

# *Inheritance*

by Lan Samantha Chang

W.W. Norton & Company

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### **SUMMARY:**

*Inheritance* is an epic tale, covering seven decades, set in China and America. It is the story of two sisters, Junan and Yinan, who are abandoned after their mother's suicide and vow never to leave each other. As the sisters grow older, however, Junan's enters into an arranged marriage and finds that she is truly in love with her husband, Li Ang. Then the Japanese invade China, and everything changes. Junan's husband, who is in the military, is sent to the wartime capital. She cannot follow him and instead sends her sister, Yinan, to look after him. It is then that the sisters split, when Yinan also falls in love with Li Ang.

The book, narrated by Junan's eldest daughter, Hong, explores many issues, including trust, betrayal, and the importance of family. In *Inheritance*, Lan Chang has succeeded in painting a rich historical picture of China and its people during the political chaos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Betrayal and loyalty are key issues in this novel. How do these issues affect the main characters in the story?
2. Compare the relationship of Junan and Yinan with that of Hong and her sister Hwa.
3. In what ways does the political upheaval in China during the 20<sup>th</sup> century affect the outcome of the story?
4. How are men viewed in the novel? In general, are the women stronger characters than the men? Why?
5. The story is told from Hong's point of view. If Hwa had been the narrator, how might the novel have been different?

6. What role does religion and spirituality play in the story?
7. This novel spans many years in China. Discuss the changes made politically as well as socially in Chinese culture during this time.
8. Oral history plays an important role in many cultures. How is this evident in *Inheritance*? Give examples of other novels in which oral history is a key component of the story.
9. The family epic novel is popular with writers. Compare this book with others you have read. How are different ethnic groups portrayed? Do you find familiar themes in this type of novel?
10. By the end of the novel it appears that Hong is carrying the weight of her family's betrayal and guilt. Do you feel that she, at last, can relinquish that burden when her mother dies?

#### **ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE READING OF THIS NOVEL:**

1. Research the political history of China during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
2. Learn more about Chinese customs, tradition, and religion.
3. Create a family tree of the characters. This should help keep the names and generations in order.
4. Have your book group discuss this book over dinner at a Chinese restaurant.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Reprinted from <http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks/fiction/chang.htm> and [http://www.uiowa.edu/~ournews/2005/april/041105chang\\_iww.html](http://www.uiowa.edu/~ournews/2005/april/041105chang_iww.html)

Lan Samantha Chang was born in 1965 in Appleton, Wisconsin. She is the daughter of Chinese parents who survived World War II and the Japanese occupation of China. They immigrated to the United States to give their family security. After graduating high school, Chang attended Yale University, first as a premed student and then as an East Asian studies major. She went on to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, but dropped out to take courses in writing at the Boston Adult Education Center. She then enrolled in the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop where she earned her M.F.A. She has been selected to become the director of the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop in January 2006.

Ms. Chang's work has appeared in *Ploughshares* and *The Best American Short Stories*. She is the author of *Hunger: a novella and stories*.

## HELPFUL LINKS:

About China Online: <http://chineseculture.about.com/>

“China in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century” from emayzine.com:

<http://www.emayzine.com/lectures/china%20in%20the%2020th%20century.html>



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