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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation* by Laifong Leung; *Modern Chinese Writers: Self-Portrayals* by Helmut Martin and Jeffrey Kinkley

Review by: Haili Kong

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Morning Sun: Interviews with Chinese Writers of the Lost Generation. Laifong Leung. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994. 392 pp. + xliii. \$59.95 (cloth); \$24.95 (paper).

Modern Chinese Writers: Self-Portrayals. Ed. Helmut Martin and Jeffrey Kinkley. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992. 380 pp. + xliv. \$55.00 (cloth); \$22.00 (paper).

After reading literature and wading through complex critical essays about it, the reader may want to listen to the writers, to see how and what they say about themselves and their literary creation. Having coincidentally similar ideas, Laifong Leung and co-editors Helmut Martin and Jeffrey Kinkley have compiled anthologies that provide authorial background and supplementary materials for the study of contemporary Chinese literature through carefully selected writings from and interviews with some representative authors. It is also an interesting coincidence that the idea of publishing these books emerged only after the compilers began other projects on modern and contemporary literature, since both found an urgent need for “a very personal introduction to contemporary Chinese literature” (Martin xi) and bemoaned “the lack of detailed biographical information about post-Mao writers” (Leung xiii).

Leung’s book is a collection of interviews with twenty-six Chinese writers of the so-called lost generation (*zhìqīng* [educated youth]), so her focus is on the post-Mao era. Martin and Kinkley’s book has a broader temporal-spatial scope, covering modern Chinese writers of both elite and popular literature from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Further, the entries in *Modern Chinese Writers* appear in a number of writing styles, including essays or speeches; some have been previously published elsewhere but newly translated into English, while others are recently conducted interviews.

The blurb for Leung’s book, by Helmut Martin, states: “The book gives an emotional picture of a generation that has moved from Maoist frenzy toward disillusion and cynicism, feeling abandoned and deceived by a morally deteriorating party and the unattainable ideals of Chinese communism.” The major success of the book, in fact, is its ability to provide such an emotional picture. What makes the book emotional involves at least two elements.

First, the willingness and frankness of almost all the interviewees to speak candidly is discernible in each entry. These autobiographic accounts represent the mentality, anxiety, and frustrations of the whole generation of *zhìqīng*, to which most of the writers here belong. Painfully recalling memories of their own experiences during the

Cultural Revolution, some of the writers, such as Zhang Shengyou and Wang Zhaojun, we are told, even shed tears during the interview. Others spoke with great sadness, regret or pain about the past, in terms of society, family and themselves. Secondly, Leung states in her preface that “the fact that I could have been one of them if I had stayed in China makes me feel close to and identify with them” (xiii). Such a conscious alignment makes the author more emotionally engaging in exploring the lives of the *zhiqing* generation. As a return to the encouragement and conscience of the *zhiqing* writers, Leung feels that as their friend and researcher, “[she has] an obligation to bring their true voices to the world” (xv).

These voices aim at offering a picture of how the interviewees survived the Cultural Revolution, especially regarding their rustication, and how they became writers. Examining the connection between creative writing and historical events not only provides the reader with more firsthand personal information on these writers, but—more importantly—the investigation reveals the psychologically and mentally traumatic development of the *zhiqing* generation from twenty-six different perspectives, thus attempting to reconfigure contemporary Chinese history, as does Zhang Xinxin in *Chinese Lives: An Oral History of Contemporary China*. The focus of Leung’s book is not on history itself but on how history has affected the *zhiqing* generation and how history is viewed by them. The interviewer’s questions center on two pivotal events: the Red Guard Movement and the Rustication Movement, along with questions about family background, education, and the origin of the interviewees’ literary inspirations.

The *zhiqing* generation has played a variety of different roles. They have been victimizers, victims, and critics of Maoism, not just during the Cultural Revolution, but afterward as well (xvii). This book’s title, *Morning Sun*, was originally used by Mao Zedong as a metaphor urging the promising youth to be his revolutionary successors. That they never fulfilled his expectations can be seen through two typical examples, Li Ping and Zhu Xiaoping, the sons of high-ranking military officers. Li Ping spent ten years finishing his novella “When the Evening Clouds Disappear,” which declares his break with the privileged class and at the same time shows that he is “very critical of the CCP” (105). The result of Zhu Xiaoping’s re-education in the countryside is that he “want[s] to reveal the psychology of cadres at all levels: the thinking of a privileged feudal-patriarchy, their selfishness, and their petty intrigues” (287).

Among the twenty-six authors, only Li Ping, Lao Gui, Zhang Chengzhi and Zhu Xiaoping (Liang Xiaosheng may be included, although he himself does not mention it in the book) were former Red

Guards, the victimizers, because of their “good” class background. More than half of the interviewees were victims from the very beginning, whether as naive followers or as candid believers. Even fourteen-year-old Kong Jiesheng, born into a family with overseas connections, rejoiced as if he were “celebrating a festival” when the Cultural Revolution broke out. For most, the real turning point is rustication, which awakened them to the realization of being duped, cheated and abandoned. Writers such as Wang Anyi, Zheng Yi and Lu Xing'er voluntarily went to the countryside in response to Mao's directive but later became critics of the rustication. Wang Anyi confessed that the reason she decided to go to the countryside was mainly due to her unsteady “adolescent stage” (180). In looking back, she says, “the days of rustication were particularly horrifying to me,” and somebody thought “rustication could make our generation mature faster. But to sacrifice so much for the sake of speeding up maturity, I don't want it” (182). She claims that “some people said that rustication still had its good points; I don't agree with this view at all,” and “if one becomes a writer only by rustication, I would rather not be a writer” (182). In contrast to Wang's negation, however, Tie Ning frankly tells the interviewer that “I was very conscious of remolding myself. . . . My experience in the countryside is a rich source for my writing” (173).

As mentioned above, Leung's interviews with post-Mao writers in China initially served the purpose of aiding the compiler's research. Due to her haste in preparation, a lack of structural tightness and conceptual integrity are the major limitations of the book. First, the selection of writers clouds the definition of *zhiqing*. Concretely speaking, this group includes graduates from urban high schools between 1966 and 1975. Thus, Cheng Naishan, Lu Tianming and Deng Gang do not belong to the group of *zhiqing* at all. Leung herself is aware of Cheng Naishan's different status, as she says, “You are different from many writers in not having been sent to the countryside” (35). Cheng Naishan also points out that “we actually belong to two entirely different generations” (36). Zhang Shengyou and Wang Zhaojun also belong to another category: they are *huixiang zhiqing* [returning educated youth], referring to those who originally came from the countryside and returned after graduation.

Although in the book's subtitle Leung uses the broader definition of “the lost generation,” which could allow for a more generous selection, in her introduction she repeatedly emphasizes her focus on the *zhiqing* generation. The result of this contradiction of her claimed focus is confusion. If the criteria of selection depend on literary achievements rather than the particular group, then many more writers should have been selected, including such representative *zhiqing* writers

as Zhong Acheng, Zhang Xinxin, Liu Heng, Lu Xinhua and Bei Dao. Of course, it is not fair to expect any anthology like this to include a complete list, but a somewhat more scientific approach to selections would have increased the value of the otherwise useful reference work for the study of contemporary Chinese literature.

In addition, there are several obvious errors (including printing errors) in the book. Some are more serious than others. For instance, in the compiler's introduction to Mo Yan, it says that he "enrolled in the graduate program at the Lu Xun Literary Institute and Beijing Normal University" (144). But Mo Yan himself claims, "I have been accepted by the Lu Xun Literary Institute to take graduate studies. This is a joint program with Beijing University" (151); clearly Beijing University and Beijing Normal University are two different institutions. Another inaccuracy occurs in the introduction to Zhu Xiaoping, where it says, "In 1978 he obtained the highest mark in Xi'an District on the entrance examination and was admitted to the Central Drama Institute" (278). But Zhu himself says that "In 1978 . . . the Central Drama Institute was recruiting students. . . . There were four hundred candidates and I was the only one who was accepted" (286). The compiler appears to have misinterpreted the writer's comments, leading to a degree of confusion. Also in the introduction to Zhu, the compiler uses inconsistent romanization in referring to the same work, "Good Men and Good Women": she uses both "Hao man Laonü" and "Hao nan hao nu" (279); actually it should be "Haonan haonü."

The order of the interviews is arranged alphabetically according to the *pinyin* transcription of the writers' names. This arrangement is, according to the compiler, "not merely for the sake of convenience but also for the sake of preserving the writers' individuality" (xiv). Each entry has a brief introduction with a list of publications and their available English translations. At the end of the book, there are five appendixes, a glossary and an index. Especially useful for the readers are the Chinese-English glossary and the Chinese characters for the writers' names inserted before each entry.

In comparison, the book by Martin and Kinkley is more ambitious, more sophisticated, and better organized. First, it offers a much broader scene of Chinese literature. Most of the selected writers are contemporary, but eight of them belong to the first half of the twentieth century. Thus vertically the temporal span is stretched. Horizontally, the compilers have taken the bold step of selecting not only writers from mainland China but also representative writers from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Such a mosaic probes the notion of unity and interrelations in the literary arena among the three centers of contemporary China. This attempt to integrate contemporary Chinese literature with

a refreshing focus on political, social, and literary issues offers a new perspective on the horizon of Chinese studies.

Secondly, the selection of writers reflects a principle of the compilers that is not only addressed in their introductory essays in the book but is also discernible through the structural arrangement: "The authors in this anthology were generally selected in accordance with their international reputation, not because they are dissidents" (xviii). After much consideration, only forty-three writers¹ were finally chosen; they are classified in several given categories, mainly according to the characteristics of the writings selected here, but some according to their literary contributions or personal experiences.

Gao Xiaosheng, Gu Hua and Jia Pingwa, for instance, appear under the heading "Accounts of Rural Realities," since they are famous for creating "native-soil" works. Wang Anyi and Zhang Jie are naturally classified in the category "Against Complacency: Women Writers." Bai Hua and Liu Xinwu appear in the group "Further Victims of Politics in the Eighties," owing to their experience as political scapegoats in the 1980s. The reader must understand the connection between the writers and the heading of the category under which they are grouped; otherwise, there may be confusion. For example, Feng Jikai, under the heading "Historical Blunders," is represented by an essay about his motivation and inspiration when he started the short novel *Oh!* (1980) about the Cultural Revolution. Thus the heading refers only to his experience with this specific novel and not to his other literary works or his thematic concerns in general. In another case, Zhang Xinxin's first appearance in the book is under the heading "Documentary Literature," simply because of her book *Chinese Lives* (1985) and the content of the interview included here. In actuality, Zhang Xinxin's literary contributions go far beyond documentary literature. Han Shaogong is the only one selected in the category of "The Search for 'Roots.'" Of course, Han is not the only representative of this literary trend, and one might question why Jia Pingwa, who appears elsewhere, is not included in this category.

Worthy of attention also are the articles themselves. *Chuangzuo tan* [an author's talking about writing] is considered a special genre in China. "Writing" here has a broad connotation. It may refer to creative writing, the process of it, the writing background, inspiration, and effect. Many well-known writers write, or are invited to write, about

¹ The compiler expresses his regret that Bei Dao himself decided to keep his interview with Martin unrepresented in this anthology; otherwise there would have been forty-four entries (xii).

experiences not necessarily directly related to their literary creation. As Kinkley points out, "The discussions of art in these pages are austere and even vague. What sticks in the mind are the authors' moving accounts of social phenomena they have witnessed" (xix). This anthology provides the reader with a kaleidoscopic view of the writers not only as individuals but also as part of a larger society. Some accounts become very emotional and critical, such as Wang Ruowang's tragic story of his wife's death. This is not an ordinary eulogy but a realistic account of the suffocating political atmosphere in which most Chinese writers have been caught. From another angle, the description of Chen Rong's frustrating experience of her passage to becoming a successful writer enhances the reader's understanding of the Chinese intellectual's anxiety and fear in the face of an elitist society and an arrogant political power. Different from most writers, with their "obsession with China" or sense of mission, Zhong Acheng frankly expresses his view of literary writing as "the act of satisfying oneself" (113): "I've already come to see my writing as my business" (117). This interview would have also been a powerful contribution to Leung's *Morning Sun* if Leung had acquired it.

Although Hong Kong has been termed a cultural desert, the "martial-arts novel" (here identified as "adventure novel") has been accepted as a form of popular literature. Jin Yong, the only representative from Hong Kong, articulates his defense of the martial-arts novel as a genre that is, according to him, a continuation of classical chapter-driven fiction. Thus, in Jin's view, the martial-arts novel is not simply entertainment fiction, but carries the legacy of Chinese literature. He insists that "to write fiction is to seek beauty" (1973); this beauty is presented through martial chivalry or loyalty in general, and it reflects an extended worship of Chinese moral and ethical traditions. The selection of Jin Yong no doubt hints at the compilers' attitudes toward popular literature as well as their attempt to establish as complete a picture as possible for the reader to understand Chinese literature.

Most representative writers have been chosen here, though some of the most promising young writers, such as Su Tong, Mo Yan and Liu Heng from the mainland and Lin Yaode from Taiwan, are missing. Some of the category headings may be arguably neither accurate nor appropriate in terms of some writers or their writings. Leung's alphabetical arrangement of the interviews seems easier and less problematic for the reader to use, but I prefer Martin's more sophisticated arrangement, although the sheer number of headings (some overlapping) is daunting. This anthology functions as more than just a dictionary; by classifying writers, it gives the reader a sense of the existence of varying literary trends and styles. In addition, the book

conveniently provides the reader with an alphabetically arranged, detailed bibliography of the selected writers at the end of the book. The absence of Chinese characters is an impediment; in this aspect, Leung's addition of Chinese characters along with writers' names at the beginning of each entry and the glossary at the end of the book is to be applauded.

In spite of minor reservations, I recommend both anthologies as valuable tools for anyone interested in twentieth-century Chinese society, in particular the writing community.

Haili Kong