

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze by Elizabeth Foreman Lewis

---

## Book Information

Elizabeth Foreman Lewis, Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze

Quiz Number: 100

Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972

ISBN 0-8050-0549-8; LCCN

267 Pages

Book Level: 6.4

Interest Level: MG

In the 1920's a Chinese youth from the country comes to Chungking with his mother where the bustling city offers adventure and his apprenticeship to a coppersmith brings good fortune.

**Award:** Newbery Medal

**Topics:** Countries/Regions, China; People, Children

## Main Characters

Father and Mother Ling an elderly couple from Tang's home country who are saved from a flood by Young Fu

Fu Be Be Young Fu's widowed mother, who tries to keep her strong-willed son from straying from traditional ways

Lu a tall journeyman in Tang's shop who is falsely accused of hiding opium

Small Den a fellow apprentice who takes an instant dislike to Young Fu and later schemes to implicate him in a theft

Small Li Young Fu's closest friend, a fellow apprentice who is saved from a deadly sickness by foreign doctors

Tang the coppersmith to whom Young Fu is apprenticed, a fair-minded artisan who comes to think of the young man as a son

Wang Scholar a venerable teacher who befriends Young Fu and teaches him writing and the wisdom of the sages

Young Fu a young country boy who comes to the city of Chungking to serve as an apprentice to a coppersmith

## Vocabulary

**abacus** a manual computing device with moveable counters

**brazier** a metal pan for holding burning coals

**coolie** an unskilled laborer or carrier

**li** a Chinese unit of length, equivalent to one third of a mile

**queue** a braid of hair worn down the back

**ya-men** an official government building

## Synopsis

As the story opens, Young Fu is seeing the bustling city of Chungking for the first time. He and his mother have come to the city to fulfill Young's apprenticeship with a local coppersmith. *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* is the story of a young boy's growth in both age and wisdom, set against a backdrop of political change in twentieth-century China.

Young Fu is fascinated by the sights and sounds in this strange new city. He meets the learned Wang Scholar, who begins to teach him to write and read. He finds Tang a fair and talented master and determines to do his best for him. Young Fu's lack of experience, combined with his curiosity, sometimes leads to trouble in his early years in Chungking. He gets on the wrong side of a group of beggars, who later ruin a brass kettle he is delivering for Tang. His disgrace and terror is lessened by Tang's even-minded reaction and appropriate punishment--no more deliveries for Young Fu for the remainder of the month. Another time, the boy is fooled into buying a watch he cannot afford, incurring a debt that seems insurmountable. Young Fu shows his ingenuity by paying the debt in a most unusual way--he sells "Dragon's Breath," snow gathered from the countryside. Already, good fortune seems to shine on him.

Young Fu's confidence grows, and he feels he can ignore his mother's warning to stay away from foreigners when he is drawn to the scene of a fire at the foreign hospital. He comes to the aid of a "yellow-haired" foreign lady and saves a building from burning. This foreign doctor sends him a gift of money, and a friendship is formed.

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze by Elizabeth Foreman Lewis

---

Young's association with the foreign doctor turns out to be a lifesaver for Young Fu's friend, Li, who is stricken with a seemingly fatal disease. Working against the inclination and fears of Li's parents, Young Fu arranges for the yellow-haired doctor to treat his friend. Li makes a full recovery.

In this time of political and social unrest, bandits ply the river, and soldiers are always present in the streets. Young Fu furthers his relationship with his employer when he helps to foil a group that would have robbed Tang during a delivery trip by boat. Later, chance brings Young Fu together with cherished neighbors of Tang's native village when he saves them from a flood. As time passes, Young Fu reveals the richness of his character, and Tang's fondness for the impetuous boy with the brave heart grows.

Tang's trusting attitude toward his young apprentice prompts him to leave Young Fu in charge overnight while the others attend a feast. A disgruntled former apprentice, Wei, takes the opportunity to break into Tang's shop, accompanied by Communist political agitators who resent the wealth of the well-to-do capitalist merchant. Young Fu proves his absolute loyalty by foiling the attempt. Later, when one of Tang's journeymen is accused of hiding opium, Tang calls on Young Fu to help him disprove the charges. Young Fu is able to identify the real smuggler and save his friend from almost certain torture. In addition, he helps Tang by revealing the existence of a thief ring at the shop, with Tang's own accountant a major participant.

But Young Fu still has much to learn. Entrusted by his mother with the family's entire savings of two dollars, he loses it in a game of dominoes. The shame, combined with the practical problem of living without money, is enough to make Young Fu physically sick, but Tang comes to his rescue with the needed funds. Though Young Fu knows he can hide his disgrace from his mother when she returns, he feels compelled to confess to her. It is then that she tells him he has finally become a man.

In the end, the greatest honor comes to Young Fu when Tang tells him that, despite his "overweening pride and hot temper," he has grown both fond and proud of the young apprentice and will adopt him as his own son.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

After Young Fu leads the elderly Lings from the site of the flood and up the wall to the foreign hospital, the yellow-haired doctor says to him, "What have you been doing tonight--cheating another dragon of its prey?" Explain what her comment means.

*Many Chungkingese believe that "dragons" or spirits are responsible for natural disasters that occur in everyday life. The doctor herself witnesses Young Fu defeating the "fire dragon" the night he prevents her house from burning to the ground. After Young Fu helps the elderly Lings escape from the flooding of the Yangtze River, she makes an allusion to the river dragon thought responsible for floods.*

### Literary Analysis

Reread the section of the book involving the man making political speeches in the tea house. How does the language of this political agitator give the reader a clue that the political system he is advocating is Communism?

*The speechmaker uses what are now well-known Communist phrases, such as "workers of the world." The speech also includes allusions to the Communist concepts of equal wealth for all people, oppression of workers by their masters, and taking from the rich to give to the poor.*

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze by Elizabeth Foreman Lewis

---

## Inferential Comprehension

How does Young Fu change over the course of this story?

*The wide-eyed young boy of the first few pages of the book becomes a journeyman of his craft, a trusted friend, and a future son by the end of the story. He proves his bravery in facing fire, flood, drug smuggling, and thievery, in each case doing his best to help those around him. He learns that all tasks in the shop are valuable, and, with Wang Scholar's help, learns some of the wisdom of the sages. He has grown from a boy into honorable manhood.*

## Constructing Meaning

Young Fu learns a sentence during one of his first sessions with Wang Scholar: "If a man's affairs are to prosper, it is simply a matter of purpose." Tang states the very same proverb to teach Young Fu a lesson after the incident with the beggars and the ruined brazier. What lesson does Tang mean to teach?

*Young Fu gets on the wrong side of the group of beggars by defending the rights of a weak beggar given money by a wealthy traveler. Later, the beggars do not forget his meddling and get even by ruining a brazier that Young Fu is delivering. When Tang hears the story, he mentions the proverb as a way of letting Young Fu know that he must attend to business when out on deliveries, and thus avoid entanglements like these.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** In her introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze*, Pearl S. Buck calls the book a "prologue to modern China," because it covers the time period just before establishment of a central Communist government in China. As a class project, research Chinese history during the latter half of the 1940's. Pay specific attention to how social change was enacted. Ask students to write a one-page report on their findings.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** *Young Fu of the Upper Yangtze* covers many years and many incidents in Young Fu's life. As an exercise in understanding chronological order, assign each student to review the book and write each major plot incident on a single 3" X 5" index card. Make up several sets of cards. Shuffle the decks and ask small groups of students to reconstruct the plot by laying out the cards in chronological order.

**Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning** A proverb is a short, familiar saying that expresses an important truth. Tang recites a proverb when he tells Young Fu, in reference to people who play dominoes, "He who rides on a tiger cannot dismount when he pleases." The respected elders in Young Fu's life often declare such proverbs to characterize events or teach a lesson. As a class project, review some of the many proverbs in the book. Then, ask each student to write one proverb of his or her own. Ask for class volunteers to share their proverbs with their meanings.

**Responding to Literature** Many adults in Young Fu's life take a special interest in him. Wang Scholar volunteers to teach him, the yellow-haired doctor befriends him, and Tang announces his intention to adopt him as his own son. Ask the class to consider the adults in their own lives who take a special interest in them. Assign each person in the class to write two paragraphs describing a special teacher, relative, coach, babysitter, etc. that explains what that person does to show their special interest.