



# Walker Books Classroom Ideas



## Dragonkeeper

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Book 1: Dragonkeeper  
9781742032450 AUS \$19.95/NZ \$21.99

Book 2: Garden of the Purple Dragon  
9781742032467 AUS \$19.95/NZ \$21.99

Book 3: Dragon Moon  
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Book 4: Blood Brothers  
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Prequel: Dragon Dawn  
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## Carole Wilkinson on *Dragonkeeper*

Though *Dragonkeeper* is a fantasy book, it is set in a historical era in China. The Han Dynasty lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE. During those years 25 different Emperors ruled. *Dragonkeeper* is set in 141 BC, the year that the Emperor Jingdi died and his young son Wudi took over as Emperor.

So the book is set about 2300 years ago and 8000 kms away. It seemed like a good idea when I thought it up, but then I had to find out what China was like way back then. Though the character of the young emperor, Liu Che, is based on a real person, I made up the story and set the book in an imaginary China where dragons were alive. I like to call it a historical fantasy. However, as with my other historical books, I wanted the detail to be as historically accurate as possible.

### From the Library

When I wrote about ancient Egypt, I could find lots of books and websites to tell me about life back then. With Han Dynasty China, the task wasn't so easy. I found only a few books at the library. There may be lots of books in Chinese, but they wouldn't be much good to me. Though I can speak a little Chinese and recognise a few simple characters, I can't read Chinese books.

I read the available books, and that helped me with some of the detail. I found out that both Chinese men and women wore similar clothing—a garment a bit like

a wrap-around dressing gown, sometimes with trousers underneath. I found out a little about what people ate and how growing food was what most people did for a living. But I was still finding it hard to picture what Han Dynasty China looked like.

### From the Earth

When I was researching ancient Egypt, there were many archaeology books to refer to as well. The Egyptians built their temples and palaces out of solid stone, so the ruins of many of these buildings were still standing. I couldn't afford to go to Egypt to look at them, but there were lots of books in the library with lovely glossy photographs. And the ancient Egyptians had covered the walls of their buildings with paintings and writing, so there was lots of information in these ruins.

In Han Dynasty China, all buildings—even palaces—were built out of wood. Over time they burnt down or the wood rotted and they disappeared entirely. There is not a single Han Dynasty building left in the whole of China.

Fortunately, just like in ancient Egypt, in ancient China important people were buried in tombs underground. And the ancient Chinese believed that they had to supply their dead Emperors and relatives with the things they would need after death. People in ancient China believed that people had two souls. When they died, one soul would ascend to the clouds and, hopefully, live peacefully with the immortals.



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The other one stayed in or around the grave. So inside the tombs they placed clothes, furniture, food and other things for this soul to live. They believed that if they didn't keep the souls of their ancestors happy, these dead spirits or ghosts would get angry and bring them bad luck.

Most people have seen pictures of the Terracotta Warriors. This is a whole army of soldiers made out of clay buried near the tomb of an earlier Emperor. People believed that the statues would turn into real soldiers in the afterlife and serve the Emperor just like a real army.

Archaeologists have been burrowing under the surface of Egypt since the early 1800s so there are lots of known tombs. China has been closed to Westerners for a lot of its history and there has not been as much archaeological research there. I found information about two tombs that were made in the Han Dynasty.

## Underground Art

One tomb is called the Mawangdui Tomb. It is the tomb of a rich woman called Lady Dai who died around 168 BCE. The tomb contained furniture, fabric, ornaments, bowls and food for the lady's earthly 'ghost' to use. I got a lot of information about what people ate in the Han Dynasty from books about this tomb. There was also a lovely silk hanging. The paintings on it told the story of how this woman would find her way to heaven. It depicts heaven as a place above the clouds guarded by celestial beasts including dragons.

Now these dragons didn't look the same as the wide-eyed and slightly ferocious Chinese dragons that we usually see in pictures. In fact they had red smiley mouths, big brown eyes and little wings. I liked the friendly look of these dragons and decided that if that was how people in the Han dynasty imagined dragons to look, that was how my dragon would look.

Until this tomb was excavated in 1972, there were no surviving paintings from the Han Dynasty, so this painting is very special.

Fortunately for me there is a big collection of Chinese books in the Melbourne University Library. Although I can't read them, I can look at the pictures! And I discovered there were quite a few books there with pictures of items from Han Dynasty tombs.

The other Han tomb I found some information about was the tomb of Jingdi—that's the emperor at the start of *Dragonkeeper*. While I was doing the research for this book, an exhibition came from China to Sydney. It contained some of the goods from the Terracotta Warriors

tomb and also some from Jingdi. I was very excited about the prospect of seeing some things from the time of 'my' emperor so I drove to Sydney. It was very inspirational to see things that were made in the time I was writing about, so long ago. One of the statues I saw was of a kneeling servant girl. This helped me picture what my main character, Ping, looked like.

## Bamboo Books

As well as everyday objects there were also books in these tombs (to give the ghost something to read, I suppose). The Chinese invented paper during the late Han Dynasty, but at the time of these tombs, books were written on thin strips of bamboo (the Chinese used to write vertically, that is up and down from the top of the page to the bottom, not across like we do). They tied the bamboo strips together so that they lay side by side. To close the book they rolled it up and tied it with string. These are called Bamboo books. Quite a few ancient Chinese books have survived and some of them have been translated into English. Once again the Melbourne University library came to the rescue and I found copies of the translations there. I got the idea about pickling the dead dragon from a brief story in one of these ancient books. I also found inspiration for the dragon's words of wisdom in these books.

## Getting it Right

When you write a historical story, you have to be careful not to mention things that hadn't yet been invented or foods that hadn't yet been introduced to that area. Along the way, I discovered that there were no tomatoes or grapes in China in the Han Dynasty.

Some of the things that seem typically Chinese to us today weren't around in the Han Dynasty. For instance there were no temples because Buddhism wasn't introduced to China until the very end of the Han Dynasty. Most people didn't eat rice and drink tea. These things were used in the south of China during the Han Dynasty, but didn't spread around China till much later.

As well as paper, Chinese scholars invented other important things during the Han Dynasty such as the wheelbarrow, stirrups for riding horses and a device called a seismograph, which detected earthquakes hundreds of miles away. Some of these things didn't reach the West for hundreds of years.

After reading *Dragonkeeper*, I hope that you find this period of Chinese history as fascinating as I do.



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## Dragonkeeper

- The Chinese had a very advanced society in the Han Dynasty. See if you can find some information about life in other parts of the world at the same time. What was life like in Greece and Britain for instance? *The whole class could work on this project.*
- Pick an illustration from a history book in the library (from any historical time you like) and think of a story you could write about that picture. Make a list of all the things you would have to find out about the time and the place to tell the story. For example what would people eat? How did they dress? How did they travel around? *Work in groups.*
- I think the friendly Han Dynasty dragon is my ideal dragon. What's your ideal dragon? Does it have wings? Is it ferocious and fire-breathing? What colour is it? Draw a picture of it.
- Find out more information about one of the things that was invented in ancient China.

## Garden of the Purple Dragon

**Table of Contents** Before reading the novel, write an imagined plot outline using the chapter headings. Then select one heading to focus on and predict and write a plot outline in depth of that chapter.

**Character Profile** At the start, Ping is weighed down by her responsibilities and loneliness. She doesn't think she is a good dragonkeeper but then realises, 'Caring for him wasn't a burden. It was a pleasure, a privilege.', page 71. Write a character profile of Ping, including her feelings and actions.

**Dragons in Literature and Mythology** Find examples of dragons in literature and mythology. Chart the different attributes of dragons, including

- Physical descriptions
- Abilities, such as fire-breathing, flying
- Personalities
- Relationships with humans

Then make up your own dragon, using some of these attributes, plus other attributes of your invention.

## Significant Numbers

1. How are numbers used and important in the story? How is the number five important? Think of some other significant sets of five.
2. Read page 156, then make up a poem or clues leading to a prediction based around numbers.

(Teacher tip: One is for the universe, two is for the forces known as yin and yang – equal and opposite, they hold the universe together ...page 156. Five is for five elements and for five friends, pages 316, 321, the five-coloured thread, page 130, and the earth of five colours, page 190.)

**Speech** Ping sounds like a youngster. Find examples. What do you think about Kai using the word, 'okay', pages 212, 304, 349. Does it suit him? Is it appropriate? Choose another word he could use instead and explain why it may be preferable.

**Symbols** As individuals or in groups, select three symbols from the book, such as dragons, fire, garden, friendship, colours, blood, immortality ... Respond to the symbols and represent each using a different medium. One of these must be the medium of writing. Others could include movement such as drama or dance; or art, such as collage.

**Han Dynasty** Research the Han Dynasty and present findings. Compare and contrast with other ancient Chinese Dynasties. See also the author's notes at the end of the novel, and her website [www.carolewilkinson.com.au](http://www.carolewilkinson.com.au)

**Chinese Writing** Chinese characters for reading and writing are described on pages 139-141. Try writing some of these. See if a guest knowledgeable in this area can visit the classroom and demonstrate these and others. Otherwise, research what they look like and see how your attempts match the written description.

The author uses the following website: <http://www.mandarintools.com>

**Tower of Babel** Read the report of the tower falling on pages 176 - 177. This scene may be inspired by the Biblical Tower of Babel. Find out what this was and what happened to the people who built it. Compare and contrast with what happened in the book.



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## Silkworms

1. Read pages 216-217, 221-2, describing silkworms.
2. Read the poem The Silkworms by Douglas Stewart.
3. Show the lifecycle of the silkworm in pictorial form.
4. Create flow charts showing the process of making silk and silk products.
5. Make cocoons from cottonwool, cotton etc
6. Make a display using mulberry leaves and mulberries, if in season, silkworms or their eggs or cocoons, threads of silk and silk products (such as silk scarves)

## The Liver

1. Read about the function of the liver in the book.
2. Research its scientific / physiological function.
3. Label a diagram of the human body, showing the liver, ribs and heart (and any other body part mentioned in the book).

**Materials** Several materials are mentioned in the book, such as bronze and iron, page 130. Research how these were discovered and their uses in the past and present.

## Dragon Moon

**Symbolism** There are many symbols in the book and trilogy. Find some and explain what they may represent.

(Teacher tip: Symbols include dragons, the moon, rain and rainbow, seasons, garden, page 55, and others)

**Dragon** How is the dragon represented? (It is also shown as an image on the cover and at the chapter headings. Also read page 32)

**Moon** What images are used to describe the moon? (There are references to the moon throughout the book, including pages 137, 233, 283, 317, 334)

Write a poem about dragons or mythical creatures, using symbolism.

**Rain** People in the novel believe that dragons make the rain, page 76. The dragons also believe they can make it rain, but don't want to help humans since the massacre at Long Gao Yuan, page 246. Also read pages 271-272. When it finally rains there is a rainbow, page 331. (Note the link

with 'dragonfly wings'.) Write your own explanation of why it rains, as a fantasy, fable, myth or legend.

**The Journey – Plot Profile** Much of this novel describes Ping and Kai's journey to find the dragon home. This is a contrast from the prequel, Garden of the Purple Dragon, which is set primarily in the Emperor's garden. What part of Kai and Ping's journey did you find most interesting? How did the author make this part interesting? Consider setting, characters and difficulties. Construct a plot profile of the journey.

**Enrichment: 'The seasons'** – use a code such as a colour or symbolic code to show which season correlates to the plot highlights.

**Text Construction – Number Eight** The author has constructed a fantasy version of Ancient China in the Han Dynasty based on research and reconstruction. The number 'eight' is regarded as an inauspicious number, page 307. The author discovered that in Ancient China 'nine' was an auspicious number and 'four' an inauspicious number (it sounds the same as 'death'). She could find no mention of 'eight' so decided that as 'two multiplied by four' equals 'eight', the number 'eight' would be very inauspicious, page 326. Find out other information from Ancient China from the book, then try to discover how the author has researched or reconstructed this. See the author website [www.carolewilkinson.com.au](http://www.carolewilkinson.com.au)

**Purpose of Life – Hot Seat** The dragons do not seem to do much so Ping questions their purpose of life, pages 278 – 280. Put the dragons in the 'Hot Seat' to answer questions about the purpose of their existence, when they should use their power or lose their wisdom, and their bond with humans, pages 289, 301.

When Ping left she was 'doing what she least wanted to do, but she knew it was right,' page 319. Relate Ping's experience here and the dragon's views, to people's lives, using public figures, known people and students themselves.

**Chinese Dynasties** Find out about the different Chinese Dynasties, including the Han Dynasty where this story is set. Show the dynasties on a large-scale timeline on the wall. Illustrate each dynasty with a representative feature, such as a Ming vase from the Ming Dynasty.

**The Great Wall of China** Read sections of the book that are set here, such as pages 90-91, 139-140. Find out more about the Great Wall. Then, in groups, select one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, such as the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and make a two-dimensional diagram or three-dimensional model of it.



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Four Spiritual Beings 'Dragons are one of the four spiritual beings. The phoenix and the qilin have already disappeared from the earth ... There are only dragons and tortoises left', pages 279-280.

1. Investigate some of these Chinese spiritual creatures further. The glossary and author's website [www.carolewilkinson.com.au](http://www.carolewilkinson.com.au) will help.
2. Discover spiritual creatures from Australia's Indigenous stories. Present as a poster and storytelling session.

**Seven Cunning Pieces** Read about these, and the lines and characters on the silk square on pages 13,15,16,18, 86. Use tangrams to make the shapes described. See also the Black Dog Books Website for more information on these [www.bdb.com.au/dragonkeeper/](http://www.bdb.com.au/dragonkeeper/) This site also shows Danzi's map, information about the Chinese language and an audio interview with Carole Wilkinson.

**Rain and Drought** There are many references to rain, and its lack, throughout the book. As Ping and Kai pass through villages, the people become increasingly upset about the lack of rain, page 88.

1. Describe the water cycle as a scientific process.
2. Research best options/procedures for supplying water to your city or region. Select the best idea from the class and propose how this could be implemented.

**Animation** Create animations by photographing changing drawings of how Kai grows and changes, particularly colour-wise, throughout this book or the whole trilogy. He becomes a dragon of 'five' colours, page 298. (Note: the number 'five' is of particular significance in Garden of the Purple Dragon.)

(Teacher tip: changing from purple to green, page 67; reverse scales growing, page 82; no wings, page 88; changed from a dragonling to a juvenile, page 103.)

**Jade** Read the descriptions of jade jewellery and other items on pages 169 – 180. Jade may come in a range of colours, but is best known in emerald green. Use emerald green beads and other jewellery-making materials (from a craft supplier) to make jewellery such as necklaces, bracelets, brooches, earrings or rings. Alternatively, hair decorations or wind chimes could be made, page 171.