

Mountain Clouds

Sharon Li

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In *Mountain Clouds*, Li shares her memories of how she—a poor child raised in wartime China—came to be a world traveler who lived in Geneva, Switzerland, and eventually settled in Montreal, Canada.

Readers of recent fiction, Lisa See's *Shanghai Girls* or Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*, for example, will recognize the struggles of a young woman fleeing the violence in China for the apparent safety of North America. Li is no naïve child bride, however, and makes a deliberate choice to settle her family in Canada. In Montreal, she characteristically puts herself to work on the practical matters of homemaking and earning an income.

Li has a lot in common with the controversial Chinese-American writer Amy Chua, who describes her culturally inherited pragmatism in *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Li raises her children in what Chua calls the strict “Chinese way,” often to the discomfort of more permissive Western parents. It can be difficult to reconcile Li's obvious passion for her family's well-being with some of her brusque parenting techniques. For instance, Li writes of making her daughter practice on piano keys drawn on paper for many months before deciding she has enough talent to warrant the purchase of the real instrument. At the same time, Li and her husband, Pierre, work nonstop to provide the best neighborhoods, education, and professional opportunities for their four daughters.

Dozens of one- or two-page sub-chapters contain a significant amount of detail from every stage of Li's life. She shares her narrative in such a matter-of-fact manner, though, that she avoids overwhelming the reader. Dialogue breaks up the retelling, bringing the reader into Li's day-to-day life and ensuring that the story does not become merely an autobiographical timeline.

Intimate glimpses of the changes in her life soften Li's otherwise straightforward style as well. She writes a series of short vignettes, creating the atmosphere of a slide show. Readers see Li at eight years old, for instance, awed by electric lights and the taste of bananas. Soon, she is married and the mother of four daughters. Photographs of Li's early years are lacking, but the book includes several recent pictures of Li hiking and sightseeing, indicating that she has not slowed down much in her later years.

Snippets of songs and poems pepper Li's text, hinting at the less practical, more emotional side of this independent woman. Some seem out of place amidst the discussion of airfare discounts and the insurance policies that preoccupy Li's thoughts, as does the book's poetic title and picturesque cover art. Perhaps these moments of artistry exhibit Li's Chinese girlhood just as much as the facts of her life.

SHEILA M. TRASK (April 24, 2012)

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