

# The Good Wife?: Pearl S. Buck's Feminist Critique

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## Time Line



## Pearl S. Buck



- **Pearl Buck** (1892-1973) was born in Hillsboro, West Virginia.
- She grew up in China, where her parents were missionaries.
- She was educated at Randolph-Macon Woman's College.
- After her graduation, she returned to China and lived there until 1934.
- Her first novel, *East Wind, West Wind*, appeared in 1930.
- *The Good Earth* (1931), *Sons* (1932), and *A House Divided* (1935), together forming a trilogy on the saga of the family of Wang.
- *The Good Earth*: the American list of best sellers; won the Pulitzer Prize and the William Dean Howells Medal.
- Pearl S. Buck won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938--the third American (and the first American woman) to do so.
- "Rich and generous epic descriptions of Chinese peasant life."
- Her novels helped to introduce American readers to Asian culture; as biographer Peter J. Conn comments, "For two generations of Americans, Buck invented China."
- Her novels have continued to deal with the confrontation of East and West, her interest spreading to such countries as India and Korea.

## Summary of *The Good Earth*

*The Good Earth* narrates a story that a Chinese farmer Wang Lung who lives in 1920s rises from a poor and humble man to become a rich landowner with a large family. When he is poor, he marries O-Lan who is a slave in the House of Hwang. O-Lan is quiet and hardworking. She even joins her husband to work on land under burning sunlight as soon as she gives birth to her child. However, Wang Lung thinks she is not beautiful enough, so he is always indifferent to her. And then, there comes a severe famine. Wang Lung's families are forced to move to a southern city. They live poorly in this city. One day, soldiers are seizing men to join the army. The city is filled with fear. Wang Lung gets some silvers from a man in a rich house by accident. The next day, Wang Lung and his families return to their home and buy some lands by these silvers. One night, Wang Lung finds out that O-Lan steals jewelries from a rich person's house. He takes her jewelries and buys more lands. Since then, he is getting rich. The richer he becomes, the more he dislikes his ugly wife. He marries another woman who is a prostitute named Lotus. As he is getting older, his fickleness and ambition fade away. His only wish is to keep all his lands. He tells his sons that they must not sell his lands no matter what happens and his sons promise him they will never do that. However, when Wang Lung is dying, they exchange a knowing smile indicating they have no intention of keeping this promise.

## Main Characters



Wang Lung



## Scenes

"Is it a man?"  
"A man!"  
"It is a man child!"

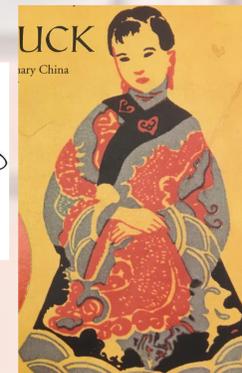
She would give birth alone, squatting over the old tub she kept for the purpose, creeping about the room afterwards to remove the traces of what had been, hiding as an animal does the birth stains of its young.

Male or female, it mattered nothing to him now--there was only another coming which must be fed.

She made a slight movement of her hand upon the bed and he saw upon the floor the child's body.  
"Dead!" he exclaimed.  
"Dead," she whispered.

Wang Lung found a bit of broken mat and thus he wrapped about it. The round head dropped this way and that and upon the neck he saw two dark, bruised spots, but he finished what he had to do.

**Interpretation:** In this scene, O-lan killed her newborn infant because the baby is a female and the whole family is suffering from starving, so she understands that even if the baby survives, she will not have a good life. This scene indicates a very common situation in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century of China that boys are highly valued, but girls are regarded as raising a slave for other families. Therefore, this scene indicates the early terrible condition of women, like wife purchase, girl child trafficking, abandoned baby girls, and female infanticide.



O-Lan

"I have borne you sons—I have borne you sons—"

"I thought one day I might have them set in earrings," and fearing his laughter she said again, "I could have hem for the younger girl when she is wed."

And he answered he loudly, hardening his heart,  
"Why should that one wear pearls with her skin as black as earth? Pearl are for fair women!" and then after an instant's silence he cries out suddenly, "Give them to me—I have need of them!"

Then slowly she thrust her wet wrinkled hand into her bosom and she drew forth the small package and she gave it to him.

**Interpretation:** In this scene, Wang Lung is taking pearls from O-Lan, and he is going to give them to his new wife Lotus. Wang Lung has already taken all of O-Lan's jewelries for buying more lands except this two pearls. From here, we can see that Wang Lung never considers O-Lan as his beloved wife. He only regards her as a slave from whom he can constantly plunder, reflecting the fact that women are thought that they are supposed to serve husbands in 1920s China. Men view themselves as the head of their family and women have no right to rebel men's thoughts. As for women, they never have any intention to refuse her husband's plunder. Most Chinese women at that time are like O-Lan. They never say "no" to their husband like O-Lan never resists Wang Lung's requests. Readers can easily see women's low position in their marriage in 1920s China from this scene.

## Birth Control Policies in China

- **One-child policy** was introduced to ensure that China, which has historically been prone to floods and famine, could feed all its people.
- **Females killed**—Critics of the policy maintain it has led in some case to the abandoning or killing of female infants because of the traditional preference for boys.
- **"Leftover Men"**—By the end of the decade, demographers say China will have 25 million "Leftover men."
- **Forced Abortions**—Forced abortion or severe financial penalties.
- China unveils **two-child policy** in 2016 in a proactive response to the issue of an aging population.

## Improvements of Women's Status in China

- In the subsequent Republic of China, under the support of Sun Yat sen, Regulations on Prohibit Women to Bind Feet was formulated, to prohibit women's foot-binding.
- In 1980, thanks to the signing the UN Convention, an attempt was made in China to eliminate all forms of discrimination of women at the legislative level

## Conclusion

*The Good Earth* gives a perfect perspective of women's role during early 20<sup>th</sup> Century in China. In marriage, O-Lan represents a "good wife" from a peasant family, who is strong but silent, lives as a slave rather than a martial partner, and plays the role of bearing sons instead of a wife. Moreover, O-Lan endures the pain of strangling her own daughter, sharing husband with another woman, and living with the only important purpose of giving birth to sons. O-Lan speaks out for many Chinese females in early 20th Century of China, who are suffering from unfair treatments and inhumanity. It is hard to change women's social status in China which is influenced by thousand-year-old traditional idea. Nowadays in China, even though women's status in marriage and society is not ideal enough, it still has been improved greatly.

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