

Big Breasts and Wide Hips: A Novel Study Guide

Big Breasts and Wide Hips: A Novel by Mo Yan

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Plot Summary

Big Breasts and Wide Hips is a novel by Mo Yan that focuses around the life of Jintong throughout twentieth-century China, and his interactions with women.

Jintong is the ninth child of Mother, preceded by eight sisters. Mother has long been hoping for a son, and so spoils her son endlessly. All of Jintong's siblings are very unhappy with this special treatment that Jintong receives. Jintong's father and grandfather are both incompetent and ineffectual men. Indeed, Jintong's grandmother is the ruler of their family until Jintong's own mother becomes the head of the family. Except for two of her children, the rest are all conceived with different men, so Jintong has no real masculine influence in his life. He continues breastfeeding well into his teenage years, and his mother has no desire to stop him.

Jintong's family passes through World War II, the Communist Revolution in China, and the very early stages of market economics in the country in the 1980s. Jintong has an unhealthy obsession with breasts, even jealously envying the breasts of his sisters. Jintong grows older, shuffles in and out of different jobs, spends time in a labor camp, and ultimately comes home in his forties. Still then, he has an unhealthy obsession with breasts, gets into a sham marriage just as he is making a success of himself as CEO of Unicorn Bras, divorces, and loses everything. He returns home to bring his mother to church before she dies, and meets his half-brother, who is a pastor.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

Chapter 1 - Swedish Pastor Malory tends to his church excitedly, and the people of Dalan Town near Black Water River. Sima Ting climbs the watchtower, and looking out into the distance, tells his fellow villagers that the Japanese are coming. Many of the villagers flee. Meanwhile, Shangguan Lu's daughter-in-law, Shangguan Lu (Mother), is giving birth while explosions sound in the distance. Mother has some Christian beliefs, and some traditional Chinese beliefs, and she implores both God and her ancestors to allow her to deliver a baby boy. Mother's mother-in-law forces some peanuts into her hand, and compels her to say a chant about yin and yang. Shangguan Lu's son, Shangguan Shouxi, is a blacksmith and does not want to fight the Japanese. His mother accuses him of cowardice when he insists on fleeing with everyone else. Shangguan Lu's husband is just as meek and timid as his son, and Shangguan Lu is angered by this. They are helping their donkey give birth, while outside, Sima Ting implores the villagers to flee, for Japanese cavalry has indeed set off from the county seat.

The donkey's baby begins to be birthed backwards, and Shangguan Lu knows this is a problem. The local veterinarian and master archer, Third Master Fan, is summoned. Shangguan Shouxi is indecisive even about which way to go through town. One way will take him past dogs he doesn't like; another will take him past Pastor Malory's goat with a bad smell that he doesn't like. He ultimately settles on going past the dogs, owned by the Sun family. Shangguan Lu's daughter, Mother, has given birth to seven previous children, all of them girls. The eldest is fourteen year-old Laidi, then Shaodi, Lingdi, Xiangdi, Pandi, Niandi, and Quidi. Laidi accidentally destroys a fine bowl, and her grandmother howls angrily at her, telling her it is time she was married. Laidi and her sisters move into town, where they hear about the advance of the Japanese. Even Felicity Manor, the large home of the wealthiest family, is in an uproar as servants rush to empty the house. The sisters decide to go home, but stop at the river to catch shrimp, and fill a basket. As they are about to leave, men arrive with straw and liquor, and pour it all onto the nearby bridge. Guerilla fighters arrive to block the Japanese advance, or at least to delay it, and the urge the girls to get home quickly.

Master Fan arrives at the Shangguan residence, bringing more news of the Japanese advance. He tends to the donkey and her offspring, though panic continues growing around outside. The baby donkey is born successfully. Meanwhile, as Laidi and her sisters leave the Flood Dragon River, it comes under Japanese bombardment. The bridge is lit and burned, and the arriving Japanese cavalry ford the river instead. The guerrillas open fire, and attack the Japanese troops. Laidi and her sisters hide. Mother reveals to her husband that her current pregnancy is not his. Pastor Malory and Aunt Sun are sent for to help with the birth. On the morning of the fifth day of the fifth lunar month (June 24), 1939, Jintong and his twin sister, Yunu, are born. As Aunt Sun attempts to leave the house, arriving Japanese soldiers shoot her dead. Pastor Malory is taken captive. A Japanese military doctor arrives, and cuts the umbilical cords, and



stops Mother from bleeding to death. A photographer takes pictures to send to Japanese newspapers, of friendship between the Japanese and Chinese.

Chapter 2 - From Chapter 2 on, Jintong narrates. He traces his family history from the year 1900. His grandfather, Lu Wuluan, was a brave and terrifying soldier who led the Red Spears military unit, and fought foreign soldiers, including the Germans. He is killed in battle. Jintong's mother, Mother, becomes an orphan, and is saved by Jintong's aunt and uncle. Mother -first called Lu Xuan'er- is raised well. She has her feet bound. Mother's aunt controls the fifty-acre farm the family owns. She is the dominant member of the family. When Xuan'er is sixteen, China becomes a republic. In the summer of 1917, and many traditional Chinese practices, such as foot-binding, are declared ancient and evil. Nevertheless, the blacksmith Shangguan family proposes a marriage contract, promising to overlook Xuan'er's bound feet. At seventeen, Xuan'er marries Shouxi. Three years into marriage, Xuan'er has not given birth, and her new family believes she is infertile. They become violent with her, and her own aunt and uncle are angry about it. Xuan'er is examined by a doctor, but found to be fertile. Uncle Big Paw Yu is even angrier. Far gone in drink, Xuan'er and her uncle go to bed together that night. She later gives birth to a daughter, and a second daughter -both from her uncle.

Xuan'er's third daughter is conceived with a duck salesman. The fourth daughter is conceived with a quack of a doctor. Xuan'er's mother-in-law begins beating Xuan'er, because she considers her worthless since she cannot give birth to a boy. Xuan'er then goes on to have a three-day affair with a dog butcher, Gao Dabiao. There comes the next daughter. In the fall of 1935, Xuan'er/Mother is gang-raped by four retreating soldiers. The seventh daughter is later born. Still suffering abuse, Uncle Big Paw tries to intervene, but Mother tells him not to. She instead turns to Christianity, to God and to Jesus Christ, in Whom she finds strength and comfort. She finds God in the early summer of 1938. She also sleeps with Pastor Malory.

Chapter 3 - Mother, because of the Japanese doctor, survives the birth of her twins. Sima Ting comes around to reveal many of the people have been killed and are suffering at the hands of the Japanese because of the ambush at the bridge. However, it is discovered that both Shangguan's father and son have been killed -one by having his head crushed, the other by having his head cut off. The corpses of the dead are piled high in a cart. The survivors, including Mother and her eight daughters and son, follow the corpse cart out of town and through farmland, to the public cemetery. There the bodies are buried. Pastor Malory says a prayer for the dead. Mother later brings Pastor Malory both twins, so that he may see his children. He is very happy to see them. Mother reveals to Pastor Malory that she has told her mother-in-law the true father of her twins. Malory has been contemplating returning to Sweden, but wants to stay in China with his children and his beloved instead. Mother also brings along the donkey and her new baby offspring, and they stay together in Malory's compound by his millstone. Meanwhile, Sha Yueliang and his guerrilla fighters come into Dalan Town. Sha is enraged that Sima Ting has been appointed to head of the Peace Preservation Corps by the Japanese Imperial Army. Sha realizes an opportunity, and enlists Sima Ting to his side as a double-agent, working for and against the Japanese.



Meanwhile, Malory and Mother prepare dinner. She asks about his past, about the time he was in love with a dark-haired Muslim woman, and the children he had with her. Malory tells her to forget such thoughts. Seeing the beauty of Laidi, Sha announces his headquarters will be the Shangguan family farmstead. Malory later baptizes his son and daughter. As they ponder names for their children, they are interrupted by soldiers who storm into the church, hoping to stable their donkey there. Malory protests. Twenty-eight donkeys are brought into the church, and Malory is shot in the legs, while Mother is repeatedly raped by all of the guerrillas. Pastor Malory then commits suicide by falling from the bell tower as Mother and her two children flee the church.

With winter approaching, Mother prepares warm clothes for her family. She takes over as head of the family, putting all of her children to work, so that they may survive. Sha Yueling brings winter covercoats for everyone in Mother's family. Mother warns Laidi not to get in trouble since she is the oldest, but she fires back that all Mother cares about is Jintong, and the girls are worthless to her. Mother says that it is not true, and that all Sha wants is to have his way with Laidi, so she must be careful. Laidi doesn't care. To prevent Laidi from going to Sha, Mother arranges a marriage with the mute son of the Sun family. Laidi is horrified. That night, she runs off with Sha. Mother is devastated. Through the winter, Sima Ku, of Felicity House, and Technician Jiang, burn holes in the river ice so that Mother and her daughters may fish, as well as the other villagers. They also set to work, confounding the Japanese by destroying bridges and railroad tracks. But Sima Ting is enraged with his brother, Sima Ku, for his guerrilla actions. Seventeen year-old Zhaodi, the second-oldest daughter of Mother, falls in love with Sima Ku. Mother fears a repeat of Laidi, and so allows Zhaodi to go after Sima Ku.

Soon after New Year's, the Japanese come to the village, and Mother and her children go down to hide in the cellar tunnel. Zhaodi brings Sima Ku's baby from another wife into the tunnel, and asks Mother to watch the baby, for Sima Ku's family has been eradicated, and Sima Ku wounded. The next day, the Japanese hang the heads of all nineteen Sima family members from a rack. Zhaodi is not heard from again. When they emerge from the cellar, Mother and her children discover that most of the food is gone, and so Mother concocts a soup with arsenic to poison them all, including Mother's mother-in-law. At the protests of her children, Mother decides not to go through with suicide, and instead leads her family outside to find food. The town is full of hungry refugees and locals. Fighting breaks out between them. To make do, Mother's daughters beg, scavenge, steal, and trade. Third Sister Lingdi falls in love with a birdman, Han, but he is taken away by Japanese soldiers, and Lingdi wants to become a Bird Fairy. She predicts gifts will come, and gifts do come -in the form of fine ceramic and a painting of a bird, from a messenger beggar sent by a son-in-law of Mother's, which he does not reveal. The village learns of Third Sister being a Bird Fairy, and she becomes well-known. Pilgrims come in droves and leave gifts of food. They even travel to the county seat, and on the way home, Third Master Fan dies leading them there.

In the county seat, people try to sell their children to wealthy families and foreigners. Among them is Mother, who gives her seventh daughter, Qiudi, to Countess Rostov, a philanthropist. Though Mother doesn't want any money, the Countess pays her anyway. They also come across Sha and First Sister's daughter, whom they bring home. The



winter of 1941 moves on into February. Xiangdi, the fourth sister, begins selling herself as a prostitute to provide money for the family, against the wishes of Mother. When they return home, they find Wang and his Fifth Squad of the Railway Demolition Battalion occupying their home. Their commander, Lu, is an old friend of Sha's. He makes sure the family is provided food. A beautiful female soldier, Little Tang, helps provide food and gifts. The daughter of Sha is named Sha Zaohua. Miss Little Tang reveals that Sha now commands an entire city, Bohai City, and three hundred men. Tang also helps to care for the daughters of Mother. Later, a member of the military squad is executed for theft and illegal selling, and it causes dissension in the squad. More members of the squad are punished. A son of the Sun family, Speechless Sun, rapes Third Sister Lingdi, but she saves his life by telling everyone that it was consensual.

The summer brings hot weather. Laidi comes home, seeking forgiveness, and seeking her daughter. She reveals Sha is working for the Japanese, and commands over a thousand troops. She wants her daughter back. As she tries to escape, her guards are cut down and she is captured by Commander Lu. He arrests Laidi, and brings Mother and her family to the Sima household. Meanwhile, the Chinese and the approaching Japanese do battle. Sha is captured, along with sixty of his men. They are hungry and are given soup. Meanwhile, Sha apparently commits suicide by hanging himself. Jintong is now seven years old, and is still breast-feeding. Laidi is now living with the family, and allows Jintong to breastfeed from her when Mother will not allow him to do so. Word comes that Japan has surrendered, and the war is over. It is 1945. The Bird Fairy Sister and Fifth Sister are now both pregnant. Sima Ku and Zhaodi come riding into the village triumphantly. Among the Sima group is Sima Ting, and an American named Babbitt. The Simas order Commander Lu and his men to leave, which they regretfully do. Lu vows revenge. Jintong almost drowns in a river. Sima Ku is welcomed into the family as Sima Liang. A great celebration for the defeat of Japan is held.

Chapter 4 - Pandi expects Mother to care for her baby as Mother cares for the babies of the others. 1946 rolls around. Mother and her family now oversee five milk goats. They are living in the Sima family residence. Mother decides she will keep breastfeeding Jintong until he has either had enough, or until he gets married. Jintong's sisters dislike this. They teach Jintong to drink milk from goats. Mother accidentally kills her mother-in-law, whom she hits with a rolling pin after her mother-in-law bites part of Yunu's ear off. The family later goes up Reclining Ox Mountain with Babbitt, where they demonstrate a parachute. Third Sister is killed when she leaps off the mountain. Sister Niandi later marries Babbitt. Babbitt has brought much technology to the village, such as electricity. He is well-respected and admired. Jintong is angry that the American will get his sister's breasts, and not him. Babbitt also brings a film projector to his wedding, and shows his guests a film, which they are all amazed by. Babbitt continues showing films to the delight of the villagers. During a viewing, Sima Ku sneaks off to have sex with Laidi, and Jintong oversees this. During another night, Commander Lu and his men return and force everyone to get down on their stomachs. Lu is now in command of the independent 16th Regiment. The people are then herded into a mill house. There, they spend the night. When Mother attempts to leave early the next morning, the men make a break for it, and overpower the guards left to handle the prisoners. Fighting erupts. The 16th Regiment is called to fight. Second Sister is killed. Mother and the others are



taken captive, and Lu is happy to have his revenge. They are herded off as prisoners of the revolution.

The Flood Dragon River floods, and several members of Mother's family, including Sima Ku and Babbitt, are going to be led back to military headquarters. Mother and the others go to the bank of the river to say goodbye. The soldiers also build a wall to keep back the flood waters. Prisoners are ferried across the river. Niandi goes along with her husband. As Sima Ku is being ferried across, he makes his escape. News later comes that Babbitt and Niandi die in an explosion in a mountain tunnel. Lu becomes the County Head, and Pandi the local Commander. A VIP, Comrade Zhang Sheng, comes to visit. They preach Communism to the people, condemning the rich and condemning those with many wives and much land. All of the people who have lived on the edge of society begin ruthlessly slandering -and in some cases, telling the truth- about their meaner neighbors, and the less-than-kind villagers who have wronged them in the past. Sima Lian, son of Sima Ku, is to be killed for his father's past sins. Sima Lian runs and hides, and his two sisters are taken captive to be killed in his stead. Speechless Sun is given the task of carrying out the sentence. But two horsemen ride into the town, firing their guns, and shooting the two girls before riding off.

A short while later, Gaomi Township's eighteen villages are ordered to be evacuated. They travel for days while the sounds of battle rage around them. None of the refugees quite know what to make of what is going on. Dozens of people die nightly from freezing to death. Mother and her group decide to head back. They find an old hut in which they regroup. Inside, they find a dead soldier who has committed suicide, and drag his body out. They keep his rifle for protection. The next morning, they continue on. They head into the wilderness. A massive artillery barrage ensues, and artillery shells land all around them. On January 1, 1948, they return to their village, and find Sima Liang.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The beginning of the novel *Big Breasts and Big Hips* by Mo Yan begins explosively, with two births and war between the Japanese Imperial Army and local Chinese guerrilla forces. The unfolding tragedy that Jintong and his sister are born into seems to spell disaster as an omen of the future. Jintong's father and grandfather are both killed during the battle that rages for control of Dalan Town. If that wasn't bad enough, the birth of the baby donkey backwards can be viewed metaphorically. The novel challenges the concept of a male-dominated China, as it turns the patriarchy on its head through the forceful and dominant control of both Mother and her mother-in-law. Indeed, these events, coupled with the illegitimate nature of baby Jintong, only seem to portend even more disaster down the road.

These expectations of disaster are well-imagined, for disaster does strike. Mother is raped following the death of Jintong's father, and between threat of Japanese raids and Chinese treachery, her life is constantly imperiled. Her eight daughters quickly grow resentful of the kindness and favoritism showered on Jintong by their Mother at their expense; the daughters quickly rebel, lured away by a desire for affection, improvement



in their lies, and the seductive nature of sex. Her daughters make horrible choices in the men whom they marry, at least initially. The eldest daughter marries a man who ultimately goes over to work for the Japanese Imperial Army, betraying not just his family, but his entire country.

Disaster continues to befall Mother, who does her best to keep her little family together. Family members come and go. Mother is saddled with caring for her grandchildren as the war rages on. A battle rages between many of the Chinese military forces themselves, between right wing forces and Communist forces as World War II ends. One of Mother's daughters goes on to engage in a life of prostitution, and another daughter is given up for adoption. Everything that Mother does is ultimately to benefit Jintong. As the Communists battle to take control of China, ruthlessly slaughtering their opponents and opposing civilians, Mother and the family attempt to flee, but return to their village. Sima Ku is sent fleeing away, two granddaughters are killed, and a grandson runs off to hide. By 1948, Mother's family has been forced to flee the fighting between the Communists and traditional Chinese forces, only to return to find the long-lost grandson, Sima Liang. No matter where she goes, misfortune follows Mother's family. The tremendous difficulties she has endured are only complicated by Jintong's growing and unhealthy obsession with breasts, from his mother's, to his sisters', to various women in the village. It is a disturbing obsession.



Chapters 5-7

Chapters 5-7 Summary

Chapter 5 - The survivors of the artillery duel and battles gather together to celebrate New Year's as best they can. Jintong is chosen as that year's Snow Prince. Everything is done in silence, as per custom. Jintong is placed in a pagoda where as custom has it, girls and women let the Snow Prince fondle their naked breasts to ensure milk and to have babies. Jintong enjoys this very much. He gets to fondle the breasts of over 120 females. Sima Ting later returns home bearing medals for his military service. The beautiful Ji Qiongzhi is given the job of remarrying widows in the villages, and she urges Mother and others to remarry. Ji will later become Jintong's teacher. Mother is forced to remarry Sima Ting. Among the things she teaches is music. She teaches her students Communist propaganda songs. A fat kid named Fang Shuzhai pretends to hang himself during recess, only to have his desk kicked over by Wu Yunyu, who almost kills him. Wu is then beaten up by Ji, and expelled from school. Wu and his friends later beat up Jintong on his way home from school, and abduct him. They urinate on Jintong, and his brother, Sima Liang, comes to his rescue. Mother brings Jintong home. The boys also hit Mother, and beat up cousin Zaohua. But they are all saved by a mysterious man who pulverizes Wu and his minions. It is Sima Ku. He then flees.

Ji continues hammering the minds of her students with Chinese Communist propaganda, blaming the rich and the elite for all of their problems. Jintong and his family are tied up and questioned about Sima Ku. They brutally torture Mother, demanding she give up Sima Ku's location. Sima Ku surrenders himself to the authorities for the release of his family. He is given a public trial, and a public execution.

Chapter 6 - When Jintong turns eighteen, he receives a mirror. Cousin Zaohua is apprenticing and is able to steal lots of things. She steals a mirror for Jintong. Knowing that he is illegitimate, Jintong feels badly for himself. Laidi is now working at the district match factory. Speechless Sun returns to the house. He hasn't been seen in a long time, having left to find out where his sons had gone. First Sister does not want him there. The district chief arrives to explain that they have reviewed the Shuangguan family files, and that because they were wrongly classified as upper middle class, and because their relatives resisted the Japanese invaders, the family situation will improve now. Employment and education will follow. Laidi will be forced to marry the Speechless Sun. Jintong becomes the brightest student at Dalan Middle School in the latter half of the 1950s, and he becomes pen pals with a gorgeous Soviet girl named Natasha. Jintong falls in love with her and becomes heartsick. Jintong is even more enraged by his sister having sex with Speechless Sun.

Birdman Han suddenly returns to the house one day. He has lived for fifteen years, hiding out in Japan, until he could escape. Birdman is given room to stay with the Shuangguan family. Birdman and First Sister begin an affair, which Mother covers up. But Speechless Sun discovers the affair, and he and Birdman fight. Birdman kills



Speechless Sun in the process. Speechless Sun's death is written off as an accident, because he had been hit by a truck beforehand. Mother uses this as an excuse for his later death, which is accepted. But Birdman confesses to the crime, and he and Laidi are arrested. They are shot the next day.

A wasteland reclamation project is begun, and the young men of Northeast Gaomi Township are mobilized for the effort. Jintong is now twenty. He works with Pandi, who has changed her name to Ma Ruilian, who owns an animal farm, and horrendous experiments are performed on the animals. He meets a pretty girl named Qiao Qisha, and they get to know each other. One day, Qiao shows Jintong how to steal eggs. But their plot is discovered, and Qiao is punished and reassigned. Female Commander Long tries to sleep with Jintong, for she is a virgin, but she cannot excite him, and so she shoots herself in the head. Jintong then has sex with her corpse. Jintong is questioned over her death; he denies killing her. But a flood washes away the body of Commander Long, as well as all the evidence. Jintong is spared. An ensuing investigation concludes Commander Long committed suicide. It is now the spring of 1960. The people are put to work sowing new crops, and the ground is salted with poisoned fertilizer to stop people from eating seeds and spuds. Qiao later allows an official to use her for sex in exchange for food. She later dies.

Jintao visits home and is happy to see Mother and his family. Rumor spreads that Anticommunists are being trained by the United States, and by Babbitt. Jintong considers his family — Laidi, Zhaodi, Lingdi, and Quidi — are dead. Pandi might well be dead. Only Xiangdi and Yunu are still alive. Birdman Han has a son with Laidi, named Parrot. Yunu, Eighth Sister, has left the family home, believing herself to be a burden. Xiangdi comes home. She is suffering from syphilis, from prostitution. She dies five years later. The Red Guards, meanwhile, have taken over security, and have fun humiliating the villagers by putting dunce caps on their heads and labeling them with horrible terms. Jintong spots his cousin Zaohua in the streets, and runs to see her. Mother is also among the people. When the Red Guards target mother for helping another man, she is savagely beaten. Mother calls Jintong useless. A diary of Qiao's is later discovered, which details what had occurred between Jintong and Commander Long, and Jintong is arrested and sent to a labor reform camp on the coast of the Yellow Sea.

Chaper 7 - Jintong waits for a bus to Dalan Town. It is now spring, 1980. Jintong recalls a horrendous imprisonment, from being forced to perform oral sex on male guards, to being beaten, to the horrendous heat of the camp. On the ride home, Jintong realizes his nephew, Parrot, is also on the bus. They are happy to see one another. Parrot is doing well for himself. The inklings of a market economy are appearing in China. Parrot gives his uncle some money. He tells Jintong to go home and spend time with Mother, and then come visit him at the Eastern Bird Sanctuary. Jintong and Mother are overjoyed to see one another. A few days later, Jintong falls ill. Parrot arranges for a doctor for his Uncle. Mother cares for Jintong throughout his illness. Jintong slowly recovers. Old Jin comes to visit Jintong. Old Jin is a one-breasted woman whom Jintong remembers from his youth. Old Jin suckles Jintong with her one breast. Old Jin finishes



helping Jintong to recover. He is now forty-two. He kills a rabbit for food, but then cannot believe he has done such a thing. Mother calls him a sissy.

Jintong later begins a sexual affair with Old Jin. He continues drinking from her breast. Old Jin runs a scrapyard, and Jintong becomes her general manager. Her husband tries to kill both her and Jintong one night, but Old Jin drives him away. Jintong is later fired. He is hired by Geng LianLian, wife of Parrot Han, to work at the Eastern Bird Sanctuary. LianLian tells Jintong that they need money to operate the bird sanctuary, and that Ji Qiongzhi is now mayor of Dalan Town. Jintong is sent to see her for a bank loan. Ji agrees to attend a tour of the sanctuary with many other bank officials. Ji does not want to give them a loan, but LianLian has gifts sent to the homes of the bank managers. LianLian fires Jintong for his incompetence. Jintong wanders around town aimlessly. He is chased by a pack of dogs. He ultimately comes to a shop district, and jumps through the window to feel the breasts of mannequins. He then spends three years in an insane asylum.

By the end of the 1980s, an amusement park has been designated for land that Mother owns. She will not let the bulldozers proceed. The Cultural Affairs Office prevails upon Jintong to make Mother leave. Jintong finally makes his stand as a man, to protect his home. Sima Liang shows up with new Mayor Lu Shengli, who halts construction. Sima has become rich. He has his Uncle go into business with him, for Unicorn Bras. Jintong is made CEO. It is now March 1991. The company thrives under Jintong. He later marries Wang Yinzhi, daughter of Broadcasting Bureau Chief Wang Jinzhi. She helps him expand the business and makes it even more successful. Unicorn expands to make clothing beyond bras. Wang becomes the face of the company, and she disparages her husband. Jintong is enraged. He tells her to leave, and she has him removed. They divorce. Mayor Lu is later sentenced to death for accepting bribes. LianLian and Parrot are thrown into prison for their bird sanctuary hoax. Zaohua returns, but is not entirely accepted by Mother. Before Mother dies, she goes to church with Jintong. There, Jintong meets his half-brother, the new Pastor Malory. There, the novel ends.

Chapters 5-7 Analysis

Jintong's unhealthy obsession with breasts is only piqued by his performance as Snow King, where he enjoys the ability to fondle the breasts of over a hundred women, young and old. Jintong's sister attempts to wean him off of his mother's breast, but she is unable to successfully do so. Horrifyingly, Mother announces she will allow Jintong to suckle at her breast until marriage if needs be. This strikes the reader as bizarre and indefensible, and they can already see that Jintong is fast growing into a spoiled, selfish man-child. He is grossly ineffective at defending himself, choosing to let others fight his battles for him, including his Mother.

As Jintong continues to grow, he is swept into things against his will, including being forced out of his home to work on farms. Here, Jintong's incompetency and helplessness are metaphorical for the greater Chinese countryside at large. Just as Mother is raped against her will, and just as Jintong is forced into circumstances against



his will, China at large is forced into circumstances against its will by violent Communists. At every step of the way, every chance that Jintong has to stand up for himself, for his Mother, or for his family, he doesn't take. He is listless, and seems to defy a reason to be alive. Indeed, Jintong himself wishes for death on more than one occasion.

Ultimately, Jintong ends up in a forced labor camp, endures unspeakable cruelties, and is released back into the world as an overgrown child. He has matured in virtually no way, and he himself admits he is not good at anything. Indeed, Mother accuses him of being worthless and a sissy. He drifts in and out of various jobs, until at long last he comes — through the grace of a nephew — to control Unicorn Bras. Although much of Jintong's effeminate nature is due to Mother's overbearing nature, and Jintong's own lack of masculine influence in his life, a large portion of his inability to grow up and be a man is his own fault. He ultimately does not grow into his own as a man.



Characters

Jintong

Shangguan Jintong is the main character and narrator of the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan. Jintong is the ninth child of Mother, and has eight older sisters. Jintong is the only son of Mother, and as such, he is spoiled beyond compare, to the detriment and resentment of his sisters. Jintong has a blind twin sister named Yunu. He and his sister are the illegitimate offspring of local Christian Pastor Malory, who commits suicide. Jintong is raised by Mother, suckling at her breast well into his teenage years. This is a source of embarrassment to his sisters, who attempt unsuccessfully to wean Jintong off of his mother's breast. Jintong, however, has an unhealthy obsession with breasts, be they his mother's, sisters', or those of women in the village.

The result of this obsession, and the lack of masculine influence in Jintong's life, lead to Jintong's adulthood being a delayed one. He is forced to work on a Communist collective farm, is sent to labor camp, forced to perform oral sex on guards, and released back into the world. In his forties, Jintong cannot hold down a job, is called worthless and a sissy by his mother, and enters a sham marriage, which later ends in divorce. The novel ends with Jintong bringing his mother to church, and meeting his half-brother.

Mother

"Mother" Shangguan Lu, formerly Xuan'er, is the mother of Jintong and eight girls. She is married off to another family at the age of seventeen to an impotent husband, and all of her children are the products of affairs. She is a domineering woman, whose husband and father-in-law are killed during World War II, on the same day that Jintong is born. Mother takes charge of her family, and babies Jintong throughout his life, allowing him to suckle at her breast well into childhood. Mother is a Christian and a forgiving soul, and she takes care not just of her children, but of their children as well. She lives through the 1980s, bemoaning her son, calling him a sissy and worthless. Before she dies, Jintong brings her to church, where he meets his half-brother.

Laidi

Laidi is the eldest sister of Jintong, and the firstborn daughter of Mother and her Uncle, Big Paw. Laidi runs off with Chinese fighter Sha Zaohua, resenting her brother's special treatment, and seeking a better life. She ultimately helps Sha work for the Japanese, and ultimately becomes an outcast. She remarries Speechless Sun and then later has an affair with Birdman Han, and has a son named Parrot.



Pandi

Pandi is the fifth sister of Jintong, and the daughter of Mother. She marries Lu Liren, a political commissar, and this gives her access to more power. She does her best to provide for her family, and changes her name to Ma Ruilian following the establishment of Communism in China.

Niandi

Niandi is the sixth sister of Jintong. She is the daughter of Mother and a monk from the Tianqi Monastery. She later marries American fighter Babbitt. They are both killed, supposedly, by the Communists, though rumors persist later on that they had been helping Anticomunist forces.

Shangguan Shouxi

Shangguan Shouxi is the impotent husband of Mother. He is abusive, imbecilic, and worthless, made so by a weak father and his own overbearing mother. He is killed by the Japanese on the day Jintong is born.

Sima Ku

Sima Ku is the scion of a wealthy family who fights the Japanese, and later the Chinese Communists. He has three children by Zhaodi, the second daughter of Mother. He later turns himself in to the authorities to spare his family suffering, and is executed.

Pastor Malory

Pastor Malory is a Swedish pastor who oversees the Christian church in Dalan Town. He is kind, honest, and in love with Mother. He has an affair with Mother, and has twins by her. He later commits suicide when Chinese renegades bring donkeys into his church and rape Mother.

Parrot Han

Parrot Han is the son of Birdman Han and Laidi. He marries LianLian, and the two attempt a scheme using a bird sanctuary to bilk the Chinese government out of millions. They are found out, and imprisoned.

Lu Shengli

Lu Shengli is the daughter of Lu Liren and Pandi. She becomes the mayor of Dalan, and manages to save her family's land from being turned into an amusement park.



Objects/Places

China

China is the main setting of the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan. It is the location of Gaomi Township and Dalan Town.

Gaomi Township

Gaomi Township is a township located in China, and is home to Dalan Town, and seventeen other towns. It is ruthlessly taken over by the Japanese, and later the Communists.

Dalan Town

Dalan Town is the home of Mother, her family, and Jintong. It is where Pastor Malory's church is located. The town grows and suffers and grows again throughout the course of the novel, as political events and fortunes shift.

Flood Dragon River

Flood Dragon River is nearby Dalan Town. Jintong's siblings fish there, and the bridge over the river is defended by Chinese guerrillas. It is in Flood Dragon River that Sima Ku escapes from the Communists.

The Church

The Church is located in Dalan Town and overseen by Pastor Malory. It is where Jintong and his twin sister are baptized, and where Chinese fighters mockingly keep their donkeys. The church is where Malory commits suicide by plunging from the bell tower, and is later restored. It is where Jintong meets his half-brother.

Unicorn Bras

Unicorn Bras is a series of shops begun by Sima Liang. Jintong is made CEO of the shops, and they thrive under him.

Yellow Sea Labor Camp

The Yellow Sea Labor Camp is where Jintong is sent to serve out a sentence for supposedly killing a commander and having sex with her corpse.



Milk

Milk is a drug for Jintong, either from his mother, his sisters, or animals. He goes throughout much of the book seeking to suckle milk from either person or animal.

Food

Food is consistently in short supply throughout the novel. Mother and her family sell, trade, steal, and prostitute themselves in order to earn money to buy food, or food itself.

Rifles

Rifles are used by the Japanese Imperial Army, Chinese resistance fighters, and Chinese Communists to win battles and to oppress the Chinese villagers.



Themes

Gender Roles

Gender roles is a major and dominant theme in the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan. Gender roles involves the responsibilities, influences, and power of the sexes illustrated in the novel. Mo Yan sets up a China that is dominated by men who are quite masculine and even animalistic, who engage in war, rape, power struggles, and other unscrupulous activities. China is renowned for repression of women, but the novel dramatically reverses the roles and appearances of most of the major male characters, including the main character, Jintong.

Jintong's grandfather on his mother's side embodies traditional Chinese manhood, and dies in combat fighting foreign troops. Jintong's paternal father and grandfather are the exact opposite. Jintong's father is impotent, abusive, and worthless. Jintong's grandfather is the same. Both men are equally disparaged by Jintong's grandmother, who is annoyed and unhappy with the weak men in her life. As such, she is the dominant power, and the men are plowed into submission. She handles the chores and takes care of the family's finances — traditionally roles for men.

Jintong's own upbringing, without a father, makes him an even more effeminate man. Just as Jintong suckles at his mother's breast, his sister's breast, and the breasts of other women into his adulthood — not out of lust, but out of impotence — so too does Jintong surrender his manhood. His mother is dominant, overbearing, and fights Jintong's battles for him. Jintong does what his mother tells him to do, rather than the other way around. He cannot hold a job like a traditional male can. He seeks women out not due to love, but due to childhood fancy. He is irresponsible, dependent upon women, and morally weak.

Religion

Religion is a major and dominant theme in the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan. In the novel, the major two religions are Christianity and traditional Chinese spiritualism/paganism. Christianity proves to be the more influential religion to the characters of the novel, especially Mother, and have far-reaching ramifications.

Mother is brought to Christianity by Pastor Malory over a period of time, seeking refuge in God and Jesus Christ, and finding strength to deal with her horrible marriage and home life. She finds Christianity empowering and beautiful, and she frequently prays to God, Mary, and Jesus, asking them for help in her life. She implores God to save her life, and the lives of her family members multiple times. Yet, her belief in Christianity is a passing and convenient thing, for she does not take core aspect of the Faith seriously. For example, her numerous affairs betray the Christian understanding of marriage, though the marriage itself does not appear to have been a Christian marriage.



The influence of traditional Chinese folk religions also make frequent appearances. These appearances occur mainly through the presence of Mother's mother-in-law. For example, while Mother is giving birth, her mother-in-law forces her to hold and shake handfuls of peanuts, and repeat chants seeking to have a boy. Indeed, even Pastor Malory references Confucius when he speaks about the importance of names for children.

Overall, religion has a positive impact on the novel where it can, not for the weakness of the religion, but the weaknesses of the believers.

Modernity

Modernity is a major and dominant theme in the novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* by Mo Yan. Modernity clashes with and enlightens the existing structure of the Chinese landscape throughout the novel, in violent and in peaceful ways. Modernity involves the insertion, presentation, or influence of new ideas, technology, and so on.

Modernity appears quite suddenly and positively to Dalan Town in the early 1900s with the establishment of the Chinese Republic. Footbinding, a traditional Chinese practice into which Mother has been forced, is considered archaic, backwoods, and draconian. Footbinding is done away with, for it is considered barbaric and against human nature. This comes as a shock to many villagers, including Mother. Technological modernity later comes to Dalan Town by way of gas-lit lanterns, and later electrical lanterns and motion pictures by the American, Babbitt.

Modernity also appears negatively to Dalan Town through the form of Communism. Dalan Town's residents are brutally slaughtered, tortured, and treated like animals in the pursuit of a modern and efficient nation. But unlike peaceful improvements and technological developments and ideas, Communism is an evil storm that plagues the life of Dalan Town.

Modernity ultimately appears in the 1980s as a positive thing as the inklings of a market economy appear in China. Many of the residents of Dalan Town are able to take their lives in their own hands, and make something of themselves, like Sima Liang through his chain of bra shops. Through this, he is able to help his family by caring for his grandmother and giving his uncle a job.

Style

Point of View

Mo Yan tells his novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, from two points of view: the third-person omniscient narrative, and the first-person omniscient retrospective perspective of main character Jintong. Telling the novel from the third-person omniscient perspective allows the reader to learn about events that occur before Jintong's birth which Jintong may or may not have become aware of himself over time. Because the majority of the novel deals with Jintong's life experiences, it is fitting that he should tell his own story. This allows the reader a degree of identification with Jintong, and the ability to relate to certain experiences he has.

Setting

Mo Yan sets his novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, in twentieth-century China, between the year 1900 and the 1990s. The setting works perfectly for the novel, as China confronts modernity, Communism, war, invasion, civil war, and change. This mirrors the unhappy lives of the nation's citizens, as their fortunes rise and fall. Just as China as a nation must confront dramatic changes, so too must its citizens handle these dramatic changes, in particular, Jintong. China, like Jintong, appears only to exist to be used, manipulated, and effeminized by others, from the Japanese to the Communists, just as Jintong has his masculinity stripped away by the women in his life.

Language and Meaning

Mo Yan tells his novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, in language that is simple, straightforward, and not poetic. Despite the sheer length of the book (532 pages), the simple language allows the reader to easily follow the plot, and to quickly traverse the people and events of the book without effort. This allows for the plot to be followed instead of the prose. Because Jintong does much of the narration, and because Jintong is a barely-educated, effeminized and ineffectual man, the disarming and plain prose mirrors perfectly the narrator.

Structure

Mo Yan divides his novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, into seven major, long, linear and chronological chapters. Each chapter is further subdivided into different sections of varying length. This simple structure for the novel works incredibly well, allowing the reader to focus on the plot instead of the book's layout. Furthermore, each chapter deals with a slew of major events for specific time periods. Chapter 1, for example, deals primarily with Jintong's birth, and Chapter 2 with the family's struggles through

World War II and Japanese occupation and defeat. This is a structure that is continued throughout the novel.



Quotes

"Weak father, weak son, accomplishing little with their soft hands -limp wicks, fluffy cotton, always careless and given to cutting corners."

Chapter 1, p. 10

"Women are worthless,' Shangguan Lu said, 'so you have to beat them. You beat a woman into submission the way you knead dough into noodles."

Chapter 2, p. 68

"One trains soldiers for a thousand days, all for a single battle."

Chapter 2, p. 87

"Mother,' she said through her tears, 'I'm his woman while I'm alive, and I'll be his ghost after I die. Please save this child, and I'll never forget your kindness as long as I live!"

Chapter 3, p. 139

"The gunshot that killed Ma Tong told us that in time of war, human lives were worth no more than that of ants."

Chapter 3, p. 176

"Elder aunt,' he said, 'she's dead, and it's the living who count."

Chapter 4, p. 226

"I don't need your absolution. I've lived long enough."

Chapter 4, p. 263

"We've come this far not because we're afraid of death, but because death is afraid of us."

Chapter 4, p. 316

"Are women really wonderful things? Maybe they are. Yes, women definitely are wonderful things, but when all is said and done, they aren't really 'things'."

Chapter 5, p. 384

"Son,' she said, 'you could live to be a hundred, but in my eyes you'll always be a little boy."

Chapter 7, p. 473



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the theme of gender roles in Mo Yan's novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. What are gender roles? How are they traditionally represented in China? How do they appear in the novel? What effect do gender roles have on the characters of Mother and Jintong in the novel? Do these gender roles positively or negatively affect the characters? Explain.

Jintong is represented in the novel as an ineffectual, useless man-child. Why is this so? What contributing factors have led to how Jintong has turned out as a man? Is anyone to blame? Is Jintong himself to blame? Why or why not?

Discuss the theme of religion in Mo Yan's novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. What are the religions that appear in the novel? Is religion a positive, negative, or ambivalent force in the novel? Why? Provide evidence to support your claim.

Why do you believe the history of China is as brutal and bloody as it is presented in the novel? How do the citizens of Dalan Town cope with the factors and events that array around them? Are the people of the town truly powerless against forces beyond their town? Or are they truly in command of their own fates? Explain your answer, and provide evidence to support your claim.

Discuss the theme of modernity in Mo Yan's novel, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. What is modernity? How does modernity appear in the novel, and how does it affect Dalan Town in particular? Is modernity ultimately a positive, negative, or ambivalent thing in the novel? Why?