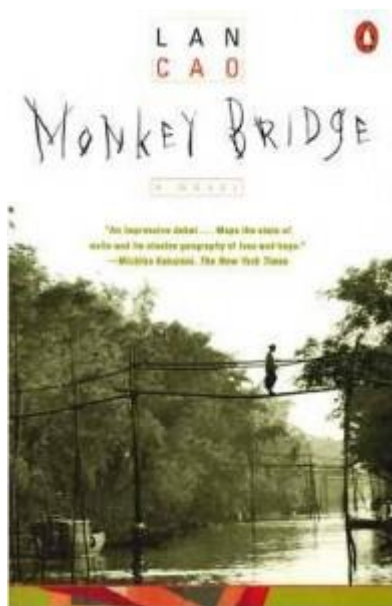


Teaching Monkey Bridge-Article



Establishing Prior Knowledge: That Was Then: This is Now
Teaching *MONKEY BRIDGE* by Lan Cao

by Anna J. Small Roseboro

Being a veteran teacher of over thirty years, I should have known better. But that first year, I so excited about teaching this new novel, that I just forgot. The setting was familiar and I just didn't think how few contemporary students have the prior knowledge to understand some of the subtleties of an autobiographical novel set in the United States and Viet Nam of the 1970's. I jumped right in and had to backtrack and begin all over again. However, easy access to technology and resources the problem of finding a wealth of background information was easily solved and I learned a lot in the process. But, I see now how selfish I'd be if I didn't share the fun with my students. That was then. With increased access to technology and digital resources, generating that cultural, historical, and literary foundation is an even richer experience because students can begin learning sooner. This is now.

To help you avoid backtracking as I did that first time, I offer you ways I learned to better prepare my students to experience a powerful work of historical fiction, *Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao and ways you can update that approach to meet 21st Century standards.

Early in the novel, the mother counsels her daughter to “Keep what you see behind your eyes, and save what you think under your tongue. Let your thoughts glow from within. Hide your true self.” (41) The first time I taught the novel, my students were appalled. They found this advice deceptive. “How,” they wondered, “can a mother give this kind of advice to a child? She’s teaching her to be a phony!”

“Oops,” I thought, “They’re missing the significance of this scene.” That first year, I had to back pedal and tell my late twentieth century California students a little about the culture in which the mother was raised in order to for them to understand the advice she gives her daughter. In subsequent years, I did what most of you do regularly – give this background before reading and then let this newly created “prior knowledge” help the students understand and enjoy the novel as they read.

Prior knowledge, you’ll recall, is a combination of the preexisting attitudes, experiences, and knowledge students bring to their reading. So excited about getting into the book, I had forgotten to prepare them to get through the book. Now, more than ever we educators know the value of background information True, we, teachers, sometimes have to provide that knowledge before teaching a specific piece of literature. However, I’ve stopped being the sole provider. It’s better to develop prior knowledge than to be given it. Let me share with you the journey.

Monkey Bridge, an autobiographical work, is a first novel by Lan Cao, and it relates the immigration from Vietnam to the United States of a mother and daughter in 1975. The story unfolds as the daughter, Mai, prepares to leave for college and during that year reads two journals her mother has written, which provide insight for the daughter and for the readers as well. The first journal describes the mother’s childhood and early years of marriage and takes the reader back to the time when Viet Nam was a French colony. The second journal is of her life once she moves from Viet Nam to Virginia, in the United States. Because both the places and times are foreign to most of my high school seniors, I prepared a PowerPoint slide show with images to introduce these students to the people, place and culture of South Viet Nam – enhancing their prior knowledge and ultimately their understanding and appreciation of the story.

So before teaching the novel the next year, I did my research and found the Internet to be a rich trove from which to gather images for a PowerPoint presentation. I found lots of computer generated art to explain the geography, history, and culture of 1970’s. As other experienced teachers know, visuals can provide hooks on which to hang new the information students encounter as they read. So, instead of jumping into the deep water and hoping the students would be able swim on their own through the this work of historical fiction, I collected images found on the Internet, videos borrowed from the local library, and more from the collection of a colleague in the History and Social Sciences Department at my school. What fun I had. How selfish I feel now.

Vietnam – the sea horse. I began with a map of the country which, in the book, is called a sea horse and it does, in fact, resemble one. Showing a map of North and South Vietnam gave me an opportunity to mention the fact that Vietnam had been a French Colony, that there were two Vietnams, North and South, and that the United States had gone into the war to support the liberation of South Vietnam from Communist ruled North Vietnam.

Later, the story mentions Madame Nhu who became the notorious “The Dragon Lady” for referring to the self-immolation of Buddhist Priests protesting the war as “barbeques.”

My students seldom saw Vietnamese dressed in their native attire, so I included pictures of the *ao dai*, a style of clothing worn by women in South Vietnam and also pictures of the intricate embroidery, Mai, the daughter is forced to wear during her college interview at Smith College in Massachusetts. My students could connect with this mortifying scene. Many of them were going on college visits themselves and understood the embarrassment caused by the generational and cultural gap between the mother and daughter, especially having to do with fashion, and could therefore empathize with the main character of this work of historical fiction.

Being from Southern California, few of my students travel to Canada and fewer understand the significance of the maple leaf flag that frightens the teenager, Mai, in the opening scene of the book. Nor could my students comprehend the fear a Vietnamese immigrant would experience just crossing the border during the 1980’s when the U.S. still had in place sanctions against Vietnam. In the story, Mai is afraid she may be unable to re-cross the border or that she may have to be sent back to Vietnam! San Diego, they knew, shares a border with Tijuana, Mexico. My Southern California students, however, were able to connect this fear of Mai’s to that of immigrants who cross our borders from Mexico.

In the book, the Mai’s grandfather talks about the “mosquito” beating the “elephant”. The grandfather refers to the Vietcong and the hundreds of miles of underground tunnels they created and lived in during the war. From these secret passageways, these small statured guerilla fighters emerged to attack at night and mysteriously escaped below ground without the American soldiers being aware of these hideouts. However, even if they had known where the Viet Cong hid, with their larger physiques few American soldiers would have been able to follow the Viet Cong into the narrow tunnels. The sting of the mosquito and the girth of elephant. Now, I thought, my students would be ready for that scene and maybe even appreciate the metaphors.

Of equal importance of knowing something about the geography of Vietnam is having a sense the culture. So I gathered images for other slides to prepare the students for the differences between Western and Eastern, in this case, Asian cultures. In one such case, is a difference in the perception of ears. Yes, ears.

In Western cultures, small ears close to the head are thought to be more beautiful. However, in some Asian cultures, it’s just the opposite. Large ears are looked upon as auspicious because they indicate wisdom and compassion. So I include several slides of the Buddha.

The Buddha and the Bodhisattvas are always portrayed with pendulous ears. Whether it’s the meditating or the reclining Buddha, the students could see what appear to be larger and longer than normal ear lobes on each of the statues, ears long enough to rest on the Buddha’s shoulders!

The question, of course, is why? The reason: The Buddha is portrayed as having big ears, because he's the compassionate one. He hears the cries of his people.

The mother in the story reminds her daughter that "The important thing is not how large our ears are, but how open are our "mind ears".

When the mother arrives in Virginia, she settles in the Little Saigon area of the D.C. suburb, and she is captivated by the TV program, *The Bionic Woman*. Few of my students, born in the later part of the 20th Century are even familiar with show – this not being one of those programs that appeared on the re-run circuit. So, I take a little time to show the students images from the program and to use those graphics to help them understand the link between the Buddha and The Bionic Woman.

You readers familiar with the show probably recall that the actress Lindsay Wagner played the strong, confident female lead in that early women's lib TV drama. She has been injured in the line of duty for the federal government and somehow she qualifies for surgical replacements of bionic implants in her arms, legs, and ears.

After the surgery, the Bionic Woman can run at almost warp speed and can hear a quietest peep from furlongs away! You can understand, now, how the mother connected with such an American – the Bionic Woman has hearing capabilities so much like that of her well-known Buddha!

The story, *Monkey Bridge*, relates incidents during which the mother has cultural clashes with people in her new country. She misunderstands and is insulted by North American gestures. One day, when Mai's mother goes shopping at the neighborhood super market, and the check-out lines are long, a young clerk opens another cash register and beckons the mother to come to this newly opened line. The cashier uses a wagging, curved forefinger, a gesture used in Vietnam only to summon one's pets- one's dog or one's cat. The mother, of course, is offended and storms out in a rage. This incident of misunderstood gestures, gives an opening for me to talk about gestures and ways one can innocently cause negative responses in international relationships. You may recall the faux pas a United States President made while visiting Australia, when thinking he was giving the victory sign; he was in fact, making a vulgar gesture!

Anyway, I included a few slides in my introductory lesson for my students that show images of gesturing people from other countries and ask the students what they think the gestures mean. Viewing examples from Japan, France, and Iran, the students soon see how easily one can offend or be offended when one is unfamiliar with significance of local gestures. Some recall the "Do you bite your thumb at me?" scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. A text to text connection seen. Point made.

There are two other cultural concepts I found important to share with my students before they began reading this autobiographical novel – which, by the way, was one of the earliest pieces of fiction written in English by a Vietnamese immigrant and published widely here in the United States. In the book, reader will learn that the mother believes strongly in the Law of Karma.

Karma in Buddhism, teaches that for every event that occurs, there will follow another event whose existence was caused by the first. The next event, some Buddhists believe, depends on the previous and this second event will be pleasant or unpleasant according to the skillful or unskillful cause. It is portrayed in the wheel of karma.

In other words, the law of karma teaches that responsibility for unskillful actions is born by the person who commits them. In the book, the mother believes she is responsible for the success or failure not only in her own life, but also in that of her daughter, Mai. Knowledge of this concept helps students understand some of the motivations of Mai's mother.

Finally, before I set the students to reading this intriguing mystery, I shared with them a few slides that help to explain the concept of loyalty to family members – even after their death – one of the motivations compelling actions in a number of Mai's friends and family members. I show the students images having to do the family altars that honor ancestors. With soft Asian music playing, I show the slides with captions and invite the students to reflect on those of their own family members who have gone on before. Among the images are an incense burner, flowers, a candle, a tray of five fruits, gourd bottles, and a funerary urn, items often found on family altars in the homes of people from Vietnam.

Ah ha! A funerary urn. This is familiar. My Southern California students connect! Many of them know that some classmates of Mexican descent set up similar displays in their homes during the celebration of *El Dia des Los Muertos*, the Day of the Dead, observed in November each year. For this celebration, the ancestor's altar creates a particular, personalized little invisible world and when the aloe wood is burnt and the flame is burning, children and grandchildren invite ancestors to come home and enjoy the offering. In both the Vietnamese and Mexican homes, a photo of ancestors may be placed on the altar. The altar I include in the slide show helps students make the connection between their own experiences and those that characters experience in the novel.

One last image I include in this introductory slide show is that of the moon cakes which symbolize family unity and perfection. It a traditional cake made with sweet bean-paste filling inside a golden brown flaky skin. Moon cakes play an important role in the August Moon gathering and in gift giving. Some moon cakes have a golden yellow yoke in the center – perhaps to symbolize the moon and the concept of rebirth.

Having created “prior knowledge” offered students an opportunity to anticipate connections to their own experiences and those of Mai and her family, they're prepared to read with greater

understanding. True, this PowerPoint slide show took just a portion of a class period and was well worth the time spent. But, it now is possible to design lessons that have the students do this research during class or as part of a homework assignment.

If you're teaching another literary work with similar characteristics of time and place unfamiliar to your students, to consider utilizing the vast resources of the Internet and invite students to help create a set of slides to show to then show to the whole class. They'll have more of a buy in when they see how their research fits with that done by their classmates and will better understand the novel when they get to the part related to their own research.

Another way to help students visualize a country and historical event so very unfamiliar to most of them, I show sections from two videos. The first is to give them a overview of the country to understand the geography and typography the Lan Cao describes so vividly, but still leaves questions in the minds of my students. The place seems so exotic, even fantasy-like to some of my seniors. So to provide a sense of realism for them, I show the Viet Nam section from a travel video called *Raise the Bamboo Curtain: Viet Nam, Cambodia and Thailand (1995)* which I borrowed first from my local library and then finding it so useful, eventually purchased a copy for myself through a website on the Internet. Now that so many film clips are available on line, if your school has access to such resources, it no longer is necessary to make these kinds of expenditures.

For years, I taught this autobiographical novel as part of a modern fiction unit for seniors. Most of them will have studied something about Viet Nam and the role of the United States in the conflicts there in the 1960's and 1970's, but few of my students recognize how accurately Lan Cao describes the events on 1975. So I pull out another video I learned about from a colleague in the History and Social Sciences Department. When I mentioned to her that my students seemed incredulous about what they were reading, she recommended I borrow a video she sometimes used when teaching this period of history. The one she loaned me is part of a Public Broadcasting Station six part documentary called *Vietnam: A Television History (1985 and 1987)* but I show only sections from Volume Six: "The End of the Tunnel: 1973-1975."

The author of *Monkey Bridge*, Lan Cao, describes from the Vietnamese perspective what happened on April 30, 1975 when the United States military jettisoned helicopters over the sides of aircraft carriers to make room for military personnel retreating from that country. These journalists' clips show anxiety, terror and anger in those closing hours of the war.

Once we completed initial reading, we would spend the next few days re-reading sections and discussing the ways the Lan Cao uses various literary structures, elements of fiction, and figurative language to make the story come alive for us. The cover image of the fragile bridge crossing a rushing stream takes on new meaning as the students reflect on the literal and figurative implications of what they now know is a monkey bridge – a single pole bamboo

bridge, held together with mangrove roots, with another pole for a hand rail that was typically used to cross rushing rivers in small towns through Vietnam.

Having heard the author speak at a recent professional conference, I learned that the emotional incidents and personal stories may have been fictionalized but they do, in fact, reflect her experience both as an immigrant and as an émigré. So now time when I teach the novel, I can include this experience as I introduce to them and then encourage my students to reflect on the power of historical fiction to portray real people, places, and events in such a creative, informative, and satisfying way.

That combination of slides in a PowerPoint presentation to prepare students to read about an unfamiliar place and unfamiliar culture and the videos to show them the landscape of the country and the final days of the war, truly did help to enrich the reading of this historical novel, *Monkey Bridge* by Lan Cao.

Now, however, due to more ready access to resources electronically, teachers assign the students do more of the research themselves. With adequate pre-planning, teachers can design lessons for in a single class period, during which students can gather and prepare a few slides with the information to share their classmates. What they learn on their own tends to last longer than what spoon is fed. No longer do teachers need to take total responsibility for researching the background information to prepare students the read a piece of literature. The development of that prior knowledge can be part of the learning experience