



# Curriculum Connections

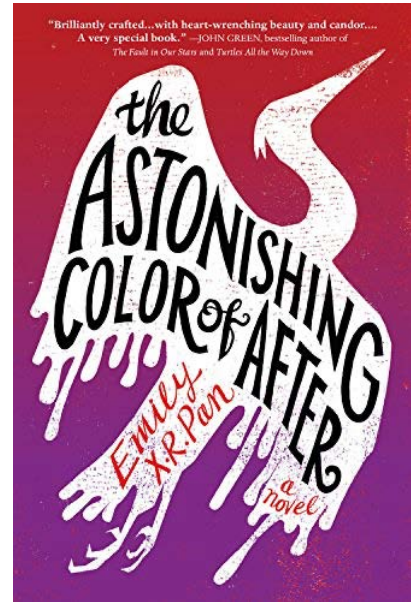
## *The Astonishing Color of After* By Emily X. R. Pan

**Little, Brown & Company, 2018**

**Fiction, Set in Taiwan**

**2018 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature**

Emily X. R. Pan's novel gives teachers and librarians opportunities to introduce students to aspects of Taiwan's culture and history. However, Pan's story also provides a subtle warning to educators. Early in the novel the protagonist Leigh recalls her middle school social studies unit on East Asian cultures when a teacher asked Leigh if anyone in her family practiced foot binding (pg. 39). While many teachers now recognize this particular question is inappropriate, the reference also serves as a word of caution about a greater set of issues - against fixating on esoteric anachronisms (foot binding, in this case) and narrowly focused assumptions about East Asia in too many American K-12 classrooms. Rather than limit our classroom presentation as teachers to dynasties, spirituality, and a study of cultures that is removed from history or particular geographic contexts, all of which are "othering" perspectives, Pan's novel invites us to view Taiwan through the eyes of one young adult and, perhaps, to join her on her quest to better know herself.



### **Connections to literature:**

Teachers of literature may choose to read this book in a class with other **coming-of-age** novels. Students are often introduced to coming-of-age literature through books such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles, and *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. Pan's novel, in contrast to these classics, includes much more attention to **intersectional identities** and **bicultural identities**. It is a novel that speaks directly to the demands of cultural competency for our time. In addition, she is writing a typical high school coming-of-age story with attention to topics that are less common in older curricula – including her focus on **mental illness**, **biracial** and **bicultural identities**, and **LGBTQ identities**. By having Leigh learn more about her Chinese and Taiwanese heritage from her white father, a Sinologist, Pan seems to position her novel through her unique perspective as an author. Rather than a story told through the White gaze, Pan, the child of Taiwanese immigrants, is writing a story from her distinctly millennial **Asian-American** perspective. Also, by situating her protagonist in this way, Pan puts the reader in the position of Leigh, limited in their

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knowledge of language and culture but invited to learn. All Chinese phrases [some are Mandarin usage while others are Hokkien] are either translated into English or explained through contextual information. Throughout the novel Leigh, along with the reader, is introduced to Taiwanese culture, traditional beliefs and customs, as well as food and music.

### **What grade levels or student populations are best served with the book?**

Our recommendation to teachers and librarians is middle school (grades 7-8) **humanities** or early high school **world literature** (grade 9). While the subject matter is mature, the book fits into a **coming-of-age** genre that we have found is more common in grades 7-9, when teachers and students are exploring identity formation. The reading level is also appropriate for these grades.

In schools with a Chinese language program, we believe this book also provides opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration between **world language** and **humanities** classes. Throughout the novel, Leigh is introduced to words and phrases that are common in the first lessons of Basic Mandarin – especially those using the popular Cheng & Tsui textbook. Students learning Mandarin could be asked to write out these words and phrases in characters or teach them to their peers in the humanities classroom.

### **Suggestions for History, Social Studies, and Humanities:**

We would only advise using this book in **History** or **Social Studies** classes as discretionary or enrichment reading since the novel is focused on the identity development of the protagonist rather than any significant historical context. The novel is better suited to a **humanities** or **literature** course. As a work of **coming-of-age** literature, students will explore many aspects of **diversity in America** as well as aspects of **East Asian culture** through the lens of Leigh's own discovery.

Emily X. R. Pan also introduces complex themes and pertinent social issues, based on which classroom conversations and discussion groups can take place. Some other possibilities include:



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### **Race-based and gender-based power dynamics:**

Leigh's father, Brian Sanders, is a White man and an established Sinologist. In the story, he is the one who teaches Leigh the Chinese language, cultural knowledge, and behavioral etiquette, while his Chinese-Taiwanese wife—Leigh's biological mother—does very little to educate their daughter in her own native language and culture, other than cooking certain foods. Why is that?

### **Racism and xenophobia:**

Towards the end of the book, Leigh—along with the reader—learns that her maternal grandparents objected so vehemently to their daughter marrying someone who was not Chinese or Taiwanese that they, in effect, disowned her (pg. 423). Given that Brian Sanders was not an average "foreigner" since he already was knowledgeable about Chinese language and culture, how might we interpret the basis for the grandparents' unyielding opinion?

Throughout her travel in the novel, Leigh learns more about the culture of Taiwan. We believe Emily X.R. Pan is inviting the reader to join Leigh in learning more about Taiwan generally.

### **Experiential learning activities might include:**

- Field trip or independent outing to Asian bakeries to look for *danhuangsu* 蛋黃酥 (pronounced: "DAH-N-hwong-soo") and other treats, followed by blogging or reporting.
- Research recipes for chive dumplings *jiucaijiao* 韭菜餃 (pronounced: "joe-TSY-jow"), or *danbing* 蛋餅 (pronounced: "DAH-N-bing"), and create your own version at home, documenting processes and results. Encourage innovation and substitutions as merited (e.g. tortilla or crepe batter for the *danbing* base, or vegan variations).
- Virtual visit to a night market for a treasure hunt—how many of the street foods and fruits mentioned in the story can you locate? What would you most like to



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try? Consider planning this with students in Taiwan acting as guides, presenting "Live, from...."

- Music of Teresa Teng (Dèng Lìjūn 鄧麗君) is featured throughout the novel. During Leigh's visit to her grandparents' home in Taiwan, she is introduced to the music of Teresa Teng. Leigh's grandmother says, "Your mother's favorite" (pg. 183). Teresa Teng, a singer and cultural icon from Taiwan, created music that was very popular across East Asia - including in Japan, China, and Hong Kong - in the 1970s and '80s. Like most popular music these songs have very simple lyrics, which are easy to learn early in one's study of basic Mandarin. Especially in a Chinese language class, students may learn the lyrics to *Tián Mì Mì* 甜蜜蜜 or *Nǐ zěnmě shuō* 你怎麼說. YouTube has videos of Teresa Teng songs with both English and Mandarin subtitles. Another popular resource for teaching Chinese language is a series of videos by Transition, an English rock band that records songs in Chinese. Transition covers Teng's song *Nǐ zěnmě shuō* 你怎麼說.

#### **Authors:**

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#### **Suggested Readings and Resources**

Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Knowles, John. *A Separate Peace*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1959.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1960.



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Liu, Yuehua, and Tao-chung Yao. *Integrated Chinese 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2016.

Transition 前進樂團. “翻唱鄧麗君‘你怎麼說’ Cover 'Ni Zenme Shuo'.” YouTube, 2:01.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ug\\_thqI47xk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ug_thqI47xk)

VLyrical. “Tian Mi Mi – Teresa Teng Lyrics.” YouTube, 3 :35.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tc2tW0jFHPo>