

***An Echo in the City* Teaching Suggestions**

This is a work that can appeal to both the English Language Arts teacher and the Social Studies/History teacher and have cross curricular application. It is a readable narrative offering a wide portal for relating teen issues of citizenship, values investigation, culturally divided hearts, global protests, and life changing decision making. It “echoes” them and the reverberations will be felt in the hearts and minds of young adult readers long after they close the book. Therein lies its true value.

For English Language Arts Teachers:

1. **BOOK JACKET PREVIEW:** Challenge students to read just the book flaps and analyze the cover to envision the following details: genres, plot, key characters, real world setting /situation, tech involvement, and real life issues covered. Ask them to predict whether they will enjoy reading the book and if it will end well for the two teenage lovers. Have students save their predictions. Have one student or a team of data analyzers summarize their classmates’ predictions. Review and discuss these after the book is read.
2. **FLIP OVER TO ADULT PERSPECTIVES:** This story is filtered through the perspective of the two teens and the viewpoints of their peers about political and personal events. A retelling of the story from Kai’s estranged father’s perspective or Phoenix’s anxious mother, who is dealing with the trauma of her divorce and losing control of her older children, would be a rich narrative. Focus on this writing challenge by having students choose a chapter in which Kai or Phoenix report an interaction with their parents. Challenge students to view and write about this interaction and dialogue from the adult parent’s perspective. This is a good devil’s advocate for the other side technique, getting students to emotionally realize that adults may have legitimate concerns or reasons to try and stop some choices by children.
3. **DIVIDED HEARTS:** Many students live with divided heart impulses as they evolve into individual personhood. Their unique identity is usually not going to completely or even partially align with their parents’ viewpoints or culture. For some from other countries or linguistic/cultural backgrounds there is tremendous pull between traditional values versus local or peer values. This ongoing, continual pull of values and emotions is mirrored in “divided heart’ themed literature like *An Echo in the City*.

Challenge students to depict their divided hearts about cultural, job, academic, social/political and other identity choices using words and/or images. An example would be a heart graphic

divided into two. If they make a collage, ask them to write a detailed artist's statement about the words and images they chose and why they chose them. Should students prefer not to work with images, they can write about their conflicting cultural pulls in the expository essay format. In *An Echo in the City* for example, Kai talks about Hong Kong versus Shanghai; Phoenix compares her American values to Chinese ones. Student responses can become part of a personal memoir or a snapshot moment of their lives to be shared.

4. **QUOTES, HOW THIS SPEAKS TO ME MYSELF:** This well-crafted narrative is full of quotes that speak directly to the emotions of teenagers and address universal choices and issues that everyone regardless of age must face. Challenge students to identify at least 4 to 8 quotes that touch, anger, or speak directly to them. Ask them to explain each quote and the reason for choosing it. They should react to its validity for them personally or its lack of relevance for their lives in a few sentences, and accompany this with a graphic, photo or hand drawn artwork. Starter quotes to share with students include the following:

1. Everyone should be an activist . . . you have to stop keeping your head down.
2. We're living in history.
3. The protests are dangerous. They are no place for a young person.
4. There's nothing I hate more than censorship. When people do not know what happened to their ancestors, they forget where they came from. They forget who they once were. Then everyone loses.

5. **REALISTIC ENDINGS OR HAPPY ONES:** Unlike the original *Romeo and Juliet* drama or many other rom coms, this story ends realistically with the two teenage starstruck lovers going their separate ways. Challenge the students as 21st century readers to consider whether they prefer happy endings in romances and thrillers that defy real world outcomes or are satisfied with a realistic ending that parallels what would probably play out in their lives. Have them debate the ending and their answers as readers. They might also share their ideas in individual messages on the author's website <https://kxsong.com>.

For Social Studies Teachers:

1. **FIRST LOOK AT WHAT WE KNOW IS GOING ON:** Immerse students in identifying Hong Kong's prior political status and protest movements before 2019. Here is a sample intake survey to determine prior knowledge:

1. What is special about Hong Kong's status?
2. What were the Umbrella protests and who participated in them?
3. What happened that placed Hong Kong in the news internationally in 2019 before Covid there?

4. What do the following words mean or signify: Activist, book banning, censorship, special administrative region, excessive use of force, police brutality, rendition, extradition, anti-extradition, passive resistance, Umbrella Movement, pepper spray.

Have the students share their answers to these questions or lack thereof. Ask them whether it is important for them as American teens to study these events even if they do not have Chinese ancestry or don't have close friends or family involved in these events. Tell them there is no single correct answer to this question.

2. DIVING IN TO LOOK AT FACTS AND IMAGES FIRSTHAND: Before the book is read, share the following sites with students:

1. "Be water: Hong Kong protest mantra influences how art is designed and distributed"
[CNN] <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/protest-art-hong-kong-intl-hnk/index.html>
2. "Hong Kong Demonstrators Sing Song from Les Miz" [NBC News]
<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/watch-hong-kong-demonstrators-pack-airport-sing-protest-song-les-n1035081>
3. "Hong Kong protests: The flashpoints in a year of anger" [BBC]
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-53942295>

Have students notice who the protesters are and how their activism is expressed. Have them react to the methods used by the police to react to this activism. Encourage students to discuss how the authorities, while needing to maintain order, should react to peaceable protests. Have them comment on the effectiveness of the protests and the ways in which artworks emphasized and communicated protest messages internationally as well as across China and Hong Kong.

3. READING INTO THE STORY AND MAKING PERSONAL TEEN ACTIVIST CONNECTIONS: Have students discuss the following as they read the book:

1. Do you see any connection between protests in the United States and those in Hong Kong?
2. Is there a particular topic expressed in the story that is as hotly contested in the United States as in Hong Kong? Explain your response to this issue. (Book censorship is a possible topic.)
3. Do you think this just a historical fiction book concerned with teen politics in Hong Kong 2019 or can you see a teen protest movement happening in America? Is there a larger message?
4. Write an editorial for your school newsletter or share your perspective online as part of a school broadcast or an iCivics festival.

4. RITE/RIGHT OF ACTIVIST CITIZEN PASSAGE or PASS THIS BY FOR NOW: Ask students to consider the following after reading the book:

In this story, Phoenix must decide if she will participate in the protests even as a photojournalist. She ultimately throws herself wholeheartedly into identifying as an activist citizen. All the teen protesters know from the get-go that they will not be successful, but still protest to highlight internationally and in China the dangers of extradition, rendering, censorship, etc. to Hong Kong as a political entity.

Since they know they cannot win, ask students if protesting is a waste of time and energy and even dangerous for the future, or is standing up for what you believe more important even if it is a losing cause realistically. Tell students there is no single right answer, but they must decide what answer to give, and avoiding the question is also an answer. Students should write an argument for or against their opinion and develop soapbox speeches debating this issue. These may be videoed and loaded to appropriate websites such as the Mikva Challenge <https://mikvachallenge.org>.

In the author's note, K. X. Song states that she hesitated to write this book, but the chapters wrote themselves. She worried about her friends and family still in Hong Kong. Song's motive was to "open a doorway, to capture a transient moment in time, and to ask a question, or several." Have students discuss whether she succeeded in doing this, and if so how. Also ask them to consider if this romance/thriller failed as an informational/historical look at the Hong Kong protests. Should she have written a more factual book by interviewing real teen protesters, not spending so many pages on romance and the digital universe? Have students write a book review that explains their responses.

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