

Women of the Silk Study Guide

Women of the Silk by Gail Tsukiyama

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Plot Summary

Women of the Silk is a story about China's silk trade. The main character, Pei, was dedicated to the trade in her youth. Her family were farmers, whose land was cultivated with mulberry leaves and fish. Their days were labor intensive and their evenings were quiet. Their home was filled with silence instead of childhood laughter. Daughters traditionally left home to marry, but when finances were tight and no marriage prospects were imminent, their boisterous third daughter, Pei, was sent away to work in a silk factory.

The city Pei was sent to was called Yung Kee. Compared to the village she came from, it was a metropolis and she was intimidated. Eventually she began to appreciate her new-found freedom. She roomed at a boarding house simply called the girls' house. It was run by a matron and retired silk worker named Auntie Yee. Auntie Yee was a sweet woman who took excellent care of the girls living under her roof. Pei was befriended by a girl older than herself named Lin, as well as by a girl who was her contemporary named Mei-li. Mei-li's smile was contagious, and she and Pei always had fun together. Lin reminded Pei of the sister she was forced to leave behind. Her older sister, Li, had always showed her how to behave and instructed her on many things. Lin took over in this capacity and helped Pei establish herself at the silk factory. Pei was used to a farmer's life with little fun, but the factory was demanding as well. The girls worked long days in poor conditions. Many were injured while at work. Pei acclimated well and was promoted multiple times. This brought her pride, but she still struggled with feelings of being abandoned by her family.

Throughout her life Pei encountered many hardships. Her friend Mei-li committed suicide after being spurned by her secret lover and forced into an arranged marriage. She and her co-workers united to form a strike that rewarded them with improved working conditions at the factory. This was a small victory, though, because a friend died in the process. China was at war with Japan and the country was in a state of fear. Pei, Lin, and Ji Shen decided to leave China and go to Canton to start again. On the eve of their departure Lin was trapped in a burning silk factory and died. Despite her many losses, the story ends with Pei and Ji Shen traveling to Hong Kong to start a new life for themselves, hopefully happier and safer than where they came from.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Women of Silk opens on a birthing scene. The main character, Pei, waits impatiently for her mother, Yu-Sung, to give birth. Pei recalls similar scenes from the births of other siblings who have passed away. Her mother requires no additional help, only privacy, so Pei focuses on her favorite item in the house. It is a beautiful silk painting depicting a scene with five birds. When the child is born, the midwife announces that it is another girl. Having lost girls in infancy prior to this birth, and preferring field help that would ensure financial stability for the family, Pei's father expressed his displeasure at the child's sex.

Pei's father, Pao, dedicated his days to their family's farm. The farm consisted of mulberry bushes and fish ponds. The mulberry leaves and fish were harvested and then sold at the village market to earn the family's meager income. During the month of Yu-Sung's confinement following her child's birth, Pei was very lonely. She had many questions, but her father was too busy doing his work as well as Yu-Sung's share and did not stop to answer her queries. Her mother gave the impression that her inquiring mind was neither appropriate nor appreciated.

Yu-Sung was married to Pao at the age of sixteen. Theirs was an arranged marriage full of functionality but lacking in romance. Yu-Sung's transition from her family to Pao's home was a difficult one. Pao's family were descendants of the Hakka tribe. They were noticeably taller than other Chinese men and women and had flatter facial features. They also spoke a dialect which was unfamiliar to Yu-Sung. Unlike most girls her age, as a child Yu-Sung had been taught to read and write. Pao was illiterate. Yu-Sung was exposed to items that numbered few but were of high quality. Pao's home was dirty. Yu-Sung's mother had been an excellent housekeeper and Yu-Sung was accustomed to cleanliness. Pao hardly spoke, but her family had been boisterous and loving. Prior to her wedding, Yu-Sung had never been exposed to a place of such filth, nor anyplace completely lacking in beauty. All in all, her marriage brought her from one world into seemingly another. When Yu-Sung looked at Pei, she saw Pao's physical appearance, but recalled her own childhood spirit.

That year's harvest was poor. Yu-Sung dreaded the consequences. She knew Pao would consult the fortune teller for advice. The fortune teller decided the fate of Pao's children. He proclaimed that Li would marry and bear two sons. Pei's future was less clear. Without an imminent prospect for marriage, Pao decided to send Pei away. He found a home for her in a building associated with a silk factory where she would work. It was his understanding that a portion of her proceeds would be returned to her family and she would be cared for as well.



Chapter 1 Analysis

Chapter One introduces the main character, Pei, and her relationship with her mother. She admires her mother from a distance. The strain within her family's dynamics is apparent in the way Pei's questions are silenced and her freedom curtailed. The reader gets the feeling that the home is filled with uneasy silences. At first one gains the impression that there is no love between the parents and children, but this is quickly revealed as untrue in the foreshadowing that says "to show them anything more would just make things more difficult when the time came for them to leave." Pei's sister, Li, was quiet by nature. To please her parents Pei imitates Li's behavior. Mention of the silk painting is important as the painting will be revisited again later in chapters four and fifteen.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Pei was wakened before dawn by her father. She dressed quickly while her mother made the customary morning porridge. She was told only that she and her father were making a long journey that day. Pei traveled by foot farther than she had ever traveled. She followed her father and picked wildflowers along the way. They stopped only once, for lunch, and enjoyed one of Pei's favorite foods, Jong, which was typically reserved for special occasions. They walked all through the day and came to their destination late in the afternoon. Pei briefly took in her surroundings. They were in the largest town Pei had ever seen. From there, they boarded a boat called a sampan, which ferried them across the river to an industrial city known as Yung Kee.

Yung Kee was filled with commotion. The marketplace was a puzzling menagerie of voices and goods. The streets resembled a maze. Pei followed her father dutifully until he came to a stop at a wooden gate. The door was answered by a smiling woman, who introduced herself as Auntie Yee. Also in attendance was Moi, Auntie Yee's housekeeper and cook. Moi's days must have been busy because the house was very large- two stories- and more beautiful than anything Pei had previously seen. Auntie Yee took Pei on what she thought was a tour of the gracious home. When Auntie Yee showed her the room reserved for the younger girls, and her bed in it, Pei realized that her father intended for her to stay there. She ran downstairs assuming he was still there, only to find him gone. Pei was both physically exhausted and emotionally devastated. She cried herself to sleep.

When Pei finally awoke, she was warmly greeted by a girl named Lin. Lin offered her kind words, a cool cloth for her face, and her friendship. That evening Pei was introduced to the other girls with whom she now shared a home. They shared a meal, but Pei ate little and returned to bed. The following day, she met another new friend. Mei-li greeted Pei happily on the morning of her second day. After breakfast, Lin helped Pei to orient herself around the house. Lin brought her clean clothes to change in to and lovingly brushed Pei's hair. After this kind gesture, Lin was accompanied by Auntie Yee, who cut Pei's hair in a style identical to that of all the other girls in the house.

Chapter 2 Analysis

In chapter two Pei is taken from her home and deposited at the girls' house. On their journey to the girls' house, she shares a special food called Jong with her father. This interaction is special. The author explains that Jong is usually only consumed once a year and is a special treat. It is one of Pei's favorite foods, yet she does not question why, on this journey, she is receiving it. The reader recognizes that something significant is happening in the story. When they arrive at their destination and her father introduces Auntie Yee, Pei is baffled yet polite. She clearly did not understand what was



happening. Later, once she realized that the girls' house was to be her new home, she wondered what she could have done or said to make her parents not want her anymore. Pei carries those feelings of self blame and abandonment with her throughout her life. Pei's forced separation from her family is painful. Fortunately, another girl boarding at Auntie Yee's, Lin, offered Pei the companionship of her sister, Li, and also the guidance of a mother.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Pei was taken aback when she encountered the Yung Kee Silk Factory. The building was larger than anything she had ever seen and built of brick. Inside, the rooms were hot and the slow moving ceiling fans did not improve the climate. Pei was shown the white cocoons and the process of spinning silk was explained. The cocoons were sorted, then boiled in water to loosen the threads, then the silk threads were wound onto bobbins to create the raw silk. The factory was owned by a man named Chung. Chung also employed managers to ensure that the girls completed their work.

All of the girls who boarded at Auntie Yee's worked the silk trade. Some were even employed in the same building as Pei. In addition to her and Lin, Mei-li and Chen Ling worked there as well. Mei-li always greeted Pei with a smile that helped to remedy her bewilderment. Chen Ling, Auntie Yee's step-daughter, was not particularly friendly, but she was kind and oversaw the production. On the way home that day Lin took Pei out for dinner. Pei noticed they were being watched. It seemed that people were interested in the silk workers and their uniforms. Despite the unpleasant looks she received from passers-by, Pei felt at ease with Lin. Lin explained to Pei how she came to be at Auntie Yee's. Pei questioned her own circumstances and Lin offered her support.

Auntie Yee and Moi bantered often. Auntie Yee claimed that Moi drove her crazy, but truthfully she had a deep affection for her. Auntie Yee found Moi when she was homeless. In exchange for a place to sleep, Moi was engaged as her cook and housekeeper. Moi was a proud and strong woman. Her days on the streets had hardened her and made her distrustful of others' hospitality. She walked with a limp but was quite capable of performing her duties at the girls' house. Auntie Yee was Moi's only real friend.

Auntie Yee was intricately familiar with the silk trade. She was seven years old when she started working silk. At twelve, she was forced to marry according to her family's custom. The farmer she married was a nice man, but Yee preferred her freedom. New wives are allowed a visit to home after their first three days of marriage. On Yee's three-day journey she returned to the silk factory. Yee's husband took a concubine, and Yee sent some of her earnings back to support the family. It was from her husband's concubine that Chen Ling was born.

Chapter 3 Analysis

In chapter three, Pei is introduced to the work that is expected of her at the silk factory. She is a hard worker and acclimates to her new life but is haunted by loneliness. Although Pao was not demonstrative with any of his children, he has come to learn that his life was fuller when Pei was near to him. Her outspoken manner and curious nature



were not the traits of a lady, but they were traits he would have encouraged in a son. Since he had not been blessed with a son, his relationship with Pei was a natural progression. Now that she was gone, he was lonely. He dreamed of her at night and heard her voice speaking to him. She thought he had sent her away for lack of love but that was not the case. The truth was that he lacked resources. They both missed each other but neither knew how the other felt.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The silk factory required long hours from the girls. They reported for work at five thirty in the morning and were not released until seven thirty at night. They received a half hour off for lunch and infrequent breaks. Intimidated by the male managers and the sticks they carried, the girls complained amongst themselves but did not speak up to those in charge. The demanding schedule was difficult for Pei, who was seemingly dropped into that life from the protected confines of childhood. With Lin and Mei-li's help she acclimated. Over time, much of her sorrow over missing her family was replaced by the excitement of the city. The time when her pain was most poignant coincided with the yearly Dragon Boat Festival. At that festival, it was customary to eat Jong, a food Pei used to relish but now associated with the day her father brought her to Auntie Yee's and abandoned her.

Six years into her work at the silk factory, Pei had been promoted several times. She had become close friends with Lin and Mei-li. Of the two, Lin was Pei's confidant. Pei looked up to her, and it was with Lin that Pei would share her innermost thoughts and feelings. Mei-li was fun and offered Pei a different kind of friendship. Mei-li was so friendly that she was loved by everyone and seemed unaffected by others' moods. Her family came every month to visit her and brought gifts. The majority of the gifts she shared with everyone at Auntie Yee's, but the sugar candy she reserved and shared only with Pei.

Some of the girls working at the silk factory lived locally and did not return to Auntie Yee's at night. Pei was friends with one girl, Su-lung, who benefited from this arrangement. While many of the girls appreciated their new-found freedom, Pei still envied those of her friends who stayed in contact with their families. When she and Mei-li were invited to dinner at Su-lung's, they readily accepted the opportunity. Pei enjoyed being part of a family for the evening.

A monsoon came and flooded the streets of Yung Kee. The people who made their living on boats became homeless. Roads washed away and commerce was halted. Rats were prolific in the city. Through all of this, the girls worked, and to get to work, they trudged through torrential rain. During the time of the rains, Mei-li became obsessed with the idea of marrying Hong, Su-lung's brother, who she had met while at Su-lung's house for dinner. They began seeing each other secretly and she became pregnant.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Pei's work kept her so busy that she managed to push thoughts of her family into the recesses of her mind. They sometimes managed to surface, however. This was



particularly true every year at the time of the Dragon Boat Festival. At the festival, Jong were traditionally consumed. Although Pei had savored the food as a child, she could no longer eat it without recalling her father's abandonment. The two were forever linked in Pei's heart. Pei wondered what had become of her family and how they felt about her. Back at Pei's childhood home, her mother, Yu-Sung, was in mourning. She still missed Pei terribly. Within a year of Pei's leaving, her baby, Yu-ling, died. Li had chosen marriage and moved away with her husband. Yu-sung was left with no children to keep her company and a husband, who preferred silence to conversation.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The girls were supposed to come home directly after work for dinner at Auntie Yee's. One night, Mei-li didn't come home in a timely manner. Her absence worried everyone. When she finally did come home that night she told Auntie Yee that she had been at Sunlung's house, but the sideways look she cast Pei left her wondering about the truth of Mei-li's alibi. Later that night, when they were alone, Mei-li admitted to having been with Hong again. She also revealed her determination to marry him. Shortly thereafter, her parents paid an unscheduled visit. They came to share with her their plans for her future. It was very upsetting for Mei-li to learn that her parents had arranged a marriage for her. She had kept her affair with Hong a secret from nearly everyone, including her parents. Even if they had known, it would not have mattered. Arranged marriages were common and were a matter of family honor. These unions were not based in choice or love, although one hoped that someday love might grow. Mei-li argued with her father, refusing to comply to the marriage he had arranged. Her disobedience infuriated him and he left very angry. Mei-li cried in his wake. While Mei-li is forced into a pending marriage by her family, Chen Ling is fortunate to have the right of choice. Chen Ling and her close friend, Ming, choose to enter the sisterhood of silk.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this chapter Chen Ling announces her decision to go through the hair-dressing ceremony with Ming. While this was not essential to the plot, it gave the author an opportunity to address the significance of the event for the girls. Choosing to partake in the hair-dressing ceremony means that the candidate is voluntarily choosing to join the sisterhood of silk weavers and live a celibate life. In Chinese culture, the oldest sibling needs to be married first to clear the way for the second oldest (and so on down the line). Therefore, young adults must consider not just their futures but that of their siblings. Some of the girls chose to join the sisterhood for this reason, others chose it to avoid an arranged marriage or to preserve their freedom. Joining the sisterhood is a lifelong commitment akin to marriage and is not to be taken lightly.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

After the streets dried out following the monsoon, Pei and Lin enjoyed a walk together. Pei learned about Lin's family. Lately, Lin's mother had been writing letters often. She had found a marriage prospect for Lin's brother. Following tradition, this meant that Lin had a choice to make. Her mother preferred that Lin marry, but Lin was not easily convinced. Lin's family lived in Canton. Before his death, her father was a politician. They were wealthy and lived in a grand home. Lin's mother expected Lin to continue on that life path, but Lin had other plans. The silk work had started out as a way for Lin to earn quick money that would help her family following her father's death. After caring for Pei so extensively, Lin was having a hard time envisioning leaving Pei behind.

The day came for Chen Ling and Ming's hair dressing ceremony. A great banquet had been prepared. Auntie Yee's house was filled with excitement. The girls' bangs were slicked back and the back was unbraided and placed in a chignon. When the hour of the celebration approached, Pei could not find either Mei-li or Lin. Mei-li was at home crying over her predicament and not feeling sociable. Lin had gone to meet her mother for the day and discuss their family dynamics. Lin announced her plan to proceed with her own hair dressing ceremony. In this way, she could remain in the city; her brother could marry, and she could continue to live near Pei.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The element of choice is very important in *Women of the Silk*. Chinese tradition favors the male where choice is concerned. Daughters do not share in this fortune. They are commonly placed in arranged marriages. Pei was sent away because the village fortune teller determined that she was unlikely to marry. Lin came from a wealthy family. Although Lin's mother would prefer that she marry, she could also choose to enter the sisterhood. Either way, she would be honoring her family and allowing her brother to marry next. This choice was made possible through her family's good name and wealth. After her father's death, they had encountered hard times, but their place in society had been restored. Many families were not so lucky. Due to their impoverished state, many families, such as Pei's, were forced to do things that they otherwise would not have considered.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

After Chen Ling and Ming joined the sisterhood, they moved to a sisters' house nearby. They were surrounded by grown women who had made the choice to work silk. They found that the circumstances that brought each woman to the house were not all equal. When Chen Ling and Ming returned to Auntie Yee's for visits, they brought colorful stories of their experiences along. The younger girls admired Chen Ling and looked forward to her arrival. While Chen Ling made her choice freely, the decision did not come as easily to others. Lin chose to follow Chen Ling and enter the sisterhood as well. Her decision was based on two things. First, she needed to protect her family's honor by making room for her brother to marry before her. Second, she preferred to stay in the city near her friends, especially Pei, who had become her extended family over the many years she worked at the factory. Pei wished to join Lin, but Lin urged her to wait before making a choice. Lin was in her twenties and Pei was just sixteen. A good marriage would still be possible if Pei wanted it, but Pei had grown up watching her parents move around each other in silent circles and was not convinced that marriage was an appealing concept. Although Pei seemed sure in her choice, she agreed to wait. The idea of days spent without Lin's friendship filled Pei with dread. The loneliness only increased her desire to join the sisterhood and stay near Lin.

Pei found considerable time to worry about Mei-li. Mei-li's parents moved forward with plans for her wedding ceremony. Although Pei knew Mei-li was not in favor of the marriage, she seemed to be complacent about it. Mei-li also stayed out late at least two evenings each week but didn't share her location with anyone at the girls' house. Pei didn't know what to believe about Mei-li's whereabouts, but she worried about her friend's happiness. One morning Mei-li rose before the rest of the house. She dressed quietly and quickly in order to leave unnoticed. Mei-li moved through the shadows towards Hong's house. They had arranged to meet each other, but he was late. Mei-li noted that this was unusual for him. When he did emerge, he pretended not to know her. Mei-li knew that their relationship was a secret, but they had agreed to meet, and it was painful that he ignored her. Mei-li followed him. She hoped that they had miscommunicated and that they could sort things out privately. Mei-li was pregnant and had been waiting for an appropriate time to tell Hong. Unfortunately, when Mei-li caught up with Hong, he did not receive her warmly. He expressed his wish to end their relationship. When Mei-li announced her love for him, he coolly informed her he didn't feel the same way. Mei-li was shocked. She struck him and then ran away. Mei-li continued for many miles. Eventually she came to the river where she waded in and drowned.



Chapter 7 Analysis

When Pei's father left her at the girls' house, her childhood essentially ended. She experienced loneliness on a scale she had never before known. Lin was the answer to her prayers. When Lin shares with Pei her mother's intention that she return home to marry, Pei is disturbed. It is understandable that she would fear the unknown; after all, she has just established a new life for herself. Lin is a central figure in Pei's new life and acts as a friend, sister, and mother figure. The reader comes to understand, though, that their relationship is not quite equal. Where Lin is independent, Pei is still rather needy. Pei is unable to control herself and blurts out her fear for her own insecurity, rather than inquiring about Lin's feelings regarding the matter. This impulsiveness and self-centered concern are behaviors associated with immaturity. The reader realizes that Pei still has some growing up to do.

Mei-li's suicide and the events leading up to it were dark times for Pei. She struggled with Mei-li's behaviors and her complacency. Pei was concerned for her friend and wondered what she could do to change the situation. She thought about informing someone else about Mei-li's love affair, but to do so would mean breaking Mei-li's trust. Pei was reluctant to divulge Mei-li's secret, but Pei urged Mei-li to be wise.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Later that morning, when Mei-li didn't show up for work, the girls realized she was missing. Everyone was concerned. This was especially true for Pei, who had observed her recent secretive behavior. They completed work despite their distracted state and rushed home to tell Auntie Yee, who began a frantic search. Pei had kept her friend's secret all day long, but felt she could wait no longer. She went directly to Su-lung's to confront Hong. Hong denied knowing Mei-li and abruptly closed the door on Pei. Pei felt he was somehow responsible for Mei-li's disappearance, even if he didn't know specific details. For the first time she felt hatred for another person.

The following morning the news of Mei-li's drowning reached the house. Mei-li's body was found by local fishermen and brought to Auntie Yee's. Pei felt awful. She grieved for the loss of her good friend, who had brought so much laughter into her life. Pei also felt partly responsible because she had not alerted anyone to Mei-li's odd behavior or her own suspicions about Mei-li's activities. She unburdened herself by sharing Mei-li's secret with Lin. Mei-li's parents came to claim her body. They took no responsibility for forcing her into an unwanted marriage. They claimed her death was an unfortunate accident. The girls believed it was a suicide. Even those who did not know about Hong recognized that she was not interested in the marriage her parents had arranged for her.

In the aftermath of Mei-li's death, Pei did a lot of thinking. She came to the conclusion that if love was so painful, she preferred not to experience it. She again pleaded with Lin to accompany her to her hair dressing ceremony. This time Lin took her request seriously. Pei awoke and went to sleep with Mei-li's empty bed beside her. The constant reminder was painful and Pei was eager to leave. The date for their ceremony was extended, however, out of respect for Mei-li's passing. When the special day arrived, Pei was confident in her choice. She entered this new phase of her life with pride. Pei and Lin moved into the same sisterhood house, where Chen Ling and Ming lived. It was run by the eldest sister present, Kung Ma.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Mei-li's death filled Pei with remorse. As the only person who knew about the affair with Hong, Pei felt responsible for not changing the course of events. She wondered if the outcome might have been different if she had not kept Mei-li's secret. Every morning when she awoke, Pei saw Mei-li's empty bed beside her. This constant reminder was painful. Pei's deep-seated feelings of inadequacy arose and she missed Mei-li. The reader can see layers of Pei's pain- first the abandonment she still carries from her family's decision to send her away, then Mei-li's death and her guilt associated with it. Compounding these circumstances is Lin's decision to join the sisterhood and leave the

girls' house. It is easier for Pei to join Lin than to contemplate losing another person she loves. Amid these powerful feelings is yet another—for the first time in her life, Pei feels hatred. The author uses strong language when describing Pei's feelings for Hong and his involvement with Mei-li.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Pei's life at the sisters' house was busy. In addition to reporting to work and the occasional pleasurable outing, the women had daily chores to complete to keep the house running. Everyone participated willingly to help one another and sustain the way of life to which they had all committed. There were a few women who had not entered the house through the hair dressing ceremony. They came as wives of husbands, who were employed far away or were searching for work. The silk factory provided them with an income, and the sisters' house was a safe place to live until their husbands returned for them. Those who had come from far away described the war being fought in the north against Japanese soldiers. One such woman, Sui Ying, made an impression on Pei. Sui Ying spoke of true love between a man and a woman. It was the first time Pei had ever heard of marriage in a favorable way. Their marriage had been arranged according to tradition, but it was a good match. Her husband, Lau Chen, was forced by the monsoon to look for work outside of the city. Their love was deep and they looked forward to being reunited.

Two years had passed since Lin's brother had become engaged. Pei and Lin still planned to attend the wedding together. As the time came closer for them to leave, Pei had mixed feelings of both excitement and anxiety. Canton, the city to which they were headed, was multicultural. Not only was it diverse, but its size was intimidating. Lin was not affected the way Pei was. Lin had grown up as part of an affluent family living in Canton. She had experienced many luxuries before her father's death and her entrance into the silk trade. At that time, her employment and related income saved her family from destitution. The family managed to maintain their expansive home, although some of the items in it were gone. Of everything Lin remembered, it was their house servant that held a special place in her heart.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The sisters' house is different from the girls' house. Now that the ladies have made a lifelong commitment, they are responsible for themselves. At the girls' house, they experienced freedom, but Auntie Yee sheltered them from many of life's responsibilities. At the sisters' house, that shelter doesn't exist. The ladies work together as a community. They share the household responsibilities of cooking and cleaning. They are each responsible for their individual finances and future. New ideas such as retirement must be considered and planned for. Now that Pei is married to the sisterhood, she is no longer obligated to support her family financially but continues to do so anyway. A portion of her pay goes to them, a portion to entertainment, some to the sisters' house and some is reserved for savings. Pei learns that responsibility comes with freedom. Her trip to Canton is a good exercise in both.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Mui, the house keeper, greeted Lin and Pei at the door of Lin's family home. She expressed sheer joy at having Lin come home. It had been twelve years since Lin had left for her work in the silk industry. Mui's tenderness was reciprocated by Lin. When Lin's own mother had been aloof, Mui had given Lin the comfort of a mother. Later, when Lin's mother, Wong Tai, was ill, Mui was Lin's confidant and helped her obtain her job in the silk trade. Mui's happiness at seeing Lin was tempered by the mistress of the house. Wong Tai had not seen her daughter since Lin had joined the sisterhood. Wong Tai did not hesitate to share her disappointment at Lin's choice. She remained cordial, yet distant, and politely thanked Lin for making the long journey home.

Two days later, Lin's brother was married. The festivities were fascinating. Pei listened to the language spoken, watched the fireworks, admired the decorations and observed the western-style clothing worn by many of the guests. The bride wore a traditional red gown with an embroidered dragon and matching headdress. Before her husband's death, Wong Tai had held many dinner parties for his colleagues. She was quite experienced at organizing large, beautiful parties and the wedding was no exception. Her son's change in marital status was a big event for the family. His union returned honor to their family name and deserved celebration.

Pei had thought Yung Kee large and bewildering when she first encountered it, but Canton was even more bustling and overwhelming. She enjoyed experiencing it but looked forward to returning to Yung Kee. Pei wished to leave because she felt like an outsider, but she wondered how Lin so easily left behind the luxuries to which she was accustomed. Lin found leaving to be easy. Lin was offended by her mother's obvious intolerance for her choices and Pei's presence.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The depth of Pei's feelings for Lin are explored in chapter ten. The author uses obscure language to capture a tender moment between the two. The text could easily be perceived as sexual in nature. The reader could also make the argument that Pei's desires are being shared, but that this does not mean they apply to her relationship with Lin. For her part, Lin was deeply embarrassed by her mother's treatment of Pei at the wedding ceremony. Her mother was rude and Lin found this unacceptable. Lin was eager to leave her mother's house. Pei was happy to comply, but she was more sympathetic with Wong Tai. Pei had glimpsed Lin's mother crying by herself in the garden. Pei had Lin to keep her company, but Wong Tai's children had all left home and her husband was dead. For once, someone was more lonely than Pei.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Conditions at the silk factory were worse following the monsoons. The environment produced cocoons of poor quality and the silk industry lost revenues. One way of making up the difference was to require longer working hours from the employees. The girls had reveled in the freedom that accompanied their working status, but it now made them feel enslaved. Chung and his managers enforced the long hours, and the girls didn't complain except among themselves. The girls were constantly weak from being overworked. The conditions culminated in the sudden death of a young girl. Along with her unnecessary death came the courage to disobey Chung. The employees began having secret meetings to discuss their working conditions and brainstorm options for change. The meetings consisted of workers from all the local factories, and when written down, the list of their complaints was two pages long. Among the most important requests were shorter hours, better ventilation and time to rest.

The workers joined together to form a united front that Chung couldn't possibly ignore. They planned a strike. Some, like Sui Ying, were unsure about the strike, but didn't want to let down their friends. All the employees were aware that for the strike to have the greatest effect, it must be unanimous and unexpected. On the day of the strike the workers arrived at their usual time. They worked all morning with their usual effort. The first lunch bell rang at noon and every worker filed out of the building. Production stopped. The managers threatened the girls and ordered them to return to work but they refused. When the owner, Chung, arrived, he was unhappy and accompanied by armed guards. Chen Ling handed Chung the list of the employees' requests. He found it comical at first and then grew irate. He was overpowered by the chanting girls, who demanded shorter hours. His guards fired into the crowd. While not intentional, the gunfire fatally hurt one person. Sui Ying was hit by a bullet intended to silence the crowd. It had the opposite effect. The girls mourned the loss of their friend but did not want her life to have been lost in vain. They resumed their chant, and Chung realized they would not be brushed off easily. Chung consented to a ten-hour work day, extra pay for time worked beyond the required ten hours, and one day off every two weeks. The strike had been successful. It was a bittersweet victory. Sui Ying had died in the process, and the authorities did not hold Chung responsible.

Chapter 11 Analysis

The strike was an achievement for the silk workers. The workers essentially created a union and lobbied for better working conditions for themselves. They formed a strategy. The workers knew that to have the most impact, their strike would have to be unanimous and unexpected. They all agreed that the conditions at work were awful, but not everyone was easily convinced to strike. A few, like Sui Ying, had a life waiting for them outside the factory and would have preferred to bide their time and stay out of



trouble. The vast majority worried about retaliation. Their earnings helped to support a family, and they worried about losing their job for insubordination. They were all physically intimidated by the male managers and had to overcome their fear. Despite the misgivings of a few, they all agreed to support one another and proceed with the strike. Sui Ying gave her life on the day of the strike. It is ironic that the one person who hesitated the most to strike was the one who was killed because of it. When her husband came to claim her body, he thanked the ladies, on behalf of Sui Ying, for their gift of friendship.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

After the New Year's celebration Auntie Yee's health began to deteriorate. She was uncharacteristically tired and achy. She was also losing weight but managed to keep her discomfort a secret. As Yee's closest companion, Moi was the exception. She recognized that something was wrong and treated Yee with herbs to restore her vitality. This worked for some time, but the illness returned. Auntie Yee eventually became so sick that she couldn't hide it anymore. She was coughing up blood and a messenger was sent to inform Chen Ling of her mother's condition. Chen Ling returned to the girls' house to help her mother. As a last request, Yee told Moi that it was her intention that Moi move from the kitchen into Yee's room where she would be more comfortable. Moi grumbled as was her customary way. They had reached an agreement of sorts, and Yee was putting things in order. She made sure everyone was well cared for and then died in her sleep.

Auntie Yee had been well known in the city. She had cared for many girls over the years, serving as a surrogate mother during the years they spent away from home. Many had returned later in life to visit and tell her how much she had touched their lives. As soon as word of her death became public, many people lined the street outside of the girls' house to pay their respects. She was a woman who was both loved and respected. Two days later they held her funeral.

The Ghosts' Feast was an important holiday in China. Food was prepared by those who survived and a portion was shared with the deceased. On the first year's Ghosts' Feast following Yee's death, Moi worked hard to make it special. She made dumplings in honor of Yee and the girls brought gifts as well. Moi was still the cook but Chen Ling and Ming had returned from the sisters' house to help run the girls' house. Yee's ghost had been visiting Moi since the week after she died. Yee's ghost usually came while Moi was preparing meals, so Moi knew that Yee would appreciate her efforts surrounding the feast.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Yee had spent many of her years working in the rooms of silk factories. She had been an employee for quite sometime before starting the girls' house. Because she was so well established in the community, her loss was felt by many. Her girls, including Pei, thought of her as a surrogate mother, who cared for them when their own mothers couldn't or wouldn't. Pei felt as if she were losing her mother all over again. The one person who was most likely to be affected on a daily basis was Moi. Yee's daughter, Chen Ling, had learned to be independent and could carry on without Yee, but Moi still relied on her. Moi and Yee had an understanding. They cared for and respected one

another. Yee provided Moi a place to stay in exchange for her housekeeping, but their relationship went beyond basic necessities. They were true friends.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Although Lin's mother had greeted her frostily, the same could not be said about her brothers. Following Lin's visit to Canton, her brother, Ho Yung, wrote to her regularly. He had taken a job in the trade business and traveled to many exciting places. He shared tales of his adventures in his letters to Lin. Lin then shared them with her friends in the sisterhood. This brought them some amusement at the end of their working days. This time he had sent not just a letter but also a phonograph. The girls tried dancing to the loud music played by the peculiar machine. It occasioned much laughter. Another source of enjoyment were the New Year festivities. Almost all of China's commerce shut down, including the silk factories, for a week surrounding the holiday. Thus the employees received a vacation from their daily duties. The girls looked forward to the extra free time. Unfortunately, they didn't enjoy it as much as they could have. Rumors circulated about the Japanese soldiers, who were said to be coming closer everyday. A feeling of fear and pressure permeated what should have been a joyous time.

To escape the political tension of the city, Lin suggested that she and Pei take a trip into the countryside. While Lin and Pei traveled, Pei wondered about her family. She was uncertain of whether they still lived in her childhood home and wondered about the status of their health. Her father was still strong. He continued to work the mulberry fields and tend to the fish ponds daily. He was lean and tanned by his work in the sun. Her mother hadn't fared so well. She was not growing old as gracefully. She had many regrets and missed her children terribly. This loneliness wore her down and she often stayed in bed. Pao worried about Yu-sung. He, too, had daydreams and nightmares about their children who had died. He especially missed Pei, and hoped she had forgiven him for abandoning her at the girls' house.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Lin's relationship with her brothers was a source of joy to her. Her return home had rekindled their relationship. Her mother continued to be aloof, but her brothers were warm. She looked forward to receiving Ho Yung's frequent correspondence. It appeared that her strong relationship with her brothers made the differences between her and her mother easier to bear. She continued to feel her mother's expectations and disappointment but was content with her choices. Lin offered Pei a chance to find peace about her family. Pei approached their trip with hesitation. She wondered if her parents still lived in the same home and if they were healthy. In fact, they were not well. Pao worried about the health of Yu-sung. In an action unusual for him, he showed great tenderness for her and brought her healing herbs. He believed that she was suffering from a broken heart. He, too, missed their children and saw them in his dreams.



Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Pei felt a surge of memories come rushing back as she and Lin traveled. The colors and smells of the earth were vivid. The horizon seemed far and unmarred by buildings. The air was clean, unlike what she had become accustomed to in the city. In order to share this with Lin they opted to walk (instead of ride). Being closer to the ground felt better to Pei. Lin commented on the beauty of the countryside. Pei admitted that it was, but that she had never thought of it that way. When she lived there it had felt stifling, and her days had revolved around the farm.

They visited the village associated with Pei's parents' farm. What had once seemed a metropolis to a little girl now seemed small and dirty to the grown woman Pei had become. Pei was embarrassed by the depth of poverty from which she had come, especially now that she had experienced the wealth of Canton. Pei tried to think of something beautiful to show Lin and settled on the temple. After the temple, they set off for her parents' farm.

Pao was working in the fields as usual. Pei could see him from a great distance away as they approached the farm. Pao could see them, too, although at first he thought they might be angels coming to claim him. Pao went long stretches of time without seeing anyone besides his wife, so these unexpected guests were puzzling. As they approached Pao took a closer look. His eyes locked with Pei's, and he knew her at once. Pao experienced his own moment of embarrassment—his grown daughter arrived in fresh garments but he had been toiling in the earth. This was underscored by Lin's presence- she had a regal air about her. Pao expressed his recognition of Pei in his own quiet yet eager way before leading them away from the fish pond and to the house.

In the house Pei was reunited with her mother. Though the years had been rough on her body, Yu-sung's eyes lit up at the sight of her third daughter. Yu-sung recounted her concern for Pei's happiness as well as her forgiveness. Pei assured her of the first and extended the second. Then Yu-sung took a moment to examine the beautiful woman her daughter had become.

Chapter 14 Analysis

As Pei and Lin approached the village, Pei experienced mixed emotions. The first feeling she recognized was excitement. She reminisced about the village as a little girl and how she had been filled with excitement. When the village was not as impressive as she recalled, she then experienced embarrassment. Having been to so many larger cities, Pei would have liked to show Lin something more impressive. This is true of her childhood home as well. Unlike Lin's family home in Canton, Pei's childhood home was simple in build and spartan in decoration. Pei felt fear when approaching her parents.



She still wondered why they sent her away and was unsure if she would be welcomed. Stronger than all of these emotions was her great sense of love for her family. Deep down, she still craved their love and acceptance. Pei's father, usually stoic, was awash with emotions, too. After reuniting Pei with her mother, he returned to the gardens rather than be caught crying.



Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Yu-sung and Pei had always experienced a distant relationship. Yu-sung loved her daughter fiercely, but they had lived in the awkward silences imposed by Pao. Not wanting to cause further upset, Yu-sung had not been demonstrative with her daughters. She knew Pei craved love, affection, and conversation, but Yu-sung thought it best to not encourage those characteristics in her daughter. Instead she loved her from a distance and strove to teach Pei her place in society. When times were tough and they could no longer support themselves, Pei was sent to work at the silk factory. It wasn't being sold, exactly, but Pei had no choice in the matter. Daughters were usually lost to death or marriage. Pei was lost to neither of those traditional routes, and this brought her parents much guilt. As Yu-sung's health deteriorated, she wondered whether or not she would ever see her daughter again.

Having the fortune of being reunited with Pei again, Yu-sung felt the need to be completely honest. Pei inquired after her elder sister, Li. Yu-sung divulged that Li had been married for ten years. She told Pei that Li had chosen to marry a widowed farmer. When she returned for her third day visit, Yu-sung discovered that she had been beaten. Yu-sung hated to see her child return to her new husband, but Li voluntarily went back. This news upset Pei. She was sorry for her sister's lot in life and angry with her parents for not preventing it. It seemed that all the children had experienced hardship. Yu-sung had a gift for Pei. She bestowed upon her daughter the rolled up scroll that used to hang on the wall of her family's home. When Pei was a girl, the silk painting of five birds had brought her great comfort. It was a priceless piece. She shed tears for her family, and her mother wiped them away. They enjoyed a heartfelt reunion. At the end of the day, though, the mulberry groves beckoned her parents back.

Chapter 15 Analysis

As Yu-sung approached her senior years, she considered her life's outcome. As a proper Chinese wife, she had acquiesced to her husband's wishes. In doing so, she had essentially broken her own heart. She had lost many children in infancy, and she had little to no contact with the two that survived. Li had left home to enter a marriage, which was a natural progression. Pei's situation was different. It seemed unnatural to Yu-sung to lose Pei in the manner she had. The two sisters had very different fates, but Yu-sung wondered if either was happy. Yu-sung wished for the chance to apologize to Pei and see her once again before her death. Yu-sung's dream came true. Not only did Pei return, but she expressed tenderness for her mother, which was much more than Yu-sung had dared to hope for. After their reunion Pei understood her mother's true feelings as well as her motivations as a parent. These provided Pei with closure.



Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

Pei's renewed relationship with her family grounded her. She no longer felt unloved or fear where her past was concerned. Her reunion with her parents left Pei wondering about her sister, Li. She was determined to find her. Pei spoke often of these hopes in her discussions with Lin after they returned to Yung Kee. Any further traveling would have to wait, however. The New Year's holiday was over and the factory was producing silk again. They were in the midst of a large shipment. The industry itself was having hard times, and this order of silk was a blessing. Everyone knew that eventually Chung would have to close down the factory just like all of his peers had been forced to do. In the meantime, the girls worked whatever hours were offered to them and prepared for the future. Some of them were searching for jobs elsewhere, and the older ladies were planning their retirements.

At Auntie Yee's girls' house, Moi was behaving oddly. She and Auntie Yee's spirit had made a plan to prepare for the Japanese invasion by setting aside and hiding extra food. Moi would set aside small amounts daily until they accumulated and then stored the filled jars beneath her bed in what used to be Yee's room. In order to keep the others from knowing about her plan, and her belief in Yee's ghost, Moi guarded Yee's room. Everyone who lived in the house knew that the kitchen was Moi's territory and off limits to all other people, but now Yee's old bedroom was restricted as well. Her loud and domineering behavior upset the younger girls. The older residents thought her an odd, old woman.

Chapter 16 Analysis

In Yung Kee, rumors about the collapse of the silk factory and the war continued. The girls were forced to consider their futures. Moi was preparing for the future in her own way. Some of the girls thought her actions were erratic, but she was actually carrying out a well-thought-out plan. Moi was caring for the girls in the only way she knew how. She was ensuring that there would be food to eat every night just as there had been every evening since Yee had hired her all those years ago. Her loud and protective act with regards to Yee's room was actually a clever act to protect both the food stores and the girls (if they didn't know, then they couldn't be punished).



Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Pei found that times were changing. With the country on the brink of war, tensions were high. Traveling even within the city became difficult. There were military checkpoints everywhere. Pei continued to write home to her family and seek information about Li. Lin also spent time writing to her family, but with a different purpose. Lin was trying to secure passage for her and Pei to Canton. During this time, Pei received word that her mother had passed away in her sleep. Pei felt great sorrow for the loss of a mother, who she was only just beginning to know.

Chung finally announced his plans to close the factory. There were only a few remaining employees, including Pei and Lin. Chen Ling and Lin were placed in charge of tying up loose ends. It was their responsibility to close the business books for the factory. Lin's brother had arranged travel accommodations for her and Pei, and they prepared to go. Pei's job had ended and she waited anxiously for Lin to complete hers.

One evening Moi found a bedraggled stranger on the doorstep. Her name was Ji Shen, and she had traveled from a northern village called Nanking. Ji Shen's family business was ransacked by Japanese soldiers and her father killed. She, her mother, and sister were raped and only she was kept alive. In order to survive she ran and then walked across the province with no food or shelter. By the time she reached the girls' house, her feet were so blistered she could only crawl and she was so malnourished and exhausted that she fainted. Her feet took some time to heal but the nightmares lasted longer. Pei tended to Ji Shen and made sure that her strength returned.

Chapter 17 Analysis

Pei and her friends began to experience more concrete evidence of the war. Fear exuded on the streets and food became harder to obtain. Jobs were lost as commerce failed. These difficulties inspired fear in the girls. Most of the girls had few reasons to stay and fled at the first opportunity. Pei was also anxious to leave but remained because of her attachment to Lin, who reassured her that everything would be fine. Pei transferred her nervous energy into caring for a lost girl, Ji Shen, who literally stumbled across the girls' home one evening. Ji Shen had experienced more grief than any of the other girls, and Pei was touched by her story. Pei mentored and cared for Ji Shen in the same manner that Mei-li and Lin had helped her. It was the first time that Pei was able to give back some of the sisterly support she had received. The role reversal provided Pei with purpose. The reader is aware of some personal growth in Pei.



Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

Ji Shen brought hope to the girls' house. The atmosphere in China was dismal. The stories of atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers were increasing and the Japanese were approaching fast. Much of China was crippled by the war effort and the people were downtrodden. Amid this backdrop, Ji Shen came into their lives. She had found a way to survive and served as inspiration to the others. Pei was closest to Ji Shen and made it her own responsibility to keep Ji Shen safe. Pei had been a younger sister and very briefly an older sister, but she had never known her baby sister beyond infancy. Pei enjoyed being able to take Ji Shen under her wing. Their relationship began to resemble the one between Lin and Pei, where Lin was the guide.

Ji Shen continued to heal over the next few weeks. Moi was enamored by her and fed her special soups brewed with herbs to strengthen her. Moi fed the others their regular meals. The girls wondered how she continued to do this when others could find no food at the marketplace. Moi did not divulge her secret. When Ji Shen's strength returned, she insisted on completing her fair share of chores around the house. Pei began to wonder if Ji Shen was well enough to make the trip to Canton with her and Lin. Pei couldn't imagine leaving her behind. Lin had been thinking along the same lines and requested passage for a third person from her brother.

Lin finished the last of the record keeping for Chung's business. She was looking forward to finally leaving the factory. Any day she expected to leave for Canton with Pei and Ji Shen. She pushed herself away from the desk and prepared to leave. She was distracted by an odd smell and accompanying noise. Outside the door to her office she saw a huge fire encompassing the factory. She checked all of the exits and found no way out. Lin died in the factory fire. Her body was found in the embers the following morning when the fire had exhausted itself.

Chapter 18 Analysis

Like many maternal figures, Moi shows her love of others through food. In this way, she is like Pao, who also provides for his family and loves them from afar. Moi procures herbs for Ji Shen's recovery. Moi brews teas for her and makes her strengthening soups. All who lived at the girls' house found inspiration in Ji Shen and rallied to help her heal. It was a natural extension of their friendship that Lin and Pei invited Ji Shen to accompany them to Canton. The three girls looked forward to starting their lives again in a new and safe setting. The loss of Lin was devastating. She was the organizer and had planned the trip with her brother's help. Pei was paralyzed by the thought of leaving China without Lin.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

Lin's death left Pei literally speechless. Ji Shen comforted her as best as she could, but the loss of Lin's companionship devastated Pei. Pei often awoke with nightmares of the fire and Lin trapped inside of it. Ji Shen could relate. She still grieved for her own family and suffered from nightmares as well. Pei was plagued by questions. She wondered if there was anything she could have done to prevent Lin's death. She wondered how things would have been different if they had left one week previously. Lin's brother, Ho Yung, came to retrieve Lin's body. He also came to retrieve Pei. Ho Yung insisted that Pei and Ji Shen travel on to Canton the way they had planned. He felt sure that his sister would have wanted her friends to be safe from the Japanese invasion.

The following day Pei and Ji Shen left Yung Kee headed for Canton. Chen Ling and Ming planned to leave soon after. They were headed for the countryside to wait out the war. Upon their departure Moi presented them with a gift of dried fruit and herbs. Moi refused to leave the girls' house. She had food stores to tide her over and figured she would stay in the house while the war raged on outside. The girls' trip to Canton was uneventful. In Canton, Lin's body was laid to rest next to her father's. The ceremony was difficult for Pei but provided closure. Soon after, Ho-Yung accompanied the girls to the dock. From there they boarded a ferry to Hong Kong for a new beginning.

Chapter 19 Analysis

Lin's death brought many feelings to the surface for Pei. Pei still blamed herself for Mei-li's death. She also blamed herself for Lin's—if only she had convinced Lin to leave a few days earlier, Lin wouldn't have been in the factory building when it caught on fire. Pei had not been invited to Mei-li's funeral and was not able to say good-bye to her close friend. This was not true in the case of Lin's ceremony. Although Lin's mother did not care for Pei, Lin's brothers knew that she had held a significant place in Lin's life. They made sure to include her in Lin's funeral. They also ensured safe passage for her and Ji-Shen out of China, just as they had intended to do with Lin. The circumstances were unfortunate, but as Pei left China she had something to be thankful for—a new beginning that she could choose for herself.



Characters

Pei

Pei is the main character in Gail Tsukiyama's novel, *Women of the Silk*. Pei was raised in rural China. Her parents were farmers and led a life of labor. Pei was their third daughter. She was curious by nature. Her many inquiries were greeted with impatience by her parents. Secretly, they both had a soft spot for Pei, but Chinese culture encourages a quiet woman. To mold their daughter according to custom, they were harsh with her. They silenced her questions and spoke little. Pei was made to feel inadequate. Eventually the lesson took hold, and she stopped asking so many questions. Pei emulated her older sister, Li, who was unassertive and behaved in a more traditional manner. Li was deserving of her parents' praise, but Pei was more likely to receive their scolding.

When Pei was a child, her father took both of his daughters to the village fortune teller. According to the fortune teller, Pei's future was uncertain. Their family's future was uncertain as well. Their harvests were not as abundant as they used to be, and Pao felt the need to cut costs. Based on the fortune teller's prophecy and Pei's personality, her father decided to send her away. Pei was brought to the city of Yung Kee when she was still a child. She thought her father was taking her on an exciting journey. It was only after he had left that she realized he was not coming back to claim her. Pei's introduction to the silk trade was eye-opening. She was exposed to challenging working conditions and felt very lonely. She also suffered from self-esteem issues stemming from her father's abandonment.

Pei's life was filled with hardships. Beginning with difficult early years and undemonstrative parents, Pei went on to experience many losses. After being deposited at the girls' house by her father, the girls of the silk trade became Pei's family. She was particularly close to two of them, Mei-li and Lin. Lin and Pei celebrated their hair dressing ceremony and took their vows of sisterhood together. Mei-li and Lin both died tragic deaths at young ages. Pei was plunged into loneliness yet again. Towards the end of the novel, Pei met a new friend, Ji Shen. Ji Shen had also experienced many tragedies and was in need of love and healing. Pei was able to offer Ji Shen her friendship. By taking care of Ji Shen, Pei reclaimed a sense of family and was able to give the nurturing that she had sought for so long in her own life.

Lin

Lin was Pei's best friend. When Pei's father dropped her off at the girls' house, she had no one and felt utterly alone and unloved. Lin was older than Pei and took a sisterly approach with her. Lin had been working in the silk trade for many years. Her father had been a controversial politician in Canton. He believed in China but recognized that there were lessons to be learned from the western world. Some of his fellow workers



considered him a traitor and he was murdered. Losing her father at a young age changed the course of Lin's life.

Lin's mother had been the perfect politician's wife. She was beautiful and seemed demure. She was an asset to her husband's career. At his side, she was admired. Her children admired her from a distance as well. She was powerful and ambitious. She was not prone to outward demonstrations of sentimentality. Lin and her two brothers were more likely to be hugged or praised by their father. Following their father's death, their mother became ill. The family's income ceased, and their way of life took a downturn. Some of the family's more expensive possessions were sold, although they managed to keep their home. The servants were all dismissed, although some of the most loyal, such as Lin's favorite housekeeper, Mui, stayed without pay.

After her father's death and her mother taking to bed, Lin felt responsible for her family. She knew someone had to earn enough money to support their family until her brothers came of age. After researching her options, Lin voluntarily moved to the city of Yung Kee and began her employment in the silk trade. The majority of her salary was sent home to provide necessities for her family. Lin was proud to be of help to her family. She was older than many of the boarders at the girls' house. She also came from a wealthy background, which further alienated her from the majority of the girls.

When Pei came to the girls' house, Lin took her under her wing and helped her to assimilate to her new life. Lin and Pei celebrated their hair dressing ceremony and took their vows of sisterhood together. They were the best of friends until Lin's death. Lin died in a fire of unknown origin on her last day of work at the silk factory.

Mei-li

Mei-li was one of Pei's closest friends. When Pei arrived at the girls' house, she was assigned the bed next to Mei-li's. When Pei awoke on her first morning Mei-li greeted her with a smile. Pei and Mei-li became fast friends. Mei-li was fun and genuine. Mei-li was so friendly that she was loved by everyone and seemed unaffected by others' moods.

Mei-li had a loving relationship with her parents. Unlike most of the girls who lived at the girls' house, Mei-li's family came every month to visit her. They brought her gifts as well as their laughter. The majority of the gifts she shared with everyone at Auntie Yee's, but the sugar candy she reserved and shared only with Pei. Mei-li's relationship with her parents turned sour when they arranged a marriage for her. Unbeknown to them, Mei-li had been having an affair with the brother of a co-worker. She and Hong had been secretly meeting for weeks. They had been having sex and Mei-li became pregnant. While arranged marriages were commonplace in China, Mei-li was no longer a virgin. She had decided that she would only ever marry Hong. When her parents tried to force her into marrying someone else, Mei-li held out hope that Hong would announce his love for her. When he ended their relationship, Mei-li was devastated. She committed suicide rather than marrying another man.



Yu-sung

Yu-sung is the mother of the main character, Pei. Yu-sung was born into a family that was not wealthy in material but rich in happiness. Her mother kept a clean home, and her parents were very loving. Yu-sung's parents arranged a marriage for her via the village matchmaker. She was sent to marry her husband, Pao, while they were still children. Pao's family was very different from her own. They were descendants of the Hakka tribe and spoke a different dialect than that to which Yu-sung was accustomed. Consequently, they communicated very little and Yu-sung was lonely. Pao was also rough with Yu-sung. Yu-sung committed herself to cleaning their home, which in her impression, Pao had failed to do, and raising the children they conceived. Unfortunately, many of the children she delivered died in infancy.

Of Yu-sung's surviving children, she saw her own likeness in Pei. She recalled her own free spirit as a child, which was broken by marriage. Yu-sung was deeply saddened by her husband's decision to give Pei to the silk work. It seemed natural to her that her oldest daughter, Li, left home to marry, but losing Pei to the silk trade pained Yu-sung. She had very little communication with her daughters over the years. She saw Li only once and their visit was brief. Li came home for the customary parental visit after three days of marriage and Yu-sung saw that she had been beaten by her new husband. It upset Yu-sung to see her daughter being hurt that way, and she reminded Li that she could stay at home with them. Yu-sung understood, however, when Li returned to her husband. Like her mother, Li had chosen to be faithful to her marriage out of honor and obligation. It was just what was expected of a woman in their culture.

As Yu-sung grew older she had many regrets. She had come to understand her husband better over the course of their marriage. He had become gentler with her, and she did the best she could to make their home a place of relative comfort. Her biggest regret was about Pei. She could not forgive herself for her complacency with regards to sending her away. She feared that she would die without ever having been able to reconcile herself with Pei. It was a solace to her that Pei returned home and expressed her love for her mother.

Pao

Pao was the father of the main character, Pei. His family was descended from the Hakka tribe. Due to this genetic variation, Pao was considerably larger than the average Chinese man and had larger features as well. Pao was a complex character. He was rough at times and at other times his character could be viewed as sentimental. It was difficult for other characters to understand Pao because he avoided communication. He chose to say very little and did not share his feelings. Pao was a hard worker. He tended to his crops and ponds every day. The only exception were days that he went to market, and on those days he walked long distances. Pao felt connected to his land and spent long hours working it. When he came home from the fields, he was greeted by his wife and daughters, for whom he provided life's necessities. Pao would have loved a



son, but that did not come to pass. His eldest child, Li, was dutiful and quiet like his wife. His third daughter, Pei, was inquisitive, and he felt that she did not know her place. Pao wanted her to learn her place in the home as was culturally appropriate, but secretly he enjoyed Pei's banter. It was a shame that he was unable to express himself better. His withholding love and affection caused Pei great pain. She felt unworthy of her parents' love.

Yee

Auntie Yee was a retired silk worker. After many years of working in the silk industry, she decided to establish the girls' house. This took an entrepreneurial mindset. Yee's business was a success and all the beds in the girls' house were occupied. The girls all called her Auntie Yee and looked up to her. Yee was a good role model. She symbolized independence. For many, she was also a mother figure because they had lost their own mothers or left them behind when they joined the silk trade.

Auntie Yee had no biological children of her own. After working in the silk trade for a while, a marriage was arranged for her. When she went to meet her new husband, she discovered he was a mere child. She played games with him for a day and then returned to the silk world forever. She did send money to him, though, as was her duty and provided a concubine for him. Through his concubine, Yee was given a step daughter, Chen Ling, who later accompanied Yee and entered the sisterhood. It was Chen Ling and Moi, Yee's closest friend and confidant, who took care of her when her health declined. Yee dies in the middle of the novel and is missed by the community.

Ji Shen

Ji Shen arrived at the girls' house unexpectedly. Her family was attacked and murdered by Japanese soldiers. Following the assault, she ran south as far as her legs would carry her. She traveled without food and shelter for many days before collapsing on the doorstep of the girls' house. She was malnourished, dehydrated, and the sores on her feet had become infected. Additionally, she and her mother and sister had been sexually assaulted by the soldiers. Ji Shen was the only surviving member of her family. She identified with most of the girls at the house because they were also without family. Ji Shen suffered from nightmares related to the atrocities she had witnessed. Pei took a special interest in Ji Shen and spent her days restoring Ji Shen's health. Pei was able to provide assistance to a younger friend for the first time (usually she was the recipient of such attention). Moi also exerted much effort in making special foods for Ji Shen. After Ji Shen had regained her strength, Pei invited Ji Shen to join her and Lin when they left the city. Lin was killed in a fire before this was possible, but Pei and Ji Shen did leave together. They hoped to start a new life that was safe and far from the war.



Sui Ying

Sui Ying was the young wife of a displaced fisherman. When the monsoon drenched the city of Yung Kee and the surrounding area, many workers were forced to search for employment elsewhere. Sui Ying eagerly awaited her husband's return. Unlike the other girls who inhabited the girls' house, Sui Ying had something to look forward to. Her marriage had been arranged, but it was a good match. Sui Ying and her husband were deeply in love and excited at the prospect of reunion. Sui Ying's position at the silk factory and her boarding at the girls' house were temporary. She looked forward to the future with her husband, but she managed to be content during their time apart. She corresponded with him often and made friends with other girls at the factory. When the workers decided to hold a strike, Sui Ying was hesitant to be involved. While she agreed that the working conditions were poor, she also knew that she wouldn't have to endure it for much longer. As soon as her husband had secured work and a new home for the two of them, she would leave the factory. She decided to participate in the strike, however, because she knew that a unanimous demand would have a greater impact on the owner. Sui Ying wanted her friends to be successful. In an effort to gain control of the situation, the guards fired out into the gathering of employees. They fatally wounded Sui Ying.

Hong

Hong was the brother of a silk worker named Su-lung. Pei and Mei-li had been invited to dinner at Su-lung's home one evening. Dinner was delightful, but Mei-li was more focused on Hong than the dinner. He was exceptionally tall. He was interested in studying economics and was busy preparing for his entrance exams to the university. Mei-li was impressed with him and quickly fell in love. Hong entertained the notion of being Mei-li's boyfriend. He met her secretly on a regular basis. During the course of their relationship, Mei-li became pregnant but did not tell him. He tired of Mei-li and ended their relationship. This was a contributing factor in Mei-li's suicide. Pei blamed Hong for Mei-li's death and felt hatred toward him.

Fortune teller

The fortune teller was integral in Chinese culture. The revelations of the fortune teller determined a person's future. For example, Li was married according to custom, but Pei was sent away to work at the silk factory because the fortune teller said her future was uncertain. Similarly, the match maker also had the capacity to greatly affect a person's future. Some marriage matches were successful and happy but others were miserable. Match makers frequently used information such as birth dates to align possible mates.



Objects/Places

Farm

Pei and her sister, Li, were raised on a farm with their parents. The farm consisted of mulberry bushes and fish ponds. The mulberry leaves and fish were sold for profit.

Village

The village was a source of excitement for Pei during her childhood. Trips to the village were infrequent and it was a special occasion when either of the girls was allowed to go. Their father, Pao, went there regularly to sell what he harvested from the farm. The fortune teller who foresaw Pei and Li's futures was consulted in the village.

Yung Kee

Yung Kee was the city to which Pei relocated when she joined the silk trade.

Yung Kee Silk Factory

Pei's place of employment. It was also the site of the fire that killed Lin.

Girls' House

The girls' house was operated by Auntie Yee. It was a safe place for girls working in the silk trade to board when their families were not located nearby. The Girls' House was Pei's first home in Yung Kee.

Sisters' House

The sisters' house was Pei's next home following the girls' house. Adults lived at the sisters' house and devoted themselves to the silk trade. Most of its inhabitants had taken a vow of celibacy, akin to marriage upon joining.

Canton

Canton is from where Lin's family comes. Their family estate is located in Canton. Lin and Pei returned there for a visit.



Reading Room

The reading room was the room in the girls' house designated for gatherings. On ordinary evenings the girls congregated there to discuss history, religion, and current events. On weekends it was a place for the girls to visit with their family members.

Pearl River

The Pearl River was a source of industry for the city of Yung Kee. Many boats transported goods along it daily. In desperation, Mei-li committed suicide by drowning in it.

Cocoon

The cocoon is the raw material for the silk trade. It is steamed and the threads are separated, then spun into silk, which is sold for large profits.



Themes

Loneliness

The characters in *Women of Silk* often struggled with loneliness. Pei, the main character, felt much discomfort while living at home with her family. Their home was devoid of laughter and the silences outnumbered the conversations. She was not alone, however, because she had the companionship of her sister, Li. Pei didn't know it, but her mother was lonely, too. Her mother was naturally more outgoing, and had grown up in an exuberant family, but had learned that she must talk less to please her husband. When Pei was dropped off at the girls' house, she found herself utterly alone. Pei's sense of loneliness continued to haunt her throughout the book. Even once she had made friends, she still longed for a deeper connection. For example, when Pei and Mei-li were invited for dinner at Su-lung's home, Pei eagerly accepted because she yearned for a family. Even after so many years away from home, she was trying to fill the inner emptiness she felt after having been abandoned by her father.

Mei-li also struggled with loneliness. Unlike Pei, Mei-li had a strong relationship with her family. Her family had a specific path defined for her, however, and she was not interested in following it. After Hong ended their romance, she could not bear to be without him or to contemplate her future. She committed suicide, thus portraying total unhappiness, loneliness, and desperation.

Lin was another of Pei's close friends. Lin came from a wealthy, yet somewhat dysfunctional, family. After her father's death, her mother retreated to her bedroom and stopped interacting with people. Lin received no guidance or love from her mother from that point on. The only person she felt connected to was the housekeeper, Mui. To assist her family, Lin left them and the housekeeper behind and entered the silk trade. Lin knew she was different from the other girls. The majority of the girls came from poor families, who sent their children to work out of necessity. Lin's family was wealthy and she clearly had richer life experiences. Lin held herself with an air of grace. She was also literate and schooled. Lin could sense that the other girls did not entirely accept her and she consequently felt like an outsider at the girls' house. When Pei came to the house, Lin sensed a kindred spirit and they became good friends, which diminished both Lin's and Pei's loneliness.

Marriage

Marriage is a pivotal theme in this book. The majority of the women were independent characters. Those that worked at the silk factory earned their own money and experienced the privileges that went along with it. Many felt no need to be supported by a man and, in fact, enjoyed their freedom. Some, such as Chen Ling, renounced marriage to a man. Chen Ling believe in equality between men and women. Her belief was not an accurate description of the average marriage in China. Chen Ling read



Chinese folklore that celebrated a heroine named Kuan Yin. Kuan Yin followed a non-traditional route and became a nun.

Other girls just didn't see the need for marriage in their own life. Pei had witnessed a cold marriage between her own parents. Their relationship did not inspire her to marry. She had also observed her sister's birth and her mother's subsequent month of confinement and did not see the process as beneficial. Then there was Mei-li, who wanted to marry Hong but suffered from a broken heart and eventually committed suicide. After losing Mei-li, Pei saw the results of a love not reciprocated and wondered about the point of it.

The alternative to marriage in China was the hair dressing ceremony. Yee, Chen Ling, Ming, Pei, and Lin all opted for the sisterhood as opposed to marriage. Not only did they not relish the idea of marriage, they feared potential mates. In China, a girl's family chooses a mate for her, and with the help of a match maker, the marriage is arranged. Marriages were less likely to be a result of love than societal pressure. Some matches were poor. Mei-li had no interest in the match that was made for her and avoided it at all costs. Auntie Yee and her husband were mismatched. He was just a boy, and she was a grown woman when they were married. Yee preferred the sisterhood to so poor a match.

The only marriage that was portrayed in a favorable light was that of Sui Ying and Lau Chen. Their marriage had been arranged by their families, but it was a good match and they had genuinely grown to love each other. If not for Sui Ying, Pei would not have known that a happy and healthy marriage was possible.

Silk Trade

The common theme that connects all the characters in the novel is the silk trade. The silk trade was a source of commerce in China. The silk trade provided its employees with better wages than could be found in rural China. Their wages were instrumental in supporting their families. The pay was not easily earned, however. The work was physically challenging. Many of the people employed were just young girls. The employees worked long days, often twelve hours, with little rest. They worked over boiling water and had poor ventilation, which combined to make them dehydrated and wan. Accidents on the job were life threatening.

The process of making silk included multiple steps. First the cocoons arrived and were sorted. The cocoons were obtained in a tightly-wound state. To loosen the strands, the cocoons were placed in large vats of boiling water and stirred continuously. When the cocoons started to become pliable, they were removed from the water. A strand was tweezed apart and then spun, with additional strands being added one upon another, end to end. The quality of the cocoon used directly affected the final product, so silk was sold with a grading system for finest quality, standard, etc.



At the time of the novel, silk was produced in large factories. It was an assembly process with many employees lined up in rows, each completing their assigned task, which would then be transferred to another set of girls. By America's standards, the conditions that the characters endured would have violated labor laws as well as child labor laws. To improve their working conditions, the employees organized a strike. The women rebelled against the male authority figures. Their strike was successful and many of their demands, such as fewer working hours, were met. The women returned to work until the close of the factory, which was prompted by the war between China and Japan.



Style

Point of View

The author tells the story through the third person point of view. She talks about, but not through, Pei. Pei's life was tragic in many ways. Despite all that she had to endure, the reader understands that the book is meant to be uplifting. As Pei and the other girls search for love, they learn independence along the way. In this way the book teaches the reader about the depth of the human soul and how it is possible to start over and choose a better life for one's self.

Setting

The novel is set in rural China in the 1920's. Japan and China are locked in a war that starts in the north and slowly trickles southward. The main character's home is a small farm on the outskirts of a village. The closest city of any size is one whole day's walk away. After passing through the village market and crossing over the Pearl River, the main character encounters Yung Kee. Yung Kee is the industrialized city that houses the silk factories, girls' house, and sisters' house.

A small part of the novel is set in Canton, when Lin and Pei go to Lin's home for her brother's wedding. Additionally, at the close of the novel, Pei was readying to journey to Hong Kong.

Language and Meaning

The language and meaning used within the novel are generally straight forward. The exception would be pages 164-165 in chapter ten, where the author's intent is not clear. The passages on those pages could be interpreted in multiple different ways. Additionally, some terms of cultural significance are mentioned, such as Jong. There may be no translation for such terms, so the Chinese name is used, even though the book is written in English. No meaning is lost, however, because the author always takes care to describe the item in question.

Structure

Women of the Silk is nineteen chapters long. The chapters are spread out over 278 pages. The chapters have no formal titles, but each has a heading that announces a character. The reader finds these character announcements to not be indicative of what comes next. For example, a chapter might be entitled Yee, but the second half of the chapter might be about someone entirely different. The subheadings, for example "Do Not Go Down to the Family," are much more relevant.



Quotes

"It would have been different if they had been sons." page 2

"It was always Pei, with all her curious ways, whom Yu-sung worried about most." page 5

"Over the years, she had grown as silent as her husband." page 9

"There's a lot you will have to learn, little one." page 39

"Just understand that you may think this is not a very good place, but its not a bad place, either. It's just another place for you to be right now." page 41

"Because I can offer you nothing more than a warm room and a cot to sleep on." page 43

"He wanted to say something of how he felt about the fish and the ponds, but he kept silent." page 49

"During the first year of learning the silk work, Pei realized there was very little time for memories." page 53

"The earth drank in all it could until every crevice filled up and the land bloated." page 65

"And for the first time, Pei felt really needed." page 93

"She could no longer deny the child growing inside of her." page 115

"She suddenly felt free of all restraints." page 119

"It was hard and cold and stone, and she couldn't have hated Hong more if he were a Japanese soldier." page 122

"After more than twelve years, Lin had come home." page 148

"Then nausea moved through Pei and shew knew something had gone wrong." page 179

"After all these years, her parents' silence gave her the strength to move forward, no longer looking back." page 205

"For a moment he thought his time had come, that the two were sent to lead him into the other world." page 218

"Yu-sung knew Li had more of a choice than Pei was given." page 226



"They stared at him placidly, knowing that within their silence was all the hatred the years had stored up." page 243

"Lin and the sisterhood had been her life for so long. They were burned into her heart." page 268



Topics for Discussion

Discuss the relationship between Pei's parents.

Pei is a mere child when she leaves her home. Recount her journey to Yung Kee.

Auntie Yee is an important figure at the girls' house. What is her role there? Why do you think she is so important in the girls' lives?

Mei-li was introduced as a girl that everyone liked... unaffected by other people's moods... yet she committed suicide. What happened?

Chung owned the Yung Kee Silk Factory. Discuss his relationship with his employees.

Compare and contrast the childhoods of Pei and Lin.

Compare and contrast the housekeepers Mui and Moi.

Arranged marriage is a sensitive topic for some people. It is presented in this book as being the source of happiness or misery. Give examples of each situation.

This novel occurs within the context of the Chinese silk trade. Give instructions for the process of spinning silk. Was the work challenging?

Explore the many facets of Pei and Lin's friendship.