Of Dragons and Devils: Chinese-Australian Life Stories

WENCHE OMMUNDSEN, DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

> I have the impression that I can sometimes see through the *nappe* of the finished ethnography – beneath the unifying glaze, chopped meat.
>
> James Clifford

The collaborative life story, and its close generic relative, testimonial writing, occupy hybrid positions between biography and autobiography, between orality and writing, between literature and various modes of factual writing (ethnography, sociology, history), and between private and public, or political, discourse. It has been characterised as a "cross-over" (Boyce Davies 7) or "borderland" (Carr 157) genre, a "heterology" and a "palimpsest" (Sklodowska 90, 92), its happy hybridity frequently troubled by generic, ethical and political dilemmas, especially in cases of cross-cultural collaboration. Thomas Couser refers to the "near oxymoronic status" of a text in which one person simulates the voice of another; many have noted the danger of replicating colonial power relations where a native "informant" tells her or his story to a Western editor who transcribes and "translates" it for a predominantly Western audience. Tensions between the claims to truth and authenticity which generally characterise the genre and its highly mediated form are frequently highlighted (see for example Padilla 142–43). Indeed, the emergence of the life story at a time of general scepticism towards notions of truth in writing may in itself seem paradoxical. As Elzbieta Sklodowska writes, "this celebration of authentic representation has occurred in the heyday of postmodernism when all notions of truth and meaning have become eroded" (87–88). Robert Carr has gone so far as to suggest that testimonial access to subaltern experience has become a kind of vestiginal "transcendental signifier" for left-leaning first-world academics (153) and thus another example of appropriation, commodification and exploitation of "Otherised" subjects.[1] Some of these concerns will inform my reading of three Chi-

nese-Australian life story publications, *East Wind, West Wind* by Fang Xiangshu and Trevor Hay (1992), *The Year the Dragon Came* by Sang Ye (1996) and *Astronauts, Lost Souls & Dragons* by Diana Giese (1997). At the same time I want to use this reading to reflect on the life story's capacity for generic variation and the effects of such variations on the life or lives it produces. What are the cultural relations created by, and in, each of these texts, and what kinds of Chinese-Australian selves emerge from the collaborative process?

The market for life stories has been expanding in Australia over the last decade. Just as the publication of Sally Morgan's *My Place* in 1987 created a wide readership for Aboriginal autobiography and inspired many others to tell their story, so the success of diasporic Chinese writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Jung Chang and Adeline Yen Mah produced a receptive audience throughout the Western world and spawned numerous imitations. The "*Wild Swans* factor" has also returned to haunt other writers, creating an arbitrary standard against which they have been judged, reinforcing cultural stereotypes for Western consumption.[2] Some deliberately set out to challenge such stereotypes and provide alternatives to the commonplaces of diasporic writing: horror-stories about life during the Cultural Revolution; accounts of exotic and/or oppressive cultural practices, such as foot-binding; the search for cultural roots. Diasporic writers steer a difficult course between market expectations and their own personal imperatives. In many cases, their imperatives include variations of what I have called the diasporic commonplaces, but there is, almost invariably, a simultaneous urge to "set the record straight" and correct Western misconceptions and simplistic understandings of a complex culture and history. This cultural negotiation is apparent in all the texts under discussion, though it takes a different shape in each.

The dragon, the ubiquitous marker of Chinese national and ethnic identity, offers a telling illustration of a cultural symbol caught between different meanings and agendas. In Chinese culture dragons are both multifaceted and multicultural. They stand for the Chinese nation but also for a number of different qualities and ideas, ranging from strength and success to impending danger.[3] Shen Yuanfang writes that the dragon figures simultaneously on at least two levels: in folk culture it is associated with life-giving rain; at the national level it is a symbol of the emperor (104–5). In the West, it is the most immediately recognisable signifier of Chineseness, paraded at innumerable festivals, adorning restaurants and Chinatowns in great profusion. But while some diasporic communities rally around the dragon symbol, many overseas Chinese regard it as an oppressive cultural stereotype, precluding engagement with more complex and contemporary versions of their culture.[4] Two of the books under discussion refer to the dragon in their title. In her gloss on the meaning of her title, Diana Giese associates dragons with success. Those Chinese Australians she calls dragons are "the survivors, the winners, the ones whose families have made good in Australia over several generations, or who have reached the head of some immigration queue" (7). Sang Ye refers to his informants as the "heirs of the dragon" (vii), though few of them fit the conven-

tional idea of the successful migrant. His specific reference is to the Chinese calendar: the "year the dragon came" is 1988, when large numbers of mainland Chinese started arriving in Australia. He does not attach any special value to the dragon image, but as the Year of the Dragon is sometimes associated with the coming of disasters[5], it is difficult not to be reminded of the events which culminated in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. *East Wind, West Wind* does not advertise its cultural origin by evoking the national symbol upfront. Indeed, the authors have explained that they consciously avoided stereotypical cultural referencing, seeing themselves as providing a more realistic alternative to both the exoticism and the sensationalism which have characterised much writing about China published for the Western market (Fang and Hay, Interview; see also Ommundsen 171). Shen Yuanfang, however, observes that Fang Xiangshu "unconsciously" identifies with the symbol of the dragon: while challenging the official symbol of national identity, he is happy to be associated with the traditional symbol of Chinese culture (104–5). Shen, who also evokes the dragon in the title of her book on Chinese-Australian autobiographies (*Dragon Seed in the Antipodes*), takes this as a sign that remnants of folk culture survived the indoctrination of the Cultural Revolution, and that people who consciously reject both the imperial and the Communist versions of the nation are still powerfully connected to their cultural roots. One legitimately wonders, however, whether all these dragons owe their existence at least as much to the pressure of publishers keen to signify Chineseness to an Australian mainstream audience[6], and whether such titles do not therefore stand in danger of reinforcing the ethnic stereotyping the books set out to challenge.

Two of the three publications I concentrate on here are collective life stories: Sang Ye's *The Year the Dragon Came* is based on sixteen interviews, most of them with recent immigrants, and Diana Giese's *Astronauts, Lost Souls & Dragons* uses over thirty informants in a wide-ranging survey of contemporary Chinese lives. Their common appeal to dragon-imagery notwithstanding, the two books could not be more different. *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons*, compiled and edited by Giese, is part of a U-sponsored oral history project. Its informants are all named, and the text is illustrated by numerous photographs of the narrators, their families and, in some cases, their ancestors. The book is organised according to thematic chapter headings such as "Arriving", "Identities" and "Reclaiming the Past". Within each chapter, the voice of the editor alternates with the voices of the informants, generally in extended monologues, occasionally broken by brief question-and-answer sections. The title of the collection lists what Giese considers to be the main categories of Chinese in Australia. "Astronauts" is a term used for wealthy cosmopolitans, mainly from Hong Kong, who commute between their businesses in Asia and their new homes in Australia, the United States and Canada. In North America, they are sometimes, ironically, referred to as the "yacht people". Few of Giese's informants belong to this category. The majority of her subjects are "dragons", successful immigrants who have made Australia their permanent home. There are no "lost souls" in this book, although the editor acknowledges their existence: "The suc-

cessful dragons are shadowed by the failures, those who didn't make good, who eked out miserable old ages, alone and far from home, those who died early, sick, injured or mad, hustled unmourned into unmarked paupers' graves" (7). Interestingly, all the lost souls in this book are of the past, stereotypically consigned to unmarked graves in a foreign land. Giese's portrayal of contemporary Chinese Australians is almost invariably upbeat: tales of resilience, industry, pride and successful integration.[7] Her informants are businesspeople and property developers, academics, a politician, a television presenter, several other professionals, and their families. Many were born in Australia, some tracing their Australian roots back three or four generations, and of the immigrants, few are recent arrivals. When the issue of racism is raised, it is relegated to the "bad old days" of the White Australia policy; today's Chinese-Australians, it appears, are integral parts of the country's multicultural mix: they work and live next to other ethnic groups in harmony. Many of them have married white or Aboriginal Australians, or are themselves the issue of inter-racial unions. (It should be noted that this book was completed before the advent of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party in 1996, and the recent resurgence of anti-Asian feelings. Significantly, Senator Bill O'Chee, one of Giese's informants, speaks with optimism about his role as the first part-Asian politician elected to federal parliament. O'Chee has subsequently lost his seat; he has also publicly voiced his concern about the racist backlash and about the lack of political leadership on issues of race and immigration.)

Sang Ye's *The Year the Dragon Came* by contrast reveals the flip side of the migrant success story. His Chinese informants are recent immigrants, scarcely thinking of themselves as Chinese Australians yet. They are part of the large number of Chinese, mostly from the mainland, who entered Australia in the late 1980s or early 1990s on student visas. After the Tiananmen Square events of June 1989, Australia offered them refugee status, and a large number were eventually given permanent residence. Sang Ye's storytellers do not fit into Giese's category of "lost souls", or, for that sake, into any convenient category, but their experience differs significantly from that described in Giese's book. Most mainlanders had borrowed money to come to Australia and many were more interested in making money to repay the loan and to obtain a degree of financial security than in their language studies. Without a work permit and without the necessary language skills they were forced into a fiercely competitive underground economy. One of the narrators is a prostitute, others work in menial jobs in restaurants and factories. Some use phoney marriages to either buy themselves residency or, if they are permanent residents, to make money. These narrators are not named, indeed, many made anonymity a condition for telling their story. Their stories are told in separate chapters with headings like "The Worker", "The Buddhist" and "Yellow Devil", preceded by a brief italicised introduction to each narrator. Sang Ye, himself a recent immigrant from mainland China, provides a general introduction, and there is also a note from the editor of the English version, Linda Jaivin. The last page of the book lists six translators.

Protected by their anonymity, the narrators of *The Year the Dragon Came* are scathing in their criticism of Australia, but hardly less critical in their assessment of China, or of their fellow Chinese in Australia. Most of them refer to Australians as "devils" (*guizi*) or "foreign devils" (*yang guizi*), which, according to the editor's preface, is equivalent to racist names like "Chink" or "Chinaman". Their frequently expressed sentiments of disillusionment, anger, cynicism and bewilderment clearly indicate that these are migrants who have not, or not yet, overcome the traumas of dislocation and the translation into an alien and sometime hostile culture. For those who view Australian multiculturalism as an untroubled success story, this book does not make for comfortable reading. Indeed, it has subsequently been used by apologists for anti-Asian politics as "proof" of a racism inherent in Chinese culture and thus as a clear indication that these people do not fit into the "Australian way of life".[8]

East Wind, West Wind by Fang Xiangshu and Trevor Hay tells of a single life, that of Fang, who was born in Shanghai in 1953 and grew up during the Cultural Revolution. He first came to Australia in 1984 as an exchange scholar, was later recalled to China for unspecified political crimes, but managed to escape and return to Australia, where he was faced with a protracted battle with the Department of Immigration, finally resolved when he was granted permanent residence in 1990. The structure of the book is one of concentric circles: the story of Fang's childhood and youth is told as an extended flashback within the story of his escape from China. An outer frame, consisting of a prologue narrated by Trevor Hay, his co-author and friend, and an epilogue narrated by Fang, brings the story up to the present, at the same time as it introduces the story of Hay's own struggle against authorities, a legal battle with the Victorian police. In the prologue, Hay describes the story as "Fang Xiangshu's account of what it is like to be in trouble in a totalitarian society" (xiii), thus placing the text within the tradition of *Wild Swans* and other recent accounts of repression and hardship under the Cultural Revolution, suggesting, moreover, that China in the more liberal 1980s is still a totalitarian regime in which the state claims superiority over individual rights. However, this "message" is qualified by the frame narrative's stories of what it is like to be "in trouble" in an apparently non-authoritarian society – Australia – a reminder that no political system can offer the individual absolute protection against the authority of the state.

Each of these texts is shaped, but shaped differently, by the collaborative process of its composition, and by the roles and relative power of the main collaborators, the author/narrator/subject of the story and the narratee/editor. To what extent is the "voice" of the written text faithful to that of the oral narrative, and what degree of distortion results from the editorial process of selecting, ordering and rephrasing, processes which, like the questions posed in the initial interview, tend to be suppressed in the final publication. In the case of cross-cultural collaboration, the ethical implications of these questions are considerable. What conflicts, inconsistencies and silences are hidden under the smooth textual surface; what is gained, and what is lost, in the translation of a told life into a written text?

Diana Giese occasionally allows her own interviewing voice to come to the surface in the text, her editorial presence, however, is unacknowledged though ubiquitous. She introduces the chapters as well as the narrators, provides links between narrators and comments on what they have to say. Quotations from the various narrators vary in length, and although many are profiled as individuals, the emphasis is nevertheless collective: the narrators are given a representative role as members of the Chinese-Australian community. While the life stories belong to the individual members of the community, the structure which shapes the overall story told by the book is the editor's. It is a teleological structure, tracing the route from precarious beginnings to successful integration. It is also a homogenising structure, in which individuals are used as illustrations of collective experience, a structure which minimises difference. There are few exceptions to the successful "dragon" narrative, and even fewer indications of absences, discordant notes or intra-communal conflict. *Astronauts, Lost Souls and Dragons* presents oral history in the celebratory mode, highlighting the achievements of a previously under-examined ethnic community, thus making an important contribution to the social history of Australia. In order to do so, however, the book glosses over what James Clifford in the passage quoted above refers to as the "chopped meat" of lived experience.

In his introduction to *The Year the Dragon Came* Sang Ye explains that he interviewed over a hundred people for his project and "selected the most interesting stories for this volume" (vii). What, one legitimately wonders, were his criteria for deciding that one life story was more "interesting" than another? Did he go for variety, or did he choose those his Australian readers would find most confronting? He also states that he promised the interviewees that "I would not add any commentary or criticise what they had to say" (vii). The one comment he does choose to make in his introduction is that "China is a country with a strong xenophobic, isolationist tradition" (vii) and that his informants, while taking offence when subjected to racist attitudes in Australia, themselves have a tendency to treat all foreigners with generalised and generalising scorn.

The Year the Dragon Came is a highly mediated text, a palimpsest of different voices and different stories. After the process of interviewing, transcribing, selecting, ordering and editing, Sang Ye handed the material over to the editor of the English version, who in turn commissioned a number of translators. In the published text, the chapters are accompanied by a set of notes explaining historical, linguistic and cultural references that are unfamiliar to an Australian audience. In spite of this complex apparatus of transcription and translation, the "truth" or "authenticity" effect is strong. The narrative voices retain a semblance of orality, and the translators have been careful to reproduce a non-native effect in the language use. Individual differences are clearly in evidence, in spite of the lack of names, and in spite of the fact that Sang Ye's informants are a more unified group that Diana Giese's: they all arrived in Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The students from the mainland are clearly distinguishable from immigrants from Taiwan or Hong Kong, and their mutual distrust repeatedly stressed.

Some are prepared to lie, cheat and steal to stay in the country, or to obtain the material goods most Australians enjoy as their birthright; they also take pride in their ability to outwit gullible foreign devils. Others reserve their scorn for their own countrymen, often expressing shame at the behaviour of some, and concern for the reputation of all Chinese in Australia. A couple are clearly suspicious of their interviewer and his project, and use their story to "set the record straight" or counteract the impression he may have gained from others. When asked in a later interview about his own role in shaping the material, Sang Ye said that he had to assume the role of an outsider, but he is not convinced that an interviewer can ever be "neutral", and admits that in some cases he had been asked to "return the tapes because the interviewees regretted what they had said and thought they might have been led into saying undesirable things" (Ouyang 213). The accounts are unverifiable, highly mediated and clearly edited with a view to their impact on Western audiences. Even so, they leave an impression of raw experience, of "chopped meat" so fresh and unprocessed that it is still bleeding. The book is an illustration of collaborative life writing at its most effective, but also, potentially, its most misleading.

Fang Xiangshu and Trevor Hay tell a very different story about their collaborative process. There were no interviews, transcriptions or translations; the two were physically together throughout the writing process and the story "belongs" as much to one as to the other (see Ommundsen). To the extent that it is, nevertheless, the story of Fang's life, it is told in his voice, and he is obviously the main source of information. The outer frame story exists in part, it would seem, to legitimate Hay's role in its production, to allow his voice to be heard and explain his role not only in the writing process but also in the narrative of Fang's life. The book cover makes the same point: the front features a close-up photo of Fang, the back cover includes a photo of the two authors together. In spite of this effort to claim dual authorship for the story, the tendency has nevertheless been to read it as straight autobiography. Shen Yuanfang, in her book on Chinese-Australian autobiographies, pays little attention to the collaborative aspect of its production, and in a review of the two authors' subsequent book *Black Ice* (a fictionalised biography of Fang's mother, similarly co-produced) the decision to name Hay first on the cover is criticised (Jones 43). To me, the self-consciousness, one might even say nervousness, about the writing process which is built into *East Wind, West Wind* marks it as a particularly interesting example of the genre of life writing, simultaneously using and questioning the practices of cross-cultural collaboration. The structure which prevents the reader from gaining "direct" access to Fang's voice and life may appear rather awkward, but it is clearly deliberate, reminding us that this is not just another story of a Chinese life, but also the story of how that story came to be told, in Australia, and the other stories and lives which made it possible.

In her book *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, Ien Ang reminds us of Janet Gunn's view that autobiography is not so much "the private act of a self writing" as "the cultural act of a self reading" (23). Ang continues:

> I would like to consider autobiography as a more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of a "self" for public, not private purposes: the displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a *useful* identity, an identity which can be put to work. It is the quality of that usefulness which determines the politics of autobiographical discourse. In other words, what is the identity being put forward *for*? (24)

In collaborative life writing, this rhetorical construction of a self may be the product of more than one cultural act of reading, the politics of the autobiographical discourse complicated by different ideas of what constitutes a useful identity. Sang Ye's informants, in most cases captured at a moment of personal and cultural dislocation, may have orchestrated the "performance" of their own identity for purposes of their own, they were not, however, in control of the selves emerging from the process of selection, translation and juxtaposition. "Put to work" in the collective story, the selves are made to support statements such as "all Chinese are xenophobic" (see vii–viii), statements which acquired added significance from the political climate at the time of publication. Less controversially, Giese's "good citizens" find their individual selves playing bit parts in a typical scenario of diaspora: the search for identity, the importance of family, reclaiming the past. Individual informants may have had some power over the story of their own lives (Giese explains that they collaborated in preparing "an agreed transcript of their words" (vii)), but the structure of the book leaves little room for dissent from its optimistic conclusion that "the egalitarian traditions of mateship and a fair go are at last being extended to all Australians" (292). In both of these texts, one does not have to dig deep beneath the seemingly coherent surface to get a sense of a more multifaceted politics of self-construction. The politics of *East Wind, West Wind*'s construction of Fang's self is at the same time more ambiguous and more coherent. It is politically ambiguous in that it seeks to avoid simplistic moral and cultural conclusions, coherent in the sense that it presents a seamless identity (Chinese for Western consumption) which bears few marks of its collaborative construction. While structurally acknowledging the collaborative process of the writing, the book does not signpost the personal and cultural negotiation which went into the construction of the autobiographical voice. Product of a collaboration based on a long-standing friendship, Fang's autobiographical self echoes that relationship: it is settled and in that sense "closed", negotiated but no longer up for negotiation.

The cultural identities produced by these texts reflect the heterogeneity of the signifier "Chinese". According to Rey Chow, an "obsession with China" is currently making itself felt, in China itself, in diasporic communities and in the West generally. It is an obsession fed by a huge range of different, often conflicting impulses, by what Ien Ang calls "an excess of meaningfulness" (32): the vastly different cultural, national and ethnic backgrounds of various groups identified as Chinese, but also the West's investment in accumulations of stereotypes, Orientalist dreams and racist fantasies. To Ang, it is an

obsession which in diaspora often takes the form of "identification in the name of a fetishized and overly idealised 'China'" (34). To the American writer Frank Chin, Chineseness is a "miracle synthetic", an artifically fabricated amalgam of residues, dreams and projections. It is an imagined community differently imagined depending on personal investment and cultural context.

The instability of Australian Chinese, or Chinese Australian, as categories for cultural identification is clearly illustrated by our texts. To the informants of Diana Giese's project, the affiliation with China is only ever cultural, and often cultural in a relatively narrow sense. Secure within their legal status as Australian citizens, they are at leisure to explore their family roots in a different culture. Their orientation tends to be towards the past: dragon dances, family history, traditional food and artifacts rather than contemporary Chinese modes of cultural expression. On pilgrimages to ancestral homes in China they report an odd, almost mystical sense of belonging, but also alienation from harsh social realities. Rather than seeking connections with relatives in the homeland they tend to identify with other diasporic communities. One notable example is the Kwong Sue Duk enterprise, a family history project which brings together the numerous descendents of this family man (he had four wives and twenty-three children) from across the world in regular reunions. Their cultural project is to reclaim the past, to make up for what might have been lost in the translation into another culture. Interestingly, many of the white Australian partners of the informants identify with their quest for roots in another culture. One of them, Paul Campbell, says: "For us, it adds to our own identity, to the richness of our lives" (16). The Chinese heritage subscribed to by these people does not challenge their status as Australians: while not exactly regarded as an optional extra, their Chineseness constitutes a non-threatening mark of difference, something that can be explored and treasured because it functions as a desirable addition to the social practices considered essential to their participation in the Australian national culture.

If Giese's narrators speak of their Chineseness in terms of "richness", those in Sang Ye's book repeatedly refer to their sense of loss. Reading their stories, one is left with an impression of cultural limbo, an in-between state that cannot, or not yet, take advantage of the dual cultural perspective afforded by the diasporic experience. They lack the competencies (language skills, qualifications, cultural knowledge) required to function adequately in the new social environment, and many of their previously acquired competencies have been rendered redundant. The more aesthetic or historical aspects of cultural belonging are rarely given any attention, except in repeated references to the poverty of Australian culture by comparison with China's long and rich heritage. There is not so much nostalgia, however, as confusion about their Chinese past, and an overwhelming need to "sort out" their attitude to the homeland:

> Let me sum things up for you. I can't stop myself from despising China, but at the same time I can't make myself love Australia. Theoretically

> speaking, I'm still under the influence of socialism, confused but not convinced. All these loose ends resolve themselves around one central thought: I hate you, China. (32–33)

There is little diasporic solidarity between the Chinese portrayed in Sang Ye's book. While the mainland students live and work together, often helping each other out, they also compete and cheat on each other, and established Chinese Australians, the restaurant and factory owners for whom they work, are frequently regarded with open hostility. Their situation is one in which hybridised notions of identity are luxuries they can ill afford to consider, and cultural difference not an enriching additive but a site of daily struggle.

In terms of his personal background and experience, Fang Xiangshu is closer to the recent immigrants interviewed by Sang Ye than to Diana Giese's story-tellers. He does not, however, display the same sense of cultural dislocation. There may be several reasons for this difference. *East Wind, West Wind* is not a book primarily concerned with questions of identity. Reading almost like a political thriller, it concentrates on the relationship between the individual and the state, but individual characteristics are not emphasised. If cultural difference is underplayed, it may be precisely to emphasise the point that political oppression, like freedom, is not culture-specific; it can happen anywhere, and at any time. Fang's less traumatic *cultural* integration may also be due to his personal circumstances: he initially came to Australia on a University exchange scheme and was subsequently able to find permanent employment at the institution he had previously visited (Victoria College, now Deakin University). Shen Yuanfang calls autobiographers of Fang's generation "historical drifters" (see Shen 90–107), arguing that they have lost their moorings in their ancestral culture, but remain similarly detached from their host society: cultural roots are less important than personal freedom and opportunity. Fang's physical and mental restlessness, she argues, marks him as typical of his generation of Chinese emigrants – typical, perhaps, of many migrants in a globalising, postmodern world.

There is, however, another possible reason for the stark difference between *The Year the Dragon Came* and *East Wind, West Wind* in terms of the construction of identity. While the latter is the product of a cross-cultural collaboration, Sang Ye's book, one must assume, was "Westernised" at a relatively late stage in its production: the interviews were conducted in Chinese by an editor who shared the cultural background of his interviewees. The types of questions asked, the cultural knowledge and cultural forms shared or not shared between interlocutors, their assumptions about the readership for their stories may all be factors in the construction of cultural "selves".[9] It is not surprising, then, to find Fang's self embodying a strongly individualistic ethos while Sang's informants have a more confused sense of self, both cultural and personal, and the "selves" produced in Giese's book are perfect embodiments of the celebratory multiculturalism embraced by official government rhetoric in Australia.

To return to the quotation, and the metaphor, from James Clifford on which I opened this paper, one wonders how it is that lives so thoroughly "cooked" in the *nappe* (sauce) of linguistic, formal and cultural translation can retain a semblance of "chopped meat", or authentic lived experience. What are the ingredients of the "reality effect" which enables publishers of life stories to market these most mediated of texts so successfully in terms of truth, voice, presence? In Roland Barthes' famous meditation on realism in fiction, "The reality effect", "reality" and "fiction" are not mutually exclusive concepts but on the contrary closely related: the appeal to reality is made *through* fictional technique, such as the deployment of "useless detail" to create the referential illusion. All the texts discussed here draw extensively on "thick" referential description to establish physical, psychological, historical and cultural authenticity; they also make use of other forms of novelistic technique to give narrative shape to the lives and control the impact on the reader. This is nowhere more evident than in *East Wind, West Wind* with its stories-within-stories structure and central focus on Fang's dramatic escape from China. Giese's thematic and teleological structure offers an overall impression of coherence and closure, whereas Sang Ye makes conscious use of immediacy, contrast and lack of closure to underline the sense of conflict which informs his book. This simultaneous appeal to truth and fiction is made explicit in the cover blurb of *The Year the Dragon Came*: "These stories read like fiction . . . but this is not fiction: these characters are living right next door to you . . ." A similar appeal is implicit in *East Wind, West Wind*'s promise of "A dramatic escape from China to Australia – to a kind of freedom". The cover of Giese's book makes its appeal through an offer of presence: photographs of smiling faces and the promise of oral exchange ("Voices of today's Chinese Australians in conversation with Diana Giese"). The strategy of these, and so many other works of non-fiction, is to offer the "reality effect" of fiction with the additional "extra" of non-fictional truth – a highly effective combination, if we are to judge by the popularity of the genre.

The "truth" of cross-cultural life stories may also be the product of a particular kind of *affective* appeal to the reader. To the Western reader of "foreign" lives, this appeal takes the form of an interplay between familiarity and difference, between what is "like us" and what is "not like us." Familiarity invites identification; difference breeds fascination, and sometimes fear. All cross-cultural life stories make a simultaneous appeal to sameness and difference, generally along the lines of "common humanity, different circumstances." Our texts, however, display interesting variations. In Diana Giese's book, difference is "domesticated": "foreign" names, faces and customs are overshadowed by the comforting familiarity of the experiences and aspirations of her interviewees. Cultural difference is at the same time valorised and rendered unimportant. In *East Wind, West Wind* the dangerous foreignness of China is brought closer: it could happen here, it does happen here (though with lesser severity). The anonymous speakers in *The Year the Dragon Came* at one level make a plea for understanding, explaining their attitudes as the consequences of background and experience (in *their* circumstances *we*

would have done the same). Their difference nevertheless come across as "untamed", a fact exploited by the cover blurb's veiled threat ("these characters are living next door to you . . ."). The unassimilated "honesty" of these "voices" and their unadorned experience of struggle touch the reader with greater power to disturb than the "different but familiar" lives of the other texts, provoking desire as well as its counterparts of fear and loathing. The "rawness", or truth effect, of the lives told in Sang Ye's book is not so much a function of the reader's more direct access to his interviewees, but of the cultural drama played out by their lack of accommodation into what is familiar. What this reading of three Chinese-Australian examples has sought to demonstrate, then, is that the cultural negotiation embodied by the cross-cultural life story offers a unique opportunity to observe the production of autobiographical "truth" in the interplay between generic expectation and textual variation.

Endnotes

1. My understanding of the generic complexity of the collaborative life story owes much to the research of my PhD student Michael Jacklin.
2. Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China*, published in 1991, was rated number 11 in the Angus & Robertson's list of "Australia's 100 Favourite Books of All Time". According to Shirley Tucker (125–26), it has created a readership hungry for more "horror stories" about China, especially the oppression of Chinese women, and thus less receptive to different genres and subject matters.
3. I am indebted to Dr Ouyang Yu for information about the complex cultural value of the dragon symbol.
4. "I hate the Western preference for our dragons. I simply hate it" (Ouyang Yu E-mail).
5. The previous Year of the Dragon, 1976, was the year Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai died, and a major earthquake struck.
6. Dragon titles are not unique to Australia. Manying Ip's collection of Chinese life stories in New Zealand, for example, is entitled *Dragons on the Long White Cloud*.
7. According to Tseen Khoo (98), Giese's book seeks to establish varied and detailed examples of Chinese as "good" Australian citizens.
8. Paul Sheehan in *Among the Barbarians: The Dividing of Australia* cites Sang Ye's book in support of statements concerning the "bristling chauvinistic bulk of China" with its "enormously long cultural history of regarding non-Chinese as lesser beings" (65).
9. I am not arguing that cultural "ignorance" is an issue here. With the possible exception of some of Sang Ye's interviewees, all the collaborators of these texts have considerable cross-cultural expertise. This does not, however, preclude culture-specific construction of identity.

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