

The Concubine's Children, by Denise Chong, is a true story about a Chinese family and how both physical and emotional distance can tear generations of families apart. We are presented with the lives of the children of three generations, starting with the oldest, the story of May-ying, a concubine, and her husband, fellow wives and children. She manages to have three children, two female and one deformed male. They override her with guilt because of her inability to bear sons, and she takes out her frustration on her children who are educated in English and Chinese. Refusing to learn English for herself, she relies on her children to communicate with the outside world. However, Winnie, one of the daughters, decides to immerse herself in nothing but schoolwork all the time to distract herself from the men and alcohol with which her mother is involved. She eventually marries and has a child, Denise, the author of the book.

This book has the author recount the story as an omniscient narrator. The author has told the story in a detached fashion, with the narrator rarely reacting personally to the events, even when they recount horrific events. This style of writing often cheapens the content of the story, making it seem rather impersonal, even for nonfiction. The book itself was written recently, using the author's grandfather's letters as a guide. The author wrote the book in an attempt to better educate herself about her Chinese heritage, and about a nation that seemed foreign to her, a place "you'd find yourself if you dug a hole deep enough to come out the other side of the Earth."

The idea conveyed by means of the story is how Chinese culture places the importance of family at an unsurpassed level and how this becomes the demise of each of her family's prior generations. One example is May-ying, a woman who will sell her body if she knows she can take the profits and mail them back to her husband so he can continue the family. She looks at maintaining family in a Machiavellian fashion, putting her morals below all else, keeping the family together at all costs. In the end, however, this practice ends up being her end, as she becomes an old woman with nothing but debt and sorrow in her life.

The personalities of the main characters play a major role in the story. Chan Sam, May-ying's husband, is a man with a purpose, to build his home in a better place to maintain his family in. He lives only to maintain the family, and will stop at nothing to get funds to achieve this. May-ying is a woman who isn't very moral, and sees prostitution as merely a business transaction. Her superior beauty, as she soon realizes, is like a curse on her. Winnie, her daughter, is looked down upon for being unattractive, especially when compared with her mother. While these insults hurt, Winnie sees excelling at school as her only ticket out of this horrible life of violence. The major contrast between May-ying and she is done to show how different parent and child can be, and how often the child can even be more mature than the adult. These characters all bring out the theme of the story, showing how as generations become more modern, the desire to break free from the norm (putting family above all else) mounts and many are willing to take serious action.

The author manages to get the reader to like Winnie and to dislike May-ying, seeing the mother as a woman who doesn't own up to her responsibilities (except the family, of course), and a daughter who does the exact opposite. While most people's situations do not have such dire circumstances surrounding them, it does allow the reader to relate a bit, especially if the reader has ever quarreled with their parents. They are all very realistic, and this story lets the reader see how things used to be only sixty years ago.

The major parts of the plot are as follows: May-ying, in a life of prostitution and determination to maintain the family, has three children, one of

whom excels in their academic endeavors. This daughter, in turn, has a child, who goes on to be a successful writer and tries to find out about her past. They arrange the incidents of the story without a real climax, but with an emphasis on the author's belief of the monotony of Chinese life in the past. The author does not pace the plot, with lots of attention to detail. I think the pace was slowed down purposely to show how slowly life really was while the story was set. They can contrast some incidents. For example, May-ying's marriage, one of pain and angst, and Winnie's, one completely opposite, are examples of how while a family's name may remain the same, the people's actions may change.

The book does have a pervading mood, one of tedium and obedience, where all that matters is family and where one is trapped for the rest of their lives. For example, when May-ying mails most of her income to her husband, one cannot help feel they trap her, though she does eventually decide to be with other men. This mood is conveyed well, with lots of emphasis on the pointlessness of life, and how important it is to bear male children, to gather points for your next life.

The setting of this novel is extremely important. The story is set in both Vancouver and China, with constant moving within each separate country. Without this setting, most of the events wouldn't have occurred. For example, had May-ying and her husband Chan Sam lived together, she probably would have kept her behavior in check and not have had to become a prostitute. Also, time-wise, had the story occurred in the present day, nearly all of it wouldn't have happened. For example, the practice of hindering the growth of Chinese girls' feet with rope to keep them tiny would be looked upon as barbaric nowadays. The setting serves the purpose of allowing the reader to suspend their disbelief. It is hard for anyone living in the present day to believe that such things actually occurred, but if they show the reader that these events didn't happen in 1996, then they can make adjustments.

My main dislike with the book was the fact that it was presented with such indifference. I think more of the author's personal input would have been helpful. Certain events that the author obviously had to embellish due to lack of information were poorer than the rest. Due to inconsistencies and a general atmosphere of monotony, I couldn't recommend this book.

