



Rediscovering

A star in China, a student at Wellesley: Bing Xin sitting on a campus lawn in May 1925

Last summer, a delegation of Wellesley faculty traveled to Fuzhou, China, to pay tribute to one of the College's most distinguished alumnae. Among the first Chinese writers to use vernacular language, Bing Xin M.A. '26 helped to usher in a sea change in China's literary tradition during the early 20th century.

By Mishi Saran '90, Weiwei Chen '08, and Francie Latour

Bing Xin



IN 1923, a young woman from China boarded a ship in Shanghai, headed on a 15-day journey across the world. When she arrived in the city of Seattle, she was met by a special US government train that carried her and a group of Chinese students to destinations that spanned the American continent.

By the time the train pulled into Boston, Bing Xin—daughter of a military family, lover of the sea since her childhood in a coastal town, and, at 22 years old, already a celebrated writer in her homeland—found herself alone, the last of the students with whom she had traveled, as she made her way a little farther, to Wellesley College.

Homesick and gripped by loneliness, Bing Xin M.A. '26 looked for solace in the same place many Wellesley students had before her: Lake Waban. The water, and her Wellesley experience, would come to hold a unique place in the heart of a poet and essayist who would become one of the most prolific and best-known women writers of 20th-century China. “The sea is like

my mother, and the lake is like my friend,” she wrote in a 1923 essay, giving Waban a new name in Chinese. “None of my beloved ones are here so only her—the daughter of the sea—can grant me comfort. Lake Waban, I thereby call her *Weibing*.” The name literally means “the lake that consoles Bing.”

Last June, a full 86 years later, a delegation of Wellesley College faculty and alumnae made Bing Xin’s journey in reverse, traveling from Boston to Shanghai, then driving through rain-drenched mountains to the author’s hometown, the coastal city of Fuzhou. There, they gathered to pay tribute at the Bing Xin Literature Museum, the only known museum dedicated to a Wellesley alumna, and one of only a few in China dedicated to a single literary figure. The story of the visit led the front pages of newspapers in Fuzhou, a city of over 7 million people. And the museum, which attracts 30,000 visitors per year, shut its doors to the public for three days in honor of the delegation’s arrival.

“In some sense, we were meeting Bing Xin again, almost a century later, across the Pacific Ocean,” says math professor Charles Bu, who organized the trip that was several years in the making. “I think the time had come to pay tribute to this alumna.”

The writer’s daughter, Wu Qing, now 72, was there to greet the delegation from her mother’s alma mater, clearly moved by the distant group’s arrival. A retired English professor and activist, she led the group through the exhibition halls and told the story of her mother’s life and legacy, which spanned nearly a century, from 1900 to 1999.

“She always taught me to love life and love people. No living thing can survive without love,” Wu said later in an interview. “[Her] most quoted phrase, ‘With love, you have everything,’ is the core of her philosophy.”

It was a legacy that produced at least 30 books and many more collections of writing. In her 99 years, Bing Xin not only broke barriers for women in China, but helped usher in a sea change in the country’s literary tradition. Born at the dawn of a new century, her life perfectly bracketed China’s tumultuous modern history.

“She was one of the earliest Chinese writers to actually publish in the vernacular language, and for women writers, she probably was *the* first,” says Jin Feng, an associate professor of Chinese at Grinnell College, who places Bing Xin as one of the influential writers of China’s literary revolution. Part of the broader,



Bing Xin (top, second from left) performing in a Japanese play with Japanese students in November 1924 and (bottom, fourth from right) standing on the steps of Tower Court, with fellow Asian students and a professor

anti-imperialist May Fourth Movement in 1919, the revolution rebelled against classical Chinese literature, which was written in a language as divorced from the vernacular as Latin is from modern European languages. “Bing Xin was part of the intelligentsia that wanted to introduce and promote modern ideas and write in the language of everyday life,” Feng adds.

In that new language, Bing Xin articulated an appeal for humanism and a deeply personal love for her fellow woman and man. Her

philosophy of love was unwavering, even though it would later be criticized and rejected by more radical peers as feminine, elitist, and naive.

If her impact in China was groundbreaking, her contributions to Wellesley were also considerable, and her influence is still felt. Mingwei Song, assistant professor of East Asian Languages and Literatures at Wellesley, has taught Bing Xin’s work in his classes. A Chinese national, Song says he first heard the name “Wellesley” at age 11, in the pages of a 1923

Bing Xin essay that was, and still is, required reading for Chinese schoolchildren. “She describes the colors—green, red, yellow, white, reflected in the lake,” he says. “She sees the moon over the lake and recalls the same moon in China.” With such vivid imagery, Bing Xin introduced Wellesley’s campus to 1920s China, and generations of Chinese women learned about Wellesley because of her. A recent Chinese student sent her translations of Bing Xin’s poems as part of her college application, and a number of others have mentioned her influence.

“Childhood is the truth of dreams, is the dream of truth, is the tearful smile of reminiscence,” Bing Xin once wrote in a poem.

BING XIN WAS BORN Xie Wanying on Oct. 5, 1900, the first of four children of a Fuzhou naval family. At the dawn of a new century, modern ideas were seeping into China: calls for government reform and more freedoms for women, a loosening of old, rigid hierarchies, and a burgeoning belief in science and technology.

In that climate, Xie Baozhang and his wife raised young Wanying. They did not bind their daughter’s feet—still a common practice then. Her father treated her like a son, dressing her in boy’s clothes and encouraging her love of nature and the outdoors. Xie taught his daughter such skills as horseback riding and shooting, and introduced her as “both my son and my daughter” during banquets and parties.

But it was Wanying’s relationship with her mother, Yang Fuci, that would have an even greater imprint on her life and literary philosophy. According to Brown University professor Lingzhen Wang in her book *Personal Matters: Women’s Autobiographical Practice in Twentieth-Century China*, Yang was not only well-educated and well-read, but she taught her daughter how to read when she was four years old, and became the first reader and editor of her precocious daughter’s early works. Her mother’s abiding love would come to anchor Bing Xin’s literary philosophy.

By 1907, three years after young Wanying moved with her family to the coastal port city of

Yantai, she began to read voraciously, both classical Chinese texts and foreign works translated into Chinese. She tried her hand at writing, both in the classical Chinese style and in *baihua*, literally “plain language,” the vernacular speech that was still regarded as lowbrow by the literary establishment, and would not be championed by the literary vanguard for another decade.

It was in Yantai too, that Wanying fell in love with the vastness of the sea. Throughout her life, the open water worked as a powerful metaphor, injecting her ideas of universal love with a mystical, almost childlike quality. “The sea is like my mother,” she once wrote, “. . . deep and wide, immense and silent. Her love is mysterious and grand, and my love for her is admiring and humble.”

AT AGE 14, Wanying entered the Bridgman Academy for Girls in Beijing. The city’s earliest Western-style school, it was founded by a Christian missionary, and it exposed the budding writer to Western ideas of Christian love and humanism that would also heavily influence her writing. Then, in 1918, Wanying entered a missionary college, which was later incorporated into Yenching University.

It was the year of Allied victory in World War I—a victory in which China should have shared after it joined Britain, France, the US, and other Allied powers and sent troops to join the war effort in 1917. China had entered into the alliance under the condition that Chinese provinces then under German control would be returned to Chinese authority. But at the 1919 Versailles Treaty, the Allied powers transferred sovereignty of one of the most strategic and symbolically important provinces—Shandong peninsula, the birthplace of Confucius—not to China, but to Japan.

The diplomatic failure unleashed massive unrest among China’s students, intellectuals, and progressive middle class. On May 4, 1919, thousands of university students staged major demonstrations in Beijing that spread to Shanghai and other cities, triggering a nationalist



A young Bing Xin in an undated photo, and above, Bing Xin at Wellesley in 1924 holding a traditional Chinese string instrument, the yueqin



WELLESLEY COLLEGE ARCHIVES

‘Upon mentioning Wellesley, I cannot help but drop tears of gratitude and excitement.’

Bing Xin M.A. ’26

struggle for social and cultural reform. The May Fourth Movement became a seminal turning point that radicalized China’s political left and spurred the rise of communism.

“It was the thunder of the May Fourth Movement that ‘shocked’ me onto the path of writing,” Bing Xin later wrote.

INSPIRED BY THE POLITICAL winds, at the age of 19, she wrote five short stories that were published in the *Morning Post*, a daily newspaper.

The first two stories, “Two Families” and “Personal Grief,” explored the tensions between family ties and nationalism, and the struggle by China’s youth to break away from old-world traditions and authority. They also saw the birth of Wanying’s pen name, “Bing Xin.” Literally translated as “ice heart,” it alluded to a classical Chinese poem about the pure soul and clean heart of a poet. Two years after creating her new literary persona, Bing Xin would publish her most famous short story, “*Chaoren*,” or “Superman.”

It is the story of a student of Nietzsche’s writings who is determined to be totally

Below, a Wellesley student visited Bing Xin at a local hospital in December 1923 as she recovered from tuberculosis. Right, the Bing Xin Literature Museum in Fuzhou, China, which includes two acres of exhibition space, courtyards, and a park.



‘Only by mixing Chinese and Western cultures were we able to produce such a great writer as Bing Xin.’ Wang Binggen, director of the Bing Xin Literature Museum

BING XIN LITERATURE MUSEUM

self-sufficient and untouched by human emotion. But when a young neighborhood boy injures his leg and starts to moan from pain during the night, it triggers the protagonist’s memories of his mother, and a new love for his fellow man.

The allegory captured the dilemma of a generation drawn to Western ideologies but still bound by a familial past, and offered a vision that rejected ideology in favor of humanism and an ideal of universal love. And it synthesized the author’s formative influences: her childhood, the Bible, Western humanism, and the work of a kindred author, literary giant and Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore.

In 1923, Bing Xin published two collections of short, free-verse poems, “A Myriad Stars” and “Spring Water.” As she began to cross over several genres—poetry, short stories, and essays—a distinctive style emerged that became widely imitated; soon, it was dubbed the “Bing Xin style.” Blending elements of classical poetry with the simplicity of the vernacular, Bing Xin crafted words that “flew into the hearts of young people,” according to one of her May Fourth-era peers, the writer Shen Congwen.

BUT IF BING XIN was a force to be reckoned with, she was also deeply self-effacing and ambivalent about success. Consider the portrait drawn by Grace Boynton, a missionary

and Wellesley alumna from the class of 1912 who became Bing Xin’s teacher at Yenching University, mentor, and lifelong friend.

In a journal entry later published in 1989 by the Chinese-English translation magazine *Renditions*, Boynton described meeting her pupil in 1921, with the faintest knock at the door and a tiny figure who slipped into her study.

“She was barely five feet tall and . . . stood with a bowed head, in an attitude of deep respect until I asked her to sit down. A half hour passed before she rose to go, and I still did not know why she had come,” Boynton wrote. When Bing Xin next returned, “she got up her courage to explain herself further . . . She had been publishing verse for two years, and from the beginning had found herself embarrassingly popular. Her readers, mostly university students, seethed with curiosity about her, to her genuine distress. . . .”

Two years later, at Boynton’s urging, Bing Xin made the trip to Wellesley to earn her master’s degree in English literature. It was a difficult journey for a young woman far from home: Shortly after her arrival, in the winter of 1923–24, she contracted tuberculosis and was sent to a hospital in the Blue Hills in Milton, Mass., where she remained for six months before she was cured.

When she returned to campus, Bing Xin’s attachment to Wellesley deepened. She translated Chinese poems for her dormmates and sat with her thesis advisor for afternoon teas. Her friendship with a Wellesley classmate, Stasia Brill Ramage ’26, extended to the next generation of both families. And her Wellesley ties

reached back to China, where she and fellow alumna Mayling Soong Chiang ’17, the wife of General Chiang Kai-shek, met in 1940 to launch a project for women’s literacy.

“Upon mentioning Wellesley, I cannot help but drop tears of gratitude and excitement,” Bing Xin said in a recording she taped for her daughter.

WHILE ON WELLESLEY’S campus, Bing Xin’s writing for children flourished. She had written for children prior to arriving in the US; the genre allowed her a forum away from literary peers who increasingly promoted nationalist ideology. Between 1923 and ’26, she penned more than two dozen essays in the *Morning Post* that were later published as a book, *Letters to Young Readers*. According to *The Dictionary of Literary Biography: Modern Chinese Fiction Writers, 1900–1949*, the book was reprinted 40 times in the next 10 years, marking the beginning of a series of *Letters* collections and cementing her place as a leading writer for young readers.

In her time in the US, Bing Xin would also meet and fall in love with Dartmouth alumnus Wu Wenzao, a pioneering sociology scholar in China. The couple married in 1929 at Yenching University, where they taught as professors; in the 1930s, they had three children together,

including their youngest, daughter Wu Qing. By the time she was 9, Wu said, her mother's humanist philosophy had already burned an imprint on her psyche. It was 1946, after the end of World War II, and her family had moved to Japan after her father took a diplomatic post in Tokyo.

"I hated the Japanese," she says. "I gathered [my Chinese friends] to bully Japanese kids near by . . . My mother found out and she ordered me to stop it right away. She said, 'Do you know how much ordinary Japanese people suffered during the war? Do you know how much their women and children suffered because of the war? You need to learn that no government can 100 percent represent the country's people.' That totally changed my view of nationalism."

Indeed, in Japan as well as in China, Bing Xin promoted peace and women's rights. When she was named the first female professor of Tokyo University, she began to teach anti-war Chinese poems.



UT BY THE 1940s, the Bing Xin style, and Bing Xin herself, were falling out of favor. Her embrace of Christian- and Western-influenced notions of humanism ran directly counter to China's rising and Marxist-rooted communist party, which took power in 1949. "[Her peers] talked about class struggle and oppression, but she didn't focus on that in her work," says Grinnell's Jin Feng. "Writing on love and nature, this was not exactly class-struggle material."

By 1966, when Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution erupted, Bing Xin and her husband were sent to labor "re-education" camps along with scores of Chinese intellectuals, and her family was scattered across China.

But her steely spirit never flagged. More than a decade after the Cultural Revolution, from her sickbed at Beijing Hospital, Bing Xin picked up her pen and wrote these words of herself

'She always taught me to love life and love people. No living thing can survive without love. [Her] most quoted phrase, 'With love, you have everything,' is the core of her philosophy.'

Wu Qing, daughter of Bing Xin

and her young audience: "Life starts at 80, and I will try my best to go forward with my 'little friends.'" She wrote yet another book, and at the age of 95, she donated royalties from her complete works to a training center for rural women in Beijing. She would live for another four years.

In 1997, two years before Bing Xin's death and after a major push to revive her place among China's esteemed authors, the Bing Xin Literature Museum opened its doors. The museum spans two acres of exhibition space, courtyards, sculpture, multimedia displays, and a research center, and includes a section on the author's time at Wellesley, with original manuscripts, photos, and furnishings, including the steam trunk Bing Xin brought with her on her voyage to the US and objects she kept on her desk while at the College.

There are also guest books, where thousands of schoolchildren and other tourists have left their impressions and names. It is here that members of Wellesley's delegation left their own notes of remembrance, including this one from the head of the delegation, Associate Dean of the College Joanne Berger-Sweeney '79:

"Whether describing the view of an ocean from a cliff or describing farm machinery, Bing Xin made the words dance off the page," Berger-Sweeney wrote. The images Bing Xin conjured in writing "are as vivid as a photograph." 

Mishi Saran '90 is a writer based in Shanghai. Weiwei Chen '08 is taking what she calls "a gap year" in China, doing volunteer work related to the environment. Francie Latour is an associate editor of Wellesley magazine.

Very few English translations of Bing Xin's work exist. You can read one story, however, at <http://www.wellesley.edu/Alum/bingxin.html>.



In June, a visit to the Bing Xin Literature Museum by a Wellesley delegation of faculty and alumnae led the front page of local newspapers. Members of the delegation posed before a statue representing Bing Xin and the young people of China.



LIU DONGFANG, BING XIN LITERATURE MUSEUM