VINTAGE

CHINA WITNESS

XINRAN

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About the Book

China Witness is the personal testimony of a generation whose stories have not yet been told. Here the grandparents and great-grandparents of today sum up in their own words – for the first and perhaps the last time – the vast changes that have overtaken China's people over a century. The book is at once a journey by the author through time and place, and a memorial to those who have lived through war and civil war, persecution, invasion, revolution, famine, modernization, Westernization – and have survived into the 21st century. We meet everyday heroes, now in their seventies, eighties and nineties, from across this vast country – a herb woman at a market, retired teachers, a legendary 'double-gun woman', Red Guards, oil pioneers, an acrobat, a female general, a lantern maker, taxi drivers, and more – those whose voices, as Xinran says, 'will help our future understand our past'.

About the Author

Xinran was born in Beijing in 1958 and moved to London in 1997. She is the author of *The Good Women of China, Sky Burial, Miss Chopsticks* and *What the Chinese Don't Eat*.

Also by Xinran

The Good Women of China
Sky Burial
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JILIN
KYRGYZSTAN
XINJIANG
INNER MONGOLIA
LIAONING
N. KOREA
JAPAN
Shihezi
Urumqi
BEIJING
Beijing
TIANJIN
Gulf of Bohai
S. KOREA
HEBEI
SHANXI
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GANSU
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Shanghai
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BANGLADESH
YUNNAN
GUANGXI
GUANGDONG
Guangzhou
Shenzhen
Hong Kong
MYANMAR
VIETNAM
Haikou
HAINAN
LAOS
Sanya
BEIJING Province
Municipality
Provincial capital
Cities/towns
0
500 km
0
300 miles

To the Mothers of China and my mother, Xujun

XINRAN

China Witness

Voices from a Silent Generation

TRANSLATED FROM CHINESE BY
Esther Tyldesley, Nicky Harman
and Julia Lovell

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Introduction

This book is a testament to the dignity of modern Chinese lives.

It has been not only a personal journey for me through the experiences of my parents' generation, but also – for my interviewees – a process of self-discovery, of revisiting and refining their memories of the past. While I have wondered what questions to ask, they have needed to think about what answers to give; about how to describe a twentieth century that, in many respects, has been full of suffering and trauma. For Chinese people, it is not easy to speak openly and publicly about what we truly think and feel. And yet this is exactly what I have wanted to record: the emotional responses to the dramatic changes of the last century. I wanted my interviewees to bear witness to Chinese history. Many Chinese would think this a foolish, even a crazy thing to undertake – almost no one in China today believes you can get their men and women to tell the truth. But this madness has taken hold of me, and will not let me go: I cannot believe that Chinese people always take the truth of their lives with them to the grave.

Why do the Chinese find it so hard to speak frankly about themselves?

"The concept of guilt by association," Professor Gao Mingxuan, an authority on the Chinese penal code, has remarked, "was always very important in ancient Chinese law. As early as the second millennium BC, a criminal's family was punished as harshly as the criminal himself. Over the next thousand years, this principle steadily tightened its grip on the judicial system. In his canonical

history of China, written around 100 BC, Sima Qian recorded that ‘after Shang Yang ordered changes in the law [c.350 BC], the people were grouped in units of five and ten households, carrying out mutual surveillance, and mutually responsible for each other’s conduct before the law’. If a member of one family committed a crime, the other families in that unit were judged to be guilty by association. By the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), the principle was applied not only within communities, but also within the army and government. In the case of minor offences, the criminal’s family would be exterminated to between three and five degrees of association; with serious offences, to nine or ten. Although the virtues of this penal principle were debated at various points in the imperial past, it remained a mainstay of the Chinese judicial code until the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911).”

China does not have a monopoly on the idea of collective responsibility in criminal law. In 1670, for example, Louis XIV installed just such a principle in France’s penal code: entire families – including children and the mentally ill – were to be killed for an individual’s crime. Sometimes, whole villages would be condemned, with even the dead posthumously disgraced.

In China, the deep historical roots of the principle of guilt by association gave rise to powerful traditions of clan loyalty, instilling in the Chinese a strong inhibition towards the idea of speaking out openly – out of a fear of implicating others.

None of the cataclysmic changes brought by China’s twentieth century – the fall of the Qing dynasty, the chaos of the warlord era, the Sino-Japanese War, the civil war, the Communist revolution – has succeeded in dislodging this strong clan consciousness. The Chinese people still seem to lack the confidence to speak out on what they really think – even as the post-Mao reforms have slowly opened doors between China and the outside world, between China’s

past and future, and between the individual and government.

The cautionary principle has governed public expression in China too long to be discarded in less than thirty years; China's freedom of speech continues to be hedged with idiotic obstinacy, ignorance and fear.

But I can wait no longer. Thanks to the destruction of the past wrought by the Cultural Revolution, and ongoing censorship of the media and control of school textbooks, China's younger generations are losing touch with earlier generations' struggles for national dignity. The individuals who fought for twentieth-century China are mocked or dismissed for their unquestioning loyalty to now outmoded revolutionary ideals. As they search for new values against the uncertainties of the present and the debunking of the past, many young people today refuse to believe that, without the contributions of their grandparents and great-grandparents, the confident, modernising China they now know would not exist.

After almost twenty years of interviews and research as a journalist, I am worried that the truth of China's modern history – along with our quest for national dignity – will be buried with my parents' generation.

Over these two decades, I compiled a list of around fifty individuals I had encountered, each with astonishing stories to tell. From these, I sifted out a final twenty names to interview for this book. Among my original fifty were numerous national celebrities whose inclusion would have guaranteed my book public attention, even notoriety. I decided, however, that they would have other opportunities to tell their stories, either personally, or through their children. I concluded, instead, that it would be of greater historical value to record the stories of ordinary people, of people who would otherwise lack the fame, money and rank to get their equally astonishing experiences heard. Although I know I cannot hope to summarise the past

hundred years of modern Chinese history in the experiences of only twenty people, I firmly believe that these individuals are a part of, and witnesses to, this history – of its notable successes and tragic failures.

The average age of my interviewees was in the seventies; the oldest was ninety-seven. Uncertainties about their physical health gave an added sense of urgency to my project.

Take, for example, the story of Hu Feibao (not his real name), a former bandit along the old Silk Road. After skirmishes with the People's Liberation Army throughout the 1950s, in the early 1960s Hu was finally arrested and condemned to life imprisonment. In the 1980s, he was transferred to a labour camp, where he has worked ever since. When I interviewed him there, from the late 1980s, he spoke to me of the bandit culture he had known along the Silk Road.

The gangs were like clans, he told me, with every bandit sharing the gang surname. Most were of mixed blood – some combination of Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian and Muslim. No one knew exactly who he was descended from, as there was no concept of normal family life. A bandit knew who his father was, but not his mother, because only boys were kept on in the gang. Girls would be left behind with their mothers – women who had been kidnapped to bear children.

His fellow bandits had never known him as Hu Feibao. Members of the gang were forbidden to tell outsiders – and especially not police – their names. "If they'd known our real surnames, they'd have used them to curse our ancestors." Hu Feibao (literally, Flying Dynamite Hu) was what the locals called him, because of the speed at which his gang moved. Growing up, he'd never heard of the "Silk Road"; he only knew it as the "Cash Highway". After he was arrested in 1963, the policeman who had travelled from Beijing to interrogate him about his "criminal

activities on the Silk Road". "Where's the Silk Road?" Hu asked in return.

His confusion was entirely natural: of neither local or ancient provenance, "the Silk Road" was a term invented by the German geographer Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, to identify the trade route between classical Europe and Asia.

In 139 BC, Zhang Qian, an envoy of the Han emperor Wudi, led the first embassy from the Chinese capital of Chang'an into the regions of the far west. One of his aides travelled as far as Anxi (Iran) and Shendu (India). All the countries visited sent ambassadors to accompany the embassy back to China. In AD 73, after the Silk Road had been closed by war, another envoy, Ban Chao, led a thirty-six-strong embassy on a second mission out of China, to reopen communications with the West; his aide, Gan Ying, almost reached Daqin (the Roman Empire), then swerved off towards the Persian Gulf, thereby extending the original trade route. This was the "desert" Silk Road, existing alongside the Silk Road of the plateaux, stretching from Chang'an, through the plateaux of Qinghai and Tibet, through to South Asia, and the maritime Silk Road, from Quanzhou, across the Taiwan Strait and through South-East Asia.

Through desert, plains and mountains, this 3,000-mile road – so romantically named by Richthofen after the prized commodity that travelled along it – offered a passage between ancient China and the Mediterranean. And as rivers shifted course and mountains became impassable with snow, so forks developed in it.

The bandit culture that Hu Feibao knew was that of the northern edge of the desert Silk Road: heading north out of Xi'an to Hami, through Jimsa and Urumqi, then on past Shihezi, Huocheng and Ili, before finally ending up on the coast of the Black Sea. His memories of the "Cash Highway" had none of the romantic associations in which

Western imaginings of the Silk Road – of its winding, luxury-laden caravans and setting suns – are steeped. The route he had known was strewn with bleached white bones – some of camels, some of humans. “It hardly ever rained,” he told me. “During the droughts, you felt like all your blood had been boiled dry. The sandstorms were like shifting graves: they buried men alive. For us, however, they were the best time for ambushes, even though they might kill us, because trade caravans always stopped; they’d never try to move on through them.” Hu Feibao and his fellow horsemen lived entirely off their wits: off their ability to exploit often fatally unpredictable local conditions. Born and raised among bandits, as early as he could remember he had always yearned to follow the example of Danbin Jianzan, the “Black Warrior Lama”.

After my first interview with Hu, I spent some time researching this mysterious Black Warrior Lama. Back in the early 1990s, there were few computers – and no Internet, of course – in China, and hardly any archives or materials available on modern police history. Although a couple of veteran policemen said they had heard of him, I could find no written sources. Later on, with the help of an army official who had researched the north-western warlord Ma Bufang (ruler of Qinghai in the 1930s and 1940s), I discovered a book by a Danish scholar called Henning Haslung, *Men and Gods in Mongolia*, from which I learned that, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Danbin Jianzan had been a tribal leader in a part of Mongolia under Russian rule. Imprisoned by the Tsar for usurping local power, Danbin Jianzan was subsequently exiled out into the steppe. After the 1911 revolution in China and the collapse of Qing authority in Mongolia, he and his troops overran and occupied the key north-eastern stronghold of Kebuduo. As various factions battled for control of the country, the Mongolian Revolutionary Party, with the help of the Soviet Red Army, encircled his power

base. Breaking out, he fled into the wild deserts of Xinjiang and Gansu, where he survived by robbing merchants and traders until, somewhere around the mid-1920s, he mysteriously disappeared. A 1994 Russian monograph, *The Head of the Black Lama*, and a Mongolian newspaper article from 1999 revealed that, in 1924, Danbin and his troops had been wiped out by some six hundred crack troops from a special unit sent by the ruling Soviet faction in Mongolia. Danbin's head now sits, perfectly preserved, in a museum in St Petersburg built during the reign of Peter the Great.

During our last interview in 1996, Hu Feibao refused to accept what I had found out. Although, he told me, locals sometimes tried to frighten their children into good behaviour by telling them "the Black Lama would get them" if they were naughty, he was generally well liked in those parts, because he never robbed the poor, Mongolians or couriers. A few villages along the way to the west even served as his eyes and ears, helping him with information and advance warnings. After his death, Hu went on, the code of bandit practice he had enforced was upheld by all the local gangs, a few of whom still operated even through the 1960s campaign against banditry waged by the People's Liberation Army. This code, according to Hu Feibao, was much stricter than the moral principles preached by the Nationalists, by Ma Bufang or by the Communist Party. He had lived by these rules all his life, and even after decades in prison he wouldn't admit that the robberies he and his fellow bandits had committed had been crimes. "That's how my people had always lived. If we hadn't stolen from the Cash Highway, how would our women and children have survived? How would the local villages have had goods to trade? For centuries and dynasties, we were the only ones who'd ever looked out for these people. We never forced them to work for us, or stole their food and livestock. And we never kidnapped women

who were already betrothed, or married with children. We only took unmarried girls, and we treated them much better than the village men; no one was allowed to beat their wives or children. The locals actually sent their daughters out onto the road to wait for us, often leaving them there for days on end. Sometimes they even starved or froze to death. Anyway, if we'd had no women, where would the sons for the gang have come from?"

This was to be our final meeting. We talked, I remember, between packing trucks inside the camp's factory complex, where he was making up bundles of gloves to put into boxes. His hands were trembling with old age. I sat silently to one side, listening to his protestations.

His stories made a deep impression on me. I had never imagined that someone my government had locked up for decades as a bandit, as a menace to society, would still show such courage and spirit; that this withered old man could once have led such an exciting life, or that the communities living by the Silk Road could have so harmoniously coexisted with this strange, apparently criminal society. In Chinese, the word "bandit" has entirely negative connotations. But the bandits along the Silk Road had had their own culture and moral standards. Hu Feibao shook me into re-examining both my own ability to judge right and wrong, and my understanding of Chinese society. Our tendency to judge other societies by our own standards can lead us to punish the innocent.

By the time I had decided to do the interviews for this book in 2006, Hu Feibao had had a stroke. When I telephoned his camp, the warder told me he was no longer able to talk. Suspecting the authorities were trying to stop him speaking to me, I tried again some while later. This time, I managed to talk directly to him. His voice was mumbling, indistinct; it had lost the confident, dignified ring that decades in prison had not succeeded in grinding out. I imagined him holding the phone with trembling

fingers, dribbling into the receiver. I knew this was not how this once formidable individual would wish to be remembered. I deleted his name from my list of interviewees.

In the initial interviews I did by phone in May and June 2006, another difficulty that I had anticipated presented itself. When I said that I would like to talk to them in person, my interviewees began to get cold feet; even to pull out completely. More and more subjects became out of bounds; some asked not to be filmed, or taped; others asked me if I knew what might happen after the interviews were published. I could tell that they were torn between the yearning to take this opportunity – quite possibly the last of their lives – to speak out, and anxiety for the possible consequences. Could I get hold of a government permit to speak to them? several people suggested. Or an official "interviewee protection" guarantee? As if the decision to talk about their lives was one for the Communist Party, rather than the individuals themselves, to make.

All of which only confirmed what I already knew from two decades of working as a journalist in China. Even though almost fifty years have passed since Mao's "Liberation" of the country, the Chinese people have not yet succeeded in escaping the shadow of three millennia of imperial totalitarianism and a twentieth century of chaotic violence and oppression, to speak freely without fear of being punished by the prevailing regime.

As I sat in my London home, I had no idea whether these people would really open up to me once I searched them out in China. When we sat down opposite each other, with the video camera running, would they respond by shutting themselves even further away from me? I didn't know whether I would be able to persuade them to talk; whether I would have the skill to tease their memories out of them.

But I knew I had to go forward: not only as a personal document of the work I had done over the past twenty years, but also for Chinese youth today, and especially for PanPan, my son and inspiration – a young man who had grown up between Britain and China. To help him understand the past of the China he knew, this project was a risk I was willing to take.

I began losing sleep, thinking constantly about how I could get my interviewees to trust me, to open up to me; how I could demonstrate to them my sense of responsibility towards their era; how I could persuade them to leave their accounts of what they had witnessed with me.

One June morning, lying in bed in our seventeenth-century cottage in Stourhead, I watched through the window the birds singing and skitting through the trees, their carefree twittering contrasting so markedly with the anxiety I felt at the task ahead of me. I wanted to run away from the project, to take refuge in beautiful, green Somerset, and write escapist fairy stories I'd thought up as a child, or reminiscences about places I had been to, people I had met, friends I had known.

If my mother-in-law, the novelist Mary Wesley, had still been alive, it would have been her ninety-fourth birthday. For some reason, since I had decided to write this book, I had been thinking a lot about her – particularly after a biography of her, *Wild Mary*, had come out. Would Mary have been happy with this document of her life, many people had wondered. Would she have regretted the choices she had made? These were the questions that I wanted to ask my interviewees, and also the questions that Western journalists often asked me: Did I regret anything about the forty years I had lived in China before I moved to the West? Had they been worthwhile?

Though I couldn't explain why, my instinct was always to say yes – they had been worthwhile. Through thousands of years of the Chinese past, so many women have toiled their

lives away, bearing children, bringing up their families, gaining nothing for themselves. Would they have said their lives had been worthwhile? I don't even know if they would have asked themselves the question. But I'm sure that towards the end of their lives, a great many Chinese people – both men and women – have thought back over their past, flicking through albums of memories they would never reveal to their children and grandchildren. What, I wonder, might these albums contain? Regret, perhaps? Self-denial? Or joyful affirmation of the life just lived? Perhaps their children and grandchildren would imagine them to contain only blindness and stupidity.

That day, I phoned a woman called Jin Zhi (not her real name). Jin Zhi is an academic authority on the former Soviet Union, specialising particularly on the relations between Mao and Stalin. An outstanding linguist, she speaks fluent English, Russian and German. Despite receiving a Western-style education up to the age of eighteen, she has been throughout her life a passionate supporter of the Communists, firmly believing that the Party will "win back for the Chinese people the dignity that they lost after the Opium Wars". She was an old friend of the family, so we were often in touch.

"Xinran," she had said to me, in her usual forthright tones, months earlier, "I definitely want to be in your book. I want to make my granddaughter Shanshan understand my past, my feelings, my political ideals. I want her to realise that her generation has something in common with mine."

But now, as we spoke on the phone, she told me that the more she thought about speaking out, the more distressed she felt. She hated herself, she said: the beauty she had lost, the fact that she had never enjoyed a warm, close family life, that even now, past eighty, she felt inhibited, controlled by her husband; that she was still not free. Her

only truly happy moments, she told me, were strolling on her own around Beihai Park in Beijing.

“Don’t be angry with me,” she said, after begging me to let her withdraw. She seemed a different person from the woman who had enthused so excitedly about the project in the past. But after putting the phone down, I knew she was the same Jin Zhi as ever; and that, in her way, she was representative of millions of Chinese. For the last hundred years, the Chinese people have been hesitating between affirmation and denial of the self; her inner struggle was entirely typical. Very few people can understand and define themselves as individuals, because all their descriptive vocabulary has been colonised by unified social and political structures. A person can readily respond to external stimuli – to political injustice, to frustrations at work, to the praise of others – but only rarely succeed in making independent sense of themselves.

I thought again of my mother-in-law, who had often been criticised for her individualism. If Mary Wesley had concentrated exclusively on rebelling against convention, on showing other women how they could dare to be different, without writing her novels, would she still be remembered? Might she have faded from view, like so many millions of forgotten old people? Mary had never been willing to be ordinary; she knew better than anything else how to be an individual.

Digging deep into her own life experiences, Mary, who was seventy when her first novel was published, used her writing – a testament to her own determination to swim against the tide – to challenge social and sexual mores. Through her own frankness and self-reflection, she encouraged her readers to re-evaluate themselves. Many older people who have come to hear me speak at bookshops and festivals have told me that reading her books made them feel constricted by their hidebound lives, desperate to rebel, though too timid to do so. But reading

the biography – about Mary's self-confidence and wild independence – inspired them.

If these testimonies to the dignity of modern Chinese lives succeed in making some members of China's older generations feel that their lives have not been wasted, and in persuading younger generations that the dazzling landscapes and possibilities of contemporary China have been realised only through the sacrifices and struggles of their forebears, I will feel that I have achieved something for my son and future grandchildren. If we let these old people take their experiences with them to the grave, I feel that we are doing them a serious injustice. They all have stories to tell; and even if these stories strike us as ignorant, foolish, perhaps criminal, they will usefully force us to reflect on progress we have subsequently made.

I realised, that morning in June, I had lost all confidence in myself. I was feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of the lives I had decided to explore – their childhood pleasures, their hopes and ambitions, their loves, friendships, attachments. Had they found happiness? Contentment? How would I begin my interviews? Where would they end?

Planning this journey took me six months; not only was it very difficult to line up interviews but also to structure a "time line" for readers to see the difference between the historical China and today's image of China. From my research, I discovered that it sometimes took more than twenty years for the poorest and westernmost regions of the country to receive the policies and orders from central government departments which were mostly located in the eastern part of China. Improvements in modern living conditions often took as long. For instance, the Single Child policy was initiated in 1979 (it finally became a law in 2004) but many families have large numbers of children in southern and western China, even in the villages near big cities. Therefore, I chose to move between the Yellow River

and the Yangtse, the most populated area of China, from west to east, so that readers could follow our journey to see what Chinese lives looked like from the 1980s to 2006.

The witnesses in this book lived in the period that is known to the West as the “Time of Red China”, but most Chinese call it the “Time of the Leadership of the Party”. For this reason, in this book (which is neither a work of historical research, nor one that comes up to strict academic standards), whether I talk in terms of Red China or of the leadership of the Party, it is necessary for me to tell some of the stories from the history of the Communist Party as plainly, readably and simply as I can. That way, readers, most of whom know nothing of the history of the Chinese Communist Party, will be able to find answers to some of the questions of today’s China.

In my search for a witness close to the upper echelons of the Communist Party, I considered several dozens of possible interviewees: I was looking for an eyewitness who has survived the political chaos of China’s modern history and come out the other side. This is why I chose Fang Haijun, a victim of a high-level conflict in 1931, the first head of Mao Zedong’s personal guard, a man personally selected by Mao in 1938 to be Chief of the Organisation Committee of the Political Office of the Central Military Commission, and a former deputy chairman of the General Party Affairs Office (a body made up of twenty-six high-ranking military leaders, which included such historical figures as Zhu De, Peng Dehuai, Lin Biao, Chen Yi and Liu Bocheng). He was also one of the people who created China’s national defence industry after 1949, as well as the founder of China’s Naval Academy and submarine fleet. However, his “closeness to history” in the end proved an obstacle, not an opportunity. His story alone requires a book, but our conversation helped me to understand the rules that govern China’s political life. When I asked him how he was able to survive the fierce infighting of Mao’s

inner circle, he told me the following story. In the 1930s, he often played mah-jong with Mao Zedong, Tan Zheng and a few other fellow Hunanese. There are many different systems for mah-jong, but people from the same place play according to the same rules: they did not need to spend a lot of time talking about it, they all understood the strategies, because they had all been raised in the earth and water of the same place. His words were often in my mind as I prepared for the interviews before me.

When choosing accommodation for our research team, I decided that in poorer areas, we would try to stay in the best government guest houses; in more developed cities, we would look for the cheapest single-star hotels. My first consideration in impoverished parts of China was security. Officials in poor areas are for the most part not very educated – particularly with respect to legal freedoms and human rights – and tend to respect only government-run institutions. I thought that if we stayed in the most expensive establishment in the area, the local officials would be too intimidated to interfere with us. In more prosperous parts of the country, I wanted the team to experience as much of ordinary, daily life as they could: to take the everyday temperature of the area through the food that they ate and places they stayed. Through noting local differences, I hoped we would see at first hand the historical fault lines in China's development: the small towns lagging ten, twenty, even thirty years behind the big showcase cities.

But, to be honest, none of us could ever have imagined or expected what we might find on this journey, planned for so long, involving fifty people and based on my twenty years of research.

Before I started, I had no idea. But I knew that I had to complete my journey.

1

Yao Popo, or the Medicine Woman of Xingyi

Sitting on the step of Yao Popo’s herb shop.

YAO POPO or the Medicine Lady, aged seventy-nine, *interviewed in Xingyi, Guizhou province, south-western China. When she was four years old, Yao Popo's mother was killed and she was given away to a medicinal herb seller. She was married off to a musician, the foster son of the herb seller, and the three of them travelled around China, from the Yangtze River to the Pearl River between the 1930s and 1960s. She says the Cultural Revolution helped her: she made a home and a life from it because hospitals and medical schools closed down, and people came to her instead.*

AT 2.20 A.M., on 27 July 2006, after twenty-eight hours on aeroplanes, from London to Guilin, via Munich, Beijing and Xi'an, I found myself too exhausted to sleep. The two strong sleeping pills I had taken earlier gave me only three hours of troubled rest, full of dreams of getting on and off planes, checking in, reclaiming baggage, and running round and round an enormous circle, searching for its centre – the witnesses I wanted to interview.

The last part of my dream was linked to what my husband Toby and I talked about on the plane: China's century-long quest for a new political and moral centre, following the 1911 revolution. Every time I go back to China, I look for the places that have been important to me in the past, but most of them have disappeared – everything is different. Sometimes, I find it hard to distinguish between my memories and my dreams. If the past is already this blurred for me in middle age, how do older people manage? Do their memories cease to become real? If so, does this cause them pain? Do the stories they hear from other people of their generation also start to seem unreal? How can they convince their uncomprehending or doubting children that stories and events that have left no physical historical trace really took place?

Returning to Guilin in the south – famous for its lush greenness and eerily beautiful limestone formations – for the first time in ten years, my heart grew heavy. As we continued our journey and the moment for approaching my interviewees drew closer, I felt underprepared, hesitant, overwhelmed by the speed at which China was changing.

Everywhere I had been a decade ago seemed no longer there. I had nothing with which to orient my memories.

When I moved to Britain in 1997, I was very proud of the speed at which China, and its cities in particular, were changing. But after I saw how careful Europe was to preserve the traces of its past, I began to be troubled by the unseemly haste with which my country was destroying the old to bring in the new. I saw now that this millennia-old empire of ours was being rebuilt by mindless modernisers who took their cultural bearings from McDonald's. In the two decades that Mao had been dead, modernisation had taken a heavy toll on every Chinese city, with arrogant local planners still gleefully bent on continuing this irresponsible destruction of the ancient past.

Xingyi, the capital of the Buyi Minority and Miao Minority autonomous region in the province of Guizhou (south China), is a typical example of a city being transformed by post-Mao modernisation. "Situated at the intersection of three provinces," the local government guidebook informed me, "Xingyi has historically been a key communications, and collecting and distributing centre in the region. Surrounded by undulating hills and intersecting rivers, the area is notable for its limestone formations. With its beautiful countryside and temperate climate, Xingyi – the home of many illustrious historical figures – has much undeveloped potential as a tourist destination."

Arriving in Xingyi, on our way from Guilin to Chengdu, felt like stepping into a time warp. Everything in the city reminded me of early 1980s Beijing and Shanghai: the streets, the clothes, the shops, and especially the municipal government guest house that we stayed in, with its shabby decor, malfunctioning room fittings and leaky bathrooms, its clueless receptionists, chambermaids who never changed your towels, and waiters and waitresses who