Across the Worlds of Insects and Humans:
A Multispecies Reading of Mao Dun's "Spring Silkworms"

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More-than-Human Worlds: A NatureCulture Blog Series

How we narrate our past matters, since the way we perceive history shapes how we understand the present and project a livable future. Yet who are the "we" in history, and how to interpret the power-ridden story of this collective "we," fully aware of its shifting pattern of inclusion and exclusion? Following the social turn since the 1960s, the historiography of modern China experienced a paradigm shift from "China's response to the West" to a framework focused more on state-society relations (Kuhn 1971; Cohen 1984). While the latter approach renders agentive a larger spectrum of historical actors and productively unfolds the complexity and contingency that conditioned the making of modern China, I often have an uneasy feeling that the overwhelming attention to intra-human struggles might obscure important struggles on another front, namely the relationship between the human and more-than-human worlds. Too often nonhuman actors are tacitly excluded through their conceptualization as a merely inert and ahistorical background. It risks turning our telling of history into one complicit in reinforcing the modern nature/culture divide and human exceptionalism, which has concrete and increasingly serious environmental consequences.

By no means do I blame specialists on late nineteenth and twentieth century China for being neglectful in their studies. These have been times of great turmoil, marked by chains of reformations and revolutions. Historians' and literary scholars' "informants," in other words, were themselves occupied with issues such as imperialism, nation and state in order to navigate the modern world, and often justified their own actions in political economical terms. In this case, is it still possible to bring other species and ways of thinking back into focus?

Recent anthropological literature, especially the rise of multispecies ethnography and the ontological turn, prompts me to reconsider history as always composed of patchy and polyphonic assemblages that continue to make many worlds in spite of the prevailing rhythm, be it termed progress or ruination (Tsing 2015). Can the art of noticing multispecies entanglements offer a way to imagine history

otherwise, unveiling alternative ontologies that do not presume a nature/culture divide? The task is difficult for scholars interested in the past who often find themselves hopelessly confined to textual materials produced by the literate minority. I follow Stengers's advice on slowing down reasoning (2005), and slow down reading to let other hidden but lively world-making projects in texts surface. With this in mind, I experiment with a classical piece in modern Chinese literature.

"Because they raised a crop of spring silkworms, the people in Old T'ung Pao's village got deeper into debt" (Mao Dun 1981: 156). With this poignant irony announced by a third-person narrator, Mao Dun (1896-1981) concludes his short story "Spring Silkworms," first published in 1932 in the Shanghai-based literary journal *Les Contemporains*, the first of his "Rural Trilogy." Zooming in on the fate of one family, this short story encapsulates the increasing blows inflicted on peasants' subsistence economy, typically consisting of wet rice cultivation and sericulture in the Lower-Yangtze region, in the face of China's crisis-ridden integration into the global market after the Treaty of Nanjing (1842).

Mao Dun's intention in composing this piece is unmistakable: a flag-bearer of literary realism since the 1920s, Mao Dun's fictional writing is grounded on faithful observation and a thorough understanding of Chinese society. He gives comprehensive depictions in order to expose social problems and explore a way to solve them. An early devotee of Marxism and dialectical materialism, his very penname alludes to "contradictions," indicative of his conviction that a higher synthesis, in accordance with the Hegelian scheme of historical progression, shall emerge out of existent contradictory political, social and economic forces, such as capitalism and feudalism (Anderson 1990). Narrating the tragic experiences of Old T'ung Pao, a typical peasant in a typical village, "Spring Silkworm" offers a point to anchor his interpretation of the predicament of rural China and to illuminate possible resolutions. Sneaking into the narrator's voice, he evaluates Chinese rural society and peasantry as pretty much hopeless, stuck in their cyclical agrarian rhythm without responding adequately to external changes. The intrusive noise of "toot-toot-toot" made by oil-burning river boats only stirs Old T'ung Pao's hatred towards the "foreign devils," who brought in foreign-strain silkworms that devalued his own products, "tak[ing] all the joy out of life" (Mao Dun 1981: 146). Caricaturing Old T'ung Pao's stubborn refusal of anything foreign without understanding the cause of his deprivation, the narrator manifestly condemns peasants' ignorance as the root of the problem.

Despite this echo of the cry of “rural bankruptcy,” then loudly uttered by intellectuals in heated debates of “the nature of society in agrarian China” (see Dirlik 1978), the premise of Mao Dun’s literary project – realism and the belief in a future direction rising from real dynamics within a society – compels him to industriously capture and reconstruct details of social life, so that he can claim to have based his writing on careful observation and objective description (Anderson 1990). Accordingly, while the main plot sentences people like Old T’ung Pao and their way of life to the pre-modern past (and to death, as the sequels unfold), the details about how villagers raise silkworms and live their everyday lives are very much on-going and far from stagnant. This incongruity betrays a dilemma in his literary model, namely, the social realities that he endeavors to document do not conform easily to his analytical framework or precipitate quickly toward his conclusion (Hsia 1999). What at first glance appears to be a deterministic commentary turns out to be a polyphony – the not necessarily harmonious coexistence of multiple melodies.

In “Spring Silkworms,” human-insect relationships constitute one important dimension of this refractory real world that constantly exceeds the fiction writer’s structuring. How does the story portray human-silkworm relationships, interwoven with intra-human relationships in the village? In the story, what kind of knowledge do villagers possess about silkworms and their shared habitat? What is the narrator’s attitude towards this knowledge that connects humans, insects and everything else in the environment? I argue that a multispecies reading of Mao Dun’s short story lays bare many rich and lively details about the intimacy between humans and silkworms, a form of human-insect entanglement preserved in village life, through embodied knowledge and respect across unknowable worlds.

The particularity of insect-human relationships is first revealed through the ardor and “unspoken mobilization order” that permeates the village as the weather turns warmer and the mulberry trees bud. An unusual tranquility befalls the early stages of the silkworm season. Villagers refrain from visiting neighbors and making noises characteristic of village space on typical days. “For a guest to come and frighten away the spirits of the ripening eggs — that would be no laughing matter! At most, people exchanged a few words in low tones when they met, then quickly separated. This was the ‘sacred’ season!” (Mao Dun 1981: 150) Perceived from the villagers’ world, silkworms have spirits, and their growth has a sacredness that should be respected by humans.

Old T’ung Pao makes all the efforts to communicate with the world of silkworms. The old man, of course, already thinks that the fate of

humans is in the hands of the Old Lord of the Sky and believes in the King of Hell, as revealed through the narrator's use of free-indirect speech to delve into his thoughts and memories. He also trusts his family's yield to the Kitchen God and the Silkworm Goddess. He deliberately purchases more expensive "tray pasting paper" with auspicious patterns, instead of using old newspapers, for papers with writing on it demands special reverence and should not be used for other purposes. Amusingly, he puts a bulb of garlic at the foot of the wall, secretly and nervously peeping at it every day for he relates its sprouting to the growth of silkworms. Making a fuss about the garlic's lack of change, Old T'ung Pao opens himself to ridicule, since his silkworms later grow even better than usual. Yet he has no other ways of knowing or predicting how the silkworms would fare, except for past experiences where seemingly robust silkworms failed to hatch.

Unpredictability notwithstanding, the whole family is committed to tending the silkworms with utmost care, sleeping and eating little to provide for their silkworms. To give a sense of the hatching process, a strenuous phase critical to a plentiful harvest, the narrator devotes a lengthy and meticulous description of a chain of physical actions conducted by his daughter-in-law: hanging cloth pieces with silkworms onto a wooden pole, brushing the silkworms with a sacred paper flower, etc. The daughter-in-law is apt at the procedure, at once practical and performative, and the paragraph records her busy bodily movements endowed with ritual meanings. The next paragraph starts with an exclamation in the narrator's voice: "a solemn ceremony! One that had been handed down through the ages!" (Mao Dun 1981:151) Indeed, all of the activities that the family conducts here are a mixture of productive labor and ceremony, a legacy handed down by collective and embodied engagement across the generations.

Finally, with the successful harvest of cocoons, the family is rewarded with delight and hope. "The 'little darlings' had proved that they had a conscience; they hadn't consumed those mulberry leaves, at four dollars a load, in vain." (Mao Dun 1981: 154) They imagine the silkworms somewhat anthropomorphically, equipped with conscience and human ethics of reciprocity. Here, economic calculations about investment and potential profits do come into the picture, as if people raise silkworms only with money in mind. But the monetary logic is not the single thread dictating all their choices. They do take painstaking care of silkworms and treat them as "little darlings." They sacrifice their own comfort, even though there are already allusions to worries about the changing market situation in previous years and rumors about not being able to sell all the products this year due to warfare.

It should be mentioned that affection is not the only possible relationship between villagers and silkworms. Far from an idyllic image of unequivocal harmony, human-insect relationships in the village exemplify complicated and shifting alliances or hostilities, driven by an amalgam of economic, social and spiritual motives. Old T'ung Pao's neighbor, for example, is spotted dumping their tray of silkworms into a nearby stream because they didn't grow well. Other villagers, including Old T'ung Pao's family, soon start to avoid his wife Lotus when she appears in public, for she is now considered to be the carrier of a bad omen. Taking her vengeance on Old T'ung Pao's family, Lotus snatched a tray from their house in the middle of a night. Caught by Old T'ung Pao's second son Ah To, she says, "our silkworm eggs didn't hatch well, but we didn't harm anybody… You acted as if I wasn't even human!" (Mao Dun 1981: 153)
Human-silkworm relationships are tightly coupled with intra-human relationships. Because of the belief in the spirituality of silkworms, neighborhood relations can be wounded, and Ah To, a young man indifferent to "superstitions," thinks to himself that "there was something eternally wrong in the scheme of human relations." (Mao Dun 1981: 153) Thus the narrator directs a critique at folk superstitions through Ah To's voice.

But in most cases, villagers in this closely-knit community live a communal life centered on the riverside and orchestrated by the rhythm of seasonal agricultural activities. The covenant of mutual aid prevails. During the busiest time, another neighbor, Sixth Treasure, comes to Old T'ung Pao's family to help since her family has a lighter load. "Bright stars filled the sky. There was a slight wind. All up and down the village, gay shouts and laughter rang in the night" (Mao Dun 1981: 154). The narrator sketches their communal evening of labor as such, reminiscent of the "joy of life" that Old T'ung Pao so cherishes earlier in the story, as he laments its probable loss (ibid.). And at the end of the season, the community shares the happiness, as "people visited one another to view the shining white gossamer" with gratitude toward the beneficent Silkworm Goddess (ibid.). Speaking dotingly of cocoons as flowers and snow, villagers celebrate the growth of life inseparable from their own.

Villagers' good harvest of cocoons is indisputable proof of their competency and ample expertise in sericulture. Yet how does one characterize their knowledge? How is it different from, say, modern entomology and agriculture? One intriguing expression of the villagers' knowledge about natural worlds takes the form of folk song, sung by the grandson Little Pao. It goes like this: "Green, tender leaves at Ch'ing-ming / the girls who tends the silkworms / clap hands at the sight!" (Mao Dun 1981: 147) The song mentions Ch'ing-ming (around April 5), one of the 24 solar terms in the

lunar-solar calendar. These solar terms correspond to cyclical changes in the natural world that punctuate the villagers' everyday life, productive activities and festivals throughout the year. In the story, villagers constantly discuss what should be done during Ch'ing-ming, and another solar term, the Grain Day (around April 20). Old T'ung Pao is particularly attuned to the changes in weather around such dates because he knows how such changes would affect the lives of animals, plants, water and soil.

If the folk songs and the 24 solar terms can still be neatly written down and compared against the measuring rod of modern science, as many intellectuals at that time tried to do (Hung 1986), other forms of knowledge are less traceable, as the paragraph on hatching discussed above makes evident. There are many other instances in the short story where villagers display embodied skills (see Ingold 2000) throughout the season, ranging from raising silkworms and spinning silk to repairing tools. The description-loaded paragraphs can strike readers as clumsy, since it is no easy task to translate each bodily move fluidly into words. After all, villagers' labor is without a written manual; they evoke their physical, embodied experiences to feel if they are doing things in the right way. What's more, as shown in the paragraph on hatching, what the narrator offers is not a purely technological account. The technological aspects of practice, which could at least count as a form of practical knowledge according to modern disciplinary classification, are enmeshed with rituals and beliefs, resulting in an unruly hybrid that would lead the entire body of peasant knowledge to be dispensed with as overly superstitious.

With this kind of embodied knowledge, villagers enter into an intimate relationship with the surrounding worlds of plants, insects, and including the supernatural. The contrast between Old T'ung Pao and the second son, Ah To, is telling. Ah To does not care about what he sees as taboo and superstition. He is also the only one in the family who understands the drastic changes in the outside world. Ah To does not believe that "one good crop, whether of silkworms or of rice, would enable them to wipe out their debt and own their own land again. He knew that they would never get out from the underclass merely by relying on hard work, even if they broke their backs trying." (Mao Dun 1981: 152) He symbolizes the possibility for the peasantry themselves to gain consciousness of their own situation and heralds a future where they spontaneously put an end to their miserable lives. In "Bitter Winter," the last piece of the "Rural Trilogy," Ah To is actually engaged in mobilizing the peasantry against feudal lords, just as Old T'ung Pao dies after enduring much hardship.

Yet in comparison with Old T'ung Pao, Ah To knows much less about agricultural work. He reckons it is better to use foreign-strain silkworms anyways, which can be sold at a higher price. In the sequel "Autumn Harvest," Ah To is the one who promotes the use of chemical fertilizers to increase the yield of rice, while Old T'ung Pao, horrified, believes chemical fertilizers to be "poison." (Unfortunately, Old T'ung Pao could not have known that he is right.) For Ah To, the only thing that matters is making money, but he does not actually understand the effects of foreign-strain silkworms and chemical fertilizers on other species and the local environment.

This is not to say that Old T'ung Pao perfectly "knows" silkworms and the paddy fields. A better way of putting it is that Old T'ung Pao accepts the agentive existence and unknowability of the worlds of insects and land that are not reducible to human perception. He only tries to approach those worlds through intimate and caring labor. Aside from that, he is content with seeking "partial connections" (Strathern 1991) via the supernatural, with due respect to the unintelligibility of other worlds in human terms. But for Ah To, nature is just an external resource to be exploited by humans for monetary gain. He extracts certainty represented by economic formulas and pays no attention to the residue. Between Old T'ung Pao and Ah To exist two different systems of knowledge, standards of value, and relationships with the more-than-human world.

Through the lively but at times satirical tone of the narrator, Mao Dun conveys his sympathy towards Old T'ung Pao's misery while crediting in Ah To with the direction and hope for a brighter future. His compelling storytelling would guide compassionate readers to agree that Old T'ung Pao, together with his superstitions, belongs to an obsolete past and offers nothing worthy in the modern era, when China's very survival as a sovereign state is at stake. The consequences of this erasure of peasants' intimate and embodied knowledge would be considered a regrettable but inevitable step toward historical progress.

Even though Mao Dun diagnoses rural society as impendingly dissolving, his text hints at the vibrant world-making projects enacted by peasants and their fellow nonhuman inhabitants in the village. Yet instead of quickly asserting a radically different and bounded ontological world, it is imperative to reflect on how categories that demarcate differences are themselves historically produced. Who is the peasantry, after all? What is "Chinese society" or "rural China"? With full awareness that Mao Dun's short story is not an unmediated and transparent rendition of village life, the way he takes for granted certain categories again demands a slowed down reading. In

pre-modern China, especially in the lower Yangtze regions, the urban-rural divide was more blurred, and the peasant world actually existed in symbiosis with the worlds of literati and classical learning, a connectedness that was to be severed only with the advent of modernity. “Society” as the cluster of people and the direct subjects of state governance, similarly, was also a recent invention (Lam 2011).

In the 1920s and 1930s, the National Essence Movement and the Folklore Movement led by intellectuals unsatisfied with westernization and elitist New Culture respectively attempted to salvage classical Chinese learnings and folk knowledge, the latter often being transcribed into folk songs. What the two movements miss, as does Mao Dun, is the intricate web of literati, peasants, plants and animals, and the natural environment in the non-modern world, a parallel world already obscure to the rapidly modernizing urban centers. These new style intellectuals often could only offer imperfect, and heavily political translations, as all translations are.[1] Yet the translations allow a glimpse into a form of peasant life that is intimately embedded in and entangled with the more-than-human world. They open up the possibility to understand the past in its polyphony, instead of an accelerating allegro racing towards the present as its incontestable telos.

Notes

[1] My use of “translation,” inspired by Satsuka (2015)’s work, puts focus on the translational practices’ indispensability and incompleteness in the production of knowledge across incommensurable epistemological frameworks, which often preserve the tension and result in a landscape of layered and inconsistent patches.

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