



Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song

Women Writers in Postsocialist China

London and New York, Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2014
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reviewed by [Coraline Jortay](#)

1. Succinct yet packed with insight, Kay Schaffer and Xianling Song's book, *Women Writers in Postsocialist China*, offers a panorama of contemporary Chinese women writers at the turn of the twenty-first century (1992–2012) through a postmodern feminist lens, building on previous interpretative frameworks that aims to account for both western and indigenous Chinese feminisms.[2] The corpus, composed of autobiographical novels, literary fiction, blogs and popular novels, is brought together as various forms of 'life writing' understood as a 'general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject' and that 'may take on many guises as narrators selectively engage their lived experience and situate their social identities through personal storytelling'.[3] Spanning a twenty-year period defined as 'postsocialist China' that opens with Deng Xiaoping's trip to the South, and ends in 2012 at the time of writing the book—coincidentally also the beginning of the Xi Jinping era—the authors analyse key representative works by women writers to explore the meanings and constraints of writing history and the self from a woman's perspective in contemporary China. Concurrently, they aim to examine how Chinese women-centred writing operates in transcultural and transnational contexts and pay special attention to the contexts of creation, translation, circulation and reception of literary texts and feminist theories, which are understood as one aspect of the global flow of ideas occurring between China and other parts of the world, setting them against the background of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.
2. The book is structured into seven main chapters, each dealing with one particular facet of life writing. Chapter Two[4] focuses on Hong Ying's 虹影 (b. 1962) *Daughter of the River: An Autobiography* (*Ji'e de nü'er* 饥饿的女儿, 1997[5]) as well as her semi-autobiographical fiction *Summer of Betrayal: A Novel* (*Beipan zhi xia* 背叛之夏, 1995) in which, the authors argue, Hong Ying manages to straddle two cultural traditions to articulate a westernised, individualised 'self' still shaped by collective, historical and ideological forces representative of the Chinese tradition of self-depictions. Chapter Three offers a subtle analysis of Chen Ran's 陈染 (b. 1962) signature novel *A Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo* 私人生活, 1996), moving away from the 'private writing' label often attached to her works and showing how the fragmented narrative weaves together a novel that is deeply political in scope, albeit in a deconstructive fashion, and explores how to address the unspeakable through textual fragmentation and disjunctions.

3. Chapter Four brings together Lin Bai 林白 (b. 1958), Sheng Keyi 盛可以 (b. 1970s), and Xinran 欣然 (b. 1958) to explore how their works attempt to go beyond traditional representations of rural and migrant women (often 'othered' by intellectually privileged city-dwelling writers and depicted as lacking in *suzhi*, 'quality'), to give them a 'voice of their own.' Although Lin Bai uses interview records to allow rural women to represent themselves in *A Record of Women's Chatting* (*Funü xianliao lu* 妇女闲聊录, 2005), these voices appear nonetheless still mediated through the writing of an established author. Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls: Life Goes On* (*Bei Mei* 北妹, 2004) fictionalises the writer's own experiences to focus on modes of resilience and survival of female migrant workers, and how they resist othering at work. The authors are more overly critical of Xinran who, they argue, uses her privileged position as a popular Europe-based writer while documenting women's oppression to promote self-serving notions of a backwards China, instrumental in promoting her charity Mother's Bridge of Love (MBL) in *The Good Women of China: Hidden Voices* (2002) and *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother: Stories of Loss and Love* (2010), commodified for a global audience.
4. Chapter Five turns to Wei Hui's 卫慧 (b. 1973) *Shanghai Baby* (*Shanghai baobei* 上海宝贝, 1999) and Mian Mian's 棉棉 (b. 1970) *Candy* (*Tang* 糖, 2000) to discuss the formation process of 'beauty writer' as a category through paratext, editorial strategies, and reception in China and abroad, contextualising their writing among the rise of bloggers and online platforms that foregrounded the recent boom of Internet literature. If a little less original given the abundant scholarship already devoted to beauty writers, this chapter's analysis of paratext as integral to these processes nonetheless sets it apart from previous work. The further section on bloggers is interesting in exemplifying how divisions between high and popular culture are rendered less obvious in contemporary China, but might have needed to be further articulated with the other works analysed in the book to reach its full potential as an analytical tool.
5. After four chapters more contemporary in focus, Chapters Six to Eight turn to Chinese history. In examining memoirs, fictionalised biographies of historical characters and historical fiction, the authors hint at how the genre can be used to destabilise official accounts of Chinese history, in relation to gender roles in particular, and be deemed threatening to social harmony. In their historical narratives, Zhang Yihe 章诒和 (b. 1942) and Chen Danyan 陈丹燕 (b. 1958) are shown to mix their own remembered experiences with archival materials, interviews and oral history to conjure China's twentieth-century past against the official version of history. At this stage, the book attempts to take up the much-written-about feminine/feminist writer debate (pp. 116–17), but comes somewhat short of a full-fledged development taking into account all relevant literature.^[6]
6. A shorter Chapter Seven on Zhao Mei's 赵玫 (b. 1954) *Woman Emperor Wu Zetian* (*Wu Zetian. Nǚhuang* 武则天. 女皇, 1998) examines how reading facts in the official annals from a woman-centred lens allowed the writer to balance rehabilitating the Tang Emperor from the 'evil unwoman' (p. 199) as she was constructed in previous biographies, while claiming authenticity by drawing her facts from the official annals, a crucial feat for biographers of historical figures in China. Finally, Chapter Eight is dedicated to Xu Xiaobin's 徐小斌 (b. 1953) *Feathered Serpent* (*Yushe* 羽蛇, 1998), envisaged not as an historical novel, but as a novel that puts the concept of 'history' itself under a critical lens through a destabilised cyclical frame that reinterprets historical figures through the everyday lives of five generations of Chinese women.
7. Beyond the analysis of different forms of 'life writing,' the book's greatest strength lies in its exploration of underlying themes emerging throughout to shape a panorama of key aspects of contemporary women's writing: the figure of the protagonist as a writer or artist in coming-of-age stories (in the works of Hong Ying, Chen Ran, Mian Mian and Wei Hui), the trauma of the Tian'anmen Massacre as a catalyst to writing (Hong Ying, Chen Ran, Xu Xiaobin), the importance of

the body as place to register a spiritual or psychological vacuum, and so forth. Meanwhile, the authors highlight different facets of literary feminism and women-centred writing in China at the turn of the twenty-first century; writers' attempts at transcending gender, at interrogating and subverting notions of social roles (in Hong Ying's refusal to idealise the working class, in Sheng Keyi's depiction of migrant workers) or, on the contrary, how self-identified feminist writers can end up publishing books packaged as commodities for the market. On several instances, brilliant attention is paid to paratext in transcultural context, editorial strategies and strategies of censorship avoidance.

8. Although no book can be all-encompassing in its subject treatment, the reader is nonetheless left wanting more when the authors posit the relative invisibility of lesbian writing in nineties China while recognising lesbian themes in works by Hong Ying, Chen Ran, Lin Bai and Xu Xiaobin (see p. 162 n. 6). Given these writers' centrality to the book's argument, and the importance of lesbian writing within China LGBT+ and the feminist movement as a whole, more emphasis on this theme, or even a dedicated chapter, would have completed the book's thematic panorama beautifully. Future reprints of the book might also be usefully served by some edits for Chinese characters' consistency. Indeed, while the names of writers and main works are not always provided in Chinese characters, and the pinyin transcriptions at times erroneous, some other chapters disproportionately provide Chinese characters for many phrases less central to the subject matter. As such, a bilingual (English–Chinese) glossary of key terms, writers' names and works would be helpful to the book's intended audience, scholars of Chinese studies and literature.
9. In the final analysis, Kay Schaffer and Xianlin Song's *Women Writers in Postsocialist China* aptly manages to capture the struggles and creative strategies of a generation of women writers caught between the intensification of the global flow of ideas in the nineties, that helped circulate feminist theories and brought their writing to a global stage, and the disillusionment and trauma of the Tian'anmen generation. As such, this book constitutes a welcome addition to scholarship on twentieth-century and contemporary women writers^[7] and provides a useful background to many current debates in the field of contemporary Chinese literature: first with thematic elements that help situate the debates on China's literary feminism, and second in its discussion of migrant women in literature in Chapter Four, which would be very useful in helping contextualise recent cases of migrant women^[8] who have taken to the keyboard to narrate their life and plight in the age of social media.

Notes

^[1] All pagination in the present review is given from the hardback edition.

^[2] See for instance, Wang Zheng, 'Maoism, feminism and the UN conference on women: Women's studies research in contemporary China,' *Journal of Women's History* 8(4), 1997: 126–52; Dai Jinhua (戴锦华), *涉渡之舟 新时期中国女性写作与女性文化* (Shedu zhi zhou: xinshiqi Zhongguo nüxing xiezuo yu nüxing wenhua; Chinese Women's Writing and Feminist Culture in the New Era), Xi'an: Shaanxi renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002; Wendy Larson, *Women Writing in Modern China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

^[3] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, pp. 4 and 18.

^[4] The introduction being numbered as Chapter One in the Table of Contents, the seven analysis chapters are Chapters Two through Eight of the book.

^[5] All dates given here when referencing the writers' works are the year of first publication of the original edition (in Chinese, except for Xinran whose works were first published in English).

^[6] Although the space constraints of a book review do not allow for a thorough discussion of relevant literature, the

reader will find a helpful summary of those debates in Hui Wu, 'Introduction,' in *Once Iron Girls – Essays on Gender by Post-Mao Literary Women*, edited by Hui Wu, 1–14, Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2010, and later in the same book by various Chinese writers in their own terms. A more theoretical summary of the question can be found in Shih Shu-Mei, 'Towards an ethics of transnational encounters, or "when" does a "Chinese" woman become a "feminist"?' in *Dialogue and Difference: Feminisms Challenge Globalisation*, edited by Marguerite Waller and Sylvia Marcos, 3–28. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

[7] Amy Dooling, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth Century China*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005; Xin Yang, *From Beauty Fear to Beauty Fever: A Critical Study of Contemporary Chinese Female Writers*, London and New York: Peter Lang, 2011.

[8] See for instance the case of Fan Yusu, who became an overnight sensation when she published her eponym essay on WeChat. See [Tom Philips](#), "'I am Fan Yusu': China gripped by Dickensian tale of a migrant worker's struggle,' *The Guardian*, 3 May 2017. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/03/i-am-fan-yusu-china-gripped-by-dickensian-tale-of-a-migrant-workers-struggle> (accessed 27 January 2018).

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