

Single Asian Female

Introductory activities

CHINESE IMMIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

Understanding the reasons why many Chinese people have immigrated (and continue to immigrate) to Australia will provide some context for Pearl and her family's actions in *Single Asian Female*. With students, brainstorm some reasons why people may leave their country of birth and move to another. Broadly, these will include push factors (those that drive a person from their country, like natural disaster or war) and pull factors (those that attract a person to another country, such as better employment opportunities). Have students examine Australian Bureau of Statistics data relating to **international and internal migration**; they may be surprised by the makeup of Australia's population, and the countries from which the most people have migrated.

Once students understand the primary reasons for immigration, discuss what they know about Australia's historical immigration policies. The **Australia-China Story** provides a simple overview of policies relating to China; additional information may be found from the Museum of Chinese Australian History (**One Million Stories**) as well as the Immigration Museum (**Immigrant Stories**).

Select and share with students a few of the articles from the Australia-China Story page (try to choose stories with varying topics and dates). Break the class into groups and assign each group a different article, from which they will extract key words and phrases that capture the experience of immigration to Australia. A volunteer from each group will approach the whiteboard to write their key words/phrases in one of three columns (see example below):

- quotes that use positive/affirming language to describe the immigrant experience
- quotes that are neutral in their discussion of immigration to Australia
- quotes that use negative/racist language to describe the immigrant experience

Positive/affirming language	Neutral language	Negative/racist language
e.g. paragraph 9, sentence 2 (Shane Green , 2012)	e.g. paragraph 8, sentence 3 (Dr Tim Southommasane , 2014)	e.g. paragraph 1, sentence 2 (Jason Yat-Sen Li , 2013)

At the completion of this activity, ask students to assess whether the media has influenced the way people view immigration and whether they believe, from these articles, the media accurately represents how most Australians feel about Chinese immigrants to Australia. Are they able to summarise people's main concerns, as expressed in the articles?

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RACISM AND THE EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA

To fully understand the experiences of Chinese immigrants and their families, we must also recognise the way Asian people are treated in Australia, especially (but not exclusively) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several reports and studies have highlighted a recent increase in hate crimes against Asian people; students can explore **the Lowy Institute's interactive website** or read **the Guardian article** that summarises the findings.

Sadly, however, racist acts and attitudes towards Chinese immigrants are not limited to recent times. Throughout Australia's contemporary history, political figureheads have emerged espousing

anti-Asian sentiment, none more infamous than Pauline Hanson and her One Nation Party. **This report by The Australia Institute** compares Hanson's policies from the 1990s to those of the late 2010s, when she was re-elected to the Senate. At the very least, the quotes highlighted in the report provide an interesting point of analysis for students. Given that *Single Asian Female* was first staged in 2017, playwright Michelle Law would have been in school when Hanson was at her most vocal, and she has embedded an awareness of those political sentiments into the play.

It is possible that some of your students may have adopted racist ideas in their personal lives and will bring these into the classroom. It is important to establish a space at the outset where negative and/or racist commentary is not tolerated. Likewise, unpacking the idea that everyone has their own prejudices – including Asian people – would be helpful before students move into studying the text.

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Waltzing The Dragon

Benjamin Law's two-part documentary *Waltzing The Dragon* (available on ABC iview) unpacks the relationship between China and Australia. This may be a useful way to engage students with the play's socio-historical context, so they can better understand the characters' motivations and behaviour.

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MEETING THE CHARACTERS

Before reading the play, have students familiarise themselves with the character list. Ask them to record their assumptions about each character – how do they expect them to behave based on the descriptions?

After reading the play, revisit these assumptions with students and have them note whether they were correct. If they were not, what qualities would they assign to the characters now? Use examples from the text to build a well-rounded character profile.

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SINGLE ASIAN FEMALE

Law has stated that the title *Single Asian Female* is a play on the idea of the 'single white female'. This term has historically been used to classify a woman's marital status, used popularly in personal advertisements for dates or roommates. More recently, 'single white female' has been used to describe a certain type of young woman who adopts her friends' style, traits and behaviours in an effort to assume a new personality or steal someone's identity (based on the 1990s thriller, *Single White Female*).

Ask students what images come to mind when they think of a 'single Asian female'. Do they know any single Asian women? Perhaps there are some in your class. Have students complete **this worksheet** (PDF, 90KB) exploring the power of the individual words and how they might convey meaning about the text before it is even read.

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Read the Prologue with students, giving attention to the way each of the words from the title has been used to introduce the three female leads. As a class explore:

- the significance of introducing the women separately
- how each woman embodies the word that they are assigned
- the role of the neon lights

Show students some images of neon lights in Hong Kong (where Pearl grew up), such as the **Peking Road** shopping strip. These have been used for a long time to promote prosperity and business success, and are almost synonymous with the city, imbuing it with a cinematic appeal. Interestingly, neon lights have been disappearing from Hong Kong at a steady rate. Where else are they used? Are there neon landmarks in your local area or city? Can students see any connection between Law's use of neon to highlight her three main characters, and more traditional uses? Ask them to keep this in mind as the neon lights return at the end of the play.

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Personal response on reading the text

CHINESE AND AUSTRALIAN CULTURE AND VALUES

After reading the text, students may have some questions about the differences between Australian and Chinese culture, especially regarding family and the values surrounding work and success. Have them write down any quotes that they find interesting or worthy of further exploration before they embark on a subsequent reading. Direct them to the **Chinese culture** section of the SBS's **Cultural Atlas**, an educational resource with information about migrant cultures in Australia, to see if they can resolve any of their queries.

Now have students create a list of values they believe Australians hold dear and try to uphold. The **list from the Department of Home Affairs** could be a sound starting point. What examples can be drawn from *Single Asian Female*? Are there any characters that do or do not embody these 'Australian values'? Similarly, what values do Chinese people celebrate and aspire to (according to the Cultural Atlas)? Have students complete **this chart** (PDF, 89KB) to explore how the three women in the play think and behave in accordance with their values.

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CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Mei particularly struggles to accept her Chinese culture and, at times, feels very much at odds with it. While her friend Katie embraces and celebrates what China has to offer, Mei finds it embarrassing and bucks against her heritage. Zoe also struggles with the responsibilities and pressures of being a first-generation Australian-born child of migrant parents (p. 36). Both daughters are, in effect, caught between two worlds and trying to find their place.

As part of the discussion about values, have students visually represent the pressures that Zoe and Mei face from both their Australian and Chinese cultures. This could be in the form of a mind map or table; creative students may wish to make a small image or collage that encapsulates the girls' experiences. Encourage students to include words and phrases that Zoe and Mei use in the play. You may have some first-generation children in your class who could use their own experiences to shape their work.

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UNDERSTANDING THE PLAY'S CULTURAL REFERENCES

There are multiple references in *Single Asian Female* that help shape the play's cultural landscape. Building students' understanding of these references will help them to interrogate the play with more nuance. Consider allowing students some time to explore the following, as well as any additional references they can identify from the text:

- cosplay
- ancestral shrines
- Chinese food
- 'Chinglish'

- fortune cookies
- Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli films

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IDENTITY

Identity is, undeniably, the central theme of *Single Asian Female*. Through the Wong family, the audience can explore what it means to be single, Asian and female, with each woman illuminating the relevant experiences.

Consider asking students how each of the following questions are answered through the text. You could print the questions and conduct a jigsaw activity, or organise a gallery walk or graffiti board. Have students articulate an answer to each question as it relates to the text.

- What does it mean to a Chinese woman?
- What does it mean to be an Australian?
- How can a person navigate the pressures of two cultures?
- What are the qualities of a 'good' mother?
- To what extent are children expected to follow the paths that their parents set out for them?
- What does it mean to be a 'good' daughter?
- How can someone demonstrate pride in their cultural heritage?

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Key elements of the text

SINGLE: PEARL

Pearl is the matriarch of the Wong family in *Single Asian Female*. She is introduced through her opening monologue at the start of the Prologue. Students could act out Pearl's monologue and experiment with using different tones for emphasis. How does this exercise change the meaning of the monologue, and how does it influence the way the text is read? Study the Prologue together, with a view to understanding Pearl's core character traits that she hopes to instil in her daughters.

- What do we learn about Pearl's life from the Prologue?
- What are five character traits you would assign to Pearl based on her monologue?
- What is the tone of the Prologue?
- How does the backing track of 'I Will Survive' reiterate Pearl's message in this scene?
- Who or what is Pearl critiquing in her monologue?
- What does Pearl's monologue allude to or foreshadow about the text to come?

Consider Pearl's name and her reference to the idiom 'the world is your oyster' (p. 2). What does this idiom mean and what are its origins? How does Pearl's name fit in here? Students might like to research how oysters make pearls to further unpack the metaphor. Are there any connections that can be established between the two? Pearl even explains how she was given her English name on p. 59. Can students pinpoint the decisions, qualities and behaviours that cemented her name during the play?

When we first meet Pearl, the word 'single' lights up above her head. During a second reading of the play, have students chart the way her marital status impacts her decisions, her actions and ultimately her fate (running into trouble with her immigration status at the conclusion of the play). How does Pearl's marital status impact her relationship with her daughters, as well as her dreams and expectations for them?

Pearl discusses having to prove the value of her contribution to both Australia and her own family (p. 56). Ask students what they think this would look like and why they think someone's immigration status would depend on such a subjective measurement. In Act 3 Scene 3, Zoe and Mei give

testimonies about Pearl's character and the things she has done for them that make her 'indispensable'. How do Pearl's marital status and the ways she has helped her daughters intertwine here? What other comments can be made about Pearl's:

- commitment to her community?
- role in the family?
- position in the restaurant as manager?

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ASIAN: MEI

Through Mei, students witness the difficulties of trying to fit in when you feel like the only thing you do is stick out. Growing up in Australia, Mei and Zoe have experienced a Western upbringing that clashes with some of the more traditional Chinese values that Pearl has tried to nurture. Scene 2 of the Prologue transports readers directly to Mei's bedroom, where she is disposing of any visible Asian influences, like her **Rilakkuma** soft toy (pp. 3–4). Have students interrogate this scene.

- What appears to be Mei's primary concern?
- How is Mei hoping to change her image?
- How has Mei felt targeted due to her race?
- What is the impact of stereotyping in this scene?
- What is Katie's role in this scene?

Throughout the play, as Mei grapples with her culture and its possible influence on her perceived 'status' at school, she repeatedly denies and feels embarrassed by her heritage. Have students annotate the text whenever this happens and record what she says. Examples will come from her school formal afterparty and the dress she wants to wear, among others. The tension reaches a peak on p. 50, when Pearl lectures Mei about her apparent shame in being Chinese. This leads to a heated discussion about the family's past, Zoe's pregnancy and the demise of Pearl's relationship with her ex-husband. Considering the Wongs' experiences of racism throughout the text, has Mei **internalised** some of the racist attitudes of the community she has grown up in?

Given Mei's apparent concern with overhauling her image, can students think of any other fictional characters that forsake part of themselves to fit in or pursue a 'bigger' dream? Think about Jane Eyre, who Mei describes as a woman who sticks to her principles and overcomes her circumstances (p. 10) – is she a suitable icon for Mei? Does she really overcome her odds? Does Mei do this too, and does she find happiness and acceptance with her Asian heritage?

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FEMALE: ZOE

Zoe is ascribed the word 'female' in the Prologue, and throughout the play we join her in navigating the world as a young woman. She is frequently faced with decisions that force her to choose between her personal aspirations, those of her mother, those promoted by society and those espoused by her culture. At the core of Zoe's decision-making is the fact that she is a woman, which comes with certain expectations and responsibilities. Have your students create a list of expectations for women in Australian society (some of these may be categorised as stereotypes). They might list such things as:

- to get married
- to start a family
- to be the primary caregiver for children

On top of this, students may pick up on the widely accepted idea that all women desire marriage and motherhood. They might then be able to draw connections to metaphors and ideas around

spinsterhood, unwed mothers and biological clocks.

Have students create a chart that tracks Zoe's opportunities and decisions, as well as the commentary from those around her. They may like to set it out in a table such as this:

Circumstance	Zoe's decision	Commentary from others	Societal expectations
Zoe tells Claudia that she has had casual sex with a guy she met online.	Zoe is exercising her right to pursue a casual relationship. Despite being a consenting adult, she is forced to defend her decision (and, by extension, the choices of other independent women) to Claudia (p. 7).	Claudia judges Zoe for her behaviour (p. 6), comparing her to a snake in the grass and offering condescending remarks that imply she should behave more responsibly (p. 7).	That all women should want to settle down and start a family with one person. That women should be ready to 'settle down' by a certain age. That women should not engage in certain kinds of activities (e.g. casual sex).
Zoe is forced to move back home when Pearl needs to sell the apartment she is living in.	Due to Pearl's short notice, Zoe reluctantly moves back in with her mum and sister. She laments the fact that she seems to be falling behind her friends in life (p. 18).	Pearl suggests that if Zoe hates living with her so much, she can live with her father instead. While Zoe does not specify why she does not want to move back home, we can assume it is linked to the infringement on her independence and her disappointment in being unable to support herself without her mother's help.	Independent women should not need to move back in with their parents; they should be able to support themselves.

Other instances where Zoe's behaviour and decisions are challenged by societal expectations include:

- anything regarding her unplanned pregnancy
- her role and success in the orchestra
- her dating life

In 2019, a documentary entitled *Leftover Women* followed three single Chinese women who had been seen as prioritising their jobs over getting married. The Chinese government has **supported initiatives** that encourage unwed women in their 20s and 30s to settle down and start a family. This is an interesting point of contrast to Australia, where the total number of marriages has **decreased** over the past decade and single-occupant households are expected to outnumber traditional nuclear families by 2026. Would students agree that Australia places less emphasis on the need for women to marry? How are unmarried women perceived in society? If students are struggling to comment, direct them to portrayals of single women in films or novels they have watched or read. For more information about 'leftover women' and the impact of this stigma, *The Atlantic* provides an interesting starting point. Can students draw any comparisons to Pearl and Zoe? What attitudes might Pearl have that mirror those of Chinese parents who sign up their daughters for dating events?

In addition to sexism, Zoe's dating experiences are marred by racism and, at times, the fetishisation of Asian women. This is outlined in the **Close Study** section of this resource.

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STEREOTYPES AND THEIR IMPACT

Respectfully engage the class in a discussion about stereotypes: where they come from, how they are formed and what their positive and negative impacts might be ([this website](#) may serve as a helpful starting point). Elicit some examples of stereotypes about Australia and Australian culture. These could be as simple as all Australians loving sport or being surfers, or all our animals being deadly.

Depending on your context – and with appropriate scaffolding – you could ask students to consider any stereotypes they may have heard about people from other cultures, laying the groundwork for a discussion on their existence and persistence in Australian society. At various stages throughout the play, both the Anglo and Asian characters are pigeonholed based on assumptions about their identities and cultures. In [her review of the play for The Guardian](#), Yen-Rong Wong (2017) posits that Law does not exploit these stereotypes for cheap laughs, but rather presents multi-faceted characters who cannot be reduced to their ethnicity (see paragraph 7 of the review).

Some activities you could conduct with your class include:

- Listing all the stereotypes alluded to or blatantly referenced in *Single Asian Female* for both the Anglo and Asian characters. This could include Mei and Zoe playing instruments, and Pearl describing her Anglo customers as lazy and needing to learn the value of hard work.
- Considering how stereotypes could be positive or negative (based on the list from the previous activity) and exploring the impacts they might have on an individual.
- Discussing what a three-dimensional character is. [This website](#) outlines the three dimensions necessary to create realistic characters. Have students track Pearl, Mei and Zoe's physical, psychological and social traits; can they see how Law has crafted them to be well-rounded and individualistic rather than stereotypical? You could dissect with students some examples of [one](#)– and [three](#)-dimensional characters to illustrate the point and highlight Law's writing craft.
- Exploring how Law's characters defy the stereotypes placed on them.

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RACISM

The thread of racism runs through *Single Asian Female* and dovetails with the stereotypes presented in the text. Pearl, Mei and Zoe have all been subjected to casual racism in their everyday lives. It would be helpful to provide students with a definition of casual racism to help focus the conversation; the [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) makes a good resource.

As early as the Prologue, Pearl relays the racist remarks she has had to endure about her appearance and culture (p. 1). Zoe remarks on the extra effort required to achieve a fraction of her white peers' success when auditioning for orchestras (p. 16). And Mei tolerates many casually racist comments from Lana about her appearance (p. 26), language (p. 39) and cuisine (p. 43).

Discuss with students the way racism influences Pearl, Mei and Zoe's respective experiences of living in Australia:

- Do they have the same experiences as Anglo-Australians?
- Are they perceived positively or negatively by their community, friends, acquaintances, etc.?
- In what ways do they try to counteract the racism they experience?
- Would you say that the Wong women can also be racist in some of their attitudes and behaviours?

Students may have seen **Peter Drew's Aussie posters** in their local area or other places they have visited. He has been putting up these **posters** since 2016 to challenge the preconceptions and racial prejudices that dominate our thinking about who is and can be 'Australian'. His latest collection of posters focuses on women and children whose nationalities were recorded as something other than Australian, despite being born here. Use these as a provocation for discussion around the prejudicial language of 'being Australian'.

Drew's posters depict people who had applied to be exempt from the dictation test, a function of the **White Australia Policy** (show students **this record** from the National Archives of Australia for more context). While Pearl and her ex-husband were likely not subjected to this test, Pearl's immigration status is still challenged during the play. Building empathy around the politics of Chinese immigration to Australia, and the lengths to which immigrants had to go to prove their citizenship, is important to understanding Pearl's predicament in the final stages of the play. Additionally, unpacking the government's attitude to Australian-born Chinese people (and other children of Asian immigrants) will help to illuminate the racist encounters they experience from members of the community.

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BEING BICULTURAL

Your class may be interested to explore what it means to be **bicultural**, and how those who identify as such might feel about this aspect of their identity. Consider Zoe and Mei's upbringing – how have their experiences of straddling two different cultural groups shaped them?

Students could also consider bicultural or biracial public figures and characters from texts they have studied. On 24 July 2021, *The Australian* published an article by Will Swanton entitled 'Burning issue: How Japanese is Naomi Osaka?'. The article challenged the tennis player's ethnicity and legitimacy to light the Olympic cauldron at the delayed Tokyo 2020 Games. This piece is no longer freely available, but you can read the crux of Swanton's argument in critiques by both **Junkee** and **The Conversation**. If students are interested in learning more about Osaka's heritage and how it has been called into question throughout her career, you could direct them to some of these articles:

- 'Tennis player Naomi Osaka speaks English, so she can't possibly be Japanese' (2019)
- 'Naomi Osaka's impossible duty to the people of Japan' (2021)
- 'Tokyo Games and Naomi Osaka lay bare Japan's cultural reckoning' (2021)

Draw comparisons back to *Single Asian Female*.

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SYNTHESISING TASK

In this activity, students will complete profiles for other single women in literature. You may wish to provide them with your own list of characters, but below are some ideas to get you started:

- Bridget Jones (*Bridget Jones's Diary*)
- Emma Woodhouse (*Emma*)
- Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*)
- Jane Marple (*Miss Marple*)
- Jo March (*Little Women*)
- Mary Poppins
- Ophelia (*Hamlet*)

For each profile, have students jot down the characters' values, beliefs, ambitions, successes and failures.

- How are these characters similar or different to Pearl, Mei and Zoe?
- What cultural expectations are placed on these women?
- How does the time in which these characters were written influence their behaviour and people's expectations of them?
- What can we learn about the perceived role of women and their place in society?

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The writer's craft

THE PROLOGUE AND EPILOGUE

As is typical of plays, *Single Asian Female* begins with a prologue and ends with an epilogue. Discuss these textual features with students and explain their purpose. Consider the following questions regarding Law's decision to include a prologue and epilogue:

- How does the Prologue foreshadow events in the play?
- What can be determined about the text's key themes and characters from the Prologue?
- What is the importance of splitting the Prologue into three smaller scenes?
- How does the Epilogue resolve the play's narrative threads?
- Are there any areas that are not brought to a believable conclusion by the Epilogue?

You may like to study the role of epilogues in literature more broadly with your students. There are many epilogues from films that you could show to illustrate how narratives can be brought to a conclusion. The endings of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* or *La La Land* could both be suitable for discussion.

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STAGE DIRECTIONS

Stage directions provide actors with clear instructions for delivering lines and moving about the performance area (known as blocking). If this is the first or only play that students have read, they may find these directions confusing. Take some time to explore their role for readers, and how they can help us get a sense of how the play should be performed ([this video](#) provides a broad overview of what is involved in theatre productions).

Descriptive directions help determine how a set should look and how a production comes together through the use of lighting, sound effects and props. Have students annotate these directions in *Single Asian Female*, starting with the neon lights in the Prologue. Is there any correlation between the descriptive descriptions and the tone or mood of each scene? Can anything be learned from the stage directions that is not evident in the dialogue between characters? Take the end of Act 2, for example (p. 46) – what do we learn about Pearl that we don't learn from what her character says onstage?

In *Single Asian Female*, most stage directions relate to the vocal and physical delivery of characters' lines. Split the class into groups and, using a table like the one below, have each group collate common delivery directions for their assigned character. How do these instructions contribute to the character's attitude and identity? Have students act out some of the stage directions to get a sense of the tone, urgency or relationship between characters.

Character	Delivery directions
Pearl	'evasively' (p. 17)
Zoe	'fearful', 'incredulous' (p. 24)
Mei	'Deflated' (p. 20), 'coldly' (p. 41)
Other	Katie: 'sagely' (p. 25)

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THE PLAYLIST

There are many songs used throughout *Single Asian Female*, typically to transition between scenes or denote the end of an act. La Boite Theatre Company has created a [Spotify playlist](#) of songs mentioned in the text, plus a few others in the same vein.

Show students some scenes from movies that include popular music they may have heard on the radio. A few suggestions have been listed below, though there are many other films with iconic soundtracks that you could choose from:

- 'All By Myself' by Jamie O'Neal, as featured in *Bridget Jones' Diary* (3:58–6:17)
- 'All Star' by Smash Mouth, as featured in *Shrek*
- 'Old Time Rock and Roll' by Bob Seger, as featured in *Risky Business*
- 'Happy' by Pharrell Williams, as featured in *Despicable Me 2*
- 'Stayin' Alive' by the Bee Gees, as featured in *Saturday Night Fever*

Discuss with students the role of music in creating a mood and establishing the tone of a film. How does the music shape their perception of the character(s) involved? Have students look up one of the songs from *Single Asian Female*, research its meaning and analyse its lyrics (if any). Have them consider:

- The role of music in shaping our perception of Pearl, Mei or Zoe at specific points in the play
- How the music reflects the views and ideas being projected in the scene
- Whether or not the music reflects the intended characterisation
- Why Law might have chosen each song

Once students have completed this task, see if they can replace some of the songs with others that convey the same message but possibly create a different tone. You could set up a class playlist on Spotify for students to add in their suggestions.

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A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

Single Asian Female is a three-act play, but to what extent does Law adhere to the typical three-act structure? A quick Google search will bring up many diagrams of the three-act structure. A simple activity for students would be to trace *Single Asian Female*'s key plot points to see if it follows this model. The [provided worksheet](#) (PDF, 114KB) may be useful for this purpose.

Once students have an understanding of the plot's shape and structure, they may need to consider who the protagonist is. Does the play follow Pearl, Mei or Zoe? Does the Wong family serve as an overarching 'character'? Or, again, are we dealing with three individual women's stories in one?

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WHY A PLAY?

Ask students to consider the impact of telling the story through performance, i.e. as a play:

- How does this text work as a piece of theatre?
- What advantages are there in telling the story as a play as opposed to another genre?
- What would be omitted by telling the story in another genre?

The following table may assist students in articulating the advantages and disadvantages of different genres. Some suggestions have been provided to get you started.

What if *Single Asian Female* was a...?

Genre	Advantages	Disadvantages
Play (staged performance)	engaging dramatisation/re-enactment of 'real life' offers a window into moments between characters in what feels like a private space	
Play (written script)	can reread the text for clarity can home in on specific parts of the text	
Novel	an opportunity to imagine the setting, characters, costuming, etc.	may only be able to focus on one character's perspective/voice use of an omniscient narrator may spoil the way information is revealed/concealed
Film	similar to a play score could be used more effectively to enhance the themes	
Radio play or audiobook		narrator's voice may impact on enjoyment (like/dislike)

Why do students think Law opted to write *Single Asian Female* as a play and not another text type? Consider:

- the play's heavy reliance on dialogue
- the importance of well-developed and authentic characters that 'leap' off the stage or page
- the role of space and staging, and the time constraints of a play (i.e. a story in two or three acts)
- how plot works in a play, and how it can be weaved through the entire piece
- the kind of audience that might view a play and how this can create opportunities to present a certain message or explore a certain theme

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FOOD AND THE GOLDEN PHOENIX

The family restaurant is central to the development of *Single Asian Female*'s plot. Not only does it provide the setting for the play, but it is also the key to understanding the broad way in which experiences of dining and eating bring people together.

The physical space

The Golden Phoenix is described briefly in the frontmatter of the text (under 'Setting'), and in more detail through the stage directions on p. 15. As well as being a space to eat, The Golden Phoenix forms the downstairs part of Pearl, Mei and Zoe's home, doubling as their living room.

Your students may have dined at a traditional Chinese restaurant, or there may be a popular local eatery in their area. What adjectives would they use to describe these establishments? To help them visualise, you could do a quick Google search for 'Chinese restaurant interiors' and share the images. Contrast these with Law's description of The Golden Phoenix.

- How do the words 'dinky' and 'dated' influence students' understanding of the restaurant?
- What other words might be associated with this description?
- What images are conjured by her word choices?
- Are there any parallels between the restaurant and the women's lives?
- How might the restaurant's condition reflect the attitudes of the women who live and work there?

Owning a restaurant

On p. 37, Zoe makes a quip about Chinese families owning restaurants. To help students understand what she means, show them *Chopsticks or Fork?*, an ABC series that tells the stories of Chinese migrants who opened restaurants in country towns. Host Jennifer Wong explores the role of these restaurants in local communities, as well as how they have adapted to 'Australian taste'. Some of the stories mirror the experiences of the women who work in The Golden Phoenix. You may like to watch some episodes with students, discuss the importance of the restaurants in their respective communities, and consider the restaurateurs' motivations, inspiration, values and experiences.

Food

On p. 16, while discussing her contributions to the food van (a *Meals on Wheels*-style initiative), Pearl remarks on the fact that everyone loves her cooking. This is contrasted with Mei's comments about the catering at her school formal afterparty (p. 22). What would students consider to be examples of 'normal' food? Australian Geographic's *history of Australian cuisine* may provide some interesting points for discussion with students.

- Why would Mei want 'normal' food at her afterparty?
- How is it that Pearl's cooking is so popular with the food van clientele, but not Mei?

There are several key principles and ideas that inform Chinese cooking. Direct students to the notion of *yin and yang in food preparation*. If they have watched *Chopsticks or Fork?*, they can record some of the reasons why people like Chinese food, as well as the elements that the chefs take pride in preparing. Students should be able to see, through both *Single Asian Female* and *Chopsticks or Fork?*, that food and dining is a central experience in many Australians' lives.

Paul describes food as having equalising or universal properties (p. 37). Do students agree or disagree with his statement? How might it be reflected as true or false through the play's events? Have students complete *this table* (PDF, 90KB) to record their thoughts using evidence from the text. What other examples can they give of food bringing people together?

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN026) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028)
(ACEEN029) (ACEEN030) (ACEEN032) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN038)

DATING FLASHBACKS/MONTAGE

Discuss with students the use of flashbacks to illustrate Zoe's dating history (Act 2 Scene 4). By now they should be familiar with stage directions, so break the class into groups of five and have them stage this scene. Given its unusual nature (i.e. not taking place in the present):

- How does this scene enhance Zoe's storyline and contribute to her surrounding themes?
- How does characterisation work in this scene?
- What is the significance of all the men being Anglo-Australian?
- How does the final flashback to the date with Paul exacerbate Zoe's feelings about men and dating?

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN030)
(ACEEN038) (ACEEN039) (ACEEN040)

Text and meaning

FETISHISATION OF ASIAN WOMEN

By now, students know that the play interrogates the stereotypical reduction of Asian cultures and peoples. In an [interview with *The Guardian*](#), Law talks about the persistent stereotypes that follow Asian women into professional and personal settings, and her desire for the play to challenge such thinking (see the third-last paragraph of the interview). She also discusses the sexualisation of Asian women with the play's Director, Claire Christian, in [a short video on Belvoir's YouTube channel](#).

With some research, you may find some appropriate resources to introduce to your students:

- ['What Is Fetishization And How Does It Contribute To Racism?'](#) (Forbes article)
- ['What's the difference between having a "type" and fetishisation?'](#) (SBS article; useful for grounding the two terms)
- ['Your "thing" for Asian girls is not a compliment'](#) (SBS article)
- ['Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes'](#) (*Journal of the American Philosophical Association*; could be a suitable starting point for exploring the notion of 'yellow fever')
- [The Swiping Game](#), Season 1: 'What Is Yellow Fever?' (SBS documentary)
- ['The history of fetishizing Asian women'](#) (Vox article; discusses how tropes about Asian women played into the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings)

There is a lot to unpack in this area, including:

- What is 'yellow fever' and how does it manifest in the play? Consider Zoe's dating history and Pearl's ex-husband.
- How do the men that Zoe dates see their preference for Asian women as a compliment? How do these stereotypes cause more harm than good?
- What kinds of comments are made to the women in the play regarding their Asian-ness and their sexuality?
- How does Zoe in particular deal with lewd comments about her sexuality?
- Is Katie's interest in Asian culture a form of fetishisation, appreciation or something else?
- What is the role of [cosplay](#) in this space?
- How is Mei's resistance to her culture pushing back against these stereotypes and fetishes?
- In Zoe's dating montage, Man 1 makes a comment about tiger mothers (p. 33). What is this stereotype, and what is Man 1 implying about Zoe and her family?
- Man 2 makes a reference to Zoe having a Chinese finger trap (p. 33). A finger trap is a traditional prank toy, but in this context it is a euphemism for the vagina. How does Man 2's comment contribute to the fetishisation of Asian women, and what does it reveal about how he is anticipating Zoe to behave?
- Man 3 is fascinated with Zoe's hair (p. 33) and asks if he can touch it. How is this an example of fetishisation?

Two influential Asian women – *Crazy Rich Asians* actress Constance Wu and MasterChef Australia judge Melissa Leong – have called out fetishisation by explaining how constant commentary and derogatory slurs have impacted them (and continue to do so) on a daily basis. Wu, a long-time advocate for the contemporary and authentic portrayal of Asian women on screen, [delivered a](#)

rousing speech at the Los Angeles Women's March in 2018. Similarly, Leong has spoken out about the barrage of inappropriate comments she has received from strangers due to her appearance.

How are these women's experiences mirrored in Pearl, Mei and Zoe? In what ways can a text like *Single Asian Female* help to erode fetishistic representations of Asian women?

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029)
(ACEEN030) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039) (ACEEN040)

COMMENTARY ON WOMEN'S ROLES AND RIGHTS

Law has made no secret of the play's stance on the competing roles and social mores of women (especially as they apply to women of certain ages). *Single Asian Female* is packed with references to a woman's right to choose, women's bodies and expectations for behaviour, with Pearl, Mei and Zoe all fending off various comments. Students could keep a list of these as they arise, with a view to sharing the myriad ways these women are expected to please other people and/or obey their rules.

Using the table below as a guide, document the competing roles and tensions that Pearl, Mei and Zoe face. Students will use their completed tables as the basis for a discussion around the prevailing expectations on these women (and women more broadly). This should illuminate how the previously-explored racial stereotypes and fetishisation of Asian women contribute to the pressures already placed on the Wong women.

Character	Behaviour/action(s)	Tension(s)
Pearl	Pressuring Mei to wear a <i>cheongsam</i> to her Year 12 formal and serve Chinese food at her afterparty	Caught between raising strong, independent women in the West and wanting them to have an appreciation for their cultural heritage
Mei	Drinking to excess	Wants to fit in with her peers and be seen as 'cool' and likeable rather than an Asian stereotype, but is inexperienced, leading her to drink too much and become hungover
Zoe	Falling unexpectedly pregnant and deciding to have an abortion	Based on her age and on Claudia, Paul and Pearl's comments, the expectation is that Zoe would want to have a baby

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029) (ACEEN030)
(ACEEN035) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039) (ACEEN040)

THE IMPACTS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

NOTE: Be sure to approach this topic with sensitivity, as there may be students in your class who have experienced (or are currently experiencing) domestic violence in their own lives.

Single Asian Female also confronts the impacts of domestic violence through Pearl's experiences. Because violence against immigrant women is often underreported, research in this area is still relatively new. In some Asian-Australian communities, the underreporting of domestic violence is connected to 'saving face'. This article identifies some other factors that might prevent women from speaking out against their abuse. They include language barriers, financial dependence, fear of the police, and the weight of cultural expectations. This is the crux of the issue for Asian women, who are expected to be strong and to keep the family unit (and its reputation) intact. There is a tendency for mainstream society to assume certain behaviours from immigrant families and to overlook real concerns by attributing them to 'cultural differences'.

Reread the sections of the play (especially the Prologue and Act 3 Scene 1) where Pearl discusses her marriage and the way her ex-husband treated her. This is mostly alluded to rather than directly stated. Tread carefully and encourage students to explore these scenes with an empathic lens. Consider why Pearl stayed in her marriage for so long; how it is and what it represents that Mei is

so attached to her father; and how Pearl's immigration status is challenged by her ex. The aim here is not to critique Pearl or her ex-husband's behaviour, but rather to understand the tensions that must exist for Pearl to find herself in this situation.

In her book *The Mother Wound*, Amani Haydar explains how race, culture, religion and violence intersect. Haydar's father murdered her mother in 2015. She explains that Muslim women face a dilemma in reporting domestic violence, as people's (incorrect) assumptions about the role of religion and cultural ideology completely undermine the issue at hand. The intertwining of harmful stereotypes with domestic violence, which leads to misunderstanding in the broader community, is as much an issue for Asian women as it is for Muslim women (so much so that Haydar felt a need to behave, grieve and report her story in a certain way). Some passages from *The Mother Wound* may be suitable to support a class discussion around these ideas; however, the text would need to be thoroughly vetted before use.

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029)
(ACEEN030) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039) (ACEEN040)

SYNTHESISING TASK

Students are to write the prologue to their own life story. [This task sheet](#) (PDF, 119KB) pulls together all elements necessary to complete the task.

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029) (ACEEN030)
(ACEEN032) (ACEEN033) (ACEEN034) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN036) (ACEEN037)
(ACEEN038)

Ways of reading the text

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST READING

According to postcolonial critics, the continuous study of literature from the Western canon has damaged our understanding of human nature and its diverse experiences, as we only study texts that promote colonial hegemony. Postcolonial feminism aims to undo these colonial legacies through feminist activism. It seeks to understand and interpret the everyday lived experiences of women by decentring the white, Western and Eurocentric experience. Pure feminist critics tend to focus on the experiences, lives and rights of white women, whereas postcolonial feminists highlight the varied lived experiences of non-white women. These critics argue that the effects of colonialism are continuing and that many women remain oppressed by certain imperial behaviours. For more information about postcolonial feminism, refer to *FEM* or the *International Journal of English and Literature*.

In relation to *Single Asian Female*, have students consider:

- How does the text represent aspects of colonial oppression as they relate to the Wong women?
- What people or groups does the work identify as 'other' and how are they treated?
- What does the text reveal about the way race, class and gender shape individual identity?
- How does the text deal with the relationship between personal and cultural identities?
- Does the text speak back to characters, themes or assumptions in colonial works?
- Does the text speak to feminist works, and does it offer an alternate or similar reading?
- How does *Single Asian Female* undermine Eurocentric colonial ideologies through its representation of colonisation?
- How are colonial oppression and racism represented in the text?

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN026) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028)
(ACEEN029) (ACEEN030) (ACEEN032) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039)
(ACEEN040)

Comparison with other texts

‘BEING SINGLE, ARAB AND FEMALE’

Author Rawah Arja has written about being a single Arab woman for the anthology *Arab, Australian, Other: Stories on Race and Identity* (an is available from SBS Voices). Have students read the **edited extract** on SBS Voices and discuss any similarities or differences between Arja's experiences and Zoe's in *Single Asian Female*. In what ways do the two women's cultural backgrounds feed into their marital status and anxiety around being single?

CRAZY RICH ASIANS

Crazy Rich Asians (both the **2014 novel** by Kevin Kwan and the **2018 film adaptation** directed by Jon M. Chu) offers a different representation of Asian people. Remarkably, this is the first film since **1993's *The Joy Luck Club*** to feature a predominantly Asian-American cast. Lead actress Constance Wu has been outspoken about the need for greater Asian representation on screen. Her character Rachel subverts the stereotype of Asian women being quiet and obedient; it would be interesting to align her values and actions with those of the women in *Single Asian Female*.

OTHER TEXT COMPARISONS

- The anthology *Growing Up Asian in Australia* (edited by Alice Pung) may provide an interesting point of comparison with *Single Asian Female*, giving readers a glimpse into the everyday experiences of Asian-Australians.
- *The Family Law* by the playwright's brother Benjamin Law (also a **successful TV series**) is a memoir about growing up in Queensland during the late 1980s.
- Select stories from Nam Le's *The Boat* reveal the experiences of Vietnamese refugees.
- Maxine Beneba Clarke's *The Hate Race* could spark an interesting discussion based on her upbringing in an Afro-Caribbean family.
- Jessie Tu's *A Lonely Girl is a Dangerous Thing* explores female desire in all its forms.
- *The Coconut Children* by Vivian Pham focuses on two teenagers growing up in Cabramatta in south-western Sydney. The teens feel torn between their Australian way of life and their longing for a Vietnamese heritage of which they have no firsthand experience.
- *Lucky Ticket* by Joey Bui is a collection of short stories featuring diverse characters with their own relationships, identities and difficulties to traverse.
- The SBS TV series *New Gold Mountain* presents the untold story of Australia's gold rush from the perspective of Chinese miners.

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029) (ACEEN035)
(ACEEN038) (ACEEN039) (ACEEN040)

Evaluation

REFLECTING ON THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN, IMMIGRANTS AND ASIAN-AUSTRALIANS

Single Asian Female delves into the experiences of several different groups: immigrants, Asian-Australians and women. Ask students to consider the text's role in illuminating some of these experiences by completing double-entry journals. They should outline the sections of the text that most influenced their understanding, as well as how they were complemented by the readings, activities and discussions undertaken in class. A template is available **here** (PDF, 92KB).

(ACEEN024) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039)
(ACEEN040)

BRINGING PEOPLE IN FROM THE MARGINS

As a class, consider how *Single Asian Female* focuses on the experiences of marginal groups. Each character has a unique experience that Law highlights for us. At the beginning of this unit

(Initial Response), students listed all their expectations based on the characters' initial descriptions. Have them revisit this list and make any amendments in light of their study of the play. These could include:

- deleting any assumptions that turned out to be false
- adding unexpected qualities that the characters exhibited
- adding experiences, challenges or obstacles that the characters endured, and how they reacted to or faced them

(ACEEN024) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039)
(ACEEN040)

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND/OR WRITTEN RESPONSE

- How does *Single Asian Female* reflect the experiences of people on the margins?
- In what ways can the Wong family's experiences be extrapolated to other peoples and groups?
- What is the key message of *Single Asian Female*, and how do each of the characters help bring it to fruition?
- Does the play's conclusion help to resolve its key themes or ideas?
- What have you learned through your study of *Single Asian Female*?

(ACEEN024) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039)
(ACEEN040)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (RECEPTIVE MODE)

In this task, students will examine a vignette from the text and rewrite it to illustrate their knowledge of the play's characters, circumstances and themes. They should aim to retain the overall tone and ideas in the scene, but replace one element in order to change the outcome. For example:

- Mei's father answers the phone and has a conversation with her, and the audience hears what he says.
- Zoe's dates go well, OR she calls one of them out and lets them know their comments are inappropriate.
- Pearl speaks with her ex-husband about his mistreatment of her.
- Zoe confronts Claudia about having shamed her for her one-night stand.
- Mei hosts the formal afterparty and celebrates her heritage and unique customs.

Students should consider any stage directions or costuming decisions that would enhance their new scene and include these in their final piece. On completion, they should write a short rationale for their choice of vignette, highlighting the ways that they have retained elements of Law's characterisation and explaining what they hoped to achieve by changing one small element.

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN026) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028)
(ACEEN029) (ACEEN030) (ACEEN032) (ACEEN033) (ACEEN034) (ACEEN035)
(ACEEN036) (ACEEN037) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039) (ACEEN040)

Synthesising core ideas

THE PLAY'S COMMENTARY

A play for 'the other'

In 2021, *Single Asian Female* debuted to audiences in New Zealand. With a few small cultural tweaks, it became applicable to the New Zealand experience. In the **program**, Law dedicates the play to audiences whose stories have never been told onstage (p. 8). She and Director Cassandra Tse both reflect that it is time for Asian peoples to speak up.

- How is the play a 'love letter'?
- How does it express thoughts, feelings and affections for the people Law believes have been excluded?
- Are there any key elements of the play that directly do this?

Australian values and fitting in

Running throughout *Single Asian Female* is the idea of being Australian and upholding Australian values. Students would have explored some of these at the beginning of this unit (**Initial Response**).

- What qualities do people need to have to 'fit in' with Australian society?
- What qualities do Pearl, Mei and Zoe exhibit? How is it that, despite their admirable qualities, they still struggle to fit in?
- Why is there a double standard when it comes to who is considered 'Australian' and why?

Resisting labels

Law has explained that the play highlights the struggles of those who resist the limitations of labels, which can prevent people from living authentic lives (see again the [clip from Belvoir's YouTube channel](#)). Similarly, in the Auckland Theatre Company program, Cassandra Tse notes that the dehumanisation of Asian peoples (particularly Asian women) has led to their reductive and fetishised representation in media (p. 6). Each of Law's characters experiences some form of labelling throughout the text: from Claudia's slut-shaming language in the Prologue, to Lana's comments about Mei's fashion sense, and Pearl's labelling by the Australian government as they remove her from the country. If you haven't already, unpack the power of labelling with students:

- Are there times when labelling is positive?
- How is labelling overwhelmingly negative?
- What is the relationship between labelling and stereotyping?

With all of these elements in mind, and working with the idea of the play as a love letter, have students write to a person or group that they (or society) have deliberately or inadvertently 'othered' through labelling. Ideally, these letters should be unidentifiable (i.e. not addressed to or singling out a specific person). Students should share their learnings and unpack any assumptions or ideas that they may have reconsidered as a result of reading this text.

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN026) (ACEEN027) (ACEEN028)
 (ACEEN029) (ACEEN030) (ACEEN035) (ACEEN036) (ACEEN037) (ACEEN038)
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RICH ASSESSMENT TASK (RECEPTIVE MODE)

As students come to the end of their unit on *Single Asian Female*, have them collectively brainstorm a list of questions about the text that they would like to explore further. Each student should aim to contribute three detailed questions to the list. Generic or book club questions are easily searchable online, or you could use this [this list](#) (PDF, 113KB) as a starting point for the class to create their own. Vet the questions for balance and suitability, with a view to ensuring that they are predominantly analytical.

Each student should prepare answers to the three questions that they contributed to the list (this could be done in-class or as homework). As a guide, they should aim to write 300–500 words per question, supported by evidence from the text. Upon completion, break the class into small groups (about five students each) and have them share their questions for discussion. Each student should share the answer to one of their questions, after which the other group members will share their own thoughts. Repeat until each person has shared one of their questions and answers.

Students can then submit their three questions and responses for assessment. You may decide to allow some time for students to improve their answers after discussion with their peers.

(ACEEN021) (ACEEN022) (ACEEN024) (ACEEN028) (ACEEN029) (ACEEN030)
 (ACEEN035) (ACEEN036) (ACEEN037) (ACEEN038) (ACEEN039) (ACEEN040)
[Back to Top](#)



Unit Suitable For AC: Senior Secondary English (Unit 2)

Duration 4 weeks

Curriculum Summary

Australian Curriculum content descriptions and NSW Syllabus outcomes

Themes

cultural differences, family, friendship, migrant experience, prejudice, racism, representations of women, sexism, societal expectations

General Capabilities

Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, Literacy, Personal and Social Capability

Cross-curriculum Priorities

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

FURTHER DETAILS

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