

Lesson Plan: *Bridge Across the Sky*

Deciphering characterization from text

Grade level	High school
Subject areas	English Lit, English Language Arts, Humanities, Social Studies, History
Time	40 minutes
Topics	Close reading of fiction, understanding fictional characters, Chinese Exclusion Act history, Chinese immigration experience through Angel Island, American history circa 1924
Lesson focus	- Analyzing fictional characters based on the actual text of the novel. - Engaging with fictional characters on an imaginative level.
Source	<i>Bridge Across the Sky</i> , a YA verse novel based on the Chinese immigration experience through Angel Island, by Freeman Ng. (Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2024.)

Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about the history of Chinese immigration through Angel Island in the early 1900s.
- Analyze the portrayal of characters from a YA novel based on close line readings.
- Engage with those characters on a more imaginative level.
- Optionally distinguish these two modes and their differing values.
- Draw parallels between this episode from American history and present-day America.

Overview

- Small groups will be assigned to represent characters from the novel.
- The instructor will interview the characters, asking them to support their answers in some cases with evidence from the novel.

Preparation: Instructor

- Decide how many small groups to divide the class into.
- Decide which of these characters from the novel to assign to which groups.
 - Assigning a single small group multiple characters will be fine, as some characters are bigger than others.
 - The number of questions addressing each character will be noted to help divide up the roles evenly.

- c. If you choose not to assign some characters, be sure to skip the Interview Questions addressed to them below.
 - Tai Go (14 total questions)
 - Sow Fong (9)
 - John Brown (5)
 - Yukiko (3)
 - Father (5)
 - Grandfather (5)
 - Yen Yi (6)

Preparation: Students

Students should read *Bridge Across the Sky*.

Students can optionally also read “My Bridge Across the Sky” (Ng-Bridge_LessonPlan-Essay.pdf), an essay about the writing of the novel that tangentially provides some of the historical context behind its subject matter.

Classroom Process

1. Divide the class into small groups and assign each group its characters.
2. Give the groups time to discuss their character(s) among themselves.
3. Ask interview questions (found below) of the various characters, encouraging multiple members of each small group to offer responses.
4. Close with a final question that personalizes the themes of the novel.

In the Book vs. Open Questions

Each suggested interview question below can be roughly labeled as In the Book or Open.

- “In the Book” questions can be answered using direct evidence from the text.
- “Open” questions call for imaginative engagement beyond the scope of direct textual interpretation.

The instructor can decide whether and how to:

- Note the distinction to the class.
- Explain the differing values of each approach.
- Guide the class to base In the Book responses on direct textual evidence.
- Guide the class to anchor Open responses as much as possible on what it knows of each character In the Book.

Interview Questions

- More questions are provided than can be asked in a single class period. This is to account for differing paces and levels of engagement, and for the option to extend the lesson across multiple class periods.
- Reserve enough time at the end to ask the Final and Closing questions below. Go through the interview questions below until you need to switch to the Final and Closing questions.
- Questions are grouped by topic, and whole topics can be skipped to control timing.
- Be sure to skip questions for characters you haven't assigned to any small group.
- Expected "In the Book" answers and sample lines supporting them will be listed after each question amenable to that kind of support. Open questions will be marked Open.
- Page numbers are for the print edition. The e-book page numbering is off by +10. (p4 in the print edition is p14 in the e-book.)

Arrival

1. **Tai Go**, why did you decide to come to America?
 - Tai Go didn't decide. He had to come because his father brought him along. ("I should be there. I *would* be there but for my father and the plan he nursed...the day I lost tomorrow." p4)
2. **Father**, why did you decide to come to America?
 - To earn more money and gain a safer position in life. (Grandfather: "Your father is here to get rich. A goal I support. He's doing it for you and your children, for the generations to come." p52)
3. **Grandfather**, why did you decide to come to America?
 - Even though he's too old to be useful to the family in America, he asked to come anyway so he could catch a glimpse of the future. ("My son is dutiful, a good son, and did not refuse when I asked to come, though I can do no work and would only be a burden to him. I only wished to see the new world and the future." pp331-332)
4. **Grandfather**, why did you approve of Tai Go's mother as a wife for your son, his father?
 - Because of her desire for an education, as long as she promised to pass that on to her children. ("I instructed your father to marry her. I assured her I would support her efforts to educate herself if she would teach it all to any children they had." p52)
5. **Tai Go**, what was your life like before you came to America?
 - Tai Go and his family were not impoverished like most. They didn't need to come to America. ("*Why?* I almost shout. We were doing fine. We weren't like those other families who had to try this place or starve." p50)
6. **Yukiko**, what was your life like before you came to America?
 - Yukiko suffered from discrimination by the Chinese because she was half Japanese. ("We've been despised by the Chinese all my life, even my mother, who is Chinese but married a Japanese man." p269)

The Station

7. **Father**, what is life in the station like for you?
 - Father is initially shocked by the harsh treatment. (“Father will not sit...exclaiming to whomever will hear, ‘...What kind of accommodations are these? To whom do we complain?’” p15)
 - Later, he grows more comfortable, finding a circle of friends. (“*Jab the awl*, my father is saying, cheered considerably by finding a crew of cronies to hang with” p42)
 - Eventually, he grows comfortable enough that he writes a poem on the walls. (“Father is writing a poem! He’s carving it into a wall! He asked permission of the Association, and it was granted.” p338)
8. **Grandfather**, what is life in the station like for you?
 - Grandfather is okay with the food (“Grandfather seems content...It’s the perfect food for him!” p22) and fascinated by the poems, constantly walking around to read them.
9. **Sow Fong**, what is life in the station like for you? (Open)
 - Sow Fong seems unaffected, joking about the conditions but never complaining about them, and serving as a guide to the “newbies”. (p18)
10. **Yukiko**, what is life in the station like for you?
 - She continues to suffer from the racism of full-blooded Chinese against her. (“One’s half-Japanese and catches a lot of shit for it.” p104)
11. **John Brown**, what is working at the station like for you?
 - He’s unfairly harassed by his boss and there is apparently no action taken against the detainees who beat him up (i.e. his status is even lower than the Chinese). (“The kitchen worker seems okay...He was already clearing the table when he got yelled at. But the kitchen boss yells again, *Come on, Boocher, move that lazy ass!*” p90)

The Association

12. **Tai Go**, what do you think of the Association?
 - He initially sees them as collaborators with their white jailors, but by the end of the novel, realizes the tricky role they play trying to shepherd their charges through the detention process. (“I once thought they linked their hands with those of the pale powers to bar our way...Now I see them as fellow travelers, hands linked with ours, taking slow steps forward against a howling wind.” pp320-321)
13. **Yen Yi**, what do you think of the Association?
 - He rails against them initially. (“...he turns on the Association. *You did this. You know it. With your collaborations and your capitulations.*” p138)
14. **Yen Yi**, why did you join the Association? (semi-Open)
 - He states his reasons (“He talked his way out of trouble...” pp194-195): that the Association had changed and that a lot of good could be done through them, but it’s worth discussing whether this is the whole truth. There are clues that he also simply loves holding power. (Sow Fong: “What Yen Yi cares about, what he’s so good at persuading men to hand over to him, is power.” p349)

The Prison Within the Prison

15. **Father**, how did you feel about Tai Go being punished by the Association for writing on the walls without permission?
- He's distraught, continually apologizing to the Association for his son's behavior. (*"We're ashamed, my father told the Association over and over."* p62)
16. **Tai Go**, how did you feel about being imprisoned by the Association?
- He feels more confined than ever by the forces that limit his actions. (See the poem he carved into the walls of his cell. "I just wanted my life..." p67-68)
17. **Sow Fong**, how did you feel about Tai Go getting busted?
- He found it hilarious. ("Sow Fong wouldn't stop laughing." p63)

The Resistance

18. **Father**, how did you feel about Tai Go joining the Resistance?
- He was alarmed and tried to dissuade him indirectly by lecturing about the need to obey the rules. ("My father lengthens our nightly paper story drills, adding long lectures on the importance of discipline and duty." p122)
19. **Grandfather**, how did you feel about Tai Go joining the Resistance?
- Grandfather is also alarmed, and also tries to warn Tai Go indirectly, through a game of Go. ("You must learn to see the whole board, to not get so caught up in local fighting that you miss the bigger moves that might be played." p126)
20. **Tai Go**, why did you join the Resistance?
- He sees in it possible meaning for his new, unwanted life in America. ("A landscape dawns in my mind, a possible future of action for my people." and "The Resistance was my bridge across the waters, the future I could live." p118)
21. **Sow Fong**, why did you join the Resistance?
- He joined only to connect with Yen Yi, whom he sees as a person who might someday attain great wealth. ("Yen Yi is a persuader...And that makes him more likely... to someday strike it rich." p346)

The Riot

22. **Yen Yi**, why did you start the riot? (semi-Open)
- He never says exactly why, but the plot suggests it was out of anger at the death of the seven-foot man. The riot occurs at the start of the meal right after the detainees discover the body of the man and Yen Yi rails at the guards and the Association, blaming them for the death.
23. **Sow Fong**, how did you react to the riot?
- With fear, denying any connection with the Resistance. ("Sow Fong turns, his face grotesque with fear." Sow Fong: "I'm not with them! I only watched the door." p145)
24. **Tai Go**, how did you react to the riot?

- Tai Go becomes fully radicalized in that moment when his father's efforts to restrain him reach their peak. ("my father's hand [finds] my arm with a grip that tells me he's done being misunderstood...I find myself. Shake loose from my father's hold." p143)

The Beating

25. **Tai Go**, what did you think about the Resistance beating up John Brown?
 - Right off, he's concerned about John Brown. ("I want to run over to Boocher, make sure he's okay." p211)
 - Later, he's outraged that it was the Resistance that beat him. ("then I understand: four men ganged up on one young guy about my age." p213)
 - Later still, he's mad at himself for not defending John Brown more strongly, but also irrationally at John Brown for being the "cause" of it all. ("Mad at myself...Mad at Boocher...Mad at myself..." pp215-216)
26. **Sow Fong**, what did you think about the Resistance beating up John Brown?
 - It's not a big deal to him because the person beaten up was not an important one. (*"Ah, says Sow Fong. It's just the Black ghost spy."* p210)
27. **Yen Yi**, why did you beat up John Brown? What if he wasn't a spy?
 - He beats up him because he believes he's a spy, but doesn't even care whether he was in fact a spy. ("If Boocher was not the spy, then someone else was. And he saw what happened to the one we thought it was." p226)

Yukiko

28. **Sow Fong**, what did you think about Tai Go's interest in Yukiko?
 - He finds it unthinkable because she's half Japanese. ("I mean, she's Japanese! Or half-Japanese. Enough, in any case, that I wouldn't touch it." p72)
29. **Tai Go**, why did you decide to pursue Yukiko? (semi-Open)
 - Partly, he's just in a new world now, and old expectations are gone. ("it's a small village, and there were some obvious matches. [Mei Ling] What's obvious now?" p107)
30. **John Brown**, why did you initially decline to accept Tai Go's note to Yukiko, then accept it after all?
 - At first, he didn't want to give a possible rival the channel of communication. (Implied by his later statement that: "I didn't deliver your letter at first. I almost never did." p300)
 - He accepted the mission only when Tai Go mentioned that he'd have to find someone else (who might then successfully deliver the letter). ("He pauses, biting his lip. Naw, no need for that. I'll do it." p187)
31. **John Brown**, why did you decide to deliver Tai Go's note to Yukiko after all?
 - After being beaten up, he realized anew the importance of solidarity. (John Brown: "It's hard to describe. It happened after they jumped me." Tai Go: "Because we have to stick together?" pp300-301)

32. **John Brown**, why did you tackle Tai Go in the dining hall?
- Not because he was angry at him, but in order to discreetly give him his notebook to pass on to Yukiko. (“...he’s grinning. He winks...His hands are urging something into yours. He says, *For her.*” p281)
33. **John Brown**, once Tai Go and Yukiko are admitted into the country, how do you plan to keep Tai Go from stealing Yukiko from you?
- He’s not. (“No one can own another human being. If anyone will be her friend—or lover—that’s for her to say.” p301)
34. **Tai Go**, weren’t you afraid you’d face some kind of punishment or disapproval for trying to get John Brown fired?
- He wasn’t, because he saw that John Brown was hated by both the Chinese detainees and the White kitchen staff. (Sow Fong: “I say we bust him up. Yen Yi will help. No one will say a word! You saw what happened before. They’ll fucking cheer us.” pp258-259)

Decisions

35. **Tai Go**, why did you change your mind about John Brown?
- After reading his notebook and seeing him as human. (“You find, on the last written page, a poem that leaves you swinging like a pendulum outside the shut doors of your prison.” p283)
36. **Grandfather**, why did you decide not to challenge being rejected?
- He’s aware he’s too old to be useful to the family in America, and had only wanted a glimpse of the future, which he’s gotten. (“My son is dutiful, a good son, and did not refuse when I asked to come, though I can do no work and would only be a burden to him. I only wished to see the new world and the future.” pp331-332)
37. **Sow Fong**, what was wrong with Tai Go’s first apology to Yukiko?
- It was more of a defense than a real apology. (“Don’t try to explain or excuse, or worse: to lay on her the burden of forgiving your sorry ass.” p315)
38. **Yukiko**, why did you never write to Tai Go again after receiving his apology? (Open)
- Her silence from that point on in the novel is the point: Tai Go is not owed any explanation. However, it might be worthwhile for students to imagine the reasons she might have given to others.
39. **Tai Go**, what did you learn from your games of Go with Grandfather?
- From the first game: the importance of attacking, lest your opponent gain (“unearned profit”).
 - From the second game: the importance of attacking from a position of strength, of mutual support. (“like stones on a hostile board; we’ll fight to see we are never surrounded.” pp353-354)

Inter-Character Points of View

40. **Tai Go** and **Sow Fong**, discuss why the silence of Yukiko was a “good riddance.”
- Sow Fong thinks of it as a good riddance because he never approved of Tai Go’s interest in her. (“I mean, she’s Japanese! Or half-Japanese. Enough, in any case, that I wouldn’t touch it.” p72)
 - Tai Go thinks of it as a good riddance of *him*—by *her*. (“*Good riddance!*” says Sow Fong, and I find a sense in which I can agree with him wholeheartedly. I was not the hero of my own story. I was the villain of another’s.” pp327-328)
41. **Tai Go** and **Yen Yi**, discuss the sense in which kin come first.
- Yen Yi thinks of kin as only his fellow Chinese. (“You and I? We’re kin. No matter who asks me for help, no matter why, if he’s one of us, if he’s of The People, I’ll give him all I have.” p310)
 - Tai Go thinks of kin as potentially everybody, all his fellow humans who struggle. (“I find a sense in which I can agree wholeheartedly. It all depends, it always has and always will, on whom you include as kin...Dark-skinned, half-Chinese, half-Japanese.” Even...the ‘pale’ [the Whites].” p310)

Final Questions

42. **Father**, what are your plans for life in America?
- He will work hard and be respectable in pursuit of a safer position in life. (“We must work hard and bank both our pennies and the approval of those above us. This is the only way to the security of wealth and the serenity of reputation.” p70)
43. **Sow Fong**, what are your plans for life in America?
- He wants to attain the wealth not just “of a wealthy man but the wealth of an emperor” (p348), of the uber-rich he’s learned exist in the Gilded Age of America.
44. **Yen Yi**, what are your plans for life in America? (Open)
- Yen Yi will probably go on organizing, but only on behalf of his own people, the Chinese.
45. **Tai Go**, what are your plans for life in America?
- Tai Go will follow his father’s direction, but will also seek to find common cause with all the oppressed groups. (“I will jab the awl, follow my father’s every rule of thumb, work long and hard to make a life in this new land, but also I will Resist. I will look for the arrival of Yen Yi, look up the landed Associations but also John Brown as he asked. I’ll connect with all The People in their groups like stones on a hostile board; we’ll fight to see we are never surrounded.” pp353-354)

Closing Question

46. **To the whole class:** What are your feelings about the family, community, or country you live in, and what are your plans for the future? Have those feelings or plans changed over time?

Supplementary Files

Ng-Bridge_LessonPlan-Essay.pdf – The essay “My Bridge Across the Sky”

The most recent versions of this lesson plan and its supplementary file can be found at:

www.AngelIslandNovel.com/lesson-plans

Additional Reading

Island: Poetry and History of Chinese Immigrants on Angel Island, 1910-1940, second edition, University of Washington Press, edited by Mark Lai, Genny Lim, and Judy Yung. Translations of all the Angel Island poems, oral histories by former detainees, and summaries of the history.

Ng-Bridge_LessonPlan-AngelIslandPoems.pdf – A lesson plan for exploring the Angel Island poems.