

## RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

### *The Curses of Third Uncle*

Grades 4 - 8

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#### 1. Novel Summary

In 1909 Vancouver, 14-year-old Lillian Ho faces a family crisis. Five months ago, her father went away on business. No-one has heard from him since then. Lillian's mother is pregnant but the family business is failing. Worst of all, Third Uncle threatens to send Lillian, her mother and her sisters back to China. Lillian learns Papa was involved in rebel efforts to overthrow the corrupt ruling dynasty in China. When she discovers that Third Uncle intercepted a letter that Papa sent her, Lillian is drawn into a dangerous search for him and a trip into the mountains of British Columbia. There, she meets a mysterious healer named Cariboo Wing. Will Lillian find Papa and save her family?

Although Lillian is a Canadian-born Chinese, her life reflects the immigrant world of her parents. As such, the reader will find these themes of immigration in the story:

- Disappointment in new homeland
- Not fitting in
- The importance of family
- Living in two worlds
- Trying to succeed
- Facing racism
- Different cultural practices

## 2. Author's Note

This story is based on the stories my Aunt Lillian told me about her childhood. She was born in Vancouver in 1895. Her father was a merchant tailor working in Chinatown. He went on a business trip to China, fell sick, and died there. His wife was left in Vancouver to raise five children. At that time, women were not expected to join the labour force. As a result, my Aunt Lillian was taken out of elementary school at age 12 and sent to work as a servant.

This novel starts with my Aunt Lillian's story, but then turns into fiction when the revolution is brought in.

My Aunt Lillian really had a Third Uncle, who actually said many of the anti-women things in the novel. Luckily, my Aunt Lillian wasn't sent back to China! Otherwise I may never have known her.

Dr. Sun was a real person who paid many visits to Canada. Many people in many Chinese communities supported his efforts to modernize China.

### 3. Background

- In the 1900 decade Vancouver becomes home to Canada's largest Chinese community. Previously, it was in Victoria.
- In the 1900 decade, 120,000 people live in Vancouver. 3,500 are Chinese.
- In and around Vancouver, the Chinese work in land-clearing, logging, and canning. They are also servants, farmers, laundrymen, tailors and merchants.
- In 1911, rebels in China succeed in overthrowing the Qing dynasty, and bring about the Republic of China. Dr. Sun is its first president.
- While some people in Chinatowns around the world support Dr. Sun's call for a revolution in China, other people favour a more gradual effort involving reform. Thus there is heated debate inside Chinatowns about the better way to modernize China.

## 4. The Craft of Writing

### 4.1. Setting

- 4.1.1. You are a newspaper reporter from Toronto visiting Vancouver. Write an article about what you see and feel while visiting Chinatown as described in this novel.

4.1.2. Why do you think the author puts Cariboo Wing far out in the woods and far away from Vancouver? How does the site of his cabin contribute to Lillian's quest?

#### 4.2. Character

4.2.1. As the novel progresses, Lillian becomes strong and stronger. Describe three different events that help make her more fearless and independent.

4.2.2. You are Lillian. Let's say that Cariboo Wing tells you, "You know, I never met Ho Jin Chong's wife. What's your mother like?" How would you describe Mama to him, based on the novel?

4.2.3. What different roles does Blind-Eye's character play in this novel? How does he affect Lillian?

4.2.4. To what degree do the motivations that are driving Lillian to take action in the novel come from her being a female?

#### 4.3 Conflict

4.3.1. Why does Third Uncle behave so badly? Did he have good reason to be angry? Is it useful for the reader to know this about Third Uncle?

#### 4.4. Themes

4.4.1. Which of the following themes do you think best fits this novel? Why?

- a. Conquering one's fears
- b. The best of two worlds.
- c. You have to believe in yourself
- d. Loving a difficult parent.
- e. Growing up isn't easy.

### 5. Discussion Questions

5.1. Up to the very end of the novel, Mama opposes Papa's involvement in the revolution. Why? Do you think her position is justifiable?

5.2. What events in the story show that Lillian doesn't like being Chinese? Why does she have such feelings?

- 5.3. As Lillian tries to find her father, she has problems getting information. Why was it difficult for her to learn about her father? How did she eventually put together the pieces of information to solve the mystery?
- 5.4. Lillian grows up in Canada feeling distant and removed from China and Chinese people. Yet, the author uses aspects of Chinese culture such as ‘Yang Family Warriors’ and qi-gung (hay-gung) to move the story along. Why do you think the author does this?
- 5.5. There is a Chinese saying, “Do good, and good results; do bad, and bad results.” What does this mean? How does this statement apply to this novel?

#### Questions re: Immigration

- 5.6 Disappointment in homeland: At first, Lillian and her sisters don’t want to be sent back to China. Why do they have such feelings about China?
- 5.7. Not fitting in: On the train, why does Lillian tell Yiwen that she should dress like a Canadian?
- 5.8 The importance of family: Do you think Mama would treat Lillian differently if she was a son instead? That is, what if Lillian was Lawrence instead?
- 5.9. Living in two worlds: How do the characters of Blind-Eye and Cariboo Wing reflect two different cultures: Chinese and Canadian?
- 5.10 Trying to succeed. Why was it important to Papa that the revolution would succeed?
- 5.11. Facing racism. At the park and on the train, Lillian doesn’t like the groups of Chinese men she meets. Do you think Lillian feels the same at the end of the novel? What caused her to change?
- 5.12. Different cultural practices. What role do the Chinese martial arts play in this novel?

#### 6. Activities

- 6.1. You are the police sergeant who is investigating the stabbing of Third Uncle. Write your report, based on interviews with Dr. Sun, Mrs. Chang, and Little Lam. Are you able to arrest anyone?
- 6.2. Many archives offer digital images of their historical photographs over the internet. For the 1900-1915 period, find photographs over the internet that show:

- a. what men, women and children wore.
- b. fire engines.
- c. police officers
- d. streetcars
- e. horse and wagons used for deliveries
- f. nurses
- g. boxers

If possible, copy these images and share them with the class.

- 6.3. You are Mrs. Bell. Write a letter of reference for Lillian when she searches for another job.
- 6.4. In 1896, Dr. Sun Yat-sen was a hunted man, on the run from China's government. While he was in London England, he was kidnapped and imprisoned in the Chinese legation there. Chinese diplomats planned to smuggle him back to China to be put to death. Find out how Dr. Sun managed to escape and report this to the class.
- 6.5. What is qi-gong, or hay-gung, the healing practice described in the novel?
- 6.6. You are a newspaper reporter. Your editor hears that Dr. Sun is in town, and assigns you to write a story for the paper. Write a story, based on interviews with Little Lam and Mrs. Chang. You have to assume your readers know nothing about China.

## 7. Further Reading

Yee Paul, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1988, revised edition 2006).