

# Snow Flower and the Secret Fan



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LISA SEE

See was born in Paris in 1955, but was raised by her mother, writer Carolyn See, in Los Angeles, California. Her father lived in Chinatown and she spent a lot of time there. At her father's home, she was influenced by her grandmother (who she says appears in spirit as a character in all of her novels) and her great-grandfather, who was Chinese. See graduated with a B.A. from Loyola Marymount University in 1979. After graduation, she worked as a freelance journalist and wrote for several publications, including *Vogue*, and was the *Publishers Weekly* West Coast correspondent for thirteen years. With this reputation to help her, she published her first book, *On Gold Mountain: The One Hundred Year Odyssey of my Chinese-American Family* in 1995. She has written eight novels since then. In addition to writing novels, See has curated and developed museum exhibits, written the companion guide for a walking tour in Los Angeles's Chinatown, and serves as a city commissioner in Los Angeles. She was named National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese Women in 2001, and in 2017 will receive the Golden Spike Award from the Chinese Historical Society of Southwestern California. She lives in Los Angeles with her husband. They have two sons.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The tenets of Confucianism govern the social and religious practices in *Snow Flower*. Most important to the novel are the ideas of filial piety and Confucian beliefs regarding a woman's place in the world. Filial piety entails respecting parents and ancestors, and is also related to the necessity of producing male heirs. A woman was expected to follow the men in her family; first her father, then her husband, and finally, her sons. The Taiping Rebellion, which Lily and Snow Flower experience firsthand, was a large-scale civil war that lasted from the winter of 1850 to the summer of 1864 and touched all but one province in China. The Taipings, led by Hong Xiuquan, wanted to overthrow the ruling class and reform the Chinese way of life. The conflict ranks as one of the bloodiest wars in human history. While there's no official census data, it's estimated that 20-30 million people died, and millions more, like Lily and Snow Flower, were displaced. When Lily is born in 1823, foot binding had been a practice in China for almost a thousand years. Legend states that sometime around 970 CE, Yao Niang, a concubine, often entertained her prince by wrapping her feet in silk and dancing on a "golden lotus pedestal." Her feet were certainly not bound like Lily's were, but the practice filtered down through the social ranks and became widespread. The *nu*

*shu* language was created by and for women to communicate with each other, as they were forbidden from receiving formal education. *Nu shu* characters are phonetic rather than logographic, and look like italicized Chinese characters. This style is due to the fact that characters were often embroidered, thus the finer lines.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Lisa See has written eight other novels, all of which deal with the Chinese (and sometimes Chinese-American, as in the case of *On Gold Mountain* and *China Dolls*) experience. All of See's novels are focused primarily on female characters and relationships between women, regardless of time period or setting. Because of this and her Chinese heritage, her work is often compared to that of Amy Tan ([The Joy Luck Club](#)), another Chinese-American author whose work explores female and familial relationships.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Snow Flower and the Secret Fan
- **When Written:** 2003-2005
- **Where Written:** Los Angeles, CA
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Fiction, Fictional Memoir
- **Setting:** Chinese villages in Hunan Province, 1823-1903
- **Climax:** When Lily and Snow Flower exchange their "Letters of Vituperation"
- **Antagonist:** At times the antagonist is arguably Lily, but the female characters are victimized consistently by the Confucian social order that deemed them worthless.
- **Point of View:** First person, narrated by Lily as an old woman

### EXTRA CREDIT

**The Golden Lily.** Bound feet that finished at less than 4 Western inches in length were considered "golden lily" feet, while feet that ended up longer were considered silver (4-5 inches) or iron (5 inches or more) lilies. Lily's feet end up being 2.75 inches when her binding process ends, which is the width of an iPhone 6.

**Three Fingers.** Lisa See admits to typing all her novels (nine as of 2017) using only three fingers.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Lily, an 80-year-old Chinese woman, is a widow now, and old enough that she can say things that would once have gotten her in trouble. She says she spent her life longing for love, despite being undeserving of love as a woman. She was an obedient girl and woman, but took obedience too far. Her only rebellion was *nu shu*, or secret women's writing, and she describes a fan sitting in front of her covered in *nu shu* notes she exchanged with her *laotong* (bonded female companion), Snow Flower. The story to follow is Lily's autobiography, which will be burned upon her death.

Lily is born in Yongming County, China, in 1823. At age five, she begins to desire affection from her Mama. When Lily and her cousin, Beautiful Moon, turn six, Mama and Aunt send for a diviner to select an auspicious date to begin their foot binding. Diviner Hu looks at Lily and suggests they consult with a matchmaker. Madame Wang arrives the next day and, after inspecting Lily's feet, tells Mama that Lily's feet could be perfect if they wait a year. Further, Lily may be able to marry into Tongkou (a richer town) and be eligible for a *laotong* match. Later that night, Mama slaps Lily for the first time, and Lily takes the slap as a sign of love. Aunt begins teaching Lily and Beautiful Moon *nu shu*, which must be kept secret from men.

The next year, Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Third Sister, who's a year younger, begin their foot binding. The pain is excruciating, and Third Sister puts up a violent fight. One day, Elder Sister allows Third Sister to sit down so she can massage her legs, and she realizes that Third Sister's legs are turning red. Mama unwraps her feet to find putrid, rotten flesh. Third Sister dies soon after, as does Grandmother.

Madame Wang visits and tells Mama she's found Lily a *laotong* match with a girl named Snow Flower, who is supposedly of a higher class than Lily's family. She offers Lily a fan and tells Mama to think about the match. Aunt reads the note on the fan to Lily, which is a request to be "old sames." Lily's family agrees to accept the match and Lily decides to send her reply to Snow Flower on the same fan, which goes against tradition. Several weeks later, Madame Wang takes Lily and Snow Flower to the Temple of Gupo Fair to sign their *laotong* contract. Madame Wang returns both girls to Lily's house, where Snow Flower stays for several days. Once Snow Flower returns home, the girls pass notes to each other often through Madame Wang. Snow Flower's messages are all about birds and flying away, which scares Lily.

By age eleven, Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Snow Flower's feet are healed. Lily's are indeed perfect, and Madame Wang arranges marriages for both Lily and Beautiful Moon in Tongkou. Snow Flower will marry out to the town of Jintian, but the girls worry that Snow Flower's husband isn't a good match. The girls learn how to behave as women and perform domestic duties, and

Snow Flower, who knows the families that Lily and Beautiful Moon will marry into, tells them about their future husbands.

Elder Sister is married soon after. The women sing of their sadness as Elder Sister goes, but Lily's county practices the tradition of not moving in with one's in-laws permanently until the woman becomes pregnant. At one point Elder Sister returns from a visit with her in-laws crying, and both Mama and Aunt say it's futile to try to change a woman's miserable life.

When Lily and Snow Flower turn 15, Snow Flower travels to Lily's home for the Catching Cool Breezes festival. All of Lily's other female relatives are visiting family and the weather is oppressively hot. On the third night, Lily and Snow Flower strip their clothes off and write *nu shu* characters on each other's bodies. Beautiful Moon returns home the next day, and Baba (Lily's father) and Uncle set the girls up to work on embroidery outside. A bee stings Beautiful Moon and she dies in minutes. Uncle and Aunt are distraught.

Two years later, Lily's wedding day approaches. During Lily's Sitting and Singing ceremony, Madame Wang tells "The Tale of Wife Wang," a story about a woman who marries a butcher but triumphs in the end. Lily thinks it's a cautionary tale for her. Over the next several days Lily attends several banquets where she cannot eat anything, and her panic about "bed business" (sex) rises. Mama tells Lily, "you have promised to be united for life." Lily is terrified. The next morning Snow Flower gives Lily their fan and a note before Lily's in-laws take her to Tongkou. The note reads that Snow Flower is afraid that once she learns the truth, Lily won't love her anymore, and Lily is perplexed. Later that day, Lily and her husband (Dalang) are officially married. Snow Flower doesn't attend the ceremony three days later, and Lily is very hurt.

The next day, Lily goes to Snow Flower's house for the first time, for Snow Flower's Sitting and Singing. When she arrives she thinks she's in the wrong place, as the house has no furniture and smells horribly. Snow Flower explains that her father smokes opium and has sold all their possessions. She finally admits that she'll be marrying a butcher. No women want to come for Snow Flower's Sitting and Singing, so Lily sends Madame Wang to pay girls to come. When Lily attends Snow Flower's after-wedding ceremony, she finds that Snow Flower's new family is unsavory at best.

Lily, upset at Mama for lying to her about Snow Flower's situation, cuts Mama out of her life emotionally. Lily and Snow Flower then spend the next two years praying for sons before finally becoming pregnant. Snow Flower's son is weak, while Lily's son is strong. Lily's mother-in-law refuses to allow Lily to see Snow Flower and Lily is crushed. However, Lily disobeys and invites Snow Flower to her natal home for the next festival. Snow Flower is already pregnant again, and Lily determines that Snow Flower and her husband haven't followed the "pollution laws" and had sex too soon after birth. Snow Flower's daughter is stillborn. Two years later, Lily has a second son and

Snow Flower has another stillborn daughter.

Lily and Snow Flower then both have daughters, Jade and Spring Moon, and Lily and Snow Flower decide to arrange a *laotong* match for them. Snow Flower begins to talk of Taipings and rebellions. When drought strikes, Lily's husband decides to travel to faraway Guilin to purchase salt to sell. Not long after he leaves, typhoid strikes Tongkou. Lily barricades herself and her three children in her room and only leaves twice per day. After several weeks the banished servants return and the epidemic wanes. Lily's mother-in-law, however, falls ill. Lily cares for her, as is her duty as the eldest daughter-in-law, but she dies anyway. Lily's father-in-law dies soon after. Lily's husband returns with salt, and he and Lily become the new Master and Lady Lu.

That fall, Lily travels to Jintian to visit with Snow Flower. On the second day of her visit they hear sounds of fighting—the Taiping rebellion has arrived. Snow Flower's husband, the butcher, won't allow Lily to wait for her husband to fetch her and they begin to march up the mountain to safety. They march for a full 36 hours in the freezing cold and listen to the screams of people who slip off the narrow mountain path. When they reach a sheltered area, Snow Flower recognizes some of her friends from Jintian and they set up camp with the three families. The butcher becomes a hero, as he's willing to perform hard tasks. Snow Flower gets pregnant again, as the butcher continues to demand “bed business.” Snow Flower's mother-in-law, a nasty woman, tries to starve Snow Flower's first weak son, but Lily makes it clear she won't allow that to happen. One day, Snow Flower's second son dies unexpectedly. The butcher takes his grief out on Snow Flower and beats her until she miscarries. He beats her daily for the next few weeks. Snow Flower walks to the edge of a cliff and Lily follows her. Lily is afraid she'll jump, but Snow Flower only says that she's wanted to die for a while, and tells Lily that Lily never understood Snow Flower's grief at her stillborn daughters. The groups are told to return to their villages the next day. Lily's husband comes for her and when they greet each other, Lily says his name for the first time.

Lily and Snow Flower see each other regularly over the next few months, but Snow Flower never seems to quite recover from the ordeal in the mountains. Lily begins writing Snow Flower suggestions for how to be a better wife or how to conceive a son. In August, Snow Flower is supposed to visit Lily for a festival, but Lotus, a woman from the mountains, arrives instead with the fan. The fan says that Snow Flower has found other women who love her, and Lily won't have to listen to Snow Flower's laments anymore. Lily is hurt beyond belief. When Madame Wang arrives several weeks later to arrange the *laotong* match between Jade and Spring Moon, Lily refuses to accept the match.

Both Lily and Snow Flower attend the Sitting and Singing ceremony for a girl in Tongkou. Snow Flower sings a “Letter of

Vituperation,” trying to explain herself to Lily. Lily retaliates with her own Letter of Vituperation and accuses Snow Flower of violating their *laotong* relationship. She tells the full room everything bad about Snow Flower. Snow Flower leaves crying, and afterward Lily truly becomes Lady Lu, as the other women respect her for exposing Snow Flower's discrepancies. Lily tries to burn every note from Snow Flower, but can't find the fan and several other items.

Eight years later, a beggar girl shows up in Lily's house. Lily recognizes her as Spring Moon, who says that Snow Flower is dying and asking for Lily. When Lily arrives, Snow Flower is surrounded by Lotus, Plum Blossom, and Willow, the women from the mountain. Snow Flower apologizes and Lily sees that Snow Flower has a tumor on her stomach the size of a baby. Lily tries to help Snow Flower with diviners, doctors, and special foods, but Snow Flower only gets worse. She dies two weeks later, asking Lily to be an aunt to her two remaining children. After Snow Flower's burial, Plum Blossom, Lotus, and Willow explain to Lily how badly she'd behaved towards Snow Flower. Lily realizes she treated Snow Flower exceedingly poorly and vows to make it right through Snow Flower's children. Spring Moon commits suicide on her wedding night, but Lily arranges for Snow Flower's granddaughter, Peony, to marry her own firstborn grandson. Lily binds Peony's feet herself and tells her stories about herself and Snow Flower.

Lily realizes now that she treated Snow Flower like a bad husband treats his wife. She asks her, and others who witnessed her life, for forgiveness.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Lily** – The narrator of the novel, daughter of Mama and Baba, wife of Dalang, and *laotong* to Snow Flower. Lily longs for love, even though as a woman, she's considered unworthy of receiving it. As such, Lily conceptualizes love in terms of duty and what she should do to show or earn her love rather than treating it as an emotion. Her **feet** are perfect “golden lilies” after her foot binding, which allows her to advance socially and marry well. However, the process of foot binding reinforces the belief that Lily's worth is dependent on her feet and her ability to bear sons, rather than her ability to experience emotion or care. Lily is quick to obey those who are superior to her, and learns to fall back on these conventions and traditions rather than express true feelings or sympathy. When Lily feels that someone has wronged her, she develops a habit of lashing out at them and then cutting them out of her life while she hangs onto her grievances for years. It is this habit that ends Lily's relationship with Snow Flower and also brings about Lily's final coming of age as Lady Lu. Lily does, however, learn the true meaning of “deep-heart” love after Snow Flower's death. While

she continues to hold tightly to convention in her old age, she uses her power as Lady Lu to encourage other women to value their lives in a way that she never valued her own life or Snow Flower's.

**Snow Flower** – Daughter of Snow Flower's Mother and Snow Flower's Father, wife of the butcher, and *laotong* to Lily. Snow Flower is very sophisticated as a child and is obsessed with **birds**, flying away, and breaking rules, in part because she was born in the year of the horse and has a free spirit. Throughout her *laotong* match with Lily, she encourages Lily to push boundaries and defy conventions. However, she keeps many secrets that anger Lily, although she keeps them because she fears losing Lily's affection. When Snow Flower marries out to a family that abuses her in a variety of ways, her spirit begins to break. She grieves the loss of stillborn daughters and one son who dies at age five, becomes nearly suicidal at points, and suffers domestic violence at the hand of her husband. Her only joys in life are her friendship with Lily and "bed business" with her husband, although when Lily proves herself unable to show empathy, Snow Flower turns to a group of sworn sisters (Plum Blossom, Willow, and Lotus) for comfort and support. Later in life she contracts uterine cancer that eventually kills her. She loves Lily unconditionally through their entire relationship.

**Mama** – Lily's mother, and the wife of Baba. Mama was born in the year of the monkey, so she's seen as being calculating and always looking out for herself. She regards Lily as little more than a burden until her **feet** are deemed to be full of potential, and then begins to show her "mother love" in the form of physical violence towards Lily. Mama's own feet were poorly bound, so she walks with a cane or flaps around like a **bird** if her cane isn't close at hand. She keeps it a secret from Lily that Snow Flower's father is addicted to opium and that her family as a whole is not the wealthy, high-class family that Snow Flower leads Lily to believe they are. When Lily realizes the truth, she closes off her emotions towards Mama and their relationship remains stony until Mama's death.

**Aunt** – Lily's aunt, Beautiful Moon's mother, wife to Uncle, and sister-in-law to Mama. Aunt isn't beautiful but is very kind and logical in her thinking and arguing. She comes from a learned family and teaches Lily and Beautiful Moon *nu shu*. She and Uncle have a good marriage, but have led generally miserable lives. Aunt has suffered a number of miscarriages and stillbirths.

**Madame Wang** – The matchmaker who binds Lily and Snow Flower as *laotong* and later arranges their marriages, as well as that of Beautiful Moon. Lily never likes Madame Wang and sees her as gaudy and hawkish. Upon Snow Flower's marriage, Lily learns that Madame Wang is actually Snow Flower's aunt. Madame Wang's love for Snow Flower means that she negotiated the best marriage she could for her, and was further willing to follow Lily's instructions to pay village girls to attend Snow Flower's wedding ceremonies. Late in life, Lily sees

Madame Wang as a woman who made the best of her life, was a shrewd businesswoman, and did very well for herself.

**The Butcher / Snow Flower's Husband** – Snow Flower's husband. Being a butcher is considered to be one of the worst professions, but he doesn't seem to dislike it. He is physically abusive to Snow Flower, especially in the aftermath of each stillbirth or miscarriage she experiences, and even induces miscarriages through beatings. However, despite his negative qualities, Lily comes to see him as very competent, filial, and both willing and able to care for Snow Flower in regards to food, shelter, and sexual intimacy.

**Elder Sister** – Daughter of Mama and Baba, and Lily's older sister. She is quiet and compassionate, which leads her to discover Third Sister's septic shock after allowing her to lie down and rest during **foot** binding. She marries into a family where she's not treated well, but not so badly that it's not considered normal or to be expected.

**Third Sister** – Daughter of Mama and Baba, and Lily's younger sister by one year. Lily describes her as acting as though she's spoiled and feels entitled to love, when in truth she is neither. She makes a great show of resisting **foot** binding and dies of septic shock after only a few weeks of having her feet bound.

**Snow Flower's Mother** – Snow Flower's mother, wife to Snow Flower's Father, and sister to Madame Wang. Lily notes that Snow Flower's mother never seemed able to accept that her family had fallen from prosperity, and she always acts like a great and sophisticated lady despite her family's poverty. She later becomes a beggar with her husband.

**Snow Flower's Father** – Snow Flower's father and husband to Snow Flower's Mother. A nasty and temperamental man addicted to opium, he sold his family's possessions to pay for opium and nearly sold Snow Flower as a little-daughter-in-law (a concubine with unbound feet). He and his wife disappear as beggars not long after Snow Flower marries out.

**Yonggang** – Lily's personal servant girl with unbound feet at the Lu house. Yonggang takes her duties to Lily very seriously and carries correspondence between Lily and Snow Flower. She later looks out for Lily's children during the typhoid outbreak. When Lily begins destroying mementos of her relationship with Snow Flower, Yonggang hides the **fan** and other items.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Beautiful Moon** – Lily's cousin, Aunt and Uncle's daughter. The same age as Lily, Beautiful Moon's **feet** are bound at the same time as Lily and Third Sister's. Beautiful Moon is described as stoic and beautiful. She dies after being stung by a bee not long before her wedding.

**Madame Gao** – The matchmaker who services Lily's natal village. Upset at having clients (Lily, Beautiful Moon) taken from

her by Madame Wang, Madame Gao speaks openly of Snow Flower's family's misfortune in Lily's natal home.

**Baba** – Lily's father and Mama's husband. He's a farmer who is very poor, but becomes one of the richest men in the village after receiving bride gifts from Lily's in-laws. He is very kind to Lily and the two are reasonably close before Lily's **feet** are bound.

**Uncle** – Lily's uncle and Beautiful Moon's father; Aunt's husband and Baba's younger brother. He and Aunt have a happy marriage, but both have led miserable lives overall.

**Elder Brother** – Lily's oldest brother, son of Mama and Baba. He's kind, hardworking, and idolized by his younger siblings and cousin.

**Second Brother** – Lily's second brother, son of Mama and Baba.

**Grandmother** – Lily's grandmother; Baba's mother, and Mama's mother-in-law. She is very old and supervises the binding of Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Third Sister's **feet**. She dies at the same time as Third Sister of an unknown illness.

**Diviner Hu** – The diviner who deems six-year-old Lily special and first brings her **feet** to her parents' attention.

**Uncle Lu** – Dalang's grandfather, a very learned man who conducts Lily's first son's education.

**Master Lu / Lily's Father-in-Law** – Lady Lu's husband, Dalang's father, and Lily's father-in-law. He's a wealthy man who collects taxes.

**Lady Lu / Lily's Mother-in-Law** – Lily's mother-in-law and Dalang's mother. Lady Lu is very powerful in her position, but she treats Lily relatively fairly, save for attempting to forbid Lily from seeing Snow Flower. She dies during the typhoid outbreak.

**Jade** – Lily's daughter. She's intended to be *laotang* with Spring Moon, but Lily forbids the arrangement.

**Spring Moon** – Snow Flower and the butcher's daughter, a very beautiful girl who looks exactly like Snow Flower. She's named in honor of Beautiful Moon and is meant to be *laotong* with Jade, but Lily calls off the arrangement. Spring Moon commits suicide on her wedding night.

**Lily's Husband / Dalang** – Lily's husband, son of Master and Lady Lu. He's a kind and fair husband and he and Lily come to feel great affection for each other.

**First Son** – Lily and Dalang's first son. He thrives as a child and is very intelligent. He studies briefly with a tutor and then with Uncle Lu.

**Second Son** – Lily and Dalang's second son.

**Second Sister-in-Law** – Lily's second sister-in-law.

**Third Sister-in-Law** – Lily's third sister-in-law.

**Fourth Sister-in-Law** – Lily's fourth sister-in-law.

**Third Son** – Lily and Dalang's third son.

**Snow Flower's (Eldest) Son** – Son of Snow Flower and the butcher, father of Peony. He's born weak and nobody believes he'll live, so he's ignored. He begins to blossom when Snow Flower and Lily teach him women's chants in the mountains.

**Snow Flower's Second Son** – Son of Snow Flower and the butcher, a strong and seemingly perfect child. He dies unexpectedly in the mountains at age five.

**Snow Flower's Mother-in-Law** – The butcher's mother. She was born in the year of the rat and as such, is greedy, rude, and conniving. She is never kind to Snow Flower. She can't read *nu shu* and doesn't care for verbal recitations either, alienating her from Snow Flower and Lily.

**Lotus** – A member of the sworn sisterhood with Plum Blossom and Willow; Snow Flower's friend.

**Plum Blossom** – A sworn sister with Lotus and Willow and Snow Flower's friend.

**Willow** – One of the sworn sisterhood with Plum Blossom and Lotus; Snow Flower's friend.

**Peony / Snow Flower's Granddaughter** – The daughter of Snow Flower's eldest son, wife of Lily's oldest grandson. She has five children and has promised Lily to burn the text of the novel when Lily dies.

**Old Man Zou** – A man who runs a stall at the Temple of Gupo fair. He serves Lily and Snow Flower taro every year when they visit the temple.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### WOMEN AND GENDER

Lily, Snow Flower, and the other female characters live very different lives from the men around them.

In the culture and time of the novel, a woman's purpose is primarily to bring honor to her natal (birth) family and her family by marriage, and to do so primarily by bearing sons. While a woman's role in society is undeniably a product of the cultural traditions of the time, the specific beliefs and expectations guiding the women in the novel deserve special consideration.

The novel sets out very specific and delineated male and female spheres and ways of being. Men work outside the home, while women spend their entire lives in the upstairs and entirely female chamber of their homes, descending only to cook, clean,

and attend to "bed business" with their husbands. They leave their homes only to visit with their friends, attend ceremonies, and to visit their natal homes during certain festivals. While Lily freely admits that she knows little of the world of men, what she does mention of their world is intensely focused on physical movement and travel. In contrast, women are unable to move far or fast once their **feet** are bound, indicating that a primary difference between men and women is linked to movement. The idea of movement as gendered carries over into the idea that even thoughts can be gendered in nature, and moving outside the appropriate thoughts for one's own gender can cause trouble. Lily sees this play out most prominently through her mother. When Third Sister and Grandmother fall sick and die (from foot binding complications and old age respectively), Lily blames Mama's "man-hope" in Lily's bright future for distracting her mother from caring for Grandmother, which should have been her top priority as the first daughter-in-law. In this way, the novel indicates that not conforming completely, in both thought and action, to the standards of one's gender has disastrous real-world consequences.

Alongside a woman's thoughts, a woman's body is one of her most important assets. A woman's "lily" feet can guarantee a good marriage, which can bring prosperity to her natal family through bride gifts from their future in-laws, and her ability to reproduce and bear sons secures her place in her husband's home. This introduces the idea of the female body as currency. Lily rises in status not just because she has perfect feet, but because she has several sons, all of whom survive. Snow Flower, on the other hand, has a son who is sickly, a son who dies very young, and daughters, all but one of which are stillborn. Further, Snow Flower's husband takes his anger at her "failure" out on her by beating her and even inducing several miscarriages due to the severity of his violence.

While Lily's reproductive body allows her to rise, Snow Flower's revolts in every way imaginable. When Snow Flower dies of what is likely uterine cancer, it's essentially her very womanhood that kills her. However, in the case of Snow Flower, the novel presents a paradox. While Snow Flower's physical womanhood kills her, her thoughts and fixation on **birds** and freedom, though very "masculine" and therefore uncouth for a woman, keep her from sinking too deeply into a deadly state of emotional despair, and arguably give her a richer inner life than that which the overly traditional and submissive Lily enjoys.



## LOVE AND FAMILY

In the first few pages of the novel, Lily, at eighty years old, explains to the reader that the story to follow is a story about love and the different forms that love can take. She explains that she has spent her entire life craving love that, as a woman, she's undeserving of receiving. This sets love up as a major motivator throughout the novel, as well as creates a dichotomy between love as a natural emotion

and something contracted or earned.

Lily's desire for love stems from the fact that as a woman, her society deems her unworthy and undeserving of love. However, this idea is complicated by *nu shu* (women's secret writing) phrases that indicate that fathers do feel love for their daughters, Lily's interpretation of what she deems "mother love," and the existence of contracted friendships between women in the form of sworn sisterhoods and *laotong* relationships. The existence of the contracted friendships in particular offers the possibility that women are worthy of receiving love from someone, but that someone must be from outside her natal or married family.

The idea that women shouldn't expect love or respect from their married families in particular is reinforced time and again. Lily's mother-in-law goes so far as to attempt to forbid Lily from communicating with Snow Flower, while Snow Flower experiences regular violence and abuse from her husband both and her mother-in-law. However, despite the abuses women experience in their married homes, they're still expected to love their new families and care for their mothers-in-law above all else. This introduces the idea that even if the word "love" is used to describe it, an in-law relationship is truly a relationship of obligation and expectation rather than emotional investment. This idea of obligated love then extends to the emotions a woman is supposed to feel towards her own children. While they are the key to a woman's worth, even the sought-after sons are raised to inhabit a different world than their mothers. This makes a close relationship with a son impossible, while daughters are raised specifically to expect the same sort of distant or cruel relationships in her own future husband's family.

Amidst the emotionally absent relationships that fill the novel, Lily and Snow Flower's *laotong* relationship stands as an example of what was supposed to be true love and care between the two. However, Lily is unable to escape what she's internalized about relationships being transactional and in turn, destroys her relationship with Snow Flower. Throughout their relationship, Lily views Snow Flower's love as something to be earned through good deeds and kindness, rather than as something that should be given freely. Similarly, rather than give her own love to Snow Flower freely when Snow Flower needs it most, Lily angrily holds onto the thoughts that Snow Flower is undeserving of her love. Thus, despite the fact that a *laotong* relationship is supposed to provide friendship and companionship for life, Lily isn't able to break her habit of viewing love as earned and as a transaction until it's too late. In this way, the novel champions the idea that while true love can indeed begin to make up for previous grievances (Lily uses her power later to help Snow Flower's children and grandchildren in an attempt to atone for neglecting Snow Flower in life), true caring and friendship must be given without question or justification. While Lily likely didn't have the power to save

Snow Flower from cancer, she certainly had the power to make Snow Flower's last several years happier and more comfortable.



## LANGUAGE, STORYTELLING, AND COMMUNICATION

As women, Lily and Snow Flower are forbidden from learning "men's writing" and instead learn *nu shu*, a form of writing created by and for women to communicate secretly with each other. *Nu shu*, however, isn't just writing in the conventional sense; it encompasses an entire cultural system that is specifically female, comprised of songs and stories meant to be performed for other women, embroidery and other textile work, and more conventional correspondence, like written prayers, stories, and autobiographies. While men's writing is logographic (each character represents a whole or part of a word), *nu shu* is a phonetic script, making the understanding of its written form dependent entirely on context. This idea that language can be slippery and confusing drives many of the conflicts of the novel, but the fact that language, and women's language in particular, is powerful also offers a sense of purpose to women who otherwise are considered useless.

Lily as the narrator peppers her story with asides that explain some of the intricacies of how her region's dialect informs certain cultural ideals, such as the words for "shoe" and "child" being the same, and the word for "wife" being the same as the word for "guest." Through these asides, the reader is reminded that language doesn't just describe something; through its very structure it can actually create and reinforce meaning. Lily states that as the language implies, a wife is merely a guest in her husband's home, and a guest in terms of an alien foreigner rather than someone to be respected. This builds on the idea that language is powerful and can be used to exert control, as so many of the women in the novel are treated as aliens in their husbands' homes.

In an opposite way, this concept extends to the practice of *nu shu*, as the language is constructed and described as one of the only ways women are able to express themselves and obtain some degree of control and power over their own lives. It allows women to communicate secretly with each other and express thoughts and desires not considered appropriate to express in any other format. Most importantly, Lily comes to realize that while *nu shu* is supposed to be secret from men, men certainly know of its existence and can likely read it. She realizes then that the power of *nu shu* comes from the fact that the female lives and struggles the script is intended to express are deemed worthless, and therefore not worth a man's time to censor.

While language at times works to control and assert power, the novel also places a great deal of emphasis on instances where

language is ambiguous or misunderstood. While language is used by Lily and Snow Flower to build their relationship, it also works to tear it apart when Lily misunderstands, for example, Madame Gao's use of the word "pipe" (mistakenly understanding that Snow Flower's father uses the pipe for tobacco, rather than opium) or misreads *nu shu* and believes that Snow Flower has violated their *laotong* relationship. At Snow Flower's death, then, Lily must come to terms with the fact that she spent much of her life misunderstanding the language that was supposed to provide her with both power and emotional intimacy. This recalls the idea that language contains multiple levels of meaning and requires a great deal of nuance to understand. As Lily accepts her lack of knowledge in that realm, she learns too late that the nuance required to understand *nu shu* is something she should have applied to all aspects of her life.

Lily ends her life as a powerful woman, and spends her final years transcribing the stories of women who cannot read or write *nu shu*. During these last years especially, her lifelong education in language is completed, as she finally has the freedom and power to turn her own life into *nu shu* songs and stories to teach Snow Flower's granddaughter, thereby giving value to her own life and experiences through language.



## PAIN, SUFFERING, AND COMING OF AGE

Experiencing pain and suffering is linked early on to the simple fact of being female. A girl is expected to undergo the painful process of foot binding starting around age six. While tiny bound **feet** are considered attractive, the pain a girl experiences during the binding process is also supposed to prepare her to endure the emotionally wrought experience of "marrying out" and leaving one's natal home, and then the physical pain of childbirth. Further, a girl is told from birth that she's worthless unless she can eventually bear sons, adding another layer of psychological trauma. The persistence and acceptance of this suffering carries Lily and Snow Flower through their lives, creating a cycle of violence from which the characters never truly escape, even as adults.

The novel describes the process of foot binding in excruciating and horrifying detail, the physical aspects of which are only made worse by the fact that the process of binding is commonly performed by a girl's own mother as an act of love. Further, despite regular mention of the pain of childbirth, the pain from bound feet is the only pain ever described in such detail. This indicates that while a woman's life is guaranteed to be full of pain, it is this first experience of pain that is truly transformative and allows a girl to become a woman. Notably, this process isn't just a normal part of life for girls; it's something that's deeply desired. Even though the process is extremely painful and very dangerous, Lily *wants* to have golden lily feet, and even as a small child she understands that this process is the key to her future. Further, as Mama and Aunt's

decision to continue the process when Third Sister's bound feet become septic indicates, it's considered better to die from foot binding than live as a crippled, "big-footed" girl. Because of this, the cycle continues for two more generations over the course of the novel. Lily binds not just her own daughter's feet but also the feet of Snow Flower's granddaughter, heralding both of them into adulthood.

The sad fate of being a woman is addressed again as a young woman undergoes the rituals of marriage. A bride isn't allowed to eat for the ten days of marriage ceremonies, and much of the singing and chanting during the ceremonies speaks of sadness at leaving one's natal home. While Lily suffers all the normal emotions about getting married, the extent of her suffering pales in comparison to what Snow Flower must undergo because of her family situation and Snow Flower's husband's lowly profession as a butcher. While both girls experience similar trauma at the process of becoming married women, the rest of Snow Flower's married life is even more traumatic as she faces stillbirths, miscarriages, domestic violence, and finally cancer. Further, the way in which Lily makes sense of and engages with Snow Flower's miserable lot in life indicates that while it's certainly sad, Lily doesn't find it exceptional or worthy of special consideration. Essentially, Lily accepts Snow Flower's fate as something normal and expected of womanhood, thereby refusing to accept the intensity of Snow Flower's grief and sadness and denying Snow Flower the comfort and sympathy she desperately craved.

Lily's coming of age is tied directly to her process of becoming Lady Lu, the most powerful woman in her county. This process of becoming follows neatly the process of deterioration that her *laotong* relationship with Snow Flower experiences. Lily's final step towards becoming Lady Lu comes when she experiences the pain of ending her friendship with Snow Flower. By humiliating Snow Flower publicly, Lily is then admired by other women for exposing Snow Flower's uncouth actions, raising her status as the whistleblower. Through the same action, however, Lily violates the *laotong* contract, which effectively denies her Snow Flower's love. In this way, Lily's coming of age comes about because of her rejection of love.

The pain described in the novel creates an intense and almost grotesque reading experience, presenting the idea that physical and emotional pain are necessary parts of growing up, becoming an adult, and especially for Snow Flower, being female.



### CHINESE CULTURE AND TRADITION

As a work of historical fiction, the culture, traditions, and actual historical events of the time (1823-1903) permeate every aspect of the novel, simply by virtue of the genre. However, Lily's engagement with culture and tradition doesn't just dictate how her life should be lived; rather, the way in which she internalizes and uses her

culture and beliefs blinds her to a more holistic understanding of the individuals and events in her life.

One of the major ways this plays out is through Lily's interpretation of individuals' zodiac signs. Both she and Snow Flower were born in the year of the horse, meaning that their personalities are supposed to be free-spirited and independent, but also hardworking. As children, Lily is both enthralled and intimidated by Snow Flower's desire for independence. As they grow older, Lily attempts to use Snow Flower's horse nature to encourage Snow Flower to rise above the abuse from her husband and conform tightly to tradition. Lily's attempts to "help" Snow Flower in this way backfire, however, as Lily's insistence on viewing Snow Flower through the lens of her horse personality limits her ability and willingness to understand the trauma Snow Flower experiences. Along the same lines, when Lily discovers the truth of Snow Flower's childhood and family, Lily blames Mama's monkey nature for keeping the truth a secret. Later on, Lily despises Snow Flower's mother-in-law for actions she attributes to being born under the sign of the rat. In all these instances, Lily uses the personality traits set out by one's zodiac sign to justify and understand individuals' thoughts and actions. Simply put, Lily consistently flattens people into one-dimensional caricatures and uses these caricatures to attempt to control them, explain their behavior, and justify the righteousness of her own beliefs and actions.

Lily's ability to receive and understand love is often hindered by her habit of leaning heavily on tradition and what should or shouldn't be done in a given situation. This happens especially as she attempts to comfort Snow Flower after a number of stillborn daughters and miscarriages. Rather than empathize with Snow Flower about the loss of children, Lily consistently encourages Snow Flower both to try again for a boy, and to be happy that only one of her "useless" daughters survived. By meeting her friend's grief with broad conventional platitudes, Lily indicates a belief that it's possible to use the upholding of traditional values as a surrogate for personal emotional comfort, as in her mind, there's little reason to grieve the loss of a female child. As a result, Snow Flower, in her attempt to follow Lily's advice to try again to conceive sons, actually breaks tradition by having sex with her husband before the mandated 100 days after birth have passed. While Snow Flower saw this as a way to improve her situation by becoming pregnant again sooner, Lily uses it to justify Snow Flower's continued misfortune as something deserved for flouting tradition. Interestingly, Lily is aware of her habit of substituting tradition for empathy and at points recognizes that it's not particularly helpful, but she finds she simply doesn't have the skills to truly empathize with Snow Flower.

Further, Lily's very traditional and prescribed actions later in life stand in stark contrast to how she behaves in her childhood, particularly during the early days of her relationship with Snow

Flower. Their match was unconventional to begin with, and Lily put a great deal of thought into the unconventional decision to return Snow Flower's first message on the same **fan** rather than a different one, as is customary. However, while Lily sees this as a way to build the loving *laotong* that she dreams of, and Madame Wang deems Lily's choice evidence of a good match with Snow Flower, Lily is unable to truly internalize these early lessons that breaking tradition can bring great joy and love to her life. Thus, by considering Lily's whole life in terms of how and where she upholds or dismisses tradition and cultural conventions, particularly where she does so as a substitute for emotion, the novel begins to paint a picture of the dangers of viewing tradition as static and unyielding. Rather, the reader is asked to consider the possibility that tradition can be fluid and molded, and is capable of both providing comfort and inflicting great pain.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### BIRDS AND FLYING

While phrases about birds (such as the consistent refrain about a mated pair of Mandarin ducks) are very common to the language of *nu shu*, the manner in which Snow Flower uses the language of birds is decidedly less conventional. For her, both writing about birds and other flying creatures and embroidering them is a way to express her desire for freedom in an acceptable fashion, as her actual freedom is slowly taken from her. Snow Flower is essentially able to use birds as a sort of alter ego for herself, where as a bird she's free and able to soar above the earthly things that keep her subjugated and at the mercy of others. While Snow Flower's fixation on birds and freedom scares Lily as a child, as a young woman Lily repeats these phrases and motifs back to Snow Flower to remind her of her free spirit.



### LILY AND SNOW FLOWER'S FAN

Over the years of Lily and Snow Flower's *laotong* relationship, the two pass notes back and forth to each other and record major life events in ink drawings and *nu shu* on a single silk fan. This fan, then, becomes a physical representation of their relationship, as well as an example of the nuance required to understand *nu shu*. The fan most importantly records the note that makes Lily believe that Snow Flower has joined a group of sworn sisters. Upon Snow Flower's death, the fan becomes incriminating evidence and a vehicle for Plum Blossom, Willow, and Lotus to impress upon Lily the damage she did to her relationship with Snow Flower

and the importance of close reading. Finally, the fan stands as a condensed version of the novel itself, and through Lily's interpretation as an old woman, asserts again the importance of careful reading and deciphering language.



### FEET

In the time and place of the novel, unless a girl was very poor and destined to be a servant (like Yonggang), she would have her feet bound starting at six years old. The goal was for a woman's feet to be between 2.5 and 5 inches long when fully grown—the smaller the feet, the more beautiful the woman was considered to be. The painful process of foot binding also prepared a girl to weather the pain of the rest of her life, which would include the emotional pain of a mother-in-law who would never truly accept her and hopefully, the pain of childbirth. A woman's feet, then, become a symbol of the pain she's endured, and a reminder of the pain she must endure throughout her life once her foot binding process is over, simply by virtue of being female. While Lily conceptualizes her first few years of life with unbound feet as the only freedom she ever experiences, she also looks down on women with unbound feet and sees their lives as sad and limited. Because those women don't carry the evidence of their pain in the form of bound feet, they're denied other rites of passage (like marriage) and the ability to move up in society.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* published in 2006.

### Sitting Quietly Quotes

☝☝ For my entire life I longed for love. I knew it was not right for me—as a girl and later as a woman—to want or expect it, but I did, and this unjustified desire has been at the root of every problem I have experienced in my life.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 3

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily is explaining to the reader why she's telling the story that follows. This statement sets up Lily's primary conflict throughout the novel as being rooted in her desire for a love that she believed she was undeserving of receiving. This speaks to both the type of person Lily is and to the cultural

ideas of the time. Lily states again and again that women are considered worthless unless they can bear sons for their husbands, and are therefore undeserving of love from anyone. Because of what is expected of a woman, Lily comes to equate love more with duty and what must be done to earn value, rather than conceptualizing it as an emotion or real human connection. Because of this, she spends the entirety of her life cultivating love like one would crops and working to earn the love of others rather than truly experiencing it. This is the primary reason why the problems she mentions come about in the first place, as she simply doesn't possess the emotional skills to experience a truly loving relationship.

## Daughter Days: Footbinding Quotes

☝ For us, the pain didn't lessen. How could it? But we learned the most important lesson for all women: that we must obey for our own good.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Beautiful Moon, Third Sister

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily explains the process of foot binding and the excruciating pain that she, Third Sister, and Beautiful Moon experience. This lesson becomes especially telling once Third Sister dies from foot binding complications. Third Sister tried very hard not to obey; she resisted having her feet bound as hard as a six-year-old can. Because of this, her death is attributed to her lack of obedience—somehow it's seen as her own fault. Lily then takes this lesson to heart and tries her best throughout her life to be as obedient as possible. She wraps herself in obedience, convention, and tradition, and by doing so she tries to protect herself from experiencing horrors like those faced by Third Sister, and later Snow Flower, both of whom flout tradition and what's expected of them.

☝ "A true lady lets no ugliness into her life," she repeated again and again, drilling the words into me. "Only through pain will you have beauty. Only through suffering will you find peace. I wrap, I bind, but you will have the reward."

**Related Characters:** Mama (speaker), Lily

**Related Themes:**     

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis

Mama justifies foot binding to Lily with this phrase, although it is also repeated throughout the novel and works in a more overarching way to justify the pain and suffering that women must endure to achieve any degree of success in this society. Essentially, Mama's advice normalizes the violence that Lily is currently experiencing as her feet break, but Lily internalizes the message and takes Mama's words several steps further. Lily later uses the same underlying normalization of suffering and violence to justify her refusal to accept Snow Flower's misfortunes as something out of the ordinary. Because Lily is told from such a young age that it's simply a woman's fate to suffer, she closes herself off from experiencing true emotions such as love or empathy in the face of pain and misfortune.

☝ "I would rather keep her on this earth unmarried than lose her forever."

"Then she would have no purpose and no value," Aunt reasoned. "Your mother love tells you this is no future."

**Related Characters:** Mama, Aunt (speaker), Third Sister

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 32

### Explanation and Analysis

Third Sister contracts an infection from foot binding, and Mama and Aunt argue about what should be done. Lily spends much of the novel hating her mother for not truly loving her, but in this situation it becomes obvious that Mama does care for her daughters beyond what Lily deems her required motherly duty. She values her daughters' lives not simply based on their worth, despite many of her other words to the contrary.

Aunt, on the other hand, introduces the idea that for a woman, it's better to be dead than to have big feet and be unmarriageable. This serves the purpose of illustrating just how important a woman's body, and her bound feet

specifically, are to her future. Lily internalizes this idea and returns to it again and again over the course of the novel. This also dovetails with her insistence on upholding tradition—if someone is dead they can be properly honored, while a life that doesn't conform to cultural standards is, to her, not a life worth living.

## Daughter Days: Snow Flower Quotes

☞ "My mother bound my feet—and me to the chair—even tighter the next time."  
"You can't fight your fate," I said. "It is predestined."

**Related Characters:** Lily , Snow Flower (speaker), Snow Flower's Mother

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 56

### Explanation and Analysis

Snow Flower is telling Lily about how she resisted foot binding. Here, we begin to get a sense of Snow Flower's spirit and personality. Unlike Lily, she's intensely independent and spent her foot binding trying to escape, even though that would've meant a life as a spinster in her parents' home or a servant elsewhere. We also start to see how Lily responds to sentiments like these from Snow Flower. Rather than commiserate (remember that Lily initially tried to pull her bindings off too), Lily simply clings to the fact that as women, it's just what's expected of them. This begins a trend of Lily responding with sentiments of convention and tradition to Snow Flower's attempts to escape what's expected of her.

## Daughter Days: Learning Quotes

☞ "Each word must be placed in context," she reminded us each day at the end of our lesson. "Much tragedy could result from a wrong reading."

**Related Characters:** Aunt (speaker), Snow Flower, Lily

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

Aunt is giving Lily and Snow Flower lessons in *nu shu*. She reminds them consistently that because *nu shu* is phonetic, the reader must take great care to properly interpret a message. These early reminders to Lily and Snow Flower about the intricacies and nuance required to understand *nu shu* begin to build a sense of reverence for the language. Aunt instills in the girls a great degree of respect for *nu shu*, as she implies that it has the power to communicate the girls' sorrow and worry in ways otherwise forbidden to them, but it also has the power to bring about tragedy if read incorrectly.

This grave reminder also creates an early counterpoint for the later events of the novel. The falling out between Lily and Snow Flower happens because Lily does exactly what Aunt warns them about and misinterprets a *nu shu* message from Snow Flower. Because of her misinterpretation, Lily suffers the consequences for half of her life.

☞ "You married out," Mama said, in a way that seemed oddly detached. "You go to another village. Your mother-in-law is cruel. Your husband doesn't care for you. We wish you would never leave, but every daughter marries away. Everyone agrees. Everyone goes along with it. You can cry and beg to come home, we can grieve that you have gone, but you—and we—have no choice. The old saying makes this very clear: 'if a daughter doesn't marry out, she's not valuable; if fire doesn't raze the mountain, the land will not be fertile.'"

**Related Characters:** Mama (speaker), Aunt, Lily , Elder Sister

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 79

### Explanation and Analysis

Elder Sister has recently married out but is not yet permanently living with her in-laws, and her husband and mother-in-law are cruel to her. She cries to Mama, but Mama and Aunt can offer little sympathy for her plight. Mama makes it very clear here that in this situation, tradition is unchangeable and cannot be molded to help Elder Sister feel better. Mama and Aunt paint women as victims of a social system that deems what Elder Sister is experiencing as perfectly normal, and the woman further are helpless to stop the cycle. At the same time, Mama's

“detached” tone and her actual words suggest great suffering of her own, and a desire to help her daughter that is stifled by cultural rules and traditions. Tragically, this scene with Aunt and Mama is one of the only times the women of Lily’s family are at all open with each other, and let themselves commiserate about their miserable fate and the harshness of tradition.

Lily then internalizes these early reminders that tradition is unchangeable and that women are helpless to reshape tradition to better fit their needs, and returns to them in adulthood. Mama’s belief that experiencing cruelty from one’s mother-in-law or husband is normal also makes Lily’s later marriage seem unexpectedly lucky. While Lily’s in-laws and husband are demanding, they’re also fair and often kind to her. This teaches Lily to view herself as an outlier, and then allows her to see the cruelty Snow Flower experiences as normal and expected.

### Hair-Pinning Days: Beautiful Moon Quotes

☝☝ Anyone who tells you that the Yao people never care for their daughters is lying. We may be worthless. We may be raised for another family. But often we are loved and cherished, despite our natal families’ best efforts not to have feelings for us. Why else in our secret writing do you see phrases like “I was a pearl in my father’s palm” so frequently? Maybe as parents we try not to care. I tried not to care about my daughter, but what could I do? She nursed at my breast like my sons had, she cried her tears in my lap, and she honored me by becoming a good and talented woman fluent in nu shu. Uncle’s pearl was gone from him forever.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Jade, Beautiful Moon, Uncle

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 96

#### Explanation and Analysis

Beautiful Moon has just died unexpectedly after a bee stings her, and Uncle, her father, is wracked with grief. Lily, as an old woman, considers the relationship between being female and receiving familial love. She indicates that she’s aware that daughters are loved, despite society deeming them worthless, as even she felt love for her own daughter. This begins to hint at the fact that despite Lily’s belief that love is primarily related to duty and tradition, it is possible for love to transcend and surpass duty. This is one of the few indications that Lily does indeed engage with love as an emotion, and not simply as the appropriate word to

describe her duty to others or a contracted relationship to someone else.

### Hair-Pinning Days: The Flower-Sitting Chair Quotes

☝☝ And in our local dialect, the word for wife is the same as the word for guest. For the rest of my life I would be merely a guest in my husband’s home—not the kind you treat with special meals, gifts of affection, or soft beds, but the kind who is forever viewed as a foreigner, alien and suspect.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Lily’s Husband / Dalang, Lady Lu / Lily’s Mother-in-Law

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 112

#### Explanation and Analysis

Lily cries in her palanquin as she heads for her husband’s home to be married, and here she’s explaining to the reader why she’s crying, when she’ll return home three days later.

While girls are traditionally considered worthless and burdens by their own natal family, Lily begins to indicate that that kind of treatment is preferable to being treated as a foreigner. The idea of a wife as a foreign “guest” complicates the idea of marriage and creates a clear power imbalance in a married relationship. Lily states at several points that a girl is expected to love her husband from the moment they’re contracted to marry, yet the language used to speak about being a wife indicates that a husband isn’t required to perform or feel the same kind of love towards his wife. This, once again, reinforces that women aren’t valued for their emotions, but for their bodies and what their bodies can do and provide for others.

### Hair-Pinning Days: Truth Quotes

☝☝ All of it was women’s work—the very work that men think is merely decorative—and it was being used to change the lives of the women themselves.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower’s Mother, Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 127

### Explanation and Analysis

Snow Flower is showing Lily her dowry, which uses fabrics that originally came from Snow Flower's mother's dowry and have already been repurposed once to make clothes for Snow Flower. Lily is shocked by the realization that "women's work" can be powerful, especially in this particular way. While this kind of textile work (making shoes, clothing, and wedding quilts) is a required skill for women, and the items are certainly necessary in order to stay warm and clothed, they are usually described as though they do little more than announce a girl's skills to her new family. Here, however, Snow Flower and her mother show that these skills don't just clothe a family; they can truly provide agency for women who for the most part are powerless to create change in their lives. This realization begins Lily's process of learning that women's work, lives, and customs are indeed powerful and worthy of praise and consideration, even if women's skills aren't necessarily valued by the men around them.

☞ As I came to the end, I added a few new sentiments. "Don't express misery where others can see you. Don't let sobbing build. Don't give ill-mannered people a reason to make fun of you or your family. Follow the rules. Smooth your anxious brow. We will be old sames forever."

**Related Characters:** The Butcher / Snow Flower's Husband, Snow Flower's Mother-in-Law, Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 134

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily is at Snow Flower's third-day wedding ceremony, reading her third-day wedding book to the women of Snow Flower's new family. Through Lily's words here, the reader gets a glimpse of the kind of friend and person Lily is. Firstly, she mostly speaks in platitudes—always adhering to tradition and rarely making her words personal or especially heartfelt. Through these platitudes, then, Lily implores Snow Flower to hide her sorrow and not worry about her fate, even though they both know that marrying a butcher is considered a horrible thing. Further, Lily begins to imply that adhering to tradition and performing one's role correctly can save someone from abuse. She indicates naively that "ill-mannered people" won't behave cruelly to Snow Flower if Snow Flower behaves perfectly, which is later shown to be an entirely misguided belief. Essentially,

while Lily admirably believes in the goodness of people, she fails to understand that cruel people will be cruel without rhyme or reason. Her inability to understand this later keeps her from empathizing with Snow Flower when she finds out that Snow Flower, despite good behavior, is routinely beaten and mistreated in her married home.

### Rice-and-Salt Days: Sons Quotes

☞ We could not write anything too negative about our circumstances. This was tricky, since the very form of a married woman's letter needed to include the usual complaints—that we were pathetic, powerless, worked to the bone, homesick, and sad. We were supposed to speak directly about our feelings without appearing ungrateful, no-account, or unfilial.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 150

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily describes for the reader the required format of a married woman's letter to her friends. Letters must follow this format because a woman never knows if her mother-in-law is reading the letters, and any true sadness a woman feels must be kept private.

While at this point the reader only has clues that Snow Flower's married life isn't happy, the requirement to write letters using this formula becomes very sinister once it's revealed that Snow Flower's husband regularly beats her. In this way, the language that's supposed to allow women the freedom to express their emotions and keep ties with their friends and families actually works to keep women silent and deter them from asking for help. It also again works to normalize the expectation that a married woman's life is hard and sad. This in turn makes physical or emotional violence like that which Snow Flower experiences seem less shocking.

☞ Sons are the foundation of a woman's self. They give a woman her identity, as well as dignity, protection, and economic value... sons are a woman's crowning glory.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), First Son, Lily's Husband / Dalang

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 151

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily has just given birth to her first son and explains to the reader how and why sons are so important. A woman's position in her new home is precarious until she proves herself capable of bearing sons, which further reinforces the idea of female bodies as currency.

Lily also alludes to the idea that sons can provide a woman safety. This continues to develop the concept that a woman is only a foreign guest in her husband's home. Until the "foreigner" proves herself useful, she's liable to be beaten and replaced. This is complicated later, however, when the reader learns that Snow Flower is consistently beaten in her own home, despite the fact that she gives her husband two sons. Unfortunately, Snow Flower then becomes proof that while Lily would like to believe that rules and traditions like this are a black-and-white matter, adhering to traditions cannot always guarantee safety, comfort, or happiness.

☞ ... Now that I lived in the Lu household, where all the men knew men's writing, I saw that our secret women's writing wasn't much of a secret. Then it dawned on me that men throughout the county had to know about *nu shu*. How could they not? ... Men just considered our writing beneath them.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis

After the birth of their sons, Lily and Snow Flower write to each other almost daily, and Lily's new family shows her that what she thought she knew about *nu shu* isn't necessarily true at all. In Lily's natal home her male relatives were illiterate, so for them *nu shu* was likely more of a secret, but in her current household the men are educated, and so almost surely know how to read *nu shu* as well.

What Lily also realizes here, however, is that the fact that men consider *nu shu* beneath them is one way that the language gains power. Similarly to how Snow Flower and her mother use "women's work" to create Snow Flower's dowry and better Snow Flower's situation, these underappreciated skills and tasks can be used by women to

effect change and communicate with each other, without the men in their lives even considering that such a thing might be possible. With these realizations, Lily begins to understand that while women and their skills are considered worthless by society, women themselves aren't necessarily worthless. They can be resourceful and use the means available to them to better their lives.

☞ With her bold act, I realized the true purpose of our secret writing. It was not to compose girlish notes to each other or even to introduce us to the women in our husbands' families. It was to give us a voice. Our *nu shu* was a means for our bound feet to carry us to each other, for our thoughts to fly across the fields as Snow Flower had written.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 160

### Explanation and Analysis

Snow Flower writes Lily a letter that doesn't follow the rules regarding formatting and content, but Lily understands that breaking with those rules allows Snow Flower to be more truthful and open about her situation. This is one of the moments when Lily learns that tradition can be interpreted in many different ways and molded to suit one's needs. She's been told her entire life that *nu shu* is intended to provide comfort to the women who write it and allow them to share their sorrows with each other. With this letter from Snow Flower, though, she realizes that while technically the two have been sharing their sorrows, they haven't been speaking with their true, individual voices.

☞ I retreated to the safety of the formal lines appropriate for a married woman, hoping this would remind Snow Flower that our only real protection as women was the placid face we presented, even in those moments of great distress.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 166

### Explanation and Analysis

Snow Flower has just given birth to a stillborn daughter, and Lily explains that women aren't supposed to experience negative emotions about this, as only stillborn sons are considered a tragedy. In this moment, Lily chooses to "comfort" Snow Flower with broad and conventional platitudes, rather than offering any real sympathy for her loss. Lily's generally good life thus far has taught her that when a woman does what's expected of her, she can expect safety in return. Essentially, Lily recognizes that Snow Flower is in danger because she's unable to successfully complete her duties as a woman. Lily then uses the structure of *nu shu* and language itself to impress upon Snow Flower the importance of hiding or repressing emotion—but in the process she comes off as cold and unavailable to her desperate friend.

refusing to follow time-honored tradition, and Lily finds that entirely unacceptable. She helps Snow Flower's son then not because she loves him, but because she feels it's her duty to keep him alive as the first son.

☝ The butcher's brokenhearted question was one that appeared in many *nu shu* stories and songs. I glanced at the faces of the other women around the fire and saw their unspoken question: Could a man—this butcher—feel the same despair and sadness that we women feel when we lose a child?

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), The Butcher / Snow Flower's Husband, Snow Flower's Second Son, Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 206

### Explanation and Analysis

Snow Flower's second son has just died unexpectedly in the mountains, and the butcher takes the death of his son harder than anyone expected. The reader comes to realize here just how little the women in the novel know of the men they live with and are married to, and none of what they know has anything to do with love or emotion. Lily has said as much before, but as a whole the novel presents such a firm delineation between men's and women's appropriate spaces, actions, and thoughts that the question of whether men experience strong emotion was simply never pertinent. Situations like this, where Lily is confronted with the fact that men and women do indeed cross lines into thoughts and feelings deemed inappropriate for one's gender, build her final argument that her story is composed of both men's and women's stories.

## Rice-and-Salt Days: Winter Quotes

☝ Certainly Snow Flower would say something on his behalf. He was the first son after all. But my old same did not love the boy the way she should have.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), The Butcher / Snow Flower's Husband, Snow Flower's Mother-in-Law, Snow Flower's (Eldest) Son, Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 199

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily and Snow Flower's group in the mountains has finished their sack of rice, and Snow Flower's mother-in-law suggests that Snow Flower's first son shouldn't eat so they can conserve resources.

Lily is struggling with some intense mental gymnastics as she tries to make sense out of the situation. Notice, first of all, that she doesn't believe Snow Flower's son should receive food based simply on the fact that he's a person who deserves to live—rather she believes he deserves to live because he's the first son whose duty it is to live and carry on the family name. Lily then moves to passing judgment on Snow Flower's actions. While it's horrible that Snow Flower won't defend her son, it's important to remember that Snow Flower is also powerless in her married family. Her mother-in-law is abusive and her husband beats her. Going against their wishes, even though that would be the "right" thing to do, would likely be extremely dangerous for her. Lily, however, is unable to see the intricacies in the situation. She sees only that Snow Flower and her mother-in-law are

## Rice-and-Salt Days: Letter of Vituperation Quotes

☝ And then the strangest thing happened. An image of my mother came to my mind. I remembered that as a child I'd wanted her to love me. I'd thought if I did everything she asked during my footbinding, I would earn her affection.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower, Mama

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 221

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily has just read the note from Snow Flower that effectively releases Lily from any emotional responsibility in their relationship. She is extremely hurt and feels as though Snow Flower has manipulated and lied to her throughout their relationship.

When Lily makes this connection between Snow Flower and Mama, it becomes increasingly obvious that Lily views love as a transaction. For her, love is something earned or won, not something given or shared freely. Further, it's not just earned by anyone; it's earned by those who are deserving. By characterizing both Mama and Snow Flower as undeserving of Lily's love, Lily tries to free herself from any emotional investment and any possible further hurt at their hands.

The fact that Lily holds this view of love also ties into her unwavering belief in the necessity of upholding tradition. Many of the reasons she gives for cutting Snow Flower out of her life are related to the fact that Snow Flower not only didn't follow tradition, but then didn't adhere to the *laotong* contract by telling Lily about it. However, all of this only serves to illustrate, first and foremost, Lily's sub-par understanding of love. Lily simply doesn't have the emotional skills to understand why Snow Flower, or her mother for that matter, might have lied to her. At this point, she's unable to realize that tradition cannot actually take the place of emotions, empathy, or true human connection.

💬 "We might expect this loss of affection from our husbands—they have a right, and we are only women—but to endure this from another woman, who by her very sex has experienced much cruelty just by living, is merciless."

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 229

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily is reciting her Letter of Vituperation (a public grievance) to Snow Flower and accusing her of violating their *laotong* contract. With this phrasing, Lily squarely situates a woman's "deserved" place in the world. She indicates a belief that women are undeserving of love from men, and

further that men have the right to mistreat their wives. This belief allows Lily to justify the fact that Snow Flower's husband beats her; it's only to be expected, and Snow Flower brought the violence upon herself by not following the rules or providing her husband strong sons. However, where Lily takes great offense is at Snow Flower's supposed perpetuation of this type of cruelty on other women. This illustrates again Lily's belief that love is something deserved and earned. It never occurs to her that she herself is similarly cruel to other women, specifically to Snow Flower and Spring Moon. She's unable to make this connection because she views Snow Flower, and Spring Moon by association, as deserving of their unhappy fates.

### Rice-and-Salt Days: Into the Clouds Quotes

💬 I thought I would never forgive Snow Flower, but instead of dwelling on that my mind tumbled with the realization that my *laotong's* womb had betrayed her again and that the tumor inside her must have been growing for many years. I had a duty to care...

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 236

### Explanation and Analysis

Lily has just discovered that Snow Flower is dying of uterine cancer. In this moment, Lily struggles to reconcile her belief that she must perform her duty as Lady Lu and care for Snow Flower with her realization that she does indeed feel "deep-heart love" for Snow Flower. This struggle once again points back to Lily's understanding of love as being intrinsically related to duty and something one earns.

However, when she realizes why Snow Flower is dying, Lily makes a very important observation about womanhood. While Lily has made her way through life believing that a woman can control her destiny and her fate by following rules, cancer isn't necessarily something one can avoid by behaving correctly. Essentially, Lily comes to understand that Snow Flower herself isn't being deceitful or willfully ignoring how things should be done. It's her body that refuses to follow the rules of womanhood appropriately, and this is something no amount of tradition and obedience can change.

So much of what happened reminded me of the didactic story that Aunt used to chant about the girl who had three brothers. I now understand that we learned those songs and stories not just to teach us how to behave but because we would be living out variations of them over and over again throughout our lives.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Willow, Plum Blossom, Lotus, Aunt, Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 240

### Explanation and Analysis

After Snow Flower's death, Lily explains to the reader that watching her die taught Lily the true reason that girls learn *nu shu* songs and stories. Lily goes on to describe how she and the sworn sisters prepared Snow Flower for burial—the way the sworn sisters behaved and what they offered for the funeral mimicked what the three brothers in the story could offer their sister. This realization arrives as Lily comes to the end of her journey of learning to understand language and how it works. While she's spent her life appreciating *nu shu* for all it can do, here the idea of language becomes far more concrete and personal. She sees it play out in the real world, not just in the space of an upstairs chamber.

Further, this realization mirrors Lily's asides to the reader about specific words and their meanings in her local dialect (such as "wife" and "guest" being the same word). She knows that the structure of language itself influences how it's understood and how it makes meaning, and as she makes the same realization about stories, she understands that stories are things that work the same way to describe life.

"But you had too much man-thinking in you. You loved her as a man would, valuing her only for following men's rules."

**Related Characters:** Plum Blossom (speaker), Willow, Lotus, Lily, Snow Flower

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 242

### Explanation and Analysis

The sworn sisters Lotus, Plum Blossom, and Willow explain to Lily how she failed to love and care for Snow Flower

appropriately in life. Notice that they attribute Lily's failure to thoughts and actions that are deemed masculine in nature. Lily herself has alluded to this throughout the novel, particularly in instances when she makes observations about Snow Flower's body. Thus, while Lily has spent her entire life trying to be the most traditional, most well behaved woman in the county, she also spent her life behaving and thinking like someone who isn't traditionally female. In this situation then, the novel illustrates another consequence of deviating from what's expected of one's sex (not to mention the very idea of gendering thoughts and emotions in the first place). Plum Blossom then indicates that it was Lily's judgmental masculine love that kept her from the deep-hearted love that both Lily and Snow Flower wanted to experience.

## Sitting Quietly: Regret Quotes

As girls we are told that we are useless branches, because we will not carry on our natal family names but only the names of the families we marry out to, if we are lucky enough to bear sons. In this way, a woman belongs to her husband's family forever, whether she is alive or dead. All of this is true, and yet these days my contentment comes from knowing that Snow Flower's and my blood will soon rule the house of Lu.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker), Snow Flower, Peony / Snow Flower's Granddaughter

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 252

### Explanation and Analysis

Snow Flower's granddaughter, Peony, has married into Lily's family, and Lily tells the reader why the fact that a woman belongs to her husband's family doesn't bother her anymore.

In the final pages of the novel, Lily explains how she used what little power she has as a woman to atone for what she did to Snow Flower. Because she spent her life behaving perfectly and honoring her husband, he honored her wishes and she was able to bring Peony (Snow Flower's granddaughter) into her family. Lily essentially describes how a woman's difficult and powerless lot in life can actually be used to effect real change. This mirrors what Snow Flower and her mother did with their dowries, but on a much grander scale. Their "useless" female skills were used to better their lives and provide stability in their married homes. Here, Lily takes that idea to its most potent

expression. She subverted what was expected of her, and of women in general, to do unexpected good in the world.

●● But it went beyond that. I wanted them to place a value on their lives, which for the most part were dismal.

**Related Characters:** Lily (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 253

**Explanation and Analysis**

As an old woman, Lily copied down women's stories. With this goal in mind, it becomes clear that while Lily spent her life believing that women are worthless, she did finally learn that women, women's lives, and women's stories do have value. Notably, she learned this through *nu shu* and the use of language. The simple fact that a word exists to describe something, or a song tells a story, indicates that those tales, objects, or ideas described are valuable enough to exist and receive attention in the form of language. Lily seeks to replicate this idea by using language to ascribe value to women's lives. She also takes this to a slightly larger scale by transcribing her own autobiography for the reader. Through this act, Lily has clearly learned that her life too has value and meaning, even if she was born a "worthless" daughter.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## SITTING QUIETLY

The narrator, 80-year-old Lily, tells the reader that she's "one who has not yet died," or a widow. At this point in her life, she can finally say things that she couldn't when she was dependent on her natal (birth) family or her husband's family.

Lily says that for her entire life she longed for love. She knew she shouldn't expect it, as she's female, but this longing caused every problem in her life. She behaved obediently to try to win affection, but was *too* willing to obey. During her foot binding, Lily says, her mother encouraged her and reminded her of the rewards that would come with small **feet**, which taught Lily to endure physical and emotional pain. Lily calls this "mother love," which, according to men's writing, is composed of two characters that mean "pain" and "love." As a result, by the age of 40, Lily's heart was as rigid as the process of foot binding.

Lily's only rebellion was her use of *nu shu*, which is women's secret writing. Lily broke tradition for the first time when Snow Flower, her *laotong* (contractual best friend), sent Lily the **fan** that now sits on the table in front of her. Lily understands now that she was blind for a long time. Lily tells the reader that she's spent her entire life in upstairs women's chambers, and while she's heard men talk about taxes and uprisings, what she knows is her family and women's work.

Lily describes the **fan** for the reader, the text of which she has memorized. An elaborate design of flowers, **birds**, and messages cover the fan, telling a story of optimism and promises that give way to misunderstandings and broken trust. Lily says that she thought she understood love, but now, looking at the fan, she understands that she didn't value deep-heart love.

Over the last few years, Lily has copied autobiographies for women who can't read or write *nu shu*, and has heard of every tragedy that can befall a woman. Conversely she knows little about men and their stories, but she understands that her own life is made up of both men's and women's stories. She's writing this story, which will be burned upon her death, so that she can explain her actions to her ancestors, her husband, and Snow Flower.

*Lily makes it very clear that the story to follow is only being told now because Lily no longer experiences censorship like she used to. This sets up the understanding that Lily has been controlled by others throughout her life.*



*We now get the reason for the censorship that Lily experienced: her sex. Further, Lily was complicit and accepting of the censorship and control because she thought it gave her a better chance of receiving the love she truly wanted. However, we learn very early on that rather than receiving love because of her obedience, Lily instead became rigid and unyielding, qualities that make both giving and receiving love difficult.*



*Lily identifies wholly with being a woman, and has structured her life around what's good and appropriate for a woman to do. Nu shu provides Lily the opportunity to both keep with that gendered structure and rebel, although it's not yet clear exactly how. The passage also introduces Snow Flower, the titular protagonist, as well as the important concept of the laotong.*



*It's still somewhat unclear exactly how the fan functioned in Snow Flower and Lily's relationship, but here Lily sets the stage for the story that will follow. We know that Lily and Snow Flower began with optimism and ended with broken trust, and we know that Lily was in the wrong and didn't value the relationship.*



*Chinese traditions are an integral part of the novel, particularly since Lily makes every effort to appropriately observe traditions. We see here that the story we're about to hear isn't just being told for Lily or the reader's enjoyment. Lily feels as though she has to explain and justify herself to her loved ones, indicating again that she likely did questionable things that she now feels guilty about.*



## DAUGHTER DAYS: MILK YEARS

Lily introduces herself and states her birthday (June 6, 1823) in the traditional Chinese format. She lives in Puwei, a village in Yongming County. It's a poor county, but not so poor that women have to work in the fields. Lily's father (Baba) and Uncle rent land to grow rice, cotton, and kitchen crops. Her family's home is typical, with two stories, the second of which is for women. The ground floor is dirt, their animals live with them, and the only window is on the second floor.

Just after Lily turns five, she begins to notice and think about what's around her. She describes waking up with a tickle in her brain—she's been sleeping between Elder Sister and Third Sister, while her cousin, Beautiful Moon, sleeps across the room. Lily and her sisters regard each other with indifference, as they all compete for attention from other family members.

Mama calls up the stairs and the girls wake up. Elder Sister goes downstairs first, as Lily and Beautiful Moon must dress Third Sister. When they come downstairs, Aunt and Uncle greet them all affectionately, while Mama ignores them. Lily thinks on this day that Aunt and Uncle are perfectly matched ugly people with an ideal marriage, although Aunt's **feet** are too big and there are rumors that this is why she couldn't carry sons to term. Elder Brother calls Lily to help him with chores, which delights her.

Mama doesn't praise Lily for carrying water or firewood, and Lily realizes that Mama views her as an inconsequential, worthless daughter. This makes Lily crave Mama's attention, but she vows to be like Elder Sister and be helpful. Mama tells Lily to help Grandmother, which tries Lily's desire to be helpful, but Grandmother waves Lily away. The family sits down to eat, and then Baba and Uncle head for the fields while the women go upstairs.

Lily, Third Sister, and their baby Second Brother are too young to go upstairs, so they go outside with Elder Brother. Third Sister acts spoiled, although (Lily says) she has no right to think she's beloved by the family. They then go home for lunch, and in the afternoon, Lily is allowed upstairs in the women's chamber. Elder Sister's sworn sisters (contracted friends from the village) arrive to embroider and chat.

*Lily describes her family home and standing as absolutely normal. They're not so poor that Lily will ever have to work, but it's implied that they're right on that edge. Lily's uncle's family lives with them, which is a normal situation.*



*On this certain day, for some reason, Lily begins to actually consider her family and the dynamics within it. Notice particularly how she talks about her sisters. She's already indicated that females are undeserving of love, and this idea makes their jostling for attention make sense.*



*Notably, Lily and Beautiful Moon have responsibility for caring for a toddler. Aunt and Uncle are good and kind to the children, while Mama is cold and very different from her in-laws. Lily also introduces the idea that a woman's bound feet are indicative of her future worth, hence Aunt's big feet supposedly keeping her from her primary goal as a woman: having sons.*



*Even if the sisters view each other with indifference, Lily still looks up to Elder Sister as a good role model. Further, while Lily should look up to her grandmother the most, as she's the most important female in the household, she's not thrilled to help her. This sets up some very complex relationships between the women in her household.*



*In the narrative itself, this is the first time we're introduced to the idea of contractual female friendship. Elder Sister's sworn sisters provide her the companionship and love that she doesn't get from her mother, aunt, or sisters, but they're contracted to perform this role, just as she's contracted to perform this role for them in return.*



Aunt suggests that Lily and Beautiful Moon go outside. Mama tries to argue, but Aunt is stubborn and reasons that "they only have these few months," as soon their **feet** will be bound. Mama gives in and the girls run outside. They find Elder Brother and follow him and their water buffalo down to the river, where Lily puts her feet in the water, allowing the river to wash away all the strange new observations and emotions she has about her family.

After dinner the family sits outside. Mama is weary and trying to get the baby to fall asleep, but when Lily tries to comfort her, Mama pushes her away. Baba then takes Lily on his lap and Lily feels precious.

*The horrors of foot binding loom dangerously on the horizon, but for now, Lily is experiencing as much freedom as she ever will. However, this freedom comes at the price of being, still, a "worthless daughter." More importantly, Lily is aware that she's considered worthless, unlike Third Sister, who appears to have no idea.*



*Lily again doesn't receive any affection from her mother, but Baba's actions here suggest that even if daughters are seen as worthless, they might still possibly be loved.*



## DAUGHTER DAYS: FOOTBINDING

Lily says that girls in her county have their **feet** bound starting at age six. Lily is still outside running, but Mama has already begun making bindings and shoes. She also creates a pair of miniature shoes to place on the altar of Guanyin as an offering. These miniature shoes are the first clue for Lily that Mama might care for her.

When Lily and Beautiful Moon turn six, Mama and Aunt send for Diviner Hu to select an auspicious date to begin their **foot** binding. Lily is scared, as she's heard the screams of other girls undergoing the process. The diviner asks to see Lily in person, which is an unusual request, and he inspects her and deems her "no ordinary child." He suggests they consult with a matchmaker (a woman who arranges marriages), and Mama doesn't even ask Baba's permission to spend the money.

The next day, the women rise early to make special tea and cakes. When Diviner Hu arrives, he has Madame Wang with him from Tongkou, rather than the local matchmaker. Lily says that the situation must be dire since Lily's family isn't expecting to see a matchmaker for several years, and then only for their older children.

Madame Wang settles herself and then asks to see Lily. Lily studies her family members' faces, all of which are worried and anxious. Mama's face, however, shows lurking "male ambition." Lily stands in front of Madame Wang, who inspects her thoroughly. Madame Wang stands and instructs Lily to sit, which Lily knows would be a very rude thing to do. When Lily hesitates, Madame Wang picks her up and sits her down, and then takes off Lily's shoes to inspect her **feet**.

*The miniature shoes express to Lily that her life might be seen as useful and she may receive love if her foot binding goes well. This further cements the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her body and her feet specifically.*



*Lily, at six years old, doesn't understand what's going on, but she knows that it must be bad if Mama is willing to spend money to comply with Diviner Hu's suggestion. While this starts to create tension regarding Lily and what might happen to her, it also points again to her family's low standing and the idea of female bodies as currency.*



*A matchmaker usually begins the process of arranging marriages when girls are several years older. Thus the arrival of an unexpected matchmaker when Lily is so young builds tension, as everyone wonders what could possibly be different about Lily.*



*The comment about "male ambition" is certainly coming from the elderly Lily as the narrator. She'll continue to gender thoughts and actions throughout the novel, particularly in regard to Mama. This is especially poignant in this case, as it suggests that women are not supposed to have ambition—they should accept their lot in life and not hope for anything better. Even as a child, Lily is very concerned about following rules and being polite.*



When Madame Wang reclaims her seat, Diviner Hu says that Lily's **feet** are underdeveloped, and so Mama needs to wait a year to begin binding them. He continues, saying that Lily's entire body is underdeveloped, as are many girls in the village, but her feet in particular have high arches and if things are done well, her feet could be perfect. Madame Wang adds that if Lily's feet are bound perfectly, she could marry into Tongkou, the best town in the county, and further, Lily may be eligible for a *laotong* relationship. Everyone is aghast, and Madame Wang and Diviner Hu leave.

Lily and Mama go upstairs. Mama slaps Lily across the face, and tells her that all this will bring Baba trouble. Lily knows that the slap is good luck and meant to scare away bad spirits, as nothing can guarantee perfectly bound **feet**, and the slap is further indicative of Mama's "mother love." Lily tells the reader that while she doesn't know if her family decided her fate that day, her life changed. She and Beautiful Moon have their feet bound the following year with Third Sister. Mama beats Lily regularly, and Baba never looks at her the same way, since now she is possibly useful. Madame Wang visits periodically over the following year, but only views Lily as a means to profit.

Lily and Beautiful Moon's education in "house learning" begins in earnest. Lily shares that she would spend her entire life in an upstairs chamber, as dictated by Confucian society. She would be expected to obey her father, her husband, and then her son, as well as follow the Four Virtues that delineate proper behavior for women. She begins learning to sew, starts making **shoes** to wear during her foot binding, and Aunt starts teaching her *nu shu*. Lily explains the basic ideas of *nu shu*: it's phonetic, meaning that one must take care not to misinterpret meaning; it can be used to write letters, prayers, and autobiographies; it can be embroidered or woven; and it can be sung. Most importantly, men can never know of it or touch it.

When Lily turns seven, Diviner Hu returns to find a date for her, Beautiful Moon, and Third Sister to begin their binding. He settles on the typical date, which is in the fall. Mama and Aunt make bandages and feed the girls soft foods to encourage their bones to be soft. The girls are congratulated on entering womanhood. Lily knows that **foot** binding will make her more marriageable, which will allow her to achieve the goal of having a son.

*For the first time, Lily is seen as possibly valuable to her family and not just a worthless girl. She gets the first taste that her life might be more than she ever thought possible, but again, she has that possibility because of her body. This suggests that while others may profit from a woman's body, she too can sometimes use her own body as "currency" in this system of objectification. It's in Lily's best interest, then, to comply with what's asked of her.*



*This passage drives home the idea that Lily's worth is tied to her body. However, this possible worth is also tenuous, as many things can go wrong. Mama certainly means that Lily will bring a greater financial burden upon her family, even though she'll likely be worth more if things do go well. Lily also begins to suggest a link between being female, having worth, and experiencing violence. Foot binding is certainly an act of violence, but it, as well as these beatings from Mama, is described as being helpful and stemming from love.*



*The way Lily describes the standards of Confucian society indicate that she sees little problem with the arrangement. This reminds the reader that in order for things like foot binding to keep happening, the women themselves must buy into the system and perpetuate these customs. Because Lily is possibly very valuable in this system, she has little incentive to try to avoid it, and this complicity will follow her throughout the novel.*



*Notice here that foot binding is portrayed as the way that these girls will become women. Coming of age here happens when a girl can endure this level of pain and achieve this standard of beauty. The fact that a woman's greatest achievement is to produce a son is indicative of how undervalued women are: a woman is considered merely a vessel.*



On the morning the binding is to begin, Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Third Sister offer the Tiny-Footed Maiden rice balls, and Mama and Aunt offer their miniature shoes to a statue of Guanyin. They gather their supplies, and Lily goes first. Mama washes Lily's **feet**, rubs them with alum, cuts her toenails, and begins wrapping wet bandages around her feet to pull her toes under her foot. Aunt wraps Beautiful Moon's feet and then it's Third Sister's turn, but she's nowhere to be found. Lily's feet ache as she listens to Mama and Aunt drag Third Sister out of a neighbor's house and berate her. When they return to the women's chamber, Aunt, Grandmother, and Elder Sister hold Third Sister down while Mama wraps her feet. Third Sister screams the entire time.

When the wrapping is finished, Mama and Aunt instruct the girls to get up. Lily's **feet** are throbbing, but Mama yanks her up and tells her to walk. Mama, Elder Sister, and Aunt lead Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Third Sister back and forth across the room on their folded toes. After ten round trips, they're left alone. The pain is unimaginable, and Elder Sister does her best to comfort the girls.

Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Third Sister are made to walk again the next day, and the day after. Every fourth day, Mama and Aunt soak off the bandages and rewrap them tighter than before. As the weather gets colder, Grandmother stops walking with the girls and only sits and watches them.

One day while Lily is walking, she hears the crack of one of her toes breaking. Mama sharply instructs her to keep moving through the excruciating pain. When Mama rewraps Lily's **feet** a few days later, she tells Lily that she will have only have beauty through this pain and suffering, and that a lady lets no ugliness into her life. Beautiful Moon's toes break a few days later, but Third Sister's toes won't break despite extra efforts. When the girls' bandages are next removed, the blood and pus from Third Sister's feet are different, and her skin is bright red.

When it begins to snow outside, the bones in Lily's mid-foot break. Third Sister becomes feverish, and one day when Mama and Aunt are downstairs, Elder Sister allows Third Sister to lie down. When Elder Sister pulls up Third Sister's pant leg to massage her legs, she sees red streaks running the length of her calves. Elder Sister fetches Mama and Aunt, who begin boiling water after taking in the scene. Mama unwraps Third Sister's bindings to expose rotting flesh, and the stench makes them gag. Mama and Aunt decide to continue to bandage Third Sister's **feet**, though, because if they halt the binding process she'll be crippled and unmarriageable.

*Alum was used to help keep the skin dry and keep infections from starting; it's the same thing that's found in modern antiperspirants. Lily again proves herself obedient and compliant while Third Sister acts as though she's above or apart from this process. We see how the tradition of foot binding, while painful and hard to read about, is normalized for the characters and turned into a ritual with the offerings. Then it's perpetuated from generation to generation: as Mama's mother inflicted this pain upon her, so she now inflicts it upon her own daughters.*



*While Lily has tried thus far to be brave in the face of the pain, she's starting to realize that this transformation from girl to woman is going to be very difficult. However, she's still willing to comply. This begins to build the sense that Lily is always stoic and accepting, especially in regards to tradition.*



*Remember that the pain of foot binding is supposed to prepare a girl to withstand a hard life as an adult woman. This pain, then, foreshadows what's to come in these girls' lives—there may be no relief at all waiting for them.*



*The moment Lily's toe breaks is grotesque, visceral, and violent, as Mama forces her to keep walking on her broken feet. When Mama tells Lily about the relationship between beauty and suffering, she begins to plant the seed that platitudes or traditional sayings can both justify violence like this and act as a stand-in for actually experiencing pain and emotion.*



*The decision to continue binding Third Sister's feet is telling of the harsh views of society. At its heart, this decision indicates that it's better for a woman to be dead (as now that infection has set in, death is far more likely) than to have big feet and be unmarriageable. Notice too that the decision here is coming primarily from kind and loving Aunt—even she can't escape societal pressures with her kindness.*



Baba fetches the doctor the next day, but the doctor is unable to help. The doctor also notices that Grandmother is very ill. Mama, as the first daughter-in-law, is tasked with caring for her, while Beautiful Moon and Lily care for Third Sister. As young girls they don't know the words to comfort her, and she dies in a terrible amount of pain. Grandmother dies the next day.

*This introduces the reader to the idea of a married woman's role in her household. Her first duty is to her mother-in-law, not her own children. Notice that Third Sister dies in pain, and that Lily ties this specifically to the fact that she and Beautiful Moon don't know the proper words to comfort her. This reinforces Lily's belief in the comforting aspects of tradition (particularly as tied to language).*



As the ground is too hard to dig graves, Grandmother and Third Sister's bodies spend the winter under the snow. The women's chamber becomes even more disciplined as Beautiful Moon and Lily make sure to not resist, and Mama, Aunt, and Elder Sister vigilantly watch for infection. Lily tells the reader that she heard many sayings during those months and didn't understand their meaning, understanding only that her foot size will determine her worth—it will be an indicator of her ability to endure pain and misfortune, and to behave obediently. She shares too that while she didn't know it then, her **feet** would later be a source of fascination for Lily's husband, even when the rest of her body was no longer enticing.

*Third Sister becomes a cautionary tale of what happens when a woman resists the path that's set out for her by her family and society. Remember that she believed she was loved, as a son would, and she dramatically resisted foot binding. Lily and Beautiful Moon, on the other hand, seem to be rewarded for their obedience, as they escape contracting dangerous infections. Also notice that once again there are traditional sayings meant to help individuals through their own personal pain.*



## DAUGHTER DAYS: THE FAN

When the ground softens, Lily's family prepares Grandmother and Third Sister for burial. Funerals are one of the most expensive life events, and Lily sees how poor her family is. The family burns Grandmother's third-day wedding books, and nothing is said about Third Sister.

*Lily's fixation on her family's poverty provides a counterpoint for her later social advancement. The third-day wedding books are burned so that Grandmother has them in the afterlife. This begins to paint a picture of the purpose of language.*



The most painful part of **foot** binding is over, and Lily and Beautiful Moon spend their days sitting and working on their house learning and *nu shu*. Madame Gao, the local matchmaker, begins visiting to negotiate "Contracting a Kin" (the first step of arranging a marriage) for Elder Brother and Elder Sister. Elder Sister will marry out to a better family in a faraway village, but Lily's family practices *buluo fujia*, or a wife not leaving permanently for her husband's home until she is pregnant.

*The custom of buluo fujia is an early example of the ways that customs and traditions can provide a great deal of comfort for some people. Lily returns to this custom in particular many times, and sees it as a very positive thing. This positive view on tradition is something she carries over into other traditions—but she won't consider that tradition isn't always comforting for everyone.*



In late summer, Elder Sister's sworn sisters meet at Lily's home for Bull Fighting Day. They beg Aunt to lead them in the call-and-respond "Story of the Woman with Three Brothers." Lily and Beautiful Moon follow the *nu shu* writing of the story on a handkerchief in Aunt's lap. The story details the tragedy of a woman whose three brothers cannot provide a dowry, so she hangs herself. The brothers care for her body, select a coffin, and choose an appropriate burial spot, and the woman finds happiness in the afterworld. The story provides instruction on how to care for a dead loved one.

The following day, Madame Wang visits. Lily feels pressured to make a good impression, as her family needs the money that her good marriage will bring. Madame Wang states that she already has interest for Lily in Tongkou, but today she'd like to discuss contracting Lily's *laotong* relationship with a girl in Tongkou named Snow Flower. At Mama's questioning, Madame Wang says that the girls' eight characters (birthdate, height, birth order, etc.) align well, but they don't match completely in that Snow Flower's family is of greater economic standing.

Mama indifferently says that Lily is stubborn and disobedient. Lily is hurt to hear this, and doesn't understand that by talking about Lily as though she's unworthy, any fees to her family may be less. Madame Wang calls Lily to her and gives her a **fan**, waving away Mama's concerns about a fee. Before she leaves, Madame Wang addresses Aunt and says that Lily's *laotong* relationship may make it possible for Beautiful Moon to also marry into Tongkou. Her final advice is for Mama and Aunt to use "bed time" to convince their husbands to agree to the *laotong* relationship.

Mama and Aunt walk Madame Wang to her palanquin (a litter carried by four men) while Lily, Beautiful Moon, and Elder Sister chatter excitedly. Elder Sister asks what the **fan** says, but Lily can't read all the *nu shu* characters running down the first fold. Aunt returns and reads the note aloud, which is an invitation to be "sames." Lily cannot reply until her family decides what to do. Aunt advocates for the *laotong* relationship, repeating each time that a *laotong* relationship is one of emotional companionship, while a marriage exists only to have sons. Mama argues that women in their family have sworn sisters, not *laotongs*, and Aunt notes that Lily's *laotong* will be beneficial to both Lily and her family.

*While the story here certainly provides instruction on caring for the dead, it also reinforces the idea that marriage is an extremely important and necessary achievement for a woman—the woman of the story would rather take her own life than live unmarried. Because Lily doesn't appear to pick up on this fact, it alludes to the idea that these societal traditions and pressures are so entrenched that they're not worth questioning. It also points back to Mama and Aunt's decision to continue binding Third Sister's feet.*



*Again, Lily is very aware that her family is poor and is depending on the financial benefits they'll receive if she can make a good marriage. Lily here introduces the idea of the eight characters, which influence how well two people are supposed to get along. Lily and Snow Flower are somewhat unconventional, as their characters are off by one.*



*Lily is trying her hardest to make the best impression she possibly can, so she can't understand why Mama would undermine her like she does. Mama's concern about the fees involved in this relationship again indicate that women are little more than currency in this society, and Madame Wang reinforces this by suggesting that Lily's worth will raise Beautiful Moon's worth as well. Also note the euphemistic term for sex here, and how the women use sex as the only leverage they have over their husbands.*



*Sworn sisters are a group of women in the same stage of life who are contracted to be friends and support each other, but the group is dissolved when they marry or grow old. A *laotong* relationship, on the other hand, lasts for life (and supposedly even for eternity). Notice that marriage here is described as something transactional and entirely unemotional. This idea will be questioned throughout the novel, and even now as Lily remarks occasionally how happy Aunt and Uncle seem to be as a married couple.*



Lily's family decides to accept the *laotong* relationship. Mama helps Lily embroider **shoes** to send to Snow Flower as a first gift, and Aunt helps Lily compose a *nu shu* reply. Lily decides to not send her reply on a different **fan**, as is customary, but rather to send it back on the same fan. The note is composed of conventional phrases of everlasting commitment. Lily notes that she certainly didn't mean all that she wrote, as she was only seven and knew little about everlasting commitment, but she hoped it would come true.

When Lily is finished with the **fan** and the **shoes**, she worries that Snow Flower's family won't accept the relationship. When Madame Wang sees the fan, though, she states that it's a perfect match and that the girls are alike in their "horse" spirits. She offers to take Lily and Snow Flower to the Temple of Gupo fair to write their *laotong* contract, and takes the fan and the shoes to give to Snow Flower.

## DAUGHTER DAYS: SNOW FLOWER

A few days later Mama carries Lily, dressed simply, to Madame Wang's waiting palanquin, where Snow Flower is sitting. Snow Flower is very pretty and wears a blue silk tunic embroidered with clouds, along with the **shoes** Lily made. The girls smile at each other. Madame Wang sits in the middle of the bench with a girl on either side to keep the palanquin balanced. The motion of the palanquin makes Lily nauseous. When she hears many voices and the sounds of bells and carts, she knows they've reached the Temple of Gupo fair. Madame Wang exits the palanquin, and Lily sees that Snow Flower looks nauseous as well.

Snow Flower suggests they look out the window. Lily scoots over on the bench and the two pull the curtain aside to look out and take in the incredible sights of the fair. Lily is silent while Snow Flower chatters about visiting the fair every year with her mother, tells Lily about Old Man Zuo's taro (a type of sugar treat) stand, and says that "Auntie" has to take them. Lily questions her use of "Auntie," and Snow Flower incredulously remarks at the fact that Lily finally speaks, adding that she herself gets in trouble with her words, and saying that Lily will be an ideal wife because she chooses her words carefully.

*Lily's decision regarding the fan is the first time she actively chooses to break with what tradition dictates should be done. This is mirrored by her family's decision to accept the match, as it's not traditional for their family. The note, however, is described as being as conventional as possible. This begins to create tension as Lily uses language to simultaneously conform and resist tradition.*



*Remember that individuals born in the year of the horse are said to be free spirits, and here Madame Wang ascribes Lily's unconventional decision to proof of this spirit. This moment will stand as one of the few times in the novel that Lily truly receives positive feedback for breaking tradition (but, of course, it's not a serious "rebellion" at all).*



*The reader here is asked to compare the girls based on their clothing. Lily's simple clothing choices are indicative of her simple life and poor family, while Snow Flower's cloud tunic shows a significant level of sophistication in comparison (while also foreshadowing Snow Flower's connection to flying and escape). This reinforces that the girls aren't matched in familial economic standing. This will be a continual source of questioning for Lily as she considers her own worth in relationship to Snow Flower.*



*Snow Flower seems to exhibit sophistication and worldliness that Lily can barely comprehend. Notice again the way in which the goal of marriage is discussed. Even at seven years old, Snow Flower and Lily are aware that achieving this goal is their primary purpose at this point in their lives. According to Snow Flower, Lily will be a good wife because she adheres to rules and traditions.*



Madame Wang returns and calls Lily and Snow Flower out of the palanquin. They're next to a paper goods stand, and Madame Wang instructs them to choose a piece of paper on which to write their contract. Snow Flower asks Lily what paper she likes, and Lily points to a large sheet. Snow Flower inspects it and deems it of poor quality, and Lily can barely comprehend how refined Snow Flower is. Snow Flower finds a better piece of paper in the back of the stand and shows Lily how to inspect it. Madame Wang pays for the paper and the girls sit down at the table in the stand to write their contract.

Snow Flower says they have to write the best contract ever. Lily suggests they follow the rules, and Snow Flower impatiently suggests that they make it unique to them. Lily makes a few suggestions, and Snow Flower picks up a brush and begins to write. Both girls sign their names at the bottom. Madame Wang announces that she's pleased, and counsels the girls to not let other girls come between them.

Lily feels extremely happy as she walks back to the palanquin with Snow Flower and Madame Wang. The palanquin takes them to the center of the market, where Madame Wang gives the girls money to buy a celebratory gift. Lily has never had this kind of responsibility, but Snow Flower takes charge and leads Lily to a stall selling embroidery supplies, where the two select colored threads.

When Lily and Snow Flower return to the palanquin, Snow Flower begs Madame Wang to take them to the taro stand. Madame Wang resists but gives in, and at the taro stand, seats have already been set for the three women. Old Man Zuo prepares a chicken dish and then the sugary taro for them, and Lily pours tea. When she puts the teapot down, Snow Flower corrects her placement of the pot, turning it so the spout doesn't point rudely at Madame Wang.

For the return trip, Madame Wang allows Lily and Snow Flower to sit next to each other, and the two giggle, hold hands, and sort their embroidery thread. Lily tells the reader that Madame Wang went on to take them to the Temple of Gupo every year through their daughter days, and Lily and Snow Flower continued to meet there after they married—as circumstances allowed.

*Lily continues to experience awe at Snow Flower's impressive knowledge and refinement. Notice that Snow Flower teaches Lily how to choose a fine piece of paper—this is only the beginning of the education that Snow Flower provides Lily in such matters, and notice that she gives it happily and willingly.*



*Lily again shows her obedience as she tries to make sure they follow protocol. Snow Flower proves herself far more free-spirited than her fellow "horse" Lily, and desires to make the contract more personal. These differing traits will come up against each other throughout the novel.*



*Snow Flower teaches Lily how to handle responsibility and make choices of her own, showing off her status and education in the process. The embroidery threads will allow the girls to further their house learning and better perform as women, again reinforcing their goals in life of perfectly performing womanhood.*



*Lily isn't embarrassed by Snow Flower's correction, as she obviously idolizes Snow Flower even at this early stage of their relationship. Lily idolizes her so in part because she's internalized the idea that she's worthless because she's female.*



*The narrator Lily's aside that they continue to visit the temple yearly sets up a tradition and a cycle to follow through the rest of the novel. Here, the girls create their own tradition, and it provides comfort and happiness for them for many years.*



When they arrive at Lily's house, Madame Wang bids goodbye to both of them. Lily is ecstatic that Snow Flower is staying, but knows that Snow Flower is used to a better way of living. Mama comes out and greets the girls. In the house, Mama introduces Snow Flower to the family. They eat dinner together, and Snow Flower's manners show sophistication beyond what Lily's family has ever seen.

Later that night, Lily and Snow Flower go upstairs with Mama and the other women. Snow Flower suspiciously dabs her fingers in the bowl of wash water and puts on a sleeping garment of Elder Sister's. Mama tucks the girls into bed and whispers to Lily to be happy. Alone at last, Snow Flower and Lily tell each other about their families and their **foot** binding. Snow Flower says that she struggled so much that she was tied to a chair where she could only look out the window at the **birds**. Hearing this both scares and thrills Lily. Snow Flower puts her hand on Lily's cheek, says that she's glad they're "old sames," and falls asleep. Lily wonders how she can make Snow Flower love her.

## DAUGHTER DAYS: LOVE

Addressing the reader, Lily says that women are expected to love their children immediately, but everyone feels disappointed holding a daughter, or a son who won't stop crying. She says that women are also expected to love their husbands as soon as the contract is made, even though they won't meet for years. Most love that women experience, Lily says, comes from duty or respect, but a *laotong* relationship is made by choice. Lily says she felt something special when she first met Snow Flower, and knows she must tend to their love like a farmer tends to a crop to make it grow.

Lily writes and embroiders notes to Snow Flower, passed through Madame Wang. While Lily writes "little-girl things," Snow Flower responds with messages of **birds**, flight, and escape. This is both frightening and exhilarating to Lily, and she wants to soar with Snow Flower. One day Madame Wang brings the **fan**, and Lily opens it to read a request from Snow Flower to come visit Lily's family again.

*Lily isn't the only one awestruck by Snow Flower's manners, which again sets Snow Flower apart from Lily and her family. Notice Mama's new kindness towards the girls—from what has already been said about Mama, we can ascertain that this agreement is financially good for the family, so she acts nicer.*



*Snow Flower's "horse" nature is developed further in the story of her foot binding, as she was spirited just like Third Sister was. However, rather than escaping her fate through death, Snow Flower mentally escaped by watching the birds. Birds and flying creatures then become a symbol for Snow Flower's desire for freedom, and her habit of mentally fleeing her worries and troubles. Lily's final comment indicates that while she may feel love for Snow Flower, she views Snow Flower's love for her as something that must be earned.*



*Lily continues to mention the cultural concept that women and daughters are useless, citing that it's expected for a mother to love a daughter but still feel disappointment. This idea is then extended to the other people that a woman must "love" throughout her life. Lily sees that she's required to love Snow Flower, but seems to believe that Snow Flower isn't required to love her back. Rather, Lily feels that she has to work to receive her love.*



*Snow Flower's fixation on birds and escape tests Lily's understanding of what a woman's life is supposed to be. Lily finds the idea of escape and movement exciting, even while she knows that neither of those things is truly possible for her because she's a woman.*



When Snow Flower arrives, Lily is waiting by the lattice window in the women's chamber. Mama carries Snow Flower upstairs and puts her down, and immediately she and Lily begin talking. Snow Flower doesn't speak of **flying** away; rather, she acts like a normal little girl interested in normal things. Snow Flower begins to teach Lily things from *The Women's Classic* (a guide for women's behavior), and asks Lily to teach her about chores like hauling water and making sticky rice cakes. Lily can't believe that Snow Flower doesn't know to perform these normal chores, but everyone in the women's chamber laughs as Lily acts out hauling water and making pig feed.

Snow Flower charms Lily's entire family and can even make Baba and Uncle laugh during dinner. Lily says her family treats Snow Flower like an escaped **bird** among chickens, but everyone is amused at the situation. That night, Snow Flower suggests that she and Lily wash their faces in the washbowl at the same time, and Lily knows that Snow Flower loves her.

## DAUGHTER DAYS: LEARNING

For the next three years, Snow Flower visits Lily's family every few months. Lily never questions why she never visits Snow Flower in Tongkou, until she's nine and overhears Mama ask Madame Wang about it. Madame Wang states that Snow Flower's family is suffering from Lily's low status, and if Lily were to visit Tongkou, her future husband might see her. Lily understands that Mama is ashamed, but thinks that she's not disturbed by finding out that Snow Flower's family feels Lily is unworthy, because she knows she's unworthy. As such, she works harder to make Snow Flower love her.

The matter is far from over, however, as Lily's *laotong* relationship means that the existing rivalry between Madame Wang and Madame Gao is heightened. Madame Gao offers her services to Snow Flower's family to slight Madame Wang and get revenge for Madame Wang "stealing" her business (in the form of Lily and Beautiful Moon). At one point when Madame Wang comes to Lily's house to pick up Snow Flower, Madame Gao is also visiting and the two quarrel in front of Snow Flower and Lily.

*The reader is reminded that the girls are still hobbled for the most part—Mama has to carry Snow Flower up the stairs. Lily attributes Snow Flower's lack of knowledge about these chores to Snow Flower's upper-class situation, but it also begins to raise questions about what's actually going on with Snow Flower and her family.*



*Lily even compares Snow Flower to a bird here, as the symbol of birds turns into a symbol for Snow Flower herself. In this situation, Snow Flower is essentially escaping her own family when she comes to stay with Lily, which foreshadows future instances of similar "escape."*



*Lily has truly internalized the idea that she's worthless and undeserving of love, even from the one person (Snow Flower) who's supposed to love her unconditionally. This belief allows Lily to avoid questioning whether there may be other reasons she can't visit Snow Flower. It's becoming clear that Mama doesn't necessarily believe Madame Wang's reasoning, even though Mama has no power to change the outcome.*



*The rivalry between the two matchmakers continues to develop the idea that the girls are worth only as much as their families, and the matchmakers, can gain from their marriages. Remember that Madame Wang will profit when Lily and Beautiful Moon marry, while Madame Gao only has Lily's Elder and Second brothers and Elder Sister in Lily's family from which to profit.*



When Snow Flower, Beautiful Moon, and Lily turn 11, their **feet** are healed. Lily's are smallest, Snow Flower's are slightly larger, and Beautiful Moon's are even bigger—but she's still marriageable. Madame Wang negotiates Contracting a Kin for the three girls. Lily is set to marry into the best family in Tongkou, where her husband is expected to be the future family headman. Beautiful Moon will marry into a Tongkou family of the same clan. Snow Flower's husband's family is in nearby Jintian. Madame Wang promises that Lily and Beautiful Moon will be able to see Jintian from their lattice windows, but says little else about Snow Flower's future family except that her husband was born in the year of the rooster. The girls find this disturbing, as a rooster and a horse aren't an ideal match.

Lily's family exchanges the first round of gifts with their future in-laws. Lily and Beautiful Moon are happy and optimistic, and continue to learn *nu shu* from Aunt and Snow Flower. Aunt impresses upon them that each word must be placed in context, and that tragedy can come from a wrong reading.

Aunt tells the girls the story of how *nu shu* was invented. A thousand years ago, a young and educated woman from Jintian was selected to be a concubine in the Emperor's court. While she was guaranteed a life of comforts, she was still sad about leaving her family. At the court, she couldn't keep the emperor entertained forever, and her talents were insignificant next to those of the other ladies. The woman silently practiced her writing as others snidely called it sloppy, but she wasn't trying to copy men's writing—she was inventing a secret code to write home with.

Aunt explains how the woman's sisters may have figured out how to read the note, but says dwelling on the "how" is not a woman's concern. What matters is that *nu shu* exists for women to share the less-than-happy things that happen under the happy surface in life. She reminds the girls that all girls marry out, but *nu shu* exists to help them keep ties with their natal families. Aunt repeats the story the next day.

When Snow Flower, Lily, and Beautiful Moon turn 13, their education picks up speed. Snow Flower's family had neglected to teach her domestic arts, so she shadows Lily in her chores. Mama and Aunt supervise the girls as they cook, clean, and sew. Lily thinks that Snow Flower will have servants one day and doesn't necessarily need to learn these tasks, but sees too that Snow Flower seems to float apart from life's practicalities.

*Diviner Hu and Madame Wang were correct about Lily's feet. Because they're considered perfect and act as currency, Lily's value rises and she's able to marry up. Remember too that having perfect feet is supposed to indicate a woman's ability to bear sons, which in theory means that Lily is going nowhere but up. Take note of the girls' suspicion of Snow Flower's husband. The girls are young, innocent, and still believe that no real wrong can befall them, but the novel is building evidence to support that they're very wrong about that. For now, though, the girls are told simply to trust their elders.*



*Aunt's warnings here work as foreshadowing for what's to come. Still, the girls are only teenagers, and Lily the narrator makes it very clear that the reader is supposed to regard them as silly and innocent, which sets the stage for a more emotional coming-of-age.*



*Regardless of whether this story is true or not, it functions as a tale that makes the idea of marrying out less of a scary proposition. It reinforces the fact that everyone is sad that girls marry out, but also reminds the girls themselves that while their in-laws may be cruel, the girls have power in the form of *nu shu* to communicate privately with their natal families.*



*Aunt genders thought and inquiry here as she sternly tells the girls that focusing on the act of learning itself is a male concern. By repeating the story, as well as the purpose of *nu shu*, the novel continues to build tension and leaves clues that misunderstanding language can bring conflict.*



*Lily is still idolizing Snow Flower and using this idolization to avoid asking questions. For example, why does Snow Flower need to learn these skills if she's going to have servants in her married home anyway? Such a question would likely be deemed inappropriate for a woman to ask, though, given Aunt's previous speech.*



The girls learn from Uncle and Baba too, as Snow Flower takes note of what foods they like and makes sure to serve those foods. Lily sees that when Snow Flower pays them these attentions, the men use better manners and talk to the women.

*Here Lily is learning a slightly different aspect of love as duty. By paying attention to people in a particular way, she can cultivate the kind of attention she'd like to receive.*



Snow Flower also tells Lily and Beautiful Moon about their future families. Lily's husband is kind and born in the year of the tiger, and his house is busy with lots of visitors. However, Master Lu (his father) has three concubines despite also having sons from his wife. Lily tells the reader that she should've been more worried at that, as a son is likely to take concubines if his father did.

*The way that Lily talks about the concubines asserts again that a married couple's one duty is to have sons, and she implies that concubines are appropriate if a woman can't bear sons. Lily the narrator reminds the reader again of her youthful naïveté, as she still believes nothing bad can happen to her.*



Snow Flower tells Beautiful Moon that she and her husband will also be a perfect match, and that her mother-in-law is kind—she visits Snow Flower's mother daily. Snow Flower's eyes suddenly fill with tears when she says this, and Lily and Beautiful Moon giggle uncomfortably. Snow Flower quickly recovers and then says that Lily's mother-in-law is traditional, and that Lily will have servants and be respected as the first daughter-in-law.

*Snow Flower's strange reaction to talking about a woman who visits her mother again builds tension that things might not be what they seem. Remember that Lily has already said that her major life transformation happened when she became Lady Lu (the successor of her mother-in-law), and here we get a first glimpse of what that might look like—namely, being very traditional.*



Lily and Snow Flower have now been to the Temple of Gupo five times. Each time they make offerings at the temple, purchase embroidery thread and paper, and eat at Old Man Zou's stall. They learn from these trips that while they will generally see no more than what they can from their upstairs windows, men have a great deal of freedom to travel along their country's many waterways.

*Lily and Snow Flower are learning that being as confined as they are is a strictly female state of being in this society. The fact that men have freedom to travel by water specifically harkens back to Lily's childhood experience of feeling freedom with her toes in the river.*



Madame Gao and Madame Wang frequently visit Lily's family, and the battle between the two escalates. One day, Madame Gao complains that local families aren't paying her on time. She continues that a peasant uprising is making things difficult, as commerce is stalled and families don't have money for dowries. She says that even Snow Flower isn't safe. Though Madame Wang tries to defend Snow Flower's father, Madame Gao says that a weak man will take to the pipe. At that, Mama sharply tells Madame Gao that she may not speak that way in front of the children, and hastily shows her out.

*This is the first mention that the outside world might have some effect on the closed, inside world of the women in the novel. While Lily would like to believe that the male and female worlds are sharply separated, the new political turmoil shows that the two are very much connected. Madame Gao's mention of the pipe will also be important, as it's one of the points at which Lily fails to understand the nuance and context that women's writing teaches her is necessary to truly understand language.*



Madame Wang is silent for a moment and then calls Lily to her, and tells her that she may never repeat what she just heard to Snow Flower. Lily promises, but tells the reader that she didn't understand what she heard anyway. She tells the reader too that from then on, Madame Gao conducted business with Lily's family outside on stools, which Lily attributes to her family's love for Snow Flower.

*Here, language is being used to both protect someone (Snow Flower) and to keep secrets. While Lily is still engaging with language as though it's always clear, as the narrator she's beginning to indicate that she didn't understand the many layers of meaning inherent to language and conversation.*



As Elder Sister's wedding approaches, the last round of gifts is delivered to Lily's family and Elder Sister's sworn sisters come for the Sitting and Singing, which lasts 28 days. They work on third-day wedding books (books to tell Elder Sister's new family about her) and help finish Elder Sister's dowry items.

*In this situation, the women must choose their words carefully, as they want to help Elder Sister make a good impression on her in-laws. They have the opportunity to use language to shape Elder Sister's future.*



On the day of Sorrow and Worry, three days before Elder Sister leaves home, Mama sits on the stairs and begins a lament at letting Elder Sister go. The women sing of their sadness at losing their sister. Snow Flower reads the couplet that she and Lily wrote on their **fan** to commemorate the occasion.

*The simple existence of the Day of Sorrow and Worry indicates that while daughters may be told they're useless, they can still be loved and cherished by their families. Notice, though, that a daughter hears this sentiment only in a ceremonial, traditional setting.*



When Elder Sister's new family arrives the next day, Lily's family throws bamboo and water on them for good luck. Her dowry is displayed and the next day, Elder Sister walks out to chants of "marrying a daughter is just like throwing out water." She goes to her new family in a palanquin. Four days later, Elder Brother picks up Elder Sister and brings her back home, as she'll only visit her husband monthly until the end of her first pregnancy.

*While three days ago Elder Sister was told she was loved, on this day she's told that her family views her departure as being as inconsequential as throwing out water. The traditional sayings are sometimes meant to comfort, but in this case they emphasize just how valueless most women are in this society.*



Lily says that she remembers best the day that Elder Sister returned from a visit the following spring. Elder Sister cried in Mama's lap about her abusive mother-in-law and her rough husband. Lily and Beautiful Moon comfort her, but believe this could never happen to them. Aunt begins to speak, and says that she's lived a miserable life—she cried when she married out, and then couldn't have sons. She finishes her speech by saying that this is how it is for women. Such a thing has never been spoken in the women's chamber before, and Lily considers how hard life must have been for Aunt despite her regular smiles and good cheer.

*Lily continues to make it very clear that she and her peers are young and extremely naïve. They've never considered that their aunt, usually so happy and kind, could have lived such a miserable life. She too had to leave her family, and wasn't able to bear sons and accomplish a woman's ultimate goal. Aunt, however, accepts that there's nothing she can do to change her fate—she's bound by tradition and custom to this miserable life. This turns tradition into something restrictive and controlling. This brief scene is, tragically, one of the only times the women of the novel talk even relatively openly about the pain they've experienced and their desire for something better.*



Mama speaks in a detached voice. She echoes Elder Sister's complaints, but says that as women they're powerless to resist. She recites the old saying, "if a daughter doesn't marry out, she's not valuable; if fire doesn't raze the mountain, the land will not be fertile."

*This saying echoes Mama's foot binding sayings in its indication that women can only truly be women if they experience pain and suffering. Elder Sister will truly be a worthless daughter if she doesn't agree to the pain of marrying out.*



## HAIR-PINNING DAYS: CATCHING COOL BREEZES

When Snow Flower and Lily turn 15, they pin their hair up in a style that symbolizes their impending marriages and spend their time working on their dowries. Snow Flower is set to join Lily's family for the Catching Cool Breezes festival, during which married-in women return to their natal homes for days or weeks. Lily and Snow Flower are the only women in Lily's household, as the rest of the women in her family are visiting family or friends. The weather is oppressively hot.

The first night of Snow Flower's visit, she and Lily lay in bed fully dressed, trying to catch nonexistent cool breezes from the window. Snow Flower suggests on the second night that they shed their outer layers of clothing. On the third night, which is hotter still, the girls strip down to their **foot** bindings and sleeping slippers, but are still far too warm. Snow Flower fans Lily with their **fan**, looking her naked body up and down. She licks her forefinger and draws wet lines on Lily's stomach. Snow Flower asks Lily to identify the *nu shu* character she'd drawn on Lily's stomach, and then draws the character again. Lily remembers they used to write on each other's hands as children. She's breathless at the cool touch and identifies the character as "bed."

Snow Flower continues to write characters across Lily's torso and hips, writing out the phrase "the bed is lit by moonlight," a line from a poem. Lily and Snow Flower switch places, and Lily regards Snow Flower's body. Lily addresses the reader and shares that at this point she had no idea that there's nothing more erotic for a man than a naked woman in her **sleeping slippers**, but says that her eyes lingered on Snow Flower's slippers nonetheless. Lily licks her finger and follows the same pattern that Snow Flower did on her own body, moving from stomach to hips. She writes the last two characters on Snow Flower's breasts. Snow Flower whispers, "I think it is the light snow of an early winter morning."

Snow Flower runs her hand down Lily's body and says they have two more lines. Moving to the foot of the bed, she takes Lily's **feet** in her lap and traces the third line around Lily's ankles, just above her bindings. Lily's feet tingle with pleasure. Lily then takes Snow Flower's feet in her own hands, writes the first two characters around her ankles, and then moves up Snow Flower's legs. She traces the final characters high up on Snow Flower's inner thigh, and blows on the wet strokes. The girls recite the full poem, which they know is about a traveling scholar, but Lily says that after this night she believed it was about her Snow Flower.

*The girls' activities are entirely focused on their impending marriages, asserting again that this next step is the most important step to becoming (hopefully) women of worth. Essentially, these women are defined only by their relationship to their future husbands, even though they've never even met them.*



*This is an intense moment of intimacy for Lily and Snow Flower. Notice that the intimacy comes not just from being naked with each other or even touching each other, but also from their use of language. Writing poetry on each other, which they did as children on each other's hands, provides an easily accessible avenue into physical intimacy. It again asserts that language is powerful, and in this situation, requires the girls to read into the greater context to understand what's happening.*



*There is an obviously sexual undercurrent to this encounter, though Lily doesn't even seem to consider this. This scene, perhaps the most intimate of the entire book, shows just how important Snow Flower is to Lily, and cements what seems like a true love between them. It's suggested here that Lily views Snow Flower as a man or a husband might view a woman (since Lily can only see things through her traditional and heteronormative worldview)—an idea that will be important (and negative) later, but in this instance, it only adds to the intimacy the two experience. The scene also explores the many different forms that writing and language can take. The girls already weave, embroider, and paint their words to each other, but here they combine set phrases (the poem is a popular one) in a new medium.*



*The entirety of this scene suggests that context and experience are extremely important to understanding and creating meaning through language. Lily and Snow Flower change the meaning of the poem by placing it in an entirely new context. They'll experiment throughout the novel with changing both format and content, but this stands as an instance in which Lily learns that *nu shu* can be more than what she previously thought. Here, it has power to make her and Snow Flower even closer, and provides her first truly erotic and romantic experience.*



## HAIR-PINNING DAYS: BEAUTIFUL MOON

Beautiful Moon returns home the next day. She, Lily, and Snow Flower have all received the first installments of their bride-prices, which include food and cloth. The cotton and silk Lily receives from her husband's family is very fine, and remind her of Snow Flower's stylish clothes. The girls are required to make clothes for themselves, as well as enough quilts, pillowcases, shoes, and other household textiles to last a lifetime. All the girls love making shoes, as they get to show off their technical and artistic skills, and the dowries arrive with patterns of the **feet** of everyone in the house. The girls stitch intricate designs to try to impress their future families.

The Catching Cool Breezes festival is still going on, and the heat has not yet broken. Lily speaks of the memory of putting her **feet** in the river as a child, and Beautiful Moon and Snow Flower speak of their own memories of coolness. Baba and Uncle finally string up a canopy outside the house, lay down quilts for the girls to sit on, and instruct them to not tell their mothers.

Lily hasn't been outside in her village since her **feet** were bound, and she relishes the rhythm of village life. Lily embroiders a serene landscape on shoes for her mother-in-law, who has slightly larger feet than Lily. Snow Flower works on a pair of purple and white shoes embroidered with **flying creatures**, and Beautiful Moon works on her red wedding slippers. Village children stop to chat and let the girls hold their baby siblings, and the girls wonder what it'll be like to care for their own babies someday.

On the fifth day of the festival, Madame Gao visits and delivers a letter from Elder Sister, who cannot leave her in-laws' home due to her advanced pregnancy. Her letter is sad: she's very pregnant, very hot, and her in-laws still make her do all the housework. Lily feels grateful for the custom of not moving in with in-laws permanently until the birth of one's first child.

*The fact that the girls spend so much time and energy creating shoes for themselves, and more importantly, for their future families, makes it very clear how important of a commodity feet are. The girls have never met their future families, but they know the foot size of everyone in the family. Their families' feet, then, become a vehicle through which they can impress these people who will care for them (or demand their care) for the rest of their lives.*



*Lily again ties feet and water together with the idea of freedom, which in the hottest months of the year mean experiencing moments of coolness. Baba and Uncle here show that they do care for the girls, even if they're supposedly considered useless. Instructing the girls to not tell their mothers also indicates that whatever the reader might be told about a woman's place in her married home, these women do have power over their husbands.*



*Lily, Snow Flower, and Beautiful Moon finally get to catch a cool breeze outside. This is a supremely hopeful and happy time for them as they are able to escape their usual setting and look forward to their future, and the shoes here represent their hopes for the future. Snow Flower's shoes especially point back to her desire to fly away and experience true freedom.*



*Again, Lily is young, naive, and feels as though she'll never experience anything like poor Elder Sister. She continues to take comfort in customs and traditions and even with this evidence that tradition isn't always positive, her wishes don't stray from her traditional future.*



Lily's reverie is interrupted by strange sounds. She looks to Beautiful Moon, who's brushing at her neck and breathing strangely. Lily instructs Snow Flower to get help and Snow Flower runs off on her tiny **feet**, yelling for help. Lily notices a bee on Beautiful Moon's embroidery. Beautiful Moon's face, neck, and tongue are swelling rapidly, and her breathing gets worse. Children and widows gather and watch the sight of Beautiful Moon's skin turning blue. Beautiful Moon meets Lily's eyes, and Lily tells her that Uncle is coming, and that they all love her.

Lily continues to talk to Beautiful Moon until finally the horrible sounds of her breathing stop and her head hangs. Uncle runs into the alley and under the canopy and begins howling with grief. Baba and Elder Brother, with Snow Flower on his back, arrive. Uncle picks up Beautiful Moon's body and carries her inside. Snow Flower takes control, telling Uncle that Aunt must be informed. She makes a plan to fetch Aunt and Mama, and then they wait.

Madame Wang arrives and asks how she can help. When she sees Beautiful Moon's engorged face, she instructs Snow Flower to wrap Beautiful Moon's face in muslin so Aunt doesn't have to see it, and dress her in "eternity" (burial) clothes. When Aunt arrives, she doesn't cry, but stands with her hand on Beautiful Moon's heart for hours. The funeral happens quickly, and Aunt does everything she's supposed to. Afterward, she doesn't cry during the day, but at night she moans and wails.

Lily explains that there's a special belief that the spirits of young women who die before marriage come back to prey on other unmarried girls in the hope of taking one to the afterworld with her for company. Snow Flower and Lily decide to make a flower tower, or a model house in which Beautiful Moon's spirit might entertain itself. On the day the heat wave breaks, Lily and Snow Flower walk to Beautiful Moon's grave and light the flower tower on fire. They recite a song they composed for Beautiful Moon's spirit, and when they return home, they write it on their **fan** and add a moon to the designs. Lily tells the reader that this tragedy can be explained by yin and yang, or the balance of opposites.

*The girls were never supposed to be outside in the first place, and breaking tradition in this way, even though the men facilitated it, has horrendous consequences for Lily and Beautiful Moon (who is apparently deathly allergic to bees). This tragedy will reinforce Lily's belief in the absolute necessity of adhering to traditions without question.*



*Beautiful Moon's death hearkens back to the death of Third Sister. Beautiful Moon still dies painfully, although here at least Lily seems able to comfort her somewhat and tell her that they all love her. Snow Flower does exactly what needs to be done and doesn't allow her emotions to negatively affect her responsibility.*



*Aunt, like Snow Flower, doesn't allow her emotions to affect how she performs her duties. She does what's expected of her, does it correctly, and experiences her emotions privately, though she is clearly devastated—Beautiful Moon was the one bright spot in Aunt's miserable life. Madame Wang appears to actually care about the girls she attends to, as she never gives any indication that she's losing money through Beautiful Moon's death.*



*Lily again shows herself to be very concerned with tradition. She views Beautiful Moon's death as something deserved and expected, given all the good in her family's lives, and is unable to view it simply as a meaningless tragedy. Beautiful Moon, however, gets to live forever on Lily's fan. In this way, language becomes a way to make someone immortal. On the fan, Beautiful Moon stays with Lily not just through the novel, but into the afterlife, as the text of the novel is supposed to be burnt upon Lily's death.*



## HAIR-PINNING DAYS: THE FLOWER-SITTING CHAIR

Two years later, Lily pins her hair into the dragon style of a young woman about to be married. Her in-laws send final items of the bride price, including jewelry and a water buffalo for Baba, which makes him one of the most prosperous men in Puwei. Snow Flower arrives for the Sitting and Singing ceremony. She and Lily grow closer still, and believe that nothing will ever alter their love. They're sure that their husbands will hire palanquins so the two can visit each other.

Mama, Aunt, Elder Sister, and other unmarried girls visit to celebrate, sing songs, and tell stories. Madame Wang visits and tells "The Tale of Wife Wang." The story tells of a woman who is married to a butcher, which is a low match for Buddhists, as killing animals brings bad karma in the next life.

"Wife Wang" tries to reason with her husband to stop killing animals, but he only tells her to remain virtuous. The King of the Afterworld claims her, but when he sees the extent of her virtue, he allows her to return to the world as a man with her real name written on her foot. She returns to her husband's village, unveils her true identity, and, thanks to her virtuousness, her entire family is allowed to enter nirvana. Lily says that she believed Madame Wang told this story to tell Lily about her future, as her husband might be impulsive and make offensive decisions. However, Lily's job as his wife would be to help him fight these bad traits.

Lily says that she had mixed feelings throughout the month as she experiences sadness at leaving and hope for the future. Snow Flower seems neither happy nor sad, just subdued. Snow Flower denies being worried about her wedding night, as does Lily, but neither girl seems convinced.

Lily tries to ask about Snow Flower's Sitting and Singing, which will start right after Lily's wedding. It will be the first time in their ten-year relationship that Lily will visit Snow Flower's family home. Snow Flower says little except that it will be a surprise planned by her mother. Lily wonders if Snow Flower feels embarrassed about Lily's low status, but reminds herself that the event is about Snow Flower, not her own worries. Snow Flower says she's worried that Lily will be disappointed.

*Lily begins describing the change in her life by focusing on the fact that her relationship with Snow Flower is only growing stronger. The tone here, however, makes it seem as though this may be subject to change, which reinforces the girls' naiveté and youth. They still believe that they'll never have lives as hard as Elder Sister or Aunt.*



*It's obvious that this story is intended to teach something. It deviates from other stories, however, in that according to Lily's interpretation, it uses a great deal of exaggeration (Lily's husband can't possibly be as bad as a butcher).*



*Once again, nu shu stories act as teaching tools. Lily understands how she's supposed to extrapolate personalized meaning and lessons out of the story to apply to her own future life, although her belief that the story is about her will be proven incorrect later. Lily also begins to conceptualize what her role as a wife will be. She begins to see that she may have power to influence the way her husband lives.*



*The wedding night is one tradition that isn't providing any comfort for either girl. It's a tradition, to be sure, but it's entirely unknown. Lily, however, knows she must follow the tradition anyway, even though she doesn't know how.*



*Lily is trying her best to show Snow Flower that she cares by acting as unselfishly as possible. She has to remind herself that Snow Flower's Sitting and Singing isn't at all about her own worries. Snow Flower's worry, however, continues to build tension as the reader and Lily wonder what could possibly happen to disappoint Lily, who still idolizes Snow Flower.*



Three days before Lily's wedding, the Day of Sorrow and Worry starts. Mama sits on the stairs and she and Lily sing and cry at each other. Lily repeats the process with each family member. Lily tries to be brave, but her resolve is weakening, since a bride can't eat for the ten days of wedding festivities, and the eggs Mama hides for her aren't enough to help.

The next morning, Lily wakes nervously but Snow Flower comforts her. She helps Lily dress in her wedding outfit and put on all her jewelry, hairpins, and her headdress, with red tassels that hang down in front of her face and create a veil. Lily can't see as Snow Flower leads her downstairs, but she hears Mama and Aunt. They walk to Puwei's ancestral temple and back home again, where they wait for Lily's in-laws to arrive. When they approach, the customary water is thrown on them and people chant, "raising a girl and marrying her off is like building a fancy road for others to use."

Madame Wang introduces Lily's parents to their future in-laws. Lily's parents host a banquet at the ancestral temple, which Lily may not eat. She hasn't eaten for seven days. The next day, the Day of the Big Singing Hall, Lily's dowry and the third-day wedding books are displayed. Lily is seated, and Lily's mother-in-law sets a bowl of soup before her. Lily notices her mother-in-law's **feet**, and she panics when she sees that she wears shoes that are much finer than the shoes that Lily made for her. As is customary, Snow Flower escorts Lily from the party and back home, and helps her change into a nightdress.

When Lily's family returns from the party, Lily thinks that now is the time that Mama will give her advice on "bed business." Mama sits with Lily and tells her that a true lady lets no ugliness in her life, and one achieves beauty through pain. These are the same words she used during **foot** binding, and Lily wonders if bed business is that bad. Mama continues and says, "you have promised to be united for life. Be the lady you were meant to be." She gets up and leaves, leaving Lily alone and very afraid.

Snow Flower returns and tries to comfort Lily by telling her how virtuous and obedient she is. She remarks that Aunt and Uncle are very happy doing bed business, and then says that Lady Lu was very impressed by Lily's fragility and beautiful **feet**. She instructs Lily to close her eyes and sleep.

*Throughout her wedding ceremony and festivities, Lily clings tightly to traditions. She realizes that not being allowed to eat makes the process hard, but she follows it because she believes it's the only way to achieve happiness in her marriage.*



*Again the phrases and chants about the place of daughters in their natal home indicate that they're little more than burdens. They're raised to serve others, but not to be loved by others. Lily is physically restricted now that she wears her wedding headdress. On the eve of her wedding, she cannot eat, see, or walk far on her bound feet. Therefore, the process of becoming a woman is very much like being captured.*



*Lily's resolve and bravery continue to weaken as her body weakens. Lily still wears her veil, so she sees nothing of her mother-in-law except for her feet. While Lily's feet are a symbol of her ability to move up in the world, when Lily compares them to those of her mother-in-law, she realizes that her feet may not be enough. This first glimpse gives Lily an idea of the kind of person her mother-in-law is: very fine, and definitely superior.*



*It's becoming increasingly evident that despite Lily and Snow Flower's insistence that they're not worried about sex, Lily clearly (and understandably) is. However, Mama does little to make Lily feel any better about what's to come (again relying only on platitudes, as Lily has learned to do as well). Notice that Lily's fixation on bed business means that she's unable to consider that Mama may be talking about something entirely different.*



*Here, Snow Flower comforts Lily by reminding her how perfectly she adheres to customs and tradition. She tries to make Lily believe that her feet truly do have power, despite Lily's fears to the contrary.*



The next morning, Lily's new family arrives to pick her up and take her to Tongkou. The women cry, but Lily can't see anyone through her headdress. As she walks outside, she thanks Mama for raising a "worthless daughter," and exchanges other call-and-response sayings with her other family members. As Mama and Baba help Lily over the threshold, she thinks of everything she's been told about her future husband. Snow Flower guides Lily to the palanquin and helps her in, tucking a note and their **fan** inside Lily's jacket to read later.

Lily cries in the palanquin and explains to the reader that part of the phrase for marrying out means "falling," as in falling leaves or dying, and the word for "wife" is the same as for "guest." A wife is only ever an alien, foreign guest in her husband's home.

Lily reads the happy note from Snow Flower on the **fan**, and then turns to the embroidered note on a handkerchief. Snow Flower writes that Lily will learn things about Snow Flower in the coming days, and Snow Flower is afraid Lily will no longer love her. Lily is perplexed and afraid.

When Lily arrives at Tongkou, bearers unload her dowry. The woman with the most sons in the village leads Lily to her in-laws' house, where Lily kneels before them and promises to obey and work for them. She's escorted to the wedding chamber and left alone with the door open. She hears people bar the door with a table, stack wedding quilts on top, and place two cups of wine tied with red and green thread on the table. Lily's husband then enters the room outside to cheers. He pulls the red thread while Lily pulls the green thread, and he jumps over the table. They're officially married.

Lily inspects what she can see of her husband, and notes that the shoes she made him look handsome. Then "Teasing and Getting Loud in the Wedding Chamber" begins, and Lily's husband's friends enter the room and make crude jokes about sex and Lily's body. Late at night, fireworks are set off and everyone goes home. Madame Wang closes the door to the wedding chamber and leaves Lily and her husband alone.

*This call-and-response again asserts that women are supposed to be worthless to their natal families. Lily still can't see anyone or anything, making the experience of leaving her home even scarier as she heads off to the unknown of her husband's home. She won't only be immobile and blind there; she'll be in unfamiliar territory.*



*Lily's explanation reminds the reader again of women's fate. While Lily is hopeful for her future, which will certainly allow her luxuries and freedoms she doesn't currently possess, it will come at the cost of being treated like a foreigner by people she's supposed to love.*



*This causes the reader to wonder what possibly might be going on that Snow Flower couldn't tell Lily herself. Lily will come to view this act as a manipulative strike against her because of Snow Flower's refusal to use direct language.*



*The fact that the woman with the most sons is charged with escorting Lily once again asserts that a woman's worth is defined by what her body is capable of producing. Even though Lily and her husband are now officially married, she still won't be able to actually see any more than his feet for several hours. This continues to develop the idea that a married woman is at the mercy of her husband and his family, as she depends on him to keep her safe.*



*The mere existence of this part of the wedding ceremony alludes to the fact that the true purpose of a marriage is to produce sons through sex. This is the one time that such things can be treated as fun (although not for Lily) and not just a societal pressure and necessity.*



Lily and Lily's husband greet each other and he offers her peanuts and dates. Lily refuses, as she's not supposed to eat for two more days. He asks Lily if she's pretty, and Lily asks him to remove her headdress. He does and the two regard each other. Lily thinks he's very handsome. He takes Lily's hands and tells her he thinks they could be happy together. He follows all the traditions that night and puts on Lily's **sleeping slippers** for her. For Lily, this is more intimate than the sex that follows.

Lily wakes early on the second day of her marriage. She goes into the hallway, feeling sick with worry, as she has been since she read Snow Flower's letter. In the kitchen, Lily's servant girl, Yonggang, has already hauled water and built a fire. Lily performs her chores and later, she and her husband attend a feast in Tonkou's ancestral temple.

The third day of marriage is a bride's favorite day, as the third-day wedding books are read to the bride's new family. Elder Sister and Elder Brother arrive, but Snow Flower doesn't come. Lily is hurt and scared by this. The books contain all the usual sentiments, even from Snow Flower. Snow Flower's book begins by mentioning a **phoenix and a golden hen**.

## HAIR-PINNING DAYS: TRUTH

On the fourth day after her marriage, Lily packs to go to Snow Flower's house for her Sitting and Singing. Yonggang escorts her through Tongkou, carrying a basket of embroidery supplies. When they reach Snow Flower's house, Yonggang opens the door and leads Lily inside. It smells sweet, rotten, and very human. The room is large but with little furniture, and there's no fire in the hearth. Lily thinks she's in the wrong place.

A woman in peasant clothes squats over a washbasin, and when she sees Lily, rises to greet her. She goes to fetch Snow Flower, and Lily notices her small lily **feet**, thinking it's unusual for servants to have bound feet. Lily is shocked to see Snow Flower at the top of the stairs. Yonggang doesn't want to leave Lily, but Lily sends her on her way. She remembers Mama's words from a few days ago (about being "united for life") and realizes that Mama wasn't talking about bed business—she was talking about Snow Flower.

When Lily gets to the top of the stairs, she tells Snow Flower that nothing has changed. Snow Flower introduces the poorly dressed woman from downstairs as her mother. After Lily greets Snow Flower's mother, she goes downstairs and leaves Lily and Snow Flower to talk.

*In the first moments when they can actually see each other, Lily's husband proves himself to be everything that Snow Flower promised he'd be. Lily still insists on following tradition by not eating anything. Her husband, on the other hand, shows that he doesn't necessarily believe that following tradition so closely is entirely necessary.*



*Yonggang becomes a prominent sign of Lily's new status as a married woman. Lily will never have to perform menial chores herself anymore, even though as a daughter-in-law, she's required to do whatever chores her in-laws ask of her.*



*Amid the complete shock Lily feels due to Snow Flower's absence, she's comforted here by the fact that Snow Flower's book adheres to tradition and what she's come to expect from Snow Flower. However, it also continues to build tension regarding what Lily is going to find when she finally arrives at Snow Flower's home.*



*Remember that Lily has spent the last ten years believing that Snow Flower is living in luxury, with servants and beautiful furnishings. The novel thus begins to draw a connection between nu shu—and the nuance required to understand it—and the nuance required to understand spoken conversation.*



*It dawns on Lily that Mama knew that Snow Flower lived like this and tried to warn her. Mama's warning, while not well received at the time, can be regarded as an act of love and an attempt to protect Lily. Lily, however, couldn't move outside of what she thought she knew and apply Mama's wisdom where she truly needed it.*



*Lily attempts to use language to comfort Snow Flower. She reasserts the power of their contract (and tradition) by stating that she'll continue to fulfill their promises to each other.*



Snow Flower cries with shame and embarrassment. She begins to explain that her family was once prosperous, but Snow Flower's father was the only son amongst many, many daughters, and while some thought he would be headman of Tongkou, others saw that he was weak and cowardly. Two years after Snow Flower was born her grandparents died. Life remained prosperous, but her father had to care for her grandfather's concubines and marry out their daughters and his sisters. He began to sell land to pay bride prices, and finally discovered opium. Lily realizes that this is the "pipe" that Madame Gao had mentioned years ago.

Lily asks Snow Flower if Snow Flower's father is alive and in the house, and she answers affirmatively. Snow Flower continues that when the famine came, her father wasn't prepared. He planned to sell Snow Flower as a "little daughter-in-law" (a concubine with unbound feet), but "Auntie Wang" saved her by binding her **feet**. Lily is aghast that Madame Wang is Snow Flower's aunt. Snow Flower says that Auntie Wang began searching for a *laotong* match to make Snow Flower more marriageable, and found Lily. She explains that Lily was supposed to teach her the practical homemaking skills that Snow Flower's mother never taught her.

Lily thinks that Snow Flower and Snow Flower's mother are unable to escape the belief that a woman's realm is supposed to be nothing but beautiful. She thinks that they look on the past with nostalgia and are unable to accept that things won't go back to the way they were.

Lily realizes that Snow Flower must be marrying into a very low family if she needs these practical skills. Snow Flower admits that her husband's family are butchers. Lily remembers Madame Wang's story "The Tale of Wife Wang," and realizes it wasn't meant for her. Lily tells Snow Flower that she won't go hungry. Snow Flower sobs for a moment and then angrily tells Lily that she doesn't want pity. Lily thinks that she's only confused, and that Snow Flower's letter ruined Lily's enjoyment of her own wedding, and she's hurt Snow Flower didn't attend the reading of her third-day wedding books. Lily feels betrayed and wonders why Snow Flower never told the truth. She wonders if Snow Flower actually believes she can just fly away with the **birds**.

*Lily finally understands that she's spent much of her life misunderstanding Snow Flower and the spoken conversations she's heard about her. This again reinforces the lessons taught by nu shu: that words, events, and actions must be placed in context and carefully evaluated to discover their meaning. Lily has proven herself incapable of doing this, and will continue to struggle with this lesson throughout the rest of the novel.*



*Snow Flower could have been a very different sort of commodity had her father sold her as a concubine, which continues to add layers to the idea of women's bodies as currency. To take that idea even further, we see too how Snow Flower's value increased when she was contracted to Lily. Thus, the *laotong* match, a match intended for love and companionship, seems to have been made in this case for more economic ones (although the girls couldn't know this at the time, of course).*



*Lily continues to gender thoughts and spaces here. Notice the implication that Snow Flower and her mother simply can't accept that the world of women is often full of sorrow and horrors, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.*



*Lily is trying to make the best of a truly terrible situation here, although Snow Flower's later sufferings will go far beyond food scarcity. Note here how Lily begins to make the situation about herself. Rather than feel true sympathy or love for Snow Flower, when Snow Flower doesn't respond the way Lily wants her to, Lily starts to resent Snow Flower for not responding or performing "correctly." Lily believes she herself has a more realistic view on life, even though the troubles she's seen pale in comparison to Snow Flower's everyday life.*



Lily the narrator explains that as a girl, she was too self-centered to see the truth of the situation. She spent her life surrounded by people who saw only her special future, and she blames Mama for choosing to not tell her about Snow Flower. She says she was a stupid 17-year-old girl and buried her feelings, but it was as though she'd eaten bad meat that then started spoiling inside her.

Lily says that she had to pretend that she wasn't sick from the proverbial spoiled meat, so she tried to help. She helps Snow Flower and Snow Flower's mother clean the house, but can't eliminate the smell. She sees that Snow Flower and her mother live in fear of Snow Flower's father, who is petulant, angry, and best left alone with his opium.

Snow Flower lays out her dowry for Lily to see. Lily recognizes familiar fabrics and realizes that Snow Flower's dowry has been created from her own clothes. Snow Flower laughs and explains that they were originally Snow Flower's mother's clothes. Lily and Snow Flower laugh and laugh. Lily thinks about how women are seen as useless and powerless, which makes it amazing that Snow Flower and her mother used their "useless" skills to change their lives.

When Madame Wang arrives, Lily sends her to her natal home to fetch food and cloth. She asks Madame Wang to bring Snow Flower's sister for the Sitting and Singing, but her elder sister isn't allowed in the house because of Snow Flower's father's bad reputation. Lily is shocked. She gives Madame Wang money and instructs her to find three girls and pay their fathers to allow them to come.

Madame Wang arrives the next day with three farmers' daughters. Lily leads them in writing third-day wedding books for Snow Flower and bullies them into making wedding quilts. The songs they sing are bleak and sad.

As the weather grows colder, Lily moves the group downstairs so they can make use of the fire. Lily starts a new third-day wedding book for Snow Flower, as her original sentiments no longer pertain. On the Day of Sorrow and Worry, Lily and Snow Flower's mother sing of helping one's husband rise to a better place. Snow Flower doesn't cry. Two days later, when Snow Flower's palanquin arrives to take her to her new home, she still doesn't cry. Lily wonders at this lack of emotion.

*As a much older adult, Lily realizes that she made her life only about herself. Lily allowed herself to believe that she was special, and this blinded her to understanding the truth or trying to truly empathize with others.*



*Notice here that Lily knows that she's harboring resentment towards Snow Flower. She feels betrayed, but she wraps herself tighter in customs and traditions to try to ignore her emotions. This places personal emotions in conflict with traditions.*



*This act begins to impress upon Lily that while she's spent her life being told that women are worthless, they do have power. Again, this is a lesson that Aunt taught Lily by teaching her nu shu, but it takes Lily seeing it in action to truly learn that women can have agency.*



*Lily uses her newfound power to its full potential here as she forces Madame Wang to help her create the facade of following tradition. She's putting her faith and her money into pretending that things are normal and as expected in the hopes that she can make it come true.*



*Despite following tradition, however, the party cannot escape or ignore the fact that Snow Flower's fate is terrible. Tradition here cannot provide any comfort.*



*The songs here draw from "The Tale of Wife Wang," using nu shu and stories as teaching tools to help encourage Snow Flower to behave a certain way. Notice too that it's supposed to be Snow Flower's responsibility to encourage her husband to live a better and more virtuous life—on top of the responsibility to bear virtuous sons. This implies that she's responsible for all the men in her married life.*



Madame Wang and Lily watch Snow Flower disappear, and Lily asks if she (Lily) was truly a special child when Madame Wang first visited her. Madame Wang admits that she wanted someone from a better family, but says that Lily's **feet** were very special and would've changed her fate anyway. She continues, saying that she told lies to give Snow Flower a chance and won't apologize for that. Lily wants to hate her, but thinks that she helped the person that Lily cares about most.

*Snow Flower's affection and kindness towards Madame Wang makes sense in light of what Lily learned about Snow Flower's family. Lily struggles here with the newfound knowledge that Madame Wang isn't just a greedy, "masculine" woman out to make a profit; she acted to give Snow Flower a chance for a better future. Discovering this nuance continues Lily's process of growing up.*



Three days later, Lily delivers Snow Flower's third-day wedding books. There's no feast at Snow Flower's married home, and the women who greet Lily are coarse and unsavory. Inside the house, Lily meets Snow Flower's mother-in-law, who she describes as dreadful. Snow Flower's mother-in-law sneers that here in Jintian, women don't value *nu shu* in its written form and prefer to speak it, as everyone knows what everyone else thinks. She asks Lily to read the books. Lily takes it all as very insulting.

*Lily is in a precarious position. She's just married into an immensely powerful family and thus has power she's never experienced before, but she still must respect Snow Flower's mother-in-law despite her low social standing. Lily also isn't received at this house like she expects to be. Not experiencing the customs and traditions she's used to knocks her off balance emotionally and makes her even more confused and sad.*



Lily reads from Snow Flower's mother's book and then picks up her own. As she reads, Snow Flower's mother-in-law just stares suspiciously. Snow Flower and Lily aren't allowed to speak when the ceremony is over, and Lily returns to her natal family. When she arrives home, she opens the **fan** and, to mark Snow Flower's marriage, writes about a **phoenix** soaring over a common rooster. Lily cries and paints a wilted, crying flower at the top of the fan.

*Lily is beginning to learn that things she thought were the same everywhere (*nu shu*, for example) actually aren't. She struggles to connect with Snow Flower's mother-in-law, in part because the two simply don't speak the same proverbial language, even though *nu shu* is a part of both of their lives.*



## HAIR-PINNING DAYS: THE TEMPLE OF GUPO

Lily's parents are happy to see her, but she struggles with the feeling that they lied to her for ten years. She rebels by refusing to engage with her family under the guise of shyness. After five days, Mama and Lily end up alone in the women's chamber and Mama calls Lily out on her pettiness, slapping her hard across the face. Lily holds her gaze angrily and grabs Mama's arm, pulling her down to her own level. She calls Mama a liar and brings up her lies about Snow Flower. Mama retaliates by blaming Lily for Beautiful Moon's death. Mama says that she gave Lily the life she now has because she personally bound her **feet**. Lily snarls that she won't expect kindness from Mama anymore, and although she'll be charitable to her family in the future, she won't forget this transgression.

*Remember that Lily's true coming of age is the process of becoming Lady Lu, so this rejection of her natal family is the first step in that direction. Lily is beginning to feel out what her power as a married woman actually is, although Mama won't let her forget that she must still be traditionally loyal to her natal family. Lily's reply, however, indicates that while she'll follow tradition and do what she's supposed to do, she won't do it with any positive emotion or because she wants to. This represents another instance in which tradition is divorced from emotional truth.*



Mama says she pities the Lu family for taking Lily, and the conversation is over. Lily says she softened to the rest of her family but remained distant from her mother, though she properly followed rules and customs outwardly. Lily says that she would later repeat this process of showing her emotions for a moment and then hanging onto her grievances, although the next time this happens it's disastrous.

*Again Lily falls back on customs and traditions to protect her from feeling uncomfortable emotions. The narration hints at the fact that this is indeed a trend for her, and that it will have disastrous consequences. For now, though, holding onto tradition and ignoring emotion provides Lily with a modicum of comfort and security.*



Snow Flower and Lily write each other often, although they can't visit each other. Lily travels to Tongkou four or five nights per year and watches the countryside go by from her palanquin. She describes Tongkou and the path she walks through the village to her married home. She spends her nights in her husband's bed, trying to conceive a son, but they don't see each other much otherwise. Lily's mother-in-law is fair but strict, and Lily is willing to learn how things are done in her household.

Lily and Snow Flower meet for the first time since their weddings to travel to the Temple of Gupo. Lily doesn't want to talk about Mama or Snow Flower's deceit, so the two delicately discuss how they're trying to get pregnant. They make offerings and pray for sons at the temple.

Neither Lily nor Snow Flower becomes pregnant in the next year, so when they visit the Temple of Gupo again, their prayers and offerings are deeper. Lily begins to get funny looks about her potential infertility as the year goes on. Several months later, Madame Wang delivers a letter to Lily from Snow Flower, saying that she's pregnant. Lily is humiliated and jealous.

The next time Lily's husband has sex with her, Lily holds him on top of her until he falls asleep. The next morning she initiates sex again and then stays in bed even after he gets up and goes into the kitchen. Lily expects admonishment from her mother-in-law, but when Lily finally emerges, Lady Lu and Yonggang are smiling. Two weeks later, when Lily is at her own home, she wakes up feeling ill and vomits. Aunt gets up to wipe Lily's face and smiles. Lily writes Snow Flower to tell her of the good news.

Mama is very strict with Lily and makes sure she eats only bland foods. Lily accepts the limitations, as she knows her worth is dependent on her baby. Lily's husband and in-laws are thrilled. They allow Lily to make a stop and visit the Temple of Gupo to pray for a son on her way to living permanently with them. Lily picks up Snow Flower on the way, and their baby bellies get in the way of a proper hug.

*Here the reader is asked to compare the actual practical differences between a laotong relationship and a marriage. It's even more obvious now that a woman's purpose in a marriage is to produce sons, as that's all Lily tries to do with her husband at this point. Lily and Snow Flower, however, experience more and more emotional intimacy as they move away from their natal families.*



*The girls can only hope and pray that their bodies will cooperate and do what they're supposed to do, and therefore allow them to triumph as "virtuous" and successful women.*



*Lily's jealousy here indicates that she truly believes she's now superior to Snow Flower, and therefore should've gotten pregnant first. This is a huge difference from Lily's previous idolization of Snow Flower, and is tied to Lily's attempts to divorce herself from experiencing real emotion.*



*The way that Lily structures the narrative here indicates a belief that conceiving a child is simply a matter of following tradition closely and doing what's supposed to be done. It's an achievement rather than luck, and Lily is able to believe she's in control of her body and what it can do. This provides Lily a sense of achievement and security.*



*Lily is very aware that she's only worth as much as the child inside her. If the child is a girl, Lily's value will decrease, hence the stop to pray for a son. Lily and Snow Flower also get to continue their tradition of visiting the temple together, which gives them comfort.*



Pregnancy agrees with Snow Flower, and she looks radiant. When they reach the temple they enter proudly and compare their stomachs with the other expectant mothers. They offer poems written on fans to the goddess, and each steal a pair of baby shoes lined up along the altar. Lily explains that a woman who wants a healthy baby steals a pair of shoes, and when her baby is born, returns a pair of shoes to the altar. This is because in local dialect, the words for "child" and "shoe" are the same. Lily and Snow Flower eat at Old Man Zuo's stand to end the day.

Snow Flower and Lily stop at an inn that night to sleep. They lie in bed facing each other and put their hands on each other's stomachs. Lily can feel Snow Flower's baby moving, and Snow Flower says that she'll love Lily's son as much as she loves Lily.

*With this insight into the intricacies of the local language, we see again how language itself can create and reinforce meaning. This continues to develop the connection between a woman's body and her worth, as a woman's worth is determined first by her foot size and then by her children.*



*Snow Flower seeks to expand the laotong relationship to include their future children. This indicates a hope for the future that their relationship will continue to be strong and emotionally fulfilling.*



## RICE-AND-SALT DAYS: SONS

Snow Flower writes a message to Lily telling her of her newborn son. Lily is happy for Snow Flower's fortune, but explains to the reader that life is fragile and infants can easily die. She's worried for her own unborn baby, and she's received little practical advice from anyone. Her in-laws seem unconcerned that Lily might die during childbirth.

Lily says that her relationship with Snow Flower seems stronger now that they're in their "rice-and-salt days." Their letters to each other, however, follow the conventional format and use accepted phrases, as they don't know who might read them. They're supposed to write about their struggles in their new homes, but not seem *too* ungrateful or miserable. Lily says that this is why she waited until now to write this story.

At first, Lily didn't have anything bad to tell Snow Flower, as her family's wealth kept life pleasant and Lily's mother-in-law doted on her once she gave birth to her first son. This secures Lily's place in her in-laws' home. Lily explains that these days are called "rice-and-salt" because they're filled with chores and worrying about the baby.

Lily's mother-in-law refuses to invite Snow Flower to Lily's first son's one-month party. Lily is crushed and confused, but has no say in the matter. At the party, the Lu family writes Lily's son's name on the wall of their ancestral temple and then serves a variety of **poultry** dishes. Snow Flower sends a beautiful jacket for Lily's son, but Lily's mother-in-law makes it clear that Lily is not to associate with Snow Flower. Lily decides to fight this.

*Lily appears entirely unprepared practically for having her baby. It comes out very clearly here that Lily is considered little more than a vessel by her in-laws.*



*Lily reminds the reader that women must walk a very fine line between accepting their worthlessness and blaming their miserable states on their families. This reasserts the purpose of the novel as well, which is to explain all these things to Lily's dead relatives and to Snow Flower in the afterworld.*



*Assuming Lily's son lives, Lily's worth is confirmed and will now appreciate further. We also begin to see that Lady Lu can be kind—when the recipient of her kindness has done everything correctly. As with Mama, her kindness and affection comes at a price.*



*This conflict between Lily and Lady Lu creates a strange paradox regarding tradition. Lady Lu wishes for Lily to break tradition via breaking her contract with Snow Flower, but Lily is also traditionally bound to obey her mother in law.*



Snow Flower and Lily write each other daily and Yonggang carries their notes. Lily watches her run to Jintian, thinking that it's not so far and she herself could make it. Lily realizes too, now that she's in a home with learned men, that men certainly both know of and can read *nu shu*, but consider it beneath them and unimportant. Lily's husband doesn't pay attention to her letters, but Lily has to keep an eye on Lady Lu.

*Lily is now feeling trapped in her married home, particularly now that she watches Yonggang easily cover the distance between the two villages. While Lily believes she could make this journey herself, she must keep to tradition for her own safety and to protect her value. She also learns that nu shu has value in part because those who might censor it believe it useless.*



Snow Flower writes Lily to tell her of her abusive mother-in-law and shares that her own mother and father sold their belongings and became beggars. She closes by asking Lily if she's happy. Lily thinks that it's better to have dead parents that you can worship properly than disappeared parents. Lily also doesn't know how to answer if she's happy, as a second daughter-in-law just came to live with them and she cries all the time, and Master Lu's concubines bicker constantly. Lily also wonders how to answer when her primary conflict is regarding Snow Flower herself.

*Lily's belief here reminds the reader of what was made clear when Third Sister fell sick: it's considered better to be dead than be crippled or a beggar (particularly for a woman). However, Lily refuses to acknowledge that Snow Flower can still mourn (and certainly is mourning) the loss of her parents, even though it isn't loss via death. Lily essentially can't conceptualize how to handle such a situation when there's no convention to dictate what should happen.*



Lady Lu makes many excuses why Lily can't see Snow Flower, but Lily knows that she simply doesn't want Lily associating with her. Lily declines an invitation to join a sworn sisterhood. Despite this, Lady Lu is kinder to Lily than Mama ever was, and teaches Lily a new axiom: "Obey, obey, obey, then do what you want." Lily vows that her in-laws can't make her stop loving Snow Flower.

*Despite Lady Lu's lack of support for Lily's laotong, she makes everyday life far more pleasant for Lily than Mama ever did. While this kind of love certainly stems from Lady Lu's duty to her daughter-in-law, it provides Lily some of the attention she craves from her family, both natal and married.*



One day, Madame Wang delivers a letter to Lily from Snow Flower. Snow Flower writes that her in-laws forced her to watch them slaughter a pig, and she's becoming more like Wife Wang (she's become a vegetarian). She doesn't want to worry Lily about her ugly life, and begs Lily to write or visit. Rereading the letter, Lily realizes that Snow Flower didn't use the conventional phrases or stylized lines, and realizes then that the true purpose of *nu shu* is to give women a candid voice, allowing their **feet** to carry them to each other and their thoughts to **fly** to each other. Lily composes a similarly constructed letter inviting Snow Flower to her natal home for the Expel Birds Festival.

*Here Lily is reminded again that tradition can be broken, and that doing so at times can bring comfort. This recalls Lily's decision to return Snow Flower's first note on the same fan rather than a different one. In both situations, Lily found that breaking with tradition could provide significantly more emotional intimacy. The recurrence of the story of Wife Wang again reminds the reader that stories are intended to offer guidance, and asks us to consider how they interact with "real" life.*



Lily is scared to deceive Lady Lu. The Expel Birds Festival marks the beginning of farming season, so women make sticky rice balls to offer to the **birds** to distract them from the fields. After they leave the rice balls, Lily gets in her palanquin and heads for Jintian. Snow Flower and Snow Flower's son enter the palanquin, and Lily notices that Snow Flower is still plump. They compare and compliment their sons. Lily sees that Snow Flower's son is thin and sickly.

*Lily can only focus on what's "wrong" with Snow Flower here. Snow Flower's son isn't robust, and Lily's focus on Snow Flower's body mimics her fixation on Snow Flower's feet from years earlier. Lily still views Snow Flower with a critical, analytical eye rather than as a true friend or companion.*



Snow Flower says she only feels joy when she's with her son. Lily tries to reassure her that winter makes her sad, but Snow Flower insists that her husband's family only wants things from her. Lily is aghast and allows herself to slip into convention. She offers, "number-one wives who are mothers of sons conquer in the end." Snow Flower then admits that she's pregnant again. Lily is again perplexed, as it seems as though Snow Flower didn't wait the prescribed 100 days after birth before having sex, but she congratulates her anyway. Snow Flower says that her husband the butcher tells her it's better to have a dog than a daughter.

Lily is saved from having to respond to Snow Flower as they arrive at her natal home. Lily is happy to be home, and everyone enjoys the gaggle of children. At night, Lily and Snow Flower sleep with their sons between them. One night, Snow Flower asks Lily if she likes bed business. Snow Flower doesn't wait for an answer before referring to herself and her husband as two **mandarin ducks** that enjoy it. Lily is bewildered, especially when Snow Flower admits that Snow Flower's husband won't respect the rules about bed business after birth.

Lily and Snow Flower continue to write each other after they return to their married homes. As their letters begin to express more of their intimate moments with their husbands, Lily continues to believe that breaking the "pollution laws" will be punished. Snow Flower writes that she had a stillborn daughter, and everyone blames her for it. Lily doesn't know how to comfort her, and again leans on convention, urging her to get pregnant again with a son. Over the next three years their sons learn to walk and talk, Lily's second son is born, and Snow Flower gives birth to another stillborn daughter. Lily recommends herbs, and Snow Flower reports that the herbs brought satisfaction to bed business.

## RICE-AND-SALT-DAYS: JOY AND SORROW

When Lily's first son turns five, Lily's husband decides to hire a tutor for him. Lily is sad to see him go, especially since the upstairs chamber is very unpleasant. The Third Sister-in-law and Fourth-sister-in-law have married in recently, and both gave birth to girls and then two stillborn boys. Lily, pregnant again, is a source of jealousy and resentment for them, but Lily longs for a daughter to keep her company in the upstairs chamber.

*Remember that married women are supposed to be unhappy, but it's implied here that Snow Flower is taking her unhappiness too far for Lily's comfort. This indicates that Lily is simply unable or unwilling to engage with these negative emotions when they don't match perfectly with what's expected. Consider too that Snow Flower is not getting comfort from Lily here, but she's not getting comfort from her husband either. She's becoming ever more isolated.*



*Snow Flower's use of "mandarin ducks" implies that she does find freedom and happiness through sex with her husband, even if the rest of her married life is wholly miserable. Lily's shock at Snow Flower's disregard for the rules about sex after birth is a pattern for Lily by this point. Snow Flower, then, is sharing her most intimate secrets with someone who believes that she is in the wrong.*



*Lily is fully embracing the idea that a woman can bring upon herself either fortune or failure by following tradition or not. While she expresses sorrow at Snow Flower's loss, she evidently feels that the stillbirth was deserved for breaking the rules. Lily then receives apparent proof of the positive results that come from following rules when she has a second son. She now feels that she has evidence to support her belief that this is something she brought upon herself and achieved, rather than a matter of simple luck.*



*After the way that Lily discussed Snow Flower's stillborn daughters, the reader is led to wonder what these in-laws possibly did to bring daughters and stillbirths upon themselves (in Lily's traditional worldview). The fact that Lily can now hope for a daughter indicates the stability of her position in her married home. She doesn't fear scorn for giving birth to a girl.*



For the Tasting Festival, Lily and Snow Flower (who's also pregnant) travel to Lily's natal home. Lily confides that she hopes they both have daughters that can then be *laotong*. Snow Flower resists this, reminding Lily that daughters are useless, but Lily insists. The following spring, they return to Puwei with daughters. When they compare the babies they don't match at all, but Lily and Snow Flower don't care. They mark the decision in their **fan**.

Two years later, Snow Flower tells Lily she's had a second son. Nobody can truly celebrate, however, as the Emperor passes away three days later and the country enters the period of mourning. Lily knows that this can jeopardize her family's prosperity, and she hears talk of rebels. Sure enough, Uncle Lu loses his position and returns to Tongkou. When Lily and her family greet him, he looks them over and then turns to Lily's first son, asking him to lead him home.

Over the next two years, Lily has another son and the rebellion begins to take its toll on the Lu household. Snow Flower's father-in-law dies, and Snow Flower's mother-in-law becomes more abusive. At Lily's natal home that year, Snow Flower tells her about the Taipings, but Lily doesn't understand. Lily asks her husband about it when she returns, and in response Lily's husband threatens to not allow her to visit home again.

That year, a drought means that everyone in Tongkou goes hungry. Uncle Lu, who now tutors Lily's first son, puts more pressure on the boy, as he has the potential to pull them out of hard times with education. One night, Lily's husband tells her that he is going to travel to faraway Guilin to buy salt to sell. He will pass through dangerous Taiping territory, and Lily is afraid. He tells her he'll be gone for a year.

After her Lily's husband leaves, Lily worries constantly. She starts to offer to fetch tea downstairs and takes the opportunity to listen in on Uncle Lu's lessons with her first son. She one day hears Uncle Lu warn of the dangerous rebels. Lily says that the terror came to them in other ways, though—but before the terror arrives, she learns that Snow Flower is again pregnant.

*Lily has learned that women may be worthless, but there is room for advancement. Snow Flower hasn't had the privilege of Lily's good fortune and sees that the life of a woman can be absolutely terrible, which justifies her fear of having a daughter. Lily also willingly ignores what custom says regarding *laotong* matches, likely remembering her own past happiness despite her differences with Snow Flower.*



*When Lily finally meets the fabled Uncle Lu, she's reminded that men have freedom of movement that she'll never have as a woman. Lily is validated, however, when Uncle Lu chooses her son to lead him to the house. Having a male child who impresses the family patriarch strengthens Lily's position.*



*Despite the troubles in the outside world, Lily continues to receive rewards for adhering to tradition and customs in the form of a third son. Snow Flower, meanwhile, continues to spiral down, but shows that she knows more about the outside world of men than Lily ever will. This again genders thoughts, actions, and space.*



*Lily is becoming more powerless and worthless in comparison to the men in her family. The fate of the family lies in the hands of her son (if he becomes a scholar, the family will be prosperous again) and her husband's salt investment. It's unclear too if Lily has real feelings for her husband, or if she only fears for her fate if he doesn't return (or only has the feelings she thinks she's supposed to have).*



*This passage creates a sense of dread for what's to come, as once more the outside world (which is now experiencing the incredibly devastating Taiping Rebellion) intrudes on the closeted world of the novel's women. It's particularly poignant since Snow Flower is pregnant (and therefore possibly experiencing some success as a woman, wife, and mother) and possibly at risk.*



The heat comes early that year, and the men offer to take the children to the river. Typhoid strikes a tenant farmer first and then sweeps through the village. The women of the Lu family gather upstairs together until Third-Sister-in-law's son takes ill. Lily takes her children to her sleeping chamber and only leaves the room twice per day to empty the chamber pot, boil water, and make congee (a type of rice pudding). She can smell the dead through her one window and worries about Snow Flower's family and her husband.

One day, Lily finds Third Sister-in-law in the kitchen dressed in mourning—her entire nuclear family is dead. Lady Lu enters and spits on Third Sister-in-law, accuses her of destroying the Lus, and leaves the room. Lily makes Third-Sister-in-law a cup of tea, which she knows is wrong, and listens to her lament her fate. The next morning, Yonggang and the other servants return and Yonggang says that Third Sister-in-law killed herself.

By midday, Lady Lu has come down with fever. It's Lily's responsibility to care for her, but she worries for her children until Yonggang promises to watch them. Lily spends the next five days caring for Lady Lu until she dies, and then prepares her for burial. With her death, Lily becomes the head woman of the Lu house. She vows that there will be no more concubines in her home.

As the epidemic wanes, Lily learns that Mama and Baba have also died, as well as a number of her in-laws. The Lu family is lucky, however. Lily's husband returns with salt and the profits solve the family's financial problems. Lily's father-in-law dies when he is walking in the fields one day, which he does because he misses his wife. Lily and her husband mourn appropriately, and by the end of the mourning period, they are the new Master and Lady Lu.

## RICE-AND-SALT DAYS: INTO THE MOUNTAINS

Snow Flower writes Lily and says that her family survived, although she miscarried a daughter early on. She invites Lily to visit, and despite Lily's husband's protests, Lily accepts. Lily travels to Jintian late in the fall. She and Snow Flower eat lunch outside and then go to the women's chamber. Snow Flower's mother-in-law is as nasty as ever. They discuss waiting to bind their daughters' feet until they're seven. Looking at Snow Flower's daughter Spring Moon, Lily says the girls will be like a pair of **mandarin ducks**.

*Lily is truly isolated in her married home, a situation reminiscent of Lily's wedding veil. In both cases she is unable to see, knows nothing of her new family, and is physically stuck. Now, however, this state of being stuck brings safety, as she hopefully shields herself and her children from the disease. The trapped nature of married life briefly becomes positive.*



*Lady Lu expresses a belief that a wife has the ability to dictate the fate of her family. Lily then rebels against this idea, and against tradition, by making her sister-in-law tea. Third Sister-in-law, however, cannot recover or move on from her sense of responsibility and guilt, and the brutal rejection of her mother. This mirrors the thought that it's better to be dead than, in this case, a widow.*



*Despite Lily's desire to care for her own children, as a filial woman she cannot abandon Lady Lu. Remember the story of the three brothers, which taught Lily how to care for the dead. Now it's her responsibility to care for Lady Lu's body, and this time she knows the right words.*



*The fact that Lily's father-in-law died essentially of loneliness alludes to the idea that there is the potential for true emotional connections within a marriage. This complicates Lily's insistence that only same-sex contracted friendships can provide that kind of companionship.*



*The mention of mandarin ducks is a common phrase in nu shu, but it works here also to point to the freedom that the girls will hopefully gain from their friendship, just as their mothers did.*



Snow Flower's husband won't allow Snow Flower and Lily to sleep together, as is customary, so Snow Flower makes Lily a bed in the women's chamber. Lily listens to Snow Flower and her husband have sex downstairs, embarrassed. The next day, Snow Flower boils water so she and Lily can wash. Upstairs, alone with each other and naked, Lily thinks that Snow Flower looks old.

Lily says she didn't realize at the time that the outer world of men was now pushing into her life. The second night at Snow Flower's house, they're awakened by sounds and smoke outside. People begin to flee the village. They learn that the Emperor has sent troops to the area to drive out the Taipings, and the fighting will arrive soon. Lily, panicked, wonders why her husband hasn't sent for her. In the late afternoon she sees a palanquin from Tongkou coming towards Jintian, but Snow Flower's husband refuses to let her stay and wait for it. He insists that she come with them to the mountains instead.

Snow Flower's husband lifts his mother, Snow Flower, and Lily into the cart, and he and Snow Flower's eldest son push. Spring Moon walks with Snow Flower's second son. They travel through the night and watch the fire behind them. When the cart can go no further, they continue on foot. The next afternoon, the road turns into a narrow path. Elders sit abandoned along the path. Lily's **feet** hurt, but she's lucky. Other women's feet break and leave them crippled.

By the second night, Lily sees young girls whose **foot** bindings have just begun—abandoned. Little boys beg for help, but Lily asks how you can help others when you're afraid for your life and thinking only of those you love. The path narrows even more. Lily knows her feet are bleeding, and she hears the screams of people who slip off the edge and fall down the mountain.

The travelers reach a sheltered spot on the mountain. Snow Flower recognizes three families from Jintian and she and her family join them. Snow Flower's husband leaves to look for firewood. Lily and Snow Flower are too tired and scared to sleep, and one Snow Flower's friends, Lotus, leads them in a familiar chant that tells the story of the Yao people, Lily's ethnic group.

*Lily is perplexed and embarrassed by this household's unwillingness to follow tradition. Notice again that Lily's thoughts about Snow Flower stray into "masculine" territory as she considers the state of Snow Flower's body. Lily's gaze is a judging one.*



*Lily continues to differentiate the worlds of men and women into neat categories. While for much of her life she simply had little to do with the men's realm, here she begins to conceptualize it as extremely dangerous, and something that directly affects her. This continues to develop her understanding that her life is made up of both men's and women's stories, regardless of how much she does or doesn't understand.*



*The butcher proves himself to be extremely loyal to his family. This adherence to tradition sits favorably with Lily, even while she goes on to hate him for other things. The importance of being filial, however, comes into question as Lily sees elders abandoned. She begins to question if there are times when survival becomes more important than tradition.*



*Here, women's bound feet turn into a liability. These women are asked for the first time to truly engage with the world of men and actual physical movement. Lily continues to question one's loyalty to family as she sees people abandoned. In this brutal environment, fear and survival overcome filial duty.*



*The fear and suffering of the people in the mountains calls women's versus men's suffering into question. War is considered the "men's realm," but it makes everyone, including women, suffer.*



Lotus begins the story of a woman who marries a dog. The two escape to the mountains and have 12 children. Willow picks up the story, chanting that the emperor wanted to tax the Yao descendants of the woman and the dog. Snow Flower chants that the emperor sent troops to flush them out of the mountain, but they're unsuccessful. Finally, the Yao divide a water buffalo horn, distribute 12 pieces of horn, and the groups scatter. Lily wonders if she's truly safe in the mountains, as the mountains couldn't protect the Yao people.

*While the story is intended to provide the women comfort, it only makes Lily question her safety and the wisdom of the characters in the story itself. In her attempt to transcribe the moral of the story to her own life, Lily continues to explore the function of these stories and chants. She's beginning to gather evidence that the stories aren't just stories; they do indeed exist and play out in real life.*



## RICE-AND-SALT DAYS: WINTER

The winter wears on in the mountains. It takes a month for Lily's **feet** to heal. When they do, she begins searching the groups in the mountains to find family. After two weeks she finds a family who knows Elder Sister, and they tell her that someone who sounds like Lily's husband came looking for her. Lily never hears a story like that again.

*Lily is aware that her power may not mean anything here in the mountains, away from her husband and family. As a valuable woman, she finds that people want to use her for their own personal gain, hence the family's unwillingness to say more about the person looking for her.*



Snow Flower's husband, as a butcher, becomes a hero. He's willing to do the necessary things for survival like hunt, cook meat, and carry heavy loads. Snow Flower's mother-in-law, however, remains nasty. One day, when they reach the bottom of their rice sack, she declares that Snow Flower's first son, who is still thin and sickly, should be allowed to starve. Snow Flower remains fixated on her second son, but Lily cannot stand for allowing an eldest son to perish. She shares her food with him.

*Notice here that Lily doesn't take offense at Snow Flower's mother-in-law's declaration because she knows it's cruel—rather she takes offense because she can't bear the thought of a first son being killed by his own family in such a manner. This suggests that Lily's belief in tradition is often stronger than any emotions she feels for individual people.*



The butcher punishes Snow Flower and her son one day for eating Lily's food. Snow Flower's mother-in-law wants to turn Lily away, but the butcher says that Lily's husband may reward him if Lily returns alive. Lily tells him that if she doesn't receive more food, she'll tell her husband she received no hospitality. She shares her resulting large amount of food with Snow Flower, Snow Flower's eldest son, and Spring Moon.

*The butcher reveals that he continues to feed Lily because he believes he might get something out of it, reasserting that even as older people, women are still viewed as currency. Lily is able to use this to promote her own cause of saving Snow Flower's first son (because of tradition) and help Snow Flower (still out of love).*



Snow Flower's eldest son begins seeking out Lily. Lily notices that he's not stupid, just uneducated, and she starts to teach him Uncle Lu's lessons. When she runs out of lessons, she tells him a didactic story and changes it to fit the boy's circumstances. Snow Flower's mother-in-law sneers at the story, but Lily sets the stage for her husband to later become the boy's benefactor.

*Lily knows the value of language, and through teaching Snow Flower's eldest son, she sets up the possibility that he can use this education to move up and out of his current dreadful circumstances. This mirrors Lily's hope for her own son, who can help her family if he becomes a scholar.*



As supplies become even scarcer, people continue to die. Lily observes Snow Flower's children. Snow Flower's second son is very bright and adores the butcher, while Spring Moon is beautiful. Lily struggles to tell the reader that despite the hunger and the cold, Snow Flower and the butcher continue to do bed business. She gets pregnant again.

*Contrary to tradition, Snow Flower's second son is the bright light of her family. Also contrary to what "should" be done, Snow Flower and her husband continue to have sex. These transgressions strengthen Lily's belief that Snow Flower is fundamentally uncouth.*



Snow Flower notices that Lily likes Snow Flower's eldest son, and asks if she'd agree for Lily's daughter Jade to marry him. Lily refuses, but the two again discuss matching their daughters as *laotongs*. Over the next weeks and months they celebrate Snow Flower's second son's fifth birthday, and begin to pay more attention to her eldest son. They teach him the few poems they know. Snow Flower glows and seems to have remembered her old independence.

*Here in the mountains, Snow Flower experiences (some of) the freedom she dreamed of as a girl. She's high up in open air (pointing back to her love of birds), and comfortably inhabits this world of men while she also successfully performs womanhood by being pregnant.*



After ten weeks in the mountains, Snow Flower's second son dies unexpectedly. The butcher is distraught and holds his son for two days, lamenting his loss. He buries his son in the woods but when Snow Flower asks where, he beats her so baldly that she miscarries. Lily and the other sworn sisters tend to Snow Flower as the beatings continue daily. Lily says she couldn't stand up for Snow Flower because both she and the butcher knew that she had no power alone.

*Lily finds the extent of her power here—she can't influence the whims and desires of men when her own body and worth can't be used as collateral. The beatings illustrate how little worth Snow Flower's body has in this society. Her body "betrayed" her by miscarrying and bearing a son who died—and these misfortunes are construed as her fault.*



Lily realizes how much she needs her husband, and vows to actually earn the title of "Lady Lu." She continues to care for Snow Flower, but Snow Flower remains depressed. Daily, Snow Flower walks as though in a dream to the edge of the cliff. Lily follows her, afraid that she'll jump to be like her **birds**. After eleven days, Snow Flower finally speaks and tells Lily that her husband beat her after every lost child. Lily is hurt to discover that it's been going on this long and that Snow Flower never told her. Snow Flower says she's wanted to die for a long time.

*Much of what we've learned about Snow Flower's married life has been through the letters she sent to Lily, which said little of her obvious deep depression. Notice, though, that Lily's main reaction to Snow Flower's suicidal thoughts is a selfish one—she's hurt that Snow Flower didn't explicitly tell her. The reader is reminded, then, that Lily brushed off Snow Flower's first attempts at truthful communication beyond platitudes and the naïve intimacy of their childhood.*



Snow Flower continues, saying that she and the butcher have been punished for not following the pollution laws. Lily greets all of Snow Flower's laments with traditional platitudes ("girls aren't meant to live"; "sons are a woman's worth"), and Snow Flower tells her that while Lily has everything, she has nothing. She asks Lily to leave her alone. Lily thinks that a woman should never outlive her children, and realizes she never understood Snow Flower's grief at her stillborn daughters.

*Remember that Lily has experienced little loss in her own life. While her parents and in-laws are dead, she had no strong emotional connection to them, and can still worship them appropriately. The culture provides Snow Flower no such comforts for her stillborn daughters, and Lily simply doesn't have the skills to provide the true, personal empathy that could help Snow Flower and make up for the cultural narratives that have failed her.*



Snow Flower mentions Lily's aunt and says that thinking of Aunt makes her want to keep living. Snow Flower then seems to snap out of her reverie, and she and Lily return to the camp to write on their **fan**. The butcher and Snow Flower do bed business that night, and afterwards Snow Flower whispers to Lily that the butcher does love her.

*Aunt represents a wholly miserable female life with a (somewhat) happy ending, an appealing narrative for Snow Flower. Here, Snow Flower is able to momentarily step out of her depression by seeking companionship from Lily and the butcher, asserting the life-saving necessities of love and friendship.*



The next day it's deemed safe to return to the villages. The butcher carries Snow Flower's mother-in-law while Lily, Snow Flower, and the children follow. Bones litter the path, and Snow Flower stops once when she sees a mother collecting the bones of a child. The butcher comforts Snow Flower and promises to bring their son's bones home.

*The reader isn't allowed to view the butcher as entirely a monster, as he does appear to care for his wife's emotions. Like Lily, he simply doesn't have the skills or the strength to truly love Snow Flower beyond the way cultural narratives have taught him to.*



When they reach the butcher's home, he runs on to Tongkou to notify Lily's husband. Snow Flower pulls Lily upstairs and helps her wash and dress in some of Snow Flower's clean clothes. Lily is concerned about what Snow Flower told her, and tries to tell Snow Flower that she has never thought less of her. Lily hears her husband arrive before she can finish. She runs outside and bows at his feet. He lifts and embraces her, and for the first time, she says his name (Dalang). Lily thinks that she had deep feelings for her husband that day. He pays the butcher for keeping Lily safe and she bids Snow Flower goodbye.

*Lily finally learns that there can indeed be love, emotion, and companionship in a marriage between a man and a woman. This widens her definition of love, although not enough to guard against what is to come. Lily's husband proves the butcher correct in assessing Lily's worth by paying him, but the possibility that love is also involved seems to humanize this example of the transactional nature of women's bodies.*



## RICE-AND-SALT DAYS: LETTER OF VITUPERATION

People begin rebuilding their lives. Lily vows to never again enter the outside world of men. She and Snow Flower see each other often, and their husbands allow them to sleep together. They also continue to travel to Puwei for festivals, where Aunt and Uncle have become beloved "grandparents" to the children of Elder Brother and Second Brother. When Lily and Snow Flower make offerings at the Temple of Gupo, they discuss their daughters' impending **foot** binding. Lily realizes that while she is very happy, Snow Flower doesn't gain weight and appears emotionally as though she jumped off the cliff in the mountains.

*Everyone (except for Snow Flower) seems to be adhering to custom and tradition as they move forward after the disturbance of the Rebellion. Lily is comforted and invigorated by the return to normal, which makes Snow Flower's inability to feel the same way seem even more annoying and offensive. Snow Flower is outwardly following what should be done, but her emotions don't follow the same path.*



Lily's husband warns her that Snow Flower isn't as strong as Lily is, and says that not every man is like him. Snow Flower confirms this when she admits that the butcher continues to beat her often. Snow Flower refuses to leave her husband, though, saying that she must protect her eldest son. Lily as the narrator says that she didn't have enough patience with Snow Flower then, and instead peppered Snow Flower with questions like "why couldn't she try to be a better wife?" Lily keeps asking why Snow Flower can't do what Lily did, and wrap herself in convention that could keep her safe. Lily says she didn't realize that Snow Flower's spirit was broken.

*Snow Flower simply can't win. Now that she's accepted that she must keep her eldest son alive, Lily wants her to put herself in extreme danger by leaving her husband. Lily shows that she once again doesn't have the emotional skills or maturity to understand the multiple layers of texture in the situation. This also hearkens back to the lessons of subtlety and interpretation in nu shu. Lily still holds onto the naïve belief that every woman, if she tries hard enough, can triumph simply by following convention.*



In the middle of August, Snow Flower and her children plan to visit Lily for the Mid-Autumn festival, but Lotus appears on Lily's doorstep instead. She carries Lily and Snow Flower's **fan** wrapped in silk and gives it to Lily. Lily is suddenly afraid. She opens the fan and reads Snow Flower's note, which says that she has too many troubles and that Lily no longer has to listen to Snow Flower's complaints. Snow Flower writes, "three sworn sisters have promised to love me as I am." Lily doesn't understand Snow Flower's use of "love." She believes their *laotong* relationship doesn't allow Snow Flower to join other sisters, and decides that Snow Flower doesn't care for her anymore.

Lily realizes that the sworn sisters must be Lotus, Plum Blossom, and Willow, the women they lived with in the mountains. Lily feels immense pain, but reacts like the Lady Lu she now is and falls back on conventions rather than feel her emotions. She begins to assess Snow Flower's faults until she's found a pattern of deceit and betrayal that went back to the beginning of their relationship. Lily remembers what she did to Mama when she found out Mama lied to her, and vows to treat Snow Flower with the same sort of distance. Lily doesn't write Snow Flower back, and doesn't start Jade's **foot** binding on the date that she and Snow Flower set.

A week later, Lotus comes again with a letter from Snow Flower, asking why Lily hasn't written. Lily burns it, as well as the next few that come as she starts Jade's **foot** binding. Lily explains that she started "Cutting a Disease from My Heart," or erasing all memories of Snow Flower. She constructs a flower tower to get rid of the ghost tormenting her and burns all of the letters from Snow Flower she can find with it. Lily cannot, however, find the **fan**, and Snow Flower continues to haunt her.

Jade bears much of Lily's suffering. Lily wraps her **feet** tightly and channels her anger into chasing Jade across the room. She repeats what Mama told her about a lady letting no ugliness into her life. Madame Wang visits Lily several months later. Lily knows that Madame Wang is a shrewd businesswoman, but her love for Snow Flower is her greatest weakness.

*Lily's understanding of the world is in very black and white terms: you're either following rules, or you're not. She once again neglects to consider the many shades of gray that exist in Snow Flower's situation as a whole, and in her note. This failure here to remember the lessons taught in nu shu lead to Lily's final, tragic "coming of age." She rejects love and this relationship, and in doing so leaves her childhood entirely behind.*



*Lily actively denies the existence of her own confusing emotions. Notice also how Lily uses tradition and custom here. She knows that choosing to not follow customs regarding Jade's foot binding will hurt Snow Flower, and this then will allow her another way to dismiss Jade and Spring Moon's laotong match, all in the name of keeping with traditions. Thus in this case traditions are used to provide Lily comfort while they do great harm to others.*



*By building a flower tower, Lily attempts to fall back on customs that are supposed to provide safety and comfort. The fact that Lily's attempt is unsuccessful, however, suggests that when traditions are used inappropriately (Snow Flower isn't dead and isn't a real ghost), they can't perform their intended purpose.*



*In her hurt and anger, Lily perpetuates violence in the same way that Mama did. She encourages Jade, as Mama encouraged Lily, to be a true lady and to not feel "ugly" emotions, even as she herself feels the very emotions she warns against.*



Lily doesn't offer Madame Wang tea and tells her it's too early to find Jade a marriage match. Madame Wang pulls out a **fan** and mentions the *laotong* match between Jade and Spring Moon. Lily asks for the fan and reads the note on it, which is nearly the same as what Lily received from Snow Flower many years ago. Madame Wang calls Lily out on severing her match with Snow Flower, and Lily replies that she cannot match Jade with a butcher's daughter. She continues that Madame Wang told them years ago to not allow "concubines" into their relationship, asking if Madame Wang knows what Snow Flower has done.

Lily tosses the **fan** at Madame Wang. Madame Wang agrees to pass the message to Snow Flower, and then kindly says that while Lily once had nothing but pretty **feet**, she now has an abundance of malice.

On the day of Snow Flower's cousin's Sitting and Singing ceremony, which Lily and Snow Flower had planned on attending together, Lily hopes that Snow Flower won't come. However, both Snow Flower and Madame Wang are in attendance. Lily sits across the circle and participates in the singing and chanting.

The bride's mother asks Snow Flower to tell them of her life, and Lily is shocked to hear Snow Flower announce that she will sing a Letter of Vituperation (a public grievance). Snow Flower starts, "the **pheasant** squawks and the sound carries far." She lists all the miseries of her life and then says that her *laotong* was her one happiness in life for 27 years. She asks Lily why she turned away, and why she refused Spring Moon as Jade's *laotong*. She begs Lily to not make a third generation of women suffer.

Lily begins her own Letter of Vituperation in retaliation. She says that all women know hard lives, but that Snow Flower thinks her own hard life is special. Lily cries as she tells Snow Flower that she always remained true, and accuses Snow Flower of embracing sworn sisters. Lily continues that as women, they have to accept when their husbands turn away from them, but it's merciless when women turn away from other women. She grows even angrier and begins telling the room everything she can about Snow Flower, including that she and the butcher don't obey the laws regarding having sex after birth.

*Lily is intentionally rude to Madame Wang, again because she knows that it's possible to do damage and cause personal pain while still officially following tradition. Interestingly, Lily is unable to recognize that she herself severed the *laotong* contract with Snow Flower, not the other way around. This again indicates that Lily hasn't truly learned the lessons that nu shu and language was supposed to teach her.*



*Madame Wang isn't willing to let Lily win. She sees that Lily has been blinded by her good fortune, and that her success comes at the expense of true love.*



*Lily is still concerned enough with appearances to not skip the Sitting and Singing. The songs and chants provide a familiar backdrop for the very unfamiliar emotions Lily and Snow Flower now experience.*



*With the Letter of Vituperation, Snow Flower uses Lily's love of formal and traditional avenues to try to talk to her *laotong* and express her emotions. She essentially tries to meet Lily on her own playing field. We see that Snow Flower still has hope that her family can escape its ill fortune, with her request that Lily not make Spring Moon suffer. She knows that a match with Jade might save her from the same fate as Snow Flower and her mother, and so she appeals to a sense of female solidarity—but this is something that Lily has never really felt.*



*At this point in her life, Lily truly believes that all women are simply destined to suffer. She justifies the violence, pain, and suffering that Snow Flower experiences as being nothing out of the ordinary and, further, feels that they're deserved. She shifts the blame for Snow Flower's fate onto Snow Flower herself, indicating that Snow Flower is simply being punished for her numerous transgressions.*



Lily tells the reader that in the moment she thought she was free, but realizes now that she was becoming trapped in hatred for Snow Flower. Snow Flower, crying, addresses Lily and says that the women in her village don't criticize her, but comfort her and visit her. She says she feels like a **bird** flying without its mate. Lily thinks of her grievance against Mama and ignores Snow Flower. Snow Flower gets up and leaves, and not even Madame Wang follows her.

Lily tells the reader that when she looks back on that day, she knows that she was despicable. However, she gained the respect of every other woman there by exposing a woman who did not conform, and destroyed Snow Flower in the process. Lily's Song of Vituperation became known and news of Snow Flower's disgrace spread. Lily is crippled by these events. She can't figure out the point of being Lady Lu without love.

*Lily as the narrator understands that hatred traps people, while love can free them. Snow Flower evidently already understands this, as she tries to surround herself with people who love her without the judgment and conditions that Lily has. Snow Flower is so dishonored by Lily pointing out her transgressions that nobody can comfort her and still be considered proper.*



*What happens to Snow Flower because of Lily's Letter of Vituperation indicates the importance of upholding tradition. If a woman doesn't, she's liable not just to suffer scorn or violence from her husband, but also a rejection of companionship from other women. Lily suffers too, though, as she no longer has any true love in her life with no laotong or sworn sisters to give her real companionship in her new position of power.*



## RICE-AND-SALT DAYS: INTO THE CLOUDS

Over the next eight years the Taiping Rebellion ends, Lily's first son marries and passes exams to become a scholar, and his wife has a son. Jade, at 16, is set to marry a rice merchant, and Lily has worked hard to forget about Snow Flower.

One day, Yonggang fetches Lily to see someone downstairs. Lily sees a girl in worn clothes, bowing. Lily offers to fill the beggar girl's bowl, but the girl stands and Lily recognizes Spring Moon. Spring Moon tells Lily that Snow Flower is very ill and will die soon, and that she's been asking for Lily. Lily promises she'll come, thinking of her duty as Lady Lu.

At Snow Flower's house, Lily meets the butcher. He says he can't watch his wife suffer anymore and that she's better off with women. When Lily sees Snow Flower in bed, the years of hating her fall away. Snow Flower looks like a crone. Lotus, Plum Blossom, and Willow sit around her, but Lily doesn't greet them. Lily takes Snow Flower's hand. Snow Flower looks at Lily and speaks, and Lily hears the little girl from many years ago. Her body spasms and Lily wipes her forehead. Snow Flower apologizes for "everything," and tells Lily that her love never wavered.

*Life has gone on as usual for Lily, and her prosperity only continues to grow. Lily's son's good fortune indicates the power of language to change lives for the better.*



*Once again, Lily decides to go not because she loves Snow Flower, but because duty says that she must. She's now ascribing what she's previously characterized as familial, dutiful love to her laotong.*



*It's obvious here that Snow Flower doesn't harbor any real ill will towards Lily; she's simply glad to have her friend back. In this moment where nothing is said about the painful past, Lily is able to draw upon her memories of their happier past, as Snow Flower asked her to do in her final entry on the fan.*



By this time Lily and Snow Flower are alone while the other women make dinner. Lily pulls back the quilt. She sees a tumor the size of a baby growing in Snow Flower's belly, and realizes that Snow Flower's womb betrayed her once again.

Lily starts planning to fetch a doctor and a diviner for Snow Flower, but Lily the narrator says that she still didn't understand that you can't control or change love or another's destiny. Lily goes downstairs and announces that she'll be back tomorrow, and won't leave "until..."

Snow Flower only lives another two weeks. Lily doesn't leave her side. At night, Lily sleeps next to Snow Flower to keep her warm. She calls for her own doctor, who says that he can do nothing, but tells her how Snow Flower will die. Lily vows not to use him again and sets about making bitter melon soup to reduce Snow Flower's fever. Willow, Plum Blossom, and Lotus do as Lily asks and clean up Snow Flower's vomit later. Lily calls her diviner, who leads Lily, the sworn sisters, and Madame Wang in prayers and songs to ward off evil spirits. It doesn't help, and Lily vows to not use diviners except to choose lucky dates.

Plum Blossom tells Lily that Snow Flower is only playing along with these attempts for Lily's sake, and begs Lily to let Snow Flower go. Over the next few days, Lily sees how Plum Blossom and the sworn sisters bring joy to Snow Flower, and realizes they certainly have been doing so for many years.

Lily begins working on burial shoes for Snow Flower and embroiders **curly-wing bats** and deer on them. Snow Flower's **feet** and legs start to turn purple, and Lily tries to make Snow Flower fight her sickness. Yonggang visits daily and brings clothes and messages, and one day, she arrives with a basket full of letters, embroideries, and the secret **fan**—all the things Lily couldn't find when she made the flower tower. Lily spends the last few days of Snow Flower's life reading through all the letters. Lily writes, "the bed is lit by moonlight" on Snow Flower's palm.

During their final conversation, Snow Flower asks Lily to be an aunt to her children. In Snow Flower's final hours, Lily reads their contract and happy parts from their **fan**. Snow Flower's skin turns golden and she finally stops breathing, surrounded by Lily, Spring Moon, Madame Wang, and the sworn sisters.

*Snow Flower has suffered in life because of her potentially reproductive body, and now that same reproductive system is going to kill her. Lily reinforces this idea as she conflates the tumor with a baby.*



*Lily still thinks she's helping, just like she thought she was helping Snow Flower by instructing her to be a better wife. Lily does show that she understands the end result won't change, however, with her use of "until."*



*The doctor and diviner's failure to help Snow Flower begin to erode Lily's trust and belief in these traditional systems. When they can't provide the comfort she seeks, she rejects them altogether. Lily is simply cycling through all the traditions and customs she can think of in the hopes of finding something that will be able to conquer the cancer. She hasn't yet accepted that no tradition can help—only love can improve the situation.*



*While Lily doesn't yet realize how bad of a friend she's been, she sees in these sworn sisters what true love looks like. Plum Blossom here equates true love with not forcing someone to suffer.*



*Practically, Lily has accepted that Snow Flower is going to die, and the evidence of this begins at Snow Flower's feet. Death will bring her freedom from the life she led in part because of her bound feet, and Lily represents this freedom with the embroideries of flying creatures. By writing the poem that the women wrote on each other during *Catching Cool Breezes*, Lily tries to rekindle the intimacy they once shared.*



*Lily finally honors Snow Flower's request in their fan, and they remember their "happy girlhood days." Remember that Snow Flower will also have these written words in the afterlife to provide her comfort.*



Lily tells the reader that what happened to her reminded her very much of the story Aunt used to tell about the woman with three brothers. Lily says that girls learn stories like that not just so they learn how to behave, but also because they live variations of the stories again and again over the course of a lifetime.

In the main room of Snow Flower's house, Lily, Lotus, Willow, and Plum Blossom dress and prepare Snow Flower for burial. Three days later, the butcher and Snow Flower's son bury her. Lily burns most of the writing from her relationship with Snow Flower so that Snow Flower can have it in the afterlife.

Lily learns then of her greatest shame. The sworn sisters say that Snow Flower wasn't actually *their* sworn sister. Lily cites the message on her **fan**, and they ask to see it. Lily learns that Snow Flower taught Lotus, Plum Blossom, and Willow to read *nu shu*, and they point out that the note says nothing about becoming their sworn sister. They say that Snow Flower only wanted someone to listen to her without pity or judgment, which they did. Lily realizes she made the worst mistake that someone literate in *nu shu* can make and did not fully consider the nuance and sophistication of Snow Flower's words. Lily says she lived for the next 40 years with this regret.

Lotus, Willow, and Plum Blossom continue to tell Lily exactly how she hurt Snow Flower. They say that Snow Flower did bed business with the butcher too soon after birth to try to adhere to Lily's calls to try again for sons. They call her out for having as little sympathy as a husband or an in-law regarding Snow Flower's dead babies. Plum Blossom says that Snow Flower loved Lily for everything Lily was, but that Lily valued Snow Flower like a man would: only for following men's rules. Lotus says that Snow Flower was already sick when she lost the baby in the mountains, as the same cycle of miscarriage happened again and again.

Lily realizes that Snow Flower's loss of appetite and paleness were due to the tumor. Lily then realizes that when she arrived two weeks ago, Snow Flower had apologized and Lily hadn't. Lily says her heart had been a shriveled old walnut. Lily goes home with the **fan** and writes on it that one day she hopes that she and Snow Flower will **soar** together. She says she'd have many years to consider the writing on the fan and how to atone for the damage she'd done.

*Finally Lily has learned the true purpose of the stories. They're not just teaching tools for proper behavior; they teach girls what real life is like. This recalls the Tale of Wife Wang as well, and provides hope that Snow Flower died a virtuous woman and will be rewarded in the afterworld and in her next life.*



*In death, language itself and the intimacy it brought in life go on to provide companionship and comfort. This tradition gives language even more power, and specifically power for good.*



*Lily finally opens her eyes to the possibility that female friendship doesn't have to be contracted (as in laotong or sworn sisters) to exist and provide true intimacy and comfort. Snow Flower couldn't turn to any person with whom she had a contract (her husband and Lily) for comfort, and so turned to non-traditional and non-contractual relationships. This realization brings Lily down from her sense of superiority, as she finally recognizes that she herself broke the laotong contract.*



*Lily never considered the possibility that Snow Flower may have idolized and looked up to Lily like Lily looked up to Snow Flower as a child. It's obvious here, though, that Snow Flower did. She both followed and broke with tradition to try to make Lily happy. This indicates that Snow Flower and Lily are maybe more similar in their deepest desires than previously thought. They both wanted to be loved, and they both tried very hard to earn love.*



*Keeping the fan was partially a selfish act on Lily's part. She doesn't allow Snow Flower to have it in the afterlife (yet), but she uses it in her own life as a reminder to consider language fully, and to love people without question and without conditions. In her last entry, Lily uses language to give Snow Flower the freedom she never had in life.*



## SITTING QUIETLY: REGRET

Lily tells the reader she's now too old to perform any household chores, and she's too tired to shoo flies off her hands. She's lived too long. After Snow Flower died, she mentally began her years of "sitting quietly," even though her rice-and-salt days were by no means over.

Lily says that she needed Snow Flower's children so she could try to make amends to her *laotong*, but it's hard to be generous when you don't know how. In the months after Snow Flower's death, Lily took her place in Spring Moon's wedding ceremonies. On her wedding night, Spring Moon threw herself into the village well and died. Gossip circulated comparing Spring Moon to Snow Flower, and Lily shut it down when she heard it. Lily felt as though she'd failed Snow Flower miserably, and recorded Spring Moon's death on their **fan**.

Next, Lily turned to Snow Flower's son. He'd recently married and his wife was pregnant, and Lily hated the thought of her living with the butcher's family. Lily asked her husband to help, and Dalang hired Snow Flower's son to collect taxes and gave him his own house.

When Lily turned 50 and stopped menstruating, people in her household began waiting on her. She wished to abstain from bed business and went against her earlier plan to never bring concubines into her home. She found three concubines to entertain Dalang, and the fact that she found them herself prevented jealousy and pettiness in the upstairs chamber. Lily's relationship with her husband became companionable. He sat with her in the women's chamber and talked with her, and their home was full of grandchildren.

There was one child, though, that Lily desperately wanted: Snow Flower's granddaughter, the daughter of Snow Flower's son. Lily's husband obliged her wishes, and Lily sent for Madame Wang when the girl's **feet** were about to be bound. Madame Wang looked very old, and Lily believed she didn't recognize her, but when Lily mentioned who the girl was, Madame Wang proved otherwise. Madame Wang tried to argue, but gave in when Lily said that she believed Snow Flower would've approved. Lily was then able to bring the girl, named Peony, under her care, and even bound her feet herself. She spoke to Peony of Snow Flower, *nu shu*, and friendship.

*One could argue that Lily was punished for her part in Snow Flower's short and miserable life by being allowed to live "too long." She now elicits pity from those around her, just as Snow Flower elicited pity from Lily 40 years ago.*



*Finally, Lily fully understands and accepts that she simply never had the skills necessary to truly love and be generous. This realization completes Lily's final stage of coming of age, as she now has the wisdom to reflect on herself and note her flaws. She's unable to break the cycle of violence and save Spring Moon, but Spring Moon removes herself from the cycle.*



*In her later years, Lily is finally able to make the Tale of Wife Wang apply to her own life as she helps raise the butcher's family out of their unsavory profession.*



*Now that Lily has accomplished all the duties of a woman, she and her husband are able to have a truly close relationship. This suggests that Lily in some ways is rewarded for her good behavior. Her decision to bring in concubines for her husband is a selfless one, and shows that she's internalized what she learned from Snow Flower. She cares truly for her husband's happiness.*



*Many years later, Madame Wang shows that she still loves Snow Flower. This indicates that while Lily never gave Madame Wang much credit, she was actually one of the most loving and selfless people in the novel. She did what she had to do to give Snow Flower the best future she could, and is willing to keep doing that to give her granddaughter a better life. Lily will hopefully impress upon Peony the importance of *nu shu* so that Peony may avoid making the mistakes Lily made.*



Lily's husband died when Lily was 57, and after that the days, weeks, and years began running together. Lily saw everyone die, including Yonggang and Jade. Lily's first son became a jinshi scholar and has already bought Lily a lacquered coffin. Peony is now 37 and has five children. In their faces, Lily sees both Snow Flower and herself. Lily is content knowing that both her blood and Snow Flower's will rule the house of Lu—as Peony's husband is Lily's grandson.

When Lily was traveling to Jintian to teach Peony *nu shu*, women began asking her if she would copy down their autobiographies. Lily charged a small fee and tried to get the women to value their lives, most of which were miserable. She wonders why a man would treasure his wife if he sees her as little better than a **chicken** or a water buffalo. Hearing these stories made Lily consider her own life, in which she treated Snow Flower, the one person she truly loved, like a husband would treat a wife. Lily says she's reaching out now to Snow Flower and others who witnessed her life, and she asks them for forgiveness.

*As a very old woman, Lily has to bear the same pain that Snow Flower did, when Jade dies before Lily does. This again supports the idea that living so long is in itself a kind of punishment. However, Lily believes that she's finally acted in such a way as to honor Snow Flower's memory by bringing her bloodline into the extremely prosperous Lu family—and indeed, they are now truly sisters in a more literal sense.*



*As her final act Lily seeks to affirm the worth that she now realizes women have, and to encourage other women to believe in their own worth—and to do this through language and *nu shu* in particular. It's implied that Lily dies after the close of the novel, but we see at the end that she finally realizes that the world isn't so black and white as she once believed. Her stories come from men and women; her thoughts are masculine and feminine. She wishes to impart these lessons to the reader as a final good deed.*





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See, Lisa. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. Random House. 2006.

### CHICAGO MANUAL

See, Lisa. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. New York: Random House. 2006.