What’s So Bad About THE GOOD EARTH?

By Charles W. Hayford

“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.”

Recently there has been a move to reconsider. Peter Conn’s
readable and well-researched *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Bio-
graphy* convincingly argues that Buck was marginalized for the
wrong reasons. 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? Conn urges that her reputation be
restored if not to the highest rank, then at least to one compar-
able 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 stud-
ies movement redefined the production of knowledge about for-
eign cultures; Sinology was claimed for the professional, prefer-
able with a Ph.D., excluding the missionary, treaty port littera-
teur, 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 professionalism 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 ques-
tions about the Chinese farm economy, family, and the status of
women. More substantively, I think I can show how Buck il-
istrates 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. For Ameri-
cans, “peasant” was what the cultural and literary critic Ray-
mond Williams calls a “keyword,” that is, a word which crys-
talizes political and historical conceptions.

The myth of the yeoman farmer who civilized the front-
tier’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. Feudal Europe had “peasants,” Republican
America had “farmers,” but China was an anomaly, neither Old
World nor New, with a motionless history, populated by “far-
mers.” By World War I, however, a new view based on Progress,
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. 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. 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.

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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.

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 praised 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 reverses 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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**NOTES**

Anita, Taiwan What is bad about my hometown? I'm from Taiwan and I come from Taipei, and Taipei is a very big city in Taiwan but it's very dirty and the air is bad, the traffic is bad. I don't feel like living in Taipei, so that's why my mom and dad choose to live in the side city near Taipei. Al, England My hometown is called Stevenich and there's nothing I can say that's positive about my hometown. It has no green spaces, no cultural icons and really nowhere to go, so don't go there. What's not good about Vancouver? Well, I think that the people of Vancouver overrate the city, and that's kind of, they think it's the best place to live on earth. It's the nicest looking city on earth. Yes, it's beautiful. The Good Earth. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Hayford, Charles (1998), "What's So Bad About The Good Earth?" (PDF), Education about Asia, 3 (3) CS1 maint: ref=harv (link). Hilary Spurling. Burying the Bones: Pearl Buck in China. See more of What's so bad about feeling good? on Facebook. Log In. or Create New Account. See more of What's so bad about feeling good? on Facebook. Log In. Forgotten account? Facebook is showing information to help you better understand the purpose of a Page. See actions taken by the people who manage and post content. Page created 16 November 2019. People. His best friend, Jean, discovers what's left of Marco on the second day of cleaning up after the battle, and is horrified when he cannot find anyone that saw his final moments. This tragedy serves as a catalyst for Jean's evolution from a selfish Jerkass into The Leader Marco always believed he could become. What helps prove how good she is is that the sight of her fading from existence causes Shu's worst Heroic BSod yet, sends him on a Roaring Rampage of Revenge, and quite possibly (at time of writing) led to a Start of Darkness in Shu as he seems to lose all hope and kindness. Angelica and Henrietta in Gunslinger Girl.
What is The Good Earth About and Why Should I Care? We see you sitting there with your arms crossed, looking at us like, "Go ahead, Shmoop. Tell me why I should care about a poor Chinese farmer in the early 1900s. I dare you." All right. Suddenly it's hip to care about the earth again. But you know who could have told us that our lives were dependent on the earth a long time ago? That's right: a little farmer named Wang Lung, dreamed up by a lady named Pearl. The Good Earth Resources. Websites. Time for High Tea Playing this game is way more fun than learning about the Opium Wars through stinky old textbooks. What's so Bad about The Good Earth? Good question. Read this to find out. The Good Earth adalah sebuah novel karya Pearl S. Buck yang diterbitkan pada 1931 dan dianugerahi Penghargaan Pulitzer untuk Novel pada 1932. Novel berpenjualan terbaik di Amerika Serikat pada 1931 dan 1932 tersebut adalah sebuah faktor pengaruh dalam kemenangan Bucak dalam Penghargaan Nobel Kesusastraan pada tahun 1938. ) Charles Hayford, "What's So Bad About The Good Earth?," Education about Asia, volume 3, number 3, winter 1998. Hilary Spurling. Burying the Bones: Pearl Buck in China. The earth is round, fluoride is good for your teeth, and Mark Zuckerberg is unfortunately not a lizard-person. But there's one! Sure, things happen, but these actions never really force Mando to change. Think about the episode where Mando reconnects with his old team, only to be double-crossed and left for dead in an Imperial cell. The show isn't exactly subtle about whose fault it is; Mando forced the team to abandon one of their fellow members when a job got rough and that callousness has come back to bite him in the Beskar. But instead of Mando learning the error of his ways, he gets by on the exact same ruthless efficiency that led him to make that choice in the first place.