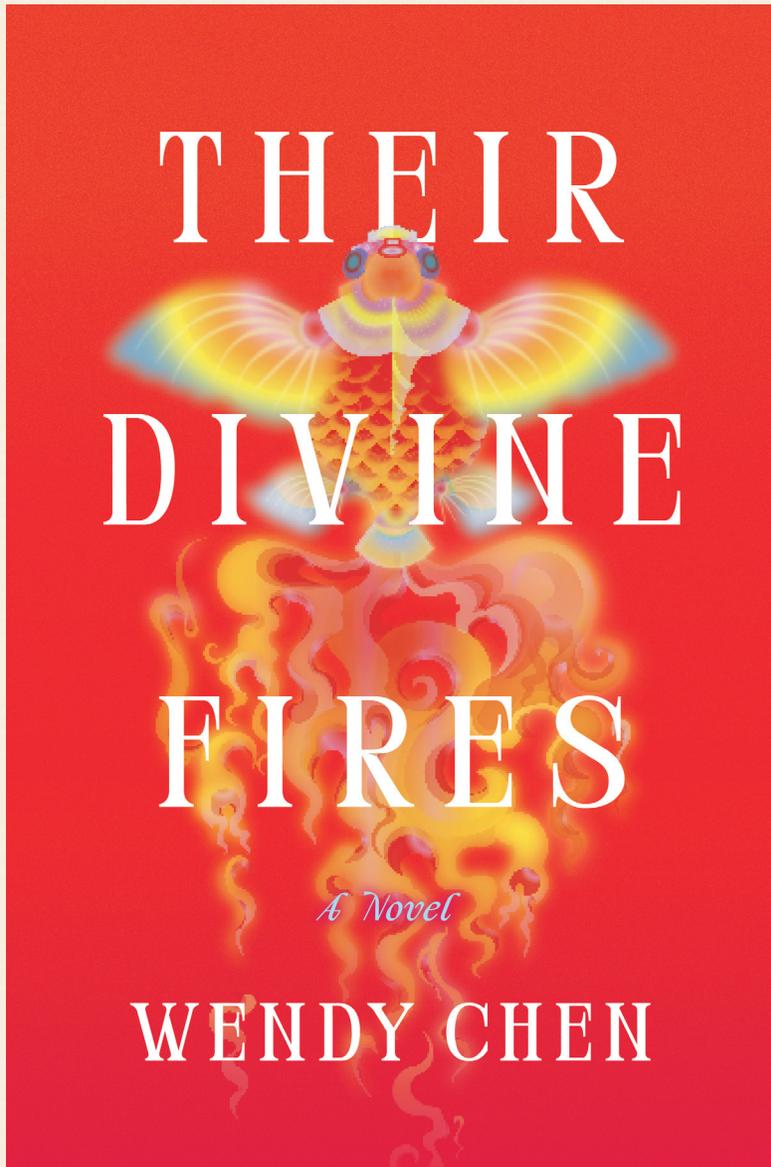




*Book Club Kit*



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Revolutions such as the Chinese Revolution or Cultural Revolution play a major role in the novel. What are the ways in which revolution can bring individuals together or, conversely, tear them apart?
- Yonghong and Hongxing grow up during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in China, a period of political upheaval and nationalism under Mao. What social or political parallels can you see between the Cultural Revolution and modern-day America?
- Many of the characters throughout the novel engage with various art forms such as calligraphy, music, dance, painting, and film. What do these art forms reveal about the characters or their social environments?
- How does the past affect Emily’s life in the present? How does it affect her relationship with her mother, aunt, and grandmother? In what ways does the historical past reverberate within your own relationships with your family?
- During the fifties, sixties, and seventies in China, Mao enacted policies that sent many urban youths down to the countryside for reeducation. This was part of the effort to break up Red Guards—most of whom were urban youth—whose political power and mobilization had become a threat. Families in these urban areas were required to volunteer one of their children—usually the eldest child. Leap Forward, despite being the younger sibling, was chosen to be sent down. How did Leap Forward’s family make such a choice? Can you imagine making a similar choice for your family?
- What forms of resistance do characters engage with over the most recent century in China? How have their lives been shaped by these kinds of resistance?
- During particularly politically fraught times such as the Cultural Revolution or modern-day China, language transforms and new terms emerge. Hongxing, for example, is “invited to drink tea,” a euphemism for being brought in and questioned by authorities. How else does language change with the times throughout the novel?
- Twins Hongxing and Yonghong are inseparable as children. Later, as they grow up, their lives take them in dramatically different directions. What are the ways in which they grow apart, and how do they come together again?
- What kinds of fires—metaphorical or literal—are present in the novel? What kinds of fires or passions are present in each of the characters?
- In what ways throughout the book do children, siblings, parents, and lovers betray one another? In what ways do they offer each other forgiveness?

- What secrets do the three siblings Yunhong, Yunli, and Yunjun keep from one another? How are these secrets revealed or kept hidden? How are they wielded or forgiven? What kinds of secrets do you keep from those you love?
- Names hold great importance in each successive generation in the novel. Names reflect an individual's place within the family as well as larger social circumstances of the times. The names Yonghong and Hongxing, for example, are a nod to the political importance of the color red during the Cultural Revolution. What other meanings are inherent in the different names that appear in the book?
- Yunli and Yonghong are both swept up in the respective revolutions of their time: Yunli in the Chinese Revolution and Yonghong in the Cultural Revolution. In what ways are they similar in their idealism? In what ways are they different?
- Throughout the novel, ghosts make several appearances—standing beneath a plum blossom tree or emerging out of a torn photograph. How do they haunt the characters who witness them?
- How do mythologies inform characters' dreams and desires? How do mythologies help explain the world around them and who they are?



**Wendy Chen** ([wendychenart.com](http://wendychenart.com)) is the author of *Their Divine Fires* (Algonquin) and *Unearthings* (Tavern Books). She is the editor of *Figure 1* and the associate editor-in-chief of *Tupelo Quarterly*. Chen is the recipient of the Academy of American Poets Most Promising Young Poet Prize and fellowships from MacDowell, the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center, and elsewhere. She earned her MFA in poetry from Syracuse University and her PhD in English from the University of Denver. Her translations of Song-dynasty woman writer Li Qingzhao are forthcoming from FSG in 2025. For more, follow her on Twitter @wendychenart.

# WENDY'S FAMILY PHOTOS



Wendy's great-grandmother, Yunzhen, who had a particular talent for embroidery.



A photograph taken in 1963 in Nanjing of Wendy's mother, Jun, as a child, with Shuming and and the author's great-grandmother, Yunzhen. Yunzhen had unbound feet, an unusual choice for a women of her time and social status.



Shuming, Wendy's grandmother, in her early 40s, when she was working as a pediatrician.



A photograph taken in 1963 in front of Tiananmen with the author's mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. Shuming was quite fashionable and fond of heels.



Shuming, in her early 30s, when she was a medical student.

# IMPORTANT DATES & EVENTS

Zhang Yunhong is born.	1907		
Sun Yat-sen founds the Guomindang (GMD), also known as the Nationalist Party of China; the National Assembly establishes the Republic of China.	1912	1911	The Chinese Revolution of 1911 successfully revolts against the Qing Dynasty, essentially bringing dynastic rule to an end in China.
The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is established.	1921	1919	Zhang Yunhong meets Tan Haiyang; Zhang Yunli marries Chen Liying.
Zhang Yunjun attends First Normal School.	1923	1922	Zhang Chunfei is born to Zhang Yunli and Chen Liying.
Zhang Yunhong and Tan Haiyang are engaged, and Zhang Yunli goes to Shaoshan to support Mao Zedong's efforts to organize peasants.	1925	1924	First United Front, an alliance between the GMD and CCP, is formed in order to fight against powerful warlords in China.
Zhang Yunhong marries Tan Haiyang; The Chinese Civil War begins between the GMD and CCP.	1927	1926	Zhang Yunli and Zhang Yunjun join the Northern Expedition, a military campaign launched by the First United Front against the warlords who ruled China in order to unify the country.
Zhang Fulong and Wan Yufang are arrested.	1935	1928	Zhang Yuexin is born.
The Second China-Japan War, also known as the Chinese War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, begins.	1937	1936	Zhang Yunli returns home with news of Zhang Yunjun's death; The Chinese Civil War ends, and the Second United Front, an alliance between the GMD and CCP, is formed.
Second United Front collapses.	1941	1939	Zhang Yunhong and her family flee from the Japanese Army.
The Chinese Civil War ends in victory for the CCP, and Mao Zedong establishes the People's Republic of China; GMD retreats from China to Taiwan.	1949	1945	The Second China-Japan War ends in the surrender of Japan, and the Chinese Civil War resumes.
Chang Yonghong and Chang Hongxing are born.	1958	1955	Zhang Yuexin marries Chang Shengming.
Zhang Yunli and his family are sent to the countryside for reeducation; Zhang Yunhong dies.	1969	1966	The Cultural Revolution begins in China, and college entrance exams are suspended.

# IMPORTANT DATES & EVENTS

Leap Forward is sent to the countryside; Mao Zedong dies, and the Cultural Revolution ends; college entrance exams reopen.

1976

Chang Hongxing enters the Beijing Film Academy, where she meets Hongmei.

1980

Sun Emily is born.

1991

Chang Hongxing is recruited into a military arts troop.

1974

Chang Yonghong attends college and meets Aiguo.

1978

Chang Yonghong marries Sun Aiguo.

1982

Chang Hongxing visits her sister and mother in America.

2018

