

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

By Dai Sijie



The Little Seamstress with Luo and the Narrator

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Before reading

Background

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), promoted by the Chinese Communist leader Chairman Mao, the universities were shut down and any boy or girl who was labelled an 'intellectual' (which usually meant anyone attending high school) was sent to the countryside to live with the peasants and learn about their life. During this period an estimated 12 million youths from the cities were sent to the countryside to be 're-educated' by the peasants. Both working and living conditions were often extremely harsh, especially in the mountain areas and as a result some died. Dai Sijie was himself 're-educated' between 1971 and 1974.

- **Activity**

Research this period of Chinese history to further your knowledge of 're-education'.

Exploring the text

How well do I know the story?

Complete the chart below writing down the main episodes in the book. Remember to complete the ones started for you. This will help you become familiar with the book's events so that you can instantly recall episodes during the exam essay.

(Note that for ease of reference here the chapters have been given numbers).

Part I

Chapter	The main events
1	The two boys arrive in the village.....
2	
3	Description of the Little Seamstress...
4	
5	Luo sick with malaria so nursed by the Little Seamstress...

Part II

6	The boys help Four-Eyes and in return are given a Balzac book to read...
7	
8	
9	Visit to the Old Miller...
10	
11	
12	Buffalo slaughter...

Part III

13	The boys read the books from the suitcase in a month...
14	
15	
16	Old Miller's Story – he saw Luo and the Little Seamstress make love...
17	
18	
19	
20	
21	Luo burns the books...

Characters

Use the following questions (making sure each answer is supported by quotations) to help you build a character study of Luo and the narrator. Work together in pairs before sharing your ideas with the rest of the class.

Luo

1. Describe Luo's relationship with the narrator. To what extent do you think he is blind to the narrator's feelings for the Little Seamstress?

2. Describe Luo's relationship with the Little Seamstress. Do you think he is right in wanting to change her?

3. What do we learn about Luo's character from his graphic description to the narrator of his lovemaking with the Little Seamstress?

4. What do we learn about his parents?

5. Can you explain the unprovoked punch he gave the narrator in Part I after they have both witnessed his father's public humiliation?

6. How is Luo's gift for storytelling described by the narrator? Find two examples of his storytelling, explaining how each reveals his talent.

7. Is Luo's capacity to lie to get them out of difficult situations to be admired or deplored? Find examples to support your ideas.

8. What does the scene with the Old Miller teach us about Luo?

9. In the coal mine, the narrator thinks he hears Luo 'weeping with passionate abandon'. Why do you think he was crying?

10. What do we learn about Luo from his individual story in Part III?

11. Why does Luo burn the books in the closing chapter? To what extent is he partly responsible for the Little Seamstress' departure?

Narrator

1. Look at the way the narrator handles the 'violin' incident (compared to Luo) in the opening chapter – what does this initial episode reveal about his character?

2. What do we learn about the narrator's parents?

3. Look carefully at the narrator's description of the Little Seamstress in Part I – what clues can you find to suggest he may already have feelings for her? Find examples of how these feelings deepen as the novel progresses?

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4. The narrator constantly reminds us that whilst Luo has a 'genius for storytelling', he himself 'was not a born storyteller'. Examine the scene at the end of Part I where the narrator describes the four sorceresses at Luo's sickbed. Discuss how far you agree with him, focusing on how successful he is here in using language to convey humour. How has the narrator's confidence in storytelling increased dramatically in Part III, when the tailor comes to stay?

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5. When the narrator first reads Balzac's book in Part II, he becomes totally mesmerised by it. Find this scene and list as many reasons as you can why you think this happens.

6. When he is with the Old Miller the narrator says 'I almost envied him his complete ignorance of the outside world'. What do you think he means by this?

7. Despite the awful hardships the two boys have so far endured, it takes a rude comment from Four-Eyes in Part II to make the narrator angry and resort to violence. Can you explain his outburst here?

8. In Part III the narrator credits the fictional character Jean-Christophe with helping him to understand 'the splendour of taking free and independent action as an individual'. How is this new skill soon put into action in this part of the novel, in connection with the Little Seamstress? To what extent does Luo's absence empower him further?

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9. Although he is not the child's father, the narrator risks his life in arranging an abortion for the Little Seamstress – explain his reasons for doing so.

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10. At the end of the novel, why does the narrator not try to persuade the Little Seamstress to return, since it seems clear he loves her too?

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Themes

The power of literature

Evidently literature is a powerful tool, capable of uplifting mankind in even the most awful of situations. Look carefully at how many people's lives are touched by coming into either direct or indirect contact with the 'stolen books' and how it affects them individually.

Re-education

- **The peasants' re-education of the boys**

1. To what extent does it take its toll, both physically and mentally, on Luo, the narrator and Four-Eyes?

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2. What do the boys learn about the life of the peasants?

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3. What is ironic about the boys discovering western literature during their 're-education'?

4. Look too at the village headman's character and their relationship with him.

5. How might the novel offer a more intimate portrayal of life under Chairman Mao than a strictly historical one?

- **Luo's re-education of the Little Seamstress**

Ironically, despite bitterly resenting his own experiences of re-education, Luo's objective is to re-educate the Little Seamstress.

6. To what extent do you think he regrets that decision by the end of the novel?

7. What does the novel therefore suggest about trying to change others according to one's own beliefs? Answer this question in the context of the experiences of both Luo and the narrator and the Little Seamstress.

Chinese culture

1. Explore the Chinese traditions and their place in the novel, for example, how a tailor is treated when he comes to a village to work.

Friendship

1. Examine the friendships in the novel. Look carefully at how each works and what it is based on.

Romantic love

- 1. Is love between characters mentioned in Sijie's novel or only in the context of the French novels Sijie's characters themselves read?

2. How would you define the relationship between Luo and the Little Seamstress compared to that of the narrator and the Little Seamstress?

Storytelling

The telling of tales is an important aspect of the novel, in the same way that the storyteller is an important figure. Discuss with a partner the many tales that are told and the storytellers that are involved.

Fashion and beauty

Look closely at all the episodes in the novel linked to this theme.

1. What happens to the tailor's designs once he has started listening to tales from French novels?

2. 'It would evidently take ... more than dire poverty to stop a woman from wanting to be well dressed.' In what way does this apparently innocent observation by the narrator link to the Little Seamstress' departure?

3. How and why does her appearance radically alter at the end of the novel?

4. What other themes can you find in the novel?

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Language, Style and Structure

Language

- **Imagery**

Similes and metaphors are frequently used to further enhance our understanding of scenes. Find some examples of each, explaining how each adds to our enjoyment of the episode described. Extended metaphors are also used: reread the scene at the Old Miller's in Part II and explain the extended metaphor and its effectiveness at this point in the narrative.

- **Blunt language**

How does the inclusion of frank language, often with swear words, enhance your understanding of peasant life?

- **Rich description**

The narrator does a commendable job in making scenes come to life by his vivid descriptions, even in the most horrendous circumstances. Look carefully at the scene of the suitcase theft in Part II where the narrator hides under Four-Eyes' mother's bed beside the 'soil bucket' and focus on the way he uses language to amuse the reader.

Style

- **Humour**

Find your three favourite comical scenes and examine what makes them humorous. Why does Sijie use so much comedy in this novel? Are the jokes always at one character's expense, or do we sometimes laugh *with* a character?

- **Irony**

Explain the irony of the following two situations: (i) Luo's desire to re-educate the Little Seamstress and (ii) the boys' discovery of Western Literature during their period of re-education.

- **Characters' names**

Why do none of the characters appear to have names except Luo? How does this affect the way we read the story?

- **Foreshadowing**

Sometimes the author gives us clues of events to come. When the narrator informs us in Part I that the Little Seamstress possesses 'an untamed quality' which reminds him of 'wild girls', how might it predict the outcome of the novel? What foreshadowing can you find concerning the relationship between Luo and the Little Seamstress in her individual story?

- **Narrative**

1. Do you think the change in perspective offered by the three 'stories', allowing us to view the story through other characters' eyes, is effective? What benefits does it offer the reader?

2. The narrator switches from first person to third person narrative when he 'assumed the role of undercover agent'. Why does he do this?

- **Fairy-tale Qualities**

3. Folk-tale scenes: Some episodes seem plucked from fairy-tales, such as the four sorceresses and their words 'My bow is from Tibet, and my arrow is tipped with silver'. How many other scenes like this can you find?

4. Symbolism: What does the black raven represent? What do Luo's keys at the bottom of the pool symbolise?

5. Dream sequences: What dreams/nightmares does the narrator have? How are they linked to events that actually happen?

Exam Practice

In pairs, make brief notes on how to answer each question before comparing ideas with the rest of the class. Then practise answering a question under timed conditions in class.

1. What personal qualities do you admire in the narrator? Show how these qualities are revealed in two parts of the book.
2. How successful is Sijie in describing life in the mountain village where Luo and the narrator have been sent to live? What aspects of his portrayal of the village life do you find especially effective?
3. *'I had intended only a brief flirtation...the flirtation turned into a grand passion.'* (The narrator in Part III.) To what extent do you agree that the only true love affair in the novel is between Sijie's characters and the stolen books?
4. What characters are 're-educated' by the end of the novel and in what ways have they been so? Would Chairman Mao be proud of the 're-education' that has taken place in the village mountains?