Chen Huiqin


*Daughter of Good Fortune* is the memoir of Chen Huiqin, a woman of peasant origin, born in 1931 in a village in Jiading 嘉定 county near Shanghai. Her story has been recorded by her eldest daughter, Chen Shehong, who is an associate professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. The book is prefaced by Chen Shehong, who explains the origin of the book project, and introduced by Delia Davin, who outlines the field of memoirs and oral history on rural lives in China, and provides a summary of Chen Huiqin’s story against the backdrop of Chinese history since the 1930s.

In her preface, Chen Shehong gives a purely professional motivation for writing this book. Through conversations with her mother which were related to a research project, she realized her mother “had wonderful memories and that her life paralleled the challenges and changes of the modern Chinese nation.” Chen Shehong therefore “decided to be the pen through which her mother’s personal experiences would be written down” (p. x). The author gives a short description of her meticulous efforts to retrieve her mother’s memories and get the details right, and concludes that “[e]verything in the final version is [...] an accurate recording of Mother’s narrative” (p. xi). One wishes that Chen Shehong would have expressed a more self-critical reflection of her role in the project, given that: first, Chen Shehong, through her mother’s narrative, also records her own life; second, her own social achievements are an important element in this narrative of material progress and evidence of a poor peasant family’s upward social mobility; and, third, the book is published in English, with an American university press and thus with a particular audience in mind. Chen Shehong is definitely more than just the “pen” of her mother.

Chen Huiqin relates her life in chronological order, starting with the family background and poor living conditions of the 1930s in the first chapter (“Ancestral Home”) and concluding with old age in the last, sixteenth chapter (“Return to Ancestral Land”). The prosperity of old age actually builds the *telos* of the story, and the escape from rural living conditions is its core motif: “We are back to our native place. But it is no longer the place of rustic living conditions that we all tried to escape” (p. 220). Looking back at her life in the last paragraphs of the book, Chen Huiqin deems herself “a pretty lucky person” (p. 330) because the familial bonds have always been marked by mutual love and care. “Our current life is good, and we are grateful for the family and health we enjoy every
day” (p. 331). At various points in the narrative, Chen admits that the achievements of her family were beyond her imagination.

Chen Huiqin, “daughter of good fortune,” presents herself as an active person who shaped her own and her family’s fate, and resolutely pursued material and familial strategies throughout her life. At the same time, she is not exceptional because this is what all her relatives and neighbors did as well. Indeed, the most impressive aspect of the book is the insight it gives into survival strategies in an environment of scarce resources. This is particularly true for familial strategies in the form of marriages – in this book almost exclusively the result of match-making – and adoptions. It also relates to economic strategies pertaining to land, agriculture, sideline production and, finally, the transfer to non-agricultural jobs. With “reform and opening,” new opportunities for upward mobility became available. In the case of Chen Huiqin’s family, education was and is the core strategy, with her eldest daughter, the history professor who lives in the United States, being the ultimate proof of success: “Now this little country girl has a PhD degree, teaches in the United States, and owns this comfortable house. All of this was beyond my dreams. The greatest regret in my life is that I did not get an education” (p. 265). Finally, the state’s housing program and the privatization of the housing market provided an additional source of capital accumulation and social distinction. Individual family members bought and sold apartments, and moved ever closer to the big city. As a result of numerous strategic decisions, the family now lives in an urban environment, has adopted an urban life style and, with the incorporation of Jiading County into Shanghai Municipality in 1992, even has an urban hukou (household registration). Two family members deviated from the family’s collective wisdom of upward mobility. Chen Huiqin’s son quit his “iron rice bowl job” (p. 308) at Shanghai University of Science and Technology in order to become a business man. However, through hard work, he gradually expanded his business and acquired wealth, too. Chen’s grandson decided to study in Japan and not in the United States. Even though the grandparents did not understand his decision, they bought him an Apple computer as a gift. His grandmother advised him not to marry a Japanese girl and to return to China after his education. He promised to follow her first advice and to consider the second.

Chen Huiqin depicts her life as one marked by gradual changes. The Maoist excesses read as short interludes within a continuous history of political and social transformation. The Great Leap Forward was a “crazy period” (p. 88) in which “unscientific farming methods” (p. 91) were carried out, the family’s private plot was taken away, cooking became communal, and everybody suffered from hunger. The Cultural Revolution marked the beginning of “years of