



# WRITING CHINESE WOMEN IN JAPANESE OCCUPIED MANCHURIA: THE LEGACY OF LAN LING BY NORMAN SMITH

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■ In the Japanese colonial state of Manchukuo (1932-1945), a long-forgotten feminist literature gave voice to Chinese women's critiques of the state's patriarchal foundations. This paper analyses the literary legacy of one of the most prolific Chinese women writers of the Manchukuo era, Lan Ling (1918-2003).<sup>1</sup> During the occupation, Lan published in a wide range of Japanese-owned publications, but her work did not serve to legitimate the Manchukuo state or its cultural agenda. While Manchukuo officials promoted policies that doomed most of the Chinese population to poverty as well as conservative ideals of womanhood that aimed to subjugate women to men and to the state, Lan expressed her dissatisfaction with life in Manchukuo in novellas and short stories, narrative poetry, essays, and one play. Lan's work was noted by contemporaries for her use of local dialect, criticisms of Manchukuo society, and articulation of ideals of womanhood that challenged those promoted by colonial officials. Lan's literary legacy provides a valuable vantage point from which to evaluate Japanese colonial rule and local Chinese women's historical experience.

Lan Ling was born Zhu Zhenhua on February 3, 1918,

in the small village of Pingjing on the banks of the Nuan river, Changji county, Hebei province. When she was still a baby, her parents moved with her to Qiqihaer, Manchuria, where she lived for the next twenty-seven years of her life.<sup>2</sup> Lan's family consisted of her mother, her father, his second wife, and several younger children. Her mother spent her days consumed with household affairs, including cooking, sewing, and tending to small repairs. She believed that girls should have basic reading and writing skills, but worried that more advanced education would detract from a dutiful focus on the domestic sphere. Thus, when Lan completed four years of primary education, her mother opposed further study. But her father, employed as a minor clerk in the local government, was swayed by May Fourth ideals of women's liberation (especially education and career opportunities, and free-choice marriage) and insisted that all their children pursue education to the utmost of their ability. Lan's completion of a four-year degree at a teacher-training school reveals much about her ambitions as well as the power dynamics in her parents' relationship. Despite her father's old-fashioned marriage arrangements, he ensured his children access to reading material that reflected "new" gender ideals and Western influences. From an early age, she was introduced to progressive Chinese and foreign literature, and in middle school she began to write poetry.

With her father's encouragement, Lan pursued

classes that eventually enabled her to fulfil her dreams of becoming a teacher. In July 1928, Lan began teacher-training courses in the local Heilongjiang Provincial First Women's Teacher Training School (Qian 437). In 1931, the Japanese invasion complicated, but did not destroy, her dreams of further study. Occupation forced two important changes in her life: her education halted for one year, and her father's income dropped precipitously, forcing Lan to prematurely help shoulder the family's financial burdens. The poverty of her teenage years is the subject of her essay "Yan" (Feast), which recounts one of the ramifications of her father's meagre income – from an early age, she was forced to the pawnbrokers: "pawning is just an everyday little thing in the struggle of life" (718). Lan reveals how, with the changing seasons, she would pawn their clothes, borrowing against any remaining value they had to help meet the daily expenses of the household. As a teenager, Lan learnt that Japanese colonial rule imperilled the livelihoods of Chinese like her.

The establishment of the Japanese colonial state of Manchukuo in 1932 occurred amidst popular debate over the future of Asia and the fate of its women. Manchukuo was the product of military force, but it was justified by its defenders as a modern resolution to regional instability (Mitter 70-1). Prasenjit Duara has demonstrated how Manchukuo's avowed *raison d'être* was "to realize a visionary modern polity" (Duara 75). Officials aimed to achieve an important

part of that modernity by transforming the region's women into "good wives, wise mothers" (*xianqi li-angmu*), who followed the orders of the state and/or the household head (a woman's father, husband, or son). Officials promoted the Confucian concept of *Wangdao* (the Kingly Way) as a Confucian "return to tradition" in which "every man would have his rights and every woman her home" (Fulton 18). Thus officialdom sought to legitimise occupation by twin-

***Lan depicts young women who refused to meekly submit to family and societal pressures, thus challenging official constructs of womanhood that demanded familial obedience from young women.***

ning Confucian ideals with an ambitious modernity project. But whatever appeal such discourses held for locals was shattered by the realities of military occupation and a racist ruling apparatus that discriminated against the Chinese, even barring them from consuming white rice.

Dissatisfaction with Japanese colonial rule prompted some Chinese writers to risk life and limb by engaging in critical reflection on Manchukuo society. A prominent example is provided by Ba Lai, an underground Communist Party member in Qiqihaer, who nurtured Lan's writing aspirations. Ba wrote and published a literary insert in the local newspaper, *Heilongjiang ribao* (Heilongjiang Daily), until he was arrested and executed in 1934 by the Japanese for links with the communists (Qian 437). Despite Ba's fearsome treatment, Lan was inspired by his activities and writings to pursue her own experimentation with self-expression and to earn much-needed money to help subsidise her family. Her first published works, including her first published poem, "Pa tajin na yinyu de jiamen" (Afraid He Will Enter That Dark House's Door), were produced with Ba's support in the *Heilongjiang ribao* in 1932, when she was just fourteen years old.

In August 1932, Lan resumed her studies in advanced coursework at the Heilongjiang Provincial First Women's Teacher Training School. Upon graduation in July 1935, she was employed as a teacher at Qiqihaer's Tongxin primary school, where she harboured conflicting emotions regarding education. On the one hand, she was excited about education's potential for personal empowerment, especially for women, but she was wary of the contemporary stress on Confucian texts, and filial piety in particular (Lan "Nan" 70). Even more vexing for the young teacher, who was

inspired by ideals of women's emancipation, was the required housework studies classes (*jiashe ke*) for girls (Qian 437). Despite her misgivings, though, Lan's teaching earned an income to support her family and, in the long term, balanced the unanticipated twists and turns of a seventy year writing career.

In the spring of 1936, the family of Cao Mengbu, a young science teacher at the Mongolian Banner Teacher Training School, moved next door to Lan's family and the eighteen year old Lan grew enamoured of Cao's knowledge of world affairs and his antipathy towards the Manchukuo government (Lan

"Nan" 72). Cao shared Lan's keen interest in literature and was even familiar with her work before they met; the critical stance in her writings had caught his attention. Cao expanded Lan's literary horizons by introducing her to Soviet literature, and to her favourite novel, Maxim Gorky's *Mother*. These works, and her fiancé's enthusiasm for communism, sharpened Lan's appreciation of the potential of social criticism. An underground Communist Party member, Cao spent hours with Lan contrasting the promise of communism with the growing menace of militarism and fascism. Cao proved a constant source of advice and encouragement for her efforts to expose the "dark side" (*yin'an mian*) of the lives of the poor, and women in particular (Lan "Nan" 72). Cao won the respect of the young girl and her parents, and they were soon engaged.

By the mid-1930s, the poverty and oppression experienced by the Chinese population in Qiqihaer compelled dramatic changes in Lan's life. In the late spring of 1936 her father left Manchukuo to travel to Beijing, Tianjin, and other cities south of the colony looking for work (Lan "Nan" 72). Lan was forced to shoulder even more responsibility for the household. In the summer of 1936, the Manchukuo government launched two arrest campaigns in Qiqihaer which were initially directed towards educators but soon broadened to encompass other professions. As fears regarding the scope and nature of governmental oppression deepened, Cao made preparations to leave the colony. Following the Xian Incident of December 1936, which precipitated the Chinese declaration of war against Japan, Cao disguised himself as a merchant and left Manchukuo with his mother. Marriage plans with Lan were put on hold indefinitely.

Thus, at the age of eighteen, Lan began three years of

hardship during which she struggled to support her siblings and two mothers. No financial assistance was forthcoming from her father who barely supported himself writing letters and selling paper in North China (Chan "Duanwujie" 70). Lan supplemented her teaching income by writing, sewing, and trips to pawn shops. Her writings began to appear in a wider range of Japanese-owned publications including the prestigious *Huawen Daban meiri* (Chinese Osaka Daily), *Xin Manzhou* (New Manchukuo), and *Qingnian wenhua* (Youth Culture). During this period, she wrote several fictional works including "Duanwujie" (Dragon Boat Festival), and three novellas that have since been lost in the ravages of time: *Shuang yin* (Double-Print), *Qingchun zai xianshi* (The Re-Appearance of Spring), and *Zaijia* (Remarriage). Each of these works illuminated the lives of the poorest members of society, amongst whom she counted herself.

In May 1937, Lan Ling published "Duanwujie," a short story about the struggles of a young woman from Shandong who followed her husband to Manchukuo looking for work (349). After her husband died on the job, she was left penniless to raise their son. Disregarding her dying husband's wishes, she refused to re-marry, devoting herself to raising their son single-handedly, despite her poverty. With bitter tears, she works all night long so that she can buy her son a *zongzi*.<sup>3</sup> Through hard work, self-denial, and devotion to her son she overcomes adversity to teach him an important lesson: "poor people who have integrity are not poor" (350). In coping with the consequences of her husband's premature death, the mother personifies virtues essential to constructs of good wives, wise mothers. But the virtues that she embodies are not shown to be exclusive to women; rather, they have application to men as well. While her character may reflect officially sanctioned ideals of womanhood, the story paints an entirely negative portrait of the life of a migrant to Manchukuo.

In 1937, Manchukuo joined Japan's war against the rest of China, as the nineteen year old writer struggled with family responsibilities and her personal life appeared to have hit rock bottom. In the spring of 1938, she commemorated her melancholic mood in the poem "Tiediaole guanghui de rizi li" (Lost Glory Days):

Mama, only for your grey hair,  
am I selling this child's sacred freedom! (89)

Lan's anxieties over household responsibilities increased at the end of the year when rumours circu-

lated through Qiqihaer that her father, unbeknownst to them, had joined the anti-Japanese resistance (Lan "Nan" 72). Lan feared that he would not be able to return for the duration of Japanese rule, which increasingly appeared to be a permanent condition.

In the spring of 1940, Lan and her family were forced out of their family home to cheaper accommodations and deepening despair. Some relief was brought to Lan's life through a burgeoning friendship with local poet Hu Dounan. Hu offered advice regarding teaching as well as critical evaluation of Lan's work. With his assistance, in the summer of 1940, Lan published her narrative poem, "Xiao xiang de chuxi" (New Year in a Small Alley), which recounts a poor widow's attempt at prostitution as a last resort to feed her child. The woman cowers "like a timid rat ... [hiding from] the police that let people rot" (808). In her desperation,

She cannot steal,  
she dare not rob,  
she can only think of using her starving body,  
to trade for little scraps of food. (808-09)

Lan suggests that in Manchukuo even a devoted widowed mother was valued only for her body, which could not even be "trade[d] for little scraps of food." But the bitter cold and lack of customers take their toll as she waits in vain in a snowy lane only to encounter a "morphine ghost." (810)

Thinking, thinking, she lay down,  
snowflakes layer on layer cover her gradually  
freezing body,  
the sounds of fireworks explode all over the  
alley. (811)

The poem ends with the woman collapsing on New Year's Eve in an abandoned street lit by fireworks, presumably to die as her starving baby lies abandoned in an empty, dark apartment. Her fatal decision to try to sell her body rather than to steal or rob implies a prioritisation of honesty over chastity, thus slighting the officially mandated "cornerstone" of women's virtue in Manchukuo.

In the fall of 1940, Lan's ongoing friendship with Hu Dounan threatened to turn into romance and she felt compelled to clarify for Hu her engagement with Cao Mengbu (Lan "Xi" 90). Their relationship cooled but Hu continued to critique writing that she sent to him. When Lan failed to contact Hu for several months, he went looking for her, fearing the worst. Lan's responsibilities had taken their toll on her

health and she had temporarily abandoned writing. By the end of 1940, at Hu's insistence, Lan was under a doctor's care and permanently back in his life (Qian 437). In April, 1941, Lan resigned from Tongxin primary school to focus on her health and writing; she did not teach again until June 1944. Despite her frail health, the early 1940s proved a particularly fruitful period as she penned several of her most famous works.

In late 1941, Lan's long-absent father responded to family pleas and briefly returned to Manchukuo. International tensions and disorder in war-torn China had made communication with Lan's fiancé Cao Mengbu impossible; she had no reliable information regarding his whereabouts or whether he was even still alive (Lan "Xi" 91). Under the circumstances, her father encouraged Lan to cancel her engagement with Cao and marry Hu. Her father then left Manchukuo with his second wife and their youngest son to return to his home village in Hebei. Lan remained as the main bread-winner for the rest of her family and she married Hu at the end of 1942. By then, both Lan and Hu had established reputations in Qiqihaer as promising writers so their wedding was elaborate and well-attended. Despite this auspicious beginning, however, their married life was simple, poor, and tragically short. Her new husband enjoyed considerable renown and held a literature degree from Beijing's prestigious Qinghua University, but his employment as a middle school teacher destined them for a life of scholarly poverty. After her marriage and the relative abatement of family responsibilities, Lan turned her attention back to writing.

In August 1942, Lan published her most critically acclaimed novella, *Yehang* (Night Navigators), which recounts the poverty and jealousy that plagues a young couple, Gun and her husband Ji. They are torn apart by misunderstandings which arise from an innocent friendship between Gun and her former neighbour, a man who becomes her husband's new boss (383). Ji misinterprets his wife's friendship for an affair and fears that Gun told his boss of their dire financial straits. *Yehang* critiques patriarchal patterns of privilege that restrict the young woman's social circle, cast aspersions on her friendship with a man, and destroy her otherwise happy marriage. The "night navigators" of the title are the hardworking, honest women and men who struggle against economic deprivation and outdated gender ideals. By the conclusion, Gun regains her optimism through the realisation that she can survive on her own, as an independent woman—not as an obedient wife. *Yehang* underlines Lan's commitment to revealing

social inequities and her especial focus on the plight of poor women.

In October 1942, Lan published a poem recounting the decline of a prosperous nomad family, "Ke'erqin caoyuan de muzhe" (The Shepherd of the Ke'erqin Plains). The family's fortune fades as if "god is jealous": the father dies, the son flees after killing a man, and the mother is left alone (818). The mother is forced into penury, relinquishing the family's remaining wealth to compensate the family victimised by her son. Poverty-stricken and alone, "the whip of life" (*shenghuo de bianzhi*) tears the mother's life apart (819). While she struggles to resolve the difficulties caused by her husband and her son, a lama wanders by whistling a tune that "sings the liberation of depressed souls" (822). His actions suggest that the depressed might not have their difficulties resolved via obedience to *Wangdao* ideals but rather through Buddhist religious devotion, and an implied abandonment of relationships and responsibilities in this world. "Ke'erqin caoyuan de muzhe" criticises the challenges that women were forced to face in Manchukuo and offers a solution that conservative officials would have abhorred.

By early 1943, Lan and Hu had attained a modicum of financial stability as they both published steadily and Hu worked full-time at a local middle school. In the spring, they moved back into Lan's abandoned family home and enjoyed the company of friends who pursued similar careers in literature and education; these included the writer Dan Di, who had returned from advanced education in a women's college in Japan (Smith "Difficulties" 90-1). In 1943 and 1944, as local authorities began earnest application of the state's onerous literary regulations, Lan published several works critical of contemporary society, thereby turning Lan and her family into targets for state persecution.

Despite a regulatory framework that prohibited the publication of literature that depicted Manchukuo in a negative light, Lan published two stories which outline the desperation of young people seeking to improve their lives. In "Guxiang de jia" (Hometown Family), Ming returns home to rescue his sister, Yu, and their opium-addicted birth mother from the poisonous environment of his hometown (34-5). Once there, believing that his mother lay beyond salvation, Ming hopes that his sister will leave with him yet fears "women always feel attached to the place they grow up in; they lack men's ability to travel extensively with bravery and determination" (37). But Yu proves ready, willing, and able to go; before

Ming approaches her, Yu had already quit her job and packed. Yu's resolute behaviour underscores the determination that Lan hoped to inspire in her readers. In "Richu" (Sunrise), a young woman refuses to submit to an arranged marriage (355-58). Her bold, assertive character is contrasted with her mother's submissiveness, which she blames for having ruined her mother's life. The story concludes as the young woman flees from her family with her lover to start a new life. In both "Guxiang de jia" and "Richu," Lan depicts young women who refused to meekly submit to family and societal pressures, thus challenging official constructs of womanhood that demanded familial obedience from young women.

In February 1944, Lan published "Zai jingjing de yulinli" (In a Quiet Dark Forest), a poem about a seventeen year old Buddhist novice who longs for meaningful emotional relationships to brighten her "cold world" (826). She fantasises about life in the city, a loving mother and father, and "a tiny warm home" that could fill the void she feels with the cold, emotionless nun in charge of the temple (826). By the conclusion, the novice learns that a terrible truth has been concealed from her: her pregnant mother had been abandoned by her lover, rejected by her father, and died after giving birth to her. In fact, her mother was buried in a grave right outside her door. The novice's "cold world" is proven to be both far colder and warmer than she could have imagined. While she learns of her mother's tragic life, she comes to appreciate the loving relationship fostered by the older woman who shielded her from the truth. The young novice's unhappiness had its genesis in her mother's mistreatment by all the men in her life: her lover refused to take any responsibility for their unborn child and her father threw her out of her home, directly leading to her death. While this poem could be interpreted as a morality tale warning of the pitfalls attending pregnant single women, the sympathy with which Lan describes the young novice and her mother forces the criticism on the men and their behaviour.

Also in 1944, Lan published a play, *Dadi de ernü* (Sons and Daughters of the Great Land), outlining a son's return to the rural home of his aged parents. They are overwhelmed upon his homecoming and dream of resurrecting their fallow farm and producing heirs to work the land. The prodigal son expresses his regrets for "wasting [his] useful spirit in the foul city" (117). He yearns for the tranquil environment of the farm that will restore him to the bosom of his family and his fiancée. The play climaxes with the family patriarch beckoning the "sons and daughters of the great

land" to plough together the "great Asian land" and produce offspring once again (118). Ostensibly, *Dadi de ernü* is an ode to Manchukuo and the concept of a "Greater East Asia," but it does not reveal why the son originally left the farm, what was so "foul" (*wuzhuo*) about urban life that compelled his return, or why his parent's lives had fallen to ruin in his absence. At the time the play was published, it would not only have been illegal to explain in detail the characters' misfortune, it would have been redundant as well: Japanese colonial rule had proven ruinous to the Chinese population.

By the end of 1944, Lan's consistently negative portrayals of colonial society were no longer ignored by the censors. The police dispatched two investigators, one Japanese and one Chinese, from the Arts Department to question the couple, twice (Lan "Xi" 92). Lan was grilled over her relationship with the editors of the capital city Xijing's *Qingnian bao* (Youth Herald), the inspirations behind her writings, and the nature of her political beliefs; Hu was interrogated at the same time. In addition to these overt intimidation tactics, their mail was tampered with and seized. Often journals in which she published were intercepted *en route* from the publishers. Her own fears for her future augmented her mother's pleading for Lan to abandon her writing career. In late 1944, in the final months of Manchukuo, with less publication opportunities, and their income plummeting, Lan quit writing and resumed teaching. While it is impossible to know her in-class activities, the critical stance that dominated her literary production must also have influenced her work as a professional educator.

The news of the Japanese surrender and the immediate collapse of Manchukuo arrived in Qiqihaer on August 15, 1945, and shortly thereafter the Soviet Army entered the city.

Lan began to write again, to reveal the bitter colonial experience and to express hope for the future. From December 1945, Lan and Hu participated in political meetings over appropriate social

changes. In April 1946, the People's Liberation Army entered Qiqihaer and Lan's professional and personal lives were temporarily stabilised. Lan and Hu both participated in the political and social movements which accompanied the army's arrival. Among the soldiers that returned to Qiqihaer was Lan's former fiancé Cao Mengbu. Cao met with Lan, acknowledged their broken engagement, vouched for her

character with the local Communist Party authorities, and then stepped out of her life. In July, she was invited to teach literature at Qiqihaer's Municipal Women's Middle School as Hu began work at the Second Middle School. In 1949, one month after the People's Republic was formally established, Hu died. To overcome her grief, Lan Ling threw herself into her work. In 1950, she joined the Communist Party and at the end of the year was transferred to Shenyang to write for, and edit, various journals including *Dongbei jiaoyu* (Northeast Education) and *Jiaoshi bao* (Educator's Paper). In the autumn of 1954, she was transferred to Beijing to edit the journal *Renmin jiaoyu* (The People's Education). There, she met and married Qiu Jingshan, a Soviet-trained intellectual who subsequently held high positions in the Foreign Languages Press; they remained married until his death in 1997.

For the most part, the political storms of the Maoist era passed Lan by. As other writers of the occupation period faced extreme persecution for their activities, a low profile combined with well-placed connections allowed her to raise her family in relative peace. Since 1978, with increasing attention to literature of the occupation, some of Lan's and Hu's works have been republished. In the 1980s, she continued to work as an editor for middle-school literature and as a vice-copy editor for *Renmin jiaoyu*. Lan's work was featured in the 1986 collection of Manchurian women writers' fiction, *Changye yinghuo* (Fireflies in the Night). She retired in 1986, to focus on family, archival work, and painting. Lan died in Beijing in 2003.

During the Japanese occupation, Lan Ling published over a dozen novellas and short stories, forty poems, dozens of essays, and a play. Her writing style was

*Social realism was a popular literary device that enabled critical Chinese and Japanese reflection on Manchukuo life, but while male writers were often incarcerated and occasionally executed, women like Lan Ling continued to forge careers by detailing the tragic nature of local women's lives.*

lauded by contemporaries, and compared to that of famed fellow Manchurian writer, Xiao Hong (Wu 27-8). Lan's legacy sheds important light on Japanese colonial culture in Manchukuo. Recently, Japanese scholar Yamamuro Shin'ichi described Manchukuo as "an Auschwitz state or a concentration-camp state, more than just a puppet state" (4). In many ways, Yamamuro is correct: Manchukuo had a ponderous

military presence, and food restrictions, violence, and a racist regulatory framework dominated local Chinese life. But Lan's legacy suggests that not all of Manchukuo's Chinese subjects were equally oppressed. Verily, Lan's work bears similarities with that of other prolific Chinese women writers in Manchukuo: they were able to write critical material for most of the occupation period – a literature that was downplayed, or at times even celebrated, by officialdom. Social realism was a popular literary device that enabled critical Chinese and Japanese reflection on Manchukuo life, but while male writers were often incarcerated and occasionally executed, women like Lan Ling continued to forge careers by detailing the tragic nature of local women's lives. Contemporary writers Zhu Ti and her husband Li Zhengzhong have since argued that Manchukuo's Chinese women writers were empowered by official misogyny that for much of the occupation dismissed anti-patriarchal writings as inconsequential, therefore sparing them the close scrutiny meted out to most male writers (468). Thus, Lan Ling was able to use her position to critique patriarchy and poverty in Manchukuo, and in turn became one of twentieth-century Qiqihaer's pre-eminent writers. Ironically, the misogynistic nature of Japanese colonial rule in Manchukuo allowed for the creation of a highly critical, Chinese feminist literature. In a characteristic self-effacing fashion, Lan once dismissed her Manchukuo literary production as "little reads" (Liang 2), but such dismissal belies the important contributions that Lan Ling's legacy has still to impart to our understanding of a highly complex historical period. ■

## End Notes

1. Lan Ling is the most popular pen name of Zhu Zhenhua. She also used the names Ah Hua and Li Suo.
2. Manchuria is used as the most common contemporary international term for the territory; the Northeast will be used in reference to the post-1945 period, when the term fell into wide disfavour.
3. A dumpling made of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves, especially eaten during the Dragon Boat Festival.

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