

## **Vivian's Notes about *Bright Swallow***

### 1. *Why did you choose to write about this particular period of your life?*

In 1972, when I just turned 15, my mother died and I began to live like an orphan; and in 1978, following the end of the 10 year long Cultural Revolution, I left the village where I did my countryside re-education.

To the nation, it was one of the darkest periods in Chinese modern history; to me, those were the hardest years of my life. But that was not the whole reason why my writing focused on this particular period. I shared misfortunes that many suffered at the time. I was not the only child who lost parents – I described how a classmate, returned from school to find out her mother had hanged herself, that was much more tragic.

It was my mother's last words to me that made this period of life of mine significant.

The very last thing my mother said before her death was, "You know what? I feel happy now. At least I've lived a life." At 15, I didn't understand, what could she have meant "to live a life" – I was living a life. But gradually, through reading the western classics, meeting the storyteller Zhang and the book illustrator neighbour, I began to see that there were different lives, richer lives. The Beethoven concert on May 1, 1973 that I attended through bartering my storytelling skills was the moment when my mind clicked. For the first time, I recalled my mother's last words and understood the life she mentioned would have included this kind of evening and much more.

I only understood its significance much later in life looking back on it. My mother had actually left me a challenge which became a great motivation in my life. So fighting against my fate, making choices against all odds, a life pattern was established. That was the reason this memoir focused on this period. At one time I considered calling this book "A Life to Live".

### 2. *Why did you elect to write and to publish this quintessential Chinese story in English?*

a) Writing in a second language involves a higher degree of consciousness.

Writing in one's own language, to a certain extent, there's an automatic aspect to it. Words come to you naturally and you don't have to search for them. But writing in English, my second language,

there's a lot more choosing, a lot more weighing the words and expressions, i.e. a lot more difficulties. However, in the process of choosing and searching for words and expressions, my writing becomes more detached and objective. This allows the stories to speak for themselves and gives me the distance to see things that once seemed normal as extraordinary or vice versa.

b) Liberated me from self-censorship

I write for an English audience who do not have much of the assumed knowledge about that period so I write more explicitly, explaining things that I might not bother to explain to a Chinese audience. In due course, I reveal things that often were subconsciously forgotten – things that even shock myself.

On the other hand, English readers do not pose any threat to me. I feel safer and less guarded to tell the truth. The habits of self-censorship, unconsciously acquired while writing in Chinese, can be avoided.

c) Language differences

Some linguistics have claimed that language is not merely a means of expression, but a way of experiencing the world. Therefore, writing in different languages is like seeing the world through different lenses. For certain subjects, I agree with this claim.

Many absurd scenes are in this book. If I wrote it in Chinese, the absurdity and the ironic feelings might not be apparent. For example, many dialogues (my final conversation with p.15 my mother, "If you're determined and not afraid to die, you will be victorious.") sounded like propaganda, like slogans. However, propaganda in Chinese was and still is a very positive concept. Talking in slogans is nothing unusual.

3. *Why were you and many others so responsive to story-telling, specifically to the retelling of the stories contained in masterpieces of western literature, in novels by writers such as Charles Dickens or Victor Hugo?*

The Cultural Revolution imposed a total ban on things that could stimulate people's imagination. People were culturally deprived and welcomed anything that offered an escape; novelties to embrace.

However, most importantly, to me and my audience at the time, the western classics presented a world that was more real to us. The characters in those books were less perfect and flawed, yet closer to our hearts. On the other hand, Chinese literature had been diminished by the Communist party since the Yan'an literary forum in 1942. The only value of literature was then decided to be its effective propaganda usage. It should serve only for revolutionary needs. In 1957 and 1964, this view was reinforced. Under these guidelines, Chinese literature focused mainly on class struggles. In fact, the whole Cultural Revolution was ignited by an argument over a play, Hairui's Resignation 海瑞罢官, which had stepped over the guidelines. We can say that although the total ban was imposed in the Cultural Revolution, the damage had been done over a long period. We lived in a 'perfect reality' which was full of heroes portrayed in the revolutionary literature whose deeds were unmatched. There was a great thirst in the Chinese public for western literature in translation that we could relate to.

#### 4. How do you see the role of a storyteller?

A storyteller has to be proficient in getting her/his story across to audiences, making them laugh, gasp or weep, i.e. be responsive. In other words, good storytellers must be able to create a two-way communication. Their telling should go beyond plots, beyond entertainment, evoke feelings and elicit understandings. This has been my goal in my storytelling (including my teaching) and my writing.

#### 5. What has been the impact on you personally of writing about what was an extremely difficult and often painful time in your life?

##### a) Anger:

When I was 15 living in the situations, I saw no alternative and I accepted my fate. Going through them with today's understanding of life, it was unbearable. Why me? This anger was revealed in many places in the book. In fact, I stopped my regular phone calls to my first brother after the book was completed.

##### b) Regret:

I felt so sorry about what I said to my mother in our last conversation. I felt guilty about having let my fourth grandma and my village friends down. I wish I hadn't said certain things or had behaved differently. These regrets were killers that nearly sent me into depression.

c) Rediscover myself:

“No one emerged unscathed from that extraordinarily dark period.” I learned to see things from different points of view, from other people’s positions or, at least, within the social contexts. “In a dark period, not many have vision of light.” As a result, I added the final chapter, Afterword, to express my changed feelings.

6. *Not infrequently during the period you describe you felt betrayed and humiliated, not just by the system and those in authority but by those close to you, those who should have protected you? How have these experiences affected your ability to trust people?*

My experience taught me how generous people can be on my behalf, yet on the other hand, I also experienced the treachery of people. I saw people being very selfish and destructive to one another. I’ve tried to be like the people who helped me. But I am also less trustful of people than those who grew up in calmer and saner times. There is a kind of wariness. I’m more kind of awake to the possibility that people could turn out to be not what they seem, to be untrustworthy. I’ve seen the weakness in people. That’s probably why I subconsciously desire to be ‘invisible’ among people, particularly in front of authority. But very ‘prominent’ with animals.

I always love animals, it’s in my nature. My experience and my countryside re-education consolidated my relationship with animals. My close relationship with those villagers is from the same reason. Those peasants were far closer to nature, human nature as well, in many senses. The city people back then had been dehumanised by the ideology, polluted by beliefs. Unfortunately, passionate beliefs can sometimes distort people – make them less than themselves.

7. *Now, you have recorded your story – beautifully and movingly – and placed it in the public arena; you and your personal story are and will be the object of acclaim, of appraisal/scrutiny – how does that feel for you?*

One of the comments on the back of my book says that this story was told with great honesty. That was my aim. I tried to be as truthful as possible. That was why I exposed my weaknesses, my not so admirable behaviours such as gobbling down 5 dumplings in my neighbour's kitchen when I knew that she was reluctant to share and bribing my hometown official. But I can't swear that I haven't held some things back. I think readers can accept that.

Writers often struggle about what to say in their memoir. They don't want to let their family or friends, anyone close to them, know certain things. I have the same struggle. I also write about other people including my family members, my opinions and judgement on them.

Also, a large part of the memoir is, inevitably, re-creation. Everything is filtered own experience. Unavoidably, some things might be disputed by those who were there.

I see this memoir as a testimony of what people have passed through. This is a period of history that has been widely written and talked about. But history can be dry, so this kind of first person's account is important, it goes alongside the histories. It gives history human dimensions and allows people to relate to it. It's important to have testimonies, important that people record what actually happened. No one's personal experiences will be the whole truth but truth is made up of many perspectives. I have my fear to have exposed quite a bit of my personal life. But I make my own small contribution.

What happened in this memoir are history, but throughout the world, many are suffering from injustice, humiliation and discrimination at this very moment. This is my conviction.

8. *What is the difference between your account and other people's accounts of the same period?*

The difference is in the description of the countryside re-education. There are many stories, fiction and non-fiction, about the city graduates' experiences in the countryside. One of their overwhelming features is that most writers regarded themselves as outsiders talking about the strangeness and foreignness and they acted as exiles. However, three reasons made my account different in this aspect:

- a) Meeting the Immortal Zheng, learning the message my own mother gave him – wherever you are, make the best of your circumstances – like a message from my mother beyond the grave – this was the turning point. It had extra value because it came from my mother to another party who had actually acted on it and benefitted from it. My mother was a driving force throughout the book.
- b) Participating in various village events, working in different jobs and mixing with all kinds of villagers – these interactions changed my perspectives on the villagers and helped me see them as equals. They enabled me to break away from my designated social group. Although there were other city graduates who, to certain extent, could free themselves from their preconceptions – seeing the quality of the villagers, understanding the constraints of their lives and wanting to help them – they remained the city graduates. If I had been one of the girls who bound herself in the city youth dormitory, my experience might have been different.
- c) Having survived in harsh conditions – I had been living alone, forced to look after myself and thus become more capable and resourceful. Unlike most of other city graduates who were torn from loving families, I had nothing to miss and I was able to do many things others were hopeless at.

9. *We know your mother seemed to be able to detach herself from the mob culture – a strong theme in the memoir. As a child, given the natural tendency of people your age to go along with the mob, to fit in and not stand out, to what extent were you able to detach yourself?*

I didn't entirely. I joined in the mockery of one of my neighbours, a Ms Ruan who was tortured at her workplace every day because of her father's Kuomintang past. She made sure to return home in the dark so no one could see her bruises. But we, the group of teenagers, determined to see her red eyes and distorted face, would wait at the gate for her. We had no compassion until she eventually killed herself. At that point something changed in me. Another changing point was when Mr Dong was arrested, my mother warned me not to gloat over it (recorded in the memoir) and my mother's remarks on a Red Guards action – taking an old lady's jewellery away – "Heaven knows how long she's saved to get these beautiful things."