

## BOOK REVIEWS

# May Fourth Women Writers

## Memoirs

Edited by Janet Ng and Janice Wickeri

HONG KONG: RENDITIONS PAPERBACKS, 1996  
133 PAGES

This slim volume introduces the reader to seven Chinese women writers from the May Fourth Movement of 1919. In a series of translated selections from their writings, readers learn that what moved women of the early part of this century is not much different from what occupies the thoughts and feelings of women now: love of family, friends and boyfriends; fear of rejection and success; aspirations for a future both dreaded and longed for; and how or whether to express the emotions that hold sway. The Chinese women writers in this volume, like women writers everywhere, realized that they must begin writing about that which they know best, their own lives, and use their talents to try to understand the world within as well as the world around them. These passionate stories focus on relationships with mothers and friends, with loss and sorrow, and on the problems of being educated people. These women, who did not fit into the expected Confucian roles, found no place for themselves in an unpredictable and changing Chi-

nese society. These tales illustrate how the "personal is political." They relate the ways the women dealt with new definitions of what it is to be female in China, a debate continuing into the 1990s.

One is struck by the contemporary nature of their writings despite the passage of time. Issues of what to write about and how to portray it are still important for women writers today. Who is the audience for these stories? Must it be a mass audience which is predominantly male? Should their writings be expected to show the same concerns as male writers? Can women's experiences be sufficient to provide a view of society from a perspective that often seems to lack a generalized reference? These questions are raised by the editor Janet Ng in the brief introduction that also introduces us to some of the writers.

Before each selection, there is a short introduction to the writer. We learn that three of the women were close friends (Shih P'ing-mei, Lu Ching-ch'ing and Lu Yin, who all attended Peking Women's Normal College) and their friendship figures greatly in each other's work. Lin Hui-yin differs in that she lived extensively outside of China, studied at the University of Pennsylvania, and was influenced by western writers. She, like Ch'en Heng-che, who also studied in the United States at Vassar, was involved in the use of the vernacular in literature and influenced by Hu Shih. Little is known about Yu T'ien, but her short story on her lack of love for her mother departs from the expected outpourings of filial piety and thus adds an interesting look at family relations. Their writing challenged the orthodoxy and involved each of the writers in politics in one way or another. Su Ch'ing spent time in prison, while Ch'en Heng-che was harassed during the Cultural Revolution for her connection to the United States.

As most Western readers are not familiar with events in China, this volume would benefit from a short essay on the May Fourth Movement, the role of women in the movement, and any parallels to the Tiananmen demonstrations of 1989. The stories themselves are useful for inclusions at the high school level in courses that introduce writing by non-Western writers. Students may be interested to see if their views and feelings differ from these women. They may be surprised by much they have in common with them and by how open the women themselves are. I highly recommend this book for such cross-cultural studies of friendship and family.

Women spend a great deal of time talking about their lives with other women. They explore the world through their contacts with other women, thereby gaining insight into what the future may bring. Will their lives duplicate those of their mothers, aunts, grandmothers? Will these lives serve as a comparison point? If they reject them, what alternatives are open to them? They vicariously share in the loves, hurts, successes of their friends, and either long for similar experiences or dread the ill health and poor marriages that seem to await them. ■

Barbara Mori

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