Culture Notes

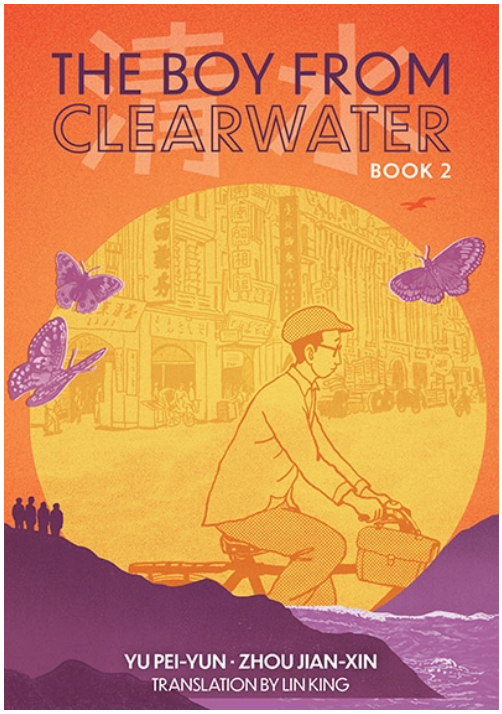
The Boy from Clearwater, Book 2

by Pei-Yun Yu

illustrated by Jian-Xin Zhou | **translated by Lin King**

Levine Querido, 2024 | **Nonfiction, set in Taiwan**

2024 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle & High School Graphic Novels



Taiwan's modern history is a complex narrative of colonization, resistance, economic transformation, and eventual democratization. From the establishment of Japanese colonial rule in 1895 to the authoritarian grip of the Kuomintang (KMT) government and the transformative period of the Taiwan Miracle, the island's journey has been shaped by both external influences and internal resilience. The true story of Kun-lin Tsai, as portrayed in *The Boy from Clearwater*, highlights many of these themes.

Following the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, Taiwan became the first colony of Japan's burgeoning empire. The colonial administration developed railways, ports, sanitation systems, and public schools. However, these advancements primarily benefited the Japanese imperial economy, colonial settlers in Taiwan, and elite collaborators rather than the general Taiwanese population.

During the 1930s, Japan's rulers pushed aggressive assimilation policies on their colonies. Taiwanese were encouraged—and later forced—to adopt Japanese names, speak Japanese, and follow Shinto practices. This period saw the suppression of traditional Chinese culture and languages, creating a deep cultural divide that lingered for decades. Resistance against these policies varied, from covert cultural preservation efforts to outright rebellions.[1]

[1] For example, the Wushe Incident—a major uprising of the Seediq indigenous people against Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan—occurred in October 1930 in the village of Wushe. One of the most significant episodes of resistance during Japan's fifty-year occupation of Taiwan (1895–1945), the uprising was brutally suppressed and led to increased efforts to assimilate the people of Taiwan.

Economically, Taiwan became an important supplier of agricultural products and raw materials for Japan's expanding empire. Sugar production, in particular, grew significantly under Japanese oversight, with plantations and processing plants dotting the island. While these developments boosted Taiwan's economic output, they were primarily designed to serve Japanese interests, leaving many Taiwanese in poverty and subservience.

In 1937, Japan invaded the Republic of China and quickly overran its Nanjing capital. Four years later, in 1941, Japan declared war on the United States and expanded its empire throughout Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. During the war, Taiwan served as both a base and a supply hub for Japan's military campaigns in the Pacific. The island's infrastructure, including ports, railways, and airfields, was heavily utilized for military purposes, and its agricultural output—particularly sugar and rice—supported Japan's war effort. Taiwanese men were conscripted into the Japanese army, with many serving in various capacities across Asia. Kun-lin Tsai and his family members were no exceptions. Additionally, the local population endured strict wartime policies, including food rationing and demands for unwavering loyalty to Japan. Bombing raids by Allied forces targeted key facilities, causing significant civilian casualties and destruction. By the war's end in 1945, Taiwan's economy and infrastructure were heavily damaged, setting the stage for a challenging postwar transition as the island transferred from Japanese to Chinese KMT rule.

Despite initial postwar optimism among Taiwan's residents, disillusionment quickly spread as the new government imposed corrupt and exploitative policies. Economic mismanagement and rising inflation fueled widespread dissatisfaction. On February 28, 1947, KMT officers harassed a street vendor for selling contraband cigarettes. The incident quickly turned violent, leading to island-wide protests. The KMT's response was brutal, with military forces massacring tens of thousands of Taiwanese in what became known as the 228 incident (also known as the February 28 massacre). Eyewitness accounts detail horrific scenes of soldiers firing into crowds, arbitrary arrests, and mass executions.

Culture Notes

The Boy from Clearwater, Book 2

by Pei-Yun Yu

illustrated by Jian-Xin Zhou | **translated by Lin King**

Levine Querido, 2024 | **Nonfiction, set in Taiwan**

2024 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle & High School Graphic Novels

In 1949, Chiang Kai-shek's KMT government was defeated by Mao Zedong and his Communist Party on the Chinese mainland. Chiang and approximately 1.5 million Chinese refugees fled to Taiwan, further complicating the island's ethnic dynamics. These newcomers, known as "mainlanders" (*waishengren* or 外省人; pronounced: WHY-sheng-ren), set up the Republic of China government in exile and held privileged positions in the government and military, while native Taiwanese (*benshengren* or 本省人; pronounced: BEN-SHENG-ren) were marginalized. Mainlanders brought with them a sense of superiority, viewing themselves as the legitimate rulers of China and Taiwan, and seeing the Taiwanese as Japanese collaborators. Meanwhile, native Taiwanese, who had experienced fifty years of Japanese colonial rule, found themselves excluded from key positions of power. Policies favoring mainlanders, such as better access to jobs and education, deepened the divide. Not surprisingly, these actions created an "us versus them" dynamic.

The 228 incident and the fall of the KMT regime on the mainland resulted in what came to be called the White Terror, a period of political repression targeting anyone perceived to be in opposition to the KMT. For the next three decades, martial law was imposed, and freedom of speech was severely curtailed. Government officials imprisoned, tortured, and executed thousands of civilians, often on unproven charges of being "communist sympathizers." In the pervasive atmosphere of fear, families of the accused faced social ostracism and economic hardships. Despite these challenges, underground resistance movements and advocacy groups began to form, laying the groundwork for Taiwan's eventual democratization. This divide created lasting resentments and tensions that shaped Taiwan's politics and society for decades, right up to the present day.

Green Island, located off Taiwan's eastern coast, became infamous as a detention center for political prisoners during the White Terror. From the 1950s to the 1980s, thousands of "subversives" were sent to this remote prison, including Kun-lin Tsai. The harsh conditions and forced ideological re-education programs symbolized the KMT's authoritarian grip on the island. Prisoners on Green Island endured extreme

physical and psychological hardships. They were subjected to grueling labor, poor living conditions, and constant surveillance. The prison also hosted indoctrination programs designed to instill loyalty to the KMT. Despite these efforts, many detainees found ways to resist, sharing banned literature, composing secret writings, and forming solidarity networks.

In addition to the White Terror, the KMT's imposition of Mandarin as the official language exacerbated tensions. Taiwanese and Japanese, widely spoken by the native population, were relegated to informal contexts, fostering a sense of cultural erasure among Taiwanese people. Public schools mandated the use of Mandarin, and speaking Taiwanese or Japanese in official settings often resulted in punishment.

This multilingual environment created unique challenges and opportunities. Literature and popular culture often blended languages, reflecting the island's complex identity. For example, songs in Taiwanese became a vehicle for expressing local sentiments, while Japanese anime and manga influenced young readers. Meanwhile, Mandarin gradually became the dominant language in urban areas and professional contexts, creating generational divides in linguistic preferences.

During the KMT-dominated era in Taiwan, *manhua* (comics) played a crucial role in both reflecting and shaping the sociopolitical landscape. Despite strict censorship and the imposition of the Comic Code, which regulated content to ensure it aligned with government ideals, *manhua* provided a unique medium for subtle social commentary and cultural expression. Artists like Hsing-chin Liu used their work to address issues such as urban-rural divides and the rapid industrialization of Taiwan.[2] *Manhua* also served as a form of escapism and entertainment for the public, offering a creative outlet during a time of political repression. Following his release from Green Island, Kun-lin Tsai eventually became a major leader in the *manhua* movement. This period laid the groundwork for the vibrant and diverse comic culture that Taiwan enjoys today.

[2] Julia Chen, "Tales of Taiwan's Comic Artists: Persecution, Isolation, and Endless Talent," *The News Lens*, 25 January 2018. Available online at https://international.thenewslens.com/article/88234.

Culture Notes

The Boy from Clearwater, Book 2

by Pei-Yun Yu
illustrated by Jian-Xin Zhou
translated by Lin King
Levine Querido, 2024
Nonfiction, set in Taiwan

2024 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/Middle & High School Graphic Novels

Despite its political turmoil, Taiwan experienced extraordinary economic growth between the 1950s and 1980s, often referred to as the "Taiwan Miracle." Initially reliant on U.S. aid, Taiwan shifted to export-oriented industrialization under the guidance of the KMT government. Industries such as textiles, electronics, and petrochemicals flourished, turning Taiwan into one of Asia's "Four Tigers." Land reforms in the 1950s, which redistributed land from landlords to tenant farmers, boosted agricultural productivity and provided the capital for industrialization. The government also invested heavily in education and infrastructure, creating a skilled workforce and modern facilities. By the 1980s, Taiwan had transformed into a global manufacturing hub and a model of economic development.

This economic growth had profound social and political impacts. Urbanization accelerated as people moved from rural areas to cities for job opportunities. The rise of a middle class empowered citizens to demand greater political rights and freedoms. In 1987, President Chiang Ching-kuo announced the end of Taiwan's thirty-eight years of martial law.[3] Thus ended the era of strict government control, suppression of dissent, and limited civil liberties. This transition was part of a broader wave of democratization occurring globally at the end of the Cold War.

The stories of Green Island survivors, including Kun-lin Tsai's, played a crucial role in Taiwan's democratization and reconciliation processes. These personal and collective recollections have helped to highlight the injustices and human rights abuses that occurred under martial law, fostering a broader public awareness and acknowledgment of this dark chapter in Taiwan's history.[4] The transformation of Green Island into a Human Rights Cultural Park serves as a poignant reminder of past

[3] Chiang Ching-kuo was the son of Chiang Kai-shek, and he assumed leadership of the party and the country upon his father's death in 1975.

[4] Lung-chih Chang, "Island of Memories. Postcolonial Historiography and Public Discourse in Contemporary Taiwan," *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 2 (March 2014), 229–244. https://doi.org/10.18352/hcm.471.

atrocities and a symbol of the commitment to human rights and democratic values.[5] By confronting and commemorating these painful memories, Taiwan has been able to promote healing and reconciliation, paving the way for a more open and democratic society.

Taiwan's history is a rich tapestry of colonization, resistance, economic transformation, and democratization. From Japanese colonial rule and its assimilation policies to the KMT's authoritarian regime and eventual democratization, these experiences have profoundly shaped Taiwan's identity. The stories of Green Island survivors, the cultural resilience expressed through *manhua*, and the economic achievements of the Taiwan Miracle highlight the island's journey toward reconciliation and progress. Kun-lin Tsai, the boy from Clearwater, is one example of Taiwan's ability to confront its past and embrace its diverse heritage.

Author: David Kenley, PhD, Professor of History and Cyber Leadership, Dakota State University
2025

[5] Guy Beauregard, "There but Not There: Green Island and the Transpacific Dimensions of Representing White Terror," *MELUS*, 48.3 (Fall 2023): 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlad064.