



# Chengli

and the  
Silk Road Caravan

Hildi Kang

STUDY GUIDE

# Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan

## Introduction

Historical fiction offers a great way to teach history, geography, cultural studies, along with literature, language arts, and reading skills. The involving stories of characters with whom readers can identify, despite the distance of time and miles, makes the learning process personal and memorable.

In *Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan*, your students will meet a thirteen-year-old boy in 630 C.E. China. An orphan living in poverty in a tightly-structured society, Chengli is, nonetheless, a lot like the boys and girls in your class: he feels the need to find out who he is and where he fits in. Chengli yearns to take charge of his own future.

As they read about Chengli's journeys—both the actual, arduous journey along the 2000-mile stretch of the Silk Road from his home city Chang'an to Kasghar *and* the metaphorical journey to discover his identity—your students will be introduced to a time and place, a society, and a way of life vastly different from their contemporary experience, but completely understandable as author Hildi Kang presents its details. The characters in the novel are like people your students know—some trustworthy, others dishonest; some generous, others selfish.

We are pleased to invite you and your class to the world of Chengli. This guide will help you take every advantage of your visit. We have included whole-class activities, subjects for discussion, topics for research projects, and suggestions for independent student work.



# Activities for the Whole Class

## TRACKING CHARACTERS

*After the sandstorm, tired as he was, Chengli found an enormous thought in his head: people can change! The princess—bossy, selfish, proud—for just a short time had been a friend, and now, after the storm, she'd actually helped. He wondered if changes could last...*

Many people believe that people never change. Even those of us who do think people can change still know that it doesn't happen in an instant. In tracking the characters that do change in this novel, have the students delineate the steps in the process on a graphic organizer.

Keep a classroom chart of the major characters in *Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan*. In the first column of the chart have your students enter what they know about each character. In the next they should write their initial impression of the character. The last column should show how the character changed and evolved in the course of the book.

### CHARACTERS IN CHENGLI AND THE SILK ROAD CARAVAN

Character	Basic Facts	Initial Impression	Changes
Chengli			
Fourth Brother		Untrustworthy	
Princess Meiling	Selfish		
Master Fong			



As the chart fills in, raise these questions for discussion:

- Do any of the characters remind you of people you know?
- How are they the same and how are they different?
- Is the change/development of the character true to real life?

## THE IMPORTANCE OF NAMES

Many of the characters in the story have given names and common names. Common names are based on identifying characteristics. For example:

Little Limp: Chengli's friend who limps

Fourth Brother: caravan boy who was the fourth brother in a family

Old Cook: cook who cared for Chengli

Skinny One: Chengli (named by Master Fong)

Caravan Boy: Chengli (named by the Kazakh mother)

Little Brother: Chengli (named by Tokta)

Uncle Tao: older man in the caravan

See how your students view themselves and their classmates. Have the students create common names for themselves as if they were in the novel. Place all of the names in a box. Draw the names out one at a time and see if the class can match the name to a student.

## TRACKING PLACES

During the boredom of walking hundreds of miles from oasis to oasis, Chengli memorized the names of the cities the caravan passed and wondered what he would find in each.

Using a map of China that shows its provinces, recreate the route Master Fong's caravan took along the northern route of the Silk Road. Start in the city of Chang'an (modern day Xi'an) and take it to the end at Kashgar. At each point on the map, notate the city the caravan visited and an important event that occurred there. For example, the princess got kidnapped at Kucha.

Your students should also write down what they learn about each city, as it exists today. Facts should include but not be limited to: population, industry, ethnicity, and customs.

You can find maps of China on the Internet. One such map can be found on Wikipedia. Type in your browser "Chang'an." Besides a history of the city you'll find a map of China and the location of the city on the map. You can do the same for each city the caravan visited.



*Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan by Hildi Kang*

## ART PROJECT

There are a number of distinctive visual scenes in *Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan*. Here are a few:

- The celebration of the fifth day of the fifth month in Dunhuang
- The sandstorm and the attack by the bandits
- The confrontation between Chengli and Fourth Brother
- The kidnapping of the princess and Chengli's attempt to save her

As a class, make a master list of the action scenes in the story. Each student should then pick a scene from the list and illustrate it in a four panel graphic strip. Mount the strips in a display in the order they appear in the book and create a graphic novel of Chengli.

## DEBATE

Because of Fourth Brother's accusation, Chengli is charged with a capital offense punishable by death. In the system of justice in ancient China, the accused must prove himself innocent. Since he could not produce a witness, he was going to be sentenced to death by hanging. He was exonerated when the Princess was well enough to speak up for him. Now, the accuser, Fourth Brother, was subject to his sentence for baring false witness. This is the opposite of our criminal justice system where someone is presumed innocent until proven guilty, and where the penalty for baring false witness is minor.

Have your students debate the opposing sides to the question of which system of justice results in the fairer judgment?



# Independent Activities

Chengli is on a quest to learn about his father and his own identity. The search for self is a common theme in books for middle school readers. Have each student keep track of the various pieces of the puzzle as Chengli discovers them. The following graphic organizer can facilitate this.

## CHENGLI'S FATHER

What Chengli Learned?	Where He Learned It?	From Who?
Father was a great horseman		

## DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE

*"It's the wind. Look!" Chengli said, pointing to a narrow wall of sand that snaked across the path in front of him, sweeping slowly closer, inches off the ground. The sand danced higher and higher until it swirled in front of his eyes. Through this dancing sand, distant ghost flecks moved, trailed, and disappeared ... The wind ripped at his hands and clawed his jacket. He blinked his eyes and the ground rose and fell, appearing and disappearing in front of him.*

It is unlikely that your students have found themselves in a sand storm, but the descriptive language Hildi Kang uses to describe the event lets them know not only how it looked, but how it felt and sounded.

Each student should think of a place they've been to or of an event they've experienced. Have them select descriptive words and expressions that will help them communicate how the place or event affected each of their senses: sight, taste, smell, touch, and sound. Then they should create a short descriptive paragraph or poem about the place or event.



Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan by Hildi Kang

## CHARACTER ATTRIBUTES

*"I was born in the Year of the Tiger. I must be as strong as tigers."*

Chengli displays many characteristics associated with the Tiger. For example, he shows his stubbornness when he resolves to leave Chang'an and learn more about his father. Other characteristics of people born in the Year of the Tiger are strength, generosity, intelligence, alertness, and trustworthiness. Have your students research the twelve animals of the Chinese Zodiac and create a reference chart of the twelve animals and their corresponding characteristics. Each student should find out what sign he/she was born under and see which of the characteristics he/she has. Each student should do their same for their siblings, their parents, and other family members.

Useful websites to use are:

<http://www.chinesezodiac.com/signs.php>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_zodiac](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_zodiac)

<http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/12-zodiac.shtml>

## LANGUAGE ARTS: WRITING

Chengli told the old grandfather White Beard that he must rescue the princess, but he had no idea how to do it, if and when he found her. White Beard advises him to create a plan.

There are several theories of planning. One is to research the situation, map out the objectives, set out a plan of attack taking in all the variables, and then carry it through to completion. The other is to have a basic, but flexible plan, leaving room for variables so that you can just makes things up as you go along. Which tact did Chengli eventually take?

Ask your students to write about the type of planning they employed to tackle goals and tasks. They should site specific examples.



*Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan by Hildi Kang*

# For Discussion

## FRIENDSHIP

Have your students talk about the relationships Chengli has with his friends Little Limp, Fourth Brother, and Meiling. Questions to discuss should include:

- How are they different and how are they the same as the relationships your students have with their friends.
- Are the relationships static or do they change in the course of the novel?
- Is Fourth Brother really a friend to Chengli?

## EXPECTATIONS

Among the things that Chengli learns about his father is that he was honest, learned, and well respected. Chengli feels unworthy since he is but a lowly camel driver. Living up to the successes of a parent is something all children wrestle with. Have your students discuss how they cope with the successes and expectations of their parents.

## GOSSIP

Hojanias, the eldest son of the nomad family, returns from Kucha and relates that Chengli has become somewhat of a celebrity. There were two conflicting stories being told about him. One was that an Imperial Princess and a lowly camel boy ran off together. The other was that the princess was kidnapped and the boy ran off to save her. Your students know what really happened, but which story seems more plausible. If they were residents of Kucha which version of the story would they believe?

Today there are many ways to spread gossip and rumors such as social networks, email, and texting. Have your students talk about an incident in your school where rumors spread with little basis in truth.

## LITERATURE

Tokta: *“Think of it! A caravan boy will try to outwit Haza, king of the bandits.”*

A common theme in children’s literature is child as hero foiling an adult. What other books have your students read that share that theme?



*Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan by Hildi Kang*

## ETHICS

Chengli refuses to accept Master Fong's jacket that Tokta stole from a stranger because he believes stealing is wrong. Tokta asks him:

*"If you take from someone a thing they took from someone else...are you stealing...or rescuing it to give it back? When you find her, will you be rescuing her...or stealing her from Haza, who now owns her?"*

Do you agree with Tokta's logic? Is rescuing the princess really stealing? Does the reason matter?

*This guide was create by Clifford Wohl, Educational Consultant*



Chengli and the Silk Road Caravan by Hildi Kang