

Chinese Cinderella – The true story of an unwanted daughter

Author: Adeline Yen Mah

This book review was made by TT (Ms. Shirley Chan)

This is an excellent memoir and really a captivating read. I try to look at the book in four different aspects. First, “loss” means change; second, we should appreciate our own Chinese culture; third, you could not tell what fate will lead you and life is full of surprises. And finally, this memoir enables us to learn important events in the past in an enlightening way.

We should recognize that “loss” is part of our lives. All forms of “loss” are entwined in the fabric of our lives and they bring “changes”. As a matter of fact, changes strengthen our characters and our abilities to survive. Leafing through little Adeline life, it was full of “losses” or “absence in different forms --- the loss of her natural mother since her birth; the sudden death of Ye Ye and Nai Nai ; the killing of her favorite duckling (Xiao bao-bei); being torn away from Aunt Baba, and the “negligence” from her father and stepmother. As I read through all the episodes in little Adeline’s life, I found that what they had in common was the idea that loss means “change”. Questions like “How could I face my destiny --- to accept destiny without grumbles or fight like a tiger?” or “Where am I going and which side should I take?” or even “Who am I now?” will come to my mind.

The loss of Adeline’s mother gave a “bad-luck” identity to little Adeline and triggered off Adeline insatiable desire to gain approval and acceptance from her father, siblings or even her stepmother. After the early death of Adeline’s mother, Adeline was under the care of Aunt Baba, who developed a motherly love for little Adeline and came to share a life with Adeline apart from the rest of the family. The loss of Ye Ye gave a sudden twist to Adeline’s life. It was the time when Adeline decided to enter the English playwriting competition, which later won approval and admiration from Adeline’s father. The tragic death of her favorite duckling, Xiao Bao-bei, made Adeline set her mind to “win over” the lost glory in her family and the burial of the little duckling symbolized an end of childhood. When Adeline was forced to leave the “shelter” of Aunt Baba, her fate has made a sudden twist. She was sent to boarding school and was forced to become independent. The absence of the love of Aunt Baba in later years motivated Adeline to bury herself in books and mesmerize in study, which had provided fertile ground for her future academic success. Losses have groomed little Adeline to be a person of character and uniqueness, as her Ye Ye has wisely foretold. In fact, the negligence from her family enables Adeline to work harder and harder to win approval from her father and steal the limelight from her siblings. In fact, pitiful, ugly duckling became a beautiful swan in later years.

I was particularly impressed with the scene that little Adeline was taught to appreciate the Chinese culture. When little Adeline was brought back to reunite with her family in Hong Kong, Adeline had a good, pleasing time with Ye Ye. This was the time when little Adeline refused to learn Chinese, which is inferior to English during the colonial period. Ye Ye indicated that appreciation of a Chinese culture is paramount to a person’s content of character. Ye Ye once said, “You may be right in believing that if you study hard, one day you might become fluent in English. But you will still look Chinese, and when people meet you, they’ll see a Chinese girl no matter how well you speak English. You’ll always be expected to know Chinese, and if you don’t, I’m afraid they will not respect you much.” Language teachers have once told us that people will master a foreign language well when they really appreciate their own

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language and culture. Respect for one's culture brought national pride to people. This reminded me that people tend to forget the basics and pursue the wrong targets in their lives. Then Ye Ye taught Adeline a series of Chinese characters, which were originated from ancient wisdom and embedded with profound meanings. For instance, Chinese characters 貧 (pin) means poverty, 貪 (tan) means greed. Those two characters resemble each other but intimately linked in mysterious ways. Once Ye Ye had said to Adeline, "All covet, all lose." Besides, the word 意 (yi) means "sound from your heart" while 危 (wei) means danger, 機 (ji) means opportunity. And when you add "wei" and "ji" together, we have a new word called crisis, which means that you are in the midst of danger as well as opportunity.

Looking through the life of little Adeline, you cannot tell what fate will lead you and you soon discover that life is full of surprises. In one occasion, little Adeline was sent to the boarding school in Tianjin, where people fled away in droves for fear of the communist take-over. Little Adeline was the last student to stay in the school and was completely forgotten by her family. Just when we thought her family would permanently abandon little Adeline. Adeline was rescued by Aunt Reine Schilling, enjoyed a good trip with the Schilling family and was finally brought back to her family in Hong Kong. In another occasion, Adeline was eager to go to Oxford to study, but her family never heeded the request. Till one day when she won the playwriting competition and the winning news was "accidentally" seen by one of the colleagues of Adeline's father. Then, Adeline had a chance to further her study abroad, where she became a physician.

I am glad that it is a memoir and the book is really suitable for teens. Though learning history is important, the subject is never welcome by young people. Sometimes, our teens prefer reading comic books or playing games. Ironically, history always repeats itself in different forms and different generations. In this book, the setting was in different parts of China, like Shanghai, Tianjin and Hong Kong. Throughout different episodes, the life of the four elder siblings of Ma's family in fact mirrored the days of people living in colonial period. In addition, we had face-to-face encounter with history when we saw civilians became panic-stricken in civil wars; and yet struggled to secure a peaceful life during the turbulent wartimes.

It is truly a story of unforgettable characters and memorable scenes.

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Word count: 1079
Book review made by TT
January 2, 2006.