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Cover photograph  Portrait of Hedda Morrison by Adolph Lazi, Stuttgart, 1931–32
(reproduced courtesy of Franz Lazi)

The Editorial Board would like to express their most appreciative thanks to Mr Alastair Morrison for his generous help with the production costs of this issue.
FROM BIOGRAPHICAL HISTORY TO HISTORICAL BIOGRAPHY:
A TRANSFORMATION IN CHINESE HISTORICAL WRITING

Brian Moloughney

The duty of the official historian lies in encouraging goodness and reproving evil, documenting the achievements and virtues of the dynasty with honesty, narrating the careers of loyal ministers and eminent persons and recording the shameful conduct of traitorous officials and obsequious people, and conveying these things for posterity.¹

The biographical essay provided the core to traditional Chinese historical writing. The success of a dynasty was thought to be dependent upon the virtues of its emperors, ministers and officials and thus a principal concern of the historian was the recording of exemplary lives, the writing of biography. And as the art of classical Chinese prose lay in succinctness, it was the essay that became the vehicle for this biographical writing.² Such a close association of biography and history ensured that biographical writing displayed all the characteristics of traditional Confucian historiography. History was seen as a record of the working out in the lives of people of the principles of political morality that were thought to govern the state and society, principles enshrined in the Confucian classics.³

This was to change with "the radical erosion" of the Confucian tradition that began in the last decade of the nineteenth century and culminated in the collapse of institutional and scriptural Confucianism.⁴ Although the authority of the Qing administration had been challenged much earlier in the century, it was only in the 1890s that the framework of Neo-Confucian discourse began to fracture and the legitimacy of a Confucian state was called into question. The first calls for a new history, a history radically different from the official historiography of the traditional state, were part of this erosion of the Confucian tradition. The enormous importance that was attached to history, to its function as a storehouse of precedent and as a record of exemplary lives, meant that new perceptions of the past directly challenged

¹ Li Ao, "Baiguan xingzhuang zou" [Memorial on obituaries for officials] (AD 819) in Li wen gong ji [The collected works of Li Ao] (1875 edition), juan 10, pp.1a–b. Beginning his memorial in this way, Li Ao is restating the ethos of traditional historiography, an ethos that has its origins in interpretations of Chunqiu [The spring and autumn annals]. For early expression of this ethos see Zuo zhuan [The Zuo commentary] for the years Chenggong 14 and Zhaogong 31 in Du Yu, Chunqiu jing zhuan jijie [Collected interpretations of The spring and autumn annals and its commentaries], reprint ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1978), 1: 735 and 2: 1,592. In his autobiographical postscript to Shi ji [Historical records], Sima Qian describes the 'virtues' of Chunqiu in a similar way: "It calls good good and bad bad, honours the worthy and condemns the unworthy." See Shi ji, reprint ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1959). juan 130, p.3297.
² "It is when the text is concise while the events are rich that we have narrative writing at its best." Liu Zhijie, Shi tong [Understanding history], reprint ed. (Guizhou: Renmin Chubanshe, 1985), vol.1, p.217. This translation is from Stuart H. Sargent, “Understanding...
Biographical writing in China probably had its origins in the desire to establish a presence beyond death. The Zuozhuan 左傳 (Zuo commentary) states that such a presence could be achieved in one or more of three ways: through moral force, distinguished status, or the power of words. When knowledge of such distinction did not fade, this was what was meant by achieving immortality, “to die yet not perish.” Without a belief in an afterlife yet with a strong commitment to the continuity of the family and the clan, there evolved very early in the Confucian tradition the notion that the only way to establish a presence beyond death was through the power of the written word. The earliest writings devoted to ensuring that knowledge of the worth of an individual’s life did not fade were probably records of funerary orations, records that were to develop into a diverse genre of writing as the ritual veneration of ancestors came to be seen as an important social duty. Liu Xie 劉勰 (c.465–522) suggests that elegies (lei 詹) were written during the Western Zhou period (c.1025–722 BC), although it is not until the...
Zuozhuan that we find the earliest recorded example. But Duke Ai’s outpouring of grief on the death of Confucius tells us little of its subject, only that he was much admired and will be greatly missed.8

The move away from such expressions of grief to a more extensive record of an individual’s life is difficult to trace. In the Graeco-Roman world this process seems to have been gradual, from the early encomia of Isocrates to the work of Xenophon, Aristotle and Cornelius Nepos, culminating eventually in the ‘lives’ by Plutarch, Tacitus and Suetonius. In discussing this gradual process, Momigliano argues it was the social and political changes of the fourth century BC that were of primary importance in the emergence of Greek biography.9 The new power that individual political leaders obtained during the century, combined with changes in the nature of philosophy and rhetoric which saw greater emphasis on individual education, performance and self-control, focused attention upon the lives of individuals in a way that had not been the case before.

It is possible that such social and political changes were also of importance in the emergence of Chinese biographical writing. The period from late Zhou, through Qin, to early Han is known as a time of great upheaval, one that allowed individuals of differing social classes unprecedented influence, in particular the group known as shi 士 (men of service).10 The political and philosophical debates of the period and the greater emphasis placed on rhetorical skills, as evidenced in Zuozhuan, Guoyu 國語 (Conversations from the states) and Zhanguo ce 戰國策 (Intrigues of the Warring States) as well as the numerous zhuizi haijia 諸子百家 writings, saw greater interest in and respect for the individual. There was opportunity for the able, the adventurous and the arrogant to make a name for themselves. Some Chinese scholars have argued that it was this period of great social change that was of paramount importance in the emergence of Chinese biographical writing.11

Indeed, some of the accounts of character in the early narratives of this time, such as the famous story of the conflict between the two brothers of Zheng told at the beginning of Zuozhuan, could be seen as indicating a shift towards biographical writing.12 With an emphasis on revealing aspects of character, such as the virtues of filial piety as in the abovementioned story, these anecdotes show many of the characteristics of early Chinese biographical writing. But they are isolated anecdotes, embedded in a body of text devoted to the narration of events. The lives of the individuals concerned are not central to the story. True biography emerges as a radical departure from these earlier texts.

The compilers of the great eighteenth-century compendium of Chinese literature, the Siku quanshu 四庫全書 (The complete collection of the Four Treasuries) considered the Yanzi chunqiu 晏子春秋 (The annals of Master Yan), a collection of moral injunctions supposedly delivered by Yan Ying 晏嬰 who served as prime minister of the state of Qi 齊 in the late sixth and
early fifth centuries BC, to be China’s first biography. These anecdotes were probably collected during the fourth century BC, although the present text dates from the edition put together by Liu Xiang (c.79–6 BC). Modern critics have tended to disagree with the editors of the Siku quanshu. Rather than a work of biography, Yanzi chunqiu is seen as little more than a collection of anecdotes, where the character of Master Yan is used simply as a vehicle to convey the doctrine. If Yanzi chunqiu were to be considered a work of biography, then surely other ‘philosophical’ texts such as Lunyu (The Analects) and Mengzi (Mencius) should be considered biography as well. Indeed, some have argued this.

Hu Shi (1891–1962), for instance, claimed Lunyu to be China’s oldest work of biography. It seems more appropriate, however, to consider these works as examples of the genre known as lunhian (essays and arguments), although Lunyu and Mencius occupied a distinctive place in the Confucian canon. Until the compilers of the Siku quanshu transferred Yanzi chunqiu into the biographical section of historical works it was classified as a work of philosophy, a more appropriate designation.

Biography proper only comes with Shi Ji (Historical Records) and can be attributed to the genius of Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–90 BC). Rather than concentrate on the detailing of event as had been the case with previous chronological narratives, Sima Qian produced an account of the past as told through the lives of prominent individuals. With Shi Ji, Sima Qian not only created a new format for Chinese historical writing, he also introduced biography into the Chinese tradition.
As is well known, Sima Qian divided his history into five sections. The first of these, the twelve "benji" or basic annals, are accounts of the major public events in the lives of those individuals who exercised paramount authority, whether they be emperors or not. The next section, the ten "biao" or tables, provides chronological lists of important events and people. The third section, the eight "shu" or treatises, are essays on institutional aspects of state administration. The fourth section, the "shijia" or hereditary houses, consists of thirty chapters devoted to the lives of prominent members of important families, families who exerted considerable influence in the governing of the realm. Lastly there are the seventy "liezhuan" or biographies, the largest section of the text. These incorporate an extraordinary variety of material and although a few of the chapters are devoted to accounts of groups of people, such as the Xiongnu, for the most part they are biographies of those whose lives Sima Qian considered exemplary.

There has been much speculation about possible antecedents to "Shiji" texts which may have influenced the way Sima Qian conceived his history. And while it is probable that the form of one or more of the five sections that compose the work was based upon portions of earlier texts, this does not negate the radical reformulation of narrative writing that Sima Qian achieved. As Li Shaoyong writes:

Although the "jizhuan" or composite form consists of five sections, its most important sections are the "benji," "shijia" and "liezhuan," and while the narrative techniques of these three sections are not identical, fundamentally they all embody the essential characteristics of the "jizhuan" form—that is, they are all biographies of one or more people. The basic difference between the "bianlian" or chronological and the "jizhuan" form of writing is that the former stresses events while the latter emphasizes individuals.

It was this composite format that was adopted as the model for all subsequent standard dynastic histories, the official and authoritative interpretation of the Chinese past. Biography thus provided the principal narrative perspective for historiography. Of course, not all traditional historical writing conformed to the pattern of "Shiji." One notable genre that differed significantly from the "jizhuan" format was that of the great institutional histories that were produced from the Tang dynasty onwards and which focused on the process of administration, not the lives of administrators and eminent people. Yet it remained the case that from Sima Qian's time Chinese historical writing was essentially biographical in character. The official nature of the standard histories gave the biographical essay an authoritative status within the Chinese prose tradition that it was to retain into the twentieth century.

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18 For a discussion of the various sections of "Shiji" see Watson, "Ssu-ma Ch'ien," chap. 4, pp. 101–34.
19 For the claim that Sima Qian simply integrated pre-existing forms of writing into a composite history see Zhang Shunhui, "Lun "Shiji," in Sima Qian—qiren ji qishu (Sima Qian—the man and his work), ed. Wang Guowei et al. (Taipei: Chang'an Chubanshe, 1987), pp. 126–40; and for the contrary view that Sima Qian created the various forms of the work himself, see Xiao Li, Sima Qian pingzhu (A critical biography of Sima Qian) (Changchun: Jilin Wenshi Chubanshe, 1986), pp. 54–70. These are just two of the more recent contributions to this long debate. A good historical summary of the debate, from Yang Xiong's (53 BC–AD 18) association of "Shiji" with the "Huai man" to the views of Liang Qichao and Fan Wenlan in the twentieth century, is given in Li Shaoyong, Sima Qian, pp. 1–15.
20 Li Shaoyong, Sima Qian, p. 15. Liang Qichao makes a similar point, writing that the greatest difference between "Shiji" and previous historical writing was that it "regarded people as its foundation." See his Zhongguo lishi yanjiu fa (Methods for the study of Chinese history), reprint ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1987), pp. 15–16.
The Nature of Traditional Biography

The formal characteristics of traditional biographical writing were established in the liezhuang section of Shiji. While some of the benji and sbjia chapters were much admired, most notably the biography of Xiang Yu, it was in the seventy chapters of liezhuang that Sima Qian made his great contribution to Chinese biography.

Finding an adequate translation for the term liezhuang has proved difficult. Interpretations of the term depend on what people conceive Sima Qian’s intention to have been in writing these chapters. Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 (661-721) felt the liezhuang provided elucidation and explanation of the material included in the benji, just as a commentary (zhuang 章) sought to explain a classic.22 Yet most feel that the term zhuang had a much wider meaning than just commentary, encompassing the sense of a body of ‘tradition’, and that in the liezhuang Sima Qian selected material from these traditions in order to compose his portraits. This interpretation has the advantage of explaining the great diversity of material which the liezhuang contain.23 The important position that Shiji occupies in the Chinese literary canon is, at least in part, attributable to the inclusion in the liezhuang chapters of this great variety of material from the written and oral traditions. Writers and critics would often use Shiji  as a standard against which to judge literary achievement, and much of the fiction produced in later periods had its origins in these liezhuang, or ‘ordered traditions’ of Sima Qian.24

An entirely different interpretation has been suggested by Pierre Ryckmans, who proposes the character lie be read as ‘exemplary’, thus translating the term as ‘exemplary lives’. Ryckmans writes that what determined the selection of subjects for the biographies was:

... not so much the importance of their historical role, as their value as archetypes of human behaviour, and among their actions those which merit his [Sima Qian’s] attention are not necessarily those which had a significant impact on history, but those which best reveal a character, a temper, a personality.25

Indeed, towards the end of his biography of Chancellor Zhang, Sima Qian notes the names of a number of others who had served in the same position yet were not worthy of consideration because they had not distinguished themselves in any way; there was nothing about them that was unique.26

This importance placed upon the distinctive nature of the subject explains the frequent use of anecdote as a means “to focus our attention upon the exemplary situation, where a typical pattern of behaviour, a specific human character all reveals itself at one blow.”27 Certain distinctive features are associated with different subjects in the biographies, so that we remember Shang Yue 商鞅 for his ‘harshness’, Li Si 李斯 as ‘corrupt’, Han Xin’s 韓信 ‘wisdom’ and Xiao He’s 小何 ‘firmness’.28 Yet the biographies are not purely anecdotal, concentrating only on what made the subjects exemplary. Sometimes Sima Qian simply provides a chronological account of the events of an individual’s life, such as in the biography of the general Wei Qing 魏青.29

23 In advocating such an interpretation, James Hightower writes: “… if we consider them [the liezhuang] as collections of material handed down (chuan) by tradition—oral and written—materials for which Su-ma Ch’ien may have been unwilling to give unqualified endorsement, their lack of homogeneity ceases to be relevant.” See James R. Hightower, “Ch’u Yuan studies,” in Silver jubilee volume of the Zinbun Kagaku Kenkyuyo (Kyoto: Kyoto University, 1954), p.197, n.1. Studies of how Sima Qian incorporated such popular ‘traditions’ into the liezhuang chapters include Guo Shuangcheng, Shiji renwu zhuangli lunwen (An essay on the biographies in Shiji (Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou Guji Chubanshe, 1985), pp.278-94; Miyazaki Ichisada, “Mihuri to bungaku—Shiki seintsu ni tsuite no ichi shiron” [gestures and literature—oral tradition in Shiji] Chuugokui bunkakubu 20 (1965): 1-27; Timoteus Pokora, “Ironic critics at ancient Chinese courts (Shih chi, 126); Oriens Extremus 20 (1973): 49-64; and Chauncey S. G(0xlrich, “Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s biography of Wu Ch’i,” Monumenta Serica 35 (1981-83): 197-233.
24 Andrew Plaks writes: “… it might be argued that the historical development of many of the genres of Chinese fiction both began with, and remained inextricably linked to, the prototypes of biographical narrative forged in Su-ma Ch’ien’s Shih-chi.” See his section “Terminology and central concepts” in David L. Rolston, How to read the Chinese novel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.119. LiShaoyong studies this relation of Sima Qian’s liezhuang to the subsequent development of Chinese literature in Sima Qian, pp.79-204.
26 Shiji, 96, p.2685.
28 These characteristic attributes of the various subjects of Sima Qian’s biographies are discussed by Zhang Dake in Shiji yanjiu (An analysis of the Shiji), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp.79-204.
29
It would seem, then, that there is no clear translation of liezhuan that will cover the great diversity of material included in these chapters and incorporate all the different meanings that can be associated with the term. There are problems even in reading the term simply as ‘biography’, as some of the liezhuan contain accounts of territories and peoples. For the most part, however, the liezhuan are biographical. Sima Qian felt the lessons of the past were demonstrated best in the lives of individuals and he moulded existing ‘traditions’ to create a new form of narrative in which he could portray these ‘exemplary lives’. As Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727–1814) has noted, Sima Qian gave this new meaning of ‘the specific record of an individual’ to the term zhuan, and from then on it has been used principally in this way, to signify biography.30

Despite the close association of biography with historical writing that was established in Shiji, notions of what biography represented remained flexible. It was not until after the emergence of a bureaucratic historiography under the control of the central government during the early Tang dynasty (618–690) that the standard and uniform character of the zhuan of the official dynastic histories came to dominate traditional biographical writing. Prior to this the term zhuan was used for writing of considerable diversity, much of it never intended for inclusion in historical compilations.

The exemplary nature of early biography was prominent in the brief ‘pseudo-biographical’ anecdotes collected to form the Lie nü zhuan 列女傳 (Biographies of women) (c.16 BC).31 Not only was the text intended for inspiration, but illustrations based on these anecdotes were painted on screens and walls to encourage conformity with the six womanly virtues. Much of the material incorporated in these zhuan was legendary, the term retaining its sense of ‘tradition’, and the stories of these women are often considered as examples of the link between biography and the moral and supernatural fiction that began to emerge from the third century AD onwards.32

Daoist and Buddhist writers also used the zhuan format in their early hagiography, the first Daoist work of this kind being the Lie xian zhuan 列仙傳 (Biographies of immortals), although more extensive biographies are presented in the compilation attributed to Ge Hong 翟洪 (283–343) and entitled Shen xian zhuan 神仙傳 (Biographies of divine immortals). The oldest surviving collection of Buddhist biography is the compilation by Hui Jiao 胡皎 (497–554) entitled Gaoseng zhuan 高僧傳 (Lives of eminent monks).33 Considering the wealth of Indian Buddhist literature translated into Chinese it is interesting that Chinese Buddhists should turn to a genre of writing such as the zhuan, with its close association to Confucian historiography, when composing sacred biography. But Indian literature did not provide a tradition of biographical writing to emulate and Arthur Wright has suggested that the use of the zhuan form by Buddhist biographers indicates a desire to rescue sacred biography “from the limbo of the exotic, the bizarre” and to give the lives of its subjects “a place of honor in the cultural

30 Zhao Yi, Niander shi, p.4. See also the views of the two Ming critics, Wu Na 吳納 and Xu Shi 徐師, discussed in Li Shaoyong, Sima Qian, pp.56–7.
31 For a detailed study of this text see Takao Shimonon, Ryo Kyo Retsuj6-den ‘no kenkyu (A study of Liu Xiang’s Li en zhuan) (Tokyo: Tokai Daigaku Shuppankai, 1989).
33 See the chapter on Buddhist biography in Chen and Zhang, Guan zhuan, pp.106–24.
history of China.” The adoption of the zhuang format for writing that ranged from such sacred biography to the fringes of supernatural fiction is testament not only to the authoritative position of historical discourse in the Chinese tradition, but also to the extremely flexible nature of early biographical writing.

The first century AD had also seen the emergence of biographical collections with a distinctly regional focus, precursors of what were to be large biographical components in the later local gazetteers. The need to broaden the base of the administrative hierarchy had resulted in a search for talent that reached out into the provinces and regions of the empire in a way that had not occurred before, and this in turn stimulated an increased interest in local achievement and local biography. While most of these texts have been lost and thus it is impossible to know their nature, it is indicative of the increasing popularity of biographical writing that people whose distinctions were of regional rather than empire-wide significance were considered as suitable subjects for zhuang.

Associated with this greater regional perspective was a growing interest in ‘characterology’ or ‘personality appraisal’ (pinti renwu 品題人物), a method for evaluating and judging the character and ability of individuals so as to assess their value to administrators. This concern with the individual was encouraged by the weakening of collectivist Confucian values that accompanied the decline and eventual collapse of the Han dynasty and contributed to a climate in which biography emerged as the most popular form of narrative writing. Perhaps the clearest indication of this is the large number of biezhuan 別傳, separate or private biographies, that appeared during the period from the fall of the Han dynasty to the early third century to the reunification of the empire under the Sui in the late sixth century. Although these biographies were often used in historical compilations, as with Pei Songzhi’s 裴松之 (372–451) commentary to the Sanguozhi 三國志 (Record of the Three Kingdoms), they seem to have been written as independent ‘lives’ and sometimes shows signs of an unusually critical perspective. Chen Shih-hsiang argues that it was these “spirited” biezhuan that might have provided the seeds from which independent and “full-fledged biographies close to our modern sense of the genre” could have grown. Perhaps Chen

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35. A list of a number of collections of such regional biography that appeared during the reign of the Han emperor Guangwu (AD 25–57) can be found in the bibliographical treatise of Sui shu and is discussed by Zhu Dongrun in “Zhongguo zhuangwenxue de guoqu yu jianglai” [The past and future of Chinese biographical literature], Xuelin 8 (June 1941): 19.


37. For a good discussion of biezhuan and other forms of non-official biographical writing from this period see the chapter on zhuangbuan 雜傳 in Chen and Zhang, Guidian zhuang (Shanghai: Shanghai Book Publishing House, 1984), pp.229–47. Chen and Zhang follow Ruan Xiaoxu (479–536) in using the term zhuangbuan to refer to all biographical writing that was written independently of official historical compilations and note that it was during the Wei Jin Nan Bei period that such writing flourished.

38. The most notable example of this is the Cao man zhuang [Biography of Cao Cao] extracts from which are quoted in Pei Songzhi’s commentary to Cao Cao’s biography. See Chen Shou, Sanguo zhi, reprint ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), pp.1–55. A list of the sources used by Pei in his commentary, which include a large number of private biographies and family genealogies, is given by Rafe de Crespigny in The Record of the Three Kingdoms: a study in the historiography of the Sankuo chih [Record of the Three Kingdoms], reprint ed. (Canberra: Australian National University, 1970), pp.43–89.


41. This process of the reorganization of historical writing during the Tang dynasty is discussed by David McMullen, State and scholars in Tang China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.159–205; in particular see pp.162–70 and 191–5.
is right. The famous biography of the Buddhist monk Xuan Zang 玄奘 (596–664) composed by his disciples Hui Li 慧立 and Yan Cong 彦琮 is an example of the way Chinese biographical writing may have developed. Considered by some to be the best biography written in pre-modern China, it is an independent work and is much longer than most traditional biographical writing. But this was an example not to be pursued by other writers. The reorganization of official historiography during the early Tang dynasty, which saw the state bureaucracy assume almost exclusive control over the writing of history, ensured that biography was to retain its close association with historical writing. This would continue to be so throughout the remainder of the imperial period.

The emergence of this bureaucratic historical enterprise saw the official dynastic histories compiled under the control of central government attain a new status as the most authoritative interpretation of the past. Thus, not only did the zhuan retain its close association with historical writing, it assumed even greater prestige and popularity through this association. Gu Yanwu 郭炎武 (1613–82) would later argue that as the zhuan was a form of historical writing it was inappropriate for anyone other than the officially-appointed state historians to compose such biographies. Inappropriate, perhaps, but many more zhuan were written than just those compiled by the official historians, although the status attached to the dynastic histories did produce a remarkable degree of similarity in this writing. As David McMullen notes, “the most coveted eventual destination for a biographical text was not the grave of its subject, or a collection of biographies, but the dynastic history itself.” Recognition through inclusion in a dynastic history carried such prestige that it encouraged conformity with the requirements of official historiography. The bureaucratic nature of official historical writing also meant that the range of subjects thought suitable for a biography in a dynastic history narrowed, so that the zhuan became restricted to recording administrative achievement and status. In the Ming shi 明史 [History of the Ming] (1368–1644), 158 of the total 220 chapters of zhuan are devoted to recording the public lives of those who had served the state in one way or another, while only a few chapters are devoted to those whose lives were thought distinctive for other reasons, such as the ‘filial and just’ or the ‘obsequious and fawning’. Gone also was the diversity and richness that was such a feature of the biographies in Shiji. Some ‘Tang writers did ignore this trend, producing portraits of ‘ordinary’ people who would never be considered suitable for inclusion in a dynastic history, yet whose lives they regarded as exemplary. Others wrote startling parodies of the zhuan form. And in the late Ming period there appeared a greater degree of intimacy in some non-official biographical writing. But these instances were the exceptions to the rule. It was official historiography, with its concern to relate virtue to administrative success, that provided the agenda for biographical writing.
The constraints imposed by official historical writing also meant that the structure of these zhuan was basically the same. The preliminary section of the biography listed the various names and ancestral home of the subject, which was occasionally supplemented with information regarding notable ancestors. Following this the biographer might relate an incident to show how the character of the subject was already evident in childhood, although it was more usual to rely simply on a few familiar phrases for this purpose.47 The main part of the biography was then built around a list of educational achievements, successive appointments, titles and honours received, and was given substance by descriptions of the subject’s involvement in public events, quotations from memorials or literary works, and sometimes the inclusion of anecdotal material intended to reveal character. The final section of the biography would give an account of the subject’s death, list any posthumous honours conferred, and might provide the names and brief biographies of children who had also been prominent in public affairs.48

As an epilogue, and clearly distinct from the text of the zhuan itself, the biographer would usually provide a brief comment (zan 諸) on what it was about the life of the subject (or subjects, in the case of group biographies) that was important, particularly with regard to the ethical principles which it was the writer’s task to demonstrate. In describing the past through the perspective of individual lives, writers of biography, whether they be official historians or not, were consciously constructing a body of evidence to demonstrate the operation of the principles of political morality that were thought to govern both the state and society. The audience for these works was the same group of scholar-officials from which the writers came and the biographies functioned as a form of guide to the ethical standards upon which sound public administration was thought to be based.

The importance of metahistorical ethical and political Confucian principles was also obvious in the body of materials which writers drew upon when composing zhuan. This body of material consisted mostly of the commemorative writings produced following the death of an eminent person; the funerary inscriptions, and ‘accounts of conduct’ or ‘obituaries’ (xingzhuan 行狀), which are to be found in the collected works of almost all Confucian writers.49 In the case of a senior official the Bureau of Evaluations (kaogong si 考功司) might compile an obituary from government records, but in general it was left to the family of the deceased to commission a well-known writer or prestigious person to prepare a laudatory account of the deceased’s life. Such commemorative writing might then be submitted to the government in the hope that the deceased would be granted a biography in an official compilation, in particular, the dynastic history, and writers of zhuan relied extensively on this material, often simply copying extracts directly from a funerary inscription or an obituary.50

Underlying all of this writing was a continuing concern with the exemplary. At the level of the family as well as that of the official historians there existed a strong sense that biography ought to provide examples for

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48 Good brief discussions of the basic structure of the zhuan can be found in Peter Olbricht, “Die Biographie in China,” Saeculum 8 (1957) pp. 226; and D. C. Twitchett, “Problems of Chinese biography,” in Wright and Twitchett, eds, Confucian personalities, p. 28.

49 For evidence of the enormous quantity of this writing see Qingdai beizhuan quanjji [A complete collection of inscriptions and obituaries from the Qing period], reprint ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1987). See also the chapter on tomb inscriptions in Ouyang Zhan in the Xin Tang shu [New Tang history: the case for Ou-yang Chan], Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews 12 (1990): 13.

future generations. The selection of material for inclusion in an epitaph, an obituary, or a zhuan, was governed by the central concern to relate virtue to administrative success. A good writer might produce a portrait that managed to be exemplary and at the same time revealed something of the individuality of the subject, as with Su Shi's unusually long obituary for Sima Guang, but the tendency was for the biographer to ignore materials that did not fit the pattern of behaviour considered appropriate for good government.\(^\text{51}\) The didactic aspects central to Confucian writing meant that in all biography, not just the zhuan of the dynastic histories, there was this concern with the exemplary, with the art of praise and blame (baobian 褒貶). The fact that biography served as the principal narrative vehicle for historical management to be exemplary and at the same time revealed something of the individuality of the subject, as with Su Shi's unusually long obituary for Sima Guang, but the tendency was for the biographer to ignore materials that did not fit the pattern of behaviour considered appropriate for good government.\(^\text{51}\) The didactic aspects central to Confucian writing meant that in all biography, not just the zhuan of the dynastic histories, there was this concern with the exemplary, with the art of praise and blame (baobian 褒貶). The fact that biography served as the principal narrative vehicle for historical writing simply encouraged this concern, so that the status accorded the dynastic history produced even in the commemorative writing of families an overriding emphasis on how the public events in an individual's life demonstrated the principles of the Confucian world.

The one form of traditional biography that was to some extent separate from historical writing was that of the nianpu 年譜, or chronological biography. The origins of this sub-genre lay not in historical narratives but in the exegetical texts that grew up around China's earliest collection of poetry, the Shi jing 詩經 (Book of Songs), and it was the concern to organize a writer's work in a sequential way, corresponding to the order of composition, that saw the emergence of the first true chronological biographies.\(^\text{52}\) Stephen Owen has argued that it was the collected works of a writer that provided the perfect form of autobiography in the Chinese tradition.\(^\text{53}\)

Here editorial exclusions, arrangement, and juxtapositions created a species of interior history, not narrating a life story, but letting a life story unfold in the author's sequence of responses.

With nianpu, the biographer uses similar methods of selection and chronological ordering to present an image of an individual's life; perhaps "not so much a biography as a collection of notes for a biography."\(^\text{54}\) It was a format most suited to the lives of writers and became increasingly popular from the Ming period onwards. Part of this popularity can be attributed to the fact that chronological biographies remained separate from historical writing. Growing dissatisfaction with the restrictions associated with the standard form of biographical writing, the zhuan, encouraged writers to turn to chronological biography instead, and private scholars could take advantage of its form to record information and opinions that would not be considered appropriate in an dynastic history.\(^\text{55}\) Yet despite this growing popularity of chronological biography, the zhuan would remain the dominant genre of biographical writing in China until the collapse of the official historiographical enterprise at the turn of the twentieth century.

\(^\text{51}\) For example, the biography of the famous dramatist Tang Xianzu in Ming shi includes a quotation from a memorial Tang submitted to the emperor, yet says nothing of his plays. See Ming shi [History of the Ming], reprint ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1974), juan 230, pp.6015-16. For a discussion of this point see Wu Pei-yi, The Confucian's progress, p.5. Su Shi's obituary for Sima Guang can be found in Su Dongpo ji [The collected works of Su Dongpo], reprint ed. (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1934), juan 36, pp.67-81.

\(^\text{52}\) Zheng Xuan's (127-200) Shi pu詩類 A register of poetry on the Book of Songs is seen as an antecedent to chronological biography, although true nianpu did not appear until Lu Dafang produced his studies of the work of Du Fu (Du shi nianpu) and Han Yu (Han wen nianpu) in 1084. For a good brief discussion of the origins of chronological biography see Zhu Dongrun, "Zhongguo zhuanxu wenxue," p.25.


\(^\text{54}\) Twitchett, "Chinese biographical writing," p.113.

\(^\text{55}\) T. C. Liang provides a fairly comprehensive catalogue of nianpu which shows the increasing popularity of the form from the Ming period onwards. See his articles entitled "Nianpu kao luc" [A bibliography of chronological biographies], Gua Li Bei ping Tushuguan juexian 5.1 (July 1929): 109-23; 3.2 (Aug. 1929): 245-76; 3.3 (Sept. 1929): 419-46; 3.4 (Oct. 1929): 547-66; and 3.5 (Nov. 1929): 699-710. For mention of how nianpu could be used to convey opinion and information considered inappropriate for other forms of biographical writing see Wang Yunwu's preface to Xinbian Zhongguo mingren nianpu jicheng [A newly edited collection of chronological biographies of famous Chinese] (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1978), preface, p.6.

This point is made by Bruno Gentili and Giovanni Cerri in History and biography in ancient thought (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1988), esp. pp.66–8. Gentili and Cerri contest the view put forward by Momigliano in The emergence of Greek biography that the ancient Greeks clearly distinguished and separated biography from history.

See the translation by D. R. Shackleton Bailey in Cicero: selected letters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p.81. In discussing Cicero’s letter, Gentili and Cerri write that he uses the term fabula to indicate a historical narrative “of the monographic type, centred on the achievements and the changing fortunes of a highly significant historic personage rich in emotional tension.” (History and biography in ancient thought, p.57.)


The only comparative study I am aware of that provides an analysis of the biographical writing of both Sima Qian and Plutarch is the essay by Li Shaoyong, “Sima Qian yu Pulu take” [Sima Qian and Plutarch] included in his Sima Qian, pp.205–318. For a discussion of Plutarch's concern with 'praise and blame' see D. A. Russell, Plutarch (London: Duckworth, 1973), pp.103–6.

For the historian, the attraction of biography is not difficult to understand. An individual life represents a natural and manageable perspective from which to view the complexities and confusion of the past, and by selecting subjects of central historical significance it is possible to gain an acute insight into the circumstances of an age. But this does not mean that biography need only be associated with history. In the Graeco-Roman world distinctions were drawn between the two by both historians and biographers, although there remained considerable correspondence in their writing. Plutarch’s familiar statement at the beginning of his Life of Alexander—that he is writing biography not history—indicates a perceived distance between the two types of narrative, yet, as Albert Cook notes, the ‘lives’“envisage comparisons and sequence in the arena of public action,” hence they are as much history as biography. Early historical writing was diverse in nature, and Plutarch was probably trying to distinguish his work from the pragmatic, political history advocated by Polybius, not the isocratean tradition which encompassed material of much greater variety, including the biographical. Cicero made a similar distinction between types of historical writing in a letter asking Luccetius to write a history of his consulate. He wanted the history written not as an annalistic record of events, but in such a way as to arouse the interest and sympathy of readers, using the term fabula to describe such writing, and noting that when such an account is “rounded off by a notable conclusion, our minds as we read are filled with the liveliest gratification.”

Cicero could easily have been describing differences in early Chinese historical writing, the zibuan of Shiji being as different from Chunqiu as the fabula was to be from the annals of Roman historiography. Zhang Xuecheng (1738–1801) notes two main forms of Chinese historical writing: zibuan 記述, or narrative, in which the description of event needed to be “rounded off with intuitive projection,” and jizhu 記注, or record-exegesis, in which events needed to be “squared,” or grounded, in “knowledge.” Zhang considers Sima Qian’s history as part of the narrative tradition, where the concern was not simply with the documenting of events. Instead, the focus was on moulding the evidence from the past into narratives that would both inspire and instruct, the concern being with what was perennial and thus salutary, and the biographical essay, or zibuan, was seen as the perfect form for this purpose. Similarly, for Plutarch it was the moral principle that was of paramount importance, and he also turned to biographical narrative to convey these lessons from the past.

While this centrality of moral vision, the concern with the allocation of praise and blame, was a feature common to both Sima Qian and Plutarch, there were significant differences in their biographical writing. Plutarch never conceived his biographies as part of a historical compilation and thus there is a tension in his portraits between ‘life’ and ‘times’, a tension absent from all traditional Chinese biographical writing, not just that of Sima Qian, where the context for an individual life came not in the zibuan itself but from
the larger work in which it was included. Frustration at this subservience to official historiography did encourage the writing of more chronological biography and autobiography in late imperial China, although most never considered biography as being independent of history, and the writing of *zhuan* continued to be enormously popular. It was not until the collapse of the state-centred historical enterprise that it became possible to conceive and establish a radically different relationship between the writing of history and biography.

**The ‘New History’ and Biography**

Prior to the collapse of the official imperial historical enterprise changes within the world of Confucian historiography itself had already produced a change in perceptions with regard to the historian's task. In the scholarly communities of the mid-Qing, private historians turned away from the explicit concern with praise and blame and emphasized the need to 'seek truth from facts'. Here it was felt that the historian's role was to record events and let them speak for themselves, not be preoccupied with the moral imperative to show that with good leadership came prosperity while bad leadership brought turmoil and decline. In the world of classical studies this emphasis on the methods of evidential research (*kaozheng* 考證 - scholarship) undermined the status of orthodox Song Learning and led on to the conflicts between Old Text and New Text scholars, between historicism and classicism, that dominated political discourse in late imperial China. The *kaozheng* emphasis on the critical use of diverse source materials also provided an important legacy for historians of the early twentieth century, enabling them to find within the Chinese tradition methods similar to those they were discovering in their encounters with modern Western historiography and thus providing an important foundation upon which they could build in their efforts to construct new, post-Confucian approaches to the past. Despite their emphasis on critical scholarship, however, the *kaozheng* historians themselves remained very much part of the Confucian tradition. They did not question the fundamentals of the Confucian world view, nor the authoritative status of the official histories. Their primary concern lay in resolving issues of textual inconsistency. It was not until after the failure of the reform movement in 1898 and the exodus of large numbers of intellectuals to Japan that radically different and explicitly iconoclastic approaches to the past were proposed.

In Japan, historical writing became both more 'scientific' and more 'social' during the years of the Meiji Restoration, and these changes were to have considerable influence over Chinese intellectuals. Evidential research (*kōshōgaku* 考證學), with its roots in China, had developed to such an extent that it became the foundation for the official historical compilation, the *Dai

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61 Emphasis on the need to 'seek truth from facts' and a critique of the use of praise and blame can be found in Wang Mingsheng's well known preface to *Shiqi shi shangque* [Critical discussions of the seventeen histories] (Suzhou: Dongjing Caotang Zanghan, 1787), preface, 1a-b and p.4. For more on *kaozheng* historiography see Du Weiyun, "Qing Qian-Jia shidai zhi lishi kaojuxue" [Historical evidential research during the Qianlong and Jiajing reigns of the Qing dynasty] in his *Qingdai shixue yu shijia* [Historians and historiography of the Qing Dynasty] (Beijing: Xinhua Shuju, 1988), pp.271-315.


63 The legacy of Qing historiography for modern historians is discussed in Qi Sihe, "Jinbianian lai Zhongguo shixue de fazhan," [The development of Chinese historiography over the last one hundred years], *Yanjing shehui ke.xue* 2 (949): 1-35; and Wang Fansen, *Gushibianyundongdexingqi* [The rise of the Gu shi bian movement] (Taipei: Yunchen Wenhua, 1987).
Nippon bennen sbi大日本編年史 (Chronological history of Japan), work on which began in 1882. The critical use of source materials that was central to evidential research saw an increasing separation of ethical and political concerns from historical scholarship, something that was encouraged by the growing interest shown by Japanese historians in the methods of contemporary European historiography, and, in particular, those of the German tradition.

In 1887 the German historian Ludwig Riess (1861–1928) took up a position in the history department of Tokyo Imperial University and began teaching Western techniques of historical research. Riess stayed in Japan until 1902 and was responsible for many Japanese learning the methods of Rankean ‘scientific’ historiography. German methods of historical research were also taught by Tsuboi Kumazo 坪井九馬三 (1858–1936), who had studied in Europe, and it was through translations from Tsuboi’s textbook on methodology, Shigaku kenyû hõ 史學研究法 (Methods for the study of history), that Chinese readers were first introduced to the methods of German historiography. Extracts from Tsuboi’s textbook first appeared in Chinese in 1902, at a time when Chinese were just beginning to talk of a ‘new history’. The translation of another influential work, Ukita Kazutami’s 浮田和民 (1859–1945) lectures on methodology, Shigaku genron 史學原論 (Principles of history) was even published in 1903 under the title Xin sbixue 新史學 (New history). It seems unlikely that there was any clear consensus as to what the term ‘new history’ meant, except that it signified historical research and writing that was clearly distinct from traditional Confucian historiography and its concern with individuals and ethics. These works on methodology discuss Western techniques for organizing and assessing historical materials and consider history as a science, related to other disciplines such as geography, archaeology and philology. But the term ‘new history’ meant more than this. It incorporated the notion that history should be the study of the past of all aspects of a society, not just its rulers and administrators. Here also the Chinese were influenced by Japanese writers and historians.

The concern with bunmeishi 文明史, or the history of civilization, was the other main feature of Meiji historiography. Here the focus was on society, not methodology, and the bunmeishi writers drew on the ideas of European social theorists such as Herbert Spencer and the histories of civilization by Henry Buckle and François Guizot. The most influential of these writers was Fukuzawa Yukihi 福澤諭吉 (1835–1901), and Fukuzawa’s ideas were developed in the bunmeishi histories by Taguchi Ukichi 田口卯吉 (Nibon kaikashõshi 日本開化小史 [A short history of Japanese civilization: 1877–1882]), Miyake Yonekichi 三宅栄吉 (Nibonsbigaku keti 日本史学提要 [A manual for the study of Japanese history] [1886]) and Saga Shûsaku 嚴瀨正作 (Nibonsbikô 日本史綱 [An outline of Japanese history [1888]].

Central to these works was the idea that history was progressive, not cyclical,
and that it was in the life of the society as a whole, not just the actions of rulers and administrators, that this progress towards civilization could be seen. In his *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* (An outline of a theory of civilization [1875]), Fukuzawa Yukichi discussed how it was the intelligence of a whole people, what he called the ‘spirit of the times’ (*jisei* 時勢), that moved the society forward. Fukuzawa wrote:

> When great historical personages achieved success in their own times, it was not because they advanced the level of knowledge and virtue of the people through their own talents, but rather because the level of the people’s knowledge and virtue permitted the successful achievement of their plans.¹⁰

This perception of the role of the individual in history was very different from the Confucian notion that it was the moral conduct of the elite that determined the fate of a society. The *bunmeishi* historians who followed Fukuzawa extended their focus from an exclusive concern with the state and its representatives to include consideration of wider social factors: subjects such as geography, popular customs, religion, literature, and ethnicity featured in their writing. Chinese intellectuals reading these works saw that a ‘new history’ must involve more than just the use of ‘scientific’ methods; it also must go beyond the Confucian concern with politics and ethics and address the history of Chinese civilization in a more comprehensive manner. It was Liang Qichao (1873–1929), one of the most influential figures of the time and a man who used his command of the new popular press to great effect, who was to do most to bring these ideas before a Chinese audience.

By the first years of the twentieth century Liang Qichao was arguing from exile in Yokohama the need for everything Chinese to be made anew. He claimed China needed a new citizenry, new fiction and new history. The main thrust of this argument came in his *Xinmin shuo* 新民說 (Theory of a new citizenry), a powerful critique of the Confucian tradition. Here Liang argued the case for a new nation-state, to be built around the collective needs of the Chinese people.¹¹ Essential to this was the requirement that both fiction and history be made to serve the new citizenry.

In 1901 Liang began writing what was to be a general history of China, and although he completed only the first chapter the ideas it contains show how the ‘new’ history was envisaged as a radical departure from traditional historical writing. Liang wrote that:

> The duty of the modern historian is different from that of historians of the past. [Whereas] in the past historians simply recorded events, the modern historian must explain the association of causes and consequences to events. Previously, historians merely narrated events related to one or two influential people. Although this was called history, in fact it was only genealogy. The modern historian must inquire into the advancement of all people, and, moreover, relate this to the total experience of the nation.¹²


¹² Liang Qichao, “Zhongguo shi xulun” [An appraisal of Chinese history], *Yinmeng shi beij, wenji* [Collected writings from an ice-drinker’s studio, literary works] (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936), 6:1.
Early the next year Liang developed these ideas in an essay published in his new journal Xinmin congbao (Collected reports on a new citizenry). Here Liang argued in more detail his claim that the new history must be concerned with evolutionary change, and with how the lives of the majority of people evolve, not just focus on the court and the lives of a few prominent individuals. Liang stated that such an approach to the past was essential if China was to be made anew: “Without a revolution in historiography, China cannot be saved.”

The conception of history Liang Qichao articulated in these essays may seem a commonplace today, but in China at the turn of the century it was revolutionary, and it is for this reason that these essays are seen as marking the beginning of modern Chinese historiography.

Liang Qichao’s claim that previous historical writing amounted to little more than genealogy was to be repeated often over the coming years as the agenda of the new history was gradually put into practice. Yet while it seemed that Liang was contesting the notion that biography, or at least biography in its traditional zhuannian form, could provide the principal narrative perspective for historical writing, at the very time he was setting out this agenda for the new history he was producing more biography than at any other stage of his life. Underlying his concern that history should be more responsive to the development of Chinese civilization, to the collective legacy of the Chinese people, was the notion that it was vital to inculcate a greater degree of patriotism amongst people in order for China to confront the new challenges it faced. At this time Liang saw the foundation of European strength and independence in patriotism and believed it was vital that the new historical writing engender a similar patriotic nationalism in China. Thus, although Liang criticised traditional historiography for concentrating only on one or two influential people, he turned to biographies of people he himself considered influential in order to cultivate the kind of patriotic sentiment he felt was essential for China’s survival.

In the first of these biographies, the accounts of the six ‘patriots’ executed following the failure of the 1898 reform movement, Liang used the traditional zhuannian format. Of the many biographies he wrote over the next ten years most were brief lives, similar if not identical in form to the zhuannian. But Liang also went beyond the tradition, experimenting with new ways of writing biography. He did this first in 1901 in his biographies of Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901) and Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858–1927), and also in his most significant piece of biographical writing, the study of Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–86) he had published in 1908.


The point that Liang’s essays mark the beginning of modern Chinese historiography is made by Zhou Yutong in “Wushinian lai Zhongguo zhi xin shixue” [The last fifty years of new historiography] (Henan: Zhongguo Guji Chubanshe, 1985), 2:425. A more detailed study of Liang Qichao’s views on history can be found in the chapter devoted to him in Xu Guansan, Xin shixue jiaoshi nian [Ninety years of new historiography] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1986), 1:9–53.

Notes

73 See “Xin shixue” [The new history], Xinmin congbao 1 (8 Feb. 1902), repr. in Yinbing shi beiji, wenyi 9, pp.1-11. The quotation is from p.7.

74 The point that Liang’s essays mark the beginning of modern Chinese historiography is made by Zhou Yutong in “Wushinian lai Zhongguo zhi xin shixue” [China’s new history of the last fifty years], Xuelin yuekan 4 (Feb. 1941; repr. March 1970): 18–20; and Yin Da in Zhongguo shixuefazhan shi [History of the development of Chinese historiography] (Henan: Zhongguo Guji Chubanshe, 1985), 2:425. A more detailed study of Liang Qichao’s views on history can be found in the chapter devoted to him in Xu Guansan, Xin shixue jiaoshi nian [Ninety years of new historiography] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1986), 1:9–53.

75 Lu Xun, for instance, remarked that the dynastic histories amounted to “no more than the family chronicles of emperors, kings, generals, and ministers . . . .” See “Zhongguoren shidiao zixinli le ma” [Have the Chinese lost their self-confidence?], in Lu Xun, Zhihe [The complete works of Lu Xun] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1981), 6:118.


77 See “Xunnan liu lieshi zhuan” [Biographies of six martyrs], Yinbing shi beiji, zhuannian 1, pp.95–112.

78 See “Nanhai Kang xiansheng zhuannian” [A biography of Mr Kang of Nanhai], Yinbing shi beiji, wenyi 6, pp.57–89; “Zhongguo sishi nian lai dashi ji: yiming Li Hongzhang” [A record of the major events in China over the last forty years: the famous Li Hongzhang], Yinbing shi beiji, zhuannian 3, pp.1–90; and Wang Anshi pingzhuannian [A critical biography of Wang Anshi], reprint ed. (Hong Kong: Guangzhi Shuju, n.d.).

79 See the very first of his prefatory comments to this biography in Yinbing shi beiji, zhuannian 3, p.1. For recognition of the innovative nature of Liang’s biography of Li Hongzhang see Zheng Zangbo, “Lun zhuannian wenxue” [On biographical literature], Zhuannian wenxue 1.3 (Aug., 1962): 4–5.

In the biography of Li Hongzhang, Liang begins by announcing his intention to depart from the zhuàn format and follow the style of Western biographical writing, and in its structure this biography does indeed differ from traditional biography. Liang emphasized the need to see the lives of individuals within the social context in which they lived and thus begins his biographies of Li Hongzhang, Kang Youwei and Wang Anshi with a discussion which relates each subject to the major social and political events of his time. For several years Liang had been contemplating the role of the individual in history, discussing the relationship between ‘heroic’ individuals and the times in which they lived, and in the biographies written at this time he developed this theme further. It was to be some years before the likes of Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978) were to show their fascination with Carlyle, and it would be wrong to see Liang Qichao’s interest in biography as simply an expression of an emerging ‘cult of the hero’. He may well have continued the Confucian concern with the exemplary, seeing particular individuals as the embodiment of certain values or ideals, but his perception of the role of the individual in history was never simply heroic. It was impossible, he argued, to see individuals abstracted from the environment in which they lived, creating the world around them. It is also important to remember that Liang Qichao conceived these biographies as ‘independent lives’ and that they therefore lacked the context provided for a zhuàn by the dynastic history in which it was included. Thus, Liang felt it was essential to incorporate within each biography the social and historical background for the subject’s life. It was here, in this new emphasis on the tension between ‘life’ and ‘times’, a tension central to biographical writing in the West, that Liang made his great contribution to Chinese biography.

These ‘new’ biographies by Liang Qichao also reflected the changes that were occurring within the structure of narrative prose, with a shift away from the segmented narrative of traditional historical writing and towards more unified monographs. Behind these changes lay the increasing influence of the ideas about evolutionary change that played such an important part in undermining the authority of Confucianism. These ideas led to the questioning of the notions of historical atrophy (lìshì tuǐhuà 歷史退化), the falling away from a Golden Age in the past, and the cyclical view of dynastic change (zhuīlùn xùnìhuà 治亂循環) that were fundamental to traditional historiography. With the ‘new’ history came instead an emphasis on the progressive development of society, and this encouraged a greater concern in accounts of the past with continuous, linear development.

The narrative structure of traditional historiography was segmented in character, with texts compiled from numerous interrelated essays. Because of the nature of such works, information regarding an individual would not necessarily be confined to a single biographical essay. For example, Sima Qian devotes much of one of the biographical essays in Shiji to the life of Tian Fen 田玢, the Marquis of Wu’an 武安侯, yet relates different information about him in other essays. For the main biography of Tian Fen see Shiji, juan 107, pp.2839–56, while other accounts of him can be found in juan 29, p.1499, and juan 113, p.2980. This example is given by Zhu Dongrun in his discussion of how the segmented nature of historical narrative affected traditional biographical writing. See “Zhongguo zhuànxù,” p.19. More general consideration of Sima Qian’s use of this narrative technique (also known as bùyànfa 互見法) can be found in Zhang Duke, Shiji yanyi, pp.290–307.

Similar changes were occurring in fictional narrative. Although there had been an increasing coherence within works of fiction since the late Ming, Milena Doleželová-Velingerová notes that in the last decades of the Qing dynasty the traditional plot pattern of the novel, “where relatively self-contained episodes were organized in a...

87 Of these three forms, the *henmo* (beginning-to-end) allowed the greatest narrative coherence. In the various essays that comprised a *henmo* text, particular social, economic and political developments could be traced over time. Quinton Gwynne Priest has suggested that the increasing popularity of this genre in the late imperial period "may have been part of a renewed emphasis upon the nature of narrative, engendered by the appearance of the novel and short story on the literary scene." See Historiography and statecraft in eighteenth century China: the life and times of Chao [1727-1814] (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 1982), p.130. This linking of literary trends and historiographical developments is important, but it was not until the early years of the twentieth century that the transition from segmented histories composed of distinct essays to integrated historical monographs occurred.

88 Naka Michiyo, *Shina tsushi* [A comprehensive history of China] (Tokyo: Dai Nihon Tosho, 1888-90). Although this only went as far as the Song period, it was written in Chinese and had a great influence over Chinese scholars. See Zhou Yutong, "Wushi nian," pp.16-17.

89 First published by the Commercial Press between 1904 and 1921 under the title *Zhongguo lishi jiaokeshu* [A textbook of Chinese history], this work was later re-issued under the title *Zhongguo gudai shi* [A history of traditional China] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1933). Xia Zengyou was not the only scholar stimulated to write general history through reading the work of Japanese historians such as Naka Michiyo; Liang Qichao and Zhang Binglin both set down outlines for such works, but never completed them. See Liang Qichao, *Yinheng shi bei*, wenji 6, p.1, and Zhang Binglin, "Zhongguo tongshi lueli" [Guidelines for a comprehensive history of China] in his *Qiushu* [Compelled writings] (Shanghai: Gudian Wenxue, 1958), pp.158-63. The extent of the transition to a unified and coherent narrative structure in historical writing about the Marquis in other parts of his history, in biographical essays devoted to other subjects. To appreciate all that Sima Qian has to say about Tian Fen it is necessary to read the full history, not just the biography devoted to him. This was common to all biographical writing in traditional Chinese historiography, and one of the characteristics of modern biography is its move away from such segmented narrative.

This transition from the segmented narrative of traditional historiography towards more unified historical monographs can be seen in the new general histories of Chinese civilization which began to appear as the ‘new’ history took hold. In these works the traditional narrative forms of *biannian*, *jiizhuan* and *jisbi henmo* were abandoned in favour of a continuous and integrated narrative. Initially, it was the work of the Japanese scholar, Naka Michiyo [1851–1908], that showed what a new comprehensive history of China might look like. But it was in the general history by Liang Qichao’s friend and colleague, Xia Zengyou [1865–1924], that the break with traditional narrative structure was made. In his prefatory comments to the work Xia states that his central concern was to “explain the origins of contemporary society,” and rather than relate aspects of the past in distinct units he provides an integrated discussion of the gradual evolution of the Chinese people. It was the narrative coherence that resulted from such a focus that distinguished this general history from traditional historical writing. Xia’s book was extremely influential and was adopted as a principal text in history courses in secondary schools and some
universities during the first decades of the twentieth century. The emergence of such new histories encouraged the move away from the *liezhuan* of traditional historiography and towards the modern, independent biographical monograph.

For Liang Qichao the political significance of the subjects he wrote about was more important than any experiment with narrative structure, yet in deliberately seeking alternatives to the *liezhuan* format he began the transition to modern biographical writing. With his study of Li Hongzhang he self-consciously sought to write what he thought was a Western-style biography, and he certainly achieved a much more detailed and critical portrait of Li than would have been possible had he written in the traditional *zhuan* style. With his longest and most important biography, the study of Wang Anshi published in 1908, Liang adapted the format of the traditional *nianpu* in order to develop the kind of detailed portrait he desired, quoting extensively from Wang’s letters and other contemporary sources. But rather than simply ordering this material in chronological sequence, Liang rearranged it in different chapters so as to bring out aspects of Wang’s career he considered to be of political importance. This extensive quotation from source materials may have been in part a consequence of the influence that Cai Shangxiang’s *Chen shang* (1717–1810) earlier *nianpu* of Wang Anshi had over Liang, but his adaptation of the techniques of traditional chronological biography suggested how aspects of the tradition might be refined in order to be more responsive to the needs of the ‘new’ history. New did not simply imply Western, and this concern with adapting traditional forms to meet modern needs would be something Liang returned to in the famous lectures on historical methodology which he gave at Nankai and Qinghua universities in the 1920s.

Following this biography of Wang Anshi, Liang Qichao turned his attention to other things. Biography did not seem a high priority, and what he did write was restricted to traditional forms, funerary writing and *nianpu*. Despite this, he had not abandoned his interest in the relationship of biography to the ‘new’ history, and this was to be a major focus of his second series of lectures on historical methodology.

In these lectures Liang described the five categories which he felt ought to constitute the core of the modern historical enterprise, categories he called ‘specialized history’ (*zhuanshi* 專史). The first of these five categories, the history of individuals, would include various forms of biographical writing, biography thus retaining its place at the heart of the historian’s work. Four of the five forms of biographical writing which comprised the history of individuals Liang retained from traditional historiography: the *liezhuan*, the *nianpu*, *beizhu* 合傳 (group biography), and *renbiao* 人表 (biographical tables). Liang felt that each of these forms of biographical writing fulfilled unique functions and thus each should remain as integral to modern historical writing. But more important than any of these traditional forms of biography, Liang argued, was the *zhuanshi* (biographical monograph) or *zhuanshibian* (special biography). What Liang Qichao meant
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when he talked of a special biography, or biographical monograph, was the type of study he had been working towards with his own biographies of Li Hongzhang and Wang Anshi.

For Liang Qichao the biographical monograph was to provide the core of the important category of historical writing he called the history of individuals. Such monographs were vital, he argued, because they would focus on individuals who were of central significance to the time in which they lived and, unlike a liezhuan, they would give detailed consideration to the individual's life. Again, Liang's emphasis remains on the tension between 'life' and 'times', with the subject of the biography serving as a pivot around which could be built a discussion of the significant events of the period. Liang was not interested in the interior life of an individual; rather, it was their involvement in affairs of public importance which ought to concern the historian.

Biographical monographs were also seen as different from nianpu in that they would entail not just a chronological detailing of the events of a life, with copious quotations from source materials, but rather should provide a critical interpretation of a life and its significance to the modern world. Liang went on to consider how a series of biographical monographs, one hundred of them, each devoted to figures of intellectual, political or artistic significance from different periods of the past, might offer a unique and valuable insight into the Chinese past: “if written well, they could provide, through the perspective of individual lives, a comprehensive history of Chinese civilization in one hundred monographs.”

It was to be some time before Liang Qichao's suggestions about the importance of a new form of historical biography were taken up and developed by others. Many did believe that biography remained very much a part of the historian's work, but it was the traditional forms of biographical history which occupied them. Such writing remained very popular in the early twentieth century. The projected dynastic history for the Qing period involved historians for whom the liezhuan form retained its authoritative status as an integral part of the historiographical tradition. And private scholars continued the traditional practice of bringing together compilations of biographical essays and funerary writing. More importantly, the gradual shift of biography away from its almost exclusive subservience to historiography, as seen in the increasing popularity of nianpu during the Qing period, continued during the early years of the twentieth century. For most historians, however, the agenda of the new history provided different and more compelling questions about the past than those encompassed by the tradition, and the writing of biography no longer seemed of great importance.

At the same time as Liang Qichao had been lecturing on the relationship of traditional historiography to the new history, others, such as He Bingsong (1890–1946), were introducing Chinese students to a very different conception of what the new history should be. Texts on historical methodology, many of them translations of Western works, were extremely popular.
during the 1920s and early 1930s. He Bingsong used his own translation of
one such text, James Harvey Robinson’s influential collection of essays, The
New History, in his lectures on methodology at Beijing University.101 A
characteristic of such methodologies was the emphasis placed on the need
to turn away from an exclusive concern with politics and to consider social
and economic issues which may have been of greater long-term significance
for a society. A new problem-centred approach to the past was encouraged
and the narrative perspective provided by biography was seen as being of
little value to such an enterprise.

The “reorganization of the national past” (zhengli guogu 整理国故)
became a major focus for historians intent on implementing the agenda of
the new history. These historians turned their attention to the foundations
of Chinese civilization, re-assessing classical texts and traditional views of
early Chinese history.102 Their critical perspective led them to question the
exemplary nature of biographical writing in traditional historiography,
where the focus was not on the specifics of an individual life but rather on
the position which a subject was thought to occupy within the moral
spectrum of the Confucian world.103 Such scrutiny of core aspects of
traditional historiography was an essential part of the process of establishing
the foundations for new, post-Confucian interpretations of the Chinese past.
It also served further to undermine the notion that biography could provide
the principal narrative perspective in historical writing.

The increasing emphasis on social and economic issues during the late
1920s and early 1930s encouraged this turn away from biography. This
emphasis was seen not only in the highly polemical contributions to the
social history debates of the early 1930s but also in the more considered work
of academic historians, most of whom had either trained overseas or had
been influenced by Western historical methodology.104 The scope of
historical research expanded enormously during the early decades of the
twentieth century. The need to look at the tradition anew in the wake of
the collapse of the Confucian foundations of Chinese civilization saw historians
ask entirely new questions about the past, and the discovery of archeological
materials encouraged a critical re-assessment of traditional perceptions of
China’s early history. As well as the new interest in social and economic
aspects of the past, historians also turned their attention to the question of
China’s foreign relations, particularly during the period of the Yuan dynasty.
Western ideas on historical methodology were absorbed and new national
and cultural histories were produced.105

With the focus of historical enquiry extended well beyond the traditional
concern with ethics and the administrative world of the elite, biography
could no longer command the attention of historians that had been
fundamental to the official historiography of the past. This would change
with the outbreak of war with Japan and the emergence of a more militantly
nationalistic history which sought inspiration from ‘heroes’ of the past, but
when historians turned back to biography in the late 1930s and 1940s few

101 James Harvey Robinson, The new his-
tory: essays illustrating the modern histori-
cal outlook (New York: Columbia University
Press, 1912). He Bingsong’s translation was
published under the title Xin shixue [The
new history] (Shanghai: Commercial Press,
1925). For discussion of the translation of
this and other Western works on historical
methodology, and of the influence these
texts had in China, see Qi Sihe, “Jin hainian
lai,” pp.23-5. A detailed account of the
intellectual context for the emergence of
the ‘new history’ movement in North Ameri-
can can be found in Peter Novick’s
social history of the American historical
profession, That noble dream: the ‘objec-
tivity question’ and the American histori-
cal profession (Cambridge: Cambridge

102 Hu Shi’s editorial in the first issue (Jan.,
1923) of the Guoxue jikan [National studies
quarterly] set out the aims of the zhengli
guogu movement. See Hu Shi wen cun
[The literary legacy of Hu Shi] (Taipei:
Yuandong Tushu Gongsi, 1953), vol.2, pp.1–
18.

103 See Gu Jiegang’s discussion of this in
his study of the legendary bad last emperor
in “Zhou e qishi shide fasheng cidi” [The
order of occurrence of the seven evil deeds
of the Zhou emperor] in Gu shi man
[Critiques of ancient history], ed. Gu Jiegang
(Beiping: Pu She, 1930), vol.2, pp.82–93.

104 The most detailed study of the social
history debates is Arif Dirlik, Revolution
and history: origins of Marxist historiogra-
phy in China, 1919–1937 (Berkeley: Uni-
evidence of the substantial body of social
and economic history published by aca-
demic historians during the 1930s and
1940s see the journal Zhongguo jindai
jingshi sbi yanjiu [Studies in the modern
economic history of China].

105 For surveys of the historical writing of
the early twentieth century see Gu Jiegang’s
bibliographical overview Dangdai
Zhongguo shixue malu [A catalogue of
contemporary Chinese historical scholar-
ship], reprint ed. (Hong Kong: Longmen
Shudian, 1964); and S. Y. Teng “Chinese
historiography in the last fifty years,” Far
sought to revive the zhuan of traditional historiography. During the first part of the twentieth century biography had begun to emerge as an independent genre, free from its traditional subservience to historical writing, and this led historians into a new form of biographical writing.

The Emergence of Modern Historical Biography

The new and increasingly diverse interests of historians did much to undermine the status of traditional biographical writing, and this was reinforced by the widespread criticism of tradition that was so much a part of the May Fourth years (1917–1927). It was one of the most prominent writers of this period, Lu Xun 蘇 (1881–1936), who produced perhaps the most powerful and influential critique of traditional biography. In his famous story of Ah Q, Lu Xun has the narrator search the tradition for a genre of biographical writing suitable for the modern life-story he has to tell, all to no avail. From the liezhuan of the official histories to the biographies included in family genealogies, each of the various genres is found wanting.

What kind of biography was it to be? As Confucius once said, “Be the title not just so—Then the words refuse to flow.” You really do have to be pretty darned careful about titles. But there are so many! Why, just for biography alone there are enough titles hanging around to make your head swim: narrative biography, autobiography, private biography, public biography, supplementary biography, family biography, biographical sketch. Trouble is—not one of them fits. 106

Lu Xun goes on to give an eloquent parody of the formalized rigidity of these traditional forms of biographical writing, a parody which served to reinforce the notion that biography must escape its subservience to historiography and find a more flexible format than the tradition allowed.

While such criticism of traditional biography was widespread at this time, much of it was not new. For instance, when Hu Shi complained of how so much of traditional biographical writing consisted of meaningless, ornamental phrases, phrases that obscured rather than revealed the subject’s character, he was simply repeating a criticism that had been made frequently from the Tang period onwards. 107 Li Ao 李翱 (772–836), in his “Memorial on obituaries for officials” submitted to the throne in 819, complains of how such writing tended to be full of extravagant and unfounded claims praising the virtuous and filial behaviour of the deceased. 108 Similar criticisms were made in a memorial submitted to the History Office during the Five Dynasties period, and Gu Yanwu 郭炎武 was one of many in the late imperial period who argued that writers should restrict assessment to the arrangement of detail and refrain from making explicit moral judgements. 109

Hu Shi’s views on traditional biographical writing were probably most influenced by an essay of Zhang Xuecheng’s 章學誠 entitled “Ten faults of classical prose.” 110 In this essay Zhang identifies what he considered were problems within the tradition of classical prose writing, problems such as...
literary embellishment, distortion, exaggeration and fabrication. In almost all instances he uses examples from biographical writing to illustrate these problems. Zhang criticized the widespread practice of adding superfluous and inaccurate material in order to make biographical accounts appear more 'literary', stating that “in a biography the writing should reflect the person, [just as in] a narrative of events the writing should reflect those events. That is all that is required.” Similarly, Hu Shi wrote that the most important feature of biographical writing was a simple and accurate account of the events of a life, and this was where traditional biography was most deficient.112

But the modern critique of biographical writing went beyond these traditional concerns. It was felt that the Confucian emphasis on the exemplary produced portraits that were static, portraits that lacked individuality113 and were unconcerned to show a dynamic and changing personality. In his influential preface Hu Shi wrote:

What is most needed in biography is to be able to bring out the subject's true status, his real appearance and tone, so it is as if the reader can see the person and feel they truly are able to know him.114

Increasingly it was felt that a biography ought not portray character as simply the manifestation of an ideal which was present at birth, but as something that changes and develops during the course of a life. In part this emphasis on change within an individual life reflected a growing interest in ideas about evolution—the notion that an individual's life is subject to change and development just as is the life of a society. It also reflected the increasing concern with the individual that was so much a part of the May Fourth years.115

The May Fourth interest in Western literature also brought new perspectives on biographical writing. A translation of one of the talks on biographical writing which André Maurois (1885–1967) gave at Cambridge University in 1928 was published in Xinyue yuekan 新月月刊 [Crescent monthly] in 1930, and the same journal also carried articles introducing readers to recent biographical writing by European writers like Maurois, Emil Ludwig (1881–1948) and Lytton Strachey (1880–1932).116 These articles described how the art of the “new biographical literature” produced by these writers lay in the use of the telling anecdote, and how it was the duty of the biographer to relieve readers of “the burden of useless material.” Such writing was a reaction against the multi-volume European biographies of the nineteenth century, what Strachey had described as “those two fat volumes, with which it is our custom to commemorate the dead.”117 While some nianpu might approach the detailed density of Victorian biography, for the most part traditional Chinese biographical writing was brief and circumspect. But the long association of biography with official historiography gave this writing a predictable formality which seemed stultifying to modern writers. Thus, the emphasis which biographers such as Maurois and Strachey placed on

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111 Ibid, p.508.
114 Zhang Xiaoruo, Zhong jizhi, preface.
117 For “the burden of useless material” see André Maurois, “Biography as a work of art,” in Aspects of biography, p.55. For Strachey’s comment about “those two fat volumes” see Eminent Victorians, reprint ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921), preface, p.viii.
This assessment, made by Hu Shi, is discussed in Du Zhengxiang, "Zhuanji," pp. 6-7. Zhang Mosheng makes the same point in the introduction to his first collection of biographies: *Yixing zhuān* [Biographies of the extraordinary], reprint ed. (Shanghai: Dongfang Shushe, 1948), zíxu, p. 6.

For a detailed study of an artist and writer who resisted the increasingly didactic and proselytizing tendencies of Chinese literature from the late 1920s onwards, see Geremie Barmé, "Feng Zikai: a biographical and critical study" (PhD. diss., Australian National University, 1989).

Some of those who contributed autobiographical essays to these journals include Yu Dafu (*Renjianshi*), Chen Duxiu, Feng Yuxiang, Xie Bingrong, He Xiangning, Chen Gongbo, Wang Yunsheng and Cai Yuanpei (all in *Yuzhou fenf*). There were regular sections (*jīnrénzhī* and *rénwù*) in *Renjianshi* devoted to short biographical sketches, which included essays on both contemporary and historical figures, and occasional book reviews which dealt with life-writing, such as the review of Strachey's *Characters and commentaries* in *Renjianshi*16 (Nov., 1934): 41-2.

For instance, Zhang had worked with the May Fourth poet Xu Yunuo at a college in Henan, and much of his biography of Xu deals with the friendship that developed between the two men. See “Jīguài shīrèn Xu capturing the spirit of a subject, and their approach to the novelist’s concern with the development of character, were attractive to those interested in bringing new life to Chinese biographical writing.

Although such ideas came from the West, there was a sense that they involved a return to the essence of Chinese biographical writing as it had been practised by Sima Qian. Some critics would argue that only this writing, the biographical art of Sima Qian, could be called 'biographical literature' (*zhuanji wénxué* 傳記文學). Almost all other traditional Chinese biogra-
phy, and especially that in the post-Tang official histories, could not be considered literature and must simply be called ‘biography’ (zhuanji 傳記). It was in the ability to convey something of the spirit of the subject, the ability to provide a dynamic rather than a static portrait, that biographical literature was seen to differ from mere biography.\(^{118}\)

Such concerns were evident in the work of those writers who retained an interest in ‘self-expression’ and who resisted the trend of the late 1920s and early 1930s towards a more explicit involvement in social issues and social reform.\(^{119}\) Amongst these writers there was an interest in continuing those aspects of the Chinese tradition which encouraged self-expression: the brief and casual genre of the biji 筆記, or notes from the brush, and the xiaopinwen 小品文, or informal essay, as is evident in the contributions to those literary journals edited by Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976), Lunyu 論語: Renjianshi 人間世 and Yuzhoufeng 宇宙風, where autobiography and biography figured prominently.\(^{120}\) What distinguished the writing in these journals from traditional biographical writing was a much greater concern with the portrayal of character.

Zhang Mosheng 張默生 (b.1897) was one of the contributors to these journals whose writing demonstrates well this new focus being given to biographical writing. Zhang chose mostly to write about people he had known personally and he always began his biographies by describing his own relationship with the subjects and why he had decided to write about them.\(^{121}\) These introductory comments would be followed by the substance of the biography, which consisted simply of a series of anecdotes intended to portray the particular and unique character of the subject. None of the subjects he wrote about were particularly famous, yet Zhang portrays them as being unusual and distinctive individuals and his first collection of biographies, Yixing zhuan 異行傳 (Biographies of the extraordinary), was very popular.\(^{122}\) Some of his biographies show an affinity with the work of classical prose writers such as Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), but the clearest influence is from Sima Qian.\(^{123}\) Zhang felt most of the liezuan in the official histories were “stereotypical” and “lifeless,” but he admired the biographies by Sima Qian, especially “Xiangyu benji,” and like Sima Qian he wrote exemplary lives, portraits he hoped would be both educative and edifying. Rather than use the zhuann format, however, which he felt had been rendered lifeless through its long association with official historiography, Zhang chose mostly to write informal essays (xiaopinwen).\(^{124}\) But he recognized also that a detailed portrait of a life was not possible within the restrictions of the essay format and thus devoted the entire second volume of Yixing zhuan to his longest and most important piece of biographical writing, a life of the eccentric Sichuanese philosopher and educationalist Li Zongwu 李宗吾 (1879–1943).\(^{125}\)

Zhang Mosheng divided this biography into three sections, each of which is given a title adapted from traditional biographical writing. In the first section, entitled liezuan 別傳 (private or separate biography), Zhang tells Yunuo“ [A record of the unusual poet Xu Yunuo], Yuzhoufeng 35 (Feb. 1937): 568–72. A slightly revised version of this essay was included in Yixing zhuan (pp.103–16).

Such intimacy was uncommon in traditional biographical writing, although it was not unknown. Much of attraction in Yuan Hongdao’s (1568–1610) famous biography of Xu Wei (1521–93) comes from the way Yuan begins the biography, relating his own delight upon the chance discovery of Xu’s poetry. The formal part of the biography, beginning with the subject’s names and native place, etc., comes only after Yuan has told of his own relationship with Xu. Perhaps such intimacy is the reason why this biography has often been included in anthologies, such as Guwen guanzhi [The finest of classical prose], despite the fact that it is known to be an unreliable record of Xu Wei’s life. See “Xu Wenchang zhuan” [A biography of Xu Wei], in Yuan Hongdao and Qian Bocheng, Yuan Hongdao ji jijianjiao [An annotated edition of Yuan Hongdao’s collected works] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1981), pp.715–19.

Following the publication of this first volume of Yixing zhuan in 1943 it was republished many times. I have used the sixth reprint, published in 1948. In the introduction to this volume Zhang Mosheng gives an interesting perspective on his approach to biographical writing. He also discusses this in his autobiography, Moseng zizhuan [An autobiography of Mosheng] (Shanghai: Dongfang Shushe, 1948).


For Zhang’s dissatisfaction with traditional biography and his desire to help reform biographical writing see Yixing zhuan, zixu, pp.12–14.

"Houhe jiaozhu zhuan” [A biography of the master of the thick and the black], Yixing zhuan 2 (Shanghai: Dongfang Shushe, 1947).
The subsequent interest in Li Zongwu's philosophical writing was largely due to Zhang Mosheng's biography. Recent reprints of Li Zongwu's writing even include large and unacknowledged sections from the biography. See, for instance, *Houbietxuedaqian* (Collected studies on being thick of skin and black of heart) (Hong Kong: Xuelin Shudian, n.d.) and the subsequent reprints of this work in Taiwan and China under the title *Houbietxue* (such as the edition published by Qiushi Chubanshe in Beijing in 1989). For an interesting, if brief, account of the radical nature of Li Zongwu's philosophy see Wolfgang Bauer, “The problem of individualism and egoism in Chinese thought,” in *Studia Sino-Mongolica: Festschrift für Herbert Franke*, ed. Wolfgang Bauer (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1979), pp.427–42.

By the early 1940s biography had become extremely popular once more. In part this reflected the new life being given the genre by writers such as Zhang Mosheng, but it was also a consequence of changed political circumstances. The patriotism sparked by the war against Japan generated renewed interest in figures from the past, particularly those who were considered to have been martyrs in the cause of national defense. Many temples and memorial halls devoted to such people, buildings which had been neglected for years, suddenly became the focus of renewed attention, with restoration being undertaken and memorial services held. Then, in 1939, the Education Department of the Chongqing-based Guomindang government issued directives that universities and colleges should begin the teaching of courses on biography and the study of biography, courses which
had not previously been part of the curriculum. These courses played a major part in the renewal of interest in biographical writing that came in the 1940s. 128

While traditional forms of biography continued to be very popular, it was the new form of the independent monograph that became the focus for most historical biography. 129 With his biography of Wang Anshi, Liang Qichao had shown that the critical biography, or pingzhuàn 評傳, might provide a new

128 Wang Yun notes that it was as a result of this directive that he taught courses on biographical writing at Wenli College and Zhongshan University in Canton. See Zhuanji xue, preface, pp.1–2. His book is based on the lectures he gave in these courses. Similarly, Zhu Dongrun notes that his interest in biographical writing arose as a direct consequence of the government's directive that a course on biography be taught at Wuhan University. See “Zhu Dongrun zizhuan” [An autobiography of Zhu Dongrun] in Zhongguo xian dai shehui kexuejia zhuanliie [Brief biographies of China's modern social scientists] (Xian: Shaanxi Renmin, 1987), vol. 3, p.137.

129 At this time the History Office of the Guomindang government was involved in the compilation of liezhuàn for a national history. This has been continued by the Republican government in Taiwan and such liezhuàn are published regularly in the journal Guoshi guan guankan.
Two of the better known pingzhuans from this period are Chen Yilin’s *Zhang Juzheng pingzhuans* [A critical biography of Zhang Juzheng](Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1934), and Rong Shaozu’s *Li Zhongwu pingzhuans* [A critical biography of Li Zhongwu (Li Zhi)] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937).

For one instance of such criticism of pingzhuans see Ye Shengtao’s review of Zhu Dongrun’s first biography in *Wen yu lixing* 1.4 (1946): 506.

Hu Shi and Yao Mingda, *Zhang Si Jizai xiansi jing nianpu* [A chronological biography of Zhang Xuecheng] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1929), Hu Shi’s other major piece of biographical writing came later, in ‘Ding Wenjiang de zhuang’ [A biography of Ding Wenjiang], *Zhi ying yanzhi yuan yuankan* 3 (1956).

See, for instance, how Yang Honglie uses the term in *Lishi yanjiu* [Methods for the study of history] (Changsha: Commercial Press, 1939), pp. 224-5, to distinguish modern biography from lienzhuans.


Zhang Xiaoruo, *Zhang jizi*.

Ibid, preface, p.4.

The biographical monograph provided a release from such restrictions without encouraging the subjugation of the narrative to a primary concern with critical commentary, as was the case in a pingzhuans. Chronological sequence remained important in the monograph, but this was developed through a continuous narrative which allowed greater freedom than did the disjointed year-by-year format of the nianpu. Similarly, while the monograph could accommodate critical commentary, the focus remained with the narrative account of a subject’s life. Liang Qichao had used the term zhuanzhuans (special biography) or zhuanzhi (biographical monograph) to refer to this new type of biography, but by the 1940s such writing was increasingly referred to as zhuanshuans (biography). The term itself was far from new, the first recorded use of it being in two works entitled *Wu xing zhuanshuans* [An account of the five phases] in the bibliographical treatise of *Han shu* 漢書, but it was only in the eighteenth century that it began to be used exclusively to refer to biography and not to a diversity of prose writing devoted to both events and individuals. The increasing restriction of this term to biographical writing continued during the early twentieth century, and by the 1940s it had become the most popular term for modern biography. It is often used in a generic way to refer to all biographical writing, yet it has also the more specific sense of the modern biographical monograph.

The potential value of the biographical monograph had been shown in Zhang Xiaoruo’s *Zhang jizi* life of his father, Zhang Jian 張謇 (1853–1926), which had been published in 1930. Zhang provides a detailed although uncritical account of his father’s life and the biography lacks narrative coherence; nevertheless, as a piece of continuous narrative written in the vernacular, it was important in helping to establish the monographic form of modern biographical writing. Hu Shi noted in his preface to the work that it marked the beginning of a new era in the writing of jiazhuan 家傳, or family biography, in China and, as with Zhang Mosheng’s biography of Li Zongwu, Zhang Xiaoruo showed the benefits for biographical writing that came from an intimate relationship between biographer and subject. Such intimacy was not possible in historical biography, where the biographer did
not enjoy the advantages that came from personal knowledge of a subject, nevertheless such works did indicate the potential richness that might come from a greater attention to detail in the narrative account of historical lives.

While there was still much ambiguity as to the exact nature of the modern biographical monograph, the work of writers such as Zhang Mosheng suggested that there should be more to this biography than simply a dour account of the main events of a life. Thus, while the monographic form of modern biography had emerged by the early 1940s, the potential existed for a considerable diversity of writing within that form. And it was from such potential diversity that modern historical biography finally began to take shape.

The patriotism engendered by the war against Japan saw the publication of a number of biographies during the early 1940s which signalled the arrival of modern historical biography. Various publishing companies commissioned biographies, but the most influential was a series of monographs put out under the auspices of the Guomindang government and entitled Zhongguo lidai mingxian gushi ji 中國歷代明顯故事集 (A collection of stories of celebrated and outstanding people in Chinese history). This series was directed at a wide readership and was first undertaken by the Shengli Publishing Company. The project was divided into three sections and prominent historians were commissioned to write the biographies. The first section was devoted to major political figures, particularly prominent emperors such as Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝 (259–210 BC), but it also included other major figures like Confucius and Sun Yatsen 孫中山 (1866–1925). The second section comprised biographies of prominent individuals such as Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234), Wen Tianxiang 文天祥 (1236–83), Zheng Chenggong 鄭成功 (1624–62) and Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814–64). The final section was devoted to scholars and thinkers and included biographies of Mozi 墨子 (c.490–c.403 BC), Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), Wang Shouren 王守仁 (1472–1528), and Liang Qichao 吳階 (1811–72) and Liang Qichao. With this series Liang Qichao's suggestion regarding the need for a number of biographies of major figures from the Chinese past was brought to fruition, and the whole project marked a significant contribution toward the establishment of the biographical monograph as part of modern Chinese historiography.

But the finest modern historical biography to appear at this time did not come out of this project. This was Zhu Dongrun's 朱東潤 biography of the sixteenth century scholar and statesman Zhang Juzheng 張居正 (1525–82), a self-conscious attempt to establish a new form of biographical writing in China. The transition to the modern biographical monograph was already well established by the time Zhu published this biography in 1945, and it was perhaps not as innovative a work as he himself imagined, yet both the detailed portrayal of the subject and the overall coherence of the biography mark it as clearly superior to the other biographical writing of the time.
The transition with regard to literary biography only really ended in 1952 with the publication of Feng Zhi's *Du Fu zhuan* [A biography of Du Fu] (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1952). But by this time the very writing of biography itself was being called into question.

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potential richness of the modern biographical monograph for a truly historical figure was shown for the first time. Thus, the publication of this biography in 1945 can be seen as marking the end of the transition from the biographical history of the *liezhuan* to the modern historical biography of the *zhuanji*. Of course, the changed political circumstances that came a few years later required that the whole relationship between history and biography be reassessed once more in light of the new perceptions of the role of the individual in history which were imposed under the PRC. The very nature of a biographical perspective on the past was called into question and few biographies were produced. But the resurgence of biographical writing in the 1980s has seen the emergence once more of the *zhuanji* form of historical biography, now the dominant form of biographical writing in China.

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