



China Witness: Voices from a Silent Generation

Xinran, Nicky Harman (Translator), Esther Tyldesley (Translator), Julia Lovell (Translator)

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This hugely important and ground-breaking book — an unprecedented oral history — gives voice to a silent generation and tells the secret history of 20th century China.

In 1912, five thousand years of feudal rule ended in China. Warlords, Western businessmen, soldiers, missionaries and Japanese all ruled China, exploited and fought one another and the Chinese. In 1949, Mao Zedong came to power.

China Witness is both a journey through time and through the author's own country, and a memorial to an extraordinary generation of men and women who have survived war, invasion, revolution, famine and modernization — to tell the story of their times. It is an extraordinary personal testimony from a normally silent generation who, in their lifetimes have seen China transformed from a largely peasant, agricultural country of more than 1.3 billion people into a modern state. These are ordinary people — a herb woman at a market, retired teachers, a legendary "bandit" woman, Red Guards, oil pioneers, an acrobat, a naval general, a shoe mender, a lantern maker, taxi drivers, and others — from west to east, across the vast country, now in their seventies, eighties and nineties, and whose memories will soon die with them.

Here, for the first time many of them speak out about their lives and private thoughts about what they witnessed. Together their intimate stories are perhaps the only accurate record of modern Chinese history.

China Witness: Voices from a Silent Generation Details

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kagami says

This is the book that got me interested in Chinese history.

It consists of interviews with older Chinese in which they talk about their experiences of various stages of the People's Republic. Some of them are gruelling and sad, and what's even sadder is that the interviewees themselves have not shared their stories with their children and grandchildren. It seems to be a common occurrence that present-day Chinese elderly don't talk much about their lives in pre-capitalist China.

When I read China Witness I hardly knew anything about even basic aspects of the country's fascinating modern history such as the Cultural Revolution, or the Red Guards, or the Great Famine, and this book was what prompted me to try and find out. I read it in 2009 and now, 7 years later, I can say I know a few more things. Thank you Xinran for inspiring me to learn!

James says

In this collection of interviews with elderly Chinese people, all of whom are witnesses to the great upheavals that beset twentieth-century China, Xinran aims to tell their stories and to testify about their personal experiences living in such a tumultuous century. The interviewees come from all walks of life: a traditional lantern maker, former police officer and court official, a general returned from America, a shoe repairer; these are ordinary people with ordinary lives (as they often say) but their extraordinary stories give a much-needed human aspect to China's rapid changes. These interviewees have suffered greatly and yet remain modest, optimistic and grateful for what good they have enjoyed. Xinran uncovers deeply-moving personal stories and her experiences as a interviewer from her years as a radio presenter serve her well.

However, many of the interview transcripts are left to stand alone without much context; left in a narrative and contextual vacuum some of the interviewees' stories lose their impact. Yet, it is Xinran's intrusive commentary that detracts the most from the reading experience because rather than letting the interviewees and history speak for themselves, she often inserts herself and her opinions into the interview.

These flaws notwithstanding, Xinran's main aim in compiling this book and devoting twenty years to the project is successfully realised (and thus why this reviewer can excuse the above faults): she is able to "restore a real modern history of China", a real people's history of the last one-hundred years and ensure that the next generations of Chinese and her readers abroad are able to know personally what great changes China has undergone and their true human cost.

Mark says

a book filled with interviews. The author is very interested in telling the story of the peasants, and the price they paid with their blood and sweat to build China after the Liberation in 1949.

What we don't understand in the West is what it was like before 1949, so we have no idea why when this new nation was born people were enthused and filled with optimism.

Not as compelling as her book interviewing just women of China, but interesting to me.

"China's peasants have been treated as a part of the 10,000 things of nature, a group that nobody notices. People are concerned about the melting of the ice caps, they fret over the disappearance of the Asian tigers, they fume at the desert swallowing up the green lands, they even have interminable discussions over the right combination of vitamins for every dish of food. But how many people are calling out for an improvement in the living conditions of the Chinese peasants?"

The author tells the stories of the generation from the 50's through the 70's.

"We cannot stand on the shoulders of the peasants for the world to admire how tall we are"

One of the most thought provoking books I have ever read. It has so much, almost too much to think about. This book must be a little like China then. So big, so vast, so many different worlds and it is changing so fast. Almost bewildering.

Some other quotes that left an impression:]the next two quotes from a lantern maker] "...traditional culture can't just be chucked into history books and forgotten. Sometimes I feel we've let down our ancestors, let down all those ancestors who've bequeathed thousands of years of folk culture to us"

[here the lantern maker is talking about how during the Cultural Revolution he was supposed to stop making traditional lanterns: "...I never thought that making revolution meant getting rid of festival traditions! I always thought the reason I was brave enough to carry on with my craft in secret was because I wasn't educated, and had no idea what feudalism, capitalism and revisionism meant. I didn't know about Party principles, or what the revolutionary Four News were meant to be. I wasn't the only one who didn't understand that. Most ordinary people had about as little education as I did. In fact, how many of those anti-everything revolutionaries with their movements for this and that understood what it was all about? Making revolution was just a pretext for people to settle private scores. "

I can't get enough of Xinran

Christina says

A fascinating look at what the older generation feels and thinks about China, and the stories of their lives.

This book makes a lot more sense if you've read a lot about China (I have) because much of what the author says and implies about certain events are easy to miss if you're not aware of Chinese recent history. For instance, many of the people are very guarded in their assessment of political history and seem unable to criticize some of the horrible policies of Mao. In fact, you have to read half the book before you even find the slightest criticism of past Chinese policies. It's often difficult to know whether or not that generation is just unwilling to speak freely because of all the purges in the past for unguarded words or whether they actually believe that "Mao was great."

What I found most interesting was first, the wide range of experiences, cultures, and backgrounds of the many interviews, second, the common theme of suffering through hard times, and third, the tenacity and

wisdom of many of the interviewees. I was touched by the account of one couple, she a shoe repair woman and he a bicycle repairman. Both were denied opportunities for education, but sacrificed and saved and lived in utter poverty so that their children could all receive doctorate degrees. The pride they have in their children, and the gratitude their children express for them, is amazing. I was touched by their sacrifice.

Some observations: nearly every subject expressed regret for not having more time for their families when they were young. Especially the men were very likely to wish they could change that. Communism and the state ethic of "work for China" really robbed families of time together. Nearly every subject also had told very little about their lives to their children. Many of the stories and experiences are being lost because it is not being passed on. Part of that is real fear of the government and worry about saying something wrong -- many times in the last fifty years, children have been encouraged to report on their parents and make a clean break with any "rightists" or those with "black backgrounds." Parents were necessarily very guarded about what they told their children. I understand that the China of today is more open, yet the tradition of remaining silent has continued. Another thing that fascinated me was that nearly every person interviewed had a negative view of the ethics of modern Chinese young people: (paraphrasing) "It's all about money and getting ahead." said one. "My children don't think I know anything because I don't have a lot of money. I ask them to learn my traditional art (of lantern-making), and they say, 'well, are you rich doing that?'"

A great book for exploring a wide variety of experiences in China.

Tweedledum says

A deeply moving testament to the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens who endured decades of fear, oppression and political machinations. Many of the people Xinran interviewed had never spoken about their experiences not even to their children or spouse. As all were elderly or very elderly Xinran has succeeded in shining a light in some very dark places.

It was a humbling experience to read these testimonies.

Nick says

Xinran is one of the most authentic voices from China writing today. I snap up each of her books as soon as they come out. I picked this one up with high hopes, as it's about the 'silent generation' of Chinese who lived through the Revolution and the suffering afterward -- the whole gamut of natural and political catastrophe that is modern China. Unfortunately, the 'silent generation' learned early to lie to stay alive, and that is how their interviews often come across -- they're holding back, even in their old age, for fear of reprisals.

Nonetheless, there are many insights, tragic stories, and heartbreakingly heartbreaking anecdotes about a generation of people who suffered more than anyone should have to. The saddest point of all is that they say, over and over again, 'why are you asking me these questions? No one cares what I went through. No one will be interested.' Xinran writes so that a whole generation will not be forgotten. It's a very difficult assignment, and she does the best she can with it. It's almost a great book. It's at least good one.

Prina Patel says

I have had a fascination with China and Chinese history since I first visited the country in 2002, spending a couple of months as a volunteer in Shanghai, and falling enough in love with the country and its people to consider moving and living there for a longer period of time (a plan that sadly never materialized).

With this in my mind (and heart), I had high hopes for *China Witness* because I remember reading Xinran's *Good Women of China* and liking it enough that it still has a place on my bookshelf today. Therefore, when it came to choosing an author for the 'X' in my reading challenge, I didn't explore much further once I realized she had another book about personal histories from China.

I think I can count on one hand the number of books I have wanted to give up on before finishing and sadly this turned out to be one of them. The premise is wonderful in theory – a respected journalist collecting personal histories from an older generation that lived through the rise of the Communist Party and the subsequent periods of Chinese history such as the Long March, the Anti- campaigns and the Cultural Revolution. Unfortunately, she just does not deliver.

I'm not quite sure what grated on me so much. It might have been the laziness of literally transcribing the interviews word for word such that the stories themselves got lost in verbosity and irrelevant detail. There were a number of interesting histories like those of Phoebe, an American-born woman who rose through army ranks to become a Major-General, or Mr. Changzheng who was a witness to the Long March that had the potential to be truly gripping but were constantly interrupted by inane and inadequate questions like 'how did you meet your wife / husband', and 'what did you wear to the wedding?', or 'what were the three saddest and happiest parts of your life?"

In many cases, these questions came across as quite naïve, and childish. It often felt like Xinran tiptoed around the subjects and avoided probing deeper because she didn't want to hurt feelings, or she herself got emotional (per transcript – I am not making this up). I don't think that I'm being cynical here, but given the journalistic nature of the book, if her aim was to bring to light personal histories of a generation that lived through one of the most turbulent political regimes in 20th century history, she should have tried to remain as objective as possible and prepared to ask some tough questions. On the rare occasion Xinran did refer to her experiences as a radio presenter and journalist, intertwining them within stories such as that of the man who joined the police force just as the People's Republic was founded, you understood why she is a well-respected journalist, but those instances were few and far between.

It could also well have been a case of lost in translation. The overly flowery language had me rolling my eyes more than I'd like to admit, and while I realise and appreciate the history of poetic writing and speech in Chinese culture, in a book like this it just felt misplaced and farcical. For me, good journalism and journalistic writing comes from the investigation and collection of information, analysis and then presentation of the material in a way that is both interesting and engaging to the reader. At a page count of 530, this is by no means a short read, and if the author had just made the effort to filter out all the unnecessary language and irrelevant detail from her interviews, she could have presented a work of interesting histories and characters that the world deserves to know about (in a book at least 200 pages shorter).

Whether you are just starting to explore Chinese history or have done a substantial amount of reading on the subject already, this is definitely not a book I would recommend. The only lesson this book drove home was that less is definitely more.

Sahel Chin says

I have read everything else by this author, and she is typically a very compelling storyteller. Sadly, this book was dull and just a chore to get through. Even worse, the subject matter is interesting, but just not presented well.

Donna Swartz says

Most interesting view, as this was a compilation of interviews of Chinese (who remained in PRC after 1949) by a Chinese journalist, Xinran, who grew up in China but now lives in London. Her sensibilities remain in sync with her interviewees, with the overlay of her western experience. The form, language and content of this book is, therefor, a wonderfully true reading of the mainland Chinese soul. What is unsaid is just as revealing as what is said. Poignant.

Buchdoktor says

Die chinesische Journalistin Xinran reiste quer durch China, von Guilin im Süden bis nach Urumqi in der nordöstlichen Provinz Xinjiang, um hochbetagte Chinesen (im Alter zwischen 70 und 80) zu interviewen. Mit diesem ehrgeizigen Projekt will sie Zeugnisse chinesischer Kultur und Geschichte dokumentieren, ehe sie in Vergessenheit geraten können. Xinran fühlt sich verantwortlich dafür, dass die Erinnerungen ihrer Gesprächspartner für die folgenden Generationen bewahrt werden. Eine chinesische Eigenheit, die uns Westlern sehr fremd ist, steht Xinrans Plänen im Weg: Chinesen reden nicht gern öffentlich über sich und beantworten erst recht nicht gern direkte Fragen. Die Geschichte (besonders während der Mao-Zeit) hat die Menschen gelehrt, dass Worte nur Unglück bringen und anderen schneller Schwierigkeiten bereiten können als man selbst ahnt. Xinran lebt inzwischen im Ausland, beherrscht jedoch noch immer die chinesische Kunst, sich einem Thema allmählich vom Unwichtigen zum Wichtigen zu nähern. Sehr einfühlsam lässt sie ihre Kontaktpersonen zunächst über Kinder und Enkel oder die landestypischen Gerichte plaudern, ehe sie ihnen direktere Fragen stellt.

Frau You arbeitete in den 50ern des vorigen Jahrhunderts als Ingenieurin in einem Prospektionstrupp, der nach Erdöl in der Wüste Gobi suchte. Ihre lebendigen Berichte lassen ahnen, wie hart das Leben im extremen Wüstenklima war und wie hart es noch heute für ihre Familie ist, dass die vier Kinder bei den Großeltern aufwachsen mussten. Für uns scheint es unvorstellbar, dass Frau You ihre Eltern 10 Jahre lang nicht gesehen hat. Herr You bewertet die Mao-Zeit sehr treffend: das Scheitern Maos sieht er in dessen mangelhaften Wirtschafts-Kenntnissen und dem fehlenden Respekt für den einzelnen Menschen begründet. Leider beendet die Autorin ihr Gespräch mit dem klugen Herrn You gerade in dem Moment, als es interessant wird.

Mit Herrn Wu, dem Neuigkeiten-Sänger aus dem Teehaus, sowie den Papierlaternmachern Li und den Brüdern Huadeng lernen wir Vertreter aussterbender Berufe kennen. Bis vor 15 Jahren hat Herr Wu täglich Nachrichten im Teehaus seiner Heimatstadt verkündet, weil bis in die 90er Jahre dort noch kaum jemand lesen und schreiben konnte. Die traditionsbewussten Papierlaternmacher stehen stellvertretend für alle Verlierer des wirtschaftlichen Wandels in China. Mit ihrem Handwerk konnten sie sich seit der Mao-Zeit

kaum noch selbst ernähren. Traditionelles Handwerkskunst wurde nicht mehr geschätzt. Die Laternenmacher betonen ihre persönliche Enttäuschung und interessieren sich weniger für die Gründe der Entwicklung. Xinran respektiert das und dringt nicht weiter in die Männer. Dass die Zerstörung von Kulturgütern eine politische Entscheidung war und Achtung vor der Geschichte des Heimatlandes zu lehren Aufgabe des chinesischen Bildungssystems wäre erläutert die Autorin nicht.

Ein Rotarmist, der Maos Truppen auf dem langen Marsch folgte, eine Lehrerin, ein Mann, der seine kranke Frau seit Jahren zu Hause pflegt, ein Ehepaar, das sein Glück erst im fortgeschrittenen Alter fand, eine Akrobatin und eine Schuhmacherin, die ihren Stand auf der Straße hat, geben ein sehr lebendiges Bild vom Leben der Menschen in China.

Fazit:

Xinran vermittelt ein anschauliches Bild vom Leben zwanzig außergewöhnlich tatkräftiger, gehorsamer und leidensfähiger Chinesen und Chinesinnen. Sie lebten und arbeiteten in bitterer Armut als unter Mao ganze Generationen, getrennt vom Ehepartner und den Kindern, als menschliche Masse verheizt wurden. Allen Interviewpartnern ist eine große Dankbarkeit gemeinsam, dass sie die schweren Zeiten überlebt haben und sich heute am Aufwachsen ihrer Enkelkinder freuen können. Die Altersmilde, die alle Gesprächspartner Xinrans zeigen, würde wohl auch in anderen Kulturen zu finden sein. Charakteristisch für China ist der Gleichmut, mit dem Ehepartner hinnehmen, dass sie über Jahrzehnte vom Partner getrennt leben mussten und ihre Kinder nicht selbst erziehen konnten. Dass viele dieser elternlos aufgewachsenen Kinder ihren Eltern die Trennung noch heute unbewusst vorwerfen, daran röhrt man in China nicht gern. Gewünscht hätte ich mir eine Vertiefung der Zusammenhänge zwischen fehlendem Vorbild der eigenen Eltern und dem Schweigen über Gefühle, die sich über mehrere Generationen bis in die Gegenwart auswirken.

In den Gesprächen wird deutlich, wie stark die chinesische Kultur durch die Abwesenheit einer allgemeingültigen Ethik geprägt wird, wie sie zum Beispiel eine Staatsreligion vermitteln würde. Die Definition von Gut und Böse wurde von der Partei vorgenommen und wechselte, je nachdem welche Machthaber gerade herrschten. Ein eigenes Urteilsvermögen wäre für die Menschen unter diesen Bedingungen eher hinderlich. Hier schließt sich der Kreis und wir begreifen die Zurückhaltung der Interviewpartner, über ihr Leben zu sprechen und damit evtl. Angehörigen zu schaden.

Xinran respektiert, wenn die Menschen die Fassade wahren und nicht an schmerzliche Erinnerungen röhren möchten. Leider bricht sie die Interviews häufig im entscheidenden Moment ab und vergibt so die Chance, die Hintergründe zu verdeutlichen. So muss man erst 400 Seiten lesen, ehe überhaupt eine kritische Bemerkung fällt, obwohl einige Interviewpartner die Zusammenhänge zwischen politischen Entscheidungen und ihrem persönlichen Schicksal durchschauen. Eine Antwort auf die Frage, ob die Chinesen aus ihrer Geschichte gelernt haben, erhält in Xinrans Buch nur, wer sich bereits mit dem Thema China beschäftigt hat. Die Analyse der Interviews im Nachwort fällt für meinen Geschmack sehr knapp aus. Obwohl der Ablauf der Interviews sehr gleichförmig wirkt, haben mich die ungewöhnlichen Einzelschicksale stark beeindruckt.

Emily says

This past century has been a tumultuous one for China. Until 1912, China was still ruled by the Qing Dynasty, which gave way after the Xinhai Revolution to a series of regional warlords vying for supremacy. Nationalists were finally able to consolidate power by 1928, but then war, first with Japan and then civil war within China, was followed by the Communist revolution in 1949. The “Time of the Leadership of the Party” and the Cultural Revolution caused untold suffering, including millions of deaths from starvation during the

Great Leap Forward. In *China Witness*, Xinran undertook an prodigious, almost Herculean, project. This amazing woman, a journalist in China for over two decades, set out to record the experiences of ordinary Chinese people, particularly those of her parents' generation, before they were lost and forgotten.

Few historical records have survived the chaos of these “cataclysmic changes” in China. Many people were understandably reticent to commit anything to paper due to fear of reprisals; the winds of fortune could change very swiftly and an innocuous comment one day could be seen as dangerous proof of disloyalty or insufficient zeal for the motherland the next day. During the Cultural Revolution, many precious traditional landmarks and practices were systematically and intentionally wiped out by those in power in an attempt to “modernize” or simply remove other focuses that might draw loyalty or attention away from the Party; even family genealogical records had to be hidden or they would be destroyed. The lack of written documentation and the aging of the population who had lived through this time period gave Xinran's project a strong sense of urgency. She spent years laying the groundwork and then traveling all over China interviewing people about life during this period.

Her interviewees include a shoe-mender who has fixed footwear on the same back street in Zhengzhou on the Yellow River for 28 years; a husband and wife pair who were two of the founders of China's oil industry; and lantern makers in Nanjing in eastern China desperately trying to keep their ancient cultural tradition alive, but resigned to its eventual demise. Xinran traveled to the desert in the extreme northwest corner of China to an isolated city called Shihezi. Located on the ancient Silk Road, Shihezi is a modern city that was built by hundreds of thousands of political prisoners in the 1950s. She visited big cities like Beijing and Shanghai and small villages all over the country. The result is a broadly painted, but deeply intimate, portrait of a Chinese generation.

Common themes crop up again and again: national pride and self-respect, resilience and persistence in the face of incredible hardship, forgiveness and a willingness to move forward despite the pain of the past. One frequent sadness expressed by those Xinran interviewed involved lost time with family. Children were often raised by grandparents while the parents devoted themselves to the aims of the Communist Party in far-flung places, sometimes able to visit only a few times a year. Xinran mentions during one interview: “Almost all the parents have shared that pain – that is, they didn't give their children the family and the love that they should have done, or fulfilled their needs, and it's the biggest regret of their lives.”

Xinran invites her Western readers to learn about her homeland. “Knowledge about China is so small,” she laments, “it is a decimal fraction many positions after the decimal point.” In her afterword she relates her disappointment in the Western media coverage leading up to the Beijing Olympics, her sorrow at the devastating 7.8 earthquake that hit north Sichuan on 12 May 2008, and her devout hope that more individuals in the West will make a sincere effort to understand China and her people. “As a Chinese media person I struggled with Chinese censorship for a long time before I moved to London in 1997. Now, I feel the same sense of struggle again, but in the West, not with censorship, but with ignorance about my motherland.” Reading *China Witness* is a solid first step towards diminishing that ignorance and increasing understanding.

For more book reviews, come visit my blog, [Build Enough Bookshelves](#).

Pat says

This is a very good book that gives some excellent insights into both current China from the perspective of both the author who is in her middle years and now lives mostly in the UK and of the people that she

interviews who are mostly people in their later years, most of whom were revolutionaries when the Communist Party took over China in the late 40s. To give an example of an insight. It had not occurred to me - duh, it should have - that the Chinese have always existed under rulers who fostered and effectively used the policies of having people report against other people. In other words, the Maoist tactics of condemning the extended family for the "errors" (whether real or trumped up) of any member of the family was not new with Mao. It has been pretty standard practice since some of the earliest dynasties. Can people who have never really been allowed to freely think for themselves ever really embrace the western concept of democracy? Good questions to ask about both the Chinese and the Russian societies of today.

Ranjeev Dubey says

Any book on China describing the 'dark years' between the 1940s and 1990s is welcome especially if it avoids the rich, the powerful and the elite and deals instead with the lived experience of common folk. Xinran has ferreted out people from a variety of fields across the face of China and discussed their lives with her. Some are powerful but many are peasants or poor or stripped of all power or all of the foregoing. The result is a very interesting portrait of life in the raw in times of enormous trouble and change. This is reason enough to read this book. The black and white photos of the period is a second reason to read the book. Written in an easy low vocab style, the book should appeal to anyone looking for easy reading. Its heartwarming subdued emotional appeal should not hurt either.

That said, the book did not leave me reeling with joy for the same old reason: not enough data density. Too much of what is in it is known to anyone who reads anything of modern China or can be surmised from a simple understanding of 20th century Chinese history. I give it only two stars for this and no other reason. If you don't know China today, ignore the stars and expect to profit from a read.

Julie says

I wept. Xinran effectively captures the unique personalities of each of her subjects, from a brief snippet of an overheard conversation to long interviews with people who lived (somehow!) through conditions that seem impossibly inhumane. Truly though, their stories of hardship are engrossing and emotional. What brings me to tears are the stories of parenting during such tumultuous times. Consistent are regrets of losing connection with their children, and though reasons are as varied as DNA combinations, the remorse is always the same.
~ personal effect

I read this book after reading The Man Who Loved China, The Bathing Women and Distant Witness. I wanted to know more about how humanity in China survives its own evils, how does it compare with the propaganda western society has about it and how does it compare with reality of hardship I have personally experienced, and what consequences result to the nations' identity and ego? This was an excellent choice for such a gargantuan expectation.

Reading this book reaffirmed for me the truth of the Buddhist mantra that desire begets suffering, and I see it vetted in the stories within its pages. Those who desired the least, regardless of their means, suffered the least. ~Or at least that's what they say in hindsight.~

Sylvia Ttl says

I sought to read this book out of a great interest over the modern history of China from the standpoint of ordinary people from all walks of life. I appreciate the author's effort to tour China to document true but publicly-unavailable stories, yet she has annoyed me in many occasions for interrupting the interviewees from telling a full account. As a result, a potentially noteworthy personal history ends up as boring and long-winded "grandmother" story that I could not bear to read on. Not to mention the lack of footnotes, and bad editing with lots of grammatical errors. Certain stories are subtly captivating though, e.g the plight of an intellectual couple and the suffering of a righteous policeman. Although this book betters my understanding of China inspiring me to investigate my ancestral history too, I am afraid that it is far from being a remarkable work for my collection. Thanks to the San Jose Library for making it available for loan.
