



Curriculum Connections

Like Spilled Water

by Jennie Liu

Lerner Publishing Group, 2020

Fiction, set in China

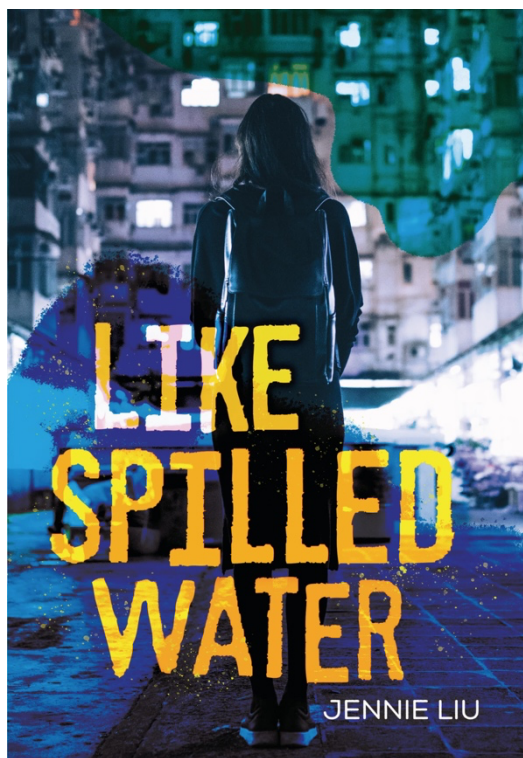
2020 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Grade level

This book is most appropriate for high school juniors or seniors due to the mature subject matter, which includes suicide, alcoholism, a violent accidental death, LGBTQI discrimination, and some obscene language. These topics are likely to produce strong emotional reactions in students. The book would be appropriate for a World Literature class or could be paired with other coming-of-age novels such as *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros or the second volume of the graphic novel *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, subtitled *The Story of Return*.

Topics

Each of the main characters and storylines reflect a social problem in Chinese society. Bao-bo resists his parents' expectations and the pressure to study for the *gaokao* (China's annual college entrance exam); he wants to be an artist. Na is a resentful "left-behind" child as a result of the mass labor migration from the countryside to the cities in the 1990s. Gilbert is gay but feels he must fulfill his filial duty to continue the family line by having a child. Min resists her mother's efforts to find her a husband. Because of the one-child policy in China from 1979 to 2015, and the cultural preference for male over female children (which led to the abandonment of female babies, some of whom were put up for international adoption), there are many more men than women of marriageable age. Women's resistance to marriage and motherhood has led to a further decline in China's birth rate. Na's parents are labor migrants who live and work in miserable conditions, hoping to finance a better future for their children, particularly their son. Trauma, mental health issues, and alcoholism are not addressed in Chinese society, often with tragic results.



Understanding of the impact of labor migration on families

The backdrop for Na's personal story is the labor migration, starting in the 1990s, from rural villages to cities to work in the factories that fueled China's "economic miracle." As



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a result of the booming export economy, which drew workers from villages in the countryside to large coastal cities, many Chinese children were left in the care of their grandparents in rural villages.

The following video clips can be used to encourage critical thinking about the novel's **point of view**. The story is told from Na's point of view, so it is understandable that she resents her parents and has little sympathy for them, but should the reader have sympathy for her parents?

Last Train Home is a documentary which provides a firsthand examination of the toll that labor migration takes on families, especially those from rural villages. The two short excerpts from the film provide a glimpse into the lives of both the parents and the "left-behind" children.

In the first short clip (3 minutes) we meet the Zhang family. The parents have worked in Guangzhou for 17 years and left their two children with their grandmother. Qin, the daughter, speaks of the relationship with her parents.

"They took care of me by sending me money. But they were never around. It has always been this way. Now I don't care if they come back or not."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X3NZUt5W_ok

Like Na, Qin is eager to strike out on her own. Much to her parents' disappointment, she takes a job in a factory.

In the second video clip, we see Qin's parents travel home for their once-a-year visit. They talk about the difficult decision to leave their children to take up factory work in Guangzhou. Qin's mother says, "We never complain, no matter how hard it is."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q07bMuQLrbY&t=6s>

Debrief after viewing video clips.

Like Spilled Water is fiction, written by an American whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from China. *Last Train Home* is a documentary illustrating the lives of Chinese people dealing with some of the same problems as Na and her family.

Compare the points of view of the novelist and the documentary filmmaker.

What did each choose to highlight in their work?

What does the documentary add to your understanding of the novel?



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Classroom discussion

Liu provides a dozen discussion questions at the end of the book that are suitable for classroom use. Particularly good are the questions dealing with traditional Chinese attitudes, expectations, and social practices.

Here are some additional discussion questions:

- In many ways, *Like Spilled Water* can be characterized as a coming-of-age story. Na, Gilbert, Bao-bao, and even Min deal with their parents' expectations, asserting their independence and career choices. They engage in their first romantic relationships, coming to terms with their sexual orientation and keeping secrets from parents.

Divide students into pairs and have each pair identify two things about the story that they think are universal and two things that are specific to Chinese culture. Keep a running list as the pairs report on their ideas. Discuss where there is agreement or disagreement and have students explain their choices.

- Na's grandmother Nainai tells her, "Whatever you argued with them about, they'll come around. The old ways are hard to change but not impossible."

Set up a Four corner debate for this topic. Assign each corner of the room to one of the positions: agree, somewhat agree, disagree, or somewhat disagree with Nainai's statement. Instruct the students to move to the corner that aligns with their opinion. Ask each group to discuss the idea among themselves and then choose a spokesperson to report to the whole group.

- At the center of the conflict between Bao-bao and his parents is his indifferent attitude about the entrance exam (*gaokao*), given the sacrifices they have made for him and the future they hope for him. What aspect of Bao-bao's situation is easiest to relate to? Hardest to relate to?
- Among Bao-bao's things Na finds the following quote by the artist and political activist Ai Weiwei. "Freedom is a strange thing. Once you've experienced it, it remains in your heart, and no one can take it from you." Looking at Bao-bao's drawings Na asks herself, "Did Bao-bao ever really feel freedom?"
- What would freedom look like for Bao-bao? For Na? For Min? For Gilbert?
- What exactly is Min trying to prove with her marriage market project? Do you think she could have succeeded?



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- What most surprised you in the novel? What in the novel challenged or changed your understanding of China?

Writing prompts

The following could be used in class or as homework assignments.

1. As the novel ends Na begins a text to her mother, but Liu leaves the reader hanging about what exactly Na will tell her mother, other than "I'm going back to school today." Finish the text as you imagine Na would. Assume she sent multiple texts to explain herself fully or sent a letter.
2. After the scene at Bao-bao's grave, Na is resolved about what she wants for herself. She returns to school, but she has left her grandmother worried about her and confused about her breakup with Gilbert. Write a letter as you think Na would to explain her desire to return to school and not marry Gilbert—without revealing that Gilbert is gay.
3. Na knows now that she would never marry Gilbert, despite his promises to help her go to college, and she's furious with him for trying to deceive her. When they part, she says "I'm sorry for him, sorry for myself, but there's nothing more to say. Not right now." Imagine that Na decides to write a letter to Gilbert. What would she say?
4. In therapy, patients are sometimes encouraged to write letters they never intend to send in order to get their thoughts and emotions in order. If Na were to write such a letter to Bao-bao, what would she say?

Research

In many schools, writing and research methods are taught in the humanities. Several topics in the novel lend themselves to interesting research projects, offering an opportunity to teach how to identify credible sources, form research questions, and shape findings into clear, concise writing.

With the basic knowledge the students would get from the book, they could undertake research on some of the following topics:



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Migration and left-behind children

China's "economic miracle" was driven by the export goods manufactured in its large cities. Many of the workers were drawn from rural villages and children were left behind to be raised by grandparents. The *hukou* (household registration) system has had a role in creating this problem.

Here's an article to get started:

"Our Parents Are All Gone: Understanding the Impact of Migration on a Generation of Chinese Children."

Stanford University Rural Education Action Program:

<https://sccei.fsi.stanford.edu/reap/docs/left-behind-children-intern-introduction>

Ai Weiwei

The activist artist was an inspiration for Bao-bao but also for Min's work and Na's decision to return to school, seeking freedom from the life her parents tried to force on her. Here's a sample of the sort of work he does: <https://aiweiweihumanity.com/>

China's single-child policy and gender imbalance

The unintended consequence of China's single-child policy is the imbalance of women to men. The imbalance is made worse by women not wanting to marry.

"China: The Men Who Are Single and the Women Who Don't Want Kids."

BBC, 24 May 2021, Waiyee Yip

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57154574>

LGBTQI rights in China vs. the U.S.

Beyond not fulfilling his filial obligations, Gilbert's gay relationship can get him into trouble with the law. What are the current laws in China?

Here's an article to get started: Wang Yuanyuan et al., "Discrimination against LGBT Populations in China," *The Lancet*, vol. 4, issue 9, (September 2019).

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(19\)30153-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(19)30153-7/fulltext)

Video game addiction

One of the sources of conflict between Bao-bao and his parents was the time he spent playing video games rather than studying for the *gaokao*. The Chinese government sees the addiction to video gaming as a serious problem.



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Here's one article to get started: <https://cybernews.com/editorial/china-declares-it-conquered-gaming-addiction/>

Resources for creating good research questions:

San Jose State University Writing Center

<https://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/docs/handouts/Research%20Questions.pdf>

George Mason University Writing Center

<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-resources/research-based-writing/how-to-write-a-research-question>

Additional resources

- Chang, T. Leslie. *Factory Girls: From Village to City in a Changing China*. New York: Random House, 2008.
- Pai, Hsiao-Hung. *Scattered Sand: The Story of China's Rural Migrants*. New York: Verso, 2012.
- Fish, Eric. *China's Millennials: The Want Generation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015.
- Jennie Liu wrote another book entitled *Girls on the Line* (also a Freeman Book Award winner) that describes the lives of several girls who work in factories. This fictional account could be supplemented with selected episodes from Leslie Chang's *Factory Girls*.
- Interview with the director of *The Last Train Home*.

The focus of the film is one family of migrant workers and the way in which their family has been impacted: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBTUrQX9grg>

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