

Preface

THE IDEA FOR this book could perhaps be said to go back to many decades ago during those walks with my father, Mei Guangdi, in Zunyi, Guizhou, the location of Zhejiang University's last wartime campus during the War of Resistance against Japan. Zunyi was a small mountain town then, and when we ventured out in the cool of a summer evening it did not take us long to get out to the country, where my father often stopped to chat briefly with those winding up their labor in the fields. Noting little that seemed to be worthy of my attention, I would stand to the side and look at the sky, or idly trace designs in the dirt underneath my feet, impatient to get on our way and rather bored with the exchanges about this year's weather or next year's crops. My father was then chairman of the Foreign Languages Department at the University and had spent almost twenty years in the United States as a student and then university professor, but in showing his concern for how the peasant was doing, he was in many ways carrying out the obligations of a traditional Confucian scholar. I had also heard from him in quite another connection that we could claim Mei Yaochen (1002–1060), whose poem "Tianjia yu" ("The Peasants' Words") I discuss in chapter 1, as an ancestor.

I never had the opportunity after I reached adulthood to discuss these matters with my father, for he did not live long enough to return with the university to its original campus in Hangzhou after the war ended in 1945. But whether or not my "family background" had anything to do

with my interest in the peasant in modern Chinese literature, the looming presence of the peasant image in that literature can hardly be ignored. Although I had begun with the idea of examining the metamorphosis of the peasant in fiction through several phases of twentieth-century literary history, my focus soon shifted to the writer/intellectual's self-representation in relation to the image of that peasant "other."

Instrumental in this change of focus was my participation at the conference "Contemporary Chinese Fiction and Its Literary Antecedents" held at Harvard's John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, May 11–13, 1990. My paper, "Text, Intertext, and the Representation of the Writing Self in Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, and Wang Meng," had little to do with the peasant image, but it reinforced my interest in issues concerning the writing self, language, and ideology. I am grateful to Ellen Widmer and David Der-wei Wang, the organizers of this conference—in many ways a landmark indicating that modern Chinese literature had come of age as an independent field of study—and to conference participants for their criticism and encouraging comments. I had the opportunity to follow up on some of the issues on January 12 the following year at a symposium organized by Theodore Hutters on "Representation of the Self in Modern Chinese Literature" at the UCLA Center for Chinese Studies, in conjunction with the Southern California China Colloquium. As I continued research on my reconceived project, it was very beneficial to me to be able to present some preliminary findings at a University of Georgia Humanities Center Research Conference on "Re-imagining the Self: Agency, Representation, and Identity Politics," May 11–12, 1993. This "multicultural" and interdisciplinary conference, organized by Linda Brooks and Kam-ming Wong, was strategically designed to juxtapose Eastern and Western theories, and included scholars and critics from such diverse fields as philosophy, anthropology, gender studies, comparative literature, English, Romance Languages, and African-American Studies. These juxtapositions produced much stimulating discussion among conference participants. I am grateful to them, and particularly to Tu Wei-ming and Kam-ming Wong, for their thoughtful comments on my subject.

A research grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, funded by the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and a fellowship from the Wang Institute of Graduate Studies, as well as an Arthur F. Thurnau professorship at the University of Michigan, enabled me to have time off from teaching and to carry out research in China and in various libraries

in the United States. I am indebted to my sponsoring hosts, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, and particularly to the colleagues in their Modern Literature Research Groups for granting me access to their library and files and for their unstinting help in locating material. Many thanks to Ma Liangchun, Liu Fuchun, and Chen Yangu for their support. Among university libraries, it was a particular pleasure to work in that of Xiamen University, with its beautiful and almost distracting view of the water, and I am grateful indeed to Zhuang Zhongqing, Lai Ganjian, and Li Yijian of Xiamen University for their generous support and hospitality. The exchange of ideas with them and many other colleagues in China was very helpful to me in formulating ideas about my subject. The staff of the Shanghai Municipal Library, which became increasingly open as time went by, provided much valuable assistance.

I am grateful for the privilege of interviewing Li Zhun and Ma Feng, two well-known "peasant writers," who kindly shared their experiences and discussed their writings with me. As is evident in the notes to this book, I benefited greatly from the many opportunities I had of meeting and talking with Gao Xiaosheng and Bei Dao. Gao Xiaosheng's visit to the United States in 1987, which included a two-month stay at the University of Michigan, was sponsored by the Visiting Scholar Exchange Program of the former Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China. Bei Dao was the first visiting artist/writer of the University of Michigan's International Institute Distinguished Visiting Artist-in-residence Program. His year-long visit here in 1994 was also sponsored by the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures and the Center for Chinese Studies.

The list of friends and colleagues who have contributed toward the development of the ideas in this book is a long one; many of their names appear in the works cited in my bibliography. My thanks to Marilyn Young for the many provocative discussions we had when we taught a course together on modern Chinese literature at the University of Michigan's Residential College, to Leo Ou-fan Lee for incisive comments over the years on several of my papers related to the topic, and to Patrick Hanan for his support and guidance. Lydia H. Liu and Theodore Hutters, both of whom read early drafts of the manuscript, provided thoughtful criticisms and comments that turned out to be invaluable to me as I carried out my revisions. Terre Fisher came through with timely and efficient help in preparing the final version of the bibliography. My thanks

to John Zierner for his encouragement of the project and to John Feron and Martin Hanfft for their meticulous editing. I want to acknowledge the contribution of the University of Michigan's Center for Chinese Studies toward production costs. My husband, Albert Feuerwerker, discriminating critic and "computer guru," has been a source of constant support throughout. And finally I would like to thank my students who, over the years, have made the rereading of literary texts both necessary and rewarding.

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