As a writer and political activist, Ba Jin (also written as Pa Chin, 1904–2005) wished above all to emulate his hero, the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), and inspire Chinese youth to rise up to create a just society. Born into the Li family of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province in China’s interior, in private life he was known by his given and courtesy names, Li Yaotang and Li Feigan, respectively. After he launched his writing career in Shanghai in the late 1920s, he adopted the pen name Ba Jin, borrowing the first syllable from the name of another famous anarchist, Bakunin (1814–1876), and the last from the Chinese spelling of Kropotkin’s name (jin). Ba Jin’s family was wealthy and well educated. His uncles, brothers, and cousins all took an interest in events in the wider world, subscribing to literary magazines and reading the news from eastern China in the tumultuous years after WWI that witnessed the rise of the New Culture movement in China. By the time he was fifteen, Ba Jin had obtained a Chinese translation of Kropotkin’s *Appeal to the Young*, first published in French in 1880. In his autobiography, he recalls its effects on him – he was so moved he could not sleep and, weeping with joy at discovering a kindred spirit, he dedicated himself to transforming the cruel social order and saving humanity from the injustices embedded in it.1

In 1923, Ba Jin left Chengdu with his older brother to go to school in eastern China, where he involved himself in anarchist circles. He witnessed the rise of the communist movement in wake of the May 30th Incident of 1925, when police in Shanghai’s British-administered International Settlement shot Chinese protesters outside a Japanese-run factory. As a committed anarchist, however, Ba Jin was critical of both of the major political parties, the Communists and the Nationalists, each of which claimed leadership of the Chinese revolution against local warlords and international imperialists. Just before open warfare between the two parties broke out in the spring of 1927, Ba Jin traveled to France, settled in Paris, and studied French literature while continuing to read and write about anarchism.

Ba Jin returned to Shanghai in 1929, where his first novel, written in France, had already appeared to popular acclaim. During the next decade, he published many popular works, some written in Japan, where he lived from late 1933 to mid-1935. As Japanese troops advanced across China in 1940, he left Shanghai and spent the war years in southwest China, writing constantly. In 1945 he returned to Shanghai, where he lived the rest of his long life. He was a celebrated...
literary figure in the early years of the People’s Republic of China and served as head of the Shanghai Writers Association and founding editor of the literary magazine *Harvest (Shouhuo)*. During the Cultural Revolution, however, he was criticized for his anarchist views and petty bourgeois sympathies; his works were banned. After the death of Mao, his novels began to circulate once more, and he reemerged as a literary elder. He played a leading role in the establishment of the National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature (Zhongguo xiandai wenxueguan) in Beijing. He publicly criticized the Cultural Revolution, famously calling for a museum to be dedicated to explaining how so many innocent people could suffer so in “New China.” Under the title “Record of Random Thoughts” (*Suixianglu*), he published a series of influential essays reflecting on Chinese history and culture. In 1990, he was among the first recipients of the Fukuoka Asian Cultural Prize. The Chinese government unsuccessfully nominated him for a Nobel Prize in literature several times. Illness kept him out of public sight for the last fifteen years of his life.

**Literary achievements**

As a writer of fiction and essays, Ba Jin was remarkably prolific; he wrote in service to his ideals and tried to tell stories that would move his readers to reflect on social problems. Both his politics and his desire to appeal broadly led him in the direction of melodrama, especially in his novels of the 1930s. The Turbulent Stream trilogy, *The Family* (1933), *Spring* (1938), and *Autumn* (1940), constitutes the most important fictional representation of the May Fourth movement of the late 1910s and early 1920s. The trilogy offers a series of tragic stories of young people whose lives are blighted by their elders’ adherence to patriarchal cultural practices justified by reference to Confucian precepts. As with many a May-Fourth-era critique, Turbulent Stream represents Chinese ideals of masculinity, femininity, filiality, and family harmony as tools by which patriarchs control the lives of the young and prevent social change that might threaten their authority. The novels were based on Ba Jin’s own life, and many young readers found his account of May Fourth student activism and family strife gripping. *The Family* was a best-seller when it appeared and continues to appeal to the young. More than any other Chinese writer of the twentieth century, Ba Jin established the coming-of-age novel as a popular form.³

While acknowledging the popularity of Turbulent Stream, many literary critics consider the trilogy and most of the rest of Ba Jin’s early writing naïve and less interesting than the more inventive and provocative writing of such luminaries as Lu Xun and Eileen Chang. In the caustic judgment of C. T. Hsia, Ba Jin’s novels of the 1930s display his “manifest inability to give the illusion of life to his characters and scenes.” Hsia argued that this began to change in *Autumn*, published in 1940, and by 1947, with the publication of *Cold Nights*, Ba Jin had become “a psychological realist of great distinction.”¹⁴ Xiaoqing Tang analyzed *Cold Nights* in a chapter entitled “The Last Tubercular in Modern Chinese Literature,” arguing that the illness of its main character represents the culmination of a literary practice, pioneered by Lu Xun, in which an individual character’s ill health is used to reflect on a range of broader problems, including “an enfeebled nation, a benighted populace, an individual’s existential angst, or a continually thwarted sensitive mind.”¹⁵ After *Cold Nights*, Tang argues, the founding of the P.R.C led to the establishment of socialist realism as the only acceptable mode; the individual angst-ridden protagonist gave way to the forward-looking and confident collective of common people as literary subject.

Of all Ba Jin’s novels, *Cold Nights* could be said to win the critics’ award, but *The Family* certainly remains the people’s choice. Translated into many languages, it has also appeared as a graphic novel, as well as in film and TV serial versions. It has an enduring appeal among young readers.
The Family

The Family chronicles the lives of three young brothers as they try to achieve happiness within the confines of a large family ruled autocratically by their grandfather, the Gao patriarch. As the future head of the family, eldest brother Gao Juexin is expected by his grandfather to impose discipline on his brothers, Gao Juemin and Gao Juehui, and on the other members of the younger generation. Juexin himself has accepted, although very unhappily, his elders’ decisions about whom he should marry and what work he should take up. His brothers, inspired by May Fourth values, choose to defy arranged marriages and other family dictates. Juehui, in particular, becomes a harsh critic of the behavior of his uncles and aunts, who abuse the servants and behave hypocritically while flattering the patriarch and his vulgar concubine. A deathbed conversion of the grandfather into a more understanding old man is too late to save the family; after he dies the atmosphere becomes even worse. The novel ends as the idealistic Juehui heads for Shanghai and the freedom it promises from the tragedies of life in a corrupt family and oppressive social order.

The Family, written as a serial for a Shanghai newspaper in 1931–32, appeared in book form in 1933 and quickly established itself as the most widely read novel of the era. Ba Jin’s contributions to modern Chinese literature stand out clearly in his most famous work: he showed how writers could capture the hearts of young readers via a passionate attack on cultural practices that were beginning to be seen as oppressive and backward. As with Lu Xun, Ba Jin came to believe that fiction offered the most effective vehicle for cultural critique. Like most of his other work, The Family highlights the tragedies that result when human sympathy is sacrificed in the name of social conventions. Such conventions, his plots reveal, are set up not to contribute to human happiness but rather to buttress the power of patriarchs and make it impossible for the hierarchical social order to be challenged by the young and marginalized members of the community. The critique of Chinese culture offered in The Family will be discussed in more detail below.

Because Ba Jin’s interest in literature grew largely out of his commitment to social change, his approach to the written word can be characterized as pragmatic rather than perfectionist. He was not known as a prose stylist; some critics found his language stilted and too influenced by patterns of speech he had picked up while studying in France. He did not capture different types of speech effectively – servant and master all tend to speak and think in the same register, reflecting his idealism about human commonality rather than a keen sociological understanding. From his point of view, though, stylistic weakness was not a fatal flaw. The basis on which to judge literature, he would argue, was on how effectively it stimulated people to reflect on and try to improve the social order, not on abstract principles of beauty or creativity unrelated to the lives of the majority of readers whose primary concern was how best to act in a rapidly changing world. As many Ba Jin scholars have pointed out, and some have documented in detail, Ba Jin revised The Family several times over the decades after it first appeared. He encouraged other writers, such as Cao Yu (1910–1996), to transform his story for the stage and for the screen. In letters to his fans, published as prefaces to the novel or as essays, he characterized his novel as words from his heart, not as a work of art that could not be improved by rewriting.

In this approach to literature, with its responsiveness to readers’ opinions, Ba Jin seems to have subscribed to the ideal of “literature to serve the people,” later promoted by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong in his famous “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” of 1942. Mao argued that writers and artists needed to understand and interact with their audiences in order to produce good work. More than most twentieth-century Chinese writers, Ba Jin tried to relate to his readers, communicate with them, and adapt his writing to address their
Ba Jin's fiction and *The Family*

concerns. He also accepted the need to revise his novels after 1949, to accord with the expectations for literature in socialist New China. References to bourgeois literature were cut, and the characters lost some of their complexity, so that heroes and villains could be distinguished even more easily than in the earlier versions. That he fell afoul of Communist critics after 1949, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, was not because he had a fundamentally different vision of the role of literature from that championed by Mao. He was criticized, rather, for caring too much about the plight of relatively privileged young people, as opposed to downtrodden workers and peasants, as well as for having believed that anarchism rather than communism offered the best hope for the liberation of humankind.

*The Family* resonated with young people in 1930s China because it told a story they could identify with, one based on Ba Jin's own experiences as a youth. Gao Juehui, the young protagonist whose life resembles Ba Jin's, recalls an idyllic childhood lost as his beloved mother dies, his father remarries, and then his father dies. Meanwhile, the Qing dynasty has collapsed and warlords vie to control the city in which he lives, leading to street battles and confrontations between arrogant soldiers and angry students. Juehui's grandfather rules the family as an autocrat, ordering Juehui's eldest brother, Juexin, to enforce his dictates among the younger generation. The ideals of democracy and science, promoted by the May Fourth movement launched in 1919, appeal to the boys, but they seem impossible to attain, given the control exercised over them by their grandfather and the cultural norms that require that they submit to him. Many of the details of the story correspond to Ba Jin's own life; the general outline of oppressed youth seeking to change society despite the opposition of their elders appealed (and still appeals) widely to young readers.

Ba Jin intended the novel to comfort young people caught in the stifling webs of family obligation and to encourage them to change their lives by standing up for themselves. Lu Xun may have worried about raising false hopes of radical change among the young – awakening sleepers trapped in an air-tight iron house, in his metaphor – but Ba Jin, a member of that younger generation, had no such reservations. His passion is conveyed through Juehui's anger and disgust at the sacrifices the family demands of its members. His elder brother Juexin's attempts to mediate and compromise are depicted as cowardly, as well as devastating to his own psyche and the happiness of those he loves; Juexin's wife Ruijue dies a miserable death in childbirth because he fails to stand up to the unreasonable demands of his elders. The path forward, Juehui comes to believe, is to abandon a family united only by birth, hierarchical relations, and ritual in favor of joining like-minded youth in a “family” that is defined rather by common values and mutual love and respect. In the novel, Juehui is able to forget his unhappy home life as he gathers with other young people to publish a radical newspaper.

In *The Family*, Ba Jin does not state explicitly that the newspaper that Gao Juehui helps run is associated with an anarchist organization. But he himself had participated in such an organization as a youth, and as a teenager published essays in anarchist journals in his hometown, Chengdu. By the time *The Family* appeared, he was quite well known in Shanghai as an advocate of anarchism. While in France in 1927 and 1928, he had written for international anarchist journals and engaged in polemics with Chinese Communists. At the time, two Italian-American anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti, were in jail in Massachusetts, accused of murder. Ba Jin wrote to them to express his outrage and support, and Vanzetti replied with words of encouragement. Ba Jin also began a correspondence with another American activist, Emma Goldman (1869–1940), while in France. As with his experience of reading Kropotkin as a boy, Ba Jin clearly felt a deep emotional connection to these heroic anarchist figures. When he took up fiction writing as a way to promote his political goals, he attempted to infuse the relationships of the young heroes and heroines of his works, including *The Family*, with this sort of intense comradely emotion.
Ba Jin was a fierce critic of Chinese tradition, but, unlike many other leftist writers of the post-May-Fourth era, his criticism was not motivated by a desire to see a rejuvenated China become strong and powerful. Nationalism is not a significant theme in Ba Jin’s fiction.

In addition to passionate anarchist visions of human community, Ba Jin’s writings were influenced by his broad reading in Chinese and European fiction and other literature. Olga Lang, author of an excellent English-language biography of Ba Jin, points out the impact of Russian literature and history on The Family. When Juehui falls in love with Mingfeng, the young girl who serves as a maid in his branch of the family, he compares their mutual attachment to that between the central characters in Tolstoy’s Resurrection. Juehui’s female cousin, Qin, aspires to be a heroine in emulation of Sophia Perovskaya, who helped formulate a plot to assassinate Russian Tsar Alexander II and was hanged for it in 1881. Juehui’s brother Juemin, who is in love with Qin, quotes a line from Turgenev’s On the Eve to encourage himself to be brave in the face of oppression. French literature also made its mark on The Family. Kong Xiangxia notes that such authors as Romain Rolland, Victor Hugo, and Emile Zola inspired Ba Jin by the forthright indignation they conveyed in their depiction of the evils of modern society. Ba Jin himself also credited Japanese writers, including Natsume Soseki and Arishima Takeo, as influences on his work.

Well before he encountered European and Japanese literature, Ba Jin read widely in Chinese literature, and the influence of the great novel Dream of the Red Chamber (Honglou meng) is particularly evident in The Family, as documented and analyzed by many scholars. Chen Qianli points out that both stories center on the theme of a conflict in values between patriarchs and young men and feature sub-plots in which love between two young people is sacrificed in the interest of mundane family considerations. Another clear example of the influence of Dream on Ba Jin concerns the Gao family compound in The Family, which resembles Ba Jin’s childhood home up to a point. But Ba Jin’s childhood home had no huge garden like the one in the novel. The Gao family garden, at first an idyllic world where the cousins escape from the supervision of their elders and Juehui expresses his love for Mingfeng, closely resembles the Grand View Garden of Dream of the Red Chamber, where Dream’s hero Jia Baoyu lives happily with his female cousins. As in Dream, tragedy eventually comes to the Gao family’s garden – Mingfeng commits suicide there when she is told she must become the concubine of the evil Feng Leshan, head of the Confucian Society, and realizes that Juehui cannot save her from that horrible fate. Craig Shaw, author of a thorough study of The Family and its debts to Dream, concludes that “Ba Jin, consciously or unconsciously, saw in Honglou meng a model” of a work that combined romantic sentiment with social criticism, his aim in writing The Family.

Another sort of influence on Ba Jin tends to be overlooked in the scholarly literature on his work: the influence of the intellectual world surrounding him in Chengdu in the early twentieth century. Unlike Li Jieren (see Chapter 5), Ba Jin did not emphasize his identity as a Chengdu native in his fiction. The Family’s depiction of the Gao family was intended to make it stand as representative of all elite Chinese families, and the city in which they lived representative of all Chinese cities seemingly untouched by modern attitudes about human equality. But, although its culture was certainly conservative in some ways and its economy only indirectly affected by the new industrial processes being introduced in eastern China, Chengdu was not at all mired in the past when Ba Jin was young. If it had been, it would have been difficult for Ba Jin to have acquired a copy of a Chinese edition of Kropotkin’s Appeal to Youth and to have joined an anarchist society. Chengdu’s elite community was not as attached to the old ways as it appears to be in Ba Jin’s fiction. In The Family and its sequels, Ba Jin subtly acknowledges the impact that Chengdu’s notorious anti-Confucian intellectual, Wu Yu (1872–1949), had on his views on Chinese culture.
Wu Yu, like Ba Jin, was the scion of a family of wealthy landowners. Although he was not a native of Chengdu, he moved there as a youth and developed a reputation as a classical scholar. In 1910, though, he had a bitter falling-out with his father. Accused by the leaders of the local educational community of unfilial conduct, Wu Yu responded by printing and distributing an attack on his father’s morals and behavior, an act that resulted in calls for his arrest. If the 1911 Revolution had not intervened and brought an end to Qing rule, Wu Yu might indeed have been punished for his lack of filial respect. Instead, he remained active in local politics and corresponded with the leaders of the New Culture movement, including Chen Duxiu. Wu Yu helped publicize Lu Xun’s story “Diary of a Madman” by praising it in an essay called “Cannibalistic Family Rituals” (Chiren de lijiao) published in the November 1, 1919, issue of New Youth (Lu Xun’s story had appeared in an earlier issue of the same journal). He lent his support to Lu Xun’s assessment of the inhumanity of the Confucian tradition by offering examples from the classical canon that seemed to justify outrageous conduct. In “On Filial Piety” (Shuo xiao), published in Chengdu in 1920 and then in a collection of his essays that was distributed nationwide, Wu Yu criticized the neo-Confucian orthodoxy that dominated scholarly circles and argued that its support for patriarchal families had turned Chinese society into “a great factory to produce submissive people.”

The history of Wu Yu’s conflict with his father and his anti-Confucian views were widely known in Chengdu when Ba Jin was young. The Family was intended to illustrate Wu Yu’s central point about how the patriarchal family system (dajiazu zhidu) systematically broke the spirit of the young and subjected them to endless demands to regulate their conduct in the name of filiality and propriety. But Ba Jin carried his critique of Chinese culture much further than Wu Yu did. In Turbulent Stream, the Gao patriarch and his friend Feng Leshan, head of the Confucian Society, expect absolute obedience from the younger generation, justifying themselves by quoting pithy sayings that they associate with Confucius, but that often date from many centuries later. For example, in Spring, the sequel to The Family, Qin reports that Feng Leshan has visited the girls’ school she attends, where he told the assembled students that “lack of talent is a virtue in women” (nüren wucai bianshi de). This phrase was one of many that came to be associated with Confucian wisdom in the Qing period and early twentieth century, although there is no evidence that it had circulated before the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Wu Yu dedicated himself to trying to peel away what he saw as the pernicious influence of Song and Ming dynasty neo-Confucian thinkers on earlier Chinese philosophy, many aspects of which he saw as sound and valuable. Ba Jin, on the other hand, contributed to a tendency among 1920s and 1930s writers to associate everything they saw as bad in Chinese culture with the classical tradition as a whole. In The Family, Feng Leshan and the Confucian Society are made to symbolize old, oppressive Chinese culture in general.

The disdain that Ba Jin felt for most aspects of elite Chengdu life is apparent in The Family and distinguishes him from older intellectuals such as Wu Yu, whose cultural critique focused more narrowly on certain strands of Chinese thought. Wu Yu was acquainted with Ba Jin’s uncles and grandfather and, like them, was fond of many of the cultural practices that are made to seem sinister, profligate, or ridiculous in The Family. Most obviously, Ba Jin’s depictions of Sichuan opera performances and the actors who portrayed female roles drip with disapproval, in contrast to the positive accounts of the new-style “spoken plays” (huaju) that Juehui and his brothers perform. The implied sexual relationships between the cross-dressing actors and some of the men in the Gao family are held up as a sign of the decadence of these hypocritical Confucian elders. In The Family, the actors themselves are equated with the women who use sex to attach themselves to powerful men – particularly Mistress Chen, the Gao patriarch’s vulgar and scheming concubine, who is said to have been a courtesan before entering the family. In Autumn, the
final novel of the Turbulent Stream trilogy, however, Ba Jin attempts to evoke sympathy for such actors by providing a pathetic backstory for Zhang Bixiu, the protégé of one of the Gao uncles: he was raised in a “good” family, but was kidnapped away from his widowed mother and forced into a life of shame on the stage. Wu Yu, in contrast to Ba Jin, loved Sichuan opera and praised the beauty and talents of the famous cross-dressing actors in essays and poems published in local magazines in the 1910s. Like the fictional Gao uncles, he was not at all puritanical, nor would he have seen a taste for opera as in conflict with upright conduct, neo-Confucian or otherwise, as Ba Jin’s fiction would have it.

Ba Jin’s rather simplistic depictions of women in The Family have attracted criticism. Literary scholar Jin Feng argues that Qin’s refusal to defy her mother’s wishes in order to act on her revolutionary beliefs is used to highlight the more revolutionary character of Juehui, and men in general. Qin cannot overcome her feminine emotions in service to a higher cause. The fate of Mingfeng, similarly, functions primarily to shed light on Juehui’s initial betrayal of her, his subsequent disgust with himself, and his growing resolution to break out of the family. The aunts and the patriarch’s concubine, Mistress Chen, are unrelievedly bad, forcing Juexin to move his wife, Ruijue, out of the family compound when she is about to give birth, causing her death. The justification Mistress Chen gives for this cruel act is a local belief that the afterlife of a recently deceased person (in this case the Gao patriarch) can be harmed by an attack of the “bloodglow” produced during childbirth. Ba Jin’s depiction of the episode, however, suggests to the reader that Mistress Chen may not really believe in this superstition – she just wants to use the power her relationship to the Gao patriarch gives her to put the younger generation in its place.

The literary critic Rey Chow writes that Ba Jin’s depictions of female characters practicing family rituals was calculated to make such practices appear ridiculous. She cites in particular the scene near the end of The Family in which the Gao women conduct formal ceremonies of mourning for the deceased patriarch. His description of this event, she argues, assumes that all of the participants are merely going through the motions – the ritual means nothing to them emotionally or intellectually. The women wail on cue when the master of ceremonies announces the arrival of guests, but occasionally make mistakes and begin wailing at the wrong time. There are no tears, because they are following instructions, not genuinely sorrowful. Ba Jin presents family rituals such as this funeral, she writes, as “something of an exotic ethnographic find, whereupon an age-old custom receives the spotlight not for the significance it carries in its conventional context but rather for a displaced kind of effect – that of an absurd spectacle seen with fresh eyes.”

As Chow suggests, Ba Jin does indeed seem to treat many family rituals and customary beliefs as “absurd spectacles” and “premodern barbarity.” But he is not consistent in his attack on family rituals. In contrast to the jarring scene of mourning for the patriarch at the end of The Family, in other parts of the trilogy Ba Jin implies that, when family members care about each other, family rituals can be very powerful emotionally. This is seen early in the novel in a joyous New Year dinner celebration involving four generations of the Gao family. Another signal that Ba Jin does not reject ritual itself is apparent in a recurrent theme throughout Turbulent Stream: the improper treatment of the bodies of deceased young women as a symbol of moral bankruptcy. Mingfeng’s dead body is simply made to disappear. Commenting on Mingfeng’s death, Mama Huang, the older woman servant who speaks as the voice of conscience in the novel, sighs over the decadent state into which the family has fallen. In Autumn, the final volume of the trilogy, Juexin’s long struggle to see that his young cousin Zhou Hui is given a proper burial by her cruel husband’s family, so that her ghost – and her living grandmother – can be at ease, is depicted as an honorable act, not as ridiculous superstition. As historian Norman Kutcher points out, funerals have long occupied a central place in Chinese cultural practice. Under Confucian...
precepts, however, the nature of the ceremony varied according to the status of the deceased. Ba Jin’s critique of funerals throughout Turbulent Stream is related to his main theme in The Family— the harm done to human relations by teachings that impose and justify great inequalities in status and power.

As many critics have observed, for all of his iconoclasm, Ba Jin was deeply shaped by Chinese cultural values. This is apparent in the actions and thoughts of Gao Juehui. As was the case with Wu Yu, Juehui’s anger at his elders is fueled by a sense that, by behaving improperly themselves, the older males have betrayed the very values they demand from their sons and grandsons. Hypocrisy and self-gratification are the worst sins displayed in the Gao household; the patriarch’s funeral is the event where all of the hypocrisy and selfishness that Ba Jin saw in family rituals and relationships is put on display. In contrast, in Autumn, both the narrator and the revolutionary youth among the characters sympathize with the pain that Juexin feels when his sorrow for the loss of his cousin Hui cannot be expressed appropriately at her grave because she has been denied a proper burial. Ba Jin’s criticism of family rituals arises from their use as tools of oppression. When real respect and love is not present, as with the Gao women’s relationship with the patriarch, rituals designed to allow respect and love to be suitably expressed must fail.

Shaped by his anarchist training, Ba Jin intended The Family as a critique of hierarchy and the beliefs, conventions, and practices that maintained it. The breadth of his critique of elite Chengdu culture, however, suggests that his personal tastes and ideas about what constituted progress were shaped by many aspects of the culture he experienced in Shanghai and Paris after he left Chengdu in 1923. Unlike contemporaries such as Li Jieren, Lao She, and Shen Cong-wen, he had little interest in local history and a certain antipathy for folk culture, as indicated in his depiction of Sichuan opera as disgusting and Chengdu customs as superstitious. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Esperanto, which he hoped would become the future world language, and shared a modernist delight in industry and production. In one essay from 1934, he expressed his views in a way that seems to echo the description of Shanghai in the first paragraph of Mao Dun’s Midnight (Ziye, 1933), which culminates with the English words “Light, Heat, Power” blazing out into the night:

I love cities, I love machines, I love what they call material civilization. They are alive, hot, fast, powerful. I know that cities contain much that is evil, that machines cause workers to suffer, and that material civilization only offers a small minority of wealthy and powerful people the means to enjoy luxuries. But this should be blamed on our perverse social system (and so we should transform it). Let those people who curse the cities, who curse the machines, who curse material civilization go comfort themselves with their “spiritual civilization.” As for me, I say once again, I love cities, I love machines, I love material civilization.

This enthusiasm for material progress and modern cities was not shared by all Chinese novelists of the 1930s and ’40s. Literature and film scholar Zhang Yingjin points out that in “the cultural imagination of modern China, the city repeatedly emerged as a source of contamination and deprivation, as a place of sexual promiscuity and moral corruption, and as a dangerous trap for the young and innocent.” In The Family, Chengdu, the hometown of the Gao family, lacks all qualities of a modern city: it is primarily a conglomeration of closed and oppressive family compounds that are only beginning to be challenged by the new social spaces of the school and street, where revolutionary youth can demonstrate and demand progress. As for Shanghai, rather than a dangerous trap, it is held up as a liberated and liberating world, where people can develop their talents and express themselves without restraint and in company with like-minded
comrades. Juehui’s aunts predict that Shanghai society will turn him into a playboy, but he is certain that it will save him from suffocating in the depths of family strife and help him forge a new revolutionary life. This seems confirmed in the sequel, Spring, when his letters home persuade his cousin Gao Shuying to follow him to Shanghai as she struggles to avoid what promises to be yet another awful arranged marriage.

As noted above, Ba Jin’s later novels differ considerably from his 1920s and early 1930s work. Shanghai and the theme of the promise of the modern city receded after war with Japan began in 1937. For the most part, Ba Jin’s later fiction lacks the optimistic, hopeful spirit that rises above the tragedy running through The Family and Spring. One exception, however, concerns the fate of Gao Juexin. In The Family, he loses his wife in childbirth and sadly supports Juehui’s decision to depart for Shanghai, fully expecting never to see him again. Over the course of Spring and Autumn, his beloved son Hai’er dies, as do two of his favorite cousins, more young victims of patriarchy. His uncles and aunts break up the family estate, despite his desperate efforts to keep it together to honor his deceased grandfather’s wishes. In an essay about Autumn, Ba Jin revealed that he had intended to end the trilogy with Juexin’s suicide, which would have reflected his own eldest brother’s sad end. But, in response to pleas from his readers to save Juexin’s life, he rewrote the ending: Juexin moves out of the family compound, which has been sold to strangers, and establishes a small household. He marries a charming servant girl named Cuihuan — almost a second Mingfeng, caring and pretty, but more pragmatic and self-confident (strongly resembling, in this regard, Jia Baoyu’s maid Aroma in Dream of the Red Chamber). The future looks somewhat bright for Juexin, who ends up being a survivor. Thus, while Gao Juehui is the main protagonist of The Family, Gao Juexin is the central character of the Turbulent Stream trilogy as a whole. This shift from a focus on revolutionary youth to a focus on emotionally fragile and weak men struggling (and usually failing) to deal effectively with family demands and social pressure carried through into Ba Jin’s later novels Garden of Repose (1944) and Cold Nights.

In his biography of Ba Jin, literary scholar Chen Sihe notes that Ba Jin never stopped calling himself “a child of the May Fourth Movement.” As a witness to and participant in the youth activism of that era, he created a novel, The Family, that is the most widely influential literary account of the movement and the ideas and passions that inspired it. His long career produced many more novels, stories, and essays, but The Family stands out as his most loved work and occupies a significant place in the history of modern Chinese literature.

Notes
1 Ba Jin published many autobiographical essays and one book-length memoir, Yi (Shanghai: Wenhua shenghuo, 1936); the latter has appeared in English translation: The Autobiography of Ba Jin, trans. May-lee Chai (Indianapolis: University of Indianapolis Press, 2008). Biographies of Ba Jin may be found in the list of further readings.
Ba Jin’s fiction and The Family


14 Craig Shaw, “Ba Jin’s Dream,” 121.

15 For a fuller discussion of this theme, see Kristin Stapleton, *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin’s Family* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), particularly chapters two and seven.


21 An expanded version of the discussion in the next three paragraphs may be found in Kristin Stapleton, *Fact and Fiction*, 79–81.


Further readings


