



Raise the Red Lantern

By Su Tong
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Introduction

The brutal realities of the dark places Su Tong depicts in this collection of novellas set in 1930s provincial China -- worlds of prostitution, poverty, and drug addiction -- belie his prose of stunning and simple beauty. Made into an internationally acclaimed film that was nominated for an Academy Award, the title novella tells the story of Lotus, a young woman whose father's suicide forces her to become the concubine of a wealthy merchant. Crushed by loneliness, despair, and cruel treatment, Lotus finds in insanity both weapon and refuge. "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes" is an account of a family's struggles during one momentous year: plagued by disease, death, and the shady promise of life in a larger town, the family slowly disintegrates. Finally, "Opium Family" details the last years of a landowning clan whose demise is brought about by corruption, lust, and treachery -- fruits of the insidious crop they harvest.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do we learn about the personalities and character of the women in "Raise the Red Lantern" from their names?
2. Are you surprised by Coral's affair with the doctor and that Chen Zuoquian has her murdered? Does Lotus's state of mind make you question whether Coral was actually murdered?
3. Why does Lotus become unbalanced? At what point does her mental state begin to decline? Do suicide and madness seem like viable options in a society with so many strictures?
4. In "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes," the narrator says, "I was being followed by my shadow." And later, he says, "If you open your windows, you will see my shadow cast upon this city, fluttering in the wind." Taking into account the narrator's family and China's economic and political history, what is the shadow? Why does he want to find out about the shadow? Does he feel he can escape it?
5. The narrator's voice is alternately present and subdued in the storytelling. At what places does it switch to third person, and why do you think the author does this?
6. What role does superstition play in "Nineteen Thirty-Four Escapes?" Does it add to its believability or detract? Does it matter if this story the narrator is constructing is believable?
7. How does Communism specifically the family and the tenant farmers "Opium Family?" Who truly believes the precepts of Communism and who uses it for revenge?
8. Why isn't Chencao punished for murdering his brother Yanyi? Why is Chencao more important to Liu Laoxia than Liu Suzi?
9. Chen Mao tells Liu Suzi, "Your family's karma is all used up and no one can save you. I'm your bodhisattva now, understand?" Is the Liu family's karma gone? Is Chen Mao a type of bodhisattva -- a spiritual leader -- for the Liu family as Communism intrudes into their rural life?
10. Before the Cultural Revolution comes to Maple Village, the grandfathers tell their grandsons, "People are just like crops: Whoever plants them, reaps them, and they reap whatever they sow." Particularly when thinking about the characters Liu Laoxia, Chencao, and Chen Mao, does "Opium Family" uphold this theory? Do they reap what they sowed?

About the Author

Su Tong was born in Suzhou in 1963 and graduated from Beijing Normal University with a degree in Chinese literature. Su Tong now lives in Nanjing.

Translator for *Raise the Red Lantern*

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