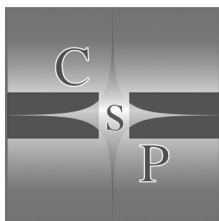


Chinese Women Writers in Diaspora

Chinese Women Writers in Diaspora:
Jung Chang, Xinran, Hong Ying, Anchee Min,
Adeline Yen Mah

By

Amy Tak-yee Lai



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To my parents, and all those who love me.

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PROLOGUE

MORE WILD SWANS

Fearful, as though she were about to do something wrong, one moonlight night, she crept down to the garden, and through the long avenues into the lonely road leading to the churchyard. She saw sitting on one of the broadest tombstones a number of ugly old witches. They took off their ragged clothes as if they were going to bathe, and digging with their long lean fingers into the fresh grass, drew up the dead bodies and devoured the flesh.¹

— Hans Christian Andersen

The mention of Chinese women writers in diaspora immediately brings to mind Jung Chang 張戎 (b. 1952) and her *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1991). This controversial book, which won the 1992 NCR book award and the 1993 British Book of the Year Award, and has been translated into thirty languages and sold ten million copies over the world, has also been officially banned in China, the motherland of its author. Stephen Thompson describes it as “a very important book both for Chinese history and for oral history,” as it “bridges the huge cultural divide between Chinese and Western culture in a way that few books have done.”² According to Howard G. Chua-Eoan, “Taken in pieces, Chang’s narrative can be prosaic. But in its entirety, the author achieves a Dickensian tone with detailed portraits and intimate remembrances, with

¹ Andersen, *The Wild Swans*.

² Thompson, “Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*,” 216.

colorful minor characters and intricate yet fascinating side plots.”³ It is not surprising, as Lisa Allardice recalls, that the book is not “just a popular success appealing mainly to women,” but also acclaimed by literary heavyweights such as Martin Amis and J.G. Ballard.⁴

Wild Swans tells the stories of three generations of Chinese women in twentieth-century China – Jung Chang, her mother and grandmother – spanning from the warlord period, the civil war intervened by the chaos of the Japanese invasion, to the Communist period. It depicts grandmother’s first marriage as concubine to a warlord, General Xue in 1924, just before Chiang Kaishek’s *Kuomintang* (The Nationalist Party) came into power; after General Xue dies in 1933, the grandmother and her new born daughter escape from the General’s palace—from concubinage and from the prospect of a slave to General Xue’s wife—to travel back home in Lulong. After she has grown up, Chang’s mother runs away from home to enrol in a teacher’s college, in her attempt to secure a self-reliant life; she later marries a young Communist who works his way up to an official in Chengdu.

The narrative is then taken up by Jung Chang who, born in 1952, spends most of her childhood with her siblings during that time when their parents dedicate their lives to the Communist Party, before the Cultural Revolution in 1966 put both of them under suspicion. Jung’s father, who regards loyalty to the Party as more important than his family, is accused of betraying Mao; over the next six years he and his wife are first detained as political prisoners, then attacked and threatened at denunciation meetings. Chang herself, subject to numerous trials to testify to her faith in Communism, becomes a Red Guard; she later drops out of the guard, labors at work camps in the countryside, and becomes a barefoot doctor, a steelworker, and an electrician. At the close of the book, Chang recalls in an uplifting tone how Chairman Mao’s regime came to an end when he died in 1976, and she was allowed to finish college, and even won a scholarship to study in England.

Elisabeth J. Croll (1996) studies how Chinese autobiographies in the twentieth century written by women writers tend to reconstruct narratives around remembered moments which gendered their experiences and memories of childhood, and which documented their journeys from girlhood and womanhood. These moments can accordingly be grouped into three clusters: “moments uniquely female en route to ‘Becoming a

³ Chua-Eoan, “The Art of Memory—*Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*.”

⁴ Allardice, “This Book Will Shake the World.”

woman” and compulsory in pre-revolutionary twentieth-century China, which remind women that they are “female” and subject to gender-specific expectations, hence also leading to the confinement and concealment of the female body;⁵ moments common to both male and female childhood but gender specific in their consequences, such as gendered naming practices and the much celebrated birth of a boy, as compared to the birth of a girl;⁶ and moments which become memorable for female precisely because they cross gender categories, good examples being cross-dressing and activities normally for males.⁷ Chang’s book is no exception, as the author reconstructs her story and the stories of the other two women around these moments: for instance, the tortures of footbinding suffered by her grandmother falls into the first cluster, while her overseas education belongs to the third cluster. Croll adds that these stories very often become “counter-narratives” in which the rebellious narrators do not think, feel, or act as they are “supposed to.”⁸ Despite the different lives and experiences of the three women in *Wild Swans*, their talents and strong determination not only enable them to survive those turbulent periods, but actually make them to outshine their male counterparts.

Yi-lin Yu (2005) cites a number of critics to explore the matrilineal narrative in women’s autobiographies, *Wild Swans* included. Marianne Hirsch (1989) recognises a shift from the paternal, as formulated in the classic Freudian model, to the maternal in her study of selected women’s texts published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and she calls these “feminist family romances,” where, owing to the psychoanalytic feminist’ preoccupation with a pre-Oedipal mother-child bond, the male position is relegated to the secondary. Audre Lorde (1993) initiates a new triangular structure, where the father figure is replaced by the grandmother,⁹ just as Naomi Ruth Lowinsky (1990) contends that the motherline is not a linear structure, but a continuously evolving one that connects one generation to the other and the past to the future, and she uses “looping” to describe women’s pattern of telling stories from their motherline, traversing different times and places and drawing interesting

⁵ Croll, “Gendered Moments and Inscripted Memories: Girlhood in Twentieth-century Chinese Autobiography,” 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122-3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 125-6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ Yu, *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing*, 65-6.

interconnections among generations.¹⁰

As Yu illuminates, though the life stories in *Wild Swans* are written in an apparently objective, third-person narrative, Chang's detailed descriptions equip the reader with their subjective experiences.¹¹ Moreover, there is a progress in her matrilineal narrative, so that "the life of a daughter repeatedly departs from and revises the life her mother is leading"—Just as Chang's grandmother has bound feet, and cannot possibly lead the life of her daughter as an educated and devout communist officer, Chang's mother is trapped in her stout loyalty to Chinese communism, and unlike Chang, she cannot truly escapes from her wasted and betrayed life under Red China.¹² Along this progressing narrative is the ambivalence towards Chang's father, a man of complete integrity who sticks to his communist belief even at the risk of his life, but a husband and father who readily sacrifices his family's needs for the benefit of the party.¹³ Chang's bonds to her grandmother and her mother are far stronger. After her grandmother dies, she blames herself for not taking good care of her, and even takes a vow of not establishing any relationship with men in the future.¹⁴ Equally, if not more, impressive is Chang's visit to, and anguished departure from her mother in the camp: her mother's insistence on running to the spot where she and her daughter have been sitting together even after her bowl of round dumplings—a symbol of family reunion in Chinese culture—is gone indicates her longing for the reconnection.¹⁵

During Jung Chang's visit to Hong Kong in October 2006, in promotion of the Chinese version of her new book *Mao: The Unknown Story* (2005), she explained that she had not encountered as many difficulties as expected in her research on Mao Zedong, not only because a lot of people who knew Mao Zedong personally had been waiting all these years to voice their genuine opinions about him, but also because a lot of them had read *Wild Swans*, and therefore had strong confidence in her dedication to historical accuracy.¹⁶ Even some Chinese critics believe that Chang does offer a little-known, but truthful story about Mao—a story

¹⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹¹ Ibid., 88.

¹² Ibid., 90.

¹³ Ibid., 91.

¹⁴ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵ Ibid., 92-3.

¹⁶ Jin, "Jung Chang's Visit to Hong Kong," 59.

debunking the myth about this political figure that for many decades has colonised the minds of many Chinese people, hence a valuable contribution to knowledge and a catalyst in their spiritual liberalisation.¹⁷

Interestingly enough, aside from disclosing to the reader the “absolute selfishness and irresponsibility [that] lay at the heart of Mao’s outlook,”¹⁸ Chang’s new book illuminates his chauvinism and oppression of women on various occasions. For instance, she emphasises that he “loved” his mother “with an intensity he showed towards no one else,”¹⁹ but then overrides this by stating that “On her deathbed, the person who took priority in Mao’s consideration was himself, not his mother, nor did he hesitate to say so.”²⁰ “On Women’s Independence,” (1919) he claimed that “women can do as much physical labour as men. It’s just that they can’t do such work during childbirth.” Dismissing the physical differences between men and women, he advocated women’s independence to his own advantage, using it as an excuse for him to shirk his responsibilities for his wives, and it is not surprising that he put women to heavy manual labour after he had come to power.²¹ Chang calls him “the cause of the death of his second wife,” who was executed in 1930 “as a result of his attacking Changsha, where she was living,” for reasons that were “entirely to do with his drive for personal power.”²² In the same vein, Chang contends that he was “largely responsible” for the repeated and irreversible mental breakdowns of his third wife, Gui-yuan, who died in 1984. Furthermore, she asserts that even Mao’s last wife, Jiang Qing, who is often thought of as the evil women who manipulated Mao, “never originated policy” in reality, but “was always Mao’s obedient servant, from the time of their marriage in 1938.”²³ He even went so far as to offer her up as a trade-off to the “opposition” that emerged near the end of his life: in return for guaranteeing his own safety while he was alive, he promised to his enemies that after he died, they could do as they pleased with her and her group of cronies.²⁴

Notwithstanding the general esteem for Chang, especially among the

¹⁷ Xu, “Mao Zedong: A Story Which Must Be Known,” 61.

¹⁸ Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 633.

²³ *Ibid.*, 622.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 633.

middle-aged Chinese who suffered during the Cultural Revolution,²⁵ her works have also invited more than a fair share of severe attacks and bad criticisms. Harriet Evans, for instance, contends that *Wild Swans* merely focuses on the experience of the privileged urban elite, and therefore does not tell the reader what other memoirs, similarly written from a position of privilege, have not already revealed.²⁶

In a much more recent essay, Letty Chen (2006) categorises *Wild Swans* as one of those “memoirs of victimhood,” which feed the West’s perennial fascination of the Orient by offering an unbalanced and uncritical examination of the authors’ personal and their nation’s traumatic past, which typically ends with finding salvation and happiness in the West. Chang engages with “two common mnemonic practices among Chinese diasporic writers” to fashion “a new discourse of self-Orientalisation”: “self-victimization” (capitalising on the authenticity of the suffering “I”) and “self-exoticisation” (emphasising abjection to create an eternal incomprehensibility that characterises the exotic Orient). In particular, she takes the “schizophrenic approach” of splitting herself into two identities with different narratological functions, enabling her to be a spectator of the horrendous historical events, while still maintaining her role as a victim of those events, hence giving her both moral authority (as someone who is in line with history and justice) and authenticity (as someone who actually experienced the trauma). The inconsistency of her identity is revealed by her role as the miraculously enlightened critic-historian, which contrasts with her being the frightened, unthinking, and submissive woman in China. This schizophrenic split is paralleled by her equally dubious treatment of China: a sympathy-worthy “China” to strengthen her self-victimisation strategy, and a vicious and irrational “China” to help her exoticise suffering.

Chen’s insightful account of *Wild Swans* nonetheless is not readily applicable to the works of other Chinese writers in diaspora. Indeed, in her *Writing Chinese: Reshaping Chinese Cultural Identity* (2006), Chen reminds us that the word “diaspora” means “the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions,” and the core of a diasporic identity lies in the “hybridity” and “creolisation” of intermixing races, cultures and languages. As Robin Cohen cautions us, the term hybridity tends to be inappropriately used, and instead of “denot[ing] the evolution of new, dynamic, mixed cultures,” “hybrids” are

²⁵ Jin, 60.

²⁶ Evans, “Hot-house History.”

inclined to “sterility and uniformity,” signifying a completely opposite meaning to its common usage; he therefore suggests a more positive term, “syncretism,”²⁷ referring to “the product of two (or more) forces that are reduceable to neither,” accentuating “the positive and energetic aspects of the process of transculturation and the equal but different elements that the various historical period and forces have contributed in forming the most post-colonial condition.”²⁸ In artistic creation, true hybridity, or syncretism, involves juxtaposing different cultural artifacts, critically imitating, appropriating, and fusing Western cultural images with local images. In the case of Chinese women writers in diaspora, who write in the intersection of various forces such as race and gender, such syncretism poses a counter-hegemony to the continual (neo)colonial practices of the West, as well as the menacing presences of the patriarchy and the masculinist state power.

This book studies four Chinese women writers currently living in the United States and England, whose works have been popularly received—and in many cases, highly controversial—but have received little scholarly attention. Xinran 欣然 (her full name Xue Xinran 薛欣然) (b.1958) is the author of *The Good Women of China* [*Zhongguo de haonürenmen* 中國的好女人們, 2002] and *Sky Burial* [*Tianzang* 天葬, 2004], both of which were autobiographical works originally written in Chinese, before getting translated into English and other languages and sold all over the world. “Chapter One: Self and Other” will study how she constructs her autobiographical self in relation to the selves of her fellow Chinese women, which reveals the limitations suffered by writers from elite backgrounds, yet illuminates how these writers can produce works that do not necessarily conform to the “Wild Swan model.” Hong Ying 虹影 (her full name Chen Hong Ying 陳虹影) (b.1962), one of the most controversial, and also the most prolific writers from Mainland China, has won multiple literary prizes over the year and has got many of her works translated into various languages. “Chapter Two: Cycles of Return” adopts the conceptual framework of the eternal return to study her works, in order to unravel how Western philosophical ideas and the Western society’s emphasis on woman’s body mingle with Taoism and Buddhism in her depiction of women’s journeys against oppression.

²⁷ Cohen, *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*, 131; cited in Chen, *Writing Chinese: Reshaping Chinese Cultural Identity*, 24.

²⁸ Ashcroft, Griffins and Tiffins, *Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, 229; cited in Chen, 24.

While Xinran and Hong Ying currently live in London, Anchee Min and Adeline Yen Mah reside in the U.S. Anchee Min 閔安琪 (b.1957), like Jung Chang, became a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution, and was even recruited by Jiang Qing's opera troupe as a potential actress, before the fall of the Gang of the Four and her flight to U.S. "Chapter Three: Actress on Stage" testifies to the impact of the opera on her life, as it explores how various theatrical conventions, both Western and Chinese, infiltrate her autobiographical and fictional narratives, and how images of theatre and theatricality are tied with the theme of female emancipation. Adeline Yen Mah 馬嚴君玲 (b.1937) spent her childhood and adolescence in China, obtained a degree in medicine in England, before going to the United States to work as a physician; her memoir, which sold over one million copies worldwide, prompted her to quit her medical career and become a full-time writer. "Chapter Four: Happy Ever After" studies the appropriation of Western fairy tales in her works, which are suffused with an aura of childlike fantasy, but which articulate serious and profound messages pertaining to feminism and Chinese cultural identity.

Peter Caws (1994) stresses the importance of the relation between the self and the world at large in identity formation: "Identity, psychologically as well as logically, is a reflexive relation, a relation of myself to myself, but it can be a mediated relation: I relate to myself through my interaction with others and with the world."²⁹ The following chapters will explore how the authors attempt not only to revive their native cultures in the articulation of their female voices, but during this process, also build a dialogical relationship with the world at large, as they piece together some of the fragments of contemporary Chinese women, be they living in China or abroad.

To justify Jung Chang's contribution to female autobiography, this preface ends by bringing in Christian Hans Andersen's well-known fairy tale that bears a very similar title, *The Wild Swans*. In this popular tale, princess Eliza, who is cast out of the palace by her wicked stepmother and later redeemed by the handsome prince of another country, nonetheless has to steal out of the palace into the graveyard at late night—she must gather enough materials for the clothes of her brothers who have been turned by the stepmother into eleven wild swans, so that they can resume their human form. In a rather interesting way, her nightly endeavours, which are mistaken for those of a witch, endow her with a life of wild adventures,

²⁹ Caws, "Identity: Cultural, Transcultural, and Multicultural," 378.

but the success of her task, the metamorphoses of her brothers back into human beings, and her marriage to the prince, puts her back in a new palace. This palace might turn into a prison, and her very self might deteriorate into something close to her stepmother's. Her domestication is mirrored by that of her brothers, who are spared the danger of falling into the wild sea, but are finally invited back to the court, a place not of comfort, but of intrigues and corruption.

It remains a mystery whether Jung Chang was inspired by Andersen's myth when she titled her book, but comparing the three generations of Chinese women to wild swans which, unlike those in the fairy tale, defy domestication, does testify to the strong feminist message in her work. Despite the limitations of the book, as addressed by numerous critics, it has evoked interest in the genre of Chinese female autobiography, and Chinese women writers who live and write between cultures. The "wild swans" does not become a confining model—it arouses general and scholarly interest in other "wild swans."

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CHAPTER ONE

SELF AND OTHER

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.¹

— Charles Taylor

Our current idea of China is terribly homogenous, based on the *Wild Swans* model, but intellectuals from good families aren't typical—the peasants are typical and Xinran has talked to them, so her book offers a much broader canvas.²

— Esther Tyldesley

In *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society* (1993), Lu Tonglin claims that Chinese women had long been

¹ Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 25.

² Translator of *The Good Women of China*, and co-translator with Julia Lovell of *Sky Burial*.

“silenced” by their society,³ as the numerous revolutions in the twentieth century, essentially “masculinist” in their aspirations and utilising the “salvation” of oppressed women as a political stratagem, could only “save Chinese women from the patriarchal society in a symbolic manner but returning them to the bottom rung of a new and equally patriarchal hierarchy.”⁴ Therefore, women writers who emerged in the literary scene in the 1970s and ‘80s in search of “individual self” and “female subjecthood” felt unsure about the positions from which they could speak, and their voice remained “problematic, dispersed and disturbing.”⁵ The end of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of self-acclaimed feminists, such as Wei Hui 衛慧, who are daring in their depictions of love and sex in contemporary China. As in her popular semi-autobiographical novel, *Shanghai Baby* [*Shanghai baobei* 上海寶貝, 1999], Wei Hui nonetheless adheres to the “China doll” construct, or that of the superficial, exotic Asian woman, in order to cater to Western and Westernised markets; authentic female voices which diverge from these stereotypes accordingly would have to find small publishers and a much smaller audience.⁶

Despite the popularity and high appraisal of Xinran’s 欣然 *The Good Women of China* [*Zhongguo de haonürenmen* 中國的好女人們, 2002] and *Sky Burial* [*Tianzang* 天葬, 2004], to date there has been no scholarly study of either of them. This is probably because they have generally been categorised as auto/biographical literature and social documentaries, appreciated more for the realistic portraits which they offer of Chinese women as well as their socio-cultural and historical backgrounds, than for the literary and aesthetic values which they are by no means lacking. This chapter aims to explore how the first-person narrator, or “I,” interacts with other Chinese female characters in genres that traverse fact and fiction. As such, it will pay particular attention to the narrative structures, which help to bring out the concepts of “sameness” and “difference” in the representation of female subjects.

The Good Women of China: Absorbing the “Good”

The Good Women of China is a collection of true stories gathered by Xinran when she worked as the host of *Words on the Night Breeze*, the

³ Lu, *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ Lyne, “Consuming Madame Chrysanthème: Loti’s ‘dolls’ to *Shanghai Baby*.”

first radio talk show in China. The program stemmed from her obsession with the question: “What is a woman’s life really worth in China?”⁷ after much persuasion and many meetings before getting approved at Henan Broadcasting, it ran from 1989 to 1995, first as a pre-recorded ten-minute slot subject to much editing and examination, and later in the form of hotline, enabling people to openly discuss such personal matters as family, gender and sexuality. As such, the program attempts to offer a realistic and multifaceted picture of Chinese women while fulfilling a therapeutic outlet for them, a large number of whom have lived through the chaos and general poverty in the early days of the Communist takeover and during the Cultural Revolution, to the post-Mao era and the mid-1990s, in a more liberal society with generally better living conditions.

The book is a significant biographical work about Chinese women. As Liz Stanley (1992) explains, most auto/biography is concerned with “great lives,”⁸ but the obsession with the “great and in/famous” would lead many gaps in history, and stories of “obscure” people are very often more significant historically.⁹ The artfulness of auto/biography becomes a concern for feminists, as those important enough to have written their own stories, or to have their stories being written, are infrequently women, except those who are “infamous,” “glamorous,” and those who are “stars” and/ or the wives of famous men.¹⁰ Describing the lives of ordinary women in Chinese history and labeling them as “good,” Xinran not only helps to fill the gaps in Chinese history, but questions the traditional Chinese standards of a “good woman,” which stipulate that she must be demure and gentle, a good housewife and a good lover, and must produce a son. If Xinran’s criteria of a good woman are not exactly obvious from her book, then at least she stated them clearly during one of her interviews: “If we don’t look down on ourselves, we are good. If we know how to love, how to give love, how to feel toward other people, then we are good.”¹¹

These good women, among others, include a girl whose only way of escaping from her sexually abusive father is to make herself sick so that

⁷ Lambert, “The Good Woman of Henan.”

⁸ Stanley, “On Feminism, Cultural Politics and Post/modern selves,” 4. Stanley’s book focuses on the Western scene, and what she mean by “great lives” refers to those of white middle and upper class men who have achieved success according to conventional standards.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹ Hong, “The Voice of the Good Women of China.”

she can stay at the hospital; a university student who, after receiving a kiss from her boyfriend and subsequently labeled a “bad woman” by her neighbor and parents, kills herself; a widow and caring mother who turns into a garbage collector so as to be close to his son, who is now an important government official and lives in the city; a woman trapped in a “family without feelings,” whose marriage was arranged by the Communist Party, and who has been used by her husband to prove his upright character, but with neither a wife’s rights nor a mother’s position; a woman with a lot of “feelings but no family,” who was forced to part with her lover during the revolution, only to realise that he has long married another women with three children when they meet again after 45 years; a Nationalist Party general’s daughter who, failing to flee to Taiwan, gets tortured by the Red Guards and villagers and loses her mind; a “fashionable woman” whose successful career is the result of her failed marriage and an unhappy romance; women in a far-off village whose only pleasure in life is the bowl of egg with water and sugar after they have given birth to a boy, and who typically have prolapsed wombs caused by the dry leaves which they use as sanitary napkins.

Xinran’s debut has received generally good reviews. Julia Lovell calls the book “gripping,” as it manages to catch the voices of those Chinese women “wonderfully.”¹² It should be noted that besides informing her reader of the circumstances in which she wrote the book, including her job at Henan Broadcasting, the difficulties which she encountered in her job and Westerners’ general misperception of Chinese women (“Prologue,” “My Journey towards the Stories of Chinese Women” and “Epilogue”), the author also includes her childhood episodes in “The Childhood I Cannot Leave Behind Me,” as well as the stories of her parents in “My Mother.” While she leaves out her divorce from the book,¹³ she does mention that she is a single mother who derives her “spirit” and “courage” from her son.¹⁴ Hence the book has strong autobiographical elements. Flora Drew appreciates the fact that Xinran, while interweaving her life with those of other women, does not over-sentimentalise her own predicament.¹⁵ However, Lisa Gee contends

¹² Lambert.

¹³ In her interview, Xinran said that many Chinese men do not treat women as “full human beings,” and she talked about her ex-husband, who thought he respected her, but who never believed women had the same value and spirit as men do (Lambert).

¹⁴ Xinran, *The Good Women of China*, 1.

¹⁵ Lambert.

that the book “doesn’t quite come off” for two reasons. First, the mediation of all the stories through Xinran, and then through translation, means that the “individuality of each woman’s voice is much diminished,” and Xinran’s own comments on the stories, as well as her immediate reactions on hearing them, are almost like telling the reader how they should respond.¹⁶ Second, mixing other women’s stories with her own autobiography—moving and interesting it is—makes herself “a heroine in other people’s life stories,” though such an effect, as Gee believes, is never intentional on the author’s part.¹⁷

Gee’s comment on Xinran’s relationship with the other women in her book deserves a close study, especially with respect to auto/biography and the nature of the “I” in this genre. As Liz Stanley argues, auto/biography claims to be realistic, premised on the referentiality of the “I” or the subject of biographical research, yet both are by nature “artful enterprises which select, shape, and produce a very unnatural product.”¹⁸ Not only is the biographer an “active agent” in constructing the subjects rather than merely representing them, but there is no “coherent, essentially unchanging and unitary self which can be referentially captured”;¹⁹ similarly, in autobiography, the “self” is construed as “something much more than an individual”: unique in one sense, it is closely enmeshed with the lives of others which offer it meanings.²⁰ That autobiographical selves are “deeply and irresolvably fractured”²¹ is augmented by the unrecoverable nature of the past, that there is no direct and unproblematic access to the past self or a succession of these selves.²² As memory is limited, fictive devices are necessary in reproducing and representing accounts of past lives, and all selves invoked in auto/biographies indeed become non-referential.²³

Critical theory offers further insights on the nature of the “I” in auto/biography, in cases where this “I” shares the world of the other characters. Roland Barthes (1977) writes of the “death of the author,” refusing to see a piece of writing as the unique product of a single, unique mind, but rather treating it as a piece of realist ideology that masks the

¹⁶ Gee, “*The Good Women of China*.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Stanley, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² *Ibid.*, 61.

²³ *Ibid.*, 62.

social production of ideas.²⁴ Brian McHale (1992) cites Barthes' "from work to text" to account for the nature of the "author" who does appear in the text.²⁵ Barthes explains what happens to the author when he (she) inserts or inscribes himself in his text:

It is not that the Author may not "come back" in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a "guest." If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheologica, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fiction but a fiction contributing to his work The word "bio-graphy" re-acquires a strong, etymological sense, at the same time as the sincerity of the enunciation ... becomes a false problem: the I which writes the text, it too, is never more than a paper-I.²⁶

Following Barthes, McHale describes the ontological barrier between an author and his fictional world as "absolute" and "impenetrable," and what the author does when he writes himself into the text, is to create a fictional character bearing his own name.²⁷

The fictionalisation and fictitiousness of the autobiographical self lead us to question the nature of autobiography itself. Estelle Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography* (1980) proposes the female tradition of autobiography in realist terms.²⁸ By contrast, Donna Stanton's *The Female Autography* (1984) rejects any "facile presumption of referentiality," and insists that feminism should explore the "graphing" of the "auto," or the creation of a textual self, to the exclusion of real life, or "bio," hence the replacement of autobiography with "autography."²⁹ The writing of autography, accordingly, becomes an act of "rebellion" and "self-assertion";³⁰ it also produces "a divided self," as the female author takes up "a phallic pen."³¹ The autography in itself becomes a Baudrillardian world, or an intertextual reality composed by representation,

²⁴ Ibid., 16.

²⁵ McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* studies the narrative structures in postmodernist fiction, but his ideas can lend special insights in reading auto/biographical texts.

²⁶ McHale, 205; Barthes's "from work to text" in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), 161.

²⁷ Ibid., 215.

²⁸ Stanley, 91.

²⁹ Ibid., 91-2.

³⁰ Ibid., 92.

³¹ Ibid., 93; Stanton, 13-4.

bearing little relation to the social and material world within which it is located.³²

It would be far too much to suspect that the stories collected in Xinran's book, including her own, are fabricated, and it would not be fair to claim that they are much-exaggerated versions of reality either. Nonetheless, except informing the reader that those are real stories, Xinran does not place so much emphasis on the reality of the stories, as on the difficulty for her to "relive" the stories and "order" her memories, so as to articulate those stories in the written form: "Reliving the stories of the women I had met had been painful, and it had been harder still to order my memories and find language adequate to express them."³³ She goes further into the arbitrariness of this process, by likening it to a journey to the past that takes many different routes, indicating the essential fluidity of memory and her view of the past as a construct: "When you walk into your memories, you are opening a door to the past; the road within has many branches, and the route is different every time."³⁴

How does Xinran construct her autobiographical "I," and how does she position this "I" in relation to her representation of other women? Though Xinran was persecuted during the Cultural Revolution owing to her wealthy family background, her life is yet a far cry from most of the women described in her book, owing to her hard work and other circumstantial factors. Thriving at the "Black School" set up for children whose parents had been denounced, she managed to enrol in a good secondary school; she later completed two degrees at one of those military schools reserved for China's elites, before studying law in the army's political department.³⁵ In 1988 she entered a highly competitive examination and became one of the fourteen candidates recruited in the broadcasting industry, and in 1989 she became the head of the evening broadcast team at Henan Broadcasting.³⁶

There is no doubt that Xinran's privileged position enabled her to open a talk show and later to write about the women who are less fortunate than her. While her superiority is obvious from her social and economic position, she indicates her superiority in terms of knowledge, including that of sex, compared with a lot of women who have suffered from sexual

³² Ibid., 93.

³³ Xinran, *The Good Women of China*, x.

³⁴ Ibid., x.

³⁵ Lambert.

³⁶ Ibid.

repression and ignorance for many years. She reminisces on how she still refused to hold hands with a male teacher at a bonfire party “for fear of getting pregnant”³⁷ when she was twenty-two years old, thereby indicating that she is no longer ignorant at the time she hosted the program and wrote the book. Nonetheless, her privileged position is deliberately and artfully subdued in other parts of the book, as is the distinction between the past and the present. In a narrative which is both autobiographical and biographical, she navigates between her life and the lives of other women, and sets up a series of exchanges which is strongly reminiscent of Hegel’s dialectic. Hegel, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, contends that subjectivity, or what he calls “self-consciousness,” arises from a dialectic by which one becomes aware that he differs and is separate from the other, and as a result of the tension and the reciprocal influences based on the interaction between self and other, both move beyond a mutual recognition to a more developed consciousness than they previously had.³⁸ Nonetheless, the relationship in mutual recognition is far from an equal one, and the imbalance in power still carries on to the new, collective consciousness, or the “Spirit.”³⁹

Gee’s contention that Xinran’s book turns herself into the “heroine” among all the Chinese women described by her is an overstatement; I would rather argue that by mediating her life through the stories of those women, she also assimilates their lives to her own. Rather than maintaining her superiority to other women, she diverts our attention from the significant differences between herself and other women, as well as among different women, with the help of images that emphasise sameness rather than contradictions. “The Childhood I Cannot Leave Behind Me,” in which she reveals her unhappy childhood, is closely followed by “The Women Whose Father Does Not Know Her,” where she describes the female prisoner Hau’er, who has been put in jail several times for her “sexual deviance and cohabitation,”⁴⁰ the aftermaths of her sexual abuses by the Red Guards, her mother’s suicide, and her father’s madness. In the former chapter, Hau’er asks whether Xinran would be able to bear the pain of listening to her story, a question that brings back the “recurring nightmares” to the latter:

³⁷ Xinran, *The Good Women of China*, 5.

³⁸ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, IV. A.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, VI.

⁴⁰ Xinran, *The Good Women of China*, 164-5.

I stumbled back to the officer's quarters where I would sleep that night, I was already immersed in my memories. Try as I might, I have never been able to walk away from the nightmare of my childhood.⁴¹

In the chapter that follows, the pains of the two women are mirrored in each other as they are sitting face to face in the prison meeting room.⁴² Eager to help Hau'er's after learning of her tragedy, Xinran realises that:

It is too late now to bring back youth and happiness to Hua'er and other women who endured the Cultural Revolution. They drag the great dark shadows of their memories behind them.⁴³

The juxtaposition of Hauer's story with Xinran's, as well as these reverberating images, do not draw a sharp contrast between them, but rather create the illusion that the nightmare of Xinran's childhood is as disastrous as the dark shadows that follow Hau'er.

The above images testify to Nancy Drew's remark that many of Xinran's stories have "great poetic qualities," all being "very cinematic and powerful."⁴⁴ Other examples are also used to create resonances among different stories, such as comparing the relationship between the two sexes to that between mountain and river. Zhou Ting, who develops a highly successful career after her failed marriage and bad relationship ("The Fashionable Woman"), says,

"... Men are like mountains; they only know the ground beneath their feet, and the trees on their slopes. But women are like water... Everybody says women are like water. I think it's because water is the source of life, and it adapts itself to its environment. Like women, water also gives of itself wherever it goes to nurture life."⁴⁵

This allusion is vaguely brought up by Jingyi ("The Woman Who Waited Forty-Five Years"), who conjures the hyperbolic image of a pool, formed by the tears she has shed for her lover all those years.⁴⁶ In one of her interviews, Xinran expresses her fondness for these comparisons:

⁴¹ Ibid., 167.

⁴² Ibid., 177.

⁴³ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁴ Lambert.

⁴⁵ Xinran, *The Good Women of China*, 211.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 145.

“There’s a Chinese saying I like very much: woman’s nature is like water; man’s is like a mountain. Mountain and water depend on each other. Water supports life and a mountain without water can sustain no life; but water without mountain loses its nature and becomes sea. So the two always depend on each other, like two human beings—but you can’t say they are the same.”⁴⁷

Xinran places emphasis on the interdependence between water and mountain, hence suggesting that women’s sacrifices are by no means one-sided. Despite the subtle differences in these allusions, they manage to highlight the sameness among women of diverse personalities and backgrounds; the web of intertextual references even extends beyond the book, and reinforces the affinity between Xinran and the women she depicts.

A further example is the image of the callus. It is initially used to convey the sense of numbness that arises out of prolonged pain. After Xinran has heard many tragic stories, as she says: “At times a kind of numbness would come over me from all the suffering I had encountered, as if a callus were forming within me. Then I would hear another story and my feelings would be stirred up all over again.”⁴⁸ The callus temporarily insulates her from pain, but it is not impenetrable and does not stop her from relating to the women and feeling painful all over again. The image recurs as Zhou Ting explains how she has coped with her divorce and her ambiguous relationship with her current boyfriend, who returned to her only because she has become rich: “Do you have a callus on your hand? Or scars on your body? Touch them—do you feel anything?”⁴⁹ Zhou Ting’s idea of the callus therefore closely resembles Xinran’s, though its effect tends to be permanent. Xinran responds: “I hope the calluses on your heart will be softened by love.”⁵⁰ Softening the callus is not the same as peeling it away: while the former is made possible with love, the latter is analogous for opening one’s eyes and widening one’s horizon, which is nonetheless risky and could lead to dire consequences. In “The Women of Shouting Hill,” Xinran realises that those women who live in a pre-modern society in the far-off village should not be allowed to know about what life is like in the modern society: “To tell them about the outside world would be like peeling away the calluses

⁴⁷ Lambert.

⁴⁸ Xinran, *The Good Women of China*, 163.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

from a work-worn hand and letting thorns prick the tender flesh.”⁵¹ The callus image and its variations make Xinran’s attitudes towards loving and not loving, and towards knowing and not knowing, much more ambiguous than they seem to be.

Aside from the above images, an interesting observation, which also serves as an assimilatory device, should be brought into this discussion. Xinran, listening to Jin Shuai’s description of her attitude towards love and sex (“The University Student”), is initially shocked at the generation gap between university students in their late teens and early twenties, and herself, then in her early thirties. As their dialogue goes on, their differences are narrowed in a subtle way. According to Jin Shuai, a fair share of her fellow students have become “escorts” and “personal secretaries” for the businessmen—both local and foreign—who proliferate in number in China with the economic reform of the nation. Jin Shuai informs Xinran about a friend who, betrayed by a married man with whom she had wanted a genuine relationship, relinquishes her belief in real love. At one point, it becomes difficult to tell whether the dialogues come from Jin Shuai or Xinran:

“... In the first letter she sent me from America, she wrote, ‘Never think of a man as a tree whose shade you can rest in. Women are just fertilizer, rotting away to make the tree strong ... There is no real love. The couples who appear loving stay together for personal gain, whether for money, power or influence.’”

“What a pity that Ying’er realized this too late.”
Jin Shuai fell silent, moved by her friend’s fate.⁵²

Though the expression of pity—which belies a distrust of real love—should have come from Jin Shuai, a cynical young woman, the close quotation mark after the first dialogue indicates that Jin Shuai has finished talking, and the second dialogue could only come from Xinran.⁵³ Such an expression might well be taken as Xinran’s empathy as a listener, which is an essential skill of a talk show host, but it also makes us wonder if Xinran has become more cynical herself. By mediating her life through the stories of those students, she realises that she is not that

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵³ Interestingly, in the Chinese version, there is no quotation mark at the end of the first dialogue, hence indicating that the expression of pity that follows is by Jin Shuai (Xinran 2003, 66).

different from these women who have grown up in the period of “Reform and Opening Up,” as the “deep layer of emptiness” that plagues the young women is the result of the state repression of the earlier generations and their ignorance.

The above resonances would not have been as strong, and the confusion would not have been made possible, if the voices of those women were physiological and we heard them in the same way as Xinran the broadcaster did; recorded in written form, and in a language that is more or less fluent, even elegant, these voices lose much of their distinctiveness.⁵⁴ Yet mediating their voices through Xinran is inevitable: the letters of the girl who kept a fly as a pet, which manage to reach Xinran, are yet accompanied with her death certificate,⁵⁵ which “certifies” the silence of her voice; the woman who bemoans her political marriage is too glad to have her voice tape-recorded, instead of having to her story on air,⁵⁶ and the vigilant authorities finally refuse to have her story broadcasted;⁵⁷ Jinshuai even cites how Chinese men categorises women into different kinds of fish,⁵⁸ metaphors which not only dehumanise, but deprive them of their voices. The book, instead of offering diverse pictures of Chinese women as individuals, becomes a textual space where different selves and various images are enmeshed. These further evolve into a collective consciousness of Chinese woman mediated by the narrator, which privileges the stronger party at the expense of the weaker one, and represents Xinran’s voice more than the other women’s. Xinran’s voice continues to dominate “The Women of Shouting Hill,” the last story of the book: these women are the only Chinese women who claim they are “happy,” but as Xinran implies, their happiness is clearly a result of ignorance. Because of Xinran’s remark, the title, named after the village where they live, both evokes the storminess of the place and the “loud, resonant voices” of its people,⁵⁹ and indicates that those “happy” women are indeed shouting, though their voices cannot be heard. As such, the story is appropriately placed at the end of the book, and carries

⁵⁴ My remark was inspired by Beth Newman study of the narrative voices in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in “Narratives of Seduction and the Seductions of Narrative: The Frame Structure of *Frankenstein*,” *English Literary History* 53 (1986), 145.

⁵⁵ Xinran, *The Good Women of China*, 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 48. Lovers are swordfish; secretaries are carp; other men’s wives are Japanese puffer fish; and wives are salt cod.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.