

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE RURAL DREAM: CULTURAL CONTEXTS AND THE LITERARY HISTORY OF *THE GOOD EARTH*

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Pearl S. Buck authored over ninety books, many of them best-sellers, and fifteen Book-of-the-Month Club selections. She wrote novels, short stories, plays, translations, biography, autobiography, children's literature, essays, and poetry. Her novel, *The Good Earth*, was the best selling American novel of 1931 and 1932 and won the Pulitzer Prize and the Howells Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for the best novel of the first half of the 1930s. The novel sold millions of copies in the United States and around the world. By 1970 UNESCO reported that Buck's work had been translated into 145 languages (Conn "Rediscovering" 2). The Hollywood version, released in 1937, was a popular and critical success, and one of its stars, Luise Rainer, a white actress, won an Academy Award for her portrayal of a O-lan. It has been praised for its universal appeal and its portrayal of Chinese characters as "ordinary, believable human beings rather than as cartoon 'Orientals'" (Conn "Rediscovering" xi). *The New York Times Book Review* from 1931 says, "One tends to forget, after the first few pages, that the persons of the story are Chinese and hence foreign." Buck, the review says, portrays "a China in which, happily, there is no hint of mystery or exoticism."

Despite the early critical reception and overwhelming popular success of *The Good Earth*, however, Buck's life and work have been ignored by literary critics and the academy. "She survives only in caricature," Peter Conn writes, "as the author of a single book, *The Good Earth*, and as the undeserving winner of the Nobel Prize" (Conn "Rediscovering" 1). Why was a novel about Chinese culture so well received in the United States in the thirties? What do these reactions say about Americans' views of the Chinese and other "non-white" groups? What is it that readers saw? In what ways did the novel

simply reflect their own definitions of self? How and why did views of the novel change so dramatically over time? The answer to such questions may be found in the examination of the literary reception and history of *The Good Earth*. Tracing the convergence of popular culture and literary history in the work of Pearl Buck reveals the ways in which a text responds to and reflects particular contexts of particular historical moments. *The Good Earth*, clearly one of the most popular novels of the twentieth century, provides an interesting model for reading the ways in which popular culture and literary history are interrelated.

Escaping into the Rural Dream

Early in the thirties the ground was well-prepared to receive a book like *The Good Earth*. In 1931, the year *The Good Earth* became a best seller, the poet AE (George William Russell) crisscrossed the country lecturing to overflowing audiences about his vision of the rural cooperative community. During the thirties a generation that grew up in a rural society was aging in an urban one and witnessing a prosperous country collapsing before its eyes. The “labor-centered, patriarchal, white, family-oriented, God-fearing mind-set” of many Americans, according to Robert Dorman, was unable to comprehend the technological advances and rapid cultural changes (such as women joining the workforce and rapid urbanization) taking place around them (107). Many historians and other scholars have characterized this shift in the terms provided by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies. Tonnies characterizes this shift as a movement from *gemeinschaft*, the small personal rural community of the nineteenth century, to *gesellschaft*, a large, anonymous society in which individual importance and achievements are dissolved in a mass culture.

Much of popular culture in the thirties, as a result of the overriding presence of the Depression as historical event, was a reaction against what many Americans saw as the excesses of the Jazz Age and the many changes and trends established in the twenties. Many of the problems in the Depression were seen to have their roots in the material and economic excess of the previous decade and the challenges to traditional core cultural values. Thirties historian Robert McElvaine characterizes the public response to the Depression as a reaction against the “acquisitive individualism” that had characterized much of the twenties. Although McElvaine sees acquisitive materialism as the most significant characteristic of the industrial

age, he argues that the rise of this characteristic was temporarily reversed in the depression. Wang Lung's undying devotion to land and family provides a powerful example of this trend. Hollywood in the thirties also participated in this reversal by recognizing "a degree of interdependence" in contrast to the twenties, as argued by McElvaine, which was marked by materialism, progress, and industrialism (xxv). Instead of these characteristics, movies in the thirties tended to stress cooperation, concern for others, and a sense of belonging. Cooperative individualism placed the individual in the context of a community. Movies displayed a reverence for small town life and values and a renewed affection for traditional ways and the past. Honest, decent, hard-working people lived in the country, while corrupt, racy, and extravagant people lived in the cities. Films such as *State Fair*, *Our Daily Bread*, *The Life of Jimmy Dolan*, and *Stranger's Return* expressed an attachment to the land, largely through agriculture. The 1934 film *Our Daily Bread* is one such film that set the cooperative life of the farm against the individualistic, competitive city. The characters John (Tom Keene) and Mary (Karen Morley), unemployed, receive the rights to an abandoned farm. Their agricultural ignorance leads them to take in dispossessed passers-by to help them develop a successful farm. Farmers, carpenters, masons, plumbers, a tailor, and a violinist, all representing varying nationalities and social levels, build a community of shared interests and experiences grounded in working the land. At a time when the American farmer was faced with ruin *State Fair*, another popular film, represented not a reflection of the way things were or even might be in the future, but a nostalgia for things that had been lost. Jimmy Dolan (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.), an embittered and cynical prize fighter, forced to leave the city after a murder, hides out in Pleasant Valley, a combination farm and orphanage, where his urban individualism and cynicism melt away bit by bit. McElvaine argues that this sort of attachment to the land and rural values held the new and the modern suspect and served to combat the disorientation and increasing fragmentation of modern life.

Recognizing that the novel spoke to the profound changes in American life in the thirties, early reviewers of *The Good Earth* tended to focus on the novel's portrayal of rural life and its universal appeal to traditional American values. W.J. Stuckley, in his analysis of the reasons for the book's selection for the Pulitzer Prize, says the book is not so much about America, but is "'American' in the Pulitzer way" (90). For Stuckley that means the book is an "ethical-moral American drama acted out against the relentless cycle of history which raises up one generation and causes the downfall of the next" (90). Stuckley

argues that *The Good Earth* appealed to the Pulitzer prize committee because of its escapism, exotic setting, lavish descriptions of poverty and famine, and thematic simplicity (91). According to Stuckley, the novel reflected problems familiar to readers in America in the thirties. Many Americans blamed the poverty and suffering of the thirties on the extravagance and excess of the twenties, when many people believed America had strayed from tradition and abandoned the old values of hard work, self-sufficiency, and thrift. As the life of Wang Lung shows, in Stuckley's analysis, disdain for these traditional values leads to softness, immorality, dependence, and eventually poverty and hunger. "One need only renounce the easy life and the primrose path," Stuckley says the novel preaches, "take up the hoe and shovel, and moral strength would come again, and every man would be saved" (91).

Placing blame for many of America's problems in the thirties on the previous decade and the urbanization and technological change accompanying it, *The Good Earth* fit perfectly the tendency in the thirties to romanticize rural life. Wang Lung clearly demonstrates the values of *gemeinschaft*: he displays a love of the land and he is involved in a system of home production and barter based on agricultural production. His relationship with his family, both immediate and extended, follows the authoritative model in Tonnies's *gemeinschaft*. This model was historically accurate for a novel set within patriarchal Chinese culture. Clearly, Buck was writing from her experience and understanding of Chinese culture, not about American culture. However, many early reviews suggest the novel's portrayal of rural life and values was responsible, in part, for its success with American readers. For example, Phyllis Bentley in *The English Journal* writes, "For my part I consider that the figure in Mrs. Buck's carpet, her true theme, is the continuity of life" (799). "Portrayed with graphic authority," Bentley observes, "is the ebb and flow of life, its change and perpetual movements, not only seasonally from spring to winter, from seed planting to harvest, but also a cycle of both family and humanity" (38-38). Clearly the "ebb and flow" of life is linked to a rural, agricultural lifestyle, which is seen to be in harmony with the cycles of nature. The story is essentially, as Peter Conn and others have pointed out, a story of the land, a familiar American genre. The struggles of farmers on the land was appealing to Americans who were watching farmers being pushed off of their homesteads and the onset of drought and the dustbowl. Other major novels of the decade, including *Gone With the Wind*, *Tobacco Road*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, share this theme.

In addition, *The Good Earth* celebrated simplicity, a theme that had run through American writing from Crèvecoeur and Franklin to Emerson and Thoreau, and that had been closely allied to agricultural life. The simple, rural life was presented as a symbol of self-sufficiency and democracy, as opposed to the aristocracies of Europe. When Wang Lung remains close to the land and the simple life, he is heroic. When he embraces wealth and materialism he loses his moral bearings. The very title of the novel held meaning for the urban poor in the midst of instability and change. It conjured feelings about the land and offered the promise of renewal, rebirth, of spring after winter. Embroiled in a massive economic depression, Americans could well relate to the shifting nature of Wang Lung's fortune and the kitchens for the poor, the homelessness, and the starvation that he encounters.

These themes would later ring true to audiences of the film version. *The Good Earth*, while set in China with Chinese characters, reflected many of the same values being projected in Hollywood films in the thirties. Like street-smart gangsters, Wang Lung's ambition, initiative, and willingness to take risks separate him from others. Early in the novel, Wang Lung is a poor peasant humbly seeking a slave from the great house of Hwang to be his wife. After being blessed with sons and modest economic success, Wang Lung's first daughter is born and drought and crop failure ensue. In order to survive Wang Lung and his family travel south to the city where they live on the streets and beg for food. The gesellschaft-like city is populated by idle rich, soldiers, and transients, all isolated and in competition with each other. Clearly, Wang Lung cannot achieve any measure of success in legitimate ways. As he flees the city he takes money from a helpless, shivering, weeping rich man. With the money Wang Lung is able to return to the land. Wang Lung feels no remorse for taking the money, and the reader is not lead to judge his action negatively. From his impoverished position, Wang Lung is able to return to his lands and amass a great fortune, eventually living in the very house where he had so humbly gone in search of a wife. Here, like the ambitious gangsters of Hollywood films such as *Little Caesar*, Wang Lung is literally able to boss his former boss. This clearly appealed to American workers who felt powerless in an ever-expanding industrial system. Wang Lung's success lies in his tenacity in clinging to the land, which has provided for him and his family. "It is the end of a family," Wang Lung exclaims at the end of the novel, "When they begin to sell the land.... If you hold your land you can live." Unfortunately the novel leads us to believe that the next generation of Wang Lung's family will sell the land and give up all that it

provides: “But over the old man’s head they looked at each other and smiled.”

The Good Earth achieved astounding popular success despite the criticism or disdain by the literary establishment because, according to Dody Weston Thompson, it spoke to the poverty and uncertainty of the thirties. Morris Dickstein characterizes the mood of the Depression as defined by not only the fear of outsiders, international crisis, and hard times, but also by the attempts to cheer people up. The decade, although rich in social criticism, was also a decade of popular fantasy spurred on by technological advances in the entertainment industry. Radio came of age and Hollywood created the great movie genres of American culture: the gangster movie, the horror film, the screwball comedy, the dance musical, and the road movie. Radio and cinema allowed people in the thirties to live vicariously. Radio serials and films transported people to different times and places, such as the fields of China in *The Good Earth* or the ravaged post-war South of *Gone with the Wind*. The use of sound, drawing yet more viewers to the novelty of talkies, made possible the musical genre, allowing Warner and RKO to emerge from near bankruptcy. These advances in media, according to John Baxendale and Chris Pawling, undermined established cultural authority by inundating the public sphere with what many intellectuals would consider low or vulgar popular taste. Like the movies, popular literature in the thirties, as Philip Melling suggests, was written with the recognition that people who had lost their money and jobs would crave escapist fiction (246). In the movies, which became the preeminent form of popular culture in the thirties, these values showed up as a tendency toward escapism and a critique of market values, businessmen, the wealthy, greed, and materialism. In contrast to these values, popular movies stressed justice and cooperation. Literature followed the same vein, with an “undercurrent of wish-fulfillment and fabulism,” providing “a major avenue of escape” (Bigsby 245). Many of the most successful films of the thirties, including *The Good Earth*, *Gone With the Wind*, *State Fair*, and *The Virginian* were based on particular novels or genres that had already been established in popular print, such as dime novels, magazine serials, or the Horatio Alger stories. Inevitably, however, the growth of mass media would pose a threat to print media, especially that which was considered “serious” literature. Rita Bernard attributes the emerging division of the low and the high to the attempts of elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to “stratify expressive forms,” evident in “‘genteel’ complaints against popular entertainments” (4). The success of both the films and the stories they were based on suggests that the audi-

ences for popular fiction and films were essentially the same. Like films in the thirties, *The Good Earth's* portrayal of the masses offered both a protest against social injustice and economic inequality and the satisfaction of a rags-to-riches tale.

Pearl Buck's Place in Literary History

In the years after WW II, Buck's critical reputation declined as her popular reputation continued. Conn admits that "in part, she deserved her fate" because her novels became increasingly sloppy and her prose commonplace ("Rediscovering" 3). Even as *The Good Earth* enjoyed popular success in the thirties, some critics had begun to point out its lack of sophistication. Most critics have characterized the 1930s, according to William Solomon, "as a period during which many novelists were searching for alternative, noncanonical methods of intervening in the political realm" (815). "Her stories," Phyllis Bentley wrote of Buck in 1935, "take the epic rather than the dramatic form; that is to say, they are chronological narratives of a piece of life, seen from one point of view, straightforward, without devices; they have no complex plots, formed of many strands skillfully twisted, but belong to the single-strand type, with the family, however, rather than the individual, as unit" (798).

Other critics, however, praised the realism of the novel in direct response to modernist principles these critics saw as vague, complex, and sometimes incoherent. For Thompson, the strength of the novel lies in its realism, straightforward narrative, and lack of Freudian influence (98). The novel, Thompson concludes, is too simple for adults in our "effete and complex age," but appealing to the young, who are "more open to illusion than the worldly" (108-109). And by implication, Thompson suggests that the novel is perfectly appropriate for a mass audience, both at the time of its appearance and in subsequent decades.

This view of the novel's realism characterizes much of the positive criticism of *The Good Earth*. Phyllis Bentley writes that Buck "observes external appearances closely, and presents them with a detailed accuracy" (796). "The great merit of *The Good Earth*, Oscar Cargill observes, "is the conviction it carries of verisimilitude to all the vicissitudes of Chinese life—nothing changes or passes which does not seem probable. And particularly well-done is the portrait of O-lan whose loyalty to her lord never wavered. Earth of the earthy-earthly, she triumphs in the end over her rivals, though her ugliness goes clear to the bone" (Cargill 149). "The descriptions are never over-

drawn or excessive;” writes Paul Doyle, “their conciseness always centers on concrete, closely observed, ‘essential’ details” (39). Paul Doyle characterizes the work as “realism rather than Naturalism because it lacks the “pessimism and despair” of the naturalists, instead using a more “affirmative approach to things as they exist” (47).

Other critics focused on the novel’s style. Of *The Good Earth* Malcolm Cowley writes, “The plot, deliberately commonplace, is given a sort of legendary weight and dignity by being placed in an unfamiliar setting. The biblical style is appropriate to the subject and the characters” (Cowley 24). The praise of the novel’s realism would suggest that it somehow truly reflected Chinese culture. Ironically, it is set in China, with characters who do not know the bible. This again reveals how criticism reflects what the western critics consider appropriate form. Paul Doyle describes Buck’s style as simple: “Pearl Buck’s writing in *The Good Earth* is characterized by simplicity, concreteness, a stress on long serpentine sentences, parallelism, balance, and repetition of words” (Doyle 40). According to Doyle, “In structure, *The Good Earth* uses a chronological form which proceeds at a fairly regular pace” (42). “The simplicity and the slow but steady movement of the prose,” Doyle concludes, “fit harmoniously the heroic and epic-like qualities of the narrative” (41).

As Conn has argued, literary tastes change and many of the criteria used to judge Buck’s work are now being called into question or re-evaluated themselves. However, Buck’s work remains neglected by literary historians and academics, despite the revival of interest in writers and history of the thirties. According to G.A. Cevasco, critics ignored *The Good Earth* because they were interested in considerations of archetypes, symbols, the subconscious/unconscious, interior monologues, and stream-of-consciousness. Gevasco predicts that this kind of experimentation in the novel has almost come to an end, and once it does *The Good Earth* will be rediscovered and reevaluated as a great novel (448-49). Doyle says Buck had been snubbed by the literary establishment because she refused to adopt modernist techniques, her popular success put off literary critics, and her work is optimistic and affirmative. Buck’s belief in the innate goodness of human beings, according to Doyle, was not in keeping with the pessimism, anguish, and indictments of humanity popular when he was writing in the mid sixties.

After the thirties an “acquisitive individualism” once again emerged that stressed living beyond one’s means, emulating those above on the social scale, and acquiring products that reflect social position and success (McElvaine). These values show up in official

policy as cuts in social programs, many of which began in the thirties, a decay in public transportation (coupled with an increase in the production and sale of gas-guzzling vehicles), egoism, and a growth in career-orientation among college students. As the academic canon was being defined in the forties and fifties, Pearl Buck “transgressed the barrier between ideology and aesthetics; she had no affinity for irony; she was not a felicitous stylist” (Conn “Pearl S. Buck” 117). Jane Rabb argues that teachers, who are often influential critics and reviewers, did not find Buck’s prose fitting for the methods of literary analysis prevailing since *The Good Earth* was published. A historical approach would not work with Buck, according to Rabb, because her novel was about a culture and its traditions that, on a literal level, teachers knew little or nothing about. Conn argues that Buck’s preference for episodic plots, her indifference to psychological analysis, and her tendency toward “time-honored phrases,” are rooted in her experience and knowledge of Chinese literary traditions, which western critics have failed to recognize. New Critics of the fifties and sixties favored works that lent themselves to close textual analysis, such as those by James, Conrad, or Faulkner. Stuckley’s comment is typical; *The Good Earth*, Stuckley writes, is a “childishly simple book in which good and evil are neatly labeled” (92). Simplicity does not lend itself easily to the literature classroom because it does away with the need for a teacher as expert who holds the ultimate, correct interpretation that students are expected to eventually attain through close analysis.

This omission from the academic and intellectual world, Rabb contends, may explain why contemporary feminists never mention Buck; she was simply not included in the reading lists in any of their college courses. Rabb points out that scholars continue to write about Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Edith Wharton, and Virginia Woolf, but ignore Pearl Buck, “one of the most distinguished figures America—if not the world—has ever produced”(103). Rabb claims that Buck’s insights about racism, scientific ethics, and sexism make her a forerunner of feminism, the civil rights movement, and anti-nuclear activism. Buck founded Welcome House, only one of several projects Buck pursued in support of children’s rights and interracial understanding. Peter Conn praises Buck’s humanitarian efforts that went “beyond the occasional painless gesture” (*Pearl* xii). Buck was a fervent and outspoken supporter of birth control and family planning, women’s rights, human rights, and labor unions.

Rabb argues that the current ignorance and indifference among scholars and critics stems from the fear the primarily male literary

establishment have always had for the popularity of Buck's work and the feeling that she was venturing into their territory. When Buck won the Nobel Prize in 1938, the literary establishment exploded in a flurry of negative, even spiteful, criticism. "If she can get it anybody can'," said Robert Frost, and Faulkner said "he would rather not win the Nobel Prize than be in the company of 'Mrs. China-hand Buck'" (Rabb 104). Conn suggests that the Academy's award of the Nobel Prize was as much a political statement as anything else. Buck had emerged as a powerful critic against the rising tide of international violence and totalitarianism. She had spoken out on behalf of liberal democracy, self-government, and tolerance. She raised money for war relief and victims of violence. Her social commitment was exemplary, far transcending, as a *Time* writer put it at the time, the influence of her writing (Conn *Pearl* 211).

Rabb offers three reasons for the ire of many Buck critics. First, many Americans felt that Buck was not really an American writer because she had spent so much of her life in China. Second, many critics felt that her work was too popular and made too much money to be considered as serious literature. Some critics dismissed the Book-of-the-Month club as evidence that middle-class Americans were not able to decide for themselves what books were worth reading, as insecure men and women grateful that someone was telling them what books to add to their libraries. And third, the mostly male critics and teachers resented awarding such a prestigious prize to a woman. Buck's success under the pseudonym David Barnes supports Rabb's argument. Buck's novel *The Townsman*, published under the pseudonym in 1945, like so many best-selling novels of the thirties and forties about the American land and the durable people who live on it, was widely and favorably reviewed, was selected by the Literary Guild, and attained the status of best-seller. An examination of Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* (1934) further supports this view. A history of the lost generation, *Exile's Return* chronicles the lives of an important group of American writers who had come of age in the years after World War I. Born in the 1890s, this group was primarily white, male, and middle-class. The book does not mention Pearl Buck.

Literary critics of the 1950s and 1960s considered Buck's most common subjects, women and China, as peripheral. Her episodic plots resisted psychological analysis, one of the prevailing literary approaches in the post-WWII academic world. These characteristics, according to Peter Conn, were simply not popular with New York critics who determined literary tastes for the rest of the nation (*Pearl*

xvii).

Buck wrote mainly about the unglamorous daily lives of Chinese peasants and women, subjects to which the writers of the lost generation were indifferent. For most American intellectuals and critics, Europe remained the center of cultural significance and aesthetic standards.

In the contemporary era of feminist criticism, ethnic studies, New Historicism, and cultural studies, Buck's work is being discussed more and more. In reviewing Buck's literary history, Doyle says that although she had been ignored from 1945-1965, *The Good Earth* is a masterpiece that will be remembered for more generations as a book that describes a whole way of life. Maxine Hong Kingston has praised Buck for allowing Asian voices to be heard for the first time in western literature. The book, Doyle admits, seemed more immediate to depression audiences, but the beauty of its style makes it timeless (150-151). Buck scholar Peter Conn argues that despite the setting and influences on *The Good Earth*, the novel addresses "a cluster of recognizably American themes" ("Pearl S. Buck" 111). Conn identifies these themes as the romance plot, the structure of much classic American fiction, and the Horatio Alger myth. Wang Lung, like Horatio Alger, is an ordinary human being suffering through natural and economic disaster. Henry Canby writing in the thirties seemed to predict the literary fortunes of Pearl Buck when he wrote that Buck is "clearly not the destined subject of a chapter in literary history" (8). Canby calls her fiction "inferior," especially compared to Cather or Glasgow. The only work he praises is *The Good Earth*, which he says will probably become a permanent contribution to world literature.

Buck's neglect by the literary establishment and the academic world reveals a set of particular assumptions about the nature of aesthetics and politics in the American academic world. In a time when white men and their ideas and themes ruled the literary world, Buck's work appealed to women readers. She had also followed a straightforward, traditional narrative pattern in a time when modernist experimentation prevailed. The modernist tradition seems to have been reserved for male heroes, valiant and virile men striving against a status quo that was often portrayed as effeminate and weak. Although her political attitudes were rooted in social activism, Buck's rejection of Communism and her distance from leftist intellectual circles alienated her from the left. At the same time, her sympathies for proletarian, women's, and civil rights alienated her from the right. Buck's international orientation, her knowledge of Chinese culture and literature, her commitment to particular social causes, and her

choice of subject matter positioned her in a place apart from her contemporaries in the 1930s, a place that is currently considered appropriate and valuable.

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