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Yao Beilin

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***Wuthering Heights* Through the Lens of the Chinese Five Elements: Narrative Structure from Mutual Restraint to Mutual Generation**

Yao Beilin*

School of Languages and Communication Studies, Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing 100044, P. R. China

25126732@bjtu.edu.cn

Abstract: The narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* does not end with destruction but moves toward reconciliation. Previous studies have predominantly approached the novel through the paradigm of binary opposition, focusing largely on eternal conflicts or intergenerational trauma while paying less attention to the dynamic process by which conflict transforms into coexistence. To address this gap, this paper employs the logic of mutual generation and mutual restraint in the Chinese Five Elements theory as a cross-cultural interpretive tool to analyze the novel's narrative arc. The paper argues that the tragedy of the first half manifests as an uncontrolled chain of mutual restraint: the passionate Fire of Heathcliff and Catherine expands excessively, restraining Metal (the civilized order of the Linton family) and offending Earth (the moorish foundation and the suppressed Hareton). This systemic imbalance inevitably leads to collapse. Conversely, the reconciliation of the second half follows the logic of mutual generation. Water—appearing as storms, tears, and the gentle stream encircling the graves—acts as a mediator that restrains Fire and generates Wood. Wood, embodied by Hareton's resilient revival, in turn generates a gentle hearth fire through his relationship with young Catherine, replacing the destructive wildfire of the first generation. Ultimately, the narrative arc presents a complete systemic transformation from imbalance to dynamic balance. Methodologically, the paper specifies the level of the Five Elements theory it employs and constructs an explicit analytical map linking elemental relations to narrative stages, so that the framework functions as an analytical instrument rather than a cultural label. By unifying characters, imagery, and spaces within a single framework, this reading demonstrates that the Five Elements theory provides a unique relational discourse for describing how destruction becomes the condition for regeneration, offering a meaningful dialogue between Eastern philosophical logic and Western canonical texts.

Keywords: Five Elements; *Wuthering Heights*; Generation and Restraint; Cross-cultural Interpretation; Narrative Structure

1. Introduction

What distinguishes *Wuthering Heights* is not its violence but the calm that follows it. Heathcliff's revenge nearly consumes both Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, yet the novel does not end in destruction. A tender affection grows between young Catherine and Hareton, the two houses resume their intercourse, and three graves lie side by side on the moors, encircled by a stream. From destruction to coexistence, this narrative arc can be traced.

Existing studies have approached the novel through binary opposition, yet most have focused on presenting conflict or repeating intergenerational trauma, paying less attention to

*Corresponding Author

the dynamic process by which conflict transforms into reconciliation. The Chinese Five Elements theory offers an alternative conceptual tool for describing this process of transformation.

The core of the Five Elements lies not in the static classification of Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth as five substances, but in two types of dynamic relations. Mutual generation is the relation of promotion, engendering, and transformation. Mutual restraint is the relation of inhibition, constraint, and counterbalance. When an element expands excessively, the chain of mutual restraint spirals out of control, and the system falls into imbalance. When the system enters a phase of systemic restoration, the chain of mutual generation reactivates, and destruction becomes the condition for regeneration.

Viewed through this framework, the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* reveals a clear two-stage pattern. The first half is marked by the loss of Fire's control. The passionate Fire of Heathcliff and Catherine restrains the civilized order represented by the Linton family and offends the foundation of the moors as well as the suppressed Hareton. The second half is the activation of mutual generation. Water, including storms, tears, and the stream that encircles the graves, generates the resilient force of growth in Hareton. This generative force, in turn, transforms into a gentle hearth fire, allowing the two worlds to coexist. This systemic reading aligns with a growing methodological awareness in cross-cultural literary studies. The novel as a whole is not a juxtaposition of two halves but two stages of a dynamic system moving from imbalance to balance. As Guo argues, a multi-dimensional model of cross-cultural interpretation allows critical tools derived from one cultural tradition to illuminate texts from another, not by force but through mutual illumination.¹ Similarly, Zhang Longxi's foundational work on cross-cultural hermeneutics demonstrates that the perceived incommensurability between Chinese and Western literary traditions often dissolves when one attends to the shared problem of interpretation itself.² The present reading of *Wuthering Heights* through the lens of the Five Elements is thus not an imposition but an invitation to dialogue. Why the Five Elements rather than established narratological or structuralist frameworks? Existing approaches excel at two tasks: identifying oppositions (structuralism) and describing how narrative meaning is produced (rhetorical narratology). What they lack is a conceptual vocabulary for the transformation of one relation into another—for describing how the very mechanism that produces destruction later produces reconciliation, without introducing an external, redemptive resolution. The Five Elements theory supplies precisely such a vocabulary in two respects. First, it is a relational rather than substantive system: the five categories are defined not by what they are but by what they do to one another—generate, restrain, offend—so characters, images, and spaces can be read as nodes in a single network of forces rather than as isolated symbols. Second, it is grounded in a cyclical cosmology in which imbalance is structurally temporary: because the generation cycle is the inherent counterpart of the restraint cycle, every collapse already contains the conditions of its own overcoming. This matches a feature of *Wuthering Heights* that binary models struggle to explain: the ending is neither victory nor defeat but coexistence. The Five Elements are thus employed here as an analytical instrument, not as a cultural emblem; their value lies in explanatory power, not in the novelty of the label.

2. The Five Elements as an Analytical Framework

A note on the level of analysis is necessary. Wuxing has operated historically on at least four levels: as a classification of material substances (the “Hongfan” inventory of water, fire, wood, metal, and earth); as a system of relational logic (the cycles of mutual generation and mutual restraint); as a scheme of correspondences linking elements to organs, seasons, and emotions; and as a cosmological principle of universal order. This paper operates primarily on the second level—relational logic—while using the first level (material imagery) only as

textual evidence. Fire in this reading is not the substance of combustion in the novel but a functional position in a system of forces: Heathcliff and Catherine are “Fire” insofar as their passion expands without restraint and disrupts counterbalancing relations, not because fire literally appears wherever they go. Concrete imagery—hearth, storm, tears, garden—serves as the phenomenal surface through which these relational positions become visible in the text. The cosmological level is invoked only in a limited sense, as clarified below. Accordingly, the terms Fire, Metal, Earth, Water, and Wood are used throughout this paper as names of relational functions, not of things.

The Chinese Five Elements theory comprises five fundamental categories: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth. This theory first appears in the “Hongfan” (Great Plan) chapter of *the Book of Documents*, which records³: “The five elements are water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. Water soaks downward, fire blazes upward, wood bends and straightens, metal yields and changes, earth receives grain and produces grain.”^{4#} *The Discourses of the States* similarly states that “the former kings mixed earth with metal, wood, water, and fire to produce all things,”⁵ indicating that the concept of the five elements combining to generate all things had already taken shape in the pre-Qin period (c. 221 BCE and earlier). These five categories, however, are not a static classification of physical substances but a discourse describing the dynamic relations among things. *Baihu tong shuzheng* (Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall) of the Eastern Han dynasty systematically expounds this theory: “What are the five elements? They are metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. They are called ‘elements’ because they signify the movement of *qi* in heaven.”⁶ Joseph Needham observes that the core of the Five Elements theory lies in its understanding of the universe as an organic whole in which all elements are interconnected through cycles of mutual generation and mutual restraint.⁷

The core of the Five Elements theory consists of two types of relations. The first is mutual generation, the relation of promotion, engendering, and transformation. The cycle of mutual generation proceeds as follows: Wood generates Fire, Fire generates Earth, Earth generates Metal, Metal generates Water, Water generates Wood. The *Wuxing dayi* (The Great Meaning of the Five Elements) by Xiao Ji of the Sui dynasty elaborates: “The five elements are all engendered by *yin* and *yang qi*. Moist *qi* engenders water, warm *qi* engenders fire, strong *qi* engenders wood, rigid *qi* engenders metal, and harmonious *qi* engenders earth.”⁸ The second is mutual restraint, the relation of inhibition, constraint, and counterbalance. The cycle of mutual restraint proceeds as follows: Wood restrains Earth, Earth restrains Water, Water restrains Fire, Fire restrains Metal, Metal restrains Wood. The two cycles of mutual generation and mutual restraint operate simultaneously, constituting a dynamic system that can explain both stability and change. When the forces of all elements are roughly balanced, mutual restraint prevents any single element from expanding excessively, while mutual generation ensures the continuous flow and renewal of energy. When an element expands excessively, the chain of mutual restraint spirals out of control, sending the system into imbalance. When the system enters a phase of systemic restoration, the chain of mutual generation reactivates, transforming destruction into the condition for regeneration.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Fire is the most conspicuous elemental image. Heathcliff’s character throughout the novel is marked by violence, uncontainability, and a devouring quality. The novel describes him repeatedly through images of burning. He is described as having eyes like “embers,” and his emotions are characterized as devouring everything “like a flame.” When he returns after three years away, Catherine feels not the joy of reunion but a fear and excitement akin to being surrounded by raging fire. Catherine herself is equally closely associated with Fire. Her declaration, “I am Heathcliff,”¹¹ is not a mild confession but a proclamation of a soul ablaze. Her vitality, her willfulness, her being torn between two men—all manifest as a state of inner combustion. *Wuthering Heights* as a space is also

saturated with images of Fire: the hearth as the center of domestic life, the lightning in storms illuminating the moors, Heathcliff gazing into the flames of the hearth as he dies. Heathcliff and Catherine together constitute the embodiment of Fire in the novel. Their passion is the primary driving force of the entire narrative and also the root of the eventual systemic imbalance.

Thrushcross Grange stands in sharp contrast to Wuthering Heights. The Grange is filled with the luster of Metal: gleaming utensils, elegant furnishings, warm and enclosed interior spaces. The Lintons are described as fair-haired, fair-skinned, and finely dressed. Edgar Linton first appears as a “beautiful” boy, in contrast to the wild children Heathcliff and Catherine. Isabella Linton’s golden curls and her naive delicacy likewise manifest this Metal temperament. Yet the symbolic domain of Metal in the Five Elements extends beyond luster and appearance to encompass containment, order, normativity, and a certain fragility. The “Hongfan” chapter of the *Book of Documents* explains Metal as “yielding and changing,” meaning that it can both comply and transform, possessing both a plasticity that yields to others and a normativity that changes them. The Linton family represents precisely this kind of civilized order: domesticating wildness into politeness, repressing passion into decorum, transforming the moors into a garden. Yet Metal has its inner fragility. In pursuing the integrity of external appearance, it may lack the inner temperature of life. Edgar proves powerless in the face of Heathcliff’s invasion, and his death marks the collapse of the entire Metal order. Within the Five Elements framework, the Linton family and Thrushcross Grange occupy the position of Metal.

Earth finds its most direct embodiment in the moors themselves. The moors are composed of rocks, soil, thorns, and graves. They resist domestication and maintain their roughness and silence. *Baihu tong shuzheng* explains Earth as follows: “Earth stands at the center and governs the emission and containment of things. The word ‘earth’ means ‘to emit.’” Earth carries and nourishes the other elements. In *Wuthering Heights*, the moors are precisely such a ground of being: all characters come from the moors or ultimately return to them, and all events take place under the gaze of the moors. Joseph can be understood as the stubborn face of Earth. His language is a coarse dialect, his faith a rigid orthodoxy; he stands like a stone in the corner of Wuthering Heights, hostile to all change. The most deeply suppressed character, Hareton, also possesses Earth’s attributes. He is rough, silent, inarticulate, deprived by Heathcliff of the chance of education, as a patch of earth trampled underfoot. Yet his tenacity is also a quality of Earth. He does not collapse completely; he retains a certain primitive dignity.

Water appears in the novel in three forms. The first is destructive Water. The storm on the night of Catherine’s death is a crucial turning point. The flood-like rain destroys order and also marks the final extinguishing of Fire (Catherine’s life flame). The second is connecting to water. Tears appear repeatedly throughout the novel. Catherine’s tears between the two men express guilt toward both Heathcliff and Linton, and tears become a medium connecting the two worlds. The third is restorative Water. At the novel’s end, the stream encircling the three graves no longer rages but flows gently. The “Hongfan” chapter of the *Book of Documents* explains Water as “soaking downward”; the basic function of Water is to moisten and to descend. Within the Five Elements framework, the function of Water is mediation and transformation. It can both restrain Fire (quenching excessive combustion) and generate Wood (providing the conditions for new growth). The narrative arc of *Wuthering Heights* as it moves from destruction to reconciliation corresponds precisely to these two functions of Water: first, the restraint of Fire, then the generation of Wood.

Wood is the last of the five elements to appear and is central to the second half of the novel. The “Hongfan” chapter explains Wood as “bending and straightening,” pliable yet not easily broken. Hareton concentrates this image of Wood. He is likened by Heathcliff to a tree

that has been cut down, deprived of education, deprived of dignity, and suppressed to the lowest position. Yet the characteristic of Wood is resilience. A felled tree does not die immediately; it will sprout anew when conditions permit. This is precisely Hareton's situation. He never fully degenerates into a brute; deep within, he retains a desire for knowledge and dignity. Young Catherine's appearance provides the moisture and soil that Wood needs for growth. The scene in which she teaches Hareton to read takes place in the garden of Thrushcross Grange. The garden that once belonged to Metal now becomes the site of Wood's growth. *Baihu tong shuzheng* states regarding the cycle of mutual generation: "Wood generates Fire. Fire generates Earth." The emotion between Hareton and young Catherine is not the wildfire of the first generation but a gentle hearth fire. It is generated from Wood (mutual respect, daily companionship, shared reading), warm yet bounded, neither destroying others nor burning itself out. This is precisely the inner logic through which the novel ultimately moves toward reconciliation. The conceptual possibility of using the Five Elements as a narrative analytic has been anticipated by scholars of Chinese comparative literature. Puett has shown that early Chinese cosmological systems, including the Five Elements, were not static dogmas but flexible models constantly adapted to new contexts.⁹ Henderson similarly observes that the explanatory power of the Five Elements lies precisely in its capacity to integrate disparate phenomena—natural, social, and psychological—into a single dynamic framework.¹⁰ The application of this framework to *Wuthering Heights* is thus an extension of its inherent logic rather than a violation of it.

To prevent the framework from being applied impressionistically, this paper follows a fixed analytical protocol consisting of six mapping operations, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 An Analytical Map of the Elemental Relations, Narrative Stages , and Textual Corroboration

Elemental relation	Narrative manifestation	Textual corroboration
Fire restrains Metal	Heathcliff's revenge against the Linton order	Reunion scene; Hindley's debts; Catherine's hunger strike
Fire offends Earth	Suppression of Hareton and Joseph	Deprivation of education; degradation of Hareton
Failure of Water to restrain Fire	Collapse of the counterbalancing mechanism	Storm and tears arriving too late; Catherine's death
Water generates Wood	Young Catherine's tears and sympathy revive Hareton	First encounter; teaching-to-read scenes
Wood generates Fire	Gentle hearth fire replaces wildfire	Book-repair scene; shared reading
Systemic balance restored	Coexistence of the two houses	Three graves encircled by the stream; final chapter

Three rules govern the application of this map. First, textual anchoring: each elemental correspondence must be supported by at least one concrete textual scene (column three); correspondences without textual anchoring are not admitted. Second, stage-level mapping: the restraint chain is applied to the narrative stages of the first generation (roughly Chapters 1–14 of the 1847 text), and the generation chain to the stages of the second (roughly Chapters 15–34), rather than being freely assigned to individual scenes. Third, falsifiability within its own terms: if a supposed elemental correspondence required distorting a character's textual function in order to fit a cycle, the correspondence would be abandoned. The framework is thus a working hypothesis disciplined by textual evidence, not a grid imposed in advance. Sections 3 and 4 apply the operations of this map in sequence.

A final clarification concerns temporality. The Five Elements operate within a cyclical cosmology, whereas *Wuthering Heights* is steeped in a Christian imaginary of linear redemption—sin, punishment, and the promise of salvation. The relationship established in

this paper is therefore analogical at the structural level but contrastive at the temporal level. Structurally, the novel's two-generation arc—the collapse of an unrestrained force and the emergence of a balanced order from its ruins—is isomorphic with the generation-restraint cycle, and it is this structural isomorphism that the analysis exploits. Temporally, however, the two cosmologies diverge in an illuminating way. In the Christian scheme, reconciliation would be legible as redemption: the sins of the first generation atoned for and harmony restored from above. The novel conspicuously declines this path. Heathcliff's end is not repentance; he is not forgiven in any explicit theological sense; the ghosts on the moors remain an unsettled remainder. What the ending presents instead is closer to the Wuxing outcome: not redemption but re-equilibration—a redistribution of forces in which nothing is absolved and everything is relocated. Reading the ending through cyclical rather than redemptive logic thus explains why the novel's peace feels neither earned by atonement nor identical with salvation: it is a systemic, not a soteriological, resolution.

3. The Chain of Mutual Restraint: Tragic Dynamics of the First Generation

This section applies the first three operations of the analytical map (Table 1)—Fire restraining Metal, Fire offending Earth, and the failure of Water to restrain Fire—to the first-generation narrative.

Within the Five Elements framework, mutual restraint functions as inhibition and counterbalance. When the forces of all elements are roughly balanced, restraint prevents any single element from expanding excessively. But when an element expands due to external conditions or its inherent properties, the chain of mutual restraint spirals out of control, and the system falls into imbalance. In the first generation narrative of *Wuthering Heights*, Fire is precisely such an uncontrolled element. It expands continuously, restrains Metal, offends Earth, and ultimately brings the entire system to collapse.

3.1 Fire Restrains Metal

The rekindling of Fire begins with the reunion scene. When Heathcliff returns after three years, Catherine's reaction is not joy but a physical and emotional upheaval. She insists on seeing him alone, despite Edgar's objections. Her body burns with fever, and she trembles uncontrollably. Nelly describes her as hardly able to contain herself. This is not the calm rekindling of an old flame but the explosive return of a fire that never died. More significantly, when Heathcliff finally enters the Grange, Catherine throws herself into his arms. Edgar stands at the door, excluded. The spatial arrangement is telling: Fire and Fire embrace, while Metal watches from the threshold, powerless to intervene. This scene sets the stage for the entire chain of Fire restraining Metal that follows. Heathcliff's revenge unfolds as Fire restraining Metal. After his return to *Wuthering Heights*, his first act is not to attack Edgar Linton directly but to work from the margins. He moves into the Heights, wins all of Hindley's property through gambling, and turns Hindley—the man who once abused him—into his debtor. This process is not violent conquest but slow, systematic erosion. Fire does not assault Metal from the front but first dismantles its external supports.

When Fire finally confronts Metal directly, Metal's fragility is fully exposed. After Heathcliff and Edgar clash, Catherine goes on a hunger strike and eventually falls ill. Catherine's hunger strike is a crucial moment that reveals Fire's logic of self-consumption. She refuses food not as a political act but as an existential one. Having torn herself between Heathcliff (Fire) and Edgar (Metal), she can no longer sustain the contradiction. Her body becomes the site where Fire and Metal collide. When Edgar, following the doctor's orders, removes the pillows from her bed, she lies on the bare mattress, head hanging over the edge. Nelly notes that she "resembled a creature who had been hunted and driven to death."¹¹ She speaks not of the present but of the moors of her childhood. Her mind retreats to the place

where Fire was pure, unconstrained by Metal. This is Fire consuming itself because it cannot find a sustainable form of existence. The illness that follows is not a physical disease but the somatic manifestation of Fire's internal collapse. Faced with this situation, Edgar can at best shut Heathcliff out of Thrushcross Grange, yet he is powerless to stop Catherine's self-destruction. Heathcliff's entry into the Grange to see Catherine before her death marks the apex of Fire restraining Metal: the order of Metal (Edgar) is completely breached by Fire (Heathcliff), and Metal's territory becomes Fire's domain. After Catherine's death, Edgar falls into prolonged grief and eventually dies. The Linton bloodline survives into the second generation only in the frail young Linton, and the master of Thrushcross Grange eventually becomes Catherine's daughter, young Catherine—a child born of both Fire and Metal, yet closer to Fire in bloodline.

3.2 Fire Offends Earth

In the mutual restraint chain of the Five Elements, Fire does not directly restrain Earth. Fire restrains Metal, Water restrains Fire, Earth restrains Water, Wood restrains Earth, and Metal restrains Wood. There is no direct restraining relation between Fire and Earth. However, when an element expands excessively, it not only restrains the element it is supposed to restrain but also offends those elements that should stand in a counterbalancing relation to it. In Five Elements logic, this phenomenon is called “overwhelming” or “transgressing”—an act of overstepping boundaries resulting from excessive expansion.

In *Wuthering Heights*, Fire's offense against Earth manifests as Heathcliff's suppression of Hareton. Heathcliff strips Hareton of everything. He deprives Hareton of the chance of education, reduces him to a servant, and deliberately cultivates him in the most degrading manner—teaching him to swear, forcing him to do coarse labor, and making him grow like a brute. Nelly Dean observes this with lament: “He was as uncomplaining as a lamb; though hardness, not gentleness, made him give little trouble”¹¹. She also notes that “he was a naturally good-hearted, affectionate lad” who was “systematically ruined”¹¹ by Heathcliff. Heathcliff himself remarks of Hareton: “There is no one who can be so stubbornly ignorant as he. But I have never met anyone so difficult to tame”¹¹. This is precisely Fire offending Earth: Heathcliff's vengeful fire not only restrains Metal (the Linton family) but also offends Earth (the moorish foundation represented by Hareton).

The other face of Earth is Joseph. This old servant, who has served at *Wuthering Heights* for sixty years, embodies the stubborn aspect of Earth. His language is a coarse dialect, his faith a rigid orthodoxy; he stands like a stone in the corner of *Wuthering Heights*, hostile to all change. Joseph is not destroyed by Fire—he continues to survive in the lowest depths of the Heights—but his very mode of existence is itself a result of Earth being suppressed: Earth cannot perform its function of carrying and nourishing; it can only degenerate into a stubborn defensive posture that refuses all change.

By the end of the first generation narrative, Earth is in a state of being offended. Hareton has been deprived of his inheritance and his dignity, Joseph cowers in his corner, and although the moors endure, they have become the silent background of Heathcliff's revenge. Earth's failure to counterbalance Fire is a crucial marker of the system's imbalance.

3.3 The Collapse of the Restraining Chain and the Inevitability of Destruction

From the perspective of Five Elements logic, the destruction of the first-generation narrative does not originate from any single conflict but from the loss of control of the entire mutual restraint chain. Fire loses its counterbalance: it restrains Metal and offends Earth. Water (Catherine's tears and the storm) fails for much of the narrative to perform its function of restraining Fire—Catherine's tears do not prevent her self-destruction, and the storm

arrives only after her death. Metal is destroyed, Earth is suppressed, and Water fails to restrain Fire. The counterbalancing relations within the system collapse completely.

Catherine's death is the apex of this collapse. She is both a bearer of Fire (her soul is a flame) and a mediator of Water (her tears connect the two worlds). Her death marks the removal of Fire's center—yet Fire does not extinguish itself; instead, it transfers to Heathcliff, becoming colder, more concentrated, and more destructive.

Heathcliff's behavior after Catherine's death is the classic presentation of Fire burning itself out after losing its fuel. Heathcliff bribes the sexton to open Catherine's coffin. He gazes upon her face, still recognizable after eighteen years. He asks Nelly what she would say if she saw him there. The act of digging into the earth is itself a violation: Fire, having lost its object, now turns against Earth itself. The moors, which had been the foundation of Heathcliff and Catherine's shared existence, are now pierced and disturbed. This is the fullest expression of Fire offending Earth. Moreover, Heathcliff's demand that Catherine's ghost "haunt him" and "take any form" is a demand for eternal, burning entanglement. He does not seek release. He seeks the continuation of Fire beyond death. The grave becomes the site where Fire, having exhausted all other relations, attempts to burn through the boundary between life and death. Heathcliff later says to Nelly: "I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!"¹¹. This is not mourning but the continuation of a relationship according to Fire's logic: not separation, not letting go, but eternal, burning entanglement.

The first-generation narrative ends in destruction. Fire restrains Metal, and the Linton family collapses. Fire offends Earth, and Hareton is suppressed. Water fails to restrain Fire, and Catherine dies. Fire consumes itself, and Heathcliff moves toward inner destruction. The entire system has fallen into imbalance. Yet, as the Five Elements theory reveals, destruction is not necessarily the end. In the ruins of the mutual restraint chain, the conditions for the mutual generation chain are quietly being nurtured. The release of Water (the storm and the tears), though it did not save the first generation, leaves behind the soil for the growth of the second generation. This is precisely the precondition for the reconciliation that unfolds in the second half of the novel. Miller offers a complementary observation from a Western critical perspective. In his reading, Heathcliff's revenge ultimately turns inward: "He destroys himself not because he is defeated but because his passion, having no external object that can satisfy it, becomes its own fuel and its own grave." What Miller describes as passion's self-consumption corresponds, in the Five Elements framework, to the collapse of the mutual restraint chain when Fire loses all counterbalance.¹² The novel's first half thus ends not merely in tragedy but in a specific kind of systemic imbalance—one that contains, as will be shown, the latent conditions for its own overcoming.

4. The Chain of Mutual Generation: Reconciliation in the Second Generation

This section applies the remaining operations of the analytical map (Table 1)—Water generating Wood, Wood generating Fire, and the restoration of systemic balance—to the second-generation narrative.

Within the Five Elements framework, mutual generation functions as promotion, engendering, and transformation. When a system falls into imbalance due to the excessive expansion of one element, the possibility of systemic restoration lies within the mutual generation chain. The first generation narrative ended in collapse: Fire expanded excessively, restrained Metal, and offended Earth, while Water failed to restrain Fire effectively. Yet destruction did not become the endpoint of the novel. The second-generation narrative traces a trajectory from destruction to reconciliation through the reactivation of the mutual generation chain: Water generates Wood, Wood generates Fire, and a new, gentle form of Fire replaces the wildfire of the first generation.

4.1 Water as Mediator: From Destruction to the Condition for Regeneration

In *Wuthering Heights*, Water appears in three forms: destructive, connecting, and restorative. These three forms are not separate but are functional manifestations of the same element at different stages of the system.

The destructive form appears at the moment of Catherine's death. The storm on that night is a crucial turning point. Rain pours down, rivers overflow their banks, and the moors are swallowed by rushing water. This storm occurs at the very moment of Catherine's death, symbolizing the extinguishing of Fire—Catherine's life flame is finally quenched by Water. Yet the storm's significance extends beyond destruction. The flood-like rain, though it destroys order, also changes the condition of the soil, leaving behind a moistened foundation for new growth.

The connecting form of Water is tears. Catherine's tears between the two men run throughout the first volume. Her tears for Heathcliff express guilt and longing, while her tears for Linton express guilt and helplessness. Tears function as mediators: they both restrain Fire (tears express pain, and pain suppresses the burning of passion) and generate Wood (tears moisten the dry soil of emotion). Catherine's tears could not save her, yet they find their continuation in the relationship between young Catherine and Hareton. The tears that young Catherine sheds while teaching Hareton to read form a subtle echo of Catherine's tears. Tears are no longer an expression of helplessness but become a medium connecting the two worlds and softening hardened hearts.

The restorative form of Water is the stream that encircles the three graves at the novel's end. The stream no longer rages, no longer roars, but flows gently. This is Water that has completed its function of transformation: it has restrained Fire, it has generated Wood, and it now endures in the system as a guardian of balance.

Thus, the destructive form of Water completes the restraint of Fire, while the connecting and restorative forms prepare the ground for the generation of Wood. The narrative arc of *Wuthering Heights* as it moves from destruction to reconciliation corresponds precisely to the sequential realization of these two functions of Water: first, the restraint of Fire (Catherine's death and the storm), then the generation of Wood (tears and the stream providing the conditions for the second generation's growth).

4.2 The Growth of Wood: From Suppression to Resilient Revival

Wood is central to the second half of the novel. Hareton embodies Wood. He is not the protagonist of the first-generation narrative but its suppressed product. Heathcliff deprives him of education, degrades his dignity, and suppresses him to the lowest position. Yet the characteristic of Wood is resilience. A felled tree does not die immediately; it will sprout anew when conditions permit. This is precisely Hareton's situation. He never fully degenerates into a brute; deep within, he retains a desire for knowledge and dignity. Heathcliff himself inadvertently reveals this Wood-like quality when he remarks that no one is "so stubbornly ignorant"¹¹ and that he has never met anyone "so difficult to tame"¹¹. Stubborn persistence and untameability are expressions of resilience.

The first encounter between young Catherine and Hareton occurs when she visits *Wuthering Heights* after her father's death. She sees Hareton for the first time and immediately notes his roughness, his dirt, his uncouth manner. Yet there is something else. She asks Nelly who he is, and Nelly tells her: Hareton is her cousin, the rightful heir of the Heights. Young Catherine does not recoil. She approaches him, speaks to him, tries to engage him. Hareton responds with hostility, but the fact that she makes the attempt at all is significant. This is Water making contact with Earth. The tears that will later appear are not yet present, but the first moistening has begun. The garden of Thrushcross Grange is still her

home, but something in her recognizes that the moors, and the boy who belongs to them, are not entirely alien to her.

Young Catherine's appearance provides the crucial external condition for Wood's growth. She brings two things. The first is "Water"—her tears and sympathy, which moisten the dry soil for Wood's growth. The second is "soil" itself—the garden of Thrushcross Grange. The garden once belonged to the domain of "Metal," a space where civilized order disciplined nature. But in the second half of the novel, the garden's function changes. The scene in which young Catherine teaches Hareton to read takes place in the garden, and the once enclosed space becomes the site of Wood's growth. This shift in the garden's function symbolizes that Metal (containment, order) has been reconfigured into a force that supports Wood (growth, resilience).

4.3 Wood Generates Fire: From Wildfire to Hearth Fire

In the mutual generation chain, Wood generates Fire. This relation occupies the central position in the novel's reconciliation logic. Wood has resilience, while Fire has expansion. When Fire burns directly from itself, it consumes its own life—unsustainable, eventually exhausting its fuel and extinguishing itself. But when Fire obtains its fuel from Wood, it can burn continuously without consuming itself. The function of Wood in generating Fire is the transformation of Fire's destructiveness into constructiveness.

The difference between the Fire of the first generation and that of the second generation has structural significance. The first generation's Fire is wildfire. It has no Wood to nourish it, no boundaries, and no sustainable source of fuel. Heathcliff's vengeful Fire burns directly from his own pain and rage, consuming his own life. His end is not liberation but death by self-consumption—he starves himself to death, defeated not by others but by his own Fire burning itself out.

The second generation's Fire is different. The emotion between Hareton and young Catherine is not the explosive passion of wildfire but a gentle hearth fire. It is generated from Wood—mutual respect, daily companionship, shared reading—warm yet bounded. Young Catherine takes the initiative to teach Hareton to read, and Hareton's initial refusal, followed by gradual acceptance, presents a slow, incremental process of warming. Young Catherine finds a book in the Grange's library and decides to teach Hareton. The choice of location is significant. The library was once the domain of Metal: Edgar's space, the space of civilized order. Now it becomes the site where Wood grows. Hareton resists at first. He is ashamed of his ignorance, and his pride makes him hostile to instruction. But young Catherine persists. She does not lecture him; she reads with him. She does not demand that he change; she invites him to share something with her. This is the difference between the two generations. The first generation demanded identification (Catherine: "I am Heathcliff"). The second generation offers invitation (young Catherine: "Let me teach you"). The mechanism of this transformation can be further illuminated by Banerjee's psychological reading of the second generation. Banerjee notes that young Catherine's shift from scorn to sympathy for Hareton occurs when she recognizes their shared condition: both have been deprived of a stable home and a proper education.¹³ In the Five Elements framework, this shared deprivation functions as a form of Water—tears as the medium that dissolves the barrier between two isolated worlds. Complementing this psychological reading, a structural analysis of the novel's narrative arc reveals that the second generation's union is not a repetition of the first generation's tragedy but its true interruption. Gao Jian, in an analysis of the novel's narrative structure, observes that the novel's narrative unfolds "a complete process of human nature gradually degenerating, even freezing, and ultimately reviving."¹⁴ This trajectory—from degeneration to freezing to revival—corresponds precisely to the sequence of mutual restraint collapse (degeneration), the aftermath of destruction (freezing), and the reactivation of

mutual generation (revival). The second generation's marriage thus marks the point at which the frozen state thaws and the generational trauma cycle is finally broken. Gao's "human nature revival" model and the present "mutual generation" model are thus complementary rather than contradictory.

The hearth fire does not reject the heat of Fire itself. The crucial turning point in the second generation's relationship is the book-repairing scene. Young Catherine, in a moment of frustration, throws Hareton's book into the fire. The act itself is a small repetition of the first generation's destructive Fire. But what follows is different. Hareton does not retaliate. He does not rage. He waits until she leaves, then retrieves the charred book from the ashes. He spends days carefully gluing the pages back together. When young Catherine discovers what he has done, she begins to cry. These are not the helpless tears of Catherine Earnshaw, trapped between two men. These are tears of recognition. Hareton's act of patient restoration transforms the nature of their relationship. He has taken something that was burned and made it whole again. This is Wood in its most essential form: resilient, persistent, capable of growth even after destruction. The fire that emerges from this moment is not the wildfire of the first generation but a hearth fire built on mutual care. Its warmth is still Fire; it still has temperature, it can still illuminate darkness. But it no longer has destructiveness. It is domesticated by the resilience of Wood, carried by the ordinary, mundane, sustainable relations of daily life. The nature of Fire depends on the Wood that generates it. When the Wood is wild thorn bushes, what is generated is wildfire; when the Wood is cultivated, tended garden plants, what is generated is hearth fire. The emotion between Hareton and young Catherine is generated from Wood—shared reading in the garden, daily companionship, mutual patience—and therefore it is not destructive wildfire but warm hearth fire.

4.4 Systemic Restoration: From Imbalance to Balance

The ending of *Wuthering Heights* presents the restoration of systemic balance. Each element finally finds its proper place within the system.

Fire no longer burns. After Heathcliff's death, it is said that his ghost wanders the moors together with Catherine's ghost, but that is another form of peace. Metal no longer pursues luster. Young Catherine does not take pride in her Linton bloodline; she identifies more with the moors. Earth carries everything. Three graves lie side by side on the moors: Heathcliff's, Catherine's, and Edgar Linton's. *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange, two worlds that were once irreconcilable, now resume normal intercourse. The coexistence of the two houses is not merely a plot device to provide a happy ending. Nelly's narration makes clear that time has passed. The young couple lives at the Grange, but they visit the Heights regularly. Hareton works the land, but he also reads. Young Catherine tends the garden, but she also walks the moors. The boundaries that once marked absolute separation have become permeable. This is the restoration of systemic balance, which is not the elimination of difference but the establishment of a new equilibrium in which each element occupies its proper place. The three graves lying side by side on the moors—Heathcliff's, Catherine's, Edgar's—make this balance visible. Fire (Heathcliff) and Metal (Edgar) are no longer at war. Earth (the moors) holds them both. Water (the stream) encircles them all. The novel's final image is not one of resolution through conquest but one of resolution through coexistence.

Within the Five Elements framework, this state of coexistence is not a compromise but the restoration of systemic balance. Earth is no longer the background to Fire but the foundation that carries everything. Water is no longer a destructive force, but the gentle stream encircling the graves. Wood is no longer a suppressed existence but the growing force that transforms the garden into a site of growth. Fire is no longer a destructive wildfire but the warm hearth fire of human affection.

The coexistence of the two houses symbolizes the peaceful cohabitation of the elements. Wuthering Heights—the domain of Earth and Fire—has lost its destructiveness. Thrushcross Grange—the domain of Metal—has lost its closeness and fragility. The marriage of young Catherine and Hareton is not the conquest of one side by the other but the natural convergence of the descendants of the two elements in the restorative phase of the system.

The narrative arc of the entire novel can thus be summarized as follows: from an imbalanced system dominated by Fire, through the mediatory transformation of Water, through the resilient growth of Wood, and finally into a new stable state in which all elements are relatively balanced. Destruction is not the end but the condition for regeneration. This is precisely the inner logic revealed by the mutual generation chain of the Five Elements.

5. A Dialogue with Western Criticism

Placing the Five Elements perspective in the context of Western criticism for comparison is not intended to prove that the Five Elements perspective is “better” but to clarify its distinctive contribution. Western criticism has produced a rich body of work on *Wuthering Heights*, and two critical traditions are particularly comparable to the Five Elements approach, which are the ancient Greek theory of the four elements and the structuralist paradigm of binary opposition. The former focuses on elemental imagery as such, while the latter focuses on the tension between opposing terms. The differences between the Five Elements perspective and these two traditions constitute precisely its value.

5.1 The Five Elements and the Four Elements

The ancient Greek theory of the four elements (earth, water, air, fire) is the earliest systematic theory of elements in Western thought. Plato in the *Timaeus* reduced the composition of the cosmos to four elements, and Aristotle further endowed them with two pairs of fundamental qualities: hot and cold, dry and wet. In Western literary criticism, the four-element theory has occasionally been used to analyze natural imagery and character temperament in literary texts. Yet the central limitation of the four-element theory lies in its static nature. It describes “what the world is made of” rather than “how these constituents interact with one another.”

The fundamental difference between the Five Elements theory and the four-element theory lies in dynamism. The Five Elements have not only a classificatory function but also a relational function. The two cycles of mutual generation and mutual restraint constitute a self-regulating system: no element can expand indefinitely, and any imbalance in any element triggers the system's restorative mechanism. This feature enables the Five Elements to explain change and transformation, an area in which the four-element theory is relatively weak. Applied to *Wuthering Heights*, the four-element theory can identify the presence of fire, water, earth, and air (wind in the storm) in the novel, but it struggles to explain why the fire of the first generation is destructive while that of the second generation is constructive, or to explain the mechanism of transformation from destruction to reconciliation. The logic of mutual generation and mutual restraint in the Five Elements theory fills this gap. The dynamic nature of the Five Elements has been systematically theorized within Chinese critical traditions. Liu Changlin argues that the mutual generation and mutual restraint cycles together constitute a self-regulating system: any element that expands excessively will eventually be restrained, and any system in collapse contains within it the seeds of regeneration through the generation chain.¹⁵ Cao Shunqing, in his comparative poetics, similarly emphasizes that Chinese theoretical concepts should not be treated as exotic curiosities but as genuine analytical tools capable of engaging with Western texts on equal terms. The reading offered here is a direct application of this methodological principle.¹⁶ Yang Yi's recent work on Chinese narratology provides a further precedent: Yang explicitly

traces narrative structures in Chinese fiction—such as the alternating rise and fall of plot tension and the cyclical return to origins—to the philosophical logic of yin-yang and the Five Elements.¹⁷ The present study extends this line of inquiry from Chinese fiction to a Western classic, suggesting that the Five Elements logic is not culturally confined but has broader narrative-theoretical implications.

5.2 The Five Elements and Binary Opposition

Q. D. Leavis famously argued that the novel is structured around the fundamental opposition between the two houses.¹⁸ The structuralist paradigm of binary opposition (nature/civilization, moors/Grange, male/female, reason/passion, etc.) has been one of the dominant frameworks in *Wuthering Heights* criticism. The contribution of this paradigm lies in its revelation of the tension structure running through the novel: Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange, wildness and cultivation, Heathcliff and Linton, Catherine's self-division—all present the irreconcilability of opposing terms.

Yet the limitation of the binary opposition paradigm is equally evident. It describes a battlefield rather than a story. The relation between opposing terms is either eternal antagonism or the annihilation of one side by the other, with little room for a third possibility. The ending of *Wuthering Heights* offers precisely a third possibility: the two houses coexist, the three graves lie side by side, and different elements find their respective places. Binary opposition cannot explain this state of coexistence because it presupposes the incommensurability of opposing terms. The Five Elements perspective differs. Within the Five Elements framework, opposition (mutual restraint) is only one link in the system's operation, not the whole of the system. Mutual restraint and mutual generation together constitute a complete cycle. The restraining relation between Metal and Fire does not necessarily lead to the destruction of Metal or the annihilation of Fire, but to a dynamic balance—as long as the system is healthy, restraint itself is the mechanism that prevents excessive expansion. The ending of *Wuthering Heights* presents precisely this dynamic balance: Metal (Thrushcross Grange) is not eliminated, Fire (Heathcliff's lineage continuing through Hareton) is not eliminated, and the two find a way to coexist through the system's self-restoration.

5.3 The Distinctive Contribution of the Five Elements

The Five Elements perspective offers a relational discourse for describing dynamic transformation. Western criticism excels at identifying opposition and conflict but lacks a ready conceptual tool for the process of “how conflict transforms into reconciliation.” The mutual generation chain of the Five Elements enables the narrative arc from destruction to regeneration to be described systematically.

The Five Elements perspective brings characters, images, and spaces into a single analytical framework. In Western criticism, character analysis, image analysis, and spatial analysis are often conducted separately. The Five Elements framework unifies them: characters (Heathcliff, Catherine, Linton, Hareton), images (flame, tears, storm, stream, trees, garden), and spaces (Wuthering Heights, Thrushcross Grange, the moors) are treated as different manifestations of the same elemental system. This integrative analysis reveals a holistic structure rather than isolated correspondences.

The Five Elements perspective offers a third way beyond binary opposition. The logical difficulty of the binary opposition paradigm is that it cannot describe the coexistence of opposing terms. The Five Elements perspective demonstrates the possibility of coexistence: not by eliminating the opposing terms but by embedding them within a larger circulatory system, allowing the force of restraint and the force of generation to operate together, ultimately leading to balance.

The Five Elements perspective is not without limitations. It is an external interpretive framework rather than a structure endogenous to the novel. Its validity depends on whether the interpreter can find sufficient textual evidence to support the correspondences. If the correspondences are established too arbitrarily, the entire interpretation collapses. Moreover, the Five Elements framework may be less effective in analyzing contemporary novels or non-naturalistic fiction than in analyzing a novel like *Wuthering Heights*, which has such strong natural imagery. These limitations do not negate the value of the Five Elements perspective but indicate that it is a situational interpretive tool with boundary conditions.

6. Conclusion

The narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* does not end with destruction but moves toward reconciliation. Using the logic of mutual generation and mutual restraint in the Chinese Five Elements theory as an analytical tool, this narrative arc can be described as a dynamic system moving from imbalance to balance.

The first-generation narrative manifests as an uncontrolled chain of mutual restraint. Fire expands excessively, restraining Metal (the civilized order represented by the Linton family and Thrushcross Grange) and offending Earth (the foundation of the moors and the suppressed Hareton). Fire loses its counterbalance, Water fails to restrain Fire effectively, and the system falls into collapse. The second-generation narrative manifests as the reactivation of the mutual generation chain. Water, in its three forms of storm, tears, and stream, completes its functional transformation from destruction to mediation, generating the growth of Wood. Wood, through its resilience, revives from its suppressed state and generates a new, gentle form of hearth fire, replacing the wildfire of the first generation. The coexistence of the two houses and the image of three graves lying side by side on the moors, encircled by a stream, symbolize the restoration of balance among all elements.

This interpretation does not seek to replace existing Western critical approaches, nor does it claim that the novel “exemplifies” the Five Elements theory. What it offers is a new language for describing the novel’s narrative structure. The value of the Five Elements theory lies in its dynamic logic. It is a relational discourse describing the contestation, transformation, and restoration of forces, not a static classification. This feature gives it a unique theoretical advantage in addressing questions such as “how conflict transforms into reconciliation.”

Applying a conceptual tool derived from classical Chinese thought to the analysis of an English classic does not aim to establish authorial intention. Its significance lies in demonstrating the intelligibility and dialogical potential between different cultural systems. The Five Elements are not only a key to understanding Chinese culture but can also, under certain conditions, become an effective perspective for reading Western texts. Methodologically, this reading has specified the level at which the Five Elements operate—relational logic rather than substantive classification—and has demonstrated through an explicit analytical map that the framework can describe the transformation from destruction to regeneration, a process that static opposition-based paradigms leave conceptually unnamed.

Do the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine still wander the moors? The novel’s answer is perhaps not “no” but “yes, but in another way.” Fire does not disappear, but it is no longer a destructive wildfire. It transforms into the warmth of a hearth fire, into the reflection in the stream that encircles the graves, into the same moors shared by the two houses under the moonlight.

Notes:

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