

Legacies: A Chinese Mosaic Short Guide

Legacies: A Chinese Mosaic by Bette Bao Lord

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Characters

Bette Bao Lord is the wife of the American ambassador to China. At the beginning of the book, her husband is preparing to leave China. Bette is going to stay on in China for a short time. She is reflecting on their time in China and she also shares portions of interviews with a variety of people in China from all classes and professions.

Their reminiscences are particularly revealing about China and the Chinese culture. The candid nature of the interviews requires that Lord disguise her informants but the book does include information about the characters in *Eighth Moon: The True Story of a Young Girl's Life in Communist China*, (1964).

By piecing together the family tree, it is possible to figure out that some of the informants are actually family members. For example, "the returned student" is really the story of Lord's maternal grandfather, and Ah Yee is Lord's aunt who raised San San when the rest of the family left China to travel to America.

Social Concerns

China is changing. There are many things about China which Westerners never knew before the opening of China during the diplomacy of Henry Kissinger. There was greater hardship, more violent control of counter-revolutionaries and greater control of independent thought than outsiders imagined.

This book shows how a revolutionary force can take control of a nation and can keep it in thrall and subjugation. Through fear, intimidation, and control of the economic and food supplies a force can keep the people enslaved. This raises many questions.

How could this happen? How could it continue, and could it happen an industrialized country like the United States?

Techniques

Essentially this is a series of seemingly unrelated interviews or portions of interviews, which is like a Chinese puzzle box. Reading one section reveals part of the puzzle, and then the next chapter reveals something quite different. By the end of the book a whole picture emerges from these separate segments.

Themes

The main theme of the book is power and the ways in which power can be used to achieve the means of the state.

China was a feudal state with a massive population before the revolution.

After the revolution it was a Communist state with a massive population.

There were severe economic problems; the government decided that the nation had to be industrialized. This book details different types of modernization programs and their effects upon individual people. There are all sorts of people who lent their stories to this book.

Essentially, Lord is trying to tell the reader that the Chinese are individual people with individual lives, they are not a monolith. Many of them did not agree with the government, but they learned to keep quiet. However, even keeping quiet was not enough. This is a fascinating study of an authoritarian state, showing how people can be made to do things they do not want to do, how they can be intimidated by people with power.



Key Questions

Many books about China speak about its vastness and its size. Bette Bao Lord takes the reader into China at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre and shows a picture of a new China — an individual China. She gives the reader a mosaic — many small tiles of different colors and textures which help to make a complete but complex picture.

1. What does *Legacies* do that historical fiction could not do? In what ways does the technique of many voices help us visualize China during this period?

2. There are many characters in this book. Do you have a favorite character in *Legacies*? Why is that person memorable? Why is the characterization successful?

3. Lord says that the Communist government tolerated the tradition of extravagant mourning and that provided an occasion for students to mourn the passing of Hu Yaobang.

Why did the government tolerate mourning and what effect did it have on subsequent events in China? Compare that ritual to that of mourning the loss of a president in America.

4. Lord says that the journey that immigrants makes marks them more than their features. The experience of becoming a naturalized citizen causes them to reflect on the meaning of citizenship. What is the nature of citizenship? How would you feel if you were an immigrant to another country?

5. Lord's friends wanted her to write a book. They felt that no one who was Chinese and in China could write a book about the experience and be totally honest. Why were they so adamant that she write the book and what does it reveal about the Chinese mindset?

6. Lord recounts an incident from her fifth grade class. Her teacher, Ms. Rappaport asks her opinion about different things and Lord begins to realize the difference between the two cultures. She felt and still feels that Americans value the right to "air their opinions." Is this a true perception, are there other traits that "mark" Americans?

7. After one interview, Lord asks, why is the sale of firecrackers banned in America and yet guns are sold everywhere?

8. Lord observes that the Chinese go through life wearing many masks. Do you think that this is true? Do other cultures wear masks? What type? How can an outsider tell if it is a mask?

9. The students were allowed to gather at Tiananmen Square for a long time, in retrospect, the government was photographing and taping everyone in the Square for later reprisals. Do you feel it is the right of the government to create files on citizens? Is there a reason for a secret police? An FBI? A CIA?



10. Before Lord leaves China, a friend gives her a gift. The gift is a coverlet which he made during the ten years he was a prisoner of the state.

The coverlet is supposed to remind her that even then he knew happiness.

What does this mean? Why did Lord choose to end the book with this story?

Literary Precedents

Pearl S. Buck recorded her experiences with the people of China in *China as I See It* (1970), which is a collection of her writings and speeches beginning in the 1930s up to the Communist takeover. Although Buck's experiences as an American living in China are somewhat different than Lord's, both loved China and her people, as Buck says, "My first conscious memories are of her people and her landscapes. They formed my childhood world . . . Chinese in education and feeling, I knew I was American on the day I very nearly lost my life at the hands of a Communist army which invaded the city where I lived."

The book also resembles Orville Schell's "Watch Out for the Foreign Guests!": *China Encounters the West* (1980), which is a series of vignettes about the changes in China since the author's first visit to China in 1975 and the price of modernization in individual people's lives. Alasdair Clayre's *Heart of the Dragon* (1985) also sensitively explores the private lives of individual families. *From the Center of the Earth: The Search for the Truth about China* (1982) by Time magazine correspondent Richard Bernstein looks at the many-layered life of the Chinese and includes haunting personal interviews with students, peasants, factory workers, victims, and dedicated Communists.

Specific information about the time Lord was living in China as the wife the United States Ambassador can be found in "Tell the World": *What Happened in China and Why* (1989) by Liu Binyan with Ruan Ming and Xu Gang.

The authors who were all former members of the Communist Party were expelled at different times but have provided fascinating eyewitness accounts of the conflict in party leadership and the events in Tiananmen Square.

Related Titles

Since Legacies contains interviews with Ah Yee and stories about Lord's maternal and paternal grandparents, the book is closely related to Eighth Moon. Because it contains additional information about so many family members Legacies adds depth and breath to Eighth Moon. It "rounds" these characters out by telling the reader more about both their past and present.

Although it was published after both Eighth Moon and Legacies, Wu Ningkun's *A Single Tear: A Family's Persecution, Love and Endurance in Communist China* (1993) is similar because he details his life in China in 1951 to the early 1980s. Although he was ordered by the government to return home to China to teach as a professor, the new Communist government soon labeled him a dangerous counterrevolutionary and subjected him to "thought reform."

His experiences are similar to many of Lord's family members.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994