

Personal Matters: Women's Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-Century China. By LINGZHEN WANG. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004. xii, 280 pp. \$58.00 (cloth).

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Navigating the Scylla of “conventional autobiography” and the Charybdis of pure “textuality” (p. 2), Lingzhen Wang’s study of “women’s autobiographical

practice” provides both a sweeping treatment of the subject, which spans the twentieth century, and an acute intervention into poststructural feminist discourse in the Western academy. Of profound import for both Chinese cultural studies and the larger realm of literary theory and women’s studies, *Personal Matters* is intelligent, insightful, eloquent, and most of all, profound in its analysis of how women from Qiu Jin to Wang Anyi have articulated their specific historical situations through autobiographical writing. As such, it sits aside the works of Tani Barlow, Rey Chow, Wendy Larson, and Lydia Liu as the latest installment in an intellectual sea change in Chinese studies, placing women, both as the objects and the practitioners of study, at the forefront of the field. It is meticulously researched, sagacious in approach, and clear and methodical in the midst of complex and sinuous subject matter.

Wang’s book is divided into five chapters, with a substantive introduction and a brief epilogue. The introduction elucidates why modern writing is different from the conventional biography of traditional China, with its Confucian trappings. In an effort to highlight both the materiality of her subjects and their work and still apply discourse analysis to her object of study, Wang establishes a category called “the personal.” She argues against both hypostasizing the subject as an inviolable entity and dismissing it as a passive, linguistic construction. She sees “the personal” as emerging through a dynamic process in which “historical beings ... have ‘actively’ participated” (p. 13) in their own formation.

Beginning with the late Qing revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin, Wang takes the reader through May Fourth and 1930s authors such as Feng Yuanjun, Bing Xin, and Ding Ling; revolutionary authors such as Guan Lu and Yang Mo; and authors of the post-Mao period such as Yu Luojin, Zhang Jie, Lin Bai, Chen Ran, and Wang Anyi. She addresses the works of canonical, oft-studied luminaries and lesser-known but still intriguing figures. Chapter 1 reconsiders the much-celebrated Qiu Jin. Wang hones in on the “personal” side of Qiu’s life, as displayed in her writings, eschewing the well-worn paths of hagiography and political analysis. Instead, by examining overlooked literary evidence, such as Qiu’s poems and her traditional *tanci* 彈詞 (narrative in verse and prose), Wang illuminates how Qiu’s life work was both a protest against the *ancien régime* and an intimate struggle, an attempt to advance the inherited forms of written expression and a confession that reveals doubts about the place of women in a predominantly patriarchal world. Qiu is thus engaged in “self-negotiations” (p. 29) that involve her self and her body as a contested identity and historicopolitical figure.

In chapters 2 and 3, Wang explores the intersubjectivity that exists between mothers and daughters, an intersubjectivity that was disregarded in orthodox Confucian discourse on human relationships and remains largely overlooked in contemporary scholarship. In her exploration of Feng Yuanjun’s short stories, which feature struggles between love for a mother and love for a lover, and of Bing Xin’s poetry, which seeks a new configuration of selfhood outside the Oedipal norm, Wang shows that “the mother persists in women’s autobiographical practice as an irrepressible figure, disrupting even as she

conforms to the modern, heterosexual, and teleological ideology of self, nation, and history” (p. 62). Wang is careful to illustrate how these relationships are not monolithic. Her readings demonstrate how the mother–daughter bond shifts, both socially and literarily. In Ding Ling’s depiction of Manzhen in *Mother*, the heroine uses “the subject position of the chaste widow and virtuous mother” to legitimize “her pursuit of a new social role” (p. 107). Guan Lu, by contrast, presents a picture of the mother–daughter relationship in *The Old and New Ages* wherein the maternal figure wields little influence or emotional effect on the daughter-narrator, and the work is indicative of the increasing disavowal of the earlier depictions as “sentimental, bourgeois and elitist” (p. 124). Wang considers Yang Mo’s now classic novel *The Song of Youth* a “completion” (p. 125) of Guan Lu’s move toward a new objectivism in revolutionary literature and shows how the Maoist period was highly effective in the “political appropriation and reconfiguration of the mother and mother–daughter relationships” (p. 132). But she also observes how this novel reveals a submerged expression for the personal need and desire for the mother in women’s lives.

Chapter 4, on Yu Luojin’s controversial *A Chinese Winter’s Tale*, is not just a reading of the novel as it was published but also of the portions that were expurgated from the text. This textual bowdlerization in itself shows how sensitive women’s autobiographical practice remains in post-Mao China. Wang charts the history of the novel’s reception, showing how, from the 1940s through the early 1980s, state censorship functioned to suppress public presentations of the personal and, when that failed, it vilified them. She thus argues that a new sexism has arisen to take the place of the traditional patriarchy and that women are still not safe to express themselves in public forums.

The last, most densely theoretical chapter is a discussion of women’s autobiographical practice during the 1990s, an age of “privacy fever” (p. 175). Wang looks at consumer culture to highlight the various dimensions of these women writers, their depicted selves in their own narratives, and the ways in which they both mirror themselves and the consuming public for whom they are written. These titillating texts serve as artifacts of their own narcissism and the general narcissistic culture of a rapidly globalizing market society. Wang’s critical engagement of the secondary Chinese studies scholarship and tertiary general theory particularly shines in this chapter.

If I have a reservation about the book, it is that Wang does not discuss works of those who left China, such as Su Xuelin, the May Fourth author of the work *Ci Xin* (A pricked heart). Charting the influence of Su through authors in Taiwan or the United States—such as Nie Hualing, Li Ang (who retains her mother’s surname), and Zhu Tianxin (whose mother is Taiwanese-Hakka and father is from Shandong)—would reveal the other side to the repression brought upon women’s autobiographical practice in the conterminous revolutionary period. The book would also be more convenient as a research tool if it included Chinese characters. Neither oversight fundamentally diminishes the incisiveness and imagination that permeate this book, a

monumental contribution to the study of modern Chinese literature and women's studies in general.

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