

## ***Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress: Part 1***

*"We were not the first guinea pigs to be used in this grand human experiment, nor would we be the last."*

The story of *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* opens as the narrator (who remains unnamed) and his best friend Luo arrive at the Phoenix of the Sky village in the Chinese province of Sichuan near the border with Tibet. The year is 1971 and Mao Zedong, Chairman of the People's Republic of China, is conducting a policy of 're-education' whereby young men of middle-class families are sent to the countryside to learn from poor peasants how to be model citizens. The two boys are tasked with menial and back-breaking work, such as coal mining and carrying buckets of faeces up the mountain to fertilize the rice fields.

The village is controlled by a headman, who is placed in charge of the boys' re-education. On arrival he wants to confiscate and burn the boys' 'bourgeois' possessions, including the narrator's violin. However, Luo convinces him to listen to the narrator play a sonata, which he cheekily says is called 'Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao.' After listening to the performance, the headman decides to let the boys keep the violin.

One day, the boys meet the 'princess' of the mountain who is the Chinese seamstress of the novel's title. They visit the tailor's house to have the length of Luo's trousers adjusted and it is clear that Luo feels attraction to the seamstress, who is the tailor's daughter. However, Luo insists that the Little Seamstress is not cultured or educated enough for him and the two boys return to their lives. Six weeks later, Luo contracts malaria while working in the mine; hearing of his illness the Little Seamstress writes him a letter and they arrange to meet.

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### **Knowledge Check**

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. Apart from the violin, what 'bourgeois' object are the boys allowed to keep?**

- (a) A wristwatch.
- (b) An alarm clock.
- (c) Their school textbooks.
- (d) Their mobile phones.

**2. What affliction do the boys see in the headman's eye?**

- (a) Blood spots.
- (b) Stigmatism.
- (c) Cataracts.
- (d) Blindness.

**3. The narrator has been sent for re-education because his parents are...?**

- (a) Lawyers.
- (b) Doctors.
- (c) Scientists.
- (d) Journalists.

**4. What is Luo's father's profession?**

- (a) Doctor.
- (b) Veterinarian.
- (c) Dentist.
- (d) Teacher.

**5. What is Luo's only skill?**

- (a) Playing the violin.
- (b) Basketball.
- (c) Football.
- (d) Storytelling.

**6. How many sewing machines does the tailor possess?**

- (a) One.
- (b) Two.
- (c) Three.
- (d) Ten.

**7. What remedy is used to treat Luo's malaria?**

- (a) Natural poultices.
- (b) Bleeding.
- (c) Cupping.
- (d) Flogging.

**8. What story does the narrator try to recite while Luo is sick?**

- (a) The Little Matchstick Girl.
- (b) The Little Flower Seller.
- (c) The Big Friendly Giant.
- (d) The Emperor's New Clothes.

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## Understanding and Interpretation

*Skim and scan part 1 to answer these questions:*

1. What do you learn about 're-education' from part 1 of the novel?
2. What is the significance of the boys' alarm clock?
3. Consider the setting (time and place) as described in part 1 and find descriptions of the village and mountain. In what ways might it be said the boys are trapped in a kind of 'limbo'?
4. Describe the tailor and his position in the community:
5. Describe the seamstress and the impression she makes on the narrator, Luo and others in the village:
6. How does part 1 end?

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## Novel Study: *symbolism of the alarm clock*

*'Luo had a brainwave: he slid the hands of the clock back by one hour. We got back into bed to enjoy our lie-in, which was all the sweeter knowing the village headman was pacing to and fro outside' – p15*

On arrival in the village, all the boys' possessions are inspected by the villagers who take what the boys are not allowed to keep; however, Luo's alarm clock is small enough to hide and it is not confiscated by the headman. Featuring a rooster pecking the ground and crowing out loud when the alarm sounds, when he later discovers the clock the headman is fascinated rather than angry and allows the boys to keep the clock in their room.

The reason for his fascination later becomes apparent: *the clock comes to represent power*. Firstly, the boys use the alarm clock to take back a little bit of control over their lives from the peasants who are in charge of their re-education. Because they have never seen a clock, they are bewitched by its power to tell the time, and the boys are able to change the time on the clock to give themselves an extra hour or two in the morning or to finish their work earlier each day. The headman appropriates this power by using the clock to time the boys' storytelling performances, as an excuse to yell at the other villagers, and generally display his own leadership position.

Furthermore, the clock symbolizes a tiny piece of city culture that is placed in opposition to peasant life by Mao and his policies during the cultural revolution. The clock is a forbidden object that belongs to the regulated life of the city. Telling the time using clocks is associated with schooling (during these years schools in the cities were closed) and other bourgeois 'norms' such as socializing and timing the workday. By contrast, the villagers time their workday by sunrise and sunset. Mao's Cultural Revolution was meant to quash bourgeois values and create an ideal society based on the image of the strong countryside peasant. Sending the boys to the village was meant to re-educate them in these ideals. However, the headman's fascination with the clock suggests that Mao's policies are not successful, and that re-education could have the opposite effect as the boys bring urban and intellectual ideas into the countryside. This is not the only time in the novel that the reader will see the powerful enlightening effect of objects and ideas that are meant to be suppressed.

### Activity

In what other ways does the novel seem to suggest that Mao's nationwide policy of re-education is failing? What other skills, objects and ideas do boys from the city (the narrator, Luo, Four-Eyes and others) bring to the village? How do the villagers react to objects and ideas from the outside?

Note down your ideas here:

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## Important Context: *The Cultural Revolution*

*‘The peasants’ faces, so grim a moment before, softened under the influence of Mozart’s limpid music like parched earth under a shower’ – page 6*

‘Chairman Mao Zedong began the Cultural Revolution in 1966 with the intent to assert communism as the primary ideology of China, while doing away with anything western or traditional. Within months, schools were closed and students at Tsinghua University Middle School formed the first Red Guard group in support of Mao and his goals. Mao voiced support for the group, giving it legitimacy, and more Red Guard groups sprang up across the country with the goal of "making China red (Communist) from the inside out." These groups destroyed a number of historical and cultural sites and artifacts, including the gravesite of Confucius, and they burned entire libraries. Two years later, Mao began to disband the Red Guard and instead started the "Up to the Mountains and Down to the Countryside Movement." While one of this movement's primary goals was to dilute the Red Guard's power by getting them out of the cities, individuals like Luo and the narrator (who weren't Red Guard members) suffered greatly as a result. Though the government considered them to be intellectuals, most of the young "intellectuals" sent to the countryside were too young to be truly well-educated. These dislocated youth were allowed to return home in the late 1970s. Though Mao declared that the Cultural Revolution ended in 1969, its policies continued for several years. Reformers began to dismantle the policies in 1976.’

- taken from *Litcharts*



This poster from 1960 is an example of Cultural Revolution propaganda. The inscription reads, ‘Fayang beilou jingshen quanxin quanyi wei renmin fuwu’ which is an exhortation to develop ‘basket on the back spirit.’ In *Balzac and the little Chinese Seamstress*, the narrator and his friend Luo are tasked with carrying buckets of faeces up steep mountain trails to fertilize rice fields. This kind of work was supposed to inculcate idealised peasant values of hard-work and self-sacrifice into the boys.

### Activity

Conduct wider reading and research into Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution and the policy of ‘re-education’. You might like to begin with the reading posted on the class blog. [Create a fact file](#) that you can share with others and store in your Learner Portfolio.

Include in your fact file:

- Key dates, places and times;
- Important figures, such as Chairman Mao Zedong;
- Aims of the Cultural Revolution;
- Key policies;
- The Red Guard;
- The ‘Up to the Mountain and Down to the Countryside’ movement;
- Consequences of the Cultural Revolution;
- Any other information you find that is relevant or interesting.

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## Quotation Bank

*If you only remember three lines, remember these...*

<i>The peasants' faces, so grim a moment before, softened under the influence of Mozart's limpid music like parched earth under a shower. (p6)</i>	When the peasants listen to the narrator perform a Mozart sonata, the effect on them is described like watering 'parched earth.' The <b>simile</b> suggests that the villagers were thirsting for cultural ideas such as art and music, even if they were unaware of their own longing. Music has the power to 'soften' the hard exterior of the peasants and creates a connection between them and the city boys.
<i>There was no road into the mountain... I could just make out a footpath rising from the shadowy fissures in the cliff towards the sky, where it seemed to melt into the misty air. (p11/12)</i>	Descriptions of the Phoenix of the Sky mountain isolate the boys from 'civilization' and trap them in the village. They are always surrounded by mist and rain, which is like a shield that isolates them from the world. Roads into and out of the mountain are 'shadowy' and obscured. The setting seems removed from the real world, as if this space and time is in suspended animation. The boys feel like they will be trapped in this 'liminal zone' forever.
<i>The whole audience wept, even the village headman who, for all his harshness, couldn't hold back the tears pouring hotly from his left eye, marked as ever by three spots of blood. (p33)</i>	
<i>Based on your own reading of Part 1 and / or your classroom discussion, add two more memorable lines to this table, and provide analysis comments for each:</i>	