

Translator's Introduction

Ba Jin's autobiography, like the man himself, is full of contradictions.

If for Jean-Paul Sartre, in his classic play No Exit (Huit clos), "L'enfer, c'est les autres," that is, Hell is other people, one could easily believe that for Ba Jin, Hell was his family. And it is the portraits of his early life in the compound of his enormous, educated, and wealthy family that make his autobiography so compelling some 70 years after it was written.

Ba Jin was born in Chengdu, Sichuan province in 1904 into a "rich, big family," as he chose to describe them at his kindest. Other expressions he employed were a "family filled with malice, darkness, and backstabbing." He blamed the authoritarian rule of his grandfather for ruining his beloved eldest brother's aspirations to be a scholar because he forced the young man at age 20 to give up his studies and instead take a job that paid a mere 24 yuan a month.

Yet it is clear that Ba Jin also loved his family dearly and was shaped by its traditional values--perhaps even more than he realized when writing this autobiography at the tender age of 30 in 1934. By then he had already published 10 novels as well as numerous essays, short stories and novellas and had achieved a great deal of fame among the young intellectuals who were desperately looking for ways to reform Chinese society in all its aspects, including its literature. The most famous of his early works--some would say Ba Jin's masterpiece--was the novel entitled simply Family, written in 1931, the same year his eldest brother committed suicide. Ba Jin blamed his beloved eldest brother's suicide on the strain of having to head this "big, rich family" with all its dark secrets and feuds, including the eldest brother's own secret--and disastrous--attempts at speculation using the family's

own money in a failed business scheme.

Ba Jin was given the name Li Yaotang at birth (Li being his surname and Yaotang, his personal name, or ming), which meant "Tall Pear Tree."¹ Once he began school, he was given a more formal, scholarly name (called a hao in Chinese), Feigan, meaning "Sweet Shelter," a phrase from the Book of Odes, one of the classic books of the Confucian education system.²

The Li clan was a very traditional and, by the standards of the day, very successful family. His father was a judge in northern Sichuan, and several of his uncles held Imperial magistrate positions. The family compound in Chengdu was enormous and housed between 80 and 100 people, including the grandfather; his wives, concubines, sons, and daughter-in-laws; dozens of grandchildren and, eventually, great-grandchildren; as well as dozens of servants of various ages. Ba Jin's grandfather and father could afford to invite various opera troupes from around the country to perform in Chengdu and visit the family compound. Many of his elder brothers and cousins wrote poetry and attempted to write novels. His mother was educated, literate, skilled in calligraphy, and taught her children--both male and female--poetry. Private tutors also were hired to teach the many children of the Li clan.

Ba Jin's pen name is derived from the syllables of two anarchist writers he came to admire as a young man--Bakunin and Kropotkin. Their names were transcribed in Chinese as Ba-ku-ning and Ke-lu-pao-te-jin. It was with this pen name that he signed his first novel in 1929 (Destruction.)

His autobiography at times reflects the political leanings of the time--a call for

¹ Olga Lang, Pa Chin and His Writings: Chinese Youth Between the Two Revolutions (Harvard University Press, 1967), footnote 1, p. 286.

² Ibid., p. 7.

revolution, a tendency to blame all ills that befell him and his siblings on the traditions and “authoritarian kingdom” that his grandfather had created. Yet it was these very traditions that also enabled him to study and become a writer where many poorer men of his generation were forced to work from childhood onward, much like the young servant girl Xiang Er, whom Ba Jin recalls fondly as his playmate and companion when he, as a precocious four-year-old, was allowed to study with a private tutor hired by his parents. And certainly it was not his family's authoritarianism, traditions, or wealth that led to the litany of deaths that Ba Jin records: Babies, children, teenagers, and adults, rich and poor alike, succumb to mysterious illnesses and die sometimes after years of suffering and sometimes quite suddenly after a few weeks or less of sickness. It is precisely these contradictions that make The Autobiography of Ba Jin a fascinating read and exciting portal into a long-gone era.

Ba Jin vividly recreates the life of a privileged family in late Qing imperial times, including the obligations, dreams, cruelty, and helplessness that they faced. He describes his parents lovingly, yet does not spare them either and records acts of cruelty they engaged in toward the less fortunate--namely, servants and defendants at the father's yamen (the traditional court compound where he presided as a judge and lived with his family). For example, Ba Jin describes observing his father extract confessions through the use of torture, and his mother, whom he idealizes and describes rather wanly through his constant and unvaried use of such phrases as “smiled warmly” and “kindly,” is shown destroying the life of a young wet nurse simply because of the nurse's appetite for cucumber (of all things!).

Readers will notice that Ba Jin tends to record his earliest memories of childhood in more vivid detail than those of his later life, which he summarizes using

more stock ideological phrases and interpretations of the “oppressive” nature of the elites, as he takes to calling his family. However, even so, Ba Jin manages to create an unusual portrait of conflicted human beings living in complicated times, caught between the burdens and benefits of Confucian traditions and the heady but frightening changes that occurred as the Qing dynasty was overthrown, marauding soldiers rampaged his family’s hometown, and the young brothers of the family tried to decide how best they should live their lives in a time of great social upheaval. By the time Ba Jin describes his adult life, the descriptions become less specific, and, in fact, members of the family die at an alarming rate, sometimes within weeks of being stricken with mysterious sore throats and other undiagnosed illnesses. The fact that Ba Jin does not describe these deaths in more than a cursory fashion suggests that death was not an uncommon occurrence in this era when Western medicine was largely unknown and it was sometimes too dangerous to try to reach traditional herbalists because of military upheavals.

Interestingly enough, despite Ba Jin’s self-proclaimed affinity for revolution in general and the Anarchist Party in particular, his writing reveals a subconscious conservatism, or at least traditionalism, that he seems completely unaware of. For example, he refers to all his family members by their family rank: Oldest Brother, Number Two Uncle, Third-Oldest Brother, Second-Oldest Sister, and so on, and never gives their personal names. However, when he writes about the servants, although he describes their lives with empathy, Ba Jin uses their personal names, as a young man of his class would. Thus, while he tries to transcend the boundaries of class that were inculcated in him from early childhood, he is not quite able to break the habits of his class, even when writing a memoir in which he attempts to explain his own “revolutionary” affinities.

Ba Jin became famous during the May Fourth Movement (1919-1937), a period of social and cultural change often dubbed "China's Renaissance." It was during this period that Chinese intellectuals began to question everything about traditional society in an effort to find a way to strengthen their nation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese society was in a period of transition--one could even say cultural disintegration. During the waning years of the corrupt Qing dynasty, Western powers with their superior weaponry had been able to divide China into spheres of influence, extracting special privileges and trade rights to the disadvantage of the Chinese government and its people. After the Boxer Rebellion failed to expel foreign missionaries and ended in bloody defeat, the Qing government was in fact required to pay to the Western governments and Japan, who had worked together to quash the Boxers, an indemnity greater than the Qing government's annual income. Most of China's peasants lived in dire poverty, opium addiction was rampant, and the gap between rich and poor only widened.

In 1911 the Qing dynasty was overthrown and a republic established in Beijing. Warlord Yuan Shikai took over the reins of power, however, and warlordism became the dominant form of government until Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek was able to unite the nation, at least nominally, under the flag of the Republic of China in 1928. During this period, China suffered humiliation after humiliation as its territory and port cities were carved up by foreign governments, where foreign law ruled, and where Chinese--and dogs--could be banned, as a sign in Shanghai infamously proclaimed: "No dogs and no Chinese allowed."

The May Fourth Movement began on May 4, 1919, after the Treaty of Versailles ended World War I and gave all Germany's territory inside China to Japan instead of returning it to China. As China had fought along side the allied forces, Chinese

intellectuals and the government had assumed the land would be returned to China after the war. The humiliation of losing this territory set off a series of nationwide protests, which then created the momentum for a generation of young Chinese to question their society and what had allowed it to become so weak in the world. The intelligentsia began to look for solutions in science, technology, democracy, Marxism, anarchism, humanism, pragmatism, and other Western philosophies. The grammar of the written language was changed to reflect the way people actually spoke Mandarin instead of the classical language that required decades of study to master but which was now deemed too arcane to communicate in the new society that needed to be built.

Ba Jin emerged in this period as one of the most popular and influential new writers. His heartfelt novels, short stories and essays about the injustices he witnessed, his search for meaning in his life, and his desire to reform China, all resonated with young people who shared his emotions. Because he wrote simply so that even those students with only a junior high education could read his work, many more young people were able to read his works than were able to read the classical literature canons that only the truly wealthy with decades of expensive tutors could read.

Today, it is hard to imagine the fame that Ba Jin acquired at such a young age--beginning in his 20s. In contemporary terms, only rock stars or rappers enjoy the emotional connection that Ba Jin experienced as a writer and leader of the so-called May Fourth Generation. This may explain why his autobiography at times has a hurried air to the writing: there are repetitions, inconsistencies, contradictions. It is the work of a young man writing as fast as he can to satisfy and nourish the fervor of his many fans. In many ways, the book is analogous to a beloved celebrity's blog--the

immediacy of the writing has the same personal feel.

For these reasons, The Autobiography of Ba Jin remains an important work, for it provides a vivid depiction of a time long gone, forgotten by many, and yet extremely important in Chinese history.

Ba Jin did not flee China as many writers of his generation did when the Communist Party came to power in 1949. Instead, he continued to live and write in China, although he never joined the Communist Party but remained forever a member of the Anarchist Party. Perhaps it is a sign of his great popularity among so-called revolutionary youths who would later join the Communist Party that Ba Jin was allowed to publish without having to change party affiliation. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), however, he was severely criticized and punished: Although he had railed against the privileges of the class into which he was born, he could not escape the punishment meted out to those of his "class origins" during this period of political and social turmoil. He was later "rehabilitated" and allowed to publish again in 1977, a year after Mao Zedong's death ended the political upheavals of the Cultural Revolution.³

The rest of the literary world had little idea of what Ba Jin was suffering. In fact, in 1975, French intellectuals who remembered and admired his writing nominated Ba Jin for the Nobel Prize in Literature. At that time, they had no idea that Ba Jin was not even allowed to publish in his home country.

When Ba Jin died in 2005 at the age of 101, his body of work was once again celebrated in articles throughout China and he himself memorialized for saying that when writing one must "speak the truth" (Shuo zhende hua). In this autobiography, written when the author was still so very young, Ba Jin succeeds in following his own

³ Nathan K. Mao, Pa Chin (Boston: Twayne Publishers, a division of G.K. Hall and Company), preface.

advice, with all the messy contradictions that the truth entails.

(This translation is based upon the 1956 Hong Kong publication of his autobiography, which was first published in Shanghai in 1934. Supplementary information comes from the Chinese edition of his revised autobiography, entitled Reminiscences, published in Shanghai in 1936.)

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Gan xie!

--May-lee Chai

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