

WHAT DO WE LEARN ABOUT MAO FROM JIANG QING BIOGRAPHIES?

LOOKING AT JIANG QING BIOGRAPHIES FROM A META-BIOGRAPHICAL

AND MYHTO-BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Silvia Salino

For the Symposium Mao Zedong: Exploring Multi-dimensional Approaches to Biography

Vienna: 1-3 July 2016

One of the most stimulating features of biography is its ability to constantly reinterpret its subject. That a life can be rewritten from ever-new positions indicates that through narrative, biography imposes form on the facts of a person's life. As Benton says, the biographer has to put together a corpus of factual data with his or her own creative impulse, and in doing so, operates in the space between writing history and writing fiction, revealing specific storytelling techniques.¹ This aspect of fictionality has become an important concern in recent discourses on biography, in particular within meta-biography and mytho-biography.

The present contribution starts with a brief description of the characteristics of the meta-biographical and mytho-biographical perspectives to the study of biography. It then offers an example of how these approaches are applied in the analysis of two specific biographies of Jiang Qing (1914-1991), the last wife of Mao Zedong (1893-1976). Overall, a meta-biographical analysis of Jiang Qing biography allows us to identify the points at which her constructed nature is more evident, and therefore complicates the usual image of the revolutionary leader.

¹ Benton, *Towards a Poetic of Literary Biography*, 15.

The term meta-biography gained scholarly attention thanks to the work by Nicolaas Rupke: *Alexander von Humboldt. A Meta-biography* (2005), where the author describes the various images of Humboldt in his numerous German biographies. The aim of the book was not to finally discover the 'real' Humboldt, but rather to compare the differing representations of Humboldts, and to see how he had been perpetually constructed in dialogue with the contemporary political environment of his biographers. Since then, meta-biography has been used to indicate various self-conscious approaches to life-writing in both fictional and non-fictional contexts. They all stress the changing nature of biography, and the process by which biographies re-envision their subjects in the light of the present. This line of meta-biographical research investigates the development of biographical representation of one subject, and corresponds to what Richard Holmes calls "comparative biography"², a virtually new discipline which analyses "the handling of one subject by a number of different biographers, and over several different historical periods".³

A sustained reflection on meta-biography in the more historiographical sense has been made by Caitríona Ní Dhúill, who wrote that the term "suggests a commitment to developing critical perspectives on the cultural and ideological mediation of biography, as well as to finding new pathways through established biographical discourses".⁴ Her definition encourages not only the comparative study of one subject in order to reveal different priorities, but also the questioning of biographical discourses, and therefore goes beyond comparative biography to indicate the study of life writing in general. In her view, meta-biography rejects the promise of an 'encounter' between the subject and the reader, and adopts a more disenchanted approach to past lives and to the layered biographical

² Holmes, "The Proper Study?", 15-16.

³ Holmes, "The Proper Study?", 16.

⁴ Ní Dhúill, "Towards an Antibiographical Archive", 283.

discourse they generate.⁵ This way, by locating “metabiographical reflections and interventions in unlikely places”, it might be possible to acquire a deeper knowledge of the “cultural functions”⁶ of biography.

The meta-biographical perspective relates to the concerns of what Michael Benton has called “biomythography”⁷. Benton thinks that in the study of biography a special focus should be placed on the complex makeup of life writing, which refuses an unmediated access to the subject and shows the limitation of really knowing a person’s life. When working from a mytho-biographical perspective, therefore, we should not forget that a life can never be textually captured and that, although we must take biography’s concern with the documentary record seriously, no biography can ever be considered truly definitive. Again, the aim is not an iconoclastic demystification in order to assess the legitimacy of different interpretations, but rather to reveal the importance of certain myths within the cultural context that produced them.

Meta- and mytho-biographical perspectives are therefore concerned with the contingent and constructed nature of biography. This is somewhat related to Hayden White’s idea of meta-history, according to which Western historiography can be explained in terms of certain plot-structures the historiographer borrows from literature.⁸ These structures coincide with his or her ideological approach to history, and therefore reveal his or her political inclinations even if this is not made explicit by the historiographer. The importance of these considerations for biography is White’s observation that the same historical event – the raw biographical material – can be presented in disparate ways, and only by looking at

⁵ Ní Dhúill, “The Hero as Language Learner”, 68,76.

⁶ Ní Dhúill, “Towards an Antibiographical Archive”, 283.

⁷ Benton, *Literary Biography*, 48.

⁸ White, *Metahistory*, x.

the text itself, is it possible to know the meaning and the context into which this material has been inscribed.

Narrative is thus the central theoretical concept, and our socio-cultural context is relevant to the narratives we choose to write and the way in which we choose to write them. To this degree, meta-biography is engaged with the relationship between the writing of history and the question of politics and ideology. This mode of inquiry detects the ideological, personal and political interests at work in the biographical representations it explores, and when applied within the Chinese context, it can be particularly interesting. In fact, it has been shown how modern Chinese fiction has recently taken a new importance in its potential to deconstruct objective historiography.⁹ Biography can deepen even more our understanding of the development of history writing in contemporary China, because it offers a very specific point of view.

Because meta-biography and mytho-biography consider the interpretive and fictive dimensions of biography as paramount, literary analysis is the best way to proceed. This means examining particular artistic structures and narrative strategies which give shape to a certain biographical representation.

The texts I will take into exam are Roxane Witke's *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* (1977), and Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* (2001). The two books are very distant in time and genre but, it will become clear, are related to each other.

Comrade Chiang Ch'ing was written on the basis of extensive interviews of Jiang Qing in the summer of 1972 in Beijing and Canton. The biography was therefore compiled 'in

⁹ See, for example, Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, "Re-Imagining Chinese Peasant: The Historiography of the Great Leap Forward", in *Eating Bitterness: New Perspectives on China's Great Leap Forward and Famine*, ed. Kimberley Ens Manning and Felix Wemheuer (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 28-50.

collaboration' with the subject, and can be considered a semi-autobiographical text. It is a crucial source for studies on Jiang Qing, not only for the complexity of the material it contains, on which later biographies have relied, but also for the way this material is presented. Witke, an American scholar, met Jiang Qing when she was leading the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Jiang Qing's role was to revolutionize the realms of art and culture, the Chinese superstructure, and she put particular emphasis on stressing the political content of cultural works, and eliminating older cultural forms which she considered a threat to the revolution. Witke, who was in China to study younger women involved in the Chinese revolution, was interested in the experiences of political women in China and describes, in this book, the difficulties of Jiang Qing in her quest for public recognition in a patriarchal and antifeminist society. Jiang Qing is placed within the history of her country; in fact, the book contains long and detailed descriptions of the historical background. These are indicators of how the subject is regarded and what sort of portrait is to be created, and show that the question is indeed about Jiang Qing's public life and reputation. There are some personal tales about Jiang Qing's life; but these episodes are rare and overall Jiang Qing's story is not exactly personal according to Western standards.

A very different text is the fictional biography *Becoming Madame Mao*. The author, Anchee Min, is a Shanghai-born writer who lives and works in the United States and who personally experienced the Cultural Revolution when she was a teenager.¹⁰ Most of her fictional work, including the autobiographical novel *Red Azalea* (1994) can be read as an attempt to rewrite the Chinese Cultural Revolution through a constant attention to women, and in

¹⁰ Anchee Min was born in 1957 and was sent to a collective farm near the East China Sea when she was 17 years old.

particular to women's sexuality.¹¹ In *Becoming Madame Mao* this is very clear: the novel retells the story of Jiang Qing with a sustained attention to her sexuality and erotic power, implying that the Cultural Revolution was indeed a site of sexual expression. Min concentrates on Jiang Qing's psychological interiority, and portrays a sharply sensitive mind. Jiang Qing's persistent efforts to leave behind the troubles of her childhood, and the enormous obstacles she had to face to gain 'success', generate a powerful empathy with her. The novel starts with the words "She learns pain early. At the age of four, her mother comes to bind her feet"¹² and follows Jiang Qing in her continuous fights for survival, pain of abandonment and rejection. In these melodramatic representations, Jiang Qing's suffering seems unjust: how can a woman cope with this situation?

Despite the significant differences in genre and style, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* and *Becoming Madame Mao* share their willingness to present Jiang Qing's point of view. Aesthetically, they are both constructed on an alternation of autobiographical and biographical narratives; in Min's novel there is a constant shifting between first-and third person narration, and this movement between the narrative "I" and the narrative "she" occurs without any apparent reason. As it has been noticed, this can be interpreted as Jiang Qing telling her story in the third person and simultaneously playing out her life in the first person, but it can also be seen as a subjective historical voice that is imagining herself as a novelistic character.¹³ This is very interesting and has prompted me to investigate more in depth how the two texts are constructed.

¹¹ Wendy Larson has connected women's sexuality in Min's work with a liberatory impulse, a sort of female liberation which is able to resist repression by state. Larson, "Never This Wild: Sexing the Cultural Revolution", 443.

¹² Min, *Becoming Madame Mao*, 19.

¹³ Hayot, "Immigrating Fictions", 626.

Here I will briefly examine how the two authors deal with the question of performance.

In Witke we read: "The 'star quality' that marked her [Jiang Qing's] political leadership was not only simply the residue of a brief acting career long past, but appeared to be rooted in a consciousness of her place in history and was as persuasive in private as before the masses."¹⁴ The revolutionary leader was a public role that Jiang Qing performed when expected. Yet, it was often impossible to distinguish between the actress and the self. In this way, her image is extremely challenging to interpret. How does Witke deal with this problem? A typical strategy she adopts is one that allows Jiang Qing to speak for herself and then unmask her controversial views: "'At first, I did not want to go to the Lu Hsun Academy of Literature and Arts, but I was obliged by my organization to work there.' I blinked and asked why the reluctance, but did not remind her that in her earlier account to me she had been wholeheartedly for admission. 'I like to do work among the masses. Compared with the art as such, work among the masses is more important. Mass work is fundamental political work.' Apparently her feelings were ambivalent."¹⁵ Although affection and respect increase during Witke's relationship with Jiang Qing, and are shown through a tone of voice that reveals complicity and intimacy between the two women, criticism is not excluded. Witke admires Jiang Qing for her courage and determination, but is also suspicious of what she is telling her. In this sense, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* is different from the book supposedly taken as its model, Edgar Snow's *Red Star over China* (1937). Here the author recounts the history of the Chinese revolution through the story of its leaders, in particular Mao Zedong, and the two narratives proceed on a parallel: the story Mao's biography is also the history of the revolution. Witke, on the contrary, wants to go against

¹⁴ Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*, 12.

¹⁵ Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*, 150.

the grain, and reveals a tension between obligations and passions. The book's mode of 'collaboration' between the biographer and the subject is important, because it shows how Jiang Qing perceives and is perceived by Witke. The implications of this are also important, because they show Jiang Qing's conscious awareness of herself as a biographical subject. In *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* therefore Jiang Qing negotiated her public identity and authority as a political leader, and this image of her that has come out from *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* could have appeared only in those particular historical coincidences.

Although we have no proof in the strict sense of the word, it is possible that by recreating the movement between the 'I' and the 'she' Min is actually commenting about Jiang Qing's self-presentation in her interview with Roxane Witke. I shall explain why.

In *Becoming Madame Mao* we read: "Not only does the girl love drama, she creates drama in her daily life. It becomes her interest first, then it extends itself to become a need, an obsession and an addiction. Finally her entire existence is based on it, her fantasy – she has to feel dramatic, has to play a role, or she gets restless, stressed and sick. She doesn't get well until she assigns herself another role."¹⁶ The book is constructed on the metaphor of the theatre, and strongly affirms that Jiang Qing's actions must be understood as the acting out of a series of roles within a theatrical setting established by the historical circumstances in which she found herself. At the same time, Min does not necessarily say that this means to falsify her life. In fact, she shows her interest to preserve the power of the myth that surrounds Jiang Qing, and sustains only one element of this myth: the fact that she was a victim. This is the result of Min's ability to envision her subject, as for her the only proper way to write biography is by showing the author's own subjectivity. *Becoming Madame Mao*

¹⁶ Min, *Becoming Madame Mao*, 31-32.

is, at least in part, a criticism of *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*, and perhaps an attempt to go beyond Jiang Qing's self-presentation, and perhaps even criticism of the very act of writing auto/biographies. It serves to reflect on the constructed image that has come out from *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*, which was so persuasive and has seduced many biographers which based their own representations of Jiang Qing on Witke's book, including those who countered this political self-presentation. Although it is generally acknowledged that Jiang Qing was role player, and that she spoke to Witke with the intent to project a certain image of herself to the Western world, her self-construction has never been seen in operation. Here we see how the analysis of the narrative helps to reveal the intentions of the author and how fictional biographies, precisely because they are more creative in their treatment of the subject, can often tell us more about the subject, and at the same time contain within the text a critical intervention toward biography.

This brief example should help to clarify what is at stake in a meta- and mytho-biographical approach. In the case of Jiang Qing, this will shed light on how she controlled her own image, generating a biographical myth, and – more importantly – how this myth, in turn, influenced the various interpretations of her life.

To conclude, I will briefly refer to the question contained in the title of this contribution, 'what do we learn about Mao from Jiang Qing biographies?'. If we want to know something new about Mao from Jiang Qing biographies, this would be perhaps in relation to the pressures she received and which came from the surrounding political circumstances, and the degree to which she shaped herself accordingly.