

A Daughter of Han; the Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman Study Guide

A Daughter of Han; the Autobiography of a Chinese Working Woman by Lao Toai-Toai Ning

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Plot Summary

The story begins with a detailed description of the area where Lao is born and raised in China. She is the youngest child of her parents, with an older brother and sister who will help shape her life and her destiny. Lao is an active child and as such, her feet are not bound until she is seven, allowing her the freedom to run and play. She falls ill and the process is put off for a period of time. Lao never seems to resent the binding and says that a plain face is nothing to be ashamed of but that poorly bound feet are a sign of sheer laziness. Lao's sister is married to a young man when she is fifteen and when Lao reaches fifteen, she too is married. Because of the way years of age are calculated in China, Lao is actually only thirteen and is relieved to find that her husband has the wife of his cousin living with them so that Lao feels a little less homesick. The woman eventually is forced to leave by neighbors when the woman and Lao begin to quarrel.

Lao is then alone with her husband and soon gives birth to two daughters she names Mantze and Chinay. Lao and the girls are often hungry because Lao doesn't know how to make a living for herself. She depends on her mother until the death of her parents, just a month apart. Lao has by now realized that her husband's addiction to opium controls his life and wants to distance herself from him, but fortunetellers have told her that she is destined for a series of marriages and that each husband will be a loser. For this reason, Lao refuses to consider divorcing her husband or seeking another; but when her husband sells their younger daughter twice, Lao decides that she won't remain with him and for a time begs on the streets to provide for her children.

Time passes and Lao goes through a series of jobs. She eventually reunites with her husband who has mellowed somewhat with age though he remains an opium addict. Lao gives birth to another daughter and then a son. The daughter dies but the son lives to adulthood, marries a girl who remains near Lao and fathers children. Meanwhile, Lao's daughter Mantze married a man chosen by her mother but the man turns out to be a thief and doesn't provide for his family. Mantze comes to blame her mother for her bad luck in life and the two women as adults become near strangers. Mantze's daughter, Su Teh, becomes very close to her grandmother and helps provide for her after a college education. Lao says, as the country faces the return of hostile Japanese forces, that she doesn't fear for herself, but that she fears for the youngsters.



Book One, Pages 1-38

Book One, Pages 1-38 Summary and Analysis

The prologue, titled "The City," includes detailed descriptions of the area of P'englai where Lao was born and lived most of her life. The region includes the Water City, where Lao and her family lives near the North Gate. "Book One. The Family," begins with a chapter titled, "Childhood, 1867-1870." Lao says that her father was an only child, his own parents dying when he was young and leaving him to be raised by his uncle who saw to it that her father was schooled. The family had once been wealthy but had squandered most of the family's inheritance by the time she was born. When Lao is born, her father is away working. He doesn't see Lao until she is a year old. Her mother lived a sheltered life as a youngster and has no idea how to handle a household with the need to save money, a point that neighbors use to criticize her. Her father cooks well and sells cakes he has made himself to earn money for the family. He's then given a job in a store as a clerk though he is required to spend some of his time working in a garden, both owned by the Chu family. Lao then tells several stories and legends, such as the fact that a dog in a courtyard is good luck, a cat is bad, a wild goose landing in the courtyard means an increase in fortune but a tame goose flying away means a decrease. She says that in the case of her family, a goose flew away.

In "Growing up, 1870-1881," Lao and her family move to the Chou Wang Temple area of the city. When she is about seven, her family begins binding her feet - an action that would have been done earlier except that she loves to run and play and her mother allows her that freedom. But soon after her feet are bound for the first time, she contracts "heavenly blossoms" and the process is stopped for some time starting again when she is nine.

Lao describes some of her childhood exploits, including her tendency to run wild with the neighborhood children. One day her uncle comes for a visit and both Lao and her sister want to go with him. Her sister tricks Lao into going into a room and locks her in so that her mother can catch Lao. Her mother beats her brutally and Lao says it's the last beating she takes at the hands of her mother. Lao says that she is learning the "reason" of adults. It's at this time that Lao's parents change her hairstyle and she is taught household duties of cooking and sewing. At this age, thirteen, she is also no longer allowed out of the house by her father who demands that they dress in specific ways. She says that to have a neighbor say that they've never seen a young lady outside her house is "high praise." Each of the girls is married at fifteen though the way the age is counted is different from the way Americans would count and she is actually only thirteen and a few months.

Lao's sister, Yintze, is treated poorly by her mother-in-law and eventually "goes crazy," leaving the house and wandering around until she's found by a relative and returns to the home of her parents where she is kept until she begins to recover. Lao's parents begin to worry about Lao's future husband and, because of Yintze's situation, seek an



older man who will be more kind to Lao. In "The Wedding, 1881," Lao describes the traditions of the wedding celebration, including that she wore red and was carried in a red sedan chair to the home of her new husband. Her parents have chosen a member of the Ning clan who owns a fishing boat and land for wheat farming, land given to his ancestors by an emperor.

Lao tells about her father, Wen Chuan, as a child and says he was "spoiled." When his father dies, his uncle takes him in. Though the uncle makes his own sons work and therefore learn a trade, he sends Wen Chuan to school. This is obviously an effort to do as Wen Chuan's father wanted but it actually hurts Wen Chuan in the long run, making him ill prepared for life. When Wen Chuan is faced with the need to grow things in his garden as a way to support his family, he is incapable and is ashamed of his incompetence, so sells the garden. Though Lao says that the family is poor, she says that the family has a good life with her mother always cooking good things to eat and both her parents show their love, sometimes by being strict as in the case of their father.

The "heavenly blossoms" mentioned by Lao is probably smallpox. She says that it leaves her face pockmarked but that every child contracts the illness and there are people who are consulted on ways to lessen the scarring. Lao says that she herself is scarred from her experience but that it's not an issue. She says that a matchmaker who is describing a marriageable girl doesn't say what her face looks like but that "poorly bound feet are a sign of laziness."

Lao says that her sister's mental breakdown at the hands of her mother-in-law is caused by demons. She says that the demons possessing Yintze are not very powerful and that Yintze was not able to foretell the future while possessed with the demons. It seems that this type of possession sometimes came with an ability to foresee the future but Yintze's case does not.



Book One, Pages 39-73

Book One, Pages 39-73 Summary and Analysis

In "Marriage, 1881-1887," Lao arrives at her husband's home and finds that the wife of his cousin is also living there with a small son, Fats'ai, fathered by Lao's husband, Liu-Yi-tze. Lao says that she is relieved to have the woman there to help soothe her homesickness and fear. Lao regularly visits her parents, as is the custom. She says that her sister, Yintze, always cries when her visit with her parents comes to an end, causing them grief though there is nothing they can do, and so Lao is careful that her parents don't see her cry. Lao describes several stories of "exceptional" events and people of the village of her husband, but says that the village for the most part is very ordinary. The wife of Liu-Yi-tze's cousin stays with them for two years and Lao often plays with Fats'ai and the other children. One day Lao is playing with Fats'ai and he hides in a water container but grows scared and cries out for Lao to let him out. She says that the child has smallpox and later dies, a fact that his mother blames on Lao for having "frightened him to death" while he was hiding in the water container. When the woman begins to regularly quarrel with Lao over the incident, the neighbors intervene and send her away. She later dies.

Lao endears herself to a cousin of her husband's father and they often feed her when there is nothing in the house to eat. When the old woman becomes ill, Lao nurses her until her death, caring for the traditions that ensure she has a safe and speedy passage. Lao's husband is a fisherman by trade and he keeps very irregular hours because of this. Lao says it's this irregularity that gives him the time and opportunity to become addicted to opium. She gives birth to a daughter, Mantze, and about two years later is expecting another child. Her life is very difficult and she is often hungry. She vows to return to the household of her parents and to learn to beg, but after a short time, realizing that she doesn't know how to go about begging, returns to the home of her husband.

In "My Father and My Mother, 1881-1887," Lao says that her father begins a business that fails because of a dishonest employee and has to leave the village to find work. He doesn't show himself when he returns to the village for fear people will want repayment of money he'd borrowed to begin his business. Lao says this is the last time any of her family sees him. Lao says that he'd heard a voice calling to him and that it was "no living person who had called him." He dies later in Chefoo where he is working of "fever in the intestines." Lao's mother dies a month later and Lao says that her mother's last thoughts were of how Lao would survive without her parents. Lao says that she remains with her mother for the days prior to her death and takes care of the traditions, such as ensuring that her mother is not lying on a brick bed when she dies so that she doesn't have to go through eternity with a brick on her back. Her brother becomes ill after their mother's death and Lao nurses him through a long illness. When he is well, he takes over the role of provider to Lao, providing food when her husband doesn't. However, Yintze tells their brother that he shouldn't be worried about Lao and that her



dependence on him will never end. One day he leaves for Chefoo without saying good-bye to Lao.

In "Starvation, 1887-1888," Lao says that Liu-Yi-tze is an opium addict and seldom brings home any food. In addition, he has been selling off property and possessions in order to fund his habit. Then Liu-Yi-tze and his father go away, leaving Lao at home with her daughters, five-year-old Mantze and three-year-old Chinya. Faced literally with starvation, Lao goes into the fields and gleanes corn and beans. She also rakes dead grass to be used for fuel to cook her food though she has to borrow pots to cook on, Liu-Yi-tze having sold everything they owned. Then Liu-Yi-tze and his father returns and the father is ill with cholera. Liu-Yi-tze promptly goes away, leaving Lao to tend the dying man who takes days to die. Neighbors refuse to help for fear of contracting the disease. When the old man dies, his body remains in the house for days until it is bloated and smelling. Lao then gives up on the hope of giving him a proper burial and he's laid on a wooden door and wrapped in a mat rather than buried in a coffin.

Lao's brother returns and again helps fulfill Lao's needs. When he leaves again, he joins the military and is killed, never again returning home. Lao and her entire family, including Liu-Yi-tze, Mantze and Chinya, go out begging. Lao finds the homes of "foreigners" to be welcoming and it's there that she gets grain, a coat for one of her daughters, flour, rice and bread. It's also there that she meets Han the cook. In "The Younger Child, 1889," Lao says that her husband takes their younger child with him to beg and she takes the elder. One day someone tells her that Liu-Yi-tze is trying to sell their child but she doesn't believe it until he returns home one day, high on opium, and says that he has sold the girl. Lao finds the girl and retrieves her but he soon sells her again and this time Lao finds that it's to a good family with a wife who is unable to conceive and who promises to treat the child well. Lao agrees to leave her there and sees her regularly until the family moves. She knows that they married her younger daughter to a fruit merchant but she never again sees her. Lao then leaves her husband.

Lao never tells the names of some of the people of her book. For example, her husband is never really identified by name though the familial name of everyone in the village where she lives is Ning and all are related. At one point, Lao says that a cousin calls him "Liu-Yi-tze, though that is his "baby name." For the purposes of identifying him in this guide, he is called Liu-Yi-tze though he is referred to only as "my husband" in the book.

Lao takes a great initiative when she leaves her two small daughters alone in her house and goes into the fields to glean. She has, up to this point, had not even enough money to buy fuel to cook whatever food she has and at one point she and the little girls had eaten raw vegetables unsuitable for sale that is given to them. To fully understand this, the reader must remember that the women Lao has had for role models - chiefly her mother - have never gone out in search of a way to make their lives better, but have always waited for their husbands to provide. Lao is very proud of the fact that she not only gathers enough for a meal, she has food left over that she stores for future needs.



She takes another great step when she decides to leave her husband. After he sells their younger daughter, Lao makes certain that the older daughter is always near her and that she knows to run away if she sees her father because Lao fears he might sell her older child as well. Lao then becomes a professional beggar and says there is freedom in that life, not only from her abusive husband but from the restrictions of society as well. She doesn't, however, fit into the life and knows she has to do something else. She will later work as a maid and will peddle items of use to families, especially young women.



Book Two

Book Two Summary and Analysis

"Book Two. In Service," begins with a chapter titled, "With the Military Officials, 1889-1896." In this chapter, Lao obtains a position with Major Liu and his family, including children from his first marriage and his second wife. While there, Mantze contracts smallpox and is near death. Major Liu's family has been vaccinated and Mantze and Lao are given the food necessary to help Mantze recover as well as the time away from her duties for Lao to nurse her child. Her life with Major Liu and his family is happy overall. She says there are many young servants in the household and that, coupled with the fact that their employers are generally easy-going and kind, makes her life easier than that of some other servants, though Lao isn't happy because she is often scolded. The oldest son of the house is married. Lao says the young bride smokes more opium than most and that she puts her own two sons into service to fund her habit until Major Liu calls her to his home. Lao says she doesn't know what happens to the woman after that.

In "The Japanese Come, 1895," Lao says that she gets temporary work for the Yin family at the Shou Pei for the New Year's holiday. The household consists of a master, his wife, his secondary wife and two sons, one belonging to each wife. She's working there when the Japanese arrive in the harbor, bombing the city but causing only a few deaths and no widespread damage in their effort to draw troops from other battlegrounds. This prematurely puts an end to her job as many, including her employers, flee to safer places.

In "With the Mohammedans, 1895-1897," Lao finds work with a family of a high military official, Chang the Chen T'ai. His mother, called Old Mistress Chang, is a harsh and demanding woman. He has four wives, one who died and a second who remains at another house, minding his lands and his sons. Third Mistress and Fourth Mistress are at his home when Lao works for him. Lao is not initially allowed to bring Mantze with her, then she is allowed to have Mantze about half the time until Mantze charms Third Mistress by saying she wishes to remain with her. The household duties are light and both Lao and Mantze have plenty to eat whenever they want. One day one of the mistresses is possessed with a god and the household has to call a shaman to toll the god out and back to the temple. Lao is once called on by the master to intervene between his wives who quarrel over his favor. When he returns, she says that she and another servant have made peace between them. It's in this household that Mantze is taught to sew and to read. Then the day comes when he is being sent to a new post and Lao has to make the decision whether to leave their employ or her home behind. She decides to remain and her mistress, in her effort to ensure that Lao is alright, calls on a woman named Liu Ma to become Lao's "sworn mother." In that position, Liu Ma agrees to feed Lao if there's a time when she's hungry and to help care for her and guide her as a mother would. This is a solemn and binding oath and both women agree to the terms. Over the coming months, Lao tries to find work and is briefly in the employ



of a woman who is opium-addicted and has little food and many lice in the house so that Lao finds she cannot remain there. She returns later to pick up shoes she'd left there and the mistress promises that there will be more food for the servants and that they want her to return to them for work. She stubbornly declines at first but then, urged by Liu Ma, agrees.

In "With the Civil Officials, 1897-1899," Lao's new master is Ch'ien Lao-yeh is qualified as a district magistrate but is not yet in an office. His family has been in the law for generations and Ch'ien is now paid a portion of what's paid to the law officials. The house is huge with hundreds living there and hundreds at the house for each meal. Her mistress tells Lao that she must never act as a matchmaker if the girl is to be a concubine or a second wife and must not become a Christian.

It's while she is working as a servant of civil officials that Lao has the opportunity to travel to Manchuria by way of Chefoo where she catches a steamer for Newchwang. There, Lao participates in the wedding and remains for a month until homesickness prompts her to return home. When they arrive in Newchang on their way home, there are hundreds of floating corpses in the water, swollen and bloated, the result of an accident involving the boiler on a ship. It's while she is in the house of Chi'ien Lao-yeh that she becomes aware of an ongoing affair between the younger daughter of the family and a young boy who had been raised by the family. When the young girl gives birth unexpectedly, Lao is told to take the infant away and so takes it to the home of Liu Ma. The master of the house dies, according to Lao, of disgrace. A nephew who takes over the family's affairs pushes the daughter to suicide. Prior to the death of the master but after the birth of the illegitimate child, Lao finds a job with the wife of a missionary, Mrs. Burns.

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Lao is hired by Major Liu and his wife to oversee the sewing for their younger children, cook the grain for the family though there is a cook to prepare the other foods, and to do some of the washing for the family. She says that she also does the washing for the other servants though it's not part of her duty, apparently in an effort to gain their favor. This seems typical of Lao's personality and her efforts to put herself in good favor whenever possible.

Lao says that she doesn't mind being scolded once or twice, but cannot withstand constant and unforgiving scolding on a constant basis. For this reason, she is sometimes at odds with her mistress, though the mistress is kind overall. When Lao talks back for the constant scolding, she and the mistress quarrel and she eventually leaves, only to return for a higher wage offered from the master of the house. Later, when things haven't changed, she leaves again and this time stays with her sister. She then returns to her husband who continues to smoke opium and to occasionally sell some baskets to support himself. She notes that she hasn't stepped back into a good situation, but says she doesn't know what else to do.



Lao recounts three times that she died. She says that one of these times she was standing in line awaiting a portion of gruel given to the beggars, which could have meant she passed out from hunger. The other two could have had similar explanations. Leo says that she does not see anything when she "dies" and so does not know if she travels to heaven or to hell. These episodes, as well as times of possessions and other supernatural events are left to the interpretation of the reader.

Lao talks about the role of concubines in a household and says that it seems a husband would stand up to his first wife when she and the concubine argue, but the husband never does. Lao says that the husband answers to his first wife and that he's "ashamed" of his actions. This seems strange because the husband is the head of the household in all ways but the women don't bow to his wishes on this point. The interesting point is that Lao says he is "ashamed." Lao also tells the story of a young woman whose in-laws find her stupid and decide to starve her to death but her husband feeds her so that her in-laws give in and decide that they should just put up with her since the son cares for her. As their life progresses, he is successful until there comes a time when he ignores her in favor of two concubines. When she has the two, who are cruel to her, beaten, the man sends her to live with his parents but he is soon without a job and finds himself having to move home as well. It's this story Lao uses to explain why men must bow to the wishes of their first wives "in such matters."



Book Three, Pages 142-174

Book Three, Pages 142-174 Summary and Analysis

"Book Three. The Family" begins with "Together Again, 1899." Lao's husband has mellowed somewhat with regard to the use of opium and she again allows him to live with her. When Mantze is twelve, Lao finds a young man her niece's husband who she believes will make a suitable husband for Mantze. Lao says that this is a "family marriage" and that she is at peace with the decision. When Mantze is fifteen, Lao leaves the home of her employer, the household of Ch'ien Lao-yeh, because she feels Mantze cannot learn to be a good servant for her future mother-in-law in a house where the food is provided by others and she has no need to sew or do any domestic chores for herself. Lao takes the job with Mrs. Burns and rejoins her husband in a house Lao leases. She says that she also decides that it's time to again share a pallet with her husband because there is as yet no son to carry on the family name or to care for them in their old age.

In "With the Missionaries, 1899-1902," Lao says that working for the foreign missionaries was easier in that she was allowed to go home at night while most Chinese families want their maids to live in the homes of their employers. Lao says that in that way she is able to build a home life of her own. She says that Chinese families have fewer demands on their maids, leaving them largely to their own devices during the day while foreign families have floors to mop and other things done. However, she says that she is overly tired at the end of the day and spends a great deal of money to maintain her own household, which means she actually makes less money under Mrs. Burns' employ than when she is working in a Chinese household where the employer provides food, shelter and heat.

In "Mantze's Marriage, 1901," Lao says she wants her daughter, who is seventeen, to begin her own life with her own family. Lao says that a woman has nothing except a family of her own. Toward that end, she insists that Mantze's marriage take place though her husband says there isn't enough money for the wedding. Lao, with the help of friends, makes it happen and Mantze stays with her husband, called Li Yuntz, only a short time before returning home. Lao says that she takes food for her daughter every one of the days she was away and that her husband, though reportedly earning money from his work, brought nothing. Finally Lao rents a small room near her own for Mantze and her husband but the cost of maintaining two households becomes too much and Mantze returns home. Meanwhile, Lao has given birth to a child of her own, another daughter. At one point Li Yuntze is locked away in an effort to cure him of his opium addiction but he is worse when he is freed and Mantze returns to the home of her parents permanently. She has conceived during her short marriage.

In "Children and Grandchildren, 1902-1910," Lao allows Mantze to go to rooms across the courtyard near Mrs. Lan, the midwife, in keeping with the tradition that a child should not be born in the home of the maternal grandmother. Lao admits that she would have



paid little heed to this tradition but Mrs. Lan assures her it will be alright for Mantze to remain there and she does so for two months after delivering a daughter, Su Teh. Mantze's husband comes back briefly but Lao encourages him to leave and eventually Lao and her husband put the young man on a boat bound for his mother's house. Lao says that his mother sends back fabric for the baby and that this token is the only aid ever given by the man or his family to Mantze, who is again pregnant by the time her husband leaves town and eventually delivers another daughter.

Lao delivers a son that her uncle names Suochutze and when her husband dies after an illness, Lao is not overly sad though she says her husband had "been good" in those later years. Mantze's second daughter is soon delivered and she and Lao work it out so that Lao nurses both children in the night and Mantze nurses them in the daytime. Eventually, the oldest girl and the boy attend Mr. and Mrs. Chang's school. Mantze's husband returns though Lao says he is "never any use" to anyone and frightens his daughter so that she spends a great deal of time with Lao. When Li Yuntze sells a pair of shoes entrusted to him for repairs, he runs away to Manchuria, to the home of his mother.

Lao is working for Mrs. Burns, who is a missionary's wife, and she watches the religion of Mrs. Burns and the other missionaries with interest. However, she says that she cannot find her way clear to believe in the religious ideals of the missionaries. She says that there is a time when she's told not to work on Sundays or at least not to let others see her. When there are people coming into the city with intentions of killing the Christians, most of them are afraid and one even goes so far as to memorize Buddhist texts to try to protect his life. Lao notes that Han, a man who cooks, is the only person who seems confident in his faith and who is not afraid.

Lao is talking about her daughter and the birth of her first and second granddaughters when she mentions that she herself is again pregnant and that the daughter born shortly before Mantze's pregnancy had died. It's mentioned almost as an afterthought and the child's name is never mentioned. It's important that the reader remember that Lao is telling these stories from many years in the future and may have thought the name of the child is not important, or it may have been omitted because of some Chinese tradition. However, it seems possible that the child was simply not a part of her life long enough for Lao to have become overly attached to her. This period of Lao's life had been chaotic with the constant comings and goings of her son-in-law, Mantze's pregnancies one right after the other, and Lao's efforts to feed her family.

Lao talks about the destinies of various people she knows and says that she has never been a fortunate person. As examples, she says that she was once given a bucket of turtles that she was supposed to care for though she said she feared they might bite her. When told that turtles bite only the fortunate, Lao put her fingers in the mouths of the little turtles, but they never bit her. She tells of a young man who had tended cows and served the traditional role of "brother" at Mantze's wedding. That young man would never have been considered a potential husband for Mantze because he had no trade



but he is later chosen for a good job buying cattle and becomes very rich. Lao seems to believe fully in destinies, fate and the inability of a person to change his or her life from what is already set. She says that she'd been told she would have many husbands, all worthless, and that is the reason she stayed with her own first husband, though he is an "opium sot." She believes, because of the fortune tellers' words, that she would never have found a good husband.



Book Three, Pages 175-248

Book Three, Pages 175-248 Summary and Analysis

In "Cheefoo, 1911-1921," Lao says that her daughter, who had been good while her father lived, "turns bad" after his death and the desertion of her husband, wearing her hair in a way that is "lewd" and sassing her mother when Lao objects. Lao takes her family to Cheefoo and gets a job at a Missionary House as an amah. All three of the children contract smallpox. She then goes to work for at the school where the children are being educated where she sews for the children. Lao and Mantze then part ways and Lao says she is happy to be living with her son. When her daughter gives birth to another child, a girl, Lao doesn't go see her. The child dies later and Lao believes it to be a good thing. She and her daughter later reunite but Lao says it's never the same as it had been in the years before.

In "My Son is Started in Life, 1921-1925," Lao makes arrangements through her friend Chang Fa for her son to marry a girl named Mei Yun who had attended school with Lao's granddaughters. When Mei Yun gives birth to her first child, her family barely reacts and sends no gifts which makes her sad. Lao says her younger granddaughter dies of shame that her mother is living with another man. Mei Yun gives birth to a second child, a boy. In "Peiping, 1928-1934," Lao reluctantly agrees to move to Peiping with her son and his family. Mantze joins them and Lao says that there is no peace with Mantze swearing that Lao had ruined her life. She remains in Peiping while her granddaughter studies for a year in America but plans to return to the land of her youth for her final days. In "The Family Reestablished, 1934-1937," Sue Teh returns from American, is making good money and is generous with the family though she doesn't marry. Lao says she is contented and remains in Peiping after all. In "The Japanese Come Again, 1937-1938," the war comes near Peiping and Lao says that she is afraid for the children, especially Sue Teh, but not for herself.

The conflict between Lao and her daughter seems typical of a mother-daughter relationship once the daughter has found a way to exert any level of independence. Lao wants to hold her daughter to her own standards which seems unfair considering how unhappy Lao's life has been. This animosity taints their relationship forever but it seems likely that it's because Lao has suddenly been forced to recognize her daughter as an independent adult. This is not in keeping with Lao's own heritage. Lao's acceptance of Sue Teh's lifestyle is interesting because she obviously doesn't hold Sue Teh to the same standards.

Lao's final thought, her fear for the children, seems typical of a woman of her age in this situation. She knows she is facing the end of her life and that she will die without having found peace and happiness. At that stage, it seems reasonable that a person would

focus on the lives of the youngsters. Lao probably endured the fears that she could not protect them or change the world for them.



Characters

Lao

Called Meimei by her siblings, and Hsiao Wutse, she is the fifth child born to her family though two of them died before Lao is born. Lao is a strong-willed woman though she is greatly bound by custom, tradition and expectations. Lao seems to realize, at least to some degree, these limitations. She says that her mother always remained at home, waiting for the men in her life to return with food and other provisions. Lao says that she herself knows to do nothing except to wait for her own husband to provide but when she is facing starvation and watching her children suffer, she comes to understand that she is stronger than the role models in her life and she learns to beg so that she can feed her family. She later works for other families in domestic situations and becomes a peddler for a period of time.

Lao loves her children and it's her love for them that motivates her most of the time. Lao has daughters but wants a son and welcomes her husband back into her life in her quest to have a son. An interesting thing about Lao's character is that she claims to believe fully in destiny and omens but not in shaman and that some fortune tellers are liars. She says that she has remained with her husband, the "opium sot," because fortune tellers have repeatedly told her that she would simply marry another man equally as worthless.

Liu-Yi-tze

The man Lao marries, he is chosen by her mother as a suitable mate because he is older and, her mother believes, more stable than the young man her sister marries. Liu-Yi-tze seems to be a good man but is fully addicted to opium and this addiction makes him unkind and uncaring. Though he makes money, he doesn't provide for Lao or for their children and nothing she has is safe from him as he pawns or sells everything they have in his efforts to feed his addiction. At one point his addiction is so strong that he sells their younger daughter in order to buy opium. As he ages, he seems to change somewhat and Lao notes that he feeds the addiction by consuming watered down opium rather than smoking it. This method of consumption is cheaper but he is still an unworthy husband. He dies soon after the birth of their son.

Wen Chuan

Lao's father, he is somewhat strict with his daughters though Lao says that she, as the youngest, is spoiled. He seems to be a hard worker who clings to the old ways of life and to want only for his family to be healthy, happy and prosperous.



Lao's Mother

She is a disciplinarian but is also concerned for her children and loves them. She cries when her older daughter cries at having to return to the home of her in-laws and spends time trying to figure out how to find a good husband for Lao. When she is on her deathbed, her thoughts are for Lao as she fears Lao will not have food to eat.

Yintze

Lao's older sister. She is married at fifteen and her husband is very cruel to her so that there comes a time when she has some sort of mental breakdown and runs away from her husband's home, wandering the streets and speaking incoherently. Lao says that Yintze is not a nice person and that her sister cares little for the lives of others.

Mantze

Daughter of Lao and her husband, Liu-Yi-tze. Mantze is something of a selfish child who grows into a selfish woman. When her life is in trouble and she has no husband, no job and little to hope for, she blames her mother, saying that it was Lao who set her course, arranged her marriage and created the problems of her life.

Chinya

The second daughter of Lao and her husband, Liu-Yi-tze, she is taken with her father to beg one day he returns home without her, having sold her. She is retrieved by her mother, Lao but is later sold again by her father, this time to a wealthy family with a wife who is unable to have children of her own. Lao is allowed to visit regularly until the family moves away and Chinya is never seen again.

Liu Ma

Lao's "sworn mother," this woman takes an oath to help Lao in the ways her own mother would have cared for her, if her mother had lived. Liu Ma is chosen by one of Lao's employers, a woman known as Third Mistress. Among her chief duties is to feed Lao if there's a time when the young woman is hungry. She also cares for Lao's daughter, Mantze, when Lao is working and unable to have Mantze with her.

Li Yuntze

Also called Li Ming, this is the young man who marries Lao's daughter, Mantze, he is a "waster" though Lao had thought she was selecting a good husband for her daughter. Li Yuntze is the son of a cobbler and he works in the military camp within the Water City as



a cobbler. He is soon caught up in the clutches of opium addiction and is unwilling or unable to kick the habit in order to care for his wife.

Su Teh

Daughter of Mantze and Li Yuntze, she is born at the home of Mrs. Lan, a midwife, near the home of her maternal grandmother, Lao. Su The is saddened by the fact that her mother comes to live with a man but does not marry him. She doesn't believe it's necessary for a woman to marry in order to find happiness. She is educated, attends college in America, has a good job and is very generous with her money, providing for her mother and grandmother.

Suochutze

Meaning "Locked Fast Son," he is the only son and the last child born to Lao and her husband. He is apparently an obedient son and remains with Lao when he marries and has children of their own.



Objects/Places

P'englai

The name of the region where Lao was born and lived.

Water City

The name of the city where Lao lived.

The North Gate

Where Lao's family lived in Water City.

Chou Wang Temple

The area where Lao and her family move when she is about three years old.

The Village of Ning

The home of Lao's husband and where she goes to live after her marriage. It's a village on the sea.

Chefoo

Where Lao's father is working after a failed business endeavor and where he dies.

Newchwang

The city located in Manchuria where Lao, traveling with a young bride, arrives after Lao's first ride in a steamboat.

Manchuria

Where Newchwang is located and where Lao stays for a month with a young bride, this is also where Mantze's husband's family moves to soon after Mantze's marriage to her son.



The Missionary House

The place where Lao works as an amah.

Peiping

Where Lao moves with her son and his family.



Themes

Belief in Fortunetellers and Destiny

The Chinese culture is steeped in a belief in the supernatural and Lao spends a great deal of time talking about the importance of these things. For example, she says that a family's fortune will dissipate if the family's tame geese fly away and will increase if a wild goose flies in. Her own family's geese fly away and Lao uses this as an omen that her family's fortune, already small, would further dissipate. She might not have mentioned the goose at all if her family's fortune had not dissipated as the omen predicted. Lao also talks about the importance of destiny and fortunetellers. She visits several fortunetellers who say that Lao is destined to have many husbands and that they will each be sorrier than the one before. She never takes another husband or even a lover because of these words and ends up in later life reunited with her first and only husband. She doesn't discount the fortunetellers' words but says that she believed them and so never wanted another man, knowing that he would be sorry as well. Lao does admit that not all fortunetellers are truly gifted and that some are liars. What's interesting is that she doesn't at all believe in the power of shamans and says that they are all liars. Lao also talks about destiny but seems to believe that one's destiny could be altered though she says there's no need to struggle against destiny.

The Importance of Family

Lao talks about the strictness of her parents and says that her father won't allow Lao and her sister to dress or act in certain ways. While this strictness is apparently binding to Lao and her sister, Lao says she understands the purpose is to keep her above reproach by the neighbors - an important aspect of the life of respectable women of her time. She also has very strong ideas about how her daughter should act and her actions are later criticized by her daughter though Lao stands up to the criticism and tells the daughter all the sacrifices made simply so that she might survive. Lao, faced with a situation in which her husband does not provide for the family at all, takes herself and her children onto the street to beg. This takes great initiative on Lao's part because of her teaching as a child. The situation would possibly never have arisen had Lao's mother still been alive by this time in Lao's life. However, her mother died and her death is another example of the importance of family. When Lao's mother lies dying, her thoughts turn to Lao and she fears for her daughter, questioning how Lao will manage to feed her young family without a parent to provide and guide her. As Lao's own life is nearing its end, she says that she doesn't fear for herself, but does worry for her children and grandchildren.



Coming of Age

Lao ages both physically and mentally over the course of this story, making it an example of the coming of age theme. Lao herself admits that she is spoiled as a child and that it prompts traits in her character that causes her problems as an adult. The main character flaw is that she says she is unable to take criticism of any kind. She also can't bring herself to allow others to talk back to her. These may not seem character flaws in a more modern society but they were in Lao's lifetime. At several points in the story she says that her temper costs her a particular job or a place in a particular household. Lao is not the only character who exhibits the coming of age theme. Her husband, Liu-Yi-tze, is older than Lao when the two are married but he is still a fairly young man. He is addicted to opium and is never willing to give up feeding his habit in order to build a life for himself and his family. Lao refers to him as "my opium sot" and has to feed her children herself, a situation unheard of among the women of Lao's family. Over the course of time, however, Liu-Yi-tze reaches an age where he apparently matures sufficiently to at least help Lao take care of the family though he never fully kicks the opium habit.

Style

Perspective

The story is presented in first person from the perspective of Ning Lao Lao but the reader should be aware of the fact that the book is actually written by Ida Pruitt. The book is written by Pruitt "from the story told her by Ning Lao Lao." The presentation in first person is a journalistic tool and it is used well by this author. The perspective is limited to Lao's point of view and her explanations are sometimes so limited that the reader may have trouble following both the story and the logic. For example, Lao tells the story of the last beating she took at the hands of her mother. She says that her mother beat her brutally and then says that her mother did not want to beat her. She says, "After that I needed no more beating for I knew that my mother loved me." In cases such as this, it's left to the reader to decide the significance of both the words and the situation. The perspective is appropriate to the story and most readers will be able to discern the reasoning behind most of the situations.

Tone

The tone of the story is one of hopelessness though Lao never gives up on her life. Despite the hardships and demands placed on her by her family, her culture and her situation, she continues to live life as best she can. The people and places are in Chinese and many of them are not named at all. Readers may find the unfamiliar names difficult to follow but the story itself is also difficult to follow because it is written in a rambling, erratic manner. The manner of presentation is true to the way an old woman might have recalled the many years of her life. Looking back over the course of her entire life, Lao is probably hard pressed to string together anything more than a series of sometimes-unrelated stories. A prime example of this is the chapter about the neighbors. In this chapter, Lao seems to be specifically trying to remember stories about the neighbors and so the chapter is basically a series of brief stories. At one point she says that weasels are good luck but doesn't elaborate and moves immediately on to another topic. There are also many aspects of the stories told that are not explained fully so that the reader may be left to interpret some of the details.

Structure

The story is presented in three "books." These are titled Book One, The Family; Book Two. In Service; Book Three. The Family. Each book is divided into chapters. These are titled and dated. For example, the first chapter is "Childhood, 1867-1870" and the second is "Growing Up, 1870-1881." The time is not always so neatly detailed. For example, chapter four is "Marriage, 1881-1887: and chapter five is "My Father and My Mother, 1881-1887." She covers the same time period of time in both chapters but tells a different aspect of her life. There are other chapters that cover time periods already



covered in another chapter as well. All years through 1937 are covered in the book. The story is written as Lao tells the story to the author, Ida Pruitt, and is somewhat disjointed, probably because of this retelling. For example, she skips from one story to the next. At one point she is telling the story of a man who lives next door who is beaten by soldiers after an altercation involving his daughter. Lao tells about this fight, ending the story abruptly by saying one of the soldiers becomes friends with her uncle. The story then abruptly changes as Lao says that she remembers the last time her mother beat her. It seems to have nothing to do with the story about the neighbor but she reveals that it was because she wanted to go see her uncle that she got the beating.



Quotes

"A plain face is given by heaven but poorly bound feet are a sign of laziness." Growing Up, Page 22

"She said, 'In the path around the mill does one not look for the hairs of the mule?' She meant to call my sister a mule and also to say that there were no signs of a daughter-in-law where such signs should be - there was no work done." Growing Up, Page 31

"We women knew nothing but to comb our hair and bind our feet and wait at home for our men. When my mother had been hungry she had sat at home and waited for my father to bring her food, so when I was hungry I waited at home for my husband to bring me food." Starvation, Page 55

"Then he struck a match and I saw that there was no child, only a bundle, a bundle of sweet potatoes. 'I have sold her.'" The Younger Child, Page 68

"Then he struck a match and I saw that there was no child, only a bundle, a bundle of sweet potatoes. 'I have sold her.'" The Younger Child, Page 68

"A good horse does not carry two saddles. A good woman does not marry two husbands." With the Civil Officials, Page 116

"And I asked her why, if their God was one that could see everywhere, it should be wrong for me to sew in one place and not in another. 'Were the laws that were to be kept not God's laws?'" With the Missionaries, Page 149

"According to custom a child should not be born in the house of the maternal grandmother." Children and Grandchildren, Page 163

"Her husband could do nothing but carry a bird in its cage out for airing and use the two pipes. Truly has opium been the curse of the lives of the women of our family." Children and Grandchildren, Page 172

"To do any of these things might give her the power over the family she was visiting and so ruin them. Women were not considered clean." Neighbors, Page 179

"Life is like a game of chess. The paths laid out must be followed." Cheefoo, Page 197

"We are Chinese and will always be Chinese. They cannot change us. But if we are dead, we are dead." The Japanese Come Again, Page 247



Topics for Discussion

Describe Lao's childhood. How does this compare with the childhood of her own children?

What is Lao's sister like? What is her brother like? How do the two differ? How are they the same?

How does Lao come to marry her husband? Why do her parents choose this man as her mate? What is her life as a young bride like?

What does Lao do when her husband doesn't bring home food? How does this compare with what her mother would have done? What does Lao eventually do to feed herself and her children?

How many children does Lao have? Describe them.

Mantze blames Lao for her lifetime of disappointments. What are the specific aspects of her life that Mantze finds disappointing? Why does she blame Lao? What has Lao really done for Mantze?

Who is Chinya? What is her fate? Was her life better for having been dealt this fate than it might otherwise have been?