

The King of Masks (1996, d. Wu Tianming)

“The world is a cold place but we can bring warmth to it.”

—Master Liang to Bian Lian in *The King of Masks*

Director Wu Tianming’s 1996 film *The King of Masks* will transport your students into China’s recent past—Sichuan Province in the 1930s. The film tells the story of Bian Lian Wang, an aging street performer who is a master of the traditional art of face-changing. The old man longs for a male heir to whom he can pass on his artistic heritage. A famous actor of the Chinese opera befriends Bian Lian and urges him not to let his art die and to find an heir. The old man tries. He goes to a place where children are being sold, finds a little boy and purchases him. The child brings the old man joy but also sorrow when he notices the bruises on the boy’s arms. Clearly, this child had been abused. The future looks bright, however, for the old man and the “grandson” he names Doggie.

Complications arise when Grandpa realizes he has been duped—Doggie is a girl. Although Bian Lian attempts to abandon her, he cannot. Still, their relationship changes significantly. He forbids Doggie to call him Grandpa. Now she must call him “boss.” She must earn her keep and, to ensure his investment pays off, he begins to train her in acrobatic skills. Doggie willingly agrees but she is nevertheless a child who longs for a family. Her efforts to win back the heart of the old man nearly destroy both their lives.

The stories the world tells through film transcend news broadcasts of current events and help us to understand the many ways people are alike, despite the barriers of political and cultural ideology and language. *The King of Masks* opens a window through which young people can view and learn more about China’s culture and history. Specifically, the film introduces students to two of China’s traditional art forms—the opera and face-changing. Additionally, the film challenges students to understand the concepts of a patriarchal society where filial piety is a duty.

The King of Masks controversially uses the respected traditional Chinese forms of artistic expression to tell a story that addresses traditional notions of gender empowerment and sexual identity. The lessons that follow focus on the film’s narrative structure. In completing these lessons, students will also explore how film language and elements of style shape the film’s meaning.

Lesson	Activity	Activity
1: A Journey into China’s Past: Sichuan Province, 1930s	Introducing the Characters—Find an Heir	The Inciting Incident —Children for Sale
2: Rising Action and Complications	Boss and Leech	<i>Enrichment</i> —The Filial Child
3: Theme—What Is the Movie About?	“The King” Comes to America	<i>Enrichment</i> —Reflective Writing

Lesson 1: A Journey into China's Past: Sichuan Province, 1930s

Activity A: Introducing the Characters—Find an Heir

- Introduce the setting for the story, providing a geographical context for students. First, distribute **Handout 1: Map of Sichuan Province, People's Republic of China**. Indicate that the light area represents China and the darker-colored region represents Sichuan Province. You may prefer instead to have students locate Sichuan Province on a wall map or on a computer-generated map that provides more geographic detail.

- Emphasize this key point about China's history:

*The People's Republic of China is a communist country, established on October 1, 1949. Although *The King of Masks* was made in 1996, its setting is a river town in Sichuan Province in the 1930s, prior to the establishment of the PRC.*

- Next, read aloud and discuss the director's comment on why he chose this particular setting for his story. Ask: What do you think he means when he says people "felt victimized?" *Answers will vary but should include the main idea that the people struggled to survive.*
- Finally, share this information about the Dafo shown on the handout: *The impressive stone carving is 230 feet high, making it one of the largest stone sculptures in the world. It is also one of the oldest. Dafo makes a cameo appearance in *The King of Masks*.*
- Distribute **Screening Sheet A—Find an Heir**. Complete the pre-screening activity, discussing the key points indicated on each "note." Additional information on these key cultural and historical points is provided below. See "Extension Activities" at the end of this lesson for online resources for further student research.

Chinese Opera

The earliest known opera performances were in the Song dynasty (A.D. 960 to 1279). While the art form has changed over the centuries, opera remains one of China's cultural treasures. Performances feature elaborately embroidered costumes, jeweled headdresses, and colorful masks. Opera was more than mere entertainment for the people. It also expressed human emotions and experiences—love, joy, sadness. Like most storytelling, opera was also educational, teaching people lessons of the past.

Buddhism and the Living Bodhisattva

Buddhism is a system of beliefs based on the teachings of Buddha, a prince of the fifth century. Buddhists believe that life naturally includes suffering, and that suffering comes from desire. To achieve happiness or perfect enlightenment, one must give up worldly goods and strive to live a life of compassion and truth. A bodhisattva is a being who strives and succeeds in living by these principles.

Face-Changing

The secrets of this art form are still closely held by modern-day masters. However, women are now allowed to perform face-changes. The hand-painted masks are light enough so that one can be worn on top of another. A silk thread from each mask is concealed somewhere on the

performer's clothing, so that with a swirl of an arm, a slight tug of a sleeve, the mask disappears revealing the next mask underneath.

Dragons

The dragon has been a symbol in China for hundreds of years. While there are many different types of dragons—winged, horned, celestial—they are all benevolent, unlike the more wicked fire-breathing dragons found in Western mythology.

- Introduce the screening activity. Explain to students that they are going to watch the opening scenes of the film *The King of Masks*. In these scenes, they will meet two of the main characters and learn important information about them. Indicate, also, that the four key points discussed above will help them to understand what is happening on the screen and why.
- **Screen chapters 1 – 4 of the DVD.** Allow time for students to complete the questions, then discuss. Recommended answers are below.

Answer Key for Screening Sheet A: Find an Heir, Part 2—Screening

1. Describe Bian Lian's appearance and his behavior. How does he earn his living? State why you think he is or is not successful. *Answers will vary but should focus on Bian Lian's plain clothes and his humble behavior. He is modest, at times seems sad, but is an enthusiastic performer who engages his audiences. He performs face-changes in the streets in return for donations by those who appreciate his art.*

2. How does Master Liang Sulan differ from the street performer Bian Lian, both in appearance and behavior? *When the audience first sees Liang, he is in costume as a performer. Later, his clothing is quite stylish in comparison to Bian Lian's. His behavior reveals a seriousness about his profession (he doesn't lose control when the women charge his chair to touch him for good luck) but also he shows modesty with Bian Lian, giving him compliments and suggesting that he, Liang, does not possess the talent of Bian Lian.*

3. Despite their outward differences, what do these two men share in common? *They are both artists, performers. Some students may point out that both men wear masks or costumes while performing.*

4. What other characters are introduced in these opening scenes? Specifically, who is Tianci? *Police officers are introduced, as is a mother and her son, Tianci. Tianci is presented in this opening scene to his grandfather.*

5. What misunderstanding occurs between Bian Lian and Master Liang? *Bian Lian thinks Liang wishes to learn the secret of his art, face-changing.*

6. What sadness does Bian Lian seem to have? *His art will die when he dies, as he has no heir to whom he can teach the art.*

7. When Master Liang asks Bian Lian to join his artist's troupe, the old man replies it is "like asking two peaks to merge." What does Bian Lian mean by this figurative language? *Answers will vary but students should understand that mountains generally do not bend or move. Bian Lian's meaning is that they are two very different men whose art and audience likewise differs.*

8. Before departing the teahouse, Master Liang tells the old man, “Generals never dismount but carry on.” What does he mean by this phrase? *Don’t give up. You make your own destiny.*

9. In these scenes, children are either seen or mentioned. Identify two images or references to children. *Answers will vary. The first child seen is Tianci and the parents and grandparents seem to dote on him. Bian Lian tells the police officer that if he were more fortunate he’d have a grandson to help him perform. Later, in the teahouse, Master Liang urges Bian Lian to find an heir.*

10. How do these scenes depict male children—positively, negatively or neutral? Provide a reason to support your statement. *Positively. Reasons will include the way Tianci seems to bring happiness to his family, and the value both performers place on an heir.*

11. How do these scenes depict female children—positively, negatively or neutral? Provide a reason to support your statement. *Negatively. Master Liang states that “no one values girls.”*

12. What do you think will happen next? Why? *Answers will vary. Encourage students to think about Bian Lian’s sadness and Master Liang’s advice. Most students will likely suggest that the story will evolve around Bian Lian’s efforts to find an heir.*

- Conclude this activity by asking: *What aspects of Chinese culture are reflected in these scenes?* Encourage students to relate the scenes to the “notes” reviewed during the pre-screening discussion, specifically the popularity of the face-change magician, and the belief that touching the throne of the living bodhisattva will ensure that a woman will have a healthy son. Comment, also, on the celebration with fireworks and the dragon parading through the street.

Activity B: The Inciting Incident—Children for Sale

- Review with students the three-act structure that most—but not all—films follow.

Act 1

The opening scenes of a film introduce the characters as well as the time and place of the story. Act 1 also includes an *inciting incident*, or event, around which the plot develops. This incident creates a sort of domino-like effect, setting in motion the action that will occur later in the film.

Act 2

The second act presents the *rising action*. Rising suggests that events follow one after the other, creating complications for the characters and building suspense as to how the characters will solve their problem(s).

Act 3

The final act includes both *falling action* and *resolution*.

- Write the word yé on the chalkboard or overhead projector. This is the Chinese word for “old gentleman” or “grandpa.” Explain that the scene they are going to watch is part of Act 1. This scene contains the *inciting incident*.

- Distribute **Screening Sheet B—Children for Sale**. Explain that students will view this segment twice. The first time, you will need to turn off the English subtitles. Allow time for students to record their responses on the sheet, then discuss. Recommended answers are below.
- **Screen Chapter 5 of the DVD, without subtitles.**

Answer Key for Screening Sheet B—Children for Sale, Part 1 – First Screening: Watching

1. Describe the “marketplace.” Use specific details to capture the atmosphere. *Answers will vary but should focus on the bleakness of the place. It is dark and without furniture or much comfort. The old man’s breath can be seen, so it is also cold.*

2. What kind of people have come to this place? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that these are common people, not wealthy adults.*

3. What visual clues suggest what these characters might be feeling? *Body language, including facial expressions, suggests feelings.*

4. What happens in this scene? *Answers will vary, but should include the main idea that the old man is being approached by children and adults with children. Some students may suggest that the children and adults are begging. Others may be more observant and see that some type of negotiation – buying and selling – is occurring.*

5. What feelings did you experience as you watched this scene? *Answers will vary. Accept all reasonable responses.*

- Define *exposition*. Exposition is background information about a person, a place, or a thing. This information is useful to understanding a character’s personality and/or motivation.
- Ask: *In the scene you just viewed, what don’t you know? What information would help you understand why the old man has come to this place or why the children are there?* Emphasize that while the visual images and soundtrack communicate meaning to an audience, some background information, or exposition, can help the viewer understand the characters’ conflicts.
- In this next activity, students will view the same scene again, this time with the subtitles provided.
- **Re-screen Chapter 5 of the DVD**, this time with the English subtitles visible on screen. Allow time for students to record their responses on part 2 of the screening sheet, then discuss. Recommended answers are below.

Answer Key for Screening Sheet B—Children for Sale, Part 2 – Second Screening: Seeing

1. How do the subtitles change your understanding of (a) the marketplace? (b) the people and what they are feeling? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that these people have suffered hardship. They give up their children, not because they do not love them but because they cannot feed or otherwise care for them. The man who attempts to sell the child with the rope around his neck states that he would not do so except that his land has been flooded.*

2. Comment on the use of light and color in this scene. How do the light and colors affect how you react to what is happening? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that the marketplace is dark, gloomy. When Bian Lian first sees Doggie, the light seems to come from above, almost like a halo.*

3. Comment on the use of music in this scene. How does the soundtrack affect how you react to what is happening? *Answers will vary. Clearly the music suddenly swelling is meant to trigger compassion or pity in the viewer for the child's plight.*

- Conclude this activity by discussing the *inciting incident*. Ask: What choice does Bian Lian have in this scene? He can purchase a child or not. Ask students to predict what will happen next. How will purchasing Doggie change the old man's life?

Lesson 2: Rising Action and Complications

Activity C: Boss and Leech

- Distribute **Screening Sheet C—Boss and Leech**. Complete the pre-screening discussion. Additional points for emphasis are below.

Confucius

Confucianism is the belief that all people are bound to one another through moral ties and familial relationships. Confucius had specific ideas about punishment, too. Among his recorded sayings is this: *Regulated by the edicts and punishments, the people will know only how to stay out of trouble but will not have a sense of shame. Guided by virtues and the rites, they will not only have a sense of shame but also know how to correct their mistakes of their own accord.*

Filial Piety

Paying respects to ancestors, those family members who have died, is also a precept of filial piety. You may wish to emphasize, too, that a wife's duty was to produce a healthy male heir. In China, there was a saying that the birth of a son was "big happiness." The birth of a female child was "little happiness." A woman who gave birth only to daughters was often referred to as "childless."

- Ask students to explain what a *leech* is. It is a worm that sucks blood or eats flesh. Next, write the word *cormorant* on the chalkboard or overhead projector, and explain that a cormorant is a water bird that feeds on fish.
- **Screen Chapters 6 – 11 on the DVD.** Allow time for students to complete the questions, then discuss their responses as a class. Recommended answers are below.

Answer Key for Screening Sheet C—Boss and Leech

1. Moving images *show* rather than tell. Identify an image or images that *show* the following:
 - a. Bian Lian is happy to finally have an heir? *Answers will vary and may include one or more of the following: he purchases new clothing for Doggie, playfully scares him with the masks, feeds him, comforts him when he sees the bruises on his arm, promises to teach him his art and to give him his name.*
 - b. Doggie has not eaten for a long time? *He eats the rice hungrily so that Bian Lian tells him not to "wolf it down."*
 - c. Someone has abused Doggie? *The bruises and also the reaction of both Doggie (lowers head) and Grandpa (curses) suggest this.*
2. Doggie has a secret he must keep from Grandpa? *At night, Doggie slips out of bed and off the boat to squat on the cobblestones to pee. The reaction of the monkey is the filmmaker's way of*

suggesting that something is surprising about this. Some students may reference an earlier scene, and in fact the first hint or foreshadowing of Doggie’s secret occurs in the shop when he is asked to try on the pants. Doggie takes the pants and changes behind the curtain.

3. This sequence of scenes can be divided into two sections, scenes that come before and then after Doggie reveals the secret. Complete the chart below.

Detail	Before the secret	After the secret
Doggie’s Clothing	<i>Doggie dresses as a male child would – in a dark blue jacket, pants, and with hair cut short.</i>	<i>Doggie dresses as a female child would – in a red flowered jacket. As the scenes progress, her hair grows and she wears it in two ponytails.</i>
Bian Lian’s behavior toward Doggie	<i>Initially he treats Doggie with love and gives away a family treasure to ensure Doggie recovers from illness. He shows Doggie off to Master Liang. Some students may note that he carries Doggie on his back at one point.</i>	<i>He cries in shame. He walks ahead of Doggie. On the boat, he sits with his back to Doggie – and Doggie is not allowed on the boat. Later, after rescuing Doggie, he begins to train her as an acrobat and uses a harsh tone of voice in correcting her exercises.</i>
Words, phrases Bian Lian uses when speaking of Doggie	<i>Grandson and “poor little melon” are two affectionate phrases he uses.</i>	<i>He calls Doggie a crook, a “stupid little girl” and a “leech on a cormorant’s foot.” Emphasize here that Bian Lian is the “fish,” the man who lives on the water, and Doggie is the parasite living off of him.</i>

4. After learning Doggie’s secret, Bian Lian decides to abandon her. Why? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that she is of no use to him. As a girl, she cannot perform his art. To keep her means another mouth to feed.*

5. Bian Lian could have sold Doggie and also could have allowed Doggie to drown. Why does he not sell her and why does he rescue her? *Answers will vary but should focus on the main idea that he is lonely and he has grown to care for her. He likely does not sell her because he knows she’ll be abused again. He gives her money so that she’ll have a chance to survive.*

- Ask students to link these scenes with the concept of *filial piety* touched upon in the pre-screening discussion. In what way do these scenes reflect filial piety?
- Conclude this activity by asking students to suggest what might happen next. Clearly, Grandpa is fond of Doggie and Doggie has found someone to trust. And he has begun to train her—as he has apparently trained General, his pet monkey. But will the relationship last? Other complications are sure to arise. What might they be?

Activity D: *Enrichment—The Filial Child*

- Before viewing the remainder of the film (running time is approximately 60:00), review with students these key points about Chinese opera:

Four Main Roles

There are four main roles in Chinese opera: the *sheng*, or leading male; the *dan*, or leading female; the *jing*, or painted face; and the *chou*, or clown. The male and female roles can be subdivided into characteristics; for example, the virtuous female, the flirtatious female, or the wise old man.

Face Painting and Masks

The *sheng* and *dan* roles require facial paint but the *jing* generally wears a mask. The colors of the facial paint and masks symbolize a specific characteristic. Red, for example, represents loyalty and courage. Black represents fierceness. White represents wickedness.

Gestures and Physical Movements

Movement and gestures are far more important in Chinese opera than scenery or props. An actor might suggest riding a horse simply by raising a riding crop, or whip, overhead. Acrobatics are also part of the opera's visual effects.

Music

Music is likewise an important element in Chinese opera. Instruments include the gong, wooden clappers, the drum, as well as stringed instruments such as the erhu (a type of violin) and the pipa (a type of lute). High-pitched, falsetto voices sing lines from the opera.

- Explain to students that in these next scenes they will see excerpts from two different operas. The leading actor in these operas is the character Master Liang Sulan. The opera scenes in the film are critical to understanding why Doggie does what she does later in the film.
- Introduce the final screening activity. In these scenes, the action continues to rise and build to a climax, or turning point. After viewing these scenes, students should be prepared to link cause and effect events that build to the climax and to identify the event that is the turning point.
- **Screen chapters 13 – 28 of the DVD.** Teachers, please note: There is no screening sheet for this activity. Instead, guided discussion questions are provided below.

Guided Discussion

1. Bian Lian takes Doggie to the opera. Master Liang acts the *dan* role. The *dan* in this particular story is a princess who kills herself. Why? *This is a challenging question requiring students to pay attention to the subtitles. The daughter in the opera believes that by sacrificing herself she will prove her father's innocence.*
2. Doggie does not seem to understand what happened in the play, particularly why the princess came back to life again. What explanation does Bian Lian provide? *That she was a good person who did good deeds and rescued souls in strife – that is, people who are suffering.*
3. How does the story of the princess dying to save her father, the king, relate to Doggie later in the film? *During another performance by Master Liang, which the general of the army is attending, Doggie ties a rope around her ankle and drops from the roof, hanging dangerously over the stone steps below. She proclaims her grandpa's innocence (he, too, is a sort of king,*

- a king of masks) and threatens to cut the rope unless the general helps to save him. The general disbelieves that the child is serious and walks away. Just as the princess cut the rope in the earlier opera, now Doggie likewise cuts the rope and falls. Master Liang saves her by breaking her fall and tumbling down the stone steps with Doggie in his arms.*
4. When was Tianci kidnapped? *On the night of the opera. He wanders away during the performance.*
 5. How does the fire start on Bian Lian's boat and what happens to Doggie as a result? *Doggie accidentally sets one of the masks on fire and drops it on straw. The boat burns, though not completely. While Doggie cries and is contrite, the next scenes show Bian Lian wandering the streets with General. Doggie is not with him. The implication is that the old man has sent Doggie away.*
 6. If Doggie had not been kidnapped, how would the story have turned out differently? *Answers will vary but Doggie's kidnappers put her in the same hiding place as they have placed Tianci. Had she never been kidnapped, then she would not have been able to rescue Tianci and bring him to Bian Lian's boat.*
 7. Why does Bian Lian confess to kidnapping Tianci? *He claims his innocence, but no one believes him. The guards beat him until he confesses. Bian Lian, however, also believes that perhaps this is his fate, that somehow he is being punished for some wrong deeds he had done in the past.*
 8. Who saves Bian Lian and how? *Answers will vary. Master Liang attempts to use his influence as a celebrity to gain the old man's freedom. He fails. Doggie's attempt to kill herself to prove the old man's innocence ultimately convinces the general that Bian Lian is innocent. The general secures Bian Lian's release. Master Liang tells Bian Lian that Doggie is his true savior.*
 9. Doggie is not related by blood to Bian Lian but in what ways is she a "filial child" to him? *Some students may argue that filial piety means obedience and Doggie does not obey Bian Lian. If she had, she never would have sneaked into his masks and set the boat on fire. On the other hand, however, she never abandons him and is willing to give her life to save his.*
 10. What incident is the climax, or turning point, of the story? *This occurs when Doggie cuts the ropes and falls but is saved by Master Liang. This action—by not only the innocent child but also the living bodhisattva—so impresses the general that he agrees to arrange Bian Lian's freedom.*
- Conclude this activity by asking students to comment on the ending of the film. Is the ending realistic? Would Bian Lian break tradition and pass along his secrets to a girl? Or is this just a happy ending tacked on to please the audience? *Answers will vary. Perhaps the contemporary filmmakers are suggesting that the subject of women's rights is in fact an issue worth exploring with empathy. Perhaps they are suggesting that China is changing.*

Lesson 3: Theme—What Is the Movie About?

Activity E: “The King” Comes to America

- Review with students the purpose of a movie trailer. Explain that once a film is ready for distribution, the people in charge of promoting the film make critical decisions that affect not only where they will advertise the film but how. Print advertisements are one way to promote a film. The movie trailer is another strategy.
- Continue this discussion by pointing out that the filmmakers made a decision to release the film in countries other than China. Why? Encourage critical thinking by reminding students that there are no Americans in this film. This is a movie about China and the Chinese people, made in China by Chinese filmmakers. Why would Americans be interested in viewing this film?
- What message about China do the filmmakers intend foreign audiences (Americans, for example) to take away from this film? *Answers will vary. Encourage students to think beyond the economic factors of “selling” the movie, to more about the audience by asking what it is about this particular film that might appeal to American audiences.*
- Introduce the screening activity. Students will view and analyze the persuasive strategies used in the trailer for *The King of Masks*.
- **Screen the Theatrical Trailer on the DVD.** Discuss the trailer with students using the Guided Discussion questions below.

Guided Discussion

1. There are no subtitles in this movie trailer. Why is that? Instead of subtitles, the filmmakers use a voice-over (an off-screen narrator). The VO is in English, indicating that the audience for this trailer is not the Chinese people but rather foreign audiences who speak English. Some students may suggest that using subtitles in the trailer would be off-putting. Remind students that subtitles are not literal translations. A trailer is a very short film and so using a narrator enables the filmmakers to communicate more information.
2. What strategies do the filmmakers use to persuade the audience to see this film? *One strategy is using a title card that states the film won a major award; another is focusing on the character relationship between the old man and the little girl.*
3. Do you think it was wise for the filmmakers to give away Doggie’s secret in the trailer? State why you do or do not think so. *Some students may think this is giving away an important element of surprise that occurs in the movie. Others, however, may suggest that giving this secret away in the trailer enables the filmmakers to focus on the film’s theme—the love between a grandparent and female child.*
4. Conclude this activity by asking students to compare this trailer to trailers they have seen for other movies. In what way is it different or similar to trailers for American-made movies? *Answers will vary but emphasize that none of the characters speak in this trailer and therefore there is no Chinese dialogue. If someone had not seen the film first, they might be*

surprised when they went into the theater to discover the film was in Mandarin with English subtitles.

- Conclude the activity by asking students to answer this question about the trailer: What aspects of Chinese history or culture are evident in the movie but not presented in the trailer?

Activity F: Enrichment—Reflective Writing

- Write this question on the chalkboard or overhead projector: *What is this movie about?* Ask students to supply answers and record these on the chalkboard or overhead projector. Encourage critical thinking by referencing discussion points from previous lessons. For example, you might ask:

*Is this a movie about poverty and the plight of China's children?
Is it about filial responsibilities? Women's rights? Corruption? Greed?*

Or is the theme one or both of these lines, spoken by characters in the film:

*Don't despair. Luck and misfortune are intertwined.
The world is a cold place but we can bring warmth to it.*

- Explain the writing assignment. Distribute **Handout 2: Reflective Writing Exercise**. Emphasize these key points about a reflective paper:

Reflection is thinking. A reflective paper is one where you examine, then write about yourself in relationship to some other subject. In this case, that other subject is the film *The King of Masks*. To write your reflective paper, follow the steps below.

1. Examine your response to the film. What emotions did you feel while watching this film? Were there points when you were happy? Sad? Angry? Confused? Why do you think you responded this way?
2. Did you make a connection to a character in the film? If so, which character? What personality trait might you share with this character? Or, did one of the characters remind you of someone else in your life? How is this person similar to (or different from) the character?
3. What issues, if any, did the film challenge you to think about?
4. Next, write your response. Remember, this is a reflective writing assignment, so do not summarize what happened, and don't write a movie review. Instead, write about yourself—your thoughts and emotions during and after viewing the movie.