

# **A Theoretical Approach to Naturalism and the Modern Chinese Novel: Mao Tun as Critic And Novelist**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Here I first suggest that, contrary to Galik's view, Mao Tun is not just a "realist" but a naturalist. Then, by looking at Mao Tun's fictional as well as critical and theoretical writing, I try to show that *here* we find more than just "naturalistic" techniques; we find a naturalistic outlook *on life*, a way of thinking, seeing, reflecting, and experimenting, a need to study and analyze in order to know.

## **KEY WORDS**

realism  
experimentalism  
Darwinism  
heredity

naturalism  
remedy  
objective-descriptive method  
environment

The time around the turn of the century is when modern Chinese literature and literary thought were born. "Modern Chinese literature" is a general term for literary criticism and theory which, to a great extent, stands in opposition to the old Chinese literary tradition and, at the same time, links up with traditions of world literature.

Mao Tun 茅盾 (1896-1981), whose real name was Shen Yen-Ping 沈雁冰 is generally regarded as the colossus of the naturalistic movement in China, both by reason of his formidable ability to engage in verbal combat on behalf of naturalism and because of the short stories and novels that he wrote, in which he employed what he called the "naturalistic method" of "objective description" and "truthful observation."

Despite the self Pro-claimed role of Mao Tun and commonly held opinions of him, Marian Galik, the distinguished Slovak literary critic, after having subjected a theoretical essay by Mao Tun to close scrutiny, came to the conclusion that Mao Tun's literary criticism from 1921-22, the period generally taken as that of his propagation of naturalism, is an example of "realistic criticism." The essay Galik examined is Mao Tun's "Tzu-jan-chu-i yu Chung-kuo shien-tai hsiao-shuo" 自然主義與中國現代小說 ("Naturalism and Modern Chinese Fiction"). His argument, well thought out, centers in fact on several assumptions all based on this one single essay. What I intend to do in this study is (1) to re-examine Mao Tun's theoretical position within the context of all his major efforts as a theorist during his relentless campaign for

naturalism in China, and (2) to study Mao Tun closely as a novelist to decide if he was a naturalist writer, and, (if so) how well and why he carried his naturalistic theories into practice.

According to Galik, the kind of naturalism presented by Mao Tun is purportedly that advocated by Zola, whose basic premise is truth (*Mao Tun* 82). Taking this as a point of departure, Galik furthers his argument by pointing out that Mao Tun's views of Zola and his doctrine of naturalism were basically taken from secondary sources, of which not one ever cites Zola's famous essay "Le roman experimental," in which Zola expounds his theory most lucidly (*Mao Tun* 78). In addition, Galik argues, Mao Tun nowhere indicated that a writer must be an observer and experimentalist in one person, that he has to set up hypotheses at first and then, based on his hypotheses, to examine and describe objective reality (*Mao Tun* 78).

In Galik's opinion, Mao Tun was equally a stranger to Arno Holz's naturalistic criticism (*Mao Tun* 79) due to the fact that, in spite of his exposure to Holz through secondary sources, Mao Tun showed no particular interest in expounding his theories. Furthermore, in Mao Tun's theories, Galik finds a constant confusion between the two terms "naturalism" and "realism." As Galik argues, when Mao Tun stated the views of other critics, the difference between these two terms is a matter of degree; however, "when Mao Tun expressed his own view without referring to anybody, the concepts of realism and naturalism completely merged" (*Mao Tun* 80). Galik attributes this confusion to the fact that, as far as terms such as *realism*, *naturalism* and the like are concerned, an extreme "nominalism" is characteristic of English and American literary criticism (*Mao Tun* 80). Since he drew his knowledge of literary criticism mainly from English sources, Galik concludes, Mao Tun was bound to be arbitrary with these labels (*Mao Tun* 80).

The fact that Mao Tun did not have first-hand knowledge

of Zola and the philosophical premises of French naturalism, that he did not promulgate Holz's literary thought, and that what Mao Tun believed to be "naturalistic descriptive techniques" are actually realistic in nature (*Mao Tun* 78-79, 81) made Galik confidently arrive at his final conjecture: "Mao Tun's literary criticism from 1921-1922 is a realistic criticism" (*Mao Tun* 82).

An extensive look at Mao Tun's theoretical attempts is necessary to ascertain his theoretical and philosophical position, and to understand the complex nature of the relationship between Western literary trends and modern Chinese literature. It is my intention in this article to ascertain Mao Tun's role both as a theorist and as a novelist and decide if he can after all be considered a naturalist in the modern Chinese literary scene.

Mao Tun, a powerful voice in the renovation of Chinese literature, started out as a prolific literary critic and translator. He worked as an editor in the twenties and was the foremost outstanding novelist of the thirties. From 1928 through 1944, Mao Tun wrote some one hundred miscellaneous essays under numerous pseudonyms and pen names in order to avoid persecution by the ruling Nationalist government (Galik, "Names and Pseudonyms" 80). At the age of twenty-four, in 1920, Mao Tun served as the editor of the then well-established literary magazine, *Hsiao-shuo yueh-pao* 小說月報 (*The short story monthly*), whose major goal was to initiate Chinese youth into Western literature and thought. The Czech literary critic, Jaroslav Prusek, has this to say about Mao Tun:

Judging from the European literature which Mao Tun was acquainted with before he reached the age of 24, and particularly from the mature critical judgment he brought to his reading, it is clear that (this) young, talented Chinese intellectual had a far broader knowl-

edge of world thought and writing than many of his contemporaries in Europe. (xii)

The major drawbacks of traditional Chinese literature, as Mao Tun pointed out, are two: 1) There had been a lack of seriousness in the traditional attitude towards literature. Literature had been treated as a form of entertainment, or, at best, a sure source of income for the writers in his day; 2) there had also been a lack of objective descriptive techniques in fictional writings, a weakness he deemed very common in traditional writings. A remedy for these two weaknesses, as he saw it, was a timely introduction to Western literature.

As soon as Mao Tun became the editor of *The Short Story Monthly*, he launched a thorough and systematic introduction to Western literary works and philosophical trends. One of the first articles which appeared in the January 1920 issue of *The Short Story Monthly* was a statement of his editorial policy, in which Mao Tun put forward his personal views on realism and modern Chinese literature. In the article entitled "Hsiao-shuo hsin-ch'ao-lan hsuan-yen" 小說新潮欄宣言 ("Manifesto of the Column of the New Tide of Fiction"), he announced that the magazine was seeking translations of Western literature from the general reader. While criticizing the uneven quality and unsystematic selection of the thousand-odd works that had been translated over the last twenty years, Mao Tun lamented the bad choice of the translators at his time for not being able to meet the needs of the age. Influenced by Darwin's theory of evolution, prevalent among the Chinese intellectuals in his day, Mao Tun inevitably held an evolutionary view of literature. While Western literature had gone through stages of development, Chinese literature, he argued, should undergo a similar process in order to find a new form for new thoughts:

At present, new thought makes a distance of one thousand *li* in one day. New thought wants new

literature to be its propagator and instigator.... Western fiction has already passed from romanticism to realism, symbolism and neo-romanticism. China has made a stop before realism.... Hence, it is urgent to make accessible the fiction of other trends.... It can be said that our contemporary Chinese literature still gropes between classicism and romanticism.

Mao Tun was apparently unaware of the intimate relations between the literature of any given society and the socio-historical factors conducive to that particular literature, — and thus believed in a uniform process of development in world literature. Since Chinese literature in the twenties still remained at the stage of classicism and romanticism, Mao Tun argued, it was realism that could answer the needs of the time. To be specific, it was the “objective descriptive method” characteristic of realism that China urgently needed (“Manifesto”). He drew up a list of various Western works to be translated and published in the magazine over a one-year period as the introduction of Western realism. Among the forty-seven titles by twenty-six writers, we find Strindberg’s *Miss Julie* and *The Father*, Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* as well as some unspecified works by Zola and Ibsen. On the same list, there also appeared the names of such writers as Maupassant, Gogol, Chekhov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Shaw. All these works were chosen, as Mao Tun proclaimed, as the representatives of realism on the basis of both artistic standards and social content (McDougall 174-75).

The systematic translation of the above-mentioned works was coupled by the attempt to introduce Western literary theories. In 1921, an excellent article on German naturalism appeared in the August issue of *The Short Story Monthly* under the title “Chin-tai Te-kuo wen-hsueh te chu-ch’ao” 近代德國文學的主潮 (“The Principal Trends of Modern German Literature”). It was a translated article originally written in

Japanese by a certain Mitsunobu. The article was about the influence that Zola exerted upon modern German writers—writers such as Arno Holz, Gerhart Harptmann, Hermann Sudermann—and upon the consequent naturalism (*konsequenter Naturalismus*) in late nineteenth-century Germany (Galik, *Mao Tun* 70). Extremely impressed by this article, Mao Tun responded favorably in the editorial column of the same issue:

Literary naturalism, though lasting only a short time, exerted an extraordinary influence in the area of artistic techniques. Everybody now seems to find that naturalism had certain drawbacks and that in the literary field it will not be possible any more to hoist its flag.... But which of today's great writers, whether neo-romantic, mystic or symbolist, had not gone through the naturalistic baptism? Chinese creative writing has of late become more "ideal" than it was two years ago. If we do not decide to propagate naturalism, the "new literature" may turn back to the old tracks. ("The Last Page" 8)

It is true that Mao Tun could not read either Japanese or German. However, while he could not directly take up the study of the problem of naturalism from theoretical works devoted to this subject, he had recourse to critical works in English on naturalism in general and on Hauptmann in particular (Yeh 46). In fact, Mao Tun drew most profit from the work of the American scholar F. W. Chandler, entitled *Aspects of Modern Drama* (Galik, "Naturalism" 314-15). The second chapter of this book bears the title "The Themes of Naturalism," wherein Chandler discusses Hauptmann and Sudermann among others. Inspired by Harptmann's life, work, and personality, perhaps more than by any other naturalist, Mao Tun saw in Hauptmann a most celebrated writer in the history of modern German drama, who could usher in a new era and serve as a model to young Chinese writers (Hsi Chen,

"Biography of Hauptmann" 1). The literary scene prevailing in Germany prior to the time of Hauptmann could very well remind him of that existing in China in his days (Hsi Chen, "Biography of Harptmann" 3). The need was felt for some new and effective literary movement to take place that would nurse China back to health and rescue it from "pseudo-classicism" (Hsi Chen, "Biography of Harptmann" 3). Naturalism was to become the new movement, and proved to be the right remedy. As a consequence, Mao Tun wrote three articles on Hauptmann and his works, which all appeared in the same issue of *The Short Story Monthly* in 1922, under the titles of "Ho-p'u-te-man chuan" 霍普特曼傳 ("The Biography of Hauptmann") (Hsi Chen 1-11), "Ho-p'u-te-man te-tzu-jan-chu-i tso-p'in" 霍普特曼的自然主義作品 ("The Naturalistic Works of Hauptmann") (Hsi Chen 11-16), and "Ho-p'u-te-man te hsiang-cheng-chu-i tso-p'in" 霍普特曼的象徵主義作品 ("The Symbolistic Works of Hauptmann") (Hsi Chen 16-20) respectively. These three articles were all written under the pen name of "Hsi Chen" (Aspiring after Truth) (Galik, "Names and Pseudonyms" 90)—one of the literary doctrines of Zola's naturalism that Mao Tun had learned through his "study of rich and heterogeneous literary material" on naturalism. Hauptmann suited admirably Mao Tun's idea of a great modern writer who began his literary activity not only as a naturalist but also as a socialist at the time of a vehement scientific upsurge and a political awakening of the masses (Hsi Chen, "Biography of Hauptmann" 6). While the life of Hauptmann yielded a parallelism to the socially concerned new writers in China, his naturalistic works, as Mao Tun declared, demonstrated a "poet's imagination and the genius of a scientist with an objective outlook" (Hsi Chen, "Biography" 10). In the article "The Naturalistic Works of Hauptmann," Mao Tun talked about both Hauptmann and the influence Hauptmann received from Zola. Given the fact, as Galik suggests, that Mao Tun's view of Zola was basically drawn from the writings of Chandler ("Naturalism"),

the following passage about Zola reveals Mao Tun's fair understanding of his doctrines of heredity and environment:

Zola was a great naturalist novelist, who believed that life is to be described on the basis of living reality itself. He suggested that the essential part of life is its dark and grim side; thus, he preferred to describe drunkenness, crime and sexual passions of people of the lower social strata. He thought that man is powerless when caught in the conflict of body and soul, and thus the individual is not able to stand up against his own environment. Moreover, he embraced the idea of making hypotheses based on the doctrine of heredity. As a consequence, he preferred to portray the immense forces of environment and heredity. (Hsi Che, "Naturalistic works" 11)

As for the "philosophical ideas" naturalism was based on, the following passage is illuminating to our understanding of Mao Tun's theoretical assumptions regarding naturalism:

What are the philosophical ideas that naturalism was issuing from? This question has already been answered almost unambiguously. It issued from philosophical materialism. If we want to explore more deeply into this problem, we can speak of three sources: first, the theory of the struggle for life and the survival of the fittest; secondly, the belief in the biological equality of the sexes; and thirdly, the idea of environment and heredity as boundless forces. The struggle for life means that there is an eternal struggle going on in human society among individuals. The individuals are bound to compete with each other for survival. On this basis, the fact which would naturally be taken into consideration is the outcome of the struggle. Since most people are

going to be defeated in the process—even if they will not necessarily die, one can imagine the miserable situation they will be in. This is why the naturalist believes that literature, being the reflection of human life, must present life in its most common aspects. The life of the individuals defeated in the struggle for survival is the most common type of life in our time. Hence, this is what must be portrayed because these individuals must not be forgotten. And yet, we must not hypothetically create a fictitious and ideal life. The doctrine of equality of man and woman is based on evidence found in biology. All the biases against women in the past have lost their validity. And, thus, the naturalist advocates a higher position of women and demands that complete freedom be given to them. As far as the fate of the individual is concerned, since environment and heredity are extremely powerful, the tragedy of mankind is then presented in a new light. Since human beings are all situated in the same great environment, sharing the burden of the same heredity, the naturalist, as a consequence, believes in mechanistic determinism. (Mao Tun, "German Dramatist Hauptmann" 35-36)

Mao Tun seemed to conceive of naturalism in terms of the strict interplay of heredity and environment. In fact, he used naturalism as a basis for theoretical argument after the fact. The difference between Mao Tun and Zola lies primarily in where they placed their emphasis. While Mao Tun was more concerned with the relation of literature to society, Zola was more interested in literature as a scientific experiment. To Mao Tun, a truthful depiction of a decayed society would inevitably disclose the tragedy of each individual as the victim of his environment. Thus, Mao Tun's misunderstanding of "universal" heredity and environment. Modeled on the medical doctor Claude Bernard, Zola advocated a scientific and

experimental method for what he called the "Experimental Novel." The novelist, as Zola argued, should work like a scientist who observes and experiments, basing his experimental reasoning on doubt and always maintaining an open mind ("Experimental Novel" 163). In Zola's opinion, the naturalist writer should work with no preconceived idea about nature and human beings. Hence, in Zola, the forces of heredity and environment run only in a given family and vary from family to family. On the other hand, Mao Tun, not being aware of the scientific and experimental orientation of Zola, as Galik maintains, mainly worked with the idea that human beings are universally at the mercy of the same heredity and environment. This departure from Zola, which marks the difference between the two, brought Mao Tun, the naturalistic novelist, closer to American naturalism, well represented, for instance, by the works of Frank Norris at the turn of the century.

In propagating naturalism, Mao Tun raised a storm of protest which he countered in a long article "Tzu-jan-chu-i yu Chung-kuo hsien-tai hsiao-shuo" ("Naturalism and Modern Chinese Fiction") in *The Short Story Monthly* in July 1922 (814). This article proves to be a more systematic expression of his views on the kind of naturalism which he submitted to his readers for discussion. The issues the article addresses are as follows:

First, the opponents of naturalism denounced the validity of a completely "objective descriptive method" such as Mao Tun advocated along with his project of naturalism for the very reason that description, as a method to present reality, is inevitably colored by the author's own observations and imagination. Furthermore, the naturalist is inevitably doomed to be subjective, especially when he only looks for evil and ugliness in life (Mao Tun, "Naturalism" 814-15). Mao Tun, however, did not take these accusations seriously simply because he intended to use naturalism as a remedy for what he regarded as the principal drawbacks of traditional Chinese

literature—literature viewed as “a means of entertainment” and the “lack of faithful description” in traditional fiction. He wished to employ in fiction the “naturalistic techniques of truthful observation and objective descriptive method” in order to reach a higher degree of artistic cognition (“Naturalism” 814-15).

Secondly, the scientific and experimental orientation of Zola was transformed by Mao Tun into the need for “scientific preparation” before the writer engages himself in writing. As Mao Tun argued, naturalism had undergone the baptism of modern science; hence, naturalistic writers studied the theory of evolution, psychology, ethics and the emancipation movement (“Naturalism” 813). Addressing himself to Chinese men of letters, Mao Tun wrote,

We must learn from the naturalistic writers the need to make use of the laws revealed by science and apply them to the writing of fiction. We also need to study social issues, problems of emancipation, and the theory of evolution. Otherwise (to rely solely upon intuition), one shall hardly be able to avoid superficiality and shallowness of thought. (“Naturalism” 814)

In other words, as Mao Tun suggested earlier in the article, knowledge of what one writes about was to be obtained if possible in a direct way, on the basis of one's own experience because he firmly believed that good naturalistic works could only be created in this manner (“Naturalism” 812).

Thirdly, Mao Tun was bombarded by his opponents with severe philosophical doubts about “mechanistic determinism.” Even though he presented this idea as being that of Zola himself, Mao Tun's main purpose had been to illustrate that naturalism was the product of scientific theories and discoveries of the nineteenth century, and that most naturalists, who had studied Darwin's theory of the evolution, applied

their scientific knowledge to the study of human beings and society ("Naturalism" 813). On the one hand, Mao Tun shared with his opponents their doubts about the justification of "mechanistic determinism," which proclaims that man is incapable of standing up against the environment in which he lives. Consequently, it was not beneficial for Chinese youth to be exposed to such a defeatist outlook on life ("Naturalism" 815, 817). On the other hand, Mao Tun brushed aside the philosophical doubts on two grounds. About "mechanistic determinism," he had this to say:

"Mechanistic determinism" is merely one of the views in naturalism. It can not represent the whole school and especially we can not say that it is naturalism *par excellence*. Naturalism and the philosophical content in naturalistic works are separate matters which should not be mixed up. ("Naturalism" 815)

Given the impact that German naturalists had on him Mao Tun perhaps had Hauptmann and other German naturalists in mind when he made this comment. Furthermore, Mao Tun tried to justify the philosophical position of "mechanistic determinism" by placing it within the socio-historical context of his time:

The idea of mechanistic determinism was not created by the naturalist. It came about as the product of society which gave birth to it; only then was it reflected in literature. ("Naturalism" 815)

Mao Tun seemed to suggest that whether the doctrine of mechanistic determinism was prescriptive or descriptive, as long as the social reality was such, it was impossible for the naturalist committed to "objective description" and "truthful observation" not to reveal the living conditions. Since the

individuals as collective beings were the actual victims of their "ugly and evil" crushing environment, it was not the "true picture" of the society presented by the novelist, but the society itself that should be put to blame. Least to be blamed were the narrative techniques—objective description and truthful observation—employed to depict the "true picture" of any given society.

From the passages quoted above, we learn that Mao Tun was indeed fully aware of the differences among the major trends of European naturalists. In Mao Tun's view, "Zolaism" was clearly just one of them. In propagating naturalism, Mao Tun did not show any interest in Holz, whereas he demonstrated extraordinary zeal in promulgating Hauptmann, through whom Zola and French naturalism were later introduced to Chinese youth.

Galik believes that Mao Tun refuted the philosophical premises of French naturalism and thus failed to follow Zola's naturalistic criticism in its most lucid form. Even though it is true that he was not aware of the experimental aspect of Zola's doctrines, Mao Tun came into contact with Zola's doctrines of "heredity" and "environment" through Chandler. More important, through a thorough "scientific preparation," a naturalistic writer could manage to eliminate "preconceived ideas" which Zola warned against in his theory of the experimental novel. While claiming to be a naturalist, Mao Tun did not adopt "heredity" and "environment" as preconceived abstract notions for his novels since he believed that, once separated from social reality, "they are unhealthy thoughts," "not beneficial to Chinese youth." He defended his naturalistic position and Zola's doctrine of "mechanistic determinism" by directing the reader's attention to the actual situation in society. As he insisted, if society was like this it would be impossible for the naturalist who sought to portray the "true picture" of society not to present it with naturalistic perspectives.

As editor of *The Story Short Monthly*, Mao Tun served

modern Chinese literature in an important capacity as both theorist and novelist. He did not emerge into prominence until 1927 and 1928, five years after he had first launched his campaign for naturalism in China, when he started publishing serially in *The Short Story Monthly* his first trilogy or short novels: *Huan-mieh* 幻滅 (*Disillusion*) *Tung-yao* 動搖 (*Vacillation*), *Chui-Ch'iu* 追求 (*pursuit*), under the pen name of Mao Tun. These three novels, later published under the collective title *Shin* 蝕 (*The Eclipse*), are of such scope and honesty that in the latter half of 1928, Mao Tun found himself acclaimed in China as the foremost novelist of his time (Hsia 141). Following the success of his first trilogy, Mao Tun wrote five studies of young women caught in the conflict of old and new values. These studies were later collected under the title *Yeh Ch'iang-wei* 野薔薇 (*The Wild Roses*). In 1929, Mao Tun published serially another outstanding novel, *Hung* 虹 (*The Rainbow*), in which he espoused again the feminine angle of observation. Two strongly socialist-colored novelettes about student life followed in 1931 and 1932: *San-jen Hsing* 三人行 (*Three Men*) and *Lu* 路 (*The Road*). In 1932, Mao Tun published his second trilogy of short pieces, *Ch'un Ts'an* 春蠶 (*Spring Silkworms*), *Ch'iu Shou* 秋收 (*Autumn Harvest*) and *Ts'an Tung* 殘冬 (*Winter Ruin*), depicting the collapse of China's rural economy under the combined depredations of imperialism and feudalism. His next major work, *Tzu Yeh* 子夜 (*The Midnight*), Published in 1933, is a monumental, powerful piece of fiction, generally regarded by critics as his masterpiece. On a much smaller Scale *Tuo-chiao Kuan-hsi* 多角關係 *Polygonal Relations* (1935) depicts the financial panic of 1934 as it affected a small city near Shanghai. From 1928 through 1994, Mao Tun wrote two volumes of forty-two short stories besides one hundred some miscellaneous essays; most of them were later included in his collected works. In the following, I shall mainly discuss *The Midnight* and study its text in the light of naturalistic concerns.

Mao Tun's endeavour to seize and communicate reality is characterized by his preoccupation with topical issues. It should be noted that few writers of his time were so closely and persistently bound up with the immediate present, with important contemporary political and economic events, as Mao Tun was. As for the subject matter of his novels, Mao Tun, for the most part, took events from the just-receding present and molded them into a work of art before the first immediate impression of the events had faded from the minds of his contemporaries. The preface to the English translation of *The Midnight* was originally an excerpt from a talk given by the author in 1939. In this preface, Mao Tun stated his motivation and preparation for the novel:

During this period (Spring 1930) I was suffering from severe eye-trouble, and my doctor had ordered me to rest from reading for eight months or even a year. Apart from the eye-trouble I was suffering from neurasthenia, and so decided on a complete rest. Among my friends in Shanghai at that time were active revolutionaries and liberals, while old acquaintances from my home town included industrialists, civil servants, businessmen and bankers. Having little else to do there, I passed much of my time among them and learned from them much that had been unknown to me before and began to understand a little of what went on "behind the scenes." It struck me that all this new information might be put into a novel. When my eyes were better, and I could read once more, I went through some of the articles and essays which were being written then on the characteristics of Chinese society. When I compared my own observations with the theories put forward in these articles, I became even more attracted to the idea of writing my novel. ("About *Midnight*" 5)

A most ambitious portrayal of China in the year 1930, *The Midnight* is a work of tremendous research, impeccable in documentation, larded with allusions to topical events, and crammed with political and economic facts. The actual writing of the novel occupied Mao Tun from October 1931 to December 1932. Between the events described and the taking in hand of the work, there is an interval of a little more than a year.

In this chronicle of modern Chinese society, a great number of themes, a wide variety of characters from all walks of life, an almost complete panorama of all the most important social processes in contemporary China, are brought within the limits of nineteen chapters, of which the last is actually an epilogue. In no more than eighteen chapters of monumental scope, Mao Tun succeeded in depicting the main outline of what is the most unstable period in modern Chinese history.

A basic tendency in Mao Tun's art is that his interest is focussed first and foremost on a certain milieu. Throughout the novel, Mao Tun remains true to the premise of a detached medical doctor who observes and renders relentlessly a truthful account of the life around him. The setting of the novel is the metropolis Shanghai in 1930. In order to perform an autopsy on the social environment in Shanghai, laying bare all the diseases that are consuming it, Mao Tun introduces an outsider, Old Mr. Wu, at the very beginning of the novel. Old Mr. Wu, father of the protagonist, industrial capitalist Wu Sun-fu, came to Shanghai for the first time in his life with his youngest daughter and son from a provincial town near-by. Through his eyes, the "decadent" life of Shanghai is portrayed most vividly.

All this talk about fashion acted like a needle on the atrophied nerves of the old man. His heart fluttered, and his eyes fell instinctively upon Fu-fang and he saw now for the first time how she was decked out. Though it was still only May, the weather was unusually warm and she

was already in the lightest of summer clothing. Her vital young body was sheathed in close-fitting light-blue chiffon, her full, firm breasts jutting out prominently, her snowy forearms bared. Old Mr. Wu felt his heart constricting with disgust and quickly averted his eyes, which, however, fell straight upon a half-naked young woman sitting up in a rickshaw, fashionably dressed in a transparent, sleeveless voile blouse, displaying her bare legs and thighs. The old man thought for one horrible moment that she had nothing else on. The text "Of all the vices sexual indulgence is the cardinal" drummed on his mind, and he shuddered. But the worst was yet to come, for he quickly withdrew his gaze, only to find his youngest son Ah-hsuan gaping with avid admiration at the same half-naked young woman. The old man felt his heart pounding wildly as if it would burst, and his throat burning as if choked with chillies.

The lights changed to green, and the car moved forward in a motley sea of traffic and humanity. On and on they went, while the din of the traffic, the stench of petrol-fumes, the women's perfume and the glare of neon signs pressed down like a night-mare on his frail spirit until his eyes blurred, his ears sang and his head swam; until his over-wrought nerves ached as if they would snap and his pounding heart could beat no faster. (*The Midnight* 17-18)

In fear of the impending trouble in his home town, Wu Sun-fu has moved his father and younger sister and brother to the big city. A complete stranger to the modern way of life, the old man clings desperately to his copy of the Taoist bible, *T'ai-shang Kan-ying p'ien* 太上感應 (*Essay of Punishments and Retributions*) as he takes his first ride in an automobile through the nocturnal glitter of the metropolis. Upon reaching his son's Shanghai mansion, his shock by the glamorous light,

heat and endless seas of traffic and of people in the city and the strong perfume of his daughters and daughter-in-law proves too much for him so that he feels suffocated in the car. No sooner has he arrived at his son's than he drops dead. This is the kind of environment, where no foreign element can remain intact, undisturbed and uncorrupted. Old Mr. Wu's "precious children have undergone a change the moment they have entered the 'Sinners' Paradise" (20).

However, to go into the internal world of a character by assuming his/her point of view is a rare device in *The Midnight*. Generally speaking, characters are paid relatively little attention to by Mao Tun, and in most characters, there is almost no development at all. In *The Midnight* we learn far more about the environment in which a character lives than about his/her personal traits. To be sure, Mao Tun was more concerned with the environment than with individual characters. His attention was always focussed on a certain situation, on a certain characteristic phenomenon but rarely on the individual and his/her personal yearnings and concerns. His aim was to give a picture of social conditions, whereas the individual traits remain obscure and sometimes even conflicting. Old Mr. Wu is a case in point, whose function is to record from an outsider's point of view the outer reality of Shanghai.

An overall view of Mao Tun's major works shows that not only do his novels as a whole have no end, but the same is true of the greater part of the strands of which the plot is made up. *The Midnight* is a good example. In this masterpiece of Mao Tun, there is a welter of subplots: the Communist uprising in the home town and the resultant panic of the Kuomintang government personnel, the strikes at the factory and the factory's repeated attempts to break them, the antics of the upper-bourgeois youth and the comic tribulations of the feudal-minded older generation stranded in Shanghai. The author picks up one such strand, carries it forward for a while

and then, suddenly, lets the story and its heroes drop out, as if forgotten, thus leaving a loose end. This is the fate of almost all the characters in the novel. All take the stage, become actors in some plot, but before they finish their role the author's lens turns away and sees no more of them. One strand after another is taken up and dropped, till suddenly the novel comes to an end. The only exception is the main strand in the plot, the story of the industrialist, Wu Sun-fu, which is carried to its conclusion: his financial ruin on the Stock Exchange. It is just this breaking-off, as if by a higher power, that gives us readers the impression that characters in the story are not the contrivers of the plots in which they act. Their personal decisions do not seem to have much effect on the course of their lives or the outcome of the events. One cannot help feeling that matters would take the turn they do even if the characters did the exact opposite of what they in fact do.

The same fate seems to be shared by all. Even Wu Sun-fu, the protagonist of the novel, is no exception. Wu is a powerful industrialist with a strong faith in national capitalism when native industry suffers a severe recession and the stock market responds to national turmoil with an upsurge in wild speculation. He has been doing well by his silk factory and his investments in his home town near Shanghai, which, under his patronage, is becoming modernized. But as the story begins, a Communist uprising in his home town has virtually wiped out his revenues from that area, and his silk factory is in a precarious state under the pressure of recession. Wu is nevertheless far from being pessimistic: the bankruptcy of many smaller mills has given him the rare chance to annex them at minimal cost and thereby consolidate his silk empire. He does not realize, however, that it takes more cash than he can command to start these factories, and they soon prove to be a huge liability. When Wu plunges into speculation on the stock market, his initial ventures are successful, but they offer no solutions to the increasing Communist-organized strikes at

his factory, which he has a hard time breaking. Moreover, Chao Po-t'ao, a financier and sensualist strongly backed by foreign capital, is clearly the dominant figure at the stock exchange. As a national capitalist, Wu is hardly his rival. After Chao has insulted him with an offer to buy out his interests and make him a subordinate, Wu is determined to challenge Chao's supremacy. In the final contest at the stock exchange, he pours in all his resources to sell short as against the bullish practice of his opponent. He could have won the day except for the fact that his trusted brother-in-law and partner, Tu Chu-chai, has without his knowledge thrown his resources on Chao's side. As a result, Wu goes bankrupt. In the struggle among the big and small capitalists, Darwin's theory of evolution is clearly at work and presented in the negative—the defeat of the weak.

The progressive economical and financial decline of Wu Sun-fu is obvious in the course of the novel. Furthermore, a spiritual degeneration is also taking place in him which runs parallel to the decline of his financial situation. In the beginning, Wu Sun-fu is portrayed as a gentleman, a member of the gentry class, full of ambition, unconventional, resourceful, quick-minded and far-sighted. Being plucky, ambitious and adventurous in nature, he is fired with the zeal to industrialize China by use of native capital. His nobility of purpose and high motivation are manifested in his attempt to revive China's declining industry:

No! I must carry on! There are not many of China's national industries left: you can count them on the fingers of one hand. And the silk industry is especially important to the future of the nation.... If only the country were something like a country and the government were something like a government: Chinese industry could really do well in the future. (63)

When one of the blacklegs in his factory makes the comment that the workers are "all possessed by devils" in their attempts to strike, the reader is presented with a picture of a tormented soul:

"Possessed by devils, eh? Ha! I can tell you what sort of devils, too : high cost of living and hunger. But there's another devil, a much more terrible one than that: world depression and slump...." Wu Sun-fu broke into loud, cynical laughter, pain and despair written all over his purplish face; but he quickly recovered his customary firmness and determination. Gesticulating excitedly, he went on, his lips twisted in a savage smile. "Very well, you devils—we'll see! Think I'm done for, eh? Oh, no! We'll have a go first!" (61)

To be sure, Wu's will and determination do not get him very far. Before long we find him in an even worse situation as the struggle in the factory gets more severe. The demands of the women workers are getting larger: they ask for a raise and go on organized strikes. In order to keep his delivery terms, Wu employs every brutal means to break the strikes. Under pressure from all directions, Wu Sun-fu himself goes through a progressive change of character. A scene towards the end of the novel, right before the Stock Exchange collapses and Wu Sun-fu goes bankrupt, reveals his irrational state of mind when he has been completely transformed into a beast, who

realized how agitated he had been and how much of his weakness he must have exposed.... He was seized once more by a consuming rage—and not just rage alone, but by hatred of himself. This hate and anger he now transferred to everything around him. He paced up and down the study in a frenzy, his eyes bloodshot and his teeth clenched. All he wanted now was someone to vent

his rage upon. He wanted to destroy something. All the reverses he had suffered over his own factory and over the Yi Chung Trust Company now fused into a single savage impulse, the impulse to destroy something!

The predator Wu-fu is ready to jump on anything that comes along:

He lowered himself on to the swivel chair behind his desk and sat there like some wild beast lying in wait for its prey, his eyes darting from side to side in search of something whose destruction would give him the satisfaction he needed and provide an outlet for his savage desire to destroy!

The maid, Wang Mah, came in with a bowl of bird's nest gruel for him. Wu Sun-fu did not notice her until she placed the bowl on the desk in front of him, when his burning gaze suddenly fell upon her hands, white, plump and dimpled. The fierce flames of his mad desire to destroy suddenly rose to white heat. He jerked up his head and fixed his bloodshot eyes on her face. To him Wang Mah was no longer Wang Mah, the maid, but an object, an object to be violated, an object whose violation would best afford him satisfaction! (401-02)

In the process of degeneration, Wu Sun-fu is driven progressively from a decent, respectable character to a person who commits crimes, brutality, violence and rape. To a naturalist, sexual instinct is the deepest layer in the human psyche; it reveals man as a "human animal" in a naturalistic world. It is one of the forces nature manifests to assert itself through man. In *The Midnight*, the blind forces at work in society eventually bring up what is hidden in the deepest corner of the human psyche and prove to be the most prominent feature of naturalism in the novel.

Mao Tun's chronicles of modern Chinese society are permeated with disillusionment, pessimism, and loss of faith. Like the majority of Chinese youth, Mao Tun was stunned by the massacres of hundreds of thousands of Chinese Communists by the Nationalist Government in 1927 (Yeh 48-50). These brutal facts filled him with pessimism, bitterness and disillusionment, which came through undisguised in what he wrote about his time.

One of the main strands in the plot of *The Midnight* is the social struggle taking place in the factory of Wu-fu, which reduces Wu-fu to bankruptcy, and closes the factory. The struggle between workers and the capitalist is only a ramification of the struggle determined at a higher level in the domain of national and world finance. It is not a struggle merely on the level of a group of Chinese national industrialists fighting the financiers; it involves an intricate cluster of factors including the penetration of American capital into China, the world-wide economic crisis, the expansion of Japanese industry in China, the agrarian revolution taking place in the Chinese countryside, and so forth. In *The Midnight*, these factors are portrayed as the decisive forces that eventually determine the fate of both the individual and the collective whole. It is these blind and incomprehensible forces that put the characters on stage, assign roles to them and sweep them aside whenever they are not needed any more. The stories of the individuals only serve to illustrate how the mighty and omnipresent forces operate in the background. In the face of these forces, the individual and his/her strivings become pathetically insignificant while his/her fate, uncertain as it is, irreversibly defies his/her free will. It is hopeless for the individual to even try to protest or to revolt. In *The Midnight*, this sense of hopelessness is brought to a gigantic proportion. It is never the fate of an individual or that of a single family that is in the spotlight; it is the fate of the collective whole, the human race, that is at stake. When Mao

Tun tells the story of the individual, Wu Sun-fu, one can not help feeling that he is the personification of the fate of a whole class, the class of Chinese industrialists, and that the situation is not typical of the one, but of the many. The same is true of the women workers in his silk factory. What Mao Tun depicts in his novel is the fate of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese. There can be no doubt that he has succeeded in bringing out, in the acutely observed realistic panorama, the features characteristic of contemporary Chinese society. The sense of hopelessness was typical of the literature of the time, which undoubtedly colored the outlook of the life of modern intellectuals, and Mao Tun managed to express what a whole generation felt.

The tragic sense of human existence induced by human beings crushed by forces often incomprehensible or inadequately explained, points to an affinity with the world perception of American naturalism, developed as a ramification of the European naturalistic tradition at the turn of the century. In the novel *Octopus* by the American naturalist Frank Norris, for instance, men are crushed, farms are destroyed, and values are shattered by the incomprehensible forces represented by the fast-and ever-spreading network of the American railway system around the first decade of the century. In *Octopus*, life is also determined tragically by forces higher than human will. "Octopus," in fact, is a metaphor for these blind destroying forces, in face of which the strivings of an individual or of a single family are simply too insignificant to change the course of events. The fate of the individual thus represents the fate of a generation. A detailed discussion and comparison of Mao Tun and Norris is not within the scope of this study. As far as the naturalistic perception of the world is concerned, Mao Tun in practice comes much closer to American naturalism than to French naturalism, the latter preoccupied not so much with the greater social, political forces at work, as with the "forces" of heredity of a single family.

An over-all textual analysis of *The Midnight* leads us to the conclusion that it is almost impossible to dismiss the novel as not naturalistic. I would venture my explanation to account for the discrepancy between Galik's view of Mao Tun as a theorist and what we discover about Mao Tun as a novelist, based on the following observations:

First, The fact that Mao Tun obtained his knowledge of European naturalistic thoughts primarily through secondary sources is not a good enough reason to dismiss him as being not naturalistic. In fact, through what means a theorist obtains his information is not relevant in determining what his theoretical position is.

Second, I would venture to say that it will throw much more light on our understanding of any literary theorist who happens to be at the same time a novelist, if we study both his/her theoretical and creative works before we decide what s/he really is. Galik's one-sided view of Mao Tun may have arisen from the fact that Galik's research was mainly based on the theoretical works of Mao Tun.<sup>4</sup>

Third, Mao Tun as a literary critic was already familiar with most major naturalistic works, including some of Zola's and Strindburg's works, and most of Hauptmann's works. Even if he did not know much about the theoretical assumptions of French naturalism, it did not prevent his novels from taking on a distinct naturalistic color owing to the fact that the Chinese society of his time was undergoing social and economic upheavals similar to those most naturalists witnessed in their environments. In a swiftly changing society, where old values are shattered overnight a new values have not yet found their way in, under the influence of Darwin's theory of evolution, a sense of loss and hopelessness produce an overwhelming fear and uncertainty towards life which must inevitably become the predominant outlook.

The foregoing speculations lead to my final conclusion: in Mao Tun we see more than just (what Galik considers) those

realistic "techniques of an objective descriptive narrative method which Mao Tun himself believed to be naturalistic. In Mao Tun's novels, naturalism is much more than that: it is an outlook on life, a way of thinking, seeing, reflecting, and experimenting, a need to study and analyze in order to know. Hence, Mao Tun is not too different from Zola in spirit after all. I am sure Mao Tun would not disagree if we say that his works, which manifest a distinct naturalistic color, are the logical products of a society which happened to beget a naturalistic outlook on life.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mao Tun, "Tzu-jan-chu-i yu Chung-kuo hsien-tai hsiao-shuo" ("Naturalism and Modern Chinese Fiction"), *Hsiao-shuo yueh-pao* (*The Short Story Monthly*), 13, July 1922; reprinted in *Chung-kuo hsin-wen-hsueh ta-hsi* 中國新文學大系 (*A Comprehensive Anthology of Chinese New Literature*), ed. by Chao Chia-pi, 10 vols. (rpt. Hong Kong: Wen-hsueh yen-chiu she, 1962), 804-10.

<sup>2</sup> Mao Tun, "Hsiao-shou hsin-ch'ao-lan hsuan-yen" ("Manifesto of the Column of the New Tide of Prose") in *The Short Story Monthly*, 11, January 1920. The English translation of the quotations of the original texts in this study is mine unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> Galik, Marian "Naturalism: A Changing Concept" in *East and West*, 16, Sept./Dec. 1966, 314-15. As Galik asserts, according to Shimamura Hogetsu (one of the sources through which Mao Tun was exposed to naturalism), the goal of naturalism is to present truth. Shimamura Hogetsu is the author of an article written in 1909, published in Chinese under the title "Wen-i-shang to tzu-jan-chu-i" 文藝上的自然主義 ("Naturalism in Literature") in *Short Story Monthly*, 12, December 1921, 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> Prusek, Jaroslav "Preface: In the Margin of Galik's Study of Mao Tun as a Literary Critic and Theoretical Writer" in *Mao Tun and Modern Chinese Literary Criticism* by Marian Galik, p. xi. In this preface, Prusek points out that when Galik started his research on

Mao Tun, a certain Dr. Gruner of Leipzig had already prepared two volumes of research specifically on the literary Works of Mao Tun as his doctorate thesis. In order not to overlap these efforts, Galik devoted himself mainly to the theoretical works of Mao Tun. This distribution of labor may account for Galik's incomplete view about Mao Tun's naturalistic literary theory and his overall literary practice.

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