

Dragon Seed Short Guide

Dragon Seed by Pearl S. Buck

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Characters

Ling Tan, who loves the earth as much as Wang Lung of *The Good Earth* (1931), lives in a village outside of Nanking and has three sons (Lao Ta, Lao Er, and Lao San) and two daughters, one of whom is married to the merchant Wu Lien. The Japanese invasion of China is only a rumor until Wu Lien's shop is hit by a bomb and he has to seek refuge at his father-in-law's house. Lao San, the youngest son who is sexually abused by the lust-crazed Japanese soldiers, becomes a ruthless guerrilla fighter until he is tempered by meeting the bright, beautiful and well-educated Mayli, who agrees to return to the hills to await him.

Four years of atrocity and sadness pass, and the narrative resumes at the time of Ling Tan's sixtieth birthday. He has neither the inclination nor the money to hold a celebration. His youngest son is far away in unoccupied territory and his oldest son is in and out of the hills. He ceases even to take joy in the land. "All men are evil," he tells his second son. Then one day this son takes him to the city where he hears the joyous news that England and the United States are about to join the war effort. Out of his weariness, Ling Tan feels slow tears come into his eyes, the first tears he has shed since the terrible nightmare of the Japanese invasion began.



Social Concerns/Themes

Dragon Seed champions the need for more active support of China as the Chinese recoil from the horrors of the Japanese invasion early in World War II. Its major theme is the outrageousness of man's inhumanity to man in wartime. Men of peace and sense, reasons the protagonist Ling Tan, in all parts of the world should band together and forbid life to all who would make war. If a child is observed to demonstrate the potential aggression of war, he should be isolated and treated, and then, if unteachable, locked up. If men had been born for warfare, they would have been made with shells as turtles have, into which they could retreat when threatened. A man who is honorable should feel sickened and angry at the thought of war.

Since, however, the Chinese peasants are being plagued by these brutal "Ocean little dwarfs" who, it is hinted, "fear a little" the great nation called America, then America should join the war effort to help liberate them of the menace. To this end, the Japanese are portrayed in all the savagery that war engenders; they kill Wu Lien's obese old mother "like a pig stuck for butchering" and they sodomize Ling Tan's youngest son, forcing his father to behold the gruesome violation.



Techniques

Sometime after winning the Nobel Prize, Buck broke away from the objectivity she had formerly viewed as a sacred literary precept, and didacticism became the dominant feature of her work. *Dragon Seed* is pure and simple propaganda, albeit for a noble cause. In addition, the plot is marred by the improbable Hollywood-style appearance of Mayli to save the day for the sexually humiliated Lao San. According to Paul Doyle, however, the style employed in *Dragon Seed* harks felicitously back to the "folk poetic" medium that Buck employed so deftly in *The Good Earth*. But whatever its failings, readers did not seem to mind.

Dragon Seed sold 400,000 copies in its original edition and was the third bestselling fiction title for 1942.

Adaptations

The 1944 movie adaptation of *Dragon Seed* was directed by Jack Conway and Harold S. Bucquet, and some critics conceded that it offered occasional moments of gripping suspense. While qualifying that its subject matter compensated for some of its shortcomings, James Agee called *Dragon Seed* an "unimaginably bad movie . . . full of wrong slants," and faults Buck's pseudo-Biblical dialogue (e.g., "The wind has brought the rain" instead of "it's raining"). He did not like the "unearthly sepia-tinted landscapes" with their phony terraces nor did he like the fact that its stars — Katherine Hepburn, Walter Huston, and Aline MacMahon — are all so unmistakably Caucasian.

Literary Precedents

As propaganda designed to enlist the sympathy of Americans for the plight of the Chinese at the hands of the Japanese, *Dragon Seed* belongs to a long tradition of ulteriorly motivated fiction dating from the doctrinaire religious allegory of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) up to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-1852) and the works of the American muckrakers such as Samuel Hopkins Adams and Upton Sinclair.

Many of the authors that Buck read and loved as a child wrote politicized novels. Dickens, for example, was concerned about the horrors of industrial society in *Hard Times* (1854), and Zola offered a mighty plea for social reform in *Germinal* (1885) by describing the bitter sufferings of workers in the French mines.



Related Titles

A sequel to *Dragon Seed*, *The Promise*, appeared in 1943. The sequel chronicles the Chinese campaign in Burma. Lao San, renamed Sheng, is one of the leaders who takes his men to Burma in order to aid the British forces there.

Mayli accompanies him as the head of a corps of nurses. Although the Chinese troops fight courageously, most of them perish because of a tactical error made by the British. Sheng survives, but he is bitterly disappointed in the Allies, who apparently refuse to treat the Chinese as real allies.



Copyright Information

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