

## The Freeman Book Awards

by Nancy Hope



Many educators are aware of the positive impact of reading literature from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Integrating diverse literature into the classroom provides the opportunity for some students to identify with characters and themes that reflect their identities and experiences—such as race, family structure, language, or religion—thus fostering a sense of validation and belonging. It also allows others to gain a better understanding of and empathy for people and cultures unlike their own, fostering prosocial behaviors. Such literature is often described as being like mirrors in the first case and like windows in the second.

However, elementary and secondary teachers who want to incorporate diverse literature into their curricula face several challenges, not the least of which is identifying books that are culturally and historically accurate in addition to being appropriate for classroom use. Fortunately, for those who are searching for titles focusing on the countries and peoples of East and Southeast Asia, the annual [Freeman Book Awards](#) can help.

The Freeman Book Awards, which are sponsored by [National Consortium for Teaching about Asia](#) (NCTA), the [Committee on Teaching about Asia](#) (CTA) of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS), and [Asia for Educators](#) (AFE) at Columbia University, recognize quality literature for children and young adults that contribute meaningfully to an understanding of East and Southeast Asia at age-appropriate levels. Over the past ten years, more than one hundred titles have been recognized in the four categories of: (1) **Children’s Literature** (picture books for up to grade five); (2) **Young Adult: Middle School Literature**; (3) **Young Adult: High School Literature**; and (4) **Young Adult: Middle and High School Graphic Novels**.

The settings of these books are mainly in one of the following: Brunei, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, or Vietnam. While they may include limited content taking place outside of East and Southeast Asia—such as in the United States or Canada, for example—the narrative may not take place there exclusively, nor focus solely on visitors touring said lands.

Principal topics explored by winning titles are family, adventure, coming of age, and identity among others. Examples include the picture books “Eighteen Vats of Water” by Ji-Li Jiang about a young Chinese boy wanting to become a calligrapher like his father, and “Up, Up, Ever Up! Junko Tabei: A Life in the Mountains” by Anita Yasuda about the first Japanese women to climb Mount Everest. Furthermore, the list of Freeman

Book Awards winners features a nice balance of historically based and contemporary settings exemplified respectively by the young adult novels “A Crane Among Wolves” by June Hur about Koreans in the 16th century, and “Echo in the City” by K. X. Song about the 2019 Hong Kong extradition bill protests. There also are several books in translation such as the middle school novel “How Do You Live?” By Genzaburō Yoshino with translation by Bruno Navasky which Academy Award–winning animator Hayao Miyazaki has called his favorite childhood story.

All submissions for the Awards are vetted first by content specialists for cultural and historical accuracy, including illustrations if any. Next, classroom suitability is evaluated by review committees composed of teachers, librarians, and teacher-educators based in institutions across the country from the East Coast to Alaska and Hawaii. Committee members then rank eligible submissions using a rubric that includes story quality, characterization, plot, and appeal to audience. The result is a list of titles that can bring the experiences of East and Southeast Asian peoples into the classrooms, libraries, and homes of students throughout the United States.

The Freeman Book Awards is funded with support from the Freeman Foundation (and until March 2025, the US Department of Education). The Foundation believes that the Freeman Book Awards are an appropriate way to recognize the Freeman family and will aid the work of many American educators in promoting education about Asia in the U.S. The Foundation hopes that the Freeman Book Awards will encourage more authors to write books about Asia, teachers to teach more of these books, and students to read more of these books.

With this mandate from the Foundation in mind, the website of the Freeman Book Awards not only lists winners, it also features associated culture notes and curriculum connections for selected titles to help teachers use these books more easily and effectively. These resources—created by content specialists as well as by seasoned educators—may be downloaded for free. The website also provides links to author interviews, publishers’ guides, and other resources for many titles that may be accessed without charge.

Additionally, professional development on East Asia and Southeast Asia highlighting Freeman Book Awards titles is provided by several NCTA national coordinating sites. Last year, for instance, the Program for Teaching East Asia (TEA) at the University of Colorado Boulder conducted one classroom outreach project entitled “Teaching Natural Sciences through East Asian Picture Books.” Teachers have reported the project has been instrumental in exposing students to different cultures, furthering understanding and provoking thought and connection by using such Freeman Book Awards winners as “When the Sakura Bloom” by Narisa Togo, “Moth and Wasp, Soil and Ocean” by Sigrid Schmalzer, and “When Spring Comes to the DMZ” by Uk Bae Lee. NCTA personnel associated with the East Asian Resource Center (EARC), University of Washington, and at the Five College Center for East Asian Studies (FCCEAS), Smith College, and at the U.S.-China Institute, University of Southern California have conducted similar programming. Information about the Freeman Book Awards also is made available during conferences of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Council for Geography Education (NCGE) at exhibit booths and during session presentations. Professional development opportunities like these are announced on the NCTA and Asia for Educators Facebook pages. We hope educators will take advantage of these opportunities to increase the use of diverse literature in elementary and secondary classrooms in the years to come.

**A list of Freeman Book Awards winners for can be found on the [Freeman Book Awards website](#).**

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