

CHINESE TAKE AWAY

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STUDYGUIDE

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ABOVE: NATHALIE TJEN AS A TEENAGE ANNA; ANNA YEN AS WARRIOR WOMAN

Written/Performed by Anna Yen
Directed/Produced by Mitzi Goldman



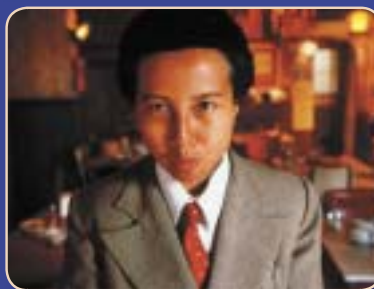
INTRODUCTION

CHINESE TAKE AWAY is an adaptation of an acclaimed physical theatre show. It blends poetic story telling, symbolism, drama and archival footage to capture the spirit of a true story. Performer /writer Anna Yen in seeking to understand a family tragedy, tries to put herself in her mother's and grandmother's shoes and unravels stories about her grandmother, her mother, her father and herself. The film moves from China in the early 1900s, to Hong Kong in the 1930s, suburban Sydney in the 1960s, and into the present day. This is an unusual and confronting documentary.

THEMES

In addition to telling the story the film explores a number of themes related to:

- Intergenerational relations
- Mother/daughter relations
- The impact of economic dependence and independence in shaping life choices
- Self-discovery
- Cultural conflict
- Sexism
- Australia's history of discrimination
- Migration



- Depression and suicide
- The role of myths and stories in sustaining family and culture
- The different ways in which people can perceive the same experience

Chinese Take Away is a very complex film, lending itself to a range of approaches depending on the nature of the subject and the age of the student. It would be a stimulating resource for upper secondary and tertiary students of History, English, Australian Studies, Media Studies, Drama, Psychology, Cross Cultural Studies, Social Science, Human Development and Religious Education.

THE CENTRAL CHARACTERS

There are four central characters:

GRANDMOTHER

In an attempt to discover all she can about her mother Anna travelled to Hong Kong to speak to her Grandmother. Her Grandmother had little to tell, 'I was too busy, when your mother was young, ask Third Sister' she re-



plies. Instead, Grandmother told Anna her own story. A long time ago she lived in a village in the country in China. Her family bred silkworms and fish. When she was five or six years old her parents lost everything in a flood and she was sold to a rich man in the city of Canton. One of her jobs was to serve opium, she was given food and a place to sleep but she received no wages or schooling and had no children with whom to play.

At sixteen she ran away, and returned to her village. After seeing her family she left, and gained work as a servant in Hong Kong. At seventeen she married. She believes, her husband killed their first son by feeding him cockerel soup. Later a fortune-teller told her she would have no sons. She went on to have ten children in total including two sons whom she gave away. Anna thinks she did this because she was afraid they might die as the first son had, and the boys would 'survive under another family's protection'. This was unusual; it was more common to give away the girls. Although very poor, grandmother, 'hung on to her girls'. When Anna's mother left for Australia, grandmother

hoped she would marry a rich man and so have a better life.

MOTHER

Born in Hong Kong, Anna's Mother died in Australia at the age of thirty eight. She came to Australia at a time when there were not many Chinese migrants. She arrived on a student visa and lived in Bondi Junction in the house of a man twenty years her senior. He had assumed she was a marriage prospect and had sponsored her but Anna's mother had different expectations ... 'I came here to study. Not marriage. I am a modern woman.' Finding herself pregnant, to him (it is hinted as a result of rape), she agreed to be married, but not without considering her options. It is interesting that even in the 1950s, she suggests that she would have taken her husband to court over the assault, but she needed money to do this ... 'but I did not have court money so no choice but to stay with him.'

Her lonely suburban life revolved around her children, and to earn extra pocket money she started a



TOP-BOTTOM: MARRIAGE RESISTOR; GRANDMOTHER; MOTHER



dressmaking business. She was a kind, controlled, sensitive woman and self-critical. The only time we see her communicating her thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams is when she writes to, 'Dear Third Sister'. Anna's mother was visited by a former school friend from Hong Kong who gave her a beautiful butterfly brooch and told her of his love for her, but he also accepted that her responsibility was with her family. On his return to Hong Kong he became ill and then committed suicide.

When Anna was ten, her mother suffered a nervous breakdown. She was tortured by noises in her head reiterating every negative comment that had been made to her. Even her daughter Anna criticized her for 'talking to herself'. She wrote letters to editors of major newspapers around the world seeking an answer to the question, 'why is there so much suffering in the world'.

FATHER

Like Anna's Grandmother, Anna's Father also suffered as a child in China. As a young boy, he worked as

a labourer.

He came to Australia in 1942 at a time when the White Australia Policy was widely accepted and anti-Asian feeling was heightened because of the war with Japan. His recollection of that period was 'hard time, hard time'

He was originally to marry Anna's mother's older sister, but she was not able to get a visa to come to Australia, so Anna's mother was sent on a student visa. The misunderstanding over why Anna's mother had come to Australia is really the basis of the tragedy that was to unfold ... 'I want marry, she want study', but they subsequently married and had four children, one of whom was Anna the writer of this story.

Although he was a good father who provided well for his family with the proceeds of a successful Chinese Take Away restaurant at Bondi Junction, the marriage was clearly a source of tension for both of them.

DAUGHTER

Born in Australia, Anna grew up with both the Australian way of life and Chinese culture.

It was an overwhelming curiosity about her mother and the tragedies that befell her, that led Anna to begin looking into the lives of her mother and grandmother and eventually to write the play on which this film is based.

In a sense, Anna also used the play to tell her mother that she is happy and is exercising the choices that her life in Australia offers.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM.

Many people will relate to the stories in *Chinese Take Away*. The film also deals with a number of issues that are outside the experience of many young Australian. In order to maximize their ability to understand and appreciate this film some preparatory research and discussion related to the following topics would be helpful.

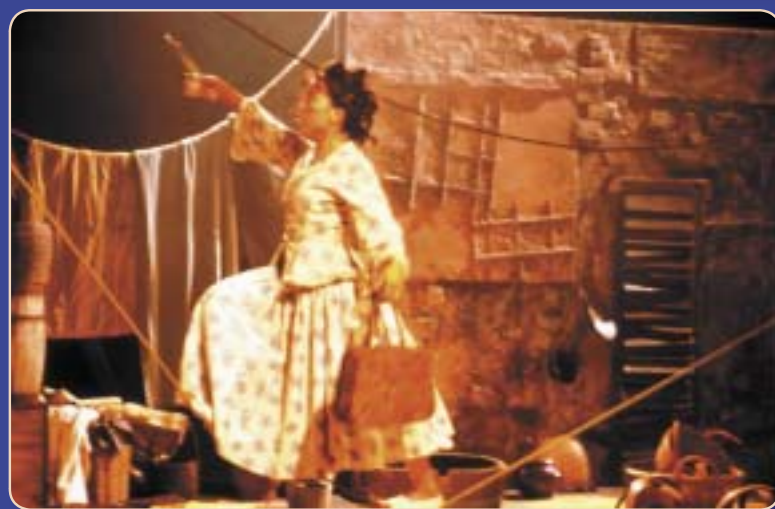
(Teachers may find it useful to research some of these topics and present information to the students in order to prepare them to view the film.)

1. What do you understand of the concept Feng Shui? How significant is it as a defining force in the lives of those who practise it?
2. Depression and mental illness are major concerns in modern society.
 - What has been used as a treatment?
 - What is Electro Shock Treatment?
 - How have ways of dealing with depression and mental illness changed over the past few decades?
3. What was the White Australia Policy? How was it administered? When was it phased out? What impact did it have on Australia's population and on non-whites who happened to live here?
4. Research the changing role of women in China over the last century. How have women's rights changed in China and Australia over the last century?

As you watch the film for the first time consider some of the following questions:

- *Though tears stained their dresses
Their hearts were full of blood
The wild strokes of their swords
Whistled like dragons
And sobbed with pain. (Ch'iu Chin).*
How does this introductory poem relate to the story?
- Why do you think the film-makers chose the title 'Chinese Take Away'? What did you expect it to be about? Could you suggest an alternate title?
- Storytelling is an important part of all families and all cultures. What is the importance of storytelling? Why do we do it? How do the 'Once upon a time' sections relate to each phase of the story?
- How were lives of both Mother and Grandmother shaped by the economic circumstances and financial decisions made on their behalf, by their families. ?

- Symbolism is used freely throughout the film. Identify as many symbols as you can and comment on their significance.
- Can you detect any connection between the Warrior Woman, her sword fighting and the unraveling of the story?
- What is the significance of the ring?
- How is the thread of silk used as a symbol in the sequence on the 'marriage resisters'?
- What is the reason for the interludes of the rolling sea?
- Is there a connection between the name of Anna's mother's former friend 'Little Dog' and her behaviour as she slides into mental illness?
- Try to identify examples of racism, either overt or subtle, that members of the family experienced in Australia.
- What was Anna's real purpose in writing the play and then turning it into a film? Is there a sense in which she was exercising the freedom that was denied to her mother and grandmother?
- Has watching this film changed any of your perceptions about migrants' lives in Australia?



LEFT: MOTHER AND TWO DAUGHTERS. TOP-BOTTOM: MARRIAGE RESISTOR; MITZI GOLDMAN - DIRECTOR/PRODUCER; THE OTHER ANNA YEN

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES RELATING TO THE CENTRAL CHARACTERS AND THEMES

GRANDMOTHER

- When Grandmother's family lost their income she was sold to a rich man in the city. How significant was this event in shaping grandmother's life? Suggest two specific ways in which it affected her.
- Consider the story of the marriage resisters who 'promise to stay together to look after one another'. What is the point of this story? Do you think that Grandmother would have been happier and more fulfilled if, through a change of fate, she had joined one of these sisterhoods?
- There may be parallels between this selling of children in China, the 'Stolen Generation' of Aboriginal children or the sending of unaccompanied children to Australia as refugees?
 - Imagine that three people, all aged 40 years meet in Australia. One was sold as a child in China, one was an Indigenous Australian removed from her parents at the age of three and one came to Australia on a refugee boat from Vietnam in 1975.
 - Construct a dialogue among the three, in which they reflect on the impact of their childhood experiences on the adults that they became.
- Grandmother gave away her two sons. What reasons does she give for this? In what way was this unusual in traditional Chinese society?
- Later in the film, Grandmother is depicted unsympathetically—was this just the way that her daughter saw her or was this a realistic depiction? Refer to scenes or incidents to support your view.

MOTHER

- Can you suggest why Anna's mother's older sister was refused a visa while Anna's mother was allowed to enter Australia.
- Anna's mother came to Australia eager to study and to be a 'modern woman'. What do you think she

understood by this?

- Clearly her husband had a different interpretation of the word 'modern'. He criticized her for being 'too modern'. What expectations did he have of her as a wife?
- Anna's mother agreed to marry her husband after she became pregnant, but she had considered charging him with rape. Why was this a particularly brave and independent thought, even if it didn't amount to anything? What was the main reason why she didn't take him to court?
- Think of another situation in which two people may have completely different and conflicting expectations. Write a short synopsis of this situation and predict the consequences.
- To what extent were the troubles which Anna's mother experienced the result of anti-Chinese feeling and to what extent were they a consequence of her own personality and situation?
- When Anna's mother came to Australia she seems to have been very lonely. Try to find out what (if any) support services were available to her then, as a new arrival.
- Imagine that instead of writing letters to the newspaper about the suffering in the world, Anna's mother had written outlining ways to improve the support services for new arrivals. Write such a letter, outlining at least three strategies to help new arrivals to adjust.
- Research the sorts of services and assistance schemes that exist today, to help new immigrants.
- Anna's mother's childhood friend 'Little Dog' visited her and gave her a beautiful butterfly brooch. What was the importance of this relationship and this visit? What aspects of her personality are shown through this incident?
- Anna's mother told her children many stories, always beginning with the words 'Once upon a time in a land far away...' Examine one of these stories in detail and comment on its relationship to Anna's mother's life or the life of the family.
- When Anna was about ten her mother suffered a nervous break-

down. What does this mean? Suggest and examine the factors which may have influenced the breakdown of her mental health.

- What treatment did she receive? Find out whether that treatment is still used today? What other treatments are available for depression and mental illness?

DAUGHTER

- Explain why you think Anna really wrote this play/film.
- Why did Anna want to put herself in her mothers' shoes? Was she successful?
- After her mothers' death, 'she wondered if it was my fault'. Taking into account Anna's interpretation of the events of her mother's life, is this a realistic conclusion?
- This film is largely about Anna's determination to put in an historical and cultural setting, the events and influences that led to her mother's death. It is interesting that the viewer could be forgiven for thinking that Mother had only one child. Can you explain why this would be the case? Does it throw a different light on the accuracy of the film?
- Anna seemed to enjoy a good relationship with her father. The visit to the circus, was of particular significance, 'it was the first time I'd seen Australians celebrate something that was Chinese'. What else was significant about this story?
- If Anna had been asked to identify three reasons why her life was so different from those of her mother and grandmother, what reasons do you think she would give?
- Towards the end of the film, Anna said that she had choices 'Anna knew that she stood on the shoulders of the women who came before her.' Write a poem or reflection which outlines what Anna would have wanted to say to her mother and grandmother, had they lived until she was an adult.

FATHER

- Father came to Australia in 1942. Why was this such a difficult time for Chinese migrants?

- Father worked hard, 'I do everything good'. Do you agree with this self-assessment? Explain your view. What could he have done differently to improve his family life?
- How do you think what happened to Father when he was a child affected his ability to do other than he did?
- Father seems to see his most important role as that of financial provider and supporter. Why do you think he held this view and would it have been common among men of his generation? Could that view have played a role in the tragedy that befell his family?
- Anna appeared to have a good relationship with her father. What scenes, incidents or passages in the film suggest this?
- List points for and against the notion that it is easier for immigrant men to adjust to life in Australia than immigrant women.
- Can Father be blamed for what happened to the Mother?

THE FILM

- Throughout the film there is a recurrent theme of storytelling. What is the purpose of these interludes? What impact do they have on the film?
- The film is rich in symbolism. Identify as many recurring symbols as you can, then choose one and outline the way that it is used to enhance the film?
- How is colour used to heighten the impact of certain scenes in the film?
- How effective is the use of the technique of letters to Third Sister as a means of telling much of the story? Can you suggest another way in which these gaps in the story could have been filled?
- This was originally a play. Can you suggest ways in which it could have been better adapted to a film?

ESSAY TOPICS AND ACTIVITIES

- 1 Imagine that you are a recently arrived migrant in Australia. What would be the most significant hurdles and what would you do to



- 2 What could be done by the community and governments in Australia to help migrants overcome the hurdles?
- 3 Debate the topic 'The driving force in this film is anger about sexism'.
- 4 'This film is really about the universal theme of economic dependence reducing life choices.' Discuss this statement making specific reference to 'Chinese Take Away' and drawing on examples of similar themes, in other films or novels.
- 5 This film refers to Chinese culture and the Australian way of life. Is there a difference? How is this difference implied in the film?
- 6 'The combination of old film clips of Hong Kong and Sydney, re-enacted roles, photographs and symbols is too confusing and detracts from the purpose of the film.' Discuss.
- 7 'Nothing has really changed. New immigrants to Australia are still emo-

tionally and culturally isolated.' To what extent do you agree?

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FURTHER READING

The stage play of *Chinese Take Away* is published in *Three Plays by Asian Australians*, Playlab Press, edited by Don Batchelor. Also included in the book is an interview with Anna Yen and an essay by Hilary Beaton, *Dramaturg's Reflection on the Script Development of the Stage Play*.