

# **When the Sea Turned to Silver Study Guide**

**When the Sea Turned to Silver by Grace Lin**

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## Plot Summary

In Grace Lin's young adult novel *When the Sea Turned To Silver*, the line between folklore and reality is blurred. Told in past tense, it focuses on the protagonist Pinmei, who lived in a small mountain village with her storytelling grandmother until one night when the emperor's soldiers attacked her village and kidnapped her grandmother. Pinmei's grandmother, Amah, was imprisoned by the emperor, and Pinmei along with her companion Yishan began a journey to rescue her. Pinmei and Yishan had heard rumors that the emperor was after a Luminous Stone, and as such they made the decision to look for one to exchange for Amah's freedom.

They set out for the City of Bright Moonlight, and after they spent the night in a neighboring village, they met Lady Meng. Lady Meng and her horse, BaiMa, were remarkable figures that seemed straight from legend, and they joined Pinmei and Yishan on their way to the City of Bright Moonlight. Lady Meng awoke a mussel that turned into a bird, and the bird lead them to the City of Bright Moonlight. When they arrived at the City of Bright Moonlight, Lady Meng demanded to see the king, and after some reluctance by the guards, they were ushered in to meet the king, KaiJae. The king told them that the Tiger King lured all the other kings into a trap where they were killed and replaced by the Tiger King's men. The Tiger King then killed the old emperor and took his place. KaiJae then told Lady Meng that her husband Wan was still alive, but before he could tell her more, the emperor attacked the City of Bright Moonlight. Pinmei, Yishan, and Lady Meng were sent to the Hall of Distant Clouds, where they were cared for by Yanna.

While in the Hall of Distant Clouds, Pinmei and Yishan hatched a plan to look in the emperor's encampment for Amah after everyone else was asleep. While they crept around the outskirts of the encampment they encountered Yanna, who was looking for KaiJae's son, who was also taken by the emperor. Pinmei and Yishan were attacked in the camp, and in the skirmish they found themselves across the Long Walkway, a passage they were told to avoid as no one had crossed it and lived afterwards. From their side of the bridge, they witnessed the emperor and King KaiJae, who were discussing the Luminous Stone and the Paper of Answers, which only King KaiJae could read. The Paper of Answers revealed that the emperor would achieve immortality, to the horror of children and KaiJae. After the emperor left, the children and KaiJae shared stories of the Green Tiger, who was KaiJae's ancestor. When they were attacked again by the emperor, KaiJae gave them the Paper of Answers, and told the children to flee with Lady Meng. They escaped again, and found themselves in the House of Wu, where they were given temporary protection from the emperor's soldiers by Haiyi.

Lady Weng and the children could not stay for long in the House of Wu, and after briefly staying there, they separated, with the children heading to the Sea Bottom, the kingdom of Lady Weng's father. While there, they discovered that the Black Tortoise of Winter was trapped by the emperor, and for as long as he was held captive, the cold, winter would continue. Yishan and Pinmei asked the Sea King about the Luminous Stone, and it was revealed that the Sea King had it in his possession, as well as the Iron Rod and



the Red Stone. The Sea King took the children to see the Luminous Stone, which was revealed to be the moon. Yishan and Pinmei attempted to steal the Luminous Stone, and were stopped by the Sea King. Embarrassed, they told him that they were only joking, and Pinmei began to despair that they would never be able to rescue Amah. Yishan then pointed out that they could ask the Paper of Answers, and it was revealed that the emperor had captured the Black Tortoise of Winter with the Iron Rod.

The group then left for Capital City to confront the emperor, where they arrived just in time for the funeral of Lady Meng's husband. The emperor, enamored with Lady Meng, had been trying to coerce Lady Meng into marrying him she told the emperor that she could only remarry after her husband had a proper burial. Immediately after the funeral, Lady Meng disappeared into the water, and a fish tail was visible. Amah was brought out, and it was revealed that the emperor was, in fact, after Yishan, who turned out to be the Ginseng Boy and was capable of bestowing immortality. In the ensuing chaos, Yishan was able to steal back the Iron Rod from the emperor, and in doing so she freed the Black Tortoise of Winter, thus restoring order.



# Section 1, Chapters 1-11

## Summary

Pinmei and her Grandmother lived in a mountain village. In the beginning of the novel, winter had just begun and conditions were especially frigid and harsh. It had also been an especially long winter, with many remarking that the Black Tortoise of Winter had stayed an especially long time, almost as if he were trapped. A new emperor had just taken control of the empire, and the rumors were swirling that he had tried to climb the mountain to pay tribute to the mountain in order to receive the blessing of the Mountain Spirit. He was pushed back however, and began to attack to the villages in the area, always taking able-bodied men to work on his Vast Wall. Pinmei's grandmother, Amah, was well known for both her embroidery skills and her storytelling, which often focused on historical figures and legends. The night before the new emperor's attack on their village, Amah told Pinmei the story of Nuwa, who saved mankind from being flooded by the Starry River by sacrificing herself, leaving behind a drop of blood and a single strand of hair.

That night, the emperor's troops attacked their village. Amah helped Pinmei hide in an old storeroom, after reminding her to always trust Yishan. Amah met the soldiers in front of their hut in an attempt to distract them from finding Pinmei. The soldiers were suspicious of Amah surrendering herself so readily, but after a brief look around, they left with Amah. Pinmei then had the realization when the soldiers were in the storeroom that the emperor himself had come to their village. He did not find Pinmei when he was in their storeroom, however he stole a special rice bowl, and when he was confronted by Yishan, a close family friend, he became enraged and threw Yishan to the floor. Yishan was able to rescue Pinmei from the hut before the soldiers set it on fire, and once they are clear of the chaos, they tried to decide what to do. Pinmei thought that the emperor was looking for a Luminous Stone that Lights the Night, and that Amah's stories would help him acquire one. Pinmei lamented that they did not have a Paper of Answers to guide their way, and when Yishan was confused as to what that entailed, Pinmei told him the story of how the Paper of Answer led to the creation of the City of Blinding Moonlight. Afterwards, they decided to head to the City of Blinding of Moonlight to look for a Paper of Answers. As Pinmei and Yishan headed down the mountain, they encountered a jade bracelet that belonged to Amah.

The Black Tortoise of Winter awoke to find himself trapped in water, and similarly, Amah was trapped in a soldiers camp. She was confronted by the emperor, who insisted she tell him the story of the Ginseng Boy. Amah refused to tell the story to the emperor, but she remembered telling the story to her daughter Meiya, Pinmei's aunt, before she died.



## Analysis

Much of this first section is foreshadowing for events to come and of characters that will shape the narrative. In the first chapter, there is a strong sense that because the new emperor is both too brutal and unfit to lead the empire, nature itself is out of balance. In *When the Sea Turned to Silver*, this is in part due to the emperor capturing and confining the Black Tortoise of Winter; his actions have unbalanced nature and his subjects are suffering because of it. The supernatural elements, in this case, The Spirit of the Mountain, has refused to give the emperor his blessing, which shows that the involvement of the supernatural has already begun. "He came... and he started up the mountain. But the wind or the winter - or who knows maybe even the Mountain Spirit - forced him down to our great misfortune" (4). The theme that the actions of one person can impact everyone is beginning to be developed in this section, as well as the lesson that it is of greatest importance to consider the repercussions on others of what one does. The emperor selfishly wants immortality, and his people suffer for his greedy desires.

Throughout the novel, there are stories within chapters, and the three stories in this section introduce three of the most important elements. These three stories introduce Nuwa, the Paper of Answers, and the Ginseng Boy. Nuwa is the goddess who sacrifices herself to save humankind and in doing so leaves behind three items that are critical to plot development: A Luminous Stone That Lights the Night, The Red Stone, and the Iron Rod. All three of these elements will appear in the story literally and will also have great symbolic meaning. A Luminous Stone That Lights the Night is literally the moon, and it symbolizes knowledge. The Red Stone is consumed by the Sea King, and subsequently his daughter is born in Nuwa's likeness. The daughter of the Sea King is Lady Meng, and she is essential to Pinmei's character development. The Iron Rod is what is holding the Black Tortoise of Winter in place, and it represents willpower and inner strength. The Paper of Answers as it is presented in Amah's story is only readable by a privileged few, but to those privileged few, it provides invaluable wisdom and truth. The Ginseng Boy gives immortality to whoever eats him, and in Amah's story, the couple who finds him becomes too greedy and it leads to their downfall. This last story begins to develop the theme of stories and immortality, and how immortality is both a blessing and a curse. Few (if any) mortals would be able to handle the challenges of immortality, however the true path to immortality lies in being part of a story. Because of this, storytellers such as Amah are highly revered and looked to as sources of great wisdom and information.

The jade bracelet that Yishan and Pinmei encounter as they leave the mountain hut is symbolic of both the connection that Amah and Pinmei share, and here it symbolizes the approval Amah would express that Pinmei has taken action and chosen a bold path to follow. Jade itself symbolizes immortality in Chinese folklore, and here it is suggested that by choosing this path, Pinmei has chosen a path towards becoming immortalized in a story.



## Discussion Question 1

What seems to be the relationship between the stories that Pinmei and Amah tell and the events of the main narrative?

## Discussion Question 2

How does the treatment of Amah reflect the reverence given to stories and storytellers in their culture?

## Discussion Question 3

From the very opening lines, there is a sense of unease and something being out of place. How does this develop leading up to the attack by the emperor's troops?

## Vocabulary

hearty, embroider, scoffing, vast, luminous, impish, mournful, deluge, lacquered, eerily, exalted, grime, gourd, poverty, proclamations, wry, petulant, melancholy, slyly



## Section 2, Chapters 12-21

### Summary

Pinmei and Yishan made their way down the mountain, and along the way they met another village that had been attacked by the emperor's troops, where they noticed that all of the able-bodied men were missing. They wandered from hut to hut looking for a place to stay, but they were unsuccessful until they came across Sai. Sai took the children home to Suya and Sifen, who was left behind by the emperor's soldiers because he was injured. Offering the children hospitality was a struggle for the family, but they offered the children food and shelter. In return, Pinmei told Sifen the story of the Red Stone, which was the drop of blood Nuwa left behind.

Amah was transferred to the palace dungeon, where she met the Stonecutter. After hearing his fate, Amah remarked that his fate was similar to another famous stonecutter, and she told him the story of a stonecutter tasked with making a dragon out of a piece of stone. The stonecutter was unable to make a dragon, and instead the stone was fashioned into a magic, living fish. The magistrate who requested the dragon was displeased, and ordered the stonecutter executed. When the fish broke however, the magistrate asked for someone to fix it, and was informed that the only person who could have fix it - the stonecutter who made it - had been executed. After hearing the story, the stonecutter told Amah that the stonecutter from the story actually escaped and was Amah's ancestor.

As Yishan and Pinmei left the village, they came across a woman who had just been thrown from her horse. The children rushed to the woman to see if she was hurt by the fall, and were amazed at her stunning beauty. Her name was Lady Meng, and she was carrying the most exquisitely crafted embroidery that Pinmei had ever seen. It reminded her of the story of the Widow's Embroidery. After some prompting by Yishan, Pinmei told the story to the Lady Meng and Yishan. The story is about the Sea King's daughter and how she crafted a piece of embroidery that was given to the Widow's son. The story concluded with the Widow's son and the Sea King's daughter happily married, which unsettled Lady Meng. She was looking for news of her husband when she was thrown by her horse, and had convinced herself that her husband had died. Lady Meng was also headed to the City of Blinding Moonlight, and she decided that the children should travel with her, though none of them knew the way. To guide them, Lady Meng pulled a mussel from the riverbed and commanded it to show them the way. The mussel transformed into a swallow and guided them to the City of Blinding Moonlight. The trio arrived at the City of Blinding Moonlight and were halted at the gate by guards. Lady Meng ordered the guards to let them through, and to Pinmei's surprise, they were allowed to pass.

Meanwhile, it is revealed that Amah was well-known and well-regarded throughout the land. She refused to live in the Imperial Palace, choosing instead to live on the mountain with her granddaughter. Amah then told the stonecutter a story about a





dragon instructing a young girl about how to find the Iron Rod. As the legends said, on the day of this young girl's life when she experienced the greatest joy and the greatest sorrow, she should grab the Iron Rod and look to the eyes of the lion statues. If those eyes had turned red, her city was about to be destroyed, and she should grab on to the Iron Rod and flee.

## Analysis

Three of the stories in this section provide deeper insights into the past of the characters introduced in these chapters, and because history has a tendency to repeat itself, they also foreshadow events to come later. Pinmei tells the story of "The Story of the Red Stone," which features Ku-Ang, Lady Meng's father, and is about how he found the Red Stone and then turning into a dragon to protect his kingdom against the might of a bully. This foreshadows what happens later in the novel. While in the dungeon with the Stonecutter, Amah tells the story of his ancestor, who disobeys a magistrate and makes a magical fish out of stone and, according to Amah's story, the stonecutter is killed because of his disobedience. However, the concept that knowledge, especially as it can be gleaned from shared stories is introduced here: the stonecutter corrects Amah's story (similar to how Pinmei will later correct a king about the ending of a shared story). This exchange of information shows that stories and knowledge are meant to be shared, and what people are capable of producing when they work together is better than what is created by one person working alone.

The other two stories in this section are deeply personal to characters. "The Story of the Widow's Embroidery" is the story of Lady Meng, and it not only deepens her backstory, but it also foreshadows the death of her husband. That a red butterfly lands and then vanishes into Lady Meng's embroidery is the first evidence that she is more than what meets the eye. Pinmei is immediately impressed by Lady Meng's beauty and poise, but it is her determination and strength that will make her Pinmei's role model and mentor. The other story is the about Amah and how she loses her daughter but gains her granddaughter Pinmei. It is both "the greatest joy and the greatest sadness" (110) of Amah's life, and this story also details why the Storyteller left the city to live in near-exile on the mountain. The Iron Rod is first seen in action in this story, and it symbolizes strength of character and willpower, which Amah needs to be able to move beyond the conflicting feelings of joy and sorrow.

Within this section, the theme of storytelling is given greater nuance. It is both a means to convey information, but more simply, great storytelling is a form of entertainment. In the case of Sifen, it is also a means of distraction from his pain. With few exceptions, many of the characters, ranging from the guards watching Amah to the villagers that Pinmei and Yishan meet, revere the Storyteller and the power of stories. When Sifen pleads with Pinmei to tell him a story to distract him from his pain and discomfort, it provides her with an opportunity to be self-directed and take action. As she tells the story, she quickly becomes comfortable enough that she gets lost in the story and allows herself "to [forget] people were listening" (69).



Key characters such as Pinmei and the emperor have been associated with animals throughout the novel, and those character developments begin to deepen in Section 2. Pinmei, who is so quiet and timid at the start, is described as "little more than a mouse" (102) by Lady Meng. The emperor is described as being "more like an animal than a man, his teeth glittering in the the flickering torchlight" (53), and between his predatory pacing, angry responses, it becomes clear how he has earned his reputation as the tiger king.

## Discussion Question 1

When Pinmei and Yishan meet Sifen, he tells them a story about how one thing leads to another and how ill-fortune can often turn out to be a blessing. What does his story say about misfortune disguised as blessings and blessings disguised as impending disasters?

## Discussion Question 2

Many of the characters are compared to animals or described as having animal characteristics. What are some examples of this? What might be the benefit of this type of comparison?

## Discussion Question 3

Do you think "The Story of the Painted Lions Eye" parallels Amah's life? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

hospitality, humble, kinship, gaunt, magistrate, pinnacle, nobility, ornate, nestle, palatial, embroidery, dismay, anxious, mandate



## Section 3, Chapters 22-36

### Summary

Lady Meng and the children were led to King KaiJae and his wife, both of whom were upset because they had just received word that a part of the city where some close friends were had been attacked. Lady Meng began immediately to ask questions about her husband Wan, whom she assumed was dead. King KaiJae told her about how her husband Wan had gone to a meeting with the emperor and never returned. Additionally, all the other kings who went to the meeting were killed and replaced by the emperor's men. However, King KaiJae had heard that Wan was kept alive. Lady Meng became especially upset when KaiJae told her about how the emperor ripped through Wan's shirt and stole a patch of it, and afterwards the emperor had both superhuman strength and invincibility. They were interrupted by a messenger who informed them that the emperor had arrived.

Yishan, Lady Meng, and Pinmei are entrusted to the care of Yanna, who warned the children to never go to the western side of the Long Walkway that divided the city while the emperor was in the city because doing so was grounds for being put to death. The Long Walkway was famous for having paintings of every important story, and as they hid from the emperor, Pinmei told the story of how a young girl brought joy to the heart of the emperor by giving him her beloved fish. The king was delighted with the gift, and in turn had the fish set free so that it would bring joy to others. When Pinmei finished the story, Lady Meng told her that the king from the story was KaiJae's ancestor and was highly revered by the people of the City of Blinding Moonlight.

Yanna continued to show the travelers around the palace, and while doing so, she impressed them with her youth, knowledge about the City, and confidence. Yanna informed them that the emperor only visits the king for a single night, and that night is always when the moon is full. After Yanna leaves, Yishan and Pinmei came up with a plan to go to the emperor's encampment to look for Amah. While they were in the encampment, they encountered Yanna, who was looking for the emperor's son. Before either could search all the tents, they were discovered by one of the emperor's troops. They fled the tents, but in the confusion and chaos, Yishan and Pinmei inadvertently crossed the Long Walkway.

On the other side, Yishan and Pinmei saw the emperor and King KaiJae speaking, and they chose to take advantage of their position and eavesdropped on the conversation. From the ensuing conversation, they learned that there is no Luminous Stone in the City of Blinding Lights, however King KaiJae has the Paper of Answers, which the emperor had been insisting that King KaiJae read on his behalf. To the horror of everyone, when King KaiJae asked the paper if the emperor would be immortal, it responded yes. Satisfied, the emperor left.



Once the emperor was gone, KaiJae invited the children to join him. During the ensuing conversation, Pinmei told KaiJae the story of the Green Tiger, KaiJae's ancestor. The Green Tiger was a man who was turned into a tiger after having the Paper of Answers touch his face. KaiJae added to her story by telling Yishan and Pinmei a story about how years later, the Green Tiger was turned back into a man. Pinmei concluded the Green Tiger story; the young king presented an empty pot to the emperor because he was unable to grow a plant from a seed the emperor had given him. Rather than punish the king for his failure, the emperor praised and rewarded him for being the only honest and virtuous king in his empire. No one would have been able to grow a plant from the seeds the emperor had given out because they had been boiled. At the conclusion of Pinmei's story about his ancestors, KaiJae admitted that his ancestors would be ashamed to see him helping the emperor.

Meanwhile, both Amah and the Black Tortoise of Winter were still imprisoned. Amah had continued to tell the Stonecutter stories, and in this section, she told him a story about a stolen bite of peach. The emperor was the son of the Mother of the Heavens, and he was celebrating his sixtieth birthday. His mother had decided that because he was unworthy of immortality, she would instead give him a peach longevity that would grant him 999 years of life. Before he could consume the peach, it was stolen, and the thief took a single bite.

The Black Tortoise of Winter realized that he was being confined by a human and, while struggling and trying to break free, he realized that it was time to do what he had never done before - ask for help.

## Analysis

A motif in the novel is the influence of ancestors and family, as two of the stories told within this section closely relate to the families of KaiJae and Pinmei. In the first story, told by Pinmei to Yanna, Lady Meng, and Yishan, Auntie Meiya's simple gift to King KaiJae's ancestor is more meaningful to the king than any of the more expensive or fancy gifts and brings great joy to his heart because it is given out of pure selflessness. Yanna draws inspiration from the message of selflessly serving others that the story has, and is moved to look for the king's son in the emperor's encampment. The Story of the Green Tiger is told by both KaiJae and Pinmei, and is the first incident where two different characters share storytelling duties, and in the process gain new insights into the story they have been telling. By telling the story, Pinmei is able to remind KaiJae of his family's honor, which inspired him to give them the Paper of Answers, even though it means that KaiJae will not be able to help the emperor the next time he visits the City of Blinding Moonlight, and in all likelihood, will mean that KaiJae will be killed by the emperor.

The remaining story in this section, told by Amah, explores the difference between being immortal and being invincible, and also introduces the idea that few are truly worthy of having immortality. As the magistrate says when the emperor in the story orders him killed: "But that peach was given to you by the Queen Mother to give you time to



become worthy of immortality. Do you think she would be pleased if the first thing you do upon receiving it is to order me to death?" (155). The emperor in the story admits the truth of that quote, however it is not told in the story whether the magistrate is spared or not.

The story King KaiJae tells about Lady Meng's husband gives insight into how the emperor has gained both strength and invincibility. Lady Meng left the Iron Rod in her husband's shirt in the form of a needle, and when the emperor rips the shirt off of her husband, he acquires the Iron Rod. The added strength and invincibility makes him such a formidable force that he torments even the very earth itself. As KaiJae says: "Now that he is emperor, the mountains bleed red where he has whipped them to make room for his Vast Wall" (128).

Yanna is bold and impulsive while Pinmei is timid and often afraid to take action, and in this section they serve as foils to one another. They both go the emperor's camp to save someone of importance, which suggests they find themselves in the middle; Yanna could use some of Pinmei's discretion, and Pinmei could use some of Yanna's boldness and determination. Pinmei is further given mouse characteristics, such as when "she tossed her braid, which had always reminded her of a long mouse tail" (149). A further contrast is seen between the Black Tortoise of Winter and Pinmei. The Black Tortoise of Winter is just starting to realize that "Perhaps it was time for him to ask for help" (172), whereas Pinmei is just starting to explore what it means to be self-reliant.

## Discussion Question 1

What does the swapped narration of the story of the Green Tiger say about the nature of shared stories?

## Discussion Question 2

What does the story about the fish bringing joy to the heart of king say about the nature of gift giving and leadership?

## Discussion Question 3

How do Yanna and Pinmei compare with each other? Do their strengths and weaknesses overlap, or do they compliment each other?

## Vocabulary

mournful, starkness, meandering, appreciation, expectant, tribute, lively, hastily, wistful, lacquered, catastrophe, deference, taut, bellow, self-assurance, yielding, opulence, infernal, resentment



## Section 4, Chapters 37-47

### Summary

King KaiJae showed Pinmei, Yishan, and Lady Meng out of the City of Blinding Moonlight through a secret door. Before they left, he gave them the Paper of Answers, and when Pinmei protested that the emperor would likely kill KaiJae without the paper, KaiJae told Pinmei that she had reminded him that "there are fates worse than death" (202). Afterwards, they were rushed out of the king's palace and into the city, where they struggled to find a direction. They were welcomed into the House of Wu by Haiyi, a servant with a horribly scarred face who rebuffed some soldiers who were looking for the children. Haiyi provided them with food, and when Lady Meng told her that her masters must be very kind, Haiyi informed her that they were anything but kind, and then asked Pinmei to share "The Story of the Scars of the Stingy Rice." In the story, a rich, greedy lord refused to share his good fortune with an old man, and the old man punished the lord and his household with stinging grains of sand that left small white scars. When she was offered sympathy at her plight, Haiyi told them that she was the servant who beat the old man because she was too afraid to stand against her master. Haiyi felt that perhaps by taking in the children and Lady Meng, she could make amends.

The trio was rudely awakened later by the Masters of the House of Wu, who were attacking Haiyi for welcoming the children into the household. To thwart their attack, Pinmei offered them Amah's jade bracelet if they promised to never beat Haiyi again, and they greedily accepted it. During the attack, the Masters threw soup on Haiyi's face, and Lady Meng gave her the Paper of Answers to wipe her face by accident, thinking it was a handkerchief. After wiping her face with the Paper of Answers, Haiyi's face instantly cleared of scars and left behind a pile of uncooked rice. The Masters return, and after seeing that her face was cleared of scars, they snatched the paper and tried to clear their own faces unsuccessfully. Instead, they were transformed into monkeys to the amusement of everyone else present.

Afterwards, Yishan and Pinmei decided to go to Sea Bottom, the kingdom of the Sea King. Lady Meng told them she would show them the way, but first she called for BaiMa, who took them to the edge of the sea. There, Lady Meng informed them that she would be going to the Vast Wall to look for information about her husband's death.

Resolved to ask for help, the Black Tortoise of Winter bit off a piece of his tongue. The piece of tongue turned into a snake and headed towards the Sea King to inform him of the Black Tortoise of Winter's ordeal.



## Analysis

In this section, another critical element of the monomyth occurs, and that is that the mentor, Lady Meng, leaves Pinmei. Pinmei has been growing steadily in her assertiveness and ability to stand up for herself, and she has reached the point in her character development that it is time for her to be fully independent. The final step is when Pinmei stands up for Haiyi to the Masters of the House of Wu. Pinmei even goes so far as to offer the Masters a cherished possession, and considering it is the last physical link she has with her beloved grandmother, giving the Masters the jade bracelet is a huge sacrifice.

A theme of *When the Sea Turned to Silver* is family influence, and in this section that family influence drives the actions of King KaiJae, who is reminded by Pinmei's stories that dishonoring his family is a fate worse than death. Lady Meng's dedication to her husband, even after learning of his death, drives her to be noble and selfless, and this influences Pinmei's actions as well. Despite the anguish of giving the Masters the jade bracelet and its deeply symbolic meaning to Pinmei- "like Amah's voice waking her in the morning" (223), Pinmei realizes that giving them the bracelet to protect Haiyi is "[what] Amah would want me to [do]" (223).

The only story within this section is "The Story of the Scars of the Stingy Rice," in which enchanted grains of rice inflict scars on everyone in the House of Wu who lacks a strong moral grounding. This curse makes the moral failings of its targets apparent, and how the different victims respond to their affliction gives great insight into their character. Haiyi responds by offering charity the next time she has the opportunity to do so, but her Masters have not learned the same lesson, and as such they are punished even more severely when they are turned into monkeys by the Paper of Answers. The Paper of Answer is revealed to not only be a source of wisdom and guidance, but also a means to reveal the inner natures of anyone who contacts it. Because Haiyi has learned the lesson of not blindly following her cruel Masters' uncharitable orders, her scars disappear. However, Haiyi's masters are revealed to be the vain, covetous creatures they truly are. That the Masters are such terrible people is foreshadowed by the fact that according to Haiyi, they are "highly favored by the emperor" (207).

## Discussion Question 1

Many of the characters are often described with animal characteristics, however some notable characters such as Yishan and King KaiJae are not. Do you think this says anything about the nature of those characters?

## Discussion Question 2

What does the effects of the Paper of Answer reveal about Haiyi and the Masters of the House of Wu?



## Discussion Question 3

How has Lady Meng been a role model and mentor to Pinmei? Do you think there are additional reasons why she leaves to pursue her own path, beyond what she told Pinmei and Yishan?

## Vocabulary

reckless, nuisances, translucent, flaunted, auspicious, amends, weary, sinuous, persistent, chastised, liltng





## Section 5, Chapters 48-60

### Summary

Yishan and Pinmei headed to the sea, and as soon as BaiMa's hooves touched the water, he transformed into a dragon horse. While underwater, a mussel guided them to the Crystal Palace, and they were met at the gate by Joy to the Heart. Yishan and Pinmei were shocked by his human form, and Joy to the Heart explained that was to honor the Sea King. Joy to the Heart then guided Yishan and Pinmei to the Sea King. The Sea King had become alarmed at the length of the winter and the freezing of the water, and had lit beacons to call for aid from the world above, meaning the land. The Sea King had sent a call out to the Storyteller, and was surprised to see Pinmei and Yishan. During their conversation, Pinmei was amazed at the changes in Yishan - he seemed to take on a new level of presence and authority when talking with the Sea King. The Sea King brought in the snake that arose from the Black Tortoise of Winter's tongue. The snake was not able to offer details, only that the Black Tortoise of Winter needed help.

While they tried to figure out what had happened to the Black Tortoise of Winter and how to help him, Pinmei worked up the courage to ask about the Luminous Stone That Lights the Night. The Sea King confirmed that he had the Luminous Stone That Lights the Night in his possession, as well as the other items left behind by Nuwa. Namely, the Iron Rod created by a strand of her hair and the Red Stone that came from a drop of her blood. The Sea King took them to his garden and showed them the Luminous Stone, which they then realized was, in fact, the moon. While they stared down at it, the Sea King told Yishan and Pinmei the story about how he created it from a dragon's pearl and how he felt that it was meant to be shared, not owned by any one being. Pinmei then had the realization that taking the moon to the emperor would be a horrible thing to do, but Yishan was determined to help his friend and he moved as if to try to capture the moon. The Sea King taunted Yishan for thinking he could grab the moon, and Yishan relented, but then Yishan took back a bracelet he gave to Pinmei and attempted to use it to lasso the moon. This horrified the Sea King and Pinmei, and Pinmei asked Yishan to put the moon back. Defeated, the Yishan and Pinmei then decided to attempt to use the Paper of Answers to find a way to save Amah since they would not be able to give the emperor the Luminous Stone That Lights the Night.

Yishan and Pinmei pulled out the Paper of Answers, and in that one opportunity to ask the Paper a question, Yishan asked how the the Black Tortoise of Winter had been captured. Pinmei was alarmed, but Yishan explained that he had figured out that the only way the Black Tortoise could be confined was with the Iron Rod, which the emperor had stolen. This act was what has made the emperor so powerful. The Sea King sent servants to confirm that the Iron Rod was missing, and afterwards, the Sea King began to put together a plan to take the Iron Rod back from the emperor with help from Yishan and Pinmei. He began by turning into a dragon and giving Pinmei and Yishan a ride to the Capital City.



In the dungeons, the emperor had revealed why he kept the stonecutter alive: he was to carve the emperor's deeds into stones, and the stones would then be used to confine the Black Tortoise of Winter, to the horror of Amah.

## Analysis

BaiMa is the first character who is revealed to be much more than what he seems when he became a longma, or dragon horse, as soon as they enter the water. Similar reveals are in store. The first being they encounter in Sea Bottom is Joy to the Heart and, in this section, it is made clear that the young girl who gave Joy to the Heart to the king is, in fact, Pinmei's Auntie Meiya. Another aspect of this lesson in generosity is also seen in the Sea King's philosophy that something as special as The Luminous Stone That Lights the Night - meaning the moon - is meant to be shared by all beings. The Luminous Stone That Lights the Night also symbolizes knowledge, which can be created or earned by one person, but the positive effects of that knowledge are best shared with all mankind. As the Sea King says "It was never meant to belong to one being. It belongs to everyone in the sea, sky, and earth. That is why it floats in the Heavenly Lake, so all can see it" (272).

The idea of selflessness is further developed when Pinmei realized that the only way to save Amah is to save everyone. "Suddenly Pinmei thought of Lady Meng and the slave workers of the Vast Wall, the hollow eyes of the king of the City of Bright Moonlight, the tearstained faces of the village children, and Suya's emptying rice jar" (284). By doing something that benefits others, Pinmei will also be rewarded herself.

The idea that immortality is a gift to be given is further developed in this section, and in particular, it is characterized as something that can only be given by mortals. As Joy to the Heart says, "I guess it's because it's the mortals who create memories that last" (258). The nature of this arrangement suggests that immortals, for all of their power and wisdom, still need mortals. It is also foreshadowing that Yishan is more than what he seems, as earlier in the novel Amah described him as not remembering all that he knew. It also hints that the emperor will not get the sort of immortality that he is so desperate to take by force, because he is seeking it so aggressively from immortals and supernatural beings. More broadly, it supports the central theme of the novel, that the only means to achieve immortality is through living on in stories.

## Discussion Question 1

In Section 5, Chapters 48-60, how is Pinmei starting to show that she has found her own courage and resolve?

## Discussion Question 2

How does Section 5, Chapters 48-60 continue to develop the relationship between mortals and immortals?



## Discussion Question 3

How do physical transformations mirror plot shifts? What sort of indications does this give the reader of internal transformations for the characters?

## Vocabulary

hostile, callous, humble, iridescent, undaunted, abominably, emanated, surreptitious, dominion, billowing, ethereal, iridescent



## Section 6, Chapters 61-76

### Summary

The Stonecutter had begun to work on the stones for the emperor's wall, and when he complained about the quality of his tools, Amah told him "The Story of the Magic Paintbrush." The tale is about a painter who created a paintbrush that whenever it was used, the paintings came to life. However, the consequences were unpredictable, and after a few mishaps, the painter needed to escape the soldiers of his local magistrate, so he painted a picture and jumped into it to get away. Shortly afterwards, the emperor visited the dungeon in disguise, and he requested a story from Amah. She told him the story of the mythical character Haiyi, who created chaos in his village with his strong will and physical strength. Haiyi rid his village of two evils, but in doing so he became an evil and threat himself to village, and when this was pointed out to him, he exiled himself from his village.

Pinmei and Yishan arrived in Capital City just in time to discover that Lady Meng had told the emperor she would only remarry after her deceased husband was given a proper sea burial. After he was buried however, she refused to marry the emperor, saying that she said "I could only marry after my husband was buried" (308), not when her husband was buried. Lady Meng then jumped into the water to escape the emperor and his troops. Before she vanished completely into the depths, Pinmei saw a fish tail. Afterwards, Pinmei began to doubt Yishan, feeling that his focus on the Iron Rod meant that he had no interest in saving Amah. In that moment of doubt, Pinmei remembered that Amah told her she should always trust Yishan. When Yishan pulled out his handkerchief, which at one point he had offered to Lady Meng to dry her tears, they were shocked to discover a Luminous Stone that filled the room they were in with light. They realized that they had what they needed to free Amah, and they began to create a plan.

They went to the palace bearing the stone, and after some reluctance from the guard, they were shown to the emperor. Pinmei requested to see Amah, and the emperor decided to have her brought to the courtyard of the Hall of Imperial Longevity, where they would meet her. Along the way to that hall, Pinmei realized how little trust the emperor had for anyone, and Yishan pointed out to her the Black Tortoise Gate, which presumably had the Black Tortoise confined behind it. At last they reached the gate, and Pinmei finally saw Amah. Amah had lost weight and aged during their separation, and after her story about Haiyi, the emperor had had her gagged to prevent her from speaking in his presence. The emperor insisted they wait for nightfall before he received the stone, and in the meantime, he requested a story from Pinmei. Pinmei then told the story of the emperor's wall and how he made his people suffer severely during its construction. The provocative story enraged the emperor and it was just long enough to last until darkness fell. With the gathering darkness, Pinmei noticed a glint from something that looked like a pin in the emperor's collar. The group was momentarily dazzled by the Luminous Stone, and in that moment, Amah pulled off her gag and



warned Pinmei that it was a trap. Amah was brutally struck by one of the emperor's guards and she fell to the ground.

The emperor then confirmed that he was, indeed, hoping to lure out the Ginseng Boy, who turned out to be Yishan all along. Yishan threw a stone at the emperor, but the stone was caught by a monkey that could not handle the weight of the stone. The emperor's guards piled on top of Yishan, and he was taunted by the emperor. The emperor announced he would kill Yishan, but Pinmei jumped on the emperor, focusing on his robes while she searched for the pin she had noticed earlier. She found the pin and pulled the Iron Rod off the Black Tortoise of Winter, freeing him. Chaos ensued afterwards; everyone was knocked to their knees. The Black Tortoise of Winter crushed the gate that contained him, and the emperor was thrown into a large pillar and killed. Pinmei noticed that the Iron Rod had become planted in the ground beneath her, and it was the only ground that was stable in the area. Afterwards, there was a silent calm, and Pinmei ran to Amah. Amah was disturbingly still, but Yishan pricked his finger with the Iron Rod, and with the golden droplet that he let into a rabbit rice bowl, he revived Amah. Doing so aged Yishan, and after Amah was revived, Yishan had become an old man. Yishan threw the rabbit rice bowl at the emperor, and it covered him and then began to turn into a mountain. Pinmei was confused about how the Paper of Answers could say that the emperor would become immortal only for him to die during the confrontation, and Yishan answered that he would become immortalized in stories.

Pinmei, Amah, and Yishan headed home, and along the way they stopped to visit Sifen, Sai, and Suya in the City of Bright Moonlight. Sifen was revealed to be the son of the KaiJae, and it was also revealed that Yanna has been reunited with her father. Before she left him, Pinmei promised Sifen she would come back with a story, and the novel ends with Pinmei about to tell the story of When the Sea Turned to Silver.

## Analysis

There are three stories in this section, and the first, "The Story of the Magic Paint Brush," begins to foreshadow the fate of the emperor. As the Stonecutter says of the greedy, arrogant rulers: "All those characters could even be Our Exalted Majesty himself" (300). Like many of the previous stories, "The Story of the Magic Paint Brush" featured a magistrate who is trying to punish an artisan or craftsman, and the magistrate comes to a bad end. Similar to all the rulers from these stories, the pride and arrogance of the emperor becomes his downfall. The stories that he looks down on for so much of the novel become his only means of immortality, as he is killed almost immediately after Pinmei removes the Iron Rod from his robes, and as Yishan points out: "He never understood immortality is a gift that has to be given. A gift you [Pinmei] will give him, even though he does not deserve it" (358). The tale of the emperor's actions become the tale that Pinmei starts at the end of the novel, and is to be titled "When the Sea Turned to Silver."

Because there is a connection between the natural, supernatural, and human world, the disturbance caused by the emperor confining the Black Tortoise of Winter is felt on all



levels, and in the final climax, all three reacted in the dramatic conclusion. "The Sky bellowed" (348) when Pinmei removes the pin, and "A gigantic, invisible force was crushing the Black Tortoise Gate" (349). That "invisible force" is undoubtedly the Black Tortoise breaking free of his prison. The earth begins "throwing everyone around her like shaken droplets of water" (349), and after the emperor is killed in the chaos, nature is immediately calm. "It was the calm, grateful quiet of one seeing a friend returning home," (351). The Black Tortoise of Winter has returned to his rightful place, and the balance has been restored.

The other two stories are told because they are intentionally provocative to the emperor. In "The Story of Our Mountain," Pinmei indirectly challenges the emperor by summarizing everything that has been part of the story they are in, starting with the failure of the emperor to receive the blessing of the Mountain Spirit. Pinmei finishes the story by saying that all of the emperor's subjects can see that he is mad, and that it is "a cruel, ruthless madness" (342). Because the story has yet to conclude, her ending does not have a great climax because it is incomplete. Amah tells the "The Story of the Three Evils" because the emperor reminds her of Haiyi, the protagonist of that story. Amah tells the story in an attempt to rid the empire of the evil of the emperor by encouraging him to leave, but the emperor dismisses the story as "Nonsense!" and "Ridiculous!" (325). This shows that the emperor, like the rulers in so many of the stories, refuses to learn from the mistakes of others and is therefore condemned to repeat history.

In this section two characters - Lady Meng and Yishan - are finally revealed in their true forms. For both, there have been hints that they are more than what they have seemed. When Lady Meng jumps into the sea rather than be married to the emperor, she is revealed as the Sea King's daughter as her silhouette in the water, which "was graceful and lithe...But what made Pinmei gape was that as the woman turned to swim away, she distinctly flipped the tail of a fish" (310). Yishan is likewise revealed to be the Ginseng Boy and the actual target of the emperor's scheming.

## Discussion Question 1

Yishan tells Pinmei that immortality is a gift that can only be given, it cannot be stolen. How does the fate of the emperor support this claim?

## Discussion Question 2

What foreshadowing in Section 6, Chapters 61-76 hints that Yishan is more than just a boy?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does Lady Meng impact Pinmei's actions in this final section (Section 6, Chapters 61-76)?



## Vocabulary

dismay, unscrupulous, ingots, clamored, ruthless, trample, vindication, tranquil, exquisite, vague, entourage, limp, tyrant



# Characters

## Pinmei

Pinmei is the protagonist of the story. She is a young woman living in the mountains with her grandmother Amah, with whom she shares a love for stories and an affinity for storytelling. In the beginning of the story, she is quiet and timid with everyone except her grandmother, whom she teases but only when they are alone. Between her long braid and squeaky voice, she is often described as mouselike.

The events of *When the Sea Turned to Silver* follow many of the steps of monomyth with Pinmei as the hero, starting with the "Call to Adventure" when she leaves her village to rescue Amah, and continuing with her meeting of her mentor, Lady Meng. Through the events, Pinmei finds her courage and her voice as she transitions from a squeaky-voiced mouse girl to a young woman who brings down the emperor through her insightful action.

## Amah

Amah is Pinmei's grandmother and caretaker. She is known throughout the empire as the 'Storyteller,' and her reputation for storytelling is what makes her a target for the emperor's soldiers. Her kidnapping and imprisonment is the impetus that Pinmei needs to develop into an emboldened young woman capable of saving the empire. Amah has an broad and impressive knowledge of both stories and folklore, which enabled her tell compelling stories full of critical life lessons and messages. She also has many stories based on her own life experiences, some of which explain why, despite being so revered and sought after for her storytelling, she chooses to live on a remote mountainside away from the city. While imprisoned, she tells stories to the Stonecutter.

## Yishan, or The Ginseng Boy

Yishan is Pinmei's close friend and confidante, and unknown to her, also the Ginseng Boy from Amah's tales. He is especially close with Pinmei's aunt, Meiya. Throughout the events of the story, he is remarkably comfortable in the presence of both immortals and kings as well as the servants. Yishan's role in the monomyth is that of 'helper,' as he is selflessly devoted to helping Pinmei achieve her goal of rescuing her grandmother, to the point that he is almost tempted to steal the Luminous Stone that Lights the Night, i.e. the moon, on Pinmei's behalf. During the climax, it is revealed that the emperor kidnapped Amah as a means to acquire the Ginseng Boy, which makes the emperor both invincible and resistant to aging.





## The Tiger King/Emperor

The emperor is the antagonist, and he is determined to make himself immortal. He orders his soldiers to attack Pinmei's village and kidnap Amah. Before he became emperor, he earned the name the 'Tiger King' because of his ferocity and aggression. Prior to the events in *When the Sea Turned to Silver*, he had several other kings killed, as well as the previous emperor, so that he could become emperor himself.

The emperor is obsessed with immortality and yet despite being told by the Paper of Answers that it is achieved through stories, the emperor sees stories as little more than potential sources of information. Despite this attitude, he does achieve this sort of immortality at the conclusion of the novel.

## Lady Meng/The Sea King's Daughter

Lady Meng is the daughter of the Sea King, and similar to Yishan, much more than meets the eye. She is extraordinarily beautiful, and because her father swallowed the red stone, she is "born in Nuwa's likeness" (256), meaning that she has a fishtail when in water. Lady Meng inadvertently provides the means for the emperor to acquire the Iron Rod when she gives her husband a shirt with the Iron Rod woven into it in the form of a knitting needle. The shirt protects her husband, but when he is taken captive by the emperor, the emperor steals the shirt from Lady Meng's husband and thus acquires the Iron Rod that he uses to imprison the Black Tortoise of Winter.

## BaiMa

BaiMa is Lady Meng's horse, and is more than just a mere horse. He is endowed with great strength and endurance, and is capable effortlessly carrying Lady Meng, Yishan, and Pinmei all together. When BaiMa takes Pinmei and Yishan to Sea Bottom, he transforms first into a Longma and then into a statue, which is his final form.

## The Black Tortoise of Winter

The Black Tortoise of Winter is a mythological creature that controls the winter weather. He has been imprisoned by the emperor, thus making the winter last unnaturally long. To free himself, he bites off his tongue and sends it to the Sea King, who comes to his aid.

## The Sea King

The Sea King is Lady Meng's father. He has in his possession both the Iron Rod and the Luminous Stone that Lights the World.



## **The Stonecutter**

The Stonecutter is Amah's cellmate and audience during her imprisonment.

## **King KaiJae**

The king is of the City of Bright Moonlight and is the owner and reader of the Paper of Answers. He shelters Yishan, Pinmei, and Lady Meng in the City of Bright Moonlight until it is attacked by the emperor.

## **Yanna**

Yanna is a servant to King KaiJae. She is inspired by one of Pinmei's stories to attempt a rescue for the king's son from the emperor's encampment. Yanna contrasts with Pinmei in that she lacks restraint and is often both bold and overconfident.

## **Haiyi**

Haiyi is a servant in the House of Wu. When Pinmei, Yishan, and Lady Meng are trying to escape from the City of Blinding Moonlight, Haiyi welcomes them in and gives them her own portions of food. Her face is horribly scarred from an attack by scarring rice, and when she is accidentally given the Paper of Answers, the scars are wiped clear.

## **Masters of the House of Wu**

The Masters of the House of Wu are greedy and uncharitable. They beat Haiyi for giving shelter to Lady Meng, Yishan, and Pinmei until Pinmei offers them her jade bracelet. They then take notice of the Paper of Answers and the effect it has on Haiyi's scars. They grab the paper, but instead of erasing their scars, it turns them into monkeys.

## **Sai, Suya,**

Sai and Suya are villagers that give Yishan and Pinmei shelter when they first leave the Mountain Village.

## **Aunt Meiya**

Aunt Meiya is Pinmei's aunt and Amah's daughter. She is close friends with Yishan for all of her life, and as a child she gives Joy to the Heart to the king of the City of Blinding Moonlight.

## Sifen

Pinmei and Yishan meet Sifen in the village when they first set out, and he pleads with Pinmei to tell him a story. This gives her the first opportunity to tell a story herself. At the very end, Sifen is revealed to be the son of the king of the City of Blinding Moonlight.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## The Luminous Stone That Lights the Night

The Luminous Stone That Lights the Night symbolizes knowledge and how when it is shared by all, it is literally illuminating. Because knowledge is passed down as stories, it is a means to become immortalized. Appropriately, the luminous stone gives its owner immortality.

## The Iron Rod

The Iron Rod represents strength and determination. When it is at its maximum, it can contend with even the mightiest elements of nature, however, when it is used for selfish reasons, it can be turned against the person who has it in their possession.

## The Paper of Answers

The Paper of Answers represents the truth, which is rarely revealed openly and can also be incredibly variable in its effect from person to person.

## The Black Tortoise of Winter

The Black Tortoise of Winter represents the mightiest elements of nature, and his predicament shows how even the most powerful aspects of nature can be twisted by human will. When that happens, everyone suffers.

## The Tiger King/Emperor

The Tiger King or emperor represents the most basic elements of human nature, including greed, aggression, and a lack of compassion. Unlike many high-minded characters who recognize that stories are of great value both for entertainment and enlightenment, the emperor sees little value in stories except as a source of information, and this small-minded level of thinking becomes his undoing.

## The Jade Bracelet

The Jade Bracelet represents the connection Pinmei and Amah share. When Pinmei first finds it, it is a sign that she is on the right path. When Pinmei gives the bracelet to the Masters of the House of Wu, the deciding factor is that it is something Amah would want. The Masters of the House of Wu want it because of its momentary value, but all other characters recognize it as something that is of high sentimental value.



## Joy to the Heart

Joy to the Heart represents both the beauty and joy of simplicity, and also the happiness that comes from selflessly serving others. When he is presented by Auntie Meiya to the king, he is the simplest but most worthwhile tribute that he receives because he was given out of pure goodwill. Later, when Joy to the Heart is in service to the Sea King, he is a lesson in the pure joy that comes from loyally serving a worthy master.

## Rabbit Rice Bowl

The rabbit rice bowl, similar to the jade bracelet, symbolizes Pinmei's connection to her family, but in particular it represents both Pinmei and Amah's connection to when family history and local history overlapped. The rabbit rice bowl is a gift from nobility after their family is involved in regional affairs, and appropriately, it will become a mountain that shrouds the emperor.

## The Tongue of the Black Tortoise of Winter/Snake

The Tongue of the Black Tortoise of Winter, or the Snake, represents humility and the value of knowing when to ask for help. The Black Tortoise of Winter bites off his tongue when he realizes there is nothing he can do to free himself and that he requires assistance.

## Lady Meng

Lady Meng fulfills the mentor role from the monomyth. Throughout her journeys with Pinmei, she models the poise, courage, and dignity that Pinmei needs to develop in order to be successful in her quest.



# Settings

## The Mountain Village

The Mountain Village is where Pinmei lives with Amah at the beginning of the story. It is remote, and their nearest neighbors are quite far away. Yishan and the Mountain Spirit - which is, in fact, also Yishan but Pinmei does not discover this until the very end - lives further up the mountain. Where Pinmei and Amah live symbolizes the space that storytellers occupy in between the supernatural and the rest of humanity.

## The City of Blinding Moonlight

The City of Blinding Moonlight is where Pinmei and Yishan first head towards after Amah is kidnapped. They are guided there by a charmed mussel to meet the ruler of the city, King KaiJae who is a close friend of Lady Meng. The city has been attacked by the emperor, who frequently visits the city in order to have King KaiJae answer his questions using the Paper of Answers.

The House of Wu, where Pinmei, Yishan, and Lady Meng take refuge after leaving King KaiJae, is in the City of Blinding of Moonlight.

## Palace Dungeons

The palace dungeons are where Amah is imprisoned along with the Stonecutter. It is "cold, but not bitterly so" (107), as well as sparsely lit and made of "earthen walls" (107).

## Sea Bottom

Sea Bottom is the kingdom of the Sea King, which Pinmei and Yishan travel to in hopes of finding a Luminous Stone. "All of it glowed with an ethereal light" (251) and the Sea King resides in the Crystal Palace, which is made of crystal brick. All who reside in the Sea Bottom take on the forms of aquatic creatures. Within the Crystal Palace is a garden with "flowers of unimaginable colors, their closed blossoms like polished shells" (269), and bridge over the Heavenly Lake. The bottom of the Heavenly Lake is the sky seen by mortals, and within that Heavenly Lake is the Luminous Stone that Lights the Night, also known as the moon.

## Capital City

Capital City is where the emperor resides and where the final climax occurs. It is also where Amah and the Black Tortoise of Winter are imprisoned, and the location of where the emperor's great wall is being built. It is well guarded by the emperor's men. The



space within the Imperial Palace is richly adorned but harsh and intimidating. The city's design mirrors the cold, imposing power of the emperor. "They stepped into the immense courtyard with red walls and columns, carved green and gold. Five marble bridges lay ahead of them, their jutting posts like bones of a skeleton" (327). Compared to Sea Bottom, Capital City and the Imperial Palace are "cold and imposing" (328).



# Themes and Motifs

## Characters are More than What They Seem/Transformations

The author uses multiple characters who are not what they first appear to be in order to remind readers that appearances and first impressions can be deceiving. Many characters have hidden traits and characteristics that are unexpected at first glance, or through the course of the narrative, they undergo a transformation and develop new traits and skills, thus becoming something more.

For instance, in the beginning of the novel, Pinmei is mouselike and timid. She is close with Amah, but as Amah says, "When I tell people how you taunt an old woman, they don't believe me. 'Little Pinmei?' they say. 'She's just a mouse'" (8). Over the course of events and under the guidance of Lady Meng, mousey Pinmei finds both herself and her courage, and those facets are essential to her defeating the emperor in the climax.

More commonly, characters such as Yishan, Lady Meng, and BaiMa are encountered in one form and are later revealed to be something far greater than what they appeared to be. Often they turn out to be legendary figures and even supernatural immortals. In some cases, such as BaiMa, this is a final transformation. Joy to the Heart is delighted to see BaiMa as a longma in Sea Bottom, because as he says "He was like me, a stone that dreams of being something else" (257). He also adds that such a transformation requires help, implying that Pinmei and Yishan are a critical part in this transformation. That BaiMa is more than just a horse is first foreshadowed by his appearance, but also by the way he changes almost instantly to be able to handle two additional riders. By aiding both Yanna and Pinmei and their adventures, BaiMa is rewarded with her immortal form as a longma.

Both Yishan and Lady Meng undergo changes that are less transformations and more revelations of their true forms. When Lady Meng first meets Yishan and Pinmei, she is an incredibly beautiful, fearless woman, and when she charms a mussel that guides them to the City of Blinding Moonlight, she shows them that she has unexpected skills and knowledge. Her reaction to Pinmei's story about the widow's son and his wife provides a more specific hint as her identity, and the final reveal is when Pinmei gets a brief glimpse of her fish form before Lady Meng returns to her father's kingdom. Pinmei gets hints that Yishan is more than what he seems, however, she is caught completely off-guard that he is, in fact, the Ginseng Boy from Amah's stories: "Pinmei suddenly felt as if she were seeing him for the first time" (345).

## Stories and Immortality

Many characters have differing views of how to obtain immortality, but the author final message on the subject is that immortality is only really obtained through becoming a





part of a story. In every one of Amah's and Pinmei's stories, the central character is often well-known to their audience, despite living in the distant past, and their deeds the stuff of legend. The lessons they learn from their exploits become cautionary tales or critical reminders for how to live a moral and purposeful life. These stories often emphasize critical life skills, such as humility, selflessness, generosity, and personal sacrifice to help others. These life skills are timeless, and for characters such as the emperor, who are lacking them, they repeat the mistakes that have been made by historical figures.

As Joy to the Heart says, only mortals have the necessary memory capabilities to give someone the gift of immortality, as immortals are too forgetful. It is noticeable in the novel that despite such larger than life figures such as the Sea King, the Ginseng Boy, and The Sea King's daughter, Lady Meng, while these characters are key figures in the stories told, they do not tell those stories themselves. The Storyteller, Amah, is so revered for her storytelling prowess that she is "honored by kings, and even invited to reside at the Imperial Palace" (108). The new emperor recognizes the value of the information in her stories because he repeatedly asks her to tell them to her, however, he is dismissive of the lessons they contain and refuses to learn from them, to his peril.

As is seen in Amah's stories about Pinmei's mother and Auntie Meiya, sometimes a story is means of keeping the memory of that person alive. Grace Lin discusses the importance of such stories in the Author's Note, especially for their role in the grieving process. As she says, "Stories are what connect us to our past and carry us to our future. They are what we cherish and what we remember" (370). Within the novel, Amah in particular embraces this philosophy by telling the stories of her daughter, Auntie Meiya. The stories she tells about Auntie Meiya as a child and as a dying woman are simple: a young girl presents a gift to a king or she refuses to let a beloved playmate be destroyed by her aunt and uncle. By telling these stories, Amah keeps the story of her beloved daughter alive.

## **How the Actions of One Person Impact Everyone**

The author warns readers of the widespread consequences of their actions; either good or bad, the actions of one character can have resounding effects on everyone. Lessons about both selfish rulers and self-sacrificing heroes abound, starting with Amah's story about how the goddess Nuwa sacrificed herself for the good of mankind to the conclusion in which the emperor's greed for immortality leads to his downfall. Other examples of characters who make personal sacrifices include King KaiJae, who decides that maintaining his family's honor by ceasing to assist the emperor is more important than his life.

There are numerous tales about selfish individuals who try to forcefully take immortality and meet unfortunate ends foreshadow his fate. This includes Amah's tale about the husband and wife who get so busy arguing about who is going to benefit from the Ginseng Boy that the Ginseng Boy is able to run away. Pinmei absorbs the lessons from these stories, and this becomes evident when Yishan and Pinmei have the opportunity



to steal The Luminous Stone That Lights the Night. The Sea King is horrified that they would even attempt to steal the moon, especially as the Sea King, according to a previous story, was “the great hero who had refused to hurt anyone, even to save himself” (277). This is further challenged when Pinmei and Yishan have the opportunity to ask the Paper of Answers a question. Pinmei is appalled that Yishan asks about the Black Tortoise of Winter rather than Amah, however, when she reflects on all of the suffering she has seen during their adventure, she realizes that stopping the emperor is much larger than rescuing Amah. “Suddenly Pinmei thought of Lady Meng and the slave workers of the Vast Wall, the hollow eyes of the king of the City of Blinding Moonlight, the tearstained faces of the village children, and Sua’s emptying rice jar” (285).

To emphasize the importance of thinking and acting selflessly, it is only by saving the empire by freeing the Black Tortoise of Winter that Pinmei is able to save Amah. Her selfless actions free the Black Tortoise of Winter, which returns balance to the supernatural, human, and natural worlds, and brings much needed relief to everyone in the empire. By removing the Iron Rod from the emperor's robes, Pinmei earns her own place as a hero in a folk story.

## The Powerful Influence of Family History

The author demonstrates how important knowing and understanding one's family history is through the many characters that have ancestors that play critical roles in the stories that Amah and Pinmei tell, including KaiJae, the Stonecutter, Lady Meng and even their own family. The act of storytelling is not just a means to immortality, but is also a means for teaching valuable lessons as well as preserving the legacy of ancestors. KaiJae is reminded that dishonoring his family's legacy is worse than death by Pinmei's story about the Green Tiger. The very first story that Amah tells the Stonecutter is about another stonecutter who fails to please a king and is punished. Upon hearing the story, the Stonecutter is able to amend the ending, telling Amah that the stonecutter from the tale actually survived, and is, in fact, that Stonecutter's ancestor.

Prior to being close friends with Pinmei, Yishan is very close with Pinmei's Auntie Meiya. Despite never appearing in the novel, Auntie Meiya is a powerful influence both on her mother, Amah, and on Yishan, who is so close to the family that he might as well be a part of it. It is because of this closeness with Auntie Meiya that Yishan sacrifices his youth to save Amah, despite her protests. As he says, “You know this is exactly what she would have wished me to do. Besides, what is another ninety-nine years?” (355).

Very little is mentioned about Pinmei's parents other than that her mother died during childbirth and that her father's family refused to take her in. Amah is the only family that Pinmei has ever known and is a very powerful influence on Pinmei's actions. Pinmei constantly looks to Amah's guidance in times of doubt, whether it be from Amah's stories or as direction for action she needs to take. Initially, she has a physical object to remind her of Amah's guidance and wisdom. The final deciding factor in the decision to give up the jade bracelet comes from the realization that it is what Amah would have wanted. “How often had she clung to this bracelet? The jade so pure and clear... Her



hand tightened around the bracelet and its perfect circle pressed back into her fingers as if resisting. Amah would want me to, Pinmei thought” (223). By giving up the physical reminder of Amah’s wisdom, Pinmei instead makes the drive to fulfill Amah’s wishes internal and self-driven, which indicates that she has fully embraced the lessons from Amah.

## Connections Between the Natural, Supernatural, and Human Worlds

The Natural, Supernatural, and human worlds are deeply intertwined and connected, the author shows throughout the novel. The line between the human world, nature, and the supernatural is blurred throughout the novel, and the ease with which characters and events shift from one realm to another suggests considerable overlap. Characters from folklore such as the Ginseng Boy and the Sea King’s daughter take human form and live among humans with few hints that they are anything more. While in that form, they are capable of doing such extraordinary things as transforming mussels into swallows that can guide them, to lassoing the moon. Additionally, these supernatural figures have strong connections with nature as represented by an identifying characteristic of an animal, the earth, or a plant. Lady Meng has a fish tail in her true form, and Yishan is both the Ginseng Boy and the Spirit of the Mountain.

Likewise, human characters are often described as having animal characteristics. Pinmei is quiet, timid, and mouselike, and in contrast, the emperor is aggressive, snarling, and predatory like a tiger. When the Masters of the House of Wu wipe their faces with the Paper of Answers, it transforms them into monkeys because they are greedy, covetous, and too base to be fully human. When Pinmei and Yishan travel to the Sea Bottom, nothing is required for them to easily slip into the mystical kingdom. The figure that transformed is the already supernatural BaiMa, who finally assumes his true form as a dragon horse or 'longma'.

All three realms are out of balance with the Black Tortoise of Winter imprisoned. The effects of the long winter are so severe that even the Sea King is worried about the impact that it will have on his people. And the human world suffers from both the harsh weather and an impending famine. When Pinmei is getting rice from their stores, she is shocked when she feels the bottom of the container. “It was too soon! She was only supposed to feel that smooth base when the tree tips were green and the swallows were awake and singing” (7). When the emperor is defeated, nature is at peace. “The wind and the sky had finally quieted, and it was not the tense, anticipating stillness of winter,” and “The moon above spread its light generously, muting ruins and wreckage” (351).



# Styles

## Point of View

The story is told from the point of view of the third person, omniscient narrator and the focus is primarily on the events involving Pinmei and her grandmother, Amah. There are also chapters focused on the struggles of the Black Tortoise of winter. Within some chapters, there are secondary stories written as if they were narrated by either Pinmei or Amah, which are also told from the third person point of view. Each view point allows Lin to tell the story of Pinmei's adventures and both Amah's and the Black Tortoise of Winter's time in captivity in parallel until the stories merge in the climax. All three characters are present during the final moments when Pinmei faces off against the emperor, and because Pinmei is the protagonist and the novel is primarily focused on her growth from a timid young girl to a strong, independent woman, the events that make up the climax are told from Pinmei's point of view.

## Language and Meaning

The language is straightforward and unaffected to intentionally recreate feeling of a folk story. Events are told as if they are a part of a mythical past, and even the most fantastical elements are told as if they are the literal truth. There is no distinction in the language used to describe events such as a mussel turning into a bird and guiding Pinmei, Yishan, and Lady Meng or Pinmei or Yishan meeting figures of legend such as the Sea King and the language used to described meeting mortal human characters such as the king of the City of Blinding Moonlight. This blurring of fantasy and reality mimics the nature of the story which is written like a story from folklore, and encourages the suspension of disbelief, which is essential for the progressing the plot.

## Structure

The story has a linear narrative with many of the elements of the monomyth (or Hero's Quest). Many chapters include shorter myth-like stories that allow Lin to further develop characters or provide historical backstory. The elements of the monomyth include a call to adventure (the quest to save Amah), meeting a mentor (Lady Meng), and winning a decisive victory (defeating the emperor and freeing the Black Tortoise of Winter) that improves the lives of others. The structure of the monomyth allows Lin to develop Pinmei's character arc through specific events that teach her specific lessons, such as humility, trust, perseverance, and most critically for Pinmei, when to take decisive action. Because the elements are familiar and universal across cultures, the structure makes specific elements, such as Lady Meng as Pinmei's mentor, and the decisive victory, recognizable and relate-able.



## Quotes

Whether you believe that or any of the things I tell you is up to you.

-- Amah (chapter 2 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** A critical aspect of Pinmei's character development is learning to determine for herself what is true and what she believes. In this quote, Amah first begins to help Pinmei make the connection from the stories she hears and what lessons Pinmei finds most personally meaningful from those stories.

Pinmei!" Yishan said in frustration. "You think and think and watch and watch. When are you going to stop watching? It's time to do something!

-- Yishan (chapter 8 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** In the beginning of the story, Pinmei is timid and mouselike, but through the events that make up this story, she finds her courage. The attack on her village is the opportunity she needs to transition from thinking and watching to actively participating and making an impact.

The little girl did her aunt and uncle a favor,' Auntie Meiya said slowly, her eyes closing. 'They would have been miserable immortals.

-- Aunt Meiya (chapter 11 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Throughout the story, the wiser characters recognize that immortality is a double-edged sword. The characters who are seeking it, such as the emperor are often represented as arrogant, greedy, or evil. Other characters, especially Amah, realize that the most worthwhile immortality one can achieve is through living on in a story.

Ah! I truly am a lucky one after all, ' the stonecutter said. 'To be in prison with the Storyteller is to not be in a prison at all.

-- The Stonecutter (chapter 14 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** The novel presents stories in several lights, ranging from a means to communicate valuable lessons or information to pure entertainment. In this quote, the Stonecutter recognizes that Amah's captivating stories are liberating and an opportunity to learn from a legendary storyteller.

The emperor was always trying to steal immortality. He never understood immortality is a gift that has to be given. A gift you will give him, even though he does not deserve it.

-- Yishan (chapter 74 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** As the Paper of Answers foretold, the emperor would become immortal, however, also as the Paper revealed, the means to achieve immortality is through living on in a story. The emperor never accepted this, and as Yishan points out, he does not deserve it.



Well, it's too bad it's just a story...but it's a good one.  
-- Yanna (chapter 24 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** This quote highlights the contrast between Yanna and Pinmei. To Pinmei, as well as other characters such as the Stonecutter, Amah, and Sifen, stories are everything and would never be dismissed as "just a story" (140). However, in contrast, Pinmei would struggle to take the bold actions that have gotten Yanna to where she is at in the king's household.

You can make time disappear. You can bring us to places we have never dreamed of. You can make us feel sorrow and joy and peace. You have great magic.  
-- The Stonecutter (chapter 27 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** In this quote, the Stonecutter describes the magic and power of the Storyteller. Good stories transcend time and remain relevant forever. They are also capable of firing the imaginations of the audience and teaching powerful lessons in empathy.

Stories!... Only that word, repeated over and over again! How could that be the secret to immortality? I even took the Storyteller too! But for nothing. Just a waste  
-- The emperor (chapter 33 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** The emperor fails to understand how stories are means to immortality, and it is portrayed as one of his many character failings. Ultimately, he will achieve immortality, however, it will be as a cautionary tale warning about the dangers of greed and arrogance.

Thank you, my small friend...for reminding me there are worse things than death.  
-- King KaiJae (chapter 37 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Contrary to the emperor who strives to acquire immortality at all costs, King KaiJae recognizes that there is higher importance to be placed on living one's life honorably. The characters with strong morals would choose to death over dishonoring their families or ancestors.

Mortals are the only ones who can give immortality. It has always been that way.  
-- Joy to the Heart (chapter 51 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** Immortality is achieved through becoming part of a compelling story, and as this quote highlights, only mortals can pass on stories to their future generations.

I myself found it long, long ago. I shaped it into a dragon's pearl, but it was never meant to belong to one being. It belongs to everyone in the sea, sky, and earth."  
-- The Sea King (chapter 55 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** The Luminous Stone That Lights the Night represents knowledge, and the



Sea King, similar to Pinmei and Amah, believe that knowledge is meant to be shared and to improve the lives of everyone.

It's interesting how all the magistrates and king's fathers in your stories seem to have the same personality. It's as if they could all be the same person.

-- The Stonecutter (chapter 61 paragraph 2)

**Importance:** A lesson from the novel is that those who do not take the time to learn the stories or history are doomed to repeat it. The characters such as the emperor who have no or little interest in listening to stories are often the ones who make the same mistakes that characters in those stories make, thus they are history repeating themselves. This quote also represents how there will always be characters with moral failings in the world, and often they have the same traits and weaknesses.