



Bearkats Read To Succeed

2010-2011

CHINA'S SON

by DA CHEN

Discussion Guide

www.shsu.edu/fye/read.htm



ABOUT THIS BOOK

China's Son tells the story of Da Chen, a young boy who comes of age during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution in China. In writing about the difficulties and triumphs of childhood, Da's touching memoir also explores the fascinating history of China during a time of great upheaval. Da, born in 1962 in the small village of Yellow Stone in Southern China, begins his story by detailing the deprivation his once respected family endures as a result of the political situation in China.

As a result of the political reforms of The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the lives of Da Chen and his family were forever changed. In asserting his power and ideology, Mao sought to change the way that Chinese people thought and lived. In the area of education, intellectuals were chastised and the rural farmer was touted as the ideal teacher. As Da Chen explains in his memoir, "School was chaos.... Teachers could do almost nothing to remedy the situation for fear of being branded a stinking intellectual or a counterrevolutionary" (p. 73). In addition, various land reforms were enacted during Mao's long reign that enabled the government to confiscate property and redistribute it among the peasant population, leaving landowners with nothing but harassment from the local community. According to Mao's ideology, class determination was extremely important and it was far better to be labeled a poor peasant than a landlord in Communist China. Landowners, like intellectuals, represented a way of life that Mao Zedong saw no place for in the revolution.

Da's grandfather, once a landowner, loses his property and is publicly humiliated and beaten. His father is fired from his teaching position and is sent away to labor camps. His mother fears for her children and their futures and advises them "...to be quiet, stay out of trouble, and wait for better days to come" (p. 3). His siblings are eventually forced to leave school by the local bureaucracy and sentenced to grueling work in the fields. Da himself is moved in and out of school, accused of counterrevolutionary activities, and subjected to the cruel taunts of his classmates. Although everyone suffers, the family never loses its sense of dignity. Da's extraordinary spirit and tenacity is a testament to his family's strength and love. He triumphs in his pursuits, eventually earning a place at a prestigious university in Beijing. He excels in school, discovers friends who accept him despite his family background, learns to play the flute and violin, and masters the English language.

Da's story includes moments of hardship, but it also includes such joys as traditional New Year's feasts and beautiful rural landscapes, and the camaraderie of his friends and family. In writing **China's Son**, Da reveals both the story of a boy coming of age and the larger story of a country in turmoil. His life experiences are inextricably linked to the land in which he lives.

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Da Chen was born in rural Southern China in 1962. After attending the Beijing Language Institute, Da moved to the United States to attend college in Nebraska where he was offered a fellowship to teach and study. He then attended Columbia University Law School and worked as an investment banker on Wall Street. Da currently lives in New York's Hudson Valley with his wife, two children, and his mother who came over from China after the death of his father. His brother and one sister remain in China and one sister lives in New York City.

TEACHING IDEAS

The questions, exercises, and assignments that follow are intended to guide your students through **China's Son** as a memoir, a work of literature, and as a work of history. The experience of childhood is an excellent way to engage students in more complex political and cultural discussions about the forces that shape Da's and his family's life. The following discussion points explore China's history and its importance to the story, test reading comprehension, offer themes for more in-depth discussion, and suggest additional memoirs, autobiographies, and works of Chinese history.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING

Understanding China and its Role in the Story

Brief Overview:

Mao Zedong (1893-1976) was one of the most influential and infamous individuals in 20th century Chinese history. As an original member of the Chinese Communist Party, he was one of the key figures in establishing Communism in China. He was the Chairman of the People's Republic of China from 1949-1959 and the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party for the duration of his life. He remained a force in Chinese politics until his death in 1976 and his policies reverberate in China even today. In an interview for **Colors of the Mountain**, from which **China's Son** was adapted, Da Chen explains the centrality of Mao in Chinese life. For Da, Mao "was this guy I was supposed to hate forever, which I do. But Mao was the heaven; Mao was the earth--and everything in between. That's how big he was. When he died it was like a whole dynasty had died, and I felt that China might die with him."

In 1958, Mao launched The Great Leap Forward, a program of agricultural and industrial reform that, because of poor planning and disorganization, ultimately ended in massive crop failure and widespread famine. After it became clear that The Great Leap Forward had been a disaster, Mao began to lose support within the Communist Party and was pushed to the political periphery. To combat his critics and reassert his authority and ideology, he launched The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). He encouraged students to abandon school and join the Red Guard to overthrow the "four olds" -- old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Mao hoped to rid the country of any capitalist tendencies, to repudiate what he felt were bourgeois academics, and to transform education and culture to support Communist ideals. For Da Chen, this meant that his family of landowners and intellectuals had no place in the new regime.

1. The Cultural Revolution directly affects Da and his family. They suffer poverty and threats from the community. Why does the fact that Da's Grandfather was a former landlord have such a powerful impact on the family's status? How is his Grandfather punished (p. 5)?
2. What do we learn through Da's story about the government's new policies on education? On intellectuals? What is the result of these policies? Why is Zhang Tie Shan considered a hero in Communist China (p. 73)? How do students gain recognition in a system that doesn't recognize individual achievement?
3. After The Cultural Revolution has ended, Da describes the predicament of a friend. (p. 148/149). What happens to those who embrace the anti-intellectualism of The Cultural Revolution after it is over?
4. The government policies shift as Da grows older. How do these changes affect Da's life and those of his family? For example, the government decides to open up the college entrance examinations to all students, regardless of their age, race or family background. This results in a great opportunity for Da (p. 132/133). Discuss other shifts in policy and how they affect Da.
5. Da explains that the family shrine where his mother prays is hidden in the attic, "because religion was not allowed in Communist China"(p. 6). Why is religion not allowed? What role does religion play in Da's family?
6. Why are so many people in China forced into agricultural work? (p. 126/127).
7. At the end of his memoir, Da describes the opportunities that he imagines learning English will provide for him: "Now I had a future, a bright one. In a few years, I would be fluent in English, could go to work for the Foreign Ministry and would converse in that fine language with fine people in an elegant international setting" (p. 208). What do Da's thoughts about the value of learning English say about the changing political landscape?
8. The death of Mao in 1976 is a pivotal event in China's history. How does it affect Da (p. 132)? How do his feelings toward Mao change as he experiences more and matures (examples, pp. 171/173)?

Understanding the Story

1. The preface to the book includes a couplet that the author's grandfather painted on the wooden door of the family home:

Colors of the Mountain will never leave our door

Sounds of the river will linger forever in our ears

In explaining the significance of this poem, the author suggests that the natural surroundings inspired his grandfather. Does Da discover the same solace in nature? In what ways is the landscape an escape for Da? How is this quote significant for the rest of Da's story?

2. On the first page of the memoir, Da says that "[T]he unfortunate year of my birth left a permanent flaw in my character: I was always hungry." Da is hungry for food, but he also yearns for other things. Identify the needs that drive Da to achieve his goals.

3. At the conclusion of the first chapter, Da prays for "Dad not to get beaten by the Red Guards, for Grandpa to be well, for Mom not to cry as much. My last request was always for food--more of it, please" (p. 6). What are the reader's first impressions of the family's life in Communist China?

4. In the early pages of the memoir, Da describes his feelings of isolation, "I no longer played. I had aged and had become an outcast" (p. 32). He desperately wants to be included even if this means belonging to groups such as the Red Guard that persecute his family. Why does Da feel this way? Is it a betrayal of his family?

5. Da is accused of counterrevolutionary activity (p. 22). How does this make Da feel about himself and his family? Da's father advises him not to confess (p. 25). Why does he advise this course of action? What does this say about his father's character?

6. Da's family--particularly his grandfather, father and mother--is very important to him. The following questions explore how each one has influenced Da.

Grandfather

1. What does he learn from his grandfather? How do his memories of his grandfather help him pursue his goals?

2. How does his grandfather react to the way he is treated in the community? In describing the rules that his Grandfather must now observe. (p. 4). What does this reveal about his grandfather's attitude towards the new laws of the Cultural Revolution?

3. In what ways does Da hope to honor his grandfather's spirit after his death (p. 189)?

Mother

1. At one point, Da describes his parents; "Dad was the dreamer. Mom was the practical enforcer..." (p. 143). Is this a just characterization? Is Da's mother a practical enforcer or does she also dare to hope and dream?

2. Da prays with his mother. Why is this time important to him? Why does his mother persist in praying even though religion is forbidden in Communist China?

3. In the dedication to the book, Da writes, "To my mother: You are all things beautiful." He reiterates this thought at the end of his memoir as he prepares to depart Yellow Stone to attend a university in Beijing, "She pulled me once more into her arms, then gently pushed me away and nodded. Only at that moment as I looked at her did I realize that she was the most beautiful woman in the whole world..." (p. 211). What qualities does Da admire in his mother?

Father

1. Is his father only a "dreamer"? How is Da's father also a pragmatist? How does he work around the Communist system to benefit himself and his family?

2. In the dedication, Da says, "...and my father, you are forever." As with his mother, he echoes this statement in the closing lines of the book by saying, "I love you, Dad. I am your son, forever" (p. 213). What qualities does his father possess that suggest timelessness for Da? What does he admire about his father?
3. How does parting from his father on the final page of his memoir show that Da has grown and changed? What does he notice about his father that differs from his perception of his father as a child (p. 213)?
4. What are Da's options for his future? How does he feel about following in the path of his brothers and sisters and working in the fields? Da's siblings lose their innocence at an early age, "They came home by moonlight after laboring a full day, their backs cramped and sore, cuts on their fingers, blisters covering their hands" (p. 19). How does Da fare on his one day in the fields (pp. 111-115)?
5. Da's mother explains that if he doesn't want to work in the fields, Da needs to "study hard. You can choose your future, your sisters and brother can't. You're lucky. If they had blisters like yours, they would still have to be there till the last stem was harvested. It's their life" (p. 115). Why is education so important to Da? What kind of lifestyle does he think an education will ensure? Why does Da have choices that his brother and sisters don't have?
6. At one point, Da explains that "Time had changed everything for me and I was always behind, it seemed, like chasing my shadow. What had once been right wasn't right anymore. I wished I knew the future, while hoping the past would not be repeated" (pp. 92-93). Is Da referring to his own past or that of Communist China?
7. Da feels a tremendous sense of freedom with his gang of gambling friends (p. 48-49). Why are these boys so important to him? What do they teach him? Why does his mother allow the friendship to continue even though these boys have a bad reputation in the community (p. 53-54)? In what ways do these boys rebel against the stifling constraints of the political system?
8. How do Da's extracurricular activities help to shape him? For example, do his Ping Pong skills change his status among his classmates (p. 67-68)?
9. He also pursues music and learns to play the flute and violin. What impresses him about his violin teacher (pp. 78-80)? How does his learning to play the flute deepen his relationship with his father and his appreciation for his father's talents (p. 73-75)?
10. Da makes several other friends throughout the course of his childhood who act as mentors. Why is I-Fei Da's hero (p. 125-126)? In what ways does he represent a certain strength and freedom to Da (p. 81-82)? Characterize this time at school with I-Fei (p. 92). Even though he isn't applying himself to his studies, is Da still learning?
11. Dia is another important friend to Da. In what ways is Dia different than Da? (p. 147-148). What does this mean? How does Da's relationship with Dia differ from his relationship with I-Fei or his other friends? Does this difference say anything about Da's growing maturity?
12. Da's brother Jin plays a greater role in Da's development towards the end of the memoir. What does Da admire about his brother (p. 180)? Although Da has had more education, what does he learn from his brother? Why was Jin chosen over the other siblings to pursue an education?
13. Professor Wei also acts as a mentor to Da. Besides teaching him to speak English, what else does she teach Da? (p. 118-119). What kind of an opportunity does Professor Wei represent to the ambitious Da?
14. Characterize the introduction of the Wei sisters and their home (p. 105). How does it differ from the rest of Yellow Stone? Da explains that the sisters are the "closest thing to real Westerners." In what ways are they Westerners? How does Da feel when he is in their home during his lessons?
15. Discuss Da's experience working at the factory (chapters 14 and 15). Does life at the factory reveal anything about how Communism in rural China has changed since Da was a young boy? Da is also exposed to different types of relationships at the factory. How is his time at the factory a rite of passage?
16. At one point Da says, "this was a defining moment: I was declaring my intention to join the race for college and if anyone had any problems with it, I couldn't care less. I had been at the bottom before, crawling on my knees. Now I was

limping along. Soon I would be running. I wanted the world to know that I wasn't born in order for someone to step on me" (p. 149). What motivates Da? What pushes him beyond all the hardships and obstacles that he experiences?

17. Find examples in the text of Da's confidence. He consistently feels that he has shamed his family, yet Da also acknowledges his inner strength. For example, at the beginning, Da says, "I shone, despite their efforts to snuff me out" (p. 37). How does this pride help Da?

18. After he succeeds in passing the college entrance exam, Da is invited to the local Communist Party Leader's house (p. 205-206). How does this make him feel? These people tortured his family, yet his mother is still excited that her son was invited to their home. Why does she feel this way?

19. In what way are Da and Jin's acceptance to university a triumph for the whole family (p. 196-197)? What is the community's reaction to their achievement?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

In-Depth Discussion

1. Although **China's Son** is a memoir, it resembles a traditional form of the novel called a *Bildungsroman*. A *bildungsroman* follows the intellectual and moral development of a young character, usually a boy, as he discovers a place for himself in the world. The first *bildungsroman* is considered to be a novel by German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, published in 1796, entitled *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. Da's story is a far cry from 18th-century Germany, but the basic narrative structure of growing up and defining one's self in society is evident in *China's Son*. Discuss with students Da's key points of growth, such as being accused of being a counterrevolutionary (p. 22) or learning how to fight back for the first time (p. 33-35). What events are pivotal in Da's development?

2. Da narrates his story through the eyes of a child. How is the reader's understanding of the political situation in China affected by the fact that Da is young and doesn't fully understand the political situation? For example, Da describes how painful it was to see his mother being hit by a member of The Red Guard, yet he later laments that he is not included in their ranks: "I was the only one in class who was not a member. I coveted the pretty red bands worn on their arms and had applied to join..." (p. 21). Does he believe in the Communist cause or does he just want to feel included? Discuss Da's reaction to Mao's death. Does he mourn the death of a political leader or is he a child mourning a loss of familiarity (p. 138)? When does Da become more critical of Mao and his policies? What does it say about Da's growing maturity? What effect does his increased awareness have on the reader (example, pp. 256-257)?

3. In the first chapter, Da writes that his mother taught her children that they "...should have dignity in the face of hardship" (p. 5). Da's family suffers tremendous losses, but they never lose their dignity. Discuss examples in the book where his family gives him strength and a sense that he can make choices and control his future despite the difficult political circumstances. For example, after a hard day working in the fields, Da's mother encourages Da to take a different path. She advises him to "study hard. You can choose your future" (p.115). Compare Da's feelings about his family to attitudes about family in our own culture. Do we have the same sense of honor and dignity and obligation? How have his family's values shaped Da?

4. In many ways, Da's life is influenced and shaped by the overwhelming political force of Communism, yet the book is also a simpler story of a boy growing up. Ask your students to discuss experiences that they have in common with Da even though they don't live in such a strictly regulated society. How does Da determine his own life?

Moving Beyond the Story

1. Research and discuss the history of China during the reign of Mao Zedong, particularly The Cultural Revolution which defines Da's formative years. All major encyclopedias will have information on this period in China's history. In particular, look up "Mao Zedong," "The Great Leap Forward," "The Cultural Revolution," "The Red Guard," and the "Gang of Four." All of these are mentioned in Da's story and learning about them will enrich the reading of the book. For general histories of China, we suggest *The Search for Modern China* (Norton, 2000) and *Mao Zedong* (Viking, 1999), both by Jonathan Spence; *China: A New History Enlarged* by John King Fairbank (Harvard University Press, 1998); *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution* by Roderick MacFarquhar (Columbia University Press, 3 volumes); *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine* by Jasper Becker (Free Press, 1996); and *A Concise History of China* by J.A.G. Roberts (Harvard University Press, 1999).

2. Discuss how the political climate in China has changed? Does the country still resemble the China of Da's childhood in

any way? What are the issues that govern the relationship between China and the United States?

3. Use Da's story as a starting point to introduce the *bildungsroman* as a narrative form. Discuss recent literary criticism which revisits the genre to include the experiences of women and people of color. Suggest reading other *bildungsroman* such as Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* or Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

4. Assign students other memoirs of life in Communist China that can be compared with **China's Son**. Appropriate titles include *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Cheng, *Red Azalea* by Anchee Min, *Wild Swans: Three Daughters in China* by Jung Chang, or *Red Flower of China* by Zhai Zhenhua.

OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

Spider Eaters: A Memoir by Rae Yang; *The White-Haired Child: Bittersweet Adventures of a Little Red Soldier* by Jaia Sun-Childers and Douglas Childers; *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Cheng; *Red Azalea* by Anchee Min; *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* by Jung Chang; *Red Flower of China* by Zhai Zhenhua; *Thirty Years in a Red House: A Memoir of Childhood and Youth in Communist China* by Zhu Xiao Di; *The Attic: Memoir of a Chinese Landlord's Son* by Guanlong Cao; *Red China Blues : My Long March from Mao to Now* by Jan Wong; *Red Scarf Girl: A Memoir of the Cultural Revolution* by Ji-Li Jiang, *The Road from Coorain* by Jill Ker Conway; *The Flame Trees of Thika* by Elspeth Huxley; *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston, *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This teaching/discussion guide was adapted from Random House's teacher's guide written by Karen Iker for **Colors of the Mountain**. Karen Iker has a master's degree in American literature and has worked in the book publishing industry for ten years.