

Kristin Stapleton (2016). *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 296 pp., ISBN 978-1503601062.

There are few resources amongst contemporary Chinese literary criticism that manage to weave such insightful literary readings and incisive historical research as Kristin Stapleton's *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family*. The book accomplishes three feats, as set out by Stapleton in her introductory chapter, simultaneously incorporating a history of twentieth-century Chengdu (and its relevance to the developments in China during this period, more broadly) alongside the author's biography of Ba Jin's formative years in the city and the historiographical context of his novel *Family*. Such an undertaking by a less skilled author would have, perhaps, produced a work which simplifies the rich historical underpinnings of Ba Jin's *Family* to supplementary readings of the novel, coupled with incidental evidence of the political and social machinations of the city in which its author grew up. Not so under Stapleton's careful guidance. By reading the social and economic development of early twentieth-century Chengdu as much as its fictional counterpart in Ba Jin's *Turbulent Stream* trilogy, Stapleton provides a perceptive reading of *Family* which invites the reader to consider how fiction can enrich and enliven our understanding of history.

Fact in Fiction is divided into seven chapters which each shine a light on the various social, economic and political contexts of 1920s Chengdu. The book organizes its chapters thematically, centring around topical discussions of "patriarchy and the 'Confucian' family, militarist politics and Chinese cities, the nature of the revolutions in cultural values and social structure during the early twentieth century, and their effects on Chinese families and on Chinese cities" (p.7). This thematic approach allows Stapleton the flexibility to manoeuvre her discussions across the broad timeframe of early twentieth-century China, whilst remaining faithful to the book's primary focus on the historical record of Ba Jin's youth, the period in which *Family* is set, and the social and political situation of 1920s Chengdu.

At the forefront of Stapleton's inquiry throughout, however, is the novel *Family*; although she also offers incidental analysis of its sequels *Spring* (*Chun* 春) and *Autumn* (*Qiu* 秋)—published in 1938 and 1940, respectively—which constitute Ba Jin's *Turbulent Stream* trilogy (of which *Family* is the first part) and which, she emphasizes, "[have] played a major role in shaping how China's history in the first few decades of the twentieth century has been understood, both in China and abroad" (p.2). Consequently, Stapleton employs the use of characters from the trilogy as her starting points for each chapter, analysing how "Ba Jin's description of him, her, or them corresponds to what the historical record tells us about real people in similar situations" (p.14). Overall, this approach works well and it provides Stapleton a rich canvas of characters whose stories throughout *Family* she uses to underpin the thematic discussions within the book.

Chapter one, entitled, "Mingfeng: The Life of a Slave Girl", for example, deals not with the most powerful of *Family's* characters, but "with the most vulnerable members of the traditional household structure, slave girls" (p.17). Whilst Stapleton

concedes that “evidence to document the lives of slave girls in China in the first decades of the twentieth century is hard to come by” (p.18), her exposition of Mingfeng among the other characters illustrated by Ba Jin is convincingly coupled with historiographic evidence to suggest why slave girls’ status had changed so little in the first half of the twentieth century; despite Ba Jin’s sympathetic portrayal of Mingfeng in *Family*. Stapleton provides a translated “Slave Girl Contract from Chengdu, 1919” to evidence the legal apparatus for the ownership of slave girls in the city and notes that, although Ba Jin’s “position in the social order was far removed from theirs” (p.18), there were many slave girls in Chengdu in the early 1920s whose experience and status, she argues, would likely have been reflective of their fictional portrayal in *Family*. It would be easy to criticize Stapleton for assuming that Ba Jin’s worldview—particularly in relation to chapter one’s concluding discussion of the “liberation” of slave girls in the May Fourth era—was reflective of the wider political and economic reforms sweeping China between the 1910s and 1940s. Indeed, as she argues throughout the book, Stapleton asserts that Ba Jin was “unusual ... in Chengdu in the 1910s and 1920s” (p.56) being, himself, in many ways, a pre-emptive “[advocate] of social change in China” and “[calling] for the abolition of slave girl status and concubinage” (p.44). Not content with unravelling the legal and social context of slave girls in early twentieth-century Chengdu, Stapleton concludes her analysis of Mingfeng by considering the city from a slave girl’s perspective, providing an insightful analysis of the experience of slave girls in Chengdu, as well as the experience of slave girls from various locations traversing the threshold of rural China to the city, more widely.

The book’s successive chapters (two-seven) successfully chart the development of Chengdu alongside their fictional counterparts in *Family*, whose professions or public profiles Stapleton employs in detailing the various social and economic contexts of the novel. While chapter two and three’s discussions of “Chengdu’s Gentry” and “The Chengdu Economy”, respectively, undoubtedly provide a significant contribution to our understanding of how Ba Jin’s work reflects the early social and economic development of Chengdu, Stapleton’s insights into the lives of everyday citizens in chapters four-six provide her greatest contribution to debates around the lived experience of individuals during the May Fourth era. Moreover, her contribution (as in chapter one) to historical debates on Gender Studies in China—as exemplified by chapter six’s exploration of “Chengdu and the ‘New Woman’”—helps shed light on why, as a result of its “stifling conservatism”, eastern cities like Shanghai, Guangzhou, and even Beijing, “became magnets that attracted many revolutionary youth away from interior cities like Chengdu” (p.183). Stapleton’s approach in this effort to unravel women’s experience in early twentieth-century Chengdu is akin to Leta Hong Fincher’s *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (2014), whose comparable use of personal stories to illustrate the challenges faced by women in contemporary China suggest that more research is needed to bridge the gap between the new conceptions of women’s education and roles in society in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and the experience of women in China today.

In *Fact in Fiction*, Stapleton has undoubtedly succeeded in producing a highly detailed and rich study of how the social and political situation in 1920s Chengdu intersects with *Family* as fiction. If there is one criticism that might be levelled about sections of the book, it is that Stapleton's keen enthusiasm for the social and economic development of Chengdu as a growing city in early twentieth-century China does, at times, overshadow her astute analysis of *Family*. Chapter three's lengthy exploration of the 1909 Chengdu census, for example—while no doubt an invaluable resource for social anthropologists of early twentieth-century China—loses its focal character, Gao Juexin's, experience of 1920s Chengdu amongst Stapleton's intricately detailed description of the city which, she concedes, Ba Jin "based ... pretty much entirely on his memories of his childhood and stories he heard from others" (p.88). Stapleton can be forgiven such indulgences, however, as the chapters which focus more prominently on her literary analysis of Ba Jin's work (notably chapters one, two and six) are instructive illustrations of how to read literary sources whilst also considering their motivation and historical context.

Thus, while *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family* should be read by anyone with an interest in Ba Jin, his *Turbulent Stream* trilogy or the development of Chengdu in the early twentieth century, Stapleton's methodological analysis and engaging exploration of Chengdu's rich history *vis-à-vis* Ba Jin's *Family* should be considered a mandatory resource to any literary historian who wishes to produce a work of equal quality and insight.

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