

The Real World in Fiction: A Comparative Literary Perspective on the Portrayal of China in the Early Twentieth-Century in *Midnight* and on a Chinese Screen

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Abstract: Both Chinese and foreign writers cast their eyes on China during the early twentieth-century, when China was at an intersection of feudalism and modernism. They depicted and recorded this complex period from their own perspectives in different literary forms. Among them, Mao Dun and Maugham present the 1920s and 1930s China from different angles through their literary works *Midnight* and *On a Chinese Screen*, respectively. There are lots of research analyzing the two works from various perspectives, but few put them together by doing comparative studies of the early twentieth-century Chinese society and people. Therefore, this essay aims to analyze the two works together from a comparative perspective and offer a more comprehensive view through the analysis. Besides official historical records, literary and visual arts are also chroniclers of history. Fictional works might also provide the real world, even with detailed social contradictions, and even the inner world of people under specific writing purposes, like what Mao Dun and Maugham held. This comparative research focuses on the depiction of China from both domestic and foreign perspectives and analyzes the narrative of the two literary works from the fictional realism in characters as well as social and natural environments. Since the two writers held different viewpoints with diverse social backgrounds, their understanding of Chinese society and people varied accordingly. Through the comparative analysis, this research explores a great deal of the historical value of these two literary works that offer a more enlightened way to link the real historical events and the fictional characters, as well as a fuller picture of China at that time.

Keywords: Early twentieth-century China, *Midnight*, *On a Chinese Screen*, Comparative literary studies

1. Introduction

China was at an intersection during the early twentieth-century, while feudalism and modernism collided with each other. Both Chinese and foreign writers cast their eyes on China during this complex period and recorded the society and its people from their own perspectives in different literary forms. During this period, Shanghai could be described as being at “midnight”, that the darkness of feudalism had not dispersed, but the dawn light of modernity could be seen faintly in the

near future. In this social context, Mao Dun, one of the forerunners of the New Cultural Movement and a modern Chinese writer, cultural activist, and social activist, took the 1930s' Shanghai as the background of his novel and named the novel directly *Midnight*. *Midnight* was first published in 1933, aiming to depict the phenomenon of Chinese society on a large scale [1]. While William Somerset Maugham, an English novelist whose work often shows a keen interpretation of human nature, took a travelogue style to record the sights and sounds along the Yangtze River in the winter of the beginning of 1920. Maugham compiled a book of his writings from this trip and named the book *On A Chinese Screen*, first published in 1922, and hoped to provide the readers with a valid and vivid picture of China through words.

This research will employ the modern novel *Midnight* and the travel notes *On A Chinese Screen* to explore the people and society in early twentieth-century China. Richard Lehan claims that there is a symbiosis between literary works and urban texts because when literary works endow the city with an imagined reality, its changes in turn help to transform the literary texts [2]. This also works with societies where literary text interacts with the relative social text. Although *Midnight* is a fictional work, with the author's writing purpose, it did, to some extent, reflect the real world. Instead of receiving information from the formal historical texts, which often concentrate on huge issues, readers could have a glance at the life, the social contradictions, and even the inner world of people from different social classes at that time through literary works. The characters and the plots might be adapted from certain realistic occurrences or entirely fictional. The characters do represent a certain group of people, and the plots are also based on the author's real feelings about the society at that time.

Similarly, *On A Chinese Screen* depicts China from a foreigner's viewpoint, which may bear Maugham's own knowledge and imagination of China. Therefore, he uses "screen" to imply the covering and estrangement between Eastern and Western cultures. Maugham recorded various images of the Chinese people and the foreigners in China, the natural scenery, and the human landscapes in the book, which makes it a "Riverside Scene of Pure Brightness" of early twentieth-century China. Besides, this comparative research of the two literary works will also focus on the depiction of China from the different perspectives of Chinese and foreign, eastern and Western. In the following, the essay will analyze the narrative of the two literary works comparatively from the fictional realism in characters as well as social and natural environments, in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of early twentieth-century China. Therefore, there is a great deal of historical value in these two literary works that will give further enlightenment to a broader range of the linkage between the real historical events and the fictional characters and storylines.

2. Literature Review

Lehan builds on Roland Barthes' understanding of the relationship between city and text, that each novel creates its own system of reality, and argues that images of cities that emerged from the texts would also become a larger narrative reality [2]. Both the two literary works record early twentieth-century China, but with different writing techniques and purposes. Mao Dun, as a social activist, put much of his thoughts and predictions into the narratives and made *Midnight* a process of his speculation and thinking of China's future. Qu Qiubai states that the book uses social science to show social and class relations in China in a literary and artistic way [3]. Liu Yongli claims that China's modernity first originated in Shanghai, which was seen as "the epitome of modern China" [4], therefore, 1930s Shanghai's modernity depicted in *Midnight* has its historical value of rewriting history in a narrative way. While Maugham, as a foreign writer, described China from the perspective of an outsider, which caused different reviews of *On A Chinese Screen*. There are scholars who believe that Maugham has a colonial mentality when describing China's rural environment and the underclass people [5]. However, there are also experts claim that the image of the East (or China)

depicted by Maugham is not, as Said points out, “a place almost created by the Europeans out of thin air” [6]. His depiction breaks the stereotype of the East (or China) as a single Other and continuously presents his historical cognitive changes along the dimension of time [7]. There is plenty of separate research on the two literary works that target various fields, but few put them together by doing comparative studies of the early twentieth-century Chinese society and people. Therefore, this essay aims to analyze the two works together from a comparative perspective and offer a more comprehensive view through the analysis.

3. Fictional Realism in Characters

People and the environment, where people live and work, are basic elements of a city or a country. Lehan believes that the city often presents itself metonymically, embodied by the crowd, so that a place can be viewed through its people, and different groups of people offer different ways of reading the place [2]. The following parts will display the complicated situation of China at the beginning of the twentieth-century from the descriptions of characters from two different perspectives: domestic and foreign.

3.1. Ideological Contradictions in the Fictional Characters

Midnight starts with Old Mr. Wu fleeing from tumult to Shanghai to his son Wu Sunfu who was a national capitalist in Shanghai. Unlike his son, Old Mr. Wu was an “old zombie” from the old days, who brought out a sharp contradiction between feudalism and modernity through holding his *Taishang Ganying Pian* (or *Lao Tse’s Treatise on the Response of the Tao*) while sitting on a modern car. As soon as he arrived the Wu residence, he was scared to death by the western furniture, the modern fashion and all the feasting and revelry in Shanghai. Mao Dun links straightforwardly the arrival and the death of Old Mr. Wu to the social environment at that time through a conversation by Li Yuting, the professor of economics, and Zhang Susu who was one of the “women of the times” that accepted the new trend of modernity in Shanghai.

“What kind of society do you think we are in?”

“...There is a magnate of finance, and a magnate of industry here. This little parlor is a microcosm of Chinese society.

“But there was also an old mister who believed in *Taishang Ganying Pian*!”

“Yes, but this old mister is dying.

“There are also countless ‘Old Mr. Wu’ in the mainland.

“...But they will die as soon as they arrive Shanghai...[1]”

Old Mr. Wu’s view of Shanghai as the nest of devils stemmed from his inability to accept the huge differences between its rapid modernization and the feudal era in which he lived for his whole life. Ironically, while Old Mr. Wu, or feudalism as he represented, held negative impression to modernity, those who were open to modern ideas also regarded those people like Old Mr. Wu were “zombies” to the new world. In the face of the conflict between the two, it was clear that modernization would triumph over unenlightened feudalism, as Old Mr. Wu’s death predicted.

After Old Mr. Wu’s death, his *Taishang Ganying Pian* was passed to Huifang, Wu Sunfu’s fourth sister and been living with Old Mr. Wu in the countryside. In the last few chapters, Mao Dun describes Huifang’s change towards *Taishang Ganying Pian*, or the Chinese traditions. Although Huifang got a sense of tranquility by reminding her of the former peaceful life with Old Mr. Wu, she could not ignore the sounds of modernity—the cars, the trams, the piano downstairs, etc. She finally got rid of the book and left it ruined by the heavy rain. According to Zhang Susu’s advice, she started to consider going to school and imagine a “free and colorful future” [1]. Mao Dun’s illustration of Huifang’s mental change was based on the ideological movement of women’s liberation caused by the outbreak

of the May 4th Movement which introduced modern Western ideas, including freedom and rights. Besides, such mental change also indicates Mao Dun's positive opinion towards the development of modern ideologies that will give all the people freedom and the right to education. This goes exact opposite of what Maugham had in mind. Maugham focused on describing a Cabinet Minister in Chapter five and expressed his regret about the decline of Chinese traditional culture caused by the invasion of Western modernism. He claimed through the voice of the minister that those students back from Europe and America were tearing down the oldest civilization the world had known that had been built up by endless generations, and they were placing nothing in its stead [8]. In this case, Maugham criticized at the end of the chapter that the Cabinet Minister had certainly had a share in reducing China to the desperate plight [8]. Maugham saw clearly and criticized strongly toward what the western powers had done to Chinese society and culture. However, both Mao Dun and Maugham had their points and they just stood in different angles to think about the influence of Western modernization in China. Mao Dun saw the positive side of modernization in destroying feudalism and enlightening people, while Maugham noticed that the western modernization caused the young people to worship foreign things and further destroy the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture.

3.2. Social and Economic conflicts in the Fictional Characters

Apart from the contradiction of the ideologies that Old Mr. Wu represented in *Midnight*, Wu Sunfu also represents the conflicts possessed by the national capitalist industries at the social and economic level. Alexander Des Forges argues that *Midnight*, focusing on the present and the recent moments of the past, is extremely topical [9]. In the spring of 1930, the world economic panic reached Shanghai, where Chinese national capitalists, under the pressure of foreign capital and under the threat of world economic panic, had intensified their exploitation of the working class in order to transfer their own crisis, which made the workers rebel and economic struggle broke out [10]. Wu suffered the same problem. Although he set up a bank with competent people and established their own financial and distribution organization aiming to help the national industries, he eventually went bankrupt under the capitalist Zhao Botao's scheme to dominate the national industry by relying on foreign financial capital.

There are also bigwigs in business and politics and shops illustrated in *On a Chinese Screen*. Maugham recorded his experience about a party of splendor at a treaty port where all the foreign businessmen were bored of China [8]. What most of those foreign merchants came to China for—was to plunder, whether wealth or goods. They never showed any mercy to the civilization of the land they invaded. Later, he devotes a whole chapter to Henderson, a junior partner in a well-known and respectable firm in Shanghai. Henderson fancied himself a socialist and refused to use the jinrickshaw when he first came to Shanghai. However, after three years, when Maugham met him, he kicked the jinrickshaw on the bottom for the pass of the turning that should have been taken. Henderson claimed that they were the “ruling race” for the Chinese people since the Chinese always needed “masters” [8]. Maugham portrays several foreign characters who glorified Chinese culture and art while at the same time exploiting the local people and the resources. Through these illustrations, Maugham criticizes this aggression and the hypocrisy of those duplicitous merchants and expresses his sympathy for the Chinese people as well as their damaged cultural accumulation. However, those characters also show the strong power of the foreign forces in early twentieth-century China, under which circumstances Wu Sunfu had no chance of beating the foreign companies by relying on his national industry.

Maugham's description of the hypocrisy of the foreign merchants is metaphorically linked to his original description of the small street shops. He described his feeling of the shops as “having a peculiar ruined magnificence” in the first chapter of the book. He imaged that in dark recesses of those shops were sold all manner of strange wares of the fabulous East [8]. Truly, there were priceless

treasures, literally and culturally, whereas they were “ruined” under the hands of the foreign invasion and predatory commerce. The arty foreign merchants spoke highly of Chinese porcelain, calligraphy, painting and other works of art, but treated the Chinese people, who created those works, all the worst. They hated the place but still needed its resources.

This goes the same as the attitude of Wu Sunfu towards the workers in his factory. Wu represents the emerging national bourgeoisie that developed under the impetus of the urban modernization. He needed the workers to work for him so that he might revitalize the country through national industry. However, he exploited those workers and hated their ideas for freedom and justice. Therefore, Wu’s failure was a foregone conclusion, and so was the purpose of the foreign invaders. The invasion of the foreign invaders contradicted their (hypocritical) love of Chinese artworks, or their (fake) socialist equality of those who at the bottom of society. They could never success for long. Wu’s identity as a capitalist who crushed the working class was in conflict with his industrialist identity that wanted to revitalize the country through national industry. At this midnight of exploring the way of China’s national industry, which was also of searching for the way out of China as a country, it was still hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

4. Fictional Realism in the Descriptions of Environments

In addition to those fictional characters or people that were recorded in the travel notes, the descriptions of the natural and social environments from the two books also reflect the two authors’ understanding and thinking of Chinese society in the 1920s and 1930s from different perspectives. Just like the contradiction between night and dawn shown in the title “*Midnight*”, the first paragraph of the novel also presents a strong sense of contradiction. The depiction turns from the local scenery of the Suzhou River suddenly to the Western-style buildings, neon light advertising and the English description of those gigantic neon signs as “Light, Heat, Power!” [1]. The old and the new, Chinese tradition and Western modernization were interwoven in the city’s buildings, traffic and billboards. Not only the streets and lights, but also the decor, furniture and guests in the Wu residence revealed an unmistakable sense of western modernity. The room was scattered with radio music, the living room was full of colorful lights in the spin, and the guests were all dressed in fashionable clothes and dancing wildly [1]. It seems like the influence of western modernization had penetrated every corner from public to private space. The one who was holding *Taishang Ganying Pian* was dead because young urbanites like Mrs. Wu were keeping *The Sorrows of Young Werther* at hand. They regarded imported foreign goods as symbols of the noble status, and this mentality of worshiping foreign stuff also foreshadowed the failure of their own national industries in the competition against foreign capital. The foreign invaders and merchants did not only exploit resources and markets but were also “killing” the traditional culture the country had, which also caught Maugham’s attention.

Similarly, Maugham faintly hints at the beginning of *On A Chinese Screen* that the same conflicts between Chinese tradition and Western modernity also took place in cities outside of Shanghai. He saw that a Peking cart came at a sedate pace in the sunset and disappeared into the gathering darkness, which seemed to carry all the mystery of the East [8]. Maugham wondered if there might be a scholar who would later discuss the golden age of Tang and Sung—the mystery of the East [8]. At the beginning of his journey, he still held a Western stereotype of China (the East) as it was in the Tang and Sung dynasties. However, he also noticed and recorded the difference between reality and his imagination that all the mystery of the East, or the beautiful imagination of Chinese traditional culture back to the ancient days, were disappearing into the “gathering darkness”, which represented the dark reality of China’s semi-colonial and semi-feudal society at that time. He later wrote that it was no longer night, but it was not yet day in the chapter of “Dawn” and called the moment as “the moment of most magical beauty” [8]. At that time, he described the Chinese bamboos looked like the hops of a Kentish field due to the “magic of the mist” [8]. Through the Chinese furniture and western

decorations he saw when visiting foreigners living in China, Maugham noticed some pictorial representations of the interaction of the two cultures, and expressed it in the metaphor of bamboo. He used “magic” to describe the process, but he also clearly realized the context in which this magic occurred. Maugham was aware that China was in the middle of moving away from the “dark night” of colonial and feudal rule and embracing modernity that may bring “bright” promise. Unlike Mao Dun, who tried to think about the future of China through fictional works, Maugham did not pay much attention to thinking and making predictions on the future trend of Chinese society in his travel notes. This also re-expresses the different positions of the two authors; one was a social activist who actively thought about social and class contradictions in China, while the other was just a foreign tourist who admired Chinese culture and sympathized with the situation of China under invasion.

5. Conclusions

In describing social life in China at the beginning of the twentieth-century, both Mao Dun and Maugham put their thoughts on the country and the people in their works respectively. Mao Dun set his sights on the national industry and explored the possibility of the national industry revitalizing China under the pressure of feudalism and foreign powers through his fictional work *Midnight*. The narration presents clearly that there were a number of social conflicts that hindered the development of China. These conflicts lay between the feudal thoughts of the older generation and the modern ideas of the young, the power gap between the national industrialists and the foreign capital, and the contradictions between the national industry and the working class. In comparison, there seem not so many social conflicts in *On A Chinese Screen*. Nonetheless, the conflicts that Maugham depicted were mainly the cultural contradictions between Europe and China (or Eastern and Western), as well as the divergence of ideas between Maugham and the colonialists over colonialism. Although Maugham had travelled all over China, expressed his fondness for Chinese culture and sympathy for the people that were under the invasion in his writings, his perspectives on Chinese social problems remained superficial. He had no idea about the future development of China, and his travel notes were just a “screen” that combined his imagined ancient China with the real image of China he saw. Such a perspective may also be constrained by the colonialist social context in which Maugham lived. Therefore, there was a lack of insight and understanding of the changing socialist state. After all, Maugham came to China only as a tourist, looking for materials for his later literary works. However, since Mao Dun was not only a writer but also a social activist, besides pure depictions of the society, his work *Midnight* also contains predictions and analyses of China’s future development, such as the triumph of modernization over feudalism, and education popularization. Due to the different standpoints and social backgrounds of the two writers, their views of China also varied from different angles, and they had different understandings of the problems reflected in their descriptions of the current situation of Chinese society around the 1920s and 1930s. Through the comparative analysis of these two literary works, this research displays early twentieth-century China from both domestic and foreign perspectives and explores the historical value of the two literary works, in order to offer a more comprehensive picture of China at that time.

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