

### Dominique Tyl

Near the end of *Ancestral Leaves*, the author offers a “family photo” representing the Ye brothers in Beijing in 1984, with other members of the family that together comprise three generations. Ye Chen, Ye Duzheng’s granddaughter, who is also on the picture, represents the present open to the future. Present is also Yao Xiang, who is the sole member of the intermediary generation; she is the daughter of Ye Duruo, a sister of the Ye brothers, absent from the picture. On the back row, six Ye brothers; and in the front, the wife of two of them. One of the Ye brothers is known as Fang Shi. They were 15 children of Ye Chongzhi from his wife and two concubines. But the first child, a girl, is classified as “name unknown”, and was the only child of the wife. Both concubines produced 5 sons and 2 daughters each; some died in childhood. That largely overpasses the six brothers of the picture. In Table 3 (p.233) we count 8 sons, of whom 7 had children. So the next generation is comprised of 25 boys and girls. Fig. 20 (p.293) presents a family photo of Ye Fang (Dulian)’s family taken in 1982; there we find three girls, great-grand children of Ye Chongzhi. Ye Fang had 9 children, much more than his brothers.

Where have the daughters, 4 of them, of Ye Chongzhi gone? Go back to Table 2 (p.130). The ones called second, third, and fourth sisters have dates of birth and death with question marks; only the fifth is known to have been born in 1921, and was interviewed by the author in 1991 (p.130), and so on. A useful index helps readers who wish to spot one or the other actor in this family history, which stops with only very few mentions of the great-great grand children of Ye Chongzhi. Going to this ancestor of the Ye family, you discover what maybe one of the main motives of this very human history of a family from Ye Sheng’er (1307-1388) to today. The first family genealogy was written in 1488, and continues until we arrive at Ye Chongzhi, who was born in 1873, and who is introduced in the chapter 6, entitled “A Time of Transition”. Of course, much less is known of very ancient times; the second part (Republican China) is only slightly shorter than the first one (The Imperial Era), which covers centuries. The third part (The People’s Republic) is the longest, but not to the point of making it the focus of the whole book. This is the great merit of the work of J. W. Esherick, and makes his narrative, very well researched and documented, something special and rare.

The following sentence from preface is worth quoting: “We cannot fully understand large historical processes unless we appreciate their impact on individual lives. Conversely the small habits of personal and daily life help shape the larger society in which people live and determine the course of history.”

(p.xiv ) When presenting his book in various universities, in February 2011, Esherick chose “Family and the State in Modern China” as the theme for a lecture. The book here reviewed does not enter into a reflexive appreciation of the two ways of what could be labeled how macro and micro forces influence the shaping of society. It is more a descriptive narrative, simply written after extensive readings of genealogies of the Ye family and in depth interviews with, and precise records of member of this family, who are his in-laws. Esherick has not given a hand to help some of the Ye family to write their memoirs. His is mainly a sensitive account of what he has learned of the ancestors and from the persons he has met, or heard of, with no judgments. The reader is invited to think for himself. It is somehow raw material, but of a high quality that invites further reflection. For this reason the book is to be recommended for a wide variety of publics, including experts on Chinese history, people interested in China for one reason or another, as well as those who have not previously focused their attention on this country or its civilization, but who are curious to understand the actions and reactions of human beings in ever changing historical contexts.

Could readers be lost among so many characters along so many centuries? Actually, the author has succeeded in telling individual stories in clear, simple style. Readers are always gently taken one step further, as they want to know what happened to these people. There, personal choices are made clear, with acceptable reasons, even if you don't agree with them. Even Ye Lizhong, born Dushen, the last child, who became the black sheep of the family and who became an entertainer, is in the picture of the Ye brother of 1984. Again, no condemnation is given of anyone. More tragic destinies, like the life of Ye Duzhuang; glorious recognition, as is the case with Ye Duzheng, receiving national science and technology awards in 2006; more political careers, as exemplified by Fang Zhi (Ye Ducheng), party member at New China News Agency; academic careers; business ventures nearly every possible choice is presented. The author concludes with the thought that “they remain one family” (p.316); electronic communications serve to maintain contact across China or abroad.

There were 143 males in the lineage at the 19<sup>th</sup> generation (1873- 1930, Table 1, p. 27). Only a few of them and their descendants are recorded in the book. It is probable that, although a sense of belonging to the lineage may prove strong in China or for the family, distant relatives will not keep the same kind of contacts as the Ye Brothers have among themselves. Anyhow, Esherick's has elegantly and convincingly made his point in the preface, that is, major historical events can usefully be read at the level of the individual life, with all the consequences of decisive, personal choices prompted by circumstances.