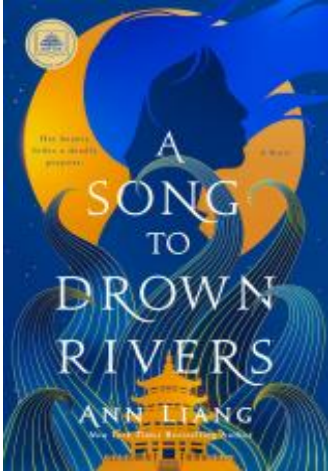


A Song to Drown Rivers

by Ann Liang



About the Book

Inspired by the legend of Xishi, one of the famous Four Beauties of Ancient China, **A SONG TO DROWN RIVERS** is an epic novel steeped in myth about womanhood, war, sacrifice and love against all odds as the fate of two kingdoms hangs in a delicate balance.

Her beauty hides a deadly purpose.

Xishi's beauty is seen as a blessing to the villagers of Yue --- convinced that the best fate for a girl is to marry well and support her family. When Xishi draws the attention of the famous young military advisor Fanli, he presents her with a rare opportunity: to use her beauty as a weapon. One that could topple the rival neighboring kingdom of Wu, improve the lives of her people and avenge her sister's murder. All she has to do is infiltrate the enemy palace as a spy, seduce their immoral king and weaken them from within.

Trained by Fanli in everything from classical instruments to concealing emotion, Xishi hones her beauty into the perfect blade. But she knows Fanli can see through every deception she masters, the attraction between them burning away any falsehoods.

Once inside the enemy palace, Xishi finds herself under the hungry gaze of the king's advisors while the king himself shows her great affection. Despite his gentleness, a brutality lurks, and Xishi knows she can never let her guard down. But the higher Xishi climbs in the Wu court, the farther she and Fanli have to fall --- and if she is unmasked as a traitor, she will bring both kingdoms down.

Discussion Guide

1. One of the opening lines of the novel is "beauty is not so different from destruction" (p. 1). Would you agree?
2. The novel is told by Xishi in the first-person past tense. What effect does this have on the tone of the story? What is the significance of centering Xishi's voice?
3. On page 66, Fanli poses the question: "What is desire?" Zhengdan's answer is "greed" and "possession." Xishi's answer is "absence." How would you respond to Fanli's question? Are love and desire the same?
4. "Perhaps history would remember him as a hero. But a hero to many was still a villain to one" (p. 244). Consider the historical figures we call heroes today. How do we determine who the heroes really are and who the villains are?
5. In stories, there is a moment known as the "point of no return" where it's too late for the character to turn back around. Can you identify that moment in the story for Xishi?
6. How would you describe Xishi's relationship with Fanli, and how does it contrast with Xishi's relationship with Fuchai? What do you think is the appeal of forbidden romances?
7. How does the novel examine the corrupt nature of power? Zhengdan's mother says that Zhengdan's father was killed not "by the Wu...[but] by the will of kings" (p. 301). Do you believe the greater divide lies between the kingdoms of Wu and Yue or between the civilians and royalty?
8. Do you think Fuchai deserved his fate?
9. Was Xishi's sacrifice ultimately worth it? If you had been in her position, would you have chosen differently?
10. The legend of Xishi has been reimagined over the years with multiple endings. In some, she's overcome with guilt for what she's done and commits suicide. In others, she happily sails across Lake Tai with Fanli. How does the ending shape --- or reshape --- the meaning of the story?

Author Bio

Ann Liang is the *New York Times* and Indie bestselling author of the critically acclaimed YA novels *THIS TIME IT'S REAL, IF YOU COULD SEE THE SUN* and *I HOPE THIS DOESN'T FIND YOU*. Her books have sold into over 20 foreign territories. Born in Beijing, she grew up traveling back and forth between China and Australia, but somehow ended up with an American accent. She now lives in Melbourne, where she can be found making overambitious to-do lists and having profound conversations with her pet labradoodle about who's a good dog.

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