

Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China Study Guide

**Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China by Edna St.
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Plot Summary

The author's great-grandfather was Yang Ru-shan, born in 1894 as the only son. It was his duty to produce heirs, effectively continuing the family name. Yang Ru-shan married at fourteen to a woman six years older. His wife had been given no name at all and was merely called "Two Girl". Just a year after they were married, they had a daughter, Yu-fang, the author's grandmother and the first of the three women in this story.

Yu-fang was forced to become concubine to a warlord general when she was only fifteen. They spent several days together before he left, returning six years later. Her life was miserable. She was under the complete control of her husband, even from afar, and had no freedom and no security. One their second visit together, Yu-fang became pregnant with a daughter who would be named Bao Qin. The child would later be adopted by her stepfather and her name changed to De-hong. After the death of the general, Yu-fang moves back into her father's house but he doesn't want her there. She eventually has a nervous breakdown and is visited by Dr. Xia, her future husband.

Dr. Xia's family object to the marriage, saying he should take her only as a concubine, but Dr. Xia loves Yu-fang and insists. One son commits suicide but the two marry anyway and soon give the children all Dr. Xia's wealth and move away to begin their life over. Yu-fang calls that the happiest time of her life. Then political unrest occurs and their lives are in upheaval.

In this atmosphere, De-hong becomes a teenager and begins to work with the Communists. It's there that she meets and falls in love with her husband, Chang Shou-yu. He is an officer and, from the beginning, is seemingly uncaring of his wife's happiness if that conflicts with what he deems is his duty to the party. They have five children and De-hong suffers one miscarriage and has one abortion. Yu-fang and Dr. Xia are living with De-hong and her family when Dr. Xia dies, leaving Yu-fang to stay on to help raise her grandchildren.

The following decades are filled with political unrest, warring factions, and conflicting regulations. Eventually, both Chang Shou-yu and De-hong are persecuted and both spend time in detention camps, being "reformed" and "reeducated". It's in this unsteady political climate that their oldest daughter, named Er-hong at birth and later called Jung, becomes a teenager. She takes little interest in politics, preferring to study and read. She's criticized for remaining apart from her fellow students, but seldom mixes unless it's with her own friends. Her father dies a broken man, confused because the party he'd loved and lived for had abandoned him.

When Jung is in her mid-twenties, she has a chance to go to Britain to study. She wins the opportunity and later decides to remain in the West.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

The author's great-grandfather was Yang Ru-shan, born in 1894 as the only son. It was his duty to produce heirs, effectively continuing the family name. Yang Ru-shan married at fourteen to a woman six years older. His wife had been given no name at all and was merely called "Two Girl". Just a year after they were married they had a daughter, Yu-Fang, the author's grandmother and the first of the three women in this story. Political unrest caused problems for many in China over the next years but Yang Ru-shan has aspirations. And his one valuable asset is his beautiful daughter. With that in mind, he arranges for a powerful warlord general, Xue Zhi-heng, to see her. A few nights later, at significant expense, he hosts an opera and places Yu-Fang so that the general can watch her. A few nights later, he invites the general for dinner and Yu-Fang plays the qin—an instrument similar to a zither. The general offers to take Yu-Fang as his concubine, and at age fifteen, she goes through a traditional marriage ceremony. The general stays only a few days and then leaves, not returning for six years. During his next brief visit, Yu-Fang becomes pregnant. Though the general asks to see her, Yu-Fang puts him off until she's told that he's gravely ill and is ordered to come.

The general's household is run by his legal wife and the head concubines. The wife immediately lays claim to Yu-Fang's daughter, who the general named Bao Qin. Yu-Fang literally has to kidnap her daughter in order to escape. She lies, saying that the child died during their trip. When the general dies, Yu-Fang discovers that one of his final actions was to release her from her duties as his concubine.

It's interesting to note that the reason Yu-Fang's father was desperate for money was so that he could buy concubines of his own, and he apparently did just that. Yu-Fang knows nothing of what's expected from her but spends her days a prisoner in the house that the general provides. Though she has money, there's little for her to do other than to read and to play mah-jongg. When she dares to say that she's not happy, her father quotes a proverb, "If you are married to a chicken, obey the chicken; if you are married to a dog, obey the dog".

The societal dictates on a woman were strict but a household was a society within itself. Yu-Fang worries that her servants won't like her and will tell the general lies in order to gain favor. She admits that, even for the loneliness, she has it better than many concubines who are forced to live in the house along with the wife, being treated as little more than a servant.

There's an extensive dialogue about Yu-Fang's feet, which have been bound and left her almost crippled. But one of the things that attracted the general was that Yu-Fang needed help to steady herself upon standing. It's noted that the woman's need for help made the man feel protective - a positive in the culture of the day. It's also noted that the

women suffered horribly, but that they would likely blame their mothers for not being strong if they grew to adulthood and were scorned because of their "large feet."



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

A letter arrives from General Xue's wife ordering the author's grandmother to move out of the house the general had provided. Her father was reluctant, but agreed to take her back into his own home. He is constantly angry at her and her situation is almost unbearable. Her father has now become a wealthy man with concubines of his own. Eventually, Yu-Fang has a nervous breakdown and Dr. Xia—the father of Yu-Fang's classmate—was called. He was immediately taken with her beauty and the two quickly fell in love.

Dr. Xia proposed marriage, saying that he didn't want Yu-Fang to endure the life of a concubine. Her father is happy that she's leaving, but peevishly says he has no dowry to give. Dr. Xia is sixty-five, wealthy, and lives with his extended family. When his three sons, their wives, and his grandchildren learn of the impending marriage, they're angry. They feel Yu-Fang will take over their father's fortune. Though Dr. Xia tells them that he's happy and begs them to be happy for him, they continue to rant. One morning, his oldest son kowtows at his father's feet. Dr. Xia loses his temper and beats the son. Finally, the son says that it seems his death is the only thing that will appease his father and he shoots himself in the stomach, dying the following day.

Dr. Xia, refusing to submit to the demands of his children, sets a date for the wedding and the two are married in an elaborate ceremony. He accepts Yu-Fang's daughter, who he renames "De-hong", meaning "virtue" and "wild swan". Both De-hong and Yu-Fang are treated with icy respect, though De-hong is tormented by the other children in the household. One day, Dr. Xia's grandson pushes De-hong into a dry well, breaking her hip. Dr. Xia gives his children everything he has and the three move to Jinzhou where they live in abject poverty with seldom enough to eat.

Dr. Xia works for another doctor until the day he gets the opportunity to treat a patient on his own. Soon after, he is called to see the governor's wife, who has fallen into a coma. Dr. Xia successfully revives her and the governor sends a procession throughout the city proclaiming the deed. The governor then calls on him because neither his wife nor any of his dozen concubines have had a child. Dr. Xia, realizing that the governor himself is infertile, has him drink potions. But knowing that it would embarrass the governor to find that he was the one with the problem, Dr. Xia also has all the women drink potions as well. Several quickly become pregnant and the governor sends out another procession. The resulting influx of patients means that Dr. Xia and his family move from the mud hut at the edge of the city into a brick home with a courtyard and a place for the doctor to see patients. Though they are still not wealthy, they are comfortable and happy, and De-hong looks forward to the many holidays and festivities.

It's interesting to note that one of the objections lodged by Dr. Xia's sons is that Yu-Fang must be soiled because she "allowed herself" to become a concubine. In truth, there's



no way she could have refused when her father arranged for her to become the general's concubine. Women had no rights and lived—or died—at the whim of the men who controlled them. Still, Yu-Fang finds that when she's living with Dr. Xia, she has the ability to sway his decisions simply because they love each other. It's said that she was gently urging him to leave his household when he finally made the decision to do just that.

Though they lived in poverty in Jinzhou, both Yu-Fang and De-hong remember the laughter and happiness. Dr. Xia spent time with his daughter and she recalls that he once brought home a steaming package holding plain wheat rolls, and that nothing else has ever tasted so good. Yu-Fang has friends and freedom and doesn't long for the comforts of the unhappy homes she's left behind.

The family participates in many festivals and it's during one of those that Yu-Fang shows De-hong scenes from hell. One man's tongue is being pulled out because he was a liar and Yu-Fang says that will happen to De-hong if she lies. The one scene Yu-Fang won't talk about is a woman being sawed in half by two men. The belief was that the woman had been married twice and the two men—her earthly husbands—each had a claim to her. The belief was so prevalent that many women remained true to their dead husbands and would kill themselves before submitting to a second marriage. De-hong would only then realize what the decision to marry Dr. Xia had cost.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

China is living under Japanese rule. Chinese children go to school in unheated, dilapidated buildings, are taught by cruel Japanese teachers, and are forced to kowtow to all Japanese, even young children. One day, a man comes to Dr. Xia with severe stomach pain. The people are allowed only acorn meal and sorghum and the man isn't able to properly digest the food. Dr. Xia gives the man some medicine and a small bag of rice Yu-Fang purchased illegally on the black market. The man ate the rice, vomited at his job, and was arrested after the guards saw that he'd eaten rice. He was imprisoned where he soon died. His wife drowned herself and their newborn baby. Yu-Fang and Dr. Xia feel responsible and are angry at the Chinese government for allowing the situation to occur. Dr. Xia's youngest son, a teacher, one day forgot to bow to a portrait of Pu Yi, emperor of Manchukuo. The son was branded a "thought criminal", which could be punished with death. He ran away and was never heard from again. Dr. Xia's only surviving son was then forced to pay protection money to gangs, and had to sell his medicine shop and move to Mukden.

When Yu-Fang's sister marries a prison warder named Pei-o, Dr. Xia begins visiting the prison to offer medical help. Between them, an executioner named Dong and the cartman who hauled the bodies to Shallow Hill where they were dumped saved many lives. Dong would simply not carry out the entire execution and the cartman would take the people away from the prison to their freedom. Han-chen, a cousin of Yu-Fang, was one of those saved. Yu-Fang and Dr. Xia took him home from the dumping pit and nursed him back to health for three months until he was well.

During the Japanese occupancy, the Chinese girls were forced to work in textile factories. This included the author's mother, Bao Qin. She survived the ordeal, went on to junior high school where she was less than successful at the various "wifely skills" being taught but where she loved sports.

As the war nears the end, the Japanese become less of a threat, only occasionally killing, torturing, and beating those who defy Japanese rule. It's during this time that Yu-Fang and Dr. Xia have problems and Yu-Fang says they can never be truly happy because they paid such a high price for their love. In truth, none of Dr. Xia's family have ever visited except his middle son, De-gui.

The family situations of the day are interesting and often unbearable. Women had few options. Yu-Fang's mother and young son, Yu-lin, were apparently in danger of being poisoned by the concubines of Yu-Fang's father. Her mother always fed some of every meal to the dog and the dog died a short time after her mother moved out of the home, indicating he had probably been ingesting poison all along. Yu-Fang's father's mother was so upset by her son's behavior that she moved out with Yu-Fang's mother. When the older woman died, Yu-Fang's mother and young son moved in with Yu-Fang and Dr.



Xia. But her mother was always conscious that she was living on charity and did everything she could to be useful. Nonetheless, she prayed constantly to Buddha that she be reincarnated as a dog or a cat—anything but a woman.

Meanwhile, Yu-Fang's sister, Lin, had married a homosexual who passed her around to other family members. Finally, Yu-Fang paid the husband to grant Lin her freedom and she also came to live with Yu-Fang until she married a prison warden named Pei-o.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

As Japan is finally forced out of China in defeat, the Japanese who remained were killed or committed suicide. De-hong recalls a teacher, Miss Tanaka, who had never hit the Chinese children and who cried at the execution of one of the girls. De-hong gains her parents' permission to have Miss Tanaka, posing as a cousin of the family, stay with them. The Japanese are replaced by Soviets who were almost as bad. They pillaged and raped, taking what they wanted and dismantling entire factories. The Communists were the next army to occupy China, followed by the Kuomintang. The Chinese hope these soldiers will maintain order but the soldiers call the Chinese "slaves who have no country of your own" and believed the Chinese owed them love and loyalty.

De-hong was fifteen and "highly marriageable". Offers pour in but De-hong is determined to find a man who'll love her. Her mother and Dr. Xia agree, though they're pressured to accept one of the offers. She soon meets Mr. Lui and it seems the two will become engaged. But De-hong realizes that Mr. Lui is shallow, not well read, and accepts women into his bed as his due. When Mr. Lui's father dies, De-hong's presence as his future daughter-in-law is requested but she declines, though Dr. Xia and Yu-Fang are angry. De-hong leaves home to enter a teacher training program. Though she and her parents soon mend their differences, she continues her training.

Meanwhile, Yu-Fang's father, Yang, had bought his way out of prison where he'd been held for many years as a matter of politics. He developed cancer and called for his children just before his death. He told Yu-lin to never "try to be an official. It will ruin you the way it has ruined me". He died penniless with one concubine by his side, and was buried in an old suitcase with none of his family present.

Han-chan returns as a Kuomintang officer. He brings along a fellow officer, Zhu-ge, who falls in love with Miss Tanaka. They marry and one day Zhu-ge's gun goes off by accident, killing the son of the landlord downstairs. He feels guilty, though they show nothing but gratitude for the money Zhu-ge's mother sends in sympathy of their grief. Zhu-ge can't stand the guilt and soon moves away. He is later sentenced to a life of forced labor at an obscure border town and Miss Tanaka was sent back to Japan.

De-hong sees communism becoming increasingly important to many people but has yet to make up her own mind about the situation. She continues to watch those in power, including those over the teaching school where she now resides.

The country is involved in a civil war and the Kuomintang begin having trouble recruiting young men. Han-chen, "Loyalty" Pei-o and others in the "intelligence" offices are heavily into opium consumption and are all guilty of shedding innocent blood. The one thing Han-chen does for Yu-Fang's family before he dies is to provide an inscription card for her younger brother, Yu-lin. By now, Yu-lin is married to a girl three years his senior and



has a promising career as a doctor, studying under Dr. Xia. Han-chen knows that Yu-lin will also fall into the traps that await anyone in the intelligence department, and manages to keep him safe from being drafted into the army without putting him in the position of having to actually work as an intelligence offer.

De-hong has become a very outspoken women. It seems possible that in this day and age, when women were treated only as a commodity, De-hong has had an exceptionally happy, loving, and protected life. Her mother and step-father have made her feel secure in their love, which is likely the reason she's willing to stand up for something better for herself. When she learns that a favorite teacher and then her best friend, Cousin Hu, had been Communists and had been either chased from the city or executed for their political beliefs, she makes up her mind that she, too, will become a Communist.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

De-hong's family has moved inside the walls of the city in an effort to be more protected from the looting of the military, and they share a house with Yu-Wu, who poses as a member of the Kuomintang military but is actually a Communist. De-hong asks to be part of the movement but he says she's too young. A short time later, she begins distributing Communist literature.

The economic situation is so bad that the family has no savings and Dr. Xia, now nearly eighty, is worried about what will happen when he dies. Extortion is rampant, food is scarce, and the money that does exist has almost no value.

De-hong becomes friendly with a Kuomintang general, Hui-ge. Using his military freedom, they travel outside the walled city occasionally and De-hong leaves messages for her Communist counterparts. She later travels with him to watch a dance, leaving detonators in his vehicle. Those are retrieved by Communists who blow up a significant military section of the city. Hui-ge talks to De-hong, looking for a clue that he'd helped cripple his own regiment. The Communists then start regular bombardment of the city, including one dud shell that crashes into the home of De-hong's family.

De-hong is putting herself, Yu-lin's wife, and her entire family in danger with her work with the Communists and it's doubtful she actually supports what they stand for. She's simply sought a way to stand against the Kuomintang military who she has come to despise. When De-hong's classmate is caught with Communist literature given to her by De-hong, she's arrested and tortured to death. De-hong, rather than being contrite, is more defiant and the incident fuels her fire for the cause.

When the Communists take the city, the people are prepared for yet another siege. They are instead treated with kindness and respect, given emergency food and heating fuel, and urged to get back to their business as quickly as possible. They make arrangements to buy the Kuomintang money and help get the economy moving. It's the end of the civil war and De-hong is aching to join in the action as her country, her family, and her friends begin to rebuild.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

When De-hong is sent to report to Comrade Wang Yu for her work assignment with the Communist party, her first impression of the man is that there's something "dreamy" about him and that he looks like a poet. He will become the father of the author.

Wang Yu was raised in poverty, often hungry and often abused. He worked mainly at a series of odd jobs after the death of his father when Wang Yu was thirteen. His first encounter with communism was when he saw a young man about to be executed. The man spoke for several moments about the virtues of communism and then was beheaded. He got a job in a bookshop that sold left-wing publications and excelled at the party's Academy of Marxist-Leninist Studies. He spent years in Yan'an, a city that was blockaded but that had a growing Communist underground. He then moved to Chaoyang, where he became a popular leader because of the Communist policies—brothels were closed and the prostitutes given six months of living expenses by the brothel owners, stored grain was distributed to those most in need, and Chinese-owned property and business were protected. The Communists stayed only a short while, withdrawing to poor conditions of a rural area. His unit continued fighting, withdrawing, and moving until 1948 when he becomes responsible for tracking Kuomintang troops in the Jinzhou area. That's when he first hears of De-hong.

Within a short time, Wang Yu tells De-hong that she is among those who'll take a trip to Harbin—the temporary Communist headquarters. The trip is being arranged as a "sight-seeing" venture, but is actually an effort to get key Communists out of the city in case the Kuomintang attempt to retake the city. Wang Yu says that he plans to write to the Communist leaders for permission to "talk about love" with De-hong. Two others had also written, though they hadn't asked De-hong first.

De-hong's mother doesn't like Wang Yu. She is even more appalled when her daughter walks to the home of her bridegroom and is not taken there in a sedan chair. When De-hong arrives at Wang Yu's apartment in the building where he works, a man enters with a message that they can't yet marry. She doesn't make a scene, a fact that impresses Wang Yu, but merely leaves again. It turns out that the party is suspicious of De-hong and her family connections. One of the reasons for the suspicion was her association with Hui-ge, the officer who had helped her get Communist communications outside the city. He was a prisoner and De-hong tried to intervene on his behalf. Her pleading accomplishes nothing and when she realizes he's to be executed, she feels she's let him down.

Her marriage is eventually approved, but is treated as only a brief break from work with a meal of crabs and some other minor delicacies.



De-hong and Wang Yu are not allowed to spend nights together, even after they are married. De-hong sneaks across a small wall and returns home before daylight. When they're discovered, they're ridiculed and forced to "self-admonishment".

Meanwhile, their friends and family are facing serious hardships. Pei-o is discovered to be a carrier of a venereal disease and is hospitalized before being sentenced to three years labor in a nearby rural town. His family goes along with him. Yu-lin was watched carefully because he had an intelligence card provided by his cousin.

De-hong and Wang Yu are immediately attracted to each other, but have actually been attracted before they met. She's seen him on "wanted posters" and he's heard of her courage. They're both pleasantly surprised with one another and he's elated to find that she's not the dragon he expected, but is instead small and feminine. De-hong is impressed that he's so well-read, the flaw she'd found in a previous suitor.

It's interesting that De-hong has been against the restraints of the times but now bows to the restraints of the Communist party. When she and Wang Yu first talk of their love, he tells her of his intention to write a letter to the leader of the Communist party, asking for permission to "talk about love" with a "view toward marriage". It doesn't seem to occur to De-hong that this is just another kind of social restriction—not the same situation as her mother and grandmother faced, but with the result that the rules of a society dictate what can and cannot happen. The party even has a "28-7-regiment-1" rule, which means the man must be at least twenty-eight years old, a member of the Communist party for at least seven years, have a rank equivalent to or greater than regiment commander, and that the woman have been a party member for at least one year.

De-hong's mother arrives late to the wedding and the other women snub her, partly because of her political connections to the former ruling party and partly because she had been a concubine. It's interesting that the Communist party has made concubines equal to wives and allows them the ability to dissolve the union, yet many of the uneducated still hold to the traditional view—that concubines are something of less worth than other people.

De-hong is quickly coming to see the Communist party for what it is—ultimate control of the people. She is constantly criticized for taking any initiative or action without the express permission of the party. She's even criticized for leaving a party meeting early in order to marry—that she put love before the revolution. With her increasing unrest, she asks her husband to apply for a transfer, which he does.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

De-hong and her husband are to join with a group of people traveling south. The trip is dangerous as civil war is still raging and De-hong wonders if she'll ever see her family again. The train rails are broken and they walk long distances each day, traveling forty days to reach their destination, Nanjing. De-hong is soon pregnant though she doesn't realize it until she's in the process of miscarrying. She is at an opera and asks Wang Yu to take her back to their army camp in his car. He refuses, saying his driver is enjoying the performance. She walks back and is on her bed, unconscious and bleeding, when Wang Yu arrives. She's taken to a hospital for an emergency operation and blood transfusion. Her first words upon opening her eyes and seeing Wang Yu at her bedside were, "I want a divorce". He begs her to stay with him, and not to leave the revolution. She agrees and when he's transferred, he writes words of love every day. She arrives safely at Yibin and is reunited with Wang Yu.

De-hong has also quickly become disillusioned with her husband. She'd thought she was waiting for a man to come along who would love and cherish her. Instead, her husband doesn't sympathize with her heartbreak over the Communist party but says they must conform. While they are traveling, De-hong is forced to walk but her husband is allowed to ride in a jeep—a privilege he accepts. De-hong is even more heartbroken when she sees a friend whose husband is also an officer, but that man has opted to walk with his wife, sometimes carrying his wife on his own back. After the miscarriage, De-hong and Wang Yu are separated because of his transfer to Yibin. It takes her four months to recover and then make the trip to him. During that time, her anger has cooled and they are happy to see each other.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Once in Yibin, De-hong's husband is appointed leader and returns to a form of his former name, Chang Shou-yu. He and De-hong live together in a mansion confiscated by the Communists and De-hong is happy. He is the epitome of the Chinese dream—leaving home penniless and broken and "returning home robed in embroidered silk". De-hong's new job is with the Public Affairs Department and their chief job is to feed the people.

Fang-Yu, despite her bound feet and difficulty walking, makes the long trek from Jinzhou to Yibin to see De-hong. She goes alone, but with a document saying she's the mother of a revolutionary. The trip is difficult and takes more than two months. De-hong is happy to see her mother but Chang Shou-yu is not, knowing he's "no match for the bonds between mother and daughter". Fang-Yu sells jewelry to buy food to cook for De-hong, which is forbidden. In addition, she doesn't qualify for housing from the state and her presence is seen as breaking the rules. Chang Shou-yu insists that she leave and refuses to change his mind, despite the pleadings of De-hong and his own sister, Jun-ying.

The party's accusations and rules go so far as to say that De-hong is not allowed to use the hot water left from her husband's daily allotment. He supports the ruling, refusing to allow her the use of his water. The idea is that people should be more like the peasants and the endless rules are mostly against the "bourgeois" or affluent lifestyle, though even hot water for daily hygiene is considered frivolous.

When De-hong gives birth to her first daughter, Xiao-hong, she is still struggling with the many rules of the party and trying to decide whether to stay involved. Chang Shou-yu is not present but his sister, Jun-ying, hires a litter carried by two men to transport De-hong and the baby home from the hospital. Chang Shou-yu is furious, saying she should not have allowed herself to be carried by other human beings. She argues that it's believed women shouldn't walk for a period of time after the birth and her husband says that peasant women go right back to work. One night, she hits the child and Jun-ying takes over the baby's care. The state hires a wetnurse and De-hong feels so guilty that she doesn't allow the baby to call her "mother". At not yet twenty, she begins to recover "her old bounce", is promoted to a new job under new bosses, and becomes pregnant again.

De-hong still has the desire to feel loved by her husband, but he refuses to do anything that might make it look like he is putting her above the revolution. Though she is pregnant, he encourages her to go on the raids in the countryside. She agrees, though she remains worried that she'll again miscarry—this time in the country with no medical aid and no transportation. One day, her group is attacked by bandits. She and another pregnant woman are unable to run and a former Kuomintang chieftain helps them hide.



When he's caught, the other woman's husband votes to spare the man's life but Chang Shou-yu refuses to allow leniency, though the man saved De-hong and their unborn child. Instead of showing the caring attitude De-hong longs for, Chang Shou-yu urges her to go on another mission, which she does. It's interesting to note that De-hong had threatened divorce after her miscarriage and that her husband had sworn his love. Now things have returned to their former state and she has done nothing to make it change.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

De-hong receives a promotion and a new boss, Mrs. Ting. Mrs. Ting's husband is powerful just like Chang Shou-yu but they have vastly different attitudes, allowing De-hong to read novels, see American movies at the cinema, and even wear colored blouses under her uniform.

She works at factories seeking to improve conditions and to recruit party members but is exposed to tuberculosis and is soon hospitalized until after she delivers the next baby. It's suggested that she move to a larger hospital as the doctor at her current location has never delivered a baby, but Chang Shou-yu refuses special treatment. The doctor calls in a second surgeon. They are concerned because Chang Shou-yu is a high-ranking official who might retaliate if his wife and child die, but they are more concerned that De-hong's lungs will be damaged after the birth because of the TB. The author, weighing in at more than ten pounds, was born safely. When Dr. Xia hears the news, he says that "another swan is born" and she is named Er-hong, or "Second Wild Swan". Dr. Xia dies just four days after the birth.

Yu-Fang argues with her son-in-law for an elaborate funeral but Chang Shou-yu refuses on one point—no monks playing instruments. Yu-Fang believes a quiet funeral is only for the poor and unimportant people. The stress of the ordeal sends Yu-Fang to the hospital. When she leaves the hospital, she moves in with De-hong and her family. Er-hong has a wet nurse, a young woman who's husband is in jail for dealing opium. Because of De-hong's position in the party, the nurse is paid a salary which she sends to her mother-in-law to care for her own child. Chang Shou-yu spends time with his baby daughter, allowing her to crawl over him as if he were a mountain.

Chang Shou-yu strives to be fair—and to appear so—to the point that he is overly harsh on his own family. He refuses to recommend a family member for a job at a cinema and refuses a recommendation to promote his own brother to a manager's position on a tea farm, saying that his brother isn't capable and that the recommendation was made only because of Chang Shou-yu's position as governor. Although he infuriated his family, the people loved him. He enforced rules to the point that officials would not use their office ink for writing a personal letter.

In 1953, De-hong gave birth to a son, Jin-ming. While De-hong is in the hospital, Er-hong is also hospitalized with a naval infection and Yu-Fang is hospitalized for severe asthma. De-hong's boss, Mrs. Ting, tries to kiss Chang Shou-yu who rebuffs her, saying he loves his wife. Citing the fact that Mrs. Ting might seek to harm De-hong, Chang Shou-yu says they'll leave Yibin as soon as possible.

With the promotion, De-hong is allowed to have her parents live with her, and her mother and Dr. Xia are provided a small house with a modest income. Xiao-hong and



her wet nurse go to live with De-hong's mother and De-hong spends much of her precious spare time there. It's interesting to note that De-hong has come full circle. From the defiant girl anxious to escape her parents' rules, she's now eager to spend time with them.

As De-hong and her family are uprooted from the home she loves in Yibin, she considers all the things the Communist party has done—both the positive and the negative. The party rules to the point that on the trip to their new home in Chengdu, De-hong sits in one section reserved for people of her rank and can have only the child without a wet nurse with her. Yu-Fang is in another and Er-hong with her wet nurse in another. De-hong is twenty-two years old and realizes that when her own mother was twenty-two, she was a virtual prisoner in a house owned by a general, was forced to serve him as a concubine, and lived at his whim. De-hong believes that more good has come than bad.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

De-hong is assigned as head of the Public Affairs Department of the Eastern District of Chengdu and the family, except Chang Shou-yu, moves into a house with a courtyard. Married couples are allowed to spend only Saturdays together. In 1954, De-hong gives birth to another son, Xiao-hei, in a very difficult delivery that requires surgery immediately after.

Extensive inquiries into the lives of party members forces De-hong to make arrangements for her children, who are all sent to boarding nursery schools when their nurses are found unsuitable for various reasons. De-hong herself is held in detention while her background is scoured. She is questioned about her brief arrest early in her days of Communist association and about her friend, Hui-ge. After six months, the process becomes bogged down and De-hong is allowed to go about her daily routine but continues to report nightly to detention. When she visits Jin-ming, he refuses to acknowledge her as his mother. When she visits Er-hong, the child is afraid to let go of her mother's hand.

When De-hong is preparing to leave the hospital, a colleague of Chang Shou-yu sends a car, which Chang Shou-yu criticizes. De-hong continues to be disappointed when her husband puts the revolution and the party ahead of the well-being of his wife, but she seems to continue to expect something more of him. He doesn't contact her at all during her six-month incarceration—a fact she puts down to again putting the party first.

De-hong allowed her son, Jin-ming, to remain in Yibin with his nurse and when the two join the family a year and a half later, the child refuses contact with either of his parents, preferring his nurse. It's interesting to note that Chang Shou-yu has a close relationship to Er-hong and the child becomes known as "Little Diplomat" because she is constantly associating with her father's colleagues.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

De-hong remains "on parole", checking in every evening, but is given the job of overseeing the nationalization of food factories, bakeries, and restaurants in her district. Yu-Fang was caught up in the sale of Dr. Xia's medicine shop to the nationalist movement and wasn't able to return to Chengdu until De-hong had been exonerated. She immediately removed the four children from the nursery. Er-hong and her sister are still taken to the nursery during the day, but Er-hong "falls ill" regularly until the practice is stopped. By 1956, the population of Chengdu had risen to seventy-two million. Because Yu-Fang could not handle all four children, Jun-ying moved in and a maid soon joined the household. Then both parents moved into the same house.

The party demands and suspicions of many people who have done and said nothing are grating on De-hong. In some cases, the accusers would say that a particular person "must feel resentment" for some particular act, but he or she had not dared say anything aloud.

Yu-Fang has given her jewelry to the state, though she is insecure. She can't fully trust the government to take care of her but does agree to "sell" the medicine shop when De-hong urges her to comply.

The country's leader, Mao, gave a speech encouraging the "intellectuals" to challenge all leaders. He later reveals that it's a plot to smoke out the dissidents. He believes that peasants pose no threat but that the educated are dangerous to his rule. De-hong is among the group of people who are supposed to turn in one hundred dissidents. They have a "quota" and De-hong is among those who don't reach the quota.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

At six, Er-hong begins school, but there are few lessons. Children help gather scrap iron which is melted down by teachers and older students while the younger students babysit and clean the teachers' apartments. At the hospital, doctors and nurses are also responsible for melting down iron. People are no longer allowed to eat at home, but eat in communal kitchens. Everyone is forced to say they'll produce outrageous feats—huge animals or vegetables. Even doctors say they've cured incurable diseases. There became no incentive to actually do work and those in agriculture simply stopped planting—and there was no harvest though the official numbers indicated a larger-than-normal harvest.

Meetings were planned for all party officials. Chang Shou-yu broke his own rule and warned De-hong that it was a trap—the first time he'd ever put his wife above the rules of the party.

People are starving. Chang Shou-yu's retarded brother, Lan, and "Loyalty" Pei-o are among the casualties. Er-hong doesn't go hungry because her parents, grandmother, and aunt pool their food and are certain to give the children enough to eat, going hungry themselves. In 1959, the party granted De-hong an abortion. When she became pregnant again in 1961, she's denied another abortion and Xiao-fang is born in 1962. Then comes a political and economic shift, paying people for the work they do and restoring land and possessions to previous owners. It all worked to create a more stable economy.

Chang Shou-yu objects to the continued processing of iron to the exclusion of everything else. He sees the people becoming less motivated to accomplish anything because they are working for the greater good, not for themselves. He writes a letter but his boss refuses to forward it, saying there's nothing new there that the party officials don't already know.

Chang Shou-yu tells his daughter years after the event that he'd overheard a conversation between two men that one of them should replace Mao on the throne. Chang Shou-yu was torn—he could be punished for telling officials but he could also be punished for having heard the conversation and not telling. The fact that he confessed this to his daughter indicates that he was also insecure, though he didn't often show it. One day, he sees their maid gobbling down some meat intended for the family, but he didn't reprimand her nor tell anyone until many years later.

It seems the family has money. Chang Shou-yu buys books and toys for the youngest child, Xiao-fang. They are short of food simply because there is none to be had.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Er-hong has grown up believing that the children in the West, in the capitalist countries, are deprived of food and even the most basic necessities. Her brother, Jin-ming, is skeptical of the propaganda and devours scientific magazines with information about Western technology.

Chang Shou-yu and De-hong are in constant contact with the children's teachers, urging the five toward academic excellence and providing extra lessons. They also work to make the children ethically responsible. Chang Shou-yu continues to be strict on this point, refusing to allow his children to sit in front of teachers or officials at performances. While Er-hong is not happy about the situation, she admits that her father is respected because of his stand.

The family members have evolved over the decades and face typical family issues. Jin-ming is the scientist and his parents fear he will become a "rightist". Xiao-hei is Yu-Fang's favorite and his parents feel she pays him enough attention for the entire family, which leads to a rift between Xiao-hei and his parents. Chang Shou-yu has mellowed and has relaxed his stringent control, even allowing himself to be talked into allowing the children some liberties. He pays compliments to his wife and often takes Er-hong with him as he visits friends or goes for a walk. At one point, Chang Shou-yu leaves a sight-seeing trip early because he is homesick. De-hong calls him a "silly old thing" but is pleased.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Er-hong wants to be helpful as a "boy scout" type of helpful has become very popular. She sometimes sees men pulling heavy carts up the street and will put her weight into pushing to ease their burden. Then a classmate tells her that those are enemies of the state and that she shouldn't help them. She turns to her teachers—who she considers the authorities on such matters—and they have no answers for her. She doesn't understand "class enemies" and once asks an elderly neighbor what her life was like under the cruel reign of the Kuomintang. The woman says the Kuomintang weren't always cruel, which confuses Er-hong even more.

Er-hong is being pulled into Chairman Mao's teachings. Many of the literature books in her school contain writings and propaganda by Mao. One day, the students are told that Mao has observed too many students wearing glasses—a sign they are harming their eyes by working too hard and are now to spend fifteen minutes each morning doing exercises meant to strengthen the eyes. Er-hong admits that she "wept in gratitude" for Mao's concern.

She loves to learn and is studying English as her foreign language. It's during this time that Er-hong begs her father for a new name, something with a "military ring". She's named Jung, meaning "martial affairs" and conjuring up images of battles between knights in shining armor.

On a trip to a museum, Er-hong is riding with her father in his state-provided limousine while her classmates ride in the back of a truck. When the teacher sees Er-hong, she is embarrassed and her father is pleased, saying it shows humility and that she was ashamed of her privilege rather than wanting to flaunt it.

Much of her education becomes military—such as throwing wooden "grenades"—and she is a failure at these lessons. The people are then required to pull up all grass and flowers and to plant cotton and cabbage. Jung is sad to see the beautiful plants go and hates herself for being sentimental. Food is plentiful, especially eggs and peaches. She feels so sorry for the capitalist children that she vows to make the Chinese Republic strong so that those children can be rescued.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

As Mao begins to fear that his power is being threatened, he seeks ways to regain his standing. In the new era, plays and novels are being released. Mao begins to persecute some of the writers and artists, calling again for names of dissidents. Many are wrongfully persecuted, just as had been the case a decade earlier. This time, some stand up to Mao. An article he's written for the newspapers is not printed immediately, another indication that he is no longer the super power he'd once been.

In this setting, De-hong takes control of a group of students who have made "prisoners" of teachers they believe to be guilty under Mao's guidelines. Once they have the teachers rounded up, they look to De-hong for guidance and she tells them to release the teachers, adding that the students owe their elders respect.

The younger people are confused by the authorities and directives. Jung admits that she's looking to her own teachers and parents for guidance but many of the teachers are being denounced as subversives. Her own parents simply aren't talking and will later admit that they don't know themselves what's going on, let alone how to explain any of it to their children.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis

Mao dismisses traditional party channels and uses groups of young people called "Red Guards". They wreak havoc at Mao's urging, burning books and art and beating teachers, often to death. Yu-lin, De-hong's brother, was beaten as were his wife and children and his family was exiled. The young people of the Red Guard run wild, forcing people to do away with high heeled shoes, closing down tea houses, and ransacking homes. Jung is forced to be involved, though her own gentle nature makes her unacceptable as a member. Jung sees an old man calmly sipping tea as her classmates are smashing up a tea house, declaring it "bourgeois". She works up her courage and asks him to "please leave". He says that home is a small room he shares with his two grandsons and that the brief interval of peace at the tea house is his only pleasure. She leaves, ashamed of what her generation is doing.

Over the next weeks, Jung is subjected to the scrutiny of the guards,. She is eventually cleared but watches as friends are declared "gray" or "black", indicating that their loyalty is in question. Jung asks for sick leave, seeking the comfort of home.

Though the students believe they are following the wishes of Mao, it seems they are sometimes unsure of themselves. Jung recounts an episode in which the students are beating a philosophy teacher who many of them disliked. The woman was ordered to kowtow and beg. Instead, she sat up, stared straight ahead, and waited for her death. Jung slipped from the room and did not see the ending, but heard the voices—previously so sure of themselves—suddenly sound tentative. When a classmate attempts suicide, they are all shaken, but their resolve quickly seems to regain momentum.



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

Chang Shou-yu says that he doesn't understand the "cultural revolution" being touted by Mao and those calling themselves the Red Guard, but that he feels it isn't right. He plans to write a letter to Mao, voicing his concerns. De-hong says he will be a moth, throwing himself into a flame, and that he will destroy his wife. While she can accept that, she says the children will become known as "blacks"—dissidents with no rights who are often brutally persecuted. He says a Communist must consider not only his own children, but all children, including those already being victimized. He is soon sent to a university meeting where pandemonium breaks out and Chang Shou-yu is called upon to restore order while other party officials leave. He is placed under house arrest, writes his letter, and asks De-hong to mail it. She hadn't wanted him to write it but now realizes their children will be "blacks" no matter what. She rushes to Peking to lodge a complaint and receives a letter ordering that Chang Shou-yu be released. Yu-Fang is eventually sent to Peking to bring De-hong home.

Meanwhile, Jung is being initiated into the Red Guard. She works in an office until one night when she is forced on a house raid where a woman is brutally beaten for her alleged possession of a picture of a pre-communism Chinese leader. Jung is horrified, more so when she realizes the woman who lodged the complaint was merely using the Red Guard to settle an old score.

Jung is fearful of her father's fate but it never occurs to her to attempt to escape entry into the Red Guard. Mao has said it's right and Mao's word cannot be questioned. But Jung is gradually learning that the Red Guard is not all she believed it to be. She discovers that many of the boys are merely seeking ways to spend time with the girls. People are seeking vengeance—not justice. Though she still believes wholeheartedly in Mao, Jung is beginning to question both the motives and the means of the students involved in the Red Guard. Her discoveries of the abuse of power fill her with rage.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary and Analysis

The older four children are involved in varying degrees with the Red Guard and are spending most of their time away from home. One day, Jung is home alone when her father reappears at the doorway. Yu-Fang, her mother, and youngest child return from Peking and Chang Shou-yu is taken to a hospital to be treated for depression. Before Jung returns home from Peking, she'll learn that her parents are being criticized as "capitalist-roaders".

Jung travels to Peking, hoping to see Mao, but ends up in endless military drills and living in deplorable conditions. Everywhere they go toilets are backed up to overflowing and people are crowded into every conceivable nook and cranny. During a train trip, Jung desperately needs to use the restroom but there are people traveling in the toilets on the train. When they stop at a station, she climbs out a window and rushes back just in time to climb back in. But she can't get herself up high enough to make it through the window. Just then, a pickpocket grabs her purse, prompting her to burst into tears. He puts her purse back and gives her a boost into the train. She says that he showed more humanity than most leaders of the day.

Jung waits to see Mao but catches only a glimpse of the back of his head as he drives by. It seems to Jung that she's wasted her time and that her dreams are smashed, and she very briefly considers suicide, though the thought is quickly dismissed.

Jung has been so thoroughly indoctrinated on the evils of capitalism that she can't bring herself to buy anything. Food—though cold and seldom containing any meat—is provided for the students when traveling. On her trip to Peking, her grandmother had given her spending money, but the only time she spent any of it was for a bunch of toffee-coated water chestnuts. When she returned to her grandmother's kitchen, she immediately devoured the stale bread because she was so hungry, and handed her grandmother almost the entire amount of spending money back. Her grandmother called her "a silly girl".



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary and Analysis

Mao suddenly says that the leaders who had allowed free markets, competitive sports, and literary or artistic freedom were to be denounced. Though the party had sanctioned all these activities, Mao now says that they weren't his orders, but were coming from a "bourgeois headquarters" within the party. Chang Shou-yu and Yu-Fang are listed among those "capitalist-roaders" guilty of those crimes, though they are both respected and well-liked and receive no punishment other than "denunciation meetings". Chang Shou-yu tells Jung that it's good for the younger generation to question and take control, but it's only his way of trying to make sense of this cultural revolution.

Groups of rebels form and quickly split into factions, all seeking power which Mao seems to be saying is available to those who will take it. Yu-Fang is forced through the streets wearing a dunce hat and kowtowing to the crowds along the way. Chang Shou-yu is ordered to burn all his books. Jung says that she comforts him but can tell something has happened to his mind.

As the fighting grows worse, Chang Shou-yu decides he must do something. He again decides to write a letter and De-hong argues with him, citing that the children will become "blacks". Chang Shou-yu suggests that she seek a divorce and raise the children her way because he feels he has to do something. In February, Mao calls for military forces to help the Red Guard. Military leaders refuse and drop thousands of pamphlets from the sky onto Chengdu calling for a halt in the violence.

The Tings—who had been the reason Chang Shou-yu and his family left Yibin—joined Mme. Mao in chasing personal vendettas. There were many cases of them making false accusations and sending people to jail for nothing. The Tings, having been rehabilitated from the old Chinese regime, are put in positions of power in the new. They ask Chang Shou-yu to join their office but he bluntly refuses. He again writes Chairman Mao, pleading for him to stop the Cultural Revolution and the atrocities on the people.

The situation has deteriorated to the point that people are afraid to throw away a newspaper because Mao's photo and his quotes are on every page. They are also afraid to keep them because rats might chew into them or the pages might mildew—either could be considered a crime against Mao.

Somewhere along the way, Yu-Fang and Chang Shou-yu have grown tolerant of each other. Yu-Fang tenderly treats the wounds of both her daughter and son-in-law, making poultices and potions to help internal injuries. Despite the troubles, both Chang Shou-yu and De-hong have remained well-respected.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary and Analysis

Jung's father is arrested by men who show no identification and have no arrest warrants. No one questions who they are but Jung's grandmother also can't bring herself to say the "police" arrested Chang Shou-yu. As De-hong prepares to go to Peking to appeal for the release of her husband, she's confronted by students Yan and Yong who want her banned from the train on the basis that "she's not one of us". She yells back that she's going to Peking to appeal against the Tings and the students—who are looking for a way to bring down the Tings—allow her on board. She addresses Premier Zhou while he's holding an audience with the students and says that her husband had some "erroneous" views but that he had every right to write the letter to Mao. Zhou gives De-hong a note saying Chang Shou-yu had every right to write the letter and that any judgment against him must wait until the end of the cultural revolution. He is released but suffers severe schizophrenia and is denied mental health treatment for some time.

From a time of complete control and organization, the country has now fallen into turmoil. The various factions fight each other in the name of Mao and are interested chiefly in self-gain. There is no order and Mao has a very limited amount of actual control. Everyone is suspicious and in danger of falling under suspicion of one or more of the various factions. De-hong is again questioned about her association with the Kuomintang. She points out that she was cleared of those charges and the argument is that the man who cleared her was a Kuomintang spy; therefore, De-hong must also be guilty.

The children, including Jung, are left to fend for themselves with only their grandmother for help and guidance. They deliver food to their mother but are told one day that no more packages will be accepted. Yu-Fang faints, believing that's a sign that De-hong is dead. Through it all, De-hong refuses to denounce her husband and Chang Shou-yu refuses to put aside his principles. Both are told the persecution will stop if they do these things, but it actually seems doubtful.



Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary and Analysis

Jung spends much of her days with friends and says she would have never survived the Cultural Revolution without them. Their lives are different from teens of different eras. There is no school and little for entertainment. Jung is caught up in her family, saying that anything personal makes her feel that she's a traitor to the bigger problems. Her parents are often incarcerated, the family's income is cut dramatically, and Yu-Fang works hard just to keep the children fed. Jung tries her hand at poetry but knows that being caught with a poem would be dangerous. Party officials tend to interpret any poem to be anti-government and reason for punishment.

Jin-ming, at fifteen, spends much of his time buying and selling books on the black market. He also buys electronic parts, builds radios, and sells them.

Xiao-hei, De-hong's twelve-year-old brother, has joined a street gang. Though he's afraid to be involved with a serious fight and also afraid to steal, he's accepted because he's the son of a high official, whereas most gang members are poor children with little education.

Xiao-fang, six, plays with other children in their apartment building. One day, he's playing doctor with another boy and the daughter of a rebel. Xiao-fang is just about to give the girl "an injection" when her mother arrives, accuses Xiao-fang of raping the little girl with the piece of wood he'd been using as a pretend needle, and calls for authorities. The girl is taken to the hospital where a doctor says there's no sign of rape and Xiao-fang and De-hong are released. Xiao-fang has to be sedated and he stops playing with other children.

Xiao-hong, Jung's younger sister, does have a boyfriend, though Jung considers it to be disloyal to their parents. Their love for each other survives the taunts of their respective friends and they join a dance troop together. They'll later be married, though the Chinese regime will keep them from living together because of the endless regulations.

One day, Jung and her friends are with a young man named Ai who tells some of his friends that he's pretending to like the group so that he can lay claim to their "privileged goods" when the Cultural Revolution came to an end. Jung says she's amazed that the people believe that the children of high officials have anything at all. It's also noteworthy that the black market continues to thrive despite the potential punishments. Jung's brother is once caught with an unsanctioned book but had the novel inside the cover of a sanctioned book.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary and Analysis

The middle school children, those aged sixteen and up, were sent to the country where they were to live with the peasants. Mao's goal was "Thought Reform Through Labor". Adults were also sent to country camps, far from the cities. Jung and her little sister were sent to Ningnan and Chang Shou-yu is sent to Xichang in Miyi County. Ningnan peasants are poor and the children are to have difficult lives. Water is carried some distance, it's a long way to wood supply, and the children are supposed to work in the fields. Jung is immediately ill with vomiting, diarrhea, and a rash and can barely work. She says that she doesn't quite want to get well because it would mean that she was giving in to her situation. An overseer sends her back to Chengdu where she's given medicine.

Her grandmother is ill and Jung helps care for her. Meanwhile, Jun-ying, Jung's aunt, is caring for Xiao-fang, but Jun-ying has a stroke. Jung goes to care for her for some time until she receives word that Yu-fang is ill, prompting her to return home with Xiao-fang. Her grandmother's illness is serious and she spends some time in the hospital. When she's released she barely makes it home, and then only with the help of a kind young man who offered them a ride. In just more than a year, Jun-ying and Yu-fang will both be dead of their illnesses.

Jung wants to be closer to Chengdu but the only way to move is to have letters from various people agreeing to the move. A friend, Wen, forges the appropriate letters but they still need a seal from a registrar. They have only a month to accomplish the deed before all transfers will be stopped. They complete the process with only one day to spare and it's then that Jung discovers that her grandmother had died.

It's interesting to note that Jung had wanted to help the women of Chengdu carry their water buckets back in the days all Chinese youth were searching for ways to be helpful. Now, in Ningnan, Jung and her friends have to walk a great distance, draw water from a well and carry the buckets, now weighing about ninety pounds, back to their quarters. She says that she's greatly relieved when the boys decide that carrying water should be their responsibility. She says that when they go out to gather wood, she is assigned the easiest task of gathering pine straw because she'd been so ill and weak. By the time she makes the trek back to their quarters, she believes her load must weigh one hundred and forty pounds or more but when it's weighed it is only five pounds.

Jung makes no explanation for her own sickness in the country but notes that she's sick again as soon as they return to the Ningnan area to arrange for her sister and friends to leave. The illness rights itself when she leaves, which indicates that it could well be nervousness.



It's noteworthy that Jung is willing to care for her sick relatives—her grandmother and aunt—to the point of sleeping on the floor under her grandmother's hospital bed. Caring for these relatives would have been left to Jung's mother, but she remains in detention. The situation of the day has truly made these young people grow up quickly to assume roles traditionally held by adults.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary and Analysis

Jung learns that her grandmother's final days were filled with horrific pain. Her siblings say she seemed to be dead but her eyes remained open. Two days before the death of Yu-fang, her daughter was given a brief pass from detention and De-hong sat with her mother in her final days. She was sent back to prison immediately after her mother's cremation. Jung is filled with guilt over the pain she caused her grandmother in those final days and because she didn't somehow save her. She comes to the conclusion that if she denies herself the companionship of young men—a point that had caused her grandmother worry in her final days—she would assuage her guilt. Of course, that resolve will weaken over time.

Jung and her sister are sent to Deyang to work. The work is hard though it's better than in Ningnan. Jung simply doesn't want to work hard and finds every opportunity to be alone so that she can read. She also travels to care for her aunt often—a practice that can't be denied by those she works with. There's a point system in place and workers get a set number of points for a day's work, whether they work hard or put forth a minimal effort.

During this time, Jung's younger sister, Xiao-hong, marries the young man they called "Specs". They aren't allowed to live together but because his job is sporadic, he spends much time in Deyang with Xiao-hong, and the peasants of the village like the couple.

Mao has pressed an idea that doctors don't need an extensive amount of training in order to practice. The term "barefoot doctor" becomes popular and refers to a doctor who works alongside the peasants. The peasants often went barefoot in order to save their shoes. Jung has the opportunity to become a "barefoot doctor" though her only training is that she's read the barefoot doctor's "manual". She's also studying acupuncture and practices on any young man willing to be her patient.

One of the things that results from Jung's time working with the peasants is that she realizes that there are two sides to the story of how life was under every ruling faction. While she's suddenly ready to admit that the peasants may have suffered greatly under the early Communist rule, she's not yet come to the point of being ready to question Mao.



Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary and Analysis

Life in the camp is difficult for both Chang Shou-yu and De-hong, but they are allowed visitors. Jung and her siblings take turns visiting their parents, staying for months at a time. They are especially concerned for their father, but Jung is relieved to find that he's not showing signs of schizophrenia. By 1972, he is saying that his life seems to be pointless and that suicide is an appealing option, but that he doesn't want to die without clearing his name because his children would live forever with the stigma. He tells Jin-ming, "If I die like this, don't believe in the Communist Party anymore".

Chang Shou-yu and De-hong are allowed to visit—their first in two years. De-hong has hemorrhaged from the womb for years and it's during one of their visits that she becomes very ill, passing out from loss of blood. She goes to the hospital and doctors find a serious skin disease while she's there. Chang Shou-yu sends a lengthy telegram, expressing his love and begging her to live for him to prove that love.

The Tings' fall from grace means that there are fewer denunciation meetings—rallies during which a particular person is publicly reprimanded and forced to confess while reprimanding himself. As the political climate changes yet again, the people are suffering the lack of true leadership while being little more than pawns in Mao's plans.

Jung points out that even with the hardships, there are some decent and kind people. A man named Young learns that Jung has brought food to cook for her father but has no kerosene for their stove. He rigs a small appliance that can be fueled by wadded up newspapers allowing Jung to prepare meals for her father. De-hong contracts hepatitis and a doctor tells everyone that her disease is very contagious. Then the doctor arranges for De-hong to have fresh goat's milk daily and the cook, delivering her meals, manages to slip in meat and eggs fairly often.

Chang Shou-yu has had plenty of time to think and he looks back on his failings as a father with regret. Jung says that the children want to be sure to surround him with love.



Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary and Analysis

It's a statement of the political machinery of the day that both Chang Shou-yu and De-hong, though they've been declared enemies of the state and hold no jobs, are receiving salaries. Chang Shou-yu even gets several years' back pay, making the family's bank account suddenly grow. Schools begin teaching and the youngest of the family, Xiao-fang, has his first schooling at age ten. As factories grow, they're recruiting workers and Jung gets the opportunity to return to Chengdu. One notable difference is that people are tired of the Cultural Revolution and long for the "good old days", making people like Chang Shou-yu and De-hong heroes.

Jung's father is released from prison. He's frail and ill and spends many months in Peking with De-hong, who has had a hysterectomy. As the universities begin to again accept students, Jung renews her hope to attend. She goes through a grueling process for the right to take the entrance exams only to have the tests declared "bourgeois". When she discovers that entrance is to be based on political association, she turns to her father. He first says that he won't help her gain admittance, citing the fact that it wouldn't be fair to all if some could use their political clout to sway the decisions. Jung cries and her father gives in. But once they are on the university campus, he says he can't do it and they leave. Jung points out that it's fortunate for her that she has a resourceful mother and De-hong calls on directors, calling in favors and making requests until Jung is admitted to the Foreign Language Department of Sichuan University in Chengdu. It's decided for her that she'll study English.

The political situation continues to fluctuate, especially with the death of a high official who had reportedly tried to assassinate Mao. Jung is allowed to return to Chengdu because her mother asked a factory engineer to request Jung. But her sister, who had married in Deyang, was banned from ever moving her registration into the city. This rule was enforced despite the fact that her husband worked in a city factory. The rules and regulations seem to be an effort to control every aspect of daily life for the Chinese and there seems to be no way for anyone to know everything that's expected of them at any given time.

It's noteworthy that things that had been condemned become accepted. US President Richard Nixon visits China, and American literature is suddenly released. The idea is that Chinese should not be ignorant of Americans in the event of other visits. The study of English is also approved since it can be a way to cultivate foreign friendships. However, some things remain in the hands of those who would control every aspect of life. While the universities are opening, the students are assigned courses because to allow a student to choose courses he or she is interested in would be "bourgeois".



Chapter 26

Chapter 26 Summary and Analysis

De-hong puts herself to work for her children. Her youngest, Xiao-fang, needs tutoring to help him catch up from his six years without schooling. The married daughter, Xiao-hong, is desperate to return to the city to be with her husband. One of the ways to get a "return ticket" was to have an incurable illness. De-hong arranges for a doctor to declare that Xiao-hong has cirrhosis of the liver. She creates the idea that Chang Shou-yu is about to complete his rehabilitation period so that Jin-ming will be accepted into an engineering school. De-hong arranges for Xiao-wei to become a member of the Chinese air force. He aspires to join the Communist party in order to have a better job once he's out of the military. With that in mind, he accepts a job caring for swine because food production is considered a very important task and those who work at that are favorably considered by the party. In his short daily "work time", he is a radio operator, but his real job becomes caring for the pigs.

At the university, Jung is hungry for knowledge but is instead met by the politics and regulations of the day. Her class is regularly sent on field exercises, just as an army unit would be. They shoot, build walls that promptly fall down, and use dynamite with abandon. Jung is angry that her labor is going into such a fruitless expedition when she only wants to learn. There are few textbooks and those that do exist are filled with Chinese propaganda. She borrows books written in English wherever she can find them and Jin-ming sends her books he bought off the black market. She is only at home with a few of the professors and in her library.

Jung continues to question the politics governing China but has never put her feelings into clear thought. She was raised to believe Chairman Mao was something akin to a god and can't yet imagine that he is anything but. It's during this time that a fellow student brings Jung a copy of Newsweek. Mao and his wife are the subject of an article—the truth without any of the Chinese censorship that would have excluded anything except the information sanctioned by Mao. It's the first time Jung considers that Mao's wife would have been powerless without her husband. Jung says that she'd never considered there to be a connection between the actions of Mao's wife and Mao himself. She writes, "I experienced the thrill of challenging Mao openly in my mind for the first time".



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 Summary and Analysis

Chang Shou-yu continues to have mental health problems. In 1974, he sensed he was nearing another breakdown and spent some time in the hospital, Jung at his side. Though the hospital staff were kind to her father, Jung says she felt he needed love more than anything else. Chang Shou-yu takes tranquilizers continuously, though he is able to taper off somewhat when the political climate is calmer. The doctors are concerned about the amount of tranquilizers he takes, but there seems to be nothing to do about it. Meanwhile, Chang Shou-yu has had several minor heart attacks and his health is failing. The following spring, he takes a nap and when she goes to wake him, De-hong discovers that he's had another heart attack. She finds a doctor but the man doesn't approve of Chang Shou-yu and takes an hour to arrive. He has no medical equipment for him and the nurse returns for what's needed. The doctor does nothing except turn Chang Shou-yu and wait for him to die.

The custom is for officials to make a speech about the deceased and De-hong begins the battle for an acceptable speech over her husband. The first drafts are filled with incrimination until De-hong finally wins out. The funeral is attended by some five hundred people and Jung notes that many of her friends show up to lend emotional support.

That following summer, Jung takes a trip down the Yangtze River with her brother, Jin-ming. She'd just snapped the final picture in a roll of film when a man with a gun demanded her camera and exposed the entire roll of film. She then discovered that she'd taken a picture of a house Mao used for a retreat. She's again struck by his willingness to live so extravagantly while people are starving.

Jung and her college classmates are taken to a port city for the opportunity to practice their English with English-speaking sailors. They are guarded carefully, lest someone try to slip aboard a ship to defect. On September 9, 1976, Jung and her classmates were ordered to the courtyard for an important broadcast. Mao was dead.

De-hong's son-in-law, "Specs", had recently been turned down for a promotion because of Chang Shou-yu's political situation. De-hong knows that if there's a negative speech over her husband, the family will live in the shadow of that negative image for generations to come.

Jung's father was a principled man who held to his beliefs until the end of his life. Not long before his death, he and Jung were waiting in a train station. A peasant woman and three little children were seated on the floor because there were no seats. A janitor swept trash and dust right over the little family without seeming to notice and the peasant woman never even moved. Jung had just asked her father if she could go to down the Yangtze River during her summer vacation. Her father pointed out the peasant



family and asked Jung how she could consider having fun when there were people living like the peasant woman and her children. Jung says she wanted to tell him that she was one person and that she couldn't accomplish anything alone, but says she knew her father's philosophy on the subject. He'd spent his life working for the good of the whole and didn't seem to understand anyone who didn't take that ideal to heart.



Chapter 28 and Epilogue

Chapter 28 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Jung notes that she's "euphoric" about Mao's passing but that others seem genuinely heartbroken. She says that people have been programmed so thoroughly that she wonders how much is real and whether people even know the difference. A short time later, Mao's wife and three others in high power—known as the Gang of Four—were removed. Jung notes that it was really a "Gang of Five" because they were powerless without Mao.

Jung is given a teaching position which she likes because she uses her English, but hates because she's under tight political control. She's even criticized because she is twenty-five with no plans to marry. University entrance requirements change from political associations to the ability to pass academic exams and Jung is sent to recruit new students. When she returns, she discovers that a teacher has been selected to study in the West. Jung objects, saying the teacher to receive that honor should be selected the same way university students are selected—and she wins the argument. She becomes one of the teachers sent to study in the West and leaves China, eager to "embrace the world".

It seems Jung had expected China to begin changing immediately following Mao's death, or certainly after his wife and others were removed from power. De-hong realizes that change will come and reports for work. She's not in the same position as before, but is put back to work. It's Jung, still young enough to want to hurry the evolution of the political climate, who is overly-anxious for the changes to occur.

Jung notes that she and her mother barely hug as she's leaving the airport. Though Jung is traveling half-way around the world, both women treated it as though it were just one more step in their eventful lives.

Jung talks of the changes in China over the years after her departure. When she decided to remain in the West, her mother sought early retirement, fearing reprisals for having a daughter in the West. None came. Jung points out the increase in communication with the outside world and says she phones her mother often. Of the five children, only one remains in China, Xiao-hong.

Jung says she's seen fear make a tentative comeback occasionally, but says the China of today is nothing like the China of almost a century before, when her grandmother became the concubine of a warlord general.



Characters

Jung Chang

Author of the book and the third of the "three swans". She was born Er-hong, named by her grandfather upon learning that he had a granddaughter. She grows up in China amid political unrest that was common through a great deal of the 1900s. Her parents are both high-ranking Communist officials and it's her father's teachings that shape many of her ideas. As a child, she is riding in her father's state-provided car when she sees classmates in the back of a truck. She's embarrassed and her father is pleased that she hasn't taken the privileges of her life for granted.

She spends her teen years forced into an adult role long before she's ready. Both her parents are arrested and held in a prison, leaving Jung and her siblings in the care of their elderly grandmother. Jung and her classmates are soon sent away to peasant villages where they are to work and learn the ways of the peasant people, in keeping with Chairman Mao's teachings. Jung is half-hearted at best and is never a good worker in the fields. She is later a "barefoot doctor", meaning a person who administers medical treatment but without any formal training.

Once back in the city, Jung works in a factory and is then given the chance to be an electrician before going to the university and later earning the chance to study in Britain.

De-hong

Mother of Jung and daughter of Yu-fang, De-hong is originally named Bao Qin but is renamed by her stepfather. De-hong was born while her mother was the concubine of a warlord general. She was later ordered, along with her mother, to the home of the general, who was dying. The general's wife demanded that she take charge of the baby and Yu-fang literally kidnapped the baby, running back to her hometown and hiding with a friend until the general's wife gave up.

De-hong grows up amid unrest and is just a young girl when the Communists took over China. She is immediately infatuated with the idea of becoming involved and begs to be put to work for the party. It's during that work that she meets the man she'll eventually marry, though their life won't be exactly as she'd imagined. She marches hundreds of miles during her first assignment with the Communists. Though Chang Shou-yu travels as well, he is entitled to a vehicle when it's available. After the march, De-hong miscarries and her first words to Chang Shou-yu are that she wants a divorce. He begs for another chance and they continue their lives together. She'll later be told to divorce her husband but refuses.

She has five children, including the book's author, Jung Chang, and one abortion. She says that she doesn't have time for another child when she becomes pregnant with the fifth but is not eligible for another abortion.



She is eventually imprisoned for a period of time but later returns to work in her government job.

Yu-fang

The author's grandmother. The name Yu means "jade" and Fang means "fragrant flowers". Yu-Fang is seen by her father as a way out of his dreary life. He arranges for her to be seen by an important general who asks to take Yu-Fang as his concubine when she is just fifteen. There's an elaborate ceremony and her family receives many gifts from the general. Yu-Fang believes she will be happy with him. He has supplied her with a house of her own and an allowance, and he often showers her with jewels. But after only a few days together following the "ceremony", the general leaves and is gone for six years.

Those are lonely years for Yu-Fang, who is not allowed to go out except for brief visits to her parents' home. She constantly worries that she'll anger a servant who will make up lies to tell the general. When the general returns, staying again for only a few days, Yu-Fang becomes pregnant. When the child is born, the general sends word to name her Bao Qin. When the general falls ill, Yu-Fang is ordered to his home where his wife and two other concubines live. He is dying, and the wife tries to take control of Yu-Fang's daughter. Yu-Fang effectively kidnaps the child and informs the general's wife that the baby died on the trip back to her home city.

Yu-Fang soon moves back into her father's house but is constantly belittled and has a nervous breakdown. She falls in love with the doctor who treats her, Dr. Xia, and the two marry, despite objections from his children. He takes her daughter for his own, changing her name to De-hong. They eventually give all Dr. Xia's possessions to his children and move, penniless, to another city where Yu-Fang is happier than she's ever been. They later join Yu-Fang's daughter and her family and it's Dr. Xia who offers the name for De-hong's daughter—"Er-hong" or "Second Swan". He dies just four days later, leaving Yu-Fang to live out the rest of her life—except for a short trip back to their home city—with De-hong and her family.

Chang Shou-yu

Wang Yu is the name chosen by the Communist in charge of youth work in Jinzhou after the Communists take over the city and the man who would become the author's father. He was born in 1921 in Yibin, some twelve hundred miles from Jinzhou, and was the seventh of nine children. When he returns to Yibin, he's appointed leader by the Communist party. He reverts to a former version of his real name, Chang Shou-yu. "Yu" means being selfless almost to the point of being foolish.

He is a proud person and totally dedicated to the Communist party. He refuses to ever use his position to help his family members. This is to such an extreme that he once even denies a request to promote one of his brothers, saying that the brother wasn't



capable and that the only reason for the recommendation was because of Chang Shou-yu's position.

He's persecuted and imprisoned after another faction takes over political control. He spends years in prison, doing manual labor. His children visit him often during that time. Later, the strain on his mind has been too much and he is hospitalized for mental problems. He dies without being cleared, though the perseverance of his wife eventually pays off and the party declares that he was a good official.

General Xue

An important military leader. Yu-Fang's father arranges for the general to see Yu-Fang, hoping he'll be taken by her beauty. He is and he soon offers to take her as a concubine, paying Yu-Fang handsomely for her. He lives in Lulong, but arranges a house for Yu-Fang in Yixian. His wife and other concubines live in Lulong and Yu-Fang is privileged to be saved from the bickering of that type of household. He stays with Yu-Fang briefly after their "marriage" and then leaves, staying away for six years. When he returns for another brief visit, Yu-Fang becomes pregnant. Just before the general dies, Yu-Fang is ordered to Lulong and the general's wife attempts to keep the daughter. Yu-Fang kidnaps the child and returns home shortly before the general dies. As one of his last acts, he releases Yu-Fang from her contract to him, effectively setting her free.

Yang Ru-shan

The author's great-grandfather, married at fourteen and father of a daughter at fifteen.

Two Girl

Mother of Yu-Fang and the author's great-grandmother. Being a girl child of a family of tanners, she was not named but simply called "Two Girl".

Han-chen

Yu-Fang's cousin who was imprisoned, supposedly executed, and lived with Yu-Fang and Dr. Xia for three months until he was well enough to travel. He later returned to their home, thanking them for what they'd done for him then.

Yu-wu

The man who rents part of the house Dr. Xia and his family live in within the walls of Jinzhou. He poses as a ranking official of the Kuomintang military but is actually a Communist.



Pei-o

The original name of the man who married Lin, becoming Yu-fang's brother-in-law. He was a warder in a prison. He later changed his name to Xiao-shek, which means "loyalty to Chiang Kai-shek". He, Lin, and their children die in a famine.

Jin-ming

Jung's younger brother who will eventually become a great scientist. As a child, he loves learning and is constantly finding ways to conduct experiments after the schools were closed down. He makes money by buying and selling things on the black market and supplies Jung with books she wants while she's in college.



Objects/Places

Yixian appears in non-fiction

The Chinese city where the author's mother was born. This is where the author's grandmother lives as a child and where she is given to the general as a concubine. It's also where she meets and falls in love with Dr. Xia.

Jinzhou appears in non-fiction

The Chinese city where De-hong moves when she is a child. Dr. Xia plans to build a new practice there. The population is almost one hundred thousand and it is the capital of one of the provinces of Manchukuo. It is a walled city, but the city has overflowed and there are buildings outside the wall.

Qin appears in non-fiction

An instrument played by Yu-Fang and meant to impress the general. When they have a child, the general orders her to name the baby Bao Qin.

Zai-li-hui appears in non-fiction

A quasi-religious sect that Dr. Xia belongs to, which calls for no tobacco or alcohol. Translated, it means "Society of Reason".

South Hill appears in non-fiction

The place outside Jinzhou where a shallow pit was dug for dumping bodies from nearby prison camps. This is also where families who have unwanted baby daughters dumped those bodies.

Yan'an appears in non-fiction

The city where Wang Yu stayed for the entire war in the 1940s. The city is blockaded for a long period of time, but the people within work to strengthen communism and become proficient at making their own consumer goods. Wang Yu became a master spinner during that time.



Chengdu appears in non-fiction

The city where the family moves after Mrs. Ting makes a pass at Chang Shou-yu and is rebuffed. It is called the "City of Silk" and the "City of Hibiscus".

Meteorite Street appears in non-fiction

Where Jung and her family move to as "punishment" because her parents were capitalist roaders. The house is large and beautiful, although the family occupies only the top floor where there is no running water. Jung says she is "so thirsty for beauty" that she doesn't mind the inconveniences.

Xichang appears in non-fiction

A region in Miyi County where Jung's father is sent to work as punishment.

Ningnan appears in non-fiction

Some fifty miles from Xichang, Ningnan is where Jung, her sister, and six of their classmates are sent for "reeducation" from the peasants. Jung is first relieved to find that she was to be so near her father's place of exile, but later finds that it's fifty grueling miles with no roads and no transportation and she is never able to make the trip.

Deyang appears in non-fiction

A commune that accepts Jung, her friend Nana, and her sister as residents after they leave Ningnan.



Themes

Love of Family

Though Chang Shou-yu is demanding of his family, there is love among the siblings and their parents. When Chang Shou-yu is imprisoned, Jung and her brothers and sister take turns traveling to visit with him. The trips are difficult as there is no established transportation. As a rule, Jung and the others catch a ride on whatever truck happens to be going the right direction, often walking miles in order to reach their father. Though they all have difficult lives of their own, they give up their time to stay with Chang Shou-yu. Jung says that they are all concerned about his mental well-being and feel that he needs to be surrounded by loving family.

That same feeling prompts Jung to stay with her father in a hospital when he later has another nervous breakdown. The doctors and nurses are kind and competent and tell Jung that there's no need for her to remain at the hospital. She again says that she believes love is the best medicine for her father and continues to remain with him throughout his stay.

Chang Shou-yu himself had been less than affectionate with his wife, but he became a different man during the years of imprisonment. It's during this time that De-hong finds she has a serious skin disease and Chang Shou-yu sends a telegram begging her to get well so that he can prove his love to her.

The families grow up against the backdrop of serious political unrest of China, a situation that creates its own drama and hardships. Still, there are many examples of love among the families.

Loyalty

Loyalty is an important theme throughout the story in a variety of situations. Loyalty to family is a major point of fact in Chinese society. Though there are some families in this story that don't adhere strictly to this call for loyalty, there are many cases that exhibit that loyalty.

Loyalty to the Communist party is another type of loyalty evident in this book. Chang Shou-yu is the most obvious person to consider on this point. When he and his young wife are walking hundreds of miles over rough terrain, Chang Shou-yu is entitled to ride in either a vehicle or on a horse whenever such transportation is available. De-hong, as his wife, is not granted the same privilege. She is pregnant and ill, constantly throwing up, but Chang Shou-yu refuses to show her any kindness saying that it would not be in the party's best interest to show preferential treatment.

De-hong has her own share of party loyalty. She has four small children at home but is required to work constantly. While it seems she may occasionally take moments to



consider the effect of this, she is diligent with her work and puts her heart into the job. She not only shows up when she's supposed to, she works harder trying to solve problems and create a better life for others. As her children grow, her loyalty is to be tested and she'll eventually place her loyalty on her family rather than on the party. When Chang Shou-yu is imprisoned, De-hong is pressed to divorce him, to "draw a line" separating him from her family. She refuses, remaining loyal to her husband.

Though Jung shows signs of that political loyalty early on, she's not destined to become the political figure her parents were. As a child, she's embarrassed to be seen riding in a car while her friends are in the back of a truck. Her father takes that as a sign of loyalty to the ideal of communism. Though she might not have been fully conscious of her actions as a child, she later makes conscious decisions and eventually comes to the conclusion that Mao has corrupted the country and made bad decisions for her people.

Self-Sacrifice

Chinese women of only a few decades ago had little say over their lives and were often called on to sacrifice themselves in a loveless marriage for the sake of their families. While marriage wasn't the only place for that self-sacrifice, there's little doubt that many women—and even some men—married in order to make a better life for the family.

Jung shows amazing self-sacrifice for her family. She is young when her grandmother becomes ill and her younger brother is sent to live with her aunt. When the aunt has a stroke, Jung travels to be with her and spends weeks there, caring for her aunt who is almost an invalid. The aunt is careful not to call on Jung for too much. She needs help just to sit up and must use Jung as a prop while she sits. She will stay up only for a short period of time so that Jung can do other things rather than propping her up for a long time. When Jung's grandmother grows ill, she and her little brother return there to care for the older woman.

Jung is with her grandmother in the hospital until a few days before her death, sleeping on a mat under her grandmother's hospital bed. She stays up with her at night, helping her to the toilet and caring for her needs. When they go home, Jung can tell that her grandmother remains ill, but her grandmother remains stoic, never complaining about the horrific pain she suffers.



Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person from the point of view of the author who has heard stories of her mother and grandmother, with the final sections of the book written from the author's own point of view. The method is appropriate because it is the three generations of the author's family that is at the heart of the story.

The book is set in the real world of China from the 1940s through the 1970s. The places and events are real. Many of them are described to the author while she is calling up her own memories for others. The houses, people, and happening are generally described in great detail, which makes it easy for the reader to become caught up in the story.

For some readers, the descriptions of World War II, the civil war, and the political factions always vying for power may become somewhat tedious, but those descriptions are necessary in order to fully understand the women and what they endured. For example, there are several descriptions of the Communist party as it began to arise during the life of De-hong. Without understanding the rules and ideals of that political faction, it would be impossible for the reader to understand why De-hong was chastised for spending the night with her legal husband. Without a full understanding of the social customs of the concubines of the 1920s and 1930s, the reader would not grasp the significance of Yu-Fang having her own home.

Tone

The wording is somewhat stiff and formal but that is likely from the fact that the author does not speak English as her native language and the story is actually translated from Chinese words, events, and dialogue. Overall, the book is easy to read and understand as the story of the author, her mother, and grandmother, and their lives in China.

However, there are extensive sections related to Chinese history. Without these sections, the trials and events endured by the three women would have made little sense, but the sections still tend to slow the reader's pace, who is seeking only to discover what happens in the lives of the three women.

There are some Chinese words but those are adequately explained. There is a map at the back of the book which offers a picture of the travels of the three women for those readers who are not well-versed in Chinese geography. There is also a section of the book entitled, "Chronology", which gives a time line of the major events of the book.

The names are necessarily Chinese and some readers may have trouble remembering and distinguishing these names. The author refers to them with regard to their relationship to her. De-hong is always "my mother", and Chang Shou-you is always "my



father". With those exceptions, the remainder of the characters of the book have names that may be strange to English readers, making it somewhat difficult to remember the various characters. To further complicate the issue, it's not unheard of for the Chinese people to change their names. For example, De-hong was born Bao Qin. Chang Shou-yu is not the given name of the author's father, but the name he selected once he'd returned to his home town. It is a combination of his birth name and the name he'd used while away. While he was away from his home town working with the Communist party, he was known by another name, Wang Yu. The author's great-grandmother had no name and was essentially called "the second girl child", or "Two Girl". The author typically uses the Chinese version of the name but occasionally—as in the case of De-hong's uncle—uses the English word for the name. In this case, his name meant "Loyalty", and she called him that.

For the sake of avoiding confusion as much as possible, this guide uses the Chinese name rather than "my mother" or "her mother". It should be noted that the name "De-hong" actually occurs in the text of the book a few times. For those who will at some point change their names, the name used will reflect the name being used at that point in time.

Structure

The book is divided into twenty-eight chapters of varying length. Each is numbered and has a two-part worded title followed by a span of years. The first part of the title is in quotation marks and is a quote from some part of the chapter. For example, "Returning Home Robed in Embroidered Silk" is the first part of the title of chapter eight. That sentence refers to the Chinese dream. In this case, Chang Shou-yu has done just that. He left his home town poor and hungry and returned home "robed in embroidered silk", meaning that he was well off and in a position of power. The second part of the chapter title describes the major event of the chapter. "My Grandmother Marries a Manchu Doctor" or "My Father Arrested" are examples of this part of the title. Finally, each has a span of years, written as (1949-1951) to indicate the years this particular event took place.

The book is written largely in chronological order with only a few deviations. For example, the story will head into the details of De-hong and her siblings headed to see her father and will drop back to describe how he came to be destitute and alone in his final days of life before telling of the visit itself, which actually happened during the specific time outlined in the chapter. In this case, the author then goes on to describe what happens to her father at the end of his life, jumping ahead of the prescribed time frame. These occurrences are rare and do not detract from the storyline. In fact, this handling is likely less confusing and more dramatic than if the father's life had been outlined during the chapters dedicated to the appropriate times. There are also some overlapping chapters. For example, Chapter 13 is "In a Privileged Cocoon" and is dated 1958-1965. The next chapter is "The Cult of Mao" and is dated 1964-1965.



There are few actual dialogues. For the most part, conversations are paraphrased rather than placed in quotes. This is likely an effort to keep the book true because accurate quotes from events remembered by the author's mother from her childhood of many years ago would not likely have been exact quotes. The majority of the book is exposition.



Quotes

"On the first night, he did not want to go into the wedding chamber. He went to bed in his mother's room and had to be carried in to his bride after he fell asleep. But, although he was a spoiled child and still needed help to get dressed, he know how to 'plant children,' according to his wife. My grandmother was born within a year of the wedding, on the fifth day of the fifth moon, in early summer 1990." Chap. 1, p. 23

"When he asked my grandmother if she would mind being poor, she said she would be happy just to have her daughter and himself: 'If you have love, even plain water is sweet.'" Chap. 2, p. 55

"She was a pious Buddhist and every day in her prayers asked Buddha not to reincarnate her as a woman. 'Let me become a cat or a dog, but not a woman,' was her constant murmur as she shuffled around the house, oozing apology with every step." Chap. 3, p. 67

"One day my father was so hungry he went into their kitchen and ate a cold sweet potato. When his sister found out she turned on him and yelled: 'It's difficult enough for me to support our mother. I can't afford to feed a brother as well.' My father was so hurt he ran out of the house and never returned." Chap. 6, p. 117

"It was unthinkable for a peasant woman to take a rest if she was pregnant. She worked right up to the moment of delivery, and were innumerable stories about women cutting the umbilical cord with a sickle and carrying on. Mrs. Mi had borne her own baby on a battlefield and had had to abandon it on the spot - a baby's cry would have endangered the whole unit. After losing her child, she seems to want others to suffer a similar fate." Chap. 8, p. 159

"In a revolution you had to fight for your side even if it was not perfect - as long as you believed it was better than the other side. United was the categorical imperative." Chap. 11, p. 219

"My mother could see that as far as my father's relationship with the Party was concerned, she was an outsider. One day, when she ventured some critical comments about the situation and got no response from him, she said bitterly, 'You are a good Communist, but a rotten husband.' My father nodded. He said he knew." Chap. 11, p. 219



"Throughout history Chinese scholars and mandarins had traditionally taken up fishing when they were disillusioned with what the emperor was doing. Fishing suggested a retreat to nature, an escape from the politics of the day. It was a kind of symbol for disenchantment and no cooperation. My father seldom caught any fish, and once wrote a poem with the line: 'Not for the fish I go fishing.'" Chap. 12, p. 237

"The day after I returned to school, I was taken out with several dozen other children to change street names to make them more 'revolutionary.' The street where I lived was called Commerce Street and we debated what it should be renamed. Some proposed 'Beacon Road' to signify the role of our provincial party leaders. Others said 'Public Servants' Street,' as that was what officials should be, according to a quote of Mao's. Eventually we left without settling on anything because a preliminary problem could not be solved: the name plate was too high up on the wall to reach." Chap. 16, p. 288

"When I bumped into them in the mornings, they always gave me a very kind smile which told me they were happy. I realized then that when people are happy, they become kind." Chap. 20, p. 350

"My parents dominated my life and my conscious thoughts. Any indulgence in my own affairs was immediately suppressed as being disloyal. The Cultural Revolution had deprived me of, or spared me, a normal girlhood with tantrums, bickering and boyfriends." Chap. 21, p. 365

"What exactly they were supposed to educate us in was not made specific, but Mao always maintained that people with some education were inferior to illiterate peasants, and needed to reform to be more like them. One of the sayings was: 'Peasants have dirty hands and cowshit-sodden feet, but they are much cleaner than intellectuals.'" Chap. 22, p. 381

"I was struck by the scornful tone in their voices. Later I discovered that most city youth, old or new, developed a strong contempt for the peasants after they had settled down among them. Mao, of course, had expected the opposite reaction." Chap. 22, p. 404

"I thought how we were like the frogs at the bottom of the well in the Chinese legend, who claimed that the sky was only as big as the round opening at the top of their well. I felt an intense and urgent desire to see the world." Chap. 27, p. 484

"The news filled me with such euphoria that for an instant I was numb. My ingrained self-censorship immediately started working. I registered the fact that there was an orgy



of weeping going on around me, and that I had to come up with some suitable performance. There seemed nowhere to hide my lack of correct emotion except the shoulder of the woman in front of me, one of the student officials, who was apparently heartbroken." Chap. 28, p. 495

Topics for Discussion

Describe the attitudes toward women when the author's grandmother, Yu-fang, was sold to the general as a concubine. What were the advantages of being a wife over being a concubine? What concessions were Yu-fang given?

Describe the attitude of De-hong with regard to the Communist party. Compare that to the attitude of the man who would become her husband, Chang Shou-yu. Give some examples of the times Chang Shou-yu put the party ahead of his family. Was he aware that he was doing that?

Describe the courtship of Yu-fang and Dr. Xia. What was his family's reaction to the news of the impending marriage? What impact did that have on Yu-fang and Dr. Xia? What was the long-term effect?

What happened to Chang Shou-yu when the next political factions came into power? What impact did this have on the family? Describe two instances in which the family were shunned, skipped over, or otherwise penalized for being the child of a "capitalist roader".

Describe De-hong's role as a mother during the formative years of her younger children. She later says she regrets having been an absentee mother, but do you believe she felt she was doing the right thing at the time? What could she have done differently?

Describe at least three instances in which the Chinese government exerts control over its citizens through regulations that now seem ridiculous. Why did the Chinese people endure those regulations?

What was childhood like for the children of De-hong? Who do they depend on for support?

List some examples of the Mao propaganda campaign. Why do you think American books were not sanctioned reading? Why do you think these books were so valuable on the black market?

Jung was taught that children in other countries are deprived and that the Chinese government is above reproach. When does she begin to change her view on these points?