

Two Stories by Xi Xi

Introducing Xi Xi

ZHANG YAN 張彥 herself denies any deliberate reference to direction in her pen-name Xi Xi 西西 (literally West West). At the same time she insists that it is formed along quite different lines from proper names like Mississippi 密西西比, Sicily 西西里 or St. Francis of Assisi 聖法蘭西斯·阿西西. It is a graphic representation of a young girl in a skirt, her legs spread within a chalked frame, playing a game called 造房子, Building a House, popular among young Chinese girls to this day.

She was born in Shanghai into a family originally from Guangdong province, and came with her family to Hong Kong in 1950 to complete her secondary school education. She then received her training as a school teacher at Grantham College of Education. After graduation, she was a primary school teacher for 20 years, then, after a four year gap, returned to teaching. There is a streak of childish delight observable in some of her stories and a spontaneous, childlike enjoyment of life in some of her characters. In *My City* 我城, 1979, the hero of the novel is a young apprentice in a telephone company; he looks at everything with wonder and awe, and his subjection to a physical examination, of which he completely fails to understand the significance, is quite hilarious.

But Xi Xi has never deliberately written for children, and her expressions of childish delight are often restrained. Her style can best be described as sophisticated, a sophistication masked by a deliberate and deceptive simplicity. Her first attempt at serious writing was "Maria", a short story published in 1965 in the *Student Weekly* 學生週報. It describes the harrowing experience, during the Congo war of "liberation", of a Belgian nun, who tries to give water to a captured French mercenary on the point of death. She leads him to a stream and he almost reaches it, only to be shot seven times from behind by the African "leopards". It is extraordinary that a young Chinese school teacher should have begun her writing career with such an outlandish subject, one which was quite beyond the confines of her own personal experience. The story won acclaim from the critics, and her writings

from then on have showed a versatility in dealing with a variety of themes from different points of view, and a determination to avoid repeating herself. She writes creditable *baihua*, and has succeeded in overcoming the influence of the local Cantonese dialect, which has hampered most young writers educated and brought up in Hong Kong. But she differs from Eileen Chang and Bai Xianyong, in that she does not set out to be a deliberate stylist. Stylistic perfection, of course, attracts imitation. But the stylist either tends to become stereotyped, or disappoints his loyal following by adopting a new approach. Xi Xi has no such qualms. The form and language of her stories are tailored to fit the subject matter.

The unique quality of her writing may in part be explained by the unique nature of the Hong Kong environment. A free port and international commercial centre, it paid no attention to "culture" until the late sixties. A few early and valiant attempts to publish literary journals failed. Eventually small groups of writers got together and managed to put out publications, financed, written, edited and even distributed by themselves. Such groups have been steadily growing in numbers over the years. Xi Xi once edited a magazine called *The Thumb* 大姆指, and now belongs to the Su Ye 素葉 group, which has a bi-monthly magazine and publishes its own series of books. This sort of thing is quite common in cosmopolitan cities. But Hong Kong possesses two distinct advantages. Hong Kong is relatively free from the obsessive influence of the May 4th Movement, and because of its two-stream educational system and the preference given to the English language it is not unduly preoccupied with the Chinese "identity crisis" and the search for "roots". It is entirely up to the individual writer what attitude he wishes to adopt towards the main stream of the Chinese tradition. And Hong Kong is in a better position to assimilate international cultural trends. Interestingly, the younger writers and artists are much more sympathetic to writers outside the English language. According to Xi Xi, the works that have had the greatest impact on her are fairy tales, European and Japanese films and Latin American and European writers. It does not follow that she rejects the Chinese tradition. On the contrary, she is essentially a Chinese writer. But she is more cosmopolitan than insular in her outlook. Her second novel *Deer Hunt* 哨鹿 is an historical account of Emperor Qianlong's 乾隆 deer hunt in Inner Mongolia, a juxtaposition of historical fact and fictional fantasy, demonstrating her ability to combine past and present through creative imagination. She has also published a volume of verse, while her latest publication *Cross Currents* 交河 is a collection of essays and short stories.

S.C.S.