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Refereed article

Jiang Qing, between Fact and Fiction: The Many Lives of a Revolutionary Icon

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Summary
Jiang Qing was the fourth wife of Mao Zedong and one of the leading politicians of the twentieth century. This paper explores the ways in which her life is narrated in four different biographies: Ross Terrill's *The White-Boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao* (1984), Ye Yonglie's *Jiang Qing zhuan* (*Biography of Jiang Qing*; 1993), Sha Yexin's *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* (1991), and Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000). Drawing on the concept of "metabiography," the author shows how each examined biographer employs specific narrative strategies to construct a certain image of Jiang, arguing that the way in which her life is told depends on the sociopolitical context in which the biography is rooted, each work ultimately serving a specific political purpose. At the same time, the strata of discourse that have settled around the figure of Jiang highlight the malleability of the biographical genre.*

Keywords: China, Jiang Qing, Nora, Cultural Revolution, documentary biography, fictional biography, metabiography

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Introduction

Jiang Qing (1914–1991) was the fourth wife of Mao Zedong (leader of the country from 1949 to 1976) and herself a career politician. She was a central figure in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), one of the darkest periods in Chinese history, during which many of the country's citizens were killed and politically persecuted. In reforming the realm of the performing arts, Jiang created the so-called Model Operas (*yangbanxi*), a corpus of works adhering to a strict political-aesthetic principle — according to which it became possible to distinguish proletarian art from nonproletarian art (see, e.g., Gu Yizhing 2010). After the death of Mao in 1976, Jiang was arrested and vilified by her opponents. She was accused of counterrevolutionary activities and sentenced to death in a show trial that took place in the winter of 1980–1981. The sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment. In 1991, Jiang committed suicide. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) tried to erase her from the cultural memories of the people by banning any commemoration and public debate on her figure. In the People's Republic of China (PRC) Jiang has, thus, been a taboo subject for decades now.

Recently, there has been an upsurge of interest in Jiang internationally. The BBC documentary series by Adam Curtis *Can't Get You Out of my Head* (2021) features Jiang as one of the main protagonists of modern global history (Jiang Qing 2021). In China, in the year of the 100th anniversary of the CCP, the Party leadership has reportedly allowed public access to the grave of Jiang, triggering much attention from all over the world (Qiao 2021).

The life of Jiang has been narrated in various biographies — both fictional and nonfictional, Chinese and Western. Taken together, these writings create different "Jiang Qings": the oppressed wife, the liberated feminist, the ruthless "empress." Each of these images is part of its own plot, with each differing in key respects. Life-writing studies have increasingly placed attention on the changing nature of biography, a genre that has adapted in order to meet different needs and serve diffuse purposes. As Peter France and William St. Clair put it: "Biography is not the same, and does not perform the same tasks, at different times and in different places" (2002: 4). Consequently, the mode of inquiry France and St. Clair adopt is one that inspects "the functions which [biography] can serve and has served in different societies, its *uses*" (2002: 4; italics in the original).

One of the few articles — if not the only — to focus on the contingency of Jiang's biographical accounts is Elaine Jeffreys's "Woman, Nation and Narrative: Western biographical accounts of Jiang Qing" (1994). Jeffreys analyzes three early Western ones: Chung Hua-min and Arthur Miller's *Madame Mao: A Profile of Chiang Ch'ing* (1968), Roxane Witke's *Comrade Chiang Ch'ing* (1977), and Ross Terrill's *The White-Boned Demon: A Biography of Madame Mao Zedong* (1984). Hereby Jeffreys reveals the "constructed, rather than given, nature of the biographical subject" (1994: 36). The article shows that the image of Jiang portrayed by biographers depends on the interconnectedness between narrative strategies and

certain assumptions about Chinese politics and society, and suggests that the authors used Jiang's life to symbolize "China's moral and political bankruptcy" (35) from a Western perspective.

Expanding on Jeffreys's method, this paper increases the understanding of Jiang's biographical constructions by enlarging the spectrum of contexts in which accounts of her life have appeared. It examines four biographies written in different genres, eras, and places.[1] Terrill's *The White-Boned Demon* (1984)[2] and Ye Yonglie's *Jiang Qing zhuan* (*Biography of Jiang Qing*, 1993; revised and expanded edition 2000) are both documentary biographies, the first written by an Australian historian mainly for a Western readership and the second published in the PRC. Sha Yexin's *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* (Sha 1991) and Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* (2000) are fictional biographies meanwhile; the first written by a Shanghai playwright for the theater (but published in Hong Kong),[3] the second a biographical novel written by a Chinese-born American writer.

The analytical focus will be on the "locatedness" of Jiang's interpreters, highlighting the malleability and ideological embeddedness of biographical representation. The aim, then, is to investigate Jiang's legacies in light of more recent theoretical developments in the field of life writing. These consider fictional narratives an integral part of the ongoing discourse on the subject, because they feed into the same archive of collective memories.

Metabiography: Theory and method

In her recent study *Metabiography: Reflecting on Biography* (2020), Caitríona Ní Dhúill illuminates the concept of "metabiography" and shows its importance in deepening our understanding of the biographical genre. According to Ní Dhúill, metabiography aims to unsettle the unified notion of the "biographical subject," contradicting the biographical promise of an encounter between the reader and the subject:

> Metabiography […] takes a step back from biography, seeking to establish a level of reflection, distance, irony, and self-consciousness with regard to the claims, assumptions, and conventions of biography, while in turn galvanising and transforming biographical practice. (2020: 4)

Focusing on a range of biographical texts — fictional and nonfictional — Ní Dhúill highlights how metabiography "as method, as approach, as a hermeneutics

1 The works analyzed in this paper represent only a small part of the vast biographical literature on Jiang Qing. The selection is by no means exhaustive, but shows rather the variety of contexts that are available.

2 Revised and expanded edition published in 1999 under the title *Madame Mao: The White-Boned Demon*. A Chinese edition was published in 1988 as *Jiang Qing zhengzhuan* (*The Real Story of Jiang Qing*).

3 The play is still banned in the PRC. In 2010 it was performed for the first time in Hong Kong by the Perry Chiu Experimental Theatre.

of biography" (2020: 10) can be applied to a great variety of biographical representations, ultimately showing the "democratic potential of biography" (2020: 10).

The term metabiography first gained scholarly attention only about a decade ago, with the publication of Nicolaas A. Rupke's *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (2008), a study of the eponymous author's biographies. Rupke investigates changes in the biographical representation of a single figure over time, introducing metabiography as an approach that aims to "explore the fact and the extent of the ideological embeddedness of biographical portraits, not settle the issue of authenticity" (2008: 215). This resonates with Hayden White's (1974) theory of "metahistory," which argues that Western historiography can be explained in terms of the plot structures that historiographers borrow from literature. For White, a historical account can be "emplotted" in romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire, each representing a different way of "explaining" the historical events at hand. The significance of White's theory lies in its entrance into discussions about the forms of historiographical writing — which, according to this scholar, is never neutral: "The events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motif repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like" (1978: 84).

White's insistence on the narrative of the historical text has inspired a way of approaching biography that focuses on the contingent, changeable, and constructed nature of the biographical subject, and which can be called, adapting White's term, "metabiographical." This mode of inquiry is, to some extent, similar to what Richard Holmes (2004) calls "comparative biography." Holmes talks about the way in which biographies are continually replaced by other later ones, offering a new interpretation of the life in question. The process by which biographies reenvision their subjects in light of the present day registers how "social and moral attitudes" and "standards of judgement" evolve over generations (Holmes 2004: 15). Biography's natural dynamic of perpetual reinterpretation is indicative, then, of changes in society and culture. "[Its] shifts and differences — factual, formal, stylistic, ideological, aesthetic" are some of the genre's most stimulating characteristics and, for Holmes, they warrant the founding of "virtually a new discipline," that of comparative biography — an examination of "the handling of one subject by a number of different biographers, and over several different historical periods" (all quotes from 2004: 16).

Ní Dhúill takes this idea to a more sustained level: while comparative biography and metabiography, as defined by Rupke, do not exclude the possibility of improving knowledge of the subject through the analysis of different interpretations, she proposes a metabiographical reading that "troubles the biographer's claim, and the reader's expectation, that the subject will be 'brought to life' and become somehow 'knowable' through the telling of a story" (2020: 24).

Her analysis is firmly concerned with the representation itself, and with its "ideological investments" (Ní Dhúill 2020: 6). This can be particularly interesting when dealing with biographical fiction. The liberty in rewriting the subject through a fictional retelling of the past allows the biographer to experiment with the new and nonconventional ways in which subjectivity can be represented, in a manner that might be more revealing of the "working of projections, desire, othering, identification, and self-reflexivity (Ní Dhúill 2020: 6). In other words, the "fiction" added by the fictional biographer makes their ideological position less hindered, thereby favoring a reflection on some crucial questions about biography — such as the one regarding the point of view from which the life in question is recounted.

In order to clarify how the various representations of Jiang reflect specific political, personal, and aesthetic interests, I first briefly outline the official image of Jiang produced by Chinese historiography.

Official historiography of Jiang Qing

Jiang's official image was first molded after her arrest in 1976, when a huge vilification campaign was started against her and the other members of the so-called Gang of Four.[4] The campaign was orchestrated by the Party, in an authoritarian political culture that continued under Mao's successor Hua Guofeng (Premier of the PRC from 1976 to 1980). The years between Jiang's arrest and her trial in 1980 were marked by the appearance of millions of posters and cartoons violently attacking the Gang of Four in a way that recalled the purging of the victims of the Cultural Revolution, denouncing them as class enemies and spies. Political caricatures depicted Jiang as an empress, mocking her ambitions to become Mao's heir, or as a prostitute, using her past as an actress in Shanghai to destroy her moral integrity; moreover, they criticized her obsession with (Western) pastimes such as photography and poker, doing so in order to undermine her political authority as a communist. Finally, she came to be identified as the "white-boned demon" — a (gendered) destructive monster.[5]

The sensational Gang of Four trial, then, officially sealed Jiang's image as guilty of wicked and manipulative deeds. According to the long indictment, the Gang of Four was held responsible for the violence of the Cultural Revolution. Jiang was accused of having framed cases against the Party leadership, setting large-scale purges in motion for the sake of personal vendettas (Cook 2006). As Mary Farquhar and Chris Berry have argued, the trial can be read within the narrative of speaking of "past bitterness and present sweetness (*yiku sitian*)" (2004: 128–129), which aims to create a positive assessment of the present by remembering past sufferings. It was propagated on a massive scale throughout the country by a range

4 The Gang of Four was a radical faction formed by Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen.

5 The white-boned demon is a fictional monster from the popular sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Xiyouji* (*Journey to the West*). For a discussion hereof, see Wagner (1990).

of media formats (including television), with the trial being broadcast both inside and outside of China.

Such a narrative is necessarily dualistic, with a clear-cut opposition between right and wrong, order and chaos, past and present. Jiang embodied the violence of the past, while the newly constituted Party under Deng Xiaoping (leader of the country from 1978 to 1989) represented the positive present and future (Farquhar and Berry 2004). In this sense, the trial is complementary to the Resolution on CPC History (1949–1981), through which the official version of post-1949 CCP history was produced. This document separated Mao the man from Mao Zedong Thought; the former was criticized for his "errors" — not crimes — while the latter was shown to be a still-valid ideology for the new order under Deng.[6] Although he was criticized, Mao was not held responsible for the disasters and excesses of the Cultural Revolution — being entirely ascribed to Jiang and the Gang of Four instead.

In general, one can consider the biographical literature on Jiang a practice of intervention, of deconstruction, as well as of the hybridization of Chinese official historiography, contributing to the broader historical debate on the legacy of the Cultural Revolution.

Shaping the Evidence: Jiang Qing, Nora, and the Cultural Revolution

Terrill's *The White-Boned Demon* and Ye's *Jiang Qing zhuan* are two of the most authoritative scholarly works on Jiang. Both authors make use of a wide variety of sources, including interviews, letters, and journal as well as newspaper articles, each claiming to deliver a truthful representation of their subject. Indeed, they can be read as a contribution to the tradition of factual, source-based biographies "inescapably wedded to a truth-telling programme" (Schlaeger 1995: 67) and committed to verifiable sources. However, we can see how the two texts only partly aim to provide factual proof to satisfy the reader's expectation of authorial objectivity. They also involve imaginative excursions, and leave room for mythology.

In *The White-Boned Demon*, Terrill sums up Jiang's participation in politics as follows:

> In Yanan, the Chinese Revolution had been Mao's, but in the Cultural Revolution period Jiang Qing began to see it as hers as much as Mao's. Her

6 The first "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party" (Guanyu ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi) was adopted by the Central Committee of the CCP in 1945 and defined a framework for interpreting events in Chinese history between 1840 and 1945 with special emphasis on the time period from 1921 onward. The 1981 "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China" (Guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi) was produced to define the interpretation of Chinese history from 1945 to 1981 meanwhile. See Weigelin-Schwiedrzik (1987; 2006).

> revolutionary idealism had always been an aspect of her drive for self-expression. Paradoxically, since joining the revolution in Yanan, she had felt little sense of self-expression, but rather a nagging feeling of oppression. (Terrill 1999: 234)

Jiang arrived in Yan'an in 1937 after leaving Shanghai, where she had worked as an actress under the name of "Lan Ping." At the headquarters of the Communist revolution, she met and married Mao, but had to sign a marital agreement that impeded her involvement in political activities for 20 years hence.[7] This is described in the book as a humiliation for Jiang, who had left Shanghai because her "ambition was swelling too large for the theater to contain it" (98). The titles and contents of the two chapters describing the 1940s and 1950s demonstrate the author's explicit intent to frame Jiang's life within a narrative of victimhood: "Mao's Housewife in Yanan (1938–49)" and "Letdown (1950s)" reveal her marriage to Mao to be a "partial return to tradition, the coupling of an emperor with an actress" (138), and repeatedly tell the reader that she is "brittle emotionally" (165), "not content," and that "[t]he bureaucracy, or Mao, or both, tried to hold her down to private life" (167). Therefore, Jiang's political role during the Cultural Revolution, and her swift rise to power, are interpreted by Terrill in terms of retaliation after decades of suppression and misery.

In Ye's work, meanwhile, Jiang's role in the Cultural Revolution underlines a very different kind of revenge:

> The "standard-bearer"[8] had authority and power, as well as two traits that the bygone Lan Ping could not have hoped for. The first one is revenge: using the authority she held in her hands, she hit back at all her "personal enemies," and even joyed when one of them was put to death. The second one is conspiracy: scheming to wipe out in one stroke her entire inglorious past, she used all available means to seal the mouth of those who knew the facts, burning all the material to "prevent it from circulating." (Ye 2000: 516; all quotes from Ye are the author's own translations)

Following the mainstream narrative of Chinese historiography, Ye condemns the Cultural Revolution as a decade of chaos and holds Jiang responsible for its excesses and atrocities. Nonetheless, as will be shown, the book is much more complex than it appears at first glance. Ye, one of the most prolific biographers from Mainland China, not only took a daring step in writing about Jiang in the early 1990s, but also included in his book private aspects of her life that would never have made it into a political biography. The traditional way of writing biographies of eminent people was mainly an assessment of the subject's successes

7 The Party established three preconditions for the marriage between Mao and Jiang Qing to be approved: 1) Mao and his previous wife He Zizhen get officially divorced; 2) Jiang Qing's only responsibility would be taking care of Mao; and, 3) Jiang Qing should refrain from playing any role in politics (including making public appearances with him) for 20 years hence.

8 In the early stages of the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing was acclaimed by the masses with the expression "standard-bearer of the Great Cultural Revolution."

and failures in living up to Confucian standards; this changed very little in the socialist period when biography had a didactic function and showed exemplary lives (Wagner 2003). *Jiang Qing zhuan* is, therefore, a departure from the conventional way of writing political biographies in China, which were exclusively concerned with the public aspects of the subject's life.

Both Terrill and Ye believe in the idea that truth can be found in the sources. But in their attempt to present Jiang's story as plausible, they generate two competing images of the subject: the poor Jiang and the evil Jiang respectively. Terrill's book is, as Adrian Hsia has suggested, a "feminist-inspired biography" (2010: 103–104), as it describes Jiang's life as the individual and isolated struggle of a woman who was oppressed and victimized. By unfolding the sufferings she endured as a child — a violent father, unloving family, lack of economic opportunity — the book brings the reader face-to-face with the tragedies of her life, foreshadowing the many sorrows to come. After she moves from her poor hometown in Shandong Province to cosmopolitan Shanghai, Jiang is confronted with misogyny on several occasions, and furthermore struggles to establish herself as a professional actress. Terrill admires her strength and determination: "[S]he was a woman of spirit, not easily controlled or bought for favors" (77). It was precisely Jiang's strong desire for individual freedom that had led to the end of her marriage to Mr. Fei, allegedly her first husband, and which would eventually lead to the end of her third marriage too, that with the Shanghai literary and film critic Tang Na.

Jiang's rejection of the Confucian system and her embracing of the Western values of individuality and free will are addressed by Terrill through the figure of Nora from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, a character Jiang played in her most successful performance, in 1935:

> Before the night was out, Lan had the audience at fever pitch by the challenge to Chinese tradition in the words falling from Nora's lips. Lan found a submerged aspect of her personality in turning herself into this "woman rebel" […]. Lan was able to shout across the footlights her own private message to Mr. Fei: "We must both be perfectly free. Look, here's your ring back – give me mine." She was able to explain her resentment of male directors: "I've lived by performing tricks for you, Torvald." Lan Ping was Nora. (Terrill 1999: 56–57)

The idea of Jiang as a woman trapped, as implied in the above passage, distinctly expresses twentieth-century Western feminists' criticism of patriarchal societies as reducing women to the status of possessions. Terrill renders female subordination in China so obvious that it can be said to convey a critique of Jiang's "imprisonment" in the spirit of Western liberal societies. Terrill, therefore, also dismisses the opportunism attributed to Jiang by Chinese official historiography, and downplays the fact that she might have used her third husband to progress in her career by presenting this as but a mere — and quite unconvincing — possibility:

> Lan's conduct made her difficult to deal with, yet she was not purely opportunistic in her approach to Tang. He did write nice reviews of her work, as

> she no doubt expected him to. Her money problems were for a time eased by the proximity of Tang's ampler purse. Yet, pure opportunism is ruled out by the fact that Lan quarreled with Tang, almost from the start of their relationship. (78)

Terrill rejects the notion that Jiang's love relationships were part of a grand strategy to achieve success and power, in clear opposition to the Party's own narrative. To this end, the author commits to the image of the poor Jiang. On the contrary, in Ye's biography Jiang's activities in Shanghai are explicitly interpreted as an immoral attempt to functionalize men for her own purposes:

> "Fundamentally, I am against marriage, I believe that when each other's love is mature, there is no need to go through the rite of marriage, but two people can just live together!" These are her "love principles." She said these words on August 4, 1935. Afterward, the kind of life she lived in Shanghai, so indecent that it gave rise to much discussion, was the result of her "practicing" these "love principles." Her "fundamentally being against marriage" was merely to avoid being fettered by the marriage contract, it was capricious. The "career" she pursued was that of the "big star," and she considered romantic love, and cohabitation, as a ladder to rise to "stardom" […]. (Ye 2000: 105)

The passage exemplifies the way in which Ye tries to make sense of Jiang's experiences as an actress. In this context, Jiang's interpretation of Nora in 1935 is seen as a professional success as well as the beginning of her project of "climbing the stage" (94), alluding to her being a self-centered person. However, this representation of unrestrained desire and greed is countered by the author's use of the sources. Ye is particularly keen to employ private letters and testimonies that would reflect Jiang's intimate nature. This perfectly expresses his aim of painting a picture of the private Jiang as part of the whole, "objective" portrait he is hoping to achieve. With regard to her relationship with Tang in Shanghai, Ye includes two private letters. He also relays in its entirety an interview with Jiang published in *Min Bao* (*People News*) (Li 1935), wherein she talks about private matters like marriage and love. Seemingly this material is used for information purposes only, as it gives, according to Ye, a "true picture of the life and environment" of the young Jiang in Shanghai.

Yet in offering this private angle, Ye opens up a space to the reader that is specifically female, and thus revolutionary for a political biography. His careful development of the details regarding the troubled love story simultaneously create a romantic atmosphere, while providing the sort of texture typically used in such novels to create notions of sentimental entanglement. The first encounter between Jiang and Tang is narrated through the latter's testimony, which is quoted in its entirety from Terrill's book. It starts like this: "That night in the Golden City Theater, he had sat entranced with Lan Ping's acting. He found her strong, exciting, and sexually attractive. Meeting her was only a question of time" (Li 1935: 114; translation refers to Terrill 1999: 64). Then, the two letters included by Ye, which were written at very critical respective moments in their romantic relationship, also portray a soft and sensitive Jiang. Tang's letter, despite being

written after a tremendous fight with Jiang, depicts her as most fragile, ill, tender, and in love, while her own's letter (in which she expresses her decision to abandon him) shows her thoughtful considerations as well as her mature reflection on their relationship.

Ye, thus, ends up offering an analysis of their relationship that appears far warmer than what he originally set out to demonstrate. As he shapes the evidence into the plot of the immoral Jiang, the letters actually reveal a sensitive person and the reader is left with a strong impression of the passion, the tendresse, and even the desire she felt. The self-assertive and malicious image he is trying to construct is, consequently, countered by the womanly Jiang.

Compared to Terrill, whose perspective remains one-dimensional, Ye's narrative includes a variety of voices conveying contradictory information. This is again visible in the authors' interpretation of Jiang's political activities in Beijing. Terrill devotes one chapter to the 1960s, entitled "Recovery and Revenge: Politics as Theater (1960s)." Form the title it is already clear what his interpretation of Jiang's work in politics is: he sees her activities mainly as a series of personal attacks for the sake of revenge after her recovery from cervical cancer, which was "a result of her own will to climb out of her pit of illness and depression" (214). Terrill describes Jiang's project of reforming drama as completely casual: "In her apartment, over meals, she listened to tapes of rehearsals, then rushed to the theater with fresh ideas" (222). He also points out her lack of skills: "Jiang Qing did not direct 'her' theatrical pieces, she hovered over them. Like a headmistress visiting the class of a junior teacher, she inspected, rebuked, dismantled, all without assuming operational responsibility" (222).

Terrill's gossipy temperament means that Jiang's has no capacities on her own. If she advances, it is only thanks to her "political marriage." Terrill is happy to reveal that people simply indulge her because she is "Chairman Mao's wife" (221) but that, in fact, they are confused at her ideas about drama, and most artists do not want to work with her. Terrill's urge to prove that Jiang has no political capabilities is aggravated by his desire to show that the Cultural Revolution is intimately related to her personality: "There was a psychological 'fit' between Jiang Qing and the Cultural Revolution" (231). As Jeffreys has correctly pointed out, Terrill explains the Cultural Revolution in terms of Jiang's "personal motivations and age-old power struggle" (1994: 47), and this is inextricably linked to the fact that she is a woman: "Terrill presents her as the other side of the feminine 'ideal': she is the empowered woman who exacts a savage revenge for her former repression. In doing so, Terrill feminises — and thus effectively discredits —the politics of this era" (Jeffreys 1994: 47). Terrill's exoticization of his subject from a feminist perspective shows his admiration of Jiang's ability to break with her past, liberate herself, and enter into history in a way no American women had yet done.

Regarding Jiang's public role in the arts, Ye is again ambivalent — never quite resolving the disjunction between his explicit aim to denigrate Jiang as an untalented person and the political enthusiasm that radiates out from the sources. The chapter "'Model opera' in Jiang's style" (Jiang ji "yang ban") narrates Jiang's work in the cultural field. Ye's primary need, as ever, is to present Jiang as a scheming woman. For instance, he repeatedly tells the reader that she "gradually carried out her scheme" (406), that she sought a "breakthrough" (411), or that she wanted to "single-handedly grab (*zhua*) 'the criticism,' single-handedly grab 'the creation'" (414). Yet, he goes on to quote at length sources that reveal Jiang's influence in creating proletarian works. Ye extensively quotes from "Tan jingju geming" ("On the Revolution of Peking Opera"), Jiang's first major public speech on drama reform.[9] The chosen extract reveals an attentive analysis of the proliferation of opera troupes across the country and shows Jiang's understanding of the urgency to promote the revolutionary cause via the reforming of the contents of the works performed.

In the subchapter entitled "Stretch one's hand and grab 'The Harbour'" (Shen shou "zhua" Haigang), Ye describes how Jiang "grabbed" the Huai opera *Morning at the Harbour* (*Haigang de zaochen*), in order to change it into a *yangbanxi* simply because "she lacked 'workers' [on the stage]" and *Morning at the Harbour* "coincidentally tells about dockers" (431), referring to Jiang's impulsive and capricious attitude. Yet, the testimony of the playwright Li Xiaoming discloses Jiang's serious engagement: "She said that she is seizing the revolution, reaching different places throughout the entire nation, her job is to watch plays, to select outstanding works that describe workers, peasants and soldiers, and arrange them for the Peking Opera" (432).

Finally, in the whole chapter we find several "comments" (*piyu*) written by Mao to Jiang in which he asks her to "read" (*yue*) a particular literary work. Ye must have privately believed that Jiang's opinions had started to become important not only for Mao but also for other members of the Party leadership too. As this idea begins to take shape, Ye concludes the chapter by firmly denigrating Jiang. Her "achievements" (*chengji*), written in quotation marks, are interpreted as Jiang's scheming all along, as in fact she is "in the dark carrying out extremely secret political activities" (436). Although Ye unveils Jiang's personality as "fundamentally competitive" and constantly stresses her "scheming talent," he avoids the normative tone that univocally condemns her as a woman of inherent wickedness. In this way, the author manages to write about a taboo subject in the PRC with an air of ambivalence.

9 The speech was given in 1964 in Beijing at the Festival of Peking Opera on Contemporary Themes.

Resisting biography: Jiang Qing and the private sphere

While factual biographies assert the delivery of a truthful representation of the subject, fictional ones make no such claim. Instead, they use raw biographical material in a playful way to rewrite the life of a historical character without strictly adhering to facts. One of the liberties that fictional biographies have is to invent dialogues and conversations, like this one:

> — What? I have committed four big crimes! Framing and persecuting leaders of the party and the country; persecuting and suppressing the party cadres and the broad masses, et cetera, et cetera. Humph, heinous crimes indeed! […] Nonsense, fabricated rumors! […] I was on the group deciding Liu Shaoqi's case, but I was only a helper. You have recorded proof? Okay, let's hear then.
>
> — (JIANG QING's voice) […] I am now taking responsibility for the nation's number-one special investigatory case … and I can now tell you, Liu Shaoqi is a big counterrevolutionary who embodies all evil.
>
> — Mmm, seems like my voice — pretty nice — probably a talk I gave in September of 1968 to the literary world. (Sha 2002: 286)[10]

This fictional dialogue between Jiang and an anonymous authority is placed in the Prologue of the play *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands*. Encircled by wooden railings, Jiang rejects all accusations made against her for the crimes committed during the Cultural Revolution. In recasting Jiang, Sha, an experimental playwright based in the PRC, deconstructs Chinese official historiography through the play's structure, merging fact and fiction: while the "recorded proof" seems to expose Jiang's "erroneous" recollection, as it is presented as a historical source, references with the status of historical sources are called into question by juxtaposing the official Jiang with the character on stage, favoring neither one nor the other. More than one version of the events at hand are presented, none of them authentic though.

In a similar way, in *Becoming Madame Mao* Min combines the fictionality of the narrated events with historical claims that attempt to legitimatize the story's accuracy, thus radically renegotiating the relationship between fact and fiction in biography.

> In the future the next moment is discussed as a moment of historical significance. Different views and interpretations have been adopted. Some say Mao walked out of the little meeting house and got into his car while Lan Ping was climbing into her truck […]. Some say that Mao bent his head as he exited the house because of his height and when he raised his eyes again, he was caught by her beauty […]. In Madame Mao's own story everyone comes to greet her with warm hellos. The truth is no one comes. No one says hello to anyone. (Min 2000: 94)

10 Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969) was a prominent victim of the Cultural Revolution. He was Chairman of the People's Republic of China from 1959 to 1968, when he was purged by Mao.

Min uses expressions such as "in the recorded history" and "as history reveals itself in the official documents," in turn countering them with "the truth is" — which is then followed by the author's/protagonist's own view. Such statements not only structure Min's narrative but they also encourage the reader to distinguish between the narratives propagated in official biographies and what is presented as Jiang's version of the truth. As Eric Hayot has correctly pointed out: "The impossibility of deciding which particular chiasmatic structure the novel favors speaks, as does the strategy of changing narrators itself, to a wish to confuse imaginative fiction with history, a subjective or fantasized perspective with an objective and factual one" (2006: 620–621). Min's note of historical accuracy is undermined by her own role as biographer, openly revealing her interpretative partiality. At the same time, this partiality is needed to nurture the reader's anticipation that the novel will eventually disclose Jiang's subjectivity. Min is motivated by her personal desire to tell the story of Jiang and yet is simultaneously skeptical about the ability of biography to accomplish this. Therefore she asserts the fictional truth, the truth of her "novel," as the primary truth capable of representing the past.

Sha's *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* and Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* both radically reinterpret the function of biographical documentation and present it as "intractable challenges to any single or definitive interpretation" (Ní Dhúill 2020: 144). Within these "anti-biographies," these authors are, for the most part, less concerned with the details of Jiang's life than with the (im)possibility of capturing her life per se. Ní Dhúill detects this pattern in many writings that call into question the "fundamental epistemological confidence in the biographer's ability to reconstruct the life and make the subject known" (2020: 144).

Sha and Min both rewrite the story of Jiang entirely from the protagonist's perspective, filtering her life through her own memories and reconstructing an ultimately inaccessible inner life, one betrayed by the omniscient narratives that have previously authored her story. In their revisitation of Jiang's life, these two authors implement a key postmodern strategy — what Linda Hutcheon describes as "challeng[ing] the impulse to totalize" (1989: 66). By focusing on the private sphere, both fictional biographies express their rejection of Chinese official historiography and of established and authoritative biography.

Jiang Qing and Her Husbands was published in Hong Kong in 1991. In dialogue with the contemporary political environment Sha is concerned with the issue of multiplicity in the artistic sphere, in a context where politics works to ensure "equality of cultural content" in order to articulate a "'main melody' discourse that 'guides' and gives shape to a possible consensus on the foundations of the modern Chinese polity, underscoring that the CCP's legitimacy continues to remain rooted in the battle over history" (Veg 2012: 44). In writing on Jiang, Sha not only breaks a taboo but also, through the subject's private sphere, gives a new assessment of

her role in the Cultural Revolution.[11] *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands*, which focuses on her role as a wife, juxtaposes in the first part of the play events that happened in Shanghai and Yan'an, moving back and forth between the mid-1930s, when Jiang meets and marries Tang, and the years 1937 and 1938, when Jiang meets and marries Mao. While in the modern space of Shanghai Jiang addresses herself as "a headstrong, petulant, and independent-minded woman who could never be a man's slave" (307) and is determined to fight for individual freedom, in Yan'an she is dependent upon her powerful and dominating husband — finally being forced to "yield" in necessarily accepting the humiliating marital conditions (see footnote 7). Both versions of Jiang are presented as plausible. As Natascha Vittinghoff has pointed out, Sha "cautiously tried to avoid giving any definitive evaluation of Jiang's personality" (Vittinghoff 1997: 94). *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* therefore opposes, through the very way it is composed, the official discourse on Jiang that identifies her as thoroughly depraved.

The initial depiction of the trial is linked to the juxtaposed scenes of Shanghai and Yan'an via these words offered by the protagonist herself: "I […] want to go back to the 1930s […] to Shanghai" (287). In Jiang's own subjective reconstruction of her life, therefore, her character is profoundly influenced by her husbands, and she reconstructs her identity as wife according to their respective personalities. While in Shanghai she admires Tang's progressive values and, just like him, is not fond of "being restricted by formalities" (306), in Yan'an Jiang is shaped by Mao's authoritarian and controlling nature: "I'll do as you say. In everything, everywhere, in my words and actions" (314). It seems, thus, that for Sha, Jiang did what her husbands told her to do. By linking the trial to her identities as a wife,[12] and by presenting these identities as ultimately shaped by her husbands, Sha forcefully intervenes in Chinese official historiography, implying that the crimes she was accused of committing should be seen as Mao's instead.

This idea becomes clearer if we consider that the husband and wife relationship the play is interested in is, in fact, the one between Jiang and Mao, and that Sha included the story with Tang in an attempt to evade censorship and get published in the PRC. It is worth noting that at the end of the Prologue, between Jiang expressing her desire to "go back" to the 1930s and the first act set in Shanghai, where she meets Tang, Sha interestingly inserts a play-within-a-play in which Jiang plays Nora, Mao plays Helmer, and Tang plays the audience, reinforcing the idea that the "husbands," plural, of the title might, in fact, refer to one — or *the* — husband. Sha's hope to be read in the PRC might also explain why he devotes only a small part of his play to the Cultural Revolution, represented in a monologue by Jiang, whose events critically engage with the official narrative. Had the play been

11 The play's experimentalism, combined with its deconstruction of the dominant narrative, can also be seen as an example of what Rossella Ferrari described as the final stage of "theatrical interculturalism," when Brechtian motifs are reworked into the local production in a synthesis of aesthetic innovation and cultural and political critique. See Ferrari (2004).

12 The link is reinforced by the presence of the two husbands at the trial as court witnesses.

published and eventually performed in the PRC, it would have caused the audience to reflect on — and question — the way in which they used to look at Jiang.

Similarly, Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* also seeks to revise the myth of the evil female ruler through the text's chosen structure; she reinterprets Jiang as a fluid and instable identity by constantly shifting the narrative perspective between the first and third person, rejecting any possibility of a totalizing narrative. The story told in *Becoming Madame Mao* is again a subjective reconstruction, this time within the framework of Jiang's suicide, which is referred to in the Prologue and in the novel's final scene. Facing death, Jiang tells her version of the story with a strong focus on sexuality, which makes the author's political and gendered point of view abundantly clear. As Wendy Larson (1999) has shown, Min criticizes the Cultural Revolution and wants to rewrite the history of that period giving voice to those figures and aspects that were marginalized and oppressed — in particular, women and women's sexuality.

At the same time the book can also be seen as part of Min's larger project to deconstruct the figure of Jiang, forcing the reader to see her from a different angle. In an interview, Min noted: "It is the Chinese tradition that every dynasty's downfall is the concubine's fault. Madame Mao is considered a white-boned demon. But how could she be all evil?" (Farmanfarmaian 2000: 66). Min's personal experience of the Cultural Revolution contributed to shaping her view on Jiang: in her autobiographical novel *Red Azalea* (1993), we read that in the 1960s Min was chosen for the main role in Jiang's autobiographical film (also called *Red Azalea*), feeding her dreams of becoming a "national starlet." But the fall of Jiang in 1976 ended Min's career in the cinema and she was forced to work as a set clerk in the film studio, before eventually emigrating to the United States in 1984. In an interview with Min, A. O. Scott noticed that she has fine memories of the Cultural Revolution and that revolutionary operas are still an integral part of her life, as she "trade[s] revolutionary arias" (Scott 2000: 44) with her daughter in California. Min's fascination with Jiang is, thus, related to an idea of revolutionary passion that, as Larson has pointed out, emerges as eroticized in Min's female characters — individuals who, "acting through lust," impersonate the "true spirit of revolution" (Larson 1999: 440–441).

In *Becoming Madame Mao*, Jiang is the protagonist not only on the stage of her life but on that of history as well: "I see myself as the protagonist in an imagined opera" (188). Her role in the Cultural Revolution is that of an active player, a "leading lady," confirming female superiority over men in performing the Revolution: "China is run by Madame Mao Jiang Ching with Mao behind every move" (Min 1996: 221).[13] Focusing on sexuality, Min presents a Jiang who, on the one hand, is used by men in an oppressive milieu that denies female desire. Above all, Mao humiliates her; from the very beginning "[he] makes her feel that she is

13 Jiang Qing is spelled "Jiang Ching" in Min's text.

already in his possession" (143). On the other hand, through sexuality Jiang is empowered as a woman, and can claim her own identity:

> She looks away, knowing that she has altered his focus. His attention is now on her, and on her alone. It happens in complete silence. A wild chrysanthemum secretly and fervently opens and embraces the sunbeams. The girl feels strangely calm and experienced. She is in her role. She takes the moment and tries to make it shine. She is pleased with herself, an actress who has never failed to cast a spell over the audience. Her heart misses no beat. In silence she introduces herself to him. Every part of her body speaks, delivers and reaches. She has him watching her, freely and boldly. Her neatly combed hair, her ivory skin. She sits still, on the ground of Yenan. She lets him find her. (Min 1996: 113)

The individualization of Jiang's experience allows Min to overcome the dichotomy victim-perpetrator and to open up space for multiple alternate possibilities: "Let me tell you stories of my life. Because in a few minutes it will be a different story. I will be called the White-Boned Demon" (Min 1996: 302).

To conclude, by rejecting the authoritative model — wherein the biographer presents the subject's life as a coherent narrative — *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* and *Becoming Madame Mao* express instead the desire to call into question the established tradition of totalizing narratives about Jiang. Eventually, the private sphere is used not as the key to more intimate knowledge of the subject but rather to deconstruct official Chinese historiography.

Conclusion

This paper raises important ideas about writing the biography of Jiang Qing. In responding to Ní Dhúill's call to "lay bare the workings of biography" (2020: 209), it shows how each author employs specific strategies to construct a particular image of the subject. Both the factual and the fictional biographies analyzed here, thus, extend the afterlife of their subject, and generate alternative narratives from the particular points of view in which each biography is embedded. Ross Terrill's *The White-Boned Demon* focuses on Jiang's struggles from a Western, feminist perspective, while Ye Yonglie's *Jiang Qing zhuan* inserts some private aspects in a political biography in an attempt to go beyond the official Chinese historiography emanating from within the PRC. Sha Yexin's *Jiang Qing and Her Husbands* encourages a new way of looking at her meanwhile — quite a problematic one at that, had the play been published in the PRC. Finally, in Anchee Min's *Becoming Madame Mao* Jiang emerges as a sexualized female revolutionary who has voiced her story, therewith gaining a place in the historiography.

Furthermore it has been shown that these "points of view" can be particularly observed in the two fictional biographies in the way they reveal the subjectivity of biographical reconstruction. Indeed, the departure from biographical convention does not signify the total impossibility of biographical representation, instead putting a positive notion of the different achievements of subjectivity in the

foreground. Biographical "experiments" that reject the simplistic conventional modes of writing biography can actually expand the possibilities for reconstructing past lives by using a style that "more accurately reflects the condition of the modern subject, a style that is felt to do justice to, and therefore, to more faithfully represent, a particular person, or a form that activates additional levels of auto/biographical communication" (Novak 2017: 3).

Finally, it is possible to see some interesting links between the examined biographies. Both Terrill and Min frame Jiang from a Western perspective by positioning her life within a feminist narrative, wherein it is possible to detect the development of feminism from a question of political power to one of the empowerment of women as individuals. While Terrill is interested in Jiang as a woman in power and victimizes her because she dared to enter a male-dominated public space, Min's urge is to give voice to Jiang's subjectivity — rejecting a monolithic image of the victim and showing her complicity with the revolutionary regime.

In the PRC, both Ye and Sha write about a taboo subject. But while Ye manages to convey ambivalence without questioning Chinese official historiography, Sha's implications are too subversive to avoid censorship. His idea that Jiang did what her husbands told her to do — assigning, thus, new responsibilities to Mao in the context of the Cultural Revolution — places him in a sort of counterfeminist position, even more apparent when compared to Terrill's idea of her as a self-willed "top rebel." On the other hand, Ye is less interested in Jiang as a woman than in her way of yielding power — and, thus, uses her to understand the events of post-1949 Chinese history.

In this way, in sum, writing the biography of Jiang Qing may not only result in a variety of different portrayals of the revolutionary's life but can also produce unexpected connections between the diverse contexts in which these portrayals have appeared over time.

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