

# CHARACTERS IN CHINESE CINDERELLA

## **Adeline Yen (Jun-Ling / Wu-Mei)**

Adeline is the narrator and protagonist of the memoir. She is blamed for the death of her mother and resented by her siblings and Father. Father's second wife, Niang, also hates Adeline and makes her the primary target of her fury. Her family life becomes defined by abuse and neglect, both from her siblings and her parents. An excellent writer and scholar, she wins frequent awards for being the top student. Though she hopes to earn Father's love by bringing him honour in this way, he pays her little attention, causing her to have a very low view of herself. The primary arc of Adeline's character development is her journey to recognizing her own self-worth. She is aided in this by the love of Aunt Baba and Ye Ye, though they are unable to shield her from Father and Niang's abuse. Both play a vital role in fostering Adeline's compassion and thoughtfulness in the face of overwhelming cruelty. Adeline makes a critical step towards believing in her own value when she realizes that her self-contempt hurts those who do love her and want to see her succeed, particularly Ye Ye. When she realises that Ye Ye's only hope in life is that she will overcome the difficulties of her childhood, Adeline's compassion and wish to honour her grandfather begin to supersede the negative messages she has absorbed from her parents. Emboldened by this, she enters and wins an international playwriting competition, causing Father to recognize her potential and send her to college in England. This offers a symbolic and literal escape from the oppression of her childhood.

## **Niang (Jeanne Proserpi)**

Niang is Father's second wife and Adeline's abusive stepmother, the novel's primary antagonist. She is a half-French, half-Chinese, and her European heritage contributes to her vanity. She despises the five children of her husband's first marriage, favouring her own two biological children by giving them good food, fashionable modern clothing, and every luxury, while denying the stepchildren anything but the barest minimum. Even towards her own children, Niang is occasionally abusive: when Little Sister is reunited with Niang as a toddler, Niang beats her furiously for not wanting to be held and for accidentally breaking her necklace. She demonstrates narcissism, becoming enraged any time that Adeline has any sort of success or happiness. Though the youngest adult in the house by many years, Niang dominates the family due to her control over Father and her intimidating manner. She subjugates both Ye Ye and Aunt Baba, especially when they show compassion to the stepchildren.

## **Father (Joseph Yen)**

Father is depicted as largely negligent of his own children. He is concerned more with his success as a businessman and his honour in the community. The rare occasions when he shows Adeline any affection are when she brings him honour by winning academic awards. Aside from that, he forgets her own name, cruelly kills her pet duckling PLT for his own pleasure, beats her with a dog whip, and constantly tells her she will amount to nothing. He cooperates with Niang's various schemes to humiliate and oppress the five children of his first marriage. After the death of his mother, he orders all pictures of his first wife destroyed and forbids anyone from speaking about her, indicating a desire to put his past life behind him and commit himself fully to Niang. When the Japanese occupy Tianjin, he is pressured to submit to being business partners. He resists this and flees to Shanghai and hides there for years, leaving most of his family behind. Father does finally recognize Adeline's potential after she wins the playwriting contest, but this seems to be less out of recognition of her value and more out of appreciation for the honour that he receives through her accomplishments.

### **Grandfather (Ye Ye)**

Ye Ye is Adeline's Grandfather, the father of Adeline's Father and Aunt Baba. He lives with the family and is dependent on them. Although Ye Ye should be the patriarch of the family and have a role of authority, he is subjugated by Niang (and by Father's commitment to her). Over the course of the novel, he becomes increasingly sad and defeated, "imprisoned by his love for his only son." Ye Ye is compassionate toward his grandchildren, secretly giving them money to pay the tram fare and giving much-needed love and affirmation to Adeline. Ye Ye expresses that he is saddened by the way many of the children turned out, especially Big Sister, and he hopes that Adeline will rise to a better future through her intelligence and compassion. He encourages Adeline to believe in her ability to shape her own destiny and to reject the messages she has received from Niang, Father, and her siblings, which ultimately gives her the necessary initiative to enter the playwriting competition.

### **Grandmother (Nai Nai)**

Nai Nai is the wife of Ye Ye, and like him she lives with the family and is dependent on them. Nai Nai was born in a more traditional era of China, and thus had her feet bound as a young child, crushing the bones and permanently maiming her. Nai Nai resents this for the rest of her life, and she encourages Adeline multiple times to be thankful that times have changed. Nai Nai serves mainly to highlight the changing role of women in China as the country modernizes. Although Adeline still faces hardship and some limiting of possibilities as a girl, these obstacles are nothing compared to what Nai Nai experienced. Nai Nai dies of a stroke when Adeline is in primary school.

### **Aunt Baba**

Aunt Baba is the sister of Adeline's Father. She is unmarried, lives with the family, and is financially dependent on them, meaning that she is not in the position to defy Niang or Father when they are cruel and abusive. Although Aunt Baba was close friends with Adeline's mother, she does not share the family's resentment of Adeline. Rather, she is the most consistently loving and supportive figure in Adeline's life. When Adeline brings home her report cards and certificates, Aunt Baba cherishes them so much that she keeps them locked in her personal safe next to her jewellery. Although Aunt Baba cannot compensate for the missing love from Adeline's parents, her support does soften the blow. Aunt Baba is the first person to tell Adeline that she is precious and smart enough to become anything she wants to be in life, helping her eventually realize her own self-worth. Father and Niang are angered by Aunt Baba's love for Adeline and view her as a "bad influence" on their daughter. They successfully separate them and intercept any letters they try to send each other for several years, effectively ending Aunt Baba's involvement halfway through the memoir, when Adeline is sent to boarding school in Tianjin.

### **Third Brother (James)**

Third Brother is the youngest son of Father's first marriage, and the only sibling that Adeline has a fond relationship with. Although Third Brother shares some of Adeline's kindness and compassion, in the presence of his other siblings he adopts their cruelty, to avoid standing out and becoming a target himself. This sometimes involves hurting Adeline – at the urging of his brothers, he convinces Adeline to drink apple juice with urine in it, betraying her trust in him for the sake of a prank. In this way, Third Brother demonstrates the way that a toxic family can overwhelm an instinct towards kindness. Although he desires to be kind, he succumbs to the pressure to be ruthless to lessen his own suffering. Adeline recognizes this and grieves the slow loss of his integrity, seeing that in a better environment he could be a better person. Even so, Third Brother's compassion persists: he

helps Adeline hold a funeral for her dead pet PLT, he tells her that life will not always be so grim, and he shows love and respect for Ye Ye.

### **Wu Chun-mei**

Wu Chun-mei is the daughter of a wealthy merchant family and becomes Adeline's best friend during her years in Shanghai. The two bond over their love of reading, and Chun-mei often loans Adeline books to read in exchange for help with arithmetic. Although Chun-mei is unaware of Adeline's abusive home life, she seems to guess that her circumstances may be difficult and responds by walking to and from school with Adeline for miles as an act of solidarity. She also refuses to have her birthday party unless Adeline can attend, showing Adeline that she is cherished by the people around her. Chun-mei demonstrates the ways in which good friends are invaluable to those enduring abusive or traumatic situations. She inadvertently discovers the abuse that Adeline suffers from her parents when, she organizes a surprise party of friends who follow Adeline home and witness Niang screaming and beating Adeline until she bleeds. As Chun-mei leaves, she shouts at Niang and Father that such treatment is cruel and unfair.

### **Big Sister (Lydia)**

Big Sister is the first daughter of Father's first marriage. She is cruel and manipulative, using her debilitated left arm as an excuse to bully her siblings into doing her chores. Early on, she is resentful of any time that Adeline earns Father's brief affection through her academic achievements, finding ways to make Adeline suffer for it and inspiring the other siblings to be similarly cruel. Although Big Sister is initially defiant of Niang's mistreatment, Niang easily buys her off with bribes and gifts. Big Sister becomes a spy for Niang and is soon similarly haughty and vicious, demonstrating herself to have virtually no moral character. When Big Sister is seventeen years old, Niang marries her off to a man twice her age. Though Big Sister seems happy about the arrangement, it disturbs Adeline and causes her to fear that the same fate will be thrust upon her. In this way, Big Sister represents an alternate fate for Adeline, the threat that comes with being a woman in 20<sup>th</sup> Century China.

### **Big Brother (Gregory)**

Big Brother is eldest son of Father's first marriage. Though he is occasionally kind to Adeline, Big Brother is most often depicted as a mean and selfish prankster, though he does share some kinship with his own brothers. When Father decides that he wants to watch his dog kill one of the children's pet ducklings, Big Brother picks Adeline's since he knows she will not retaliate, demonstrating his cowardice and further showing how a toxic family can condition children to be cruel to each other. Big Brother is also initially the most defiant to Niang's mistreatment, though he is the first to be sent to study overseas, and so he receives the earliest escape.

### **Second Brother (Edgar)**

Second Brother is the third child of Father's first marriage, stepson of Niang, and middle of the stepchildren. Second Brother is the cruellest sibling towards Adeline. He constantly demeans her and physically assaults her (often punching her hard in the back of the head). Second Brother similarly despises Niang and the humiliation she puts them through, though his cruelty echoes her own. This demonstrating the way that children often absorb the behaviour they see modelled by their parents.

### **Fourth Brother (Franklin)**

Fourth Brother is Niang's eldest and favourite child and is given every luxury that can be offered. He is depicted as haughty, enjoying his elevated position over his older stepsiblings. When Little Sister,

being reunited with Niang as a toddler, struggles against her mother, Fourth Brother screams at her to try to please Niang. As an older child, he tries to drop heavy encyclopedias on Ye Ye's head as a prank, though it would certainly result in a serious injury. He seems to know that he is impervious to punishment since he is Niang's favourite.

### **Aunt Reine**

Aunt Reine is Niang's older sister and Adeline's aunt. She and her family rescues Adeline from Tianjin and the Communists by taking her with them aboard a ferry destined for Hong Kong. Although Adeline assumes that Aunt Reine will be just like Niang, she quickly discovers that her aunt is quite the opposite. Aunt Reine treats Adeline as if she were one of her own children, a stark contrast to Niang's blatant favouritism. When, aboard the ferry, someone will have to sleep on a low cot instead of an uncomfortable bed, Aunt Reine suggests drawing lots and puts herself in the draw. This is a shock to Adeline, who is so accustomed to Niang's narcissism that she cannot fathom a mother figure who is not domineering and selfish. Aunt Reine and her family play the critical part of demonstrating to Adeline what a healthy, normally functioning family can look like. The days that Adeline spends aboard the ferry with Aunt Reine and her family are some of the happiest of her young life. However, in the presence of Niang, Aunt Reine does not object to the unequal treatment of Adeline, indicating that she, too, falls subject to Niang's power.

### **Claudine**

Claudine is Aunt Reine's daughter and a cousin of Adeline. Like her brother, Claudine shares the love of her family with Adeline and demonstrates what a happy family can look like. Her good character is highlighted when, having drawn the lot to sleep on the uncomfortable cot on the ferry, she does so happily, without complaint. This is an act of selflessness that Adeline has never seen from any of her siblings, and Claudine's contentedness makes a strong impression on Adeline.

### **Victor**

Victor is the older brother of Claudine. He is protective of his sister and sensitive to her feelings, even though he does occasionally tease her. He is good-humoured and kind, creating a sharp contrast to Adeline's own brothers. When Victor sees that Niang treats Adeline unfairly, he shows more courage than his mother and openly defies Niang by choosing to stay home to keep Adeline company. Adeline is overwhelmed by his chivalry, having never experienced anything close to it from her own brothers, and she gifts Victor a book of origami.