the Mao era in labour camps, in which he was to be "re-educated" and his life and thought repeatedly probed by the state. These constantly forced reflections on his life found expression in his fictional and non-fictional writings.

These seven case studies are preceded by Dryburgh's excellent introductory chapter, which draws out common themes and theoretical discussions about life writings. In their first, very dense, core chapter "Chinese life writing: themes and variations", Dauncey and Dryburgh outline how the conventions for life writings changed in China over the centuries depending on political fashions and intellectual ideals, from the earliest life writings in the Han Dynasty to the present.

The intriguing life stories discussed make *Writing Lives* a wonderful book. It successfully taps into the potential of collaborative research by bringing together the work of scholars who study different time periods and geographical regions. In this way, it evidences and brings to life the postcolonial claim that Chinese "tradition" was dynamic and multi-layered, rather than unchanging and stagnant. By choosing men's and women's, seventeenth- and twenty-first-century life writings, the authors cross boundaries the discipline sometimes draws along gender lines and between "imperial" (pre-1912) and "modern" China.

The volume's "inclusive" approach to life writings is highly commendable, as it opens up productive spaces without being constrained by academic genre constructs. However, I would have wished a more extensive discussion of the question of the extent to which Ruan Dacheng, Zhang Xianliang or Zhang Haidi depicted their own selves (or personas) in their fictional writings, rather than fictional characters that were partly inspired by the authors' life experiences. *Writing Lives* engages productively with theoretical writings on diaries, autobiographies and so forth. However, it would have been insightful to expand further the historical dimensions of the way these writings were produced or received, a theme Henrion-Dourcy starts to develop. How did actual audiences respond to the individuals' attempts to justify their lives through writings? Did the discussed diarists plan for their diaries to be published? Did people who reclaimed their lives against master or unfavourable narratives discuss this intention – although this is admittedly difficult to trace under the political conditions of the PRC.

Apart from these small points, *Writing Lives* is to be highly recommended to China scholars, and is full of fascinating case studies. It evidences once more how fruitfully the new angles of postmodern and postcolonial trends have contributed to the study of China. By building on these developments, *Writing Lives* succeeds in addressing the long-debated questions of conventions in life writings in a new, exciting and productive way.

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ZHANG DAYE:
The World of a Tiny Insect: A Memoir of the Taiping Rebellion and Its Aftermath, circa 1894. (trans. XIAOFEI TIAN)
viii, 200 pp. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2013. ISBN 978 0 295 99317 1.
doi:10.1017/S0041977X14000925

This book is not the product of academic research but rather the rediscovery of an old memoir by a witness to China's horrific bloodshed during the second half of the

nineteenth century, marked by the Taipings and Nians in China's most affluent region, the Yangtze Delta, commonly known as *Jiangnan* (currently southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang). The original title of the memoir is *Weichong Shijie*, and a copy is available at the National Central Library in Taipei.

The academic element of this book is its English translation from the Classical Chinese original by Xiaofei Tian, including many poems and annotations of a long chain of historical events in that region and the numerous relationships that the author had. Being a professional translator myself, I fully appreciate the efforts of the translator. Although I do not have Zhang Daye's original, judging by the annotations of historical events, I see the achievement of the translator in term of "faithfulness" (*xin*) and "accuracy" (*da*), vital for a good translation.

As regards the memoir, it is not the only work on the Taiping-Nian attacks on the Lower Yangtze during the 1850s and 60s. There is the multi-volumed Taiping History Museum (ed.), *Taiping Tianguo Shiliao Congbian Jianji* (*Essential Collection of Historical Materials of Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace*) (Beijing: Zhonghua Books, 1962) in which eye-witness reports and memoirs both adopted the moral judgement that the rebellion in question was in fact bandits rioting, and that ordinary citizens of China were the main victims of looting, raping, killing and slavery on an industrial scale.

It is worth noting that it was Western observers of the time, who did not seem to know much about Qing China, who dubbed the riot a "revolution" – e.g. W. Hewett and Company (ed.), *The Religious Precepts of the Tae-Ping Dynasty, with a Brief Account of the Chinese Revolution* (London: John Such, 1853); E.G. Fishbourne, *Impressions of China, and the Present Revolution: Its Progress and Prospects* (London: Thames Ditton, 1855); A.F. Lindley, *Ti-Ping Tien-Kwoh: The History of the Ti-ping Revolution* (London: Day and Son, 1866); C.C. Spielmann, *Die Taiping-Revolution in China, 1850–1864* (Halle: A.S., 1900). This view then became orthodoxy. In the hands of Marxists and Maoists, the terms "revolution" and "rebellion" are the only ones permitted to define the riot.

Zhang's memoir shows us once again that what happened in the delta had little that was revolutionary about it. To call a spade a spade, Zhang's witness account of an innocent boy makes this line of interpretation of the later Qing history far more credible than any of the ideologically charged assertions commonly circulating. First, the rioters were unpopular: very few locals joined them. Second, the main target of the Taipings and Nians was not the Qing state and its officials: rather, the rioters were after people's possessions. Third, the senseless destruction of innocent lives and property, especially arson, for which the Taipings were notorious, shows that there was no attempt to rebuild a new state for new governance by the rioters. Fourth, it was the Qing state and Qing officials (such as Zeng Guofan and his Hunan Army) that managed to pick up all the pieces left by the rioters and resume law and order in society. In other words, neither the Taipings nor the Nians represented any workable institutions which tried to organize Chinese society. As such, their defeat was inevitable. It is thus counterfactual to speculate what kind of social order the bandits would have established if they had prevailed. It is time put the record straight.

What strikes me most as an economic historian is how people at the grassroots level behaved when law and order were systematically violated and deliberately broken down by intruders (the Taipings came from the Pearl River region and the Nians from the Yellow River region). It becomes clear that the rioters' attacks united ordinary people in towns and villages. The strengths possessed by people in the delta were not eye-for-eye violence but loyalty, responsibility, resourcefulness, and community spirit, even sometimes in the cruellest way (e.g. a medical doctor

killed his own crying baby in order not to attract the attention of the Taiping looters to their hideout). Sharing was common, be it food, shelter, transport or cash. In particular, Confucian loyalty and responsibility saved the author's young life repeatedly by servants who would have been expected to join the riot from the dogmatic Marxian point of view. Here, the reader senses where the real value of the Chinese civilization lay: although the author viewed himself as an unworthy little insect (*weichong*), he was safe because of the help he received from other people. In the end it was those ferocious bandits that lost their heads.

The last point I wish to make is that the author came from a well-to-do family from the gentry (based on the facts that he was educated from a very young age, his family had several homes, and his father and grandfather had concubines) but he became interested in joining the bureaucracy only when his livelihood was in difficulty. This challenges the cliché that every man dreamed of being an official in China (this may be true today). Instead, the author's lifetime pursuits were travelling and composing poems, a Confucian middle-class lifestyle that he was brought up in, which seems to have been far more attractive than running an office. Indeed, as far as we can tell, in the Late Qing (*c.* 1850) the gentry-to-officials ratio was 57:1, and the population-to-officials ratio was 15,136:1! So, the author represented the mainstream of his stratum of the time. If so, all the alleged root causes of China's backwardness associated with Confucianism have become very questionable.

As an important primary source, I highly recommend the English version of this memoir to students of the modern history of China.

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NANYANG GUO:
Refining Nature in Modern Japanese Literature: The Life and Art of Shiga Naoya.
(AsiaWorld.) xiv, 205 pp. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014.
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Many books have been written about the special role played by nature in the Japanese cultural and literary tradition from ancient times until the present day. Indeed, it has become a cliché to claim that the Japanese are uniquely sensitive to natural phenomena. Of course, things are never as simple as that. For example, while it is true that nature's rhythms are strikingly embedded in traditional Japanese literary forms – Court poetry anthologies were divided into sections partly in accordance with the season referenced in the verse – more modern literature such as that describing the newly opened northern island of Hokkaido during the late nineteenth century revealed evidence of a deep aversion to any kind of natural wilderness that had not yet been tamed and humanized through repeated literary allusion over previous centuries.

In her new book *Refining Nature in Modern Japanese Literature: The Life and Art of Shiga Naoya*, Nanyang Guo argues that Shiga Naoya, one of Japan's most famous and revered modern authors, employed what Guo calls "subjective realism" as a way of offering deep insights into art and culture through close observations of the natural world. She makes a convincing case in this very well researched book.