

## Questions for *The Goddess of Yantai*

1. The novel opens with mentions of two of China's greatest tragedies, the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), which caused 20 million deaths from starvation, and the Tiananmen Square protests (1989), where “hundreds, if not thousands” (14) of demonstrators were killed in the square named for the “Gate of Heavenly Peace.” Later in the book, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) is mentioned a few times. These historical forces have obviously shaped China, but how do they shape the characters in the novel?
2. The “Goddess of Yantai” obviously refers to Pang Fai. And directors like Tsang Min and Lau Lau are described as being like “gods” on the movie set. Is celebrity culture merely a substitute for religion? Does human nature require us to believe that some who walk among us are more important?
3. When Ava and Lop first visit Mo, he describes Fai as being “at an age where her appeal is starting to fade . . . it has to be expected that there will be fewer projects that suit her. That may seem cruel, but it’s the nature of the business” (77). Is this observation still true in the film industries in other countries? What role does the media and celebrity culture play in women like Ava, who has so many talents of her own, worrying about getting old and fat?
4. Fai lives in a hutong, Lau Lau lives in a warehouse converted into an artist co-op, Bai Jing lives in a tall, ugly apartment building, and Xia’s offices are in a forty-storey office tower “of glass and steel without any real character or attempt at architectural originality” (45). How does the architecture of Beijing reflect these characters and the society in which they live?
5. “I think about films all the time. I see them in my head and I make them there. I’ve got three or four of them shot. All I need is a camera and a crew,” says Lau Lau (324). Fan tells Ava, “if Lau Lau had had better management support, he might still be making movies today” (100). Ava, rich enough to invest in any project she likes, begins to see herself as that new management support. How well do Ava’s skills translate to film management? Do you think Ava will have problems with helping Lau Lau make movies again?
6. One of Chen’s first pieces of advice to Ava is that “business is business and sometimes we have to let things go” (87). Although such business advice often passes for unassailable truth, what ethical lines can and should be drawn to contain the excesses of any business?
7. Mo, the head of the China Movie Syndicate, seems like a familiar character in the film industry. Fai says, “I’ve watched him intimidate, dominate, and humiliate people for years” (102). As Chen describes him, “It’s not so much about the sex as it is about recognizing and acknowledging who exercises power in the Syndicate. It’s all about power” (86). Although Ava has engineered a “Mexican standoff” (to use a movie cliché) with Mo to protect Fai, how likely is it that Mo has learned his lesson? Is it the responsibility of Ava, Fai, and Chen to make sure that Mo stops his abuse of power?

8. While perusing the art at the hotel, Ava notices that “the Chinese art was mostly pedestrian. It was as if the Chinese artists didn’t want to be too avant-garde, to take too many risks” and that the artists “had been raised after the Cultural Revolution, in a system that didn’t value eccentricity or individualism” (66). This criticism seems to be true of the Chinese film industry as well, considering that the release of *Mao’s Daughter* is so problematic. How do social and economic conditions affect the creation of art? Are the individual efforts of the artists themselves the deciding element in producing great art or are other factors more important?
9. Throughout the novel, the characters discuss the relative powers of fate, luck, and choice on how events unfold. How do the different characters’ understanding of these ideas reflect their personalities and life experiences? Which do you believe in? Why?
10. Do you believe that Ms. Hua was the person responsible for the blackmail of Fai and the attacks on Ava, or was it Mo, who is described by Chen as a vengeful man “who loses control of his anger over the tiniest of slights” (361)? What motivations are involved for Mo versus Mr. Hua?
11. Of Ding Fa, the film editor, Fai says, “He’s a really good editor, and he always makes my performance look better than it was” (243). What other professions make people “look better” without getting much credit for doing so? How does this compare to the support Ava often provides?