

Xinran

The Voice of the Good Women of China

By Terry Hong

The *Good Women of China: Hidden Voices* is one of those books you just can't put down. Part memoir, part history, part tragedy, part social documentary, *Good Women* is the first book by Xinran, a journalist who hosted a nightly radio show in China called *Words on the Night Breeze*. The show debuted in 1989 on Radio Nanjing and ran for seven years. As the first show in China to give voice to the everyday, personal issues of women, *Words* had millions of faithful listeners. Xinran received hundreds of calls and letters every day, in which women from all walks of life poured out their stories. Xinran often wept.

These stories make up *Good Women*. So important were they to Xinran that she actually put her life on the line for the sake of the book. When she first moved to London from China in 1999, she was mugged on her way home from London University where she was teaching at the time. She struggled desperately with the assailant, refusing to give up her bag, which contained her only copy of the book's original manuscript. While she admits today that "of course, life is more important than a book," she insists that in many ways, this book was not only her own life, but also a testimony to the lives of all the women in China who had been silent for far too long.

Xinran bears witness to stories of incest, rape, kidnapping, brutality, suffering, torture, and neglect. She writes of a young girl whose only escape from her father's horrific, incestuous demands was to die in a hospital. She writes of mothers who lost their entire families to a violent earthquake, who have re-created a large, makeshift family filled with earthquake orphans. She writes of a woman trapped in a loveless, binding marriage to an abusive man too powerful to leave. She writes of a woman who spent more than four decades searching for her young love, only to find—upon what should have been a joyous reunion—that he was married with a family. She writes of the women in a far-off village that time forgot whose lives are filled with suffering—they work all day from sunup to sundown, then must "service" the men in every way, sometimes as a shared wife to numerous men, and bear children endlessly year after year after year. Their only joy is receiving an egg mixed with water and sugar, upon the birth of a son—and yet they are the only women among the countless women Xinran interviews who claim they are "happy."

Xinran also offers glimpses of her own life, a brutal experience as a much-abused victim of the Cultural Revolution. Somehow Xinran, like the women she represents in this mem-

orable book, not only survives, but thrives. Some form of hope, of belief, and ultimately of love keeps these women caring for their children and their families, keeps them living their most difficult lives.

The Bloomsbury Review: *In the book you talk briefly about your difficult childhood. Could you take us from that childhood to how you became a journalist?*

Xinran: After secondary school, I received further education in a military university, where I studied English and international relations. I can't believe I didn't use my English for 25 years, but it was very difficult to get any practice. After my studies, I worked in the military as a civilian.

I published my first poem at 15, and then after that I published quite a lot—short stories, poems—and I think that is why they put

me in that station [for the broadcast of *Words*]. Now with this book, I've been published in 50 countries in 27 languages. I can't believe it!

TBR: *How were you able to leave China for London?*

X: It was very difficult. In my application form to leave, I had to get 14 red stamps, then they would let me go. The stamps represented permission to let me go. I had to get this special permission from each of the necessary officials, one by one. It was quite a complicated process.

I have many relatives in America, and if you have overseas relatives, then it's even more difficult to get permission to leave. My father's brothers are all in America, which is why I needed more stamps than others. Our family had a very hard time because of our overseas relatives during the Cultural Revolution.

TBR: *Since your relatives left the country, why didn't your parents follow them?*

X: My first uncle left in the 1940s. And then China was closed for a long time. My other two uncles had a very difficult time leaving, but to be honest I don't know any of the details. In the Chinese culture it's hard to have conversations between the generations. Parents don't want their children living in the black shadow of their past, so I never knew the details of my father's family.

TBR: *Once you arrived in London, what did you do? How did you become a writer?*

X: I did so many different things. I worked as a cleaner in a store, I taught Chinese classes, I was a freelance journalist, I did voice-overs for a Chinese television production company. I did quite a lot. I just wanted to learn, to practice the English language in different ways. If you want to be part of a new country, you have to learn about it at different levels, from different people, so I tried a little bit of everything. I was also very interested in learning about the lives of Chinese women living overseas. I wanted to try all the different kinds of jobs they

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Hidden Voices

XINRAN

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were doing while living in a foreign country.

TBR: *And what did you discover about these overseas Chinese women?*

X: This is one of the reasons I have written this book. Chinese women have the reputation of having no feelings, no emotions, no color, no taste—I was so sad to hear comments like these about Chinese women's lives. But here in England, most of the overseas Chinese women are middle-aged by the time they get here, without children, without husbands. They never go out to restaurants or go to the movies; they have no men. And this is what people think is the Chinese culture. In fact, this perception is so unfair because these Chinese women come from a past with strong traditions. Between 1989 and 1997, I interviewed, face-to-face, more than 200 women from the countryside, from the city, from small villages where life is as it was 500 years ago. I know Chinese women have colorful feelings, they know emotional things, but they have to try and live their lives in different ways, because our culture is a hiding, negative culture. If you meet a Chinese woman with a wonderful, beautiful daughter, she will tell you "No, my daughter is no good; yours is best." That's the Chinese culture. It can't be understood by Western culture. That makes me so sad.

This is why I chose this name for the book. When we women come into this world, we want to be good—a good daughter, good mother, good friend, good lover, good wife. But because of our culture, many women feel they're no good. In 1995, I opened four telephone lines to ask two questions, just of men: One, could you please tell me how many good women you have met in your lives? And two, what's the standard of a good woman? I received more than a thousand letters, but only a few letters said that they had met a good woman in their lives. Most of the men said no, they had not met a good woman. I was so shocked. "This is modern times!" I was thinking. If these men could write to me, then obviously they were educated. And this is the way educated men felt.

To be a good woman, according to the men, required five standards: One, a good woman is quiet, never goes out, is never open, especially to other men; two, a good woman must give the family a son; three, a good woman is always soft and never loses her temper; four, a good woman never makes mistakes in doing the housework, she never mixes the colors when doing the wash, she never burns the food when cooking; and five, a good woman is good in bed and retains her beautiful figure.

TBR: *What was your reaction?*

X: I was completely shocked by this standard. But I learned this kind of thinking is not only in China. When I traveled to Australia last year, I asked a Chinese man who had been there for 15 years, who was university-educated, and he told me the exact same points, in front of my English and Australian companions.

In my eyes, the standard of a good woman is completely different from these standards. 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. This is my

personal view.

But under this Chinese standard, we are not good. I'm a freelance television producer, I'm a writer, I do consulting for companies in foreign countries, but when I come home and find my husband cooking dinner, I think I should be cooking the dinner. I'm the woman, I'm the wife, cooking should be my job. I'm very well educated, and still it's difficult for me to break out of this kind of thinking.

When people ask me if I'm a good woman, in my mind I want to be. My family would say, "Yes, she is a good woman." But under the traditional Chinese standard, I don't think there are many people who would say I am good.

TBR: *What have you learned from writing this book?*

X: I have learned quite a lot in writing this book. America is the eighth country I have traveled to since September 2002. And in all my travels, I've learned that quite a lot of corners of the world have this kind of thinking. I received a lovely letter from storyteller Annapurna Alisa Sydell, who said to me that the lives of women are similar everywhere, even if they are in different countries, in different classes, in different lives.

TBR: *What are some of the things you're discovering on your book tour?*

X: I didn't expect this kind of response. In New Zealand, there is a tiny, woman's bookshop in Auckland. I didn't take the visit very seriously. There were people sitting outside the door, on the streets—hundreds of people, including men. There was such a long queue for buying books, and each of them wanted to tell me their own stories. In the audience was a Chinese student who said that she had never seen any of the things I write about in the book in China, and that she felt very sad that people would think that Chinese people were like that. I told her that she has never seen that kind of thing for the same reason that she was standing there in the audience that day: because she was from a powerful or rich family. A powerful or rich family would not want their children to go to the poor countryside, to see what happens there. I told the student that if she did not believe the book to go ask her parents.

I asked the women in the bookshop, "Do you think in your country such things have never happened in the past and are not happening now?" More than 30 women stood up and said to this girl, "Don't worry about this. We have the same thing, this same kind of problem, these same kinds of experiences right here. So we have to speak out and get help." I was so moved by this.

I have so many amazing stories. I have a photo of a visit in Hong Kong where people waited one or two hours in a queue to talk to me. A chair was set up next to me with a little sign that said "You have three minutes."

In each place I go, I ask ordinary people to sign books for me. So I have copies of books filled with people's signatures, the people who came to listen to my talk, the people who bought my books. I want to give all these books to my son on his 18th birthday. He is 14 now. I want him to remember that in this world, people help each other, listen to one another, talk to one another. I will give him more than 50 books with

different jackets, in different languages, signed by many different people. That will be my gift to him.

TBR: *What are you working on now?*

X: I am working on a television project in China with John Brinkley, an independent American director. I started a program that sends Western students of the Chinese language to China after their studies to work in television stations, radio stations, and newspapers. Their accommodations and travel expenses are covered, but they are not paid for working. After about three to six months in China, they come to the West and bring back the work they have been doing in China. With that experience they will be able to get a job utilizing their Chinese in the media. The media needs Chinese-speaking journalists with a Western view. With the upcoming 2008 Olympics in China, the demand will be even greater. I want to do this for the students and young people who have chosen to learn about the Chinese and Chinese culture.

I also finished my second book, *Sky Burial*, about a Chinese woman who goes to Tibet in search of her missing husband and lives there for 34 years. I have lots of notes for a third book, but I need time for my television project. So when that is over, I will go back to writing again. I have to keep writing, because I need to keep learning, I need to keep improving myself. ■

WRITER/INTERVIEWER: **Terry Hong** is coauthor of *Eastern Standard Time: A Guide to Asian Influence on American Culture: From Astro Boy to Zen Buddhism*. She is also project director of the Korean American Centennial Commemoration at the Smithsonian Institution's Asian Pacific American Program.

NOTE: Portions of this interview appeared in the October 31, 2002, issue of *AsianWeek*.