

An Interpretation of the Contradictory Character of Wang Long in Pearl S. Buck's *The Earth* under Lacan's Theory of Desire

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Abstract:

The American female writer Pearl S. Buck's novel *The Good Earth* won the Nobel Prize in Literature. This work mainly tells the living conditions of Chinese farmers represented by the protagonist Wang Long in the 1930s and 1940s, presenting all aspects of rural life in old China to Westerners and shaping a vivid and plump image of Chinese farmers. This study interprets the character image of Wang Long in "The Earth" through Lacan's theory of desire, explores the close connection between Wang Long's desire and self, and attempts to dissect his character image and the promoting role that his desire plays in his own construction.

Keywords:

Desire, Pearl S. Buck, *the Earth Good Earth*

1. Introduction

Pearl S. Buck won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1938, becoming the first female writer in the history of American literature to receive this award. She is skilled at creating works on Chinese themes, among which *The Earth* is her representative work. This novel mainly describes the living conditions of Chinese farmers in the 1930s and 1940s and is regarded as a classic work of literary exchange between China and the West. It has won the Pritzker Prize for Fiction and the Nobel Prize in Literature. Since its publication in 1931, *The Earth* has sparked a research craze worldwide, reshaped the image of the Chinese people in the eyes of Westerners, and promoted cultural exchanges between the East and the West. It mainly describes the experiences of farmer Wang Long and his family in the land struggle. At a time when people were still not very familiar with China, Pearl S. Buck told the story of such Chinese farmers in English, thus letting Westerners know that Chinese people are not "East Asians" with braids, opium smoking and small feet tied. They, like all farmers in the world, are striving for survival and have a blood and flesh connection with the land. However, since its publication, the novel has also faced various criticisms. Some people believe that it deliberately smears the image of China. The 1982 edition of the *Encyclopedia of China: Foreign Literature* volume stated that the trilogy *Houses on the Earth*

does not depict the true face of Chinese society and does not reflect the fate of the Chinese people. [15] Since the publication of the novel, current research on Pearl S. Buck's *The Earth* has mainly focused on the study of the construction of female character identities in the novel, the land complex, cross-cultural Chinese character images, and comparative studies of Chinese rural literature. Pearl S. Buck's *The Earth* has attracted much attention from the academic community. Research is not limited to its diverse themes but also delves into cross-cultural and interdisciplinary narratives. Scholars such as Yao Junwei, Sun Zongguang, Yao Wang, Zhang Yuan and Liang Zhifang have all conducted in-depth research on Pearl S. Buck. For instance, in the article *On the Classicism of The Earth*, Yao Junwei [12] analyzed the rich implications, innovative concepts, typical themes and aesthetic innovations of *The Earth*. In his monograph, Liang Zhifang [6] explores from the perspective of imagology theory how the Chinese translation of *The Earth* depicts China, constructs its image, and expresses his imagination and expectations for China and the Chinese nation. Sun Zongguang [10] interprets Pearl S. Buck's observations and imaginations about the past, present and future of the Chinese nation from a political perspective. Starting from the search for *the Earth* in the Title column of the China National Knowledge Infrastructure, Zhang Yuan [13] found 116 papers. She summarized that the research directions before 2014 were mainly divided into three parts: the study of the creative subject, the study of the theme of *The Earth*, and the study of character images. In conclusion, researchers have analyzed *The Earth* from multiple perspectives mentioned above. The image of China depicted is vivid and concrete. Lacan's theory of desire can provide a broader perspective for exploring the subjectivity of characters. Entering from the perspective of desire is more conducive to our understanding of the operational mechanism behind their personalities at a deeper level. The sources of Lacan's theory of desire include the Surrealist trend in European artistic practice, linguistic structuralism, and Koyev's philosophical interpretation of Hegel, etc. He emphasized a dissolution of the philosophy of subjectivity and saw the self-realization and fragmentation that desire experienced in its development process. [3] The shift of desire in Lacan's perspective provides new clues for the desire theory in psychoanalysis. Wang Long is a contradictory character with a full and vivid image in Pearl Pearl's works. He is diligent and hardworking, trying to ensure that himself and his family have enough to eat and wear with his own hands, creating a good environment for his wife and children. He has his own moral bottom line and detests deception and theft. Even when he is poor, he is unwilling to sell his daughter to get travel expenses. It is precisely this image of an upright and hardworking farmer whose first pot of gold was stolen gold and jewels stolen from a crack in the wall, the image of a disgraceful father who constantly persuaded himself to sell his daughter but eventually gave up because even selling her was not enough to buy a cow, and the image of a faithless man who pursued his desires in a teahouse with fireworks and willow alleys while neglecting his first wife, yet constantly remorseful. From Wang Long's image, we can see the duality and contradiction in his character, that is, the constant interweaving of good and evil. Behind his complex character image lies the continuous development of the character himself and the constant growth and transformation of his desires. Desire holds a fundamental position in human philosophy and culture and is also an important part of human social life. [14] This article attempts to analyze the character construction of Wang Long based on Lacan's theory of desire and conduct an analysis of Wang Long's character image.

2. Material Desires Manipulated by Others

One of Lacan's definitions of desire is that the subject desires precisely as a great other, that is to say, the subject desires from the perspective of an other. Such a result is that "the object of human desire...". In essence, it is an object desired by others. [5] This idea is also derived from Koyev's interpretation of Hegel. Koyev pointed out that "the desire directed at a natural object is human desire only when it is mediated" by another person's desire directed at the same object: only humans will desire what others desire because of others' desire for something." The subject controlled by the desires of others will gradually lose the true desires of the self, and thus gradually lose the development of the true self in the process of castration. Land was Wang Long's initial desire. It not only meant having enough to eat and being rich, but also represented the original aspiration that Wang Long held fast to in the chaotic times, the determination and will to change the current situation of himself and his family through hard work and labor. However, under the influence of the Great others and against the backdrop of famine, Wang Long's desires were no longer merely about buying and farming land; they gradually transformed into more material desires. Wang Long's wealth came from the silver and jewels he and his wife plundered from wealthy families during the wars in the south. This is in sharp contrast to Wang Long's initial scolding of his youngest son for stealing and cheating, which is highly ironic. In the face of material desires, Wang Long has sold out his principles and conscience and has already become a money-loving person driven by money. The subject imitates the desires of others and then regards the objects of others' desires as the goals of his own desires. This process reveals the imitative nature of desires. [11] At first, Wang Long's desire was to buy several more fertile plots of land to meet his family's basic needs and save some food. Later, with the large amount of money he brought back from his southward journey, he was no longer content with merely purchasing a fertile field or a cow. He wanted to become a member of the Huang family and buy their land to prove his status. He wants to be completely equal with those people from the stupid and wasteful rich families. He is going to hold a silver dollar in his hand and openly say, "I'm rich. What price do you want to sell that piece of land for?" It is not only because buying the land of the Huang family means being superior to them, but also because Wang Long's wife was also borrowed from the Huang family. Wang Long's wife's wish is to live a better life than any other member of the Huang family. This has also deeply influenced Wang Long's material desires. Wang Long's ever-expanding desires in the symbolic realm actually all stem from the desires of others. Such desires cannot satisfy Wang Long's construction of his own spiritual world. Therefore, after becoming wealthy, Wang Long's spiritual world has completely vanished, and he has lost his original positive and upward life goals. Every day, he was in a daze, eager to spend all his money to achieve the luxurious life of a wealthy family as defined by this society and others. The result was that a large amount of money flowed out of his hands like water, and Wang Long drifted further and further away from his original intention, completely becoming a puppet of material desires. Wang Long's complex character has always been linked to his relationship with the land. When Wang Long was still a poor peasant, the kind side of his character occupied the core of the character. He was hardworking and compassionate, which was a vivid portrayal of the simple character of Chinese farmers. But when he became rich, he began to indulge in pleasure and despise the chaff, and there was no longer any kindness or simplicity of human nature. [8] But Wang Long eventually recognized the bubble behind his desires and held fast to the

land. The land not only represents the highly vigorous and inclusive nature of rural people, but also symbolizes a kind of simplicity and firmness. From the author's delicate description, one can deeply sense Wang Long's profound and passionate feelings for the land. This feeling is so intense that it has almost become an inseparable part of his life. But at the same time, we can also feel that under the impact of desires, Wang Long once lost himself and pursued the desires of nothingness. Under Pearl S. Buck's pen, Wang Long is not only vividly depicted but also a vivid and typical microcosm of the countless hardworking and tenacious farmers in China. His image profoundly reflects the universal traits and emotional world of this group.

3. Transferred Love Desires

Alan served in a prominent family and was highly skilled in cooking. He was highly appreciated by the old lady, and the two of them developed a deep friendship for more than ten years. When the old lady decided to marry Alan to Wang Long as his wife, she was not without reluctance. This was sufficient to prove that Alan was gentle and extremely endearing. Wang Long's vision for his wife is that she doesn't have to be very beautiful but must be strong, healthy, capable of giving birth and working hard. The two of them should be able to take care of their father together. In fact, Alan has fulfilled all these requirements. She is diligent and brave, working hard with Wang Long to raise children for him. However, in the end, Wang Long's evaluation of Alan is: He looked at her, not this time because she was a woman, nor because she was ugly, emaciated, with yellow and dry skin. He looked at her because of a strange sense of guilt. [9] One of Lacan's explanations of desire is that desire is always "the desire for something else", because we cannot have a desire for what we already have. The object that gives rise to desire is constantly delayed, which is why desire is a metaphor. When Wang Long was still a poor peasant, Alan fulfilled all his desires for his wife. But later on, after Wang Long became rich, Alan had become a useless wife. All the habits of hard work before were regarded by Wang Long as disgraceful and not like a rich mistress. When Alan was in trouble, she would give Wang Long the jewels she had taken from the rich. After his joy, Wang Long actually showed dissatisfaction and contempt, thinking that it was foolish and a useless waste for his wife to ask for two pearls. Therefore, Wang Long's desire for love was successfully transferred to Hehua. Hehua was a courtesan in a teahouse. She was both beautiful and could please Wang Long. At this point, Wang Long no longer needed a capable lover but a beautiful auntie who was worthy of his title as a master. Wang Long has a clear understanding of the roles of Lotus and Alan. These two women each have their own place in this family. The Lotus girl is his toy and joy, fulfilling his demands for beauty and sexual desire. Alan, on the other hand, works, gives birth to children, supports the family, and takes care of him, his father-in-law, and the children. But when Wang Long realized that Alan's time was running out, he had already seen through the essence of the lotus. His sudden change in attitude towards Alan led him to miss the days when Alan never looked down upon his dirt and was content with it. After Alan's death, he often shed tears, recalling the scenes of working with Alan on the land in the past. Desire does not have a definite and stable object. The object of desire is always elsewhere and always lingering. Desire is the desire for what is lacking. The subject constantly generates desires for others to seek satisfaction, and in this process, gets deeper and deeper. [1] Such guilt was surely not a long-lasting love. Later, he transferred his love to another female character, Lihua. By this time, Wang Long was already old. He was attracted by Li Hua's youthful vitality and kindness,

which was very similar to Alan's. He wanted to entrust his children to Li Hua for care. How can one love others? Only through one's own body rather than the desires of others can one achieve individuation. The desire pursued by the desire subject is itself an unfulfilled desire. [4] From Alan to the lotus and then to the pear blossom, Wang Long has always been in pursuit of what he can't get, and the love he has obtained, he never cherishes. In this unfulfilled desire, the subject constantly seeks and anticipates the manifestation of itself. The constant transfer of love desires not only reveals Wang Long's own hypocrisy and selfishness, but also shows how he is held hostage and tempted by desires and how he merely regards so-called love as a tool and carrier of his own desires. Therefore, he will never obtain true feelings because he has been pursuing those delayed desires all along. But Wang Long is not completely heartless to his wife. He once bought brown sugar for Alan, felt sorry for her pain of giving birth, and generously gave her pocket money. All these show Wang Long's kindness. However, as his desires expand, this pity for Alan only reveals itself when he feels guilty. Therefore, from the perspective of love, Wang Long's image is not single or one-sided. Rather, it is highly contradictory.

4. The Rising Desire for Power

Desire, in essence, is the desire for the greater Other, which means both that desire becomes the object of another's desire and that desire is recognized by another. The subject has the desire to obtain "recognition", so it will fulfill its own desires according to those of others. To cater to the gaze and desires of others, the subject will actively adjust and change the possible visual effects formed by its own form. On his wedding day, Wang Long walked into his room, put on a new blue long gown, let down his coiled braid, and went to the city wall to have his head shaved. All of this was to avoid showing any fear when picking up the bride and not to be looked down upon by the Huang family. After getting rich, he began to wash his strong brown body. He bought soap produced in other places from the store and applied it to his skin when taking a bath. No matter what, he no longer ate garlic, although it was his favorite food before. He made clothes in the style of city people and bought shoes of the same style as those worn by the old man of the Huang family. He wanted to become a city dweller completely, a rich and wealthy Lord, rather than a wealthy farmer. So he often stood in front of the mirror and gazed at himself. He began to pay attention to his body, examining it carefully as if looking at others' bodies. This kind of gaze was not so much the subject's cognition and confirmation of his own mirror image as it was a kind of descent of the subject in the web of the other's desires. "Seeing" stems from the sense of desire deprivation formed under the gaze of others and the drive of self-identity on the subject's behavior. Wang Long is thoroughly obsessed with the desire to be recognized by others' desires, constantly desiring greater power and social status. When his eldest son offered to rent the Huang family compound, that scene immediately came to his mind. To him, that place would always be a symbol of a wealthy family. Some people who used to call Wang Long the "Farming Wang Family" now begin to address him as "Lord Wang" or "Rich Man Wang". China has been a major agricultural country since ancient times. Just as Fei Xiaotong said, "Viewed from the grassroots level, Chinese society is rural in nature." Those who are called rustic country folk. They are the grassroots of Chinese society. [2] Although Wang Long has lost himself in the constant pursuit of social status, his deep love for the land has never changed. Even on his deathbed, he still urged his son not to sell the land, believing that it is the foundation for his livelihood. This has never changed from beginning to end. Therefore, Wang Long's character image has a

contradictory trait, that is, he pursues getting rid of the identity of a farmer. And I am deeply rooted in the land. Under the catalysis and interweaving of desires, the image of this contradiction becomes more prominent.

5. Conclusions

Desire has become an important issue since modern philosophy shifted its focus from heaven to earth and from God to human beings. The question of what the subject is and how to define the subject has become the most core issue in philosophical theory. After Descartes' proposition of "I think, therefore I am" determined reason as the essence of the subject, subject philosophy strived forward along the path of rationalism and achieved brilliant accomplishments in Kant's critical philosophy system. [7] This means that, after setting aside the concept of theological teleology, desires or needs have become the most fundamental connection between human beings as sensible beings of nature and the natural world from which they originate. And Rican's theory of desires has profound enlightening significance for the development of cultural criticism in modern society. The desire proposed by Lacan is not thin and abstract, but full and substantial. From the manipulation of desire by others to the delay of desire and then to the desire to be recognized by others, all these offer a relatively new interpretation of desire in a deeper philosophical sense. With a technique that blends the brilliance of ideals with romantic legends, she meticulously weaves a grand and epic scroll of The Times' features. The constantly changing and alternating desires of Wang Long in his book "The Earth" are an important factor constituting the contradictory character color. Therefore, this paper analyzes the protagonist Wang Long from the perspective of Lacan's desire theory, in order to deepen the readers' and related understanding of this book and the character.

Conflicts of Interest

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