

The Merit of English Section

Senior Division

Name of Winner : Cheung Ching Huen

Name of School : St. Paul's Co-educational College

Book Title : *Falling Leaves*

Author : Adeline Yen Mah

Publisher : Penguin Books

Falling Leaves is an autobiography written by the renowned Chinese author Adeline Yen Mah who currently resides in the United States. In the book, she told the bitter-sweet tales of her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, which are vividly related to the twists and turns of her family and the rise and wane of her homeland.

Although born in a wealthy family, her childhood was nowhere near happy. She suffered from the prejudice and

insult from her siblings since an early age as her birth was believed to have caused their mother's death. Moreover, her relationship with Niang, her Eurasian stepmother, was strained. Her inborn lofty and unyielding character dictated that she would never submit to Niang. As a result, she was sent to boarding schools, where no one cared about her.

Despite the fact that she had grown up in endless fear and solitude, she is optimistic and perseverant. She overcame multiple challenges and eventually self-actualized in the United Kingdom, where she earned a degree in Medicine. Towards the end of the book, she recounted her several marriages, her complicated relationships with her siblings and parents long after she stepped into her adulthood, and her visits to her motherland.

First and foremost, I am proud of young Adeline's

courage. Her courage as a child to defend herself in the face of her oppressive stepmother is unparalleled. Following the death of Adeline's grandmother, Niang became the de facto leader of the internal family affairs with absolute control over the finances. To demonstrate her authority, Niang banned Adeline's aunt Aunt Baba and Grandfather from giving pocket money to the children. On the other hand, she would only issue them to her stepchildren if they were as obedient as dogs which wag their tails to their master. Eventually, all the children but Adeline gave in. As a child, it was hard to resist the temptation of pocket money: it meant daily tiring and time-consuming trips to and from school on foot instead of on trams. This also meant that Niang would harbour a hatred for her. Yet, the reason why she insisted was astounding: faithfulness to her grandfather and Aunt Baba. She preserved the dignity of herself, her grandfather, and Aunt Baba under Niang's rule.

On another occasion, cruel Niang beat her own daughter Junqing. Raised by Aunt Baba, she could not recognize Niang. No one dared to speak up, not even Dad and Grandfather. Yet, brave Adeline stopped Niang immediately to protect her half-sister, at the expense of being driven out of the house. This made Niang hate Adeline until her death, as evidenced by Adeline not being entitled to receive a single dollar from Niang according to her will. Although there is an imbalance of power and family status between Adeline and Niang, Adeline had the courage to remain independent and fight back. Her sense of righteousness and her courage to defend herself and those she respected has earned her my admiration. Her heroism and resistance shone brightly in contrast to her siblings' submission. Being courageous to stand up for our dignity is indeed easier said than done.

Secondly, I highly commend the kind-heartedness of young Adeline. After the Reform and Opening Up of

China, Adeline, who was then a doctor in the US already, had the chance to visit her elder sister, who bullied her as a kid, in Tianjin. Adeline forgave the cruelty of her elder sister and promised to sponsor her sister's children to study abroad. Yet, she betrayed Adeline by writing to Niang about Adeline's contact with her and Junqing, which was banned by Niang. This is to appease Niang and get the greatest portion of her inheritance at the hour of her death. Cunning Niang and Adeline's elder sister are the foil of Adeline, making her benevolence shine. It is indeed hard to forgive someone who has deeply hurt us in the past. However, Adeline is able to overcome those feelings. Regardless of the fact that she grew up without much familial love, she planted her impartial love in other's lives without seeking return.

Thirdly, I am deeply touched by the writer's strong sense of national identity. Although living far away, her heart is always tied to her homeland. Her narration

skillfully blended the course of history with her own story, revealing her sentiments towards her motherland. In fact, the twists and turns in her life coincides with the ups and downs in modern Chinese history. For example, the fact that she grew up in the French territory of Shanghai before World War II indirectly led to her father's marriage of Niang, as a wife with European blood could earn him respect, fulfilling his desire for a higher social status. Not only did this directly lead to Adeline's sufferings, but it also made her aware of the discrimination against her own people by both foreigners and her own people because of historical reasons. Another example is the civil war in China. The war forced her flee to the United Kingdom to continue her studies. This experience made her even more aware of the interactions of Chinese and foreigners, allowing for her identity formation in the midst of political instability at home and being a diaspora in her host nation. Also, her reunion with Aunt Baba, her childhood guardian, after all

these years was only possible because of the Reform and Opening Up of China. Although she witnessed all the turmoil in modern Chinese history, still she is optimistic about China's future. Indeed, the interconnection between her life and Chinese history only made her prouder of her own Chinese identity. The title of the book *Falling Leaves*, a metaphor for her review of her several decades of extraordinary life as well as, more importantly, her origins, truly echoes with her mentality. Although she has lived abroad longer than she has resided in her homeland, she attaches firmly to her Chinese identity: for no matter how tall a tree is, falling leaves must return to its roots.

Adeline recounted her bitter-sweet memories in a compelling way. Her courage, benevolence, and faithfulness to her own culture left a deep impression on me. Although she dubbed herself the Chinese Cinderella, she is the true hero, both in her life and in my heart.