Falling Leaves

Adeline Yen Mah

About the author
Adeline Yen Mah was born in 1937. In August 1952 she left her family in Hong Kong and went to England to study. At University College in London, she studied medicine and became a doctor. She has written two other books: *Chinese Cinderella* and *Watching the Tree*. She lives with her husband in California and has two children.

Summary
*Falling Leaves* is the true story of Adeline Yen Mah, who was born in north-east China in 1937 – her parents' fifth child. Her mother died as a result of her birth, which left her father a sad man feeling in need of a new life. Adeline's father seemed never to fully forgive her for his wife's death. He married again soon after and Adeline's new stepmother, a beautiful young woman they called Niang (a Chinese word meaning mother), strongly disliked her. Father and Niang had two other children together: Franklin (who Niang loved) and Susan (who Niang did not love). Adeline and her brothers and sisters suffered emotionally and physically from their cruel stepmother's words and actions – but Adeline suffered more than the others. Her story is full of the pain and heartbreak of a young girl always hoping that her father will be proud of her. But it is also a story of hope. Adeline works very hard in school and wins prizes. When she wins a play-writing competition, her life changes. She goes to England and becomes a doctor. After a failed marriage, in which she has a child, she finds real happiness with her second husband. The lives of all the members of her family, as seen through the troubles of twentieth century China, make this an unforgettable and very interesting story, which begins and ends with the reading of Adeline's father's will. Niang has left him penniless. She has taken all of his money and property. When Niang dies, she leaves nothing to Adeline. The relationship between Adeline and Niang is painful and shocking, but the Chinese tradition of obedience makes it impossible for Adeline to be anything other than dutiful towards this woman.

Chapters 1–2: Jun-ling was born in 1937 in China. Her mother died shortly after her birth, so Jun-ling is an unwanted child. Jun-ling's father remarries and Niang, changes the children's names.

Chapters 3–4: Adeline's (Jun-ling's) childhood was unhappy. She was badly treated especially after she stopped her stepmother, Niang, from beating her daughter Susan. Her Aunt Baba was kind to her but it was a difficult time as Niang controlled everyone's money.

Chapters 5–7: Adeline's friends come to see her and she is whipped as a result. She is sent away to school and becomes ill and nearly dies. Her father visits her once. The family escape to Hong Kong when the communists take over.

Chapters 8–12: Adeline wins a writing competition and goes to England to study medicine. When she returns to Hong Kong, her father organizes her career. She moves to America, where she marries Byron and has a son. Byron is violent and the marriage fails. Susan, Adeline's sister is disowned by the family.

Chapters 13–16: Aunt Baba, who stayed in China, has suffered a lot under communism. Adeline goes to visit her. Adeline's father dies and the family finds out that he has left them nothing. Everything has been put into Niang's name. Later Niang develops cancer and dies. Afterwards Adeline goes back to visit Aunt Baba who is dying too. Adeline realizes that Aunt Baba loved her and was like a mother to her. Both women are peaceful at the end of the book.

Background and themes
Social and political upheaval: Throughout the nineteenth century China suffered from rebellion, war and foreign take-overs. By the end of the century, the world powers controlled areas in most large cities and these areas were not considered Chinese. In this story, Adeline's father and stepmother move the family to the French area of Tianjin.

Chinese Cinderella and Watching the Tree. She lives with her husband in California and has two children.
The government at that time was weak and dishonest. It did, however, try to make some improvements but in 1911 there was a revolution led by Sun Yat Sen, which saw the start of a republic in South China. In 1912 the Empress died and Manchu rule ended. This was a time of great social change and political upheaval. As modern and democratic ideas spread, young men cut off their long hair, and women refused to have their feet bound. These were very daring, and even dangerous things to do.

Communism: In 1921 the Chinese communist party was formed, and for some time worked together with the nationalist Kuomintang. Sun Yat Sen even invited advisers from the Soviet Union to help with the changes. But after he died in 1925 anticommunists in the Kuomintang formed a nationalist government under Chiang Kai-Shek and they began fighting against each other.

War: The Japanese had taken a large area of North China as a result of the First World War. They soon began to fight for more land, including Shanghai, which was heavily bombed in 1937. After the Second World War all foreign countries gave up their areas in China, but fighting between the communists and nationalists continued until the communists drove out the Kuomintang. They formed the government in Peking (Beijing) in 1949. The nationalists escaped to the island of Formosa, now Taiwan, where they claimed to be the real government of China. The only part of China that remained under foreign rule was Hong Kong, which had been leased to Great Britain for ninety-nine years. The communist government changed many traditional things in China, and not all of these changes were popular.

Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution: In 1956, to make the government more popular and to make people feel they could express views and opinions on the government, Mao Zedong began the Hundred Flowers Campaign (sometimes called the Double Hundred Campaign). This was followed by the ‘Great Leap Forward’, which aimed to encourage speedy economic development. There were arguments about both campaigns in the Communist Party, and Mao himself was criticized. In 1966, to regain control, Mao began the Cultural Revolution. He encouraged young students and workers to form the Red Guards, whose job was to stop all protest or complaint about the communists. At this time millions of people, many of them educated intellectuals and party officials who didn’t support Mao, were sent to work camps or even killed. The Cultural Revolution finally ended when Mao died in 1976.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Research: Have the students do some research on China around the beginning of the twentieth century. Ask them to use books or the Internet and find out what type of life ordinary people had. Where did ordinary people live, in cities or in the country? How did they make their living? What differences were there between men and women? How were women treated at this time? What can you find out about the practice of foot binding? This could form an ongoing project on China that could be done while reading the book.

2 Discuss: Put students into small groups and have them discuss the title of the book and the front cover. What does the cover make you think of? What do you think the picture suggests? Have you any idea what the book might be about?

Chapter 1

Before reading

3 Predict: Have students work in pairs and predict what they think Chapter 1, Changing Iron into Gold, is about. Do you think this is about changing a metal into gold, or does this title mean something else? Write down your ideas.

While reading

4 Write: Have students work in pairs and write notes on what they have learned about the family. Where does the family meet? Who has died? Why do you think the family has not been together for forty years?

5 Pair work: Have students work in pairs and talk about the writer’s grandaunt. What do we find out about her aunt in this chapter?

After reading

6 Discuss: Have students work in small groups and discuss what they have found out about the treatment of women in China through reading this chapter. What do you think about the treatment of women you have read about here? Are they treated fairly?

7 Discuss: Have students work in small groups and discuss the following: Do you agree with arranged marriages? Do you think it is a good idea not to meet the person you are to marry before the wedding? Do arranged marriages happen in your country? Do you think they can work?

8 Discuss: Put students into small groups and have them discuss the practice of foot binding. Why did people in China bind their daughter’s feet? How do you think this affected the child? What do you think happened to a girl who did not have small feet in this society? Do you think traditions are more important than health?

9 Pair work: Ask students to look at their predictions about Chapter 1. Were you right about your predictions? Having read the chapter, what is the real meaning of this title?
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Chapter 2

Before reading

10 Research: Have students do some background research on the relationship between China and Japan, during the First World War. What happened during this time? How did the Japanese treat the Chinese? How do you think the Chinese felt towards the Japanese?

While reading

11 Artwork: Have students read the descriptions of Shanghai at the beginning of this chapter. Have students draw what they think Shanghai looked like. Then, have them find photographs or pictures of modern Shanghai and compare the two. Discuss this in class together. How does old Shanghai compare to modern Shanghai? What type of city is it now? What type of buildings does it have? These pictures could form a display.

After reading

12 Pair work: Have the students answer the following questions. Who do we find out is the author of the story? When was she born? What happens to her mother?

13 Discuss: Put the students into small groups and have them discuss the following. Niang gives all the children European names? How do you think the children felt about this? How would you feel if someone suddenly changed your name?

Chapter 3

After reading

14 Discuss: Put the students into small groups and ask them to discuss the behaviour and treatment of the children. Do you think there is a reason why the children are so unkind to each other? Do you think Niang has influenced them or is there another reason? Do you think it is a good idea to split the family house into different floors?

Chapter 4

While reading

15 Write: Ask students to make notes on how Niang gains control of the family home. What methods does she use to gain more and more control? Discuss this together after reading the chapter.

After reading

16 Write: Read again what Adeline says about her life on page 19. Imagine you are Adeline and you are writing a page of your diary. Write about school, your success, your unhappiness and your loneliness. Write how you feel about everything.

17 Discuss: Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following. Do you think it was right for Father to whip Adeline? Why was she whipped? Is there a difference between whipping and hitting a child? Is it normal for children to be hit in your society?

18 Discuss: Ask students to discuss the following. Father and Niang take Adeline to Tianjin to go to school. At this time everyone was leaving the area because of the fighting. What sort of family would leave their daughter in a place like this? Why do you think they treated Adeline so badly?

Chapter 7

Before reading

19 Predict: Ask students to predict what this chapter (Dreaming of Magic Lands) is about. Why would Adeline be dreaming of magic lands? Is she planning to escape or to travel?

20 Discuss: Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss what Ye Ye says: ‘We all want to live … but some things are worse than dying: being lonely or bored, suffering pain.’ Do you agree with Ye Ye? Why do you think he feels like this?

Chapter 8

Before reading

21 Predict: Ask students to predict what this chapter is about? Is Adeline’s life going to improve in any way? Write down your predictions.

After reading

22 Discuss: Put students into small groups and have them discuss the following. Adeline experiences racial prejudice in England. Why do you think this is? Have you ever experienced this? What can be done to stop people experiencing racism?

Chapter 10

After reading

23 Pair work: Ask students to discuss the following. Adeline marries someone after only being alone with them for ten hours. Why does she do this? Do you think this might be because of all the rejection she has suffered?

Chapter 12

After reading

24 Research: Have students do research into the Cultural Revolution by using books or the Internet. Have them discuss how this affects Chinese society and what evidence of this can be seen in the book. This can form part of a project on China.

Chapter 14

After reading

25 Discuss: Put students into small groups and ask them to discuss Adeline’s attitude towards Niang. Why do you think Adeline still offers to help Niang after everything Niang has done to her? Would you do the same? Would you help a parent who had treated you so badly?

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.