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Preface

Chinese Cinderella is my autobiography. It was difficult and painful to write but I felt compelled to do so. Though mine is but a simple, personal tale of my childhood, please do not underestimate the power of such stories. In one way or another, every one of us has been shaped and moulded by the stories we have read and absorbed in the past. All stories, including fairy-tales, present elemental truths which can sometimes permeate your inner life and become part of you.

The fact that this story is true may hold special appeal. Today, the world is a very different place. Though many Chinese parents still prefer sons, daughters are not so much despised. But the real things have not changed. It is still important to be truthful and loyal; to do the best you can; to make

Chinese Cinderella

the most of your talents; to be happy with the simple things in life; and to believe deep down that you will ultimately triumph if you try hard enough to prove your worth.

To those who were neglected and unloved as children, I have a particular message. In spite of what your abusers would have had you believe, please be convinced that each of you has within you something precious and unique. *Chinese Cinderella* is dedicated to you with the fervent wish that you will persist in trying to do your best in the face of hopelessness; to have faith that in the end your spirit will prevail; to transcend your traumas and transform them into a source of courage, creativity and compassion.

Mother Teresa once said that 'loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted are the greatest poverty'. To this I will add: 'Please believe that one single positive dream is more important than a thousand negative realities.'

Adeline Yen Mah

Author's Note

Chinese is a pictorial language. Every word is a different picture and has to be memorised separately. There is no alphabet and no connection between the written and spoken language. A person can learn to read and write Chinese without knowing how to speak one word.

Because each word is a pictograph, Chinese calligraphy evokes a greater emotional response than the same word lettered in alphabet. The art of calligraphy is highly revered in China. Poetry written in calligraphy by ancient masters is prized and passed on from generation to generation.

Through *Chinese Cinderella*, I hope to intrigue you not only with the plight of a little girl growing

up in China, but also interest you with her history and culture.

Names

In Chinese families, a child is called by many names.

1. My father's surname is Yen (嚴). My siblings and I inherited his surname of Yen (嚴). Chinese surnames come at the beginning of a person's name.
2. At birth, a baby is given a name by his or her parents. My given name is Jun-ling. Since my surname comes first, my Chinese name is Yen Jun-ling (嚴君玲).
3. At home, a child is called by a name dependent on the order of his or her birth. The oldest daughter is called Big Sister, the second daughter Second Sister and so on. There are separate Chinese words for 'older sister' (jie 姐) and 'younger sister' (mei 妹); 'older brother' (ge 哥) and 'younger brother' (di 弟). Since I was the fifth child in my family, my name at home was Fifth Younger Sister (Wu Mei 五妹). However, my younger siblings called me Wu Jie (五姐), which means 'Fifth Older Sister'.

Author's Note

4. When the older generation calls me Wu Mei (五妹) the word 'mei' takes on the meaning of 'daughter'. Wu Mei (五妹) now means Fifth Daughter.
5. The same goes for the word 'di'. Er Di (二弟) can mean Second Younger Brother or Second Son.
6. Our stepmother gave us European names when she married my father. When my brothers and I attended schools in Hong Kong and London where English was the main language, my name became Adeline Yen.
7. After I married, I adopted my Chinese American husband Bob Mah's last name and my name is now Adeline Yen Mah.
8. Big Sister's (大姐) name is Lydia, Big Brother's (大哥) is Gregory, Second Brother's (二哥) is Edgar, Third Brother's (三哥) is James. Fourth Younger Brother's name (四弟) is Franklin. Little Sister's name (小妹) is Susan.



M O N G

X I N J I A N G

G O B I

T A K L A M A K A N
D E S E R T

T H E G R E A T

C H I N A

T I B E T

H I M A L A Y A
M O U N T A I N S

L H A S A



1. Top of the Class 全班考第一

Autumn, 1941

AS SOON as I got home from school, Aunt Baba noticed the silver medal dangling from the left breast-pocket of my uniform. She was combing her hair in front of the mirror in our room when I rushed in and plopped my school-bag down on my bed.

‘What’s that hanging on your dress?’

‘It’s something special that Mother Agnes gave me in front of the whole class this afternoon. She called it an award.’

My aunt looked thrilled. ‘So soon? You only started kindergarten one week ago. What is it for?’

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‘It’s for topping my class this week. When Mother Agnes pinned it on my dress, she said I could wear it for seven days. Here, this certificate goes with it.’ I opened my school-bag and handed her an envelope as I climbed onto her lap.

She opened the envelope and took out the certificate.

‘Why, it’s all written in French or English or some other foreign language. How do you expect me to read this, my precious little treasure?’ I knew she was pleased because she was smiling as she hugged me. ‘One day soon,’ she continued, ‘you’ll be able to translate all this into Chinese for me. Until then, we’ll just write today’s date on the envelope and put it away somewhere safe. Go close the door properly and put on the latch so no one will come in.’

I watched her open her closet door and take out her safe-deposit box. She took the key from a gold chain around her neck and placed my certificate underneath her jade bracelet, pearl necklace and diamond watch – as if my award were also some precious jewel impossible to replace.

As she closed the lid, an old photograph fell out. I picked up the faded picture and saw a

solemn young man and woman, both dressed in old-fashioned Chinese robes. The man looked rather familiar.

‘Is this a picture of my father and dead mama?’ I asked.

‘No. This is the wedding picture of your grandparents. Your Ye Ye was twenty-six and your Nai Nai was only fifteen.’ She quickly took the photo from me and locked it in her box.

‘Do you have a picture of my dead mama?’

She avoided my eyes. ‘No. But I have wedding pictures of your father and stepmother Niang. You were only one year old when they married. Do you want to see them?’

‘No. I’ve seen those before. I just want to see one of my own mama. Do I look like her?’ Aunt Baba did not reply, but busied herself putting the safe-deposit box back into her closet. After a while I said, ‘When did my mama die?’

‘Your mother came down with a high fever three days after you were born. She died when you were two weeks old . . .’ She hesitated for a moment, then exclaimed suddenly, ‘How dirty your hands are! Have you been playing in that sand-box at school again? Go wash them at once! Then come back and do your homework!’

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I did as I was told. Though I was only four years old, I understood I should not ask Aunt Baba too many questions about my dead mama. Big Sister once told me, ‘Aunt Baba and Mama used to be best friends. A long time ago, they worked together in a bank in Shanghai owned by our Grand Aunt, the youngest sister of Grandfather Ye Ye. But then Mama died giving birth to you. If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.’

2. A Tianjin Family

天津家庭

AT THE time of my birth, Big Sister was six and a half years old. My three brothers were five, four and three. They blamed me for causing Mama's (媽媽) death and never forgave me.

A year later, Father (爸爸) remarried. Our stepmother, whom we called Niang (娘), was a seventeen-year-old Eurasian beauty fourteen years his junior. Father always introduced her to his friends as his French wife though she was actually half French and half Chinese. Besides Chinese, she spoke French and English. She was almost as tall as Father, stood very straight and dressed only in French clothes – many of which came from Paris. Her thick, wavy, black hair never had a curl out of

place. Her large, dark-brown eyes were fringed with long, thick lashes. She wore heavy make-up, expensive French perfume and many diamonds and pearls. It was Grandmother Nai Nai who told us to call her Niang, another Chinese term for ‘mother’.

One year after their wedding, they had a son (Fourth Brother) followed by a daughter (Little Sister). There were now seven of us: five children from Father’s first wife and two from our stepmother, Niang.

As well as Father and Niang, we lived with our Grandfather Ye Ye (爺爺), Grandmother Nai Nai (奶奶) and Aunt Baba (姑媽) in a big house in the French Concession of Tianjin, a city port on the north-east coast of China. Aunt Baba was the older sister of our father. Because she was meek, shy, unmarried and had no money of her own, my parents ordered her to take care of me. From an early age, I slept in a cot in her room. This suited me well because I grew to know her better and better and we came to share a life apart from the rest of our family. Under the circumstances, perhaps it was inevitable that, in time, we loved each other very deeply.

A Tianjin Family

Many years before, China had lost a war (known as the Opium War) against England and France. As a result, many coastal cities in China (such as Tianjin and Shanghai) came to be occupied by foreign soldiers.

The conquerors parcelled out the best areas of these treaty ports for themselves, claiming them as their own 'territories' or 'concessions'. Tianjin's French Concession was like a little piece of Paris transplanted into the centre of this big Chinese city. Our house was built in the French style and looked as if it had been lifted from a tree-shaded avenue near the Eiffel Tower. Surrounded by a charming garden, it had porches, balconies, bow windows, awnings and a slanting tile roof. Across the street was St Louis Catholic Boys' School, where the teachers were French missionaries.

In December 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the United States became involved in the Second World War. Although Tianjin was occupied by the Japanese, the French Concession was still being governed by French officials. French policemen strutted about looking important and barking out orders in their own language, which they expected everyone to understand and obey.

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At my school, Mother Agnes taught us the alphabet and how to count in French. Many of the streets around our house were named after dead French heroes or Catholic saints. When translated into Chinese, these street names became so complicated that Ye Ye and Nai Nai often had trouble remembering them. Bilingual store signs were common but the most exclusive shops painted their signs only in French. Nai Nai told us this was the foreigners' way of announcing that no Chinese were allowed there except for maids in charge of white children.

3. Nai Nai's Bound Feet

奶 奶 的 小 腳

THE DINNER-BELL rang at seven. Aunt Baba took my hand and led me into the dining-room.

My grandparents were just ahead of us. Aunt Baba told me to run quickly to the head of the big, round dining-table and pull out Grandmother Nai Nai's chair for her. Nai Nai walked very slowly because of her bound feet. I watched her as she inched her way towards me, hobbling and swaying as if her toes had been partly cut off. As she sat down with a sigh of relief, I placed my foot next to her embroidered, black-silk shoe to compare sizes.

‘Nai Nai, how come your feet are so tiny?’ I asked.

‘When I was three years old, a tight bandage was wound around my feet, bending the toes under the sole and crushing the arch so that my feet would remain small all my life. This has been the custom in China for over one thousand years, ever since the Tang dynasty. In my day, small feet were considered feminine and beautiful. If you had large and unbound feet, no man would marry you. This was the custom.’

‘Did it hurt?’

‘Of course! It hurt so badly I couldn’t sleep. I screamed with pain and begged my mother to free my feet but she wouldn’t. In fact, the pain has never gone away. My feet have hurt every day since they were bound and continue to hurt today. I had a pair of perfectly normal feet when I was born, but they maimed me on purpose and gave me life-long arthritis so I would be attractive. Just be thankful this horrible custom was done away with thirty years ago. Otherwise your feet would be crippled and you wouldn’t be able to run or jump either.’

I went to the foot of the table and sat at my assigned seat between Second Brother and Third

Brother as my three brothers ran in, laughing and jostling each other. I cringed as Second Brother sat down on my right. He was always saying mean things to me and grabbing my share of goodies when nobody was looking.

Second Brother used to sit next to Big Brother but the two of them fought a lot. Father finally separated them when they broke a fruit bowl fighting over a pear.

Big Brother winked at me as he sat down. He had a twinkle in his eye and was whistling a tune. Yesterday he'd tried to teach me how to whistle but no matter how hard I tried I couldn't make it work. Was Big Brother up to some new mischief today? Last Sunday afternoon, I came across him crouched by Grandfather Ye Ye's bed, watching him like a cat while Ye Ye took his nap. A long black hair from Ye Ye's right nostril was being blown out and drawn in with every snore. Silently but swiftly, Big Brother suddenly approached Ye Ye and carefully pinched the nasal hair between his forefinger and thumb. There was a tantalising pause as Ye Ye exhaled with a long, contented wheeze. Meanwhile I held my breath, mesmerised and not daring to make a sound. Finally, Ye Ye inhaled deeply. Doggedly, Big Brother hung on.

The hair was wrenched from its root. Ye Ye woke up with a yell, jumped from his bed, took in the situation with one glance and went after Big Brother with a feather duster. Laughing hysterically, Big Brother rushed out of the room, slid down the banister and made a clean getaway into the garden, all the time holding Ye Ye's hair aloft like a trophy.

Third Brother took his seat on my left. His lips were pursed and he was trying to whistle unsuccessfully. Seeing the medal on my uniform, he raised his eyebrow and smiled at me. 'What's that?' he asked.

'It's an award for topping my class. My teacher says I can wear it for seven days.'

'Congratulations! First week at school and you get a medal! Not bad!'

While I was basking in Third Brother's praise, I suddenly felt a hard blow across the back of my head. I turned around to see Second Brother glowering at me.

'What did you do *that* for?' I asked angrily.

Deliberately, he took my right arm under the table and gave it a quick, hard twist while no one was looking. 'Because I feel like it, that's why, you