

EDUCATION

Playing the cards right for literature

Bukit Batok Secondary School students get to analyse novel's text through a game of cards

Yuen Sin

The Chinese game of mahjong plays a central role in author Amy Tan's 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club*, which examines the experiences of four Chinese-American immigrant families in San Francisco.

The women in the four families formed a club of the same name as they met regularly to play mahjong.

At Bukit Batok Secondary School, where the book is being studied for O-level English Literature, students do not merely read about the significance of symbols in the book, or weigh in on the characters through discussions.

Instead, the mahjong motif leaps out of the pages in the form of a card game that takes some of its structure from mahjong, and incorporates quotes, themes and characters from the book.

It is the brainchild of Bukit Batok Secondary School teacher Ow Yeong Wai Kit, 29, and Raffles Institution teacher Nicole Kang, 25.

After hearing about how Ms Kang designed card games for her students based on two literature textbooks – William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and William Golding's *Lord Of The Flies* – at a symposium last year, Mr Ow Yeong approached Ms Kang to discuss the possibility of a game for *The Joy Luck Club*.

"Instead of it becoming too focused on assessments, I was looking for a way to make learning about literature texts interesting for students," said Mr Ow Yeong.

Four players are usually required, just like a mahjong game, and players have to collect sets of cards bearing similar symbols from the text. They can also claim cards that have been discarded by other players. The first one who declares a winning combination – three sets of three cards, and another set of two – claims victory.

In the book, Eastern fatalistic perspectives are challenged by the will to survive and compete, imbued in the immigrant experience of the Chinese-American mothers, who are struggling to build new lives for themselves and their families in a foreign land.

The game cleverly mirrors this, with students taking on roles of key characters in the book. "Event cards", containing plot snippets from the text, also affect the cards that players end up with.

"As you play the game, you end up inhabiting that character," said Mr Ow Yeong, noting that the game fosters a sense of empathy with the text's characters in students.

It was first introduced to Mr Ow Yeong's Secondary 4 English Literature class of eight students in January and has been played in class twice. He also uses elements of the game to start discussions about the book about once every one or two weeks.

A fan of 19th century novelist

Jane Austen, Ms Kang came up with the idea of a literary card game based on *Pride And Prejudice* at a birthday party about four years ago. But she thought of incorporating it in her teaching only in 2015.

The game can cater to students with different abilities, she said. Better students are prompted to come

up with their own original analysis of a text, and it can also pique the interest of weaker students.

Mr Ow Yeong said they are in the process of modifying the game, based on students' feedback, and are open to collaborating with other schools on games for other texts.

Bukit Batok Secondary 4 student

Fareehah Amir Ahmad, 16, said she learnt more about the traits of the characters that she played, Waverly and Lindo Jong – a competitive mother-and-daughter pair – through the game. "I didn't have to discard many of my cards, and could take cards from others, which reflect their selfish characters."

Student Jessie Zhao, 16, said she had a harder time playing the unlucky, docile character of Jing-mei in the game. "I never knew that she had so much bad luck until I played her character twice and realised that it was difficult for me to win."

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Bukit Batok Secondary School students Calvin Lim (with spectacles) and Edgar Pang, both 16, play a card game based on the book *The Joy Luck Club* under the tutelage of their teacher Ow Yeong Wai Kit. The game takes some of its structure from mahjong, and includes character cards (bottom row, below), event cards and a dice. ST PHOTOS MARK CHEONG



MAKING LEARNING ENJOYABLE

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MR OW YEONG WAI KIT, an English literature teacher at Bukit Batok Secondary School, on the card game that he invented together with Raffles Institution teacher Nicole Kang.