



Teachers' notes  
Written by Jean Yates

## *A Ghost in My Suitcase* By Gabrielle Wang

### Summary

After the death of her Chinese mother, twelve year old Celeste LaClaire decides to honour her by returning her ashes to the Isle of Clouds, her ancestral home. At first she feels some trepidation in leaving her father, a French artist, and her younger brother, Robbie, at home in Australia, still suffering with their loss and grief. But, in Shanghai, Celeste is reunited with Por Por, her maternal grandmother, whose strong and straightforward manner helps Celeste come to terms with her own grief. In spite of her heritage and upbringing, from her very arrival in Shanghai, Celeste is surprised and delighted by the differences between China and Australia.

At Por Por's house, Celeste is introduced to Ting Ting, a girl about her own age whom her grandmother had adopted a couple of years ago when her parents died. From their very first meeting Ting Ting makes it clear that she resents Celeste's presence in the house and Por Por's wish that the girls become good friends seems very unlikely. Celeste enjoys exploring Shanghai and absorbing herself in the Chinese culture. But her stay is marred by Ting Ting's increasingly hostile attitude and her obvious resentment of Celeste.

One afternoon, Celeste finds herself drawn to her grandmother's room which seems to radiate and pulsate. She finds it filled with a range of strange and mysterious treasures, and Chinese symbols, yet the room feels surprisingly familiar and evokes a sense of déjà vu.

One afternoon, Por Por's neighbour, Mrs Wang, arrives in a distressed state seeking help from Por Por in dealing with the reappearance of '*the wretched thing*'. In Por Por's absence, Ting Ting sets off to fix the problem and to reassert her own superiority in the process. When Por Por discovers this, she hurriedly sets out to rescue Ting Ting and the situation.

At Mrs Wang's, Por Por is confronted by a distressed man who rants and argues with her. Realising that the man is speaking French, Celeste instinctively rushes to her grandmother's aide and helps her to assist the man and to soothe him. Celeste is surprised by her grandmother's strength and ability. She is also surprised by the sense of familiarity she feels with the unusual situation and with the strange apparatus Por Por has brought with her. Celeste begins to realize that her grandmother is quite unusual, but when she tries to question her, Por



Por is evasive and fails to answer her questions. Furious at having failed to resolve the situation on her own, and at having been upstaged by Celeste, Ting Ting runs off claiming that Por Por no longer cares about her as she is not her real family.

The next day, Por Por and Celeste set off on their long journey to the Isle of Clouds where Celeste wishes to scatter her mother's ashes. On the way she is increasingly surprised and fascinated by the Chinese customs and lifestyle and how different her mother's country is from Australia. The Isle of Clouds turns out to be a magical place, a world apart from anything that Celeste has ever experienced before. Built on canals and over five hundred years old, the town has an air of charm and romance but in spite of its marked difference, Celeste feels surprisingly at home here.

Once again, one of the locals, Mrs Gao, seeks Por Por's assistance and she is forced to reveal to Celeste that she, like many of her ancestors, is a ghost-hunter. Celeste is surprised, and yet this news makes sense to her and explains a lot of the feelings she has experienced since arriving in Shanghai. When she joins her grandmother on a ghost-hunt, Celeste proves that she has natural talent and knows instinctively what to do. Celeste feels as if she has unlocked a secret part of herself.

Por Por takes Celeste to visit the Bao Mansion, the grand home that belonged to her family before her father was wrongly disgraced and imprisoned by a corrupt official, Shen Da Pai. When Por Por points out her old bedroom, a room with intricate carvings of fish around the windows, Celeste again feels a surprising sense of belonging and familiarity. Por Por is saddened by the house's state of disrepair, but delighted to discover that the new owners plan to restore it to its former beauty. She tells Celeste that after the Bao's were forced to leave, the Shen family moved into the house and had been there ever since. But Shen Da Pai's elder son had tricked his younger brother out of his inheritance, forcing him to start a new life in Shanghai with his wife and daughter. When the parents were killed in a bus accident, Por Por took in the little girl. Realising that this child was in fact, Ting Ting, she is amazed by her grandmother's ability to forgive her family's greatest adversaries. Por Por warns Celeste that Ting Ting has no knowledge of the family connection and asks her not to reveal the truth. Mrs Tan, the new owner of Bao Mansion tells Por Por that the eldest son of the Shen family was swindled by a con-artist, forcing him to sell the house in a hurry. She then asks Por Por to help her with an unexplained and terrifying presence that has appeared in the house in the last week, which Por Por immediately agrees to do.

When Por Por and Celeste investigate, they discover an extremely powerful ghost. They are also unexpectedly joined by Ting Ting, and Celeste is surprised and impressed by how well she works as a team with Por Por. The three leave



Bao Mansion knowing that this encounter was simply the first battle with this particular ghost.

Back at home, Por Por tells the girls that she must face this ghost alone. When Ting Ting overhears Por Por praying for the ghost of Shen Da Pai she is angered and tells Celeste that her grandfather can't possibly be the ghost as only those with unfinished business return as ghosts, whilst her grandfather was an important and honorable man. When she goes on to tell Celeste that Por Por only took her in to try to improve her own status, Celeste is so angry that she forgets her promise to Por Por and tells Ting Ting the truth. Refusing to believe Celeste, Ting Ting runs away.

Before the big battle with Shen Da Pai, Por Por takes Celeste on a training round, to capture 'a fat belly'. Other than providing her with the necessary ghost-hunting equipment, Por Por leaves Celeste to her own devices, knowing that she has instinctive abilities. Celeste proves that she has a calm, sensible manner, similar to that of her grandmother. She is easily able to capture the fat belly simply by talking to him and cajoling him. She and Por Por then return him to the underworld where he will be happy. Celeste is pleased by her grandmother's high praise for her natural talent.

When they return home, Celeste and Por Por find a battered and bloodied Ting Ting. Refusing to believe Celeste's words, she had gone to Bao Mansion alone to confront the ghost, only to hear him boasting about how he got rid of Por Por's father. His wicked plot was all written down and locked in his strongbox. He tells her that after Bao Mansion was sold he felt Por Por's presence and re-emerged, hoping to use Ting Ting as a means of hurting her. Shen Da Pai easily overcomes Ting Ting, making her powerless by using her own emotions against her. Ting Ting is terrified to discover that she has dropped her talisman necklace at Bao Mansion, enabling Shen Da Pai to use it against her. She is even more worried when Por Por remains determined to recover it and to defeat the ghost. Celeste blames herself for these events, knowing that if she had kept Por Por's secret Ting Ting would not have been hurt. She sets off for Bao Mansion, determined to retrieve Ting Ting's necklace for her. She finds Shen Da Pai's strongbox which reeks of sadness and despair. But when she removes the necklace, the ghost confronts her. With no weapons other than her voice, Celeste manages to force Shen Da Pai cowering into a corner and races back to Por Por's house.

When Por Por sets off for Bao mansion, Celeste follows her and is terrified to see a black shadow hanging over the house and to hear the booming voice of Shen Da Pai shaking the windows. Fearing for her grandmother's life, she discharges Ting Ting from the hospital to help her. Forced to work together, the two girls form a strong bond, especially when Celeste returns Ting Ting's necklace to her and she realises the danger Celeste put herself in to retrieve it for her. After an exhausting battle, the three finally manage to trap Shen Da Pai's ghost, but the



girls are horrified to discover that Por Por has been sucked into her own mingshen mirror from which no-one has ever returned. Remembering her grandmother's words about the purity of the water at Bao mansion, the girls place the mirror in the water, releasing Por Por.

After the battle, the two girls are exhausted but excited. Celeste is touched when Ting Ting asks to refer to her as *little sister*. That night, Celeste dreams of her mother for the first time since her death. She sees her planting 'tomorrows' in the garden and tells Celeste that all the tomorrows are there waiting for her. Celeste and her grandmother finally make the difficult climb up Mount Mystery to scatter Mama's ashes before Celeste returns to Australia feeling a sense of peace and belonging.

### Before Reading the Novel

- Examine the book cover. What are the images on the cover? What feeling or mood do these images evoke? What images or features on the cover make the scene depicted so recognisably Chinese?
- Now, read the first page only, then consider:

The cultural differences between this novel and the ones you are used to reading are immediately apparent. Consider the chapter title, the illustration and the words of the introductory verse:

*Hey there Mama  
Beautiful bird in the sky  
How is your heart today?  
There's a bridge that stretches to the Isle of Clouds and back  
One thousand white cranes heading north,  
You and me on that bridge, almost home.*

- What aspects of them are unusual for you? What is the tone or the mood established in the writing? How can you tell that this novel has a different style or flavour to it? Can you make any inferences or predictions about the character/s introduced on this page?
- In Chinese culture, what is the significance of the white crane? (Longevity, peace and happiness).
- Research the role of Chinese symbols. Try to find out the meanings of as many symbols as you can. What is a talisman?



## Setting

### Research Activities

- Research some statistical facts about China and Australia: e.g. size, population, climate, religion, etc.
- Por Por refers to a time almost 100 years ago when a large section of Shanghai was owned by the French (p42). Research this period in China's history.
- When Celeste first arrives in Shanghai she describes her drive back to Por Por's house (pp9-10). Make a list of the information she provides and note the differences between Shanghai and where you live in Australia.
- Celeste is intrigued by the canal houses and Ling Feng's floating vegetable shop (pp52-54). What aspects does she find so surprising?

### Writing Activities

- Imagine that someone from Shanghai has come to visit you in Australia. Write a description of the journey from the airport to your house as described through their eyes. What aspects of the journey do you think would most fascinate them?
- Describe your local shopping precinct, as seen through the eyes of a Chinese visitor.
- Using travel brochures, internet sites or photographs, create two posters that depict the aspects of Shanghai that Celeste describes, and your own local area. Make a list of the similarities and differences you can identify.

## Understanding Characters

### Celeste (Little Cloud)

Celeste is twelve years old, with *dark brown eyes and long skinny arms and legs*. She has a Chinese mother and a French father, yet she was born and raised in Australia. In many ways, Celeste is different from other girls her age. She is a very strong person and copes with her mother's death surprisingly well. She is clearly independent and brave, embarking on the voyage to China alone. She has a very calm, sensible nature and is clearly the person holding her family together in this time of grief.

- What sort of person is Celeste when we first meet her?
- What characteristics does Little Cloud have that make her a good ghost-hunter and show her to be like her Por Por?
- Consider the following quotes:
  - *I've found a key that has unlocked a secret part of me.* (p70)
  - *I never write about my feelings. Well, I never used to before coming here. I was always scared that if someone knew my deepest thoughts they would have some kind of power over me.* (pp89-90)
  - *For the first time in my life I know who I am.* (p176)



- How does Celeste change during the course of the novel?

#### ACTIVITY:

- Make a graph that charts the development in Celeste's character through the story. On the graph, plot the key incidents that you think help to shape her character.

#### Por Por (Bao Min)

Like Celeste, Por Por is an unusual person and unlike most grandmothers. She has a lovely sense of humour and is sprightly and energetic. She too is a calm and sensible person to whom others turn for help and guidance and has a good heart that enables her to see the best in people. Por Por is clearly well respected on the Isle of Clouds, in spite of her family's misfortune and disgrace.

#### For Discussion:

- Make a list of any information you discover about Por Por and her family.
- Por Por takes in Ting Ting when her parents are killed, even though she knows that she is the grand-daughter of the man who caused her own father's death. What does this reveal about her character?
- Little Cloud says, *Por Por is always so patient, never pushy*. Find evidence in the novel to support this.

#### Ting Ting

Ting Ting is a young girl whom Por Por adopts when her parents are killed in a bus accident. She is the grand-daughter of Shen Da Pai, the corrupt official who had Por Por's father imprisoned and brought disgrace to their family, although Ting Ting believes that her family was great and honourable. She is resentful of Celeste fearing that she will take her place in Por Por's affections.

#### For Discussion:

- Why does Ting Ting resent Celeste so much?
- What do we find out about Ting Ting's family?
- Why does she believe that Por Por is using her to improve her own status? (p107)

#### WRITING ACTIVITY:

- Create a character portfolio of each of the 3 main characters. Place a picture of the character in the centre of the page and around their image write a series of words or phrases that describe each character.

#### Shen Da Pai

Shen Da Pai was a corrupt official who accused Por Por's father of theft, causing him to be imprisoned and his family to be forced from the Isle of Clouds. His



jealous and manipulative nature was obviously passed on to his eldest son, Ting Ting's uncle who caused a similar fate to befall his brother's family.

For Discussion:

- Why is Shen Da Pai *stronger than any ghost* [Por Por has] ever met before. (p104)?
- What story has Ting Ting been told about her grandfather and the Bao family? What does this reveal about his character?
- What is a black magician (p142)? What does it reveal about their characters that Shen Da Pai follows black magic whilst Por Por doesn't?
- Little Cloud describes Shen Da Pai's strongbox as smelling 'of dread and sadness'. What does this tell us about his character? In what ways is he a 'typical' bully?

### Celeste's Mother

Celeste's mother refused to acknowledge or pursue her abilities as a ghost-hunter, preferring instead to believe in science and facts. She was clearly a loving person and the strength within her own family. Whilst happy in Australia, she clearly loved her Chinese origins and has passed on many traditions to her children.

For Discussion:

- Although we never meet her, Celeste's mother is obviously very important in her life. As you read the novel, make a list of all the information you are told about her mother.
- Why might Celeste's mother have chosen not to use her own ghost-hunting abilities?
- Why does Celeste's mother not become a ghost trapped somewhere on earth? What does this tell us about her character?

WRITING ACTIVITY:

- Write the eulogy that may have been delivered at her mother's funeral, describing the sort of person she was.

## **Themes**

### The Environment

There are many references throughout the book to the role of the environment. The traditional Chinese attitude towards the environment clearly makes use of every available resource and has a great deal of respect for the earth.

Consider:

- the farmers' painting of the toilets to attract visitors to use their facilities to provide them with more manure for their farms.



- the acceptance of the frogs on board the bus on the way to the Isle of Clouds
- Por Por draws her strength from nature and returns to nature and its resources to help her rejuvenate.
- the use of animals and symbols from nature in Chinese art and culture
- Por Por tells Celeste, '*Nothing ever goes to waste in China.*' (p47). Why are the Chinese so careful to use every possible resource? Are we as careful in Australia? Why do you think this is?
- What could we learn from this traditional Chinese attitude towards the environment?

### Family

The notion of family is very strong throughout this novel. Celeste's family is clearly very important to her and to her mother, hence Celeste's desire to return her mother's ashes to the family home. '*Mama always wanted to go back to China one day. So that's where I'm taking her ashes, back to the Isle of Clouds, the home of our ancestors.*' (p5)

Por Por's life was drastically altered because of events that happened to her family, as was Ting Ting's.

- Celeste feels as if there is a thread that binds her to her grandmother. What indications are there of the close bond the two share? (e.g. p27 when Celeste first enters Por Por's room)
- Ting Ting resents Celeste and fears for her own relationship with Por Por, simply because Celeste is her real family and Ting Ting is not. What does this tell you about her understanding of family?
- Ting Ting asks to call Celeste 'little sister' (p167). What does this reveal about her (and everyone's) need for family?
- Celeste says, '*In China, everyone in your family has a special name. It's like being part of a great big jigsaw puzzle. You always know where you belong, and who you belong to.*' (p2)

For Discussion:

- Why is family such an important part of our lives?
- Are there any bonds that can be as strong as those of family?
- What does family mean to you? In China, many generations of family often live together. Does the smaller, nuclear family that is more traditional in Australia change our understanding of family and hence the role it plays in our lives?



### Belonging

Part of what we love about families is that they provide us with a feeling of belonging.

Consider:

- What does it mean to belong?
- Celeste was born in Australia, but to a French father and a Chinese mother. She can speak some Mandarin and some French and clearly adopts a lot of Chinese customs at home. Where does she really belong? Is she Australian? French? Chinese? How do you think Celeste would classify herself?

If there are students in the class whose families are from other countries, discuss with them where they feel they belong.

### Jealousy

The notion of jealousy and the damage it can cause is apparent throughout the novel. Consider the way Shen Da Pai treated Por Por's father and the way Ting Ting's uncle treated her father. What statement does the author make about jealousy?

Ting Ting resents Celeste because she is worried that Celeste will take her place in Por Por's affections.

- Think of a situation in which you have been jealous of a newcomer. (Or of an example of this from a film or book you have read). How did the jealousy make you act towards this person? Was the situation resolved? What helped to resolve the problem?

### Working together

When Ting Ting decides to confront the ghost, she returns bloodied and injured. Even Por Por has difficulty confronting Shen Da Pai on her own, and would certainly never have been freed from the mingshen mirror without the help of Celeste and Ting Ting.

Consider:

- Is it always better to work together?
- Discuss situations in which working together was of more benefit than working alone. (It may be useful to set up some sort of team building exercise and then discuss the outcomes with the class. What were the difficulties in working alone? How did it help to use all the members of the team? Were there any disadvantages in working as a team?)
- Why would it have been more natural for Celeste to work as part of a team than for Ting Ting to do so?



## Good vs. Evil

The notions of good and evil are often part of stories that contain spirits, ghosts or other worlds.

- According to this story, why do only unhappy people return as ghosts? What does this tell us about the nature of humans?
- Por Por traps the naughty spirits in her fish ponds, but releases the good back to the underworld. Why?
- Shen da Pai and Por Por were both trained by a Daoist magician. Why did one use this power for good and one for evil?
- Can humans be neatly classified as good or evil?
- Can life be classified as good and evil?
- Research the notions of Yin and Yang and how this relates to the notions of good and evil.

## ACTIVITY:

- Write your own chapter to insert in the story about another ghost that Por Por and Celeste have to capture. Consider what sort of person this ghost would have been and what his/her problem may be.

## Loss or Grief

Celeste appears to be very strong and to cope well with her mother's death, but there are hints that she is still very fragile. Consider her statements:

- *Before Mama died I felt as if I could wrap up the day and put it in my pocket and know exactly what it was going to be like in the morning. But now I feel trapped, as if I'm in a giant spider web. The more I struggle, the tighter the web gets until my heart is squeezed so tight, I can hardly breathe.* (p2)
- *Sad thoughts are like canaries in a cage. If you let them out, they can fly off in all directions, banging against the windows wanting to be free.* (p7)
- What do these quotes reveal about her feelings?
- Why does Celeste gain comfort from lying in her mother's big camphor chest? *'As I lie there some of the pain goes away.'* (p3)
- Make a list of the ways in which the death of Celeste's mother has affected each member of the family.
- *'It's strange lying in Mama's old bed. I look up at the ceiling, the same ceiling Mama used to lie under, and I fall asleep knowing that I'm hearing the same sounds Mama used to listen to.'* (p19) Why does Celeste feel this way?
- When Little Cloud asks Por Por *'Why do people have to die? That boy was only ten. It's not fair'* (p126), is she only referring to 'fat belly'?
- Por Por replies *'That's just the way it is, Little Cloud.'* In what ways does her matter-of-fact attitude help Celeste to deal with her own grief?



- What is the significance of the 'planting tomorrows' dream that Little Cloud has? (p168)
- After Celeste and Por Por sprinkle the ashes, the family begins to heal. What changes can you detect in each of the family at the end of the novel?

#### WRITING ACTIVITY:

- Have you ever lost a family member or someone who was very close to you? Write a paragraph describing them and how you felt when they had gone. Did any special event, action or advice help you through the grieving process?

#### Chinese Culture

- Make a list of all the Chinese customs we learn from the novel e.g.
  - white dresses are worn at funerals, not weddings (p3)
  - the wearing of straw slippers in the house (p14)
- Celeste's mother maintains a number of Chinese customs at home in Australia. As a result, Celeste finds it quite easy to stay with her grandmother in China. Make a list of any similarities between Celeste's life in Australia and her Por Por's life in China.
- Why do many migrants maintain their native customs in their new country?

#### ACTIVITY:

- Survey any students from migrant families to discover what customs their families have maintained since migrating to Australia.
- Celeste is constantly surprised on the bus trip to the Isle of Clouds (pp49-50). Make a list of all of the surprising aspects of her journey. What does this reveal about the economy and lifestyle in China as compared to Australia?
- What is the significance of the white crane that is on the back of the talisman Ting Ting gives to Celeste?

#### RESEARCH ACTIVITY:

- What other symbols does the Chinese culture have and what do they represent?

#### What's in a name?

- Many Chinese names have a meaning – e.g. first sister, second sister, first aunt, etc. Celeste likes this as it makes it easy to identify all of the people in her family. Try to make a list of these Chinese titles.
- Find other nationalities that have a similar system (e.g. Danish) and list the titles they use.
- As a class, devise your own names that could be used to make Australian family trees clearer and then have students draw up their own family trees.



- Other nationalities have their own customs with regards to naming their children. For example, first sons are named after the Paternal Grandfather and second sons after the Maternal Grandfather. Some families adopt the mother's maiden name as a middle name for their children. Conduct a survey of the students in your class to determine if any of your families follow any such customs with regards to names.
- Other names in Chinese reflect items from nature – e.g. Little Cloud. Make a list of any other names like these you may have heard (students' family members, characters in books etc). Can you think of any other nationalities that create their names in a similar way?

## Text, Style, Mood and Structure

### Significant quotations

The following quotations have been taken from the novel. They could be used in a number of different ways e.g.:

- have students identify who said each of these things and what they mean in the context of the novel
- break students into groups and stage mini debates arguing for and against the viewpoint put forward in the statement
- have students use the quote as the basis for their own piece of writing
  - *When you are small, you have to be smart to survive.* (p14)
  - *Papa said once that forests regrow. That after a devastating fire they become stronger than ever.* (p16)
  - *'Weiqi is like life,' Mama once told me. 'You have to see the bigger picture. You might think you are losing. But by making one right move, you are suddenly winning.'* (p26)
  - *'In every three people you meet, one can be your teacher... Almost anyone can teach you something, so you must never judge anyone by the way they look.'* (pp69-70)
  - *It's really the not knowing that scares you the most.* (p111)
  - *'It's no use running away, Little Cloud,' I hear Mama's voice echo inside me. 'Your mistakes will only catch up with you sooner or later.'* (p133)
  - *'Wishing won't do any good, says my mother's voice... Think with your heart, Little Cloud'* (p135).



### ACTIVITY:

- Re-read the echo story that Celeste tells to 'fat belly'? (pp119-120). What is the moral of the story?
- Many cultures tell stories with morals to their children. Make a list of any fables with morals that you heard as a child and note what each of the morals is.
- Choose one of the above quotes from the novel and create your own fable to illustrate its meaning or moral.

### Language

The text is sprinkled with Chinese phrases and their English translations. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Does it help to reinforce the Chinese culture? For you as a reader, does it add to or detract from the novel? Have you ever come across this sort of technique in other novels?

### Genre

Most novels fit within a specific style or genre. What genre would you say this novel fits into? Is it a fantasy novel? Is it a fable or a story with a moral? Consider other stories that you have read that fit easily into these genres. Make a list of their features. Do the features of this novel fit into either of these genres?

### **Literary Devices**

#### Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a device used by authors in which they provide clues along the way as to what might be going to happen or be revealed. There are a number of instances of foreshadowing in this novel.

- Make a list of any examples of foreshadowing that provide early clues as to the fact that Por Por is a ghost hunter. (Consider both the events and the words chosen by the author).

#### Humour

In spite of the fact that the story starts with the death of Celeste's mother it is not a sad story.

- How does the writer manage to keep the story happy, positive and even humorous at times?
- What examples of humour can you find in the novel?
- Was this style of writing more effective than making this a sad story about loss or grief? Why?



## Overall Message

- In many ways the novel *A Ghost in My Suitcase* is not really about ghost-hunters. What would you say are the over-riding messages in the story? (e.g. good vs. evil; coping with grief; finding your own abilities etc). Support your interpretation using evidence from the novel.
- Consider the effectiveness of the title *A Ghost in My Suitcase*. To whom is the term *ghost* referring? Do you think it is Celeste's mother or the ghosts she and Por Por hunt? In what ways does the term 'laying ghosts to rest' apply to this novel?

GABRIELLE WANG

A Ghost in my  
Suitcase