

# **Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter Study Guide**

**Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter by Adeline Yen Mah**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 1 and 2.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 3 and 4.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 5 and 6.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 7 and 8.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 9 and 10.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 11: PLT.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 12: Big Sister's Wedding.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 13: A Birthday Party.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 14: Class President.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 15: Boarding School in Tianjin.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 16: Hong Kong.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 17, 18 and 19.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Chapters 20, 21 and 22.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">27</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>



## Plot Summary

Chinese Cinderella, *The True Story of An Unwanted Daughter*, is the autobiographical account of Adeline Yen Mah's childhood, covering her life during the ages from four through her early teen years. Four-year-old Adeline proudly showed Aunt Baba the medal she received from the kindergarten teacher for being the best student of the week. Aunt Baba was proud of her little niece and put the certificate that Adele received along with the medal into her lock box, the same place she kept her precious jewels and other valuables. It meant that much to her. Aunt Baba had cared for Adeline since she was two weeks old, when her mother died. Adeline always asked to see pictures of her mother but Aunt Baba had no pictures her. Adeline learned years later that her father had ordered all pictures of her mother destroyed.

A short time following the death of Adeline's mother, her father married a beautiful Eurasian woman named Jean. The children were all instructed to call her Niang, a Chinese term for mother. At seventeen, Niang was nineteen years younger than her new husband but there was nothing shy about the new stepmother. She immediately began establishing harsh rules for her stepchildren. After her own two children came along, things only got worse for Adeline and her four siblings. After they moved into a new house in Shanghai, Niang instructed them that they could only enter and leave the house through the servants' door. The living room was off-limits to them. They all had to share rooms on the hot third floor while Niang, Adeline's father and their two children had bedrooms on the coveted second floor. The stepchildren could only enter the second floor with permission.

Adeline quickly became the main target of Niang's cruelty. Adeline was the top student in her class and was elected its president. Niang told her she was a show off and that she was getting uglier and uglier as she matured. Soon Niang saw to it that Adeline was shipped away to boarding school. During two years at one boarding school, Adeline received no visitors and no mail. Later, she learned that Niang instructed that all of Adeline's incoming and outgoing mail be sent to Niang. She was even left at school during Christmas breaks, the only student in the entire school who was not taken home.

Somehow Niang's abusive behavior and Adeline's father's abandonment of her did not dampen Adeline's drive to learn and excel at school. Her father, who had forgotten her given name and actual date of birth while filling out some documents for a flight she was taking, finally realized what an outstanding person his daughter was and what a great potential she had. When, as a young teenager, Adeline won an international writing competition, he told her that he would be sending her to school at Oxford in England. Aunt Baba told Adeline that she was proud of her and that she would always be precious to her. She affectionately called Adeline her Chinese Cinderella.



# Chapters 1 and 2

## Chapters 1 and 2 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 1: Top of the Class

August 1941

The four-year-old Adeline Yen-Mah proudly displayed to Aunt Baba the gold medal she received from Mother Agnes for being the best student of the week. Aunt Baba was proud of her but could not read the certificate because it wasn't written in Chinese. Aunt Baba saved the certificate in a locked box that contained her expensive jewelry—it meant a lot to her. An old photo dropped to the floor of a young Chinese couple. Adeline asked if it was a picture of her mother. Aunt Baba quickly changed the subject but Adeline persisted, wanting to know more about her mother—did she look like her.

Aunt Baba told the young girl that her mother died of a high fever when Adeline was just two weeks old. Adeline recalled how her big sister told her if she hadn't been born their mother would still be alive—Adeline was bad luck.

### Chapter 2: A Tianjin Family

Adeline had four siblings from her father's marriage to her mother. Adeline was the youngest of these children, who were 6, 5, 4 and 3 when she was born. After her mother's death, her father married a beautiful Eurasian girl who was seventeen, nineteen years his junior. Adeline and her siblings were told to call the girl Niang, a Chinese term for mother. Her father and Niang had two additional children. They lived in a large house in the French concession of Tianjin with Grandmother Nai Nai, Grandfather Ye Ye and Aunt Baba. Since Aunt Baba was single and without an income, she was meek and was treated like a servant. She was ordered to care for Adeline after her mother's death. Adeline and Aunt Baba grew very close.

The French concession of Tianjin came to be after the Opium War, which China lost to France and England. As a result, foreign soldiers occupied cities along China's coast and Tianjin became very influenced by French culture. Many signs were in French and the language was taught at the Catholic school that Adeline attended. Even though the Japanese had occupied Tianjin after Pearl Harbor, it was still governed by French officials.



# Chapters 3 and 4

## Chapters 3 and 4 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 3: Nai Nai's Bound Feet

Aunt Baba told Adeline to help Nai Nai to her chair at the dining room table. Nai Nai had difficulty walking—her feet had been bound when she was a young child. Adeline compared her feet to her grandmother's and asked why her feet were so small. Nai Nai explained that her feet were bound so they would not grow. Small feet were considered feminine and beautiful—it had been a Chinese tradition for over one thousand years. Nai Nai was in severe pain and begged for the binding to be taken off, but her parents refused. Her toes were forced to bend back under the sole, ultimately crushing the arch. She had arthritis her entire life and her feet hurt every day in memory. She told Adeline that she was lucky the tradition was abandoned thirty years before or else she would already have had her feet bound and been on the path to a life of pain.

At the dinner table, Adeline sat between Big Brother and Second Brother to separate them because they always fought. Second Brother noticed her medal and praised her for her good work at school. Big Brother hit her on the back of her head and told her not to be so arrogant. Niang always had Big Sister sit next to her because she was her step-mother's favorite. Big Sister had a partially paralyzed arm from birth and used it as an excuse to make her younger siblings do her chores. Big Sister told Wu Mei to get a book for her but Niang said it could wait until after dinner (Adeline was referred to as Wu Mei, which meant Fifth Younger Sister). Niang's young children were too young to eat at the dinner table. It was accepted that Niang's real children were smarter and better looking than Adeline and her siblings. For the first time in her memory, her father, Dia Dia, singled her out and praised her for doing good work at school and told her to keep it up. Big Sister and some of her brothers were jealous of the attention she was getting and rushed up after dinner and took all of the fruit from her bowl.

### Chapter 4: Life in Tianjin

#### A Few Months Later, in Early 1942: Wintertime

Adeline loved going to school, where she felt more welcomed by the students there than she did at home by her siblings. She attended St. Joseph's French Convent School which Big Sister had been attending for years. Since Big Sister didn't want to walk her back and forth, Nai Nai told the family rickshaw puller to take the girls to school each day and pick them up afterward. Adeline was afraid of a blind beggar woman who sat in front of their house every morning. She was always happy when the rickshaw pulled away.

Adeline and their rickshaw driver, An Mao, had to wait for Big Sister every day. One day in the rickshaw after Adeline had repeatedly won the best student medal, Big Sister



slapped her and tried to rip the medal off of her. At the end of the school year, Adeline won the prize for having the most weeks as best student. Unlike all the other prizewinners, no one from Adeline's family came to the award ceremony.

The children were told to always bow to the Japanese soldiers—if they showed any disrespect, they might be tortured or killed. Japanese businessmen were trying to take over Dia Dia's business. Japanese men with their bodyguards would often come looking for Dia Dia. One day, Dia Dia went on an errand and never returned. The children were told that he was on a business trip. Soon after, Niang and her older child, a boy, were suddenly gone, reportedly to join Dia Dia somewhere. A year after Dia Dia, Niang and their son had been away, Nai Nai died from a massive stroke. She was prayed over by the Buddhist monks and honored in death. The children all participated in the funeral procession, with Big Brother taking the position of chief mourner in place of his missing father.



# Chapters 5 and 6

## Chapters 5 and 6 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 5: Arrival in Shanghai

One day Ye Ye took Adeline and her siblings to the railroad station. To their surprise and delight, their father was in one of the cars. He told them he would be accompanying them to their new home in Shanghai where he, Niang and their son had been living. Niang greeted them when they arrived and laid down the rules. The house was large and beautiful, but much of it was off-limits to Adeline and her siblings. The living room was only for their father's visitors. They must always enter the house by the back door. The second floor had bedrooms for their father, Niang and their two children. Their bedrooms were located on the third floor. The three older boys would share a room, Adeline and Aunt Baba would share a room and Big Sister and Ye Ye would each have their own bedrooms. Niang warned the children to make sure their rooms were always neat because she or their father might inspect them at any time.

### Chapter 6: First Day at School

Aunt Baba had stayed behind temporarily in Tianjin to observe an anniversary mark of her mother's death. Adeline prepared for her new Shanghai school, which was named Sacred Heart. No one had thought about how Adeline would get to school for her first day in first grade. The cook noticed she was crying and took her on the handlebars of his bicycle. No one was there to pick her up. As she watched young mothers anxious to hear about their child's first day take her classmates away, Adeline was frightened and didn't know what to do. Feeling she had no choice, she decided she had to try to find her way home on her own.

Adeline got lost. She was hesitant to ask anyone her way home because she was afraid and she didn't know her home address. It was getting dark. She passed a sum shop and the aromas of cooked duck and chicken made her salivate. A woman insisted that she come in the shop to wait for her parents. Luckily, she remembered her phone number and called home. When her father answered, he asked to speak with the shop's proprietor. Dia Dia picked her up and gave her a map of Shanghai so she would never get lost again.



# Chapters 7 and 8

## Chapters 7 and 8 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 7: Family Reunion

Aunt Baba, Ye Ye, Third Brother and Little Sister, who had all stayed behind in Tianjin, arrived to rejoin the rest of the family in Shanghai on October 1st. Everyone was vying for Little Sister's attention, since she was precocious and adorable and looked like a big doll. Little Sister had grown close to Aunt Baba and had been away from her real mother, Niang, so long that she didn't know her.

When Niang tried to pick Little Sister up, she told Niang that she didn't like her and to go away. But Niang persisted and picked up Little Sister, who howled and tried to get away, begging Aunt Baba to take her. The baby pulled on Niang's necklace and broke it, making the precious pearls roll all over the floor. Niang lost her patience and slapped the little girl, which only made the girl scream louder. Niang literally beat the girl, glancing slaps across every part of her head. The only one to speak up was Adeline, who blurted out, "Don't beat her anymore. She is only a baby!" (34) Niang was furious with Adeline's arrogance for speaking up. She warned her that she would never forgive her and that she would pay for her arrogant behavior.

### Chapter 8: Tram Fare

Even though they were well off, Adeline's father and Niang decided to teach the children about money and instituted an austerity program. They were given no spending money, not even enough to take the tram to school. The girls were ordered to keep their hair short and traditional and the boys' heads were shaved like monks—which of course brought them ridicule of the classmates at school. Aunt Baba announced she was going to work at the bank run by Adeline's grandaunt. Her father told Aunt Baba that she didn't need to work like a commoner. He would give her and Ye Ye any money they needed—they just had to ask.

Ye Ye told Dia Dia that he needed to give the children money for the tram. He had given them money but had run out. Dia Dia and Niang were outraged. Walking, they insisted, was good exercise for them. Niang forbade the children to go to Ye Ye or Aunt Baba for money. Niang would give them tram money only if they apologized for their behavior and were truly contrite. Everyone was silent and knew, now that Nai Nai was gone, that Niang was in charge of the family. The children were all upset with Niang and her takeover of the family. They all pledged their allegiance to Ye Ye and vowed to walk to school until they graduated. One by one, the children all capitulated and apologized to Niang so they could get tram fare—everyone except Adeline. She continued to walk even in the rain and storms and even though her classmates ridiculed her. She could not bring herself to bend to Niang, because if she did she would be admitting that she and Ye Ye were wrong. She couldn't betray him!





# Chapters 9 and 10

## Chapters 9 and 10 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 9: Chinese New Year

Everyone in the family was measured for new clothes to signal the Chinese New Year and a new beginning. Unfortunately, the only stylish clothes were made for Niang's two children. Her step-children were given loose-fitting traditional mandarin clothing—new but unfashionable. The older boys were upset—they had wanted western style clothing. The siblings discussed their plight. The boys hated their shaved heads, noting that Little Brother's head was not shaved. The siblings were allowed only three meals a day with no snacks while Niang's children could order anything they wanted from the kitchen at any hour of the day. Big Brother was told by the cook that bacon was reserved for those on the second floor. The new nanny was asking them so many questions, they they figured she was a spy for Niang.

Big Sister wanted to go on a hunger strike while Big Brother was for revolution—raid the kitchen and face the consequences. It was decided that Big Sister would write a letter of complaint to their father in Chinese, a language that Niang could not read. As they were making their plans, Third Brother left to go to the bathroom and ran right into Niang, who was eavesdropping at the door. The confrontation make him sick—vomiting repeated in the bathroom. When he finally returned, Niang was gone. He told the others that Niang had heard everything. Big Sister tore up the letter and the boys burned it to ashes. They headed downstairs ready to face the music. But Niang surprisingly was more cordial than usual at dinner.

Niang's tact was to divide and conquer—she was determined to get Big Sister in her camp. Big Sister was offered a bedroom on the coveted second floor. Eventually Big Sister was completely won over. She began distancing herself from her siblings and became very close with Miss Chien, the spy nanny. New furniture, including a desk, was purchased for Big Sister. She took on the same attitude as Niang, telling her siblings to ask permission before they entered her room.

Adeline drew even closer to Aunt Baba—their room was the only place she felt safe and comfortable. She felt sorry for Aunt Baba because she had to be so subservient to Niang. The only thing Adeline could do to make her aunt happy was to do well in school. By the time she was seven, her classmates called her Genius because of her perfect scholastic record. When asked to write an essay about "your best friend," Adeline wrote it about Aunt Baba. In the essay, she wrote about the friendship between her real mother and her aunt and how her mother would some day come down from a cloud and rescue her. Adeline's love of writing grew. The other girls in her class always wanted to read her essays. To her, writing was a way to escape the horrors of daily life.



Regardless of how many awards Adeline received, no one from home came to cheer her on at the award ceremonies. She was never allowed to invite anyone to her house or accept invitations from anyone else. Her hair and clothes were the envy of no one. She kept up a pretense of a happy home life at school but in reality, she was lonely, miserable and always sensing an impending doom. Her only identity was her scholastic ability which she worked at maintaining in order to have some feeling of self-worth.

#### Chapter 10: Shanghai School Days

Adeline became very good friends with her classmate, Wu Chun-mei who was an outstanding athlete. Her father was a physician and he drove her to school everyday. They offered Adeline a ride one day but she refused, saying she liked to walk. However, when there was a terrible storm one day after school, Wu Chun-mei's father stopped and insisted on taking the thoroughly soaked Adeline home.

In 1945, when Adeline was almost eight, the US dropped the atom bomb on Japan, ending World War II. Adeline, along with her classmates, prayed and thanked the American allies for winning the war. American culture was impacting China, American movies had swept into Shanghai like a tidal wave. American movie stars were their new idols and became household names.

Wu Chun-mei loaned Adeline a book about a seven-year-old girl who was an heiress but became penniless overnight. Adeline read and re-read the book, strongly identifying with the heroine. During the spring of 1946, Adeline's father, Niang and their two children left for Tianjin to reclaim their property. They were gone three months, during which time Adeline and her siblings enjoyed their freedom from Niang's constant criticism. They ate what they wanted, the boys let their hair grow and even Ye Ye and Aunt Baba felt free to relax and enjoy themselves.

Adeline and Third Brother found they had a lot in common. They both seemed to be favorite targets of their other siblings, and especially of Niang. What haunted Adeline was that her older siblings blamed her for their mother's death. Adeline told Third Brother that she planned on leaving as soon as she could and that she would take Ye Ye and Aunt Baba with her—Third Brother was also welcome to come. She asked Aunt Baba to see a picture of her real mother but learned that her father had ordered all pictures of her destroyed some years before.

Adeline had the highest mid-term grades and also won first prize in a writing contest sponsored by the Shanghai Newspaper Association. On a very hot day, her jealous brothers made her a nice cool drink. She was reluctant to take the drink at first because she suspected it was a prank. She finally took a sip and quickly discovered that the orange juice was loaded with urine. She ran out crying and immediately washed her mouth out. She felt the saddest because Third Brother was in on it. Her only ally was being corrupted.

# Chapter 11: PLT

## Chapter 11: PLT Summary and Analysis

Adeline's father, Niang and their children returned from Tianjin. Family friends, the Huangs, brought each of the children a pet duckling. Adeline's was thrilled to have a pet, something to take care of a look after. She named the duck Precious Little Treasure—PLT for short. After digging up worms in the garden for PLT one day, she ran up to the roof where the ducks' pens were kept. She fed the worms to PLT and shooed the other ducklings away. Suddenly, she was hit so hard by Second Brother that it knocked her over. He was angry that she favored her duck over his. Adeline returned to the garden to get another worm but the family dog, a German Shepherd who didn't take to her, bit her on the wrist. Aunt Baba dressed her wound and cautioned her not to say anything about the incident at dinner.

After dinner, Adeline's father suggested they test the dog's progress at obedience training. He told Big Brother to fetch one of the ducklings. They all went outside and watched as the duck was placed in the middle of the yard. Adeline's father was holding the dog by his collar. Adeline was terrified and prayed for the safety of her pet. But the dog pounced and severely injured PLT. Adeline took the duck to bed with her that night, but by the next morning the duck was dead. Adeline buried PLT in the garden. Third Brother attended the funeral. Adeline told him that she felt it was the two of them against the world.



# Chapter 12: Big Sister's Wedding

## Chapter 12: Big Sister's Wedding Summary and Analysis

Niang had arranged for Big Sister to meet Samuel Sung, the son of a local physician. She agreed to marry him although she was only seventeen and he was thirty-one. Adeline feared that Niang would do the same thing to her. She vowed to run away if she was ever being forced into an arranged marriage. Wedding gifts arrived weeks before the wedding. Niang went through them, keeping the best ones for herself.

The lavish wedding was attended by 500 guests and featured two professional radio comedians and a master of ceremonies. Adeline had nothing new to wear and her brothers were forced to have fresh haircuts and wear long traditional robes. Other guests openly ridiculed the boys. Grandaunt had sent a jade pendant to Big Sister as a wedding gift. Aunt Baba warned Big Sister not to tell Niang or she would take it. Unfortunately, at the wedding, Grandaunt mentioned the gift to Niang. Adeline overheard that conversation and told Big Sister to be ready for a confrontation from Niang. Big Sister was thankful to Adeline and told her she'd never forget what she did for her. Big Sister confessed to Niang about getting the pendant, blaming Aunt Baba for her not telling her. She offered the pendant to Niang but was allowed to keep it since she was so "honest." Adeline was very disappointed that Big Sister chose to blame her favorite Aunt Baba for the entire issue.



## Chapter 13: A Birthday Party

### Chapter 13: A Birthday Party Summary and Analysis

Wu Chun-mei kept inviting Adeline to her house. She was getting a new puppy for her birthday and had lots of dolls and books she wanted to show Adeline. Adeline kept making excuses but when she learned that there would be no school the following Tuesday, she agreed to come that day. Six other girls would be joining them to celebrate Wu Chun-mei's birthday. Adeline didn't tell her father and Niang that there was a school holiday and went to school dressed in her uniform, where Dr. Wu's chauffeur picked her up there for a day of fun at Wu Chun-mei's house. Adeline knew she was breaking Niang's rules and would have to face the consequences if she found out.

Adeline had to run home for lunch and told Wu Chun-mei that she would be right back. Wu Chun-mei didn't want her to leave and asked for her phone number. Adeline got home a little early but it would allow her enough time to buy her friend a birthday present with the silver dollar she had in her pocket that Aunt Baba had given her. Unfortunately, when she ran into her room, Niang was standing there. She demanded to know why she was home early and what she was fiddling with in her pocket. Niang pulled the coin out and demanded to know where she got it. Adeline wouldn't answer because she didn't want to get Aunt Baba in trouble. Niang was in a rage and slapped Adeline across the face.

The maid told Niang that there was a phone call for Adeline. Niang took the phone call, which was from Wu Chun-mei. Niang learned everything—that Adeline had been at a birthday party and that there was no school that day. She told Wu Chun-mei that Adeline would not be returning to the party. Niang made Adeline stay in her room with no dinner until her father returned. Later, he came with a whip and made her tell him where she got the money. Her father beat her with the whip and informed her that Aunt Baba was a bad influence on her and that they were going to be separated.



# Chapter 14: Class President

## Chapter 14: Class President Summary and Analysis

Adeline was nominated by Wu Chun-mei to be class president. Adeline, in turn, nominated her. It was between the two friends and their rival Chen Lei-lei, who handed out treats to the kids to get them to vote for her. The evening before the voting, Aunt Baba wanted to know what went on between Adeline and her father. Adeline refused to talk about it and got surprising support from Ye Ye, who told Adeline not to bother the girl, that she was strong and would not turn out like Big Sister. Adeline was elected Class President by her schoolmates. To her horror, her friends showed up at her house with gifts to celebrate her victory. When the cook told her that her friends were waiting for her downstairs, she was overcome with fear, knowing that Niang would be outraged and that her horrible home life would be exposed.

As expected, Niang called Adeline to her room and accused her of planning the party. She slapped Adeline multiple times and ordered her to tell her friends to leave and never come back. When Adeline returned downstairs to her friends, their squeals of celebration had been silenced having heard the scolding that Adeline received. Niang had hit her so hard that her nose was bleeding and dripping blood on her dress. Adeline could no longer hide her horrible home life. She told her friends that her father wanted to sleep and that they should go. Wu Chen-mei was the last to leave and shouted loudly that she was going to tell her father about the abuse Adeline lived under.

Adeline's father made her come in their bedroom to open the presents from her friends. Adeline explained that her friends brought her gifts because she was elected class president. Niang told her she was becoming conceited and arrogant and to throw all the gifts away. Her father told her since she shamed the family by her public display of their private home that she would have to go somewhere else to live—where he had not decided yet. Niang ordered her to not speak to Aunt Baba, who was an evil influence on her. Niang told her they would look for an orphanage that would take her in. After school the next day, Adeline was told by a servant that she would be flying to Tianjin tomorrow with her father and Niang. Adeline and Aunt Baba said good-bye. Aunt Baba told Adeline she could be anything she wanted to be and that she would always be there for here. They promised to write often while she was away.



# Chapter 15: Boarding School in Tianjin

## Chapter 15: Boarding School in Tianjin Summary and Analysis

Without explaining where she was going, Niang and her father drove her to St. Joseph's School, where she had kindergarten. She was there again, but this time as a boarder. Sadly, when her father had to fill out papers for the flight to Tianjin, he couldn't remember her given name or her birth date. Neither her father or Niang told her good-bye. The next morning she woke up in the bright room and met Nancy Chen, who was in the bed next to her. Nancy's mother asked what was wrong with Adeline's parents leaving a child alone in a dangerous situation—the Communists would soon be invading and arresting all the capitalists. That explained to Adeline why the large school that could house a thousand students only had one hundred.

The student population dwindled steadily until in December, Adeline was the only student left. Adeline ate Christmas dinner alone. The nun who brought her the food forgot to bring a fork so she couldn't eat most of it. The letters Adeline sent to Aunt Baba were not answered. She was unaware that Niang had instructed the nuns to forward all of Adeline's incoming and outgoing mail to her. Adeline was thrilled one day when she was told her aunt was there to take her to Hong Kong. She was exhilarated thinking that Aunt Baba somehow got away from Shanghai but disappointed when she saw that the "aunt" who was there to get her was Niang's sister, Reine. The Communists were coming and they had to get out. Aunt Reine was thankful she remembered that Adeline was there. Adeline was very frightened when she learned that Niang didn't know that Reine was bringing her to join them in Hong Kong.



# Chapter 16: Hong Kong

## Chapter 16: Hong Kong Summary and Analysis

Adeline made fast friends with Reine's two children, Claudine and Victor. For the first time in her life, she was treated like she counted. Reine was kind and caring and treated Adeline just like she did her own children. When they arrived at her father's apartment in Hong Kong, neither her father or Niang greeted her directly. The one bright spot was that Ye Ye was there. She sensed a difference in his attitude and finally figured out that it was "defeat." He had given up.

One thing Ye Ye didn't give up on was the Chinese language. He told Adeline that it was fine to learn English but she should never forget her Chinese. He predicted one day that English, Chinese and Spanish would be the only languages. He agreed that Chinese was the more difficult language because it had no alphabet and was based on images rather than phonetics. Ye Ye would have her read the Chinese newspaper and write down words that were new to her.

Niang invited everyone to lunch at the beach one day. When everyone piled in except Adeline, Victor said it was unfair that Adeline never was allowed to go anywhere. Niang said that that was just the way it was. Victor refused to go and stayed behind with Adeline.





# Chapters 17, 18 and 19

## Chapters 17, 18 and 19 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 17: Boarding School in Hong Kong

Aunt Reine and her husband and children left Hong Kong. Adeline was not given the chance to say goodbye to them. As soon as they left, Adeline was informed to pack her things because Niang and her father would be taking her away. Little Brother rode along and ignored Adeline because he was angry with her for stopping a prank the day before. He had rigged several large books so that they would fall on Ye Ye. Adeline saw it just in time and saved Ye Ye from being hurt—it could have killed the frail old man. They finally arrive at Sacred Heart School and Orphanage. Adeline was secretly delighted when she learned she would be a full-time boarding student and would not have to live with Niang.

### Chapter 18: Miserable Sunday

#### Two Years Later: Summer 1951

At thirteen, Adeline was the top student in her class. She hated Sunday because there were no classes. The only student who was competition for her as top scholar was a girl named Monica, whose father was very wealthy and whose mother was stylish and a former concubine. Because they were an expensive delicacy, chicken eggs would only be served to students whose family sent eggs for them. Of course, Adeline got no eggs and no visitors her entire two years at school. One day she did get an egg but refused it because she knew no one sent it for her and thought it was either a prank or a mistake. She found out later another girl put Adeline's student number on the egg because she felt bad that Adeline never got an egg. Adeline struggled with her image since most of the girls wore pretty new dresses while she wore a brown, ill-fitting "refuge dress" and cheap tennis shoes.

### Chapter 19: End of the Term

It was the end of the term and all the students were waiting for their parents. Adeline was the only student who didn't pack so everyone knew no one would be picking her up. Several friends felt sorry for her and stayed with her as long as they could. Adeline made a pact with Rachel and Mary that they would always be there for each other.



# Chapters 20, 21 and 22

## Chapters 20, 21 and 22 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 20: Pneumonia

Adeline developed pneumonia and was hospitalized. Her friend Mary came by to see her. A few times when her father came, he ran into Mary, who was then able to verify that Adeline actually had a father who was handsome and looked very important, thus dispelling the rumor that Adeline was an orphan. Her father's chauffeur picked her up when she was released with instructions to bring her home instead of back to school. Niang was away for a week but had left orders for Adeline to stay home for one week to recuperate.

Adeline enjoyed her time at home with Third Brother and Ye Ye. Her two older brothers were away in England at College; Big Sister had a baby daughter and had moved back to Tianjin; and Third Brother would be heading to England soon to attend college. Adeline bemoaned her possibilities because even though she continued to excel at school she saw no future for herself—her father would never send her to England. Ye Ye told her she had to believe in herself. The world was changing—she should compete for what she wanted and create her own destiny.

### Chapter 21: Playwriting Competition

Mother Louisa encouraged Adeline to enter a playwright competition. Adeline approached the contest with passion. She returned earlier from winter break than the other students so she had a lot of time to devote to her play. The play was about an African girl who was kidnapped by bandits. She dedicated her work to her grandfather. That spring, Adeline was notified that her beloved Ye Ye had died. Her father sent his chauffeur to pick her up and take her to the funeral. Adeline was grief stricken, sobbing throughout the entire ceremony.

Niang told Adeline's father, in front of Adeline of course, that she was getting uglier with age. Later that day, Niang informed her she had to get a job after school ended. After all, she was fourteen and her father had too many people to support. They could not afford her school fees any longer. Adeline returned to school, where she was overcome with gloom. If she was forced to quit school, what kind of future could she have?

While playing a game of Monopoly, Adeline was once again informed that her chauffeur is waiting for her. She was petrified—was this it? Would she be leaving school forever? When she arrived home, she was told to see her father in his room immediately. She was frightened and was wondering why he was smiling. Was it a trick? He proudly showed her the newspaper announcing that she had won the international playwright contest and had brought honor to Hong Kong. She would be awarded with a medal and fifty English pounds. Based on her success, her father agreed to send her to college in



England. She suggested she could major in writing and literature. He told her there was no future in writing and that she would be studying medicine and become an obstetrician. Adeline happily agreed.

#### Chapter 22: Letter from Aunt Baba

On her way to Oxford in England, Adeline wrote a letter to Aunt Baba. In Aunt Baba's response, she expressed her best wishes for Adeline as she entered college. She reminded Adeline that she was always in her thoughts and prayers. Aunt Baba wrote that she will always hold Adeline precious in her heart. She related a story from Chinese folklore about a young girl whose mother died and whose father married another woman. Her step-mother mistreated her but the girl was able to escape from her stepmother's clutches and marry a brave warlord. Aunt Baba told her that there was a similar story in America that was called "Cinderella." Aunt Baba ended the letter expressing her pride in Adeline and affectionately referring to her as her "Chinese Cinderella."



# Characters

## Adeline Yen Mah

Yen Jun-ling's mother died two weeks after she was born. Shortly afterward, her thirty-six-year-old father married a beautiful seventeen-year-old Eurasian girl named Jean. After becoming the matriarch of the family of five small children, Jean decided to rename all the children, giving them European names. Jun-ling's name was changed to Adeline, a name that she chose to use throughout her life. The children were instructed to call Jean Niang, which is a Chinese word for mother.

Although Niang was young, she was not reluctant to take over the large family. She immediately set up harsh rules for the children, which she failed to apply to her own two children who were born a few years later. Although Adeline was a shy child and very respectful and obedient to her elders, she knew that her stepmother was acting in a cruel and self-centered way in her treatment of Adeline and her siblings. The others fared better than Adeline because she refused to apologize for things she didn't do and would defend the others when they were treated harshly. This attitude made her the main target of her selfish, uncaring stepmother.

Although Adeline was under great stress at home, she excelled at school. She was named best student most school weeks; elected class president; and was most honored at the end of each school year. Adeline held on to an inner belief that if she continued to excel at school, someday her father would recognize her as a worthwhile person. She desperately wanted to attend Oxford in England like her older brothers. When Adeline brought honor to her family and to Hong Kong by winning an international writing contest, her father finally realized the gem that he had in Adeline. He agreed to send her to Oxford where she would study medicine. The person she was closest to while growing up was her Aunt Baba, who was always on her side and affectionately called her the Chinese Cinderella.

## Niang

A short while after Adeline's mother died when she was just two weeks old, her father married Jean, a beautiful Eurasian girl who, at seventeen, was nineteen years his junior. Adeline and her four siblings were instructed to call their new stepmother Niang, which is a Chinese term for mother. Niang was self-centered and focused more on her clothes and appearance than on the care and welfare of her husband's children. As soon as she became the mistress of the house, Niang instituted very harsh and unfair rules for the children, which she did not apply to her own two children born a few years later.

Niang was always concerned about how much money the children were costing, although she thought nothing of the cost of the precious jewels and Rolex watch she wore. She arranged a marriage for Adeline's older sister—one less mouth to feed. As



the gifts for the bride arrived at the family home, Niang picked over them and took the best ones for herself. When Adeline, who always excelled at school, was elected class president, Niang's reaction was to first call her ugly and arrogant and second to send her off to boarding school. Niang instructed the boarding school to forward all of Adeline's incoming and outgoing mail to her. As a result, Adeline did not receive one piece of mail for the entire two years she attended the school. On orders from Niang, Adeline was left at school over the holidays—the only student who wasn't allowed to go home for family gatherings.

Adeline was not allowed to have visitors at home. No friends were ever allowed to visit her during her entire childhood. When a group of friends came to her house with gifts in celebration of her being elected class president, Adeline was in big trouble. Niang called her in the other room and accused her of planning the party against her orders. Niang slapped her so hard and so many times that she had to return to the girls to tell them to leave with a bloody and battered face.

Finally Niang's rule of terror over Adeline came to an end when her father finally recognized Adeline's abilities and worth and agreed to send her to Oxford to study.

## **Aunt Baba**

When Adeline was just two weeks old, her mother died. Aunt Baba was charged with raising the baby. Aunt Baba was the only loving mother Adeline ever knew. They remained close throughout their lives.

## **Nai Nai**

Nai Nai was Adeline's grandmother. She was a caring grandmother and the head of the family. After she died, Niang took over as matriarch.

## **Ye Ye**

Adeline was very close to her grandfather Ye Ye. He would sneak money to his grandchildren so they could take the tram to school. Niang wanted them to walk so she could save money.

## **Adeline's Father**

Adeline's father was very detached from her through most of her childhood. When Adeline surprised everyone by winning an international writing contest, she brought honor to her family and to Hong Kong. Her father was so impressed that he promised to send college in Oxford, England.



## **Big Sister**

Big Sister was a few years older than Adeline. She was usually not very kind to Adeline and was jealous of her outstanding scholarly performance. Niang forced Big Sister into an arranged marriage when she was seventeen.

## **Aunt Reine**

Aunt Reine was Niang's older sister. Unlike her sister, Reine was kind to Adeline and treated her just like one of her own. She remembered that Adeline was in school in Shanghai when the Communists were occupying the city and arresting all the capitalists. She rescued her and brought her to safety in Hong Kong.

## **Victor and Claudine**

Victor and Claudine were Aunt Reine's children. Adeline became fast friends with Victor and Claudine, who treated her with friendship and respect. Victor refused to go on an outing when he realized that Adeline was not invited.

## **Wu Chun-mei**

Wu Chun-mei was Adeline's best friend at school. She nominated Adeline for class president and was among the girls who brought gifts to Adeline's house to honor her election victory. Wu Chun-mei insisted that Adeline attend her birthday party which got Adeline in serious trouble with Niang when she found out.



# Objects/Places

## Tianjin

When she was a child, Adeline and her family lived in a large house in the French concession of Tianjin, a port city of the northeast coast of China.

## The Opium War

Many years before Adeline was born, China lost the Opium War against England and France, which resulted in many foreign soldiers occupying Chinese coastal cities like Tianjin, where the Yen family lived.

## St. Joseph's French Convent School

St. Joseph's was where Adeline attended kindergarten. She returned there several years later when her stepmother wanted her to stay away from home and decided to enroll her in a boarding school.

## Best Student Medals

Starting in kindergarten, Adeline began receiving best student of the week awards. She received many such awards over the years, much to the chagrin of her jealous siblings.

## PLT

PLT, Precious Little Treasure, was a duckling and the only pet Adeline had as a child. Her father placed PLT in the center of the garden to test his German Shepherd's obedience. The outcome was tragic for PLT and Adeline.

## Sacred Heart Academy

When her family lived in Shanghai, Adeline was sent to boarding school at the Sacred Heart school. During the two years she was there she didn't receive one visitor or one piece of mail.

## Shanghai

After the Japanese occupied Tianjin, Adeline's family fled to live in Shanghai. They lived in a large and posh residence, the living room and second floor of which were off-limits to Adeline and her siblings.



## Hong Kong

Aunt Reine rescued Adeline from her school in Shanghai. The Communists were taking over the city and Adeline was in peril. When Reine came to get her she was the only student left—parents of the other students had taken their children away weeks before.

## Writing Competition

One of the nuns at Adeline's school in Hong Kong encouraged her to enter an international playwright competition. She brought honor to her family and all of Hong Kong when she won the contest.

## Oxford, England

When her father finally realized how bright and talented his daughter was, he was finally convinced to send Adeline to Oxford University in England, where she would study medicine.





# Themes

## Emotional Abuse

The account of the mistreatment that Adeline Yen Mah suffered through during her childhood included many incidents of both emotional and physical abuse. However, though the physical acts were certainly brutalizing and even criminal, the violations that lingered the longest and did the most damage to her self-image was the demoralizing mental and emotional abuse that she was forced to live under. Most of this mistreatment was at the hands of her self-centered and cruel stepmother who the children called Niang.

Adeline was the perfect student. She was never absent or late and she more often than not earned the weekly best student award. She was eventually elected class president and always won the most year-end honors. But just a mention of any of her achievements would send Niang into a rage. Telling a young, vulnerable girl that the taller she gets the uglier she gets inflicts a damage that some young girls could never recover from. Niang was the opposite of a supportive parent—she would tell Adeline that she was showing off and arrogant when she did well at school.

Niang hurt her to the core when she told her she would have to quit school to earn money—her father could no longer afford her school fees. Adeline knew Niang was lying since her father was a wealthy businessman. Nonetheless, Adeline was wounded by this news—her school, the only place she felt at home, would be taken from her. Niang knew full well how much hurt such a comment inflicted on the naïve youngster.

Even her own father would tell her that she would never become anything—that she had no future. How she managed to survive such an imprisonment of the spirit is miraculous. Adeline was demoralized and demeaned at a time when most children are being taught to believe in themselves. All the strikes were against Adeline, but her story eventual survival and success in a triumph of the human spirit. Adeline found a way to develop a positive sense of self even in the most direst of circumstances.

## Self-Worth

Although Adeline suffered consistently throughout her childhood from an abusive stepmother, she was fortunate to have some genuine love and support from within her family and learned from them to believe in herself. These family members saw the potential in the young girl and told her to never give up on herself.

Her biggest supporter was her surrogate mother, Aunt Baba, who had raised her from two weeks of age. Aunt Baba was aware of the abuse that Adeline had to endure. She could relate since she herself was a victim of abuse—she was single and had no income and was treated like a servant by Niang and Aunt Baba's brother, Adeline's father. Although she herself did not achieve much in life, she saw early on how



intelligent and capable Adeline was and always told her that she could become whatever she wanted.

Adeline's grandfather Ye Ye scolded her for saying she would never amount to anything, that she had no chance for a future. He told her that times were changing—an obvious reference to the way women were treated in China—and that she should never give up on herself. He told her she could compete with anyone at any level and come up on top. He told her to make her own destiny.

Although her father was complicit in the abuse the Adeline was made to suffer by virtue of his passivity, he finally realized her worth when she won an international writing contest. He could no longer deny her abilities—her efforts to impress him with her scholarship all those years finally paid off. He agreed to send her on to college. Despite being demeaned and demoralized for years, Adeline was able to develop and maintain a belief in herself. Without self-worth, she would have never achieved the outstanding level success she enjoyed.

## Chinese Culture and the Abuse of Women

Chinese Cinderella is the story of Adeline Yen Mah's childhood in her homeland China. It is a story of a young child who suffered years of emotional and physical abuse at the hands of her cruel stepmother which all took place in the presence and full knowledge of Adeline's natural father. Chinese culture itself was partially to blame for the mistreatment that Adeline was forced to endure during her entire childhood. Even though many Chinese families still prefer to have sons today, during the time that Adeline grew up it was perfectly acceptable to despise, even murder, unwanted daughters. Families disappointed with the birth of daughters dealt with them in various ways: Daughters were abandoned outdoors to die from exposure; some were shipped off to orphanages; some were sold; and some, like Adeline, were emotionally and physically abused. One could imagine that other methods were also used to deal with unwanted girls.

For thousands of years, the Chinese culture felt free to demean women by interrupting the natural growth of their feet. Adeline's grandmother, Nai Nai, needed help walking. Her feet were the same size as the seven-year-old Adeline. She explained to her granddaughter that when she was three her feet were bound so that they would stay small. It was considered feminine and attractive. No man would want a woman with big feet. Nai Nai told Adeline that she was lucky that the tradition, which had been in effect for over a thousand years, was finally abandoned thirty years before.

When Adeline was a child, it was rare that a women made it to college. Even though Adeline excelled at school from kindergarten on, she was given relatively little parental praise for her efforts and there were no initial long-range plans to send her to college. Arranged marriages for very young girls were common and considered a plus for a family since they relieved the family of unwanted, unproductive daughters.

# Style

## Perspective

The autobiographical account of the early life of Adeline Yen Mah is written from her own recollections of that period. In writing her story, Adeline effectively balanced the account between the emotional and physical abuse she suffered at the hands of her stepmother with the unyielding support she felt from her Aunt Baba, who raised her, and her grandfather, Ye Ye.

Despite her demoralizing beginning, Yen Mah was able to withstand and eventually triumph over the abuse and humiliation to become a renowned writer and physician. No one other than Yen Mah could have been better placed to write this book. It is a perfect and personal representation of her heart and soul. Having won an international writing contest when she was just a young teenager was early evidence of her exceptional communication skills and potential for a future in writing.

There is no direct corroboration of the abuse that Yen Mah describes in her book. And though it is universally accepted that a child's imagination can exaggerate a situation, the details and descriptions of Yen Mah's experiences are both vivid and convincing. Her life under the cruel control of a selfish, merciless stepmother compelled her beloved Aunt Baba to affectionately dub her niece as the "Chinese Cinderella". This certainly provides affirmation that Adeline was under duress.

## Tone

Adeline Yen Mah, who wrote the story of her abusive childhood, in *Chinese Cinderella - The True Story of An Unwanted Daughter*, approaches her tragic experience in both a delicate and thoughtful manner. Though she was forced to withstand humiliation, emotional and physical abuse and an uncaring attitude from her father who allowed his daughter to be continuously mistreated by a selfish, cruel stepmother, she looks back on that time as building blocks to the person she was able to become. Though she describes the incidents of abuse in great detail, there is not a hint of bitterness in her words. Even as a child she had to instinctively know that her father could have stepped in and rescued her but he remained aloof and detached from the situation.

Part of the blame for Adeline's abusive childhood can be attributed to the China she grew up in. At the time, Chinese culture fostered resentment for the daughters of a family. Some female babies were left outside to die from exposure—others were sent off to orphan homes and some were even sold. Although Adeline had few good words for her stepmother, her persistence in trying to please her father with her schoolwork finally paid off. He was so astonished by her winning the first place prize in an international writing contest that he agreed to send her to Oxford in England to study medicine.



Throughout the book, Adeline remained respectful to the memory of her father and described her joy when she finally won him over. Her respect for her grandparents and Aunt Baba, who were always on her side, did not surpass the respect she felt for her father. Respect for the elders in a family is a centuries-long characteristic of the Chinese culture.

## Structure

Chinese Cinderella, *The True Story of An Unwanted Daughter*, the autobiographical account of Adeline Yen Mah's childhood, is separated into twenty-two chapters. The book covers the life of Adeline Yen Mah from four years of age through her early teen years. It chronicles the persistent abuse of the young girl resulting from the actions of a domineering, cruel, self-centered stepmother and the passivity of a detached, inattentive father.

Adeline Yen Mah begins the book by dedicating the heart and soul of it to all unwanted children. She writes of her hopes that her story will help to inspire other children who are suffering from abusive, uncaring parents and are trying to survive in a dysfunctional family. Adeline is bi-lingual, and although this edition was printed in English, it is interspersed with Chinese calligraphy which she describes in a section entitled "Author's Note."

In her "Preface," the author she explains that some of the abuse she lived under could be attributed to Chinese culture. The China that Adeline Yen Mah grew up in relegated daughters to subservient roles. Also in the Preface, Yen Mah explains the naming conventions in Chinese families in which children are called by many different names. This section is helpful to the reader since the same child is often referred to by various names. Yen Mah also describes how each chapter of her book is marked by numbers written in two ways—in Arabic numerals and in Chinese symbols.



## Quotes

"But then Mama died giving birth to you. If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck."

Chap. 1, p. 3

"When I was three years old, a tight bandage was wound around my feet, bending the toes under the sole and crushing the arch so that my feet would remain small all my life. This has been the custom in China for over a thousand years, ever since the Tang dynasty."

Chap. 3, p. 7

"I was winning the medal every week and wearing it constantly. I knew this displeased by siblings, especially Big sister and Second Brother, but it was the only way to make Father take notice and be proud of me."

Chap. 4, p. 15

"Cautiously, I pushed against the massive iron doorway. Trembling with fear, I realized that no one was coming to pick me up. Too embarrassed to knock or draw attention to myself, I walk tentatively out into the Shanghai streets—surely if I tried hard enough, I would remember my way home."

Chap. 6, p. 27

"For the first time since our departure from Tianjin, a tailor had come to our house to measure everyone for new outfits. In china, new clothes were worn on new Year's day to signal a new beginning."

Chap. 9, p. 42

"I don't know why, but I feel as if it's the two of us against the world. Whatever happens, we must never let them win."

Chap. 11, p. 84

"I looked up at him in utter desolation. The fabric of my life was about to be torn apart. My heart felt heavy with the most excruciating pain. But he merely re-looped the whip over his arm and walked out."

Chap. 13, p. 104

"You may be right in believing that if you study hard, one day you might become fluent in English. But you will still look Chinese, and when people meet you, they'll see a Chinese girl no matter how well you speak English. You'll always be expected to know Chinese , and if you don't, I'm afraid they will not respect you as much."

Chap. 16, p. 151

"Instead of trying to memorize every book in here, you'd be more popular if you get yourself some pretty dresses instead."

Chap. 18, p. 165



"I've tried to tell you over and over that far from being garbage, you are precious and special. Being top of your class merely confirms this. But you can vanquish the demons only which you yourself are convinced of your own worth."

Chap. 20, p. 181

"First, you must believe that you can do anything you set your mind to. Remember the old adage: genius is ten percent inspiration, ninety percent perspiration."

Chap. 21, p. 184

"You have defied the odds and garnered triumph through your own efforts. Your future is limitless, and I shall always be proud of you, my Chinese Cinderella."

Chap. 22, p. 197



## Topics for Discussion

How old was Adeline when her mother died? Why did some of her older siblings blame Adeline for their mother's death? What sibling told Adeline that she was "bad luck?"

How many years older was Adeline's father than his second wife, Jean, who was also known as Niang? Who ordered that all pictures of Adeline's mother be destroyed?

What are some of examples of Niang's mistreatment of Adeline and her siblings? Why was Niang so unfair to her stepchildren? Who was head of the family before Niang took over the role?

What torture was Adeline's grandmother, Nai Nai, made to endure as a child? Why was she tortured in that way? How long did the pain of that childhood torture endure in Nai Nai's life?

Who were the three relatives who supported Adeline? How did each of them provide some support for the young girl who was so obviously mistreated by her stepmother and ignored by her father?

What orders did Niang give her stepchildren about the new house in Shanghai? What floors did the stepchildren sleep on and what floors did Adeline's father, Niang and her children sleep on? What happened when Adeline's friends showed up with gifts in honor of her being elected class president?

Why was Adeline's father so passive about how Niang treated her? What "awkward" moment occurred when Adeline's father had to fill out papers for her for their flight to Tianjin? What finally turned Adeline's father around to thinking that his daughter was an exceptional person?