



# Curriculum Connections

## *The Boy from Clearwater, Book 1*

by Pei-Yun Yu

illustrated by Jian-Xin Zhou

translated by Lin King

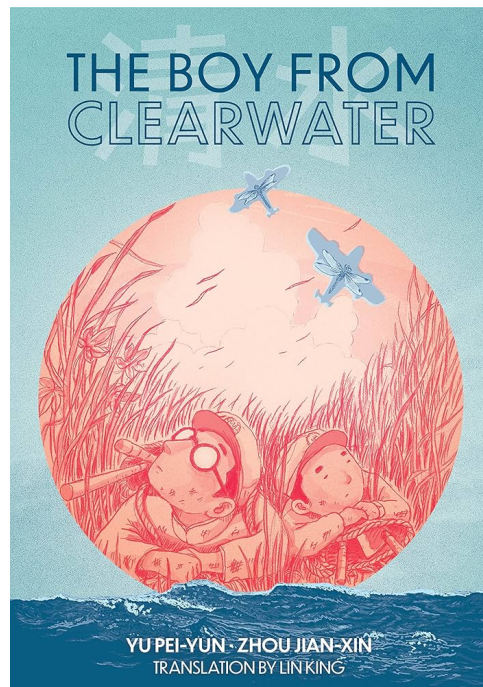
Levine Querido, 2023

Nonfiction, set in Taiwan

2023 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle & High School Graphic Novels

*The Boy from Clearwater* offers educators and students an opportunity to explore pivotal eras in Taiwanese history and to identify and discuss themes that will resonate with young readers in grades 9–12. The graphic novel style invites readers into the world of protagonist Kun-lin Tsai with its simple and direct text, engaging illustrations, and riveting plot.

*The Boy from Clearwater* was published in 2023<sup>1</sup> by the author Pei-Yun Yu, with illustrations by Jian-Xin Zhou. It depicts one of the most consequential eras of Taiwan's history: the period of martial law known as the "White Terror," which lasted from 1947 to 1987. The novel chronicles the tragedies and triumphs of Kun-lin Tsai, whose life followed the arc of this tumultuous time in Taiwan's history.



Kun-lin Tsai was just a boy when the island of Taiwan, colonized by Japan in 1895, was drawn into the shadows of World War II. Kun-lin is drafted by the Japanese as a student soldier in 1945, near the end of the war. In 1949, Taiwan was brought under Republic of China (ROC) rule when Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang (KMT) army fled the mainland after being defeated in the Chinese Civil War. In 1950 Kun-lin is arrested for treason, for the crime of joining his high school book club. He is imprisoned for a decade and "re-educated" on Green Island (about 20 miles off the eastern coast of Taiwan).

Author Pei-Yun Yu and the book's translator, Lin King, communicate the vacillation of control over Taiwan using color-coded text throughout the novel's two books: green for

<sup>1</sup> Book 2 of *The Boy from Clearwater*, published in 2024 and also a Freeman Book Award winner, details Kun-lin Tsai's life upon his release from prison in 1960 and his efforts to rebuild his life in the aftermath of Taiwan's "White Terror" period.



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Japanese (the narrative that takes place when Japan ruled Taiwan); red for Mandarin (the narrative that takes place under ROC rule in Taiwan); and blue for Taiwanese (used by Kun-lin Tsai when he speaks with friends and family in personal and informal settings).

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

We recommend this book for high school (grades 9–12), in both **English Language Arts** and **Social Studies**. While some of the illustrations depicting Kun-lin's torture and imprisonment by military police might warrant a content warning, the book's narrative is not graphic, and neither are most images. It should also be mentioned that Kun-lin's father takes his own life while Kun-lin is detained on Green Island, and students should be warned about this in advance as well. Overall, the narrative addresses mature topics, but the plot is a coming-of-age narrative, and the reading level is appropriate for students in grades 9–12.

Additionally, schools that offer Japanese and Chinese language programs may be able to create cross-curricular units for their students in ELA, Social Studies, and World Language classes since the books so richly shares these languages throughout their entirety along with the English translation.

### Connections to English Language Arts:

For teachers of English Language Arts (ELA), this graphic novel offers a sobering window into a dark chapter of one society's past and can be compared and contrasted with novels that also address its themes of "loss of innocence," "marginalization," "identity," "coming-of-age," "political oppression," and "hope," such as *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei, *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi.

Because *The Boy from Clearwater's* protagonist faces hardships and privations that rob him of his youth and innocence, such as war, physical punishment, and incarceration, young adult readers may be particularly drawn into his story and may find that the book's themes resonate with many of their concerns as teenagers.



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### Connections to Social Studies:

Teachers of Social Studies might use this book to discuss important events and eras in World History and U.S. History courses. Pivotal events in China and Taiwan's histories intersect with terms such as the Republic of China, World War II, the Chinese Civil War, China's Communist Revolution, the People's Republic of China, the Cold War, the White Terror, the Korean War, Taiwan's democratization, and South China Sea tensions. Similarly, Japan's imperialist and colonist history plays an important role in this book with contextualizing events such as the Meiji Restoration, the Mudan Incident, the Taiwan Expedition, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, and the Treaty of Shimonoseki, which ceded the island of Taiwan to Japan from Qing-dynasty China in 1895 as a result of China's loss to Japan in the Sino-Japanese War.

### Ideas for Classroom Use:

- *Unpack the illustrations.* The illustrations throughout the novel are so powerful and descriptive that a thematic collection of them could, with just a few accompanying questions, serve as an assessment tool for a lesson plan focused on any of the topics above.
- *Discuss censorship.* The protagonist Kun-lin Tsai was arrested on charges of treason for joining a high school book club—deemed “an illegal organization” by the KMT government in Taiwan. Is censorship still an issue today? If so, what kinds of issues fuel the phenomenon of censorship?
- *Political oppression as an historical phenomenon.* Consider assigning students (or allowing them to select on their own with teacher approval) one historical example of political oppression that they will then compare and contrast with Taiwan's “White Terror” era of martial law and Kun-lin Tsai's struggle. Suggestions include the following: the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Students could research the “White Terror” in Taiwan and one of the other historical examples and write an essay or present a slide deck about their research.

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