



Curriculum Connections

Bronze and Sunflower

By Cao Wenxuan

Illustrated by Meilo So
Candlewick Press, 2017

Translated by Helen Wang
Fiction, Set in China

2017 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Overview

Originally published in Chinese in 2005

Genre: Historical fiction, Cultural Revolution

Pages: 381.

Lexile: 790L

Reading Level: 5.6

About the Title

The title, *Bronze and Sunflower*, reflects the names of the two main characters. The author has used a third-person omniscient point of view, with the story alternating between the perspectives of the title characters.

About the Author

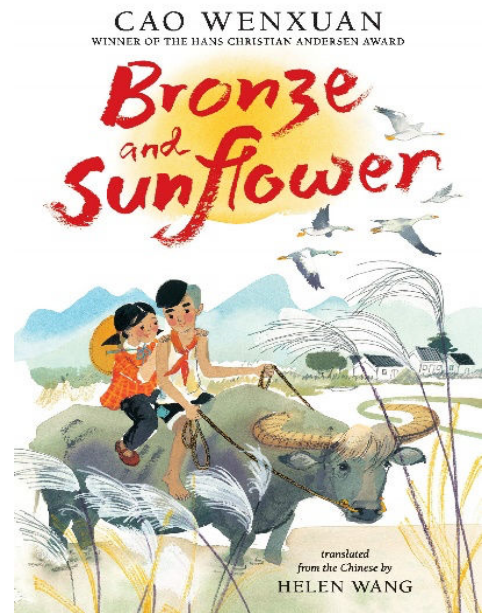
Cao Wenxuan (pronounced: Tsao Wen-shwen) is a Chinese author born in 1954. Cao is his family name, and Wenxuan is his given name. He grew up in rural China during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). His father was the principal at a rural school, and the family lived in poverty. Cao Wenxuan is a professor of literature at Beijing University. His novels are well-loved in China.

About the Translator

Bronze and Sunflower was translated by Helen Wang. Wang lives in London and is the curator of East Asian Money at the British Museum. Her translation of *Bronze and Sunflower* won the 2016 Marsh Award for Translated Children's Literature. Wang has also translated short stories and essays from Chinese to English along with other novels for children and young adults.

Recommended Audience

Some of Cao Wenxuan's writing has been described as melancholy, and this is certainly true for *Bronze and Sunflower*. The story is beautifully told, but this book will not appeal to all students. Specifically, its slow pace may be a barrier to reluctant readers; it is recommended for readers aged 9–13. *Bronze and Sunflower* could also be





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considered for readers over the age of 13, particularly older readers who might struggle with more complex texts. The merits of *Bronze and Sunflower* lie not only in its poignant storytelling, but also in its rich sharing of cultural information.

Curricular Entry Points

Entry Point	Teaching Suggestions
Aesthetic	<p>Examine images of the sites mentioned in text. Use the see, think, wonder strategy to guide students as they examine and analyze the photos. Here is a link to a see, think, wonder strategy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Damaidi Village ● May Seventh Cadre Schools ● Sunflower fields ● Reed marshes ● Water buffalo ● Yellow River (flows through Damaidi) <p>Students might also examine images of the ancient petroglyphs carved into cliffs and boulders near Damaidi, though they are not mentioned in the book.</p>
Narrative	<p>Read aloud or have the students read Cao Wenxuan’s short story <i>A Very Special Pigeon</i>.</p>
Logical	<p>Sunflower and her father were relocated to a May Seventh Cadre School. Research May Seventh Cadre Schools.</p>
Foundational	<p>Compare the images of “bronze” and “sunflower.” How are they different from one another? In what ways are they similar? How do they reflect the personalities of the two main characters?</p>



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Consider the impact of moving from a city to a rural area. What might someone miss? What new opportunities would be available? Next, consider this type of move when someone is facing financial hardships.

Survey the class or lead a discussion on why authors write books. Look over the information about Cao Wenxuan and reflect on why he may have chosen to write *Bronze and Sunflower*.

Specific Teaching Suggestions

Reading Suggestions

- **Read Aloud or Whole Class Assigned Reading:** While *Bronze and Sunflower* can be read aloud or assigned to a whole class as independent reading solely for its literary merits, it is an ideal book to be integrated with a social studies unit on China or East Asia.
- **Excerpt:** *Bronze and Sunflower* is touching and compelling in many ways, but it may not be the type of fast-paced story many of our middle-year students are accustomed to. Consider working with pages 1–89 as a stand-alone short story.
- **Small Group or Book Club Reading Choice:** *Bronze and Sunflower* could be assigned as an enrichment activity for a small group of students. Similarly, it could be used for book clubs around the theme of Chinese culture. See below for suggested books that could be included in a Chinese culture-themed book club along with *Bronze and Sunflower*.

Title/Author	Age Level	Lexile	Pages	
<i>The Emperor's Riddle</i> by Kat Zhang	8–12	780	256	

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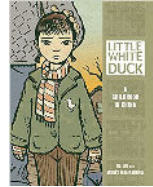


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<i>Little White Duck</i> by Na Liu (Graphic Novel)	9–13	710	108	
<i>Girl Under a Red Moon</i> by Da Chen	8–12	1120	208	
<i>Little Leap Forward</i> by Guo Yue	8–12	810	128	

- **Character Analysis:** Compare and contrast the characters Bronze and Sunflower. Consider both internal and external characteristics.

Writing/Storytelling Suggestions

- Read the song lyrics in the supplemental materials aloud, and create stories to go along with them. Where possible, make connections to the characters in *Bronze and Sunflower*.
- Write a story in petroglyphs using the style of those found in the hills near Damaidi village.
- Write or tell an epilogue in which Bronze and Sunflower are reunited.

Social Studies Suggestions

- The story is set in Damaidi (pronounced: da-MAI-dee), a small village in Zhongwei. Find Damaidi on a map of China, noting that it is located in Ningxia, an autonomous region.
- Research the differences between a province and an autonomous region in China.



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- The story takes place during the Cultural Revolution. Learn more about this period.
- Explore why the government set up the May Seventh Cadre Schools.

Math Suggestions

- Plan a trip to from Beijing to Damaidi. Calculate the cost of airfare, hotels, and transportation. Consider how a modern-day trip compares to how someone would have traveled fifty years ago, during the Cultural Revolution.
- Use tangrams to create representations of a sunflower, oxen, boat, and the village buildings mentioned in the story. Here is a link to a digital tangram builder: <https://mathigon.org/tangram>

Art and Architecture

- Sunflower's father was an artist who worked in bronze.
- Make a model of the Damaidi village as it may have looked during the Cultural Revolution.
- Examine Cultural Revolution propaganda posters related to Cadre Schools. Here's a link to a web page with posters: <https://chineseposters.net/themes/may-seven-cadre-schools>
- Petroglyphs can be found in the cliffs near Damaidi. Explore the history of petroglyphs and view images of those near Damaidi. Students might also create their own drawings in the style of the Damaidi petroglyphs.
- Draw a water buffalo, an egret, or other animals mentioned in the story.

Science

- Investigate the life cycle of the sunflower.
- Compare Damaidi's climate to the climate where you live. How is it the same or different?
- How do the geological features of Damaidi compare to those near your home?
- Learn about Damaidi's flora and fauna. Water buffalo, fish, egrets, and ducks are mentioned in the story, as are sunflowers, cogon grass, and arrowhead plants.



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Themes

Family: As the story begins, Bronze's family includes a grandmother, father, mother, and son. The family takes in Sunflower and treats her as one of their own. Family members are thoughtful and caring, often sacrificing for each other.

Loss: Sunflower's mother and brother have both died. Not only have Sunflower and her father lost these family members, but they have also lost their home and way of life in Beijing. Tragically, Sunflower also loses her father.

Friendship: Bronze and Sunflower share a deep friendship despite being from different worlds. They spend hours together in the countryside. Even though Bronze does not speak, the two seem to understand each other.

Education: Education is not compulsory during this period in the Chinese countryside. Parents must pay to send children to school, and many do not attend. Bronze's family is very poor, yet Sunflower's education is of utmost importance. They regularly sacrifice to send Sunflower to school.

Hardship: Sunflower's adopted family is very poor. They have trouble providing for even basic needs. Life in general is hard, and the villagers of Damaidi endure fire, locusts, flooding, and freezing temperatures.

Perseverance: Sunflower's family never gives up in the face of hardship.

Sacrifice: Even though they are very poor, Sunflower's adopted family makes many sacrifices to care for her and send her to school. The family makes the ultimate sacrifice at the end of the book, when they insist that Sunflower return to the city, where opportunities for a brighter future exist.

Nature: Nature is a powerful force in *Bronze and Sunflower*. Sunflower's father drowns in the river. Winters can be very cold. Locusts destroy crops, and a wildfire threatens the village.



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Symbols

Sunflowers: Sunflowers are symbols of happiness and optimism. The Sunflower character is an orphan who experiences loss, yet she is happy with Bronze's family, despite living through many hardships.

Water: Rivers can be symbols of division. A river separates Damaidi village from the May Seventh Cadre School. The former urban dwellers now working at the Cadre School are separated from the rural villagers. These two classes of people live near each other, but crossing the river is not a simple endeavor.

Supplemental Materials

Supplemental materials can be found on the following pages:

- Character map
- Songs
- Web links



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Character Map





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Songs

Song learned from village girls (p. 116)

The rice cakes smell sweet,
Their scent fills the kitchen.
The leaves smell so sweet,
Their scent fills the house...

Song learned from Nainai (p. 113)

Little Sister we combed your hair
And now you look like a lady!
Big Sister Jeimei, we combed your hair
And now you look like a baby!

Nainai's song while the women weave slippers (p. 119)

When roses bloom in the spring
And the silk worm season begins,
The women go out to pick mulberry leave
In pairs, in pairs
Their baskets hang from the mulberry trees
And they strip the branches bare in tears, in tears



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Web Links

Blog: [Randomly Reading: Book Review for Kids, Teens, and Grownups](#)

Map: <https://mapcarta.com/32622446>

Interview with translator: <https://worldkidlit.wordpress.com/2021/03/11/helen-wang-talks-to-nanette-mcguinness/>

Author: Karen Gaul, Grade 5 Teacher, Winchester Thurston School, Pittsburgh, PA
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