

## BOOK REVIEW

### *All the King's Women*

By Mimi Chan

Hong Kong University Press, Aberdeen, Hong Kong, 2000, 176.pp. On-line ordering: <http://www.hkupress.org>

"I wrote this book," said the author, Mimi Chan, "to satisfy my own creative instincts." This creativity is highly evident in this work of historical fiction. The story, told by the "King's" daughter-in-law years after his death, begins in 1885 with the birth of Lee Pak Hung, the "King," in Nanhai, China. The book is clearly historical in that it is replete with carefully researched customs, mores, behaviors, attitudes, and traditions of the Chinese in South China, where the story takes place mostly during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



The author maintains that this is also a work of fiction. This fiction is obviously based on fact. Some of the characters are, no doubt, composites of people the author herself has personally known, enhanced, of course, with a bit of fantasy and lots of imagination. Yet, the author, with proven literary techniques, skillful descriptions, dialogue, and the use of a narrator has successfully portrayed characters, that resound with authenticity.

The "King," a rich, flamboyant lord, came to Hong Kong in 1924. He lived in a large mansion on the Peak with a large household of wives, children and servants. In 1944, in trying to escape from the dangers of the Japanese war raging in Hong Kong, he set out for Macau, where he hoped to establish a safe haven for his large family. Besides much of his enormous fortune, he took along with him wife Number Two, his senior concubine, Number Nine, Number Eight and her son, Ah Lung and Tak Lai, the docile, much-loved son of Number Five, along with a large number of servants. The vessel on which they were traveling was hit by an American bomb. Only Number Eight and her son, Ah Lung, survived the bombing.

*All the King's Women* is the story of eight women in the King's life told in retrospect. As the narrator tells each woman's story, the reader enters intimately into the background, families, and lives of these women. The reader shares the restricted existence imposed on them by the times, the culture and their upbringing. The general atmosphere throughout the book is fairly lighthearted. It lacks the stereotype, tyrannical, Chinese mother-in-law and the popular preconception of constant in-fighting among the women. Nonetheless, the Western reader still marvels how all these women and their children can live together in comparative harmony within one household.

These women are not popular stereotypes of Chinese women found in much of Western literature and fossilized in the movies of the 30s and 40s. The women are all real Chinese and, as such, bear certain common Chinese characteristics, but they are also eight very different individuals, each with her own particular personality, specific characteristics and values. This is perhaps what makes the reader sympathize with their common aspirations, and come to the realization that there is something in this book that shatters our Western stereotypes of Chinese women.

We, who live in a different era, and who have been culturally conditioned very differently, are appalled by the women's lack of choices, their acquiescence to social structures that keep them so subservient to male domination. We learn

especially about marriage customs, those arranged and those delayed, about the selling and buying of children, and about "strange" women who buck the system by taking a vow of spinsterhood. Above all, we learn of the overwhelming concern of Chinese women to give birth to a son. At first glance, this overriding preoccupation is disconcerting to the Western reader. The emphasis seems exaggerated, but on second thought, it is totally in line with the Chinese culture even today, and appropriate to each character in the total story. An understanding of the influence of Confucius and his five obediences are very helpful for appreciating this deeply rooted anxiety within the Chinese woman's psyche.

The book is very informative, fascinating and entertaining. It is also well presented. The cover, a painting by Liu Xiaoxi of a young Chinese woman is lovely, the paper is glossy, the print is clear. Although each chapter is a complete story, the unifying thread within the book keeps the reader alert to the totality of the story. The surprise ending has something of an O. Henry flavor, or if you prefer, Guy de Maupassant! In reading this book, the reader can learn a lot about Chinese customs and have fun doing it. The book is a splendid addition to books about Chinese women, written by Chinese women, since the end of the Cultural Revolution.

*Reviewed by Betty Ann Maheu, MM.*