



## ***Thank You, Mr. Nixon* Discussion Questions**

Prior to reading *Thank You, Mr. Nixon*, what did you know about President Richard Nixon's visit to mainland China in 1972?

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In the title story, Tricia talks about learning the song "Home, Home on the Range": "No one knew all the English words, but we understood that it was about home—we understood that 'home, home' meant *jia, jia*. We understood its heart. Home was where my mother wanted to live again. Home was where I wanted her to be. And I guess you could say it was one more thing that confused us, that heart. How could this be an American imperialist song?"

What is "home" to you? And how do you think our society sometimes employs the idea of "home" for both positive and negative reasons?

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The story "It's the Great Wall!" explores — for some characters — traveling to a culture that is not one's own. "China had been no-go for so long that it was difficult not to think of it as a movie backdrop for tragedy and perfidy but as a place about which enticing travel books were written."

For you, what is the “purpose” of travel? Talk about some of the non-Chinese characters on this tour. Why do you think they might travel? How is this different from Opal’s experience traveling?

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Discuss Opal’s position as both a Chinese-born/-raised woman and someone who has lived in America longer than in China. How would you imagine Opal feels at the end of her trip? Have you had to navigate this duality, even if on a less distinct scale?

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In “Mr. Crime and Punishment,” Jen writes this about law student Gunner and “his upbringing, his genes, his ego”: “Of course, it bugged a lot of us, not just that Gunner was the ideal and knew it, but that he was the ideal to begin with.” Why is Gunner “the ideal”?

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In many of the stories in *Thank You, Mr. Nixon*, Jen’s characters use and/or struggle with American-English idioms, such as “scout’s honor” and “catch your meaning” as well as Chinese idioms translated to English, such as “lightbulb” to mean “chaperone.” Is spoken language always adequate as a way to communicate with people from different backgrounds? Is there more to truly understanding others than “by-the-book” knowledge?

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Discuss this quote in “Duncan in China” that Jen uses to describe Duncan: “Still he could say this, that there was one thing he had, being an American—not so much an unshakeable conviction as a habit of believing in the happiest possibility. Truly it was a form of blindness.”

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How does Jen explore the idea of “freedom” using extremely contemporary events in “Detective Dog,” the collection’s final story? What is the significance of using both COVID and the Hong Kong protests in this story?

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In some ways, *Thank You, Mr. Nixon* both starts and ends with politics. Discuss this quote from “Detective Dog”: “If Betty ever wrote a mystery, it would be about a world without politics and what a mystery it was that we had to have them when everyone hated them.” What are some of the other ways that Jen has either directly or indirectly woven “politics” into this story collection?