The Nightingale
Philippe Muyl, 100 Mins, China/France, 2013

Education Resource
About this resource

This resource has been written by ACMI educator Susan Bye with a focus on students of Chinese language and culture. *The Nightingale’s* themes and visual storytelling also make it an ideal text for years 5-8 English and Media.
THE NIGHTINGALE

Philippe Muyl, 100 mins, China/France, 2013, Mandarin with English subtitles

The Nightingale is a charming film about making real life connections in a world dominated by digital technology. It tells the story of ten year old Ren Xing, a city girl who loves her iPad and mobile phone but knows very little about the world outside Beijing. When she travels through the Chinese countryside with her grandfather, she discovers a different way of life and another way to live.

The Nightingale is a French-Chinese co-production and is the first Chinese film to be directed by a foreigner. When making the film, French director Philippe Muyl worked intensively with the Chinese members of his crew to make sure he communicated the story effectively in Mandarin and represented Chinese culture accurately.
Before Watching the Film

The Setting

The Nightingale is a story set in two quite different Chinese landscapes and cultures – the urbanised China of the present-day and the rapidly disappearing Chinese countryside. The film opens in the overcrowded and highly industrialised environment of Beijing and moves to the lush, more sparsely populated Guilin area of the Guangxi region. This beautiful and tranquil area is contrasted with the hectic and disconnected world of the city and offers Ren Xing a space where she can learn to connect with her grandfather and her community.

Ask students to:

- find out more about Beijing and the lifestyles of its inhabitants.
- research the Guilin area of Guangxi.
- plot the journey from Beijing to Guilin, and from Guilin to Yangshuo on a map.
  - How far is it?
  - How long should each stage of the journey take?
- join together as a class to share and compare information.

Relationships

Family and community relationships are a key element of the story told in The Nightingale. As characters change and learn more about themselves, their respect for others grows.

Ask students to find out more about relationships in China.

- Which relationships are considered the most important?
- How important is the idea of respect?
- Have these traditional values changed over time?
- What are some of the challenges and stresses faced by families and communities in modern China?

Students may find the following articles useful for researching this theme:
The Story


- Ask students to identify the film’s key themes as they are presented in the trailer.
- As a class, consider Ren Xing’s comment: “Since I left home, it’s like being a bird, as if my cage has been opened and I’ve flown away.” What do the students think she might mean by this?
- What are some of the reasons Ren Xing might feel trapped?
After Watching the Film

Class discussion

Ask students:

- How would you describe *The Nightingale*?
- What was the film’s message?
- What did you learn from the film about Chinese culture?
- Were there some elements of the story or the depiction of Chinese culture that surprised or confused you?
- Were there any aspects of the film that you felt misrepresented Chinese society?

In exploring the film together as a class, you may find it useful to look at some of the interviews given by the French director, Philippe Muyl. For instance, in this interview, he explains his perspective on Chinese culture and the story he has chosen to tell:


The Title

- Ask students to find out how to write and pronounce the Nightingale in Mandarin.
- What is special about nightingales?
- What is special about the nightingale that features in this film?
- Ren Xing describes herself as a bird that has finally escaped from its cage and learned how to fly. Can this metaphor also be applied to her grandfather? Explain.
- Ask students to write a paragraph uncovering the layers of meaning contained in the title.
- How does the visual language of the film contribute to our understanding of the title and the theme?
  - What is the effect of the many interior shots of the characters in Beijing? Consider, in particular, the opening in which Ren Xing’s grandfather, Zhu Zhi Gen, is shown in his tiny apartment.
  - Contrast the representation of the city with the magnificent wide shots of the countryside framing the tiny figures of Ren Xing and her grandfather. (The image overleaf is a particularly memorable example of this effect.)
Change and Tradition

China is going through a period of rapid change. In just a few decades it has shifted from being a struggling rural economy into an industrial powerhouse. This has led to intensive migration away from rural areas into large cities.

- As a class, make a list of the ways that the changing landscape of modern China is shown in *The Nightingale*.

Ask students to consider the following questions when exploring the film:

- How have the demands of modern society changed Zhu Zhi Gen’s life? Why did he decide to leave the village he loves so much?
- How do the three generations of Ren Xing’s family represent the rapid changes that have taken place in China?
- How are costume and setting used to represent the division between the past and the present?

Divide students into small groups and ask them to consider the following questions, before joining together as a class to share answers.
• As represented in the film, what are some of the things that have been lost as part of the modernisation process?
• Which aspects of traditional Chinese life and culture do you consider a great loss?
• Are there any elements of modern life in China that are seen as a positive thing?
• What do you consider to be the most positive and the most negative features of the changing landscape of modern China?
• How many of these problems and benefits are also a feature of modern Australian life. Explain and give examples.

Communication

China is a huge country with an enormous population. Accordingly, modern systems of communication are a fundamental part of everyday life.

• In The Nightingale, communication technology does not prove to be a particularly effective way of bringing people together. Explain and give examples.
• How does Ren Xing’s attitude to communication and media technology change? What does this tell us about her and her spiritual journey?
• Most Australians are also very reliant on communication technology. Are there many similarities between the way that Ren Xing and her family live their lives in Beijing and your life?

Families

The Nightingale focuses on a single family across three generations.

• In what ways could the three generations of Ren Xing’s family be considered a representative or typical modern Chinese family?
• To what extent – if at all -- does this family continue to draw on the traditional Chinese family structure and in what ways has this family become disconnected from tradition?
• How have the traditional place and role of the grandfather changed because of his relocation to the city? How is his customary status restored to him?
• How does the family change? Explain, give examples and describe your response as a viewer to this change.
• How might Ren Xing’s characterisation reflect concerns in China about the impact of the one child per family policy, particularly in the context of the growing affluence of many Chinese families?

When presenting the bitter dispute between Zhu Zhi Gen and his son, filmmaker Philippe Muyl was surprised to learn that no matter how much anger a Chinese son might feel towards his father, he would never raise his voice to argue with his father. This would be too disrespectful.
• Taking into account this idea of the respect owed to older Chinese people, how do we explain Ren Xing’s disrespect to both her grandfather and the family that gives them a bed for the night?
• What does her rudeness suggest about the way she has been brought up?
• How does Ren Xing demonstrate her growing respect and sense of duty?

Narrative

Film narratives usually contain:
• a beginning where we are introduced to the characters and a problem arises.
• a middle where the problem is worked through.
• an ending that brings about some kind of resolution.

• Briefly describe the narrative structure of *The Nightingale*.
• What is the main problem that needs to be resolved?
• How is the problem resolved?
• Harmony is an important principle in Chinese culture. How does the principle of harmony contribute to the ending?

Character Development

The story focuses on Ren Xing and Zhu Zhi Gen, their growing relationship and their contribution to each other’s lives and happiness. Using the table on the following page as a template, ask students to plot the development of each of these characters.
Name of Character: _______________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEGINNING</th>
<th>END</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about this character at the beginning of the film?</td>
<td>What more do you know about the character at the end of the film?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide an example that explains what the character is like in the beginning.</td>
<td>Has this character changed by the end of the film? Explain your answer.</td>
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</tbody>
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