Chinese Cinderella

By Adeline Yen Mah
Chinese Cinderella is an autobiography. It is a story written by a woman in her fifties about her own childhood. It is riveting memoir of a girl’s painful coming-of-age in a wealthy Chinese family during the 1940s.

A Chinese proverb says, “Falling leaves return to their roots.” In Chinese Cinderella, Adeline Yen Mah returns to her roots to tell the story of her painful childhood and her ultimate triumph and courage in the face of despair. Adeline’s affluent, powerful family considers her bad luck after her mother dies giving birth to her. Life does not get any easier when her father remarries. She and her siblings are subjected to the disdain of her stepmother, while her stepbrother and stepsister are spoiled. Although Adeline wins prizes at school, they are not enough to compensate for what she really yearns for — the love and understanding of her family. But this is mainly an account of the relentless neglect and loathing which was heaped on Yen Jun-ling during her excruciating childhood, and the way she chose to cope with it.

Following the success of the critically acclaimed adult bestseller Falling Leaves, this memoir is a moving telling of the classic Cinderella story, with Adeline Yen Mah providing her own courageous voice. In doing so, she provides lessons on the strength of human character and the power of education.

The story is set against a background of life in Japanese-occupied China and the civil war between the communists and nationalists. This followed Japan's defeat at the end of the Second World War. There are some fascinating snapshots of the old way of life such as the binding of Grandmother Nai Nai’s feet which had been the custom in China for over a thousand years. It also includes the legend of the original Chinese Cinderella.

Where is China?

The People's Republic of China is in Eastern Asia and the northern hemisphere. It has land borders with 14 countries, including India and Russia. China has an area of 9.6 million square km, making it larger than Australia and the 4th largest country in the world.

The world is changing China and China is changing the world. It is the world's fastest growing country - by 2040 China is expected to be the largest economy in the world, with India second and the US in 3rd.
The country has transformed itself and its role in the world at great pace and there are few signs of a slowdown in the social, economic and environmental change. Our lives are increasingly interdependent with China as it re-emerges as a new ‘superpower’.

Beijing and Shanghai are two famous cities in China. Chinese cities are growing dramatically in number and scale. At the same time, there has been a rise in rural poverty.

**What is life like in China?**

China is a country of contrasts - hot and cold climates, mountains and deserts, skyscrapers in modern cities and small traditional hamlets, rickshaws and the latest cars, poverty and wealth. People follow many different faiths in China, including Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese folk religions. It is estimated that a quarter of Chinese are Buddhists, making China the country with the world's largest Buddhist population. But for the majority of Chinese who live in rural areas, life has changed little from the subsistence agriculture they have practiced for hundreds of years.
What is unique about the Chinese way of life?

1. When is Chinese New Year?

2. How do people greet each other during the Chinese New Year?

3. What is the Chinese Lion Dance?

4. What is the Lantern Dance?

5. What is the Dragon Dance?

6. What are the Chinese horoscopes?

7. What are the names of two Chinese fairy tales?

8. Name three Chinese meals.

9. What is Feng Shui?

10. Find three Feng Shui symbols that you like.

11. Who was the last Chinese emperor?

12. Who build the Great Wall of China?

13. Why was the wall built?

14. Why do the Chinese eat fortune cookies?

15. What are the Tang Tomb figures?

16. Who is Confucius?
The Role of Women

Read the following information and answer the questions. You need to write 2 sentences on each question.

1. Why were women’s feet bound?
2. What roles were available to women in traditional Chinese society?
3. Who decided what would happen to a woman?
4. How did things change for women after the Communists came to power?
5. Why did the leader, Mao Tse Tung, make these changes?
6. In rural villages, extended families – three generations living in a house – were common. How does this affect women, even today?

Glossary

1. custom - tradition
2. peasantry - the poorest people
3. hindering - stopping
4. essential - necessary
5. eligible - suitable
6. oppressed - had no freedom
7. subservient - obey
8. kowtowing - bowing
9. equality - fairness
10. scold - to tell someone off
Life for Women in China before Communism

**Foot binding:**

- Foot binding was a custom introduced in the eleventh century, first practiced by the wealthy and later by the peasantry as well.
- When a girl reached approximately three years of age, her mother would wrap her feet with bandages so all toes except the big one were tucked under the sole of the foot.
- The bandages were left on and tightened nightly, in order to keep the feet small. Eventually, the big toe and heel were brought together, bending the arch, causing constant pain and hindering free movement.
- The binding caused the flesh of the woman's foot to rot and her bones to break, with toes sometimes dropping off.
- A woman's foot should only be 3 inches, and even as late as the 1920's, foot binding was considered essential for a woman to be considered eligible for marriage.
- When a woman was to be married, the first thing the bridegroom's family would look at was her feet.
**Women’s relationships with men**

- Women were also **oppressed** through their relationships with men.
- Within society, women had few alternatives as to what roles they could play. The main options available were those of the wife or concubine (also called a prostitute).
- A wife had no power over her own life; her husband’s decisions were her own.
- She was forced to be completely **subservient** to her husband’s family, kowtowing to them every morning.
- Men were allowed to have several wives. The first wife’s ranking was higher than the other wives.
- A woman had to look after a household, cook and sew, arrange flowers, embroider and, above all, obey without question.
- A concubine (or prostitute), was produced children and had even less power than a wife.
- Female children were often sold by peasants to people in the cities.

**Life for Women in China after Communism**

- Women’s lives were improved by the Communists.
- The idea of **equality** for women was introduced.
- Women were included in the workforce.
- Foot binding faded out by 1949.
- Women could choose their husbands.
- Divorce was made easier.
- Women who were not married were promised that they would not be sold into marriage and were protected from arranged/forced marriages.
- Child marriages were forbidden.
- Neighbors knocked on the doors of wife beaters to **scold** them.
- Prostitution and the use of concubines were forbidden.
- A one child policy was introduced in 1979.
Chinese Cinderella

**Character**
- Major Characters
  - Antagonist
  - Protagonist
- Minor Characters

**Setting**
- Place
- Time
- Historical/Social context

**Point of view**
- Narrator
  - First person
  - Second person
  - Third person
  - Omniscient

**Tone**
- Author’s attitude about the subject

**ELEMENTS TO ANALYSE IN A NOVEL**

**Language Techniques**
- For example:
  - Similes
  - Metaphors
  - Personification
  - Sensory Imagery
  - Symbolism

**Structure**
- Chronological
- Dialogue
- Vignettes
- Foreshadowing

**Plot**
- Main problem
- Rising action
- Climax
- Resolution

**Themes**
The Yen family tree

1. After reading the Author’s Note (pages xi-xiii) and Chapter 2 complete the Yen Family Tree.

2. What was the Chinese name that Adeline was given at birth?

3. Where is the surname written in a Chinese name?

4. What is the oldest daughter called at home?

5. What was Adeline called at home?

6. What did her younger brother and sister call her?
7. The older generation called Adeline Wu Mei. What does this mean?

__________________________________________________________

8. What do you think the word ‘di’ means?

_______________________________________________________________

9. What is the Chinese term for ‘mother’

_______________________________________________________________

10. Using the method of naming a child in a Chinese home, work out what you would be called (hint: what is your order of birth in your family?)

_______________________________________________________________
Chapter Questions

Preface
How does the author ‘hook’ or interest the reader, making them want to read on?

Chapters 1-4

Summary - Chapter 1: Top of the Class
Autumn 1941. Four-year-old Adeline is intelligent and smart, receiving an award from her kindergarten teacher (Mother Agnes) on the first week of school. Her Aunt Baba treasures Adeline’s award by placing it in her special safe-deposit box. Adeline is close to her Aunt Baba, asking her about her deceased mother. Aunt Baba isn’t willing to share what she knows but Adeline learns that her mother died from a fever two weeks after she was born.

Summary - Chapter 2: A Tianjin Family
The whole family (seven children, her Father and Niang, her Grandfather Ye Ye, Grandmother Nai Nai and Aunt Baba (older sister of her Father) lived in a big house in the French Concession of Tianjin (city port on the north-east coast of China)

Summary - Chapter 3: Nai Nai’s Bound Feet
Adeline is mystified at her Grandmother Nai Nai and her bound feet. Adeline learns that having your feet bound wasn’t good and luckily, the custom had changed and small feet were no longer considered an important part of being feminine and beautiful. Adeline gladly shares the news of her achievement, but her siblings aren’t happy and are probably jealous of her, thinking it’s not possible. Because of the medal, her father singles her out, which had never happened before. Whatever someone in the family doesn’t want to do, they force it on Adeline to do it in the end.

Summary - Chapter 4: Life in Tianjin
Winter, early 1942. When Adeline started kindergarten at St Joseph’s French Convent School, her Big Sister was already in fifth grade. Complaining about having to walk Adeline to and from school, Grandmother Nai Nai finally told Ah Mao, the rickshaw-puller, to take them to and from school. Adeline loved everything about school. It was a place where they were all equals and a place where unlike her own siblings, nobody looked down on her. Finally, she felt like belonged. A year after Father, Niang and Fourth Brother had been gone, there was a heatwave on. Nai Nai decided to soak her feet, but unfortunately, she died of a massive stroke. A grand funeral was held for her.

1. Describe the relationship between Aunt Baba and the narrator of the story, Adeline. (Chapter 1)
2. What do you learn about Adeline’s real mother, her connection with Aunt Baba and her early death? (Chapter 1)
3. Summarise your first impressions of Niang. (Chapter 2).
4. Do you think that Tianjin was a pleasant place in which to live in Adeline’s early years? Explain your answer. (Chapter 2)
5. What was Nai Nai’s opinion of the custom of foot binding? (Chapter 3)
6. How did Adeline’s third and second brothers differ in their attitudes towards her? (Chapter 3)
7. Describe the rivalry that existed between the various groups of Father’s children. (Chapter 3)
8. How does the author describe the relationship between herself and her father? (Chapter 4) Give three examples.
9. How was school a positive place for Adeline? (Chapter 4)
10. How does Big Sister treat Adeline? (Chapter 4)
11. What explanation can you provide for Father’s sudden disappearance? (Chapter 4)
12. Write down the simile that Aunt Baba used to express how Nai Nai’s life had ended (page 21, Chapter 4). Explain what it means. Describe its effect on the reader.

**Chapters 5 – 6**

**Summary - Chapter 5: Arrival in Shanghai**
Adeline, Big Sister and Big Brother are taken to the railroad station to meet their father. Together, the four went to the house in Shanghai. Father, Niang and Fourth Brother had been living there for one and a half years. The children are told that they are to live on the second floor (three brothers in one room, Adeline and Aunt Baba in another and Ye Ye and Big Sister in separate rooms.) The others, Father, Niang and their stepsiblings would live on the first floor in individual rooms showing prejudice against the children, Aunt Baba and Ye Ye.

**Summary - Chapter 6: First Day At School**
At Shanghai, Adeline starts first grade at a new school called Sacred Heart, her Big Sister goes to Aurora Middle School and her brothers goes to St John’s Academy. After school, Adeline is forgotten about so she tries to find her way home by herself. Of course, she doesn’t know where she lives, so she gets lost. Luckily a lady from a restaurant spots her and Adeline calls her father to pick her up. Her father tells Adeline that in future she needs to use a map.

1. What does Niang’s description of the living quarters in the Shanghai house tell you about her attitude towards her step children? (Chapter 5)
2. What is revealed about Adeline’s memory and her father’s attitude to his parental responsibilities in Chapter 6?

**Chapters 7 – 9**

**Summary - Chapter 7: Family Reunion**
Last Sunday of October. Ye Ye, Aunt Baba, Third Brother and Little Sister arrive at Shanghai. Little Sister hadn’t seen her mother for one and a half years so she doesn’t remember her. When Little Sister threw a tantrum and wouldn’t go to her mother, Niang started beating her deliberately and viciously. Adeline finally speaks out (to stop beating her) when none of the other adults did so. After that, the children realized that because Nai Nai was dead, Niang was now the one in charge.

**Summary - Chapter 8: Tram Fare**
The children’s schools were a fair distance away and the number 8 tram ran directly from door to door. But the children were being taught an austerity programme to teach them about the ‘value of money’, so they weren’t given any pocket money, meaning that they couldn’t take the tram to and from school. When Ye Ye first arrived in Shanghai, he gave them tram fare to go to school, but two months later, all
his money was spent. The subject was brought up but Niang and Father found out that the money had been spent on tram fares. The children were told to apologize before being allowed to receive tram fares from their parents. Although they promised each other they wouldn’t give in, Big Sister held out for ten days and her three brothers held out for another week before giving in. Adeline wouldn’t and didn’t give in.

**Summary - Chapter 9: Chinese New Year**
Second Grade – Seven years old. Niang and Father gave Adeline and her siblings’ traditional clothing (‘unpopular’) whilst Niang’s children received stylish Western outfits (‘popular’). The children feel it’s unfair and plan to plot against Niang. Unfortunately, Niang overhears their entire conversation so by getting back at them, she recruits their leader, Big Sister, over to ‘their’ side and moving into a spare bedroom on the first floor. Although Adeline is a ‘Genius’ in her class, she wants her classmates to like her and her parents to love her. Adeline is depressed and lonely.

1. What does the incident with Niang and her baby tell us about her? Why was Adeline the only one who tried to stop Niang? (Chapter 7)
2. What was made clear to the children after this incident? (Chapter 7)
3. How is Niang portrayed in Chapter 7?
4. Explain how teaching the ‘value of money” further isolated the children. (Chapter 7)
5. Was Adeline’s decision not to beg for the tram fare a wise one? Explain her reasons for refusing to comply with Niang’s wishes. (Chapter 8).
6. How did Niang ‘foil’ the children’s attempt to write an anonymous letter of complaint about her to their father? (Chapter 9)
7. In what way did Niang break up the unity of her step children to gain control of them? (Chapter 9)
8. How does Adeline cope with her stepmother’s cruelty? (Chapter 9)
9. How did writing help Adeline? (Chapter 9)
10. Adeline expresses her true feelings at the end of chapter 9. What do we learn about her self-image?

**Chapters 10 - 12**

**Summary - Chapter 10: Shanghai School Days**
Adeline befriends the most athletic girl in Sheng Xin School (Sacred Heart), Wu Chun-mei. August 1945, almost eight years old. America dropped the atom bomb on Japan. This ended the Second World War. Spring term, 1946, eight and a half years old. Father took Niang, Big Sister, Fourth Brother and Little Sister north to reclaim his Tianjin properties. They stayed away for three months. The remaining family had freedom once again and did as they wished.

**Summary - Chapter 11: PLT**
Mr and Mrs Huang came to visit not long after Father and Niang returned from Tianjin, bringing gifts (seven baby ducklings). Obviously, Fourth Brother picked first, followed by Little Sister, Big Sister, Big Brother, and so on. Adeline named her duckling Precious Little Treasure (PLT). PLT becomes her first pet and a real friend. PLT dies when Father decides to test Jackie’s obedience by seeing if Jackie will harm
the duckling.

Summary - Chapter 12: Big Sister’s Wedding
Chinese New Year holidays, 1948. Father and Niang, and sometimes along with Big Sister continued to travel to Tianjin. It turned out that Niang had decided to marry off Big Sister (17) to Samuel (31), Nai Nai’s doctor’s son.

1. Compare Wu Chun–Mei’s and Adeline’s fathers’ attitudes towards their daughters. (Chapter 10)
2. World War II ended in 1945 when America dropped the atomic bomb on Japan. How is America depicted as “the new conqueror”? Give four examples.
3. Why was Adeline so enraptured by the book “A Little Princess”, lent to her by Wu Chen-Mei? What lesson does Adeline learn? (Chapter 10)
4. What does Third Brother’s demand for a huge omelette breakfast tell the reader about his feelings towards Niang’s strict rules? (Chapter 10)
5. What role does imagination play in Adeline’s connection to her late mother? (page 75 Chapter 10)
6. What explanation does Third Brother give for getting on better with Adeline than her other siblings? (Chapter 10)
7. How does Third Brother cope with the stresses at home? (page 75 Chapter 10)
8. How does Third Brother betray Adeline and what saddened her most? (Chapter 10)
9. Find and copy three phrases which show Adeline’s great love for PLT. (Chapter 11)
10. Explain why you think her father chooses to test the dog’s obedience in such a brutal way. (Chapter 11)
11. How does the writer use language to create pity and sympathy for PLT and for Adeline? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. (Chapter 11)
12. What are your feelings towards the death of the duckling? Do you blame Father, Third Brother or Jackie for its death? Explain your answer (Chapter 11).
13. Why did news of Big Sister’s arranged marriage fill Adeline with horror? (Chapter 12)
14. Explain how the “jade pendant” incident drove a deeper wedge between Niang and Aunt Baba. (Chapter 12)

Chapters 13 – 15
Summary - Chapter 13: A Birthday Party
September 1948, after summer holidays. Wu Chun-mei persuades Adeline to go to her birthday party. Niang finds out about the party and Adeline is whipped.

Summary - Chapter 14: Class President
Adeline is voted as Class President. The girls in her class decide to follow her home as a surprise, but instead, a very ugly surprise awaits them. They see Adeline’s true family.

Summary - Chapter 15: Boarding School In Tianjin
Adeline is sent to St Joseph’s boarding school. Middle of November 1948, Nancy Chen left Tianjin with
her mother. By the middle of December, Adeline was the only student left. Adeline’s Aunt Reine Schilling (Niang’s older sister), came to take Adeline away after New Year, 1949. Aunt Baba had stayed in Shanghai whilst Father, Niang, Ye Ye, Fourth Brother and Little Sister.

1. Adeline’s actions in relation to Wu Chun-mei’s birthday party were both sneaky and disobedient. Who do you blame for her behaviour? Explain. (Chapter 13).
2. List the things that Niang and her father accuse Adeline of when her friends come to visit her at home. (Chapter 14)
3. What reasons do her parents give Adeline for sending her away to school? (Chapter 14)
4. Why was Adeline in danger from the Communists? Explain how she is saved from them. (Chapter 15)

Chapters 16 – 17
Summary - Chapter 16: Hong Kong
Uncle Jean, Aunt Reine, Victor and Claudine (cousins of Adeline) and Adeline took a boat to sail to Hong Kong. On the boat, Adeline was treated equally, like a family that she belonged to. On arrival to the new house in Hong Kong, Adeline’s parents completely ignore her. Ye Ye shows Adeline the way Chinese characters are formed and immediately, it interests Adeline in learning Chinese again. Victor decides not to go on a Sunday outing to keep Adeline company. In return, Adeline gives him her ‘Paper Magic’ book.

Summary - Chapter 17: Boarding School in Hong Kong
The Schillings left Hong Kong for Geneva on Thursday morning. Two days later, an hour after lunch on Saturday afternoon, Adeline is taken to Sacred Heart, a boarding school.

1. In what ways does the Schilling’s treatment contrast to that of Adeline’s own family? (Chapter 16)
2. How had Ye Ye changed in the time that Adeline was away? (page 168 Chapter 16)
3. Why does Ye Ye believe the Chinese language is still important for Adeline? (page 171 Chapter 16)
4. How does Adeline describe her grandfather on page 180? How did this come about?
5. What makes Adeline happy at the end of Chapter 17? Why might this be the case?

Chapters 18 - 20
Summary - Chapter 18: Miserable Sunday
Two years later. Summer, 1951. Adeline’s number (37) is called out to be given an egg. But after 730 eggless days, Adeline is suspicious of the sudden egg. In the bathroom, Adeline overhears that some of her classmates are sorry for her.

Summary - Chapter 19: End of Term
Each of the girls are going home but only Adeline stayed behind for the summer holidays.

Summary - Chapter 20: Pneumonia
Adeline’s headache further develops into Pneumonia. After she is discharged from hospital, her Father takes her home. Upon arrival, she learns that Third Brother has also arrived at Hong Kong. Big Brother and Second Brother left over a year ago to go to university in England. Big Sister moved back to Tianjin
with her husband and their baby daughter. Adeline is afraid her parents will force her into an arranged marriage after she finishes school and she won’t be able to go to England.

1. Explain how Adeline “saved face” in the egg incident at school. (Chapter 18)
2. What is it about King Lear that appeals to Adeline? What connections are there to her own family? (Chapter 18)
3. Briefly explain the term “serendipity.” (page 197, Chapter 19).
4. What advice does Ye Ye give to Adeline? (Chapter 20)
5. How does Monica Lim’s life differ from Adeline’s life?
6. Why was Adeline “full of inarticulate emotion?” (page 194)
7. What does Adeline dream of doing? (pages 200-201)
8. How does Ye Ye support Adeline after she arrives home and how does she intend to repay him? (pages 205-208)

**Chapters 21 - 22**

**Summary - Chapter 21: Play – writing Competition**

After a week staying at home, Adeline went back to school, although it was still holidays. Upon reading in the library, Adeline finds a magazine with an announcement of a play-writing competition. Chinese New Year, 1952. No contact came from home and although it had been after six months, there was no news of the play. March, 1952. Adeline’s Grandfather dies. One Saturday, Adeline is called home because her father has found out that she entered the International Play-writing competition and that she had won first prize. Therefore, her father agrees to allow her to go to a university in England to study obstetrics at medical school.

**Summary - Chapter 22: Letter From Aunt Baba**

22 September, 1952. Aunt Baba writes Adeline a letter to say congratulations on going to Oxford, England with Third Brother and that she was living in Shanghai on Avenue Joffre with Miss Chien and two maids. Aunt Baba also retells the story of Chinese Cinderella. In a way, both Ye Xian and Cinderella are like Adeline: children who are mourning for their dead mothers. Aunt Baba also congratulates her on winning the prestigious international play-writing competition.

1. How is Adeline finally able to convince her father to allow her to attend university? (Chapter 21)
2. What was sad about the timing of Ye Ye’s death and Adeline’s competition win? (Chapter 21)
3. “Like Ye Xian, you have defied the odds and garnered triumph through your own efforts.” (page 225, Chapter 22) To whom is Aunt Baba comparing Adeline and why?
4. Compare the Chinese Cinderella folk tale with the European version. In what ways are they similar/different? Create a table to compare the two.
Analysing characters

The reader can find out about characters in a text from:

- Their words:
  - In dialogue
  - In reported speech
- The way a character interacts with other characters
- A character’s thoughts
- What other characters say about them
- Their behaviour and actions in the novel/film – especially in difficult or dangerous situations
- Figurative language that describes them e.g. similes and metaphors
- Adverbs and descriptive verbs that tell us how a character speaks or behaves

1. Using the above mind map as a guide, analyse the following characters:
   - Adeline
   - YeYe
   - Nai Nai
   - Niang
   - Father
   - Big Sister
   - Third Brother
   - Aunt Baba

2. What impression do you get of Adeline’s relationship with her family, particularly her father? Select and comment upon three quotations.
**Creating character through implication**

Much of the information the reader gains about Niang’s character and motivation is gained indirectly through her actions and words, rather than from Adeline’s explicit descriptions of her. The only explicit statement that Adeline gives about Niang is very brief and comes at the end of her account. This statement has been included below.

In the following exercise, sentences that have indirect or implied information have been listed. For each example, write down what characteristics of Niang are implied for each extract.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implied examples</th>
<th>Implied characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Niang was dressed in a dark brown Parisian silk dress, with dangling pearl earrings and a string of large pearls around her neck.</td>
<td>• stylish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• expensive taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• non-traditional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surprised and hurt, Niang bent down to pick up her baby, who was wriggling and resisting with all her might. An unnatural hush fell upon the room.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Keep still!” Niang screamed futilely, again and again, in a piercing voice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This proved simply too much for Niang. Thoroughly exasperated, she gave a stinging slap across her baby’s face.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberately and viciously, Niang now set about beating her daughter in earnest. Her blows landed indiscriminately on Little Sister’s ears, cheeks, neck and head.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niang glared at me. Her large, prominent eyes appeared to be popping out of their orbits with fury. “How dare you!” she hissed. Fuming with rage, Niang slowly extended her right arm and pointed her index finger at me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Get out!” she snarled in a cold, distinctive voice. “I shall never forgive you! Never! Never! You’d better watch out from now on! You will pay for your arrogance!”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Explicit example**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explicit characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In those few moments, we had understood everything. Not only about Niang, but also about all the grown-ups. Now that Nai Nai was dead, there was no doubt about who was in charge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Genre: Autobiography**

Autobiography and biography are very popular genres. What is the difference?

They are both windows into the lives of others.

Consider the following quotations in the light of Adeline Yen Mah’s story and your own views on the writing of life stories:

‘*Autobiography is probably the most respectable form of lying.*’ Humphrey Carpenter, 1982

‘*Autobiography begins with a sense of being alone. It is an orphan form.*’ John Berger, 1992

‘*Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something truly disgraceful.*’ George Orwell, 1944

‘*Part of the genre’s attraction is the notion that we will discover more about ourselves if we read about the lives of others.*’ Richard Freadman, 2011

1. When reading such a story, do you compare the life to your own?
2. How easy do you think it is to write honestly about experiences that have affected you, or are all views subjective in the final analysis?
3. Adeline Yen Mah chose the title *Chinese Cinderella* for the title of her autobiography. What do you think the significance of the title is? How does it prepare us for the type of story we are told?

**Setting**

1. Where is the story set?
   Consider:
   - Time
   - Places
   - Historical context (background)
   - Social context (background)
2. How important is the setting to the text as a whole?
**Plot**

Identify the following plot elements (use your overall knowledge of the plot and the chapter headings as a guide).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The main problem:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rising action:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climax:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolution:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Point of View**

This story is told in **first person narrative** - from the point of view or perspective of the main character. It is identified by the use of personal pronouns such as ‘I’, ‘my’ and ‘we’.

- ‘As soon as I got home from school, Aunt Baba noticed the silver medal dangling from the left breast-pocket of my uniform.’ (page 1)
- ‘We had nothing to wear except our school uniforms.’ (page 41)

First person narrative helps the reader feel as if they are being told the story directly from the lips of the author. In *Chinese Cinderella*, it makes us feel as if Adeline is telling the story just to us. Find two other examples from the novel that show the story has been written from Adeline’s point of view.

**Example 1:**

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

**Example 2:**

____________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________

---

**Voice**

*Chinese Cinderella* is a series of small windows into how Adeline was feeling at the time, how particular events affected her and marked her for life. Her voice comes through vividly in her writing, bringing to life each scene as she unveils to us the raw emotion she felt, her uncertainty and confusion.

Adeline describes tremendous lows, such as when her little duck is killed by the dog: ‘I was overwhelmed with horror. My whole world turned desolate’ (p.96) and at the death of her grandfather (p.213) – she feels as if the world will end for her at these times.

Similarly, less frequently, but no less eloquently, her highs are powerful and all encompassing. Upon hearing of her writing competition win, and finding her father pleased, Adeline felt: ‘My whole being vibrated with all the joy in the world. I only had to stretch out my hand to reach the stars’ (p.220) As a result of this glorious win, Adeline’s father agrees to send her to University in England to study medicine, though she would prefer literature. To her: ‘Does it matter what you do after you get to heaven?’ (p.220)

She quotes Wordsworth to describe her feelings: ‘Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive’ (p.221)
The descriptions of Adeline’s powerful highs and lows capture her voice most effectively. Although there are simple, straightforward descriptions, the power of her writing lies in the depth of feeling in her most extreme moments. These, set against a life of study and emotional deprivation, give the book an extraordinary force and insight of great strength.

**Structure**

This autobiography is written in chronological order. It relies on the memories of Adeline presenting us with vignettes, or small scenes, from her childhood. Because of this, the book often jumps periods during which Adeline either may remember little, or little of importance happens. Other scenes are vividly recalled.

The author writes: ‘Although ‘Chinese Cinderella’ was written when I was in my late 50’s, inside I am still the same little child yearning for the love of my parents.’

1. How easy do you think it would be to recall events from so many years ago?
2. How effective is the use of vignettes in telling the story? Does a series of vignettes really enable us to come to a true understanding of what the life lived was like?
3. Why, when we reconsider our lives, do certain scenes come to mind whilst others are forgotten?

**Language Techniques**

Adeline Yen Mah shapes our understanding of the world in which she grew up through her choice of language techniques, which help keep us interested in her story.

Language techniques include:

- Adjectives and detailed descriptions
- first person narrative
- rhetorical questions
- direct speech
- similes

Each language feature has an effect on us. For example, adjectives describe. These, together with detailed descriptions, help us picture the scene. The use of first person narrative and rhetorical questions help the reader feel involved in the story, as we feel that Adeline is talking directly to us, like she would to a special friend. Similes help create a visual image in our minds about what is being described. Direct speech or dialogue gives us exact information about conversations between the characters and helps us imagine them talking to each other.
Adjectives/detailed descriptions
Her use of adjectives and detailed descriptions helps us to visualise the scenes and understand the characters she describes. Read the following passage taken from the novel and visualise the scene as it is described. It has had the adjectives (and some adverbs) removed.

Father’s house was situated on Avenue Joffre, deep in the heart of the French Concession. It was a building, just like all the other houses within the same ‘long tang’, a cluster of houses surrounded by a wall. Father’s chauffeur drove us from the station through the lane of our ‘long tang’, turned left into an alley-way, and stopped in front of a gate. Father led us into a garden, with a lawn lined by bushes, a tree with blooms, and a wishing-well next to a dog-house. A German shepherd rushed out, jumped excitedly at the sight of Father, but barked at us. I glanced briefly at the animal with its teeth and ears. Father noticed and said to me, ‘His name is Jackie. Don’t be afraid of him. He won’t dare bite you.’ (pages 25-26)

- Describe the houses
- What was the alley-way like?
- What type of gate was it?
- What was the garden like?
- Did the German shepherd look friendly?

Now reread the paragraph including the adjectives the author actually used:

Father’s shanghai house was situated on Avenue Joffre, deep in the heart of the French Concession. It was a big, square, dark-grey concrete building, just like all the other sixty-nine houses within the same ‘long tang’, a cluster of houses surrounded by a communal wall. Father’s chauffeur drove us from the station through the main lane of our ‘long tang’, turned left into a narrower alley-way, and stopped in front of a wrought-iron gate. Father led us into a charming garden, with a small lawn lined by clipped camellia bushes, a magnolia tree with wonderfully fragrant blooms, and a wishing-well next to a wooden dog-house. A large, ferocious-looking German shepherd rushed out, jumped excitedly at the sight of Father, but barked at us. I glanced briefly at the large, brutish animal with its sharp teeth and pointed ears. Father noticed and said to me, ‘His name is Jackie. Don’t be afraid of him. He won’t dare bite you.’

How does this change our view? Adjectives are words that tell us more about nouns. They can describe what kind, what colour or how many. If bold adjectives are used your writing will produce vivid pictures in the readers mind.

1. Draw a picture of Niang from Adeline’s description on page 4 Chapter 1. Use an A4 blank page.
2. Illustrate the details of the streetscape described on page 31 Chapter 6. Use an A4 blank page.

Rhetorical questions
These are questions that do not need an answer. They invite the reader to pause and consider a response. This helps to make us feel involved in the story.

• On page 132, Adeline describes her thoughts after Niang accuses her of bragging about being elected class president: ‘What’ll my friends say this time? How will my voters look at me? Will I be the laughing stock of my class? Will everyone sneer and whisper about me during recess?’

Find another two examples of rhetorical questions on page 133.

Example 1:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Example 2:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Direct speech
Direct speech records exactly what the characters say to each other and helps us imagine them saying it and how it is said.

• Adeline’s father notices the medal she won for topping her class pinned to her chest and says, ‘Is the left side of your chest heavier?’ Father continued, beaming with pride. ‘Are you tilting?’ (page 12)

Find another two examples from the story of direct speech with information that describes clearly how it is said.

Example 1:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________

Example 2:
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________
Example 2:

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

Similes

A simile compares one thing to another, using the words ‘like’ or ‘as’. They help create a picture in the reader’s mind.

- One example of a simile in *Chinese Cinderella* is found on page 111: ‘I lied, squirming like a worm.’

Here Adeline compares herself to a squirming worm because she feels so uncomfortable and unhappy about lying to Niang. We have an image in our minds of Adeline being like a poor, vulnerable worm, squirming because it cannot find the earth to burrow safely into.

You will find another two examples of similes on pages 111-112. Copy them and explain what they mean in the context in which they have been used.

Example 1:

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

Example 2:

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________
Themes

Events that occur in the plot of a story indicate its themes. In *Chinese Cinderella*, the main themes are:

- family and relationships
- abandonment and loneliness
- self-esteem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family &amp; relationships</th>
<th>Abandonment &amp; loneliness</th>
<th>Self-esteem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Example:</em> Adeline is unhappy with her family life, but does not tell anyone out of embarrassment. ‘They didn’t know that, in front of them, I was desperate to keep up the pretence that I came from a normal, loving family.’ (page 63)</td>
<td><em>Example:</em> Adeline wonders what her fate will be when she is punished for her friends visiting her. She is constantly afraid of being made an orphan. ‘What’s going to happen to me? Will I be sold?’ (page 131)</td>
<td><em>Example:</em> Adeline is constantly reminded that the treatment of her and her siblings is her fault (despite that not really being true). ‘If you had not been born, mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.’ (page 3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Linking quotations to themes**

Read the quotes below, identify which theme each relates to and explain how it illustrates that theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>How quote relates to theme(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you. You are bad luck.’ (page 3)</td>
<td>This quote relates to the theme of <strong>self-esteem</strong>. The reader feels very sorry for Adeline and it is easy to see why she does not feel good about herself and carries guilt if she is constantly spoken to in this way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Continue studying hard and bringing honour to the Yen family name so we can be proud of you.’ (page 11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Unlike my siblings, no-one looked down on me.’ (Refers to people at school) (page 14)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I was winning the medal every week and wearing it constantly... it was the only way to make father take notice and be proud of me.’ (page 16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>How quote relates to theme(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘To her we are not separate people. Over here, we have become one single unit known as <em>all of you</em>.’ (page 28)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘One by one they were greeted and led away by anxious mothers. Nobody came for me.’ (page 30)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘We merely want you to acknowledge your errors in the past... We’ll only give you the tram fares if you are truly contrite.’ (page 45)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘In no time at all big sister went over to the other side. I knew Niang loathed me and despised my aunt.’ (page 59)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘They didn’t know that, in front of them, I was desperate to keep up the pretence that I came from a normal, loving family.’ (page 63)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘It all stems from mama dying when you were born...things were much nicer when she was alive. You made her go away’. (page 74)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What was it that bothered me...it was the loss of the nicest parts of Third Brother that saddened me.’ (page 80)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I took the duckling to my heart...it comforted me to know I was needed.’ (page 84)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘As soon as I heard Aunt Baba’s footsteps, I started feeling better immediately.’ (page 91)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I only took yours because you’re the one least likely to give me trouble afterwards.’ (page 97)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I imagined Niang introducing me to a strange man and ordering me to marry him. The thought filled me with horror and fear.’ (page 100)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘For the first time she was nice to me and I felt very close to her.’ (page 104)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>How quote relates to theme(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Nothing will ever come of you...you don’t belong in this house.’ (page 113)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I don’t want her to grow up like Big Sister. She is going to be different.’ (page 122)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Now they knew the pathetic truth! Unwanted and unloved by my parents! How long did take for a person to die of shame?’ (page 129)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The thought of being separated from my aunt filled me with dread.’ (page 131)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘...does he truly hate me or is he just going along with her because he loves her more and wants a peaceful life?’ (page 133)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I was such a no-body that he didn’t remember my name.’ (page 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘They made me feel like I was their third child.’ (page 160)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I felt I was part of the Schilling family and no longer the unwanted daughter who always came last.’ (page 161)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I was overjoyed! Not only had Niang finally acknowledged me, she had given me a task to perform!’ (page 169)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Together, we watched the car drive off. I was overwhelmed by his chivalry, but could find no words sufficient to express my gratitude.’ (page 177)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘There is a God after all.’ (page 183)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘No way will I ever allow myself to be the object of anyone’s charity or pity.’ (page 194)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Into her lips, I injected my loneliness, isolation and feelings of being unwanted. To my...’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quote</td>
<td>How quote relates to theme(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heroine, I gave everything of myself.’ (page 210)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I was looking uglier and uglier as I grew older and taller.’ (page 213)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I wondered why he was being so nice.’ (page 218)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘For once, he was proud of me...My whole being vibrated with all the joy in the world.’ (page 220)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Analysing Extracts**

How does this description of Niang, Adeline’s stepmother, separate her from her husband’s first children?

‘Our stepmother, whom we called Niang, was a seventeen-year-old Eurasian beauty fourteen years his junior. Father always introduced her to his friends as French wife, though she was actually half French and half Chinese. Besides Chinese, she also 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.’ (p. 4)

What does this extract tell us about where Adeline fits in her family?

‘... they were already ‘special’ from the moment of their birth. Though nobody actually said so, it was simply understood that everyone considered Niang’s ‘real’ children better-looking and smarter than her stepchildren – simply superior in every way. Who dared disagree?’ (p. 10)

How important to Adeline are these words from her grandfather Ye Ye? Explain why.

‘You mustn’t talk like that! You have your whole life ahead of you. Everything is possible! I’ve tried to tell you over and over that far from being garbage, you are precious and special. Being top of your class merely confirms this. But you can vanquish the demons only when you yourself are convinced of your own worth.’ (p. 181)

One of the highlights of this book is learning about Chinese customs, traditions, and values. What is Ye Ye teaching Adeline in the following extract?

‘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 as much.’ (p. 151)

Name another two customs that we learn something about.

Re-read the extract on page 125 ‘A crowd of your little friends.’ to page 129 ‘I’ll never forget your loyalty.’

How do Adeline’s feelings about school contrast with her feelings about her home?

How does this heighten her misery at home?

Discuss the methods that the author uses here to evoke our sympathy.
What do the following passages tell us about the importance of books and education to Adeline?

‘I sauntered into the library and picked out a few books. What a beautiful room! Away from all the noise, giggles, and excitement. My haven. My sanctuary. The place where I belonged! My real world!’ (p. 166)

“I read because I have to. It drives everything else from my mind. It lets me escape to find other worlds. The people in my books become more real than anyone else. They make me forget.” (p. 180)

‘To me, writing was pure pleasure. It thrilled me to be able to escape the horrors of my daily life in such a simple way. When I wrote, I forgot that I was an unwanted daughter who had caused her mother’s death. Instead, I could be anybody I wished to be. In my narratives, I poured out everything that I dared not say out loud. I was friends with the beautiful princesses and dashing knights who lived in my imagination. I was no longer the lonely little girl bullied by her siblings. Instead I was the female warrior Mulan, who would rescue her aunt and Ye Ye from harm.’ (p. 53)

Why is it so important for Adeline to gain high marks? In what way does she lead a ‘double’ life?

‘But if I tried to be really good and studied very very hard, perhaps things would become different one day, I would think. Meanwhile, I must not tell anyone how bad it really was. I should just go to school every day and carry inside me this dreadful loneliness, a secret I could never share. Otherwise, it would be over, and Father and Niang would never come to love me.’ (p. 55)

The story’s setting was during Adeline’s childhood in the late 1930s and early 1940s when Tianjin, China was still divided into foreign concessions despite the fact that the Japanese army ruled the entire country outside these foreign concessions. How do we know that Adeline’s powerful and rich family was rich and powerful?

‘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 this 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 tiled roof.’ (pages 5 - 6)
Things changed drastically when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and declared war on the US and UK. When Japanese troops invaded the foreign concessions, Adeline’s powerful father had already fled to Shanghai where he was joined by Adeline and her siblings two years later. Even when World War II ended and Japan surrendered, this was still a time of political and civil unrest for China, with war erupting between the Nationalists and the Communists. At the height of the civil war, Adeline’s parents took her from Shanghai to a missionary convent school. The administrators and the teachers were astonished by Adeline’s “enrolment” in the school while everyone else was fleeing and leaving the city. Why did her parents do this?

‘Didn’t your parents tell you the Communists don’t believe in God and hate foreigners? A Chinese student in a foreign convent school is seen by them as a member of the same religious order and will be persecuted along with the nuns if they win the war.’

I could only stare at her dumbly as she continued.

‘What are your parents thinking of? Everyone is fleeing Tianjin for Shanghai or Hong Kong. And here you are coming from the opposite direction!’ (p. 129)
Overview Questions

1. Choose three words or phrases from the description of Adeline’s meeting with her father (pages 218 - 221) which are effective in creating a sense of tension.

2. Adeline experiences a wide range of emotions during this encounter. Read the extract again and try to identify as many of these emotions as possible, providing a quotation and comment for each one. Think about how her emotions change during this time. Explain your reasons for choosing each one.

3. How does the author convey the tensions and conflicts between the various characters in the text? Explain in detail, using examples from the text.

4. Using appropriate quotations, comment upon the different views on education that are expressed in this autobiography.

5. Select and comment upon three words or phrases that illustrate Adeline’s isolation from her family.

6. How does the author demonstrate the affluent nature of Adeline’s upbringing? Find and comment upon three examples.

7. When Adeline’s father agrees to send her to university in England it is on the condition that she study medicine. Although Adeline wishes to become a writer she does not challenge her father and accepts his proposal with good grace. How do you think the reader is supposed to feel about this? Does it alter our response to Adeline’s character?

8. How do Adeline’s aspirations differ from those of her father? Contrast their differing ideas of success by selecting and commenting upon appropriate quotations.
Chinese Cinderella

Creative Activities

Choose **ONE** of the following to complete:

1. Create a display that outlines the main events in the story.

2. Construct a scrapbook of one of the main characters. Explain why you have included these images/artefacts.

3. Make a diorama of a scene from the story.

4. Collect a series of images or artefacts that represent the main character. Write a quote from the book that illustrates each one.