

Dead in Exile: The Life and Death of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye

China Information Spring 1997

Gu Cheng and Lei Mi, *Ying'er*, Beijing: Huayi Chubanshe, 1993.

Gu Cheng and Lei Mi, *Ying'er: The Kingdom of Daughters*, (Li Xia translator)
Dortmund: Projekt Verlag, 1995.

Mai Qi (pen name of Li Ying), *Hunduan Jiliu Dao* (Heartbroken on Waiheke),
Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1995.

Gu Xiang, *Wo miandui de Gu Cheng zuihou de shisi tian* (The Last Fourteen days
of Gu Cheng), Beijing: Guoji Wenhua Chubanshe, 1994.

Chen Zishan (ed.), *Shiren Gu Cheng zhi si* (The Death of Poet Gu Cheng),
Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1993.

Anne-Marie Brady
Australian National University-Beijing University

*No-one can transcend the prison of lies
No-one knows Who is a corpse
When the sun explodes Sleeves
are empty
Everywhere is a foreign land
Death gives no refuge¹*

Introduction

Everywhere is a foreign land/Death gives no refuge, laments Yang Lian² in his soliloquy on the fate of the exiled artist. Unable to exist in the hostile environment that is their country of birth, yet alienated from the foreign land that provides refuge, the artist is dead in exile. Such is the fate of China's artists and writers under state socialism who do not conform with the guidelines on Spiritual Civilisation, Mao Zedong Thought, whatever the current line of dogma. As George Konrad has

¹Yang Lian, "The Dead in Exile", *The Dead in Exile*, Mabel Lee (transl.), Kingston, Australia: Tiananmen Publishers, 1990, p 12.

² Yang Lian (born 1955), like Gu Cheng, of the "Misty" school of modern Chinese poetry, was also based in New Zealand. He and his wife Liu Youhong were based there from 1989 to 1993 and they became New Zealand citizens. Like Gu, Yang worked in the Department of Asian Languages at Auckland University for a time.

commented, under state socialism, “He who agrees to be controlled exists; he who does not ceases to exist.”³ In the first thirty years of CCP-rule ideological imperatives controlled the creative world. In the materialistic 1990s, in addition to ideological pressure comes pressure from the deep indifference of the average citizen (*lao bai xing*) to innovative creative work. Mammon, or his Chinese equivalent Caishen, is the God that drives China’s soul in the 1990s. China suffers from a deep spiritual void caused by the ravages of forty-odd years of political campaigns. The artist is a stranger in his own land, speaking a foreign tongue that few comprehend or wish to hear. The choices are limited: remain silent, produce what the government approves of, produce what it does not approve of and suffer the consequences, or go abroad.

For an all too brief period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, New Zealand was home to two of China’s most prominent poets in exile, Gu Cheng and Yang Lian. I knew them both well, I helped Yang Lian and his wife Liu Youhong find an apartment in the ramshackle old house where I lived, and we were neighbours from 1989 until they left for a posting in Australia in mid-1993. Gu Cheng was first my teacher, and soon, with his wife Xie Ye, became a close friend.

New Zealand is a quiet, peaceful land, very different from the chaos and struggle that is modern China. Many Asian migrants to New Zealand, accustomed to *renao* and a much more crowded environment, find it too quiet for their tastes. For Gu Cheng and to a lesser extent Xie Ye, New Zealand was the sanctuary they had been unable to find at home. In New Zealand Gu Cheng was able to realise his dream, to create a “kingdom of girls” (*nu’er guo*) and to live a simple life close to the land. He continued to write poetry and other compositions, sketched, taught Classical Chinese poetry at the university and raised chickens in his spare time. At least this is what he told his readers and admirers. But reality was far more complex than this idyllic picture. The first glimpse that those outside Gu Cheng’s inner world had that his life might not be as he depicted was the news that he had first attacked his wife with an axe, and then killed himself on his beloved island of Waiheke.

I write this review article both as a close friend of the couple and as someone interested in the state of China’s modern culture after the ravages of war, ideological control, and finally economic imperatives. It has been three years since Gu Cheng and Xie Ye died. For a time, in my guilt and pain, I tried to forget that I had ever known them. But I found I could not. Reading the books written by and about them has helped me to resolve some of my grief. This article is as much a personal account of my friendship with two remarkable people as it is an examination of the myth that has been woven around their lives. The life and death of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye was intimately connected with the process of China’s recent history. Their fate gives us a bleak insight into the deep spiritual malaise that has permeated China’s cultural world.

Gu Cheng and Xie Ye in New Zealand

On 8 October 1993, on Waiheke island in Auckland harbour, New Zealand, Gu Cheng (1956-1993), one of the most well-known of China’s “misty” (*menglong*) poets attacked his wife Xie Ye (1958-1993) with an axe and then hung himself. Xie Ye died

³ Haraszti, Miklos, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism*, Penguin Books, London, 1983, xv.

of loss of blood on the plane taking her to hospital, Gu Cheng died in his sister's arms after she cut him down from the tree he hung himself from.

The story of this brutal and tragic murder-suicide was widely reported, not least because only a few months before Gu Cheng murdered his wife, his book *Ying'er*, an account of his idyllic life with two "wives" was about to be published and news of the book had spread in the Chinese-speaking world. The publication rights for the book were sold in Shenzhen in November 1993, a month after the two deaths. At the time, *Ying'er* received the highest price ever paid in China for an unpublished manuscript. The book sold well, no doubt as a result of the notoriety of its authors and their tragic fate.

The Gu Cheng murder-suicide story was a lucrative topic for Chinese-language newspapers and magazines too. This led to ghoulish behaviour by some who sought to cash in on the notoriety. One journalist phoned Gu Cheng's sister, Gu Xiang, claiming to be a "friend" of her brother within hours after news of the deaths became known. Without informing her, he recorded their conversation and with much fanfare had it published in his paper. The Mainland Chinese government cashed in on the story's notoriety by using it as a means to criticise the "decadence" of avant-garde writers. Articles appeared in papers such as *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* (China Youth Newspaper) and *Beijing Qingnian Bao* (Beijing Youth Newspaper), particularly targeted at the post-CultRev generation who had been most attracted to Gu Cheng's writing. The topic was a tempting one for film-makers too. By December 1993 two competing film proposals had been publicly announced. One publicised itself as featuring the music of Hou Dejian, in the 1980s, like Gu Cheng a leading folk hero of disaffected youth in China. Hou, like Gu, had settled in New Zealand and although he did not know Gu, his involvement in the film seemed to be a symbolic attempt to associate with some of the mana that, bizarrely was growing about the poet's last violent act.

In New Zealand the story was reported as a brutal example of domestic violence. Gu Cheng's fame as a Chinese poet was noted, but not regarded as significant. Gu was not well-known in his country of adoption. In China, Hong Kong and Taiwan however, in the months after the event more detailed articles were published on the story speculating on the reasons for the murder-suicide. Many of the articles glamorised Gu Cheng and his "romantic" life and down-played the violence of his actions. They took at face value his own writings on the subject of his "idyllic" lifestyle in New Zealand.

The five books I have chosen to review build on this mythical view of Gu Cheng and his behaviour. The first of these is Gu Cheng's own book, *Ying'er*. This book was translated into English in 1995 by Li Xia as *Ying'er: The Kingdom of the Daughters*. Soon after Gu Cheng's death, Gu Xiang, who was a witness to the murder-suicide published her account of the events, *Wo miandui de Gu Cheng de zuihou shisi tian* (Gu Cheng's Last Fourteen Days With Me). In 1994, Li Ying (Ying'er), the third and crucial figure in the famous *menage a trois* defended her reputation in *Hunduan Jiliu Dao* (Heartbroken at Waiheke). The book is an account of her love affair with Gu Cheng and her life after she "escaped" the island. The fifth and final book I review is *Shiren Gu Cheng zhi si* (Death of the Poet Gu Cheng) a collection of materials related to Gu Cheng, including newspaper articles, personal letters and reminiscences from those who knew him.

I first met Gu Cheng in February 1989. He and his wife Xie Ye came to New Zealand in 1988 and their son, Samuel Mu'er was born there. Gu was my Chinese conversation class tutor at Auckland University and we soon became close friends. I visited him at his house on Waiheke and befriended his wife Xie Ye.

Waiheke is a small island in Auckland harbour, thirty minutes boat ride from the city. It is bush-clad and quiet with beautiful beaches. Gu Cheng and Xie Ye had bought a run-down old house set on the forest-clad hill of a tranquil island valley. From 1988 to 1989 Gu Cheng commuted by ferry once a week to his teaching position at Auckland University. Later on he and Xie Ye eked out a living from Xie Ye's odd-jobs and by selling spring rolls and pottery at the island's weekly market. It was a difficult existence. At times they were so poor they did not have enough money to buy water in the summer when the supplies on their roof-top water tank ran out. Still, they managed to find the money to help Gu Cheng's sister Gu Xiang and her young son emigrate to New Zealand, as well as their close friend Li Ying and Xie Ye's brother Zhang Chun.

Since they both had poor English - Gu Cheng had vowed never to learn as he feared learning a foreign language would affect his ability to write, Xie Ye had made some effort to study but was by no means fluent - I became an interlocutor for them, helping them to understand New Zealand society and assisting them in negotiating some of its administrative hurdles. Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were the first Chinese people I ever really got to know. At the time I met them I was a young student in the final year of my bachelor's degree in Chinese and Politics. I had not visited China and it seemed a strange and alien place, especially after the violence of the June 4 incident later that year.

Gu Cheng and I first became close because of a shared preference for the imaginary world. After the Chinese tradition, when we got to know each other well we stopped calling each other by our formal names. He called me Hong Dou (Red Bean) the nickname my friends in Taiwan had given me for my fondness for all things made of sweet bean paste, while I called him Qiu (Autumn) after the time of his birth and the sense of melancholy that he emanated. Like Gu, I wrote and enjoyed reading poetry; unlike him I was unpublished and not at all famous. Yet we found much in common. My classmates however, soon stopped coming to Gu Cheng's pitiful attempts at conversation class - he was such a poor teacher, he really had no idea of how to teach. The students would sit around him in a circle saying nothing, waiting for him to speak. He would watch them uncomfortably, waiting for *them* to speak - after all it was a conversation class wasn't it? But he never learnt how to get a conversation going, even if he was paid to do it. So they all stopped coming, relieved to miss out on one hour less of class.

In contrast to the tongue-tied sessions with the other students, Gu Cheng and I would talk for hours on our common interests - poetry, spirituality and *Hong Lou Meng*, which I was then reading for the first time. Gu Cheng fancied himself a latter-day Jia Baoyu. Determinedly cynical at this stage in my life, I never took him seriously on this point, even when I met Li Ying the following year. Gu Cheng told me then that Li Ying was a friend of Xie Ye's who had escaped China after June 4. I had no reason to doubt him.

Gu Cheng created a particular style for himself overseas. Before he left China he had a grey cadre suit made up, a style that no one even in non-fashion conscious China wore any longer. It looked surprisingly *chic* in an unfamiliar context. He took to wearing his odd conical hats permanently, from morning to night, whereas in China he

told me he only wore them at home. He joked that they were a “fortress” (*cheng*, in Chinese like his name) to protect his thoughts, and there was probably some truth behind the humour. Gu Cheng’s hats were his sartorial security blanket, a statement of his difference and separation from that which surrounded him.

The year that Li Ying arrived in New Zealand I went to China on an eighteen-month scholarship. But in the holidays when I returned to New Zealand, and in 1991 when I came back for good, Xie Ye, Li Ying and I spent long hours on the telephone or over at their house on Waiheke amusing ourselves with fanciful conversations about politics and half-jokingly analysing the class backgrounds of our various friends. We three women were fascinated by the political world, both in theory and practice; Gu Cheng was not. Contrary to his fantasy about an ideal world where he would be the centre of a group of talented young women, he soon became jealous about our affection for each other. I found I had to make a concerted effort to reassure him that I was still his friend too. In discussions alone with me he complained that Xie Ye and Li Ying were getting too close and always “ganging up” on him. I was surprised at the changes in my friend. He seemed under pressure, different from the man who had inspired me the year before with his whimsical discussions on *Hong Lou Meng*. Whereas previously he had impressed me with his lack of materialism, now he talked constantly about his desire to earn more money.

A further change that had come about in the household since I had been away was that Gu Cheng and Xie Ye’s son, Sam, was no longer living with them. Sam was staying with a neighbour, a middle-aged Maori woman named Poko who cared for him as if he were her own son. When I asked Gu Cheng why Sam was not living with them, he confided that it was because he felt violent towards his son and was afraid of hurting him. It was typical of Gu Cheng’s selfishness that it was his son that had to be removed from the household, not himself. Yet living in isolation in Waiheke, in a culture and society he had alienated himself from by refusing to learn the language, there was little that could be done to alleviate Gu Cheng’s psychological problems. He trusted few outside his immediate family and both he and Xie Ye were reluctant to seek help. Xie Ye seemed accepting of the situation, she could visit her son whenever she wished and she could continue to look after Gu Cheng. At least so it appeared on the surface. Sam was as happy and carefree as he had always been.

Xie Ye was a warm and attractive person. Both she and Li Ying became popular with the people living on Waiheke, a small community consisting mostly of what in New Zealand are called “alternative lifestyle” and retired folk attracted to the benign climate. In contrast to Xie Ye’s popularity, Gu Cheng was regarded as a little strange and even sinister with his peculiar habit of wearing the bottoms of trouser legs as hats. But he was tolerated, and the affection many people held for Xie Ye was transferred to him a little too.

In 1992 Gu Cheng and Xie Ye went to Berlin on a DAAD cultural exchange. They did not take Sam with them, to Xie Ye’s great unhappiness. Before their departure I assisted Xie Ye in arranging Sam’s guardianship. Poko was to look after Sam while they were away. Xie Ye was terribly distressed at the pressure she felt both from Gu Cheng to get rid of their son, and from Poko to give her legal control of him. Poko tried to make Xie Ye choose between Gu Cheng and Sam, she told her she would only care for Sam if she was made legal guardian of him. In doing so she hoped that Xie Ye would leave Gu Cheng and start a new life. Xie Ye felt she was in a hopeless situation. “No one can help me,” she told me. I asked her why Gu Xiang or Li Ying could not look after the child, but she was unable to explain adequately. All

she could say is “There is nothing else I can do.” Xie Ye was terrified that giving up guardianship of Sam to Poko would mean she would no longer have access to her son. But she was too caught up in the mystique of being Gu Cheng’s wife and all it entailed to see any other way out of her predicament.

While Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were in Berlin, Li Ying eloped from the island with a man whom she and Gu Cheng had always referred to derisively as “the old man” (*lao touzi*), a martial arts instructor. Gu Cheng was mad with grief. He wrote to me urgently from Berlin asking me to help find Li Ying, who he said had gone missing. Though I did what I could, I found no trace of her, other than a bizarre story that she might have gone to Saudi Arabia. I received a series of incoherent letters from Gu Cheng and Xie Ye, with what amounted to a police description of her, which they asked me to circulate.

In his despair at the loss of Li Ying Gu Cheng became extremely suicidal. At the suggestion of a friend in Germany, he began to write *Ying’er* as an outlet for his pain. Not long after beginning the book he realised that Xie Ye was having an affair with a friend of his in Berlin, and was thinking of leaving him. This sent him into further depths of despair and loss. He began to believe that Xie Ye and her lover, as well as Li Ying, were “waiting for him to die.”

The Beginning of the End

Ying’er was written in Berlin in the first half of 1993. Although the book is credited to both Gu Cheng and Xie Ye, only the last few chapters, beginning with a “A Final Journey” and ending with the postscript were actually composed by Xie Ye. The book was, however “written” by Xie Ye in the sense that she typed while Gu Cheng dictated. Gu Cheng was not comfortable with modern technology. He could not drive a car, he could barely do anything for himself, which is why the thought of Xie Ye leaving him to manage by himself was so hard for him to bear. That Xie Ye was willing to type up the manuscript describing his love affair with another woman demonstrates the extent to which her life had become inseparable from his own. She was the handmaiden of his genius; though it caused her much suffering she also drew much emotional satisfaction from this role.

Xie Ye participated in *Ying’er*, in much the same way as she bought condoms for Gu Cheng and Li Ying to use when they were lovers, in a detached sense. She was successful most of the time at controlling her feelings. I only ever saw her cry twice; once when she was about to leave New Zealand for Germany and she told me that Gu Cheng wouldn’t let her take Sam with them and, when they returned, when she told me of her relationship with Dayu, the man she met in Berlin.

Ying’er represents Gu Cheng’s slow public suicide. He mentions his desire to die many times in the book. He wrote, “Staying alive is a choice, not an instinct. Lei, it is so. When you are no longer interested in life, then it is time to die.”⁴ When Li Ying disappeared, Gu Cheng’s dream died. He told me when he returned from Germany, that he knew now that neither Xie Ye nor Li Ying, his two “wives”, had shared his dream. Gu Cheng decided to end his life when he realised that Li Ying was gone for good, but he wanted to leave a testimony to their affair. The book would serve both to make her suffer and he hoped, to make a lot of money, initially for Xie Ye on his death, and after he learned of her affair with Dayu, for his parents in China.

⁴ *Kingdom of Daughters*, 104.

The book is addressed as much to Xie Ye, Lei in the book, as it was to Li Ying. (Lei is the name Gu Cheng used for Xie Ye in private.) The book is written in part as a plea for Xie Ye not to leave him. Gu Cheng wrote that without Lei by his side he lapses into madness, that “the minute Lei leaves me, then death has come for me.”⁵

Gu Cheng and Xie Ye returned to their beloved island in Auckland harbour in late September 1993, a few days before Gu Cheng turned 37. I did not see them for the first few days after they arrived, but we talked on the phone almost daily. Xie Ye, in tears told me that they were having problems in their marriage. Gu Cheng had suffered a mental breakdown in Berlin and tried to strangle her to death; now he would not let her out of his sight, afraid that she would leave him at any moment. She said he even followed her into the toilet. As Xie Ye talked, Gu Cheng listened by her side. When it was his turn to talk, he confirmed all that Xie Ye had said. He told me Xie Ye had a lover and wanted to leave him. I tried my best to comfort my old friends. I persuaded Gu Cheng to give Xie Ye some space, to trust her more and not follow her around all the time. I tried to persuade Xie Ye to come and stay at my house for a while, to get away from Gu Cheng. Both I, and Xie Ye’s other close friend, Bridget, felt Xie Ye was in danger. We knew that Gu Cheng was in a dangerous state, that he had tried to kill her once before and might try again. Yet Xie Ye refused to come, she felt she couldn’t leave without Sam and since Poko was still Sam’s legal guardian she had no rights to take him away. Xie Ye knew it wasn’t safe to be with Gu Cheng at this time, but she seemed to accept whatever her fate might be by staying with him. I wanted so much to see both of them, it had been eighteen months since we last met, but I was in the middle of the final exams for my Masters’ degree. I promised to come and see them as soon as I could and to keep in phone contact.

A week after they arrived back in New Zealand, I phoned Gu Cheng by chance one Friday morning, to see how he was. After speaking with me for a while, he went to call Xie Ye to talk with me. It was then that he discovered she had disappeared, taking their car, her wallet and passport with her. Gu Cheng rushed back to the phone to tell me that he would call me when he found Xie Ye, that he suspected she had run away.

One hour later I received a call from Gu Cheng, in a state of great anxiety. He was in the office of the principal of Sam’s school with Xie Ye, Xie Ye had been trying to take Sam out of school, to take him away. The principal would not let her, because of Poko’s guardianship of Sam. Gu Cheng wanted me to translate for him, to tell the principal that he loved his son and did not want Xie Ye to take him away. In recent months Gu Cheng had suddenly begun to care very much about the young son he had previously rejected. It was as if he felt that Sam was the only thing left in this world for him to love and be loved by. At the urging of both Xie Ye and Gu Cheng, I caught the next available ferry over to Waiheke to try and mediate between them.

Gu Cheng and Xie Ye met me at the Ostend wharf at 3.30 pm. I was shocked by the changes in them. Xie Ye’s formerly radiant skin was crisscrossed by lines of fine wrinkles, it was as if her face was a mirror which had been smashed into tiny pieces but still remained together by force of gravity. Her hair was turning grey. Gu Cheng looked shrunken, I noticed he had begun to lose his hair. Though they were obviously unhappy they were much calmer than when I had spoken to them earlier. We drove to a nearby cafe and I sat between the two of them holding their hands, as they talked and tried to find a way to separate amicably.

⁵ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 89.

I spent the weekend talking with both Xie Ye and Gu Cheng separately and together, about what had happened and what they were going to do about it. Years ago I had been trained as a volunteer counsellor, and I seemed to have some success in helping them resolve their differences. For the first time I learned of the true nature of Gu Cheng's relationship with Li Ying. They had kept it a secret from all but Gu Cheng's sister Gu Xiang.

Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were staying at the house Gu Xiang shared with her New Zealand partner, Leith. They told me it was too painful for them to stay in their old house at Rocky Bay, it had too many memories for them. Despite the trauma they were suffering, both Gu Cheng and Xie Ye continued to work on their separate writing projects everyday. It was as if they knew that time was limited. Gu Cheng was working on a series of recollections for Sam, writing about what it was like while he and Xie Ye waited for Sam to be born. Xie Ye also wrote about Sam, as well as her relationship with Gu Cheng.

Like many who have suicidal thoughts, Gu Cheng did not really want to die. He hoped that somehow, something or someone would save him from his pain. On the Saturday afternoon he and I went down to the beach alone to talk. He told me he felt nobody loved him, he didn't know how to live a life without Xie Ye. He was afraid that Xie Ye's lover, Dayu, would come to the island and live in the house he had built, before he and Xie Ye had time to get divorced. Gu Cheng told me, "Every nail in that house is a part of me." He felt it was very important for him to divorce Xie Ye as soon as possible, to become separate from her so he could begin a new life. We talked about how he could begin this new life - learn to drive, study English, he could stay with his sister and spend more time with his friends. I tried to reassure him that there were many people who cared about him, that life would go on, that it might even be a good thing to be more independent. Gu Cheng was uncertain about this, but hopeful. He wanted very much to believe that it was so.

Xie Ye and I talked alone too, late on Saturday night. She seemed confused, unsure if she really wanted to divorce Gu Cheng. She told me that she had never told Dayu she loved him, but he seemed set on marrying her. She wanted Gu Cheng to accept the situation of her relationship with Dayu as she had his with Li Ying, but Gu Cheng would not agree. Though he admitted it was unfair of him, he said, "There are different people involved, so it is a different situation."

I returned to Auckland late Sunday afternoon. Gu Cheng and Xie Ye had agreed to divorce as soon as possible. Xie Ye agreed that she would let Gu Cheng know in advance what her plans were, she would not try to run off as she had on the Friday before. She would teach him to drive and continue to type his manuscripts for him. She was to live in their old house, while he would stay with Gu Xiang. It was as if the crisis had passed. They seemed at peace and relaxed when I hugged them goodbye. As I got on the ferry I had an odd feeling that this was the last time I would see them, though I suppressed the thought as overly morbid.

That night Gu Cheng and I talked on the phone briefly. He said Xie Ye had gone home and that everything was fine. I told him to phone me whenever he needed to talk and promised him he could come and stay at my house after my exams were over.

The following week I concentrated on revising for my exams. Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were often in my thoughts, I talked about them a lot with Bridget whom I shared an office with at the university where we both taught Chinese. I felt a presentiment of danger, but I channelled my anxiety into concentrating on studying.

Gu Cheng and Xie Ye didn't phone all week. I persuaded myself that this must mean that all was well, so I didn't contact them either. On Saturday 9 October I went as usual to my office at the university. No sooner had I arrived than I received a call from home, that I must come back immediately. Somehow I knew what had happened. "Is it Gu Cheng and Xie Ye?" I asked, "Are they dead?" Yes, I was told, and the police were at my house asking me to identify the body of Xie Ye. As if dead myself I returned home, totally numb. I answered the policemen's questions as if I were acting in a play, I could not recognise the sound of my own voice. They drove me to the mortuary where Xie Ye's body lay. "Yes, this is Xie Ye," I said, though I could hardly recognise my friend with all the life gone out of her. Her face was puce, she didn't seem real. Maybe I'm just imagining this, I thought, somehow there has been a mistake.

After the police dropped me home I had to phone Xie Ye's only brother Zhang Chun, who was living in Auckland and tell him the news. Gu Xiang had not wanted to tell him and had asked the police to get me to identify the body, now I was left with the responsibility of informing him of his sister's terrible fate.

The days that followed were a painful blur. I organised Gu Cheng's funeral on behalf of Gu Xiang for the following Monday. Very few people came and we had to organise a fundraising effort to pay for the cost of it. Xie Ye's funeral was crowded with those who had known her and loved her. Dayu, who had arrived on the Sunday after the murder-suicide was there, but I could not bear to speak with him.

Gu Cheng and Lei Mi, *Ying'er*, Beijing: Huayi Chubanshe, 1993.

Gu Cheng and Lei Mi, *Ying'er: The Kingdom of Daughters*, (Li Xia translator) Dortmund: Projekt Verlag, 1995.

It was some years before I could bring myself to read *Ying'er*, though I collected the book and any other publications I came across about my former friends. I wanted to write down my own feelings about their deaths, but found it too painful. The translation of *Ying'er* into English and the likelihood that it would reach a wider audience has at last given me the courage to write.

*We are so much alike. Two poisonous snakes betraying each others' treasure.*⁶

Ying'er is a convoluted mix of Gu Cheng's philosophical fantasies, fact and an attack on the character of Ying'er, the woman he once loved. In Gu Cheng's fantasy world he lives in a "heavenly kingdom" a world of adoration of women who "must not love a man".⁷ He fantasises his women sleeping together, making love, while he watches. Cao Xueqin's *Honglou meng* is an important key to Gu Cheng's personal myths in this drama: Gu Cheng had long fantasised himself as a modern Jia Baoyu; Lei is his Xue Baochai, beautiful, talented but somehow unable to completely satisfy his spiritual needs; Ying'er is the Lin Daiyu he desires but is unable ultimately to obtain.

Ying'er's real name is Li Ying, but in discussing Gu Cheng's writing on her we should distinguish the real person from the fictional character Gu Cheng' creates.

⁶ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 37.

⁷ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 218.

Li Ying and Gu Cheng met in Beijing, when she was a young student of Chinese at university. They only met a few times, but each made a profound impression on the other. Gu Cheng believed that in Li Ying he had discovered a woman who shared his deepest fantasies, who would help him create a “kingdom of girls”. After Gu Cheng and Xie Ye left China in 1987, Li Ying and Gu Cheng corresponded with each other. Not long after Gu Cheng and Xie Ye arrived in New Zealand they decided to invite Li Ying to come and live with them. This took some time, first Gu Cheng and Xie Ye had to become permanent residents of New Zealand in order to be eligible to invite others to visit, next they had to find the money to sponsor Li Ying’s visit.

When Li Ying finally arrived in New Zealand in 1990 after four years of corresponding with Gu Cheng, she was different from how he had imagined her. Gone was the shy, ethereal creature he had dreamed of for so long. In Gu Cheng’s eyes Ying’er had become materialistic, she “wanted to lead a normal life...and liked to sit in a coffee shop like others.”⁸ After a few days together in Waiheke, Gu Cheng writes their “mutual disappointment” with each other was obvious.⁹ Nor was Gu Cheng as Li Ying had imagined. The couple’s bare existence in a run-down old house in the bush of Waiheke did not appeal to Li Ying, accustomed to the cosmopolitanism of Beijing. This was not the luxurious West *she* had fantasised.

Nevertheless, in Gu Cheng’s prose, Ying’er despite her materialism desired him and his body. The text is dominated by detailed erotic descriptions of Gu Cheng’s love-making with Ying’er. He is obsessed and her smallest response to his caresses are recounted. Reading these sections, knowing that they were typed by Xie Ye, one cannot help but be stunned at her complicity in this. How much pain she must have felt. In Gu Cheng’s mind the motivation for Xie Ye’s actions are explained accordingly, “Lei, you are the only person who has wanted me, not because of love, but because of glory.”¹⁰

After she leaves him for another man Gu Cheng accused Ying’er of thinking he only wanted her body, of being so materialistic to think he cared about the cost of the airfare he and Xie Ye had paid for her to come out to New Zealand. He accused her of being incapable of sharing his dream. In his eyes she acts like a prostitute, selling herself to him in return for a way out of China. Gu Cheng only agreed to go to Berlin after Ying’er persuaded him, to earn the money to repair the house in Waiheke. After she leaves him he says he hates her “not because I don’t love her, but because she mentioned money and our work together. This is not predestined, not what we asked the heavens to do.”¹¹

Throughout *Ying’er* is a diatribe against “the old man”, the English martial arts instructor who Ying’er ran off with while Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were in Berlin. Gu Cheng is obsessed with the thought of “the old man” having sex with “his” Ying’er. He denounces him: “as debauched as waste paper”¹² Gu Cheng was often contemptuous in private of non-Chinese. He did not understand New Zealand society and made no attempt to do so. Yet at the same time he and Ying’er are exhilarated by the difference of life in New Zealand and the strangeness of its different culture. Gu describes a visit a neighbour who shows them her collection of fossils and various treasures. He writes that Ying’er came home excited, “She seemed to be learning to

⁸ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 212.

⁹ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 212.

¹⁰ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 16.

¹¹ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 177.

¹² *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 60.

deal with people in a new way, a kind of lifestyle which led her to forget everything else.”¹³

Ying'er is a testimony to the breakdown of the marriage of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye. Each addresses themselves to another love object outside their relationship. As Gu Cheng dwells on his lost moments with Ying'er, so too does Xie Ye go over the times when she and their son Sam could be together. Xie Ye's writings about Sam come at the tale end of Gu Cheng's story of his love affair with Ying'er. Xie Ye writes in a melancholic depressed style, saddened at being separated from her son, both in Berlin and while she lived in New Zealand. Xie Ye writes, “by the law of nature you and I are inseparable.”¹⁴ She tells Sam, “In the face of such ugliness and suffering, my fragility is no different from yours. How I wish you didn't know such unbearable sadness in me. You have just turned three and we have nothing but each other.”¹⁵ Xie Ye's prose is filled with fatality and despair. She feels powerless that because of Gu Cheng's madness she is forced to have her son live with Poko. She writes as she had often said in private, “No one can help me.”¹⁶

Ying'er includes a preface by Gu Cheng's father, Gu Gong, himself a well-known poet. From Gu Gong we learn the origins of his son's Thoreauic dream. Gu Gong describes that in reaction to the violence of the Cultural Revolution, “[Gu Cheng] wished to be in a world devoid of human presence and with only the creatures of nature.”¹⁷ The Gu family were sent down to the countryside from 1968 to the early 1970s. During that time, Gu Cheng helped his father feed pigs and wrote poetry. After the family returned to Beijing, Gu Gong tells us his son absorbed himself in reading fiction as an escape from real life, “Dream and fantasy, not differentiating the sun from the moon, accompanied and possessed him every minute.”¹⁸

Two years after the Chinese edition of *Ying'er*, the book has at last been translated into English. Gu Cheng's book is translated by Li Xia as, *Ying'er: The Kingdom of Daughters*. The second half of the title comes from Gu's fantasy of living in a world where he is surrounded only by young beautiful girls, *nu'er guo*. Li Xia translates Gu Chang's term, *nu'er guo*, as “kingdom of daughters”. It would be more accurate to translate the term as “kingdom of girls”. Gu Cheng's fascination was with young women, or girls, rather than with the female sex as such. His fascination was influenced by his reading of *Hong lou meng*, that it was a paean to the fragile bloom of young beauties. His belief also reflects the influence of Taoist sexual philosophy, which claims that making love with young women is more beneficial to one's health than making love with mature women..

In his foreword to the translation Li tells us, Gu Cheng's *Ying'er* “amounts to a true love confession.”¹⁹ This is an overly idealistic view of Gu Cheng and his text. Gu Cheng's prose is a stream of subconscious rambling. His pen roams from descriptions of being with Ying'er to the arguments he and Xie Ye were having at the time of writing. His text is incomplete and contradictory, a result of the rush to get it printed. It is more a lament, or an extended wail than a “love confession”. Gu Cheng told me he wrote the book for two reasons: firstly to keep his sanity in his despair that Ying'er

¹³ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 71.

¹⁴ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 237.

¹⁵ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 239.

¹⁶ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 254.

¹⁷ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p xv.

¹⁸ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p ix.

¹⁹ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p v.

had left and that Xie Ye was having an affair, secondly, to earn money. Indeed the main reason for Gu Cheng and Xie Ye going to Berlin was to earn money. Despite the public picture of Gu Cheng being above the dirt of everyday material life, he was as concerned as anyone about having money to pay the bills. In *Ying'er* he writes, “Since coming abroad, we have hardly been able to breathe because we are so poor. Everything takes money. Only that we haven’t been stranded, that we have survived.”²⁰

The translation has a number of obvious flaws. Because she is unfamiliar with New Zealand society the translator mistranslates terms such as *zhuliu zheng* (permanent residence) as a “green card”, the American term, and translates the name of the Waiheke Island ferry, “Quick Cat”, as “Fast Cat”. Li Xia’s prose is awkward at times. In some sections the translation is too literal, or not colloquial enough to match the Chinese. The translator’s work is made more difficult by errors in the original text, such as when Gu Cheng calls New Zealand’s nikau palm a coconut tree.

Li Xia’s translation needs more detailed notes to explain some sections. Such notes as there are, are useful, but as there are no footnotes in the text, one doesn’t become aware of them until reading to the end of the book. In the glossary of names, the translator erroneously describes “the old man” as “an elderly man”. The man concerned, is in his early fifties, “the old man” is simply the derogatory name Li Ying and Gu Cheng gave him. The translator tells us Bridget, who Xie Ye address some of her writings on Sam to, is a friend of hers living on the island. A more closer reading of the text, or a minimal amount of checking would have revealed that Bridget lives with her family in Auckland, some distance from Waiheke. The translator also mistranslates the name of Bridget’s daughter April, as Apple. Nevertheless, given the disjointed state of the original, Li Xia’s translation is a reasonable attempt.

Mai Qi (pen name of Li Ying), *Hunduan Jiliu Dao (Heart-Broken at Waiheke)*, Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1995.

Li Ying wrote *Heartbroken at Waiheke* to present her side of the events of her relationship with Gu Cheng and Xie Ye. She felt the need to defend herself and her actions after Gu Cheng’s *Ying'er* was published and after the publicity the murder-suicide attracted. She says “I know my book will hurt a lot of people”.²¹ Li Ying’s account certainly differs from Gu Cheng’s romanticised version, but most of the basic elements remain the same. What differs is Li Ying’s feelings about what was going on.

After Li Ying’s preface explaining why she wrote the book, the book begins with an introduction by her former boyfriend, Liu Zhanqiu, also a poet, who describes the work as “a book about a Chinese woman and the three men who loved her”²². Li Ying wants us to know that Gu Cheng wasn’t the one and only man in her life, that there is more to her life than was described in *Ying'er*.

As with Gu Cheng’s *Ying'er*, Li Ying’s account is not chronological. The book begins with an account of her life at the time of writing the book, then moves back in time to when she and John, the English martial arts instructor who “rescued” her from

²⁰ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 163.

²¹ Mai Qi, p 7.

²² Mai Qi, p 15.

Gu Cheng are living together in Sydney. She gives us detailed accounts of being sexually harassed while working in a shop in Australia, and how she applied for a job at what she thought was a tour guide company and later discovered was an escort agency. Li Ying lingers for several pages on the topic of prostitution and escort agencies. She wants us to know that she would never consider such an occupation herself, no matter how desperate. As with the inclusion of details of her relationship with the two other men in her life, this reference to prostitution is deliberate, Li Ying is indirectly rebutting Gu Cheng's slander that she behaved like a prostitute with him.

Li Ying's prose carries on in a self-indulgent vein for more than half its length. One begins to wonder if she will attempt to explain her relationship with Gu Cheng at all, or whether this is simply another "Chinese woman living overseas" book in the vein of a "A Chinese Woman in Manhattan (*Mahadun de Zhongguo nuren*). In Li Ying's account she is an extremely desirable female who men are falling over themselves to be with. She fantasises herself as a great beauty, a lure to men in the Chinese tradition of the fox-fairy spirit (*hulijing*).

Suddenly the book launches into a description of her feelings arriving in New Zealand in 1990. Li Ying's portrait of New Zealand's rain-soaked scenery is vivid and interesting, in a way her self-obsessed reveries of her love life are not. Her prose style is fluent in patches, whenever she is not indulging her ego.

Li Ying arrived in New Zealand in the winter of 1990. She says that she decided to leave China "after the summer of 1989",²³ meaning the events of June 4. She says she also received invitations from friends in Japan and the USA to come, but decided on New Zealand because of her relationship with Gu Cheng and Xie Ye. Li Ying's visa to New Zealand was facilitated because Gu Cheng and Xie Ye claimed that she was a political refugee from the protest movements in 1989. However, their letters to each other from 1987 on, some of which are collected in Gu Xiang's book, reveal that she had been trying to leave China for years. June 4 was simply an added excuse. Li Ying provides this information in an attempt to convince her readers that she did not leave China for material reasons, as Gu Cheng alleged in *Ying'er*.

Within days of her arrival in New Zealand, Li Ying tells us she wanted to leave. She was distressed because Gu Cheng came into her room and forced her to have sex with him. The following day when she tells Xie Ye what had happened, Xie Ye replies, "What do you think you were brought here for?" Li Ying asks herself, "Why would I want to live with people with such weird ideas?"²⁴ She contrasts her admiration for Gu Cheng and Xie Ye when she was writing to them, with the reality of living with them. Li Ying becomes depressed and cries constantly. She and Xie Ye go for a walk to the beach together. Li Ying tells Xie Ye she wants to go to live in Auckland and find a job, that she can't stay with them. Xie Ye persuades her to stay, saying that Gu Cheng would die without her. She appeals to Li Ying's sense of her feminine power, "You can't go. If you go he won't be able to live."²⁵ She tells her, "If only you'll stay, I guarantee Gu Cheng won't go into your room again." Li Ying reluctantly agrees to stay on, and she returns to the house following behind Xie Ye, feeling, she says, "like a captive".²⁶ Her account differs markedly from that reported in *Ying'er* and what Xie Ye later told Gu Xiang.

²³ Mai Qi, p 314.

²⁴ Mai Qi, p 159.

²⁵ Mai Qi, p 161,

²⁶ Mai Qi, 162.

Li Ying's account of Gu Cheng's seduction of her and her feelings afterwards are the most moving and honest sections of her book. Reading it was the only time I felt sympathy for her and could truly believe this is how she felt at the time. The previous sections of her book are self-indulgent, this section is raw and honest. Reading the first half of the book the reader cannot help but feel she is a shallow and foolish person. After her description of the seduction one feels sympathy for her naivety and the way it was abused by the older and more worldly-wise Gu Cheng and Xie Ye. The naive and somewhat childish student who first met Gu Cheng when she was still at university and had worshipped him from afar for so long, was destroyed in one evening. However this feeling of sympathy for Li Ying cannot last long, because before long she reveals her petty and selfish side. From this point on the book becomes more interesting, not in the end because Li Ying becomes a more likeable character, but because through her egotism she can't help but reveal her true self.

Though she wrote to Gu Cheng for four years before she arrived in New Zealand, Li Ying claims their "dreams were different."²⁷ She says she thought she made it clear to him in her letters, that her friendship was with both Xie Ye and Gu Cheng. She didn't realise that he had already fantasised her as his "second wife". She enjoyed being worshipped by him, but says she couldn't come to terms with the reality of what he expected of her when she arrived in New Zealand.

Li Ying coped with Gu Cheng's violation of her by trying to adapt to her new environment. She found a job cleaning for the pastor of a local church, and she helped Xie Ye make spring rolls to sell at the Saturday market. She tried to improve her English and began to copy Xie Ye in the way she dressed and the way she spoke. She was proud that people on the island sometimes confused her for Xie Ye. She secretly craved to be Xie Ye, she wanted to be Gu Cheng's wife and to be as popular as Xie Ye was with everybody they knew.

Li Ying gives a patronising description of the "weirdos" living on Waiheke - not realising how strange they themselves must have seemed to many people.²⁸ When Gu Cheng kills his pet rabbits in a fit of pique, she and Xie Ye use the meat to make spring rolls to sell at the weekend market. After one customer turns away in disgust upon learning what kind of meat they have used, Xie Ye comments derisively, "Foreigners are so fussy."²⁹ Li Ying says the *laowai* in New Zealand are "simple" because they don't understand why it is necessary for Xie Ye to leave her son behind when she and Gu Cheng go to Germany. Li Ying's attitude towards non-Chinese is indicated by the language she uses to describe them in the book. When she is feeling affectionate she refers to them by name, when less affectionate by the derogatory nicknames she has invented such as "old man" and "old Mary", occasionally she uses the word New Zealanders, but mostly she says "*laowai*" (foreigners or literally the "outsiders"). Li Ying does not relate well to New Zealand society. Through Li Ying's book and even more so in Gu Cheng's, one gets a sense of their isolation in their adopted land. To them, though they both claim New Zealand as "home", it is simply a backdrop to their private drama. Neither of them identify with or understand the people and their customs. None of the three are able to comprehend or appreciate the Green ethics of the inhabitants of Waiheke. Li Ying describes Gu Cheng constantly repeating the story of how the Waiheke council refused to allow him to keep 200

²⁷ Mai Qi, p 4.

²⁸ Mai Qi, p 103.

²⁹ Mai Qi, p 132.

chickens on his property and ordered him to dispose of them. He was unable to comprehend the city planning laws or why it was illegal for him to cut down several ancient trees growing on his land. Gu Cheng cuts the trees down to let in sunlight, he does not recognise the value of the trees to the island ecology.

Li Ying's account of "the kingdom of girls" gives us a glimpse of the violent side of Gu Cheng's personality which was hidden from most who knew him. Li Ying tells us Gu Cheng threatened to kill her. She describes how he attacked his three year old son one night without any reason, and kicked him to the floor. Afterwards Xie Ye held Gu Cheng's hand and comforted him saying, "It's okay. Tomorrow I'll take him away."³⁰ That night Xie Ye went off crying to the little shack on the hill, taking Sam to sleep with her for the last time. Li Ying tells us Gu Cheng had wanted Xie Ye to have the baby adopted out when it was born, and had tried to persuade her to abort the foetus as she had during an earlier pregnancy. Yet Li Ying is so accustomed to the madness of their existence that it does not seem abnormal to her that a mother should be separated from her child. In her own way Li Ying was competing for Xie Ye's attention and maternal love as much as Gu Cheng was, so the removal of Sam could only be advantageous to her. Li Ying was searching for a father/mother figure in her life, someone who would protect her and look after her. She writes how attracted she is to old people, old people make her feel safe she says. In this respect she and Gu Cheng were competing for the same need. Both craved the love they feel was denied them in their turbulent childhood. Xie Ye fulfilled some of this need for both of them, - but not enough for two - in Li Ying's eyes at least. She tells us Gu Cheng tried to make her choose between Xie Ye and himself.

Not longer after Gu Cheng attacks Sam however, Gu Cheng and Li Ying move in to the house of a neighbour who is away on vacation and needs someone to house-sit for a few months. This allows Xie Ye and Sam to stay together without influencing Gu Cheng's moods. In this brief period Li Ying says she came to enjoy being Gu Cheng's lover, she began to love him. They live as husband and wife, leading a simple life: walking on the beach in the morning, Gu Cheng working on his poems or his sketches, Li Ying going out to work and coming home to cook for him. Xie Ye comes to visit them frequently and all appear happy and content. Li Ying seems to hold completely contradictory views on the situation however. She tells us, "I know I should become a female follower of the church of Gu Cheng, I shouldn't love Zhanqiu..."³¹ At the same time she tells us she enjoys Gu Cheng's "religion" of one man and many women living together and her central role in this "philosophy". She says Gu Cheng's "voice is my number one religion."³² Li Ying is outwardly obedient to Gu Cheng and Xie Ye, grateful to their help, but inwardly resentful of the role she is being asked to play. On all sides their drama unfolds in multiple directions, each player unaware of the others' true feelings.

Their idyllic situation is suddenly broken by the news that Gu Cheng has been invited to Berlin. Li Ying realises for the first time that Xie Ye is not as happy with their living arrangements as she had always thought. The letter from Germany's DAAD invites Gu Cheng and his family - meaning Xie Ye and Sam - to come to Berlin on a cultural exchange programme for one year. Li Ying is fiercely jealous, her

³⁰ Mai Qi, p 244.

³¹ Mai Qi, p 133.

³² Mai Qi, p 133.

fantasy of being Gu Cheng's wife is spoiled. She thinks bitterly how the couple will meet up with old friends in Berlin and everyone will think they are happily married.

At first it seems Gu Cheng doesn't want to go, but Xie Ye asks Li Ying to persuade him. Xie Ye wants a better life than the subsistence they are living on. She craves to return to Europe and see old friends. She craves the material comforts the income of the exchange programme will bring them. She tells Li Ying that their going to Germany is a chance for her to escape Gu Cheng and start a new life of her own. Li Ying tells Xie Ye it is not like before when she wanted to leave, now she really loves Gu Cheng. But as Xie Ye forced Li Ying to stay, now she forces her to go. She persuades her that their current situation cannot continue, that there is no hope of Gu Cheng choosing to be with her alone. Xie Ye wants to lead a normal family life with Gu Cheng and Sam. Neither Xie Ye or Li Ying share Gu Cheng's dream of a "kingdom of girls", each wants him for herself.

Li Ying finally agrees to ask Gu Cheng to go to Berlin so he can earn enough money for them all, and they can build a new house with the proceeds. Gu Cheng is persuaded by the idea. But he tells Xie Ye he will only go if Sam does not come along. To his surprise, Xie Ye accepts. By now she is willing to do anything to get what she ultimately desires. In Li Ying's book, Xie Ye is the master-plotter, manipulating both Gu Cheng and Li Ying. Gu Cheng goes along with the plan, naively thinking Li Ying will be waiting for them when they return to New Zealand.

Li Ying outwardly goes along with Xie Ye's plan to persuade Gu Cheng to go to Germany, but inwardly she feels deep self-pity. "No one has ever really loved me," she tells us.³³ She laments "I was just a shadow," all her friends in New Zealand are Gu Cheng and Xie Ye's friends, it is as if she has no identity of her own.³⁴ Li Ying is bitter at being used by both Gu Cheng and Xie Ye. She is distressed when Gu Cheng hugs her as he leaves for Germany and tells her to "take care of yourself and wait for us to come back."³⁵ She feels empty when she drives away from seeing them off at the wharf.

Both Li Ying's and Gu Cheng's books should be read as much fiction as it is fact - since all three characters liked to believe themselves to be living a life removed from reality. Li Ying's book gives a biased but fascinating view on one angle of the romantic triangle Gu Cheng constructed. She wrote in order to defend her reputation after the slander of Gu's Cheng's prose, but in the end gives us an all too unfavourable picture of her personality. She would have been better to remain the mysterious Ying'er.

Gu Xiang, *Wo miandui de Gu Cheng zuihou de shisi tian* (The Last Fourteen Days of Gu Cheng), Beijing: Guoji Wenhua Chubanshe, 1994.

The cover of *The Last Fourteen Days of Gu Cheng* claims that Gu Xiang was "the only person who really knew Gu Cheng at the time of the murder-suicide". But as Gu Xiang herself admits in the book, her relationship with her brother was not close and hadn't been for years. On a number of occasions when Gu Cheng attempts to confide in his sister Gu Xiang rebuffs him, seemingly unable to cope with what he wants to

³³ Mai Qi, p 296.

³⁴ Mai Qi, p 305.

³⁵ Mai Qi, p 303.

tell her. Her book is a tragic account of the last days of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye, but is not completely reliable, since neither Xie Ye or Gu Cheng told her everything that was going on or had happened in recent months. Both of them existed in a world of secrets and lies, telling one thing to one person and something else to others. The book is painfully honest about Gu Xiang's inability to cope with the tragic situation that occurred in her own house and her despair at being unable to stop it.

Gu Xiang argues that her brother didn't mean to kill Xie Ye when he attacked her with an axe, he only "hit" her.³⁶ Her claim seems hard to accept when one considers that he had already attempted to kill Xie Ye at least once before, by strangulation in Berlin and had been trying to get hold of a gun when they arrived in New Zealand.

Gu Xiang further claims that her brother didn't want to die when he returned from Germany³⁷. Had she talked with him in depth before he killed himself she might have understood his state of mind better. Gu Cheng had been wavering on the edge of suicide for months, ever since he heard of Li Ying's disappearance. This state of mind was aggravated when he found out that Xie Ye had a lover. He felt betrayed and was unable to accept the thought of being alone. Gu Cheng was afraid of how he would cope without Xie Ye as his protective barrier from the realities of life, especially in a culture foreign to him. He found it hard to conceive of learning a new way of living, of becoming more independent.

Gu Xiang is critical of Li Ying's version of events.³⁸ Of course she has a different perspective and perhaps blames Li Ying in part for her brother's death. Gu Xiang reports that Xie Ye told her she was distressed by having to help Gu Cheng write *Ying'er*. This is very different from the picture Gu Cheng describes, of his idyllic world where his "two wives" coexist in contentment.³⁹

In the last few days there were petty disputes over money between Xie Ye and Gu Xiang, and contention that Li Ying had taken more than her share of their money earned making spring rolls. Xie Ye was under strain, no longer able to convince the world of her happiness with a smiling face. She seemed exhausted and depressed, not just by the events of the last few months in Germany, but of the past few years. In the final few days of their lives, Gu Xiang tells us, Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were embittered. Each accused the other of betrayal. Gu Cheng confronted Xie Ye about Li Ying's departure. He guessed that she had known about it before their departure for Germany, and had even encouraged it. Xie Ye would only reply that those events were all past history. Xie Ye recounted to Gu Xiang her version of the *Ying'er* story, closer to Li Ying's version than it was to Gu Cheng's romanticised account. According to Xie Ye, after the first night when Gu Cheng had sex with Li Ying, when Li Ying came to tell Xie Ye about what had happened, it was an attempt to get Xie Ye to take responsibility for it.⁴⁰ Xie Ye was sarcastic about Li Ying's false modesty because in her letters to Gu Cheng before she arrived in New Zealand she had claimed that Gu Cheng's dream, to create a "kingdom of girls", was her dream too.

Gu Xiang reports that Xie Ye found it hard to leave Gu Cheng, she enjoyed the prestige of being help-mate to a famous poet, ideally she hoped that Gu Cheng would accept her relationship with Dayu and she could coexist with them both as he had with

³⁶ Gu Xiang, p 5.

³⁷ Gu Xiang, p 12.

³⁸ Gu Xiang, 14.

³⁹ Gu Xiang, 13.

⁴⁰ Gu Xiang, p 105.

Ying'er. Gu Cheng was unable to accept this arrangement. Gu had very traditional ideas about women, he believed that since Xie Ye was going off with Dayu, by rights he should have custody of their son Sam, even though until recently he had never expressed any affection for him.

Gu Xiang's prose accurately describes the sense of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye living life as if they were in a play or a novel. Indeed, they often proudly boasted of this to their friends and acquaintances. She conveys the sense of powerlessness those around them felt as the drama unfolded: Gu Xiang emotionally unable to cope with her brother's needs, her husband Leith's inability to understand what was going on because of lack of Chinese, Bridget busy with her family, I was busy with final exams, and no one else knew them well enough to help.

Gu Xiang writes of Xie Ye's relationship with her lover in Berlin, Dayu. Xie Ye's fascination with the flashy Dayu surprised all who knew her well. She was obsessed with the fact that he wore fashionable name-brand (*mingpai*) clothing, was a sharp thinker, who drove a car well and didn't look for a job after graduation with a PhD because he knew that the German government would give him a year of full government pay anyway.⁴¹ After more than ten years of being a mother to Gu Cheng, living in poverty and having to accept his lovers, Dayu's way of life and thinking was appealing to Xie Ye. Gu Xiang's book reveals a smug side to Xie Ye's personality that wasn't usually visible. She boasts to Gu Xiang that "all Gu Cheng's friends fall in love with me."⁴² Given Gu Cheng's wandering eye it is only natural that she should need to persuade herself of her desirability.

The most devastating section of Gu Xiang's book is her depiction of the last few minutes of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye's lives. After Gu Cheng returns to Gu Xiang's house having attacking Xie Ye with an axe, he tells his sister, "Something has happened. I've attacked Xie Ye." Gu Cheng stands at the kitchen sink and calmly washes his hands. He tells Gu Xiang, "I'm going to kill myself. Don't try to stop me." Gu Xiang watches her brother, seemingly stuck-dumb. She knows he is preparing to kill himself and feels unable to prevent him. She describes watching him tie the knot of his hangman's noose, then she runs to look for Xie Ye - but to where? Xie Ye is up a slope, Gu Xiang would have had to run past Gu Cheng to look for her. The house is on one side, the tree where Gu Cheng hung himself is in the middle and the slope where Xie Ye lay bleeding to death is fifty metres beyond the tree. Gu Xiang's explanation of this time is as incoherent in print as it was when she described it to me not long after the event. It is clear that she was in a severe state of shock, her English was poor, and she didn't know who to call for help. As she admits in the book, she had been backing away from the problems of her brother all week.

Of all the accounts of this tragedy, Gu Xiang's is the most vivid and moving. Her prose is honest and gripping to read. Her tale of the last fourteen days of her beloved younger brother helps us unravel some of the layers of deception surrounding the story. Unlike Gu Cheng and Li Ying's works, her book is neither fantasy nor an attempt at self-justification.

Chen Zishan (ed.), *Shiren Gu Cheng zhi si* (The Death of the Poet Gu Cheng), Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1993

⁴¹ Gu Xiang, p 25.

⁴² Gu Xiang, p 25.

Death of the Poet Gu Cheng is an attempt at hagiography. As a piece of writing one can't help but agree with China's cultural commissars who complain that Gu Cheng is being made into a hero.⁴³ In this book Gu Cheng's uxoricide and his own violent end are secondary to benevolent reminiscences from a group of contributors who are noticeable for not knowing Gu Cheng and Xie Ye well in real life. The book aims to discuss the life and works of Gu Cheng, to record reminiscences and appraisals of his work for those who wish to research the man, *menglong* poetry and his generation of Chinese writers in the future.

Death of the Poet begins with a discussion by a group of editors and writers on the meaning of Gu Cheng's death and the significance of his work. The book's editor Chen Zishang describes the murder-suicide as a "sudden event".⁴⁴ One of the speakers comments that he was surprised at Gu Cheng's murder of his wife, but less so at his suicide. He and other speakers say it doesn't fit in with their image of Gu as a "childlike poet". The discussants regard Gu Cheng's *Ying'er* and his poetic writings as non-fiction. They idealise him, seemingly excusing his actions with, "He lives in a fairytale world, where there is no right or wrong."⁴⁵ They are determined to create a united view of Gu Cheng's life and why he died.

The main focus of the discussion is Gu Cheng, though some of the writers in the selected newspaper articles discuss Xie Ye and what it must have been like being an poet's wife. Perhaps one day someone will write an in-depth profile of Xie Ye and how in her relationship with Gu Cheng she subordinated everything to him, even to the point of giving up the guardianship of her child. Those writers who do mention Xie Ye describe her as a typical Chinese wife, and if this is so, which I truly doubt, then the future for women in China is not bright. It is significant that most of the writers of these articles are men. Xie Ye was a victim, she was emotionally and physically abused by Gu Cheng to the point of passive compliance, even to the point where she knowingly risked her own life. Xie Ye was totally financially dependant on him, she had no career of her own. From the recollections of a family friend later on in the book, we learn that soon after their marriage Gu Cheng insisted Xie Ye stop working and going to night classes. Neither of them worked from that time on until they left China in 1987.⁴⁶

Following the discussion the book is divided into three sections. The first is a collection of newspaper articles about the deaths, mostly from Hong Kong papers. The second section contains selections from the love letters of the couple, written before

⁴³ See for example the comments of Zheng Bonong (Editor in Chief of *Wenyi Bao*) in a commentary on current trends in literature by a group of China's cultural commissars in *Qiushi*, "Since the Third Plenary Session, we have made sharp efforts to redress those "leftist" mistakes. Literary and art criticism was quite popular for a time, particularly in the late 1970's and early 1980's, when it played a large role in freeing up our thinking, bringing order out of chaos, supporting creativity, and discovering new talent and innovative works. But new problems have arisen subsequently. From the time of the criticism of Bitter Love, Comrade Deng Xiaoping started to warn us to pay attention to the problem of weakness and laxness in literary and art circles, repeatedly stressing the need for sound literary and art criticism, while the Central Committee has also recently emphasised that we must not say that normal literary and art criticism is a case of bludgeoning. Comrade Sun Li says that some literary and art criticism is now "like being in kindergarten," which is quite thought-provoking. The style of not daring to criticise and blind flattery does much harm, with Gu Cheng's kind of praise and mourning for even murderers being misleading to many literate youths." Forum on Literary and Art Criticism, *Qiushi*, December 1996, Foreign Broadcast Information Service (transl.).

⁴⁴ *Shiren Gu Cheng zhi si*, p 1.

⁴⁵ *Shiren*, p 4.

⁴⁶ *Shiren*, p 21.

their marriage. This section is the most interesting and useful part of the book, it comes closest to the aims of the book's editors. Through the letters we learn more about the personalities and psychology of the couple than we do in any of the other books. The letters were written when Gu Cheng was still an unknown poet, dependent on his parents for financial support. Xie Ye's letters are especially interesting, reading them we can see that she had talents as a writer from early on. After marriage Xie Ye's writing abilities were subjugated to heavy household duties - since Gu Cheng left everything to her - and by Gu Cheng's jealousy at her abilities. He was afraid of being overshadowed in his sphere of influence and did not encourage her abilities in any area he wanted to excel in. Xie Ye told me privately that Gu Cheng was jealous because he and Li Ying were better at making pottery than he was, and that Gu Cheng was resentful when she started writing. Li Ying said the same and added that Gu Cheng didn't like her writing either.

Gu Cheng and Xie Ye's letters to each other are very touching to read. It is sad to read them in retrospect, knowing what was to pass after these early declarations of love. The letters tell us how the couple first met, while travelling by train from Shanghai to Beijing. They sat near each other and began to talk, each fascinated by the other. Through the letters we observe how entranced Xie Ye was, as Li Ying later was to be, by Gu Cheng's escapist world view. Both Gu Cheng and Xie Ye's parents had been targets in the Cultural Revolution, both of them had suffered deep psychological distress from growing up in such a harsh and turbulent environment. It was Gu Cheng's defiant otherworldliness which was so appealing to his Chinese audience. This otherworldliness was defiant because it swam against the current of contemporary Chinese life. By ignoring politics and choosing to exist in a fantasy world, by refusing to cooperate with modern realities, it was in itself a primitive political statement.

Death of a the Poet concludes with a collection of writings by Xie Ye and Gu Gong about Gu Cheng, as well as a summary of *Ying'er*. The book is a blatant attempt to cash in on the Chinese-reading public's fascination with the subject of Gu Cheng and his love life. It tells us little we don't already know, in some cases presenting disinformation. It has many factual errors, such as calling Xie Ye's lover, Dayu "Dayou" and stating that he arrived on in New Zealand on 9 October, the day after the murder-suicide, when the actual date was the 10 October. In some pieces Waiheke island is called Auckland island. It is clear the writers have relied on gossip rather than actual research for their work, which they aim to present as a collection of vital documents. Ultimately the book comes across as prurient and exploitative. With the exception of the love letters, it is significant only as an example of the crass commercialism which dominates the academic and publishing world in China at present, compounded by a cultural and political climate that actively discourages serious considered analytical pieces. Sensationalism and the desire to earn fast money are the environment in which this book and all the other books reviewed here represent.

Conclusion

What can we learn from the deaths of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye? And what does their tragic fate tell us about the state of China's creative world? Gu Cheng and Xie Ye were both products and victims of the last fifty years of China's history. Their most formative years were spent under the destructive influence of Mao Zedong's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Xie Ye responded to the distressing experience of her early years by withdrawing into herself, while presenting a cheerful visage to the world. She accustomed herself to suppressing her feelings and had a passive outlook on life. Though an intelligent and talented woman, her greatest desire was to have enough money to pay for the needs of her family and to be able to live with her son. Gu Cheng's response to the destruction of his early years was to reject the outside world and retreat into a world of fantasy. He was a disturbed and unhappy young man, first attempting suicide in 1973 and showing violent tendencies early on in his life. Gu's poetry became popular in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as a result of his escapism and focus on the imaginary world. After the ravages of Mao's political campaigns, China's poetry readers longed for release from the prison of political struggle and economic hardship. Gu's poetry offered a window to another world. It was this new perspective which eventually attracted both the vituperation of the Communist authorities and the interest of international scholars of Chinese literature. In 1987 Gu Cheng and Xie Ye left China for the West, the symbol of freedom and a better way of life. After giving lectures in various European countries, the couple arrived in New Zealand to begin a teaching post at Auckland University. In the eyes of their friends and admirers, Gu Cheng was a success: he was well-known both in China and amongst those in the Western world who read Chinese literature, he had succeeded in settling in a Western country and buying a house of his own. Gu Cheng was free to compose whatever he pleased, and free to live as he pleased. Yet Gu was alienated from his new country and produced nothing of note in this time. Life was a constant struggle for Gu Cheng and Xie Ye in New Zealand, both economically and psychologically. They had achieved their dream, but found the dream was empty. They were dead in exile. When a crisis came in their lives, it was much harder to avoid than if they had been living in a familiar environment.

The life and death of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye are symbolic of the crisis in modern Chinese culture. The choices that Gu Cheng faced as a writer living in modern China - to remain silent, to produce what the government approves of, produce what it does not approve of and suffer the consequences, or go abroad - are typical. Gu Cheng and Xie Ye's alienation both from their home land and their adopted country is also not unique. A study which looks honestly at Gu Cheng's life and the *milieu* in which he was shaped, Communist China, needs to be written.⁴⁷ It must analyse his life and work without stooping to preference and hagiography. Through understanding the meaning of the fate of Gu Cheng and Xie Ye we will come to a deeper understanding of the *malaise* affecting China's proud two thousand year old cultural history in the modern era.

⁴⁷ At the time of writing this article I have come across a further book on the life of Gu Cheng, written by Jiang Xi and Wan Xiang, *Linghun zhi lu - Gu Cheng de yisheng* (Spiritual Road - the life of Gu Cheng), Beijing: Zhongguo renshi chubanshe, 1995. The book suffers from the same problems as the others I have reviewed here: reliant on gossip rather than thorough research for its information and failing to discuss the political and social environment which had such an important influence on Gu Cheng's life and work.

*If I have any regrets in this life, it is this. I don't have much to regret, but if someone asks me, I will say it again. I regret this: I left my island, my home, my destiny. I should die there. I should believe in nothing, want nothing, like a mad tree that does not move no matter how powerful the storm is. It stands there until it is broken. It won't float around in the sea or in dirty mud.*⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *Kingdom of Daughters*, p 103.