

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LISA SEE

LADY TAN'S
CIRCLE
OF WOMEN

A NOVEL

Reading Group Guide



LADY TAN'S A NOVEL
CIRCLE OF WOMEN
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This reading group guide for Lady Tan's Circle of Women includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

The latest historical novel from *New York Times* bestselling author Lisa See is inspired by the true story of a woman physician from 15th-century China—and perfect for fans of See's classic *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* and *The Island of Sea Women*.

Lady Tan's Circle of Women is a captivating story of women helping other women. It is also a triumphant reimagining of the life of a woman who was remarkable in the Ming dynasty and would be considered remarkable today.






TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The opening of this novel begins with a preface which includes the line “My cousin has excelled at treating women because she has shared in the losses and joys of what it means to be a female on this earth.” How does this set up the novel and what is to come for Yunxian? After reading the novel, what does it mean to be a “female on this earth?”
2. How does the death of Respectful Lady shape Yunxian? What lessons from Respectful Lady does Yunxian carry with her? When Respectful Lady is near her end, she mutters: “To live is to suffer.” How is this a warning for Yunxian early in the novel?
3. Grandfather Tan and Grandmother Ru have very different ideas about childbirth. Who do you agree with, and why? Although 500 years have passed since the time the novel takes place, do you think these contradictory ideas still hold true today – not just for childbirth but for women’s medical care in general?
4. Lisa often writes about friendship: Snow Flower and Lily in *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, Youngsook and Mija in *The Island of Sea Women*, and now Yunxian and Meiling in *Lady Tan’s Circle of Women*. These two girls shouldn’t have contact with each other, let alone have a relationship formalized and sanctioned by Grandmother Ru and Midwife Shi. How do Yunxian and Meiling each benefit from the relationship? Are there downsides for each of them? Talk about what friendship means to you. And, since you’re all in a book club—typically a circle of women—share what it means to you.
5. Each character—and Yunxian’s relationship to that person—changes and evolves over time. How does Yunxian come to see and understand the characters of Miss Zhao, Miss Chen, Lady Kuo, Doctor Wong, and her husband and father?
6. The importance of having a son was critical in ancient China. It still is in many countries and cultures around the world. What are the main plotlines in the novel related to this issue? Consider the perspectives of Spinster Aunt, Miss Chen, Doctor Wong, Midwife Shi, Lady Kuo, and Meiling and Yunxian. Were these characters out for his or her own self-interest?
7. Lisa often uses aphorisms to help illuminate a character or a plot point. One of the most significant in this novel is *No mud, no lotus*. Discuss how this aphorism is important to the story. On page 256, Miss Chen recites a series of aphorisms to Yunxian: *It takes a lifetime to make a friend, but you can lose one in an hour. Life without a friend is life without sun. Life without a friend is death.* What message is Miss Chen trying to convey to Yunxian? Lisa considers these aphorisms to be true across time and cultures. Do you agree? How have they played out in your life, if at all?



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8. A case could be made that Yunxian was a modern woman. What are some of the ways she balances work and family? Do you see yourself in her?
 9. The Dragon Boat Festival looms large in Yunxian's imagination. What does it mean for her—and the other women who reside in the Garden of Fragrant Delights—to finally get to attend?
 10. Lisa was inspired to write this novel during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, walking past her bookshelf to find a text she had but hadn't read in the decade that she owned it. How does time and memory inspire us to examine neglected objects? Have you experienced newfound inspiration or ideas by the objects around your home?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Host a tea tasting for your book club. Bana Tea Company has put together a package featuring the special tea dried in the mandarin orange that Yunxian serves Lady Kuo on page 166 and the jasmine tea that Meiling and Yunxian share on page 177. Access the custom tasting kits here: www.banateacompany.com/pages/Lisa-See-Tasting-Kit-2023.html



2. Share with your book club the year in the Chinese zodiac in which you were born. What are the characteristics of your birth sign? Do they ring true to you? What other signs are you compatible with, and why? What signs should you avoid?
3. Design your own Ming dynasty outfit. On the next page, find an outline of an outfit along with some symbols and their meanings. You can do this as a group activity with the host providing crayons, colored pencils, felt-tip pens, or even watercolors. Or you can create your outfit at home and bring it to your book club to share. What symbols did you use, and why?
4. Visit Step Inside the World of Lady Tan on Lisa's website www.LisaSee.com to see photos, videos, and more about the people, places, customs, and traditions that inspired the book.



LISA SEE'S COLORING CIRCLE

Chinese Good Luck Symbols

Bat: Happiness

Clouds: good
Fortune & happiness

Fish: surplus

Gold Coins: wealth

Lotus: continuous harmony

Peach: longevity

Pearl: purity & preciousness

Shoes: harmony

Vase: peace

Zodiac Animals: your own birth sign-
tiger, dragon, rooster, rabbit, etc

