

A Curriculum Guide for

The Good Earth

By Pearl S. Buck

He stooped sometimes and gathered some of the earth up in his hand and he sat thus and held it in his hand, and it seemed full of life between his fingers.

The Good Earth, page 356

About the Book

Pearl S. Buck's epic tale of the peasant farmer Wang Lung's rise to wealth and status in pre-revolutionary China won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1935, and since then has been read and beloved by millions of readers the world over. The tale begins on Wang Lung's wedding day, as he prepares to retrieve his bride O-lan, a slave in the great House of Hwang. Together, Wang Lung and O-lan tirelessly work their small plot of land, start a family, and begin to see their fortunes grow. Fates change as the family flees to the city to escape a crushing famine, and there they must scrape and beg to survive. In another twist of fate, Wang Lung acquires enough money to bring the family back to the land, where his unbridled ambition and desire for status make him one of the wealthiest men in the region. With great wealth comes its trappings, and as Wang Lung becomes more and more removed from the land his simple life becomes increasingly complicated and tragic. Buck's sweeping tale encompasses the political and cultural upheavals of early 20th century China, as Wang Lung and his family experience the pain and benefits of a changing world. With beautiful, unsentimental language *The Good Earth* is a realistic portrayal of one family's shifting fortunes in a vanished China.

Before Reading

The Good Earth roughly spans the period in China between 1900 and 1949. Readers witness a gradual change from pre-revolutionary, agrarian China to what would eventually become the Cultural Revolution. Screen the following short tutorial that explains the complicated history of China during the first half of the 20th century: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/euro-hist/china-early-1900s/v/overview-of-chinese-history-1911-1949>

Read the new introduction to *The Good Earth* by Peter Conn. Discuss the following subjects and themes referenced in the introduction: Chinese and Asian stereotypes; rebellions and revolutionary movements in early 20th century China; “collision between traditional China and the revolutionary future”; patriarchal customs; second-class status of women; and migration driven by poverty and natural disasters.

The author Pearl S. Buck grew up the daughter of a missionary and spent her youth and young adulthood in China. Her first hand experiences growing up in China informed *The Good Earth*. Lead a discussion about cultural appropriation and how *The Good Earth* would be received if it were being published today.

Discussion Questions

Chapters 1-10

After reading chapter 1, what can you discern about the character, Wang Lung? How does Buck reveal his traits, fears, attitudes, desires, strengths, and weaknesses?

Discuss the relationship between Wang Lung and his father. How does Wang Lung reveal his resentment toward his aging parent? How does Wang Lung’s father’s attitude toward women, especially his desire for his son to marry a slave “not too young, and above all, not a pretty one (p. 8),” influence his son? Although Buck describes Wang Lung as a simple peasant farmer, he draws the line at taking a “woman who is pock-marked, or who has a split upper lip (p.

9).” How does this protestation to his father reveal his own pride? In what other ways does Buck show Wang Lung to be prideful?

Discuss Wang Lung’s behavior once he enters the city to retrieve his bride, O-lan. How does his behavior reveal his provincialism? Discuss examples of his naiveté and impotence in the face of those he believes to be judging him. How do personal feelings of inferiority drive his decisions?

Describe O-lan. How does her treatment by the Wang-Lung, his father, and the Old Mistress demonstrate that she is a commodity? Why is Wang Lung concerned if O-lan likes him, and why does he feel shame for his concern? Discuss the passage on page 28: *What had been her life, that life she never shared with him? He could make nothing of it. And then he was ashamed of his own curiosity and of his interest in her. She was, after all, only a woman.* How does this passage show his human emotions in conflict with China’s cultural attitudes around women? Discuss Peter Conn’s description of O-lan in the book’s introduction: *Condemned by her gender to second-class statue, she is at the same time the novel’s moral center, a person of courage, perseverance, and instinctive common sense.* Cite examples from the text that support this description.

Wang Lung and O-lan develop a rhythm of life, best described by their working of the land. On page 30, after a day of farming together, O-reveals she is pregnant. Wang-lung is overcome with feeling. What do you think the author means by Wang Lung’s thought that “it was their turn at this earth!” Track and discuss additional examples in which Wang Lung relates life events to the land.

In the beginning of chapter 3, O-lan gives birth to their first child. She flies into a rage when Wang Lung suggests they ask a woman from the House of Hwang to assist in the birth. Though she hates her former slaves masters, she has an elaborate plan to return with the child dressed in beautiful, rich clothing. Why is this act so important to O-lan?

Wang Lung and O-lan are superstitious people. Discuss the thoughts and rituals the couple engage in, such as offering incense to the gods. Discuss the line on page 40: *The air and the earth were filled with malignant spirits who could not endure the happiness of mortals, especially of such as are poor.* How might this line be a foreshadowing of things to come for Wang Lung and his family?

At the end of chapter 4, Wang Lung and O-lan agree to hide money “in the inner wall of their room behind the bed: *and into this Wang Lung thrust the silver and with a clod of earth she covered the hole...Wang Lung was conscious that he had money more than he need spend, and when he walked among his fellows he walked at ease with himself* (p. 45). At this point in the story, what changes have you observed in Wang-Lung, both positive and negative as a result of his growing wealth?

Pride is a recurring theme in *The Good Earth*. In chapter 5, how does pride influence Wang Lung’s behavior, first with the rice cakes and then in how he acts at the House of Hwang? Compare his behavior in this chapter to how he acted when he first entered the great house. Upon hearing from O-lan that the Hwang family may be struggling, Wang Lung impulsively decides to make an offer on part of their land. Discuss the following passage: “I will buy it!” he cried in a lordly voice. “I will buy it from the great House of Hwang.” Shortly after, in reply to O-lan’s trepidation about the idea, he says again, “I will buy it,” he repeated, “I will buy it,” only this time “peevishly as he might repeat a demand to his mother who crossed him (p. 52).” What do you think accounts for his difference in tone? How does Wang-Lung’s need for land reveal his desire for power, prestige, status, and acceptance?

After purchasing the parcel of Hwang land, Wang Lung is filled with a sense of buyer’s remorse. Upon seeing the Hwang land markers, Wang-Lung replaces his feelings of inferiority with a steely ambition to purchase more of the great family’s land: *And so this parcel of land became to Wang Lung a sign and a symbol* (p. 56). Discuss what Buck means by *sign* and *symbol*. After O-lan gives birth and then returns to work the fields on the same day, Wang -Lung resists

an initial feeling to let her rest, and instead allows her to continue working the land, rationalizing that his labors in the field are equal to the labor of childbirth. What do think accounts for this sudden flash of cruelty toward O-lan?

In chapter 7, Wang-Lung has a conflict with his conniving and shiftless uncle. How does Wang Lung's pride and sense of his place in the family patriarchy cause him to give his uncle money? How does O-lan's suggestion to *give* Uncle the money, not lend it, reveal her wisdom? How does this act, combined with the birth of a girl and the crows in the sky convince Wang-Lung that trouble is coming for him?

In chapter 8, a drought descends on the region, but Wang Lung continues to buy land. What does this decision reveal about Wang-Lung's obsession and need to acquire more? How does having the land, as he loses nearly everything else, give him comfort?

In chapter 9, Buck describes in stark and vivid language the process of starvation on the human body, as well as the desperate behavior of the starving. Discuss these descriptions throughout this chapter. What stands out the most to you? How does Buck help you visualize this human suffering? Discuss the scene toward the end of the chapter in which Uncle comes to Wang Lung with city men to buy the land. Although he and his family are starving, Wang Lung refuses the paltry offer: *I shall never sell the land! Bit by bit I will dig up the fields and feed the earth itself to the children and when they die I will bury them in the land, and I and my wife and my old father, even he, we will die on the land that has given us birth* (pps 86, 87). How does O-lan's wisdom and calm save Wang Lung in this moment?

Wang Lung decides to migrate to the city as a final chance for survival. They decide to take a train southward, a *firewagon*, along with hordes of other starving migrants. Wang Lung fears the train, and thinks: . . . *there was always distrust if that which one did not know and understand. It is not well for a man to know more than is necessary for his daily living* (p. 91). Do you think this

thought will remain consistent as the story progresses? How does this thought reveal Wang Lung's insecurities and fears as he moves into the unknown?

Chapters 11-20

Chapters 11-14 describe the family's migration to and life in the city of Nanjing, beginning with Buck's description of the southerly train voyage through to the riots and looting of the city's wealthy homes. Discuss the survival measures the family must take in their first days in the city. How do his early experiences in the city inflame Wang Lung's feelings of inadequacy? Why does he refuse to beg for money but allows Olan, his sons, and even his old father to beg in the street? Discuss additional examples of how city life confronts Wang Lung's sense of self-worth.

Discuss the role of O-lan during the family's time in the city. What actions does she take and decisions does she make that serve as a counterpoint to Wang Lung behavior? How have O-lan's life experiences prepared her for the hardship facing the family? Discuss possible outcomes for the family if O-lan weren't present.

How do memories and the promise of returning to the land sustain Wang Lung during the family's time in the city? What broad themes emerge as Wang Lung labors in the city (hunger, poverty, man's inhumanity to man), as opposed to themes that emerged in chapters 1-20 (dignity, sustenance, hard work, integrity).

Discuss the conditions and "fierce despair (p. 115)" in the city that lay the foundation for events in chapter 14. How does Buck drive home the appalling living conditions, as well as the apathy of human beings?

Wang Lung is conflicted about selling his daughter, the "little fool," into slavery, but O-lan appears emotionless about the prospect of the act, even though she was sold into slavery as a small child. Discuss O-lan's statement to Wang Lung: *If it were only I, she would be killed before she was sold...the slave*

of slaves was I! But a dead girl brings nothing, I would sell this girl for you—to take you back to the land (p. 117). Why do you think O-lan could have this attitude given her own history as a formerly enslaved person? Why is O-lan so clearly devoted to Wang Lung, to the point that she would sell her daughter into a life of slavery?

Into the spring, having been in the city for months, Wang Lung still holds on to his pride, setting himself apart from the other poor laborers in the city: *Most of these ragged men had nothing beyond what they always took in the day's labor and begging, and he was always conscious that he was not truly one of them. He owned land and his land was waiting for him...He belonged, not to this scum which clung to the walls of a rich man's house; nor did he belong to the rich man's house* (p. 121). How do his ties to his land help him to survive in the city? Why do his values breed scorn in those men around him who Wang Lung has contempt? In what ways is Wang Lung caught in the middle?

Discuss how Wang-Lung reacts to the picture of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, given to him by a missionary, and what presumptions does he make about its meaning? How does this scene illustrate the isolation of China in the early 20th century?

How does the unequal distribution of wealth in the city lead to the climactic scene at the end of chapter 14? What drives Wang Lung to steal the man's money, after he has made clear how he feels about thieves? In addition to the actual currency, what does Wang Lung gain by the act? How does his tendency to keep himself apart from others place him in a situation where he has the opportunity, albeit through theft, to reverse his fortunes?

In the beginning of chapter 15, readers find the family back in their home on their land. With the stolen gold, Wang Lung is able to restart his life, purchasing an ox and “seeds the like of which he had never planted before...(p. 138).” Why does he need to buy the ox that was first refused to him? Why does his “heart burn with possession (p. 139)?” Contrast Buck's description of city life with Wang Lung's utopian vision of his land as he surveys it from his

front porch. Discuss how he treats his neighbors who visit him after his return. Why does he reserve his humanity for Ching?

When Wang Lung discovers O-lan's stolen jewels, he cries, "Now treasure like this one cannot keep. It must be sold and put into safety—into the land, for nothing else is safe (p. 145)." Describe the interaction between Wang Lung and O-lan as she asks him for two simple pearls. Why are these small gems so important to O-lan? What do you think the pearls symbolize?

Wang Lung takes the jewels to sell to the House of Hwang, and finds their fortunes have changed. Whereas when Wang Lung first approached the family to purchase land, he had to deal with a "greasy" middleman, but now he interacts directly with the Old Lord and the slave called Cuckoo. In describing the fall of the House of Hwang, she tells Wang Lung: *But all this was not a sudden thing. All during the lifetime of the Old Lord and of his father the fall of this house has been coming. In the last generation the lords ceased to see the land and took the moneys the agents gave them and spent it carelessly as water. And in these generations the strength of the land has gone from them and bit by bit the land has begun to go also* (pps. 151, 152). What does Wang Lung resolve to do upon hearing this story? How does the transaction lead to Wang Lung's need for more?

In chapter 17, Wang Lung applies the lessons of famine and poverty to become an astute businessman. Discuss the thoughts and actions of Wang Lung as he begins to grow in prosperity. How does Wang Lung's pride and insecurity drive his decision to educate his eldest son?

Chapters 18 and 19 mark a turning point in the story, as Wang Lung has grown quite rich and has achieved a degree of status in the community. Discuss Wang Lung's treatment of O-lan in this chapter. How is Wang Lung's own need for acceptance and social status behind his cruel treatment of O-lan? How does Wang Lung's inability to work the land during this time of flood cause him to investigate the brothel? How does he justify the taking of a concubine, and why do you think he is conflicted about his decision?

Discuss the relationship between Wang Lung and Cuckoo. Why does Wang Lung allow her to condescend to him? Discuss Lotus' bound feet, and Wang Lung's fascination with them. Discuss the meaning of Wang Lung's thought upon Lotus: ...she was not flesh and blood but the painted picture of a woman (p. 180). How does Wang Lung's lust for Lotus exacerbate his insecurities? How is this a betrayal of his true self? Why is he ashamed to wear his fancy clothes in front of O-lan and his family? How is taking the pearls from O-lan a metaphor for Wang Lung's betrayal?

Why does the reappearance of Wang-Lung's uncle and family stir his resentment and contempt for those he feels beneath him, including O-lan? How is Wang Lung becoming like the Old Lord of the House of Hwang? How is buying Lotus and bringing her into the home the ultimate cruelty to O-lan? Discuss her feelings as she says to Wang-Lung, "I have borne you sons—I have borne you sons— (p. 194)." After all of his bluster, what does Wang Lung actually feel as he brings Lotus and Cuckoo into his home?

Chapters 21-30

Lotus and Cuckoo's presence in the home of Wang Lung brings discord, resentment, anger, and shame. Discuss how he navigates the new family dynamic. How does Wang Lung react to the knowledge that O-lan knows that Lotus has her pearls? What consequences does he suffer for taking Lotus as his concubine? How is this discord in his home a direct result of his wealth and station, and also a distancing of himself from the land? How does Lotus' insults toward Wang Lung's children cause him to realize he must get back to his land? How does getting back to the earth right Wang Lung, *as if he was healed from a sickness* (p. 212)?

Wang Lung's status continues to rise as his wealth grows. Discuss the importance of respect to Wang Lung. How does he go about selecting a wife for his eldest son, and why are the village farmer's daughters not an option? Contrast his process of finding a wife for his eldest son to his father's arranging of his own marriage to O-lan. How is O-lan's wisdom revealed in

chapter 22? Why does Wang Lung become enraged when he learns that his eldest son has been frequenting brothels?

Discuss his reaction to learning of his Uncle's gang affiliation and its implied threat. Compare this scene to previous scenes of Wang Lung's impotence and deference within the family patriarchy. How does patriarchal loyalty keep Wang Lung from action, although he lives with constant resentment? Why does the poor fool bring Wang Lung "more comfort than all the others put together (p. 231)?"

Discuss the onset of locusts in chapter 23. How does Wang Lung approach this new threat to his land, and thus, the very core of his identity. Discuss the following thought and how it marks a shift in attitude for Wang Lung: *Well, and every man has his troubles and I must make shift to live with mine as I can...* (p. 234).

Discuss O-lan's behavior and reaction to the situation between Lotus and the eldest son. Contrast her reaction with Wang Lung's. How have years of suppressing anger, insecurity, and lack of self-worth come to fruition in chapter 24?

Discuss the role of women in chapter 25. Why does O-lan bind the youngest daughter's feet? Wang Lung muses, "with all her dimness O-lan had seen the truth in him (p. 249)." What truth does O-lan see in Wang Lung? Why does O-lan's illness stir feelings of remorse in Wang Lung? How does he rationalize his cruel and insensitive behavior toward O-lan over their years together? Why does it take seeing physical pain on O-lan's face for Wang Lung to allow her rest from her constant work (p. 251)? When he finally weeps, is it for O-lan or for himself? How does her illness cause the family to finally appreciate her?

In chapter 26, Wang Lung resolves to take care of O-lan as she slowly dies over the course of the winter. When he yells out in desperation: *This I cannot bear! I would sell all my land if it could heal you, to which O-lan replies: No, and I would not—let you. First I must die—sometime anyway. But the land is there*

after me (p. 256). How are Wang Lung and O-lan perfectly suited in their reverence to the land? Why is Wang Lung still conflicted in his feelings (pity, compassion, revulsion, kindness) toward O-lan as she lay dying? Why do you think O-lan summons Cuckoo to her bedside, saying “Well, you have lived in the courts of the Old Lord, and you were accounted beautiful, but I have been a man’s wife, and I have borne him sons, and you are still a slave (p. 258).” How are these words the sweetest revenge O-lan could hope to have?

Discuss the funeral procession. Compare this description to that of Wang Lung’s wedding day in Chapter 1. Wang Lung feels remorse about taking the pearls from Olan and thinks, “There in that land of mine is buried the first good half of my life and more.” Discuss the role of O-lan in Wang Lung’s rise?

After O-lan’s death, a great flood and famine descends on the land. Whereas Wang Lung was superstitious and gratuitous to the Gods in his youth, he now spites them: *I have never had any good from that old man in heaven, yet. Incense or no incense, he is the same in evil.* What accounts for this change in attitude? Discuss Wang Lung and his son’s plot to addict his Uncle and his wife to opium in order to control them. After initial ambivalence, why does Wang Lung decide to purchase six ounces of opium (p. 280)?

In chapter 28, people return after the famine. Wang Lung becomes a money lender: *...and he loaned it at high interest, seeing how greatly it was in demand, and the security he always said must be land* (p. 283). How does his enormous wealth lead him to a life similar to the House of Hwang? Why is Wang Lung able to buy so many slaves for his household, when earlier in life the thought of selling his daughter horrified him? As Wang Lung ages, becoming more removed from the land, how does his life become more complicated?

Discuss the confrontation between Wang Lung and his eldest son (p. 287). How does the son appeal to Wang Lung’s pride and ego by casually mentioning the idea of purchasing the House of Hwang? How do the shameful memories carried throughout his lifetime of “crawling into that great house

(p. 288)” make Wang Lung consider purchasing and leaving his house on the land?

Discuss the thoughts and feelings Wang Lung experiences as he walks through the courtyard of the great house: *...he despised these people who swarmed everywhere, and he said to himself that they were filthy and he picked his way among them with his nose up and breathing lightly because of the stink they made. And he despised them and was against them as though he himself belonged to the great house* (p. 292). Compare Wang Lung’s attitude toward the common people to how he was perceived and treated in earlier parts of his life.

After Wang Lung moves into the city, his transformation to the elite is complete. Discuss how Buck describes Wang Lung’s city life behaviors. How do his pride and ego feed his spending and encourage the trappings of wealth? How has the eldest son inherited Wang Lung’s pride? How is it different from his father’s sense of pride? Why does Wang Lung so deeply mourn the loss of Ching? What did Ching represent to him?

How are Wang Lung and the eldest son both alike and different? Discuss the passage on page 306: *that eldest son of his who was never content with what was going on well enough but must be looking aside for more*. How did Wang Lung teach his son to be discontent? How does his desire for materialism and disdain for common people make the eldest son a metaphor for the seeds of revolution? What is meant by: *as the poor do come back when the rich are too rich* (p. 308). How are the “trees that bear no fruit and the idle, blooming lilies (p. 309) symbols of the family’s decadence? What does Wang Lung mean when he tells his eldest son: *And roots, if they are to bear fruits, must be kept well in the soil of the land* (p. 311)? How does the eldest son “play” Wang Lung, and why is Wang Lung so easily manipulated? In what ways is each of Wang Lung’s sons like their father?

Chapters 31-34

In the final chapters of *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung is an old, very rich man living in the house formerly owned by the Hwang family. In chapter 31, life changes yet again with the onset of war. Led by his uncle's son, a large group of soldiers sequester in Wang Lung's palatial home. Discuss how Wang Lung and his eldest son handle this invasion. Why does Wang Lung feel that because he is rich, he "need not fear anything"? How does this show what little he learned from his early life experiences, and the corruption and delusions brought on by great wealth? Discuss the threat of rape in this chapter, the treatment of enslaved women, and how Wang Lung ultimately decides to spare Pear Blossom? How does this show Wang Lung's humanity and compassion?

After Wang Lung promises to find a poor man for the slave who conceived his nephew's child, he reflects on his own life arc: *Here he was promising a woman to a poor man, and once he had been a poor man come into these very courts for his woman. And he had not for a lifetime thought of O-lan, and now he thought of her with sadness that was not sorrow but only heaviness of memory and things long gone, so far distant from her now* (p. 331). What specific aspects of his life with O-lan might Wang Lung be recalling? Discuss the symmetry of Wang Lung calling the crude farmer to his home to be husband to the slave. How does Wang Lung's wealth, his children's expectations, and his fracturing family rob him of the peace he desires? Discuss how shame, ego, greed, and privilege undermine Wang Lung's final years. How is the youngest son's confrontation with Wang Lung a metaphor for the shift from pre-revolutionary China to what would ultimately become the Cultural Revolution? How does Wang Lung's definition of "the land" differ from his youngest son's?

How does Wang Lung's conflicting shame and pride emerge after he takes Pear Blossom as a concubine? Discuss the visits from Wang Lung's three sons (pps. 343-347). What is revealed from each interaction? Why is Wang Lung "suddenly afraid of this one, whom he had scarcely considered from his birth up"? How does his encounter with the youngest son humble Wang Lung?

Nearing his final days, Wang Lung returns to his earthen house to die. Why do you think Buck decided to bring her character, Wang Lung, back to the place where her story began? Wang Lung cries to his sons, “It is the end of a family—when they begin to sell the land, he said brokenly.” How has the family as Wang Lung believes it to be already come to an end? Recall the lines from chapter 16 in which Cuckoo explains to Wang Lung how the House of Hwang gradually fell into decline: *But all this was not a sudden thing. All during the lifetime of the Old Lord and of his father the fall of this house has been coming. In the last generation the lords ceased to see the land and took the moneys the agents gave them and spent it carelessly as water. And in these generations the strength of the land has gone from them and bit by bit the land has begun to go also* (pps 151, 152). How does Wang Lung’s life story parallel the House of Hwang? What is “the strength of the land?” How is the firstborn and second born sons’ plan to sell off the land the ultimate betrayal?

Thematic Connections

Identity-

- Wang Lung is a character in conflict with himself. Discuss aspects of Wang Lung’s conflicting identity that emerge throughout the story, such as pride vs. shame, compassion vs. cruelty, his place in the patriarchal family and societal systems, and his deeply rooted feelings of inferiority vs. his ceaseless ambition to acquire land.
- Wang Lung has an obsessive reverence for the land. What does land mean to Wang Lung, and how does the land define him?
- Discuss examples from the novel in which Wang Lung’s identity is challenged, both from internal conflict and societal and cultural forces

Family Relationships-

- Throughout the story, Wang Lung is bound by the patriarchal customs and expectations that are the foundation of the family and broader

society. Discuss scenes in the book where his filial duties change the course of his life.

- Compare Wang Lung's character in his various roles in the family: son, husband, father, grandfather. Discuss specific examples in the story of how these roles influence his attitudes, actions, and behaviors.

Resilience & Survival-

- Although Wang Lung ends up with material wealth beyond his wildest dreams, he is at his heart a humble farmer. How does Wang Lung and O-lan demonstrate almost superhuman resilience in order to survive?
- What aspects of Wang Lung's character, both positive and negative, served him in his most dire moments?

Revolution-

- *The Good Earth* is set in China in the turbulent first half of the 20th century. Discuss how class inequality, poverty, natural disasters, and famine sow the seeds of revolution. How do Buck's descriptions of rioting and looting underscore the anger and desperation of the underprivileged?
- Discuss the aspects of the book that offer glimpses into the early stirrings of discontent among the underclass in China, and Wang Lung's lack of understanding of the societal shifts occurring around him.

Role of Women-

- Throughout *The Good Earth*, women and female children are treated as commodities, sexual objects, slaves, objects of ideal beauty, and disposable beings. Discuss how the characters of O-lan, Cuckoo, Lotus, the little fool, the youngest daughter, and Pear Blossom are all victims of the patriarchal dehumanization of women.

- Discuss the role of O-lan in *The Good Earth*. Although sold into slavery as a child, beaten, neglected and abused in the House of Hwang, O-lan achieves a measure of dignity in the story, even in the face of Wang Lung's cruelty and sexual betrayal. Discuss how O-lan is the moral center of *The Good Earth*.

Extending Learning

Global Treatment of Women and Girls.

Readers of *The Good Earth* learn of horrible acts perpetrated on women and girls in pre-revolutionary China: children sold into slavery and prostitution, foot binding, arranged marriages, lives of endless childbirth in the the quest of male heirs, backbreaking labor. These aspects of women's lives still exist in many parts of the world. Do research into the treatment of women across the globe. Topics might include: male dominance over women's bodies, arranged marriages, child sex trafficking, and human slavery.

<https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/gender-equality/>

<https://www.apa.org/advocacy/interpersonal-violence/trafficking-women-girls>

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/other-types/human-trafficking>

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/female-genital-mutilation>

Migration.

When Wang Lung decides that to stay in his home equals certain death from starvation, he and his family join the "hordes" of people who flee south to the city to find food and work. Reread Buck's descriptions of this migration. Do research into recent migrations patterns in the world as a result of famine,

natural disasters, climate change, political upheaval, war, and human rights abuses.

<https://refugeesmigrants.un.org>

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/world-history/medieval-times/migration/a/migration-focus-block>

<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/introduction-human-migration/>

The History of China in the 20th Century.

Buck's epic story spans roughly the first forty years of the 20th century. Investigate the major events that unfolded in this complex and paradigm-shifting period in China's history. Trace actual events to events Buck alludes to in *The Good Earth*.

<https://www.facinghistory.org/nanjing-atrocities-crimes-war/timeline-events-china>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13017882>

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/main_pop/kpct/kp_chinarevolution.htm

http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/timelines/china_modern_timeline.htm

History of Opium.

In *The Good Earth*, opium appears as a symbol of addiction, sloth, depravity, and moral decline. Research the history of opium in China and the West. Compare aspects of this history to the opioid epidemic in The United States of America in the first part of the 21st century. What parallels can be drawn?

<https://www.deamuseum.org/ccp/opium/history.html>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/world/asia/opium-war-book-china-britain.html>

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heroin/etc/history.html>

Resources for Teachers & Students

The Good Earth, Graphic Adaptation:

[https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Good-Earth-\(Graphic-Adaptation\)/Pearl-S-Buck/9781501132773](https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Good-Earth-(Graphic-Adaptation)/Pearl-S-Buck/9781501132773)

Pearl S. Buck biography and bibliography: <https://www.biblio.com/pearl-s-buck/author/258>

Novel Studies from Teachers Pay Teachers:

<https://www.teacherspayteachers.com/Browse/Search:the%20good%20earth>
[h](#)

Lesson Plans from BookRags:

<http://www.bookrags.com/lessonplan/the-good-earth/#gsc.tab=0>

Primary Source Photographs of Pre-revolutionary China:

<http://www.bookrags.com/lessonplan/the-good-earth/#gsc.tab=0>

Information on Foot Binding:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/09/the-peculiar-history-of-foot-binding-in-china/279718/>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/why-footbinding-persisted-china-millennium-180953971/>

NPR Review of biography of *Pearl S. Buck in China*:

<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=128238422>

This guide was created by Colleen Carroll, literacy specialist, curriculum writer, and children's book author. Learn more about Colleen at www.colleencarroll.us.