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Ripple on Stagnant Water by Li Jieren, and: Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family by Kristin Stapleton (review)

Shiamin Kwa
Bryn Mawr College, skwa@brynmawr.edu

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jointly made by civil and military leadership, the main reason for some PLAN strategists to hail the aircraft carrier decision is the leap in capability and strategy.

The book concludes with a summation of China's military transformation. Arguing that military transformation, almost by definition, is seldom complete, increased PLA power is fundamental to China's rise. Moreover, the conclusion that the PLA has transcended the stage of weapons R&D and entered a new stage of comprehensive modernization has profound implications.

This book is for those who study military transformation and those who study the impact of military transformation on China. It is also for China scholars. The author, You Ji, has once again written a book on the Chinese military that will be referenced again and again.

Elizabeth Van Wie Davis

Elizabeth Van Wie Davis is a professor of international politics and Asian affairs at Colorado School of Mines.

Li Jieren. *Ripple on Stagnant Water.* Bret Sparling, translator. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013. xvii, 316 pp. Hardcover $65.00, ISBN 978-1-937385-25-5. Paperback $25.00, ISBN 978-1-937385-24-8.

Kristin Stapleton. *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's* Family. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016. xi, 280 pp. Hardcover $85.00, ISBN 978-0-8047-9869-3. Paperback $25.95, ISBN 978-1-503601-06-2.

> I believe that if there were ever any doubt as to the authenticity of the Koran, this lack of camels would suffice to prove that it is Arab. It is written by Mohammed, and Mohammed, as an Arab, had no reason to know that camels were particularly Arab; they were, for him, a part of reality, and he had no reason to single them out, while the first thing a forger, a tourist, or an Arab nationalist would do is bring on the camels, whole caravans of camels on every page; but Mohammed, as an Arab, was unconcerned; he knew he could be Arab without camels. I believe that we Argentines can be like Mohammed; we can believe in the possibility of being Argentine without abounding in local color.
>
> *Jorge Luis Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition"*

The ripple on stagnant (or, literally, dead) water (*sishui weilan* 死水微瀾) of the title of Li Jieren's 李劼人 novel, published in 1936 and revised and republished in 1955, is directly referenced at its denouement:

> Although the news [of an embassy attack in Chengdu] did raise a slight ripple such as a clear breeze raises on a pool, the bureaucrats did not lose their composure, and the businessmen accordingly kept about their business, and the residents and pleasure-seekers and opium addicts kept residing in their homes and seeking their pleasures and smoking their opium, respectively, nor was the spread of the news even very fast; the hearts of the people in their various riches remained, like stagnant water deep beneath the surface, without the slightest agitation. That is to say, there was no movement great enough to penetrate the depths. (Li, p. 201)

This rippling effect can be used to describe the effect of political events on the "periphery," a state that the novel's translator Bret Sparling argues is still recognizable decades later. Upon reading the novel, he notes that "farmers still felt isolated from Chengdu, and Chengdu still felt isolated from Beijing, and Beijing still felt isolated at the center of the world" (Li, p. x), to the extent that he muses on translating the novel entirely into the twenty-first century, substituting Internet café for opium den.

The novel is infused with other rippling effects, most notably the way that one character's stories beget another's desire for stories. At least this is the case for its heroine, Sister Cai, called "Baby Deng" at the beginning, who dreams of going to Chengdu. Ignoring her mother, a native of Chengdu, who describes the city as "no paradise . . . no kaleidoscope, and the impoverished families in Chengdu were still more wretched than the rural poor" (Li, p. 15), Baby Deng prefers the descriptions of the capital told to her by her neighbor Second Mistress Han, whose affection she has cultivated with her embroidery skills. Through Second Mistress Han, who "suffered a tendency to idealization," Sister Cai instead,

> assembled the metropolis as she received it . . . and although she had never glimpsed so much as the crenellations of the parapets, to hear her talk you would have thought she knew a good deal more about the city than even her older brother, whose business often took him there in person. She knew the height and thickness of the city wall, and knew how to describe the crowds of people pressing both directions through the portals in that wall, of which she knew that there were four—north, south, east and west. She knew the distance was nine and three-tenths *li* from the north gate to the south, and that the west part of the city had a separate imperial garrison whose Manchu residents were very different to us Hans. (Li, p. 13)

The imagined city's colors and sounds, with its textures and mores, are acts of imagination so real to her that they seduce her. With the untimely death of Second Mistress Han, Sister Cai's hopes to marry into a Chengdu family are thwarted, and the narrator wryly notes: "the girl's most appropriate feeling toward her teacher should have been resentment, since had she never met her, how could the mirage of Chengdu have risen in her mind? Or how could she have known to envy the women who lived in the mirage? Still more, had she not been handed such a

fanciful measure, why would she ever have begun to despise the life she knew and to long to leap to a better one, or lacking any opportunity for such a leap and not being disposed to a philosophic view of things, to abandon herself to despondency?" (Li, p. 18).

Sister Cai eventually settles into marriage with a village simpleton who runs a wine store in a market town north of Chengdu's north gate called Heaven's Turn. If this premise sounds a bit like *Madame Bovary* with *Jinpingmei* characteristics, it should. Li Jieren had in fact been the first translator of Flaubert's novel ten years earlier; his novel shares with *Madame Bovary* a deep interest in setting, the folly of a heroine who is prey to low-quality unreliable plots, and storytellers. She is married to a dullard that everyone in town agrees is a poor match for her charms, and the reader is treated to a narrator's sometimes sympathetic yet eye-rolling observation of her actions. In the tradition of the sprawling Ming novel *Jinpingmei,* which picks up on and embroiders a subplot in *Outlaws of the Marsh,* we recognize Pan Jinlian in the comely young woman with tightly bound feet married to Wu Dalang's counterpart, the ugly and dull-witted merchant Cully. Cully is protected by a gangster with a sense of honor, Cambuel (or "Skewmouth" Waizui 歪嘴) Luo, who plays the part of Wu Song. Here the comparisons begin to crumble, as it turns out that the Wu Song character is just as happy playing Ximen Qing. After a happy cohabitation with a prostitute in his employ, Half-Peniware Liu (Liu Sanjin 溜三金), he eventually courts and wins Sister Cai and then happily shares her with his cousin Cully who is, after all, still her husband, in a gamely conceived arrangement. Theirs is a world of opium, gambling, and deception that, in a series of plot twists and turns over the course of the novel's five parts, interweaves historical events that make ripples of various sizes in these characters' fates.

By novel's end, Sister Cai has agreed to marry Gu Tiancheng, a country rube from a landlord family, who had earlier in the novel been fleeced by Cambuel Luo and Half-Peniware Liu and left a widower, landless, and without his beloved daughter, Brother's Beck, who has been sold as a slave to a wealthy family. This series of events recalls the travails of the character Zhen Shiyin in *The Story of the Stone* (or *Dream of Red Chambers* 紅樓夢), a minor character who nonetheless carries a great deal of freight in its symbolic order. Through a series of circumstances, the Job-like Gu is transformed following his conversion to Christianity and alliance with the foreign powers in Chengdu into a position of strength again by novel's end. Sister Cai, too, endures a brutal beating and the loss of love and livelihood before the final pages restore her to the stability of married life and property. Kenny Ng notes the likeness to late Qing satire: "the author represents his downtrodden hero in caricature as one who desires personal gain, profit, and carnal pleasures, a self-anointed knight-avenger who dares to violate the existing social order and join the foreign power in order to achieve his personal mission of retribution. Whether his personal passion and self-interest counteract or coincide

with the great historical movement, the ongoing tension between the individual and history is the rupture point at which the novelist seeks to diagnose his age" (Ng, p. 87)[1].

The plot expands and contracts to absorb these characters, even as it does not resolve all loose ends. Gu Tiancheng is never reunited with his daughter, Brother's Beck, who is instead incorporated as a slave girl into the household of an aristocratic family that was glimpsed briefly in the plot during an operatic melee. Yet, Brother's Beck now lives in the sort of wealthy and luxurious surroundings that Sister Cai imagined when she was still Baby Deng. Her father, who earlier in the novel appeared simply to be a country bumpkin inserted for local color and to show how Cambuel Luo made his money, becomes a major character by novel's end. This element is what provides the strongest definition to the ripples suggested in the title. We are each the center of our own worlds and send out ripples that may have an overturning effect on those closest to us or may register as barely an exchange of glances to someone else. What the novel accomplishes is what the fictional world can allow: a view from outside, marking out symmetries—daughters lost set against daughters returned home, wastrels who find the light against wastrels who disappear into shadows, minor characters becoming major ones, and major ones receding into the unknown. The prologue, which interposes distance both through the use of first-person narrative and through a hindsight gained by years of elapsed time, has been moved to an appendix by the translator. When read at the beginning of the novel, it too is suggestive of the way that stories move through space and time: it proposes one way of understanding the events that follow it, even though, chronologically, they precede it.

Ba Jin's 1933 novel *Family* (*Jia* 家) is more *Dream of Red Chambers* than *Jinpingmei,* with its focus on an aristocratic family. It is also suffused with that specialty of adolescence, perfervid outrage that has seemingly infinite targets. In the case of *Family,* these include injustices that range from the insult of preventing young women from cutting their hair short and the suffocating pressures of unbendable class boundaries and family hierarchies, to the life-threatening primitive beliefs in traditional medicine that induce the family's eldest son to send his pregnant wife away from home so as not to "pollute" the compound, thus causing her death. This may or may not account for the enduring popularity of *Family* in screen adaptations as well as syllabuses, but *Family* finds itself in the same position as Second Mistress Han's tales of Chengdu. It is a story that induces a desire to seek out more stories, and the historian Kristin Stapleton seeks to address that desire for more historical context with her book *Fact in Fiction* as a reading companion about Chengdu in Ba Jin's fiction.

Stapleton writes in her introduction that "Ba Jin did not set out to offer his readers a realistic portrait of a particular city [and] wanted the Gao family to be seen as representative of a type of patriarchal family common across China" (p. 3). Teachers of modern Chinese history who assign *Family* as a historical document

are thus faced with the dilemma of how to teach the novel as history when it resists defining itself as such. Stapleton writes that "the goal of this book is to shine a light on the city within which Ba Jin grew up. Doing so allows us to understand how he made selective use of his childhood experiences to craft a powerful indictment of the social order of the time. At the same time, by illuminating Chengdu, we can appreciate the challenges of Chinese urban life in the 1920s from alternative perspectives that are not reflected in the novels, the works of May Fourth writers, or the historical narrative they popularized" (Stapleton, p. 5). The book is meant to be a corrective, filling in details about Chengdu that were left out of Ba Jin's narrative. Thus we are told that, compared to Li Jieren, Ba Jin has more "emotional punch," whereas Li Jieren is a "far better social historian" (Stapleton, p. 6). She goes on: "Ba Jin left it to others to fill in the historical background necessary for readers to understand the setting within which his characters lived. This book does so" (p. 7).

This premise leaves Stapleton with the predicament of furnishing facts about the period and region within a framework of how it does not relate to Ba Jin's novel, but could have, such as: "*Turbulent Stream* does not mention the importance of salt to Chengdu's economy, but many people in the city of Ba Jin's youth made money from it" (p. 103). Fortunately, for the most part, the details in her book do indeed make *Fact in Fiction* a welcome classroom companion for *Family.* Stapleton arranges the chapters around key characters or events in the novel. The first chapter, "Mingfeng," uses the character of the slave girl Mingfeng to introduce readers to the practice of the buying and selling young girls into households described both in *Family* and *Ripple on Stagnant Water.* Chapters that reflect the circumstances of the Gao family, such as one on elite families (chap. 2) and one on Qin and the "New Woman" (chap. 6), are set against chapters on Chengdu's economy (chap. 3), the kinds of labor available to the urban poor (chap. 4), and protest and warfare in the city (chap. 5), to give readers a fuller picture of the world that the Gao family lived in, even if they—or the novel's plot that followed them most closely—had little occasion to consider the subjectivities of those unlike themselves.

Listening to Second Mistress Han describe the wonders of Chengdu in *Ripple on Stagnant Water,* the young Sister Cai knows that "the women themselves never lifted a finger; nor were only the wives and daughters exempt from work, for even the higher-up slavegirls of the big families—who had ever seen them touch a spatula or broom? And who had ever seen a slavegirl of such a family who didn't have tender white hands and nails reddened with balsamine? Such was [her] familiarity with Chengdu and the life of Chengdu's women" (Li, p. 15). Little Brother's Beck, on the other hand, lost in Chengdu and sold into the Hao family as a slave girl, experiences the wonders of a life when she "simply couldn't eat enough. She ate so much that the young master and misses . . . were all reduced to tears of laughter . . . the only chores were learning how to serve Second Mistress in

combing and dressing and making up, how to polish the furniture and fill water-pipes and pour tea and serve rice and wring hand towels" (Li, p. 156). But she misses her former liberty, and her only dream is to run away. In the gap between the two versions of Chengdu—the imagined and the lived—we recognize the ubiquity and inescapability of such gaps. We are told a story so real that we believe in it, and we want to learn more about it. We pursue the story, and, as we learn more about it, we question whether we should believe in it.

Shiamin Kwa

Shiamin Kwa is an assistant professor of East Asian languages and cultures and comparative literature at Bryn Mawr College, and is writing a book about the translations and adaptations into French, English, and Italian of the fourteenth-century play The Orphan of Zhao.

NOTE 1. Kenny Kwok-kwan Ng. *The Lost Geopoetic Horizon of Li Jieren: The Crisis of Writing Chengdu in Revolutionary China*. Leiden; Boston: Brill 2015.

Terry F. Kleeman. *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. xiii, 425 pp. Hardcover $49.95, ISBN 978-0-674-73716-7.

The beginning of Terry Kleeman's magisterial history of early Daoism reads like something from a Judge Dee murder mystery. Did Zhang Lu, grandson of the enigmatic cult leader Zhang Ling, ambush his erstwhile superior Marshall Zhang Xiu and steal his force? Or did Zhang Lu merely adopt and expand Zhang Xiu's teachings without actually having him killed? Did the provincial governor Liu Yan's son then have Zhang Lu's mother assassinated and her family exterminated? Such are the murky origins of Celestial Masters Daoism, at least as recorded in the official histories of the era. Kleeman's approach to this historical material in the first four chapters of his book is to treat the source materials separately. Chapter 1 examines official histories, and locates the origins of the tradition firmly within the civil war at the end of the Han dynasty. It is a complex and often confusing narrative full of murder, strategy, intrigue, and violence. It is as if one were reading about the origins of Christianity from the perspective of the multiple conflicting accounts by Roman aristocrats, generals, and politicians charged with keeping peace in first-century Judea. Here and there are snippets of information about the religious teachings, but they are not the main issue. Such teachings are treated as the fabrications of power-hungry aristocrats eager to dupe the masses into their political cause.