Against the Grain

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Booklover-Sustainability

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like sweet fruit, fresh vegetables, and fragrant flowers, Farmer’s Markets are spreading up everywhere in the greater Charleston area. We find markets in Marion Square on Saturday, in the horseshoe courtyard at the Medical University of South Carolina on Friday, and at the Mount Pleasant Farmer’s Market Pavilion next to Moultrie Middle School on Tuesday. This revival is like coming home to the Lowcountry of South Carolina since its history is strongly rooted in an agrarian society. Trends to buy local, join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), eat slo-food, plant a garden, and think sustainability are growing in popularity as the Farmer’s Market once again becomes rooted in the culture of our society. More and more people are thinking about the Earth in a manner that harkens back to a simpler time. The 21st century may be awash in sophisticated technology that changes faster than we can make a purchase, but the desire to plant a garden, compost, recycle, and live a sustainable life is demanding a different outcome from our technology. The conflict is not a modern one. Pearl S. Buck in her 1931 novel The Good Earth gives the reader the smell of the earth, the sweat of the toil, the value of the land, and the conflict of hard work vs. wealth and easy living all from the point of view of a poor peasant farmer named Wang Lung.

I don’t remember a time that I didn’t know about The Good Earth, but it took finding a red hardcover, beautifully illustrated, 1992 Reader’s Digest edition at Blue Bicycle Books on King Street in Charleston for me to begin to read this classic. The simplicity of the language reminds me of a foreigner trying to speak English and adds a dimension to the story that is tangible. The story begins with the marriage day of Wang Lung, a farmer in a small village. We are guided through his rituals and journey to the House of Hwang where he meets O-lan, a slave in the house that has been promised to him in marriage. Wang Lung is a man whose love for the land is as strong as the ox that pulls his plow. He is anxious to have a wife and family to share the toils of his everyday life and hopefully his love for the land. Nothing else matters to him but the land, and this sets the stage for an intriguing peak into Chinese culture.

Wang Lung’s obsession with land coupled with Nature’s cycles of drought and full harvest allow Buck to give the reader the essentials of Chinese life in the rich and poor times for a peasant farmer. Wang Lung’s obsession extends to acquisition, and he uses the family money to purchase land from the House of Hwang which has fallen under the influence of opium and unbridled spending. A drought comes, and the family has no monetary reserve to survive and decides to travel south on a “fire wagon,” known in the West as a railroad, to eke out a living. The family lives in a hut on the street in the southern city and can only manage to live hand-to-mouth until an enemy invasion occurs. All Wang Lung has thought about is returning to his land in the north. As the city is in turmoil the poor people seize the opportunity to loot. Wang Lung and O-lan join in and find enough riches to provide them the means to return to their home. The years of prosperity that follow give rise to another dilemma — one of wealth. Wang Lung can afford education for his sons, men to help with the labor, time to visit the village’s tea rooms. He ultimately is not able to instill his love for the land in his sons, much to his final dismay.

Pearl Buck was raised in China, the daughter of a missionary. She left China to study at Randolph Macon Women’s College from 1910 to 1914. Upon returning to China she married John Lossing Buck. Buck was an agricultural specialist hired by the Presbyterian Mission Board to teach the local Chinese farmers American farming methods. Buck was able to immerse herself in the culture of the Chinese farmers of northern China where they lived and observe their lives and customs. She described herself as “mentally bicoal.” “When I was in the Chinese world, I was Chinese, I spoke Chinese, and behaved as a Chinese, and ate as a Chinese did, and I shared their thoughts and feelings. When I was in the American world, I shut the door between.” This bifocal mentality provides the reader with a unique Chinese experience — one that is given to us by an American who feels as if she is Chinese. We learn of foot binding, the significance of the color red in celebration, the insignificant position of women in Chinese society, the desire for a son to carry on the family name and traditions, and the toils and tribulations of the poor peasant farmer.

The success of The Good Earth planted Pearl Buck among the internationally-renowned authors, as she became the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1938. The book was translated into several languages including Chinese and has been cited as one of the principal reasons for changing the West’s view of China. A recent book review in the Wall Street Journal written by Melanie Kirkpatrick about the biography Pearl Buck in China: Journey to the Good Earth by Hilary Spurling gives us an opportunity to revisit an old friend.