



Curriculum Connections

Want

By Cindy Pon

Fiction, set in Taiwan

Simon Pulse, 2017

2017 Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School

The sci-fi drama *Want*, written by Cindy Pon in 2017, presents a dystopian future that seems eerily prescient in light of the COVID-19 global pandemic that began in late 2019. The book's action, mystery, and excitement will surely appeal to YA readers. While it is important to present the novel as futuristic fantasy, it also opens up discussion of contemporary issues such as global public health, income inequality, and environmental justice. From the vantage point of educators of grades 7-12 and school librarians, the novel may best fit into the subject of Global Studies, an approach to history and social studies education that is growing in popularity for its more interdisciplinary way of teaching and learning about the recent past and current events. Even in more traditional English or Social Studies classes, the topics covered by the book can open up discussions about important twenty-first century global issues such as: Taipei as a global city and Taiwan as a gateway to the region, income inequality, environmental justice, and proposals for a better future.



Taipei as the Global City

Global Cities can be an entry point for a closer look into twenty-first century global issues in a Social Studies or Literature classroom. Global Cities will fit easily in the AP Human Geography curriculum but may also be incorporated into other independent social studies classes. Taipei may be considered a "global city" according to definitions presented by Professor of Geography Doreen Massey in her book *World City*. Massey notes that global cities may be defined by a "dominant foci in particular spheres of activity" (Massey, pg. 36). In other words, Taipei is not only an important financial center but also a center for facilitating the production of global products, exporting both technologies and culture. In addition, Taipei as the seat of government represents the strength and potential of East Asian democracy.

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Taipei 101 (Wikipedia)

Students may also explore this symbolism with a closer look at Taiwan's tallest building, Taipei 101. While this famous building is described in *Want* as a home to some of the characters' posh condos, in fact the real building Taipei 101 is today a commercial building and not a residential one. It was the world's tallest building for six years. The architect of this building, C.Y. Lee, said the building represented both Asian tradition and Western technology, and this blending is captured in the combination of Chinese motifs such as large discs that represent Chinese coins on an 8-segmented pagoda shaped façade with a cutting-edge technical design. In Chinese numerology, eight represents good fortune. Taken with the coins, the building—shaped like a Buddhist pagoda—conveys economic strength and prosperity. In East Asian history, beginning with Japan's Meiji Restoration

(1868-1912), technology has often been associated with the Western world since the Japanese borrowed much of its early modern technology from Western Europe and the United States. Perhaps these distinctions have grown passé. In the novel *Want*, Taipei represents the center of a battle between haves and have-nots, those with access to protective gear and those exposed to viruses and pollution. The Jin Corporation is the creator of cutting-edge technology but is also the purveyor of a laboratory-based deadly virus. The novel presents readers with a series of dichotomies, increasingly common features of life in the twenty-first century. Students will:

- Understand Taiwan's place globally as a leader in technology and popular culture.
- Consider if healthcare, personal protective equipment, and vaccines should be a basic human right for all or a series of products for sale in the free market?



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- Explain: “the tragedy of the commons” as it relates to the environmental degradation and pollution presented in the novel.
- Consider and explain the push and pull factors drawing migrants to Taiwan from neighbors such as the PRC and the Philippines.

Taiwan in World History and Economic History

In World History classes, study of the VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*), or Dutch East India Company, is central to modern economic global history. The Dutch rose to prominence in trade between Asia and the West when they colonized the area around present-day Tainan City in 1624. Due to its location along the busy sea routes between East Asia and Southeast Asia, fertile and resource-rich Taiwan served as an ideal base for VOC-controlled trade. During the 1630s, the VOC traded silk purchased from China and natural resources from Taiwan such as hemp and deer skin in exchange for silver from Japan. The Dutch purchased Chinese porcelain with the silver and then sold the porcelain to European markets along with natural resources from Taiwan (Tsai, 2016). The [Maritime Asia: War and Trade online curriculum](#) includes a lesson on the colonization of Taiwan.

Throughout its later history, under Chinese Qing (pronounced: “ching”) dynasty rule from 1863-1895 and Japanese rule from 1895-1945, Taiwan became a major grower and exporter of rice for Asia (Manthorpe, 2009). Post-World War II, Taiwan under Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) rule saw major land reforms and U.S. aid bolster its economy. Private sector development of new industrial technology paved the way for Taiwan’s rapid economic growth in the 1970s, known as the Taiwan Miracle. Today, Taiwan is at the forefront of the twenty-first century global economy, leading the world in the production of integrated circuits used in laptops and smartphones, the manufacture of high-end bicycles with carbon-fiber materials, and the invention of the globally popular bubble or boba tea (Rigger, 2014).

Income Inequality

A central theme of the novel is income inequality. While this topic may elicit strong feelings grounded in political ideology, it is important to note that income inequality is a



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very salient feature of the twenty-first century, with common trends of a wealth gap between rich and poor throughout the globe. In fact, the novel takes the extra step of suggesting that this growing income inequality is creating literally two different types of human beings. Cindy Pon narrates: "This is what it meant to be *you*, to *have*. To be genetically cultivated as a perfect human specimen before birth—vaccinated and fortified, calibrated and optimized. To have an endless database of information instantly retrievable within a second of thinking the query and displayed in a helmet. To have the best air, food, and water, ensuring the longest possible life spans..." (pg. 3).

Students will:

- Come up with five to seven examples of how income inequality is depicted in the novel *Want* (the *you* and the *me*) (pronounced: "yo" and "may" respectively).
- Conduct research to compare Taiwan's growing income inequality with the U.S.'s and world-wide.
- Explain what challenges Taiwan faces in addressing income inequality and what strengths it possesses to address these challenges.

Environmental Justice

The novel also emphasizes the global "tragedy of the commons," the way that individuals worldwide overuse our common resources and disregard how our collective action is contributing to polluted air and water, the loss of biodiversity, the degradation of the environment and contribution of greenhouse gasses to exacerbate climate change. Cindy Pon describes this future in *Want*: "The sky used to be blue. This is what my research on the undernet told me, some sites even displaying actual photographs from another time...I didn't know anyone who had ever seen a blue sky" (pg. 18).

Students will:

- Study, describe, and explain the theory of the "tragedy of the commons" using resources like a case study from [Harvard Business School Online](http://www.harvard.edu/business-school/online).
- Discuss three to five examples of the effects of pollution and climate change in the novel.

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- Explain how the examples of environmental injustice contribute to the plot of the novel.
- Explore the website <https://www.whatismissing.org>, read and reflect on stories of something from the natural world that other contributors have witnessed diminish or disappear. Students can also share their own stories or examples of school or neighborhood conservation projects.

"Future We Want"

Cindy Pon describes a future of temporary physical enhancements and exceptional health as well as young lives lived in a metaverse of virtual reality. She writes, "They say money can't buy happiness but those *you* kids try hard. They spend and spend. Then when things aren't enough, they plug into the sim world so they can create and be whatever they want" (pg. 104). These topics are only partially fiction. With emerging technologies accessing the metaverse becoming more common, these topics are salient for student conversations. These topics encourage students to engage in philosophical and ethical thinking about the future they want, the future they think is good. In doing this, students begin to articulate values and make ethical judgments. Students will:

- Identify, explore and analyze their ethical values - Freedom, Diversity, Equality, Cooperation, Security, Justice, Self-reliance, Community, Stability, Democracy - from the [Choices Program "Values and Public Policy" curriculum](#).
- Students will discuss three to five examples of "an alternate near future" in Taiwan. Is this future already here in some ways and are there good as well as bad aspects to it? What are some ways to act now to avoid the negative aspects of this alternate future?

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