



The Banana Sprout

芭蕉的芽

Author: Zuo Hsuan **Illustrator:** Zuo Hsuan **Publisher:** Gaea Books

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Award: 2023 The 14th Golden Comic Awards, Comic of the year

BFT2.0 Translator: Mike Fu

In the 1930s, Yeh Hsing-Chiao, a new student at a top prep school known for fostering independent learning, moves into the dormitory. There, he meets his roommate, Nanjo Untaro, a student on the verge of dropping out. Inspired by the school's culture of intellectual freedom, the two decide to create a magazine together.

Yeh, a diligent student with a talent for writing, earns a place at Taihoku High School, a prestigious institution known for nurturing an atmosphere of intellectual freedom.

Upon moving into the dorms, Yeh meets his Japanese roommate, Nanjo, a notorious campus eccentric who frequently skips class. At first, the straight-laced Yeh is frustrated by Untaro's unorthodox behavior.

But soon Yeh discovers another side to Untaro: a voracious reader who skips class to pursue self-directed learning. To Yeh's surprise, Untaro has even mastered German, a subject Yeh struggles with. The roommates decide to start a campus literary journal. Will these unlikely partners succeed?

Author and artist Zuo Hsuan conducted extensive research to authentically portray the campus, uniforms, and student life in Taiwan during Japanese colonial rule. Her delicate, warm linework brings to life this story of two young men with contrasting personalities, who risk everything to pursue their passions and shape their own path.



Zuo Hsuan

Comic artist and illustrator Zuo Hsuan's *The Banana Sprout Vol. 1* won the 14th Golden Comic Award for Comic of the Year and was selected as an Excellent Extra-Curricular Reading for Elementary and Secondary Students. In 2014, Zuo Hsuan published *Rites of Returning*, which won the Bronze Award at the Japan International Manga Awards. It also sold rights in Japanese, French, Italian, and Vietnamese and was adapted into a television drama that aired in 2020. Zuo Hsuan participated in the "Comic Plant Theatre" project, creating a comic adaptation of *What She Put on the Table*, which was selected as an Excellent Extra-Curricular Reading for Elementary and Secondary Students and included in the Books From Taiwan program. Zuo Hsuan has represented Taiwan at the 2017 Angoulême International Comics Festival in France, the Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany, the 2022 Lucca Comics & Games in Italy, and the 2023 BDFIL Comics Festival in Switzerland.

The Surprising Constancy of Youthful Anxiety Across Time

By Itzel Hsu

Translated by William Ceurvels

(Originally published by Readmoo)

In *The Banana Sprout*, our protagonist Yeh's first encounter with his new roommate, the notorious oddball Nanjo, is one of the most jaw-dropping moments. As Yeh walks past the dormitory, relishing the cool relief of a gentle rain, he suddenly hears the dorm matron cursing. Looking up, he sees a curly-haired youth zipping up his pants and nonchalantly calling out, "My bad!" It's only then that Yeh realizes the "rain" he enjoyed was not rain at all.

Despite this shocking introduction, Yeh quickly learns that Untaro is not a slouch. His room is packed with books, both in Japanese and foreign languages. Untaro, in fact, reads so voraciously that one of their teachers admits to being less well-read. Though he frequently skips class, Untaro spends much of his time in independent study, mastering German—a language that Yeh struggles to grasp.

Yeh's disciplined and obedient nature contrasts sharply with Untaro's carefree

attitude. At first, Untaro is nothing more than a source of frustration for Yeh. However, through their daily interactions and insights from a teacher, Yeh begins to see that Untaro's impulsive behavior stems from the same uncertainty about the future that Yeh feels himself.

After a heartfelt conversation, the two come to a conclusion: if they both feel lost about the future, perhaps they can explore it together. They decide to combine their literary talents and create a new, more open-minded literature journal—one that challenges the rigid conventions of the school's official journal.

The Banana Sprout could be easily mistaken for a modern Japanese high school bildungsroman. It features the familiar elements of the genre: two young friends with opposite personalities unite in pursuit of an ambitious goal. Their enthusiasm is inspiring, their antics hilarious, and their moments of self-

discovery full of melancholy.

But once we understand when and where the novel is set, we can't help but marvel at Zuo Hsuan's

skill. This charming, poignant story is the result of meticulous historical research. Without Zuo Hsuan's detailed recreation, even the average Taiwanese reader might struggle to imagine what life was like at Taihoku High School in the 1930s.

Taihoku High School, the predecessor of today's National Taiwan Normal University, was an elite all-boys academy during Japanese rule. It was a seven-year school, with a four-year middle school program (the "Basic Program") and a three-year college preparatory program (the "Advanced Program"). Graduates of the preparatory program were automatically admitted to Japan's top universities, such as Tokyo and Kyoto University, without having to take entrance exams. Competition was fierce: of the 160 students admitted to the Advanced Program each year, fewer than thirty were Taiwanese, with the rest being Japanese. Regardless of nationality, wearing the Taihoku High School uniform marked a student as someone destined for greatness—future doctors or influential politicians.

Surprisingly, this academic elite was far from a bunch of bookish nerds. Like the banana leaves that adorned the school crest, these students were lively and exuberant. The school's lax

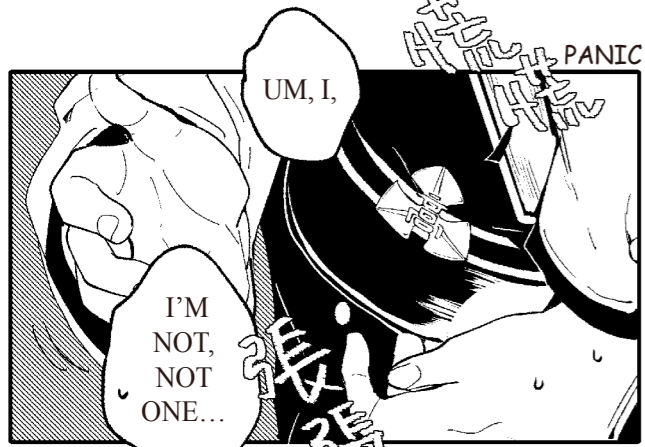
In a society strictly regimented under colonial rule, Taihoku High School was a rare oasis of freedom and liberalism.

regulations allowed for a great deal of freedom, giving students the space to pursue their own academic interests and extracurricular

activities. They were free to explore life without restrictions. Some, like Untaro, adopted a disheveled appearance, while others relished late-night sessions of singing, dancing, and drumming. This open and bold campus culture likely blurred the ethnic divide between Japanese and Taiwanese students. In a society strictly regimented under colonial rule, Taihoku High School was a rare oasis of freedom and liberalism.

Will modern readers relate to these youths from ninety years ago? That question didn't even cross my mind while reading. Zuo Hsuan's clean, precise prose and meticulous detail pulled me into Yeh and Untaro's world. From a modern perspective, their uncertainty about themselves and their future feel surprisingly similar to those of today's high school or college students. As the story progresses, we may encounter conflicts of race, gender, and agency that reflect the specific tensions of that era. But for now, readers are likely to have just one desire: to see more of these young men, who, like the banana sprouts of their school's insignia, embody limitless potential.

This essay has been edited for the purposes of this booklet.



UM, I,

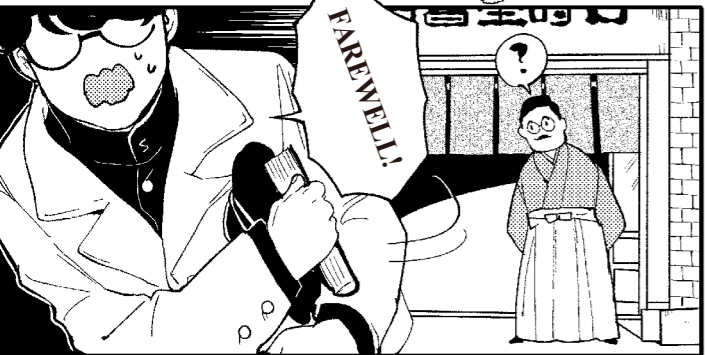
FLUSTER

I'M NOT, NOT ONE...



AH, OUR CUSTOMER, YOU MUST ALSO BE...

OUR OWN LITTLE TAKESHI-CHAN IS GOING TO STUDY AT TAIHOKU HIGH SOMEDAY, TOO!



FAREWELL!



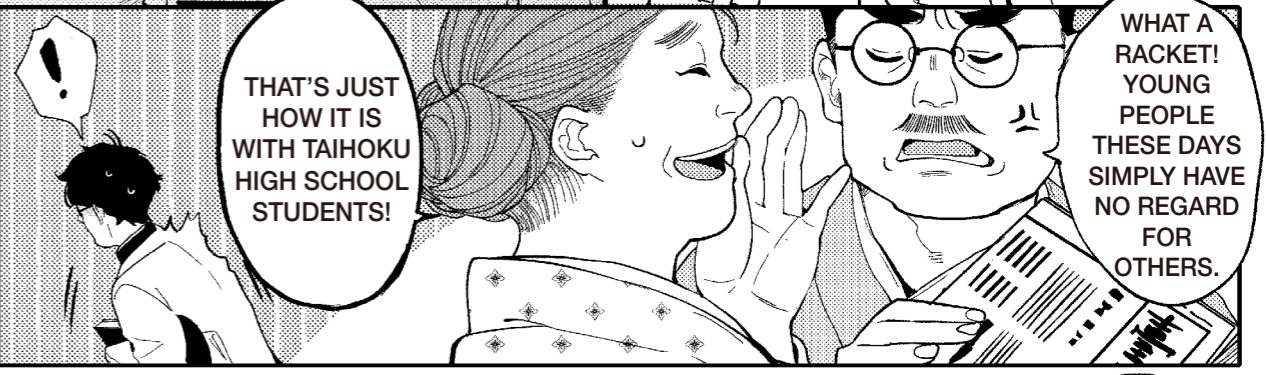
THAT'S JUST HOW IT IS WITH TAIHOKU HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS!



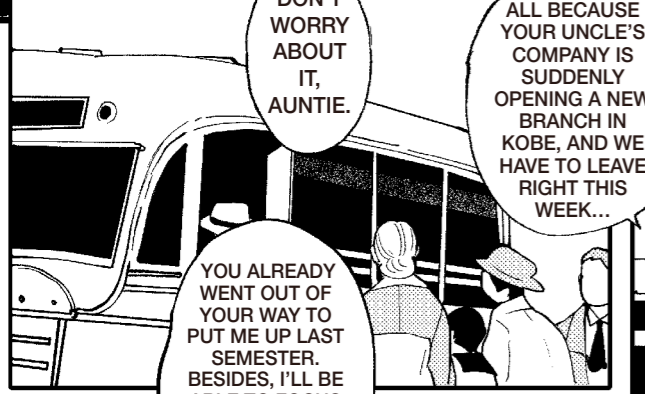
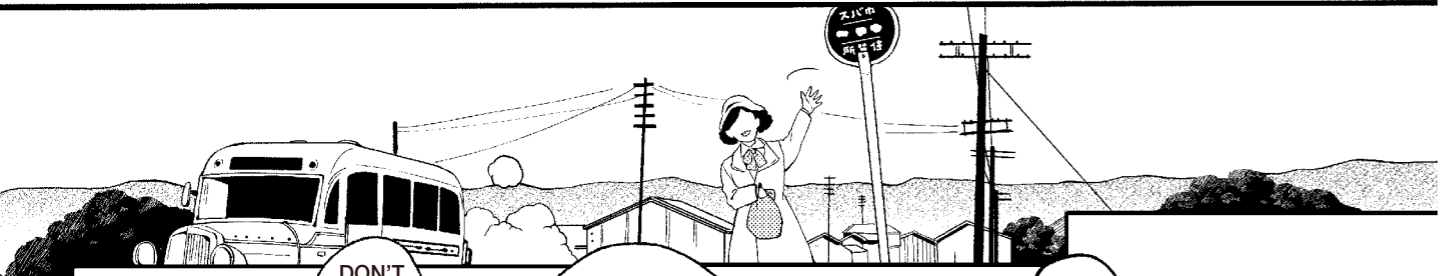
HAHAHAHA!



YOI-- DEKANSHO-- DEKANSHO--



WHAT A RACKET! YOUNG PEOPLE THESE DAYS SIMPLY HAVE NO REGARD FOR OTHERS.

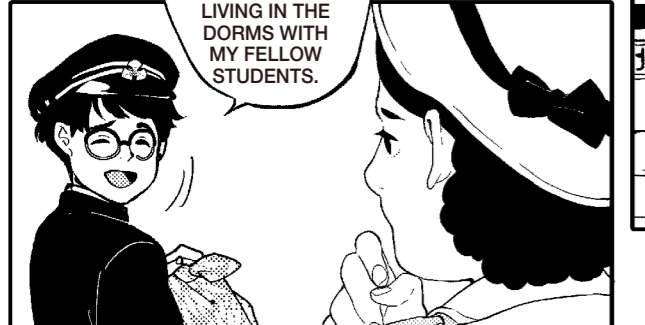


DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT, AUNTIE.

ALL BECAUSE YOUR UNCLE'S COMPANY IS SUDDENLY OPENING A NEW BRANCH IN KOBE, AND WE HAVE TO LEAVE RIGHT THIS WEEK...

THE DORM ON SUCH SHORT NOTICE.

AH KYO, I'M SO SORRY FOR MAKING YOU MOVE INTO



YOU ALREADY WENT OUT OF YOUR WAY TO PUT ME UP LAST SEMESTER. BESIDES, I'LL BE ABLE TO FOCUS MORE WHILE LIVING IN THE DORMS WITH MY FELLOW STUDENTS.

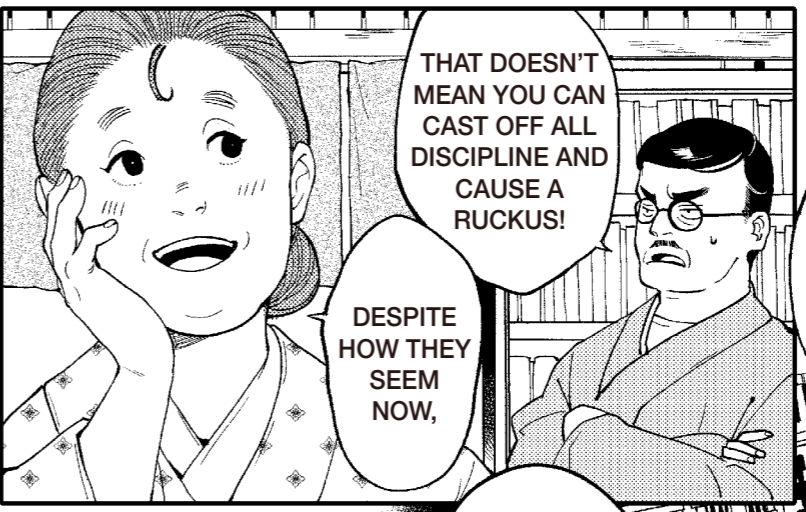


THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN CAST OFF ALL DISCIPLINE AND CAUSE A RUCKUS!

DESPITE HOW THEY SEEM NOW,

ONCE YOU GET IN, YOU'RE BASICALLY GUARANTEED ENTRY INTO IMPERIAL UNIVERSITY.

I HEARD THAT THEIR ENTRANCE EXAM IS THE TOUGHEST IN ALL OF TAIWAN. TALK ABOUT A HIGH BAR!



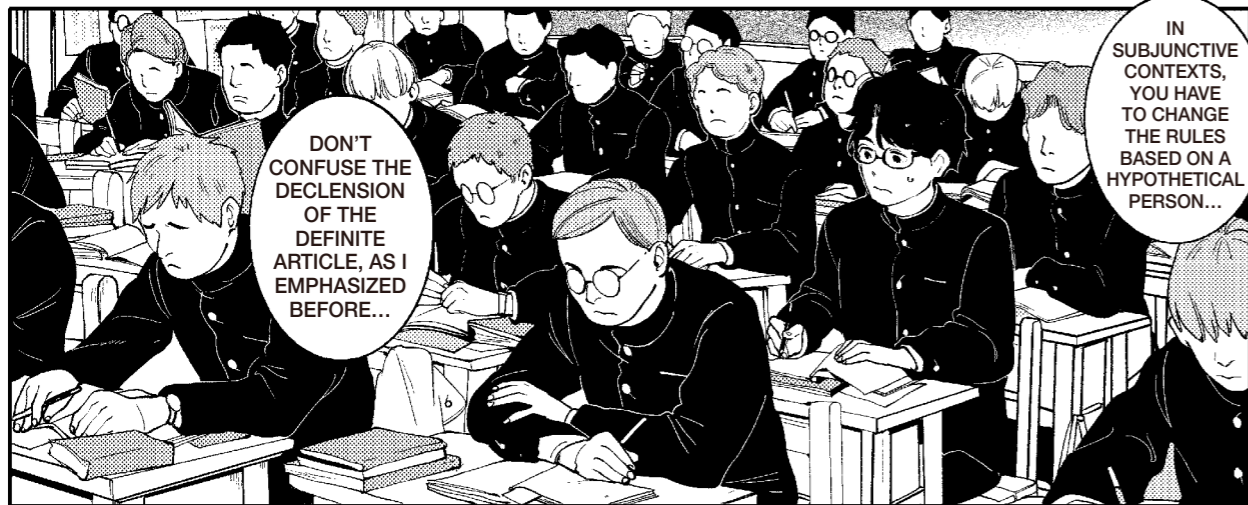
I BET THEY'RE ALL GOING TO BECOME GREAT SCHOLARS AND MINISTERS!





... DETERMINE THE TYPE OF CLAUSE, BE MINDFUL OF THE ANTECEDENT.

PLACE THE RELATIVE CLAUSE AFTER THE MAIN CLAUSE.



DON'T CONFUSE THE DECLENSION OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE, AS I EMPHASIZED BEFORE...

IN SUBJUNCTIVE CONTEXTS, YOU HAVE TO CHANGE THE RULES BASED ON A HYPOTHETICAL PERSON...



TO ASSESS YOUR GRAMMAR APTITUDE, WE WILL HAVE AN ESSAY EXAM AT OUR NEXT CLASS SESSION.

DANG DANG



I'M DOOMED.

NOMINATIVE, GENITIVE... WHAT'S THE OTHER CASE CALLED?



FOR VERB CONJUGATIONS, PLEASE THINK LOGICALLY AND DON'T RELY ON ROTE MEMORIZATION.

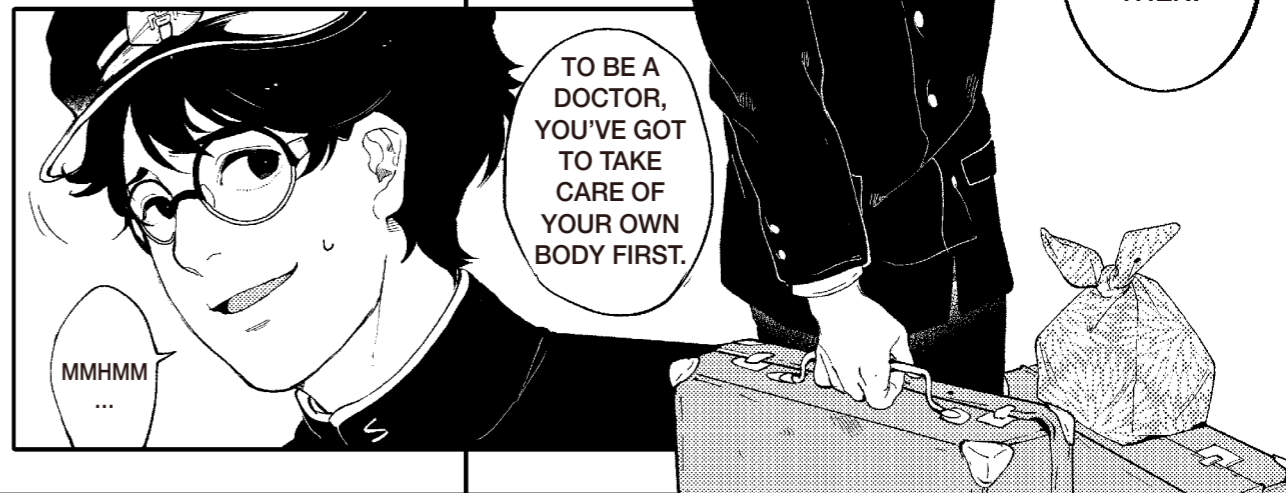


WILL DO.

MAKE SURE TO EAT NUTRITIOUS FOOD WHILE LIVING IN THE DORMS.

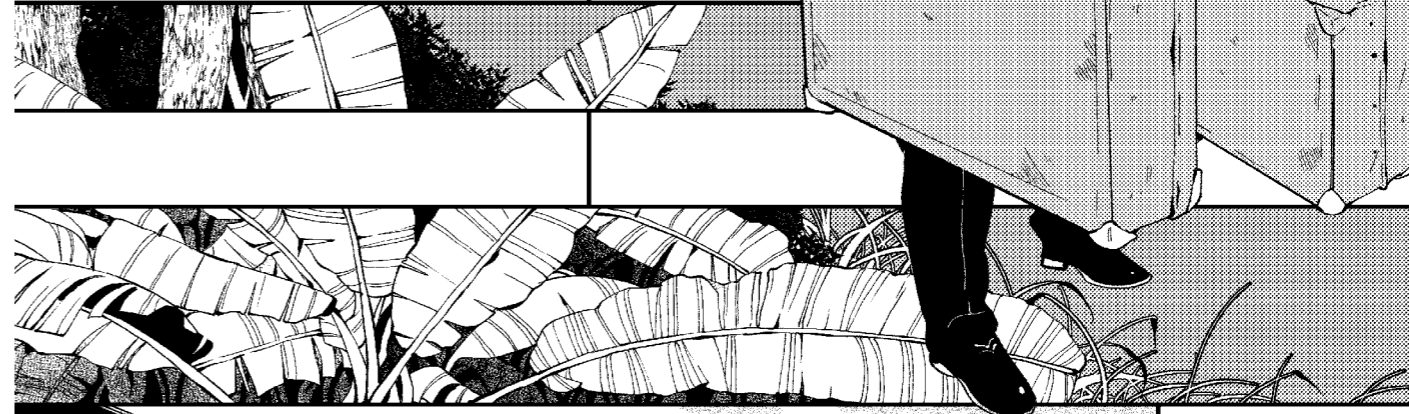
DON'T FORGET TO WRITE TO YOUR MOM AND LET HER KNOW YOU'VE SAFELY ARRIVED. SHE ALWAYS HAS YOU ON HER MIND!

I'LL BE OFF THEN.



TO BE A DOCTOR, YOU'VE GOT TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN BODY FIRST.

MMHMM ...



TAIHOKU HIGH SCHOOL —

IN ORDER FOR ALL OF YOU TO READ GERMAN HISTORY AND LITERATURE IN THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGE SOMEDAY,

WE MUST LAY A SOLID FOUNDATION WHEN IT COMES TO GRAMMAR.

