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When "I" Was Born: Women's Autobiography in Modern China.
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by Jesse Field

SCHOLARS OF LIFE WRITING and Asian studies alike owe a great debt to Jing M. Wang for giving us *When "I" Was Born*, a highly crafted literary history that tells us how modern autobiography emerged in China from the 1920s through 1945. It is a highly gendered story in that vernacular, prose-based life writing in China is a rare example of a field dominated by women writers. Wang's exploration of how this came to be takes the reader on a journey into early commercial publishing centered in Shanghai in the 1920s and against the backdrop of political tumult from Chiang Kai-shek's consolidation of power to the Japanese occupation of Shanghai.

In her Introduction, Wang presents her basic motivation for the study, which is quite simply to adopt an approach informed by Philip Lejeune and other theorists of life writing that distinguishes autobiography both from fiction and from other types of historical writing. Readers from the field of Asian studies will find here a sensitive scholar who is profoundly dissatisfied with past criticism in which "fiction overshadows autobiography" and autobiography, if considered at all, is only used as a historical resource. What Wang says is perfectly true, and as her readings show, the course correction that incorporates life writing brings out of the "shadows" an amazing new canon of works: "The light of these texts shone out to me from dusty shelves in libraries, urging me to bring them together as one tradition" (10). Wang's enthusiasm is infectious.

When "I" Was Born is organized into seven brief chapters, all of which maintain an admirably clear, concise writing style that, for the most part, encourages the general reader and does not assume a specialty in the field of modern Chinese literature. Familiarity with major figures like Lu Xun (1881–1936), Hu Shi (1891–1962), Lin Yutang (1895–1976), and others would be welcome, but Wang takes care to introduce these in her text. On the other hand, Wang simply assumes familiarity with basic figures of the women's movement in China such as the feminist and revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin (1875–1907), and she does not describe any of the major events of the women's movement *per se*; readers will have to look elsewhere for this crucial background.

Chapter one is an extremely abbreviated look at the tradition of life writing in China from ancient times to the early twentieth century.

This is perhaps the weakest chapter of the book, as I argue below. Chapters two through seven are a closely associated set of stand-alone pieces that show the emergence of modern vernacular autobiography in China; each of these chapters contains exciting, highly original contributions to a story that has gone too long untold. First, in chapters two and three, we meet impresarios like Lin Yutang, producing translations and introducing new writers in the mass-market publishing center of Shanghai, and we learn how the new autobiographical forms were taken up by a wide readership of would-be writers. In chapters four through seven, Wang gives individual portraits of four of the new women writers: Lu Yin (1898–1934), Su Xuelin (1897–1999), Bai Wei (1894–1987), and Xie Bingying (1906–2000). Collectively, these essays are a major advancement in our understanding of the range of autobiographies produced in China before the end of World War II.

In Chapter one, Wang attempts to lay out the challenges faced by would-be Chinese-language autobiographers. She outlines a tradition she calls “an institutionalized mechanism of documenting imperial history by court-employed historians” (16). Traditional Chinese historical biography crafts heroic lives to be model figures of moral rectitude; this historiography reaches extreme didactic ends in works like the Ming dynasty *Biographies of Women*, which “is filled with gory atrocities women inflicted on themselves to prove their sexual loyalty toward their husbands” (19). The dramatic forms of self destruction in these biographies are good figures for the generality that Wang wishes to emphasize, which is that “for both women and men, the circle of the so-called self can be compared to a ripple stirred up by the dropping of a pebble into water: it multiplies, magnifies, and gradually extends and disappears into the body of water” (24). This image helps us understand why autobiographical writing in ancient China was most often considered only a supplement to larger works, was usually very short, and did not dwell on the interior workings of the author’s mind.

As might be expected, this generality does not effectively sum up the entire Chinese tradition. Wang could be forgiven for oversimplifying traditional Chinese self-fashioning if indeed the twentieth-century figures she studies turned their backs on this tradition, but by her own admission in later chapters, they are often highly engaged with it. Su Xuelin, for example, was a scholar of Qu Yuan, whose lyric poem *Encountering Sorrow* has been called China’s first autobiography, and yet neither the legend of this poet nor his significance in the tradition are described here or later in the book. Besides Qu Yuan, there is a significant counter tradition of self-focused writing in China, one that reaches its peak in the late Ming (1368–1644) and

early Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, but despite a familiarity with Wu Pei-yi's 1990 study of this subject, *The Confucian's Progress*, Wang does not emphasize this tradition. Even later in the Qing dynasty, when feudal and patriarchal gender frameworks were at their most severe, progressive figures within the tradition existed, like Yuan Mei (1716–1799), who could be called a precursor of Lin Yutang in that he helped publish women writers. Why does Yuan Mei appear only in a footnote to chapter seven and not in chapter one? Wang's apparent attempt to monolithize the imperial tradition underemphasizes the strength and continuity of an equally old counter-tradition of personal, private writing.

But despite this unsatisfactory background chapter, in Wang's second chapter, the reader is treated to one of the highlights of this generally excellent work. "Western Life Narratives and Theories in Chinese Translation" is a masterful engagement between translation studies and a contemporary market-based history-of-the-book perspective. Wang's interdisciplinary approach is effective at illustrating how autobiography as a modern Chinese-language form was essentially born in the late stages of the collapse of the Chinese Republic and the subsequent plunge into World War II. Under these unforgiving political and economic conditions, China's first mass-market literature producers introduced autobiography to Chinese readers and garnered a wide response whose significance in the field of modern Chinese literature resonates to this day.

Wang's goal is to explain the apparently paradoxical situation of an increasingly nationalist and anti-individualist literary field that simultaneously produces the first women's autobiographies. The solution is two-fold: first, the mass-market for books was dominated not by ideologically inclined literary leaders like Lu Xun but by advocates for a literature that eschewed politics and engaged with people's ordinary lives. Second, the 1910s and 1920s saw the coming of age of a broad generation of educated, working women: the Chinese "new woman." Taking up new roles as teachers, writers, and soldiers, they were often forced to make tough decisions about family, sex, marriage, domesticity, and bearing children. The new autobiographical forms, introduced to them from the West by mass-market publishing, gave them powerful new tools to imagine new ways of being, to craft genuinely personal new literary forms of themselves, and to distribute these forms amongst each other as readers. "It was an act of literary democracy," says Wang later in chapter three, when the first anthologies of new women's autobiographies had begun to emerge (100).

A set of particularly brilliant case studies drives Wang's narrative. We learn of Zhang Jingsheng, who in 1929 translated Rousseau's

Confessions to widespread Chinese acclaim. Zhang, a “Parisian free spirit” (48), whose radically egalitarian notions of sex, society, and art earned him imprisonment and exile in China, was the perfect translator for Rousseau. Just as influential to Chinese readers was the translation of Isadora Duncan’s *My Life*. Duncan (1877–1927) was a great American dancer whose autobiography told of her rise from poverty to great fame on the strength of her talent. Rousseau’s story, with its iconoclastic egocentrism, and Duncan’s, with her more modest reflection on the writer’s doubts, gave inspiration to Chinese readers as Wang proves with the comments of Lu Yin, Su Xuelin, Xie Bingying, and others.

Rousseau’s *Confessions* and Duncan’s *My Life*, both imprints of Shanghai’s Commercial Press, function in Wang’s narrative as precursors to the wave of translated autobiographies produced by the publishing machine of Lin Yutang. In Wang’s fascinating and original perspective on the author of such American bestsellers as *My Country and My People*, Lin emerges as the single most important agent for autobiography as a form to emerge in China. As World War II began in earnest with the occupation of Shanghai, Lin worked hard to provide cheap yet sustaining new literature for Chinese readers that would emphasize the values of humor, fortitude, responsibility, and independence. With a triumvirate of literary magazines—these were cheaper to produce and consume in war conditions—Lin Yutang and his colleagues published new translations of great Western autobiographies like W. H. Davies’s *Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* in serial form. Other autobiographies were reduced to digest form, again mainly in response to the material conditions of the war. These new “short autobiographies” were devoured by a readership that was able and eager to answer a call from Lin’s magazines to write up their own stories in like kind.

Having described the publication arena that brought autobiography to China in the 1920s through the 1940s, Wang turns in the third chapter to five anthologies of short autobiographies published between 1936–1945, focusing on a majority of female authors. Wang surveys all of the collections deftly, showing that major themes of later autobiographies first appear here. Especially to be noted is the theme Wang calls “dissociation from femininity,” but which might better be called a re-negotiation of traditional feminine values. For example, Wang says, “Women’s refusal to discuss domestic life in their autobiographies serves as a good index of their new self-definition in the public arena” (77). Actually, “refusal” is perhaps too strong a term. Certainly, some writers distanced themselves from traditional female values: Fan Xiulin defends her decision to wear short hair, Xie Bingying is a proud soldier, and one brave woman, Shi Wen, openly

dreams of adopting a lesbian lifestyle. But more often, these writers wish not to "refuse" domestic life, but to renegotiate it. A writer named Meng Zhuo proposed that "school and home work together in the raising and education of children" (80). Li Su and Fu Ying love being mothers and find room for personal growth in this. And even Xie Bingying, stuck in a Japanese prison camp, is proud of her skills at mending socks.

In chapter four, Wang considers Lu Yin's 1934 *Autobiography* to be among the earliest voices to develop themes that we see in later women's autobiographies in China, including the "awakening consciousness of oppression." In Lu Yin's case, her birth on the day of her grandmother's death makes her particularly unwelcome in an already misogynist household. "This is the inglorious beginning of Lu Yin's life as told in her autobiography, rare in Chinese life writing by men but recurrent in that by women." This theme continues as Lu Yin grows up in an abusive household, eventually recognizing the power of education for attaining independence and identifying early role models in autobiographies that she read. Wang finds in all of this "a microhistory of educated Chinese women's fight for new womanhood through writing" (114). In another telling anecdote, Lu Yin found love with a young man over a shared love of literature, but the relationship ended when Lu decided that "marriage would ruin [her] life" (115). Thus, we see an original exploration of the potential for a severe opposition to traditional female roles.

Just as opposed to misogyny but more ambivalent about the Chinese tradition of arts and literature, novelist, literary scholar, and memoirist Su Xuelin presents a much more problematic case. Where Lu Yin's reputation can be judged from a single work, her 1934 *Autobiography*, Su Xuelin's fragmented autobiographical essays have to be tracked with a scattershot approach: some were originally put out as early as the 1920s but not collected in book form until the appearance of Su's *My Life* in 1967, and others were published in a painfully ignored 1991 volume called *Ninety-Four Years of a Floating Life*. Wang finds in the old teacher's little-known life writing the story of a major 1920s-era thinker who fought at once against misogyny and for preserving certain parts of the Chinese tradition, such as classical Chinese language and literature. Her complicated positions in the ideological wars of the 1920s left her marginalized in modern Chinese literature, despite her immense talent—indeed, Wang feels no compunction in labeling her "the best female prose writer in modern times" (122).

Wang can feel confident in this appraisal because, of the writers surveyed in this book, only Su Xuelin masters the difficult pre-modern written version of the Chinese language, which opens up access

to a rich tradition of idiomatic, allusive, scholarly, and poetic forms of expression that give her prose elegance and sophistication. In an essay called "My First Literature Teacher," Su narrates her growth as a person as she teaches herself to read. Wang understands this as one way in which Su mostly eschews personal writing in favor of a form of life writing that tells who she is in terms of her values. As Su, the young student, identified with books, so Su, the researcher, also identified with the ancient and probably legendary founding father of the Chinese lyric tradition, Qu Yuan. Su, the fiction writer and literature theorist, defined herself *contra* Lu Xun, whom she considered a political opportunist and a vengeful despot over the field. Su was so engaged in a life of literature that she rarely makes direct personal observations, and these are often wry and pessimistic. "I owe my literary accomplishments to my joyless marriage," she once said (140).

The sort of frustrations bubbling just under the surface of Su Xuelin's catalog of her work and role models emerge much more vividly in work by Wang's third individual subject, Bai Wei. Wang argues persuasively that Bai Wei's 900-page autobiography, *A Tragic Life*, deserves a look for both its complex and highly innovative structure and its nearly Augustinian contemplation on sex, illness, and existence.

Wang especially attends to the preface of the work, which affirms Bai Wei's opinion that she was an ordinary woman driven to record her life during a course of treatment for syphilis, contracted from her lover Zhan: "I wrote in tears, in pain, in debility after spells of illness, in critical condition, with paper spread on my knee and the ink bottle hanging on my neck. Some parts I wrote in the wake of high fevers, biting my lips and sitting in bed in the crowded third-class ward" (146). In plot structure, Bai Wei's story is similar to that of Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: trapped in the "quagmire" of a bad relationship in an unsympathetic society, Bai must find her own path out. Bai Wei's contribution to this narrative is the clearest example yet of "the autobiographical pact" in Lejeune's sense. Readers confront Wei's inner struggle as she constructs a convincing "I" who desperately wants to "free herself from the entanglement with Zhan and devote herself physically and mentally to the collective good of the country" (160).

Finally Wang's seventh chapter contains what has to be the fullest reading yet of Xie Bingying's 1906 "girl soldier" persona. Wang reveals the international impact of her life stories as they are composed, translated, revised, reworked, supplemented, and reverse-translated. As we learn in this chapter, the key to Xie Bingying's success in the 1930s was the skillfully evoked immediacy in her self-portraits of a

rebellious child turned "girl soldier" on the war front. As Wang tells us, "her very identity as a rebel depended on the shapeless jacket, the leggings, the belt, the gun, all of which gave her a set of new vocabulary to describe the Chinese brand of feminism of the early twentieth century" (180). As a soldier, Xie felt she had to give up many traditional female values, such as motherhood and domesticity, and like many self-empowering girls her age, she had a fraught sex life. No wonder her story quickly gained a mass audience!

Like Lu Yin, Su Xuelin, and Bai Wei before her, Xie faced adversity at home and at school and responded by rebelling. Exposed to the memoirs of Isadora Duncan and Agnes Smedley, she was inspired to write her own story to figure herself out, make a statement to the world, and perhaps gain some financial independence along the way. As she wrote, Xie developed a new style she called the "spur-of-the-moment account" that incorporated diary entries, lyric poems, and journalistic reports into a tightly-spun reportage of personal engagement. Xie's story took on a new level of fame and influence when Lin Yutang commissioned his own teenaged daughters to translate and reformat Xie's stories into English; the resulting *Girl Rebel* was a big success in an American market suffused with new titles about the state and fate of an embattled China (183–84).

Meanwhile, Xie wrote a fuller, more highly crafted autobiography in the 1930s, this was only completed with a second volume in the 1940s, and these were revised and combined by Xie in her retirement in San Francisco in 1980. This cross-continent, decades-long process of revision and translation points to a new significance for Chinese women autobiographers in the larger scope of world literature. All of this makes Xie Bingying a fitting last subject to Wang's study.

Wang's conclusion re-affirms her commitment to considering autobiography as a tool for identity formation, one crucial to the generation of the Chinese "new woman." Wang's emphasis here is on the "subjective truth" of a writer who genuinely means to tell her own story and what this means for literary history. Her argument is that when this new form was presented to Chinese audiences in translation in mass-market books and literary journals, women readers and writers responded particularly strongly because so many of them were just then taking very active—indeed, quite courageous—steps to be something new, something their parents and local communities for the most part did not expect them to be: writers, teachers, and soldiers. For them and their readers, the craft of autobiography was a crucial tool to motivate, to negotiate, and to explain how and why they did what they did. The significance of this coincidence of a new literary form and rapid social change goes far beyond the scope of

Chinese women's literature; it is a phenomenon worth considering by any student of history.

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