

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan Study Guide

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan by Lisa See

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Contents

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	4
Sitting Quietly and Milk Years.....	6
Footbinding.....	8
The Fan.....	10
Snow Flower and Love.....	12
Learning.....	14
Catching Cool Breezes and Beautiful Moon.....	16
The Flower-Sitting Chair.....	18
Truth.....	20
The Temple of Gupo.....	22
Sons.....	24
Joy and Sorrow.....	26
Into the Mountains.....	28
Winter.....	29
Letter of Vituperation.....	31
Into The Clouds.....	33
Regret.....	35
Characters.....	37
Objects/Places.....	41
Themes.....	44
Style.....	47
Quotes.....	50
Topics for Discussion.....	52



Plot Summary

"Snow Flower and the Secret Fan" is a lovely, delicate story of two women in nineteenth-century China, who pledge themselves to be soul-mates for life at the young age of seven. Although the truth is stretched to accommodate the relationship, the laotongs are supposed to have eight "characters" that match; the girls were born in the same month and have their feet bound at the same age, but it turns out that there are differences between them they only discover as adults. Binding their lives is their continuous learning of women's writing called "nu shu," which is a secret, minimalist variation of "men's" writing, and one which only females can know. A silk fan passed back and forth between Snow Flower and Lily Wu, two "old sames," is where they recorded, in nu shu, the major events and turning points of their lives.

The culture of Hunan during this period of history was dictated by very strict rules and customs, including that of binding the feet of young girls before they entered puberty. After the binding, girls were restricted to the women's upstairs parlor, where they would remain, primarily, throughout their lives. Only as young children in their "milk years" were they allowed to see the outside world and explore nature. Their lives were devoted to creating embroidered clothing and quilts and building their wardrobes and those of their future husbands to create a dowry. Women were considered "worthless branches" in the family tree, and their sole purpose was to produce sons for their husbands. Since feeding a family was a major challenge, a female mouth to feed was simply a liability.

Lily and Snow Flower maintain an intimately close relationship throughout their young adulthood, getting together as often as possible for different festivals and celebrations, sleeping together, reciting poetry, touching and soothing one another and discussing the trials and tribulations of marriage and parenthood. Snow Flower is portrayed to Lily as someone who comes from a high-ranking family; however, it is not until much later that Lily learns that Snow Flower's family is in a state of ruin. Lily holds resentment toward Snow Flower and toward her own mother for keeping this truth from her for so long.

By chance, the women are together at a time when the approach of rebel forces made it necessary to spend three months in the harsh, steep mountains above their villages. They return safely, but Snow Flower's favorite son does not survive the harsh conditions. Snow Flower becomes increasingly despondent over the physical abuse dealt by her husband and over losing her babies. Lily, who has risen in social status to a high position, impatiently encourages Snow Flower to practice the traditions of obeying and finding pleasure in serving the family, in essence, to snap out of her depression. Lily wants the best for Snow Flower, but does not know how to fix her dismal situation and is frustrated with Snow Flower's feelings of hopelessness. When Snow Flower turns to other friends for their understanding and love, Lily denounces her and ends their relationship, even though it causes her great pain and sorrow.

Lily finally realizes that she misunderstood Snow Flower's commitment to the other friends and had never stopped loving Lily as her "old same," but was simply very ill and needed support and love, just as Lily had needed her love when they were children. Lily

commences to care for Snow flower night and day until she passes away, and she recounts their relationship through this novel.



Sitting Quietly and Milk Years

Sitting Quietly and Milk Years Summary

Our narrator, Lily, begins this novel in the present, writing as an elderly widow, who is doing the traditional quiet sitting expected of someone her age. She realizes that her need for love has caused every problem in her life since childhood, beginning with the breaking and binding of her feet at a young age. Going along with what was expected of her, hoping to receive love in exchange, she has lived her entire life doing what was expected, with the exception of writing in nu shu with Snow Flower, her "laotong," or "old same." She still has the fan upon which she and Snow Flower wrote and adorned the promises and thoughts of their lives. Lily realizes now that the heart-love between her and Snow Flower was the most important love in Lily's life. She knows much about the hardships of women but very little about men. However, she feels she waged a "man's battle between my true nature and the person I should have been." Her words will be burned with her when she dies so that they may be taken to the afterlife. The Chinese characters for mother-love are analogous with love and pain. She acknowledges her mother's attempts to teach her endurance, as well as her mother's sharp criticism.

Lily now speaks of her childhood in Puwei during Emperor Daoguang's reign. She descends from the original Yao clans of the area and her father and uncle grow rice, cotton, taro and kitchen crops. The upstairs room of her home is for women, and other rooms are designated for other purposes, including the family's animals. She slept with her two older sisters and her cousin, Beautiful Moon. She and her sisters vied jealously for their mother's attention. Her Aunt and Uncle, Beautiful Moon's parents, also live in the house, as do her grandmother, two brothers and father. Lily's aunt and uncle provide the only cheer in the household, and her mother stonily disregards Lily since, as a girl, she is not important. Although her brother showed her a form of respect, at five years old it was clear to her that she was inconsequential to her mother.

Still allowed to work and play outside, Lily knows her foot-binding time is coming. Her older sister has a group of "sworn-sisters" who visit and share secrets. Her mother's feet were not "lilies" like other women's, but were ugly stumps. On this particular, memorable day, she lets water from the river wash over her feet, hoping to wash away her heightened awareness of melancholy, and injustice in her family.

Sitting Quietly and Milk Years Analysis

This older woman's story is fraught with remorse and sadness, although, at this time we do not know why. Her love for Snow Flower is deep and perhaps the most poignant love she has experienced, but she writes about it later with sadness, as though she has violated it in some way. Although her relationship with her mother is apparently the norm, she recognizes how difficult it was for her to have self-esteem when her mother clearly cared so little for her.



Lily's culture is oppressive and stifling to women, their feet being "broken" and bound at a young age, severely limiting their mobility. Her county is average. The women are not educated, but have "house-learning" involving sewing, cleaning, cooking, footbinding and other domestic activities. The outside world of men is foreign to Lily, with the exception of the males in her household. She clearly enjoyed the freedom of her milk years, the only time she was able to taste the beauties of nature. As a child, her pain is clearly rooted in her mother's disregard and lack of attention. Rather than acting out, Lily tries to be an even better daughter by doing what is expected of her, in the hope that her mother might notice her and love her.

Lily admits to jealousy desire to be in the women's chamber and her envy of her sister's sworn group of friends. She is clearly a little girl who wants to belong and be loved.

See's writing is straightforward and easy to read, and reflects the unsophisticated simplicity with which someone so cloistered and protected would think. She refers to "lily feet" of the women, which implies that their bound feet are considered beautiful and feminine.



Footbinding

Footbinding Summary

Lily's footbinding was to occur later than most girls of her class. Lower classes either loosely bind the feet or do not do so at all, but these women end up being hard-working servants called little daughters-in-law. Lily's mother is preparing the fabric and shoes for Lily's footbinding. The Diviner came to her home and announces that Lily is not an ordinary child, leaving the entire household tense and uncomfortable. When he returned he had Madame Wang with him, known to be the best matchmaker in the region. During this visit, Lily realizes her mother's conniving "monkey" nature, which she compares to male ambition. Madame Wang examines Lily thoroughly, and agrees with the Diviner that Lily's high arch may mean that her feet could be the most perfect "golden lilies" produced in their county. Madame Wang suggests that Lily could marry into a Tongkou family, which is a higher status, and waives her fee, assuming that a future groom's family will pay handsomely later. They want Lily's mother to wait until she is seven to bind her very special feet.

Madame Lang also suggests that Lily might qualify for a laotong relationship with a girl in a different village. Different from sworn sisters, a laotong is an unbreakable, lifelong relationship. In private after this meeting, Lily's mother slaps her face and tells her this will bring trouble to her father, but Lily is happy for the mother-love. The future of the entire family has changed with this announcement because the prospects of moving up in society come with great responsibilities. Lily's status is raised from worthless to possibly useful, but this fact estranges her father and invites beatings.

The cloistered woman's chamber mimics the expectation that women are to stay closed in their thoughts and actions. Lily learns how to sew and embroider, and her aunt teaches her nu shu, hoping that she and Beautiful Moon might share it forever. Lily describes nu shu as phonetically understood and lightly drawn - easy to misinterpret. There are many rhythmic songs and stories in nu shu, but only Aunt knows how to write it.

The Diviner returns on Lily's seventh birthday and sets a day for footbinding for her, Beautiful Moon and Third Sister. The girls are fed red-bean dumplings to soften their bones, knowing that this process will make them more marriageable, which will take them toward the ultimate goal of producing sons. To make the feet soft, pointed and tiny, the toes and arch have to be broken and bent under the foot, the resulting cleft deep enough to hide money in its folds. Lily's feet are bound and sewn with bandages, preventing her from walking down the stairs for two years. Third sister, when her turn came, ran from her mother and fought the process, screaming and struggling, much to the disgust of her mother. In excruciating pain, the girls are forced to walk back and forth in the room to further the process. Each day their feet are cleaned and rebound in ever-smaller bindings, and their responses reflected their futures as women. The bones



finally begin to break, and Lily's mother reminds her that she will find peace through suffering.

Third sister, who fiercely resisted the process, becomes ill because her feet have not broken properly, and they become infected, causing blood poisoning. When the doctor announces the case as hopeless, he also notices grandmother is quite ill. Since tending to her mother-in-law is one of the mother's two main responsibilities, Lily's mother made soup from her own blood and tried to make her well. Four days later third sister died, and grandmother died the following day.

The two girls become more serious about their own feet now, knowing their small feet will show their future husbands and in-laws their ability to cope with suffering, and will be an object of fascination for their husbands.

Footbinding Analysis

This is a very sad chapter, given that Lily is seven and third sister is only six. These little girls are tormented with unbearable pain to accomplish goals that they really do not yet understand. For a girl in this culture, all that matters is being married and having sons, and although Lily discusses this in a very matter-of-fact way, the reality of it is made horrifyingly clear by Lisa See. Lily maintains the detached tone in her narrative of an elderly woman, who has seen too much to be freshly upset by telling these tales. She recalls with a certain fondness the sayings and proverbs that were meant to encourage her through this wretched footbinding process and even at this late time in her life, she does not seem to regret that she was put through it. She does not sound particularly sad about having lost her little sister this way, although we can assume the years would have healed any grief.

Status in these families is determined by who is alive and who dies. When grandmother dies, Lily's mother takes control of the children. Ultimately, her father controls the family, and Lily's mother will be expected to answer to her eldest son. This extremely patriarchal system goes unquestioned in this culture, as well as in this novel.



The Fan

The Fan Summary

Grandmother and third sister are buried in accordance with their status in the household not far from Lily's home. The family is too poor to make much ado about the burials, but enter into their three-year mourning period. The young girls continue to heal and learn nu shu, and the first stage of the marriage contract is begun for elder sister and elder brother through the local matchmaker, Madame Gao. Elder brother is matched to someone of Aunt's home town of Gaojia, which means she will be able to communicate with her family. Elder sister is matched to a family higher in rank, but is only eleven and will not live there permanently until she is pregnant.

Madame Gao is coarse and unsophisticated compared to Madame Wang and makes inappropriate comments in front of the little girls. Elder sister's sworn sisters join the festivities by being entrepreneurial with their rice and bringing their own dishes made at home. They tell stories and sing songs, with one calling out a story line and the others answering back. The stories are concerned with virtue, filial obligations and the afterworld, both very important in their culture, as well as admonishments to women about how to behave.

Madame Wang continues to check on Lily's progress and suggests the possibility that Lily could have a laotong named Snow flower, who is from a higher ranking family, but who shares many similarities with Lily. The two are of equal beauty, height, and their feet were bound on the same day. They are both horse spirits, and, although Snow flower's great-grandfather was a jinshi scholar, Snow Flower's mother does not object to the pairing. Their "eight characters" are well-matched. Lily's mother, the conniving "monkey," was delighted, but to protect the family from responsibility for any future mistakes, denigrates Lily as unworthy of the match. It is agreed that Lily does not have equal learning, but the match will enrich Lily's family in terms of her bride price and would also ensure that Beautiful Moon could marry into a higher ranking family. Madame Wang gives Lily a silk fan from Snow Flower, which contains a message in nu shu inviting Lily to be Snow Flower's "old same." Having an old same was a lifetime marriage of sorts, and the family knows it will cost them, but will ultimately be of benefit in status and money when the girls are grown.

Lily writes a message back to Snow Flower on the same fan, sealing their relationship as a "pair of mandarin ducks," and " a bridge over the river." Madame Wang, who feels there is going to be a profit for her in this relationship, offers to take Lily and Snow Flower to the Temple of Gupo fair in Shexia to write their contract. She leaves to deliver the fan back to Snow Flower.



The Fan Analysis

The culture of these women is so different and strange compared to modern, American women. Little girls get excited over being assigned to men, being good, passive wives and mothers and being assigned to a lifelong best friend. They spend their time, while their feet are healing, embroidering and learning a secret language, imprisoned in an upstairs room and not allowed to go anywhere, but these restrictions are only mentioned in passing by Lily, who accepts them all as part of life. This particular caste system is one where, apparently, a family can move up with the right education or connections and marriages. Lily's family is poor and her mother, in particular, seeks to have more and live at a more elevated social status. The rules of decorum and false humility that govern the oblique negotiations with Madame Wang are absurd, but obligatory..

It is interesting to note that Madame Wang's agenda in making this match is all about her profit. She may even be in on some kind of deal with the Diviner; it is not clear whether, at her current narrator's age, Lily actually believes that she was singled out as being special. Madame Wang overlooks the fact that Lily is not a third daughter like Snow Flower and says that since Lily's sister has died, this doesn't matter. Madame Wang holds a higher status than the local matchmaker, Madame Gao, and is more sophisticated, although, Lily realizes now as Lily is relating the story that Madame Wang was gaudy and strange and clearly not much more than a good salesperson. .



Snow Flower and Love

Snow Flower and Love Summary

Lily is excited about meeting Snow Flower and getting their contract signed and sees this as a new life before her. Riding in a palanquin together, the girls steal forbidden glimpses of the outside world and Snow Flower tells Lily about the man who sells delicious fried taro - crisp on the outside and soft on the inside. The girls are not allowed to walk much because of their feet, but they do explore the fair booths. Snow Flower is more experienced and better spoken than Lily. They choose special paper for their contract and write out promises to learn, work and be together for ten thousand years, with never a harsh word between them. Madame Wang is pleased and warns them that there can be no concubines or other friends that come between them. Lily feels grown up in her feet.

They choose coordinating embroidery thread and Madame Wang, who Snow Flower calls "auntie," buys them lunch. Snow Flower teaches, by example, many rules of etiquette to Lily. When Madame Wang drops them off, she leaves Snow Flower at Lily's, saying she will be back in a few days for her. Snow flower has brought no clothes or toiletries, and Lily knows she is used to better living conditions. But Lily's family has worked hard to clean and organize their home.

In bed the girls talked about their families and how Snow Flower had resisted her footbinding, but daydreamed out her window to get through it. Lily wants Snow Flower to love her the way she longs to be loved. Snow Flower falls to sleep with her hand on Lily's cheek.

Lily acknowledges that mothers' love is not always without disappointment, that loving relatives is an obligation and that most forms of love are "sources of sadness, rupture, and brutality." But the growing love of the laotongs was different and Lily felt the need to cultivate it. She carefully learned and practiced nu shu and exchanged gifts and communication with Sun Flower through Madame Wang. She feels her family is not as good as Snow Flower's but is learning from Snow Flower. Snow Flower often speaks of birds, which Lily interprets as her spirit wanting to soar. Lily is confused that Snow Flower does not invite her to her home. Snow Flower comes again to Lily's home wearing the same jacket, which Lily presumes is due to Snow Flower not wanting to embarrass them with fancy clothing.

Lily teaches Snow Flower many household things that she, surprisingly, has never learned and enjoys showing Snow Flower through charades how to do common chores. Snow Flower brings light and humor to the women's chamber, which Lily has always seen as a very dark and sad place. They share face-washing water, and Lily now knows that Snow Flower loves her.



Snow Flower and Love Analysis

It is not yet clear what this relationship will require of the two girls. Like their marriages, this friendship is sealed by a contract. They are both very pleased and excited about this bond, although they have agreed to the most simple loyalties and activities together. It is touching that Lily's family has cleaned and organized their house; Lily's mother tells her that Madame Wang told her what needed to be done. Lily is not sure whether Snow Flower is judging her in disgust or not regarding to her poverty, but it does not seem so. Snow Flower is better educated and better dressed than Lily and has had a more privileged childhood, which has apparently had an effect on the entire Wu family.

There is some foreshadowing that Snow Flower is not wealthy, as Lily and her family believe her to be. The second time she visits the Wus in the same jacket implies this, but we also learn that Snow Flower has been to the fair many times and the fascinating sights and smells are not new to her as they are to Lily.



Learning

Learning Summary

Over the next three years Snow Flower visits the Lu family often, but Lily is not invited to Snow Flower's home. When Lily's mother questions Madame Wang about why Snow Flower's family has not reciprocated, Madame Wang reminds her that the girls' eight characters did not all match and mentions that there was no complaining when this idea was first raised, and, further, they could not chance the possibility that Lily's future husband might see her in Tongkou if she went there. She suggests that Snow Flower's family suffers over her relationship with the lower-class Wu family and offers to terminate the laotong. Lily's mother apologizes in shame and fear.

Because Madame Wang stepped into Lily's life and will arrange marriages for both Lily and Beautiful Moon, the local matchmaker, Madame Gao, has been cut out of her territory. Madame Gao goes to Madame Wang's village looking for work, which causes an noisy competition between them. In an argument, Madame Gao mentions Snow Flower's circumstances, which causes Snow Flower to blush bright red.

At age eleven, the marriage process began for Lily, Snow Flower and Beautiful Moon. Lily's feet had turned out perfectly and earned her a high-ranking marriage in Tongkou, her future husband's uncle being a jinshi scholar and land baron. Beautiful Moon was to marry into a less prosperous farming family, and Snow Flower would live in Jintian, close by. Although Snow Flower's astrology was not perfectly suited to her future husband's, Madame Wang assures them the matter has been duly studied. They are happy to have their futures settled. Aunt continues to teach the intricacies of nu shu and repeats lessons that remind them how difficult it will be to leave their natal families. Aunt also tells the girls that moving higher in rank does not always bring happiness.

At thirteen the girls practice household chores. Snow Flower is bad at cleaning, but Lily believes it goes unnoticed because Snow Flower will have servants some day. Lily learns from Snow flower how to relate to men, and Snow Flower tells them what she knows about the husbands to whom they are promised in Tongkou. Lily and Beautiful Moon will live in close proximity. Lily will hold a high position in her household as first daughter-in-law. Her father in law has taken concubines, but it does not occur to her that her husband may also.

Madame Gao and Madame Wang continue to clash, since Madame Gao is involved with Lily's older siblings' arrangements. Madame Gao mentions that Snow Flower's family has fallen into trouble because of bad crops and her father, who takes the pipe too often. Madame Wang makes Lily swear to never repeat what she has heard to Snow Flower, and Madame Gao is never allowed inside their home again.

The women prepare for Elder sister's wedding with weeping and crying over the loss of her on the Day of Sorrow and Worrying. Her dowry of items she has made is presented,



and her sworn sisters bid her goodbye. They all create third-day wedding books for her. Elder sister only makes nuptial visits to her husband's home until she is pregnant, and she returns home and weeps over her abusive mother-in-law and difficult husband. Aunt reminds them that their fate is predestined and shares how difficult her own life has been, in spite of her good sex life. Elder sister's misery confirms their philosophy that a woman is only valuable if she marries out, and it is the fire that makes the land fertile.

Learning Analysis

There is clearly something amiss at Snow Flower's upper-class home in Tongkou. We learn now that her father's crops have not done well due to inattention, and that he has an opium problem and a gambling habit.

Young Lily does not exactly understand these details yet. Snow Flower, when she mentions her mother, becomes teary-eyed.

As readers we have reason to be suspicious of both of the old matchmakers, since they are quite concerned with their fees and seem willing to bend the truth when necessary. Elder sister's treatment at the hands of her mother-in-law and new husband does not bode well for the other girls, who are too dreamy eyed to imagine that they could end up with similar troubles. Lily continues to hold Snow Flower in high esteem, always assuming that she is better because of her family's status. It is clear from Lily's perspective in her old age that she was naive, and she remembers now the little hints about Snow Flower's family that she was unable to process as a child. The odd color combination in Snow flower's new tunic is probably because it was made from something else.

Being married well and having a mother-in-law who is not abusive is a primary goal of the girls, and they are diligent in their learning, so they will make good, subservient wives. Lily's mother has a tendency to appear hard-hearted, but she is simply resigned to her daughters' fate and wants them to be resigned as well.



Catching Cool Breezes and Beautiful Moon

Catching Cool Breezes and Beautiful Moon Summary

The girls are fifteen and their hair is now pinned up as a symbol they will soon be married. During the Catching Cool Breezes festival, women return to their natal homes, and Lily and Snow Flower are alone in the women's chamber. They sleep together in the hot night with no clothing, fanning themselves, drawing symbols on one another's stomachs and guessing what they are. This is a potentially erotic scene, but never develops into anything sexual beyond writing on their nipples, although there is a sense Snow Flower knows more about such things. They trace symbols with dampened fingers on the sensitive parts of their legs and hips and recite a poem, feeling close and in love.

Bride-price gifts have begun to arrive and the girls have to sew their dowries. Lily's cloth is hand grown, spun, dyed and sewn; Snow Flower's clothing is made from beautiful fabrics and patterns. But Lily receives beautiful new fabrics from her in-laws for the quilts, bed linens, shoes and clothing she must make to last an entire lifetime. The three girls love making delicate embroidered shoes for their new families using footprint patterns sent to them.

The weather is so hot that Lily's father and uncle build a canopy outside for the girls to sew under. Lily has not been outside much since her childhood days, and the girls enjoy talking to neighborhood children and embroidering in the shade. Madame Gao delivers a letter from Elder Sister, who is miserable.

Beautiful Moon gets stung by a bee and has a serious allergic reaction. Snow Flower tries to run for help on her tiny feet and Lily tries to help her, but Beautiful Moon says some final words and dies. Uncle is beside himself with grief. Snow Flower takes charge and sends elder brother to fetch Aunt from her natal home. Madame Wang instructs them to wrap Beautiful Moon's face, so her mother will not see her in that state. Aunt only cried at night and retreated to her room. Her night time moaning was interpreted as Beautiful Moon trying to get Snow Flower and Lily to come with her to the afterworld, so the girls build a flower tower to appease Beautiful Moon's spirit. Constructed for Beautiful Moon's spirit to dance in for all eternity, the tower contains many levels of entertainment, such as embroidery and nu shu materials. They place the tower at Beautiful Moon's grave and sing to her while it burns. Going home, they write their lamentations on their shared fan.

Lily sees this death as the universe's way of setting things back into balance in their family, and attributes it to the yin and yang.



Catching Cool Breezes and Beautiful Moon Analysis

The relationship between Lily and Snow Flower is peculiar. They are both in their late adolescence and naturally have sensual urges, but instead of exploring further, they are content to share their intimate moments together and enjoy the bond that it creates for them.

Beautiful Moon, Lily's cousin, has been her constant companion since childhood. They had their feet bound on the same day and had shared their growing up years. Lily is grief stricken, but Snow Flower is very practical and takes matters into her own hands, setting out mourning clothing and giving orders.

This culture's attitude about fate is clarified in Lily's conclusions about Beautiful Moon's death. She and Snow Flower had been so supremely happy that it needed to be swept away; Aunt and Uncle were happy people, and the death of their daughter now presents them with an unknown future. The poverty of their family and the weight of too many weddings has shifted the balance of the universe. There is no life without death, and the girls are trained to expect things to go badly in order to balance the good.



The Flower-Sitting Chair

The Flower-Sitting Chair Summary

Now that she is close to being married, Lily is receiving money, jewelry and cloth, in addition to rice and pork for her family and friends. Her father received a new water buffalo making him the richest man in the village. Snow Flower came to sit and sing with Lily. Aunt, still in deep mourning and elder sister came to join them in this final period before marriage. Snow Flower and Lily have been old sames for more than ten years. Madame Wang told stories of wife Wang, married to a lowly butcher, whose own life was so exemplary, she came back reincarnated as a scholarly boy and was rewarded by the entire family by being allowed to transcend to nirvana. Her lesson was that although you cannot change your spouse, living to your own fullest potential will benefit the family. Talking about their marriages, Snow Flower is concerned that Lily will be disappointed when she finally meets Snow Flower's family. After a Day of Sorrow and Worry to mourn Lily's transition to a married woman and seven days of fasting, Lily is dressed for her wedding with a red veil of fringe in front of her eyes. Snow Flower assures Lily that her in-laws approved of her during their feast, and that she will make a good wife and mother. Lily is upset that her mother-in-law has not worn the shoes Lily made for her, noting that the shoes she wears has embroidery superior to Lily's.

When it is time to go, her family seems devastated, but wish her well as they escort her to her flower sitting chair in the palanquin. The word for wife is the same as the word for guest, and she will always be a guest in someone else's home. In a letter from Snow Flower, Lily learns that Snow Flower is afraid that when Lily learns the truth about Snow Flower, which will be soon, that Lily will not love Snow Flower. Snow Flower has included Lily's new husband in her latest nu shu on their fan.

In Lily's new bedroom, her dowry is placed on a table with two cups of wine tied by threads. Her new husband pulls his thread, and she pulls hers, he jumps over the table and onto the bed, and they are married. Her husband's friends visited the room with bawdy jokes and pranks, and, eventually, she was left alone with her new husband. He seems kind and hopeful.

Lily is very worried about Snow Flower's note. She learns she has her own servant named Yonggang. On the second day, she makes tea for her in-laws; she and her new husband attend another ceremony where they receive money, then return to their wedding chamber. On the third day Lily is allowed to read the third day books written by her friends and family members, which is attended by her elder sister and brother's wife and women from Tongkou, but not by Snow Flower or her mother, which hurts and frightens Lily. The sentiments in Snow Flower's third day book again incorporate her love of birds.



The Flower-Sitting Chair Analysis

In a sense, Snow Flower and Lily have become pseudo-lovers as they have grown up and wait for the marriages. They have more intimacy with one another than, perhaps, they will have with their husbands.

Snow Flower has always shown a kinder heart toward Madame Wang than Lily has, and Lily notices small affections between them. Obviously, part of Snow Flower's secret involves Madame Wang.

The marriage ceremony is made up of several segments, most of them denying the bride of food. Lily enters her marriage utterly unprepared for intimacies, but her new husband is not knowledgeable either. She is very careful to meet all expectations and do everything exactly right, so she will be loved by her in-laws. She has clearly moved up to a more affluent family, and her family is reaping the rewards as well.

There are specified times for venting feelings and feeling sentimental, and specified times for joy, which are strictly observed. These moments are honored appropriately by the author, as well, who very objectively moves through Lily's wedding night and any feelings about the new husband.

The third day wedding book readings are the highlight of the marriage process, so Lily is devastated that Snow Flower has not attended. Lily finally knows now, from Snow Flower's letter, that there is something about Snow Flower that Lily does not know. Lily is sure she will love Snow Flower forever, regardless of the secret, but Lily is worried and sad.



Truth

Truth Summary

Rather than return to her natal home on the fourth day, Lily has planned to go to Snow Flower's for her Sitting and Singing month. Snow Flower's house, beautiful on the outside, reeks and is sparsely furnished. It is filthy and revolting, and a peasant woman is working in the kitchen. Lily's new servant waits outside for her.

Snow Flower is dressed badly. The home has clearly, at one time, been luxurious, but is now all but empty. Snow Flower tells her they were once prosperous, and the house was glorious, but her grandfather fell from favor when the Emperor died. Snow Flower's father was raised in a house with too many women and thus, was cowardly and susceptible to vice. Snow Flower says her father, after spending lavishly, took to the pipe; a famine had wiped out their crops, and her father's concubines left. Her father sold off his land and their furniture and Snow Flower had been afraid he would sell her as a little daughter-in-law.

Snow Flower explains that Madame Wang, her mother's sister, saved the family by matching the elder sister, sending her brother to an apprenticeship and binding Snow Flower's feet. Lily is embarrassed that she, herself, has called Madame Wang auntie all these years, when she actually was Snow Flower's aunt by blood, but Snow Flower thought Lily knew their relationship. By arranging a laotong for Snow Flower, Auntie Wang tried to save the family's reputation through implying Snow Flower was educated, loyal, obedient and marriageable. Lily has taught Snow Flower everything about domestic life; her mother lives in her past. Snow Flower's mother was unable to help her as a girl; her father was an addict, and her siblings all left home. Lily learns that Snow Flower will be marrying a lowly butcher, whose profession is unclean and disgusting. Snow Flower does not want Lily's pity.

Lily is hurt and feels betrayed, especially by her mother, who has known for years about Snow Flower's family. But, as the new Madame Lu, she graciously helps Snow Flower clean her house and try to rid it of the stench of opium and the father's "impacted bowels." Snow Flower and her mother live in fear of her father, who is a self-indulgent mess.

Snow Flower's dowry is re-cut from older clothing from her mother's dowry, and Lily is impressed with her resourcefulness, but realizes that Snow Flower and her mother have created the dowry of a fine maiden to try to restructure her fate. Lily sends Madame Wang to her natal home to pick up vegetables, meats and cloth, and pays her to find some girls for Snow Flower's Sitting and Singing. Lily leads the singing and helps the three farmer's daughters make third-day wedding books and do quilting. All was done in a traditional manner, but with sadness. They observed the Day of Sorrow and Worry, and Lily assures Snow Flower they will always be together as old sames.



Madame Wang admits to Lily that, although her feet are special, she was looking hard for a laotong for her niece and will not apologize for trying to help Snow Flower. Lily delivers the third-day books to Snow Flower after she has married, and sees that Snow Flower's new home is coarse and her new, sneering mother-in-law, dreadful. Lily reads the books, which ask the family to treat Snow Flower well. Lily's book is written to impress the in-laws that she will always be there for Snow Flower, despite the gap in their social standing.

Lily, making an entry on their fan, expresses her wish that the phoenix will soar above the rooster and nothing will tether Snow Flower, and she paints a wilted flower with teardrops.

Truth Analysis

Lily is shocked by Snow Flower's living conditions and must draw on her memory of what she has been taught about commitment. Snow Flower's aunt has shown her love and affection beyond what Lily is able to grasp. Placing the laotongs together gave them both the opportunity to better themselves in the areas where they were lacking.

Lily is sick with confusion and sadness for Snow Flower, but she is also highly agitated that Snow Flower's letter ruined Lily's wedding day, and Snow Flower not appearing at her third day wedding book reading had wounded her. She is basically feeling more angry and violated than sympathetic. She realizes that it is her own failing that kept her from seeing the truth. She jumps in and takes over, trying to help. Her efforts take the form of cleaning the house and arranging events to make it look and seem as though Snow Flower's rite of passage is meeting the traditional expectations.

It is easier to understand, now, why Snow Flower spent so much time at the Wu household. Lily realizes that her feet were good, but her specialness only was connected with the need for Madame Wang to find a laotong for Snow Flower in order to improve her chances for marriage.

Lily only has a vague idea of what her new rank entails and still wants to keep the bond intact with Snow Flower forever, but they both acknowledge that Snow Flower, because of her father, has fallen into a miserable marriage in a polluted family.



The Temple of Gupo

The Temple of Gupo Summary

Lily returns to see her parents. They are happy to see her and receive her gifts, but she is angry inside for their deceit about Snow Flower. She rejects any affection from them and tends to her chores politely, but her mother finally accuses her of thinking she is too good for them. Lily and her mother, after exchanging painful digs of their nails, finally have it out, with Lily accusing her of lying, and her mother accusing her of being responsible for Beautiful Moon's death. Lily realizes her mother's intentions have always been selfish and warns her mother that she will not forget this. Lily keeps her distance from her mother and travels to her husband several nights a year.

Lily's in-laws' home is beautiful, and she is happy, even now, to live there. Her mother-in-law is tolerable, but freely orders her around, and Lily obeys her, as is expected. Lily meets other young women in Tongkou.

During the annual visit to the Temple of Gupo with Snow Flower, the old sames discuss matters related to trying to get pregnant and challenges with their mothers-in-law, but they avoid the subject of Snow Flower's deceit. Snow Flower is clearly being worked too hard. Lily receives a note telling her Snow Flower is pregnant. Lily is humiliated not to be first. On her next conjugal visit, she makes a point to try to get pregnant, at the risk of being reprimanded to get up and do her chores. She does become pregnant. Lily's knows her "worth is based entirely on the child growing inside" of her.

She leaves her natal home to begin life with her husband's family, picking up Snow Flower on the way so they can pray for sons at the Temple. They leave fans with prayers, and both "steal" a pair of baby shoes from the altar. They share their favorite food at the taro stand and spend the night at an inn, where they happily sleep together once again. Lily is about to turn twenty years old.

The Temple of Gupo Analysis

The two old sames' lives have changed forever now that they are pregnant. They are still naive and still want to remain close, but Lily's anger is seething over being deceived for so long. She realizes that her mother is, and has always been, manipulating and conniving toward her own ends. Any mother love that Lily has tried to imagine was there from her mother may not ever have been genuine.

Lily has taken her mother's abuse for years, but now digs her own fingernails into her mother's skin and warns her mother that Lily will have more power than her mother some day.

Lily is feeling more strength and assurance now that she is worth something, with a son in utero. She is feeling more mature, but the pain of her childhood has begun to manifest itself in the form of anger.



Sons

Sons Summary

Snow Flower's son has arrived healthy, a relief to Lily. Lily has no one to comfort her, and Aunt avoids her to keep from bringing her bad luck. The girls' letters become more formal and respectful. They are expected to complain about their powerlessness and work, but not to be ungrateful or unfilial. "any daughter-in-law who lets the real truth of her life become public brings shame to both her natal and husband's families..."

One official in the family benefits the entire family, down to the servants and pets. Lily's position is secure, and her baby is welcomed by the family. Lily now feels worthwhile having given birth to a son. Days of motherhood are called rice and salt days because they involve domestic chores and parenting.

Snow flower is not invited to Lily's son's one-month party, a huge celebration. Lily's mother-in-law tells Lily that Lily cannot associate with a butcher's wife. She is forced to write to Snow Flower in secret every day. It occurs to Lily that men must certainly know nu shu, since it is derived from their own writing and is embroidered into all of their clothing, but they just see it as beneath them. Lily thinks the women's dexterity in embroidery and fluency in nu shu had as much importance to survival as "a pig's fart."

Lily sends her servant to deliver messages back and forth. She learns that Snow Flower's parents have now taken to begging. Snow Flower's new family is somber, and she worries about her own mother.

Lily does not know if she is happy; the women in her household do not get along. She rarely sees her husband except at meals. Lily's main conflict in life is connected to her relationship with Snow Flower, who her mother-in-law wants her to drop as a laotong because Snow Flower is beneath Lily's station and of another village, which could cause problems. Snow Flower is having troubles of her own. Her husband makes her participate in preparing slaughtered pigs, and she has become a vegetarian. She feels alone in the world and apologizes for lying about her ugly life. Lily wants to drop the formalities through their nu shu and allow the two to have a real voice and express their true thoughts.

Lily plots to secretly pick up Snow Flower on her way to her natal home for the Expel Birds Festival. Snow Flower shares that she is miserable from all the demands being made of her. Lily advises her to accommodate her husband and mother-in-law because one day she will be the lady of the household. Snow Flower's son does not seem healthy. Snow Flower says that one of her only pleasures is her "bed business" with her husband. They broke the "pollution laws" by not waiting the required number of days after the baby was born, and she is pregnant again.



They return to their respective homes and to raising their sons. Snow Flower sends a letter telling Lily that her daughter was stillborn, and that she is devastated. This bewilders Lily because she knows girls are worthless. She does not have empathy for Snow Flower but tries to soothe her with her written words. Lily gives birth to a second son, and Snow Flower loses another daughter. Lily suggests they see an herbalist to help conceive a son.

Sons Analysis

The two women are maturing differently due to their circumstances. Snow Flower's aversion to "pollution" is being so violated by the slaughter of pigs that she is feeling abused enough to stop eating meat but is breaking down in terms of her personal rules. The only thing she is enjoying about her life is the "bed business," and so agrees to break the rules and engages in that too early after childbirth.

Lily is less able to relate to Snow Flower as her life grows more comfortable and Snow Flower's grows less so. They start out being at different social stations and have now swapped sides of the track, although Lily's life was never as harsh as Snow Flower's life was both before and after marriage. Lily still subscribes, even more so now, to the societal rules imposed on women, but Snow Flower, who learned them all at a young age, is moving in the other direction. In her current state of heightened comfort, Lily can not relate to Snow Flower's sadness over losing a girl, or her unfortunate circumstances. They want to stay close, but are drifting apart.



Joy and Sorrow

Joy and Sorrow Summary

Lily's first son leaves the upstairs chamber to begin his education. The chamber is crowded with women, some in ill favor with Madame Lu. Lily is pregnant again and secretly hopes for a girl. Snow Flower is also pregnant.

During a celebration at her natal home, Lily suggests to Snow Flower that if they both have daughters, their girls could become old sames. But their new daughters have nothing that matches. Snow Flower's daughter, Spring Moon, is more beautiful than Lily's daughter, Jade; their feet do not match, and they were not born in the same month, but the mothers decide the girls will be old sames regardless. They do not realize they are breaking a taboo.

Snow Flower gives birth to another son. Emperor Daoguang dies and China goes into mourning. China's transition of power brings problems with rebel forces. Uncle Lu, having lost his position, returns to Tongkou. Life changes at the Lu household. Their wealth is diminishing, and Uncle Lu takes over as tutor of Lily's first son.

Snow Flower's life is even more miserable except that her second son is robust and healthy. Her father-in-law has died; her mother-in-law's cruelty increases. Snow Flower tries to explain to Lily about the political unrest in China, and the Taipings, who want a more even distribution of land. Lily is not allowed to talk of or ask about the outer realm in her husband's home.

Lily's husband has a dangerous idea to use the family's savings to buy salt and bring it back to Tongkou to sell, and he may be gone a year. Lily is terribly worried and anxious. Uncle Lu warns and teaches Lily's son about the rebellion and uprising.

Snow Flower is again pregnant and the summer heat sets in early. Tongkou's shared water supply contains typhoid, killing many servants and people in the village. When one of the family children becomes ill, Lily closes her own children in her sleeping chamber. She carefully boils their water and makes congee for them and Uncle Lu as the epidemic spreads through the village. She slaps her daughter for complaining about the lack of food.

Lily's sister has lost her entire family so swallows lye and kills herself. The servants return. Since Lily's first obligation is to tend to her in-laws, her servant, Yonggang, offers to watch her children. In spite of Lily's careful nurturing, her mother-in-law dies, leaving Lily the head woman of the household. Her father-in-law's concubines have died, and Lily is clear there will be no more concubines in the house. The epidemic subsides, but both Lily's parents have died as well.

Uncle Lu's enthusiasm for tutoring Lily's son is rejuvenated. Lily's husband returns and sells the salt, making them financially comfortable. His father dies from loneliness and is



given a lavish, 49-day funeral, and the eaves are painted with new scenes of what has taken place there. Lily and her husband are the new Master and Lady Lu.

Joy and Sorrow Analysis

Lily secretly hopes her son will become highly educated and have status. She is bluntly critical of Snow Flower's weaker older son, and she is developing a harsh edge like her mother's, such as slapping her daughter's face. She has taken on the pride of her status of Madame Wu and has done everything according to what she has been taught; whereas, Snow Flower is having trouble living up to the standards Snow Flower learned in her younger years.

In the passage where Lily talks of tending to her mother-in-law, she temporarily turns to her reader personally, saying, "But I don't have to tell you how terrible this disease is. You know what happens." This is a reminder that Lily is speaking to the reader from another time.

The Taiping is a communist organization that wants to balance the wealth in the country and poses a threat to land owners such as the Lus. As more impoverished people join the rebel forces, everyone experiences a reduction in their wealth, and the Lus are no exception. But even at their poorest, they are not as poor as Lily's family has always been.



Into the Mountains

Into the Mountains Summary

After the typhoid epidemic, Lily hears from Snow Flower that she lost her third daughter. She wants Lily to come before they begin binding their daughters' feet. Lily is now free to see Snow Flower with her mother-in-law gone and does special favors for her husband to get his approval.

Lily visits Snow Flower's house and sees and smells the pig slaughters. The two agree to wait, like their mothers did, until their girls are seven to bind their feet. Snow Flower's husband will not allow them to sleep together, and the sounds of Snow Flower's lovemaking are offensive to Lily. The next day the two bathe together, and Lily notices Snow Flower's roughened and worn skin.

The second night of her visit, a battle between government troops and the Taipings moved into the village, and the family is forced to gather their things and leave. Lily waits for her husband to pick her up, but he does not come. She sees someone coming, but the butcher insists Lily go with them for safety. They escape on foot with other villagers, walking continuously for thirty-six hours and later climbing steep hills. Women are in pain and going lame from walking. They continue until the second night up the steep mountains walking single file; people are dying, begging and falling into the ravine off the slippery rocks. Snow Flower's family and Lily find Snow Flower's friends from Jintian, three families, around a fire. Snow Flower's husband tells her to push the others from the fire if they need to. The women around the fire are sworn sisters, who sing songs Lily remembers from childhood. Snow begins to fall as they sing about how their ancestors felt safe and secure long ago.

Into the Mountains Analysis

Although their daughters have nothing in common, Lily and Snow Flower are forcing themselves to think there is a laotong match between them, based on their own relationship.

It is ironic that Lily and Snow Flower end up in this extremely dangerous situation together. Lily's mother-in-law had warned Lily about the dangers of going to her laotong's village. Lily is now separated from all her family members and has only Snow Flower, whose other friends are there also. Lily brought no clothing or food to Snow Flower's, as was the custom when they were young and Snow Flower visited the Lus. Lily is now suddenly dependent on the butcher, who she sees as disgusting, and her life is hanging in the balance with her family unaware of where she is. With her affluent, safe surroundings out from under her, Lily is the same as everyone else, and her life is in just as much danger as the poor villagers.



Winter

Winter Summary

Relentless cold and snow, injured feet, no privacy and loneliness plague the refugees. Lily goes out to search for her elder sister and learns that men were looking for her. Snow Flower's husband becomes a champion of the refugees, providing firewood and meat and being a guardian. His mother continues to complain, hoarding food and blankets and suggesting they stop feeding Snow Flower's oldest, weaker son. They want to save Lily because they think there will be a reward for doing so, so Lily shares her portions of food with them, but they are all malnourished and weakening.

Snow Flower's oldest, unloved son takes to Lily, who teaches him about men's writing and other lessons she has overheard. She tells him a story of a boy who finds a benefactor and lives to turn his back on those who had treated him badly. She tries to give the boy hope, secretly thinking perhaps her husband can help him. She sees that he is like his mother, gentle and delicate, while his younger brother is the light of the family. Snow Flower suggests the possibility of her son marrying Lily's daughter, but Lily would never let her daughter marry so low. Because Lily shows interest in him, though, Snow Flower seems to warm up to her first son. Together they teach him poems and recitations.

With families starving, men go for help, some of them dying and their widows committing suicide. Lily misses her family, and cannot understand Snow Flower's pleasure with bed business. Snow Flower is happy, though, until they find her second son frozen to death. Snow Flower and her husband are crushed with grief, but her husband takes out his pain on her, beating her viciously, causing her to miscarry. The beatings continue, and Lily is powerless to stop them.

Lily vows that she will be an excellent wife and no longer just acting out a role. Snow Flower, who has been brutally blamed for the death of five children, has been beaten each time a baby was lost and wants to commit suicide. She misses her babies and her mother, and her only pleasure is in sex, which Lily does not understand. Snow Flower tells her that in spite of having everything, Lily has nothing. Lily can only offer her empty, rote advice, but looking back she has a better understanding of her pain over lost babies. They discuss how they did not understand Aunt's pain when Beautiful Moon died. They write on their fan and sleep together. The butcher's wrath subsides; Snow Flower understands him.

After three months they are able to return to Jintian. The butcher promises to bring Snow Flower's younger son's bones home later. Lily's husband comes for her, and they are desperately happy to see one another. He had taken the people of Tongkou from the village and had thus become a much-respected head man. Lily leaves the fan with Snow Flower.



Winter Analysis

This leveling event that throws Lily and Snow Flower together in desperate circumstances only serves to make Lily more appreciative of her family, her husband and her living circumstances. Although her sex life is limited compared to Snow Flower's, she is lucky to have the love of her husband since most women do not.

Lily cannot imagine allowing Jade to stoop so low as to marry Snow Flower's son. Her elevated status is beginning to erode her character. In taking Snow Flower's first son under her wing, Lily is doing what she thinks is right, but there is also a tone of judgment regarding how he is being raised.

Lily tries to sympathize with Snow Flower, but, ironically, is unable to do much more than her mother would have done with her, which is to recite the tired old platitudes. Snow Flower is needing much more from Lily in terms of support, but Lily has noted in the last chapter that her new position has made her impatient with the low living of Snow Flower and her husband's family. Even when Lily realizes that Snow Flower has been enduring beatings for a long time, her response is to be angry that Snow Flower has lied to her. Lily envied Snow Flower when they were children and felt sorry for herself because she was not loved enough. However, Snow Flower ends up with a much more difficult path, and Lily does not truly grasp the depth of Snow Flower's misery.



Letter of Vituperation

Letter of Vituperation Summary

The people of China are rebuilding and regaining their health. Lily's eldest son is now twelve and while she was gone, studied hard and learned that all people are educated the same in the realm to maintain a singular vision. Lily feels he will eventually sit for his exams.

The two laotongs now visit one another often, since Lily's husband trusts the butcher, and the butcher likes the gifts Lily brings. Lily's husband tells her they are not alike, that she is strong and Snow Flower only puts on a brave face. Snow flower is underfed, and her husband continues to beat her. Lily wants her to leave him and come to her home, but desertion makes it acceptable for him to kill her. Lily continually asks Snow Flower why Snow Flower can not fix her problems by following the rules and traditions of the inner realm. Further, Lily is impatient with Snow Flower's despondency and thinks Snow Flower should keep trying to have more babies. Lily is frustrated with Snow Flower for not doing what she tells her to do, but Snow Flower knows there is no fix for her situation.

When snow Flower and her children were expected to arrive for a holiday, Lily instead received the fan from a mutual friend. Snow Flower has written she has too many troubles and does not want Lily to hear them any longer. She says to remember their happy girl days together, and that three sworn sisters have promised to love her as she is. Lily turns her rejection and hurt into criticism of Snow Flower and focuses on her weaknesses and dishonesty. She compares Snow Flower to her mother, who loved only for what she could gain from the relationship. She does not write back and burns Snow Flower's subsequent letters. Lily actively and visually tries to cut the negative memories from her mind, appreciating her life and working hard to protect her "damaged heart." She builds a flower tower and burns everything from their lives as laotongs. She treats her daughter exactly as she was treated during the painful footbinding. When a fan arrives from Snow Flower's daughter asking Jade to be laotongs, Lily rejects it saying they have no characters that match. Madame Wang tells Lily that Snow Flower is confused; Lily says Snow Flower violated their agreement not to have concubines. Madame Wang says Lily is breaking two hearts.

Lily's neighbor is Snow Flower's distant cousin and both attended the festivities. Snow Flower sings a song of vituperation, telling of all her problems and that her only joy was her laotong, who thought she could change her destiny. Lily sang a song calling Snow Flower unfaithful. She loses control of her emotions, humiliating Snow Flower, accusing her of lying, having a dirty house, squandering her talents, and always being in heat. Snow Flower sadly says that the women in her village do not criticize her or expect her to be someone she is not. They don't pity her and they visit her when she is lonely; she feels like a bird who cannot find her mate. She leaves the gathering.



As Madame Wu, Lily looks back and realizes this was her passage into her station of being Lady Lu. She set an example of decorum and earned respect for her correct thinking, even though she destroyed her laotong in the process. Lily's song was taught to girls as a didactic lesson and sung during wedding festivities, spreading Snow Flower's disgrace.

Letter of Vituperation Analysis

We can assume from Lily's reaction to her deep pain and sorrow that her mother must have been cruel for some of the same sad reasons. Lily is now fully Madame Lu, and without wanting to, has cast Snow Flower away and robbed them both of the special relationship they cherished. Lily has done so because she thought Snow Flower had cast Lily aside. Lily is still as strong-minded and strong-willed as she was as a girl, except that it is not serving her as an adult, at least on an emotional level. Her love for education is shown through her philanthropic work, helping provide teachers to the smaller villages and helping Snow Flower's son, but the lack of love she feels is so ingrained that her lifetime of hurt is all taken out on Snow Flower, just as Snow Flower's husband takes out his pain on Snow Flower.



Into The Clouds

Into The Clouds Summary

Eight years later Lily's children are grown; her daughter about to be married out, and her son studying to be a xiucai scholar. Snow Flower's daughter, Spring Moon, comes to Lily's door, asking her to go to Snow Flower, who is dying. The butcher is very sad that he has been cruel to Snow Flower. Snow Flower is aged and dressed in rags. Her sworn sisters leave the two alone; she is very ill with a tumor in her uterus. She apologizes to Lily, who arranges to stay with her until she is well or dead. Lily only has two weeks to show her all the love she feels and does not leave the room, sharing their wash water as they did as children. They sleep together, Snow Flower's hand on her cheek. Lily summons a doctor who tells her there is no hope for Snow Flower; Lily swears not to use him again. Lily feeds Snow Flower bitter melon, but she cannot hold it down. The diviner came in and they all prayed and sang to drive away the ghost that was trying to take Snow Flower away. Lily decides not to use diviners for such things again. One of the sisters tells Lily that Snow Flower is only doing these things to please her, but is being kept in pain. Lily sees that these sisters have been helping Snow Flower for years.

Still, Lily tries to get Snow Flower to fight her disease, even when her limbs are turning purple. Yonggang, Lily's faithful servant, brings her a basket containing all of the things she was unable to find to be burned in the flower tower, when she and Snow Flower had their falling out. They relive their past, and Lily promises to be an aunt to Snow Flower's children. Lily and the sworn sisters prepare her body, and Snow flower is buried. The sworn sisters tell Lily that Snow Flower was never their sworn sister but only their friend who taught them nu shu, and that Snow Flower wanted only to be loved without pity and impatience.

Lily had not considered texture, context and shades of meaning and had mistaken the meaning of Snow Flower's more sophisticated nu shu. The sisters made Lily understand that her love for Snow Flower valued her only by the rules of men. When Snow Flower miscarried in the mountains, she was already ill, and there was no baby. When Lily pushed her to try again, she did, and then Lily criticized her. Lily's remorse over her own impatience, and not realizing that her laotong had been sick for many years, is strong. She realizes her heart was hard, while Snow Flower's was pure. She writes on their fan that she hopes they will soar together one day.

Into The Clouds Analysis

This book turns out to be a form of confession for Madame Wu, whose heart as an eighty-year-old woman is wise and compassionate but who caused much pain through her insensitivity and arrogance. In a culture that uses so many words, music and rules for right and wrong, the area most lacking is their communication. This is a story of



missed cues and misunderstandings, and how one can destroy relationships until it is too late to save them. These two were bonded at the heart level, but Lily's trust issues stemming from her childhood cause her to mistrust her best friend. Snow Flower tried to tell Lily what she needed from her, but Lily made assumptions, like her mother, about what was best and right, always needing to be right.

Ironically, those characteristics of Lily's mother of which Lily was so critical are the very same ones that predominate in Lily's relationship with Snow Flower and which made what could have been a meaningful, supportive friendship, into a cause for bitter regret. Perhaps the laotong relationship was their society's means of offering women a way for joy in their lives, when living in a society which devalues their worth. Sadly, Lily used those very standards and attitudes towards woman that was the predominant cultural bias as the basis of her response to Snow Flower.



Regret

Regret Summary

Lily is too old to do domestic chores. She is tired and has lived too long. In her heart, she entered Sitting Quietly after Snow Flower's death.

Spring Moon, Snow flower's daughter, threw herself down a well on her wedding night, polluting the village. Lily tries to quiet people who repeat her responding letter of vituperation, which is now well-known. Snow Flower's passing was the most difficult day of writing on the fan that Lily has ever done. Lily's husband hired Snow Flower's son as a rent collector and gave him a house, so that he did not have to go into pig butchering. Eventually, his butcher father joined him there.

Lily became a vegetarian, contemplated sutras and hoped to renounce bed business. Out of sympathy for her husband, she chose three concubines, who had his babies and improved his esteem in the village. Her relationship with her husband grew strong and companionable. After menopause, she watches everyone in the house and corrects them on anything not done to her satisfaction.

Lily wants Snow Flower's granddaughter to marry her eldest grandson and, even though her son and daughter-in-law are displeased, they must obey her and her husband. Lily calls Madame Wang who is now very old and blind and tells her what she wants, offering to bind the girl's feet herself and teach her womanly arts. The granddaughter, named Peony, came under Lily's protection; her feet were perfect. Lily told her stories and taught her nu shu.

Lily speaks highly of her husband, who died when Lily was fifty-seven. When he died she no longer cared to be an exemplar of the community and let the years drift away. She has outlived many of her family members, including some of her children. Her son is a jinshi scholar and the Lu family will be secure for many generations. Peony will take her place as Madame Lu when Lily dies.

Lily still feels it is better for women not to be educated. While teaching nu shu to the women in Jintian, Lily wrote down some of their autobiographies and charged them, so they would value their lives. Many were from bad or abusive families and they were married out young, and their stories are sad. Lily thinks of her own story which has only aroused regret for forty years. Snow Flower felt they would be together forever, but Lily wonders and asks Snow Flower to forgive her.

Regret Analysis

This chapter is all in past tense, as Lily Lu looks back over her life and ends the story. Lily implies that she is having an official autobiography written. She has been an important woman and at this advanced age, sees things very clearly. Unlike Lily, Snow



Flower accepted and loved Lily just for who she was without wanting to change her. Lily tries to impose her will frequently, arranging marriages, taking over where she can. But she is also driven by her need to rectify or try to pay back Snow Flower for deceiving Lily about the state of her family when young. The fact that she invited concubines in indicates a vast change in her temperament from her younger years. She indicates that she watched everyone in her household, just as her mother did, correcting them when they didn't do things perfectly. She knows these things about herself, and yet has never been able to be any different, even though she knows that her mother's detached determination was very damaging to her as a child. The last words of her novel sum up her story: she needs to be forgiven. As hard as she has tried to be perfect, she could have done better.



Characters

Lily Wu, Madame Lu

Lily Wu is the main character in this novel and also serves as narrator of the story. As a sweet little girl she wants only some positive attention from her mother. Her family is not wealthy, and she learns how to do all the practical women's work that comes with having no servants. She is obedient and careful to follow the rules that her mother and her culture have structured for her and quick to believe that one-half of mother-love consists of pain. She accepts her mother's detached coldness and her beatings in Lily's efforts to be a good daughter. As a yielding child, she eventually grows into a yielding young woman, obedient to her in-laws and her husband. She shows the proper respect to her eldest son and continues to try to follow all the rules set before her.

Locked rigidly into her belief in the rules she has been taught, Lily fails to stay in touch with her heart and becomes hardened and impatient, eventually alienating the one person in her life who means the most to her, her "old same," Snow Flower. Lily gets caught up in her social status as an important and wealthy woman and justifies her rigid beliefs by viewing them as her duty to her community, who looks to her for leadership.

At eighty years old, she writes with perspective on how she was forced to come to terms with her need for love when her laotong passes away, and she realizes that Snow Flower's love for her never faltered. It becomes clear to her that she misread Snow Flower's own need for love and understanding and felt betrayed that Snow Flower turned elsewhere for support. Now, as a woman waiting to die, she uses this story to express her revelations and deep regret.

Snow Flower

Snow Flower is raised in the village of Tongkou in an affluent family. Her uncle is highly educated and has provided well for the family. However, Snow Flower's father, lazy and addicted to opium, lets his farms go, and eventually loses all of their wealth. Although Snow Flower and her parents still live in a large, beautiful house, it is all but empty of furniture and is run down and filthy. Snow Flower has learned some of the finer women's arts, such as fine writing in nu shu and embroidery, but she has no idea how to cook or feed chickens or any other base, domestic chore. When she becomes laotongs with Lily, she stays at Lily's house frequently and learns domestic skills, as she teaches Lily her more sophisticated skills. Her life at home remains a mystery to Lily for many years, but when they are "married out," Lily is married into a wealthy, upstanding family, and Snow Flower is married to a pig butcher.

Snow Flower suffers much hardship in her life, in addition to having lost the comforts of family life very early on. Being married to a coarse butcher offends her sensibilities. She misses and worries for her mother. Snow Flower's husband beats Snow Flower. She



loses babies, which is devastating to her. She loses her second son, who was bright and healthy. Ultimately, we learn that she has been very ill for a long time, and has suffered for years. She is a good soul and a devoted friend to Lily, but is also a simple person, who has tried all her life to escape her pain.

Madame Wang

Madame Wang is a colorful character. As a matchmaker, she makes a living on her own and travels independently, which is unusual for a woman in her culture. She is highly painted and decorated, and has a bit of a superior attitude. She is also very conniving, but everything she does is out of love. The fact that she matches the two girls as laotongs without Lily's awareness of Snow Flower's family problems was a move made only to better the life of her niece. She bound her niece's feet and took care of her to prepare her for a better marriage, when Snow Flower's own mother would have neglected her and allowed her to become a "daughter-in-law," or a servant.

Madame Wang interferes in Madame Gao's geographical territory for matchmaking, but has everyone convinced that because she comes from Laotong, she is of a higher caliber in her work because she works with more affluent families. This is the information and impression that she puts out, and it is believed.

Lily resents Madame Wang's controlling and bossy nature, but we realize later that her agenda was not selfish (with the exception of her fee), and that she truly was a good woman. Lily later appreciates her for helping her beloved Snow Flower, and even feels something like respect for her, as well, for living all those years without a husband.

Aunt and Uncle and Beautiful Moon

Lily's Aunt and Uncle Wu have one female child, Beautiful Moon. They have had no sons, and they live with Lily's father and family because that is the way a family like this is structured according to the rules of their culture. He works hard and is really the only man in the household who shows Lily much affection and humor. Aunt is a toothless, comical character who tries to make everyone happy and to keep the atmosphere light. She mentions more than once what a good sex life she and her husband have had.

Uncle is the one who takes pity on the girls sewing upstairs in the heat and allows them to sit outside to work, which is how Beautiful Moon gets stung by a bee. When these two lose their daughter, it is a sad, sad situation because she was all they had. Aunt stays away from Lily when she is pregnant, so that she will not bring her bad luck. They are both very sweet, lovable characters.

Beautiful Moon is Lily's cousin and lives with her. They are inseparable for most of their childhood. Beautiful Moon is "demure," quiet, and loving. Her premature death from a reaction to a bee sting causes unbearable grief for her parents. Later, we learn that Lily's mother blames Lily for Beautiful Moon's death, believing that she led the girl outside to sew.



Lady Wu, Lily's Mother

This character is not developed as fully as some of the others, but we learn that Lily's mother, born under the sign of the monkey, will do whatever it takes to try to advance her family, and will keep secrets and tell lies if necessary to get ahead. Lily realizes that any love her mother has shown her has been a means to her own end, and it is not clear whether her mother is even capable of loving. She is rigid in her determination to follow the rules set down for women of her class and wants the same for her daughters. When third sister tries to escape the painful footbinding, running and screaming, she is shown no mercy whatsoever by her mother, and eventually dies as a result of the process. When there is sadness over the daughters having to leave their natal homes to go to the family of their husbands homes forever, Lady Wu sternly reminds her daughters that they are worthless unless they are married out.

Uncle Lu

A Jinshi scholar, Uncle Lu's connections with the government are the primary reason for the Lu family's wealth and status. When Uncle Lu loses his position with the change of government when the Chinese Emperor dies, he is forced to come home to the Lu home in Tongkou. He chooses Lily's first son as a pupil, and tutors him; her son eventually goes on to be a great scholar like Uncle Lu. Uncle Lu has moles on his face with long hairs protruding from them, with which he proudly plays.

The Butcher

Snow Flower's husband, the butcher, is coarse, vulgar and mean. He is used to doing vile work such as butchering and bleeding pigs, and he blames Snow Flower for the loss of each child. His life is "polluted" by Snow Flower's standards. However, when the Wang family and Lily are forced into the mountains and must survive through hunger and severe weather, the butcher cuts firewood and takes care of the chores that the women cannot do. In this way, Lily and her husband come to see him as a better man than they had realized.

Although the butcher is abusive to his wife, Snow Flower, he is remorseful at the end and shows some respect to Lily. He is really not a bad man, but just crude in his ways.

Third Sister

Lily's sister, who is a year younger than Lily, is scheduled to have her feet bound at the same time as Lily and Beautiful Moon. However, this sister cannot face the torture she is about to endure, and she runs from her mother, terrified, and fights the process the entire time. When her foot bones are supposed to be breaking, she instead develops blood poisoning and dies. Her death makes Lily's mother more conscientious about the process, and makes Lily realize how seriously bad it can go if not done correctly.



Third Sister-in-Law

In the Lu household, this woman is married to one of the Lu sons and is the mother of his children. Her husband and all of her children die from typhoid. Madame Lu spits at her and slaps her and hopes for her painful death, since she is in such deep grief over losing her son and grandchildren. Third Sister-in-Law drinks lye and kills herself.

Madame Lu, Lily's Mother-in-Law

Madame Lu is not a perfect person, but she has been very fair to Lily about her relationship with Snow Flower. She has wanted Lily to break off the latong since she married into the Lu family and has encouraged her to stop seeing Snow Flower altogether, but she knows they are visiting and sending notes and does not force the issue. When typhoid strikes the village, Madame Lu is also stricken and becomes Lily's primary responsibility, even above caring for her children. Lily cleans and feeds her and prepares her for burial when she dies, arranging a huge, elaborate funeral. Madame Lu's death leaves Lily in her place as the new Madame Lu.



Objects/Places

Puwei

Puwei is the farming village in Hunan where Lily Wu and her family reside. It is an agricultural community, and, although the residents are not well-off, they are not terribly poor. Lily's father and Uncle work in the fields and paddies in Puwei.

Tongkou

Tongkou is a more upscale village where Snow Flower was raised. The homes are architecturally beautiful, and the village is nestled among trees. Lily Wu is married to a Tongkou family and spends the rest of her life in her husband's family's home in Tongkou. She becomes an exemplary citizen and the people of Tongkou look to her for leadership.

Temple of Gao

This is the temple where Lily and Snow Flower visit to pray for sons. The altar has pairs of baby shoes which have been left by new mothers, and are there for expectant mothers to secretly "steal" for their new babies.

Jintian

Jintian is a very poor village where Snow Flower goes to live with her husband. It is desolate and dirty, but is near Tongkou. Later in life, Lily arranges to have school teachers sent to Jintian to teach the young boys.

Women's Chamber

The larger, upstairs room of a house in these times was set aside for women and small infants. The women were not allowed to go outside and for the most part, spent most of their lives in the chamber embroidering, binding their feet and healing, making clothing and shoes for their dowries, writing nu shu and singing songs. The chambers usually had latticework windows so that the women could see outside.

Nu shu

The secret writing done by Chinese women that is developed among them so that they can communicate. It is loosely based on men's writing, and is painted onto fans and notes and embroidered into shoes and clothing. The greatly-refined girls were were



more capable at nu shu. Lily's Aunt teaches Lily and Snow Flower how to write nu shu, and this is the language they record life events in on their shared silk fan.

Daughter Days, Hair Pinning Days, Rice and Salt Days, Sittin

These periods of a Chinese female's life denote the following respective stages: Daughter Days: Childhood days before she becomes an adolescent; Hair Pinning Days: the pubescent days when her hair is pinned up as she prepares to be married; Rice and Salt Days: the days when she is raising her family and taking care of her household, and Sittin: the days when she is quiet and is waited on by other family members, mostly her daughter-in-law.

Taro

A vegetable commonly eaten in China. Snow Flower and Lily, as a tradition, eat at the taro stand every year at the festival they attend. The cubed vegetable is deep fried, coated in sugar and plunged into cold water, making it hard and sweet on the outside and soft on the inside.

Taipings

The rebels in China, growing in numbers during Lily's adulthood, who tried to reform the government and achieve a more equal distribution of wealth among the Chinese people. When the Chinese army forces clashed with the Taipings, the villagers in Jintian are forced up into the mountains for safety.

Footbinding - Golden Lilies

At the age of six or seven, Chinese girls had their toes turned underneath their feet and bound with bandages so that they would have tiny, ineffective feet as adults. The painful process involved allowing all the bones of the toes and foot to break so that the feet would stop growing and fold under themselves. The tiny feet kept the women from moving very fast, and caused them to sway as they walked. Prized for their beauty, well-bound feet were called Golden Lilies.

Dowry

During this period in China, young women did nothing but work on their dowry, which consisted of quilts, clothing and shoes. They were expected to make enough of these to last their entire lifetimes, as well as clothe the entire family into which they marry. The size and quality of their dowry helped determine their "bride-price," or what was exchanged for them, at the time of the wedding.



Flower Tower

A flower tower was built for a person who had passed on, so that they would have something to do in the afterworld besides bother the people who are still living. When young Beautiful Moon dies from her footbinding, Snow Flower and Lily construct a flower tower with paper, pens, embroidery thread, pasted pictures and things for her to look at and do. They took the flower tower to the graveside and burned it to the ground so it could be with Beautiful Moon in the afterworld.

Temple of Gupo, Fair at Shexia

The first time the girls go on an outing together, Madame Wang takes them to the fair at Shexia and they visit the temple at Gupo. They write and sign their laotong contract here and make this an annual tradition to visit the fair every year. The fair is where they visit the taro stand to eat, which is also part of their established tradition together.

Palanquin

A rickshaw with a covered seating area that carries women from one village to the next, pulled by a male servant.

Sworn-Sisters

In this period in China, women would form bonds among themselves and take vows to remain friends as a group, becoming "sworn-sisters." When Snow Flower turns to a group of sworn-sisters for comfort, Lily mistakenly thinks she has joined the sisterhood, abandoning her promises as her latong.



Themes

Love and Pain are Inextricably Linked

Lily Wu learns very early that the love her mother has for her is entirely wrapped up in the pain she delivers to her. In fact, the Chinese word for mother means pain. The footbinding that a mother was obligated to do, was a terribly painful ritual in which her daughter's feet completely break down. Making her walk on her injured feet is the only way to get them to break, and the mother must force this, even if it means beatings. This is what will make the daughter lovable, and "marriageable."

The pain of marriage love, to Lily, involves "rupture" and is the picture of subservience. A new wife is expected to not only serve her new husband, but to serve his entire household, particularly his mother, doing the hardest work. She is also expected to bear and raise children, be available for "bed business" at all times, and not go out of the house. By performing these tasks, she is assured love from the family into which she has "fallen."

On the other hand, the pain involved with childbirth is quickly forgotten, dimmed by the strong love of a mother for her baby; however, the two are strongly associated. The love of a daughter for her natal family is laced with the pain of knowing that she will leave them forever once she is married. They actually have ceremonies to grieve together over that loss. Snow Flower's love for her babies is fraught with pain over losing them. Her husband's love comes with the pain of his fists.

Finally, the love between Snow Flower and Lily ends with Lily's pain over the misunderstanding she had with Snow Flower and the regret she will live with until she dies.

Social Position Does Not Determine Character

Lily and Snow Flower come from entirely different backgrounds. Living in an upscale neighborhood with a wealthy family early in her life, Snow Flower had privileges of learning and breeding that were not afforded to Lily as a child. Snow Flower is able to teach Lily many things about how to behave socially, how to talk to men, how to write in nu shu, and other more refined aspects of living. Snow Flower learns from Lily about hard work - how to feed the pigs, clean the house and cook - practical chores that she has never had the opportunity to learn.

However, Snow Flower's station in life has fallen to that of being married to a butcher, which, in this culture is apparently one of the worst fates for a woman. Lily's status has risen to that of the affluent head of a community. It would naturally follow that Lily would have a stronger underlying character, given her humble beginnings. However, it turns out that Lily's perception is skewed, due to her innate sense of lack, causing her to misperceive Snow Flower's pure and simple message, so that Snow Flower has had to



get what she needs in other ways. Lily's character can be said to have decreased with her rise in society, while Snow Flower, whose position has sunk to the lowest point possible, has always shown a strong character and sense of honesty.

Oppression of Chinese Women

It is difficult to imagine why the Chinese began binding the feet of their female children. Women, clearly, are not allowed to be involved in the "outer realm" and, in this culture, are seen as only good for one thing, which is to bring sons into the world. Women are not allowed to even be outside in Lily's world, which is astonishing given the fact that this was not that long ago. To cripple women's feet and assure that they remain helpless in the world is certainly a vile act of patriarchy, however, that women accepted this position for so long is curious.

Lily and Snow Flower remind each other several times in this story that, as females, they are worthless branches of the family tree. There are many instances where baby girls are mentioned as a huge disappointment. Even being a pretty girl is not enough unless one has gone through the excruciating process of footbinding. "A lovely face is a gift from Heaven, but tiny feet can improve social standing."

The only thing that validates the existence of woman or gives them any worth is the birth of their sons. Ironically, Chinese males involved in the outer realm of politics, battle and rebellion end up having to carry the maimed women on their backs. In their helplessness, the woman truly do become useless to the outer realm.

Another fascinating aspect of the oppression of Chinese women was the incredible volume of goods they were expected to produce in order to make their dowry sufficient. Snow Flower, in particular, has resourcefully taken remnants of her mother's dowry and transformed them into wearable clothes, quilts and shoes. Even Lily is astonished at the resourcefulness it took to transform these fabrics into a full-blown dowry. Women were obligated to provide enough clothing for a lifetime for themselves and their families, taking years to painfully construct and embellish hundreds of article - this could be hardly worthless.

Being made helpless by having crippled feet also made women susceptible to abuse that was all but ignored by the law. Snow Flower says that her husband would have legal grounds to kill her if she leaves his home to escape his physical abuse.

Superstition's Role in Ritual and Tradition

This novel is rife with superstitious ideas and practices, and the very structure of this culture is seeped in superstition. One must bind feet in the fall, and be buried on a sunny hill. The girls thought that Beautiful Moon's spirit was tormenting them because Aunt's moaning was upsetting them. The girls' flower tower, built for their dead cousin to play in, was burned so she could have it in the afterlife to play in with her new ghost friends. Women's writings are also burned to make them available in the afterlife.



The "gods set things right" by making bad things happen when there is too much imbalance in the universe. Lily's mother was born under the sign of the monkey, which makes her conniving and sly. Snow Flower and Lily were born under the sign of the horse, which makes them want to be free spirits. Lily was never allowed to go to Snow Flower's home for fear that her future husband might see her before they were married. The women pretend to steal baby shoes from the temple's altar and make offerings prior to their babies' births. The family makes an offering to the Tiny Footed Maiden prior to footbinding. The Chinese believe that pain and suffering is what brings about growth and new life. "If a daughter doesn't marry out, she's not valuable; if fire doesn't raze the mountain, the land will not be fertile." Many stories, songs and messages are sung and written in the women's chambers that teach them the lessons of life in symbols and fantasy.

The interesting rituals of Sitting and Singing before a girl gets married, hair pinning days of an adolescent, rice and salt days of motherhood and sitting quietly days of old age are all part of the superstitious nature of this culture. They try very hard to make things go well for themselves by behaving in prescribed ways, out of fear, hoping that unseen forces will favor them. Their rules and teachings are all based on the idea that alone, they are powerless, and their behavior results in either punishment or happiness, meted out by the gods.



Style

Point of View

Most of the novel is written strictly from the narrator's point of view. An important aspect of the novel's texture is that it is from Lily's point of view, and the reader can see that Lily does not always perceive things appropriately, even at the end of her life. She is a reliable narrator insofar as she is honestly telling her story the way she sees it.

During her childhood days, we are in the present tense with Lily and Snow Flower, as Lily narrates the stories of their lives. With the exception of the first chapter in which Lily is 80 years old, up until the last chapter, we are reviewing time that is in the past. Our reading experience of her life comes through her memories as she re-lives them.

Her culture is stifled, especially in regard to the value of women, but Lily, as the narrator, never really sees beyond it or imagines a life when unbound feet might be more practical. In fact, she has only heard of bizarre women, whose unbound feet "flap like just-caught fish." Growing up in the women's chamber of a house, rarely seeing the outside or spending time in nature, has made Lily's world very small, and it is from this cloistered perspective that she writes her story.

Occasionally, Lily speaks to her readers and reminds us that she is telling this story. For instance, she says to her reader, "But I don't have to tell you how terrible this disease is. You know what happens," describing the death of her mother-in-law. Lily occasionally poses a question to the reader, such as "Could I have written to Snow Flower about my husband?" In these ways we are reminded that we are being told a story, and that it is all from Lily's memories.

Setting

The novel is set in the counties of Puwei, Tongkou and Jintian, all in the Hunan province of China. Puwei is a poor farming district, where Lily grows up with her natal family, the Lus. Snow Flower grows up in a wealthier area in Tongkou, and later marries into a family in the very poor village of Jintian, which is not far from Tongkou. The story is set in the 1800s, a time in China when women were not allowed to live freely, but were hidden away in women's chambers, isolated from the realities of life and survival, and their sole purpose on earth to give birth to sons, do domestic chores and wait on their in-laws. Later, when the women are married, they make an occasional trip back to their natal homes during different festivals.

The women's chambers invariably have a latticework, more elaborately designed in nicer homes. Lily remembers spending a brief time playing outside on the river as a little child, but as soon as she was six years old, she had to live indoors. When not serving meals to the men of the house or in the kitchen, the women and small children remained upstairs in the women's room. The courtyard in Lily's husband's family home



is elaborately paved and is "fen shui perfect," meaning that it is arranged and built in perfect harmony with nature.

The trek into the mountains with the villagers of Jintian is cold, treacherous and the climb so vertically steep that the characters get used to hearing peoples' fading screams as they fall into the canyons.

The fair and festival that Lily and Snow Flower attend yearly in Shexia are loud and colorful, with lots of smells and unusual sights. The atmosphere inside the temple is, naturally, quiet and subdued.

Language and Meaning

Lisa See's writing style mimics the clipped speech and brevity that we perceive in the Chinese language as it compares to English. It is difficult to remember that the author is not Chinese, since Lily Lu is such a developed, Chinese personality. Terms foreign to English speaking readers are placed in a context that allows the reader to easily understand their meanings. The meanings of other Interesting terms, such as "golden lilies," also become clear within the context of the story. It is not clear why Lisa See italicizes the word "cash" throughout her story, but it seems possible that it was such a sought-after commodity that the word held great importance to the characters.

Lisa See's objectives in this story, which may be to educate her reader about the subtleties of communication; to portray the unusual bond among Chinese women at that time, as well as to record the history of the Hunan culture, are achieved subtly and, often, in retrospect, i.e., as the reader thinks about the book after reading it. Lily never comes out and really tells us what she has learned about her mistakes, but instead simply expresses her remorse. There is nothing she could have done to change the society in which she lived, and following the rules was mandatory - she was only, always, trying to be an exemplary person. However, she lost touch with her feelings once she achieved a high social status, and her ability to interpret Snow Flower's needs was flawed. Lily makes this determination in retrospect once the story is finished and reviewed.

Structure

This novel of 253 pages is divided into nineteen chapters, which are divided by sections titled "Daughter Days," "Hair Pinning Days," "Rice and Salt Days" and "Sitting Quietly." The first chapter, not included in a section, is also titled "Sitting Quietly," so that when one is finished reading the novel, it is nice to go back to the first chapter and remember how the story started in the same context that it ended.

The Chinese woman's life was divided into segments. The Daughter Days section is a description of childhood days when Lily was still allowed to go outside and play. It is also the time of life when her feet are bound, and covered her growing up as a young girl under the authority and care of her parents. Hair Pinning Days are the days of



puberty and adolescence, when young women are preparing for their marriages, sewing, learning womanly arts and preparing their dowries. Rice and Salt Days are the days of motherhood, when a woman's life is occupied with feeding and raising children, and their children are still at home under their roof. Sitting Quietly is, of course, old age, which came on at a fairly young age compared with modern times. Dividing the book into these major sections helps us follow the sequence of life events that Chinese women expected for themselves.



Quotes

We live at the whim and pleasure of others, which is why what Snow Flower and her mother had done was so beyond. They had taken cloth that had once been sent from snow Flower's family to Snow Flower's mother as a bride-price gift, been shaped into the dowry of a fine maiden, been reshaped again into clothes for a beautiful daughter, and now restructured another time to announce the qualities of a young woman marrying into the house of a polluted butcher. All of it was women's work - the very work that men think is merely decorative - and it was being used to change the lives of the women themselves. Pg. 127

That woman had been critical of me for so long. She had also lied - not to my family but to me. I had never cared for her and now I liked her even less for her duplicity, but she did exactly as she was told. (I now outranked her, after all.) pg. 128

"I have heard that you should not do bed business after too much hard work," snow flower told me, "But I don't believe that my mother-in-law has heard that." She looked exhausted. I felt the same way after visiting my husband's home - from the nonstop labor, from being polite, and from always being watched. "this is the one rule my mother-in-law doesn't respect either," I commiserated. "Haven't they heard an exhausted well yields no water?" Pg. 141

Our words had to be circumspect. We could not write anything too negative about our circumstances. This was tricky, since the very form of a married woman's letter needed to include the usual complaints - that we were pathetic, powerless, worked to the bone, homesick, and sad. We were supposed to speak directly about our feelings without ever appearing ungrateful, no-account or unfilial. Any daughter-in-law who lets the real truth of her life become public brings shame to both her natal and husband's families, which, as you know, is why I have waited until they were all dead to write my story. Pg 150-151.

Sons are the foundation of a woman's self. They give a woman her identity, as well as dignity, protection, and economic value. They create the link between her husband and his ancestors. This is the one accomplishment a man cannot achieve without the aid of his wife. Only she can guarantee the perpetuation of the family line, which, in turn is the ultimate duty of every son. This is the supreme way he completes his filial duty, while sons are a woman's crowning glory. I had done all this and I was ecstatic. Pg. 151

Men write about the outer realm of literature, accounts, and crop yields; women write about the inner realm of children, daily chores, and emotions. The men in the Lu household were proud of their wives' fluency in nu shu and dexterity in embroidery, though these things had as much importance to survival as a pig's fart. Pg. 153

When Jade protested that there were no scallions, no slivers of pork, not even any preserved vegetables, I slapped her hard across the face. The other children swallowed



their complaints, while their sister bit her lower lip and fought back tears. I paid no attention to any of it. I simply picked up my broom and went back to sweeping. Pg. 179

For the next five days, I cared for my mother-in-law in all the ways a daughter-in-law can. I cleaned her lower half when she no longer had the strength to use the chamber pot. I made her the same congee that I had made my children; then I cut my arm as I had seen my mother do so that my vital fluid could be stirred into the porridge. This is a daughter-in-laws' supreme gift and I gave it, hoping that through some miracle what had given me vitality would replenish hers. Pg. 181

My good fortune had made me impatient and intolerant. The polluted and polluting nature of that place and the people who lived there rasped against my senses, my flesh, my soul. Pg. 188

But I was lucky in my suffering. I saw women my age and younger - women in their rice-and-salt years - whose feet had broken under the stress of walking so far or had fractured into bits against a rock. From the ankle up they were unhurt, but they were completely crippled. They lay there, not moving, only crying, waiting to die from thirst, starvation, or cold. But we kept going, never looking back, burying shame in our empty hearts, shutting out the sounds of agony and sorrow as best we could. Pg. 192

"Obey, obey, obey, then do what you want." Pg 216

When the second night fell and our world grew black, despondency enveloped all of us. Belongings were abandoned. People got separated from their families. Husbands searched for wives. Mothers called out for their children. It was late fall, the season when footbinding begins, so many times we encountered young girls whose bones had recently broken and who were now left behind, as had food, extra clothes, water, traveling altars, dowry gifts, and family treasures. Pg. 192



Topics for Discussion

What changes in Lily's life that makes her attitude toward Snow Flower's suffering become so cold?

Is Lily, or Madame Wu, an honest narrator? Support your opinion.

Discuss the extent to which women are oppressed in this culture and the possible reasons.

What significant role does Lily's mother play in her life? Explain her mother's monkey nature and how it comes out in her dealings with Lily.

The butcher is a complex character. Is he good or bad, or a little of both? Discuss his assets and his flaws.

What is a diviner? What role does he play in setting the course for Lily's life?

Discuss the irony in Lily's mis-translation of the nu shu that caused the break in her relationship with her laotong.

Does wealth always change people? Did it change Lily, or would she have been the same if she had married the butcher?

Why does Snow Flower have such rotten luck? What is at the basis of her bad situation?

Discuss some of the images that are repeated throughout the story, such as the river, the phoenix, the mandarin ducks.