FOR A HISTORIAN IN THE CHINA FIELD, writing biography is a “natural.” Life stories dominated imperial China’s major historical works. The Chinese imperial elite was obsessed with remembering and recording lives: male and female, elite and commoner. These life stories were supposed to convey history’s great moral lessons. The historian’s job was to make sure the lessons were crystal-clear, and so most biographies were recorded in dramatic scenes, sparked with verbatim dialogue. It is impossible, as a historian working today, to resist the appeal of these stories. Their wit, empathy, and verisimilitude convey so much about individual character that, however idealized or one-sided a life story may be, the reader feels that on some level he has come to know that person. When in a recent research project I decided to set scenes as a way to organize my own biographical account of three generations of women in a nineteenth-century Chinese family, the results gave me unexpected insight into the explanatory power of this Chinese narrative strategy.

IF YOU SET OUT TO ACQUAINT YOURSELF with Chinese historiography, one of the first things you will learn is that biography was central to the writing of good history.\textsuperscript{1} Famous men constantly referred to the lives of mentors, teachers, friends, relatives, or sages (long dead) who had guided their own decisions and inspired their personal visions. “Those above” were reared to believe that they were responsible, moreover, for “those below,” meaning that if the masses rebelled, it was the elite’s own fault. So every member of China’s late imperial elite was, on the one hand, conscious of models to whom he was indebted and, on the other hand, aware that he himself was a model for others. One of the best ways to understand the history of any particular time or place, therefore, was simply to read non-stop through the lists of biographies in whatever the relevant history was: of a dynasty, or a county, or a province, or a monastery. Whole groups of people, moreover, especially a category designated “female,” or “women,” were understood through collected lives, starting with the famous \textit{Biographies of Exemplary Women} by the Han historian Liu Xiang, and con-
tinuing right up until the present. As Arthur Wright once put it, Confucianists tended to be skeptical of abstract ethical theory. They preferred instead—like Jesus and other great teachers in Western cultural traditions—“to teach by parable and example and, in this process, to make intensive use of . . . exemplary figures of the past.”

Not surprisingly, China historians writing in English have always loved biography, even while biography as a genre has gone in and out of fashion in other fields. From dissertations to bestsellers, biographies of individuals have been among the most influential scholarly works in Chinese history, and the field’s best prose stylists—particularly Jonathan Spence—have produced some of their best work as biography. Landmark biographies written in English by historians of China include—to name only a few—Spence’s many biographies, among which my personal favorite is his life of the leader of the Taiping Rebellion, Hong Xiuquan; William T. Rowe’s monumental biography of the statesman Chen Hongmou; Willard Peterson’s beautiful reconstruction of Fang Yizhi’s life and times; and R. Keith Schoppa’s richly imagined life and death of the revolutionary Shen Dingyi. Even this short list serves to dramatize the broad and enduring appeal of biography to China historians. That these biographical subjects have been men, not women, may be partly explained by the relatively late development of research on women’s history in the China field, and by the belated discovery of the value of poetry as a biographical source, at least for the lives of elite women.

Not only is the genre of biography perfectly compatible with Chinese approaches to historical writing, but sources in classical Chinese also lend themselves perfectly to use by the biographer. The writings, travels, achievements, and networks of elite men were scrupulously chronicled in year-by-year accounts called nianpu, usually written by disciples or students. Family members or close friends faithfully (or flattering) recorded the virtues and achievements of their deceased loved ones. Formal epitaphs commissioned for publication in official histories, and eulogies prepared for carving on stone at the gravesite, added ballast to the more anecdotal material in intimates’ accounts. In addition, prefaces to an individual’s collected works, published posthumously, often included detailed sketches of moments in the life of the author, calling vividly to mind the personality and the social milieu in which he or she had lived.


4 Jonathan D. Spence, God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan (New York, 1996); William T. Rowe, Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China (Stanford, Calif., 2001); Willard J. Peterson, Bitter Gourd: Fang I-chih and the Impetus for Intellectual Change (New Haven, Conn., 1979); R. Keith Schoppa, Blood Road: The Mystery of Shen Dingyi in Revolutionary China (Berkeley, Calif., 1995).

5 Scholars of literature, rather than history, have produced the leading work on the lives of individual women, usually as collective biography or prosopography. See Grace S. Fong, Herself an Author: Gender, Agency, and Writing in Late Imperial China (Honolulu, 2008), and Nanxiu Qian’s forthcoming life of the late Qing woman writer Xue Shaohui (1866–1922).
The standard for Chinese biography was set by the Grand Historian Sima Qian (ca. 145–86 B.C.E.), who used scenes to tell lives. In his *Historical Records* (*Shi ji*), as Burton Watson once remarked, the past becomes “a series of dramatic episodes in which, instead of describing the action, the historian makes his characters speak aloud.” Sima Qian offered his own comments on the stories he told, but he relegated those to a note at the end of each narrative, which he carefully marked off with the byline “The historian says . . .” His goal was a well-told tale that would illustrate basic human principles of right and wrong, praise and blame. In this respect, the Chinese biographer had to be something of a dramatist. Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801), the eminent philosopher of history, returned constantly to this issue when he railed against stereotype and convention in the biographical writings of his own day. In recording events, he conceded, absolute accuracy was essential, but describing historical figures themselves demanded inventiveness: “In regard to the method of recording speech,” he wrote to a friend, “the [historian] must convey what was in the speaker’s mind at the time, even if it requires adding a thousand words.”

If biography was the perfect medium for conveying vivid historical lessons in imperial China, it was also the perfect vehicle for connecting past and present. Patrilineal lines of descent tracked historical continuity and rupture, and genealogical records demanded biographical accounting. Every educated person died with the expectation that a son or a friend of the family would compose a *mu zhi ming* (epitaph), or a less formal biographical sketch that could serve as the basis for a *mu zhi ming* when the appropriate author could be found. Epitaphs for the dead were interred along with the coffin, but they were also copied into dynastic and local histories, preserved in family literary collections, and excerpted in genealogies. Among these are hundreds of thousands of eulogies and epitaphs for women as well as men: mothers, wives, widows, “faithful maidens,” suicidal martyrs, and so forth. In the urban print culture of the late seventeenth century, these short biographies became voguish among local historians as well as family chroniclers, and the numbers of women’s biographies exploded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Biographies of commoner women, if somewhat truncated in form, are well represented, mainly to serve as a chastening example for their betters, especially elite men.

In late imperial times, biographical vignettes from the historical record made their way into opera scenes and illustrated books. Especially popular among the audience of male and female readers in the eighteenth century were collections of illustrated vignettes about famous “beautiful women” and illustrated popular reprints of a Han dynasty classic collection of biographies of exemplary women, a

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6 Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Historian: Chapters from the Shih chi of Ssu-ma Ch’ien* (New York, 1969), 4–5. As Watson remarks, reading this kind of history is like “reading a novel.”

7 Viewers of the Zhang Yimou film *The Assassin*, based on one of Sima Qian’s most famous biographies, will appreciate how readily his stories lend themselves to film scripting.


sampling of which appear below. Both, through short poems and rudimentary images, dramatized a certain quintessential principle or archetypal quality in the life of a highly individualized and intimately portrayed woman. In that sense, they were classic examples of Chinese narrative style. Stories about the lives of the virtuous and beautiful illustrate the moral standards to which women were held, absolute fidelity unto death being the most important. Fidelity in late imperial discourse meant fidelity to spouse, but the principle was dramatized and romanticized in stories of famous female lovers. For example, the story of the heroic Han general Xiang Yu’s consort Yu, based on Sima Qian’s vivid biography of the general, was captured in a scene in a woodblock illustration that shows her reaching for a sword. That scene tells readers that they are watching the last of the final fatal moments when Xiang Yu, facing certain defeat and death, turns to his consort in a tent surrounded by the enemy, and commands her to dance. While she dances, he watches and sings a mournful song, ending with these words: “Yu, O Yu, what is to become of you?” Yu stops dancing, sings back to him, and slits her throat. (See Figure 1.)

The faithful woman who is constant unto death need not be a noblewoman; even

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10 Literary critics have shown how narration constructs the grand archetypes organizing virtually all of Chinese classical writing, such that the plots of small narratives illustrate the grand principles, and the grand principles are imagined by recourse to the lives of individuals who have played them out. See, e.g., Andrew H. Plaks, “Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative,” in Plaks, ed., Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays (Princeton, N.J., 1977), 309–352.

11 For her biography with translation from original sources, see Barbara Bennett Peterson, ed., No-
courtesans could have a sense of honor that put men to shame. In the complicated
tale of Liang Lúzhù (the Lady of the Green Pearl), a beautiful and talented dancer
becomes the subject of rivalry between her abusive master and a murderous prince
who sought her for his own. When she spurns the prince, he takes revenge by accusing
her master of a capital crime and condemning the man to death. Lúzhù, reviled by
her master on his way to the gallows, flings herself from a balcony, crying: “It is I
who should die in your stead!”¹² (See Figure 2.)

Women as martyrs are a big theme in Chinese biography, and death scenes are
always the centerpiece of their stories. A famous example from Liu Xiang’s collec-
tion, which was actually ridiculed as “virtue taken to extremes” by some later com-
mentators, is the following (slightly abridged) story of “The ‘Chaste and Obedient’
Zhao Zhen Jiang of Chu”:

Zhen Jiang was the daughter of the Marquis of Qi and the wife of King Zhao of Chu. While
King Zhao was away, a flood sent water rising around her palace. The king sent his retainer
back to rescue her, but in his haste forgot to give the retainer the seals of office. The queen

¹² An illustrated book of “beautiful women” presents an aestheticized version of Lú Zhu’s and other
stories of famous women, omitting the death scene and celebrating her talent instead. See Yan Xiyuan,
comp., Bai mei xinyong tuzhuan (Illustrated Life Stories of One Hundred Beauties, Embellished with New
refused to go with the retainer because, lacking proof of the king’s seals, she could not trust him. She drowned.

The illustrated version of her story shows Zhen Jiang elaborating: “The king and his lady have made a vow. If he has charged you with fetching me, you must have his seal; yet now you do not carry it, and this humble woman dares not follow you away.” The retainer replies (urgently): “The waters are about to flood; if I go back to get the seals, I fear it will be too late.” The queen responds: “This humble woman understands that it is the duty of a pure woman never to betray a vow and always to be fearless in the face of death, guarding her chastity to the end. This humble woman knows that if I go with you, I will live, if I stay, I will die, but it is better to remain here and die than to abandon my vow [of chastity].”

Domestic scenes involving genteel women of the governing class often featured widow suicide. Consider this memoir of the widowed mother of Zhang Huiyan, a mid-Qing intellectual:

I recall that when I was five, my mother wept constantly for nearly a month. Then suddenly one day she lay down and was very still. I was playing at the foot of her bed, and I remember thinking that she must have cried herself to sleep. In a little while my grandmother came, and only then did I realize that she had tried to strangle herself with her sash. Fortunately, they were able to revive her.

Fortunately, indeed. Thanks to his mother, Zhang Huiyan—who became a brilliant polymath—received early schooling through a family connection in a nearby town. His vivid memories of his long-suffering mother are captured in other scenes, including one recalling a visit home after his first month of study. He was so eager to get there that he did not stop to eat dinner, and he went to bed so hungry that the next morning he was too weak to get out of bed. His mother set him straight:


14 Zhang Huiyan, Mingke wen er bian (Collected Prose, Second Volume; printed 1869), xia: 25a–b.
My mother regarded me scornfully and said: “How pitiful that you are so unaccustomed to going hungry! This is how your sister and brother and I feel all the time!” At this I burst into tears, and my mother began weeping too.15

Direct quotations make better scenes, as Zhang Huiyan—a master of the memoir—knew too well. In another classic memoir, this time for his paternal grandmother (the mother-in-law in the story of the suicide attempt above), Zhang Huiyan describes her poverty after her husband’s death and then, to show her character, sets a scene where a well-meaning friend offers advice on rearing her sons for practical careers in trade or some other economically secure position. This is her reply: “For five generations before my father-in-law, this family was a family of scholars. My own husband continued that tradition. If I permit my own sons to end it, I will betray my father-in-law’s dying wish!” (The scene with the dying wish is duly supplied in the same verbatim detail.)16

Postmodern theory and criticism have forced contemporary historians to question the presumptions of recording lives. Self-fashioning, multiple identities, shifting subjectivities—the instability and elusiveness of the biographical subject—have changed the biographer’s agenda. The historian is no longer expected to chronicle a life, but rather to interpret a performance. Fascination with performance has heightened as studies of gender identity and sexuality reveal individuals consciously transgressing cultural norms, or physically changing their bodies to embrace new cultural roles. All of the female subjects in Jo Burr Margadant’s collection of “new” biographies must perform creatively and selectively as they move from domestic space into public politics: they are breaking old molds and making new ones. Their biographers respond accordingly.17 Ironically, Chinese biographical conventions pose no difficulty for those of us who are interested in role performance. Performance of roles, indeed, was all that Chinese biographers cared about. They were singularly uninterested in selfhood or individual identities, and they had little patience with the notion that selves and identities could shift in any meaningful way. In Chinese philosophical and literary thought, what a person did was what a person was; action and knowledge were the same thing.

Recently, in writing a series of biographical stories about women from three different generations of a nineteenth-century Chinese family, I thought that their own memoirs would suffice for the material I needed.18 By immersing myself in the family’s writings, I got some fine character sketches. Then I constructed a chronology of their complicated lives. But how to convey to my own readers the sense of intimacy and individual character that a good Chinese biography requires? I decided to follow the lead of Chinese historians and set my characters in scenes.19 The scenes had to be invented. I rarely knew the words my subjects spoke. But I had plenty of raw

15 Ibid., 24a.
16 Ibid., 22b.
19 With coaching from writer Erie Vitiello, to whom I am indebted.
material to make scenes not only plausible but historically accurate. For example, I had several colophons written on a painting that was important to the family’s history. I knew the painter’s name and family background; I knew the approximate time and occasion for the painting; and I had a short biographical sketch of every woman who composed a colophon. From there, it was a relatively simple thing to set the scene where the family members present posed for the painting. But then I had to set another scene in which the one absent sister (who is not in the painting) composes her own colophon. The scene required that she open a letter from her brother imploring her to send her colophon by mail from her marital residence far away in the capital, so that it could be copied onto the painting along with others composed by her sisters, whose life together in her natal home the painting celebrated. These two scenes revealed siblings wrenched apart, and cast the tone of the various sisters’ colophons in completely different registers. Resentment, jealousy, loneliness, insensitivity, and pride suddenly leapt onto the page and into my scene, where just moments earlier a young matron holding a calligraphy brush had been sitting in placid repose.

Oh, good, I thought, let’s try this some more. I had in my documents a much-copied description of the poetic talents of each one of the four Zhang sisters, a conventional puff written for some polite occasion by a close family friend. But setting a scene in which each sister in turn showed this family friend a poem she had written suddenly brought me up short. I imagined four daughters, each learning to write in turn, each joining family poetry competitions, each appearing on command to recite for her father’s visiting friends on special occasions, each aware that “drafts” of poems would be saved for eventual printing and circulation. My sources never hinted that these sisters were party to a competition. When they wrote, and when they were written about, I heard only loving, appreciative, and sentimental thoughts. Plainly, however, young women like these, in the elite families of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century China’s Lower Yangzi region, who were singled out as “talented girls” from their youth, were under enormous pressure. My sources, in fact, sometimes commented on the enviable lot of elite young women who escaped the pressures of the civil service examination system that weighed upon their brothers. But my scene was telling me that these very same young women were drawn inexorably into competitive arenas where their talent was judged not only by family members, but also by a rather broad public readership, if and when their poems were published. True, an occasional source complained that women writers may succumb to a thirst for fame that will make them as corrupt as men. But it was only by setting scenes in my mind—imagining a young girl’s first poem passed among her older siblings or her parents; imagining the author of a preface puzzling over how to match what he wrote for one sibling in composing a preface for her younger sister’s poems; imagining an eldest daughter burdened with household responsibilities envying the leisured education of her much-indulged baby sister—only in such scenes was I able to reconstruct other aspects of women’s lives that the written record would not reveal.

Even though I liked what my scenes were telling me, I also took comfort in recalling lines I read many years ago in an essay on short biography by Peter Ackroyd, who remarked that “in biographical narrative the writer rather than the subject is
paramount. If this... sounds paradoxical, perhaps it ought to be recalled that the only biographies that have survived the encroachments of time and forgetfulness are those that have been written well... Only well-written biographies survive because, by the alchemy of charmed language, the truth they reveal is the one that lasts." 20

I would only add that language is charmed by the scenes that give it alchemy.

My most dramatic example of how a good scene reveals historical "truth" comes from an obscure member of the Zhang family whom I call "Miss Fa." Miss Fa was a "faithful maiden"—that is, she had already been betrothed to the Zhangs' eldest son at the time of the boy's death as a teenager, and she later swore fidelity to her deceased fiancé by refusing another match and joining the Zhang household to live out her days as if she were his widow.21 That such a figure was complex goes without saying, but precisely because of the complexity of the situation, the family's records barely spoke of her. I had resigned myself to discussing her as a fine example of glaring silences in the historical record when by accident I came upon a memoir of her sister-in-law that was full of juicy detail about Miss Fa's "mental illness" and her fraught relationship with other young women in the Zhang household. This memoir was all I needed to inspire several imaginary scenes involving Miss Fa. Among them, the scene that proved most illuminating was the moment when the Zhang family learned of Miss Fa's decision to move in with them as a faithful maiden. In creating that scene, I had to begin with the reaction of Miss Fa's mother-in-law-to-be, Tang Yaoqing. This made me think backward in time to the death of Yaoqing's son, some ten years before, and forward in time to her hopes for the future marriages of her four daughters and one surviving son. I had to imagine the reactions of other family members and the manner in which they were informed (as in a letter to Yaoqing's husband, who was traveling), along with Yaoqing's own fears and anxieties about what living with Miss Fa might be like. That scene, once set, sent emotional frissons in all directions. Yet every outburst (imagined in my mind) had a logic determined by biographical materials from many other sources. The full implications of a faithful maiden's vow for the woman who would become her mother-in-law and the family into which she moved were not revealed to me, in other words, until I connected the dots of evidence required to frame a scene.

Sima Qian understood very well what this historian learned only by following his example: The best way to grasp the full meaning of a historical moment is to set a scene. Then watch it and see what you find out.

21 The complexity of the faithful maiden role is thoroughly explored in Weijing Lu, True to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China (Stanford, Calif., 2008).

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