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ALISON LLOYD

***Year of the Tiger* by Alison Lloyd**

Year 7

Background

The Year of the Tiger documents the lives of two vastly different boys during a turbulent time in the Han period in China. The Great Wall is under threat, the horsemen of the steppes are threatening attack, and corruption and disobedience within the empire may be just as destructive. While the world of politics and war rages on the big stage, the real story is told on a smaller human scale. Lloyd focuses on the lives of two boys. Ren is an unimportant son of a battalion commander, who has accompanied his father to the small town closest to the wall. His father's task is to mend the wall and survey the situation. Hu is the poor son of a noodle seller and acrobat. Both boys have something to prove; both want to achieve something, be somebody, and an archery contest offers them that opportunity. Though different, the boys form an important friendship that tests them both through a series of adventures.

Like *Benny and Omar* by Eoin Colfer, and *Camel Rider* by Prue Mason, this book throws together two vastly different boys, who through a series of adverse events, grow closer. A comparison of *The Year of the Tiger* with either, or both, of these books would make for valuable study.

While this is a character-driven text that focuses predominantly on the relationship between the two boys, it is also very much about China during the Han period – the politics, lifestyles and trials of the time.

Objectives

[Students] analyse text and support interpretation with evidence drawn from the text... They analyse imagery, characterisation, dialogue, point of view, plot and setting.

Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2008) *The VELS, Discipline-based learning, English, Level 4*, p. 42

The National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians says:

[Students] are able to relate and communicate across cultures, especially in relation to culture and countries of the Asia Pacific.

National Curriculum Board (2008), 'The Shape of the National Curriculum' in *The National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, p. 5.

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



Focus

Unlikely Friendship

- Much of the appeal of the novel is in the vivid characterisation of Ren and Hu, and how friendship can cross the divides of class, status and power. Ren: *'He would show them all that he could be a worthy son'* (p29) is contrasted with Hu's *'was there anything he could do to help his family?'* (p33).
- What brings them together? Is it a real friendship or one of necessity - *'someone to share his brightest dream'* (p108)?
- Trace the development of the friendship from an early encounter on pages 38-39, and identify significant moments, such as when Hu saves Ren (pp. 55-57). Include the tests of the friendship such as Hu being imprisoned as a result of his helping Ren, Ren accidentally shooting an arrow into Hu's leg and then their adventure alerting Beicheng to the invaders.
- On page 180 Ren says to his father of Hu, *'he's my friend'*. What has forged that unlikely friendship?

Historical period

- It would be engaging to explore the richly created time of the Han dynasty. *The Year of the Tiger* is full of details of everyday life, such as what the poor Li children play with, what is important in their lives, how they support themselves, how Hu and Mei have to contribute through lugging wood, buying flour, even marriage for Mei.
- The life of the son of the Commander is much more comfortable but lacking in overt affection and constricted by obligation.
- Debate who has the higher stakes for the archery competition – Ren, seeking his father's approval, or Hu keeping starvation and poverty at bay (he is well loved).
- Create a map of the town of Beicheng from the descriptions provided such as (market place, wall, river, south gates, town hall, grain store, millet field, perhaps beginning with Ren's bird's eye view on page 19).
- You might like to create it when it is under siege, in full colour (pp. 190- 191).

Alison Lloyd's personal website (<http://www.alisonlloyd.com.au/>) has a page entitled Life in Ancient China.

Most towns and cities in ancient China had a wall around them. Rich people's homes also had walls around them, and even towers to keep watch. People did not feel safe, clearly, and they wanted to protect themselves - from bandits, barbarians and even Chinese armies. Part of the Chinese word for 'city' means 'wall'.

In the Han Dynasty, and for many centuries after that, China had large stretches of wild forest. China was rich in wildlife: deer, monkeys, pandas, wolves and – most feared of all – tigers.

Armies were extremely important to the emperors of Ancient China. They helped protect China against attacks by other people, including the northern nomads and the Tibetans. They also protected trade routes, such as the road that Chinese silk travelled on for sale to Ancient Rome. Quite often, armies controlled by local officials fought for the control of China itself.



Assessment

- Lloyd uses language to reveal character and culture; for instance the important saying on page 28 '*A nobleman without integrity is like a chariot without an axle*'.
- Write some similar analogies that relate to your class environment, and/or students' lives. You might suggest starters, such as 'A cricket team without a captain is like...' or 'A book without an ending is like ...' or 'A school day without a lunch time is like...'
- Or students could write some new jokes for Hu – in the style of the ones he tells (p53-54).
- Who would you rather be, Ren or Hu, Mei or Lien? Compile a character profile of your choice including why you would like to be that person.

Related Reading

Friendship

- Colfer, Eoin *Benny and Omar*
- Gleitzman, Morris *Once; Then*
- Kane, Kim *Pip: The Story of Olive*
- Laguna, Sofie *Bird and Sugar Boy*
- Mason, Prue *Camel Rider*

Ancient China

- McCaughrean, Geraldine *The Kite Rider*
Tamburlaine's Elephants
- *Mulan* (Disney movie)
- Wilkinson, Carole *Dragon Keeper series*

YEAR OF THE TIGER

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

