



Curriculum Connections

The Emperor's Riddle

by Kat Zhang

Simon & Schuster; Aladdin, 2017

Fiction, set in China

2017 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature

Genre: Mystery
Pages: 256

Lexile: 780L
Reading Level: 5.4

Perspective

This story is told from eleven-year-old Mia Chen's point of view. Mia is an American whose mother was born and raised in China.

About the Title

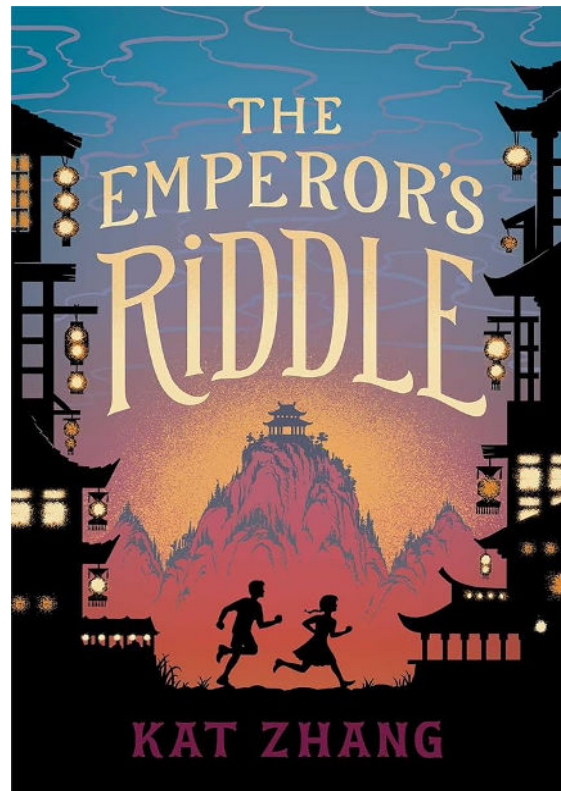
The emperor in the title is Zhu Yunwen (pronounced: JEW YUHN-wuhn), who rose to the throne in 1398 at the age of twenty-one. His death remains a mystery even today. Yunwen was an ambitious ruler who wanted to increase the lands over which he ruled. Although he succeeded in conquering some nearby territories, he was eventually defeated in 1402 by his uncle, whose rule Zhu Yunwen threatened. The uncle's troops burned Zhu Yunwen's imperial palace, and it was said that he died in the fire. Another version of the story claims that Zhu Yunwen escaped and lived out his life in a monastery. The story's protagonist, Mia, had ancestors who knew Zhu Yunwen. More information about Zhu Yunwen can be found at this website:

<https://www.mingtombs.eu/emp/02jianwen/jianwen.html>

The riddle refers to a treasure map combined with a series of clues that lead to a mythical treasure, said to have been hidden by Zhu Yunwen after fleeing the palace.

About the Author

Kat Zhang is an American author. Her parents are immigrants from China; her mother is from Fuzhou, and her father is from Wuhan. She began writing at a young age, and as of 2021, she had published both novels and picture books. More information about Kat Zhang can be found at her author website: <http://katzhangwriter.com/index.php/about-me/>





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Recommended Audience

This book is ideal for middle readers (ages 8–12), particularly those who enjoy mystery and adventure, and students who want to learn more about Chinese geography and history. Additionally, this book might serve as a mirror for students who identify as Chinese American.

Curriculum Entry Points

Entry Point	Teaching Suggestions
<p>Aesthetic</p>	<p>Examine images of the historical sites mentioned in text. Use the see, think, wonder strategy to guide students as they examine and analyze the photos. See a list of historical sites visited by the book's characters along with images below. Here is a link to a see, think, wonder strategy description: https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/see-think-wonder.</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Yongquan Temple</p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Pottery Pagodas</p>  </div> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p>Sanfang Qixiang</p>  </div> </div> <p>Black and White Pagodas</p>  <p style="text-align: right;"><i>*Images above sourced from Wikimedia Commons</i></p>
<p>Narrative</p>	<p>Retell or have students read the legend of Zhu Yunwen. Here is a source for the story: https://www.mingtombs.eu/emp/02jianwen/jianwen.html. For additional perspectives, watch a video about Zhu Yunwen's uncle</p>



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	<p>who defeated him in 1402 at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XqxTJ91mS0.</p>
Logical	<p>Recreate the emperor's treasure map (as illustrated in the book) on poster paper. Share the first clue and ask students to share ideas about its meaning. Add to the map as students progress through the novel.</p>
Foundational	<p>Survey the class or lead a discussion on the topic of legends. Is there truth in legends? Could these truths be relevant for us in the twenty-first century?</p> <p>Survey the class or lead a discussion on why authors write books. Look over Kat Zhang's website and reflect on why she chose to write <i>The Emperor's Riddle</i>. Here is a link to Zhang's website: http://katzhangwriter.com/index.php/about-me/</p>
Experiential	<p>Have student create their own paper pagodas. This link provides instructions: https://www.education.com/activity/article/build-a-pagoda/</p>

Specific Teaching Suggestions

Study Guide

A study guide can be found on the pages following this compilation of Curriculum Connections. The guide can be used by a teacher to preview the book. All or part of it might be distributed to students before, during, or after reading. The guide includes the following:

- Back of Book Summary
- Character Map
- Character Analysis
- Timeline of Event
- Plot Summary
- Vocabulary List
- Riddles

Reading Suggestions

- **Read Aloud or Whole Class Assigned Reading:** While *The Emperor's Riddle* can be read aloud or assigned to a whole class as independent reading solely on



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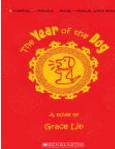
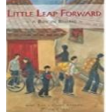
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its literary merits, it is an ideal book to integrate with a social studies unit on China or East Asia.

- **Small Group or Book Club Reading Choice:** *The Emperor's Riddle* could be assigned as an enrichment activity for a small group of students. Similarly, it could be used for book clubs that are focused on Chinese culture. In addition to *The Emperor's Riddle*, here is a list of book suggestions:

Title/Author		Age Level	Lexile	Pages
<i>Bronze and Sunflower</i> by Cao Wenxuan		9–13	790	400
<i>Little White Duck: A Childhood in China</i> by Na Liu and Andrés Vera Martinez (graphic novel)		9–13	710	108
<i>The Year of the Dog</i> by Grace Lin		8–12	690	160
<i>Little Leap Forward: A Boy in Beijing</i> by Guo Yue and Clare Farrow		8–12	810	128

Writing/Storytelling Suggestions

- Zhu Yunwen went missing in 1402. If Kat Zhang's story about a hidden treasure were true, how might Zhu Yunwen have gotten away with the treasure and created the map and clues? Create an original story to tell this tale. Share it orally and/or in writing.

Social Studies Suggestions

- The story is set in Fuzhou (pronounced: foo-JOE). Find Fuzhou's location on a map of China, noting that it is located in Fujian (pronounced: FUH-gee-AHN) province. Here is a link to a commercial site from which an inexpensive tourist map can be purchased: <https://trax2maps.com/fujian>



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- The emperor referred to in the title was from the Ming dynasty (pronounced: ming). Explore the history or the Ming dynasty. Here is a link to a short video summary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AtHGNZs6Urs>
- Explore other Chinese treasures that have gone missing. Here is a link to the missing treasures of the summer palace: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/01/c_139556267.htm
- Aunt Lin was sent away to the countryside to work on a farm during the Cultural Revolution. Learn more about the Cultural Revolution at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7G0UXnXpABw> and/or read *Little White Duck*, a graphic novel by Na Liu.

Math Suggestions

- Map the travels of Mia and Jake as they search for the treasure. Calculate the total distance they traveled. Order their trips from shortest to longest and calculate the average distance traveled for each journey.
- Plan a trip to Fuzhou. Calculate the cost of airfare, hotels, and transportation. Here is a website with information about Fuzhou: <http://www.chinatouristmaps.com/city/fuzhou.html>
- Use tangrams to create representations of the historical sites mentioned in the story. Here is a link to a digital tangram builder: <https://mathigon.org/tangram>

Art and Architecture Suggestions

- Create a pen and ink drawing similar to the crane picture described in chapter 1.
- Examine the architecture of the historical sites visited in the story.
- Create original drawings of the historical sites visited in the story.
- Mia and Jake see many Buddha statues at the Yongquan Temple. Examine images of Buddha statues from China, noting the variations in scale and the variety of materials used to create the statues. You could do the same with Guanyin Pusa, whose statue Mia and Jake also see at the temple.

Science Suggestions

- Compare Fuzhou's climate to the climate where you live. How is it the same or different?
- How do the geological features in Fuzhou compare to those near your home?



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Themes

Family

Family is an important theme in *The Emperor's Riddle*. Mia travels to Fuzhou, the family's ancestral home, with her mother, aunt, and brother. They stay with her uncle, who is living in the apartment that belonged to his parents, Mia's grandparents. Mia feels inferior to her older brother. She has a close bond with her aunt, but Mia feels as if Mia's mother lives in a different world. Events that unfold in the novel provide opportunities for Mia to grow closer to her mother and feel more equal to her brother. Her uncle is a stranger to her at the beginning of the story, but their relationship also grows over time.

Coming of Age

Mia is the younger of the two children in her family. She is a daydreamer who has trouble focusing in school. Her brother, Jake, is a charismatic athlete who does well in school. Mia is close to Aunt Lin, her Mom's older sister, but she has a hard time connecting with her mother. When Aunt Lin goes missing, Mia loses the person on whom she relies for advice. As Mia and Jake team up to find Aunt Lin and the treasure, Mia must rely on herself to make decisions. Jake is impressed by Mia's vast knowledge of history, and both realize that this is a valuable asset in their search. In the end, it is Mia who saves the day in a hand-to-hand fight.

Heritage

Mia has always known that Fuzhou is her family's ancestral home. She visited once when she was very young, and now, at eleven, she is making her second family trip to Fuzhou. She has loved hearing Aunt Lin's stories about Emperor Zhu Yunwen, yet she is a reluctant traveler to China. Mia misses her friends back home. After looking through a trunk of family memorabilia, Mia begins to develop more of a connection to her heritage and a sense of belonging. One of the items in the trunk is a crane painting once owned by an ancestor who knew Zhu Yunwen. The treasure map and clues are discovered on the back of the painting, setting the events of the story in motion.

Tropes

The story's antagonist, Ying, is described in chapter 2 as a typical bad guy. He is unsmiling and powerful, "with fists as solid as oak." Ying's brow is often furrowed, his eyes are heavy lidded, and his hair is like a black cloud above his face. On page 22, "He slipped away like a shadow leaves a sunny room."



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Study Guide

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2017 NCTA Freeman Award Honorable Mention

Back of Book Summary

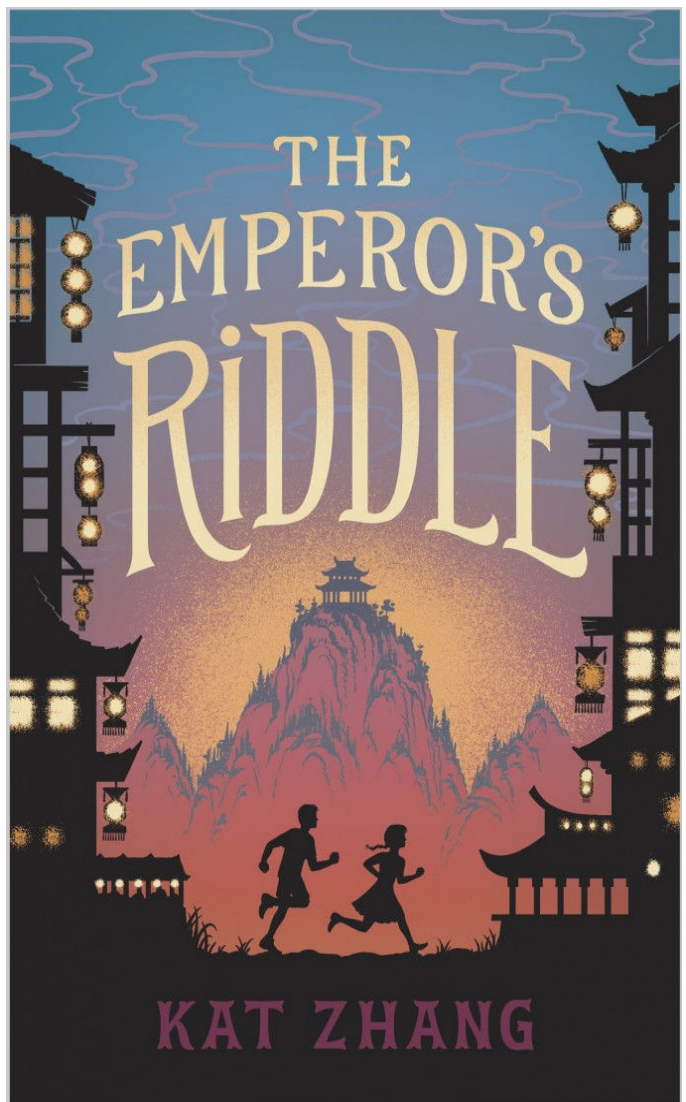
Source (author's website):

<http://katzhangwriter.com/index.php/the-emperors-riddle/>

Mia Chen is on what her mother calls a Grand Adventure. She's not sure what to make of this family trip to China and didn't want to leave her friends for the summer, but she's excited about the prospect of exploring with her Aunt Lin, the only adult who truly understands her.

Then Aunt Lin disappears, right after her old nemesis, a man named Ying, comes to visit. Mia knows that, years ago, when Aunt Lin and Ying were sent to the Fuzhou countryside to work as laborers, the two searched for an ancient treasure together—one that still hasn't been found. She's suspicious that their shared history might be linked to Aunt Lin's disappearance.

When Mia discovers an old map filled with riddles in Aunt Lin's room, she quickly pieces together her mission: find the treasure, find her aunt. Now, Mia, along with her big brother, Jake, must solve the clues to rescue the person she knows best in the world—and maybe unearth a treasure greater than her wildest dreams.





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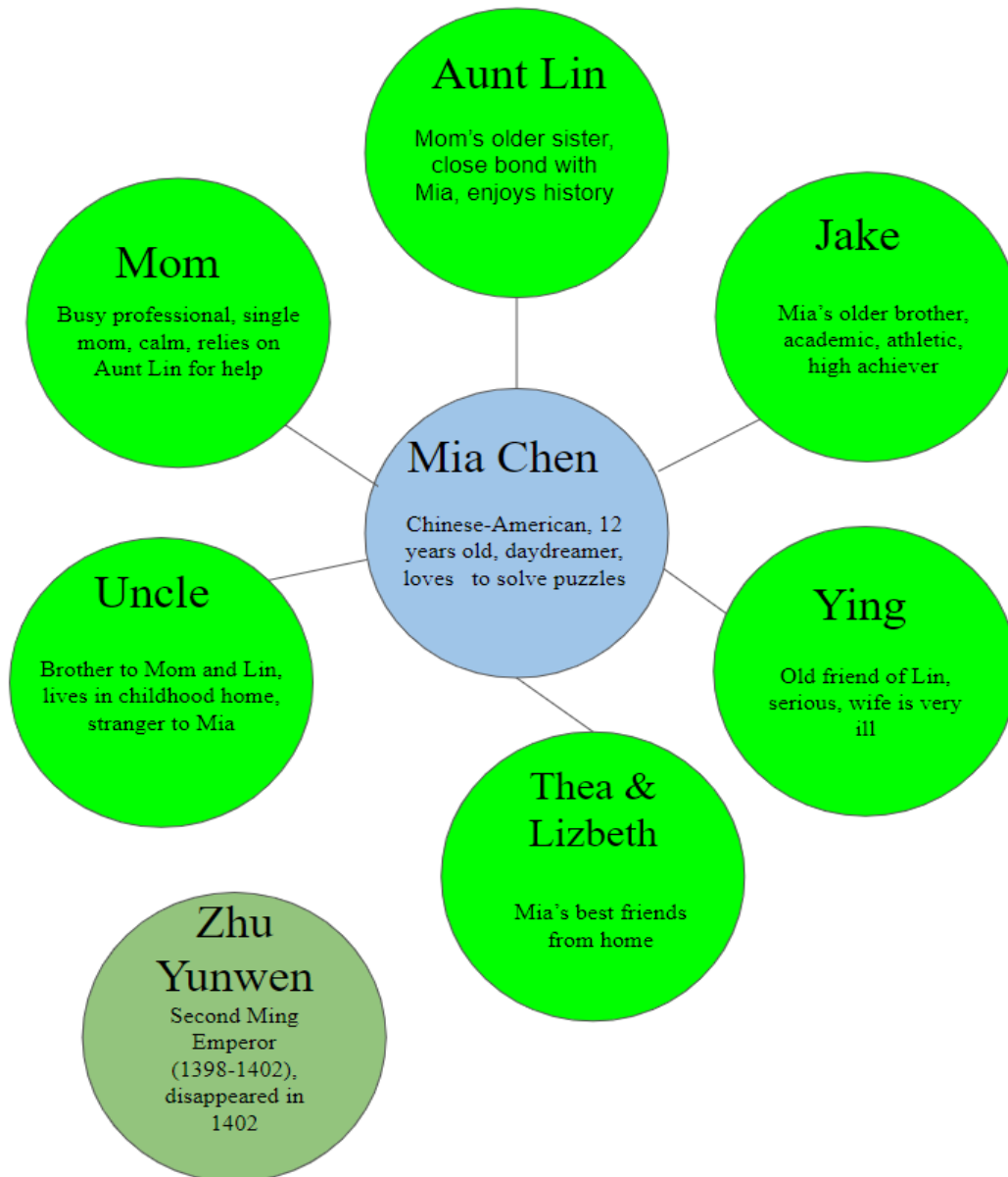
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Character Map





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Character Analysis

Mia Chen: Mia is an eleven-year-old girl from Memphis, Tennessee. Early in the story, she describes herself as a “puzzle piece that doesn’t fit” (p. 2). She feels overshadowed by her high-achieving older brother, Jake. Mia is a reluctant participant in her family’s summer trip to her mother’s childhood home in Fuzhou, China. Mia’s relationship with her mother is less than ideal, but she has a strong bond with Aunt Lin. She feels they both “love stories, history, and make-believe” (p. 6). Mia often daydreams and has a hard time paying attention in school.

Mom: Mom is a busy single mother raising two children. She frequently relies on Aunt Lin for childcare. Mom is described as “always punctual” and “never letting her thoughts wander” (p. 5). Mia’s father left the family when the children were young.

Aunt Lin: Aunt Lin is Mom’s older sister. She seems to understand Mia in a way that Mia’s mother doesn’t. Aunt Lin came of age during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and spent three years working in the countryside in Fujian province before being able to go to university. During her time in Fujian, she learned of a legendary treasure hidden by emperor Zhu Yunwen over 600 years ago.

Jake: Jake is Mia’s older brother. He is described as charismatic and athletic, someone who “does well in school without even trying” (p. 6).

Uncle: Uncle is Mom’s older brother. His appearance is described as a “laughing Buddha statue come to life” (p. 13). Mia met Uncle only once before, when she was very young. He is a stranger to Mia, and through no fault of Uncle, she has a hard time connecting with him.

Ying: A large man described as “powerfully built” with “fists as solid as oak” (p. 13). He met Lin when they worked on the same farm during the Cultural Revolution. They were once close friends who dreamed of finding Zhu Yunwen’s hidden treasure. They parted on bad terms because Ying wanted to profit from finding the treasure. Ying’s wife is very ill.

Thea and Lizbeth: These are Mia’s best friends from Tennessee. Mia misses them, and they often figure in her memories.

Zhu Yunwen: Zhu Yunwen is also known as Jianwen. He became the second Ming emperor when he succeeded his grandfather to the throne in 1398. He disappeared in 1402. Many believe he died, while others are convinced he went into hiding, dreaming of the day he might one day regain power. *The Emperor's Riddle* storyline proposes that Zhu Yunwen hid a treasure from his imperial riches before going into hiding.



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Timeline of Events (page 1)

The Chen family arrives in Fuzhou, China for a month-long visit. They stay with Uncle in the apartment that was once the home of Mia's grandparents

Ying, Aunt Lin's old friend, shows up uninvited. He casually mentions their childhood hunt for Zhu Yunwen's treasure. Mia doesn't trust Ying

Aunt Lin goes missing. A letter signed as if written by Lin explains that she is visiting old friends. Mother believes the letter, but Mia is suspicious.

Mia and Jake team up to discover the real reason for Aunt Lin's absence and search for the treasure. They agree to keep their plans a secret from their mother.

Mom tells Mia that the crane painting may have been made during the Ming dynasty.

Mia connects the third riddle to the Ming dynasty war minister Zhang Jing, whose house in Sanfang Qixiang still stands.

Aunt Lin shows Mia an old chest containing family memorabilia. Its contents include an antique crane painting highly valued by Mia's grandparents.

Aunt Lin's memory is jogged by her conversation with Ying, and she draws an image of Zhu Yunwen's well in her notebook.

Mia finds a treasure map and clues in the form of riddles on the back of the crane painting. She solves a riddle using Aunt Lin's drawing of the well.

Mia and Jake travel to the Yongquan Temple and solve the second riddle.

Mom takes Mia and Jake to Sanfang Qixiang, a historic and cultural area in Fuzhou. Its name translates as three lanes and seven alleys.

Mia and Jake go to Zhang Jing's house. Mia notices Ying there. She and Jake solve the third riddle.



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Timeline of Events (page 2)

Uncle helps Mia with the fourth riddle that connects to Fuzhou's black and white pagodas.

Mia goes to the store with Uncle. He reminisces about a childhood visit to the black pagoda. He buys a firework that they plan to use later.

Mia realizes the final riddle refers to a remote tomb, that some say belongs to Zhu Yunwen, on a mountainside in Ningde.

Ying attacks Mia and Jake at the tomb. He holds them captive in a van where he has also been keeping Aunt Lin against her will.

Mia, Jake, and Aunt Lin escape the van and are pursued by Ying

Mia realizes the completed map reveals that the treasure is hidden nearby. They find a secret passageway that leads to the treasure.

Alerted by the firework, policemen arrive and rescue Mia, Jake, and Aunt Lin.

The destruction of artifacts at the black pagoda during the Cultural Revolution prevents Mia from solving the riddle.

Mia finds a picture in the red trunk of Uncle visiting the black pagoda as a child, before the Cultural Revolution. She uses the image to solve the fourth riddle.

Mia and Jake travel 40 minutes by train to Ningde and locate the tomb on a remote mountainside.

Ying has completed the map but doesn't know how to read it. He pressures Mia to interpret the map.

Ying has followed. Once again, he captures all three. When Ying takes Mia with him to get the van, she aims the firework from Uncle at Ying and sets it off. It misses him.

The family decides to leave the crane painting in China to be kept in a museum along with the treasure. Mom gives Mia a gold necklace of two cranes.



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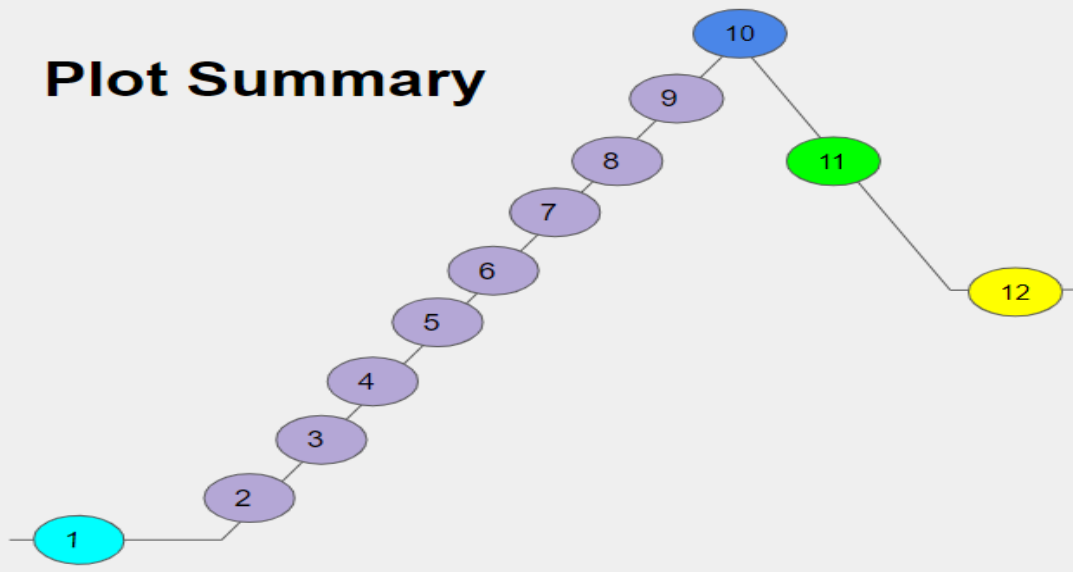
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Plot Summary



Background

1 The Chen family travels to their ancestral home of Fuzhou, China.

Rising Action

2 Aunt Lin goes missing shortly after a visit from her friend, Ying.

3 Mia discovers a map and clues to Zhu Yunwen's treasure on the back of a crane painting.

4 Mia uses Aunt Lin's drawing of Zhu Yunwen's well to solve a clue.

5 Mia and Jake visit the Yongquan Temple and solve another clue.

6 Mia and Jake solve the next clue at Zhang Jing's home. Mia notices Ying is also there.

7 Mia uses a childhood photo of Uncle at the black pagoda to solve a clue.

8 Mia and Jake travel to a tomb in Ningde to solve the last clue.

9 Ying captures them and holds them along with Aunt Lin.

Climax

10 They escape and find the treasure near the tomb. Ying recaptures them.

Falling Action

11 Alerted by a firework, Mia sets off, the police rescue Mia, Jake, and Aunt Lin.

Resolution

12 The treasure is given to a museum. Mom gives Mia a crane necklace



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Vocabulary List

Chapter 1: swathed (p. 7)

Chapter 2: nebulous (p. 13), dour (p. 15), mollified (p. 19)

Chapter 3: ponderous (p. 26), harried (p. 27)

Chapter 5: lattice (p. 42) balustrade (p. 42)

Chapter 6: tangible (p. 50)

Chapter 7: impetuous (p. 61)

Chapter 10: loitered (p. 80)

Chapter 11: facade (p. 99), fretwork (p. 99), anachronism (p. 101)

Chapter 12: scabbard (p. 104)

Chapter 13: wended (p. 109)

Chapter 15: furrowed (p. 131)

Chapter 17: rankled (p. 150)

Chapter 19: exasperated (p. 167)

Chapter 20: perfunctory (p. 179), eclectic (p. 180), dais (p. 184), niche (p. 184)

Chapter 21: stoic (p. 197)

Chapter 22: lithe (p. 202)

Chapter 24: threshold (p. 211)

Chapter 25: befuddled (p. 220)



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Riddles (in the order in which they were solved)

#1

At the foot of the mountains
Sweet water flows, singing
Not only in the rivers
But pulled from the earth.
Seek me at the edge of the ring.

#2

Jutting above the world on nine glazed layers
One thousand buddha chant in unison.
Their voices are backed by the peal of heavenly bells.

#3

They came from the seas, murdering and pillaging
Twenty thousand strong, like a battering wave
But like a wave, they retreated again
Driven by the sword of war's minister.
Find me in the southern heart of this lionheart's hearth.

#4

Two brothers stand, eye to eye
The fairer steady on the turtle's back
Search for me low, on the heads of the darker brother's feet,
Carved into a cheek like a scar

#5

I lie cloistered in a shadowy mountain glen
Edged by sea, enclosed by sturdy walls of stone
But protection of my eternal sleep
Lies with the twin dragons stretched out below
Approach me at my final rest
And look for me at the head.

Author: Karen Gaul, Grade 5 Teacher, Winchester Thurston School, Pittsburgh, PA
2024