

Teaching About Asian War Refugees and Diaspora Experiences through Graphic Novels

By Peter Braden

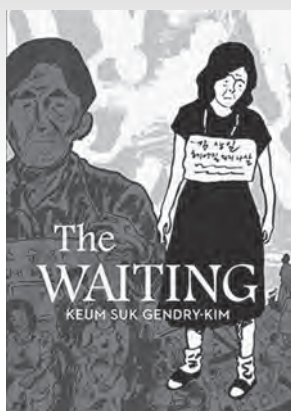
Throughout history, humans have sought new environments, often voluntarily in search of greater economic opportunities, but also because they are fleeing natural disasters, invasion, civil war, human rights abuses, and exploitative governments. In the three graphic novels discussed below, the hardships that the protagonists and their families endure do not end when they arrive in another land. The migrants struggle to integrate economically and culturally into societies that view them with skepticism or even hostility. To achieve cross-cultural understanding, education is important for building strong foundations of humane and respectful relationships between people who have fled and those who will become their new neighbors.

The urgency of learning about mass involuntary migration is increasing, for refugee numbers worldwide are rising as people flee wars, unstable or abusive governments, and climate catastrophes. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there were 103 million forcibly displaced people worldwide in 2022. Of these, some 53 million were internally displaced, while 32.5 million were refugees.¹

The three graphic novels reviewed in this essay focus on mid-twentieth-century Asian migrations of families from North Korea, Vietnam, and Cambodia who joined the Asian diaspora as war refugees. These

narratives, based on personal and family memories, emphasize that refugees are not passive victims, but ordinary people handling the fear, injustice, and uncertainty of involuntary migration. With their focus on the daily lives and emotional experiences of individual refugee families, all three books give a highly detailed, ground-level depiction of resilience and fortitude amid extreme stress and deprivation. Finally, each book explores what it means to be an immigrant or refugee in a foreign land. While these books are rooted in the context of East and Southeast Asia, they are also valuable for broader classroom discussions of flight and migration today.

Altogether, these three graphic novels give students powerful tools for thinking about displacement and integration, the specific experiences of individual refugees and their families, and the creation of historical narratives. They are all unique and perceptive personal accounts of war refugees fleeing violence and oppression and settling in their new countries. One common trait among the refugees is their acknowledgement that the trauma of losing friends and family lingers even after they are settled in their new homes. This trauma, ill-defined and seldom discussed, sometimes affects even generations born in the new country, who did not personally undergo the hardships of emigration.



The Waiting

BY KEUM SUK GENDRY-KIM

JANET HONG, TRANS.

MONTREAL, CANADA: DRAWN & QUARTERLY, 2021

284 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1770464575, PAPERBACK

Keum Suk Gendry-Kim's *The Waiting* traces the life of the author's mother, Gwija, an elderly woman living in Seoul, South Korea, in the present day. The novel follows Gwija through two parallel stories: first, her separation from her husband and son as they fled south to escape the oncoming North Korean army in 1950; and second, her experiences in Seoul raising

her family, including the author. As these two strands of Gwija's life crisscross, in the background lies her intense hope ("the waiting" of the book's title) to reconnect with her lost son and sister living above the border at the 38th parallel, drawn between North and South Korea at the end of the Pacific War in 1945. The peninsula, which had been a Japanese colony for the first half of the century, was divided between a Soviet-backed North and a US-backed South. Hostilities exploded between these new states in 1950. Since the armistice of 1953 that ended the war, periodic crises have punctured the anxious stability of the peninsula. The two Koreas have never signed a formal peace treaty.

Like the author's earlier graphic novel *Grass* (previously reviewed in these pages), this book is sensitive to how living through adversity shapes a person's perspective and priorities during the years that follow. In one of the most arresting images (p. 207), the author walks beside her mother, asking about her escape from the Korean War. The two women appear to be walking



The Waiting, page 207.



The Waiting, page 56.



The Waiting, page 57.



The Waiting, page 78.



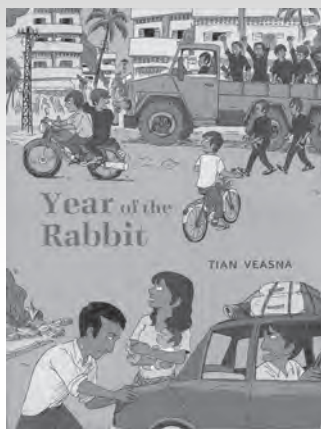
The Waiting, page 139.

into the historical events depicted on the rest of the page. This visual metaphor helps readers see how conversations about memory and history can connect the past and present, making distant events come alive, at least briefly.

The Waiting skillfully uses spare brushstrokes on white backgrounds to illustrate the challenges of Gwija's life both before and after her wartime migration. During her childhood in northern Korea during the Japanese occupation, the women of the family eat millet rather than the more desirable white rice that the men enjoy. Women also receive much less education than men, focusing instead on childrearing and housework [p. 56–57]. One illustration of a faceless fiancé [p. 78] deftly portrays the lack of information that these women and girls had about the marriage partners that their parents arranged. These details not only help readers understand the gender politics of prewar Korea. They also establish a basis for comparison when wartime turmoil separates Gwija from her family. Whereas her rural childhood was restrictive and patriarchal, after the war, she struggles to raise her family in Seoul with limited resources. Her life exemplifies the versatility and resilience necessary for survival among people who must flee their familiar environments, cultural norms, and support networks.

In the climax of the book [p. 136–139], Gwija recalls the last time she saw the faces of her husband and firstborn son, Sang-il. In the hurried confusion of their escape from the advancing North Korean army and their battle-damaged home region, the family is separated. For the rest of the book, Gwija struggles to balance her aching desire to find her lost relatives and her need to care for her daughter, Minhye. Although she remarries and raises children in South Korea, Gwija is tormented by the sorrow, guilt, and fear she feels on behalf of her missing family. She is far from unique in her loss, as the war tore apart tens of thousands of families. The author explicitly extends the significance of her story beyond the Korean context, noting that “We were not the only ones who were forced to flee our hometowns because of war.”

In a note at the end of *The Waiting*, Gendry-Kim explains that her book is a work of fiction, based on her own research and the “testimonies” of her mother and other Koreans who also survived wartime dislocation and family separation. She explains that she “didn’t want to unintentionally hurt those who shared their stories so vulnerably with me.” This disclaimer provides a teachable moment in which students can reflect on the nature of truth and the making of historical narratives. Students may also grapple with the obligations of oral historians, both to their interviewees and to their readers. How are oral and textual evidence different? What do historians and their readers gain by departing from documented evidence? What do they lose? Is the trade-off worthwhile?



Year of the Rabbit

BY TIAN VEASNA
HELGA DASCHER, TRANS.
MONTREAL, CANADA: DRAWN & QUARTERLY, 2020
380 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1770463769, PAPERBACK

Tian Veasna's *Year of the Rabbit* is the story of his family's escape from the Khmer Rouge regime that ruled Cambodia from 1975 to 1979. The narrative begins with the forced evacuation of all city dwellers on April 17, 1975 (p. 30 and 37). Tian (romanized in the book as Chan) was born on the third day of his family's escape from the capital city of Phnom Penh. Near and distant relatives briefly crossed paths,

exchanging survival tips and warnings (p. 88), scarce supplies, and moral support, but all were now refugees in their own country. With delicate brushstrokes, Tian documents the harrowing experience of life under Khmer Rouge control. The new government of Democratic Kampuchea, collectively known as "Angkar," followed an ideology of "new thinking," which focused on forced agricultural labor, constant surveillance, and political indoctrination. (p. 159). Everyone was at the mercy of Angkar, and violations meant death (p. 88). In addition to families like the author's, other victims included Khmer Rouge soldiers who had fallen out of grace with the regime. They were sent to the notorious S-21 Detention Center (formerly a high school) in Phnom Penh (p. 261) or taken to the Killing Fields at nearby Choeung Ek. The Khmer Rouge leadership, including Saloth Sar (Pol Pot, Brother No. 1) and Kaing Guek Eav (Comrade Duch), head of S-21, viewed their opponents as expendable, as captured in the chilling slogan: "To keep you is no gain / To destroy you is no loss."

For educators, some of the most valuable pages in *Year of the Rabbit* are the charts, maps, and diagrams at the start of each chapter that accompany Tian's finely crafted panels. One picture (p. 110) shows a sampling of items associated with Western culture that could draw unwanted attention from the Khmer Rouge. These included photos, diplomas, eyeglasses, books, or military uniforms from the prewar nationalist government. Still another standalone image (p. 220) shows a variety of behaviors and attitudes that the Khmer Rouge interpreted as signs of hidden resistance to their regime. These included practicing traditional Buddhism, appearing unfamiliar with farming methods, and seeming reluctance to discuss one's prewar social position or career.

Lists, charts, and prose could convey much of this information, but the author's meticulous illustrations give this material a greater sense of immediacy and vividness. They show how the Cambodian people were disoriented and traumatized by not knowing what would happen next. The "rules of the game" had changed virtually overnight, compelling people to radically alter their economic, political, religious, and social practices. Even before becoming refugees in a new country, most were alienated from the Khmer Rouge way of life, but not from their former culture and traditions. Those were hidden in their minds until they could safely bring them forward again.

Unlike the Vietnamese and Korean families in the other two books under discussion, the family in *Year of the Rabbit* was relocated to the countryside to work in rice paddies (p. 155) and on irrigation projects. Several striking pictures convey the grimness of life in the new state of Democratic Kampuchea. The "New People" were issued just one bar of soap per year, a single



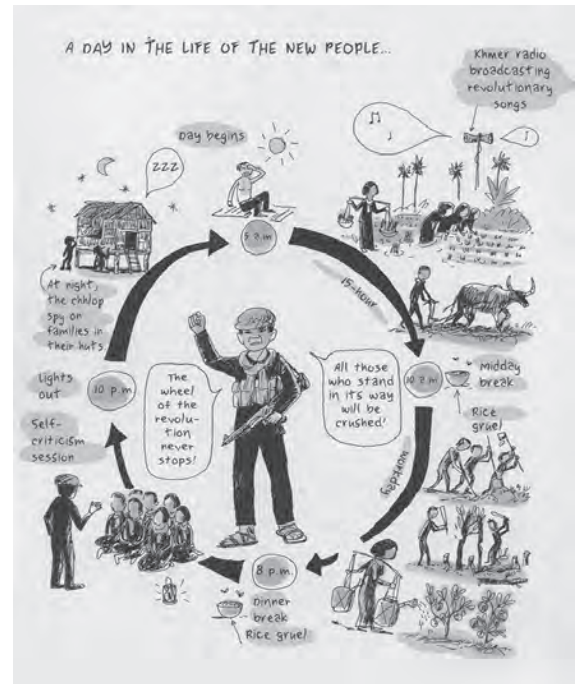
Year of the Rabbit, page 37.



Year of the Rabbit, page 158-159.

black outfit with the iconic red Khmer scarf, a hoe, and a lice comb (p. 188). Another powerful image shows a day in the life of the former urbanites (p. 202) who had to rise at 5 a.m. and work for fifteen hours accompanied by revolutionary songs on the radio. After a meager dinner and a collective self-criticism session, they slept while *chhlops* (spies) monitored their homes for signs of dissent. One last image shows “tips and tricks” for surviving with the limited resources available in the dysfunctional Khmer economy: making tableware from bicycle parts and brushing one’s teeth with coal (p. 240). These illustrations demonstrate the brutal living conditions more convincingly than could a purely textual account. They also reinforce the author’s message that even for those who did not flee the country, life was nearly unrecognizable.

These images could also be a helpful starting point for classroom discussions of “the history of the everyday.” While headlines and history courses usually focus on the words and actions of social elites, most people’s experiences and memories are rooted in the mundane details of daily life: frustrations, needs, fears, and goals. After class discussion of Tian Veasna’s drawings, instructors could have students sketch or design mini graphic novels about their own daily routines. Although students may not produce artistic masterpieces, the educational value of this exercise is in learning how authors select and omit scenes to create a compelling or informative narrative. Students might ask how historians of the future would interpret their schematics: What could scholars learn about a society by examining ordinary people’s everyday experiences? Would drawings of a single day yield the same insights as conventional written accounts? What questions might these personal artistic works raise for any future scholars who study them?



Year of the Rabbit, page 202.



The Best We Could Do An Illustrated Memoir

By THI BUI

NEW YORK: ABRAMS COMICARTS, 2017

336 PAGES, ISBN: 978-1419718779, HARDCOVER

Thi Bui’s beautifully illustrated *The Best We Could Do* follows the author’s family from her parents’ lives in prewar French Indochina through the Vietnam War and their harrowing journey to Malaysia by boat and their ultimate emigration to the United States. With notable empathy for her traumatized and often-difficult parents, the author interweaves her family’s odyssey with her own experiences as a child war refugee

and later as a new mother in the US. Of the books under discussion, this one devotes the most space to the refugee family’s challenging process of cultural integration in their new country, the United States. At the same time, it is steeped in historical content that shows why Bui’s parents, especially her father, are filled with angst and regret.

Thi Bui skillfully shows how two generations of her family experienced the chaos in their home country, while seeking opportunity and freedom through education. Her father, Bô, who came from a broken family, was a scholarship student in French schools, first attending grade school at the elite Henri Rivière in the city of Haiphong, and then college in the capital city of Sài Gòn (p. 150–162). Here, he enjoyed the pleasures of “citification” and “Westernization” such as wearing French clothing, eating chocolate ice cream, and seeing cars (p. 153). In Sài Gòn, he met Bui’s mother, Má, whose background was in many ways an inversion of his own life. Má came from a well-to-do southern Vietnamese family who saw themselves as “French-Vietnamese,” speaking and living in the manner of the colonial power. Her mother’s father worked for the colonial regime and for the South Vietnamese government that succeeded it after the French withdrawal following the Geneva Conference of 1954. The two families’ disparate backgrounds and political leanings mirror the issues plaguing the country itself.

During the colonial period, Bô feels pride in his homeland and sympathy for the Communist Viet Minh rebels, who proclaim their mission to liberate Vietnam from colonial domination. As



The Best We Could Do, page 154.

Can we talk meaningfully about a “refugee experience,” in the context of Asia and even globally through Graphic Novels?

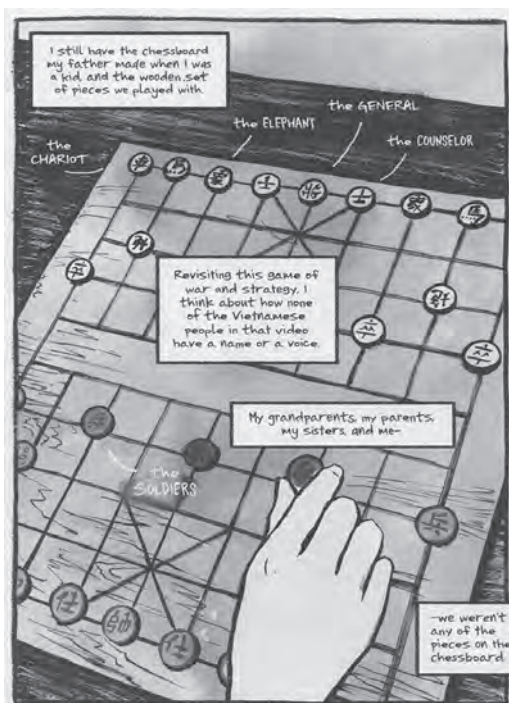


The Best We Could Do, page 211.

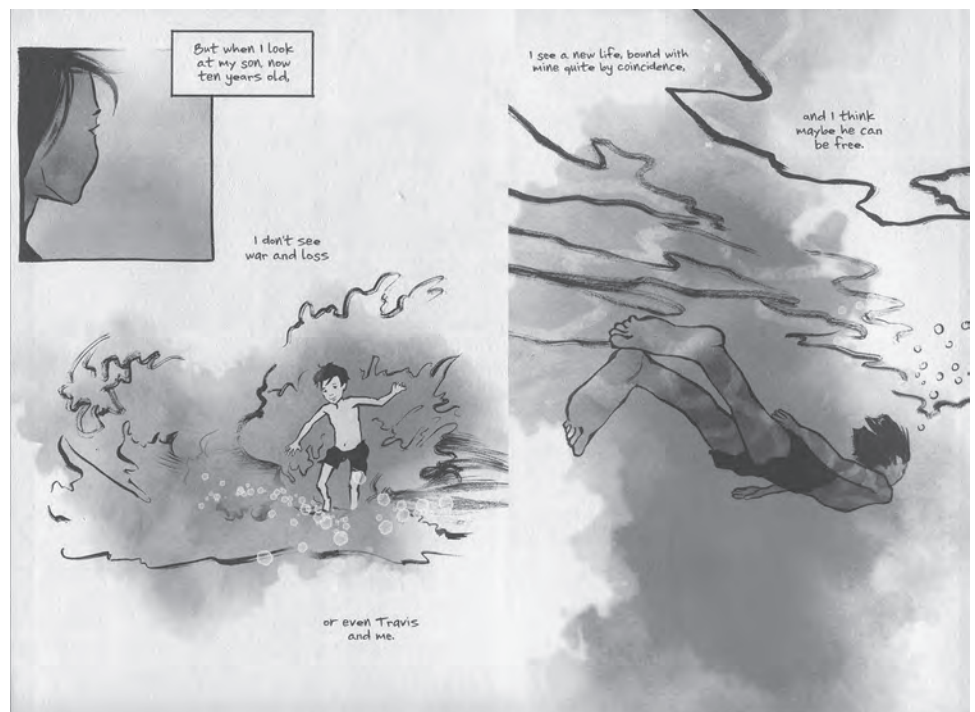
a teenager, Bô visits his estranged father in a Communist stronghold in North Vietnam, carrying official identification papers in one pocket and letters of passage from the Viet Minh in the other. The stark poverty of his father’s life quells Bô’s desire to join Hồ Chí Minh’s revolution. But even after emigrating to the United States as an adult, Bô retains his uneasy sense of not fully belonging to any one culture or society. Later, when his children are grown, he declines an opportunity to join them as they visit his father in Vietnam (p. 35). Bô’s displacement and sense of rootlessness haunt his daughter as well. She is excited about the opportunities she enjoys upon moving to New York for college. But only when she begins interviewing her parents about their memories of Vietnam for her graphic novel does she really think about her own journey, her marriage, and her hopes of overcoming the burdens of war and loss, so that her young son is free to be himself in their adopted country (p. 328–329).

Textbooks, with their impersonal statistics and bloodless prose, can make students’ eyes glaze over. By contrast, graphic novels’ tight narrative focus encourages readers to see the family members in each novel not as abstract historical figures, but as people with individual personalities. As the authors were mostly young children during the events of their books, their stories rely primarily on family memories and artifacts, supplemented with journalistic or historical accounts. Undergraduate classes may enjoy discussing how these authors balance the detached candor of history writing with the urgency and conviction of personal and familial memory. How can writers turn a handful of photographs, family stories, and scraps of documentation into coherent, meaningful narratives?

The challenge of accurately depicting individual experiences of mass violence could help students think carefully about how we construct historical narratives. Thi Bui notes that “every casualty in war is someone’s grandmother, grandfather, mother, father, sister, brother, child, lover” (p. 157). She is dissatisfied with the caricatured version of the Vietnam War that she encounters in an American documentary, noting that “none of the Vietnamese people in that



The Best We Could Do, page 185.



The Best We Could Do, page 328–329.

video have a name or a voice” (p. 185). She rejects the metaphor of the war as a chessboard with clashing sovereigns and armies, saying, “we were more like ants, scrambling out of the way of giants, getting just far enough from danger to resume the business of living” (p. 186). Another contrast juxtaposes official and popular memories of the war’s end on April 30, 1975. The Communist government commemorates this date as Liberation Day, while expatriates like Bui’s parents recall it as “the day we lost our country.” On the following page, we see how the author’s parents experienced the fall of Sài Gòn as new parents fussing over their baby (p. 211–212). In the gaps between grandiose narratives of national redemption and bereavement, the lives of ordinary people unfold. Kings and generals make the headlines, suggests the author, but historians cannot lose sight of life, loss, and love among the “ants.”

These books could also contribute to discussions of postcolonial history by highlighting how subject peoples can carve out space for their own empowerment amidst imperialist policies. The same French colonial education system that suppressed and distorted the cultural heritage of Indochina also equipped the parents of Thi Bui and Tian Veasna with the language skills that facilitated their journeys to the US and France. These families fled Vietnam and Cambodia for the relative security of the same Western countries that had devastated their homelands. Even before arriving, they were already conversant with the literature, cuisine, and pop culture of their adoptive countries.

All three books give readers an unusually intimate view on the lives and struggles of families experiencing historical turmoil. Does this sustained attention to individual families have any drawbacks for historical understanding? Teachers and students may enjoy discussing the issue of representativeness: How much of each family’s struggles was unique to their specific social status and background, and how much was common to their societies at large? Can we talk meaningfully about a “refugee experience” in the context of Asia and even globally?

Graphic novels convey personal stories with more emphasis on social and cultural content than most traditional textbooks. They offer a rich historical experience that could be valuable in a world history class, an Asian studies elective, a world literature class, or as personal reading for high school or undergraduate students. Students who engage seriously with these books will gain a deeper understanding of the specific conflicts in question. Additionally, they will better understand the personal experiences of wartime and postwar trauma, gaining an empathetic awareness of the grueling hardships that confront refugees fleeing conflict zones. In short, these books help students “imagine the unimaginable.” ♦

NOTE

1. “Figures at a Glance,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed August 30, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/3htwcu8d>.

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