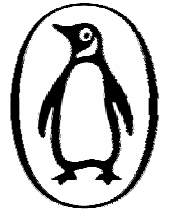


ALISON LLOYD

Teachers' notes  
written by Jean Yates



# *The Year of the Tiger*

by Alison Lloyd

## THEMES

- Class structure
- Chinese history and culture
- Friendship
- The power of positive thinking
- Families

## PRE-READING

Students would benefit from some general knowledge about China and its culture and customs. Research/discussion may include:

- When and why was the Great Wall of China built?
- Why would it be important to maintain checks and repairs along the wall?
- What are the years of the Chinese Zodiac? What characteristics are people born in each of the years supposed to possess?
- The class structure of Ancient China was very much a feudal system. What does this mean? Make a diagram representing the Chinese class structure of the time. What opportunities existed for upward mobility (i.e. the ability to move from a low class into a higher class)?
- Li San and others from Beicheng are conscripted to work on the Great Wall. Explain how this was possible.
- Ren is the son of Zheng's third wife. How was this possible?
- As in many Chinese families, Hu's maternal grandmother, Ah-po lives with the family. What was the traditional structure of the Chinese family? In what ways is this different from a typical Anglo-Saxon family?

## POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

### Chinese society of the Han Empire

- What 'barbarian' forces posed a threat to China in the 2nd Century AD?
- Li San and others are conscripted to repair the Great Wall. What does this reveal about the society?
- How does Hu's family stop him from having to work on the wall as well and what does this reveal about society?



# ALISON LLOYD

- The idea of corruption is repeated many times throughout the story. List other examples from the novel. Why might societies with rigid class structures often become corrupt?
- As described in the novel, what was life like for peasants in the Dynasty?
- In what ways was Ren's life different from Hu's?
- Whilst Ren had more material possessions and more comfortable surroundings, his life was not necessarily better than Hu's. In what way might this be true?
- Which of the boys do you think had the better life? Why?
- Hu and his family manage to make additional money as performers. As in traditional Greek, Roman and English theatre, they draw upon the ancient legends of the Chinese Gods and Ancestors for their plays. Research some ancient Chinese myths and legends. What sorts of images, themes or messages re-occur? Are there any common characters? Compare the role the Li's performances played with those of the medieval court jester, or court dramas of the Renaissance period in Europe.
- Many of the myths held religious significance. Research the role religion played in people's lives, with their devotion to and fear of upsetting the ancestors and the gods or spirit world.
- Mei is hesitant to enter the Zheng's house, saying 'People like us can't come into the homes of people like you' (p195). What does she mean by this? How does Lien react to the notion of class differences?

## Misunderstandings

Many of the situations in the novel occur because of misunderstandings between characters. Make a list of the misunderstandings that occur and the ramifications each one has.

## **CHARACTERS**

### Hu

- What sort of person is Hu? (Provide evidence from the novel to support your opinion).
- In spite of his harsh life, why might he have such a good sense of humour and such a positive way of looking at things?
- 'Hu was not Ren's equal and never would be. No matter how hard he worked or how well he could shoot' (p145). Why is this true?
- When Hu describes his life to Ren (p145), how does Ren react? What does this reveal about the aristocracy's knowledge and understanding of the working class people?
- 'Hu had always been the sort of person who'd hoped for the best' (p144). What causes him to change his attitude?
- In what ways did this broken spirit work well for the government?
- With his foot so badly damaged, why might Hu end up as a beggar? (p206)





# ALISON LLOYD

- Li Hu asks himself 'were poor people really worth less? Was it useless to aim for a better life?' (p208) What is your opinion?
- Why won't Hu tell his father who injured him?
- Hu and Ren describe themselves as being like the Tiger Tally, two halves of a whole (pp220-221). Make a list of the characteristics of the two boys that are similar and those that are different. Li Hu is knowledgeable in life skills, whilst Ren has book knowledge. In what ways do their different skills complement each other and help them to resolve their situations?
- What statement might the author be making about knowledge and abilities?
- What statement does the novel make about friendship?

## Ren

- What sort of relationship does he have with his father?
- What sort of relationship does he have with his sister?
- Why does he live with his father's first wife and how is he treated by her?
- Why is Ren so desperate to prove himself in his father's eyes?
- At one stage, Hu describes Ren as being rich and selfish (p145). Do you agree that he is selfish?
- When Ren shoots Hu in the foot, why is he angry with Hu and not himself? (p148)
- Ren's father warns him that violating orders is punishable by death. 'Since when have you been allowed to do what you please?' (p201). In what ways has Ren been raised like a soldier? In spite of his wealth and opportunities, does Ren have any freedom?
- Commander Zheng asks Ren, 'Why not come to me instead of sneaking off across the Wall?' (p204). Why does Ren not go straight to his father? Do you think Zheng would have listened to him if he had?
- In what ways does Ren change throughout the story?
- In many situations, crises bring out the best in people. How does this saying relate to Ren?

## Li San

- Is it true that Li San was a thief? Look carefully at the crime he committed (p133). Is this a real crime? What does it reveal about Li San, his family circumstances, and the justice system of the time?
- Li San has already survived one stint of hard labour. What does this reveal about him?
- What skills and attitudes did Li San teach his children?
- In what ways is Li San a very different father from Commander Zheng?

## Ma and Ah-po and Hu, one year in their lives will be

- What do these characters reveal about the status of women in society?
- How were the women expected to behave?



# ALISON LLOYD

## Mei

- What sort of person is Mei?
- As a girl, what sort of opportunities would she have in Chinese society?
- In what ways is Mei different from her mother and grandmother? Will this make life easier or harder for her?
- Why does Hu's sister Mei agree to marry Big Ears, with whom she is clearly not in love? What does this reveal about society?
- In what ways do the women in the family suffer from Li San and Hu's arrest and incarceration?

## Commander Zheng

- What sort of person is Commander Zheng?
- Do you think he loves Ren and Lien?
- Did he send Ren and Lien away because he didn't love them? (p205)
- Why is he not as openly affectionate as Hu's father?
- What evidence is there towards the end of the story that he may be softening and changing in his relationship with Ren?

## Wang

- Right from the start, there are clues that Wang is bad. Make a list of all the clues that are given throughout the story.
- What crime did Wang commit?
- Wang tells Ren that he was nobody. 'He told me no-one cared about the children of a slave girl' (p204). Why would Wang have said this?
- Why does Commander Zheng decide not to pursue and punish Wang?

## **ACTIVITIES**

Choose a paragraph from the novel that really describes the living conditions of the day. Describe the village and the life of the people who lived there in your own words.

Select a story from Chinese mythology, write a short script and perform the story as Hu and his family would have done.

Write your own short story about two boys from very different backgrounds who are thrown together in adversity and form a strong friendship.

## **ADDITIONAL TEXTS**

- Birrell, Anne. *Chinese Mythology: An Introduction*, JHU Press (1993).
- Cotterell, Arthur. *Ancient China*, Dorling Kindersley Eyewitness Books (1994).
- Li Cunxin. *Mao's Last Dancer* (Young Readers' edition), Penguin Books (2005)







ALISON LLOYD

- Roberts, Claire and Barme, Geremie. *The Great Wall of China*, Powerhouse Publishing, (2006).
- Roberts, Jeremy. *Chinese Mythology A to Z: A Young Reader's Companion*, Facts on File (2004)
- Xuegang/Ghoyun. *Chinese Fairytales*, Penguin Books, (2008).
- Yang/An. *Handbook of Chinese Mythology*, Oxford University Press, (2008)

### Films

*Mulan* Disney Studios (1998)

More information can also be found at the author's website  
[www.alisonlloyd.com.au](http://www.alisonlloyd.com.au).

# YEAR OF THE TIGER

For Ren and Hu, one year in their lives will be  
more dangerous than they ever imagined . . .

