

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN *THE GOOD EARTH*

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GOH VERN JAN

Approval Form

This research paper attached hereto, entitled “Social Construction of Gender in *The Good Earth*” prepared and submitted by Goh Vern Jan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) English Language, is hereby accepted.

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Abstract

The construction of gender in terms of masculinity and femininity in *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck is examined based on the social constructionist theory. Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity are social constructs which are shaped by Confucian culture. The portrayal of both characters is also influenced by the author's background. The qualitative methods used in this study include close reading, thematic analysis and biographical analysis. To begin with, Wang Lung's masculinity is molded by his father and Confucian culture. Feudalism also influences his appreciation of sons, concubines and bound feet. Similarly, Confucianism and feudal norms construct O-lan's femininity. Her parents and the mistress of the House of Hwang shape her beliefs of women's responsibilities in a Confucian culture. Furthermore, Wang Lung and O-lan are depicted based on the author's parents. Buck's father was oppressive while Buck's mother was submissive. This study is carried out as there seems to be relatively little research which employed the social constructionist theory to examine gender in *The Good Earth*. For further research, this theory can be used to study the element of superstition. On the whole, Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity result from the Confucian culture instead of biological sources.

Declaration

I declare that the material contained in this paper is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“ . . . the husband is the master of the household. . . . the husband is to be firm,
the wife soft; conjugal affections follow from this. Listen carefully to
and obey whatever your husband tells you.”

(Song, ca. 800 C.E./1999, p. 5)

The quote above is derived from *Analects for Women* (女论语) which was written by Confucian scholar Song Ruozhao or 宋若照 (Song, ca. 800 C.E./1999, p. 1). This book was produced after the Tang dynasty to bound Confucian ethics more tightly around Chinese women (Ma, 2004, p. 15). According to Ma (2004, p. 15), the Chinese patriarchy utilised it to justify the repression of women and to regulate women's behaviour. Based on this quote, one can conclude that men and women have specific roles in a traditional Confucian society. Men are of a higher authority and status. Women, on the other hand, are expected to behave submissively. They occupy a very low position in the social hierarchy.

The Good Earth is set in a traditional Confucian society in pre-Communist China where faithfulness to the patriarchal system is the core value (Buck, 1966). The story takes place in the Anhwei province and follows the life of Wang Lung who is a Chinese farmer. It begins with the day of his marriage to O-lan and ends with his days of old age. It is a story full of human warmth and told by a novelist who knows the human spirit as intimately as she knows the eventful peasant-life of China.

Pearl S. Buck was born in 1892 in Hillsboro, West Virginia (Esplin, 2005, p. 14). Her missionary parents brought her to China when she was a child. Buck lived in two distinct worlds: “the small white clean Presbyterian American world of [her] parents and the big loving merry not-so-clean Chinese world” (Conn, 1998, p. 24). Consequently, she grew up a bilingual. Buck then attended Randolph-Macon Women’s College in Virginia. She left China permanently in 1934 (Esplin, 2005, p. 15). She wrote dozens of novels which include *East Wind*, *West Wind* and *Imperial Woman*. Buck died of lung cancer in 1973.

Statement of Problem

In *The Good Earth*, gender is a social construct which is dependent on Confucian culture. This culture plays a major role in shaping Wang Lung’s masculinity and O-lan’s femininity. Ferree, Lorber and Hess (2000, p. 5) stated that gender is an ongoing product of daily social practice. Men and women are typically geared towards behaving in particular ways by their society and culture. They are socialized to become people who are socially accepted (Edwards, 2006, p. 105). The same applies to Wang Lung and O-lan. Their mannerisms are inevitably constructed by their culture which advocates Confucian teachings.

This study will examine gender in terms of masculinity and femininity from a social constructionist perspective. According to Burr (2003, p. 3), social constructionism warns people to be doubtful of their beliefs about how the world seems to be. This theory queries whether the categories of “man” and “woman” are just “a reflection of naturally occurring distinct types of human being” (Burr, 2003, p. 3). The same goes for the normative prescriptions of masculinity and femininity in a culture. A person can be born female yet have masculine characteristics. This

notion suggests that masculine and feminine traits are not simply inborn but are built upon people.

The Confucian culture illustrated in *The Good Earth* affects the demeanor of Wang Lung and O-lan. Liu Xiang (刘向), a Confucian scholar in the Western Han Dynasty, wrote *Biographies of Exemplary Women* which is originally known as 列女传 (*Biographies of Exemplary Women*, 2010). In this book, Liu Xiang (ca. 33 B.C.E.) provided a quote which was supposedly from the mother of Mencius, stating “A woman's duty is not to control or take charge” (*Confucian Inspired Sayings*, 2010). This quote clearly emphasizes women’s submission and duty. It also implies that men have more power than women in a Confucian society. Filial piety is prominent in Confucianism too. A son has to take care of and worship his father even after his father’s death (*Principles of Confucianism*, 2008). This notion entails that a father plays an important role in constructing his son’s masculine characteristics.

Purpose of the Study

The Good Earth particularly appealed to me because of Buck’s ability to describe Chinese traditions. As a Chinese Malaysian, I am able to relate to most of the Chinese traditions which she illustrated. For example, Wang Lung is depicted as saying “It is poor stuff—it is badly prepared” when his guests praise the food which his wife prepared (Buck, 1966, p. 30). According to Hu and Grove (1999, p. 51), the Chinese are not likely to respond to praise with thanks or any other acknowledgement of its validity. Such action would express a lack of the essential virtue of humility (Hu & Grove, 1999, p. 51).

Furthermore, this study intends to show how the social constructionist theory can be applied to the analysis of gender in *The Good Earth*. Explanations of the ways in which the

Confucian culture constructs Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity will be provided. This study also strives to examine whether Buck's background shaped her portrayal of the Wang Lung and O-lan.

Significance of the Study

Buck's novels are frequently analysed from a feminist viewpoint. Most studies concentrated on the oppression of the female characters. The same situation applies to *The Good Earth*. There seems to be relatively few studies done in terms of examining gender in the novel based on the social constructionist theory. Most feminist research simply discussed Wang Lung's subjugation of O-lan. Further information on the source of his domineering attitude and O-lan's submissiveness was not provided.

This study hopes to investigate how Confucian culture constructs gender in terms of Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity. Readers will come to realize that this culture holds significant influence in molding the characters' behaviour. In short, they will be able to look at Wang Lung and O-lan from a cultural perspective. Moreover, readers can achieve a clearer view of the social constructionist theory and Confucianism. This study will also allow them to better understand and appreciate *The Good Earth*.

Research Questions

There are three research questions that I will focus on in this study. They are as follows:

1. Based on the social constructionist theory, how does Confucian culture affect the male character's masculinity?
2. How does Confucian culture construct the female character's femininity in terms of her

perception and response towards the male character's oppression?

3. How does the author's own upbringing influence her portrayal of the male and female characters in the novel?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This study focuses on gender in terms of masculinity and femininity. The male and female character in *The Good Earth* will be analysed based on the social constructionist theory. I will also provide clarification on how the Confucian culture molds their behaviour.

I shall begin by defining “Confucianism.” I will then explain the social constructionist theory and the aspects involved such as social constructs and social reality. Besides, details on the social construction of gender will be given. I will also touch on the past research done on *The Good Earth* so that the readers will know how this novel has been studied.

Definition

Confucianism. Confucian culture is portrayed in *The Good Earth*. It was introduced by Confucius who was originally known as 孔子 (*Analects of Confucius*, 2009). As the most prominent ideology in China, Confucianism was employed by almost every feudal dynasty and the nationalist government (Gao, 2000, p. 30).

In feudal China, society was managed mainly by males (Huo, 2001). As a result, there was a persistent belief in men’s superiority over women. This belief eventually became the ruling ideology throughout the feudal society. According to Hu (2001), men were allowed to have many concubines. They could also divorce their wives for causes ranging from unfaithfulness to laziness. Conversely, women did not have the right to divorce their husbands (Hu, 2001). In addition, foot-binding is a common practice in a traditional Confucian society. It began in the Southern Tang period but did not become popular until after the Song Dynasty

(*Foot-binding*, 2010). The popularity of this practice increased when women's status further declined under the pressure of feudal ethics which were promoted by Neo-Confucian scholars (*Foot-binding*, 2010).

Women's role and status are clearly defined in a Confucian society. Confucianism borrowed its essential wisdom from the concept of "yin" and "yang" (Hong, 1997, p. 21). "Yin" represents femininity which is weak and passive while "yang" symbolises masculinity which is strong and active. This cosmological belief was incorporated into Confucian teachings. It also became part of the official value system as it helped maintain the feudal rule—the son of Heaven was "yang" and the ruled were "yin" (Hong, 1997, p. 21). Based on this concept, men and women were as dissimilar as heaven and earth. Men were significant and superior while women were unworthy and inferior. The primary female Confucian of the Han age was Ban Zhao or 班昭 (Andrea & Overfield, 2001, p. 151). In her work *女诫* or *Lessons for Women*, Ban Zhao (80 C.E./1932) stated "If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of conduct manifesting his authority are abandoned and broken." Based on this quote, one can deduce that men in a Confucian culture are encouraged to control women.

Furthermore, the authority of males was preserved by specific norms. In feudal China, women's behaviour was governed by the "three obediences and four virtues" or 三从四德 (*Confucianism*, 2007). These "obediences and virtues" were included in the teachings of Confucius. According to the rule of the "three obediences", a woman must obey her father as a daughter (未嫁从父), obey her husband as a wife (既嫁从夫) and obey her sons in widowhood (夫死从子) (*Confucianism*, 2007). The four virtues, on the other hand, include morality (妇德), proper speech (妇言), modest manner (妇容) and diligent work (妇功) (*Confucianism*, 2007). These rules clearly show that women were severely restricted in feudal China.

Besides, Confucianism stresses filial piety. An excerpt from *The Analects* or 论语 stated “It is honouring parents and elders that makes people human” (Confucius, ca. 500 B.C.E./1998, p. 3). Confucianism emphasizes the father-son relationship too. This relationship is also known as 父子 which means “the father over son” (*Confucianism*, 2007). According to Pease (2000, p. 57), fathers are expected to be the primary transmitters of culturally approved forms of masculinity to their sons. Thus, one can infer that a father has a big influence in his son’s life, particularly his son’s behaviour or masculinity. This notion is especially so in a Confucian culture where filial piety is crucial.

Theoretical Framework

An appropriate theory that can be used to analyse gender is the social constructionist theory. By using this theory, I will attempt to explain how Wang Lung and O-lan came to attain their mannerisms. I will also use this theory to clarify how Buck’s life affected her portrayal of these two characters.

Social constructionist theory. Social constructionism surfaced from the combined influences of a number of North American, British and continental writers dating back more than thirty years (Burr, 2003, p. 10). These influences stemmed from philosophical developments that began two to three hundred years ago.

One of the main contributors of the social constructionist theory is Gergen (1985). He posited that this theory views discourse about the world “not as a reflection or map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange” (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). According to Gergen (1985, p. 267), one’s process of understanding is not innate but is the product of “an active, cooperative

enterprise of persons in relationship.” In this light, one has to look into the historical and cultural bases of diverse forms of world construction. For instance, historical investigation demonstrated that there were extensive historical variations in the concept of the child (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). This concept has changed considerably across time. Childhood was not regarded as a specialized phase of development in certain periods. When one examines the social constructionist theory, one naturally has to look at social constructs.

Social constructs. Social constructs are things that result from social interactions, as opposed to objective reality (Flamand, 2009). Examples of social constructs include gender and language. These things are non-existent outside of the context of human social behaviour. Even so, they are present as integral parts of one’s social functioning (Flamand, 2009). There are philosophers who depicted social constructs as epistemologically objective and ontologically subjective. Social constructs are meaningful objects of knowledge only within “the framework of inter-subjective human understanding” (Flamand, 2009). One can also examine the concept of social reality when discussing the social constructionist theory.

Social reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that human beings create and sustain all social phenomena through social practices. In “The Social Construction of Reality,” they claimed all human activity is subjected to habitualization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 42). Any action that is repeated frequently is cast into a pattern which can be reproduced with an economy of effort. Habitualization also implies that the action may be performed again in the future in the same manner with the same economical effort (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 42). Such actions shape a world and their objectivity becomes crystallised for new generations

(Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 45). Instead of repeating the actions, it now becomes “This is how things are done.” These actions become norms in society and influence people’s beliefs and actions. In this study, I will concentrate on the social construction of gender in *The Good Earth*.

Social construction of gender. Hacking (1999) posited in *The Social Construction of What* that one starts to claim that something is socially constructed when they find that:

- (1) In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable (p. 12).
- (2) X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable (p. 37).

Hacking (1999, p. 7) gave gender as an example. He stated that one of the central ideas of gender theorists was that biological differences between the sexes do not establish gender, gender attributes or gender relations (Hacking, 1999, p. 7). Gender is dependent on the social world. Thus, it is a constitutive social construction.

Lorber (1994) agreed with Hacking (1999) in that gender is a social construct. She claimed that gender is typically assumed to be inborn. It is, in fact, a product of social and human interaction. According to Lorber (1994), gender construction begins with delegation to a sex category based on what the genitalia look like at birth. Gender construction can also be observed through the choice of clothing for children. Boys are adorned in t-shirts and pants while girls are given frilly dresses. Some cultures go beyond clothing in gendering children (Lorber, 1994). In a traditional Chinese society, for instance, mothers bound their daughter’s feet to boost their daughters’ sexual attractiveness.

West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) posited that gender is a human production. They claimed that the “doing” gender involves “a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional

and micropolitical activities” that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine “natures” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). All in all, gender is the result of and a rationale for diverse social arrangements. It is also a way of legitimating one of the most basic divisions of society (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Apart from that, masculinity and femininity are socially constructed.

Social construction of masculinity and femininity. Chesebro and Fuse (2001, p. 203) asserted that masculinity is constructed socially and symbolically. The various meanings and associations ascribed to masculinity are the result of characteristics that people have attributed to men over time. Chesebro and Fuse (2001, p. 209) also claimed that masculinity is a product of human interaction and not an outcome of “divinely inspired, innate or biological” sources. Whitehead (2002, p. 12) agreed with Chesebro and Fuse (2001) by stating that an individual is neither “passive in the face of his or her genetic make-up” nor simply “an empty vessel to be filled with ideological material.” The Human Genome Project demonstrated that human genes cannot take all the credit for one’s social actions (Whitehead, 2002, p. 12). Such actions can be affected by the environment as well as other external factors.

Similar to masculinity, femininity is constructed by social and cultural forces. Feminist Simone De Beauvoir (1989, p. 267) said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman . . . ; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine.” Beauvoir’s quote implies that femininity is not bred into one’s genes. Instead, it is created by members of a society. Females are typically encouraged to behave in specific feminine ways from a young age (*The Social Construction*, 2007). For instance, girls are discouraged from acting roughly for society frowns upon such displays of unfeminine traits. Girls are also provided

with toys that strengthen these “rules” of “femininity” (*The Social Construction*, 2007). For example, girls are given dolls and kitchen sets to play with. They are expected to become mothers and manage household chores.

Past Research on *The Good Earth*

There seems to be relatively little studies done in terms of analysing how gender is constructed in *The Good Earth*. In this case, I will compare two articles which focused on the female characters in the novel—“Portrayal of Women in *The Good Earth*” and Eleanor Pam’s “Patriarchy and Property: Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931).” Basically, these articles include touches of feminism.

Both articles agreed that Buck effectively portrayed the situation in traditional China. Her description of the female characters is consistent with the authentic Chinese culture of that period (“Portrayal of Women in *The Good Earth*,” 2010). Her illustration of these women is realistic as Buck included traditional Chinese practices like wife purchasing and concubinage. The oppression of women is a typical scenario in a Confucian culture. In *The Good Earth*, O-lan has to withstand Wang Lung’s meanness. For example, she is forced to tolerate his affair with Lotus, a woman in a teahouse (Buck, 1966, p. 155).

According to Pam (2003, p. 121), Buck’s personal experiences in China enabled her to depict a world in which women are property. Women are strictly confined in the severely rigid patriarchal society of the early twentieth-century China. They are “de facto slaves” no matter how fortunate they are (Pam, 2003, p. 121). Gender behaviour can also be determined by one’s social class (Pam, 2003, p. 122). For instance, Wang Lung’s oppression of O-lan intensifies when he becomes wealthy.

Besides, both articles pointed out that Buck included the perspectives or stereotypical roles of women in a Confucian society. She brought forth the perspectives of O-lan, Lotus and Wang Lung's youngest daughter ("Portrayal of Women in *The Good Earth*," 2010). From O-lan's perspective, one sees the role of a mother and a wife who helps to sustain the family. Another perspective is illustrated with Lotus who is Wang Lung's concubine ("Portrayal of Women in *The Good Earth*," 2010). Even as a concubine, Lotus holds more power than O-lan since she is able to manipulate Wang Lung. Wang Lung's youngest daughter demonstrates the fate of a girl in a wealthy Chinese family ("Portrayal of Women in *The Good Earth*," 2010). Her feet are bound and she is married off to a man of Wang Lung's choice.

Similarly, Pam (2003, p. 123) stated that the primary focus of the novel is Wang Lung's three intimate relationships. These relationships emphasize and distinguish stereotypical roles of females in a traditional Chinese society (Pam, 2003, p. 123). O-lan functions as his working-class partner who maintains the family and home. Lotus symbolizes his status and provides him with pleasure. Pear Blossom, a young servant girl, offers comfort and company when he is old. However, none of these women can achieve success on their own (Pam, 2003, p. 123). All of them are obliged to serve Wang Lung.

Basically, these articles discussed the repression of women. However, explanations on the source of O-lan's meek response to Wang Lung's domination were not provided. She could have rebelled against Wang Lung's tyranny but she did not do so. This notion implies that something was holding her back. Like these articles, most of the research concentrated on examining *The Good Earth* from a feminist perspective. There appears to be relatively little research studying Wang Lung's behaviour, particularly in terms of his masculinity. Further elaboration on what contributes to Wang Lung's oppressive attitude was also not specified.

Moreover, fairly little research employed the social constructionist theory to analyse gender in *The Good Earth*. By using this theory, I can provide readers with specific reasons on what caused Wang Lung and O-lan to behave in a particular way.

The Confucian culture illustrated in the novel influences how the Wang Lung and O-lan perceive certain things. It also determines how men and women should behave. As stated by Huo (2001), men in a traditional Confucian society have the right to exert their authority and dominance over women. The notion of a man succumbing to a woman was unheard of during that period of time. In contrast, women have to obey men and possess no right whatsoever. Ultimately, the Confucian culture constructs Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this study, qualitative methods will be used to analyse gender in terms of masculinity and femininity. The methods that will be employed include close reading, thematic analysis and biographical study. Besides, I will examine *The Good Earth* from the perspective of the social constructionist theory. I will also use feminism to discuss the oppression of the female character O-lan.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research offers details about the “human” side of an issue (*Qualitative Research Methods Overview*, 2010). It is an efficient way of discovering intangible factors like social norms, gender roles and religion. According to Ereaut (2007), qualitative research looks for the “why,” not the “how” of its topic through the investigation of unstructured information such as interview transcripts and emails. Common examples of qualitative methods include focus groups, in-depth interviews and content analysis.

Schwartz (2009) asserted that qualitative methods are useful for describing complex phenomena. They are particularly effective when an issue is too complicated to be answered by a simple yes or no hypothesis (*Qualitative Research Design*, 2011). However, the knowledge produced cannot be generalized to other settings since findings might only apply to the few individuals included in the research study (Schwartz, 2009). In other words, the findings are not representative. One of the qualitative methods that I am going to use is the close reading technique.

Close reading. Close reading is a technique which involves scrutinizing what is written on the page (*What is Close Reading*, 2010). One has to pay attention to all the nuances and connotations of language as it is used by writers (*What is Close Reading*, 2010). This notion means that one has to be attentive to a work's particular vocabulary, sentence construction, imagery and themes. Close reading can be seen as four separate levels of attention which one can bring to the text (*What is Close Reading*, 2010). These levels include linguistic, semantic, structural and cultural levels.

Kain (1998) stated that one can either choose to observe the prominent features of the text such as cultural references or to study only chosen features of the text like particular historical references. Then, one has to interpret one's observations. This notion involves inductive reasoning where one moves from the observation of specific details to a conclusion or interpretation, based on those observations (Kain, 1998). Another qualitative method that I am going to employ is thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis. A theme is the focal idea or ideas investigated by a literary work (Wiehardt, 2010). *The Good Earth*, for example, has the theme of one's relationship to the earth. Buck demonstrates this theme by repeatedly showing Wang Lung's attachment to his land. For instance, Wang Lung is illustrated as being concerned about his crops—"The farmer in Wang Lung was diverted for an instant and he stooped to study the budding heads" (Buck, 1966, p. 19). Another example can be found where Wang Lung yearns for his land when he is stranded in the south to escape the famine. He cries out, "Shall I never see it again" (Buck, 1966, p. 98). This statement shows Wang Lung's emotional attachment to his land. In this study, however, I will be analysing the theme of gender in *The Good Earth*.

Thematic analysis refers to analysing data by theme (*Thematic Analysis*, 2010). This type of analysis is extremely inductive (*Thematic Analysis*, 2010). The themes surface from the data and are not imposed upon by the researcher. Data collection and analysis also occur concurrently (*Thematic Analysis*, 2010). Howitt and Cramer (2008) posited that in thematic analysis, researchers have to discover themes which effectively reflect their textual data. Subsequently, researchers have to code their data. One then attempts to identify themes which integrate substantial sets of these codings (Howitt & Cramer, 2008). Apart from thematic analysis, I will also include biographical analysis in this study.

Biographical analysis. According to Lausch (2009), a biographical analysis intends to critically examine a person's life instead of concentrating on telling a person's life story. The analysis can focus on one aspect or it can encompass a person's entire life. For example, one can examine how an author's childhood affected her writing style. A good biographical analysis has "short segments of narration" and "long sections of analysis" (Lausch, 2009). The analysis should consist of identifying relationships among diverse parts of a person's life and showing how those parts correlate to one's thesis in general. Roberts (2002, p. 3) claimed that "life story" is typically distinguished from "life history." Basically, "life story" is applied to the narrated story by the author while "life history" infers the later interpretive, presentational work of the researcher (Roberts, 2002, p. 3). In the case of *The Good Earth*, Buck portrayed Wang Lung and O-lan based on her parents.

Social Constructionist Theory

Besides these three aspects of qualitative research, I will use the social constructionist theory to examine how gender is constructed by the Confucian culture in *The Good Earth*. Social constructionism is a sociological theory of knowledge that mulls over how social phenomena or objects of consciousness develop in social contexts (*List of Sociological Theories*, 2010). For instance, religion is viewed as a social construct. Its basis stemmed from either our psyche or one's need to worship a higher presence (*Introduction to Sociology*, 2010). Social constructionism also discovers the ways in which people take part in the construction of their perceived social reality (*List of Sociological Theories*, 2010). It involves looking at how social phenomena are created, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by humans. Other than the social constructionist theory, I will incorporate touches of feminism into my research.

Feminism

Feminism is a philosophy which promotes the appreciation of women and their contributions (Henry, 2010). It is based on social, political and economical equality for women. Feminism can also be viewed as a movement or a revolution that yearns for an equal world without limitations (Henry 2010). An example of such limitations includes discrimination against gender. According to Brizee and Tompkins (2010), women are marginalized in “every domain where patriarchy reigns.” They are subjugated by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically. Brizee and Tompkins (2010) further asserted that culture, not biology, determines one's gender. This notion also implies that culture establishes masculinity and femininity.

Chapter 4

Findings and Analysis

In this analysis, the social constructionist theory will be employed to discuss how Confucian culture constructs gender in *The Good Earth*. I will examine the ways in which Confucianism affects Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity. Explanations on how Buck's own experience shaped her depiction of both characters will also be provided.

Social Construction of Masculinity in a Confucian Culture

West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) asserted that gender is a product of human beings. They claimed that humans' socially guided perceptual and interactional activities led to the existence of masculinity and femininity (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126). Their claims are parallel to those of the social constructionist theory. Based on this theory, masculinity is constructed by social and cultural forces. Confucianism highlights five important relationships, one of which includes the father-son relationship which is known as 父子 (*Confucianism*, 2007). In *The Good Earth*, Wang Lung's masculinity is undoubtedly molded by his own father.

Father-son relationship in shaping masculinity. Fathers play an important role in influencing their son's behaviour. This notion particularly applies to Confucian culture which emphasizes filial piety. Confucius (ca. 500 B.C.E./1998, p. 5) stated "If you leave your father's Way unchanged for all three years of mourning, you are indeed a worthy child." This quote implies that Confucianism encourages a son to view his father as his role model. Pease (2000, p. 57) claimed that boys need to identify with their fathers to acquire their masculinity. There is

also a direct link between the father's behaviour and the son's subsequent behaviour (Pease, 2000, p. 58).

According to the social constructionist theory, Wang Lung's masculine mannerisms are not inborn. Instead, they are inevitably constructed by his father. His father's masculinity, on the other hand, would have been shaped by his own father, Wang Lung's grandfather. This process reflects Berger and Luckmann's (1966, p. 45) assumption of the social construction of reality—the objectivity of repeated actions will become crystallized for new generations. Consequently, the new generation will not question the validity of such masculine traits and will think of them as norms or traditions.

Wang Lung's father regards women as insignificant. After all, men's superiority over women is the central ideology in a traditional Chinese society (Huo, 2001). He believes that men must never succumb to women. When Wang Lung's bride, O-lan, reaches their home, Wang Lung's father deliberately ignores her. He feigns interest in the clouds and comments on the weather (Buck, 1966, p. 29). It would have been beneath him to notice her. His ignorance of O-lan illustrates his disdain of women. To him, she is merely a person to be used for the household chores, not someone to be appreciated.

Besides, Wang Lung's father holds on strongly to traditional Confucian sex-role beliefs. He is adamant that women are meant to be used as servants. He is portrayed as impatient for his evening meal—"I'm too old to wait for my food like this" (Buck, 1966, p. 36). He says this to O-lan when she returns home from the fields with Wang Lung. He refuses to prepare his own meals since she is now staying with them. His attitude shows that he holds women responsible for all domestic chores. In his perception, women must also be submissive and satisfied with what their husband provides them with. This notion can be seen in the scene where he condemns pretty

women who are materialistic, saying “She will be for ever thinking about clothes to go with her face” (Buck, 1966, p. 20).

As a child, Wang Lung would have observed and absorbed his father’s masculine traits. Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 42) claimed that human activity is subjected to habitualization. Habitualization entails that a certain action will be repeated in the future and in the same way. This action will eventually evolve into a norm or tradition (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 45). Likewise, Wang Lung follows his father’s footsteps in terms of masculinity. Filial piety enhances a father’s influence on his son. In a Confucian culture, sons are encouraged to view their fathers as a role model (Confucius, ca. 500 B.C.E./1998, p. 5). A son typically scrutinizes his father’s masculine characteristics and tends to take it upon himself to be the same. As a result, Wang Lung’s masculinity is parallel to that of his father’s.

Similar to his father, Wang Lung views women in inferior terms. He feels that they are not worth thinking of or mentioning. Wang Lung is ashamed of his interest in O-lan, thinking “She was, after all, only a woman” (Buck, 1966, p. 34). This line of thinking strongly demonstrates Wang Lung’s mediocre perception of women. He deems O-lan unworthy of all this attention as she is a female. He feels that women are to be forgotten or ignored since women are of little importance in a Confucian society.

Like his father, Wang Lung expects women to be subservient as he perceives that men are superior. Men in a Confucian culture are represented by “yang” which is strong and active (Hong, 1997, p. 21). They are even likened to the son of Heaven himself. Therefore, Wang Lung is pleased when O-lan is afraid of him (Buck, 1966, p. 33). His approval of her fear shows that he is satisfied with the control he has over her. O-lan’s fright also ensures that she stays obedient

and loyal. This situation is typical in a Confucian culture where men are allowed to dominate women.

In addition, Wang Lung's father shaped Wang Lung's belief that men and women have clearly divided roles. Wang Lung takes pride in dealing with the farm implements while O-lan manages the house implements (Buck, 1966, p. 45). He holds O-lan responsible for bearing him sons too—"And if the woman wearied there would be her children . . . the many children she would bear to Wang Lung" (Buck, 1966, p. 16). Wang Lung also perceives he possesses the authority to make decisions. This notion can be seen when he announces to his family that they will move south in order to escape the famine (Buck, 1966, p. 70). He makes this decision without discussing it with O-lan. His action shows that her opinion does not hold any significance to him. In a traditional Confucian culture, there are several ways in which a man's pride can be enhanced.

Masculine pride in a Confucian culture. Sons, concubines and foot-binding are deemed valuable in a traditional Confucian culture. Such perception, however, is not a product of nature. Gergen (1985, p. 267), a primary contributor to the social constructionist theory, posited that one has to investigate historical and cultural bases of diverse forms of world construction. By doing so, one will discover that the male appreciation of sons, concubines and foot-binding is the result of, as Gergen (1985, p. 267) puts it, "an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship." In this case, the glorification of sons, concubines and foot-binding stem from feudal China.

According to Huo (2001), men were the dominant ones in the feudal society. They were more important ever since ancient times. As stated by Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 45), the next generation tends to follow what is passed down by the previous generation. Consequently,

sons are of a higher value in a patriarchal Confucian system. Wang Lung is brought up to believe that sons are more valuable than daughters. His eagerness for a son is evident when O-lan gives birth to his child. He asks her importunately, “Is it a man? Tell me at least this—is it a man” (Buck, 1966, p. 40). When he learns that the child is a boy, he plans to buy a basketful of red eggs for the people in his village, saying “Thus will everyone know I have a son” (Buck, 1966, p. 41). The birth of his son boosts Wang Lung’s masculine pride for a son is significant. After all, sons are responsible for bearing the family name and maintaining family traditions (Lee, 1953, p. 276).

Chesebro and Fuse (2001, p. 203) asserted that one’s masculine mannerisms are constructed socially and symbolically. They stated that the diverse associations credited to masculinity are the result of characteristics that people have attributed to men. In short, they claimed that masculinity is socially constructed. Wang Lung’s appreciation of concubines can be traced back to feudal China. According to Hu (2001), men were permitted to have numerous concubines in feudal China. It is also a well known fact that Chinese emperors had many concubines. Thus, it is no wonder that men in a Confucian society think of concubines as symbols of wealth and status (Hays, 2008). Wang Lung too takes pride in buying a concubine—“And it was a pride to Wang Lung in the village that men mentioned with envy the woman in his inner court. . .” (Buck, 1966, p. 166). Having a concubine is one of the characteristics attributed to the wealthy men in his society. Thus, his concubine Lotus greatly increases Wang Lung’s male pride and allows him to be on par with the rich.

Foot-binding is a “feminine mystique” designed to please men (Blake, 1994, p. 676). According to the social constructionist theory, social phenomena are formed, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by humans (*List of Sociological Theories*, 2010). Likewise, the

significance of foot-binding was communally agreed upon and made into a tradition in feudal China. Wang Lung's masculine admiration of bound feet is shaped by members of the Confucian culture. They consider bound feet beautiful. Therefore, Wang Lung too deems it a sign of beauty. His desire for O-lan to have bound feet is apparent—"He saw with an instant's disappointment that her feet were not bound" (Buck, 1996, p. 26). Wang Lung's yearnings for this old Chinese tradition of beauty illustrate the influence society has on constructing his masculine traits.

In a nutshell, Wang Lung's masculine view of sons, concubines and foot-binding is constructed by the Confucian culture and feudal China. Had he belonged to a different culture or society, he might not have shared the same perception. Wang Lung's masculine characteristics also show that he conforms to what is conveyed by his father, society and culture. Other than that, culture can affect one's femininity as well.

Social Construction of Femininity in a Confucian Culture

It is stated in the *Book of Odes* or 诗经 that, "Disorder is not sent down by Heaven, it is produced by women" (*Confucian Inspired Sayings*, 2010). This quote implies that women are viewed as troublesome in a Confucian culture. The *Book of Odes* is the oldest collection of Chinese poetry with more than three hundred songs, odes and hymns (詩經 *Shi Jing*, 2010). The social constructionist theory claimed that various aspects of one's daily experience are the result of implicit social agreement, institutional practices or collective social action rather than objective reality (Flamand, 2009). Correspondingly, members of a Confucian culture implicitly and collectively agreed upon the inferiority of women. Since Confucianism emphasizes men's authority, women are obliged to be submissive. There are certain incidents that serve to shape and reinforce O-lan's feminine characteristics.

Events that reinforce the social construction of femininity. Based on the social constructionist theory, femininity is a social construct. A social construct is significant only within “the framework of inter-subjective human understanding” (Flamand, 2009). This notion entails that what is practised in one culture may not be valid in another culture. There are other cultures in which women are not meek nor are they encouraged to be so. It is only within the context of a Confucian culture that such a practice is meaningful. Lorber (2009) posited that gender is the result of human interaction and social life. Women are basically geared towards behaving in particular ways deemed appropriate by society. This situation is especially so in a Confucian culture where women are expected to be passive.

According to Lorber (1994), gender construction starts with delegating one to a sex category based on one’s genitals. Buck (1931, p. 905), a feminist herself, said “From the very fact of her sex at birth she has had to submit herself, to endure what she did not like. . . . Work has been her daily bread and silence her virtue.” O-lan suffers as she is a female born in a traditional Confucian society. She was sold by her parents to the House of Hwang and used as a kitchen slave (Buck, 1966, p. 26). Her parents’ action of selling her negatively affects O-lan, making her conscious that girls can be sold for money. This incident also reinforces her belief that women are inferior. Her sorrow is depicted when she and Wang Lung discuss whether to sell their daughter in order to escape the famine. When Wang Lung asks her if she will sell her daughter for money, O-lan says, “If it were only I, she would be killed before she was sold . . . the slaves of slaves I was! But I would sell this girl for you” (Buck, 1966, p. 98). Hence, though brief, her parents constructed her perception of a woman’s low status in a Confucian society.

According to Hu (2001), women in a Confucian culture are merely the private properties of their husband—toys for sex and tools to bear children and work. Since her parents are absent

from her life, O-lan's superior is the mistress of the House of Hwang. When giving O-lan to Wang Lung, the mistress is portrayed as saying "Obey him and bear him sons and yet more sons" (Buck, 1966, p. 27). Her mistress's opinion of a woman's duty is evidently affected by Confucianism. According to Lee (1953, p. 275), the basic function of women in a Confucian culture is to produce male offspring. Their position in the family is insecure if this condition is unfulfilled. O-lan is compelled to abide by her mistress. Therefore, she does not doubt the validity of her mistress's words. O-lan is also influenced into believing that as a woman, it is her responsibility to obey her husband and produce children. Consequently, one can deduce that O-lan's mistress shapes and reinforces O-lan's belief that women are obliged to be submissive.

Feminist John Stuart Mill (1864) claimed in *The Subjection of Women* that society has traditionally subjugated women and treated them as slaves (Sanders, 2004, p. 18). He puts the blame on "the legal subordination of one sex to the other" (Sanders, 2004, p. 18). Mill (1864) claimed that this legal subordination is based on the ridiculous reason that men are physically stronger (Sanders, 2004, p. 18). Women in a traditional Confucian culture suffer from oppression. Worse still, like O-lan, they tend to endure the tyranny instead of fighting for their own rights.

Oppression of women in a Confucian culture. Confucianism stresses the husband-wife relationship (*Confucianism*, 2007). This relationship is also known as 夫妇 which means "the husband over the wife" (*Confucianism*, 2007). Husband and wife, however, do not share an equal status. Simone De Beauvoir (1989, p. 83) stated in *The Second Sex*, ". . . he buys her as one buys a farm animal or a slave; he imposes his domestic divinities upon her. . . ." The wife is rigidly required to comply with her husband's wishes. O-lan undergoes the exact fate.

At the beginning, Wang Lung is satisfied with O-lan. However, things change once he becomes wealthy. He exhibits a strong sense of male entitlement and starts to scrutinize O-lan's physical appearance. He is particularly infuriated by her big feet which are unbound, crying out ruthlessly "I would have my wife look less like a hind. And those feet of yours—" (Buck, 1966, p. 134). He looks at her feet with such anger that she thrusts her feet farther under the bench she sits on. O-lan replies in a whisper, "My mother did not bind them, since I was sold so young" (Buck, 1966, p. 134). As mentioned in Chapter Two, women's behaviour is governed by the "three obediences and four virtues" or 三从四德 in a Confucian culture. According to the rule of the "three obediences," a woman must obey her husband as a wife (既嫁从夫) (*Confucianism*, 2007). Therefore, O-lan does not retaliate as she is brought up to believe that women are not supposed to go against their husbands. Violating the norms would make her a deviant. Therefore, she chooses to endure his meanness in a meek way.

O-lan's passive behaviour becomes especially obvious when Wang Lung is besotted with Lotus, a woman in a teahouse. He gives O-lan's treasured two pearls to Lotus, saying to O-lan "Why should one wear pearls with her skin as black as earth? Pearls are for fair women" (Buck, 1966, p. 147). O-lan cries but she does not do anything to reclaim her precious pearls. Her timid response all the more shows her staunch belief that women must be obedient. This incident also demonstrates that O-lan's mannerisms are constructed by Confucianism. In a Confucian culture, the concept of men and women is based on the feudal rule that the son of Heaven is "yang" and the ruled are "yin" (Hong, 1997, p. 21). Women are represented by "yin" which indicates that they are weak and submissive. O-lan's behaviour is parallel to what is advocated by Confucian teachings. As a result, it can be inferred that the Confucian culture shapes her femininity.

Apart from that, O-lan does not protest when Wang Lung decides to buy Lotus as his concubine (Buck, 1966, p. 155). She is devastated but remains silent. O-lan is forced to endure it as it is a norm for wealthy men to have concubines even in feudal times (Hu, 2001). Moreover, women are not allowed to rebel against their husbands. Female Confucian philosopher Ban Zhao or 班昭 (80 C.E./1997, p. 71) stated, “Husband is Heaven. Just as Heaven cannot be disobeyed, so a husband should never be forsaken.” This quote is derived from Ban Zhao’s *Commandments for Women* or 女诫 (Ban, 80 C.E./1997, p. 71). It is impossible for O-lan to divorce Wang Lung even if she wants to. Thus, she tries her best to ignore her pain by keeping her mind preoccupied with work (Buck, 1966, p. 156).

Brizee and Tompkins (2010) stated that biology determines one’s sex. Gender, however, is determined by culture. Culture is responsible for establishing masculinity and femininity. O-lan is not born with her submissive behaviour. Her meek behaviour is influenced by feudal norms and traditions such as the “three obediences and four virtues.” On the whole, it can be concluded that Confucianism and feudalism play a role in constructing O-lan’s feminine mannerisms. Such a notion can be related to the social constructionist theory which sees discourse about the world as “an artifact of communal interchange” (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). The portrayal of Wang Lung and O-lan is shaped by Buck’s own background.

Buck’s Upbringing in Affecting the Portrayal of Wang Lung and O-lan

Parents undoubtedly have a huge influence in their children’s personality or identity. Hetherington et al. (2006, p. 459) claimed that parental conflict can harm a child emotionally and psychologically. Research showed that parents’ failure to resolve an angry conflict was the most likely behaviour to arouse children’s anger and initiated the most displays of anger in older

children (Hetherington et al., 2006, p. 458). Buck's parents who did not have a happy marriage made an impact on her illustration of Wang Lung and O-lan.

Influence of an oppressive father. Buck's father, Absalom Sydenstricker, was a zealous missionary who traveled across China to persuade the Chinese to accept Christianity (Conn, 1998, p. 3). He perceived that women are trivial. He was the kind of man who "wished his daughters had been sons; who walked out of church if a woman spoke; who refused to let his wife write a check" (Conn, 1998, p. 20). According to Whitehead (2002, p. 12), one is "not passive in the face of his or her genetic make-up." He claimed that one's social actions are influenced by environmental conditions and external contingencies. Whitehead's claims are akin to what is advocated by the social constructionist theory. Similarly, Absalom's domineering behaviour is not something that is bred into his genes. His masculine characteristics were cultivated by his own father. Absalom's father was an intensely religious and violent man with a dangerous temper (Conn, 1998, p. 4). His mother also constructed his masculine traits. Spurling (2010, p. 40) claimed that Absalom's mother permanently molded his ideal of womanhood, in which the only two qualities that mattered were meekness and docility.

Buck shaped Wang Lung's masculinity based on her father. Similar to her father, Wang Lung views women as insignificant. In his eyes, women are to be used as servants for work and pleasure. He is pleased with his women's roles—Lotus for his pleasure and O-lan for his woman of work and the mother of his sons (Buck, 1966, p. 166). Besides, Wang Lung fervently believes that women must never disobey men. He is, therefore, incensed when he suspects that Lotus is having an affair with his eldest son (Buck, 1966, p. 187). He beats his son senseless with a bamboo stick when he discovers them together in the same room. Enraged by Lotus's

disobedience, he hits her too when she tries to interfere, leaving her with “swollen purple marks of his whip” (Buck, 1966, p. 187).

Like Buck’s own father, Wang Lung is oppressive, especially in the later half of the novel. His tyrannical behaviour brings unhappiness and misery to O-lan whose fate is similar to that of Buck’s mother, Carie Sydenstricker. Wang Lung’s sense of male power intensifies when he becomes wealthy. He starts to treat his loyal wife cruelly. His nastiness is evident when he is disgusted by O-lan’s appearance and reprimands her harshly. Wang Lung ignores her when she bursts into tears like never before and cries “I have borne you sons—” repeatedly (Buck, 1966, p. 153). Likewise, Buck’s father was not concerned about his wife’s distress and grief. Instead, his thoughts were consumed by his missionary work (Conn, 1998). Apart from that, O-lan’s character is based on Buck’s mother, Carie.

Influence of a submissive mother. Feminist Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) asserted in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that, “Women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions which men think it manly to pay to the sex, when, in fact, men are insultingly supporting their own superiority.” Correspondingly, Buck’s father did not pay much attention nor was he concerned about his wife’s feelings. Buck’s mother Carie accompanied her husband to China but became homesick (Conn, 1998, p. 3). Carie’s suffering was made worse by her husband’s disdain for her as a woman. According to Conn (1998, p. 20), she could feel “the sting of his misogyny” throughout her entire marriage.

Hacking (1999, p. 7) posited in *The Social Construction of What* that biological differences do not determine gender, gender attributes or gender relations. He claimed that these aspects depend on the social world. Similarly, Carie’s subservient behaviour is not due to her

being a female. Her behaviour reflects her own mother's characteristics. Conn (1998, p. 7) asserted that Carie's father did not help lessen the burden of his family's hard farm work. He was the only man in his community who changed his white shirt and collar daily. His wife had to wash and iron the shirt and collar, no matter "how much canning or churning there might be on hand" (Conn, 1998, p. 7). One can conclude that Carie's mother constructed her femininity since Carie too took on the role of a submissive wife.

Buck's father's obsession with his mission left his wife Carie forlorn and miserable (Conn, 1998, p. 3). She did not, however, force her husband to abandon his mission in China. Instead, she chose to endure her loneliness. Likewise, Wang Lung's fervent pursuit of wealth and the things money can buy brings O-lan nothing but unhappiness. To her dismay, Wang Lung hires Cuckoo, her former superior who often insulted her, as Lotus's servant. O-lan is depicted as saying miserably "It is a bitter thing in my own house and I have no mother's house to go back to anywhere" (Buck, 1966, p. 159). From her piteous statement, one can see that she has no choice but to bear the hardship. O-lan does not retaliate because she does not have a choice. As stated by Hu (2001), women in a Confucian culture are forbidden from divorcing their husbands. Similar to O-lan's plight, Carie yearned to escape China but she was hampered by her husband's self-centeredness (Conn, 1998, p. 3).

When Carie lived in China, she made a flower garden which was a place of beauty and refuge (Conn, 1998, p. 3). She was avidly devoted to the garden. Conversely, her husband was oblivious to it. In a way, the garden implies Carie's submissiveness. Instead of arguing with her husband, she turned her attention to the garden and sought refuge from it. O-lan busies herself with work to avoid feeling miserable too. On the day Wang Lung brings Lotus home, she goes to the fields to work at dawn and returns at night to prepare food for her family (Buck, 1966, p.

155). She is portrayed as “going into her accustomed room” and “sleeping alone upon her bed” (Buck, 1966, p. 156). Women are expected to be compliant in a traditional Confucian culture. Thus, O-lan does not go against Wang Lung’s wish of having Lotus as his concubine.

When examined carefully, one can definitely see the similarities between the behaviour of Buck’s parents and the characters in *The Good Earth*. All in all, masculinity and femininity are outcomes of social interactions. The mannerisms of Buck’s parents were influenced by their own parents. Ultimately, Buck’s parents attained characteristics which were similar to those of their own parents.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In Gould's (1972) *X: A Fabulous Child's Story*, she tells the story of a child, X, who was raised without being defined by gender. Consequently, X had both masculine and feminine characteristics. X played ball like a boy and played house like a girl. Through this tale, Gould (1972) pointed out how society interacts with children in a particular way based on their gender. This story also creates a powerful message about how gender is socially constructed. Likewise, Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity are social constructs.

Summary of Analysis

The social constructionist theory is employed in the analysis of gender in *The Good Earth*.

This theory demonstrates that Wang Lung's father and the Confucian culture play a role in shaping his masculine traits. Wang Lung's masculine characteristics were fed to him by his father ever since he was a child. His father's behaviour is affected by Confucian teachings. As a result, like his father, Wang Lung looks down upon women. This notion correlates to Berger and Luckmann's (1966, p. 45) statement of the social construction of reality. Through this analysis, one will also find Wang Lung's approval of sons, concubines and bound feet is constructed by feudal China and Confucianism which value such practices.

After examining the novel, it can be inferred that O-lan's parents and the mistress of the House of Hwang molded O-lan's femininity. According to the social constructionist theory, certain aspects in one's life result from implicit social agreement and social action (Flamand,

2009). O-lan's passive behaviour is shaped by the Confucian society which communally insists on the compliance of women. Feudal norms and traditions which were established ever since ancient times also maintained her submissiveness. Examples of these norms include the "three obediences and four virtues" (三从四德), the concept of "yin" and "yang" as well as Ban Zhao's *Commandments for Women* (女诫). Therefore, O-lan cannot rebel even if she desires to. She is severely bound by Confucian ethics and is obliged to comply.

Some authors tend to outline their characters based on their own life. Similarly, Buck portrayed Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity based on her parents. Buck's father's dominant attitude was influenced by his parents. On the other hand, Buck's mother took after her own mother's meek behaviour. This notion is parallel to the claims of the social constructionist theory which states that masculinity and femininity are not products of nature (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). Instead, they result from communications in one's social life. Like Buck's father, Wang Lung is dominant too. He mistreats O-lan and makes her life miserable. Yet, similar to Buck's mother, O-lan does not strike back and tolerates her pain mutely. Buck's long-suffering mother gave her a view of the immense suffering women have to go through due to the domination of men.

Recommendations for Further Research

For further research of *The Good Earth*, one can use the social constructionist theory to examine the element of superstition in the novel. Similar to the case of masculinity and femininity, superstition is socially constructed. Superstitions are created and made into traditions by society. In the novel, Buck demonstrated several examples of superstitious beliefs in a Confucian culture. For instance, Wang Lung is suddenly smitten with fear when he rejoices in

having a son. He then hides his child with his coat and cries out “What a pity our child is a female whom no one could want and covered with smallpox as well! Let us pray it may die” (Buck, 1966, p. 50). He believes that there are evil spirits around who will harm his son. Thus, he takes the precaution of pretending that he has a lowly daughter instead.

Apart from superstition, one can analyse the symbols which are illustrated in *The Good Earth*. Symbols refer to a word or object that stands for another word or object (*All American*, 2011). In the novel, Buck portrayed several symbols. For example, the earth symbolises life as well as its ups and downs. Farmers like Wang Lung rely on their land for survival. When the earth produces an abundance of crops, Wang Lung and his family prosper (Buck, 1966, p. 43). However, once the earth ceases churning out crops, famine and suffering strike. This dire situation forces Wang Lung and his family to travel to the south in search for food (Buck, 1966, p. 62).

A novel which is rather similar to *The Good Earth* is *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) by Amy Tan. Like *The Good Earth*, the characters in *The Bonesetter's Daughter* are Chinese who practise typical Chinese traditions. This notion especially applies to LuLing and her mother Precious Auntie. For instance, LuLing is continually subjected to her mother's criticism. However, she later discovers that though she is regularly criticized, Precious Auntie actually means the opposite—“And Precious Auntie went on to say how selfish I was. . . . She criticized me so much that I did not consider until now that she was saying she loved me even more” (Tan, 2001, p. 206). LuLing follows Precious Auntie's footsteps in harshly criticising her own daughter Ruth. This practice is typical in a traditional Chinese society. According to Hays (2008), the Chinese usually do not compliment others. They normally say the opposite of a compliment.

In conclusion, gender is a social construct. More specifically, Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity do not stem from biological sources. As advocated by the social constructionist theory, their mannerisms exist by virtue of culture and social interactions. Wang Lung and O-lan's characteristics result from the influence of the Confucian society and culture, as illustrated in Figure 1 (refer to Appendix A, p. 46). Buck's action of outlining Wang Lung and O-lan based on her parents also enhanced the realism of both characters. In a nutshell, Wang Lung's masculinity and O-lan's femininity are contingent products of feudal China and the Confucian culture.

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Appendix A

Social Construction of Gender in *The Good Earth*

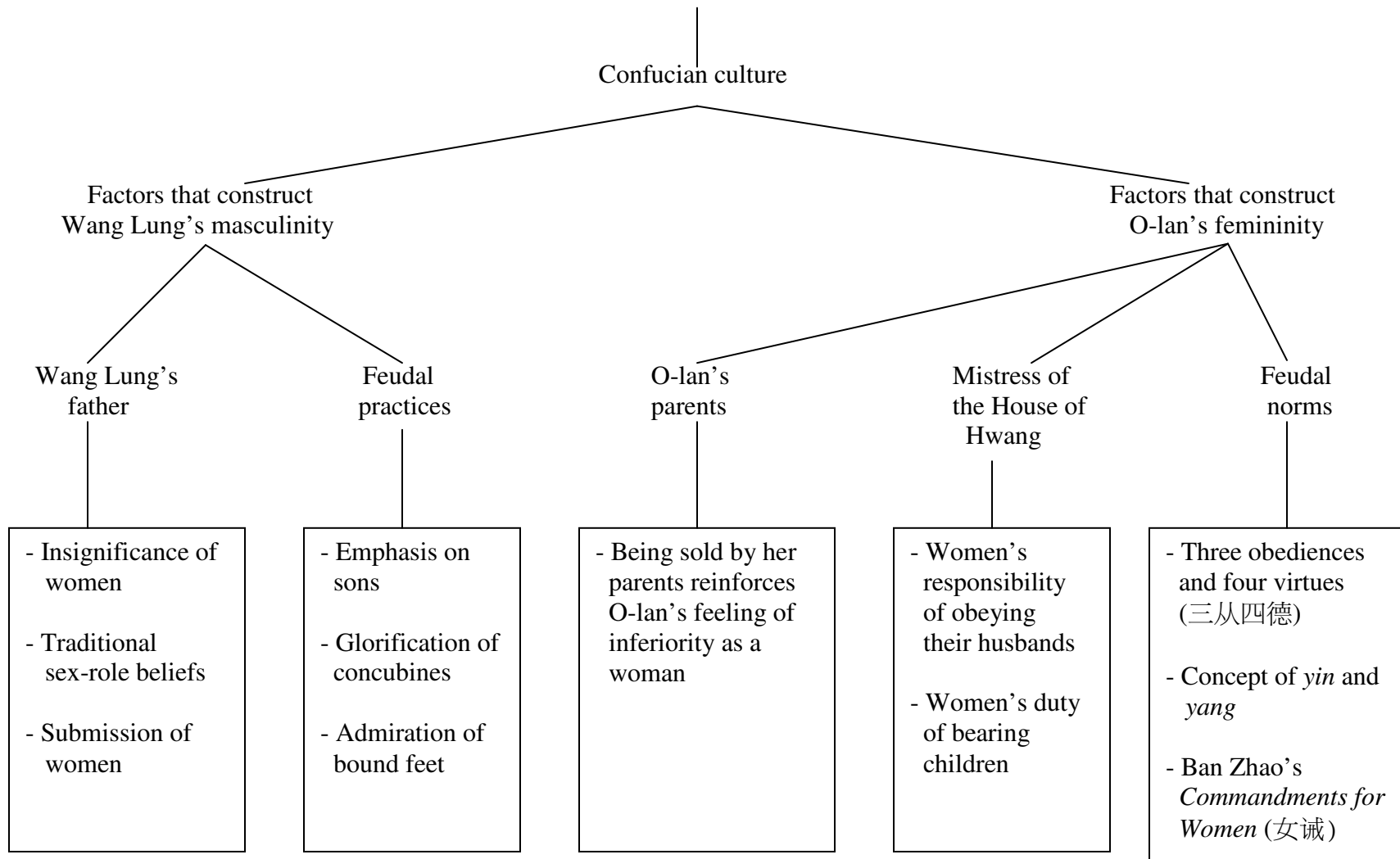


Figure 1. Social construction of gender in *The Good Earth*.