CHAPTER FIVE

MEDIATED IMAGININGS:
BIOGRAPHIES OF WESTERN WOMEN AND THEIR
JAPANESE SOURCES IN LATE QING CHINA

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As the title of this volume suggests, cognitive transformation was central to the historical changes of the late Qing era. Authors and editors of new-style textbooks and organs of the periodical press—the two most effective media for transmitting Western ideas to the Chinese reading public in this period—were not only committed to raising their female readers’ basic level of literacy but also their level of political, cultural, and global literacy. They did this by comparing the status of women in China, Japan, and the West, and by providing detailed introductions to foreign social practices and pedagogical theories. Most significantly, however, they extended the cultural horizons of their readership by adding the life stories of publicly engaged Western heroines to the two-millennia-old repertoire of Chinese female exemplars.1

This appropriation of Western women’s biographies was more culturally threatening than the widespread introduction of Western men’s biographies in this period. Biographies of foreign heroes and politicians galvanized their Chinese counterparts to perform their existing roles more effectively: to lead more courageously, to respond to new challenges more creatively, and to defend the nation’s interests more boldly.2

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1 For a discussion of this repertoire, see Joan Judge, “Blended Wish Images: Chinese and Western Exemplary Women at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” in Beyond Tradition and Modernity: Gender, Genre, and Cosmopolitanism in Late Qing China, eds. Grace S. Fong, Nanxia Qian, and Harriet T. Zurndorfer (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 102–35.
2 Biographies of Western men appeared in the range of journals of the period from Liang Qichao’s 梁啟超 (1873–1929) Xinmin congbao 新民雑報 (New people’s miscellany) to the popular pictorial Tuhua ribao 圖畫日報 (Daily pictorial). They included biographies of such individuals as Otto von Bismarck (1815–98), George Washington (1732–99), and Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821). On the invocation of such heroes in the essays of Liang and Shibao 申請 (original English title: The Eastern Times) journalists, see Judge, Print and Politics: “Shibao” and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 94–95. For a more detailed discussion of Liang’s biographies,
In contrast, the actions of Western female exemplars defied normative Chinese gender principles and made previously unimaginable feminine social and political roles thinkable. Unlike most historical Chinese female paragons who had left their mark in history through private actions on behalf of their male kin, the Western heroines celebrated in the Chinese textbooks and women’s journals examined here intervened directly in history, unencumbered by domestic ties or concerns for ritual propriety.3

The Western women’s biographies published in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Chinese materials were not unmediated appropriations, however. Chinese editors and compilers rarely worked with original Western-language biographies; rather, they were dependent on Japanese translations of Western texts. Chinese, Japanese, and Western selection strategies were thus layered on one another: Chinese editors chose from among biographies Japanese compilers had already selected from Western collections, collections that were themselves the product of editorial and ideological decisions.4 At the same time the meaning of a Western woman’s life story was translated both literally into a new language and substantively into new cultural registers and historical contexts first by Japanese and then by Chinese writers.

The Chinese authors often freely translated and liberally altered the content of Japanese biographies of Western women. Even their more faithful translations frequently contained commentaries that directed the reader’s understanding of a particular life story. The biographies that resulted from these multiple mediations were, thus, not merely distortions of “original” texts but new creations, products of the Chinese cultural imaginary as much as the result of foreign borrowing. The complex processes of translation, appropriation, elision, and omission through which they were written illuminate how new cultural and political meanings were negotiated in turn-of-the-twentieth-century China.


3 Xue Shaohui (1866–1911) was unique in celebrating Western women for private accomplishments in the *Waiguo lienü zhuan* 外國列女傳 (Biographies of foreign women), co-compiled with her husband Chen Shoupeng (1857–1923?) (Nanjing: Jingling Jiangchu bianyi zongju, 1906), which I briefly discuss later in this chapter.

4 On the different purposes collections of “women worthy” had served in Western history from Plutarch to the nineteenth century, see Natalie Zemon Davis, “‘Women’s History’ in Transition: The European Case,” in *Feminism and History*, ed. Joan Wallach Scott (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 79–80.