

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The House of Sixty Fathers by Meindert De Jong

Book Information

Meindert De Jong, The House of Sixty Fathers

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189 Pages

Book Level: 5.5

Interest Level: MG

A young Chinese boy and his pet pig are separated from his parents when Japanese soldiers invade his country.

Award: Hans Christian Andersen Award;
Misc./Other; Newbery Honor

Topics: Adventure, Lost/Abandoned; Animals, Pigs;
Emotions, Fear

Main Characters

Beauty-of-the Republic Tien Pao's baby sister

Glory-of-the-Republic Tien Pao's pig and
companion

Huan a Chinese guerrilla who aids Tien Pao in the
mountains

Lieutenant Hamsun an American airman saved by
Tien Pao; he helps Tien Pao to find his family

Master Sergeant Wilson a senior airman at the
base

the men of the Sixteenth Bombardment Squadron
the sixty men of the air base; they care for Tien
Pao and become like fathers to him

Tien Hsu Tien Pao's father

Tien Pao the main character of the story; a young
boy who desperately searches for his family
through his war-torn country

Tien Yin Tien Pao's mother

Yin Huan's wife; she cares for Tien Pao while he is
in her house

Vocabulary

convoy a group of military vehicles traveling
together

crone an old woman

guerrilla a member of a military unit that conducts
operations in enemy-held territory

sentry a guard or watchman

surreptitiously secretly

wretch a miserable creature

Synopsis

Tien Pao is the young son of a Chinese family that has been forced to flee their tiny village because of the invasion of Japanese soldiers. After their home was destroyed, they found a sampan floating in the river and rowed upriver to the city of Hengyang, far from the fighting. Penniless, Tien Pao's father, Tien Hsu, and his mother take a construction job near the city at an airfield being built by the Americans. Very early each morning, the parents take their infant daughter, Beauty-of-the-Republic, with them to the airfield and leave Tien Pao and his pet pig, Glory-of-the-Republic, on the sampan at the river's edge. His father has sternly instructed him not to take the sampan out into the river. But one day an American airman offers him a great deal of money to ferry him across the river and back. Tien Pao accepts the offer, thinking his father will be grateful for the money. When Tien Pao finally returns, he finds his parents frantic with worry and angry that he would risk losing control of the boat and floating down the river toward the Japanese army.

The next day, as Tien Pao's parents are at work, a playful water buffalo accidentally pulls out the stake that holds the family's sampan to the shore. A short time later, the sampan heads down the river with a sleeping Tien Pao on board. When Tien Pao awakens, he realizes that he is now behind Japanese lines. Farther down the river he slowly steers the sampan to shore. After climbing a nearby cliff with Glory-of-the-Republic, Tien Pao watches as the sampan is pulled back into the current and down the river.

Knowing he is not safe from the Japanese, Tien Pao finds a cave to hide in with his pig during the daytime. He determines to find his way back to his family by traveling at night, using the sound of the nearby river to guide him. Six days later while searching for a dry cave in which to hide, he spots Japanese trucks and horses pulling cannons in the

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direction of Hengyang. Suddenly, a plane attacks the convoy but is shot down by Japanese fire. The plane bursts into flame, and a wounded airman stumbles out of the wreckage. Tien Pao sees a Japanese soldier preparing to capture the airman and screams a warning, allowing the airman to escape. The Japanese hear Tien Pao's screams and shoot at him. He runs from a barrage of bullets and climbs into a pile of leaves covering a crevice. Much to his surprise, the airman, the same one whom he had helped cross the river, is also hiding in the crevice. Communicating by gestures, the two quickly become friends and plan to travel together by night to safety. Tien Pao is comforted knowing he is no longer alone.

That night, the wounded airman, feverish and weak, tries to walk with Tien Pao to a new hiding place. When the airman collapses, a group of Chinese guerrillas helps them. The guerrillas smuggle the airman back to his base. The leader of the guerrillas feeds Tien Pao and leads him away from the fighting. When they finally arrive at a spot near Hengyang, Tien Pao and his rescuer discover that the Japanese have already overtaken the burning city. Before the guerrilla leaves Tien Pao, he assures him that his parents, hoping to find their son, would not leave the city until the last possible moment. This encourages Tien Pao to search for his family in the city.

Though he searches for them by the river bank where his parents had left him, he finds no trace of his family. He concludes that they must have already left the city, so he walks to the train station, where a Chinese soldier pulls him and his pig onto a car jammed with refugees. Later that night, he and his pig fall out of the car as it rounds a curve. Tien Pao climbs to the top of a cliff to watch the throngs of refugees escaping the villages on foot along the railroad tracks. Tien Pao is certain he will spot his family in the crowd, but he falls asleep in exhaustion.

He is awakened by two American servicemen, who take him to the airfield of the Sixteenth Bombardment Squadron. At the airbase he is fed,

and an interpreter tells the boy's story to the sixty men of the squadron. When they hear Tien Pao describe how he saved the airman, the men become excited because they realize he is referring to Lt. Hamsun, who had previously told them about the young boy who saved his life. The men treat Tien Pao as a hero and become like fathers to him.

Although Tien Pao is grateful for the airmen's efforts, he remains determined to find his family. He returns to the cliff to watch the crowds of refugees, but his family is not among them. In a final desperate attempt to find Tien Pao's family, Lt. Hamsun takes Tien Pao and his pig in his airplane to search for his family from the sky. As they fly over an airfield that is being built, Tien Pao sees his mother. The plane lands and Tien Pao and Glory-of-the-Republic are reunited with his family.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does Tien Pao need to protect his pig from both Japanese and Chinese people?

Because of the fighting occurring in China, most people have lost their homes and belongings. The nearly-starving Chinese would see the pig as a meal. The pig is also in danger from the Japanese because, though they are not starving, they especially enjoy pork and would not hesitate to take the young boy's friend to have a good meal.

Literary Analysis

Why is Glory-of-the-Republic such an important character in the story?

When Tien Pao becomes separated from his family, the pig gives him companionship and a sense of family. Tien Pao is able to face his struggles and loneliness because he knows he is not alone. Also, Glory-of-the-Republic inspires Tien Pao to continue his desperate search for the rest of his family.

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Inferential Comprehension

Why are the sixty airmen so eager to act like fathers to Tien Pao?

First, they are grateful to him for rescuing one of their downed pilots. In addition, they probably miss their own children, who have remained in the United States while their fathers fight in the war. Tien Pao becomes, perhaps, a surrogate son to help ease their loneliness while they are overseas. It is likely that the horrors of war have heightened their sensitivity to suffering, also enabling them to feel a deep compassion for the young boy.

Constructing Meaning

Explain why the guerrilla leader instructs Tien Pao to act as his son and to follow his instructions exactly.

The guerrillas oppose the Japanese who have taken over their land. By day, the guerrillas perform their usual farming activities and pretend to be obedient to any Japanese they encounter. This is done to avoid arousing suspicion among the Japanese. At night, the men go into the mountainous territory to attack the Japanese in order to weaken their hold. Tien Pao is told to behave as if he were the guerrilla leader's son because the Japanese will be less likely to harm him if they think he is the child of a farmer. If Tien Pao becomes frightened and tries to run away from the Japanese, they will suspect that he is part of the guerrilla unit trying to thwart them.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Details Traditional Chinese forms of transportation such as the sampan and rickshaw are mentioned in the story. Have each student select one of the two and write a short report about its history and role in Chinese culture. The student should then make a model of the vehicle. The models can be displayed around the room with a short explanation accompanying each.

Recognizing Setting The story takes place during the Japanese invasion of China. Although the story does not reveal when the invasion occurred, it does contain a number of clues. Have

the students work in groups of three or four to research the history of China, using references in the story to determine the approximate year the story takes place. The groups should then write a brief summary of what they found in their research and how they made their determination.

Responding to Literature When Tien Pao is with the airman, the two communicate using gestures and motions. Have the students work with a partner and take turns explaining an event of the story without talking. They should not use sounds or writing. After one partner finishes explaining, have the other partner take a turn. After each partner has tried to explain the event, have them discuss with each other their feelings and frustrations during this exercise. Class discussion should focus on how Tien Pao must have felt trying to communicate with the Americans before the translator came to assist.

Understanding Characterization The story identifies strong personality traits of the main characters in the story. Have each student select one of the characters and a scene in the story that reveals those traits. Each student may choose a character, or the characters can be assigned to ensure variety. The students should write a paragraph in first person describing their character's background, strengths, fears, etc. Have each student read the paragraph to the class. Class discussion can focus on what circumstances or events may have contributed to each character's personality.