

Orphan of Taiwan: The Importance of Identity and Upbringing in the Mid-20th Century

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Introduction

In a world stuck in the past, ruled by outsiders, and ignored by most, we see a strong, independent nation rise from the grip of authoritarianism. I explored how young people's identities and upbringings in Taiwan during the 1930s and 1940s were affected by foreign rule. Between Japanese and Chinese leadership, the island could never form an identity of its own. Through personal interviews and print works on Taiwanese youth, I constructed a framework to answer how these youth were affected by authoritarian rule.

In 1936, the world was already descending into the chaos of the Second World War. Japan had invaded Manchuria in 1931-32, still controlling the region. As the Great Depression set in, people became more open to political change. Countries and their leaders across the world became more radical and emboldened in response to the widespread economic hardship of the Great Depression. From FDR to Mussolini, radical change was afoot. In Asia, there was a great war between the Communist and Nationalist Chinese forces. Chiang Kai-shek led his men around China, almost completing total victory by stamping out the Communists led by Mao Zedong. The Japanese

invasion was the only factor that saved the Communists from total defeat, as a larger danger pulled attention from the civil war to defend them from a foreign invasion. In this context, on the Northern side of Taiwan in 1936, a child was born named Lynn Lin. His upbringing through World War Two and the Cold War show how the abrupt transition from Japanese to Chinese rule in Taiwan reshaped the educational landscape, profoundly affecting young children's identities and sense of belonging. This change not only forced Taiwanese children to navigate conflicting cultural and linguistic demands but also exposed them to a politicized system of indoctrination and repression, leaving lasting impacts on their psychological well-being and shaping Taiwanese identity for generations.

To better understand the current situation of Taiwan and its history, it helps to remember why the island's identity has been continuously changing. As the Cold War generation of survivors grew older, their stories and memories became small windows into the period of White Terror. Utilizing more recent and more in-depth research, I construct a more current narrative of Taiwan that past historians have not been able to.

Life under Japanese rule for many Taiwanese citizens was regimented but straightforward. Rules were fair but overbearing. As the world tilted closer to a second world war, the island was especially pulled into chaos. Taiwanese children grew up seeing soldiers in crisp military uniforms be replaced with pots and pans. The island saw a shift from one foreign leader to another, denying the Taiwanese people the chance to be fully Taiwanese. My research looks to find what effects the political, cultural, economic, and militaristic conditions had on those born in the 1930s in Taiwan, during the radical uncertainty of the mid-20th century. It should be noted that the identity of Taiwanese-born and Chinese-born citizens are not the same, although, as time has passed, each generation has become less removed from the time of Japanese rule. Those alive to tell the story have lived long lives, and seen countless wars, the space age, the birth of the internet, and the expansion of globalization.

Three main primary sources serve as the basis for my research. The first is *Orphan of Asia* by Wu Zhouliu, published in 1945. It follows Hu Taiming's journey through Japanese-controlled Taiwan and its society's suppression of Taiwanese identity. Second is *The Boy From Clearwater: Part 1 & 2* by Yu Pei-Yun and Zhou Jian-Xi, published in 2023/2024. It is a graphic novel duet centered around a boy named Tshua Khun-lim, who is born in Japanese-controlled Taiwan. Tshua Khun-lim

finds that the easy-natured life under Japanese rule is replaced by the struggle of a war-torn world. Early in my research, I found that my roommate's grandfather was not only born in Taiwan but also had a story that matched the period of the graphic novel. I quickly asked if he would be willing to be interviewed as a contribution to my research. His quick and positive response made it a straightforward process. My work analyzes these contrasting stories to help answer how children who experienced the change from Japanese to Chinese rule felt about Taiwan's place in the world.

From Japan to the KMT: A Tale of Alien Regimes

A Broken Identity

The *Orphan of Asia* by Wu Zhuoliu tells the story of a young Taiwanese boy living under Japanese rule from the early 20th century to the end of World War Two. This historical fiction novel shows our protagonist, Hu Taiming, reconciling the world around him. An ambitious learner, Taiming grows from a distracted teenager to an upstanding young man. He finds early on that his true passion is not in bureaucracy but in the classroom. "Taiming did not want a scholarly or bureaucratic career, regardless of what his grandfather thought"¹. Although Taiming is born into a wealthy family, he resents many of the traditions and actions of his greedy relatives who are content with leeching off the family's existing

¹ Wu, Zhuoliu. *Orphan of Asia*. Translated by Ioannis Mentzas. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, 11.

wealth. It bothers him that Japanese officers ruin a celebration day by calling the Taiwanese people in attendance names plus hitting them with clubs. Societal indoctrination and bigotry by the Japanese means “Those who can’t speak Japanese are as good as fools in the civil service today”². This reality pulls Taiming from his sheltered youth in private school to the freedom of public education. After quickly becoming accustomed to Japanese schooling, he would study to become a teacher. The field of education is not without faults, such as “the pungent whiff of the school’s smoldering racial tension [that] gave Taiming a sinking feeling”³. This early racial tension between Taiwanese-born and Japanese-born teachers foreshadows Taiming’s future struggles with living under a foreign regime that undervalues his identity.

When attempting to become friends with his teacher crush Hisako, Taiming’s non-Japanese background leaves him to be treated as inferior. He thinks, “Then my blood is polluted after all. It’s my karma I must overcome”⁴. This is seen in both of Taiming’s trips overseas to Japan and China. He finds that informing others about his Taiwaneseness puts him at a disadvantage. This all spills over with the treatment of Taiwanese students. When one student is belittled by the Japanese principal on stage, he breaks down into tears, leading him to receive a beating for not holding composure. Watching this, “Taiming felt

as though he himself was receiving those blows”⁵. Even though Japanese rule over Taiwan is brutal and filled with bias, Taiming finds that he can not proudly identify as Taiwanese in China either. When trying to attend a lecture by a Chinese Academic Association, he admits his Taiwaneseness to a friendly attendee. Instead of being supportive, the attendee sneers and spreads news that “he’s Taiwanese”, and “he might be spy”⁶. This experience not only confuses and angers Taiming but alienates his friend, Lan, who extended the invite. This one act leads them to not see each other until years later. Taiming only finds solace when accepting his Taiwaneseness. Instead of attempting to assimilate like some of his countrymen, he opposes the Japanese people and families who “received extra rations of meat and vegetables”⁷ and always acted more entitled than natives. Taiming’s story reaches its last legs after his attempts to save a friend’s son from the war are successful, but another member of the household is killed in civil service because of exhaustion. Something switches in Taiming, as he slowly goes insane.

A Painful Story

The Boy from Clearwater Part 1 begins in a whimsical time for our main character, Tshusa. The rose-colored pages paint a carefree upbringing in the 1930s. Only through an earthquake do we see the family struggle, but even that is fixed when his family builds an even

² Wu, *Orphan of Asia*, 15.

³ Wu, *Orphan of Asia*, 24.

⁴ Wu, *Orphan of Asia*, 30.

⁵ Wu, *Orphan of Asia*, 40.

⁶ Wu, *Orphan of Asia*, 62.

⁷ Wu, *Orphan of Asia*, 230.

pronunciation of his Chinese name and reading about the February 28th Incident, Khun-lim starts to realize his true identity.

After some sense of normalcy is established, Khun-lim sees a massive shift in his life because of a small action. Joining a reading club in school leads him to be arrested and jailed for ten years. Military police take Khun-lim and interrogate him for information on his alleged Communist connections. The torture tactics are shown by the steady dehumanization of the interrogators from faceless men to monsters. Page 184 is particularly captivating to me because of the way Khun-lim is the only light in the room, surrounded by dark, demonic words and figures of evil interrogators. A broken Khun-lin agrees to sign whatever they wants so he can go home. This leads him to sign confession papers leading to ten years of miserable time on Green Island in a reformation prison.

In book two, Khun-Lim attempts to move on with his life after the horrors of Green Island. Like Taiming in the *Orphan of Asia*, “Khun-Lim never forgot his dream to become a teacher”¹¹. He also reconnects with a childhood friend whom he still has a crush on, named Pik-ju. Although outside influences push back their wedding, the couple happily gets married in 1962. The novel seems to reach a happy ending with Khun-lim being hired and promoted at an advertising company. He is fortunate to receive protection from his boss, who

nicer home. This carefreeness is interrupted by the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. The war only grows larger and closer to the young Tshusa. Through volunteering in a junior military division, Tshusa realizes his proximity to violence when he and his friends essentially become child laborers for the military on an airstrip. Tshusa’s commitment to being Japanese is seen even more when he is enlisted as a student soldier in the Japanese Army. Shortly after the war extinguishes itself, leaving behind deep scars on and beneath the surface of every household. Khun-Lim finds himself searching for new meaning in his new Chinese world. In his last moments, considering himself Japanese, he is surrounded by men angered by the surrender, calling out, “We’ll defend Taiwan. We’ll fight to the end”⁸. Little do they know that their home will quickly become almost unrecognizable under new Chinese rule. Our intrepid narrator, although happy to see his Ba and Ma, is selected to attend a summer camp with other promising youth. There they train for “one and a half months”⁹. The military training shows how corrupt and propagandistic the KMT was, just as much-if not more-than the Japanese. The repetition of cult-like phrases like, “Our country, our territory. We will retake it! We will retake it!”¹⁰, makes Khun-lin uncomfortable, his gaze standing out among the other trainees. This pushed a rift between the Taiwanese prisoners and KMT soldiers. With examples like improper

⁸ You, Peiyun. King, Lin (Trans.) *The Boy from Clearwater: Book 1*. (Levine Querido, 2023), 114.

⁹ You, *The Boy from Clearwater: Book 1*. 124.

¹⁰ You, *The Boy from Clearwater: Book 1*. 219.

¹¹ You, Peiyun. King, Lin (Trans.) *The Boy from Clearwater: Book 2*. (Levine Querido, 2023), 70.

sends the government away when they visit, citing that “my brother-in-law was also taken away... they executed him in the end”¹². The small and harmless action of accepting an invitation to a book club caused Khun-lim and his family undeserving pain. *The Boy from Clearwater parts 1 & 2* is similar to the *Orphan of Asia* through the main character’s drive to better Taiwan through education and push back against oppressive rulers.

Memories of Past

On the northern side of Taiwan in 1936, we see the start of Dr. Lin’s story. He lived next to a sugar factory and main road which left him often witnessing patrols of Japanese soldiers. “They would always be in spick and span uniform, shiny boots, marching in step. It was a very impressive thing for me as a kid, so I wanted to grow up and be a Japanese soldier”. Like *Orphan of Asia* and *The Boy From Clearwater*, the prominence of Japanese soldiers and traditions was inevitable during this time. Dr. Lin shows us this contrast even more so when compared to later Chinese KMT soldiers who “Came in straw shoes, carrying pots and pans. For me, I asked myself, ‘is this really the winning country’s soldiers?’ The unprofessional look was “the opposite of what we imagined” and translated into their treatment of the local Taiwanese population. The pots and pans hanging from the KMT soldiers needed to be used. When rations ran low, Dr. Lin explained, the “soldiers even robbed people”. Corruption was seen not

only in the military sphere but also in the political system. During World War Two, “my brother was in the Japanese military because they drafted anyone over 16”, said Dr. Lin. After the war he “started to work for the railroad bureau, so he was fine”. It was true that the average Chinese were not more corrupt than those who were higher up, “when you are in middle management you just do what you are supposed to do and follow the orders, so he was not involved in the decision-making”. Because of corruption, KMT rule, and a search for better opportunities, Dr. Lin pushed his family to move outside of Taiwan.

Dr. Lin enjoyed early schooling in Japanese. This all changed with the sudden switch of languages. Fortunately, he was a quick study, learning Chinese, to continue schooling under KMT rule. The classroom was one of the main places of propaganda and corruption, as “We were actually in it, so we could feel not just see it”. This reality of martial law was even more evident in Dr. Lin’s “first year of graduate school, since moving to the US” when he “saw that it was just like Japan, more honest and less corrupt compared to the Chinese”. Hearing about his move across the world, it became clear how he viewed the USA: “Children from the US don’t appreciate how lucky they are to have amazing opportunities here”. He was able to witness the hardships of multiple foreign regimes. He first considered himself Taiwanese/Japanese, then Taiwanese/Chinese, and now Taiwanese/American. His economist

¹² You, *The Boy from Clearwater: Book 2*, 93.

mindset is a different perspective of a straightforward-thinking human being, confident in his place in the world. Interviewing Dr. Lin gave me a small look into the importance of oral interviews but also showed me the limitations, such as time and memory.

These three sources give insight into the late Japanese and early KMT rule while furthering the collective story of identity on the island. Dr. Lin would travel to the United States for study in 1956, where his primary residence remains today. Education has played an imperative part of his life, providing him the opportunity to break free from Chiang Kai-shek's tight grasp. Dr. Lin has gone back to China and Taiwan to teach classes at multiple universities but keeps his current residence in Ohio. Being able to conduct a personal interview allowed me to connect more deeply with my research. Having such a powerful personal story has given me the motivation to keep studying and working to help others less fortunate than myself.

Later writers attempt to link the story of the White Terror to today, such as in Taiwanese

Identity and The Memories of 2-28: A Case for Political Reconciliation by Cheng-feng Shih and Mumin Chen, or Taiwan and the Issue of National Identity by Lowell Dittmer. These works, written in the 2000s, expand and criticize the ideas of Taiwanese historians from the 20th century who predicted that the situation would improve and almost work itself out in a European Union-type way. Instead of economic improvement leading to cooperation between the mainland and Taiwan, the rift between the two has ballooned. The new challenging party to the KMT is more left/Taiwanese than ever, pushing back against ever being unified with mainland China. Even many current KMT members realize that going back to China is not currently an option and is most likely not going to be a real possibility anytime soon. At the center point of current geopolitics and modern-day tensions between the United States and China, Taiwan is only becoming more important.

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