

# Lady Tan's Circle of Women

by Lisa See

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## About the Book

The latest historical novel from *New York Times* bestselling author Lisa See, inspired by the true story of a woman physician from 15th-century China --- perfect for fans of See's classic *SNOWFLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN* and *THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMEN*.

According to Confucius, "an educated woman is a worthless woman," but Tan Yunxian --- born into an elite family, yet haunted by death, separations and loneliness --- is being raised by her grandparents to be of use. Her grandmother is one of only a handful of female doctors in China, and she teaches Yunxian the pillars of Chinese medicine, the Four Examinations --- looking, listening, touching and asking --- something a man can never do with a female patient.

From a young age, Yunxian learns about women's illnesses, many of which relate to childbearing, alongside a young midwife-in-training, Meiling. The two girls find fast friendship and a mutual purpose --- despite the prohibition that a doctor should never touch blood while a midwife comes in frequent contact with it --- and they vow to be forever friends, sharing in each other's joys and struggles. *No mud, no lotus*, they tell themselves: from adversity beauty can bloom.

But when Yunxian is sent into an arranged marriage, her mother-in-law forbids her from seeing Meiling and from helping the women and girls in the household. Yunxian is to act like a proper wife --- embroider bound-foot slippers, pluck instruments, recite poetry, give birth to sons, and stay forever within the walls of the family compound, the Garden of Fragrant Delights.

How might a woman like Yunxian break free of these traditions, go on to treat women and girls from every level of society, and lead a life of such importance that many of her remedies are still used five centuries later? How might the power of friendship support or complicate these efforts? *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.

## Discussion Guide

1. The opening of this novel begins with a preface that 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?
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?

## Author Bio

Lisa See is the *New York Times* bestselling author of DAUGHTERS OF THE SUN AND MOON, LADY TAN'S CIRCLE OF WOMEN, THE ISLAND OF SEA WOMEN, THE TEA GIRL OF HUMMINGBIRD LANE, SNOW FLOWER AND THE SECRET FAN, PEONY IN LOVE, SHANGHAI GIRLS, CHINA DOLLS and DREAMS OF JOY, which debuted at #1. She is also the author of ON GOLD MOUNTAIN, which tells the story of her Chinese American family's settlement in Los Angeles. See was the recipient of the Golden Spike Award from the Chinese Historical Association of Southern California and the History Maker's Award from the Chinese American Museum. She was also named National Woman of the Year by the Organization of Chinese American Women.

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