

An Integrated Unit of Chinese-American Literature and Media

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Introduction

The purpose of this unit is to incorporate a typically underrepresented topic into the high school English classroom. The experience of the Chinese American – and specifically the Chinese American woman – usually receives at most the attention of a one-day lesson rather than a four week unit. However, as our country's classrooms continue to diversify, it is important to integrate the perspectives of many groups of people into the content and curriculum. Moreover, by presenting these diverse perspectives using a variety of mediums, students are able to respond to the topic on many different levels. Hence, the integrated use of film, literature, and other forms of media in this unit.

Despite the obscurity of its subject, this unit of Chinese literature can fit comfortably into a variety of courses. It can be one of many cultures represented in a non-western/minority literature course. Because of its focus on the female perspective of the Chinese-American, it can also fall into a course on women's literature. Lastly, as the thrust of the unit revolves around Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* – an American text – it can unapologetically be present in a survey of American literature.

The unit covers a time period of four weeks. Therefore, the following lesson plans are organized by day, some grouped together by topic. Any additional materials are cited as part of the appendix and included at the end of the unit.

Unit Goals

- Students will gain a greater appreciation for the experience of Chinese-Americans as expressed by film and literature.
- Students will be exposed to Chinese culture, tradition, and folklore.
- Students will recognize a variety of representations of Asians – including common stereotypes reinforced by American society.

Day 1: Introduction to Chinese Culture and Stereotypes

Objectives

- Students will be able to cite stereotypes of Asians in America.
- Students will be able to analyze the reasons for the perpetuation of certain stereotypes.
- Students will be able to discuss key components of traditional Chinese culture.

Materials

Copies of poem, “Suzie Wong”; cued video of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*; class set of *The Woman Warrior*; syllabus/schedule; power point slideshow

Launch

Give students little or no introduction to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Watch clip (2-3 minutes) of Mickey Rooney's character.

Body

1. How many people thought this clip was humorous? Explain background of film (popularity during the 1960s). Why might this film not be considered humorous?
2. Discussion of stereotypes seen in the film (record on board).
3. Pass out and read aloud "Suzie Wong Doesn't Live Here" by Diane Mei Lin Mark (Appendix 1). Introduce the unique stereotypes of the Asian woman: exotic, silent/submissive, mystical/magical. How are these stereotypes illustrated and refuted in the poem?
4. Introduce the topic of the unit. Give syllabus/schedule and expectations for journal responses and daily reading. Pass out books.
5. Lecture on key parts of Chinese culture that are central to understanding the book. Slideshow on filial piety, ancestor worship, structure of Chinese society/family. Students take notes.

Assignment

Read "No Name Woman," p. 1-17 in *The Woman Warrior*. Respond to the following question in your journal: What are Kingston's reflections about her aunt? Why does she make them and what does it tell the readers about Kingston or themselves?

The following ten lessons all revolve around the reading of *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. The lessons, grouped together by the five main sections of the book, are displayed by chapter title. While I have included discussion as the main thrust of each lesson, other activities should be supplemented based on the needs and style of the learners involved. Note: quizzes and many ideas for discussion questions were provided by Carol Fevola's Global Literature lesson plan (see references).

Day 2: "No Name Woman"

Objectives

- Students will be able to analyze the "truth" of a memoir.
- Students will be able to discuss and analyze key events of the reading.

Materials

copies of Quiz 1

Launch

What kind of a book is this? (memoir) How is truth portrayed in a memoir? Remind students that this book is classified as non-fiction. What kind of impact does this categorization have on Kingston's words?

Body

1) Discussion Questions:

- Why does Kingston proceed to tell the tale that she was forbidden to tell?
- How is her retelling the tale of her dead aunt an example of filial piety?
- What ghosts are present in the first chapter?
- Why are cautionary tales told? How are these tales distinct for Chinese-American children versus any children?

2) Discuss student responses to the journal question.

Assessment

Quiz 1 (Appendix 2)

Assignment

Read “White Tigers,” p.19-53. Respond to the following questions in your journal: Identify the most incredible aspect of Fa Mu Lan’s story. What makes it so astonishing? How would the story be different if the character was a man?

Days 3-4: “White Tigers”

Objectives

- Students will be able to identify and analyze the aspects of a “talk-story.”
- Students will be able to connect the two narratives of the text.
- Students will be able to discuss and analyze key events of the reading.

Materials

copies of Quiz 2

Body

1) Discussion Questions:

- What exactly is a talk-story?
- Where do the memoir end and the tale of Fa Mu Lan begin?
- Name as many superheroes as you can. Note how many of these are female. How usual is it to have a female super hero, especially from a country like China where women play traditionally subservient roles?
- Why does Kingston decide she “would have to grow up a warrior woman”?

- How does Fa Mu Lan lead her men? How do they regard her?
- How is Kingston's remaining family in China doing? How do she and her family try to help them?

2) Discuss journal response.

Assessment

Quiz 2 (Appendix 3)

Assignment

Read "Shaman," p. 57-109. Respond to the following question in your journal: Describe the dynamics of the relationship between Kingston and her mother.

Days 4-6: "Shaman"

Objectives

- Students will be able to discuss and analyze key events of the reading.

Materials

copies of Quiz 3

Body

1) Discussion Questions:

- What does the word shaman mean?
- Why does Kingston choose to use this word to describe her mother who was a doctor in China?
- What do we learn about Kingston's mother from her opening description of her in the chapter?
- Why did Kingston's mother attend medical school? Where were her husband and children?
- Explain the significance of a personal name and a public name. Why had Kingston's mother given her classmates her personal name?
- What kind of doctor was her mother in China?
- What kind of work ethic does her mother have? What is its impact on Kingston?

2) Discuss response to journal question.

Assessment

Quiz 3 (Appendix 4)

Assignment

Read p. 113-160, "At the Western Palace." Respond to the following questions in your journal: What are the ghosts in this chapter? How do they impact the story?

Days 7-8: "At the Western Palace"

Objectives

- Students will be able to discuss and analyze key events of the reading.

Materials

copies of Quiz 4

Body

1) Discussion Questions

- Where is the Western Palace? Why does Kingston call it this?
- Who is Brave Orchid? Tell how you know this.
- Describe the behavior of Brave Orchid's American children?
- Why is Brave Orchid looking for a younger woman to come off the plane?
- Moon Orchid is described as someone "who never understood the gravity of things." What does this foreshadow about her in America?
- Describe what they do when they first go home. Explain the differences between the Chinese and American behaviors.
- What is the situation between Moon Orchid and her husband?
- What are the differences between Brave Orchid and her sister, Moon Orchid? How have their lives differed?
- How did the interaction with Moon Orchid's husband differ from how the two women had imagined it? Explain the reasons for this.
- What happened to Moon Orchid after she confronted her husband? How had her life changed from the one she had lived in Hong Kong?
- What kinds of ghosts are in the chapter?
- Why does Brave Orchid's mother have her children promise to never let their father marry a second wife?

2) Discuss journal responses.

Assessment

Quiz 4 (Appendix 5)

Assignment

Read “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” p. 163-209. Respond to the following in your journal: Explain the reason for the “talk-story” at the end of the book. Tell how it relates to the book as a whole.

Days 9-11: “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”

Objectives

- Students will be able to discuss and analyze key events of the reading.

Materials

copies of Quiz 5

Body

1) Discussion Questions

- In this chapter, Kingston faces even greater differences between herself as a first generation American and the *ghosts*. Are her interactions with the ghosts at the pharmacy normal for any kid or unique as a Chinese American?
- Describe what happens with Kingston and the Chinese girl who wouldn't talk in her school. What do you see causing her to be so violent?
- Kingston came to think, “talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity” (186). How did this influence her and her behaviors?
- Who are the “crazy ones” and why does Kingston take the time to describe them?

2) Discuss response to journal question.

Assessment

Quiz 5 (Appendix 6)

Assignment

none

Day 12: The Legend of Fa Mu Lan

Objectives

- Students will be able to compare and contrast different versions of the story of Fa Mu Lan.
- Students will cite reasons why Kingston chose to integrate Fa Mu Lan into her memoir.
- Students will understand the historical context of the story of Fa Mu Lan.
- Students will be able to identify the elements of a folktale plot, narrator, character, theme and/or moral.

Materials

Copies of several English translations of Mu Lan

Launch

One central story within Kingston's book is the legend of Mu Lan. This ancient story has uncertain origins, but are believed to have begun somewhere in the Northern Wei Dynasty (AD 386-534). Today, we have several interpretations of this story, translated into English from its original Chinese form.

Body

1. Break the students into groups of 4-6 (depending on how many versions of the text are available).
2. Each group is responsible for reading their version of the text and discussing the following questions:
 - What is the main plot of the story? (this should remain the same in all groups)
 - What are some important details in this text?
 - How does this version compare to Kingston's?
 - How would you judge the "authenticity" of this version?
3. As a whole class, students now discuss major aspects of each version (teacher can record on the board).
4. Discuss elements of a folktale and why Kingston chose to integrate one into her memoir.

Assignment

Respond to the following in your journal: Does Mu Lan give less/more credibility to Kingston's story? What folktale might you integrate into your life story?

Days 13-14: Disney's Mulan

Objectives

- Students will be able to analyze the film as a western interpretation of a classic Chinese story and make a value judgment of its literary merit.
- Students will be able to compare and contrast plot elements of multiple versions of Mulan.
- Students will be able to make connections and/or judgments as to how Disney's version of Mulan assists or detracts from Kingston's version.

Materials

Video of Disney's *Mulan*; viewing worksheet

Launch

Many Americans are familiar with one version of Mulan – in fact, prior to this, the Disney version may have been the only one many of you had been exposed to. Today we will view Disney's *Mulan* and critically examine it for authenticity, cultural representation, and other cinematic aspects.

Body

1. Pass out worksheet and go through the questions that students are expected to respond to while viewing the movie:
 - How does the film represent the cultural practices of ancestor worship and filial piety?
 - What stereotypes are perpetuated in this film?
 - What stereotypes are refuted in this film?
 - How is this version of Mulan's story similar/different to Kingston's? How does it compare with the translations we read yesterday?
2. View the film, stopping frequently to comment or discuss different aspects.

Assessment

Students will turn in their viewing sheets and be scored on their responses to each question.

Days 15-17: Dim Sum or Raise the Red Lantern

At this juncture, the instructor may choose to show one of two companion film to *The Woman Warrior*. *Dim Sum*, a 1984 film by director Wayne Wang, tells the story of an elderly Chinese woman and her grown American-born daughter. This film would be a meaningful addition to the unit because of its focus on the immigrant experience of the mother and the unique relationship between the two women. Students could analyze this relationship and connect it to the mother/daughter illustrated in Kingston's book.

Another alternative for a film choice would be Zhang Yimou's acclaimed *Raise the Red Lantern*. Unlike *Dim Sum*, this film is spoken in Chinese, so students would have to become accustomed to reading subtitles. This film would be an equally meaningful addition to the unit, while emphasizing a completely different aspect of the unit. *Raise the Red Lantern* is very much a woman's story. It would correspond heavily with the feminist issues that surface in the many versions of Mulan already discussed throughout the unit.

In either case, students will be expected to complete viewing worksheets during the film. These worksheets, as well as structured class discussion on the film, can serve as part of the assessment for the unit.

Days 18-19: Final Assessment

During these days, students will be assigned a final paper to write and will be given class time to begin it. They may choose to expand on any journal topic they have already written about or may select another topic on their own (with the guidance of the instructor). The paper must be 3–5 pages in length and must somehow involve one of the major texts studied during the unit.

Day 20: More Contemporary Reactions of Asian Americans

This concluding day is meant to expose students to other means of expression for Asian Americans. Students might connect the events of the dated pieces already discussed throughout the unit with the current challenges of Americans of Asian descent. The following are only some of many possibilities for activities:

- “Angry Little (Asian) Girls” – Originally, these comic strips by Lela Lee provided humorous insight into the struggles of first generation Asian Americans. Lee has since broadened her intent by target the issues of women, rather than solely Asian women. Students might spend time reading and analyzing several of her comics. If access to a computer lab is available, students could interact firsthand with her website (angrylittlegirls.com).
- I was Born with Two Tongues – This spoken word group writes and performs poems/songs empathetic to the experiences of today's generation of Asian Americans. Students could listen to songs from one of their CDs and discuss the issues that currently face Asian Americans.

References

Books/Literature:

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior*, New York: Random House, 1975.

Mark, Diane Mei Lin. "Suzie Wong Doesn't Live Here." (publishing information unknown).

Films:

Breakfast at Tiffany's, Blake Edwards, 1961

Dim Sum, Wayne Wang, 1984

Mulan, Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft, 1998

Raise the Red Lantern, Zhang Yimou, 1991

Music:

I Was Born with Two Tongues – CDs include "Broken Speak"

Websites:

Fevola, Carol; Global Literature – excellent resource for teaching *The Woman Warrior*.
http://gc2000.rutgers.edu/GC2000/MODULES/GLOBAL_LIT/woman_warrior.htm

Kuo, Angela; Chinese culture in Disney's *Mulan* – describes many features of the film and how authentically they can be applied within the actual traditions of China.
<http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/5082/culture.html>

Lee, Lela; Angry Little Girls – access to comics, chat rooms, and contact information
www.angrylittlegirls.com