

The Experience of Modernity

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*Chinese Autobiography of the
Early Twentieth Century*

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Preface

Autobiography as a literary form is both distinct in its characteristics and undefined as a genre. The many paradoxical elements in autobiography, its simultaneous claims to facticity and subjectivity, honesty and pretense, history and fiction, are precisely what make autobiography attractive to writers and intriguing to readers. It was one of the most widely used literary forms in China in the few decades following World War I. During the cultural, linguistic, and political reform movement known as May Fourth, almost all writers, well known and less known, wrote some form of autobiography.

The autobiographic impulse in the literature of this period has been variously explained as the discovery of psychology, the new recognition of individualism, or the result of stylistic influence from Western literary schools, especially expressionism and romanticism. Emphasis has always been placed on the influence of the West in the development of modern Chinese autobiography. Without doubt, May Fourth intellectuals were extremely curious and enthusiastic about learning from the West (that is, England, France, and Germany), but also Japan, Russia, and eastern Europe. However, discussions of influence may tell us little about the political and social conditions of the “reception sites” that make certain trends congenial. It also does not explain to what ends foreign materials are used once transported to these sites. While I do not belittle the importance of foreign influence on May Fourth literature, my discussion is focused on the question of why certain methods of writing became predominant and how they functioned in the political and social context of twentieth-century China. Why did the first-person monologue, which was the basis of autobiographical writing, become such a predominant style of writing at the time? Why did the highly sentimental and melodramatic confessions that we often associate with expressionism become a preferred style in the story of the individual and the

nation? Why did some writers give up the conventional teleological program of storytelling in narrating modern experience? In this study, autobiography as a formal, textual strategy is sociological and political, even if the content is personal.

Formal changes in literature are related to the semiotics of the times, which are, in turn, conditioned by historical and political events. For this reason, my discussion of autobiography starts with the May Fourth language reform that began in 1917. Simply put, the movement was about promoting the use of the vernacular in writing. May Fourth reformers believed that through literature, new ideas could be conveyed to the common people. They considered the *wenyan* (classical, written language) that had dominated literary writing elitist and backward, since it could only be read by the small number of educated people, all of whom were trained in the classical curriculum that upheld, to the new reformers, old-fashioned ideals. But May Fourth changed more than the basis of writing. Language reform was more than simply a matter of semantics. It caused a shift in perception and with it, a shift in the concept of realness. This necessitated new strategies of representation. Interest in autobiographical strategies is a direct result of these new developments of perception and language.

May Fourth is now a general designation for a period defined by literary experimentation, social reforms, and patriotism. All of these developments were responses to China's political turmoil. Internally, China was plagued by warlords. Externally, it was in a semicolonial relationship with Europe, America, and Japan. This chaos culminated in 1937 when Japan launched an all-out war against China. May Fourth—a name that derives from anticolonial demonstrations on that date in 1919—is very much the intellectuals' response to China's political problems, for writing was an important way to participate in the political life of the society and nation. In fact the literary reform propagated by the May Fourth movement reinvigorates the late-nineteenth-century notion that the root of China's weakness is the ignorance of the masses, and that literature has a moral function, to educate them and lift them out of their ignorance. This didactic view of the function of literature influences our expectations and reading of the writings from this period even today. Because of this lingering predisposition to view May Fourth literature as political and didactic, autobiography, conventionally regarded as self-

indulgent and egoistic, is often ignored despite its connection to the language reform advocated and practiced by May Fourth writers.

In the patriotic fervor of the 1920s and the wartime and revolutionary austerities of the 1930s and 1940s, the grand rhetoric of nationalism, personal stories and individual expressions seem to have no place. For this reason, autobiography's popularity during this era is an odd phenomenon. Nevertheless, we should not proceed as if the phenomenon did not exist. Because of the popularity of autobiography as a form, its consistent neglect in the literary studies of May Fourth, based on facile assumptions about the genre, impoverish our understanding of the era. To understand the practice of autobiography and the autobiographical impulse of this period, one needs to examine the notion of the individual as a sociological and political category and not a psychological one. With this perspective, we can understand that the personal and the political are not mutually contradictory.

Writers who emphasize their own stories have been accused of egotism, sentimentalism, or, euphemistically, "romanticism." Rather than dismiss their voices as stylistic peculiarities, however, it is more productive to examine them as politically motivated strategies. Autobiography not only is an efficient way to narrate the nation, as an allegory of the nation, but also a sensitive measure of social changes. It is often only through the personal, even physical, accounts of the individual that the health of the nation is revealed. Autobiography is a form that articulates the case of the individual as well as the nation. It fulfills an intellectual's sense of engagement and mission while providing an outlet for creativity and expression.

In the title of this book is the ever-contentious word *modernity*, of which there can be no straightforward definition. I use this term primarily as a temporal marker to bracket a particular era in which literature undergoes a significant transformation. At the same time, there is no doubt that modern autobiographies are uniquely descriptive of the modern sensibility and modern concerns.

Premodern autobiographies have been habitually read as a form of history. But autobiography can be more revealing of the time and place in which it is written than accurate about the events and times it narrates. The autobiographical impulse arises from the response to one's immediate society, even if that response is nostalgia for, or justification or legit-

imization of, the past. The mistake of looking for historical information in autobiography has frustrated generations of scholars in their attempts to define the “autobiographical truth.”

The subject matter of autobiography is not necessarily a specific historical past or even the actual life of the author. However, these elements are crucial in the allegorical construction of modern life. Autobiography reflects an attitude or political position toward one’s society. The May Fourth autobiographers all believed that they were in some ways representative of their contemporaries. Their concerns, sentiments, and experiences reflected those of the entire generation. Even those who professed unique achievements in their own lives attempted to use their successes to inspire others along the same proven paths. No matter how personal the individual stories were, many wrote from a didactic impulse to fulfill their sense of social duty through literature. However, the reverse is also true: no matter how consuming the narration of the nation is, through autobiography the uniqueness of personal stories and the peculiarities of individual voices are always evident. Autobiography is an especially important kind of writing in this era because it is singular in its capacity to demonstrate both the modern condition and individual experience.

The political and social concerns of women and ethnic minorities differ from those of mainstream, male intellectuals. The feminist consciousness, newly uncovered in the early years of May Fourth, became increasingly vulnerable to the continuing demand to put literature in the service of nationalism. Many scholars have pointed out that the early efflorescence of women’s voices did not survive the nationalist and then the revolutionary projects of the late 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Even more crucial in terms of literary production is women’s access to literary tools that a male writer may take for granted. I argue that the realist perspective, for example, so crucial to modern writing, was not available to early women writers. However, the effort to overcome a certain “lack of perspective” among women writers created the modern autobiographical strategy. It is this strategy that, in the end, preserved women’s voices. Autobiography is thus strongly connected to women’s writings.

Women not only have to confront social constraints *in* writing, but also the very idea *of* writing. Women have always been the objects of description. This position-as-object has been the topic of much feminist scholarship since the 1980s. In autobiography, this issue assumes a special

complexity. A woman autobiographer simultaneously provides the subjectivity of her work and is the object of description. In her self-writing, how does she avoid the perspectival and representational positions that for centuries froze her into a lifeless object-state in masculine writings?

Women's issues of representation are not dissimilar to those of ethnic minorities in China. Literary portrayals of these groups are processes of objectification, similar to women's objectification. In the context of China's administrative policies of control and occasional extermination of ethnic groups beginning in the eighteenth century, this objectification is a form of imperialist violence. As in the case of woman's autobiography, self-representation by a minority writer could very well fall into self-cannibalism. Paradoxically, autobiography, the ultimate form of self-writing, becomes a way out of such narrative entrapment. The reflexivity of autobiography, as a form of self-representation, offers an opportunity to scrutinize the politics of representation. As a form of self-reading, it also investigates the morality of reading. Through both processes, autobiography offers a way out of the conventional literary entrapment.

Autobiography in the first half of the twentieth century was used variously by different writers to interrogate, to negotiate, and even to program the social and political progress of modern China. Despite the popularity and success of the genre, it is also the most frequently overlooked in literary and historical discussions of modern China. This has much to do with the difficulty and instability of this group of writings as a genre. However, it is precisely because of its ambiguities that it became a ubiquitous means of self-narration in volatile times.

The story of the Chinese modern experience is not an easy one to tell; it is made up of many competing narratives. Autobiography, renewed and reinvigorated during the May Fourth period, became the most widely used literary form because it embraces both the creative and national needs of the time. The neglect of autobiography in the studies of this period, the result of prejudices in reading assumptions and the difficulty of the genre, has diminished our understanding of the literature and the society of modern China. It is my hope that the present study will help locate autobiography in its rightful place in twentieth-century Chinese literature.

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