

Introduction



The Study of Autobiography



The study of literary forms or genres is notoriously hazardous and unproductive, for as long as there are identifiable conventions, there will be deviations, innovations, and defiance. In 1968 Stephen Shapiro termed autobiography the “dark continent” of literature, because it was unexplored and unyielding to theorization.¹ Certainly, autobiography is no longer uncharted territory. In recent decades its study has become a veritable industry. Yet we are as far as ever from a conclusive articulation of this genre. Why does this seemingly futile endeavor continue to engage our critical efforts?

Georg Lukács long ago pointed out the importance of the study of literary forms: “But in literature, what is truly social is form. . . . Form is social reality; it participates vicariously in the life of the spirit. It therefore does not operate only as a factor acting upon life and molding experiences, but also as a factor which is in turn molded by life.”² In other words, as the formal postulate of the material world, a literary form is always a worldview and an ideology. Particular literary forms are results of particular social conditions, and as such, they are sociological. Franco Moretti points out that precisely because form is an ideological product, it is conservative and limiting. He terms it a “petrification of life.”³ When form becomes convention, it is more effective in its organization, he argues, but it also loses its ability to change, and the pursuit of purity of form becomes a limit to creativity.

Genre studies that aim at grouping a variety of writings under a general rubric are perhaps hard to justify. Moretti argues that behind such an effort to organize is a presupposition that “literary production takes place in obedience to a prevailing system of laws and that the task of criticism is precisely to show the extent of their coercive, regulating power.”⁴ Paradoxically, it is also through identifying the coercion of forms and critical ideologies that the process of defiance can be distinguished. Through writers’ attempts to break out of them, we can understand the operative constraints and all the coterminous issues, formal, social, or political, against which individual writers work. In other words the study of form is a study of antiform and, by extension, a study of resistance to the tyranny of ideological presumptions.

The Modern Period



This volume is a study of modern Chinese autobiography. The idea of modernity is, needless to say, a highly contested one. Historians variously identify Chinese modernity as occurring in the urban centers of the Ming dynasty, or push it back to the Southern Song, or more commonly, to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Literary scholars also more and more frequently look to the late Qing for the real stirrings of modern literature. However, in this discussion I adhere to the convention of the year 1917 as the beginning of a new era in literature.

In 1917, Hu Shi published the all-important “Preliminary Proposal for the Reform of Literature” (Wenxue gailiang cuiyi), in *New Youth* magazine, which not only advocated the use of vernacular Chinese as the new literary medium for the masses, but also the rejection of a cultural past represented by the elitist literature in the classical language and form (*wenyen wen*). In 1917, the first vernacular short story, “One Day” (Yiri), was published, written by a young, little-known woman, Chen Hengzhe. The literary reform then gained momentum with Lu Xun’s “The Madman’s Diary” (Kuangren riji), published in 1918.

The May Fourth Incident of 1919 is the political side of the new consciousness and infused the literary reform with social and nationalist urgency. The incident began as a student protest in Tiananmen Square

against Western and Japanese imperial ambitions in China. These ambitions were manifest in the Treaty of Versailles, which proposed to award the former German concession of Shandong Peninsula to Japan. This was further aggravated by Japan's Twenty-One Demands, which the Chinese president, Yuan Shikai, was on the verge of accepting. Together, these would have essentially turned China into a Japanese protectorate. The anticolonial demonstration on May 4, 1919, ended in violence. Hundreds of protesters were seized. Beijing University was effectively turned into a detention center. However, when male students were placed behind bars, female students, in a defining moment of Chinese feminism, took to the streets in place of their male compatriots. The years before and after May 4, 1919, became generally known as the May Fourth era, now used to designate the rise of both a new literature and a nationalistic consciousness among young intellectuals. As is obvious in this abbreviated description, May Fourth is a complicated movement that shuffled the cultural, political, and social alignments of Chinese society.

My discussion unavoidably refers to "traditional society" or "the past" or "patriarchy," in contrast to the sense of newness in the May Fourth zeitgeist. Without question, it is arbitrary to make a clear temporal divide between old and new. However, just as the literary language (*wenyan*) became an identifiable target of attack for the May Fourth generation, all the marks of the existing dominant society became symbols of the old and outmoded. In other words, in the May Fourth context, terms such as *tradition* and *modernity* are used as dialectical moments, and are not necessarily descriptive of material conditions.

The definition of the historical past in the dialectics of social power was different for different social groups. Women's oppression was not the same as men's. Men suffered from certain expectations from the patriarchal society from which women were exempted. Ethnic minorities had their own "dominators" against which they struggled. Urban pressures were different from rural oppressions. Intellectuals suffered differently from peasants and manual laborers. This is why there are as many autobiographical strategies as there are writers.

In terms of literature, "traditional" and "modern" are also not discrete categories. Clearly, there is no line that divides tradition and modern into two unrelated realms. There are tremendous continuities, revo-

cations, and derivations throughout the history of Chinese literature, with each period proclaiming itself different and new.

In truth, reevaluations of existing social structures are not unique to the May Fourth generation. However, the self-perception of a wholesale refutation of the past is. Frederic Jameson has argued that “emblematic breaks” are historiographic decisions.⁵ It is this self-perception of being distinguished from any existing social convention and institutional power that makes this generation call itself “new.”

What Came Before



In order to understand the defiance and innovations of the May Fourth generation, it is worth a detour to an examination of the assumed tradition in autobiographical writing against which the May Fourth generation contended. Chinese biographies (*zhuan*) originally existed as an important section of both the dynastic histories (*zhengshi*) and local histories (*difangzhi*).⁶ Recognized as part of the biographical form in pre-twentieth-century Chinese letters, autobiography is manifested in short necrologies, self-prefaces, and personal annals (*nianpu*). It is small wonder that pre-twentieth-century Chinese autobiographies are to this day read more for their historical than for their literary value. Thus, in 1933, Mao Dun complained that “there are people who say that the Chinese are a nation with five thousand years of genealogies (*jiapu*). However, I have to say that the Chinese are a nation that has never developed a biographical literature (*zhuanji wenxue*).” He added that “although we have more than a few biographies among ancient classical works, they are only a part of the Standard Histories. The aim of such writings is to provide matter for historical investigation. They did not become an independent literature.”⁷ It is in agreement with this opinion that Hu Shi laments the dearth of Chinese biographical literature in 1937.⁸

The origin of the Chinese biographical form⁹ has been traced to Sima Qian’s (145–85 B.C.) biographies in his *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji*), the first of the twenty-five Standard Histories.¹⁰ Though Sima Qian did not write an “autobiography,” several self-reflective pieces extant in the *Shiji* are paradigmatic.¹¹ These include autobiographical references embedded in a postface and the “Letter to Ren An.” These fragmented

self-revelations have been referred to as “additive autobiographies.”¹²

In “historical biography” of imperial times, an implicit teleology often organizes the compilation of the multifarious events of a life.¹³ In the terminology of James Olney, traditional autobiographies place emphasis on the “bios” of the individuals rather than the “aute,” the sense of self; or the “graphe,” the individual writing style.¹⁴ In all the twenty-five Histories, biographies are sorted in categories, such as loyal officials, virtuous wives, filial sons, and villains. These standard categorizations indicate thematic structures already in place in the narrative of a person’s life. These biographies entail an organization of material and events that contributes to the culminating achievement of “virtue” or “talent.” In a sense, these autobiographies or biographies are not about the particular details of one’s life but about how one arrives at a certain title or becomes an exemplary stock type.¹⁵

The historical biographical form of the Histories serves as the paradigm in the writing of both “independent biographies” and autobiographies. This biographical convention is highly efficient. By enumerating lineage, family history, career position, and so on, a biography is an immediate reflection of the subject’s social status. So strong is this convention of anchoring a narrative within the framework of one’s filiations and affiliations in society that Stephen Durrant is led to call Chinese biographies “relation-centered” or “tradition-centered”: the individual is legitimized by family tradition, and “genealogy is identity.”¹⁶

The pre-May Fourth biographical form uses stringent rhetorical effects such as tabulations, figures, and enumerations of dates and facts (as in chronologies and annals) to establish veracity and authority and to avoid any suggestion of subjective intervention. These practices were even employed by Hu Shi in *Self-Narration at Forty* (Sishi zishu) in 1937. By his own admission, *Self-Narration* is mainly an aggregate of facts and data, usually at the expense of character and plot development.¹⁷ The material proofs used to support his claims are acquired, as Hu insists, by “seeing with his own eyes and listening with his own ears (*qinjian qinwen*).”¹⁸ In this pared-down style, Hu adheres to a traditional emphasis on facticity in a text that he imagines will contribute to the study of modern Chinese history.

Following Liu Zhiji (661–721) in *Generalities on History* (Shitong), tradition has placed Qu Yuan’s (555–67) *Encountering Sorrow* (Li Sao) as the first autobiographical work. Recent scholarship, however, tends to

regard Tao Qian (365–427), with his various self-conscious writings, as the first true autobiographer.¹⁹ Regardless of where we place the “true” beginning, it is in Tao Qian’s “Biography of Master Five Willows” (Wuliu xiansheng zhuan) that we see the appearance of an autobiographical paradigm—a self-conscious writing of oneself in a biography. Pei-yi Wu points out that early autobiographies “slavishly imitate” the biographical form, and Tao Qian’s work is no exception. Wu argues that, inspired by the *Biography of Lofty Recluses* (Gaoshi zhuan), attributed to Huang Fumi (third century), Tao’s work reflects the influence of the historical biography in both form and style.²⁰ However, it is obvious that Tao’s spirit of imitation is ironic at best. He adheres to the conventional beginning of establishing one’s social position, but only to parody it: “The origins of the Master are not known, nor are his family and given names. There were five willow trees by his house, hence he acquired this appellation.”²¹

Tao’s work imitates the historical *zhuan* in form. However, in effect, it is antifactual, antihistorical, and, ultimately, antibiographical. By elimination of referentiality, Tao not only rejects the historical, utilitarian attitude toward biographies, but also the literary and social institutions and the “relation-centered” ideology on which such works are commonly based. Relating the written form with the individual politics of the writer, Wendy Larson points out that Tao’s work is an example of an “impressionistic autobiography,” a text that reveals the writer’s indifference and withdrawal from mainstream society.²² Tao’s suppression of his biographical data is a gesture of social renunciation. In this way, though confined by social conventions, Tao is able to elude social as well as literary ideological coercions. His work is about neither a loyal minister nor a virtuous scholar, but a hermit who rejects such roles and values. As such, it is counterpoised with the more common “circumstantial autobiography,” which, as Larson explains, is a form that affirms one’s familial and societal lineage, implicitly recognizing one’s participation and belonging in society.²³ Extrapolating from Larson’s discussion, the autobiographical form is an ideological and political statement, reflecting one’s relationship with mainstream society.

The development of the diary form also has important implications in the rise of modern autobiography. In fact, the diary became an important autobiographical form with the May Fourth literary movement. Since the late nineteenth century (the late Qing), writers had been

enthusiastically experimenting with literary forms, attempting to incorporate into fiction writing strategies of traditional genres such as travel-ogues, anecdotes of famous people, historical places, and jokes (*youji*, *yishi*, *zhanggu*, *xiaohua*). According to Chen Pingyuan, the use of diary in narratives was introduced through Lin Shu's (1852–1924) translation of *La Dame Aux Camélias*, by Dumas fils, in 1901. It was not till 1912 that Xu Chenya (b. ca. 1876) in *The Spirit of the Jade Pear* (Yuli hun) first incorporated the diary into narratives as a Chinese fictional strategy. In 1914, Xu wrote another version of the *Jade Pear* by telling the story of He Mengxia, the heroine, completely through her diary entries, renaming the work *Xuehong leishi* (The sorrowful history of the snow swan). This became the first Chinese novel in diary form. However, Chen stresses, despite these first attempts, and despite the occasional diary-essays by late Qing writers, it was the May Fourth generation that self-consciously employed diary as a literary device of self-expression.²⁴

So far, my discussion has addressed some fairly standard formal issues concerning the biographical genre in pre-twentieth-century literature. It is the identification of these general principles that allows scholars to group a large body of work into a single genre. It is true that when one places an individual work against the inertia of a convention, one will always find exceptions, as we have seen in Tao Qian's case. It is of course uncertain how long in literary history particular conventions hold sway, or whether one should speak of a literary institution. One should not rely on ahistorical rules of genre, yet to see in every piece of writing a radical innovation is to be oblivious of the material conditions behind a cultural form. In the case of Tao Qian, for example, to understand the peculiarity of his work, we must also understand the cultural or political conventions against which he wrote.

Modern Chinese Autobiography



The May Fourth revolution is both a distinct historical incident and an empirical decision with which we have to reckon in the study of modern Chinese literature. This movement, as I discuss in chapter 1, results in an epistemological disjunction and provides a discrete point in time and space where one can locate a real change. The May Fourth period is

defined by a collective and concerted effort at producing a “spirit of the age” through a new writing and a new attitude—the so-called May Fourth spirit (*Wusi jingshen*). Certain political and social issues that the May Fourth generation faced were unprecedented in China’s past. Politically, China was slowly extricating itself from the grip of colonialism after World War I, having contributed to the victorious side of the war. However, the betrayal at Versailles, the increasing Japanese threat, and internal political turmoil hampered China’s efforts at modernization. The relationship between Chinese intellectuals and the modern world, represented by the West and Japan, was ambivalent—desiring to be part of it, yet at the same time understanding that its greatness was built upon China’s weakness. This tortured negotiation between the national self and foreign others is the basis of the particular kind of nationalism among modern Chinese intellectuals.²⁵ The “I” of the May Fourth youth was identified by an intense consciousness of the self in the world and, as such, a deep awareness of the self as a political entity. The autobiography became a unique literary tool of this period to express this new sense of self.

Tremendous changes in social values also have great effects on ideas of language and representation. With the use of the vernacular language in writing, representation is no longer fixed on the level of phenomenal reality and outward expression. In his essay on diary as literature (*riji wenxue*), Yu Dafu proclaims: “Human life is a dangerous thing—a struggle. Heaven and hell are separated only by a piece of paper. The devil and the divine exist together within the heart of the individual.”²⁶ It is this interest in “the interior,” commonly explained as the rise of individualism, a psychological phenomenon, or as subjectivity in literary terms, that marks the modern autobiography.²⁷ Though this awareness of a complex internal dimension of human life might not be a uniquely modern or Chinese idea, it nevertheless complicated the convention of representation and required a new strategy. Perception no longer constituted the only method of attaining knowledge. “Seeing” could not account for the occult reality in one’s interiority. May Fourth writers traversed a new realm in which the distinctions between true and false and between authenticity and mendaciousness based on appearance and perception are destabilized. Indeed, facticity, so long the standard for biographical (*zhuan*) literature, was of little use to modern writers, as

Hu Shi, who experimented on the chronological form (*nianpu*), discovered. He discovered that the world of facts and data allows no expression of the interior reality of the individual. To modern writers, truth is no longer captured through a repetition of visible reality. It is in the method of figuration.

There are direct effects of this transformed epistemology in writing. As surfaces and structural resemblances are de-emphasized in modern self-writing, the chronicity (so-called real time or historical time) of conventional biographical practice also becomes irrelevant. The disintegration of the authority of real phenomena makes it possible for such diverse writers as Chen Hengzhe, Lu Xun, and Eileen Chang to transcend the notions of plot or teleology in their writings. Many modern works seem to be series of essays put together in collections that lack obvious causal or logical continuity. This is in part a result of the exigencies of publishing—many writers put out their works in installments in newspaper serializations or in literary journals. However, since the compilation of these collections involves selecting, editing, and arranging the different pieces of one's story from different periods of one's life, it is not far-fetched to regard it as a sort of autobiographical activity. The dissolution of traditional forms necessitates a broadening of the definition of autobiography.

Admittedly, I define autobiography rather liberally. However, one of the points I try to demonstrate is that part of the modernization of autobiography is a challenge to the existing conventions of writing and the idea of reality upon which these conventions are based. The change in the apprehension of reality is the particular “emblematic” and semiotic disjuncture from which many of the issues in modern Chinese autobiography can be worked out.

Very simply, the self-consciousness of a break with the past is what creates the experience of the modern. In a sense, I am not interested here in defining modernity, but in identifying how modernity as a consciousness affects the way one formulates oneself and one's perception of reality. The notion of newness and the self-appointment as a new person in the May Fourth period are important coordinates for the birth of twentieth-century autobiography. The reverse is also true—autobiography as a form provides an expressive venue for the self-creation and fulfillment of the modern individual.

A Theoretical Discussion of Autobiography

Despite the proliferation of writings in the first person and various forms of self-narrative in the literature of the period, no prevailing critical attitude toward the reading of modern Chinese autobiography has been established. In terms of the form itself, it is convenient to regard autobiography as part of the romanticism of the period—an angst-driven, solipsistic, albeit fashionable ideal of young intellectuals and writers. It is often assumed that romantic writers “mature” into social accountability and adopt a form that underscores this change, such as social realism. (According to a common critical perspective, only in the late 1930s, when China and Japan were moving toward all-out war, did Creation Society writers, associated with high romanticism and sentimentalism in modern literature, shed their egoism and adopt “responsible” patriotic voices.)²⁸ As for content, autobiographies are either read for historical interest, used as resources in psychobiographical studies of writers, or subsumed under social themes such as the relationship between self and society.²⁹

There are problems with readings that confuse the narrated with the actual, or the work with the writer. Without recapitulating recent theoretical developments in autobiographical studies in their entirety, suffice it to say that the equation between the textual subject and its external referent, the author, has been fully critiqued and the subject destabilized. With his classic study “The Autobiographical Contract” (1980), Philippe Lejeune was among the first scholars to question the assumed truth content in autobiography.³⁰ He argues that the differentiation between autobiography and fiction cannot be based on the criterion of veracity or falsity of the events represented in the work. This is because readers of autobiography will always try to discover where the author deviates from the truth, whereas readers of fiction will always be tempted to identify “underlying motives” or elements that coincide with the author’s life. In an effort to bypass the mire of truth and falsity in which the reading of autobiography was caught,³¹ Lejeune approaches autobiography as a contract between readers and writers: “the contractual name of the author is a signifier/signature of his/her ontological reality.”³² Thus, autobiography is a speech act just like any other form of articulation, to be examined according to its linguistic effect. In this

way, emphasis moves away from a “realist” reading that seeks referential reality or veridical proof.

Paul de Man, who analyzes the specular moment in autobiography in which the author confronts his or her textual reflection as an essential self-reading, problematizes the notion of Lejeune’s “autobiographical contract.” In this instance, the self divides into two parts—a historical self and a textual spectacle. The latter is a figure of speech or a trope. According to de Man, such a tropological structure underlies all cognition, including the knowledge of the self. The autobiographical moment is the alignment between the two subjects, historical and tropical, each involved in the process of reading and determining the other in a reflexive substitution. This specular structure is interiorized in the autobiography.³³

Autobiography is a double displacement of the author, or, as de Man puts it, a “defacement” of the author.³⁴ The subject that is projected to the readers is not even a representation of the original, but a re-presentation of this reflection. The figure of the author in an autobiography is, to use a cliché, always “already read.” In other words, meaning is no longer located in and limited to the person of the author. The subject of autobiography is not the center of meaning but is discursively created in a speech act. He or she is a textual effect inscribed in the writing. In perceiving autobiography as a linguistic structure, we release the autobiographer as well as the subject from the world of referential immediacy. The emphasis in the reading of autobiography is not on discovering *what* is represented, but *how* and *why*. What becomes exposed in this examination is the method of figuration.

However, Judith Butler returns our attention to the historic or, in her words, the psychic self. She locates two aspects of textual power in the writing—the power of the author as the autobiographical subject’s agency, and the power of the author as the effect of the subject.³⁵ Like de Man, Butler differentiates between the author and the textual subject. However, while de Man deflates the authority of the author and places emphasis on the textually constructed being, Butler is concerned with the psychic circularity in the relationship between the author and the subject of his or her text, and their power to generate each other:

On the one hand, the subject can refer to its own genesis only by taking a third-person perspective on itself, that is, by dispossessing

its own perspective in the act of narrating its genesis. On the other hand, the narration of how the subject is constituted presupposes that the constitution has already taken place, and thus arrives after the fact. The subject loses itself to tell the story of itself, but in telling the story of itself seeks to give an account of what the narrative function has already made plain. What does it mean, then, that the subject, defended by some as a presupposition of agency, is also understood to be an *effect* of subjection? Such a formulation suggests that in the act of opposing subordination, the subject reiterates its subjection (a notion shared by both psychoanalysis and Foucauldian accounts). How, then, is subject to be thought and how can it become a site of alteration? A power exerted on a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject's becoming.³⁶

The recognition of the circularity between a subject and "subjection" is an interesting analogy of autobiographical reflexivity—of the self generating the self. The relationship between these two selves can be seen as a contest of power, or in Butler's words, "opposing subordination." I will deal with some of these issues of reflexivity in chapter 2 of this volume.

The reading of autobiography should be focused on the discursive level, or how the subject is discursively related to us. It is on this level that we can understand the contest between external social powers and internal sublimation of such powers. Subject and subjection both rely on the dominant social ideology as the source of their procreation. It is precisely under this assumption of the constructedness and manipulability of the self that writers as diverse as Hu Shi and Yu Dafu design their negotiations with society. However, Butler reminds us that this constructedness is paradoxically reliant on a self-consciousness. This self-consciousness is predicated on the antagonism of an individual toward the society that is also part of his or her formation. These contradictions are the property of the textuality of autobiography.

Autobiography is the site on which the process of self-making or remaking takes place. The subject thus created has historicity and specificity as a product of a political activity—writing. Writing is political because it seeks to state the case of the self and, in May Fourth, the case of the nation as well. However, insofar as this political act is mani-

fested in writing, its efficacy is passive—having effect only if it is read. Herein lies the limitation of the subject as a discursive product as opposed to the individual as a political being. On a textual level, it is the subject that occupies me as a topic of direct investigation. However, inhabiting this subject is the individual as a political actor who produces the discourse and invents him- or herself as a political or social act. In reading autobiography, one is constantly dealing with the negotiation between the political actor and the text as a reflexive creation, either as a political assertion or a reflection of his or her ideological capitulation.

Reading autobiographies is not about discovering whether the details relayed in the work are fact or fiction, true or false. It is not about verisimilitude. It is, however, about iterability and its sincerity. It is not what appears to be true, but what is narrated *as true*. Truth, one can safely say in this case, is a linguistic condition—what is or can be spoken. The modern experience of truth is an issue I will explore in some depth.

The Question of Western Influence



Because of the immediately related issues of individualism and interiority, the study of modern Chinese autobiography often leads to discussions of foreign influence on early May Fourth intellectuals. British romanticism, German expressionism, and Japanese naturalism and I-novels are often associated with the highly sentimental tone of early May Fourth productions. The attention on the “internal self” (*neixin*), in the struggle between personal desire and social obligations, is often attributed to Freud’s theory of the id versus the ego. Despite the proximity of my subject matter to these phenomena, I will not discuss autobiography in terms of foreign influence. Foreign influence is one way of looking at modern Chinese literature, of course, and one that has been fully explored in the scholarship of the last few decades. Labels of romanticism and expressionism have been applied liberally to writers like Yu Dafu, Guo Moro, and Lu Yin, who demonstrate an autobiographical bent in their works or exalt subjective feelings, physical desires, and behavior that pushes the limits of social propriety.³⁷ However, such labeling only diverts our attention from the writings them-

selves to formal conventions, and the only feasible conclusion in this kind of “influence study” is that modern Chinese literature, compared to the original Western forms, is inaccurate, derivative, and reductionist.³⁸

Traditional “influence studies” that only examine the product of cultural transfers but do not trace the process of the transfer are problematic for other reasons. Scholars such as Mary Layoun and Alan Wolfe question the real impact of certain schools of Western literature, most prominently realism and naturalism, that seem to be particularly influential on non-Western writings. Layoun and Wolfe argue that these kinds of writings contain narrative imperatives (such as linearity and teleology) that are not just formal stylistics, but also reflect particular ideological inclinations.³⁹ A more significant consideration than the formal influences of the transfer of literary modes from one place to another is their ideological impact on the countries of reception.

Zheng Boqi, a founding member of the Creation Society, argued in the *Great Compendium of New Chinese Literature* (*Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi*, 1935) that the works of Creation writers actually demonstrate a complex and ambivalent relationship with the West:

First, [the Creation members] had all been abroad for a long time, and had a rather clear perception of the flaws of other countries (capitalism) and the diseases of China (colonization): They felt a double disillusionment and a double pain. They became fed up and disgusted with contemporary society. The different kinds of oppression they suffered inside and outside their country only increased their rebelliousness. Second, since they had been abroad for a long time, they were often homesick for their motherland. However, when they returned home, the various disappointments they experienced made them bitter. This is the reason why prior to their return, they were sad and yearned to come back; but after their return, they became filled with indignation and disgust. Third, since they had been abroad for a long time, they were naturally influenced by trends in other countries. The bankruptcy of rationalism in philosophy and the failure of naturalism in literature resulted in their tendency toward antirationalistic romanticism.⁴⁰

Many of the European values reflected in western European literary forms, as Zheng argues, were antipathetic to Chinese intellectuals and their humanistic concerns. How, for example, was the rhetoric of racism

and imperialism embedded in the European novel processed, once it was commuted to the reception sites outside of Europe?⁴¹ The reception of a particular literary form from one polity that has aggressive designs on one's own culture requires tremendous reprocessing and filtering, a procedure so complex and so elusive that traditional comparative or influence studies cannot fully encompass it.⁴²

Europe's predatory behavior toward China was understood as part of its intellectual program. The Creationists' adoption of the romantic writing style is not evidence of their admiration of Western romanticism. Rather, it is a desire to adopt a kind of writing that is by nature the absolute ideological and aesthetic opposite to the prevailing realist and naturalist perspectives of the imperialistic West. The so-called romantic inclination of the Creationists, according to Zheng, does not demonstrate admiration for the West, but an emotional rejection of the Western intellectual trends at the time. The flamboyant rhetoric that we see in the works of these Chinese writers is not romanticism per se, but antirationalism. Modern Chinese literature's adoption of Western trends, illustrated by the example of the Creationists, is ambivalent at best. This is especially the case after the carnage of World War I and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, when the imperialistic designs of the West and Japan were fully exposed.⁴³

In Lydia Liu's study, the issue of influence or borrowing is recast in precise historical grounds, especially at the reception site. She addresses the issues, not only of what was transmitted, but how the transmission took place and how ideas were adapted and transformed according to the changing historical and cultural needs and tastes at their point of destination. Liu introduces into the equation the dynamics of the relationship between China and Japan and the western European imperialist powers, and the condition of China's internal struggle with modernity—in short, the social and political situation of the reception site. By her “translingual practice” of close examination of an individual term and its ideological career within Chinese letters under specific social and political contexts, Liu advances beyond the traditional idea of translation as a mere substitution of a foreign term for a local one.⁴⁴

The exploration of “translingual practices” debunks any notion of a stable or “authentic” center of meaning, which is usually the trajectory of “influence studies.” Concepts such as interiority (*neixin*) or individuality (*geren*), which are the particular focus during the early twentieth century, have sociopolitical importance in tune with the specific values

propagated by intellectual leaders. The numerous transformations each of these terms underwent after their introduction into China point to constant negotiations between China and the imperialist powers, between modernity and tradition and among the different social groups. This idea of “translingual practice” well illustrates the ideological as well as sociopolitical conditions of cultural borrowings. Especially important to my own understanding of autobiographical writing, Liu demonstrates how the notion or the invention of *geren* (the individual) is complicit with nationalism.⁴⁵ Just as the assertion of the linguistic/epistemological category of the *individual* is a political and social act, autobiography must also be seen as part of this political and social program. The new modern autobiographical form, then, is a method of discursive management of contemporary political and social ideology and, as such, requires careful scrutiny.

I regard Chinese autobiography as first autobiography, then Chinese. It shares the major generic and formal properties of autobiographies: first-person narrative, self-reference, and temporal distance between the autobiographical subject and the author. What makes this group of works Chinese are not any intrinsic or ethnic differences that condition one to think or feel a certain way. What make them Chinese are the specific historical conditions and the necessary responses by individuals to these conditions. For this reason, concerns about the suitability of “Western theories” to Chinese literature, and the nationalistic idea of using “Chinese” theories for Chinese studies, are misplaced. Should we consider the designations “Western” or “Chinese” political, racial, cultural, or disciplinary categories? At a time when there are so many crosscurrents in the international academic community, can one even differentiate between “Western” and “Chinese” theory?

I use the works of Peter Brooks, James Olney, Judith Butler, Philippe Lejeune, or for that matter, Lydia Liu, David Der-Wei Wang, and Wendy Larson—albeit with certain adaptations and adjustments—not to apply the “Western gaze” to ethnic studies, but in recognition of the universal ideas of writing and human expression, conditioned by historical circumstances. I believe that nonethnic Chinese can “truly understand” the “authentic” feelings in Chinese literature, just as North American, West African, eastern European, and South Asian literary works are not beyond the power of Chinese readers to appreciate. This is a lesson from the late Qing and May Fourth intellectuals.

In literary studies, we have emerged from an era of theoretical factionalism. One no longer calls oneself a semiotician, a poststructuralist, a deconstructionist, a Foucauldian, a New Critic. In general, one can perceive a renewed interest in historical-materialist specificity in readings and a reconsideration of psychological investigations. However, among all these various inclinations, there can be synthesis. A historicist basis does not detract from the validity of a nominalist one and vice versa. If the latter teaches a rigorous questioning of language as a discursive tool, it is the former that provides explanations of how and why meanings in language shift.

In reading autobiographies I align myself with the poststructuralist position in problematizing the notion of an a priori subject. At the same time, I identify with the cultural materialists who attend to the historical weight and nationalist principles in these writings, attempting what Edward Said would call a “contrapuntal analysis.”⁴⁶ Of course, a historicist reading of modern Chinese literature is hardly exceptional. If anything, emphasis on historicist, realist, and utilitarian readings has been disproportionate, and scholars are beginning to argue for the necessity of an aesthetic discussion.⁴⁷ This study of autobiography examines the idea of a historical epoch articulated through an intense self-consciousness of its cultural and literary production. In essence, then, I am wedding historicist with literary considerations. The political nature of the form, the subjectivity of the content, as well as the historical moment of their emergence all constitute the autobiography as a system of signification. The selection of certain theorists’ works to assist the reading reflects more of my intellectual milieu than the particular efficacy of specific approaches to modern Chinese autobiography. In a way, this book is a form of intellectual autobiography as well.

Conclusion



The primary trajectory of my discussions of modern Chinese autobiography is the May Fourth language reform. However, there is no necessary teleology to this book, nor can there be one. The unifying factor in the narrative is the fact that all of these writers deal with a particular process of creating, defining, and articulating the self in dialectic with

the greater historical forces that envelop one's self, despite one's self. The variety in the forms of self-definition discussed in this volume represents only a portion of the problems confronting the May Fourth generation. However, despite the limited focus, this study illustrates the magnitude of the changes and challenges in the experience of twentieth-century China. What this discussion also illustrates is that the self is very much a mutable cultural product, responsive to and inflected by political and social conditions. Even the most solipsistic self-examination has a much more public objective of understanding and addressing the society in which one is embroiled. Autobiography is a varied discourse enabled by, though not solely restricted to, political and nationalistic impulses in which we find tensions between private and public as well as issues of gender and morality. Autobiography is a paradigm of the reciprocal relationship between political and textual practices.

I do not attempt to define a modern Chinese subjectivity or individuality. The location of the "I" shifts and changes. It ranges from the socially oppressed and vulnerable May Fourth youth articulated by Yu Dafu or Lu Xun to the historical oppressor or dominator, as in Shen Congwen and Hu Shi. Between these two poles are the struggles between women and men, subjects and nations, the colonized and the colonizers. This modern "I" is socially, culturally, politically, and ethnically varied.

In early-twentieth-century China's semicolonized state, the fate of the self is measured against the fate of China itself. The concept of the great "I" and the small "I" (*dawo, xiaowo*) current at the time illustrates a new bond, not between self and tradition, but between self-existence and national survival. Have the young intellectuals of the time struggled so hard to be heard against the commands of family and tradition just to be subsumed under an even larger and more powerful narrative—the nation? How does one find one's voice within the overarching rhetoric of nationalism? Indeed, the primary objective in writing an autobiography is rescuing the self from obscurity. This is most obvious in women's writings. But even in the works of prominent men such as Lu Xun and Hu Shi, the desire to assert a voice, presence, and thought against social and political arbitration is unmistakable. Many studies have told us that the individual, especially the individual woman, did not survive the story of the nation.⁴⁸ But the writers discussed here prove otherwise. This, I believe, is the important contribution of autobiographical writings to the study of literature.

The reflexive self-gazing in autobiography opens up an opportunity of rearranging the reality of one's representation. This is a point illustrated most rigorously by women writers who are confronted with historical portraits of themselves that are entirely out of date and unsuitable. They have the most to change. Self-writing is then a redesigning of the self and, even more, the world. The writing of autobiography means a self-consciousness of the significance of one's existence, role, and responsibility in society. This autobiographical impulse of the young intellectuals of May Fourth arises from the need to reexamine the values that have been passed down to them over generations. The fundamental overhauling of society and the world starts with the investigation of individual consciousness. For better or for worse, their society did change and, most would argue, for the better. Most intellectuals understood at the time that while political power shifts from one locus to another, the eradication of an external political structure means little if there is no fundamental change on the individual level.

In 1937, Hu Shi made a public call to the "famous people" of society to record their life stories in order to inspire the new generation toward greatness. Thus the writing of autobiography is equated with the great work of nation building. There is surely a proliferation of autobiographies during that period, though not really as a result of Hu Shi's plea. Many writers, major or minor, start writing autobiographically, producing the interminable monologues of the era (a serious challenge to Philippe Lejeune's *autobiographical space*—the concept that only famous people can write truly autobiographically, because the text is about a recognized name). What this generation achieved through tireless telling of their stories was the importance of a personal spoken voice—not merely narratives, not merely plots or stories, not merely descriptions. Even if we put aside the romantic notions of sincerity, true feelings, and so forth associated with first-person narration, ultimately the spoken voice asserts the individual more potently than anything else. Even under the strictest conformist atmosphere of the late 1930s and 1940s, when China was gearing up for war, this emphasis on the spoken voice provides the surest form of subversion. This voice is the greatest legacy of the vernacularization of literature. Autobiography, a form intricately associated with the use of the voice, is a fundamental development of the vernacular movement. This obvious connection has too long been overlooked.