
Kuan's Wonderland

A Novel Exploration of Inequality

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Introduction

***Kuan's Wonderland* tells the story of a ten-year old boy being snatched from home and taken to a bizarre world, where he is suspected of being an enemy of the state. Unable to escape, he keeps telling himself that his father will come to his rescue and all will be well again. As he waits, and hope begins to fade, he tries to adapt to his new life only to discover the true nightmare awaiting him.**

This novel provides an alternative medium for exploring the threats to equality & democracy. Suitable for anyone aged 14/15 (KS4/Year 10) upwards, it's been widely acclaimed as a fantasy adventure & political fable:

- *“Kuan’s Wonderland is an unmissable page-turner. Henry Tam has created a fantasy universe unlike any that has come before.”* (President, the Independent Publishers Guild)
- *“A great book to open debate and enquiry with young people on society and politics.”* (Chief Executive, Young Advisors)
- *“Simply a tour de force. ... [F]ull of plot surprises and layers of deeper meaning.”* (Director for Education, WEA)
- *“[This] fast-moving adventure in a new world ... sparkles with visually captivating creatures and imaginative technology ... [The ending is] astonishing.”* (Fantasy Book Review)
- *“It is fast-paced while containing beautifully written and memorable passages. And the ending is tense, unexpected and powerful.”* (Economics Editor, *The Independent* newspaper)

How to use the resources available here

After reading the novel, you can click on selected topics in the right hand menu to find out more. There are suggestions for closer exploration, and opportunities for you to submit reviews or devise action plans for tackling inequality, which may then be shared with

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others via the Equality Trust and Cambridge University's Forum for Youth Participation & Democracy. If you have not read the novel, please beware of 'spoilers'.

How to get a copy of the novel

Kuan's Wonderland is available to download for just 77p to Kindle, iPad, or any computer device with a free Kindle app from Amazon:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Kuans-Wonderland-ebook/dp/B008144G9I/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1336413074&sr=8-1

A free pdf version may be supplied on request from teachers for use at their schools. A printed book version will be available for purchase in due course.

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The Problem of Power Inequality

Kuan's Wonderland invites the reader to think about why the inequality of power is such a disturbing issue. Debates about income and wealth inequality can sometimes be sidetracked by accusations of envy or rhetoric about the freedom to make money. But the real problem concerns power. If some have substantially more power than others, the risk of oppression is inevitably higher. And if the gap between the powerful and the powerless is not bridged, the latter will be at the precarious mercy of the former.

Money is a proxy measure of the relative power we have in society. Ultimately, it is the power that money, status and any other privilege can help to secure that determines who can tell others what to do. *Kuan's Wonderland* is set in a world where wealth is not quantified in any conventional sense, but is assessed in terms of the number of hours others have pledged directly or indirectly to one another. It shows that so long as the relative power to bend others to one's will is not curtailed, the few would come to dominate others absolutely.

In the novel, the Circles of Challenge illustrate how claims that people should be free to act provided they follow the rules miss a key point, namely, that it depends on whether those rules are fair. The Circles of Challenge are of course designed by the privileged few to protect their own position and keep the majority in subordinate roles. What do you make of the rules that determine who can get on and who can't in our society? What scope do you see for questioning or altering those rules?

Having read the novel, you may also be interested in a brief historical account of how the problem of power inequality has emerged and been tackled through the ages: Henry Tam's *Against Power Inequalities* is available as a free download from the Equality Trust:

<http://www.equalitytrust.org.uk/resources/against-power-inequalities>

Write a Review

A good way to reflect on what you have read is to write a review for others. There are three simple rules you may wish to follow: 1. Draw out what particularly moved you in the story; 2. Give your interpretation of one or more of the major themes (see, e.g., topics outlined in 'Discussion Points' section below); and 3. Hint at intrigues without giving away any key plot twists.

You can share your reviews in one of two ways: send it to hbt21@cam.ac.uk for consideration for inclusion as part of our 'Young Person's Guide to Inequality' web resource (between 200 and 400 words); or you can add it to the review section for the novel on the Amazon page http://www.amazon.co.uk/Kuans-Wonderland-ebook/dp/B008144G9I/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1336413074&sr=8-1 (to post your review on amazon.co.uk, you would need to have made at least one previous purchase, not necessarily the novel, from them).

A selection of the most interesting reviews will also be shared with schools via Cambridge University's Forum for Youth Participation & Democracy.

Discussion Points

For the purpose of writing a review or conducting a group discussion, you can consider the overall theme of power inequality, how it affects your life personally and society more generally, and also how the novel brings out a number of questions about specific problems you will need to deal with. Four particular discussion points are put forward below:

Who are the Potokans?

One of the most important revelations in the novel is about who the Potokans really are. Why they have such a misshapen form, and how they came to be distrusted and despised by others, reflect how societies intentionally create a sub-class to loathe and blame.

The name 'Potokans' came from the Greek word 'Ptochos' in the New Testament, meaning the Poor, as in "Blessed are the *Ptochos*". The association between Potokans and Blessing points ironically to the hopelessness of being reduced to penury and routinely treated as a scapegoat for all wrongs. In the novel, Blessing is a hallucinogenic substance used to deceive Potokans and prevent them from realising the real injustice that should be rectified.

Listening to politicians, hearing the news, do you notice how the 'Potokans' of our own society are presented by the equivalent of the Mauveans as undeserving of support? And what do you think about the way our economic system is creating more Potokans everyday?

Inequalities & Environmental Injustice

It is increasingly recognised that social and environmental injustice cannot be tackled separately. The root cause of both lies in the determination of those with sufficient power to exploit any human or other form of natural resource to increase their own profit and wealth.

Simply encouraging the use of renewable energy or promoting fair treatment and decent wage for workers would never be enough to halt powerful corporations from doing what they think is in their interest irrespective of the consequences for others.

The Mauveans in Shiyan typify how those with concentrated power tend to see the world. Their use of the noxious elephantium they possess is already repugnant on many levels, but as the storyline of the Sun Disc further shows that if left politically unchecked, they would trample on social and environmental justice without the slightest restraint.

The Escapist Alternative

In the novel, Kuan finds himself trapped in the surreal realm of Shiyan. He wants to make his escape, but first he has to learn what he truly needs to escape from. At one point, he is tempted to make the most of what Shiyan has to offer him, but he gradually reaches the conclusion that he must reject the illusory comforts of Plutopia, and return to his own world (where what is waiting for him is finally revealed).

This motif of how to find salvation is developed with the symbolic trinity of 'Father, Son & Amo'. In the beginning, Kuan pins all his hope on his father coming to his rescue, then he relies on Amo (whose name means 'Love' in Latin, and in her flame-like form flickers like a ghostly spirit) who sustains his belief in finding a way out of his predicament, and ultimately he realises why 'Father, Son & Amo' must act together to overcome what has virtually destroyed Kuan's life.

We all feel the pull at one time or another to turn away from the problems created by growing power inequalities. Sometimes we wish the problems would just go away if we ignore them, or some higher force from elsewhere would rescue us. But in reality, who do you think must act to challenge and reverse the spread of inequality and oppression?

Masks of Oppression

Oppression does not always show itself in an obvious way. But it does consistently arise when some have managed to channel more power to themselves at the expense of others. *Kuan's Wonderland* gives three types of example of oppression in disguise. What do you make of their manifestation in our society?

General Chi-Ling: the self-styled patriot, always encouraging Shiyanese to suspect, fear, and hate Potokans. He uses that animosity towards the 'enemy' to build up his military power

base, to launch ruthless attacks on opponents, and justify imprisonment and torture of anyone who stands in his way.

The Curator: the self-proclaimed prophet, relentlessly promoting false hope to those who have been marginalised. He offers them Blessing to lure them into a dependency relationship with him; makes them serve him in return for the warped sense of salvation he provides them; and seeks ultimately to transform them into fanatic followers in carrying out his destructive mission against everyone else.

Chairman Dao: the self-assured plutocrat, tirelessly explaining why the unrestrained accumulation of wealth for him is good for the whole of Shiyan. He entices others to do what he wants done, removes obstacles by using his expanding power, and conceals his overall plan with meticulous care.

Tackling Inequality

So what can be done about the problem of power inequality? The novel points to some possible approaches. After exploring these, you may consider devising your own action plan. We have outlined below what this should cover and some possible partners you may seek to work with:

Lessons from the novel

Kuan's struggle in Shiyan leads to a gradual discovery of the dire consequences of allowing vastly unequal distribution of power to persist. The main challenge is how to deal with that seemingly unbridgeable gulf. The actions of three of the characters point to possible options, including their strengths and limitations. What are your views of them, and how may you apply them in our society today?

Lord Ou-Yang tries to moderate the effects of inequality with his paternalistic provisions to help meet basic needs. He eases suffering, but without challenging the changing power structure of Shiyan. In the end, he too is ousted by Plutopia.

Agent Tan is an enigma whose significance only becomes clear at the end of the novel. On the surface he has to serve the political establishment of Shiyan, but he knows it cannot be allowed to continue unchecked. His duel with Chairman Dao is critical to mounting a real resistance to the expansion of Plutopia.

Dr. Erica Lee's approach develops from at first taking subversive action to help the Potokans, then she becomes increasingly vocal in lobbying for fairer treatment of them, until she takes on the task of running for office to reform Shiyen comprehensively.

From Kuan's interactions with each of these characters, what lessons would you draw?

Devise an Action Plan

One exercise you may consider undertaking is to devise an action plan to tackle inequality. This can be a personal or a group plan. The plan should contain 5 elements:

1. Description of a particular problem of power inequality you want to tackle;
2. Analysis of what would solve/ease that problem;
3. Outline of what you would do to bring about improvements;
4. Indication of any partner, supporter, shared responsibility with others that will need to be secured to carry out your planned actions effectively;
5. Timescale for implementation and review of the plan.

Partners to Work With

In devising your action plan to tackle inequalities, there are organisations which may be helpful partners for you. Here are some you may wish to contact:

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL: www.amnesty.org.uk/youth

You can find out about campaigns, especially on behalf of political prisoners, and how you can help by visiting Amnesty's website. You can contact the Education and Student Team via est@amnesty.org.uk. You can also contact them to arrange for a speaker to visit your school or university, and they will give a talk about human rights, and how you may set up your own Amnesty youth groups. You can email speakers@amnesty.org.uk to request a list of speakers near you and their areas of expertise, or if you have any questions.

COOPERATIVE COLLEGE: <http://www.co-op.ac.uk/schools-and-young-people/>

The College works with a wide range of co-operatives, including a rapidly growing network of co-operative schools, and delivers programmes to help individuals and groups achieve the skills and understanding needed to put co-operative values and principles into effective

practice and help build successful co-operative businesses. It provides advice and curriculum resources to schools, and runs the Young Co-operatives programme which helps young people set up their own cooperative businesses (take a look at: www.youngco-operatives.coop). If you would like to find out more, contact Julie Thorpe: Julie@co-op.ac.uk

FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY & SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (FDSD): <http://www.fdsd.org/>

FDSD aims to build understanding and knowledge about the links between democracy and sustainability – whether that is about how democracy can adapt to better achieve a sustainable future, or how environmental challenges could undermine democracy. They launched the Manifesto for Democracy and Sustainability <http://www.democracyandsustainability.org> as an online platform where people can share ideas and actions on how to get democracy working for a healthy environment and a fair and socially just world for people now and in the future. Find out what others are doing at: <http://www.democracyandsustainability.org/themes/democracy-and-sustainability-are-inseparable/putting-it-into-practice/> You can also add ideas of your own to the website.

OXFAM <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/get-involved/opportunities-for-young-people>

Oxfam's youth action groups can help you find out more about global issues of inequality and how you can make a difference. It has lots of resources designed to help you achieve the change you want to see in the world. It also has a team of people around the UK who you can contact for advice and support. To find out more about Oxfam's Youth Action Board in your area, start a Youth Action Group or get involved in some other way, look at the 'Support Section' on: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/get-involved/opportunities-for-young-people/resources-and-support> You can contact Oxfam via youthteam@oxfam.org.uk or education@oxfam.org.uk

STUDENTVOICE: www.studentvoice.co.uk

This student-led organisation represents the views of students across the UK. They support students to have their voices heard within their schools and communities. Get in touch if you want to be part of a national student movement, have your say, get some training, run a campaign and more. You can join StudentVoice for free. Find out more on their website, and contact them on support@studentvoice.co.uk. You can also follow them [@StudentVoiceUK](https://twitter.com/StudentVoiceUK)

Contact the Author

If you would like to discuss your interest in exploring the issue of inequality in the novel further in any of the ways suggested above, you are welcome to contact the author of *Kuan's Wonderland* about:

- planning for a group discussion in your school or college
- submitting a review
- putting questions to the author about certain aspects of the novel
- requesting a talk on the novel/power inequality to your class with follow-up Q&A
- starting a class-based project to develop an action plan to promote equality & democracy

About the Author:

Henry B Tam is the author of *Kuan's Wonderland*; *Communitarianism* (nominated by New York University Press for the 2000 Grawmeyer Award for Ideas Improving World Order); and other books and articles on politics, ethics and public policy.

He is currently the Director, Forum for Youth Participation & Democracy, University of Cambridge:

<http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/academicgroups/equality/forumyouthparticipation/>

His essays on politics & society appear regularly on *Question the Powerful*: <http://henry-tam.blogspot.co.uk/>

Follow him on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/HenryBTam>

Email address: hbt21@cam.ac.uk

More information about his work as a writer, academic & former senior civil servant can be found at: <http://www.hbtam.blogspot.co.uk/>

Miscellaneous Curiosities

Here is an A-Z selection of some of the allusions and references in *Kuan's Wonderland* that may interest you:

- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: There are echoes of Lewis Carroll's Alice books throughout the novel. Wu-yin, the white cat morphing into an Alice-like girl is one such moment. A deeper homage is to be found in the closing poem – a variation of the melancholic acrostic at the end of Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*.

- Batya's pebble: Batya, the orangutan-like outsider asks Kuan to return the emerald pebble to his son, a memento about a father-son relationship the meaning of which only becoming clear when it is no longer in Kuan's possession.
- Camus, Albert (1913-1960): *The Rebel* and *The Plague* are major influences on *Kuan's Wonderland*; the Clinic for Potokans is named 'Oran' after the city where the story of *The Plague* is set.
- Dante's Vision of Hell (from *The Divine Comedy*): The 9 Circles of Challenge mirror Dante's 9 Circles of Hell (hence the use of names such as Minos, Asterion, and Antaeus). What for the Mauveans merits the highest honour is therefore the most unforgivable.
- Elephantium: Comparable to any substantial energy-producing substance which has many harmful side-effects, and which enables those who have control over it to enrich themselves and dominate others.
- Father: The psychological motif of the novel is the transition from asking, "will father save me?" to "can I save father?"
- Guantanamo: A hint to the final destination is given with Kuan, and the two characters who have been steadfast in helping him get to where he will find the truth: Tan and Amo (Note: the 'K' in 'Kuan' is pronounced 'G' in Chinese). A British resident, Shaker Aamer, has been held at the US Guantanamo Bay facilities for over ten years even though he not been convicted of any wrongdoing.
- Hades: hell is where the mind is imprisoned with no hope of being released.
- 'I'm About To Die': Amadeus' most heinous retribution is to trap his victim in the inescapable moment before death, so that one is consumed by ever-lasting despair. It captures the state of mind of arbitrarily held and tortured political prisoners.
- *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng'en (1505-1580): this classic Chinese novel (also known as *The Monkey King*), often available in comic book versions (like the one Kuan was reading), uses the format of a fantasy adventure to tell the story of someone struggling through a long and trying journey to discover vital truths kept in an inaccessible place.
- Kafka, Franz (1883-1924): *The Trial* is an important influence on *Kuan's Wonderland*, but it is from the title of another Kafka novel (with its theme of being inescapably thwarted) that a recurring symbol in our novel is derived – *The Castle*. Kuan's predicament follows him on the submarine, *FSS Castle*; the place known as Schloss 22 ('schloss' - German for 'castle'); Rook Mansion ('rook' is another name for 'castle' in chess); the city of Bastille ('bastille' - French for 'castle'); and with Dr Erica Lee in jeopardy on Chengbao Island ('chengbao' - Chinese for 'castle').
- Long March (1934-1935): The chapter heading 'Long March' (referring to the difficult journey for Dr. Lee and the Potokans to escape to Chengbao Island) alludes to the historical Long March when the Communists in China, being hunted down by their enemy, escaped on foot over some 12,500 kilometers (8,000 miles) over 370 days. Around 7,000 of the 100,000 soldiers who began the march made it to the end.
- Moon: a recurring motif about painful separations. The poem by Su Shi (1037-1011), referred to by Dao in the novel, contains this final stanza, “人有悲歡離合，月有陰晴圓缺，此事古難全。但願人長久，千里共嬋娟”
“People may be joyful or sad, together or kept apart,

The moon may be bright or dim, full or hidden from view,

This unavoidably is how it has always been.

Let us hope we endure,

And though far from each other, we can in unison admire the lunar beauty.”

- New Beginning: The prophecy of Amadeus demands for its own fulfilment the cleansing of all impure elements in Shiyan so that an imagined past can commence again. It is a staple of religious and ideological charlatans.
- Orwell, George (1903-1950): *Animal Farm* as a political fable in part inspires *Kuan's Wonderland*, but it is *1984* which is most strongly echoed. Can you spot where '1984' is displayed in the novel?
- Peterloo Massacre: when Dao mentions the name of his uncle, 'Peter Lu', to Kuan, the latter is reminded of the Peterloo Massacre, a historical incident that took place at St Peter's Field, Manchester, on 16 August 1819, when cavalry charged into a crowd estimated to be around 60,000–80,000 that had gathered to demand the reform of parliamentary representation (15 civilians were killed and 500-600 were injured).
- Quantum Level Nebula: Amo's home turns out not to be in some far off nebula, but in a tiny space far closer than Kuan could have expected.
- Reflectors: This ubiquitous technology, embedded in every reflective surface in Shiyan to transmit and receive all forms of signal, is a reminder of how communications are widely monitored and manipulated in contemporary society.
- Shiyan: The name of our dystopian world means 'experiment' in Chinese. At one level it represents the plutocratic experiment initiated by Dao (serving as a warning to countries such as China which in embracing it, risks creating oppressive divisions). At a deeper level, it is an experiment for Kuan to see if turning his back on the world he has left behind is a feasible way to cope with the tragedy in his life.
- Typewriter: The typewriter motif points to the reason why an innocent person is wrongfully imprisoned in the story. It is said that the pen is mightier than the sword, and a downside of that is that anyone typing out unwelcome words can end up being locked up without charge for years.
- "Underground spirits and their reflected sound": This phrase comes from Terry Pratchett's word play on 'economics' in *The Colour of Magic* (1983). In our novel, Kuan asked if it was true that such spirits were responsible for bringing Potokans into the world. In fact, it is precisely the economic system that is the cause.
- Vortex of Charybdis: The vortex signifies the danger of death by drowning, and is part of the series of incidents throughout the novel which eventually led Kuan to the realisation of what the eerie splashing sound he heard was about.
- Wuchang Tearoom: The Tearoom where Kuan met up with Agent Tan to talk about the "mission" gets its name from the Wuchang Uprising of 1911, which heralded the Xinhai Revolution to end the Qing Dynasty and replace it by the Republic of China.
- Xian: The character of Chief Engineer Xian (the one with the leopard head atop her human body) shows how dedication to a patriotic or environmental cause can be manipulated into serving the opposite if one does not question what one is being asked to do by those in more powerful positions.
- Yearning: Kuan's and Amo's yearning to regain the life they have lost provides the emotional engine for our story, propelling us to the shock revelation of what has in truth been lost.
- Zamenhof particles: The name given to the particles, which supposedly enable diverse beings to communicate with each other in Shiyan, is derived from Ludwig Lazarus Zamenhof (1859-1917), the inventor of Esperanto (the international language).

Selected Reviews

Submit your reviews and those selected will be included below:

[Extracts from reviews by readers posted on the *Kuan's Wonderland* page on amazon.co.uk]

Wonderland indeed

By A.J. Marks

"I can't remember the last time I was so gripped by a book. It kept me up late three nights in a row while I finished it. ... It's a very seductive read - you don't have to suspend your disbelief for very long before you're a part of its world. And the main characters are so carefully drawn that you engage with them immediately, so you want to find out what happens to them.

It's clever without being clever-clever. It covers a range of emotions without being melodramatic. It's by turns funny, moving and frightening. And the end, and the book's message, are very powerful."

A Political Allegory with overtones of Vonnegut & undertones of Kafka

By Helen M.

"Kuan's Wonderland has a lavish plot but an accessible style. ... Although Kuan's Wonderland has a less straightforward narrative arc than 1984, it's the same kind of book: there are so many layers of meaning, intertextuality, and interwoven themes, that a reader will be able to return again and again, and see fresh details each time. As soon as I'd finished Tam's novel, I had a huge urge to go back to the beginning and start all over again."

Real page turner with a great twist

By Yakina Mac

"Imagine the bastard lovechild of Pan's Labyrinth and 1984 - if you can - and you might get a flavour of what's waiting for you with Kuan's Wonderland. You'll be glued to the page as Kuan is snatched from home and transported to a bizarre, parallel world, full of sinister characters where nothing is ever quite as it seems. The twist at the end is inspired - it will be playing on your mind for days after you finish reading."

A many-layered masterpiece

By Charles W

"This is a great story you can enjoy at a number of different levels. You can follow Kuan and his collaborators as they move breathlessly through an ever-changing worldscape of technological and psychological challenges. You can enjoy the characters, well-drawn despite their constantly changing external form. You can be intrigued by the religious references in the chapter headings and some of the locations through which Kuan moves. You can reflect on the underlying political analysis, which is evident but not pushy. And you can read to the end (which you must do) and (in my case, at least) still have an intriguing question mark in your mind as you close the book."