

# Lantern - ESOL Learning Guide

## LANTERN A PLAY BY RENEE LIANG

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### About the play

Chinese New Year's Eve is when families get together, eat like gluttons and sweep the house clean of any bad-luck issues before the New Year. Unfortunately for the Chen family, there are a *lot* of issues.

Henry is a broken man, consumed by memories of war and immigration. His children Jen and Ken are still struggling to figure out who they are. And then his wife Rose, who walked out of their lives a year ago, reappears just in time for dinner...

The play is done in the “two-hander” style, where two actors play all the characters between them while making it clear which character they are by means of voice and gesture. It’s a play which explores the interrelationships in a Kiwi-Chinese family and their response to living in New Zealand. This is a story inspired by the many Chinese immigrants who made their home in NZ and the experiences of their children who grew up in New Zealand.

## Characters

Lantern is a play about a Kiwi-Chinese family. The members of the family are:

- Rose, whose grandparents emigrated to NZ from China in the 1920s and worked as market gardeners and labourers;
- Henry, who was born in China, fled the Japanese as a young boy during the war and grew up in Hong Kong, emigrating to NZ in the 1970s when he married Rose;
- Jen and Ken, the two children who were born in NZ.

There are a number of side characters also, both Chinese and non-Chinese. In total there are ten characters.

### **Questions:**

1. Which character do you most identify with, and why?
2. Are there any family stories which you'd like to write about?
3. How does telling these stories as drama make them more interesting?
4. Have you ever had similar experiences to the ones the characters in the play experience?

## Time and place

The play is set in two different times and places:

1. Present-day Auckland
2. Auckland/Hong Kong in the 1970s.

### **Questions:**

1. How can you tell that the time has changed?
2. How is music used to indicate the time period?
3. Do you have any memories of living in a place and watching it change over time? Do you enjoy change?

## Language

*Lantern* includes some dialogue in Cantonese. There is also some buried meaning in the Chinese writing on the lanterns.

**Questions:**

1. If you understood the Cantonese, how did that make you feel?
2. Did it help you to understand the ideas of the character? Did you identify with him?
3. If you didn't understand the Cantonese, how did that make you feel?
4. Do you think even the non-Chinese watching the play would have understood what the character meant?

**Staging**

*Lantern* has had professional lighting, sound and stage design.

**Questions**

1. Did you understand when the actors changed characters?
2. Do you enjoy this style of theatre? Have you seen it before?
3. How did the set relate to the story?
4. Were there any scenes that you particularly liked?
5. How did the colours used in the set relate to the stories and ideas in the play?
6. If you were staging *Lantern*, how would you stage this? What kind of music and lighting design would you use?

**History**

*Lantern's* four main characters come from very different backgrounds, all of which are "Chinese" and "New Zealander". Henry is a first-generation new migrant, while his wife Rose is fourth-generation. The children who were born in NZ see themselves as very Kiwi but somehow also don't fit in.

**Questions**

1. How much do you think appearance affects the way you relate to others?
2. How much do you think appearance affects how others in NZ see you?
3. Can you relate to the language problems of any of the characters?
4. Do you think that the way they acted is right?

5. How much does language and understanding influence the characters in the play?
6. How much do you know about the history of Chinese in New Zealand?

## **Themes**

People watching *Lantern* have said different things about what the play means to them. We'd like to find out what the play meant to you.

## **Questions**

1. What do you see as the main themes of the play? Why?
2. What are the most important themes in your life right now?
3. Does the play make you think differently about something that's happening in your life?
4. If you wrote a play, what would it be about?
5. How important are stories?

## **Lantern – plot synopsis (for use in full or in part)**

Summer, Auckland, 2009. Jen, thirty-going-on-forty, is contacted by her estranged mother Rose, who left the family home without explanation a year ago. Rose announces her intention to turn up for dinner – but forbids Jen to tell anyone. The day happens to be Chinese New Year's Eve, where traditionally families get together for a meal, a last chance to sort out any issues and to "clean the house" before the start of the New Year.

Rose's father Henry, originally an immigrant from Hong Kong, is confused and bitter about Rose and still traumatised by memories of the Sino-Japanese war and its aftermath. Jen's brother Ken is also confused, but in a different way. Jen and Ken are involved in a car crash whilst arguing about their parents.

Act 2 takes us back to 1950's Hong Kong and New Zealand, where a young Rose and Henry are courting. Rose is a headstrong, 3rd-generation NZ Chinese who 'does the right thing' by going back to Hong Kong to marry a boy her family have selected for her. Despite this, the two fall in love and return to Auckland only to face the realities of adapting to their two very different world views. Rose gives birth to a daughter, Jen.

Act 3 takes us back to the present day, to the midst of chaotic preparations for dinner. Jen and Ken are trying figure out how to tell their father that the car has been destroyed. Rose appears and confronts each of her children in turn, and then finally Henry. Dinner is served and Ken and Jen find the bravery to

tell the truth about the car and about a number of other things. The two children disappear to light lanterns leaving Rose and Henry alone together. Henry declares his continuing love and forgiveness of Rose and begs her to return, but after hesitating she decides she cannot. In the ensuing struggle a precious vase, Henry's last link to his family in China, is smashed. As Rose leaves, we return to Jen and Ken lighting lanterns and making wishes for the future.

### **Further Reading for teachers**

[http://www.goingbananas.org.nz/papers\\_2005.php](http://www.goingbananas.org.nz/papers_2005.php) (and other years)

<http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/The-Chinese-in-New-Zealand/The-Chinese-in-New-Zealand/>

(multiple downloadable papers)

Ng, James. Windows on a Chinese Past (4 volumes) Otago Heritage Press, Dunedin, 1993

Ng, Eva Wong. Chinatown Girl. Scholastic, 2006

Further information about Lantern is available by visiting the website <http://www.lanternplay.com>. Further copies of this ESOL Guide are downloadable.

Copies of the Lantern script (in full or in part) are available by contacting Renee Liang, [docrnz@gmail.com](mailto:docrnz@gmail.com), 021 265 9131. Renee is also available for school visits and workshops.

### **Auckland performances of *Lantern* – June 8-13 2009**

The Basement, Lower Greys Ave, Auckland CBD

#### **8 pm evenings**

Bookings: [buytickets.co.nz](http://www.buytickets.co.nz) (09) 357 3355

Tickets \$22/\$18/\$15 - Service fees apply

#### **12.30 pm School Matinees**

June 9 & 11

Tickets \$8 - Service fees apply

Book at <http://www.the-edge.co.nz/About-THE-EDGE/THE-EDGE-Programmes/Education/Inspired-Learning.aspx>