

# CHINA WITNESS *Voices from a Silent Generation*

BY XINRAN

NEW YORK: PANTHEON, 2009  
448 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0375425479, HARDCOVER

Reviewed by John F. Copper

There is no shortage of history about China. In fact, there are more publications written about China than all other countries in the world combined prior to about a hundred and fifty years ago. However, books written about China's past are almost exclusively about past dynasties and interpretations of them by present rulers. More recent historians, and even Western scholars, write about war, politics, economics—they seldom talk to ordinary people or look at history from their perspective.

*China Witness* is an account of bits of China's past that might otherwise have become history lost. In fact, the author feared there was much about China the younger generation would never know or understand—especially the past generation's struggle for China's national dignity. That fear motivated Xinran to write this book.

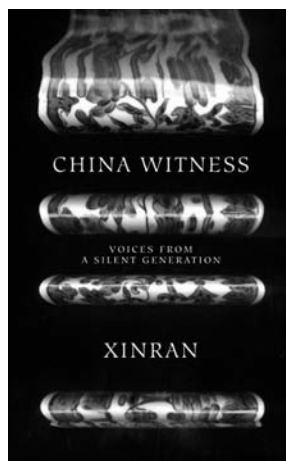
Indeed, countless Chinese sacrificed everything in the Cultural Revolution. Many now are mocked for their "misplaced loyalty." Many, of course, died or were otherwise victimized and are forgotten. The numbers are staggering, and so are the sad stories.

Xinran could only scratch the surface. She wrote from notes that she took after interviews, mainly with older people throughout China in 2005 and 2006. She spoke to twenty people whose ages averaged in the 70s. Some were famous, but most were not. From what they told her, Xinran wove a picture that few Chinese or outsiders have seen.

The author is eminently qualified to write about the neglected people of China. She was born in China. She is an accomplished writer, having authored two successful books on China, *The Good Women of China* and *Sky Burial*. In both, she demonstrated that she knows the Chinese soul. Working as a foreign journalist for a number of years, she also demonstrated that she can explain China to the West.

Xinran traveled from east-central China to the north, to the east and to south China. She spent considerable time in minority areas and places that are usually left out of Chinese history. She interviewed a number of women who tell of the sorrow and tribulations their families experienced. She talked to one local heroine called "Double-Gun Woman," whose fame was for her a double-edged sword. She spoke to a "news singer," a profession now gone in China.

During her travels, the author learns about the world's largest prison from local people in Xinjiang Province in the northwest. They told her that Mao sent 200,000 Nationalist troops there after he came to power, plus perhaps 300,000 others for "reform through education." His real purpose, Xinran was told, was to transform the



predominantly Muslim and Caucasian area into a predominantly Chinese area. The interviewees said that during this time, in the early to mid-1950s, Mao might have been preparing for a future when China's relations would soon deteriorate with the Soviet Union, which indeed happened.

Xinran interviewed a person who went on the Chinese Communist Party's epic long march. She asked him if the march was really as long as claimed, and if there were as many battles as reported. He confirmed the official version of the event, but he also mentioned that there

was a sad ending for most of those who survived. Many were left in the countryside when the top party members went to Beijing. Many were later purged during party factional struggles; some even became enemies of the state. Some even became scapegoats for Mao's failed policies.

The author delves into the private lives of Chinese. She read love letters between a young couple that revealed how they viewed their relationship. They were supposed to be politically compatible, and they wrote of this. But underneath this façade they had deep feelings of love for each other—something they did not want to speak of, but understood.

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Xinran writes of the life of a woman who grew up and was educated in the United States, and returned to China after it was “liberated,” to help the communist cause. The author notes her extreme devotion and utter disappointment. She writes of a policeman who had inside information about decisions made at the top. The policeman spoke of how local officials acted according to their own whims, sometimes based on cruelty and jealousy, while “following instructions from above.”

In the concluding chapter of *China Witness*, Xinran talks to Chinese students who offer their help and want to tell about their own parents and grandparents. Her ending thought in the book is the song “Dyed with my Blood” and the appropriateness of China’s flag being red.

*China Witness* is interesting and instructive, easy to read, and presents a side of Chinese history not available in other books. It gives the reader a unique human side to the past. It is recommended for high school students, undergraduate, and even graduate students in the US, who unfortunately know so little of a nation that will have more influence on our future than any other, and one that does not fit it into the mold of multiculturalism and political correctness. ■

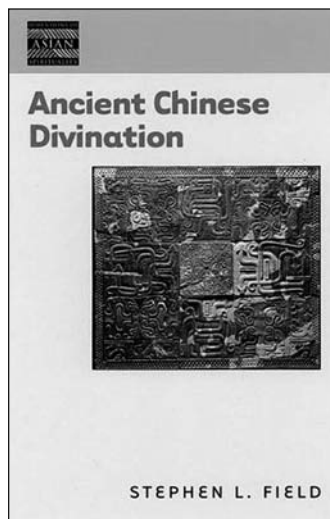
**JOHN F. COPPER** is the Stanley J. Buckman Distinguished Professor of International Studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. He is the author of more than twenty-five books on China, Taiwan, and Asian Affairs. In 1997, Dr. Copper was recipient of the International Communications Award. Professor Copper’s most recent books include *Playing with Fire: The Looming War with China over Taiwan* (2006) and *Taiwan: Nation-State or Province*, fifth edition (2009).

## ANCIENT CHINESE DIVINATION

BY STEPHEN L. FIELD

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 2008  
142 PAGES, ISBN: 978-0824832766, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Diana Marston-Wood



This compact volume, part of the *Dimensions of Asian Spirituality* series, provides an excellent introduction to Chinese divination and does so without unnecessary complexity. Stephen Field points out that any study of Chinese culture should focus on divination, since it influenced the fields of “medicine, science, government, and most importantly, philosophy and religion.” (xiii) For many, it is the applicability of divination to religion that is of greatest interest. I have found that American students

struggle with the syncretism of Chinese religions and with the absence of monotheism. This book suggests that a more effective approach to understanding Chinese religion begins with a focus on divination (the art of foretelling the future through occult knowledge), instead of the standard textbook delineation of discrete schools of thought, e.g., Daoism.

Stephen Field argues that Chinese thinkers studied the natural world to “learn how to pattern their personal and societal lives.” (xiii) The three important entities for determining a path of action were humans, the state, and the cosmos. The Chinese saw all three as integrated, and the objective was to determine what these interrelated parts suggested for human behavior. Thus, Chinese religion evolved from this need to seek divine guidance from the universe using their cosmology. Within this study of divination, Field devotes three chapters to the evolution of the Chinese view of the universe throughout ancient times, the important role that divination played in that view, and the coherent system of thought that developed by the time of the Han dynasty. The final four chapters explore the types of divination that grew from the ancient traditions.

In Field’s crisp treatment of “Chinese Correlative Cosmology” he explores the evolution of the concepts of *qi*, *yin*, *yang*, and the various approaches to categorizing *qi*. One of the most significant became the “elemental designations” of *qi* to be found in water, metal, fire, earth, and wood. Included in this section is an explanation of the *ba gua* and the increasingly complex aspects of Chinese cosmology that are shown

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