



Watercress

Written by Andrea Wang

Illustrated by Jason Chin

Holiday House, 2021, 32 pp (unpaged)

ISBN: 978-0823446247

This story is based on the childhood memory of the author, Andrea Wang. Writing from a first-person perspective, Andrea Wang tells the story of a Chinese American family picking watercress in a ditch beside the road. Through this experience the younger daughter in the family, also the narrator, comes to understand the

family history, develops empathy towards her family heritage, and explores her Chinese cultural identity.

A distinct clue that guides the development of the plot is the protagonist's attitude toward watercress. At first, the narrator feels ashamed of her parents' behavior of picking free food from a ditch. The resistance of the narrator is portrayed by her description of the ditch, "The water in the ditch is cold. / It stings my ankles / and the mud squelches / up between my toes."; her reaction to passing cars, "A car passed by / and I duck my head / hoping it's / no one I know."; and her mixed feeling towards her gleaned watercress, "The paper is soaked and I'm / half afraid / half hopeful / that the bottom will split, / sending all the plants back down / into the muck."

The narrator further expresses her resistance by refusing to eat any watercress at the dinner table and when her parents persuade her to try some watercress saying "it's free" and "it's fresh," her hatred toward "free" climbs to the climax because it hurts her self-esteem as a teenage girl. This reaction pushes her mother to reveal their family history connected to watercress—in 1960s China, the family suffered from hunger and lost the younger child. During that great famine, people ate anything they could find and watercress was one of the resources that people relied on for living. Having learned the family history, the narrator develops a different perspective toward watercress, which serves as the bond for her to understand her parents and value her family history and cultural identity.

The illustration of *Watercress* complement the layers of memories in the text. The illustrator, Jason Chin, chose watercolor as his way of painting since it is common to both Chinese and American cultures. In his note at the end of the book, Jason Chin explains his choice of color: "The color palette is heavy in yellow ochre, which reminds me of the old photographs and 1970s decor, and the cerulean blue, which is similar to the blue often used in Chinese paintings." Jason Chin indicates that the technique of soft washes echoes the painting features in traditional Chinese landscapes and that the dreamlike quality created by soft marks is appropriate to imply memory. He also applied softness to the story content. For example, in the images portraying the great famine, rather than directly displaying the heartrending scenes, he embedded hardship through the empty bowls on the table, the frowning faces of characters, and the disappearance of the younger sibling.

Watercress delicately presents the struggle of the second generation of immigrants in the U.S.—their difficulties in finding their own cultural identities and building connections with their cultural roots. The story employs the conflict between the parents and children on the issue of picking watercress from a ditch to depict the cultural gap between first and second-generation immigrants—while the parents regard picking watercress as their family heritage, the child who was born and grew up in the U.S. views it as a shame of taking free food. Though the child’s perspective fits cultural values in the U.S., it stands in contrast with her parents’ complex family heritage in which watercress symbolizes life and hope during the great famine. Though the author tied up the story with a happy ending, her depiction of the parents’ hesitance to share their family history with children reveals a social issue in immigrant families—the difficulty of sharing family history with the following generations who have little connection with their cultural origins. Moreover, it is worth considering that there are still numerous families and children struggling to find, and even losing, their family histories and cultural identities.

Considering Bishop’s (1990) metaphor of mirrors and windows and the target audiences of this picturebook, *Watercress* falls into a special category: at the first glance, it seems to be a book that helps readers to see themselves; however, the “self” in this book is second generation immigrants. Therefore, it can be both a mirror and a window through which the readers can see and explore their identities. This picturebook can help children from immigrant families who experience difficulties in identifying their cultural identities and who struggle with being in between—neither able to fully understand their parents nor fit into the new environment. Meanwhile, *Watercress* is also a reminder for the parents in immigrant families to see the importance of sharing their family heritage with the younger generations.

Watercress can be paired with other thematically related picturebooks, like *Drawn Together* (2018), written by Minh Lê and illustrated by Dan Santat. A second pair could be *A Different Pond* (2018), written by Bao Phi and illustrated by Thi Bui.

Andrea Wang is a celebrated author of children’s literature and the second generation of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. Her book *Watercress* has received awards including the Caldecott Medal, a Newbery Honor, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, a New England Book Award, and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor. Andrea focuses her work on the exploration of culture, creative thinking, and identity. Wang’s work can be explored at her website (<https://andreyawang.com/>).

Jason Chin is an acclaimed author and illustrator of children’s literature and the third generation of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. His distinguished works include *Grand Canyon* (2017) which received a Caldecott Honor, a Sibert Honor, and the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award. His illustrations in *Watercress* (2022) were awarded a Caldecott Medal, and the picturebook also won the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, a New England Book Award, and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor.

References

Bishop, R. S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and using books for the classroom*, 6(3).

Holiday House. (2022). Jason Chin. Retrieved from <https://holidayhouse.com/artist/jason-chin/>

Nan Jiang, University of Arizona, Tucson

© 2022 by Nan Jiang



WOW Review, Volume XV, Issue 2 by Worlds of Words is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Based on work by Nan Jiang at <https://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/review/xv-2/9/>