
Opening Extract from...

Wild Swans

Three Daughters of China

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WILD SWANS

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'Three-Inch Golden Lilies'

Concubine to a Warlord General
1909–1933

At the age of fifteen my grandmother became the concubine of a warlord general, the police chief of a tenuous national government of China. The year was 1924 and China was in chaos. Much of it, including Manchuria, where my grandmother lived, was ruled by warlords. The liaison was arranged by her father, a police official in the provincial town of Yixian in southwest Manchuria, about a hundred miles north of the Great Wall and 250 miles northeast of Peking.

Like most towns in China, Yixian was built like a fortress. It was encircled by walls thirty feet high and twelve feet thick dating from the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907), surmounted by battlements, dotted with sixteen forts at regular intervals, and wide enough to ride a horse quite easily along the top. There were four gates into the city, one at each point of the compass, with outer protecting gates, and the fortifications were surrounded by a deep moat.

The town's most conspicuous feature was a tall, richly decorated bell tower of dark brown stone, which had originally been built in the sixth century when Buddhism had

been introduced to the area. Every night the bell was rung to signal the time, and the tower also functioned as a fire and flood alarm. Yixian was a prosperous market town. The plains around produced cotton, maize, sorghum, soybeans, sesame, pears, apples, and grapes. In the grassland areas and in the hills to the west, farmers grazed sheep and cattle.

My great-grandfather, Yang Ru-shan, was born in 1894, when the whole of China was ruled by an emperor who resided in Peking. The imperial family were Manchus who had conquered China in 1644 from Manchuria, which was their base. The Yangs were Han, ethnic Chinese, and had ventured north of the Great Wall in search of opportunity.

My great-grandfather was the only son, which made him of supreme importance to his family. Only a son could perpetuate the family name – without him, the family line would stop, which, to the Chinese, amounted to the greatest possible betrayal of one's ancestors. He was sent to a good school. The goal was for him to pass the examinations to become a mandarin, an official, which was the aspiration of most Chinese males at the time. Being an official brought power, and power brought money. Without power or money, no Chinese could feel safe from the depredations of officialdom or random violence. There had never been a proper legal system. Justice was arbitrary, and cruelty was both institutionalized and capricious. An official with power was the law. Becoming a mandarin was the only way the child of a non-noble family could escape this cycle of injustice and fear. Yang's father had decided that his son should not follow him into the family business of felt-making, and sacrificed himself and his family to pay for his son's education. The women took in sewing for local tailors and dressmakers, toiling late into the night. To save money, they turned their oil lamps down to the absolute minimum, causing lasting damage to their eyes. The joints in their fingers became swollen from the long hours.

Following the custom, my great-grandfather was married young, at fourteen, to a woman six years his senior. It was considered one of the duties of a wife to help bring up her husband.

The story of his wife, my great-grandmother, was typical of millions of Chinese women of her time. She came from a family of tanners called Wu. Because her family was not an intellectual one and did not hold any official post, and because she was a girl, she was not given a name at all. Being the second daughter, she was simply called 'Number Two Girl' (*Er-ya-tou*). Her father died when she was an infant, and she was brought up by an uncle. One day, when she was six years old, the uncle was dining with a friend whose wife was pregnant. Over dinner the two men agreed that if the baby was a boy he would be married to the six-year-old niece. The two young people never met before their wedding. In fact, falling in love was considered almost shameful, a family disgrace. Not because it was taboo – there was, after all, a venerable tradition of romantic love in China – but because young people were not supposed to be exposed to situations where such a thing could happen, partly because it was immoral for them to meet, and partly because marriage was seen above all as a duty, an arrangement between two families. With luck, one could fall in love after getting married.

At fourteen, and having lived a very sheltered life, my great-grandfather was little more than a boy at the time of his marriage. On the first night, he did not want to go into the wedding chamber. He went to bed in his mother's room and had to be carried in to his bride after he fell asleep. But, although he was a spoiled child and still needed help to get dressed, he knew how to 'plant children', according to his wife. My grandmother was born within a year of the wedding, on the fifth day of the fifth moon, in early summer 1909. She was in a better position than her mother, for she was actually given a name: Yu-fang. *Yu*, meaning 'jade', was her generation name, given to all

the offspring of the same generation, while *Fang* means 'fragrant flowers'.

The world she was born into was one of total unpredictability. The Manchu empire, which had ruled China for over 260 years, was tottering. In 1894–95 Japan attacked China in Manchuria, with China suffering devastating defeats and loss of territory. In 1900 the nationalist Boxer Rebellion was put down by eight foreign armies, contingents of which had stayed on, some in Manchuria and some along the Great Wall. Then in 1904–5 Japan and Russia fought a major war on the plains of Manchuria. Japan's victory made it the dominant outside force in Manchuria. In 1911 the five-year-old emperor of China, Pu Yi, was overthrown and a republic was set up with the charismatic figure of Sun Yat-sen briefly at its head.

The new republican government soon collapsed and the country broke up into fiefs. Manchuria was particularly disaffected from the republic, since the Manchu dynasty had originated there. Foreign powers, especially Japan, intensified their attempts to encroach on the area. Under all these pressures, the old institutions collapsed, resulting in a vacuum of power, morality, and authority. Many people sought to get to the top by bribing local potentates with expensive gifts like gold, silver, and jewellery. My great-grandfather was not rich enough to buy himself a lucrative position in a big city, and by the time he was thirty he had risen no higher than an official in the police station of his native Yixian, a provincial backwater. But he had plans. And he had one valuable asset – his daughter.

My grandmother was a beauty. She had an oval face, with rosy cheeks and lustrous skin. Her long, shiny black hair was woven into a thick plait reaching down to her waist. She could be demure when the occasion demanded, which was most of the time, but underneath her composed exterior she was bursting with suppressed energy. She was petite, about five feet three inches, with a slender figure

and sloping shoulders, which were considered the ideal.

But her greatest assets were her bound feet, called in Chinese 'three-inch golden lilies' (*san-tsun-gin-lian*). This meant she walked 'like a tender young willow shoot in a spring breeze', as Chinese connoisseurs of women traditionally put it. The sight of a woman teetering on bound feet was supposed to have an erotic effect on men, partly because her vulnerability induced a feeling of protectiveness in the onlooker.

My grandmother's feet had been bound when she was two years old. Her mother, who herself had bound feet, first wound a piece of white cloth about twenty feet long round her feet, bending all the toes except the big toe inward and under the sole. Then she placed a large stone on top to crush the arch. My grandmother screamed in agony and begged her to stop. Her mother had to stick a cloth into her mouth to gag her. My grandmother passed out repeatedly from the pain.

The process lasted several years. Even after the bones had been broken, the feet had to be bound day and night in thick cloth because the moment they were released they would try to recover. For years my grandmother lived in relentless, excruciating pain. When she pleaded with her mother to untie the bindings, her mother would weep and tell her that unbound feet would ruin her entire life, and that she was doing it for her own future happiness.

In those days, when a woman was married, the first thing the bridegroom's family did was to examine her feet. Large feet, meaning normal feet, were considered to bring shame on the husband's household. The mother-in-law would lift the hem of the bride's long skirt, and if the feet were more than about four inches long, she would throw down the skirt in a demonstrative gesture of contempt and stalk off, leaving the bride to the critical gaze of the wedding guests, who would stare at her feet and insultingly mutter their disdain. Sometimes a mother would take pity on her daughter and remove the binding cloth; but when

the child grew up and had to endure the contempt of her husband's family and the disapproval of society, she would blame her mother for having been too weak.

The practice of binding feet was originally introduced about a thousand years ago, allegedly by a concubine of the emperor. Not only was the sight of women hobbling on tiny feet considered erotic, men would also get excited playing with bound feet, which were always hidden in embroidered silk shoes. Women could not remove the binding cloths even when they were adults, as their feet would start growing again. The binding could only be loosened temporarily at night in bed, when they would put on soft-soled shoes. Men rarely saw naked bound feet, which were usually covered in rotting flesh and stank when the bindings were removed. As a child, I can remember my grandmother being in constant pain. When we came home from shopping, the first thing she would do was soak her feet in a bowl of hot water, sighing with relief as she did so. Then she would set about cutting off pieces of dead skin. The pain came not only from the broken bones, but also from her toenails, which grew into the balls of her feet.

In fact, my grandmother's feet were bound just at the moment when foot-binding was disappearing for good. By the time her sister was born in 1917, the practice had virtually been abandoned, so she escaped the torment.

However, when my grandmother was growing up, the prevailing attitude in a small town like Yixian was still that bound feet were essential for a good marriage – but they were only a start. Her father's plans were for her to be trained as either a perfect lady or a high-class courtesan. Scorning the received wisdom of the time – that it was virtuous for a lower-class woman to be illiterate – he sent her to a girls' school that had been set up in the town in 1905. She also learned to play Chinese chess, mah-jongg, and *go*. She studied drawing and embroidery. Her favourite design was mandarin ducks (which symbolize love, because they always swim in pairs), and she used to embroider

them onto the tiny shoes she made for herself. To crown her list of accomplishments, a tutor was hired to teach her to play the *qin*, a musical instrument like a zither.

My grandmother was considered the belle of the town. The locals said she stood out 'like a crane among chickens'. In 1924 she was fifteen, and her father was growing worried that time might be running out on his only real asset – and his only chance for a life of ease. In that year General Xue Zhi-heng, the inspector general of the Metropolitan Police of the warlord government in Peking, came to pay a visit.

Xue Zhi-heng was born in 1876 in the country of Lulong, about a hundred miles east of Peking, and just south of the Great Wall, where the vast North China plain runs up against the mountains. He was the eldest of four sons of a country schoolteacher.

He was handsome and had a powerful presence, which struck all who met him. Several blind fortune-tellers who felt his face predicted he would rise to a powerful position. He was a gifted calligrapher, a talent held in high esteem, and in 1908 a warlord named Wang Huai-qing, who was visiting Lulong, noticed the fine calligraphy on a plaque over the gate of the main temple and asked to meet the man who had done it. General Wang took to the thirty-two-year-old Xue and invited him to become his aide-de-camp.

He proved extremely efficient, and was soon promoted to quartermaster. This involved extensive travelling, and he started to acquire food shops of his own around Lulong and on the other side of the Great Wall, in Manchuria. His rapid rise was boosted when he helped General Wang to suppress an uprising in Inner Mongolia. In almost no time he had amassed a fortune, and he designed and built for himself an eighty-one-room mansion at Lulong.

In the decade after the end of the empire, no government established authority over the bulk of the country.

Powerful warlords were soon fighting for control of the central government in Peking. Xue's faction, headed by a warlord called Wu Pei-fu, dominated the nominal government in Peking in the early 1920s. In 1922 Xue became inspector general of the Metropolitan Police and joint head of the Public Works Department in Peking. He commanded twenty regions on both sides of the Great Wall, and more than 10,000 mounted police and infantry. The police job gave him power; the public works post gave him patronage.

Allegiances were fickle. In May 1923 General Xue's faction decided to get rid of the president, Li Yuan-hong, whom it had installed in office only a year earlier. In league with a general called Feng Yu-xiang, a Christian warlord, who entered legend by baptizing his troops *en masse* with a firehose, Xue mobilized his 10,000 men and surrounded the main government buildings in Peking, demanding the back pay which the bankrupt government owed his men. His real aim was to humiliate President Li and force him out of office. Li refused to resign, so Xue ordered his men to cut off the water and electricity to the presidential palace. After a few days, conditions inside the building became unbearable, and on the night of 13 June President Li abandoned his malodorous residence and fled the capital for the port city of Tianjin, seventy miles to the southeast.

In China the authority of an office lay not only in its holder but in the official seals. No document was valid, even if it had the president's signature on it, unless it carried his seal. Knowing that no one could take over the presidency without them, President Li left the seals with one of his concubines, who was convalescing in a hospital in Peking run by French missionaries.

As President Li was nearing Tianjin his train was stopped by armed police, who told him to hand over the seals. At first he refused to say where he had hidden them, but after several hours he relented. At three in the morning General Xue went to the French hospital to collect the

seals from the concubine. When he appeared by her bedside, the concubine at first refused even to look at him: 'How can I hand over the president's seals to a mere policeman?' she said haughtily. But General Xue, resplendent in his full uniform, looked so intimidating that she soon meekly placed the seals in his hands.

Over the next four months, Xue used his police to make sure that the man his faction wanted to see as president, Tsao Kun, would win what was billed as one of China's first elections. The 804 members of parliament had to be bribed. Xue and General Feng stationed guards on the parliament building and let it be known that there would be a handsome consideration for anyone who voted the right way, which brought many deputies scurrying back from the provinces. By the time everything was ready for the election there were 555 members of parliament in Peking. Four days before the election, after much bargaining, they were each given 5,000 silver yuan, a rather substantial sum. On 5 October 1923, Tsao Kun was elected president of China with 480 votes. Xue was rewarded with promotion to full general. Also promoted were seventeen 'special advisers' – all favourite mistresses or concubines of various warlords and generals. This episode has entered Chinese history as a notorious example of how an election can be manipulated. People still cite it to argue that democracy will not work in China.

In early summer the following year General Xue visited Yixian. Though it was not a large town, it was strategically important. It was about here that the writ of the Peking government began to run out. Beyond, power was in the hands of the great warlord of the northeast, Chang Tso-lin, known as the Old Marshal. Officially, General Xue was on an inspection trip, but he also had some personal interests in the area. In Yixian he owned the main grain stores and the biggest shops, including a pawnshop which doubled as the bank and issued its own money, which circulated in the town and the surrounding area.

For my great-grandfather, this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, the closest he was ever going to get to a real VIP. He schemed to get himself the job of escorting General Xue, and told his wife he was going to try to marry their daughter off to him. He did not ask his wife for her agreement; he merely informed her. Quite apart from this being the custom of the day, my great-grandfather despised his wife. She wept, but said nothing. He told her she must not breathe a word to their daughter. There was no question of consulting his daughter. Marriage was a transaction, not a matter of feelings. She would be informed when the wedding was arranged.

My great-grandfather knew that his approach to General Xue had to be indirect. An explicit offer of his daughter's hand would lower her price, and there was also the possibility that he might be turned down. General Xue had to have a chance to see what he was being offered. In those days respectable women could not be introduced to strange men, so Yang had to create an opportunity for General Xue to see his daughter. The encounter had to seem accidental.

In Yixian there was a magnificent 900-year-old Buddhist temple made of precious wood and standing about a hundred feet high. It was set within an elegant precinct, with rows of cypress trees, which covered an area of almost a square mile. Inside was a brightly painted wooden statue of the Buddha, thirty feet high, and the interior of the temple was covered with delicate murals depicting his life. It was an obvious place for Yang to take the visiting VIP. And temples were among the few places women of good families could go on their own.

My grandmother was told to go to the temple on a certain day. To show her reverence for the Buddha, she took perfumed baths and spent long hours meditating in front of burning incense at a little shrine. To pray in the temple she was supposed to be in a state of maximum tranquillity, and to be free of all unsettling emotions. She set off in a rented horse-drawn carriage, accompanied by a maid. She

wore a duck-egg-blue jacket, its edges embroidered in gold thread to show off its simple lines, with butterfly buttons up the right-hand side. With this she wore a pleated pink skirt, embroidered all over with tiny flowers. Her long black hair was woven into a single plait. Peeping out at the top was a silk black-green peony, the rarest kind. She wore no makeup, but was richly scented, as was considered appropriate for a visit to a temple. Once inside, she knelt before the giant statue of the Buddha. She kowtowed several times to the wooden image and then remained kneeling before it, her hands clasped in prayer.

As she was praying, her father arrived with General Xue. The two men watched from the dark aisle. My great-grandfather had planned well. The position in which my grandmother was kneeling revealed not only her silk trousers, which were edged in gold like her jacket, but also her tiny feet in their embroidered satin shoes.

When she finished praying, my grandmother kowtowed three times to the Buddha. As she stood up she slightly lost her balance, which was easy to do with bound feet. She reached out to steady herself on her maid's arm. General Xue and her father had just begun to move forward. She blushed and bent her head, then turned and started to walk away, which was the right thing to do. Her father stepped forward and introduced her to the general. She curtsied, keeping her head lowered all the time.

As was fitting for a man in his position, the general did not say much about the meeting to Yang, who was a rather lowly subordinate, but my great-grandfather could see he was fascinated. The next step was to engineer a more direct encounter. A couple of days later Yang, risking bankruptcy, rented the best theatre in town and put on a local opera, inviting General Xue as the guest of honour. Like most Chinese theatres, it was built around a rectangular space open to the sky, with timber structures on three sides; the fourth side formed the stage, which was completely bare: it had no curtain and no sets. The seating area was more

like a café than a theatre in the West. The men sat at tables in the open square, eating, drinking, and talking loudly throughout the performance. To the side, higher up, was the dress circle, where the ladies sat more demurely at smaller tables, with their maids standing behind them. My great-grandfather had arranged things so that his daughter was in a place where General Xue could see her easily.

This time she was much more dressed up than in the temple. She wore a heavily embroidered satin dress and jewellery in her hair. She was also displaying her natural vivacity and energy, laughing and chatting with her women friends. General Xue hardly looked at the stage.

After the show there was a traditional Chinese game called lantern-riddles. This took place in two separate halls, one for the men and one for the women. In each room were dozens of elaborate paper lanterns, stuck on which were a number of riddles in verse. The person who guessed the most answers won a prize. Among the men General Xue was the winner, naturally. Among the women, it was my grandmother.

Yang had now given General Xue a chance to appreciate his daughter's beauty and her intelligence. The final qualification was artistic talent. Two nights later he invited the general to his house for dinner. It was a clear, warm night, with a full moon – a classic setting for listening to the *qin*. After dinner, the men sat on the veranda and my grandmother was summoned to play in the courtyard. Sitting under a trellis, with the scent of syringa in the air, her performance enchanted General Xue. Later he was to tell her that her playing that evening in the moonlight had captured his heart. When my mother was born, he gave her the name Bao Qin, which means 'Precious Zither'.

Before the evening was over he had proposed – not to my grandmother, of course, but to her father. He did not offer marriage, only that my grandmother should become his concubine. But Yang had not expected anything else. The Xue family would have arranged a marriage for the

general long before on the basis of social positions. In any case, the Yangs were too humble to provide a wife. But it was expected that a man like General Xue should take concubines. Wives were not for pleasure – that was what concubines were for. Concubines might acquire considerable power, but their social status was quite different from that of a wife. A concubine was a kind of institutionalized mistress, acquired and discarded at will.

The first my grandmother knew of her impending liaison was when her mother broke the news to her a few days before the event. My grandmother bent her head and wept. She hated the idea of being a concubine, but her father had already made the decision, and it was unthinkable to oppose one's parents. To question a parental decision was considered 'unfilial' – and to be unfilial was tantamount to treason. Even if she refused to consent to her father's wishes, she would not be taken seriously; her action would be interpreted as indicating that she wanted to stay with her parents. The only way to say no and be taken seriously was to commit suicide. My grandmother bit her lip and said nothing. In fact, there was nothing she could say. Even to say yes would be considered unladylike, as it would be taken to imply that she was eager to leave her parents.

Seeing how unhappy she was, her mother started telling her that this was the best match possible. Her husband had told her about General Xue's power: 'In Peking they say, "When General Xue stamps his foot, the whole city shakes."' In fact, my grandmother had been rather taken with the general's handsome, martial demeanour. And she had been flattered by all the admiring words he had said about her to her father, which were now elaborated and embroidered upon. None of the men in Yixian were as impressive as the warlord general. At fifteen, she had no idea what being a concubine really meant, and thought she could win General Xue's love and lead a happy life.

General Xue had said that she could stay in Yixian, in a house which he was going to buy especially for her. This

meant she could be close to her own family, but, even more important, she would not have to live in his residence, where she would have to submit to the authority of his wife and the other concubines, who would all have precedence over her. In the house of a potentate like General Xue, the women were virtual prisoners, living in a state of permanent squabbling and bickering, largely induced by insecurity. The only security they had was their husband's favour. General Xue's offer of a house of her own meant a lot to my grandmother, as did his promise to solemnize the liaison with a full wedding ceremony. This meant that she and her family would have gained a considerable amount of face. And there was one final consideration which was very important to her: now that her father was satisfied, she hoped he would treat her mother better.

Mrs Yang suffered from epilepsy, which made her feel undeserving towards her husband. She was always submissive to him, and he treated her like dirt, showing no concern for her health. For years, he found fault with her for not producing a son. My great-grandmother had a string of miscarriages after my grandmother was born, until a second child came along in 1917 – but again, it was a girl.

My great-grandfather was obsessed with having enough money to be able to acquire concubines. The 'wedding' allowed him to fulfil this wish, as General Xue lavished betrothal gifts on the family, and the chief beneficiary was my great-grandfather. The gifts were magnificent, in keeping with the general's station.

On the day of the wedding, a sedan chair draped with heavy, bright-red embroidered silk and satin appeared at the Yangs' house. In front came a procession carrying banners, plaques, and silk lanterns painted with images of a golden phoenix, the grandest symbol for a woman. The wedding ceremony took place in the evening, as was the tradition, with red lanterns glowing in the dusk. There was an orchestra with drums, cymbals, and piercing wind

instruments playing joyful music. Making a lot of noise was considered essential for a good wedding, as keeping quiet would have been seen as suggesting that there was something shameful about the event. My grandmother was splendidly dressed in bright embroidery, with a red silk veil covering her head and face. She was carried in the sedan chair to her new home by eight men. Inside the sedan chair it was stuffy and boiling hot, and she discreetly pulled the curtain back a few inches. Peeping out from under her veil, she was delighted to see people in the streets watching her procession. This was very different from what a mere concubine would get – a small sedan chair draped in plain cotton of the unglamorous colour of indigo, borne by two or at the most four people, and no procession or music. She was taken right around the town, visiting all four gates, as a full ritual demanded, with her expensive wedding gifts displayed on carts and in large wicker baskets carried behind her. After she had been shown off to the town, she reached her new home, a large, stylish residence. My grandmother was satisfied. The pomp and ceremony made her feel she had gained prestige and esteem. There had been nothing like this in Yixian in living memory.

When she reached the house General Xue, in full military dress, was waiting, surrounded by the local dignitaries. Red candles and dazzling gas lamps lit up the centre of the house, the sitting room, where they performed a ceremonial kowtow to the tablets of Heaven and Earth. After this, they kowtowed to each other, then my grandmother went into the wedding chamber alone, in accordance with the custom, while General Xue went off to a lavish banquet with the men.

General Xue did not leave the house for three days. My grandmother was happy. She thought she loved him, and he showed her a kind of gruff affection. But he hardly spoke to her about serious matters, in keeping with the traditional saying: 'Women have long hair and short intel-

ligence.' A Chinese man was supposed to remain reticent and grand, even within his family. So she kept quiet, just massaging his toes before they got up in the morning and playing the *qin* to him in the evening. After a week, he suddenly told her he was leaving. He did not say where he was going – and she knew it was not a good idea to ask. Her duty was to wait for him until he came back. She had to wait six years.

In September 1924, fighting erupted between the two main warlord factions in North China. General Xue was promoted to deputy commander of the Peking garrison, but within weeks his old ally General Feng, the Christian warlord, changed sides. On 3 November, Tsao Kun, whom General Xue and General Feng had helped install as president the previous year, was forced to resign. The same day the Peking garrison was dismissed, and two days later the Peking police office was disbanded. General Xue had to leave the capital in a hurry. He retired to a house he owned in Tianjin, in the French concession, which had extraterritorial immunity. This was the very place to which President Li had fled the year before when Xue had forced him out of the presidential palace.

In the meantime my grandmother was caught up in the renewed fighting. Control of the northeast was vital in the struggle between the warlord armies, and towns on the railway, especially junctions like Yixian, were particular targets. Shortly after General Xue left, the fighting came right up to the walls of the town, with pitched battles just outside the gates. Looting was widespread. One Italian arms company appealed to the cash-strapped warlords by advertising that it would accept 'lootable villages' as collateral. Rape was just as commonplace. Like many other women, my grandmother had to blacken her face with soot to make herself look filthy and ugly. Fortunately, this time Yixian emerged virtually unscathed. The fighting eventually moved south and life returned to normal.

For my grandmother, 'normal' meant finding ways to

kill time in her large house. The house was built in the typical North Chinese style, around three sides of a quadrangle, the south side of the courtyard being a wall about seven feet high, with a moon gate which opened onto an outer courtyard, which in turn was guarded by a double gate with a round brass knocker.

These houses were built to cope with the extremes of a brutally harsh climate, which lurched from freezing winters to scorching summers, with virtually no spring or autumn in between. In summer, the temperature could rise above 95°F, but in winter it fell to minus 20°F, with howling winds which roared down from Siberia across the plains. Dust tore into the eyes and bit into the skin for much of the year, and people often had to wear masks which covered their entire faces and heads. In the inner courtyard of the houses, all the windows in the main rooms opened to the south to let in as much sunshine as possible, while the walls on the north side took the brunt of the wind and the dust. The north side of the house contained a sitting room and my grandmother's chamber; the wings on the two sides were for the servants and for all other activities. The floors of the main rooms were tiled, while the wooden windows were covered with paper. The pitched roof was made of smooth black tiles.

The house was luxurious by local standards – and far superior to her parents' home – but my grandmother was lonely and miserable. There were several servants, including a doorkeeper, a cook, and two maids. Their task was not only to serve, but also to act as guards and spies. The doorkeeper was under instructions not to let my grandmother out alone under any circumstances. Before he left, General Xue told my grandmother a cautionary tale about one of his other concubines. He had found out that she had been having an affair with a male servant, so he had her tied to a bed and stuffed a gag into her mouth. Then raw alcohol was dripped onto the cloth, slowly choking her to death. 'Of course, I could not give her the pleasure

of dying speedily. For a woman to betray her husband is the vilest thing possible,' he said. Where infidelity was involved, a man like General Xue would hate the woman far more than the man. 'All I did with the lover was have him shot,' he added casually. My grandmother never knew whether or not all this had really happened, but at the age of fifteen she was suitably petrified.

From that moment she lived in constant fear. Because she could hardly ever go out, she had to create a world for herself within the four walls. But even there she was not the real mistress of her home, and she had to spend a great deal of time buttering up the servants in case they invented stories against her – which was so common it was considered almost inevitable. She gave them plenty of presents, and also organized mah-jongg parties, because the winners would always have to tip the servants generously.

She was never short of money. General Xue sent her a regular allowance, which was delivered every month by the manager of his pawnshop, who also picked up the bills for her losses at the mah-jongg parties.

Throwing mah-jongg parties was a normal part of life for concubines all over China. So was smoking opium, which was widely available and was seen as a means of keeping people like her contented – by being doped – and dependent. Many concubines became addicted in their attempts to cope with their loneliness. General Xue encouraged my grandmother to take up the habit, but she ignored him.

Almost the only time she was allowed out of the house was to go to the opera. Otherwise, she had to sit at home all day, every day. She read a lot, mainly plays and novels, and tended her favourite flowers, garden balsam, hibiscus, common four-o'clock, and roses of Sharon in pots in the courtyard, where she also cultivated dwarf trees. Her other consolation in her gilded cage was a cat.

She was allowed to visit her parents, but even this was frowned upon, and she was not permitted to stay the night

with them. Although they were the only people she could talk to, she found visiting them a trial. Her father had been promoted to deputy chief of the local police because of his connection to General Xue, and had acquired land and property. Every time she opened her mouth about how miserable she was, her father would start lecturing her, telling her that a virtuous woman should suppress her emotions and not desire anything beyond her duty to her husband. It was all right to miss her husband, that was virtuous, but a woman was not supposed to complain. In fact, a good woman was not supposed to have a point of view at all, and if she did, she certainly should not be so brazen as to talk about it. He would quote the Chinese saying, 'If you are married to a chicken, obey the chicken; if you are married to a dog, obey the dog.'

Six years passed. To begin with, there were a few letters, then total silence. Unable to burn off her nervous energy and sexual frustration, unable even to pace the floor with a full stride because of her bound feet, my grandmother was reduced to mincing around the house. At first, she hoped for some message, going over and over again in her mind her brief life with the general. Even her physical and psychological submission was mulled over nostalgically. She missed him very much, though she knew that she was only one of his many concubines, probably dotted around China, and she had never imagined that she would spend the rest of her life with him. Still she longed for him, as he represented her only chance to live a sort of life.

But as the weeks turned into months, and the months into years, her longing became dulled. She came to realize that for him she was a mere plaything, to be picked up again only when it was convenient for him. Her restlessness now had no object on which to focus. It became forced into a straitjacket. When occasionally it stretched its limbs she felt so agitated she did not know what to do with herself. Sometimes, she would fall to the floor

unconscious. She was to have blackouts like these for the rest of her life.

Then one day, six years after he had walked casually out of the door, her 'husband' reappeared. The meeting was very unlike what she had dreamed of at the beginning of their separation. Then she had fantasized that she would give herself totally and passionately to him, but now all she could find in herself was restrained dutifulness. She was also racked with anxiety in case she might have offended one of the servants, or that they might invent stories to ingratiate themselves with the general and ruin her life. But everything went smoothly. The general, now past fifty, seemed to have mellowed, and did not look nearly as majestic as before. As she expected, he did not say a word about where he had been, why he had left so suddenly, or why he was back, and she did not ask. Quite apart from not wanting to be scolded for being inquisitive, she did not care.

In fact, all this time the general had not been far away at all. He had been leading the quiet life of a wealthy retired dignitary, dividing his time between his house in Tianjin and his country mansion near Lulong. The world in which he had flourished was becoming a thing of the past. The warlords and their fief system had collapsed and most of China was now controlled by a single force, the Kuomintang, or Nationalists, headed by Chiang Kai-shek. To mark the break with the chaotic past, and to try to give the appearance of a new start and of stability, the Kuomintang moved the capital from Peking ('Northern Capital') to Nanjing ('Southern Capital'). In 1928, the ruler of Manchuria, Chang Tso-lin, the Old Marshal, was assassinated by the Japanese, who were becoming increasingly active in the area. The Old Marshal's son, Chang Hsueh-liang (known as the Young Marshal), joined up with the Kuomintang and formally integrated Manchuria with the rest of China – though Kuomintang rule was never effectively established in Manchuria.