

# **Paradise of the Blind Study Guide**

**Paradise of the Blind by Dương Thu Hương**

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## Plot Summary

The story begins with Hang, a young Vietnamese woman, who works at a textile factory in a Russian suburb. She receives a telegram to visit her uncle immediately. As she reluctantly makes the thousand-mile trip to Moscow, she recounts her dislike and hatred for her uncle, and her families' history that has led her to this moment in time. Though this novel would be classified as historical fiction, for Hang it is her coming-of-age story. The present-day plotline takes place mainly on the train as Hang dips back into reveries of her past in Vietnam.

Hang's maternal grandparents died when her mother was young, leaving her mother and uncle orphaned. Hang's mother's brother was taken in by the friend of the family and put to service in the Communist army. When he returned, his sister had married a neighbor and they lived together in her parent's ancestral house. Though her husband's family had recently inherited land and a home, Hang's father's family was not wealthy.

When Chinh, Hang's uncle, returns from war he is now a general in the communist regime and is implementing the redistribution of land to peasants. He kicks Hang's father, Tan, and the family, out of their home. He then gives away their land and forbids his sister to stay married to him. Ashamed, Tan leaves the village. Shortly after the redistribution of land, from the landowners to the peasants, begins the period of the "Rectification of Errors", where the government attempted to give the land back to the landowners. One evening the townspeople come in anger to Hang's mother's home—they want retribution for what her brother has done. In fear, she flees to Hanoi.

Hang's mother lives in Hanoi for ten years until one day her husband shows up. In a moment of lust, they have intercourse and she conceives Hang. He is married now to another woman in a village and out of his shame, returns home and kills himself.

Hang lives with her mother in Hanoi in poverty as her mother ekes out a living vending snacks on the street. Hang knows nothing about her father until they are forced to visit the village to get money from the sale of their house for the uncle. On this initial trip to the village Hang meets her aunt, who for years has slept little and done back-breaking work to rebuild a life for herself. She has built a fortune and is much respected in the community. She loves Hang and will do anything to honor her brother's blood. She still harbors resentment and anger toward Hang's mother for defending her brother when he has brought both families shame and heartache. Uncle Chinh has two children and they live in a communist bloc of apartments in Hanoi. Hang's mother pities them and because they are of her blood, she feels that she must help them. Even though Chinh and his wife are communist party leaders, they welcome and except all of Hang's mother's lavish gifts of food and money. Hang's mother begins making sacrifices at the cost of caring for herself and her daughter. Simultaneously, Aunt Tam has said that she will buy Hang whatever she needs. Because of this, Hang and her mother's relationship suffers.



Hang's mother is in a terrible accident which leaves her with only one leg and Hang must quit her university studies to help her mother make a living. Aunt Tam has refused to help Hang's mother in any way. Due to Vietnam's economic situation, Hang goes to the Soviet Union as an "exported worker" to earn money working in a textile factory. She returns when her aunt is very ill and dying. Her aunt dies and leaves Hang her entire fortune. Though her aunt has made her promise she would never leave the village and would honor the ancestors by living in this house, Hang wants to get far from the village and the dark stories it holds. She breaks her promise and plans on living elsewhere, somewhere far away where her past can't haunt her.



# Chapters 1-2

## Summary

Chapter 1. Hang, an “exported worker” from Vietnam living in Moscow, has just received a message from her housekeeper that her uncle is sick. Hang does her best to go about her day and ignore the message imploring her to “come quickly” but eventually her homesickness and a promise to her mother force her to make the trip via train.

She boards the train and settles in; she closes her eyes and is overwhelmed by her homesickness. She remembers standing in her mother’s ancestral house spooked by all of the dark corners. The women are sitting in the courtyard eating and gossiping and it is in overhearing their conversation about a man named Tan that she realizes who her father was.

Chapter 2. While on the train to visit her sick uncle, Hang remembers the stories from her mother during the Section for Land Reform. Hang’s uncle, whom she is going to visit, was an officer in the war and when he returned he was made a general in the communist party. His goal was to take the land from the land-owning classes and redistribute evenly to the peasants and working-class. Since Hang’s father was a schoolteacher and his mother owned land he was considered an “exploiter” and an enemy to the state. Uncle Chinh forbade them from staying married and one day Tan, Hang’s father, disappears.

## Analysis

Hang is living in Russia as an “exported worker” in the 1970s. Though this chapter does not explicitly say, it can be assumed this was not her choice. She is terribly homesick and resents the fact her uncle has called on her. She does not like her uncle and would like to ignore her familial obligation, but even though she tries, she cannot. In the train station she watches all of the exotic, tall blond women and men bustling about in their heavy winter coats. She is knocked about by all of these people and realizes in this country she is invisible—this is indicative of how the author perceives the Vietnamese were treated in Russia during this time period. Despite not wanting to go, she boards the train.

As Hang makes the journey to visit her uncle, she recalls the reasons why she doesn’t like him. Effectually, he destroyed her parent’s marriage, her mother’s chance at happiness—and her own. He was so concerned about his reputation with the communist party he forbade his sister from being with “an enemy” of the state. He is also angered by her being a street vendor—which he calls an “exploiter”. Ironically, though we know little about Hang’s current living situation, it sounds like the uncle is somehow responsible for her being in Russia and she is the one being exploited.



## Vocabulary

buxom, relics, relapse, lucid, monotonous, awash, exile, buffeted, acrid, pungent, deftly, crude, fondle, salvaged, quavered, veranda, sinister, dank, ghoulish, transoms, phosphorescent, troughs, imploring, subjected, contempt, degenerates, flout, malicious, irretrievable, saffron, province, fanfare, condescending, convalescing, aloof, exploiter, directives, denounce, sanctions, calamities, jeer, conscientious, denunciate, prostrate, secular, sordid, baseness, vagabond, proletarian, exhorting, demobilized, oafish, granary, havoc, impenetrable, reproach, riddance, redistributed, furtively, condemned, emaciated, squall, invoke, massacred, vengeance, ransack, imperious, provincial, exuding, enthralled, sensual, fermenting, mirage, obliquely, receded, repugnant



## Chapter 3

### Summary

Six months after Hang's father leaves her mother and the village, her mother leaves for Hanoi and becomes a street vendor. Hang is born ten years after her mother's move to Hanoi. In Hanoi, Hang attends school and her mother continues to sell foodstuffs out of a cart. She makes very little money, but they get by with the help of neighbors and friends. One day, when Hang is eight, Uncle Chinh shows up and demands his half of the mortgage from the sale of the ancestral house that was their parents'. He also tells Hang's mother she needs to quit being a street vendor and become a secretary and join the movement. Hang's mother says she'll think about it even though she does not want to do it. Instead, she agrees to travel to the village to get his money. On their journey, Hang continually asks who her father is, since she still doesn't know and her mother ignores the question, but it obviously upsets her.

### Analysis

Hang has a dream the first night on their way to the village: she dreams about the neighbors mocking her, laughing about the fact she was fatherless and didn't know where she came from. She dreams she is being suffocated and can't breathe, but in this dream her mother tells her who her father is and for the first time Hang thinks that she can see him clearly. Her mother initially ignoring Hang's questions is indicative that there is something implicit that upsets her, that even after all of these years she is still bothered by her husband's absence and death.

Hang is intuitive about not liking her Uncle Chinh when she first meets him, despite not knowing much about him. She is shocked by how her mother becomes subservient to him and agrees to travel back to their home village to collect his money, even though he treats her poorly. Uncle Chinh wants the money to buy furniture for his new house but cannot afford it on the salary he is earning in the service. This is ironic because he supports and lives the life of communism, yet asks his sister to get him additional money to help him furnish his house. Likewise, he wants her to take a low-paying respectable job because of how he looks to the others.

### Vocabulary

rancor, moldered, rancid, anise, disdain, falsetto, scuttled, livid, contempt, migratory, yielded, stigma, ideological, enthralled, rapt, curtly, haranguing, proletariat, avant-garde, beacon, apprentice, bourgeoisie, socialism, township, banyans, foliage, pagoda, lichens, knoll, iridescent, sienna, wistfully, conical, hoary, commemorate, incandescent, hamlets, stagnant, dispersed, desolate, dike, disembarked



# Chapter 4

## Summary

In Chapter 4 Hang remembers her father and stories she heard about him after he fled her mother and the village. Hang's father Tan left the village because he couldn't handle the humiliation and injustice of the "Land Reform Act" and his brother-in-law's disapproval. He leaves behind his mother, sister, and wife. He travels around aimlessly finally landing in a Muong village and marries the village vice president's daughter. He lives in this village for over ten years living a peaceful and tranquil life, but never going back to his home village, his mother and sister—his first wife, Hang's mother, long forgotten and left behind.

One day a traveling salesman comes through the Muong village. Per Vietnamese customs the visitor is greeted warmly and invited into their homes. They learn he is from the same village that Hang's father is from. Tan learns that the traveling vendor knows Hang's mother and he knows where she lives in Hanoi. With this information Tan leaves on a voyage to Hanoi to visit Hang's mother after being apart for ten years.

## Analysis

On Hang's father's journey he follows Vietnamese spiritual customs—since he is a wood sign, he follows water. This is what takes him to the Muong village—essentially being his natural destiny. This is an integral belief system in the villages of Vietnam, and it would provide guidance and explanation for many of the people who were vagabonds, like Hang's father, trying to find his life. Muong villages were rural and left untouched by the Communist Regime of Vietnam. They were farmers and used the lands to harvest crops. This is why once Tan moves there, he is left alone and has very little exposure to the outside world until the traveling vendor pays the village a visit.

Additional customs in Vietnamese culture are welcoming hospitality complete with a place to sleep and lavish feasts, even if the guest is not necessarily welcome. The traveling salesman is received in the Muong village warmly even though his presence isn't desired. Likewise, in the past few chapters we see Hang's mother react in similar ways—one does things out of tradition and respect not necessarily because one wants to—just like Hang on her own journey to visit her uncle whom she detests. Though it is not explicitly said, Hang must have been conceived when her father goes to find her mother. Based on when Hang's mother saw him last and the age Hang is when she learns about her father, this would make sense.





## Vocabulary

bayonets, lurid, exile, sampan, implacable, taciturn, inscrutable, automatons, lugubrious, subsisted, nomadic, rudiments, ordeals, dormant, repertoire, bawdy, mirth, errant, befallen, buffeted, hovel



# Chapter 5

## Summary

Remembering her journey to her mother's ancestral village to fetch her uncle's portion of the money from the sale of the house, Hang remembers when she first met her Aunt Tam, her father's sister. Aunt Tam is old now and hunched and frail. Her house is the most opulent house Hang has ever seen. At dinner Hang and her mother are served a feast and Aunt Tam tells them about her life since Hang's mother left the village. After her land was taken away, she worked hard for others and slowly cultivated what she had, when the Vietnamese government paid retribution by giving some of the acreage back to landowners she cultivated the land to grow rice and oranges and other crops. From this, she made a large sum of money and is now rich. She worked hard during those years rarely stopping for a break or to sleep. Still even at her old age, she works hard.

During their visit, Aunt Tam broaches the subject of Hang's uncle Chinh and Hang's mother defends him. This upsets Aunt Tam and she tells the story of how Hang's father died. Shortly after his visit to Hanoi, they found him floating in the river. Aunt Tam blames his disgrace and ruination of his life on the government, specifically Hang's uncle. When Hang and her mother go to leave for Hanoi, Aunt Tam gives her golden earrings and promises to always provide for her. .

## Analysis

Hang is unnerved by the golden earrings Aunt Tam has given her. Hang sees this woman as old-fashioned, nearly a stranger, and frail. She does not feel comfortable taking the gift, or the fact that Aunt Tam insists on carrying her by back all the way to the boat. Hang is unsure of the attention from this aunt and knows the doting and gifts come with a price; she just doesn't know what yet.

Aunt Tam implies Hang's father killed himself at the river. He kills himself because of his humiliation in life, for cheating on his new wife, for deserting Hang's mother once again and not being able to live an honest life. Aunt Tam blames this all on Uncle Chinh since he was the one who banned their marriage and cast them both out of the village. Though Hang's mother cries at the mention of Tan, whom she loved, she continues to defend her brother out of honor for bloodlines and ancestry.

## Vocabulary

hierarchy, mesmerized, encrusted, refinement, opulence, voraciousness, wizened, ecstatic, reverent, sullen, imperious, candelabra, viscous, contempt, pungent, excrement, pilfered, ventured, absolve, orangeries, welter, careened, luminous, pilgrimage, splendor, dissolving, torrent, vulgarity, fetid



# Chapter 6

## Summary

Hang and her mother travel back to Hanoi. When they return, their neighbor tells them someone has been looking for them every day. The following day Uncle Chinh shows up to collect his money. He tells his sister he has found her a job and she can start the following day. She asks him for a week to think about but does not want to take it. She tells Hang he is a tyrant, but to his face still remains respectful. Uncle Chinh tells Hang he does this all for her, so she can have a future full of promise. Aunt Tam visits in honor of Tet bringing a feast with her. She is surprised and disapproving that Hang's mother does not have a feast set out for the ancestral altar to honor Hang's father. When Aunt Tam leaves she gives Hang a large wad of money to buy whatever she needs. She tells Hang she will provide for her—her schooling, things that she wants, her travels—whatever Hang desires since she is last in the bloodline.

Six months pass, Hang attends school and sends reports to Aunt Tam; Hang's mother does well selling her foodstuff and is able to repair the kitchen, she wants to fix the roof by Tet, in six more months. Hang's uncle falls ill and her mother is called for. She makes the expensive journey to visit him in the hospital but he is released before she can get to see him. So, she goes to visit him at this home which is in a communist block of apartments. She is received coldly by him and his wife, his children look thin and starving and they gape at the meat Hang's mother brings for them. When they leave Hang says that she will never go back to their place.

Her mother falls sick and once she returns to work her cart has been robbed, all of her good fortune gone, she has to sell bricks and wood from their house. Despite their own poverty, Hang's mother insists Hang deliver food to Uncle Chinh. She buys a feast and has Hang deliver it. When Hang arrives Aunt Thanh acts suspiciously, closing all of the windows and hiding the food. A few years go by and Aunt Tam continues to take care of and pay for all that Hang needs while Hang's mother continues to foster her relationship with her nephews and sister-in-law. In the present time, Hang is still on the train to visit her uncle and all of these stories are her memories of the past.

## Analysis

A few years pass in this chapter and what is most notable is Hang's relationship with her mother has changed due to the idea of reverence and obedience to serving bloodlines. Aunt Tam is giving everything Hang could want or need to succeed, in order to see her bloodline and heritage carried forward successfully. This causes a distance between Hang and her mother because her mother knows she cannot provide for Hang in this way.



In the meantime, Hang's mother feels the same way about her nephews. She feels they are helpless victims of the communist regime and her brother and aunt. She brings them food and other luxuries they aren't allowed to have. At one point Uncle Chinh even asks to borrow money, but Hang's mother does not have it and cannot give it. Uncle Chinh is a hypocrite unaware of the irony of his asking his sister for help, but based on his wife's actions she's aware of how their political beliefs are affecting their lifestyle. She hides the food, but shows gratitude and kindness to Hang's mother.

Hang's mother's fortune goes through ups and downs throughout this chapter. Initially, she makes promises to Hang about fixing their house up and getting a better heater, a new roof, but the more she becomes involved in her brother's life, the farther away she gets from these goals. Even after she has fallen ill and her cart is robbed, she buys them elaborate lavish food that she has not provided for Hang. Even though Hang can now buy this food with the money her Aunt has provided for her, she recognizes her mother didn't make the same sacrifices for her.

## Vocabulary

scampered, convoys, lulled, soothsayers, innards, banque, excrement, incredulous, indignant, disown, tyrant, sumptuous, laden, concoctions, catastrophe, sinewy, squatted, personified, vicissitudes, dispose, toughs, rancid, cadres, decreed, gaped, officious, haughty, cauterized, absinthe, vagabond, bellow, absurd, prescient, barraged, subversive, roguish, delegating, lineage, insinuating, adversary, erudition, ferret, enslaved



## Chapters 7-8

### Summary

Chapter 7. This is the shortest chapter in the book, at just over three pages. Hang is still on the train. She is sharing the car with an older Vietnamese man. He has shown kindness to her by offering her food and something warm to cover herself with. As she watches the countryside pass the train window, Hang recalls an English painter she used to know. More than anything he wanted out of England and he succeeded by traveling and painting all over the world. But, his paintings of landscapes always have a fog in them, even though fog wouldn't be something that would exist in these new and exotic landscapes. Hang likens this to her being haunted by the purple flowers in the ponds of her mother's home village—the flowers were at once beautiful and decadent and an image that haunts her.

Chapter 8. In this chapter Hang prepares for entrance to university. Her aunt sends for her and once she arrives back to the village, her aunt is preparing for a large feast. Her aunt is having *pâté* prepared and Hang wakes to find the men butchering a pig and others grinding the meat using a large pestle and mortar. This feast is to celebrate Hang's entrance to university—the first in the family. Hang is surprised by the fortune of her aunt.

### Analysis

The imagery of the Englishman being haunted by the fog of his homeland represents how Hang feels about the village in Vietnam. As she is recalling this, she is homesick. But she knows what she is homesick for is dangerous. This image foreshadows the decision she will make at the end of the book once her aunt dies and leaves her the fortune. Hang's train companion is an elderly man who is very kind. Hang has never had a grown man treat her so well before. She wonders if this is what it feels like to have the protection of a father.

When Hang arrives at her aunt's she is shocked at the lavish celebration her aunt has planned. Never before had she been so fussed over, with so much work done to celebrate her. Hang is beginning to get used to the attention and grows to like it. Contrast this with her relationship with her mother—her mother is giving all that she has, which is very little—to her brother at the sacrifice of the health of her daughter. Hang is resentful of this and Hang and her mother continue to grow away from each other—both harboring bitter resentments.

### Vocabulary

monotonous, precipices, godforsaken, stagnant, bogs, ramshackle, atrocious, tedium, vulgarity, furtive, ferreting, tarmac, vicarious, accompany, irony, coy, gregarious, tripe,



excrement, fatal, methodically, oblivious, emanate, imperious, equilibrium, cooperatives, fermented, resound, intermittently, lucidly, dawdled, keel , collectivism, meritorious, absolute



# Chapter 9

## Summary

Hang recounts the celebration thrown for her before her entrance to university. During the preparation she overhears a cook telling her aunt she will not serve the vice president of the village because he is forcing her sister out of her house. Aunt Tam tells the woman not to worry, she will not need to serve him. At the dinner, the vice president tells Aunt Tam he would like to ask her a favor and she says of course, but only after she can tell a story. She tells a story about a corrupt leader of the village who is selfish and tyrannical, who will take things at the sacrifice of others. The men and women around the table sit around stunned by the aunt's boldness and her ability to tell stories.

In the present time on the train, a group of young Russian men board the train and begin harassing Hang, asking for her to sell them jeans. But she tells them she has none, and they still won't leave her alone. The older man with Hang tells the men to leave her alone and finally they do.

## Analysis

Aunt Tam takes a risk in telling the story about the corrupt leader—it is obvious to all at the party, even the vice president, she is telling it as a comparison. She does this to shame him and expose how corrupt he is. She is letting him know the town knows it and doesn't like it. Likewise the man in her story has a tragic ending, so she also tells the story as a warning. Hang is impressed with the boldness of her aunt, how well loved she is by all in the town and her ability to throw such a lavish event. Hang wants to do all she can to make her aunt proud.

On the train, Hang experiences racism against the Vietnamese from the Russians. At the time the Vietnamese were known for their secret businesses of selling imported goods. Again, there is irony in this since the Soviet Union was supposed to be guiding Vietnam in its quest for communism. Though Hang does not sell imported goods, her uncle does. Again, the irony of his actions and his ideology are not seen by him. His actions denounce the very movement he says he supports.

## Vocabulary

exquisite, essence, raucous, materialism, guffaw, circumspection, ingratiating, malleable, rampant, trajectory, dignitaries, kowtowed, dispensation, formidable, prodigious, sumptuous, conciliate, languidly, pomp, retinue, palanquin, parasols, discretion, blanched, prostrated, pious, simpleton, entrust, aspirations, citadel, curative, predicament, farce, drubbing, wrath, brazen, mirth, livid, tempest, subsided, laden, cacophonous, vulgar, anarchic, brambles, silhouette, maliciously, sordid, denounce, unintelligible, matrons, hectoring



# Chapter 10

## Summary

Hang begins university and despite their disagreements, she still lives with her mother. Her mother is not doing well in her business and she and Hang eat very little. She continues to sell goods from the house to buy the little cabbage they do eat. Hang grows very thin and weak. One day she tells her mother she wants to sell some of the gold rings her aunt gave her to buy food for them and get the roof fixed. Hang's mother is furious and will not allow it. Aunt Tam shows up and is angry at Hang's mother for allowing Hang to starve. She provides a feast for Hang, but tells her mother nothing she gives Hang can be used for her family's benefit. The aunt asks for the rings back and after a long absence looking for them, Hang's mother says she has made investments in a company but has not seen the returns yet. Shortly after the aunt's visit, Hang's mother kicks her out and she lives in the dorms at the university. One night she leaves the dorm to buy snacks and her mother's neighbor finds her: her mother has been hit by a car and has lost her leg.

## Analysis

Though Hang's mother tells Aunt Tam that she has sold the rings for a share in a business, it is very clear she has sold the rings to give money and buy things for her uncle and nephews. This sickens and infuriates Hang and forever changes their relationship. Aunt Tam is infuriated what she has worked so hard for has gone to a man who is responsible for the ruination of her family.

After the aunt leaves, Hang's mother is angry and resentful of Hang, upset Hang did not defend her in front of the aunt. Hang is also very angry and resentful. When Hang's mother is hit by the car and her leg is amputated, Hang does what she knows she must even if she doesn't want to: out of duty to family, she quits university to work and care for her mother.

## Vocabulary

nostalgia, contentment, monotonously, obscene, stagnant, copious, neurotic, remedial, officious, tonics, sallow, assaulting, intoxicating, transfixed, emaciated, ashen, distraught, resentment, monotone, furrows, supplicating, mirthless, absurd, stony, contemptuous, presumptuous, malevolent, dignity, queries, sentimental, homely, sanctions, boisterous, jostling, corporal, mollify, feudal





# Chapters 11-12

## Summary

In Chapter 11, Hang finally arrives in Moscow and bids farewell to the man on the train. She goes to the hospital, but her uncle is not there. She is directed to the university housing and finally arrives at an apartment where her uncle is cooking a feast for a group of men with whom he does business. The men are kind to Hang and since she is recovering from an illness, allow her to sleep and eat. When she wakes, one young man, whom she recognizes from university in Vietnam, tells her all her uncle wants is her money and help translating since she is fluent in Russian. He gives her money to give to the uncle, since he can tell she doesn't have it. She takes the long train ride back to her apartment and another telegram is waiting for her: her aunt is sick and she must go home. Her friend, whom she calls, the Bohemian, helps her get a plane ticket and she travels home. Her aunt is dying of an unnamed illness, and sets out provisions for her funeral. Hang does all she can to keep her aunt comfortable. Her aunt dies and Hang throws the appropriate funeral services per Vietnamese customs.

Chapter 12. Before Hang's aunt dies, she makes Hang promise she will never sell the ancestral house, that she will live in it and honor the dead by living the legacy. Chapter 12 takes place during the time period of 45-100 days after her Aunt's death. Hang holds lavish funeral rites at 45 days and 100. The funerals are expensive and she finally takes the map and digs up the rest of the fortune. When she announces she is going to sell some furniture to pay for the funeral, she is disgusted by the people who show up to pilfer her aunt's treasures. She chooses to sell the house and leave the village.

## Analysis

Hang's learns that her uncle was a cook for the higher-up generals—that was his role in the communist party. She sees him differently now, more pathetic than before and realizes she hates him, but she is also mad at herself for allowing him to use her. She is keeping a promise she made to her mother. When Hang arrives back home, there is still coldness between her mother and herself and she only stays briefly before continuing on to her aunt. She knows this action will hurt her mother and possibly damage their relationship forever, but with a new boldness, she denies her duty to her mother.

She makes promises to her aunt—to live in the house, in the village—but after she has seen how the villagers act when she needs money to help pay for the funeral, she despises them. They are greedy. The ponds she once so loved, are now cesspools full of bitterness and greed. More than anything, she wants away from this place that haunts her. She digs up the money left by her aunt and sets out to leave the very house she promised she never would—breaking another familial duty in order to garner her own happiness.



## Vocabulary

provisions, adjacent, queuing, telegram, ledge, lumbering, savage, placid, resigned, ascended, scarce, awry, unctuously, complicity, laboriously, leer, lewdness, curtly, voraciousness, philosophizing, ironical, disdain, extinction, lucid, acrid, eloquent, civic, pendulum, deviate, edicts, innumerable, draconian, procure, derisive, intuition, pensive, lynx, delegation, brazenly, vice, bereft, aquiline, exuded, eked, dossier, ferreting, canonized, edification, chasm, helm, granary, ephemeral, hallucinatory, cesspool



# Characters

## Hang

Hang is the narrator of the story. Throughout her journey to Moscow she recounts significant events in her childhood. As she is looking back on the past, she realizes it is the steadfast resolve toward familial duty that has made her family so miserable. She realizes this does not have to be her fate. While she is waiting to leave Russia for Vietnam, she sees a group of young Japanese students who are happy and laughing and free. She longs to be Japanese, of a race that does not carry the same burdens as her people. She resolves to do what it is that makes her happy—because her duty to her mother, who would sacrifice her own daughter to help her corrupt brother—is not happiness.

Hang does not fulfill promises made to her aunt, but feels her aunt would be happy she made a choice that is good for her. She feels her aunt would not want her to be haunted by the burden of family as she had for all her life.

## Mother

Hang's mother is never named in the story. In the beginning of her life, Hang's mother was strong and beautiful—one of the most beautiful women in the village. She was happily married, despite being orphaned and looked forward to building a new life for herself. When her brother returns from the service, he forces her to separate from her husband, saying that it disgraces the family and his reputation in the communist army. Hang's mother obeys, despite her unhappiness. Later, when she and her brother reunite, Hang's mother still obeys and respects her brother, despite her own happiness. Above anything else, Hang's mother honors the ties of family—even at the cost of her relationship with her daughter.

## Father—Tan

Hang never knew her father. He killed himself before she was even born. Hang's father was a respected schoolteacher, but once he left Hang's mother by force, he left his village in shame. For ten years, he lived peacefully in a removed Muong village, but after his reuniting with Hang's mother, kills himself in shame—for disgracing his new wife and family, himself and Hang's mother.

## Aunt Tam

Aunt Tam is Hang's father's sister. Hang meets Aunt Tam around eight-years-old when she is visiting the village with her mother. Initially, her aunt's intensity and attention scare her, because she doesn't know what her aunt expects from her. But Hang learns



that like her mother, her aunt lavishing attention and goods on her, is her aunt fulfilling her familial duty and helping her brother's legacy live on. Hang grows to love her hard-working aunt, who leaves everything to her in her death.

## Uncle Chinh

Uncle Chinh is Hang's mother's corrupt brother who works for the communist regime of Vietnam. In his speech to Hang and her mother, he resolutely believes in the cause and objective of communism, even encouraging Hang's mother to take a more respectable, though low-paying job. He feels that anyone who sells anything is an "exploiter", but the irony is he is constantly exploiting his sister, and then later his niece for his own benefit. Uncle Chinh and his family welcome the lavish gifts of food that Hang's mother brings them on her meager salary, later even asking her for money. He does not live according to his communist ideals.



## Objects/Places

### Golden Earrings

Aunt Tam gives Hang expensive golden earring as her first gift.

### Tet

Tet is the spring New Year's celebration where families feast and honor the dead.

### Ancestral House

A family's ancestral house is where the family has lived and where an ancestral altar is built in the deceased's honor.

### Fuzzy White & the Cripple

Fuzzy White is a dog owned by the Cripple who lives in Hang's neighborhood in Hanoi. She loves the dog and is haunted by the Cripple's chants.

### Cyclo

A cyclo is a giant tricycle with a bench seat in back that men use to give rides to others for a fee.

### Moscow

Moscow is where Hang is traveling via train to visit her uncle.

### Village

The village is the hometown of Hang's mother and father, where her Aunt Tam currently lives.

### Hanoi

Hanoi is where Hang grew up with her mother.



## **Apartment Building K**

Apartment Building K is where Uncle Chinh's family lives in communist housing. Hang notes how gray and dirty everything looks—that nothing looks happy or vibrant in this place.

## **Roof**

Hang's mother repeatedly promises Hang that she will fix the roof so that they have a proper place to live. She never does, instead using the money to buy food for Chinh's sons.

## **Ancestral Alters**

The ancestral altars are set up in homes to offer food and other goods to the dead in their honor.



# Themes

## Coming of Age

In this story Hang grows from a young obedient girl of eight to a young woman of 20. Examples of the women around her—her mother and her aunt—demonstrate a life that women live to honor their dead. By the end of the novel, she realizes that this path will not bring her happiness and takes the risk to leave behind her familial duties in pursuit of her own happiness.

Even from an early age, Hang is haunted by the images of the village, everything being too bright, too close, too dank with the smells of life. Her family's lives have been ruined in this village, its decorum suffocating. Hang watches her mother deteriorate in her honoring her brother. Her mother becomes so blinded by her service to him that she neglects Hang. When Hang learns that her mother has sold her rings to provide food for them, her perspective on her mother changes. She no longer pities her because it is her mother who is making the choice.

When Hang sees her uncle stooped over cooking for the young group of men, she realizes not only how pathetic he is, but also how disgraceful it is that she is allowing her uncle to take advantage of her. This changes her and her actions henceforth are of her own will—she does things because she wants to, not because she feels like she needs to.

## Communist Ideology

Hang's Uncle Chinh is a communist who has devoted his life in service to the regime. He forces his sister to separate from her husband in order to make himself look better and to honor his beliefs. Later, he tries to force his sister to take a job as a secretary in a factory so his reputation will be bolstered. He asks his sister to travel to get money from the sale of their parents' house so he can buy furniture for his new apartment. Later, when his sister visits, she notes how sickly his children look.

She brings them gifts of lavish food and money, which her brother begins to depend on. Her sister-in-law closes the curtains and furtively hides the goods. In Russia, Uncle Chinh has a side business of selling imported goods and requires that Hang help him by asking her for money, bringing goods back from her aunt and using her language skills. Even though Uncle Chinh was willing to destroy families in the name of the communist ideology, he does not live by it himself. He cannot afford the lifestyle he desires on such a small income and gladly takes from his sister—whom he has declared a lesser citizen because of her job selling street snacks. Despite the fact Hang's uncle pontificates about his communist beliefs, he, more than anyone in the book except his foil Aunt Tam, is in it for themselves. Everything he does is self-serving, only looking out for himself, and sometimes his sons and wife.



Aunt Tam is his foil—she lives a life with a goal to amass more and become more—but she does it through hard work, not exploitation. And all that she has, she gives to others: in celebrations, as jobs and salaries, and to Hang.

## Respect for Bloodline and Heritage

One theme dominating the relationships in *Paradise of the Blind* is the respect paid to bloodline relatives. After years of living in a volatile country where many people have lost loved ones and been displaced from their families, people more than ever treasure ties to their heritage and bloodlines. At one point in the story, in response to taking in and caring for a distant relative and employing her, Aunt Tam says, “After all, a single drop of our own blood, even a hundred times diluted, is worth more than swamp water.”

When Hang’s mother and brother are reunited, the relationship between Hang and her mother changes. Even though Uncle Chinh destroyed Hang’s family, her mother still feels the pull of tradition and familial duties. When Hang’s mother sees her brother’s children are going without, that they look thin and frail, she sacrifices to bring them gifts of food—despite the fact that her brother is working for the Communist part of Vietnam and this is clearly against their ideology.

Later the sacrifices Hang’s mother makes comes at the cost of feeding Hang, caring for her own health and the home she lives in. Now that Hang is an adult, she sees clearly her mother is willing to take lavish spreads of food to her brother and her nephews but cannot afford to feed Hang. Additionally, the final blow is when Hang realizes her mother has sold her gold rings from Aunt Tam to buy food for her brother's family while Hang is starving. Similarly, Aunt Tam dotes on Hang for the same belief in serving one’s family. Hang is the last line in her family and the only thing Tam has left of her brother. She serves Hang so her bloodline can live on. Everything she works for now is for Hang.





# Style

## Point of View

The point of view in *Paradise of the Blind* is from Hang in the first person perspective. Hang is telling her story when she is an adult living in Russia. While she is telling her story she is making a reluctant journey to visit her uncle whom she dislikes. It is on her train ride that she dips back into remembered reveries of her childhood and her eventual trip to Russia. She is telling her own coming-of-age story. As the story progresses the reveries are chronological and begin to catch up with the present time—with the past and present converging at the end of the novel. Memories are woven throughout as her journey on the train reminds her of different moments in her life.

## Setting

The present day setting is mid-seventies Russia where Hang has been sent to work as an “exported worker”. She lives in a communist bloc with other Vietnamese exported workers. Though she works in a textile factory and does not hawk imported goods, many Vietnamese do to make extra income. In the Russia she is living in she feels invisible—as if she is not seen at all. And when she is noticed she is humiliated by the racist assumptions presumed by the Russians. She is homesick for Vietnam and dislikes being in this cold, lonely and foreign place.

In her memories, the setting is small villages in Vietnam and Hanoi. The villages are rural and pastoral whereas Hanoi is a crowded bustling city. Throughout Hanoi are Communist blocs where generals in the army live, like her uncle. In her memories, Vietnam is struggling to become its own country, having just been released from French rule. With influence and force from China and Russia, the Viet Minh army forced landowners to redistribute their land, a few years later, they apologized and tried to rectify this. Though they live in a country volatile and committed to a communist regime, there are periods of respite and peace blending with volatile violent regimes.

## Language and Meaning

This is a translation from Huong’s original novel. The food and plant references are often not translated, but easily understood with the description. Some of the language of the communist leaders seems unnatural and robotic, but Huong does this intentionally to reveal the grotesque injustices done to the people by outsiders and their countrymen alike. The story is told with beautiful lyrical prose and despite the foreignness of topic is at an easy reading level. Huong attempts to capture the feelings of the people during the tumultuous times and often it was the land, the love of country and family that grounded them.

## Structure

The novel has two plotlines: the present and the past. In the present Hang is on a train ride to visit her uncle. As she takes the thousand-mile train ride to Moscow, she is reminded of and haunted by her past and her homesickness for her mother and Vietnam. Her reveries begin when she is eight years old and chronologically follow her childhood until they converge with the present time, with both stories conceding in Hang's present-day Russia. Huong uses context clues to guide the reader between the two plotlines.



## Quotes

Life was all around her, but it was a life that belonged to others. And she looked at her own little straw and fire. (Chapter 2)

They were told that the louder they screamed, the greater their fervor and the firmer the proof of their revolutionary spirit, of the hatred that they felt for the “exploiters,” the landowning class. (Chapter 2)

The sight of the house stirred something in me: a vision of a former life, my own, that of my parents, my friends, of my country; a past to which each of us is linked, inextricably, by the ties of blood and race. (Chapter 4)

‘It’s like the old proverb goes: A rich man loves to work, a poor man loves to eat. In the end, they were reduced to misery. (Chapter 5)

This past has poisoned life for her, taking with it all joy, all warmth, all maternal feeling, all the happiness the world might have offered her. (Chapter 5)

The habit of misery had twisted these people, driving them to this paranoia. What had once been diligence turned to desperation. (Chapter 5)

In every life, there must come a moment when what is most sacred, most noble, in us evaporates into thin air. (Chapter 5)

Since Aunt Tam had come into our life, Mother had stopped doting on me and calling me her ‘dear child. (Chapter 6)

‘Hail autumn and its procession of dead leaves. The rows of barren poplars stand silent on the hillside. (Chapter 6)

How intoxicating it can be, self-sacrifice. (Chapter 6)

After all, a single drop of our own blood, even a hundred times diluted, is worth more than swamp water. (Chapter 8)

In spite of everything she stood for, everything I was trying to escape, she was still my mother. (Chapter 10)

It stirred something in me: I had yearned for this protective look so many times, in the searing, dead heat of our summers, on the days when the wind howled and the rain pounded our roof. (Chapter 11)

I can’t squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes. (Chapter 12)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

How does Hang change throughout the story? What events were the catalysts for her change?

## Topic 2

Why does Hang refuse to honor her aunt's wishes by living in the ancestral house? Why does she compare the village to a "cesspool"?

## Topic 3

How does Hang's relationship with her mother change? What factors influence this change?

## Topic 4

Why does Hang's mother continue to defend her brother despite all that he has done to destroy her family?

## Topic 5

When in Russia, why does Hang continue to help her uncle? What does she learn about her uncle in Russia? Does this change her perspective?