

Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter Study Guide

Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter by Adeline Yen Mah

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Plot Summary

Adeline Yen is the fifth child born to Joseph Yen and his first wife. The older four children are born close together, but three years lapse before Adeline's birth. The birth is easy and Adeline's father refuses to send his wife and newborn daughter to the hospital for recuperation. Adeline's mother dies a few days after her birth, possibly the result of an infection. Adeline's father never gets over the death of his wife and Adeline is considered an unlucky child because of the death of her mother. Adeline's Aunt Baba gives up her job at a bank to become caregiver for the children. Joseph remarries a short time later and his new wife hates the five stepchildren. Aunt Baba remains Adeline's chief caregiver and the only person who loves her unconditionally, gives her support and encourages her to excel in academics and to dream of a better future.

Adeline is tormented by her home situation, her stepmother Niang and her siblings. Though the five older children are treated exceedingly differently than the two children of Joseph and his second wife, the children become separated by the treatment they receive from their parents. Those who are willing to bow to Niang are treated more favorably than the others, even to the point of being given the fare for the tram rides to and from school. Adeline refuses to bow down to the demand that she beg for her tram money. When Adeline wants to go to college abroad, her father agrees, but only after Adeline wins a writing competition and Joseph's colleagues congratulate him on her success.

Adeline travels to Europe where she attends medical school and hopes to become an internal specialist. When her father tells her to change to obstetrics, Adeline agrees. She eventually does break with her father's career plans for her and goes to America where she works as an intern again. She marries but soon discovers that the man she'd married had lied to her repeatedly. She becomes his victim and is regularly abused. They have a son together and Adeline hesitates to leave him, fearing the stigma and the shame a divorce will bring her parents. When her father visits her in California, he urges that she protect herself and she takes that as permission to leave her unhappy marriage. She later marries a professor from UCLA who is everything she had hoped for from her first marriage. Though now in a happy marriage with a blooming career, she longs for a close relationship with her siblings and her parents. Her father dies, followed only a few years later by her stepmother. It's only after her stepmother's death that she discovers that her father hadn't intended that she be left out of his will. It's only then that her brother says that Adeline, alone of all the children, wanted a close-knit family and that none of the other children held that same desire.



Chapters 1-6

Chapters 1-6 Summary and Analysis

The prologue opens with Adeline Yen describing a situation in which she and her siblings are in the offices of an attorney, waiting for the reading of their father's will. Adeline and the others are given orders not to read the will past the front page and they comply. They are told that their father's estate has no money and that none of them are inheriting anything. Adeline says that in order to explain why they are all willing to do as their stepmother, Jeanne, says, she has to explain her own ancestry.

In chapter one, Adeline begins the story of her life with the story of her grand aunt who, at three years of age, refuses to allow her feet to be bound, bucking tradition and society's dictates. The family, including Grand Aunt and Adeline's grandfather, known as Ye Ye, live in Shanghai. Grand Aunt founds a bank, the Women's Bank, which caters to the needs of women and is wildly successful because women are treated better than in the traditional banks, where their efforts at financial decisions are scorned by the men. Ye Ye is married through a broker, and he and his young bride are very happy together. They have seven children, but only two survive. The boy is Joseph, Adeline's father. The girl is Aunt Baba. Ye Ye begins a successful business and the family is wealthy enough to live comfortably.

In chapter two, Ye Ye moves to Tianjin and his business endeavors flourish. He is devoted to his wife, Adeline's grandmother. Joseph learns enough to become the person who types up most of Ye Ye's company correspondence. At nineteen, Joseph begins his own business, Joseph Yen and Company. Ye Ye is certain Joseph will succeed and invests the equivalent of about a million dollars in the enterprise. The company does succeed and Aunt Baba goes to work in Grand Aunt's bank. The bank is so successful that Joseph's new enterprises are backed by credit from the bank, allowing him to expand. His endeavors are so successful that he becomes known as "the miracle boy."

In chapter three, Aunt Baba befriends a woman named Ren Yong-ping. When Joseph meets her, the two are immediately attracted. They marry and settle in Tianjin. They have a daughter, Jun-pei, who is later named Lydia. Her left arm is partially paralyzed at birth. Three sons follow, later named Gregory, Edgar and James. Aunt Baba visits Joseph and his wife. There's a time of upheaval in the country and Joseph is unable to get his young wife to the hospital for the birth of their next child, Adeline. The doctor arrives and the birth is uneventful, so that Joseph refuses to move mother and child to the hospital, taking care of them at home instead. Two weeks later, Ren contracts an infection and dies.

In chapter four, Aunt Baba leaves her position at the bank and moves in with Joseph and the children. Joseph meets Jeanne Prosperi and marries her. She is of European descent, which makes her very desirable. It's Jeanne who changes the names of the



children from their Chinese form, giving them all western names, including Adeline, who had been called Jun-ling from birth. Joseph and Jeanne have two children, Franklin and Susan.

In chapter five, Adeline begins kindergarten and travels back and forth to school with her sister, Lydia. Lydia quizzes Adeline and slaps her when she can't get the answers correct. Gregory has a sunny personality and attracts many friends. Edgar is quieter. Adeline says that James is her "only friend." The Japanese take control of many businesses in the area. In an attempt to save at least some of his assets, Joseph leaves the area and transfers some assets out of the country. The family pretends he's been kidnapped or fallen victim to some other crime. The profits from the companies remaining under Ye Ye's care soon dwindle and the Japanese interest flags. Joseph lives in Shanghai under the assumed name Yen Hong, buys a house and moves Jeanne and Franklin with him. Susan remains behind. Joseph's mother dies at fifty-five. Joseph is unable to return home for the funeral. Adeline says they didn't realize but, this death is the end of their carefree childhood days.

In chapter six, Lydia, Gregory, Adeline and Edgar travel to Shanghai with their father and find that Joseph has a ferocious German shepherd named Jackie. The step-children are relegated to the second floor while Franklin is given preferential treatment on the first floor. Adeline attends Sacred Heart primary school. Susan arrives with Aunt Baba and James. She's two and doesn't remember her mother. Jeanne slaps the child and Adeline intervenes, prompting Jeanne to yell at her and earning her Jeanne's long-term hatred.

Adeline finds escape from her unhappy home life in several ways. She makes up stories on the way to and from school and she writes some of these down, sharing them with classmates. She begins to read voraciously. A tutor is hired for Franklin, though she also spies on the children, Ye Ye and Aunt Baba. The stepchildren in the upstairs rooms are barely given enough food though the family has enough money. Franklin and Susan are feed extravagantly and Franklin often throws food from his window to the dog. When Franklin isn't around, Susan is ignored.

Aunt Baba and Adeline develop a close relationship, Adeline's only real escape from loneliness. Aunt Baba keeps all Adeline's report cards in a safety deposit box and encourages Adeline in her studies. All the children are given a baby duck, and Adeline names her Precious Little Treasure. When Joseph decides to test Jackie's new obedience training by putting a duck in front of him, Jackie mortally wounds the duck and it dies. She never has friends over and never shares with anyone her fearful situation at home. When she's invited to a friend's house on a school holiday, she manages to plan it so that she believes she can get away with it. She has a great time but is caught by Jeanne and punished. On other occasion, Adeline wins a class office and a group of her friends arrive after school to congratulate her. Jeanne and Joseph accuse Adeline of inviting the friends despite the rules that she can't have guests, and is slapped brutally. Her nose is bleeding when she returns to her friends and asks them to



leave. Jeanne and Joseph accuse Adeline of trying to turn her friends against them and threaten to find someplace else for her to be.

The lives of the family changes dramatically after the death of Adeline's grandmother. Jeanne seems to have been willing to leave her mother-in-law in control as long as she lived, but it's a courtesy she doesn't extend to her father-in-law, her husband or Aunt Baba. In Shanghai, Joseph sets up a new set of rules for the family, though these actually only apply to Jeanne's stepchildren and Ye Ye. These rules include the fact that the children aren't given money for the tram. For Adeline, the walk is fairly short, though she is a young child in a dangerous city. For the boys, the walk is several miles and takes a long time. All are walking in all kinds of weather. When Ye Ye arrives and gives the children some spending money that they use for tram fare, Joseph and Jeanne are furious with Ye Ye and with the children. They then implement a policy of giving out tram money, but only to the children who beg for it. Lydia and the boys give in to this and plead for the money. Adeline's friend ridicule her for having to walk but she stands firm, deciding that to plead for money would be disloyal to Ye Ye, taking her stepmother's side against him.



Chapters 7 - 13

Chapters 7 - 13 Summary and Analysis

In chapter seven, Lydia becomes betrothed to a man named Samuel Sung in Tianjin. Samuel has an engineering degree and is the son of a doctor. Lydia talks to Adeline about her upcoming marriage in glowing terms, in her private writings, she reveals that she is worried and doesn't want the marriage. Jeanne tells Lydia that Joseph has too many children to support and that she must marry in order to eliminate that much of his burden. Jeanne also points out that Lydia has a deformed hand and so is not likely to attract a better offer. Lydia realizes with these words that she is "surplus and unwanted." When Lydia leaves, she and Adeline don't reconnect for thirty-one years.

By now, Aunt Baba is working at the bank again. She says she has too much time on her hands, but Adeline knows that she's really trying to make at least a little money for herself. She gives half her money each payday to Ye Ye. In 1945, the Americans put an end to the war and the Japanese Occupation, but there's almost immediately a civil war. Joseph decides that he's going to move his family to Hong Kong. Ye Ye agrees to go along but Aunt Baba refuses, deciding that she will stay in Shanghai and continue to work in the bank.

There's a brief conversation in which Aunt Baba and Ye Ye speak up to Joseph, telling him that children should be rewarded for good deeds such as academic excellence and asking whether Joseph has made any arrangements for the children's future. Joseph points out Adeline's shortcomings and her recent rebellions, saying that she's going to have to be "taught to be obedient and modest." He plans to leave her in Tianjin at a convent and warns that she won't be allowed visitors or letters. Ye Ye tells Aunt Baba that it has nothing to do with Adeline's actions, but is a way for Joseph to get rid of a child he doesn't want. As the Red Army descends on Shanghai, the people are surprised that there's no looting and Aunt Baba lives peacefully and happily. The three older boys remain with her to finish school, with Gregory going to England as soon as he graduates. Edgar leaves later and James leaves in 1951, though travel is difficult by the time he makes his escape.

In chapter eight, Adeline is taken by Joseph and Jeanne to St. Joseph's, a boarding school in Tianjin. Adeline faces immediate conversation barriers because the nuns allow no Chinese and her English and French are weak. As the political situation weakens, all the girls leave except Adeline. The nuns are told they should leave as well but don't know what to do with her. Then Jeanne's sister, Reine, arrives, and without being told what to do and without consulting Jeanne, takes Adeline from the school as she and her family flee to Hong Kong. Adeline expects a blow-up on arrival but it doesn't happen. She's enrolled at the Maryknoll Convent School, where she attends for awhile. One day Jeanne takes Franklin and Adeline from their house and they stop at a restaurant. Adeline can't believe that she's going to be allowed to eat, but Jeanne does allow it. In chapter nine, they leave the restaurant and arrive at the Sacred Heart Convent School



and Orphanage where Adeline is left as one of the sixty-six girls who are boarders at the school.

The school is filled with orphans and Adeline notes that girls are a "cheap commodity" in China during this time. All the girls have open lockers for storing items sent from home and Adeline is the only one who never has anything. Eggs are only given to girls who receive them from home and Adeline notes that, though they aren't expensive, she remains "eggless" during her stay at the school. On Sundays, the girls entertain visitors and Adeline soon finds a way to slip away with a book rather than to be the only girl without a family member or friend to visit. During vacations, Adeline is often the only boarder who remains at the school.

In chapter ten, Adeline says that she goes home three times - twice to celebrate the Chinese New Year and once to recover from a serious bout of pneumonia. Ye Ye develops diabetes and is put on a strict diet by Joseph. Ye Ye tells Adeline that he'd set out to come visit her in the hospital but had slipped and fallen, later discovering that something slick had been smeared on the soles of his shoes by Franklin, who laughed at the fall. Ye Ye tells Adeline that she has to study hard, be smart and escape from her home situation. The family moves to a "secluded villa" and Ye Ye writes to Baba that he has nothing to live for. He also writes about his despair at having worked hard all his life and having nothing now to show for it. Finally, he tells her that he's sorry he didn't arrange a marriage for her. He says that he'd wanted her to have the perfect man and that perhaps that person exists only in Ye Ye's mind. He dies in 1952.

In chapter eleven, Adeline is in the hospital, recovering from pneumonia. Her friend from school, Mary, has been her only visitor for some time until the day her father arrives. He awkwardly asks how she's feeling and she assures him that she's feeling better, but both then fall silent and Adeline realizes that she and her father have nothing in common and nothing to say. She wonders why she'd so desperately longed for his visit. A nurse says that, until the moment Adeline's father arrives, they'd believed Adeline to be an orphan. She responds that she "almost is." Adeline recovers for a week at home and then returns to school to spend the rest of the summer break. With nothing to do, she writes a play, "Gone with the Locusts," and submits it to a contest open to all English-speaking students. One day months later, Adeline is sent home and discovers that she's won the contest and that her father heard about it because the local newspaper carried a story, which was pointed out to Joseph by a colleague. Joseph tells her that he'll allow her to go to England to study but says that she will study medicine rather than writing, as she suggests she'd like.

In chapter twelve, Jeanne discovers that Lydia and her family are living in his house in Tianjin and Joseph orders them out. They retaliate with Lydia saying she's discovered crimes committed by Joseph's employees. He pays them off and allows them to retain possession of the house. Franklin "dominates" the household, and at thirteen, he has use of the family car. He orders the chauffeur to stop and buy strawberries at a roadside stand and eats them on the way home. He develops bulbar polio from eating the unwashed berries, which had been fertilized with human waste, and dies. Jeanne, who has devoted her life to Franklin, withdraws from everyone, including Joseph and Susan.



In chapter thirteen, James and Adeline sail for England on the SS Canton. She enters college but finds that there's too little taught in the way of science and transfers to the University College in Bloomsbury, where Edgar is also seeking a degree in medicine. Edgar comes to hate Adeline, especially when she catches up with his study level, and denies to other students that he even knows her. There are few women in the medical program and that are all serious in their studies. There is extensive cultural prejudice but Adeline is happy and holds to the dream that she'll return to Hong Kong and make her father proud. She begins a relationship with a lecturer named Karl Decker who describes symptoms of schizophrenia, telling Adeline that they aren't right for each other but refusing to let her completely go.

The situation between Ye Ye and Jeanne is unusual because in this time frame a father-in-law seldom lowered himself to speak to his daughter-in-law. Jeanne has so completely taken over control of the family that Ye Ye is left penniless. The only way he can have any money is to ask for it. He has worked hard all his life and is now forced to beg for money to buy himself tobacco or candy. Adeline also notes that Joseph, in supporting Jeanne's actions, completely undermines Ye Ye's self-respect. An interesting aspect of this entire situation is that Ye Ye won't let Baba tell anyone of their situation, even relatives who might step in and alleviate his suffering at Jeanne's hands, because he doesn't want Joseph to "lose face." This is an attitude that is repeated later when Adeline takes a job that she doesn't want because Joseph has spoken to someone on her behalf. She says that to not take the job would be to cause her father to lose face.

The five older children are treated differently from the two younger children, and even one of Joseph's friends remarks on the difference. Lydia claims to hate her parents for marrying her off in order to be rid of her, but will later do everything she can to make problems between Adeline and Jeanne. Gregory becomes an adept forger in order to make spending money and Edgar begins stealing from his grandfather. Though Ye Ye knows about the thefts, he realizes that the children are driven to it and doesn't tell.

Reine is ultimately fair and her sense of fairness has been obviously adopted by her children. At one point, her son asks why Adeline is always left behind when the family goes on outings. When he's told not to question the situation, he opts out of one of the outings and remains at home with Adeline. The gesture is important to her, and one can't help but wonder how her life might have been changed if she'd had someone like this with her for a longer period.



Chapters 14 - 19

Chapters 14 - 19 Summary and Analysis

In chapter fourteen, many of the Chinese she knows are ordered back to China. Among those is a man who'd sought her attentions. Years pass before she learns that he'd been accused of having "ulterior motives" for being willing to help the people of his home country and commits suicide rather than confess to these crimes. Though her relationship with Karl continues to be secret, she is unable to form any other attachments. She eventually decides that in order to leave the impossible relationship behind, she has to leave the country. She does so in 1963, returning to Hong Kong with her degree complete.

In chapter fifteen, Adeline had talked to Professor McFadden, a man she'd met while working on her degree, who is now at Hong Kong University Medical School. He offers her a position on his staff with room, board and a salary. She decides she will accept. By now, the upheaval of the country has prompted Joseph to diversify into light manufacturing. When she arrives at home, her father intervenes, saying that he's arranged for her to work in the obstetrics department at a local hospital. Adeline knows that to do anything other than accept the position would be to cause her father to "lose face" and agrees to the terms, which are much less favorable. Adeline eventually talks with Professor McFadden again and he renews his offer, but Adeline has come to realize that the only way for her to take control of her life and her career is to move out of the country and away from her father's control.

In chapter sixteen, Adeline meets a young American exchange student named Martin Ching, who is on loan from the New York University Medical School. Martin talks to Adeline about America and she comes to believe that emigration might be more than an impossible dream. Because both have nowhere to go during off time, they spend time together and become closer. With his encouragement, she applies to Presbyterian Hospital in Philadelphia and is accepted as an intern. She is thrilled but has no way to pay for the plane ticket. She tells her parents of her plan and they tell her that she won't get any help from them. Adeline writes to the school and explains that she hasn't the money for the plane ticket. She asks if there's any help available in the form of a loan for her travel expenses and receives a check and a pledge of any additional help necessary just two weeks later. Adeline notes that she has more kindness offered from this stranger than from her own parents.

In chapter seventeen, Adeline arrives and meets a young man renting a room from Martin. His name is Bryon Bail-lun Soon and he's very handsome. He and Martin are soon competing for her attention, a fact she finds disconcerting, and Byron predicts that they'll marry before the year ends. She remains only a short time before traveling on to Philadelphia to begin her work. She and Byron marry in New York City in 1964. Adeline soon finds out that he's lied about a number of things, including his job as an engineer and his immigration status. Adeline confronts him, but the situation turns ugly and Bryon



quotes an old proverb, "Marry a chicken, follow a chicken, marry a dog, follow a dog." When he does get a job in Long Beach, Adeline applies for and is awarded a new internship at St. Mary's Hospital. They have a son named Roger and the marriage continues to deteriorate. Adeline notes that the marriage is outwardly perfect, though it's a complete sham.

In chapter eighteen, the marriage continues to get worse. Adeline explains away bruises to her colleagues. Byron frequently creates horrible scenes, often in public. Adeline hires a nanny, Ginger Morris, for her son Roger and says she is fortunate to have Ginger with her for the next eleven years. Byron buys a restaurant and Adeline supports it. However, he's soon embroiled in disputes with his staff and sells out. In 1969, he leaves for Hong Kong and Adeline's life is much more peaceful while he is away. In October of 1970, Joseph and Jeanne arrive in California for a visit. Before they leave, Joseph and Jeanne warn Adeline not to trust Byron with her financial decisions, to keep his name out of a property investment she's about to make, and to be careful to protect herself. She takes it as permission to end her marriage. Adeline is moved by the concern she feels from her parents. She hires a lawyer and Byron signs soon after. Adeline says that when Byron leaves the house, he never again makes contact with Roger.

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Though Adeline is an adult and a qualified physician upon her return to Hong Kong, Jeanne takes control of her life, takes Adeline to the hospital where she's taken on as an intern, and insists that they provide a bed for her use. Jeanne then summarily dumps Adeline's belongings and leaves her there. Adeline is shamed in front of her colleagues, but this doesn't matter to Jeanne. The only thing that's important to her is that Adeline isn't going to be staying with Jeanne and Joseph, despite the fact that they have ample room. It's interesting that Adeline says she takes the position in order to keep Joseph from losing face, but she is also seeking his support and approval. She's still holding to the dream that Joseph will be proud of her and her accomplishments. This tendency continues throughout her life as she seeks both Joseph's approval and Jeanne's.

Adeline's relationship with Karl is very involved but is twisted and problematic so that it has no hope of long-term success. First, there is a great deal of prejudice and Karl is a lecturer. The fact that Adeline is obviously Chinese means they put themselves out for ridicule and prejudice overtures if they appear in public together. Karl is also likely to be dismissed from his job at the college if it's discovered that he's seeing a student. Added to these problems is that Karl is mentally ill and there are many outward signs of the inner struggles he's experiencing. For example, he insists that Adeline see other men but won't allow any of these relationships to develop. In one case, he attends a movie with Adeline and a young Chinese man, ostensibly in the role of something of a chaperone, but then reaches out to caress Adeline's hand during the movie. To make the situation more complicated, Adeline is unable to stand up to Karl and end the relationship.



Chapters 20 - 32

Chapters 20 - 32 Summary and Analysis

In chapter nineteen, the Vietnam War has created problems for Joseph's business and he moves his successful enamelware business to Nigeria, putting Gregory in charge. Gregory is married by now, and this means he and his wife are forced to live in the harsh conditions of Nigeria. Gregory asks Joseph to relieve him, but then changes his mind and asks to remain in Nigeria. Joseph takes action on his own and sends James to Nigeria, going further in accusing Gregory and his wife, Matilda, of wrongdoing with the company's resources and of mismanagement in the form of taking naps in the afternoon, acts Joseph calls "wasteful extravagance." James dates and eventually marries Louis Lam, the daughter of Jeanne's good friend Beverly. The two women later have a falling out when Jeanne's domineering nature wears thin with Beverly. James takes Gregory's place in Nigeria while Gregory settles in Canada. Gregory hopes to build his own empire but finds his efforts at financing thwarted, probably at his father's instruction.

Edgar calls on Adeline for help getting a position in California, but Joseph advises that she not answer the letter, saying that Edgar will poison Adeline's current success. Edgar buys and sells a practice and marries but then divorces and remarries. Adeline says that he seems happy and his second wife suits him. Meanwhile, Susan graduates college and returns to her parents' home, but there are problems. Jeanne intercepts a phone call from a suitor and ends that relationship. Susan is angry and she and Jeanne argue. Susan marries a wealthy young businessman named Tony Liang. Susan and Jeanne sometimes move in the same social circles, though they by mutual agreement don't acknowledge each other. After the final argument between Susan and Jeanne, all the children receive letters from Jeanne and Joseph informing them that Susan has been disowned and that none of them are to have anything to do with her. Adeline says that she and Gregory continue to visit Susan when they are in Hong Kong, but Edgar heeds his parents' dictate.

In 1976, Joseph falls ill and James leaves Nigeria to work more closely with Joseph's concerns in Hong Kong. James' wife, Louise, is bitterly unhappy, but James continues to do Jeanne's bidding.

In chapter twenty, Aunt Baba continues her life in Shanghai, though Joseph has instilled an employee as a spy whose presence makes life difficult for Baba. In 1953, Grand Aunt is fined and found guilty of largess, then is forced to resign from the bank she'd founded. Adeline notes that Baba never comes to Grand Aunt's defense, because she would have been found guilty as well. Lydia's life has also been difficult and she has become bitter and hateful, much like Jeanne. Baba is eventually forced from her home and lives for the next few years in a single room in a neighbor's home. She is allowed to continue work for some time, but is moved from one bank to another. Despite the hardships, she believes there is an ultimate plan in pace for the "deliverance of China."



By 1972, conditions have worsened and Baba writes to Joseph, pleading for money for Grand Aunt. He sends a monthly stipend until her death three years later.

In chapter twenty-one, Adeline's career continues to flourish. She has become an anesthesiologist and makes friends with the few other female doctors. One of them sets up a blind date with Professor Robert Mah, a Chinese-American professor at UCLA. His family had struggled to help him, the youngest of the family, earn his degree and Adeline compares that to her own family's uncaring attitude their refusal to share the abundant wealth of the family. They are married and have a daughter, Ann.

In chapter twenty-two, Jeanne tells Adeline that Joseph is ill and they plan to come to America for a second opinion. Adeline is worried about her father but "thrilled" that they come to her for help. He goes to a doctor for evaluation and is asked to perform some fairly simple math problems, which causes him to struggle. When it's time to pay for the testing and medical procedures, Jeanne is floored by the five thousand dollar bill and Adeline writes a personal check for the cost. He's soon diagnosed with Alzheimer's. At one point Adeline is talking to James, who says that Jeanne is "mellowing." He says that Jeanne had said that James and Adeline were the only two of the children she could count on. Adeline notes that she and Bob have withstood the fifty thousand dollars, the cost of Joseph's extended medical care. Edgar is excluded from a birthday party thrown to celebrate Joseph's seventieth birthday.

In chapter twenty-three, Adeline and Bob travel with a tour group around China. Jeanne warns that Baba and Lydia will ask for favors and gifts and warns Adeline not to become embroiled in Lydia's pleas for help. Adeline asks James's opinion with regard to Lydia and he says that she should "let it be." They arrive in Baba's neighborhood and Adeline and Bob go immediately to visit with her. She cooks noodles for them and gives them a much-folded one hundred dollar bill as a gift. Baba tells Adeline the story of her family and urges that Adeline "write it down." Baba goes with Adeline to her hotel, where she takes hot baths every day of Adeline's stay. However, she is scorned by the tour guide and refuses to set foot in the dining room after the first visit. She tells Adeline that she's had a full life and wants nothing unless it would be possession of the family home. Adeline manages to arrange that later and Baba lives out her life there.

In chapter twenty-four, the group flies to Beijing and Adeline is surprised to meet Lydia, who'd been told of her coming by Baba. Baba apologizes to Adeline for all the wrongs she'd done as a child and pleads forgiveness. She then tells Adeline that her daughter is involved with a romantic relationship in China and will want to remain in the country but pleads with Adeline to help her son escape the country. He is an accomplished musician and adds his pleas to those of his mother. Adeline helps him enroll in the University of Southern California and pledges to support him, ensuring permission to enter the country. Lydia also pleads with Adeline to help her reunite with their father and stepmother.

In 1982, Joseph is admitted to the Hong Kong Sanatorium and stays there six years, until his death. Susan goes to visit him before his death, earning Jeanne's wrath and threats of legal action if she tried to visit again.



In chapter twenty-five, James calls in 1988 to say that Joseph would certainly die in the next few hours. Adeline attends the funeral and it's following this that the opening of the book is played out. The will is presented but taken away and each of the children hands over his copy without reading, as instructed. Lydia and Adeline share a room and have a fight. When Lydia falls asleep immediately following their argument, Adeline realizes that her sole purpose in sharing a room with Adeline was to "make a break." Adeline returns home alone.

In chapter twenty-six, Lydia cuts off communication, but her son, Tai-way, remains in contact. It's through him that she learns that his sister is being married. Lydia and her daughter are rude, despite a large check Adeline presents as a wedding gift. Lydia says that she and her daughter feel that Adeline favored Tai-way over the daughter and that the daughter was cheated.

In chapter twenty-seven, Adeline calls Jeanne's house and learns that she's in the hospital. Adeline asks to come to her but Jeanne refuses, saying she's okay. From her symptoms, Adeline knows it's probably colon cancer, and that's confirmed a short time later. Adeline notes that Jeanne's son is dead and her daughter disowned, but that she has five stepchildren to "play with" during this final opportunity to exert her control.

In chapter twenty-eight, Adeline and Bob attend the funeral and Adeline is told by a solicitor that she's not going to receive anything from the estate. His intentions are to save her the hurt of hearing it during a formal reading of the will with her siblings present. Those who do inherit, including James, have obviously known this for some time. Adeline doesn't attend but James brings her a copy. James gets half, Gregory and Edgar get twenty percent each and Lydia gets ten. The will states that "in no event" is Adeline to receive anything.

In chapter twenty-nine, Susan believes Adeline's rejection is unfair despite the fact that she has also been left nothing. James tells Adeline that if she contests the will she'll be fighting directly against him. Adeline says she has no intention of contesting the will but wants to see a copy of their father's original will. James allows her to go to Joseph's apartment to search for the document but says it isn't there. James suggests that each of the four who received portions of the estate give Adeline a share but others refuse. Lydia agrees but only if Adeline "makes a full confession," though she can't say exactly what she want Adeline to confess.

In chapter thirty, Adeline and Bob find her father's will and discover that Adeline was not eliminated from his will. Adeline also finds a huge stack of letters from Lydia to Jeanne, telling Jeanne all sorts of lies about Adeline and obviously endearing herself to Jeanne while driving Jeanne away from any positive thoughts about Adeline. In chapter thirty-one, Adeline confronts James with the letters but he is angry, saying they are personal correspondence and that she has no right to them. He then tells her that she is the only member of the family who has ever wanted this close-knit family unit she so desperately desires.



In chapter thirty-two, Baba writes to Adeline for help. Adeline rushes to her aunt's side and knows that the end of her life is near. Baba says that she's prepared to die and spends time talking with Adeline. She shares the story of a young girl who paints beautiful pictures, prompting the wrath of her father's concubine who drives a nail in the girl's hands. The wounds never heal but the girl paints more beautifully than ever, gaining the attention of the Emperor who falls in love with her. Though the wounds are tended by the best doctors, they never heal, but the girl continues to paint and lives to "a ripe old age." Adeline says that Baba never dwells on the hardships of her life and that Adeline now realizes that her mother was exceedingly wise to leave Adeline in Baba's care. She says that she feels at peace, that "life had come full circle," and that "falling leaves return to their roots."

When asked by the doctor how many children he has, Joseph can't answer. Bob reassures Adeline, saying that her father was probably unsure whether to count the children who are currently out of favor and trying to remember who is currently disowned and how many might fall out of favor in the coming days. At one point, when Jeanne is out of the room, leaving Joseph, Adeline and Bob alone together, Bob asks Joseph about Adeline as a child. Joseph says that she'd been very studious, so much so that he began to expect that she would always perform well. He says that he unfairly chastised her when she failed to be at the top of her class. This admission is one of the few times that Adeline gets anything other than criticism from Joseph. Jeanne interrupts their conversation.

Jeanne seems upset by the illness and Adeline takes it at face value. Over the course of his time in the hospital, Jeanne spends almost every afternoon with Joseph. Adeline says that she is taking the situation hard but James believes Jeanne is only doing it to keep up appearances in the society that would expect nothing less from Jeanne as a devoted wife.

Adeline seems to envy Susan to some degree because Susan has cut herself off from her mother without allowing her desire for Jeanne's approval to drag her back to the family fold. James is interesting in that he continues to wait for Jeanne's demands, bowing to them without restraint. Adeline agrees that James should receive a larger part of the estate and he does. What seems to hurt Adeline is that she's give her family money and gifts and paid for anything they request in order to garner favor and goodwill. Despite these gestures on her part, she's cut out of the will. Adeline obviously doesn't need the money and tells her siblings that it's not about the money, but seems to want to be recognized as part of the family.



Characters

Adeline Yen Mah

Adeline is the author and youngest of the five children of Joseph and his first wife. Adeline is named Jung-ling and is three years younger than her older brother. Adeline is, from early in life, desperate to have a family life. From her earliest childhood, she is tormented and tortured by members of her family. Her desire for approval results in a studious attitude. Her Aunt Baba, who provides the only loving care and support Adeline knows, is the first to praise her efforts and to encourage her to study as a way out of her intolerable home situation. Adeline soon comes to realize that succeeding at academics is the best way to attract her father's positive attention. She becomes so adept at this that her rare failures are met with undue criticisms. Adeline is undoubtedly an unloved and unwanted daughter, though she is not the only among the children to receive this designation. She succeeds in spite of her family and the obstacles put in her way with only sporadic help from her father and stepmother, though they could easily have afforded more financial support.

Aunt Baba

Sister of Joseph, she is Adeline's aunt and is her sole caregiver in the years after Adeline's mother's death. Baba is working in a bank prior to the death of Adeline's mother but gives up her career and any possibility of marriage in order to live in Joseph's house to care for the children. Initially, it seems to be a rewarding position for her as she is surrogate mother to the five children, but it later turns into nothing more than a prison as she becomes financially dependent on Joseph and his second wife. She bonds closely with Adeline, especially so after Joseph's second marriage. It's Baba who praises Adeline for her grades and teaches her that education is the way to escape her difficult life. She keeps Adeline's report cards in a safe box until they are destroyed during the cultural uprising in China many years later. Baba continues to live in Shanghai when the family moves away, though it puts her in danger. When Adeline returns to China years after moving to America, she reacquaints with Baba. When Baba is dying at age eighty-nine, she calls for Adeline, who spends the final days with her aunt.

Susan

Adeline's half-sister. Adeline admires Susan's ability to escape their mother's harsh demanding rule. Susan marries well and becomes a socialite who moves in the same social circles as her mother, though her mother doesn't recognize Susan when they encounter each other. Susan is the only one of the children who understand Adeline's feelings of abandonment upon Jeanne's death, which is important to Adeline because Susan herself has also been disowned.



Lydia

Adeline's oldest sister and the oldest of the children, Lydia has a deformed arm from birth and is forced into a marriage at seventeen by her father and stepmother. She is horribly unhappy and hates her husband, who passively withstands her abuse. Lydia turns her stepmother against Adeline so that Adeline is left out of the will upon her stepmother's death.

Edgar

The second of the older three boys, Edgar is self-centered and eventually moves to America to become a doctor. He is studying there at the same time Adeline is working on her degree. Edgar hates the fact that Adeline catches up with him and distances himself, lying to other students by saying that he doesn't even know her. He calls on Adeline later, asking for her help establishing himself in California, but Adeline, heeding her father's advice, doesn't answer the request.

Gregory

Gregory is the oldest son and the favorite of the children until Joseph's second marriage. Gregory works with his father for many years but eventually is released from his duties with the company and is all but cut out of their father's inheritance.

James

The youngest of Adeline's older three brothers by her father's first marriage, James is nearest in age to Adeline. Adeline cares for James, very much though he never puts himself in a position of being chastised or berated for standing up for her. However, throughout her life she believes in James. She recalls having her brothers give her orange juice laced with urine and says that James' betrayal hurts more than anything else. She feels this same sense of hurt later when James knows that Adeline has been cut out of their stepmother's will.

Joseph Yen

Joseph is Adeline's father, he seems to never really get over the death of his first wife, who dies soon after giving birth to Adeline. Joseph shows little affection to his children, though he is proud of Adeline when she excels at school, prompting Adeline to work diligently at her studies. Joseph remarries soon after his first wife's death and becomes completely subservient to his second wife's demands.



Franklin

The youngest son of Joseph, he is the only natural son of Joseph's second wife. Franklin is spoiled, having the best of everything while his stepbrothers and sisters live very austere lives. Franklin's sister, Susan, is also ignored in favor of Franklin. He dies young, the apparent victim of having eaten unwashed strawberries that had been fertilized with human waste.

Jeanne Prosperi

Adeline's stepmother is called Niang by all the children, which is a word for "mother." She is a self-centered woman and hates Joseph's children by his first marriage. She takes over the household and rules with an iron fist, even to the point of refusing to give Joseph's father and sister spending money. She moves all Joseph's assets into her name and refuses to give any to the children. When Jeanne dies, Adeline discovers that Jeanne has cut Adeline completely out of her will.

Karl Decker

A lecturer who suffers from schizophrenia, he and Adeline begin a relationship, but Adeline knows that it's not a relationship that will survive. She wants to have another relationship, but the hold Karl has on her makes it impossible so that she eventually leaves the country in an effort to break free.

Byron Bai-lun Soon

The man who meets Adeline after her arrival in America, is Byron, a compulsive liar who charms Adeline. They marry, but he soon becomes abusive both to Adeline and to their son to the point where Adeline has to lie about the bruises to her colleagues. She eventually leaves him, having had a conversation that appears to be a blessing to do so from her parents.

Robert Mah

Robert Mah, "Bob," is Adeline's second husband. He has the support and love of his family, which Adeline compares that to her own lack of family support. He is a professor at UCLA and travels with Adeline on her various trips to China.



Objects/Places

Hong Kong Sanatorium

Where Adeline's father dies.

Jackie

The large dog that is the pet of Joseph. He is mean, bites Adeline and kills her baby duck.

The Women's Bank

The bank founded by Adeline's grandmother.

Joseph Yen and Company

The company founded by Adeline's father prior to the political and social upheaval in China.

Tianjin

Where Adeline's family lives when her parents are newly married.

Shanghai

Where Adeline's family moves when she is just a child.

Hong Kong

Where Joseph moves with Jeanne as things are in upheaval in the country.

Sacred Heart Covenant School and Orphanage

Where Adeline is taken and left by her parents as a boarder, though she always fears she might be transferred to the orphanage side rather than living as a boarder.



Gone With Locusts

The play Adeline writes that wins an award and earns the interest of her father.

The SS Canton

The ship that Adeline and James board for their trip to England.

University College in Bloomsbury

Where Adeline and Edgar are both enrolled in medical school.

Presbyterian Hospital in Philadelphia

Where Adeline first practices medicine in America.

St. Mary's Hospital in Long Beach

Where Adeline practices medicine after her move to California.



Themes

The Desire for Family

Adeline's desire to have a close-knit family overrides everything else in her life, and this is a desire that is never really fulfilled and that she never gets over. From her earliest age, Adeline is anxious to form a bond with her siblings. She especially longs for a relationship with her brother, James, who is nearer in age to her than the other older siblings. James is close to her but never comes to her defense and tells her that she should never care about anyone else either, in order to protect herself against hurt. Adeline doesn't heed his advice and continues to long for this close relationship. She wants this so much that she is willing to overlook the torments handed out by her siblings, her stepmother and her father in order to develop a relationship in later life. This is clearly seen after the death of her father. Despite the fact that Adeline and all the other children inherit nothing from their father's extensive estate because their stepmother, Jeanne, had stolen it all, Adeline continues to make regular contact with Jeanne. When Jeanne is in the hospital and likely about to die of cancer, Adeline asks to come to her stepmother's aid. Jeanne refuses, but Adeline is continually seeking a way to be closer to the members of her family. She heeds the advice of her father even when it's not in her own best interests and gives up her own dreams in favor of her father's dictates.

Coming of Age

The story holds several examples of the coming of age theme. The first is seen when Adeline is in the hospital recovering from pneumonia. She remains in the hospital for days, and during this time, Adeline longs for visits from her family. Despite the fact that she is near death for a great deal of that time, she has no visitors other than a friend from school. This is so obvious that the nurses believe her to be an orphan and are surprised when her father finally does come to visit. When this visit occurs, Adeline reassures him that she's feeling better and the two of them are then deadly silent. Adeline knows that she has nothing to say to him and that he has nothing to say to her. It's here that she realizes that good friends are better to her than her own family. Another example of this theme is seen when Adeline decides that she will leave Hong Kong for a career in the United States. As soon as she announces that she wants to make this career change, her father and stepmother are angry. They refuse to offer her any assistance and send word to her that she is completely on her own. This might have been enough to make Adeline seek a way to regain their favor, but she realizes that she has to leave the country in order to find her own way in the world.



Ambition

Adeline has a great deal of ambition, though it is initially fostered by her Aunt Baba. Aunt Baba urges Adeline to learn all that she can, saying that knowledge is the one thing that can never be taken from Adeline. Aunt Baba also tells Adeline that having the best education she can achieve will get her away from her stepmother's dictatorial household and allow her to be independent. Adeline soon discovers that by earning academic acclaim, she also gains the positive attention of her father. This spurs Adeline on to greater successes. An interesting aspect of her ambition is that she spends a great deal of time reading because she is lonely. Her holidays are often spent at school with nothing to do but to read and study. One holiday she writes a play and enters it in a contest. When this play wins first place, her father is so pleased that he relents and agrees that she can go abroad to study. This ambition is also seen in later life as she works on her degrees, becomes a doctor and embarks on a successful career. The ambition is soon evident as Adeline builds a life for herself and her son, almost single-handedly and definitely despite the hindrance of her husband. She is soon wealthy enough to buy investment property and to set herself up to become a wealthy woman in her own right.



Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person from the limited perspective of Adeline Yen Mah. This limitation is actually not a problem because Adeline presents information of her ancestry and tells the story of her childhood from the perspective of adulthood. She includes things she knows though she wasn't there to personally witness all the events she describes. For example, she describes the first meeting of her parents and her own birth. While she can't possibly have witnessed these things, she relates them as they were told to her, probably by her Aunt Baba. She seems to relate these faithfully, though there may have been some aspects of the story that were either presented as a supposition on her own part or as supposition on the part of her family. For example, she says that her mother is ill after giving birth to Adeline and that she doesn't recover well, so that she is having to use a bedpan provided by Adeline's father. Her story is that her father helps her with the bedpan using his unwashed hands, indicating that this has something to do with her mother's failure to recover.

The story opens with a prologue that includes an introduction of the members of Adeline's family. She says that the story is true, though she warns that she has changed the names of those who are still alive at the time of the writing.

Tone

The tone is overall one of hope, though the undertone is of deep despair and longing for something she is never able to achieve. The aspects of hope override the hopelessness of the situation, though one cannot help but feel sorry for Adeline who is berated, abused and tormented by her family. This tendency toward abuse is so prevalent that when Adeline has moments of peace with her family, most readers will fear that there will be an upheaval to return to this tendency. An interesting fact is that the reader who expects an epiphany ending in which Adeline and her siblings magically reunite will be disappointed. Though Adeline learns several years after her father's death that he had intended that she inherit part of his estate, her stepmother thwarts his efforts and effectively disinherits Adeline. Adeline's only wish is that she inherit, because it will mean she is accepted as part of the family. As the story draws to a close, Adeline's siblings initially agree to share their inheritance, indicating their acceptance of Adeline even though their stepmother didn't. They reconsider, saying that they won't share. The final blow comes when Adeline's brother, James, says that she is the only member of the family that does want this family unity. Despite this, Adeline isn't beaten and continues to work at making her life and career better.



Structure

The book is divided into thirty-two chapters. Each chapter is titled with three separate titles. The first of the titles is Chinese characters. The second is the Chinese version of the title, but written in words rather than Chinese characters. The third version is the English version. Many of the titles are reminiscent of Chinese fortunes or proverbs. The words of the titles are then used in the chapter. The titles are Appropriate Door Fits the Frame of the Correct House; Converting Iron Into Gold; Inseparable as Each Other's Shadows; Surpassing Loveliness Good Enough to Feast Upon; Episode of a Spring Dream; Yang: Family Ugliness Should Never Be Aired in Public; Climbing a Tree to Seek for Fish; Extend the Same Treatment to All; Inspired Scholar in an Enchanting Land; Each Day Passes Like a Year; Original Ideas in Literary Composition; Same Bed, Different Dreams; Is Anything Impossible?: One Lute, One Crane; Swimming in a Cauldron; One Horse, Single Spear; Marry a Chicken, Follow a Chicken; You Plant Melons, You Reap Melons; Hearts Reduced to Ashes; Scales and Shells in the Belly; Heaven-made Union; Besieged by Hostile Forces on All Sides; Coarse Tea and Plain Rice; While Drinking Water, Remember the Source; Sever This Kinship with One Whack of the Knife; Creating Waves Without Wind; Near Vermillion, One Gets Stained Red, Near Ink, One Gets Stained Black; Wine and Meat Friends; Headless and Clueless Case; Opened the Door to Salute the Thief; Steal the Bell While Covering Your Ears; and Falling Leaves Return to Their Roots.

The book opens with a prologue that includes an introduction of the members of Adeline's family who are gathered upon the death of her father. The book then drops back to Adeline's heritage and goes then to her childhood. The death of her father occurs near the end of the book but the story then continues until the death of her stepmother.

The chapters vary greatly in length. Chapter six is thirty-three pages while chapter twenty-nine is only three. The final chapter is titled "Falling Leaves Return to Their Roots." Adeline describes herself as a falling leaf. This kind of symbolism is evident throughout the book.



Quotes

"My mother died two weeks after my birth with five doctors at her bedside. She was only thirty years old and I have no idea what she looked like."

Chap. 3, p. 24

"Come to us and beg for your tram fare and we might give it to you, but you have to learn that tram fare is not a birthright. We'll only give it if you show enough repentance."

Chap. 6, p. 51

"After desperate struggles, right would triumph over might, and victory invariably went to the champions of the underdog. These books gave me hope."

Chap. 6, p. 54

"One day, I was going to be a famous writer? Banker? Scientist? Doctor? Anyway, a famous 'something.'"

Chap. 6, p. 62

"The breakfast egg, more than anything, divided us into two distinct and transparent groups: the loved ones and the unloved ones. Needless to say, I remained eggless throughout my tenure at Sacred Heart."

Chap. 9, p. 102

"Going to England was all I dreamt of. It was like going to heaven. Did it matter what you did after you entered heaven?"

Chap. 12, p. 116

"I could not help but compare their love and mutual support to the strife and jealousy in my own family. While his family had helped Bob fulfill his ambition, I felt that whatever I had accomplished was achieved in spite of mine."

Chap. 21, p. 210

"Your poor father probably doesn't know what the party line is just now. Do you count the disowned daughters or don't you? Besides, the ones that were dispossessed yesterday may be in favor tomorrow."

Chap. 22, p. 214

"I watched her heaving shoulders and, as her tears soon turned to snores, I realized



that the reason she came tonight was for the sole purpose of making a break with me."
Chap. 26, p. 239

"Except for Susan, who through sheer strength of will had made herself independent, all of us were emotionally shackled to Niang throughout our lives."
Chap. 27, p. 250

"I recalled my elation when I finally escaped from her reign of terror and oppression. And yet it continued to matter to me whether or not she loved me."
Chap. 28, p. 254

"You wanted to believe that we all shared your dream of a united family. In fact, no one cared except for you."
Cap. 31, p. 269

Topics for Discussion

Describe the birth of Adeline. How does this impact the rest of her life? Describe her childhood.

Who is Baba and what is her role in Adeline's life? Compare her role as Adeline's caregiver to that of Adeline's stepmother. How are the two women different? How are they different in their treatment of Adeline?

Describe each of Adeline's siblings. What are their relationships with Adeline? How do their relationships change over their lives?

How does Jeanne come to be Adeline's stepmother? What is the relationship between Jeanne and Joseph? How is this different from Joseph's relationship with Adeline's mother? How does Joseph change after his marriage to Jeanne? Why does he change?

How does Adeline come to excel as a student? What are the challenges she faces in these accomplishments? What is the role of her father in her education?

Describe Adeline's first marriage. How does this compare to her second? What are her motivations for each of the marriages? Compare those to her relationships with Karl and with Martin.

Describe how Adeline comes to be a doctor. What are the steps of her education? What are the internships she serves? How does her father influence her career choices?