

Daughter of the River - An Autobiography, Hong Ying (Bloomsbury, 1999)

Stories of growing up in China are becoming more and more common. *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang may be the best best known of them all with many others having followed.

Daughter of the River deals with a different stratum of society. The intricacies of party politics and personal feuds and the ups and downs of the Cultural Revolution, that are the core theme of *Wild Swans*, are not to be found here.



Instead, *Daughter of the River* traces the life of a girl growing up in a hillside slum in Chongqing, on the Yangtze River. Born in 1962 during the famine induced by Mao's Great Leap Forward, she survives by the efforts of her mother and lives through the Cultural Revolution before coming of age in the post-Mao era.

As a child, she felt her life was full of mystery, unsure why she was somehow different, why she seemed to be watched. Her parents were poor; her father worked on the boats that ply the Yangtze River, her mother a manual labourer struggling with the physical demands of her work and the hardships and life and death decisions in bringing up six children in extremely difficult times. Hong Ying's own life is miserable and bright spots are few and fleeting. She hates her mother while her father, now blind, treats her well.

The grim struggles of her family to survive are mirrored in the difficult lives of others around her, a kind teacher with a past, her relatives, classmates and workmates. The book brings to life the human impacts of the stresses, violence and tragedies brought on by misguided policies and harsh rule of the Chinese Government. Even after it was over, the effects of the Cultural Revolution continued to reverberate and blight lives.

The author finds an outlet in writing and eventually a path opens to enable her to leave Chongqing. But even then life does not go smoothly; "following the river downstream" she finds herself in Beijing in 1989 during the events in Tiananmen Square.

The horrors of the times are related in a sombre low-key style which only serves to emphasise the subject matter. This book is not for the faint-hearted, but well worth reading for another view of real life in China.

Daughter of the River is available from the Napier Public Library stack. It is also available on Amazon.com. Hong Ying has also written some fiction works which have been translated into English, including *K: The Art of Love* (Hastings Library, Amazon.com) and *Peacock Cries at the Three Gorges* (Napier Library, but, as of Aug 2013, is not available at Amazon.com).

Matthew Griffiths is a long time member of the NZ China Friendship Society. He loves Chinese food, has visited China many times, studied Mandarin, and attempted to learn Tai chi. He and his Chinese-born wife Deborah have two bilingual children. They lived in China from 2008 to 2010 and now Matthew can't stop reading about it.