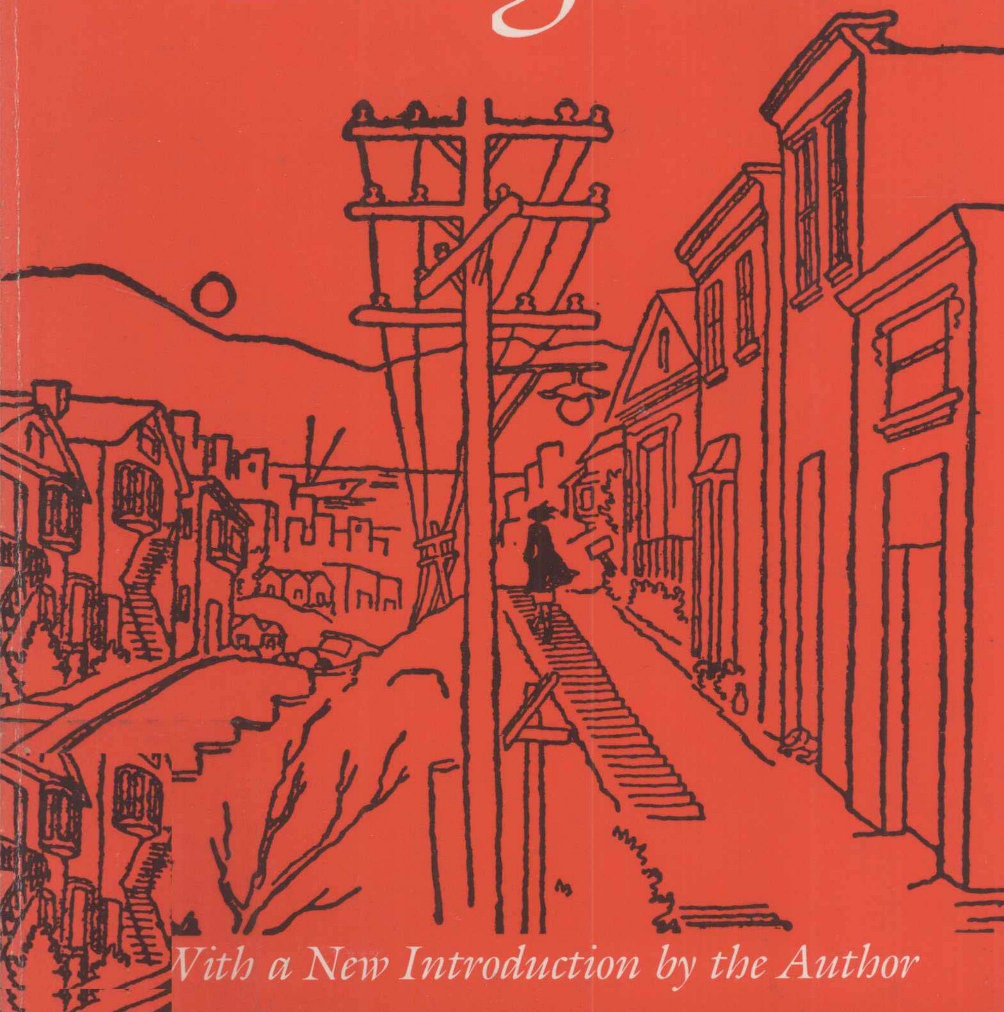
Jade Snow Wong

Fifth Chinese Daughter



With a New Introduction by the Author

Fifth Chinese Daughter

Jade Snow Wong

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Illustrations by Kathryn Uhl

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Fifth Chinese Daughter

To my mother and father

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INTRODUCTION TO THE 1989 EDITION

AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-FOUR, I WAS AWARE THAT MY UPBRINGING by the nineteenth-century standards of Imperial China, which my parents deemed correct, was quite different from that enjoyed by twentieth-century Americans in San Francisco, where I had to find my identity and vocation. At a time when nothing had been published from a female Chinese American perspective, I wrote with the purpose of creating better understanding of the Chinese culture on the part of Americans. That creed has been my guiding theme through the many turns of my life work.

Although I felt it was important to record that period of my life, together with conflicting cultural expectations, I had no inkling of acceptance for my book. Who would be interested in the story of a poverty-stricken, undistinguished Chinese girl who had spent half of her life working and living, without romance, in a Chinatown basement? To my astonishment, readers and literary critics responded with great interest—and not just in America. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was published in both England and Germany. In addition, the U.S. State Department published translations in the languages and dialects of Japan, Hong Kong, Malaya, Thailand, Burma, East India, and Pakistan. As a result, my book could create more than the hoped-for understanding of Chinese by Americans. Beyond America (even including Chinese), *Fifth Chinese Daughter* could offer insight into life in America.

The third-person-singular style in which I told my story was rooted in Chinese literary form (reflecting cultural disregard for the individual). Since that time, while I have succeeded in establishing my individuality on a local and international basis, I have nonetheless maintained my psychological detachment from my personal importance.

I have been rewarded beyond expectations. I recall a handsome young paratrooper in full military dress who appeared at my San Francisco studio on his way to Vietnam. He came to thank me for writing the book, which he had read in a Texas military base, for he would better understand the Asians where he was going. I also recall a

long-distance call from a stranger in New York City. She had bought the book in San Francisco and read it aloud as her husband drove their way across the United States. She finished the reading by flashlight while he drove!

In 1953 the State Department sent me on a four-months' grant to speak to a wide variety of audiences, from celebrated artists in Kyoto to restless Indians in Delhi, from students in ceramic classes in Manila to hard-working Chinese immigrants in Rangoon. I was sent because those Asian audiences who had read translations of *Fifth Chinese Daughter* did not believe a female born to poor Chinese immigrants could gain a toehold among prejudiced Americans. I was newly married then; my husband accompanied me at his own expense.

Having discovered kindred Asians halfway around the world, we established a travel agency just at the advent of the jet age. In 1956 my husband and I led a first tour of Americans to Japan. (Japanese freely acknowledge China as mother of their culture.) My early career as potter and enamelist put me on easy terms with those Japanese who were designated "Living Human Treasures." For the next twelve years, we led a number of personally planned tours to Asian countries while, in between, I developed my ceramic arts and mothered two sons and two daughters. Husband and children knew that they held priority over my career. I have spent more time at my kitchen stove than at my kilns. It has been said that food, family, and endurance (in that order) characterize Chinese consciousness. Each of my children did homework in the kitchen while I coached and cooked, and each is now able to create delicious innovations at the wok.

In 1972 my husband and I succeeded in obtaining visas to the People's Republic of China—a month after Richard Nixon's visit. (My book about that experience, *No Chinese Stranger*, was published by Harper & Row in 1974.) Together, we led a number of tours to China; since my husband's death in 1985, I have continued to do so once a year. This has enabled me to witness the remarkable changes there. Thus, I am carrying out my life's creed in another way.

When I first visited China liberated by the Communists, seven years before general travel there, I was apprehensive about relating to those who would represent a way of life much different than that in the United States. Indeed, I found a cult of Mao worship, saw anti-American slogans in public places, and heard daily loudspeaker reminders that Americans were running dogs who must be defeated.

But my husband and I were welcomed as descendants of heroic immigrants who had braved hardship to escape the harshness of an impoverished China in waning Imperial days. At formal banquets hosted by Communist officials, we were completely at home. Table courtesies were unchanged; our parents' training of half a century ago is as appropriate in Beijing today as it has been in San Francisco's Chinatown. Everywhere that I have gone, in 1972 and now, I have had the unaccustomed comfort of being in a homogeneous Chinese populace (though, looking different, I am recognized as being from abroad).

I have learned from my travels that the lot of Chinese immigrants everywhere has been hard. The injustice of America's past legal exclusion of the Chinese is well documented. My father was prevented from becoming a naturalized citizen until 1943, a year after I graduated from Mills College. Others of my race in Asia and South America have been denied citizenship, have lost property rights, have suffered persecution, and have been put on the run—in Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, India, and, most recently, in Vietnam. Less than 150 years ago, Chinese were kidnapped from Macao for ranch labor in Peru and were physically branded as slaves. Depending on the period of history and the economic conditions prevailing in various coastal areas of Southern China, different communities of Chinese have emigrated to specific countries that could utilize their labor. Cantonese came to the United States, but from Chaozhou they went to Thailand, and from Fujian they went to the Philippines. Voluntarily, in ultimate risk-taking by venturing to lands and languages unknown, or involuntarily, as slaves, they labored to survive; to survive well, they had to be ingenious. And now, in 1989, some of their descendants, familiar with their parents' or their own smarting as targets of prejudice or still finding restrictions in relocated lands, are returning to invest in China in Special Economic Zones.

In the course of that 1953 mission for the State Department, I met American Foreign Service personnel abroad, from Nagoya to Calcutta, who belonged to private clubs and who diligently observed American holidays. Chinese who cling to their customs in America have followed the same human impulse. My grandmother and parents established their bit of familiarity in San Francisco. Recreating the China they knew, enforcing what they thought correct, they gave me a precious heritage that I have transmitted to my children. As a parent, I know that it would have been much easier to let our children do as

they wished rather than to shape them patiently in the way I chose.

My father regretted that he had not become rich enough to retire during the depression thirties to his native Chung Shan district, as many of his successful colleagues did. If he had returned with me and my siblings, I could never have had my independent career; instead, I would have endured and perhaps would not have survived the tumultuous times of China in the past five decades.

Having suffered repression, my husband and I gave freedom to our own offspring. Having been cruelly—and sometimes inexplicably—punished, we established the norm of fairness and caring. Having had to conform to restrictions on individual expression, we supported their creativeness. Having been cowed by humiliation, we respected their feelings. Family travel, laughing together—these we also thought important. Thus, our children have developed differently from my generation. From my parents' account, life in China was hard work, grim in its prospects. Rewards were nonexistent. In my own time, life is still primarily hard work, but prospects, though uncertain, have been more promising. Rewards may be brilliant, unexpected. Now my children expect to work hard, but they can also plan to have fun, and they are reasonably certain of rewards. They cherish their ninety-year-old grandmother, with whom they can converse in Cantonese; for their entire lives, they recall her presence at our home or in restaurants during festive occasions.

On the other hand, they and I do not question some positive values which we cherish as our legacy (be they Chinese or particularly our family's). My husband and I chose our home within walking distance of Chinatown so that each child could attend six years of the same Christian Chinese evening school I had. And though they then protested the burden of their studies, which their friends escaped, as adults they are glad to understand the tongue their friends do not. They know well that, in behavior, we emphasize personal modesty, self-reliance, dependability, courtesy, and modulated voices. In values, we esteem love of books and learning, reverence for the natural world, service to fellow man, moderation, living within one's means. Are these values different from those of non-Chinese? Our basic and greatest value is family cohesiveness. From time immemorial, in every culture, for every economic station, the family is the enduring motivation of human activity. Ours is grateful for our Chinese past.

Fifty years ago, as related in *Fifth Chinese Daughter,* I learned in

Chinese school that China was a weak victim of corruption from within and conquest from without; thus, her citizens in the United States did not fare well. In the past twenty years, partly because of the blacks' forging ahead for civil rights, joined by other minorities; partly because of the rising international prominence of China, Korea, and Japan; partly because of Chinese economic success in Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, a gradual improvement has taken place in American consciousness about Asians. When I graduated from Mills College, I was told to avoid prejudice by looking for work in Chinatown. I refused to fence myself in; instead, I became the only Chinese face in a series of office positions for which I applied outside of Chinatown, as well as on numerous San Francisco/California community boards to which I was invited. Yes, being Chinese in America, I have had problems, but they have not stopped me. Now Asian faces are commonplace in the corporate world or in professional offices; sometimes Asians are sought for their special attributes. There has been a quiet evolution. Asian Americans, however, know that the battle against race prejudice is not finished.

Despite prejudice, I was never discouraged from carrying out my creed; because of prejudice, the effort is ongoing. My Chinese heritage has been my strength and advantage. In Beijing or in Washington, D.C., I can find private doors open to welcome me. To be a member of the Asian race is to be part of a world majority. As an Asian in Asia, we would not find the freedom of choice which is our particular American birthright. We who did not choose our ancestry can be grateful for opportunities more expansive in this country than in most others, not only for Asians—indeed, for other races as well. To be an Asian American, to be an ethnic American, is a unique combination which is a beginning. With the plus of our rich cultural heritage, to be an Asian in America is our distinction.

To my mother and father

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AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION

A CHINESE MAXIM OFTEN REPEATED TO ME BY MY PARENTS IS, "When you drink water, think of its source." The source of this book flows from the continuous encouragement and assistance of Miss Elizabeth Lawrence, who saw the possibilities of such a book, and the patient technical guidance of my friend and teacher, Dr. Alice C. Cooper. Without them, I should not have had the audacity to complete an autobiography at an age when I am, as some amazed persons have pronounced, "not even dry behind the ears."

Included in this story are the significant episodes which, insofar as I can remember, shaped my life. There is no attempt here to judge individuals, only an attempt to evaluate personal experiences, many of which were not "typical." I have not been concerned to discover whether they were good or bad, but rather to what extent they affected one individual's thinking, purpose, and action.

To protect their privacy, people's names have been changed, or disguised. The only exception is Aurelia Henry Reinhardt, for whom a fictitious name seemed inappropriate and unnecessary.

Although a "first person singular" book, this story is written in the third person from Chinese habit. The submergence of the individual is literally practiced. In written Chinese, prose or poetry, the word "I" almost never appears, but is understood. In corresponding with an older person like my father, I would write in words half the size of the regular ideographs, "small daughter Jade Snow" when referring to myself; to one of contemporary age, I would put in small characters, "younger sister"—but never "I." Should my father, who owes me no respect, write to me, he would still refer to himself in the third person, "Father." Even written in English, an "I" book by a Chinese would seem outrageously immodest to anyone raised in the spirit of Chinese propriety.

The drawings are authentic and accurate in detail and represent many hours of careful research on the part of Kathryn Uhl Ball, who co-operated fully to make this book a careful record of an American Chinese girl's first twenty-four years.

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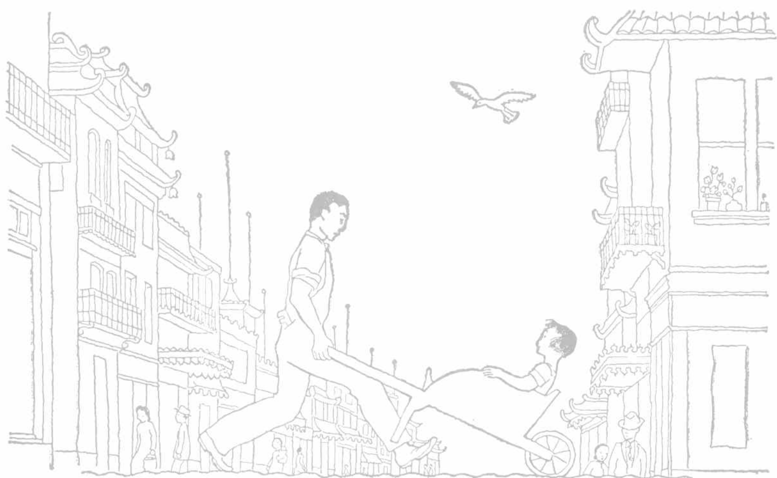

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THE WORLD WAS NEW

Hugging the eastern slope of San Francisco's famous Nob Hill is one of the unique spots of this continent. A small, compact area overlooking the busy harbor at its feet, it extends only a few blocks in either direction. Above its narrow, congested streets, the chimes of beautiful Grace Cathedral ring out the quarter hours; and tourists and curio-seekers in a bare three minutes can stroll from the city's fashionable shopping district into the heart of Old China.

Chinatown in San Francisco teems with haunting memories, for it is wrapped in the atmosphere, customs, and manners of a land across the sea. The same Pacific Ocean laves the shores of both worlds, a tangible link between old and new, past and present, Orient and Occident.

To this China in the West, there came in the opening decade of

this century a young Chinese with his wife and family. There they settled among the other Cantonese, and as the years slipped by, the couple established their place in the community.

I tell the story of their fifth daughter, Jade Snow, born to them in San Francisco.

Until she was five years old, Jade Snow's world was almost wholly Chinese, for her world was her family, the Wongs. Life was secure but formal, sober but quietly happy, and the few problems she had were entirely concerned with what was proper or improper in the behavior of a little Chinese girl.

Even at this early age she had learned the meaning of discipline, without understanding the necessity for it. A little girl never questioned the commands of Mother and Father, unless prepared to receive painful consequences. She never addressed an older person by name—it was always Older Brother, Oldest Sister, Second Older Sister, Third Older Sister (she had died at one month without a name, but still she held a place in the family), and Fourth Older Sister. Only her mother and father, or their generation of uncles and aunts, addressed them as Blessing from Heaven, Jade Swallow, Jade Lotus, or Jade Ornament. In short, a little girl was never casual with her elders. Even in handing them something she must use both hands to signify that she paid them undivided attention.

Respect and order—these were the key words of life. It did not matter what were the thoughts of a little girl; she did not voice them. She assumed that her mother must love her, because Mother made her bright silk Chinese dresses for holiday wear, embroidered with gold threads and bright-colored beads, and washed her, and cleaned her white, buckled sandals. Father must love her, because he taught her her first lessons from Chinese books and put her high on his shoulders above the crowds so that she could watch from unobstructed heights the Lion Dances on the streets at Chinese New Year's; and sometimes he took her downtown with him on business errands to that outside foreign American world.

But in spite of her parents' love, she must always be careful to do the proper thing. Failure to do so brought immediate and drastic punishment. Teaching and whipping were almost synonymous. Once, because in fun she had knocked Older Brother's hat off his

head when she passed him on the stairs, Father whipped her with a bundle of tied cane; then he withdrew permission for her to go with Oldest Sister to visit the city zoo. Since she had never been to the zoo and had looked forward to this treat for a week, the disappointment and the shame hurt almost worse than the whipping.

Another time, when their neighbor's son spit on her as she was playing, she ran to tell Mother, who was sewing overalls in the factory which was also their home. Mother did not sympathize but reproved her, saying that she must have spit on her playmate first or he wouldn't have spit on her. She was told to bring a clothes hanger, and in front of all the other working women Mother spanked her. Again the shame was almost worse than the pain, and the pain was bad enough, for Mother usually spanked until the wooden hanger broke.

Thus, life was a constant puzzle. No one ever troubled to explain. Only through punishment did she learn that what was proper was right and what was improper was wrong.

At this time, Oldest Sister and Second Older Sister were already married, and Fourth Older Sister was living with Oldest Sister; Jade Snow scarcely knew them. At home, besides Jade Snow there were Father and Mother, Older Brother, who was about twelve, and three-year-old younger sister Jade Precious Stone.

Jade Precious Stone and Jade Snow were closest. They slept in the same room, dressed together, ate, played, cried, and got spanked together. They hardly ever disagreed. Jade Precious Stone was a delicate child, gentle and quiet. Because she was younger, she addressed her sister as Older Sister Snow, and she was taught to respect her Fifth Older Sister's judgment on all things. That meant that Jade Snow was responsible for any trouble they got into together.

The Wongs lived at the back of their father's overall factory on Stockton between Clay and Sacramento streets. The factory-home was huge. To the right on the street floor was a room containing ten or more sewing machines of various kinds. Also on the street floor, to the left, was the office. A forty-inch-wide cutting table ran the length of the room to the kitchen and dining room at the rear. Beyond was a door leading to the bathroom, one of the few in

Chinatown at that time equipped with running water. What fun the children had in that bathtub, which served also for washing the family clothes!

On the second floor were the finishing machines and more long cutting tables where women sat all day examining the finished overalls before folding and tying them into bundles of a dozen each. In front were the family sleeping rooms: one for Mother and Father, one for the two younger daughters, and another for Older Brother.

Home life and work life were therefore mixed together. In the morning, Father opened the factory doors while Mother prepared a breakfast consisting of rice, a green vegetable or soup, a meat or fish, and steamed salted dried fish from China. For the rest of the day Mother was at a machine except when she stopped to get the meals or to do other housework.

The Wong daughters and the children of the workers played hide-and-seek around the high bundles of blue denim, rode on the pushcarts used for loading overalls, climbed onto the cutting tables to talk to the women as they worked. It was the Wong girls' responsibility not to quarrel with the employees' children, who were of guest status.

Instead of playing, Jade Snow often followed her father around as he saw to the placement and repair of the machines or the distribution of work. At first she asked questions, being curious. But her father did not like questions. He said that one was not supposed to talk when one was either eating or thinking, and when one was not eating, one should be thinking. Only when in bed did one neither eat nor think.

However, he seemed to understand a child's need to make noise. To satisfy this need constructively, he started to teach his daughter Chinese history. He would read aloud a sentence, "Wong Ti was the first king of China," and Jade Snow would repeat it after him word for word. So, while her father laid out material, or numbered and labeled the spools of thread, she would trail along near him, reciting the text over and over until she knew it without prompting.

It was not great fun to make a noise in this way, but Father said that all Chinese children in America should learn their ancestral language, and one did not dispute one's father if one were a dutiful little girl taught to act with propriety. From the first Chinese

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