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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS


Biographical dictionaries or encyclopedias on women of the western world, though not plentiful, are not scarce. Scantiness however typifies biographical works that focus specifically on Chinese women. Furthermore, existing English-language biographical works on Chinese of the dynastic and contemporary eras fail to provide adequate coverage on women.¹ The *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Twentieth Century, 1912-2000* is another major contribution by the two experienced and knowledgeable editors-in-chief, Lily Xiao Hong Lee² and A. D. Stefanowska.³ While their 1998 work on the Qing period (1644-1911) renders voices to many otherwise unknown Qing dynasty women, this present work succeeds in bringing into spotlight many remarkable but otherwise unknown women never before the subject of a biography. Temporally, this work picks up where the former work leaves off.

Twentieth century China is characterized by enormous political upheavals which affected the lives of women in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas. Chinese women of this time period also experienced the transition from traditional China to modern China. Their life experiences may differ, but they all shared a culture traditionally defined by patriarchy and conservatism. Their biographies demonstrate their courage, strength, spirit, determination and perseverance in tumultuous societies.

In compiling this biographical dictionary, Lee and Stefanowska received assistance from over eighty biographers and translators from all over the world who contributed without any monetary compensation. Since Lee and Stefanowska are based in Sydney, Australia, it follows that a large number of contributors are from Australia. All the biographers have subject expertise and most of them are affiliated with universities or other institutions of higher education.

Through this biographical work, Lee and Stefanowska strive to provide “... an accurate and informative portrait of the most notable Chinese women of the twentieth century.” They state clearly in the Preface that this work is to serve as a summary of existing knowledge and information, and is not intended to be original research. Their intended audience is English-speaking, including specialists, generalists, and readers who seek to learn more about the history of China and that of Chinese women. Both a retrospective and current biographical work, it includes active women between 1912 and 1990. Some are deceased, while some are still alive today. Certain biographies have been updated to 2000/2001, but Lee and Stefanowska leave women who became active in the 1990s for the editor of a future biographical work. Their selection of biographees is primarily based upon the availability of resources such as adequate source materials, sufficient information, suitable contributor and time. The majority of the biographees are Chinese women from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. They include non-Han Chinese women, such as Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchurian, Bai,

and Hui minority women. Also included are some overseas Chinese women, like Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston. The only non-Chinese woman included is Renée June-Nikel, known as Wang Henei 巴合内 in Chinese, a French sculptor who adopted Chinese citizenship, and lived, worked, and died in China.

This work pays tribute to some 300 women who made their mark in the history in modern China. Some are more known, some lesser known, and some even obscure and known only to Chinese studies specialists. All women contributed towards or achieved prominence in their fields of expertise, or they exerted certain influence, positive or negative, over their contemporaries and/or posterity. Political changes ushered in new choices and opportunities for them to expand their spheres of influence. Many received a good education and were able to make life choices independently. A lot of them made names for themselves and earned reputations or titles of being “the first,” “one of the first,” “the most,” “one of the most,” “the foremost,” and “queen” in their respective areas of endeavors.

As China became modernized, women’s roles and status changed. They became increasingly less male-identified and they were no longer just known as so and so’s daughter, wife, or mother. Consequently, the conflict between traditional roles versus self-actualization became ever more intense. Considering the traditional social prejudice and attitude towards women, many women had to make unpleasant choices, even sacrifices, in order to pursue their own goals and destinies. For example, in order to avoid arranged marriages, drastic measures were taken by a few, including suicide attempts, escape to different parts of China, escape overseas, or public renunciation which brought undesirable alienation from natal families. Consciously and unconsciously, women in this work have helped to significantly move forward the position of Chinese women. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, many met with unhappy or even tragic endings, and a few became infamous and stigmatized in Chinese history.

The three hundred-odd women are grouped into thirteen major categories covering a variety of activities. Due to the many political upheavals in China since the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911, it is not surprising that women in politics and government (revolutionaries, politicians, political activists, reformers, and women’s rights activists) constitute the largest category. The second largest group is that of literary women, including poets, fiction writers, essayists, and literary critics. The lesser categories are artists and performing artists (photographers, painters, sculptors, photographers, paper-cut artists, musicians, opera stars, dancers, singers, actresses, directors and producers of film, television, and theater), and others that include academics, scientists, policewomen, military officers, nuns, athletes, mountaineers, and entrepreneurs.

Entries are arranged in alphabetic dictionary order according to romanized surnames. The traditional Chinese name order of surnames followed by given names is generally applied, and the Pinyin romanization system is used for most names, except for women who are widely known or go by their English or non-standard romanized names, and for women from Taiwan or have spent significant time there. For this latter group, Wade-Giles romanization is used. Cross references link alternate spellings, and the extensive 32-paged “Glossary of Chinese Names” at the end of the work is especially valuable in providing useful “see” references for looking up Chinese names (both in simplified and complex Chinese characters) and for checking alternative names or pseudonyms. It would be even more useful if corresponding page numbers were indicated for each name. Entry
length varies from ¼ page to 10 pages, with the average being 2½ pages. A number of better-known women such as Song Qingling, Soong Mayling, and Jiang Qing have longer entries (4 to 10 pages) since there exists much research already done and there is readily available historical material. As a result of Lee’s own expertise on women of the Long March (1934-1935), coverage on the thirty Red Army women on this historic trek is particularly detailed.

Each biography provides factual and descriptive information on most if not all of the following areas: birth year, birthplace, family background, parents, spouse, children, and death year, if applicable. Each woman’s life is traced from birth, through childhood, to adulthood, and to either death or the present if still living. Her education, positions held, achievements, and organizational memberships are often included. Focus is often given to her significant contribution, her influence or impact on other women. For some, their personal habits, hobbies and peculiarities are also mentioned. For example, Dame Lydia Selina Dunn is known for wearing cheongsam, while Li Zhen is known for wearing her army uniform even after retirement and almost to the end of her life. Each entry is signed by the contributor, and by the translator if any. A bibliography of sources accompanies each entry to direct interested readers to sources used for each entry and to point to further reading. These include monographs, journal articles, encyclopedias articles, dictionaries entries, other biographical materials, and historical materials from China, Hong Kong, Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, etc. Personal interviews also serve as a resource. Some recent web resources with URLs are included in a number of bibliographies. All sources are listed in full and consistent bibliographical format, and the numbers of sources for each entry range from 1 to 24.

An additional feature called a “Finding List by Background or Fields of Endeavor” which classifies women according to the activities where they are best known is provided before the biographical entries. This 8-page list functions as an index, and is thus very useful in facilitating the easy identification and location of women. Another feature is the 1½-page “Brief Chronology of Twentieth-Century Events” which provides a list of key events for readers not familiar with Chinese history of the twentieth century. The last feature is a short list of “Abbreviations and Guide to Chinese Words Used.” That these features are included demonstrates that Lee and Stefanowska would like to equip the non-Chinese specialist readers so they can better utilize the biographical information in the dictionary.

A few limitations slightly mar this otherwise excellent work. First, names in Chinese characters are not listed with the biographical entries, but only listed at the “Glossary of Chinese Names” at the end of the work. Second, Chinese names of organizations and titles of works which should prove to be very helpful especially for readers interested in further reading are not provided. Third, accessibility could be greatly improved by having a subject index and an index of works cited.

Lee and Stefanowska are seemingly aware of these deficiencies as they lament the financial constraints in the production of this work. They hope the planned future publication of Chinese editions of their two biographical dictionaries, beginning with the Qing dynasty volume, will compensate for these shortcomings.

To conclude, this collaborative biographical work is an invaluable reference work and research tool. It constitutes a major contribution towards adding knowledge and understanding to the fields of Chinese and women’s studies. It should facilitate further research into the lives and
accomplishments of Chinese women as the editors-in-chief have hoped for. It captures the lives of Chinese women from diverse fields and is definitely a timely addition which fills a significant gap among existing biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias that have disproportional heavy coverage on western women or Chinese men. Indubitably, academic libraries affiliated with programs in Chinese and/or women’s studies at both the undergraduate and graduate levels should have this fine work in their collection.

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2 Lily Xiao Hong Lee has professional expertise in the areas of librarianship, publishing, and Chinese women’s studies. Lee and A. D. Stefanowska have collaborated before as editors-in-chief for the Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Qing Period, 1644-1911. Lee is also this volume’s editor. She is at present a lecturer at the Department of Chinese and South-East Asian Studies, the University of Sydney.

3 A. D. Stefanowska has much experience as an editor of journals and in publishing. She has taught Classical Chinese at the University of Sydney for 30 years.

4 Jiang Qing, or Madam Mao, for example, is infamous for being the chief instigator of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). She is often referred to as the “white-boned demon”, a man-eating demon capable of transformations from the classical Chinese novel Journey to the West.