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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 66

***The Good Earth* Book Review with Dr. Liz
Woodworth and Lt Col Charles Gartland**

Host: Major Erin Davis & Major Charlie Hedden

Guests: Dr. Liz Woodworth and Lt Col Charles Gartland

In this episode, as part of the Great Powers Competition series, Maj Davis and Maj Hedden sit down with Air War College professor Dr. Liz Woodworth and AFJAGS Law Chair Lt Col Charles Gartland to review *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck. *The Good Earth* is a novel set-in early 20th century China and describes the life of Wang Lung, a peasant farmer, and the privations his family overcomes while maintaining their ancestral connections to the land and agriculture.

[Music: Band playing clip of Air Force song]

Introduction

Major Erin Davis:

Hello, everyone, and welcome back to another episode of The Air Force JAG School Podcast. Today we have another book review we are going to be discussing *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck. It was a Pulitzer Prize winner as well as Pearl is a Nobel Prize winner. So with me today, as always, I have my co-host, Charlie Hedden. Major Hedden.

Major Charlie Hedden:

Howdy.

Maj Davis:

I have Lieutenant Colonel Charles Gartland.

Lt Col Charles Gartland:

Hi, Erin. Thanks for having me back.

Maj Davis:

And then we are joined again by Dr. Liz Woodworth.

Dr. Liz Woodworth:

Excited to be here, Erin.

Maj Davis:

She's a professor, of course, at Air War College. So today, again, spoilers—as with all our book reviews, we are going to heavily spoil this book. So if you wanted to read it for yourself and we suggest that you do, you might want to go read it and then come back. But today we are again talking about the good earth And Dr. Woodworth, why are we talking about this one?

China.

Maj Davis:

Yes.

Dr. Woodworth:

China is.

Lt Col Gartland:

And you could end it right there. Yes.

Who is Pearl Buck?

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes. China is on all of our radars in different ways than it has been in the last 40, 50 years. And this is a quintessential book about China, however, written by an American. The interesting thing about Pearl Buck, she, at four months old, was carried to China by her parents and then lived there for several decades. And her book, *The Good Earth*, was published in 1931, went a long way to help Americans better understand China.

Everybody I think understands China was very much a closed country in some ways. And her book really revealed to international reading audience not just Americans the structure of Chinese life and not just imperial life, but the life of a village. And I think it really helped those outside China understand what the true struggles were and allowed us to befriend and help China when it was in need.

And that was that's one of the important things that her book did, raising awareness of a country that people really didn't understand.

Lt Col Gartland:

And go go ahead.

Dr. Woodworth:

And in 1931 and '32, two years in a row, it was a bestseller in the United States. And that was the year—the second year was the one that she won the Pulitzer in '32. And by '38 she had been such a prolific author that they awarded her the Nobel Prize for Literature. The first American woman to win.

And it wasn't just for this book. This is the first of three books that talk specifically about village life. But she also wrote memoir, biographies of her missionary parents. And those were considered masterpieces as well. And she very much after World War II wanted to go back to China. She could not. The Communist Party refused to let her enter the country again.

She was an American imperialist. She very much wanted to go back. Tried to go back with Richard Nixon in 1972. Unfortunately she died in 1973 and she never got back to her beloved China. She was out of China for just a few years in her early life. She left once to go to college in Virginia and she married a man and they both taught at universities around Nanjing, China.

And she came back to the U.S. shortly after she gave birth to her first child. Her husband had a sabbatical. And during his year of sabbatical, while she had a brand new baby, while they were adopting another child, she got her master's degree at Cornell.

Lt Col Gartland:

Whoa.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. And at some point when all of this was happening, she spent her mornings over the course of a year writing *The Good Earth*.

So everybody else handled whatever they needed to handle in the morning. And she would go away to the attic and write. So took about a year to do this. The Nobel Committee said that they were giving this award to her for the notable works which pave the way to human sympathy, passing over widely separated racial boundaries and for the studies of human ideals which are great in living art of portraiture.

The Swedish Academy feels that it acts in harmony, in accord with the aim of Alfred Nobel's dreams for the future.

Lt Col Gartland:

This is one the Academy got right.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes.

Lt Col Gartland:

In my mind, and maybe we'll have some time to discuss later, because there actually was some some pretty trenchant criticism of this book. As a negative criticism of this book.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes, absolutely.

Lt Col Gartland:

And as I read some of those reviews online, I couldn't help but think of the haughty aristocrats described in the book itself.

Dr. Woodworth:

Mm hmm.

Lt Col Gartland:

And I really identified them with a lot of those critics who just really couldn't appreciate the simple the simple life of the former. But more on that later.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah, she actually address some of those criticisms in her acceptance speech in '38, saying that she did not write for artists or other novelists. She wrote. I have been taught, she said, to want to write for these people. The Chinese people that she wrote about. If they are reading their magazines by the million, then I want my stories there rather than in magazines read only by a few.

Lt Col Gartland:

I have to applaud her. I'd like to go back and read that now that you've mentioned it Liz. But I think ... this is a discussion Charlie and I were having before we started recording that unfortunately with a lot of these literary critics and we could do a whole podcast and we won't get a chance to. But with a lot of these literary critics, it seems as though that if it's not ponderous and inscrutable and impenetrable, it simply can't be a good book.

Dr. Woodworth:

Right.

Lt Col Gartland:

And I think in many ways it's really the opposite. I think it's hard to write like this. Anyone can write complicated, incomprehensible gibberish. And that's not what this is. And I think that there are some of the criticisms out there I think are fair. But the writing style, in my opinion, is is not one of them.

[Women Writers](#)

Maj Davis:

Yeah. And I think, too, I mean, especially her contemporaries in the thirties and forties, and it makes me think of Dorothy Parker, Algonquin Roundtable.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes.

Maj Davis:

What a pretentious bunch of jerks that was. Dorothy Parker got a lot of same criticism, I think most women did. I know I read a book review, New York Times, and they were talking about contemporary book reviews in the thirties when she won all the awards and all the male authors were like, I could have thought of 15 male authors who could have got it.

Well, I guess Willa Cather if it had to be a chick and not to knock Willa Cather because she did write a very good book.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah, she's written some wonderful things.

Maj Davis:

Yeah. So I think she was kind of climbing uphill a little bit there, even if she had written a masterpiece, they probably would have criticized her for it. But I also think it's important to make a note here. This is a white woman missionary writing from the perspective of a Chinese man in China.

Lt Col Gartland:

It's a remarkable. Let's take that in for a second.

Maj Davis:

And of course in the 1930s, I know right now, contemporarily in discussions about books, we are having a conversation about identity and who is writing books from the perspective of whom. And there's a lot of discussion about who the voices, who's the author, and who is the voice that they're portraying in the book, and are they trying to represent somebody who is not them and not the experience that they've actually had?

Kind of putting words in the mouths of other people. So we're not really having that discussion today. But I wanted to mention it first because I think it's notable for a lot of different reasons. To say that she is a white woman having this writing from this perspective. But this from I looked it up because I want to see more contemporary art, contemporary like modern day viewpoint was of this book and from the Asian scholars that I took a look at.

It looks like they still consider this book to have a lot of value despite the fact that it was not actually written by a Chinese man. Because in the moment that this was written, most of the writing coming from China was propaganda, it was idealist. It was government writing, and it wasn't novel writing. And she was one of the only people actually writing about accurately the day to day lives of the people living in China.

Lt Col Gartland:

And you can say I should have the freedom to do that.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes.

Maj Davis:

Yes. Because she's not a Chinese citizen.

Lt Col Gartland:

She has the detachment from that culture.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes. And the education.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yeah, right.

Maj Hedden:

The culture she's representing here—that she experienced, I got to think very few women were even allowed to learn and study like she ... to the extent that she did. Like we've already right kind of mentioned off air the fact that she was tutored in Chinese scholastic, I guess, fields, not just in just reading and writing and stories and things like that, as well as playing with other people there.

I think it's very interesting. And I will also point out that for what it's worth. Oprah didn't have a problem with it back in 2004.

Dr. Woodworth:

Ok. Well—what Oprah says ...

Lt Col Gartland:

And really, Oprah got it back in the book clubs, as I understand it. I wasn't I don't recall it back at the time, but that's what I've been reading, it looks like she brought it back into circulation.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. Doesn't her copy ...

Lt Col Gartland:

It says it right on the front ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Oprah's Book Club.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes, it does.

Dr. Woodworth:

And, you know, I think that it's right that she ... this book in particular of all her works kind of comes back because she herself was an advocate for women's rights and the rights of Asian children. She helped found with Oscar Hammerstein.

Lt Col Gartland:

That's an interesting name to drop into this podcast ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Oscar Hammerstein. And I can't remember the other very famous American founded an adoption agency to take care of children who were biracial and therefore had no place in Chinese culture. And so she founded this ... several different organizations to take care of women's rights, children's rights, she wrote widely on Chinese and Asian cultures. And she was truly bilingual in the sense that at four months old, she started living in China and was raised with parents that spoke multiple languages and all around her.

So I think part of my thinking about a white woman who's writing about an ... an Asian book from perspective of an Asian man and his family, she probably more than a lot of authors who attempt that kind of cross-cultural cross-gender writing probably did a better job simply because she had been immersed in that world for so long and really didn't know much else from 1892 in the fall - the year she was born until the thirties.

Lt Col Gartland:

In some ways ...

Dr. Woodworth:

She was in China, she really was of China. So I get the importance of identity in literature now. But there is a time when, for instance, we would never question Charles Dickens writing a novel from the perspective of a woman at the time he was writing.

Maj Davis:

I made the same comparison yesterday, but I said from the point of view of somebody who is experiencing poverty because he was an enormous advocate for poverty in England, and in London specifically. And he wrote, you know, he was never orphaned working for a pickpocket gang.

Dr. Woodworth:

Right.

Maj Davis:

Right. I mean, that's not the same thing as writing from the perspective of somebody who's a different race than you.

Dr. Woodworth:

Right.

Maj Davis:

But, you know ... I think we can have this discussion at another point.

Dr. Woodworth:

Sure.

Maj Davis:

But, I do think it's sometimes you have to take a look at the book in context. I think you have to look at the intentions of the author and their accuracy and what they're trying to do with it. She's not pretending to be a Chinese man. She's not ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Right.

Maj Davis:

... selling this ...

Lt Col Gartland:

Absolutely true.

Maj Davis:

She didn't write something wrong on the cover and pretend that she was a Chinese man writing a book.

Dr. Woodworth:

Right.

Maj Davis:

You know, everyone knew who she was when she wrote it. So I think and I think her intentions because we talked to this, my concern when I started reading this book was how much of this was going to be colored by her personal opinions and her religion because she was a missionary.

And we're going to talk a little bit more about her religion and religion in the book in a little bit. But from what we were able to learn about her, I think she was trying to be as accurate as possible. And I don't think she actually inserted her own perspective on this very much at all.

Lt Col Gartland:

And in a patriarchal society, she was being completely accurate in that sense and writing it from the perspective of a man. And one more thought along the lines of what you were saying before, Liz, in terms of her perspective and why she would be well positioned to mention that she was immersed in that and in Chinese culture from the time you said she was four ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Four Months old.

Lt Col Gartland:

Four months old. So she was living in it. But she was not of it. She was freed from all the trappings of the culture that would have bound so many Chinese, almost all Chinese people, from being able to comment freely on some of these observations. And at the time, so and so and in many regards, I think that she was ideally positioned. It's an odd thing to say, but ideally positioned to be writing from the perspective of a Chinese man.

Dr. Woodworth:

Well, there were no villagers in China who were going to write a successful English novel about their lives at that time. So, you know, in a way, it's a cultural artifact,

Lt Col Gartland:

Right.

Dr. Woodworth:

... that we wouldn't have otherwise.

Maj Davis:

It's almost anthropology in a way.

Dr. Woodworth:

It feels that way.

Lt Col Gartland:

That is that's what especially sort of all the discussion of the Earth.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. Ethnographic sort of observation, very detailed.

Maj Davis:

Because I think she probably wrote about things and details that if it was your daily life, it wouldn't occur to you to write about because it wouldn't be noteworthy to you but to her because she was kind of observing from the outside almost like a documentary or something like it has that lens of like, I'm just here to observe and I'm just writing down what I see.

Lt Col Gartland:

That's the outsider again, the outsider perspective because no peasant in any society, whether we're talking about a European peasant or we're talking about a Chinese peasant, would really find anything remarkable

about this quotidian day to day existence that they had. But it was a remarkable thing to her and certainly was remarkable to the American readers who just devoured this book.

Liz, I forgot was if you mentioned like how many millions of copies or maybe it's millions when we're ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Millions. I'm so glad that we actually mentioned the good earth in part of this initial discussion, because what a fascinating title for a book that by all measures, it is not a good earth.

Lt Col Gartland:

It's very unforgiving.

Dr. Woodworth:

It's very unforgiving. It's it is the earth that causes famine. It is the earth that turns families against each other. It is earth that kills. And yet that is the title of the book. I think that really comes ... it becomes an ironic title almost by the end.

Lt Col Gartland:

It is, absolutely. And that that's one we'll get to later on when we start talking about start talking about wealth.

[The Good Earth Book](#)

Maj Davis:

All right. So without further ado, I was going to tell you all a little bit about what happens in the book so you can follow along with us. Again, this is just super, super brief. I certainly can't get into as much detail as the book probably deserves, but essentially this book takes place in a small Chinese farming community, mostly rice, that seems like and also wheat ... and a couple garlic and a couple other crops, I guess.

Lt Col Gartland:

Basic food stuffs.

Maj Davis:

Basic foodstuffs, very basic. And the main character whose kind of point of view we're with the whole time is Wang Lung. He is a farmer. In the first page, he wakes up and it's his wedding day. He and his father had negotiated to purchase a bride who is a slave in the probably the most wealthy local family's home.

And the rest of the book is basically a story of their lives, except that it's actually just really the story of Wang Lung's life. Because in my opinion, I think people are a little bit of a footnote to Wang Lung, and they really only exist as they reflect upon him. But Wang Lung and Olan have several years of prosperity on their farm.

Thanks to their mutual hard work and dedication to the land. But then after they give birth to a few children and go through a few prosperous years, the entire community is hit by a famine. Wang Lung and Olan have to bring their children and Wang Lung's father to a southern city just to survive. People in the local community are literally trying to eat each other because the famine has gotten so terrible.

So they moved to a southern city where they kind of they live in little bit of what we call like a tent city or homeless area where they put up a reed hut and Olan takes the children and the old father out every day to beg for food and for money. And Wang Lung pulls a rickshaw and they survive. While they're in the city there is civil unrest. Wang Lung is somewhat oblivious to this. He's much more concerned about actual survival of his family, and he doesn't really do much to get to know the other peasants who are kind of sheltering with them. Against this, the wall of a big house belonged to a rich family. But one day there is an uprising and the people break into this house.

They pass the wall to the riches on the other side. And Wang Lung/Olan managed to steal enough of their wealth, coins and jewels to get them back to their farm. They buy more property they buy an ox. And they end up buying property from the family, the rich family, the local area, the Huangs, where Olan was once a slave.

His wife, Olan. They work the land, and they prospered to the point that when Wang Lung actually becomes sort of a larger land owner and he's able to hire other people to work for him, and he eventually just sort of becomes a man of leisure. His sons are able to go to school. They don't have to work the land because they have laborers.

But as a man of leisure, Wang Lung acquires a concubine named Lotus and brings her into their household, which is very dismaying to Olan. And Olan eventually dies. She has complications from the birth of their twins a few years ago. She just says, like her vitals are on fire. I don't know what that means. It sounds awful.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes, yes.

Maj Davis:

It sounds awful. So Olan eventually dies and the family just gets richer and richer, and they end up moving into the Huang's house, the old house where Olan used to work as a slave. And they just sort of are rich and hang out.

Dr. Woodworth:

And a little decadent.

Maj Davis:

And a little decadent.

Lt Col Gartland:

And a little decadent. We will definitely cover that one, since that was actually a really nice summary, Erin, of the whole ...

Maj Davis:

Thank you.

Lt Col Gartland:

Because it is pretty sweeping ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Definitely epic.

Lt Col Gartland:

... as in any one of those events from the time that from the time that Wang purchases land from the landed family in town to their demise with the first great famine, the move to the south, any one of those events is much, much richer in detail.

That's a great summary. Should we pause here for a second just talk about because you mentioned a number of characters there. So, Olan.

Maj Davis:

Yes.

Lt Col Gartland:

Because one thing that struck me in your reprise there, Erin, is that you mentioned that it was their mutual work that brought them that initial prosperity. And I think that's a fair I think that that's actually a fair statement for Olan.

[Olan](#)

Maj Davis:

I did that to advocate for Olan.

Lt Col Gartland:

However. And yes, however and Wang is certainly toward the beginning of the book. He is a very hard worker, and he takes a great pleasure, actually. And what he does, he really derives satisfaction from working the land. But I had an I and I said that I wanted to pause and talk about this simply because it was this was one of the most excruciating literary experiences of my life to read about Olan.

Maj Davis:

Not because it was bad.

Lt Col Gartland:

Not because ... because she ...

Maj Davis:

It was heart wrenching.

Lt Col Gartland:

But yes, it is. It is. She is the absolute embodiment of the utterly selfless wife and mother. She so to put into perspective her selflessness, they had no she didn't have anyone to attend to her when she was giving birth to

the children. And Wang comments on this, her husband said this is that this is unfortunate and I believe even mentioned, hey, isn't there someone who you know who we could bring in here and she had been a slave in the wealthy house and she didn't want to trouble anyone she didn't want to deal with.

And so she goes into their bedroom and gives birth on her own. And in the midst of all of that is still tending to the cooking, goes out and helps him in the fields. She simply is a person with no consideration for herself. And there's a hint in the book that, oh, perhaps that's because she's so because she is she is portrayed as being ... it's odd because she is portrayed as being dull. I don't know that she actually is ...

Maj Davis:

I don't think she is.

Lt Col Gartland:

But she's actually probably the most astute of them all. And so and I know it because I can see both of you, which are just just a waiting to jump in on this because I mean, she's really just such a powerful character, but she's actually successful in everything that she does.

Maj Davis:

She is so resourceful.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes, she is successful in childbirth. She is successful even in her thievery, which was nice that she's a successful beggar, which was absolutely essential for the family. She's successful in assisting her husband out in the field. She is successful in childbirth. Successful in all that she does and even on a number of occasions. It's a it's a fascinating point in the book when which you'll recall during the during the famine, during that first famine that forces them to flee south.

And the desperation has reached such a fever pitch that the villagers storm their house, thinking that they have all of this stored up food, which by that point they didn't. And it is Olan. So there's this there's this mob.

Maj Davis:

Angry mob.

Lt Col Gartland:

Angry men, essentially. And Olan is the one who stands up and not her husband and shames them.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes.

Lt Col Gartland:

And says what you know, how how do you know you know, have you no honor that you should that you could be in our house. And of course, they take a look at her and they're just they're stunned, of course, because here is this woman. And in the Chinese culture at the time, this was not her place.

Dr. Woodworth:

Well, she walked behind her husband as was her place.

Lt Col Gartland:

Walked ... literally trailed behind her husband. So and she is the one who stands up to them. And you see this throughout the book, her decisions and her resourcefulness and Erin, as you say, are life changing.

Maj Davis:

She just sort of silently takes charge. And she so as a child, her family experienced famine and they had been begging. And eventually her parents sold her to this rich family so she could work as a slave in their household and they would get some money for her. So and then she worked for many years as a slave in this household.

So she has a lot of practical skills, possible lot of life experience that she draws on. So she knows right away she's like, no, we have to go south. And then they get there. And then she's like we're going to have to beg and she just like they get back and people have like ransacked their house, even taken the roof off of the reeds.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah.

Maj Davis:

And he says she just she like sits there and she just like and she ... the roof is back on the house.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right.

Maj Davis:

All along she takes charge, you know, she comes into that house and before you know it, it's tidy. There's a fire going, there's new this there's new that. And then she takes such good care of the house and one day, she just kind of shows up in the field and she's like, I don't have anything to do in the house, do you need help out here? And she does all the she works on the land, too.

Dr. Woodworth:

And the description of her working alongside Wang Lung is just joyful.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes.

Dr. Woodworth:

It's beautiful and joyful. From his perspective, he talks about the rhythm of them working together, and he describes how her clothing, she gets so sweaty, the clothing just sticks to her and but she doesn't stop. She works as hard as he does.

Maj Davis:

Until she's literally so pregnant that she's like hey, I'll be right back. She has the baby.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah, okay, we can keep going, let me thresh this wheat. It's, it's crazy.

Maj Davis:

And I think he does her and this is I really started to dislike Wang Lung at this point.

Lt Col Gartland:

Oh, it's because Liz, it's because of that. Because it is a beautiful depiction of peasant husband and wife ...

Maj Davis:

And partnership.

Lt Col Gartland:

... working in synergy ... And then that makes the betrayal.

Dr. Woodworth:

It feels like betrayal.

Lt Col Gartland:

I mean, in my mind, it's a betrayal.

Maj Davis:

I think it's a betrayal to Olan.

Lt Col Gartland:

But it makes the betrayal sting all that much more.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah, I would ... as I've been thinking about this book, I've wondered if Olan is the good earth. She's a metaphor for all good that comes from ...

Lt Col Gartland:

Life springs from her.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. I because I really love what Charlie said right before I started recording. Well, you know the books about her. The book's about Olan. And really, she is the she is the only character who stays true to who she is and exhibits an unbelievable strength and determination throughout everything, even when her vitals are on fire.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right. Charlie - what were you about to say?

Maj Hedden:

Well, I gone back to the passage that you just talked about where they're ... this is one of the first times she's working with him. And she says moving together, you know, in a perfect rhythm without a word. Hour after hour, he fell into a union with her which took the pain from his labor. He had no articulate thought of anything.

There was only this perfect sympathy of movement, of turning this earth of theirs over and over to the sun, this earth which formed their home and fed their bodies and made their gods. And I thought that was, to me, one of the focal points of the book, just symbolically, like the man, the woman, the Earth. And this is the most harmonious, probably that they ever.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes. In in their in their poverty, really, the relative poverty.

Maj Davis:

And it's the way he says it, it's their earth. It's their food, it's their labor. And it does sound it sounds like, oh, like this was and even they mentioned a couple times in the book where he's like, I couldn't have gotten any luckier, you know, in who they gave me as a wife because they specifically asked for a woman who's not pretty.

And but it's you learn, though, over time, Wang Lung just really does not appreciate Olan. I think, is putting it mildly. And he doesn't kind of say this at first because she's pretty quiet. She doesn't really speak a lot. And when she does speak she takes her time in with what she says.

Lt Col Gartland:

It's consequential when she speaks.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes.

Maj Davis:

And he gives he has the impression or the belief that she is not smart. She's kind of dumb. And it astonishes him to find out that she has like conversations with other people in the family and has expressed opinions. So he does not love her. He is very clear about that. But he doesn't I guess he doesn't say this to her.

So they have a young daughter and Olan is going to start binding her feet and Olan makes the comment to the daughter because the daughter is saying, you know, it's painful and Olan says, well, you want your husband to love you because my husband does not and it's because I'm not beautiful. My feet are not bound.

Lt Col Gartland:

It was painful to read and it was even painful ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes.

Lt Col Gartland:

... to Wang to hear the words.

Maj Davis:

But he acts like he just found out the dog could talk.

And he's like, Olan thinks things like that? She noticed?!

Lt Col Gartland:

He repeatedly expresses astonishment about that.

Maj Hedden:

That first time whenever she has this plan for when her son is born and how she's going to go back to this great house where she was a slave. And she describes this to him and he says that's the most words she's ever said at once. And holy cow ... the dog can talk.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah and it happened exactly like that.

Lt Col Gartland:

It was it was prophetic. It was absolutely prophetic because that happened.

Maj Davis:

And I think that he has talked himself into thinking that she is sort of a dullard because he feels guilt that he doesn't love her because there's a scene where in the uprising world, they're in the southern city, they both helped break into this house and they split up and Wang Lung, kind of extorts gold out of a fat rich man who's trying to make an escape and he pretends he's going to hurt him if the guy doesn't give him gold and then they find out after they get home. That Olan, having been a slave in a wealthy household, knows where they hide the good stuff. And she stole a handful of jewels.

That she had smuggled out, like on her body, like in the little bag. And he takes them from her and he has this thought where he's feeling some guilt. And he says, well, she's so dumb she probably just picked them up because she thought that they were beautiful, not because she actually understood what the value of them was.

What were you going to say?

Maj Hedden:

We may have to take this out, but ... the place where she has this bag is in her bosom. Oh, yeah, right. And it's not the only time they talk about her providing for the family.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yeah, there's there there's a very I think probably the most one of those vivid depictions of that that I've that I've actually ever read.

Maj Hedden:

Even while they're starving, she has this newborn and she's able to feed the newborn.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right.

Maj Hedden:

... from herself.

Maj Davis:

Yeah.

Maj Hedden:

And ...

Dr. Woodworth:

It's the good earth.

Maj Hedden:

... more thinking about her as the Earth. That's just another way where not just for her babies, but even for her, for her man, for her family, for her future generations. She provides out of her bosom.

Maj Davis:

Yeah. No, I think that's I think that's. Yeah. So, you know, English class of you to notice.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. That's the end of Grapes of Wrath.

Maj Davis:

Yes. I compare this to Steinbeck. Did you?

Dr. Woodworth:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, it's it's very Steinbeck.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes. Yeah, it's hard. Very.

Dr. Woodworth:

Very hard to read. Very hard to even experience in the comfort of my 21st Century home. Reading it was painful.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes. Yes. In fact, I was talking to Charlie before we started recording here, and, of course, we just we had a previous podcast on Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich with the same esteemed gathering here that one of my favorite podcasts of all time, by the way. For our contributions as far as it goes, but this and that.

And that was so that's the gulag. Yeah. Out in Siberia. So those are all political prisoners for the most part. And they have in a very very difficult life. But this is orders of magnitude worse than that, worse than Solzhenitsyn's depiction of the gulag. So it was hard to read Liz. No doubt.

Dr. Woodworth:

The hardest part, I think was right before they decided to go south. When Olan gives birth to ...

Lt Col Gartland:

A skeleton.

Dr. Woodworth:

Going to be an underweight baby who does not live and Wang Lung is praying please, please, don't you know, hurt my wife, don't hurt my baby. Please don't. This child can't possibly and he said, maybe it won't. Maybe there will be no breath. And he hears because of course, Olan is giving birth by herself alone again in the other room which.

Lt Col Gartland:

Again ... which she did for all, right? For all her children, I believe.

Dr. Woodworth:

And oh, and by the way, cleaned up everything before having her husband enter the room and see his children.

Lt Col Gartland:

And that was after cooking dinner, usually.

Dr. Woodworth:

Right. Made sure people had food. So he hears the very faint cry of the baby, and he thought well, that's it. And then no more noise. And he takes the baby away to bury the dead baby. And the description of how he holds the baby and its little head bobbing around is so horrific.

Maj Davis:

Yeah.

Dr. Woodworth:

And it's just a tiny little skeleton. He takes it outside to bury it, and he sees a hungry dog and he throws a rock at the dog. THWACK doesn't move, and he just lays the baby down and thinks maybe this is for the best, but not before he doesn't see telltale bruises on the baby's neck from adult fingerprints.

Lt Col Gartland:

And to put it in context for the reader, which which anyone can understand when they read this, just to put into perspective the extent of the desperation. The book refers to cannibalism taking place. Yeah.

Dr. Woodworth:

In the village with.

Lt Col Gartland:

With his uncle.

Dr. Woodworth:

His uncle. His uncle is actually filled out physically. Right when when everyone is out. Yeah. He's literally fed by everyone while their family, the children's how have the distended tummies of starvation.

Lt Col Gartland:

Eating dirt. Literally eating dirt.

Dr. Woodworth:

With a little bit of water to make it a slurry to just temporarily fill their bellies will not keep you from dying. Only tiny bits of minerals.

Lt Col Gartland:

I think it surpasses even Grapes of Wrath. Erin, Liz, would you agree?

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. It's I felt that exact same level of discomfort, but I felt this was so much worse.

Maj Davis:

Yeah. Nobody cannibalizes in Steinbeck that I recall.

Lt Col Gartland:

It's just flat out un-American, Erin.

Dr. Woodworth:

I can't. Yeah. I can't remember any cannibals in any Steinbeck's. Emotional cannibalism for sure. But not literally.

Lt Col Gartland:

Not actual cannibals within your own family.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. But the kinds of things that happened during that famine time, I just kept reading and thinking, did I skip this part in high school? Because this is horrifying.

Lt Col Gartland:

It certainly explains Olan's decision finally. She is the one that makes them head south.

Dr. Woodworth:

All of the eating of the the cats, the dogs, the oxen, every piece of grass. They were boiling bark from trees and eating that. All of that leads to this horrifying moment when she has to give birth to this baby who she knows will not live and take her vital life that she needs to give to her children who are ... older/stronger.

Maj Davis:

She's already she's still trying to breastfeed their other daughter. Who is ... the fool.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. Well partly ... she doesn't develop correctly because of the starvation.

Maj Davis:

Yeah.

Dr. Woodworth:

And always has some kind of. Well, I guess you deny food to a baby for long enough, things are not going to go right.

Maj Davis:

Yeah.

Dr. Woodworth:

And clearly that was happening and ...

Maj Davis:

And stunted her development.

Lt Col Gartland:

And she's this enduring reminder throughout the book of those times as they ultimately come into great wealth, at least relative to all of their surroundings. So I think we think we've given the reader a good sense of Olan and her sacrifices and what a remarkable person she was. Any other characters that we should take a moment on?

Obviously we're going to be talking about Wang since he's the centerpiece, he's arguably the centerpiece generally. Right.

[The Huang Family](#)

Dr. Woodworth:

How did you guys feel when you first read about the Huang family. Huang family. The wealthy family. When Wang picks up Olan for the first time and we see the absolute full corruption of a land, a wealthy family who has too much. The mother is an opium addict and can barely function there. They've gone through their wealth.

They're concubines everywhere, and they're they're just they're seedy in their wealth.

Lt Col Gartland:

And they're just really, just really kind of distasteful people. Poor, poor Wang, he goes in to pick up to pick up Olan and he is just met with mockery and derision from from everyone because he's because he is a poor farmer at that time. And and the decadence is incredible and it and it only it continues to descend.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah.

Lt Col Gartland:

Into into the abyss as the book goes on.

Dr. Woodworth:

And he keeps going through these courtyards and these courtyards. And you can just imagine the elaborate decor and room after room. And I think it's such a fascinating bookend to where the family ends up.

Maj Davis:

Yeah. And the rich son.

Dr. Woodworth:

And the same thing happens at the end to his sons.

Maj Hedden:

I think this is them being separate from the earth. These houses, this town. Right. Is not made of clay. The passage I read earlier about them tilling the ground goes on to say something about this is, you know. Well, it said it in that passage. And this is where there's this earth provided their home, literally right clay walls of these houses except when you get into town.

And then you have these reptiles, you have wood, you have pillars, you have courtyards and courtyards, and the picture there of being this distance from the earth is a picture of your distance from health, from harmony, from you know, virtue.

Dr. Woodworth:

The gods themselves they worshiped were formed with clay and lived in a little handmade hut. And they would redress those little gods every year and prop them up with new clay arms and heads. And the idea I think that's really hitting an important note. The further they get from being connected to the good Earth, the harder it is to retain their health and mental wellness.

Maj Hedden:

And I think another point on that is that the Huang family and then later even Wang Lung. They own plenty. They have access to lots of plots of land. Right. But it does that doesn't save them being there because they're still disconnected. That's not them working it, feeling it, walking through it and working with it. It's just them extorting it.

Lt Col Gartland:

It's a really another one of these themes that transcends culture and transcends time. You see it all throughout history. That there are these certain individuals who acquire wealth from the land because of the wealth that they've acquired from the land. They develop power and the ability, the wherewithal, economic wherewithal to be able to acquire things. And that in turn enables them to such as what happened with Wang here.

He's now a moneylender. He can charge interest to people. And so this wealth accumulates that is a product of the land, but transmutes now into a wealth that is disconnected from the land, even though it owes its origins to the land and so now this person who has derived everything originally from the land is disconnected from it and ceases to know it and you see Wang throughout the book go being with being literally being in the land, moving away from it, and then ultimately coming back to it.

And you see that oscillation all throughout the book.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah, it's like losing a tether, an important tether to your soul. When you're disconnected from the land. And Olan, when she's not there, when she's not considered - it's like you've severed the tie.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right, right. It's really, I mean, something that's marked all civilizations that Jeffersonian Agrarism. Jefferson wondered in his writings, could America remain a vibrant democracy once it became an industrial an industrialized nation? Because of because of because of the social ills and all of the unintended consequences of wealth originally produced by the land.

Maj Davis:

Yeah, I could think of a lot of distasteful social consequences of American agrarianism in Jefferson's time.

Lt Col Gartland:

Sure. Oh, for sure. Sure. Absolutely. And in all fairness, right? Not as but to the extent that there is something bad that happens ... Well, actually, Erin, now that you say it, that's actually a great point because of course, Jefferson's wealth was in large part based on the land.

But of course of of slave of the slave labor that worked it.

And he became, in a sense, very detached from his own land also. So that's that's interesting because he was one of these landed aristocrats, one of these landed aristocrats that had moments in his life, which he actually recognized in his writings where he plunged into a bit of this decadence. And of course, now we know there's this historical consensus, but he probably had out of wedlock child with one of his slaves, which takes us right back to the good to the good earth.

Dr. Woodworth:

And the concubines.

Maj Davis:

And just a kind of an author note. Her husband, who she lived in China with, was an agricultural economist.

Lt Col Gartland:

An agronomist.

Maj Davis:

Yeah. So he definitely I think that's one of the probably one of the reasons that she focuses so much on the land in farming is because I think they're probably pretty immersed in it in their personal lives

So again, speaking a little bit about China in this moment in history, right where I, you know, Pearl Buck and her husband were living and where WangLung, where this is set, the book is a little vague about details. Wang Lung is really not tuned in to the goings on in Beijing or in any right.

Lt Col Gartland:

Which is part of the point and you are kind of left to wonder by the end of it to what to what degree is it actually advantageous to have all this knowledge of world events.

Dr. Woodworth:

Agree.

Maj Davis:

Right. Oh, and it's so interesting because he certainly he doesn't live his life in consideration at all of what's going on in the government or in the country at large.

Lt Col Gartland:

He's oblivious.

Maj Davis:

Yeah. We know he moved to the south and he does he's like foreigners and he's like, oh, I'm a foreigner. And then he's like, oh, no, wait. I guess I'm Chinese. And he's so detached from it. Except that obviously it influences the entire existence that he lives.

Dr. Woodworth:

Hmm.

Maj Davis:

What were you going to say Charlie?

Maj Hedden:

Well, I was going to say that along those lines, he talks about war at one point, like I would talk about a meteor shower. It's like, you know, I've heard of those, but there's just never been one very close to me. And that would be cool to see one up close one day.

Lt Col Gartland:

And ultimately, he does have a son who actually joins the military and Wang is just aghast at this prospect.

Maj Davis:

Because it's kind of like low class of him to join the military. It's not out of there certainly isn't any patriotism.

Lt Col Gartland:

No, no. In fact, he actually very explicitly the son says he just wants to he just wants to see something different and get away. And and that is a that certainly has been a motivation throughout time for people going into the military. Yeah.

Maj Hedden:

Well, there was conscription, like active conscription in the book to the point where Wang Lung works nights to avoid it for a while.

Lt Col Gartland:

To avoid all.

Maj Davis:

Literally grabbing people off of the street and shoving them into a cart.

Maj Hedden:

Right. So especially from that perspective of Wang Lung like this was this it was you could get shanghaied into the military when I was coming up. And now you want to go do that, which I think brings me to a point I think I would like to piggyback on something Colonel Gartland said about wealth and the generational part of it is that another byproduct of this wealth we see that transcends cultures all over the place is this idea that this family that has worked so hard to build this wealth ends up using that wealth to protect their the next generation from the very things that equipped them to reach these heights in the first place. So that whenever it gets to this next generation, they are ill equipped. They're soft.

They're soft and spoiled and detached and ungrateful. And they have no idea what any of this means. And it can't because they didn't build it. And that you see across time and culture and history everywhere that this second, third, fourth generations just aren't capable of what that founding generation did.

The End**Dr. Woodworth:**

Did you get to the end of the book, Charlie, and think, oh, that can't be it, there's another page. Because the ending just solidifies exactly what you were saying about the father being very old and almost. Yeah, almost ludicrous in the eyes of his children. And he's very upset in the last few pages of the book. You can't sell the land.

You can't sell. But I hear you talking about selling the land. That's crazy. And and they say, No, no, Father, we're not going to sell the land. But the last moment he's ... they're between him, they've calmed him down and the sons, look at each other like, yeah, we're totally selling the land. And, and and I thought, oh, that oh, that's horrible because the good earth is now gone.

Lt Col Gartland:

It is ...

Dr. Woodworth:

It is ...

Lt Col Gartland:

... depressingly realistic arguably ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Absolutely.

Lt Col Gartland:

... but enormously unsatisfying.

Maj Davis:

Yes.

Dr. Woodworth:

felt like as a reader, what after all this you're going to take me from the land? I can't even in my mind, go back to that. I have to live with this knowledge. It was I clearly didn't remember the book from high school. But did you have that feeling at the end, like, oh, this is so typical of ungrateful children.

Maj Hedden:

And you could see it coming a mile away.

Lt Col Gartland:

Oh, yeah.

Dr. Woodworth:

Oh, yeah.

Maj Hedden:

The ... when they start describing the last third of the book is a lot about the personalities of his, especially his oldest two sons and their differences and their differences from him. And you can just begin to see it coming that they only appreciate this land for what it can buy them.

One from a very stingy perspective and one from a very.

Lt Col Gartland:

That's right.

Maj Hedden:

Willing to spend on image and nice things but but both of them, it just it's all it is it's asset generation and.

Dr. Woodworth:

They're untethered from the land finally.

Maj Hedden:

Right.

Dr. Woodworth:

And Wang Lung's going to die and he'll have no idea.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yeah. It's a full and this is this is your description, by the way, as the reader knows, not mine, but Charlie's from before we started recording. But you mentioned that essentially the cycle the cycle had to come the earth, the earthen cycle had come 360 degrees because we had the Lungs and there decadence and the collapse in their family the greatest landowners in the town with Wang acquiring I think all their property almost toward I mean to include the mansion, right?

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah.

Lt Col Gartland:

All of their land to include the mansion. The Wong, the patriarch, had become completely alienated from his family, just consumed with his concubines and all and all of his other pleasures. And not really aware of all the money that was being squandered and as, as their family collapses. And then Wang's family ultimately takes over even that estate.

And now he has sons just like the Lord who had previously occupied that area. And his sons are completely disconnected from the land and never really worked the land at all. Erin, you had mentioned, as we started talking about that, some historical context here to kind of put this kind of put a bit of perspective on it.

And as you said, it's a vague as you go. This is not a political treatise. Certainly there's there is much in here that is the product of what's going on politically in China. And to your introductory comments, Liz, on why it is that we're reading this near War College and if I could if I could sum it up, I would say that we're reading this for appreciation on great power competition and strategic competition because the China that we have today as a strategic competitor was ultimately forged from all of the tumult that is taking place in this book.

So as Erin said there aren't very many definite historical markers. We just can kind of vaguely make out what's happening at that time. The one that we could really pin down would be when when the family moved down to I believe it was Nanchang. So the large city in the south, and there is this upheaval of the citizenry and there's an army that marches in and that appears to be, from what I've read online and from what you can gather from the historical timeline, that that was the 1911 revolution that finally spelled the demise of the QING, Q-I-N-G of the QING dynasty.

So that was the end of 2000 plus years of Imperial China to put in perspective the momentous occasion of what's happening here. So essentially at this period in time in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion and the Opium Wars, from the, from the 18, from the 1800s, there's a significant amount of foreign intervention within China.

Dr. Woodworth:

The hundred years of ...

Lt Col Gartland:

A hundred years.

Dr. Woodworth:

... of depression. Yes.

Lt Col Gartland:

You had the protest, you had the British, the introduction of opium that that the Brits were cultivating in India. It's used as a way to pay the Chinese for, for various goods that are being exported. So this starts to open up China to the outside world, but it induces this epidemic of opium addiction domestically, opium being, and don't have time to elaborate on it here.

But opium is actually a motif of this of this book. I mean, it's a recurring kind of recurring recurring phenomena that shows up with a number of people. And it is clearly a sign, at least in my mind, clearly a sign of decadence and also, again, of not having any bearing with concrete. Concrete reality ...

Maj Davis:

Almost a sign of like villainy.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes.

Maj Davis:

Or evil.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes. For sure.

Maj Davis:

Right. It's like the more like maybe not the most probably the worst character is the nephew who's like a rapist.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right.

Maj Davis:

But his uncle's family, his uncle and the wife, the rich Lord's wife, they're all opium addicts. And it's to the fact, to the extent that they, Olah, or Wang Lung and his eldest son, who doesn't have a name they used as a weapon against them where they get them hooked on opium to because they're kind of a pain.

Lt Col Gartland:

Very shrewd.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yes.

Maj Davis:

Yeah. It's very it's very calculated. I was like, oh, are they really going to do that? And they did.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah.

Lt Col Gartland:

And it worked.

Maj Davis:

It did work.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yeah. And it worked. So you have the introduction of opium. The Chinese market is open to the outside world. And then in 1911, the Qing dynasty collapses. And in its aftermath, you just have this welter of competing factions. You have a period where the nationalists are actually aligned with a surging with a surging Communist Party. Now, that and that takes me to one of the other definite historical markers here, which of course is the publication of the book and so I believe is 1931.

Yeah you said Liz so this is before Mao has actually gained full steam.

Dr. Woodworth:

That's right.

Lt Col Gartland:

Before the long march. But, at this time you nonetheless have this, this jostling for influence and control within China between the Nationalist Party and expelling the Japanese and expelling all of the European colonial powers. And so you don't, you don't really get any explicit references to that in the book, but when it repeatedly refers to armies and distant battles and then that one milestone that we have down in Nanchang which appears to be again the 1911 revolution, you get a sense for kind of this boiling cauldron of what's about to come and it doesn't really fully burst forth here, but it's right on the precipice.

And so that is the relevance of the book. Now that just ultimately wound up producing Mao and the Communist Revolution

Dr. Woodworth:

And Chiang Kai-Shek and now we have China and Taiwan.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right.

Dr. Woodworth:

And it comes from this era of history in which she lived in China.

Lt Col Gartland:

She was there.

Dr. Woodworth:

She was there for all of that. In fact, she had to - she and her family had to evacuate before the conquering armies. They had to leave.

Maj Hedden:

And there was and that's ...

Lt Col Gartland:

Yeah, that that's interesting you say that because there was a slight taste of that when they were in the southern city. There was this rice kitchen. We'd call it a soup kitchen. It was really a rice kitchen system where everyone would go. And it's this remarkable thing to Wang Lung and his family, of course, because they had just emerged from this famine, they were compelled to go south on a train, incidentally, which was a what was it called in the book?

Dr. Woodworth:

A fire dragon? A rail dragon. It was ...

Lt Col Gartland:

Yeah ... something along those lines because he'd only heard of trains ...

Dr. Woodworth:

Right, they'd never seen a train.

Lt Col Gartland:

He'd never actually seen one. And so that's really just a kind of an apocalypse event for him family to be on the train going south. But at any rate, these rice kitchens appears as though it's run by missionaries is the sense that I get from it. So of course, yeah, this is something where she has experience, right? Of of Pearl Buck.

And there's also this sense that the foreigners who they see there and there are a couple of instances where Wang is transporting on a rickshaw and I don't know that it said it was an American woman. It was a white woman.

Dr. Woodworth:

It was a white woman, for sure. And it was stunning.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right.

Dr. Woodworth:

What is this evil oh, yeah. I've never seen anything like.

Maj Davis:

Well, he says it because he he takes her in the rickshaw and he yells out to another guy in Chinese. He's like, What is this?

Lt Col Gartland:

Ha.

Maj Davis:

And that was an American woman. They're like, get all the money you can out of her.

Lt Col Gartland:

Because they always pay too much, and they don't know the value of silver. I believe was the line in the book.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah, which was so great.

Lt Col Gartland:

You get you get a sense of this growing distaste among the Chinese populace for all of these foreign powers who had intervened in their country and brought about the scourge of opium etcetera.

Maj Davis:

And there is a part where he is out and about in the southern city and someone hands him a tract. And there's a Chinese man who is speaking in front of, I think in some sort of like city square. And the theme of it, I remember thinking, oh, communism is happening because the theme of what he was saying was, you know, the rich have gotten too rich.

And the wealth has to come back down to the people and the hubbub at the camp where they lived, the kind of homeless camp is all these men saying, well, you know, the rich are going to have to give up that wealth someday. And if I were rich, I would do this. And Wang Lung in his earthly innocence is like, well, I would just buy more land. And they're like.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yeah.

Maj Davis:

You farmers ...

Dr. Woodworth:

You fool!

Maj Davis:

You farmers in your land.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah.

Maj Davis:

You don't even know what you could do with all this money. And I mean, they eventually get that money and they do, of course, go back to the land. But it's definitely you can feel the unrest in the city. And there's literally a rebellion and there's literally conscription happening. And I remember I remember wondering what moment in time we were because I was like, I feel like this is you can feel the seeds of communism is being planted.

Lt Col Gartland:

Yes.

Dr. Woodworth:

Very much.

Lt Col Gartland:

It's a great depiction, actually, of revolution because in that scene when Wang when all of the people in the shantytown are storming or storming the mansion, the way that it's described in the book, it is as if Wang is just carried in.

Dr. Woodworth:

He's squished by this crowd.

Lt Col Gartland:

In other words, and he is in the currents of revolution.

Dr. Woodworth:

And he can't get out.

Lt Col Gartland:

He's splashed. He can't get out, and he is just splashed into this house where now he has an opportunity to change his his life in the midst. And it is change in part because the astuteness of Olan, at the time who kind of has enough wits about her to realize that this is that this is this.

Maj Davis:

This is their moment.

Lt Col Gartland:

This is their moment.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. It's really shocking to think about the trajectory of the whole book and the comment on human hubris that you can own land. That you can own land.

Maj Davis:

You can't make it give you food.

Dr. Woodworth:

Right. Right. And that that is the thing that counts. It's not the thing that counts. And it's not the wealth the thing that counts. It is that moment where they're working the land together, where there's human harmony and human connection that's what really counts.

Maj Davis:

Well, that's where they're the most really the most prosperous.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah.

Maj Davis:

In their moment when they didn't have the money. And that's when the land is the most fertile for them is when they're working in that harmony together.

Dr. Woodworth:

Yeah. And then it's gone, and they don't get it back. And there is no political party. There's no amount of wealth, there's no amount of land, there's no amount of concubines.

Lt Col Gartland:

Right.

Dr. Woodworth:

That can bring back.

Lt Col Gartland:

That's right.

Dr. Woodworth:

Those moments of contentedness and they never get that again.

Lt Col Gartland:

It was within them.

Dr. Woodworth:

It was within them.

Lt Col Gartland:

The happiness.

Dr. Woodworth:

Within those moments. And yet the Earth doesn't cooperate. It's not a human error.

Maj Hedden:

Well, and they're.

Dr. Woodworth:

That causes the famine.

Maj Hedden:

Right. The only effort to harness nature to do what they want is the system of dikes. And there's the one episode which is the only explicit discussion of actual politics in the book, really, where the community members know that these dikes are about to burst. They need reinforcement. So they pool their money. They give them to a local magistrate who's never seen this much money.

And he basically absconds with it, just he just embezzled all of it. And he doesn't fix the levees and they just keep breaking. And he it's this corruption.

Lt Col Gartland:

He is one of these corrupt government officials that Mao was was decrying later on to rally rally the peasantry. Well, I think that we've we have we've given a pretty, pretty, pretty, pretty resounding, pretty resounding summary here of the main characters and the incredible sweep of material that's covered in the book. How about we maybe finish off with one final thought.

Final Thoughts

Maj Davis:

Yeah. So actually, Charlie, do you want to finish off talking a little bit about religion and the Taoist kind of mindset? Because I think that's really the bow on this. I think that's maybe what the underlying ...

Maj Hedden:

Yeah, a little bit because religion throughout it is kind of benign. And we've talked a little bit about their relationship to these clay gods but nobody is apparently very devout. They go to them when they need something or when there's a big event, light a little incense. But other than that, they don't they don't really come up and then there's another there's another God, that's not the Earth God. There's this weather God that he occasionally curses because there's not enough rain or there's too much rain.

And so that's you know, that's a lot of the the actual religion, formal religion that's in there. But I thought it was pretty fascinating to think about from the perspective of the author because she has been mentioned a Presbyterian missionary at first, and she was kind of important for something stateside that had to do with the foreign mission work that she was a part of.

And that's in the big part. The big story is this fundamentalist modernist controversy within the American Western Protestant church and she, you know, played a not insignificant role in that because she was this missionary who had been there and done the work. And then she ended up kind of coming out against how Americans had been doing it, how they had is these are my words, but essentially decrying how American missionaries were condescending.

They were they were kind of rude and uncharitable to the people they were supposed to be ministering to rather than helping them with the things that they needed. I think the way that she puts this in the book is Wang Lung comes home with this Christian tract that's got a picture of Jesus Christ on it on the ground.

Lt Col Gartland:

Oh, right.

Maj Hedden:

He has he has no idea what this is, who this is or what it's for. And so his wife uses it to fix a shoe and like Erin pointed out in one of our earlier discussions, you know, that's a real cool picture of of this disconnect where what they needed was something to fix their shoes. And that then ends up being her her message here. But she didn't denounce her faith, just how her denomination and other great Western denominations were sending missionaries to these other countries, essentially trying to westernize the people, Americanized, Christianized the people, rather than respecting the cultures that they were already in their own languages and their own practices and traditions and things like that.

And and so I think that that finds its way into the book. And also, I, I can't help but think that this was on her mind when she's writing the whole thing in the book of Genesis after Adam and Eve have sinned, and God is pronouncing His curse on them, the way he says it to Adam is thorns in thistles the Earth will yield for you and you will eat the plants of the field by the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread until you return to the ground because out of it, were you taken for dust you are, and into dust you shall return. And I think she made this epic out of that curse.

Lt Col Gartland:

And Charlie, I cannot end it any better than that. So I think you've taken it. Right there - I mean, obviously that had to be I mean, based on her her formation, her faith formation and the title of the book that very clearly is is one of the overriding themes.

No doubt about it. So to all the audience, if you want to understand the development of the communist revolution, and also want a great story with some pretty powerful meditations on wealth, agrarianism, love and drug addiction, among other topics ...

Dr. Woodworth:

The will to survive.

Lt Col Gartland:

The will to survive. This is a great this is a great, great book to read.

Maj Davis:

All right. Well, I think we'll wrap it up there again, Dr. Woodworth, Colonel Gartland, thank you so much for joining me and Charlie today to talk about this book. It's probably our last one that Charlie and I are going to be doing because everybody's about to PCS out of here, our last book review. So thank you again so much for sitting down and talking about this stuff with us. We really had such a good time talking about it.

Lt Col Gartland:

Thank you Liz. Thank you, Charlie and Erin. Thanks for all your efforts over the last two years.

Maj Hedden:

You bet. Thank you, sir. Thank you, ma'am.

Announcer:

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Glossary

- **AFJAG:** Air Force Judge Advocate General
- **JAG:** Judge Advocate General
- **PCS:** Permanent Change of Station