

*Asian American Literature: Discourses and Pedagogies*  
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## Review

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Chen, Kirsten. *Bury What We Cannot Take*. New York, NY: Little A, 2018. 275 pp. \$24.95 Hardcover.

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The popularity of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* made me think that the work of Singapore-born author Kirsten Chen might in turn garner a larger readership as her debut novel also deals with upper-class Singaporeans. Her first book, *Soy Sauce for Beginners*, follows a woman living in the United States as she returns to Singapore to run her family's soy sauce business. Her second novel, however, does not mention Singapore at all. Instead, it deals with a wealthy Asian family in a very "crazy" era: the first decade of Mao's rule over the People's Republic of China.

*Bury What We Cannot Take* is set during the summer of 1957, just as the Hundred Flowers Campaign is winding down and the Anti-Rightist Campaign is about to heat up. The novel centers on the Ong family: Bee Kim, the widow of a former factory owner; her son, Ah Zhai; Ah Zhai's wife, Seok Koon; and their two children, Ah Liam and San San. While Ah Zhai is a businessman in Hong Kong, the rest of the family lives on Gulangyu, or Drum Wave Islet, just off the coast of Xiamen in Fujian province. Their island, known for its foreign influences and for being an enclave for the wealthy, embodies everything Mao's government loved to villainize. Many of the inhabitants respond by trying to leave the country, but the borders are closed to all but those granted special exit visas. While the narration is filtered through each of the family members, the driving force of the book is San San, the nine-year-old granddaughter.

Indeed, sixteen of the thirty-eight chapters are told in third person and filtered through San San, who is separated from her family when it attempts to flee to Hong Kong to join Ah Zhai. The novel is at its best and most riveting when we are following her path. In fact, the whole work is a quick read, but it moves most quickly when the other characters' chapters are reduced to single interstitial segments between chapters of San San's story. This novel really should be marketed as young adult fiction as its energy largely comes from the dangers and fears that San San faces, as well as her resiliency and courage. Indeed, Chen manages to pack much of the power of a Harry Potter story into a realist depiction of 1950's China. Some of the

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themes are even the same, including the danger of death, loss of family, authoritarianism, peer pressure, and even – what may be most frightening – the inability of adults to keep children safe. San San’s resilience in the face of unimaginable loss, danger, and even familial betrayal make her a force to be reckoned with. While she ends up on her own at nine, her quick thinking and inventiveness allow her to not only claim her own agency but to help others. Her character should be particularly inspiring for young female readers.

The chapters that are filtered through family characters other than San San serve to provide context for the motivations and decisions that have led to San San being in the situation she is in. Chen shows that most of the forces that are so powerful as to endanger the very existence of this family can be set in motion by very simple human desires and actions, such as a private expression of frustration or a child’s desire to please a teacher or their peers. The text memorably asks,

What if a mistake was too grave to live with? What if the guilt wormed its way deep into the flesh and grew more and more potent, devouring tissue and fat and skin, until one day, you looked down, and your whole self had been ravaged and nothing remained? (277-278)

The novel also thematizes the difficulty of discerning truth from falsehood— a problem unfortunately shared by residents of Maoist China and contemporary readers in the internet age. San San must interpret both the falsehoods her family members tell her –whether in an attempt to shelter her or because they know that their letters will be read by government censors – and the government’s own propaganda, which her education has taught her to embrace. San San’s maturation process in the course of the novel is marked by her growing ability to discern falsehood, such as when she thinks about turning herself in to the authorities to save others, but realizes, “Only one thing mattered to these people: to make an example of the criminals. The truth was irrelevant” (144). Her mother’s discussion of her family’s escape to Hong Kong prompts a priest to opine,

They let you go to sustain the charade. If new China is the paradise the Party claims it is, then no one in his right mind would ever leave. For

those officials, acknowledging your family's scheme to escape would be tantamount to admitting that their entire lives —and the whole nation—are built on lies. (134).

The novel itself supports the priest's viewpoint by depicting great poverty and inequality in the midst of Mao's new China. Perhaps the character who is least equipped to discern truth from falsehood is San San's older brother, who puts himself and his family at great risk due to his whole-hearted belief in the Party.

Although the novel includes dark elements such as political execution and the breakdown of the bonds of marriage, adult themes are not elaborated with a candor beyond what one could expect in young adult literature. This book is recommended for teachers looking for books for their advanced middle and high school students who would like to explore cultures and histories outside of the United States or who are just in need of more diverse protagonists. It might be particularly relevant for both young readers and adults trying to come to terms with the many news stories of children put at risk due to current immigration policies in the United States. *Bury What We Cannot Take* could fit into a class structured around issues and depictions of migration, resistance, life under totalitarian regimes, or even questions of gender hierarchies. Teachers of both literature and creative writing might pair this text with Chen's essay on *Literary Hub*, "Am I Chinese Enough to Tell this Story?" which details not only how she prepared to write this story but considers key issues of cultural appropriation and the privileges and responsibilities of creative writers (<https://lithub.com/am-i-chinese-enough-to-tell-this-story/>). The novel might also work well in a class paired with other tales of young female protagonists, such as Sandra Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* or Helena Maria Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

*Williams*

---Noelle Brada-

*University*

*San José State*