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THE ORDINARY IN TIMES OF TRANSFORMATION: EVERYDAY LIFE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN MAO DUN'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines "The Ordinary in Times of Transformation: Everyday Life and Social Change in Mao Dun's Fiction" through a close reading of Mao Dun's (茅盾) selected works, particularly Midnight (子夜), Spring Silkworms (春蚕), and The Shop of the Lin Family (林家铺子). The study explores how ordinary individuals, families, workers, peasants, and small business owners experience and respond to profound social, economic, and political transformations in modern China. Mao Dun's fiction presents everyday life not merely as a background to historical change but as a significant site where structural inequalities, class relations, economic pressures, and changing social values become visible. Midnight portrays the tensions of urban capitalism, industrial development, and class conflict, while Spring Silkworms highlights the vulnerability of rural communities and peasant households affected by economic exploitation and changing market conditions. The Shop of the Lin Family depicts the precarious existence of small traders confronting commercial competition, debt, and social instability. Through these narratives, the study argues that Mao Dun connects individual experiences with larger historical processes, revealing how transformation reshapes livelihoods, relationships, aspirations, and identities. The study ultimately demonstrates that the "ordinary" in Mao Dun's fiction provides a powerful lens for understanding the complexities and human consequences of social change in twentieth-century China.

KEYWORDS: Mao Dun, Everyday Life, Social Change, Modern Chinese Fiction, Class and Society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mao Dun (茅盾, 1896–1981) is one of the major figures of modern Chinese literature. His literary career developed during a period of profound political, economic, and social transformation in China, particularly during the May Fourth and Republican periods. China experienced the weakening of traditional social structures, the expansion of commercial and industrial capitalism, increasing class differentiation, rural economic hardship, foreign economic influence, and political instability. Mao Dun responded to these changes through socially engaged fiction that connected individual experiences with wider historical and socioeconomic forces. His works, particularly *Midnight* (子夜), *Spring Silkworms* (春蚕), and *The Shop of the Lin Family* (林家铺子), portray workers, peasants, small traders, families, and other ordinary people struggling within changing social conditions (Hsia, 1961; Lee, 1980).

The experiences of ordinary people are important for understanding social transformation because major historical changes are ultimately experienced through everyday life. Work, family responsibilities, economic insecurity, aspirations, and social relationships reveal how structural changes affect individuals and communities. In *Midnight*, urban economic development, industrial competition, labour relations, and class tensions shape the lives of different social groups. *Spring Silkworms* portrays peasant families facing economic exploitation and changing market conditions, while *The Shop of the Lin Family* illustrates the vulnerability of small traders confronting debt, competition, and economic uncertainty. Through these representations, Mao Dun demonstrates how broader economic and social forces enter everyday life (Goldman, 1977; McDougall & Kam, 1997).

1.2. Research Gap

Existing scholarship has extensively examined Mao Dun in relation to realism, revolutionary literature, class conflict, social criticism, and modern Chinese literary history. However, comparatively less attention has been given to everyday life as a unified framework across these three selected works. In particular, the relationship between ordinary experiences and broader structural transformation requires further comparative examination. This study addresses this gap by placing everyday experiences at the centre of its analysis.

1.3. Research Question

How does Mao Dun represent the everyday experiences of ordinary people in *Midnight*, *Spring Silkworms*, and *The Shop of the Lin Family*, and how do these experiences reveal broader social and economic transformations in modern China?

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To examine representations of work, family, economic insecurity, aspirations, and social relationships in the selected fiction.
2. To analyse how everyday experiences reflect broader changes in class relations, economic structures, and social hierarchies in modern China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Scholarship on Mao Dun (茅盾) has consistently emphasised his role as a major representative of modern Chinese realism and socially engaged literature. Hsia (1961) identifies Mao Dun's fiction as closely connected with the social realities of Republican China, while Feuerwerker (1982) situates modern Chinese fiction within the ideological and historical transformations of the period. Goldman (1977) and Lee (1980) further demonstrate how Mao Dun employed realistic representation to expose social contradictions, class tensions, and the consequences of political and economic change. McDougall and Kam (1997) similarly regard modern Chinese literature as an important medium through which changing social identities and modern experiences were articulated.

A second body of scholarship examines Mao Dun and modernity. Pollard (1979) and Link (1981) associate modern Chinese literary development with urbanisation, new forms of social consciousness, and the encounter between traditional structures and modern institutions. In *Midnight*, Mao Dun's depiction of Shanghai presents modernity through industrial expansion, financial competition, consumer culture, and changing class relations. Lee (2001) and Wang (1997) suggest that Chinese literary modernity cannot be understood simply as Westernisation; rather, it involved complex negotiations between inherited social structures and new economic and cultural forces. This perspective is useful for analysing how Mao Dun represents modern life as both an opportunity and a source of insecurity.

Another significant area concerns class and economic transformation. Feuerwerker (1982), Goldman (1977), and Hsia (1961) highlight Mao Dun's sustained interest in class conflict and socioeconomic inequality. His representations of

industrialists, workers, peasants, and small merchants reveal how market relations restructure social relationships. *Spring Silkworms*, for example, illustrates the economic vulnerability of rural households, whereas *The Shop of the Lin Family* demonstrates the pressures experienced by small-scale commercial actors. Recent scholarship on modern Chinese literature continues to emphasise the importance of capitalism, labour, rural transformation, and socioeconomic inequality in interpreting Republican-era literary texts (Huters, 2005; Denton, 1996; Wang, 2011).

The representation of ordinary or common people provides an additional perspective. Chen (2003) and Liu (1995) argue that modern Chinese literature increasingly brought previously marginalised social experiences into literary visibility. Mao Dun's peasants, workers, traders, and family members are therefore significant not simply as individual characters but as embodiments of social processes. Scholarship on everyday representation also suggests that literary texts can reveal dimensions of historical experience that institutional histories often overlook (Highmore, 2002; Gardiner, 2000).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Everyday Life Studies, particularly Henri Lefebvre's concept of everyday life and Michel de Certeau's analysis of everyday practices. Lefebvre (1991) understands everyday life as the space where large-scale social structures are reproduced but also experienced and potentially contested. De Certeau (1984), meanwhile, emphasises the ways ordinary individuals use everyday practices to negotiate systems that structure their lives. These perspectives directly support the analysis of Mao Dun's fiction because work, household relations, consumption, debt, survival strategies, and interpersonal interactions reveal how structural transformation is lived at the individual level. The framework is complemented by concepts of modernity, social structure, and individual agency, allowing the study to examine both structural constraints and the responses of ordinary characters. Thus, rather than treating everyday life as a secondary background, the study approaches it as the primary site through which Mao Dun makes social transformation visible.

Analysis Part I: Everyday Life and Social Transformation

Mao Dun's representation of everyday life demonstrates that social transformation is experienced not primarily through abstract political

events but through work, family relations, economic insecurity, aspirations, and ordinary survival. His realism brings structural changes into the immediate world of households, shops, farms, factories, and interpersonal relationships. This approach corresponds closely with his commitment to confronting contemporary reality and explains why his fiction remains important for understanding the social experience of modern China (Wang, 2019). Recent scholarship likewise argues that Mao Dun's realism should be read through its simultaneous attention to modernity, sociality, politics, and lived reality.

3.1. Work and Labour

In *Spring Silkworms*, labour is the foundation of family and community life. The villagers devote themselves to the cultivation of mulberry leaves and the raising of silkworms, making work simultaneously a source of dignity and a mechanism of exploitation. Mao Dun describes the villagers as impoverished but sustained by the hope that a successful harvest will restore their economic security. The translated text observes that they were "sustained by enormous patience and grand illusions" and believed that if they produced a good silkworm crop, "everything will be all right." The contrast between extraordinary labour and uncertain reward exposes the vulnerability of traditional rural production to forces outside the villagers' control. Foley (2022) similarly interprets the silkworms as a metaphor for villagers whose labour becomes alienated and dehumanised.

3.2. Economic Insecurity

Economic insecurity is perhaps the strongest connection between everyday experience and structural transformation. In *The Shop of the Lin Family*, Lin's apparently ordinary activities—selling goods, dealing with customers, managing credit, and negotiating debts—become increasingly determined by larger economic forces. The shopkeeper is caught between creditors, customers, competitors, banks, and political authorities. Wedell-Wedellsborg (2006) notes that the story represents the "relentlessly progressing financial ruin" of a small shop owner whose individual efforts cannot overcome the surrounding economic crisis. Thus, the shop functions as a microcosm of a changing commercial economy in which small producers and traders become increasingly vulnerable to capital concentration and market instability.

3.3. Family Relationships

Mao Dun also presents economic transformation through its effects on family relationships. Economic pressure enters the household and changes relationships between husbands, wives, parents, and children. In *The Shop of the Lin Family*, Lin's economic responsibilities are inseparable from his obligations toward his wife and daughter. His business failure therefore becomes a family crisis rather than an exclusively commercial problem. Similarly, in *Spring Silkworms*, the family works collectively around silkworm production, but shared labour cannot guarantee shared prosperity. Foley (2022) shows that the intense care devoted to the silkworms gradually displaces ordinary human interaction, revealing how economic necessity reorganises family and community life.

3.4. Social Mobility and Changing Aspirations

Midnight expands this relationship between everyday life and transformation into the urban environment of 1930s Shanghai. Its characters inhabit a world of factories, finance, automobiles, entertainment, and commercial competition. The novel's central conflict surrounding Wu Sunfu represents the unstable position of Chinese national capitalism. Earlier criticism describes *Midnight* as an extensive representation of Shanghai's industrial and financial world and of the "collapse of national capitalism." The desire for wealth, independence, social status, and modern lifestyles therefore becomes inseparable from the opportunities and contradictions of capitalist modernity. Mao Dun's characters aspire to move upward socially, yet their aspirations are repeatedly constrained by class structures, financial power, and political conditions.

3.5. Everyday Struggles and Social Transformation

Taken together, the three works demonstrate that Mao Dun does not separate the ordinary from history. The farmer tending silkworms, the shopkeeper managing debt, the worker entering an industrial workplace, and the family attempting to maintain its household are all positioned within larger systems of economic transformation. His realism therefore converts apparently private experiences into evidence of structural change. The significance of this method is that social transformation becomes visible through its consequences for ordinary routines. Work becomes precarious, family relationships become economically determined, aspirations become shaped by modern markets, and survival becomes dependent upon forces beyond individual control.

This is why Mao Dun's fiction can be productively read through everyday-life analysis: the everyday is simultaneously the place where social structures are reproduced and where their human consequences become most visible.

Analysis Part II: Individual, Social Structure and Change

Mao Dun's fiction presents the individual neither as completely autonomous nor as a helpless victim of historical forces. Instead, his characters negotiate, adapt to, compromise with, and sometimes resist the social structures surrounding them. This relationship is particularly evident in *Midnight* (子夜), *Spring Silkworms* (春蚕), and *The Shop of the Lin Family* (林家铺子). Across these works, economic transformation reshapes class relations, rural and urban life, family relationships, aspirations, and opportunities for social mobility. Mao Dun's representation of modernity therefore emerges through the interaction between individual choices and wider historical forces (Lee, 2016; Ng, 2020).

3.6. Class and Economic Change

In *Midnight*, individual agency is closely connected with the emerging capitalist economy of Shanghai. Wu Sunfu attempts to expand industrial production and compete with foreign capital. His ambition represents both personal economic advancement and the aspirations of the Chinese national bourgeoisie. His determination demonstrates agency, but financial markets, political interests, foreign competition, and class conflict continually restrict his choices. Mao Dun consequently shows that economic modernisation creates opportunities for advancement while simultaneously producing inequality and dependency (Lee, 2016).

3.7. Rural and Urban Transformation

The contrast between *Spring Silkworms* and *Midnight* reveals different experiences of transformation. Shanghai represents accelerated commercial and industrial modernity, whereas *Spring Silkworms* centres on an agricultural community dependent on traditional labour. Nevertheless, rural production is increasingly connected with wider market forces. The villagers work intensely and place their hopes in a successful silkworm harvest, believing that prosperity can be restored through productive labour.

The peasants should therefore not be interpreted simply as passive victims. Old Tongbao and his family organise their labour, care for the silkworms,

respond to production difficulties, and attempt to improve their circumstances. Their actions demonstrate adaptation and persistence. Foley (2022) argues that Mao Dun's silkworm imagery connects human labour with economic necessity and dehumanisation. Their agency is genuine, although the economic structure severely limits its results.

3.8. Family and Social Relationships

Economic transformation also penetrates family relationships. In *The Shop of the Lin Family*, Lin's identities as shopkeeper, husband, and father are inseparable from the economic crisis affecting his business. His family responsibilities influence his commercial decisions, while debts, creditors, customers, and competitors increasingly enter the private sphere. Economic instability consequently becomes a family crisis.

Lin nevertheless exercises agency. He attempts different business strategies, negotiates with creditors, manages customers, and seeks to protect his household. His compromises should not simply be understood as weakness; they represent survival strategies within an unequal economic structure. Wedell-Wedellsborg (2006) observes that the story follows the progressive collapse of a small shopkeeper whose individual efforts cannot overcome the larger forces surrounding him.

Individual Aspirations, Adaptation and Resistance

Mao Dun's characters possess aspirations reflecting the changing social order. Wu Sunfu seeks industrial expansion and economic power; Lin attempts to preserve his business and social position; and the peasants in *Spring Silkworms* hope that productive labour will improve their family circumstances. These aspirations are shaped by modern economic values, including wealth, productivity, commerce, and social advancement.

At the same time, characters repeatedly compromise. Wu Sunfu employs strategic alliances and competition, Lin negotiates with stronger economic actors, and rural producers adapt traditional practices to market demands. Mao Dun therefore presents modernity not simply as progress but as a process requiring continuous adjustment. Individuals attempt to shape their circumstances while adapting to changing conditions (Ng, 2020).

3.9. Limits of Individual Agency

The three works establish a dialectical relationship between individual agency and social structure. Characters make meaningful choices, but these choices occur within systems of class, capital,

markets, political authority, and social hierarchy. The villagers in *Spring Silkworms* provide a clear example: despite investing enormous labour in production, external market conditions prevent them from receiving corresponding rewards. Their failure is therefore not merely personal but structural.

Similarly, Wu Sunfu's entrepreneurial ambition cannot overcome the larger economic and political environment, while Lin's efforts to save his shop remain insufficient against stronger commercial forces. Mao Dun thus avoids portraying ordinary characters merely as helpless victims. Their adaptation, negotiation, aspiration, persistence, and compromise constitute forms of agency, even when they cannot transform the structures governing their lives.

Overall, Mao Dun shows that social transformation occurs through continuous interaction between individuals and social structures. His characters negotiate economic change, maintain family relationships, pursue social advancement, and imagine better futures, while their possibilities remain constrained by wider forces.

4. CONCLUSION & ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTION

Mao Dun's *Midnight* (子夜), *Spring Silkworms* (春蚕), and *The Shop of the Lin Family* (林家铺子) demonstrate how the experiences of ordinary individuals can become a powerful representation of broader social transformation. Through workers, peasants, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, and family members, Mao Dun connects everyday activities such as labour, household responsibilities, economic survival, consumption, and social interaction with wider processes of economic modernisation, class differentiation, market expansion, and changing social relationships. His characters are not merely passive victims of historical change; they negotiate, adapt to, compromise with, and occasionally resist the structures that shape their lives. Consequently, the everyday becomes a space in which both structural constraints and individual agency can be observed.

The major academic contribution of this study lies in placing everyday life at the centre of the interpretation of Mao Dun's fiction. While previous scholarship has frequently examined his realism, class consciousness, modernity, and social criticism, this study demonstrates that these concerns become particularly visible through ordinary experiences. Everyday life provides a valuable analytical bridge between individual agency and large-scale structural transformation. It reveals how economic and social

changes are experienced within homes, workplaces, farms, and commercial spaces.

More broadly, this approach contributes to the study of modern Chinese literature by demonstrating that literary representations of ordinary life can illuminate historical processes that remain less visible in macro-level political or economic

narratives. Reading modern Chinese fiction through everyday-life studies therefore enables a more nuanced understanding of modernity as a lived, uneven, and contested experience, while highlighting the complex relationship between individual agency, social structure, and historical change.

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