

BALZAC and the LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS

by Dai Sijie

You will need to finish your reading of Dai Sijie's novel by **Monday, June 14th**. As you read, you may want to keep some of the following questions in mind as we will be discussing them in class and on our Ning site.

Reading Schedule:

Part One (pages 3-41)

Thursday, June 3rd

Reflect on:

Early in the novel, the narrator says, "The only thing Luo was really good at was telling stories. A pleasing talent to be sure, but a marginal one, with little future in it... modern societies everywhere, whether socialist or capitalist, have done away with the old storytellers..." (18). Is storytelling a dying art? If so, what does this mean for literature and the boys' love of books?

Part Two (pages 45-105)

Monday, June 7th

When the narrator first reads Balzac, even though he's heard "nothing but revolutionary blather about patriotism, Communism, ideology and propaganda all his life," he is transformed by Balzac's story of "awakening desire, passion, impulsive action. . . . In spite of my complete ignorance of that distant land called France . . . Ursule's story rang as true as if it had been about my neighbours" (57). What is it that enables him to identify so strongly with characters and situations he has never experienced? What does his experience suggest about the power of literature? In what ways does *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* exert a similar power on its readers?

Part Three, 1st section
(pages 109-134)

Thursday, June 10th

As readers of Dai Sijie's novel, we know that the author has stated that the story is loosely autobiographical, with Dai Sijie's life experiences mirroring some of what the narrator experiences. If this is so, how does this complicate our reading of the story? How does this change the way we read and understand the relationship between Luo and the seamstress? Who ends up "winning" the seamstress - Luo or the narrator/author? Do you think he portrays the seamstress in a positive or negative way?

Part Three, Miller's Story - end
(pages 135-184)

Monday, June 14th

Throughout the novel, the repression of Western literature and culture is presented as something that is detrimental. Yet at the end of the story, when the Little Seamstress sets off for the city, she tells Luo that "she had learnt one thing from Balzac: that a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price" (184). How does this ending complicate the novel's apparent endorsement of cosmopolitan Western culture and literature over rural Chinese culture?

About the Author:

Born in China in 1954, Dai Sijie is a filmmaker who was himself "re-educated" between 1971 and 1974. He left China in 1984 for France, where he has lived and worked ever since. This, his first novel, was an overnight sensation when it appeared in France in 2000, becoming an immediate best-seller and winning five prizes. The book was also recently adapted into a film in France.



Is Literature Dangerous?

In March of 2002 Dai Sijie was a guest on the radio program All Things Considered and tackled the question, "Is literature dangerous?"

LISA SIMEONE, Host: In 1966 China changed. That was the year Chairman Mao Tse-tung launched the great proletarian cultural revolution, a sweeping and ultimately brutal reorganization of the entire society. Intellectuals were declared enemies of the state and imprisoned; their children were sent off to rural camps to be re-educated along party lines. All artifacts of Western culture, such as books and music, were banned. Though the cultural revolution officially ended in 1969 and Chinese universities reopened in 1970, re-education continued and the fear of being denounced went along with it. This is the setting for a new novella by Dai Sijie called *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. Dai Sijie himself was re-educated between 1971 and 1974. He left China in 1984 and settled in France, where he still lives. Dai Sijie joins us from Paris. Hello. Welcome.

DAI SIJIE, Author: Bonjour.

SIMEONE: Now this book is not exactly an autobiography, but it does contain some autobiographical elements. Is that right?

SIJIE: (Through Translator) Yes, indeed. This book is very autobiographical. It is about many things that I lived. But at the same time, I made them more into a literary style.

SIMEONE: I guess we should explain to the audience a little bit about the characters, about the story. We'll just give them a kind of synopsis of the story.

SIJIE: We have three main characters in this book. Two are re-educated boys who are sent by the government for their re-education and a small girl who comes from the mountains.

SIMEONE: And the narrator is one of the characters and his best friend is named Luo, and they manage to smuggle a violin to this re- education camp.

SIJIE: Yes. So I wanted with this scene to show the shock of the two civilizations, the Western civilization in one part and a very old, delayed civilization deeply rooted in a mountainous region. And this episode at the start of the book is when these two boys bring in their baggage a violin. And these revolutionary peasants in the village have never seen a violin. They think it's a toy. The main character in the book knows how to play this violin very well, and so he plays a very famous song. And he tells the revolutionary peasants in the village that the name of the song is "Mozart Always Thinks of President Mao Tse-tung."

SIMEONE: Well, the two boys have a friend in a nearby village named Four-Eyes, because he wears glasses. And Four-Eyes has this secret cache of books. And not only do they appreciate being able to read the books, but when they meet the little seamstress they fall in love with her and they read her stories and they introduce her to great literature.

SIJIE: Yes. This story, in fact, I lived it. It was actually more the story that my friend lived, because he fell in love with this girl from the mountains. She was a very beautiful girl but, at the same time, she was very poor. And it was difficult to imagine for us that such a beautiful girl could exist amidst all this poverty. So my friend decided to educate this girl with the books that we had stolen and to change her head, because he found that she a little stupid, even though she was beautiful. So he would go up the mountains and read her these books.

SIMEONE: I don't want to give away the ending for people who haven't read this book yet, but let's just say that all this goodwill has unintended consequences.

SIJIE: But that was not my favorite author among the authors that we found. But this girl, she absolutely loved Balzac. It was by far her favorite writer, and her life really changed after she discovered his writings.

SIMEONE: It's hard to convey, I think--or I would find it hard to convey to a modern audience surrounded by television, surrounded by technology, surrounded by movies, the thrill, you know, how thrilling it is to read a book, to come upon literature. And how did you convey that?

SIJIE: I had an idea initially when I was writing this book. I wanted to honor literature. This is just a story about my modest life. But literature and the discovery of this literature really helped me during this time of re-education, when everything was forbidden, when everything was austere. This Western literature showed me a new world, that showed that there were other options out there. And I tried to portray this through this simple story.

SIMEONE: Mr. Sijie, you said that Balzac is not necessarily your favorite French author. Who is or who was during the time you were in the re-education camp?

- SIJIE: I remember among all the books that there were there was one author in particular that I liked a lot, it was a Russian author, Gogol. And I also found a Mark Twain book that I liked a lot. I think that clearly two foreign literatures have influenced Chinese life since the early 20th centuries and these are Russian literature and French literature. I think that US literature arrived much later in China compared to the other two foreign literatures that were the most dominant, French and Russian.
- SIMEONE: Is your book being translated into Chinese and is it being sold in China?
- SIJIE: No. The Chinese government has not accepted my books, even though it has been translated in about 30 languages.
- SIMEONE: You know, one of the lessons I think a reader can learn from this book is that, besides being beautiful, literature is also dangerous. And so it's paradoxical, but it makes one understand why tyrants and why governments have tried to ban books over the centuries.
- SIJIE: I don't agree. I don't think that literature can be seen as something dangerous. It simply portrays a fictional world and it helps us understand reality, but I don't think you can say that literature is dangerous.
- SIMEONE: Dangerous in the sense that it gives people ideas. And when you have ideas, you can do anything.
- SIJIE: These types of governments are threatened by everything, I think. They can be threatened by a small song or even a monk's speech. They have the ambition to possess everything. They have the ambition to possess people up to their thoughts; they want to possess what they think, but this is impossible.
- SIMEONE: Dai Sijie is the author of "Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress." He joined us from Paris. Thank you. Au revoir.
- SIJIE: Au revoir. Merci.

More Information:

- National Public Radio personality Diane Rehm talks with critics about Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress. You can listen to the interview on the internet by going to www.wamu.org/ram/2003/r2030416.ram and scrolling down the page until you find the Wednesday, April 16th show.
- Look to our classroom web page for an updated web resource list. Locate our page at www.msward.org/10webresources.html.
- If you are interested in learning more about Confucianism or Taoism, visit the Chinese Cultural Site sponsored by the Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York. You will find the site at academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/chinrelg.html.

VOCABULARY

Fill in the definitions as we go through them in class.

Part 1 - Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

- **galvanized** –pg. 5 –() _____
- **beatific** –pg. 6 –() _____
- **foisted** –pg. 8 –() _____
- **veneration** –pg. 15 –() _____
- **macabre** –pg. 33 –() _____
- **limpid** –pg. 40 –() _____

Part 2 - Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

- **Myopia** –() _____
- **Masochistic** –pg. 57 –() _____
- **Redolent** –pg. 59 –() _____
- **Decrepit** –() _____
- **Pious** –() _____
- **Precipice** –() _____
- **Undulate** –() _____
- **Bereft** –() _____
- **Imminent** –() _____

Part 3 - Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

- **Dubious** –() _____
- **Consecration** –() _____
- **Vertigo** –() _____
- **Amicable** –() _____
- **Complicity** –() _____
- **Fulminated** –pg. 126 –() _____
- **Torrent** –() _____
- **Reconnaissance** –() _____
- **Auto-da-fé** –() _____

BALZAC and the LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS

Literary Criticism Grid

Much like we did for our study of *The Kite Runner*, you will use this grid to keep track of some of your interpretations of Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress using the various literary criticism approaches. You will need to fill in at least 3-4 examples for each approach.

THE APPROACH:	SCENE DESCRIPTION:	ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION:
HISTORICAL: These critics see works as the reflection of an author's life and times (or of the characters' life and times). They believe it is necessary to know about the author and the political, economical, and sociological context of his times.	1. In the NPR interview, Dai Sijie states that this story is loosely autobiographical. He mentions that he did have a best friend who loved the same girl that he did.	1. Because it is loosely autobiographical, readers must think about why he is choosing to share this story. What is the author's motive?
FORMALIST: These critics are interested in the work's effect on the reader. Formalistic critics spend much time analyzing irony, paradox, imagery, and metaphor. They are also interested in the work's setting, characters, symbols, and point of view.		
PSYCHOANALYTIC (Freudian): Freudian critics are concerned with what motivates the characters (or sometimes the author). How is a character motivated by fear or desire? How do the characters actions and reactions reveal his values or beliefs?		

<p>ARCHETYPAL (Jungian): The Jungian approach to literature assumes that there is a collection of symbols, images, characters, and motifs (i.e. archetypes) that evoke basically the same response in all people. These critics identify these archetypal patterns (e.g. hero's cycle) and discuss how they function in the works.</p>		
<p>FEMINIST: Feminist criticism is concerned with the impact of gender on writing and reading. A feminist approach to understanding literature attempts to uncover what a particular text has to say about gender and gender differences.</p>		
<p>MARXIST: Marxist critics are concerned with the portrayal of class differences. Does the work reinforce power/class differences or does it challenge them?</p>		

FILL IN THE BLANK:

Please read each question carefully and write out a 1-2 sentence response that most accurately answers the question.

1. In the Chinese text of the Tao Te Ching, the author Lao Tzu makes a number of statements that seem to contradict themselves as can be seen in the following lines from Chapter One: "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao./ The name that can be named is not the eternal name." These statements are an example of what literary device?

2. Name four basic beliefs of Confucius philosophy?

3. Mao's hope for China was to be free of the "four olds," which he thought held China back from true progress. What are the four olds?

4. What does 3 in 1,000 stand for?

5. Although our narrator only has three years of middle school education, he is labeled part of the bourgeois class and sent up to the mountains for reeducation. What is the most likely reason he is sent for reeducation?

6. The title of this text bears some significance. Honore de Balzac was a noted author who published a long list of well known and read books. In contrast, the Little Seamstress remained unnamed throughout the novel and did not have any sort of formal education. Paired together in the title of this book, these two characters seem to be exact opposites. What is another word that could be used to describe this pairing? _____

7. What is the "Phoenix of the Sky"? _____

8. What is the name of the nearest town where the boys are sent to watch movies and where the tailor gets his bolts of fabric from? _____

9. The narrator and Luo are paid for working three jobs on the mountain. What three jobs do the boys hold?

10. How do Luo and the narrator get their first book from Four Eyes?

11. The first book the boys received was Ursule Mirouet by Balzac. The narrator is so moved by the words that he does not want to give the book back to Four Eyes. What does the narrator do with the Balzac text? _____

12. In order to get their hands on another text, how do Luo and the narrator help Four Eyes?

13. What is jade dumplings with miller sauce made of?

14. Why does the narrator hit Four Eyes? _____

15. When Luo, the Little Seamstress, and the narrator venture into the city to watch the Korean film, The Little Flower Seller, who do they run into?

16. Whose initial idea was it to steal the suitcase of books?

17. What technical task does the headman ask Luo to do for him?

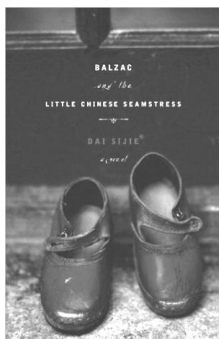
18. Why does Luo agree to go ahead with completing the task (question 17) even though he doesn't want to?

19. The tailor comes to visit the boys' village and stays with Luo and the narrator. During the evening and early morning hours, the narrator switches places with Luo and becomes the storyteller. What story does the narrator tell to the tailor? _____

20. How does Luo lose his key ring? _____

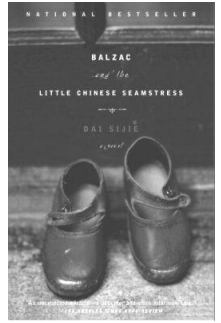
21. Who are the narrators of Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress? _____

22. Why does Luo get a month's leave? _____
23. Why do the narrator and the Little Seamstress venture into the city alone?
24. How does the narrator pay for the Little Seamstress' doctor's visit?
25. What triggers Luo to burn all the Western novels?
26. Using details from the text, explain a psychoanalytic interpretation of the story.
27. Explain the final quote about the Little Chinese Seamstress: ""she had learnt one thing from Balzac: that a woman's beauty is a treasure beyond price" (184). What is meant by this? How does this impact the ending of the novel?



Movie Comparison

Dai Sijie's differing versions of Balzac and the *Little Chinese Seamstress*



Please answer using complete sentences.

- 1) In the movie version, Dai Sijie gives the narrator the name Ma. However, in the book version, the narrator remains unnamed. Why do you think Dai Sijie made this change? Does it change the way we understand the story? Which is more powerful?

- 2) What are other significant changes between the two versions? (Doesn't need to be in complete sentences)

The Scene as Portrayed in the Book

VS.

The Scene as Portrayed in the Movie

- 3) Select **one** of the scenes you've described above, and analyze the differences between the movie and book in more depth. Why do you think Dai Sijie made this change?

- 4) Select a "stand-out moment" from the movie, a moment that strikes you as critical and important to both the plot and theme development of a story. Analyze a particular theme by filling in the steps below. Look at the description of each step, then fill in details below each step that describe the particular scene from the movie you have selected. (Doesn't need to be in complete sentences)

SCENE: Briefly describe the action of the characters in this scene	POINT: What is the point being made? What is the author trying to say?	COMMENT: What comment is being made about people? Theme related to the characters.	UNIVERSAL TRUTH: What does this say about people in general?	SO WHAT? Where else do we find this truth? Connect to other works/ideas.

- 5) Is the message of the movie version similar to the book? In terms of the movie version, what is the movie's message for humanity?

BALZAC and the LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS

Vocabulary Review

Across

4. (adj.) friendly
8. (adj.) leave desolate or alone, esp. as a result of death
10. (adj.) about to occur
11. I was so pleased with my dedication that I was tempted to add a drop or two of my blood, by way of _____.
12. We were refused admission to high school, then the role of young intellectuals was _____ on us on account of our parents being labeled "enemies of the state."

Down

1. (adj.) giving rise to uncertainty; doubtful promise or outcome
2. (v.) to issue a thunderous verbal attack or denouncement
3. "A toy from the city," the headman continued, "go on, burn it!" His command _____ the crowd.
5. We were surprised to see how the alarm clock seized the imagination of the peasants. It became an object of _____, almost.
6. "The song is Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao," Luo broke in. The headman's menacing look softened. He crinkled up his eyes in a wide, _____ smile.
7. There was Luo now, on his knees in the middle of the ridge, staring down the _____ on his right.
9. (adj.) devoutly religious
13. (adj.) suggestive, reminiscent; usually relating to a specific scent

