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THE GOOD EARTH: THE REPRESENTATION OF CHINESE FARMERS IN PRE-
REVOLUTIONARY CHINA BY PEARL S BUCK

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ABSTRACT

Pearl S Buck though not Chinese, remained to be the only original source of China, for Americans and other world. Her fiction shows various aspects of China and Chinese life. They portray rural china, a revolutionary China, a changing China and also China at war. They depicts the Chinese migrant story his emotional psychological trauma. Her fiction made aware of the Chinese as human being to the other world who was just to be heathen for the western world. This paper in particular deals with the Chinese farmer which she has portrayed in novel *The Good Earth*.

Key Words: Farmer, Chinese, Pre-revolution, Nature.

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Pearl Sydenstricker Buck was, the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, she wrote over seventy books in her lifetime, and she published several award-winning novels, including the Pulitzer Prize winner *The Good Earth*. This novel had the first literary representation of Chinese farmers not only for America but China also. Her work changed the image of the Chinese people in the American mind. China was a mysterious culture to many Americans, but to Pearl S Buck, it was the culture she had known so closely and intimately. Spending almost forty years of her life in China she had the firsthand experience of its culture, society and history. The image of China that she depicted in her works is much more real and valid than the exotic and strange images that were created on the basis of China town that prevailed during those days in America or those enacted by actress like Anna May Wong in Hollywood films.

The Good Earth is a novel in the form of biography. The story follows Wang Lung's journey of life from his young man hood to old age. The narrator explains aspects of Chinese life revolving around Wang Lung, who barely manages to buy a very ordinary looking slave for his wife, bears three sons and a daughter, rises to the status of wealthy land owner through wrong means of theft, wants his children to keep his land forever but dies at a very ripe age with this desire unfulfilled as his children distribute the same land then and there while he is still on death bed. All along the novel, in the very fiber of the story she describes the Chinese tradition and culture, condition of farmers and women in society, religious practices, morality, necessity etc. Pearl Buck uses the inferior status of women in traditional China with great emotional impact. She has also focused on importance of family and showed it as the central unit of Chinese society

The Good Earth depicts the life story of the Chinese farmer 'Wang Lung' his wife O-lan, and their family against the larger background of the hardship of Chinese peasant's life, natural catastrophe and political turmoil in the pre-revolutionary China. Philip C.C. Huang in his paper published in *Modern China; The Rural China part I*, describes that the Chinese pre- revolution rural society was marked by inequalities and poverty this is also shown by Buck in her novel. The following lines where the two protagonists, Wang-Lung and O-lan have a conversation from the text will explain it further:

"Take to my father first a bowl of hot water for his lungs."

She asked, her voice exactly as it had been yesterday when she spoke, "Are there to be leaves in it?"

This simple question troubled Wang Lung. He would have liked to say, "Certainly there must be tea leaves. Do you think we are beggars?" He would have liked the woman to think that they made nothing of tea leaves in this house. In the House of Hawang, of course, every bowl of water was green with leaves. Even a slave, there, perhaps, would be angry if on the first day the woman served tea to him instead of water. Besides, they really were not rich. He replied negligently, therefore,

"Tea? No-no-it makes his cough worse." (Buck, *The Good Earth* 19)

Wang Lung was a poor farmer whereas 'The House of Hawang' was the richest house in that region, where O-lan was a slave.

The sharpest disparities were between the landlords and the poor villagers. These landlords lived in substantial and spacious, often luxurious, houses; ate meat fish and poultry as a matter of course; dressed in silk or more modern fabrics; used servants and lived a life devoid of physical labor. Some of them lived in the villages, in which case the contrast between their life style and those of poor were glaringly apparent to all, most lived in the market towns or larger urban centers. Some had personal contact with their tenants only at the time of rent collection. The poor on the other hand more than one half of the rural population lived in shabby dwellings; struggled to keep from starving; seldom if ever tasted meat; dressed in rags, and lived a life of constant toil. Some among the poor were landless agricultural labors who depended entirely on wages for their living,

Jonathan D Spence in his book, "*The Search for Modern China*" credited Pearl S Buck as 'the most influential informant' through whom Americans got to know about rural China. He had mentioned in his book that there were various other works like Victor Segalen's novel 'Rene Leys', Franz Kafka's "The Great wall of China", Andre Malraux's novels and others such , through which Americans were exposed to China. He further says that, "But of all these and hundreds more, it was Pearl Buck's Chinese farmers, with their stoic dignity, their endurance, with their innate realism, and their ceaseless battles with an unrelenting nature, who reached deepest into American hearts." (387)

The novel is a story of the land, a rather familiar American genre. Wang Lung lives in era of change. China has been a backward country in many respects. Her principal fault, however, was the existence of two distinct classes of people - the rich and the poor. The rich led a pseudo cultural existence unconcerned with the realities of the country. The poor in between fighting plagues, floods and famines, were taxed as well. On the fringe of these two groups were the robbers' bands that plundered wherever they could. The old aristocracy of China was rotting away as the result of its own greed. Waiting for their chance was a group of young intellectuals who claimed that they were going to bring about many reforms .However, since the time that *The Good Earth* was written in 1931, history has shown that these revolutionaries only intended to replace the old aristocracy with a new one. They had a little intention of doing anything constructive for the poor people.

The contrast between Wang Lung's modest hope at the beginning of the novel that his wife not be pork marked and his later disgust with his wife for not being sexually attractive demonstrates how the transformation of his class status affected his ideas about women. Buck uses gender, sexuality and domesticity to highlight the issues of class. The economy both agrarian and commercial is also rewritten as a narrative of domesticity. Stricken by a famine, the Wangs are forced to leave the land and to live in the city practically as beggars. The narrative of domesticity also allows the text to engage larger political and ideological issues, such as Western imperialism and Chinese nationalism. The city settings give the reader a glimpse of the Western

presence in China and the forces and implications of western imperialism, but these are rendered from the perspective of Wang Lung's domestic life.

All of these issues – class, the economy of the city, Western imperialism, and Chinese nationalism and militarism are tied together by the metaphor of the land that runs throughout the novel. Buck had a strong faith in the strength of farmers in rural China and the novel refers to the land and the farming life as the backbone of China.

Pearl developed a balanced and mature estimate of Chinese society. While she remained critical of rural oppression, especially the treatment of peasant women, her essays and fictional works often celebrated the strength and simple integrity of farming families. She carefully details those techniques- such as winnowing, storing, preserving, which Wang Lung has developed to survive in one particular environment, "The harvests were past, and the grain was also the dooryard to the house. They beat it out with flails, he and the woman together...ploughed the land the woman followed behind with her hoe and broke the clods in the furrows".(The Good Earth, 29)

The history of five thousand year civilization of China is the history where farmers have been fighting against floods and droughts, which occur almost every year causing famine which resulted into severe consequences like cannibalism. One of such drought and the peasant's condition during that period has been depicted in novel. The sick economy of rural china was based on the nature and its environment. The novels most powerful episode tells a killing famine that slowly annihilates the entire countryside reducing Wang lung and his neighbor to poverty and near starvation condition. When their food is exhausted, the people begin to eat the roots of plants, then the seeds, then a kind of clay which provide the flavor of food but no nourishment. In the novels final section, a chronicle of natural calamity and political turmoil has been shown in which life of Wang Lung is turned upside down. His farms are ruined by a disastrous flood and his house is occupied by a unit of revolutionary army. "But there came a day when there was no rice left and no wheat left and there were only a few beans and a meager store of corn, and the ox lowed with its hunger and the old man said, "We will eat the ox, next." Then Wang Lung cried out, for it was to him as though one said, "We will eat a man next."(51)

Even in the best of times the life of Chinese farmers, who toiled in the fields were perilous. Any natural disaster, such as flood or drought, upset the precarious balance of their lives and pushed them into abyss of starvation. While millions of farmers perished during famines and other millions struggled just to survive, some took part in revolts against government which did little or nothing to resolve the food shortage or its cause. Some became rebels and joined army of warlords. One of such rebel was Wang the Tiger the youngest son of Wang Lung and protagonist of the sequel that followed "*The Good Earth*".

The Good Earth presents a phlegmatic Chinese farmer with no interest in politics. Arthur Smith's 1894 *Village Life in China* where he says:

Our ancestors may have perhaps have been farmers, but they were an integral part of the land in which they dwelt ... A Chinese village is physically and intellectually a fixture. Could one gaze backward through a vista of five hundred years..., he would probably see little more and little less he sees toady. The buildings standing are not indeed five hundred years old, but they are just such houses as half a millennium ago occupied the same sites... Those who now subsist in this collection of earth – built abodes are the lineal descendants of those who lived there when Columbus discovered America..., doing what their ancestors did, no more, no less, no other.(5)

Several passages in *The Good Earth* resonate with the above quoted, for example Wang Lung and his wife O-lan are in the fields:

He had no articulate thought of anything; there was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods. The earth lay rich and dark, and fell apart lightly under the points of their hoes. Sometimes they turned up a bit of brick, a splinter of wood. It was nothing. Some time, in some age, bodies of men and women had been buried there, houses had stood there, had fallen, and gone

back into the earth. So would also their house, some time, return into the earth, their bodies also.
(*The Good Earth* 22)

Wang Lung representative of a Chinese farmer in prerevolutionary china is shown literally grounded and ignorant, who rejects change in the form of either radical (social or political reforms) agitation or Christianity. When Wang takes his family to the city as a refuge from draught and famine, Buck shows us his reaction to a missionary tract and revolutionary pamphlet. He gives this pamphlet to his wife as paper to patch shoes. Wang Lung resists the agitator's attempt to define him as a peasant whose poverty is caused by a landlord.

Now that he was poor Wang Lung knew full well but he had heretofore blamed it on heaven that would not rain in its season, or having rained, would continue to rain as though rain were an evil habit. When there was rain and sun in proportion so that the seed would sprout in the land and the stalk bear grain, he did not consider himself poor. Therefore he listened in interest to hear further what the rich men had to do with this thing, that heaven would not rain in its season...Wang Lung grew bold and asked, "Sir, is there any way whereby the rich who oppress us can make it rain so that I can work on the land?"(90)

Buck presented characters that were hard working, ordinary farming people struggling against famine, weather, natural disaster, poverty, war and corruption. She was able to present a sympathetic portrait of a Chinese farmer and his family that ran true to the American experience of rural existence. Buck re-created China by portraying characters which were influenced from her real life and events. Her representations are based on the real encounters she had in her life rather than fictional.

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