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**HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY
IN
MODERN CHINA**

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE RESEARCH SCHOOL OF PACIFIC STUDIES
EAST ASIAN HISTORY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

Unless otherwise stated, this is my original work

BRIAN MOLOUGHNEY

Abstract

This thesis is a study of history and biography in modern China. It is historiographical in focus, examining one way in which the writing of history has changed during the course of the twentieth century. As a biographical perspective was central to traditional Chinese historical writing, such a study of the relationship of biography and history can help reveal what it is that distinguishes modern historical writing from the tradition out of which it has emerged.

The first chapter looks at the origins of biographical writing in China, the traditional relationship between biography and history, and the dominance of a biographical perspective on the past. Chapter Two provides an assessment of how that traditional relationship between history and biography changed during the early twentieth century, the transition from the traditional practice of biographical history to the writing of modern historical biographies. Chapter Three then looks in detail at the work of Zhu Dongrun, at his views on what modern biography should be and at his biography of the late Ming scholar and statesman Zhang Juzheng. In Chapter Four the focus shifts to a consideration of the re-evaluation of biography and of the role of the individual in history during the early years of the People's Republic. Chapter Five is devoted to the historical and biographical writing of Wu Han, and, in particular, to the way political changes influenced his biography of the first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. Finally, in the Epilogue, brief consideration is given to the revival of biographical writing during the 1980s. By exploring the evolving relationship between history and biography, it is hoped that this thesis will contribute to an appreciation of how modern Chinese have reshaped their past in order to give it new significance.

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從列傳到傳記

The drawing of characters is one of the most splendid, and, at the same time, one of the most difficult ornaments of historical composition.

Hugh Blair *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London:W. Creech, 1783) vol. 2. p.281.

Preface

Do you know that since the creation of heaven and earth
 there have always been ghosts who remain deathless?
 The sage, the virtuous, the faithful and the filial
 have their deeds written in books...
 and they live on eternally.¹

One of the principal ways to establish a permanent presence in Chinese culture, to live on beyond death in the minds of others, was to find favour with the official historians. Inclusion in an official history carried such status that the record of an individual life might then attract the attention of storytellers and dramatists, and in this way filter out beyond the world of the literate elite and enter the collective memory of the society at large. This myth-making process, the creation of "ghosts who remain deathless," grew up largely around the records of individual lives, lives enshrined in the official histories. In China, historians were biographers. The writing of biography was an integral part of traditional historical writing. But how did this change in the twentieth century? How did the creation of a new sense of the past and the search for new myths affect this traditional relationship between history and biography? These are the questions that provide the focus for this study.

¹ Zhong Sicheng *Lu gui bu* [Register of ghosts] (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue reprint, 1957) preface, p.2.

The changes that have occurred in Chinese historical writing during the twentieth century have perhaps received less attention than they deserve. When compared with the interest that has been shown in literature, this lack of attention seems even more pronounced. Each year studies appear in English uncovering and examining aspects of twentieth century Chinese literature, especially the poetry and fiction of the May Fourth period. Much less attention is given to the historical writing of this period. The reason for this cannot be that the changes were less significant; they were not. And it seems all that much more puzzling considering the authoritative status which historical writing always enjoyed in the Chinese tradition. With the collapse of institutional Confucianism went the collapse of traditional historiography, and the subsequent attempt to refashion the world, to make it new, was just as prominent in historical writing during the twentieth century as it was in poetry and fiction.

The development of a Marxist historiography in China is the feature of modern historical writing which has received the most attention, which is perhaps only natural. Yet this was but one aspect only of the many changes that came to Chinese historical writing as a consequence of the collapse of the Confucian tradition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A characteristic of the new history that emerged during this period was its great diversity. Marxist historical writing developed amidst this diversity and even once it became the new orthodoxy it was far from static. Historians interpreted Marxist ideas about the past within the context of the wider changes and developments that had occurred in historical writing since the beginning of the twentieth century. The intention in this thesis, therefore, is to look at those wider changes, not just focus on the consequences of the adoption of Marxist-inspired perceptions of the past.

The particular focus of the thesis, its concern with the relationship between history and biography in the modern period, is a reflection of the nature of the tradition of historical writing in China. It was biography that dominated in traditional historical compilations; but did this continue to be the case with modern historical writing? If the biographical perspective was central to traditional historical writing, how did this change in the twentieth century? How did perceptions of both biography and history alter? In what way did changes in the understanding of what history was affect biographical writing, and how did changes in the understanding of what biography was affect historical writing? Did biography continue to be seen primarily as the work of the historian, or did modern biographers perceive of their craft as distinct from history? These are the sorts of questions that lie at the heart of this study. In reflecting on these questions it is hoped that something of the diversity of modern Chinese perceptions of the past will be revealed, and that this will add to our understanding of what was 'new' in the practice of both modern historical writing and the craft of modern biography.

The first chapter of the thesis examines the tradition of Chinese historical writing, and the place of biography in that tradition. By looking at the development of this tradition a better understanding can be gained of the significance of the changes that came in the twentieth century. Chapter Two then turns to the transformation of historical writing that came with the spread of new ideas about the past from the late nineteenth century onwards. These new perceptions of the past not only affected the way people viewed the historical tradition, they also influenced their understanding of how the past should be portrayed. Biography lost the status it had enjoyed in traditional historiography as new narrative perspectives were developed to respond to the new questions that were being asked about the past. Chapter Three then

focuses on the work of one scholar who saw these changes as beneficial to biographical writing. He wished to see biography freed from the constraints which the requirements of historiography had imposed. The transformation from traditional biographical history to modern historical biography, which was discussed in general in Chapter Two, is looked at in more specific detail in this third chapter.

Chapter Four deals with the changes that came after 1949 and the attempts to define what was required of history under the People's Republic. One of the central issues debated during these years was the role of the individual in history and the place of biography in historical writing. These debates are discussed within the context of earlier perceptions of these same issues. The fifth chapter then looks in more detail at the work of a single historian who wished to see some continuity between traditional China and the China of the People's Republic, and who was an outspoken advocate of the value of a biographical perspective on the past. Thus, this chapter is concerned with the politics of historical biography as seen through the writing of one historian. Finally, in the Epilogue, consideration is given to the revival and popularity of biographical writing in the 1980s. Despite the debates of the early years of the People's Republic, it seems that biography is now accepted as an integral part of the historian's work. The principal form which this biographical writing takes, the independent study of a 'life and times' nature, was a product not of Marxist historiography itself but of the wider changes that had occurred in historical writing during the first part of the twentieth century. The thesis is thus concerned with the way the Chinese tradition of biographical history was transformed, leading to a situation where independent historical biographies are seen as just one sub-genre, and not the dominant form, of modern historical writing.

The thesis is a study in historiography, a study of the history of historical writing. But the focus is on the developing relationship between history and biography, and on the extent to which biography is seen to exist independently of history. When specific examples of biographical writing are introduced, the discussion is centred less on the subject of the biography and more on the way the work reflects changing developments in the relationship between history and biography in modern China. With such a focus, the aims of the historian or biographer, the way they perceive biography and its place in the historian's work, are more of interest than what they have to contribute to an understanding of the particular person or period about which they write.

Similarly, this is a study of the changing nature of modern Chinese perceptions of themselves and their tradition. It is not concerned with how they have seen the history of other places and peoples. For this reason, the historical and biographical writing discussed relates solely to the Chinese tradition, to Chinese people and Chinese events only. Chinese biographical and historical writing about foreign peoples and places is not considered. Nevertheless, the volume of material encompassed by such a study is large. Not all of it could be covered. The focus is therefore on that writing which is either representative of general trends or is of considerable significance in itself.

Where known, the dates for individuals are given at the time they first appear in the text. All Chinese and Japanese names, titles and terms mentioned in the text are included in the character glossary.

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