



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders



INTRODUCTION

The Good Earth, by Pearl S. Buck, published in 1931 endures today as a classic novel of peasant farm life in China during the first quarter of the 20th century. It is regarded by many as one of the two most important writings of an American woman author (The other novel is *Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell). Following its publication, *The Good Earth* led the best seller lists for 21 months. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and the William Dean Howells Award in 1935, given only every five years by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and it was the work chiefly responsible for Pearl Buck winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. The epic of the Wang family continues with two sequels to *The Good Earth: Sons* (1932) and *A House Divided*, (1935). Together they formed a trilogy called *The House of Earth*. Many other novels, short stories and children's books followed with American as well as Chinese backgrounds. Interspersed with these were two autobiographies, *My several Worlds* (1954) and *A Bridge for Passing* (1962), articles for popular magazines, and the biographies of her parents, *The Exile* and *The Fighting Angel* (both 1936). Most of Pearl Buck's books take place in Asia, but five were published under the name John Sedges when her rate of production outran her publisher's ability to market her novels. Her first Sedges novel was *The Townsman*, (1945), an American historical novel set in Kansas.

Millions of people have read, and continue to read, her most famous novel, *The Good Earth*, in English or one of more than thirty languages (including Chinese) into which it was translated. It became a Broadway play in 1932 and an Academy Award winning movie in 1937 starring Paul Muni, a leading actor of the time, playing the role of Wang Lung.

The Good Earth introduced China and its people to America and the world. It is a universal story of life and hope that still touches a world in need of cross-cultural awareness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pearl Buck was very familiar with remote villages in China and the Chinese peasant farm families that became the setting and characters in her award winning novel *The Good Earth*.

Born in her grandparents' home in Hillsboro, West Virginia in 1892, she was taken to China by her Presbyterian missionary parents, Caroline and Absalom Sydenstricker, when she was only 3 months old. She soon learned to speak both Chinese and English.

Pearl's parents preferred to live among the Chinese rather than in a missionary compound. Thus she grew up in close intimacy with the Chinese people, playing with Chinese children, visiting their homes, listening to their ideas and absorbing their culture.

"Happy for me that I had such parents, for instead of the narrow and conventional life of the white man in Asia, I lived with the Chinese people and spoke their tongue as I spoke my own. We learned by example to judge people by character and intelligence rather than by race or sect."



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders



Pearl had a Chinese nurse and attended a missionary school for Chinese girls where she was called "Tseng-tzu," Chinese for Pearl. She was only eight during the height of the Boxer Rebellion, which endangered the Sydenstricker family and Chinese Christians and foreigners. The family returned to America for a furlough, but the uprising jolted young Pearl into realizing for the first time that she was a foreigner. All these experiences combined to develop the mind and imagination of an alert, intelligent child who stored and used this material years later in her many novels and short stories.

In 1910 Pearl again returned to the United States and enrolled in Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. She received a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy in 1914 and was invited to teach psychology at the college. After one semester she returned to China to care for her ill mother. In 1917 she married John Lossing Buck, an American agricultural missionary. The couple spent their first years together in Nanhsuchou in the farming country of northern Anhwei. Many of the peasant farmers there had never seen a white person. She worked with her husband and was quickly accepted. Ten years later, her experiences with these Chinese farming families found their way to the pages of *The Good Earth*.

On March 4, 1920, Pearl Buck gave birth to her only biological child Carol. Following surgery shortly after Carol's birth, Pearl Buck discovered she could never have another child. She soon became concerned that Carol was not developing normally. At that time nothing was known about the eventual diagnosis of PKU Syndrome (phenylketonuria), which results in progressive mental deterioration if not treated immediately at birth. The emotional strain she felt about Carol is reflected in *The Good Earth* in Wang Lung's love for his retarded daughter "the Poor Fool."

In 1921 the Bucks moved to Nanking, where both joined the university faculty. Ten years earlier the Republic of China had been established when the Manchu Dynasty ended. Pearl saw little change in Chinese traditional ways when she had first returned to China, but now in the city and the university, she saw the clash of old and new ideas. She wrote numerous articles on the ferment in China, which were published in prominent American magazines.

The Bucks returned to the United States in 1925 to attend Cornell University to study for graduate degrees and to seek possible treatment for Carol. Tests confirmed that the condition was incurable. Before returning to China, the couple adopted an American baby girl and named her Janice.

In 1927 civil war broke out between the nationalist and Communist forces, both seeking control of China. Pearl S. Buck and her family, and other foreigners, were hidden by Chinese friends and evacuated to British and American warships off shore. One of her manuscripts was lost, but the precious biography of her mother (*The Exile*) was saved. These many tumultuous events, vividly remembered by Pearl Buck, are reflected in *The Good Earth* and later works.

Pearl Buck's first novel *East Wind, West Wind* was published in 1930, but seeking a publisher was not an easy task. Most publishers felt people would not be interested in reading about China. The John Day Publishing Company accepted the novel as an investment on her future work. They were more than compensated with the success of her second novel *The Good Earth* (1931), when it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1932.



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders



Pearl Buck and her family returned to America in 1934 to escape the threatening atmosphere for foreigners in China. At the same time, she and Richard Walsh, president of the John Day Company had developed a more personal relationship. Pearl divorced John Lossing Buck and married her publisher in 1935. They lived at Green Hills Farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where they raised a large international family, including their six adopted children and several foster children.

In 1938 Pearl Buck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for her epic portrayal of Chinese peasant life and the biographies of her parents. She was the first American woman to receive both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In addition to her outstanding literary accomplishments, Pearl Buck was a driving force in humanitarian causes. She was a longtime advocate of cross cultural understanding and racial harmony to achieve world peace. As early as the 1930's, she was a vocal supporter of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. She fought prejudice wherever she found it. In 1949 when she became aware of the immense problem of children of mixed race, she set out to save the children of American soldiers and Asian women who were shunned in Asian society. She founded Welcome House adoption Agency, the first such agency to find American homes for children of mixed ancestry. In 1964 she started The Pearl S. Buck Foundation to help these children in their own countries. Both continue today under the name Pearl S. Buck International.

Pearl Buck died on March 6, 1973, shortly before her 81st birthday.

WORDS TO RESEARCH – before you read ***THE GOOD EARTH***

Confucius	Buddhism	Taoism
Anhwei	Kiangsu	Ancestor worship
Ching or Manchu Dynasty	Warlord	Geomancer
Foot-binding	Concubine	Riksha



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders

THE GOOD EARTH -- Character List

In China, the last name of a person is always written first; thus we have The House of Wang at the end of the novel. Also in China, people were frequently identified by their profession; therefore Wang Lung was often called “Wang the farmer.”

In *The Good Earth* many characters are not named, but are identified by their relationships to one another, such as “Wang Lung’s father” and “the Uncle’s wife.”

Wang Lung: The central character in the novel, Wang Lung is a struggling Chinese peasant farmer. He is simple and hard-working and has a tender heart, but human flaws. Wang overcomes many obstacles to increase his wealth and become the head of the House of Wang.

Olan: The former kitchen slave brought home by Wang Lung from the House of Hwang to be his wife. She performs her household duties well and helps Wang Lung with the hoeing and planting. She is alert, resourceful during the famine they endure and remains loyal and diligent until her death.

Wang Lung’s Father: A frail old man in the beginning of the novel who serves mainly to prove the tradition of respect for the elderly.

Wang Lung’s Uncle: A shiftless farmer who exploits the Chinese traditional obligation to blood relatives and preys upon Wang.

The Uncle’s Wife: Fat and self-indulgent, she has no control of her children and takes advantage of her husband’s hold over Wang Lung. She helps Wang to acquire Lotus Flower as his concubine.

The Uncle’s Son: He is disrespectful of family and tradition, introduces Wang Lung’s eldest son to prostitutes and later tries to seduce Wang’s daughter.

Wang Lung’s Eldest Son: When Wang Lung begins to prosper, he gives this son an education. The son later feels contempt for the land so loved by Wang Lung.

Wang Lung’s Second Son: This son is also unwilling to work on the land and demands an education. He uses his education to increase the wealth of the House of Wang. He and his elder brother disagree on money matters.

Wang Lung’s Third Son: A very quiet young man who also demands an education and later joins the revolution.

Wang Lung’s Daughters-in-law: There is much contrast in their characters—one aspiring to the upper class, and the other a lively village girl. Their feud deprives Wang Lung of peace.

Wang Lung’s Eldest Daughter (“poor fool”): She was born just before the famine and did not develop mentally due to deprivation. Wang Lung feels great tenderness toward her and calls her his “poor fool.” He worries about her well being after his death.



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders



Wang Lung's Youngest Daughter: She is Wang Lung's pretty daughter whom he must protect from the Uncle's son.

Lotus Flower: A high-class tea house prostitute who can barely walk on her bound feet. Wang Lung purchases her as his concubine. She was a former slave, as was Olan. Her treatment of his children eventually offends Wang.

Cuckoo: She was the last slave in the House of Hwang before it fell and became the proprietor of the house of prostitution where Lotus was found by Wang Lung. Later, she becomes a servant to Lotus in the House of Wang.

Pear Blossom: She is a frail 7-year-old slave girl bought for Lotus as a serving maid. She grows into a beautiful young woman and becomes Wang's mistress and comfort in his old age.

Ching: Wang Lung's neighbor and best friend, he becomes the trusted manager of Wang's lands.

Liu: A grain merchant who employs the second son. He also provides a wife for the eldest son and a husband for Wang's youngest daughter.

The Old Lord Hwang and the Old Mistress Hwang: As the heads of the House of Hwang, these two intimidate Wang Lung in the beginning of the novel, but their fortunes fade as the Old Lord is occupied with his concubines and the Old Mistress with her opium. They represent the decadence of wealth.



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders

FIFTY QUESTIONS to review, ponder & discuss Pearl S. Buck's Pulitzer Prize winning novel

THE GOOD EARTH

Consider the following questions as you read the novel. Use them as possible topics for term papers, book discussions or tests.

(A compilation from study sources, Pearl S. Buck International Historical Archives and volunteer educators—June, 2009.)

- What is the relevance of *The Good Earth* today?
- Who is your favorite character in *The Good Earth*? Why?
- Who is your least favorite character? Why?
- Water is an intruding note in the beginning of *The Good Earth*: hot water for tea, water for bathing. Of what ensuing events in Wang Lung's life might this portend?
- Practices of infanticide or taking a concubine are very foreign, and for many western readers, distressing. How does Pearl Buck's writing help you understand the complexity of these practices? Can you think of things that we do in our culture that would appear strange to other cultures?
- Was love in the lives of Olan and Wang Lung?
- Are we imposing Western ideas on the story of Olan and Wang Lung when we question love in their family and lives? Why? Why not?
- What is Wang Lung's wedding gift to Olan?
- While working in the city, Wang Lung has mixed reactions to foreigners in the population--some reactions spoken, some just felt. What are they?
- Wang Lung is swept up in a revolutionary camp in the city. Gold is stolen from a rich man. Do you sympathize with the rich man or Wang Lung? Why? Why not?
- Olan steals jewels, which enables the family to return to their farm—the good earth--- to rebuild their lives. She asks only for two pearls for herself. What do they signify? What happens to the pearls?



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders

- Lotus was sold into slavery because of her beauty; Olan was sold into slavery because she was plain. Explain your feelings for each of them.
- Wang Lung had an intense love of the land. Imagine a conversation between him and a modern merchant or businessman.
- Make a list of all the superstitions you find mentioned in the novel. Explain them and tell how they may have originated.
- The original title of the book was “*Wang Lung*.” Why do you think the publisher changed the title?
- What is the meaning of the word “good” in the title of the book?
- In what ways is the Chinese farmer similar to farmers in other countries?
- Compare Wang Lung’s character in his early years and in later life. In what ways did he change? In what ways did he remain the same?
- What is your analysis of Olan’s character?
- What part did Olan play in Wang Lung’s success?
- What makes *The Good Earth* a universal story?
- *The Good Earth* was the pivotal work in Pearl Buck receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. What makes it a classic?
- List the Chinese customs revealed in the story that are different from those in your community/culture.
- How is wealth regarded in the story of Wang Lung and *The Good Earth*?
- What is the destructive factor in the Hwang family and Wang Lung’s uncle’s family?
- How many children were born to Olan and Wang Lung? Why are they not named?
- Pear Blossom, the last wife/concubine of Wang Lung is a redeeming factor in the story of the Wang family. What makes her such an enigmatic character.
- The character in the Wang family known as “the poor fool” is based on Pearl Buck’s only birth child who suffered mental disabilities due to Phenylketonuria, an unknown condition at the time. What is your reaction to her? What is her importance in the story?



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders

- A quote near the end of the book promotes the belief that things will change “*when the poor become too poor and the rich too rich.*” How does this reflect upon the whole of *The Good Earth*? Do you believe it is true? Is it relevant to our world today?
- How might this novel be different if written by a Chinese author?
- Comment on the writing style of *The Good Earth*---Pearl Buck’s influences in writing were the Bible, the works of Charles Dickens, and Chinese writings and history. What do you see of these in *The Good Earth*?
- Do you feel Pearl Buck’s characters in *The Good Earth* are real or stereotypes? Are they simple or complex? Explain your thoughts on either side of this question.
- How did the Chinese traditional obligation to the elderly affect Wang Lung in the novel?
- Why did Wang Lung buy red paper and eggs?
- What are the meanings of the colors red, white and black in the Chinese culture?
- Why does Wang Lung not want the gods to know he has a healthy manchild?
- How was Olan’s life as a wife and mother different from her life when she lived in the “great house”?
- Celebrating Chinese New Year has become a growing interest in the United States and other Western cultures. How did Olan and Wang Lung celebrate the New Year?
- Which of Wang Lung’s sons is most like Olan and cares most for his mother? Site examples of this.
- When does Wang Lung decide to find/provide a bride for his second son? Why?
- What family quarrels disturbed the peace of Wang Lung’s home?
- Describe the relationship between Wang Lung and his close friend Ching.
- What is the significance of tea in Chinese culture/home life?
- What are the reasons Wang Lung takes a second and then a third wife?
- What is the importance of the train in the Wang Lung/Olan story?
- Describe the importance of the river and flooding in the lives of the Wang family?



Basics of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

An aid for readers, teachers and book discussion leaders

- What is Wang Lung's understanding of the wars and fighting in the towns and cities around him?
- Why does Wang Lung want his sons to promise never to sell the land?
- What is your most shocking memory/insight effected by your reading of *The Good Earth*?
- A 1931 "New York Times Book Review" of *The Good Earth* observed that while reading the book "...one tends to forget after the first few pages that the persons of the story are Chinese and hence foreign... There is very little in her (Pearl Buck's) book to label Oriental." Do you agree or disagree with these statements? Why? Why not?

SOURCES USED:

Buck, Pearl S. *THE GOOD EARTH*, edited by Jay Greene, Board of Examiners, NYC. New York Globe Book Co., School Edition, c.1949. Foreword Pearl S. Buck 1945, 34 chapters, chapter questions for advanced study and discussion pp. 320-324. Topics and questions for advanced study.

Buck, Pearl S. *THE GOOD EARTH*, Enriched classic. Detailed explanatory notes, overview of key themes, Questions for discussion, Supplementary material by Stephanie Reents, Pocket Books (Simon & Schuster) c.2005. ISBN 1-4165-0018-9

Huntley, Stephen, *The Good Earth Notes*, Cliffs Notes , C. K. Hillegass, c.1974 ISBN 0-8220-0535-2

Buck, Pearl S. *THE GOOD EARTH*, Reading Group Guide (Oprah Book Club Edition, 2005) Simon & Schuster ISBN 0-7432-7293-5

Buck, Pearl S. *THE GOOD EARTH* Enriched Classic Series, Washington Square Press/Pocket Books. Introduction, editing, critical excerpts, end notes ---Dr. Peter Conn, ISBN 0-671-51012-6

OTHER SUGGESTED SOURCES:

Goode, Ruth, Barron's Book Notes, Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, c.1985 by Barron's Educational Series, Inc. ISBN 0-8120-3517-8

Google "The Good Earth" (numerous excellent sites can be found)