Nian, the New Year Monster

retold by Chris Tse

The Learning Progression Frameworks describe significant signposts in reading and writing as students develop and apply their literacy knowledge and skills with increasing expertise from school entry to the end of year 10. This teacher support material describes the opportunities in "Nian, the New Year Monster" for students to develop this expertise.

Overview

This story sets out to explain the origin of the Chinese New Year festival. It tells how a mysterious old man helps a village to get rid of Nian, a rampaging monster who has been terrorising the villagers at the start of every spring (on the first day of the Chinese New Year). The story is told in the style of a traditional folk tale, but its origins are thought to be more recent.

"Nian, the New Year Monster" requires students to "confidently use a range of processing and comprehension strategies to make meaning from and think critically about" text (*The Literacy Learning Progressions*, page 14).

There is a PDF of this text and an audio version as an MP3 file at www.juniorjournal.tki.org.nz

Related texts

Other Chinese tales: *Two Tiger Tales* (Ready to Read, Purple); "Chang-O and the Moon" (*JJ* 57); "The Race" (*SJ* L2 May 2017)

Other tales that involve overcoming dangerous creatures: *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Ready to Read, shared); "The Clumsy Tiger" in *Two Tiger Tales, Giant Soup* (Ready to Read, Purple); "Rumpelstiltskin" (*JJ* 56), and many other traditional tales involving witches, giants, and monsters

Ready to Read texts about New Year celebrations and/or other cultural festivals: *Chinese New Year, Diwali, Matariki Breakfast* (shared); *White Sunday in Sāmoa* (Turquoise); *Matariki* (Gold)

Text characteristics

"Nian, the New Year Monster" includes the following features that help develop the reading behaviours expected at Purple.
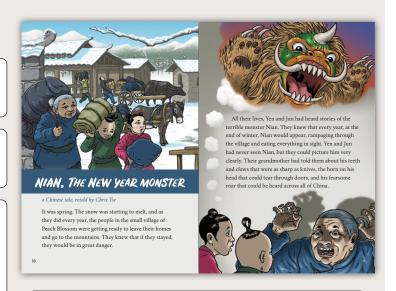
Features of a traditional tale, such as a setting far away in time and place, a villain (often overcome through trickery), magical or mysterious events, and the use of literary language

A mix of explicit and implicit content that requires students to make connections between information in the text and their prior knowledge to make predictions and inferences

Some words and phrases that may be unfamiliar (for example, "Nian", "Yen", "Jun", "rampaging", "fearsome", "relatives", "spare", "shone", "secret weapons", "stranger", "exclaimed", "instructions", "arrival", "rumbling", "realised", "creature", "nervously", "approached", "banners", "lanterns", "tremble", "thunderous", "terrified", "fled", "whimpering", "disappearing", "returned", "good fortune") requiring students to apply their processing system

A variety of sentence structures requiring students to attend to punctuation, pronouns, indicators of time, and other linking words and phrases (such as, "as", "if", "but", "that", "too") to clarify the connections between ideas

A shift in time to the present day in the final paragraph, which is addressed directly to the reader

NIAN, THE NEW YEAR MONSTER

a Chinese tale, retold by Chris Tse

It was spring. The snow was starting to melt, and as they did every year, the people in the small village of Peach Blossom were getting ready to leave their homes and go to the mountains. They knew that if they stayed, they would be in great danger.

All their lives, Yen and Jun had heard stories of the terrible monster Nian. They knew that every year, at the end of winter, Nian would appear, rampaging through the village and eating everything in sight. Yen and Jun had never seen Nian, but they could picture him very clearly. Their grandmother had told them about his teeth and claws that were as sharp as knives, the horn on his head that could tear through doors, and his fearsome roar that could be heard across all of China.

Language features that provide opportunities for students to apply and extend their knowledge of vocabulary and word structure, for example:

- adverbs ("clearly", "really", "quickly", "quietly", "nervously", "slowly", "suddenly")
- literary language (for example, "spare me some food", "eyes shone", "deep in thought", "before the night comes", "night fell", "no one in sight", "fled") and a simile ("teeth and claws that were as sharp as knives")
- the prefix in "<u>dis</u>appearing" and the suffixes in "fear<u>some</u>", "thunder<u>ous</u>", "wonder<u>ful</u>"

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Cross-curriculum links

English (Reading)

Level 2 – Processes and strategies: Selects and reads texts for enjoyment and personal fulfilment.

Level 2 – Ideas: Show some understanding of ideas within, across, and beyond texts.

Suggested reading purpose

What can the students expect to find out or think about as a result of reading this text?

- To find out about Nian and why he is a "New Year monster"

Possible learning goals

What opportunities does this text provide for students to learn more about how to "read, respond to, and think critically" about texts?

The goals listed below link to the descriptions of reading behaviours in *The Literacy Learning Progressions* and the *Learning Progression Frameworks*. **Select from and adapt** them according to your students' strengths, needs, and experiences – their culture, language, and identity (*The Literacy Learning Progressions*, page 7).

This text provides opportunities for students, over several readings, to:

- **make connections** between their prior knowledge and information in the story to **make predictions and inferences**

- **ask questions** and look for or think about possible answers

- use information in the text and illustrations to track (**summarise**) and **visualise** events

- **monitor** their reading and, when something is unclear, take action to solve the problem, for example, by checking further sources of information, rereading, and/or reading on.

Introducing the text

Before introducing this story to your students, you could listen to the audio version to familiarise yourself with the pronunciation of the Chinese names.

Use your knowledge of the students to ensure that your introduction to the text is effective in building or activating their prior knowledge and providing appropriate support for a successful first reading. A short video on the importance of introducing the text is available at https://vimeo.com/142446572

Several options are provided below for you to **select from and adapt**.

For English language learners, discuss the story before the whole-group session to build confidence with vocabulary and text features that may be unfamiliar. Read the title and give out copies of the illustrations (page numbers removed). Have the students work in pairs to decide on the correct order for the images, then share their ideas with the rest of the group. Use this discussion to highlight, feed in, record, and clarify key vocabulary (in English or in their first language). You can find further information about features of texts that may need support at ELLP.

- Have the students read the title and the author byline to clarify that this is a tale from China. Invite any students familiar with this tale to share what they know. Otherwise, wait until after the first reading to discuss the link to New Year celebrations.

- Briefly discuss some of the common features of traditional tales, making connections to familiar examples, such as "Hansel and Gretel" or "Rumpelstiltskin". Ideas could include: a faraway setting, a villain or monster to be overcome, a hero, magical events, the use of trickery, a happy ending. You could record the ideas to refer to after the reading.

- Use the illustrations on pages 18 and 19 to discuss the setting and characters. Tell the students the children's names and clarify that the older person shown here is the children's grandmother. Expect them to infer that page 19 shows Nian. Encourage them to speculate about the link between the title and the illustrations on these pages and record any questions or predictions they have. Remind the students that making predictions (or asking themselves questions) helps them to think about what they are reading.

- Together, set a reading purpose. Share the learning goal(s). You could have the students begin reading from this point. If you think they might need more support, you could also discuss the illustration on pages 20–21 and consider the possible significance of the new character shown here.

- Provide sticky notes for the students to record any questions or ideas they have as they are reading or to mark parts they might want to return to later.

Reading the story

Observe the students as they read the story by themselves, intervening only if it's clear a student needs help. During the first reading, the focus is on students experiencing and enjoying the story, rather than on totally accurate word solving. Much of the processing that they do at this level is "inside their heads" and may not be obvious until the discussion afterwards. There will be many opportunities to provide support with word solving and comprehension on subsequent readings.

Student behaviours

Examples of the sorts of behaviours (often overlapping and developed over several readings) that will help students achieve their learning goal(s).

The students make connections between their prior knowledge and information in the story to make predictions and inferences.

- They predict that the "great danger" (page 18) involves Nian and confirm this when they read page 19.

- They draw on their knowledge of traditional tales to predict that the old man and his "secret weapons" will solve the problem.

- They use the information on page 22 to infer what the children and their grandmother can hear and how they are feeling. They may also infer from the reference in paragraph 3 that Nian is particularly interested in eating children.

They use information in the text and illustrations to track and visualise events

- They clarify who, where, what, and when on pages 18 and 19.

- They use indicators of time to track the sequence of events.

- They use punctuation and linking words to help clarify the connections between ideas, for example:

  - in the second paragraph on page 21, they use the speech marks, the context of the conversation, and the pronoun "she" in the preceding sentence to infer that it's the grandmother who is speaking the unattributed dialogue

  - they notice the use of dashes to link ideas (on page 21, about the work to be done, and on page 22, about the heavy breathing).

They ask questions and look for or think about possible answers.

- For example, they might wonder about:

  - how the grandmother knows what Nian looks like

  - if the old man can be trusted

  - what the three secret weapons and the old man's instructions might be (and notice the answers on page 22)

  - who the old man was, how he knew what to do, and where he went at the end of the story.

They demonstrate self-monitoring and problem solving.

- They use a range of word-solving strategies, for example:

  - they break unfamiliar words into chunks ("fear-some", "rel-a-tives", "ner-vous-ly", "ban-ners")

  - they use nearby clues such as "monster", "eating everything in sight", "tear through doors," "fearsome roar" to attempt the meaning of "rampaging"

  - they read on to clarify the use of "picture" as a verb on page 19

  - they use the context of the sentence and their awareness that words can have more than one meaning to clarify the meaning of "slipped" on page 22.

- They check punctuation and linking words to support phrasing and meaning, for example, to clarify that "they" in the last sentence on page 18 refers to "the people in the small village".

- They mark words or phrases they are not sure of or that they want to come back to.

Deliberate acts of teaching

Examples of how you can support individual students (if needed).

- Remind the students of strategies they can use for word solving (for example, looking for the biggest known word chunk and applying their knowledge of letters, sounds, and word structure) and for clarifying meaning (rereading or reading on, referring to the illustrations, and/or thinking about the overall meaning of the sentence or paragraph). If necessary, provide support with specific words, for example, reassuring them about the pronunciation of "shone".

Discussing and rereading the story

You can revisit this story several times, providing opportunities for the students to build comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. **Select from and adapt** the following suggestions according to your students' needs and their responses to the reading. Some of the suggestions overlap, and several can be explored further as after-reading activities.

DIGITAL TOOLS 🖥 For some suggestions, you may find it helpful to project the PDF of the story so that you can zoom in on relevant sections.

- Encourage the students to share their responses. Remind them of the reading purpose and have them briefly summarise the story (who, what, where, why). Prompt them to speculate about the role of the mysterious old man. *How did he know what to do? Where did he go at the end?*

- Discuss the wider purpose of this tale as described in the last paragraph. Encourage the students to make connections to other traditional tales that are linked to celebrations or festivals (for example, Matariki and Diwali).

- Compare the features of the tale with the list compiled when introducing the story.

- Have the students reread the story, stopping to discuss points of interest, including aspects they have marked with sticky notes. For example:

  – predictions they made (or changed) as they were reading and any answers they found to their questions

  – what made the story exciting, for example, the plot and the descriptions of the monster on pages 19 and 22 (both before and after the fireworks). You could also have the students identify clues in the story about the feelings of the human characters

  – the literary phrases (or storytelling language), such as "spare me some food", "eyes shone", "deep in thought", "night fell", "no one in sight". Reread the sentences where they appear and discuss their meanings. Together, practise changing them to less formal language to hear the difference (for example "Can you spare me some food" could become "Can I please have some food"; "deep in thought" could become "thinking very carefully")

  – sentences with multiple phrases or with unfamiliar structures. Read some examples together, attending to punctuation (commas, dashes, and ellipses) to support phrasing and meaning. Discuss how ideas can be combined within one sentence rather than two. Use some sentences as models for innovation, for example, "He turned and fled, whimpering" could change to "She stopped and waited, smiling"

  – how the students worked out (or tried to work out) unfamiliar words or phrases. You could also explore such features as:

    • the prefix in "disappearing" or the suffixes in "fearsome", "thunderous", "wonderful". Support the students to generate further examples (for example, "disagree", "awesome", "adventurous", "beautiful")

    • the irregular past-tense verbs "shone" and "fled". Discuss their root words ("shine" and "flee") and remind the students that some words in English can't have "ed" added.

    • the use of adverbs ("clearly", "really", "quickly", "quietly", "nervously", "slowly", "suddenly") to show how things happen or how characters are feeling.

After reading: Practice and reinforcement

After-reading tasks should provide purposeful practice and reinforcement of learning goals and address the needs you have noticed from your monitoring of the students. Where possible, make links to other texts, including texts generated by the students, and to the wider literacy programme (for example, oral language, writing, handwriting, and word games and activities) and other curriculum areas. **Select from and adapt** these suggestions according to the needs of your students.

For English language learners, SELLIPS also has ideas for purposeful and relevant tasks.

- The students can reread the story as they listen to the audio version. Audio versions are particularly supportive for English language learners because, as well as clarifying pronunciation, they provide good models of the prosodic features of English, such as intonation and phrasing.

- Provide many opportunities for students to reread this story and to read other related texts.

- The students could use the descriptions on pages 19 and 20 to draw their own picture of Nian, adding descriptive phrases from the story as well as their own ideas.

- Have them create a cartoon strip summary of the story. Alternatively they could illustrate two sections of the story they found most dramatic and exciting.

- Ask the students to work in pairs to sort some or all of the following statements into True/False/Not sure, referring to relevant parts of the story to justify their decisions.

Nian had never seen fire or red before.	This story has also been told by other people.	This is a true story.
The old man was scared of Nian.	Yen and Jun believed Nian was real at the start of the story.	Yen and Jun believed Nian was real at the end of the story.
Grandmother trusted the old man straight away.	It didn't take long to prepare for Nian's arrival.	The old man came knowing that he would help the village.
The old man knew what he was doing.	This story explains a way of celebrating a special time.	Grandmother and the children were slow to leave the village.

- Use an adaptation of a Say It activity. (This activity is particularly supportive for English language learners because it provides opportunities to practise using the language from the text.) Write prompts on cards and have the students take turns to turn over a card and respond to the prompt. For example:

  You are the old man. Tell us why you came to the village (or what you did after Nian ran away).

  You are Yen. Tell us how you felt when your grandmother told you about Nian (or how you knew that Nian had arrived in the village).

  You are the grandmother. Tell us what you were doing when the old man knocked on the door (or why you agreed to let the old man try to get rid of the monster).

  You are Jun. Tell us what you thought when the old man told you he could help get rid of Nian (or how you felt when you heard Nian arriving in the village).

  You are Nian. Tell us what you could smell in the village (or how you felt when you saw the red banners and lanterns).

- Give the students a list of words with the prefix "dis" or the suffixes "some", "ous", or "ful" (for example, awesome, dangerous, adventurous, disagree, dislike, disobey, disconnect, beautiful, careful). Have the students work in pairs to identify the root word and write definitions. They could also add their own examples.

Example	Root word	Meaning
fearsome	fear	making people feel fear
thunderous	thunder	sounding like thunder

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