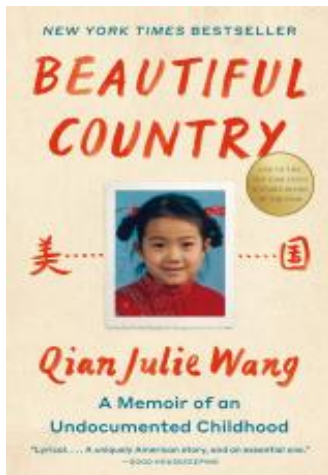


Beautiful Country: A Memoir of an Undocumented Childhood

by Qian Julie Wang



About the Book

An incandescent memoir from an astonishing new talent, BEAUTIFUL COUNTRY puts readers in the shoes of an undocumented child living in poverty in the richest country in the world.

In Chinese, the word for America, Mei Guo, translates directly to "beautiful country." Yet when seven-year-old Qian arrives in New York City in 1994 full of curiosity, she is overwhelmed by crushing fear and scarcity. In China, Qian's parents were professors; in America, her family is "illegal," and it will require all the determination and small joys they can muster to survive.

In Chinatown, Qian's parents labor in sweatshops. Instead of laughing at her jokes, they fight constantly, taking out the stress of their new life on one another. Shunned by her classmates and teachers for her limited English, Qian takes refuge in the library and masters the language through books, coming to think of *The Berenstain Bears* as her first American friends. And where there is delight to be found, Qian relishes it: her first bite of gloriously greasy pizza, weekly "shopping days," when Qian finds small treasures in the trash lining Brooklyn's streets, and a magical Christmas visit to Rockefeller Center --- confirmation that the New York City she saw in movies does exist after all.

But then Qian's headstrong Ma Ma collapses, revealing an illness that she has kept secret for months for fear of the cost and scrutiny of a doctor's visit. As Ba Ba retreats further inward, Qian has little to hold onto beyond his constant refrain: *Whatever happens, say that you were born here, that you've always lived here.*

Inhabiting her childhood perspective with exquisite lyric clarity and unforgettable charm and strength, Qian Julie Wang has penned an essential American story about a family fracturing under the weight of invisibility, and a girl coming of age in the shadows, who never stops seeking the light.

Discussion Guide

1. Qian had expectations about the US before she arrived. What were they, and what surprised her the most? How does that line up with your understanding of the US and your day-to-day view of it?
2. How does Qian's understanding of her race change when she comes to the US? How does her understanding of other races change?
3. How is Qian treated at school by her teachers? Why is she treated differently, even within her Chinatown school where most students are Chinese immigrants, and how does it affect her view of herself and her opportunities?
4. We are shown a community of immigrants through Qian's eyes --- other people working at the sweatshops, family friends. How do their lives differ from the Wang family's, and how are those differences discussed?
5. How does the use of pinyin, phonetic Chinese, feature and shift throughout the book?
6. Qian seems to notice class for the first time when she arrives in the US. What are the designations of class that she pays most attention to?
7. Books make a huge impact on Qian. Did you read any of these same books when you were younger, or read them with your kids? How did they affect you?
8. Qian's relationship with her mother changes significantly over the course of the book, from their time in China and then over their time in the US. How does it evolve, and why do you think it changes the way that it does? Does this remind you of your own relationship with your mother in any way?
9. Personal space is discussed often in the book, both as a need and a signifier of class. Qian has her own room for the first time at Lin Ah Yi's. Why is it so meaningful to her, and what does it allow her?
10. One of the few connections Qian makes is with her cat, Marilyn. How does her special connection with this animal help her cope with her difficult family situation? What did your pets mean to you as a child, and how might this be different from your experience with pets as an adult?
11. What do you make of the narrator's voice and perspective? How does it change as Qian grows older over the course of the book?
12. Has this book changed your understanding or opinion of what it means to be a citizen or to be undocumented?
13. The family has a perpetual fear of being noticed for their immigration status --- at school, at work, at the hospital. How does this affect their quality of life, and what would being noticed have meant for them? How does it affect Qian, specifically, as a young girl growing up? What did being noticed mean to you when you were younger?
14. Why do you think Qian Julie chose to end the book (aside from the epilogue) at their departure from the US? Would you have expected it to continue to the present day? What do you think is achieved by containing the narrative to those

five years of undocumented life?

Author Bio

Qian Julie Wang is a graduate of Yale Law School and Swarthmore College. Formerly a commercial litigator, she is now managing partner of Gottlieb & Wang LLP, a firm dedicated to advocating for education and civil rights. Her writing has appeared in major publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and their two rescue dogs, Salty and Peppers.

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