

Iron & Silk Study Guide

Iron & Silk by Mark Salzman

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Contents

Iron & Silk Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	4
Chapter 2.....	6
Chapter 3.....	8
Chapter 4.....	11
Chapter 5.....	14
Chapter 6.....	16
Chapter 7.....	18
Chapter 8.....	19
Characters.....	20
Objects/Places.....	23
Themes.....	25
Style.....	28
Quotes.....	30
Topics for Discussion.....	32



Plot Summary

Mark Salzman writes about his experiences as an English teacher in the Hunan Province of South Central China in his work, "Iron & Silk." The title represents two forms of martial arts where one form is harsh and muscular and the other is softer and gentler but just as effective. Mark's interest in China and its culture was sparked at an early age. At the age of thirteen, he enrolled in a Kung Fu school where he studied martial arts, calligraphy, and ink painting. Later in life, he continued his studies at Yale University, graduating Phi Beta Kappa, Summa Cum Laude with a major in Chinese Languages and Literature. After graduation, Mark and several other Yale graduates, accepted teaching positions in China.

Mark and his colleagues arrive together in the city of Changsha where the Hunan Medical College is located. The new arrivals will stay at the College where they will teach English. Mark is assigned to teach several different classes, which are comprised of medical students, teachers, and doctors whose knowledge of English range from nothing to near fluency. Mark enjoys his classes and learns many interesting and anecdotal incidents about China and its people and culture from his students.

Mark receives much support from the dedicated and knowledgeable people who he encounters at school and in the community. One of his biggest passions in life is martial arts. He has studied wushu, one of the many martial arts forms, for years in the United States. When he is in China, in the birthplace of the art form, Mark feels blessed that he is able to receive instruction from world class experts. Mark learns that to be a true martial arts competitor, he must learn to develop his internal strengths that are referred to by the Chinese as "qi" and "gong fu." He also takes formal lessons from artisans who are experts in calligraphy, which is another passion that originated in his youth.

Beyond formal lessons, Mark learns about other strengths that the Chinese cultivate. They are dedicated and respectful people who are loyal to their friends and family. They disdain arrogance and shun any sign of disrespect. He learns of a people who will walk a hundred miles to repay a debt and encounters a felon who is respectful of his feelings. He befriends an old fisherman who feels so honored that Mark is his friend that he promises to buy him his own fishing boat if he agrees to live with him and his family.

The only negativity he encounters is the influences that the Chinese Communist Party is having on the people. He never blames the people for the propaganda they repeat. Instead he feels concern and is hurt that their pure natures are being compromised.

After two years, Mark heads back to the United States. He speaks of no regrets and attests to the increased admiration and respect he has for China and particularly its people.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Leaving

Mark Salzman leaves the Hunan Province in China after a two-year stay. He is detained at the railway station because the large bag he is carrying contains sabres and swords. Although he provides documentation that he is a student of a well-known martial arts teacher and that the weapons are all gifts, the officials are still dubious. According to the railway personnel, the bag is too long and the weapons may indeed be Chinese artifacts. If the objects are artifacts, Mark cannot not leave the country.

Salzman runs into a policeman he knows who tries to convince the officials to let him through. His plane from Hong Kong to New York leaves in two days and he fears this delay may cause him to miss his flight. The policeman advises him to put on a display of his martial arts skills to prove that he is a student of the famous teacher. He rips his pants during his demonstration and is deluged by little old ladies who offer to sew up the rip and by little old sick men who think that he may have learned healing powers during his lessons. Finally Salzman gets on the train with his weapons and is off to Hong Kong.

Arriving

Salzman describes arriving by train in South Central China with three other companions, Bob, Jean, and Julian, to teach English. While in Canton, Salzman and his friends had been ripped off by an organization called the China Travel Service, which presents itself as a support system for foreign travelers. In reality, it was a way to get a "fee" at every turn such as a fee to have their bags carried, another for a taxi, another fee for a better bunk on the train, and so on. There are problems getting tickets for night travel but finally the friends are able to secure them. Another official challenges them as to their right to go into a certain region. But finally everything is smoothed over and they are allowed to travel onto Changsha.

The next morning the foursome arrives in Changsha where signs of Mao are everywhere. The group is greeted by a welcoming team from the Hunan Medical College where they will be teaching. The ride through the city was eye-opening. The streets are crowded with small men toting large and heavy carts containing materials of every description. Small shops of every description line the streets and the residential area is poor and filthy. There is discarded dishwater and refuse everywhere along with the flattened dead bodies of rats that are the size of squirrels.

Arriving at the school campus, which is desolate and abandoned looking, Mark and his colleagues are greeted by friendly school officials who seem to be happy with their arrival. That evening they visit a crowded theater where everyone is hot and sweaty. The crowd is so rude that the band leaves the stage in the middle of its performance.

During the entire performance, men all dressed in identical grey Mao suits and caps are scattered about observing the crowd.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

A Piano

From his early childhood, Mark Salzman has been interested in China and Chinese culture. His parents enroll him in a kung fu school where he learns, among other things, discipline and what it means to "die well." He learns both the Mandarin and Cantonese languages as well as some classical Chinese. He attends Yale, majoring in Chinese literature. Although he is not keen about going to China or traveling in general, he needs a job and lands a two-year assignment teaching English at the Hunan Medical College in Changsha.

Mark is assigned to teach several classes. One consists of young medical students and another is comprised of doctors and teachers of medicine. He is greeted with great enthusiasm by all his students who seem overjoyed with his presence. Their English ability ranges from near fluent to hopeless.

Teacher Wu beckons Mark to her office to help in the translation of some school loan documents. The application concludes with the promise that the school would be transformed as set out by the guidelines provided by the Communist Party. Mark advises Teacher Wu that the content should be more "Western" sounding since it was being submitted to an international organization.

Teacher Wu has heard that Mark plays the cello. She invites him over to her tiny apartment, asking him to bring the cello and play for her. She has a piano but it is out of tune. Later, Teacher Wu locates a tuning wrench and convinces Mark to tune her piano. Even though he had never tuned a piano before, he is able to adjust the keys and pedals and provide Teacher Wu with a much improved instrument. She is very grateful.

Teacher Wei

To avoid the terribly crowded buses, Mark purchases a bike to use for his transportation needs. He is so dusty after his first ride that he immediately takes a shower. There is a regulation against foreigners bathing in public bathhouses so he is lucky enough to have his own private shower. Just as he emerges covered in a towel, he is visited by Teacher Wu. She has brought along Teacher Wei, another elderly woman around her age, who has been assigned to help Mark with his Chinese.

That evening, Mark is scheduled to give a lecture at school on the movie, "E.T." The large audience loves Mark's interpretation of the film. They laugh and cheer as he half-narrates and half-acts the story of the alien. Teacher Wei meets with Mark the next evening. She begins their lesson by discussing the works of ancient Chinese author Tao Qian. Since all writers are dreamers and drinkers, she says she brought rice wine with her and insists that Mark drinks it all or else "no lesson."



Mark practices the martial art known as wushu outside his apartment building in the mornings. One morning, a guest staying in the building, Dr. Li strikes up a conversation with him. As it turns out, Dr. Li is an expert in wushu and provides instruction to Mark. Dr. Li tells Mark his wushu is beautiful on the outside but he needs to work on his "gong fu" which translates to inner strength.

Mark and his fellow teachers from Yale decide to spend a holiday weekend in another town called Wuhan. Teacher Wei is the traditional Chinese teacher who is as dedicated to developing her student's character and watching out for his safety as she is as teaching him. She is surprised that Mark and his friends, all in their early twenties, think they are mature enough to buy their own tickets and plan their travel schedule without help from any elders.

Hong Kong Foot

Mark develops athlete's foot. A medical student tells him that athlete's foot had been eradicated from the Socialist Motherland and that he must have contracted it in another land. The student refers to Mark's condition as "Hong Kong Foot" and advises him to have someone from America send him medication for it. Mark has a friend in Hong Kong send him the medication.

When the box with the medicine arrives, the clerk at the post office refuses to release it until Mark pays a huge tax on it. Such taxation was to be waived for him as a foreigner working in China. Hence he appeals to the authorities who tell him they will "research" the matter. Although initially there was to be a waiver of these taxes, the regulation abruptly changes and he is told that he will not be reimbursed for any taxes he pays for mail or packages.

Myopia

Mark starts receiving Cantonese lessons from Mr. Gong in his building in exchange for English lessons. Mr. Gong tells Mark of the countryside where he spent several years. He helps a young boy recover from a high fever. The father of the young boy is ashamed that he had nothing to pay Mr. Gong with but shows up thirteen years later at Mr. Gong's doorstep with a basket of eggs for remuneration. The man travels the one-hundred mile trip on foot.

Mark is invited to Mr. Gong's house for some of their lesson exchanges. One of Mr. Gong's son is so myopic that he will not be able to pass the eye exam for college and will have to learn a trade. The boy shows an interest in sketching so Mark comes back several nights later with his water colors and charcoals as gifts for the boy. Mark comes back a few more times to teach the boy how to use the materials.

The parents are harsh with their son when he fails to draw as well as Mark. Mark tries to relieve the tension by telling the boy that the most important aspect of drawing should be the joy it brings him. Neither the boy nor the parents understand this concept. Later, Mark learns that the boy had given up drawing for sports much to the shame of the parents.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Peking Duck

Mark and his class of teachers discuss the recent reading assignment, which was about World War II. Since America and China are on the same side in World War II, Mark does not think there would be any controversy in reading a story about WWII. On the contrary, the students react to the story with great passion. One asks Mark how he feels about his country, which bombed and killed innocent people. Mark points out that the bombing is intended to save lives by bringing the conflict to an abrupt end.

The students all proclaim their gratitude that China and America are friends. The students express their view that since China is a peace-loving country and never attacks other countries, the world would be better off if China is the the leader of all nations.

The students read their compositions on their most joyous times. The last one to read his account is Teacher Zhu. He, like the other teachers, has been assigned by the Party to teach in the dismal Hunan Province and has been away from their homelands and families for years. He tells of traveling to his hometown Beijing, where he and a relative eat at a restaurant, enjoying a main course of duck. After Teacher Zhu finishes his story, he confesses that it is not he but his wife who had enjoyed the duck dinner. She has relayed the story to him many times and even though he is not there, it becomes his happiest memory.

Pan

Mark is woken by one of his doctor students on a cold January morning. It is Dr. Nie who insists that Mark come with him because he has a surprise for him. Mark follows Nie through the crowded and dirty streets to the Provincial Sports Unit, which houses facilities for Hunan athletes. Mark is pleased and astonished to see the display of martial arts put on by a group of three young male athletes. After the men finish, two young women take center stage, set to begin an unarmed match. The women battle with sufficient power and enough striking force to knock a large man unconscious. The athletes are members of the Hunan Provincial Wushu Troupe.

While waiting for a "special guest," Mark and the others watch as the troupe entertains with various displays of the arts. Suddenly, the great actor, director, and choreographer, Pan, enters the large room. He has played an evil character in the martial arts movie, "Shaolin Temple." Mark recognizes him immediately. As part of his training and workout regimen, Pan is known to punch an iron plate thousands of times each day. His nickname, "Iron Fist," describes his strength and personality as well as his heavily callused right hand.



The troupe works out for the next two hours and endures endless criticism and instruction from Pan. When they take a break, Pan suggests that since Mark took wushu lessons in America for years, he should demonstrate his abilities. Mark explains that he does not have their skill level and puts on a chaotic display of dancing and martial arts that he makes up as he goes along. Sensing that Mark is floundering, Pan offers to train him.

A Fisherman

One foggy morning, Mark watches a fisherman in a boat casting his net on the Xiang River. When the fisherman realizes that he is being watched by a "white man," he seems stunned and almost paralyzed. The shoeless fisherman, who must be freezing, is overjoyed when Mark speaks to him in Chinese. He asks Mark to board his boat so he can take him and show him to his family. The two travel downstream for about thirty minutes during which time they talk and sing. They near a flotilla of several boats which the fisherman tells Mark is his family. He asks Mark to hide under the bamboo covering at the end of the boat until he tells him to come out.

When Mark emerges from the boat, Old Ding's family is overjoyed. They are stunned but delighted that Mark can speak Chinese. He is given more food and drink than he can consume and is taught how to row the family boats and cast the large fishing nets. Ding and several brothers volunteer to escort Mark back in time to make his afternoon class. Going upstream, the trip takes an hour and a half. Before Old Ding and his brothers will finally return him to his original starting point, they insist on visiting a large river boat. The crew is astonished to see the white man and are thrilled to give him a tour of their vessel. As they touch shore, the brothers gift Mark with two large fish which he later gives to Teacher Wei. She cooks them to perfection in a rich Hunan sauce and returns them to Mark.

Kissing

The topic of kissing begins at a dinner party during with the viewing of a Nastassia Kinski film. The doctors and teachers from Mark's class do not like the movie chiefly because Nastassia is not beautiful because of her big lips. Mark counters that in America, such full lips are considered attractive because they are kissable. The comments brings shrieks of laughter and taunts that Mark is a "naughty boy." He comments that he has never seen a kiss exchanged between any Chinese couples. The teachers and doctors point out that a cultural difference on the matter exists between America and China. One male teacher proclaims that parents should not kiss their children when they are past infancy. After most of the others had departed, Teacher Liu, a reserved and quiet man, confirms that what the others said about kissing one's children is true. However, when his ten and twelve-year old daughters are sound asleep at night, he comes into their rooms and kisses them good-night.

A Suicide



Comrade Yang, also known as Old Sheep is the woman who tends to the needs of the apartment residents. She brings Mark a thermos of boiled and hot water every day. She is always friendly and greets Mark with a big smile and laugh. One morning she enters quietly and is not at all herself. She tells Mark that the body of a college woman had been found. She had apparently committed suicide. Old Sheep hurries with her duties. She is not supposed to believe in ghosts but she does. The ghosts of suicide victims roam at night.

Mark learns that the woman was a clerical worker who had been abused by her superior for years. The woman hung herself in the superior's office. Mark asks if the superior will face any prosecution but learns that the woman's family is more likely to be under official scrutiny. Suicides are against Chinese law and are considered criminal offenses against Socialism and the Communist Party. Family members are often punished since it is presumed that they condoned the "incorrect thought" that led to the suicide. The woman's children will probably have difficulty finding jobs when they come of age.

Five days after the woman's death, her superior is deemed not guilty of any violation. Her death was the result of personal not political issues. Her family is then allowed to hold a memorial for her.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Lessons

Mark is taking lessons from Pan four nights a week at the training hall. Much of the first few weeks are dedicated to staring at each other. Mark grows comfortable with this practice, realizing that it evokes strength from within. One evening, Pan brings Mark to his apartment. Pan's wife prepares a meal for the two men. After his two sons greet their guest, they and their mother disappear for the evening.

Pan relates accounts of his past experiences and ventures and how he vanquished his enemies and defeated hoodlums and criminals. Pan's wife tells Mark in the twenty-five years he had been training martial arts, that he, Mark, had been the only person to be accepted as his private student. Later Mark becomes discouraged in his progress with Changquan boxing and asks Pan if he can drop that part of his training. Pan, showing anger for the first time, tells Mark he must show more dedication to his goals and that if Mark quits taking training in Changquan, Pan will be disgraced.

Pan asks Mark to teach him English. For his first lesson, Pan has a recorder set up and a list of phrases that he wants translated. He wants Mark to say the words in English into the recorder so that Pan can practice saying them correctly. Pan has Mark write down in English the ancient story of a farmer who took down a mountain shovel full by shovel full. In turn, Pan begins teaching Mark routines that involve the use of swords. Pan is a tough teacher who, when Mark is injured during a practice session, says, "Sweating and bleeding. Good."

A Garden

Teacher Wei tells Mark to learn calligraphy to improve his mind. Arrangements are made for a young student and expert calligrapher called Hai Bin to become his teacher. Mark quickly understands that calligraphy is an intense and precise art that has many and varied styles. Achieving success takes total dedication and much effort. Hai Bin tells Mark that his skills in wushu and calligraphy will support one another. Hai Bin proves to be as much a task master as Pan. Mark dubs Hai Bin "slave driver," which pleases the young man. After Hai Bin sees Mark betraying the art by listening to music on a Walkman while practicing, he admonishes him and dubs him "Bad Boy."

Mark and one of his American colleagues Bill visit Hai Bin's home town during a holiday. The city Suzhou is one of the most beautiful he has ever seen. It is a city with many gardens that are popular tourist attractions. On their last day, Hai Bin brings one of his teachers, a distinguished artist in his eighties, to a garden and introduce him to Mark and Bill. The old man brings several of his drawings with him to show the Americans. Two punks wandering through the garden spoil his drawings by purposely flicking



cigarette ashes on them. Hai Bin is furious and forces them to leave. He then brushes off the ashes from the artwork and apologizes to Mark and Bill for the young men's rude behavior.

Mark's main goals are to become very good at something and for people to like him. Hai Bin's goals are to eat and sleep. Hai Bin tells Mark his goals are more achievable because they are within his control. Eating right and sleeping away from home at college is not within anyone's control.

A Short Story

Mark reads a story entitled "The Lottery" aloud to the class. The story is about a small town that holds a lottery each year in which everyone must participate. The "winner" is stoned to death by the rest of the townspeople. One of Mark's students insists that the story is true and asks why Americans behave in such a way. Mark explains that the story was a fictional and allegorical depiction about the dangers of "crowd mentality." Another student points out that when Mao swam across the Yangtse River, many of the local residents jumped in the Xiang River to emulate their leader. So many crowded in the river that it was difficult to swim and many drowned. Another student asks Mark to select stories with happier endings in the future.

Mei Banfa

Hai Bin introduces Mark to a lab technician called Little Guo who as it turns out is very tall and large. He knows a wushu teacher who will take Mark on to supplement the lessons he is receiving from Pan. Little Guo's teacher, Zheng, is an expert nei-gong boxer which is an art based on the development of qi or "internal force" rather than physical strength. Little Guo takes Mark the next week for his first session with Zheng.

Zheng introduces Mark to Wudang boxing which belongs to the soft school of martial arts. Even though Wudang boxing does not seem as powerful as its harsher relatives like Shaolin boxing, it is just as effective. Mark complements Zheng on his skills but he insists it is not his skills but rather qi, which is a force that lies in the lower abdomen and circulates throughout the body. The force is so powerful that it can be passed from one person to another. To prove the strength of qi, Zheng breaks a wooden stool on his head but without causing any damage to his head. Qi is something that cannot be taught but is cultivated by the individual. Zheng begins giving Mark guidance in seeking qi. Zheng's training differs from Pan's in one major respect. While Pan's style is frenetic, Zheng's style is more relaxed and slow-paced.

Zheng takes Mark to another town to visit his friend, Lin who is an artist. The old artist has only one sculpture to show Mark—he gives all his work away. The only thing he will not part with is an old post card with a photo of Michelangelo's David which Lin refers to as his "lesson book." Mark offers to get a book on sculpture from America for him. Lin is thrilled; however, he is unable to receive the book after it is sent. Mark decides to end his training sessions with Zheng because the master has stopped teaching his other



students to concentrate 100 percent of the time. Mark's actions disgrace Zheng so therefore his friend, Lin, cannot accept the book.

A Ghost Story

Mark returns to the riverbank and sketches a junk that is moored nearby. Old Ding pulls up and is amazed by the likeness of Mark's drawing. The junk's owners greet Mark warmly and offer him food and drink. Mark gives the drawing to the elder man of the family. He at first resists but finally accepts it and discusses with Old Ding what an appropriate gift would be for Mark. The family wants to give Mark one of the row boats which Mark finds a ridiculous payment for his little charcoal sketch. He tells the family that in America a gift of art must be exchanged for another gift of art and asks the family to sign folk songs for him.

That weekend, Old Ding picks Mark up for the afternoon. He brings his cello and family photographs. They reach Old Ding's apartment by dark and unfortunately, there is an electricity black-out and it is pitch black inside. They ask Mark to stand by a candle so the children can see him clearly. One of Old Ding's brothers, a very large and intimidating man whom Mark calls Fu Manchu, tells the kids that a spirit that eats little children is inside the cello case. The children of course are fearful but impressed with the red velvet lining inside of the case. After he finishes playing the cello, he is asked to sing a song. He sings "Scarborough Fair," which the family asks him to repeat over and over again.

Old Ding announces that it is time for ghost stories. Mark tells the kids about a scary monster with blond hair and blue eyes who likes to nibble on children. The kids do not miss that he is describing himself and run away from him in fear. That evening, the brothers take Mark further downstream. They will be sleeping on the boat that evening in anticipation of an early fishing expedition the next day. They do not have much luck fishing but it does not seem to bother the brothers.

Mark watches as fishermen take down their trousers and use the river as a toilet. Immediately after that, Old Ding asks Mark if he wants to wash up and brush his teeth using river water. When Mark declines, the brothers question Mark's lack of personal hygiene. The brothers ask Mark to live with them. They will give him his own boat. Mark tells the family that he could not live on a boat since he has too many personal items like books. They offer to buy a boat for his books. Finally, he returns to where they picked him up and he rides back to his apartment on his bike. The next morning, there is a large tub with a gigantic fish sitting on his front porch.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Pan Learns Script

Mark learns more about Pan's background. Pan lost his father at a young age and his two older brothers considered his martial arts training was a waste of time. This forced Pan to practice secretly. During the day he did metal work with his brothers and practiced his skills at night. He let no one know about his training until he registered for a national competition and emerged as China's grand champion.

One day Mark is refused entry to the training facilities. He eventually learns that the country is undergoing a nationwide purge of leftist elements under the Party Rectification Campaign as well as a move to rid the country of western ideas. Mark is never allowed back in the training hall. Pan continues their lessons on a rooftop of a public bathhouse. Pan is away often, accompanying his troupe on competitions or away in Shanghai or Hong Kong making another movie.

Pan insists on learning script, or long-hand. When Mark tries to discourage him, recommending that he learn English better, Pan becomes angry reminding Mark that he can accomplish whatever he sets out to do.

A Runaway

Bill is visited by a runaway boy early one morning. Bill encounters an eleven-year-old boy when he was on a mountain climbing expedition the year before. The boy claims to be from Hunan where his family lives. He has runaway from home to see the world. He asks Bill if he could travel with him. Bill takes the boy with him for a few days but then he heads back to school. He gives the boy his address and told him to keep in touch. Bill receives a letter from the boy about six months after that saying that his parents are willing to let Bill adopt him. The boy asks that if Bill did not want to adopt him, that he should send him some foreign currency.

The next day the campus authorities take the boy away to stay in the guest house until his parents can be located. The boy escapes from the guest house and returns to the apartment where Bill and Mark are staying. Mark is at first put off by the boy who seems arrogant but then realizes the boy, being on his own at such a young age, has naturally built up defenses. The boy enjoys the wushu skills that Mark has learned. The runaway wins Mark over completely when he chases away a group of young boys who come by on a daily basis to harass Mark while he is doing his wushu exercises.

The authorities take the boy away again, promising that he will be on a bus in the morning headed for home. The boy returns once again because he would rather stay in Mark and Bill's apartment building and because Mark, that evening, is giving a lecture on "Crime and Punishment in America." Bill buys the boy's bus ticket and takes him to



the station in the morning. The runaway is the topic of discussion in Mark's classes for quite a few days. One elderly doctor agrees with the others that he is a bad boy. Since she has never had a vacation she admires how the boy uses his imagination to slip away.

Teacher Black

A student introduces Mark to another wushu teacher named Teacher Hei. "Hei" is a rare surname which means "black." He asks that Mark tell no one that he is teaching him. It would be an insult to Pan because Hei is not as skilled as Pan. They begin with the Xingyiquan and Baguazhang disciplines. The two styles resemble each other, making it easy to master both.

Hei notices scars on Mark's knuckles from "hitting iron." Hei's hands have no such scars. The style of wushu that he ascribes to does not require such self-brutality. Hei feels that Mark needs further instruction in soft-style boxing and should study Taijiquan. Hei is not an expert in that style and suggests another teacher who could help Mark learn that discipline. Hei introduces Mark to Teacher Yi and his father-in-law, Old Zai, both experts in taiji and Mark soon begins taking lessons from them.

Hei and Mark work out on a mountain clearing one day to take advantage of the beautiful weather. Hei reminds Mark that in his style of wushu, one's hands move like silk. Hei tells Mark that he does not dress properly for the Hunan climate. Hei's wife had knitted a black wool sweater for Mark and it fits perfectly. She makes a black one for him so he had something to remember Teacher Hei by when he leaves.

In a Gallery

While working out alone, Mark accidentally stabs himself with the tip of a sword. It is a minor injury which he dresses himself. Mark visits an art gallery where he meets one of the most famous artists in the region. The man known as Master Lu, invites him to his home for dinner where he shows Mark some of his works. He promises to paint a landscape for Mark.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Unsuitable Reading

October 1st is China's National Day, and a large banquet is arranged for all foreigners working in Hunan. A speech is delivered by a high official of the government touting the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party and its goals of adapting to the Four Modernizations by the year 2000. The speech is tediously long and people in the audience are talking or dozing off. The speaker does not seem to be annoyed by this behavior as he himself seems bored with the speech.

Mark meets a man at the meeting with whom he becomes friendly. The man translates books from English to Chinese and asks to borrow some of Mark's books to translate. After reading the books he returns them and tells Mark they are all unsuitable for China since they are either pornographic or anti-Socialist. He borrows "The World According to Garp" which he finds most unsuitable of all the books he borrowed but asks if he can keep it.

No Sad, No Cry

Most of Mark's teaching hours in his second year are spent with young medical students. China feels somewhat inferior to the west when it comes to technical abilities. The more fluent the young medical students are in English, the better their exam scores will be. A lot of pressure is placed on Mark's students to succeed and excel.

When a China Field Staff Director from Yale University observes the class, one student says he wants to eat Mark's heart and drink his blood. It is obviously an attempt at humor. However, Teacher Wu who is observing as well, finds the remark totally unacceptable and insists that the boy be punished. Mark tries to explain that in America, students are encouraged to have light exchanges with their teachers. But Teacher Wu is steadfast and insists that Chinese students do not say such things to their teachers.

Mark works with his students to abandon their tendency to learn by rote in favor of using the language. To do so, he has the students participate in impromptu exchanges in English in various scenarios.

Thinning Hair

Little Guo introduces Mark to another taiji expert called Master Liang. The master tells Mark that taiji, when practiced correctly, not only improves one's health but prolongs life. Master Liang turns out to be a cheerful and fun-loving master. He admits that he was at first afraid of Mark. He thought Mark's blue eyes looked like they were lit and were intimidating. In Taiji, one exploits the opponent's own force and loss of balance to defeat him. Taiji uses the technique of "pushing hands" rather than a traditional boxing move.



Mark makes enough progress with Master Liang that he earns the nickname of "Little Tiger." Mark takes photos of the Master and his family to show his friends back home. He asks the Master to remove his shirt so he can show his friends how strong the Master is. Master Liang asks Mark to touch up the photos of him by giving him some hair—he's going bald.

Bad Elements

Mark is on a crowded train where he meets two young men reeking of liquor. He learns that one of the men has just gotten out of prison for stabbing someone. The man cannot wait to see his mother who will be waiting at the station. The other man tells him he should not talk about his mother since the white man across from them (Mark) never gets to see his mother.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Don't You know It's Snowing Out?

Pan becomes ill and it is discovered that he had been suffering for abdominal pain for years. The doctors determine that he has an ulcer, a gall bladder disease, heart disease, and other problems. He will not stay in the hospital for treatment however because he is getting his students ready for a competition. Since Mark will not be in China much longer, Pan allows him to choose what he wants to learn next. Mark wants to learn swords but Pan cautions him to do well or else Pan will be sad.

A Coffee Shop

While on a holiday in Hangzhou, Mark stumbles onto a coffee shop. There is a \$5 charge to enter the cafe where the coffee is served. He is not able to get any coffee to go so he returns to his room to get his metal travel mug. An African gentleman is talking to Bill when Mark returns to his room. The African man is a medical student who has been in China for six years but has been treated terribly because the Chinese hate black people. They treat African people like animals. Mark returns to the coffee shop where the clerk tries to charge him \$5 just for the coffee but he winds up paying only \$1 after she pours most of the hot coffee out.

Professor Jin

The English Medical Class is performing co-ed skits to enhance their confidence in speaking publicly with the opposite sex. Mark receives a letter from calligrapher known as Jin Wenzhi, who would like to meet with him because of his interest in the art. Mark begins taking calligraphy lessons from Jin on Saturdays. On one occasion, Jin gifts Mark with several calligraphy books. Unfortunately, Jin falls ill and is unable to keep up the lessons with Mark.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

A Rat

A rat jumps up on Mark's desk during class. He slams a large dictionary on the pest and kills it. The students enjoy the event, telling Mark that he is displaying real gong fu. They dub Mark the "Rat-Killing Hero". The students convince Mark to turn the rat's corpse into the Rat Collection Office where he will be given five cents. He finds out that foreigners cannot collect rewards for dead rats because an official paper would have to be issued evidencing that China has a rat problem, which they try to hide.

A Night Ride

Mark has a brief encounter with a beautiful Chinese woman. She is a doctor who loves to read English language books and borrows some from Mark. She is ill with terminal leukemia and tells Mark that he is lucky to travel the world and make friends everywhere. She comes by on two different evenings and on the last night, she stays too late to take a bus home. Mark takes her home on his bike. At the top of a big hill, she convinces him to ride down the hill with her on the back as fast as possible with no brakes. She says goodnight to him at the bottom of the hill and walks back up the hill to her home.

The Long Swords

Mark begins his sword training using broomsticks. After a few times, Pan fails to show up for the lessons. Mark is getting ready to leave the country and wants to get the word out to Pan before he departs. The night before Mark has to leave, Pan shows up again with a rolled up rug under his arm. Mark tells Pan he will miss him and surprisingly the usually unemotional Pan says that he will also miss Mark. Pan unrolls the carpet to reveal two large swords. Pan and Mark work out together with the swords. Pan takes only one sword with him and he leaves the other one with Mark to take home.



Characters

Mark Salzman

Author Mark Salzman has great admiration for China and its culture from a young boy on. At thirteen years of age, he begins his studies on China and Chinese culture in his homeland of America. He studies marshal arts, calligraphy, and ink painting. Salzman majors in Chinese Language and Literature at Yale University where he becomes fluent in the Mandarin and Cantonese dialects as well as classical Chinese. He wins the Williams Prize for the best paper on Eastern culture during his senior year at Yale.

It seems natural for Salzman to accept the opportunity to visit and live in the land he loves and knows so much about after graduation. He, along with several other Yale classmates, accept positions at the Hunan Medical College in South Central China in the city of Changsha in the Hunan Province. They are assigned to teach English to doctors, teachers, and medical students. Although he is the "teacher," Mark meets many other teachers in China from whom he hones his skills in language, martial arts, and artistic pursuits such as calligraphy. Other teachers, even simple fishermen and peasants, teach him about inner-strength, respect and loyalty.

After his two-year tenure is up, Mark returns to the United States. However, he is invited back to participate in a National Martial Arts Competition in China where he gives a public performance of his martial arts skills. These skills, which he learned at a young age, are greatly enhanced during his years in China.

Pan

A friend takes Mark to the Provincial Sports Unit in Changsha, which houses facilities for Hunan athletes. After watching a few martial arts displays by the Hunan Provincial Wushu Troupe, Mark is surprised by the sudden appearance of a "special guest." Suddenly, the great actor, director, and choreographer, Pan, enters the large workout room. Pan is very famous in China, most specifically in the world of martial arts. Pan had been in several martial arts movies, the best known of which was "Shaolin Temple," one of China's few blockbusters.

Due to his love and devotion to all things Chinese, Mark recognizes him immediately. Pan is known as a harsh critique and instructor and as a strict disciplinarian to his students. However, he is not any tougher on his students than he is on himself. As part of his personal training and workout regimen, Pan is known to land at least one thousand punches every day on a heavy iron disc, earning him the nickname, "Iron Fist." The nickname can be used interchangeably to describe his strength and personality as well as his heavily callused right hand.

In an usual move, Pan takes on Mark as a private student. Although he does not reveal much about his thoughts or motivations, Pan is impressed by Mark's tenacity and love



for martial arts. Under Pan's tutelage, Mark greatly enhances the martial arts skills he already had and comes to understand the importance of developing inner strength, which is referred to as "qi" or "gong fu."

The conclusion of the story has Pan giving Mark his last wushu lesson. The unemotional Pan shows a new side when he tells Mark that he will miss him. As a parting gift, he gives Mark one of his ancient Chinese martial arts swords to take back with him to the United States.

Teacher Wu

Teacher Wu is an elderly woman who is a senior member of the English Department at Hunan Medical College. She asks for Mark's help in translating some school loan papers.

Teacher Wei

Teacher Wei is an elderly English teacher at the College. She is assigned to help Mark with his Chinese.

Bill, Jean, and Julian

Bill, Jean, and Julian are also Yale graduates and travel together with Mark to the Hunan Province in South Central China. In China, they teach English to medical students, teachers, and doctors.

Hai Bin

Hai Bin is a young college student who is an expert at Chinese calligraphy. He is introduced to Mark and takes him on as a student of calligraphy.

Old Ding

Mark strikes up a friendship with Old Ding who is a fisherman on the Xiang River. He and his family welcome Mark and enjoy his company so much that they offer to buy him a boat if he will live with them.

Old Yang

Old Yang, usually called Old Sheep, is the woman who cleans and manages the building where Mark and his colleagues live during their two-year stay in Hunan.



Master Zheng

Master Zheng is an expert nei-gong boxer and introduces Mark to Wudang boxing, which belongs to the soft school of martial arts.

Master Liang

Mark is introduced to taiji expert, Master Liang, who takes him on as a student. Master Liang proves to be a cheerful and pleasant instructor and much less intense than Pan.



Objects/Places

China

Mark Salzman spent two years in China in the Hunan Province. He teaches English to teachers, doctors, and medical students during his time there. Mark greatly admires China and its culture before teaching and living there.

Hunan Province

Author Mark Salzman recounts his time in the Hunan Province of South Central China. He teaches English at the Hunan Medical College in the city of Changsha.

Changsha

Changsha is the city in South Central China where Mark Salzman teaches English at the Hunan Medical College. The city has over one million people, most of whom lived in poverty and filth.

Hunan Medical College

Author Mark Salzman spends two years following graduation from Yale as an English teacher in the city of Changsha in the Hunan Province. He lives and teaches at the Hunan Medical College.

Provincial Sports Unit

The Provincial Sports Unit located in Changsha is a training center that houses facilities for Hunan athletes. The wushu expert Pan gives Mark lessons at the center.

Suzhou

Suzhou is the home town of Hai Bin who becomes Mark's intense calligraphy teacher. Mark spends many hours at Hai Bin's home in Suzhou learning the art of Chinese calligraphy.

Wuhan

Mark and his fellow teachers from Yale spend a holiday weekend in a town called Wuhan. Teacher Wei, a traditional Chinese teacher, is surprised that Mark and his



friends, all in their early twenties, think they are mature enough to plan their own travel plans without the help of an elder.

Xiang River

Mark becomes friendly with a fisherman named Old Ding who makes his living fishing in the Xiang River. Old Ding and his brothers and cousins are all fishermen and have boats on the river.

Hangzhou

While on a holiday in Hangzhou, Mark stumbles onto a coffee shop. Mark anxiously purchases some coffee since it is a rare commodity in China.

Rooftop of Bathhouse

When the authorities decide to purge Western influence from China, Mark is no longer allowed to practice martial arts at the sports center. Pan then holds his training sessions for Mark on the rooftop of a local bathhouse.



Themes

Martial Arts

Mark Salzman is intrigued with China and the Chinese culture early in life. His parents recognize his interest early on and enroll him in a kung fu school. At the school, he has his first lessons in wushu, one of the many Chinese martial art forms. After arriving in the Hunan Province of South Central China to teach English, Mark does not abandon his love for martial arts. In fact, being in China, he is in the heart of the martial arts world and his love for the sport only grows. He is determined to develop his knowledge and skills.

When Mark first visits the Sports Unit, he observes several presentations by the Hunan Provincial Wushu Troupe. He is impressed by their skills and dedication and aspires to achieve their level of perfection.

Perhaps due to his dedication and obvious love for the sport, one of the most renowned wushu masters in all of China, Pan, takes Mark on as a student. Pan gives Mark private lessons and as a strict task-master, emphasizes the discipline and commitment that is necessary to achieve perfection in the performance of wushu.

Mark meets a young man called Dr. Li, who offers to help Mark in developing his skills. He tells Mark that although he presents a beautiful image outwardly, that he needs to work on his internal strength, which is known in the martial arts world as "gong fu." Later when studying calligraphy, Mark realizes that "gong fu" is an element that is needed in that art as well. Mark's abilities in wushu and calligraphy support and complement one another.

Yet another instructor, Teacher Hei, introduces Mark to the wushu disciplines of Xingyiquan and Baguazhang. These styles do not require the self-brutality that is part of the wushu discipline taught by Pan. Mark also works with Teacher Yi who is an expert in soft-style boxing and Taijiquan. Another martial arts expert, Master Zheng is an expert nei-gong boxer, which is dependent upon the internal force known as "qi."

A constant theme that emerges is that the great Chinese martial arts masters are willing and even anxious to teach their disciplines. They never want payment nor gifts for the many hours they devote to teaching. They are compelled to teach their art to worthy students because of their own love for the sport, which brings discipline and self-knowledge to those who study under it.

Chinese Culture

Author Mark Salzman admires Chinese culture since he was a child, especially their martial arts forms. His parents recognize his interest and enroll him in a kung fu school where he gains knowledge about their Eastern culture. Over the years, Mark learns



classical Chinese and the Mandarin and Cantonese languages. At Yale University, Mark majors in Chinese literature. After graduating, it makes perfect sense that he accepts a position, along with several other colleagues, in China as an English teacher. Although he truly admires the Chinese culture, when he actually lives there, he finds that he would have to make many adjustments.

Mark learns that the elders in the Chinese population are respected for their wisdom and experience, unlike in the US where "kids" typically reject interference from the older people in their lives. Mark has to learn to adjust to this cultural discrepancy. For example, Teacher Wei is assigned to help Mark with his Chinese. But the role of teacher in China differs by far from that of a teacher in the United States.

Teacher Wei is elderly and as a traditional Chinese teacher, takes her role as her students' guardian seriously. She is not only dedicated to helping Mark with the Chinese language, she feels duty-bound to help him in developing his character as well as safeguarding him against any danger. She is astonished that Mark and his friends, all twenty-two year old young men, are capable of making their own plans for a trip without consulting an elder. When Mark returns from his weekend trip, Teacher Wei meets him at the station, telling him it would be inappropriate if on his first trip in China, no one welcomes him home.

In another incident involving Teacher Wei, a student's attempt at humor falls flat. Teacher Wei views the student's comments as disrespectful and insists that the student be punished as well as the others who laughed at his comments. Although Mark tries to soothe her ruffled feathers and assure her the student meant no harm, she is adamant. Chinese students do not behave in such disrespectful ways.

Mark is surprised when a reading assignment about World War II is controversial, especially since China and the United States are on the same side. However, there is much emotion among his students who accuse the US of having killed many innocents during the war. He does not convince anyone that the bombings were designed to curtail the war and thus lead to saving lives. As the conversation goes on, he realizes that the Chinese Communist Party is painting the US as an evil force, while touting itself as a peace-loving nation whose leadership would benefit the rest of the world.

Lessons Learned

Mark Salzman is a teacher in China who ends up learning more than his students. He studies the obvious pursuits like martial arts, calligraphy, and ink painting. These are skills he already has but which become immeasurably enhanced. As important, or perhaps more important as these disciplines, are the intangibles he learns about, like inner strength, dedication, loyalty, and respect. His "teachers" vary from accredited Chinese teachers and doctors to peasants and poor fishermen and on one occasion, a felon.



Although Mark's skills in the wushu form of martial arts are excellent, his Chinese instructors recognize early on that there is a missing element in his displays of the art. He is told that he must develop his inner strength known as "qi" or "gong fu." Although the instructors can offer advice on developing these characteristics, they cannot truly contribute to their manifestation. The connection with one's inner powers must be left to the individual.

Mark is told of a destitute and peasant farmer who was shamed that he had nothing to give the doctor who saved his son's life. The man never forgot his gratitude. Thirteen years later he traveled one-hundred miles on foot with a basket of eggs to give the doctor. Mark learned from Teacher Wei that students are always respectful to their teachers without exceptions. A beautiful Chinese woman with terminal cancer encourages Mark to stay positive and not to worry and that the world needs such happiness.

Old Ding, a fisherman who Mark befriends, is so happy to have Mark as a friend that he offers to buy him his own river boat if he agrees to live with him and his family. When asked to write about his most joyous memory, a male student provides an account of a delicious duck dinner he enjoyed at a restaurant. Later, he reveals that it is his wife who had the memorable time. The student has no happy memories of his own to recount but without bitterness finds joy in his wife's experience. On a crowded bus one day, a man who is just released from prison speaks about looking forward to seeing his mother again. His companion tells him to have respect for the white man (Mark) across from them who is not able to see his mother.



Style

Perspective

In "Iron & Silk," author Mark Salzman writes an account of his own experiences in the Hunan Province of China. He accepts a position to teach English to doctors, teachers, and medical students at the Hunan Medical College. The work is written in the first-person narrative and given that Salzman is relating his own experiences, he is naturally the best person to write about them.

Salzman has admired China and its culture since he is very young, having enrolled in a Kung Fu school at thirteen where he began studies in martial arts, calligraphy, and ink painting. He furthers his knowledge and enhances his admiration for the culture by majoring in Chinese Language and Literature at Yale. When he accepts the teaching position, he is fluent in both the Cantonese and Mandarin languages. Therefore, no one can be better prepared to make an easy transition to that culture and understand its nature. However, once actually living in China, he still meets with surprises, usually happy ones, and issues that are intrinsic to that land.

Based on his knowledge about China before he lives there and the understanding he gains during his tenure there, he is at a great advantage in writing this account and produces a work that few could replicate.

Tone

Since Mark Salzman loves and admires China and its cultures since his childhood, it is not surprising that he writes "Iron & Silk" or the account of his years as an English teacher in that land with respect and love. Even though he knows more about the new country he is moving to than most people who make such a move, there are still elements of surprise. He still experiences wonderment at the foreign land and culture, which is evident in his words. Despite some difficulties he has with a few officials several times, he never loses the reverence he has for the land of the rising sun and especially its people.

Even though he is temporarily thrown sometimes by regulation or views that to him seem illogical, he never loses the respect he has for the land and the people. He is a young man who is open to other opinions and ideas and is willing to accept without prejudice the Chinese way of life. Salzman proves that he is a young man who is not arrogant and is willing to build relationships with people of all descriptions and position, ranging from the respected Chinese doctors and teachers to his house maid called Old Sheep and to Old Ding, an old fisherman whom he befriends.

A somewhat disturbing tone does arise in a few incidents that involve the Chinese Communist Party. His words are not disparaging about this political aspect of the land he loves. Instead, it is one of concern for the people who are forced to live under it.

Structure

"Iron & Silk," a non-fiction account by author Mark Salzman, depicts his two-year tenure in South Central China's Hunan Province where he teaches English to doctors, teachers, and medical students. The work is segmented into eight major chapters, each of which has two to four sub-sections. The account is not in a distinct chronological order. The episodes that are described are chiefly stand-alone incidents that are not necessarily connected to other episodes within the same chapter.

Each episode that is recounted represents a succinct story that includes a conclusion. No episodes are left in limbo and there are no cliffhangers. Chapter 1 is comprised of two episodes, "Leaving" and "Arriving." In "Leaving," Salzman tells the reader of his difficulty in leaving the country with his martial arts wushu swords. In the episode titled "Arriving," there is an initial flashback to his initial arrival and then a description of his two years of experiences and adventures in a new and strange land.

The last chapter ends on an emotional note when he parts forever with his wushu teacher, Master Pan. Pan presents Mark with a wushu sword, considered an ancient Chinese artifact, to take with him back West. This incident then ties into the first chapter, which describes his difficulty in departing with the weaponry.



Quotes

"Dishwater and refuse were thrown casually out of windows, rats the size of squirrels could be seen flattened out all over the roads, spittle and mucus lay everywhere, and the dust and ash from coal-burning stoves, heaters and factories mixed with dirt and rain to stain the entire city an unpleasant greyish-brown." (Chapter 1, page 10.)

"I'd been interested in China since I was thirteen. I had seen the television movie "Kung Fu" and decided right away that peace of mind and a shaved head were what I had always wanted." (Chapter 2, page 17.)

"Now, practice the form, and this time don't fuss over the technique. Just enjoy it, as if this mound gave you power. That is the kind of feeling that makes wushu beautiful—it is tradition passing through you. Isn't that a kind of power?" (Chapter 2, page 34.)

"Our newspapers are controlled by the people, but your newspapers are owned by capitalist organizations, so of course they make things up to support themselves." (Chapter 3, page 54.)

"The blade, unsharpened, had twirled a bit too close to him and passed through his Achilles' tendon without a sound. Pan handed the dadao back to the woman and walked over to me. 'What if you had made a mistake?' I asked. 'I never make mistakes,' he said, without looking at me." (Chapter 4, page 91.)

"We were looking at a pair of Mandarin ducks swimming under a plaque that extolled the virtues of their species, which chooses only one mate and remains devoted to it for life. I asked Hai Bin if this was true and he answered, 'yes, of course—but I've heard that if you take them to America, they as for a divorce within a few months.'" (Chapter 4, page 98.)

"'Oh. . .well, you know, you are quite a spectacle. Not many people look like you around here.' I asked Teacher Hei if people in Changsha thought I looked ugly. 'Oh, no!' he answered quickly. 'Not ugly—you look. . .interesting! You have a very three-dimensional face.'" (Chapter 5, page 148.)

"'Do you remember when I told you that your hands should move as if they were made of silk?' Hei asked me. 'Yes.' "Well, that's what I mean. Isn't it beautiful?'" (Chapter 5, page 154.)

"He stared at me with no expression on his face for a long time, then suddenly asked me what I thought of the meeting. I said I thought it was very boring, too long and repetitious. 'That is because you are listening,' he said, and went back to sleep." (Chapter 6, page 162.)



"We don't have much time. Just a few months. I don't have time for English anymore—there's only wushu now. What is the one thing you want to learn before you leave? Choose it, and I'll give it to you." (Chapter 7, page 185.)

"He pulled his ink-stone and tray of brushes near him and showed me how to improve the strokes. Though he could barely move his fingers, all of the rigid with arthritis, he managed to wield the brush with extraordinary fluidity. He took frequent pauses to rest, wiping the sweat from his forehead and throat and closing his eyes to recover from dizziness." (Chapter, 7, page 195.)

"Your lectures make everyone laugh, and you make people feel happy all the time. This is very unusual. You should always be that way. It makes sad people happy." (Chapter 8, page 208.)



Topics for Discussion

What experiences does the title of the book "Iron & Silk" refer to? How are the two issues related? Which teacher was an advocate of each?

What view did Mark's students have of World War II? Why did Mark think discussing World War II would not present a controversy in his class? What was the probable cause of the difference on how China and the U.S. viewed World War II?

How did Mr. Gong, a casual acquaintance of Mark, help a man's son in an outer region in the Hunan Province? How did the man repay Mr. Gong and how long did it take the man to pay him? How did Mark help Mr. Gong's son?

What is "gong fu?" How does it relate to martial arts training? What is Mark told about his wushu training relative to gong fu?

Where does Mark's colleague Bill, meet the "runaway boy?" What happens when the boy shows up at Bill's apartment? How does the officials handle the boy? What person surprisingly has admiration for him?

What is poignant about Teacher Zhu's composition about his most joyous memory? Whose actual memory is his account? Why did he present the memory as his own?

How is kissing viewed by the Chinese culture? At what age do the Chinese feel parents should no longer kiss their children? How is that privately refuted by one of Mark's class members? What about the Chinese culture or the nature of the Chinese people lead them to their stance on public displays of affection such as kissing?