

The Dimension of Compassion Ai Wu's Reflections on Self, the Marginalized, and the Era in Southward Journey

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Abstract: *Southward Journey* stands as a representative achievement of Ai Wu's early literary creations, surpassing mere travel accounts or records of exotic customs. Its deeper value lies in constructing a literary world imbued with a layered sense of compassion. This paper employs a combined approach of close textual reading and theoretical analysis, centering on the work's distinctive wandering narrative, and examines it through three dimensions: self-spiritual redemption, empathy with marginalized characters, and awareness of the era's crises. The key findings suggest that Ai Wu's compassion is not a simple, condescending sympathy; rather, it is based on egalitarian dialogue, lived experience, and historical reflection, forming a complex emotional structure that integrates self-reconstruction, humanistic empathy, and critique of the times. It begins with self-reflection through a lowered narrative perspective and a breakthrough of the spiritual world, deepens into a dialectical recognition of the inner contradictions of marginalized characters and empathic resonance, and ultimately elevates into an acute concern for the sufferings of the borderlands and the destiny of the nation, highlighting life's resilience amid the interweaving of realistic depictions and romantic tones. The academic contribution of this paper lies in clarifying the intrinsic connections between self, the marginalized, and the era in *Southward Journey*, enriching the multidimensional interpretation of Ai Wu's compassionate consciousness, providing a model case for breaking doctrinaire narratives in the study of leftist literature, and deepening the understanding of the humanistic value of modern wandering narratives.

Keywords: *Southward Journey*; Compassion; Self-Reconstruction; Narratives of the

Marginalized; Reflection on the Era

1. Introduction

Within the context of 1930s leftist literature, Ai Wu's 1935 work *Southward Journey* exhibits a unique aesthetic heterogeneity—it belongs to the realm of leftist literature while simultaneously being "a novel imbued with a bright, fresh romanticism and emotion, possessing strong subjective lyrical elements." [1]. His quality breaks through the long-standing dogmatic narratives prevalent in leftist literature. This breakthrough is most evident in his vivid portrayal of various marginalized figures along the Yunnan-Burma frontier, achieved by immersing himself in their world as a "drifter." It represents a spiritual exploration into the depths of life and the frontiers of the soul. This paper is based on the text of *Southward Journey* and previous research results, conducting an in-depth analysis of the author from three dimensions: his pursuit of spiritual self-redemption, his empathy for grassroots characters, and his awareness of the concerns of the times, thereby enriching research on Ai Wu and *Southward Journey*. The paper sequentially analyzes the writer's spiritual reconstruction through his wandering experiences, the profound empathy he demonstrates toward the complexity of society and human nature among the lower strata, and his dual depiction of the suffering in borderlands and the resilience of life within a specific historical context. Ultimately, it argues that Ai Wu's 'compassion' not only refers to the author's abandonment of his old self and pursuit of a new self during his wanderings, but also manifests in his deep 'empathy' for the contradictory yet vivid humanity of those who are humiliated and harmed, further elevating into an overall 'concern' for individual destiny, regional suffering, and the survival of the nation amid turbulent times. Ai Wu's writing thus serves both as a chronicle of the individual soul and a reflection of the era's visage. By examining the interplay between self, the underclass, and the times in *Southward*

Journey, we glimpse how Ai Wu transformed his personal journey of wandering and hardship into a literary expression rich in warmth and power, endowing his work with a timeless vitality that transcends space and time.

2. A Journey of Self-Reconstruction

Ai Wu's journey southward was initially a geographical displacement, but at its core, it represented a spiritual exodus and reconstruction—a "cross-cultural imagination during Ai Wu's wandering"[2].

Driven by "the path of working while studying, the strong pull of the Work-Study Mutual Aid Group, and the pressure of an arranged marriage" [3], Ai Wu resolutely severed ties with his established cultural order and social networks. Departing from Chengdu, he entered Kunming and then journeyed toward Burma, placing himself in the utterly unfamiliar wilderness of the frontier. Throughout this "journey," the narrator's perspective evolves from an initial gaze tinged with the cultural superiority of the Central Plains to one marked by awe and curiosity. He witnesses the tenacious labor of frontier folk on barren lands, observes both tolerance and division among diverse ethnic groups, and most profoundly, sees the struggles and perseverance of marginalized individuals within the torrent of fate. This shift in perspective inevitably triggers an identity crisis. Neither a traditional intellectual nor a native of the frontier, the narrator exists as an observer and participant straddling multiple cultural boundaries.

Amidst this persistent upheaval, the narrator learns to embrace diverse forms of existence with greater humility and inclusivity. This process constitutes the first dimension of his developing compassio—the contemplation and reconstruction of the self.

2.1 The Evolutionary Trajectory of Narrative Perspective

A notable feature in the narrative progression of Southward Journey is the gradual shift in the narrator's perspective from an external observer to an internal participant.

Upon first entering the frontier region, as a youth educated in modern ways, I inevitably viewed the "barbarian tribes" and strange customs around me through the lens of a civilized world, maintaining a certain psychological distance. This initial sense of detachment formed the foundational tension for the narrative's development. In the

opening chapter, "The First Lesson in the Philosophy of Life," the narrator, newly arrived in Kunming, is bewildered, lonely, and helpless, preoccupied with finding lodging and a foothold. "Kunming, this city... seemed to wear a lonely smile. Descending from the distant peaks, I wandered aimlessly along Xiangxi Street, bathed in a pale yellow haze, a small bundle clutched in my right hand." [4] This reveals the protagonist's disorientation and alienation in a foreign land.

Yet as the wandering deepened, the harsh realities of survival swiftly dissolved these cultural differences and barriers. The author did not merely place characters within class antagonism; instead, he immersed himself in their world, portraying their hatred for oppressors through the eyes of the oppressed. In a remarkable way, he revealed the courage, integrity, and willingness to help others inherent in the common people. [5] The marginalized characters in Ai Wu's works possess a distinct consciousness of resistance. This resistance is not a class awakening under revolutionary discourse, but rather a spontaneous struggle born from the instinct for survival. In this process of immersing himself in life, the author's narrative perspective gradually descends and internalizes, transforming his identity from an "observer" to an "experiencer."

In *The Gorge*, the narrator personally witnesses and participates in the struggles of a vagrant gang, becoming both observer and participant in their spontaneous resistance. "We, these people cast aside by the world" [4] form a communal viewpoint, with the narrator fully embracing the identity of this vagrant collective. Here, "we" transcends mere grammatical plurality, signifying a fundamental shift in narrative stance. Readers no longer observe the story of an unfamiliar group through the eyes of "I," but instead follow the experiences of "we," feeling the will to survive as a marginalized group supports each other and struggles fiercely in desperate circumstances.

This metamorphosis of perspective signifies the author's abandonment of the enlightener's customary condescending stance. Instead, they attempt to perceive and comprehend an entirely different world through an equal, even apprentice-like, identity. This integration of perspective lays the groundwork for deeper emotional resonance and value reassessment, marking a crucial step in broadening the author's spiritual horizons.

2.2 Pathways to Breakthrough in the Spiritual Realm

Geographical displacement and life's hardships, while ravaging the body, also constitute a powerful assault and tempering of entrenched ideas and value systems.

Ai Wu "plunged into the lowest strata of society, encountered the most extreme individuals in the harshest world, experienced the most extreme existence, and thus gained profoundly intense life experiences"[6]. His original knowledge and ethics often proved feeble and powerless when confronted with the stark and brutal survival laws of the frontier. Yet it was precisely within this abyss of value disarray and existential crisis that Ai Wu achieved a crucial breakthrough in his spiritual world. This breakthrough did not lead to a wholesale rejection of civilized society or blind admiration for barbarism. Rather, after experiencing extreme living, he shed the prejudices of hypocritical dogma and rediscovered and affirmed the primal vitality, simple emotions, and survival wisdom that stem from life instincts and are not overly constrained by etiquette and rules.

In *The First Lesson of Life Philosophy*, when the dignity of an intellectual-"exchanging a few old books for a meal"-is utterly shattered by the demands of survival, the dignity and value inherent in the existing knowledge system rapidly collapse. After enduring a series of misfortunes-failing to sell straw sandals, being unable to pull a rickshaw, and having his shoes stolen-the narrator witnessed how marginalized individuals maintain the bare minimum of dignity in desperate circumstances. Yet he was not defeated. Instead, he broke through the intellectual constraints of his former life, issuing a deafening cry: "I must survive!" [4] This path to spiritual liberation stems not only from the author's personal insights but also from the raw vitality of diverse marginalized characters. In "On the Pine Ridge," an elderly peddler lives alone on a desolate mountain ridge, sustaining himself through meager trades. He not only battles nature but also, in the depths of extreme solitude, reshapes his own logic of survival and moral code-a way of acting stripped of social networks, stemming directly from the instinct for life's preservation. Though I cannot directly link the bloodthirsty pauper with this kindly old man who treats me with warmth, I observe a primal force at work-one that manifests as brutal competition

yet transforms into sudden, genuine care for fellow travelers. Though this force clashes with conventional ethics, its direct connection to the essence of survival renders it profoundly authentic. These experiences compel the narrator to continually reflect upon and adjust their existing cognitive framework.

This spiritual breakthrough is a process of dismantling the old to establish the new-shattering rigid class prejudices and cultural barriers while forging a more inclusive understanding of complex human nature and a deeper reverence for life's resilience. This inner spiritual journey and value reconstruction enabled the writer to examine and depict the people and events he encountered with a more mature, profound, and down-to-earth perspective. His compassionate spirit thus gained a solid inner foundation, achieving a reconstruction of his self-identity and spirit.

3. Empathy for the Marginalized

As Ai Wu's "self" was reshaped through wandering, *Southward Journey* transcended mere documentation of the author's nomadic experiences. It became "a work that integrates the author's reflections on life and existence with his wandering life." [7] In this process, his gaze turns more profoundly toward the marginalized masses who journey alongside him-no longer blurred figures in the background, but vivid subjects embodying the resilience of life and the complexity of humanity.

The most profoundly moving force in *Southward Journey* stems precisely from its deep exploration of marginalized "wanderers" and its dialectical portrayal of their contradictory humanity. The characters in the work include horse thieves, bandits, opium dealers, and other marginalized souls rejected by mainstream society. Forced from their normal lives by natural disasters, war, or heavy class oppression, they drift in the wilderness and treacherous society along the Yunnan-Burma border. Under this dual pressure, their survival becomes both a physical struggle and a spiritual battle. Ai Wu's compassion manifests as profoundly empathetic understanding. He not only chronicles suffering but also strives to reveal the complex spectrum of humanity under crushing hardship, making compassion the bond between "I" and "them."

3.1 The Profound Carving of Contradictory Human Nature

Ai Wu's portrayal of the underclass completely eschews simplistic moral caricatures. They are victims of social injustice, often struggling at the very edge of survival and forced into occupations despised by conventional morality (such as theft, smuggling, prostitution). Yet simultaneously, within them often flickers an undimmed radiance of humanity.

In the renowned work "In the Gorge," the narrator—a wandering scholar—relates a tale of mountain legends. The opening scene, where flickering embers in a dilapidated temple seem insignificant amid the roaring river and encircling mountains, sets a solemn, desolate tone—much like the author's self-proclaimed status as one cast aside by the world. Driven by extreme survival conditions, "I" and the bandits embrace a path of plundering wealth unacceptable to society. Among them, the figures of Xiao Hei Niu and Ye Ma Zi stand out most vividly and offer the starkest contrast, revealing the complexity of marginalized characters and prompting profound reflection on human nature. One strong, one weak—while Wildcat radiates cheerful optimism and sharp wit, Little Black Ox carries a timidity and vulnerability uncharacteristic of bandits. As the Old Man observes, "Little Black Ox is just too dumb. He can't even lie straight—some things slip out the moment he opens his mouth." [4] This inherent "goodness" ultimately leads to his abandonment by his comrades. Swept away by the relentless currents of survival in a world where the weak perish and the strong thrive, he becomes a testament to humanity's complexity, witnessed by both the narrator and the reader. Wildcat, true to her name, embodies feline wildness and cunning. She represents both the feminine strength within the bandit gang and the resilience of women at the bottom of society. Navigating the gaps between social morality and legal norms with agility, she thrives in her adventurous existence, starkly contrasting with Little Black Ox's utter helplessness. Moreover, the portrayal of Wildcat teasing the wooden man and humming a tune leads readers to conclude she is merely a tender, innocent girl. Like ordinary village women, she carries the unique worries of her youthful years and the hazy awakening of budding romance. That song of wandering, "River waters, flow slowly, flow slowly, flow on and on, flowing to the eastern sea..." [4] Within its slow rhythm lies an irrepressible sorrow, revealing that beneath the wild cat's seemingly fierce exterior lies its own

suffering and grief. The harsh times and treacherous environment forced them to conceal a part of their "goodness" and "beauty." Similarly, in "On the Pine Ridge," the white-haired old man with a tragic past, who makes a living dealing drugs, still holds deep affection for his daughter and a longing for a peaceful life deep within his heart; In *Our Friends*, Lao Jiang—a drug dealer and thief riddled with sores—reveals his optimism and survival-driven "ingratiation" within "our circle of friends," pleading only that we spare him out of pity and not cast him out.

This complex coexistence of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, vulnerability and strength, submission and rebellion forms the most authentic charm of his characters. Ai Wu does not shy away from the "evil" and "flaws" in his characters, but he always strives to trace the social and existential roots from which this "evil" arises. Thus, while exposing their actions, he deeply sympathizes with their fates. Thus, "when Ai Wu portrays the inner worlds of vagabonds, he gazes with an emotional eye, probing and unearthing the moral beauty and emotional depth within their souls." [8] This defense of contradictory human nature prevents his compassion from slipping into cheap sentimentality or moral judgment, instead presenting a cool, profound, and tension-filled realism.

3.2 The Essential Core of Compassion

Ai Wu's gaze upon the underclass is not rooted in a condescending, detached sympathy, but rather in an empathy that strives for equality and seeks to truly feel another's pain. His compassion is built upon meticulous observation of the specific circumstances of individual lives, attempting to achieve a spiritual connection and resonance with the inner worlds of his characters. He not only "mourned their misfortune" but also dedicated himself to "understanding the reasons behind it," immersing himself to comprehend the helplessness behind their choices. This understanding resolved him to "faithfully depict the tragedies of all the weak who struggle against oppression." [4]

In his research, Lin Jinli points out that Ai Wu's uniqueness lies in "emphasizing the exploration of the simple and kind aspects inherent in their nature." [6] His narratives embody a profound empathy rooted in the equality of all life. When depicting characters whose actions defy convention due to life's pressures, Ai Wu rarely

resorts to direct moral condemnation. Instead, through vivid portrayals of their environments and nuanced depictions of their inner lives, he allows readers to grasp how the crushing weight of survival distorts human nature. In "The Foreign Official and the Chicken," Ai Wu does not simplistically portray the lowly Burmese "boss" as a pitiable figure groveling to curry favor with British colonial officials by offering a chicken. Instead, he meticulously unfolds the existential fear and desperate calculations of the colonized masses. The boss's offering of chickens represents both a feeble attempt to trade meager gifts for illusory protection and a twisted survival strategy born of brutal oppression. As an assistant, "I" deeply understood this helplessness. Finally, when grabbing the scrawny black chicken, I uttered the ironic and humorous phrase, " [4] This shared laughter masks the humiliation inflicted by the foreign official, revealing a mindset akin to Ah Q's: "Once you've spiritually conquered them, all is peaceful again. Life resumes its old course, unfolding as before." [9] The author conveys profound empathy here, not moral judgment.

This stance of understanding before judgment endows Ai Wu's compassion with ethical depth and intellectual force. It transcends abstract humanitarian slogans, crystallizing instead into respect and attentive listening for each unique life story—a profound recognition of the vitality erupting from human beings under extreme circumstances and the spiritual wounds they endure. This compassion—fundamentally rooted in equality, dialogue, and understanding—forms the emotional bedrock that allows *Journey South* to transcend time and resonate with generations of readers.

4. Reflections on the Anxieties of the Era

Ai Wu's southward journey unfolded during the turbulent 1920s and 1930s, an era marked by internal strife and external threats. Though *The Journey South* does not directly depict grand historical events, it deeply infuses its portrayal of frontier landscapes and human customs with the anxieties of the era, the suffering of the nation, and the intellectual's sense of crisis. Within a dual aesthetic style characterized by "a bright, fresh romanticism and emotion, with strong subjective lyrical elements"[1].

4.1 Realistic Depictions of Frontier Suffering

The Yunnan-Burma frontier depicted in

Southward Journey is not a romanticized utopia but a realm of suffering marked by acute social contradictions and existential hardships. With a starkly realist pen, Ai Wu reveals the multi-layered map of suffering on this land. As Luo Hua notes in his research, the realist essence of *Southward Journey* lies in its "profound revelation of the typical environment in which typical characters operate, convincingly demonstrating the living soil in which the unique character traits of the 'I' in the work are formed and developed." [10] This spirit of realism ensures that beyond its legendary elements, *Southward Journey* maintains an authentic portrayal of the survival conditions of the lower strata of society.

First is the extreme material poverty and treacherous living conditions, where malaria, wild beasts, and rugged mountain paths constantly threaten life. Second is the profound class oppression and economic exploitation, where chieftains, landlords, unscrupulous merchants, foreign colonizers, and warlord forces form a network of layered exploitation, leaving the lower classes toiling year-round yet unable to secure basic sustenance. In "My Beloved," the narrator, who understands Burmese, hears the anguished lament of a female prisoner in the adjacent cell. Originally an ordinary woman from Salawadi County, she was imprisoned due to British colonial oppression, enduring the tragedy of her "son and pig being burned alive beside the stove." [4] In "The Foreign Official and the Chicken," the brutal tyranny and oppression of British colonizers are vividly portrayed. Old Liu, the boss, and other colonized subjects are merely their "toys." Ai Wu consistently examines the tragic fates of individuals within the vast and oppressive social landscape of his time. His characters are not merely bearers of personal suffering but inevitable products of their era's structure. Whether torn apart by the loss of loved ones or humiliated by the trampling of dignity, their plight is inextricably linked to the deep-seated ills of the age: the brutality of colonial rule, the cruelty of class hierarchy, and the chaos arising from the clash between tradition and modernity.

It is precisely this profound and meticulous realist portrayal of marginal suffering that elevates Ai Wu's work beyond mere documentation of events. By depicting the suffering of both self and others, he transcends individual narratives to capture the anguish of an

entire era. Through this pain, he reveals the resilience of human spirit while conveying profound concerns about the times and society. Thus, his compassionate spirit transcends mere personal sympathy, gaining vast historical depth and social dimension. It becomes a profound critique of an unjust era and a persistent call for the dignity of ordinary lives.

4.2 The Romantic Contrast Between "Beauty" and "Evil"

Yet Ai Wu did not wallow in a singular portrayal of reality's cruel suffering. While confronting darkness head-on, he consistently employed an observant eye to capture the tenacious glimmers of humanity and natural beauty flickering within the shadows. This approach created a powerful contrast and tension between "beauty" and "evil" throughout his works.

On one hand, there are the brutal, ugly social realities and harsh living conditions; on the other, the majestic, awe-inspiring natural landscapes of the frontier (such as primeval forests, precipitous gorges, and exotic locales). Wu Jin notes in his research that "the distinctive exotic coloration is one of the prominent features of the romantic spirit in Southward Journey." [11] As depicted in the opening lines of "In the Mountain Gorges": "Across the river lay a chain-link suspension bridge, serpentine and stubbornly bizarre in appearance... Beneath it, the fierce river raced through the darkness, roaring and raging as it furiously pounded the rocks, unleashing terrifying clashes." [4] This primal, untamed natural imagery serves not merely as a backdrop for human activity but is imbued with independent aesthetic significance and a forceful presence. The romanticism in "On the Pine Ridge" manifests in the description: "From the surrounding mountains, near and far, came the roar of pine waves. For a moment, the mountain inn seemed transformed into a fisherman's cottage by the sea. Yet within the small world of the house, there was quiet and warmth." [4] By depicting the "roar of the pine waves" within the four mountains, the author heightens the auditory experience, immersing readers in the overwhelming, oppressive, even threatening presence of this colossal force. The phrase "as if transformed into a fisherman's cottage by the sea" evokes an association between the pine waves and ocean tides, instantly transposing the mountain forest into an ocean. This synaesthetic metaphor transcends physical boundaries,

pushing romantic imagination to its zenith. The abrupt shift introduced by the word "but" then unveils another core theme of Romanticism: the soul's transcendence and guardianship over reality. The roaring nature outside represents the chaotic, perilous external world, while inside lies a "quiet, warm" "little world." This stark contrast vividly highlights the resilience and dignity of the human spirit.

On the other hand, its romanticism is also reflected in the untamed vitality, simple human warmth, indomitable character, and yearning for freedom that flourish even in such harsh conditions. This juxtaposition and interweaving of "beauty" and "evil" does not seek to romanticize suffering, but rather, through an artistic lens, highlights the unconquerable resilience and dignity inherent in life itself. Just as he depicts bandits' brutality while portraying their boldness, and narrates fate's cruelty while interspersing it with the splendor of frontier landscapes or fleeting moments of human warmth. This romantic illumination infuses the overall aesthetic of *Southward Travels* with glimmers of light amid its somber tone, and hope within its condemnation [11]. It expresses the author's conviction that even in the deepest suffering, the spiritual flame of humanity's pursuit of beauty, goodness, and freedom will never be completely extinguished. This persistent pursuit and depiction of "starlight in the dark night" is itself a profound expression of compassion—an affirmation of the spiritual value of the suffering, a tribute to the tenacious power of life, and an aesthetic solace and spiritual encouragement offered to readers amidst despair. This fusion of realism and romanticism greatly enriches the compassionate essence of *Journey to the South*, grounding it in the earth while allowing it to sparkle with the light of ideals.

5. Conclusion

Through analyzing the three dimensions of self, the underclass, and the era in *Journey South*, we see that Ai Wu's compassion is a complex emotional structure born of wandering, nurtured by dialogue, and elevated through reflection. His compassion originates from the spiritual reconstruction of the "self" under extreme conditions. The shift in his narrative perspective and the collision and breakthrough of his value system enabled the author to transcend the barrier between intellectuals and the underclass,

gaining a warm-hearted understanding rooted in shared life experiences. This understanding deepens into a dialectical recognition and profound empathy for the contradictory human nature of the underclass. Ai Wu refuses to simplify characters' moral profiles, instead focusing on portraying their complex interweaving of good and evil. While revealing their actions, he traces their social roots, elevating compassion beyond mere sympathy into a striving for shared experience, life equality, and value recognition. Building upon this foundation, Ai Wu's compassion consistently bears the weight of his era's anxieties. He situates individual suffering within the expansive social landscape of the Yunnan-Burma borderlands, endowing his narratives with profound historical resonance and critical realism. Simultaneously, with romantic brushstrokes, he tenaciously captures the glimmers of humanity and nature within the darkness. Through the stark contrast between "beauty" and "evil," he affirms the resilience of life, thereby endowing his compassion with a dimension of hope and an aesthetic height. Thus, distinct from other vagabond novels, *Southward Journey* stands as a monument in modern Chinese literary history, built upon compassion and radiating the brilliance of humanism.

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