

TEACHER NOTES

Teacher Notes by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM

WALKER BOOKS



DRAGONKEEPER
CREATOR: CAROLE WILKINSON
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About the Book

"Ping must search heart to find stone." (p.212)

Ancient China, Han Dynasty. A slave girl saves the life of an ageing dragon and escapes her brutal master. Pursued by a ruthless dragon hunter, the girl and the dragon make an epic journey across China carrying a mysterious stone that must be protected.

This is the story of a young girl who believes she is not worthy of a name but finds within herself the strength and courage to make this perilous journey – and do what must be done.

About the Author

Carole Wilkinson is the internationally award-winning and bestselling author of the *Dragonkeeper* series. Carole writes both fiction and non-fiction and her stories are loved by young people all over the world. Carole embarked on her writing career at the age of 40 and she has been making up for lost time ever since. Her latest book, *Atmospheric: The Burning Story of Climate Change*, was the winner of the Wilderness Society's 2016 Environment Award for Children's Literature – Nonfiction category as well as a Notable Book for the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards.

About the Teacher Notes Author

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and publishes regularly on children's literature, Australian fiction, and publishing history. She was inaugural director of and is a Life Member of the Queensland Writers Centre, and was co-founder of Jam Roll Press. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia (1946-2005)* (2006) co-edited with Craig Munro and *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky: 100 Years of Queensland Writing* (2002) co-edited with Stuart Glover. In 2012 she was recipient of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature. In 2014 she received the Queensland Writers' Centre's Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia.

CURRICULUM LINKS

English (Language; Literature and Literacy)
• Science • Humanities and Social Sciences
(Geography) • The Arts (Visual Arts)



Questions and Answers with Carole Wilkinson

**Carole, this is a work of historical fantasy.
Can you describe the inspiration and origin of the book and series?**

Though *Dragonkeeper* is a fantasy book, it is set in a historical era in China. The Han Dynasty lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE. During those years 25 different Emperors ruled. *Dragonkeeper* is set in 141 BC, the year that the Emperor Jingdi died and his young son Wudi took over as Emperor.

So the book is set about 2300 years ago and 8000 kms away. It seemed like a good idea when I thought it up, but then I had to find out what China was like way back then. Though the character of the young emperor, Liu Che, is based on a real person, I made up the story and set the book in an imaginary China where dragons were alive. I like to call it a historical fantasy. However, as with my other historical books, I wanted the detail to be as historically accurate as possible

How do you research? Were libraries particularly useful to you?

When I wrote about ancient Egypt, I could find lots of books and websites to tell me about life back then. With Han Dynasty China, the task wasn't so easy. I found only a few books at the library. There may be lots of books in Chinese, but they wouldn't be much good to me. Though I can speak a little Chinese and recognise a few simple characters, I can't read Chinese books. I read the available books, and that helped me with some of the detail. I found out that both Chinese men and women wore similar clothing—a garment a bit like a wrap-around dressing gown, sometimes with trousers underneath. I found out a little about what people ate and how growing food was what most people did for a living. But I was still finding it hard to picture what Han Dynasty China looked like.

What did archaeologists and the architectural remnants of the Han Dynasty have to reveal to you?

In Han Dynasty China, all buildings—even palaces—were built out of wood. Over time they burnt down or the wood rotted and they disappeared entirely. There is not a single Han Dynasty building left in the whole of China. Fortunately, just like in ancient Egypt, in ancient China important people were buried in tombs underground. And the ancient Chinese believed that they had to supply their dead Emperors and relatives with the things they would need after death. People in ancient China believed that people had two souls. When they died, one soul would ascend to the clouds and, hopefully, live peacefully with the immortals.

The other one stayed in or around the grave. So inside the tombs they placed clothes, furniture, food and other things for this soul to live. They believed that if they didn't keep the souls of their ancestors happy, these dead spirits or ghosts would get angry and bring them bad luck. Most people have seen pictures of the Terracotta Warriors. This is a whole army of soldiers made out of clay buried near the tomb of an earlier Emperor. People believed that the statues would turn into real soldiers in the afterlife and serve the Emperor just like a real army. Archaeologists have been burrowing under the surface of Egypt since the early 1800s so there are lots of known tombs. China has been closed to Westerners for a lot of its history and there has not been as much archaeological research there. I found information about two tombs that were made in the Han Dynasty.



**The tombs of this civilisation apparently yielded a lot of riches for you as a writer.
Can you describe what you discovered?**

One tomb is called the Mawangdui Tomb. It is the tomb of a rich woman called Lady Dai who died around 168 BCE. The tomb contained furniture, fabric, ornaments, bowls and food for the lady's earthly 'ghost' to use.

I got a lot of information about what people ate in the Han Dynasty from books about this tomb. There was also a lovely silk hanging. The paintings on it told the story of how this woman would find her way to heaven. It depicts heaven as a place above the clouds guarded by celestial beasts including dragons. Now these dragons didn't look the same as the wide-eyed and slightly ferocious Chinese dragons that we usually see in pictures. In fact they had red smiley mouths, big brown eyes and little wings. I liked the friendly look of these dragons and decided that if that was how people in the Han Dynasty imagined dragons to look, that was how my dragon would look. Until this tomb was excavated in 1972, there were no surviving paintings from the Han Dynasty, so this painting is very special. Fortunately for me there is a big collection of Chinese books in the Melbourne University Library. Although I can't read them, I can look at the pictures! And I discovered there were quite a few books there with pictures of items from Han Dynasty tombs. The other Han tomb I found some information about was the tomb of Jingdi—that's the emperor at the start of *Dragonkeeper*. While I was doing the research for this book, an exhibition came from China to Sydney. It contained some of the goods from the Terracotta Warriors tomb and also some from Jingdi. I was very excited about the prospect of seeing some things from the time of 'my' emperor so I drove to Sydney. It was very inspirational to see things that were made in the time I was writing about, so long ago. One of the statues I saw was of a kneeling servant girl. This helped me picture what my main character, Ping, looked like.

What were 'bamboo books', and how did researching them add to your research?

As well as everyday objects there were also books in these tombs (to give the ghost something to read, I suppose). The Chinese invented paper during the late Han Dynasty, but at the time of these tombs, books were written on thin strips of bamboo (the Chinese used to write vertically, that is up and down from the top of the page to the bottom, not across like we do). They tied the bamboo strips together so that they lay side by side. To close the book they rolled it up and tied it with string. These are called Bamboo books. Quite a few ancient Chinese books have survived and some of them have been translated into English. Once again the Melbourne University library came to the rescue and I found copies of the translations there. I got the idea about pickling the dead dragon from a brief story in one of these ancient books. I also found inspiration for the dragon's words of wisdom in these books

What do you need to be conscious of, when writing historical fiction/fantasy?

When you write a historical story, you have to be careful not to mention things that hadn't yet been invented or foods that hadn't yet been introduced to that area. Along the way, I discovered that there were no tomatoes or grapes in China in the Han Dynasty. Some of the things that seem typically Chinese to us today weren't around in the Han Dynasty. For instance, there were no temples because Buddhism wasn't introduced to China until the very end of the Han Dynasty. Most people didn't eat rice and drink tea. These things were used in the south of China during the Han Dynasty, but didn't spread around China till much later. As well as paper, Chinese scholars invented other important things during the Han Dynasty such as the wheelbarrow, stirrups for riding horses and a device called a seismograph, which detected earthquakes hundreds of miles away. Some of these things didn't reach the West for hundreds of years. After reading *Dragonkeeper*, I hope that you find this period of Chinese history as fascinating as I do.

TEACHER NOTES

A. Critical Literacy: Before and After Reading the Book

- The **title** of this book refers to the main character of the series, Ping, a young slave girl who becomes a Dragonkeeper. After you have read the book, discuss the title, and what other title the book might have had.
- Before reading, examine the images that feature on the **cover**, and discuss what the book might be about, and any other suggested messages in the cover design. [See also D. Visual Literacy Activities below.]
- **Examine the cover** (front and back) after your reading, and then discuss the cover's relationship to the internal text.

B. Themes and Curriculum Topics

NOTE: A list of references to use as a starting point for activities in this section can be found below in the **Bibliography**.

Han Dynasty in China

The Han Dynasty was a period in Chinese history when the emperors all belonged to a particular family. It lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE. It was established by Liu Bang and ruled by the House of Liu. It was the second imperial dynasty and succeeded the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE) and was followed by the Period of the Three Kingdoms (220–280 CE).

Dragonkeeper is set in 141 BC the year that Emperor Jungdi died and his young son Wudi took over as Emperor. Liu Che is based on Emperor Wudi, but is fictional as are many of the events described in the novel. Dragons existed in this fantasy scenario as well!

Discussion Point

'The Emperors ruled with complete authority and could not be challenged. "I don't need you to accompany me on my walk," the Emperor told his servants. It was their duty to stay with the Emperor at all times and yet they could not disobey him.' (p 275)

Read three sections detailing – the arrival of the Emperor at Huangling (pp 33–34); a description of him (p 36); the Death of the Emperor (p 104). What did these passages reveal about his character?

Discussion Point

The brutality of the imperial rule is revealed in these two quotes:

"His imperial majesty was very pleased, Master Diao," the minister replied. "The lions provided great sport, though one mauled a minister to death before his imperial majesty was able to spear it." (p 3)

"Did the Emperor kill them?" she whispered. "No, that was the shaman's duty, before he killed himself." The Grand Counsellor looked at Ping's stunned face. "They are blest," he said. "They will have a special place in Heaven." (pp 313–14)

What other examples of such brutality occurred in the novel?

Discussion Point

"Why did he hide the books in a wall?" asked Ping. "To save them from the great burning, of course." He looked at Ping as if he could hardly believe she was so ignorant. "A hundred years ago the First Emperor was so concerned about ordinary people having more knowledge than himself, that he ordered all the books in the empire to be burned. Some scholars memorised entire volumes. Other brave souls risked death and hid books. Thanks to their courage, we still have copies of the great books today." (p 104)

Discuss such censorship in ancient China and how it has also taken place in other countries and eras.

Discussion Point

"Why don't you change the imperial colour?" Ping said. "I can't do that. The imperial colour has been black for a hundred years." "But you're the Emperor, Liu Che," Ping replied. "Can't you do whatever you want?" Liu Che stopped in his tracks. "I can," he said. "You're right, Ping. I am the Emperor." He surveyed his empire. "What shall the new imperial colour be? Something cheerful." Ping looked around the garden. There were daffodils everywhere—in the garden beds, in between rocks. "What about yellow?" she replied. "That's a nice bright colour." (p 281)

This quote highlights the fact that sometimes rulers are so bound by tradition that they fail to exercise their own power to modernise or to revitalise their regimes. Try to find other examples of such conservative rule.

Discussion Point

The role of women in Han Society is revealed in both Ping's upbringing and in the experiences of the boatwoman, Jiang Bing. Both have to fight for their rights. The Empress is also clearly limited in what she can do or say. Research how women were regarded in this society and locate some examples of women of the time.

Discussion Point

Religious and philosophical concepts such as Daoism are mentioned in the novel, and Danzi's aphorisms also bear some resemblance to the teachings of the famous philosopher, Confucius. Research some of the major religious and philosophical beliefs held in Chinese culture.

Discussion Point

The structures described in this novel will give students an idea of Han architecture, and how buildings were made during the Han Dynasty. Research and discuss this topic further.

Discussion Point

Customs regarding food and beverages are another topic that might be discussed in relation to the novel. For example, tea is a novelty to Ping when Wang Chu offers it to her. Rice isn't taken with most meals. They eat meat, fish vegetables or noodles. The emperor's lavish feasts are full of foods that are unusual today such as turtle stew, panther breast, and baked owl with peony sauce (pp 267–8).

What other facts or customs about food or beverages did students observe in the novel?

Slavery

Discussion Point

'The slave girl didn't have a name; she didn't know how old she was. She had lived at Huangling Palace since her parents had sold her to Lan when she was a small child.' (p 2)

"Idiot," snarled Lan. "No wonder you were so cheap. I've had nothing but bad luck since you arrived." (p 24)

Such cruel slavery of children wasn't uncommon in these times. Research and discuss.

Discussion Point

'Ping found it hard to believe. In a way the Emperor had been abandoned by his family just as she had.' (p 279) In many ways this is a story about being parentless. Being enslaved so young, Ping has no memories of her parents, which leaves an emotional void in her life. How does she overcome her feelings of abandonment?

Discussion Point

What values does the slave girl demonstrate in this novel? What qualities has her mistreatment by Master Lan instilled in her?

Grief and Loss

"Loneliness," the slave girl thought, though she didn't know why. She put her hands over her ears to try and block out the mournful noise. "Misery." The dragon continued to roar. Hua scrambled out of the girl's jacket and ran away, squeaking. "Despair." The word echoed in her mind, though she didn't really know what it meant.' (p 16)

"Danzi, why did the other dragon die?" The dragon stopped walking, but didn't answer her. Ping could feel his aching grief, but this was something she had to know. "Was it because I didn't feed her properly?" "No, Ping," Danzi said sadly. "Lu Yu died of misery like others." (p 83) Much later in the narrative we learn that the dragon stone holds the dragon born to Lu Yu and that Danzi has been protecting it for her. So Danzi has suffered grief, as well.

Discuss the theme of grief and loss in *Dragonkeeper*.

Courage and Bravery

'The world was far too big and frightening. Ping wanted to get back to the small part of the world that she knew. She looked at the dragon. She'd never ridden on any sort of animal, let alone a dragon.' (p 59) What is the source of Ping's bravery?

Friendship and Kindness

Discussion Point

Ping makes two unlikely friends in this book:

'She couldn't leave without him. He was just a rat, but he was her friend—her only friend. He was a clever rat.' (p 46)

'At Huangling she had often wished for one thing even more than she had wished for a bigger dinner, a warmer jacket or fewer things thrown in her direction. She had wished that she had a real friend to talk to. She had never imagined a friend would arrive in the shape of a dragon.' (p 175)

What draws her to Hua and Danzi?

Discussion Point

Several times in the book Ping either demonstrates kindness or receives it, for example:

"My parents would like to make you a gift," said the son. "They hope you will not take offence." He was holding a gown and a pair of shoes. "These belonged to my sister. You are welcome to have them, unless you feel uneasy about wearing a dead girl's clothing." (p 79)

Ping gives a poor thief some money (p 131).

What does this novel say about kindness to strangers?

Nature

Discussion Point

In Ping's journey she encounters many beautiful landscapes and she evinces a propensity to relish nature. Read these two quotes:

'The green of the new leaves was so bright, Ping couldn't believe it was natural. Danzi told her the trees were called ginkgo. "An infusion of the leaves helps relieve a cough," the dragon explained. Ping wasn't interested in their medicinal value, she was just enjoying their beauty. "Are you sure a painter hasn't coloured them all?" she asked.' (p 137)

'Cherry trees covered in blossom were scattered about the garden. At intervals the path wound its way through grottos of misshapen, craggy rocks which suggested the shape of lions or dragons or monkeys. There were also pretty pavilions. Ping would have liked to stop and sit in one of them, but the guards marched her past them ignoring the garden's beauty.' (p 263)

What do these quotes suggest about the emotional power of nature?

Discussion Point

Man's threats to nature are also evinced in this narrative:

"I've never seen so many trees," she said, staring in wonder at the pine trees surrounding them. "Why has no one chopped them down for firewood?" "Some people value trees for beauty," Danzi replied. "Not many people here anyway," he added.' (p 73)

What does this novel reveal about the destruction of landscape during this time?

C. English Language & Literacy

Genre

This novel is a work of **historical fantasy**. As Carole Wilkinson explains in the Q&A, the fantasy is based on researched historical facts about the Han Dynasty, but then she extrapolates on them to create an original story about Ping, a fictional slave girl. As a fantasy, it includes a range of magical topics and concepts, for example:

Ping's spiritual energy and power.

Several quotes gradually reveal that Ping is no ordinary girl:

"Ping must learn to focus qi," the dragon announced. "What is qi again?" "Spiritual energy." "Do I have any?" Ping asked. "All creatures have qi." (p 95)

'It was as if an invisible thread, fragile as a strand of spider's web, was connecting her mind to the fur hat.' (p 130)

'The anger grew to the size of a taro root. Ping could feel the shape of it inside her. She didn't try to stop it, she let it grow until it filled her. The strength of it made her shake. She reached out with her mind, searching for the dragon stone the way she had searched for the fur hat.' (p 215)

'Ping felt the anger grow within her again. Her body tingled from head to foot. She felt her qi focus in a rush that filled her within seconds. It coursed down her arm and burst out through her fingertips. The necromancer was thrown to the ground by its invisible force.' (p 224)

'Whatever magical powers the stone had, Ping was sure it had some connection to her.' (p 244)

"Dragonkeepers are left-handed. Hear dragon speech, can harness qi and have second sight." (p 249)

"Anyway, you said Dragonkeepers were all from the Huan family or the Yu family." Danzi nodded. "But my name..." "Ping doesn't know family name." (p 249)

'But in her heart she knew the dragon was right. It was as if a secret place inside her, that had always been closed, had opened. She felt pride swell her chest. A few months ago she had been a nameless slave, now she had discovered she was a special person. She would accept the token. It was her destiny' (p 252)
What does the reader discover about the special powers that make Ping worthy of being a Dragonkeeper?

Dragon Lore

The novel contains a great deal of detail about dragons and the 'lore' that guides them. Dragons historically symbolise power, good fortune, and strength and evince traits such as intelligence, ambition and charisma. Historically linked with imperial power, Chinese emperors considered themselves descendants of dragons, emphasizing the dragon's esteemed position.

Quotes from the novel amplify these ideas, for example:

Description of a dragon on page 28.

"There can't be very many dragons left in the world," the Empress remarked. "There were never that many," replied Diao. "And there are very few now. Wild dragons are good at hiding from men." (p 40)

'Close up he had a rather unpleasant smell, like a mixture of overripe plums and fish brine, but he did give off some warmth.' (p 51)

"Must be kept away from iron, five-coloured thread and the leaves of the chinaberry tree," he told her. "Dragon stone prefers an even temperature. Also benefits from occasional rub with arsenic. Ping must never lose sight of stone. Dragon stone has great value. Dishonest people, rich and poor, desire it." (pp 72-3)

"Is there nothing you're afraid of...apart from dragon hunters?" "Dragon hunters are just men. It is iron weapons Danzi fears." (p 74)

'Ping looked at the old man behind her. There was a strange green tinge to his skin as if he were recovering from a recent illness. He put his hand on Ping's arm for support. Just for a second, the stiff, wrinkled hand appeared to be a taloned paw. The peasant and his son didn't see this transformation.' (p 76)

"Dragonkeepers of old belonged to only two families, the Huan and the Yu. And then only one son each generation born to be true Dragonkeeper." "How could they tell which son was the true Dragonkeeper?" "There are signs." "And Master Lan didn't have the signs?" (p 84)

"Long ago chiefs of tribes knew about dragons' love of jewels and precious metals," he explained, "so captured wild dragons to guard wealth." It was discovered that some young men, when they were in the presence of dragons, developed a second sight. They were able to locate lost items and, when their skills developed, to read men's hearts. Those who developed a strong bond with a dragon could even glimpse the future.' (p 87)

"Dragons have 117 scales," Danzi told her. "Each has magical powers. Eighty-one can be used for good purposes and thirty-six for bad." Such numbers had little meaning for Ping, but he certainly had many scales. "Under chin there are five scales which lie in reverse." Five was a number she could comprehend. Sure enough, on the dragon's chest there were five larger scales which grew up towards his head instead of down towards his tail like all the others.' (p 91)

'Though the dragon instructed Ping about many things, he particularly liked to tell her about his own kind. He told her that dragons could live to an age of two thousand years or more. When they were born they had no horns or wings. It wasn't until they were five hundred years old that their horns were fully grown. They were close to a thousand before their wings first sprouted. He also told her that dragons were one of the four spiritual animals—the others were the giant tortoise, the red phoenix and a strange animal with one horn called the qilin.' (pp 97-98)

"How did you know I was in trouble?" asked Ping. "I didn't think you'd hear me crying for help." "Didn't hear. Saw. Dragons are hard of hearing but can see a mustard seed at a distance of hundred li, even at night. I told you this as we walked. Ping doesn't listen." "I'll listen closely to everything you say from now on. I promise.' (p 165)

What did you learn about dragon lore in reading this novel?

Alchemists, Astrologers, Sorcerers and Necromancers

Danzi warns Ping about necromancers:

"Alchemists, astrologers and sorcerers not bad people," the dragon told her. "No need for Ping to fear them...only necromancers." "What are necromancers?" Ping asked. "Sorcerers who raise the dead to find out future" (p 208)

What did you learn about these magical figures in Chinese mythology?

Plot & Structure

Discussion Point

The 'Journey' or 'Quest' lies at the heart of this novel. Danzi is determined to travel to Ocean with the Dragon Stone and with Ping's assistance: But any journey negotiates pitfalls: *'Ping had never heard the dragon so angry. "Ping has failed," he said over and over again. "Ping responsible for stone. Dragon stone comes first. Even before own safety."* (p 152) When they encounter hurdles (as all who embark on a quest do) they sometimes suffer self-doubt: *'The comforts of imperial life had seduced her. She had allowed herself to be diverted from their quest to reach Ocean by the friendship of someone close to her own age. Worst of all, she had accepted the seal of the Imperial Dragonkeeper.'* (p 298) But all this culminates in the arrival at Ocean which is not as Ping had expected, and with the birth of the baby dragon (p 334). What do you imagine Ping's next quest might be?

Discussion Point

The novel is structured using quotes at the beginning of each chapter to set the scene in an enticing way. Discuss some of these quotes in relation to the contents of the chapter.

Discussion Point

The structure is enhanced by strong opening and closing sentences to chapters, for example:

Beginnings: *"I can't do it," Ping said angrily.'* (Ch 8, p 100)

Endings: *"The dragon stone is gone," she said. "Diao must have taken it."* (Ch 10, p 150)

Which chapter beginning or ending did you find particularly gripping?

Discussion Point

Suspense is a key structural element in the novel as well. Questions posed include: Why does Danzi wish to go to Ocean? What are Ping's secret powers? Who were Ping's parents? Will the boy Emperor be a good ruler? What other suspenseful questions does the novel pose to the reader?

Narrative Person & Perspective

This story is told in third person past tense. This allows the reader to identify with both Ping and Danzi, and to a certain extent with Hua, as well. Had Ping told the story, she would have lacked the overview of the action contained in the third person narration. Discuss the importance of narrative point of view in this novel.

Style & Use of Language

The language used in the novel is very poetic for example, *'The sky was the colour of ashes.'* (p 2) The writer employs a range of literary devices, for example:

Simile

'Icy drops, blown by a strong wind, stung the girl's face and hands like sewing needles.' (p 18)

'Sunlight seeped through gaps in the cloud cover like water from a cracked bucket.' (p 27)

'Its slopes were patched like a moulting sheep where the snow was thawing and the dung coloured earth was showing through.' (pp 61-2)

'A smile as bitter as apricot kernels crossed Ping's face as she strode towards the dragon hunter.' (pp 320-1)

Personification

'Wucheng looked like a town with secrets to hide. It crouched in the shadow of the wave of solidified rock as if it were trying to avoid the sun.' (p 202)

What other usage of either simile or personification did you particularly note in reading this novel?

Aphorisms (or wise sayings)

Danzi is constantly making intriguing statements that Ping doesn't quite understand, for example:

- *"All answers lie beyond the gate of experience," he replied.'* (p 68)
- *"Composure is the master of haste," the dragon said.'* (p 72)
- *"The journey of a thousand li begins with a single step," he said.'* (p 82)

- *“Anger focuses qi,” the dragon remarked. “But better if use more positive emotion.”* (p 101)
- *“The way of Heaven is to diminish excess.”* (p 105)
- *“It is because of its emptiness that the cup is useful.”* (p 121)
- *“Recognising one’s limitations is knowledge,” said Danzi.’* (p 127)
- *“Sharp weapons are not the tools of the sage,” replied the dragon. Ping sighed, wishing he had more to offer than riddles.’* (p 143)
- *“The skilful traveller leaves no trace,” he said.’* (p 157)
- *“The straight path must sometimes be crooked,” replied the dragon.’* (p 184)
- *“Sometimes advancing seems like going backwards,” the dragon said.’* (p 203)
- *“Nothing under Heaven is softer than water,” Danzi said. “Yet it can overcome the hard and the strong.”* (p 223)
- *“The sapling is small, but none can defeat it,” he whispered.’* (p 236)
- *“Too much colour confuses the eyes,” he said.’* (p 271)
- *“Net of Heaven is cast wide. Though its mesh is not fine, nothing slips through.”* (p 286)
- *“He who tries to take carpenter’s place, always cuts his hands,” the dragon said softly. “Danzi’s fault.”* (p 325)
- *“The path is easy if you avoid turning off it.”* (p 341)

Discuss any of these sayings in relation to the action in the novel.

Such wise sayings are also reminiscent of the sayings of Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE) whose teachings have been celebrated by successive generations. Discuss some of his sayings as well.

Alliteration

Examples of alliteration appear in chapter headings eg ‘Combing and Counting’ (p 83); ‘Magic at Midnight’ (p 135); ‘Halfway to Heaven’ (p 296). Where else in the novel is alliteration employed in the language?

Humour

There are some subtle moments of humour in the novel, for example, ‘Will the birds strengthen my qi?’ Ping asked as she picked the meat from the bones. ‘No,’ Danzi replied. ‘But taste good.’ (p 247) What other humorous incidents appealed to you?

Symbolism

There are many examples of symbolism in the book, for example, the moon, dragons [See above], jade, colours, numbers, animals, flowers, water (Yellow River and Ocean).

What symbols did you particularly notice when reading this novel? Research their significance in Chinese mythology or cultural beliefs.

Characters

Major Characters

- Ping (duckweed), a slave girl
- Long Danzi (Courageous Dragon)
- Hua, the rat

Minor Characters

- Master Lan, the Imperial Dragonkeeper
- Lao Ma, the old woman who keeps the Huangling Palace clean
- Emperor and Empress
- Master Diao, a Dragon hunter
- Tian Fen, the Emperor’s Grand Counsellor
- Wang Cao, a herbalist and alchemist
- Jiang Bing, the boatwoman
- the evil necromancer
- Long Kai Duan
- Liu Che, the new boy Emperor

Discussion Point

Which of the characters did you find most interesting, and why?

Setting

The novel describes several settings very poetically. Read and discuss some of them. They include:

Huangling Palace on Huangling Mountain which is an extremely remote and barren place. The interior is also described (p 30+).

The Emperor lives at Chang’an which is described: ‘The city was overwhelming. Ping had never imagined that so many people could be in the same place at one time. In fact, she thought the entire populations of the Han empire and foreign lands must be in the city that afternoon. The main street, the Street of the Vermillion Sparrow, stretched north in a straight line. The buildings towered high on either side of the road. They were beautiful, but too big.’ (p 110)

The village of Fengjing. (p 139)

The harbour town where boats leave to cross the Yellow River. (p 186)

Wucheng is described as a very intimidating place, and the markets there sell curious and unpleasant things: *'The items for sale were different from the goods at the market in Chang'an. One stall sold dead insects—centipedes, spiders, beetles—all neatly pinned onto pieces of bamboo leaf in rows of ten or twice ten. Another sold rocks, some with glittering specks of silver and gold, or veins of red and green, others which were shaped like living things—a turtle, a pear, a fist. Other rocks looked like any that you could pick up off the ground, but the stallholder was calling out their magical properties. On another stall there were bowls of organs bathed in blood—kidneys, hearts, lengths of gut. There were snakeskins, bears' ears and jars containing teeth, claws and eyes. The woman who was selling these things mistook Ping's wide-eyed, open-mouthed stare for interest in her wares. "Tiger liver and bats' blood," she called out. "Fresh today."*' (p 209)

The Emperor's Garden of Secluded Harmony (palace garden in Chang'an) (p 276+)

Tai Shan (p 300+).

Ocean: *'Ping watched the Ocean continue to grow until it seemed to surround them completely and there was nothing but blue.'* (p 331)

Activity: Setting is also described using a variety of senses. Write a description in your own words, of any of the locations described in this book, employing several senses.

Writing Exercises

Activity: Invite students to write a short story based on any character encountered in this novel.

Activity: Write an acrostic poem using the letters in 'Dragonkeeper'.

Activity: Imagine if Ping could write, and recorded in her diary how she feels when she parts from both Danzi and Hua at the end of the novel?

Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion

1. Read and compare this novel to other novels about Ancient China. [See **Bibliography.**]
2. Create a classroom display of other novels about Ancient China and students' reviews or other responses to them.

3. Read non-fiction and visit websites about Ancient China and discuss what you learn there. [See **Bibliography.**]
4. Research some of the other concepts and references mentioned in the Q&A with Carole Wilkinson.
5. Read other works about dragons and compare to the *Dragonkeeper* series.

D. Further Reading Ideas for Class Discussion

Activity: Design a new cover for this novel.

Activity: The Australian Children's Laureate 2022 and 2023, Gabrielle Wang, produced some excellent resources teaching children how to draw dragons during her term. 'Creative Activities: Gabrielle Wang' Australian Children's Laureate Foundation <https://www.childrenslaureate.org.au/gabrielle-downloads>. Use some of these resources with students.

Activity: Invite students to draw one of the scenes described here: *'Villages and fields slipped by. Scenes of rural life—farmers ploughing fields, women washing clothes at the river's edge, a young boy minding a wallowing water buffalo—appeared and disappeared as if she were looking at a series of paintings rather than real events. Mulberry orchards crowded to the water's edge.'* (p 198) Examine Chinese paintings and endeavour to emulate the style.

E. Visual Literacy and Visual Arts Activities

Activity: Research online any of the topics covered in these notes.

Activity: Listen to, and watch related videos. [See **Bibliography.**]

Conclusion

Dragonkeeper is an epic quest adventure but also a touching narrative about a young girl's journey from slave girl to Dragonkeeper, and about her friendships with Danzi, a dragon, and Hua, a rat. It also celebrates resilience, spiritual power, and fortitude.

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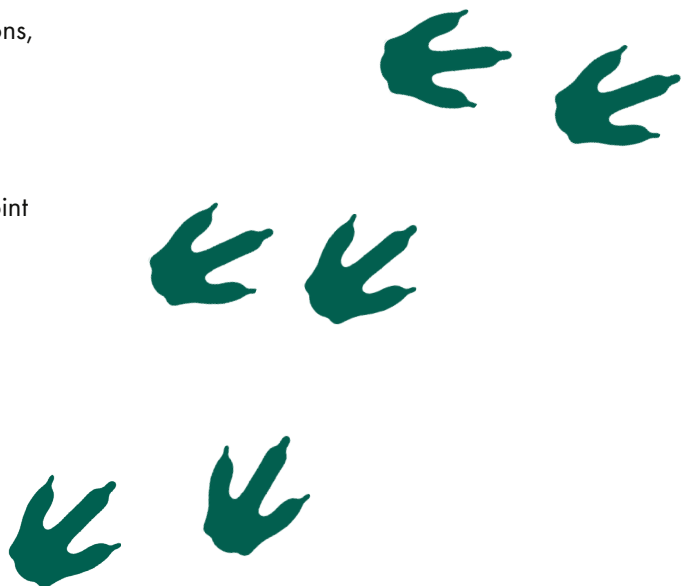
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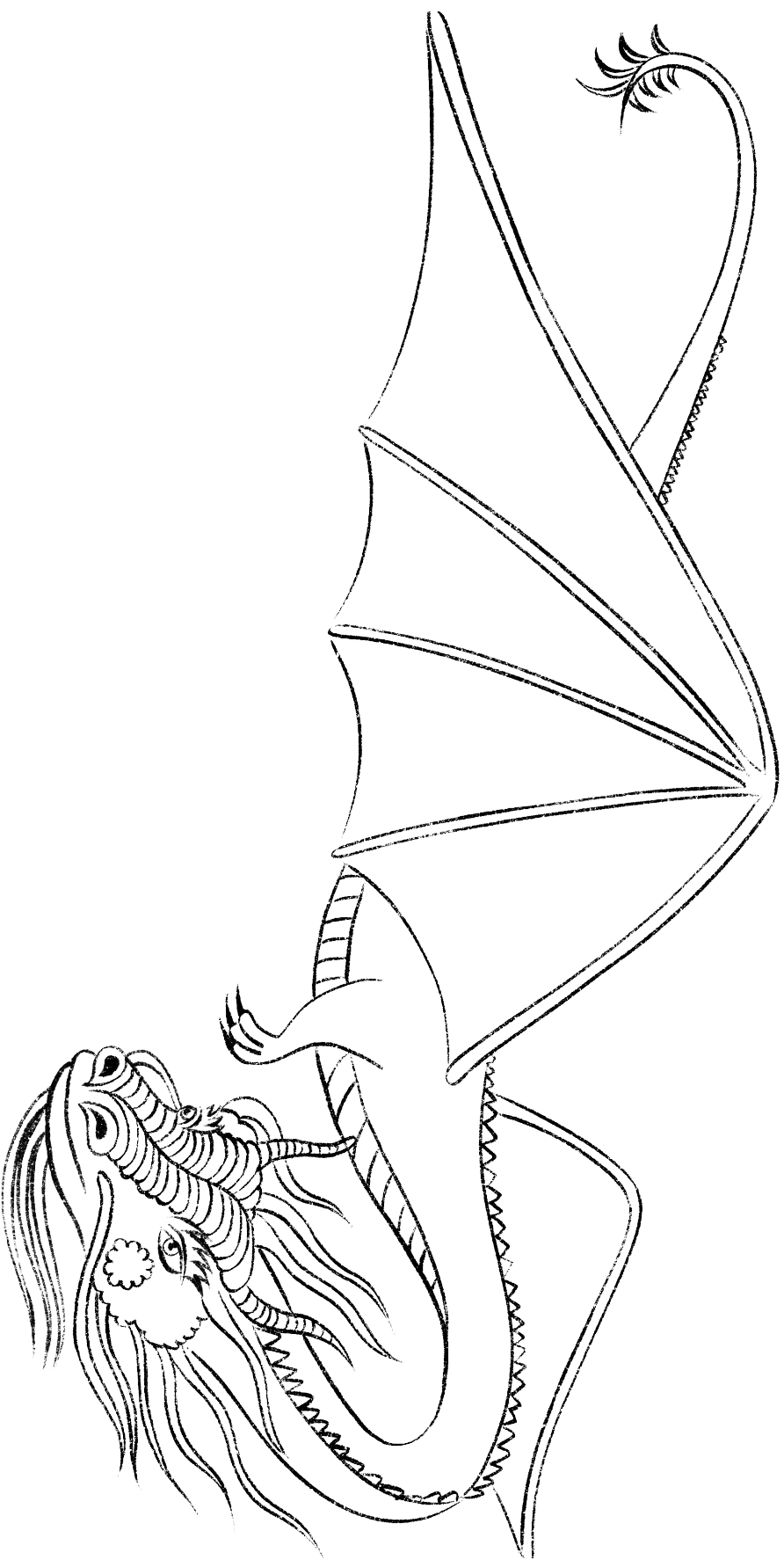
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1. Complete the Drawing

Draw an image of Ping and Hua below this image of a dragon, and colour or collage the image.



2. Quiz

This quiz might be used to test comprehension of the novel.

1. Who was the Dragonkeeper at Huangling Palace?

2. What was the food that caused the Emperor's death?

3. What does Danzi the dragon's name mean?

4. How does Danzi manage to travel with Ping and yet to not be observed by people they pass on the way?

5. What are Wang Cao's special skills?

6. What herb did Jiang Bing put in the food to injure Danzi?

7. What gift does Liu Che, the boy emperor, give to Ping in the Garden of Secluded Harmony?

8. Liu Che changes the imperial colour from black to what colour?

9. What was the name of the town on the Yellow River that was renowned for sorcerers and that Ping feared to visit?

10. Before Liu Che ascended the final summit at Tai San, what disturbing ritual took place?

11. What was the last dragon's name?

12. What is Danzi's final destination?



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