

Family Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Family is the story of an aristocratic Chinese family at the beginning of the 20th century. The Kao family lives in a well-appointed compound in the city of Chengtu and enjoys all the material and cultural benefits the city has to offer. Three brothers in the Kao family, Cheuh-hsin, Cheuh-min, and Cheuh-hui, are the main characters of the story. Cheuh-hsin, the oldest, is married and has a son, and the other two brothers are students in their late teenage years.

Cheuh-hsin suffers greatly because he has never been able to stand up for himself. He is a big believer in filial piety, and he has always been willing to do what his elders tell him to do, even when his own dreams are sacrificed. For example, Cheuh-hsin wanted to marry his cousin Mei and pursue a career in scientific academia, but his grandfather arranged a marriage with Jui-cheuh and got him a job in town. Cheuh-hsin accepted the marriage and job quietly, but they have eaten away at him.

Cheuh-min is the middle brother. He is not as docile as his older brother, but he is not openly rebellious either. He is intelligent and gentle, and he falls in love with his cousin Chin. His love for Chin puts him in a very similar situation with his older brother, but he watches what happens to Cheuh-hsin and vows to stand up for himself and for Chin. He temporarily runs away in order to avoid a marriage that his grandfather arranges with the daughter of a family friend. His grandfather renounces the arrangement on his deathbed, and Cheuh-min is saved from Cheuh-hsin's fate.

The youngest brother, Cheuh-hui, is defiant and rebellious. He does not agree with most of the family's traditions and is never afraid to speak out against them. The elder members of the family learn that they cannot push Cheuh-hui around as they have done to Cheuh-hsin. Cheuh-hui falls in love with one of the servants, Ming-feng. He even promises that he will marry her. When she is to be sent as a concubine to one of the Master Kao's friends, she drowns herself in the lake rather than live in such misery. Ming-feng's suicide pushes Cheuh-hui even farther into rebellion.

Tragedy heaps upon tragedy as Cousin Mei dies from a broken heart and then Jui-cheuh, Cheuh-hsin's wife, dies in childbirth after the family agrees to send her outside of the city to give birth in order to protect the corpse of the Venerable Master Kao. Each tragedy pushes Cheuh-hsin deeper into despair. At the same time, Cheuh-hui decides that he cannot live in such an immoral environment. After Jui-cheuh's death, Cheuh-hui decides that he must get away from the family in order to survive morally. He gets his older brother to help him financially and leaves for Peking where he hopes to start a new life that is closer in line with his ideals.



Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary

In Chapter 1, Chueh-hui and his older brother are walking home from school. It is snowing, and they are hurrying because they're late for dinner. The homes on the street are very nice, but their home is one of the nicest. On the walls of the entrance to their home, there are plaques that say, "Benevolent rulers, happy family; long life, good harvests."

A young maid meets the brothers outside and tells them to hurry. The older brother is named Chueh-min, and he is eighteen years old. Chueh-hui is about a year younger than his brother. The older brother, Chueh-min, runs in to change his sloppy clothes before dinner, but Chueh-hui stays to talk with the servant girl, Ming-feng. He thinks Ming-feng is beautiful. She is sixteen years old.

Two aunts and a cousin are in attendance at dinner. The boys' cousin Chin is a girl about their age. After dinner, the teenagers talk about school. Chin is a beautiful, ambitious girl, and she wants to go to a better school. The boys' school is going to admit girls for the first time during the next school year, and Chin would like to go. She knows, however, that their family would never allow such a thing. Their family is well-known and prosperous, and it would be improper for her to go.

The teens' conversation continues in Chapter 3. Chueh-hui calls to Ming-feng and asks her to bring them some tea. She does, and he wants to talk to her. She must get back to the women, however, and because he detains her, she gets in trouble. Chueh-hui feels badly about getting Ming-feng in trouble, and then he starts to wonder if he could ever marry Ming-feng. He thinks she is every bit as beautiful as Chin. He wonders what she would be like if she had been born into a wealthy family instead of happening to be born into a poor one.

Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The author begins the book with two boys walking along the street in the snow. It's a beautiful scene, and the relationship between the brothers is playful. This scene could be played out between any two boys in the world. The author does not immediately disclose the boys' social status. In fact, it's not until the dinner that the reader is aware that these boys are members of the gentry. This is made plain when their aunt is shocked that they walked home in the snow instead of riding in a sedan chair.

The author further sets the stage for the story during the conversation between the teenagers after dinner. It's normal for teenagers to talk about school, but there is foreshadowing of conflict when the boys talk about girls being admitted to their school. Chin's character is revealed a bit when she talks about wanting to go to their school.

despite the upheaval it may cause in their family. The reader gets a sense that the family is very traditional and secure in their aristocratic position.



Chapters 4-6

Chapters 4-6 Summary

These three chapters develop the characters of three important figures: Ming-feng, Chin, and Chueh-hsin. In Chapter 4, Ming-feng is getting ready for bed in the servants' quarters of the house. The older servants are already asleep, but Ming-feng tries to enjoy the few moments at night when no one is giving her orders or scolding her. She thinks about the seven years she has spent at this home. Ming-feng was eleven-years-old when her mother died and her father sent her to be a servant for this wealthy family. She can't believe that so much time has flown by since that time. Nothing extraordinary has happened. This sets her to worrying that nothing exciting will ever happen to her. She will end up working for others her entire life and never have a real home of her own. She cries herself to sleep.

Chapter 5 is set at the same time as Chapter 4 with Chin and her mother riding home in the snow in sedan chairs. Chin is excited about the prospect of going to the boys' school the following year, and while she broaches the topic while she helps her mother get ready for bed. It is clear from their conversation that Chin and her mother, Mrs. Chang, have an amiable relationship. Chin's father died years before, and Mrs. Chang has always tried to give Chin everything she wants. This, however, is too much for Mrs. Chang to bear. She knows that others will gossip about her if she allows Chin to go to a co-ed school. She has always been liberal with Chin. She did not bind Chin's feet when she was a baby, and she allowed her to go to school. Chin is very disappointed by her mother's answer, but she recognizes that her mother loves her very much.

In Chapter 6, the readers become acquainted with Chueh-hsin, the older brother of Chueh-hui and Chueh-min. He is the oldest child of wealthy parents, and much has always been expected of him. He is handsome, intelligent, and obedient. He graduated first in class from his middle school and expected to go to a university to study science. However, when Chueh-hsin is nineteen-years-old, his father informs him that he has arranged a marriage for him with a girl from the Li family. Chueh-hsin is devastated by this news as he is in love with his cousin Mei, but he acquiesces to his father's command and marries. His new wife is pleasant and pretty, and he finds comfort in this. But several weeks later, his father tells him that he's gotten a job for him. Chueh-hsin must put aside his dreams of further education and work to earn his living. Soon after, his father dies, and the responsibility of the large family falls on his young shoulders. Chueh-hsin is soon a father of a beautiful baby boy, and he hopes that his infant son will carry out his thwarted dreams.

Chapters 4-6 Analysis

There is a common theme in these three chapters. Each of these characters (Ming-feng, Chin, and Chueh-hsin) has a particular dream. Each character has the potential



and talent to successfully pursue the dream, but each of them is prevented from following it by outside forces. Ming-feng wants a home of her own but will probably not attain that dream because of her economic and family circumstances. Chin wants to further her education, but her family thinks it is improper for a young woman to follow that path. Chueh-hsin wants the freedom to love and live the way he wants to, but he is chained to a set destiny by his family obligations.

These chapters show much pathos because the author delves deeply into these characters to find their greatest dreams and greatest sorrows. In the scenes preceding these chapters, we see a surface situation where a family happily eats dinner together and the servant girl is flattered by the attentions of one of the sons. All seems to be fine on the surface. But when the author digs into the characters, we see discontent beneath the surface. Knowing the characters' discontent creates conflict for the reader because we want to see the characters' concerns resolved.



Chapters 7-9

Chapters 7-9 Summary

In Chapter 7, the three brothers are at Chueh-hsin's office on Sunday. There are no days off at the office, and the younger brothers like to visit Chueh-hsin. Next to the office is a bookstore that specializes in new publications. The brothers are especially interested in a magazine called *New Tide*, which talks about revolutionary topics. A friend of theirs, Chien-yun, is also in the office, and they are all reading and talking.

Chin and Mrs. Chang arrive. Mrs. Chang wants Chueh-hsin to go shopping with her to buy some silk fabric. Mrs. Chang and Chueh-hsin leave for the store, and Chin talks with the boys about her plans to go to their school in the fall. Chin knows Chien-yun because he tutors some children who are relatives of hers. Chien-hsin becomes very nervous and quiet around Chin. Chin tells the boys that Cousin Mei's husband has died and she has come back to Chengtu. She also tells them that there was talk long ago that Mei and Chueh-hsin would be married, but an argument between their mothers precluded the marriage. They all agree that it would be best to not tell Chueh-hsin that Mei is back in town.

Chapter 8 picks up where Chapter 7 left off. When Chueh-min and Chueh-hui leave Chueh-hsin's office, they separate. Chueh-min goes to Chin's house to help her prepare for her English entrance exam to the boys' school, and Chueh-hui walks toward a friend's house. He only gets a few blocks, however, when he runs into a classmate who looks distraught. The classmate tells him that he was at a theater where the students were performing their plays when some soldiers came in and demanded free entrance. The soldiers proceeded to climb on the stage, wreck the props, and destroy the play. The students are now gathering in a park to plan a petition to the governor.

Chueh-hui joins the students in the park. They decide on some demands they want to make to the governor, and then they walk down the street to the governor's compound. The deputies in front of the governor's compound tell them to go away because the governor isn't available to listen to them and they are wasting their time. They stand outside and wait until a representative of the governor comes out and tells them that the governor has received their demands and will attend to them. Chueh-hui walks home in the cold rain.

In Chapter 9, the students call off classes because the governor doesn't keep his promise of attending to their demands. The students launch a campaign to "preserve respect for students." They publish and distribute leaflet in the streets, but still there is no response from the governor. Chueh-hui is much more involved in the student activities than Chueh-min, who is spending lots of time with Chin to prepare her for her entrance exams. One day, Chueh-hui's grandfather, Yeh Yeh, calls him into his room to talk with him. Yeh Yeh lectures Chueh-hui about his behavior because he has heard from a sedan chair driver that Chueh-hui has been passing out leaflets on the streets.



Cheuh-hsin intervenes and tells Yeh yeh that he'll watch Cheuh-hui and make sure he doesn't leave the house for a few days. Cheuh-hui agrees to this just to keep Cheuh-hsin out of trouble with Yeh yeh.

Chapters 7-9 Analysis

In Chapter 2, there was foreshadowing of social conflict, and in these chapters we begin to see the reality of that social conflict. The brothers are very interested in social change as evidenced by their interest in the magazines they read at Cheuh-hsin's office on Sunday morning. The ideas contained in the magazines prepare Cheuh-hui to jump at the opportunity that faces him when he runs into his classmate later that day after the soldiers have wrecked the students' plays. Cheuh-hui shows spirit when he talks with his grandfather, but he also is wise enough to listen to his older brother and not argue with family authority.

Chin proves herself to be as brave as Cheuh-hui as she presses forward with her goal of entering the boys' school in the fall. As soon as she decides that she wants to do it, she takes action by beginning to study for the entrance exams. The older two brothers, Cheuh-min and Cheuh-hsin, on the other hand, like to dabble in the ideas of the revolution, but they don't seem inclined to jump into the action like Chin and Cheuh-hui.



Chapters 10-12

Chapters 10-12 Summary

In Chapter 10, Chueh-hui is imprisoned in his house. He eagerly reads all accounts of the student protests in the newspaper, but the stories are short and after a few days there are none at all. He grows very restless and impatient. One day he sees the maid Ming-feng talking with another maid in the garden. He hides among the plum trees so he can listen to them. The other maid leaves, and Ming-feng begins to gather plum blossoms for Madame Chou and Mrs. Chang. Chueh-hui helps her, despite her protests. He tells her that he wants to protect her, and she confesses that she thinks about him a lot. Chueh-hui feels that he is in love. That night Chueh-min says that he loves Chin. They younger brothers hear Chueh-hsin playing a sad song on his flute.

Chapter 11 begins as the clash between the soldiers and students subsides. It is time for the New Year holidays, and some students leave town to spend the holidays with their families. During this time, Chueh-min spends most of his waking hours with Chin, helping her to study for her exams. Chueh-hui is still imprisoned in the house, and he is growing increasingly frustrated with his family. To pass the time and vent his frustrations, Chueh-hui writes a long entry in his diary.

In his diary, Chueh-hui says that his grandfather handed him a book entitled, "On Filial Piety and the Sunning of Lewdness." Chueh-hui tears the book up and goes into the garden where he talks to Chueh-hsin's wife and her little four-year-old son. Chueh-hsin's wife is gathering plum blossoms for Chueh-hsin because he loves them so much. She tells Chueh-hui that she is embroidering plum blossoms on a runner for their canopy bed. This embarrasses Chueh-hui, because he knows the real reason Chueh-hsin loves plum blossoms so much. Mei's name means "plum blossom." The sister-in-law feels sorry for Chueh-hui and tries to cheer him up. She invites him to play chess. Later in the day he plays three games of chess with her. She tells him about her life before she married into the Kao family, and Chueh-hui realizes that she lost some important things when she got married, just like Chueh-hsin did.

In Chapter 12, the three brothers and Chien-yun are at Chueh-hsin's office reading magazines. Chueh-hui has decided not to stay at home anymore, even if his grandfather punishes him. Chueh-hui is reading a book by Turgenev, and he reads passages out loud every now and then. He is feeling very critical of his brothers because he thinks they are living contradictory lives. They talk about revolution, but they still live the same way they always have. He provokes them until Chueh-hsin breaks down and talks to them about the night their father died and turned the family responsibility over to him. He weeps as he tells them that every one of his dreams has been taken away from him and he thinks that he will never find any happiness. Their grandfather comes in to ask Chueh-hsin to go shopping with him, and he doesn't say anything to Chueh-hui about being out of the house.



Chapters 10-12 Analysis

In Chapter 10, the love relationship between Chueh-hui and Ming-feng begins as has been foreshadowed. Ming-feng is afraid to be seen with him because it is inappropriate for a master and servant to have such a relationship. Nevertheless, she dreams that he could be her way out of a life that seems to be a dead-end. Likewise, Chueh-hui thinks that Ming-feng is the way to a purer, more authentic life than the one he has always led because of his aristocratic family.

In Chapter 11, the three brothers all have something in common. They are all in unrequited love situations. Chueh-hui loves a servant girl, which is forbidden by his elders. Chueh-min loves his cousin Chin but realizes that his older brother was in the exact same situation years earlier and was thwarted from marrying the girl he loved. And Chueh-hsin is already married and has a child but has never reconciled the fact that he doesn't really love his wife because he would have chosen differently if the choice had been his. Despite their differences, the brothers can relate to one another in this way.

In Chapter 12, the brothers seem very different from one another. Chueh-hui is passionate about his ideas. His youthful self-righteousness irritates his older brothers, but they feel a little jealous of Chueh-hui's optimism and exuberance. Chueh-hsin finds it necessary, however, to enlighten Chueh-hui about his past so that Chueh-hui will understand where he is coming from. The sedan chairs seem to be the symbol of the aristocracy to Chueh-hui. He refuses to be carried around in a sedan chair, and he likes to talk with the sedan chair drivers who tell him stories about heroes and battles.



Chapters 13-15

Chapters 13-15 Summary

It is New Year's Eve in Chapter 13. The household is prepared for a feast. The family members are seated by rank with the older generation at a different table from the younger generation. The younger table is much more lively than the older table. Everyone drinks freely, and soon many of them are drunk. After the feast is over, Chueh-hui goes outside to watch some of the fireworks. He sees a small beggar boy outside the gates and gives him two silver half-dollars. He feels hypocritical for this act, knowing that giving a beggar a couple of coins will not change the world.

In Chapter 14, it is New Year's Day, and everyone is in a good mood. A new character, Mama Huang, is introduced. She is the boys' maid and has been with them for ten years. She has watched them grow up and looks after them well. She is stricter with them than Yeh yeh's wife. Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min take a long walk and find Cheuh-hsin lying down in a shelter on the other side of the compound. He is hiding from his responsibilities, hoping that no one will find him. He doesn't mind talking with his brothers, though. Cheuh-hsin has been drinking a lot lately, and Chueh-hui asks him why.

Cheuh-hsin is feeling miserable. He has seen Mei once at a department store, and although they didn't speak to each other, he has been thinking about her. He feels badly that her life has turned out so disappointingly, and he also feels guilty for thinking about Mei when he loves his wife and son so much. As Cheuh-hsin speaks, Cheuh-hui realizes that all his talk about change and the new order must be devastating to someone like Cheuh-hsin who is stuck in his life no matter what happens to the social order of the country.

Chapter 15 covers the evening of New Year's Day. There is a ceremony that happens once a year on New Year's Day. Again, the family dresses up and assembles for the festivities. There is an altar table where the Venerable Master Kao kowtows to the gods. After this, each group of family members performs a similar rite, according to rank. After the ceremony, the servants all come in to pay their respects. Then the boys go outside to watch and play with fireworks. Chueh-min and Chueh-hui decide to go to Chin's house. They pay their New Year's respects, and then Chin takes them up to their bedroom where she has another visitor: Cousin Mei. The boys haven't seen Cousin Mei since before she was married. She is very melancholy. It is not proper for a young woman of her station to remarry once she is widowed, and she feels that her life is over. She must live with her mother the rest of her life. The boys try to cheer her up, but they soon see that her situation is beyond redemption, just like Cheuh-hsin's.



Chapters 13-15 Analysis

In seeing the stark reality of Chueh-hsin's and Mei's situations, Cheuh-hui begins to feel a little disillusioned. He has put his trust in the new ideas he's read about in magazines and heard about during student demonstrations, but now he sees that the hardships of life cannot be overcome simply by a change in government. People make decisions that cannot easily be undone, and this is something that can't be changed. The beggar boy outside the Kao compound gates is a symbol of this disillusionment. In another light, Chueh-hui may have seen the boy as a victim to be redeemed by the new order, but he's beginning to see that there will always be poverty of some sort or other.

Firecrackers are mentioned several times in these chapters. They convey a festive setting, but they also represent Cheuh-hui's youthful exuberance, which burns out quickly. The fireworks are often described with images of death: "the smell of powder filled the air; corpses of exploded firecrackers littered the street," and "scattered remains of fireworks lay ignored and disappointed, emitting their last warm sulphurous breath." These fireworks could also be foreshadowing of the casualties of revolution, who are often the young and enthusiastic.



Chapters 16-18

Chapters 16-18 Summary

In Chapter 16, Chueh-hui overhears Ming-fung talking with another household servant. The New Year's festivities are still going on, but Cheuh-hui has been feeling depressed and lonely. He hears the two girls discussing what will happen if one of them is chosen to be a concubine. The other girl, Wan-erh, is afraid that she will be chosen to be a concubine because she knows that Master Kao's friend Feng is looking for a concubine and Master Kao had agreed that one of his servants would be the concubine.

Ming-feng is as terrified as Wan-erh at being the chosen one. After Wan-erh walks out of the room, Cheuh-hui knocks on the window to get Ming-feng's attention. He says that he overheard her conversation, and she fills in the details, even though she is embarrassed that he was listening. Cheuh-hui feels defeated by this news, and he waits just outside her room as he thinks about it. Having him stand outside the room helps her to feel safer.

In Chapter 17, the author describes the days that follow. Chin comes to stay at the Kao compound, which greatly adds to the youths' enjoyment. They have picnics and play games. Their biggest project during this time is a fireworks show for the rest of the family. They procure beautiful fireworks and set them to live music played by Cousin Shu-ying and Chueh-hsin. The rest of them sing in the chorus.

In Chapter 18, the boys' Uncle Ke-ting puts on a dragon show for the family. He gets some of the younger boys to help him build the dragon out of bamboo sticks and paper. The sedan-chair drivers help make fireworks, and then everyone assembles for the show. During the performance, dancers are underneath the dragon to manipulate its movements. The movements begin joyfully, but as the show progresses, some of the boys and men attack the dragon with fireworks, setting parts of it on fire and burning some of the dancers until the dragon is destroyed. The family enjoys the show, all except for Cheuh-hui. He is disgusted that everyone thinks it's okay to hurt the dancers as long as the dancers are paid for their performance. He asks Cheuh-min and Chin what they think of it, and they don't see any problem with it. He's disgusted.

Chapters 16-18 Analysis

As the New Year's holidays roll on, Chueh-hui finds himself increasingly distant from the rest of his family. He begins to be critical of traditions that he previously never gave a second thought to. He sees the servants as people with concerns and problems of their own instead of household fixtures. These thoughts separate him from those he loves and depends upon. His brothers and Chin tolerate his outbursts, but he is making everyone feel uncomfortable.



The New Year's dragon is a symbol for the way the aristocracy treats the lower classes. The aristocracy uses the lower classes for their entertainment and comfort. They believe that if they just give money to these people that they can treat them however they want. The thing the aristocracy never seems to think about offering to the lower classes is respect. When one of the young dancers limps away, Cheuh-hui sees the pain on his face, and he can no longer see any entertainment value in the dragon.



Chapters 19-21

Chapters 19-21 Summary

In Chapter 19, the younger people take a boat ride in the evening. The moon is large and bright, and they feel relaxed and calm. Chin and Shu-chen talk about school. After a while, Cheuh-hui gets impatient and gets the others to turn the boat around by saying there are sweet dumplings waiting for them at home. When they emerge from the garden, two of the younger boys are running to find them. There has been a newspaper extra announcing that fighting has begun: the "governor has ordered a punitive campaign against General Chang."

In Chapter 20, the mood shifts dramatically. That very evening, they begin to hear military fire, and Chueh-min sees wounded soldiers being carried on stretchers into the city. Cheuh-hsin's wife Jui-chueh gets very upset and worried. Everyone speaks in quieter tones. At about ten o'clock, the firing becomes louder and more intense. Everyone starts to think about dying. They know that their position is precarious. Chueh-hsin and his wife seem to be the most distraught. Chueh-hui is the calmest. He sleeps soundly through the fighting.

The next day, everyone goes outside to see what damage has been done. The Kao compound hasn't been damaged much. Cheuh-min and Cheuh-hui go to see how their aunts and uncles have fared. Soon, Madam Chang, Chin, and Mei arrive. The military has taken over Madam Chang's house, and they need somewhere to go. Mei is as melancholy as she was in the previous scene with Chin, Cheuh-hui, and Chueh-min. Mei gets to know Chueh-hsin's wife briefly. That night everyone goes to bed early, feeling much braver than the night before.

In Chapter 21, the family is all holed up in the compound. They cannot walk the streets. The servants cannot get to the market, so the food is not as good as usual. Cheuh-hsin comes upon Mei in the garden and they finally have a chance to speak to one another. They talk about the past, and Cheuh-hsin feels that Mei is being cruel toward him. He begins to cry, and then Mei cries as well. They feel sad for the dreams that were never fulfilled. As they are crying, Cheuh-hsin's younger sister Shu-hua comes upon them and sees that they're both upset. Jui-chueh and Chin walk up at this point, and then Jui-chueh and Mei walk off together.

Chapters 19-21 Analysis

The author puts the characters in an interesting situation when they are holed up in the compound during the fighting. This is an interesting way to explore characters, by putting them in a different and stressful situation. Adding to the stress, Mei is included in the group, and she has not seen her former love Cheuh-hsin for many years. Now she



is forced to be with him, his wife, and his child. Initially, Mei proved herself to be very emotional and melancholy, and this chapter reinforces those traits.

In contrast, Chueh-hsin's wife Jui-chueh, whom Cheuh-hsin married through an arranged situation, shows that she is empathetic and friendly. She takes Mei under her wing, even though she realizes that Mei and her husband have a long history, and tries to make her feel better. The reader begins to feel that Cheuh-hsin is lucky to be married to Jui-cheuh, even if he doesn't realize it yet.



Chapters 22-24

Chapters 22-24 Summary

Chapter 22 covers a couple of tense days. Within two days, the conflict seems to be diffusing and the people in the Kao compound begin to relax, but then, a messenger comes with news that looting has begun in some parts of the city. The Kao family is the richest family on their street, and their compound would surely be a target for looting. Madam Wang leaves with her five children, and Madam Chang leaves with her three children. The Venerable Master Kao and his concubine are away from the compound visiting relatives, so there are very few people left. Those who are left are very scared of impending attacks by looters.

Everyone shows signs of stress, but Chin can't stop crying. She is upset with herself because she thought she was a new modern girl, fighting for her independence. She has been trying to make herself as strong as Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, but now she sees that she is really weak and frightened. No one really understands why Chin is so upset; they think she is just scared. Cheuh-hsin orders his younger brothers to take the women to the lake and hide. His wife, Jeu-chueh, says that she will not leave him. She says she would rather die with him, but eventually she gives in and goes to the lake house with everyone else. The night passes uneventfully, and everything returns to relative normality.

Mei is still at the Kao compound, and she is still very sad. Jeu-chueh confronts her and tells her that she knows why she is so sad. She knows why her husband loves plum blossoms so much, and she feels badly that she got in the way of their happiness. Mei is touched by Jeu-chueh's kindness, and they become good friends. Mei needs a friend, and Jeu-chueh would like to think of Mei as a sister since her own sister died.

In Chapter 23, Cheuh-hui becomes more intensely involved in the cultural movement as he and some friends publish a magazine called *Dawn*. He writes his articles and helps to publish and distribute the magazine. He gets responses to some of his articles and is invigorated by the debate and discussion surrounding his acquaintances and magazine. His uncle Ke-ming discovers one of his articles and doesn't comment but lets Cheuh-hui know that he's seen it. Cheuh-hui worries about his grandfather finding out, but he doesn't reduce his involvement. He tries hard to conform his life to the movement. A writer from Peking wrote an article about how Chinese youths should refuse to fall in love, and Cheuh-hui tries to do this, but when he sees Ming-feng he can't help but be inspired by her.

In Chapter 24, Ming-feng learns from Madam Chou that she is to become the concubine of Master Kao's friend Master Feng. The wedding is to be in four days. Ming-feng begs Madam Chou to help her and says that her life will be over if she has to marry the old man. Madam Chou says there is nothing she can do; she cannot go against Master Kao's orders. The night before she is to be married, Ming-feng tries to find Cheuh-hui.



She goes to his room and tries to tell him what's happening but he tells her he is very busy and will speak to her in two days. He kisses her and sends her away. She goes to the lake and drowns herself because she cannot bear to be defiled by the old man.

Chapters 22-24 Analysis

Chapter 24 is a climax in the story. Ming-feng's suicide is shocking to the reader, and even more shocking to Cheuh-hui. He was teetering on the edge of rejecting his lifestyle before Ming-feng's suicide, but now everything about his family is repulsive to him. Cheuh-hui is propelled to action by the events in Chapter 24, but the result of his actions is yet unknown.

The third-person omniscient point of view is especially effective in these chapters. The author goes into great detail about what is going through Ming-feng's mind right up until her death. The following morning, Chueh-hui goes about his day knowing nothing about the suicide until he returns home from school in the afternoon. Knowing all of the events and the thoughts of all of the characters creates great suspense for the reader. We wonder how Cheuh-hui will react when he learns of Ming-feng's death.



Chapters 25-27

Chapters 25-27 Summary

In Chapter 25, Cheuh-hui doesn't sleep well the night of Ming-feng's death and hurries off to school in the morning knowing nothing about Ming-feng's fate. When he arrives home late in the day, he sees the sedan sent by the Feng family and he hears weeping from inside the curtains. Cheuh-hui feels heartbroken when he hears the weeping. Inside the compound, Chien-yun, the boys' friend, is sighing and saying that life is too cruel. Cheuh-hui scolds him for being so gloomy. He tells Cheuh-hui that Wan-erh has had to go to the Fengs to be a concubine. Cheuh-hui is excited to hear that Ming-feng hasn't left, but then Chien-yun tells him what happened to Ming-feng. Cheuh-hui responds violently and runs out of the house.

In Chapter 26, Cheuh-min finds Cheuh-hui beside the lake and tells him that he knows all about his love for Ming-feng. Cheuh-min says that he has been so wrapped up in his love for Chin that he hasn't taken the time to talk with Cheuh-hui about his feelings. Cheuh-hui says that he hates himself, that he isn't any different from Big Brother when it comes to being spineless. Cheuh-hui is tired of the aristocratic kind of life. He hates the restraints imposed on him by his family and social status.

In Chapter 27, life returns to normal in the compound. Most members of the family quickly forget about Ming-feng and Wan-erh. Cheuh-hui and his friends work hard on their magazine and spend a lot of time at their magazine office. One day, two police officers arrive and tell them that two of them will have to come to the police station with them. Cheuh-hui and Hui-ju follow the policemen out. Then one of the policemen tells them to go back, that they don't really have to come. But he tells them that their magazine must shut down immediately. They decide to shut it down but start a new one with a new name. The new one is called For the Masses.

One evening, Cheuh-hui smells smoke in the compound. He follows it until he sees Chien-erh, one of the servants, burning paper "money." Some people believe that the spirits of the dead need this money in order to stave off hunger and discomfort in the next life, and Chien-erh is burning two small piles, one for Ming-feng and one for Wan-erh. When she explains to Cheuh-hui what she is doing, Cheuh-hui protests that Wan-erh isn't dead. However, Chien-erh explains that Wan-erh asked her to do this because even if she lives, her life will be worse than death.

Chapters 25-27 Analysis

Until Ming-feng's death, Cheuh-hui has always found himself above the general misery and despair that others in his family feel. When Cheuh-hsin feels miserable about his regrets, Cheuh-hui shows little sympathy and points out that he has brought the misery



on himself. Now, however, Cheuh-hui is in the midst of the tragedy, and he feels regrets of his own about how he treated Ming-feng.

In addition to learning empathy, Cheuh-hui also feels increasingly justified in his negative feelings towards his family and their way of life. He sees how they don't mourn Ming-feng's passing; instead, they send another servant in her place so as not to disappoint the Feng family. Cheuh-hui's relationship with Cheuh-min is strengthened during this time because Cheuh-min senses the depth of Cheuh-hui's sadness and comes to his rescue by offering a listening ear and understanding heart.



Chapters 28-30

Chapters 28-30 Summary

In Chapter 28, the summer holidays have arrived, and Cheuh-min spends even more time with Chin. The members of the Kao compound prepare for the Venerable Master Kao's sixty-sixth birthday celebration. The celebration is enormous and lasts several days. Crowds of people are invited to the festivities, which include feasts, operas, parties, and enough decorations to completely transform the place. Many of the entertainments are lewd and blatantly sexual, and Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min are disgusted by the displays.

Cheuh-min and Chin come to an understanding about their relationship. They want to get married, and they decide they will sacrifice whatever it takes to be together. Cheuh-hui is happy for them, but he feels a little bitter about love, especially when he sees old Feng at the birthday party. Wan-erh has come back to visit as Feng's concubine. Cheuh-hui finds her with a group of young women. She is crying as she tells them what her new life is like. Cheuh-hui finds out from the girls that his grandfather has arranged a marriage for Cheuh-min with Feng's daughter, but Cheuh-min hasn't heard anything about it yet. When Cheuh-min finally finds out about the match, he braces himself for the resistance he will face when he refuses. His older brother Cheuh-hsin tells him there's nothing he can do but accept it.

In Chapter 29, Cheuh-min runs away to avoid the arranged marriage. He stays with a friend from school, and Cheuh-hui delivers messages to and from him but doesn't tell anyone where he is. Cheuh-hsin is very stressed by this situation, because he cannot stand discord or confrontation. Everyone tries to get Cheuh-hui to disclose Cheuh-min's whereabouts or to get him to come home, but Cheuh-hui thrives on this power and refuses to give anything away. Cheuh-hui takes Cheuh-min to see Chin one day. Chin is so happy to see Cheuh-min and cries when he has to leave.

In Chapter 30, Cheuh-hsin finally accedes that the arranged marriage would not be good for Cheuh-min and tries to speak to the Venerable Master about it, but the Venerable Master is furious by his attempt and Cheuh-hsin doesn't press the matter any farther. News arrives that Mei has died. Jui-cheuh wants to go pay her respects, but Cheuh-hsin asks her not to go. Jui-cheuh is expecting her second child, and Cheuh-hsin says it would not be good for her to go. He goes instead and takes care of all the funeral arrangements. Cheuh-hui goes to pay his respects. Before he leaves he says to Mei's body, "You didn't die; you've been murdered!"

Chapters 28-30 Analysis

In these chapters, the consequences of the society's traditions come full circle in several ways. Since the beginning of the story, we have seen the consequences of Cheuh-



hsin's arranged marriage. Although the marriage has been successful in some ways, Cheuh-hsin and Mei have never recovered from the breakup of their relationship by their families. Cheuh-hui insinuates that Mei's death is directly caused by his family's interference in that relationship. At the same time, Cheuh-min is being forced into a similar arranged marriage. His relationship with Chin is very similar to Cheuh-hsin's relationship with Mei. They are two sets of cousins who have fallen in love and wish to marry, but their relatives want them to marry other people for social and political reasons. Cheuh-min has seen the distress and depression in his brother and doesn't want to go down the same path.

There is foreshadowing in Chapter 30 when Jui-cheuh talks to Cheuh-hsin about going to see Mei after they have heard of her death. Jui-cheuh has become a good friend of Mei's, and she is immediately affected by the death, weeping and having to sit down upon hearing the news. Cheuh-hsin begs her not to go, saying that it's bad for her and that she'll get too upset. He tells her that she is all he has left, and if anything happens to her it will be the end of him.



Chapters 31-33

Chapters 31-33 Summary

Chapter 31 begins when Cheuh-hui goes to see Cheuh-min the following day to tell him about Mei. Cheuh-min weeps and admits to being a little afraid of going against their grandfather. He's very lonely. Cheuh-hui does his best to reassure his brother. Then he goes to visit Chin. Chin says she is determined to not end up like Mei, and she gives him a letter to deliver to Cheuh-min.

When Cheuh-hui gets home there is drama in the compound. One of his uncles, Uncle Ke-ting, has been stealing jewelry from his wife to keep a concubine in the city. The Venerable Master Kao berates Ke-ting in front of everyone and forces out of him other shameful things he has done like racking up gambling debts and becoming addicted to drugs. The Master Kao makes Ke-ting hit himself in front of everyone. The Master Kao breaks out into a violent coughing fit and waves everyone away. After all he has done to build this family up, they are sliding downhill.

In Chapter 32, the Venerable Master Kao takes ill. At first, the doctors think it is a minor illness, but after a few days he takes a turn for the worse, and some members of the household turn to superstitions and quackery to try and cure him. A man is hired to drive the devils out of the compound. He runs from room to room and house to house screaming shrilly and burning resin. Cheuh-hui refuses to let him into his bedroom. Everyone tells Cheuh-hui that he must let the man in so his grandfather can recover, but Cheuh-hui says they're all crazy and that screaming people are liable to make their grandfather worse, not better. They give up and leave Cheuh-hui alone.

In Chapter 33, Cheuh-hui goes to visit his grandfather. His grandfather is kinder to him than he has ever been before. He says that he sees things better now and asks Cheuh-hui if he ever sees Cheuh-min. The Venerable Master Kao wishes to see Cheuh-min to tell him that he doesn't have to marry the Feng girl. Cheuh-hui leaves to go get Cheuh-min, but he takes his time and goes to see Chin first. Cheuh-min is very excited to hear that his grandfather has given in. By the time the boys get back to their grandfather, he is taking his last breaths. He manages to tell Cheuh-min that he doesn't need to worry about the Feng girl. He tells them to study hard and bring honor to the family. Then he dies. The funeral preparations begin immediately and are as grand and far-fetched as his sixty-sixth birthday plans. Before long, the uncles are squabbling about dividing up the property. They immediately begin to cheat Cheuh-hsin out of his share.

Chapters 31-33 Analysis

It's interesting to compare and contrast the deaths and funerals of Ming-feng, Mei, and the Venerable Master Kao. Ming-feng's body is removed from the compound on a stretcher as soon as she is discovered, and the only rites made mention of are the



bondmaid secretly burning paper "money" for her behind a tree at the back of the property. The servants and Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min are very sad about Ming-feng's death, and their friends feel very sorry for her.

Mei has a more formal funeral than Ming-feng, but hers is still not a big production. Very strong emotions are shown at Mei's funeral, but it seems that most of these emotions are prompted by regret more than by affection. There is a comparison in the chapter about Mei's funeral that insinuates that Mei is forgotten, just as the four bodies in the holding room are forgotten.

The Venerable Master Kao's funeral is a grand production and is surrounded by tradition and superstition. People do not seem very sad at his passing. Their main concern is dividing up the inheritance and doing things properly so the family will look good to outsiders. The Venerable Master Kao is surrounded by family at his passing, but it is not because they love him. They are all trying to get something from him. For instance, Cheuh-min is trying to get permission to not have to marry the Feng girl.



Chapters 34-36

Chapters 34-36 Summary

In Chapter 34, the women of the Kao compound are worried about "the curse of the blood-glow," which is a superstition about the dead. When the body of an older member of the family is still in the house and a woman gives birth, the woman's blood attacks the corpse and causes it to spurt blood. The Venerable Master Kao's body is still in the house, and Jui-cheuh is preparing to deliver her second child. The only way to prevent the curse of the blood-glow is for the woman to give birth outside of the city gates and across a bridge, and even then, a layer of bricks and dirt must cover the coffin.

The women pressure Cheuh-hsin into finding a place outside the city gates for Jui-cheuh to live until after she gives birth. He knows he should stand up for her, but he can't. He finds a house outside the city for her, but it is damp and has a dirt floor. He apologizes to her for being so weak, and she is kind and forgiving, but she is very hurt by the move. One of the servants tells Cheuh-hui that she is worried about Jui-cheuh giving birth in such a situation and asks him to talk to Cheuh-hsin about it. Cheuh-hui is surprised to hear that Cheuh-hsin is actually making Jui-cheuh move for the birth. He tells Cheuh-hsin that one girl has already died because of him.

In Chapter 35, Cheuh-hsin takes Jui-cheuh to her new home. Some of the women go also, but they leave her alone with servants for the night. Cheuh-hsin doesn't even stay. She will have to live in the gloomy house without him for a month. Cheuh-hsin returns in the morning with their son Hai-chen. Jui-cheuh is very sad when it's time for them to go home. Cheuh-hsin tells her that he won't be able to return the next day because the family has asked him to supervise the building of the bricks around the coffin to protect the Venerable Master Kao's corpse. Jui-cheuh says she doesn't know what's wrong with her but she worries that she's never going to see him again.

In Chapter 36, Jui-cheuh goes into labor. Cheuh-hsin arrives at the house during the labor but is forbidden to enter the room because that would make the Venerable Master Kao susceptible to the curse of the blood-glow. He hears agonized screams coming from inside the room. She begs for him to come in, but the door is locked and he can't get in. Jui-cheuh dies in childbirth, but the baby boy lives. Jui-cheuh's mother arrives after she has died, and her words to her dead daughter pierce Cheuh-hsin's heart.

Chapters 34-36 Analysis

The foreshadowing in these chapters is multi-layered and obvious. When the family suggests that Jui-cheuh move out of the city gates and across a bridge to respect an ancient superstition regarding the dead, the reader feels at once that something terrible will happen to Jui-cheuh because of her forerunners, Mei and Ming-feng. Young women seem to be especially vulnerable to the cruelties of the family's traditions. Jui-cheuh



feels foreboding emotions when Cheuh-hsin leaves her at the temporary house. She feels that she will never see him again and she weeps easily and long.

The brick and earth covering over the Venerable Master Kao's coffin is a symbol of the wall between Jui-cheuh and Cheuh-hsin. The wall in their relationship is the family. Cheuh-hsin doesn't have the personal strength to put himself or his wife above his family, and therefore, the family is always a wedge in his marriage. Before he was married to Jui-cheuh he loved Mei, but again, this relationship was blocked by the family, which put up a permanent wall between them.



Chapters 37-39

Chapters 37-39 Summary

Chapter 37 begins with an outburst from Cheuh-hui. When Cheuh-hui hears about Jui-Cheuh's death, he decides that he cannot live with his family anymore. Cheuh-hsin tries to convince him to stay, because he doesn't want to lose one more person he loves, but he understands why Cheuh-hui feels this way. Although they disagree on many things, they are still brothers and still love each other. Cheuh-hsin says he will help Cheuh-hui. He will send money to Cheuh-hui and help in any other way he can. They must keep the help a secret from the rest of the family, though.

In Chapter 38, Cheuh-hui says good-bye to his friends in the magazine office. They wish him well. Cheuh-hsin gives him some last-minute advice about dressing warmly and eating well. Cheuh-hui says good-bye to their step-mother Madame Chou in a roundabout way, because she doesn't know that he's leaving and he doesn't want her to know until after he's gone. In Chapter 39, Cheuh-hui rises early the next morning. Chueh-min accompanies him to Chin's house as she wants to see Cheuh-hui before he leaves. After saying good-bye to everyone, Cheuh-hui boards a boat headed for Peking and looks forward to everything ahead of him: new friends, new activities and new people.

Chapters 37-39 Analysis

Jui-cheuh's death in the previous section is the final climax in the story. Cheuh-hui must resolve the climax in some way, and his solution is to leave this family that has caused so much tragedy and destruction. In his mind, the family has been the downfall of three promising young women: Ming-feng, Mei and Jui-cheuh. He feels that he cannot morally be a part of the family and feel good about himself or lead a productive life. Therefore, the only solution available to him is to leave it all behind.

The author does not tell us about Cheuh-hui's future or what he makes of his life after he leaves his family. The book ends on an optimistic note, however, because Cheuh-hui doesn't dwell on his regrets or his past but instead looks forward to what is to come. We know from Cheuh-hui's actions that he is very proactive and willing to make great sacrifices to live by his ideals.



Characters

Cheuh-hsin

Cheuh-hsin suffers greatly, because he has never been able to stand up for himself. He is a big believer in filial piety, and he has always been willing to do what his elders tell him to do, even when his own dreams are sacrificed. For example, Cheuh-hsin wanted to marry his cousin Mei and pursue a career in scientific academia, but his grandfather arranged a marriage with Jui-cheuh and got him a job in town. Cheuh-hsin accepted the marriage and job quietly, but they have eaten away at him.

Cheuh-hsin becomes very frustrated and distraught at times, but his frustration melts into tears and weeping instead of propelling him to action. He is ashamed of himself for not standing up for the women he loves, but he cannot get himself to do anything about it except for apologize. He feels trapped by his situation in life. When Cheuh-hsin was a young man, his father died. On his deathbed, his father told him to take care of his younger siblings. Cheuh-hsin sometimes feels conflicted about this advice because it is not always apparent how to best take care of them.

Cheuh-hsin is the oldest son of the oldest son in the Kao family. This birth position brings with it much honor and great responsibility. Perhaps the pressure of his birth position is too great for the weakness of his disposition. He knows that much is expected of him. These high expectations squash his inner strength and leave him without opinions or actions of his own.

Cheuh-min

Cheuh-min is the second brother. He wears round gold spectacles and takes his studies seriously. He dabbles with the cultural movement and even works on the magazine with Cheuh-hui, but he is more interested in school and in his cousin Chin. When Chin decides to try to get in to the boys' school for the following school year, Cheuh-min begins spending all his spare time helping her to study for her exams.

He is not as docile as his older brother, but he is not openly rebellious either. He is intelligent and gentle, and he falls in love with his cousin Chin. His love for Chin puts him in a very similar situation with his older brother, but he watches what happens to Cheuh-hsin and vows to stand up for himself and for Chin. He temporarily runs away in order to avoid a marriage that his grandfather arranges with the daughter of a family friend. His grandfather renounces the arrangement on his deathbed, and Cheuh-min is saved from Cheuh-hsin's fate.

Cheuh-min is a great strength to Cheuh-hui throughout the story. After Ming-feng's death, Cheuh-min realizes that Cheuh-hui was in love with her, and he helps his brother through the crisis. After this point, the brothers are always strong supports of each other.



Cheuh-hui helps Cheuh-min run away from the arranged marriage, and Cheuh-min helps Cheuh-hui to escape to Peking.

Cheuh-hui

Cheuh-hui, the youngest brother, is defiant and rebellious. He does not agree with most of the family's traditions and is never afraid to speak out against them. The elder members of the family learn that they cannot push Cheuh-hui around as they have done to Cheuh-hsin. Cheuh-hui falls in love with one of the servants, Ming-feng. He even promises that he will marry her. When she is to be sent as a concubine to one of the Master Kao's friends, she drowns herself in the lake rather than live in such misery. Ming-feng's suicide pushes Cheuh-hui even farther into rebellion.

Cheuh-min calls Cheuh-hui "the humanitarian" because he refuses to ride in a sedan chair. As a boy, Cheuh-hui sits on the beds of the sedan chair drivers and listens to them tell stories. As a teenager he is angered by his family's treatment of the servants. He doesn't believe in their superstitions, and he isn't afraid to tell them that their superstitions are foolish. Cheuh-hui is also blatant in the way he talks to his older brother. He tells Cheuh-hsin that he is responsible for the deaths of Mei and Jui-cheuh.

Cheuh-hui is an idealist who is not content to live in a world that he considers morally depraved. At his grandfather's sixty-sixth birthday party, Cheuh-hui is disgusted by the lewd behavior of the entertainers and guests. He tries to stay away from the party as much as possible. He goes to the magazine office where he spends his time trying to spread ideas about a utopian society.

Venerable Master Kao

The Venerable Master Kao is the head of the Kao family. He has worked hard his entire life to build the family up into a large and respected family in the city. The family now has five branches all living in the same compound. The Venerable Master Kao is very concerned about what others think about him and his family. He follows traditions strictly and rules his family with an iron fist. When the Venerable Master Kao dies, the family still follows his orders, even though he softened in the final days of his life.

Ming-feng

Ming-feng is a sixteen-year-old bondservant in the Kao compound. When her mother died, her father sent her to work as a bondservant for the Kao family, because he couldn't take care of her. She was nine-years-old at the time. She has grown up working for the Kao family and has fallen in love with Cheuh-hui, even though she knows that it probably won't work out between them. Ming-feng is beautiful, intelligent and pure. Cheuh-hui falls in love with her, because he loves these qualities. When Ming-feng is told that she is being sold as a concubine to the Feng family, she tries to tell Cheuh-hui



what is happening, but he is too busy at the time to listen to her. She commits suicide the night before she is to be sent away.

Mei

Mei is the cousin of the three brothers and grew up with them. As teenagers, Mei and Cheuh-hsin fell in love and wished to be married. Their mothers argued and arranged marriages for each of them outside of the family. Cheuh-hsin married Jui-cheuh, and Mei married another man. The marriage was difficult and abusive, but Mei's husband passed away. Under their family's tradition, a widowed woman may never marry again, which leaves Mei husbandless and childless at a young age. Under such misery, she wastes away and dies.

Jui-cheuh

Jui-cheuh is the wife of Cheuh-hsin. She is an energetic and kind young woman. She is also very pretty and has a little boy named Hai-chen. Jui-cheuh finds a good friend in Mei when she finally meets her. She realizes that her husband loves Mei more than he loves her, and her big heart is generous enough to welcome Mei into her life anyway. She also looks after Cheuh-hui, because Cheuh-hui is motherless. Jui-cheuh dies in childbirth when Cheuh-hsin sends her away from the city at his family's bidding.

Chin

Chin is another cousin of the boys. She is a beautiful, bright, ambitious girl. She has heard that girls are going to be admitted to the boys' school for the following term, and she makes plans to get accepted. She is the only child of her widowed mother. Her mother wants what's best for her but isn't sure if the new cultural movement is better for her than the old traditions in which the family has advantages. Chin falls in love with Cheuh-min, and after all the tragedies that take place in the Kao family, Chin's mother decides to let her marry Cheuh-min, even if it goes against the wishes of the Venerable Master Kao.

Madame Chou

Madame Chou is the concubine of the Venerable Master Kao, which makes her the boys' step-mother. She wears a lot of makeup and is unfailingly loyal to the Master. The boys don't like her much, but she is sometimes kind to them. Madame Chou always looks after her own interests before others' and is very superstitious.



Uncle Ke-ting

Uncle Ke-ting is one of the boys' uncles. He is a grown man but is still under complete rule by his father. When he is caught stealing jewelry from his wife to support a concubine in the city, the Venerable Master Kao publicly punishes him. Uncle Ke-ting kneels on the floor and hits himself as he confesses to gambling debts, drug addiction, adultery, and theft. Cheuh-hui makes an interesting contrast between this depraved uncle and Cheuh-min, who is in hiding to avoid an arranged marriage with a daughter of the corrupt Feng family.



Objects/Places

Sedan Chairs

Members of aristocratic families like the Kaos ride around town in sedan chairs. Cheuh-hui refuses to ride in a sedan chair, which act earns him the nickname "humanitarian."

Paper

Paper "money" is burned after a death to help the deceased person stave off hunger and want in the afterworld. Cheuh-hui comes across a servant burning two piles of paper "money," one for Ming-feng and one for Wan-erh, the bond-servant who is taken as concubine in her place.

Magazines

Working on magazines is a great outlet for Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min when they are frustrated with their family and their culture. They feel they are doing some good by enlightening others with their ideas through their magazines.

Kao Compound

Much of the action in the novel take place in the Kao compound. The boys grow up in this compound, but as they get to be older teenagers, they find the place suffocating because of the feudal beliefs and superstitions held by those in control.

Plum Blossoms

Jui-cheuh gathers plum blossoms to arrange in her husband's room and embroiders them on his bedstead because he is so fond of them. Only later does she realize that the reason he loves plum blossom is because Mei's name means plum blossoms.

Soldiers in the Streets

As hostilities arise in the city, soldiers are seen on the streets. Soldiers always inspire fear in the Kao family instead of security.



Electric Lights

Electric lights are a sign of prosperity in Chengtu at the time. During celebrations, such as the Venerable Master Kao's sixty-sixth birthday party, additional electric lights are brought into the compound

Fireworks

Fireworks are displayed during the New Year celebrations in the compound and on the street. Cheuh-hui becomes disturbed when his uncles begin to use fireworks to try and burn the hired dragon dancers for fun.

A Doll's House

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is a book that inspires Chin to be her own person instead of a puppet in the Kao family.

New Tide

New Tide is the name of the magazine that initially inspires Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min to join the youth movement and rebel against their family.



Themes

Inequality

The book begins with Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min trudging home in the cold because Cheuh-hui refuses to ride in a sedan chair and make other men suffer so he can travel in comfort. Throughout the story, Cheuh-hui finds examples of inequality, and these inequalities make him want to rebel against the traditional family in which he has grown up.

One example of inequality that bothers Cheuh-hui is when his uncles gather during the New Year's festivities to make fireworks. They hire dancers to move the large dragons they have ordered to be constructed. During the celebration, the uncles throw fireworks at the dragon and try to burn it. In so doing, they burn the dancers and laugh as the dancers writhe in pain. Cheuh-hui is outraged at this behavior and thinks it is immoral to treat someone this way just because they have been paid.

The deaths portrayed in the book show the inequalities evident across socioeconomic and gender boundaries. Ming-feng, the female bond-maid who drowns herself, doesn't receive a funeral at all. The family doesn't even pay their respects to her, with the exception of Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min. Mei, a member of the family who is widowed and has no adult male relatives, receives a modest funeral arranged for by Cheuh-hsin instead of by someone of the older generation. The Venerable Master Kao receives a lavish funeral, which inconveniences everyone and actually causes the death of Jui-cheuh.

Courage

Cheuh-hui derides his older brother Cheuh-hsin throughout the whole book because he thinks that Cheuh-hsin has no courage. Cheuh-hsin is the oldest son of the oldest son, a position that comes with great honor and responsibility, especially after his parents die young and he assumes responsibility for his brothers and sisters. This responsibility weighs heavily on Cheuh-hsin and seems to dampen his spirits.

As a result, Cheuh-hsin finds himself unable to stand up for himself or for anyone else who goes against the wishes of a member of the older generation. This lack of courage accounts for the loss of his dreams. Instead of going to school and studying science as he wanted to, he ends up taking the desk job that his grandfather procures for him. Instead of marrying the woman he loves, he submits to an arranged marriage because the others convince him that it will be best for the family.

In response to his older brother's lack of courage, Cheuh-hui finds himself with an abundance of courage. With each unfolding tragedy, Cheuh-hui finds that he gains strength and power. He is not afraid to tell members of the older generation exactly how he feels about their superstitions and moral ineptitude. By the end of the story, Cheuh-



hui realizes that he cannot change his family, so he leaves in search of a purer way of life.

Moral Purity

The brothers, especially Cheuh-hui and Cheuh-min, are concerned about moral purity. They fall in love with girls who are pure, beautiful, and full of integrity. One of the reasons Cheuh-hui falls in love with Ming-feng is that she is untainted by the upper-class aristocratic society that he deems to be morally depraved. She is also beautiful and wants to do what is right.

During the festivities for the Venerable Master Kao's sixty-sixth birthday, entertainers and guests flock to the compound. They stay up late eating, drinking, and gambling. There are men hired to be female impersonators. The guests and older male family members have liaisons with these female impersonators, and the brothers are disgusted by the display. The operas performed during the celebration are also lewd and immoral.

The three young women who die in the story are all virtuous, pure women. They are the victims of a society that rewards lewdness and immorality. Ming-feng dies because she is not willing to sacrifice her virtue to a corrupt old man. Wan-erh, who is the bond-servant sent to replace Ming-feng, feels that she suffers a fate worse than death. Mei is casualty of the system because she is not allowed to marry the virtuous young man she loves. She is sent to marry an abusive man who leaves her without family or children. Jui-cheuh is a casualty because her comfort is considered to be less important than the comfort of a corpse.

Style

Point of View

The point of view of the novel is third-person omniscient. The unknown narrator knows everything that is going on, but he specializes in points of view from time to time to give the reader more information. For example, towards the beginning of the book, the narrator spends more time examining Ming-feng's thoughts and feelings than the thoughts and feelings of other characters. This specialization gives the reader more empathy for certain characters and also helps with foreshadowing.

The narrator doesn't focus in on the thoughts of the Venerable Master Kao until right before his death. This becomes a device used over and over again. Until right before his death, the other characters and the reader feel no sympathy for the Venerable Master Kao. But the point of view, artfully used, allows the reader to see that the Venerable Master Kao has had good intentions all along. He just hasn't employed wise methods in attaining his goal: a strong, well-respected family.

Setting

The setting is the city of Chengtu in China during the second decade of the twentieth century. At this time, Chengtu is a volatile place. The setting propels the plot because the characters must react to the changes and destruction going on around them. The setting adds to the conflict and creates tension. During some of the early chapters, military forces take over the city and force the governor to leave. During these terrible few days, the family huddles together in the compound fearing for their lives. They stay awake all night listening to the firing and the shells dropping on nearby buildings.

The social setting is as important as the physical setting to the story. Changes are afoot in China and in Chengtu. The students in Cheuh-min's and Cheuh-hui's school actively protest the government's treatment of them, marching on the governor's mansion and writing subversive magazines to spread their revolutionary views. Chin decides she wants to apply to the boys' school for the next term, because she has heard that they will soon be accepting female students.

The setting of the family's compound is idyllic. As they are so wealthy, they have every luxury the city has to offer. They have servants and good food, and even during the fighting in the city, they can close their thick gates and shut the world out. Their compound has trees, gardens, and a lake. The streets outside sometimes feel very hostile compared with the luxuries of their compound.



Language and Meaning

This is a translation of Pa Chin's original work. The translator is Sidney Shapiro. The writing is poetic and very insightful, full of metaphors and beautiful images. The author includes many of the thoughts of characters in addition to dialogue, so the reader gets a good understanding of the motives of each of the characters. This allows the reader to have more empathy for some of the characters who might be easily misunderstood.

Some adjectives may seem overused to the modern English-speaking reader. For example, the author often refers to female eyes as "limpid eyes." This description is not commonly heard in English language literature, so it may stand out. It's important to remember that this is a translation and may not exactly reflect the author's original intent.

Structure

The novel is divided into 39 chapters. The last several chapters are fairly short, and some of the chapters in the middle of the book are long. The action follows chronologically with only a few flashbacks in order to explain present circumstances. The story begins with Cheuh-min and Cheuh-hui walking home from school in the dark after play practice. The main action of the story has not begun at the beginning of the story.

The first death in the book is shocking, because Ming-feng is a beloved character and the reader roots for her relationship with Cheuh-hui. After this death, however, the rhythm of death permeates the story and almost becomes the framework for the book's structure. Death, with its periods of mourning and promptings to introspection, propel the remaining characters to examine their lives and make changes if they feel they need to. After Ming-feng's death, three other deaths follow. They belong to Mei, Jui-cheuh, and the Venerable Master Kao.



Quotes

"Chueh-hui was almost choking with rage. He had a lot more to say but he couldn't get the words out. What was infuriating him, in fact, was not his eldest brother's fate, but that of the girl whose expression was so docile. He felt he was being cut off from her by an invisible high wall, and this wall was his gentry family. It prevented him from attaining the object of his desire; therefore he hated it." Page 13

"Lying in their beds, stripped of the masks they had worn all day, people took stock of themselves. They opened their hearts and examined their innermost secrets, peering into the recesses of their souls. Stricken with remorse and anger, they wept over the waste, the losses, the bitterness of the day gone by. Of course there were a few pleased individuals among them, but these were already wrapped in satisfied slumber. The rest were disappointed, miserable creatures in unwarm beds, tearfully bemoaning their fate." Page 17

"Cheuh-hui gazed at his grandfather stubbornly. He examined the old man's long, thin body. A peculiar thought came to him. It seemed to him that the person lying in the cane reclining chair was not his grandfather but the representative of an entire generation. He knew that the old man and he—the representative of the grandson's generation—could never see eye to eye." Page 64

"He looked up again at the full moon, bathing the night with its limitless radiance. An irresistible strength seemed to well up within him as he thought of Ming-feng." Page 80

"It was impossible for the dragon to escape. No matter how it writhed and rolled, the sparks streamed against the bare flesh of the dancers, some of the flame adhering to their bodies, making them halt their dancing and cry out loudly. Finally the dancers stood stockstill and, holding the poles by which they had manipulated their segments of the dragon end up like walking staffs, they struck bold poses and let the carriers spray them. Their only defense was to shake their bodies violently to throw off the sparks. The audience laughed approvingly, and the carriers moved in closer with their fire-spitting tubes, determined to make the dragon dancers beg for mercy." Pages 138-139

"It was like entering another world. They could still hear the firing, but their surroundings helped them forget their terror. Green grass, flowers of red and white—everywhere expressions of gentle life. Veiled in the twilight mists, the garden had an air of mystery. Although people were overwrought, they could not help noticing these beauties of nature." Page 159

"A person is always short of courage, acting alone. I never thought she'd take that road. I truly loved her. But under the circumstances, how could I marry her? Maybe I was too selfish. Maybe I was dazzled by other things. Anyhow, I killed her. She ended her life in the waters of the lake, and another girl, weeping, went to the Feng family to bury her youth, to satisfy the passions of a lustful old dog. With that always in my mind, do you think I'll ever be able to live in peace?" Page 214



"The funeral hall was in the wing of a large dilapidated temple whose courtyard was overgrown with weeds. Each of the wings flanking the main temple building contained a series of small rooms. Most of these housed coffins and funeral equipment, much of it in a decayed and neglected condition. Ordinarily a coffin was left in a funeral hall until the family could arrange to transport it back to the deceased's native place for burial. But here, in one room were four coffins that had been brought in almost twenty years ago; no one remembered to whom they belonged." Pages 260-261

"Cheuh-hui couldn't help begin impressed by the contrast between his Fifth Uncle, Ke-ting, and his brother, Cheuh-min. Cheuh-min, nineteen years old, surrounded by enemies, sustained only by his faith and enthusiasm, was fighting bravely, the family helpless against him. Ke-ting, over thirty, the father of a thirteen-year-old daughter, knelt on the floor, slapping his own face, insulting and reviling himself, implicating others, offering no resistance by word or deed." Page 269

"The remainder of the crowd broke up too. No one offered the witch doctor any help. Although the sorcerer grumbled, and some of the ladies of the family privately expressed dissatisfaction, this time Cheuh-hui won a total victory. He himself had never expected it." Page 277

"No matter what happens, I must go my own road, even if it means trampling over their dead bodies. Cheuh-hui seemed to be hemmed in by bitterness, with no way out, and he encouraged himself with these words." Page 293

"Gnawing his lips and clenching his fists, Cheuh-hui listened. He forgot about his own affairs. He could see the full, pretty face of his sister-in-law, Jui, and a coffin. Gradually the coffin became two, then three. The faces of three girls appeared—one full and pretty; one mournful and sad; the third innocent and lively. The faces multiplied. Four, five—he knew them all—more and more and more. . . . Suddenly they all disappeared, and he was confronted with only the tear-stained visage of his Big Brother." Page 308

Topics for Discussion

How would you describe the personalities of the three brothers Cheuh-hsin, Cheuh-hui, and Cheuh-min? How do their personalities affect their fates?

Compare and contrast Mei and Jui-cheuh. How are they different? If their marriage had not been arranged, do you think Cheuh-hsin and Jui-Cheuh would have loved each other anyway?

Do you think the Venerable Master Kao enjoys his role as head of the family? Why or why not?

Cheuh-min calls his brother Cheuh-hui "the humanitarian" because he refuses to ride in a sedan chair. What do you think the sedan chair symbolizes to Cheuh-hui? Is he really a humanitarian?

Ultimately, why does Ming-feng commit suicide? Cheuh-min says that her suicide shows strength of character. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

Compare and contrast the deaths and funerals of the following characters: Ming-feng, Mei, Master Kao, and Jui-cheuh. How do others respond to their deaths? How are their funerals different privately and publicly. Which of these characters has the most influence over others?

Chueh-hsin is motivated by pleasing others. Cheuh-min is motivated by love. What motivates Cheuh-hui?

Several characters lament the fact that Ming-feng was not born into a wealthy family. How would she have been different if she had been? Would she have been as sweet and likable?