

Four Sisters of Hofei: A History

By Annping Chin

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Four Sisters of Hofei is an intimate encounter with Chinese history, told through the collective memory and stories of four sisters born between 1908 and 1924, and with the benefit of the extraordinary knowledge of Yale historian Annping Chin.

Now in their late eighties and early nineties, the Chang sisters lived through a century of historic change in China. In this extraordinary work, assembled with the benefit of letter, diaries, family histories, poetry, journals, and interviews, Annping Chin shapes the story of this family into a riveting chronicle that provides uncanny insight into the old China and its transition to the new.

From their father, the Chang sister inherited reason and a belief in the virtues of modern education. From their mother they learned about the human spirit and the art of finding an appropriate path. Their nurse-nannies -- uneducated widows from the Hofei countryside -- contributed their own traditional beliefs and opinions on modern ways. As the sisters grew up, one broke with tradition to marry an actor, one survived the most violent political years of Communist rule, one married one of China's greatest novelists, and one, raised separately by her devout Buddhist great-aunt, was taught to be a rigorous practitioner of China's classical arts.

The Chang sisters' prolific correspondence provides a rare glimpse of private life in China during the twentieth century, as well as a chronicle of the country from prosperity to persecution, from foreign wars to Cultural Revolution. In Chin's expert prose, *Four Sisters of Hofei* is an intensely person story that illustrates the complex history of a complex land.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Countless authors have chronicled the lives of people who survived the trials of 20th-century China, but few bring as much knowledge and style as Chin (Children of China: Voices from Recent Years) does. The esteemed Yale historian successfully combines an academic's interest in the big picture and a novelist's attention to the finest detail in limning the lives of the title characters of this excellent account. The history of the Chang sisters is heavy with episodes of injury and inhumanity, yet Chin has found affecting anecdotes of how the sisters fought to "make mirth" in the face of anguish and loss brought by imperial collapse, foreign invasion, civil and world war, revolution and famine. The first half of the book details the history of the prosperous Chang family from the turmoil of the Taiping Rebellion in the 1860s to the birth of Yuan-ho, the oldest sister, in 1907. From there, rather than writing conventional biographies of the four sisters, Chin mimics the structure of k'un-ch'i, a refined form of Chinese performance that showcases only a few scenes of an opera. In this style, drawing on voluminous family correspondence, diaries and interviews (all four sisters are still alive), Chin chooses each sister's most significant experience and expands upon it to depict their life-long struggle for constancy in the throes of violent political transition, and stirringly conveys the universal ability to endure and prevail despite adversity.
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From Booklist
Born between the years 1907 and 1914, the four Chang sisters openly shared their earliest recollections of Chinese society and details of their aristocratic upbringing with the author, Annping Chin. It was on the occasion of a dinner at Chin's home that Annping first began a discourse with the youngest daughter, Ch'ung-ho, which would inspire her and lead her to chronicle the lives of these intellectual, artistic sisters. Their great-grandfather, Chang Shu-Sheng, brought honor and wealth to the family in the 1860s by defeating the Taiping rebels during China's civil war. From that time on, the Chang family wielded its power and influence with great consideration for those under their jurisdiction and maintained a keen eye for the importance of education and enlightenment. Chin provides a myriad of political and literary information on China from the late-nineteenth through the twentieth century, and the chapters that provide glimpses into the ancient rhythms of marriage and the household rituals are particularly fascinating. It is unfortunate, however, that many of the sisters' earliest memories are vague and translate dispassionately. *Elsa Gaztambide*
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Review
Carolyn See *The Washington Post* Extraordinary...The four sisters live, sustained by family, music, love of learning...an amazing story.

The New York Times Book Review Chin's style is fluent without verbosity, poetic without ostentation....This is, above all, a story of private lives, sometimes quite alien, sometimes disturbingly familiar. Chin is...to be commended for...re-creating a world that would otherwise have been lost to us.

The Washington Times This is a charming book, full of quiet scholarship and illuminating insights, and offers the Western reader a good introduction to the long tragedy of 20th-century China.

The Sunday Telegraph (London) Remarkable....It is not often that you read something so powerfully understated. One hesitates to throw the word `uplifting' around, yet it is appropriate here.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Annie Boyd:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have a lot more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity to get spend your time. Any person spent all their spare time to take a wander, shopping, or went to typically the Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book entitled Four Sisters of Hofei: A History? Maybe it is for being best activity for you. You already know beside you can spend your time together with your favorite's book, you can smarter than before. Do you agree with its opinion or you have other opinion?

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Krystal Sutherland:

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Rodolfo Buker:

Playing with family within a park, coming to see the ocean world or hanging out with pals is thing that usually you might have done when you have spare time, subsequently why you don't try issue that really opposite from that. Just one activity that make you not feeling tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you already been ride on and with addition details. Even you love Four Sisters of Hofei: A History, you may enjoy both. It is fine combination right, you still wish to miss it? What kind of hang-out type is it? Oh can occur its mind hangout fellas. What? Still don't understand it, oh come on its referred to as reading friends.

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