The Wangs vs. the World by Jade Chang

A wealthy but dysfunctional Chinese immigrant family has it all, only to lose every last cent. Mad at America, Wang, a brash but lovable immigrant businessman takes his family on a cross-country road trip that, despite a few harrowing twists and turns, eventually brings them back together again.


About the Author: Jade Chang has covered arts and culture as a journalist and editor. She is the recipient of a Sundance Fellowship for Arts Journalism, the AIGA/Winterhouse Award for Design Criticism, and the James D. Houston Memorial scholarship from the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. The Wangs vs. the World is her debut novel. She lives in Los Angeles.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why is Charles Wang “mad at America” and “mad at history”? Does he have a right to be? To what extent is he the cause of his own misfortune? Or to what extent is he simply one of the millions of victims of the 2008 financial collapse?

2. How does this story differ from other immigrant stories you may have read? How does it differ in tone? Are Chang’s characters as sympathetic as those in other coming-to-America novels? What about the characters’ sense of displacement, their feeling of never being at home anywhere?

3. Describe the members of the Wang family: Charles, the patriarch; Barbara, Charles’ wife; and the three children, Andrew, Grace and Saina (pronounced Sy-na). What are their particular hopes and internal conflicts? What conflicts exist between family members?

4. What does Charles hope to recover? Is his plan reasonable – or successful? What do his children and wife think of his plan?

5. The author has said that the Wangs struggle with and are influenced by “their experiences and knowledge as Chinese people...but they do no struggle over their Chineseness.” What might she mean by that observation?

6. What does Chang have to say about the worlds of makeup and fashion, as well as the visual arts and stand-up comedy? What are the differing “currencies,” other than money, that determine success or failure in the areas? What is valued...or how are individuals valued in these industries/markets? Do fashion, art, and comedy-performance have anything in common with one another?

7. How does the novel portray the power of the internet? What impact, for example, does the web have on Saina? The novel takes place back in 2008; is the Net different today?

8. How does Charles Wang view the American Dream? Does he consider it strictly an American invention, or does he see it as a universal longing, a dream shared by people everywhere? How do you see the American Dream?
9. In an interview with Rumpus.com, Chang was asked where she places the Wang family on the reality-to-absurdity spectrum, Chang said …

    *I think real life is absurd. There are plenty of things that happen in our day-to-day lives that would be unbelievable if we saw them in a movie or read about them in a book. So, to me, the story of the Wangs is in some ways larger than life — but I don’t find any of it to be untrue. My goal was definitely emotional truth.*

Do you see life as absurd? Do you see the Wang story as absurd? If so, what is the emotional truth Chang refers to? Actually, maybe one might start with a definition of “absurdity.”

10. What do the characters — all of them, but in particular Charles — come to learn by the novel’s end? What lessons do they learn or insights do they gain, about themselves, the world around them, and how they fit in this world?

11. Why did Saina want to be an artist as a young girl? What does she believe the purpose of art should be? What has Saina taught about the choice between art and love, and what does she come to think of this teaching as an adult?

12. When Andrew turns to comedy, what does he discover as one of the true joys of this kind of performance?

13. How are the Wangs ultimately affected by their travels together and their reunion?

*(Questions provided by the publishers and Litlovers)*

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