

OCI Public Talk:

Xuē Xīnrán: Bridging Hearts and Cultures Stories of Love, Identity, and Belonging

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[Edited transcript of the talk and part of Q & A]

Kan, Qian

I'm Kan Qian. I'm the Senior Lecturer in the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics, and Director of the Online Confucius Institute at the Open University. This talk is hosted by the Online Confucius Institute.

Today, it's my pleasure and great honour to welcome our guest speaker, Xuē Xīnrán, who really needs no introduction. I'm sure many of us here in the room are familiar with Xīnrán's work. Xīnrán is a British Chinese journalist, author, speaker, and advocate for women's issues. Her first book, I'm sure many of you have either read or heard of, *The Good Women of China*, was published in 2002, and it has become an international bestseller. She has since published another 8 non-fiction books. She also frequently contributes to The Guardian and the BBC.

In August 2004, Xīnrán set up the [Mothers' Bridge of Love charity](#), creating a bridge of understanding between China and the West and between adoptive culture and the birth culture. Its noble mission is to reach out and enrich the lives of Chinese children in all corners of the world: those adopted by Western families, those raised abroad, as well as those living in China. They are now working with over 27 countries. The Mothers' Bridge of Love book for adopted families, entitled [Motherbridge of Love](#), came third in Time Magazine's list of the top 10 children's books of 2007. So, without further ado, let's welcome Xīnrán to give us her talk: *Bridging Hearts and Cultures: stories of love, identity, and belonging*.

Xīnrán

Hello, everyone, *Ni hao*. Thank you so much for sharing such a beautiful time with me, and also, first of all, I'd like to thanks to Kan laoshi (Teacher Kan) and also the Open University, and the Online Confucius Institute team, and every single one of you.

As you can hear, actually my talk will be not in 'proper' English: I'm talking in *Chinglish*, because I'm Chinese, when I came to the UK in 1997, I was over 40, and also I have this kind of problem with my language as well - somehow I lack this kind of talent.

Today, I want to share my life of 'Three Homeworks' with you. Why I talk about this as a 'homework,' is, in fact, from my soul, my heart as a Chinese daughter, Chinese mother, and

a Chinese person, woman, I feel that these are three homeworks that I never stopped working on during my learning and research.

My first homework is my own country

First of all, I spent over twenty years re-educating myself, learning to understand my country and my people. When I came to London in 1997, I was 40 already. Before that, I had a 20-year career in China, where I tried to learn, interviewing more than three hundred people to see how to run my radio show and how should I understand myself and my mother and my grandmother's generation. And afterwards, after 1997, after I came to UK, I spent another twenty-nine years learning about the West, and what it is when we talk about the 'Western' or 'overseas' or 'Americans' or 'Europeans' or 'Asians' - who they are. And particularly, we are all overseas Chinese, but why people see us very different. except the personality, except the family roots, except, you know, but they always see us in one formation, in one kind of, 'Oh, this is *Chinese*'. But in fact, we are so different as well.

Now I'm 60 plus - nearly 70 - and recently, I've been thinking quite a lot of my published books and asking who am I and what am I? I believe we ask these kinds of questions in our life, maybe as a teenager, or maybe even from an early age, we think about this. But this kind of thinking and this kind of view of ourselves is changed by age, by experience, by culture, by education, by marriage, by many, many different shapes. So today I'd just like to share a little bit of myself with you. I hope you don't mind.

The first of all is my country. When I talk about my country, I did spend twenty years after I became a journalist in the 1980s - and by now, actually, it's 40 years - but I have to say that in fact, this map covers a period of about twenty years of my travelling around China between 1988 all the way to 2020. Since COVID, I haven't done this kind of job again. And I think lots of overseas Chinese and most of them come from, what you see in the top right photo, which is modern China and the biggest cities. China has about sixty-five cities like this. China is huge, the size is like a whole Europe and a populations of 1.4 billion. people, so there is no such thing as *a* China at all, no such thing as *a* Chinese person at all, because between the Yellow River yellow, the young and the poor, we have all the different cultures, or even similar, but different civilizations as well.

On the bottom three photos I want to show you those women I met. The one on the left is a shoe repair; she's the same age as me. She spent her whole life over twenty-eight years in Zhengzhou near the Yellow River and she's a very successful woman and so are her children: a son went to a university and became a PhD student, and a daughter became a student at Beijing University. When I met her, she was so emotional; she told me she's a very proud mom and sent her children to this next level of life. She said, 'I didn't take anyone's money, I didn't take any benefit from anyone. I'm just a repairer of shoes and I did it penny by penny, and I sent my children. That is my most successful life'. I met her in Zhengzhou.

In the middle, you can see this lady, she forages for and sells wild vegetables. She's my age as well. I met her in a small town in Guizhou. There is a huge, very famous Chinese mushroom market there. I saw her, she was so shy and trying to sell her vegetables to others. when I started talking with her, I said, how did you pick these and she told me that every single morning in the Spring she went to the mountain area at 5 o'clock. She said at that time, wild vegetables are very fresh. So, I asked her, 'What do you do it for? You work

so hard day by day'. She said, 'Oh, I have to send my children to school. They can't have a life like I do.' I was very touched by her, so I had a photo with her and afterwards I discovered we are exactly same age, we were born the same year and the same month. Life shaped us so differently.

On the right, you can see my favourite: Yao Popo. Yao Popo, she is a herb seller. When I met her, she told me, amazing, how the people's knowledge changed since the 1980s. She said, before, people only knew they had a joint problem, a headache problem. She said once people had a computer, everybody had a neck problem. Now they have a mobile phone problem, which is a hand problem. Then she mentioned that many people come to her with a 'McDonald's' problem. She shared me so much medical knowledge with me. And then I discovered that she's also my age. So, I specially picked these three women to share with you. I want to share my feeling, my view of China. They are all my heroes in my book called [China Witness](#). They are the generation, they are the women, our mothers, grandmothers, and the daughters who shouldn't be forgotten because they are the roots of China, the future and the today. They are the powerhouse behind China becoming such a big, successful country. So, that is my view from the last twenty, thirty, maybe even forty years, of my country and my people. A colourful and such a proud people, especially the mothers and the grandmothers.

My second homework is "Overseas Chinese"

We've come to my next 'homework', which is about 'Overseas Chinese'. Since I moved to the UK, in 1997, I published my non-fiction books based on my research and interviews with people, mostly the stories of Chinese women I've interviewed since the 1980s. I'm a very lucky author: I've been invited to so many countries - more than thirty countries - for book tours, university lectures, international conferences, including so many debate on women's rights. I took the opportunity, as a good student, to interview over a hundred historians and lots of Sinologists - Hànxué jiā (汉学家) - learn what they think about Overseas Chinese and what they see as the difference between the elder Chinese generation and today's Chinese in their country. It's very interesting this 'homework', but again, after these twenty years, I still don't think I'm qualified to define 'Overseas Chinese' identity, but I do believe my experience is one, maybe only one drop in the ocean of the history of Overseas Chinese. But I believe even one drop can carry the taste of his ocean. So, I like to share why I have got a very different image of Overseas Chinese in world history. Because when I interview people, I can see the way they talk, the overseas of Chinese. It's like many people from a distance talk about a beautiful landscape, and some people talk about very close friends and their network, and some even talk about their family relations. And again, I discovered many of them actually based this on the review of historical knowledge. I want to show you, share with you, what exactly is 'Overseas Chinese' in world history, in people's eyes, is very different. In Europe, most people talk about Chinese art and it is full of mystery. So, when I ask them why, many of them only talk about the [Silk Road](#), and the [East India Company](#) and the [Opium Wars](#). After that, how much about modern China from 1911 when the [Last Emperor](#) ended until today? Actually, there's not very much knowledge at all. It's very colourful or very distant as well.

I've been to America a few times, Canada a few times, and Brazil as well, and when I see people talk about Overseas Chinese, they give me very different words. One is 'diligence',

one is 'endurance.' And when I ask why they have this kind of view, then people would say, 'Oh, you know, we learned this about railway workers and Chinatown and the West Coast fishermen' and all of this kind of history. Again, there's not very much about what happened after the 1980s with Overseas Chinese in America or in North America, with huge numbers of Chinese there. It's very interesting.

I've been to many countries in South Asia, like Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, at least more than seven, eight times. And again, I learned they have a very different and a very complex, also a fast-changing view. It's changing very fast. And then I realised that most of their view is rooted in, migration and trade and also influenced by this kind of colonial history. And I learned that actually when we talk about South Asia, 'the Overseas', many of them can talk a lot about the history of their grandparents' story, about the Dutch, about the Japanese, about the French, about the English, and about the Chinese. So, I learned, there is no such 'Overseas Chinese' in the world history record. In Europe, in America, North America particularly, and in South Asia there are very different images.

So now I will try to show you what I learned about why this happened, or why this is so different. From this image, we can see routes Overseas Chinese took to different parts of the world: North America, Europe, or South Asia. They are based on two land routes and two in the ocean.

First of all, we'll talk about Europe. Now everybody knows the Silk Road was a major path for the Chinese to reach out to Europe. But in fact, in history we have three Silk Roads.

Nowadays, when people talk about the Silk Road it is only in the north, along Qing Hai, Tibetan Plateau. In Chinese, we call the Qinghai Gaoyu. Okay, is along to that. And then we said it is from Qing Hai all the way to the Middle East and central Europe as well. So, this is what most people talk about, and the route shaped European knowledge about Overseas Chinese.

Then we come to America. Most people came by boat. It's to do with ocean currents in the northern hemisphere, and the ocean moves clockwise, so many Chinese followed these ocean currents to the west coast of America, but not only Chinese but also Japanese, Vietnamese and from the Philippines, including some Italians. If you read a history book, you can see those people were the very first group from Asia to America. But those people, when they went there, they were mostly fishermen, labourers, laundry workers and railway workers. So, for them, it was very hard work. I have to mention that in American history, they have had very, very cruel policies starting from the 1820s, anti-Chinese policies. And by the 1840s this policy included very cruel rules: they wouldn't allow Chinese women to come to America, unless they were prostitutes, only sex workers were allowed you. So, this policy continued all the way to, I think, to the 1940s, yeah, and stopped in 1943 during the anti-Japanese World War II. But it wasn't until 2011 that the American government apologised for this policy. So this is why in America, when people talk about overseas Chinese, they always think they are labourers, and a very cruel, a very sad part of this history is that before the 1980s or 1960s, Chinese people were paid less than Black people. When I was there the first time, in 2002, there was a movement requesting the American government to apologise for this anti-Chinese law. In 2011, this finally, this happened even though the law had ended in 1943. So, who brought about this change? I would say it was a new generation of American-Chinese. They stood up. Actually, they tried very hard from the 1960s. If you

read the books, you can see a lot of the young generation from the 1960s and they stood fighting shoulder to shoulder with Black Americans.

So let's come to South Asia and the Chinese. You can see most people went to South Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, and these kind of places, Malay, by boat. And but when you talk to local people about Overseas Chinese there, you feel their attitude very strongly, or even in historical materials, it seems very similar to the Jewish historical experience in Europe, because they believe the Chinese destroy their local economies and their traditional family social system. So, if you go to these kind of places, you can find quite a lot of evidence.

Now I'll show you some pictures of these three different parts of the world and how they see the Chinese.

This is Europe. You see, under the books on the top, on the left, this book [[The Chinese View of their Place in the World](#)] was published in 1964 as a handbook for the Foreign Office in the UK. In many European countries, at least the Chinese, French, Dutch, German, and Spanish, published a lot of books and talked about Chinese art, Chinese classical books like [The Monkey King](#), that were translated many times in many languages. But very few mentioned the [Chinese Labour Corps](#) in World War One. So that is the kind of knowledge for Europe: they believe all Chinese are living the artist's life and they are full of mystery.

Then you come to North America, and these are two books that are really recommended. The book on the left is called [Chinese Gold](#). It is based on the first family that went to America by boat, then later on, they fought with the Vietnamese, Italian, the fishermen. Later on, they turned to a laundry business, then they set up a Chinatown, one by one, almost everywhere in America. I discovered this book in 2003, 2004. When I read the book on the airplane. I was in tears at how hard it was for the Chinese there. So, later on, I introduced book to Chinese publisher *Flower City Publishing House*, and now a Chinese translation is available. The next book I really want to introduce to you is called [Driven Out](#). It's by [Jean Pfaelzer] a professor, a specialist researching the anti-Chinese policy and how much it affected the Chinese community. Again, I introduced this book to *Flower City Publishing House*, the Chinese publisher, and finally it was published in Chinese.

Why did I choose and work on these two books? Because these two books gave us a 3D image to see from the government side, the system side, the immigration side, and the personal family side, how they treated the Chinese, their life, dignity, their endurance, and the... It's amazing. I could tell you a lot. When I interviewed this family and the professors, I could see their tears and their muscles in their necks moving with this kind of story, the struggling, this kind of emotion as well. So, I really admire those American-Chinese, and today people respect them, and the ... well, it's not easy.

The next one is 'From China to South Asia'. I picked out some photos to show you. On the top line, the three photos are from Indonesia. In Indonesia, they have experienced at least three mass killings during their history, as you can see. One was in 1740, one in 1965, and one, I would say, in 1998, very recently, not far away. In the Indonesian capital, there is a very famous Chinese massacre gallery in the National Museum of Indonesia. It's very moving and very sad. It is very similar to the history of Jewish situation in Europe. I've travelled quite a lot to Prague because my later husband come from there and also in Germany, in France, and in many places, they have this kind of museum to reveal this kind of history, too. So, this is why South Asian people mainly identify the Chinese with trade. Lots of people talk about the history of trade, and a lot of people talk about survival. It's very complicated and it's also

changing. I remember first time I went there in 2003, people hardly spoke about this history of Chinese massacres, but later on, when I went back in 2018-19, I saw people talking much more openly about that generation. Of course, obviously, this is due to the generations' hard work in opening up the history and evidence as well.

So, now in quick conclusion, I wanted to mention these three images as these historic roots teach us the lesson that there is no such thing as *a* Chinese in today's China, and no such thing as *an* 'Overseas Chinese' across the world either.

My third homework is the most difficult: who am I?

My third lesson is about 'Who and what am I?'. Why do I want to talk about this? Because this year we had a big argument, involving many Overseas Chinese, about how we greet each other in the West: 'Happy Chinese New Year' or 'Happy Lunar New Year' or 'Happy Spring Festival'? This is actually based on the pattern of migration, too. So, in fact, there are two different things: one is how we see ourselves in Chinese is returning to one's roots - *rèn zǔ guī zōng*, 认祖归宗. The other is how the locals see ourselves as immigrants in another, adopted society, how do we authenticate our identity - 身份认证, *shēn fèn rèn zhèng*, and that's very different. So, in this part, I would like to show why it is very different and you can see that in these images. We have a lot of different 'selves': one we call the 'biological self', one is the 'social self', and one is 'the cultural self'. These are our selves, but how do other people see us? That is different as well. So, in fact, our identity is not only our ID on paper, and even there we struggle: for example, the NHS in the UK has a form and on the form, they put 'Chinese' and 'Asian' separately. This may cause a lot of confusion for Chinese, or for many adopted Chinese, people asking, which part should I belong to? So, I would introduce three books to help people to understand. In the West, they believe the three books shape their view of the world. One is called *Meditation* 沉思录, one is called *The Words of the Nations* 国富论, and one is called *Theories of Government* 政府论. Many Westerners believe the Chinese have three books to match them as well, as they recognise the Chinese: *one is called* 论语 (*Sayings of Confucius by Confucius*), *one is called* 道德经 (Dao De Jing), and *one is called* 孙子兵法 (Art of War) by Sunzi.

For my 'homework', these lessons and experience I have got from my life teachers, I want to thank my teachers. As I mentioned at the beginning, they are my life teachers, because they help me to understand that actually birth culture and a new culture are very different. We need a bridge to help them communicate more with each other. Also, for the developed China, the fast-changing China, we need to have a bridge between the impoverished part of China and the developed part of China. So, since my charity was founded in 2004, we have set up 31 thirty-one village libraries in rural China for those children who left the behind. Also, we support a lot of the Western schools, communities, and libraries to have these kinds of events, even in shopping malls. So, in this photo, you can see on the bottom left, those adopted children in the UK who I met 22 years ago, and happily, many of them still come to see me, have grown up cheerfully as adopted Chinese women. They want to know their roots.

At the moment, we are trying calling on people to share our experiences. It doesn't matter where you are, in America, in Europe, in South Asia, to share something, to talk about how we feel the experience in the new country, new culture, why we come out, and why we want a new generation to have this kind of mixed culture or education. So, this is MBL project on the 20 years of memory in UK and so happy to share with you. *Now, Ha Ha!*

Britain was published last year in UK, in both English and Chinese. Now we are working on *Ha Ha! Canada* and the *Ha Ha! America* and *Ha Ha! Holland* and *Germany* as well. So, why are we doing this? As part of my work, this is what I learned from people I met in many countries, in my own country, and I think it's very important, it's a failing culture difference, and seeing generations changing and awakening to Chinese civilization. So, that is my 'three homeworks'.

After tomorrow, on Sunday, we will have an online debate about adoption. We have invited people from many countries who have been adopted from China to share their experience, and love, and confusion about being Chinese. I hope more and more people can join us and support us.

谢谢 Xie xie.

[End of transcript for the talk]

The Questions and Answers session wasn't recorded, but we have noted down two questions and answers that might be of interest to you.

Question 1:

Han.Xu 9:24

H

Thank you very much, Xinran, for the wonderful talk. I got a lot of information. I want to ask a question. What's the biggest challenge you've met when your charity helped the adopted children find their birth parents?

X

xinran 9:28

In all the years of working with adopted children through The Mothers' Bridge of Love, I have come to understand that the greatest challenge we face is not distance, nor bureaucracy, nor even the passing of time. It is "the weight of silence".

Many of the children we support were separated from their birth families in a time when records were incomplete, identities were concealed, and stories were never told. When they begin the search, they are not simply looking for a person—they are searching for a truth that has been buried for decades.

This is something I came to understand deeply while writing *Message from an Unknown Chinese Mother*. The women whose voices fill that book were not mothers who "did not want" their children. Most of them were making impossible choices under overwhelming pressures—poverty, social expectations, the one-child policy, family structures that valued

sons over daughters. Many placed their babies in locations where they hoped someone kind would find them. And then they lived the rest of their lives carrying a quiet, enduring grief.

Because of this, “a search is never just a search. It is an encounter between two silences”. For the adoptee, there is hope—but also fear: What if I was not wanted? What if the truth is too painful to bear? For the birth mother, if she is found, there is often another kind of fear: Will my child forgive me? Do I have the right to be found? Through the interviews I collected, the most common sentence was not explanation, but longing: “I think of her every day. Where is she now?” And yet, alongside that longing, there is also a deep sense of unworthiness. So the greatest challenge is not simply “finding someone.” It is whether both sides are emotionally able to face what will be revealed when they meet.

In many cases, what needs healing is not only a relationship, but a narrative—the meaning of “abandonment.” We try to help adoptees understand that their mothers’ decisions were not purely personal choices, but were shaped by a particular historical and cultural moment. As the book shows, a mother’s love sometimes existed in the form of letting go.

As a bridge, our role is to gently build understanding between these two worlds—to help the child move beyond the identity of “being abandoned,” and to give the mother, if she is found, a chance to be seen not only through guilt, but through the truth of her circumstances.

And sometimes, despite all efforts, we cannot find the birth family. Then the challenge becomes even quieter, but no less profound: how to help a child live with an unanswered question, while still feeling whole, loved, and rooted.

So I believe the greatest challenge is this: how to transform absence into understanding, and silence into a space where healing can begin. I believe that behind every separation, there is often a love that was never spoken—but never absent. Our work is simply to help that love, one day, be heard.

H

Han.Xu 14:46

Thank you very much.

Question 2

JA

Jean - AstorVisas 15:00

Hello, hi. It's really impressive for the whole meeting and I personally been living in the UK for 25 years and I also have my first education completed in China. So myself experienced a great cultural impact.

And sometimes in the middle of the dilemma of promoting the icon as being a belonging, which culture we belong to. And especially, I felt like quite difficult to tell my home country, my friends from home country, my thoughts can, they will label me saying that you've been living outside for such a long time, you don't know our culture anymore. And if I try to talk to the people here locally and they still would treat me as a person from China, then I don't know much of the culture. So how can you cope with such kind of a dilemma when you try to be promoting this kind of cultural belongings, identification to friends around?

X

xinran 16:04

Thank you for sharing something so honest. What you described is not only your experience—it is the experience of many of us who live between cultures.

I often feel that people like us are standing on a bridge. But the difficulty is, when we look back, one side says, “you have left us.” When we look forward, the other side says, “you are not fully one of us.”

For many years, I also struggled with this question: Where do I belong? But over time, I realised—perhaps we have been asking the wrong question. The question is not which culture we belong to, but what kind of human connection we can create between cultures.

Because belonging is not something fixed. It is not given by others. It is something we grow, through understanding and empathy. When people in China say, “you have been away too long,” they are speaking from their sense of distance. When people here say, “you are from China,” they are speaking from their way of seeing.

But neither of these is your full truth. Your truth is richer. You carry two ways of seeing the world, two emotional languages, two cultural memories. That is not confusion—that is a gift.

So how do we cope? We stop trying to prove where we belong. Instead, we begin to live as a bridge. A bridge does not ask, “which side am I on?” A bridge exists so that both sides can meet. And perhaps that is our role—not to choose, but to connect. In time, you will find that belonging is no longer a place others define for you, but a quiet strength within yourself. Hope this helps. Thanks.

<https://www.mothersbridge.org/homepage-1-1-2>



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