

Hardcover: China

# Survivors' stories from China

'Woman From Shanghai' digs up memories that the Chinese state still works hard to suppress

BY HOWARD FRENCH  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

Xianhui Yang's (楊顯惠) *Woman From Shanghai: Tales of Survival From a Chinese Labor Camp* (上海女人——中國勞改場倖存者的故事), a newly translated collection of firsthand accounts that the publisher deems "fact-based fiction," centers on what might be called the Gulag Archipelago of China.

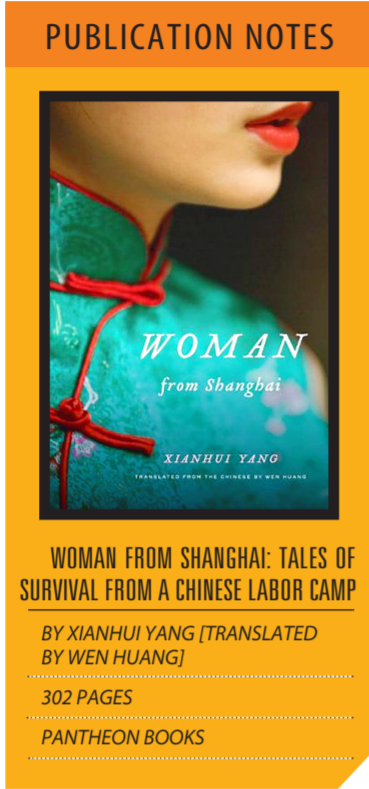
Yang's stories, which he painstakingly collected over a three-year period a decade ago, are the recollections of people the Chinese state branded as "rightists" in the late 1950s and sent to Jiabiangou (夾邊溝), a camp notorious for "re-education through labor" in the northwestern desert wastelands of Gansu Province. In his introduction, the translator, Wen Huang, explains that the camp, which was built to hold just 40 or 50 criminals, came to hold roughly 3,000 political prisoners between 1957 and 1961. All but 500 of them would perish in Jiabiangou, mostly of starvation.

When word of the soaring death toll reached the capital, Beijing began an investigation. In October 1961, the government ordered Jiabiangou closed and subsequently mounted an exhaustive cover-up. After Jiabiangou was shuttered, a doctor assigned to the camp spent six months fabricating the medical records of every inmate. In letters to family members, the cause of death was attributed to all manner of illnesses except starvation, a word that was never mentioned.

Though less well-known in the West than two other immense political disasters visited upon the Chinese people by Mao Zedong (毛澤東), the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, the so-called Anti-Rightist Movement to which the subjects of Yang's stories fell victim remains difficult to research because of continuing censorship. Chinese historians say this is partly because of the central role that Mao's much revered successor Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), now credited with putting the country on the path of economic liberalization, played in these ideological purges.

Yang first encountered stories of Jiabiangou's horrors as a self-described idealistic youth, while working on a collective farm in the 1960s. Though Yang was skeptical at first, the stories stuck with him. Years later, when he was denied access to archives from this period and when queries to the government on the subject of Jiabiangou went unanswered, his research turned to what he calls China's human archives: living people and their oral histories.

In this regard, *Woman From Shanghai* represents a remarkable contribution to the growing literature based on personal histories. Huang, the translator, has played an important role in bringing such work to an English-language audience. He also recently translated *The Corpse Walkers: Real Life Stories, China From the Bottom Up* (中國底層訪談錄), a work by a giant in this budding field, the muckraking Sichuan journalist Liao Yiwu (廖亦武).



Readers of Yang's book should not be put off by the frequent recurrence of common elements in these stories: the exposure to bitter cold; hunger so intense as to cause inmates to eat human flesh; the familiar sequence of symptoms that eventually leads to death; the toolbox of common survivor techniques, whether toadyism, or the manipulation of the vestiges of privilege that withstood even incarceration in this era of radical egalitarianism. It is through the accumulation and indeed repetition of such subjects that *Woman From Shanghai* draws its utterly convincing portrait of a society driven off the rails.

In one story, a man without medical training, pressed into service as a camp doctor, relates his dismay at watching a starving patient die after the only available remedy for the critically ill, glucose injections, fails. "Don't blame yourself," a qualified doctor tells him. "It was not your fault. We had brought him back to life twice already. His time had come. Nobody could have saved him."

While the stories contain no sugarcoating and are frequently grim in theme, the reader consistently encounters the stubborn persistence of humanity's best qualities. In the title story, a young woman travels to the labor camp to visit her husband, only to learn from reluctant fellow inmates that he has just died. In the face of threats from camp authorities, she collects his remains from a shallow grave and carries them home for proper burial.

Most moving of all is *The Love Story of Li Xiangnian*, a narrative about the persecution of a young man and the persistence of his ardor for his girlfriend. Li escapes from detention to reunite with her, only to be arrested again. Their touching reunion many years later, after the woman is married, would not be out of place in a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel.



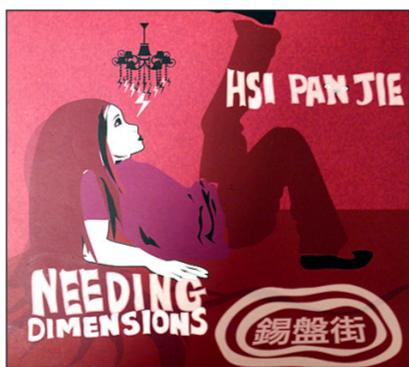
**Green Flower**  
(紅布綠茶)  
Xiaojuan and Residents of The Valley (小娟&山谷裡的居民)  
Wind Music



**Love Is Like a Song**  
(愛像一首歌)  
Tsai Chin (蔡琴)  
Universal



**Shamanizm**  
Shaman (玄武)  
Self-released



**Needing Dimensions**  
Hsi Pan Jie (錫盤街)  
Self-Released

Songs for nature lovers is one quick way to describe *Green Flower* (紅布綠茶) by Chinese musicians Xiaojuan and Residents of The Valley (小娟 & 山谷裡的居民). This recent Wind Music release will probably hold its greatest appeal among tea-drinking, nature-loving urbanites with its gentle acoustic folk sounds and ambient atmosphere.

The music plays it safe through and through with cleanly strummed and picked acoustic guitars, flutes, bells and hand drums. Then there's the pristine voice of singer and guitarist Xiaojuan, who impressively glides through the high range in songs like *Three Birds* (三隻小鳥). It's easy to imagine the Hebei Province native's yodels echoing through picture-perfect mountain scenery.

And that's what much of this album is — reverent, romantic portraits of nature. In *Valley Life* (山谷裡的居民), full of guitar lines that evoke babbling brooks, Xiaojuan sings of how residents in a mountain valley will never leave their home, for how could they? "Forever blue the sky is in the valley."

Xiaojuan's confident voice keeps the album going, even if the pastoral theme grows tiresome. Her haunting, whispery timbre in *Evening Red* (晚霞) adds emotional weight to the sparse lyrics, while her crystal-clear diction and phrasing in the Celtic-tinged *Heartful World* (心的世界) is attention grabbing.

Guitarist Li Qiang (黎強) and percussionist and flutist Liu Xiaoguang (劉曉光) both deserve mention for solid performances that play off the strengths of the music and Xiaojuan's voice.

The group will be in Taiwan next month to appear at a concert commemorating the 9/21 Earthquake. For details, visit Wind Music's Web site at [www.windmusic.com.tw](http://www.windmusic.com.tw).

— DAVID CHEN

Few can rival Tsai Chin (蔡琴) for sheer staying power, and whether you like her style of music or not, she has proved herself a consummate performer over nearly three decades, releasing innumerable songs that have become classics of the Mando-pop repertoire. Vast quantities of her work are now available in cheap multi-disk collections. This should not put anyone off *Love Is Like a Song* (愛像一首歌), Tsai's most recent release, which includes a mix of updated covers of classic songs from the campus song movement, and a number of originals.

Tsai has always been willing to experiment with even the best loved songs, often giving them a Western feel that this reviewer has often found off-putting. In *Love Is Like a Song*, the most notable example of this is her treatment of the Taiwanese favorite *My Grandma's Penghu Bay* (外婆的澎湖灣) made famous by Pan An-pang (潘安邦). It has lost its lilting campus song cadences and acquired a honky-tonk piano sound that in this instance proves surprisingly effective, giving the song a propulsive energy totally lacking in the folksy original.

In taking on the classic *Farewell Again, Cambridge* (再別康橋), the lyrics composed by poet Xu Zhimo (徐志摩), Tsai opts for a cinematic treatment with a rich, layered orchestral feel. Her voice glides above the orchestra, dominating the lyrics, familiar to almost every lover of Mandarin music, and imposing her own sense of purpose. The song, a meditation on memory and on death, acquires in her hands a passionate strength that distinguishes it from the fatalistic lament that characterizes its usual rendition.

While Tsai has put a new gloss on the old songs, her original tracks seem to hark back to an earlier age. The title track, while lyrically appealing, seems all too reminiscent of the lounge ballads of the 1970s, with its backing singers, electric guitar and organ. Other tracks, such as *By Chance* (偶然), with its vaguely Iberian flavor, is perfectly delightful, if rather self-consciously exotic. In all cases, Tsai is unafraid and utterly self-assured. Her strength, of character and voice are what emerge most clearly in this album. More than anything else, *Love Is Like a Song* shows that age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety.

— IAN BARTHOLOMEW

Shaman (玄武), aka Elliot Tsai (蔡一聯), is an American-born, half-Taiwanese rapper with a penchant for self-fashioned modern mysticism and party music. Earlier this year, the 31-year-old took a break from his group, THC (Taipei Hip-hop Crew, H中P在台北) and came up with *Shamanizm*, a collection of smooth and driven hip-hop tracks.

In a *Taipei Times* interview, he cited influences like Tupac, Method Man, Eminem, Snoop, UGK, and 50 Cent, which inform his keen musical phrasing and vocal bravado. But his lyrics don't dwell in gangsta mythology — he sets out to stitch together his own.

The album kicks off with a couple of short clips announcing the Shaman's arrival. *Force* gets things rolling with sharp old school beats, which bring to mind Afrika Bambaataa, and a personal statement: "I'm just a modern day sage ready to wage war/on the illusions of the Matrix/cuz that's what I came for."

In songs like *Tha Freedom*, Shaman sounds at ease rapping in both Mandarin and English. His delivery is always musical, while the lyrics still carry their weight in either language after repeated plays.

*Shamanizm* references psychedelia, comic books and science fiction (he name-drops the X-Men and the Matrix). *Druid Fluid* samples Spock and Uhura from a 1960s *Star Trek* episode. A hallucinogenic-inspired revelation reminds Shaman of his mission: "In the full moon I saw a rabbit/he gave me a bite of some mystical cabbage/he told me to go speak to the masses and undo some of the devil's damage."

In some places, the post-production is uneven. Shaman uses a live band to create a groovy, organic sound on a few tracks, but their final mix doesn't quite flow with the rest of the album. However the music crew deserves praise for original beats and creative sampling. One B-side track, *Bumpkin*, makes great use of the blues traditional *You Got to Move*.

There are rousing party songs like *Mystic* and *Wolvez Eat Meat*, but it's hard not to go back to tracks like *Who Am Eye*. Here he gets existential: "Who am eye/well my name is Elliot, but my name is meaningless/once my body turns to dust... name of the nameless/ego without confidence, only humble cognizance."

— DAVID CHEN

Hsi Pan Jie (錫盤街) is a post-rock band formed by guitarist Huang Wan-ting (黃婉婷) of the beloved and now-defunct girl punk group Ladybug. Its second album, *Needing Dimensions* is a refreshing and original take on a genre that often gets pigeonholed as wandering, shoegazer music.

Listeners won't be just staring at the ground here. The album has a lively, buoyant feel, even with the requisite droning rhythms and under space guitar effects. The opening track, *New Magicians*, runs on an exuberant, power chord-driven melodic figure. A sense of wonder and excitement grows as Huang's guitar lines grow more and more lyrical. The key change towards the end prevents listeners from drifting away and sets up nicely for a satisfying crash finish. The fade-out decay of the buzzing guitar would make Neil Young smile.

The title track builds suspense with some spacey noodling from the band, and then explodes into an unforgettable, wonderfully dense storm of distortion — a testament to the skills of both Huang and the recording engineer who manages to keep the overall mix warm and transparent.

The punk in Huang takes over in tracks like *Trendy Psychiatrist*, which has vocals that sound intentionally rendered to be unclear, and the hyperactive *195*, in which the band flaunts both its speed and agility.

Like many post-rock groups, which mostly perform instrumentals, Hsi Pan Jie sets out to create evocative moods that drive the music. But what sets this band apart is how well it balances musical whims with snappy song structures and arrangements — something clearly evident on *Needing Dimensions*.

While Taiwanese fans pin over renowned bands of the genre like Mogwai or Mono, hopefully they won't forget that compelling music is being made in their own backyard.

— DAVID CHEN

Softcover: Thailand

# A tippale for all time

'The Ultimate Guide to Chinese Tea' is an excellent introduction to the subject for would-be connoisseurs

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Why does everyone get so worked up about making tea? The English get into a tizzy over warming the pot and milk first or last, while the Japanese have evolved a mind-numbing ceremony that makes the task comparable to a high mass. What's all the fuss about?

Bret Hinsch has the answer, or at least one of them. He's lived in Taiwan for 15 years and, in addition to being a professor of Chinese history at Fo Guang University, is an enthusiast for Chinese tea in all its forms. "Enjoying tea," he writes, "takes place primarily in the mind." It induces serenity, in other words, and promotes what Wordsworth called "the philosophic mind." Not surprising, then, that 200 years ago the most valued possession of William and Dorothy Wordsworth in their otherwise humble English cottage was their teapot.

Hinsch's underlying assumption in this excellent little book is that China, except for a brief interlude

now coming to an end, was always at the center. Things started there and then spread outwards. Japan and England were consequently on the distant peripheries of tea-drinking culture, and all their fussiness probably originated from a fear that they weren't doing it in quite the right way. The right way, of course, was the way it was done in China.

But Hinsch goes to some lengths to point out that the Chinese way was actually relaxed and undogmatic. There were as many ways of making a cuppa there as there were tea varieties, and this was entirely appropriate because tea-drinking was essentially all about relaxation and ease.

Taiwan is everywhere in this book. The author's favorite watering hole is the Wang De Chuan Teahouse (王德傳茶莊) in Taipei, and he's not surprisingly an enthusiast for Taiwanese oolongs, the semi-oxidized teas that occupy a space between green and red in the grand spectrum of Chinese

infusions. These, he points out, descend historically from the darker, stronger oolongs of Fujian Province but are lighter, brighter and, these days, produced with a technical sophistication (that nonetheless preserves essential quality) scarcely to be matched in China itself.

This Taiwanese hi-tech comes at a price, however, resulting in oolongs being mostly sold here in the affluent country that produces them. The wide variety of altitudes available for tea cultivation in Taiwan goes a long way to explaining the range of local teas, Hinsch informs us, but Taiwanese tea in general can be seen as nonetheless just one variation on a pan-Chinese theme, or one section — possibly the higher wind instruments — in a grand orchestral effect.

As regards price generally, the most expensive tea mentioned in this book, and described as being "virtually impossible to obtain," is also an oolong, the legendary Big Red Robe tea (大紅袍茶) from

PUBLICATION NOTES

**The Ultimate Guide to Chinese Tea**  
Bret Hinsch



**THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO CHINESE TEA**

BY BRET HINSCH  
142 PAGES  
WHITE LOTUS

craggs high on Wuyi Mountain in Fujian Province. In 2004 a small amount, guaranteed as authentic by the Wuyi local government, was auctioned in Hong Kong and fetched a staggering HK\$166,000 (around US\$21,283).

Most Westerners in Hong Kong would find this arcane world hard to come to terms with. They'd be more interested in seeking out the latest Cabernet Sauvignon than paying that kind of money for a pinch of tea they wouldn't ever dare drink. But status comes in different guises for the Cantonese, and if by any chance it was a foreigner who paid that price it could only have been as a once-in-a-lifetime gift to a Chinese tycoon to finalize some out-of-this-world business deal.

Fashion influences tea just as it does anything else. The Wenshan District (文山區) of Taipei City used to be famous in the West for its Oriental Beauty tea (東方美人茶), dubbed at the time the champagne of teas despite being an oolong that was almost red in color. And 50 years ago the area around Sun

Moon Lake developed an imitation of Indian tea to satisfy international preferences. Both eventually became priced out of the market.

China and Vietnam are producing fake Taiwanese oolongs, we read, hoping to cash in on the prestige and price-tag of the originals. I enjoyed Hinsch's balanced comment here: "Counterfeit tea is not necessarily bad, but, of course, consumers deserve to get what they are paying for."

Until recently, Western tastes have differed strongly from the Chinese norm. After the 19th-century British had engineered a move away from Chinese green teas to the heavily oxidized reds they were busy developing in India and Sri Lanka, the only China-produced tea left in fashion was the smoked Lapsang Souchong, something from which any well-bred Chinese could be guaranteed to shrink away from in horror. It nonetheless gained an international cachet as James Bond's preferred tippale, laced

in his case with Scotch whisky (Hinsch recommends Laphroaig).

However, Chinese green tea — far and away the most common kind, with too many varieties for our author to list — is back in fashion as a bringer, not only of good cheer, but of health. This, it's hard not to think, is a harbinger of what's to come — a China-dominated world where things Chinese are eagerly sought after as fashion accessories. Under the emperors, teas were long given to the court as tribute — notably the celebrated *pu-er* (普洱茶) teas from Yunnan Province, but also Fujian's oolongs — and it can't be long before what's being drunk in Beijing's corridors of power will be eagerly sought after in the supermarkets of the West, marketed of course in exactly these terms.

When that time arrives, *The Ultimate Guide to Chinese Tea* will be an estimable book to have at your side, to help ensure you aren't bamboozled by the advertising if nothing else.