



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Dreams to Ashes

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Dreams to Ashes tells the story of the 1871 Los Angeles Chinese Massacre — one of the largest mass lynchings in American history. The book traces the forces that led to the massacre, the night of violence itself, and its long aftermath, ending with a call to remember and to act.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many of the Chinese immigrants in this story came to the United States seeking economic opportunity and fleeing difficult conditions at home. Imagine yourself in their position. How would you weigh the pros and cons of making that journey? Would you have immigrated? How is their situation similar to that of immigrants coming to America today? How is it different?
2. The author focuses part of the narrative on three individual people: Gene Tong, Tong Won, and Wing Chee. Why do you think she does this, rather than speaking only in general terms about "the Chinese community"? What does it change about how we read the story?
3. The book describes several factors that built up over time and contributed to the massacre. What were they? Do you agree with how the author frames them? Which factors do you think played the biggest role?
4. Newspapers of the era were quick to blame the "dregs of society" — criminals and drifters — for carrying out the massacre. But the book points out that the mob included city councilmen, farmers, store owners, and ordinary citizens. Why do you think newspapers portrayed it the way they did? What purpose does that framing serve?
5. In the aftermath of the massacre, very few people faced legal consequences for their involvement, and even those who were convicted were soon freed. What are your thoughts on that? What does the fact that the perpetrators

were freed on a technicality say about the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law? What characteristics are necessary in a legal system for it to effectively enforce justice and deter crime?

6. The book uses fire as a central metaphor — kindling, sparks, infernos, smoke clearing. What does that metaphor do that a straightforward historical account might not? How does it shape the way you feel reading the story?
7. The LA Chinatown Massacre has until recently been largely absent from history books. There is now a push to raise awareness of it and include it in school curricula. Some argue, however, that focusing on dark chapters creates an overly negative view of our country's history. How do you think events like this should be taught in schools, if at all?
8. The book ends with a call to action — to remember, to write dark stories back into history, to embrace change, to affirm the humanity of all. Do you think literature and storytelling can actually change how people think and act? Can you think of examples where they have?

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Activity 1: City Council Proposal

Imagine you are on the Los Angeles City Council in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. You have been tasked with creating initiatives to prevent future acts of racial violence in the city. Working in groups, discuss and draft a formal proposal. What measures would you put in place? Consider law enforcement, the press, community relations, and legal protections. Present your proposal to the class and be prepared to defend your choices.

Activity 2: Memorial Design

In 2022, the LA City Council accepted proposals for a memorial to commemorate the victims of the 1871 massacre. Design your own memorial proposal. Where would it be located, and why? What would it look like? What materials would you use? What do you want visitors to feel or understand when they encounter it? Present your design to the class with a visual sketch or description.

Activity 3: Research a Modern Parallel

Find a recent incident of racially motivated violence against an immigrant community. How was it covered? What happened legally? How does it compare?

Activity 4: Research and Write a Historical Event

Research a historical event and write about it. Use the following questions to help organize your work:

- Who is centered in the narrative? Why did you make that choice?
- Are the people involved portrayed as humans with dignity and agency?
- What societal forces led to the event?
- Can any parallels be drawn to our current society?
- What lessons can be drawn from the event, in general, and for our community specifically?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For teachers looking to extend this unit, the following organizations have developed full lesson plans on the 1871 LA Chinese Massacre:

Asian American Education Project — Includes timeline activities, vocabulary, and connections to contemporary anti-Asian violence.

asianamericanedu.org/chinese-massacre-of-1871-connecting-past-with-present.html

Zinn Education Project — Includes an excerpt from a historical newspaper account.

zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/la-chinatown-massacre/

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