

**Teachers' Notes**  
**by Lindsay Williams**

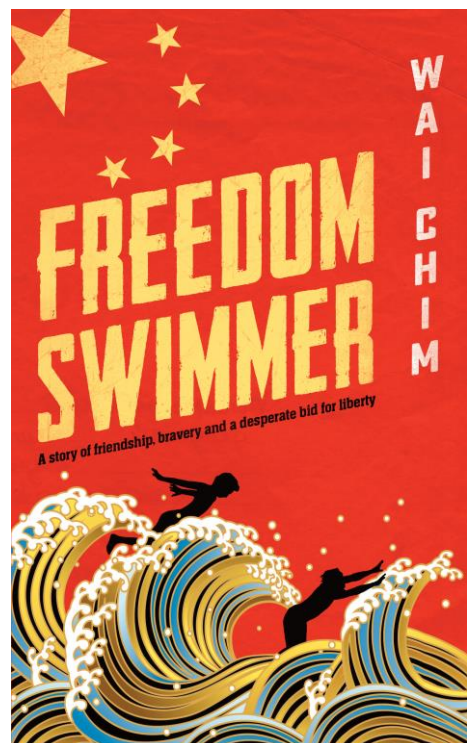
**FREEDOM SWIMMER**

by  
**Wai Chim**

**ISBN 9781760113414**  
**Recommended for ages 11-14 yrs**

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Introduction .....	2
Plot summary .....	2
Themes .....	2
Links to the curriculum .....	3
Before-reading activities .....	4
During-reading activities.....	7
After-reading activities .....	9
Further reading .....	14
About the writers .....	15
Blackline masters .....	16



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# INTRODUCTION

## PLOT SUMMARY

*Freedom Swimmer* is largely set on the Dapeng Peninsula in China and follows the story of a young Chinese boy, Ming, from Winter 1962 to Spring 1977. It is the height of the Cultural Revolution and some time before the story opens, Ming's father has been shot trying to cross the bay that separates the Peninsula where Ming's family lives under Communist Party rule from possible freedom in Hong Kong. After the death of his mother, Ming is left an orphan, with no brothers or sisters and living in a house in a poor, rural village.

Two weeks after burying his mother, a young, orphaned girl, Fei, knocks on the door of his rundown home. They share a simple meal together and the girl spends the night after they bond with tragic stories of their families. The next morning, her Aunt Shu arrives to take Fei back to her house, berating her niece for mixing with a boy from such a disreputable family. Despite this, Fei sneaks back some time later and leaves a sweet potato. This is the start of a special relationship that will last many years.

In the Summer of 1968, a group of youths (former members of the Red Guard) from the city of Guangzhou arrives in Ming's village to work alongside the local farmers. Ming and his friend Tian find themselves sharing a dormitory with a number of the newcomers, including Li. A bond forms between the boys, but especially between Li and Ming.

One day while Tian and Ming are visiting the local village of Long-chi, Ming finally sees Fei again. Before he can speak to her, he sees her speaking to Li and is terribly upset, feeling betrayed. However, the next day, Li reveals to Ming that he has a letter for him – from Fei.

It is now the Winter of 1968 and Li helps Ming write a return letter to Fei. During this process, Li learns about Ming's father and Ming's longing to escape to freedom in Hong Kong. Despite his position as a former Red Guard member, Li does not turn his new friend into the authorities. This is a turning point in their relationship as we discover that Li also has doubts about the Communist Party and the restrictions it places on individual dreams.

Meanwhile, Li finds an opportunity for Ming to legitimately spend time with Fei and for a while everything seems to be progressing well. Then, one night Ming and Li save a boy from drowning, only to discover that he commits suicide anyway. After this, Li suffers from an illness that appears to be some sort of emotional breakdown. This is the beginning of a series of events that cause Li to fall under suspicion of being a counter-revolutionary, considerably worsened when it is discovered that Li has been harbouring his father who has escaped arrest. Meantime, Aunt Shu sends Fei away and tells Ming he will never see her again. It appears that both boys have lost everything that was dear to them and, so, they make plans to escape China and swim to freedom in Hong Kong...

## THEMES

*Freedom Swimmer* can be used to explore issues such as:

- life under a totalitarian regime
- the nature of freedom, escape and happiness
- the nature of friendship
- courage and heroism
- trust, loyalty and betrayal
- our expectations versus the reality
- the importance of knowing our shared histories
- the motivations of and challenges faced by refugees.

## LINKS TO THE CURRICULUM

The activities in these Teachers Notes are designed with a particular emphasis on English. However, there might be scope for using this novel as part of a History unit, although studies of China in the Australian curriculum only take in the period up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; this novel is set mainly in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, the novel would be useful for implementing the cross-curriculum priority of *Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia* (see <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/crosscurriculumpriorities/asia-and-australia-s-engagement-with-asia/overview>).

The novel is especially suitable for studying in the middle years (7 to 10), depending on the nature of the students in a class. However, it meets the particular demands of the Year 8 curriculum, for example, where novels used would 'involve some challenging and unpredictable plot sequences and a range of non-stereotypical characters. These texts explore themes of interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas within [...] fictional settings and represent a variety of perspectives' (from the Year 8 Level Description, ACARA).

More specifically, the following activities based on the novel provide the opportunity to address the following content descriptions for Year 8 and 9. Note: a sample only is provided.

### YEAR 8

Literature	Literacy
Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups (ACELT1626)	Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content, including multimodal elements, to reflect a diversity of viewpoints (ACELY1731)
Share, reflect on, clarify and evaluate opinions and arguments about aspects of literary texts (ACELT1627)	Analyse and evaluate the ways that <b>text</b> structures and <b>language features</b> vary according to the purpose of the <b>text</b> [...] (ACELY1732)
Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts (ACELT1807)	Use comprehension strategies to interpret and evaluate texts by reflecting on the validity of content and the credibility of sources, including finding evidence in the <b>text</b> for the <b>author's point of view</b> (ACELY1734)
<b>Create</b> literary texts that draw upon <b>text</b> structures and <b>language features</b> of other texts for particular purposes and effects (ACELT1632)	

## YEAR 9

Language	Literature	Literacy
Understand that authors innovate with <b>text</b> structures and language for specific purposes and effects (ACELA1553)	Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1633)	Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content [...] for <b>aesthetic</b> and playful purposes (ACELY1741)
Identify how vocabulary choices contribute to specificity, abstraction and stylistic effectiveness (ACELA1561)	Present an argument about a literary <b>text</b> based on initial impressions and subsequent analysis of the whole <b>text</b> (ACELT1771)	Interpret, analyse and evaluate how different perspectives of issue, event, situation, individuals or groups are constructed to serve specific purposes in texts (ACELY1742)
	Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts (ACELT1635)	Apply an expanding vocabulary to <b>read</b> increasingly complex texts with fluency and comprehension (ACELY1743)
	Analyse <b>text</b> structures and <b>language features</b> of literary texts [...](ACELT1772)	

## BEFORE READING

### Activity One: Frontloading about the History of Modern China

*Freedom Swimmer* is set (largely) during China's 'Cultural Revolution' of the 1960s. Some background knowledge about this time will be helpful for students when reading the novel. As such, students could work in groups to research some of the topics listed below. A starting point for web searches is provided below.

**Note:** Many of these resources are American (or from Western cultures at the very least) and, therefore, somewhat one-sided. However, very little from a mainland Chinese perspective is available. In addition, teachers should read these resources carefully: depending on the age of students, some may be more suitable as teacher background due to their complexity.

#### Mao Zedong

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXMMzL5THPk> [This is one-sided, but provides good insight & a useful introduction to Mao.]

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mao-Zedong>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/mao\\_zedong.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/mao_zedong.shtml)

<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/china-1900-to-1976/mao-zedong/>

[http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china\\_1900\\_mao\\_early.htm](http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1900_mao_early.htm)

### **Mao's Little Red Book**

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34932800>

<http://www.beijingmadeeasy.com/beijing-history/the-little-red-book> [This site is useful for understanding why the boys make so much of carrying the *Little Red Book* and learning quotations from it.]

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/> [This is an online translation of Mao's book. If teachers feel some trepidation in accessing the site, the book is easily available through the Amazon bookstore:

<https://www.amazon.com/Chairman-Maos-Little-Red-Book/dp/B0046NE00E.>]

### **Great Leap Forward**

<http://asianhistory.about.com/od/asianhistoryfaqs/f/greatleapfaq.htm> [A basic, but useful introduction.]

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Leap-Forward>

<http://chineseposters.net/themes/great-leap-forward.php> (This site includes posters associated with the Great Leap Forward.)

<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/china-1900-to-1976/the-great-leap-forward/>

<http://monthlyreview.org/commentary/did-mao-really-kill-millions-in-the-great-leap-forward/> [A review of the Great Leap Forward and its repercussions.]

### **Cultural Revolution**

<http://www.history.com/topics/cultural-revolution>

<http://asianhistory.about.com/od/modernchina/f/What-Was-The-Cultural-Revolution.htm> [This site introduces the notion of the 'Four Olds' which are featured in the novel.]

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-explainer.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/15/world/asia/china-cultural-revolution-explainer.html?_r=0) [A site that provides background for many of the events of the novel; even though an American site, it is quite even-handed. Also despite being a *New York Times* article, it is straightforward enough for most middle school students.]

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/27/china-cultural-revolution-sons-guilt-zhang-hongping> [This is a personal story about the writer denouncing his mother during the Cultural Revolution. It includes a video and might provide helpful background so that students can better understand Li's behaviour when his father is arrested.]

<http://chinaboom.asiasociety.org/period/inheritance/0/91> [This is another personal, family story about the Cultural Revolution and its impact on people at the time.]

### **Freedom Swimmers**

<http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1120852/veterans-who-fled-mainland-hong-kong-1970s-tell-their-stories> [Stories and pictures of the 'freedom swimmers' from the *South China Morning Post*.]

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1126786/forgotten-stories-huge-escape-hong-kong> [From the *South China Morning Post*, this is an interview with the author of a book about freedom swimmers.]

[http://taiwaninfo.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=150026&CtNode=103&htx\\_TRCategory=&mp=4](http://taiwaninfo.nat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=150026&CtNode=103&htx_TRCategory=&mp=4) [An article from Taiwan Info; it should be remembered that Taiwan and China dispute which country is the **real** China.]

<http://taiwantoday.tw/ct.asp?xItem=171448&ctNode=103> [This is an article from *Taiwan Today*, published in November 1970. Consequently, it is almost contemporary with the main events of the novel.]

<http://siyigenealogy.proboards.com/thread/2161/veterans-fled-mainland-hong-1970s> [On this site, veteran 'freedom swimmers' of the 1970s tell their own stories.]

### **Big Character Posters**

<http://projekt.ht.lu.se/en/rereso/sources/big-character-posters/> [A useful history of the Big Character poster as used by the Communist Party.]

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big-character\\_poster](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big-character_poster)

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/dazibao>

<http://chineseposters.net/gallery/theme-07.php> [Images of Big Character posters from the Cultural Revolution.]

[http://www.shanghaipropagandaart.com/collection\\_3\\_2.asp?class=Cultural\\_Revolution](http://www.shanghaipropagandaart.com/collection_3_2.asp?class=Cultural_Revolution) [This is interesting for the more personal perspective provided on Big Character posters.]

### **General Background to the Novel**

<http://www.waichim.com/whats-coming-next/> [This is official website of the author, Wai Chim].

### **Activity 2: Locating the Setting**

It is likely that many students will be unfamiliar with the geography of the locations described in the novel, especially the Dapeng Peninsula and Hong Kong. Using Google Maps, students can locate these key locations, zooming in and out of the map to gain both an overview (e.g. of the location with respect to Australia) and more specific detail. Remind students that this is a modern map and does not exactly reflect the topographic reality at the time the novel is set.

<https://www.google.com.au/maps/place/大鵬半島/@22.4964699,114.3643606,10.57z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x34046acdaa54b37f:0x250b970358961f77!8m2!3d22.5505556!4d114.4913889>)

Students should also find the map at the beginning of *Freedom Swimmer* and identify the area it depicts on Google maps.

### **Activity 3: Structure of the Novel Part 1**

The novel has a reasonably complex structure. In order to help students understand this structure before they begin reading, students can complete the table in [Appendix One](#) (best blown up to A3 size). After completing the Graphic Overview, students can then discuss what they notice, e.g.

- What is the timeframe of the novel?
- How are narrators used and why do you think Wai Chim has made this choice?
- Each part begins with a quote. From where might these come? *Hint*: Think back to the research completed as part of Activity 1.

## DURING READING

### Activity 4: Reading the Novel

The prologue (in which Ming buries his mother) may be quite confronting for some students and, therefore, it is recommended that students read this together, e.g. through a teacher read-aloud. Due to the amount of dialogue, subsequent chapters lend themselves to Readers Theatre, e.g.

- <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/readers-theatre-172.html>
- <http://www.readingrockets.org/article/readers-theater-giving-students-reason-read-aloud>.

In order to avoid the necessity to create a script, students can read directly from the novel, with individual students reading the dialogue of particular characters and one student to read the narration. This technique (especially used with the early chapters) will provide the teacher and students with the opportunity to connect what they are reading with their earlier research. In addition, it can help build students' confidence with the pronunciation of Chinese names.

In that regard, before students read aloud, they can be given background on how to pronounce Chinese names. Teachers can draw on the expertise of students in the class (e.g. those who speak Chinese). Alternatively, sites such as the following might be useful:

- <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~zhuxj/readpinyin.html>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fb73w3eT9tk>

Once students feel confident with potentially unfamiliar content and language, they can read silently.

#### Extensions:

- Using a 'double bubble map' (for a good explanation of this thinking tool, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwcaXFbJZ0>) compare and contrast the opening chapter of *Freedom Swimmer* with similar chapters in other books. For example in *Jameela* by Rukhsana Khan, a young Muslim girl has to help prepare her mother's body for burial.
- Various key scenes (e.g. Ming being taught to swim on pages 31-32 or Li's formal interview on pages 166-175) can be performed in small groups. This will allow students to gain a visceral insight to the characters and their emotions, as well as drawing attention to important moments in the story. Alternatively, students could be involved in creating tableaux of these scenes, with an emphasis on expressing emotions through their bodies and facial expressions. For more information, see:
  - <http://dramaresource.com/tableaux/> or
  - <http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/scenes-in-tableau-drama-strategies-to-use-with-any-days-times-part-2/?r=0>

### Activity 5: A Place of My Dreams

In the novel, Ming writes a poem about Hong Kong, a city he dreams about, imagining it as some sort of paradise. Students should re-read the poem on page 93 and then continue to read the rest of page 93 through to page 96 ('I was pretty sure I already knew the answer.') As a class, discuss the way that Ming personifies Hong Kong.

After some modeling and guided practice, students can write their own poem about a place that is special to them, or a place that they have a strong desire to visit (and/or live). Perhaps their poem could be a reflection on a place where they used to live and

now miss. Whichever option students take, they should use the same structure as Ming, i.e. I see...I listen...I taste...I smell...I yearn to touch...I ache to become....

Share these stories by reading them aloud in small groups and posting them on a class bulletin board.

### Activity 6: Painting with Words

Language is the writer's main tool: amongst other things, it allows her to paint word pictures of places and people. As students read the novel, they can find examples of uses of language that they find particularly effective. These can be shared and students can discuss how these uses of language contribute to the way characters are constructed and events are portrayed.

The teacher might like to provide some guidance. For example, students could be asked to be alert for examples of:

- personification, e.g. *Here, with the ocean's murmuring to drown out our fears, it felt like we could be alone with our true thoughts. [...] The ocean is a powerful force that can carry your hopes or crush your qi.* (pages 93-94)
- using descriptions of the environment to reflect emotional states, e.g. *There was nothing but darkness and the chirruping of crickets as I slipped into the blackness.* (page 201)
- the use of similes, e.g. *A gust of wind blew through the hut, fluttering the mosquito netting. It echoed around the room like a voice laughing.* (page 211)
- the use of contrast, e.g. the role reversals of father and son in the scene where Li confronts his father (see pages 188-194); the contrast between Hong Kong and the village where Ming grew up; and between Hong Kong as the idealized place of freedom and the reality (pages 224-225)
- the use of Chinese words and phrases, often untranslated, e.g. *fan ge ming* (page 94) and *Ho ye!* (page 106).

### Activity 7: The Language of Letters

Letters play an important role in this novel, giving us insight into characters, allowing us to catch glimpses of life beyond the village, and revealing the impact of the party on the lives of the characters. The latter would provide a particularly fruitful enquiry. For example, students could compare Ming's original letter to Fei (page 91) and the one that he eventually writes (page 123-124). Ask students to consider why he writes in the very formal way that he does in the first version, including the reference to what he sees as Communist Party ideals. Consider this in the context of Li's self-criticism session (pages 165-176) where he is in trouble about Ming's poem (from page 93).

Compare this to the initial letter that Li receives from his father (pages 101-103); while Li describes his father as 'expressive and full of ideas and musings' (page 100), the letter is actually quite formal, careful and reveals very little. This can be seen when compared to the comments Li makes about the letter (pages 102-104). To assist students in drawing these comparisons, they could try writing a less constrained letter to Li from his father, one that reveals more of his father's inner thoughts, including some of the details for which Li wishes. After sharing students' attempts, as a class discuss why the Communist Party might have found this sort of letter 'dangerous'.



## AFTER READING (THINKING CLOSELY ABOUT THE NOVEL)

### Activity 8: Structure of the Novel Part 2

One of the challenges faced by students as they become older is to write longer and longer stories. Some students may even be interested in writing novellas and novels. In order to assist them, firstly identify the over-arching narrative arc of the novel:

- **Orientation**, i.e. Ming living as an orphan in a small, rural village in China
- **Complication** (the main problem of the novel), i.e. Ming's desire to seek freedom in Hong Kong
- **Resolution**, i.e. Ming's escape to Hong Kong.

However, students can also consider how various Parts and chapters have their own, internal structure. For example, within the overall structure and on the way to resolving the main Complication, there are a series of smaller *problems* for which (temporary) *solutions* must be found. Students can be asked to identify some of these problem-solution structures. This is also a way of building tension as the problems become more serious as the story progresses. For example, compare Ming's problem in the prologue (the confrontation with Auntie Shu on pages 12-15) with Li's and Ming's problems towards the end of the book (see Chapters 14 to 16).

In order to visualise this development students might use the following plot diagram tool: <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/plot-diagram-30040.html>.

The suggested activity above assumes Ming as the main character. However, as an extension, students can also consider the narrative arcs for other characters such as Li and Fei. Their stories also help the author write a whole novel instead of just a short story.

### Activity 9: Balancing the External and Internal

To further assist students with their own writing, students should understand that novelists (and other story writers) include more than just plot in their stories, i.e. a novel is more than just about 'the stuff that is happening'. Novels are also about the psychological and emotional development of various characters, especially the protagonist. To help students, researchers such as David Rose from the University of Sydney have identified a number of narrative **phases** (or sub-stages) that occur within the bigger Stages of a story:

- setting (introducing characters, places and times)
- description
- episode (a sequence of expected events)
- problem (an unexpected event)
- solution
- reaction (characters expressing emotions)
- comment (the narrator's observations about what is happening)
- reflection (characters thinking about the meaning of what's happened)

In order to raise awareness of these phases, students could be asked to identify these within various sections of the story and discuss their roles in making the story more interesting. Contrasting examples are provided below:

**From pages 77-78:** (description) *The doctor's house was one of the largest in the village, with two big sleeping rooms, enough for two large families. But since they didn't*

*have sons or daughters of their own, the doctor's wife used the rooms to care for patients, even letting them stay overnight.*

*Li was lying on his back on a rickety bed, a washcloth pressed to his neck. He was breathing audibly, the inhale and exhale of air like an old man's wheezing. (reaction) He turned when he heard me approaching and I was surprised when he greeted me with his trademark grin, though there was no masking the wince of pain.*

(comment) *'Hey, it's the Flying General Lu Bu,' he croaked.*

(reaction) *I blushed. (reflection) Lu Bu was a ruthless general from ancient times who had betrayed his lord. (reaction) Li's eyes twinkled at the joke, which made me feel even worse. 'I'm sorry, Li. I don't know what came over me,' I mumbled. 'Are you okay?'*

**From page 219:** (episode) *Stroke, stroke, kick, kick, stroke, stroke, kick, kick.*

*I pushed through the water, straining to keep my arms and legs from breaking the surface as I paddled hard. (comment) Any splashing or sounds of paddling would have been a dead giveaway, so I kept my limbs churning underneath like dogs did. (problem) My lungs already felt raw. I was burning energy too fast and not going anywhere quickly. Still I kept up the halting rhythm.*

(episode) *Stroke, stroke, kick, kick, stroke, stroke, kick, kick.*

(description) *I was aware of nothing but the black, black sea. The rocky beach had long disappeared behind me. The inky water pushed against my chest, and wrapped around the numbness of my limbs.*

## Activity 10: Choice Points

In every story, there are various choices available to characters at particular points of the plot. The choice that a character makes (or, more precisely, the choice the author makes on behalf of that character) can have a significant outcome on the story and, in turn, the meaning that readers might take away from that story. In *Freedom Swimmer*, there are a number of significant choices that characters make, e.g.:

- Ming asking Fei into his home in the Prologue (page 7)
- Li deciding not to turn Ming into the authorities after he reveals his dream of escaping to Hong Kong (pages 93-96)
- Li refusing to denounce his father (pages 195-201)
- Aunt Shu sending Fei away (pages 203-205)
- Ming continuing his swim to Hong Kong when he can't find Li (pages 219-223)

Students should locate these choice points and re-read the pages around them. Then, they can discuss what other choice/s the character had at that point, and how the story might have developed differently if these different choices had been made. This could be shown in a flow chart, see example below and also the BLM of this flow chart in [Appendix Two](#).



**Note:** More consequences of each choice could have been listed.

Once students have explored the possible implications of different choices, they should then discuss how the choices made by characters in the book influence the reader's attitude towards them. For example, if Li had decided to turn Ming into the authorities, the reader would have little sympathy for him. Moreover, if Ming had then been re-educated and come to accept the Communist Party values, he may never have escaped and, therefore, the reader might have taken away a more pessimistic message about the power of the state over individuals (a bit like Winston Smith being crushed under the boot of Big Brother in George Orwell's *1984*.)

### Activity 11: Imagining the Perspectives of Others

As we have seen, the chapters of the novel are told from either Li or Ming's perspective. To help students empathise with other characters and gain different perspectives on the events of the novel, students can create extra chapters. For example, students can create a chapter:

- that tells Fei's story after Aunt Shu sent her away (see pages 202 to 205). If desired, this could be written as a letter to Ming that she never has the chance to send.
- from Hongbing's perspective just before or after the formal interview with Li (see pages 169 to 175). Again, perhaps this could be written as letter to his wife/father/sister etc. (none of whom we find out about in the story).
- from the point of view of Li's brother after he is captured trying to escape (see Chapter 17 and pages 232 to 237).

Share these stories and consider what contribution they make, e.g. providing a female perspective on events (i.e. giving Fei more of a voice), adding an extra dimension to secondary (but important) characters (i.e. further humanising Hongbing), putting a main character's actions in a wider perspective (i.e. considering the impact of Li's attempted escape on the rest of his family).

**Extension:** Between the various Parts, there is often a big leap in time. For example, Part 2 takes place in the Winter of 1968 and Part 3 in the Spring of 1969, i.e. about a

year elapses between the events described in the two parts. Students could be invited to imagine what happens in that time, producing a script, storyboard, series of 'diary' style entries etc.

### Activity 12: Reflecting on Characters

This is a whole class role-play activity that will give all students an opportunity to walk around in the skin of characters from the novel, and to be creative. One card from each of two sets (see [Appendix 3](#)) is distributed to students: each student receives a character role card and a response card, e.g. Ming + 'I would [blank] for a friend'. There will be multiple students with each card; however, there should be a variety of combinations, e.g. Ming + 'I would [blank] for a friend', Ming + 'I would [blank] for freedom', Li + 'I would [blank] for a friend'.

Students then stand in a circle, facing towards the centre. After the teacher models for the students, they take turns stepping into the centre and making their in-role statement, e.g. 'I am Ming, and I would swim across shark-infested waters for a friend'. Statements must be consistent with the novel, but creativity should be encouraged.

After everyone has had a turn, discuss the various responses, with a special emphasis on unusual or particularly interesting ones. As this is a way of synthesising their understandings of the characters and events from the novel, responses can be used as they create longer pieces of writing and speaking (see the following activities).

### Activity 13: Defending Characters (Roleplay)

In this activity, students will imagine that Wai Chim's editors have asked her to cut two characters from *Freedom Swimmer* from the following list: Ming, Li, Hongbing, Auntie Shu, Fei, Tian (or any other characters you choose to add). Each character has the opportunity to defend their role in the novel to a panel of judges (consisting of expert readers, i.e. selected students from the class).

To prepare, students form small groups of three or four and the teacher randomly assigns each group one character. In groups, students prepare a defense (collecting relevant quotations and page references) and assign one person to be the spokesperson. After sufficient time, the spokespeople, i.e. characters, sit in chairs at the front of the room. One at a time, the characters deliver a short speech. Characters may ask questions of other characters and challenge them if desired. In addition, the moderator asks each character to name two characters they would save and why. When everyone has had a turn speaking, the expert panel announces their decision about which two characters they would cut. (Note: this is a modified hot-seat role-play activity.)

As a follow-up, discuss the changes that would be required if these characters *were* cut. This should include a discussion of the role these characters play in the story.

**Extension:** The hot-seat panel could consist of characters from different novels and be based around topics such as:

- the most loveable character from fiction
- the most villainous character from fiction
- the most heroic character from fiction

### Activity 14: Reflecting on Events and Characters

Students should read Wai Chim's reflection on writing the novel: <http://www.waichim.com/and-its-off-to-print/>. As a class, discuss what the author means when she says: 'It's a part of the collective social conscience, a shared reality of razor sharp experiences that has dulled into memory with time.'

Individually, students should then select an event from the novel that made an impact on them, e.g. an event they thought was confronting, surprising, inspiring etc. In order

to share their reactions to this event, students can write an anecdote based on that event. An anecdote is a genre used to share feelings (i.e. an emotional reaction) about a problematic event and has the following stages: Orientation, Remarkable Event, Reaction (i.e. feelings about what happened). Alternatively, for something more sophisticated, students could write an Exemplum that is used to judge the character or behavior of a person involved in a problematic event. In this case, the structure is: Orientation, Incident, Interpretation (i.e. what does this event tell us about a person's behaviour or character).

### Activity 15: Continuing Ming's Story

Re-read the epilogue (pages 245-247). It is left to the reader to decide who Fei and Li know in the United States, but it could be Ming. Imagine that Ming has finally written them a letter. Remember that Li and Ming attempted the swim in 1969 and it is now 1977, so much has happened. Write the letter that Ming might have sent to Fei and Li. Then, write the letter back to Ming. *Variation:* Half the class could write the letter from Ming and half the class could write the reply from Fei and Li.

### Activity 16: Reflecting on Personal Values

In order to reflect on the personal significance of the novel for students, they could participate in a human barometer activity. In preparation, the teacher places cards on the wall in different parts of the room, e.g. Agree, Disagree. Then students stand and move to an area near one of the cards after the teacher reads statements such as the ones below:

- Ming's family should have done more to try to fit into his village.
- Ming is a hero.
- Ming should never have left Li behind.
- Li was right to try to escape, despite the trouble these actions might have caused his family.
- Sometimes people have to take drastic action to escape dangerous situations.
- The grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence.
- Freedom is essential for human happiness.
- Absolute freedom is not always in the best interests of a cohesive society.

After each move, various students volunteer to justify their position, drawing on events from the novel and their own experiences and knowledge. Students from the opposing position can ask questions or challenge the justifications provided.

### Activity 17: Producing Text Responses

Students could be given one or more of the statements above and asked to produce an extended piece of writing, more specifically either of the following:

- Analytical Exposition (argumentative essay) to argue a point of view, e.g. *Ming is a hero*. The structure would be Thesis, Arguments, Reiteration.
- Interpretation to interpret the message of a text, e.g. *Wai Chim uses the characters of Ming and Li to show that people can still find happiness even when their political freedoms are limited*. This genre has the structure of Evaluation (i.e. the meaning of the text), Description of Text (e.g. structure and plot, characters, use of language features), Reaffirmation.

Alternatively, students could review the novel by writing a literary-style blog, or by participating in a panel discussion of the sort that might be found on the ABC television's 'The Book Club'.

## Activity 18: Getting Creative

Students can either think about a time when they wanted to be free, e.g.:

- the last period before school holidays
- a time when they were physically trapped somewhere
- an event when they could not be themselves
- a period in their lives when they faced bullying
- an activity which put a lot of pressure on them – this could be a sport that required intensive training, an instrument they were learning that required many hours of practice a day.

If desired, this could be an incident that they have been told about by someone else, or an event from the news. Using some of the techniques learnt from reading this novel (e.g. use of multiple perspectives), students can write their own, fictionalised story about an 'escape to freedom'.

Alternatively, imagine that a movie of *Freedom Swimmer* is planned. Students can make decisions:

- Whose story will be the focus?
- Which characters will be retained? Which will need to be cut or combined?
- which scenes from the book will be retained? Which will be deleted or changed? With the latter, they will need to consider that scenes that will work in print (e.g. internal reflection) will not always work on screen.

Finally, students could produce a storyboard for one or more scenes. See:

- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Storyboard> and
- <http://www.floobynooby.com/comp1.html>.

## FURTHER READING

### WAI CHIM

<http://www.waichim.com>

<https://twitter.com/onewpc> [Twitter page]

### Publisher's web pages about Wai Chim's books:

<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/young-adult-fiction/Freedom-Swimmer-Wai-Chim-9781760113414>

<http://www.uqp.uq.edu.au/Author.aspx/1686/Chim,%20Wai>

### OTHER NOVELS

After reading *Freedom Swimmer*, students might enjoy the following titles.

#### ***Mao's Last Dancer* by Li Cunxin**

[Also made into an acclaimed feature film, this is the true story of growing up in poverty in rural China and becoming one of the best ballet dancers in the world. The author eventually defected to the USA and now lives in Australia.]

#### ***Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter* by Adeline Yen Mah**

[This is a now famous autobiography about Adeline Yen Mah's difficult childhood growing up in China.]

### ***The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew**

[This is a popular and critically acclaimed Singaporean graphic novel that explores the impact of the last 50 years of Singapore's history on a local comic book artist. It includes political critique that led to government support for Liew being withdrawn.]

### ***Wolf by Wolf* by Ryan Graudin (Indigo Books)**

[The first part in a series, this is a speculative fiction novel for young adults set in a world in which Nazi Germany and Japan won World War Two. As such, it is an entertaining exploration of a different totalitarian regime.]

### ***1984* by George Orwell**

[For something more challenging, some students might enjoy this classic critique of totalitarianism.]

## **ABOUT THE WRITERS**

### **WAI CHIM**

Wai was born in New York City in the US. Although her parents didn't speak much English, Wai harboured a passion for books from a very young age, sneaking stories into bed to read well into the night.

Wai graduated from Duke University with majors in Economics and English. With a thirst for adventure and unique experiences, after graduation Wai moved to Japan where she spent over a year teaching English to Japanese children.

In 2006, she moved to Australia to enjoy the sun and to pursue her passion for writing. She completed a Graduate Certificate in Creative Writing at the University of Sydney under the inspiring tutelage of great Australian writers such as Kathryn Heyman and David Brooks.

Wai Chim is also the author of a junior fiction series called 'Chook Chook'.

### **LINDSAY WILLIAMS**

Lindsay has taught English for over thirty years and was a Head of English for many of those. Currently, he is undertaking his PhD through the University of New England, coordinates the English curriculum courses for Years 5 through to 12 at the University of Queensland, and runs Wordsmart Consulting. Recently, he produced a unit on Tim Flannery's *Here on Earth* for the Reading Australia website and has written a chapter on collaborative learning for the recent AATE publication, *The Artful English Teacher*. In addition, he has produced Teacher Notes for many new Allen and Unwin novels, including the *Worldshaker* and *Darius Bell* series, the picture book of *And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda* and Louis Nowra's YA novel, *Prince of Afghanistan*. Finally, he was the content writer for the Australian Children's Television Foundation CD to accompany the *Lockie Leonard* television series. Follow him on twitter: @Lindsayguru.





Appendix Two: Example of Choice Points for Activity 10



Appendix Three: Roleplay Cards for Activity 12

**Role Cards**

Ming	Li	Tang
Fei	Auntie Shu	Tian
Commander Hongbing	Li's father	CaoCao (the cadre's son)

See the next page for Response Cards.

**Response Cards**

<p><i>I would...</i> [insert your response in role]</p> <p><i>...for a friend.</i></p>	<p><i>For me, freedom is...</i> [insert your response in role]</p>
<p><i>I would...</i> [insert your response in role]</p> <p><i>...for love.</i></p>	<p><i>For me, Chairman Mao is...</i> [insert your response in role]</p>
<p><i>My family is...</i> [insert your response in role]</p>	