Multiple Expressions of Left-wing Literature: A Comparative Analysis of Revolutionary Elements in Mao Dun's Midnight and Lu Xun's Call to Arms and Wandering

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Abstract. In the 1930s, Chinese Left-wing Literature emerged as a highly influential trend in modern Chinese literary history, and this trend took on diverse forms in the works of different writers. Focusing on Mao Dun's Midnight and Lu Xun's Call to Arms and Wandering, this research examines the differences in how the two authors depict revolutionary elements and explores the ideological similarities and divergences within Left-wing Literature. Through multidimensional analysis of revolutionary elements, combined with relevant data and social historical background, this study finds that Mao Dun adopted a holistic view of society, identifying the working class and progressive intellectuals as the core force of revolution. In contrast, Lu Xun centered his narratives on individuals, revealing the predicament of failed enlightenment and mass blindness, while portraying the tragic loneliness of pioneering conscious individuals. The fundamental differences between the two authors epitomize two distinct paths in modern Chinese Left-wing Literature: "structural transformation" and "spiritual awakening". This research not only deepens the understanding of these canonical texts but also offers a multi-faceted perspective for comprehending the complexity of revolution.

Keywords: Midnight; Lu Xun; Left-wing Literature; Revolutionary Elements.

1. Introduction

In the 1930s, modern Chinese literature entered a highly politicized transitional phase. The Left-wing literary movement, centered on the "League of Left-Wing Writers", rose rapidly and became one of the most impactful ideological and literary endeavors following the May 4th New Culture Movement. "Left-wing writers turned politically left, assumed the responsibility of standing with the people and the nation, and naturally came to embrace communism and follow its leadership."[1]. Against this historical backdrop, Mao Dun and Lu Xun—key founders and representatives of the League of Left-Wing Writers—jointly undertook the mission of engaging with reality through literature, awakening the public, and advancing social transformation. Yet, while both aligned politically with revolution and criticized the corrupt society, their novels diverged sharply in their revolutionary narratives. These differences are evident not only in narrative style and character development but also in their fundamental understandings of the revolutionary subject, methods, and objectives.

Existing scholarship often analyzes the revolutionary narratives in Midnight or Lu Xun’s works in isolation, overlooking the fundamental disparities in their treatment of revolutionary elements. This research aims to transcend such fragmented approaches by conducting a multi-dimensional analysis of "revolutionary subject, revolutionary methods, and revolutionary objectives", and systematically comparing the narrative logic of revolutionary elements across Midnight, Call to Arms, and Wandering. The ultimate goal is to identify the deep-seated differences in how Lu Xun and Mao Dun portrayed revolution, explore the reasons behind these differences, and illuminate the ideological vitality of Left-wing Literature. Additionally, re-examining the tensions between the two authors helps contemporary scholars grasp the spiritual dilemma faced by progressive intellectuals in modern China amid crises—their desire for action tempered by vigilance against illusions—and offers insights for understanding the interaction between contemporary Chinese literature and politics.

2. Theoretical Framework of Left-wing Literature and Its Revolutionary Elements

2.1. Concept and Development of Left-wing Literature

Left-wing Literature is not a fixed genre or uniform mode of writing, but a complex literary endeavor centered on proletarian revolution, concerned with the voices of the oppressed, and committed to pursuing social justice. Its ideological roots can be traced to the introduction and preliminary interpretation of Marxism by advanced intellectuals during the May 4th Movement. However, as an organized literary movement, it truly took shape between 1927 and 1937—a period often referred to as the "Left-wing Decade". The establishment and activities of the League of Left-Wing Writers propelled the development of Left-wing Literature while forging a collective practice characterized by unique aesthetic approaches and narrative logic [2].

According to Chen Guoen's research, the core feature of Left-wing Literature lies in the construction of "revolutionary modernity". As a political expression of China's New Democratic Revolution, "revolutionary modernity" laid down the proletarian criterion for justice and drove the advancement of the Left-wing literary movement. It integrates the vision of a modern nation-state with a distinct proletarian stance, raising critical theoretical and practical questions about justice. Within this framework, texts cease to be mere vessels of aesthetics; they become arenas for class and ideological struggle [3]. Lu Yi further notes that the rise of Left-wing Literature depended on several factors: a group of writers developed a clear sense of agency in producing revolutionary literature; Left-wing Literature addressed the spiritual needs of disillusioned and confused young intellectuals; the urban publishing system—centered in Shanghai—expanded; and, most importantly, it aligned with the historical context and theme of national salvation [4].

2.2. Composition and Multi-dimensional Analysis of Revolutionary Elements

"Revolution" in Left-wing Literature is not an abstract slogan but a concrete proposition manifested through character portrayal, plot progression, and value orientations. To understand how different writers depict revolution, we must break down the concept into analyzable dimensions. Drawing on the texts themselves, this research identifies three core elements: revolutionary subject, revolutionary methods, and revolutionary objectives. These three elements address the questions of "who leads the revolution", "how to conduct the revolution", and "why the revolution is waged", respectively, forming a foundational framework for understanding revolution.

The revolutionary subject refers to the primary force driving change. Revolution requires a powerful agent to implement it, and Marx's theories focus heavily on the real-world subjects that drive transformation. A writer's choice of subject often reflects their assessment of the masses' level of awakening and class consciousness.

The revolutionary methods pertain to the path of transformation. Answering "how to revolutionize"—or defining the form of revolution—is an inescapable question in constructing revolutionary discourse [5]. This dimension not only reflects preferences for practical revolutionary strategies but also reveals the writer's fundamental understanding of social change: should institutional replacement take priority, or should ideological awakening come first?

The revolutionary objectives directly target the end goal of transformation: Is it to overthrow oppression and achieve national independence and social equality, or to break spiritual shackles and restore human dignity? The varying definitions of "goals" in different texts often shape their narrative focus and value claims.

These three elements are interconnected, collectively shaping the writer's overall vision of revolution. Take Mao Dun's Midnight and Lu Xun's Call to Arms and Wandering as examples: while both share a critical stance, they differ markedly in the aforementioned dimensions. It is this internal tension that demonstrates the diversity within Left-wing Literature.

3. Revolutionary Elements in Mao Dun’s Midnight and Lu Xun’s Left-wing Works

The significance of literature has never only existed in literature itself, but also rooted in the specific historical context in which it emerged. Although Mao Dun's "Midnight" and Lu Xun's "Scream" and "Wandering" belong to left-wing literature, their creative time spans more than ten years, which happens to be the most turbulent period in modern Chinese history. To understand the diverse expressions of "revolutionary elements" by the two writers, it is necessary to analyze them in the context of this dramatic historical change.

3.1. Social Analysis and Economic Struggle in Mao Dun’s Midnight

Published in 1933, Mao Dun’s Midnight is not only the first work in modern Chinese literary history to offer a panoramic portrayal of urban capitalist operations but also a social realist novel underpinned by Marxist political economy. As Mao Dun explained in How Midnight Was Written, his aim was to expose the compromises and vacillations of the Chinese national bourgeoisie under the dual oppression of imperialism and feudal forces, while simultaneously depicting the rise of the working class as an emerging force [6]. This dual focus allows the work to transcend the portrayal of individual fates and fully exert its function of social analysis. Rather than describing social changes based on intuition alone, Mao Dun consciously applied Marxist theory to dissect the dilemmas of the Chinese revolution [7].

3.1.1 The Role of the Working Class and Progressive Intellectuals as Revolutionary Subjects

In Midnight, the working class makes its first appearance in modern Chinese novels as a collective force. Female workers at the Yuhua Silk Factory stage strikes, distribute leaflets, and expose the actions of labor traitors—demonstrating a nascent but clear class consciousness. Among them, the character Yao Jinfeng, though flawed, shows early political awakening through her courage to resist oppression. More importantly, the novel repeatedly implies that revolution is not a spontaneous uprising but an organized, guided political action.

Meanwhile, the portrayal of intellectuals is nuanced: on one hand, characters like Fan Bowen and Du Xintuo indulge in empty talk and decadence; on the other hand, figures such as Lin Peishan and Lei Ming embody the potential of young people to engage in social transformation. This reflects the complex positions of intellectuals in the revolution and their ongoing shift toward revolutionary engagement.

3.1.2 Revolutionary Path of Organizational Mobilization and Economic Struggle

Mao Dun did not place his hopes on moral inspiration or individual heroic resistance, but emphasized that organized collective struggle is the effective way to change reality. He is well aware that in the highly organized production system of capitalism, individual resistance is easily fragmented and disintegrated. Only through institutionalized and strategic collective action can a real challenge to capital power be formed.

The three worker strikes in the novel all have clear organizational clues, are not isolated incidents, and are closely related to the macroeconomic situation. These three struggles progressed layer by layer, reflecting the logic of development from spontaneity to consciousness Marx said in "The Poverty of Philosophy": "The movement of the working class is not for certain private interests, but for the liberation of the entire relations of production[8]. Especially crucial is that these strikes have always been closely linked to the macroeconomic situation. When Wu Sunfu's capital chain broke due to the stock market failure, workers took advantage of the situation to expand the scale of their struggle, demanding higher treatment and the restoration of their laid-off positions. This plot reveals the interactive relationship between class struggle and economic crisis: the fragility of capital provides a strategic window for workers to fight for their rights.

3.1.3 Goal Orientation of Ethnic Self Rescue and Institutional Reconstruction

Midnight "ultimately reveals the limitations of national capital through Wu Sunfu's bankruptcy, superficially confirming the assertion that" the Chinese national bourgeoisie has no way out" [9]. But it was in this failure that Mao Dun raised a deeper question-relying solely on individual national bourgeois entrepreneurs cannot completely save the country's crisis. Only by breaking the oppressive structure of imperialism, comprador capital, and bureaucracy can true national independence be achieved.

Mao Dun depicted the idea of Wu Sunfu and other industrialists using industry to save the country, and set it as an ideal of saving the country in opposition to comprador capitalists such as Zhao Botao, presenting his nationalist ideology of active resistance and struggle. However, in reality, this nationalist ideology is not what the novel aims to promote. Instead, the novel uses realistic techniques to reveal its difficulty in implementation [10]. Therefore, the purpose of revolution should not be limited to saving a particular enterprise or class, but should be directed towards fundamental changes in the entire social-economic system. Zhang Quanzhi called "Midnight" a masterpiece of modern Chinese long novels about the workers' movement, precisely because it did not depict the tragic fate of individuals, but placed the workers' movement in the overall narrative of national destiny, endowing it with historical legitimacy and holistic significance [11].

3.2. Individual Awakening and the Dilemma of Enlightenment in Lu Xun’s Call to Arms and Wandering

Compared to Mao Dun's realist approach of analyzing macro social structures, Lu Xun presents a more penetrating micro narrative strategy in "The Scream" and "Wandering". These two novels were compiled into a book during the historical "confusion period" after the failure of the Xinhai Revolution, the intensification of warlord chaos, and the retreat of the peak of the New Culture Movement. In this context, the "revolution" depicted by Lu Xun is not a linear social change, but a constantly repeating spiritual tragedy-ideals are misunderstood, sacrifices are ignored, and cries ultimately return to silence.

3.2.1 The subject image of the seer and the blind masses

In his creative works, Lu Xun remained skeptical of the romanticized proposition that the people are the revolutionary force'. In his writings, the true awakeners are often solitary individuals, while the so-called "people" and "masses" often become unconscious spectators or even perpetrators.

In "Medicine", Xia Yu dedicated himself to the revolution but was regarded as a madman by the masses. In "The True Story of Ah Q", Ah Q blindly followed the revolution and was used by those in power. These plots collectively present the solidification of society's understanding of revolution and the unconscious predicament of the group.

If there is no independent personality and ideological awakening, the so-called 'revolution' is only a change in the way and object of attachment. In Lu Xun's view, "the people" and "the masses" are not natural revolutionary subjects.

Without ideological enlightenment, group behavior is prone to fall into the vicious circle and dilemma of blind obedience and collective unconsciousness.

3.2.2 The Revolutionary Logic of Enlightenment Prioritizing Action

Lu Xun always adhered to a core position: true revolution must begin with people's inner awakening. He proposed in his book "The Theory of Cultural Deviation" that "establishing people" is the foundation of "establishing a country", emphasizing the importance of "cultivating spiritual intelligence through material means, and allowing individuals to stand out from the crowd" [12]. This idea runs through the overall narrative of "The Scream" and "Wandering".

In the text, Lu Xun uses literary symbolism to reveal the suppression and disintegration of individual subjectivity by feudal ethics and social alienation. The fates of characters in works such as "Diary of a Madman," "Hometown," and "In a Restaurant" all point to one thing: Lu Xun's understanding of revolution is not the organization of riots, but the awakening and resistance of the

individual's inner spirit. However, he also realized soberly that this awakening is often lonely, ineffective, difficult to form a collective resonance, and may even be distorted, alienated, or dissolved by society.

3.2.3 The purpose differentiation between reshaping human nature and institutional reform

Unlike Mao Dun's focus on institutional reform, Lu Xun's core concern has always been the liberation of "people".He believes that even if there is a change of regime, if the national spirit remains numb, it is only a temporary solution, and history has not progressed.

The death of Sister Xianglin and the fate of Kong Yiji reflect the persistence of human dignity. In Lu Xun's view, the fundamental purpose of revolution is not to seize power or change the system, but to restore human dignity and consciousness. This kind of change is more fundamental but also more difficult. It requires a long process of education, criticism, and psychological reconstruction, which cannot be accomplished by a single uprising or movement.

4. Comparison and analysis of core differences in revolutionary elements

4.1. Overall Analysis of Core Differences in Revolutionary Elements

To deeply reveal the fundamental differences in revolutionary cognition between Mao Dun and Lu Xun, this article conducts a systematic comparison from three core dimensions: the subject, path, and purpose of revolution. Although both belong to the left-wing literary genre, their revolutionary writing presents completely different value orientations and ideological paths. By carefully reading the key plot points and character image constructions in representative texts, their different understandings of the essence of revolution can be analyzed. Table 1 summarizes the differentiated writing of revolutionary elements based on text close reading and historical background, aiming to highlight the ideological tension and diverse possibilities within left-wing literature.

Table 1. Comparison of Core Differences in Revolutionary Elements

analysis dimension	Mao Dun	Lu Xun
Revolutionary subject	Emphasize collectivism and organized groups	Emphasize individuals who are proactive and lonely, and the masses are mostly blind followers or bystanders
Revolutionary path	Emphasize organized action and focus on practical struggle strategies	Spiritual Resistance with Enlightenment as the Core
Revolutionary purpose	Change the social structure, achieve national independence, and social system transformation	Awaken individual consciousness, pursue human liberation, and personal independence

Table 1 is a comparison and summary of three core dimensions in revolutionary writing based on two sets of works. Mao Dun demonstrated his concern for the overall social system in "Midnight", and his revolutionary writing was rooted in specific historical conditions and complex class relations; Lu Xun, on the other hand, focused more on individual fate and spiritual difficulties, and remained deeply skeptical of the actual effectiveness of mass mobilization. The two are not simply a distinction between right and wrong or superiority and inferiority, but reflect two different ideological paths within left-wing literature: Mao Dun follows historical laws, reproduces the overall structure of society through literature, advocates grasping social contradictions through scientific cognition, and relies on organized forces to promote social change; Lu Xun, on the other hand, always questioned grand narratives, emphasized the awakening of individual spirit, endowed literature with the function of spiritual dissection, and through it broke the dilemma of collective unconsciousness.

The difference in revolutionary cognition between the two stems from big differences in knowledge background, practical experience, and literary value. Mao Dun received systematic

training in social sciences, delved into Marxist theory, and paid attention to the operation of urban capital and the transformation of class structure. He emphasized the sociality and contemporaneity of literature, believing that the core of literature lies in its social value and artistic expression. Therefore, he believed that social change could be promoted through scientific analysis and social mobilization; Lu Xun adhered to the principle that literature and art are the expression of a writer's personality and character, always focusing on the spiritual dilemma of rural China, deeply troubled by the issue of individual awakening, and always maintaining vigilance against mass blind movements and revolutionary alienation [13]. The former uses literature as a social diagnostic tool, dedicated to revealing structural contradictions; The latter regards writing as a spiritual enlightenment, dedicated to awakening dormant individual consciousness. This difference is not only a difference in methods, but also a fundamental difference in the way China responds to change.

It is worth pondering that these two orientations have long coexisted and intertwined in the practice of modern revolution in China. The many policy debates after the founding of the People's Republic of China can be traced back to the divergence between "prioritizing structural change" and "prioritizing ideological transformation". From this, it can be seen that the distinction between Mao Dun and Lu Xun has gone beyond simple literary differences, and its essence is the fundamental proposition of how modern China understands "how to change".

4.2. Limitations of Thought Dialogue Beyond Text

Although Mao Dun and Lu Xun had long-term cooperation in the field of left-wing literature, according to existing materials, there is still a gap in their direct theoretical confrontation on fundamental issues such as revolutionary subjects and enlightenment paths. This kind of "silence" and "no talk" is not only self-protection under the pressure of the times, but also reflects the difference between the two: Lu Xun, as a critical thinker, tended to express doubt through textual symbolism; As an analytical practitioner, Mao Dun is committed to providing solutions in his novels. Their differences lie not only in literature itself, but also in the cognitive mode and action logic they choose when facing the crisis in China. They jointly expand the ideological boundaries of left-wing literature in their respective steadfastness, surpassing literature itself, and effectively contribute to the modern Chinese revolution.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the fundamental differences in the revolutionary imagination of Chinese left-wing literature through a close reading of the texts and theoretical reconstruction of the works of Mao Dun and Lu Xun. Although the two share the mission of saving the country, they exhibit vastly different ideological paths in the three core dimensions of "who initiated the revolution, how it was achieved, and ultimately where it leads". Based on the analysis of social structure, Mao Dun emphasized the organizational struggle and institutional replacement of the working class under the guidance of political parties, reflecting the realistic path of structural change; Lu Xun focused on the awakening of individual spirit, questioned the spontaneous revolutionary ability of the masses, and was wary of the cycle of violence, presenting a critical logic of prioritizing awakening. These two orientations are not opposed or excluded, but together constitute a tense cognitive system of left-wing thought.

Research breaks through the traditional perception of left-wing literature's singularity and instrumentalization, and regards it as an exploration of diverse ideas. By systematically comparing the creative logic of the two, the academic community can see the different responses of modern Chinese intellectuals to the fundamental question of "how to change China" in the same historical context. This difference reflects both personal experiences and positions, as well as the social change dilemma of the 1930s-the need to break the oppressive system, and the constraints of public cognition and ideological foundations. Therefore, reviewing the creations of both can help the academic

community fully understand the inherent richness of left-wing thought and avoid it being simplified into fixed political labels.

It should also be noted that although this study preliminarily explores the diverse writing of "revolution" in left-wing literature, there is still room for expansion in this field: including writers such as Ding Ling, Xiao Hong, and Rou Shi, examining their textual writing and ideological expression, and revealing the differentiated writing paths of "revolution" discourse in gender, class, and individual dimensions, constructing a more complete theoretical framework for left-wing literature; The research perspective can also break through limitations and shift towards cross media, cross regional, and cross genre comparison and analysis, which not only deepens the understanding of the diversity of left-wing literature, but also provides new references for the research and development of the interaction between Chinese literature and politics in the new era.

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