

Bridging the gap

Sky Burial

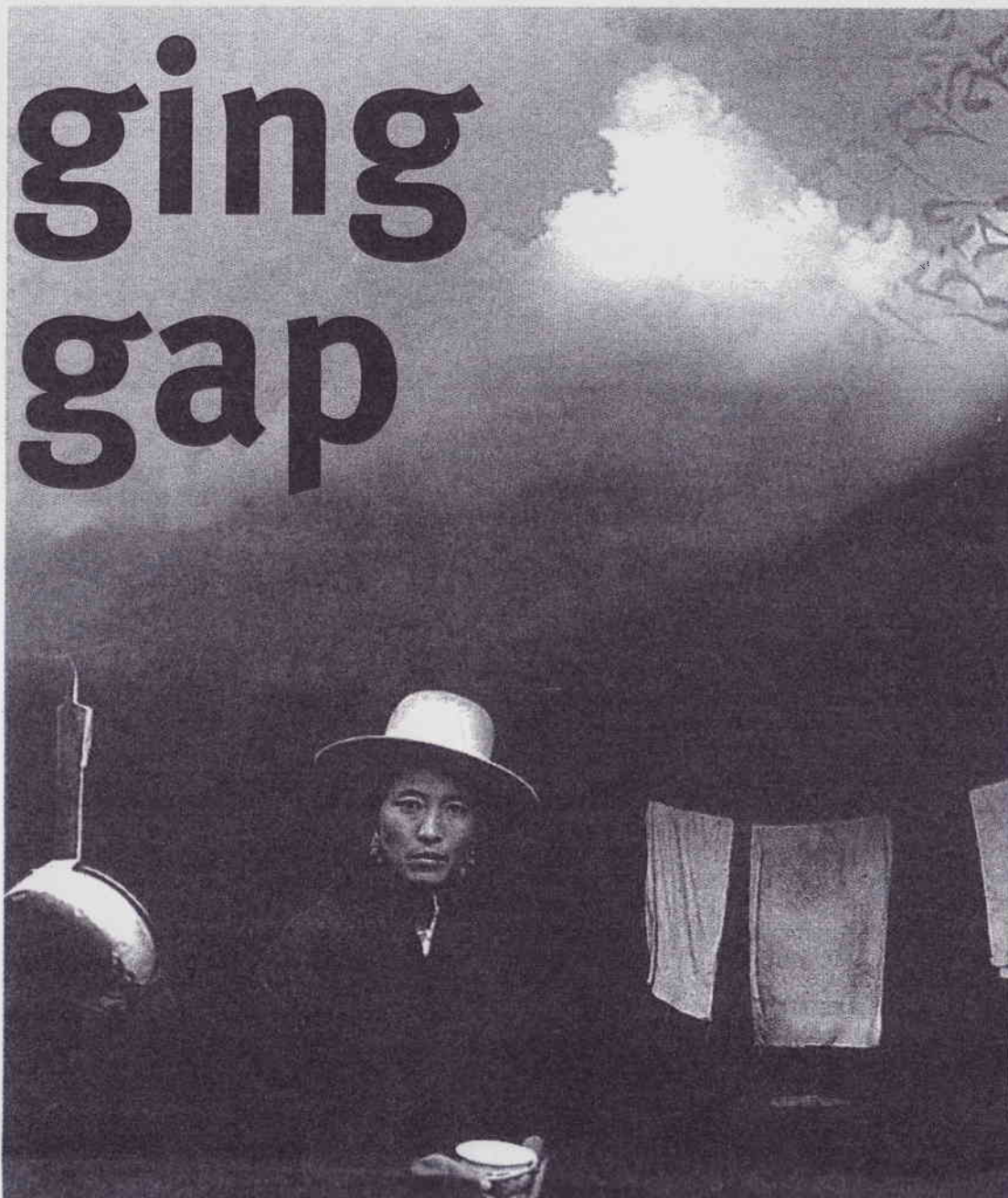
By Xinran Xue, Chatto, 164pp, \$32.95

Village of Stone

By Xiaolu Guo, Chatto, 181pp, \$32.95

TWO years ago on a wintry day at the Melbourne Writers Festival, Xinran Xue, author of *Good Women of China*, told the audience: "I just would like my mum to give me one hug. She never hugged me and when I came to the West I see the body conversation is so beautiful between mother and daughter." On leaving, Xinran was surprised to find a long queue of Australian women in the street. "They were waiting to hug me, one by one. I was in tears. They said, 'I wish I could be your mum. This is from your mum.' I was so touched."

A radio journalist-cum-agony aunt, Xinran became famous across China and as far as Malaysia and Japan with her program on Radio Nanjing, *Words on the Night Breeze*. Beginning in 1989, Xinran was one of the first to conduct live phone-in interviews — previously all programs were prerecorded — and to



Left, a Tibetan woman from *Sky Burial* cover; below, detail from *Village of Stone* cover

Tibet. Shu Wen joined the army as a doctor but, after losing her unit, was adopted by a Tibetan nomad family. It's Shu Wen who tells Xinran the story behind the legend of sky burial, the Tibetan custom which suggests that enemies may be fed to vultures. Brilliantly evoking the sense of space and silence of the high Tibetan grasslands, the poignant tale of reconciliation between ordinary Chinese and Tibetans "is to give people feeling even if we fight each other like enemy, we are still human being watered by love and peace".

Xinran heard about Shu Wen through a listener 10 years ago and interviewed her in a busy teashop in a town near Shanghai. After they had spent two days together, Shu Wen disappeared. "I was so stupid to let her go," exclaims Xinran. "I even took the police motorbike to circle the town." It was to be a catalyst in Xinran's journey into Tibetan culture — she visited the plateau and did countless inter-

install an answering machine so women could talk about their lives anonymously. "It really helped lots of women, who could pick up the phone and aaaggh, shout, cry for hours but afterwards feel better," says Xinran, 49, a slight woman with silky skin and a penetrating gaze.

As she won the trust of her female audience, she unwittingly released a deluge of suffering. Letters piled up imploring for her help. The disturbing stories — of gang rape, incest, abuse — compelled her to see the desperate conditions in which rural women lived. She travelled with an armed policeman after threats to her life, including one incident when her food was laced with rat poison. "At the beginning the older women hate me. They say I broke the law of women — that women shouldn't stand up against men even if they beat and abuse them. But when I arrive in a village, the men stop beating."

After eight years of compassionate listening, she suffered dreadful nightmares (and still does). In 1997, she immigrated to Britain. Briefly she worked as a waitress in London's Chinatown — "I wanted to start from zero again" — but was quickly recognised and began teaching at the School of Oriental and African Studies. After only a few months she was introduced to literary agent and Chinese literature expert Toby Eady. What began as an explosive writer-agent relationship led to marriage five years later.

Eady is responsible for introducing a raft of Chinese women authors to the West, among them Jung Chang, author of *Wild Swans*, which sold 250,000 copies in Australia. "The Australians grabbed it. More than any other country, Australians have a real curiosity for these writers. They are genuinely part of the Pacific and far more interested... than the UK, which is still stuck in the two world wars," says Eady.

Eady, 63, represents Adeline Yen Mah, who wrote the bestseller *Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter* (which sold 75,000 copies in Australia), and Xiaolu Guo, 30, whose dark, powerful novel



Claire Scobie on two Chinese women who are turning memories and experience into riveting yarns

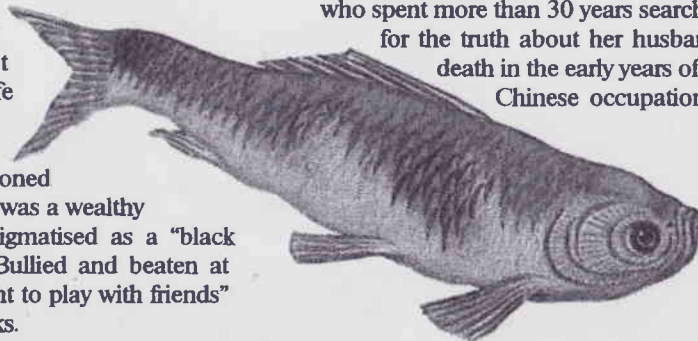
Village of Stone was launched at the Melbourne Writers Festival this week. Like other Chinese writers, Xiaolu mined her brutalised childhood for *Village of Stone*, which is about Coral Jiang, an orphan brought up in a remote fishing village. Xiaolu did not know she had parents until she was seven — her father had been imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution. "I can see," she says, "why Coral was so bitter — because she didn't receive love."

Xiaolu "recovered through writing", as did Xinran. Writing the stories she heard as a radio journalist for *Good Women of China*, says Xinran, "became kind of my medicine — like a food, a spiritual thing that supports me".

All her life, Xinran has been searching for answers. "I always ask 'why?' and 'for what?' Since I was little, my grandmother taught me this." Brought up during the Cultural Revolution, Xinran's early memories were pleasant — eating chocolate, her grandmother regaling her with tales by Charles Dickens — but overnight her life changed with the advent of that revolution. Her parents were imprisoned and, as her grandfather was a wealthy landowner, she was stigmatised as a "black child" — a capitalist. Bullied and beaten at school, she "had no right to play with friends" and lost herself in books.

Encouraged by a kind teacher who had maintained an underground library with works by Hegel and Victor Hugo despite the book-burning Red Guards, Xinran believed education was a way out of suffering. At 19, she joined the military and took degrees in international relations and English, and international law, while teaching herself psychology. After 12 years she was offered a job as a radio broadcaster on Radio Nanjing and, because of her army background, was allowed to talk to listeners about personal issues. She rose to become head of the department but her hectic schedule left her little time to spend with her son, PanPan (whose father she won't discuss), who now lives with her and Eady in London.

This week she was in Melbourne with PanPan, 16, to talk about her second book, *Sky Burial*, in which she recreates an extraordinary love story about Shu Wen, a Chinese woman who spent more than 30 years searching for the truth about her husband's death in the early years of the Chinese occupation of



placard and did countless interviews to validate Shu Wen's story. "Shu Wen's eyes were so still, you could see a power inside. What kind of religion or culture gives this?" says Xinran. "Tibetans had given Shu Wen such a strong lesson in how to be at peace... In my eyes she had lost everything, but she gave me the impression that she had everything."

Haunted by her presence, Xinran still hopes to be reunited with the woman who looked Tibetan, with "skin so rough and dark, smelling of yak milk". Aside from advising the BBC World Service on Chinese issues and writing a column for *The Guardian*, Xinran devotes much time to a charity she founded this year, Mother Bridge of Love. This helps 60,000 Chinese girls adopted into Western families around the world reconnect with their Chinese heritage through cultural exchanges and information sharing, aiming to create a sense of community.

"People talk about China in a very negative way and psychologically this can destroy the children. It's so important to build a bridge between China and the rest of world — so they are proud of being Chinese. And when they become a mother, they can tell their children about their roots."

Healing the rift between generations and between mothers and daughters is part of Xinran's own journey to heal her broken childhood. When she returned to China last year, she told her mother about the hugging queue in Melbourne. "My mother didn't feel she want to hug me" — too much embarrassment and frozen emotion.

Sometimes she misses her childhood. "When I go to a toyshop... or when I walk in the park, I want to jump," she says, a shadow crossing her face. "A professor asked me, 'Xinran what is it you most want in your life?' You have worked in the army, as journalist, professor, writer." She sighs, tears welling in her eyes. "The only answer is, 'I want to be a daughter.'"