



Four Treasures of the Sky

By Jenny Zhang

Book Discussion Questions

1. Daiyu grows up hating her name and namesake: “Lin Daiyu was weak. I would be nothing like her, I promised myself. I did not want to be melancholic or jealous or spiteful. And I would never let myself die of a broken heart.” What is Daiyu’s relationship to Lin Daiyu, and how does it change over the course of the novel? Do you agree with Daiyu’s assessment that Lin Daiyu “was no heroine”?
2. How do Daiyu’s relationships with her mother, father, and grandmother shape her? What do they teach her as a child? When Daiyu learns of her parents’ deaths, what impact does it have on her?
3. Master Wang describes calligraphy as “the monumental task of creating unity between the person you are and the person you could be.” How does Daiyu interpret his words? Why does calligraphy become so important to her? What role does it play in the story?
4. Throughout the novel, Daiyu must continue to reinvent herself to survive: “Since the beginning, being myself has led only to darkness. Instead, practice erasing and overturning and re-creating the self, until all I have to do is disappear.” What remains consistent for her throughout each reinvention, from Daiyu to Feng to Peony to Jacob? What does she lose along the way?
5. Before she is smuggled across the ocean in a coal bucket, Daiyu is forced to learn English. How does this new language compare to Chinese? What does it suggest to Daiyu about the worldview of the English speakers she will meet? Discuss, in particular, how love and time are differently described in English and Chinese.
6. At the brothel, Daiyu is immediately drawn to Swallow: “She was a character I could neither read nor write, her face shifting between day and night.” When Daiyu asks Swallow to escape with her, Swallow tells her, “For you, there was a you before this and there will be a you after this. For you, leaving is easy. Leaving is an escape.

For me, it is the opposite.” What does she mean? Do you agree with Swallow’s view that she can do more good by staying at the brothel than by leaving? How does Daiyu’s understanding of and empathy for Swallow evolve over the course of the novel?

7. To survive at the brothel, Daiyu tries to become “whatever they want me to be . . . and perhaps that will be my greatest weapon.” What does she mean? How does that bear out in her relationship with Samuel?

8. When the gray-haired man sexually assaults Daiyu in Boise, how does she change? How does that experience continue to impact her for the rest of her life?

9. When Daiyu transforms herself into Jacob in Idaho, she reflects, “What does it mean to be a man? My experiences then told me everything: it was a matter of believing oneself invincible and strong, and owed everything.” How does her gender shape her life? What opportunities does she have as Feng and Jacob that she doesn’t have as Daiyu and Peony?

10. Discuss William’s and Nelson’s different approaches to resisting the racism and discrimination around them. When Nelson asks Daiyu to join their efforts, she tells him, “I came here against my will . . . This is not my country. These are not my people. This is not my problem.” Do you sympathize with Daiyu, or do you agree with Nelson that this is a selfish perspective?

11. Discuss Daiyu’s experience of racism in America: “My body is covered in the syllables of another language, the scroll of a kingdom that has existed long before they did and will continue existing long after they are gone. I am something they cannot fathom. I am something they fear. We all are.” How are she and the other Chinese in Idaho treated? What injustices do they face because of their race? How might this novel help us understand antiChinese racism today?

12. When she sees Nelson and Caroline embracing in the clearing, Daiyu feels shame: “I am nothing but a girl trapped inside a boy, a woman pretending to be a man. Love 愛, a giving up of self for another. But to do that, you must have a heart that is free to give itself away. I have nothing to give to Nelson, because nothing I have is true.” What does she mean? What is her relationship with Nelson? Do you believe they love each other, in their way?

13. When she finds out from William that Jasper has died, Daiyu asks, “What do I have to fear, now that the threat of Jasper is gone? Who is Daiyu without her villain? Who will I be now that I can be anything?” Do you agree that we often define ourselves against a villain? What role does Jasper play in Daiyu’s story?

14. Discuss this passage: “Is my life my own? Or have I always been destined for tragedy because of my name? My name. The characters that have haunted and plagued me since the beginning appear before me again, precious with their weight and familiarity. This thing that I have hidden, that I have changed and added to, this thing I have yearned for all along. I am the constellation of all the names within me, of every name I have ever inhabited. And this is the truth I see for the first time: I have only been able to survive because of my name. I ask myself again, Will I be the one holding the brush or will I be the one who is written?” What role do fate and free will play in this novel? How does Daiyu’s relationship to her name change over her life?

15. Daiyu’s parents taught her that her intentions and actions must always match. How do you interpret that lesson? Do you think Daiyu ultimately achieves, as she describes it, “the perfect line”?

16. As she is being hanged, Daiyu tells the men, “You will never forget me.” To us, she says, “My life was written for me from the moment the name was given to me. Or it was not. That is the true beauty. That is the intent. We can practice all we want, telling and retelling the same story, but the story that comes out of your mouth, from your brush, is one that only you can tell. So let it be. Let your story be yours, and my story be mine.” What does this passage mean to you? How might it shift our understanding of the entire novel that precedes it?

17. Discuss the novel’s epilogue, in which we see an old woman and another figure on a shoreline, both calling out the same name. How do you interpret this scene? Do you find it hopeful?