

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Ghost Train

Grades 1 - 4

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1. Story Summary

Choon-yi is a girl born in 19th century China with only one arm. As she grows up, her talents as a gifted painter are revealed. Her father goes abroad to work on a North American railway. Later, he summons her to his side, to involve her in putting to rest the souls of the Chinese workers who died while labouring on the transcontinental railway. Choon-yi's trip is about art, family and history.

2. Background

- Between 1881 and 1885, seventeen thousand Chinese came to Canada, and many worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway.
- They received a dollar a day, one-half the wage paid to white workers.
- In gangs of thirty, the Chinese cleared and graded the roadbed and secured the rail ties with gravel.
- It is estimated that 600 Chinese died during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Landslides and careless dynamite blasts killed many.
- When the railway was completed, the city of Vancouver sprang up at the western end of the line.

3. Oral Communication, Reading and Writing

- 3.1 You are a farmer who has taken beans to sell in Choon-yi's district. This is the first time that you see Choon-yi in the market. When you go home, you meet your neighbour. What do you tell your neighbour about Choon-yi?
- 3.2 In the village, you are either Choon-yi's mother or her uncle. You are talking to the next-door neighbour about the last letter Choon-yi received from her father. What do you say? What worries do you have?
- 3.3 You are the railway stationmaster. Choon-yi came to you today (as in the story). At day's end, you go home for dinner. Family members ask you, "How was your day?" What do you say?
- 3.4 You are Choon-yi. You are about to take your first train ride, as described in the book. Before you go, you write your mother a letter. What do you tell her?

(Questions can be asked after an oral reading of the story, or students may read the book themselves. Answers can be written and/or read aloud to the class.)

4. Other Media

- 4.1 *Ghost Train* was staged as a play for live audiences by Young People's Theatre in Toronto in 2001. If you were the director, what scenes from the story would be the most difficult to stage? Why?
- 4.2 In the play version of *Ghost Train*, the characters sang songs to music. Write a song for (a) Choon-yi, (b) Choon-yi's father, (c) Choon-yi's mother, or (d) the Stationmaster.
- 4.3 On the inside endpapers of the book, there are four Chinese words. From left to right, the first word is 'dream.' Second word is 'soul.' Third and fourth words together are 'train.' Which title do you like better: the English one or its Chinese translation? Why?
- 4.4 Look in an atlas for Hong Kong, Vancouver, and Revelstoke. Choon-yi boarded the ship in Hong Kong. The ship landed in Vancouver. The railway went from Vancouver to Revelstoke. What is the distance between the 3 sites? Which trip took the longest?

- 4.5 Can you make *Ghost Train* into a board game, like *Snakes and Ladders*? Can you design a box for the game? Can you write a script for a television ad for the board game?
- 4.6 A good background book to *Ghost Train* is *The Kids Book of Canada's Railway* by Deborah Hodge, illustrated by John Mantha, Kids Can Press, 2000. How are these two books different from one another?

The Paintings

- 4.7 In the painting on the cover, what is Choon-yi holding? Is it a brush or incense? Why do you think Harvey Chan artist painted it like that?
- 4.8 In the first painting inside the book, only Choon-yi's face is clear. Why do you think Harvey Chan the artist did this?
- 4.9 In the second painting inside the book, what animal is there? Did you see it the first time you saw this painting? Why?
- 4.10 Harvey Chan the artist painted these illustrations using dark colours. Why do you think he did that?