

# Jade Snow Wong



Image Courtesy of the Jade Snow Wong Family

## Teacher Packet

©2020

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	3
Lesson 1. Jade Snow Wong: Breaking the Mold	5
Lesson 2. Drawing Together Jade Snow Wong’s Many Influences	9
Lesson 3. The Art and Science of Jade Snow Wong’s Work	12
Lesson 4. Jade Snow Wong: Crafting a Chinese American Identity	15
Lesson 5. Jade Snow Wong’s Writing: Shaping Her Story	19

**Special thanks to Mark Ong for sharing his memories and insights into his mother’s life and work.**

## Introduction:

**Jade Snow Wong (1922-2006)** was significant not just as a celebrated ceramics and enamels artist but also as one of the first writers on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese American experience. The theme of “working with your hands” resonated throughout her life: she saw her immigrant parents laboring with their hands in their garment factory; she cooked and cleaned as a maid to pay for her college education; she wrote her best-selling memoirs by hand and on the typewriter; she personally handled matters (objects and tours) in her import/export and travel businesses; and, of course, she worked with her hands as a ceramics and enamels artist. This “hands-on” approach in all of her endeavors enabled Wong to create a strong sense of identity that withstood the expectations and judgments she faced as an Asian woman. The acclaim she received for her art and writing led the U.S. State Department to ask her to serve as a cultural ambassador speaking to audiences throughout Asia. Thus, Jade Snow Wong is worth studying not just for her work in the arts, but for the many ways she succeeded in sharing her perspective with the world.

In the lessons below, teachers and students have the opportunity to explore the following:

1. Wong’s artistic style and the influences on her work
2. The ceramics- and enamels-making process
3. Wong’s memoirs and her family’s immigrant experience, including the conflicting age-, race-, and gender-related values that shaped her
4. The way Wong’s story was interpreted and dramatized for a short film (looking at the film itself as a work of art/historical artifact)
5. How Wong’s story might stir students’ thinking about their own identities and what it means to be “American.”

**Key words/subjects of study:** ceramics, pottery, enamels, late 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century China and America, Confucianism, the immigrant experience, race relations, gender roles, family relationships, identity formation, the American Dream, historical texts

**Grade Levels:** The lessons below increase in the level of analytical thinking required of the students, with Lesson 1 being accessible to all grade levels and the final lesson, Lesson 5, being more appropriate for Grades 9-12+. The lessons are not dependent on each other, and they draw from a range of disciplines and skills, so teachers may pick and choose the activities that are most relevant and appropriate for their classes.

## **Common Core State Standards Addressed:**

### **Lessons 1 and 2:**

Visual Arts 1.0: Processing, Analyzing, and Responding to Sensory Information Through the Language and Skills Unique to the Visual Arts

Visual Arts 3.0: Understanding the Historical Contributions and Cultural Dimensions of the Visual Arts

Visual Arts 4.0: Responding to, Analyzing, and Making Judgments about Works in the Visual Arts

Visual Arts 5.0: Connecting and Applying What is Learned in the Visual Arts to Other Art Forms and Subject Area and to Careers

K-12.SL.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade appropriate topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

### **Lesson 3: (Same as Lessons 1 and 2, plus the following)**

2-PS1-1: Plan and conduct an investigation to describe and classify different kinds of materials by their observable properties.

### **Lessons 4 and 5:**

#### **ELA & Literacy:**

6.L.2: Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g. visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

6-12.SL.1: Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade appropriate topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

7.SL.3: Delineate a speaker's argument and specific claims, and attitude toward the subject, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

9-10.RI.7: Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

6-8.10: Write routinely over extended time frames (time for reflection and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of discipline-specific tasks, purposes, and audiences.

#### **History-Social Science:**

1.4: Students compare and contrast everyday life in different times and places around the world and recognize that some aspects of people, places, and things change over time while others stay the same.

2.5: Students understand the importance of individual action and character and explain how the heroes from long ago and the recent past have made a difference in others' lives.

11.11: Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.

# Lesson 1—Jade Snow Wong: Breaking the Mold

Grades K-8 and above

Duration: 1 45-min. class period

## Objectives:

- To understand how Wong was viewed by her community as a rebel in her choice of career and in her artistic style
- To practice using compare/contrast skills to identify the hallmarks of art from the Qing and Song dynasties, to understand how Wong’s work was initially judged
- To hone discussion skills through the use of Project Zero’s [Artful Thinking Routines](#).

## Materials:

- Powerpoint of Images: Jade Snow Wong working in the storefront window; Song vs. Qing ceramics; Jade Snow Wong’s ceramics
- For older students, handout with quotes about the start of Wong’s career and discussion prompts.
- Post-its and pens/pencils

## Part 1: Discussion of Wong’s Nonconformity

In her writing about the start of her artistic career, Wong recounts how she was unable to find an affordable rental space where she could make and sell her pottery. She ultimately struck a deal to work in the front window of a Chinatown store, a decision that helped her business to thrive but also drew her community’s disapproval.

**\*For younger students (K-5)**, the teacher can simply tell this brief story and show the image of Wong working in the window (Slide 2 of PowerPoint). Then, use the following Artful Thinking questions to encourage the students to share their responses to the picture:

1. What do you **see** in this picture?
2. What do **think** is happening this picture?
3. What do you **wonder** about this picture?

After hearing a variety of responses, you can ask the students why working in the window might have been seen as a bold move on Wong’s part. What are the pros and cons of doing her work in public?

To wrap up the discussion, you can make a connection to today and how there is now much more interest in “maker-spaces” and showing the process behind a product—can the students think of examples? (The proliferation of online how-to videos; open-kitchen restaurants where customers can see the chefs cooking, etc. If you’re interested in pursuing this topic, here is an article on the renewed “Arts and Crafts” movement:

<https://mymodernmet.com/arts-and-crafts-movement-revival/>)

**\*For older students (Grades 6-8 and beyond),** in addition to discussing the picture above, you can also have the students break up into small groups to read and discuss the quotes below:

From the time I stepped into the window, I attracted crowds. I sold enough pottery to the general American public to convince that my style was acceptable. However, the Chinese community and my mother were not enthusiastic. With perpetually muddy hands, I had forsaken the 2500-year-old Confucian ideal of the scholar who studied to avoid getting his hands dirty. When I shopped for groceries, immigrant Chinese tradesmen laughed in my face. My mother would not look at me or at my work. Had I caused her to lose face in public? (*Jade Snow Wong: A Retrospective* 18)

From the first, the local Chinese were not Jade Snow's patrons. The thinness and whiteness of porcelains imported from China and ornate decorations which came into vogue during the late Ching [Qing] Dynasty satisfied their tastes. They could not understand why "silly Americans" paid dollars for a hand-thrown bowl utilizing crude California clays, not much different from the inexpensive peasant ware of China. That the Jade Snow Wong bowl went back to an older tradition of understated beauty was not apparent. They could see only that she wouldn't apply a dragon or a hundred flowers. (Wong, *No Chinese Stranger* 22)

Notes:

1. Even if the students haven't yet studied Confucianism or Chinese history, they'll be able to infer from the quotes the different cultural values that Wong was trying to reconcile.
2. You might want to clarify that Wong's simple pottery style "utilizing crude California clays" reflected her admiration of not just the older tradition of Song dynasty art but also of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Arts and Crafts movement in America. The Chinatown community would not have been familiar with Wong's approach, which was actually "new" for her time.

**Possible Discussion Prompts:**

1. Given the first quote, what kind of career do you think Wong's parents and community originally expected her to choose? What kind of work did the Chinese community respect?
2. How did Wong's pottery differ from the art the Chinese community valued? From the two quotes above, who were Wong's main customers? How might this situation have caused tension for Wong?
3. What does it mean to "lose face"? What risks was Wong taking in choosing this career and pursuing it in the way she did?
4. What is more important, staying in harmony with your larger community or pursuing your own goals, which might conflict with those of the people you live with?
5. Wong started her artistic career in a shop window because she couldn't afford a studio space of her own. How is affordable space still an issue in the Bay Area today? How

might artists be especially affected by this issue? (You might refer to the Oakland “Ghost Ship” fire in 2016 as a compelling example.)

## Part 2: Connecting Wong’s art to that of the Song vs. Qing Dynasties

**1. Introduction.** For younger students (K-5), the teacher can first introduce the Song (960-1279) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties as two important periods in China’s past, each with its own style of art. You might want to clarify that while the Qing dynasty came later, that doesn’t mean its art was more “advanced”—while looking at the pieces in this slideshow, the goal is to draw out what artists in each era emphasized, rather than judging one style of art as “better” than the other.

**For older students,** you can give dates and more background, if you wish (resources linked at end of lesson). Then show Slide 3 from the PowerPoint.

Give the students a few minutes to look at the two images. Then, have each student think of two words, one that describes the Song ewer and one that describes the Qing ewer. Tell students to avoid using general words such as “good” “bad” or “better”—encourage them to dig into their vocabulary and think of descriptive adjectives/phrases. Older students can write their chosen words on post-its and stick each word on the board next to the relevant image.

**2. Share out.** Ask students to share the words they thought of for one ewer and then the words for the other ewer. Or, if you used the post-its, you could simply read out the submitted words for each image and have the students take-in the range of adjectives.

**3. Game:** Show students the following subsequent images in the slideshow (up through Slide 11) and have students guess whether each image shows a piece from the Song dynasty or the Qing dynasty.

**Drawing Conclusions:** Ask students to turn to a partner and work together to come up with a sentence that summarizes the overall differences in the art of the two eras. Have volunteers share out their sentence. Come to a consensus as a class as to how to identify a Song piece vs. a Qing piece.

**4. Connecting to Jade Snow Wong.** Display images of Jade Snow Wong’s ceramics (the rest of the PowerPoint) to show how she was influenced by Song dynasty art. Older students who did the discussion portion of Part 1 will already know that she preferred the Song era, but for younger students, this is a chance for them to make the connection themselves.

**For K-5 students,** ask, “From looking at these pictures of Jade Snow Wong’s art, which era do you think her work is closer to, the Qing or the Song? What similarities do you see?” Then explain to students how Jade Snow Wong’s community expected her to make art that looked

more like the Qing era than the Song era, so she was viewed as someone who didn't do what she was "supposed to do."

**For older students,** you can pose the following question: Where do you see the Song influence on Wong's art, and where do you see her putting her own stamp on that style? Ask for specific examples from the images in the slideshow.

## 5. Wrap up:

**Question for all students:** What personality traits did Jade Snow Wong need to have (or cultivate) to do the art she wanted to do?

For older students, you could assign this as a journal-write. Ideally, students would write about more than Wong's artistic choices; also important are her efforts to start her business despite the cultural pressures she faced.

To help students make personal connections to Wong's story, you could add the following question:

Have you ever thought of becoming an artist (whether in the visual arts, dance, writing, or music)--why or why not?

## Lesson 1 Additional Resources:

### On the Song Dynasty:

Asian Art Museum. *China: An Introduction to the Song Dynasty (960-1279)*

<https://education.asianart.org/resources/an-introduction-to-the-song-dynasty/>

### On the Qing Dynasty:

Asia Society. "Qing Dynasty Porcelain." *The Collection in Context*.

[https://www.asiasocietymuseum.org/region\\_results.asp?RegionID=4&CountryID=12&ChapterID=32](https://www.asiasocietymuseum.org/region_results.asp?RegionID=4&CountryID=12&ChapterID=32)

### Jade Snow Wong's memoirs:

*Fifth Chinese Daughter*. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1950.

*No Chinese Stranger*. New York: Harper & Row. 1975.

You can also search the [Asian Art Museum's online collection](#) for more images of Jade Snow Wong's art as well as pieces from the Song and Qing dynasties. (For best results, click on the "Advanced Search" tab and enter "Jade Snow Wong" in the Artist Name field.)



## Lesson 2—Jade Snow Wong: Drawing Together Her Many Influences

Grades 6-12, College

Duration: 2-3 45-min. class periods

### Objectives:

- To become familiar with Wong’s artistic style and recognize how an artist can have many influences and sources of inspiration
- To use compare-contrast skills in discussing artwork from different cultural contexts
- To practice online research skills, presentation skills, and working in groups

**Materials:** Laptops/computers with Internet access, projector.

### If you didn’t use Lesson 1, you might want to start with this Pre-Activity

#### Discussion:

Before showing the students images of Wong’s ceramics, divide the students into small groups, with each group getting one of the quotes below from Wong’s second memoir, *No Chinese Stranger*. If you need to create more than three groups, you can have multiple groups discuss the same quote. (Note that Wong wrote the first part of this memoir in the third person.)

#### Quotes:

“From the first, the local Chinese were not Jade Snow’s patrons. The thinness and whiteness of porcelains imported from China and ornate decorations which came into vogue during the late Ching Dynasty satisfied their tastes. They could not understand why “silly Americans” paid dollars for a hand-thrown bowl utilizing crude California clays, not much different from the inexpensive peasant ware of China. That the Jade Snow Wong bowl went back to an older tradition of understated beauty was not apparent. They could see only that she wouldn’t apply a dragon or a hundred flowers.” (22)

“To enlarge her production base, she experimented with enamels on copper forms conceived in the fluid shapes of her pottery, layering jewel tones for brilliant effects. They differed from the earth tints of clay and attracted a new clientele. With another kiln and new equipment, she made functional forms, believing that fine things should become part of the user’s everyday life.” (24)

“I am a craftsman who has spent most of her waking hours for the past seven years working with her hands. My materials are clay from the earth or chemicals for the alchemy of glazes. My tools are simple bamboo. My inspiration comes from the weeds in the fields or the colors of a sunset.” (94)

**Each group will discuss their given quote and jot answers down for the following questions:**

**What influences, concerns, and hopes does Wong grapple with in this quote? What do you think you’ll see in Wong’s art?**

**Then have the students re-gather as a large group and share out what they took away from their quote. As a class, brainstorm a list of “what to look for” in Wong’s pieces (to help prime**

students for analyzing the web images of Wong’s ceramics and enamels). Keep this list on the board or take a picture of it so the students can return to it at the end of the lesson.

**Activity:** (Need computers/laptops, access to the Internet, and ability to project images.)

1. **Divide students into small groups;** each group gets the name of one of Jade Snow Wong’s influences. Depending on the size of your class, you may not use all of the influences listed.

<b>Influence</b>	<b>Possible starting points for web research:</b>
Art of the Song Dynasty (960-1279)	<a href="https://education.asianart.org/resources/an-introduction-to-the-song-dynasty/">https://education.asianart.org/resources/an-introduction-to-the-song-dynasty/</a> <a href="http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/songdynasty-module/econ-rev-ceramics.html">http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/songdynasty-module/econ-rev-ceramics.html</a>
The Arts and Crafts Movement (1880-1920)	<a href="https://www.theartstory.org/movement-arts-and-crafts.htm">https://www.theartstory.org/movement-arts-and-crafts.htm</a> <a href="https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/keywords/arts-and-crafts-movement/">https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/keywords/arts-and-crafts-movement/</a>
Ceramics of the Japanese Momoyama Period	<a href="http://www.e-yakimono.net/html/mino-momoyama-jt.html">http://www.e-yakimono.net/html/mino-momoyama-jt.html</a>
Japanese Mingei (1920-on), especially the work of Shoji Hamada, Rosanjin, Toyoza Arakawa, and Kenkichi Tomimoto	<a href="https://www.toki.tokyo/blogt/2016/12/12/mingei-the-revival-of-japanese-folk-art">https://www.toki.tokyo/blogt/2016/12/12/mingei-the-revival-of-japanese-folk-art</a> <a href="http://artbooks.yupnet.org/2015/12/07/japanese-mingei-and-the-history-of-american-studio-ceramics/">http://artbooks.yupnet.org/2015/12/07/japanese-mingei-and-the-history-of-american-studio-ceramics/</a>
Japanese tea bowls	<a href="https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2013/11/20/arts/tea-bowls-simple-emblems-of-power/#.W4q7qy2ZN7M">https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2013/11/20/arts/tea-bowls-simple-emblems-of-power/#.W4q7qy2ZN7M</a>
Bernard Leach (1887-1979)	<a href="https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/bernard-leach-1478">https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/bernard-leach-1478</a>
Contemporary California artists in the post-WWII era, especially Ruth Asawa, Benjamino Bufano, and Bob Stockdale	<a href="https://communityofcreatives.com">https://communityofcreatives.com</a> (use links on right hand side for certain artists)
F. Carlton Ball (1911-1992) and Fred Uhl Ball (1945-1985)	<a href="https://www.themarksproject.org/marks/ball">https://www.themarksproject.org/marks/ball</a> <a href="http://www.enamelarts.org/index.php?fred-ball-enamels&amp;action=view_artist&amp;artist_id=75">http://www.enamelarts.org/index.php?fred-ball-enamels&amp;action=view_artist&amp;artist_id=75</a>

2. **Research:** In their groups, students will research their assigned artist/movement, to take notes on the following questions:

- Briefly, what was the historical context for this artist/movement? (When did this person live or when did this movement take place?)
- What are three stylistic hallmarks of this artist/movement?
- What is one representative work of art from this artist/movement? Be ready to share an image of this piece.

3. **Making Connections:** Once they have a general understanding of their assigned influence, the students must then find an image of a Jade Snow Wong piece that displays signs of that influence. For a good range of images, they can search the [Asian Art Museum's online collection](#) (for best results, click on the "Advanced Search" tab and enter "Jade Snow Wong" in the "Artist Name" field).

After studying their chosen Jade Snow Wong piece, each group should be able to explain the following:

- How does this piece connect to artist/movement that influenced her?
- Where in Wong's piece do you see similarities to the piece you chose for your assigned artist/movement? Where do you see differences?

4. **Presentations:** After the groups have completed their research, they will share their findings with the class. They will project their two chosen images on the board, give the brief historical context and hallmarks of their assigned influence, and then explain how their chosen Wong piece connects to the first piece.

#### 5. **Wrap-up:**

Show the students the list of "what to look for in Jade Snow Wong's pieces" that they brainstormed at the beginning of the lesson. What new terms/phrases would they add to the list now that they've learned more about Wong's art and understand her influences better?

**Final Journal Write** (making the lesson relevant to the students' own lives):

Just as Jade Snow Wong was inspired by many artists from different eras and cultures, you have been inspired by artists who have shaped how you express yourself. Which artists (in the visual arts, music, literature, film) have influenced you? Where do you see their influence on how you speak/write/dress/create?

## Lesson 3: The Art and Science of Jade Snow Wong's Work

Grades 6-12, College

**Duration: 1 45-minute class period for video, discussion, and choosing research topics; more class time later for presentations**

### Objectives:

- To learn some of the hallmarks of Wong's ceramics and enamels
- To gain a general understanding of the ceramics- and enamel-making processes
- To understand some of the scientific processes involved in art

### Activity:

Watch and discuss videos of Mark Ong (Jade Snow Wong's son) explaining his mother's methods in the studio as well as the considerations that went into creating her pieces.

### Links to Videos:

Jade Snow Wong's Ceramics: Carving Her Own Niche

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5UNTdEWhX4&feature=youtu.be>

Jade Snow Wong's Enamels: Color and Form

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmlmQ4eF3TQ&feature=youtu.be>

### Some useful vocabulary:

**Ceramic:** art piece made of clay that has been fired in a kiln

**Glaze:** a glassy coating that helps to make a ceramic waterproof

**Flux:** a substance that helps a glaze to melt and fuse

**Slip:** a mixture of clay and water that is used for decorating ceramics

**Enameling:** the use of heat to fuse powdered glass onto a surface, usually metal

### Follow-up Discussion Questions:

1. According to her son and to the excerpts from her books, what were the defining traits of Jade Snow Wong's art? (What did she emphasize/pay close attention to in her pieces?)
2. What are some of the things that could go wrong while Wong was working in the studio? Given the possible setbacks that could occur, what life lessons did Wong have to accept to keep doing her art?

### An Interdisciplinary Project

In the ceramics video, Ong describes his mother's efforts to mix new glazes, work that required extensive experimentation and careful recording of data. In many respects, she was just as much a scientist as an artist. Students could do some research or "detective

work” on the science involved in ceramics. A possible prompt for this project is the following passage from Wong’s second memoir, *No Chinese Stranger*:

Creativeness was 90 percent hard work and 10 percent inspiration. It was learning from errors, either from her lack of foresight or because of the errors of others. The first firing in an unfamiliar new gas kiln brought crushing disappointment when the wares blew up into tiny pieces. In another firing, glaze results were uneven black and dark green, for the chemical supply house had mistakenly labeled five pounds of black copper oxide as black iron oxide. One morning there was a personal catastrophe. Unaware of a slow gas leak all night from the partially opened gas cock, she lit a match at the kiln. An explosion injured both hands, which took weeks to heal. (23)

**To get the students started** you could ask them to use a highlighter to mark the parts of these quotes that are “mysteries” to them. What are they wondering about? Ask them to write down the questions they want to answer in order to understand this passage fully.

**As part of their investigation**, the students could do Internet and library research as well as interview the science and art teachers at their school. The “detectives” could then share their findings with the class; they would thus help their peers to understand just how painstaking (and sometimes dangerous) Wong’s work could be.

If you have time, you could have the detectives do **safe, simple demos** that could help explain the scientific processes involved in Wong’s art. For example:

- Showing how/why copper pennies turn green/black.
- Creating a “mystery solution” out of food coloring and having students experiment to find just the right mix of food colorings to reproduce the mystery color (to show the experimentation and careful notation needed to create certain glazes).
- Watching popcorn pop in the microwave to understand why ceramics might explode in the kiln (the build-up of steam inside a kernel leads it to “pop,” just as a ceramic bowl might explode from too much moisture in the air pockets in the clay).

---

**High school chemistry students** could go further and investigate the various elements and processes that produce glazes.

--The Spruce Crafts website provides resources on...

- the making of glazes :<https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/what-goes-into-glazes-2746232>
- the factors involved in creating certain glaze colors:  
<https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/ceramic-and-glaze-colorants-2745859>
- oxidation and reduction in the firing process:  
<https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/oxidation-and-reduction-atmospheres-2745940>

--Here is a more detailed explanation of the chemical reaction involved in reduction:

<https://ceramicartsnetwork.org/daily/firing-techniques/gas-kiln-firing/demystifying-the-reduction-firing-process/>

With the help of their chemistry teacher, students can choose their favorite Jade Snow Wong ceramic and try to figure out the ingredients for the colors in the piece and even write out the oxidation or reduction equations for producing those colors.

#### **Additional Resources for more STEM-related lessons:**

For further discussion of the chemistry of pottery—including the plasticity of clay, the difference between earthenware and stoneware, and the creation of glazes and colors—see the Royal Society of Chemistry’s “Education in Chemistry” website:

<https://eic.rsc.org/feature/the-chemistry-of-pottery/2020245.article>

For further discussion of the chemistry and physics of enameling, see the following page from the Ganoskin website:

<https://www.ganoskin.com/article/origins-evolution-practice-enameling/>

The process of sifting enamel evenly onto a cup or a bowl entails some knowledge of geometry and physics; a discussion of this process can be found here:

<https://www.ganoskin.com/article/proper-enamel-sifting-process/>

Just as Wong had to keep safety in mind when firing ceramics in a kiln, she also dealt with safety concerns while enameling; here is a clear explanation of the issues involved (including the issues caused by certain chemicals):

<https://www.ganoskin.com/article/enameling-safety-issues-know/>

# Lesson 4-- Jade Snow Wong: Crafting a Chinese American Identity

For Middle School, High School, and College history, literature, or ethnic studies courses

**Duration:** At least 1 45-min. class period to watch video and do journal writing/sharing. The number of additional periods depends on how many topics you want to cover.

**Objective:** Watch and discuss the film *Jade Snow Wong* (1977, 30 minutes, accessible online at <https://vimeo.com/126857095>) to understand the cultural conflicts experienced by Chinese American women during the 1930s-40s and how similar tensions still exist today.

---

## 1. Watching the Film

### Before watching the film....

- Acknowledge that the film is a product of its time (1970s) and that it doesn't tell Wong's complete story—her work as an artist, cultural ambassador, and civic leader is left out. The focus is on Wong's upbringing in SF Chinatown and her struggle to reconcile her father's strict Confucian teachings and traditional views on gender with her desire to be "American." If students are unfamiliar with Confucian teachings, teachers may want to give an overview first before students watch the film. (A possible resource: <https://asiasociety.org/education/confucianism>.)
- Students might benefit from an overview of the major U.S. immigration laws that shaped the Wong family's experience. You can use the following timeline to give a general sense of how Chinese immigrants were viewed by the U.S. government in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: <http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/chinese-immigration-to-the-united-states-1884-1944/timeline.html>

### While watching the film....

As students watch the film, they should be jotting down notes on what they find interesting, confusing, upsetting, or even funny.

### After watching the film....

Expanding on their notes from the viewing, students journal-write for 10-15 minutes on their reaction to the film. Ask the students to be specific—which scenes/moments in the film spurred this reaction in them?

If there is time, have the students pair-share on their journal-writes using the following guiding questions:

1. What did your responses have in common; what was different?
2. How is *Jade Snow Wong's* story still relevant today? (This question helps the students to move beyond their own reactions.)

**2. In-Depth Discussion:** You can divide the students into small groups and assign each group a topic on which they'll share out later; or, you can stay together as a large group. The following are possible prompts, organized by topic:

### **Treatment of Chinese-Americans in 1930s-'40s:**

1. Why was Jade Snow's father unable to become an American citizen during her childhood? (May need to give background on the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 as well as other immigration restrictions of the time.)
2. Recall the speeches given at the ship christening. Why was it significant that Jade Snow won this honor? (How did her honor come to reflect that of all Chinese-Americans?) Why did mainstream Americans change their attitude toward the Chinese and Chinese-Americans during this time? (May need to give background on the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Japanese Internment.)
3. How is Chinatown depicted in this film? How did Chinatown shape Jade Snow's upbringing and views on life? (For further discussion: How is SF Chinatown different today? If not in SF, how is Chinatown viewed in your city?)
4. How might the scapegoating of different Asian groups in America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century resonate with certain immigrant groups today?

### **Confucianism and Chinese Family Structure/Relationships**

1. What expectations did Jade Snow's father have for her and her siblings? Give specific examples of his hopes/dreams/fears for his children.
2. How did Mr. Wong teach his children?
3. How did birth order impact the way the children were treated?
4. How did Jade Snow's father react when she rebelled against his authority? What was *his* perspective—can you sympathize with his concerns?
5. How did the Milligan family behave with each other? (Share specific examples.) How do you think Jade Snow felt witnessing these interactions?

### **Gender Issues:**

1. Why was Jade Snow's position in her family especially "low"? Give specific moments/quotes that illustrate the restrictions and expectations placed upon her.
2. How did Jade Snow's mother behave throughout the film? What did we see her doing? When did she speak (for the first and only time)? (One last note: Why wasn't she able to attend Jade Snow's graduation?)
3. What kind of jobs did we see Jade Snow do in the film? (Cooking, cleaning, ironing, typing.) Why is it significant that she eventually became an artist?
4. How did Jade Snow's male friend treat her? How was their behavior relatively "progressive" for their time? How might that behavior be viewed in the 1970s, when this film was made? How does their behavior look to you today?
5. What aspects of the gender roles depicted in the film still exist today?



### **The Immigrant Experience/The American Dream:**

1. What kind of work did the Wong family do? What was their family schedule/routine?
2. Did Mr. Wong plan on staying in America? Why not? Does this make his adherence to Chinese values and traditions more understandable? Why was Jade Snow's father so concerned with how the Chinatown community viewed him and his family?
3. Which of Jade Snow's experiences show that she was always seen as "Chinese" and not "American"? (fight with her father over dating, kind but condescending treatment by Milligans)
4. How does the film's ending suggest that the Wong family achieved the "American Dream"? (Might need to first discuss what the "American Dream" means.)
5. How does Jade Snow Wong's story, as depicted in the film, illustrate the pros and cons of assimilation? (Might need to define "assimilation" first.)

### **The Film as a Historical Artifact/Document:**

1. What was the purpose or agenda of this film? (What did it focus on? What did it leave out?) For which audience was this film meant?
2. How "factual" do you think this film was? How does the film promote intercultural understanding? At the same time, does it reinforce any stereotypes about Chinese women or families?
3. What does the film tell you about the time in which it was made (the 1970s)? How might the film be different if it were made today?

### **Connecting to Jade Snow Wong's Career as an Artist:**

The following quotes from Wong's introductory essay to the book *Jade Snow Wong: A Retrospective* describe her efforts to establish her art career by doing pottery in the window of Chinatown storefront. Contemplating these quotes might further the class discussion on how Wong viewed being "American":

"From the time I stepped into the window, I attracted crowds. I sold enough pottery to the general American public to convince that my style was acceptable. However, the Chinese community and my mother were not enthusiastic. With perpetually muddy hands, I had forsaken the 2500-year-old Confucian ideal of the scholar who studied to avoid getting his hands dirty." (18) [\*see note below]

"I did not step into the window to be a 'pioneer.' I felt it was the option which would enable me, almost sixty years ago, to be free of the Chinese culture's subjugation of women, while I would also avoid being boxed into twin American obstacles of prejudice against women in the corporate world, and against Chinese economically, legally, and socially. (I found no prejudice against me in art or in writing.)" (21)

“[My husband and I] were both renegades against illogical tradition while American values supported individual creativity.” (22)

--How accurate is Wong’s assertion that American values support “individual creativity”? How is her story one of both rebellion *and* conformity?

\*Ironically, Jade Snow Wong could be seen as embodying the Confucian ideal—she was a modern female version of the *literati*: a scholar-artist-poet who also served the government (in Wong’s case, as a cultural ambassador).

### **Additional Resource:**

Kingston, Maxine Hong et al. *Jade Snow Wong: A Retrospective*. Chinese Historical Society of America. San Francisco: 2002.

### **Evaluation Options:**

#### **1. Journal Write on one of the following topics:**

- a. Can you relate to Jade Snow Wong’s story? If so, what episodes and conflicts resonated with you? What did you take away from watching this video?
- b. Did any scenes in the video introduce you to something new or shed light on something you didn’t understand before? Explain.
- c. If you couldn’t connect to Wong’s story, what made her experience seem too different from yours? What made it hard for you to relate to her story?

#### **2. Possible Formal Assessments:**

- a. Write an essay analyzing the ending scenes of the *Jade Snow Wong* film (from 22:46 on). What messages is the film trying to convey about how Chinese Americans could feel accepted into mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century American society? How are the messages similar/different for immigrants today?
- b. Write an essay analyzing the different “layers of time” that shape the audience’s response to this film. While the story actually takes place in the 1930s-40s, the film was made in the late 1970s, after the Civil Rights era. How might the timing of the film’s production have affected how Wong’s story was told? How do our current 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibilities affect our viewing of *Jade Snow Wong* today? Is it possible to ever get an “uncurated” look at the past?
- c. Near the end of the film, the narrator mentions a change in immigration laws that made it possible for Wong’s father to become an American citizen. Research and write a paper on the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century immigration laws that shaped the Wong family’s experience in the U.S.

## Lesson 5—Jade Snow Wong’s Writing: Shaping her Story

For high school/college literature, American studies, gender studies, or ethnic studies courses

Wong’s memoirs—*Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) and *No Chinese Stranger* (1975)—offer students many opportunities to examine issues related to Asian American identity, history, art, and storytelling. Depending on how much time you have, you can assign one or both books or specific passages; no matter the length of the reading, Wong’s stories and reflections lend themselves to provocative discussions.

**Introductory Activity:** You can use the images from the PowerPoint used in Lesson 1 to give a general overview of Wong’s career as an artist (starting with the image of her working in the shop window and then skipping ahead to the slides of her ceramics and enamels).

Then, show the video of Mark Ong (Jade Snow Wong’s son) speaking on his mother’s reconciliation of the Chinese and American parts of her identity.

**Link to video:** Jade Snow Wong: Shaping Her Own Story

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7VwlxJNQL0&feature=youtu.be>

**As the students watch,** they should jot down notes on any quotes or stories that intrigue them.

**At the end of the video, divide the students into two groups to conduct a “concentric circles” discussion (for more info:**

<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/concentric-circles>).

**Some questions the students could address in the different “rounds”:**

- What initial impressions do you have of Jade Snow Wong after hearing her son speak about her?
- “Am I of my [parent’s] race, or am I an American?”—does this question resonate for you? Why or why not?
- In what ways did Wong try to foster “East-West understanding”? Have you ever tried to explain a part of your culture to someone who wasn’t from that culture? Going further, how have you felt when learning about a culture or belief different from your own? In both situations, what were the challenges, and what was the outcome?
- Do you agree with Wong’s assertion that “the greatest values” are the same across cultures? If so, do you think those values have stayed consistent, or have they changed since Wong’s time (if they have changed, what are they now)?
- What do you think Mark Ong means when he says identity isn’t some “fixed point” that we’re supposed to reach? Does that make sense to you—why or why not?

After this exercise, the students will have a sense of the themes explored in Wong’s writing, and they’ll be ready to start reading the assigned text(s). There’s one last topic you might want to discuss before you dive into the books:

Asian American authors were first accepted into the mainstream for their autobiographical writing (Wong’s books were bestsellers); it wasn’t until later that Asian

American *fiction* became popular. Why do you think Asian American writers had to tell their own stories first before their imagined stories could be embraced?

**Some possible topics/prompts for discussing *Fifth Chinese Daughter*:**

1. Why is the autobiography written in the third person? What are the pros and cons of writing from this perspective?
2. In an especially poignant passage, Wong describes being comforted by her white schoolteacher:

It was a very strange feeling to be held to [Miss Mulholland's] bosom. She could not remember when Mama had held her to give her comfort. Daddy occasionally picked her up as a matter of necessity, but he never embraced her impulsively when she required consolation. In fact, when she was hurt either inside or outside, it was much better not to let Mama or Daddy know at all, because they might criticize her for getting into such a situation in the first place.... [S]he was now conscious that "foreign" American ways were not only generally and vaguely different from their Chinese ways, but that they were specifically different, and the specific differences would involve a choice of action. Jade Snow had begun to compare American ways with those of her mother and father, and the comparison made her uncomfortable. (20-21)

After reading this passage together, have students (if they're comfortable) share when they've felt a similar conflict between their home culture and their school culture. What do they wish their teachers/classmates understood about their home culture?

3. In Chapter 8, "The Taste of Independence," Wong describes how she was "introduced for the first time to racial discrimination" (68): a white boy named Richard shouts degrading epithets and throws a blackboard eraser at her. On her way home, she mentally reaffirms the Chinese culture's superiority and concludes,

[P]erhaps the foreigners were simply unwise in the ways of human nature, and unaware of the importance of giving the other person "face," no matter what one's personal opinion might be.... When she arrived home, she took off her coat and brushed off the chalk mark. Remembering the earlier incident of the neighborhood boy who spit on her and its outcome, she said nothing about that afternoon to anyone. (69)

Why do you think she didn't say anything about this incident to anyone?

4. Wong seems to emphasize her gender, not her race, as the main obstacle in her early professional career:

[Her boss] gave it to her straight. "Don't you know by now that as long as you are a woman, you can't compete for an equal salary in a man's world? If I were running a business, of course I would favor a man over a woman for most jobs. You're always taking a chance that a woman might marry or have a baby. That's just a biological fact of life.... I'm just tipping you off. If you want to make a decent salary or to be recognized for your own work, and not as somebody's secretary, get a job where you will not be discriminated against because you are a woman, a field in which your sex will not be considered before your ability." (234)

Why do you think she focuses more on gender than on race in her work experiences? (Think about her upbringing and where resources were allocated.)

5. What does Wong seem to blame more for her struggles as a Chinese American woman artist—her Chinese background or the American values she tries to embody? By the end of the book, has she reconciled these two competing outlooks on life?

**Wong's second memoir, *No Chinese Stranger***, covers Wong's marriage, parenthood, and work as an artist, cultural ambassador, and civic leader. Her views on race, gender, and family are thus more complicated than the ones professed in her first book. Some possible discussion prompts:

1. How does Wong's view of and relationship with her father change over time? Why does Wong start the second part of this book using first-person narration rather than her usual third-person perspective?
2. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Wong seemed to see her gender as a bigger obstacle than her race; in *No Chinese Stranger*, how do she and her husband Woody Ong navigate and subvert the different gender expectations they learned growing up?

As a starting point, you could look at the following piece of advice Mother Ong gives before Jade Snow and Woody's wedding: "To have an enduring marriage, you must let your husband have his way, no matter what he says or does. If he should be wrong, he will know this later, but you do not argue with him at the moment" (33). –How closely does Wong follow this advice? What factors cause her and Woody to deviate from this "ideal"?

How are Wong's views on gender complicated by her travels throughout Asia? Two relevant quotes:

"A few women her age who had been educated in the United States, living here [in Hong Kong] where their husbands worked, lamented the lack of adult education classes. Because help was cheap, wives were forced to be idle. Jade Snow had come to this corner of China to affirm that her father was right; she could never have obtained her education, or learned her art, or started a career, had she been born on that side of the Pacific." (64)

"Though naturally they conversed with each other in Cantonese, the hostess [in Kuala Lumpur] was not shy about talking to other guests in English. Jade Snow thought about her mother, who after more than thirty years in the United States still depended on her children to interpret English. San Francisco's Chinese women had been more isolated than the Malayan Chinese." (80)

3. How do Wong's views on racism in America differ from those in her first book? In *No Chinese Stranger*, Wong openly writes about the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Alien Land Act, and the abuses of Angel Island—how did all of these factors shape Father and

Mother Wongs' immigrant experience (and thus Jade Snow's upbringing)? In conjunction with her changing views of American race relations, how has Wong's depiction of the Chinatown community changed? What are her new concerns for the Chinese American community?

4. From Wong's account of her efforts to establish and maintain her own studio, what do you learn about the life of a working artist? Why did she and Woody decide not to sign the design contract with Marshall Fields?
5. Over their long careers as artists, cultural ambassadors, and travel agents, Jade Snow and Woody were ultimately entrepreneurs who took risks and made the most of their opportunities to reinvent themselves. How do their careers illustrate the idea of the "American Dream"?  
\*It might be interesting to look at Chapter 16, in which Wong reflects on the difficulties of pursuing this dream: "Between the plodding hopelessness of many Asians' everyday existence and this casual panorama of Americans at play, who lived the happy medium?" (141).

#### Evaluation Options:

1. Write a compare/contrast essay on how race and gender are addressed in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *No Chinese Stranger*. Go beyond simply pointing out the basic differences in the two depicted time periods; instead, analyze *how* Wong writes about each issue. In what ways have her views changed between the writing of the two books; in what ways have they stayed the same?
2. Research the literary criticism that has been published on *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. (Note: [a search of JSTOR](#) results in a wide range of substantive articles, the most recent of which is from 2012.) How has the critical response to Wong's first memoir changed over time? End with your own assessment of how Wong's first book would be received today.
3. Compare/contrast the book designs for *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *No Chinese Stranger*: what images are used for the covers and what styles of illustration were used to complement the text? What do the different design choices emphasize/highlight? How do they reinforce the messages in each book?