

Death of a Red Heroine Study Guide

Death of a Red Heroine by Qiu Xiaolong

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Plot Summary

Death of a Red Heroine by Qiu Xiaolong is a murder mystery infused with politics and poetry. It is set in Shanghai, China in the early 1990s. Chief Inspector Chen is an honorable police officer tasked with solving the murder of a national celebrity. When the chief suspect turns out to be an influential figure in the Communist Party, Chen must negotiate the dangerous waters of party politics in order to bring the killer to justice. Death of a Red Heroine mixes the traditional elements of a mystery into a political thriller and ties everything together with poetry and romance. It is an English language novel from a Chinese writer who grew up in Shanghai before moving to the United States.

When the body of Guan Hongying is pulled from a canal, her murder case is assigned to Chief Inspector Chen of the Shanghai special case squad. Chen is an unusual police officer, promoted because of Communist Party politics and seemingly more interested in poetry than police work. At first the case seems to have no leads and Chen is willing to pass it on to another department, but when the identity of the victim is confirmed, Chen takes the case. Guan was a national celebrity and the case has political ramifications.

Chen becomes consumed with the case. His personal life suffers and a budding romance falls apart when his girlfriend decides to return to her husband. He has to fight against the interference of Party representatives in order to progress in the case. His investigation leads towards Wu Xiaoming, the son of an important Party leader and an influential man in his own right. Wu, though married, had been having a covert affair with Guan. The identity of the suspect and his high connections as well as an ongoing feud with his Party adviser leaves Chen vulnerable to political attack.

Unable to find a compelling motive, Chen is taken off the case and himself put under investigation for his unorthodox investigation methods. With the backing of a close group of friends and the help of an old girlfriend with whom he reunites, he continues the investigation surreptitiously and discovers that Guan had been blackmailing Wu in an effort to get him to leave his wife. Her actions jeopardized Wu's promising political career, so he killed her.

When Chen takes his evidence to his mentor, Party Secretary Li, the killer is seemingly brought to justice. Wu is arrested, tried, and executed for corrupt and immoral behavior. The Communist Party hierarchy uses him as an example to launch a campaign against Western immoral behavior. Chen is discouraged by this turn of events but realizes that he can best serve himself and his country by acting as a conscientious police officer regardless of party politics.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

Death of a Red Heroine by Qiu Xiaolong is a murder mystery set in China in the early 1990s. It is infused with the politics of the era in a country that is transitioning from Communism to a market driven economy. Chief Inspector Chen is an honorable cop with a strong sense of morals who attempts to solve the murder of a young Communist Party icon while maneuvering through the political ramifications of pursuing the case to its conclusion. Set in a country in the midst of monumental political and cultural changes, Death of a Red Heroine mixes poetry, politics and mystery in a thrilling quest for justice.

Chapter one begins with the basic facts of the crime. The body is discovered on May 11th, 1990 in a remote canal some twenty miles from Shanghai by the captain of a river patrol boat. After these facts are disclosed, the details of the discovery are related.

Captain Gao Ziling discovers the body while he is supposed to be on duty, however he has instead been fishing with an old friend. They have spent the afternoon fishing in the canal and when they are ready to leave, they discover something caught in the propeller. It is the naked body of a young woman wrapped in a large plastic bag. She has not been in the canal long. Gao covers the body and calls the Shanghai police. Detective Yu Guangming of the special case squad takes the call and heads to the crime scene.

Chapter two introduces Chief Inspector Chen Cao, the head of the special case squad of the Shanghai police. Chen is throwing a housewarming party. Due to Shanghai's housing shortage it is a mark of Chen's considerable good fortune that he has acquired his new apartment. Chen invites Wang Feng, a young reporter with whom a romance is blossoming, his old friend "Overseas Chinese" Lu and Lu's wife. Chen is a poet as well as a cop and uses his knowledge of poetry to flirt with Wang.

After eating dinner, the ladies clear up dinner and Lu asks Chen for a loan in order to open a restaurant. Though barely able to afford the loan, Chen gives Lu the money requested free of interest. Lu and his wife depart soon afterward in order to leave Chen and Wang alone. The evening is starting to become romantic when Chen receives a phone call. It is Yu, informing him of the body in the canal. The mood broken, Wang exits, leaving Chen alone with his thoughts.

In Chapter three, Chen arrives at work and finds Yu's report about the crime on his desk. The report details the body, the scene of the discovery and the witnesses, concluding that death was possibly caused by strangulation and that sexual assault could not be ruled out. Chen theorizes that either the murder took place on a boat and dumped in the canal or the crime took place elsewhere and her body was transported to



be dumped. He thinks the first scenario unlikely and realizes that the murder could have happened anywhere.

Yu arrives at the office and discusses the case with Chen. He agrees with Chen's initial conclusions and suggests the murderer might be a taxi driver, noting the similarities to a previous case. Yu also notes that private cars remain rare in Shanghai. The special case squad is short staffed and Chen debates whether to pass on the case to another division. There is tension between Yu and Chen. Yu seems to resent Chen's recent promotion to Chief Inspector, as Chen has not been a policeman for as long as Yu.

Chapter four follows Chen through the rest of the day. At lunch, he goes to a bookshop to search for a book of poetry. Though unsuccessful, he finds and purchases an old book written by his father. When he returns to the office, he receives a call from Party Secretary Li Guoha. Secretary Li informs him that he has been selected to attend the Central Party Institute seminar—a great honor for Chen. Chen discusses with Li, his mentor, whether or not to take the case. Li suggests he pass it on to others. The special case squad is supposed to be for politically sensitive cases.

Chen decides to visit the crime scene before making a decision. He is not encouraged by what he sees. The case seems difficult, with few available leads, and a failure to solve it would not increase his reputation at work, where his recent promotion has already shown petty jealousies and resentment.

The autopsy report confirms Yu's initial suspicions. The cause of death was strangulation and the deceased had sex before death, though sexual assault could neither be confirmed nor ruled out. He decides to delay his decision until more becomes known. Satisfied with this choice he calls his mother. She is delighted with the purchase of his father's book, but chides him for not settling down and finding a wife.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

These chapters introduce the main characters in the coming investigation. Chief Inspector Chen and Detective Yu Guangming will be the lead officers in the case. The crime is also introduced. Details are scarce to begin with, but what is known is that a young woman was strangled and dumped in a remote location. She would not have been found so quickly but for a lucky chance. These early chapters set the tone of the book. Rather than focusing intensely on the crime from the beginning, time is spent on delving into the backgrounds of characters and details about the setting—one which for most readers will be unfamiliar.

Chen's deep love for poetry is established early and often. Whether ruminating on his attraction to Wang Feng or caught in details of the crime, Chen's thoughts turn to lines of poetry that he has either studied or written. He sees the world through romantic eyes, though tempered with the reality of life. He is shown to be keenly aware of nuances of tone and body language in the people he is talking to and demonstrates a knack for creative thinking.



Detective Yu is a foil to Chen. He is a career cop with a methodical approach to his job following book procedures. He sees Chen's love of poetry as a weakness and harbors a slight resentment at having to answer to a man with a background in English literature who became a cop because of party politics rather than a relish for the job. That Chen both recognizes and understands this is another mark of his empathetic nature.

Communist Party politics infuse the society in which the book takes place. It is so ingrained in the characters that it is second nature to them to consider the political ramifications of an action before moving forward. This is established early and foreshadows the development of the investigation later in the book.

Likewise, the changing society in which they are living is established early. Shifts towards a market based economy and the adjustments to everyday thinking that this brings is discussed by the characters, but is also present in the details of the text. Seemingly small things, the mention of Budweiser beer for instance, are easily overlooked, yet demonstrate the incessant encroachment of international companies into a previously insular society. In a society where politics plays such a key role in the daily interactions of people, such a change is amplified and has ramifications for all of the characters and their interactions. Qiu establishes the importance of politics and society early and often. Both are key in the development of the characters and the story. The level of conflict present in everyday life mirrors the level of internal conflict that is shown in Chief Inspector Chen.

Chen's love of poetry is important to his character but also to the tone of the writing. Qiu's writing tends towards the poetic, becoming truly utilitarian only within the confines of police reports and details of the crime. Chen's poetic ruminations aid in the reader's acceptance of the poetic tone of the writing and establish a strong connection between the reader, the text and the protagonist of the book.

Finally, the importance of Chen's personal life is introduced in these early chapters. His blossoming relationship with Wang Feng and the interest his friends and family have in seeing Chen settle down form a compelling subplot to the main mystery of the book. Chen is immediately established as a character in conflict. Personally, politically and in his career, conflict is ever present in his life. This creates interest, his empathy and honor draw attachment from the reader and the result is that Chen is quickly established as a character worth investing in.



Chapters 5-8

Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter five demonstrates a busy Chief Inspector Chen struggling to cope with his workload. He is interrupted by a call from Wang telling him that a national newspaper has decided to publish one of his poems. They flirt and he invites her to lunch. Chen has been too busy preparing for the Party seminar to give much thought to the case, but Wang's call reminds him of the dead woman. Chen checks in with Yu about the murder, but there has been no progress.

Chen calls Dr. Xia, who performed the autopsy, and asks him to prepare a description of the deceased more detailed than the clinical language of the autopsy report. From Dr. Xia he learns that she was a beautiful woman who took care of her physical appearance; she had never had a child and had no scars; though she had sex before death, it seemed to have been consensual; and she had eaten a meal including caviar less than an hour before death. Chen takes the information from the report and prepares a new description for distribution, hoping to identify the body.

In Chapter six, the identity of the body is established. She was Guan Hongying, whose name translates as "Red Heroine." Guan was a national model worker and a celebrated public face of the Communist Party. Chen realizes that this immediately changes the tone of the investigation. The identity of the victim makes it an important political case. The solution of the case might lead to it all being hushed up, but failing to solve it could lead to intense political pressure from above.

An emergency meeting is called that is headed by Secretary Li. Chen and Yu are in attendance as is Commissar Zhang Zhiqiang, a senior party official. Chen is surprised. The victim had been a celebrity, but not so important as to attract this level of attention. They are ordered to keep the case under the radar and report to Commissar Zhang, who will act in an advisory capacity. Chen is aware that Zhang doesn't think highly of him and is concerned that his authority may be lessened by Zhang's presence.

Immediately after the meeting, Chen confronts Li. Li assures him that he is still in charge and that he should just put up with the inconvenience of Zhang as an adviser, a purely honorary position. You and Chen are in agreement that the political aspects of the case are being overblown and that the killing was most likely random. They make plans to begin a regular investigation.

Chapter seven focuses on Detective Yu as he interviews Guan's coworkers. She worked as head of the cosmetics department of a department store. From her colleagues, Yu learns that she was a conscientious worker and Party member who kept her private life to herself and never seemed to date. Nobody can think of any enemies that she might have had. The only unusual pieces of information Yu gains are that Guan had started taking more frequent vacations and wearing jewelry, which was out of



character, and that one of her colleagues thought she saw Guan out with a man recently, although she wasn't really sure it was Guan.

Yu is able to piece together Guan's movements on the day of her death. Guan had arrived at work at 8am, dined in the canteen at lunchtime and attended a routine Party meeting in the late afternoon. She had made a phone call at 6:30pm and left the store just after 7pm. She had been planning to leave for a vacation that evening, but nobody had seen her after 7.10pm.

Frustrated with the lack of firm information, Yu visits his father, a former cop nicknamed "Old Hunter". Hunter sympathizes with his son, remarking that such cases are rarely solved if the solution does not come quickly.

In Chapter eight, Chen investigates Guan's dormitory. Guan lived in a single room in a dormitory building. The room contains little furniture, a few books and photo albums, her clothes and jewelry and a couple of pictures. At first glance, Chen finds her room unremarkable, but on further investigation he discovers a few out of the ordinary items. One side of Guan's wardrobe contains drab, utilitarian clothes and the other side is full of expensive fashions and lingerie that Guan should not have been able to afford—nor did there seem to be a reason for the lingerie as she was apparently single when she died. Her photo albums contain some surprising pictures that are too racy to have been developed in a state-run photo studio and risky for a public figure like Guan to have taken at a private studio. Chen cannot reconcile the clothes and the pictures with the known facts about Guan.

Chen interviews Guan's neighbors. Mostly, Guan was disliked and resented by her neighbors. She was viewed as cold and unfriendly and nobody knew much about her. One elderly neighbor pitied her rather than disliked her, believing that she liked to keep to herself because of the daily pressures she was under as a public figure. The only remotely useful information Chen discovers about the case is that she was seen leaving the dormitory with a suitcase around 10:30 p.m. Guan's landlady is barely more helpful, although she does report that she saw a man exit from the area of Guan's room on the night of her death, after 11:00 p. m. The man was tall, neatly dressed and in his mid to late thirties. Chen still believes it unlikely that Guan was seeing anyone when she died, backed up by the lack of privacy of her living quarters and the lack of gossip about her.

Chapters 5-8 Analysis

The investigation begins in earnest in these chapters. The victim is identified and the translation of her name "Red Heroine" gives the book its title. It is also a fitting name for her, as she is a political celebrity, her image used in propaganda by the Communist Party, often represented by the color red, as a model of what people should aspire to.

The early investigations are frustrating for the police and by extension the reader. This is intentional. Little of apparent importance jumps out from the routine of the early investigations. However, to the careful eye, details emerge that form pieces of the



puzzle. Some of these details have attention drawn to them by the reactions of Chen and Lu. The inappropriate pictures, for example, and the out of character clothing discovered in Guan's wardrobe are noted by Chen as details that don't gel with the picture their investigation is forming. Some details are passed over, for now, but return later and prove important. The fact that she ate caviar shortly before she died, for example, is not picked up by anyone yet, but is mentioned for the reader's benefit. It is the kind of detail often thrown in by mystery writers as a clue to the reader. This serves to involve the reader in the investigation and provides a sense of satisfaction if the reader picks up on it before the detective.

There are two other types of clue utilized by Qiu. One is the unconfirmed detail, in this case, the man exiting from the area of Guan's dormitory on the night of her death. At this stage we do not know if he is connected to the crime, or even if he was exiting her room. There is also the false clue, commonly referred to as a "red herring." These are details that have no bearing on the case but attention is drawn to them to confuse the investigator. In this case, the prevalence of politics in everybody's lives makes it easy to play up the political aspects of Guan's life and the possible ramifications regarding her murder. It is later revealed that Guan's political career was not what led to her death, though, as established earlier, politics does play a role in almost everything in Chinese society.

Qiu Xiaolong utilizes a structure during these chapters that contrasts the styles of his two main investigators. By alternating chapters between Chen and Yu's investigations and points of view, it becomes clearer what the differences between them are, as well as their similarities. Yu is clearly a solid, conscientious cop, like Chen, but his thinking is more methodical. Yu follows routine and follows orders. Politics are a distraction from his job.

Chen, on the other hand, is a political being. He has been promoted above Yu because of politics. His background is not in law enforcement and his thinking is more creative. Lines of Chinese poetry are frequently quoted when the focus is on Chen. They demonstrate how he sees the world and are present, not just to color his character, but to draw the reader through his line of thinking. Sometimes the poetry seems random, but it usually leads to a decision or observation that helps Chen work through the puzzles in his head. His wider knowledge of politics also benefits Chen. If Yu had investigated the apartment, it is unlikely that the photographs, and the problem of developing them for a figure like Guan, would have jumped out at him as they did Chen. It might be assumed that Yu would eventually arrive at the same conclusion, but the juxtaposition of Chen and Yu's differences show how they gather information differently and how their differences allow them to work efficiently as a team, despite any tensions between them.

These chapters also continue the depth of detail about the setting that differentiates the book from simple murder mysteries. Communist China and, by extension, Shanghai are almost like subsidiary characters in the novel. The colorful descriptions and cultural details are necessary for the understanding of the central plot of the book. They serve to educate the reader on an unfamiliar society and are woven into the tapestry of the text

in such a way as to avoid seeming cumbersome and dry. Chen's observations of the world around him, in particular, are central to his character, but without that being true, the descriptions of his thoughts would seem out of place.



Chapters 9-12

Chapters 9-12 Summary

In Chapter nine, Chen's poem is published, providing him with a welcome break from the frustrations of the dead-end investigation. Pushed into following fruitless leads for political reasons and making no progress with the case, Chen is losing hope. During a sleepless night, however, he realizes that caviar is not easy to come by and only a few people in Shanghai could have eaten it at a very limited number of establishments.

Chapter ten focuses on Yu's frustration with the case. His feelings are that they are spending too much time on the murder to the detriment of other cases. With their leads going nowhere, Yu feels that it is time to put the murder aside until new information emerges. Commissar Zhang does not agree. At a meeting, Chen brings up the caviar. Chen has investigated it and discovered that the likely scenario is that she dined with someone who has access to caviar privately, inferring that she knew her killer.

In Chapter eleven, Chen receives a gift from a friend, Ling, in Beijing. It is a book of poetry and a response to his published poem. Needing a rest from police work, Chen invites Wang to breakfast. Their conversation turns to the case and, in discussing it with Wang, Chen realizes that it is odd that Guan had not told anyone where she was going on vacation. Signs increasingly point to her having been in a relationship. Chen also realizes that they may be able to use Guan's photos to trace some of the people she was on vacation in the Yellow Mountains with on her last trip. As he parts from Wang, his thoughts turn to the future of their relationship.

Chapter twelve has Chen returning to Guan's room to examine her photographs. He finds that there is no one else in them and that some were taken from quite a distance, suggesting that she was traveling with someone who photographed her. Chen goes to a nearby restaurant. While there he notices the public phone service that Guan would have used to make and receive phone calls. He talks to the operator, Bao Guozhang who is also known as Uncle Bao. Bao is enlightening. He remembers that Guan made more calls than most people, unsurprising given her position. However, unusually she made a number of late evening calls. This further suggests to Chen that she was indeed seeing someone before her death. Bao promises to check the call logs, especially for the night of her murder, and see what information he can provide.

Chapters 9-12 Analysis

The investigation, slowly begins to build in pace during this section. In chapters nine and ten, the case seems dead. No progress is being made. Beginning with Chen's realization about the caviar, however, a series of steps forward begin to happen. Evidence emerges suggesting that Guan was not, in fact, single. The caviar, the photographs and Guan's telephone calls all point to this conclusion. If true, it opens up a



whole other avenue of investigation. With Zhang overly focused on politics and Yu ready to give up, it is Chen's ability to think through the details that opens up the avenue of investigation that will lead them to the killer.

The introduction of Ling, Chen's friend in Beijing, is far more important than it would seem. Her gift to Chen and the mention of her name is innocuous, but foreshadows her later involvement in the story. Without laying the seeds of this character early on, however, her later appearance would appear to be a "deus ex machina" or a device originated in Greek drama and often used by writers to solve otherwise unsolvable problems. Ling plays a key role later in the story, but her early appearance here, however slight, lays the groundwork for her future appearance and lends credibility to her role at the conclusion of the book.

For much of this section we step away from the murder and delve into Chen's personal life. His relationship with Wang plays on his mind constantly and it is a measure of how important she is to him that he turns to her to discuss the case when it seems to have hit a wall. Chen wants to further his relationship with Wang and although they are not a couple, he frequently seems to think of her as his partner. His dismissal of concerns about her suitability as a wife for political reasons forms the third part of the chain of work life, home life, and political life. The relationship between Chen and Wang symbolizes Chinese society as a whole on a smaller level. It is a further demonstration that those three aspects of Chinese life cannot be broken apart.



Chapters 13-17

Chapters 13-17 Summary

Chapter thirteen finds Yu on a family outing. His investigations are still yielding no results, Commissar Zhang is becoming increasingly difficult to work with and his mind is on his work instead of his family. He discusses the case with Peiqin, his wife, and her insight leads him to the same conclusion as Chen—Guan may not have been single.

In Chapter fourteen, Chen attempts to clear his desk of routine work, but finds his thoughts locked on Guan. He returns to her dormitory once more. In looking through the photo albums for a third time, he discovers a photo of a lady with gray hair. It is signed on the back "To Comrade Zhaodi, Wei Hong October 1989" (pg. 154.) Chen realizes that Zhaodi is a common pet name. It must have been given to Guan, why else would she have kept it?

Chen meets with Uncle Bao who has traced the number that Guan received calls from. The callers surname was Wu and he had a Beijing accent. On the night of her death he had left Guan a simple message, "We'll meet as scheduled."

The investigation leaps forward in chapter fifteen. Using the photograph of Wei Hong, the gray-haired lady, Chen tracks down the travel agency used by to travel to the Yellow Mountains the previous October. From them he is able to find out the name of the tour guide for that trip. Guan is not listed but Zhaodi is. Chen tries to locate the tour guide, Xie Rong. He speaks to her mother and discovers that shortly after the Yellow Mountain trip Xie Rong quit her job and moved to another city called Guangzhou.

Chen also interviews Wei Hong. She easily identifies Guan as Comrade Zhaodi and Chen discovers that Guan was not only travelling under an assumed name but with a man. A man with a Beijing accent.

When Chen traces the number that Uncle Bao provided him he finds that the owner is Wu Bing, an important government official. Wu Bing has been in the hospital for a long time, but his son, Wu Xiaoming has a connection to Guan—he had photographed her for a newspaper. Chen is able to get a photograph of Wu Xiaoming and quickly identifies him as the man who had traveled with Guan. Further, Wei Hong tells him that Guan and Xie Rong had fought during the trip. Guan had called Xie a whore.

In Chapter sixteen, Chen is investigating Wu's work and he enlists the help of Wang. As a journalist she has access to more thorough records of Wu's press photography. At lunch with Wang, Chen invites her to dinner at his place. Wu's photography career is extensive and somewhat controversial. Wu does not shy away from artistic nude photography. Such images, while no longer forbidden in China are still divisive. Chen even discovers photos of Jiang Weihe, an artist friend of his.



Chen realizes that his investigation is heading towards a confrontation with the powerfully connected Wu family. What bothers Chen most is that, despite circumstantial evidence, he can find no motive to attach to Wu. Without one the investigation may stall.

In Chapter seventeen, Chen returns to the office to find that Yu has left him a tape of an interview with Lai Guojun, a past lover of Guan. The interview reveals that Lai had been Guan's first lover a decade earlier. They had been in love but Guan had unexpectedly broken it off. In an addendum to the interview, Yu notes that Guan had been instructed to end the affair by the Party because of Lai's family background, which included an uncle who had been executed as a counterrevolutionary. Yu concludes that he doesn't think Lai is a suspect. The story resonates with Chen, whose career path had been changed because an uncle he had never met had been deemed unsuitable by the Party. Chen surmises that the incident may have emotionally traumatized Guan, hence her apparent lack of a personal life until Wu came along. Chen reports to Zhang, who stresses again the political importance of the case. Chen departs with a subtle dig at Zhang's obsession with the political aspects of the case.

Chapters 13-17 Analysis

The investigation picks up steam in these chapters. The important facts learned are Guan's apparent relationship with Wu, her emotional scarring from a previous relationship that ended badly and a fight between Guan and the tour guide Xie Rong during her trip to the Yellow Mountains. A picture of Guan is emerging that is very different from the model image projected by the Communist Party. In private Guan was conducting a clandestine affair under an assumed name with a notable figure—the son of a high ranking Party official. All of this leads to suspicion falling on Wu, her lover, but with no real motive becoming apparent. By now the importance of politics has been well established, so the level of danger in pursuing the investigation comes into sharp focus when the lead suspect turns out to be an influential figure.

Information is presented that gives insight into Chen's emotional connection to the case. There are a number of parallels between Chen and Guan. Both have lived and worked under intense political pressures. Chen empathizes with Guan's broken relationship because his budding relationship with Wang faces some of the same issues. His career has also been affected by the same forces as ruined Guan's relationship, leading him into a career as a police officer rather than a diplomat.

This section focuses strongly on Chen, singling him out as the lead investigator on the case. Up until now he has clearly been the protagonist of the story and the lead investigator in name, but Yu's detective work has been given nearly equal time with Chen's. As the book moves towards the middle, however, Qiu has chosen to clearly mark Chen as the true detective, ably assisted by Yu but clearly the more inspired police officer.

The balance between Chen's work life and personal life in this section has moved strongly towards work being of primary importance, yet his blossoming relationship with



Wang, though pushed to the background, is kept in sharp focus by his use of her to gather information. More and more, Wang is being built as a character that could be a partner to Chen in every sense of the work. He has deep feelings for her, is attracted to her and she also has the intellect and resources to enable him to perform his detective work better. Wang is being elevated in Chen's mind and thus the reader's mind which makes her fall from Chen's graces in the chapter eighteen acutely painful for all.

Chen's increasing friction with Commissar Zhang foreshadows the future barriers that will meet the investigation. Zhang symbolizes the political authority of the Chinese government. He is old fashioned and mired in the past, struggling to deal with the changing world in which he finds himself. As Chen increasingly flouts the authority of the Party figurehead in the face of an increasingly political case, the conflict and tension is given a personal touch. Zhang is an individual that makes an antagonist that you can relate to rather than functioning as a political entity alone.



Chapters 18-21

Chapters 18-21 Summary

Chapter eighteen steps away from the investigation and into Chen's personal life through his dinner with Wang. The dinner goes well. The mood is romantic. Chen believes they are headed for an intimate night. Before events can progress that far, however, Wang drops a bombshell. She is going to Japan to join her husband, who defected there some time before. Wang needs Chen's help to obtain a passport. Wang has strong feelings for Chen and knows there is not much between her and her husband, but factoring in the opportunities to advance her own career free from China's censorship and the harm she could cause to Chen's career through her attachment to a defector, she believes the right choice for both of them is for her to go. Wang tells Chen that they can still have a few months together before she leaves, but Chen's honor will not permit him to continue a relationship with another man's wife if she is returning to her husband. Chen agrees to help Wang, but tells her they can only continue to see each other as friends. With the rapid collapse of his blossoming relationship, Chen vows to solve the case. His work is the most important thing left to him.

In Chapter nineteen, Chen dines with Yu and his family. Yu has invited him after discovering, with some surprise, that Chen stood up for him in a meeting with Commissar Zhang and saved Yu's job. After dinner, Chen fills in Yu about the developments in the case, especially regarding Wu. Chen is surprised at Yu's vehement reaction against Wu. Yu has a strong dislike for the HCC or the High Cadre's Children of whom Wu is one. Chen's desire to follow the investigation despite its difficulties impresses Yu. Any remaining animosity Yu harbors for Chen fades away. They have become a true team by the time dinner ends.

In Chapter twenty, Chen and Yu confront Wu in his home. Wu admits to everything they have uncovered, but has an explanation for it all. He maintains that their relationship was a professional one and that their trip to the Yellow Mountains together was nothing more than a shared vacation. He claims they posed as a couple under assumed names both for anonymity and to save money. He provides an alibi for the night of the murder, claiming he spent the evening with a friend, developing photographs there. This rings false to Chen and Yu who know that Wu has his own darkroom. Chen and Yu leave more convinced than ever that Wu is the killer but still without any clear motive. They surmise that possibly another man entered the picture, but have no evidence for it. Chen suggests that Yu interviews the artist, Jiang Weihe, who appears in some of Wu's nude photographs. Chen himself intends to travel to Huangzhou to track down Xie Rong, the tour guide.

Chapter twenty-one follows Commissar Zhang through his day. He begins the day looking for a birthday gift for a friend as is shocked at the increase in prices now that the market based economy is taking hold. State set prices are no longer applicable. A meeting with the special case squad goes badly. Zhang feels that Chen undermines his



authority and Yu does not respect him. Zhang feels that they are deliberately leaving him out of the loop and is shocked to discover an important figure such as Wu is the prime suspect. He also disapproves of Chen's planned trip to Guangzhou, thinking it a waste of resources.

After the meeting, Zhang goes to an explicit movie to take his mind off of things. Despite the movie's content he is angered to notice a couple being intimate in the movie theatre. Back at home, he picks up a magazine to read and discovers one of Chen's poems in it. He is unsure of his interpretation, but thinks he sees some politically incorrect material in the poem. Zhang's daughter calls him to ask for money for her sick child. Zhang feels a strong sense of guilt over his daughter's difficult life and promises to send the money.

Zhang mulls over the case. He cannot decide what the right thing to do for the Party will be. He decides to consult an old friend in Internal Security and also encloses Chen's poem with some passages marked. He is aware his actions might hurt Chen, but does not see his actions as spiteful. He is trying to do the best thing.

Chapters 18-21 Analysis

This section holds only one important event that directly bears on the case, the interview with Wu. Wu is portrayed as confident to the point of arrogance. He has an answer ready for every question posed to him, though none of it rings true to the experienced detectives. Yu lets his prejudice against the HCC's lead him, but Chen has no such feelings and though more cautious in his conclusions, clearly sees Wu as the prime suspect. Wu's alibi is one of convenience, making little real sense, but being hard to disprove. Motive is still lacking.

Surrounding events, however, do bear on the case indirectly. Wu's influential of position continues to be a barrier. Chen and Yu have to move cautiously because of the political aspects of the case. Their increasing dismissal, however, of the old party ways represented by Commissar Zhang, however, will prove to be a mistake, causing huge disruptions to their investigation later on. The changes in society are, perhaps, blinding the younger generation to the influence that the old ways still hold.

Personal relationships, particularly Chen's, are central to this section of the book. The sudden collapse of his budding relationship with Wang comes as a shock. Suddenly his love interest is taken away and with it, his sounding board. Wang has, up until now, been key in developing Chen's ideas regarding the case. Chen's character is shown strongly by his refusal to enter a sexual relationship with Wang, even when offered, because of the circumstances. Chen has a strong moral sense and code of honor that will not allow him to continue a romantic relationship with Wang.

The loss of his foil is immediately remedied by a strengthening of his relationship with Yu. Again it is in Chen's character to stand up for his assistant when he saves Yu's job. As Yu gets to know Chen better, it is Chen's nature that draws Yu to him. Yu is able to discard any lingering animosity because it was born from circumstance not from Chen's



disposition. IN the end it is necessary for the block to arise between Wang and Chen in order to enable the development of Chen and Yu's working relationship. The loss of Wang as a romantic interest also enables Chen to focus fully on the investigation as it picks up speed.

The abrupt switch to seeing the investigation and the world through Zhang's eyes is unexpected but powerful. Zhang has been established as the personification of the forces that resist the new world and make the investigation difficult for the detectives. The opportunity to visit the thought processes behind that antagonism allows the duality of being able to sympathize a little with their viewpoint and being frustrated by the close-mindedness of the older generation. Zhang is confused by the changing world around him. He wants to act for the best, but does not know what the best is. Having grown up in a paranoid world where political enemies were around every corner, he sees threats where none exist and overreacts when caution might be wiser.

Zhang's establishment view and actions only seem to cause problems where his intentions are good. He no longer understands, like the old thinking that he represents, how to interact with the world around him. While he regrets errors of the past, he commits new errors that can be just as harmful. This insight into the other side of the coin provides a deeper understanding of the issues facing the heroes and, perhaps, a little more insight into the heroes' flaws.



Chapters 22-25

Chapters 22-25 Summary

In Chapter twenty-two, Chen goes to Guangzhou to search for Xie Rong. The local police are not particularly helpful and Chen's own investigations prove fruitless. Chen stays at the Writers' Home, a hostel for writers, to save money. There he meets a businessman called Ouyang who is enthused to meet a published poet. Chen asks Ouyang if he can help locate Xie using his local connections and Ouyang says that he will try asking some of the madams he is acquainted with. Chen has misgivings about Ouyang's connections to prostitution, but decides that his murder investigation is more important.

Chapter twenty-three has Yu visiting the artist Jiang Wehe. She discloses her relationship with Wu. It was a purely sexual one, convenient for both of them, with no expectations of a romantic involvement. Jiang broke it off when she discovered Wu had a collection of pornographic pictures of former lovers, with notes detailing their secrets and sexual preferences. Jiang gives Yu another lead of a woman called Ning Jing who was also a lover of Wu.

Yu bluffs information out of Ning by threatening to show Wu's pictures of her to her employer although he does not have the photos. Ning tells him that she had hoped Wu would divorce his wife and marry her, but Wu tired of her and threatened to make his photos of Ning public if she did not leave him alone. Yu builds a picture of Wu as a serial womanizer who takes obscene photographs of his conquests to blackmail them with when he tires of them. Yet Yu still cannot understand Wu's motivation for killing Guan.

In Chapter twenty-four, Chen, with Ouyang's help, locates Xie. When he goes to her room he is taken off guard by the fact that she is a prostitute. Even more so that Ouyang has paid for him to have a full day with her. Chen is so surprised by the situation that he lets matters progress a little far, allowing her to give him a Japanese foot massage (where she massages his back with her feet) before revealing that he is a cop. Chen persuades her that he is not interested in arresting her and offers to take Xie for lunch while he interviews her about the murder case.

Xiu had a brief fling with Wu during the Yellow Mountain trip. She had realized early on that Guan and Wu were not married and allowed Wu to seduce her. Guan found out and confronted Xie. Wu pulled them apart when the confrontation turned physical. Wu took Guan's side. Xie tells Chen that she left the travel agency soon afterward, though not as a result of the soured affair and fight with Guan. Chen empathizes with Xie and tells her he hopes they meet under better circumstances. He resolves not to tell Xie's mother of her new profession. When his task is complete, Chen heads back to Shanghai.

In Chapter twenty-five, Chen returns to Shanghai only to be immediately summoned to the offices of the Party Discipline Committee to meet with Director Yao. The director



wants to discuss the case with him and suggests that, due to its political sensitivity, Chen pass it on to Internal Security. Yao is well informed of the investigation, including Chen's trip and, indirectly, Chen senses she is interfering in the investigation. Yao makes thinly veiled threats to Chen about his future in the Party and the Party's concern about his personal life. All of a sudden, Chen feels his position is under serious threat.

Chapters 22-25 Analysis

The certainty that Wu is the killer builds through this section as a darker picture of his actions and character emerges. He is a serial seducer of women who routinely tricks them into taking obscene photos, or does it without their knowledge, in order to blackmail them into silence when he is finished with them. He keeps records of his lovers' sexual preferences and secrets too. From suspect he is turned, in these chapters, into an out and out villain. Even so, the detectives continue to struggle to find a motive for the murder. The closest they come is in the disclosure of the fight between Guan and Xie. Clearly Guan was possessive and jealous. However, Wu took her side in the confrontation and discarded Xie.

Yu's growing friendship with Chen is highlighted in his concern for Chen's personal life after the interviews with Jiang and Ning. Though his thoughts are with Chen's romantic past, and in particular the Beijing lover who broke his heart, the concern is further evidence of Yu and Chen's solidifying relationship. More than that, it foreshadows the test of character that Chen is about to face.

Chen is tested by his encounter with Xie. His humanity is shown in all its flaws as he nearly succumbs to temptation when caught off guard by the nature of Xie's work. It is a lapse of judgment and of character for Chen to allow events to proceed as far as the intimate massage he receives from Xie. However, ultimately he survives the test of character, not quite unscathed, because his code of honor will not allow any overtly sexual contact with a prostitute and a witness in his case, no matter how much he might be tempted as a man. Showing the hero's flaws in this manner only serves to make him a character that the reader can relate to. "Superhuman" characters can be harder to empathize with, creating a disconnect between the protagonist and the reader. The more human a character appears through demonstration of his flaws, the easier it becomes to forgive their errors and celebrate their successes. Qiu is using his writing techniques to create a strong connection between the reader and the hero.

The ever present politics enter the picture towards the end of the section. Chen's summons to the Discipline Committee is ominous and, as is normal in politics, nothing is stated explicitly. Nonetheless it is clear that Chen suddenly finds himself in disfavor. The reader knows that this is a result of Zhang's actions in the earlier chapter. To Chen, it comes a complete surprise. The rapidity of his change in circumstance is a timely reminder to Chen that his position, like everyone's in a society of politics and intrigue, is a precarious one. Without such a reminder, the narrative might follow a different path, with Chen becoming overconfident, even arrogant, leading to a tragic finale. This kind of

roadblock is a necessary one to warn the hero of the dangers ahead. It makes Chen's life more difficult, but directs him ultimately down the right path.



Chapters 26-29

Chapters 26-29 Summary

Chen returns to the office in Chapter twenty-six. He receives a call from Old Hunter, Yu's father, asking to meet him. Old Hunter has information about the case. Through one of his contacts, Old Hunter has discovered Guan's affair prior to her death. His source witnessed Guan leaning in to the driver's side of a car for a passionate kiss on several occasions before getting in the car. Old Hunter also warns Chen that word has surfaced that Chen has displeased some influential people, hinting that Chen is under surveillance.

In Chapter twenty-seven, Chen, paranoid and discouraged, visits his mother. She fusses over his inability to maintain a relationship. He tells her about Wang and she agrees that he did the right thing where Wang was concerned. She worries about his happiness in his career and he defends police work, momentarily forgetting his troubles.

Chen goes home in Chapter twenty-eight, to find a message from Secretary Li summoning him back to the office. Chen brings Li up to date with the case. Li is also concerned with the lack of motive. What concerns Li more, however, is a report filed against Chen. Internal Security had followed Chen's every move in Guangzhou. Worse than that, they had obtained a receipt for Chen's visit to Xie. Ouyang had paid for a "full-service" visit. Chen's unorthodox investigation methods had raised suspicions against him. Li stood up for Chen, but given the political sensitivity of the case, the lack of a motive and Chen's suddenly precarious position, Li tells Chen to suspend the investigation.

In Chapter twenty-nine, Chen is woken by a late night phone call from Wang. Her passport application had been turned down and Wang had discovered that Chen was in trouble. She had been told he was suspended. Though not officially true, Li's decision to stop the investigation amounts to the same thing for Chen. She offers to come over, but he declines. Unable to get back to sleep, Chen wanders the streets. He eventually wanders into a post office where, in despair, he sends a letter to his friend in Beijing.

Chapters 26-29 Analysis

The investigation comes to a complete halt in this section. The only new discovery is that Guan's lover, presumably Wu, drove a white car. The forces working against the investigation seem to have been successful in bringing it to an end. Though these forces are not explicitly identified, it is easy to conclude that a mixture of Wu's influence and Zhang's actions have brought matters to a head.

All four chapters follow Chen through his darkest period in the book. Having lost Wang, he now seems to be losing his job and may be heading towards being blacklisted within the party. Despite these turns of events, it is clear that a number of people remain on



Chen's side. Of course, Chen's mother has his best interests at heart, and in chapter twenty-seven Chen's respite from the events surrounding him is revealed. It provides a comfort that, no matter what happens to Chen, he will always have somewhere to turn. At the hero's lowest point, the reader can continue with safety in the knowledge that Chen has a safety net of sorts. This is reinforced by other people around him. Chen still has the protection of his mentor, Secretary Li, though Li's influence can only do so much. He also has kindred spirits in Old Hunter and Yu. Wang returns into the picture. She clearly still has feelings for Chen and once again he is put in a position of temptation when she offers to come and see him, but even as his despair grows, Chen's moral code prevents him from accepting her offer.

The importance of Chen's mysterious friend in Beijing is highlighted by the fact that Ling is the person that he turns to in his darkest moment. She has only been referenced in brief interludes. As yet we have no sense of who Ling is, or her history with Chen. This is the moment that registers Ling as an integral character, although very little is known of her.



Chapters 30-33

Chapters 30-33 Summary

Chapter thirty returns to Detective Yu. He is temporarily reassigned as security to a conference and told to forget about the Guan case for now. Chen has likewise been reassigned to look after some visiting writers from America. As Yu is finishing some work before his reassignment he receives a call from someone claiming to have information about the Guan case. Her information proves very useful, but Yu will have difficulty relaying it to Chen. They must not appear to be working on Guan's case anymore. Chen has left some extra tickets to one of the events he is taking the Americans too and Yu decides to use the event as an opportunity to pass information to Chen through his wife, Peiqin

Chen is escorting the Americans through their schedule in chapter thirty-one. He has been unable to contact Yu since returning from his trip, so he calls Peiqin. Both realize their conversation might be monitored, but manage to subtly convey means of contacting each other. Peiqin conveys that she will be at the ticketed event later. Chen lets her know that she can go to Lu's restaurant and leave messages for him there. Chen continues to obsess about the case. When the Americans suggest that Chen pick a restaurant for them to dine in, he suggests Lu's restaurant so he can check if Peiqin has left a message.

In Chapter thirty-two, Peiqin meets Chen at a karaoke party. Yu is there too but he keeps his distance so as to avoid suspicion. Peiqin passes on Yu's information. First she fills in Chen about the interviews with Jiang and Ning. Then she tells him of the new witness. Someone has come forward that saw Wu close to the canal on the night of the murder. She also had a receipt for Wu's gas purchase, which Peiqin passes to Chen along with a tape of the interview between Yu and the witness.

Chapter thirty-three begins with Chen returning to the office after his assignment with the Americans. Secretary Li checks in with Chen and tells him to take a couple of days off. Chen's suspension is still not official, but the message is clear, which is to do nothing about the Guan case. Nonetheless, Chen wonders if Wu's collection of obscene photographs could provide a motive for murder. If Jiang had found them, did Guan see them too and what would she have done with them?

Little Zhou approaches Chen at lunch and lets him know that he overheard Secretary Li's conversation while driving him around the previous day. First he lets Chen know that Li is working hard to protect him with the upper echelons of the Party and secondly he tells Chen that a female acquaintance of Chen's from Guangzhou, who can only be Xie Rong, has been arrested. Chen knows it is not because of her profession but because of him.



Chen goes to Lu's restaurant and Lu lets him know that Old Hunter, in his position as traffic patroller, has noticed Wu's car being driven around the neighborhood. Wu is not in Shanghai, so he wonders who the driver is. He is also contacted by Ouyang who lets him know that Xie will not sell Chen out and that Ouyang himself was in no trouble.

Chapters 30-33 Analysis

The tone of the book changes from that of a mystery to that of a thriller in this section. The suspension of the investigation has left Chen and Yu unable to discuss the case despite the breakthroughs being made. Clandestine meetings and secret messages become the only way for them to continue the investigation. A witness that puts Wu at the scene of the crime puts to bed any lingering doubts that Wu is the killer. The question of motive remains unclear, though Chen is beginning to put together a theory that Guan might have discovered Wu's collection of obscene photographs and that led to her death.

In the environmental constraints under which they have to work, Chen and Yu have two options. They can continue the investigation against orders in this secretive manner or give up. It is in the character of neither Chen nor Yu to give up. They can only be true to themselves and that means finding a way to work around the system. It introduces a level of true danger for the heroes. Up until now they have been working through blocks to their investigation, but were in little real danger themselves. Now the stakes have risen. If they are caught pursuing the investigation against party wishes the consequences could be dire in the heated political environment of China. This danger is further highlighted for the consequences of people associated with Chen. Xie's arrest brings into sharp focus just how much danger Chen is in.



Chapters 34-37

Chapters 34-37 Summary

As Chen is leaving work in Chapter thirty-four, he is given a package from Beijing. It is a response to his letter. It is from Ling, his friend in Beijing. She has answered his plea for help by using her Party contacts and passes on a message from the Wen Jiezi, head of the Public Security Ministry, "Don't push on with the investigation until further signal. Be assured that something will be happening shortly" (pg. 390.) She also gives him a direct phone number for emergencies and informs him that she told Minister Wen that she was his girlfriend to expedite matters. Given his position, Ling has gone far beyond anything he could have expected of her.

Chen reminisces about his past with Ling. They had, in fact, had a relationship in college. It had ended both because she went to Australia for a year and because her high family connections, as an HCC herself, rendered him an undesirable match for her. They shared a love of poetry and parted with the unspoken agreement that they could not be together. Now Chen doubts if they had ever really parted. He has never gotten over her, and she clearly still cares for him.

In Chapter thirty-five, Chen is forced into action despite all the warnings. Secretary Li has been evading him to avoid talking about the case, but Chen learns that Wu has applied for a visa to America. Chen reflects that Guan must have presented a real threat to Wu. Wu must have known that her status as a national celebrity would mean her disappearance would be investigated. Chen wonders what that threat could have been.

Dr. Xia visits Chen's office and asks Chen to introduce him for Party membership. It is a gesture of solidarity with Chen. Xia's gesture makes Chen realize that he is surrounded by people who support him. It renews his resolve to solve Guan's murder and bring Wu to justice. He goes back through all the files and reflects on Guan's life. He realizes that the cultural changes in China were making Guan's role as a model work obsolete. In a few years she would literally be a joke, though she had devoted her life to the good of the Party. Guan must have realized this. Chen can't quite tie this to why Wu would kill her. He decides to go back to her dormitory.

Chapter thirty-six sees Chen investigating Guan's dormitory once more. He realizes, finally, what is not striking him as quite right. Guan has hung a large portrait of the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping. In the time of Chairman Mao's leadership, such a thing was a requirement, but not so under Deng's leadership. Chen takes down the portrait. Behind it, he discovers a stack of pictures—Wu's obscene pictures. Many of them are of Guan, but there are also some of Wu's other conquests. Here, at last, Chen has discovered the motive. Now that he has these pictures, he can piece together the lead up to the crime.



Guan had given her life to the Party, even discarding a relationship and a chance at marriage. Now, in China's changing society, her position was fading into obscurity, but it still presented obstacles for being able to have a normal relationship with someone. In Wu, Guan had seen her chance at personal happiness and a way to maintain her political position, but he was married. When she failed to entice him away from his wife, Guan had turned Wu's own weapon against him and blackmailed him with his own photographs. It had cost her her life. Chen is inclined to believe that it was her personal passion that led to her actions rather than political ambition, but he realizes he may never know the whole truth.

Chen goes to Secretary Li in Chapter thirty-seven. Li agrees that Chen's analysis makes sense, but brings up Wu's alibi. Chen asks to bring in Guo Qiang, the man providing Wu's alibi to make him tell the truth. Li tells him that it is impossible to do so in the current political climate and that they have to proceed carefully. Li changes the subject and tells Chen that he has been given a new assignment.

Chen's new assignment is acting director of Shanghai Metropolitan Traffic Control. To all appearances, it is a promotion for Chen, but his thoughts immediately turn to the political ramifications and motivations behind the move. As a temporary position, he worries that when it ends it could serve as a convenient excuse to remove him from his Chief Inspector duties as well, but he has no choice other than to accept. Li makes sure that Chen knows in his new position, he is in charge, with no need to report to Li. Li also lets Chen know that Ling had called the bureau looking for him.

The unexpected change in position disorients Chen. He finds himself in a much more important role, with hundreds of people beneath him, but he is overwhelmed with the amount of work needing to be done. When he finally makes it home that night, he wonders again why he was chosen for the position. He worries that it may be a trap, or even worse that Ling had orchestrated it to get him out of danger.

Chapters 34-37 Analysis

The case is finally cracked in this section, as the long awaited motive finally appears. Guan was blackmailing Wu in an attempt to get him to leave his wife. There is a certain irony in the fact that she was using Wu's own obscene photographs against him. All the facts of the case now tie together. Wu has been placed near the place that the body was discovered on the night of the crime. He had been engaged in a clandestine affair with Guan, who had showed a definite jealous streak and had also found her place in society under threat. Wu could have maintained her political stature and she clearly saw him as husband material. When he wouldn't leave his wife, Guan blackmailed him with his own photos. This would have been bad enough, but Wu was on the verge of being offered an important political position. His only recourse to get rid of Guan was to kill her. There remain two loose ends. The first is Wu's alibi and the second is the question of who has been driving Wu's car while he is not in Shanghai.



Another mystery solved in this section is the identity of Ling, Chen's friend from Beijing. She is one of the HCCs and had previously had a relationship with Chen. Due to political considerations because of her high birth and because they were being forced apart by circumstances including her long trip to Australia, the relationship had ended, but neither Chen nor Ling has ever gotten over it. Chen has turned to Ling for help as a last resort and she has used all of her influence to rescue him, at cost to herself by positioning herself as Chen's girlfriend in the eyes of the Party.

The constantly pervasive party politics of China continue to touch almost every action however. Despite having all the pieces of the crime, Chen is stopped from bringing the case to a conclusion. He is promoted, but is unable to enjoy the apparent good fortune for worries about the politics behind the decision. For Chen, there is unfinished business and whether he is being moved away from the case by Li or whether Ling may have pulled strings to move him to a less sensitive position, the net result is that Chen has not closed the murder case because of politics. This eats at Chen. The case has become his obsession.

Yu's continued absence from the case at this late stage serves to position Chen as the true hero of the piece. His working partnership with Yu has been important, but it would be an unsatisfactory mystery if the main protagonist failed to solve the murder because his sidekick did it first! Yu's disappearance might seem like a convenience for this reason, but it seamlessly fits into the structure of the novel because the realities of Chinese society provide a natural cause to remove him from the story at this crucial juncture.

The book has provided more background information on the setting than a murder mystery typically would. This makes sense because the setting is unfamiliar to most readers, but it is also key because the reader is unable to solve the mystery without the knowledge of Chinese society that the author provides, and one of the true joys of murder mysteries is trying to beat the detective to the conclusion. All of the necessary information has been provided to solve the mystery before Chen reaches his own conclusion. The careful reader with an eye for detail will have been able to pick out the important information and reach the same conclusion along with Chen, or even a little earlier.



Chapters 38-40

Chapters 38-40 Summary

In Chapter thirty-eight, Chen, in his role as Director of the Traffic Control Office, hires Old Hunter as an adviser. Since his retirement, Old Hunter has been volunteering as a traffic officer, so the appointment does not appear unusual. Chen instructs Hunter to detain anybody he suspects may be driving without a license, and tells him to patrol the area around Wu's house. Old Hunter understands his role. He is to stop Wu's car and detain the driver.

Before long, Old Hunter appears in Chen's office with Guo Qiang or the driver of Wu's car and the man who provided Wu's alibi. Chen pressures Guo into confessing. At first Guo is terrified of Wu's retaliation, but Chen persuades him that the decisions are being taken at a level above Wu's influence. Guo admits that the alibi he provided for Wu was fake. He also relates how Guan had attempted to blackmail Wu, confirming Chen's theory about the motive for the crime.

Chapter thirty-nine sees Chen heading to the police bureau to report to Secretary Li in person. He had called Li the previous evening to tell him what had happened. Li mulls that it all makes sense, but has come at an inopportune time. He tells Chen they will meet in person tomorrow.

Before the meeting, Chen goes over his notes to fine tune his presentation. He is prepared to quit if necessary if justice is not done. Chen is surprised to see Yu, Zhang and Dr. Xia at the meeting along with other important bureau members. Chen is completely caught off guard when Li announces that the case is concluded and that Internal Security arrested Wu the previous evening. Yu is outraged that the arrest was done behind their backs after they had solved the case, but Li tells him that everything was done in the best interests of the Party. Commendations are given to all involved in the case.

After the meeting, Li takes Chen aside to explain that he had orchestrated the arrest by Internal Security to protect Chen from retaliation by Wu's allies. He promises Chen that justice will be done. As he is leaving the bureau, he bumps into the officer that turned down Wang's passport application. Now that Chen is back in favor, he promises that they will process her application quickly.

In Chapter forty, Chen is at a police conference. He calls Yu to check in at the bureau and learns that Wu's trial is about to begin. The trial is being run by Internal Security and some of the key evidence, for example the witness placing Wu near the canal on the night of the murder, is not being used. Nonetheless, Yu expects Wu to be sentenced to death.



Later that evening, after an exhausting series of meetings, there is a knock on Chen's door. It is Ling and she is wearing a bathrobe. She is visiting Shanghai as escort for an American library delegation and is staying in the same hotel. In a way it is as if they had never parted. After a little conversation, they make love. Later, as Ling sleeps, Chen awakes and begins to write poetry, which is something he had discarded since Guan's case began.

When Chen awakes, Ling is gone. He receives a call from Yu who tells him that the trial has ended and Wu has been executed along with Guo Qiang. Chen is shocked at the speed of the trial and execution until he learns that politics has once again interceded. The most serious charge against Wu had been "Crime and corruption under Western bourgeois influence." The case marks the beginning of a new Party campaign against such corruption.

As Chen is leaving the hotel, he sees Ling again. They promise to meet again soon. Chen realizes that sleeping with Ling while they were not married could easily be twisted as the same Western crime and corruption that had led to Wu's execution. Wu's execution had been just, but the Party had used him as a scapegoat for something else. Chen also sees the irony that he used his own HCC carnal connection to bring the case to a conclusion.

Chen goes to visit his mother who is always a haven in the sea of politics. In the end, he realizes that all he can rely on in his work is his own honor and conscientiousness. As long as he acts in an honorable way, he will never disappoint the people who care for him.

Chapters 38-40 Analysis

The conclusion of the case is bittersweet. Chen is successful in tying up the loose ends satisfactorily, but he does not get to make the arrest. This spares him from the possibility of retaliation. When the case is out of his hands, however, politics takes over once more. In the end, though justice is served by Wu's execution, the crime he is convicted of is not murder but immoral behavior. It is a troubling conclusion to the case for Chen, who is aware that despite the best of intentions he has committed immoral acts. Chen has been built up as such a moral character that the inference is that everyone commits immoral acts. Thus, the execution of Wu for that crime sends a message that nobody is safe. Political manipulation can lead to anybody being made to appear a threat. Chen can only take refuge in his own character and that of those around him. As his mother states, "It helps a little if there are a few honest policemen around, even though it may not help much." (pg. 463.)

The question of immorality is brought home by the juxtaposition of Wu's conviction and execution with Ling and Chen's reconciliation. Ling, an HCC like Wu, has an out of wedlock sexual encounter that could easily be viewed as bourgeois corruption. Chen used his connection with Ling to advance the case. The question that is posed by this is whether the ends justify the means. This is immediately turned on its head in Wu's trial.



Wu was brought down by Chen's investigation, but is ultimately used as an example to others by the party, posing the question of whether the means justify the end. There is no question that Wu's actions were immoral and criminal. In the context of a love affair, Chen's were not. The same facts twisted by politics, however, could be used to bring down Chen and Ling in the right circumstances. The conclusion of the case is not without an ominous undertone.

Ling's appearance in the last chapter brings Chen's journey full circle. When Chen first appears, it is in preparation for a party at which his apparent love interest, Wang, will appear. When Ling comes to Chen in the final chapter, it completes his romantic journey, at least within the confines of the book. When Wang proved not to be what Chen wanted, a hole was left. Ling fills that hole, completing Chen and leaving him with the promise of a future relationship. It is also revealed that Chen's romantic journey really began with Ling. Wang was never his true desire. Ling has been an ethereal presence throughout the book, now she is made flesh, tying up the final loose end of the book. Professionally and personally, Chen ends the book at peace.

In these final chapters, though it is never explicitly stated, the behind the scenes actions of other characters are revealed more thoroughly than before. The inference is clear that Li had made Chen Director of the Traffic Control Office both to relieve him from possible retaliation for the Wu case and also to leave him in a position to complete the case. It is made clear that Li is a very savvy political operator, and this is his masterstroke. Guo has been Wu's friend, but his actions in providing Wu's alibi were motivated out of a mixture of fear of Wu and personal gain through Wu being indebted to him. Simply put, Guo saw political and personal benefit in aligning himself with Wu. He chose the wrong side and it got him executed. Such are the dangers of life in the politically charged atmosphere of China. It is left hanging whether Guan was acting out of passion for Wu or to save her political importance, perhaps a little of both, but the point is well made that the political and personal actions of everyone in the book cannot be truly separated.

Poetry has infused the story. Chen is a poet. The language of the book is poetic. Samples of Chinese and English poetry have peppered the text and enriched the story. It is fitting then that the last line of the story is a couplet. Poetry is an art form that relies on interpretation by the reader. Qiu leaves the reader with poetry as a reminder that in China, perhaps in life, everything relies on interpretation. As Chen decides, the only way to ensure a clear mind and heart is to be true to yourself.



Characters

Chief Inspector Chen Cao

Chief Inspector Chen Cao is the novel's main character. He is the lead investigator in the murder case that forms the central plot of the book. He is something of a rising star within the Communist Party. He is quite young to have been appointed Chief Inspector and he has been invited to an important Party symposium, which is a rare honor. Chen is a hard and conscientious worker. He never planned to become a cop, having studied English Literature at the university. Chen initially was on a diplomats track in his career but when it was discovered that an uncle of Chen's, who he had never met, had been a counter-revolutionary, his diplomatic career was derailed and he was assigned to the Shanghai Police Bureau.

Chen's real love is poetry. He is a writer as well as a cop and his poems have received some acclaim. He has been published in national newspapers and magazines. He also supplements his income by translating English language mystery novels into Chinese. Poetry is in Chen's nature. It is a part of his being. He thinks poetically and abstractedly. This trait proves important in his pursuit of the killer.

Chen has a strong moral code. There are definite lines that he will not cross, both professionally and personally. For example, when Chen is romantically pursuing the journalist Wang Feng, he believes that she is fully separated from her husband. When Wang tells him otherwise, he immediately backs off any romantic attachment to her and their relationship becomes purely platonic. Likewise, during the course of his investigation, Chen is put in a situation where he must interview a prostitute. She thinks he is a client, but Chen does not and indeed cannot take advantage of the situation. It would go against his nature.

Chen is skilled in the politics required to negotiate life as a Communist Party member. He is very politically astute. However, he has to deal with quandaries when the needs of the party come into conflict with the needs of his job and of serving justice. Chen is willing to place himself in a bad situation politically in order to do the right thing. It is a measure of his strength of character that he refuses to cave in the face of tremendous pressure to drop the investigation for political expediency.

He follows two paths in the novel. The central plot follows his relentless pursuit of a politically influential killer despite the obstacles thrown in his path along the way. The secondary path is one of personal growth and a search for romance. Chen has two love interests in the book. His pursuit of Wang goes sour in a painful way for him, but the case reconnects him with an old flame, Ling which has a happier ending for Chen.

His experiences in the book lead Chen to the conclusion that the right thing to do is not always clear. He contents himself with the knowledge that as long as he acts with honor for the cause of justice, he will not disappoint the important people in his life.



Detective Yu Guangming

Detective Yu Guangming is a career police officer and family man. He is not ambitious, wanting only to make his father proud by rising above his father's achievements in the police force and to provide for his family. He harbors some initial resentment towards his boss, Chief Inspector Chen, because Chen has been promoted rapidly for political reasons, and Yu does not view him as worthy of his position. He views Chen's poetic nature as a weakness. Through the course of the case, Yu develops a friendship with Chen. They work well as a team and Yu learns that Chen's idiosyncrasies can be a strength.

Chen is not politically savvy like Chen. In the society in which he lives, this has held back his career. He is often confrontational with supervisors, like Chen and Commissar Zhang. It nearly costs him his job, but Chen stands up for him and saves him.

Nonetheless, Yu is a good cop. His style complements Chen's. He is methodical and thorough. Though he often gets fixated on an idea at the expense of other theories, he provides insight that helps Chen move forward in the investigation.

Yu loves his wife and son and often feels like he is not properly providing for them. This leads to a strong feeling of resentment towards the powerful and privileged Party officials and especially their children, who Yu thinks are entitled, spoiled and corrupt. When the murder investigation leads towards Wu, the son of a high ranking Party official, he shows substantial prejudice, but it also fires in him a tenacity and determination to see the case through. This desire coupled with Chen's determination for other reasons keeps the case going even when they have been told to stop investigating.

Yu learns throughout the book that his impressions of people, Chen for instance, cannot always be trusted. He is able to open his mind through his interactions with Chen, who he comes to view as a trusted friend and colleague.

Wang Feng

Wang Feng is a young journalist. She is separated from her husband who defected to Japan and has formed a flirtatious friendship with Chen. They are in the blossoming stages of a romance when the book begins. Wang is a good foil for Chen. They share similar interests and Chen is able to discuss his work with her. She is intelligent and insightful and seems to be the perfect partner for Chen. She also serves as a useful resource. Her journalistic connections are able to progress the case faster than Chen would be able to through official channels.

Wang's romance with Chen is ill-fated. She no doubt cares for him deeply, but the political unsuitability of the match such as marrying a divorcee whose ex-husband was a defector will not reflect well on Chen. This alongside her desire to enhance her own career leads Wang to decide to go to Japan to reconcile with her husband. She uses



Chen and his connections to obtain a passport for her. Though her actions can be seen as selfish, Wang is actually trying to act in Chen's best interests. She wants to be with Chen until she leaves for Japan, but Chen is unable to accept the relationship on those terms.

Despite the bad ending to their romance, Wang continues to demonstrate a deep affection for Chen. She worries about him when events turn sour and Chen himself is put under investigation. When her passport application is declined, her thoughts are of Chen's position, not her own. She proves to be a loyal friend and it is clear that parting from Chen is as painful for her as it is for him.

Guan Hongying

Guan Hongying is the murder victim. Her given name, Hongying, translates as Red Heroine, giving the book its title. She is dead at the beginning of the novel and is only seen through the testimony of others. Guan is a national celebrity, a Chinese icon of sorts. Her public persona is that of a dedicated Communist worker. Her private persona is very different. To most people, she seems a very private person who keeps to herself. In reality she is actually a very calculating, uninhibited individual. Sexually, she is very open, performing acts with Wu, captured in photographs, that shock many of the other characters. She has targeted Wu as a husband, aware that in China's changing landscape her celebrity and influence is fading. In the end, it is left a mystery whether her passion for Wu or her political ambition led to her blackmailing Wu and, ultimately, her death.

There are dueling images of Guan throughout the book. Early on she is portrayed as the victim or a lonely woman with little going for her beyond her work interests. A clearer picture of her emerges throughout the investigation. Guan turns out to be deceptive, calculating, jealous, hedonistic and ambitious. The irony of the case's conclusion is that her killer is executed not for killing her but for behavior which would have condemned her too.

Overseas Chinese Lu

Lu is an old friend of Chen. They are very different, but have remained friends despite their differences. Chen loans Lu money to open a restaurant. Lu uses his connections to help Chen wherever he can. He involves himself in Chen's personal life and takes pride in being more Westernized, though this brands him an outcast of sorts. He provides a safety net of sorts for Chen when Chen is considering quitting the police force. Chen's interest in Lu's restaurant gives Chen a job to fall back on if he finds his life and career in ruins. Chen is exuberant and outgoing, mostly free of the constraints that trouble the other characters. He provides a good contrast to the other characters.



Party Secretary Li Guoha

Secretary Li is Chen's mentor. He is a very skilled politician who is able to manipulate most situations to the outcome he desires. Li is a loyal Party member and acts, wherever possible, in the best interests of the Party. Li is instrumental in bringing the case to a close, enabling Chen to act unrestrained by temporarily transferring him to another department. He then ensures Chen and his team are shielded from retribution by manipulating the arrest and probably the trial. Li uses his influence to protect Chen because he sees in Chen a man who will benefit the interests of the Party.

Wu Xiaoming

Wu Xiaoming is identified as the killer fairly early in the investigation. Chen and Yu have little doubt that they have found their man. He is an HCC, the son of an important Communist Party official. Wu is a decadent, ambitious hedonist with a cruel streak. He is a serial seducer, using his position as a photographer to win over women and use them until he is done with them. Wu takes obscene photographs of the women he seduces to blackmail them into silence when he wants rid of them. Wu has no respect for women, seeing them as sexual objects. He is married, although his wife is bedridden.

Wu kills Guan because she has obtained some of the photographs he intends to blackmail her with. She is attempting to blackmail him. He is in line for a promotion and cannot afford a scandal. Wu uses his influence to try and block the investigation wherever possible. He obtains a false alibi. He is arrogant and overconfident, but is ultimately brought down and executed. Due to his position, in the interests of the party the murder charge is hushed up and he is convicted of corrupt behavior.

Ling

Ling is Chen's college girlfriend. The child of an important Communist Party official, their romance ended when she took an opportunity to visit China and the couple realized the political inconvenience of their match. Chen has never gotten over Ling, and the feeling is mutual. They remain in contact. When good events happen, Chen writes to Ling. At his lowest point, he turns to her. It is not really because of her influence, however, but because Ling is the person that Chen truly wants to share his life with in all its highs and lows. Though Wang is the overt romantic figure of the first half of the book, Ling is the true romantic figure. She remains in the background until the final chapter when she appears, reuniting with Chen and bringing the promise of a happy ending.

Commissar Zhang Zhiqiang

Commissar Zhang Zhiqiang is an old Communist official. He is set in his ways and his thinking is rigid and predictable. Zhang is appointed adviser to Chen's unit. He insists on



painstakingly following dead end leads and politicizing the case more than Chen and Yu believe is necessary. His first thought is always the good of the Party. Zhang is a fossil in a modern world. He no longer understands the world around him. His actions and thinking are, at best, outdated and at worst harmful. He does not understand the people he is advising, seeing Yu as a surly, complaining idiot and Chen as an effete, decadent artist with dubious political leanings. Frustrated, Zhang reports Chen to Internal Security for his actions and his poems. His intent is not to hurt Chen, though he realizes that possible outcome, but the result is very damaging to the progress of the investigation and to Chen.

Peiqin

Peiqin is Yu's wife. She loves her husband very deeply and takes pains to reassure Yu when he worries about her and their son. She is happy to put herself at risk to help her husband and proves to be quite an adept agent when Yu needs to covertly pass information to Chen. Chen sees in Peiqin a lot of the qualities he desires in a wife such as loyalty, intelligence, a loving nature and a tranquility that appeals to him, although he has no design on Peiqin herself.

Old Hunter

Old Hunter is Yu's father. He is a retired policeman and plays the political game rather better than his son. Old Hunter is instrumental in breaking the case open. He knows how to operate within procedure and outside of it and has his finger on the political pulse of every situation. As a volunteer traffic officer, he is perfectly placed for Chen to be able to hire him without suspicion in order to break Wu's alibi. Old Hunter is a cop through and through. He is almost embarrassed to take payment for his help. It is the thrill of police work that gives him satisfaction.

Xie Rong

Xie Rong is the tour guide on Guan and Wu's visit to the Yellow Mountains. She is independent, feisty, and curious. She witnesses Wu taking obscene photos of Guan. Wu seduces her. She has no objection to his advances since she knows Wu and Guan are unmarried. Guan finds out and confronts Xie, calling her a whore. Wu has to pull them apart and he abandons Xie. Shortly after this trip, Xie quits her position at the travel agency, though she denies it was because of the incident with Guan.

Xie moves to Guangzhou where, ironically, Xie becomes a whore. She is not self-conscious about this choice, viewing it as a good way to earn money until she has enough to do something better. She is initially distrustful of Chen both because he is a cop and because he concealed that fact from her. Chen has to win her trust, but when he does so, with kindness and without judging her, he earns her confidence and also her loyalty. Xie provides Chen with a lot of useful information about Wu and Chen. She



is arrested, caught in the political crossfire of the case, but refuses to speak against Chen.

Little Zhou

Little Zhou is a friend of Lu. He acts as a chauffeur for the police bureau—a job that Chen helped to get. He is very loyal to Chen because of this. He becomes a kind of informant for Chen, passing on overheard conversations from within the bureau that relate to the case and to Chen personally.

Dr. Xia

Dr. Xia is the police medical examiner. He performs the autopsy on Guan's body and, at Chen's request, prepares a more thorough study of her, including the contents of her stomach. This leads to the discovery of caviar in her stomach, consumed not long before her death which is an important lead in the case. Xia is a fan of Chen's poetry and thinks Chen is also a good cop. He goes out of his way to show support for Chen when things get rough.

Uncle Bao

This is the operator of a public phone service who leads the Resident Committee, a kind of neighborhood watch, in Guan's neighborhood. Bao provides vital information to the investigation through records of Guan's phone calls.

Guo Qiang

This is a friend of Wu that provides his alibi. Guo connects himself to Wu for personal and political gain. He helps Wu to take his obscene photos, even participating in drugging and abusing some of the women. Despite confessing to try and save himself, Guo is executed along with Wu for corrupt behavior.

Chen's mother

Interested only in her family and not in politics, Chen's mother provides shelter for Chen from the world around him. She worries about Chen's career and personal life, but has raised him well and supports his decisions, secure in the knowledge that he will act with honor.



Jiang Weiyhe

This is an artist who is a former lover of Wu. Jiang tells the detectives about Wu's collection of obscene photographs, which led to her breaking off their relationship. Jiang is instrumental in steering the investigation to its end. She has an artistic temperament that is at odds with the typical behaviors expected by the Party. She is suspicious of authority but as an acquaintance of Chen's is willing to speak to Detective Yu.

Director Yao Liangxia

This is the director of the Shanghai Party Discipline Committee. Director Yao inserts herself into the investigation because of the political delicacy of the murder investigation. She does not act against Chen, but leaves him with subtle warnings about proceeding carefully and the importance of appearances.

Captain Gao Ziling

The man who discovers the body, Gao reports his find despite knowing it will lead to trouble for himself. He does not appear again after the first chapter.



Objects/Places

China

China is one of the world's oldest civilizations. Modern China has been a Communist country since the mid-20th century. Beginning in the late 20th century it began to move to a more market-based economy and went through a turbulent period of change and readjustment. Often criticized by the western world for poor human rights practices, China nonetheless remains an economic and political power that dominates much of Asia. It is the world's most populated country with a population in excess of 1.1 billion people during the time the novel is set. By 2010, the population had risen to 1.3 billion.

Shanghai

This is the largest city in China and one of the largest in the world, Shanghai is located midway down China's east coast. It is an important political and cultural center roughly the same size as Los Angeles.

National Model Worker

One of China's highest honors, this is awarded to individuals who have made remarkable contributions to China in areas such as culture, national security, and economics.

Yuan

This is the base unit of Chinese currency. The value of the Yuan is strictly controlled by the Chinese government and is worth approximately 15 cents in 2010, though less at the time the book is set.

Chairman Mao Zedong

One of the most influential people in modern history, the Communist leader Chairman Mao led China from 1949 until his death in 1976. He remains a controversial figure, loved by many in China and hailed as the savior of the nation, but also reviled for political purges estimated to have killed more than fifty million people. Mao's legacy remains debated today. He is compared to Stalin and Hitler in some circles and to others, he is revered as one of the greatest leaders of modern times.



Deng Xiaoping

This is the leader of the Communist Party in China from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. Deng Xiaoping instituted the economic reforms that led socialist China towards a more capitalist and market-based economy.

Cadre

This is an individual holding a full time position of responsibility in government. In China, the cadres of the Communist Party became the new upper class despite the socialist ideals they claimed to adhere to.

HCC (High Cadres' Children)

These are the privileged children of senior Communist Party officials.

Counterrevolutionary

In China, this is an individual acting or voicing ideas that are counter to the interests, goals and declarations of the Communist Party.

Caviar

This is a delicacy consisting of salted and unfertilized eggs from a sturgeon, a species of fish commonly found in the Caspian Sea. Most commonly imported from Russia or Iran, it can cost as much as \$10,000 per pound.

Taiji

Known better in the west as T'ai chi, it refers not only to the martial art, but also to the supreme spiritual state of being.

Guangzhou

Known in English as Canton, Guangzhou is China's third largest city. It is located in the south of China and known for its fine cuisine.

Cultural Revolution

This is a violent political upheaval in China from 1966 until 1976 that resulted in social, economic, and political change. It resulted in the persecution of over 36 million people



and the deaths of nearly 1.5 million. Widely regarded as a grave mistake in modern China, it is viewed as a dark period in Communist China's history.

Internal Security

This is a paramilitary division of the Chinese police tasked with investigating counter-revolutionary behavior.

Socialism

This is one of the most important philosophical and economic philosophies of the last two hundred years. It is based on the idea of public ownership and distribution of resources.

Capitalism

This is an economic system in which production is privately owned and operated where price and demand are determined by private decisions in a free market instead of through a planned economy.

Open Door Policy

Originating as a concept in foreign affairs in the 19th Century, in modern China it has come to refer to Deng Xiaoping's policies that opened Communist China up to the outside world.

Confucius

This is an ancient Chinese philosopher from the 6th Century BCE. He advocated family loyalty, respect for elders, and was one of the earliest proponents of the idea "Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself." Although Confucianism is often followed religiously by the Chinese, it is not considered a religion.

Chinese Naming Conventions

Chinese names are written with the family name first and the given name last, thus the author of *Death of a Red Heroine* should be addressed formally as Mr. Qiu, or familiarly as Xiaolong.



Themes

Justice

The theme of justice is central to the main murder mystery plot. The main thrust of the novel is whether the killer can be brought to justice. Chen is devoted to the pursuit of justice. The question posed by the ambiguous ending to the case, however, is whether justice was served. In a pure sense it can be argued that justice was indeed served by Wu's execution. Death is the ultimate punishment for his crimes. However, Wu is not executed because he killed Guan. He is executed for corrupt behavior and his death is used by the Communist Party to begin a new campaign against the "corruption under Western bourgeois influence." The author does not give an opinion or come to a conclusion, but poses the question of whether it can be truly be considered justice if the victim's story is left untold. It is a just ending for Wu, given his crimes, but has Guan received justice by his execution. The reader is left to decide.

Even more ambiguous is the fate of Wu's accomplice Guo. Guo is, no doubt, an accessory to the murder. He is deserving of punishment. His execution, however, seems harsh, but he was guilty of the kind of decadent and corrupt behavior that led to Wu's execution. Again, in a strict sense, justice seems to have been served. Guo committed the crime and received the punishment. From the Western perspective of the reader, it might seem a harsh punishment. Looking behind the motivations for the sentencing, however, justice seems to have been laid aside. If WU had been tried for the murder, Guo might have been punished but probably wouldn't have been executed. Due to the focus of the trial being on corrupt behavior, however, Guo's behavior cannot be separated from Wu's.

This raises the question of whether the law and justice are one and the same. Does the law provide justice or does it provide punishment? The two do not necessarily go hand in hand. Chen reflects after Wu's execution that he himself has committed acts that could be labeled corrupt behavior. Does Chen, then, deserve execution too? Would that be just? Clearly not. Strictly speaking, physical relations out of wedlock are an illegal act, but it cannot be considered just for a person to be executed for such behavior, especially when both parties are single. The vastly different culture of China enhances this question for the reader. It also serves to make the reader wonder whether justice is served in their own society.

Moral Behavior

Moral behavior permeates the book. It is kept at the forefront because Inspector Chen is such a moral figure. He has moral absolutes or lines that he will not cross. For example, he is given the opportunity to begin a sexual relationship with Wang, even knowing that she is returning to a husband that she does not really have strong feelings for. The very fact that she is returning to him, however, does not allow Chen to accept her offer. It



would simply go against his character to do so. Likewise, though he is tempted by Xie, and even after she discovers he is a cop, she attempts to seduce him, a man such as Chen could not take advantage against his deeply ingrained moral code. However, Chen's code is not about rules but about moral absolutes. He bends and even breaks the rules to continue the investigation against Wu because he believes it is the right thing to do. Morally, he must act in the correct way.

Secretary Li, for example, though he does aid the investigation and manipulates events accordingly can not be said to have the same moral fortitude. His thoughts are on what is right for the Party. This is not always the moral thing. Indeed, Li plays a large role in the manipulation of the trial which is, at the least, morally questionable. Li knows this and is content with his choices. If he cannot be viewed as entirely moral in an objective sense, he does follow his own moral code.

Wu, however, is a thoroughly immoral character. He has a sense of entitlement rather than a sense of morals. He uses people for his own ends. Wu, like most villains, does not consider himself to be evil or immoral. He does not act with a willful flouting of morals, but rather an absence of them. He simply does not consider the moral ramifications of his actions. The difficulty in killing Guan is not the decision to kill her, but the decision of how to get away with it. His collection of obscene photos for blackmail purposes is both a means to his own ends and also a kind of perversion that Wu enjoys.

The most complex character to apply morals to is Guan. Her public persona is that of a conscientious, moral example to the people. As the investigation continues, a picture emerges that is very different. Some of what could be termed immoral acts, such as an affair with a married man, are quite clear. Within the confines of accepted Chinese morality, what she does with Wu behind closed bedroom doors is considered immoral. From a Western viewpoint, perhaps this is not so cut and dry. Even with the fact that Wu is married, Western societies tend towards keeping such matters private. Then there is the question of Guan's blackmail of Wu. There is no doubt that blackmailing a married man in an attempt to get him to leave his wife is immoral. When Guan's motivations are examined, however, the matter is in more of a gray area. If Guan was acting out of passion, the immorality of her actions seems enhanced. If she was acting out of survival instinct, however, the matter is less clear. That her motivations are left undiscovered is an indication that the author is leaving such a conclusion up to the reader.

Political Interference in Chinese Life

The influence and interference of the Communist Party is present in every page and every action of the book. It is particularly vibrant for Party members such as Chen. Every single decision he makes has a political consequence. Whether it be in his work place, where the cases he chooses and the decisions he makes within them all affect his future in his job and in the Party, or in his personal life, where his choice of girlfriend is scrutinized, everything goes back to the good of the Party. This is an absolute in a Communist state. The needs and desires of the individual are secondary to the needs and wants of the state.



Such a state of affairs is prevalent in the investigation as a whole. The victim, Guan, was used and controlled by the Party as much as she was used and controlled by Wu. Guan's apparent lack of a personal life is traced back to the Party stopping her from continuing a relationship with a man she loved because he was considered an unsuitable match for her politically. This leads directly to her inability to handle her relationship with Wu in later life and her desperation to use him for both personal and political gain when her situation is fading. In a sense, the Party's actions started Guan on the road that led to her death.

When the delicacy of the investigation becomes clear, at the point that Wu becomes the main suspect, Party interference in the case is ramped up. This is partly because Wu has influential friends in the Party and partly because there are those within and close to the investigation more interested in the effect on the party than either finding justice or simply enforcing the law. Ultimately the case becomes important not only for its political ramifications, but because of its use as a political opportunity—using Wu's execution to launch a new party campaign against corruption.

Constant reference is made to Chinese history, which is rife with the state's interference in people's lives. Multiple characters are in the positions they are in, good or bad, because of suspicions or connections to desirable or undesirable people and groups. Chen would be a diplomat but for the actions of a distant relative he had never met. Ling and Chen could have been together from the start without state interference. Wang and Chen's relationship unravels, in large part, because Wang is a politically unsuitable match for Chen and she knows it.

Chen is reported for his poetry simply because a high ranking party official is vaguely uneasy about images within it that could be interpreted a hundred different ways. There is no escaping the influence of the Communist Party on everyone's lives. Barely a page goes by where such influence cannot be seen or inferred.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in the third person. This point of view is reliable and omniscient. The narrator can relate both the events of the novel and the feelings of the characters. This point of view works well for the novel because numerous characters are followed at different stages of the book. Though Chen is the main character, there are times when he takes a subsidiary role and Yu, Peiqin, or Zhang becomes the main character of a particular chapter. The reader is allowed to see the thoughts, emotions and prejudices of the characters, creating a greater dramatic impact and empathy with a wider range of characters within the book.

The author uses a number of different techniques to tell the story. There are long passages of exposition and political and cultural context for the story interspersed with frequent, extended dialogue. Official reports and transcripts are also utilized to convey hard facts that are important to the investigation. Much of the path leading to the successful conclusion of the mystery happens through Chen's thought process. The reader would not be able to follow the investigation without access to Chen's thoughts. The sometimes rapid shifts into the romantic and political subplots of the novel would be difficult to follow with a different style of narration.

Setting

The novel is mostly set in Shanghai, China in the early 1990s. Shanghai is a huge city that is made up of many districts. Modern day China is adjusting to economic reforms that are at odds with the Communist ideals that people have been used to in the previous half century. Communist policies and politics are pervasive to every aspect of the tightly controlled society. Whether in work or at home, the Party is an ever present force in society.

Certain locations are important to the case. Guan's dormitory is a key location where Chen spends a great deal of time. The canal where the body is found is visited by multiple characters. The bureau at which the detectives work features prominently. Chen's own apartment is the focus of many of the book's more personal interludes. Chen also travels to the city of Guangzhou. This city has a distinctly different flavor to Shanghai. To Chen it is exotic and unfamiliar.

Chen's memories take the reader to Beijing of the past when Chen was a student. This location takes on a dreamlike quality through the lens of Chen's memories. The reader also sees locations important to the investigation through the recollections of witnesses. Guan's trip to the Yellow Mountains is seen through memories and photographs, though none of the characters actually travel there in the action of the novel.



It is impossible to plumb the depths of detail for all of the locations in the book, but the narrative provides us with enough detail and color to form vivid pictures despite the fact that most readers will be unfamiliar with China.

Language and Meaning

The language in the novel varies. In large part, it tends to be descriptive and poetic. The sentences are constructed colloquially with a modern sensibility, but are infused with poetic images and actual lines of poetry. It is easy to comprehend the language of the novel and the author integrates a great deal of cultural and historical detail without letting it drag the story down. At times, the style will abruptly switch to a more utilitarian approach when a character is reading a report or listening to the transcript of an interview.

When the focus of the narrative changes to a different character, the language reflects that change. With Chen, the poetry so important to his character is ever present. When the focus is on Yu the language and style are much more methodical. When Peiqin is the focus the language takes on a more feminine tone.

The characters engage in dialogue frequently that aids in creating distinct personalities and mannerisms for each character. This is in keeping with the shifting tones of the language. The shifts can be abrupt, but it is not difficult to follow them. The flowery language of much of the book does not slow down the narrative because the characteristics of the people and locations are so important as is a basic cultural understanding of the world that they live in.

On occasion, the tone can become a little preachy when delving into Chinese society. It is a small and infrequent fault which can serve to disrupt the narrative on a few occasions, but is easily glossed over.

As with most poetry, the lines of verse that are often quoted throughout the text are open to interpretation. Glimpses of the characters' interpretations are shown, but it is left to the reader to draw their own conclusions about how the verses relate to the action at hand. This can be frustrating when the meaning is not immediately clear, but it is never vital to the forward movement of the plot and thus serves more as color and character to enhance the story rather than detracting from it.

The reader should pay close attention, especially early on in the book, to character names. Chinese names will be unfamiliar to most readers and many of the names can be quite similar. The characters, however, are not difficult to separate from each other apart from their similarity in names. Even the minor characters are clearly defined in their speech and actions.



Structure

The book is comprised of forty chapters, each of which is approximately eleven pages long. The chapters are unnamed but each has the viewpoint of a distinct character. Mostly, the character focused on in a particular chapter is Chen, but other key characters become the focus when necessary.

The plot is quite complex with a multitude of subplots. The murder mystery is the main plot of the novel, to be sure, but as in the society it depicts, everything is interwoven. Chen's political life is inseparable from his career and the tendrils of politics spread out in many directions, creating obstacles that Chen has to overcome. Chen's personal life forms a substantial subplot of its own. Chen's search for the killer is mirrored in his own search for inner peace and fulfillment. It is a jigsaw puzzle with details from multiple small subplots coming together to form an overall picture by the end. This is true of the murder investigation and of Chen's personal life. They are separate plots within the book, but they follow a similar path.

The novel does not move at the lightning fast pace of many murder mysteries, instead taking its time over the details of people, places, culture and history. These details are a benefit rather than a hindrance, however, and it is easy to become engrossed in the story. Back-story is slowly revealed in mostly short passages. The occasional longer flashback can prove frustrating, but they are few and far between and prove to be integral to their piece of the story. It is a novel that requires some investment of time and attention to detail in order to get the most out of it, but its rewards are worth the work.



Quotes

"The body was found at 4:40 P.M., on May 11, 1990, in Baili Canal, an out-of-the-way canal, about twenty miles to the west of Shanghai" (Chapter 1, pg. 1.)

"It's the market economy," Liu said. "The country is changing in the right direction. And the people have a better life" (Liu Gaoliang, Chapter 1, pg. 4.)

"The episode came to him like an echo of his colleagues' criticism: Chief Inspector Chen was too 'Poetic' to be a cop" (Chapter 4, pg. 39.)

"He had a vague feeling that there was something about the case, something complicated, waiting for him. Something like a parallel to his writing experience" (Chapter 5, pg. 46.)

"Her name is Guan Hongying. Guan, you know, for closing the door. Hong for the color red, and Ying for heroine" (Detective Yu Guangming, Chapter 6, pg. 49.)

"It's an important political case, comrade. That's something we should all be aware of" (Commissar Zhang, Chapter 10, pg. 111.)

"Today, China was once more witnessing a profound change, with significant challenges to the established systems and views" (Chapter 12, pg. 131.)

"Whatever complications might be involved, Chen was determined to solve the case" (Chapter 16, pg. 169.)

"In the course of this investigation, he had raised more questions about his own life. It was time for him to make up his mind—as Guan should have made up her mind, years earlier" (Chapter 18, pg. 197.)

"A typical HCC, Wu must have thought the world was like a watermelon, which he could cut to pieces as he pleased, spitting other people's lives away like seeds" (Chapter 19, pg. 220.)

"What if Wu Xiaoming had committed the murder? Whoever had committed the crime should be punished, of course. But then, would that be in the interests of the Party?" (Chapter 21, pg. 250.)

"A week earlier, Chief Inspector Chen had told himself he was on the way up—to serve the people. Now he was not sure" (Chapter 25, pg. 314.)

"Justice was like colored balls in a magician's hand, changing color and shape all the time, beneath the light of politics" (Chapter 30, pg. 352-3.)



"It might be a losing battle, but Chen saw he was not alone in it. Detective Yu, Peiqin, Old Hunter, Overseas Chinese Lu, Ruru, Wang Feng, Little Zhou...and Dr. Xia, too. Because of them, he was not going to quit" (Chapter 35, pg. 405.)

"So her [Guan's] union with Wu appeared to be her last chance both for personal happiness—and for political ambition" (Chapter 36, pg. 414.)

""Under normal circumstances, yes, these are possible options. But in the present political climate, it's out of the question."" (Chapter 37, pg. 418.)

"Chen had been aware of the difference between being a chief inspector and being a Party member, but he had not thought much about the possibility of his two roles coming into direct conflict. And here he was, waiting for the resolution of just such a conflict" (Chapter 39, pg. 439.)

"In the words of the poem his father had taught him, a son's return for his mother's love is always inadequate, and so is one's responsibility to the country:
Who says that the splendor of a grass blade returns/
The love of the spring that forever returns?" (Chapter 40, pg. 464.)



Topics for Discussion

China is adjusting to a new free market economy in the novel. Discuss where Western influences can be found creeping into Chinese society and how these affect the characters in different ways.

How does Chen's love of poetry assist him in the investigation? How does it hurt him?

Is justice served in the end? How can Wu's fate be viewed as just and in what ways might it be perceived as unjust? Can justice truly be served when it plays a secondary role to political interest?

Discuss Wang Feng's actions. Does she truly care for Chen? Does she act in Chen's best interests? Does she act in her own best interests? Is she only using Chen for her own ends?

How do Chen and Yu complement each other? Could Chen have solved the crime without the help of Yu? What traits does Yu have that Chen lacks that aid the investigation?

Discuss how Secretary Li aids the investigation? How does he obstruct the investigation? Would Li have blocked Chen's investigation at the expense of justice in the interests of the Party, or does he simply know how to manipulate the system to the best ends? What role does Li play in the ambiguous ending to the case?

Why does Chen have such an affinity for this particular case? In what ways is he like Guan that allows him to empathize with her? What leads to his obsession to see the case through to the end no matter the cost to himself?

Duality plays a key role in the book. Chen deals with the duality of his roles as a police officer and poet. Guan struggled with the duality of her public and private personas. Yu tries to find balance between his dual roles as detective and husband. Many of the characters balance conflicts between their work or personal lives and the interests of the Party. Discuss duality and balance and the effects they have on the characters' decisions and actions.

Political interference and influence is prevalent in the book. Discuss how it effects the personal and professional interactions of the characters on even the most minor matter.