

Abstract

The present dissertation investigates three self-narratives written by Chinese women autobiographers in the first half of the twentieth century: Chen Hengzhe's *Autobiography of a Young Chinese Girl*, Yang Buwei's *Autobiography of a Chinese Woman*, and Ling Shuhua's *Ancient Melodies*. Written with foreign audience in mind, these narratives provide a range of Chinese female images aiming to contest the predominant Western stereotypes about China and its people. Therefore the main argument of this study is that these women writers adopted the roles of cultural interpreters, which allowed them to position themselves as authoritative and representative voices and, at the same time, rejuvenate China's image in the global arena.

Scholarship in modern Chinese literature has already approached these texts from the perspectives of genre, gender, and translation studies providing many valuable insights into the questions of female subjectivity, autonomy and literary activity. This dissertation, however, adopts a new approach in that it applies various aspects of narrative theory in order to examine the autobiographies in question as spaces of intercultural communication (I apply Baker's term of narrative framing, Abbot's approach to narrative as a combination of a story and narrative discourse, and Fisher's paradigm of narration as a way of human communication).

Encouraged to write their life narratives by their foreign friends, these Chinese women writers enthusiastically responded to this call by taking authority into their hands and describing themselves and China on their own terms. Chen Hengzhe did so from the position of the woman scholar who, as a historian, possessed an ability to view and judge Sino-Western interactions from a larger perspective. Yang Buwei interpreted China for the West from the perspective of a "typical" Chinese woman with a quite atypical claim to have unique insights into both cultures. Finally, Ling Shuhua adopted the role of the woman artist who, as a true connoisseur of Chinese culture, had the authority to explain the beauty of its manifestations for the Western reader. The common feature of these women's self-narratives is that they establish human connections across country boundaries by transmitting ideas and images, thus creating a meaningful dialogue between cultures. To highlight these issues this study operates with such essential key concepts as narrative frames, images, representations, power/knowledge relationship, space and cross-cultural communication.