

THE LAST MANDARIN

Discussion Questions

1. The relationship between Vivien and Alice Li, mother and daughter, is a central theme of *The Last Mandarin*. When we meet both characters, they're having a fraught brunch at a hotel restaurant in Washington, DC. Where do we leave them at the end of the novel? How does their relationship grow and change? How do each of these two characters, as individuals, grow and change over the course of the novel? Do you see yourself, or any of your family members, in these two characters?
2. There is a ton of mouthwatering food in *The Last Mandarin*. The events of the novel kick off with a photo sent to Alice by her friend Liam—a selfie of her fellow food blogger holding a coconut bun—and then we follow the characters from the kitchens of the White House to food stalls in China and beyond. What are some examples of food moving the plot of the story forward? Which dish in *The Last Mandarin* would you be most excited to try?
3. In *The Last Mandarin*, Vivien is constantly wearing her Shanghai Tang jacket. As Louise and Mellissa write, "it was more than an item of clothing. It was a cloaking device, a shield. An expensive piece of Chinese fashion that told those in the know that Vivian Li, the peasant girl from the rice fields, was important." Do you have a piece of clothing or accessory that you consider to be your most important? How does that item make you feel?
4. The two major world leaders featured in the novel, the President of the United States and the President of China, are given nicknames related to children's books: "Paddington Bear" and "Eeyore." Given what you know now about these leaders, how do these nicknames fit each man? Did the actions of either politician surprise you throughout the novel?
5. Vivien Li, her husband, Liu Tongzheng, and her brother, Kai-wen, were all important pro-democracy demonstrators in the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising. How is their shared history relevant to the events of *The Last Mandarin*? What did you learn about Chinese history from this novel that you didn't know before? Did anything surprise you?
6. The relationship between Alice and her mother is at the heart of *The Last Mandarin*, but throughout the novel, Alice must also reckon with her relationship with her father. How is the real Liu Tongzheng different from the father Alice remembered from her childhood? How do you feel about his actions in the novel?

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7. In Chinese mythology, Pangu is the primordial god of both creation and destruction. As Vivien describes it, “Pangu emerged from chaos, and when he died, his corpse created the world around us.” In *The Last Mandarin*, what is the ultimate goal of the group that calls themselves Pangu? Given this mythological identity of Pangu, does the name of the group fit their actions?
8. During their first meeting at the White House, Vivien says to the President, “You see, sir, in China, things appear to be one thing when they are often the opposite.” What is she referring to in that meeting? What are some other examples of things not being quite what they seem throughout the novel, in China and the United States alike?
9. In *The Last Mandarin*, Peach Blossom Spring is a fable, a painting, and a noodle shop. What is the fable of Peach Blossom Spring? Why do you think Kai-wen was so drawn to that concept?
10. As a political thriller, *The Last Mandarin* contains depictions of terrifying events happening worldwide, including disruptions to electronic systems and elevators causing a global panic. How do you feel about the ways the governments in the novel reacted to these events? The characters? Can you picture events like this happening in our world? What would you do?
11. Given a chance, would you go into the tomb of the first emperor?
12. Women are central to the plot of *The Last Mandarin*. It’s two women—Vivien and Alice—who save the day. We see women in the upper echelons of government among the western countries (but not in the Politburo in Beijing). And it’s Nüshu, a language invented and used entirely by women, that is key to unraveling the mystery. For the women in your book club, are there certain words or phrases that you consider to be a “secret language” used only by women in your circles? Can you think of any other international thrillers you’ve read where it’s women who “save the day”?