



Curriculum Connections

The Boy from Clearwater, Book 2

by Pei-Yun Yu

translated by Lin King

Nonfiction, set in Taiwan

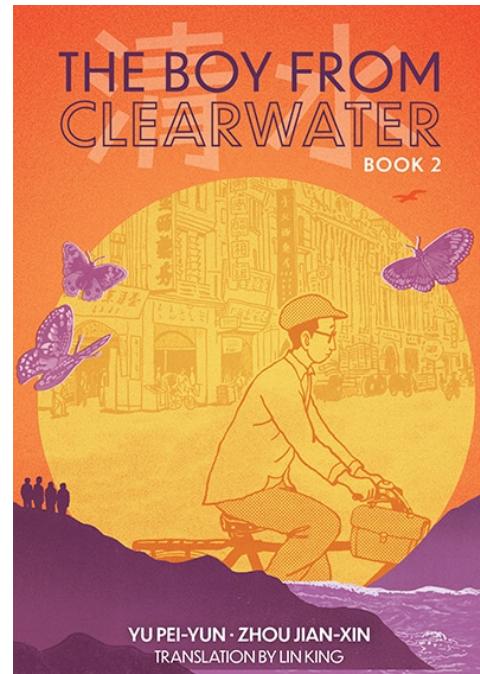
illustrated by Jian-Xin Zhou
Levine Querido, 2024

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

The Boy from Clearwater, Book 2, a YA (Young Adult) graphic novel, offers an opportunity for educators and students to explore several pivotal historical eras in Taiwanese history and to identify and discuss themes spanning a range of 9–12 grade disciplines that will resonate with young readers. The graphic novel genre invites readers into the world of protagonist Kun-lin Tsai with its simple and direct text, its engaging illustrations, and its riveting plot.

The Boy from Clearwater was published in 2023* by the author Yu Pei-Yun with illustrations by Zhou Jian-Xin. (Yu, Zhou, and Tsai are all family names; family names are given first in East Asian cultures.) This graphic novel depicts one of the most consequential eras of Taiwan's history: the nearly half-century long "White Terror" period of martial law on the island, from 1947–1987. The novel chronicles the tragedies and triumphs of protagonist, 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 as a student soldier near the war's end in 1945 and then brought under Republic of China (ROC) rule when Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and his Kuomintang (KMT) army flee mainland China in 1949 upon their defeat in the Chinese Civil War. Kun-lin Tsai is the victim of Taiwan's Cold War anti-communist military persecution when he is arrested for treason, imprisoned, and "re-educated" on Green Island (about twenty miles off the eastern coast of Taiwan) for a decade in 1950 for the crime of joining his high school's book club.

In *The Boy from Clearwater, Book 2*, Kun-lin Tsai returns to his home in Taipei, Taiwan, after serving his ten-year prison term, but struggles to adapt to life back home, learning





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that his father took his own life while Kun-lin was in prison and feeling as though his own life has passed him by while he was imprisoned. Happily, however, Kun-lin is reunited with his childhood sweetheart, Pik-Ju Lunn, or "Kimiko" (her Japanese name), and the two are married in 1962. Kun-lin goes through a dizzying array of jobs over the next decades, from potential teacher (his application is denied due to his "criminal past") to children's magazine editor to corporate employee, all the while dodging his past. In 2018, Kun-lin Tsai meets the future author of *The Boy from Clearwater*, Pei-Yun Yu, at the National Human Rights Museum's exhibition "Delayed with Love: Last Letters from Victims of White Terror Era Political Persecution," where he shared his experiences as a political prisoner on Green Island. Pei-Yun Yu went on to conduct a series of interview sessions to collect Kun-lin Tsai's oral history and to ultimately share his remarkable life in graphic novel form. As a fitting ending to Kun-lin Tsai's story, the last page of the book announces Kun-lin's exoneration for his political crimes during the White Terror by Taiwan's Transitional Justice Commission in 2018.

Author Pei-Yun Yu and the book's translator, Lin King, communicate the vacillation between control of Taiwan using color-coded text throughout the novel's two books: green for Japanese language (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 is speaking with friends and family in personal and informal settings in the book).

*Book 2 of *The Boy from Clearwater*, published in 2024, 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.

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

Our recommendation to educators is high school (9–12 grade) **English Language Arts (ELA)** and **Social Studies**. While some of the illustrations that depict the protagonist Kun-lin Tsai's torture and imprisonment by military police might warrant a



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content warning before students view them, the narrative of the book is not graphic, and neither are most images. It should also be mentioned that Kun-lin Tsai's father takes his own life while Kun-lin is detained on Green Island, and students should receive a content warning about this as well. Overall, while the narrative addresses mature topics, the plot is in keeping with a coming-of-age narrative and the reading level is appropriate for 9–12 graders.

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 these World Language classes since Book 1 and Book 2 so richly share these languages throughout their entirety along with the English translations.

Connections to English Language Arts:

For teachers of 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. These include *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.

Connections to Social Studies:

Teachers of Social Studies might use this book to discuss important historical 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



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Cold War, the White Terror, the Korean War, Taiwan's democratization, the Taiwan Miracle, and South China Sea tensions. Similarly, Japan's imperialist and colonial 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 message behind 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 one historical example of political oppression (or allow them to select on their own with teacher approval). They could then compare and contrast their example with Taiwan’s “White Terror” era of martial law and Kun-lin Tsai’s struggle. Suggestions include the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust, and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Students could conduct research on the “White Terror” in Taiwan and one of the other historical examples and write an essay or present a slide presentation about their research to the class.



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- *Use interactive technology to learn about Taiwan's economic and political development.* Invite students to explore the [Centering Taiwan in Global Asia](https://centeringtaiwan.pitt.edu/) curriculum resource website (<https://centeringtaiwan.pitt.edu/>), specifically its [Modern Taiwan](https://centeringtaiwan.pitt.edu/taiwan/) (<https://centeringtaiwan.pitt.edu/taiwan/>) and [Modern Taipei](https://centeringtaiwan.pitt.edu/taipei/) (<https://centeringtaiwan.pitt.edu/taipei/>) pages, where they can learn about Taiwan's post-White Terror political liberalization and the island's economic ascendance starting in the latter half of the twentieth century and often referred to as the "Taiwan Miracle." Lesson plans and document-based question activities are included on the website for K-12 classroom use.

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