

Ties That Bind, Ties That Break by Lensey Namioka



Teachers GUIDE

Two girls, bound by friendship, defy the ancient traditions of their class and heritage and emerge as young women of indomitable spirit.

Ailin, the main character of *Ties That Bind, Ties That Break*, is born into the Tao family at a time when China is in great turmoil. The foreigners, known as the “Foreign Big Noses,” are eroding the empire by bringing in Western philosophies. More spirited than her older sisters, 5-year-old Ailin refuses to have her feet bound, causing the family of her intended husband to break their marriage agreement. Shamed by her decision, Ailin’s family is no longer willing to support her. At 14 she becomes the amah, or governess, for the Warner children and embarks on a new life that gives her happiness in ways she never dreamed.

In *An Ocean Apart, a World Away* (the sequel to *Ties That Bind, Ties That Break*), 16-year-old Xueyan, Ailin’s best friend from school, wants to become a doctor. While Xueyan’s dream is unorthodox in her culture, her family is supportive when she moves to America to enroll in Cornell University. Lonely and suffering from culture shock, Xueyan is beginning to doubt her decision to come to America when she is reunited with her friend Ailin, who is now married and living in San Francisco. Ailin’s encouragement and a developing relationship with L.H., a male Chinese student at Cornell who has a modern view of women, gives Xueyan the courage she needs to pursue her dream.

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR

Lensey Namioka was born in Beijing and moved to the United States when she was a child. She is the author of many books for children, including *April and the Dragon Lady*, a nominee for the Utah Young Adults’ Book Award; *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear*, a Young Reader’s Choice Award nominee; *Yang the Third and Her Impossible Family*; *Yang the Second and Her Secret Admirers*; *Ties That Bind, Ties That Break*, an ALA Best Book for Young Adults; and most recently, *An Ocean Apart, a World Away*. Lensey Namioka lives in Seattle, Washington, with her family.

TEACHING IDEAS

Pre-Reading Activity

Ask students to share what they know about China and the Chinese culture. Record their ideas on a chart, asking them to group their ideas in such categories as land, people, geography, and social customs. Divide the class into small groups and send

them to the library media center. Ask each group to check their ideas for accuracy and to find an unusual fact in their category to share with the class.

Thematic Connections: Questions for Group Discussion

FAMILY AND RELATIONSHIPS—Describe the Tao family. Discuss Ailin’s relationship with her father. What is her relationship with her mother and grandmother? How does Ailin’s life change after her father dies? Why does Second Sister feel that she must warn Ailin of the dangers of being different? Ailin and her friend Xueyan are alike in many ways. How is Xueyan’s family more supportive than Ailin’s family? How is Xueyan’s father different from most Chinese fathers? What do you think Xueyan misses most when she comes to America?

COURAGE—Ailin is high-spirited, headstrong, and defiant, and her father supports her determination not to get her feet bound. How does it take courage for her to resist her elders’ wishes? How does it take courage for her father to stand up to Big Uncle? Does it take more courage for Ailin to remain in the United States or to return to her native land?

At what point in *An Ocean Apart, a World Away* do you realize that Xueyan is a courageous young woman? Discuss how her courage is tested throughout the novel. What is the difference between “courage” and “recklessness”? Cite scenes when Xueyan appears reckless. How does Xueyan’s visit with Ailin help her regain the courage to continue pursuing her dream?

VALUES IN CONFLICT—Ailin rebels against many ancient Chinese customs. Discuss how change is the result of rebellion. How do Ailin’s father’s values differ from those of Big Uncle? How is James also fighting a war against traditional Chinese customs and values? Suppose Ailin and James have children. Will the children be taught Chinese customs and culture? How are Xueyan’s cultural values different from the other Chinese students she meets at Cornell? How do these cultural differences contribute to her loneliness? Explain what Xueyan means when she tells Baoshu, “There is no place for me in your world.” (p. 189)

SELF-ESTEEM—Explore Ailin’s statement “With the Warners, I felt I was making a contribution to the family.” (p. 141) At the end of the novel she tells Hanwei, “I’m proud of the hard work I did because by standing on my own two feet, I helped my husband make this restaurant a success.” (p. 151) Ask students to contrast Ailin’s view of her self-worth to what she might have felt if she had remained in China. In *An Ocean Apart, a World Away*, how does it take a positive sense of self-worth for Xueyan to pursue her dream? Xueyan says, “I never knew that growing up could be so painful.” (p. 192) How can self-esteem affect the process of growing up?

Connecting to the Curriculum

LANGUAGE ARTS—Ailin reads Chinese folktales to the Warner children. She is warned against reading anything that is closely connected to Confucianism, a “heathen” religion in the eyes of Mr. and Mrs. Warner. Ask each student to find a Chinese folktale or fairy tale that Ailin might read to Grace and Billy Warner. Allow the students time to give a brief oral summary of the story in class.

At the end of *An Ocean Apart, a World Away*, Xueyan and L.H. form a strong relationship. Ask students to write a letter that Xueyan might have sent to her parents describing L.H. and what he means to her.

SOCIAL STUDIES–In the treaty ending the Opium War of 1839, China ceded Hong Kong to the British in perpetuity. Ask students to research why the Opium War was such a threat to China. How did it affect the Chinese people? Then have them locate newspaper and magazine articles to find out when and why Hong Kong reverted to Chinese sovereignty. Engage the class in a discussion about why the entire world took such great interest in this event.

Ask students to study how the female characters in *Ties That Bind*, *Ties That Break* and *An Ocean Apart, a World Away* are treated by the male characters. Send students to the library media center to find out about the Marriage Law of 1950, established after Ailin and Xueyan’s time. How did this law change the lives of women in China? Then have students research the custom of mail-order brides in United States history. Have them compare and contrast the treatment of women in the two cultures.

SCIENCE–Ailin’s father dies from tuberculosis at a relatively young age. Ask students to research the causes, symptoms, and treatment of tuberculosis. The disease is still a threat to many Asian countries, and a new strand of tuberculosis is showing up in the United States. How and where can a person be tested for tuberculosis? How is it treated today?

In *An Ocean Apart, a World Away*, Xueyan comes to America to study medicine. Ask students to investigate how Chinese medicine is different from traditional American medicine. Look at the curriculum for the study of Chinese medicine at www.actcm.org

ART–Ailin settles in San Francisco with her husband James. Have students identify some interesting places to visit in San Francisco and draw a picture-postcard that Ailin might send to Grace and Billy Warner on their return to China. Students may also enjoy creating an illustrated memory book that Xueyan might make after visiting Ailin in San Francisco.

Ailin studies Chinese writing when she attends school in the family compound. She is very proud when she masters the Chinese character for virtue. It takes fifteen strokes and is considered the most difficult character to create. Ask students to use a calligraphy pen, marker, or brush and create a small dictionary of simple Chinese symbols and their meanings. Bind the dictionary and design an appropriate cover.

VOCABULARY

The vocabulary in *Ties That Bind*, *Ties That Break* and *An Ocean Apart, a World Away* is challenging. Students should be encouraged to write down unfamiliar words and try to define them from the context of the sentence. Such words in *Ties That Bind*, *Ties That Break* may include lilted (p. 8), grimace (p. 20), fastidious (p. 27), looting (p. 35), lamented (p. 41), agility (p. 41), insolence (p. 73), lethargy (p. 77), concubine (p. 81), impertinent (p. 100), and impudence (p. 115).

Unfamiliar words in *An Ocean Apart, a World Away* may include legation (p. 9), feint (p. 27), arrogance (p. 31), consulate (p. 43), melodramatic (p. 63), traitorous (p. 66), reparation (p. 136), debase (p. 141), and monotonous (p. 165).

OTHER TITLES OF INTEREST

Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter

Adeline Yen Mah

Family and Relationships

Courage • Values in Conflict • Self-Esteem

Grades 7

The Giver

Lois Lowry

Values in Conflict • Courage

Grades 7

When Legends Die

Hal Borland

Values in Conflict • Courage

Family and Relationships

Grades 7