A Motivation Psychoanalysis of Buck’s Self-transformation in The Call of the Wild

Yulong ZHU
Sichuan University, China

The everlasting popularity of The Call of the Wild, a classic by American naturalistic author Jack London, lies not only with the artistic fusion of adventures, nature, animals and humans, but also with the spearheading of “animal fable” in the early 1900s. The delineation of the subtle and complex psychological states within those arctic animals and inhabitants contributes a lot to the glamour of the tale. The plot evolves around the protagonist, a dog, named Buck, who is abducted from the comfortable and happy life in California and cast into the brutal life of an Alaskan sled dog. After serving several different masters and experiencing unimaginable treatments and miseries, he regains his ancestral traits and transforms into a wolf leader in the wild.

This essay adopts the concept of psychological motivation to explore this process of Buck’s self-transformation. In humanistic psychology, “motivation refers to the process whereby goal directed activities are energized, directed, and sustained” (Ryan, 2012: 13). It is a powerful drive that activates organism to move in a particular direction in behavior. Motivation psychoanalysis denotes a psychological interpretation of organism’s certain behavior according to motivation theory.
Psychoanalysis of motivation can help us understand “why people and animals initiate, choose, or persist in, specific actions in specific circumstances” (Mook, 1987: 04).

The rationality of using motivation psychoanalysis in this study rests with the similarity of human motivation and animal motivation. The mechanism is theoretically identical. The driving force of intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation is equally strong in all organisms. Besides, when Buck’s humanlike characteristics are taken into account, the possibility of using human motivation theory to explain Buck’s behaviors can be reasonably justified. Through this interdisciplinary study, a new psychological view of Buck’s self-transformation process can be reached. In addition, it renders readers a chance to introspect upon human psychological realm.

I. Specific Motivations for Buck’s Early Self-transformation

In motive system, social motivation, power motivation and achievement motivation stand as the three basic motivations that distinctively activate, organize and orient organisms’ behaviors. For Buck’s early self-transformation, the three specific motivations exert multiple influences on Buck’s alterations of mentality and identity, resulting in his transformation from a pampered dog into a conscientious dog leader.

Human beings, since antiquity, have been constantly involved in social activities and have unavoidably established manifold relations with their peers. People’s innate incentive for man-to-man interaction in social environments is conceptualized as social motivation or attachment motivation. It means a sense of relatedness and bond between an individual and the external community (c.f.: Mook, 1987: 456).

Attachment theorists argue that power motivation can in effect trigger two different kinds of actions. Primarily, actions concerning attachment can be “directed toward obtaining, or maintaining, proximity to a caretaker in the form of approaching, following and calling” (Mook, 1987: 462). Meanwhile, attachment-related actions can also be the avoidance of “proximity to unknown and potentially dangerous objects or persons; it calls into play such acts as crying, escape, and cautious immobility as its components” (Mook, 1987: 462). Attachment motivation, given to its duality of catalysis on people’s mentality and behaviors in an interactive situation, makes it possible for people to involve themselves into diverse social groups, during the process of which, people are allowed extensive space for
changes of internal impulses and external behaviors to better adapt to the surroundings.

In the novel, Buck's social motivation apparently presents two distinctive aspects: his motivation of establishing attachment to his intended caretaker and his motivation of enhancing attachment to the unfamiliar dog team. The two aspects of attachment motivation go hand in hand working as a tube of catalyst in the initial state of Buck's self-transformation.

At the outset of the story, Buck is a civilized and self-confident dog who lives as a pet on Judge Miller's ranch in California. The love and care given by Judge Miller make Buck take Judge Miller's believability for granted, and his approaching to, following and liking Judge Miller are all spontaneous actions. Hence, in this phase, Buck is identified as a pampered dog, benign, even-tempered and proud.

The event that arouses Buck's strong attachment motivation is the betrayal of Manuel, the gardener helper, who sells him to unmerciful dog dealers. Manuel’s treacherous kidnapping brings Buck into a long series of hardship and affliction. The previously established attachment link is broken. Buck's spontaneous proximity to his caretaker is now taken place by his avoidance of closeness to men. Fear and wariness intrude, gain strength and control Buck's actions, eventually escalating into a kind of madness out of his self-preservation, especially in the face of the man in a red sweater.

Buck's defiance manifests his refusal of his new caretaker, a ruthless one. Simultaneously, attachment motivation also impels Buck to achieve a more compromising relationship with this new caregiver, albeit more vicious and merciless. After all, Buck is a domesticated dog who knows nothing about survival under harsh conditions. At a time when existence and survival become an imperative, Buck's instinctive tendency to rely on this new caregiver for establishing an attachment link is guiding Buck's behaviors. His fury is no longer helping him get farther away from beatings; and getting farther away from the new caretaker means nothing but starvation and coldness. Attachment motivation in Buck results in his compliance with his caretaker's orders, signifying the establishment of a subtle emotional reliance between Buck and his caretaker.

Considering Buck's motivation of enhancing attachment to the unfamiliar dog team, things are less complicated. Basically, Buck holds no repulsive attitude towards living in groups and is willing to establish attachment tie with these fellow dogs. The unfamiliarity of the surroundings and his inexperience of living as a sledge
dog do present before him big challenges and difficulties. However, as an animal, groupment and gregariousness are Buck’s natural motives that activate him to learn and to acclimatize. Therefore, the time when Buck is introduced to the dog team, his underlying attachment motivation to participate in the activities of these dogs is obvious. He befriends Curly, a good-natured dog as a reliable partner, quickly gets to know other dogs’ character and eagerly learns to adapt to the new group. Finally, his attachment motivation is realized and Buck succeeds in proving himself an eligible member of this group by transforming from a spoiled pet dog to an able sledge dog.

“Power is a basic state of social life.” (Rheinberg, 2012: 84) According to social scientists, in proper time and place, almost everyone has a desire to obtain power and use power, which in the field of motivation psychology, is termed as power motivation, referring to “the need for power (n Pow) to influence, control, or impress others and, as a corollary, to receive acclaim or at least recognition for these power-motivated behaviors” (Schultheiss, 2010: 3).

In general, based on David Winter’s observation and experiment, the formation of power motivation in human mind follows certain patterns and the exertion of it accords with certain process. He then conceptualizes the process as four distinguishable parts:

1. Wishes, anticipations, and affective states along with status attributions likely to accompany these states of mind; 2. Possible blockage to expression of the power need; 3. Instrumental activity directed toward the goal of achieving impact, which on occasions may circumvent the external barriers; 4. Attainment of the power goal, perhaps resulting in the desired Eff (far-reaching effect). (Schultheiss, 2010: 5)

Throughout Buck’s adventure, his power motivation empowers and strengthens his attempt to win the mastership of the dog team. It can be comprehended from the four distinguishable parts of power-motivated process mentioned above.

After living in the dog team for some time, Buck excels in integrating into the collective life and enjoys the teamwork as well, but that’s not well enough to suppress his power motivation. Buck’s perception of the dominant force of power begins when he witnesses the horrifying scene of Curly’s death. The brutality of his own species and the suffering of the innocent prompt the change of his state of mind. He is aware of the importance of power in this dog-eat-dog world where powerlessness and weakness incur tortures and afflictions. Besides, when he sees the unsympathetic and callous enjoyment found by Spitz, the head dog, in Curly’s death, Buck hates him.
“with a bitter and deathless hatred” (London, 2005: 20). It is this uncontrollable hatred that drives him to bury the seed of revenge in his heart and forms his preliminary perception of what power can do. Moreover, as a head dog, Spitz is exercising his power peremptorily and unscrupulously, which truly increases Buck’s natural abhorrence of the way the power-holder Spitz abuses his power.

Buck has long sensed his ardent feeling about power before taking actions to usurp Spitz’s position. However, as has been said, power stress is a temporary state of mind which restrains the attempt to actualize power motivation just for the time being. As the duration of power stress stretching longer, people’s wish to get over it grows stronger. Feasible ways that are based on people’s judgment and reason to achieve power motivation can be worked out. Eventually, the fight becomes the only solution. It is a fight of life and death where both of the opponents spare no mercy and intelligence to defend their dignity and esteem. Buck breaks Spitz’s legs and leaves him to be butchered by the whole team, a bloody scene parallel to that when Curly is butchered:

It was inevitable that the clash for leadership should come. Buck wanted it. He wanted it because it was his nature, because he had been gripped tight by that nameless, incomprehensible pride of the trail and trace—that pride which holds dogs in the toil to the last gasp, which lures them to die joyfully in the harness. (London, 2005: 42).

After trial and error, the victory dawns on Buck. The winner enjoys the honor of being the leader, while the loser dies of shame and indignity. The time when Buck first joins the dog team, he is timid and cautious, carefully maintaining his attachment ties with his masters and with his fellow companions; but now, he is an assertive and powerful leader who is cunning in dealing with troubles. This comparison of his status and character indicates that, power motivation, which is the cardiac behind this power-seeking anabasis, prompts Buck’s transform into an assertive dog leader.

Literally, achievement motivation can be simply understood as the need for success. Atkinson has offered a generally acknowledged definition: “Achievement motivation, often denoted as n Achievement, refers to a nonconscious and recurrent preference for affectively rewarding experiences related to improving one’s performance.” (Schultheiss, 2010; 30). This definition highlights that the purpose of one’s preference for achievement-related actions is to obtain certain
affective rewards. Since “n Achievement is an acquired drive that is based on a set of instrumental response elements that are directed by their sensory effect” (Schultheiss 2010: 35), the influence of achievement motivation on people’s mind depends on its sensory effect or in other words, affective feedback, like a dose of cordial, giving rise to people’s change of behavior and even change of character. This sensory effect can be simplified as the hope of success (HS) and the fear of failure (FF), which can find its illustration in Buck’s attempt to fulfill his achievement motivation in work.

For Buck’s team, work is a crucial part of daily life and is also where their value lies. As a sledge dog, the work is to finish the pulling tasks duly and devotedly; as the leader of the team, the work is to keep all the dogs in harmony and in high efficiency. Buck shoulders the two responsibilities of work. When the team is in the charge of Perrault and Francois, hope of success is Buck’s sensory effect. He wants to succeed in regulating the order of the team and in performing his duties well. Relying on his immense power and huge physique, Buck punishes the lazy and distracted dogs who always loaf on the work. And by his cleverness and patience, he manages to build up his reputation in the team. He proves himself a qualified team leader that is more competent than Spitz.

Nevertheless, with the ending of Perrault and Francois’s work, Buck’s team is taken over by a Scotch half-breed, meaning a turning point of Buck’s feeling about work. The sensory effect of his achievement motivation changes from the hope of success into the fear of failure. Work is no longer a source of satisfaction or success, instead, the heavy workload makes it a demanding toil. “It was a hard trip, with the mail behind them, and the heavy work wore them down. They were short of weight and in poor condition.” (London, 2005: 63). Exhaustion burns out the dogs’ enthusiasm about work. Yet, Buck “stood it, keeping his mates up to their work and maintaining discipline, though he, too, was very tired” (London, 2005: 64). His sticking to work is the result of his fear for failing to do his duty. He holds fast to his own position, because the trace and trail is the pride of sledge dogs. Without any chance of achieving success in work, Buck only wants to do his utmost to keep his role as a sledge dog and as the leader. Furthermore, Buck’s fear of failing to perform duties is replaced by his fear of punishment after the “three incompetents” , Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, take over the team. They treat the dogs with clubs and whips. Buck continues to work, for stopping work incurs punishment of stiff beatings. In a case like this, achievement-motivated actions are triggered by the sensory effect of fear of failure. Achieving the goal is to avoid the negative
consequences that may come and to preclude the possibility of being punished.

From the afore-analysis of Buck's achievement motivation, we can see the influence of achievement motivation on Buck's self-transformation is twofold. On the one hand, to pursue affective rewards, Buck keeps improving his performances as a dog leader, which helps him to be more responsible and self-assured; on the other hand, to avoid failure in work, Buck experiences fear of dereliction of his duty and fear of punishment, which in the end, fosters his perseverance and endurance. His achievement motivation helps him transform into a real Alaska dog leader with all the valuable qualities that a sledge dog can have.

II. The Extrinsic Motivation and Intrinsic Motivation for Buck's Final Self-transformation

Extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation are not specific motivations. They are a pair of concepts psychologists proposed to explain the causes of an individual's actions based on the different goals and reasons that trigger the actions. "Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome." (Ryan & Deci, 2000) Contrarily, "intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence" (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the process of Buck's final transformation, that is, from a greatly loved dog into the wolf leader, extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation altogether play a decisive role in leading him to answer the call of the wild.

Falko Rheinberg, a German psychologist points out that if a behavior is alleged to be driven by extrinsic motivation, the behavior must be motivated by a force that is outside of the behavior itself, or in other words, the performer is controlled by the external world. (c. f.: Rheinberg, 2012: 130) We can easily find out that in the story this external force is the death of Thornton. Or more precisely speaking, the external force is the deprivation of belongingness caused by the accident.

Belongingness, in the general sense, refers to people's need for interpersonal bonds. Baumeister and Leary propose the "belongingness hypothesis" to explain people's need for social bonds, suggesting that "the belongingness hypothesis is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary 1995). After Buck takes revenge on the Yeehats who have killed Thornton, the "ill effect" of his loss of belongingness forces him to become wild and return to
nature.

First of all, the most conspicuous effect of the loss of belongingness is that Buck becomes alone. Tracing back to the days with Thornton, Buck belongs to Thornton and it makes sense. All his great performances are to prove his worth to his master who gives him a home. In return, he will get recognition and love. Thornton's kindliness and generosity breed Buck's faithfulness and devotion. The sense of belongingness in Buck exists so strong that he naturally fears to lose it. He is afraid that Thornton will leave him just like Perrault and Francois and the Scotch half-breed have done. Every night he will creep through the hill to the tent in order to ensure his master's presence.

Besides, Buck belongs to Thornton's group as well. Thornton's other two dogs, Skeet and Nig, manifest no jealousy toward Buck, and treat Buck with boundless friendliness. They live in peace and share the care from their master together. Thornton's partners, Hans and Pete, both dog lovers, are on good terms with Buck. Living in this harmonious group, Buck finds his belongingness. But after the accident, the bond of this group collapses; Buck then belongs to no one and becomes alone. "John was dead. The last tie was broken. Man and the claims of man no longer bound him." (London, 2005: 134) Abraham Maslow points out that if a person lacks the sense of belongingness, "he will feel sharply the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection, of friendlessness, of rootlessness" (Maslow, 1954: 43). Rootlessness causes him to return to the wolf pack for the purpose of regaining the sense of belongingness.

In addition, the loss of belongingness is also the loss of connection with human world. Before, Buck has never broken the connection with humans. Initially, as a domesticated dog, he has to relinquish his freedom in exchange for the food and shelter humans can provide. Later, he meets more sympathetic and goodhearted humans, and establishes with them more favorable relationships—that of servant and master linked by work and though. Afterwards, he becomes a loyal companion of the "ideal master", Thornton. Throughout the process, Buck's situation of existence undergoes constant changes, but what remains unchangeable is that he is at the mercy of humans, no matter what kind of relationships he has with them. Buck finds attachment and belongingness in human world, but also loses his freedom. Durst Johnson writes that "in a sense, for a creature like Buck, domestication and loss of freedom have in themselves become a form of cruel oppression by men" (Johnson, 2007: 187). Humans' mastery over Buck, coupled with their different forms of
oppression, confines Buck’s pursuit of relationships to human world. When Buck’s last master, Thornton, is killed, he is deprived of his belongingness to a man, to a group, and also to the human world. He transforms from a dog dependent on human beings to a wild one in nature.

In the light of the knowledge that intrinsically motivated activities provide satisfaction of innate psychological needs, we can expound such influence by focusing on Buck’s innate tendency to achieve self-actualization and self-acceptance which can be detected throughout his transformation process.

The concept of self-actualization tops Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs as the most superior human need or desire. Maslow regards self-actualization as the dominant intrinsic human motivation. In his book *Motivation and Personality* (1954), he explicitly states that self-actualization “refers to man’s desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially; this tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow 1954: 46). Maslow uses this term to describe people’s innate motivation to obey their true nature. In fact, one of the major characteristics of self-actualizers is self-acceptance. Actualized people are inclined to accept whatever concerns human nature in the stoic style, including even their character flaws.

In the story, Buck’s self-transformation from a dog to a wolf leader is ostensibly a reestablishment of his identity, but fundamentally, it’s a process of seeking his true nature and obeying his heredity so as to accomplish self-actualization.

Buck’s intrinsic tendency to accept his heredity has long existed as early as the time when he is serving as a sledge dog. After hours of hard work, when darkness falls, Buck hears the long-drawn wailings of the southern huskies. To him, the sound is the song of defiance, the pleading of life and the articulate travail of existence. The primordial traits of wild song remind him of his ancestors, and their pains, fear and mystery. “It was an old song, old as the breed itself—one of the first songs of the younger world in a day when songs were sad.” (London, 2005: 45) He cannot help thinking of the untamed old generations and the raw beginnings of life in the howling ages. Buck’s memory of his ancestors comes from the depth of his inner being, rather than from the concrete external experiences. His ancestors’ feelings resonate with him because of his heredity from those primitive animals. Buck unconsciously accept the heredity as part of his nature, and even without the outside stimulus like the song of huskies, he can easily perceive the wildness in his body.
when the memories of his wild fathers recur in his mind.

Buck's fascination for his ancestral kindred is also reflected in his illusive visions of the hairy man. The man is “shorter of leg and longer of arm, with muscles that were stringy and knotty” (London, 2005: 62) and “he was all but naked, a ragged and fire scorched skin hanging partway down his back” (London, 2005: 62). From the appearance of the man, we can sense a figure of ancient primitiveness and wildness. In Buck's dreams, he always sees this man sleeping by the fire, head between his knees. The man is sleeping sound in the early stage of Buck's dreams, but is getting restless in the later stage. To some degree, the primitive man is the embodiment of Buck's own wildness in his subconscious mind. Potentially, Buck is actuated to face what he really is. In reality, Buck is a work dog or a pet dog, restrained by a bunch of rules and laws from the outside world; while in nature, he is an animal possessing the features of a wild beast. Buck's dream is a throwback to his primordial trait which indicates his recognition of his ancestral kindred. The awakening of the primitive man in Buck's dreams is the awakening of his true nature.

When Buck's beloved master Thornton is dead, he answers the call of the wild and joins the wolf pack. “The wolf embodies that basic, ancient element from which creatures have sprung; it is the true 'self,' independence of civilization.” (Johnson, 2007: 222) Buck's true self is a beast, a free spirit filled with passion, power, and wildness. The civilized world may tame Buck as a pet or an obedient tool, but it cannot change his real nature. He belongs to the wild and his potentials can only be developed there. The accomplishment of his self-actualization signifies the completion of his profound self-transformation.

Motivation is a psychological and neural mechanism that generates organisms' goal-related behaviors. It enables creatures to better adapt to the world of complexity and diversity. The most essential influence motivation exerts on creatures is to orient their actions, during the process of which, creatures' characters and identities may go through fundamental transformations. In this way, different types of motivations become the cause and drive of creatures' relative behaviors in the course of self-transformation. Focusing on the novel, we can figure out that the process of Buck's self-transformation is a long and tough process of exploring and fulfilling his different motivations.

In the early stage of Buck's self-transformation, his behaviors are substantially driven by the three specific motivations: social motivation, power motivation and achievement motivation, which corporately catalyze his transformation into a
determined and self-achieved work dog. In the final stage of Buck's self-transformation, extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation exert conclusive effect on Buck's behaviors. His regain of primordial wildness and return to nature is directly stimulated by the belongingness crisis and essentially guided by the quest of self-actualization and self-acceptance. The accomplishment of his self-actualization also signifies the completion of his self-transformation.

The psychological elements reflected in Buck's self-transformation process also apply to human beings. Humans, like any other creatures, betray an internal organization of behaviors activated by motivations. To study the knowledge about motivations is to look into the question about the causes of specific actions. Therefore, this thesis helps us remove some of our psychological confusions about our own changes and actions, which can facilitate our motivated life in the modern world.

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Yulong ZHU, Graduate Student at English Department, School of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University. He is currently working on American literature and culture.