Pearl Buck In China

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think of Pearl Buck's parents? How was it, for instance, that women had no souls, according to his beliefs?

2. Why, emerging from childhood, had Pearl developed such an abiding faith in the power of fiction? How might her childhood experiences have drawn her to read—and re-read—Charles Dickens. What would she have found so appealing in Dickens?

3. Why was Buck critical of the missionary zeal of the Christians who, like her father, worked in China? What did she observe in their treatment of the Chinese?

4. Buck's light-colored hair and gray-green eyes made her a stand-out in China. Her appearance was shocking to Chinese. How would you react to the constant stares—always made to feel different, even freakish? Nonetheless, despite the fact that she was caucasian, she still felt more comfortable in China than in the U.S. Why?

5. Talk about Pearl's marriage to John Lossing Buck. What was the initial attraction and what were the stress points? What were the reasons for its ultimate failure?

6. What do you make of Buck's decision to take her daughter to New Jersey—and leave her there while she returned to Nanjing?

7. In what way do Pearl Buck's experiences of China correlate to her novels?

8. What are the qualities, according to Spurling, that make Pearl Buck such a stirring writer? If you have read works by Buck, how would you describe her qualities as a writer?

9. Talk about the descriptions of Chinese rural poverty. What observations struck you most powerfully?

10. What was America's racial attitudes toward the Chinese, and how were those attitudes put into practice in the U.S.? What was Buck's role in challenging a discriminatory legal system?

11. Describe China's patriarchal culture, especially how wives were treated, as well as the attitudes regarding female babies. Does that cultural bent exist today?

12. What happened to Buck's career, and life, after she moved back to the U.S.,
especially her involvement with Theodore Harris? What does Spurling mean when she says that Buck began writing on an "industrial scale"?

13. How was Buck's treated in the U.S. at the height of the anti-communist scare? How did the Chinese also feel about Buck? What's the irony here?

14. What did you learn from this book about Chinese culture and about Pearl S. Buck? Does this biography inspire you to read any...or more...of her books?

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