

theory is carefully spelled out in Bush's thoughtful and insightful account of literary modernity's engagement with China and Chinese writing throughout the book, though it is more persuasively explored in some parts than in others. As a book that seeks to redefine China's place in modernism, *Ideographic Modernism* is immensely successful and presents a valuable study of the complex web of interactions that exist between cross-cultural imaginings, semiotics and technological media. China emerges from Bush's study as contemporaneous to the West. Most importantly, it exists not in a belated or peripheral status, but rather in a world where the distinction between the periphery and center, self and other, cannot possibly be drawn, as one is inevitably "constituted by the other" (p. 118).

Yanhong Zhu
Washington and Lee University

A Garden of One's Own: A Collection of Modern Chinese Essays, 1919-1949, edited and translated by Tam King-fai. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012. Pp. 279. \$49.00 (paper).

This slender, elegant book collects fifty essays from 1922 to 1949 by thirty-one different Chinese authors. Half the essays were published in the 1930s; two thirds of the authors are among the most well-known May Fourth and post-May Fourth writers; all the essays are considered by editor and translator Tam King-fai to belong to the genre of *xiaopin wen* (*xiaopin* essays). Tam leaves the word "xiaopin" untranslated because it has no exact counterpart in the Western tradition, but his working definition identifies the *xiaopin* essay as creative, personal, meditative, non-fictional, short-form prose that is almost always about quotidian experiences but nevertheless often manages to convey uncommon philosophical insight. In a thirty-eight-page introduction, Tam provides a clear, useful, and reasonably detailed account of the history of the *xiaopin* genre in the two-and-half-decade span during which the essays were first published. The book ends with a bibliography of more than fifty secondary sources in Chinese and English for the convenience of those who want to know more about the history of the genre, including the reasons for its emergence in the 1920s and its flourishing in the 1930s.

Tam's introduction is largely concerned to trace and assess efforts by critics to isolate and describe the characteristics of *xiaopin* essays, but one may infer Tam's general endorsement of the conventional wisdom: the *xiaopin* essay was promoted by writers, including Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang, and Liang Shiqiu, who believed that literature could and should be independent of politics. Tam also aligns himself with critics who believe that twentieth century *xiaopin* were influenced by Western models but remain very different from Western essays; and that modern *xiaopin* essays and late-Ming dynasty essays "echo each other in many significant ways" (p. 2). Zhou

Zuoren and others believed literature should be personal, expressive, lyrical, and aesthetically pleasing, and they believed *this was enough*; they did not believe that literature had a duty to strengthen the nation, right injustice, or speak for and to the masses. Tam quotes Lin Yutang, commenting in 1934 on his plans for his journal *Renjianshi* (This Human World), which was devoted to *xiaopin* essays, as writing, "All I want is to run a good magazine" (p. 19); Lin's frustration can make one feel a stab of sympathy even today. The *xiaopin* essay was the antithesis of the "topical polemical essay (*zawen*)" that is most closely associated with Lu Xun and that is characterized, Tam writes, by "heavy-handed argumentation and rational precision" (p. 163). The standard history of the critical discourse surrounding *xiaopin wen* almost comes down to a disagreement among brothers, with Zhou Zuoren and his friends being in favor of the genre, and Zhou's older brother Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren) and his allies being against it. Tam devotes several pages of his introduction to an account of Zhou Zuoren's history of Chinese literature and its defense of *xiaopin* and Lu Xun's dismissal of *xiaopin* as literary "knickknacks." Lu Xun, writing in 1933, used the term "xiaopin" to refer to prose essays in general, and "xiaopin" did for a time have this broader meaning. Lu Xun's criticism, however, was directed at a particular kind of essay that had its charms but he considered frivolous, which is what "xiaopin" came to denote to most people, even if they disagreed with Lu Xun's value judgment.

Tam's remarks in the Introduction, together with his selection of essays for translation, make it clear that he wishes to correct misunderstandings of the *xiaopin* genre, demonstrate that it includes essays not only by liberals who were relative cultural conservatives but also by left-wing and communist writers, and argue for its lasting importance as literature. Tam tends to offer a more narrow—and hence more easily comprehensible—definition of *xiaopin* when explaining why progressive critics disliked it: the genre openly celebrated the trivial and disavowed subject matter with social and political significance (pp. 36-7). Tam seems to accept this definition of what *xiaopin* essays are, but he argues that the genre's critics misunderstood what *xiaopin* essays do. Tam argues that by capturing a moment of existence that is resonant with meaning, a successful *xiaopin* essay achieves the quality of "yixiao jianda," which Tam glosses as "a quality that enables one to apprehend the significant through the examination of the trivial" (p. 30). In the process of mounting his defense of *xiaopin*, Tam moves to a more expansive definition of the genre, calling it "multifaceted" (p. 4); to Tam, the *xiaopin* essay doesn't argue, it philosophizes; its concerns are not politically or socially topical but are rather ethical and interpersonal; its subject matter is often mundane but it may also address questions with existential implications; it possesses "intimacy, naturalness, and artlessness"; and it is the "expression of individuality" (pp. 2-3). Not surprisingly, the more inclusive the definition gets, the harder it is to say exactly what makes *xiaopin* different from other forms of lyrical or expressive nonfiction prose. "A Garden of One's Own" is the title of a 1923 essay by Zhou Zuoren, and one assumes that by borrowing Zhou's title for his book, Tam is endorsing Zhou's humanism, his insistence that writers be free to pursue their

aesthetic and philosophical interests, and his advocacy of *xiaopin* as a genre suited to the expression of personal interests that have nothing to do with politics.

The term “*xiaopin*” was first used in print to refer to a particular type of the modern, vernacular essay in 1922. One assumes that the essays Tam selected for translation were either first published as *xiaopin* or under other terms for the genre that were in use through the late 1920s, when *xiaopin* became the generally accepted term, replacing other names, such as *meiwen* (aesthetic writing) and *xuyu sanwen* (familiar essay). The book, however, lacks a Chinese-language bibliography of primary sources that would be a help to anyone who wishes to confirm this assumption. The first essay that Tam translates is Lu Xun’s 1925 “Fengzheng” (The Kite). This, of course, is included in Lu Xun’s 1927 book *Yecao* (Wild Grass), which is commonly regarded as a collection of *sanwenshi* (prose poetry). *Wild Grass* was advertised as prose poetry in 1927 and called that by Lu Xun in 1932. Tam does not say if his reason for including “The Kite” is historical or aesthetic; he does not say, in other words, if “Fengzheng” appeared as *xiaopin* when it was first published in February 1925 in *Yusi* (Threads of Conversation), which did publish *xiaopin*, or if he believes it should, in retrospect, be considered as such, even though it was published as prose poetry. A few of Tam’s other selections also potentially complicate our understanding of what *xiaopin* essays are. Ba Jin’s “Feiyuan wai” (Outside the Garden Ruins; 1941) was written in Kunming two days after a Japanese bombing attack on the city that killed, among others, the young woman whose “mud-covered leg” Ba Jin sees under a pile of rubble (197). The tone and style of Ba Jin’s essay fit the definition of *xiaopin*, but it is topical and deals with a non-trivial matter of political and social significance, which would place it outside the *xiaopin* genre by a narrower definition. Tam translates a few other essays that, atypically for *xiaopin*, are as politically charged as Ba Jin’s essay, including for example, He Qifang’s “Ji’e” (Hunger; 1941). If the essays by Lu Xun, Ba Jin and He Qifang were first published and discussed as *xiaopin* it is significant, because it changes the conventional understanding of what *xiaopin* essays are, and therefore it should be noted. If they were not published as *xiaopin* and Tam is expanding the boundaries of the genre, this too is significant and might be made explicit.

Tam begins his introduction by writing that the works he has translated “are known in Chinese by the name *xiaopin wen*” (p. 2), but one wonders if this is still the case, strictly speaking. Many of the essays in *A Garden’s of One’s Own*, including to choose just two examples, Zheng Zhenduo’s “Yan zhi qu” (The Pleasures of Food and Wine; 1932) and Ye Lingfeng’s “Qiaocui de xiansheng” (The Weary Sound of the Fiddle; 1932), have for decades been anthologized under the general term “*sanwen*” (prose nonfiction). Tam argues quite forcefully against the use of the general term *sanwen* instead of the “more specific references” to subgenres (p. 11). Tam argues for the utility and indeed the virtue of using the specific term *xiaopin* to refer to the type of essay he is interested in. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that Chinese publishers and readers are now content to use the single term *sanwen* to refer to prose

non-fiction essays that might be separated by scholars into smaller categories. Tam's introduction leaves one unsure as to exactly what is at stake when it comes to choosing one term over the other to refer to the essays in this very readable and enjoyable anthology.

By any name, the essays that Tam has translated are very interesting. Tam's translations read well and he provides author biographies that give the reader essential information in admirably concise form. Several of the essays are beautiful and thought-provoking, including Xu Dishan's "Undelivered Letters (Three Selections)," which has several pleasingly odd turns of imagination; Zhang Henshui's "Checkers," which was written in classical Chinese, making it the exception to the rule that *xiaopin* are in the vernacular, but which is exemplary of what Tam calls the ability of *xiaopin* to capture the "singular moment" (p. 32); three essays by the delightfully idiosyncratic Feng Zikai; Bing Xin's poetic "The Smile"; Wu Boxiao's "Conversations at Night," which manages to create a sort of cozy suspense or relaxed tension; and Su Qing's brilliant "Sweet Bean Cakes" and "My Hand," which are precise, evocative and poignant. Several of the essays that Tam translates appear in Chinese-language anthologies that collect examples of the best use of the language in prose form, including Zhou Zuoren's "Black-Canopied Boats"; Mao Dun's "Before the Storm"; Lao She's "Winter in Jinan"; and Yu Pingbo's "West Lake on the Evening of the Eighteenth Day of the Sixth Month." These essays were, one assumes, especially difficult to translate because they are descriptive and lack any narrative momentum whatsoever. Their appeal lies entirely in their language—in their diction, syntax and rhetorical devices—and therefore this appeal translates into English only by dint of great effort and skill.

In the Chinese tradition, the claim of prose nonfiction to status as literature (meaning writing deserving of appreciation, study and transmission) is equal to that of fiction. The Western critical tradition doesn't give prose nonfiction as much respect, which is part of the reason English-language studies of modern Chinese literature have tended to ignore *sanwen* and *xiaopin*. Tam King-fai's *A Garden of One's Own*, therefore, joins work by David Pollard, Charles Laughlin, and Martin Woesler, among others, as a welcome and valuable contribution to the effort to make the history of *sanwen* and *xiaopin* known to scholars and students who rely on English-language materials and to make some of the most important modern Chinese essays available in English translation. Perhaps incidentally, the essays, taken in the aggregate, also offer insight into the material and affective lives of Republican-era writers and the modern, urban middle class, to which most of them belonged. For example, while writers of *xiaopin* may have tried to avoid subject matter of political and social significance, that significance often remains. Zhou Zuoren's "First Love"; Lin Yutang's "Ah Fang"; Su Xuelin's "In My Moments of Dejection (Two Selections)"; Zhu Ziqing's "Looking for a Mate"; and Lu Li's "The Water Pestle" all refer in passing or at length to the class- and gender-based oppression that appalled and enraged many of the same progressives and radicals who had no patience with literature that

was for leisure only. But politics and social engagement aside, many of the essays, besides providing aesthetic pleasure and philosophical insight, also give interested readers some understanding of the architecture, modes of transportation, clothing, food, pastimes, and family life of the Republican period. This might be another reason why *xiaopin* may be considered “tremendous trifles,” to quote Tam, quoting Chen Shuhua, borrowing for new use a coinage of G. K. Chesterton (p. 31). It is also an additional reason why the book will be useful and engaging to students of Chinese literature in translation.

Tom Moran
Middlebury College

Chiang Yee: The Silent Traveller from the East, by Da Zheng. New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2010. Pp. 358. \$49.94 (hardcover).

Chiang Yee: The Silent Traveller from the East is an excellent cultural biography of the Chinese artist and writer Chiang Yee (1903-1977). The book traces, with admirable attention to the balance between details, anecdotes, and the larger historical context, this emigrant writer's complicated journeys from China to England and then on to the U.S., Japan, and Australia from the 1930s to the 1970s. The author Da Zheng shows quite a bit of consideration for readers who may not be familiar with Chinese history. In many sections of the book, he provides lucid and succinct explanations of major political and social histories in China of the relevant periods. But the biography as a whole focuses more on the personal life of Chiang with particular attention paid to the mental state and psychology of this intercultural figure. For the latter, the author relies on Chiang's correspondence and interviews of his friends and family members as indicated by the footnotes. Overall the book strikes a good balance between the historical and the personal, or external and internal descriptions of this figure, although occasionally the transition between the two kinds of writing seems a bit sudden.

Chiang grew up in a scholar's family in Jiangxi Province, China, and was given a solid training in calligraphy, painting, and classical poetry at a very young age. Influenced by the New Culture Movement that looked to modern science as a savior of what was perceived by the intellectuals as a weak and backward China, Chiang chose chemistry as his major at the National Southeastern University in Nanjing, but he ended up not pursuing a scientific career after graduation. Instead, he was swept into politics by the unfolding Northern Expedition and took a minor administrative position in the newly formed Nationalist government. As a civil servant, Chiang found himself embroiled in complicated bureaucratic politics and tricky negotiations with warlords and gangsters. He quickly learned that the only way for him to survive was by constructing a public image as a man who was both mad (癲) and mute (啞).