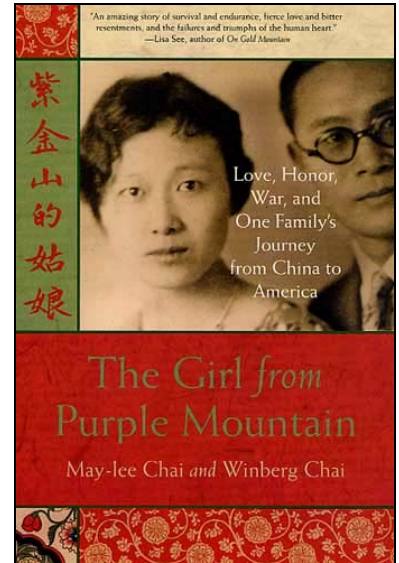


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Girl From Purple Mountain by May-Lee Chai & Winberg Chai

St. Martin's Press

ISBN: 0-312-30270-3 (paperback)



Introduction to *The Girl From Purple Mountain*

A family memoir set against the shifting tides of twentieth-century China, *The Girl from Purple Mountain* begins with a mystery: the Chai family matriarch, Ruth Mei-en Tsao Chai, dies unexpectedly and her grieving husband discovers that she had secretly arranged to be buried alone—rather than in the shared plots they had purchased together years ago.

For many years, Ruth's family remained shocked by her decision and could not begin to fathom her motivations. Over time, they would fully understand her extraordinary story. Ruth was born in China at the beginning of the 20th century, during the reign of the last emperor. Educated by American missionaries, she was one of the first women admitted into a Chinese university, during an era when most Chinese women were illiterate and had bound feet. She would defy tradition and refuse to marry the man her family had chosen for her, instead choosing his younger brother as her husband. Later, as the Japanese Army advanced across China during World War II, her foresight and quick thinking kept her family alive as she, her husband, and their three sons were forced to flee from city to city. In war-torn Chungking, she was Lady Mountbatten's interpreter as the Allies struggled to help China. After the war, the Chais immigrated to the U.S. to what seemed, until Ruth's death, a happier and more peaceful life.

In this extraordinary family epic, Ruth's first-born son, Winberg, and his daughter May-lee explore family history to reconstruct her life as they seek to understand her fateful decision. As Winberg writes: "It is my duty to try to understand my mother, to seek answers. To ignore the past is too much like forgetting . . . I hope my memories are enough to fulfill a son's obligations."

Praise for *The Girl From Purple Mountain*

"This is an intricately orchestrated cross-generational memoir, and one that is particularly successful in linking the world of China in the first half of the twentieth century to the opportunities and ambiguities of those Chinese who grew up as Americans. It is a subtle book that resonates in the mind as well as being a true family history that spans moods and generations."

—Jonathan Spence, author of *The Search for Modern China* and *Sterling Professor of History*, Yale University

"Absolutely mesmerizing. It captures not only the soul of a family, but the essence of twentieth-century China."—Iris Chang, author of *The Rape of Nanking*

"A beautiful piece of memory and history. *The Girl from Purple Mountain* presents the intimacies and secrets of the Chai family set against the broad canvas that is China in the twentieth century. This is an amazing story of survival and endurance, fierce love and bitter resentments, and the failures and triumphs of the human heart."—Lisa See, author of *On Gold Mountain*

"*The Girl from Purple Mountain* is a wonderful resource for teachers of modern China, appropriate for introductory courses in East Asian Civilizations or East Asian Religions, and advanced courses and seminars on Confucianism or the history of modern China. The story of an unusual and resourceful woman and her family coping in China in the 1930s, *Girl from Purple Mountain* provides both context and challenges to abstract ideas about Chinese culture in general and Confucianism in particular. I have used *The Girl from Purple Mountain* for an introductory undergraduate course 'Chinese and Japanese Religious Traditions' and for an upper level seminar entitled 'Confucianism and Its Critics.' My students were absorbed by the stories of Ruth and her family; they quickly saw the breakdown in the traditional, Confucian ideals of family. My students also developed a new sympathy for the difficulties of a time and place that can seem remote and disconnected from their own experience; I will use *Girl from Purple Mountain* for future sections of our introductory 'East Asian Civilizations' class."—Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, Wittenberg University

"The fascinating story of a Chinese family, covering three generations and the entire 20th Century . . . To read this work is to understand the drama of China—and its people—in revolutionary times."

—Robert A. Scalapino, Robson Research Professor of Government Emeritus, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley

"This stirring memoir . . . is graced with masterful writing and keen observations. The authors deftly move in and out of colorful anecdotes by means of flashbacks while never stalling the forward motion of their narrative. In telling a moving story of Chinese immigrants who suffer the hardships of war and political strife, the authors also give a succinct account on modern Chinese history. *The Girl from Purple Mountain* should be on the must-read list of anyone interested in Chinese culture and history."—Tao-Tai Hsia, Chief of the Eastern Law Division, Library of Congress

"More than a good story . . . it reveals the conflict between a daughter's desire to know her heritage and her father's desire not to be reminded how much distance the passage of time and the vicissitudes of history have placed between him and his origins."—*The Washington Post Book World*

"*The Girl from Purple Mountain* was one of the most popular texts in my American Women's Auto/Biography course. The students found Ruth Tsao Chai's story, and the father-daughter dynamic of the Chai's dual-narration, to be fascinating. The photographs at the beginning of each chapter also

provided another opportunity for textual analysis and discussion in the course. I recommend it, enthusiastically."—Dr. Lori Askeland, English Department, Wittenberg University

"A multilayered memoir that successfully weaves historical detail with familial emotions of different generations."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Adept and bold-spirited, savvy in its perspective on history, unflinching in its revelation. The authors' compelling rendering of our human proclivity for both tenderness and cruelty distinguishes them as ardent laborers in the fields of the word. This is a work which smolders and sings."
—Marilyn Krysl, author of *Warscape With Lovers*

"A poignant and delightful memoir."—Henry Luce III, former publisher of *Time* magazine

"This remarkable and beautifully written memoir is indeed a love story, on many levels, set against the backdrop of modern China's turbulent history. The mix of generations and cultures, told engagingly by two separate narrators, makes *The Girl from Purple Mountain* a unique and fascinating read."
—Howard Goldblatt, translator of *Red Sorghum* and *The Republic of Wine*

"*The Girl from Purple Mountain* is an eloquent and searching story of mystery and revelation, a rich deep, multilayered saga destined to be compared with *Wild Swans* and other masterpieces of familial exploration. Filled with finely wrought historical detail, the book is both a powerful personal narrative and an illuminating look at China, complete with irony and grace."
—Karin Evans, author of *The Lost Daughters of China: Abandoned Girls, Their Journey to America, and the Search for a Missing Past*

"This 20th-century odyssey of an elite Chinese Christian family from Nanjing focuses on Tsao Mei-en, mother and grandmother, respectively, to the father and daughter coauthors of this remarkable narrative. The authors' individual voices weave throughout this compelling story of one of China's first female college graduates. A woman of indomitable will and passionate conviction, Tsao Mei-en dominated her husband, a professor of law, and her three sons, including the eldest, Winberg. Her strength of character, resourcefulness, and intelligence held the family together through turbulent decades of civil and foreign wars, revolution, and upheaval. Tragic, funny, lyrical, and respectful, this intimate and unforgettable family chronicle is also a history of modern China. In the Chinese tradition, it is a filial act of reverence by a father and daughter who cherish their roots and understand how the past shapes our lives."
—Steven I. Levine, University of Montana, Missoula, *Library Journal*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. The book provides a portrait of Chinese family life as it evolves in China and America, during war and peace, over more than a century. What are some of these changes? What adaptations do the Chai family make after moving to America?
2. How are the changes in women's roles over time reflected in the book—beginning with Ruth Mei-en's mother's story and ending with May-lee?
3. Why do the authors relate the story of how Ruth Mei-en's mother had her feet bound and unbound?

4. How is Ruth Mei-en's decision to be buried alone connected to her personality as manifested throughout her life?
5. What is the role religion plays in Ruth Mei-en's life? Did this role remain static or change over time?
6. Based on the Chai family's experiences in family conflicts and in war and peace, which do you feel is more important in shaping people's lives: our capacity to make decisions or historical circumstances? Or both?
7. Although this story takes place largely in China during WWII, do the issues of survival, family, remembering and forgetting the past remind you of other ethnic groups' experiences? What about your own family's history?
8. What kind of man is Ruth Mei-en's husband? How does his character come through in the narrative? How would the story have been different if the authors had chosen to put Charles Chu Chai at the center instead of Ruth Mei-en?
9. Ruth Mei-en never forgave her brother-in-law Huan because of a number of things he did during the war. Is her intense anger justified in your view? Does her anger in itself pose a threat to the family?
10. Ruth Mei-en is quoted as saying that she could have withstood all the hardships of war without complaint but really family problems were the worst thing on earth. Why do you think she found the family conflicts harder to bear than the problems brought on by the wars?
11. Winberg describes his own reluctance to talk about the past because of the trauma his memories caused him, yet May-lee expresses her need to know and understand her family. Are there similar issues of forgetting v. remembering in your own family regarding its past and how do you feel about exploring this past?
12. How did the two narrative voices—Winberg's and May-lee's—differ in telling Ruth Mei-en's story? How did generational, gender and cultural differences affect how the narrators viewed Ruth Mei-en? Do their views change over time?
13. Are there any lessons women of today could take away from Ruth Mei-en's life story?

About the Author

Winberg Chai was born in Shanghai. He received his Ph.D. from New York University, and later became the first Asian American vice president of a state university. The author of more than twenty books on China, he is currently a political science professor at the University of Wyoming.

Daughter of Winberg Chai, **May-Lee Chai** is the author of the novel *My Lucky Face*. Her short stories have been published in various publications, including *Seventeen*, the *North American Review*, and the *Missouri Review*. A former reporter for the Associated Press, she has also taught creative writing at San Francisco State University and the University of Colorado at Boulder. Chai has Master's degrees from Yale University and the University of Colorado at Boulder.