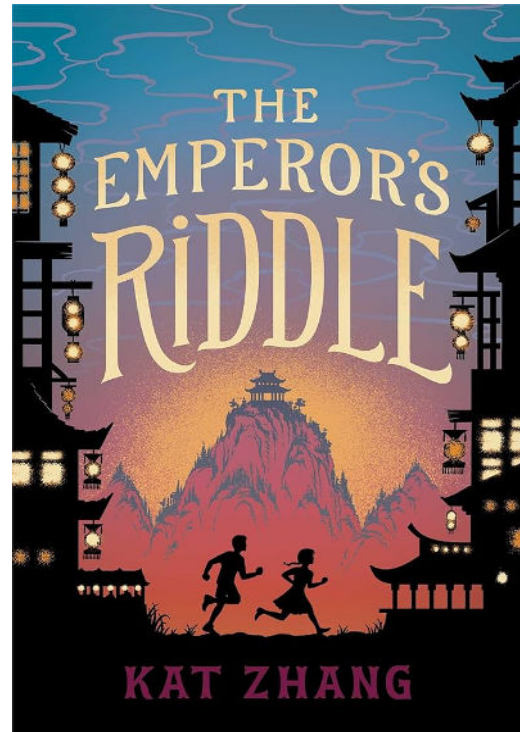
Culture Notes
The Emperor's Riddle
by Kat Zhang

Simon & Schuster; Aladdin, 2017 **Fiction, set in China**
2017 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle School Literature



The Emperor's Riddle provides an excellent entry point to China's imperial and modern history, and an opportunity to discuss the Chinese diaspora. More broadly, it can allow us to talk about first and later generations of immigrants, their different experiences and views of the host country, and of their country of origin.

In the case of China, we must also consider its very long history. Even just from the twentieth century to the present, we find enormous differences in the motivations and backgrounds of immigrants from China. In the last two decades, many young, wealthy, and very well educated Chinese have decided to relocate to North America or Europe to expand their opportunities and enjoy more civil liberties. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the most common reasons to leave China were poverty and oppression. It was not unknown for a whole village to support a young person in going away, sometimes to a foreign destination, so that he (often it would be a young man) could work hard and eventually help his family and other villagers emigrate. The period of the California Gold Rush of 1849 is a prime example. In the recent past, four historical events prompted massive migrations:

1. The Chinese Civil War (1927–1949) fought between the forces of the Guomindang (National People's Party) (pronounced: GO-ming-dahng) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

2. The second Sino-Japanese war (1937–1945) prompted by the Japanese invasion of China.

3. The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and the retreat of the Guomintang to Taiwan.

4. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

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Mia, the main character, lives with her Chinese immigrant mother and older brother in the United States. Early in the story, Mia, Jake, and their mother are visiting Aunt Lin in Fuzhou, their family's ancestral home. Aunt Lin shows Mia a photograph taken when she was allowed to go home for the first time after three years of having been "sent down to the countryside" (p. 6). Mia imagines this as "a pretty exciting time," something she would have preferred to sitting in school. But Aunt Lin is referring to the Great Proletarian Revolution, commonly known as the Cultural Revolution—a period of great hardship.

Mao Zedong (pronounced: MAH-oh ZEH-dohng), the Chairman of the Communist Party, was growing wary of pro-capitalist and bourgeois ideals gaining traction even within the party, and he unleashed a "purge" that resulted in millions of deaths and the implementation of a system of tight control of the citizenry. *The Emperor's Riddle* briefly mentions some of the events that took place during the Cultural Revolution such as the destruction of "historic things" (pp. 148–149). The story makes it sound rather casual but, in truth, the destruction was massive, especially at Buddhist and Daoist temples. Many of those same temples are now being restored or rebuilt by the Chinese government. The human cost and the many ways the Cultural Revolution upended people's lives are still being assessed. Students might also find it especially interesting to hear the voices of those, such as the fictional Aunt Lin, who were students then. In 2016, the *New York Times* printed testimonials of survivors from that period. Below is one of them:

> Chen Qigang (pronounced: CHEN | CHEE-gahng), 64. Mr. Chen, a composer who now lives in France, was a student at a middle school in Beijing when the movement began. He spent three years in a re-education labor camp outside the city:
>
> I have always been a very direct speaker. When the Cultural Revolution was starting, I spoke out about what I was seeing. The day after I said something, a big-character poster appeared on campus overnight: "Save the reactionary speechmaker Chen Qigang." I was so young. I didn't understand what was going on. Yesterday we were all classmates. How come today all of my classmates are my enemies? Everyone started to ignore me. I didn't understand. How could people be like this? Even my older sister, who was also at my school, came to find me and asked, "What's wrong with you?" You saw in one night who your

> real friends were. The next day I only had two friends left. One of them is now my wife.
>
> At the time, no one really knew who was for or against the revolution. It was completely out of control. The students brought elderly people into the school and beat them. They beat their teachers and principals. There was nothing in the way of law. There was a student who was two or three years older than me. He beat two elderly people to death with his bare hands. No one has talked about this even until this day. We all know who did it but that's the way it is. No one has ever looked into it. These occurrences were too common.
>
> If there had been no Cultural Revolution, then I would not be who I am today. People who haven't been through it can't appreciate how easy everything else is. It wasn't the manual labor. That's a different kind of hardship. This was the worst kind of bitterness. You are constantly told: "You are against the revolution, so therefore you have no right to speak. You don't have freedom. You will have no future in this place. You will not have a good job. Everyone looks down on you."
>
> That burden, that burden on your spirit, is very heavy. It was very different later when I went to France. I could have been criticized. I could have had a different opinion on something artistic. But for me that was nothing. It is nothing. Because it doesn't affect my freedom. (*New York Times*, May 16, 2016)

The Cultural Revolution spread to the Chinese Communist Party itself. Thousands of CCP officials were purged, including such high-ranking officials as Deng Xiaoping (pronounced: DUHNG | SHAO-pin), who would be China's top leader from 1978 to 1989.

Zhu Yunwen's Treasure and the Architectural References

Zhu Yunwen (pronounced: JEW | YUHN-wuhn) was the second emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), known in the West for its blue-and-white porcelain, which was exported around the world. Zhu reigned for only four years (1398–1402) before being overthrown by one of his uncles. His uncle claimed that Zhu had been killed, but rumors circulated that Zhu had managed to escape. Stories of his escape were embellished

over time. Some claimed he had disguised himself as a Buddhist monk, taken a great treasure, and hidden in temples and other places. *The Emperor's Riddle* refers to these elements (pp. 17–18; p. 27), allowing the author to present a number of architectural jewels of Fujian (pronounced: FUH-gee-AHN). We encounter Buddhist temples, pagodas, and tombs.

Pagodas have a long history in Asia, and are often associated with Buddhism. The pagoda form—a tiered tower—can be traced back to an earlier form, the stupa, a type of shrine that predates Buddhism. Stupas were first built in ancient India as mortuary monuments to commemorate sages and kings by housing their relics or remains. To simplify, we might say that stupas were related to Hinduism (although this is a problematic statement) and were later adopted by Buddhists. With the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Road, the stupa became popular in South, Central, and East Asian kingdoms and empires. Each region transformed the stupa according to local preferences and tastes, so that it developed from a low, hemispherical domed monument in ancient India into a multistory building in China, often made of wood or stone and resembling a traditional Chinese watchtower.

Fascinating legends connect individual pagodas to magnificent treasures or magic feats. The number of floors in a stupa is not random, as numbers in Chinese culture often take on special significance, and the size and height of buildings were regulated. In chapter 8, Mia discovers that one of the clues corresponds to "The thousand Buddha pottery pagoda," which had nine levels. The number nine was associated with the emperor. At certain points in Chinese history, Buddhism was officially recognized and closely associated with imperial power. However, this pagoda also illustrates that, at other times, Buddhism was persecuted, and their temples and monasteries destroyed. "The thousand Buddha pottery pagoda" (or rather, pair of pagodas), built in the Song dynasty (960–1279) (pronounced: song) were housed within the Yongquan Temple. This temple was first built in 783 CE, during the Tang (pronounced: tahng) dynasty (618–907), only to be ordered destroyed by the Tang emperor, Wuzong (r. 814–846) (pronounced: wuu-TSONG) who unleashed the Great Anti-Buddhist Persecution (841–845). Later, during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907–960) the king of Fujian ordered the reconstruction of the temple. Ultimately, it has suffered the ravages of time and natural disasters and has been repaired and rebuilt multiple times.

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Chinese Language and Characters

Mia discovers what she believes to be Zhu Yunwen's treasure map (p. 42). Beside the drawing of the map, she can make out some calligraphy. To Mia, this looks like "traditional, complex Chinese," the kind she cannot read. This may be a good opportunity to introduce students to the evolution of language and a new family of languages: Sino-Tibetan.

The Sino-Tibetan family encompasses various dialects of spoken Chinese. The most common among these is Mandarin, spoken by more than 900 million people. The *lingua franca* among Chinese speakers is Standard Northern Mandarin (also known simply as Mandarin), which is used in schools, the media, and workplaces throughout the People's Republic of China. In fact, it is the official language of mainland China, and one of the official languages of the United Nations. Mandarin is taught at most foreign schools and universities. In Chinese it is called *putonghua* 普通話 (pronounced: poo-TUNG-hwah), which means "the common language," and is based on the Beijing dialect of Mandarin. The idea of a common language is very old in China, but *putonghua* refers to a standardized form of speaking that is quite recent.

The written language has a long and complex history: the earliest evidence of writing dates from the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE) (pronounced: shahng); the first official standardization of Chinese characters occurred during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BCE) (pronounced: chin); and the most recent standardization took place after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. With the aim of encouraging literacy, Simplified Chinese was created. As compared to traditional Chinese writing, the simplified characters have fewer strokes. For instance, the character *hua* (of *putonghua*) is written 話 in traditional Chinese and 话 in the simplified form. One of the most striking examples of simplification is the verb *ting* ("to listen, hear, obey") that was written 聽 and became 听 —going from twenty-two to only seven strokes!

Mia cannot read the calligraphy on the map, likely because the characters are written in the traditional Chinese form that she has not learned. The traditional form is still used in Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong, although the situation has been changing in Hong Kong and Macau since both reverted to Chinese rule (Hong Kong in 1997 from British rule, and Macau in 1999 from Portuguese rule).

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