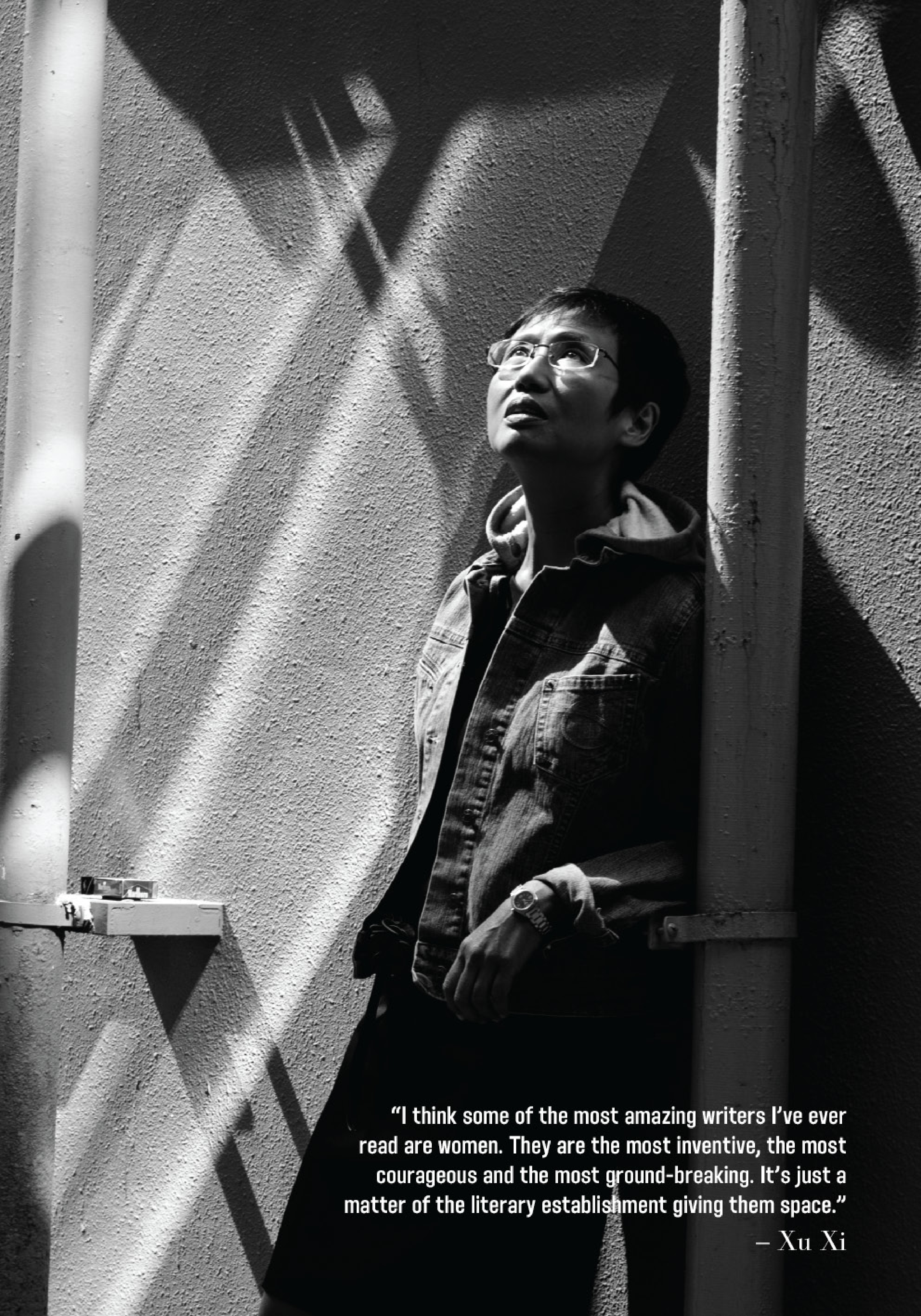

Women Hold Up Half The Sky

*From obscurity to the global stage, **Samantha Kuok Leese** charts the rise of China's female authors and speaks to two of the brightest contemporary stars*

Photograph by Earl Wan

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says "women hold up half the sky", meaning that women are equal to men in their place on earth. However, the realm of literature in China has been habitually dominated by men for centuries, in large part due to a Confucian doctrine introduced in the 6th century BC that saw a lack of literary talent in women as a virtue.

As Wendy Larson, a professor of East Asian languages and Literatures, outlined in her book *Women and Writing in Modern China*, by the time of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) female virtue was defined as a bodily ordeal, which implied that women's 'nature' was "physical, material and concrete", unsuited to the "transcendent emotional and intellectual spheres" associated with men and with writing. "Literary talent therefore entered the modern era as male, and the mere participation of women as writers did not create a niche for them."

As such, Chinese literature by women was rare, and it was only after the effects of May Fourth radicalism in 1919 – a series of riots which challenged the social dictates of the time – combined with changes in the education system, that female writers achieved a real voice and place alongside their male contemporaries. Though they generally tackled issues such as relations between the sexes, family, and friendship, they were revolutionary for being the first to give direct expression to female subjectivity; and though they would still be largely suppressed for the next half century, they would pave the way for the female author in China.

In the last thirty years, the bias has unravelled slowly. Leading scholar Michelle Yeh recognises the 1980s as a time when an "unprecedented number" of women, such as Zhang Jie, Chen Rong, Zhang Xinxin and Wang Anyi, showed their "impressive talents" on China's literary scene.

However, Chinese women's writing did not find its niche in

Chinese author Xujun Eberlein

Photograph by Joey L

the global mass market until 1991, when the publication of Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* took the world by storm. According to its publisher Harper Collins, *Wild Swans* remains "the biggest selling non-fiction paperback in recent publishing history".

While the book is still banned in the author's home country, overseas critics hailed Chang's memoir as one of the era's most significant works, as it revealed first-hand the tragedy of life in twentieth century China at a time when the West knew very little about what happened behind the so-called 'bamboo curtain'.

Despite its extraordinary success, *Wild Swans*' damning content allowed Chang's audience to assume an easy vision of China as a brutal and oppressive foreign power. A perspective which has become increasingly problematic as Western readers develop a more balanced and contemporary view of Chinese history and culture.

During the 1990s, publishers keen to capitalise on *Wild Swans*' success encouraged a series of works in a similar vein. Chinese women's writing in English came to be characterised by a crowd-pleasing formula that, as literary scholar Helena Grice noted in her book *Asian American Fiction, History and Life Writing*, takes as its "focus and organising rubric the central character's/author's suffering and pain as the victim of a totalitarian regime".

Some found this approach difficult to accept. Henry Y. H. Zhao, professor of Chinese literature at Sichuan University, described it thus:

"How can you summarise the chaos of China in the twentieth century – the Civil War, the Cultural Revolution? The situation was confused until Jung Chang came along and boldly simplified it all. *Wild Swans* is hardly literature but it was a brilliant formula. It was written in English with the West in mind, which already implies a certain dumbing-down. The Chinese were mystified by the book. They said, any family could have just such a history and tell it in a more interesting way!"

Flora Drew, translator of modern Chinese literature and partner of the celebrated dissident author Ma Jian, explained it further:

"There's a certain type of autobiographical writing, mainly by women, mainly for a Western readership, cataloguing the suffering the Chinese have endured for generations, and you get a slight feeling that the writers are trying to out-do each other, so the more gruesome the suffering the better the book will do. Patriotic Chinese object strongly to these books damning China that are aimed specifically at Western readers."

Such works include Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* (1993), Pang-Mei Natasha Chang's *Bound Feet and Western Dress* (1996), Adeline Yen Mah's *Falling Leaves* (1997) and Hong Ying's *Daughter of the River* (1998), among others.

While it would be simplistic to regard these books as the same, enough of a common thread runs through them that they formed what was widely accepted as a new body of women's writing. Today, Grice believes it is still "commodified as a perspective", which tends to compound stereotypes about women's experience in China. She argues, "Publishers are currently engaged in selling a reading public an Orientalism that continues to be extremely profitable, one that continues to fetishise Asia and Asians."

In the last decade, however, there seems to have been a growing effort to move away from the *Wild Swans* model and to produce stories about China that are accessible as primarily personal, rather than political, narratives. By encouraging global readers to relate to the author as fellow human beings rather than as voyeurs of a bleak foreign experience, the shift normalises women's lives in China and helps to demystify the nation's complicated past and rapidly-changing present.

Contemporary author Xujun Eberlein is a native of Chongqing, one of China's major south-western cities, who moved to the United States in 1988. Her first book, *Apologies Forthcoming*, won the 2007 Tartts Fiction Award and established her as one of the most refreshing new voices in Chinese women's writing.

The collection of eight stories is a moving remembrance of the Cultural Revolution at an individual level, through which Eberlein gives voice to a variety of characters in a range of times and settings. The book's subtitle is pointedly *Stories not about Mao*. Her time outside China encouraged her to present the historical calamity of the Cultural Revolution in small but deeply absorbing episodes.

"Having lived in two countries of political opposites, I am no longer easily excited by '-ist' labels, be it communist, capitalist, imperialist, or terrorist. I have learned there are people's faces behind all those '-ists', with human commonalities and differences, human weaknesses and biases. I've seen similarities in national and international politics and propaganda, and the information disparity that exists on both sides of the earth.

"It is easy for people in each country to see the other in a rather abstract and presumptive manner, instead of as fully fleshed fellow human beings. My intention was thus to return to the basics of human nature, to portray the characters as realistically human as I could."

Although the overall theme of her book is the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, Eberlein was careful to avoid what she calls 'victim literature'.

She explains, "Despite the fact that the Cultural Revolution was an 'all-people' movement, in which people often took turns to be both victimisers and victims, today you see mostly 'victim literature', while few talk about their own regrettable actions. I'm a pessimist when it comes to human nature and I thought the apology would forever be forthcoming, but never arriving, thus my book title."

While she is ready to praise *Wild Swans* as "one of the best memoirs I've read on this period", Eberlein holds that when Chang portrays her father, for example, she assumes a position of victimhood that could not have always been true. "As a [Communist] Party cadre and a co-director of a provincial propaganda department, it was impossible that the father hadn't victimised people just doing his job," Eberlein explains, "But you won't see this anywhere in the book. I understand it was difficult for the author. You need distance to be truthful."

She is positive however, about the way Chinese women's writing in English has developed: "I think there is a greater variety of voices now, which is a really good thing. The only way, in my opinion, to counter propaganda is to hear many different voices, to see many different pictures. And yes, propaganda is not China's patent alone."

Among the growing variety of voices are those who pose more universal questions about womanhood. While most of the books discussed investigate – directly or otherwise – the status of women in China specifically, some writers have widened their polemic without relinquishing the cultural viewpoint that distinguishes their work.

Xu Xi is a well-known author who divides her time between New York and Hong Kong, where she is celebrated as one of the city's most successful literary talents. She established the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) programme in Creative Writing at the City University of Hong Kong last year. It is the only programme in the world to focus on Asian writing in English.

Her 2010 novel *Habit of a Foreign Sky*, which was shortlisted for the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize, investigates what it means to be a woman in the modern world. "With all the privileges feminism and the women's movement have given us, we are still stuck," she observes.

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– Xujun Eberlein

Habit of a Foreign Sky, named for a line in an Emily Dickinson poem and inspired by Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*, is a thoughtful novel that tells the story of a tightly wound, mixed-race executive who must deal with the sudden death of her mother alongside the shifting course of her career in international high finance. Xu Xi calls it her 'woman's book'.

"I went into it knowing that the question was complicated and I came away understanding why a lot of women's writing is a form of 'chick lit'." She interprets the term not as an inferior label, but as "a certain amount of willingness to deal with the emotional and the sexual in a way that male writers don't."

Xu Xi admits that women's writing is often referred to in a disparaging way, but says that it is "getting freer."

"I think some of the most amazing writers I've ever read are women. They are the most inventive, the most courageous and the most ground-breaking. It's just a matter of the literary establishment giving them space."

She notes that women writers – in China and the West – come from a literary tradition informed by men. In reinventing a tradition today, they must highlight questions that matter to women universally.

For example, *Habit* aims in part to explore what Xu Xi calls the "myth of the Superwoman": can women forge a meaningful and powerful career while nurturing a successful family life? "I am a feminist, and I called myself one at a time when that wasn't fashionable to say, but I've never quite believed we can have it all," the author says.

Habit's action unfolds in Hong Kong, New York and Shanghai, a testament to the international identity many Chinese people hold as a result of a vast diaspora. In Asian writing more generally, Xu Xi identifies an increasingly multicultural outlook.

"I see it as writing out of Asia," she says of the sub-genre, "so it could be about Asia, from Asia or influenced by Asia. It could or could not be set in Asia. What I notice time and again is the transnational perspective that Asian writers bring to looking at fiction."

Chinese women's writing, then, seems to be shifting its focus not only from the big to the small – that is, from the historical to the human – but also towards an international appeal that does not rely on a Western readership's fetishistic approach to the body of work as a whole. Instead it relies on its own quiet confidence that people the world over will identify with the story of the human condition.

At a time when the world's gaze has turned East, it is important that we recognise the value of this change for overcoming prejudices and advancing understanding between cultures. If literature is the written expression of dreams, we shall continue to learn that China's are not all nightmares.