

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FATE: THE LOST DECADES OF UNCLE CHOW TUNG

Written by Ian Hamilton

1. The novel opens in June 1959 during one of China's greatest tragedies, the Great Leap Forward. Known by the Chinese peasantry as "the years of slow death" and "the bitter years," this badly implemented agrarian reform resulted in 20 million deaths from starvation. Like many refugees before and since, Chow Tung, his fiancée Gui-San, and several old friends and new acquaintances decide that risking death by swimming for the New Territories of Hong Kong is a better option than staying put. How bad would conditions have to be in your home country for you to risk such a crossing? What would trigger becoming a refugee yourself? How does Uncle's experience as a refugee influence his behaviour in the novel?
2. The novel's title, *Fate*, suggests that the course of Uncle Chow Tung's life is pre-ordained. Do you agree that fate is the driving force of his life? What parts do luck or choice also play in how Uncle's life is unfolding?
3. Uncle Chow Tung is the White Paper Fan of his triad, "responsible for keeping the books, managing the gang's money, and devising legal and business strategies" (21). It is an important position, but several rungs from the top job. What skills does Uncle bring to this job that other gang members lack? How much does his success in the gang relate to how good he is at business? How do these skills help him handle the rival gang?
4. The action of the novel unfolds over the course of one week, beginning on a Tuesday with a meeting about Chow Tung's idea for a new, potentially lucrative night market business, and ending the following Monday with an election for Mountain Master. How much do we learn about Uncle over the course of this week? What do you feel you still don't know about him by the end of the novel?
5. The initiation ceremony for the Heaven and Earth Society includes reciting poetry, swearing oaths of loyalty, and a symbolic rebirth as a gang brother. For Uncle, who lost everyone he loved before reaching the shores of the New Territory, the Fanling triad is his new family, for which "he felt a depth of camaraderie that threatened to overwhelm him" (31). In what ways does the triad operate as a family? What are the differences between a "true" family and a gang?

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6. Uncle says that “not everyone who was involved in crime as a willing participant, and some members had been branded as criminals simply because they belonged to a secret society” that had been made illegal (27). Considering this, and considering what a collegial relationship Chow has with the police, how should we define crime and criminality? Uncle’s life is very routine. How might this help him cope with both his high-stress job and with the terrible personal losses he has suffered? Do you find such routines supportive or stifling?
7. In the middle of the novel, we learn what happened to Uncle’s family in China, with his mother, father, sister, and grandmother all dying within ten days of each other and Uncle having to nurse and then bury them. And yet, the narrator tells us, “it hadn’t hardened him. What it had done, slowly but relentlessly, was make him realize how precious life was, and how important it was to live in a way that honoured it,” which means living by the values one believes in, and not backing down (167). How does being part of a triad align with Uncle’s values?
8. Gui-San, in death, has become Uncle’s closest confidant. Why does Uncle need her to fill this role when he already has good friends in Xu and Fong and a mentor in Tian? Why does he apologize to her for having ambition?
9. Just as Uncle will one day mentor Ava Lee, he too has a mentor in Tian. How important are mentors in our lives? Can we get by without them? Can anyone be, as the saying goes, “a self-made man”?
10. At what point did you, as a reader, suspect that Ren was not the man Uncle hoped he was when he endorsed his candidacy for Mountain Master? What do you think his motivations were for the things he did?
11. Sammy Wing plays the role of informant by finding Uncle at the racetrack and warning him about a rival gang’s plans to take over the Fanling territory. Why do Sammy and his gang want to warn Uncle and his gang? How does this warning affect the events that follow?
12. One of Uncle’s complaints about Ma is that he “acted as if he was a lord and they were his peasants.” Uncle also knows that people who are treated like that “could be dangerous if pushed too far” (91). Why do people like Ma believe they can get away with treating others this way? Does treating people this way help certain individuals as leaders?