

# **Pavilion of Women: A Novel of Life in the Women's Quarters Study Guide**

**Pavilion of Women: A Novel of Life in the Women's Quarters by Pearl S. Buck**

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# Plot Summary

Set in pre-world war China, Pavilion of Women is the story of Madame Wu, the highly respected matriarch of an expansive and wealthy family. In many ways traditional and conservative in terms of morality, spirituality, and household practicality, she undergoes a significant transformation on all three levels as the result of a series of encounters with the European tutor of one of her sons. By the novel's conclusion, she has come to a new and deeper understanding of herself, her family, and her culture.

As the novel begins, Madame Wu is celebrating her fortieth birthday with a momentous decision – she is going to bring a concubine (sexual companion) for her husband into the household. Because her word is viewed and acted upon as law in the multi-generational Wu family, those whom she tells of her decision suppress their shock and resentment. The one family member who is less successful at that suppression is Mr. Wu, who protests that he still loves Madame Wu and still finds her desirable. Convinced that her decision is the correct one, Madame Wu maintains complete control over the situation, chooses the orphaned Ch'iuming, and withdraws to a separate part of the family compound, convinced that she has shaped events in the family to give her long-standing peace.

Madame Wu's peace does not last long, however. Her two older sons have difficulty with their wives; her flighty best friend proves simultaneously warm and irritating; and the visits of a female Christian missionary become increasingly annoying, to the point when Madame Wu becomes inclined to ban her from the house. Her inclination changes, however, when she realizes that her youngest son, in need of developing a more peaceful relationship with his new, worldly educated wife, needs a private tutor. Madame Wu asks the missionary whom she recommends, and the missionary arranges for the Wu family to be visited by the formidably, gently learned Brother Andre.

When Madame Wu meets Brother Andre, she finds himself immediately drawn to his ideas and his teachings: a secret reader and introspective thinker in circumstances when women were valued solely for their reproductive capabilities, Madame Wu finds her mind and spirit reawakening as the result of Brother Andre's teaching. Meanwhile, her son's marriage improves; the relationship between Mr. Wu and Ch'iuming results in a pregnancy for the latter; and the environment of the household is changed by the sudden death of Mr. Wu's mother.

Eventually, Brother Andre's pupil resolves to leave the family home and travel to America. For a while, Andre's visits stop, but they eventually resume. Madame Wu is unwilling and/or unable to let her own education come to an end. She finds her intellectual and spiritual awareness deepening, frequently losing herself in contemplation, much to the consternation of her family. Over time, a series of further difficulties (including the deaths of both Brother Andre and another of her sons, and the arrival of another concubine) sends Madame Wu even further into spiritual searching, and she finds both herself and her life reaching new depths of enlightenment. The novel concludes with Madame Wu's dawning realization that her soul is truly immortal.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

On the morning of her fortieth birthday, serene and beautiful Madame Wu dresses herself with care, helped by her loving and talkative servant Ying. Later, Madame Wu's light breakfast is interrupted by the arrival of two visitors: her gossipy longtime friend Madame Kang (who is also the mother of Madame Wu's daughter-in-law Meng), and European missionary Little Sister Hsia. Shortly after Little Sister arrives, the more traditional Madame Kang leaves, promising to return later in the day for Madame Wu's birthday feast. After she goes, Little Sister reads Madame Wu a story from her holy book about a house built on sand. Madame Wu listens politely, and then tactfully ushers Little Sister out. A short while later, Madame Wu is visited by her eldest son, Lingmao, who is surprised and dismayed to learn that his mother plans to arrange for his father to take a concubine (i.e. a young woman engaged to provide sexual satisfaction and possibly children for the patriarch of the family). Madame Wu refuses to explain the reasons for her decision and will carefully choose the concubine herself. As he goes, she tells him that in him, she has "built [her] house upon a rock".

Later that day, Madame Wu is the honored guest at a birthday feast attended by a large number of family and friends, including Madame Kang and her attractive daughter. Madame Wu calmly notes how much attention her husband pays to the younger woman, and feels as though she has made the right decision about the concubine. After the feast, Madame Wu retires for the night. As she waits, for a night-time visit from her husband, she contemplates a simple and elegant painting in her bedroom that portrays a human figure struggling up a mountain. The figure, narration comments, sometimes seems to be higher or lower on the climb, depending on the light. This night, narration comments further, the figure seems higher.

When Mr. Wu comes to visit his wife, he is tender and loving, but eventually surprised and upset when she suggests that it's time for him to consider a concubine. Madame Wu explains that she feels her husband's desires are still active, that he deserves more sons, and that it would be more appropriate for them to be born to a younger mother than to her. Mr. Wu is doubtful and resentful, commenting that he still finds his wife as beautiful as she ever was. Madame Wu tells him to go to bed. After Mr. Wu returns to his own bedroom, Madame Wu goes down to the new rooms she has prepared for herself next to those of her husband's elderly mother (Old Lady), an act that puts the final touch on her movement into a new stage of her life. Although initially finding her new bed cold and uncomfortable, she soon falls into a deep sleep that narration describes as being like death.



## Analysis

This chapter introduces the central character and protagonist (Madame Wu), introduces the circumstances that propel the plot and action of the first part of the novel (Madame Wu's decision to introduce a concubine into the family), and introduces several of the work's primary themes. One of these is the chapter's subtle, careful reference to Christianity: it is never explicitly revealed that Little Sister Hsia is a Christian, and it is likewise never mentioned that the holy book she reads from is the Bible. Nevertheless, the story of the house built on sand (one of the more well-known teaching parables recounted by Jesus Christ) is familiar enough that watchful readers can infer both aspects of Little Sister's presence and perspectives. There are several other similarly subtle evocations of Christianity throughout the novel, more often than not tied in with its exploration of another of its main themes, the relationship between body and soul, as are other thematic elements introduced in this section. These include the book's consideration of the relationship between men and women (with the true reason behind Madame Wu's concubine decision being revealed later in the work) and the relationship/tension between confinement and freedom. This last is explored through Madame Wu's physical movement to living quarters within the family compound that, she believes, will give her more freedom, and the sense that she is making choices that will make her similarly free emotionally and psychologically. Here the novel's thematic contention seems to be that the physical body is a particularly challenging type of confinement from which the soul has to struggle to find freedom.

Other important elements introduced in this section include a couple of important metaphoric images that recur throughout the novel. The most notable of these is the painting of the mountain climber, while there are also references in this section to flowers – specifically, orchids and peonies. Throughout the narrative, these two flowers provide vivid symbolic reinforcement of the situations experienced by Madame Wu and her husband.

Finally, there are also several important relationships introduced in this section: the friendship between Madame Wu and Madame Kang (which evolves in various ways throughout the narrative), between Madame Wu and Old Lady (the resolution of which later in the narrative proves important in Madame Wu's overall journey of transformation over the course of the novel), and between Madame Wu and Lingmao. This last foreshadows the novel's ongoing explorations of Madame Wu's relationships with all four of her sons.

## Discussion Question 1

Research the Bible story of the house built upon sand. What do you think the author is intending by including this story in juxtaposition with Madame Wu's comment about her son, and the kind of "house" he is?



## Discussion Question 2

What are the metaphoric parallels between how Madame Wu views the painting in her court and her beliefs about her concubine decision?

## Discussion Question 3

What are the metaphoric parallels between the narrative's description of how Madame Wu reacts to her new bed and the new situation within her marriage that she has created for herself?

## Vocabulary

dissatisfaction, clarity, lowly, fragrant, sandalwood, porcelain, amah, exquisite, abash, continuous, woeful, shrewd, endeavor, concubine, tranquil, compel, incessant, tumult, courteous, stupendous, diffidence, enigma, gruel, scanty, brocade, elixir, austere, encompass, vehemence, wretched, glutinous, zealous, penetrate, sateen, compel, courteous, median, ardent, surfeit, jessamine



## Chapter 2

### Summary

The morning after making the move to new quarters, Madame Wu wakes “with a new feeling of lightness.” She considers the quiet and peace of her new rooms which, narration reveals, were once those of her quiet, bookish father-in-law (Old Gentleman). Narration comments on how little of her past life she has brought with her: aside from clothes and her little silver pipe, only the painting of the mountain climber has made the move with her. As she dresses and breakfasts, she contemplates the qualities that she believes would be most appropriate for a concubine for her husband, and decides that someone as different as possible from herself (in appearance, temperament, background, and intellect) would be best. Her contemplations are interrupted by the arrival of her mother-in-law, Old Lady, who demands to know the true reasons for her (Madame Wu’s) decision. Madame Wu assures her repeatedly that the choice was made by no-one but herself, and for no reasons but her own, narration revealing those reasons: that men, because “heaven” made their desires and determinations towards parenthood last longer than those of women, deserved younger women that were able to fulfill those desires. Narration also reveals that for a woman to bear a child after the age of forty was, in that culture and in that time, considered inappropriate and unacceptable.

After Old Lady leaves, Madame Wu is able to enjoy the quiet and solitude of her new living situation, but can’t help imagining the fuss and conversations taking place in the rest of the house as a result of the changes she has made. She half-expects members of her extended family to come visit and confront her, but she is visited only by Rulan, the wife of her second son, Tsemo. Narration describes Rulan as outspoken, hot-tempered, and sophisticated, as older than Tsemo, and as needing him more than he needs her. The impetuous Rulan tells the consistently serene Madame Wu about how upset everyone in the house is, how they’re all trying to figure out why she’s doing what she’s doing, and wondering how their situations are all going to be affected. Madame Wu reassures that even though a concubine will be coming into the house, nothing about the status of the other members of the family, particularly the women, is going to change. Rulan leaves, still uneasy. After she goes, Madame Wu falls into a deep, emotionally exhausted sleep.

Narration describes how Rulan and other members of the family met while Madame Wu slept and talked for several hours about her decision. Narration also describes the depth and intensity of Rulan’s insecurities and fears about her relationship. The chapter concludes with Rulan being told by Tsemo to give them both a rest from her complaining: it will be, he says, his father who will have the most change to deal with when the concubine comes into the house.



## Analysis

The novel's thematic interest in the tension between tradition and change develops early in this section, with narration portraying Madame Wu simultaneously being happily and at peace with the change she has made, changes that came about because of her traditional beliefs about male/female relationships (the exploration of which is another of the novel's key themes). Here again, as in the previous chapter, Madame Wu is portrayed as being secure, confident, and comfortable with herself and with the choices she has made. Here, though, it's interesting to note how the novel indicates that these changes are clearly in line with those made by generations of Chinese women before her: changes she undergoes later in the narrative are much less traditional, meaning that the changes here are ironic foreshadowing of changes to come.

Other important elements in this section include the introduction of several important characters. The first of these is Old Gentleman, whose presence here is important for two main reasons. First, the fact that his influence lives only in Madame Wu's memory foreshadows circumstances later in the narrative in which another important character influences her in a similar, post-death fashion. Second, the description of Old Gentleman's character foreshadows later revelations of the sort of influence he had on his daughter-in-law. A second important character introduced here is Rulan, whose rebelliousness and outspokenness are vivid contrasts to the delicate restraint practiced by Madame Wu. It's important to note, however, that both women possess a strong sense of will and determination. They simply express it in different ways. The third important character introduced here is the second of Madame Wu's four sons, Tsemo, whose striving for success plays an important, defining role in events much later in the narrative. Meanwhile, the description of the tempestuous, intense, needy love shared by Rulan and Tsemo can be seen as foreshadowing later events in the novel that result in Madame Wu coming to a deeper understanding of love, and sharing that understanding with other characters, including Rulan.

Finally, a stylistic note: at the end of the chapter, the narration takes the first of several brief shifts in perspective away from Madame Wu and into that of another character – in this case, Rulan. This creates an intriguing shift for the reader, a glimpse away from the protagonist and into the lives, feelings, and experiences of those whom her decisions and choices affect.

## Discussion Question 1

What do you think might be the reasons that Rulan and other family members are concerned about the coming of the concubine? What might the concubine's arrival mean for the status of other family members?





## Discussion Question 2

The novel suggests that the main reason Madame Wu chooses to bring a concubine into the family is that traditional beliefs contend that men's sexual and procreative desires last longer than those of women. How do you react to this idea? On these grounds, do you agree or disagree with her decision?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Madame Wu brought the mountain climber painting with her? What do you think it means for her?

## Vocabulary

fecundity, vast, ineffable, futile, contemplate, peevish, reticence, reproach, ancestral, sullen, impetuous, pent, consternation, contemptuous, debonair



## Chapter 3

### Summary

The following morning, Madame Wu resolves to choose the concubine for her husband as soon as possible. She sends for Liu Ma, an elderly woman who brokers matches (both marital and sexual) between men and women. When she arrives, Madame Wu tells her the sort of girl she is looking for and demands that the new concubine should be found as soon as possible. Liu Ma eagerly tells her that she knows of just the girl, and as the result of her enthusiasm, Madame W demands that Liu Ma to bring the girl to the house that night.

After Liu Ma leaves, Madame Wu reflects on her relationship with her father-in-law (Old Gentleman), an intellectual with conservative views about women (i.e. that their bodies are more important than their minds) but who nevertheless recognized the power and the value of Madame Wu's intellect. Narration describes how, in the past, Old Gentleman insisted that the newly married Madame Wu never read the many books in his library; and how Madame Wu, in the present, read and became disturbed by one of those forbidden books, which portrayed a man whose soul and mind died even while he gratified the pleasures of the body.

Later that day, Madame Wu's contemplations on what she read are interrupted by the arrival of Liu Ma and the young woman. Madame Wu is impressed with the girl's appearance and manners; intrigued by the girl's story (of having been abandoned as a baby and found wrapped in an expensively embroidered piece of silk); relieved by the fact that she cannot read or write; and moved by her eagerness to make a good impression. She gives the girl (who was never properly named) a meal and a place to sleep, waking before dawn to the sound of the girl rising early, as she was trained to do on the farm where she was raised. The compassionately amused Madame Wu gives her a couple of small jobs to keep her busy and then herself goes back to bed.

After waking at her usual time and eating her breakfast, Madame Wu is surprised by a visit from her third son, the thoughtful Fengmo. She is subsequently annoyed by the sudden attention he seems to be paying to the girl, and by his questioning of Madame Wu's decision to bring the girl into the house. She sends him away, reminding both him and the girl that the genders are to live quite separately in the Wu household. The chapter concludes with Madame Wu giving the girl her name: Chi'iuming, which Madame Wu says means Bright Autumn. With this name, Madame Wu says, the girl's duty is clear. "His is the autumn," she says, "yours is the brightness."

### Analysis

Thematic explorations of the tension between tradition and change develop in a couple of key ways in this chapter. First, the tension seems embodied in the character of Old



Gentleman, while at the end of the chapter, Madame Wu's conversation with Fengmo suggests just how firmly traditional, particularly in terms of gender relations, she continues to be. This, in turn, is a facet of the novel's exploration of relationships between men and women. Changes in this aspect of her experience and perspective prove to be among the most important in her overall journey of transformation throughout the story, and are themselves indirect manifestations of the novel's thematic interest in the relationship between body and soul (see also the paragraph following). One further glimpse of theme in this chapter occurs in the moment when Madame Wu is woken by the busy Ch'iuming: the former's compassion for the latter, in this moment and other moments throughout this chapter and the narrative, can be seen as manifestations of the novel's thematic interest in the power of compassion.

Again in terms of the novel's exploration of the relationship between body and soul, there is the reference to the book read by Madame Wu that portrays a troubling variation on that relationship. The reading of that story, and the contemplation of its implications, are important triggers of further, deeper transformation for Madame Wu, which result in what the novel portrays as a deepening connection with her own soul. Meanwhile, the inclusion of that story is one of several important pieces of foreshadowing in this section, in this case foreshadowing several circumstances later in the narrative in which Madame Wu both experiences, and has insights into, similar sorts of separations. Then: the reference to the piece of silk owned by the woman who comes to be known as Ch'iuming foreshadows events later in the narrative when the true meaning of that silk, and its relationship to Ch'iuming's identity, is revealed. Also in terms of Ch'iuming, the passing description of what Madame Wu perceives as an attraction between Ch'iuming and Fengmo foreshadows later circumstances in the narrative when the true nature of Ch'iuming's feelings is revealed. Perhaps the most significant piece of foreshadowing, however, occurs in the narrative's passing reference, through Old Gentleman, to Madame Wu's intellect. Later in the story, the unexpected attention paid to Madame Wu's mind proves catalytically transformative for both her and the story.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the character and perspectives of Old Gentleman. In what ways are aspects of his character in conflict? In what ways does he seem to be an ally to Madame Wu? In what ways does he seem to be restrictive?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the relationship between the forbidden book read by Madame Wu and her current situation? Consider not only Madame Wu, but other characters: which character's experience might be similar to that of the man in the book? What connection does this similarity have to her being disturbed by the book?



## Discussion Question 3

What are the implications of the girl's name, in terms of her relationship with Mr. Wu?

## Vocabulary

arrogant, diffidence, profound, sensuous, loathsome, surfeit, devotion, perceive, intuitive, divination, delicacy, amiable, convenient, industrious, pathetic, slattern, lassitude, severity, surly



# Chapter 4

## Summary

Narration describes how Mr. Wu had, ever since his wife's birthday, left her alone – and how Madame Wu understood the shame and confusion behind his absence. Returning its focus to Madame Wu, narration describes her visits to the various men in her household - first Mr. Wu, agreeing with him that the beloved, pale orchids she had planted in the courtyard of their shared space should be transplanted out and replaced with more colorful peonies. Madame Wu then lets her husband know that Ch'iuming will be coming to him in a couple of days, responding to his angry question about whether she has any jealousy in her with calm assurances of her faith and trust in their relationship – and reminding him of her recent fortieth birthday.

After she leaves, Madame Wu visits Liangmo (telling him to assist Mr. Wu well in his business deals) then visits Liangmo's pregnant wife Ming, asking for her help in arranging the marriage of her younger sister to Fengmo. The agreeable Ming says she'll go along with whatever Madame Wu wants. Madame Wu then visits Tsemo, who is practicing writing in English and who tells her that Rulan is unwell. Madame Wu visits her and urges her to rest, and the unusually quiet Rulan does so.

Back in her part of the house, Madame Wu finds Ch'iuming busily sewing, and tells her be ready to go to Mr. Wu tonight. After noting Ch'iuming's nervous blushes, Madame Wu spends the rest of the day reading a book of history and taking care of household affairs. That night, Madame Wu sends Ch'iuming to her husband, then contemplates the night sky, telling herself she has no regrets and thinking of the new life she is making for herself.

Narration then shifts to Ch'iuming's point of view as she nervously makes her way to Mr. Wu's room, waits for him to arrive (reflecting all the while on how unworthy she feels), and remembers her lonely childhood and youth. After a while Mr. Wu appears, but does not join her in the bed right away. Eventually, however, he comes to the waiting Ch'iuming, opening the silk curtains around the bed "as though they were ripped" and "pulling her hands away from her face." There the chapter ends.

## Analysis

The first of several points to note in this chapter occurs right in its opening moments – specifically, another of the narrations infrequent shifts in point of view, in this case to that of Mr. Wu. A related point is the shift in perspective at the end of the chapter, which focuses on the experience of Ch'iuming. Both these shifts reinforce the sense that such shifts throughout the narrative offer the reader insight into how the focused, determined, carefully chosen actions of Madame Wu affect those around her. On another level, this is an example of a writing technique known as bookending, in which sections of text that



focus on similar or parallel actions or stylistic elements (in this case, perspective shifts) come at the beginning and end of a section of writing grounded in the work's primary focus (in this case, the experience of Madame Wu).

Another point to note about this chapter is the reference it contains to flowers, with again, the discussion about orchids and peonies metaphorically reflecting the relationship between Madame Wu and her husband. A third noteworthy point is Madame Wu's calm reassuring of Mr. Wu that their relationship is solid, an ironic foreshadowing of events later in the narrative when she comes to realize just how limited that relationship actually is.

In the second part of the chapter, important points to note include the introduction of Ming (who, in her calm and quiet docility, is a vivid contrast to another of Madame Wu's daughters-in-law), and the reference to Rulan, whose unexpected quietness is the result of somewhat surprising events revealed later in the narrative.

Part three of the chapter sees Madame Wu deep in contemplation, the object of her thoughts (the night sky) becoming the subject of even deeper contemplations later in the narrative. Finally, part four of the chapter (as noted above, recounted from the point of view of Ch'iuming) is vividly evocative in its spare description of the first encounter between Ch'iuming and Mr. Wu).

## Discussion Question 1

In what way do the references to orchids and peonies in this chapter reflect the relationship between Madame Wu and her husband?

## Discussion Question 2

What are the thematic implications of the book that Madame Wu reads in the middle of the day? What are the contrasts between this book and the book she read in the previous chapter? What are the thematic implications of those contrasts?

## Discussion Question 3

What are the implications of the final moments of the chapter (i.e. in its images, word usage, and events)? What are the implications of feeling on the part of Mr. Wu? On the part of Ch'iuming? What is the implied event?

## Vocabulary

resolute, impede, coax, admonition, judicious, proportion, splendor, plight, founding



# Chapter 5

## Summary

The next morning, after another long and deep sleep, and after breakfasting, dressing, and beautifying her appearance, Madame Wu plans to visit Madame Kang and talk with her about the possibility of her daughter Linyi (the daughter Madame Wu noticed earlier at her birthday feast in Chapter 1) marrying Fengmo. Meanwhile, she also hears from Ying that the servants believe that Tsemo had beaten Rulan, who had been heard weeping. She resolves to speak with both of them, but finds that Tsemo has left the house earlier than usual, and that Rulan is sleeping.

After spending two hours inspecting the running of the house, Madame Wu goes to the much more chaotic home of Madame Kang, where she (Madame Wu) skillfully guides the conversation towards the subject of Fengmo and Linyi. Madame Kang is at first excited about the idea, but then reveals her concerns that the more worldly Linyi would not take kindly to the less well-traveled Fengmo. The two women plan to get Fengmo additional education from a visiting priest of whom they both know, and Madame Wu leaves. When she gets home, she finds that Little Sister Hsia has come to visit her. Knowing that Little Sister is an immigrant and a Christian like the priest, Madame Wu asks for her help in arranging for the priest to teach Fengmo, and Little Sister (who hopes that this might be a step towards converting the family to Christianity) agrees. After Little Sister goes, and after spending the afternoon again tending to household affairs, Madame Wu speaks with Fengmo, again carefully guiding the conversation to a place where Fengmo agrees to the possibilities of both the priest and Linyi. Mother and son then go in to dinner.

Ch'iuming is at that dinner, attending for the first time (on the orders of Madame Wu) as a member of the family. Madame Wu carefully and tactfully ensures that she is taken care of, and at the end of the meal, even though several members of the household seem uneasy, Meng makes a point of promising to come and visit Ch'iuming the next day. Madame Wu, meanwhile, goes to bed early, and again has what narration suggests was a deep, restful sleep.

For a few paragraphs at the end of the chapter, the narration shifts to Ch'iuming's point of view, describing her gratitude to Madame Wu, her dawning sense of comfort in the family, and her unease with Mr. Wu when he comes to visit her. She hides her face as he calmly gives her some rules about how he is to be treated, looking at him only to ask whether she is truly wanted. He assures her she is, and narration suggests he begins to feel some kind of "heat" towards her.



## Analysis

Here again in this chapter, there are several points to note. The first are the frequent references to how Madame Wu manipulates conversations: there are similar references throughout the narrative to this aspect of her character and relationships, but this chapter is particularly notable for the emphasis the narrative places on Madame Wu's conversational techniques. There is the sense here that, for whatever reason, Madame Wu is working harder to exert control over that which she CAN control: having lost, in a sense, control over her husband and his sexual activities, she seems to be asserting the kind of control she is accustomed to having in other circumstances.

Other points to note about this section include the deepening contrast in personality and home-keeping styles between Madame Wu and Madame Kang (a vivid contrast that says more about Madame Wu than it does about Madame Kang) and the references to the relationship between Tsemo and Rulan, an outgrowth / deepening of references made in the previous section and, like those references, a foreshadowing of the somewhat surprising truth about Rulan that emerges in the following section. Then there are the developing relationships between Ch'iuming and Mr. Wu, and Ch'iuming and the rest of the family, which can be seen as another aspect of the novel's thematic exploration of the effects of change. A related point is another shift in narrative point of view, again away from Madame Wu and towards Ch'iuming. Here it's worth noticing that of the shifts in perspective throughout the novel, up to this point in the text and at points subsequent, there are few, if any, shifts to the points of view of the men in the household: the shifts tend to be away from Madame Wu and towards other women. This can be seen as relating to the book's title, which is "Pavilion of Women". That title, in its turn, can therefore be seen as evoking the book's thematic interest in relationships between men and women.

Arguably the most significant element in this section is the reference to the priest / teacher who is to undertake Fengmo's further education. This character appears in the following section, and has important effects on character and story elements that go far beyond the effects foreshadowed here. The effects of this character (who appears and is identified in the following section) are analyzed in relation to the chapters in which they occur.

### Discussion Question 1

What are the novel's references to Madame Wu's ways of speaking and of getting what she wants. What do these imply / suggest about her character, and her way of conducting conversations / relationships?

### Discussion Question 2

What do you think are the metaphoric implications of the novel's frequent references to sleep – specifically, that of Madame Wu?





## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think so many members of the Wu household continue to be uneasy about Ch'iuming's presence?

## Vocabulary

wayward, cholera, lenient, decorous, rickshaw, courteous, proportion, canopy, fervent, forbear, rebuke, visor, haughty, inexorable, portent, demur, clamor, assuage, ravenous, inexplicable, rigidity



# Chapter 6

## Summary

A week or so later, Madame Wu and the rest of the household are surprised by the arrival of Fengmo's tutor – Brother Andre, very tall, very slender, and very dark in complexion (narration later reveals he is Italian). Madame Wu is surprised by his courtesy, his intelligence, and his fluency in Chinese, which he says he learned (along with several other languages) in order to be able to speak well with people of other cultures. After some polite greetings on both sides, Madame Wu leaves Brother Andre alone with Fengmo, and when she comes back to see how the lessons went, she is surprised to see how attentive the usually rebellious Fengmo is.

As the lessons continue (nightly), Madame Wu becomes increasingly drawn to Brother Andre's intelligence and ideas, finding they agree with what she learned about the world and about her own beliefs from Old Man and from her somewhat more liberal father. At the same time, she becomes increasingly nervous about his influence on Fengmo, and resolves to get Fengmo married to Linyi as soon as possible, in spite of the objections of Mr. Wu, who resents her control over the lives of their children. Her efforts to calm him down result in a physical closeness that triggers such a strong emotional response in Madame Wu that she forces herself back into her usual cool reserve. Later, she tells Ying to give some of her (Madame Wu's) scents to Ch'iuming, and Ying reluctantly obeys.

After calming her husband down, Madame Wu then visits Madame Kang, to arrange for a meeting between their two children. After tearfully confessing that she is once again expecting a child (and as the two women reflect on how socially inappropriate it is for a woman over forty to bear a child), Madame Kang agrees to Madame Wu's arrangement for Fengmo and Linyi to meet. Madame Wu then tells Fengmo that Linyi wants to meet him, carefully manipulating him into agreeing to do so. Meanwhile, she notices that Fengmo is spending even more time with Brother Andre, and discovers that he (Fengmo) is learning how to write a letter in English to Linyi. Meanwhile, Fengmo visits Linyi, and Madame Kang reports that the feelings and attraction between the two young people were very strong. The two women agree that the young people should marry as soon as possible, Madame Wu feeling somewhat guilty that she is manipulating Brother Andre as she is.

## Analysis

By far the most significant element of this chapter is the introduction of Brother Andre, a character whose influence on the other characters in the story and on the story itself is perhaps more than any other character. In sketching in his character, here and in subsequent sections, the author creates a portrait that is simultaneously powerful and gentle, irresistible and delicate: the force of Brother Andre's personality and beliefs is



forceful without being aggressive or violent. He is, in many ways, an extremely vivid contrast to Little Sister Hsia, whose twitchy, desperate insecurity and need for her faith to be followed is similarly vivid but, in many ways not nearly as engaging or appealing. That said, and as the force of Brother Andre's character and values becomes more apparent, as the portrait develops more and more facets, it becomes increasingly clear that Brother Andre is the embodiment of two of the novel's thematic interests: in Christian philosophy and allegory, and in the relationship between body and soul.

On a technical level, the appearance of Brother Andre sends Madame Wu's story in a new and different direction in terms of plot. Her steps along this new phase of her journey are small at first, and tentative. Nevertheless, the disquiet and subtle transformations that begin here are important foreshadowing of transformations yet to come, in her and in other characters, all of which again offer embodiments of the body/soul theme. Here it's important to note another important piece of foreshadowing: this is the deepening relationship between Fengmo and Madame Wu, which foreshadows later revelations (or realizations in both characters) of how similar they are.

Finally, the novel's thematic interest in the tension between transition and change is again apparent in this section, with tradition vividly making its presence felt in the discussion of Madame Kang's post-forty pregnancy and change making its presence felt more glancingly in narration's reference to the influences of Old Gentleman and Madame Wu's (perhaps surprisingly) open-minded father. Likewise, references to the various husband-wife relationships in this section evoke the narrative's thematic exploration of male-female roles and how they manifest that tension as well.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Madame Wu becomes more determined to get Fengmo married to Linyi after Brother Andre arrives?

## Discussion Question 2

There is a sense of irony about Madame Wu's concerns about what Fengmo is being taught. What is that irony?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Mr. Wu feels so resentful of Madame Wu's influence over their sons at this point in the narrative? What has changed for him? How might his agitation reflect the novel's thematic interest in male / female roles and relationships?

## Vocabulary

resonant, acute, impersonal, amiable, converse, contradict, stipulate, rectitude, petulance, lattice, brusque, piteous, exorcise, deft, reap, slattern, dissolute, satiate



# Chapter 7

## Summary

This chapter begins with narration of Fengmo and Linyi's small (and therefore untraditional) wedding, and how Madame Wu's quiet contentment is interrupted by the arrival of Ch'iuming who, after the ceremony, reveals privately to Madame Wu that she is pregnant. Struggling to control a wave of unexpected anger, which she releases as she eats some lotus pods, Madame Wu assures the apprehensive Ch'iuming that both she and her child will be wanted. Ch'iuming begs her to give Mr. Wu the news, and Madame Wu reluctantly agrees. She also dismisses Brother Andre: she believes that now Fengmo is married, he will no longer need Brother Andre's teaching in order to make him appealing to Linyi. Madame Wu, however, is sorry to see Brother Andre go.

The next day, on her way to visit Mr. Wu with the news of the pregnancy, Madame Wu is called into the rooms of Old Lady, who has fallen ill as the result of eating too much at the wedding. Madame Wu sees that Old Lady is frightened of what she fears is coming (i.e. death) and attempts to reassure her by saying that her spirit and the life of the family will live on forever. Once Old Lady seems somewhat recovered, Madame Wu visits her husband, telling him first that his mother (Old Lady) is ill. They bicker with sudden anger over who took better care of her, and then Madame Wu changes the subject, revealing that Ch'iuming is pregnant. Seeing her husband's boyish happiness at the news, Madame Wu suddenly realizes that there is no love in her for him, and that there never has been. She then tells Mr. Wu to visit Old Lady, and give her the news about the pregnancy. The news, however, does not cheer her: Old Lady's illness suddenly gets worse, and she very quickly dies. Madame Wu comforts her intensely grieving husband, feeling no real grief herself. After Mr. Wu unhappily drinks himself into sleep, Madame Wu reflects on how each generation passes away and leaves life to the generations to come.

After several months of ritual and personal grief, and as she and her husband settle into their new roles as heads of the family, Madame Wu becomes aware of increasing tension between Fengmo and Linyi. She learns that Linyi is not happy: that she feels trapped and either wants to not be married, or move out of the multi-generational family home. Madame Wu also learns that Old Lady was physically abusive to Rulan: the incident that caused Rulan to weep was caused by Old Lady hitting her. Madame Wu leaves the conversation feeling both concerned and frustrated about the troubled younger generation living in her house, and resolves to ask Brother Andre to return – partly to distract and / or occupy Fengmo, partly to help her deal with the young people and her own frustrations. When she calls Fengmo in to tell him of her decision, she is surprised by his comment that “there is a me ... that has nothing to do with you, Mother, and nothing to do with the child to come from me”, a surprise that is intensified by the realization that she has had similar thoughts.



## Analysis

Two of the novel's key themes (its exploration of the tension between tradition and change, its exploration of male / female relationships) are developed in the wedding between Fengmo and Linyi. Their small and non-traditional wedding is the result of the new understanding they have about the relationship between man and woman, or husband and wife, an understanding that Madame Wu accepts in an action that functions on two levels: to begin the development of the novel's thematic exploration of compassion as a motivator for action (specifically, Madame Wu's compassion for the feelings and perspectives of Fengmo and Linyi), and to foreshadow later events when compassion for others in fact becomes the primary guiding force in her decision making process.

Other important elements include the revelation of Ch'iuming's pregnancy and Madame Wu's subsequent discovery of the nature of her feelings towards Mr. Wu. Then there is the revelation of Old Lady's violence towards Rulan, which on one level comes as a surprise (since narration had been preparing the way for Tsemo to be the one hurting her) and which, on another level, is an ironic and violent contrast / foreshadowing to how Rulan has been treated, and will again be treated, by Madame Wu. It is also an example of a darker aspect to the novel's title, specifically of some of the violence that can go on in this "pavilion of women".

Other important pieces of foreshadowing include the vivid description of how Madame Wu eats the lotus pods (which foreshadows, in both action and emotional quality, a similar incident in Chapter 9) and, perhaps even more significantly, Fengmo's comment to his mother at the end of the chapter, which foreshadows Madame Wu's eventual discovery that, like her son, she too has "a me" that has nothing to do with anyone else.

Finally, the death of Old Lady serves as a catalyst for important, transformation-triggering realizations and actions both in this chapter and in later parts of the narrative. Several of these relate to the questions about the soul with which Madame Wu is confronted here, questions which she confronts – in other manifestations – in subsequent chapters. Those confrontations, in turn, become further manifestations of the book's thematic emphasis on the relationship between body and soul. Ultimately, the death of Old Lady is a turning point in Madame Wu's life and perceptions – a small one, when placed next to other events that prove to be other turning points, but an important one nonetheless.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Madame Wu becomes so angry as the result of Ch'iuming's announcement that she is pregnant?



## Discussion Question 2

What is your relationship with thoughts of death? Are you, like Old Lady, fearful of what is to come? Or are you, like Madame Wu, confident that death is in fact a gateway to immortality?

## Discussion Question 3

Two events are juxtaposed in this section which suggest, through their juxtaposition, that Madame Wu's beliefs about immortality, about the enduring qualities of family, will go on forever. One of these events is the death of Old Lady. What is the other event? How does that second event develop the idea of immortality within a family?

## Vocabulary

assuage, valiant, lattice



## Chapter 8

### Summary

The next day, Brother Andre returns to the house. Madame Wu, however, calls him to talk with her before he goes into his lesson with Fengmo. Their conversation is deep and intense, and Madame Wu is again surprised to discover how much of her own way of thinking, wondering, and questioning is echoed in the ideas and words of another. After they have finished talking, Madame Wu looks up and out at the stars, contemplating the ways in which generations build, both literally and spiritually, on those that have gone before; contemplating the space, spiritual and physical, between the stars and between people; and the surprising ways of what Brother Andre has taught her of the wider world. Her contemplations last so long and are so deep that first her three sons, and then Mr. Wu, come to her and gently try to talk her soul back into her body. But it is only the tender ministrations of Ch'iuming that bring Madame Wu's mind back to her family. When they see that she is again with them, Mr. Wu and the others slip away, Fengmo surprising his father and brothers by telling them that Madame Wu is more like him than she is like them.

The next day, Madame Wu is irritable with servants and with her husband, who asks her again to go back to their previous living arrangement. She refuses and he goes away, wondering whether she has fallen under the influence of Brother Andre. Madame Wu is then visited by Little Sister Hsia, who asks for her help in getting Brother Andre to help her (Little Sister) to start a school for orphans. Madame Wu intuits that what Little Sister really wants is to develop some kind of relationship with Brother Andre, and tells her to focus on her relationship with God instead – neither she (Little Sister) nor Brother Andre, she says, must focus on the paths they have chosen. Little Sister erupts in anger, calling Madame Wu and all “you Chinese” hateful. As she goes, Madame Wu resolves to never see her again.

Before she can calm down, Madame Wu is called to Ming's bedside: the younger woman is giving birth to her second child which, after intense struggle (and the arrival and assistance of her mother, Madame Kang), is revealed to be another boy. After the baby is born and mother and child are both sleeping, Madame Wu takes the opportunity to talk to Madame Kang about the troubles between Fengmo and Linyi, but is surprised to hear not only that Madame Kang believes Linyi is being a good wife, but that Madame Kang believes that she (Madame Wu) has not raised Fengmo to be a good husband. The two friends quarrel, with Madame Kang accusing Madame Wu of being too clever not only for her sons, but for her husband. With that, Madame Kang leaves angrily.

Afterwards, Madame Wu calls Fengmo to apologize for not handling the situation better, but Fengmo comforts her by saying the fault lies with him and Linyi who, he adds are simply not compatible and need more between them than bodily connection. He goes on to say again how similar he and his mother are, a realization that Madame Wu also





comes to: she comments that she has failed to recognize Fengmo as an individual, independent person, and asks him what he wants. He tells her he wants to be free, and that Brother Andre has helped him see the way to do that: he, Fengmo, has to leave. After a moment, Madame Wu agrees to let him go.

## Analysis

In some ways, this chapter is a transitional one, in that its actions and events serve to move the story in a different direction, which might be described as inward, rather than forward. To be specific, it's a shift in direction that can be perceived as relating primarily to Madame Wu's journey deeper into herself and into a simultaneously, more compassionate, wider understanding of life, existence, and the world in which it all takes place. Perhaps the most notable event in this section is the portrayal of the night of Brother Andre's return – specifically, Madame Wu's experience of her soul leaving her body and becoming one, as it were, with wider, broader, more mysterious elements of existence. This sequence dramatizes one of the novel's key thematic perspectives – that the body and the soul are separate, and that to define one's life by experiences of the former, while ignoring the latter, can be destructive. There is evidence of this perspective throughout the narrative, both before and after this point, but Madame Wu's experience here suggests that such destruction can be avoided if one allows oneself to become both aware of and connected to the wider life of the soul. From this point on, Madame Wu makes increasingly conscious efforts to do this, embodying the narrative's thematic explorations of confinement (i.e. the life of the body) vs. freedom (i.e. the life of the soul); of the power of compassion (compassion for the self and for others as triggered by connection to that wider life); and of Christian allegory and philosophy (which emphasizes, in both faith and practice, the worth of the soul over that of the body). Meanwhile, these interconnected themes can also be seen in events such as Madame Wu's decision to let Fengmo leave.

Other key elements in this section, aside from the return of Brother Andre (an essential catalytic presence in Madame Wu's journey of transformation) are the reiterated references to the similarity in character and nature between Fengmo and Madame Wu, and the deepening of the tension and differences between Madame Wu and Madame Kang. This last can be seen as manifesting another of the novel's themes: its exploration of tradition vs. change (as represented by Madame Kang's attitude towards Madame Wu's intellect and deepening awareness). Then there is the irony of Ch'iuming being the character whose influences are the ones that bring Madame Wu back to herself, and the pointed argument between Little Sister Hsia and Madame Wu about the former's intentions towards Brother Andre. This last is both ironic and important foreshadowing – ironic in that Madame Wu also has a personal motive for wanting to be with Brother Andre (although that motive is more spiritual than sexual, which is what she implies Little Sister's motive is) and, with that in mind, foreshadowing of the deepening relationship between Madame Wu and Brother Andre in future chapters.



## Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Madame Wu's decision to let Fengmo go reflect the novel's various themes?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways are the ministrations of Ch'iuming, in bringing Madame Wu back to her body, ironic?

## Discussion Question 3

In many ways, the book asks the reader to think about the connection between bodily and spiritual needs in marriage. What do you think the relationship is? Do you think Madame Wu is correct in, for example, realizing that her husband's bodily needs can be taken care of by a concubine and therefore detaching herself emotionally from him?

## Vocabulary

brazier, tendril, imperious, translucent, impudent, fastidious, profuse, reverent, insatiable



## Chapter 9

### Summary

It is the beginning of winter when Madame Wu, her family, and the town say good-bye to Fengmo. Narration describes Madame Wu's feelings: "She was frightened and sad, but she comforted herself by these words, 'He is free.' And wrapping her coat about her, she returned to her own walls." Shortly afterwards, she convinces Madame Kang and Linyi that the latter should move back into the Wu household and take lessons from Brother Andre so that she (Linye) will be better able to connect with her husband when he returns. Madame Kang agrees happily, Linyi sullenly, and the move takes place. Madame Wu asks Brother Andre to teach her as well, and he agrees, becoming amused at how many questions she continues to have. Madame Wu finds her thoughts, ideas, and soul expanding with each lesson.

In the meantime, the household and its inhabitants become neglected. When Ying reminds her of her lack of attention to the house, Madame Wu does a tour of inspection and corrects things that have gone wrong. She also has conversations with her daughters-in-law. She corrects Meng's attitude towards her unhappy servant, and later tells Rulan, who reveals herself to be desperately in love with Tsemo, that she must find something else to do with her time and energy, otherwise she will go mad. She also decides to send Tsemo away so that both he and Rulan can become happier in themselves, in order to become happier with each other.

A short time later, Madame Wu discovers that Mr. Wu has been visiting flower houses (brothels) and, in confirming this knowledge with Ch'iuming, discovers that the relationship between concubine and master is not going well, in spite of Ch'iuming's pregnancy. After giving Ch'iuming some of the jewelry that she (Madame Wu) had been given by Mr. Wu, she asks to talk to Mr. Wu, and is unhappy to notice that he has become thinner and less attractive; unhappy to hear that he is indeed visiting flower houses; and sad to hear that he feels as though Ch'iuming's child does not feel like his own. He also confesses both his longings for, and happy memories of, good times with Madame Wu, and leaves her with a promise to do whatever she needs him to do. After Mr. Wu leaves, Madame Wu frets about how she has become responsible for all the men in the household, wondering if that responsibility is going to continue forever.

### Analysis

The first points to note about this section have to do with its opening sequence – Fengmo's departure. Both the setting of this event at the beginning of winter and narration's description of Madame Wu's thoughts on that departure are significant. In the case of the latter, this is particularly true of its reference to Madame Wu's returning to the living space within her own walls. The juxtaposition of walls (which throughout the narrative represent both spiritual and physical confinement) with her thoughts on



Fengmo's being free suggest a great deal about where Madame Wu's own personal experience of freedom sits at this point in her story. In other words, the juxtaposition of these two images is a clear evocation of the novel's thematic interest in confinement vs. freedom.

As the chapter progresses, other important elements emerge. First among these is the ongoing development of the relationship between Madame Wu and Brother Andre – specifically, narration's description of how Brother Andre answers Madame Wu's many questions. There is also new information about Mr. Wu and how he is fulfilling his physical needs, a circumstance that tends to bear out comments made earlier by various characters on how much men are ruled by those needs. This, in turn, is a facet of the novel's consideration of the relationship between body and soul, which is developed in other ways as well - for example, Ying's reminder that the needs of the collective body of the Wu family need to be taken care of, neglected as they have been by Madame Wu's almost exclusive attention to the needs and desires of her soul. Here, there is the sense that Madame Wu's struggle to find the balance between the two aspects of existence has swung too far in a new direction, a sense of her previous priorities having been abandoned. There is also a metaphoric echo here of Madame Wu's experience in the previous chapter of leaving her body behind while her soul searched the universe and having to have her soul brought back to her body.

At the same time, there are further developments in the book's thematic exploration of compassion: on the one hand, a deepening of compassion in Madame Wu's relationship with Rulan (compassion based in awareness of the desperate love between Rulan and Tsemo) and, at the same time, a narrowing of compassion in Madame Wu's relationship with Mr. Wu, whose uncertainties and frailties Madame Wu responds to with irritation. Here it's important to note that this particular element indicates that she still has a good distance to go in her spiritual journey, a distance that she travels in the remaining chapters of the narrative. The irritation here is therefore ironic foreshadowing of the transformation of her feelings later in the story.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the metaphoric value of setting Fengmo's departure in wintertime?

## Discussion Question 2

Is the education of Linyi the true motivation for Madame Wu suggesting that she (Linyi) return to the house? Or is there another factor involved?

## Discussion Question 3

Consider the similarities between the following narrative descriptions:



“These hands of Madame Wu’s always looked as though they had no strength in them. But they had strength. The pith inside the pod was tough fiber, yet it gave way beneath her fingers and she plucked out of it one of the many seeds it hid. With her small sharp teeth, which were as sound today as they had been when they grew, she peeled the green skin from the white flesh.”

“[Brother Andre] stripped the leaves away, and he picked the fruit and cracked the husk and peeled the inner shell and split the flesh and took out the seed and divided it, and there was the kernel, pure and clean.”

What do these clear, seemingly deliberate similarities suggest about the parallels and differences between the characters and/or the events portrayed?

## Vocabulary

docility, chrysalis, falter, scrupulous, rebuke, consternation, indomitable, rigorous, pellucid, awry, whit



# Chapter 10

## Summary

The chapter begins with a description of Mr. Wu's visit to what he believes to be a reputable "flower house" (i.e. brothel), and to the young woman there whom he sees regularly, the child-like Jasmine. During his visit, Jasmine tells him she "has happiness" in her (i.e. that she's pregnant), and tells him the child is his. While he is considering what to do about her and the child, he is interrupted by a messenger, who tells him to hurry home: Ch'iuming has hung herself.

When he arrives home, Mr. Wu finds the household in turmoil around the apparently dead Ch'iuming, and that Madame Wu has sent for Brother Andre. When he arrives, he gives Ch'iuming an injection that brings her around and forces her into labor. When the baby girl is born, Ch'iuming is too weak to take care of it. Madame Wu takes it to her quarters.

A few days later, when Madame Wu talks with Brother Andre, he pointedly tells her that she has been too selfish, thinking only of her own contentment, ease, and power, adding that the only way she can redeem herself is to think only of others. After he goes, Madame Wu contemplates his words, and then takes the baby back to Ch'iuming, who promises to take care of it and confesses that she tried to kill herself because she believed the baby was a girl. Leaving the baby with its mother, Madame Wu leaves, only to encounter an embarrassed and anxious Mr. Wu who reveals the existence of, and his feelings for, Jasmine. Madame Wu offers to take her into the household.

A few days later, and after further conversation with Brother Andre, Madame Wu learns that he has been injured protecting a moneylender from a street gang, and that he has been taken to his home to die. Madame Wu hurries after him, desperate for one last piece of guidance. With his last breath, he says to her "Feed my lambs", and then dies. Madame Wu quickly realizes that he means all the children and troubled adults that he had been taking care of; just as quickly realizes how much she loved him; and that she must do as he asks. She makes arrangements both for his funeral and for the children to move into the Wu family house, all the while contemplating the nature of her love for him, how damaging it would have been to both of them if they had ever acted (physically or sexually) on their shared connection, and how pure her feelings for him could remain following his death. Following the funeral, Madame Wu leads the children "into her own gates, and from that day they were homeless no more."

## Analysis

This chapter contains several key turning points for Madame Wu and for the story, events which tend to have both thematic and narrative implications. Arguably the most significant of these come about in relation to Brother Andre, both his blunt speaking to



Madame Wu about her past attitudes and actions and his death. The former changes Madame Wu's spiritual reality, while the latter is a trigger for changes in both her spiritual and physical realities. In short, Brother' Andre's lesson to Madame Wu here is a key element of the book's thematic exploration of the relationship between body and soul.

These changes are also deeply connected to two of the novel's other themes – the power and necessity for compassion, and its exploration of Christian allegory and philosophy. There is a sense here that Brother Andre's death is an act of self-sacrifice that, while not on the same scale as Jesus Christ's (i.e. in allowing himself to be crucified in order to, according to Biblical teaching, absolve the sins of the world), is nevertheless similar in intention. This idea is further borne out by Brother Andre's last words, "lambs" being a reference frequently used by Christ in the Bible to refer to those whom he led, taught, and sacrificed himself to save. Yet another manifestation of Christian experience and teaching comes in Madame Wu's welcoming of the prostitute Jasmine into her home: in the Bible, Christ is frequently portrayed as behaving compassionately towards women and prostitutes.

One final point to note about this section: the gender of Ch'iuming's baby. Throughout the narrative, and in Chinese culture both past and present, male children are believed to be particular blessings. They are regarded as the true and best heirs to family reputation, monetary status, and history. Women are regarded as lesser human beings, and their births tend to become occasions almost of mourning, rather than of celebration. The fact that male children could not exist without women makes the cultural (and often personal) devaluing of the latter an irony almost too extreme to be believed, but irony notwithstanding, this view of gender (held by both men and women) was, and is, widely held, and would – at the time – be considered a valid reason for a mother to at least want to kill herself ... she could / would have been perceived as failing in her duty as a woman and as a wife. In short, Ch'iuming's attitudes and actions in this section can be clearly seen as a manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in the relationships between men and women.

## Discussion Question 1

Do you agree or disagree with Brother Andre's contention that, to this point in her life, Madame Wu has acted selfishly and with her own contentment in mind? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways are the two main events of the chapter (Brother Andre's comments to Madame Wu and his death) related to the novel's thematic exploration of compassion?



## Discussion Question 3

What is the parallel (literal and/or metaphoric) between what Brother Andre does for Ch'iuming in this chapter and what he does for Madame Wu here and throughout the novel?

## Vocabulary

proprietor, gentry, malicious, ruffian, proportion, bier, gingko, rosary, cluster, contrite, renunciation, excrescence, haphazard, stolid, insidious, recompense, discernment





# Chapter 11

## Summary

The next morning, as Madame Wu wakes and dresses, she reflects on how she now knows what love truly means as the result of having known and loved Brother Andre, believing that she can still hear his voice and wisdom in her mind. When Ying tells her that Jasmine is waiting to see her, Madame Wu meets with the girl, and quickly discerns that she has lied and is not expecting a child. Faced with the truth, Jasmine strives to persuade Madame Wu that she will bring happiness to the house, not anger or trouble. Madame Wu tells her a decision will be made the next day and sends her away.

A day later, and again upon waking, Madame Wu's morning reflections on what she has learned from Brother Andre are interrupted by the arrival of the children from his home, and she goes to meet them. She discovers that he had given them names like Pity, Faith, and Humility, and gives a scarred child the name Love: Brother Andre had died before he could give the name himself. Madame Wu then leads all the children into an abandoned, but well-maintained, ancient family temple. There, she says, the ancient gods will watch over them, and she herself will oversee their earthly care.

As the children play and settle in, Madame Wu is told that Jasmine has returned for her decision. The two women meet, and Madame Wu agrees to let Jasmine be regarded as Mr. Wu's Third Wife, Madame Wu being the first and Ch'iuming being the second. She then goes out into the courtyard of the house, where she finds three men waiting to see her. They tell her that they wish to prosecute the gang members who killed Andre, and that they need her help. Madame Wu, hearing Andre's guidance in her mind and heart, says that he would not have wanted any form of vengeance or punishment, and that she will not help them. The men go away, disappointed.

Madame Wu then goes to see her husband. Their conversation about Jasmine reveals to Madame Wu that he has, somehow, found the capacity to love (i.e. Jasmine) in him. Their mutual openness and vulnerability leads them to hold hands in affection. Their time together is interrupted by the noisy, urgent arrival of Ying, who says that Madame Kang is having a difficult time giving birth to her new baby. Madame Wu immediately leaves to be with her friend.

## Analysis

In this and subsequent chapters, the relationship between Madame Wu and Brother Andre both deepens and takes on new aspects. Perhaps the most notable of these is how Madame Wu maintains that relationship, both by remembering their past conversations and by imagining him having further conversations in the present. There is the sense in this manifestation of the Madame Wu / Brother Andre relationship that, as Madame Wu believes, theirs is a connection of the soul rather than of the body



(arguably the sort of relationship she had with her husband), making it an important aspect of the novel's exploration of the differences between the two different types of relationships (i.e. body/soul, male/female).

Other important points to note in this section include the names given by Brother Andre to the founding children in his care (representative, it seems, of essential aspects of his spiritual beliefs / teachings) and, subsequently, Madame Wu's similar naming of the child Love. Here it's important to note that from this point on, the novel's definition of "love" is primarily defined by compassion – not desire, not affection, but sensitivity to needs, longings, identity, vulnerability, and sense of purpose. From now on, now that "Love" is in her life both literally and symbolically, Madame Wu acts / reacts with that idea of compassionate love in the forefront of her mind and decision making process.

This new sense of love = compassion is borne out in the experience she has with Mr. Wu on the subject of Jasmine, with both of them coming across as acting out compassion more than anything else. Granted, with Mr. Wu there is a sense that there is also some desire involved, but primarily, both are acting out of a sensitivity towards the vulnerability they see in Jasmine – and that Madame Wu sees in her husband.

Finally, the end of the chapter – with its revelation of Madame Kang's struggles to give birth – functions on two levels. On a storytelling level, it is perhaps the most vivid and impactful example in the book of a chapter ending drawing the reader into the beginning of the chapter that follows. On another level, it draws the reader forward into further exploration of the novel's exploration of the power of compassion – in this case the compassion shown by Madame Wu towards Madame Kang and her husband.

## Discussion Question 1

What are the metaphoric / symbolic / spiritual implications of Madame Wu's transforming the ancient family temple into a home for Brother Andre's potentially lost children?

## Discussion Question 2

Which of the novel's main themes manifests in Madame Wu's decision to not participate in the prosecution of Brother Andre's killers? Do you agree with that decision? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

The arrival of Jasmine in the Wu family compound has clear echoes of the arrival of Ch'iuming. What other arrival(s) in this section does Jasmine's entry metaphorically parallel, and why?

## Vocabulary

enmity, permeate, skeptic, mummery, sagacity, querulous, robust, jargon, reprove



# Chapter 12

## Summary

Madame Wu hurries to Madame Kang's bedside and sees that she is having great difficulty giving birth to the new baby. She immediately takes charge, reassuring Madame Kang and insisting, in a sharp break from usual tradition, that Mr. Kang come into the birthing room. Mr. Kang is terrified, but does as she asks. Under Madame Wu's ministrations, and with Mr. Kang assuring her of his love, Madame Kang eventually gives birth: the child is dead, but knowing that the Kangs have revealed the depth of their love to each other, Madame Wu assures them that the death of the child is but a small sacrifice to pay.

After returning home, Madame Wu reflects on what has happened, and how it manifests the insights and transformations she has experienced since the death of Brother Andre – specifically, his teachings about love, compassion, and the soul. She further manifests these same transformations in an interview with Ch'iuming, who confesses that she is in love with Fengmo and that she does not love the child she bore for Mr. Wu. Madame Wu comforts her, and sends her to take care of Brother Andre's children in the temple. Ch'iuming leaves, and Madame Wu then reflects further on her conversations with Brother Andre, thinking specifically of a conversation they had in which Andre referred to a beautiful, inspiring, loving man who died young and was taught by a compassionate father named Joseph.

Narration then describes how the Wu household regularly receives letters from both Tsemo (rebellious and ambitious in the city, helping government prepare for an impending war) and Fengmo (studious and content in America). Thoughts of war also infuse the conversation Madame Wu has with Tsemo's wife Rulan, who has softened her appearance and her anger, but who is still clearly – and desperately – in love with her husband. Madame Wu, again inspired by the spiritual guidance of Andre, convinces Rulan to separate her love for Tsemo from the need to bear children and from her passion: the first (love) is of the spirit, the second (bearing children) is of the need of the human race and of society; the third (passion) is of the body. Rulan takes the teachings to heart, and returns to her part of the Wu household. That night, Madame Wu tells Ying to take care of Rulan (bathing her, dressing her) in the same way as she (Ying) took care of Madame Wu in the early days of her marriage. "She needs help, poor child, as all women need it," Madame Wu says. "And she knows it now."

## Analysis

The birth of Madame Kang's baby, and Madame Wu's participation in it, place two of the novel's key themes in direct juxtaposition. On the one hand, there is the theme of compassion, manifest in Madame Wu's choice to help which, on the other hand, is in direct conflict with tradition (i.e. friends and husbands are never present at the



transcendently intimate experience of childbirth) but which nevertheless triggers change away from tradition. This change has to do with Madame and Mr. Kang's awakening to true love and connection – or, more specifically, Mr. Kang's awakening to that connection as the result of his new compassion for his wife's suffering during childbirth. The overall thematic impact of this interaction of themes might be summed up this way: "compassion, in awareness and/or in action, leads to positive change in individual life and in relationships".

Another important point to note about this chapter is the reference to the son of a man called Joseph, a subtle but unarguably clear reference to Jesus Christ who, in the Christian Bible, was the son of a carpenter named Joseph and a woman named Mary. The reference here, even in its subtlety, is the most overt and/or direct reference in the novel to the Christian foundations of Brother Andre's teaching and experience. As such, it is simultaneously the most overt and/or direct reference to the novel's thematic exploration of Christian philosophy and practice. There is the very clear sense, at this point and throughout the rest of the narrative, that Madame Wu has been converted to a pure, compassionate form of Christianity that Little Sister Hsia, for all her (implied) Bible reading in earlier chapters, was unable to achieve. It could be argued, in fact, that Brother Andre's teaching, arguably like Christ's, transcends the Bible and is instead anchored in pure, open-hearted compassion ... another of the novel's central themes.

Other important points to note about this section include the reference to war (not specifically identified, but which is generally interpreted to mean World War II) and Madame Wu's dissection, or breaking down, of the three different sorts of love for Rulan. This seems to be a thematically relevant combination of tradition (i.e. the need for the bearing of children) and new, changed, compassion-defined thinking (i.e. the separation of body and soul). It is also one of the clearest, most focused statements yet on the narrative's thematic consideration of male / female relationships.

## Discussion Question 1

In what way(s) does Madame Wu's decision to send Ch'iuming to take care of the children in the temple manifest the novel's thematic focus on compassion?

## Discussion Question 2

Consider and discuss Madame Wu's dissection of marriage and relationships into three components. Do you agree or disagree with her analysis? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Which of the novel's main themes manifests in Madame Wu's order to Ying that she (Ying) take care of Rulan? How does this indicate growth or transformation in Madame Wu? In Rulan?



## Vocabulary

reprove, distraught, spittoon, pretense, falsity, sordid, perplexity, crevice, meager, residue, courteous



# Chapter 13

## Summary

The Wu household receives word that Tsemo is coming for a visit. Madame and Mr. Wu meet for the first time in months and make plans to welcome him, Madame Wu noticing how well Mr. Wu seems since Jasmine came into the family. Together they send for their fourth son, Yenmo, to return from the family farm/business where he had been living for the past few years: when he arrives, Madame Wu is surprised and pleased to see how strong and well he seems.

When Tsemo arrives, he greets his mother formally, and is surprised to see how calm, quiet, and beautiful Rulan seems. The couple spends ten days together, feasting and celebrations going on around them. Throughout it all, and in spite of Tsemo's insistence on talking about the impending war, Madame Wu remains quiet and thoughtful, thinking of how, through her, Andre has influenced Rulan. Madame Kang attends the celebrations, but there is a distance between the two former friends, neither comfortable with the other after the intimacy of Madame Wu helping Madame Kang through childbirth.

After ten days, Tsemo departs, but is killed instantly when the plane he is on explodes in mid-air. In spite of there being no body, the Wu family goes through formal mourning, filling a coffin with his most precious possessions and burying them. Throughout the mourning period, which she moves through gracefully, Madame Wu pays special attention to Rulan, who grieves quietly and intensely, but who remains grateful for how Madame Wu helped her and Tsemo have ten days of peace.

Shortly after the funeral, Yenmo tells Madame Wu that he wants to return to the country, where he feels he belongs. Madame Wu agrees, and says she wants to go with him so she can see both the family's rural assets and where he lives. The trip into the country is freeing, busy, and satisfying to Madame Wu, and she leaves a contented Yenmo at the farm where he is most at home. On her way back into town, she stops at the site where Andre is buried and pays her respects, again remembering their inspiring, enlightening time together.

Shortly after her return, Madame Wu is visited by a village craftsman who has created a portrait of Andre painted on alabaster. Madame Wu is at first worried that someone knows of her feelings for Andre, but is reassured when the artist reveals his intention to give it to the children now living in the Wu family temple. The children are happy to receive it, and Madame Wu is happy to see their happiness. She notices, however, that Ch'iuming is not at the temple, and is surprised to learn that she (Ch'iuming) is spending much of her time with Rulan, since Mr. Wu is now spending most of HIS time with Jasmine. Madame Wu finds herself contented and happy that the two young, troubled women are finding comfort with each other, and that her husband is finding contentment with his new third wife.



## Analysis

The first noteworthy element in this section is the juxtaposition between good news and bad, between the life affirming (the relationship between Rulan and Tsemo, Madame Wu's decision regarding Yenmo) and the life destroying (the death of Tsemo). There are several values to this narrative technique. The first is how the story once again portrays contrasting sides of similar experiences, exploring the concept of duality. Then: aside from portraying what might be argued as one of the basic realities of life, the story-telling value of this juxtaposition is that it shows how deeply Madame Wu's sense of compassion, peace, and spiritual contentment has begun to run: she grieves for Tsemo, she celebrates the new peace of his relationship with Rulan, but the more substantial, the more affecting, the more significant experience is how her spirit-grounded equanimity or calm is fundamentally unruffled by either experience. There is the sense that she has come, or at least is coming, to experience life from its inner spiritual core, rather than from its external physicalization, i.e. the body. Here is another example of how the narrative thematically explores the body / soul relationship.

Other points to note include the passing reference to the impending war (again, an apparent but non-specific reference to World War II), and Madame Wu's determination to not let the joy, peace, and contentment of herself and her family be interrupted and/or influenced by its looming presence. There is the sense here that war, both this particular war and war in general, is being portrayed as perhaps the ultimate in disruptive influences in the physical world, an influence that Madame Wu, in her determination to remain connected to and/or motivated by the movements and ways of her soul, is equally determined to keep out of her life as much as possible. Finally, there is Madame Wu's visit to Brother Andre's grave (which is in many ways an evocation of the book's thematic interest in the tension between confinement and freedom), and the arrival of the painting on alabaster. Both events are metaphoric representations of the spiritual impact Andre had on Madame Wu's life, and can therefore be seen as evocations of the novel's thematic interest in the body/soul relationship.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the metaphoric parallel between Madame Wu's experience in the freedom and openness of the country and her experience with Brother Andre? Why is it significant that Brother Andre is buried in the country?

## Discussion Question 2

What inner / spiritual experience is echoed and/or represented by the physical representation of Brother Andre (i.e. the painting on alabaster) that comes unexpectedly into Madame Wu's life?





## Discussion Question 3

Why is it surprising to Madame Wu that Ch'iuming and Rulan are becoming close?  
What previous event(s) in the story make this friendship unlikely?

## Vocabulary

repulsive, docile, dissension, commendation, retaliate, conclave, folly, soothsayer,  
imbecile, diversion, ordure



# Chapter 14

## Summary

Some months later, Madame Wu and the rest of the household are surprised to learn that Fengmo is returning home much sooner than expected. As preparations for his welcome are made, Madame Wu goes to see Madame Kang to talk about Linyi who, Madame Wu believes, must move back to the Wu compound to be with Fengmo. Madame Wu finds Madame Kang fat and happy, surrounded by all her children and still loved by her husband, but not too concerned about Fengmo and Linyi, agreeing easily to what Madame Wu wants. Madame Wu leaves, convinced that the distance between her and her former friend is now too great for their friendship to resume. When she discusses with Linyi how things are to proceed, their talk turns to Andre, with Linyi saying that she did not like his teaching and Madame Wu seeing, in spite of Linyi's apparent resentment, how much Andre had in fact affected her.

Fengmo returns, and in the midst of the welcoming celebrations, he confesses to Madame Wu that he developed feelings for a foreign woman while he was away, and that he came home out of loyalty to both his family and to Linyi. Before he can say more, however, the conversation is interrupted by Ch'iuming, who has been making a plan with Rulan that would see them both leave the Wu household: they want, she says, to go out into one of the Wu villages and start a school. Fengmo enthusiastically confesses that this is his idea too, having learned from both Brother Andre and his trip to America how valuable education is. He goes on to say that Ch'iuming and Rulan, as well as Linyi, can help him. Madame Wu can see the need for both the school and for the three young people to leave, and gives her consent.

As narration describes the preparations being made for the school, it flashes back to the final conversation between Fengmo and the woman with whom he fell in love, in which he confesses his marriage, his loyalty to his family and to his ancestors, and his commitment to future generations. His inner nature wants to love her, but the circumstances of his life call him to what he sees as his truth. The girl lets him go, and Fengmo returns home.

Fengmo's plans proceed; Linyi proves herself supportive and loving; and Ch'iuming and Rulan go along with everything Fengmo wants. Madame Wu allows Linyi to go with Fengmo into the country, but insists that when it comes time for children, they return for any births. "The grandchildren," she says, should be born under their own roofs." Fengmo agrees, and Madame Wu contemplates how Ch'iuming must learn the truth about her relationship with Fengmo on her own.



## Analysis

If this chapter were to be given a title, it might most accurately be called “Letting Go”, as many of the characters referred to here are letting go of one thing or another – externally driven needs, internal desires, old ways of being, new dreams. There is the sense in many of these circumstances that the characters are responding to various changes in the world and relationships around them from a place of compassion – for themselves and/or for each other, a manifestation of the novel’s thematic interest in exactly that. The possible exception to this is Fengmo who, in his rejection of his beloved in America, could be seen as acting according to the demands of tradition and family as opposed to his own sense of self and identity (i.e. out of compassion for himself. It could be argued, however, that in rejecting what seems to be a truth, Fengmo actually finds a deeper truth, one that is grounded in the kind of compassion that both he and his mother have learned as the result of their interactions with Brother Andre, and with each other, the kind that both serves and addresses personal needs / values and those of others.

A related point has to do with the apparent selflessness and generosity of Fengmo’s desire to educate the countryside. This is a clear evocation of several themes – tradition is being broken down by his determination to educate the people in the country and change their lives; those same lives are given new freedom by education, and Fengmo and his fellow teachers are breaking free of the confinement of their own lives; Fengmo’s decision is driven by compassion; and, perhaps most importantly, his work and that of the other teachers has clear echoes of Christian perspectives on outreach to the uneducated, the poor, and the vulnerable.

On the other hand, and in the story of Madame Wu, there is the sense, as the chapter concludes, that tradition still has a lingering hold on her values and attitudes. This manifests first in her suggestion that Linyi move back to the Wu compound in order to traditionally / physically continue her marriage with Fengmo, and later in her demand that Fengmo and Linyi’s children be born in the city, according to tradition and ancient family values. Only in the following, final chapter does Madame Wu more fully reach the goal she has been striving for throughout her relationship with Brother Andre: a life changed, a life transformed to one of the soul rather than one of the body, one more attuned to the needs and values of the ever-changing moment rather than the traditions and confines of the past.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the different ways in which the various characters in this section are letting go, and why they might be doing so at this point in their lives.



## Discussion Question 2

In previous chapters, Fengmo has commented on how he and his mother are so much alike. In what ways are their actions, attitudes, and motivations in this chapter similar?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you agree or disagree with Fengmo's decision – choosing service and compassion over what appears to be true love? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

rattan, pensive, surety, placid, aghast, ribald, exceed, solace, ardor, nunnery



# Chapter 15

## Summary

As months and years pass, Madame Wu and her family continue along their ways. There are changes: as the result of the movement of refugees away from the war, Ch'iuming is reunited with the searching mother who was forced to give her up shortly after she was born. The connection is established when the woman first reveals that her lost child was left with a piece of embroidered silk, and Ch'iuming produces the piece of silk with which she was found. Once the two are reunited, Ch'iuming leaves the Wu family with Madame Wu's blessing and several gifts.

Meanwhile, Fengmo and Linyi are productive in both their family and in their school, successfully bring both children and education into the world. Fengmo is driven and intense, his determination irritating the industrious and hard-working Liangmo, particularly when Fengmo insists that Meng make herself useful and become a teacher. Liangmo takes his concerns to Madame Wu who, after reflecting yet again on the teachings of Brother Andre, tells him that she will speak with Fengmo. When she finally has that conversation, and because of their shared feelings for Brother Andre, she feels a stronger connection with him than she did with any of her sons. Their conversation concludes with Fengmo revealing that he has already decided to let Liangmo and Meng have their own lives.

After the passage of several more years (during which Madame Wu, among other things, arranges for a respectful burial for the lonely Little Sister Hsia), the novel concludes with a visit from a nephew of Brother Andre's, who found the family through Fengmo. The nephew (who, Madame Wu soon sees, resembles Andre physically but not spiritually) reveals that Andre's family considered him a heretic and cast him out for his beliefs. He thought, the nephew says, that "it was men and women who were the divine", and not God. The nephew expresses a desire to see Andre's grave, but Madame Wu tells Fengmo, who is interpreting the conversation, that such a visit is not a good idea. "Tell this young foreigner that it is a very long way to that grave ... tell him the road is rough and narrow. When he gets there it is only the grave, nothing more."

After the nephew leaves, Madame Wu contemplates the idea of death and its relation to the soul, realizing that after the body died, the soul would continue. "Love alone had awakened her sleeping soul and had made it deathless. She was immortal."

## Analysis

The novel reaches its quiet climax in this section. In most narratives, the climax is a point of emotional and/or thematic intensity, where dynamic conflicts reach their point of most vivid confrontation. The climax here, by contrast, is much gentler – there are no intense confrontations, no earth-changing drama, only quiet, deep revelations of truths



that the characters have long been seeking. For Ch'iuming, that truth has to do with a need to belong, to FEEL as though she belongs. For Fengmo and Lingmao alike, their truths have to do with the identity and work to which they discover they were born. Perhaps most significantly, Madame Wu discovers the truth that the novel suggests she has been seeking since she was a child: the freedom and respect to develop her intellect and her soul. She had been prevented from doing so by tradition and history: now, as the result of the influence of Andre and her experiences in letting go of control of the lives of her children and in-laws, she finds new freedom in and for herself. In the story's final moments, she seems to find the ultimate freedom – a sense of life in death, and of the mysteriously tempting presence of death in life. This, in turn, can be seen as perhaps the ultimate representation of several of the novel's themes.

Other noteworthy elements in this section include the revelation of Ch'iuming's true identity (which had been foreshadowed several chapters earlier with the reference to the piece of silk with which she was found) and the appearance of Brother Andre's nephew with his revelation of how Andre was viewed by his family and out in the world. Here it's important to note that the novel, with its portrait of how its characters are all transformed for the better by Andre's teaching, seems to have a very different perspective: that Brother Andre was, in fact, correct. Certainly Madame Wu's reaction to the nephew's contention supports this idea.

The final point to consider here is the comment made by the nephew which seems to be a restatement of something said by Brother Andre – that the divine is in individual lives, not necessarily only in God. This can be seen as an echo of some of Christ's teachings on the subject of the Holy Spirit, which he often contended was exactly that – a manifestation of God in man (remembering that in Christian teaching, God has / had three aspects: father, son, and spirit). Therefore, the novel (through Brother Andre) seems to be saying that because God is spirit and spirit / soul is in every human being, then every human being has God in him / her. To put it another way, the various moments in this final chapter suggest that each human being has inside him / her the infinite, an experience that the novel's final moments suggest has been discovered by Madame Wu, and by extension, is possible to be discovered in everyone.

## Discussion Question 1

Several times earlier in the narrative, Madame Wu is described as sleeping deeply and well. What is the metaphoric connection between this aspect of her earlier life and the novel's final lines?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss how the novel's various themes are explored, developed, and concluded in the novel's final moments – specifically, and as the analysis suggests how, “in the story's final moments, she seems to find the ultimate freedom – a sense of life in death, and of the mysteriously tempting presence of death in life.”



## Discussion Question 3

Which perspective on Brother Andre do you agree with – the nephew's (i.e. that Brother Andre was a heretic) or Madame Wu's / the novel's (i.e. that Brother Andre's perspective and values were positively transformative)? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

ague, admonition, prosperous, fanatic, ineffable, heretic



# Characters

## Madame Wu

Madame Wu is the novel's central character and protagonist. At the novel's beginning, she is celebrating her fortieth birthday by deliberately and thoughtfully moving herself, both physically and emotionally, into the next phase of her life: she moves out of the living space she shares with her husband (see "Mr. Wu" below), arranges for his sexual needs to be taken care of by a concubine (see "Ch'iuming", below), and begins a process of emotional and spiritual withdrawal from the world that, over the course of the story, takes her in some unexpected but rewarding directions.

Throughout the book, and over the course of her transformation from austere gentle autocrat to compassionately authoritative contemplative, she retains several consistent characteristics. She is thoughtful and intellectual (in a time and place in which women were expected to be little more than docile son incubators), almost supernaturally insightful into the motivations and needs of the people around her, and almost above all, devoted to the well-being and success of her four sons. It is in this last that her transformation is perhaps most notable. In the early stages of the story, "well-being and success" is defined, for Madame Wu, in the same way as it is defined by the culture of the time: in terms of social status and financial success. As her personal / spiritual / intellectual journey unfolds, however, and as the direct result of both her own experience and the influence of Brother Andre, Madame Wu comes to define success as an experience of living according to one's own personal, individual truth. This becomes true for Madame Wu not only in the situations of her sons, but in the situations of everyone around her. She recognizes, for example, the need and love in Mr. Wu that his relationship with his Third Wife fulfills, and acts on that recognition. The same holds true for her actions in relation to her three married sons, their three wives, a group of orphans for whom she assumes responsibility, and most particularly herself.

In other words, and again as a result of her relationship with Brother Andre, her relationships with others and herself become defined by compassion, rather than control.

## Brother Andre

Brother Andre is the second of the book's two major characters, Madame Wu being the first. He is, in many ways, a powerful contrast to her: tall and physically strong where she is short and physically frail; dark-skinned where she is carefully pale; simple and limited in wardrobe where her clothes are both expansive and decorative. The element of character that is most significant about Brother Andre, however, is that he is the novel's primary antagonist, or catalyst of change – specifically, the change in Madame Wu.





Without challenging, confronting, or blocking her directly (as many antagonists in many narratives do in relation to the protagonist), Brother Andre triggers change simply by being who he is: spiritually enlightened, profoundly compassionate, and above all sensitive and responsive to the human needs and vulnerabilities in those he encounters. By contrast, and at the beginning of the novel, Madame Wu is sensitive and responsive only to her own beliefs (defined as they are by culture and tradition) about the ways in which people should behave. In short, Brother Andre is portrayed as having a wider, deeper, and stronger sense of people and what drives them – his knowledge is book-learned (following years of study), lived (following years of travel), and intuitive (acquired following years of contemplation and meditation that ran concurrently with both travel and study).

While Brother Andre's catalytic / transformative influence on Madame Wu is the primary driving force of the novel's conflict, it is his death about three quarters of the way through the story that provides the final, propulsive, defining element in Madame Wu's transformation. As the result of that death, Madame Wu is forced into acting on the insights he has given her – and on the insights he continues to give her, as her imaginary conversations with him form the basis of many of her decisions and choices after his death. It is ultimately through Brother Andre, and her experience of his transcendently spiritual nature both before and after his physical death, that leads Madame Wu to an understanding of how to both live in the world and connect to the immortality of the soul.

## **Mr. Wu**

Mr. Wu is Madame Wu's husband. He is traditional and conservative, not particularly intelligent or ambitious, resting and thriving on the work and influence of his ancient family. He professes love for Madame Wu and concurrent resentment of her plans to bring a concubine into the house, but when first Ch'iuming and then Jasmine come into the family, he accepts and welcomes their presence, and their function (i.e. to bear children) as his right and his due.

## **Old Lady**

Old Lady is Mr. Wu's father, and mother-in-law of Madame Wu. Autocratic, selfish, and a glutton, Old Lady is accustomed to having a great deal of influence in the Wu home, and wields as much as possible in her old age. Old Lady's fearful death is a catalyst for some of the deepening of Madame Wu's contemplations.

## **Old Gentleman**

Old Gentleman is Old Lady's husband, father of Mr. Wu and father-in-law of Madame Wu. Old Gentleman is wise, intelligent, and insightful: he realizes that Madame Wu, in spite of her outward show of subservience and conservatism, has a searching mind and soul. He encourages her to read, to see the true (weak) nature of his son, and to



question the traditions and rules she is forced to live by. He is dead as the novel begins: Madame Wu's memories of him appear in flashback.

## Madame Kang

Madame Kang is Madame Wu's best friend. In many ways, the friendship is a case of opposites attracting: where Madame Wu is reserved, Madame Kang is outspoken; where Madame Wu is elegant and immaculate, Madame Kang is rough around the edges and always messy; where Madame Wu rejects further sexual relations with her husband when she reaches forty, Madame Kang continues them, and as a result finds herself pregnant. The relationship between the two friends changes drastically when Madame Wu is uncomfortably, intimately present at the birth of Madame Kang's baby.

## Little Sister Hsia

Little Sister Hsia is a white, European missionary - her country of origin, like her true name, is never clearly revealed: there is the sense, however, that she is British. She makes repeated efforts to convert Madame Hu to the Christian faith, and is occasionally hopeful of success as a result of Madame Hu's intelligence and curiosity. Little Sister Hsia leaves the relationship angrily when Madame Hu suggests that her (Hsia's) interest in Brother Andre is less than pure.

## Ch'iuming

The orphaned Ch'iuming is the carefully chosen concubine (sexual companion) that Madame Wu brings into the family for Mr. Wu. Ch'iuming is fearful and nervous, insecure about her own value and her place in the household. Her insecurities lead her to a suicide attempt which, with the help of Brother Andre, she survives. Late in the narrative, after several years of being in the Wu household and being replaced in Mr. Wu's affections by the prostitute Jasmine (see below), Ch'iuming discovers that she is not, in fact, an orphan, and leaves the household to make a new, more fulfilling life for herself with her new family.

## Liangmao

Liangmao is Madame Wu's oldest son, and therefore the heir to the family's finances, land, and reputation. Mature and responsible, traditional and conservative, he is happy and content to accept and live by the rules imposed by tradition. Later in the narrative, he becomes quite possessive of his position, particular when faced with the passion of Fengmo to get both him (Liangmao) and Meng (Liangmo's wife) involved in his plans for teaching the rural population.



## Meng

Meng is Liangmo's wife, and like Linyi, a daughter of Madame Kang. Meng is the quietest and most compliant of Madame Wu's daughters-in-law, neither very intelligent nor very rebellious. She is also the most traditional of the daughters-in-law, content to be supportive of her husband and give him sons. As such, she is a vivid and telling contrast to Madame Wu and to both Rulan and Linyi.

## Tsemo

Tsemo is Madame Wu's second son. Sharp tempered and ambitious, highly intelligent and a little spoiled, Tsemo is the most difficult of the sons – until, that is, he realizes an opportunity to move to the city and participate in government. As passionately in love with his wife as she is with him, Tsemo finds ways to balance all his drives and needs. He is on the way to considerable success when he is accidentally killed, sending his wife and the rest of his family deep into debilitating grief.

## Rulan

Rulan is Tsemo's wife. The most worldly and sophisticated of the second generation of wives as the result of being educated in Shanghai, Rulan is also the most rebellious of the wives. Madame Wu realizes that Rulan is desperately in love with Tsemo, and teaches her how to preserve her own sanity and identity while, at the same time, being true to the responsibilities of her marriage.

## Fengmo

Fengmo is Madame Wu's third son, and is – as both he and Madame Wu realize – the most like his mother of all her children: he and Madame Wu share a depth of thought and spirit, as well as a hunger for knowledge fed by Brother Andre, that in Fengmo's case lead him to moving across the world to America. He returns in reaction to a tempting relationship with an American woman, resumes his relationship with Linyi, and obsessively starts bringing education into the countryside.

## Linyi

Linyi is Fengmo's wife, and like Meng is a daughter of Madame Kang. Linyi is intelligent but uneducated, willful and independent. Her relationship with Fengmo is uneasy, but over time (and as the result of the efforts of both Brother Andre and Madame Wu) she becomes more respectful and loving.



## **Jasmine**

Jasmine is a prostitute to whom Mr. Wu feels he has become responsible after visiting her several times. At first she pretends to be pregnant with his baby in order to manipulate her way into a healthier, happier life in the Wu home: but when confronted with the truth by Madame Wu, she confesses and admits her desperation. Madame Wu admits her into the family home as Mr. Wu's official Third Wife.

## **Andre's "Children"**

Following Brother Andre's death, Madame Wu discovers that he was responsible for the well-being of several street orphans. As the result of the lessons she learned from his teachings, she decides to take over his responsibilities, and establishes a small community of the children in an abandoned family temple.

## **Yenmo**

Yenmo is Madame Wu's youngest son, raised on a farm (in order to give him firsthand knowledge of the family's business) and away from the city. Of all Madame Wu's four sons, he is the one who is most clear, at the youngest age, about who he is and where he is truly meant to be.

## **Brother Andre's Nephew**

This unnamed character appears only in the novel's final chapter. He arrives at the Wu family compound in search of information about his uncle, and in turn provides information to Madame Wu (and to the reader) about how Brother Andre was negatively viewed by his biological family. Perhaps as the result of the views he reports, Madame Wu refuses to take him to see her beloved Andre's grave.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Madame Wu's Painting

An elegant, simple painting of a person climbing a mountain is one of the few personal possessions Madame Wu values enough to take with her as she moves from the living quarters she shares with Mr. Wu into the quarters she shares with no one. Ambiguous in terms of the gender of the climber and seemingly changeable in how high up the mountain the climber seems to be, the painting can be seen as metaphorically representative of several of the novel's characters and of its various themes.

## Flowers

Throughout the narrative, two different types of flowers (orchids and peonies) are presented as key visual metaphors for the experiences of Madame Wu and her husband. Initially, their shared living space is decorated by pale, delicate orchids, which go with Madame Wu when she moves into her own private living space. As he remains in their once-shared space, Mr. Wu asks for brightly colored peonies to take the place of the orchids. Subsequently, and throughout the narrative, references are made to how both the orchids and the peonies are thriving or dying, their state of being reflective and/or evocative of the relative emotional states of being of the characters with whom they're associated.

## Ch'iuming's Piece of Silk

When she first comes to live in the Wu household, one of the few personal possessions Ch'iuming brings with her is the small piece of embroidered silk with which she was found after being abandoned. Much later in the narrative, the piece of silk becomes the essential piece of identification that links Ch'iuming to the well-off, aristocratic woman who is eventually revealed to be her long-lost mother.

## Walls

Throughout the narrative, physical walls (between living spaces within the Wu family compound, between the compound itself and the outside world) are used as metaphorical representations of the psychological, emotional, and/or spiritual walls between people and enlightenment – or, more specifically, between Madame Wu and deeper understanding of / compassion for the people and the world around her. Several times, Madame Wu's spiritual transformation is described in terms of her mind / soul transcending the walls of tradition and belief that have surrounded it for much of her life.



## The Country

For much of the narrative, the country is portrayed and/or experienced by Madame Wu as a necessary but remote part of the Wu family life, and its source of income. Late in the narrative, however, her perspective changes. Following the burial of Brother Andre in a country plot, the revelation that her youngest son is happiest there, and the determination of another son to educate and broaden the experience of the country, Madame Wu comes to realize that the country, with its freedom, its unfettered embracing of both life and death, and its general openness, is in fact a metaphoric echo of her own spiritual experience of freedom and self-identity.

## Silver

Frequently and consistently throughout the narrative, Madame Wu's voice and attitude are portrayed as "silvery" – cold, clear, and bright. The mood / tonal quality of these descriptions is one of unarguable, carefully chosen tact. Later in the narrative, after her experiences with Brother Andre, the narrative's description of the qualities of Madame Wu's voice and attitude changes: no longer silvery, cold, and controlling, she becomes warm and compassionate.

## Madame Wu's Pipe

Throughout the narrative, Madame Wu is described as taking one or two light puffs from a small silver pipe. There is the sense that even though the pipe is filled with nothing more than tobacco, its smoke is nevertheless an aid to contemplation, to deeper thought, and to calmness.

## The Family Temple

Deep in the Wu family compound, there is a family temple placed in reverence towards ancient societal and family gods. Long abandoned, the temple eventually becomes a refuge for the children left without a home by the death of Brother Andre, and also for the virtually abandoned Ch'iuming.

## The Painting on Alabaster

Following the death of Brother Andre, Madame Wu is given a gift by an artist whom he helped – a small portrait painted on alabaster (a soft, creamy white stone). While she finds it imperfect, she also finds it an evocative, valued representation / reminder of who he was and what he meant to both her and the children whom he helped. She places it in the family temple where the children are to be housed.



## “We Borrow Your Light”

This phrase is referred to several times throughout the narrative as a cry in the streets when Madame Wu and / or other citizens of the town where she lives are carried through the streets either in a rickshaw (a two wheeled carriage pulled by a human driver) or a sedan chair (a small enclosed booth carried on two poles by human servants). The phrase is a polite warning that the drivers are about to take the space of other drivers, an almost poetic way of saying “get out of our way”.

## Bible References

Throughout the book, both the narration and the characters make references / quote the Christian Bible. These references / quotes are not often direct (the word “bible”, for example, is used rarely, if ever). Nevertheless, the intention and use of the quotes seems specifically and carefully relevant to Madame Wu’s story: she is, in many ways and without her knowing, being converted to what is arguably the truest and most compassionate form of Christianity. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see “Analysis, Chapter 12”.



# Settings

## China

This is the book's primary broad strokes setting – the country of China, rich and heavy with tradition, morality, and rigid perspectives on relationships between men and women and the function and nature of those relationships.

## The Late 1930's / Early 1940's

The novel's setting in time is one of important transition in China. While the Communist Revolution of the late 1940's had not yet taken place, its seeds had been planted decades before and, in the time of the novel's setting, were just beginning to take root. The country was slowly moving away from the almost ritualized, quite restricted attitudes of the past, slowly being opened to Western influences, and beginning to struggle with the process of determining social and cultural identity. Madame Wu's struggle towards personal enlightenment can, therefore, be seen as on some level reflecting that of the country in which she lives.

## The Wu Home

The Wu family home, perhaps best described as a compound (i.e. collection of individual dwellings / buildings), consists of several separate living spaces, or courts. There are communal living spaces such as a dining area, but separate family units have their own separate areas. Thus at the novel's commencement, Madame Wu shares a court with Mr. Wu, each having their own sleeping space but sharing a common area, while her sons and their wives have similarly separate areas. The sense here is of family members living separate but fully connected, fully interrelated lives defined by that family, rather than individual identity.

## Madame Kang's Home

Although appearing only passingly on relatively few occasions in the narrative, the home of Madame Wu's best friend is nevertheless an important setting not only for key story-related conversations, but also in terms of the contrast both the home and its inhabitants provide to the home of Madame Wu and the lives of those who live here. Madame Kang's house is messy, chaotic, full of life and laughter. Madame Wu's home, by contrast, is scrupulously clean, tightly organized, quiet and austere. Both houses evoke the essential character and nature of the women who run them, meaning that both are evocative – one by actual portrait, the other by vivid contrast – of the true nature of Madame Wu.



## **Madame Wu's Library**

As part of the changes she initiates on her fortieth birthday, Madame Wu moves into the court once occupied by her father-in-law and which still contains his library, books that were once forbidden particularly to women. It is in the library, however, that the newly independent Madame Wu spends much of her time, reading and considering what she has read. It is there that the seeds of insight planted by more public conversations with Brother Andre germinate and grow in private contemplation.



# Themes and Motifs

## Tradition vs. Change

This is the book's primary theme. It is the foundation for the sub-themes listed below, and plays out on a number of levels. The most apparent of these is in the personal lives (emotional, intellectual, spiritual) of the central characters, and most particularly in the life of the novel's central character, Madame Wu.

As the novel begins, Madame Wu lives her life in ways strictly defined by tradition – ways of being a parent, ways of being a wife, ways of being a landowner, ways of being a citizen, ways of being a friend ... all, narration suggests, are defined by the way things have been in the past. This is, the novel suggests lightly, similar to the situation as a whole in the country of China where Madame Wu and her family live.

Over the course of the narrative, Madame Wu is confronted by unexpected truths arising from the tradition-defined decisions she makes in the novel's early stages. She discovers, for example, that her previous ideas about marriage, sexual relations, and child-rearing are restrictive to all those her choices have affected. She also discovers that the ideas about gender (roles, rights, and responsibilities) that have been imposed upon her by tradition are similarly restrictive. Finally, she discovers that traditional ideas about the nature of being human, being alive, being in the world, and of being gifted with a soul are both limited and limiting. Eventually, as the result of all these discoveries (which are themselves the result of study, conversation, and contemplation), Madame Wu experiences significant transformations that result less in changes of behavior and more in changes FOR behavior. In other words, she still does what she believes is best for those for whom she is responsible, including herself. But by the end of the novel she is doing so not out of a drive to control grounded in tradition and the way things are supposed to be, but out of a drive to think and act compassionately and with love ... considering the way things are, the way things need to be, as opposed to the way things SHOULD be.

## Confinement vs. Freedom

This is one of two ways in which the book's primary theme of tradition vs. change manifests throughout the novel. Over the course of the narrative several characters, but particularly Madame Wu, have experiences of confinement that is not quite imprisonment, but is nevertheless restrictive and tradition based. This sense of confinement manifests in both outward and inward ways, both physically and psychologically.

In terms of manifestations of physical confinement, there are two primary examples. The first is the author's repeated and varied use of the motif of literal, physical walls – around the Wu family compound, around the various courts within the compound, and



within the various rooms within the compounds ... walls within walls within walls, defining how men are with women, women are with men, parents are with children, and individuals are with themselves and their belief systems. These physical walls, in turn, echo and metaphorically manifest inner spiritual, emotional, and intellectual walls, the barriers within the characters – specifically, restrictive ideas about what can be believed, felt, and acted upon. Physical confinement reflects psychological confinement.

Meanwhile, the second example of how physical confinement manifests throughout the novel is in the portrayal of individual bodies as another form of that confinement. This is particularly vivid in the character of Madame Wu who, at several points in the story, experiences her soul and mind existing separately from her body, her inner identity traveling past the physical walls of her earthly dwelling outwardly into space and inwardly into her soul. She finds freedom from confinement in the journeys of her mind and soul, those journeys leading her down the path of change, at first tentatively but as the novel progresses with increasing confidence and courage. As Madame Wu discovers this spiritual freedom (which she observes as the active, defining force at work in both the physical and spiritual lives of Brother Andre), she sees the need for it in other members of her extended family, and bases her subsequent decisions on what both she and they believe to be the best means forward towards that individual freedom ... said freedom being a profound breakaway from how tradition dictated individuals needed to act in order to preserve society and the family, prioritized in that order.

## Relationships between Men and Women

This is the second way in which the book's primary theme of tradition vs. change manifests throughout the novel. For much of the narrative, Madame Wu's decisions not only about her own life and marriage but about the lives and marriages of those around her, particularly her children, are defined by tradition – by what is expected, by what has always been done. For example, her page one decision to bring a concubine into the Wu household is based on what the narrative later reveals is a traditional belief about married mothers – that having a baby after the age of forty is inappropriate and shameful. She brings in the concubine because that is what is believed to be right. Similarly, her decisions about how her sons relate to their wives are also defined by what has been believed to be right: women, as Madame Wu's father-in-law tells her (in spite of his compassionate awareness of her searching mind and soul) are meant to bear sons to their husbands and secure the continuation of family lines. No more. All Madame Wu's relationship-based decisions in what amounts to the novel's first half are defined by this traditional perspective.

As her mind and inner life are transformed, however, and as the direct result of her friendship with the much more spiritual, much more open-minded Brother Andre, Madame Wu begins to see that traditional views of male – female relationships are restrictive, disrespectful, painful, and perhaps most importantly, unloving. She comes to understand that love not only in her own life but in the lives of those around her – those she herself professes to love – is the most important defining factor in male female relationships ... love, not duty. It could be argued, in fact, that the discovery of how love



works in male / female relations, and the enacting of that discovery, is the second most significant exploration of the tradition vs. change theme, after Madame Wu's self-discovery of how restrictive tradition has been in her life and how change makes her life so much richer, truer, and worth living.

## **The Relationship between Body and Soul**

The third way in which the book's primary theme of tradition vs. change manifests is in its exploration of the relationship between body and soul, a thematic element that intertwines with the other two manifestations of that primary theme and with other themes as well.

For much of the early part of the narrative, Madame Wu is portrayed, in terms of her attitudes, actions, and history, as being primarily defined by physical needs, which she prioritizes over all others. One example: her decision to bring in a concubine for her husband, which is based on what tradition dictates are his driving, longer-lasting physical needs for sexual companionship. Another example: her long-standing prioritizing of the physical needs of her family (i.e. cleanliness, security, nourishment) over their spiritual and/or emotional needs, which tradition dictates as being the primary responsibility of women in the home. Here the reader can see how the themes of both confinement (in the prioritization of the physical, confining body) and male/female relationships are initially introduced.

Those themes are developed / explored further as the narrative progresses and Madame Wu, as the result of both the influence of Brother Andre and her own contemplations, comes to embrace the power and value of the soul more and more fully. As she does so, she breaks down the physical and psychic confinements of tradition and gender roles, becoming compassionate (see below) in relation to the non-physical needs and values of those around her in a way that transcends the body. She becomes connected to, and valuing of, the soul in a way that improves both her own life and the lives of those around her.

On another level, this theme is explored through the relationship between the finite and the infinite. As Madame Wu becomes more and more connected to, and inspired by, her relationship with her soul, she comes to realize that its expanse and scope has far more range to grow and embrace life than her body. This is most vividly exemplified in the scene in Chapter 8 in which she is portrayed as experiencing her soul traveling out into the infinity of space and being forced to return to the more finite experiences of her body. This experience is echoed in the novel's final moments when she is described as realizing she, because of her soul, is "immortal" ... that she is infinite.

## **The Power and Role of Compassion in Transformation**

Ultimately, the novel contends that the true source of transformation and change, both in individuals and in society (i.e. society as a whole, individual family societies) is compassion – the identification with, or empathizing with, the inner struggles of another.



This compassion, the novel further contends, this empathizing, is only effective in creating change when it defines and shapes action. It's not enough, the novel says, to share inwardly in another's difficulty or suffering: it is more important that that sharing results in action, taking steps towards alleviating that difficulty or suffering. The change that results, the novel suggests, changes the lives of those who are helped, but also those who do the helping. The giver benefits as much as the given to, with both dropping pebbles of change into the pond of tradition that create ripples of transformation that at first may seem small and insignificant but can have broad societal effects.

This last is particularly evident, in "Pavilion of Women", in the character and experience of Fengmo. Treated with compassion and good faith as an individual with an identity and dreams by both his mother (Madame Wu) and his teacher (Brother Andre), Fengmo comes to a place where he recognizes the importance of giving other people the same treatment. Ultimately, after experiences in other lands and cultures, he comes back to the country in which he learned what is arguably his most important lesson – to listen and act compassionately – and strives to apply it (through teaching and empowering the uneducated) outside the walls of the Wu family compound, in the farming community that supplies the family with the labor that makes their money. In transcending physical boundaries between people through the careful deployment of compassion, Fengmo is breaking down psychological and social boundaries, motivated by the same capacity for compassion that motivated both his mother and his teacher.

It must be noted, however, that an important aspect of the novel's exploration of the power and role of compassion is not limited to compassion for others. An important teaching of Brother Andre's, and therefore of the novel, is the necessity to have compassion for the self. He teaches Madame Wu this lesson, and it is this lesson that she, in turn, passes on to Jasmine, to Ch'iuming, to Rulan – to other women in the "Pavilion of Women" who, as the result of what society and tradition have forced them to be, have sacrificed compassion, identity, and personal truth on the altar of history, of what is expected and assumed to be.

## **Christian Philosophy and Allegory**

Although the word "Bible" is rarely found in the text, if ever, its basic thesis – relating the capacity for personal and cultural directly to compassion – is a profoundly Christian message ... that is, the Christ-oriented, compassion-oriented Christianity of the New Testament, as opposed to the fearful, authoritarian Christianity of the Old Testament.

There are two vivid portraits of these contrasting views of Christianity in "Pavilion of Women". The latter – the preachy, doctrinaire, tradition and fear-based style of Christianity – is represented by Little Sister Hsia, who reads repeatedly from her "holy book", who repeatedly attempts to get the amused Madame Hu to change her religion, and whose true negative attitudes towards China and its people eventually erupt in judgmental anger. The more compassionate Christianity is represented by the open-minded, open-hearted, quite Christ-like Brother Andre, whose transcendent respect for



all people echoes that of Jesus Christ, and whose caring for abandoned children is an even more vivid echo of Christ's "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Here it's essential to note that Madame Wu's spiritual transformation comes about entirely as a result of her encounters with the latter sort of Christianity, rather than the former, which seems (to both her and to the reader) as restrictive and as traditional as the culture away from which she (Madame Wu) is trying to grow.

It's also essential to note that there are very, very few actual references to the Bible in the book. The name of Jesus Christ is never actually mentioned: he is referred to only obliquely by Brother Andre, and is referred to at another point not by name, but as the son of a carpenter named Joseph. These few references, along with the practice of faith evidenced by Brother Andre, make it clear that Madame Wu's journey and experiences are, on some level, a Christian allegory: a Christian story told in another, other-than-Biblical way.

# Styles

## Point of View

The story is primarily told from the third person limited point of view – specifically, that of protagonist Madame Wu. The narrative is, for the most part, focused on her experiences; her interpretations and insights as the result of those experiences; and her transformation at the conclusion of it all. In all but a few occasions, the motivations, goals, and intentions of the other characters are to be inferred (understood) through Madame Wu's insights into other characters. This is why, for example, the essential but consistently enigmatic Brother Andre is as engaging to the reader as he is to the central character, with the former's understanding of him evolving at the same time as the latter's: the reader is clearly being led to identify with Madame Wu, perhaps with the idea that the reader will emerge from the experience if not as fully enlightened, at least more thoughtful along the same lines.

Here it must be noted that there are occasionally diversions into the experiences of other characters, into other points of view: there are instances, for example, when the narration describes in detail the reactions of one character or another after an experience with Madame Wu. This is particularly true of Ch'iuming, but is also true of Rulan, Fengmo, and at one point even of Jasmine. What's particularly significant, however, is that the narrative never detours into the point of view of Brother Andre: he is, as noted above, kept a mystery to the reader. It is only the results of his experiences and teachings, teachings, not the motivations for them, with which the reader is led to engage.

In terms of thematic point of view, the novel and the events and characters it describes seem primarily defined by the perspective that compassion, for the self and for others, is the true root of necessary, healthy change on both the personal and societal levels. Here again, the reader is led to identify with the experience of Madame Wu, whose experience of compassion's transformative effects is clearly intended to be inspirational, in the most compassionately Christian sense of the word.

## Language and Meaning

Here, there are several important points to note. The first is that the author seems to have made a careful effort at accurately reproducing if not the actual Chinese vocabulary, the sense of Chinese culture and atmosphere – specifically, the geography (both physical and social) of a multi-generational, traditional, Chinese home. Without going into oppressive or obtrusive amounts of detail, the sense of place and of community is vivid and appropriate: circumstances are not presented self-consciously, but directly and matter-of-factly.



The second is that the author develops a sense of motifs, or repeated styles of writing, throughout the narrative. For example, the words “silver” or “silvery” are used repeatedly to describe Madame Wu’s voice, both at the beginning of the narrative when she is secure in her power, position, and sense of self and later in the narrative as components of descriptions that indicate how much she has changed. “Silver” or “silvery” is now aligned with descriptive terms that indicate a softening, a warming of her voice. The sense here is that style, in the form of word use, is deployed as a means of defining both character and transformation. It could be argued that the use of such motifs is repetitive and, in some ways, lazy writing: on the other hand, it could also be argued that such motifs give a clear, anchored sense of identity and character.

Finally, the language of narration is generally consistent in its objectivity and lack of authorial commentary. There are occasional interjections, however, of phrases like “let it be seen that ...” or “it is proved that”, phrases that draw the reader’s attention to what the author is saying and thinking, away from the actual events and characters in the story. These interjections feel somewhat intrusive, in that they create a sense of distance between story and reader: they are, however, relatively few and far between, and when they appear they are fleeting, and the reader’s attention, for the most part, quickly and cleanly returns to the story.

## Structure

For much of the novel, the action consistently moves forward – from Event A to Event B to Event C, from cause to effect, from action to reaction. This is traditional linear storytelling, as the narrative moves from beginning, through middle, towards a climax, and from there to an end. That structure, for the most part, is defined by the experiences and drives of protagonist Madame Wu: she sets the events of the plot in motion, she makes most of the choices and decisions that drive the plot, and her process of transformation as the result of those choices and decisions (as well as the impact of events beyond her control, such as the death of her son) shape, and are shaped by, that plot. Here it’s important to note that the novel begins with a clear, strong, triggering action by Madame Wu, a decision that sets in motion every event, every change that follows ... an example of a common structural technique in which such a decision, event, or choice – often referred to as an “inciting incident” or “trigger”, marks a clear starting place for story, plot, and character development.

All that said, there are occasional significant detours, or diversions, into the past. This takes place through the deployment of a narrative device called the flashback, in which the memory of previous events is triggered by present day events / circumstances, and rather than describe such memories in prose, the author decides to replay them, relive them in the mind and experience of the character having the flashback. The most vivid example of this in “Pavilion of Women”, repeated several times, takes place after the death of Brother Andre about two thirds of the way through the novel. As a way of dramatizing the increasing, deepening spiritual closeness that Madame Wu experiences with him after his death, the narrative flashes back to their previous conversations, replaying their dialogue for the reader in the same way as it replays in Madame Wu’s



mind. The narrative shows us those encounters, rather than simply telling the reader they happened, thereby engaging the reader more closely in those encounters and in the realizations that result from them.



## Quotes

[Madame Wu] put out her little hand and rested it on his arm for a moment in a gesture of affection so rare that it startled him. She did not easily endure the touch of another human being, even her own children's.

-- Narration (Chapter 1)

**Importance:** This quote vividly indicates an important aspect of Madame Wu's character as the novel begins.

But in a great house servants were like furniture, used without heeding."

-- Narration (Chapter 1)

**Importance:** This quote succinctly portrays the different levels of status traditionally upheld between masters and servants in a Chinese household of this time and place.

He stood in their midst, the center of them all. And yet [Madame Wu] thought musingly, it was not he himself, not this simple creature, who so held their hopes in him. Were he to die, another would take his place. No, he was a symbol of continuing life. It was the symbol which held all their dreams.

-- Narration (Chapter 1)

**Importance:** This quote suggests how male descendents in a Chinese family, historically and perhaps even today, are seen as symbols of hope and possibility. It is very much a traditional, conservative attitude, and is a facet of the novel's thematic contemplation of male / female relationships

'... a woman's body is more important than her mind. She alone can create new human creatures. Were it not for her, the race of man would cease to exist. Into her body, as into a chalice, Heaven has put this gift. Her body therefore is inexpressibly precious to man. He is not fulfilled if she does not create. His is the seed, but she alone can bring it to flower and fruit in another being like himself.'

-- Old Gentleman (Chapter 3)

**Importance:** Two of the book's key themes are developed in this narrative - its exploration of male / female relationships, and the nature of tradition (i.e. traditional views of such relationships) vs. change.

Did she suffer pain? She knew she did not. Did she regret? No she had no regrets. In this state of emptiness so might a soul find itself lost in death. Did not a soul unborn exist also in the womb in just such emptiness? So she, too, might now be born again."

-- Narration (Chapter 4)

**Importance:** On the night that she sends Ch'iuming to her husband, Madame Wu reflects on how her own life will change as a result. There are clear resonances here



with the novel's interest in male / female relationships, in Christian allegory (found in the "born again" phrasing), and in the relationship between body and soul.

...to her it was not birth so much as reclaiming her own body ... as soon as the child was brought to her, washed and dressed, she began to love him for what he was, but never because he was a part of herself. She did not, indeed, wish for any division of herself. She wanted only to be whole again."

-- Narration (Chapter 5)

**Importance:** This quote portrays Madame Wu's reaction to the births of her sons, and her relationship with her own body/soul after each birth.

She did not know she was lonely, and had anyone told her that she was, she would have denied it, amazed at such misreading. But she was too lonely for anyone to reach her soul. Her soul had outstripped her life. It had gone out far beyond the four walls within which her body lived. [It] ... reached into the past and climbed toward the future ... but now and again her soul came home to this house. It came back now ... the generations marched on, hers ending, his beginning."

-- Narration (Chapter 5)

**Importance:** In this quote, the novel portrays an important step along Madame Wu's journey towards reclaiming her soul.

The four walls of the room seemed to fade; the walls of the courts where she had spent her whole life receded. She had a moment's clear vision. The world was full of lands and peoples under the same Heaven, and in the seven seas the same tides rose and fell."

-- Narration (Chapter 6)

**Importance:** This quote marks the first of several occasions in the narrative at which Madame Wu is changed and/or intrigued by the teachings of Brother Andre. It also includes a reference to walls as symbolic representations of the body and of confinement.

When a god steals the soul out of a body, the body takes revenge and twists the soul and wrecks it and mars it. Boy and soul are partners, and neither must desert the other."

-- Narration (Chapter 6)

**Importance:** Another evocation of the book's thematic exploration of the relationship between body and soul.

These hands of Madame Wu's always looked as though they had no strength in them. But they had strength. The pith inside the pod was tough fiber, yet it gave way beneath her fingers and she plucked out of it one of the many seeds it hid. With her small sharp teeth, which were as sound today as they had been when they grew, she peeled the green skin from the white flesh."

-- Narration (Chapter 7)



**Importance:** Here, in this description of an aspect of Madame Wu's physical / bodily existence, there is an echo of her spiritual / emotional / psychological perspectives on other people. It is, in its way, an evocation of the novel's exploration of body / soul tension.

Her soul is beginning to wonder what is to come next, and she asked me if I believed in another life after this one. Such questions mean that the body is beginning to die and the soul is afraid.

-- Madame Wu (Chapter 7)

**Importance:** In this description of Madame Wu's experience at the bedside of the dying Old Lady, narration again evokes the book's thematic interest in the body / soul relationship.

'If the body is mated, then other mating will come, or if it does not the two can still live as one. But the body is the foundation of the house the two build. Soul and mind, and whatever else, is the roof, the decoration, whatever one adds to a fine house. But all this fails without the foundation.

-- Madame Wu (Chapter 7)

**Importance:** Here narration entwines the book's thematic explorations of the body/soul relationship with explorations of the male/female relationship.

...he feared that her soul had left her body, and when this happens the soul must be wooed and coaxed and not frightened, lest it never return. For the body is the cage and the soul is the bird, and once the door is left open and the bird goes forth free, why should it return to the cage? It must be tempted and received."

-- Narration (Chapter 8)

**Importance:** This quote is taken from the point in the novel (almost exactly half way through) at which Madame Wu first experiences a deep separation of soul from body, and subsequently realizes how much longing her soul has to be free (i.e. no longer confined).

[Brother Andre] stripped the leaves away, and he picked the fruit and cracked the husk and peeled the inner shell and split the flesh and took out the seed and divided it, and there was the kernel, pure and clean.

-- Narration (Chapter 9)

**Importance:** This quote is a clear echo of the description of how Madame Wu consumed some nuts. In both cases, the language and imagery suggests power and determination, but in this instance, in relationship to Brother Andre, there is the sense that the image here is a metaphoric commentary on his search for his own, and Madame Wu's, personal spiritual truths.



By her separation from Mr. Wu, in the flesh, she had cut all cords that had entangled her. She mused on this strong secret bond of body to body, which when it was cut, freed not only body but soul. And her soul followed the paths that were now opened over all the earth.

-- Narration (Chapter 9)

**Importance:** Here again, the novel entwines, in a single quote, the themes of male/female relationships and the body / soul relationship.

...[Madame Wu] was amazed at the coldness in the pleasure she had felt. For her to choose a woman to take her place was one thing. To have him choose a woman was quite another. She marveled at the tangle that life could make between a man and a woman. She had thought herself free of him because she did not love him. But she was not free of him if, when she knew his love had ceased, she could feel this wounded pride. Brother Andre had been right. She thought always and only of herself.

-- Narration (Chapter 10)

**Importance:** To get to the truth of herself, Madame Wu has to cut through some painful, essential discoveries about herself. The quote here refers to new awareness of her true motivations in bringing Ch'iuming into her husband's life.

... peace welled up in her being. It was so profound, so quieting, so contenting, that for the first time in her life she knew that never before had she known what peace was. Standing motionless in the bare room before his shell, she felt happy.

-- Narration (Chapter 11)

**Importance:** Here, in the presence of Brother Andre's dead, empty shell of a body, Madame Wu (perhaps ironically) has a powerful encounter with her own soul, and with the concept of the soul in general.

... she saw his face appear slowly against the dark curtain of her memory. Her eyes were warm upon her, his bearded lips smiled, and the half-merry sagacity which was his usual look came before her so vividly that she smiled back at him. She could not hear his voice, but she felt suddenly assured that Andre did love her. Behind the walls of his priesthood, which kept him separate from her while he was alive, he had loved her. Now he was no longer priest, and the walls were gone.

-- Narration (Chapter 11)

**Importance:** In its evocation of walls as a symbol of both confinement and tradition, as well as an important component of the thematic interest in body / soul relationships, this quote indicates how clearly and vividly Brother Andre continues to live in Madame Wu's memory - more specifically, how the connection between their souls transcends the boundaries of their bodies.

'I thought men and women could be mated like male and female in beasts. Now I know that men and women hate each other when they are mated only as beasts. For we are not beasts. We can unite ourselves without a touch of the hands, or a look of the eyes.



We can love even when the flesh is dead. It is not the flesh that binds us together.'  
-- Madame Wu (Chapter 12)

**Importance:** In this quote from Madame Wu, she indicates that as the result of her connecting with her soul, she has come to a fuller, clearer understanding of male/female relationships, as well as body/soul relationships.

'And of what meaning is suffering ... if it does not teach us, who are the strong, to prevent it for others? We are shown what it is, we taste the bitterness, in order to stir us to the will to cast it out of the world. Else this earth itself is hell.'  
-- Brother Andre (Chapter 12)

**Importance:** This comment of Brother Andre's sums up his view about compassion, which seems, in turn, to also be the novel's view.

'Love is not the word. No one can love his neighbor. Say, rather, "know thy neighbor as thyself." That is, comprehend his hardships and understand his position, deal with his faults as gently as with your own. Do not judge him where you do not judge yourself.' ”  
-- Brother Andre (Chapter 13)

**Importance:** Here is another of Brother Andre's core beliefs, and perhaps one of the ideas that distanced him from his family. The quote is a reference / rephrasing of the Bible's teaching to "love thy neighbor as thyself". In changing "love" to "know", Andre is evoking the power of compassion and empathy, rather than love, in connecting with one's own soul, and that of another.