

# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *The Foreigner*

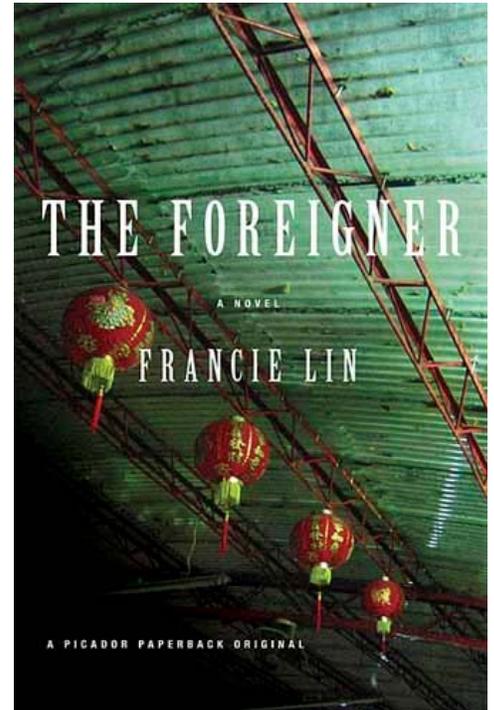
*A Novel*

*by Francie Lin*

*A Picador Paperback Original*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Foreigner* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Foreigner*.

### About the Book

A crime novel, a family saga, a meditation on the nature of cultural identity—Francie Lin’s *The Foreigner* is a dynamic novel of both action and ideas. It is also a transporting novel, one that takes us to the darkness of Taipei’s criminal underworld, where the ashes of burnt hellnotes flurry out of gutters and where tough guys exchange Byzantine insults in the backrooms of Karaoke bars – this is an uncommonly eccentric Asian gangland, a world that is brought vividly to life on the page. Our guide through this world, Emerson Chang, is himself unusual -- a nebbish but noble Taiwanese American, a simple financial analyst with a rather complicated moral code, who finds himself tossed into circumstances that are quite beyond his control. Will

he be able to hold strong to everything he believes, and at the same time save what is left of his family?

*The Foreigner* is a novel about the gulf between a man's culture and his deepest self – what it is like to be a foreigner in one's own country, to perhaps be a foreigner in the world at large. It is also a story about brothers, the meaning of fraternity, and the outsized, often distorted, expectations we may have of our own families. With its shadowy mise-en-scene, its fascinating and secretive characters, and its elegantly drawn themes about culture and history, Francie Lin's debut novel, *The Foreigner* offers much to discuss.

## About the Author

**Francie Lin**, a former editor at *The Threepenny Review*, received a Fulbright Fellowship to Taiwan in 2001-2002. She lives in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

## Discussion Questions

1. Emerson's mother has a complicated relationship with America – she seems to believe that America has its value, but that it also poses a threat. Why does she think that American culture will taint her children, and what is this “idea” that she claims to be protecting when she insists that Emerson marry a Chinese woman?
2. Along those same lines, is it common for one generation to wish that the next generation marry within the family's cultural group? Why?
3. Why do you think Emerson's mother wills the hotel to Little P? Is she betraying her loyal son, or do you think she had a larger scheme in mind?
4. Were you surprised to discover that Emerson is a virgin? Did you notice any early clues regarding his chastity? How do you think he managed to remain a virgin for so long? Did his mother play a role? At the same time, why did he resist J-'s advances while at the same time doing so much to court her?
5. What does J- mean when she says “that's all it is”? Are her words echoed in the behavior of Little P, or any of the other characters? Is she telling Emerson to abandon his lofty beliefs about sex and love, or is she simply imploring him to be more human?
6. Discuss the role of Atticus in the story. In what way are his ideals different from Emerson's, or from Emerson's mother's – are they both attempting to preserve the same “idea”? Is Atticus corrupt, misguided, or nobly fighting an unwinnable battle?
7. In what ways are Emerson and Little P alike? Underneath their differences, do they share an unbreakable bond? What is the difference between an obligation to a family member, and an obligation to a friend or stranger?

8. Why is it so difficult for Emerson to part with his mother's ashes? Does the ceremony of consigning her to the afterlife matter to him? Does Emerson believe in a cosmology, an afterlife, or in anything beyond the realm of human consciousness ("It was a kind of immortality, I suppose, to live on in an idea")? Or is the physical world simply more important to him? Would you say that Emerson's principles serve as a kind of religion instead?
9. Little P harbors many dark secrets, and he has committed unspeakable crimes. Are his worst crimes forgivable? Consider that Little P is Emerson's only real connection to the past, to his own childhood – does the value of that connection make Little P worth holding on to? What exactly makes Emerson run off the plane at the end of Part I?
10. Why do Emerson and Little P remember the family hotel so differently? Why does Emerson have so many happy memories, while Little P obviously couldn't wait to fly away from it?
11. Who do you think is a better romantic match for Emerson, Angel or Grace? Are perhaps neither of them suitable?
12. What do you think of the poem, "Osprey", which is crudely translated into English by Grace on page 215? What does this poem tell the reader about Grace, and how she feels about love? Discuss how Francie Lin uses the poem to reveal another side of Grace (she is the only character to express herself with poetry, although Emerson certainly has a poetic soul). Is the courtly language of the poem intended to be funny, touching, or both?
13. Discuss how the idea of identity -- and of what we expect from ourselves, based on our culture – is woven throughout the novel. Is the very island of Taiwan itself in the grip of an identity crisis, with regard to its politics and its history? And is there a bit of role reversal between China and Taiwan – who is exploiting whom in this novel?
14. Why does Emerson believe, on first arrival in Taiwan, that if he listens hard enough, he will be able to understand Chinese? Is anything elemental about our character and who we are?
15. *The Foreigner* cleverly plays with conventions of the crime novel – there is gunplay, gambling, gangsters, and much tough talk among a threatening cast of characters. But in what ways is this novel different, how does Francie Lin distort these common elements of the crime genre? Are the characters more vulnerable, more fallible, or perhaps simply more strange and eccentric than the kind you usually find in the crime genre? Are they more human?
16. At the end of the novel, who is the shadowy figure who falls from the bridge? Is it Poison, Little P? Are we intended to know for certain?

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