



Voices  
from the  
Gaps

# The Moon Pearl

by Ruthanne Lum McCunn

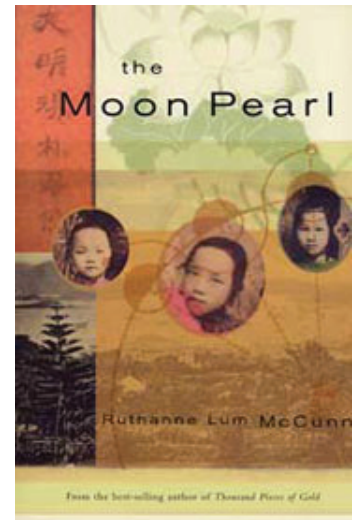
## Finding the Moon Pearl: Chasing Independence in 19th Century China

Ruthanne Lum McCunn's novel, *The Moon Pearl*, pays tribute to women overcoming opposition to their struggle for independence. McCunn spins a tale of three young women living in China's Pearl River Delta during the 1830s. *The Moon Pearl* originated from stories told in McCunn's Hong Kong childhood home by various wives, mothers, concubines, and spinsters.

To write accurately about a way of life over a century old, McCunn went through a plethora of articles, books, and dissertations. She then fleshed out characters using both old and new interviews of independent spinsters. The result is a heart-warming reminder that being a spinster, even in 19th century China, does not define what you are.

Mei Ju, Rooster, and Shadow are sent to the same girl's house and become fast friends while slowly being introduced to the tasks and ideas expected of a dutiful Chinese wife. But Mei Ju, Rooster, and Shadow start to question their predetermined path of marriage, and begin to imagine lives in which they answer to no one.

Nineteenth century Chinese thought placed little value on women. They were defined in terms of their fathers, and later their husbands. Even unmarried daughters who had the misfortune of passing away before marriage were wed posthumously; else they would not be able to rest in peace. To lead independent lives, Mei Ju, Rooster, and Shadow must bypass over 1000 years of traditional thought that women should be "obedient, skilled in wifely arts, and without any interests beyond duty to family" (22).



Publisher: Beacon Press,  
2000



# The Moon Pearl

by Ruthanne Lum McCunn

McCunn could have depicted Chinese marriage during the 1830s as harsh and totally unjust, but opts for a more realistic telling of her story. Mei Ju, Shadow, and Rooster see marriages with distinct personalities, showing that marriage types varied from extremely happy to blatantly abusive, with most marriages falling somewhere in the middle. Grandparents, parents, brothers, and neighbors each have a different type of marriage, making Mei Ju, Shadow, and Rooster's reasons for spinsterhood much more complex.

Just like her depiction of marriage, some of McCunn's characters are two-dimensional, with predictable thoughts and actions. However, she takes time to give Mei Ju, Rooster, and Shadow individual backgrounds and motivations for wanting to remain single. Rooster comes from a poor sharecropping family, and finds the solution to eternal peace in books. Rooster knows that as a wife, she will not be permitted to learn to read, much less study the religion that will bring eternal peace.

Shadow comes from a single-family home, neither rich, nor poor. Her desire to remain unmarried is directly linked to her realization that if married, "she would not only lose Elder Brother and Mama and Baba, but her good friends Mei Ju and Rooster, their nights in the girls' house loft, every single one of the freedoms and privileges she now enjoyed" (128).

Mei Ju comes from a huge clan, and of the three girls, she is the most unsure about renouncing tradition and striking out on her own. However, she shares the spirit of Rooster, Shadow, and all other women who wish to define themselves in terms of nothing but themselves. Seeing three very different girls grow up from questioning but obedient daughters into resolute women dependent only on themselves gets the message across much more effectively than a generic, stereotypical telling would.

For much of the book, McCunn does her best to show every point of view concerning women's independence in 19th century China. However, some would say she finds an easy solution for an issue that would generate far more controversy, and in a longer dose, than McCunn chooses to do. But if her only fault is finishing things neatly and quietly, it is difficult to blame McCunn for wanting an ending that we can all cheer for. This delightful coming of age tale, set against a refreshing backdrop, will delight, as well as encourage and inspire women to question their predetermined path in their own searches for independence.

*Reviewed by Jessica Heerwald*