

A Post-Colonial Inquiry of Pearl S. Buck's Narratives

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Abstract: Pearl S. Buck, a famous cross-cultural female writer, during the past century has appealed to both domestic and foreign scholars, as her works are remarkably distinguishable from other Western writers. This article investigates the comprehensive narrative features of Pearl S. Buck, by taking the perspective of post-colonialism. The reasonability of applying the theory to the research of Pearl Buck's works lies in two aspects. Firstly, the historical background of post-colonial criticism is similar to that of Pearl Buck's works, namely, to break the grand narrative of Western World and to make the voice of the Orient be heard. Secondly, the core concepts of both are consistent — the relationship between “knowledge” and “power” and how to promise sovereignty in intercultural communication. The findings are summarized features in perspective, character and language use of Pearl S. Buck's stories, which carries a significance to the narrative techniques.

1. Introduction

Pearl S. Buck, with the complicated intercultural background of both American and Chinese, is one of the most typical cross-cultural female writers. Her appeal of the harmonious coexistence of heterogenous cultures showed her broad horizon, especially her consciousness of ridding the restraint of Western imperialism in the communication of civilizations, which reveals her tendency towards post-colonialism. She was appraised “Be ahead of her time for at least forty years and will continue to be ahead”^[1]. She deserves the praise for the uniqueness and advancement of her works, which have become classics nowadays. Thus, it is worthwhile to exemplify Pearl Buck's Chinese narratives, including plots, characters and structures, from which the very skills can be concluded and employed in cross-cultural communications.

From the standpoint of the post-colonial criticism, Pearl Buck's works devoted to remove barriers on the way of describing a truthful and brand-new Chinese image to the Western world and her effort was paid off by the award of Nobel Price in 1938. Hence, this study is accordingly designed to investigate her writing techniques and answer to the following questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics of Pearl S. Buck's narration from the perspective of post-colonialism?
- (2) How do these characteristics embody in various aspects according to narratology?

2. Literature review

2.1 Overview of Pearl Buck and Post-colonialism

In the past two decades, the trend of researches on the narration of Pearl Buck is shown in Figure 1:



Figure 1: Research on Pearl S. Buck's narratives in the past 20 years

The research began in 1999, and became the most extensive in 2014. 93 essays have been published.

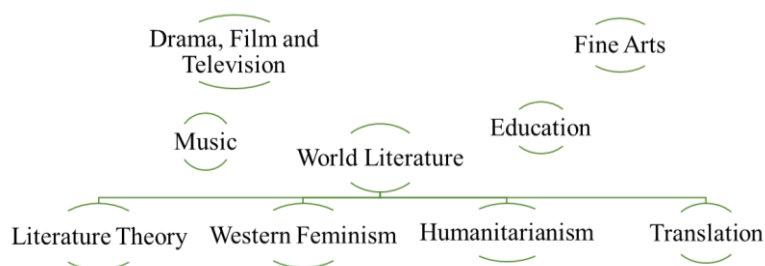


Figure 2: Subjects that have been involved in relevant researches

Then, as is shown in Figure 2, the relevant researches have referred to many subjects.

According to the quantitative analysis, we can see that applying the post-colonial theory to Pearl Buck's works is of value, for the unexplored potential and the existing materials.

As Edward Said termed in the *Orientalism* [2], the image of the Orient has formed a savage, ugly, weak and effeminate stereotype, leading to the mature of the so-called "Oriental studies". While Pearl S. Buck distinguished herself from it, as we can see "from her literature ideas to specific content" [3]. The aim of post-colonialism is to overthrow the rule of Western imperialism in international writings. Pearl Buck, as a "pioneer of the post-colonial criticism" [3], not only broke the constraint of the grand narratives, but also proposed a far-reaching wish of mutual complement on the basis of equal status. The typical post-colonial feature of Pearl can be further highlighted when we compare her with another individual transcultural figure: the American missionary Authur Anderson Smith. Authur confessed that the Western-centralizing theory was so deep-rooted that it worked unconsciously on him. Instead of viewing Chinese as "the other" to the West, Pearl Buck clearly "opposed the cultural hegemony of western colonialism and sympathized with Chinese culture and people" [4] and successfully presented a true image of Chinese through her works. Therefore, there is a practical motivation to deconstruct her writings from the perspective of post-colonialism so that the contemporary transcultural communication can use it as a reference.

2.2 The term of Post-colonial Feminism

Post-colonial Feminist Criticism, sometimes called the Third World Feminist Criticism, is the result of the combination of both Feminism and post-colonialism. Foucault once indicated in his works: people in the third world are excluded from the Western humanitarianism, likewise women in the third world are the marginal group out of the Western “white women” Feminism. The kind of feminism supports what are critically criticized by the post-colonialism and the relationship is like:

Women in the third world = old-fashioned = conventional = ignorant, (1)

While, Occident = civilization = progress = brilliant, (2)^[5]

Strictly speaking, Said’s theory mainly focuses on men in the third world. To tackle the problem, Gayatri C. Spivak further developed post-colonialism by illustrating the Western Feminism. The most impressive is that she pointed out the Jamaican woman Bertha Mason, namely the mad woman on the attic, was intentionally described like a “beast”, for Jane Eyre’s stance of a white woman. Meanwhile, some other scholars tried to build up the “Counter-discourse” to explore a new way out of Western traditional concepts.

In this way, if we are going to research Pearl Buck’s narratives, the female characters are not neglectable, as her description of Chinese women not only fully filled the gaps of Said’s post-colonialism, but also was beyond Spivak’s theory, as her creation of Chinese female character is rooted in the Chinese reality — the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, which means the revolution of Chinese women is not so much relevant with the patriarchal society, as with the colonialism^[6]. And her works also manifested that, women in China, when compared to the Western females, have their unique beauty of decency. The purpose of this study, then, contains the elaboration of this.

2.3 Western Narratology

Professor Shen Dan mentioned that Western narratology generally adopts dichotomy to divide narrative works into two levels: “story” and “discourse”^[7]. Compared with the dichotomy of “content” and “form”, this classification method highlights the different expressive effects produced by different ways of thinking in the narration. Therefore, on the one hand, at the level of “story”, this paper analyzes the transformation and function of Pearl Buck’s narrative perspective and anti-traditional characterization. On the other hand, at the level of “discourse”, this paper explores the innovation of the narrative structure and the creative use of narrative language.

3. Discussion

3.1 Perspective-taking

The most remarkable view in Pearl’s works are common people, especially the Chinese peasants. However, while narrating from the perspective of ordinary people, Pearl Buck’s work has a different emphasis from that of traditional Chinese novels. Ah Q in Lu Xun’s writing is not the “normal condition” of our Chinese, but just an exaggerated “abnormal condition”; Maodun’s works, like *Midnight* focuses on psychological description, so they should be defined as “psychological novels”. Unlike Shen Congwen, who presents the idyllic countryside through the simple and naïve image of ordinary people, the ordinary people depicted by Pearl Buck showed the character, cognition and customs of Chinese people in the real society at that time.

From this point of view, Pearl Buck has formed a unique narrative style. But let’s not forget that a Western writer rarely uses a Chinese person as the main narrative character, only with the exception of several epistolary novels like “The Citizen of The World”, “Goldsmith's Friend Abroad Again”^[8].

It is even more precious for Pearl Buck to use Chinese women as the first-person narration in *East Wind: West Wind*. Therefore, the conversion of view angles, from western people themselves to the Chinese peasants, reveals the transition from “Object” to “Subject”, according to the post-colonialism and it is reflected in the following points.

Firstly, depictions of folk-customs seem more authentic in the eye of a Chinese local person. For instance, there is a detailed description of making tea:

Wang Lung dipped some into a bowl, and then, after a moment, he opened a glazed jar that stood upon a ledge of the stove and took from it a dozen or so of the curled dried leaves and sprinkled them upon the surface of the water. ^[9]

It is argued that the description is untruthful as the way for Chinese making tea is putting boiling water to the tea and the order here is reversed. However, Liu Long, a contemporary scholar, found this custom is preserved in some particular regions even till now, as tea is scarce. The local custom can only be observed and told by the “subject”. Also, another example is in “*The House Divided*”. The kind landlady laughed “But rice is the best I can do --- snails and rats and dogs and all them things you eat I can’t supply!” ^[10] Pearl Buck arranged the protest for the main character Wang Yuan and in this way, she stuck up for the true features of China.

Secondly, the conversion from the third-person omniscient narrative pattern to the limited angle of view also embodies the subjectivity. When Wang Lung met the missionary, it’s easy to tell that the description belongs to a Chinese person. As he has never seen a foreigner before, the missionary was such a freak with blue eyes and a hooked nose. When it comes to the picture of the crucified Jesus, both Wang Lung and his father asserted that Jesus must be such a vicious man that he deserves the torture. And then, O-lan even use the “holy picture” to prepare the shoe soles for it was not a common thing to get such a thick paper. To present western behavior and culture from a Chinese perspective, shows Pearl Buck’s focus on the Chinese instead of the traditional western centralism.

Another example is the emphasis on the usage of Chinese language. In *The House Divided*, Wang Yuan, the main character, was expected to be a Christian leader by his respected professor and Yuan became confused and embarrassed. While the professor’s daughter, Mary, persuaded him. Once she realized her parents’ intention to transform Wang Yuan into a missionary, she said seriously: “To me, how presumptuous to think you could be made more than you are — by a religion! You are of your own race and your own time. How can anyone dare to impose upon you what is foreign to you?” Instead of being at loss, Wang Yuan regained his ego because of Mary’s advice. And then he claimed his Chinese identity solemnly: “I wish that I can speak to you in my own language. For I find your speech never wholly natural to me.” ^[10] We can say Wang Yuan, as a representative of the Chinese, claimed our right to speak for ourselves in Chinese, which settled the core problem of Orientalism, namely “the Orient fail to express themselves”. Chinese no longer had to acquiesce in the labels that are imposed on them, but to develop a self-consciousness to communicate with equal rights. Hence, in the view of the perspective-taking, Pearl Buck made a great progress in promoting the Chinese voice.

3.2 Image-building

Gayatri C. Spivak once mentioned the dual constraints of male chauvinism and colonialism on the females in the third world, as it is written: White men, seeking to save brown women from brown men, impose upon those women a greater ideological constriction by absolutely identifying. ^[11] As an American writer, Pearl Buck didn’t write women into a group that was totally out of manipulation, but a group that rose up against oppression, comprising women of different identities, races and backgrounds, in different ages.

O-lan, in *The Good Earth*, is a real Chinese woman, a woman that is against the traditional

stereotype for the Westerners. Actually, the description of her appearance was revolutionary: she was robust rather than delicate, with a pair of normal feet rather than bounded feet, with a square, honest face rather than an oval face, with small eyes rather than narrow eyes that are upturned. Although she was given as a slave, more than a wife to Wang Lung, she made her way in fighting against her initial social status at last because of her tenacity and independence.

There is an example to show her consciousness of revolting:

And again the slow smile spread over her face, the smile that never lightened the dullness of her narrow black eyes, and after a long time she said, "Last year this time I was slave in that house."^[9]

Even a woman like O-lan in the lower-class had an attempt to get liberation in Pearl Buck's work. It is her silent support and industrious labor that helped Wang Lung become wealthy. In the adapted film of *The Good Earth*, it was changed that O-lan happened to get the "life-saving money" for the family instead of Wang Lung, which was a justified revision for me in view of Pearl Buck's praise for O-lan. Nevertheless, this kind of feminism was excluded and criticized by the Western Feminism as it was not radical and constructive enough (which can be reflected by O-lan's miserable death) and male power was not deconstructed. While it would be proper if we explain from the perspective of post-colonialism, as Pearl Buck portrayed the real status quo of Chinese women in the modern China, in which women couldn't get rid of the shackles of semi-colonial society and patriarchy, and these are all inescapable factors in the post-colonialism.

Another typical female character is Mei-ling in *The House Divided*, who was set as a sedate, erudite and rational young woman. The lady who adopted her placed much hope on her, even more than her own daughter. And Mei-ling symbolizes Pearl Buck's wish of combining both Western and Eastern culture, because Mei-ling studied both traditional Chinese medicine and western medicine treatment. Out of her pursuit of devoting to the humanitarian career, she rejected the love of Wang Yuan at first, which was an unprecedented conduct for women in Chinese stories.

If we see O-lan and Mei-ling as evident breakthroughs of Pearl Buck's Chinese stories, we may find the contrasts between characters implied her post-colonial features, namely the equal status of women in the third world and those in the western countries. Just use Mei-ling and Mary as an example. Both of them stand up for the amalgamation of heterogenous cultures as Mary had a good knowledge about Chinese culture. The advancement can be revealed through their speeches, their merciful attitudes towards the world and they are reserved in face of love.

Another contrast is Wang Lung's granddaughter, Ai-lan, who fit well in the free and open city life and the landlady's daughter, who was met by Wang Yuan in America. We may compare the descriptions of their appearances:

Ai-lan: ...the prettiest little face, three-cornered as a kitten's, the black hair smooth and curled upon her rounded cheeks. ... the brightest, blackest eyes shot through with light and laughter, and beneath them was her red little mouth, the lips very full and red and yet small and delicate.

The landlady's daughter: ...she had taken her mother's wiry flaming hair and changed it by some youthful magic in herself into the softest curling coppery stuff...her mother's eyes she had, but softer, darker, and larger...Her lips, too, were soft and full and very red.^[10]

With the similar beautiful eyes, hair and lips, we can find Pearl Buck determined to stress the equality of the Chinese girls in physical beauty and warm personality. The confidence of Ai-lan also reflected the fighting against the submissive tradition of Chinese women. While the end of Ai-lan — marrying a dandy, proved the influence of the semi-colonialism society, which means she became a passive woman at last. It is the paradox that makes Pearl Buck a pioneer of post-colonial feminism as she was aware of the realistic obstacles for women to get access to real liberation.

3.3 Language-using

Nowadays, with the advent of globalization and the increasing concern about identity problem, the theory of Homi K. Bhabha has received much attention. The first key point is Hybridity, which is borrowed from Bakhtin Michael by Homi Bhabha, suggesting the subversion and deconstruction of the colonial discourse during the blending process of two different cultures, due to the agency (i.e one's power to act) of the colonized. Then, this hybridity may derive a "Third Space", which belongs to no one but breaks the binary oppositions so as to stand up to the western grand narrative. Meanwhile, another "object" that is independent of the colonized will come into being, through mimicry. Just as Homi Bhabha once implied, it is the third space that constitutes the discursive conditions of the act of publishing, enabling the same symbol to be possessed, translated, re-historicized and re-interpreted.

Hence, when it comes to literature, it can be reflected in the language in both writing and translating. As the theme of this essay is the narrative features of Pearl Buck's Chinese stories, we do not discuss her translated works. It seems that as if Pearl Buck appreciated the "third space" in advance and she had a similar viewpoint as Aime Cesaire, who emphasized that the black must realize and acknowledge the fact that they are black in order to retain the spirit of their traditional culture. In like manner, Pearl Buck applied this idea to her Chinese stories and insisted this in her writings to help keep the originality of Chinese culture.

In the writings, on one hand, Pearl Buck reserved Chinese colloquial expressions in English writing. For example, "my son's mother" (haizitama; wife), "have happiness" (youxile; being pregnant), "old bone" (laogutou; cursing words for the husband) were employed in her works. On the other hand, she used literal translation deliberately, like "Ying Country" "Mei Country" (yingguo, meigu; Britain, America), "electric letter" (dianbao; telegram) and "running dog" (zougou; stooge), etc. Pearl Buck believed that when a culture has to narrate itself in the language of "the other", the first problem would be the translation problem. And Homi Bhabha's notion is that during the progress of language conversion, the indigenous culture would mix with some heterogeneous factors, including the hegemonic discourse. Thus, these examples show us Pearl Buck's attitude toward her writings that the original Chinese words or phrases ought to be presented from the perspective of Chinese people. Even though the intelligibility would be denied by some foreign writers, the new narrative style is what really matters.

The post-colonial features in language-using can also be seen through the narration mode. Pearl Buck chose the mode of Chinese traditional serial novel (Zhanghui style) because she was "genuinely fond of and thus constantly defended the classical Chinese novel", and "she was extremely disapproving of modern Chinese novelists blindly imitating the West, seeing them as young, sentimental and incapable of expressing themselves freely."^[12] The most typical characteristic of serial novel is the simple opening, but rather the minute and lengthy descriptions of the surroundings in conventional western novels. The functions of this can be illustrated by using the example of *The Good Earth*, whose opening is merely a short sentence of "It was Wang Lung's marriage day"^[9]. The given information reveals two things instantly: the main character is named Wang Lung and the setting is the beginning of his family life. With the development of the descriptions, a vivid picture of a peasant who were too poor to choose a wife was depicted, unfolding the survival conditions in the post-colonial society while narrating a real Modern China. In the meantime, another feature of her choice of learning from serial novel is the ambiguous ending of the stories. The last part of *The House Divided* are cited here: "We two --- we need not be afraid of anything." We readers have no idea of what happened to the characters in the end. But as "One thousand readers, there are one thousand Hamlet", we all have our own thoughts after reading the book. The audience are often left with an imaginable ending instead of a definite one, as it is in the western novels. And the benefit is

that we will gain an individual and new impression of the age and the country in which the novel is set. Although this mode may be a preference of Pearl Buck herself, it still shows the charm of Chinese traditional culture and it would be a new style to perform a multi-dimensional China to the West.

4. Conclusion

With the advent of the increasing intercultural communications, skills and techniques have to be summarized so as to eliminate obstacles of intercultural communication in the era of globalization.

From the perspective of post-colonialism, this essay analyzed Pearl S. Buck's narrative features of her stories in multi-aspects. Firstly, Pearl Buck took local citizens as her main characters and the perspective conversion contributed to the authentic descriptions in her works, when compared to the previous Western "Chinese stories". Secondly, when set characters, Chinese females were not only taken into consideration by Pearl Buck, but also the status was largely promoted to the same level of Western women, which was totally uncommon in the past. Thirdly, Pearl Buck used "metaphrase" to present the original Chinese linguistic features. And she intentionally employed Chinese traditional narrative mode, leaving a room for imagination as well as challenging the Western restraint on Chinese writings. The above points give us inspirations for cross-cultural writings.

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