



A Private Life (Weatherhead Books on Asia)

Ran Chen

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From one of China's most celebrated contemporary novelists comes this riveting tale of a young woman's emotional and sexual awakening. Set in the turbulent decades of the Cultural Revolution and the Tian'anmen Square incident, *A Private Life* exposes the complex and fantastical inner life of a young woman growing up during a time of intense social and political upheaval.

At the age of twenty-six, Ni Niuniu has come to accept pain and loss. She has suffered the death of her mother and a close friend and neighbor, Mrs. Ho. She has long been estranged from her tyrannical father, while her boyfriend -- a brilliant and handsome poet named Yin Nan -- was forced to flee the country. She has survived a disturbing affair with a former teacher, a mental breakdown that left her in a mental institution for two years, and a stray bullet that tore through the flesh of her left leg. Now living in complete seclusion, Niuniu shuns a world that seems incapable of accepting her and instead spends her days wandering in vivid, dreamlike reveries where her fractured recollections and wild fantasies merge with her inescapable feelings of melancholy and loneliness. Yet this eccentric young woman -- caught between the disappearing traditions of the past and a modernizing Beijing, a flood of memories and an unknowable future, her chosen solitude and her irrepressible longing -- discovers strength and independence through writing, which transforms her flight from the hypocrisy of urban life into a journey of self-realization and rebirth.

First published in 1996 to widespread critical acclaim, Ran Chen's controversial debut novel is a lyrical meditation on memory, sexuality, femininity, and the often arbitrary distinctions between madness and sanity, alienation and belonging, nature and society. As Chen leads the reader deep into the psyche of Ni Niuniu -- into her innermost secrets and sexual desires -- the borders separating narrator and protagonist, writer and subject dissolve, exposing the shared aspects of human existence that transcend geographical and cultural differences.

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