

## **Review of *An Echo in the City* by K.X. Song**

This book is appropriate for grades 8 through high school and especially recommended for ESL self-contained classes as well as classes with students from diverse backgrounds.

**Why I chose it:** As an English Teacher with a passion for YA books, I was immediately drawn to the cover created by Hsiao-Ron Cheng. It situated the book as a romance set in an urban setting, a favorite genre for teens. The book jacket flap promised a fictional tale filled with the almost universal conflict between well intentioned parents' dreams of an Ivy League university versus a teen's dream of remaining in her native home. Furthermore, the main character is a well-to-do sixteen-year-old with a divided heart about herself. Phoenix is culturally caught between her formative years in Cary, North Carolina, and her Hong Kong birthplace. Students can relate to this narrative especially if they too have a "divided heart" and grapple with feelings of being an American. The political rites of protest that Phoenix deals with as an evolving activist citizen closely parallels the citizenship and personal values choices that all teens will address as well.

As befitting the romance genre, this is a Romeo and Juliet story of love between two persons from different backgrounds, classes, economic status, and political viewpoints. Kai is a seventeen year old, a struggling artist who is forced by his career driven and politically conservative Hong Kong police officer father to become a police cadet. Kai is also grieving his mother's death from lung cancer and blaming himself. Such common YA themes converge to hook teen readers. The book flap also promises "Going undercover" and uses alluring words like "forbidden love story," to reveal that these star crossed teens will meet through an accidental phone swap, thus making resistance to choosing this book futile.

**What I liked:** K.X. Song defines herself as a diaspora writer with roots in Hong Kong and Shanghai. These roots plus her growing up in America (where she now lives) are authentically mirrored in Phoenix's dilemma. As a minority Chinese person at her school in North Carolina, Phoenix never truly felt American, but among native Chinese at her American language school in Hong Kong, she feels a pull towards American culture. This pull is far greater than just her love of pop music or her American slang choices, but creates in her a culturally "divided heart." This emotional cultural division within her adolescent identity further translates into a choice between prestigious Yale University versus Hong Kong University, and even traditional Chinese filial values and American democratic values versus the social unrest of the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The nuances of this diaspora-rooted divided heart about the protests translates beautifully into a romance driven tale told through the very different emotional, economic, political, and social lenses of two Chinese teens. Their love at first sight, texts, artworks,

photos, and touching work to carry teenage readers through the narrative, but it is a page-turner for readers of any age.

Moreover, the critical issues included in the narrative encourage students as young citizens who are studying global and United States history to ponder activism and legislation. These range from a carefully positioned song playlist including American protest favorites like "Amazing Grace" and "Do You Hear the People Singing" from *Les Miz* to accurate depictions of Chinese book banning, the Umbrella Movement, political slogans, policing methods, and even rendition and extradition. Although the work reads as a teen romance and undercover espionage political thriller, the characters are very nuanced and very realistic teenagers. Phoenix's older brother has been diagnosed with ADHD considered shameful by his family. Kai has grief, survivor, and imposter syndrome issues. His aspiration to be an artist-perceived by his father as a waste of time-is pivotal to his inner struggle as he is inherently a creative artist, not an enforcer of political norms. His father is estranged from Kai and though he loves him, is not a communicative or warm parent. Phoenix's younger sister is perhaps at age ten wiser and higher achieving than her older siblings. Clothes continue matter to Phoenix amidst all this political and life shattering drama. Messaging, digital journalism, Instagram, posts, identity reveals online, text messages, and unlocked passwords play a big role in this teenage, digital universe. *An Echo in the City* is in short a work that packs a wallop of real world political and cultural content packaged into a page turning, enthralling YA romance thriller.

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