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The Good Earth (USA 1937)

This film is based on the novel of the same title by Pearl S. Buck (1892-1973), a prominent woman author of the 1930s. Buck was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1931 for this novel and later received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1938, approximately one year after the release of the film version.

Pearl Buck was born in Hillsboro, West Virginia but grew up in China, the daughter of American missionaries. She returned to the United States at the age of 17 for university. Her first husband was also a missionary to China. Buck was fluent in spoken Chinese, but was unable to read the language.

The script for the film adaptation was by Tess Schlesinger, an American woman communist writer with Hollywood connections, also flourishing in the 1930s.

It tells the story of Wang Lung, a simple farmer, and his wife O Lan, a refugee from famine who was sold by her parents into servitude in "the Great House" of a wealthy landlord, where she remained until Wang Lung buys her out as his wife. The story begins without reference to any time or era and the audience is given the impression of an eternal China, an agrarian society where nothing changes.

Through hard work and frugal living, Wang Lung eventually purchase land from a Great House fallen on hard times. He becomes a prosperous middle peasant and O Lan returns proudly to the Great House where she once worked as a low-ranking servant to show off her new baby boy.

Famine eventually forces the family to flee south to a city (Shanghai?). During the flight they are rescued by the arrival of a train, which most of them have never seen before and refer to as a fire god. In the city they are reduced to begging. Finally Wang Lung gets a job as a coolie (a puller of heavy loads) and the Revolution of 1911 breaks out. The peasants do not understand the rhetoric of "China will soon be free," but Wang Lung realizes from a detail in a revolutionist's speech that there has been rain in the north, so the famine will be over eventually. O Lan follows a mob which loots a wealthy household and then witnesses mass executions, at which she herself is almost executed for looting by the soldiers of the newly-established Republic ("Let that be a warning to you. We are Republicans, not bandits"), but in the aftermath of the looting manages to pick up and conceal up a bag of sapphires or diamonds, which are worth more than enough to take them back to the land and buy back their property in the north.

As Wang Lung's sons grow and are educated in modern subjects, he becomes more and more successful, eventually buying the Great House and a concubine, who sends the family into turmoil by having an affair with his youngest son.

Finally, a plague of locusts (Biblical reckoning ?) descends on the area and Wang Lung and his sons lead the fight against them, armed with Western technology and petroleum products. The locusts are driven off and Wang Lung's prosperity protected, but only by the skin of his teeth. This prompts his decision to sell the Great House and his concubine and move back to a small house on the land again, which gratifies the dying O Lan.

Questions:

1. Why is China depicted as timeless?
2. Where do the crowd scenes occur and what do they tell us?
3. How do the natural disasters operate?
4. What things are being said about gender roles and sexuality?
5. What changes might we expect the revolution to bring about?
6. 60 million people viewed this film, including about 30 million in the former Soviet Union under Stalin. What do you think Stalin liked about the film?

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