

Pearl S. Buck's Dual Narrative Dynamics: An Interpretation of the Conflict between Localism and Modernity

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Abstract. Pearl Buck is a famous cross-cultural female writer. As an American writer closely related to China, her trilogy of *The Good Earth* is well known for her depiction of Chinese peasants and “land worship”. However, there is a covert progression which is parallel with the plot of “family epic” in her works. Based on the dual narrative dynamics proposed by Professor Shen Dan, this paper illustrates the conflict between localism and modernity in Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* trilogy, and explores the profound thematic significance created by the dual narrative progressions. Pearl Buck’s consideration of the changes in society and people’s mentality in modern times is inspiring for the future study of contemporary works.

1. Introduction

Pearl S. Buck won the 1938 Nobel Prize for Literature for her work *The Good Earth*. Taking advantage of a third-person omniscient perspective, the novel tells the story of a family that became wealthy through farming since Wang Lung. Subsequently, in the following two sequels, *Sons* and *A House Divided*, Pearl Buck further narrated Wang Lung’s children and grandchildren’s struggles and choices in the face of the conflict between agriculture and industry, with the cultural conflict between the Orient and the Western world as the setting.

When it comes to the interpretation of Pearl Buck’s trilogy, the research focus of scholars in the past decade mainly lies in the explanation of the thematic meaning, the symbolic meaning of the “land” and the analysis of Chinese farmers’ image, focusing on the cultural conflict between China and foreign countries [2][3][4]. The revelation of these meanings not only constitutes the mainstream of criticism in academia, but also has enlightening significance for the study of the Oriental image in the early narrative, so as to highlight the cultural and social values of Pearl Buck’s works. However, if we turn our attention to the details of background setting and characterization in Pearl Buck’s text, we will find that there is a hidden picture. Namely, she metaphorized both the explicit plot and the intellectuals to imply the conflict between the localism and modernity in the developing process of the specific time observed by herself as an “outsider”. In this regard, previously some scholars have paid attention to the inextricably linked cities Zhenjiang, Nanjing and Shanghai in Pearl Buck’s works, and they tended to regard Zhenjiang as the symbol of localism and Shanghai as the representative of modernity. From the perspective of historical facts, they have indirectly analyzed the influence of these two factors on the establishment of the dual conflicts in Pearl Buck’s

works. [5][6] However, some scholars put forward the problem at present, “there is a shortage of scholars at home and abroad to explore Pearl Buck’s thinking on modernity in Shanghai and China’s local relations”^[1], and I believe that it can be solved by deconstructing the text itself.

Professor Shen Dan in Peking University proposed that “behind the development of the plot, there is a narrative undertone advancing together and running through the text”, and called it “covert progression”^[7]. The fundamental difference of it from the easily confused “submerged plot” and “covert plot” lies in the fact that it focuses on the complete narrative process outside the category of plot, rather than a part in the plot which lacks the integral compositions of a narrative process. This concept raised by Professor Shen Dan is incredibly inspiring to the study of the conflict between “localization” and “modernity” in Pearl Buck’s works. In this way, we would be able to break the shackles of traditional thinking and pay attention to the detailed descriptions in Pearl Buck’s works, which seem to have little relevance to the obvious plot but would be helpful to uncover the track of the covert progression that has been ignored and suppressed for a long time. The discovery would be beneficial for us to grasp the more profound thematic implication, to clarify the complementary theme of modernity and localism throughout the whole text.

Therefore, this essay is going to investigate the following questions:

- (1) What is the reason for the neglecting of the covert progression in Pearl Buck’s works?
- (2) What kind of means of discourse is used to show the covert progression in Pearl Buck’s works?
- (3) What is the overall narrative characteristic of Pearl Buck’s works?

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2. Discussion

2.1 Reasons for the neglecting of the covert progression in Pearl Buck's Trilogy

For a long time, there are two reasons for the rare exploration of the covert progression in Pearl Buck's works.

Firstly, in a broad sense, the most striking thing for the readers in any work would be the explicit narrative presented directly in front of readers, namely the main plot. However, Professor Shen Dan argues that in order to discover the covert narrative process, "first of all, we need to break through the stereotype of merely focusing on the main plot, and try to see that in some works, there may be another narrative dynamic moving along with the apparent one. The important hints of covert progression are often elements in texts which seem to be trivial and irrelevant to the development of the main plot or conflict with the thematic meaning of the plot."^[8] Therefore, the covert progression in Pearl Buck's works was hidden under her extensive writing of "worship of land", which in the long term leads to the result that her writing of the collision between modernity and localism could be easily overlooked.

Secondly, in a narrow sense, Pearl Buck's most representative narrative feature can be embodied in her praise of Chinese farmers, agriculture and countryside, in view of her cross-cultural identity, which, in other words, makes scholars unconsciously surprised by her identity as a "foreigner", so as to focus on the Chinese land she wrote and the process of constructing the image of China in the early age. It can be said that Pearl Buck's cross-cultural identity not only opens up a new perspective for scholars, but also causes some troubles. This is because we should realize that Pearl Buck is different from other foreign writers. As a cross-cultural writer who studied China in depth, she not only possesses the soberness of an outsider, but also tries to understand the characteristics of the times from the perspective of the internal Chinese farmers. She understood the stubbornness and conservatism of the peasants in China's hinterland when confronting rapid modernization, and the nostalgia of the intellectuals in the new cities as well as their dependence on tradition. However, *The Good Earth* trilogy integrates this conflict and contradiction into the natural developing process of the society through the narrative technique of the natural time passing, so it is not easy to be noticed.

The interactive relationship between the dual narrative dynamics is composed of the relationship of complementarity and contradiction. In Pearl Buck's works, this kind of mutual relationship is more of a complementary performance. So how do these two narrative progressions interact with each other? Professor Shen Dan divided the specific types into small categories. This paper will analyze and clarify from the following two aspects.

2.2 The interpretation of the complementarity of the dual narrative dynamics

2.2.1 The juxtaposition of dual conflicts

In the main plot of Pearl Buck's works, the Chinese people's value of tradition is highly stressed, so that it forms a conflict with Western culture, namely the "external conflict" between various cultures. This conflict is manifested mainly from the perspective of farmers through the statement of "subjective" identity, language and religious differences, which is the most straightforward and most powerful. In the eye of Wang Lung, he saw that the foreign man has "a great nose projecting beyond his cheeks like a prow beyond the sides of ship".^[7] Even the most superficial difference in appearance could prove the existence of the cultural conflict, through the illustration of Wang Lung's psychology.

What Pearl Buck deeply buried in her works is the conflict between "modernity" and "localization" in the internal culture during the turbulent course of history in modern times. If the conflict between China and foreign countries is caused by the collision between cultures, then the conflict presented in the covert narrative progression is endogenous and rooted.

First of all, this internal conflict is hidden between the continuation of the trilogy. Starting with Wang Lung, the protagonist of *The Good Earth*, he made his fortune through buying land and farming, which symbolizes the side of "localism". But when this "localism" reached its peak, it began to deteriorate towards a slump in the end of the first book, when his two sons behaved dishonestly: "But over the old man (Wang Lung) they looked at each other and smiled"^[9], from which it is deducible that they have made an unspoken determination to sell their father's land. Indeed, later in the second sequel, *Sons*, both Wang Lung's sons embarked on a modern career in commerce.

In this way, we would find that modernity dominates the conflict in *Sons*, in which Pearl Buck focused on portraying the two sons' business life after they sold Wang Lung's lands, symbolizing "modernization". However, the character of the third son of Wang Lung, Wang Hu, retained the native character since he behaved eagerly to conquer the "land", acting as a general. In the third generation of the family, namely among the grandchildren of Wang Lung, Wang Yuan, Wang Hu's only son, was desperate to escape from his father's control and headed for the big city. Again, the conflict hidden behind the plot was revealed again in the form of a metaphor — the modernity seemed to show more attraction than the localism, as Wang Yuan became bored of his father's savage invasion of land. But gradually the readers would find the advantage of "localism", shown by Wang Yuan's inner love of farming and thirst for agricultural knowledge.

Even more convincingly, the most obvious example was that Wang Hu forced Wang Yuan to return to his hometown within 20 days from the metropolis to finish an arranged marriage, in face of which Wang Yuan had no choice but to obey. Metaphorically, Wang Yuan's life in the city is a sign of the "modern" industry, but it is still subject to the "indigenous" agriculture represented by Wang Hu, and Wang Yuan himself, was uneasy to fit in the modern life. This conflict is hidden so deep in the text that it deserves to be explored.

Secondly, this internal conflict is also hidden in the metaphor of characters in the works. O-lan, a woman with Chinese traditional characteristics, is hardworking, tenacious, reserved and introverted. Starting from scratch, she helped Wang Lung to buy land and make a fortune. However, as Wang Lung grew wealthier, he turned to be obsessed with a “modern” woman named Lotus, who was greatly influenced by Consumerism and refused to toil in the field. Arguably, she is a symbol of modernity. Eventually, O-lan passed away miserably without Wang Lung’s gratitude and compassion, and Lotus squandered Wang Lung and O-lan’s savings without compunction. The localism is declining like O-lan, but it is always the foundation of modernity and it nourishes the root of modern development. In addition, Wang Yuan, the protagonist of *A House Divided*, kept pace with the development of science and technology in the city, but he was still persistent in learning ploughing techniques from farmers and researching new seeds. This kind of conflict between modernity and localism is bidirectional, rather than solely focusing on the theme of “land” as emphasized by predecessors. Such a view ignores Pearl Buck’s clear understanding of the modernization process as a foreign “outsider”.

2.2.2 *The juxtaposition of characters*

In the main plot, Pearl Buck uses characters to show the struggle between Orient and Western cultures. The representative instance is the description of the women’s characteristics. For Wang Yuan, he had no feeling for foreign girls. Even if he began to show a special feeling for Mary, his mentor’s daughter, the reason was that the girl was equipped with some classic Orient virtues, namely calmness and rationality. In this way, the collision between disparate cultures is remarkable enough to be noticed.

Apart from this, in the covert progression, Pearl Buck often highlights the paradox features of the characters, by implicating the traits that are opposite to those revealed by the direct description. Thus, she not only enriched the image of the characters, creating round characters, but also inspired the readers to reflect on the meaning of the theme. In Pearl Buck’s works, she often uses the double-sided character image to show the conflict in their inner heart between localism and modernity.

Firstly, this conflict is embodied internally in one single character. As we mentioned before, Wang Lung, although cherished the land as the essence of his wealth, he failed to resist the temptation of Lotus. Hence, Wang Lung himself is depicted as an individual involved of the root of localism and the expectation of modernity. Another typical example is Mei-ling in *A House Divided*, who possesses the traditional qualities of Chinese local women — genteel and reserved, as well as the traits of women in modern times — erudite and independent. The fight of localism and modernity reached a kind of balance in this character, on which Pearl Buck placed her hope of the peaceful coexistence of the two features. Also, Ai-lan, the cousin sister of Wang Yuan, was totally in her element in parties and fit well in city life. However, the result of

marrying a dandy tragically denotes that modernity is still subject to localism. It also shows that in the aspect of image shaping, Pearl Buck’s most prominent performance lies in the realistic observation of the practical situation. She did not fully accept the concept of Western Feminism and build women into a completely free and liberated group. Instead, women in her mindset appear to be an anti-oppression group including women from a wide range of classes, backgrounds, races and ages. Influenced by the modern ethos, these women tried to resist, but could not easily succeed due to the external environment and their own psychological motivation.

Secondly, the comparison of the juxtaposition of characters reveals the conflict. The comparison between O-lan and Lotus in *The Good Earth* is a convincing example. Likely, in *A House Divided*, Wang Yuan and Wang Sheng, formed a comparison. After Sheng and Yuan arrived in the foreign land, Pearl Buck directly narrated “Yuan and Sheng parted early ... for Sheng fell into love of a great city ... and he said the schools there were better for such as he was who loved to learn of verse and music ... and he cared nothing for the land as Yuan did.”^[10] Without the nourishment of localism, Yuan expressed his feeling that even the language was awkward by speaking friendly to a foreign friend that “I find your speech never wholly natural to me”^[10]. After returning to China, Yuan was looking forward to planting the selected seeds from abroad into his own country’s land so that might all harvests would be improved. While Sheng became depressed and found life unendurably dull and inane. Obviously, Yuan developed into a hybridity of modern and local cultures. On the basis of his intense emotion for the local land and people, he expected to apply what he learnt from modernity to locality, so that the two sides could be complementary to each other.

3. Conclusion

“When we find some elements in a text seem to be irrelevant to the development of the story, we should not dismiss them out of hand. Instead, we ought to examine them carefully to see if they contribute to a narrative undercurrent.”^[11] The cultural collision in Pearl Buck’s works has already been demonstrated while the exploration of the narrative undertone reveals the author’s consideration of the developing process for a country in a specific time, in which people, especially the youth, inevitably has to experience a mental struggle between modernity and localism. Therefore, Pearl Buck’s works are thought-provoking for the further study of people’s mentality in modern ages.

Through the close reading of the text above, this paper tries to sort out the covert progression in Pearl Buck’s “family epic” — the conflict between modernity and native nature in plot and character. Although some scholars have noticed the localism in Pearl Buck’s works, they mainly started from her own life, not only ignoring the style and structural arrangement of her works, but also failed to notice that modernity and localism together form an independent narrative progression throughout the trilogy. Thus, once given a critical thinking, the dual contradictions in the works could be distilled, which on the one

hand fully reflect the rich discourse space of Pearl Buck's works while on the other hand, the duality also calls the readers to dig over the thematic meaning profoundly.

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