

# Chinese Cinderella

馬嚴君玲

The  
true story  
of an  
unwanted  
daughter



Adeline Yen Mah

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Falling Leaves*

Top of the  
Class

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— 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 schoolbag down onto 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 a week ago. What is it for?”

“It’s for leading 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 schoolbag 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 into 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 your 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 with 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 sandbox at school again? Go wash them at once! Then come back and do your homework!"

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 grandaunt, 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."

A Chinese proverb says, "Falling leaves return to their roots." In *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline Yen Mah returns to her roots to paint an authentic portrait of twentieth-century China as well as to tell the story of her painful childhood and her courage and ultimate triumph over despair.

After her mother dies giving birth to her, Adeline's affluent, powerful family considers her bad luck. Life does not get any easier when her father remarries. She and her siblings are subjected to their stepmother's disdain, while her half brother and half sister are thoroughly spoiled. Although Adeline wins prizes at school, they are not what she really yearns for—the love and understanding of her family.



An ALA Best Book for Young Adults

A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book

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