

Teaching with Kristin Stapleton's *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family*

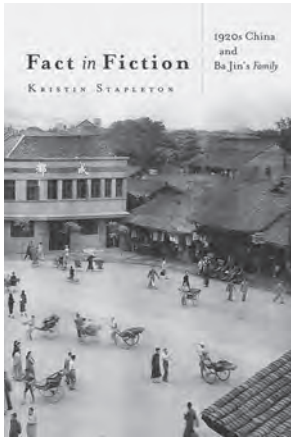
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FACT IN FICTION: 1920S CHINA AND BA JIN'S FAMILY

BY KRISTIN STAPLETON

STANFORD, CALIFORNIA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016

296 PAGES, ISBN 978-1503601062, PAPERBACK



Historian Lawrence Stone once noted that “a diet of statistics makes a dry and unpalatable meal unless washed down with the wine of human personality.”¹ History courses often come alive when personal narratives are assigned. Even so, sometimes those narratives lack the verve to maintain the reader’s interest (ask anyone who has read Marco Polo’s *Travels* cover to cover). Then there is the possibility of bringing fictional accounts into the class, yet doing so raises the issue of how to use nonfactual texts to support the factually based discipline of history.

Kristin Stapleton has engaged students learning about early twentieth-century China by assigning Ba Jin’s novel *Family*, part of a trilogy titled the *Turbulent Stream*. Stapleton first points out that “Ba Jin’s writing slights social history in favor of emotional impact” (6). Stapleton’s *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin’s Family* attempts to fill the gaps and misrepresentations of the fictional account through a study of the city of Chengdu, Sichuan, where Ba Jin’s novel is set. Stapleton’s work can serve as an excellent model for bringing together fictional accounts and historical research. At the end of this review, I recommend some ways that Stapleton’s and Ba Jin’s texts can be used in the classroom, and also suggest parallels that could be developed with some other fictional accounts popular in Asian history classes.

Stapleton’s goal is “to reveal how this era was experienced in Chengdu, and to do so by plotting several transects through the historical record, so as to detect waves and ripples of social change not only in the thoughts and lives of the educated class but also in other subsets of the urban population: entrepreneurs, merchants, laborers, beggars and slaves, soldiers, students, and the small foreign community” (14). Although the book’s subtitle suggests the focus is on the 1920s, the work really provides much more by including information from the late 1800s to the 1930s. Yet, the heart of the analysis is the human experience of the turbulent period from the Qing Dynasty’s collapse in 1911 to the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949.

To achieve this, Stapleton organizes the book into chapters that use a character from Ba Jin’s novel as an entry to one facet of Chengdu. The first chapter examines the lot of “slave girls” (*binü* 婢女, or *yatou* 丫頭 in Mandarin), describing the legality of selling and buying young females, the hold their purchasers had over them, and the general prospects of these girls. The one place where I might disagree with Stapleton is in her translation of these terms as “slave girl.” She notes that previous

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translators have used the same language, but that Sidney Shapiro’s 1958 translation of *Family* used “bondmaid” (19). Stapleton chose “slave girl” due to the complete control masters had over their purchased servants, including the responsibility of “choosing a mate” (either marriage or concubinage) at the end of the contracted terms of service. This last part is what makes “bondmaid” seem more appropriate. The sample contract Stapleton provides stipulated a term of service (27). This suggests more of a parallel to bonded labor in Western history, rather than the status of slaves in the Atlantic Triangle Trade. These are the difficulties translators face. On the one hand, “bondmaid” seems too tame for the situation of these commodified women in China’s patriarchal system; on the other, “slave girl” seems to exceed this situation for readers more familiar with slavery in the Americas. This problem of translation can also lead to interesting classroom discussions on comparative history.

The fourth chapter, “Sedan-Chair Bearers, Beggars, Actors, and Prostitutes: The Worlds of the Urban Poor,” examines the life of the urban poor who were not in service to the gentry families. Stapleton notes that the urban underclass is nearly absent in Ba Jin’s work, which makes her work on them all the more important (112 and 118). “Juexin’s City: The Chengdu Economy,” the third chapter, looks at the attempts to modernize Chengdu in light of the turmoil in the early twentieth century. The discussion of boy apprentices, who, like the slave girls, were also contracted labor, is interesting for talking about the gendered dynamics of child labor in Chengdu (95). More on changing gender dynamics is found in the sixth chapter, “Qin: Chengdu and the ‘New Woman,’” which looks at the way images of the modern woman were adopted and opposed in Chengdu. According to Stapleton, Ba Jin, like most reformers, homogenized the female experience as one of universal oppression (156). As with the other themes addressed in *Fact in Fiction*, the historical reality is multifaceted. The ability of women to engage in public life, education, and commerce varied greatly depending upon social class, family background, and individual determination. The overarching trend, though, is one of growing social acceptance of women as public figures. It would seem that one of the greatest sources of opposition to this trend was not the gentry as much as the fraternal gangs that rose to prominence in the period (173).

Chapter 2 shifts to the top of the social spectrum to describe the worldview of the gentry patriarchs who headed the traditional family Ba Jin railed against. One of the great strengths of Stapleton’s book is her ability to convey the concerns of people from very different levels of society in their own terms. Without defending the traditional family, Stapleton makes clear the Confucian moral basis for patriarchy and hierarchy. While reformers like Ba Jin saw the family system as stunting individual development, the Confucian patriarchs believed reinforcing hierarchical roles led to familial, social, and even cosmic harmony (76–77). Moreover, Stapleton points out that, even before the fall of the Qing, Confucian gentry were not strict conservatives holding on to all aspects of tradition. Instead, many embraced the pairing of “substance-function” (*tiyong* 體用) that advocated maintaining the “substance” of Chinese morality and culture, while adopting practical “functional” techniques from Western science and technology (58). In a similar vein, Stapleton reveals the complexity of local politics in the fifth chapter (“Students, Soldiers, and Warlords”)

and the seventh chapter (“Juehui: Revolution, Reform, and Development in Chengdu”). Arguing that most scholarship on the period focuses on the conflict between Nationalists and Communists in eastern Chinese cities, Stapleton strives to describe the complexity, conflict, and confusion of the period in the interior city of Chengdu (185). If one took Ba Jin’s trilogy as an accurate representation, the picture would be a simple struggle between traditional, conservative forces and progressive, liberating forces.

Everyone in Chengdu was affected by nearly forty years of civil war. In each chapter, Stapleton underscores the crippling effect civil war had on China after the Qing collapsed. She also makes clear that many in Chengdu saw some of the warlords as potential beacons of progress (139). One even promoted a public role for women. However, the rapid turnover of who controlled Chengdu made civil government ineffective. This, in turn, led to the rise of gangs. In Chengdu and its environs, the “Gowned Brothers” became a source of stability. The price, though, was their support of prostitution, the opium trade, and gambling (146). Militarists and the gangs encouraged opium farming and production as a source of revenue. This reduced the amount of land producing food, while not benefiting the farmers (102). The presence of gangs and the lack of civil government impeded the reforms people like Ba Jin longed for. However, Stapleton also demonstrates that many in Sichuan sought reform without appealing to party politics. People in Chengdu believed the political parties represented the interests of eastern cities, not those of the interior (186). The Chengdu Stapleton presents is an excellent case study of the tensions and issues that severely handicapped efforts to produce positive change in the early part of the twentieth century.

By drawing upon a variety of sources, Stapleton shines light on multiple trends not apparent in the *Turbulent Stream*. She highlights Ba Jin’s lack of discussion of democratization, women’s liberation, Western-style institutions, militarization, and economic instability in the series (3). Stapleton supplements Ba Jin’s account with contemporary information from Ida Pruitt’s interviews with Mrs. Ning in *A Daughter of Han*, Maria Jashock’s modern scholarship on slave girls, diaries of other Chengdu citizens (particularly the reform-minded Wu Yu), and a 1909 Chengdu encyclopedia. These sources are further bolstered by archival research in a variety of fields.

Teasing out the complexity of the historical context of Chengdu and presenting it in clear, structured prose is a strength of the book; it could be assigned in an introductory survey. Stapleton’s introduction leads the reader through the main themes, clarifies the purpose of the book, and introduces the chapter structure. Then, each chapter begins by connecting a larger historical theme to a character or passage in *Turbulent Stream*. These chapter introductions often conclude or lead into questions that will be answered in the chapter. After providing an evidentially grounded discussion, chapters conclude with the significance for understanding the period. Even if one did not assign Stapleton’s work in an introductory survey, an instructor could assign Ba Jin’s work for students while the instructor reads Stapleton’s work to be able to supplement class discussion with historical information.

The strong structure of *Fact in Fiction* suggests another way one might use the book in conjunction with Ba Jin’s *Family* in a seminar on Modern China. *Fact in Fiction* is the sort of work I walk students through to help them understand the structure of scholarship: topic of interest, research questions, evidence from sources, analysis, and conclusions regarding larger significance. One could begin a seminar by reading *Family*, allowing students to trace out topics of interest, and then shifting to a research component in which they develop research questions, find sources, and develop a factually based project tailored to the individual student’s interests. Given the amount of English-language material (both primary and secondary)

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available for the period, students should be able to engage the complexity of the period on their own. Stapleton’s book provides an excellent model for doing so. In a history seminar, I would probably use it in conjunction with William Cronon’s website on conducting research. Although Cronon is a historian of the American environment, the information on his site can be adapted to most historical research.²

Stapleton’s project can be a model for similar work in other periods and places. An analogy that leaps to mind is studying Heian Japan by using Murasaki Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji* in conjunction with Ivan Morris’s *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*. For those working in Global History or interested in drawing larger connections in Asia, Amitav Ghosh’s recent *Ibis Trilogy* could be useful. Ghosh’s trilogy ranges throughout the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Its characters come from India, Britain, France, the United States, the Indonesian archipelago, and China. The *Ibis Trilogy* was recently the focus of a Roundtable in the December 2016 issue of *The American Historical Review*.

Back to the point that Lawrence Stone raised: for many undergraduate students, history courses are dreaded as a parade of soulless names and dates. Bringing fictional accounts into history courses can introduce “the wine of human personality”; however, as historians, we cannot become besotted with the tale and forget to question its relation to factual evidence. In a classroom, the intersection of fiction and historical research can open many engaging avenues for intercultural education and developing research skills. Kristin Stapleton’s *Fact in Fiction* is an excellent example of a work that can be assigned for history survey students solely for its information and analysis; however, it can be equally valuable as a template for research projects focusing on modern Chinese history. ■

NOTES

1. Lawrence Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.
2. William Cronon, “Learning to Do Historical Research: A Primer for Environmental Historians and Others,” *Learning Historical Research*, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/mszvqcg>.

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