

# **The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided Study Guide**

**The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided  
by Denise Chong**

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# Contents

[The Concubine's Children: Portrait of a Family Divided Study Guide.....1](#)

[Contents.....2](#)

[Plot Summary.....3](#)

[Chapters 1 through 4.....4](#)

[Chapters 5 through 7.....8](#)

[Chapters 8 through 10.....11](#)

[Chapters 11 through 13.....14](#)

[Characters.....16](#)

[Objects/Places.....19](#)

[Themes.....21](#)

[Style.....23](#)

[Quotes.....25](#)

[Topics for Discussion.....27](#)



## Plot Summary

The story opened with the book's author, Denise Chong, explaining that her grandmother, May-ying, sought out a fortune teller to discover the gender of her unborn child. May-ying was a concubine and had already given birth to two daughters. Her husband had yet to father a son and she wanted to be the one to provide that. Upon learning from the fortune teller that the child was to be a boy, May-ying insisted that her husband take her to Canada. She wanted to give birth there so that her son would have Canadian citizenship. The story then dropped back in time to describe May-ying's life. Her mother sold her as a very young child to the woman she called "Auntie." May-ying was then sold to Chan Sam, a man who lived in Canada, as his concubine. Chan Sam's wife lived in China. When she arrived in Canada, she discovered that she was to work as a waitress to repay the cost of her trip to Canada.

Chan Sam and May-ying had two children, both daughters, and returned to China for a visit. May-ying, who believed her next child was to be a boy, insisted that they return to Canada and agreed to leave the older two girls, Ping and Nan, in China with Chan Sam's wife. May-ying was disappointed when she gave birth to a girl, Hing. Over the course of coming years, the relationship between Chan Sam and May-ying disintegrated and she finally left him. She continued to provide money that he sent to China, using a great deal of it to build an elaborate house for his Chinese family.

May-ying got heavily involved in gambling and drinking, and she had short-term relationships with many men and a longer-term relationship with a gambler named Guen who never dedicated himself to their relationship. Hing virtually raised herself. She was a good student but was ignored by May-ying and often boarded with whoever would take care of her for the least cost. May-ying adopted a son whom she also ignored and left to be cared for by anyone who would take him. This boy's Canadian name was Leonard and his Chinese name was Gok-leng.

Hing eventually left home, married and had five children, including the author of the book, Denise. Denise had an opportunity to return to China and convinced her mother to join her there. They found Ping and a half-brother, Yuen, had lived very difficult lives as well. In this way, Hing realized that the nice house and all the other purchases that were paid for by May-ying were aimed at creating better lives for the Chinese family, but had in actuality created problems for them.



# Chapters 1 through 4

## Chapters 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

The story opened with the author, Denise Chong, and her mother, Hing, arriving at the home of Hing's older sister, Ping, and her half-brother, Yuen. The house was obviously very elaborate in its day but was in dire need of repair. Ping told her younger sister she has something to give her and gives her a coat, obviously old, that Hing recognized. In chapter two, the story then dropped back in time to May-ying who is seventeen in 1924 when she's told by her "aunt" that she was being sold as a concubine to a man in Canada, Chan Sam. The woman was not really her "aunt," because May-ying had been sold to this woman when she was only four. May-ying didn't want to go but really has no choice. She traveled alone to Canada. When her ship landed in Vancouver, Canada, Chan Sam was waiting for her on Granville Street.

Chan Sam had spent his years in Canada working. He seldom spent any extra money on comforts or leisurely activities. His efforts in Canada were helped along by others from his Chinese province. Chan Sam went into business with some friends. He helped not only his wife, but sent money home to his brothers and their families as well. When May-ying arrived aboard the Blue Funnel Steamship, she was nervous but Chan Sam immediately put her at ease by telling her that he was going to take her to a teahouse for a meal. Chan Sam would never have spent money on a taxi for himself but did so for May-ying. The taxi dropped them at the edge of Chinatown and Chan Sam took May-ying into a teahouse called Peking House. They were greeted with a great deal of fanfare and May-ying believed that Chan Sam must have been an important man. The owner refused to accept payment for their "feast" and it was only then that Chan Sam introduced the man as May-ying's "new boss."

In chapter three, Chan Sam told May-ying that the owner of the Peking House paid for her passage to Canada and the documents to get her into the country. To repay him, she had to work for him in the teahouse for the next two years. May-ying spent six or seven days a week at the teahouse and was very popular as a waitress, partly because she was very pretty but also because the men in Chinatown greatly outnumbered the women. May-ying knew a girl named Shortie Lan who was only thirteen but was also working as a waitress. It was not at all uncommon for the waitresses to wear heavy make-up, especially on the days their husbands left bruises on their faces. Chan Sam didn't change his focus after May-ying's arrival but continued to work toward providing money for the Chinese wife he'd left behind. May-ying's wages helped that cause and she accepted that as her duty. Her only real hope is that she'll be repaid by having sons in the household willing to take care of her in her old age. May-ying wanted to stop working in order to do her duty as Chan Sam's wife and he wanted her to stop working so that he didn't have to share her. She became pregnant with her first child and Chan Sam opened a business catering to those who wanted to play mah-jongg. In 1926, May-ying gave birth to a daughter that Chan Sam names Ping in memory of his first wife. Ping was a happy child and it's obvious that Chan Sam loved her. May-ying gave birth



to a second daughter in 1928. The girl was named Nan but May-ying saw her only as a second failed attempt for a son.

May-ying took on an active role in Chan Sam's business then, learning to play mah-jongg and helping to keep the action rolling in the gambling rooms. She was incredibly popular and often had to smooth things over when Chan Sam made some blunder, such as pointing out that someone had a good hand. People soon refused to play there because of him and the business folded. Just months after Nan's birth, Chan Sam buys tickets to China for his entire Canadian family. They arrive at Chang Gar Bin in a motorcar bearing many gifts. There was soon problems in the family unit because Huangbo was too gentle to take control of May-ying. When Huangbo complained, May-ying seemed proud of the fact that she'd made Huangbo cry and refused to do the majority of the housework, as concubines were expected to do. It's only when Chan Sam suggests that he might take another concubine that Huangbo and May-ying unite, forcing Chan Sam to back down. May-ying attended school in China and when she became pregnant she sought out a fortune teller. Informed that the child she carried was a boy, she insisted that Chan Sam return with her to Canada so that their son could be born with Canadian citizenship. Huangbo said that the trip was too risky for May-ying and the unborn child but May-ying insisted and agreed to leave Ping and Nan behind with Huangbo. Chan Sam and May-ying arrived in Vancouver only three days before May-ying gave birth.

In chapter four, the child was a girl and Chan Sam named her Hing. May-ying was bitter and one day when friends were visiting, she dropped Hing. Some later said she'd dropped the child on purpose. The 1930s brought the Depression and there was no work. Chan Sam considered returning to China but couldn't bring himself to admit that life in China was better than life abroad. He wanted to go home only when he could return in pride, with the son that had been predicted and the material possessions. One day May-ying didn't return home from an outing and a couple of days later Chan Sam found her through a mutual friend. May-ying had found a job and preferred to live in Nanaimo's Chinatown where she felt more at home. Chan Sam found her working at the Canton House. When Chan Sam presented her with Hing, who was obviously ill, she was tender with the child. Chan Sam chastised her for not taking care of her children and May-ying was upset, remembering that she'd left Ping and Nan behind in China when they were only four and two. May-ying continued to work but the Depression worsened and the teahouses were having trouble staying in business. May-ying fit in well with the owners of the Canton, the Wongs. She liked the lifestyles of the people in Nanaimo, including that children can play outside unattended and that almost every family had a garden behind their home. She worked hard and everyone liked her, including her employers.

May-ying and Chan Sam knew they couldn't afford to feed another child in Canada but she tried to convince him that he should go to China and try to father a son with Huangbo. She told him that she would stay in Canada and work. Chan Sam paid close attention to everything about China that might affect his land holdings there. By this time, he owned several tracts of land and he held to the hope that this would support his Chinese family. May-ying often gambled and Chan Sam worried constantly that her



gambling represented money necessary for their next trip to China. When Hing was five, Chan Sam prepared to return to China, planning to Hing in school there as was the tradition for families living abroad. May-ying supports Chan Sam's decision to return but pleads that he allow Hing to remain in Canada. May-ying's employer granted her an advance on her pay to fund Chan Sam's way home. He planned to build a house while he was there and estimated the construction would take a year. May-ying agreed to pay for the project, believing it to be a small price to pay to have Chan Sam away from Canada for an entire year.

Over the years, there had been legislation that affected the ability to come into the United States and Canada. These changes impacted the flood of people arriving and when America closed its borders, the Chinese came into Canada. Chan Sam had spent years working his meager land holdings in China. He'd lost his first wife to death without any children and had married Huangbo before making the decision to go to Canada. Once there, he hoped to work hard and live frugally, sending the results of his earnings home to support his Chinese family better than he could have had he been there working. The problem was that Chan Sam was lonely and it was this that prompted his decision to seek out May-ying as a concubine. The Canadian borders were all but closed to immigrants when May-ying arrived but she was allowed in because she had a false document listing her birthplace as Canada. This was a common practice and Chan Sam later sells the documents of Ping and Nan which eliminated their options to ever return to Canada.

The women who worked as waitresses in the teahouses were ashamed because in China that servitude was considered akin to prostitution. The interesting part was that there were so few women in Chinatown, they were in huge demand to be waitresses in the teahouses. That meant that a woman willing to do this job could make double the wage by a man who is working as a laborer. However, the attitude of servitude was strong in these women and their husbands usually showed up on payday to collect the wages, not trusting the women to turn it all over. That meant that the women often had to support themselves and their children only on their tips. This was bound to make the women work harder at being good waitresses in order to garner better tips, which in turn made them more popular. In Chan Sam's case, he became jealous because of May-ying's popularity. It also created chaos in May-ying because her upbringing demanded that she be a chaste wife. Her need to cater to customers - mostly men - in order to do her job well and make more money was not in keeping with what she considered her duty as a wife.

Chan Sam knew that he needed to tell his wife in China that he'd taken May-ying as a concubine, but couldn't bring himself to do so. Eventually, word got back to Huangbo and she took the matter out of his hands, writing to him with word that she was pleased with the move because it was good for Chan Sam to have companionship. It probably wasn't that she was happy for him but that she was trying to save face with her friends and family by pretending that she already knew about the concubine and that she approved. This was the first inkling that Huangbo was not the kind of person to stand up



for herself. The wife typically held an important role in the family and the concubine was subservient to that role. This won't be the case with Huangbo and May-ying. The situation also pointed to Chan Sam's personality. He obviously felt some guilt for having left Huangbo alone so many years in China. Chan Sam wanted to be an important person. He believed that luck had been against him which was the reason he hadn't made a fortune in Canada. He cited the luck others had experienced as the reason for their wealth and success.



# Chapters 5 through 7

## Chapters 5 through 7 Summary and Analysis

In chapter five, Chan Sam arrived in China and began work on the house. He planned a large, elaborate dwelling in order to keep up the appearance that he'd done well with his life in Canada. He was concerned for the health of the Chinese family and provided some basic medicines, including quinine for malaria. As people paid more attention to Chan Sam's obvious wealth, Huangbo became more "humble, yielding, diligent." No one talked about the fact that work sometimes halted while Chan Sam demanded more money from May-ying but it wouldn't have mattered because people expected that a woman's wages were the property of her husband and May-ying handing over money for Chan Sam's project was expected. Ping remembers little of her birth mother and knew only that Huangbo was the better of Chan Sam's wives.

May-ying found that she enjoyed the freedom of Chan Sam's absence and whenever he asked for money, she found some way to borrow it so that he would remain in China. Her attitude of spending, borrowing and debt was typical of the people of Chinatown of the period. Her friends completely understood her attitude and supported her borrowing to keep Chan Sam in China. May-ying, however, was on a dangerous path to financial ruin made worse by Chan Sam's constant demands. She gambled a great deal, often reverting back to mah-jongg where her skill played a bigger role than some games of chance. Men often paid gambling debts or gave her gifts, though it wasn't prostitution in the strictest sense of the word because many wanted only her favor or a bit of her time. Chan Sam learned that Huangbo was pregnant and about this same time he sold the little house in preparation of moving into the larger house, though he was never paid for the cottage. Huangbo gave birth to a son but the midwife is the first to realize that the baby's feet were bent almost completely backwards. Huangbo blamed it on having broken the legs of a chicken because it wouldn't fit into the pot for cooking. Chan Sam named the child Yuen and celebrated the birth of his son despite the deformity. Chan Sam announced that he would be leaving for Canada just weeks after Yuen's birth, partly because of the threat of war and partly because of the deteriorating economic situation in China which made it necessary for him to find work in Canada.

In chapter six, May-ying often took Hing with her to work and everyone noted that she was a well-behaved child, a credit to May-ying's parenting skills. When teachers demanded that Hing have a Canadian name, she chooses Winnie Chin with the help of a friend. Hing often heard her mother's derogatory remarks about Chan Sam and these stories colored her own impressions of her father, just as conversations by Chan Sam and Huangbo colored Ping's impressions of May-ying. Despite these stories, Hing recalls good memories of her father. May-ying often demanded that Hing tend her "aches and pains," using the herbal remedies May-ying kept on hand.

Chan Sam returned in 1937 after being in China more than two years and immediately moved May-ying and Hing from Nanaimo to the Royal Hotel in Vancouver. It became





clear that war was going to spread to China and Chan Sam increased the amount he sent home as often as possible, fearing the day when it wouldn't be safe to send money at all. May-ying supported the plan. Hing began classes at Mon Keong School and wrote to her sisters in China, as instructed by her father. She addressed those letters to Huangbo as well, who held the honored place of mother to all the children born to Chan Sam and May-ying. Hing often looked at the photos of the two girls living in China. May-ying was relieved that Huangbo gave birth to a son because it meant that she was no longer responsible for a sexual relationship with Chan Sam but she was jealous because it elevated Huangbo's status in the family as the mother of the son. May-ying had an affair with a man named Jang Noong and when Chan Sam discovered it, May-ying packed her belongings and those of Hing and moved to Nanaimo. Chan Sam accepted the decision. Hing, at seven, enrolled herself in school and repeated the first grade. May-ying continued to hand over money to be sent to China but Hing never saw her father during his visits to Nanaimo.

May-ying is strict, brutally punishing Hing for infractions such as "playing too long." May-ying often brought men home with her and carried on sexual relationships in the bed where Hing was supposed to be sleeping. Hing consoled herself by working diligently at school and she was soon among the top students though May-ying didn't notice and didn't care. Hing often wished that her sisters from China could come to Canada to live. She imagined what their lives might be like if they were together but knew that her mother couldn't provide a place for them to sleep.

In chapter seven, May-ying had to change jobs as the job market faltered. She always tried to arrange for Hing to take her meals at whatever teahouse would hire May-ying promising that Hing didn't eat much. If the employer couldn't be talked into it, Hing would be left behind to be cared for by someone who would do so cheaply. When May-ying was working at the B.C. Royal Café in Vancouver, she met a gambler named Chow Guen. Guen owned a gambling club and the two started up a courtship. Hing initially resented his presence, hating that he took what little time she might have had with her mother. She had to admit that he was often a steadying influence on May-ying but continued to tell herself that he was "not my father." May-ying told Guen that she wanted to find a baby boy to adopt but said she wouldn't have the money to complete the transaction. Guen provided the money and May-ying adopted a little boy, Gok-len, who was registered as Leonard Chan. Gok-len was boarded out immediately because May-ying had to work. When Gok-len was four months, May-ying was offered steady work again at the B.C. Royal Café and she moved there with Hing and the baby. A woman named Granny Yip took Gok-len in to raise. Occasionally, Hing and her mother would encounter Chan Sam but May-ying refused to allow Hing to talk to him. Despite this, he continued to drop in regularly to pay the tuition for Hing's school.

May-ying seldom allowed Hing to go to the movies, a pastime of other children. But May-ying did let Hing go to the opera and she loved it. One day Chan Sam, in an apparent effort to save face over May-ying leaving him and living as though she wasn't his concubine, told her that he wants Guen to "buy" May-ying. May-ying said that Guen won't approve and she was right. Hing became very self-conscious over her appearance and May-ying's constant poverty made it even worse. She realized that her



home life was nothing like that of most of her classmates and she resented May-ying for allowing them to live in such a way. May-ying began using a pawn broker and sometimes had Hing go along as interpreter, a duty Hing hated. May-ying always redeemed her jewelry on time but the loans were a constant situation for the family and Hing came to realize what it meant to see May-ying leaving the house with a particular item.

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When Chan Sam was away in China when Hing was only about five, May-ying began dressing her daughter in pants and had her hair cut like a boy of the era. May-ying said it was because Hing got dirty when she played and the boy's clothing and short hair made it easier to clean her up afterwards, but it seemed more likely to Hing that this was an expression of her mother's disappointment that Hing was a girl. There was a picture taken about that time and that photo was the first taken of Hing.

Guen had a great deal of money in his pocket and was usually willing to give May-ying money if she asked for something specific, but didn't offer to give her anything unless she asked. He made it clear that he wasn't willing to pay off her gambling debts but May-ying didn't take advantage of him to that point. It's interesting that May-ying apparently had enough pride in herself that she wouldn't ask for money from Guen on a regular basis.



# Chapters 8 through 10

## Chapters 8 through 10 Summary and Analysis

In chapter eight, war broke out bringing shortages. China was in the grip of the war and people were suddenly struggling to survive. Huangbo visited the market regularly to buy the things needed for the family's survival, but she also spent a great deal of money in an attempt to find someone who could cure Yuen's crooked feet. Some bound him, similar to the method used to bind girls' feet during that time period. Others prescribed herbal remedies. Despite these "cures," Yuen's feet remained deformed. The money from Canada stopped altogether and Huangbo ended the schooling for Ping and Nan. Both worked in the fields in an effort to help feed the family. Yuen, then four, was often strapped to Ping's back and she carried him wherever she went to work. Ping and Nan were reasonably attractive and considered "marriageable" by most families. This was an accomplishment because many considered Yuen's deformity to be a sign of ill luck against the entire family. One day Nan was found in the field, bleeding and pale. She was taken to bed and died there a month later. Chan Sam arrived at May-ying's apartment one day with a letter informing them that Nan had died. About that same time, the woman who owned the apartment May-ying was renting became concerned over May-ying's constant cough and, fearing she was infected with tuberculosis, evicted her. May-ying decided to go to Winnipeg where Guen was living at that time. She took Gok-leng with her but left Hing behind to be boarded by anyone willing to take her in.

Three years passed. During that time, Hing lived with women and families who are indifferent to her, who care little whether she eats and nothing for her whereabouts. Hing said that she raised herself during this period, even more so than when her mother was there. During this time, Hing reunited with her father who was pleased at her good grades. When she was living in a particularly squalid situation, she began spending time at the Municipal Library. One day Hing overheard the woman boarding her asking a man for money to buy Hing a coat. She said that Hing's mother cared nothing for her and the man provided the money. Hing didn't expect to ever see the coat, but she did. She felt so used over the incident that she called her mother, pleading to be allowed to visit. Hing was sent back to the same house at 124 Market Alley and a few weeks later May-ying and Gok-leng show up there. Hing was then left to be responsible for her brother as well as herself.

When Guen returned to Vancouver, May-ying and Guen took apartments in the same building. Their lives settled into something more like a family routine with the four of them often gathering for meals in the evening. Hing said that she is so happy with the lifestyle and the fact that May-ying has put some energy into making a home that she can overlook the fact that the floors were rough wood filled with splinters and the cockroaches a constant problem. One day, Guen washed Hing's socks, showing her how to make them very white, and she acknowledged the stabling influence he had on their lives. Sometimes Chan Sam dropped by and he was welcomed as a guest. But May-ying resumed gambling, saying that it was her job rather than a way to pass the



time. One day Hing and some classmates were walking home from school when Hing sees that May-ying is among those being hauled away from a gaming hall, under arrest for illegal gambling.

Chan Sam worried about his Chinese family and what would happen to them if he were unable to send money. He encouraged Yuen - then seven - to get an education, seeing that as the only way the boy would ever be able to support a family. Ping married a boy from the village, a union that would never have been condoned pre-war. She took the proposal because she wanted to remain close to the woman who had raised her, Huangbo. Yuen was heartbroken as Ping was taken away by her husband on his bicycle. In 1945, Ping had been married two years when the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, effectively ending the war but not the conflict of the Chinese people. Hing had aspirations of becoming a doctor though she didn't realize that Chinese students had not yet been accepted into medical programs. She attended Britannia High School and she and a friend, Doreen, promised to help each other become successful in their academic careers.

In chapter nine, the situation in China continued to deteriorate as the Communists sought control but some of the Chinese living in Canada chose to return home anyway as soon as the war was officially over. May-ying was involved in a gambling tournament one night and won just less than two thousand dollars. May-ying and Hing took a trip with another woman and her daughter. When Hing and another girl were out past their curfew, May-ying berated her in front of everyone, saying Hing might as well die. Hing left high school in favor of a vocational school and depended on the friendship of Doreen to keep her motivated. One day she discovered that Doreen had dropped out, leaving only a note of good-bye. Hing went to Doreen's house and learns that Doreen is pregnant and about to be married. Hing held on for some time but eventually realized that May-ying would not be able to support them for the years remaining until Hing's graduation. She dropped out in favor of a secretarial school, Pittman Business College, and Guen paid the tuition. Partway through the course, Hing discovered that Escondale Mental Hospital was opening its nursing program to Chinese and Hing was granted a spot there.

In China, Ping discovered that her husband had a mistress and refuses to allow him into her bed. She told her father of the situation and he urged her to move to Canada. She planned to do so but when she learned that her two-year-old son would not be allowed into the country, she couldn't bring herself to leave him to be raised by her indifferent mother-in-law or her husband's mistress. In Canada, May-ying was having trouble with Gok-leng. She wasn't as strict with him as she was with Hing and the result is that he got into constant trouble. May-ying fell ill and Hing sent her mother her entire paycheck each week, keeping back five dollars for spending money. It was about this time that she met John Chong. Their relationship got off to a rocky start with Hing uncommunicative and John speaking little Chinese. When they decided to marry, May-ying insisted on a five hundred dollar "bride price." John agreed but balked when May-ying also insisted that the newlyweds take Gok-leng to live with them. John said that they would be living in the house with his family and they wouldn't like having Gok-leng there too. John took over a dry cleaning business he bought from his sister and May-



ying leaves her nursing behind. She did alterations and helped in the dry cleaners as needed. A few months after their marriage, she was expecting their first child.

In chapter ten, Communism came to power in China. Huangbo and her family were persecuted for the excessively elaborate home Chan Sam had built. The house is stripped of its showy features and Ping and Yuen were persecuted. Ping's husband apparently gave up his mistress who moved away and Ping allowed him back into her bed. They had several children. Yuen was forced out of school by the Communists. Chan Sam waited for years in the hope that the time would be right to return home. Chan Sam sold Nan and Ping's Canadian citizenship documents. Meanwhile, Hing and the other members of her household were having trouble getting along. Hing and John used their savings and a gift from Chan Sam for a down payment for a house. Chan Sam moved in with them and Hing rose every morning to cook breakfast for him before he headed off to his job, cleaning hotel rooms. Whenever he returned from a day at work or a trip to Chinatown, he brought something home for the family or the children.

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Nan's fate was not described in detail except to say that she was found in the field, bloodied and with torn clothing. Some said that she was "bleeding from the womb." It seems evident that Nan was raped, probably by soldiers who had invaded the country at that time, but apparently no one was willing to say so.

Hing was harassed during her term at Escondale Mental Hospital, probably because she was among the first Chinese to be admitted to the nursing program. The harassment seemed petty with someone accusing her of sleeping during her shift.

Hing expected her mother to rant and make her feel guilty for John's refusal to take Gok-leng into their household after they marry, but that wasn't the case. Instead, May-ying said that she had asked too much and assured Hing that Gok-leng would be found remaining with his mother. What Hing didn't say but what seems evident to the reader is that May-ying was trying to make her feel guilty. May-ying had not been able to support herself for some time and she knew that Hing was fully aware of that fact because Hing had been supporting them.



# Chapters 11 through 13

## Chapters 11 through 13 Summary and Analysis

In chapter eleven, land reforms were implemented in China so that many of the people lose most of their property. Chan Sam worried that a letter he received from China was a forgery. May-ying and Hing didn't communicate for four years until May-ying returned with Gok-leng. One day Hing received word from her mother that Gok-leng had run away and became a ward of children's services. May-ying eventually moved in with John and Hing but it was obvious that she drank too much and May-ying kept her in a tight budget in an effort to curtail the drinking. May-ying moved in with Chan Sam. The fact that Communism was in power in China prompted a new slant on letters between Chan Sam and his Chinese family, typically spouting the Communist rhetoric that would keep the Chinese family out of trouble with the officials. Chan Sam was diagnosed with cancer and died a short time later.

In chapter twelve, May-ying roamed from one apartment building to the next. Then John was transferred to Prince George, five hundred miles away, and Hing, John and their children moved. The family sometimes returns to Vancouver to visit friends. Hing gave birth to her fifth child, Wayne. The children sometimes spent a short time with May-ying without May-ying and John present. At one point, May-ying allowed her older daughter to stay with May-ying for a few days but her visit was cut short by May-ying's drinking.

Gok-leng became a nurse and got his life together. One day, when Denise was home alone, he called and asked that Hing call him right away. When Hing called, she learned that May-ying had been involved in a car wreck and had died.

In chapter thirteen, Denise and her mother met in Hong Kong. John had died several years earlier and Hing continued to live in Prince George. Denise was living in Peking, having moved there to be near her boyfriend and to take some time to focus on her writing. Denise had convinced her mother to join her for a trip through China. Denise sent a letter to Chinese officials, explaining that the purpose of their trip was to find her mother's relatives. Denise didn't really expect an answer but heard from the authorities that they'd found both of Hing's sisters and a stepbrother. Denise and Hing traveled to a meeting place and were picked up by government officials. They arrived at Chang Bar Gin and discovered that the information was wrong - only one of Hing's sisters was there. Denise wondered if the government officials might be lying about the relatives but Ping said she recognized Hing from the photos. When Yuen arrived, Hing and Denise were impressed with his deformity, which confirmed his identity in their minds. They spend some time together and Denise soon realized that Yuen and Ping know a great deal about May-ying, Chan Sam and their lives in Canada but know only what they learned from Chan Sam and Huangbo. Denise and Hing wanted to tell them about May-ying's sacrifices, that she'd worked as a waitress in order to build the house Yuen lived in, but Yuen and Ping weren't interested. It was during their visit that Ping gave Hing the coat that has been sent from Canada.

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There was a serious problem between Hing and her parents after May-ying moved out. Hing was served with a lawsuit filed by her parents demanding money. Among other things, they demanded that Hing and her husband repay the money Chan Sam had loaned them to buy their house. Hing responded on the advice of an attorney, demanding that both her father and mother pay for back rent. Both suits were dropped without money exchanging hands.

Denise seemed driven to spend some time in China and said that she really needed to have her mother with her for the tour of the area. Denise needed to see the place her grandparents came from but Hing really wanted to forget. Hing said that Denise was born in Canada and was therefore Canadian. May-ying recommended that Denise forget her "Chinese-ness."

Denise realized that her childhood was very different from that of her mother. She said that sometimes her mother became incredibly sad and that she knew, from an early age, that it was memories of her childhood and her mother that prompted those bouts of depression. John was very understanding, believing that patience was the key to helping Hing through those difficulties.

While Hing and Denise were visiting with Yuen and Ping, Yuen broached the subject of helping his children escape China. He said that he would repay any amount toward that goal. He said that he'd begun arrangements for one of his daughters to marry a man outside China. When Hing and Denise asked how old the man was, Yuen said that it didn't matter. Yuen said there was nothing more important than getting his children out of China and that getting one out might mean that one could help the others.



# Characters

## May-ying

The author's grandmother, she was sold by her mother as a very young girl and then sold as a concubine by her employer. May-ying was terribly disappointed that her two first children were girls and hoped desperately that her third would be the son she believed she owed her husband. The third child was also a girl, Hing, who was the author's mother. May-ying's disappointment was at least partly because she believed that having produced a boy would end her obligation to her husband, Chan Sam. After Hing's birth, May-ying began gambling and drinking heavily. Often, Hing woke to hear May-ying entertaining men. May-ying adopted a son, Gok-leng, though he lived with her only occasionally. May-ying seldom seemed to care about making a home for Hing and Gok-leng though at one point she settled into an apartment and for a short time their lives became more tolerable. As she aged, May-ying took an occasional interest in her grandchildren, including the author, Denise. But these occasional bouts of interest were interrupted whenever May-ying wanted to drink or gamble. May-ying willingly continued to send money to China as long as Chan Sam insisted that she do so. May-ying died in an automobile accident without having ever returned to China to see her oldest daughter, Ping.

## Hing

The author's mother, she was the daughter of May-ying and Chan Sam. Hing was the third daughter born to May-ying who was desperately disappointed that Hing was not a boy. At one point in her life, Hing was dressed as a boy. As an infant, Hing was dropped by her mother and some believed it was an effort on May-ying's part to kill the child. Hing was an intelligent child and soon realized that she could excel in school. She used the name "Winnie" when teachers insisted that she have a Canadian name to use rather than her Chinese name. She worked diligently at her studies but was disappointed that her mother didn't even notice. Her father did, but wasn't around enough for Hing to depend on his praise to meet this need. May-ying constantly called on Hing to rub her back and tend her personal needs. Hing was in high school, hopeful for a career in the medical field, when she realized that her mother was never going to be able to keep working and that Hing would bear the responsibility for providing for the family. Hing eventually married and had five children, including the author, Denise. Hing returned to China at her daughter's request and met her sister and half-brother. There she learned that her life in Canada, though filled with hardship and deprivation, was better than that of the Chinese family.





## Denise

The author, she was the daughter of Hing and the granddaughter of May-ying. Denise realized that she lived a dramatically different life from her mother. Denise had always been curious about the black and white photos that told the story of her mother's childhood and the lives of her grandparents, May-ying and Chan Sam. Denise had been told by her mother to forget her Chinese heritage because she was Canadian, but Denise had a desire to visit the village where her grandfather lived though she knew her mother has to accompany her on that journey. Denise seemed somewhat surprised to discover that her Chinese family had information about the Canadian family provided by Chan Sam and that they had definite ideas about the subject based on that information.

## Chan Sam

The author's grandfather, he was Chinese by birth but sought his fortune in Canada, leaving his wife behind in China. Chan Sam, like many men in his position, took a concubine, May-ying, and they have three children, including Hing who is the author's mother. Chan Sam had definite ideas about the way people were to act and this regimented take on life was stifling to May-ying. The two separated and Chan Sam died in Canada.

## Ping

The oldest child of Chan Sam and May-ying, she was taken to China as a young girl and left there with her father's wife, Huangbo. Ping was not the smartest of the girls but was determined. She married and discovered that her husband was carrying on an affair, which prompted her to keep him from their bed. He eventually returned to her and they had several children though he did leave her alone to raise the children. Ping was happy to have reunited with her sister from Canada but had her mind set on aspects of her parents' lives, including that Huangbo was far superior as a wife to Chan Sam than May-ying without acknowledging that much of the money sent from Canada to support the Chinese family was earned by May-ying.

## Yuen

The son of Huangbo and Chan Sam, he was the only male child born to Chan Sam. Yuen was born with a horrific deformity - both his feet were turned so that he appeared to be wearing his shoes backwards. As a young boy, he didn't walk and depended on Ping to carry him everywhere. At his father's encouragement, he learned to walk and depended on a bike to help him get where he was going. He said that he, like his father, worked hard to support his family and that drinking and gambling are vices to be avoided at all costs.



## Nan

Hing's older sister, she was born after Ping to May-ying and Chan Sam. Nan was left in China with her father's wife, Huangbo, when May-ying and Chan Sam returned to Canada. Nan died young and her family worried that her spirit would be doomed to wander because she wasn't married. With the goal of stopping her restless wandering, her family got together with a family who lost two sons at an early age and they held a ceremony to marry Nan to one of the boys. The marriage was regarded by both families as binding and a medium assured the families that both Nan and her groom were present and that they left the land of the living behind for good after the ceremony.

## Gok-leng

Adopted by May-ying as a child, Gok-leng was known as Leonard and was boarded out for most of his life. When Hing was to marry, May-ying insisted that she take Gok-leng into her home but Hing's husband objected and Gok-leng remained with May-ying though she seldom took an interest in his life. He eventually ran wild and was taken in by juvenile authorities though he seemed to find a settled life for himself in that setting.

## Guen

The man who attracted May-ying's attention for many years, he was a professional gambler and businessman who never seemed able to make a go of any business endeavor for the long-term. For awhile, he lived in the same apartment building with Hing, May-ying and Gok-leng and they took on the semblance of a settled family unit. He never committed to a relationship with May-ying and when he left the area she typically follows, leaving her children behind in whatever boarding situation she could find.

## John Chong

The man Hing eventually married. He was a patient man and seemed to deal effectively with Hing's occasional bouts of deep depression, citing Hing's unhappy childhood as the cause. John died prior to Hing's return to China.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Chang Bar Gin**

The small Chinese village where Chan Sam and his family lived.

### **Granville Street**

Where Chan Sam was awaiting May-ying's arrival when her ship docked in Canada.

### **Vancouver**

The Canadian city where May-ying and Chan Sam met for the first time.

### **Blue Funnel Steamship**

The ship on which May-ying arrived in Canada.

### **Peking House**

The teahouse where May-ying worked upon her arrival to Vancouver in order to repay the cost of her passage from China and her documents for entry into Canada.

### **Canton House**

Where May-ying was working when Hing became ill.

### **Royal Hotel**

Where Hing moved with her parents upon her father's return from China in 1937.

### **The Municipal Library**

Where Hing spent a great deal of time when her home situation became particularly squalid or unbearable.

### **Britannia High School**

Where Hing attended.

## Prince George

Where Hing, John and their family move for John's job.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

Hing was the major example of the coming of age theme. She spent a great deal of her childhood feeling that she was wronged because her mother made no attempt to make a good home for Hing. Over the majority of her childhood, Hing hated her situation and blamed her mother for it. This was natural because Hing was very young. As she aged, she put her hopes into education with the goal of becoming a doctor. The hope for her future was important to her but she came to realize that her mother was not going to be able to support herself long enough for Hing to reach those goals. She dropped out of school and sought other options, looking ahead to the time when she would have to provide support for her mother. Hing eventually found her way into a nursing program but became the brunt of prejudice. She was accused of petty infractions, such as sleeping during her shift, but stayed with the program in an effort to finish her degree. May-ying can also be considered an example of this theme, though to a lesser degree, when she leaves Chan Sam in an effort to gain the freedom she was so desperate for.

## The Importance of Family

The importance of family was a recurring theme though the family dynamics of Hing and her sisters were atypical because of the relationship of her mother as the concubine. Hing realized from the beginning that her mother was the concubine and that her father's wife was the more important of the two "mothers." She also knew that she had two sisters who lived in China but had never seen them. Despite the fact that they didn't have a typical relationship as sisters, Hing longed for them as companions. She knew that her mother - May-ying - would never be able to provide for them but still longed for their company. Ping and Nan were left behind in China to be raised by their father's wife. The fact that they weren't raised by their biological mother was an important aspect of their lives and they transferred the loyalty that might have been reserved for their biological mother because of being raised by Huangbo. Denise provided another example of this theme. As she grew to adulthood, she wanted to find a way to return to the village of her grandfather's home. Denise wanted this connection and found it when she located her aunt and uncle, Ping and Yuen.

## Dreams for a better life

Dreams were an important part of the story. It was Chan Sam's dream of providing a better life for his family that prompted his move to Canada and his life in Canada that prompted his decision to take a concubine. Chan Sam was willing to work hard for these dreams though he also believed that he hadn't been blessed with good luck as some others had. May-ying seemed to accept his dreams as her own but in reality she wanted desperately to have a life of freedom. She was never able to fully achieve that though



she found a small aspect of it when Chan Sam left for a two-year stay in Canada. Hing also wanted a better life for herself and it was because of that dream that she threw herself into her education. She hoped to gain a medical degree but when she was forced to drop out of school she sought out an alternative - secretarial school. Chan Sam realized the power of education and urged Yuen to remain in school in order to have an opportunity to support himself and his family. Yuen later pointed out that he wanted his children out of China. He wasn't particular how they got out of the country but felt only that having them out of the country would be a positive move toward a better life.



# Style

## Perspective

The story was written in first person from the perspective of the author. What was unusual about this was that the author made a very brief appearance in the first chapter of book but did not appear again until near the end. The word "I" was used only early in the story and again late in the book, each time the author actually put in an appearance. Otherwise, the book was presented from the author's perspective from the limited viewpoint of her research into the lives of her grandparents. This research was accomplished with the memories, letters and other documentation discovered by the author. However, the reader should remain aware that these memories may have been less than reliable. For example, the author's mother recalled a less-than-ideal childhood. She remembered her mother as freely gambling and spending a great deal of time with men. These attributes may have been expanded in Hing's mind because of her unhappy childhood. The reader has to decide whether this is the case and, if so, if it matters. It should be noted that the author's personal memories of her grandmother are in keeping with the stories of her mother. Again, these memories could be skewed because the author's loyalty naturally lies with her mother. The author's memories may lean toward what her mother remembers because of this loyalty.

## Tone

The tone is somewhat dark throughout most of the book though there remains an undercurrent of hope on the part of the author's mother. The author's grandmother, May-ying, is a dark person who spends most of her life separated from her two older daughters. She is always looking for a way to better her life but doesn't want to work at it. She seeks to gamble herself into wealth or to find a man who will support her. Ironically, she leaves a man who supports her - Chan Sam - because he is too restrictive with her money. This constant quest for something that seems always just out of her reach makes May-ying a dark, brooding and unhappy person. The counter of that is seen in some aspects of Ming's life. Ming hates the shanties they live in and the dark, smelly alleys that she is forced to go through. She believes that excelling in her school work will provide the opportunity to escape the life May-ying has made for her. But she is forced to face the reality that she's going to have to drop out of school and find a way to support her mother and young adopted brother. The obstacles thrown in her path are sufficient to make her life difficult but she continues to look for ways to overcome those problems. In this way, the hopeful side of the story comes through though Ming spends the rest of her life in an attempt to overcome the hardships of her childhood.



## Structure

The book is divided into thirteen chapters. Chapters vary in length with chapter one being only four pages. The majority of the other twelve chapters range between eighteen and twenty-two pages. The first chapter is a very brief introduction of some of the main characters, including the author, her mother Ming, and her aunt and uncle, Ping and Yuen. The first chapter also introduces the setting which is China at the home of Ping and Yuen where the author and Ming have been reunited. The basics of the story - that Ming was born in Canada, that her mother was a concubine, and that Ming's sisters and half-brother lived out their lives in China - are also introduced in this brief first chapter. The story then steps back in time to 1930 when the author's grandmother, May-ying, insists that she be taken to China where she hopes her third child will be a boy, born on Canadian soil. The story from that point is chronological, presenting information through the lives of the author's grandparents, May-ying and Chan Sam. The story goes on to tell of the birth of May-ying's third child, a girl named Ming who is the author's mother. As the story progresses, May-ying grows to adulthood, marries and has children of her own. The final chapter of the story reveals the author's stay in China and her efforts to bring her mother back to the Chinese village where her grandparents lived. That trip is successful and ends in the reunion of Ming with her sister Ping and half-brother, Yuen.





## Quotes

"Had he been at home in the village with two wives, Chan Sam would have been the envy of every man; there was not another man in Chang Gar Bin with such a household. But here in Chinatown, he couldn't repress a nagging feeling that he was a man wronged." Chapter 3, Page 31

"To the patrons, she was the tiny waitress, the one with the fair skin, bright eyes and the dangling jade-and-gold earrings. To the Wongs, she was ever punctual, polite and soft-spoken, someone who minded her own business and never complained about the long hours and hard work, who was never mad at anybody." Chapter 4, Page 57

"For them, it had come down to swallowing the shame of going home poor or going home dead, their bones dug up and cleaned from the grave and crated for the last boat ride home." Chapter 4, Page 62

"Just as her sacrifice to the family was to endure an existence more like widowhood than marriage, any sacrifice on the part of the concubine would be considered just and honorable, and expected." Chapter 5, Page 76

"When she didn't have enough credit to play the big sums expected at the fan tan table, she changed her game to mah-jongg, where the stakes were lower and where skill played a bigger role than luck. But even there, her shrewd playing was often undone by not knowing when to talk away from the table." Chapter 5, Page 83

"Huangbo was anguished that instead of a gift of a son who would take care of his aging parents, who would be able to cultivate the mau tin, she had given her family a son with a deformity who was as much a liability as a daughter." Chapter 5, Page 87

"Among the tool-sharpeners, tinkers, scribes, barbers, and dentists, she looked for the herbalists and self-styled medical doctors. Somebody, she hoped, would have the miracle cure that would turn Yuen's feet the right way around." Chapter 8, Page 136

"Forgetting the slivers in the floor-boards, the cockroaches around the sink and the bedbugs that came with every rooming house, she would say to her brother, 'This is like a dream come true.'" Chapter 8, Page 146

"She would not do to her child what May-ying had done to her and her sister - turn her back on him and leave him in China to go to Canada. And so Ping, having made her choice not to start her life anew in Canada, the country of her birth, stayed in her adopted country." Chapter 9, Page 171

"While Chan Sam believed imposters were behind the suspicious letters, he also worried that his children may have been trying to get more money from him. Such a thought annoyed him, but it also provoked his guilt because he couldn't provide it." Chapter 11, Page 201



"There was no weeping. There were some prayers, people threw dirt on the coffin and left." Chapter 11, Page 214

"Her father had come to Canada to throw off the cloak of poverty at home, but the truth was that his penchant for showiness had brought the family members persecution, had left them victims of a regime driven by vindictiveness. For Mother, who had lived her childhood in a shadow of sacrifice for the Chinese side of the family, her parents' act of immigration to the new world and her mother's determination in pregnancy to chance the journey by sea had been her liberation, the best gift of all." Chapter 13, Page 259



## Topics for Discussion

Describe how May-ying came to be the concubine of Chan Sam. What was known about her life prior to being sent to Canada? What did she discover upon her arrival in Vancouver? What was her life like after her arrival?

Who was May-ying? What was her relationship to Ping? Hing? Nan? Yuen? Gok-leng? Chan Sam? Huangbo? Denise? Guen? What kind of mother and grandmother was she?

What were May-ying's strengths? Her weaknesses? How did each of these impact her life? How did they affect the life of her daughter, Hing?

Who was Hing? What was her relationship to Ping? Nan? Denise? Yuen? Chan Sam? May-ying? How did each of these people impact her life? Which impact her in a positive way? Which were negative?

Describe Hing's childhood. What was known of the childhoods of Ping and Nan? Compare the lives of Hing with those of her sisters. What did Hing believe about the money that's sent to China by her parents? What did she eventually come to realize about that money?

Describe the lives of Chinese in Canada during the time of Hing's childhood there. Compare that to the lives of the Chinese in China during that same period. Which lifestyle was better? Why?

What was the role of a typical concubine in the traditional Chinese period during May-ying's life? How did that role compare to the role of a typical wife of the same period? How did May-ying fit into that role? How did Huangbo fit the role of the wife?