



Article

Mao Dun's "Spring Silkworms": Living Like Worms

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Abstract: Mao Dun's (茅盾) 1932 short story "Spring Silkworms" (春蚕), the first of a three-part series known as the *Village Trilogy*, is widely regarded as one of the author's most representative works. Given Mao Dun's leftist politics and commitment to critical realism, the story has generated debate over its depiction of the Chinese peasantry and the extent to which it condemns tradition in support of revolutionary progress. This article contends that the key to the ambiguity of the peasants' depiction lies in the fundamental questioning of what is human, which underlies the story's overall ideological framework. Through a close examination of the story and its 1933 film adaptation, the article aims to show how the silkworms act as a metaphor for the villagers themselves, who are dehumanized through their helplessness and alienated labor. By reading the human villagers as metaphorical worms, the article demonstrates how they are both exposed as a kind of valueless "bare life" and situated in a narrative pause in historical materialist time, which indicates a space for the potential fundamental reconceptualization of the human. Ultimately, the article hopes to push beyond didactic readings of the story's politics to reveal an ontological anxiety at its core.

Keywords: Mao Dun; Spring Silkworms; leftist Chinese literature; leftist cinema; human and animal



Citation: Foley, Todd. 2022. Mao Dun's "Spring Silkworms": Living Like Worms. *Literature* 2: 225–238. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature2040019>

Academic Editor: Stephen Roddy

Received: 1 September 2022

Accepted: 4 October 2022

Published: 10 October 2022

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1. Introduction

In Lu Xun's 1918 story "Diary of a Madman" (狂人日记), his first vernacular work and a landmark of China's New Culture Movement, the infamously paranoid protagonist juxtaposes the category of "real humans" (真人) with that of "worms" (虫子). Describing to his brother what he perceives as the cannibalistic society that surrounds them, he presents a theory of social evolution essentially based on the moral prohibition of cannibalism:

Brother, probably all primitive people ate a little human flesh to begin with. Later, because their views altered, some of them stopped and tried so hard to do what was right that they changed into men, into real men. But some are still eating people—just like reptiles. Some have changed into fish, birds, monkeys, and finally men; but those who make no effort to do what's right are still reptiles. When those who eat men compare themselves to those who don't, how ashamed they must be. Probably much more ashamed than the reptiles before monkeys. (Lu 2000a, p. 43)¹

Interestingly, the translators of this passage, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, choose to emphasize the moral rather than scientific elements of this evolutionary ladder, translating 虫子 *chongzi* as "reptile" instead of its more literal meaning of "insect" or "worm"; Julia Lovell, in her more recent translation with Penguin, retains this translation of "reptile" (Lu 2009, p. 28). Keeping in mind, however, Lu Xun's fondness for Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, which he encountered through Yan Fu's 1898 translation/reinterpretation as *Tianyuan Lun* (天演论),² we might note the way that the madman fuses moral action with a Darwinian notion of evolutionary biology, invoking a hierarchy of lifeforms from worm to monkey. Humans can only become real humans—either at the top of this ladder, or outside of it altogether—by practicing a social morality. In this sense, the separation between human and animal paradoxically falls in line with the traditional Confucian notion whereby the category of human is distinguished from animal through its capacity for moral action.

Spring Silkworms

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