

*The
Night Tiger*

By Yangsze Choo

Reading
Group Guide

#NightTigerTogether

“A sumptuous garden maze of a novel”

Kirkus

“Riveting . . . Mythical creatures, conversations with the dead, lucky numbers, Confucian virtues, and forbidden love provide the backdrop for Choo’s superb murder mystery”

Publishers Weekly

“A work of incredible beauty. . . astoundingly captivating and striking in its portrayal of love, betrayal, and death, *The Night Tiger* is a transcendent story of courage and connection”

Booklist

A vertical decorative illustration on the left side of the page. It features a dark background with stylized green leaves, pink and purple flowers with yellow stamens, and a tiger's head in orange and black stripes. At the bottom is a yellow lotus flower. In the top right corner, there are white and yellow circles with green lines extending from them.

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *The Night Tiger*. Please note: this booklet contains spoilers! If you haven't finished reading *The Night Tiger* yet, we strongly suggest you wait until you have before reading this guide.

Join Quercus for *The Night Tiger* buddy read, #NightTigerTogether! Chat to fellow readers about this luscious, escapist read set in 1930s Malaysia. Read chapters alongside other readers each week, ask questions and share your thoughts on social media on Monday nights at 8pm using #NightTigerTogether and tagging @QuercusBooks. Look out for author @YangszeChoo joining in!

18th February Chapters 1 to 100 (under 100 pages)

25th February Chapters 10 to 20

4th March Chapters 20 to 30

11th March Chapters 30 to 40

18th March Chapters 40 to 53

25th March Post your review and take part in a social media Q&A with author Yangsze Choo

Use this reading group guide to help you join in and ask questions!



Lunar New Year: A Feast for the Gods and Family

By author Yangsze Choo

Chinese new year is upon us, and I'm almost ready. That is, if one can prepare for several days of non-stop eating and visiting relatives. This year's lunar new year falls on February 5, which is uncomfortably close to the excesses of Christmas and New Year's, when I told myself sternly that I must stop drinking bubble tea and do more push ups.

"You could just do things in moderation," my husband pointed out mildly. Clearly he had no idea of the true crazy scope of this festival. The lunar new year is the most important event in the Chinese calendar. All over the world, millions of Chinese close businesses that are never shut on any other day of the year and empty out cities in order to rush home. In China, there are massive traffic jams sparked by the new year's rush, when hordes of people pack themselves into flights, buses, and trains. In Singapore and Malaysia, where there's a large overseas Chinese population, people have been known to set off at 3am in the morning in order to avoid the crazy lines at the causeway.

All of this trekking is to get home for the big reunion dinner on New Year's eve, when family members unite to set off firecrackers, play mahjong all night, and eat. And eat. Food and love and filial piety combine to reach dizzy heights of guilt and delight, together with once-yearly treats like pineapple tarts, nian gao, and red packets crinkling with the promise of pocket money.



As children, our main roles appeared to be to consume the food that appeared, like magic, at all hours of the day. “Have you eaten?” was the constant outcry from the adults. Treats were stuffed in hands, laden on plates, and tucked into pockets. For my grandparents, who had survived WW2 and the Japanese occupation of Malaya, nothing gave more joy than the sight of a well-fed child. There were no dietary rules in their house—only large tins filled with homemade biscuits.

My grandparents lived in a long narrow Chinese shophouse on the main street of a little town in Malaysia. Going back was a must, never mind that our car, windows rolled down in the sweltering tropical heat to prevent overheating, inched forward on jam-packed roads. Part way there, we’d make a stop at Bidor, a small town known principally as a purveyor of delicious duck noodles. Around new year’s, the open fronted food stalls would be festooned with lime green globes of giant pomelos. Each steaming bowl of dark aromatic broth came with a meltingly tender piece of duck pillowed on springy noodles.

When we finally pushed back the metal grill door of my grandparents’ shophouse, we were hot, tired, and bearing gifts (food of course).

Heong beng, the flaky biscuits made with lard and filled with caramelized sugar, pork floss, and other delicacies my mum had stuffed into bulging shopping bags. Not to be outdone, my grandmother would amass crispy fried keropok, prawn crackers, and other traditional sweets like the delicate curled biscuits called love letters, in ancient Jacob’s Cream Cracker tins. Just in case anyone had fainted from hunger on the way.

Lined up on the cool cement floor of the courtyard was a queue of fat nian gao or new year’s cakes. Made of glutinous rice and sugar, this sticky paste was ladled into banana leaf wrappings, steamed to a rich caramelized brown, and then left to dry in the sun until it hardened. On New Year’s day, my mum would slice the nian gao into half inch thick slices, dip each into beaten egg, and fry them till they were crisp on the outside and satisfyingly gooey on the inside. Traditionally, a little bit of sticky-sweet nian gao would be smeared on the picture of



the kitchen god so that he would have nothing but sweet things to report when his picture was burned to send him back to Heaven.

Before the family reunion dinner could be eaten, the gods must be served first. My grandmother followed her own particular mixture of Buddhist and folk beliefs: no washing your hair on new year's day, or sweeping the floor or throwing the garbage, since that was equivalent to bad luck. Neither was complaining or saying unlucky phrases. The food for the gods had to be prepared just so: a whole steamed chicken that my grandmother had reared in the back kitchen courtyard, dishes of meat and a fresh green lettuce (*sang choy*, a homophone for fortune) were put on a tray with chopsticks and bowl and offered at the altar. No one was to touch them before the gods had partaken. Even the prayer had an order. First she prayed to the god of Heaven, next the god of Earth, then for the ancestors, and the kitchen god. Finally, there was a prayer to the small god in the bedroom who kept the children safe, known as the godmother of children.

Once the food had been ritually offered and accepted, it was consumed by the family. The whole steamed chicken, rubbed with fragrant sesame oil, was expertly chopped into bite size pieces and served with a dipping sauce of ginger, soy sauce, shallot oil, and green onions.

Accompanying it were stir-fried greens with garlic, succulent pork belly slow cooked with fermented bean paste and wine, and noodles for long life. Every family cooked its favourite dishes for the new year. Some made dumplings and wontons shaped like fat purses of gold, others steamed a whole fish in a gloss of shallot oil and soy sauce. For dessert, we nibbled on juicy peeled segments of pomelo and ate tang yuen, mochi dumplings served in a sweet soup. Whatever stomach



space was left was devoted to an unending parade of toasted watermelon seeds, crystallized sugary pieces of winter melon, and peanuts.

Now that I'm middle-aged, all this feasting which traditionally continued for the fifteen days of lunar new year seems a bit daunting. Not least because I'm no longer able to digest vast amounts of carbohydrates, but also because I live a continent away from my extended family, who would noisily cook and partake of these new year excesses. Every year, I think my kids are missing out by not being forced to stand over a hot wok, laboriously caramelizing pineapple jam. The freshly made jam, redolent with cloves and sugar, was used to fill divinely buttery, golden pineapple tarts. Maybe this year, even if we can't manage the rest of the menu, we'll actually make them.



Author Yangsze Choo Explains the Confucian Virtues

Ren

The most important Confucian virtue. Benevolence, goodness, humanity, kindness. Ren is best expressed when a virtuous person treats others in a humane and upright way. Our protagonist, Ren, is in some ways the pure “heart” of the book - yet in the reversal of the virtues (how they’ve all become crooked in some way) he’s asked to steal severed fingers, act as a sorcerer’s servant (comparisons to the inhuman toyol), and generally do ghoulish things that are at odds with his basic humanity. And in the end, of course, he actually murders William by accident, though in each case Ren is trying his very best to do good.

Yi

Righteousness. A moral sense of what is right and wrong, and the ability to discern and make good choices. An intuition of what is the correct path. For example, in *The Night Tiger*, Yi fails to make good choices, when he decides to stay on and lure his brother to death.

Li

Ritual, order, proper conduct, propriety. Doing things in the correct order. In ancient China, li originally referred to cosmic/religious rituals. Later in Confucianism this came to mean formal social roles. It is a sign of civility and human-heartedness to be able to perform the correct rituals in the proper way. e.g. mourning a parent shows filial piety, not putting yourself first etc., tea drinking (you see some of that sense of ritual still preserved in the Japanese tea



ceremony, studying). My sense is that it also suggests a certain amount of self-restraint. That's why in the book, the 5th person (Li) subverts natural order by putting his/her passions and desires first and not waiting for the proper time.

Zhi

Wisdom, knowledge. Some scholars have argued that zhi in Confucianism is more properly described as an active process of realization - gaining wisdom through the realization of what is right. According to Mencius, while yi is the initial impulse towards choosing right or wrong, zhi is the skill in understanding why. Confucianism doesn't distinguish between moral and intellectual wisdom - they are the same. In *The Night Tiger*, Ji Lin's curiosity helps her to unearth a number of crimes, yet at the same time she's blind to many things that are obvious to the reader.

Xin

Faithfulness, loyalty, integrity, keeping one's word. For Confucius, there must be trust between people in order to build and honestly administer the country. Integrity is also extremely important for interpersonal relationships. Shin is unfaithful in the sense that Ji Lin thinks he's fooling around with lots of girlfriends, yet in his own way, he's also faithful only to her.



Reading Group Questions

1. The novel's title evokes the story of the weretiger, "a beast who, when he chooses, puts on a human skin and comes from the jungle into the village to prey on humans." What is the significance of that Malayan folktale in the novel? What does it represent for the different characters?
2. Discuss the structure of the novel, alternating between Ren and Ji Lin's perspectives. How do their narrative styles and worldviews compare? Do you prefer one to the other? How would the novel have been different had it only been from one perspective?
3. Discuss Ren's relationship with Dr. MacFarlane. Does Ren's desire to bring the finger to his former master's grave come from a place of love or fear? How is Ren's life shaped by the masters for whom he works, and how does he determine his own fate?
4. As a surgeon in Batu Gajah, William Acton straddles two worlds, that of the locals and that of the foreigners. What is his relationship to the local people, specifically the young women he sleeps with? Do you think his impact on the community is ultimately positive or negative? What does this novel have to say about race and class more generally?

- 
5. Ji Lin is a more talented student than her stepbrother Shin, but because she is a girl, she isn't allowed to continue on to medical school with him. How does this novel portray gender dynamics in colonial Malaya? How do Ji Lin, Lydia, and the other women in the novel either conform to or rebel against societal expectations? What parallels do you see with today's world?
 6. At the beginning of the novel, Ji Lin leads two different lives—one as a dressmaker's apprentice and one as "Louise," a dancehall instructor. What are the pros and cons of each role? Does she find a way to reconcile these two sides of herself by the end of the novel?
 7. Ji Lin reflects, "When people talked about being lucky, perhaps they simply wanted to feel powerful, as though they could manipulate fate." Discuss the role of superstition in this novel, in which the supposed luck of certain numbers in Chinese tradition motivates many of the characters. What about in your own life? Do you consider yourself to be superstitious?
 8. While speaking with Ji Lin about the other Confucian Virtues, Yi notes, "there's something a bit wrong with each of us." How do each of these characters—Ji Lin (knowledge), Ren (humanity), Shin (integrity), Yi (righteousness) and William/Lydia (ritual)—stray from their namesake values? At the end of the novel, are they more "right" or "wrong"?

- 
9. In Chinese culture, the five Confucian Virtues are considered a matched set. Ji Lin reflects: “I had the odd fancy that the five of us were yoked by some mysterious fate. Drawn together, yet unable to break free, the tension made a twisted pattern. We must either separate ourselves, or come together.” Discuss the tension between independence and dependence for these characters.
 10. In his conversations with Ji Lin, Yi hints that the Confucian Value Li, meaning order or ritual, has been disrupted. What are some examples from the novel of characters, relationships, and other elements that are seemingly out of order or unconventional?
 11. Discuss Ji Lin’s relationships with the men in her life. How do her experiences at the dancehall shape her views of men, in particular with Shin? At the end of the novel, she wonders, “had I managed to catch up to Shin, or had he, by playing a cool and patient game, ensnared me instead?” What does she mean, and what do you think the answer is? Do you think Ji Lin and Shin will ultimately get married?
 12. Why do you think Yi disappears from Ji Lin and Ren’s lives at the end of the novel? What previously unfinished business does he complete? Discuss how the supernatural twines through this novel. Do you believe that the dead can continue to communicate with the living, as Yi does?

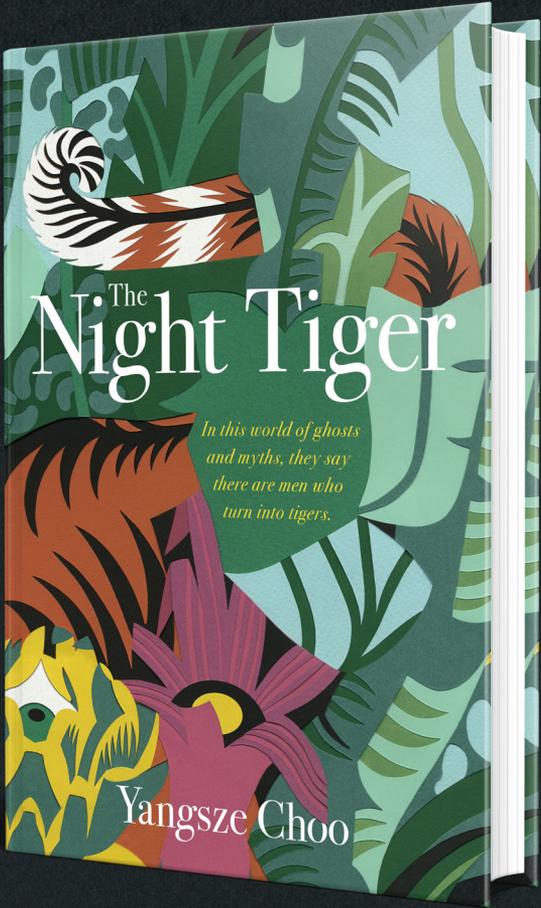
- 
13. Although Lydia is proven to be a murderer, she also works hard to improve the lives of Malayan women. Does her charity work at all redeem her in your eyes? Do you think she is in part a victim of her circumstances?

 14. The novel ends with Ji Lin, Shin, Ren, Ah Long, and Rawlings all headed to Singapore. What do you think the future holds for them? Are you glad the ending leaves open the possibility of a sequel?





Yangsze Choo is a fourth-generation Malaysian of Chinese descent. After receiving her undergraduate degree from Harvard, she worked as a management consultant before writing her first novel, the *New York Times* bestseller *The Ghost Bride*. She lives in California with her family and several chickens and loves to eat and read (often at the same time). *The Night Tiger* would not have been possible without large quantities of dark chocolate.



Out 12th February 2019

#NightTigerTogether