

The Wangs Vs The World Study Guide

The Wangs Vs The World by Jade Chang

(c)2017 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Wangs Vs The World Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Page 1-28.....	7
Page 29-53.....	11
Pages 54-78.....	14
Page 79-95.....	17
Page 96-107.....	20
Page 108-128.....	22
Page 129-143.....	25
Pages 144- 172.....	27
Pages 173-199.....	31
Pages 200-229.....	34
Page 230-257.....	37
Page 258-267.....	39
Page 269-285.....	41
Pages 286-308.....	43
309-351.....	45
Characters.....	48
Symbols and Symbolism.....	55
Settings.....	58
Themes and Motifs.....	60
Styles.....	64
Quotes.....	67

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Chang, Jade. *The Wangs vs. America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

The Wangs Against the World begins with Charles Wang bankrupt and preparing to leave his Bel-Air home and take a cross-country road trip to live with his oldest daughter, Saina, the only one of his three children with any money left. Charles grew up in Taiwan after his family lost their vast holdings in China during the Communist Revolution, and he was obsessed with reclaiming the family land. As the book opens, the only person he told of his plan to return to China, however, was his son, Andrew, a student at Arizona State.

The beginning of the book rotates through the different Wang family members' perspectives, all in the past tense, so the reader can see how Charles's bankruptcy effected them.

Saina, Charles's oldest daughter, lived in a farmhouse in Helios, New York, where she hid after her career as an artist went sour. Recently dumped by her superstar-artist boyfriend, Grayson, Saina tried to discover who she was. She was dating an African American man, Leo, when Grayson came back into her life. When Leo found the two of them in bed together, he left Saina.

The next morning, Charles and Barbara left their home early. Charles had still not explained to Barbara his plan is to continue on to reclaim the family fortune in China.

His son Andrew seemed unaffected by the coming changes in his life. He lounged in his dorm room with Emma, his girlfriend, who he refused to sleep with. He was committed to remaining a virgin until he falls in love, a sentiment that caused Emma to storm off. Andrew was too distracted by a phone call from Grace to go after her. Andrew told Grace about the \$7 million trust funds each child once had, which led Grace to believe the situation was test her father devised to see if she was worthy of the money.

In Helios, New York, Saina Grayson received a call from Sabrina, the woman he had left Saina for, and he left Saina to return to Sabrina.

As Grace waited for her family to arrive at her school, the headmistress told her that the laptop with her entire style blog on it did not belong to her because it had not yet been paid for. When Charles arrived in the middle of her attempt to download her files, he managed to negotiate the purchase of the laptop for \$75. The headmistress of the school did not quite agree before Charles threw the money at her and ran with Grace to the waiting car. The absurdity of her millionaire father stealing a laptop further convinced Grace that everything happening to her was a test rather than her new reality.

When Grace got into the old Mercedes station wagon, she tacked a picture of her mother, May Lee, inside of the door. May Lee was Charles's first wife, a beautiful third-



generation Chinese-American model who died in a helicopter crash when Grace was only eight weeks old.

Before the family reached Andrew in Arizona, Charles stopped to rent a U-Haul and to break into one of his California warehouses. His goal was to take a large order of cosmetics to a couple in Alabama. By delivering the order personally, he would be able to take payment and keep the money.

Once the theft was complete, the family continued on to pick up Andrew, whose car was repossessed. Charles received a call, but from his lawyers who had been looking into the land in China for him. They told him that there was already a Charles Wang who claimed the land, and they promised to look into it.

On the way to Andrew, the family had to drop Ama, the woman who had served first as Charles's wet nurse and then as his children's nanny, with her daughter, Kathy. Kathy's home was a depressing metal structure in the middle of a dust-covered lawn, Grace is horrified to be served hot dogs for dinner. Grace began to understand that their trip was not a test when Kathy makes it clear that she understood that Charles was basically stealing Ama's car.

At this point, the narrative reveals the actual circumstances around Charles's financial ruin. Believing that the ethnic cosmetics industry was wide open and waiting for someone to invest in, he staked not only his business but his personal assets as well to get a loan to start his own line of cosmetics. The inevitable bumps of a new business venture happened at the same time that the economy as a whole took a hit, and the bank called the loan, causing Charles to lose everything. It was emotion--a desire to look strong in front of the white bankers--that caused him to make such a stupid mistake.

Meanwhile, Andrew decided to actually attend classes. His economics professor gave a lecture-turned-rant about the collapse of the housing market and banking systems. The professor blamed a Chinese mathematician--and China as a whole--for giving Wall Street the idea that risk could be controlled through math. Angry at his professor, Andrew told the entire lecture hall that his family was bankrupt, before storming out for good.

In New York, Saina was dealing with her loss of both Grayson and Leo. She found Leo at the farmers market where he sold his produce and lied to him, telling him that she was the one who wanted Grayson to leave. When she arrived back at her house after making up with Leo, Saina found Billy Al-Alani, a literary theory quoting hipster who became an art journalist. Billy wanted an exclusive interview with Saina, but she refused, even though she knew that the refusal would cause Billy to retaliate and destroy what was left of her reputation. At this point, Saina's realized that without an audience to witness her art, she could not produce it.

In Arizona, Charles and the rest of the family interrupted Andrew's masturbation session. Humiliated, he cleaned up and grabbed his expensive sneakers and comedy



albums before climbing into the Mercedes with the rest of the family. When they arrived at a seedy motel, Andrew and Grace sat by the pool and talked. He confessed that he is still a virgin, and she told him that she was not. Angered and shamed by her admission, he lashed out at her.

The next day, Charles took another call from his attorney and Barbara, overhearing the conversation, realized that he has set his sights on reclaiming the Chinese land. The two fought, and at that night's stop, Barbara volunteered to go with Andrew to an open mic night. His comedy routine was awful and fell flat, because it was derived from such over-used stereotypes about Asians that they were no longer provocative. Knowing that his performance was bad, Andrew was on an even shorter fuse.

Back in New York, Saina and Leo rekindled their relationship. She remained confused about why something major had not happened when Grayson left her. She had always associated national disasters, like the Challenger explosion and Chernobyl, with her own failed love life.

On the way to make their delivery in Alabama, the Wangs stopped to visit Nash, their father's friend, a professor of Chinese Studies. Nash has moved back to his home town to take care of the family plantation, an old cotton plantation that will need to be sold off by the end of the year to pay taxes. Nash invited the Wangs to a family wedding, a low-country affair featuring mudbugs and bourbon, where Charles's worries about Andrew's masculinity come to the forefront. Already upset by Grace and his own comedy performance, Andrew stormed off and found Dorrie, an older cousin of Nash's. Dorrie took him to a surreal cabaret in the French Quarter, where Andrew passed out. He awakened in Dorrie's bed and chose finally to relinquish his long-defended virginity. The next day, he told his family that he was staying with Dorrie.

Meanwhile, Saina received a call from her lawyer, who alerted her that her funds might not have been as safe as they had expected. Her trust was still tied up with Charles's assets, and the banks have frozen all of her money.

When the rest of the family reached Alabama, Charles discovered their detour has been a waste of time. The cosmetics went bad from the heat. Charles wrote the couple a refund check that he knew would bounce and drove off without anything. Following this disappointment, Barbara considered leaving Charles and starting over, but she barely began planning when she realized that she had already given him her heart.

As Barbara decided to stay with Charles, the Mercedes gave up. Spinning off the road, it landed broken and unfixable, leaving the family stranded in North Carolina.

Back in New Orleans, Andrew realized his mistake and left Dorrie to wander through the French Quarter. He found another open mic night, and this time he spoke truly and the audience responded well. On the side of the road, Grace realized she loved life and did not want to die, and that there was beauty in the world beyond superficial style. In New York, Saina understood that her goal was to make people feel something through art. Even though her last show was a failure, it did just that.



The family finally arrived, battered and bruised, at Saina's home. They met Leo and everything seemed to be going well, even though Billy's article appeared at the same time as the family. However, that night Charles received a call about the imposter who has his land in China and he determined to go.

In China, Charles discovered that most of his imaginings had been incorrect. Beijing is a modern city that seemed to exceed even the U.S. Once in his ancestral homeland, the thing he craved most was his childhood foods and experiences in Taiwan. He eventually made his way to the family land and felt a deep sense of connection. He buried the bone fragment from his father and urinated to mark the land as his, but he noticed a large sign that said the land would soon become apartments for city living.

In New York, the siblings tried to figure out a new dynamic in Saina's house. Saina learned that Leo had a child that he did not tell her about. Hurt that he would hide such a large part of his life, she told him to leave just as she received an email that said her father was in the hospital in China.

The children rushed to Beijing. Barbara would come later, her passport having expired. They found their father in and learn that he had a ministroke, something that was not a new occurrence. He had been having the same small strokes that killed his own father but had been hiding them from the children. When he found the man impersonating him--the son of an old family friend--and fought him, he had another, more devastating attack. He sent the children to a dinner in his honor, happy to have them with him. At the dinner, Leo calls Saina and she forgave him, promising to come home to him. But before the dinner was over, the children received news that they needed to come to the hospital immediately.

When they arrived, Barbara was already there with their father. Charles had another stroke. The narrative shifts to Charles's perspective, who was lucid but unable to make his mouth form the words he wanted to say. Finally, he got the three most important words out: Daddy discovered America. The novel ends with him feeling satisfied that he has done this much for his children, but it is not determinant whether Charles himself will survive.



Page 1-28

Summary

This first section of the book introduces Charles, Saina, Grace, and Barbara with separate chapters, each focused through a particular character's perspective. The novel opens with Charles Wang already in financial ruin, and in the first pages, the reader learns that he saw his failures as something tied to him through genetics, or as the continuation of the larger Wang family's misfortunes. He was a cosmetics manufacturer who grew up in Taiwan after the Chinese Communist revolution forced all wealthy land owners to flee, but even in exile, his family owned a manufacturing plant. The Urea, or nitrogen-rich substance, they produced turned out to be a necessary ingredient in high-end cosmetics, and in a matter of time, he made an empire worth \$200 million. Despite his success in America, his focus was always on returning to China and recovering his family's land.

Saina Wang was Charles's oldest daughter. As the novel opens, she found herself living in a farmhouse in upstate New York, where she fled after her art exhibition caused the art world to turn against her. Her father called to tell her that he had lost everything and the family would be coming to live with her. At 26, Saina was old enough for her trust fund to no longer be attached to the rest of the family's wealth, and she was the only one with anything left. She was unable to truly focus on the import of her father's call, however, because her thoughts were still on her ex-fiance, another artist who left her for his pregnant girlfriend after Saina's exhibit was a disaster. Unsure of what to think, Saina was nonetheless willing to be a refuge for her family.

Grace, the youngest, was away at boarding school and did not become aware of the family's financial issues until her tuition went unpaid. She taunted the headmistress, who she called Brownie, even as she began to realize that her life as she knew it was about to end. Back in her dorm room with her roommate Rachel, Grace compared herself to one of the Romanovs, and in a burst of immaturity and anger, she decided to leave all of her expensive clothes behind. As she packed, the only thing she took were the clippings of dead celebrities (including the one of her mother, May Lee). Obsessed with death and suicide, Grace's focus was on appearance rather than substance. She ran a style blog, where she posted pictures of her clothing and believed that at least with suicide, the person got to choose.

Barbara Wang is Charles's second wife, though she met Charles when they were both students at a University in Taiwan. Growing up in poverty, Barbara saw in the younger Charles someone who was going somewhere, but he went off to America and married his beautiful first wife, a third generation model named May Lee, without her. When she learned of May Lee's death, Barbara came to America to get Charles, and though she knew about his constant infidelity, she remained loyal to him. "Money," she thought "made everything easy to indulge" (27). She had no children of her own with Charles, and she did not function as a mother for the children. She battled constantly with Ama,



Charles's wet nurse and the children's nanny, and used her own perfect English to keep Ama in her place. As the novel opens, Barbara was sitting in her beloved dressing room, going through her things, which included the Hermes scarf from the art show that cost Saina her career.

Analysis

In the opening chapters of *The Wangs Vs. the World*, the novel establishes its storytelling style through the short chapters, which revolve through the various characters. In this first section, the Wang family deals with the reality of their new situation. Charles and Saina were both successful in their own careers and have now fallen from grace, Charles because of money and Saina because something has gone wrong with her latest project. Though we do not yet know what happened, the image of Barbara looking at the Hermes scarf foreshadows the problem. Because the chapters are third-person, past tense narratives, all focalized through the perspectives of individual characters, the novel provides a single over-narrative while also allowing the reader to see the events through each character's individual perspective. Just as Charles and Saina serve as foils for one another, both having been brought low in what were once flourishing careers, so do Barbara and Grace serve as foils. Barbara was once a school girl who had nothing, and through her own determination made a life for herself with a successful businessman, while Grace is a school girl who has been given everything, but whose boredom and lack of determination causes her to fixate on dying young and beautiful, rather than building something of worth.

In this opening section, the narrator presents us a clear understanding of who Charles Wang was and what drives him. His focus on the mythic history of his family and of a China he has never experienced for himself was what caused his fall, and much of the remaining book will be a study in revealing the truth about this. As he finds himself penniless and without the status he built for himself, his immediate thought is not that he made a mistake in business, but that he made a mistake in coming to America, a mistake he blames on history itself. "He'd be there, living out his unseen birthright on his family's ancestral acres, a pampered prince in silk robes, writing naughty, brilliant poems, teasing serving girls, collecting tithes from his peasants..."(1). It was not his own fault, therefore, that he found himself without anything, but the fault of a history going back as far as the Communist Revolution. "History had started fucking Charles Wang, and America had finished the job" (2). These opening chapters establish Charles as the opposite of a realist. We know right away that his ancestral homeland is more a dream than anything else, and his fixation on it will not come to any good.

The cosmetics industry plays an important role in Charles Wang's characters and the themes of the book. Made from the Urea his family produces in Taiwan, he built his entire fortune on artifice. Urea is a type of fertilizer, "Faux pee," that Charles used to make products that allow people to change their appearance (3). In this way, his success might be authentic, except that it was built on his family's previous success--and therefore, he was not a rags-to-riches story, and that it was built on an industry of artifice. "Artifice, thought Charles, was the real honesty" (6). A mark of the dark humor in



the book, the cosmetics that make him a millionaire are made from fake urine. Through Charles, the curtain is pulled back for the reader in a move reminiscent of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where pure white paint is made with a drop of black. The pure cosmetics people pay top dollar for contain ingredients they would not otherwise touch, but Charles's position as an outsider in American society allows him to make his mark. While most Americans never bother to look at the fancy soap ingredients, it was his new encounter with a luxury beauty product--something he had not seen in Taiwan--that led him to read the ingredients and see that "the beautiful was made of the grotesque" (6).

Charles's success in American business has not protected his family from discomfort or failure. When the novel opens, Saina is nursing a broken heart, after her artist fiance ran off with the woman who designed her engagement ring. Her Catskills farmhouse is "three generations away from any kind of respectability" and on the edge of a town that has not yet been overrun by the wave of hipsters and gay couples that have gentrified other towns. Her decision to purchase the house is a marked departure from the rest of her life, and at the beginning of the novel, despite being the only one with any financial stability, Saina is the most adrift emotionally.

Grace's lack of understanding of her new situation helps to show the difference between the generations of siblings. She believes that "if her mother were alive, things would be different," (17) and at this point in the novel, the reader does not have any reason to doubt her. Eventually, however, later chapters will reveal that the beautiful May Lee was not the mother Grace imagined her to be.

At the beginning of the novel, Grace may seem like a spoiled, selfish, and difficult character to like in any traditional sense. As a teenager, she does not yet understand how the world works in terms of her family's wealth, and she has a thread of violence running through her (as evidenced when she fantasizes about kicking her roommate in the face) that indicates both her volatility and emotional immaturity. Her character, however, must be seen as a product of the Wang family's excess as a whole: "Grace was raised to know that appearances mattered" (20). Ultimately, the first introduction of Grace helps the reader to understand how helpless she feels. Her fixation on famous suicides and her wall of clippings of famous, young dead celebrities comes in part from her need to feel as though she has some control over her life.

Where Grace sees death as a sort of agency, Barbara is the opposite: she grabs life hard and gets what she wants. In this case, what she wanted was Charles. The novel establishes Barbara as the closest thing as an outside perspective that the reader will get to the Wang family. Though she married Charles when Grace was a baby, and has been married to him for nearly 16 years, Barbara remains distinct from the Wangs. She was born and raised in Taiwan, and as the text tells us, "there was no China in her blood" (23). This declaration is both literal (she has no Chinese ancestry) and figurative, as in, she does not yearn for some mythic China the way Charles does. She will serve as a foil for the family, often providing an outsider's view or context for how the reader might understand how to interpret the Wangs' experiences.



Discussion Question 1

How does Charles's mythic vision of China compare to the reality of his life and experience?

Discussion Question 2

How does Barbara's ambition compare with that of the rest of the Wang family?

Discussion Question 3

Explain how Barbara's experience in coming to America differs from that of Charles.

Vocabulary

ancestral, bastardized, symmetrical, hydrolyzed, grotesque, Han dynasty



Page 29-53

Summary

This section of chapters focuses on departures and endings of the various family members, and in these sections, the narrative will often move between perspectives within a single chapter, unlike in the previous chapters. Charles was unable to explain to Ama about his misfortunes, but when Ama allowed him to have the old Mercedes station wagon he gifted her years before, he understood that she knew what had happened. The next morning, Barbara and Charles left their Bel-Air mansion early in the morning, long before the hired help arrived at their neighbors' homes. As they left, Barbara remembered when Charles told her about his business failings. She referred to his announcement as "the reveal" (31), and the moment he explained everything, she understood that his life had been a series of wrong steps. The stress of speaking about his failures caused Charles's English to falter, and Barbara realized that when she often picked up his broken grammar when he spoke. Charles, however, did not explain everything to Barbara, and in his mind, the house he lost in Bel-Air became equated with the land his family lost in China. He drove away from the house with his eyes closed, so he would not have to see the assessor's car waiting for them to depart. We learn at this point that Charles had been having mini-strokes his family does not know about.

Meanwhile, as Grace prepared to leave from her school in Santa Barbara, she received a call from her brother, Andrew, who did not seem to be very upset about their changes. Andrew, it turned out, was actually with his girl of the moment, Emma Lerner, who was trying to get him to sleep with her. Andrew, however, refused her, because he had decided not to have sex until he was in love. His prudishness was a direct result of watching his father, Charles, have multiple affairs without hiding them. After Emma left, Andrew received a call from Saina before he could call Grace back. Charles revealed to Andrew that his ultimate goal was to return to China, but he did not tell his daughters. Together, Andrew and Saina called Grace to make sure she was okay, and during the call they revealed that all of Charles's children received a talk about their \$7 million trust funds when they turned seventeen. This would eventually cause Grace to believe that the whole trip was a test, to see if she was ready for the talk.

In Helios, Saina took up with Grayson, the fiancé who dumped her for a pregnant jewelry designer, when he appeared on her doorstep. They fell into a heated stream of sex, but Saina decided that she had to get rid of him before her family arrived. Still, she had trouble separating from him because "there was a place in sex that emotion didn't quite reach" (47). Just as she was making up her mind to throw Grayson out, Leo, her current lover, walked in on them, and when he realized what was happening, he walked out of her house and her life. Despite knowing that she should go after Leo and that Grayson was bad news, Saina could not quite make herself leave him. She worried that her talent was somehow a derivative of his star power. But once she had resigned herself to losing Leo, Grayson got a call from Sabrina, the woman pregnant with his



child, and decided that because he was now a father, he had to go. Saina was left alone, without Leo or Grayson.

Analysis

In this section, the reader can appreciate that the Wang's have more than financial troubles to deal with. Each member of the Wang family also seems to be missing some essential part of themselves. These short chapters reveal the insecurities of the various family members. For Saina, she worries that her talent is simply derived by her relationship (or proximity to) Grayson. For Andrew, he struggles against being the womanizer he believes his father to be. He wants love to mean something more than the string of affairs Charles has had. For Grace, she does not understand her place in the world. Without her computer and without her clothes (which she elected to leave behind in an earlier chapter), she is unhinged. She cannot even comprehend how she is supposed to understand her mother's death. The story she tells herself of her mother's death is simple: "She had me. She got into a helicopter" (63). The story, unlike those she tells about the other celebrities on her walls is not even a narrative about death; it is a narrative about abandonment. May Lee, young and beautiful, had a baby and then got into a helicopter. For Grace, her mother could have as easily flown off and never returned as she died. Either way the result is the same, Grace is left behind.

For Grace and for Barbara, May Lee will function as an absent center in the novel. Without memories of her mother, Grace invents a history, much in the same way that Charles invents a history in China for his family. May Lee, like Charles's mythic China, is more perfect and untouchable than the reality of the woman herself. For Barbara, May Lee will always stand in the way of her feeling like an integrated part of the family. She has no way of knowing that Charles could not stand his first wife (a fact the reader will learn later in the novel), and the children, especially Grace, will see her as an interloper.

The emphasis on love and emotional relationships in this section helps to reveal the truth of what the Wangs are missing. True, their money and possessions have been lost, but at the outset of the novel, they seem separated from each other and from themselves as individual people with agency. Despite their wealth, Andrew, Saina, and Grace have not made emotional connections with anyone, except perhaps with each other. Their money and the luxury they were accustomed to living in has not protected them from making decisions out of fear and insecurity. Because these particular chapters often switch between perspectives, the reader is able to see the connections the family might have with each other, even as they are disconnected from the rest of the real world.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of May Lee dying only eight weeks after Grace's birth?



Discussion Question 2

How would you describe the relationship between the siblings?

Discussion Question 3

How does Saina's affair with her ex-fiance help us to understand her insecurity?

Vocabulary

wizened, blemish, scandalous, chaste, sordid, unfazed, gravitational, satellite, allusions



Pages 54-78

Summary

This section of the novel signifies the Wangs on their road trip. From here, chapters that feature the family in the car driving toward Saina's home in Helios, New York also include the mileage from the Bel-Air home. Chapters about Saina do not feature mileage.

As Grace waited for her family to arrive, she learned that the laptop that contained all of her blogging materials was actually school property that had not yet been paid for. Upon realizing she would not be able to take the computer with her, she urgently attempted to download the large picture files before her father arrived. Waiting, she thought of her father, who often expected her to understand allusions to Chinese poetry when she could not speak the language. Charles arrived when the download was only half complete, and when he realized what she was trying to save, he tried to convince the headmaster of the school to accept a mere \$75 for the laptop. When the headmaster attempted to say no, he took the laptop and Grace and ran for it. The absurdity of her father stealing a laptop from her school helped to convince Grace that everything happening to them was some sort of a test for her to get her \$7 million trust fund. As she got into the car, she drove her knees into the back of Barbara's seat, an act of violent defiance, and thought of her mother, who was in a helicopter when Grace was only eight weeks old and died. Ama seemed happy to see her, and Grace marked her place in the car by tacking a picture of her mother, May Lee, onto the Mercedes door.

While Grace's thoughts turned to her mother, the narrative turns to a story about May Lee's death, focused through Charles's perspective. While many people believed that his glamorous first wife died on a mule in the Grand Canyon, the truth was more fantastical: the couple was in a helicopter crash that Charles, miraculously, survived by not having his seat belt latched. This portion of the novel is the first real indication of who May Lee actually was. A third-generation American, she was vapid and only married Charles because she thought her life would be easier that way.

Before the family reached Andrew in Arizona, Charles stopped to pick up a U-Haul, which he would use to break into one of his old warehouses in Vernon, California. His goal was to steal some merchandise he had manufactured for a couple in Opalika, Alabama, (Ellie and Trip Yates) who had a high-end general store. He wanted to deliver the merchandise and get the final payment, a goal that would take the family nearly 400 miles out of their way. The changed locks on the warehouse were further evidence of the state of Charles's businesses. After Grace climbed through the window, he located the merchandise. He insisted on delivering it personally, because "business is all about the personal," but it was more likely that he did not have the funds to ship such a large quantity (73). Charles felt a pride in Grace for helping with the theft, but his perspective in this section also begins to reveal what happened that caused him to send Grace off to boarding school.



The family continued to drive along I-10 East, and everyone talked on their cell phones, which had not yet been turned off, except for Barbara. Through a series of phone conversations written like scripts of a play, the reader learns that Andrew's car had been repossessed. Grace learned that Charles did not warn Andrew about the car, and Barbara began to change how she looked at Charles. When she saw him waver in the face of his daughter's question, Barbara felt maternal toward him. Grace voiced her irritation at having to stop at Ama's daughter's house, and Barbara realized that she thought of Grace as May Lee's daughter (instead of as her own person) sometimes.

Analysis

Throughout this section, the focus on family and language begins to become apparent in the novel. Grace's reflection that her father "always doubted her ability to understand the simplest words and then expected her to get allusions to old Chinese poems and pointless ancient sayings" begins to underscore the complexities of language that the novel will continue to interrogate (55). Chinese, for Charles, is the language of intimacy and intellect. For his children, Chinese serves as a means to an end--they understand simple, everyday phrases, but as this quote shows, they do not understand the nuances that require a deeper understanding of the Chinese culture. The split in their use and understanding of language further illustrates the connections between language and identity, language and culture. Barbara prides herself, earlier in the novel, on speaking English fluently. In his own sections, Charles's perspective is rendered in perfect standardized English. However, when Charles is seen by other characters in the novel--through the gaze of his wife or children, for instance--it is clear that his actual speech is more "broken," as one would expect of an immigrant who came to English later in life. That Charles's chapters are rendered in perfect English, rather than in the English he actually speaks, indicates that he sees himself as much as a part of or product of America as of China.

The explanation of May Lee's death helps to reveal to the reader that Charles's original belief that his failures were somehow pre-ordained by history is upended in this section of the novel. When May Lee died in the crash, Charles was in the process of figuring out how to divorce her. The crash solves this problem for him, and he thinks as he looks down at the fiery wreckage at the base of the canyon, "luck had once again smiled upon Charles Wang" (68). Through mentions of luck beginning with this one, the reader will come to understand that Charles's insistence on the mythic vision of a lost China is one born from his failure rather than one he has necessarily carried his entire life.

Charles's failure and his reaction to it highlights the importance of masculinity in the novel. As he watches his daughter climb through a window at the warehouse, he sees himself for what he is: "Charles could feel himself sagging with middle-aged defeat, a loser who lacked the hot-blooded need to wrestle America to the ground and take her milk money, who never had the balls to flip his father's shame into a triumphant empire, who marched obediently towards death and hid from life and always chose the wrong path" (71). The digression this long thread of thoughts mirrors the transformation in Charles's thinking. From what the reader has learned thus far, it is clear that Charles



Wang did, indeed, have the "balls" to turn his father's fake urine plant into an empire. But here, his one failure subsumes all of his victories. That he equates failure in business with a failure to be "hot-blooded" and aggressive is important, because it underscores the version of masculinity Charles has bought into, and the reader will see in later chapters that this is a version of masculinity that becomes his undoing.

While masculinity is a part of what causes Charles to act irrationally, this section also gives the reader a deeper vision of his character. He is not, as one might expect, a careless businessman, out only for profit. He has invested in the Alabama couple's business, waiving minimum orders and spreading out their payments, because he wanted to feel "that bubbling, champagne-in-the-veins high, that desire to be part of someone else's new life, someone else's realized potential" (73). This is essential to understand, because Charles Wang is more than he appears to be. There is a softer, more emotional and caring side to the character that is in direct contrast to the masculinity he attempts to perform.

Discussion Question 1

How does Charles's vision of himself differ from the picture of Charles that the reader has at this point?

Discussion Question 2

In this section, Charles commits what might be considered theft twice, first with the laptop and then with the products in the warehouse. How do these actions compare with Charles's vision of who he is?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Barbara feel "maternal" when she looks at Charles (72)?

Vocabulary

sartoriphilia, maternal, ecosystem, migratory, acquisition, gargantuan



Page 79-95

Summary

The family arrived in Twentynine Palms, CA, where Ama's daughter Kathy lived with her two grandchildren. Grace was horrified to find the house made of metal, the yard dingy and dried out, and a half-deflated bounce house in the front yard. Grace struggled to figure out Ama's age, and Kathy's. The reader can see through Grace's inability to figure out the other women's ages that Ama must have been very young while she was Charles's wet nurse. Kathy's grandchildren were the product of a mix marriage between Kathy's daughter (who remains unnamed) and a man from the Dominican Republic. Despite their usual disapproval of Chinese marrying outside their own ethnicity, Charles and Barbara both agreed the children are "well mixed" (81). Grace compared this to a time when her father and stepmother called one of her school friends "mixed ugly" (81).

As Grace registered her distaste for the hot dogs Kathy served them, Kathy asked Charles about Ama's car. His answer made Grace aware that Charles would commit a third theft by taking Ama's car from her.

At the moment the reader (and his family) does not believe Charles can fall any farther, the narrative turns to a recounting of the actual events that caused the family fortunes to dry up. "Everything he did, he did with passion; emotions didn't enter into it" (86) the narrator tells the reader, but it was emotion that was the culprit in his fall. Charles's fall was a combination of three things: the banker who impugned Charles's masculinity, the year (2006), when the interest rates were climbing, and a belief that the ethnic cosmetics market were worth \$6 billion dollars. The banker saw Charles's interest in ethnic cosmetics as a social project, as a way to do good in the world. Charles did not see the market in this way, and to prove it, he staked his entire net worth on the venture. In the span of two years, he lost everything because the interest rates plummeted and the banks called in the loans before the Christmas rush. Rather than cutting his losses, Charles doubled down and gave away his personal assets, so when the bank called the loan, he lost everything.

This section ends with a vignette about America as a whole. At the same time Charles was losing his fortune, people all across America were losing homes to foreclosure, retirement accounts to the plummeting interest rates, and businesses to the lack of economy.

Analysis

This section of the novel juxtaposes Charles's personal loss with the larger American landscape. In one sense, this is an intensely personal novel, one built around the minutia of family and the interpersonal relationships between the Wangs. But Chang's examination of the Wang family is a microcosm of what is happening elsewhere in the



country at the same time. Just as Charles bet large on his cosmetics empire, so too were people across the country taking out mortgages they could not truly afford, and when the economic forces that caused the cosmetic market to stumble hit Charles, they also hit the country as a whole. By making the personal analogous with the public, Chang is able to make the large, amorphous banking crisis in the years following 2006 personal. Through the Wangs' stories, we see exactly what that boom and bust of the economy did to a family.

One of the most important aspects of Chang's novel is that she never allows the Wangs to become flat or stereotypical characters. Even when dealing with the racist views about other ethnicities they hold, whether it is Grace's Japanese boyfriend or Chinese people marrying non-Chinese, they are able to acknowledge the beauty of Kathy's grandchildren. Race and racism, therefore, are complex systems within the book, much as they are in real life.

In detailing Charles's mistakes, the novel further explicates the relationship that Charles Wang has with a system of masculinities--both American and Chinese. Women's magazines, Charles believes "were all about feeling something," while men's magazines "were about making money, going places, having sex with beautiful women, and eating rare or bloody things. Passions, not emotions" (86). This fictional split in Charles's mind between passion and emotion leads him to make the financial mistakes that cause his ruin. When he believes the bankers see him as being emotional (trying to do good), his response is to do whatever he can to prove he is basing his projections on business sense (money) rather than emotion. That is, he attempts to prove his legitimacy as a business man. The bankers "made Charles feel like five thousand years of Chinese culture didn't stand up to a few generations of penitent nobodies who thought a single act of tea-soaked rebellion was enough to crown a nation" (89). Here, when his masculine identity is called into question, he reverts to a dependence on his Chinese identity. Even when he sees his foray into ethnic cosmetics might be unsuccessful, that same fear of being seen as wrong, weak, or emasculated causes him to continue on rather than cutting his losses.

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel use the financial crisis of 2008 as a backdrop to the Wang's misfortunes?

Discussion Question 2

Is Charles correct to believe that emotion (as opposed to passion) caused him to lose everything? Based on what the narrative shows us, does Charles correctly understand his own situation?



Discussion Question 3

Why is it important that Kathy was married to someone in the armed forces and that her daughter is also serving the country? What about the time period does this recognition bring into the story?

Vocabulary

flimsy, syndrome, wayward, aftermath, encoded, blithe, mythos, judiciously, riled



Page 96-107

Summary

While the rest of his family was dropping off Ama, Andrew was in his Phoenix dorm room, selecting the five pairs of sneakers and comedy albums he planned to take with him. His last day of college, he attended his economics lecture--on time for once. His professor, an adjunct (part-time instructor) named Kalchefsky, dumped a box of beanie babies onto the table at the front of the room and gave a rant in which he made numerous racist references to China. As the professor lectured, Andrew realized that he would now have to actually work for a living, as opposed to living off his family's wealth.

During the lecture, the professor discussed the American Dream, the delusion of the real estate market, and a Chinese mathematician named David X. Li, who he claimed came up with a formula that financial institutions came to believe would control risk. The professor claimed that the communist government sent Li to America and weaved a conspiracy theory about how China owns 8% of American debt. When Andrew finally had enough, he stood up to protest the professor's theories, which caused the professor to reveal how his own finances were recently ruined. Disgusted, Andrew told the entire lecture hall about his own family's financial ruin and stormed out.

The narrative then moves onto a short, page-long chapter meditating on the financial crisis. In it, the narrative voice, now unmoored from any character tells the reader that it might have been Americans' own "unbridled self-delusion" that caused the economic collapse of 2008.

Analysis

This portion of the novel is the most obvious at linking the Wang's personal misfortunes with the larger issues in the American economy. The narrative has already hinted at the connection, but here, the reader gets from the mouth of an actual economics professor an explanation of the issues the American economy faces. The problem with this, however, is that the professor's own explanation is tinged with racism and anti-Chinese sentiment. Throughout his lecture he makes quips about "we might as well pack up and sell to the Chinese" (97) or how every bond trader who heard about David X. Li was ready to "hop aboard the Orient Express" (103). The connections that the professor draws between the growing Chinese economy, the weakening U.S. economy, and the crisis overall are reminders of the anxiety felt by Americans about their place in the world order. The professor's casual racism in a lecture hall that contains multiple Asian students exposes the depth and breadth of American fear of the other.

The professor himself, however, is being used by the narrative to further comment on the situation of the U.S. economy at this time. An adjunct, or part-time, teacher, the professor has neither job security nor benefits, and most likely is not making a living



wage to teach the lecture hall filled with students. The dependence on adjunct professors in large state universities, especially, rose in years following the financial collapse, when state budgets constricted and university's were forced to balance budgets through hiring decisions. That this professor has lost everything in the collapse is perhaps not the most important thing about his appearance in this novel. Instead, he is the opposite of Andrew in many ways, a person who has ostensibly worked hard to achieve advanced degrees, and still finds himself at the mercy of the market.

Discussion Question 1

What does Andrew's decision about things to keep and take with him tell us about his maturity and who he is as a character?

Discussion Question 2

How does the lecture on banking that Andrew listens to show how ingrained racism is, even in the most educated classes?

Discussion Question 3

Does the narrative think it was simply three mistakes that toppled the U.S. economy? What explanation does it give?

Vocabulary

vaguely, vantage, dolt, phenomenon, likelihood, regulation, subprime



Page 108-128

Summary

Following the narrative's discussion of the causes of the economic downturn of 2008, the novel then turns to Saina, who had been somewhat absent as the story followed the fortunes of the part of the Wang family that was on the road. As Charles, Barbara, and Grace headed toward Andrew to pick him up from school, Saina dealt with the aftermath of her poor decisions about Grayson. She wanted to go to the farmers market, to prepare for her family's arrival, but she was afraid to face Leo, a farmer who brought his wares to the market. As she watched him help his customers, she saw him as tall and sure and wished that Grayson had met that version of Leo. Comparing him to a certain senator from Illinois, Saina critiqued the "Upper West Side transplants," who were buying his organic produce (109). But she stopped herself and realized that it was unfair to make the critique, comparing it to the way her father told her not to trust Indians.

The narrative then turns to Leo, describing him through Saina's perspective. An orphan adopted by a troupe of Borscht Belt comedians and big band leaders at the age of seven, he grew up in an unconventional household.

Eventually Saina decided to say hello to Leo, but when he asked her whether Grayson left because she asked him to or on his own, Saina lied and said that she asked him to leave.

At 28, Saina felt disconnected from the world, especially because she was a single woman in Helios, when most people marry young. She had trouble getting a sense of who she has become, a woman who goes between love affairs and does not have a career of her own any more.

When she arrived home from the farmer's market, she found Billy Al-Alani, a hipster-styled journalist from her art days. Billy came to ask her for an interview, because he wanted to write an expose on her life now. His appearance caused her to remember how she got her start in the art world, first working for Lee Bontecou, her idol, and Cai Guo-Qiang, who exploded things with gun powder. As she tried to get her start, she realized that women were afraid to be "assholes" and she became determined to be an Asshole if it meant being successful. This determination was what got her the first break of her career--a performance piece at the Basel art fair that used cheap jackets made in a Chinese factory with images of her face on the backs. After hiring some young club promoters, Saina was able to plaster the fair with people wearing images of her face, and from there on out, she was a person of interest. Her subsequent art exhibitions were equally spectacle-based in nature. Made in China, See Me/Say You, and the Power Drum song all used bastardized versions of Chinese culture and identity as part of the event. Her fourth show, however, was panned by critics and criticized by feminists and other activists, who accused her of "privileged ignorance" (120). Despite the \$1,200



Hermes scarf produced for the exhibition, the event was a complete failure and ultimately cost her a place in the New York art world.

Staying in upstate New York, Saina came to realize that her art depended on spectacle, which meant that she had not produced any new work during her absence. She was not interested in giving Billy an interview, because she saw herself as "a commodity in his eyes, their connection a stock that had yielded excellent dividends in the past and now promised to pay off even more" (123). She got rid of him, finally, by accusing him of becoming a paparazzo, but as soon as he left, she realized that he could destroy her.

This realization, however, caused a lightness Saina had not expected. As she focused on this new lightness, the radio talked about futures looking good, and she could not help but think about the similarities between art and stocks--both were items that someone imbued with value. In the end, she concluded that finance was even better than art at serving as the "shamanic totems of our time" (125).

After her moment of lightness, the narrative flashes back to the moment she decided to become an artist, an experience with a Morley Safer called, "Yes...But is it Art?" (125). As she considered her experiences in the art world, she arrived at the realization that her goal in making art was to make an audience feel emotion, which she had succeeded in doing--however unintentionally--with her fourth project.

Analysis

In this long chapter about Saina's life and situation, the novel juxtaposes art and finance to show how value is derived from shared beliefs. Like works of art, stocks are nothing more than pieces of paper that someone has assigned a value beyond their material worth. Like art, finance is capricious and unpredictable because its value is derived from the shared beliefs of a community. When a community perceives the housing market to decrease or perceives something to have less value economically, it affects the value of the item.

Saina's experiences, specifically, show just how unpredictable the public's perception can be. Her first art show *Made in China*, commodified the Tiananmen Square Massacre through clothing items. Gallery visitors could try on the clothing in the faux boutique, while being broadcast live to Chinese seamstresses on the other side of the world. In her third show, *Power Drum Song*, she took Chinese artists and paid them to paint her friends like Chinese people. While both of these shows commercialized the very idea of Chinese culture and, in the case of the second show, actual Chinese artists, the public found them revolutionary. However, her fourth show, was protested and critiqued for commodifying the images of women taken in war-torn areas. Saina cannot see a difference between what she has done with Chinese culture and history and what she does with photos of refugees. In her attempt to comment on the way journalism uses its gaze to highlight the most beautiful subjects, commodifying them in order to sell the tragedy, she misstepped. Where it seems to be fine for her to use China, the public decides that the work for her fourth show has no value.



Saina turns away from Billy and refuses to be interviewed because she realizes herself to be a commodity to him, and she does not wish to give him that power. She comes to realize that the things a community decides to call art "can mean everything or nothing, depending on what the people who look at them decide" (125). For the American art community, her work does not have value they wish to recognize. Perhaps this is because she stepped away from critiquing her own ancestry and critiqued the Western journalistic gaze, or perhaps it was because the public did not want to be seen as complicit in the commodification of beautiful refugee women who might have already died. Either way, the group decides value, which leaves Saina and her identity adrift.

Discussion Question 1

Compare Saina's four different exhibitions. Does her fourth show seem any more obscene or offensive than the first three? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How is Saina's identity as an artist tied up in her identity as a woman?

Discussion Question 3

What does Saina's decision to lie to Leo about Grayson's departure mean for the future of their relationship?

Vocabulary

chlorophyll, pickaninny, ghetto, gangly, hipster, interludes, detox, vernissage, frantic, mah-jongg, tete-a-tete, Dadaist, ignoble, spectacle, commodity, shamanic, totem, pandering



Page 129-143

Summary

While Saina experienced an existential crisis about her identity as an artist, Andrew was undergoing something decidedly less intellectual, namely a masturbation session with a packet of ketchup. He was interrupted, however, when his family arrived, and he was forced to wash up and prepare himself for his new identity--that of a son, brother, and middle-child. After greeting Grace, who knew exactly what he had been up to, Andrew climbed into the station wagon with the rest of the family, his eyes shielded by glasses so no one could see his tears. As they drove away, his father criticized him again for wanting to go into comedy, a profession that he knew his father sees as unmanly.

Later at a cheap hotel somewhere in Texas, Grace talked to Andrew, quoting Virginia Woolf as she drank small bottles of liquor. She had realized at some point on the drive that the ordeal she found herself a part of was not some test to get her inheritance. The two siblings talked about sex, and Andrew revealed that he was still a virgin, while Grace revealed that she was not. In this chapter, the narrative perspective switches between the two siblings, and the reader discovers that Andrew believed himself to be the most boring of his siblings. His frustration with himself gave way to anger, and he questioned Grace about her sex life, causing her to be mad at him. The siblings ended sleeping head-to-toe in a bed next to their parents, and despite the cramped quarters, Andrew remained feeling adrift and alone.

The end of this section shifts from the perspective of the children to the perspective of the Mercedes. Once May Lee's, the car was well cared for and barely driven. Now, however, it was in a state of confusion. The car could deal with Charles farting into the upholstery, Grace taping things to the interior door, and Andrew littering the interior with paper, but it could not stand the sight of Barbara, who it saw as an interloper.

Analysis

In this section, the dark comedy of an ill-fated masturbation scene is juxtaposed with Andrew's larger attempt to understand his place in the world now that he can no longer attend college or depend on his family's wealth. That a moment that should be private and could be as personally satisfying and empowering as masturbation is interrupted by his family serves to humiliate him. That his younger sister knows what he was doing makes things worse. This incident is yet another event in a long string of situations where Andrew feels unmanned, starting with Emma's irritation with his refusal to have sex in an earlier section and through to the repossession of his car. When he finds himself talking to his sister and realizing that even his younger sibling has had a more adventurous life than he has, he lashes out. But his attempt to play the stern big brother backfires. Rather than helping him establish his place in the family order, Grace's anger



at what she sees as his shaming her causes her to pull back, leaving Andrew more isolated than before.

Discussion Question 1

What does Charles think of his son's decision to be a standup comic?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Grace and Andrew's relationship.

Discussion Question 3

How does the Mercedes's anger about Barbara serve to further distance her from the Wang family?

Vocabulary

copulate, timeworn, sage-brush, cicada

Pages 144- 172

Summary

Following Andrew and Grace's argument, the story turns back to a focus on Charles. As he drove down I-10 East, Charles listened to his phone messages, most of which were from the wives of his white colleagues who were hoping to receive his continued support for their philanthropies. As he listened, he began to think about the wasteful things he spent his money on. He also received a call from his lawyer, who had been looking into the possibility of reclaiming his family's land in China, but the lawyer informed him that there has already been a Charles Wang who claimed it. The reader realizes from his conversation with Barbara, that Charles had not yet told Barbara about the land. The only family member he had shared his plan with was Andrew, the only other male. When Barbara pushed him to tell her, he exploded at her claiming that because she started poor, she could not understand what he felt.

America, Charles came to believe, was "a great deceptor" (150). Even the holiday of Columbus day was no more than a lie. But Charles had to remind himself not to become too excited, because he was still worried about the mini-strokes. The reader learns here that his father died of one of these same strokes, and that Charles was not there, having delayed his trip to Taiwan 4 times. After arguing with both Barbara over the land and his children over what to eat for lunch, he agreed to allow Andrew to use the car to go do an open mic night when they next stopped.

Although Barbara allowed Charles to take her hand after their argument, she did not remain settled. Instead, she thought back to the day she discovered she shared a birthday with Charles's first wife, May Lee. She had thought they were going out to celebrate her birthday, only to have the children angry that she should come with them to celebrate their mother's birthday. That petulance had only intensified during their relationship, and Barbara conceded that even though fortunes might change, character usually remained constant. Barbara then thought back to the reason she chose the English name Barbara. She had just seen *The Way We Were* and was struck by how Streisand could be both physically ugly, but still had enough grace and self-possession that one did not notice her ugliness until it was pointed out.

Barbara was still angry with Charles and his family by the time they reached the hotel, so she volunteered to go with Andrew to the open mic night. His act went very poorly, because it was little more than jokes about Asian stereotypes that were so common they were no longer even offensive. The audience did not respond positively and Barbara thought to herself that the Chinese word for both ugly and shameful were the same--chou.

Meanwhile in New York, Saina reminisced about her relationships with both Grayson and Leo. As a child, she came to believe that major disasters happened when she got her heart broken. For example, after a boy she had a crush on laughed at her, the



Challenger exploded. She was confused that nothing major happened after Grayson left her.

The narrative then turns to Saina's memory of meeting Leo for the first time, six months before the opening of this novel. She had arrived in Upstate New York, expecting it to be nothing more than "set dressing" for her comeback (164). What she found instead was that she was unable to pull off the play to go with the set--she found wood too difficult to chop and her chickens died before she could harvest their blue eggs. She first met Leo when he was helping his friend Graham open a new restaurant. When Graham went into the back to work, Leo convinced Saina to help set up the space for him, allowing Graham to open much faster than planned.

Back in the family car, the mood was tense and silent as America passed by in a blur of almost surreal landscapes and scenes. When Andrew finally asked what Ama's name was, no one in the car was able to tell him. He called Saina and she did not know either. As the siblings talked on the phone, they learned that Saina had a new boyfriend, and Saina wondered if she had not really built her family a prison rather than a home. Andrew came to wonder suddenly why he had not just stayed at school and worked his way through, as so many other people did, and he also realized that there were parts of the world he had never even considered to explore.

Analysis

This section of the text begins to expose the limitations that Charles's wealth has placed on his children. Saina lived such a charmed existence that she has spent her entire life believing that major disasters in the world were caused by her very own heart break, as though she were the character in some novel of magical realism. Andrew has so depended on his father's wealth and guidance that he never even thought to simply stay at school and find a way to pay for himself. He goes to Arizona State, which is not exactly an Ivy League school, but he is half way across the country before he realizes that he could have taken out loans, got a job, and kept his life the way it was.

The children's weakness is juxtaposed with Barbara's strength here. Again, she serves as an outside perspective, allowing the reader a window into the Wang family through a gaze other than their own familial understanding of one another. While Charles looks at his wife and believes she does not understand because "if you never have anything, you can never lose anything," Barbara knows that her own early life growing up in poverty and struggling to become something has forged her stronger than either Charles or his children (148). Charles sees the land in China as his, despite never actually having it, whereas Barbara understands that the loss of a fortune was not supposed to change character. But what Barbara sees suddenly is how the Wang family wealth has emotionally stunted Charles's children: "The Wang children were so used to getting things that it rarely occurred to them to want anything" (157). This lack of want, or the lack of a drive to go out and make a future happen for them, is in direct contrast with their father and with Barbara herself.



However, it seems that Andrew has found something to want--a career in stand up comedy, but the novel uses Barbara's perspective to expose the weakness of this desire. Andrew is so committed to his dream that he is willing to seek out open mic nights at stand up clubs and to risk taking the stage. Until this point in the novel, the reader might see this drive--to break away from his father's expectations, to have a goal in mind for himself--as positive or noble, but through the perspective of Barbara, the reader comes to understand that Andrew is, in fact, a terrible comic. His jokes are nothing more than offensive stereotypes that belittle Asian culture and his own family. "In Chinese, the word for ugly was *chou*--it was the same word for shameful," (161) Barbara thinks, and Andrew's performance is both. Here, Barbara, the outsider, is able to use Chinese language to unpackage for an English-speaking audience the problem with Andrew's routine. It is not that he is simply offensive, but that he has thrown away what is important. She explains, "the slang for shameful was *diou lian*, which was usually translated to English as 'lose face,' ... as if the bereft had willfully tossed away anything worth finding and keeping" (160). This, to a large extent, is exactly what Andrew has done by belittling his family and his culture in an attempt to create a space for himself as a standup comic. He has thrown away the parts worth keeping, in part, because he has failed to understand them.

Andrew's offensive comedy act mirrors Saina's early art exhibitions (discussed in earlier chapters). Like Saina, he has borrowed only the most obvious and most stereotypical parts of his Chinese culture. Like Saina, he attempts to profit on a stereotypical understanding--or a commodified understanding--of what it means to be Chinese or Chinese-American. Both children, American to their core, use their family culture when it suits them, but in both cases, they use the parts of the history and culture of China or Chinese people that are readable for a largely white audience. For Saina, she takes the Tiananmen Square Massacre, with its emblematic picture of the man right before he is plowed over by a tank, and uses it to create a spectacle. She uses this image with almost no understanding that the man who attempts to stop the tank is part of the very movement that will make it possible for her father to reclaim his ancestor's land. The disconnect between her real family's history and the public version of that history creates a space for the reader to see how even within a family or a culture, history can be misunderstood or misused. With Andrew, he uses the idea of immigrants' inability to speak clear English as a way to bond with a white audience. His dismissal and mocking of the struggle of these immigrants ignores the very real challenges his father must have faced coming to a new country and trying to start a business. Those real personal and historical struggles are erased, or at least ignored, by Charles's children, but through the multiple perspectives it focuses through, the narrative itself allows the reader to understand what is being lost and tossed aside.

The novel uses each character's inability to see him or herself clearly to make a larger point about perspectives and about the complex nature of character. Like Andrew, Saina has been unable to see past her own life, and that inability has stunted her. She recognizes, "we can only ever see the world through our own half-blind eyes, set in our own stupid heads, backed by our own self-obsessed brains" (163). For Saina, it does not make any sense that the world did not simply cease to turn when Grayson left her, but her recognition here reveals a larger point about the structure of this novel. The



Wangs Vs. the World would never work as a single person's story. Instead, it requires the revolving narratives of all of the Wangs, including the almost-outsider Barbara, for the reader to understand the completeness of the family's situation and story.

The narrative's shift at the end of Saina's memory about meeting Leo reminds the reader that the family cannot tell their story themselves--there is always an outside perspective. "That was six months ago. Enough time to fall halfway in love, once. To betray someone, once. To be betrayed, once. And, maybe, to win someone back, once" (166). Here the narrative voice is not focused through Saina's perspective, but as in the chapters where the reader gets short vignettes about America as a whole, the narrative voice serves as a unifying presence, stepping in to tie together the loose strands and create a unity out of the individual threads of the characters' lives.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the relationship between Andrew's standup routine and Saina's art. How do each borrow or steal from their family or cultural past?

Discussion Question 2

How does Barbara's status as an outside within the family add to the reader's understanding of the Wang family's challenges? How would the narrative be different or weaker without Barbara's presence?

Discussion Question 3

How does Leo serve as a foil to Grayson? What does it mean for Saina's character that so much of her focus is devoted to the men and relationships in her life, rather than to her own career or future?

Vocabulary

fishtail, bombarding, reclamation, analogy, inevitably, vanquish, motherland, blithely, ceaseless, surety, witless, aquiline, turbinado, yeshiva



Pages 173-199

Summary

On their way to Alabama, the Wang family stopped at the home of one of Charles Wang's oldest friends in America, a man called Nash, who was a professor of Chinese Studies in California but who had since moved back to his family's home outside of New Orleans to run the family landholdings and try to keep them afloat. Nash invited the Wangs to a family wedding, a casual affair at a bayou shack, where Charles was able to sate himself on crawfish, and his children drank too much bourbon. During the meal, Grace insulted Andrew's masculinity by hinting at his virginity while Charles gave him advice on how to talk to women, driving Andrew away from the family's table.

The narrative then flashes back to the time when Nash met Charles in San Gabriel Valley, California. The two were friends, and Charles knew that Nash was half in love with May Lee, though he did not worry, because "May Lee didn't have enough imagination to leave an increasingly wealthy manufacturer for a poor scholar" (180). The conversation with Nash ultimately circled back to China, and the novel compares Nash's loss of his birthright to Charles's family's loss.

As Charles drank and talked with Nash, his son found his way home with one of Nash's cousins, a woman named Dorrie. She took Andrew to a burlesque show in New Orleans, where he got up on stage to start his comedy routine, only to fall off the stage because he was too drunk. He awakened in Dorrie's bed and in a haze of lust and bourbon, he allowed her to take the virginity he had been holding onto for so long.

The next morning at breakfast, Andrew was missing. He arrived in Dorrie's car and told the family that he was no longer coming with them to New York, but was staying with Dorrie instead. Grace raged at the unfairness of this, because when she tried to run off with a Japanese boy, her father sent her away, but with Andrew, her father simply allowed him to go.

Analysis

This section marks a shift in the Wang family's fortunes during their road trip and foreshadows what lies ahead for the family on their journey. Despite the obvious problems that have acted as an inciting incident for the novel, Charles Wang's family has fallen into line with his plans and everything has gone according to plan. He is able to rent a U-Haul, despite having a credit card that does not work, stolen the cosmetics from his warehouse without incident, taken the blue Mercedes without Kathy stopping him, and has made it half-way across the country without any major malfunction in the 20-year-old car. When he loses Andrew, however, it marks a moment of fracture in the family, and indicates that their apparent cohesiveness may not last until the end of the novel.



The journey into the American South also serves as a comparison, or a foil, to Charles's own losses. For the first half of the novel, he has seen his mythic China as a lost homeland that it is his duty to regain. Nash has faced a similar loss. His family's cotton plantation is being sold off, piece by piece, to keep him afloat financially. His family is not as Charles pictured it, not "white-gloved waiters and polite dancing under moss-draped trees," and idyllic version of the old South that goes with Charles's expectation of "biscuits and black people," but instead is described as "hony-tonk bachanal" (173). Like old China, the genteel nobility of the Old South has been lost forever, because like the China of Charles's imaginings, which is built on the back of peasants, the South was built on the backs of slaves. Nash will have to sell the estate for taxes before the end of the year, and already the evidence of this new South is encroaching, in the plantation-styled condos that are for sale on the outskirts of the property.

Charles disappointment with the South and Nash's loss of his birthright to the march of capitalism and industry foreshadows Charles's own eventual disappointment with China in the final chapters of the novel. Charles's visit to Nash's house should help him to realize that when the material factors of a society change, then there are effects throughout the society. Instead, he keeps himself separate from his friend and pulls his own denial closer. As Nash unloads emotionally about the dearth of culture in American society, Charles thinks, "the key right now was to say something, but not too much of something. Enough for his friend to know that he heard him, but not enough to open the vast floodgates of their twin losses. If the breaking down began, it might never end" (182). This quote indicates that Charles does, indeed, have an inkling about what lies ahead for him, but he pulls his denial around himself and pulls his family deeper into his commitment to recover a past that is forever lost.

The theme of masculinity resurfaces in this section through the character of Andrew, which allows the narrative to make a more compelling argument about the failure of aggression-based masculinity. At the wedding, he is faced with Charles' half-drunk questions about his sexuality and Grace's quip that he "might as well" be gay (177). His masculine identity is under assault from his father, sister, and a random stranger at the wedding. When the stranger sees him more clearly than any of his family and tells them, "The boy is holding out for love! Your son ain't gay, Mr. Wang. It's worse--he's a romantic...and probably a virgin," Andrew feels cornered enough to lash out and call his father on the many affairs he had (178). His decision to go off with Dorrie, a woman much older than him with "crazy blue diamond eyes" and "amazing masses of goldfish red hair like some sort of a fairyqueen" (184) is, in part, a response to remembering bombing on stage in Austin and, in part, a way for him to prove his father and everyone else wrong by becoming like his father. Charles, too, had red-headed mistresses. But Andrew's decision to go with Dorrie is a trip down the proverbial rabbit's hole, where Andrew encounters a surreal cabaret in New Orleans where nothing seems to make sense. Here, he has another attempt at standup, but here, he fails again. Riding on that failure and too much bourbon, he accepts Dorrie's challenge of the handcuffs. In doing so, he accepts his father's version of masculinity and loses himself, as signaled by the divide he feels from Grace at the end of the section. This emotional distance from Grace signals to the reader that his decision to stay with Dorrie will turn out badly, just as his father's decision to defend his masculinity through abrupt and poorly conceived



business deals ended badly. The narrative seems to suggest, then, that this action-oriented, aggressive performance of masculine identity is doomed to failure.

Discussion Question 1

Compare Nash's South with Charles Wang's China. Which man has a clearer sense of what the future has in store?

Discussion Question 2

How might Charles' visit to Nash's plantation estate foreshadow what Charles will find in China when he returns?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Andrew decide to go with Dorrie and allow her to tie him to the bed after being so set in his virginity and on the goal of falling in love?

Vocabulary

corrugated, honky-tonk, vulgar, immersion, begrudge, blackface, plateau, appendages, orifices



Pages 200-229

Summary

After Andrew decided to stay behind in New Orleans, the narrative returns to Saina, who took Leo back into her life and now thought more about her parents' relationship. Love, she realized, was what saved you. All of her life, she had tried to choose a career, but that was all wrong. Her decision to pursue a career came from her mother, May Lee, who did nothing all day but sleep, shop, and wait for her father to return home. Love, Saina realized, could not save her mother because there was nothing to save.

Her morning in bed with Leo, however, was interrupted by a call from her lawyer who informed her that because of some tax issues, Saina's accounts had been tied up with Charles's and had been frozen. Once off the phone with her attorney, she revealed to Leo and her other friends that she was, in fact, rich. No one had realized that she owned her home outright or was worth as much as she was worth. She came to realize that the only thing the Wangs had or could depend on was the farmhouse she owned, a new homeland for them.

As Saina was learning that her money is gone, Charles faced another catastrophe: the products he brought to Opelika had been ruined by the heat. He apologized in shame and wrote the couple a check to refund their deposit, one that he knew would bounce. All that was left of what he had built was the remaining cash from the \$10,000 he had hidden in the house.

With the realization of how far Charles had fallen, Barbara then turned to thinking about whether she would stay. Outside of Atlanta, Georgia, she thought back to her own life and her decision to come to America after hearing of May Lee's death. She stole her parents' life savings to go after Charles, a decision that made them disown her. Despite her success at winning Charles, May Lee was always in Barbara's mind, and in death she "became the entire country," a force that Barbara could not win against (222).

Through Barbara's perspective, the reader learns more about Charles and his children. He was not the self-made man he believed himself to be, but was instead the son of an industrialist in Taiwan, someone "born on third" (223). She saw herself as the true self-made person, who carved a life out of nothing, and briefly considered leaving them all and starting again. However, she took one look at herself wearing Charles's lipstick and realized she had already given her heart to Charles and there was no way to take it back.

This section of narrative ended with the failure of the Mercedes. The narrative shifts to the perspective of the Mercedes, and the reader sees the moment when its material existence had become too much to bear, and it literally gave up. The accident threw the car from the road, and the section ends with the clear understanding that somewhere in North Carolina, the car was done.



Analysis

The novel juxtaposes Saina's loss of her money and Leo's discovery of her wealth with Barbara's discovery of her love for Charles. These sections examine the combination of love and wealth, desire and the drive for more money and luxury. Saina has only ever seen herself as wealthy, while Leo has never considered her wealth, even though he knew about her career as an artist. No one in her upstate New York life, it seems, has seen her as wealthy. Her revelation that she may no longer be wealthy is seen by Leo, at first, as a betrayal--that she kept the truth of herself and her life from him is another indication that she has never been as serious about the relationship as he has been. However, he comes to realize that the Saina of New York City, darling of the art world, might have been identified by and with her wealth, the Saina that he met in Helios had already distanced herself from what that wealth meant. No amount of money, for instance, could bring her frozen chickens back to life or make firewood any easier to chop (see earlier chapters). Barbara, on the other hand, believed in Charles because of his money. When it is stripped away, she must make a choice about whether to stay or leave, but even as she ridicules makeup, the thing Charles dedicated his life to, as "so ephemeral" (225), it is a tube of his lipstick that makes her realize how much she has already given her heart to him.

This section, then, seems to interrogate the relationship between money, identity, and love, but just as the novel seems to suggest that the financial losses of the Wang family are minuscule in the face of the love they claim for each other, the narrative refuses to allow the reader any comfort. In the same moment Barbara realizes that her relationship with Charles is about more than his wealth, the car--one of their last possessions--gives up. That we see this through the car's own perspective is important, because it becomes more than simple bad luck, or a plot contrivance to throw more pain at the Wang's. Instead, because the car is lucid and we have its perspective, we see the moment when it can no longer deal with the ignominy of being forced to go on a family road trip. This moment is the same moment when Barbara realizes she loves Charles. Barbara, the second wife and interloper in the car's view, leans towards Charles, and the Mercedes sees it as "an obscenity. Flesh and blood might be different from metal and glass, but this was a display as brazen as a twenty-four-karat-gold gearshift" (227). The car swerves in anger, and only tries to right itself when it realizes Grace, who it still loves, is in the backseat. The car's death becomes not something that simply happened to the Wangs, but a conscious choice on the part of the car to punish Charles for his choice in Barbara. The car, which is the consummate symbol of everything that Charles once had and worked for, a material mark of wealth and status, reacts against love and in doing so, leaves the family that it once loved stranded.

Discussion Question 1

Why does the Mercedes seem to detest Barbara so much?



Discussion Question 2

Why is it important that it is lipstick from Charles's ethnic makeup line that brings Barbara back to him?

Discussion Question 3

Compare Barbara's journey to wealth with that of Charles and his children. How does her agency and choices reflect who she is as a character? How do her choices (to abandon her own family, for instance) relate to Charles's decisions in business and life?

Vocabulary

propaganda, jaunty, mottling, minstrel show, outsized, ephemeral, obscenity, withered



Page 230-257

Summary

As the Wang's car spun out somewhere on a highway in the South, Saina was on her way to her first public appearance since the press and art world turned against her--a speech at Bard College's final MFA show. Leo accompanied her on the trip and told her a story about how his adopted family probably sold the only picture he had of his mother. This struck Saina as sad, because while Leo seemed so alone, she always felt part of China itself, the country with "a billion potential family members" and centuries of Wang bloodlines (232). In a fit of inspiration, they had sex on the side of the road, and Saina asked Leo if they should have a baby together, a question that made Leo withdraw. Feeling bereft after Leo pulled away from her, Saina nearly fumbled her speech and instead gave a two-line statement after nearly 15 minutes of silence, which the school director saw as a brilliant performance piece. At the gallery show, Leo remained withdrawn and the two seemed at odds, though Saina was not sure why. But she began to wonder if maybe the future she saw with herself and Leo was not an illusion.

Meanwhile in New Orleans, Andrew surfaced from his drunken haze to realize that Dorrie was not as mentally stable as he had originally imagined and that his decision to leave his family was a bad one. After leaving her home, he wandered around the French Quarter, disappointed in everything he found. Finally, he found an open mic night where he put aside his usual, tired jokes about Asian-ness and talked to the audience instead about the truth he was living through. In doing so, he discovered that it was not applause or laughter he had craved all along, but honesty.

Analysis

In this section, the novel uses Saina and Andrew's concurrent epiphanies about art and honesty to indicate that there is a possible way forward for the family and to begin the business of reclaiming the power of art. Throughout the novel, art has stood in as a commodity. For Andrew, it was the dream of easy fame and fortune on the comedy circuit. For Saina, it was giving up her original work with miniatures for the overproduced spectacle that created her fame. For both siblings, a moment comes when they drop their artifice and posturing and speak truly to their audiences. Saina realizes that she has very little to say except, "if you're going to be artists, then you have to ask yourselves, do you rebuild the world or do you destroy it? That is the question" (235). It is a question that she has resisted wrestling with throughout her career, turning instead to being difficult to get her way. But she comes to see her vision of a future with Leo as a way to rebuild the world, as is her dedication to giving her family a home and a homeland. For Andrew, he puts aside the stereotypes that have become so overused they no longer even register as being uncomfortable to an audience, and he speaks directly to his own experience, an experience strangely enough shared by many people



in the audience. For Andrew, he comes to understand that the only thing that matters is "the connection you make with another person" (257). The moment he actually sees his audience, he connects with them and can make art of value.

All of this is in contrast to the world Charles Wang built, which was an empire based not on connection but on posturing and distance. Or rather, Charles might have started with the idea of connection, as we see with his willingness and excitement to help the Alabama couple, but when the connection break down and he builds up walls around himself, everything falls apart. It should be noted that the idea of building connections and deep relationships is often viewed as a feminine endeavor. It is directly at odds with a version of masculinity that revolves around aggression. The moment these characters allow themselves to become vulnerable--to audiences, to their partners, to each other--is the moment that they are at greatest risk, but it is also the moment with the most possibility for growth.

Discussion Question 1

Does Saina's identification with China and the billion Chinese that populate her family tree surprise you at this point? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Andrew seems disappointed with the authenticity of most of New Orleans, commenting that even the beignets at Disney were better than the ones he ate there. How does this disappointment relate to Charles Wang's disappointment with America and his situation?

Discussion Question 3

How is Andrew different from his sisters and the rest of his family?

Vocabulary

vintage, sentimental, domesticity, empathetic, luxurious, swaths, imperceptibly, catapulted



Page 258-267

Summary

While her siblings have their epiphanies about truth and art and human connections, Grace recovered from the car accident that totaled the Mercedes. As she sat on the side of the road, she was forced to deal with an EMT who offered her a blanket in an attempt to flirt with her, even though it was clear she was underage. When he asked, "Where are you from?" - a common question many Asian-Americans dealt with on a regular basis, she shut down completely and dismissed him. Despite the pain the EMT caused, Grace came to realize she was happy to be alive. She began to see beauty in things that she would not have considered beautiful before. She understood the same thing Andrew and Saina comprehended--that connections were important--and began to make calls, leaving voicemails and messages to people she had broken contact from, attempting to repair relationships.

Analysis

Throughout the novel, Grace is focused on aesthetic beauty and the idea of style for style's sake, but the accident becomes a moment of awakening for her. From her blog to her distaste for Kathy's home (in an earlier chapter), anything that is not conventionally stylish or beautiful is not considered worthy. The accident literally and figuratively shakes her loose from this mode of thinking. Part of this way of thinking came from her understanding of her mother, May Lee, as a static image in a fashion magazine. Not knowing the woman, Grace could only aspire to the surface beauty, and because her mother had died young (and still beautiful), Grace has been fixated on the idea of an early death that she can control. The accident takes all of that from her. She had no control over the car, and because her life was almost ended by the crash, she suddenly understands that she wants to live: "They weren't dead and they didn't want to be!" (261).

In the moments after the crash, her vision is adjusted. Beauty is no longer something that is merely polished or arranged, but comes instead from within. She sees her father, "his chin wobbled and new patches of gray hair glinted in the moonlight. He was old, but he was alive, and in the unflattering angle there was something unashamed about him. He looked almost beautiful" (261). This new beauty and new understanding of what can be beautiful relates specifically to her siblings' realization about honesty. Charles Wang is, at his heart, unwilling to be shamed. Even in the face of massive professional failure, he fulfills his role as head of the family, and the moment Grace can recognize this, she realizes that growing old or dying will happen and that "loving too hard was the only option" (263). In this moment of epiphany, Grace reaches out and hugs Barbara, the woman that could have been a mother to her, if Grace had allowed it. And once she can accept Barbara, she can begin to repair other relationships.



It should be noted that these epiphanies can only happen with material wealth stripped away from the family. As long as they have some belief that their lives will go on as usual, there is no motivation for change. But for each of the children, coming to accept a new reality means accepting the possibilities of that new reality as well, and it also represents the possibilities for growth. Charles Wang, with his dream of reclaiming his family's land in China, has not yet relinquished the old life, and is not yet able to move on.

Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the question the EMT asks Grace?

Discussion Question 2

How does the accident redefine the idea of beauty for Grace?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the accident allow Grace to feel more connected to the world and her family? Is this the simple result of trauma, or is the novel suggesting something deeper about personal development and connections?

Vocabulary

sulfurous, feathering, moire effect, en masse, mired, ripple, encompassed



Page 269-285

Summary

The novel marks the arrival of the Wang family in Helios, New York by adding the mileage 3,561 to the usual chapter heading. Although we begin with Saina, the reader knows immediately that this is the chapter of their arrival.

Once the introductions are made, Saina realized that Billy's article had arrived. The article she had worried about turned out to be a fluff piece that did not get to the heart of her at all, a narrative written by a paparazzo, just as she'd accused him of being. But with her family there, the article barely touched her.

That night, Barbara dreamed of being in China, her feet bound in tiny satin slippers, and awoke to Charles on the phone with his lawyer. He confessed to Barbara that he remembered her from Taiwan all along, but that he must go to China to see who was impersonating him. When the children awaken the next morning, Charles was already gone, leaving his children nothing more than an email as a goodbye.

Analysis

The novel has had as its goal a road trip to bring the family from California to New York, a reverse migration as the Wangs re-discover America and reclaim the East. But when they arrive, it becomes clear that Charles's trip is not over. Unlike his children, he has not found a sense of connection or identity within his own family and situation, because he remains fixated on the myth of a China that may have never existed. He continues his journey east, taking the longest way possible to get from California to China, a decision that seems at this point utterly ridiculous. He could have simply sent his wife and children on to New York and taken a flight from LA to Beijing, but part of the novel's point is the importance of the journey itself. The absurdity of Charles's journey is essential to understanding the absurdity of his refusal to relinquish the ever-increasing dream of what China has in store.

The opposite is true for Saina, however. While she has spent the entire novel waiting for her family and worrying about who she is, their arrival allows her to settle into herself more completely. The article Billy wrote, a tawdry fluff piece that reads like the work of a paparazzo cannot touch her with both Leo and her family around her. The connections that she has formed, the understanding that her self is linked to this authentic family rather than the performance of being the young, fashionable artist, allows her to accept the piece without it harming her.

But Charles's departure is foreshadowed by Barbara's dream. In the dream, she is on a roller-coaster of a highway and tries to reach for the break of the driverless car with her foot, but her foot is bound in the style of old China, a "tiny, bound hoof stuffed inside a beautiful embroidered slipper, royal blue, just a toe's length too short to stop the car"



(274). The image of her foot bound by Chinese custom should indicate to the reader that Charles's desire to continue pursuing his dream of China will end badly. They are, figuratively speaking, in a runaway car, and China cannot give Barbara what she needs to save them.

Discussion Question 1

Why is it important that Billy's article arrive at the same time as Saina's family?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Barbara's dream and how it parallels and differs from the family's actual roadtrip.

Discussion Question 3

How does the family respond to Leo? Does this surprise or upset Saina's expectations?

Vocabulary

vulnerabilities, flamboyant, impetuous, precise, socialite, residencies, psychic, patricide, quivering



Pages 286-308

Summary

When Charles Wang arrived in China, he was met with a country that astounded him. The China of his dreams was a pastoral place, filled with green fields and peasants, but the China he found was an utterly modern and advanced civilization. To his dismay, he came to realize the things he craved most were not of China, but of his Taiwanese childhood. Despite his disappointment with Beijing, when he arrived at his family's land, he felt a sense of belonging that he could not dismiss. He climbed to the top of the ridge to survey the property, and there he buried the bone fragment of his father that he had been carrying since the cremation. As soon as he buried the bone, however, he noticed a billboard, advertising the apartment complex that will soon be built on the land.

Meanwhile, Andrew began to make his way from New Orleans to New York by bus, and Saina attempted to register Grace for public high school. Leo confessed to Saina that the reason he was distant when she asked about having a baby with him was that he already had a daughter, which he'd kept hidden from her. With her relationship crumbling in front of her, Saina received an email from their father in China that upset her.

Analysis

The entire novel, or at least Charles's portions of it, have been building to the moment when he finally makes it to his family's land and reclaims his Chinese inheritance. It should not be surprising, in so darkly comic a novel, that nothing goes as planned. China is not what Charles has expected. "China had leapt past him and the America he'd so naively thought was the Wang family's future" (286). The realization that his family had given up and left too easily shakes him, but the experience of Beijing, the smoggy industrialized city that it has become, is surreal to him. "How had all these peasants transformed themselves?" he wonders, as he sees a city filled with successful Chinese (290). But what is most unsettling to Charles is that the China represented by Beijing does not call to him. "As much as he'd left Taiwan because it was not China, would never be China, he'd come to China expecting to find the Taiwan of his youth" (291). These disappointments and unmet expectations piled atop one another help the novel to interrogate the idea of place and nationality, heritage and inheritance. For all that he made of Barbara not truly being Chinese, he himself was very much part of Taiwan. As the reader should have expected, his idea of a mythic China waiting for his greatness to save it will never come to pass.

Despite his disappointments, there is something about being in China that is a comfort to Charles. "What did it matter how a country full of white people saw them when the whole world was theirs?" he wonders as he watches the swirl of humanity on the public



transportation (294). Even if China was not what he expected, it still remains bigger and more promising than the America he had once believed in.

When he finally reaches the land that had once belonged to his family, all of Charles's expectations seem to be rewarded. "I know this place. This place is mind," he thinks as he looks at the sprawling acres (297). The irony, however is that the land is not his. It has been claimed and sold away already by an imposter, and the pastoral vista that so speaks to his very sense of self will eventually be plowed under to make way for apartments. Just as Nash's plantation was sold off to build condos, so too was the family land in China. The truth is, even if Charles is able to claim it, the cities of China are no longer filled with peasants willing to work the land for him. The world has changed around him, leaving his dream behind.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Leo keep his daughter a secret?

Discussion Question 2

What is the connection between Nash's plantation in New Orleans and the land Charles finally finds in China? How does the book use this connection to develop meaning?

Discussion Question 3

How does Grace adjust to being enrolled in school in New York?

Vocabulary

hyperintelligent, linoleum, recalibrating, ineffectual, genealogy, dwindling, haphazard



309-351

Summary

After they received their father's email message, the Wang children all left for Beijing. Barbara's passport was expired, so she was forced to wait and come later. Andrew met his siblings in the airport in Beijing. The entire time, Saina continued to check her phone, reading the many desperate voicemail messages Leo had sent her during the long flight. She also received a long, ardent love letter via email from Grayson that she decided to ignore. An assistant set up by Saina's gallery takes them to Gaofu, China, where her father was.

At first the hospital would not allow the children to see Charles, because they arrived outside of visiting hours. As they sat in the hospital Grace and Andrew marveled at seeing Chinese janitors, something they never saw in the states. Charles was glad to see them, and explained that the man in the bed next to him was an old family friend who had decided to pretend he was Charles to claim the land. Charles beat him up, but suffered a ministroke in the process.

Meanwhile, back in Helios, New York, Barbara's preparations to leave and join the rest of the Wangs are interrupted by Leo's unannounced visit. She told him to get Saina back, he should come with her, but she knew he will not go.

In China, the Wang siblings are forced to attend a large dinner with relatives they'd never met, which turned out to be a type of state affair, overly formal and with unending amounts of food. During the dinner, Leo called and Saina talked to him, forgiving him for lying to her by hiding his child when he tells her that together they are home.

The dinner was interrupted by Saina's assistant, who told them the hospital had called and they needed to go immediately.

Arriving at the hospital, the Wangs discovered that Barbara had already arrived and that their father had suffered another larger and more devastating stroke. The final section of the book shifts from the children to Charles's perspective as he drifted in and out of lucidity and consciousness. With his children around him, Charles felt there was something he needed to tell them, some discovery that he had made through his enormous love for them. He felt as though his heart and brain had been somehow switched, and his final words were "Daddy discovered America!" (251). The novel ends with Charles satisfied with this discovery. His recovery remains uncertain, because his children are not given a perspective, but the narrative as a whole comes full circle with his statement and recognition of America, a country that had become just as much a part of him as the China he never knew.



Analysis

The final chapters of the book are a whirling rush to the unsettling and open-ended finish. Just as Charles Wang has found himself in China and has found the China he had hoped to recover, just as his children are all together, everything comes tumbling down because of the ministrokes that have worried him throughout the narrative.

The Wang children's experience of China is much what the reader might expect from thoroughly Americanized children who have had no real desire to retrace their Chinese roots. This China is not so different from America, as the first thing Andrew finds is the Chinese equivalent of a Panda Express. When the siblings are forced to go to a large dinner in their father's place, the overwhelming amount of food seems almost strangely synonymous with America's own gluttony. "These men wanted to consume everything," Grace thinks as she watches the fourteenth course come out (341). Despite its communist government and revolutionary past, this China has become a replica of American consumption and over-brashness.

Charles's final pronouncement, that "Daddy discovered America!" (351) is almost absurd and is at the very least difficult to digest after such a long, winding journey across that very country. The novel does not give any indication about what, exactly, Charles means at this point. Even Charles himself knows he is not talking sense: "his thoughts were lucid, but it is a struggle to form words and force them out. They push against each other, each word a fat and slippery thing, until only the important ones remain" (351).

It is important to note here that the narrative perspective shifts. All along, the narrative has focused through individual characters in the past tense, but at the moment of Charles's health crisis (and implied eventual death) it shifts to present-tense. While Charles has spent the entire novel looking backward--back toward his failures and his family's past--in this final moment, Charles is completely aware of the present. His final pronouncement, then, becomes a way for him (and his family with him) to find themselves and to move forward in the world, a world that might not have Charles Wang in it.

Discussion Question 1

What do Charles's final words mean?

Discussion Question 2

How do the children's experiences in China reflect their understanding of themselves as Americans and as Chinese?



Discussion Question 3

What does Saina's acceptance of of Leo's apology mean for her, and her family's future?

Vocabulary

metallic, tang, circumvent, weathered, treacherous, humble



Characters

Charles Wang (Wang Da Quian)

Charles Wang is a Chinese immigrant who was raised in Taiwan after the communist revolution in China took away the privately held land from the Chinese Aristocracy. In Taiwan, his father owned a small Urea factory, which manufactured the nitrogen-carrying ammonia substitute used in fertilizers. Rather than see his father's success at rebuilding the family fortunes after losing their land, Charles sees nothing but shame in his family going from ruling over acres of fertile Chinese land to operating what he calls a "faux piss" factory (4). Going against his father's wishes for him to become a Taiwanese statesman, Charles drops out of university and flies to America, where he realizes that the cosmetic soaps use the same Urea his family produces. In a matter of years, he builds a cosmetics empire worth more than \$200 million. He marries a beautiful Chinese-American model, May Lee, and has three children with her: Saina, Andrew, and Grace. When Grace is a few months old, May Lee dies in a helicopter crash and Charles marries Barbara, a woman he knew in Taiwan.

Charles believes in the greatness of China, even though he has no real memories of his homeland. For him, China becomes a mythic place where true greatness lies, and despite his own immense success, his dream is to return to China and reclaim his family's homeland. Charles's weakness is his belief in this mythic ideal of China and his dependence on a traditional masculinity embodied by strength. He wants nothing more than to be the "king" that his family name stands for, and he is often easily goaded into making poor choices if he feels his masculinity has been questioned. Although he is married, it is well known (even to his son) that he has numerous affairs on the side, but he is also dedicated family man, who loves his children deeply. This love combined with his insistence on performing the role of traditional Chinese father often puts him at odds with his children. He does not understand his son, Andrew, or his son's desire to become a stand-up comic, and when his youngest daughter, Grace, starts a relationship with a Japanese boy, Charles reacts by sending her away to boarding school.

Through the entire story, Charles worries about the small strokes he has been having. His own father died of a similar illness, but he does not tell his children or wife about them, in an attempt to remain the strong patriarch he sees himself as.

Charles is a complicated character, pulled between two worlds. He loves his children and family, but cheats on his wives. He is dedicated to his Ama, the woman who was his wet nurse and who has cared for him and his family, but never bothers to learn her name. He is a smart, cunning, and successful businessman, but allows himself to be goaded into signing away his personal possessions and income as collateral on a loan when the bankers are reluctant to fund his new cosmetics line. He sees himself as fully Chinese, but as the story progresses, it becomes clear to the reader exactly how much his character has been built from America. When he does finally return to China at the end of the novel, he is disappointed in it because it is not the Taiwan of his youth.



Saina Wang

Saina is Charles Wang's oldest daughter. As the novel opens, she is living in a restored farmhouse in Helios, New York, a small farming village upstate. She moved to Helios after her career and personal life in New York City fell apart. She is the type of person who shops at the local farmer's market with a Gucci bag, but she is also fiercely loyal to her family. When her father announces that they are all traveling cross-country to live with her, she does not even blink. She simply accepts their arrival and prepares to give the Wangs a new home.

Once, she was a renowned up-and-coming artist, who managed to build an entire mythos around herself. When her original artistic projects--small miniatures--did not get any attention, she realized that the most successful artists were "assholes," and decided that she was willing to do that as well if it meant success. To launch her career, she passed out cheap jackets with her image and name on them to the homeless around a major art convention, which generated enough interest in who she was (rather than the art she did) that she became an instant phenomenon. After this, she gave up her work with miniatures and instead focused on conceptual performance art, often related in some way to her identity as a Chinese-American. But the link to her ancestry was always specious at best. For instance, she herself did not know how to do Chinese calligraphy, so she hired other artists to do the calligraphy for one of her exhibits.

She has two extraordinarily successful art exhibitions, but her third ruins her career. In it, she photoshops the beautiful women and children out of photographs of war and disasters and places them as commodities in new images. She was not prepared for the backlash this exhibit received, and even as she hides away in upstate New York, she does not understand how or why this particular project was any different or more offensive than her earlier projects.

When the art world and general public turns against her, Saina's fiancé, another artist, reveals that he is leaving her, because he got another woman pregnant. The combined disasters of her professional reputation crumbling and her personal life also falling apart causes her to make the rash decision to sell her New York loft and buy a farmhouse in Helios. She has a plan to renew herself and career there, living a rural life where the color of the chicken eggs matches the bright blue of the shutters. It is not long, however, before she discovers firewood is difficult to chop and baby chickens will die in the cold spring nights.

She gives up on that plan, but does not leave Helios. Instead, she meets an African American man, Leo, who is a local farmer. She has a strong and stable relationship with him, until her ex-fiancé, Grayson, comes back into town and Leo finds her in bed with him. Weeks later, just as she is about to kick him out, her ex announces that his girlfriend has had a baby, and he has to leave. Abandoned again, Saina turns back to Leo, and lies when he asks if Grayson wanted to stay.

Like all of Charles Wang's children, Saina has grown up in a life of unending luxury. She is the only one whose \$7 million trust fund is separate from Wang's other holdings--or



so they all believe. Throughout the novel, she has to come to terms with the person she has become, with her understanding of art vs. life, and with how to be the type of person Leo would want to build a life with. Her journey is as much about discarding the shallow artifice of the art world as it is rebuilding herself as the safe-harbor for her own family.

Andrew Wang

Andrew Wang is the middle child of the Wang family and the only boy. His father's only son, Andrew is a constant disappointment, especially because his dream is to become a standup comic, an occupation Charles Wang cannot begin to understand.

Like his siblings, Andrew is accustomed to luxury. When his father tells him that the family fortunes are lost, rather than stay at Arizona State and work his way through school, Andrew allows himself to be picked up and taken along on the family road trip. Even after his car is repossessed, he decides to save his large collection of athletic shoes and comedy albums rather than thinking more practically.

Unlike his father, Andrew sees himself as a romantic. He refuses to have sex with his current girlfriend, because he does not believe himself to be in love with her. He sees his reluctance to have sex with random girls as rebelling against his father's promiscuity. His desire to become a comic stems from his memories of making his mother, May Lee, an often distant and emotionless woman, laugh.

He decides to use the Wang's trip across the country to try out his comedy at the many open mic nights he finds along the way. The reader soon sees that his comedy is not good. He relies on tired and offensive Asian stereotypes to try to make the audience laugh, but in this America, they are no longer edgy and interesting. Instead, they are boring and overused tropes that the audiences are not interested in. Andrew, however, does not seem to see this or understand that he is not exactly a talented comic.

Throughout the novel, Andrew struggles with the idea of love and being in love. However, when his family stops in Louisiana to visit his father's friend and attend a wedding, he allows himself to be carried off by a combination of too much bourbon and Dorrie, a woman in her late thirties. All of his commitment to save his virginity for love goes out the window after she ties him to her bed. Deciding that this is love, he tells his family that he is staying with her and will not continue on their cross-country pilgrimage to Saina's home.

He realizes his mistake not long after, but rather than allowing Saina to save him with a plane ticket, he forces himself to take on the penance of a Greyhound bus trip from New Orleans to New York.

Grace Wang

Sixteen-year-old Grace Wang is the youngest child of the Wang family. She is the last of May Lee's children, but she is the only one who does not remember anything about her



mother, since May Lee died just months after she was born. Barbara, Charles's second wife, might have been a mother to her, but she is always just Barbara. Because Grace has no memory of her mother, she does not know that May Lee was a distant and vapid woman. She only sees the beautiful woman in the magazine clippings that she keeps pinned to the wall of her dorm room and (after she is on the trip with her family) to the inside of the car.

Grace curates a style blog with thousands of followers, and even Saina recognizes her talent with styling clothes and through photography. Her whole project is a single image to capture a moment. She is not interested in re-taking the picture multiple times. Grace is also somewhat obsessed with famous suicides at the beginning of the novel. Many of the people she has images of on her wall are women who took their own lives while they were young. Her roommate worries about her obsession with suicides, but Grace brushes it off, even though deep down she wonders if it is not better to die young and beautiful--perfectly preserved as her mother was--than to continue existing.

At first, Grace does not believe that her father has lost everything. When Andrew tells her that they are going to Saina's because Saina is the only one old enough to have her trust fund separate from the rest, and that each of them got "the talk" when they were 17, Grace comes to believe that the ordeal is only a test to see if she is worthy of her own trust fund. When she sees her father basically take back, or steal, the car he had gifted to Ama in order for them to continue their trip, she realizes that it is not a test and that this new existence without money or luxury is her real life.

Grace comes to realize that she has no interest in suicide and that her life is good--and she wants to live it--when the family is in a car accident in North Carolina. After their ancient Mercedes spins out and is totaled, Grace understands that she does not want to be dead, that there is beauty in the world beyond the stylings of clothes, and that she is going to be okay.

Shallow as she might seem at the beginning of the novel, Grace consistently reveals greater depths and intelligence in her use of quotes from great writers, such as Woolf, Tennyson, and Emerson. She does not use these quotes as decoration, however. Instead, she seems to have a clear understanding of how they apply to the moment and to her own life.

Barbara (Hu Yue Ling)

Barbara Wang is Charles Wang's second wife, but she always wanted to be his first. The two met when he was a student at the National University in Taiwan and she was living in a single room on campus with her parents, who were cooks in the dining hall. She saw in Charles Wang someone who would make something of himself, and she believed that they were meant to be together, so when he up and left for America, and then she received word that he had married a beautiful model, it was a devastating blow to her.



Barbara knows that she is not as beautiful as May Lee is, and she is aware that she is perhaps not beautiful at all. She chose her American name from Barbara Streisand, a woman who was not beautiful, but who was strong and self-assured enough that people forgot about her lack of beauty.

When Barbara hears that Charles's first wife died in an accident, she steals her parents' life savings from the can they keep it in and goes to America to get him back. Her plan works, and soon she is living a life of luxury--enough that she pays her parents back tenfold. They return the payments, however, with a note that they have no daughter. If this news hurts Barbara, the reader never sees it. Instead, she forges forward, making a life for herself next to Charles despite the children who see her as an interloper and Charles's own infidelity.

She sees herself clearly and understands that she has married Charles for his money. She sees Charles not as the self-made man he sees himself as, but as someone who was already born with advantages, because of his father's manufacturing plant. She understands exactly how soft his children are, because she herself grew up in actual poverty. However, despite knowing that she has married Charles for money and security, she understands that she loves him as well. There is a moment on their road trip where she thinks about leaving him, because he has become weak and because he can no longer provide her with the life she married him for, but in the end, she knows she will never leave because she has already given him her heart.

Ama

Ama is the nameless nanny that raises Charles and his children. She worked for Charles's family, a clear indication that he came from some wealth, when he was a baby, and when he had children of his own, he brought her from Taiwan to raise them as well.

When Charles loses the family fortunes, Ama can no longer stay with them. She will go to live with her daughter, Kathy, in a mobile home in the desert. Unlike Charles Wang's children, she detests her own daughter who is far too American and is, as she sees it, a disappointment. The story makes clear, however, that Ama's judgement of Kathy is unfair: Kathy is a military wife who has kept her family together and is now raising her grandchildren while their own mother (Kathy's daughter) is in the military.

Though the Wang family professes to love Ama, none of them know her actual given name. Grace, whose Chinese is limited, actually believes Ama is her name, rather than a title. When they discard Ama in the desert with her daughter, the Wang's take the one gift they gave her--the ancient Mercedes that had once belonged to May Lee.

The Mercedes

While it may seem strange to think of a car as a character, in Chang's novel, the car has its own chapters and its own personality. Loyal to May Lee, it dislikes "the Barbara," who



it sees as an interloper. Pampered and polished its entire existence (much like the Wang children), the car is ill-suited for a cross-country trek at this point.

The car registers its losses as it goes, underlining the difficulty of the journey and the true state of the family's situation. It finally gives out and gives up somewhere in North Carolina, in part because it sees Charles flirting with Barbara. It remembers that Grace is in the backseat, too late, and flings the family off the road, leaving them without a car or a way to continue.

Lionel Grossman (Leo)

Leo is Saina's boyfriend when the novel opens. He is an organic farmer in the Helios, New York area where she lives. They met at the farmer's market, where he sells his goods, and to all appearances they have a healthy, stable relationship.

Leo himself was an orphan and was adopted by a troupe of Vaudeville-styled performers, who raised him in a busy and chaotic house and who somehow lost the only picture he had of his real mother.

When Leo discovers Saina in bed with her ex-fiance, Grayson, he gives her a chance, but when Saina chooses Grayson, he leaves her and avoids her. He takes her back, later in the novel, only after Saina assures him that it was she who kicked out Grayson and not Grayson who left.

For much of the novel, Leo seems the most stable and almost-normal character in a cast of over-the-top characters. However, after he and Saina are back together, the reader learns that he is not the simple character that Saina saw him as. He has a daughter that he was hiding from Saina, and that omission nearly drives her away.

Billy Al-Alani

Billy is a young journalist that Saina knew in New York City. His articles about her early career helped to launch her into super-stardom in the art world. Saina and her friends were older than him, but when he arrives at her Helios, New York farmhouse to do an unscheduled interview with her, Saina realizes that their relationship has changed. She realizes that what she saw as friendship between the two of them was always only a professional relationship based on what each could get from the other.

Billy writes the article despite Saina's wishes for privacy and without her help. By the time the article is published, however, Saina's family has arrived and his words no longer have the power to destroy her that they once might have had.



Grayson

Grayson is Saina's ex-fiance, who left her for his pregnant girlfriend after Saina's star in the art world fell. The Wangs hate Grayson, and for good reason. He is shallow, materialistic, and uses Saina and her influence for his own personal gain, but only supports her when it suits him. Despite the relationship's many faults, Saina knows that the two of them were good together because of the powerful, almost manic, creative energy they generated. When he shows up at her Helios farmhouse, she takes him back because of the sexual chemistry between them. But as their second try at a relationship progresses, Saina begins to see what her family saw all along.

Professor Nash

Nash is one of Charles Wang's oldest friends in America. Born from Southern aristocracy, he fell in love with Chinese culture and became a Chinese Studies professor in California for a number of years. He can speak Chinese more fluently than Charles Wang's own children can, and probably knows more about Chinese culture in China than Charles himself.

Just as Charles dreams of a lost mythic history in China, Nash is drawn back to the past to care for the family estate--an old plantation that he can barely keep afloat because the world and the economy has passed him by.



Symbols and Symbolism

Saina's hermes scarf

The scarf symbolizes Saina's failures and what the Wangs have misunderstood about success in America.

The Scarf is a 56x56 inch silk square produced by Hermes for the ill-fated art exhibition that cost Saina her place in the art world. It appears first with Barbara, but the reader does not see or understand its importance until the chapter that uncovers the reason behind Saina's career problems.

The scarf, being a luxury good, represents everything the Wangs have managed to achieve in America. Barbara decides to bring the scarf along on their journey across the country, not realizing that seeing it might upset Saina when they arrive. None of the family, including Saina, understand why the art exhibition--and the scarf along with it--were offensive to people. This lack of understanding mirrors Charles Wang's lack of understanding about his ethnic beauty line.

The Mercedes

The car the Wang family drives in across country is symbolic of everything they have had and lost. Technically, it is not their car. Charles Wang gifted it to Ama, which is the only reason it has not been repossessed with the rest of their possessions. They steal it out from under her, leaving her nothing, to take it across the country. Once pampered as their lives had been, the car is not in good enough shape to make it. Unlike the car, however, the Wangs are able to adjust themselves to their new world and their new lives. They continue on without the heavy piece of the past as a reminder of what they once were.

The bone from Charles's father

The bone fragment from Charle's father symbolizes the past that Charles cannot relinquish.

One of Charles's most precious possessions, in addition to the "chop" (or stamp) that bears the Wang family name is the fragment of bone he carries that once belonged to his father. The bone is reminder of how he failed as a son. He did not return to Taiwan when his father summoned him, and so he was not there to see his father before he died or to give him a proper burial. His father was cremated before Charles arrived, and he carries the bone as a reminder of all he has left to do to restore the Wang's fortunes. He buries the bone, finally, in his ancestral land, signaling in many ways the end of his obsession with the myth of his family's past.



Saina's Helios, New York home

Saina's home is symbolic of her entire existence. She has fashioned herself an artist through presentation and spectacle, but inside she remains unconvinced about her own worth and talent as an artist. Similarly, her refurbished farmhouse has the same inside/outside quality. From the outside, it appears to be the perfect farmhouse, picturesque and well-suited for the land it sits on, but the outside is a sham. She neither grows anything nor farms. Inside, the house looks like something from HGTV, and the furniture is neither functional nor comfortable, but it has the appearance of a place where an artist lives.

Nash's plantation

Nash's plantation just outside of New Orleans symbolizes a family loss, much like the one Charles Wang experiences. Without the systems of slavery, the plantation cannot survive. This is not so very different from the Chinese land system, where peasants had once worked the land for rich aristocrats. Charles Wang fails to see that without peasants, a social status erased by the Communist Revolution, there would be no way to sustain his land, even if he were to reclaim it. Just as Nash is selling off pieces of his family's past to build plantation-esque condos, the land in China has already been sold to make way for apartment housing.

New Orleans beignets

The beignets Andrew eats in New Orleans symbolize the disappointment of authenticity.

When Andrew stays behind and finds himself in New Orleans, he thinks that the beignets in the French Quarter are not as good as the ones at Downtown Disney's Jazz Cafe. Though these beignets are authentic, and are exactly what a beignet should be, Andrew sees the (quite literally) Disneyfied recreation of the beignet as superior. The beignets and his opinion of them symbolizes the meaninglessness of authenticity in the book. No one and nothing is authentic, except perhaps these beignets, and the characters find them wanting.

The Chinese smog

The Chinese smog is symbolic of every expectation Charles Wang has had, turned on its head. For his entire life, he has envisioned a China that is pastoral and almost magical in nature, but when he actually encounters the reality of China it is through the lung-choking smog brought on by industrialization.



The people at the party in China

The people who consume massive amounts of food at the party in China symbolize all of the differences between the Americanized Wangs and the Chinese. When the Wang children attend a dinner in China in place of their father, they experience a crowd of men who "wanted to consume everything" (341). The literal consumption of the multi-course meal is symbolic of all of the consumption the post-communist China has become.

Grace's blog

Grace's blog symbolizes her misunderstanding of beauty.

Grace is, perhaps, the ultimate millennial. She has a style blog in the years before Instagram makes visual blogging a mainstream part of the culture, and she lives through this blog. For her, arranging things into a single moment, a unified image of stylistic perfection is the height of beauty. The blog symbolizes her lack of engagement with the world. Sheltered and pampered, it is not until Grace is at the end of the road that she realizes that beauty exists outside of the careful arrangement in her blog.

The soap

The separated soap Charles attempts to deliver symbolizes the impossibility of his return to the industry that made him rich.

Charles makes a detour and spends a portion of the last of his cash to rent a Uhaul and steal the specialty soap and cosmetics he has made for a couple in Alabama, only to discover that his long road trip has caused the product to separate. The soap represented his last chance to recoup the past he had built, but the oil-laden soap, with its ruined boxes, underscores that he will not be able to return to that past. His only way is forward.



Settings

Saina's House in Helios, New York

Saina's refurbished farmhouse is perhaps the most stable setting in the entire novel. While the rest of her family undertakes their ill-fated road trip across the country, Saina is stationary. Her house represents both her fall from grace with the art world and a new beginning that she has not yet come to terms with. The house is aesthetically pleasing. From the outside, its bright blue shutters against the washed white exterior look like a call to the past, while the inside contains high-end and highly contemporary furnishings, such as clear plastic armchairs, that do not match the exterior's country charm. She realizes the house is a mistake and not a place where she will be able to reboot herself or her art, because her art depends on spectacle, but it also becomes an unexpected new homeland for the Wangs.

The Mercedes

Much of the novel, at least for most of the Wang family, takes place within the confines of an ancient Mercedes that had once belonged to Charles's first wife, May Lee. The Mercedes has been well cared for, despite its years, and is still in pristine condition until it undertakes the road trip with the family. As they drive, the inside becomes littered with Grace's clippings and the family's trash, while the once-pristine paint job of the car's exterior becomes covered with dirt and dust from the road, its top coated with a layer of bird droppings. The car is a claustrophobic space in the midst of the great openness of the American road, and its slow, continual disintegration mirrors the collapse of the family's fortunes.

Charles Wang's California House

The family's California home takes up very little space in the text, because the family leaves it in the early pages of the novel, but it remains an important touchstone for the rest of their journey. The Bel-Air mansion is a "house full of polished glamor" (26). It had been photographed for magazine spreads, with a hidden wine cellar retrofitted for Charles's whisky and a closet that is Barbara's own sanctuary. Unlike their neighbors, though, they do not hire scores of landscapers and maids, but instead keep their home private. The home is on the opposite shore from Saina's farmhouse, and in many ways serves as its foil.

Nash's Plantation

The family makes a brief stop in their cross-country journey at Professor Nash's Louisiana home. The once-grand plantation is now filled with rotating groups of Nash's family members, and he has been selling off the family holdings little-by-little so



developers can build "plantation-style" condos in order to keep the rest of the land solvent (173). The South of Nash's plantation is not what Charles Wang imagines it should be, because it seems to be missing "the biscuits and black people" (173). Nash's plantation and the Old South it represents is a foil to Charles Wang's own imagining of pre-communist China. Both are lands lost to wars and time, but although Charles sees them as "twin losses," he does not see the warning in Nash's home (182). He still imagines China will be the same when he returns to it.

Kathy's Home in Twentynine Palms, California

When the family starts off on their road trip, they have to drop Ama off at her daughter's home. Kathy's home is a small, metal structure in Twentynine Palms, California. For the Wang children who have been raised in nothing but luxury, the small, metal-wrapped house, with its dusty yard and moldy jump house represents the depths to which they might tumble.

America

Because *The Wangs Vs. the World* is, at its heart, a road trip novel, the family drives through and by much of America. In the novel, we see an America hit by the financial collapse of the early 2000s, though. The people and places they experience all seem to have been affected in some way by the collapse of the financial markets, but we also see the beginnings of the era to come, in the hints at a young Obama beginning his campaign for the White House. The uncertainty of this America is mirrored by the uncertainty of the Wang's experience. After all, Charles Wang built his fortune in the booming economy of the Reagan years.

China

At the end of the novel, Charles Wang returns to the China he has dreamed about for his entire life. Unlike the Taiwan of his youth, this China is modernized, a gleaming electrical place that seems to have surpassed even American greatness. His experience of China is not at all what he expects, and though he has disavowed his Taiwanese upbringing for most of his adult life--claiming a specifically Chinese identity instead--the things he yearns for most in this new China are the experiences and foods of Taiwan.



Themes and Motifs

The road trip

The Wangs vs. America uses the trope of the cross-country road trip to explore the differences in the journey for a Chinese-American family. There are few tropes in fiction more purely American than the Road Trip. As early as the captivity narratives in the 1700s, and through to Kerouac's *On the Road* Again and beyond, the idea of hitting the road in search of one's self or a new version of America runs throughout the country's literature. It should not be surprising that Chang has taken up this well-worn trope and repurposed it for her immigrant-American family.

Charles Wang's choice to drive his family across the country in a car that was older than most of the children is not accidental. It is clear by the end of the novel that Charles Wang had enough cash hidden away to fly his family to New York. As he drives, he becomes part of a larger body of literature, one where identity can be formed--or reformed--on the open landscape of America. Through deserts and the south, the Wang family experiences the openness of America at the very moment that their future seems closed to them. This is not accidental. Because the Wang's fortunes mirror that of the rest of the country, Chang is able to use the trope of the American Road Trip to show how the country's supposed openness and promise has become stunted and stymied in the financial collapse.

But like the trope of the road trip in other novels, the trip the Wang's undertake allow them to come to terms with who they believed themselves to be and who they want to become. For Andrew, he must realize that becoming a comic isn't about being seen or making people laugh but observing and being witness to truth. For Grace, she must come to terms with the beauty of life as it is, instead of the artificial and overly stylized version of beauty she has built her identity around. For Barbara, she must realize that she loves Charles for more than his money. For Charles, his road trip isn't complete until he flies to China, going east rather than west as he might have from California. He comes to understand that the mythic China and Chinese identity he has held to so tightly was nothing more than a story, and that his true identity is based as much in America as in the country he never called home, China.

Rags to riches

In *The Wangs vs. America*, the "rags to riches" trope is inverted to explore the preconceptions about immigrants and success. The rags to riches story is, perhaps, even more ingrained into the psyche of American literature than the road trip. From the earliest Horatio Alger stories to the fall of *Gatsby* in Fitzgerald's classic novel, the idea that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and fashion a new life for themselves is at the heart of many classic American novels. Many ethnic-American novels and authors have used that trope to insert immigrant identities into the larger



American experience. Chang takes this trope--and the use of the trope in immigrant stories--and turns it on its head.

In *The Wangs vs. the World*, the Chinese immigrant that is Charles Wang did not start out penniless, but as the heir to a Urea factory in China. It is this factory that enables him to make his fortune. At the beginning of the novel, he has already had his success and because of his poor choices, his entire empire has crumbled, taking his family and all of their wealth and security along with it. Therefore, he does begin the novel in the same state of poverty that many rags to riches stories begin with, but it is clear almost from the beginning that his often erratic choices and his refusal to relinquish the dream of some lost Chinese past will not enable him to rise again.

By inverting this trope, Chang is able to interrogate the very heart of the American Dream. The rags to riches story often focuses on the gap between monetary wealth and social standing. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, no matter of wealth can bring Gatsby's social standing to the same level as Tom and Daisy. In realist novel after realist novel (early twentieth century), we see the parvenu, or social climber, tossed aside by American Aristocracy for confusing wealth with social standing. Charles Wang makes a similar mistake. When he misunderstands the American Dream as getting rich--a dream that he does not see as so distinctly American--he does not see that the so-called Dream is as much about changing ones position in society as it is about changing the amount in ones bank account. He sees the loss of his wealth as a failure of this dream, and in many ways it is, but the Americanization of his children are one mark of the Dream's success. Where he will always be seen as an immigrant, "a small but gracious man" to the magazines that interview him, his children are more American than Chinese, and Saina's success is one mark of that (26).

Asian exceptionalism

In *The Wangs vs. America*, the reader is met with a reversal of the usual stereotype of high performing Asian American children in order to interrogate the idea of Asian exceptionalism. One stereotype of Asian Americans is that of high-performing and highly successful children from high-pressure families. From the recent "Tiger Mom" phenomenon, made popular by Amy Chau's 2011 parenting memoir to the often one-dimensional Asian side-kick characters in many novels, the idea that Asian Americans are somehow smarter, more focused, or more determined toward success has become a stereotype in American Culture. Chang's novel takes this stereotype and interrogates it to reveal the three-dimensional humanity behind these characters.

On the surface, Charles Wang fulfills the stereotype of the successful Asian businessman, but the entire conceit of the novel is to show how he falls from success to failure, from riches to rags. His fall is, in part, driven not by a capricious market but by his own choices, which are rooted in his understanding of himself as a Chinese man in America.



The Wang family children continue this interrogation of the stereotype of the highly successful, math-and-science-oriented Asian-American child. None of Charles Wang's children have any interest in the sciences. Instead, all select creative fields: art, stand up comedy, blogging. With the possible exception of Saina, none of the children are successful. Andrew is an average student at an average college who can't even make it to classes on time, and doesn't care that he's falling behind. Grace is more interested in style than in any discipline of study. Even Saina's success comes not from her own talent as an artist, but from a willingness to put aside the technically difficult art she began with in exchange for an art driven by spectacle and performance.

Throughout the novel, Chang uses the Wang family to upend the reader's expectations about what a Chinese-American family should or can be like. In doing so, she allows the characters a complete humanity while the novel interrogates the very nature of culture and Americanness.

Masculinity

Charles Wang's fall from grace is rooted in his understanding (and misunderstanding) of both Chinese and American masculinity. His decision to put all of his personal wealth and family holdings at risk to procure the bank loan he needs for his new cosmetics line occurs because he feels as though the white, American bankers do not see him as an equal, or as a man. His decision to risk everything he owns on his venture to create an ethnic line of cosmetics is, in part, his attempt to perform a specific type of masculinity.

Charles's focus on masculinity is apparent from the earliest chapters of the book, when he laments that he has wealth and a large house, but that his family does not live under his roof (as they would have in China). He is the patriarch, but that position is empty without a house full of bodies to accede to his power. From the affairs that he has with white women to the satisfaction he gets from writing large charity checks for his white business partner's wives, Charles seems focused on claiming a masculine identity through business and wealth, an identity that is, perhaps, more American in nature than the Chinese identity he clings to.

The irony of Charles's focus on this specific brand of masculinity derived through financial success and power is that at his heart, Charles's strength comes from his emotional attachment to his family. He loves his children fiercely, and nurtures them even more than his first wife, May Lee, ever did. Even in the final pages of the book, when he lies dying in a hospital ward somewhere in Beijing, Charles's love for his family is perhaps his strongest and most consistent attribute.

The financial collapse

The financial collapse is a central theme in *The Wangs vs. America*, one that mirrors Charles Wang's own financial destruction. Throughout the novel, the Wang family's misfortunes are set against the backdrop of the larger American landscape. Set in the year preceding Barack Obama's presidency, the country has been hit hard by the



housing collapse and the collapse of financial markets. Andrew's college economics professor, for instance, an adjunct (part-time) instructor erupts in the middle of a lecture and tells the class that Wall Street's gambles have wrecked what little retirement plan he has. The status of the professor as an adjunct, the low-wage workers without benefits or job security that began to grow in numbers during this period, is another indication of the state of the country.

As the Wang's travel from their Bel Air home to Saina's Helios, New York farmhouse, they encounter an America where veterans and active duty soldiers live in run-down housing complexes, unable to get ahead, where the once-wealthy aristocrats of the Old South are forced to use their family homes for tourist attractions, and where the landscape is bleak. In a chapter not linked to any of the family members, the narrative tells the reader, "All across the country, one by one, foreclosed house by shuttered business, in cold bedrooms and empty boardrooms and cars turned into homes, people had the same thoughts...it was spread across the country: a club, a collective, a movement, a great populist uprising of failure in the face of years of shared national success" (95).

Racism

The Wangs vs. America deals with the theme of racism against immigrants and against Chinese or Asian-Americans, specifically, in the way it details each individual family member's experiences with American culture. As a Chinese immigrant in America, Charles Wang faced his share of racism. From the magazine writers who comment on his smallness to the bankers who do not take him seriously when his command of English falters, he built everything he accomplished in spite of an America who looked at him and thought him other. This sense of the Wang's identities as Asians (and therefore somehow outside American culture) is pervasive throughout the book. Saina deals with it in the art world, Andrew encounters people on campus who expect him to embrace his Asian-ness, and Grace is asked the proverbial question about her origins as she sits in shock on the side of the road after an accident. Despite the children's American identity, the world around them sees them first as Asian.

However, even as the Wang's face racism and stereotypes because of their own identity, the novel demonstrates how they also have beliefs about other cultures. Grace is sent away to a boarding school because she wants to date a Japanese boy. Saina is afraid of what her family will think of Leo, because he is black. Throughout the novel, the idea of race as a seeable and knowable identity, and the effects of other people's understanding of race are constantly being interrogated.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is told through third-person, past tense point of view. Individual chapters usually are focalized through the perspective of a single character, but some chapters switch between the perspectives of more than one of the Wang family members. The omniscience of the narrator allows the reader to understand the inner thoughts of each individual family member, including the Wang's ancient Mercedes, but the perspectives explored by the narrative are limited to the Wang family. In this way, the reader can see what each family member perceives about the others, the world around them, and their situation, but the narrative does not offer any outside perspectives about the Wangs themselves.

Language and Meaning

The novel uses straightforward and engaging language, often adopting the cadence and thought processes of the individual characters each chapter focuses on. While the language of the narrator might be considered straightforward, however, the individual characters often speak in untranslated Chinese. These exchanges are always between members of the Wang family and are usually at times of crisis or high emotion. The Chinese is rendered into pinyin or the Romanized system of representing Chinese characters into Roman (or Latin) script. That is, the words are rendered into the alphabet used by English readers of Chang's novel. However, while the reader might use context clues within the individual conversations to derive meaning from the untranslated sections, there are places where not even the context clues will reveal the content of the words spoken. The use of pinyin Chinese within the narrative mirrors the use of untranslated Chinese characters at the top of each chapter. The English reader is left at some distance from the text because of them.

The focus on language within the novel is a common trope in both Asian-American writing and the broader spectrum of ethnic-American literature. It is not uncommon for a writers such as Gloria Anzaldua, Maxine Hong Kingston, Faye Mynne Ng, and others to include words, phrases, and sometimes entire sections of text in languages other than English within a book published in English. The decision whether to translate these portions of text or to leave them untranslated does political work within the texts. Especially in an age before online translators were so prevalent and easy to find, using non-English words for an English-speaking audience could do the work of either distancing the audience from the text or bringing them into a new world. For an audience of English speakers, encountering phrases or passages in an unknown and unfamiliar language can have the effect of making them feel like an outsider in the text, mirroring the same experience immigrant populations often have in an English-only world. This distance is intended to make the audience feel uncomfortable, and to make



the reader make a decision about how much effort they will put into understanding the Other.

Chang's novel is part of that larger tradition. As noted, though the novel, characters within the Wang family do speak to one another in Chinese without the benefit of the narrator's translations. This, in effect, causes a distance between the reader and the text or the characters. The same thing occurs when readers encounter the untranslated Chinese characters that serve as chapter headers. They are left wondering what the characters mean and how they relate to the chapter. (As noted elsewhere in this guide, the markings are simply numbers for the chapters.) It should be noted that the distance this creates is intentional. Many readers might feel angry that the translations are not provided for them, but this anger and the experience of feeling "outside" is the entire point. In Chang's novel, however, the reader feels "outside" of the Wang family as much as the Chinese-American experience. But the reader is not alone in this feeling; the Wang children do not speak fluent Mandarin. There are moments when they, too, are outsiders within conversations. Because Charles Wang's children only know the most common, everyday phrases, they are not able to converse about deeply emotional moments in the language their father is most comfortable in. Professor Nash, a southerner and white man, is able to hold more nuanced conversations in the language that should be "theirs" than the Wang children are. By showing the Wang children's lack of knowledge about their father's language, the novel is able to make a subtle argument about what is lost between generations of immigrants and their children. The familial closeness that a mother-tongue might entail is lost in America.

But Chang's novel does not simply use language to distance the reader. There are portions of the text where the narrator takes a moment to "educate" the reader about a word or concept in Chinese. For instance, it explains that the name "Wang" means "king," but the narrative also uses explanations to reveal character. We learn something important about Charles Wang when the narrative tells us, "In Chinese, there were no separate words for animal meat and human flesh. It was all just rou. Muscle was ji rou, fat was fei rou. Beef and pork? Niou rou and ju rou. Forget about special words like poultry, designed to coddle and protect. Chicken was chicken, and it was all meant to be eaten" (175-6). Because Charles was raised in this other language, his very understanding of the world is different. So while his youngest daughter expresses squeamishness over eating a hot dog, "cow lips and tails and ears and vaginas, probably," Charles does not have the same ideas at all (82). By explaining and revealing the meaning behind language, the novel is, in certain places, able to best explain the divide between Charles Wang and his children, as well as Charles and America in general.

Structure

The novel is structured through a series of often short chapters titled only by the location of the particular family member the chapter is focused on. The chapters that focus on the portion of the Wang family in the car and driving toward Helios, New York also have a number of miles with them. These mileage chapters continue until Charles



Wang arrives in Beijing, China. The milage given then is 10,310, the milage going east to reach China from California, rather than the shorter distance of flying west. The chapters also include untranslated Chinese characters along with the locations. Like other portions of the text which remain untranslated, such as the family's speech to one another, the lack of translation for English-only audiences may make the reader think that there is some deeper meaning being obscured. However, when translated, these character are simply numbers of the chapters.

The individual chapters revolve between the different family members: Charles, Andrew, Grace, Saina, Barbara, and the Mercedes they're driving in. MayLee, the children's mother and Charles's first wife, does not get a chapter or a perspective, nor do any of the characters who are not part of the Wang family. Earlier chapters in the novel reveal the backstory of Charles, Barbara, and Saina. The younger children, Andrew and Grace, focus less on their childhood or history, and so it is not included in their chapters to as great a degree.

The individual chapters also revolve between Saina, who is stationary in Helios, New York, and the family in the car, allowing the reader to wonder what sort of an arrival the family will receive upon their arrival.

The back-and-forth between characters and locations gives the novel as a whole a sweeping feel. This is not simply Charles Wang's story, but the story of his entire family. It is not simply the story of Chinese immigrants or the children of immigrants, but through the family's travels across an America that has recently been devastated by the housing and finance collapse of the early 2000s, it also becomes a sweeping tale of a moment in America.



Quotes

He shouldn't be here at all. Never should have set a single unbound foot on the New World. There was no arguing it. History had started fucking Charles Wang, and America had finished the job.

-- Charles Wang

Importance: This quote summarizes Charles Wang's entire belief about who he might have been and what he might have done if his family in China had not had their land taken. He mythologizes the greatness of the China of the past without realizing that it was purely American capitalism that allowed him to rise so high.

His father's English sounded more broken than usual. Not that he'd ever bothered to perfect it in the first place--the rules of grammar were beneath him, bylaws for a silly club that he had no intention of joining.

-- Andrew

Importance: The use of language is essential in the novel. Written in English, it also uses both translated and untranslated Chinese to either bring the reader in or distance them from the family. In this quote, we see Charles's relationship with English. Though his words are rarely notated in any sort of dialect, they are occasionally represented through so-called "broken" speech patterns when he is angry or highly emotional. This quote prepares the reader for that.

She wanted to die young and beautiful, not all messed-up looking. It's just that, well, with suicide, you got to choose...

-- Grace

Importance: When the novel opens, Grace is obsessed with superficial style and beauty, and with the idea of suicides. This will change as she comes to see beauty in things other than the latest fashions and realizes that she wants to be alive.

Really, though, it wasn't some sort of noble consideration for Leo's feelings. It was more that she wasn't ready to deny Grayson's gravitational pull, to be knocked out of his orbit. A satellite, after all, can still look like a star.

-- Saina

Importance: This quote underlines the insecurity Saina has about herself and her talent. When Grayson comes back into her life, she clings to him because part of her believes that he is the thing that made her great.

Charles could feel himself sagging with middle-aged defeat, a loser who lacked the hot-blooded need to wrestle America to the ground and take her milk money, who never had the balls to flip his father's shame into a triumphant empire, who marched obediently towards death and hid from life and always chose the wrong path.

-- Charles



Importance: Despite his successes, Charles Wang holds a deep insecurity for himself and what he has accomplished, and much of that insecurity is linked directly to masculinity.

Women, she realized, were scared to be assholes. And what is any artist, really, but someone who doesn't mind being an asshole? That was when she birthed her plan: Be an Asshole.

-- Saina

Importance: Saina has built her own art empire on this one edict, but when it comes crashing down around her, she has to decide who she really is.

Somehow, in all the attendant commotion and loss, the thing itself, the eternal, singular piece of art, had gotten away from her. What she didn't want to say to herself was this: Saina couldn't create art with spectacle, and spectacle, but its very nature, had to be witnessed.

-- Saina

Importance: Much of the book, especially in Saina's sections, looks at the relationship between art and artifice. This quote helps to show her as someone who is deeply engaged with the idea of art, even as the use of artifice has gotten in her way.

The things we agree to call art are the shamanic totems of our time. We value them beyond all reason because we can't really understand them.

-- Saina

Importance: This quote plays into the larger themes of the book related to representation, meaning, and power. She later will compare art to finance, artistry to value.

Nothing made him feel better than tossing off a check that elicited a breathy hasp of pleasure from one of the wives.

-- Charles

Importance: In this quote we see how closely linked Charles's financial success is with his masculinity. Just as he routinely cheats on his own wife, he sees success and derives satisfaction from being able to impress the wives of his white business associates. He never touches them sexually, but the cutting of checks for their philanthropies, which elicit these breathy, almost sexual, responses, stands in as replacements for actual sexual conquests.

Life was so weightless for some people. She wanted to call her father right now and tell him not to come. Just wash her hands of the Wangs altogether, never mind that family was family and she was going to give hers a home. A homeland.

-- Saina



Importance: The entire novel leads up to the Wangs' arrival at Saina's home in New York, and for that entire time, she wrestles with the responsibilities of family and what that means for herself. Ironically, Charles Wang has always seen China, the land of his fathers, as his homeland, but Saina is correct here. It will be a daughter, who gives him a new homeland in the most unexpected of places.

Who were the Native Americans, really, but a band of Chinese people who had set their sights east and walked for millennia?

-- Saina

Importance: The fact that Saina is the one to think this shows just how important the ancestral mythos of China is to the entire family, not just to Charles Wang. This is important because for so much of the book, the children are very American in their self-identities, putting on their Chinese identities only when it suits them.

The Communists had it all wrong. It wasn't the rich who were imprisoned by their possessions, it was the poor.

-- Barbara

Importance: In this quote, Barbara reflects on her own poverty and the effect it had on her. While the Wang children value very little (as seen in what they choose to take with them on their trip into poverty), Barbara was raised in abject poverty and knows how simple a small possession can be, and how it can capture someone's imagination.

'Baba...!' But she couldn't formulate the sentence in Chinese. Her knowledge of the language only extended to daily necessities and small affections.

-- Saina

Importance: Despite having an art career revolving around her Chinese-American identity, Saina actually knows very little. In a book where language becomes a way of bringing readers in or distancing them, Saina's recognition of her inability to speak in the language her father best understands distances her from him.

How could he have been so wrong? From the moment he deplaned, it was clear that China had leapt past him and the America he'd so naively thought was the Wang family's future.

-- Charles

Importance: Charles Wang's arrival in China is an absolute reversal of every expectation he has ever held. While he was dreaming of some mythic China ruled by aristocratic land owners, China was actually moving ahead into a modernity as great--perhaps more great--than America's.

The people of the world could be divided into two groups: those who used all of their chances, and those who stood still through opportunity after opportunity, waiting for a moment that would never be perfect.

-- Barbara



Importance: Barbara is a person who sees herself as using all of her own chances. It is what she most admires in Charles and most despises in his children. It is important to note, however, that she is wrong here. She's talking about Leo not going to China after Saina, but though Leo does not go, he also does not throw away his chance completely.

Daddy discovered America!
-- Charles

Importance: These three words are implied as being Charles Wang's last words and last gift to his children. In a book where he has been focused on reclaiming China, he realizes at the end that his true discovery was something about the New World he claimed for his own. This also relates back to Saina's earlier belief that the first Native Americans were simply Chinese people who walked East across the Bering Land Bridge. These enigmatic words help to bring closure to Charles's struggles, but for the novel as a whole and for the children's futures, they remain somewhat obscure and abstract.