From Soil to Self: Existential Identity in *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck

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Abstract

This study explores existentialism in Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth, set in pre-revolutionary agrarian China. It examines how themes of individual agency, meaning-making, and endurance appear in the lives of Wang Lung and his family, who navigate a society shaped by feudal customs, poverty, and patriarchal norms. Using a qualitative textual analysis grounded in existentialist theory, the research considers characters both as individual agents and as products of broader cultural and historical forces. Findings reveal that the novel highlights core existential concerns such as authenticity, freedom, and responsibility even within a collectivist, non-Western context. The study demonstrates the universality of existential dilemmas and shows how literature can express human resilience and dignity. Ultimately, Buck portrays rural Chinese life as a space where human existence remains meaningful despite hardship and social constraints.

Keywords: *The Good Earth, existentialism, pre-revolutionary China, patriarchal culture, human existence*

Introduction

Pearl Sydenstricker Buck (1892–1973), an American writer who spent most of her early life in China, drew extensively on her experiences in rural Chinese communities to write *The Good Earth* (1931) (Conn, 1966). Born to Presbyterian missionaries, Buck was immersed in Chinese language, culture, and society from infancy (Spurling, 1949). Her exposure to the hardships, traditions, and social structures of rural China profoundly influenced her literary imagination (Schiff, 2015). While her biography is notable, this study focuses on how Buck's personal experiences inform the existential themes of her novel, rather than on the details of her life.

The Good Earth portrays Wang Lung and his family navigating a society constrained by poverty, feudal customs, and patriarchal norms. Through their struggles, the novel explores existential questions of agency, meaning, and endurance. This paper investigates how Buck's autobiographical elements shape her depiction of these themes, demonstrating the interplay between individual experience and broader socio-cultural forces.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative textual analysis grounded in existentialist literary theory. The analysis focuses on key characters and their interactions with land, family,

and society, considering both individual choices and the historical and cultural constraints shaping them. By thematizing Wang Lung's journey toward self-hood and his moral and social

struggles, the study aims to reveal the universal dimensions of human existence reflected in a non-Western, collectivist context.

Statement of the Problem

Although *The Good Earth* has been widely examined for its cultural, historical, and sociological portrayals of rural China, there remains a significant theoretical and knowledge gap regarding its existential dimensions, particularly how human agency, suffering, freedom, and meaning-making are expressed within an agrarian, patriarchal, and non-Western setting (Conn, 1966; Spurling, 1949). Existing studies tend to focus on Pearl S. Buck's biography, East–West cultural encounters, or the socio-political background of pre-revolutionary China, leaving an empirical gap in scholarship that systematically applies existential philosophy to the lived experiences of Wang Lung and O-Lan (Schiff, 2015). At the same time, previous research has largely relied on cultural or historical criticism, and very few works employ a hermeneutic–phenomenological textual method, creating a clear methodological gap in the interpretation of existential identity within the novel (Ryan, 2018). Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by offering an existential reading of *The Good Earth* that integrates Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Buber, and Marcel to explore how the characters' choices, struggles, and relationship with the land construct a meaningful yet contested form of existential identity.

Research Questions

The primary research question guiding this study is:

How does *The Good Earth* construct existential identity through the choices, struggles, and lived experiences of Wang Lung and O-Lan in pre-revolutionary rural China? Supporting questions are:

1. How do existential concepts such as freedom, responsibility, authenticity, absurdity, and meaning-making manifest in the characters' experiences within the agrarian, patriarchal, and feudal setting of the novel?

2. In what ways do Wang Lung's and O-Lan's existential struggles reveal aspects of the novel that have been overlooked or underexplored in existing scholarly interpretations of *The Good Earth*?

3. How does a hermeneutic–phenomenological textual analysis offer deeper insight into the novel's existential dimensions compared to traditional cultural or historical approaches?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in hermeneutic and phenomenological principles (Heidegger, 1962; Ryan, 2018) to analyze how existential identity is constructed in *The Good Earth* (Buck, 1931). By engaging in close and reflective reading

of the text, the research addresses theoretical and knowledge gaps by applying existential thought to a novel traditionally examined through cultural or historical lenses. Textual analysis serves as the primary method, with thematic analysis identifying existential motifs such as freedom, responsibility, absurdity, alienation, patriarchy, and authenticity (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A hermeneutic–phenomenological perspective further enables the study to explore how Wang Lung and O-Lan experience "being-in-the-world" (Heidegger, 1962), responding to the empirical gap in prior scholarship. The research is entirely library-based, drawing from the primary text and secondary sources on existential philosophy, literary criticism, and Chinese cultural history. Through this methodological approach, the study provides a philosophically informed understanding of existential identity within Buck's narrative, moving beyond conventional approaches and filling the methodological gap.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in existentialist theory, drawing on both atheistic and religious existential philosophers to interpret how *The Good Earth* constructs human identity, freedom, and meaning within the socio-cultural context of pre-revolutionary rural China (Ryan, 2018). The analysis begins with Jean-Paul Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence," which helps explain how Wang Lung and O-Lan shape their identities through choices amid hardship, uncertainty, and social constraints (Sartre, 1957). Martin Heidegger's concepts of Dasein, being-in-the-world, and being-toward-death illuminate the characters' immersion in land, labor, and mortality, revealing existential anxiety shaped by famine, poverty, and constant uncertainty (Heidegger, 1962). Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of inherited morality and his call for individuals to create their own values provide a lens to understand Wang Lung's shifting identity as he moves between poverty and wealth, virtue and temptation, and tradition and desire (Nietzsche, 1974). Complementing these atheistic perspectives, the study incorporates Søren Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjective truth, inward struggle, and the individual's confrontation with suffering, which is particularly useful in interpreting O-Lan's silent endurance and emotional resilience (Kierkegaard, 1985). Martin Buber's relational philosophy, especially the distinction between "I–Thou" and "I–It," clarifies the moral and existential significance of human connections in the novel—between husband and wife, parent and child, and human and land (Buber, 2002). Likewise, Gabriel Marcel's insights on embodiment, participation, faith, and transcendence shed light on the spiritual dimension of survival, belonging, and renewal in a world governed by hardship and impermanence (Marcel, 1961). Together, these philosophical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the novel's existential conditions, revealing how Buck's characters negotiate authenticity, agency, responsibility, and meaning within the intersecting forces of land, culture, patriarchy, and chance.

The Existential Perspectives on *The Good Earth Existentialism in Rural China*

Existentialism is the philosophy that places emphasis on individual existence, freedom, and choice. According to *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Cuddon, 1998):

> In philosophy, the terms exist and existence denote something active rather than passive and thus are closely dependent on the Latin root ex, 'out' + sistere from stare, 'to stand.' The term existentialism means 'pertaining to existence'; or, in logic, 'predicating

> existence.' Philosophically, it now applies to a vision of the condition and existence of man, his place and function in the world, and his relationship, or lack of one, with God (p. 78).

Since the setting of Pearl S. Buck's novel *The Good Earth* is pre-revolutionary China, it portrays more than one man's struggle. Set on the brink of change, *The Good Earth* tells the story of a family dependent on agriculture and the hardships they face to survive amid economic inequalities, superstitions, natural disasters, and lust. However, the ways Wang Lung and O-lan exist differ, and the binary oppositions present in the novel—poverty and prosperity—guide their lives. Wang Lung, the protagonist, is a humble farmer in late ١٩th-century China struggling to work the land and care for his aging widowed father.

Their existence is a daily grind for survival, entirely dependent on the whims of the earth. To expose the condition of the characters, Buck (1931) writes: The house was still except for the faint, gasping cough of his old father, whose room was opposite to his own across the middle room. Every morning the old man's cough was the first sound to be heard (p. 1).

Needing assistance, Wang Lung decides to take a wife and negotiates the purchase of a slave girl from the House of Hwang. The Hwangs are actually a rich and prosperous noble family. The House of Hwang represents wealth and privilege, while Wang Lung's family is poor and simple. The great man in the Hwang household responds to Wang Lung's appearance: You cannot appear before a great lady with a basket on your arm—a basket of pork and bean curd. How will you bow? (Buck, 1931, p. 11).

Parallel to this economic disparity, Buck (1931) further writes about the treatment of women by their male counterparts in rural, agro-based Chinese society: They sell Wang Lung their servant O-lan, who is a selfless, disciplined woman, making her the ideal farmer's wife. He said to himself that she was a woman such as is not commonly found (p. 36). From the beginning, the novel depicts the distinction between the "haves" and "have nots" to underline the existence of poor farmers like Wang Lung and the anxiety they feel when unable to make successful endeavors to change their situation. Some lines depicting the same reality include: It is the rich and gentry of the town who do it, and some do it for the future, that by saving lives they may get merit in heaven, and some do it for righteousness that men may speak well of them… (Buck, 1931, p. 21).

Wang Lung lived in the rich city as alien as a rat in a rich man's house—fed on scraps thrown away and hiding here and there—never part of the real life of the house (Buck, 1931, pp. 99–106). *The Encyclopedia Americana*, edited by John K. Ryan, provides a clear definition of existentialism:

> The term [existentialism] is used to name certain philosophical attitudes and doctrines that have come into prominence since World War I, particularly in Germany and France. The various thinkers popularly called existentialists differ greatly in important ways, and some of them have even repudiated the name. Hence, there is no single existentialist philosophy, and no single strict definition of the word can be given. However, it may be said that with existentialists the problem of man is central and that they stress man's

> concrete existence, his contingent nature, his personal freedom, and his consequent responsibilities for what he does and makes himself to be (p. 639).

This definition emphasizes that the human being, thrown into the world, embodies Sartre's concept of being "condemned to be free," meaning humans have no predetermined essence and must take full responsibility for their choices and actions (Sartre, 1943). Humans must accept the responsibility and guilt of their actions, as each decision excludes other possible courses and their consequences, making them accountable without excuse. Thus, the human being must not evade this burden but rather take ownership of freedom through action and responsibility.

In existentialist thought, there is no inherent meaning in the world or the universe. Existence is a contingent fact, not a necessary one. If a person rejects the illusion that life has intrinsic meaning, he confronts the Existence is often marked by absurdity and futility. Human beings have no predetermined role or fixed purpose; they must actively make choices to define their lives. This power to choose defines human freedom. However, the tragedy, according to

existentialism, is that many people refuse to make authentic choices, thereby failing to realize both their freedom and the existential void they inhabit. Ryan (1920) summarizes the existential concept as follows:

> Man is free and responsible, but he is responsible only to himself. As with Nietzsche, man creates moral values. Besides being free, man is a finite and contingent being, existing in a world that is devoid of purpose. The pessimism resulting from this position is likewise expressed by Camus' doctrine of "the absurd." Absurdity or contradiction arises from the clash between human hopes and desires and the meaningless universe into which man has been thrown (p. 639).

In *The Good Earth*, the existential element is reflected in the life of Wang Lung and the agro-based Chinese society. Wang Lung is a farmer who strives to improve his life through diligent work on the land, and his efforts are often fruitful. Buck (1931) describes his labor:

> He put the hoe upon his shoulders, walked to his plots of land, cultivated the rows of grain, yoked the ox to the plow, and tended the western field of garlic and onions. His labor bore tangible rewards: when the sun reached its zenith, he could return home to a prepared meal, with the dust wiped from the table and the bowls and chopsticks neatly arranged (p. 27).

The novel traces the cyclical nature of success and hardship in Wang Lung's family. No sooner do Wang Lung and O-Lan marry, start a family, and secure a modest plot of land—markers of stability and accomplishment—than the unpredictability of life challenges them. Yet, through conscious effort and resilience, their labor and choices often yield fruitful results, underscoring the existential theme of human agency in a contingent world. To depict the picture of suffering in agro-based rural China, Buck (1931) writes:

> A life that once seemed to hold so much promise for Wang Lung comes to feel empty and wayward—as near as he can tell, through no fault of his own. Across his province, everyone is starving. "Now the grandsons were coming, grandsons upon grandsons!

> They would have to put beds along the walls and in the middle room. The house would be full of beds" (p. 3).

This incident, in which O- lan appears to kill her daughter, probably by strangulation, comes in chapter 9, which depicts the existential crisis in the novel. The context is the famine the village is enduring, which is reaching its worst point. There is no food for anyone, and there are rumors

that in the village, people are even eating human flesh in order to survive. The narrative does not state explicitly that O- lan killed the baby, but it is strongly implied. Wang Lung heard the baby cry, so it was born alive. But when he enters O-lan's room, he finds the baby dead on the floor, and he notices " two dark, bruised spots" on its neck."(p. 71)

There is no doubt that O-lan regards her deed as an act of mercy. Throughout the novel she is presented as a good mother; she would not have destroyed her own offspring had she not

believed it was for the best. Was the correct in her belief? Whether this was an act of mercy or a crime depends on one's own beliefs about when it is permissible to take life and when it is not. But it would perhaps be a hard heart that condemned a starving woman who ended the life of a

tiny malnourished infant (" a wisp of bone and skin") perhaps a few more hours of days than it would otherwise have endured. This is certainly the conclusion that Wang Lung reaches. After he has buried the dead baby, he mutters to himself," it is better as it is". (p. 72)

However, there is another side to the question. It may be significant that the baby was a girl. In the society depicted in the novel, a baby girl was not considered cause for great rejoicing,

even in good times. When O- lan gives birth to her first daughter, she refers to it as a slave," not worth mentioning" (p. 56) Would O-lan have been so quick to snuff out the life of her child, even in the midst of a terrible famine, if the child had been a boy? It seems unlikely. It was easier for her to kill the infant girl, given the lower value that the society in which she lived placed on women's lives. Had the baby been a boy, she might have felt a stronger need to try to preserve his life, hoping against hope that he would survive.

O-lan exists amid slavery, excessive household burdens, patriarchal oppression, and social dislocation, even at times when her husband, Wang Lung, is tempted by a prostitute. Her existence is portrayed in a distinct light. At the beginning of the novel, O-lan is a slave in the Hwang household, where Wang Lung comes to arrange a marriage with her. The old lady carelessly says, “Come here, slave. This man has come for you” (p. 17). “This woman came into our house when she was ten, and here she has lived until now, when she is twenty years old” (p. 17). “Obey him and bear him [Wang Lung] sons, and yet more sons. Bring the first child to me to see” (p. 18).

O-lan’s existential condition differs from Wang Lung’s. After her marriage, she continues to live within a rigid patriarchal world, navigating constraints imposed by both tradition and circumstance. But she never talked, this woman, except for the brief necessities of life. Wang Lung watching her move steadily and slowly about the rooms on her big feet, watching secretly the stolid, square face, the unexpressed, half- fearful look of her eyes, made nothing of her. At

night he knew the soft firmness of her body. But in the day her clothes, her plain blue cotton coat and trousers, covered all that he knew, and she was like a faithful, speechless serving maid, who is an only serving maid and nothing more. And it was not that he should say to her, " why do you not speak?" It should be enough that she fulfilled her duty. (p. 29)

Many existentialist scholars, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1957), Martin Heidegger (1962), and Friedrich Nietzsche (1974), argue that the existential condition often emerges in situations of destruction and reconstruction, frequently precipitated by dislocation and crisis. In *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung's family experiences such existential pressures during famine. Along with other villagers, Wang Lung, accompanied by his wife and children, migrates southward due to deprivation and food shortage. Buck (1931) writes:

When they had passed through the town and had come out on the southern side, and this they found a multitude of people going toward the south… we are starving people and we are going to catch the fire wagon and ride to the south (p. 91).

Fortune, chance, and coincidence play pivotal roles in the novel to expose its existential dimensions. Amid hardship, natural calamities, and food scarcity, luck favors Wang Lung's family. Similarly, superstition and worshipping nature as God foreground the novel's existential design. Wang Lung, as a rural farmer, takes cultural, religious, and economic relief in worshipping nature as God. Buck (1931) illustrates:

> Looking at the blue heaven above him and the white clouds driving across it, feeling upon his ploughed field as upon his own flesh the sun and rain in proportion, Wang Lung muttered unwillingly, "I must stick a little incense before those two in the small temple. After all, they have power over earth" (p. 143).

Wang Lung's existentialism reveals the world—specifically pre-revolutionary China—as totally absurd, incoherent, disintegrated, chaotic, and disordered, governed by pure chance and contingency. Buck (1931) captures this:

> Wang Lung and his family had come from a country where if men starve it is because there is no food, since the land cannot bear under a relentless heaven. Silver in the hand was worth little because it could buy nothing where nothing was (p. 109).

Eloquently elaborating on how Wang Lung was compelled to face the situation of starvation and famine, Buck (1931) writes:

> Nothing could stop the mass of hungry men and women and they fought like beasts until all were fed. Wang Lung caught in their midst could do nothing but cling to his father and his two sons and when he was swept to the great caldron he held out his bowl and when it was filled threw down his pence, and it was all he could do not to stand sturdily and not be swept on before the thing was done (p. 104).

The existentialistic element in the novel is incorporated not only in Wang Lung but also in the support from his family, which fuels his existential outlook during hard times. Buck (1931) depicts their relief:

> Wang Lung led them all back to the hut they had made, and there they laid themselves down and slept until the next morning, for it was the first time since summer they had been filled with food, and sleep overcame them with fullness (p. 99).

On the discriminatory line drawn between haves and have-nots in rural China before the revolution, Buck (1931) writes:

> If I have a handful of silver, it is because I work and my wife works, and we do not, as some do, sit idling over a gambling table or gossiping on doorsteps never swept, letting the fields grow to weeds and our children go half-fed! (p. 63).

The existentialist stance in the novel is best portrayed depicting Wang Lung's fascination for land. However, not only does the family physically lose their land at the time of famine, but Wang Lung also loses track of his commitment to the earth- and its source of renewal- almost as regularly as pendulum swings from one side to the other. His fields are flooded. His land dries

to a hard lump of earth. In similar fashion, Wang Lung's ability to appreciate his fortunes, and to give thanks for them to the Gods, goes through many shifts and changes.

Unlike the absurdist perspective, which views life as meaningless, existentialism believes that humans are part of an ordered social structure and capable of heroism and dignity even in defeat. Wang Lung proves himself an existential hero, most strikingly during poverty. Buck (1931) illustrates the stark contrast:

> Day by day beneath the opulence of this city Wang Lung lived in the foundations of poverty upon which it was laid. With the food spilling out of the markets, with the streets of the silk shops flying brilliant banners of black and red and orange silk to announce their wares, with rich men with their skin covered with garments of silk and their hands like flowers for softness and perfume and the beauty of idleness, with all of these for the regal beauty of the city, in that part where Wang Lung lived there was not food enough to feed savage hunger and not clothes enough to cover bones (p. 113).

Wang Lung's temptation with luxury and extravagance should be seen from a different existential height. A poor Chinese farmer suddenly finds his fortune and discards the foundation stone that built his personality in the process of imitating upper-class values. Wang changes from the ignorant farmer to the man who spends huge amounts of money in the great teashop for Lotus, the whore. By forgetting purity, he brings Lotus into his home due to her beauty; after that, Wang changes his habits and behavior and involves himself in a new culture where Buck (1931) describes:

> There every light was lit, bright oil lamps which are to be brought in the foreign cities of the coast, and men sat under the lights drinking and talking, their robes open to the evening coolness and everywhere fans moved to and fro and good laughter flowed out like music in the street. All the gaiety which Wang Lung had never had from his labor on the land was held here in the walls of this house, where men met to play and never to work (p. 127).

Unnatural changes in Wang Lung let us analyze the alteration and modification in his existential outlook. Different changes in Wang Lung's life took place from the outcome of liminal negotiation between southern and northern cultural differences. Bhabha's understanding seems quite apt here:Two contradictory and independent attitudes inhabit the same place, one takes account of reality the other is under the influence of instincts which detach the ego from reality (p. 128). From the negotiation between two attitudes, one new attitude appears. Due to the interaction between two different cultural traditions of marriage, Wang accepted some ideas from southern standards instead of selling his daughter in the slave market. From the negotiation between two traditions concerning sex, Wang changed himself from a farmer to a corrupt rich man.

The novel begins with Wang Lung's expectation of rain, the daily boiling of water for his father, and his bathing for his wedding, following the compulsion to purchase the rice field from the House of Hwang. Buck (1931) captures his ambitions:

> He had in his mind to buy more and this year from the house of Hwang and more land year after as he was able, and he dreamed of adding a new room to his house and it angered him that as he saw himself and his sons rising into a landed family, this shiftless brood of his cousins should be running loose, bearing the same as his own (p. 45).

The then Chinese society was patriarchal, dominating all other forms of beliefs including Chinese rural existence. Wang Lung, the rural farmer, takes the birth of his daughter as an unfortunate prophecy: Wang Lung stood still. A sense of evil struck him. A girl! A girl was causing all this trouble in his uncle's house. Now a girl had been born into his house as well (p. 65). The emotionally complex relationship that Wang Lung develops with the city after leaving his famine-stricken homeland vividly portrays his yearning to adopt and exist amid new culture. The abundance of food in the city contrasts with the characters' impoverished lives. Buck (1931) illustrates the cultural divide:

> But Anhwei is not Kiangsu. In Anhwei, where Wang Lung was born, the language is slow and deep and it wells from the throat. But in the Kiangsu city where they now lived the people spoke in syllables which splintered from their lips and from the ends of their tongues (p. 106).

As O-lan dies, she bemoans her lack of beauty and states that she is too ugly to be loved by anyone. Wang Lung feels guilty but still cannot love her as he did Lotus. Neither woman can control destiny—Lotus was an orphan sold into prostitution because she was beautiful, and O-lan had been sold as a kitchen slave because she was plain. Sympathy extends to O-lan because of her ability to exist amid all kinds of sufferings, pains, and anxieties. Buck (1931) portrays her:

> But she never talked, this woman, except for the brief necessity of life. Wang Lung, watching her move steadily and slowly about the rooms on her big feet, watching secretly the stolid, square face, the unexpressed, half fearful look of her eyes, made nothing of her. At night he knew the soft firmness of her body. But in the day her clothes, her plain blue cotton coat and trousers, covered all that he knew, and she was

> like a faithful, speechless serving maid, who is only a serving maid and nothing more (p. 28).

Toward the end of the novel, the belief emerges that things will change "when the poor became too poor and the rich are too rich." The ambivalence of this statement—a mixture of hope and despair—is reflected in these lines:

> The son sighed then and after a time he answered, "you are rich and you may do as you like." And sighed again and he said, "Well, I suppose one is not always enough for any man there comes a day" (p. 345).

This depicts the true existential thrust of human beings.

Søren Kierkegaard proves helpful in analyzing the rural existential elements in Buck's work. Kierkegaard (1846) revolted against Hegel's doctrine of pure thought, which claims to decipher the immanent movement of being and provide objective truth. He emphasized "subjective truth and a person's conditioned thinking as an existing individual" (Kierkegaard, 1846, p. 376).

Kierkegaard (1846) himself views:

> The truth can neither be communicated nor be perceived except as it were under God's eyes, not without God's help, not without God's being involved as the middle term. He himself being the truth it can therefore only be communicated by and received by 'the individual', which as a matter of fact can be every living man. The mark, which distinguishes such a man, is merely that of the truth (p. 240).

The Good Earth earns worldwide attention for universalizing peasants but depicts women's trauma more than any other aspect of Chinese society. Female existence was not the outcome of conscious thought but a reflection of ignorant thought. Martin Buber, a famous religious existentialist, asserts that a person exists only in relation to God and the world, an idea echoed in the novel's depiction of God (Buber, 1970).

Buber emphasizes the importance of the relation between self and other (I-Thou) and its radical differences from the relation between self and object (I-It). According to him, relations should be concrete and immediate—an "I" to a "Thou" and not abstract and objective, an "I" to an "It" one (Buber, 1970). The relationship between Wang Lung and O-lan, and with his daughters and sons in the novel, presents the importance of the relation between self and other (I-Thou).

While discussing existentialism, Gabriel Marcel cannot be forgotten; he regards philosophy as reflection to restore the unity of living and thinking. Marcel, a French thinker who believes in transcendental help from God, contrives his philosophy around incarnation and invocation. He views that the essence of man is to be in a situation in the world. Marcel has an "unshakable conviction that God does not want to be loved by us over against the created but to be glorified through the created and starting from it" (Marcel, 1967, p. 383).

Atheistic Existentialism

Atheistic existentialism posits that "existence precedes essence," a concept introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre (1957). This philosophy asserts that individuals are not born with a predefined purpose or essence; instead, they create their own meaning through actions and choices. Sartre emphasized that without a divine creator, humans are "condemned to be free," bearing the responsibility of defining their own existence (Sartre, 1957).

Martin Heidegger, though not self-identified as an existentialist, significantly influenced the movement. In *Being and Time*, he explored "Being-toward-death," suggesting that confronting mortality is essential to understanding existence (Heidegger, 1962). Heidegger's notion that "existence precedes essence" aligns with Sartre's, emphasizing the individual's role in defining essence (Heidegger, 1962). Friedrich Nietzsche, a precursor to existentialism, famously declared "God is dead," challenging traditional moral values rooted in religion (Nietzsche, 1974). He proposed that individuals must create their own values in a world devoid of inherent meaning, a concept central to existentialist thought (Nietzsche, 1974).

These philosophers collectively argue that in the absence of a higher power, humans are free to define their own existence, bearing the weight of this freedom and the responsibility it entails. Nietzsche views morality as a discipline constraining individuals to act against their natural inclinations, agreeing with Kant that morality involves laws (Nietzsche, 1974). Mary Warnock highlights Nietzsche's perspective:

> Nietzsche rejects the whole doctrine of the universality of the moral law. For him, to legislate means to legislate for one. He rightly argues that universalizing one's maxim according to the Kantian formula is not a straightforward operation, since an evaluative element comes into the decision to describe one's act in a particular way (p. 19).

The destiny of characters resembles Nietzsche's existential crux. According to Heidegger (1962), anguish controls human existence, with individuals preoccupied by death's inevitability—death as the goal of being. Nothingness connects to "the finitude of human beings, their essential movement towards their own ends in death" (Warnock, 1970, p. 60). Heidegger states:

> It would be immature to adopt the facile explanation that nothing is merely the nugatory, equating it with the non-existent. We ought rather to equip ourselves and prepare for one thing only: to experience in nothing the immensity of that which every being gives its license to be. That is, being itself (p. 61).

The concept can be applied in the text in a way that throughout the novel, the protagonist of this novel, Wang Lung is never able to escape the fact or belief that all good things come from the good earth and that all things are ultimately returned to it. This is the point that all characters are living and also it is the universal.

A Glance of Twentieth Century Existentialism

Twentieth-century existentialism was highly influenced by phenomenology, as exhibited in the works of Husserl and his student Heidegger. In *A Short History of Philosophy*, Solomon and Higgins (2012) write:

> The "ontological" problem for Dasein (existence) was to find out who one is and what to do with oneself or, as Nietzsche said, how to become what one is. Phenomenology, for Heidegger, became a method for "disclosing being"; following both Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre used the phenomenological method to defend his central thesis that humans are essentially free (p. 79).

Subjectivity is central to existentialism, where passionate choices and actions matter. Personal experience and acting on one's convictions are essential to arriving at personal truths. A better understanding of a situation emerges when one is immersed rather than watching from the sidelines with detachment. Systematic reasoning and acting is avoided in existential thought.

The novel begins on the marriage day of Wang Lung, a poor young farmer in rural, turn-of-the-century China. During this period, Chinese society showed signs of modernization while remaining deeply connected to ancient traditions and customs. When Wang Lung reaches marriageable age, he approaches the powerful local Hwang family to ask if they have a spare slave named O-lan—a plain-looking, dull, and slow but hardworking, thrifty, and resourceful woman. Customs dictate that Wang Lung must show utmost respect to members of the older generation.

Earth, the source of all, serves as the existential symbol in the novel. By the charity of the earth, all life is brought forward; by the earth's gnarled hand, this charity is choked. All people are subject to the gifts and wrath imposed by the earth, which exists as lord of all, governing life and creating it—from the earth it lives, on the earth, and to dust it returns. In Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*, the reign of earth over humanity is clearly visible, as citizens of this period depend entirely on it, dominating all aspects of their lives. Wang Lung and his family are governed wholly by their land—a fortune yet a curse that brings great wealth and much pain. This reign manifests in three roles of the land: the life it provides, the suffering it causes, and the healing it instills.

Life emerges from the land, where fortune is made. Wang Lung works the fields, and "by his sweat he wrung food from it and from the food, silver" (Buck, 1931, p. 36). He grows rich and prospers because "the gods helped him and for seven years there were harvests" (Buck, 1931, p. 171). These rich harvests enable him to acquire more land and "thus (he) built the fortunes of his house" (Buck, 1931, p. 177). The fortune from his land allows prosperity, though the land also causes suffering after nurturing him. The land's health heals Wang Lung, affecting his mood and actions, making him one with the earth.

Conclusion

Presenting rich details of daily life in rural China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *The Good Earth* by American-born writer Pearl S. Buck offers vivid insight into

what people ate, how they dressed, the nature of their labor, the gods they worshipped, and the marriage and family customs of pre-revolutionary China. Through the story of Wang Lung and his family, readers witness the cyclical rise and fall of fortune, the unpredictability of fate, and the cultural forces shaping rural Chinese life. The narrative portrays the spectrum of Chinese rural existence, from depths of poverty to periods of prosperity, and back into despair during droughts and famine, compelling the family to migrate to the city and rebuild their lives (Buck, ١٩٣١). The novel portrays a clear division between rich and poor in pre-revolutionary China. Wang Lung, the central character, emerges from a lineage of peasant farmers accustomed to hardship. Through his struggle for survival, the novel depicts a world that is absurd, chaotic, unpredictable, and shaped by random events—hallmarks of existentialist thought. In this world, individual choices, freedom, and responsibility become central themes.

Though the novel primarily follows Wang Lung, it also opens a window into female existentialism, particularly through O-lan. Her existential journey intertwines deeply with her duties as wife and mother. From entering Wang Lung's household, her silent strength and sacrifices embody burdens placed on women in patriarchal Chinese society.

Her resilience shines when forced to accept her husband's betrayal without protest, choosing instead to continue existing in her role while silently bearing responsibilities toward husband and children. In contrast, Wang Lung's existentialism operates within a patriarchal framework—he initially denies female existence, passively accepts it, then gradually recognizes gender role complexity through shifting cultural and economic circumstances.

The novel critiques a male-centered system that uses women for practical purposes, ignoring their agency. It also shows how changes in economic, social, and cultural life create new ideas about gender. Through O-lan, Buck highlights the quiet struggles of women in traditional Chinese society and the conflicting expectations placed on them (Buck, 1931). The existential dimension of the novel is most powerfully symbolized by Wang Lung's connection to the land. If existentialism centers on *Dasein*, the state of "being-in-the-world," then the earth becomes the existential anchor of the narrative (Heidegger, 1962). The land provides more than survival; it offers Wang Lung identity, stability, and spiritual grounding.

Despite occasional suffering, the earth ultimately nourishes and sustains. When Wang Lung labors in the fields, he feels contentment and belonging. The contrast between rural life and urban dislocation underscores the land's vital role: in the city, cut off from earth, Wang Lung becomes alienated; in the countryside, he reconnects with roots and purpose. His decision to have his sons work the fields reflects belief in land as the foundation of meaningful existence (Buck, 1931).

Told in the tradition of Chinese narrative simplicity, *The Good Earth* addresses universal themes: women's rights, family bonds, class struggle, moral and spiritual dilemmas, and the endurance of the human spirit. It avoids exoticized Western perspectives, offering a sincere, grounded portrayal of rural Chinese life. This study explores the existential conditions of pre-revolutionary Chinese society—its survival amid poverty and patriarchy—and illustrates the profound human-land connection, showing how survival, labor, and moral choices shape destiny

(Buck, ١٩٣١). The story of Wang Lung and his family highlights fortune's cyclical nature and existential challenges in rural China, emphasizing navigation of suffering, responsibility, and agency within social and environmental constraints.

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