

FACING HISTORY

Strategies for Teaching Chinese and World History with Memoirs

By Joseph W. Ho and Kristin Stapleton

As Adam D. Frank noted in a 2001 *EAA* review, “A well-written memoir is a surefire way to make Asian history and culture come alive for students who approach the subject with little or no knowledge.”¹ Building on Frank’s sentiment, in this essay we discuss effective uses of memoirs to teach about modern China and Sino-US encounters. While our examples are China-focused and draw from experiences in undergraduate instruction, the techniques we discuss are applicable to wider East Asian topics and can be introduced in settings ranging from high school courses to pedagogical training for graduate students.

No matter how accessible, memoirs as teaching resources pose challenges. Memoirists are certainly experts on their own lives, but the retrospective nature of memoir writing means that accounts of those lives are selective, shaped more or less in hindsight to fit a narrative that the mature authors or their editors want to share. More problematic, though, from a teaching perspective is the fact that memoirists tend not to write only about what they themselves have experienced—they often pass judgments on larger issues about which they may be badly informed. Sometimes, they are just plain wrong about historical facts. And there are practical problems with using memoirs in class, too. Even if memoirs have been written or edited with a contemporary Anglophone audience in mind, they may be too long and detailed to assign.

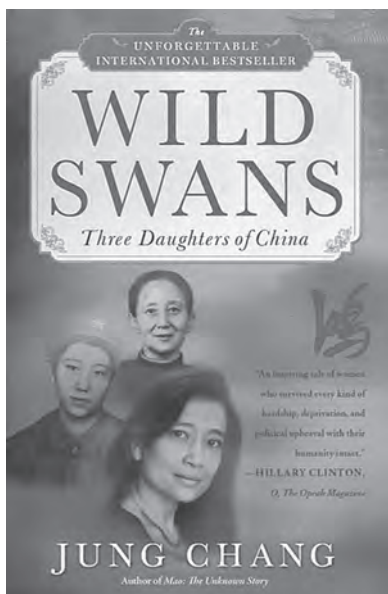
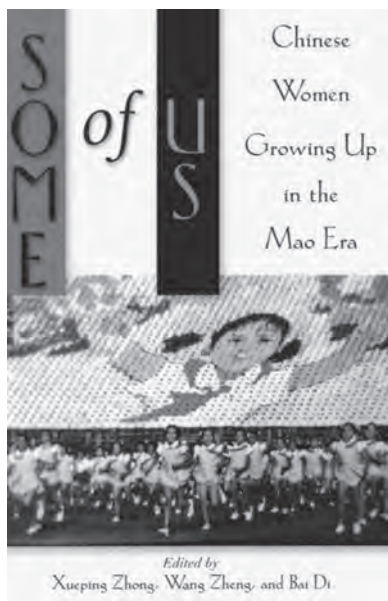
Three valuable strategies to address the challenges of teaching with memoirs are (1) to ask students to compare memoirs with other sources, including other memoirs and scholarly histories; (2) to create assignments that allow students to engage creatively and think seriously about the nature and limitations of memoirs; and (3) to identify short memoirs and excerpts of long memoirs that are particularly useful for teaching. In what follows, we discuss these three strategies with examples from twentieth-century Chinese history.

Comparative Perspectives

As noted above, memoirs can be frustrating teaching tools because their authors often write in authoritative language about topics they may know little about. A striking example of this appears in Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans: Three Generations of Chinese Women*, which has often been assigned in Chinese history classes. Early in the book, Chang asserts that China never had a “proper legal system”—a judgment that casually dismisses the rich history of law in China.² Teachers who assign this book could distribute a list of such generalizations and ask students to investigate whether historians of China agree with them. Setting aside the question of inaccuracies, however, using memoirs to teach history may cede too much power to the memoirist to shape historical understanding. Chang was raised in a very exceptional family in the People’s Republic of China. Her experience of events was not very typical. With any personal account, though, comparison with other sources is essential for critical distance.

The last third of *Wild Swans* concerns Chang’s experience of the Cultural Revolution. Because so many memoirs about that earth-shaking event have appeared in English, the phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars; teachers can benefit from their analyses of the genre. Historian Peter Zarrow explores the nature of memoirs in general as part of a stimulating discussion of Cultural Revolution memoirs and the messages they convey to American audiences.³ The editors of *Some of Us*, a collection of short memoirs by women who relocated from China to the US, note that they collected the stories in order to convey a better sense of the diversity of experiences in 1960s China than they had found in the most popular memoirs.⁴

One of the most stimulating memoirs about early twentieth-century China was first published in 1945. *Daughter of Han* is the story of Old Mrs. Ning (Ning Lao T’ai-’ai) as told to American social worker Ida Pruitt in Beijing in the mid-1930s. Pruitt interviewed Ning for two years and then assembled her life story. Born in 1867, Ning lived through the tumultuous decades before and after the 1911 Revolution, and her memoir shows how ordinary people experienced the collapse of the imperial system and the political instability of subsequent decades. Even more striking, though, are the accounts of family and social life, such as arranged marriages, medical and religious practices, and class distinctions. The book as a whole reveals many changes in cultural expectations and social practices between the 1870s and the 1930s. By reading only the first thirty pages of the



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book, though, students can immerse themselves in life in the late nineteenth-century community of Penglai, Shandong, where Ning grew up.⁵ Several families of foreigners—Protestant missionaries—lived near Ning's childhood home, and she comments on their lifestyles and unusual customs.

Pruitt herself spent time as a teacher in Penglai in the 1910s. Part of her motivation for publishing Ning's story may have been to balance the picture of China that readers received from foreigners' accounts with a narrative told from a local point of view. Of course, Pruitt's reconstruction of Ning's story reflects her own preconceptions and interpretations, in addition to facts about Ning's life. Lydia Liu notes that the concept of "face" featured prominently in many late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century foreigners' accounts of Chinese culture, and points out that observers often failed to understand the concept in the context of social hierarchies in which they themselves were embedded.⁶ As a social worker, Pruitt was more sensitive to such issues than most foreign writers who described Chinese life. Still, her descriptions of Ning's attitudes toward her adult daughter's disobedience evoke a concern for "face" that may be inexplicable to students. Reference to Liu's comments in her essay on *Chinese Characteristics*, Arthur Smith's influential 1890 book, will help teachers learn how to unpack the concept and the use that foreigners and some Chinese made of it. Unfortunately, *Daughter of Han* has not been systematically assessed by scholars of cross-cultural relations, perhaps because it is so highly regarded. For tips on how to interpret and teach about memoirs featuring cross-cultural encounters, teachers should consider reading Robert Rosenstone's *Mirror in the Shrine*, which analyzes three American writers' accounts of life in Meiji Japan.⁷ As Rosenstone notes in an essay about how he wrote the book, he used an array of techniques to call attention to the nature of his sources themselves and to make a point that should be central to our teaching: that, in the case of works of history and memoir, the written page is "where author and reader meet to make sense of the past."⁸

Pairing Ning's description of life in Shandong with foreign accounts can open up discussions of the nature of cross-cultural interactions, as well as the particular problems in interpreting them in the early twentieth century, when foreigners from powerful countries occupied privileged positions in Chinese towns. The newly published memoir of a member of one of those privileged families, Claire Malcolm Lintilhac, shows local life from a perspective very different from that of Old Mrs. Ning. Lintilhac (1899–1984) was born in north China; in 1914, her family moved to Shandong, where her father, a Canadian, was a doctor at the British hospital in the port of Yantai (formerly known as Chefoo). The memoir features pencil sketches Lintilhac made throughout her life, as well as photographs of her family. A companion website features audio of Lintilhac telling some of the stories included in the memoir.⁹

Several parts of the Lintilhac memoir can be read fruitfully in conjunction with Ning's account. On pages 36–45, Lintilhac describes her encounters in 1910 with the wealthy Gu family, whose daughters delight in exchanging visits with their foreign friend and welcome the concubine their mother has brought into the family so that their father can have a son. As a child, Ning had much less freedom than the Gu girls, and, although curious about the way the foreigners lived, she did not share the Gu girls' admiration for their clothes or housekeeping. The arrival of sons and grandsons, though, is pretty much the best life can offer for her, as well as for the Gu family. On pages 81–93, Lintilhac describes the amah who helped raise her, her early career as a private nurse, and a visit to Penglai in the early 1920s, where she and Old Mrs. Ning might actually have run into each other. She visits Penglai in the company of half-Japanese and half-Scottish "Jenny of Chefoo," who owns the first private automobile in town. Jenny admits to having purchased a boy she knew had been kidnapped to raise as her own son, a story that echoes Ning's sad experience of having a daughter sold by her opium-addicted husband. The foreign community intersects with the local community in complex ways, as can be seen through both memoirists' eyes.

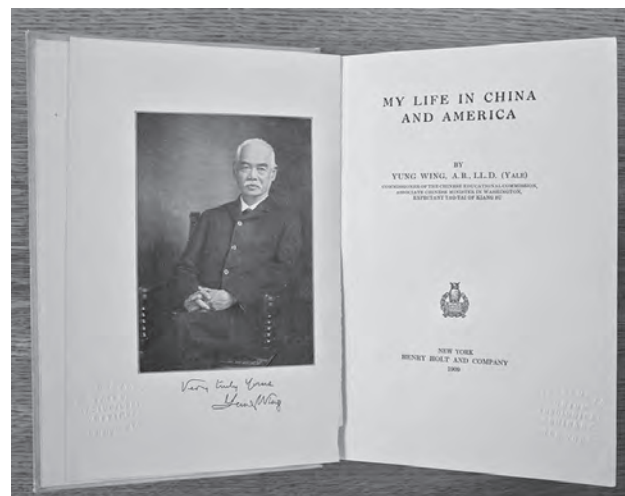
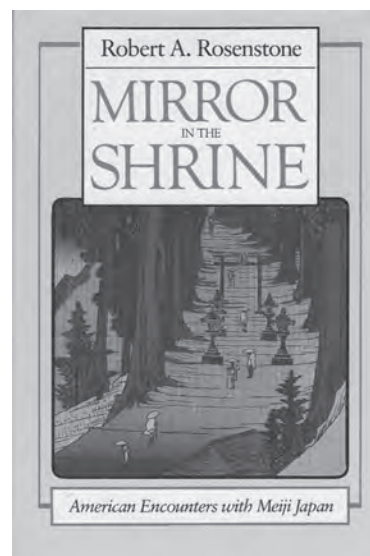
The omnipresence of military forces in early twentieth-century Chinese life is another common theme in the memoirs. Ning serves as a maid in the household of a military commander, while Lintilhac befriends the American naval personnel whose ships occupy Yantai's harbor every summer in the 1920s and 1930s, and gives a fascinating account of a siege of a walled Shandong town in the late 1920s (pages 118–124). To help students understand the context of China's militarization during the Republican Era (1912–1949), a scholarly essay on this topic can be assigned, along with excerpts from the two memoirs. For example, Harold Tanner, an expert on Chinese military history, gives a brief and helpful explanation of warlord conflict in the 1920s in chapter 13 of his textbook *China: A History*.¹⁰

Further examples of transnational memoirs grounded in US–China exchanges include the autobiography of Yung Wing (1828–1912), the first Chinese person to earn a Yale degree, as well as a very large number of accounts by missionaries, military personnel, and members of diplomatic or educational exchanges from across the twentieth century.¹¹ Many of these are underexplored in a

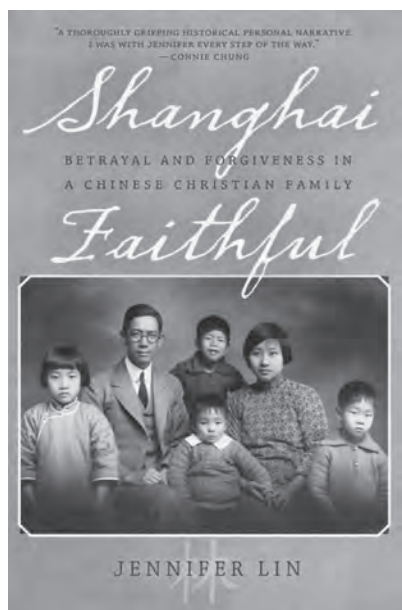
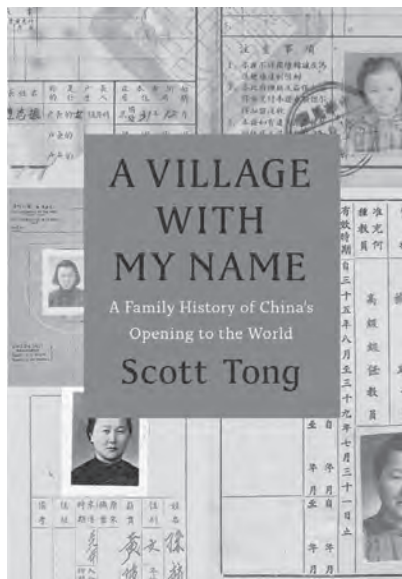
A Daughter of Han The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman



By Ida Pruitt
From the Story Told Her by
Ning Lao T'ai T'ai



Portrait of Yung Wing next to the title page of his 1909 book, *My Life in China and America*, as found in the library of the Union Theological Seminary (Columbia). Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y6o7tn2>.



teaching context and come with their own blind spots and problematic historical interpretations. But they do offer similarly useful points of comparison, aspects of which can only be touched on here.

Yung's account is fascinating not only for its embedded "insider" view of the Chinese Educational Mission that brought 120 boys to study in the US in the 1870s—the Self-Strengthening Movement—and Sino-US relations, but also for Yung's candid observations of 1850s American college life as a foreign student, with shared experiences (including late night studying and a dislike of integral calculus) that resonate with student readers.¹² Moreover, careful attention to Yung's accomplishments and their failure to take hold in the late imperial era allows students to evaluate "unsuccessful" historical experiences that run against a more visible (or triumphalist) grain.¹³

Similarly, memoirs by missionaries and their secular counterparts not only offer snapshot glimpses of life in China at specific historical moments, but also help make visible larger historical trajectories. These may include the evolution of nation-building projects and religious modernity, particularly noticeable when comparing writings by missionary, military, and diplomatic children at various points in time with those of older generations. Twentieth-century examples include the autobiographies of Pearl Buck and Han Suyin, among many others, as well as recent multigenerational family histories by Scott Tong (*A Village with My Name*) and Jennifer Lin (*Shanghai Faithful*).¹⁴ The lives of mid-twentieth-century missionary children bridged the Republican and PRC eras, the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Cold War, and East Asia and the world. Their memoirs merit scholarly exploration and are likely to prove valuable in teaching. In all these accounts, students are exposed to personal history-as-process, as the memoirists wrestle with interpreting their and their families' place in a rapidly changing Asia that is not far from (or directly connected to) the twenty-first century.¹⁵

Such sources highlight the role of memoirists as cultural mediators and participants in history, even if their individual perceptions do not always neatly align with scholarly views or expectations of historical accuracy. In their observations and conversations (both with the people in their lives and with us readers of the future), they offer a view of connected, negotiated experiences: messy, prismatic, and compelling.

Creative Assignments

When teaching with historical memoirs, it is best to provide ways in which students can approach these materials creatively and think about them as specific interpretations of experience. A helpful starting point takes the form of asking students to consider hypothetically what their own memoirs might look like in the future, a question that most high school and undergraduate students have never considered. By starting with this broad look ahead (and perhaps even having students jot down possible major topics or entries they might include in such a future document), students have an opportunity to think critically about what it means to place oneself in relation to the past and present. Moreover, in imaginatively narrating their own experience, they step out of the present and into the position of a backward-looking perspective in the future—mirroring the ways in which memoirists construct their narratives as intersections of past, present, and future views. While this often presents a jarring shift in thinking and writing for many, it allows students to better understand how memoirs are the result of interpretative meaning-making from a personal perspective, artifacts of memory always intertwined with micro- and macro-level histories. They are as much about the writers' relationships to time and space as they are about the larger worlds framed by their words.

With these frames in mind, and moving closer to the memoirs as source materials in the classroom, students often respond well to interpretative exercises in which they have creative input. In addition to situating memoirs as products of specific historical contexts and afterlives, students can respond to narrative problems as historical "fact-checkers." This may take the form of examining errors and silences in close readings—issues of which students may now be better aware after com-

prehending the selectivity of their future memoirs. In light of the specific cultural lenses through which memoirists produced their views, students should pay close attention to the writers' use of language and possible silences—the friction between these accounts and contextual histories previously mentioned. At the same time, the instructor should often remind students that memoirs are fragments of historical experience and not the whole; like physical lenses, they shed light and reveal detail while simultaneously framing and shaping reality. This, however, should not serve as a catchall excuse to dismiss memoirs on the grounds of bias and to shy away from critically analyzing their contents, problematic or productive. Rather, the instructor

should encourage students to be self-reflective and generously open-minded in working with these documents—warts and all—and to see their own readership as not merely a point of interpretative superiority (which is all too often an uninterrogated assumption). This approach can reveal our positionality as twenty-first-century audiences and history-makers, the memoirists' roles as

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observer-participants in their own times, and all history as diverse interpretations of reality. With students considering what they and the writers might “get wrong” and “get right,” course activities and assignments may involve them “assisting” the memoirist by producing scholarly commentaries (like a short book review or editorial abstract) in which they outline how the narrative, and their readings of it, may be buttressed with other voices.

Moving from critique to creation (or combining the two), here are further activities in which students may productively engage with memoirs. The first is an off-the-cuff exercise in which they imagine what the writer would say about their experiences if Twitter existed in the person's lifetime, whether in the moments discussed in the memoir or looking back from the future point of the narrative's creation. Students then convert key issues from the memoir into 280-character tweets. Beyond its fun and unconventional nature, this exercise distills broad issues into succinct statements and topics of importance, jump-starting discussions on the memoir (hashtags and emojis aside, one potential result is the creation of thesis statement elements that may be useful in other course assignments based on the source). It also brings issues closer to social media forms with which students are more familiar and leads them to think about varying modes of knowledge transmission and their impact on the reception of historical narratives. By engaging in this kind of translation, students not only bring their social media skills to bear on the material, but also imaginatively enter the world of memoir-as-interpretation while unveiling core ideas and areas of importance that stand out to them.

Creativity, of course, does not mean loss of critical distance. A question that often arises when reading memoirs is the presence of other lives that intersect with (or are privileged or downplayed by) the author's. Why are some individuals referenced by name and in detail, and others in vague generalities? How do memoirs construct or privilege certain narratives while obfuscating others? Using these questions as points of departure, students may produce “countermemoirs” from the points of view of people referenced in the original text, writing as though they were the characters in the narrative looking back at the narrator. This entails research in the historical contexts discussed by the memoir, as well as a crucial evaluation of plausible other voices. What might the Chinese Christian “Bible woman” have written in her own diary or memoirs about her Western missionary colleagues? Or a Japanese military officer about a local collaborator? Or a Red Guard who heard Mao speak: a disembodied voice across a sea of people in Tiananmen Square? The list goes on. By literally flipping the script, students expose the lenses and intersecting planes of gender, religion, politics, race, class, and a score of other identities behind individual memoirs. And in doing so, they recognize that rather than being a “master narrative,” memoirs exist in a network of other lived experiences that affect each other. In the conventional reading, one voice is foregrounded while others are elided, erased, or otherwise reframed. But by examining the possibilities of “countermemoirs,” this exercise demonstrates that different, oppositional, or complementary threads emerge from the memoir-as-artifact, coloring the fabric of historical documentation.

Students then convert key issues from the memoir into 280-character tweets.



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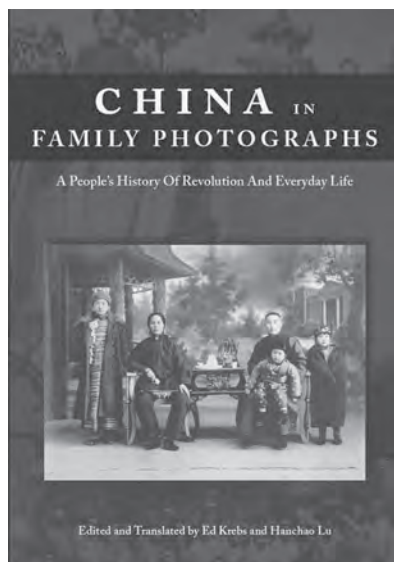
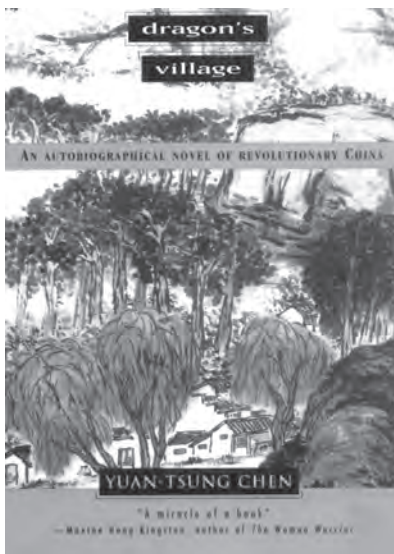
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It is worth mentioning that all these activities work well with personal historical narratives beyond memoirs.¹⁶ These approaches are equally effective with such sources as private letters, travel narratives, newspaper reports, and many others. But the utility of merging creative work with memoirs lies in the potential conversations between the historical narrator and the students as historical respondents. By providing these new forms of engagement, we are able to show that memoirs are not only reflections of the writer's personal voice and place in history, but also those of our own.

Identifying Pedagogically Useful Memoirs

Compared to scholarly works, memoirs tend not to be reviewed critically for their educational value. *Education About Asia* is one of the few Asian studies journals that regularly publishes reviews of memoirs.¹⁷ Columbia University's *Asia for Educators* website offers lesson plans with discussion questions for several memoirs, including Yuan-tsung Chen's *Dragon's Village* (on the 1950s land reform)¹⁸ and Shen Tong's *Almost a Revolution* (on the 1989 popular political movement), as well as Cultural Revolution memoirs. Cengage's *Histories of Everyday Life in Totalitarian Regimes*, published in 2015, includes overviews and scholarly assessments of memoirs related to the PRC, primarily from the Cultural Revolution period, including Ji-li Jiang's *Red Scarf Girl* (New York: Harper, 1997), frequently assigned in middle and high school classrooms. Also included are reviews of memoirs by political dissidents of the post-Mao Era, including Wei Jingsheng and Harry Wu, and post-Mao oral history collections compiled by Sang Ye and Xinran.¹⁹

Many memoirs can be difficult to incorporate into teaching, other than as part of independent student projects, because of their length. Teachers who lack the time to wade through entire books can find excerpts of memoirs in document collections.²⁰ A good source of short memoirs is *China in Family Photographs*. The forty-one essays included in this book appeared originally in a Chinese periodical called *Old Photos*, which invites its readers to send in a family photo and the story behind it. Each of the personal vignettes could form the basis of a class activity.²¹ Moving beyond the written word, a University of Pittsburgh team has been collecting oral histories of the Cultural Revolution in the form of audio files. The program, called China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project, limits each interview to ten minutes and makes the video files available online with English subtitles.²² Most participants share their most vivid memories of the Cultural Revolution; interviewees who were too young to have experienced it discuss how they first learned about it. These interviews are very well-suited for class discussions; individual students or groups of students can learn about and share the experiences of one interviewee, and then the class as a whole can compare all the perspectives and discuss why they vary. ■

NOTES

1. Adam D. Frank, "Martial Musings: A Portrayal of Martial Arts in the Twentieth Century," *Education About Asia* 6, no. 3 (2001): 62–63.
2. Jung Chang, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 22.
3. Peter Zarrow, "Meanings of China's Cultural Revolution: Memoirs of Exile," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 7, no. 1 (1999): 165–191. See also Denise Y. Ho, "Teaching China's Cultural Revolution," *The PRC History Review* 4, no. 2 (2019): <https://tinyurl.com/y4gmaq8q>. This special issue of *The PRC History Review* is devoted entirely to pedagogical questions.
4. Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, eds., *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001).
5. Ida Pruitt, *A Daughter of Han: The Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967).
6. Lydia H. Liu, "The Ghost of Arthur H. Smith in the Mirror of Cultural Translation," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 20 (2013): 406–414.
7. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Mirror in the Shrine: American Encounters with Meiji Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).
8. Robert A. Rosenstone, "Introduction: Practice and Theory," in *Experiments in Rethinking History*, ed. Alun Munslow and Robert A. Rosenstone (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 5, ProQuest eBook Central, accessed June 19, 2020.
9. Claire Malcolm Lintilhac, *China in Another Time: A Personal Story* (Montpelier, VT: Rootstock Publishing, 2019); companion website with teacher resources available at <https://tinyurl.com/y2j28qrs>. After WWII, Lintilhac's husband became a vice president of C. V. Starr & Co. Their son Philip contributed a preface for the book, which was edited by Doug Wilhelm.
10. Harold M. Tanner, *China: A History* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).
11. Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1909). While memoirs by missionaries, diplomats, and military personnel are too numerous to list, the *Frog in a Well* blog provides an excellent starting point for missionary sources, including open-access memoirs: <https://tinyurl.com/y4eymbyr>.
12. Yung, 37.
13. Yung, 34–41, 137–159, and 180–215. These are representative sections of Yung Wing's memoirs that may be assigned in a modern China history course or seminar on China–US encounters.
14. See Pearl S. Buck, *My Several Worlds: A Personal Record* (New York: Pocket Books, 1954); Han Suyin, *The Crippled Tree* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), *A Mortal Flower* (New York: Putnam, 1966), *Birdless Summer* (New York: Putnam, 1968), and *My House Has Two Doors* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980); Scott Tong, *A Village with My Name: A*

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Family History of China's Opening to the World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); and Jennifer Lin, *Shanghai Faithful: Betrayal and Forgiveness in a Chinese Christian Family* (Latham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

15. One recent example is Tom Scovel, *The Year China Changed: Memories of Remarkable Events and Extraordinary People* (Mustang, OK: Tate Publishing, 2013). The bibliography for David Hollinger's *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) offers other such sources relating to the writings of missionary children.
16. In parallel with memoirs, the coauthor successfully applies these activities to his edited collection of primary source letters from wartime China. See Charles Bright and Joseph W. Ho, eds., *War and Occupation in China: The Letters of an American Missionary from Hangzhou, 1937–1938* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).
17. For example, see Jimin Kim, Beverly Milner (Lee) Bisland, and Sunghee Shin, "Teaching about the Comfort Women during World War II and the Use of Personal Stories of the Victims," *Education About Asia* 24, no. 3 (2019): 58–63. Other essays on memoirs may be found by doing a keyword search for "memoir" in the online archives.
18. Historian Brian DeMare assesses and interprets *Dragon Village*, along with William Hinton's *Fanshen* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1966) and other accounts of land reform, including fiction, in *Land Wars: The Story of China's Agrarian Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).
19. Thomas Riggs, ed., *Histories of Everyday Life in Totalitarian Regimes* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2015).
20. See, in particular, Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1993); and Janet Chen, et al. (eds.), *The Search for Modern China, A Documentary Collection*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2014).
21. Ed Krebs and Hanchao Lu, eds., *China in Family Photographs: A People's History of Revolution and Everyday Life* (Encino, CA: Bridge21 Publications, 2018).
22. China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project: <https://tinyurl.com/y5pf755z>.



Screen capture from the CR/10 Project Trailer.
Source: *China's Cultural Revolution in Memories: The CR/10 Project* website at <https://tinyurl.com/y5pf755z>.

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