customs of her parents (“What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” she asked) she had turned to *The Good Earth*. When the cartoonist Milton Caniff was asked in the late 1930s to create the comic strip “Terry and the Pirates” (which generated the “Dragon Lady”), he refused to settle, he said, for the superficial view; instead, he went to the library and read all the books by Pearl Buck he could find!²

These are weighty misgivings. Still, the book, movie, and Broadway show made Chinese people real for millions of Americans; some have credited Buck with drawing the U.S. into war with Japan. This is overstated—it was Pearl Harbor, not Pearl Buck that did the trick—but Harold Isaacs is surely correct that for a generation of Americans, Pearl Buck “created” China in the same way Charles Dickens “created” Victorian England.³ Yet in the four editions of John Fairbank’s *United States and China*, the book is not mentioned.⁴ The canon makers have not admitted it to the pantheon of Great American Literature (though it is in the Valhalla of *Cliff’s Notes*).

Buck received the 1938 Nobel prize for a body of work which included *The Good Earth* (1931) and the twin biographies of her missionary parents; the gatekeepers charged that she couldn’t compare with William Faulkner in the modernist values of stylistic complexity, irony, and moral ambiguity. Jonathan Spence’s survey of influential Western writing on China does not

mention the book's strengths, but comments (fairly enough) on the book's "oddly archaic language," which "sought to root China's contemporary experiences in a timeless zone that has been at the center of so many Western views of China."⁵

Recently there has been a move to reconsider. Peter Conn's readable and well-researched *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* convincingly argues that Buck was marginalized for the wrong reasons.⁶ True, like others accused of being "scribbling women," Buck wrote too much for her own good; she wrote her first novels to escape an unhappy marriage, to support a family, particularly her retarded daughter and adopted children, and if she became imperious and crotchety at the end of her life—well, how many male authors have done the same without being severely criticized for it?⁷ Conn urges that her reputation be restored if not to the highest rank, then at least to one comparable to John Steinbeck or Sinclair Lewis, and that her feminism and antiracism be part of the story of her generation.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE — After World War II the area studies movement redefined the production of knowledge about foreign cultures; Sinology was claimed for the professional, preferably with a Ph.D., excluding the missionary, treaty port litterateur, retired diplomat, colonial administrator, gentleman scholar, or lady author who wrote in civilian language, without footnotes or bibliographies, for the proverbial general public. This "raising of standards" was genuine, but professionalization also meant that women and "feminine" approaches were devalued. To assay *The Good Earth* challenges us to balance these real gains in professionalism against what we have lost in clarity, force, and access to the general public. The book raises fruitful questions about the Chinese farm economy, family, and the status of women. More substantively, I think I can show how Buck illustrates the long term cross-cultural moral debate over the nature of modernity, introduces students to issues in American foreign relations (rather than simply diplomatic relations), and shows how unarticulated views of history shape the ways we see the world.

THE VIRGIN LAND AND THE GOOD EARTH: CONSTRUING THE CHINA DIFFERENCE — The book Pearl Buck wrote in the attic of her cottage in Nanking is not the same one as the American public read. The American audience reads a novel about "peasants," a word that does not appear in Buck's book. In fact, I have found almost no use of the English word "peasant" in relation to China before the 1920s; "farmer" continued almost unchallenged through the 1920s.⁸ For Americans, "peasant" was what the cultural and literary critic Raymond Williams calls a "keyword," that is, a word which crystallizes political and historical conceptions.

The myth of the yeoman farmer who civilized the frontier's "virgin land" was central to the self-image of American democracy. To cultural Jeffersonians, the landless "peasant" was a symbol—and perhaps cause—of European despotism and backwardness.⁹ Feudal Europe had "peasants," Republican America had "farmers," but China was an anomaly, neither Old World nor New, with a motionless history, populated by "farmers." By World War I, however, a new view based on Progress,

Race, Nation, and Middle Class Culture began to reconstrue China; now the "China difference" was not geographical distance but historical sequence.¹⁰ The President of the recently formed American Sociological Association toured China in 1911; the first sentence of the first chapter of his China book was "China is the European Middle Ages made visible."¹¹ China was now labeled "feudal" (and capable of progressive revolution) and its rural denizens "peasants."

We need to add an important caveat: of course, China had not been "feudal." If the term means anything at all, it refers to a decentralized politics in which local military power dominates the economy and subordinates markets in land and labor. In fact, late imperial China had a centralized civilian government, national markets, and interaction with world markets for centuries before the political and economic disasters of the 1920s—to explain which, "feudal" was imported. Never mind: acolytes of Woodrow Wilson and Lenin agreed China was feudal and that Revolution could cure it; they only fought over whether the revolutionary vanguard was to be the Middle Class or the Proletariat. Much of what the historian Michael Hunt calls the American Open Door "paternalistic vision" of "defending and reforming China" rested on this definition of her situation.¹² But *The Good Earth* implicitly questions and resists Progressive assumptions that China naturally would and morally should become "just like us." Buck's implied historical placement of the Chinese farm economy, nationalism and revolution, and the Chinese family system all go against the conventional understandings of missionaries, Marxists, and liberals who wanted to uplift and civilize China.

THE CHINESE FARM ECONOMY — After a childhood spent in China, Pearl Sydenstricker graduated from Randolph Macon College in Virginia and married (briefly and unhappily) John Lossing Buck, a missionary and one of the first scholars to scientifically survey the Chinese farm economy and proselytize for technological modernization. She went with him to village after village, building on the knowledge of the common people she had as a child.¹³

The Good Earth presents a vivid description of small family farm life, though it is curiously lacking in detailed description of just what it is that Wang Lung and his family do besides hoe. Readers do see important features of the Chinese farm



First Pocket Book (PocketBooks, Inc.) edition published November 1938 by arrangement with The John Day Company

economy: multigenerational entrepreneurship; intensive cultivation; a petty capitalism in which the family invests capital and labor in an enterprise based on the accumulation of land and commercial handicrafts production; intense competition; and upward/downward mobility from generation to generation. Unlike her agronomist husband, however, Pearl Buck saw nothing technologically wrong with Wang Lung's way of life that coming across a little money wouldn't solve.

CHRISTIANITY AND MIDDLE CLASS CULTURE — Pearl Buck is often characterized as representing missionary views; in fact, *Fighting Angel*, a scathing biography of her father, an old school missionary, and *The Exile*, an aggrieved biography of her mother, are both full of sharply expressed anger at the patriarchy which denied women any role in mission policy and subordinated Chinese Christians to missionary domination.¹⁴ Peter Conn's biography makes clear Buck's deep distrust of fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Still, was she a missionary of the American way of life? One friend calls *The Good Earth* a "Chinese Horatio Alger," particularly appealing to Depression Americans and the dream of rags to riches success by hard work, individualism, and other apple-pie virtues. One American cultural historian argues, however, that the Alger hero is more likely to be awarded promotion for rescuing the boss's daughter from a locomotive than to strike out on his entrepreneurial own and rise by sweat.¹⁵ Wang Lung works fiercely hard, but is helpless against nature—locusts and drought. When famine drives the family into the city, O-lan, who had been a slave in rich folks' houses, uses her knowledge to find hidden jewels and save the farm. There is no sign that Buck sees middle-class virtue as China's future. Salvation comes through luck, not Christianity, and certainly not through class struggle.

Wang Lung doesn't suffer from "poverty," it's just that he doesn't have any money; his problems are individual, not social, running more to locusts and evil uncles than feudalism. The only foreigners in the book are naive fools. When an evangelist displays a picture of a figure on the cross, Wang Lung wonders what this criminal must have done to deserve such a punishment; he takes the evangelist's pamphlet and gives it to his wife to make shoes.

REVOLUTION AND NATIONALISM — Buck refused to believe that China had to adopt American middle class Christianity, but she ran the equal and opposite danger of not allowing China the capacity to develop, of pickling China in a static exoticism. Young China of the 1920s and 1930s wanted to build an autonomous new nation powerful enough to attack feudalism and repel imperialism. This ambition is what many of them meant by "revolution." Strikingly, Mao's classic Autumn Harvest Uprisings of 1927 took place a few hundred miles from Buck's cottage on the campus of Nanking University.

In a very short time, in China's central, southern and northern provinces, several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so violent that no power, how-

*ever great, will be able to hold it back. They will smash all the trammels that bind them and rush forward along the road to liberation.*¹⁶

Later, by the time of World War II, Buck was outspoken in support of world anticolonialism and nationalism. But her family had fled the Boxers in 1900 and the revolutionary Northern Expedition troops in 1927. In *The Good Earth* she demonstrated a typical American difficulty in seeing a need for national mobilization and revolution. In 1924 she wrote:

*Bolshevism? No, I think not. The young Chinese rants a little and philosophizes a great deal, but he has an inner foundation of unemotional, hard commonsense, a practical gift from his ancestors, which will make him stop and see what Bolshevism has done thus far, and finding it barren of fruit, he will cling to a saner, slower order of progress.*¹⁷

Wang Lung is just such a person, the phlegmatic farmer happily mired in the eternal Good Earth. In the city, a young agitator passes out political leaflets; Wang does with the leaflet exactly what he does with the Christian tract—he stuffs it into his shoe to fill a hole. He blames the weather, not the landlord, for his troubles. Where Mao sees a revolutionary hurricane, Buck describes a looting mob as emitting a "tigerish howl." As one of my students once put it, "Mao Zedong's revolution could not have taken place in Pearl Buck's China." (Perhaps Mao Zedong's revolution couldn't take place in Mao Zedong's China either, but that's a question for another day!)

WOMEN, FAMILY, AND FEMINISM — Buck's reluctance to "see" revolution did not lead her to approve American paternalist, big stick counter-revolution of the sort that Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson practiced in Central America and Mexico. This forbearance is related to Buck's feminism, one which Peter Conn's biography explains as pioneering and strangely neglected. After she returned to the United States in the mid-1930s, Buck joined Eleanor Roosevelt in attacking racism and promoting the independence of women, earning the honor of J. Edgar Hoover's censure.¹⁸

In *The Good Earth*, the feminism is complicated. The book rebuffs the Chinas of three men—her father's patriarchal missionary China, her husband's agronomic China, and Mao's revolutionary China. We see child-selling, wife-buying, foot-binding, infanticide, and self-sacrifice to the point of starvation. Americans remember O-lan giving birth and immediately picking up her hoe to go back to the fields. But perhaps Buck, who lauded Chinese 1920s feminists, had seen too much racist treaty-port condescension or too many Sunday night magic-lantern slides in which a quaint disgusting China was pictured in order to raise mission money. The situation of women is clearly, almost gruesomely, presented, but "China" is not labeled "patriarchal" or essentialized as such (is the word "Confucian" in the book?). O-lan is a strong, competent person, essential to the household economy, who achieves many of her ambitions; she is betrayed (but not broken) as much by her husband's weak character as by social attitudes. Students benefit from debating whether the family system oppresses but also sustains O-lan with the values which explain and animate her

life. Perhaps, as in Ida Pruitt's *Daughter of Han*, the women do not demand revolution, but would be satisfied if men just lived up to their responsibilities.¹⁹

The China family, students learn, was not the nuclear family, based on a romantic love contract, made up of Mom, Dad, Junior, and Sis, but a multigenerational community of the living and the dead, of the past, present, and future. Both genders subordinated individuality to group and hierarchy in order to achieve a sort of religious transcendence. Wang Lung is not "free" as a male to do what he wants; he sincerely reveres and serves his father, while his uncle cynically abuses the call of filial piety to cadge money.

A FEW QUESTIONS IN PLACE OF A CONCLUSION—

This is all well and good—we should not dismiss *The Good Earth* on irrelevant snobbish grounds, nor should we uncritically accept it (or anything else) as presenting "the" picture of China. But, in practical, yes-or-no terms, should we assign it? Most licensed China academics would not use *The Good Earth* as the human interest component in a college-level history of China (I prefer *Daughter of Han* and Chinese fiction). But I do urge friends to re-read Buck's novel and Peter Conn's book, and to consider using *The Good Earth* in courses on United States-China relations which examine the problems of historical cultural understanding and representation, where it serves as a primary document, not a sociological resource on China.

On the other hand, the book is still widely read, especially at the secondary level, and I would not discourage teachers who find the book a good read. As long as we remind students that not all Chinese are rural, that the Chinese family system is not evil simply because it differs from our modern American model, and that China has tremendously changed since the 1930s, reading *The Good Earth* conveys much more good than harm. We take our starting points where we can find them; the dangers in the book are "teaching opportunities" rather than excuses to avoid discussion. Students can be challenged to compare the China which Buck invented with the Chinas invented by others mentioned in this essay (Ida Pruitt, Mao Zedong, Maxine Hong Kingston), or with classic Chinese novels such as Cao Xueqin's *Story of the Stone*, or even with the Chinas in recent movies as *Yellow Earth* or *Red Sorghum*.²⁰ As a starting point, *The Good Earth* still works. ■

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This essay is drawn from a larger manuscript, now titled "America's Chinas: Construing China from the Opium Wars to Tiananmen."*

NOTES

1. See *Donald Duk* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1991), 136.
2. Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 5–6. Edmund White, "The Politics of Identity," *The New York Times* (December 21, 1993), A27; Kingston, "Address," Pearl S. Buck Centennial Symposium, Randolph-Macon Women's College, Lynchburg, Virginia, March 27, 1992. Maurice Horn (ed.), *Terry and the Pirates* (New York: Nostalgia Press, 1977), Preface.
3. Harold Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (New York: John Day: 1958; reprinted, M. E. Sharpe, 1980), 155. For the book's influence, see Michael Hunt, "Pearl Buck—Popular Expert on China, 1931–1949," *Modern China* 3.1 (January 1977), 33–64.
4. John Fairbank, *United States and China* (four editions) (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948, 1958, 1971, 1981).
5. Jonathan Spence, "Western Perceptions of China," in Paul Ropp, ed., *Heritage of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 10.
6. Peter Conn, *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996; paperback 1998).
7. James C. Thomson, Jr., "Pearl S. Buck and the American Quest for China" and Jane M. Rabb, "Who's Afraid of Pearl S. Buck?," Peter Conn, Elizabeth S. Lipscomb, Frances E. Webb, eds. *The Several Worlds of Pearl S. Buck* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994), essays from the 1992 Randolph Macon centennial symposium; and Paul Doyle, *Pearl S. Buck* (New York: Twayne, Twayne United States Authors Series, 1980), which surveys her writings. Also see Buck's readable and effective memoir *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record* (New York: John Day, 1951).
8. Charles W. Hayford, "The Storm Over the Peasant: Rhetoric and Orientalism in Construing China," in Shelton Stromquist, Jeffrey Cox, eds., *Contesting the Master Narrative* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1998) and Myron Cohen, "Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese 'Peasant,'" in Tu Wei-ming, ed., *China in Transformation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 151–170.
9. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950; reissued 1976) uses "myth" not in the sense of false or misleading belief, but of energizing historical images which bind a society together.
10. Cf. Michael Hunt's analysis of United States foreign relations under three categories: "Visions of National Greatness," "The Hierarchy of Race," and "The Perils of Revolution." *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
11. Edward Alworth Ross, *The Changing Chinese: The Conflict of Oriental and Western Cultures in China* (New York: Century, 1911), 3.
12. *The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. xi.
13. Randall Stross, "Myopia: Lossing Buck and Agricultural Economics, 1920s and 1930s" in *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
14. Pearl Buck, *Fighting Angel and The Exile* (New York: John Day, 1936).
15. Michael Zuckerman, "The Nursery Tales of Horatio Alger," *American Quarterly* 24.2 (May 1972), 191–209.
16. Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" (March 1927), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. 1 (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 23.
17. Pearl Buck, "China the Eternal," *International Review of Missions*, October, 1924.
18. Jane Hunter's psychological study examines the difference between American masculine and feminine approaches to China, and draws on Buck's writings. Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 226, 102; for Buck's attempts to fight anti-Japanese racism see John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 7 and following.
19. Ida Pruitt, *Daughter of Han* (reprinted Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1945).
20. David Hawkes, tr. *Story of the Stone* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973).