



Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

by Dai Sijie

Teacher's Guide

Written By Kathy Sammis

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Synopsis

(Note: Chapters in the book are unnumbered. They are numbered here for reference.)

PART I

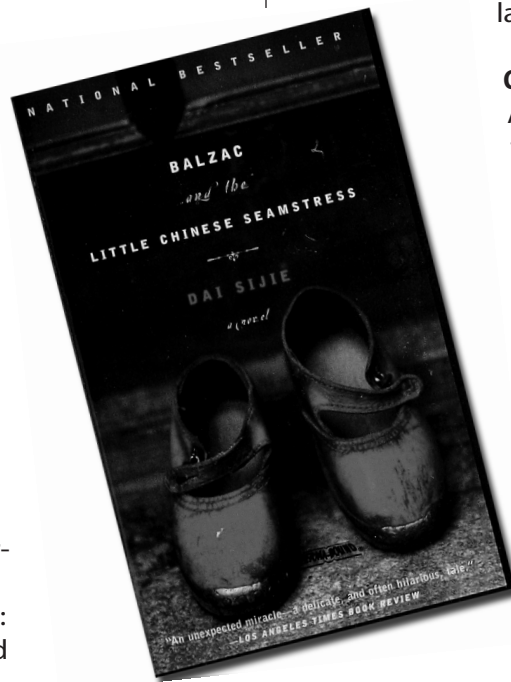
Chapter 1, p. 3-10

Two teenage “city youths”—the unnamed narrator and his longtime best friend, Luo—have been sent to a remote mountain village for “re-education” during China’s Cultural Revolution. As the novel opens, the two boys have just arrived in the village after an exhausting trek by foot. The headman condemns the narrator’s violin as a “bourgeois toy” until the quick-thinking Luo bids the narrator to play a Mozart sonata and announces its title as “Mozart Is Thinking of Chairman Mao.” This scene establishes the novel’s overall tone of wry humor. Then the narrator explains the background: His parents had been doctors, and Luo’s father had been a famous dentist, all now labeled as reactionaries and enemies of the people. As a result, the narrator and Luo have been labeled “young intellectuals” in spite of their limited schooling and sent away.

Chapter 2, p. 11-20

The boys’ new home is a building on stilts over a pigsty; its only furniture is two makeshift beds. Every day, they labor in the fields with the peasants. The worst chore is carrying buckets of excrement on their backs up the tortuous mountain paths to the fields above. Gloom drags at the boys as they face a bleak future: as sons of enemies of the people, their chances of returning home are

three in a thousand. But Luo’s gift for storytelling, which the narrator dismisses as trivial at first, changes their situation dramatically in a number of ways. The first change begins when the village headman sends Luo and the narrator on the two-day journey to the nearest town, Yong Jing, to see the outdoor cinema show and then return and give an “oral cinema show” to the villagers. The boys’ show is a great success, thanks to Luo’s talent, so the headman tells the boys they will be sent to Yong Jing once a month to see the latest film.



Chapter 3, p. 21-27

A few weeks later, the boys go to the neighboring village to visit Four-Eyes, a friend from the old days. There, they meet and are enchanted by the daughter of the district tailor, who is often away doing his tailoring. This Little Seamstress is a great beauty. While she can’t read well, she enjoys talking to the city youths in the area. Both boys are smitten, but when the narrator asks Luo how he feels, Luo replies, “She’s not civilised, at least not enough for me!”

Chapter 4, p. 28-34

The boys spend two grueling months toiling in the mountain’s coal mines. Luo contracts malaria. The Little Seamstress arranges for the boys to get some days off and come to her village to give an oral cinema performance.

Chapter 5, p. 35-41

The Little Seamstress treats Luo with a poultice she prepares. She arranges a nighttime vigil by local sorceresses. To keep the crones awake, the narrator begins an oral cinema performance which Luo interrupts and salvages at the appropriate time.

PART II

Chapter 6, p. 45-55

The boys visit Four-Eyes regularly; he is being re-educated because his parents are disgraced writers. Luo and the narrator discover a heavy, locked suitcase hidden under Luo's bed; they are quite certain it contains a stash of forbidden books. Four-Eyes hotly denies this, but after Luo and the narrator help Four-Eyes complete an arduous work detail because he has broken his eyeglasses, their friend hands them a slim book written by an author named Balzac.

Chapter 7, p. 56-60

The boys are completely absorbed by Balzac and *Ursule Mirouët*. Literature has long been banned, and neither boy has ever read a novel, let alone a Western one. After finishing the book, Luo goes to the Little Seamstress and narrates it to her. Swept away by emotion, the pair makes love standing under a ginkgo tree.

Chapter 8, p. 61-65

A letter from his mother offers Four-Eyes hope: if he can collect sincere, authentic folk songs from the mountain's peasants for publication in a revolutionary journal, he may be able to leave the mountain. But the only good source of these songs is a poor old miller, who clams up after Four-Eyes turns down his hospitable offer of pebble soup. Luo and the narrator offer to get songs from the old miller in exchange for more books.

Chapter 9, p. 66-76

Hoping to secure more of Four-Eyes' books, Luo and the narrator visit the old miller posing as government officials. A jovial, drunken evening yields many ditties and lice infestation.

Chapter 10, p. 76-79

Four-Eyes is furious when the boys return—the songs are all ribald, and their friend refuses to part with any more books. Four-Eyes thinks he can edit the songs making them suitable for publishing. The narrator and Four-Eyes scuffle when Four-Eyes refuses to give them more books.

Chapter 11, p. 80-89

Luo and the narrator are accompanied by the Little Seamstress to Yong Jing. At their humble hotel, they learn of a guest from the capital who has

come to retrieve her son who's being 're-educated.' The narrator encounters the woman en route to his village and learns she is Four-Eyes' mother. His rewritten peasant songs have been accepted for publication, and he's been offered a job at the journal. After tricking the woman into admitting Four-Eyes had many books, the narrator tells her his name is Luo. The Little Seamstress suggests stealing Four-Eyes' books before he departs.

Chapter 12, p. 90-105

The mother hosts a great feast for the people of Four-Eyes' village the night before their departure. Luo and the narrator take the occasion to sneak into Four-Eyes' house and extract the suitcase full of books, narrowly escaping detection.

PART III

Chapter 13, p. 109-118

For the next month, the narrator and Luo lose themselves in their treasure trove of classic Western literature, "spellbound by the mystery of the outside world, especially the world of women, love and sex." Luo enthusiastically brings Balzac novels to the Little Seamstress and reads them to her, even though the mountain path to her village hazardously skirts deep chasms.

Chapters 14, p. 119-130

The district tailor stays with Luo and the narrator during his visit to their village because, he says, his daughter has told him that the boys are excellent storytellers. Each night, the narrator tells the tailor progressive portions of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Then the headman bursts in. He threatens to turn the narrator in to the authorities for "spreading reactionary trash."

Chapter 15, p. 131-134

Luo, son of the famous dentist, takes care of the headman's rotted tooth using a needle spun by the tailor's treadle sewing machine—spun slowly, therefore more painfully, while the narrator works the treadle.

Chapter 16 (The Old Miller's Story), p. 135-138

The old miller tells the narrator a story about seeing a young couple (Luo and the Little Seamstress) making love in a pond and the presence of ravens with red beaks.

Chapter 17 (Luo's Story), p. 139-142

Luo describes teaching the Little Seamstress how to swim and how she taught herself to dive. His keychain, a memento from his childhood, makes him wonder if he'll ever return to his home. When his mother becomes ill, Luo is allowed to return to her bedside for one month; he returns home without his lucky keychain.

Chapter 18 (The Little Seamstress's Story), p. 143-146

The Little Seamstress tells the narrator how Luo's readings always made her want to dive into the mountain pond. She frequently retrieved the keychain he'd toss in the pond. On her last attempts to retrieve the key chain, she brushed a snake and was later bitten by something that left a scar on her finger.

Chapter 19, p. 147-157

When Luo gets a month's leave to be with his sick mother, he appoints the narrator to safeguard the Little Seamstress from her numerous admirers. The narrator loyally carries out his duty, is attacked by rival suitors while returning from her home, and suppresses his own desires for the young woman (except when dreaming).

Chapter 20, p. 158-175

Then the Little Seamstress reveals that she is pregnant, and the narrator assiduously works with her to secure an abortion, a forbidden procedure. (Medical assistance for unmarried women in childbirth is also forbidden, as is marriage before the age of twenty-five.) The narrator finally gets a doctor to perform the procedure in return for the copy of Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët*.

Chapter 21, p. 176-184

Three months later, Luo and the narrator burn all of their books. The Little Seamstress—without a word to either boy—has left the mountain village for the city, never to return. Luo's program to reeducate her and make her more intellectual and sophisticated has succeeded in a way that neither he nor the narrator ever expected.

Timeline

1968	China's Cultural Revolution begins.
early 1971	The narrator and Luo arrive in the mountain village.
later	The two boys begin their visits to Yong Ling to view films.
weeks later	The two boys meet the Little Seamstress.
early 1973	Luo falls ill with malaria.
next week	The two boys discover Four-Eyes' heavy suitcase.
spring	Four-Eyes loans the two boys a Balzac novel; Luo and the Little Seamstress begin their romantic relationship.
summer	The narrator and Luo collect folk songs from the old miller.
September	The narrator and Luo steal Four-Eyes' suitcase full of books and fall under the spell of literature; Luo leaves the village for a month.
October	The narrator arranges for the Little Seamstress to have an abortion.
3 months later	The Little Seamstress departs for the city, and the narrator and Luo burn their books.

Author Sketch

Dai Sijie was born in the Fujian province of China in 1954. Like the narrator of this novel, he was the son of middle-class doctors and was sent away to rural Szechuan to be re-educated from 1971 to 1974 during China's Cultural Revolution. After his return, he was able to go to high school and university, studying art history. In 1984 he received a grant to study abroad and left China for France, where he still lives and works. He became a filmmaker, directing three well-received movies, before turning to writing. He wrote the screenplay for and directed a movie adaptation of *Balzac*, shot in China and released in 2002. He lives in Paris and writes in French.



Critic's Corner

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress became an overnight sensation when it was first published in French in 2000. It became a French best-seller and prize-winner, and went on to become an international hit, translated into more than twenty-five languages. Critics, along with readers, admired the book. *Library Journal* described the novel as a "lyrical, affecting tale," *School Library Journal* as "beautifully presented," and the *Sunday Telegraph* as "funny [and] poignant." The *Sunday Telegraph* added, "Its narrative makes universal themes of adolescence—jealousy, loss, irrepressible adventurousness, and all that longing for a wider world—shine through the utterly appalling specifics of time and place." *New Statesman* called Sijie "a captivating, amusing storyteller, his writing as seductive and unaffected as the little seamstress herself," and *Publishers Weekly* admired the "warmth and humor" of Sijie's prose. The *Times Literary Supplement* found the novel to be "a simple story, seductively told. . . . What marks it out is the way it touches and lifts up the beauty of human experience far beyond the mountains of Western China."

Works By Dai Sijie

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (2000, English translation 2002) (Books on Tape version, 2002)
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School Library Journal, November 2001, p. 192
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"Dai Sijie": www.answers.com/topic/dai-sijie
"Dai Sijie":
www.frenchculture.org/books/tours/cv/sijie.html
"Dai Sijie" and "About . . . *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*":
www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/sijie/

General Objectives

1. To become familiar with the events and effects of China's Cultural Revolution
2. To learn about rural Chinese life
3. To consider the value of political and personal freedom
4. To examine the transformative and redeeming power of literature
5. To discuss the cultural value of storytelling
6. To identify ways in which a totalitarian regime maintains control over its subject people

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the reasons why Luo, the narrator, and their parents become targets of China's Cultural Revolution
2. To note the elements of the Cultural Revolution revealed in the novel
3. To recognize the ways in which Luo and the narrator find out about the books and then acquire them
4. To understand the benefits for and effects on the boys of both storytelling and reading the books
5. To understand various terms used during the Cultural Revolution, such as reactionary, recidivist, class enemy, enemy of the people, and bourgeois
6. To trace the various ways that the theme of re-education plays out in the course of the novel
7. To recognize Luo's plans for the Little Seamstress and the expected and unexpected effect on her of Luo's efforts
8. To analyze the many elements of irony in the novel
9. To identify the elements of the fable and the fairy tale in the novel
10. To speculate about the lives of the main characters after the novel ends

Literary Terms and Applications

To enhance students' appreciation and understanding of the novel, present them with these terms.

autobiographical novel: a novel that draws largely from the author's own life experiences. Author Dai Sijie was himself sent to rural Szechuan from 1971 to 1974 for re-education during China's Cultural Revolution; like the narrator of this novel, he was the son of middle-class doctors. Presumably, the suitcase of forbidden classics of Western literature and the Little Seamstress are pure fiction.

coming-of-age novel: a work of fiction in which the main character moves into and/or through adolescence and develops at least the beginning of maturity. In this novel, the narrator, Luo, and the Little Seamstress all experience coming-of-age: they awaken to youthful passion, love, and sex; they learn about an outside world they had formerly been ignorant of; and they absorb life-changing lessons.

parable: a narrative that illustrates some moral, useful truth, illuminating a principle of human behavior. At the end of this novel, Luo and the narrator learn an ironic lesson about human reaction to exposure to new ideas and concepts.

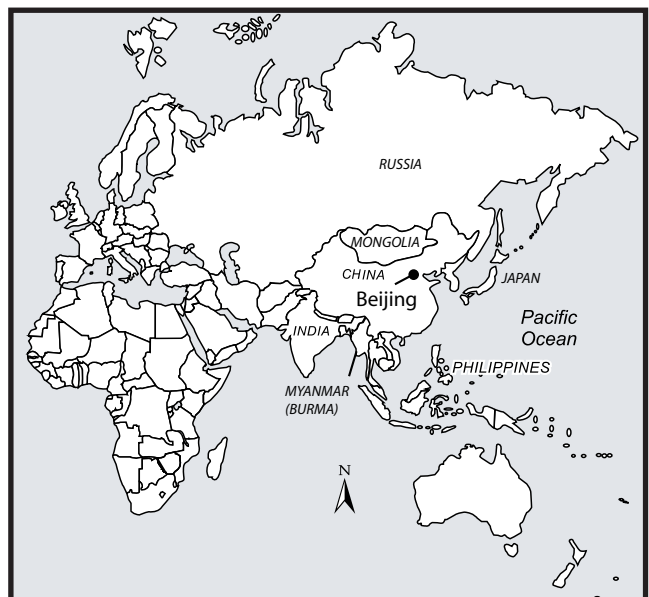
first-person narration: the telling of a novel or short story from the point of view of only one person. In this novel, the unnamed narrator describes the events. We learn about other characters through his eyes, with the exception of the three chapters that describe the trysts of Luo and the Little Seamstress at the waterfall pool directly through the eyes of the old miller, Luo, and the Little Seamstress.

historical novel: a narrative that presents an imaginative series of events occurring in an actual historical setting. The characters may be both fictional and historical. In this novel, the characters are all fictional, although actual historical figures such as Chairman Mao and Jiang Jieshi are mentioned. The author of a historical novel often does considerable research to incorporate accurate everyday historical detail into the novel. In this case, author Dai Sijie lived through the events depicted and uses his personal knowledge to place the novel in its historical setting.

The Importance of Setting

The novel is set principally among the villages of a Chinese mountain known as the Phoenix of the Sky, a remote and rugged area two days' walk from the nearest small town, Yong Jing. The mountain paths are so steep that hand carts can't be used; everything is transported on people's backs. Villagers grow rice in paddy fields on the mountainside, aided by water buffalo, and extract coal from a dangerous, cramped mine. Luo and the narrator live in a humble building on stilts with no furniture except two makeshift beds. Here, they read their books, entertain the tailor, and perform dental work on the headman. Across a valley is the neighboring village where Four-Eyes and the Little Seamstress both live. Luo and the narrator steal the suitcase full of books from Four-Eyes' house, and Luo makes repeated trips to the Little Seamstress's home/workplace to read and tell Balzac novels to the beautiful girl.

Yong Jing is a simple small town with a single main street on which is a post office, town hall, general store, library, school, and hotel with restaurant. Here, Luo and the narrator and, sometimes, the Little Seamstress, view the movies once a month. At the far end of town is the hospital, which the narrator haunts for days to arrange for the Little Seamstress's abortion. Two other settings are the old miller's mill and home, where Luo and the narrator spend a drunken evening recording folk song lyrics, and the pastoral waterfall pool where Luo and the Little Seamstress regularly have trysts.



Cross-Curricular Sources

Fiction

Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies*
Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451*
Lyll Becerra de Jenkins, *The Honorable Prison*
Ha Jin, *Waiting* and *Under the Red Flag*
Minfong Ho, *Rice Without Rain*
Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner*
Elizabeth Foreman Lewis, *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze*
Bette Bao Lord, *The Middle Heart*
Anchee Min, *Wild Ginger*
Lensey Namioka, *Ties That Bind, Ties That Break*
Julie Otsuka, *When the Emperor Was Divine*
Katherine Paterson, *Rebels of the Heavenly Kingdom*
Mark Salzman, *The Laughing Sutra*
Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*
Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*
Gail Tsukiyama, *The Samurai's Garden*
Yoshiko Uchida, *A Jar of Dreams*
Yoko Kawashima Watkins, *So Far from the Bamboo Grove*
Laurence Yep, *The Rainbow People*

Nonfiction

Richard Evans, *Deng Xiaoping and the Making of Modern China*
Human Rights in China Staff, *Children of the Dragon: The Story of Tiananmen Square*
Michael G. Kort, *China Under Communism*
Don Lawson, *The Long March: Red China Under Chairman Mao*
Bette Bao Lord, *Legacies: A Chinese Mosaic*
Harrison E. Salisbury, *Tiananmen Diary: Thirteen Days in June*
Robert Temple, *The Genius of China: 3,000 Years of Science, Discovery, and Invention*
Ross Terrill, *China in Our Time*

Memoirs/Autobiographies

Jack Chen, *A Year in Upper Felicity: Life in a Chinese Village During the Cultural Revolution*
Yuan-trung Chen, *The Dragon's Village*
Anne Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl*
Liang Heng and Judith Shapiro, *Son of the Revolution*
Peter Hessler, *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze*
Quang Nhuong Huynh, *The Land I Lost: Adventures of a Boy in Vietnam*
Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*
Ilse Koehn, *Mischling, Second Degree: My Childhood in Nazi Germany*
Anchee Min, *Red Azalea*
Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*
Shen Tong with Marianne Yen, *Almost a Revolution*
Yoshiko Uchida, *The Invisible Thread*

Loung Ung, *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*

Harry Wu and Carolyn Wakeman, *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag*

Computer Software

The First Emperor of China (Voyager)
History and Culture of China (Queue)
Qin: The Tomb of the Middle Kingdom (Time-Warner)

Internet

"Chinese History Timeline":
www.chaos.umd.edu/history/time_line.html
"Chinese Propaganda Posters":
www.iisg.nl/~landsberger
"Discovering China: The Cultural Revolution":
library.thinkquest.org/26469/cultural-revolution
"Learning Chinese Online":
www.sculb.edu/~txie/online.htm
Pacific Bell Knowledge Explorer China sites:
"Exploring China: A Multimedia Scrapbook Activity":
www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/China/scrapbook.html
"Songs of China's Cultural Revolution":
www.wellesley.edu/Polisci/wj/China/CRSongs/cr_songs.htm

Video/DVD

Art in the Cultural Revolution (Cinema Guild)
Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (Empire Pictures)
China Rising: The Epic History of 20th Century China (A&E)
Democracy Crushed—Tiananmen Square (History Channel)
Great Leap: Communism in China (Communism Series) (WGBH)
Emerging Powers: China (Wall Street Journal Video)
History's Turning Points: The Incredible March (Ambrose)
Moving the Mountain (Tiananmen Square; features some violence) (Xingu Films)
Sunrise Over Tiananmen Square (First Run/Icarus Films)
When Cultures Collide: China and the U.S.: In the 21st Century (Newsmatters Series, Knowledge Unlimited)

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* should include these aspects.

Themes

- China
- literature
- Cultural Revolution
- love
- jealousy
- loss
- storytelling
- wanderlust
- intellectual liberty
- political re-education

Motifs

- violin
- alarm clock
- rural labor
- peasant culture
- pregnancy and abortion
- Chairman Mao
- Phoenix of the Sky
- house on stilts
- dentistry
- treadle sewing machines
- movies and oral cinema shows
- Balzac and other French novels
- red-beaked raven

Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, or sentences that have a particular meaning in the novel. Explain each as it relates to the book. Use the chapter and page numbers given in parentheses to reread the term in context if you wish.

1. "... a bourgeois toy." (Ch. 1, p. 4)
(Bourgeois refers to middle-class persons, things, or values. A bourgeois person is a member of the middle class and/or a person with social behavior and political views considered to be influenced by private-property interest. During China's Cultural Revolution, all things considered to be bourgeois were reviled and, where possible, destroyed, as almost happens with the narrator's violin.)
2. Written on the slab were his name and his crime: REACTIONARY. (Ch. 1, p. 9)
(In terms of the Cultural Revolution, Luo's father is a person who favors the former and now disgraced social order, a bourgeois person who fails to support the new revolutionary ways.)
3. ... the mountain known as the Phoenix of the Sky. (Ch. 2, p. 11)
(The phoenix is a legendary bird that lived for 500 years, burned itself on a pyre, and emerged from the ashes to live for another long period of time. The enduring mountain rises above the earth like the phoenix, at an altitude that no lowland birds can approach.)
4. ... you could see her flexing her toes as she worked the treadle of her sewing machine. (Ch. 3, p. 21)
(The Little Seamstress is using a non-electrified sewing machine. She presses a lever device called a treadle with her foot, which drives the machine. The more rapid the foot motion, the more rapidly the needle moves through the fabric.)
5. ... sorceresses ... old crones (Ch. 5, p. 38)
(The Little Seamstress calls in sorceresses, women who use power gained from control of evil spirits, to help cure Luo of his malaria. These sorceresses are crones, withered old women. This incident adds a fairy-tale element to the novel, and it illustrates the continuing adherence of China's rural peasants to old beliefs and customs. The sorceresses reappear at the going-away feast for Four-Eyes.)
6. I greeted him, not in the Szechuan dialect of our province, but in Mandarin. (Ch. 9, p. 67)
(The people of China speak in a number of different regional dialects. The narrator and Luo are from Chengdu, the capital of the southwestern province of Szechuan [also spelled Sichuan and Szechwan], and so they speak in the Szechuan dialect. Mandarin is the standard form of Chinese spoken in the district centered around Beijing; formerly, it was the language of the court and the upper classes of the Empire. As such, it is unintelligible to the rural peasants to whom the narrator is speaking. The Szechuan dialect is perfectly understandable to the Phoenix mountain peasants, but it is somewhat different from their speech patterns; late in the novel, the Little Seamstress adopts Luo's and the narrator's "accent.")
7. ... they were the mark of a real revolutionary cadre. (Ch. 9, p. 68)
(Luo is telling the old miller that the narrator is a person who is active in promoting the interests of the Cultural Revolution, as attested to by the shiny buttons that have caught the miller's interest.)

8. "They'd accuse me of being a recidivist and send me straight to prison." (Ch. 20, p. 165)
(The Cultural Revolution has its eyes and ears everywhere. The night watchman won't let the narrator talk about his girlfriend's missed periods for fear of being labeled a recidivist—a person who has relapsed into supporting the old social mores rather than the new revolutionary ones.)
9. The auto-da-fé continued. (Ch. 21, p. 178)
(An auto-da-fé is the burning of a heretic; originally, it was the ceremony accompanying the pronouncement of judgment by the Inquisition. The boys are ceremonially burning not just their books but also the characters in them, in response to the effect they have had on the Little Seamstress, inspiring her to leave her old life behind and go to the city.)
10. That the ultimate pay-off of this metamorphosis, this feat of Balzacian education, was yet to come did not occur to us. (Ch. 21, p. 180)
(A metamorphosis is a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances. The Little Seamstress has achieved such a change in her appearance; Luo is delighted that she looks so stylish and sophisticated. What the boys don't yet realize is that the Little Seamstress has also undergone a striking internal change, thanks to the ideas and ways of the world she has learned about through Balzac.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important, and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

Literal Level (Questions 1-4)

1. What are Luo's and the narrator's family backgrounds? Why have Luo and the narrator been sent to the remote mountain village to be re-educated?
(The boys' parents are medical professionals. Luo's father has been a famous dentist, and the narrator's parents are both medical doctors who enjoyed a modest provincial reputation. Under the policies of the Cultural Revolution, such professionals have been labeled enemies of the people, or class enemies. Luo's father sealed his fate by once telling his students that he had fixed the teeth of both Chairman Mao and the hated Jiang Jieshi [Chiang Kai-shek].)

As sons of class enemies, Luo and the narrator have been labeled "young intellectuals" even though they have only had a very limited middle-school education, and "young intellectuals" must be sent to the countryside to be "re-educated" by the peasants among whom they will now live and work. As sons of enemies of the people, the boys' chances of returning home are only three in a thousand.)

2. What is life in the mountain village like for the two boys?
(It is gloomy and depressing at first. Their new home is a dilapidated structure on stilts above a pigsty, with only two makeshift beds for furniture. It rains two days out of three on the mountain. The work is hard and sometimes disgusting, as when they have to carry buckets of excrement up the torturous mountain paths to the farm fields far above. Work in the coal mine is grueling and dangerous. Things look up when the boys get a four-day break each month to travel back and forth to Yong Ling so they can return to put on "oral cinema shows" for their villagers. Then the boys find glorious escape via the suitcase of books and the glow of romance with the Little Seamstress.)
3. What elements of China's Cultural Revolution does the novel reveal?
(City youths are being sent to live and work in the countryside and be re-educated by the rural peasants. Professionals like doctors, dentists, and writers are disgraced and classed as enemies of the people; some of these, like Luo's father, are targeted for public shows of humiliation. Elements of Western culture are banned. Middle school curriculum is restricted to the basics of industry and agriculture. All books are forbidden other than state-approved textbooks and Mao's "Little Red Book." Red Guards will confiscate other books from people's homes and burn them in the street, as happened with Luo's aunt.)
3. How do Luo and the narrator find out about Four-Eyes' secret stash of books? How do Luo and the narrator acquire the books?
(While they are alone in Four-Eyes' home one day, the narrator finds a heavy, triple-locked suitcase tucked away in the bottom of a packing crate. The narrator and Luo deduce that the suitcase is full of books because of its weight, its locks, and the fact the Luo's parents are writers. Four-Eyes denies that he has books but acts very vigilant and distrustful after the other boys suggest this likelihood. Then, in return for helping him while he's without his much-needed eyeglasses, Four-Eyes loans Luo and the narrator a copy of Balzac's Ursule Mirouët. When Four-Eyes refuses to part with any more books after the other two boys secure the folk song lyrics, Luo and the narrator decide to steal the suitcase and all the books. They accomplish this on the night of Four-Eyes' going-away feast, narrowly escaping detection by Four-Eyes and his mother. Once the books are gone, Four-Eyes

and his mother can make no complaint to the authorities, since the books are banned.)

Interpretive Level (Questions 5-8)

5. What benefits do the boys gain through storytelling and getting the books?
(Storytelling is Luo's special talent, and telling stories lifts the boys' despondent spirits. When the boys tell the village headman stories of films they have seen, the headman rewards them with monthly four-day outings to Yong Jing to view the latest films and then give their villagers "oral cinema shows." The novels open a whole new world for Luo and the narrator, a world full of "awakening desire, passion, impulsive action, love," and societies far different from that of Communist China. After he reads Balzac to the Little Seamstress, Luo is rewarded with her love and a sexual affair. Later, the narrator is able to arrange an abortion for the Little Seamstress by giving the doctor a book by Balzac in return.)
6. In what ways does the theme of re-education play throughout the novel?
(Luo and the narrator have been sent to live and work in the remote mountain village so they can be "re-educated." But it is not the village peasants who re-educate the boys—it is the stash of forbidden Western literature that gives them a very different type of re-education than that planned for them by Chinese government officials. Luo then takes on the role of re-educator as he reads Balzac to the Little Seamstress, with successful and then completely unexpected results.)
7. What impact does reading the books have on the narrator personally?
(The narrator is inspired by Jean-Christophe's "fierce individualism" and for the first time grasps the notion of "one man standing up against the whole world" and "the splendour of taking free and independent action as an individual." Also for the first time, the narrator wants something to be his very own possession rather than something he shares with Luo—the copy of Jean-Christophe. Of course, how the passion for individual action will play out for the narrator within Chinese Communist society would be problematic.)
8. What is Luo's plan for the Little Seamstress? How does his plan work out?
(When he first meets the beautiful Little Seamstress, Luo declares, "She's not civilised, at least not enough for me!" After the boys acquire the books, Luo embarks on a program of educating the Little Seamstress by reading and telling her the novels of Balzac. He looks forward to this process making her "more refined, more cultured." The tales do indeed transform the Little Seamstress—she becomes like a city girl in accent, hair style, and clothing. "All that time we spent reading to her has certainly paid off," Luo declares. Then, astonishing the two boys, the Little

Seamstress takes her re-education to its ultimate point: She abandons her village and mountain life to try her chances in the city.)

Critical Level (Questions 9-11)

9. What elements of irony do you find in the novel?
(Examples include the following: The unexpected outcome of Luo's re-education of the Little Seamstress; the actual re-education of the two boys by the Western novels rather than by the village peasants; Luo, who is bitter at being sent to be re-educated, embarking on a re-education of the Little Seamstress; the boys' discovery of Western literature after being sent away to have decadent Western ideas and culture re-educated out of them; the boys' classification as "young intellectuals" when in fact they have had a very limited education stopping at middle school; the narrator's early comment about Luo having only a trivial talent, that of storytelling; Four-Eyes altering authentic peasant culture—supposed to be the re-educating source—by making the folk songs conform to Communist dogma.)
10. What elements of the fable and fairy tale do you find in this novel?
(Like a fable, this simple tale unveils, at the end, a useful truth; at the end, a lesson is learned, perhaps a bitter one, as in the case of the boys and the result of the Little Seamstress's re-education. Like a fable, the novel has many rustic, pastoral elements, and the characters are mostly human types, underscored by the fact that only Luo has an individual first name. Fairy-tale elements include the crones/sorceresses, the raven appearing as an omen, and the hidden jealousy of the rival lover.)
11. In your opinion, should the author have included more descriptions of the drudgery, grit, and repression of everyday life in the Chinese countryside and in the boys' lives there?
(Opinions will vary and can lead to an interesting class discussion.)

Creative Level (Questions 12-14)

12. Write an account of the Little Seamstress's experiences with city life. Does she ever return to the mountain village?
13. Write some letters home from Luo and the narrator to their parents.
14. How and when are the boys allowed to return home, or do they really stay in the mountain village until they are old men?

Across the Curriculum

Art

1. Practice the art of calligraphy, either in creating beautiful English script or beautiful Chinese characters.
2. Create a class display of traditional stylized landscape paintings of China's mountainous areas. You could also create your own painting of this type.
3. Create an illustration of the Little Seamstress before and after her metamorphosis.
4. Draw a map of the Phoenix of the Sky region, including the various villages and the town of Yong Ling.

History and Social Studies

1. Give presentations on aspects of China since 1949 such as the establishment of the People's Republic, the Hundred Flowers campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Soviet-China rapprochement and break, the Cultural Revolution, establishment of relations with the United States, the Gang of Four, the death of Mao, Tiananmen Square, and other topics.
2. On a map of China, locate the various places the narrator mentions in the novel.
3. With classmates, evaluate the Cultural Revolution in China in the form of a chart noting effects on different aspects of life, such as society, politics, economics, education, and home life. You could then have a debate on the overall positive and/or negative result of the Revolution.
4. In China at the time of this novel, the narrator says that abortion was illegal, medical assistance for unwed mothers was banned, and no one under the age of twenty-five could get married. What is the current Chinese government policy regarding families, having babies, and marriage?
5. Luo's father made a terrible mistake when he spoke of having Jiang Jieshi as a dental patient. Who was this person? Why was he

considered the "worst scum of the earth" during the Cultural Revolution?

6. The Cultural Revolution's policy of sending city youth to the countryside was greatly expanded some years later by the Cambodian government. Research and report on this event.
7. Present a multimedia report on the Tiananmen Square event.
8. What other societies in recent times have worked to keep outside/modern values and culture out of their nation, to keep them from undermining traditional and/or religious values?
9. Create a chart of the succession of Chinese dynasties.

Language Arts

1. Read other novels about or narrative memoirs by young people who lived during China's Cultural Revolution and compare them with the narrator's tale. What common experiences and emotions did these young people share? What differences do you find in their narratives? In what ways do you relate to these narratives and their authors?
2. Study the Chinese language and teach classmates how to read and write some basic Chinese characters and words.
3. Make a list of the various British spellings used in the novel. Next to each word, write the American spelling.
4. Author Dai Sijie uses some striking similes to enrich his writing, such as "Three incisors protruded from blackened inflamed gums like flakes of prehistoric basalt, while his tobacco-stained canines were like snagged rocks of diluvian travertine." Find at least three more interesting similes in the novel. Then write three striking similes of your own.
5. Read a novel by Balzac. What elements of this novel would have strongly appealed to the narrator, Luo, and/or the Little Seamstress?

Science and Health

1. Create a class display that shows the techniques of rice cultivation in different areas of the world noting required climate, soil, and water conditions, various means of harvesting, and use of water buffalo.
2. Report orally or in writing on malaria. Include information on symptoms, causes, and treatments.
3. Using illustrations, explain what myopia is and various ways of correcting its effects.
4. Create an illustration that explains how a stone-grinding mill works. Label each element, and explain how it functions and what part of the milling process it is carrying out. If possible, visit a stone-grinding mill near where you live.
5. At one point the narrator experiences vertigo as he tries to cross the mountain path to the Little Seamstress' village. Research and report on vertigo. What causes it? How can people affected with it deal with its effects?
6. The women at the Yong Jing hospital debate as to whether the narrator should go to the ophthalmology or the otology departments. What does each of these medical specialties deal with?

Mathematics

1. Convert some of the many metric measurements mentioned in the novel to U.S. measurements. Note next to each conversion the original metric measurement and the page of the novel on which it occurs.

Music

1. Play some folk songs for your classmates (yourself, or via recordings) from a culture of your choice. Or, play some folk music of China.
2. Play part of a recording of a Mozart sonata for classmates (yourself or via recordings). Talk with classmates about how this music might have the effect on the villagers that the narrator describes in the first chapter of the novel.

3. Demonstrate to classmates the skill of violin playing, either yourself or by inviting someone you know who plays the violin to class.

Student Involvement Activities

1. With classmates, discuss these questions:
 - Is this a coming-of-age novel? If so, who comes of age?
 - Does this book endorse Western literature and culture as superior to their Chinese counterparts?
 - Why did Luo burn the books?
 - What is the meaning of the final line of the novel?
 - Why does the point of view change in the three chapters about Luo and the Little Seamstress at the waterfall pool?
2. Perform an "oral cinema show" with classmates for your class or for a larger audience.
3. Because the parents of Four-Eyes are writers, the narrator thinks those parents probably wanted their son to read books. Do your parents have dreams and/or plans for your future jobs? If so, what are their plans? How do you feel about this?
4. The narrator of this novel has some vivid dreams that have their origin in his recent experiences. What dreams of this kind have you had? What triggered them?
5. Bring a treadle sewing machine to class and demonstrate to classmates how it works, including how faster and slower treadle speeds affect the movement of the needle.
6. Suppose you were ordered to leave your home and family and be relocated to a new place and new way of life. What three things would you bring with you?
7. The French novel *Jean-Christophe* and its hero deeply affect the narrator of this novel. What novels and novel protagonists have affected you deeply? In each case, why?
8. Luo says that he had only to teach the Little Seamstress a few things about how to swim.

What skills have you learned mostly naturally, without little teaching? Explain this experience.

Alternate Assessment

1. Draw up a detailed character list for the novel under two headings, major characters and minor characters. List each character's name, give a brief character description (for those you have enough information about), and tell what role she or he plays in the life of the narrator and Luo.
2. With classmates, stage a hearing that will decide when and why Luo and the narrator should or should not be sent away for re-education. Or, stage a hearing about why or why not they should now be sent home after a given period of re-education.
3. Create a map of the settings in the Phoenix mountain district of the novel, and add a key that tells what happens in each location.

Teacher's Notes

Vocabulary

Match each underlined word with its meaning listed below. Write the letter of the meaning in the space next to the sentence number.

- | | | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| A. arrogant | F. irate | K. unintentionally | P. dizzying |
| B. excess | G. inclined to laugh | L. persuade against | Q. obscene |
| C. echoed | H. move in waves | M. very disturbed | R. denounced |
| D. shame | I. not understandable | N. travels | S. underground |
| E. clear | J. reckless boldness | O. little known | T. deep canyon |

- ___ 1. We—two frail, skinny, exhausted and risible city youths—were ignored.
- ___ 2. The audacity! But it worked.
- ___ 3. "Next month," the village headman announced with an imperious smile, "I shall send you to another film."
- ___ 4. A pinprick of light quivered in the darkness at the end of a long subterranean passage.
- ___ 5. The sound reverberated in the inky tunnel.
- ___ 6. Its petals were reflected in the limpid, shallow water of the stream.
- ___ 7. In the end it was I who stepped on the spectacles inadvertently.
- ___ 8. The band of plaited straw that served as the old miller's belt began to undulate too.
- ___ 9. "All you've got here is a load of smutty rhymes!" Four-Eyes barked.
- ___ 10. She was truly perturbed that I had mentioned the subject of books.
- ___ 11. The sorceresses intoned unintelligible incantations that were taken up by the crowd.
- ___ 12. Luo crawled along a narrow track with a yawning chasm on either side.
- ___ 13. He had been obliged to climb a vertiginous, narrow ridge.
- ___ 14. The headman's face contorted with rage as he fulminated against one of the doctors.
- ___ 15. One of the ravens, perhaps more incensed at the disturbance, swooped down towards me.
- ___ 16. This was a tempting prospect, but Luo felt obliged to dissuade him.
- ___ 17. The delay in his visit may have been due to a surfeit of work.
- ___ 18. The perambulations of this slimy tongue were interrupted by the needle.
- ___ 19. The yokels were flabbergasted by the sight of this recondite object: a book.
- ___ 20. Blushing with mortification I headed for the door.

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Read each character description. In the list below, find the character who matches the description. Write the letter of the character in the space next to the description number. You will use each name only once.

- | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| A. Luo | E. the headman | H. Luo's father |
| B. Four-Eyes | F. the narrator's father | I. the tailor |
| C. Balzac | G. the Little Seamstress | J. the old miller |
| D. the narrator | | |

- ____ 1. A medical doctor who is now classified as an enemy of the people
____ 2. A poor man with a reputation of being a champion singer
____ 3. A child of disgraced writers with a secret stash of books
____ 4. Person in charge of the mountain village
____ 5. A fine violin player
____ 6. A famous dentist who is now disgraced
____ 7. The mountain district's much-admired great beauty
____ 8. An especially gifted storyteller
____ 9. A famous French writer
____ 10. Father of the Little Seamstress

Part II: Fill-In (30 points)

Write one or two words in each blank to make each statement true.

1. Re-education is part of the movement called the _____ that has swept China.
2. Luo tells the headman that the violin sonata is titled "_____ Is Thinking of Chairman Mao."
3. The primitive house where the two boys live is set on _____, above a pigsty.
4. Luo and the narrator have been sent to live in the village to be _____.
5. The village where the two boys now live is called the _____ of the _____.
6. The village headman sends Luo and the narrator to the nearest town to see _____.
7. Luo and the narrator steal a locked _____ from Four-Eyes.
8. The narrator's favorite novels are by writers from the far-off country of _____.
9. Luo and the narrator successfully collect _____ from the old miller.
10. The two boys take the Little Seamstress to see a popular North Korean film titled The Little _____.
11. The narrator relates the story of the Count of _____ aloud to the tailor.
12. A red-beaked _____ often appears as an omen.
13. When the Little Seamstress tells the narrator she is in trouble, she means that she is _____.
14. Luo operates on the headman's rotten _____.
15. The Little Seamstress says she has learned this lesson from Balzac: a woman's _____ is a treasure beyond price.

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III. Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline the choice that correctly completes each of these sentences.

1. The headman calls the violin a **(revolutionary cadre, bourgeois toy, rare treasure, dangerous weapon)**.
2. Luo and the narrator have gone this far in their education: **(high school, vocational school, grammar school, middle school)**.
3. Luo and the narrator must carry buckets of this up the mountain to the farm fields: **(excrement, coal, rice, topsoil)**.
4. The narrator admires this fictional character the most: **(Romain Rolland, Ursule Mirouët, Jean-Christophe, Père Goriot)**.
5. Luo is terribly afraid of **(snakes, heights, blood, needles)**.
6. The narrator and Luo speak in the dialect of **(Beijing, Szechuan, the mountains, Shandong)**.
7. Luo operates on the headman with a needle from a **(doctor's kit, dentist's drill, veterinarian, sewing machine)**.
8. Luo is pleased when the Little Seamstress makes herself look like a(n) **(city girl, actress, Red Guard, folk singer)**.
9. As the novel ends, the boys burn their **(city clothes, journals, books, house)**.
10. As he prepares to leave the mountain for a month, Luo enlists the narrator to guard the **(books, violin, Little Seamstress, alarm clock)**.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Why does the narrator identify so intensely with the characters and situations in the Western novels he is reading?
2. Luo and the narrator acquire new knowledge from their reading, which they feel enriches them. Yet this also leads directly to their loss of something very precious to them. How are they enriched? What is their loss? Overall, are they better off or worse off?
3. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator says that the only thing Luo is really good at is storytelling. The narrator calls this "a pleasing talent to be sure, but a marginal one, with little future in it." How do events of the novel contradict this statement and make it ironic?

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Matching (20 points)

Read each character description. In the list below, find the character who matches the description. Write the letter of the character in the space next to the description number. You will use each name only once.

- | | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| A. Luo | E. Four-Eyes' mother | H. Luo's father |
| B. Four-Eyes | F. the narrator's mother | I. the headman |
| C. the tailor | G. the Little Seamstress | J. the old miller |
| D. the narrator | | |

- ___ 1. Person who travels from village to village performing a popular service
- ___ 2. A medical doctor who has been classified as an enemy of the people
- ___ 3. Person who performs dental work on the headman
- ___ 4. Person who threatens to turn in the narrator for speeding reactionary trash
- ___ 5. Person who falls in love with Luo and Balzac
- ___ 6. Person who once fixed Chairman Mao's teeth
- ___ 7. Person who gets a city job and is released early from re-education
- ___ 8. Poet who hosts a village feast
- ___ 9. Person who sings folk songs for Luo and the narrator
- ___ 10. Person who watches over the Little Seamstress while Luo is away for a month

Part II: Short Answer (30 points)

Write a one- or two-word answer to each of the following questions.

1. Who is the author of this novel? _____
2. In what country do the events in this novel take place? _____
3. What suspect item has the narrator brought with him when he first arrives in the mountain village?

4. What label has inaccurately been applied to Luo and the narrator, which officially puts them in need of re-education? _____
5. What profession did Luo's father become famous for practicing? _____
6. What is the name of the town that is a two-days' walk from the mountain village?

7. What is Luo's great talent? _____
8. What is hidden in Four-Eyes' suitcase? _____
9. From what sickness does Luo suffer over a period of weeks? _____
10. What precious item does Four-Eyes break? _____
11. What creatures do Four-Eyes, Luo, and the narrator collect from the old miller?

12. What domesticated animal do the peasants work with in the paddy fields?

13. Who makes a blue Mao jacket for the narrator? _____
14. Where does the old miller observe Luo and the Little Seamstress naked together?

15. Where does the Little Seamstress go to try her chances? _____

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part III. Multiple Choice (20 points)

Underline the choice that correctly completes each of these sentences.

1. The local villagers are (**opium growers, intellectuals, peasants, Red Guards**).
2. The Phoenix of the Sky is a(n) (**mountain, legendary bird, valley, ancient god**).
3. The headman is fascinated by Luo's (**books, alarm clock, tennis shoes, key ring**).
4. The narrator and Luo find it is terrifying to work naked in the (**paddy field, village slaughterhouse, pigsty, coal mine**).
5. Luo and the narrator entertain the villagers with their oral (**puppet theater, folk tales, cinema shows, poetry readings**).
6. Through most of the novel, the Little Seamstress wears her hair in a (**ponytail, short bob, pigtail, pair of braids**).
7. The Little Seamstress's "Made in Shanghai" is a(n) (**sewing machine, stylish jacket, washing machine, ebony hairbrush**).
8. The first book the boys get from Four-Eyes is Balzac's (*Père Goriot, Jean-Christophe, Madame Bovary, Ursule Mirouët*).
9. The narrator copies some passages from Balzac onto his (**upper arm, sheepskin coat, sheet music, bed sheets**).
10. The Little Seamstress travels to the nearest town to get a(n) (**abortion, special fabric, library book, travel card**).

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Why do Luo and the narrator burn their books?
2. The novel's final line is: "She said she had learnt one thing from Balzac: that a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price." What does this mean?
3. Compare Luo and the narrator.

Answer Key

Vocabulary

- | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. G | 6. E | 11. I | 16. L |
| 2. J | 7. K | 12. T | 17. B |
| 3. A | 8. H | 13. P | 18. N |
| 4. S | 9. Q | 14. R | 19. O |
| 5. C | 10. M | 15. F | 20. D |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. H |
| 2. J | 7. G |
| 3. B | 8. A |
| 4. E | 9. C |
| 5. D | 10. I |

Part II: Fill-In (30 points)

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Cultural Revolution | 9. folk (peasant) songs |
| 2. Mozart | 10. Flower Seller |
| 3. stilts | 11. Monte Cristo |
| 4. re-educated | 12. raven |
| 5. Phoenix, Sky | 13. pregnant |
| 6. movies/films | 14. wisdom tooth |
| 7. suitcase | 15. beauty |
| 8. France | |

Part III: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. bourgeois toy | 6. Szechuan |
| 2. middle school | 7. sewing machine |
| 3. excrement | 8. city girl |
| 4. Jean-Christophe | 9. books |
| 5. heights | 10. Little Seamstress |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Matching (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. H |
| 2. F | 7. B |
| 3. A | 8. E |
| 4. I | 9. J |
| 5. G | 10. D |

Part II: Short Answer (30 points)

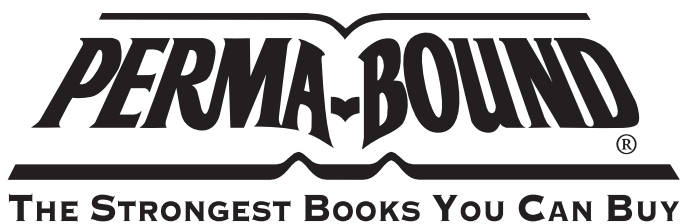
- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Dai Sijie | 9. malaria |
| 2. China | 10. eyeglasses |
| 3. violin | 11. lice |
| 4. young intellectuals | 12. water buffalo |
| 5. dentistry | 13. Little Seamstress |
| 6. Yong Jing | 14. waterfall pool |
| 7. storytelling | 15. the city |
| 8. books | |

Part III: Multiple Choices (20 points)

- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------|
| 1. peasants | 6. pigtail |
| 2. mountain | 7. sewing machine |
| 3. alarm clock | 8. Ursule Mirouët |
| 4. coal mine | 9. sheepskin coat |
| 5. cinema shows | 10. abortion |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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