

**Teachers Notes**  
by **Dr Susan La Marca**

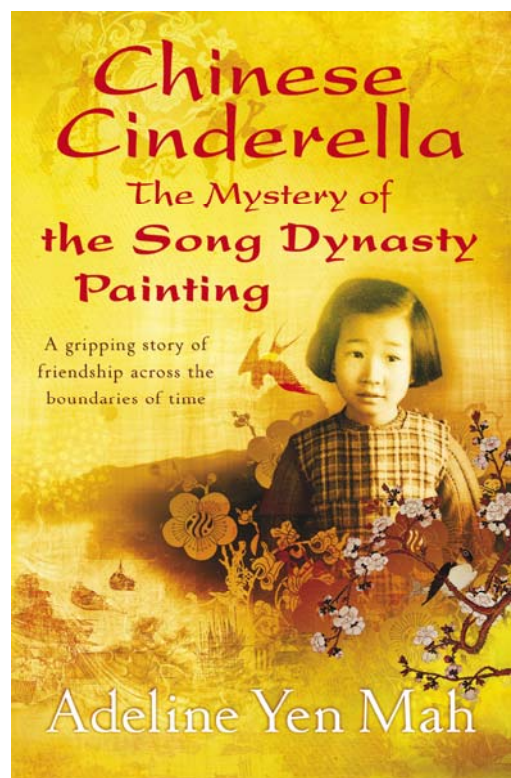
**Chinese Cinderella**  
**The Mystery of the Song Dynasty Painting**  
by  
**Adeline Yen Mah**

ISBN 9781741146363

Recommended for ages 10-14 yrs

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## INTRODUCTION

### PLOT

*The Mystery of the Song Dynasty Painting* at first appears to continue the story of CC and her fellow Secret Dragon Society members. The story very quickly changes focus: though it begins with CC in 20<sup>th</sup> century China, it is the story of another time and place.

The American airmen are still in hiding as the group attempt to get them to safety. During a stop for supplies, CC is sent to the market where a lady in black appears to recognise CC and, fearing for the safety of their mission, CC panics. While escaping, CC falls from a roof and is knocked unconscious. During her recuperation she has difficulty sleeping and is not healing well. Hypnosis is suggested and this allows CC to tell the story that occupies the inner recesses of her mind. In this other place she is a character from twelfth century China, a young girl called Mei Lan, resilient and talented like CC but living a life immersed in the ritual and rules of a much earlier China.

CC recounts the story of Mei Lan's life and, in particular, her relationship with Ah Zhao, the gifted artist responsible for the Song Dynasty painting. The lives of Mei Lan and Ah Zhao highlight the attitudes and customs of the time allowing for a rich exploration of this period of Chinese history. Despite this rewarding historical setting, this is ultimately a story of young lives affected adversely by the historical period in which they live.

### IN THE CLASSROOM

The novel offers opportunities to discuss the genre of time-slip stories and the stylistic device of 'the story within a story'. The nature of the novel means that study of characters' actions and motivations inevitably involves taking account of the historical period they lived in: this can give rise to discussion about the relationship between 'innate' human character and the social structures and cultural practices and attitudes that shape or constrain it. Mei Lan, the main historical character, is an example of a girl whose life's path might seem completely determined by her society, yet she does have choices and the novel's open ending gives students the chance to imagine a life for Mei Lan other than the historical cliché of powerless Chinese wife in an arranged marriage.

The novel is concerned with the nature of Art: its creation, its value, the sacrifices artists make for their art. The Song Dynasty painting of the Qing Ming festival that the novel is partly built around has created a great deal of interest throughout history and is nowadays sometimes referred to as 'the Chinese *Mona Lisa*'. These notes reproduce two *New York Times* articles about the painting, followed by discussion questions. They also include a list of resources, some of which are online and interactive, that provide excellent material for a study of the painting and the historical period. The visual material available is fascinating, offering an excellent opportunity for specific study of the various aspects of this detailed work.

### LANGUAGE

The language in the opening chapter of the book 'Woman in black' (pp.1–6) builds tension and suspense. How? (Consider the short sentences and the vocabulary that instil in the reader a sense of urgency and foreboding.)

Language, words, and how they communicate feeling are important to Mei Lan. They are also important to the author, Adeline Yen Mah (see the author information on the very first internal page of the novel).

Are there other identifiable characteristics that Adeline Yen Mah and Mei Lan share?

## STRUCTURE

The structure of *The Mystery of the Song Dynasty Painting* is interesting because it is a story within a story. Those who have read the first adventure of CC and the Secret Dragon Society may be expecting another instalment in their tale but almost immediately the story shifts to that of Mei Lan and Ah Zhao in the Song dynasty.

Students could explore the idea of a story within a story by writing their own. Discuss possible devices to move the story elsewhere – time travel or time slip and reincarnation are possibilities presented by the text. Discussion may present others.

At the end of the book Mei Lan falls (p.208) and our connection with her story ends. This creates an open end to the final stages of the book.

What do you think happened? To which side of the wall did Mei Lan fall? And what happened next?

- Did Mei Lan become a nun as is suggested? (p.214)
- Do you think Ah Zhao retraced the steps of his ancestors?
- Did the pair ever see each other again?
- What happened to Gege? Did he regret his actions?

Any of these possibilities are worthy of exploration. Discuss other possibilities for future storylines for each of the characters.

Write a story detailing one of these possibilities.

## CHARACTERS

### CC/ MEI-LAN

What similarities can you see between Mei Lan and CC?

(This comparison will be best made by those who also have read the earlier book *Chinese Cinderella and the Secret Dragon Society*). Consider:

- CC's bravery and sense of humour
- Mei Lan's mother died giving birth to her (p.24)
- Mei Lan's passion for words and writing (p.117, 166)
- Mei Lan stands up to her family by refusing to have her feet bound (p.114) and refusing to marry.

Writing about the attempted foot binding in her notebook was a solace to Mei Lan (p.114), and all forms of writing are of interest to her. She also enjoys creating songs for her brother to sing (p.161). She claims 'It takes courage to be a writer' (p.166).

When encouraged to write song lyrics for her brother and Cai You, Mei Lan writes:

*Like a caged bird,  
I have wings but cannot fly.  
Like a horse in a forest,  
I have legs but cannot gallop*  
(p.182)

To what do you think Mei Lan is referring?

Mei Lan is using the animals and their circumstances as similes to describe a feeling. Explore this by engaging in writing similar short poems using animals and their characteristics to describe a feeling.

Towards the end of the story Mei Lan considers becoming a Buddhist nun; this future appeals to her much more than marriage (p.183-4). Why?

## **GEGE**

Gege invites Ah Li/Ah Zhao to address him as 'big brother' and Mei Lan as 'little sister', directly contradicting a structure that expects Ah Li/Ah Zhao to treat them with less familiarity. At this point Gege sees them all as family (p.47).

But this united approach does not last. As time passes Gege's attitude towards Ah Zhao and Mei Lan changes:

- Gege warns Mei Lan away from Ah Zhao (p.129)
- On another occasion he allows Cai You to insult Ah Zhao and does not defend him (p.163)

Why?

What motivates Gege? He knows that the three of them have been good and close friends and that Ah Zhao is a talented young man.

When Ah Zhao says he must leave, Mei Lan says:

*Gege's face betrays his sadness, but I realise with sudden insight that he's prepared for this to happen. In a way, he wanted it to happen.*

(p.172)

Why?

Toward the end of the story Gege paints a gift for the Emperor and happily says the painting is by the Emperor (p.182). Unlike Ah Zhao, he appears to have no difficulty acceding ownership of his art.

Why does it not seem important to Gege to maintain power over his own work?

Is his attitude different because he views the world differently to Ah Zhao or, do they have different things to gain and lose by currying favour with the Emperor?

When Ah Zhao returns he gives Gege the painting of the Qing Ming Festival, a truly amazing gift of great beauty. Gege appears to almost convince himself that he is the artist who created the painting (p.198).

How can he do this? Is this tied up with his own view of Ah Zhao? His own ambition?

## **AH LI/AH ZHAO**

Ah Zhao is a very creative and talented young man; from the outset his skills are recognised by everyone. For example:

- From his first attempt at calligraphy his work is better than that of Gege or Mei Lan. 'Ah Li's (big characters) are balanced, harmonious and imbued with emotion' (p.42)
- He is ambidextrous (p.47)
- Described by Gege as a genius (p.57)
- Mei Lan realises that Ah Zhao is handsome (p.100)

- Gege says: 'Sometimes, I see Ah Zhao as a prophet, a figure of light, or a character out of myth. At other times, I see him as a man of destiny...' (p.169)

Is Ah Li/Ah Zhao seen as a barbarian because he is not Chinese or is there more to this than just being different?

In helping Mei Lan and Gege, Ah Li/Ah Zhao 'emphasizes over and over that *space* and *voids* are as important as flowers and trees in the creation of beauty and harmony.' (p.38)

What does he mean?

Ah Li/Ah Zhao tells Mei Lan 'If you can see, then you can draw' (p.44). He claims 'What we all need to do is look at every object with fresh eyes.' (p.45)

Do you think this is true?

Ah Zhao is commanded to carve a jade dog for the Emperor – a great honour (p.49). He needs to find the right piece of jade: 'In this piece of stone there is a dog begging to be released'. (p.50)

What does he mean?

Ah Zhao is allowed to use the Zhao name after pleasing the Emperor with his art. Why is this an honour?

Ah Zhao pays ten coppers for two caged pigeons that he immediately releases. He explains his actions by querying what an imprisoned bird would yearn for, saying: 'Freedom! Lack of freedom is a fate worse than death!' (p.87) Mei Lan thinks that Ah Zhao 'as a servant...must feel like a caged bird' (p.87).

At one point in the story Ah Zhao says to Mei Lan 'with a hint of darkness': 'That's not for the likes of me...You're the boss and I'm the slave. Let's remember this at all times.' (p.100)

What makes Ah Zhao say this?

He questions:

*Am I really that different from everyone else? Why give me a nickname at all?  
Don't I eat, drink and breathe just like you? Are we that dissimilar?*

(p.101)

Commissioner Ye says that 'Barbarians don't think like normal people.' (p.177)

Ah Zhao's ancestry is difficult for most Chinese to come to terms with. He is the son of a barbarian, a Jew, and his mother died the day he was born. His father was murdered in a fight during a cricket competition. (p.103).

Is it only Ah Zhao's origins that set him apart?

Ah Zhao feels he can create a home wherever he goes by using the images in his mind to establish his own oasis (p.115).

Why does he feel the need to do this?

Ah Zhao is sent for by the Emperor due to his prowess in working with stone (p.139). He also presents Baba with the birthday gift of a painting that demonstrates his artistic skill and impresses everyone present (p.141), the work being inspired by a real rock since 'rocks are full of meaning' (p.142).

Is his skill in many areas and his insightful manner enough to make him accepted?

General Tong makes the Emperor's offer to Ah Zhao (p.157). Ah Zhao must become a eunuch and only paint what is directed. Ah Zhao decides he would rather die than live the life of a eunuch in the palace under these conditions (p.172).

Why is this not appealing to him? Is his reluctance only about being made a eunuch or is it about the art?

Does Ah Zhao see this opportunity differently to how other characters in the story might?

It is suggested that Ah Zhao rejected power and luxury in favour of freedom and liberty (p.178). Do you agree?

On parting Ah Zhao says:

Remember that one single positive dream is more important than a thousand negative realities. Since we're young and free to create whatever we wish, *yu he bu ke* (is anything impossible?) (p.176)

And the book finishes with Dr Allen quoting Ah Zhao's favourite saying 'Is anything impossible' (p.216)

What does the saying mean?

How does it apply to Ah Zhao at different times in his life?

Do you think Ah Zhao would have maintained this optimistic outlook throughout his life?

### **NIANG (STEPMOTHER)**

Consider the description of Niang on pages 24-27.

- What is her life like?
- Do you think she is happy?

Niang calls CC 'rebellious, lazy, ugly and unfilial' (p.40), and slaps and pinches her.

- Why does she treat Mei Lan so cruelly?

Can you recognise the character of Niang and the relationship she has with Mei Lan in any other character from an Adeline Yen Mah book?

- Why do you think Mah often writes about this type of abusive relationship?

Niang has arranged a marriage for Mei Lan to a man that Mei Lan finds repellent (p.126).

- Does Niang act with Mei Lan's best interest at heart?
- What motivates her? There may be a series of motivations for her actions. Explore what these might be.

### **GRANDMA WU**

Grandma Wu is described as having 'intelligence, calmness, emotional stability and quiet strength' (p.14) and she is admired by Dr Allen for these characteristics. She is constantly by CC's side during the girl's recovery (p.32).

Why are these characteristics admired?

Are they characteristics shared by any of the others in the story?

At the end of the story Grandma Wu says: 'It's the journeys we take in our lifetime that make us who we are' (p.215).

Is this true?

What else contributes to the person that any of us become?

How much impact have we ourselves? Or is it predetermined fate that controls our lives?

## **THEMES**

### **CLASS**

Class dominates during the period in which the bulk of this novel is set.

At the opening of the book Ah Li/Ah Zhao is introduced as an 'orphan slave...forever ruled by others' (p.46). Because of his obvious talent in a range of areas this status can be improved through the sponsorship of others but, ultimately, his life is not fully his own.

Mei Lan says of Ah Zhao: 'Although he is so much more intelligent than Gege and me, he can never be part of our world' (p.74). Mei Lan's father has sent him to run an errand while they eat a special lunch.

Mei Lan goes on to observe that:

*No matter how hard he works or how beautifully he carves, he will always be a servant. Why? Because he can't read or write and will never be able to pass the Imperial Examinations. How unfair life is!*

(p.74)

Later in the text Niang makes it clear that Mei Lan must not consort with Ah Zhao (p.125–127). Why?

How do these ideas of class compare to those of our own society? How do they compare to other societies throughout the world that you may have learnt about? Is class discrimination still with us?

Throughout the text there are a number of descriptions of events or rituals that also involve an element of class distinction. Consider the following passages in relation to what they tell us about class distinctions during this period in history:

- Pomp and ceremony involved in the birthday party (p.132-4)
- Different coloured robes indicate status (p.133)
- The Prime Minister's long finger nails (p.136)
- The Emperor as Son of Heaven can change anything. He decides the painting by Ah Zhao is his, painted by him even though this is not true (p.156)

As well as being an orphan and poor, Ah Zhao is also a foreigner. Everyone refers to him as a barbarian. What connotations does this word embody?

As a barbarian, Ah Zhao will always be an outsider (p.152). Is this another level of discrimination separate from that of class or are the two interrelated in Ah Zhao's case?

Cai You claims barbarians are barely human. How could Ah Zhao have created such a beautiful garden (p.163) if he is a barbarian?

Why does Cai You have this view? Does it stem from ignorance?

Do we make similar assumptions about different nationalities or groups of people that are members of our own community?

Despite this, according to Mei Lan and Gege, Ah Zhao's room and the way it has been created shows that he possesses 'good taste that money can't buy' (p.168-9). But is this enough?

## FRIENDSHIP / AFFECTION

The relationship between Ah Zhao and Mei Lan is important to both of them. What begins as something akin to a sibling relationship develops into something deeper and more meaningful to both of them. Both characters make sacrifices to try to be together; Ah Zhao returns for Mei Lan though he may be placing himself in danger by doing so and Mei Lan refuses all marriage arrangements in the hope that she will be reunited with Ah Zhao.

How important is this relationship to them?

At one point in the story Mei Lan composes a poem about friendship:

*When we talk, there is always something new  
Our topics are endless and inexhaustible  
A poet's pen has turned this affinity to shape  
And given it a name. It is called...*

(p.146)

Who is she writing about?

There are a number of occasions when the developing relationship between Mei Lan and Ah Zhao is hinted at. Consider the following:

- Ah Zhao looks up 'with a startled expression' upon hearing that Mei Lan is to be married (p.128)
- 'Ah Zhao's hand is warm in mine, and I wish I could feel its support there all the time.' (p.160)
- Mei Lan tells Ah Zhao she still has his carved snail and keeps it under her pillow (p.165)
- When Mei Lan misses Ah Zhao very much, 'my heart is full of inexpressible emotions' (p.185).

There are clear indications that the two share feelings for each other. Do you feel their relationship was always doomed? Why or why not?

Mei Lan asks Ah Zhao to take her with him (p.173) 'I have no future. I would do anything to come with you'.

Is this friendship, love or desperation?

Ah Zhao's painting for Mei Lan is of his nose superimposed on her crippled foot (p.195). Mei Lan sees Ah Zhao's painting as a pictorial metaphor (p.199).

Consider also this poem:

*I'm Big Nose!  
Who are you?  
Are you Bad Foot?  
Then we're a pair.  
Don't say anything.  
They'll punish us  
For you being me  
And me being you.*

(p.196)



Both young people identify strongly with what others see as their shortcomings. Why?

Towards the end of the story both characters reveal their true feelings. Mei Lan thinks to herself:

What he doesn't know is that my heart is tied to him as a boat is to its rudder. My childhood is over, there's nothing here for me any more. I'm prepared to pay any price to go wherever Ah Zhao wishes to take me.

(p.200-1)

And she describes Ah Zhao as having a 'voice...full of love' (p.204).

How deep is their love?

Do you think their relationship would have worked if they had been able to be together?

## REINCARNATION

At the outset of the story, after CC is hurt, she notices the Song Dynasty painting in an art book whilst in the hospital (p.15) and feels that she has seen it before. The artist's name is also familiar and evocative (p.16). On returning to the painting CC feels she can 'recall fleeting expressions of people she had encountered long ago...Were these memories or hallucinations?' (p.16)

CC describes the feeling the painting evokes in her as a 'doubling of consciousness' (p.17).

What does this phrase suggest?

Grandma Wu suggests that the story CC shares under hypnosis is her remembering a previous life. She says 'just because people don't believe in something doesn't mean it isn't true' (p.31). Later in the story she again suggests the connection between CC and Mei Lan is the result of reincarnation (pp.212-3).

What is your opinion?

What other explanation could there be?

There appear to be a number of triggers for the connection between the two girls CC and Mei Lan. For example:

- The fall (p.208)
- The painting (p.211)

As well as this there are obvious similarities between the two girls' personalities. What similarities can you see between the two?

At one point in the story Gege comments that Ah Zhao's room, his presence, seems timeless (p.169).

Is Ah Zhao from another time in his views or behaviour? How is he timeless?

The following poem is credited to a Buddhist nun that may have been Mei Lan:

*What we call 'death' is often a beginning  
'The end' is just another term for giving birth  
Every life is a commencement but also a close  
Every epitaph a lullaby*

(p.214)

What does the poem mean?

Do you think it was written by the Mei Lan that you have come to know through the text?

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

There are various occasions throughout the text where descriptions of events, behaviours or rituals demonstrate the historical period in which the book is set. Consider the following examples:

- Four scholar's treasures – ink-stick, ink-stone, brush and paper. (pp.41-2)
- Cricket fighting (pp.60-7)
- Coinage (pp.67-68)
- Mei Lan has not been out of the house for 3 years (p.71)
- Match makers (pp.73-4)
- The rigorous study Gege has to complete to pass the examinations (p.44)
- The children discuss eunuchs and their place in the palace (pp.130 – 1)
- The birthday invitation (p.131)
- Tea rituals (p.162)
- Formal procession with the Emperor (p.178)

What does each of these vivid descriptions tell you of:

- the rituals involved in daily life and important celebrations?
- entertainment?
- class and gender?

Read Baba's description of Jie's sacrifice and death that led to the creation of the cold food festival (pp.76-77).

Create your own story to explain the resulting festival where no fires are lit for cooking. Try to create a story that has similar themes, perhaps sacrifice, pride or tragedy, as in Baba's explanation.

Women are not invited to Baba's birthday party – 'Women don't count!' (p.132) – neither are Baba's children allowed to attend though they may watch.

Is this a celebration or a political event to curry favour and impress powerful 'friends'?

How does it compare to birthday celebrations today?

Are there members of our modern society who choose to use celebrations such as these for political or monetary gain?

When the matchmaking process for Mei Lan begins (p.73) she is only 13 years old. What is the place of women in this historical time?

Consider the way Gege reacts to finding Mei Lan escaping to be with Ah Zhao (pp.207–8).

How does Gege treat Mei Lan?

What motivates him to speak to her as he does?

At the Spring Equinox ceremony they burn a paper water buffalo to ensure a good harvest. The buffalo is made from coloured paper with each colour representing a different element:

Black for metal  
White for water  
Red for fire  
Green for wood  
Yellow for earth

(p.187)

What is the significance of each element?

## THE PAINTING

The Song Dynasty painting of the Qing Ming festival has created a great deal of interest throughout history. The following resources, some of which are online and interactive, provide excellent material for a study of the painting and the historical period. The visual material available is fascinating, offering an excellent opportunity for specific study of the various aspects of this detailed work.

After looking at the detail of the painting, students will see that Chapter 10 – ‘Visit to the capital’ – and Chapter 11 – ‘Along the River at Qing Ming’ – both contain descriptions of the city and its bustling life that could be seen as inspiration for the painting. For example: description of the road traffic (p.72), river boats (p.84), walled city streets (p.92).

- If you created a similar painting today of your own city or neighbourhood what details would you include to represent 21<sup>st</sup> century life in a panoramic painting?

## RESOURCES

The central pages of *Chinese Cinderella: The Mystery of the Song Dynasty Painting* offer colour plates of the Qing Ming Festival painting and other important paintings featured in the text (between pages 84 and 85).

*There is an excellent Wikipedia entry on the scroll*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Along\\_the\\_River\\_During\\_Qingming\\_Festival](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Along_the_River_During_Qingming_Festival)

*Flash movie interactive version of the scroll*

[http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh96/orientation/flash\\_4/index.html](http://www.npm.gov.tw/exh96/orientation/flash_4/index.html)

*Stamp series based on painting*

<http://www.artonstamps.org/Countries/Taiwan/Cathay/cathay-city.htm>



*Life in the Song seen through a 12<sup>th</sup> century scroll, Columbia University*  
[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/song/main/main\\_c.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/song/main/main_c.htm)

## Two newspaper articles

The following extracts from two different *New York Times* articles illustrate how relevant and influential the painting has been throughout history and into the present. (N.B. They use US spelling.)

Extract from

## The New York Times

### ‘A RARE PEEK AT CHINA'S TREASURES’

By Sheila Melvin

Saturday, January 11, 2003

Many visitors were drawn by what was arguably the exhibition's treasure of treasures, a Song Dynasty painting by Zhang Zeduan called "Spring Festival on the River." The painting — a five-meter (17-foot) hand scroll of ink and color on silk that dates to the early 12th century — is so famous and so complex that visitors had to wait in a special line to view it. The line stretched from the second floor to the fourth and the wait was three and a half hours. In the line was a young art student from Northeast China who had taken a 30-hour train ride for one look at the painting and a Harvard Business School professor who had flown to Shanghai to view it every day for a week.

The scroll was ensconced in a glass case, unfurled from right to left. It depicts a tranquil landscape of rolling mountains and leafless trees with thatched

cottages scattered here and there along a riverbank. As the river meanders onward, the landscape becomes more populated. Farmers ride past on donkeys, fishermen moor their boats and men carry buckets of water in shoulder poles. The river widens and is spanned by a gravity-defying, rainbow-shaped bridge mobbed with peddlers, pedestrians, coolies and idlers. A boat prepares to pass beneath, its crew hustling to lower the masts as dozens of passersby stop to watch and offer unsolicited advice. Just past the bridge lies the town, a snug and prosperous enclave of homes, restaurants, hotels and temples. Everywhere there are people engaged in the business of life: shopping for a new bow; slurping noodles; commuting by camel caravan, ox cart, horse, sedan chair and foot; listening to a story-teller; having their fortune told; sipping tea, or showing off a grandson to friends encountered in the street. For a brief moment, I too am a part of all this activity — until the man beside me elbows my ribs and the guard shouts "Move on!"

## The New York Times

### 'CHINA'S MONA LISA' MAKES A RARE APPEARANCE IN HONG KONG



Palace Museum, Beijing

*A detail from "Along the River During the Qingming Festival," a scroll that was a pride of the imperial collection and much copied for centuries. The fragile work is seldom displayed.*

By KEITH BRADSHER

Published: July 3, 2007

HONG KONG, July 2 — Politics and art don't always mix well, but the combination has yielded a rare chance for Hong Kong residents and visitors to see what is arguably China's most famous painting.

Trying to foster nationalistic pride in China's heritage among Hong Kong residents, the Chinese government has sent 32 artworks here for an exhibition to mark the 10th anniversary of Britain's return of Hong Kong to China on July 1, 1997. Among them is Zhang Zeduan's "Along the River During the Qingming Festival", a scroll painted in the early 12th century.

"Qingming Festival" is famous partly for its involvement over centuries in palace intrigues, theft and wars, and partly for its detailed, geometrically accurate images of bridges, wine shops, sedan chairs and boats beautifully juxtaposed with flowing lines for the depiction of mountains and other natural scenery. It is routinely covered in courses on Chinese history, art and culture, across China and in the West.

"The 'Qingming Festival' is probably the single most widely known work in China," said Marc F. Wilson, a Chinese specialist and the director of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Mo.

He added that the painting was "like China's *Mona Lisa*."

Because of its fragility, the scroll is seldom displayed, even in Beijing, and has never been lent for an overseas exhibition.

It was briefly exhibited in Shanghai in 2003, where it drew lines that snaked for a quarter-mile outside the museum, and in Shenyang, China, in 2005.

*continued over page...*

“Qingming Festival” and 15 other paintings and examples of calligraphy dating from the 6th to the 14th centuries are to remain on display through July 22. Another 16 works, dating from the 4th to the 16th centuries, will be on view from July 23 to Aug. 11.

Zheng Xinmiao, China’s vice minister of culture and the director of the Palace Museum in Beijing, described the works as “the highest grade of art ever shown” outside of China proper.

“Through all the turmoil of different dynasties, it is remarkable for these pieces to survive,” he said.

The purpose of the exhibition is clear from its title: “The Pride of China.” The Beijing government has sponsored a series of Chinese cultural events here this summer to foster Chinese identity in a population where many have seen themselves as citizens of Hong Kong first, and only secondarily as Chinese.

Yet one visitor, Ringo Lau, a 47-year-old consultant who attended the exhibition on Friday, the opening day, remarked: “I have no question I am Chinese. I don’t need this to enrich it.”

He said he had studied “Qingming Festival” and recalled that a bank branch near his boyhood home in Hong Kong displayed a large reproduction of part of the painting. Although only allowed to look at the painting itself for five minutes on Friday — guards enforce time limits for each group of visitors — he said he was satisfied.

“It’s detailed, it’s marvelous, it’s very colorful,” he said.

Like the *Mona Lisa*, “Qingming Festival” is to some extent famous for being famous.

The *Mona Lisa* became a household word partly because it was stolen from the Louvre in August 1911. The theft and subsequent sale of forgeries passed off as the real painting set off a frenzy of news coverage, as well as songs and even cabaret acts, until the original was recovered in Italy in December 1913.

“Qingming Festival” has been famous since the 14th century, when forgeries began to circulate, said Tang Hing-sun, an assistant curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art who helped organize the exhibition here.

Forgers could pass off their copies as the original partly because the original was repeatedly stolen or misappropriated from the imperial collection, starting as early as the 1340s. It kept showing up in the hands of wealthy, influential families, from whom Emperors repeatedly recovered it when they confiscated estates during disputes.

Qiu Ying, a 16th-century artist, established a reputation for painting beautiful copies of “Qingming Festival,” prompting forgers even to begin producing forgeries of his copies.

The Nationalists moved the cream of the imperial collection to Taiwan shortly before losing the civil war to the Communists in 1949. But through a quirk of history, “Qingming Festival” had been separated from the rest of the collection and stayed on the mainland.

What vocabulary do the articles use to describe the painting?

How would you characterise these words?

What sense do you get of the painting, and its influence and importance throughout history?

Consider the article from the *New York Times* that describes the Song Dynasty painting as China's *Mona Lisa*:

Why is the Song dynasty painting China's *Mona Lisa*? (This view of the painting as the Chinese *Mona Lisa* is also mentioned in the text – in the author's note (p.ix) and in the caption for the illustration of the painting in the colour page following page 84).

What painting or work of art is the equivalent of the *Mona Lisa* in your country or city? Or the country in which you were born.

What influences your choice? The most expensive? The most rare? Or is it also about how the art has become part of the country's consciousness?

Consider what are the '*Mona Lisa*' works of art from a range of countries of your choice.

The Song Dynasty painting obviously inspired Adeline Yen Mah (see Author's note) to include it in her story. Throughout history art has often inspired story.

Students could peruse art books for a work that inspires them and write either a poem, story or song either about the work or, like *The Mystery of the Song Dynasty Painting*, a story that includes the work.

Ah Zhao sends the completed painting to Gege as a gift (pp.193–5) and he has already marked it as having been made by Gege – it is a gift to him, one that he promised he would complete (p.121).

Why did Ah Zhao do this?

Does it not go against his views to mark a painting he created as someone else's work?

How is this gesture received by Gege?

Following the colour plates in the book of the Song Dynasty painting of the Qing Ming Festival the author and publishers have included reproductions of two other paintings that also feature in the story.

What are your opinions of these works?

Consider from your viewing of these colour plates the nature of Chinese art. What stylistic elements does the genre embody?

## **THE ARTS**

Ah Zhao asks the others, 'What is the meaning of art? Why is art important?' (p.170) and on pages 119 to 121 he and Mei Lan discuss the meaning of art:

*Ah Zhao believes that the goal of a great artist is to strive for artistic Truth; not just to make things look realistic. He thinks loving art will improve a person's quality of life... 'An artist', he says, 'is in touch with Heaven. In fact, he's an instrument of Heaven... beauty comes from Nature. A true artist is engaged with a spiritual quest. He's searching for his private Heaven.'*

(p.119)

This discussion about the meaning of art between the two central characters can be interestingly compared to the view of art demonstrated by the Emperor. On a number of

occasions his interest and support for the arts are made clear, e.g. the importance of music (p.118), the Emperor's love of all arts (p.138).

As the story progresses the motivations and attitude of the Emperor to art are questioned. It is suggested that he is confusing creation with possession (p.171).

Mei Lan complains to Gege that the paintings produced at the palace of divine inspiration are 'devoid of feeling or inspiration' (p.188) and when Gege recognises that he has been painting like everyone else for so long that he has lost his *qi* or energy (p.190) he feels that he has 'sold himself'.

Despite this questioning of creating art for the Emperor there are advantages for those who choose to acquiesce and work only for him.

### **Discuss**

How do you see the creation of art? Can it be compromised as Mei Lan and Ah Zhao suggest?

Can there be different reasons for creating art?

John F Kennedy said:

Above all, we are coming to understand that the arts incarnate the creativity of a free people. When the creative impulse cannot flourish, when it cannot freely select its methods and objects, when it is deprived of spontaneity, then society severs the root of art.

—<http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/5170.html>

Does JFK see the arts in the same way as the Emperor or Ah Zhao?

## **FURTHER READING**

### **ALSO BY ADELINE YEN MAH**

Yen Mah, Adeline *Chinese Cinderella*

Yen Mah, Adeline *Chinese Cinderella and the Secret Dragon Society*

Yen Mah, Adeline *China: Land of Dragons and Emperors*

### **CHINA – THEN AND NOW**

Compestine, Ying Chang *Revolution is not a Dinner Party*

Jiang, Ji Li *Red Scarf Girl*

Li, Yiyun *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*

Lloyd, Alison *Year of the Tiger*

McCaughrean, Geraldine *The Kite Rider*

Namioka, Lensey *Ties that Bind, Ties that Break*

Namioka, Lensey *An Ocean Apart, A World Away*

Napoli, Donna Jo *Bound*

Rippin, Sally *Chenxi and the Foreigner*

Whelan, Gloria *Chu Ju's House*



Wilkinson, Carole *Dragon Keeper* series

### **TIME SLIP / TIME TRAVEL**

Caswell, Brian *Dreamslip*

Constable, Kate *Cicada Summer*

Hearn, Julie *Follow Me Down*

Park, Ruth *Playing Beatie Bow*

Price, Susan *Sterkarm Kiss*

### **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

#### **ADELINE YEN MAH**

Readers young and old have warmed to Adeline Yen Mah through her memoirs *Falling Leaves* and *Chinese Cinderella* — both about her own unhappy childhood in China during and after the Second World War. In these memoirs, she related how, when she was a child, story-telling and writing helped her escape from the loneliness and rejection of family life. As a storyteller, she was accepted and respected by her school friends. Her Chinese Cinderella novels about CC and her friends are based on the stories she wrote to amuse herself and her friends.

#### **DR SUSAN LA MARCA**

Susan La Marca is a secondary school teacher-librarian. Her PhD, completed in 2003, explored how a teacher-librarian creates a reading environment.

Susan works for the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) and edits their research journal *Synergy*. She is also an associate editor of the journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* and editor of a number of books on reading and school library design. She is the co author, with Dr Pam Macintyre, of *Knowing readers: unlocking the pleasures of reading* (2006).

As well as being the Children's Book Council of Australia awards judge for Victoria for 2006/7, Susan works as a consultant and writer in areas related to reading and teacher-librarianship. She has presented in these areas both nationally and internationally.