

Reading Group Questions for THE GIRL FROM PURPLE MOUNTAIN

1. 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?
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? How does this story fit into the larger themes of the book?
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: the decisions we make or historical circumstances beyond our control? 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 the past?

12. Are there any lessons women of today can take away from Ruth Mei-en's life story?