

The Cycles of Land, Culture, and Identity in Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*

Kamal Prasad Bhattarai

Lecturer, Shaheed Smriti Multiple Campus

Email: mail2kamalbhattarai@gmail.com

Abstract

Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth (1931) offers a powerful depiction of rural life in early twentieth-century China, foregrounding the intimate relationship between human survival and the land. Despite the novel's critical acclaim, its thematic complexity, particularly the intersections of land ownership, social hierarchy, gender relations, and personal identity, has not always been examined through an integrated analytical framework. This study addresses this gap by investigating how Buck uses the life of Wang Lung to reflect broader social and moral transformations within a traditional agrarian society. Employing a qualitative textual analysis, the research draws on close reading and socio-cultural interpretation to examine key narrative episodes, character development, and symbolic representations of land and wealth. The findings reveal that the land functions not only as a source of material prosperity but also as a moral anchor that shapes identity and social order. As Wang Lung rises and falls economically, the novel illustrates a recurring cycle of moral integrity followed by corruption, highlighting the tension between tradition and change. The study concludes that The Good Earth ultimately presents agrarian life as both sustaining and restrictive, suggesting that human fulfillment is deeply tied to ethical balance rather than material accumulation alone.

Keywords: *Land, identity, Chinese culture, modernity, class and gender roles*

Introduction

Pearl S. Buck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Good Earth* (1931) stands as a cornerstone of American literature and remains one of the most influential cross-cultural narratives of the 20th century. Set in rural China before the communist revolution, the novel tells the story of Wang Lung, a humble farmer whose life spans from poverty to wealth and back to spiritual uncertainty. At first glance, the narrative appears to be a simple rags-to-riches tale, but Buck weaves a complex and morally nuanced exploration of land, family, tradition, and change within a society in flux. The novel is deeply rooted in the agrarian values of Chinese peasant life while offering a powerful meditation on the universal human experiences of ambition, loss, and identity.

What makes *The Good Earth* particularly significant is Buck's unique perspective. As the daughter of American missionaries who spent the majority of her formative years in China, Buck inhabited a cultural space between East and West. She was not an outsider gazing into an alien culture with ethnocentric distance; nor was she a native writer inscribing a local reality. Instead, Buck served as a literary bridge, bringing the rural Chinese experience to the Western imagination with both empathy and authenticity. Her firsthand knowledge of Chinese customs, language, and societal norms allows her portrayal of Wang Lung and his world to transcend exoticism or stereotype. Instead, her characters breathe with complexity and contradiction, reflecting the dignity and struggles of human beings everywhere.

In the decades following its publication, *The Good Earth* has been widely read and translated, serving as a vital introduction to Chinese culture for Western audiences. At the same time, the novel has sparked debates about representation, cultural appropriation, and the political implications of portraying "the other" through Western eyes. Despite these tensions, Buck's work remains enduringly relevant, especially in our globalized world where intercultural understanding is increasingly essential. By focusing on ordinary people rather than emperors, generals, or politicians, Buck elevates the peasant voice and re-centers history from the margins.

This research article seeks to analyze *The Good Earth* through multiple critical lenses, with a particular emphasis on land as both a literal and symbolic foundation of identity. The novel's portrayal of land is not merely economic—it is spiritual, moral, and existential. Wang Lung's relationship with the earth is a metaphor for stability, selfhood, and ethical grounding. As the narrative unfolds, we see how his increasing detachment from the land parallels a deterioration in his moral compass, suggesting a cyclical relationship between prosperity and spiritual decay.

Moreover, the novel presents a nuanced examination of social mobility and the ways in which wealth transforms personal and familial relationships. Buck does not romanticize poverty, but she also does not idealize wealth; instead, she highlights the contradictions and compromises that come with upward mobility. Gender also plays a crucial role in the narrative, particularly through the character of O-Lan, whose silent resilience and sacrifices stand in stark contrast to the male pursuit of power and pleasure. In this way, *The Good Earth* critiques patriarchal norms and underscores the often-invisible labor that sustains both families and societies.

Finally, this article will explore how Buck's portrayal of traditional Chinese culture operates in tension with the forces of modernization and Western influence. The generational shift at the novel's conclusion—where Wang Lung's sons plan to sell the land that grounded their family—marks a break with the past and introduces uncertainty about the future. This moment encapsulates the broader socio-cultural transformation taking place in China during the early 20th century, as feudal structures

gave way to industrialization, revolution, and reform.

By examining these intersecting themes—land, identity, social class, gender, tradition, and change—this research article aims to reveal the enduring complexity and relevance of *The Good Earth*. Through textual analysis and engagement with critical scholarship, it will demonstrate how Buck's novel continues to speak to contemporary concerns about cultural continuity, ethical responsibility, and the costs of human ambition

Literature Review

The critical reception of Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth* has been both enduring and dynamic, generating significant scholarly debate across multiple disciplines, including postcolonial studies, gender studies, American literature, and Asian-American critique. Since its publication in 1931 and subsequent award of the Pulitzer Prize in 1932, the novel has been praised for its accessible portrayal of rural Chinese life and simultaneously scrutinized for its position within the historical context of Western literary production about the East.

One major axis of critical discourse revolves around the cultural authenticity of Buck's narrative. Scholars have frequently remarked upon Buck's bicultural upbringing—having been raised in China by missionary parents—and how that unique position informs her storytelling. Judith E. Smith emphasizes that *The Good Earth* played a pivotal role in popularizing a sympathetic and humanized view of non-Western cultures in American literature. In her view, Buck broke away from the Orientalist tropes common in early 20th-century fiction by representing Chinese characters not as caricatures, but as complex individuals with relatable hopes, fears, and moral dilemmas. Smith credits Buck with helping American readers develop a more empathetic, if not entirely accurate, understanding of Chinese life during a time of significant geopolitical misunderstanding between East and West.

However, this praise is not without its counterpoints. Karen Leong and other feminist and Asian-American critics raise important concerns about the novel's reinforcement of patriarchal and gender-normative ideals. Leong argues that while Buck provides visibility to Chinese women like O-Lan, the portrayal still relies on a quiet, submissive archetype that upholds traditional gender roles. She suggests that Buck's narrative, though well-intentioned, risks exoticizing Chinese womanhood by framing O-Lan's silence and suffering as virtuous in ways that may appeal to Western ideals of feminine endurance, rather than challenge them. The depiction, then, although sympathetic, may inadvertently reaffirm stereotypes under the guise of cultural fidelity.

Similarly, postcolonial scholars and Asian American literary critics have critically examined *The Good Earth* with particular attention to Pearl S. Buck's positionality as a white American author representing Chinese society. Although Buck spent much of her early life in China and possessed deep linguistic and cultural familiarity, critics argue

that her narrative perspective cannot be fully detached from a Western ideological framework. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong notes, Buck's attempt to affirm Chinese agrarian values and universal human experiences is mediated through the cultural assumptions of her historical moment. Within this critical tradition, scholars raise important questions about representation: some argue that Buck tends to idealize the rural peasantry as embodying a form of "noble simplicity," while others suggest that her portrayal at times resembles an ethnographic gaze shaped by missionary discourse. These critiques do not dismiss Buck's sympathetic intentions but instead highlight the ethical and epistemological tensions inherent in cross-cultural literary representations that continue to inform scholarly debate on the novel.

Peter Conn, one of Buck's foremost biographers, offers a more charitable interpretation. In his *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*, Conn asserts that *The Good Earth* should be read not just as a fictional representation of China but as a deeply personal narrative born from Buck's intimate life experience. He argues that the novel blends Buck's emotional attachment to Chinese landscapes, people, and customs with an underlying Christian-humanist philosophy of compassion and respect. According to Conn, Buck was acutely aware of both the beauty and the hardships of Chinese life, and *The Good Earth* reflects her earnest attempt to honor the people she had lived among without glamorizing their poverty or minimizing their struggle.

Despite critical concerns, few dispute the novel's massive influence on American perceptions of China during the early to mid-20th century. Before *The Good Earth*, most Western depictions of China in popular literature were limited to political treatises, missionary reports, or sensationalist fiction. Buck's contribution was revolutionary in that she humanized China for the American reader, offering a story grounded in family, survival, land, and moral conflict rather than geopolitical intrigue or Oriental mystique. In doing so, she helped lay the groundwork for a broader, more respectful engagement between East and West—although not without the inevitable limitations of cross-cultural representation.

More recent literary critics have placed *The Good Earth* in conversation with themes of ecocriticism, class struggle, and transnational feminism. Some have examined Wang Lung's relationship with the land as a metaphor for environmental stewardship, while others have explored how the novel critiques the moral degradation that comes with material wealth and urbanization. The character of O-Lan, long interpreted as a symbol of passive strength, has also been reclaimed by feminist scholars who view her as embodying a kind of resistance rooted in survival, labor, and unspoken emotional power.

In summary, while *The Good Earth* continues to be widely celebrated for its emotional depth and cross-cultural reach, it remains a critically contested text. Many scholars acknowledge the novel's narrative power in portraying what Pearl S. Buck herself

described as “the common humanity beneath cultural difference” (Buck, *What America Means to Me*). At the same time, critics have raised concerns about the ideological implications of her representation of Chinese rural life. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, for instance, argues that Buck’s work occupies an ambivalent position: although it resists overt Orientalist stereotyping, it nevertheless reflects “a benevolent but authoritative Western voice that mediates China for American readers” (Wong). Similarly, postcolonial critics note that Buck’s depiction of the peasantry often emphasizes moral simplicity and endurance, a tendency that can be read as idealizing rural life in ways that obscure historical and political complexity. As Rey Chow observes, such representations risk transforming cultural difference into an object of ethical sympathy rather than historical specificity. These critical perspectives suggest that *The Good Earth* functions not only as a literary window into Chinese society but also as a site where questions of intercultural empathy, narrative authority, and literary ethics are negotiated. The sustained and often divided scholarly engagement with the novel thus confirms its enduring relevance—not merely as a cross-cultural success, but as a text that exposes the limits and possibilities of global storytelling.

The Land as Life Force

Wang Lung’s intimate relationship with the land in *The Good Earth* is not merely a narrative detail but the central moral and symbolic foundation of the entire novel. From the opening pages, Pearl S. Buck positions the land as a sacred entity—a force of life that sustains, humbles, and defines human existence. For Wang Lung, the land is more than property or an economic asset; it is the essence of identity, dignity, fertility, and continuity. His personal sense of self-worth and integrity is deeply rooted in his physical interaction with the earth.

The opening scene of the novel powerfully establishes this dynamic: “The earth lay rich and dark, and fell apart lightly under the points of the hoe” (3). This sensory image does more

than describe agricultural labor—it evokes a spiritual communion between man and nature. The tactile richness of the soil is rendered with reverence, and Wang Lung’s joy in tilling it represents a harmony that is as ethical as it is environmental. The act of working the land affirms his place in the natural order, where labor is virtuous, and rewards are honestly earned.

This sacredness of land extends beyond the physical. It becomes a psychological anchor that guides Wang Lung’s moral compass. In times of drought, famine, and social collapse, it is the land to which he turns, and the land that ultimately sustains him. Even when he is forced to migrate to the city with his starving family, Wang Lung never relinquishes his mental and emotional bond with the soil of his home village. His repeated refrain “If I had the land under my feet again” (104) reveals the existential dependence he places on ownership and proximity to the earth.

However, Buck carefully charts how this symbiosis begins to deteriorate as Wang Lung ascends socially and economically. With wealth comes detachment: Wang hires laborers instead of working the fields himself, moves into the opulent former home of the Hwang family, and begins to adopt the very customs of extravagance and idleness he once scorned. This moral and emotional distancing from the land parallels his increasing spiritual corrosion. The soil, once lovingly tilled, becomes a backdrop to ambition rather than a partner in life. Buck portrays this shift not as growth, but as loss: the abandonment of ethical simplicity for pride and indulgence.

This disconnection is not accidental. Buck uses the land as a metaphor for virtue, drawing from both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions that idealize the pastoral as a site of purity. In Confucian thought, reverence for the natural world and agricultural life is tied to social stability and personal integrity. Similarly, in Western pastoral literature, the countryside is often seen as a moral counterpoint to the decadence of urban life. Buck's narrative engages both these traditions, offering a universal commentary on how distance from nature leads to alienation from self.

Furthermore, the land serves as a symbol of lineage and continuity. Wang Lung's ultimate desire is to pass his land on to his sons, ensuring that the moral and material foundation of the family will endure. Ironically, it is his sons who plan to sell the land at the novel's end decision that signals not just a generational shift, but a rupture in the ethical cycle the land represents. Their betrayal of this legacy, made clear in the final scene, underscores the thematic arc of disintegration that Buck constructs: when the land ceases to be sacred, all forms of social and familial order begin to unravel.

Scholars such as Peter Conn and Judith E. Smith have noted that Pearl S. Buck's representation of land is deeply informed by her missionary upbringing as well as her sustained engagement with Chinese agrarian culture. While this background shapes the ethical framework of *The Good Earth*, critics argue that Buck's treatment of land ultimately moves beyond cultural particularity. In the novel, the land functions as a universal moral touchstone, a stabilizing force amid social dislocation and personal uncertainty. As Conn observes, "Buck, through the figure of Wang Lung, elevates agricultural labor to a near-spiritual practice, wherein the body and soul are unified through honest toil" (134). This critical insight underscores how Buck transforms farming from a mere economic activity into a moral and existential practice, reinforcing the land's central role in shaping identity, discipline, and ethical responsibility.

Moreover, Wang Lung's fluctuating relationship with the land can also be read through an ecocritical lens, which interprets literature in terms of its representation of nature and environmental ethics. Buck anticipates contemporary ecological concerns by highlighting how

the exploitation or neglect of the land—whether through abandonment, urbanization, or commodification—leads to both ecological imbalance and human suffering. The land is not a passive setting but an active force in the novel—responsive, generative, and ultimately moral.

Gender and the Silenced Power of O-Lan

The character of O-Lan, Wang Lung's wife, stands as one of the most quietly powerful and symbolically rich figures in *The Good Earth*. Her life and character embody the gendered expectations of traditional Chinese society—expectations built on silence, obedience, and invisibility. A former kitchen slave in the great House of Hwang, O-Lan enters Wang Lung's life without ceremony, romance, or autonomy. She is given to him as property, reflecting the institutional objectification of women. Yet, despite her marginalized position, O-Lan becomes the emotional and economic backbone of the family. Her unspoken strength, resilience, and sacrificial love provide a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant masculine arc of Wang Lung's material ascent.

From the outset, O-Lan's actions speak louder than her words. She tends the home, bears children, works the fields beside her husband, and makes decisive, practical choices during crises—often without recognition. She saves the family during the famine by begging in the streets and orchestrates their move to the southern city. Upon their return, it is her foresight and thrift that allow the family to invest in land, thereby setting the foundation for their future wealth. Unlike Wang Lung, who fluctuates between discipline and indulgence, O-Lan remains ethically consistent, embodying a form of wisdom grounded in lived experience and intuitive understanding of both nature and family.

Buck's portrayal of O-Lan is neither entirely celebratory nor reductive. She does not romanticize O-Lan's submission or turn her suffering into a moral spectacle. Instead, Buck uses O-Lan to reveal the gendered structures of power and the human cost of patriarchy. O-Lan's silence is not merely personal—it is a cultural imposition. Her inability to voice her desires, assert her value, or resist injustice reflects the systemic silencing of women in patriarchal societies. Literary scholar Karen Leong argues that O-Lan represents “the commodified woman whose worth is determined by utility, not by individuality” (Leong 78). Even as she proves herself indispensable, her emotional needs remain invisible to those around her, especially to Wang Lung.

One of the most poignant and telling moments in the novel occurs when O-Lan, after years of unyielding labor and loyalty, is emotionally discarded by her husband in favor of a young, beautiful concubine named Lotus. The moment when Wang Lung tells O-Lan, “There is not beauty in you,” is brutal in its honesty and devastating in its cruelty (Buck 175). It signifies the ultimate betrayal of utilitarian affection—once her physical labor is no longer needed and her body is worn, O-Lan is pushed aside. Yet

she does not retaliate or protest. Her silence in this moment, as in so many others, is not weakness but a form of endurance and dignity that exposes the emotional poverty of the very society that overlooks her.

Buck uses O-Lan's treatment at the hands of her husband to critique patriarchal success. As Wang Lung climbs the social ladder, acquiring land, wealth, and eventually servants of his own, he internalizes the values of the elite class he once despised—including their disregard for women as partners and equals. His desire for a concubine and the subsequent neglect of O-Lan mark a moral decline that parallels his detachment from the land. Buck subtly but powerfully equates economic ascent with ethical decline, and O-Lan becomes the sacrificial figure in this transaction.

Despite her marginalization, O-Lan's influence in the narrative is profound and enduring. It is her careful management of food, money, and family affairs that ensures the family's survival and upward mobility. As Peter Conn observes, "O-Lan is the silent architect of the family's fortune, and her absence is felt as deeply as her presence" (161). Even in death, she continues to shape the family's legacy, particularly through her children, who are born of her strength and raised through her sacrifices.

Additionally, O-Lan's symbolism transcends her individual character; she represents a class of women whose labor builds empires but who are rarely allowed to partake in their benefits. In this way, Buck gives voice to the unseen foundations of societal progress—the domestic and agricultural work done by women who are historically erased from narratives of success. O-Lan is not heroic in the traditional, dramatic sense, but her heroism lies in survival, constancy, and moral clarity.

From a feminist literary perspective, O-Lan's character has generated sustained and often polarized critical debate. Early feminist readings, influenced by second-wave feminist concerns with patriarchy and female silencing, frequently interpret O-Lan as a tragic embodiment of domestic oppression. For instance, Peter Conn notes that O-Lan is portrayed as "a woman whose labor is indispensable, yet whose voice is almost entirely absent from the narrative," a silence that reflects the structural marginalization of women within both family and society (142). In contrast, postcolonial feminist critics caution against judging O-Lan solely through Western feminist frameworks. Rey Chow argues that women's agency in non-Western contexts often appears "not as overt resistance but as survival, endurance, and bodily sacrifice within restrictive cultural systems" (109). Read through this lens, O-Lan's restraint, emotional economy, and refusal to articulate protest may be understood not as passive submission but as a culturally embedded form of resilience. This divergence in feminist interpretations highlights the need for contextualized readings that account for both gendered oppression and culturally specific modes of agency.

Her death marks a turning point in the novel. With O-Lan gone, Wang Lung loses his

last tether to humility and balance. Her absence reveals the full extent of her quiet influence, much like the way land, once lost or neglected, reveals its true value in retrospect. Just as Wang Lung's moral grounding slips away with his detachment from the land, so too does it erode with the loss of O-Lan—the two most stabilizing forces in his life.

Social Mobility and the Corrupting Force of Wealth

Wang Lung's rise from impoverished farmer to affluent landowner lies at the heart of *The Good Earth*, functioning not only as a compelling personal narrative but as a cautionary allegory. Pearl S. Buck presents social mobility as a double-edged sword—offering opportunity and empowerment while simultaneously exposing individuals to ethical decay and alienation. Wang Lung's initial virtues—thrift, hard work, humility, and reverence for the land—slowly erode under the influence of wealth and status. What begins as a righteous pursuit of stability and dignity evolves into a dangerous spiral of greed, vanity, and moral compromise.

In the early chapters of the novel, Wang Lung is portrayed as a deeply grounded individual. His pride stems not from material possessions but from his ability to cultivate the earth with his own hands. His marriage to O-Lan is practical and based on shared labor and survival. Together, they navigate famine, poverty, and social exclusion with quiet resilience. At this stage, Wang Lung represents the ideal Confucian farmer, whose honest toil and devotion to the land symbolize moral purity and social harmony. His rise begins modestly—he saves money, avoids unnecessary indulgences, and reinvests in land, which he sees as both a physical and spiritual foundation.

However, Buck subtly begins to depict how success breeds excess. As Wang Lung accumulates land and silver, he also accumulates desires that distance him from his former self. No longer satisfied with the companionship of O-Lan, he seeks pleasure in the courtesan Lotus, thus betraying the very loyalty and sacrifice that enabled his ascent. His generosity, once a virtue, morphs into performative pride. His judgment, once rooted in necessity, becomes clouded by ego. Buck uses these changes not to vilify Wang Lung, but to highlight the insidious nature of prosperity. As he grows wealthier, Wang Lung increasingly resembles the corrupt aristocrats he once despised—the Hwang family—whose decline at the novel's start mirrors his eventual moral regression.

Wang Lung's shift in attitude toward land ownership further underscores this transformation. In the beginning, he loves the land because it nourishes and connects him to something timeless. But by the middle of the novel, his acquisitions become more transactional than spiritual. He purchases property not as a sacred inheritance but as a symbol of dominance and success as the narrator states, "He bought more land, not because he needed it, but because it was a sign of power" (215). Here, land shifts from being the source of moral balance to a status object, marking the precise moment

where Wang Lung's integrity begins to falter.

Buck's critique of materialism and class mobility transcends the personal and enters the political. Wang Lung's personal story mirrors China's broader transformation during the early 20th century—a period of upheaval marked by the decline of feudal structures, the emergence of capitalist and urban economies, and the widening gulf between the rich and the poor. His journey becomes an allegory for national change, in which the traditional agrarian values that once defined Chinese identity are challenged—and often destroyed—by the promises and perils of modernization. Just as Wang Lung forgets the virtues of the peasant life, so too does the nation forget the ethical foundations of its communal and agricultural roots in the face of rapid material progress.

From a Marxist perspective, the novel critiques how wealth reconfigures social relationships and personal ethics. Wang Lung's increasing reliance on hired laborers reflects the alienation of the bourgeoisie from productive work. He no longer participates in the very labor that earned him his fortune. The accumulation of capital, instead of providing security, fosters paranoia, arrogance, and emotional emptiness. His home becomes filled with servants, concubines, and disputes—none of which existed when he lived a simple, labor-driven life. Moreover, Wang Lung's shifting identity demonstrates the psychological toll of social ascent. He is caught between two selves, the hardworking farmer and the aspiring aristocrat. His longing for legitimacy among the elite, represented by his move into the decaying Hwang estate, contrasts with his discomfort in assuming the lifestyle that comes with it. He attempts to balance the values of peasantry with the privileges of wealth, but in doing so, he loses clarity, stability, and ultimately peace. His sons, who are raised in affluence, embody this confusion even more deeply, growing up detached from the values of work, humility, and respect for land.

Buck's narrative also reflects the paradox of upward mobility: that the very traits needed to succeed—discipline, sacrifice, and frugality are often abandoned once success is achieved. O-Lan's quiet strength, which helped build the family's foundation, is disregarded; the land is no longer tied with love; and filial piety dissolves into greed and disrespect. The tragic irony is that Wang Lung, in escaping poverty, recreates the very cycle of decay he once witnessed in the Hwang family. This full-circle moment suggests that material success without moral grounding leads not to liberation but to a new form of bondage—one in which the soul, not the body, is enslaved.

In this way, *The Good Earth* operates on dual levels. It is a personal narrative about one man's rise and fall, but also a national allegory about the cost of unchecked material ambition. The disintegration of Wang Lung's moral compass serves as a warning about the dangers of forgetting one's origins and values in the pursuit of

wealth. Buck's portrayal is remarkably prescient, anticipating the psychological and social fractures that accompany the shift from agrarian collectivism to capitalist individualism.

Cycles of Change and the Threat of Modernity

One of the most powerful structural elements in *The Good Earth* is Pearl S. Buck's use of cyclical imagery to mirror the rhythms of agrarian life. From the outset, Buck builds the narrative around the natural cycles of sowing and reaping, drought and flood, birth and death. These recurring patterns are not merely background settings; they are embedded in the emotional and moral pulse of the novel. The land and the seasons serve as a kind of metaphysical framework through which Wang Lung and his family navigate hardship, fortune, and transformation. The predictability and regularity of these cycles offer stability and continuity; a deep sense of time rooted in nature and human tradition.

In this cyclical worldview, the land is not only the source of sustenance but also a spiritual anchor. Each season brings with it renewal and the possibility of redemption. When famine strikes, the reader knows spring will come. When O-Lan dies, her memory endures in the labor she performed and the children she bore. This structure instills a kind of agrarian optimism, wherein the cycles of nature, though harsh, are also self-correcting and restorative. Wang Lung's attachment to the land is in part a recognition of these rhythms: he knows that the land will always yield something if it is treated with respect, patience, and hard work. However, Buck complicates this natural harmony with the rising threat of modernity, which she portrays as linear, disruptive, and disconnected from the cyclical wisdom of rural life. The intrusion of modernity into the rural setting is subtle but persistent seen in the growing influence of money, urban decadence, and mechanized systems of labor. It is most devastatingly symbolized in the final chapter, when Wang Lung's sons, now fully absorbed into the culture of materialism and modern ambition, reveal their plans to sell the land after their father's death. "We will not tie ourselves to the earth anymore. There is no reason for it," they declare (Buck 357). This moment, quiet but shattering, represents the symbolic death of tradition.

This generational betrayal stands in stark contrast to the loyalty Wang Lung showed toward the land throughout his life. His sons, raised in privilege and distance from manual labor, no longer see the land as sacred. To them, it is merely an asset to be sold—its spiritual and ethical value eclipsed by monetary gain. In this way, Buck uses the ending not just to resolve Wang Lung's personal story, but to signal a larger cultural shift—one that mirrors early 20th-century China's own transition from a rural, Confucian society to a rapidly modernizing and increasingly Western-influenced nation.

Critics such as Peter Conn and Gail Tsukiyama argue that this transition is one of *The Good Earth*'s most important subtexts. Conn views the novel as a meditation on cultural continuity and rupture, where the very foundations that sustain a people—land, family, work—are being replaced by unstable systems of wealth and inheritance (174). Tsukiyama, in her reflections on Buck's legacy, emphasizes the melancholic tone of the novel's conclusion, describing it as "an elegy for a vanishing world" (202). Buck does not explicitly condemn modernity, but she mourns the cost at which it arrives: the erosion of ancestral wisdom, the commodification of nature, and the alienation of children from their roots.

Moreover, Buck's use of symbolic contrast between the generations accentuates this theme. Wang Lung, though flawed, maintains a reverence for the land, for cycles, for tradition—even when his moral compass wavers. His sons, on the other hand, are portrayed as impatient, disconnected, and seduced by new values, comfort, convenience, appearance, and profit. This generational divide underscores a metaphorical departure from the earth-bound spirituality that once guided rural life. The children reject the very values that gave rise to their privilege, and in doing so, initiate a cycle not of renewal, but of decline masked as progress.

This disjunction between traditional and modern values can also be understood in the context of early 20th-century Chinese history. The Republican Revolution of 1911, the collapse of the Qing dynasty, the rise of nationalist and communist ideologies, and increasing Western influence contributed to a period of dislocation and cultural questioning. Buck, having witnessed these changes firsthand as a child of missionaries in China, embeds this cultural turbulence within the microcosm of Wang Lung's family. The selling of the land is not merely an individual decision—it is an allegory for national forgetfulness, a rupture in generational memory, and a warning about spiritual dispossession.

The motif of detachment from the land thus takes on both literal and metaphorical weight. Just as Wang Lung's sons plan to abandon the land for unknown futures, so too does a generation risk abandon its heritage. The loss is not just economic—it is ontological, a severing of the human from the natural, the familial from the historical. Buck's final scene, quiet and devastating, lingers in the reader's mind as an unresolved tension: the old man, frail and dying, begs his sons not to sell, while they laugh behind his back. The scene is stripped of sentimentality, leaving only irony and unease.

From a modern ecocritical perspective, Buck's ending anticipates a broader global anxiety about the consequences of detaching human life from the natural world. In replacing cycles with progress, rootedness with ambition, and tradition with convenience, humanity risks not only ecological degradation but spiritual impoverishment. *The Good Earth*, then, can be read not only as a historical novel but as a prophetic one—one that captures the cultural moment before a break, when values

shift, often irreversibly.

East Meets West: Buck's Cross-Cultural Positioning

Pearl S. Buck occupies a uniquely liminal space in literary history—a white American woman who wrote about Chinese life with such vividness and emotional nuance that her work was often mistaken for that of a native Chinese author. *The Good Earth* places Buck in the challenging terrain of cross-cultural storytelling, where questions of authenticity, appropriation, empathy, and representation inevitably arise. Her position between East and West, both geographically and psychologically, informed her worldview and shaped her narrative lens, leading to a body of work that is at once pioneering and problematic.

Born in 1892 in West Virginia, Buck was raised in Zhenjiang, China, by missionary parents. She spoke Chinese before English, lived among Chinese people for most of her childhood, and developed a deep familiarity with Chinese customs, dialects, and beliefs. This bicultural upbringing equipped her with a sensitivity to Chinese life that few Western authors of her time possessed. Buck herself stated that she “felt Chinese” and considered China “the country of [her] childhood, [her] youth, and [her] young womanhood.” As such, her depiction of rural China in *The Good Earth* was not based on secondhand observation or exotic fascination but on immersive experience.

Still, Buck's position as a cultural mediator has drawn sharp critical debate. Some scholars, particularly from postcolonial and Asian American perspectives, argue that despite her good intentions, Buck inevitably filtered Chinese life through a Western lens. In this view, *The Good Earth*, while sympathetic, remains rooted in Western narrative structures and values—elevating individualism, moral clarity, and humanist themes that may not fully align with traditional Chinese worldviews. Scholar Sau-ling Cynthia Wong critiques Buck's portrayal of Chinese peasants as sometimes overly sentimentalized or simplified, suggesting that Buck's fiction, however respectful, risks flattening cultural complexity in its effort to universalize human experience.

This concern is echoed in Edward Said's framework of Orientalism, which identifies how Western writers often present Eastern cultures as static, mystical, or morally inferior. While Buck's novel avoids the more egregious tropes of Orientalism—she does not depict China as barbaric or irrational—there are moments where her characters' stoicism, submission, and emotional restraint can be seen as reinforcing Western ideas of the “noble other.” O-Lan, for instance, is presented through a lens of reverent suffering, her silence interpreted as strength but also aligning with a Western literary tradition that romanticizes the quiet endurance of Eastern women.

Yet to reduce Buck's work solely to appropriation would be to ignore the literary and ethical breakthroughs she achieved. In *The Good Earth*, Buck's depiction of Chinese values—filial piety, reverence for ancestors, communal responsibility, and agricultural

virtue—are not presented as exotic artifacts, but as ethical frameworks intrinsic to the characters’ emotional lives. She does not “translate” these values for a Western audience in a didactic or patronizing way; instead, she allows readers to engage with them through immersion, nuance, and emotional proximity. Her characters are not allegories or types; they are deeply flawed, emotionally layered human beings who struggle with universal issues of pride, survival, love, and mortality.

Moreover, Buck’s use of language—direct, unadorned, and often echoing Chinese syntactical rhythms—contributes to a style that feels authentically grounded in the cultural context she portrays. She avoids both flowery prose and condescending exposition. This stylistic choice, influenced by her fluency in Chinese, helped to make her writing more transparent and respectful, focusing on the lived reality of peasants rather than the abstraction of foreignness.

Buck’s primary concern, it seems, was not to define China for the West in political or anthropological terms, but to express the shared humanity of people often marginalized in global discourse. In doing so, she created space within American literature for non-Western stories to be taken seriously, not just as curiosities, but as literary works with moral and emotional gravitas. At a time when most Western narratives about China were filtered through colonial, missionary, or imperialist perspectives, Buck’s empathy for the poor and her refusal to demonize or glorify her subjects represented a significant ethical departure.

Her Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938—the first awarded to an American woman—underscores the impact of her cross-cultural vision. Yet even this recognition has drawn mixed responses. Some critics argue that her award was more a reflection of Western fascination with the East than of genuine literary excellence. Others contend that Buck’s contribution lies precisely in her bridging of cultures, helping readers on both sides of the East-West divide themselves into seeing one another with new eyes. As literary scholar Yunte Huang notes, “Buck was neither wholly insider nor outsider. She wrote from the borderlands of culture, where empathy and misunderstanding coexist” (89).

In recent decades, there has been a renewed interest in reevaluating Buck’s legacy. Contemporary critics have acknowledged both her limitations and her trailblazing role in shaping American multicultural consciousness. While she may not be free of Orientalist influence—as no writer fully escapes their historical moment, Buck’s work remains a formative attempt at cross-cultural literary empathy, remarkable in its scope, sincerity, and ambition. Rather than appropriating Chinese identity, Buck sought to mediate cultural understanding by foregrounding the emotional truths that connect human beings across geography and history.

Conclusion

Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth* is more than a historical novelist, a powerful reflection on human ambition, cultural change, and our connection to the natural world. Through Wang Lung’s journey from humble farmer to wealthy landowner, Buck explores how

success can erode the very values that make it meaningful. The land, once a source of identity and morality, becomes a commodity, symbolizing the loss of ethical grounding amid material gain.

O-Lan's silent strength further underscores the novel's critique of gender inequality. Her labor and sacrifice enable the family's rise, yet she remains unacknowledged and ultimately cast aside, revealing the emotional cost of patriarchal structures.

As the younger generation prepares to sell the land, Buck warns of the consequences of forgetting one's roots. Her portrayal of generational and cultural shifts captures the tension between tradition and modernity—a theme still relevant today.

Ultimately, *The Good Earth* endures as a cross-cultural narrative that bridges East and West, reminding readers of the enduring importance of humility, land, and moral clarity in a rapidly changing world.

Works Cited

Buck, Pearl S. *The Good Earth*. John Day, 1931.

Conn, Peter. *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Leong, Karen J. *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*. University of California Press, 2005.

Chan, Anita. "Cultural Translation and the Limits of Cross-Cultural Understanding: Pearl S. Buck's Portrayal of China." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1996, pp. 355–372. JSTOR, doi:10.1353/mfs.1996.0037.

Conn, Peter. *Pearl S. Buck: A Cultural Biography*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Leong, Karen J. *The China Mystique: Pearl S. Buck, Anna May Wong, Mayling Soong, and the Transformation of American Orientalism*. University of California Press, 2005.

Li, Xiaojue. "Land and Identity in *The Good Earth*." *The Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2012, pp. 112–130.

Smith, Judith E. *Visions of Belonging: Family Stories, Popular Culture, and Postwar Democracy, 1940–1960*. Columbia University Press, 2004.

Tsukiyama, Gail. "Pearl S. Buck's Legacy and the Nostalgia for Rural China." *Studies in American Fiction*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1996, pp. 183–196. ProQuest, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/12959423>.

Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. "Gender and Representation in Pearl S. Buck's *The Good Earth*." *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2005, pp. 53–78. JSTOR.