

Analyzing Truth and Fiction in Realist Literature--Taking Mao Dun's Midnight as an Example

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Abstract:

Mao Dun was an outstanding writer, artist, and social activist who significantly contributed to modern Chinese literature and revolution. Taking Shanghai in the 1930s as the main background of the era, *Midnight*, as the masterpiece of Mao Dun's entire life and the representative work of a realist novel, profoundly impacted modern literature. In the context of the era, *Midnight* is an exploration outcome of Chinese literature and realism, depicting life in cosmopolitan Shanghai in the last century from political, economic, and military aspects. This paper intends to take Mao Dun's *Midnight* as an example to study the revelation of the weight of truth and fiction in realist themes in literary creation for veteran writers and new writers, respectively, and the influence it has had on similar works in the course of the development of realist literature in China and globally. Upon analysis of this paper, it becomes evident that *Midnight*, as depicted in this significant text, embodies the dual traits of truth and fiction within a novel, which are inherently complementary and essential. Nevertheless, the proportion of authenticity in the content distribution leans towards the higher end, prompting future realist writers to consider the judicious incorporation of fictional elements.

Keywords: Realist literature; *Midnight*; Mao Dun; truth and fiction; novel writing.

1. Introduction

Realist literature is pivotal in the literary realm, playing a crucial role in shaping the literary landscape. Numerous Chinese and foreign writers have crafted enduring masterpieces throughout the centuries, exemplified by works such as Balzac's "The Human Comedy" and Mark Twain's "The Million Pound Bank Note," which continue to captivate and delight future generations of readers.

Within the broad realm of literature, authenticity stands out as one of its most distinctive characteristics, drawing attention from the external world. However, there are still varying degrees of fictional elements under this characteristic, making literary creation not entirely "real." Nowadays, the well-known French novelist Jacques Tournier criticizes contemporary writers trying to cater to readers' preferences by blurring the distinction between fact and fiction, maximizing their immersive experience in reading [1]. In other words, writers and readers acknowledge the presence of friction in literary works. Still, in formal literary creation and writing activities, writers downplay their use of fiction to avoid the outside world putting a "liar" label on themselves. Consequently, they proclaim the truthfulness of their writing, showing that the content

is true and completely in line with social life.

For the majority of readers, they know that literary works are fictional premises. However, they are happy to affirm the sense of reality in the works and keen to reveal the hidden false components, but not too much care because their pursuit of reading is to look for the real in the reading to find the correlation with reality. In the eyes of many foreign literary scholars, the "truth" boasted by literary works is only a kind of attraction to the readers. By establishing a "real" image for their works, they seek the attention of the public, who will take this as a kind of "honor" and "honor" for their works [2].

Therefore, fiction is an unavoidable artistic technique even in the most authentic realist literature, in which the avant-garde writers of the 20th century even played the fictionality to the extreme, so much so that the works of their genre are seriously out of touch with real life, full of "subjective, distorted remnants of reality, which the people can never translate into the language of their own life experience." Therefore, readers cannot bridge this gap and relate the literature to their own experiences [3]. Thus, the research intention of this paper is to further explore what significance and value these two seemingly contradictory characteristics have in literary creation and what influence

they have had on similar works in the development of realist literature in China and the world as a whole, as well as how much each of these two characteristics is better distributed in a work of fiction, to make the subsequent literary works more appealing to the public and resonate with the public. The two characteristics have impacted similar works to make later literary works more appealing and resonant to the general public.

Among the abundant Chinese realist literature works, Mao Dun's *Midnight* is undoubtedly the most representative. As the first realist novel in the history of modern Chinese literature, it profoundly portrayed the life of the metropolis in modern China (the 1930s), describing and recounting to varying degrees the characters and social conditions in the book, constituting a panoramic picture of Shanghai society. Then many famous writers have highly evaluated this work and have also used it as a blueprint to carry out various levels of research, which is still a hot topic in the Chinese literary world, so this work has a lot of places worth exploring and carrying out research, both in terms of its content and in terms of its creative techniques.

In addition to this, Mao Dun believes that there are still a lot of omissions in this work, such as the economic situation in the countryside, as well as the ideology of the residents of small towns; the idea is too simple, the reality is far more complex than he imagined. However, Mao Dun's physical condition can not support the completion of his work, so the creation of city life is emphasized in the description of the rural areas of the description of less [4]. The self-description in the postscript is of great value for the subject's research and is suitable as a breakthrough for the discussion. Therefore, this paper is devoted to reading the text carefully, combining relevant Chinese and foreign literature and the research results of many predecessors under the premise of full understanding, and analyzing the pair of "contradictory" characteristics of realist literature based on the masterpiece *Midnight*, to finally realize a further answer to this literary topic.

2. „Truth“ in Every Aspect of *Midnight*

The setting of *Midnight* was in the 1930s when China was in an internal and external crisis. Domestic political turmoil and frequent wars caused severe economic difficulties and social changes, while the left-wing cultural movement emerged in the same period. Internationally, China faced oppression and aggression from the great powers. Against the background of such a general environment, *Midnight* is full of epochal character, and Mao Dun's skillful writing technique also gives the work another characteristic -- authenticity.

2.1 Realistic Setting

To make a good work fascinating, creating an environment where the story takes place is indispensable. *Midnight* was written in 1930, in the middle of the Republican period, a relatively peaceful time after the Northern Expedition's success and before the Anti-Japanese War outbreak. During this time, the Nationalist government's rule had already spread over mainland China, with only the three eastern provinces still under Japanese occupation. Politically, the Kuomintang boasted of being the only legitimate political party, and the Nanjing National Government was also the only legitimate government at that time. Militarily, there was warlordism, and in the book, the constant wars in various localities, especially the commotion in the rural areas, prompted Wu-Sun-Fu to pick up the Elderly Master Wu and bring him to live in Shanghai. Economically, the implementation of the industrial program, highway and railroad construction, and national industry and commerce development are highlighted. The whole text of *Midnight* almost entirely centers on the commercial warfare of Wu and Zhao, who are the representative figures of national capitalism.

Shaping a typical setting requires not only a big setting but also a smaller one. Shanghai, as the center of the development of the character's story, is unreservedly shown in the text as a prosperous scene of its modern international metropolis. For example, the beautiful sunset over the Huangpu River unfolds the reader into the real Shanghai Bund. Using steel frames, trams, and neon tube advertisements, which symbolize the industrial era, bring the industrialized picture into view as the panoramic view of the Shanghai Bund is shown. At the same time, the psychological description of Mrs. Wu's ride on the tram is used to show the real lights and greenery of Shanghai, as well as the uninhibited atmosphere of the people in society, such as the women's clothing that dares to show off the curves of their bodies, and the bustling traffic routes, and so on. Mao Dun is also good at using English to show the real international city. As a famous modern city, Shanghai's fashionable nature attracts many young people who have returned from overseas. Most of the young group in *Midnight* are heavily influenced by Western ideas. Therefore, the dialogues with English characters, such as Grafton, Beauty Parlour, Crimson Umbrella, and Michel Tsang, vividly portray the internationalized Shanghai, closer to the real scene of the last century's cultural intermingling. These images of Shanghai are also evidenced by Korean writers of the 1830s about Shanghai [5].

Through the background of internal and external problems and the scenery of Shanghai, *Midnight* creates a realistic and natural setting for the story. It also lays a certain foun-

dation for the conflict of story development between the characters.

2.2 Realistic Economic Principles

The business battle between Wu and Zhao is interspersed as the main content of *Midnight*, and Mao Dun utilizes the characters' everyday language dialogues to popularize many realistic economic principles. For example, since the chips on the market are fixed, they have to be increased one after another. The market changes rapidly, and as long as the political situation starts to wind down, the bond market will be affected [4]. To cope with the economic difficulties, the national government formulated the wartime economic unification policy and, at the same time, used severe administrative and legal means to control. Wartime fiscal policies such as increased issuance, field levies, borrowing of domestic and foreign debt, and implementing the monopoly system played a positive role in the victory of the war [6]. At the same time, the policies arising from the war were inevitably affected by the success or failure of the war. The point of competition between Wu and Zhao was, to a large extent, also related to the war as well as the frontline situation of the political situation. Whoever knew or was able to know the outcome of the war in advance would be able to gain an absolute advantage in the commercial war.

There is also the relationship between raw materials and output. One of the more classic examples in the book is that of the match factory and the silk weaving factory. Zhou Zhongwei, the owner of the match factory, once complained in the book that he had "suffered from the loss of expensive gold and cheap silver." The raw materials for matches are foreign goods, so the price of gold and the raw materials rises. These commercial competition phenomena throughout the text, the 1830s China's economic activities on display, serve the article's authenticity.

2.3 Realistic Characterization

Character is the first and decisive element of a novel. Mao Dun's description of characters is very delicate, not a single, vague silhouette. For example, Wu Sunfu, the main character, is depicted not only with the basic physical description of "a square face in purple color, thick eyebrows, round eyes, and many small blisters on his face" but also with the sensory feeling of a "tycoon." The portrayal of Master Wu is more sensory, both visual and auditory. He is a real old traditional thinker with a real sense of the modern metropolis of Shanghai, such as the description of Shanghai's traffic roads, the street lamps become "strange eyes," the flow of the streets and towering buildings, the "mountains and mountains." The description of the traffic roads in Shanghai, the street lights becoming "strange

eyes," the flowing streets and towering buildings pouncing on the old master, his old-fashioned image jumps off the page and shows the impact of the traditional old-school and the new civilization. For female characters, the author depicts Feng Yunqing's daughter in this way: red lips, long wavy hair, and a long cheongsam of waltzing yarn make a delicate ladyboy come to life [4].

In addition to delicate descriptions, Mao Dun's characterization focuses on "imperfect" settings. The character's positive and negative sides are depicted for authenticity when constructing a three-dimensional character. For example, Wu Sunfu, as a good businessman, was not a good husband or family member. For his wife, he often fails to sympathize with her and often brings the temper of the business world home. For his family, even the funeral of Mrs. Wu could be used as a place to exchange benefits, utilizing every opportunity to serve his self-care. Zhao Botao was born for business, always able to see the right business opportunity to strike. However, this person's sense of patriotism is weak and self-centered. He was also addicted to beauty, thus leaking many business opportunities. Such "imperfect" settings, the closest to the real world, sensory characters, and readers closer to the distance, are more immersive. In addition to this, the characters are vivid, and there is no complete definition of good guys and bad guys, which increases the reader's imagination.

In Mao Dun's writing, the protagonist and supporting characters have distinctive character images, and they are not the universal, inevitable personality in the conventional sense of realist literature, such as human nature, personality, and destiny [7]. The characters in the book are not the same as the characters in the book but are the same as the characters in the book [7]. Non-universal, non-necessary personality in the setting by setting one or two typical events to establish the character image and status, the use of conflict with the main characters of the article can increase the authenticity of the character image so that the characters do not hang in the air. Consequently, the characters depicted in Mao Dun's writings leave a lasting and profound impression on readers, remaining entrenched in their memory for a considerable duration.

3. The Defense of Truth and Fiction

In the context of *Midnight*, it becomes evident that the frictional elements are interwoven within its narrative, even though it is a work of realistic literature. First, in that commercial metropolis, which was so glamorous and full of the smell of copper, ambitious national capitalists like Wu Sunfu seemed to be rare. They did not dominate the mainstream of society. Although there were patriotic

national bourgeoisies such as the “Scholar” Zhang Jian and the Rong Brothers, more often than not, especially in a modernized metropolis like the Shanghai Bund with its glittering and colorful paper and gold, how many national bourgeoisies exhibit the level of intense patriotic fervor demonstrated by Wu Sunfu in the face of the overwhelming forces of modern society? Moreover, amidst these societal currents, how many among this class possess a comparable steadfast spirit of resistance? There are two possibilities for Mao Dun to portray such a contradictory character as Wu Sunfu; one is to use the story of Wu Sunfu’s high and low development to emphasize that the national bourgeoisie’s idea of “industrial salvation” was out of reach [8]. The other is to use their tragic situation to highlight that the road to China’s national rejuvenation still has to be taken by the Chinese people. Another possibility is to use their tragic situation to emphasize that China’s national rejuvenation must be realized by the Chinese Communists, who are stigmatized as “communists” in the book [9]. Again, the workers’ movement description in the book’s second half is somewhat “atypical” compared with other left-wing literary works. Although the book has some tragic aspects, it is still full of harmful colors. It is impossible to see the greatness of the Chinese revolution and the inevitable victory of the revolution, which is not in line with the vigorous sound of the workers’ movement at that time, and this may be one of the aspects lacking in the authenticity of this work.

4. Recommendations

Through the above analysis of the work of *Midnight*, it is not difficult to see that this is a pivotal position in the Chinese literary world of realism. Despite its classification, the novel intricately weaves real and fictional elements throughout its narrative. Mao Dun navigates the blend of these two facets, effectively balancing the portrayal of reality with fictionalized elements. The portrayal of the social environment is exceptionally vivid, giving people a sense of immersion. A certain amount of fictionalization has been added to the detailed descriptions of some characters and activities, creating a distance from reality. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize the truth in describing the social background, which is crucial in establishing an emotional connection with the readers. At the same time, the following characters and the small environment can be appropriately used in the fictional description. Mao Dun can proficiently control these elements, built on his very high literary literacy and writing skills. Otherwise, it is very likely to go to two extremes: one is to go on the vanguard of literature as purely fictional, and the other is to seek purely factual documentary

literature. The pace of social development is getting faster and faster, which poses higher requirements and challenges for writers’ creative difficulty and writing level. Thus, they have to be passive in presenting and recording life as a transitional choice of writing [10]. Therefore, the main targets of the writing suggestions are writers with rich experience and new writers with little experience.

Regarding the former group, their existing writing and creative background equipped them with valuable experience, enabling them to keenly observe and explore societal transformations. for literary creation. Therefore, when creating realistic novels, this group of writers can, based on their own experience, combine with the knowledge of some classic works of their predecessors, control the proportion of actual content and fictional components more accurately, and hit the resonance of the public accurately based on fully adapting to the reality of the society, coupled with a variety of vivid depictions, to make their works more appealing to the modern readers. For those new writers who have just begun to create, it is crucial to form a set of unique creative methods and content structures of their own. At the same time, because they have just stepped into the door of the literary world, they also need to pay more attention to the social life and natural landscapes around them and organize their discourse system based on their observations, combining with the writing methods they have learned before, and saving up their writing experience step by step in the process of creation, thus laying a solid foundation for the birth of their first works. This will lay a solid foundation for the birth of their first work.

5. Conclusions

The two characteristics of truth and fiction are indispensable for creating realist literature. The former is to make the works fully close to the social environment in which the writer lives so that his works can better reflect the era’s characteristics and the environment and echo reality. In this paper, from the factual environment, economic principles, characterization, fictional characters, and fictional revolutionary sound of *Midnight*, it is discussed that fiction and truth are complementary and indispensable in realist literature. However, in the distribution of the contents of realist novels, the authenticity of the works should be ensured as a priority, and then the fictional elements should be added appropriately. Therefore, truth is the soul of realist literature, while fiction is the coat to show its unique charm to the public. Contemporary writers must pay attention to the relationship between truth and fiction when creating realist literature, taking truth as the background color and letting fiction enrich the article. Gener-

ally speaking, the research in this paper is conducive to enhancing contemporary writers' deeper understanding of the proportion of truth and fiction in realist literary works and facilitating the development of their pre-conceptualization of their future writing activities, which, of course, has an indispensable significance to the construction of a complete realist work. However, this paper still has some shortcomings. For example, the research angle chosen in this paper is relatively single, and the conclusions may be more accurate if the research samples are more diversified. Meanwhile, the specific ratio of reality and fiction in realist novels can be further studied in the future.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed alphabetically.

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