

Yu-shih Chen: *Realism and Allegory in the Early Fiction of Mao Tun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. 262 pages.)

This is by far the most detailed study of Mao Tun's early fiction — *Eclipse* (*Disillusion, Vacillation, Pursuit*) and *The Wild Roses*. What marks this from a host of other works on the writer is Chen's sensitive reading of these early texts. For Chen, all these works have strong allegorical meaning, and she undertook the challenging task of uncovering what she thinks are the pervading levels of meanings in them. The result is a well-documented and original piece of work.

One of the contributions of this study to Mao Tun scholarship lies in the author's fresh approach. Chen went further than any previous study on the author in her effort to probe behind the so-called "political realities" of the time to see how they helped to shape Mao Tun's fictional writing. By drawing extensively on the writer's life history, as well as on those of the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party of the twenties and thirties, Chen unravelled step by step the intricate relationships between fiction and reality in Mao Tun's early works.

Chen argues that the many puzzles in these works can only be explained in terms of political allegories. Because of the suppression by the KMT, Mao Tun, a Communist Party member since the early 1920s, had to resort to the allegorical form to put his points across. This, I think, is a credible line of argument. After all, so rich is the Chinese tradition of using allegories in literary and political writings that the unriddling of them in such famous novels as the *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *The Scholars* has become a scholarship unto itself. And one can still remember clearly the campaign in 1975 to denounce the classic novel *Shui Hu Chuan* (*Water Margin*), which was targeted towards none other than China's Premier, the late Chou Enlai. It is therefore quite conceivable that Mao Tun, a classical scholar in his own right, should have loaded his novels with political allegories. Following this line of argument, I find Chen provided interesting insights when she wrote, for example, that "Disillusion depicts the process by which the Chinese Communists' first illusions about the Nationalist Revolution were dispelled." (p. 60) By way of substantiating her argument, she finds that the students' public debate in Chapter 5 of the work about a woman student, Wang Shih-t'ao's, triangular love relationship "becomes integral to the novel when it is viewed as a representation of the question raised at the Third Congress, whether a CCP member should at the same time take KMT membership." The two suitor policy, Chen writes, is voted down at the student assembly, and there is even a proposal to punish Miss Wong. The debate and the vote, the author contends, "accurately represent the feeling of the majority of the CCP members at the Third Party Congress, and it can even be said that Mao Tun is not merely indulging in wishful thinking but carefully setting the historical record straight." (p. 62) This example brings out clearly the tenor of Chen's arguments as well as the tone of her work. Questions, of course, can be asked as to the potency of this line of argument, of whether the author is not reading too much into the texts, or whether Mao Tun was not just depicting the thoughts and behaviour of the estranged intellectuals during a time of defeat, as he himself had said?

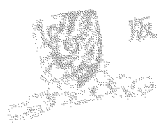
These are all fair questions, and they are the type that Chen can anticipate from her readers. Given the conjectural nature of this kind of study, no answer to them will come

easy. Be that as it may, Chen should be congratulated for doing a marvellous job in what she has set out to do. Through her painstaking efforts and new interpretations, she has brought much enrichment to the field of Mao Tun study.

Reading Chen's work, one is in fact reminded of the foreword that Mao Tun wrote for Cheng Chento's translation of *The Pale Horse* by the Russian author, Ropshin. One may have different opinions on Ropshin's terrorist-hero George, but, contended Mao Tun, one cannot remain indifferent to him as a character. The same may also be said of one's response to Chen's work. Through her original thesis and provocative arguments, she has challenged her readers to think twice about what lurk behind Mao Tun's works purporting to be about intellectual life in the 1920s. In the end, whether one is converted to her line of thinking is not as important as the new vistas that she has opened up in the study of the early Mao Tun and his time.

Mau-sang Ng

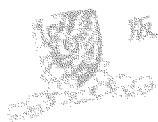
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