Connotations
Vol. 16.1-3 (2006/2007)

Self and Other: Narrativity in Xinran's *The Good Women of China* and *Sky Burial*

AMY LAI

In the past two decades, a number of Chinese diaspora writers have attained worldwide fame and sparked the interests of historians and literary critics. Nobel Prize winner Gao Xingjian aside, one of the most prominent figures is Jung Chang, author of the best-selling and award-winning memoir *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (1990), while Xinran (her full name Xinran Xue) is a much more recent example. Also born in the 1950s and an emigrant to the United Kingdom, she is the author of *The Good Women of China* [*Zhongguo de haonuyan*] (2002) and *Sky Burial* [*Tianzang*] (2004), both of which were originally written in Chinese, before being translated into English and other languages and sold all over the world.

Despite the popularity and high appraisal of Xinran's works, to date no critical study of either of them has been documented. This is probably because they have generally been categorized 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 are by no means lacking in these genres. This essay aims to explore the images of Chinese women, but especially how the first-person narrator, or "I," interacts with the female characters in a genre that traverses fact and fiction. 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 is a collection of true stories gathered by Xinran when she worked as the host of *Words on the Night Breeze*, the

---

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/deblai01613.htm>.

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?" (Lambert). 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.

As Liz Stanley explains, most auto/biography is concerned with "great lives" (4),[1] but the obsession with the "great and in/famous" would lead to many gaps in history, and stories of "obscure" people are very often more significant historically (8). 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 (26). 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 that she 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" (Hong).

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 she can stay at the hospital; a university student who, after receiv-

ing 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 her 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 realize 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, is tortured by the Red Guards and villagers and loses her mind; a "fashionable woman" whose successful career is born 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" (Lambert). 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 there and Westerners' general misperception of Chinese women ("Prologue," "My Journey towards the Stories of Chinese Women" and "Epilogue"), the author also includes some of her own 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,[2] she does mention that she is a single mother who derives her "spirit" and "courage" from her son (1). Hence the book, categorized as a biography, has strong autobiographical elements. Flora Drew appreciates the fact that Xinran, while interweaving her life with those of other women, does not oversentimentalize her own predicament (Lambert). However, Lisa Gee

contends 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. Second, mixing other women's stories with her own biography—moving and interesting as 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.

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" (3). 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" (8-9); 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 (14). That autobiographical selves are "deeply and irresolvably fractured" (14) 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 (61). 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 (62).

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 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

social production of ideas (Stanley 16). Brian McHale (205) cites Barthes's "From Work to Text" to account for the nature of the "author" who does appear in the text.[3] 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, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions 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*. (161)

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 (215).

The fictionalization 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 (Stanley 91). By contrast, Domna Stanton's *The Female Autograph* (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" (Stanley 91-92). The writing of autography, accordingly, becomes an act of "rebellion" and "self-assertion" (92); it also produces "a divided self," as the female author takes up "a phallic pen" (93; Stanton 13-14). The autography in itself becomes a Baudrillardian world, or an intertextual reality composed by representation, bearing little relation to the social and material world within which it is located (93).

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 for 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" (x). 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" (x).

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 (Lambert). In 1988 she entered a highly competitive examination and became one of the fourteen candidates to be recruited in the broadcasting industry, and in 1989 she became the head of the evening broadcast team at Henan Broadcasting.

There is no doubt that Xinran's privileged social and economic position enabled her to open a talk show and later to write about the women who are less fortunate than her. She is also privileged in terms of knowledge, especially when compared with a lot of women who have suffered from sexual 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" (5) when she was twenty-two years old, thereby indicating that she was 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 Hegal'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 of one's difference and separation 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 (ch. IV. A.). 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" (ch. VI).

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 them, with the help of images that emphasize sameness rather than contradictions. "The Childhood I Cannot Leave Behind Me," in which she reveals her unhappy childhood, is closely followed by "The Woman Whose Father Does Not Know Her," where she describes the female prisoner Hua'er, who has been put in jail several times for her "sexual deviance and cohabitation" (164-65), the aftermaths of her sexual abuses by the Red Guards, her mother's suicide, and her father's madness. In the former chapter, Hua'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:

> 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. (167)

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 (177). Eager to help Hua'er after learning of her tragedy, Xinran realizes 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. (194)

The juxtaposition of Hua'er'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 Hua'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" (Lambert). 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." (211)

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 (145). In one of her interviews, Xinran expresses her fondness for these comparisons:

> "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." (Lambert)

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" (163). 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?" (212). 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" (213). Softening the callus is not the same as peeling it away: while the former is made possible with love, the latter is analogous to 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 realizes 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 modern society: "To tell them about the

outside world would be like peeling away the calluses from a work-worn hand and letting thorns prick the tender flesh" (226). 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.

Another assimilatory device can be seen in "The University Student." 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 the wake of the economic reform that takes place in China. 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. (45)

Though the expression of pity—which betrays 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.[4] 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 medi-

ating her life through the stories of those students, she realizes that she is not that 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 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.[5] 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 (33), 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 (107), and the vigilant authorities finally refuse to have her story broadcasted (115); Jin Shuai even cites how Chinese men categorizes women into different kinds of fish (48),[6] metaphors which not only dehumanize them, but also 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 women 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 (220), 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 more urgency than it would

elsewhere; at the same time, it betrays the fact that their voices still have to be mediated by someone like her.

It should be emphasized the women's stories are enclosed by "Prologue" and "Epilogue," which detail the production of the book. In the "Prologue," Xinran describes her attack by a robber one night, and her struggle to defend the manuscript of the book. Though she "could not see a face" in the darkness, she uses the pronoun "he" to refer to the robber: "I kicked with my feet at where I thought his groin might be" (ix). The "pair of strong yet invisible hands" becomes symbolic of the invisible forces of the patriarchy and state politics from the earliest days of the PRC to contemporary China. As a journalist who struggles against these forces, Xinran negotiated between her will and the party,[7] and even moved to England so that she could carry out her struggle further, let alone that she later got her book published in China as well as all over the world.[8] The "Epilogue" rounds up her project in a highly satisfactory manner. It ends with this sentence: "It was as if a pen had grown in my heart" (229), strongly reminiscent of Domna Stanton's "autography," which describes writing as an act of self-assertion and rebellion, in which the author takes up a phallic pen. This statement also makes apparent the phallic image in the first story, "The Girl Who Kept a Fly as a Pet," where Hongxue, although she is not offered a private space to write (except at the hospital where she finds shelter from her father's sexual advances), has managed to get her essays published in the *Youth of China* magazines (30). Though the poor girl finally dies of self-inflicted blood-poisoning ("septicaemia") in 1975, it is as if her spirit has "reincarnated" in Xinran, who was born in 1958 and who is now able to make her tragedy known to the world. Considering the phallic image, it might not be a pure coincidence when Xinran, in one of her interviews, stresses her dedication to writing since she was a teenager: she published her first poem when she was only fifteen, and since then she had published quite a lot (Hong).

Whereas Xinran's first book advocates the "goodness" inherent in the women described and tends to synthesize the diverse experiences

of these women to evolve a collective consciousness, her second book, *Sky Burial*, manages to preserve differences in the "other" through the narrative structure, and to do so without distorting their voices.

Sky Burial, named after the traditional Tibetan funeral ritual in which the corpse is exposed to the open air to be eaten by sacred vultures, can also be traced to Xinran's nightly radio program.[9] The story begins in 1994, when a listener calls Xinran from Suzhou, telling her that he has just met a strange woman on the street. Xinran thus travels to the said town and meets with Shu Wen, a woman dressed in Tibetan clothing, but whose facial characteristics are that of a Chinese woman. Shu Wen informs Xinran of her story, on which the most part of the book is based. The narrative shifts to 1958: still in the third person, it tells of Shu Wen meeting her husband Kejun, a doctor in the People's Liberation Army. Deeply in love, they get married a few years later. Soon Kejun is posted to Tibet, and after a short time, news arrives in Suzhou that he has been killed. The obscurity of the news, as well as Shu Wen's disbelief in his death, prompt her to follow the army to Tibet to look for him. There she meets a young Tibetan woman, daughter of a land-owning family in the north of Lhasa, who has a keen interest in Chinese culture, and who has spent several years studying in Beijing. Zhuoma relates her story to Shu Wen: after her father died, she was forced to deal with the struggles between Chinese and Tibetans, and unwilling to harm either party, she set fire to her estate and eloped with her loving servant, whom she calls Tiananmen. The two couples, however, soon lost touch in the blizzard. Shu Wen and Zhuoma end up living with a Tibetan family.

As the story continues, Zhuoma is kidnapped, and probably forced to be someone's wife, as was common along the Silk Road during that time. The time she unites with Shu Wen and others again, she realizes that Tiananman has become a lama. Shu Wen also learns from Old Hermit Qiangba the true circumstances of her husband's death thirty years ago: during a sky burial ceremony, Kejun found a vulture attacking a living lama among the corpses, and keen to save the lama, he shot what Tibetans regard as a sacred bird. This enraged the lamas,

and in order to atone for his sins and prove that Han Chinese are also worthy of salvation, Kejun killed himself and let the lamas perform a sky burial for him by feeding him to the vultures. Old Hermit Qiangba is the lama whom Kejun saved many years ago. Although Shu Wen has long adopted the language, customs, clothing and even faith of Tibetans, she decides to return to Suzhou. She longs to see her family again, but after thirty years all the buildings have been torn down and replaced by new ones, and her family is nowhere. At the end, she cannot tell whether she is a Tibetan or Chinese, and feels lost and desolate in a strange place.

Linda Jaivin (2004) expresses her disapproval of *Sky Burial*, owing to the fact that it does not even hint at the extent of the devastation China wreaked in Tibet from the 1950s through the 1980s.[10] She calls Xinran's Tibet an "almost Disneyfied version in which Sino-Tibetan conflict is more or less symbolically resolved by the self-sacrifice of a Chinese man." Nonetheless, despite the absence of strong political statements against China, the book can in fact be read as a critique of the Communist Party in various aspects, including its treatment of Tibetan people. One aspect is the demand that people must devote themselves to the Party at the expense of the family and the individual. Shu Wen calls herself "lucky," as compared with a lot of Chinese women, as she had the chance to go to a missionary school and later to Jingling Girls' College to study medicine, before going to the university to specialize in dermatology (5). It is clear, however, that she was educated more for the sake of the state than for her own personal growth, and the state-oriented purposes of education become more apparent with the description of Kejun's background. Having lost all his relatives in the Sino-Japanese War, he went to medical school with the support of the state, and worked very hard in order to "repay this debt" (6). As the state takes precedence over the family and the individual, the loving couple ironically regards separation from their loved ones—which is normally a despairing situation—as a good chance to demonstrate their "loyalty to the Motherland" (7).

If the above examples only reveal Kejun's gratitude for his nation, then the critique of China's conquest of Tibet becomes more apparent as Kejun, in his letters to Shu Wen, expresses his surprise and fear at the resistance and hostility from the Tibetans, because he had been "led to believe"—again by the Party—that the negotiations between the Chinese government and Tibetan religious leaders had been "entirely successful" (134). While his decision to take his life and thereby settle the disputes between Chinese and Tibetans (at least in that area of Tibet) has been made for the good of his nation, this act also gives him a chance to express his undying love for Shu Wen, which would have been considered "bourgeois" in Party ideology. In his last letter to her, he says:

> I love you. If I am allowed into paradise, I'll make sure you live a safe and peaceful life, and wait for you there. If I go to hell for this, I will give everything I have to pay the debt we both incurred in life, working to give you the right to enter heaven when your time comes. If I become a ghost, I'll watch over you at night and drive away any spirits that trouble your rest. If I have no place to go to, I'll dissolve into their air and be with you at your every breath. (138)

Such a natural and spontaneous expression of romantic love becomes a form of resistance to the state, not to mention that the belief in ghosts and afterlife was prohibited at that time, along with the banning of Buddhism and other religions. Similarly, Shu Wen is unlike other women of her time and unlike most other victims in Xinran's former work. Her decision to leave her work unit in Suzhou in order to follow the army to Tibet, using her knowledge of medicine as an excuse, is a strongly personal move, which would have been prohibited if not for the urgent demand for dermatologists in the army. Through the eyes of Shu Wen, another criticism of the state, including its conquest of Tibet, is launched: though there are indeed "records of Kejun's death," his death notice neither mentions how he died, or accords him with the status of a revolutionary martyr (153)—and such omission might have been the result of the Party's attempt to cover up

the serious conflicts between Tibet and China which, if exposed, would have rendered their conquest of Tibet unjustified.

Jaivin expresses her surprise at hearing Xinran call *Sky Burial* a "novel," as the book and all its publicity have trumpeted it as a true story, though she adds that even when the book is read as literary non-fiction, not every detail of conversation or incident could be treated as a faithful record of fact. Peter Gordon describes Xinran's story as existing in that "strange place" where truth and fiction overlap, concluding that the "strength" of the story makes it unimportant whether the story is true or not. Indeed, Xinran, aware of the many gaps left by Shu Wen with whom she interviewed over two days, spent eight years interviewing Tibetan lamas, soldiers, generals, and ordinary people for her book and also watched over 100 hours of video made by different people (Samdup). Xinran the narrator stresses that she is only the mediator of Shu Wen's story, even though she tries to capture faithfully what she has told her over the two days they were together:

> As I wrote Shu Wen's story, I tried to relive her journey from 1950s China to Tibet—too see what she saw, to feel what she felt, to think what she thought. Sometimes I was so immersed that I did not see the London streets, shops and tube trains—or my husband standing beside me with a cup of green tea. (10)

Interestingly enough, her indication that her story can only be a representation of what really happened is mirrored by Shu Wen's thoughts about Dalai Lama, his character and his involvement in the struggles between Tibet and the Chinese government from the 1950s to the 1980s, which extend to a general comment on the elusiveness of the truth and the irrecoverable nature of the past:

> The truth, she thought, would always remain elusive because humans could never recover the past as it actually happened. (107)

Hence *Sky Burial* is very similar to *The Good Women of China* in the fictional and fictionalized nature of its characters and the narrator.

Their differences in terms of narrative structures nonetheless should not be overlooked. Indeed, it is necessary to explore what is known as framed narrative and its variations, which characterize both works, to illustrate how Xinran's relationship with her women characters in *Sky Burial* is significantly different from the self-other relationship in *The Good Women of China*.

McHale describes the framed narrative, or Chinese-boxes narrative, which consists of a primary world, or "diegesis," in which there is embedded a "hypodiegetic" world; sometimes there is within it a "hypo-hypodiegetic" world, and an additional "hypo" is prefixed for each level down the narratives (113). The embedded worlds may be more or less continuous with the world of the primary diegesis, as in *Wuthering Heights*, or they may be subtly different, as in the play-within-the-play of *Hamlet* (113). The latter is an example of "mise-en-abyme": first, it is an embedded representation; second, it resembles something of the diegetic world; third, such resemblances constitute some "salient, continuous aspects" of the primary world (such as the story, the narrative situation, or the style), to the effect that it reproduces and/or duplicates the primary representation as a whole (124-25).

As McHale's observes, postmodernist texts tend to suppress the "difference in flavor" that help the reader keep different narrative levels distinct in his mind: in other words, they encourage "trompe-l'oeil," misleading the reader into regarding an embedded world as the primary world, though such deliberate "mystification" is often followed by "demystification" in which the true ontological status of the supposed "reality" is revealed (115-16). The text nonetheless solicits an active involvement in the "unreal," and among the various strategies is the missing end-frame, meaning that the embedded text does not return to the primary diegesis at the end (117). McHale refers to Borges, who suggests that the Chinese-box structure of *Don Quixote* seems to imply that readers are fictional characters and that their lived reality is as much a fiction as Quixote's is (130). Similarly, Brian Richardson in his *Narrative Dynamics* contends that frames are "inher-

ently unstable," appearing "definitive" and yet "capable of being reconstructed within a larger frame"; he even postulates a "rule of the violated frame" which states that ontological boundaries between embedded worlds are regularly transgressed (330-31).

In fact, the framed narrative technique is used in *The Good Women of China*: Xinran's story makes up the primary diegetic world, whereas the other women occupy the hypodiegetic level, and despite some examples of hypo-hypodiegetic narratives,[11] the stories of these women are chiefly embedded in a horizontal manner along the same plane.[12] William Nelles contends that horizontal embedding has the paradoxical effect of producing an illusory realism and of undercutting that illusion (352). Yet *The Good Women of China*, in which the stories of different women are horizontally embedded with one another, does not produce this paradoxical effect. Even though the "I" might be treated as "fictionalized" and enmeshed with the other "selves" to create the total effect of a collective consciousness, the overall impression of realism is not quite diminished and the stories are as realistic as they can be. How well, then, does the theorization of vertical embedding apply to Xinran's second work? Does the framing of the stories of Shu Wen and Zhuoma create the paradoxical impression that Xinran, Shu Wen and Zhuoma are equally real, at the same time, all equally unreal?

Xinran, as narrator, mediates her identity through Shu Wen, and knows herself better in the process. At the beginning, she shares a deep affinity with the woman. When she asks where Shu Wen was born, Shu Wen emphasizes, "In your Nanjing," which is also the place where she first met her husband. Very soon, however, Xinran realizes that they are very different, and even remarks that Shu Wen is "one of the most exceptional woman" (2), which makes herself "foolish, ignorant" by comparison (3). She further expresses her disbelief that a young woman at that time should have dreamed of traveling to a place as "distant and terrifying" as Tibet, as it is quite unimaginable for women in her previous generation (and her own) to love so "passionately" (4). The story of this remarkable woman prompts Xinran to

ask herself these questions: "How would that change you?" "Who would you become?" (91) but she can give no answer. Her impression of Tibet on her first real visit takes on a symbolic significance:

> But it was not until I went to Tibet again in 1995 to make a documentary that I felt I began to understand what it might be like to live there. I and my four cameramen were rendered speechless by the emptiness of the landscape, the invisible wind that swept across the barren land, the high, boundless sky, and the utter silence. My mind and soul felt clean and empty. I lost any sense of where I was, or of the need to talk. The simple words that Shu Wen had used—"cold," "colour", "season", "loss"—had a new resonance. (10)

Her paradoxical feelings towards the landscape, which are a combination of fear and attraction, is interestingly mirrored in her relationship with Shu Wen, in which friendliness and empathy do not lead to further intimacy, but are overtaken by alienation: "I longed to draw her into an intimacy that would enable me to ask the torrent of questions that I had been storing up during the day, but it was clear that Wen considered all the talk for the day to be over" (90).

Xinran, by mediating herself through Shu Wen's story, therefore recognizes the differences in the "other" woman. These differences, however, are not assimilated to the "I," but preserved and articulated by the narrative structure. After Shu Wen has learnt that her beloved husband died thirty years ago, she attempts to create a sense of anchorage and permanence at the site where he killed himself, reassuring herself that "in the months and years to come, at all times and in all places, she would be like a kite, connected by an invisible thread to Mount Anyemaqen" (143). To accomplish this, she divides her book of essays which she has written to Kejun throughout those years, carrying one half with her, while leaving the other half to Old Hermit Qiangba, so that "a part of Kejun and a part of herself would live on in Tibet" (143). If Shu Wen expects the rest of herself (and of Kejun) would live in Suzhou, then such a feeling of certainty is nonetheless undermined by the desolation that overwhelms her as she revisits that place that used to be her "home":

> Wen stood in the middle of the street, paralysed by the strangeness of her hometown. She was so absorbed in thought that she heard neither the sound of the clappers nor the noise of the cars and bicycles rushing past her only inches away. All she had now were her memories. Would she have the courage to embark on a second search so late in her life? If not, where should she go?
>
> She put her hand into the pocket of her robe where she kept the photograph of Kejun. Laying her fingers on the image that had shared the sweetness, the bitterness and the sweeping changes of her life for so many years, she whispered the words *Om mani padme hum*.[13]
>
> Up above, a family of geese flew towards home.
>
> Here, there were neither sacred vultures, nor sky burials. (158)

The Buddhist mantra of compassion, whispered at a time when Shu Wen suffers from a loss of direction, reminds the reader that she has long become a Tibetan Buddhist. Hence, she is very different from those women who use religion as a refuge from poverty and who change their objects of faith all the time, depending on what is "in fashion," in "What Chinese Women Believe" in *The Good Women of China* (90). However, the desolation evoked by the ending makes us doubt whether her faith really enables her to embark on her "second search" in her life, or insulates her from the pain of losing her husband.

If the book simply ended at this point, then it would have encouraged the reader to empathize with Shu Wen and even get lost with her in Suzhou, but this is not the case. The book begins with the primary, diegetic world of Xinran's life as a broadcaster, and this world gradually recedes in the first chapter "Shu Wen," as Shu Wen's story, and her hypodiegetic world, takes over. The primary world, in the form of italic text, intercedes between chapters five and six and between chapters six and seven, containing Xinran's reflection on what happened to Shu Wen and Zhuoma; the diegetic world finally takes over after Shu Wen's story ends in chapter nine. Xinran, in "A letter to Shu Wen," expresses her "gasps of admiration that the beauty of her story inspires," as well as her eagerness to know what has happened after Shu Wen left Tibet (161). Nonetheless, as Xinran earnestly begs Shu Wen to contact her through her publisher, we are made aware that the

setting has changed from China to London. Therefore, even though the letter signifies a metalepsis and a crossover from the diegetic to the hypodiegetic world, the abrupt shift in time and space does not so much create the impression that Xinran is on the same ontological plane with Shu Wen, as reinforce the fact that they live in different worlds. This is how Xinran's second book further differs from her first. The letters and phone tapes in *The Good Women of China* are desperate, but deferred attempts to reach out to the world. In *Sky Burial*, there is also an abundant use of letters—ranging from the letters by Shu Wen's parents and sister, to Kejun's which only reached Shu Wen after thirty years, and the letters which Shu Wen has written to Kejun during her time in Tibet, in her attempt to vent her love for him and dispel her loneliness. Above all, the book ends with Xinran's letter to Shu Wen. These letters are also deferred means of communication, but the deferral and ineffectiveness do not convey a sense of urgency; instead, they help to build up a lost world—one that the author has failed to describe, and interestingly, has decided to leave as it is, in order to add to the legendary status of its protagonists.

If the boundary between the diegetic and the hypodiegetic worlds fleshes out the isolation of Shu Wen from Xinran, what about the relationship between Shu Wen and Zhuoma? It now becomes obvious that Zhuoma's story is a "mise-en-abyme" of Shu Wen's. Like Shu Wen, Zhuoma is a highly intelligent woman, and her passion for freedom and romance makes her forsake her inherited estate to follow her will to love and live: "My property and my role as head of the estate meant little to me any longer. And so, I decided to walk away from the fighting in the hope of finding freedom" (42). She serves as a stark contrast to Saierbao, the woman of the Tibetan household which they stay with. Described as an "extremely calm and dignified woman who seemed to savour all her chores," Saierbao is no doubt a tough woman; but as a wife who is shared by two husbands she remains a model of female exploitation in Tibet (61). Zhuoma's relationship with her lover is also sad. Though Tiananmen, unlike Kejun, has managed to survive, by the time they reunite, they cannot even touch each

other, as his the life was "pledged to the Buddha" (112). The fact that Zhuoma has named her servant and lover after the Tiananmen Square now becomes significant: though the Tibetan woman's longing and admiration for Chinese culture is unquestionable, her final estrangement from him signifies the ambivalent relationship between China and Tibet, as much as between Shu Wen and Zhouma. While there is a strong sense of intimacy and affinity between the two women, Zhuoma finally separates from Shu Wen, as she stops at Beijing and does not accompany her to Suzhou. Just as there is a boundary between the diegetic and hypodiegetic worlds, the narrative puts a stop to the crossover between the hypodiegetic and the hypo-hypodietic worlds, and the two remarkable women are isolated from each other.

The effects of the narrative embeddings now become obvious. While the multiple frames are usually violated and tend to create the impression that the embedding worlds are as fictitious as the embedded ones, this is not what the multiple embeddings do in *Sky Burial*. Xinran's diegetic world sounds realistic, but the stories of Shu Wen and Zhuoma are so different from Xinran's that they are not completely imaginable, and even attain a legendary status. It is their distinctive and legendary nature, as gleaned through the eyes of Xinran, which resists integration to any collective consciousness such as the one articulated in *The Good Women of China*. In addition, neither Shu Wen's nor Zhuoma's story is given any real closure, not to mention that their thoughts and feelings are never fully articulated. In this way, their voices can avoid being fully appropriated by Xinran, the narrator; as such, they are mediated in a relatively undistorted manner.

* * *

Esther Tyldesley, translator of *The Good Women of China*, and co-translator of *Sky Burial* (with Julia Lovell), appreciates Xinran's first book for the variety of lives it describes. She says, "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" (Lambert). This remark would not be quite applicable to the author's *Sky Burial*, which only focuses on the lives of two women, both of whom embark on life paths that no common woman—Chinese or Tibetan—would ever dare to tread. Focusing on the lives of only a few women should not make an auto/biography any less worthy than one that focuses on many. With the use of narrative structures, as well as tones and images, and through the intervention and mediation of the auto/biographical "I," the author not only reveals the interesting processes of interaction between self and other and of identity formation, but guides the ways with which the readers construct pictures of Chinese women, whose lives cannot be circumscribed.

Hong Kong

NOTES

[1]Stanley's book focuses on the Western scene, and with the notion of "great lives" she refers to those of white middle and upper class men who have achieved success according to conventional standards (4).

[2]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 that women had the same value and spirit as men do (Lambert).

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

[4]Interestingly, in *Zhongguo de hao nuyan* (2003), 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 (66).

[5]My remark was inspired by Beth Newman's study of the narrative voices in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (145).

[6]Lovers are swordfish; secretaries are carp; other men's wives are Japanese puffer fish; and wives are salt cod (48).

[7]She talks about her radio program: "At the beginning, everything was an experiment, because before 1988 there had been only one voice for radio and TV. So before we had any idea what was allowed, we tested it out: very carefully at first, gradually getting bolder." Nonetheless, she was fully aware that she was "working in the gap between two walls…one side was the Communist Party and the

other side was my own soul. I began to find the burden overwhelming" (Lambert).

[8]It was bought by Shanghai Joint Publishing House in 2002 and got published in 2003.

[9]Indeed, she included this story in the first draft of *The Good Women of China*, but later considered it special and inspiring enough to deserve a brand new book on it alone (Yuan).

[10]These include the demolition of temples, looting of treasures, imprisonment and torture of monks and nuns, and other serious human rights abuses—some of which continue today and are all documented by international human rights monitors.

[11]One example is the story of Yulong, which is embedded in Hongxue's story in "The Girl Who Kept a Fly as a Pet."

[12]William Nelles differentiates between two kinds of narrative embedding: "vertical" embedding, in which narratives at different diegetic levels are inserted within each other, and "horizontal" embedding, in which stories at the same diegetic level are recounted by different narrators following one another (351).

[13]This is the most frequently recited Buddhist mantra in Tibet. Embodying the compassion and blessing of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, it invokes especially the blessing of Avalokitesvara (Goddess of Mercy), the Buddha of Compassion, which liberates all sentient beings from sufferings of the different realms of samara. In Shu Wen's story, the six syllables also make up the names of the six children of the family which the two women stay with (54).

WORKS CITED

Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." *Image-Music-Text: Essays*. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977. 155-64.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition.* 1968. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Colombia UP, 1994.

Gee, Lisa. "*The Good Women of China*." *Orange Prize for Fiction* February 2004. <http://www.orangeprize.co.uk/botm/china.html>.

Gordon, Peter. "*Sky Burial* by Xinran." *Asian Review of Books* 8 July 2004. 19 May 2008 <http://www.asianreviewofbooks.com/arb/article.php?article=413>.

Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. Arnold V. Miller. Oxford: OUP, 1977.

Hong, Terry. "The Voice of the Good Women of China." *Asianweek* 1-7 November 2002. 19 May 2008 <http://www.asianweek.com/2002_11_01/arts_xiran.html>.

Jaivin, Linda. "Sky Burial." *The Age* 18 September 2004. 19 May 2008 <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/09/15/1095221655003.html?from=storyrhs>.

Jelinek, Estelle C., ed. *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980.

Lambert, Angela. "The Good Woman of Henan." *The Guardian* 13 July 2002. 5 May 2008 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,12084,754126,00.html>.

Lu, Tonglin. "Introduction." *Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Society*. Ed. Lu Tonglin. Albany: SUNY P, 1993. 1-22.

Lyne, Sandra. "Consuming Madame Chrysanthème: Loti's 'dolls' to *Shanghai Baby*." *Intersections* 8 (October 2002). 19 May 2008 <http://wwwsshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue8/lyne.html>.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. London: Routledge, 1987.

Nelles, William. "Stories within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative." *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. Ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2002. 339-53.

Newman, Beth. "Narratives of Seduction and the Seductions of Narrative: The Frame Structure of *Frankenstein*." *English Literary History* 53 (1986): 141-61.

Richardson, Brian. "Narrative Frames and Embeddings." *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*. Ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2002. 329-32.

Samdup, Tseten. "An Account of a Young Chinese Woman's 34 Years Life in Tibet." *Phayul* 29 June 2004. 19 May 2008 <http://phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id =7179&t=4&c=1>.

Spivak, Gayatri C. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1985. *Colonial Discourse ad Postcolonial Criticism: A Reader*. Ed. Patriach Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993. 66-111.

——. "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations." 1989. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. London: Routledge, 1993. 121-40.

Stanley, Liz. *The Auto-biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Autobiography.* Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992.

Stanton, Domna C. *The Female Autograph*. New York: Literary Forum, 1984.

Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. 25-73.

Xinran. *The Good Women of China.* 2002. London: Vintage, 2003.

——. *Sky Burial*. 2004. London: Vintage, 2005.

Yuan, Wei. "Telling the True Stories of Chinese Women to the World—*New Zealand Mirror* Exclusive Interview of World Famous Chinese Writer Xinran. [Xiang shijie jiangsu zhongguo nuxing de zhenshi gushi—xinxilan jingbao dujiazhuanfang shijie zhuming zhongguo nuzuojia Xinran]." *New Zealand Mirror* 30 June 2006.