The Good Earth

Chapters 1 – 2

Vocabulary

articulate – to express with words
cauldron – vessel used for boiling water
contrived – obviously planned
demurring – voicing objection
fruition – accomplishment; bearing fruit
gruel – thin, watery porridge
guffaw – burst of laughter
impudence – offensive, bold behavior
obeisances – body movements or gestures
stolid – impassive
thatched – roofing made of plant material
volubly – fluently
zenith – summit; upper region in the sky

1. What is the setting for the novel? Describe the images you have of Wang Lung's farm, his house, the city, and the House of Hwang.

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2. What is the point of view in the novel? What effect does knowing these thoughts have on the reader?

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3. Characterize Wang Lung by his personality traits, his attitude and his values. How do you feel about Wang Lung?

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4. How has Wang Lung’s poverty as a farmer influenced his character?

5. Describe Wang Lung’s relationship with his father.

6. What is your opinion of the wife’s role at this time in China?

7. Do you think that O-lan and Wang Lung love each other?

8. What is the cause for the sadness in O-lan’s eyes and her silence?

9. Point out parts in these chapters that you found humorous.

10. What aspects are realistic in these chapters?
Chapters 3 – 4

Vocabulary

- **chaff** – worthless matter
- **flails** – manual threshing tools
- **frugal** – careful spending
- **gilded** – covered to make attractive
- **hemp** – cord or cloth made from the cannabis plant
- **malignant** – inclined to do evil
- **mar** – to inflict disfiguring damage

1. How can Wang Lung's prosperity be explained?

2. As O-lan and Wang Lung plan for the birth of their child, in what ways is O-lan like most women; in what ways is she unusual?

3. Characterize O-lan's personality, attitudes, and values.
4. Name several Chinese customs that are evident in the novel. Which of these activities and attitudes are similar to what Americans express and share?

5. What, if anything, is there about Wang Lung and O-lan’s life and marriage that appeals to you?

6. Explain Wang Lung’s thoughts on his silver.

7. In the description of O-lan nursing the baby in the field, what image comes to your mind’s eye?
Chapters 5 – 6

Vocabulary

arduous – strenuous
concubine – a woman who is contracted to a man as a second wife, often having low status and few rights
consternation – paralyzing dismay
haws – fumbles in speech
hoary – ancient; grey or white
maliciously – deliberately spiteful
millstones – stones used to grind grain
mottoes – brief statements
placid – calm

1. As you read these chapters, what pleased you?

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2. What image do you have of Wang Lung’s good luck rituals? Do you believe in the concept of good luck? What, in your opinion, creates success?
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3. The people in the village are now treating Wang Lung in a much different way, especially the gatekeeper. How do you explain their change in attitude?
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4. What changes do you see in Wang Lung? State how your feelings toward him have changed.
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5. What are O-lan’s responses to the following: Wang Lung’s insistence on buying land from The House of Hwang; Wang Lung’s attitude toward O-lan’s second pregnancy; Wang Lung’s desire for O-lan to work in the fields?

6. At this point what is your opinion of O-lan?

7. What is your opinion of the Ancient Mistress and the Old Master?

8. Contrast the way things are run in Wang Lung and O-lan’s household with the way things are run in The House of Hwang. Points of comparison could include attitude toward money, activities, and marriage.

9. What conclusions may be drawn about the House of Hwang?
Chapters 7 – 8

Vocabulary

ardent – strong enthusiasm
berate – to scold
beseeching – begging for
brazen – loud sound
filial – parent-child relationship
lout – an awkward, stupid person
piety – showing reverence
scanty – insufficient
unctuous – insincere earnest

1. Describe your image of Wang Lung’s uncle’s wife.

2. How has Chinese custom influenced Wang Lung’s response to his uncle? If you were in Wang Lung’s position, how would you deal with this uncle? Explain how American custom influenced your response.

3. Explain the foreshadowing at the end of chapter seven.

4. Explain the figurative language in the following description:

“But before sufficient clouds could gather for promise, a bitter wind rose out of the northwest, the acrid wind of the distant desert, and blew the clouds from the sky as one gathers dust from a floor with a broom. And the sky was empty and barren, and the stately sun rose each morning and made its march and set solitary each night. And the moon in its time shone like a lesser sun for clearness.”
5. Wang Lung recognizes his dependence on the earth, yet tells himself that he is determined to succeed despite gods and drought, and buys more land from The House of Hwang. What contradiction do you see between what Wang Lung recognizes and what he tells himself?

6. Given the situation, what do you predict will be the outcome of Wang Lung buying this land?

7. Explain how Buck's description of the villagers coming to Wang Lung and O-lan's house is objective. Find another description that is objective and explain the objectivity.

8. Contrast Wang Lung and O-lan's ability to cope with the difficult circumstances. Points of comparison could be: attitude, knowledge, or strength. Considering your information, how do you explain their differences?

9. Consider O-lan and Wang Lung's reaction to having a female child. What is your opinion of this attitude toward females?

10. Comment on anything that disturbs you in these chapters.
Chapters 9 – 10

Vocabulary

- **allayed** – relieved
- **desponding** – becoming discouraged
- **hoarding** – reserving more than necessary
- **imperturbable** – calm and composed
- **quavered** – trembled
- **respite** – short period of rest
- **retorted** – answered in a quick manner
- **scant** – inadequate

1. By the end of chapter ten, with what hopes are you left?

2. In the narration of the birth of the fourth child, O-lan is described as creeping around the room afterwards, hiding the birth stains as an animal does. How do you react to that statement?

3. How does Buck’s repeated mention of the impenetrable stillness that is everywhere create the atmosphere of this section?
4. Read again the section that tells of the birth, death, and burial of the fourth child. The focus of the narration is Wang Lung's thoughts and feelings about what is happening. What effect does this focus have on you?

5. What details indicate that O-lan killed the fourth child? What details indicate that the uncle has eaten his own children? Do you find these actions to be realistic?

6. What image do you have of the fire wagon?
Chapters 11 – 12

Vocabulary

bumpkin – a country person

caravan – pack of animals

gorge – throat

haranguing – giving a long speech

haughty – scornfully proud

millet – a type of grass

perpetual – lasting forever

1. While reality reports life as it actually is, the comic is often mixed with the sad. Comment on what may be considered comical and what may be sad.

2. What, if anything, intrigues you about the great Chinese city?

3. Give specific details from the chapters to prove the following four statements about Wang Lung: living in the city is disturbing, the job of rickshaw-puller is extremely difficult, he is confused and uncomfortable about what goes on in the city, and ultimately seems to be in a hopeless position.
4. Although O-lan and Wang Lung continue to work together, there are now differences between them. State how O-lan is different from Wang Lung in their approaches to getting things done, their attitudes, and their values.

5. What details in these chapters foreshadow the Boxer Rebellion?

6. Briefly point out the difference between Wang Lung’s sons.

7. Comment on the following description of the wall against which Wang Lung’s hut leans.

“It stretched out long and grey and very high, and against the base the small mat sheds clung like fleas to a dogs back.”
Chapters 13 – 14

Vocabulary

cur – cowardly person; an undesirable dog
downtrodden – oppressed
indifferently – having no interest or concern
leprosous – relating to the disease leprosy
opulence – great abundance
rebuking – punishing; scolding
repose – being at a state of rest
scythe – tool used for cutting
sumptuous – suggesting great expense
thrice – three times

1. Buck provides the reader with contrasting images of wealth and poverty. Find words and images that describe both the rich and poor people on the following points: physical appearance, facial expressions, clothing, food, activities, and homes.

2. List five details that increase Wang Lung’s desperation.

3. In Chapter 14, Wang Lung listens to a group of ragged men who discuss what they would do if they had money. What would they do, and why do they rebuke Wang Lung?

4. They tell Wang Lung that he is ignorant because he does not understand the view that if the rich would share what they have, all have money or food. What do the impoverished men not understand?
5. What do the impoverished men see as the solution to their poverty and oppression? What does Wang Lung see as the solution?

6. What is your opinion of the solution presented here?

7. What action did Wang Lung take? In your opinion, did he go too far?

8. What is your reaction to the practice of forcing men to become soldiers?

9. What is your opinion of O-lan for her willingness to sell her daughter into slavery? What in your cultural background influences your opinion? How might having the Chinese cultural background of this era be influencing Wang Lung and O-lan?

10. Wang Lung is given two pictures, which he puzzles over. What are the pictures? What does Wang Lung's reaction to these pictures suggest to you?

11. What is there about the way Buck reports these activities that lead us to say her style is objective?
Chapters 15 – 16

Vocabulary

agape – with the mouth open
castrated – an animal removed of its sexual organs (testes or ovaries)
contempt – treating someone as inferior
cultivate – to prepare land for crops
furrow – a trench made from a plow
musing – engaging in meditation
proverb – a widespread saying used to express truth or teaching
shrewish – ill-tempered

1. Give examples to prove that Wang Lung is no longer as frugal as he once was. How can this change be explained?

2. What about Wang Lung’s character has stayed the same? Consider the focus of his activities and his relationship with Ching.

3. Explain what is significant about the interaction between O-lan and Wang Lung over the jewels. Do you think Wang Lung was right to take them?
4. What do you learn about the bandits that roamed China at this time?

5. What is your opinion of Cuckoo? Point out details that characterize her.

6. Why does Wang Lung allow O-lan to have the jewels she wanted?
Chapters 17 – 18

Vocabulary

boisterously – loudly
dotard – person experiencing mental deterioration
paltry – lacking worth
pendulous – hanging loosely; swinging
proprietor – an owner of a business
reproach – to express disparagement
subsist – to exist
tendril – structure that supports vine-like plants

1. What in these chapters may be disturbing?

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2. What factors lead to Wang Lung and his sons losing their connection to the land?

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3. Cite incidents or observations from the novel to prove the following statement: at this point, Wang Lung's pride motivates much of his actions.

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4. As a parent, what mistake does Wang Lung make with his second son?

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5. What similarity do you notice between Ching and O-lan?

6. After being angry with O-lan over her lack of beauty, Wang Lung says, “Well, and I will go to the tea shop and see if I can hear anything new. There is nothing in my house except fools, a dotard and two children!” What does he mean? What is your reaction to Wang Lung's comment?

7. At the end of Chapter 18, what does it appear will happen?

8. In your opinion, is Wang Lung in control of the circumstances of his life? What is determining his circumstances?
Chapters 19 – 20

Vocabulary

- comfit – a sugar-coated pastry
- imploringly – urgently begging
- indolent – lazy
- loafers – people who are habitually idle
- prodigally – extravagantly wasteful
- repine – to be discontented; to complain
- slavishly – having the characteristics of a slave
- superintended – supervised

1. What, in your opinion, determines Wang Lung’s decision to have an affair with Lotus?

2. The reader describes Wang Lung’s love affair with Lotus as a sickness. “It was though a man, dying of thirst, drank the salt water of the sea which, though it is water, yet dries his blood into thirst and yet greater thirst so that in the end he dies, maddened by his very drinking. He went in to her and he had his will of her again and again and he came away unsatisfied.” How does Wang Lung’s love affair with Lotus contrast to his relationship with O-lan? Explain Wang Lung’s misery. What resolves this sickness? What is your opinion of the resolution?

3. What does the incident with the pearls suggest to you?
4. What is your response to Wang Lung's uncle? Why does Wang Lung support him?

5. When Wang Lung seethes with anger over having to take in his uncle and his uncle's wife and son, what wisdom does O-lan offer him? In what way does O-lan follow her own advice? What is your opinion of this advice?

6. How do you feel about O-lan?

7. What images do you have of Lotus and her apartment?

8. What is your opinion of Wang Lung's uncle's wife?
Chapters 21 – 22

Vocabulary

betrothed – engaged
harlot – female prostitute
melancholy – gloomy
petulant – peevish
sundered – broken into parts

1. Point out the reason for O-lan’s anger and how she deals with her problem. Why is O-lan’s method effective?

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2. Give several of the reasons that Wang Lung’s love for Lotus cools.

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3. What do you find comical in these chapters?

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4. What wisdom does O-lan offer Wang Lung about the melancholy of their older son? What is Wang Lung’s solution?

5. Cite details to support the following statements: Wang Lung is constantly struggling to find peace in the midst of family conflict, and he is proud as a result of his achievements.

6. What contradictions do you find in Wang Lung’s attitude toward his son?
Chapters 23 – 24

Vocabulary

begrudging – giving with reluctance
fermented – alcohol which is produced by chemical reactions
gaunt – bony
magistrate – a civil officer
marauded – raided
pining – desiring
scampish – like a rascal
tallow – fat from animals or plants

1. What are the causes of Wang Lung’s displays of anger? Do you think his anger is justified? Does he accomplish anything with his rage?

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2. Compare Wang Lung’s response to the locusts and the responses of the other men in his attitude, behavior, and outcome.

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3. What is your opinion of Wang Lung’s oldest son and Wang Lung’s treatment of him?

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4. For which character do you have the most sympathy?

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5. From your own life experiences, what are the common issues Wang Lung deals with that many people share?

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6. Give details to prove that Wang Lung's continued pride is apparent in his changed attitude toward the earth gods.

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Chapters 25 – 26

Vocabulary

- abbot – the superior at a monastery
- acquiescent – without protest
- apprentice – learner of a trade
- distraught – deeply agitated
- dowry – money or items a bride takes to her husband for marriage
- wretch – a miserable or despicable person
- zeal – enthusiastic devotion

1. What detail of Chinese burial and wedding ceremonies are present? What similarities and differences do you see between American and Chinese ceremonies?

2. What other Chinese customs are brought out in these chapters?

3. What about O-lan’s death saddens you?
4. What was Wang Lung’s greatest regret about O-lan?

5. What is your opinion of Wang Lung’s kindness to O-lan as she dies?

6. At this point in the novel, what do you predict the future will hold for each of Wang Lung’s family members?
Chapters 27 – 28

Vocabulary

buxom – healthy, plump figure
dais – a raised platform
dykes – barriers blocking water
eddies – currents of water that move in opposition to the main current
goaded – urged
serf – laborer who works on the land of a lord in return for certain rights
verandas – partially enclosed porch
vigor – enthusiasm

1. Over Wang Lung's lifetime, one of his greatest desires was for peace in his house. What causes the trouble in Wang Lung's house?

2. Compare and contrast the response of Ching and Wang Lung toward an expected flood.

3. Wang Lung's oldest son presents Wang Lung with suggestions for dealing with his uncle and cousin. Evaluate the three suggestions.

5. What is realistic about the story of the magistrate?

6. Do you think Wang Lung should rent the Hwang inner courts?
Chapters 29 – 30

Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>inheritance</td>
<td>land or money that is given after death</td>
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<tr>
<td>lagging</td>
<td>failing</td>
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<tr>
<td>lewdness</td>
<td>lustful; obscene</td>
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<tr>
<td>paltry</td>
<td>lacking worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parsimony</td>
<td>extremely frugal</td>
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<tr>
<td>repented</td>
<td>having felt remorse</td>
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<tr>
<td>stout</td>
<td>fat</td>
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<tr>
<td>unduly</td>
<td>excessively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urn</td>
<td>container used to hold a person’s remains</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1. Support the following statements: Wang Lung and his family have left their old life close to the land, and Wang Lung’s oldest son does not seem to grasp the meaning of his father’s view of their dependence on the land.

2. Give reasons for the following statements: Although Wang Lung yearns for peace, he cannot have peace in his own household, and Wang Lung’s sons manipulate him.

3. Compare the scene of the birth of Wang Lung’s first grandchild with the scene of the birth of his first child. Points of comparison could be the activity in the household, Wang Lung’s response, and the behavior of the woman who is giving birth.
4. What do you find sad in these chapters?

5. What is your opinion of the pride Wang Lung and his sons feel?

6. Compare and contrast the first and the second son of Wang Lung. Identify three points of comparison.
Chapters 31 – 32

Vocabulary

awry – amiss or askew  
coquettishly – in a flirtatious manner  
expenditure – an expense  
horde – a large group; swarm  
implement – tool; equipment  
pertly – boldly  
rapt – enchanted  
uncomely – not keeping with the accepted standards of society  
wench – peasant girl

1. What is your reaction to the situations with Pear Blossom?

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2. In a conversation with his father, the third son says he has dreams and wishes for glory. Describe the importance of these goals and how they relate to his character.

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3. Explain the following figurative language: “in his courts the [the soldiers] poured like evil filthy water, filling every corner and crack…”

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4. Describe your impression of these soldiers in Wang Lung’s courts.

5. Why, again, is Wang Lung unable to find peace in his home?

6. The narrator tells us that Wang Lung was just to all. What is your opinion of this view of Wang Lung?

7. What do you find comical or pleasing in these chapters?
Chapters 33 – 34

Vocabulary

- begrudge – to give with reluctance
- interest – payment for borrowed money
- requited – made repayment
- tenant – occupant
- vaguely – indistinctly

1. What was Wang Lung’s focus during his last years? What is the significance of this focus?

2. What do you see as the significance of the final scene of the novel in which Wang Lung overhears his sons plan to sell land?

3. Why might Pearl Buck’s description of Wang Lung’s relationship with Pear Blossom be described as objective? Consider the novel’s point of view.

4. Do you think Pear Blossom’s relationship with Wang Lung is her choice? What is your opinion of this relationship?
5. What is foreshadowed by the elder son's response to Wang Lung's relationship to Pear Blossom?

6. Why is Wang Lung content with the idea of his own death?

7. During the last years of his life, Wang Lung gets his information about his family from Cuckoo and Pear Blossom. What conclusions can you draw from this fact?

8. Do you think the choices Wang Lung's sons have made in their lives are a result of their own will? Explain.