The Flower Drum Song

C.Y. Lee

About the Author

C.Y. Lee’s novel The Flower Drum Song was turned down by most major New York publishers before one finally accepted it. Lee, with a degree in playwriting from Harvard University, had been working for a Chinese newspaper in San Francisco and writing fiction in his spare time.

When The Flower Drum Song was published in 1957, it became a New York Times bestseller. In 1958, the Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II musical production of the story opened on Broadway. Soon after Flower Drum Song was made into a film. Ironically, the musical and movie overshadowed the novel, which quickly went out of print. Lee continued writing, however, and won a number of awards.

Background

The Flower Drum Song is set in the 1950s, when Chinese women in America were outnumbered by their male counterparts. The problem originated in the series of immigration acts passed in the late 1800s that excluded or limited Chinese immigration. Chinese laborers had poured into the United States during the mid-1800s to join the Gold Rush and to help build the transcontinental railroads. They quickly became the target of prejudice and discrimination. In 1875, a law was passed that made it difficult for Chinese women to immigrate to the United States. The law effectively limited the growth of the Chinese population in the United States: Without women, the population would not expand. In 1882, The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, limiting immigration of all Chinese to the United States. When China became a United States ally during World War II, the exclusionary acts were dropped. However, through the mid-1950s, when this novel is set, there was still a shortage of women in the Chinese community.

Quick Guide

As you read The Flower Drum Song, think about these literary elements:

- The setting of a literary work is the time and place of the action, including a specific social, economic, or cultural environment. As you read, notice the details that capture Chinatown and its culture.

- Characterization is information that reveals a character. In direct characterization, the author directly describes a character's traits. In indirect characterization, the author uses a character's actions and words and the reactions of others to show what the character is like. As you read, note how the author reveals the characters.

- Character motivation consists of the reasons behind a character's behavior. As you read, think about what motivates the main characters.

- Writers may use contrasts between characters to emphasize their qualities or to convey a message about life. As you read, note how Wang Ta and his friend Chang are alike and how they are different.

- A conflict is a struggle between opposing forces. An internal conflict occurs when a character struggles with his or her own opposing feelings or choices. An external conflict occurs between characters or between a character and a larger force, such as society. As you read, note the conflicts the characters face.

- Humor is writing that is meant to amuse. As you read, note where the author uses humor to poke fun at characters.
### Vocabulary

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
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<td>calligraphy</td>
<td>(kæ lə’gə ɹ fə’)</td>
<td>n. ornate and beautiful handwriting</td>
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<td>subordinate</td>
<td>(sə bó’r ɹ da ɹ nit)</td>
<td>n. someone who is below another in rank or importance</td>
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<td>infallible</td>
<td>(ɪn fæ ɹ lə’bəl)</td>
<td>adj. never wrong</td>
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<tr>
<td>filial</td>
<td>(fɪ’læ ɹ el)</td>
<td>adj. suitable to receive from a son or daughter</td>
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<td>noncommittal</td>
<td>(nən’ kæ mit’l)</td>
<td>adj. not committing to any decision or point of view</td>
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<tr>
<td>rejuvenating</td>
<td>(rɪ ʃə ɹ bæ ɹ tæn’)</td>
<td>adj. bringing back youthful energy or appearance</td>
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<tr>
<td>physiognomy</td>
<td>(fɪz’ə ɹ e ɹ gə mə’ɹ ɹ)</td>
<td>n. face; facial features that supposedly reveal character</td>
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<tr>
<td>longevity</td>
<td>(lən’ ʃə ɹ və’ ɹ tə)</td>
<td>n. long lifespan</td>
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<tr>
<td>incorrigible</td>
<td>(ɪn kər’ɹ ɹ ja ɹ bal)</td>
<td>adj. unable to be corrected or improved</td>
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<td>proletarian</td>
<td>(pro’ ɹ la ɹ ter’ ɹ ɹ an)</td>
<td>n. worker; member of the lower class</td>
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<tr>
<td>venerable</td>
<td>(və nə’ɹ ɹ bəl)</td>
<td>adj. worthy of respect because of age and dignity</td>
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<tr>
<td>sporadically</td>
<td>(spə’ɹ ɹ ræd’ɹ ik ɹ lə)</td>
<td>adv. from time to time; not regularly</td>
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<tr>
<td>progeny</td>
<td>(prə’ɹ ɹ ɹ jə ɹ nə)</td>
<td>n. children; offspring</td>
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<tr>
<td>philanthropic</td>
<td>(fɪ ɹ lan’ ɹ tro̞p’ɹ ik)</td>
<td>adj. showing generosity or humane behavior</td>
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<td>cosmopolitan</td>
<td>(kəz’ɹ ɹ mə ɹ pə’ɹ ɹ tən)</td>
<td>adj. belonging to the world; not local or national</td>
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<td>coaxed</td>
<td>(kə ɹ jəd)</td>
<td>v. coaxed with flattery</td>
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<tr>
<td>coaxed</td>
<td>(fʊr’ɹ ɹ tɪv ɹ lə)</td>
<td>adv. in a hidden or concealed manner</td>
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<tr>
<td>diverted</td>
<td>(də’ɹ ɹ və ɹ rt’ɹ id)</td>
<td>v. turned aside; distracted</td>
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<tr>
<td>pensively</td>
<td>(pɛn’ɹ ɹ sɪv ɹ lə)</td>
<td>adv. in a deeply thoughtful or serious manner</td>
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<tr>
<td>vehemently</td>
<td>(vɛn’ɹ ɹ ə mənt ɹ lə)</td>
<td>adv. in a fervent or passionate manner</td>
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### Part One: Chapters 1–3 (pages 3–37)

#### Discussion Questions

1. Explain whether Old Master Wang (Wang Chi-lang) has adjusted to the novel’s setting. Give three details that support your answer.

2. How would you describe the character Chang Ling-yu, Wang Ta’s friend?

3. What common social problem do Wang Ta and his friend Chang Ling-yu share?

4. According to Chang Ling-yu, what is Wang Ta’s problem with women?

5. What does Madam Tang want Old Master Wang to do? Why does he finally agree to one of her requests?

#### Writing Activity

Write a paragraph describing Old Master Wang’s family and household.

### Part One: Chapters 4–5 (pages 38–56)

#### Discussion Questions

1. How does young Wang San feel about Western ways?


3. Give an example of indirect characterization that shows Miss Tung’s character. Explain what it reveals.

4. What is the humor in Wang Ta’s view of Miss Tung?

#### Writing Activity

Write a paragraph describing how the young Wang San follows American customs.

### Part One: Chapters 6–7 (pages 57–92)

#### Discussion Questions

1. Why does Master Wang’s trip to the International Settlement alarm him?

2. How can you tell that Master Wang is superstitious?

3. How does Wang Ta initially regard Helen Chao? How does his attitude toward her change?

4. What internal conflict does Wang Ta have over Miss Chao?

#### Writing Activity

Old Master Wang enjoys foods and uses medicines that he purchases on his visit to Grant Street. Write a list of things that he purchases that might be unfamiliar to non-Chinese Americans.
Part Two: Chapters 1–2
(pages 95–132)

Discussion Questions
1. How does Wang Ta react to the news of Miss Chao’s death?
2. Explain the contrast between Chang and Wang Ta. What does the contrast help you appreciate in Wang Ta?
3. What problems does Chang say are due to the shortage of Chinese women?
4. What plans do Master Wang and Madam Tang make for Wang Ta’s life?

Writing Activity In an essay, tell how the Wang household celebrates the New Year.

Part Two: Chapters 3–5
(pages 132–171)

Discussion Questions
1. Why are May Li and Old Man Li reluctant to accept Wang Ta’s invitation?
2. How do plans for Wang Ta’s “picture bride” go astray?
3. Why is Madam Tang upset when Master Wang rejects her new plan? What does her reaction show about her?
4. What does Liu Ma’s behavior show about her character?

Writing Activity In an essay, explain the effect of setting and culture on the plans for Wang Ta’s marriage.

Part Two: Chapters 6–8
(pages 171–201)

Discussion Questions
1. What does May Li’s behavior show about her character?
2. Predict what will happen between Wang Ta and May Li. What clues support your prediction?
3. When Wang Ta meets Chang and his new wife, how does Chang suggest that Wang Ta has changed?

Part Two: Chapters 9–12
(pages 201–244)

Discussion Questions
1. What is Liu Ma’s motivation for discrediting May Li and her father? What does she do to discredit them?
2. How does the discussion in Chapter 10 between Old Man Li and Wang Ta about Master Wang’s cough illustrate the conflict between traditional Chinese culture and Western culture?
3. What argument does Master Wang make in favor of the girl whom he has chosen to marry Wang Ta?
4. What does the gold clock represent to Master Wang?

Writing Activity As Wang Ta, write a letter to your father explaining why you must choose your own wife. Remember that you are a respectful son: Use a suitable tone.

Pulling It All Together

Writing The novel describes a number of conflicts, including Wang Ta’s conflicts over women and the conflict Master Wang has with American culture. Write an essay analyzing one of these conflicts. Identify the conflict as internal or external. Then, explain its underlying cause. Finally, explain whether or not it is resolved.

Scene Working with a group of students, perform the scene in Chapter 12 in which Master Wang and Madam Tang gather the household to discover the truth about the clock. Copy the dialogue from the book in the form of a script. Include stage directions explaining characters’ movements. Conclude your scene with Madam Tang’s exit from the house. After practicing the scene, perform it for the class.
Lesson Plan • The Flower Drum Song

Before you begin, please review the Sensitive Issues, which appear with the answers to this title.

Preview • 1 Day
1. With the class, read and discuss the RG Preview. If this book begins class study of a novel, discuss Background on the Novel, Resources, p. 151.
2. Assign Part One, Chapters 1–3, pp. 3–37

Part One: Chapters 1–3 • 2–3 Days
1. Reading Guide Discussion Questions 1–5 and Writing Activity.

Part One: Chapters 4–5 • 2 Days
1. Reading Guide Discussion Questions 1–4 and Writing Activity.
2. Resources Characterization (follow-up): SAS, p. 15. Assign students the Activity Sheet to help them find details revealing Miss Tung's character.
4. Resources Vocabulary: TG and Word Identification—Prefixes: SAS, pp. 136, 144. Have students use vocabulary words 1–5. Focus on prefixes sub-, in-, and non-.

Part One: Chapters 6–7 • 2 Days
1. Reading Guide Discussion Questions 1–4 and Writing Activity.
4. Assign Part Two, Chapters 1–2, pp. 95–132.

Part Two: Chapters 1–2 • 1–2 Days
1. Reading Guide Discussion Questions 1–4 and Writing Activity.

Part Two: Chapters 3–5 • 1–2 Days
1. Reading Guide Discussion Questions 1–4 and Writing Activity.

Part Two: Chapters 6–8 • 1–2 Days
1. Reading Guide Discussion Questions 1–4 and Writing Activity.
2. Resources Characterization (follow-up): SAS, p. 15. Focus on the use of indirect characterization to reveal May Li's character.
5. Assign Part Two, Chapters 9–12, pp. 201–244.

Part Two: Chapters 9–12 • 1–2 Days
1. Reading Guide Discussion Questions 1–4 and Writing Activity.
5. Assign Pulling It All Together activities, RG. You may wish to assign the Book Report or one of the Book Report Alternatives, Resources, pp. 158–161.

Pulling It All Together • 3 Days
1. Writing Collect and evaluate the writing assignment. Have volunteers read their papers aloud.
2. Scene Allow students time to practice the scene. Help them prepare and provide them with props to use if they wish.
3. Review for and administer test.
The Flower Drum Song by C.Y. Lee

Sensitive Issues

The main character, in pursuit of marriage, must negotiate relations between the sexes. Sensitive issues in the book, including a discussion of prostitution, a description of a strip tease, and illicit sexual encounters, underscore the main character's predicament. The book also includes drunkenness, suicide, and cursing. Students may be disturbed by descriptions of wife beating and corporal punishment, and you may wish to discuss with them the cultural differences reflected in such violence.

Part One: Chapters 1–3

1. Old Wang has a comfortable life in Chinatown, where he has weekly routines, keeps a house decorated with Chinese paintings, and can wear traditional Chinese clothing. However, he has not really adjusted to life in the United States. He has never learned to speak English; he refuses to put his money in a bank; he refuses to wear Western clothes.

2. He has a Ph.D. degree, which he considers a burden; he is heavy-set and outgoing; he seems to know much about women. He is practical, working as a clerk because he cannot make a living with his education.

3. There is a shortage of Chinese women, and neither can find a Chinese woman interested in him.

4. He takes love too seriously.

5. She wants him to become more Americanized: specifically, to put his money in a bank and to wear Western suits. He is robbed.

Writing Activity

His house is furnished like homes in China. He has two sons, one in college, one younger, and a sister-in-law. His wife has died. He has a cook and two other servants, the old deaf man Liu Lang and his wife Liu Ma.

Part One: Chapters 4–5

1. He likes American ways and wants to be a typical American teenager.


3. When Wang Ta proposes marriage, she does not directly discourage him. Instead, she laughs at him and pats his face. These actions show she does not take his love for her seriously but will not take responsibility for encouraging him. She seems like a shallow flirt, manipulative and deceitful.

4. He has romantic feelings for her and is blind to her faults; he proposes marriage and accepts her stories about her “brother.”

Writing Activity

Wang San likes American food such as hamburgers, hot dogs, and sandwiches. He likes to read comic books and chew bubble gum. He plays baseball.

Part One: Chapters 6–7

1. He encounters unsavory characters and loose women and worries about his sons being exposed to them. He sees Wang Ta with Miss Chao, who is dressed in Western clothes; with her pockmarked face and American hairdo, she seems to him to be a demon.

2. He consults the lunar calendar for lucky dates for certain activities; he believes Miss Chao with her pockmarked face would bring bad luck to his household.

3. At first, he regards her as his friend or as an older sister. After they become romantically involved, he becomes ashamed of her; he feels uncomfortable being with her.

4. He is ashamed of her and knows he will not love her, but at the same time he feels guilty for rejecting her.

Writing Activity

Lists might include the following: sea dragon, sea horse, dog tail, tiger tail, heavenly heroic lizard, horse hoof, tiger-bone medicine wine, clean hair vegetable, old-fruit skin, bird’s-nest, stomach of eels, and deer’s horn.

Part Two: Chapters 1–2

1. He feels terrible guilt.

2. Chang is friendly, outgoing, and practical; Wang Ta is shy, thoughtful, and concerned with doing the right thing. The contrast helps readers appreciate Wang Ta’s sensitive nature by showing them someone who is not as sensitive. It also helps readers appreciate another perspective on his problems and shows that there are other ways of dealing with them.

3. He thinks the shortage of women causes violence and unhappiness in Chinatown, such as the shooting involving Miss Tung; the unhappiness of young men like Wang Ta, who at his age should be married with children; and the death of Miss Chao, who overestimated herself because of the shortage.

4. They plan to arrange a marriage for him with a woman from Hong Kong.

Writing Activity

The book also includes drunkenness, suicide, and cursing. Students may be disturbed by descriptions of wife beating and corporal punishment, and you may wish to discuss with them the cultural differences reflected in such violence.
not afraid to stand up for herself.

2. They will fall in love. Wang Ta gives May Li a small gift that she treasures; she tells her father how much she admires Wang Ta; they flirt with each other.

3. He seems happier; he has taken a new interest in medical school.

4. She treats her mother well.

Writing Activity Old Man Li and May Li like the household and their work, except for the woman Liu Ma. They find everything is just as in China, except Wang San, who has American ways. This resemblance makes them feel comfortable and at home.

Part Two: Chapters 9–12

1. Her motivations are jealousy and insecurity. She is afraid they will take her place in the household. She hides the gold clock and plans to accuse May Li of stealing it.

2. Old Man Li says the cough is caused by cold in the throat and heat in the lungs, a traditional Chinese belief; Wang Ta says it is caused by germs. Their discussion shows that Western and traditional Chinese ways of viewing disease are quite different.

3. Master Wang says that the woman’s father is respected in the community and that the woman comes from a reputable household; she was born under a sign of the zodiac compatible with Wang Ta’s sign.

4. The gold clock represents the traditional Chinese household that Master Wang’s wife once created for him.

Writing Activity Student letters will vary. Students may suggest that the writer is willing to obey his father in other matters, but he has to choose his own wife. He is now an American, and he cannot live by Chinese customs. He must be in love with the person he marries.

Pulling It All Together

Writing Students’ essays should demonstrate an understanding of the main ideas of the novel and should focus on one of the conflicts. They should show an understanding of the underlying conflict, identify it as internal or external, and recognize the resolution of the conflict.

Scene Students should perform the scene as a play, using the dialogue as it is written and following the action in the narrative. Each student should perform his or her part in a manner consistent with the character being portrayed.