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Review of Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History

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Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History. By Joseph W. Esherick (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011) 374 pp. \$60.00 cloth \$24.95 paper

Ancestral Leaves is both a family history of Joseph Esherick's affines, a descent group of the Anqing Ye lineage of Anhui province, whose recorded history begins in the fourteenth century, and a wide-ranging history of modern China. A number of émigrés have written histories of their families during the modern era. Central to a number of these works has been an account of a family's successful positioning of itself in the elite during the twentieth century and its eventual victimization under the People's Republic. In contrast, Esherick places the similar experiences of the Ye family in historical context, balancing the personal and particular with a superb understanding of late imperial and modern politics, social history, and cultural change. The life histories of various family members are deeply researched and selections from their genealogical records, diaries, letters, literary works, and interviews show how they saw their the world and their choices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Esherick succeeds in humanizing the history of China's modern transition without losing a historian's perspective on the lives of his subjects. It is a wonderfully rewarding book.

Among the many themes running through *Ancestral Leaves*, I will address three. First, we see the broadening horizons of the family. Ye Kunhou, who established his line through his service to the Qing dynasty during the rebellions of the nineteenth century, did not really see beyond the empire. For him, the victories of foreign powers over the Qing were actually the defeat of foreign forces, and the opening of treaty ports the Qing's gift to the surrendering powers. His son, Ye Boying, equally successful in his official career, saw no further. In fact they did not really see beyond the interior of northern China and the court in Beijing; they were men of the interior, who took little or no note of the modernizing developments in the coastal cities. However Boying's grandson, Ye Chongzhi, who established himself up in the treaty port of Tianjin, turned from pursuing an official career to business, in which his success owed much to the family's political connections. His many sons (by two concubines) took advantage of new opportunities in business, science, politics (the Communist Party and the liberal Democratic League but not apparently the Guomindang), and even entertainment. By and large they aspired to national prominence but for some this now included studying abroad in Japan and the US. The last generation covered in the book has seen seven children seek advanced degrees and settle in the US. Their horizons have gone from a city in Anhui to encompass the globe.

The cultural worlds of Kunhou and Boying were "traditional" in the sense that they acquired literati cultural skills such as poetic composition and art collecting and adopted a very conservative Confucian political view. For them the rebellion that wracked the nineteenth century were attributable to misconduct by state officials, a belief that required assuming that the political system was perfect in principle and could orchestrate social harmony were it not flawed in its effectuation. At the same time they held that government should interfere as little as possible society, which required assuming that left to their own devices the people could take care of themselves and that by nature people would act harmoniously. The events that marked their lifetimes contradicted both assumptions, from which they concluded not that they were mistaken about state and society but that those who rebelled had to be suppressed without mercy. Neither of them were true products of the examination system, although their education was grounded in the examination curriculum; their rise was facilitated by the purchase of degrees and offices, meritorious service, and the seeking out of connections among other Anhui natives. They were typical of some portion of Qing officialdom, but one would like to know more about what they were not: what the other points of view existed at the time, what other types of officials were active? Can it be shown that their limited intellectual horizons were in fact more typical of North China officials, officials in the interior in general, than the were of natives of the coastal provinces or of the south more generally?

The second theme is the change in family culture, from the patriarchal large family that was maintained from Kunhou to Chongzhi to the nuclear families of Chongzhi's children. The Chinese state has often been ambivalent about large families, I think, honoring them in the abstract but in practice seeing the value of family division and the multiplication of tax-paying households. Kunhou's commitment to family was focused on his descendants, he and his progeny were not interested in sharing their wealth and networks with the kin who remained in Anqing (despite the entreaties of those kin), and in fact their recent reconnection to the Anqing lineage seems to have been arranged as part of the Esherick's research

(although some lineages today are trying to reestablish lost connections on their own). The multi-generational family – in which education took place at home, women were kept inside, marriages were arranged on the basis of matching status, and family division was postponed as long as possible – were elite families by definition and maintaining such a family was a mark of elite status. The splintering of these families beginning in the 1920s was a product of the dislocations of war, new ideas, and state policy. As a result elites began to conclude that there was little advantage to be had by maintaining a large family and when, during the political campaigns of the 1950s and 60s, political character was held to be in the blood, there was much to be gained by minimizing ties and obscuring ancestral connections. And yet this cannot be entirely the case, for today in some regions in the south predominantly single-surname villages abound, local industries are owned by descent groups, genealogies are being recompiled, and the locality is once again the focus of identity. Is it possible that when Ye Kunhou and his sons broke with their Anqing kin they were choosing to make government service the family business – at a time when connections and nepotism offered many opportunities for a career in government to men without higher examination degrees – and no longer saw any value in the tradition of combining occasional official status with long-term embeddedness in local elite society?

A third theme has to do with the Ye family as an elite family. They were, Esherick says, an elite of a “middling sort” (xi), which I take to mean that among the few percent of the population that composed the political, business, and academic elites of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were some ahead of them and some behind them. This was supposed to be a safe place to be, or so the aristocrat Yan Zhitui writing in the sixth century had advised his descendants. The Ye brothers, whether they served the Party or were on the state payroll, suffered during the PRC’s political campaigns, but afterwards they were restored to status, they reknit their connections to each other, they used their positions to benefit their kin, their children entered universities, and they established members abroad. Is it a retrospective and outsider’s view that leads me to think they were putting into effect a successful strategy for maintaining the elite status of their family? Esherick notes that in the transition from the Qing to the Republic marriage alliances continued to be status-based and that official status under the Qing still mattered to Ye marriages in the early Republic. Once marriages came to be based on personal choice rather than parental arrangement, did status-based marriage come to an end? And does personal marriage choice and the rise of the nuclear family mean that in some sense the Ye family as a corporation no longer exists or will soon cease to exist? Many have observed that the families of high officials today intermarry, but is the same happening among other kinds of elites? The social processes of China’s past allowed for both a degree of social mobility and elite self-perpetuation. It is possible that these processes, the subject of much research by social historians including Esherick, always pertained to families that sought a degree of political involvement? In which case, has the current generation of the Ye family, by turning away from politics (the one member who was rising in government suffered an untimely death), also removed itself from this pattern?

Much of the social history of Chinese families since the twelfth century has been written about the south, with north China only now beginning to gain attention. This history of the Ye succeeds in telling the story of modern China through a branch of a southern lineage that becomes a northern elite family. A generation from now I hope someone will pick up their story, at which point perhaps it will be a case study of a new kind of international family, spreading across the globe from China.

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