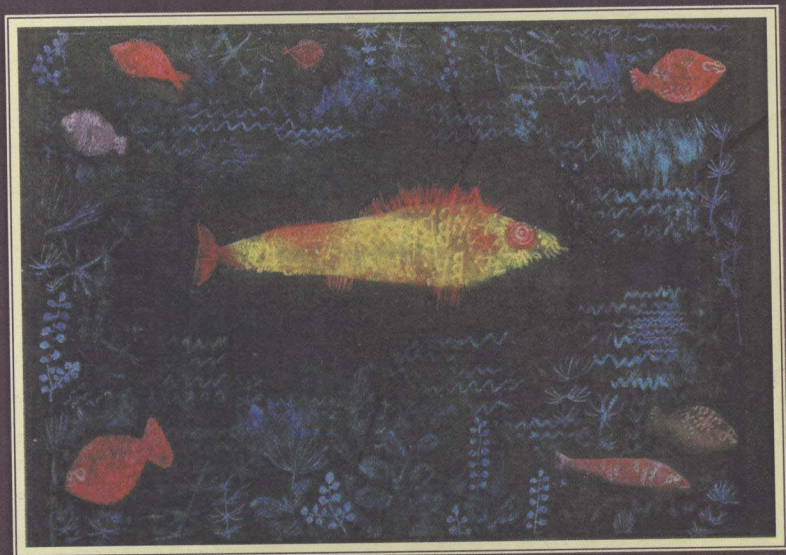


# CHINESE WOMEN WRITERS IN DIASPORA



JUNG CHANG, XINRAN,  
HONG YING,  
ANCHEE MIN,  
ADELINE YEN MAH

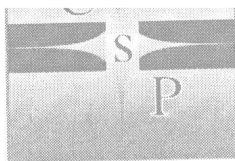
BY

**Amy Tak-yee Lai**

Chinese Women Writers in Diaspora:  
Jung Chang, Xinran, Hong Ying, Anchee Min,  
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# Chinese Women Writers in Diaspora

*To my parents, and all those who love me.*

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Though I came across the five authors during different periods of my life, the idea of writing this book was borne out of my research trip in Cambridge a year ago. My deepest thanks go out to my parents, who have supported me financially and emotionally all these years.

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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.<sup>1</sup>

— 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.”<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Andersen, *The Wild Swans*.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, “Jung Chang, *Wild Swans*,” 216.



colorful minor characters and intricate yet fascinating side plots.”<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

*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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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;<sup>5</sup> 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;<sup>6</sup> and moments which become memorable for female precisely because they cross gender categories, good examples being cross-dressing and activities normally for males.<sup>7</sup> 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> Croll, “Gendered Moments and Inscribed Memories: Girlhood in Twentieth-century Chinese Autobiography,” 118.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 125-6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 128.

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

interconnections among generations.<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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.<sup>16</sup> Even some Chinese critics believe that Chang does offer a little-known, but truthful story about Mao—a story

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 92-3.

<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly enough, aside from disclosing to the reader the “absolute selfishness and irresponsibility [that] lay at the heart of Mao’s outlook,”<sup>18</sup> 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,”<sup>19</sup> 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.”<sup>20</sup> “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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> 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 woman who manipulated Mao, “never originated policy” in reality, but “was always Mao’s obedient servant, from the time of their marriage in 1938.”<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding the general esteem for Chang, especially among the

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

<sup>18</sup> Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 633.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 622.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 633.

middle-aged Chinese who suffered during the Cultural Revolution,<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

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

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<sup>25</sup> Jin, 60.

<sup>26</sup> 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,”<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> 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.

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

<sup>28</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths 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."<sup>29</sup> 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,

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<sup>29</sup> 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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