MARJORIE DRYBURGH and SARAH DAUNCEY (eds):
Writing Lives in China, 1600–2010: Histories of the Elusive Self.
xii, 265 pp. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. £50.
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Writing Lives in China, 1600–2010 explores stories that tell individuals' lives spanning over five centuries, a wide range of social groups and regions. This edited volume emerged from an interdisciplinary workshop with the title "Writing Lives in China", held in March 2008 at the University of Sheffield.

When writing about life narratives in China, scholars have long drawn attention to the role genre, political and social conventions played in describing people's lives. This has raised the question of the extent to which these conventions hid the individuals' "true selves". In a postmodern vein, the authors of *Writing Lives* explore instead the "productive space" between the "life-as-written" and the "life-as-lived" (p. 2). This is a very fruitful exploration of the conventions question, which has been hovering around in much of the literature on auto/biographical writings, including in newer works on the topic. Also impressive is the volume's inclusive take on life writings (p. 3), which is not confined to writings labelled auto/biography, but also subsumes diaries, blogs, novels and plays. Tapping into recent trends in the study of Chinese auto/biography, this approach eschews the danger of being tied down by genre discussions.

One of the central themes of *Writing Lives* is the way in which individuals subtly subvert political master narratives through their own life writings. When composing autobiographical texts in the 1980s, female soldiers explicitly affirmed the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) claim to promote emancipation. But they described their daily experiences between the mid-1920s and 1949 in ways that indicated that emancipation had not yet been achieved (Nicola Spakowski). The disabled woman Zhang Haidi (b. 1955) rewrote in blogs and novels the image created by official biographies, which depicted her as the embodiment of CCP ideals of struggle and service to society (Sarah Dauncey). The Tibetan official Lhalu Tsewang Dorje (1914–2011), who worked for the People's Republic of China (PRC), affirmed in his officially solicited autobiography his loyalty to the PRC state, but the wording he chose was so formulaic that it appeared to undermine this claim (p. 218, Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy).

Writing one's own life to defend oneself against an unfavourable image is a strategy particularly relevant for figures whose lives were looked at askance by contemporaries and later generations. The seventeenth-century scholar-official Ruan Dacheng (1587–1646), who repeatedly threw in his lot with losing or unpopular factions, sought to reshape his image in the plays he wrote (Alison Hardie). Zheng Xiaoxu (1882–1938), a politician who served the Japanese puppet state Manzhouguo in China in the 1930s, attempted to do the same in his diary (Dryburgh).

With the nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectuals Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Hu Shi (1891–1962), Harriet T. Zurndorfer shifts the focus to people who shaped conventions and master narratives. Although these intellectuals supported women's emancipation, they wrote the Qing female scholar Wang Zhaoyuan (1763–1851) out of history, because Wang did not fit with their particular ideals for emancipation. This argument has elements in common with Dorothy Ko's famous *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth Century China* (Stanford, 1994). Choosing a different angle on the conventions question, Chloë Starr shows how the life of the twentieth-century writer Zhang Xianliang (b. 1936) was shaped by political ideals. Zhang spent long years during

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)
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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