



**Classroom Guide for  
GRANDFATHER COUNTS**  
by **Andrea Cheng**  
illustrated by **Ange Zhang**

**Reading Level**

\*Reading Level: Grade 2

Interest Level: Grades 1–3

Accelerated Reader® Level: 3.6

\*Reading levels based on the Spache Readability Formula

**Themes:**

Family, Intergenerational Relationships, Grandparents, Transitions, Heritage, Biracial Families, Communication, Asian American Interest

**Synopsis**

Helen, a biracial Chinese Caucasian child, has to give up her room when Gong Gong, her grandfather, comes from China to live with her family in America. Gong Gong seems disappointed that his grandchildren don't speak Chinese, his only language, and Helen, her brother, and sister, who speak only English, are disappointed they cannot communicate with their grandfather. At first Gong Gong stays in this room and reads the Chinese newspapers he has brought with him. But one day Gong Gong joins Helen as she watches the trains go by behind their house. Soon he and Helen begin counting the train cars together, and they teach each other to count in their own languages. The ice is broken and they begin to bond, which fosters Helen's interest in learning more about her Chinese heritage.

**Background**

As in many cultures, family life has been an important part of Chinese culture for centuries. It is not uncommon for extended families to live together. Grandparents will often live with one of their children's families, and in many instances, look after the home and their grandchildren during the day while parents work. Although relationships within

families are less formal than in previous times, obedience, duty, and respect are still highly stressed as family values.

As the number of biracial and multiracial children in the United States continues to increase, these children often are curious about parts of their heritage they may know little or nothing about. Many times a special relationship with a family member is the impetus for children to develop an interest in learning about and embracing the diversity of their backgrounds.

**Teacher Tip**

You may wish to feature this book as part of your celebration of Asian American Heritage Month, which is observed in May.

**BEFORE READING****Prereading Focus Discussion and Questions**

Before introducing the book, you may wish to have students discuss one or more of the following questions as a motivation for reading.

1. Why is it important to communicate? How do you feel when you can't make someone understand you?
2. What are some ways you communicate with others?
3. Do you speak a language besides English? What is it? How is knowing more than one language helpful?
4. What are some things you do with your grandparents or other relatives?
5. Why would it be hard to go live in a country where you don't speak the language? What would make you want to do something like this?
6. Do you have your own room? How would you feel if you had to give it up for another family member? Why?

**Exploring the Book**

Show students the book cover and ask what they think the man and girl are doing with their fingers. Ask students how this might relate to the book title. Talk about why the man and girl might be counting together. What might they be counting?

Invite students to do a "page flip" through the book. Talk about the impression they get as they turn the pages. What do the illustrations show? What do the people's expressions suggest?

**Setting a Purpose for Reading**

Ask students to write down what they think the title of the story means. Then ask students to read the book to find out what the title means, and to see if the title might have more than one meaning for the story.

**Vocabulary**

*Grandfather Counts* contains several compound words. Write the following compounds on the chalkboard:

butterflies  
wallpaper

paintbrush  
airport

railroad  
newspaper

Explain or review that a compound word is made up of two or more words put together. Call on volunteers to come up and draw a line between the two words that make up each compound on the board. Then ask students to find a compound word in the book title, and identify the two words that make up "grandfather."

Follow up by having students name other compound words they know.

**READING AND RESPONDING****Discussion Questions**

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to help guide their understanding of the book. Encourage students to refer to passages or pages in the book to support or illustrate their responses.

1. Why don't Helen, Cece, and Henry speak Chinese? How do you think Gong Gong feels about this? Why?
2. Think about the role of trains in the story. What do trains suggest to you?
3. Why were trains important to Helen? How did trains help bring Helen and Gong Gong together?
4. Why does Mom get upset about the wrinkled wallpaper?
5. How do you think Mom feels about the arrival of Gong Gong?
6. How does Helen help Gong Gong understand that Cece's picture is for him?
7. Why do you think Gong Gong spends so much time reading his Chinese newspapers?
8. How does Gong Gong teach Helen to count in Chinese?
9. How did Helen get her Chinese name? Why are Helen and her sister and brother all named Yin?
10. What does it mean when Gong Gong tells Mom that her name is her family?
11. How do Helen and Gong Gong feel at the end of the story?

**Literature Circles\***

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in developing the roles of the circle members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to those in the Discussion Question section of this guide to help group members explore the book.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for passages and accompanying illustrations that relate to the characters' feelings.
- The **Illustrator** might draw the engineer in the freight train who waves to Helen and Gong Gong.
- The **Connector** might find and teach the group other Chinese words.
- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
- The **Investigator** might locate and share other stories about people who have come to the United States from other countries.

\*There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

### Reader's Response

Use the following questions or similar ones to help students practice active reading and personalize what they have read. Suggest that students respond in reader's notebooks or in oral discussion.

1. What else do you think Gong Gong will teach Helen? Will he teach her brother and sister as well? What will Helen teach Gong Gong?
2. What did you learn from this story? How might you use what you learned?
3. How is Helen's relationship with Gong Gong like one you have with a grandparent or other family member? How is it different?
4. How would you describe Helen? What kind of person is she? Why do you think so?

### Other Writing Activities

You may wish to have students participate in one or more of the following writing activities. Set aside time for them to share and discuss their work.

1. When Mom was a little girl, Gong Gong told her, "When you do a job, always do it right." Why does Gong Gong think this is important? What does it show about a person? What are the things that you want to do right? Write a paragraph telling why it is important for you to do these jobs right.
2. Pretend you are Gong Gong living in the United States. Write a letter to someone back in China telling about your family and life in America.
3. Suppose you are the engineer who waves to Helen and Gong Gong. Write a story about your day on the train. Include the part where you wave to a man and girl sitting on a wall near the tracks.

4. The story touches on the themes of feeling alone and of making long journeys. Write a poem about one of these themes.
5. Helen and her siblings are biracial—half Chinese and half Caucasian. How do you think this makes them feel? Write a journal entry for Helen or Henry expressing their feelings about being biracial.

### **ELL (ESL) Teaching Strategies**

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are learning to speak English as a second language.

1. Read aloud short passages from the story. Point to and explain the illustrations as you read to help students gain meaning.
2. In the book, Mom used flashcards to help Helen and her brother and sister try to learn Chinese. Pair ESL students with strong English speakers and have them make flashcards with words from *Grandfather Counts*. Suggest that students illustrate the words as well as write them. Then have student pairs use the cards to practice the words.
3. Invite ELL students to teach the class how to count in their language. Ask these students to comment on how Helen and Gong Gong helped teach one another.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES**

To help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas, introduce some of the following activities.

#### **Social Studies**

1. Have students locate China on a world map or globe. Ask them to trace routes from China to the United States. Have students use the map to find the following:
  - China's capital and major cities
  - Countries that border China
  - Bodies of water bordering China
  - Important rivers of China
2. Explain that many products we use in the United States are manufactured in China. Have students make a list of different things they find in their homes that say "Made in China." Ask students to bring their lists to school and allow students time to compare and chart their lists.
3. Recall with students how *Grandfather Counts* is a story about communication. Talk about why communication is so important. Then brainstorm with the class to develop a web about different forms of communication. You might assign students to find out more and prepare short reports on each form included on your web. Be sure to include the arts as well as more traditional forms such as newspapers and telephones.
4. Interested students might research the different kinds of cars used as freight trains. For example, students might find out about hopper cars, flatcars, tankers, and boxcars. Suggest that students cut out or draw pictures of the cars and write about the kind of freight they carry.

### Math

Remind students that Helen and Gong Gong begin developing a relationship by teaching each other how to count. Draw attention to the words and characters for one through eight in Chinese on page 2 of *Grandfather Counts*. Have students make large poster charts showing how to count in English, Chinese, and other languages students in your class may know.

Display the charts around the room. Challenge students to write simple addition or subtraction problems using the different languages, and then to quiz each other orally. For example:

**Ba** minus **qi** equals . . . ? (**yi**)

### Language Arts

1. Point out that *Grandfather Counts* is told in the first person by the main character, Helen. Explain that when a story is told in the first person, the pronoun “I” is used. Have students find examples in the book. Then have students practice using the first person. Ask them to pretend they are one of the other characters in the book. Have students retell the story in the first person from that person's point of view.
2. Draw attention to the colorful language used in the story, such as the similes and idiomatic phrases “eyes lit up” and “lump in my throat.” Explain that a simile is a comparison of two unlike things using the words **like** or **as**. For example: “I miss those cracks, all connected and spreading out from the middle **like** the branches of a tree in winter.” Encourage students to write colorful phrases of their own to describe one of the characters in *Grandfather Counts*.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Andrea Cheng** is the director of the ESL program at Cincinnati State Technical Community College. She is the daughter of Hungarian immigrants and grew up in a bilingual household in Cincinnati. Cheng studied Chinese while in college and married the son of Chinese immigrants. Her books reflect the diversity of her own life as well as the experiences of family members, and some of her stories are inspired by visits to her husband's extended family in China. Cheng got the idea for *Grandfather Counts*, her first book, from her husband's disappointment that he was never taught Chinese and could not communicate with his Chinese relatives. Cheng's book, *Goldfish And Chrysanthemums*, also explores the bond between grandparents and grandchildren. Says Cheng, “I've listened to stories all my life, and I hope that when people read my books, they hear the voices of the storytellers. Through the stories of others, we can begin to make sense of our lives. We start to see how we fit into a bigger world.”

*Grandfather Counts* is a critically acclaimed picture book that was a “Choices” selection from the Cooperative Children's Book Center, was chosen as an Honor Book by the Society of School Librarians International, and was listed by the Cooperative Children's Book Center as one of 50 Multicultural Books Every Child Should Know.

### ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Ange Zhang** is a theater designer and animation artist as well as an illustrator of children's books. He was born in Beijing, China, and now lives in Ontario, Canada, with his wife and son. Other books illustrated by Zhang include *The Fishing Summer* and

*Winter Rescue*. He is currently working on writing and illustrating his own story about his experiences growing up.

### Resources on the Web

Learn more about **Grandfather Counts**

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/57/hc/grandfather\\_counts](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/57/hc/grandfather_counts)

### Other Books by Andrea Cheng

**Goldfish And Chrysanthemums**

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/goldfish.html>

### Shanghai Messenger

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/107/hc/shanghai\\_messenger](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/107/hc/shanghai_messenger)

View other **Active Reader Classroom Guides** at:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-asian\\_american.mhtml](http://www.leeandlow.com/p/teachers-asian_american.mhtml)

### Book Information

\$8.95, Paperback

ISBN 9781584301585

\$16.95, Hardcover

ISBN 9781584300106

8-1/2" x 10-3/4", 32 pages

Interest Level: Grades 1-3

Reading Level: Grade 2

(Reading level based on the Spache Readability Formula)

Themes: Grandparents, Sharing, Intergenerational Relationships, Biracial Families, Asian Americans, Immigration, Learning Languages, Multi-Ethnic/Diversity, International, Sharing/Giving, Counting

Accelerated Reader® Level/Points: 3.6

### Order Information

#### On the Web:

[http://www.leeandlow.com/books/57/hc/grandfather\\_counts](http://www.leeandlow.com/books/57/hc/grandfather_counts) (secure on-line ordering)

<http://www.leeandlow.com/p/ordering.mhtml> (general order information)

#### By Phone:

212-779-4400 ext. 25

212-683-3591 fax

#### By Mail:

Lee & Low Books, 95 Madison Avenue, NY NY 10016