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THE PROMISE: LOVE AND LOSS IN MODERN CHINA By Xinran IB Tauris, 288pp, \$36

BRIGHT SWALLOW: MAKING CHOICES IN MAO'S CHINA By Vivian Bi Hybrid, 208pp, \$26.99

Over the past 100 years, China has been beset by conflict and social upheaval: the militaristic Warlord Period; civil war; Japanese occupation; famine under the charismatic but dangerous communist revolutionary Mao Zedong, who followed up with the Cultural Revolution, where to be declared a reactionary could mean impoverishment, imprisonment or execution.

Who would have believed that within 40 years, China would transform itself into an emerging world superpower and global economic leader?

So how have the Chinese people coped with this transformation? More particularly, how have they managed the transition from a life focused on loyalty to the motherland and to the Communist Party, to one in which individual needs are becoming recognised and prioritised? And where is the place of love within such rapid cultural, political and economic change?

It is exactly this question — the place of love in China over the past 100 years — that is explored in *The Promise: Love and Loss in Modern China*, the eighth book from the internationally bestselling British-Chinese author Xinran, who first came to public attention with her 2002 book *The Good Women of China*.

Exploring love and loss in modern China is a big job but it is in simplifying the overwhelming that Xinran excels. And in the introduction to this compelling and moving book, the author clarifies just how she has managed the task. *The Promise*, she tells the reader, is the story of the love lives of Chinese women told through four generations of one family, whose names have been changed but whose stories are true.

And with that we are brought into the world of Han Anhong, nicknamed Red. In 1920, Red was born to a mother whose feet were bound to ensure that they were only ever 7.5cm long and to a father who, obliged to marry Red's mother, grew, through a shared love of poetry, also to love her.

By the age of nine, Red herself had been promised in marriage, a betrothal that kept her both committed to and separated from her groom-to-be as war and upheaval swept through the country.

When the wedding finally did take place, Red was 28. And although the marriage lasted 60 years, it would never be consummated. Instead of making love, Red and her husband would lie side by side

“talking love”, often about the lover from whom Red’s husband had been separated and whose return he continued to await.

In a world where women were expected to be dutiful and obedient, Red was forced to remain in the sham marriage, deprived of sexual intimacy and the hope of children.

By contrast, the marriage of Red’s sister, nicknamed Orange, was passionate and loving but cut short by her husband’s shocking death during the Cultural Revolution.

It is the legacy of the Cultural Revolution that Xinran explores most fully in the later story of Crane — Red and Orange’s niece — who, like Xinran, was born in 1958 and, like Xinran, became a child of the revolution. Crane’s cry to Xinran is anguished and heartfelt:

The China I was born into didn’t have literature and romance; it didn’t even have movies, books or theatre. It had slogans ... At school we didn’t have expert teachers, and we didn’t become lifelong friends with any of our classmates, either. Every other page in our textbooks spoke of class struggle. We were snatched away in the prime of our youth and cast into a darkness that taught us only to accept fear as an unavoidable truth.

But Crane was luckier than many and when sent to the countryside in accordance with Mao’s edict that urban Chinese participate in rural life, she met the man who would become her husband and with whom she would negotiate a courtship at a time when any display of affection could be punished.

Three decades later, the path to love is very different for Crane’s daughter, Lili, who finds intimacy through a range of dating trends including flash marriage, rented marriage and internet dating, and who sees “love as a playground set among a hundred blooming flowers — why shouldn’t I pick them to see how they smell?” In these carefully told vignettes, Xinran takes the reader through a century of tumult and change in China, her writing beautifully reflecting the intimately honest voices of the women whose stories of love she tells.

Like Xinran, Vivian (Xiyan) Bi was born in China in 1958 and grew up as a child of the Cultural Revolution. Like Xinran, she found salvation through education, with both women gaining highly sought-after university places at the end of the Cultural Revolution. While Xinran later made her home in London, where she continues to live, Vivian Bi came to Australia, where she completed her doctorate and became a teacher. The author of three books, her latest work is the memoir *Bright Swallow: Making Choices in Mao’s China*.

Beginning with her mother’s death in 1972, when Bi was 15, the memoir takes us through the following five years of the Cultural Revolution. This is a sobering story of betrayal and hardship which shows the impact on family relationships of a time when, as Bi describes it, “people were trained as sniffer dogs, constantly on the lookout for problems”.

People like the local postman, whose keen eyes led to the downfall of the formerly wealthy Bi family. During the Cultural Revolution, letters would often be sent with the slogan “Never forget the revolution” written on the back of the envelope. The Chinese characters used meant that the slogan in fact read “Never forget to remember the revolution”.

By mistake, however, Bi's father omitted the character for "forget" on a letter he posted. As a result, his slogan instead read "Never remember the revolution". The eagle-eyed postman duly reported the matter. Found guilty of treason, Bi's father had his salary cancelled, leaving the family in financial distress.

Despite the subsequent difficulties encountered by Bi, left to fend for herself after her mother's death and later betrayed by the father who had himself been betrayed, Bi is a hopeful and resilient character whose energy and determination is both touching and inspiring.

This is a book that describes not only the horror of the Cultural Revolution but also the small kindnesses shown to the author at a time when a word out of place could prove fatal.

She gives a moving description, for example, of the leader of the compound where Bi lived, who helps the motherless girl survive fierce winters and tight rationing.

Heartening, too, is the help offered by a fellow passenger on a train who, despite having never met the teenager before, vouches for her to protect her from the inspector, suspicious of a young girl travelling alone.

Bright Swallow is an important and engaging memoir of adversity and resilience during a decade of particular havoc and fear in China's history. Both the books under review here serve to fill in the silences of China's history through the eyes of its women and the stories they have to tell. **Suzanne Leal's** most recent book is the novel *The Teacher's Secret*.