

Praise for  
**Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress**



"Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress . . . speaks of the power of stories to transform lives."

**Carol Jago**, Santa Monica High School  
English Department Chair

"An unexpected miracle – a delicate, and often hilarious, tale."

**Los Angeles Times Book Review**

"A mesmerizing story, classic and new, fabulist and gritty in its realism, full of riches as in the best of tales. My imagination and heart were seized."

**Amy Tan**

Check the Santa Monica Citywide Reads website at [www.smpl.org/cwr](http://www.smpl.org/cwr) for book discussion groups and other special events, April 6 – May 17, 2003.

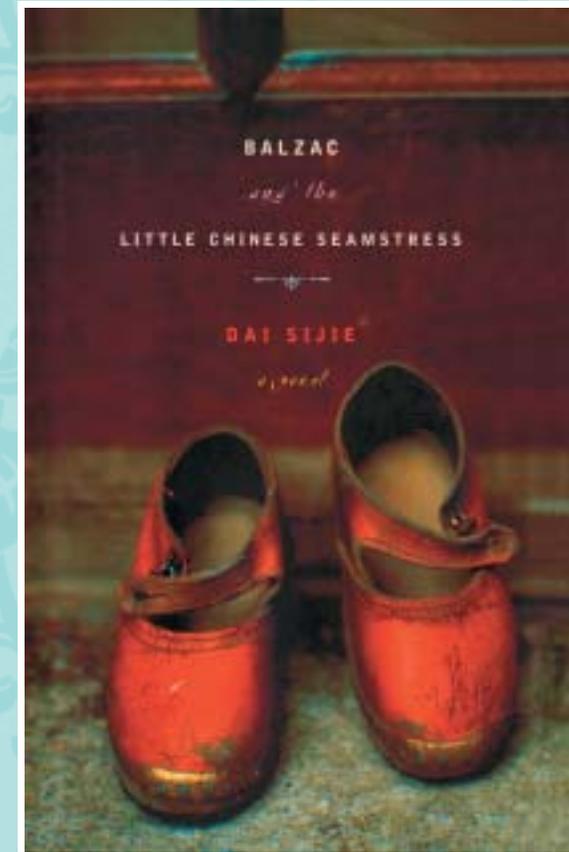
Special thanks to the Friends of the Santa Monica Public Library for printing this Resource Guide and to Dominique Isner of Emeritus College for her translation assistance.



Santa Monica

# Citywide Reads

## Resource Guide



APRIL 6 – MAY 17, 2003



# Citywide Reads

---

Santa Monica Citywide Reads is an open invitation to everyone who lives, works, visits, or attends high school or college in Santa Monica to read and discuss the same book. The program is designed to encourage an appreciation for reading and talking about books by creating an "All Santa Monica Book Club", if you will.

Our inaugural Santa Monica Citywide Reads selection is a fantastic book entitled Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie. The choice was a collaborative effort among Library and City staff, Friends of the Library, educators, writers and other community members. This international best seller resonates with the themes of friendship and the transforming power of storytelling. As the characters in this novel discover, sharing ideas about books with friends adds insight and richness to the experience of reading. How apropos!

You can easily find a copy of Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress at the Santa Monica Public Library or at your local bookstore. Please plan on attending one of the many public Citywide Reads book discussion groups being held during April and May 2003 (see page 8 of this Guide). I also hope you will make time to discuss the book informally with a friend or neighbor.

I sincerely hope that your participation in Santa Monica Citywide Reads will be a rewarding experience that brings you together with your community through literature.

Happy reading!

Richard Bloom  
Mayor / City of Santa Monica

**SAVE THESE DATES FOR SPECIAL**

# Citywide Reads Events

---

**FREE FAMILY CONCERT**  
**Sunday, April 13, 1:00-2:30 pm**

## Mozart in Mao's China

Music Suggested by  
'Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress'  
Featuring the



David H. Young, Artistic Director

**MILES MEMORIAL PLAYHOUSE**  
1130 Lincoln Boulevard (at Wilshire Boulevard)

---

**Saturday, May 17**

## Santa Monica Festival

Join Citywide Reads at the Festival for readings, crafts  
and other activities inspired by  
'Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress'

**CLOVER PARK**  
2600 Ocean Park Boulevard

---

Check Citywide Reads website for more events  
[www.smpl.org/cwr](http://www.smpl.org/cwr)

1976

Chinese premier Chou Enlai dies in Beijing at the age 78.

Deng Xiaoping is deposed and Hua Kuo-feng is appointed Prime Minister and Chairman of the Communist Party.

Communist Chinese leader Mao Zedong dies in Beijing at age 82. The Gang of Four are jailed.

Deng Xiaoping returns from disgrace and eventually seizes power.

## Book Discussions

**Tuesday, April 8** – 1:30 pm

Ken Edwards Center,\* 1527 4th Street, Room 100

**Thursday, April 10** – 2:00 pm

Senior Recreation Center,\* 1450 Ocean Avenue

**Saturday, April 12** – 2:00 pm

Fairview Branch Library,\* 2101 Ocean Park Blvd.

**Monday, April 21** – 10:00 am

Joslyn Park Auditorium,\* 633 Kensington Road

**Wednesday, April 23** – 10:00 am

Marine Park Auditorium,\* 1406 Marine Street

**Thursday, April 24** – 10:00 am

Douglas Park Clubhouse,\* 25th Street & Wilshire Blvd.

**Friday, April 25** – 3:00 pm

Reed Park Auditorium,\* 7th Street & Wilshire Blvd.

**Wednesday, April 30** – 7:00 pm

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Montana Store, 1426 Montana Avenue #5

**Wednesday, April 30** – 7:00 pm

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Main Street Store, 2901 Main Street

**Saturday, May 3** – 11:00 am

Ocean Park Branch Library,\* 2601 Main Street

**Sunday, May 4** – 2:00 pm

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Ocean Park Store, 3150 Ocean Park Blvd.

**Thursday, May 8** – 7:00 pm

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, 2nd Street Promenade Store, 200 Santa Monica Blvd.

**Thursday, May 8** – 7:00 pm

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, 3rd Street Promenade Store, 1312 Third Street

**Saturday, May 10** – 10:30 am

Montana Avenue Branch Library,\* 1704 Montana Avenue

**Friday, May 16** – 12:30 pm

Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, 9th and Wilshire Store, 829 Wilshire Blvd.

## Teen Book Discussions

**Saturday, April 26** – 3:00 pm / 18th Street Coffeehouse, 1725 Broadway

For more information, call Catherine Ronan at 310-458-8976.

**Thursday, May 15** – 7:00 pm / YMCA Teen Center, 1332 Sixth Street

For more information, call Andy Groeneveld at 310-393-2721.

\*All City of Santa Monica facilities are wheelchair accessible. To request a disability-related accommodation, call Library Volunteer Services, 458-8646 (TTD 395-8499), at least three working days (Mon-Fri) in advance.



The life of a novel, in my opinion, is always started by his author, but completed by his readers. Do you think that a book can change somebody's life?

Dai Sijie 14.02.2003

## Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress

Freedom, loyalty, love, and friendship are universal storytelling themes that transcend time and setting. Their power is key to understanding Dai Sijie's novel Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (Trans. Ina Rilke, Anchor Books, 2002). Most readers will immediately be riveted by the descriptions of 1970's China, in the grip of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Imagine being 17 years old, and sent off to a remote province for purposes of "re-education," an attempt to eradicate all evidence of Western culture or class structure. Our intrepid protagonists, the unnamed narrator and his friend Luo – reminiscent of Mark Twain's Huck and Tom – never fail to rise to the challenges of their new circumstances. And, as is the case with most coming-of-age novels, there is "the girl" who completes the triangle and creates the tension of young love. Surprisingly funny, Dai's book sheds a fresh new light on this difficult time. Anyone who has ever faced adversity will be rooting for the young characters as they discover their own talents, love, and an appreciation of freedom – all seemingly unattainable in this remote mountaintop village.

Don't just take our word for it! International best seller Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress has been on the *New York Times* Bestseller List two years in a row, most recently as a paperback. A fast read, the fable-like novel is told in first person narrative, a memoir of sorts for Dai Sijie, a Chinese-French filmmaker. His film version of the book was a 2002 selection for the Cannes Film Festival. Dai has said that his intent was to "show how a few books can completely change the lives of individuals. The Cultural Revolution is merely the backdrop of this story." This is a book that will make you laugh, reflect, and ultimately realize: This is why books and their stories matter.

## Dai Sijie

Born in China in 1954, Dai Sijie (*pronounced Dye See-Jee*) is a filmmaker who was himself re-educated between 1971 and 1974. He left China in 1984 for France, where he has lived and worked ever since. This, his first novel, was an overnight sensation when it appeared in France in 2000, becoming an immediate best seller and winning five prizes. The film, "Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress," (France, 2002) directed by Dai Sijie, was nominated for a 2003 Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

Mao Zedong, China's "red, red sun" urges young Chinese to revolt against traditional culture and leaders.

Mao asks to wipe out bourgeois ideology in the academic, educational, and journalistic fields, in art, literature, and all other culture.

"Working groups" of party members are sent out into the provinces to purge the Party, the press, and the universities.

Wang Li leads the Red Guards to a violent takeover of the Foreign Ministry building.

Henry Kissinger and Chou Enlai agree to quell Soviet military buildup "in a manner so that no one feels we are allies."

A program to rehabilitate party leaders reinstates Deng Xiaoping as Vice Premier.

The Gang of Four advocate for elimination of private business and the strengthening of central planning.

Chiang Kai-shek dies at age 87. Madame Chiang Kai-shek moves to New York following his death.

## Historical Context

The Cultural Revolution in China, led by Mao Zedong, began in 1966 and continued until his death and the fall of his political allies, known as the Gang of Four in 1976. In the most general sense, the Cultural Revolution represented the triumph of anti-intellectualism. Intellectuals were assumed to be inherently counterrevolutionary, and it was asserted their characteristic attitudes and practices were necessarily opposed to the interests of the masses. At the beginning of this period, Mao turned to Lin Biao, his Minister of National Defense, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to purge capitalist and bourgeois influences.

Intraparty infighting and factions ensued and continued throughout the entire period of the Cultural Revolution. On the one side were Mao Zedong and Lin Biao, supported by the PLA (the military arm of the Chinese Communist Party). The other side was a faction led by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, that had its strength in the Communist Party. Premier Chou Enlai, while remaining personally loyal to Mao, tried to mediate or to reconcile the two factions.

From 1966 to 1968, traditional military endeavors virtually ceased as the PLA concentrated on the promotion of the Cultural Revolution. The Red Guards – made up mostly of Maoist students – organized political demonstrations on their behalf. The Red Guards made world famous the "little red book" of quotations from Mao. This became the standard by which all revolutionary efforts were to be judged. Most important of Mao's tenets were the "four big rights" – speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big-character posters.

Millions of Red Guards were encouraged by the Cultural Revolution group to become a "shock force" and to "bombard" with criticism both the party headquarters in Beijing and those at the regional and provincial levels. The result of this barrage of criticism was massive civil disorder, punctuated by clashes among rival Red Guard gangs and between the gangs and local security authorities.

## Further Reading & Viewing

Cao, Guanlong [The Attic: Memoir of a Chinese Landlord's Son](#)  
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Chang, Jung [Wild Swan: Three Daughters of China](#)  
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.

Chen, Chen [Come Watch the Sun Go Home: A Memoir of Upheaval and Revolution in China](#)  
New York: Marlowe and Company, 1998.

Davidson, Nick, producer, director, writer. [Mao Tse-Tung: China's Peasant Emperor](#)  
New York: A&E Home Video, c.1998.

Feigon, Lee [Mao: A Reinterpretation](#)  
Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.

Jiaqi, Yan and Gao Gao [Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution](#)  
Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996.\*

Keesing's Research Report [The Cultural Revolution in China: Its Origins and Course](#)  
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967.\*

Nanchu [Red Sorrow: A Memoir](#) / New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001.

Ross, James R. [Caught in a Tornado: A Chinese American Woman Survives the Cultural Revolution](#)  
Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994.

Schoppa, R. Keith [The Columbia Guide to Modern Chinese History](#)  
New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.\*

Thurston, Anne F. [Enemies of the People: The Ordeal of the Intellectuals in China's Great Cultural Revolution](#)  
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Wen, Chihua [The Red Mirror: Children of China's Cultural Revolution](#)  
Boulder: Westview Press, 1995.

Zhenhua, Zhai [Red Flower of China](#) / New York: Soho Press, 1992.

\*Resources used for compilation of Resource Guide.

Nixon meets with Mao Zedong and Chou Enlai, issuing the Shanghai Communique and ending a 22-year travel ban to China.

The U.K. and China agree to establish full diplomatic relationships. China wants the return of Hong Kong.

The Republic of China presents two pandas to the US National Zoo: Hsing-Hsing and Ling-Ling.

Japan and Canada re-establish diplomatic relations with China.

A mass rally to celebrate the Cultural Revolution is attended by about 1,000,000 people.

Mao's "four big rights" – speaking out freely, airing views fully, holding great debates, and writing big-character posters.

"Working groups" are dissolved, and replaced by the "Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution."

Red Guards break into private houses and throw bourgeois possessions into the streets. Denunciations are made.

## After Pearl Buck: Modern Chinese Fiction

Before Pearl Buck, most Western readers knew China through dime novels where stereotypes like Dr. Fu Manchu lurked in opium dens. Buck's depiction of the Chinese as human beings who struggled against poverty, loved their families, and had ambitions for a better life astonished Americans. Today, however, there is a new generation of Chinese authors. Their narratives – some satirical, some straightforward, some imbued with magic realism, some wildly experimental, some realistic – present a nuanced portrait of China in all its diversity.

Jicai, Feng *The Three-Inch Golden Lotus*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994. Another outstanding parable, like *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress*. An excellent representation of the "scar literature" oeuvre (describing personal suffering during the Cultural Revolution).

Lin, Zhu *Snake's Pillow and Other Stories*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994.

Xiaolong, Qui *Death of a Red Heroine*. New York: Soho Press, 2000.

Xingjian, Gao *Soul Mountain*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2002.

*Excerpts from article by: Andrea Kempf, "The Reader's Shelf," Library Journal, February 1, 2002: 164.*

## Web Resources

City Weekend : The English speaker's guide to life in today's China  
[http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/issues/2002/17/Cover\\_ScarLit](http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/issues/2002/17/Cover_ScarLit)

Library of Congress Country Studies\*  
[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+cn0041\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+cn0041))

Picturing Power: Posters of the Cultural Revolution. The Huntington Photographic Archive of Buddhist and Related Art, College of the Arts, Ohio State University  
<http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/poster/exhibintro.html>

Timelines of History. Created by Algis Ratnikas\*  
<http://timelines.ws/20thcent/TWENTIETHCENT.HTML>

In early 1967 the military high command was purged, and regional military forces were instructed to maintain order and establish military control. By July of 1968, Mao had abolished the Red Guards and established Revolutionary Committees to replace traditional government and party organizations.

Among China's people, the Cultural Revolution caused many to look down on education and cultural knowledge. Graduates were not sought by any office or profession, and revolutionary education excluded science and cultural subjects, depriving students and society of a crucial knowledge base. The abundance of young workers in the cities meant a nationwide effort to send "educated youth up to the mountains and down to the countryside" to receive re-education among peasants. From 1968 to 1978, the educated youth who were sent for re-education numbered 16,230,000.

During the early and mid-1970s, the radical group later known as the Gang of Four, Jiang Qing (Mao's fourth wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen attempted to dominate power. The Gang of Four advocated the primacy of nonmaterial political incentives, reduction of income differences, elimination of private farm plots, strengthening of central planning, and denounced the use of foreign technology.

Uncertainty and instability were exacerbated by the death of Zhou Enlai in January 1976, and by the subsequent second purge of Deng Xiaoping (principal leader of China, 1978-1987) in April. But this uncertainty finally ended when the Gang of Four was arrested in October 1976 – one month after Mao's death. During the Eleventh National Party Congress of August 1977, the Cultural Revolution was declared officially to have ended with the arrest of the Gang of Four.

**1968**

Mao is confirmed as the supreme leader. Lin Biao is named as Mao's successor. Professional personnel are criticized, and sent down to the countryside.

**1969**

Soviet and Chinese troops begin skirmishes along the 2,500 mile border. Lin Biao launches an extensive war preparations campaign.

**1970**

An earthquake of 7.7 magnitude kills over 15,000 people in Yunnan province.

**1971**

China launches its first satellite, which repeatedly transmits the song, "The East is Red."

The UN General Assembly votes to admit the People's Republic of China.

Lin Biao dies in a plane crash as he flees China after an aborted coup attempt.

**1972**

Nixon tours Red China and sells \$750 million worth of grain to the Soviet Union: the "great grain robbery".

**Discussion Questions**

1. What does Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress reveal about the nature and purpose of China's Cultural Revolution and the suffering it caused? In what ways does the novel offer a more intimate portrait of what life was like under Chairman Mao than a strictly historical account could?
2. Why have the narrator's and Luo's parents been named "enemies of the people"? What were their crimes? How does this classification affect the fate of the two boys? What was the purpose behind China's desire to re-educate people like the narrator and Luo?
3. What does the novel say about storytelling and the status of the storyteller in the modern world? Is this novel an argument for or against the importance of storytelling? Who are our modern storytellers?
4. The narrator has lived a relatively short and secluded life, yet he seems to identify strongly with characters and situations in Western novels he has never experienced himself. What does this suggest about the power of literature? Does Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress exert a similar power on its readers?
5. Why does Four Eyes object to the authentic mountain songs Luo and the narrator bring back from the Old Miller? How does he alter them to make them politically correct? What can you say about the effort to make peasant culture conform to communist ideals?
6. Are personal desires of dress, literature, family, and friends inspired by cultural pressures or inherent in human nature? What does this novel suggest about the ability to shape and control a people's basic wishes?
7. Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress is a harshly realistic novel, in which the two main characters are forced to work in a coal mine and to carry buckets of excrement up and down a mountain; but it also has a fairy-tale quality. What makes the book read like a fable? Is the tone appropriate?

8. Can Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress be read as a coming-of-age novel? How do the events in the story change the narrator and Luo? Have they lost their innocence by the end of the book?
9. What do you make of the novel's ending? What sort of statement do you feel this ending makes about literature, or perhaps about the perils of "re-education"?
10. For most of the story, there is only one narrator and one point of view. Why do you think that changes two-thirds of the way through the novel? Why are The Old Miller's Story, Luo's Story, and The Little Seamstress Story included? And why does the narration switch back to the unnamed narrator afterwards?
11. This is Dai Sijie's first novel, but he is already an established filmmaker. Do you see signs of his background in film in this novel?

**Get Reading Now With Two Great Library Resources:****Chapter-A-Day**

([www.smpl.org/chapteraday](http://www.smpl.org/chapteraday))

Get the first few chapters sent directly to your e-mail address.

**Novelist**

([www.smpl.org/research/novelist.html](http://www.smpl.org/research/novelist.html))

Find more resources and discussion questions here. You will need a library card number for this site.