

Negotiating biography in Asia and Europe

Autor(en): **Trakulhun, Sven**

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NEGOTIATING BIOGRAPHY IN ASIA AND EUROPE

Sven Trakulhun, University of Zurich

I

The influence of modern Western concepts of selfhood on the non-Western world cannot be denied, but a great variety of traditions of (auto)biographical writing in Asia co-existed and at times competed with those from the “West”. Each of these traditions is embedded in a distinctive literary-historical genealogy employing particular literary codes and conventions. Local traditions did not simply vanish when brought into contact with Western colonial modernity; at the same time there are striking features in which Eastern and Western concepts of biography converge. Many of the discursive or rhetorical functions which constitute European biography are indeed compatible with, or at least not in contradiction to, those in many Asian cultures.

In China, biography is an old and well-established literary genre that made its first appearance in the second century BC. It emerged as a subgenre of historiography and for the most part maintained an intrinsic connection with history.¹ Traditional Chinese biographers were bound to a certain frame of references. They were forced to record only what could be documented from archives or be gleaned from other historical evidence, adding concrete historical detail to the story that could not be obtained elsewhere. Biographies were instrumental in elucidating the didactic purposes of a historical narrative, either by recounting exemplary or cautionary lives (for which a substantial number of different models existed), or by demonstrating a general truth. There was no room for private or personal reflection; rather, the author’s unverifiable inner world had to be hidden from the reader to confirm the untainted objectivity of the story.²

This paradigm (which is all but alien to European historians) seems to have dominated in literature throughout China’s imperial history, although there were

1 NIVISON, 1963: 457–463. For a particularly rich account of Chinese biographical/autobiographical writing see BAUER, 1990.

2 WU, 1990: 3–14.

alternative forms of life-writing evolving vis-à-vis or opposed to mainstream historiography. Fictional self-writings, personal confessions, and narratives of individual spiritual progress consciously transgressed the confinements of historical biography and thrived particularly in times of crisis, e.g. among Confucian scholars in seventeenth-century Ming China. These and related writings continued to exist outside of the official canon, sometimes in a rather ill-defined realm between history and fiction. At the same time biography could imply a political statement, a gesture of social renunciation, in fact one that would later become central for Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth Movement, informing the ways in which they articulated political opposition and adopted or transformed European concepts of biography, and especially *autobiography*.³ Once its potential as a resource for resistance was discovered, first-hand narratives could provide a reservoir of alternative literary patterns – not only as a means to overcome the constraints of antiquated traditions or the external threat of colonialism, but also as an efficient tool for narrating the nation. Even highly personal expressions of the body or the most intimate confessions of the individual self could serve as an allegory of the condition of Chinese society.⁴

As a peculiar system of signification, biography is neither a European privilege nor is it quintessentially Asian. Telling life-stories and handing them down for posterity is a quite common operation in virtually all societies. It is probably due to the ubiquitous nature of the phenomenon that concepts of life-writing could travel more easily than other literary forms whose elements are culturally more specific. In many Asian cultures religious biographies were written and brought together into diverse collections well before the coming of the Europeans.⁵ In Muslim India there was a whole literary landscape composed of autobiographies of scholars or saints and of recorded lives of monarchs and poets. It has been argued that the authors of these writings usually obliterated peculiarities of character and instead concentrated on features that could serve as an expression of collective norms. But there are other examples such as the sixteenth-century autobiographical memoir of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, the *Baburnama*, of which has been remarked that it “would occupy a significant place in the history of autobiography had it belonged to Europe.”⁶

3 LARSON, 1991: 61–85.

4 NG, 2003: 69–90.

5 For examples from India, Tibet and China see GRANOFF / SHINOHARA, 1988. On Japan see BATHGATE, 2007: 271–303.

6 DALE, 1990: 38.

There is a wide range of responses to European models of biography in Asia which differed according to time and circumstance. In some places Western narrative structures were cautiously translated into local forms of life recording, in others they could strategically complement or even replace these local traditions for political ends. The noted Indian Muslim scholar Shibli Nomani, for instance, was ready to adopt both a literary genre and the Western discourse of nationalism when he thought around 1886 of commencing a series entitled “Heroes of Islam”. Devoted to the principal task of infusing a sense of pride in the hearts of his Indian Muslim contemporaries, he envisioned a collection of biographies of great figures in Islamic history that was explicitly modeled after Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841).⁷ Some Indo-Persian autobiographical authors, on the other hand, chose to execute the familiar teleological program of life-writing in the shape of then current European genres in order to address a *Western* audience. Their own voices were not silenced due to these adaptations, nor did the act of borrowing necessarily deter them from producing a *different* discourse.⁸ The allegedly ubiquitous presence of imperialism as a frame of representation should therefore not obstruct the view on alternative or coeval traditions of life-writing in Asia that resisted transformation or blended with European forms and ideals of biography.

II

Biographical narratives in transcultural contexts exhibit strong affinities with travel writing, a field of literature that in many cultures served as the most appropriate genre for positioning the self in light of “others”.⁹ Travelogues and biographies are not identical in scope: not every biography involves physical travel. But every travel account requires a traveler. Transcultural biographies tell the life stories of these travelers. Travel literature, as a literary genre, was often highly formalized. Authors were subjected to an intricate set of demands and formal conventions circumscribing what should be written about and how this should be done. The task of travel writing took on different forms in Asia and Europe, some inspired by aesthetic, moral or religious concerns, others more devoted to miraculous events or personal adventure, and others still with a

7 DAS, 2005: 262.

8 See FISHER, 1996; 2010, and Fisher’s essay in this volume.

9 See e.g. the contributions in MELIKOĞLU, 2007.

historical-ethnological focus on describing and comprehending foreign peoples and environments.

In Europe travel writers were prompted, at least in theory, to adhere to a set of rules of observation of the cities and countries through which they would pass. A large body of travel advice literature has been published since the sixteenth century to instruct domestic or overseas travelers how to observe perceptively, how to avoid danger and unnecessary hardships on the way, and how to resist the ambiguous allure of exotic locales.¹⁰ Eye-witnessing and truthfulness were major requirements for every travel author, but although personal observation was an essential precondition according to the formal doctrine, the traveler's personality had to be excluded from the narrative: "a travel writer must not talk about himself".¹¹ An educated traveler was expected to teach as well as entertain; to collect reliable information on the places he or she had visited – from the geographical setting and natural surroundings of a foreign country to its political and social institutions – and to arrange this material according to established literary patterns. The taming of the author's self was part of the curriculum. This ideal of an educated traveler, who confined himself to the impersonal relating of facts, was frequently undermined in practice, however. Plagiarists and "travel liars" continuously blurred the definitional distinctions between fact and fiction, while many travel writers were found guilty of a fondness for talking about themselves and were dismissed by contemporary literary critics as "egotists". Even the most careful observers were sometimes accused of mingling personal observation with hearsay. The ominous and enduring presence of an unreliable narrator was therefore a recurring theme in contemporary discussions on travel literature.¹²

European authors have produced a large body of travel writings on Asia that grew over centuries and eventually became part of the colonial archives of Western imperial powers.¹³ Asian travel in the reverse direction was certainly less frequent before the nineteenth century, though it was more substantial in

10 On the generic tradition of travel writing in Europe see STAGL, 1995. For a commented bibliography of early modern instructional literature on travel (*Apodemiken*) see STAGL, 1983.

11 BATTEN, 1978: 13.

12 ADAMS, 1980.

13 There is no room here to recognize the contributions of those who have critically engaged with this material, particularly from a postcolonial perspective dealing with 19th and 20th century literature. For a nuanced and extensive treatment of early modern European literature on Asia see CAREY, 2003, LACH / VAN KLEY, 1965–1993 and OSTERHAMMEL, 1998.

quantity than has generally been acknowledged.¹⁴ To be sure, Asian travelers who were writing for an audience at home employed their own conventions of exploring and describing new peoples and geographies.¹⁵ Even a cursory sketch of the various traditions of travel and self-writing in Asia is beyond the scope of a brief introduction like this. The main purpose here is to gesture toward the multiple and independent origins of Asian travel and biography writing that informed the ways in which personal experiences of crisscrossing peoples and cultures were represented. There are early and famous examples such as the fourteenth-century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta, who between 1325 and 1355 visited most of the Islamic world and left a detailed account of his journey.¹⁶ Some decades later the Chinese interpreter Ma Huan participated in Zheng He's maritime expeditions that brought him from China to Southeast Asia, India and Arabia (though not to Europe).¹⁷ An early prototype of a "scientific" traveler was the geographer Xu Xiake who in the seventeenth century devoted thirty years of his life to traveling, mostly by foot, across the Chinese empire and who meticulously documented his voyages in extensive personal diaries and journals.¹⁸ The traditional predominance of textual knowledge in Chinese culture stimulated the production of written and published geographies. John E. Wills has argued that Chinese authors of travel literature were bound from early on to certain rules of representing foreign places according to which eye-witnessing and truthfulness were no less important than in the European tradition.¹⁹

After the Ming turn against foreign trade Chinese long-distance travel waned and accounts of countries lying beyond the borders of China became extremely rare. There was neither an economic nor a religious incentive in any Asian culture to stimulate traveling abroad on a scale comparable to Europe. Asian travel accounts written before the nineteenth century therefore dealt with domestic rather than overseas voyages. In some places in Asia foreign travel was limited by religion or law. According to Hindu belief the crossing of oceans was associated with contamination and a loss of social status and personal ties. High-caste Brahmans were thus notoriously reluctant to travel overseas.²⁰ In early

14 This picture is now changing; see e.g. the contributions in CHATTERJEE / HAWES, 2008. On Indian travels to the West see FISHER, 2004; FISHER et al., 2007; CODELL, 2007.

15 FISHER, 2007: 153–172.

16 DUNN, 2005.

17 His travel account was first published in 1416. For an English translation see MILLS, 1970.

18 WARD, 2001.

19 WILLS, 2007: 191–201. See also HARGETT, 1986: 67–93.

20 See ARP, 2000; METHA, 2004.

modern China and Japan foreign diplomacy remained limited to tributary relations, at most, while individual travel was firmly restricted to domestic locations. This is not to say that travel literature did not flourish in these parts of Asia. Japanese travel literature (*kikō bungaku*), for instance, often focused on famous local places continually described by Japanese poets over generations. Future travel writers were expected to search for and follow the literary traces of their precursors and to summon their poetic examples, “adding layer upon layer of reference” to a well-defined number of distinctive places as their referents.²¹ This constant circulation of referents and references was challenged when overseas travel became more common during the Meiji period. The unfamiliar landscapes of foreign lands and the industrialized cities in Western countries did not conform to the literary inventory provided by tradition, so Japanese literary travelers had to create a new set of images and phrases to capture and accommodate these new environments. When Western travel literature became known in Japan at the end of the nineteenth century, traditional elements of Japanese travel writings were sometimes skillfully merged with Western sensibilities; but these hybrid narratives rather complemented than substituted the established traditions of Japanese travel writing.²²

The classical Siamese *nirat* or travelogue, to give an example from Southeast Asia, was predominantly concerned with describing the feelings of the traveler who was away from home and separated from his beloved.²³ In traditional versions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the outside world, encountered as space, nature or social interaction, served above all as a foil for individual introspection, reflecting like a mirror that which the sojourner had lost or left behind.²⁴ The concreteness of changing physical and social environments, although presented in ornately poetic phrases, was secondary to the aesthetic invocation of nostalgia. In the nineteenth century the Thai poet Sunthorn Phu (1786–1855) subtly redefined the genre by adding verifiable empirical data to his travelogues, proposing a more naturalistic view on geography and social phenomena.²⁵ Accounts of overseas travel such as Mom

21 FESSLER, 2004: 14. These codified poetic references are called *uta makura* in Japanese; see *ibid.*, 12–27.

22 FESSLER, 2004: 178–245.

23 The term *nirat* derives from Sanskrit *nir* (without) and *āśā* (desire or hope). In Thai poetry it means separation, to be separated from, or to be without something which is eagerly desired. Compare MANAS, 1972: 138–139.

24 HUNDIUS, 1976.

25 WENK, 1985: 20–28.

Ratchothai's *Nirat London* of 1857 would later adhere to this renewed literary tradition.²⁶

While in Siam this shift in emphasis accorded to a more general intellectual trend towards a rational mode of dealing with nature and social reality, it ran counter to coeval developments in the West. At the end of the eighteenth century the conventions of travel writing in Europe changed significantly. Travel accounts more often employed a personal perspective and frequently related autobiographical details of the authors, who also began to add fictional parts to their narratives.²⁷ The gradual transformation of travel writing from a literature of observation into a narrative of personal experience and self-reflection rendered genre borders notoriously vague. The numerous and often overlapping variants of travel and life writing developed in the West did not pass unnoticed in Asia, where literates, intellectuals and political leaders adopted and assimilated these literary forms in different ways, while local forms of life-writing still persisted. The travel book *Klai Ban* (Far From Home) of King Chulalongkorn of Siam was arranged by the editors as a series of private letters to his daughter written during his second voyage to Europe in 1907. It was clearly molded after the Western epistolary form of self-writing but also maintained elements of a *nirat*. It is not known if Chulalongkorn ever intended to publish these letters, but he must have understood that they would circulate in manuscript. The book was first published in 1923 and soon became popular in Siam, particularly because it ostensibly provided insight into the king's innermost thoughts.²⁸

III

The contributions in this volume provide avenues to some of the dynamics of construing, writing and living transcultural biographies in different Eurasian contexts. The authors are aware of the aporia that complicates all (auto)biographical writing, refocusing in particular on the entangled status of the author as subject and investigator as well as on the literary traditions that

26 MOM, 1918. As a result the distinction between *nirat* poetry and a documentary account or written memorial (*chotmai het*) became increasingly insecure.

27 BATTEN, 1978: 118.

28 A part of the journal was translated into German: CHULALONGKORN, 2001. On the impact of the *nirat* genre on Chulalongkorn's travel writings see MANAS, 1972: 135–136.

informed biographical representations in Asia and Europe. The life-paths of individuals and groups presented in this special issue are based on a variety of sources that crisscross literary genres, textual categories and media of communication. Michael Fisher's essay considers the radically different yet connected life paths of two Indians, Sake Dean Mahomet and David Ochterlony Dyce Sombre, who traveled to and settled in Europe in the early nineteenth century. Examining a range of diverse and often contradictory sources, Fisher provides insight into complex discourses on ethnic identity and questions of cultural belonging. The chapters from Angelika Malinar and Maya Burger broaden our view on female life courses in transnational contexts. Malinar examines the life of the noted British theosophist and political activist Annie Besant that subverts the biographer's search for unifying principles in narratives of the self. She demonstrates that Besant's contradictory self-fashioning as a mediator between India and Britain was part of a political and spiritual program that firmly rejected racial and cultural boundaries but was also linked to Indian nationalism and Besant's idea of Hinduism. Commuting between Europe and Asia, and between spiritual and political realms, Besant's life-path illustrates the complex historical constellations that marked the decades preceding Indian independence.

Maya Burger argues in her chapter that the study of biographical sources reveals some of the micro-structures of cross-cultural communication, cultural borrowing and translation that can deepen our understanding of global processes in history. Taking the conversion to Christianity of the Indian author Pandita Ramabai as a starting point, Burger explores the limits of a transcultural life. While Ramabai's life course from a high-caste Hindu woman to an Anglican Christian displays numerous transgressions of geographical, social and religious borders, her conversion in fact remained partial, shifting and negotiated.

For Faisal Devji the biography of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, mirrors a crucial period in India's history during which the limits of European imperialism became obvious. Devji argues that Jinnah's anglicized character and his heretical background were incompatible with any generic type of an Indian Muslim leader, but exemplary for a novel kind of nation. Devji demonstrates that Jinnah's career represented a politics based on artifice rather than authenticity, one that moved beyond the familiar blood-and-soil forms of nationalism then current in European (and Indian) political thought. His life course served to exemplify Pakistan's abstract national identity as rooted not in cultural integrity, language or ethnicity, but in political logic.

Biographical and travel writing became inextricably intermingled in the narratives of Protestant foreign missionaries, whose vocation it was to travel and proselytize abroad, and who were constantly in need of giving written account of both their spiritual and physical journeys.²⁹ Sven Trakulhun's essay considers missionary auto/biographies both as a technique of self-scrutiny and self-discipline deeply rooted in Protestant ethical-religious culture *and* as a means of Christian propaganda in the West. Based on biographical and autobiographical material on the lives of the Baptist missionary couple Eliza and John Taylor Jones in nineteenth-century Siam, Trakulhun traces their quarrels with Siamese Buddhists over Christianity and civilization and explains why these religious conflicts became important in subsequent decades for the Siamese way of negotiating colonial modernity and local traditions and beliefs.

Siddarth Satpathy's article on the life of the itinerant preacher Gangadhar operates on the interface between social history, anthropology and philology. The author demonstrates how the Oriya preacher cultivated the Baptist habit of writing journals and how he carefully blended Protestant techniques of self-fashioning with Oriya discursive traditions. Satpathy shows that the Christian converts produced detailed accounts of daily life in Cuttack, India, by using Protestant concepts of self-writing and brought about a peculiar form of "pastoral modernity" based on cultural mediation.

Transcultural life courses can also be traced from material culture and art. Paola von Wyss-Giacosa and Andreas Isler pursue in their collaborative essay a biographical reading of the Indonesian artifacts of the Swiss Leupold family. This complex heritage is composed of photographs, texts and different kinds of "colonial" pieces that shed light on the history of a family whose members operated outside in the colonial machine. Modern literature borrows and accommodates various forms of biographical material beyond the confinements of textual sources. Justyna Jagusciak's essay explores how the poet Zhai Yongming revisited Frida Kahlo's works and biography and how text and images interacted during this process. Kahlo's visual narrative is re-appropriated by the poet, as Jagusciak argues, and becomes "transcribed into her own life story of somatic dysfunctions". Henning Trüper deals in his article with the lives of three European Oriental scholars, Ignaz Goldziher, Theodor Nöldeke and Enno Littmann. He explores a variety of patterns of discourse and genres of text, fostering a way of life-writing that leaves room for the incongruences and contradictions that distinguish the biography of the scholarly subject.

29 On the evolution of Protestant self-narratives see LYNCH, 2012; MULLAN, 2010.

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