

The Narrative of Authentic Love and Alienation in Wang Anyi's *The Destination*

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ABSTRACT

This essay undertakes a critical investigation of Wang Anyi's short story, *The Destination*, employing Erich Fromm's humanist psychoanalysis to elucidate the complex interplay between societal transformation, the erosion of authentic love, and the resulting existential anxieties within the context of contemporary Chinese modernity. The analysis focuses on the protagonist, Chen Xin, and his return to a radically transformed Shanghai, a disorienting architectural and bureaucratic maze that disrupts historical continuity. This spatial disorientation, the essay argues, mirrors Chen Xin's strained familial ties, which exemplify Fromm's notion of alienated pseudo-love, wherein genuine emotional intimacy is replaced by commodified social exchanges operating under the pressures of a state-capitalist regime. Fromm's contrast between a way of life focused on owning and controlling things, versus one that emphasizes being present, growing as a person, and forming meaningful relationships, reveals a subjectivity caught between the pressure of inherited ideologies and the basic human need for love, care, and real emotional connection in a globalized and increasingly commodified society.

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1. Introduction

This essay analyzes Wang Anyi's *The Destination* through the lens of Erich Fromm's humanist psychoanalysis. In an era shaped by ideological dislocation and accelerated modernization, the boundaries between lived experience, emotional authenticity, and spatial coherence have become increasingly unstable. Anyi reveals this rupture, offering a critical entry point into the cultural and psychological dilemmas faced by individuals

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navigating post-Mao urban transformation: “Sometimes, the sacrifices I made to return to Shanghai weren’t worth it” (2002, p. 124). In *The Destination*, Anyi depicts this estrangement through the character, Chen Xin. He returns to a Shanghai utterly transformed, “a town which was fully different” (2002, p. 138). The very clear difference displays that there is a lack of the true emotion he was looking for and the loss of his connection to home. The stark difference indicates a lack of the true emotion he was seeking and the loss of his connection to home.

The city is now, in Fredrick Jameson’s words, a “hyperspace,” an abstract, “bureaucratic urban space” resisting historical continuity and emotional rootedness (1999, p. 19). This is shown through the lines “[E]arly in the morning, Chen Xing and his brother went to the labor bureau to start the formalities.” (Anyi, 2002, p. 121). This transition signifies an alienation from the human element and a shift toward alignment with bureaucratic systems.

The mass return of sent-down youth to urban areas depicts post-Mao China, epitomized by Chen Xin’s re-entry into Shanghai, and serves as an allegory for modernity’s existential and relational crisis. While critics often interpret Anyi’s novella as a reflection on political trauma, this study argues that ideological systems shape emotional life. This is explored through Fromm’s notion of authentic love, which reveals the ethical vacuum in Chen Xin’s relationships. Ultimately, this essay contends that *The Destination* dramatizes the alienation of a generation suspended between memory and modernity, intimacy and ideological constraint. Through spatial analysis and psycho-emotional critique, Wang’s narrative emerges not only as a reflection of historical transformation but as a compelling call for reclaiming human connection in a commodified mass world.

2. Review of Literature

Wang Anyi is widely regarded as a leading figure in post-Cultural Revolution Chinese literature, especially noted for her nuanced explorations of memory, urban transformation, gender politics, and psychological alienation. Her translated works, including *The Destination* (2002), *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (2008), and *Love on a Barren Mountain* (1991), engage deeply with the everyday lives of individuals shaped by historical upheaval and ideological transition. As Yue (1999) observes, Wang’s fiction intricately navigates the evolving texture of modern Chinese identity, foregrounding the ways ordinary experiences are inflected by political rupture (p. 32).

In *The Art of Loving* (1956), Erich Fromm reframes love as a disciplined act of ethical responsibility rooted in care, respect, and knowledge, challenging its reduction to sentimentality or possession. This framework offers critical insight into the emotional vacuity within Chen Xin’s relationships, which operate under what Fromm terms “mutual exploitation” (34).

Few studies have applied Fromm to analyze Chinese fiction. Wu (2014) explores Fromm’s theory in relation to emotional estrangement in post-revolutionary literature, noting its utility in unpacking the ethical emptiness embedded in social interactions. Meanwhile, Chen (2020) applies Jameson’s postmodern critique to representations of urban space, arguing that ideological abstraction reshapes memory and personal identity in contemporary Chinese narratives.

At last, these critical perspectives establish a theoretical foundation for interpreting *The Destination* as a complex meditation on alienation, commodification, and the crisis of intimacy in the post-Mao era. By synthesizing Fromm’s psych ethical framework with

spatial-cultural analysis, this study situates Wang Anyi's novella within broader discourses of affect, ideology, and urban transformation. It's a powerful way to explore the psychological and social consequences of urban transformation. In light of the theme of authentic love and given scope constraints, this essay focused on the pseudo love as alienation contrasted with Fromm's authentic love.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study draws upon Erich Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis to examine the emotional and ideological dimensions of alienation in Wang Anyi's *The Destination*. Fromm's theory concentrates on the premise that love is not merely a sentiment but an ethical act grounded in care, responsibility, and respect. He asserts, "love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence" (Fromm, 1956, p. 104). In societies dominated by materialism and commodification, individuals become estranged from both themselves and others, rendering authentic love increasingly unattainable.

In the social context of the story, alienation is conceptualized as a structural condition embedded within the commercial social dynamics. This commercial culture in Jameson's words, commodifies memory and flattens emotional experience, leading to what he terms the "waning of affect" (p. 19). This transformation of history into stylized surface imagery erodes depth and disorients the subject's capacity for meaningful connection.

Though this framework, the paper aims to interpret *The Destination* as a narrative that portrays alienation both as an emotional failure, rooted in Fromm's critique of pseudo-love and as a cultural condition, articulated through the analysis of spatial and ideological fragmentation. Together, these theories illuminate how Anyi's novella critiques the erosion of intimacy and historical consciousness in a society shaped by urbanization and ideological abstraction.

4. Discussion

In *The Destination*, Anyi constructs a rich depiction of authentic love amidst personal alienation and systemic change. To fully grasp this complexity, it is essential to situate love within the Chinese philosophical and poetic tradition and through Erich Fromm's (1956) ethical lens. Chinese classical poetry frequently portrays love as enduring yet bittersweet. "My love is like the moon, hidden by clouds, yet always present," (Li Bai, as cited in Zhang & Monte, 2011, p. 36). This resonates with Chen Xin's muted longing, as seen when "his heart grew heavy as he watched [Yuan] disappearing into crowds" (Wang, 2002, p. 125). Moments of potential intimacy are often undercut by fear and uncertainty, reflecting what Fromm (1956) might describe as a failure to embrace productive love, characterized by care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge.

Unlike Li Bai's poetic endurance, Chen Xin's feelings remain emotionally inaccessible. This emotional inaccessibility speaks to Jameson's (1991) concept of the waning of affect, where even nostalgia fails to yield depth. "He had overlooked them all. The new moon eyes, the countryside, the life he couldn't wait to end. Now he missed them." (Wang, 2002, p. 140). This line captures Chen Xin's retrospective longing, stripped of depth and fulfilment, nostalgia that fails to restore meaning, echoing Jameson's critique of modern emotional detachment. The familial dimension of love, central to the novella, is illustrated when Chen Xin's brother conveys, "mother got up at three this morning to buy food for you" (Wang, 2002, p. 119). This act embodies Fromm's

(1956) principle of love as care and sharply contrasts with the emotionally sterile urban environment. However, these moments of authenticity are rare and isolated.

The modern world Chen Xin encounters prioritize efficiency, duty, and ideological conformity, not emotional depth, revealing the potential for commodification in a globalizing world. This is seen through Aunt Shen who says “[m]ind whether the young man is well off or not, provided that he’s nice. If he has no room, he can live with them.” (Wang, 2002, p. 132). Aunt Shen’s pragmatic advice reflects a prioritization of social cohesion and familial stability over individual romantic fulfilment, highlighting the influence of economic considerations on personal relationships within the modernizing Chinese society that Chen now inhabits. The focus in the phrase shows the potential of the husband, which will be based on his capacity, and not his personal well-being.

During the Cultural Revolution, love itself was politically suspect. According to Nettina (2008), “romantic love distracted one from the goals of the Cultural Revolution” (p. 47). Furthermore, marriage could disqualify someone from urban return, which is seen, as “he couldn’t have come back if he had been married” (Wang, 2002, p. 117). These policies exemplify notions of ideological structuring, where affect and intimacy are subjugated to systemic goals.

Anyi’s (2002) portrayal of romantic hesitation is particularly telling. As Chen Xin asks himself, “if he married for the sake of getting married... wouldn’t he be adding a burden to his life?” (p. 139). This tension reflects Fromm’s (1956) assertion that individuals, alienated from their true selves, cannot love authentically. Alternatively, Jameson might contend that such hesitation stems from ideological scripts that commodify and depoliticize emotion. This portrays love in tension with societal obligation. Chen xin insists: “I don’t want spare room, Mother. I’m not marrying” (Wang, 2002, 136). As a result, *The Destination* presents authentic love as a contested ideal. Through the lens of Chinese tradition and reinforced by Fromm’s view, love emerges not simply as personal longing but as a site of ethical struggle and ideological disruption.

Alienation in Wang Anyi’s *The Destination* emerges as a central theme shaped by both political ideology and socio-cultural transformation. The Communist era’s emphasis on collective identity over individual personality laid the groundwork for widespread emotional estrangement. As Nivison (1996) notes, Mao Zedong and Liu Shaoqi endorsed “utopian images of the future communist society, the radical priority of party over individual interests, and the demise of personality” (p. 52). This ideological configuration contributes to a social landscape in which personal longing and emotional authenticity were increasingly stifled, as individual needs were sublimated to the goals of the collective.

Modernization, while promising progress, also deepened the crisis of emotional dislocation. Isay (1993) argues that “the modern striving for progress” often inhibits “the modern mode of living,” manifesting in feelings of existential fragmentation and isolation (p. 1). This alienation, as seen through Fromm’s (1956) lens, stems from a disconnection with one’s own sense of self. In *The Destination*, this alienation is vividly portrayed through Chen Xin’s return to an unfamiliar Shanghai, an urban space that reflects both the promise and rupture of modern life, embodying both material advancement and a loss of authentic connection: “The buildings were taller, the streets wider, the lights brighter. But the people seemed distant, their faces unfamiliar, their voices hollow” (Wang, 2002, p. 135).

As Chen Xin navigates the city, his observations highlight the paradox of proximity and estrangement. “People rubbed shoulders, toes touched heels. Though they lived so

closely, they were all strangers. Not knowing or understanding one another, they were proud and snobbish” (Wang, 2002, p. 138). Chen Xin observes what Jameson (1991) describes as the waning of affect, by which the emotion decays due to constructivism in ideology.

Chen Xin’s alienation is not only spatial but also psychological. His reflection reveals growing distance from the city he once knew. “In the past decade, he had been to Shanghai on holidays and on business. But with every visit, he only felt the distance between him and Shanghai grow. He had become a stranger, an outsider, whom the Shanghainese looked down upon. And he found their superiority and conceit intolerable” (Wang, 2002, p. 118). This moment is a reflection of Fromm’s (1956) idea about connection through genuineness in society. Chen Xin “thought of the remote town he had lived in where passengers squeezed in any old way, no scientific method at all” (Wang, 2002, p. 122), suggesting a nostalgia for a time when human interaction, though perhaps unrefined, felt more authentic and less mediated by the alienating forces of modernization and lack of ability to create his own means.

The protagonist’s experiences of both connection and isolation shape his evolving identity, leaving him with a persistent sense of fragmentation. Moments of potential intimacy are often undercut by fear and uncertainty, reflecting what Fromm (1956) might describe as a failure to embrace productive love, characterized by care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. This is starkly illustrated in Chen Xin’s reaction to Yuan’s departure: “Chen Xin heart grew heavy as he watched her disappearing into crowds” (Wang, 2002, p. 125). This fleeting connection highlights the ephemeral nature of relationships in his life and amplifies his feelings of loneliness, underscoring a lack of genuine relatedness as Fromm conceives it.

Furthermore, Chen Xin’s internal anxieties about marriage reveal a fear of perpetuating his alienation through a loveless union, a fear that reflects the corrosive effects of ideology and the fear of being caught in a false consciousness, where genuine needs are obscured by societal expectations. He questions, “if he married for the sake of getting married and his wife he chose was not understanding, wouldn’t he be adding a burden to his life?” (Wang, 2002, p. 139). He deeply fears that marriage could worsen his isolation. This reflects a concern about commodified relationships. Genuine connection is sacrificed for social conformity or personal gain and Fromm would see this as detrimental.

Another example of this situation is obvious in the following: “When Chen Xin had eaten his fill and bathed, he lay on the double bed he was to share with his younger brother, feeling as relaxed as if he were drunk” (Wang, 2002, p. 121). Chen finds a sense of comfort and relaxation in sharing a bed with his brother. This sharing, reminiscent of communal living often idealized in communist ideology, paradoxically highlights a potential loss of individual space and identity, hinting at the complexities and potential compromises inherent in collectivist systems.

This tension between inner yearning and structural alienation positions Chen as both a victim and observer of modernization’s contradictions. “He believed that once he arrived at his true destination, he would have no doubts, troubles, or sense of rootlessness” (Wang, 2002, p. 140). This line emphasizes Chen Xin’s yearning for coherence in a fragmented socio-historical landscape. His belief in a “true destination” function as a symbolic resolution to unconscious political contradictions where emotional clarity substitutes for ideological critique. Finally, end with a memorable statement that

emphasizes the significance of the research or encourages further thought or action. this paper.

5. Conclusion

This essay critically explores the themes of alienation and authentic love in Wang Anyi's work *The Destination*, applying Erich Fromm's psycho-ethical framework. By examining the protagonist's fragmented social identity and emotional estrangement upon returning to Shanghai, the analysis reveals how post-Cultural Revolution urban space functions as a site of ideological dislocation. The essay interprets the protagonist's internal exile as symptomatic of consumerist cultural logic—marked by loss of historicity. Fromm's concept of authentic love is then applied to the protagonist's strained familial relationships, illuminating a pathway toward emotional reintegration and existential meaning. Ultimately, the essay argues that Wang Anyi positions authentic love as a counterforce to commodification and alienation, suggesting a humanist reclaiming of self within an increasingly bureaucratic context.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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