

## Culture Notes

### *The Astonishing Color of After* By Emily X. R. Pan

**Little, Brown & Company, 2018**

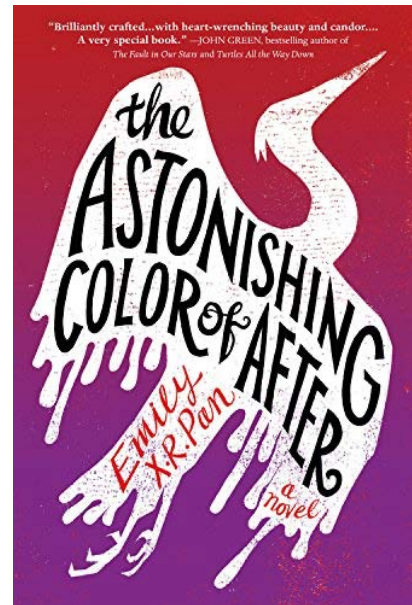
**Fiction, Set in Taiwan**

**2018 Winner, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature**

#### Introduction to the Story

This YA novel's protagonist is Leigh Chen Sanders, a teenage, biracial, single child with a Chinese-Taiwanese mother and Irish-American father. Primarily a family story unfolding in contemporary USA and Taiwan, it also features high school life, friendships, and budding romances.

Abundant with **intersectionality**, the content addresses diverse topics such as: mental illness, through explicit descriptions of depression and suicide; race and ethnicity, through an embedded conflict resulting from interracial marriage, and by centering biracial protagonists (Asian/White, Asian/LatinX); LGBTQ identity; single parent households; and socioeconomic disparities.



As realistic fiction interwoven with magical realism, the plot offers rich potential for addressing universal themes that arise as one encounters and explores different worlds and their liminal spaces—be they physical, cultural, or psychological. Imagery and narrative style showcase artistic references (quoting Emily Dickinson's poems, employing nuanced, precise colors as indicators of emotions, charcoal sketches, paintings, and photography), along with musical themes (notably Mom's passionate piano playing, and Axel's digital compositions), that serve as alternate modes of communication- "languages" in their own right.

The book's fantastical and supernatural elements are tinged with Chinese traditional practices that continue to be observed by many people in Taiwan, and beyond. The lighting of incense is a prominent, commonplace example that also functions as a plot device to transport the protagonist elsewhere, in order to bear witness to memories that may or may not be her own. Implicit in the narrative is the potential of parallel universes, along with the idea that other dimensions may exist in which life forces dwell when they have departed from the corporeal realm.



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Throughout her journey, Leigh learns about rituals that are influenced by **Daoist** beliefs and **Buddhist** teachings, as well as cultural sensibilities and folk customs dedicated to remembrances of loved ones who have passed—such as serving up lavish feasts or burning purpose-made “spirit money” and other necessities for the afterlife. Leigh’s perceived “deadline” for locating her mother-as-red-bird also aligns with the forty-nine-day period during which the spirit of the deceased is thought to hover in transit between this world and a desired release into the next life.

By setting the story during **Ghost Month** (the seventh month in the Chinese lunisolar calendar, *guiyue* 鬼月; pronounced: “gway-YOU-eh”) the range of possibility broadens for contact to occur across realms, thereby enhancing this work’s sense of mystery and storytelling imagination. It is said that the transom between worlds opens the widest during this period, and more spirits and souls are free to move about among living humans. As such, in popular culture there are innumerable variations on practices and superstitions specifically associated with **Ghost Month**.

On its own, the word *gui* 鬼 (pronounced: “gway”) can mean ghost or spirit, connoting life forces—or souls—that exist beyond bodily flesh. Depending on the circumstances, context, and relationship to living individuals, a particular *gui* 鬼 may be benign, helpful, needy, tricky, vicious, or vindictive.

#### **Taiwan—relevant background**

This section helps to clarify why Leigh was confused about Mom’s origins (pg. 39), and the mixture of languages as well as cultural influences Leigh encounters when she visits Taiwan.

Today’s Taiwan is a **multicultural society** with nearly 24 million residents, a democratic government, and distinct identities that set the island apart from its neighbors. Its citizens include an indigenous population, ethnic Chinese whose families migrated from China’s mainland over the past few centuries, and recent immigrants from Southeast Asia. Mandarin/Putonghua, Taiwanese/Hokkien, and Hakka are the main spoken languages, and traditional Chinese characters are used in writing. English is prominent in signage and public announcements to cater to international travelers.



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The Taiwan that Leigh experiences both shows how locals live, as her grandparents do, and features popular tourist activities—including trips to the iconic Shilin Night Market 士林夜市 and Jiufen 九份, another top destination for visitors.

Geographically, Taiwan is an island located near China's southeastern coast. According to Jonathan Manthorpe in his book *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan*: "People have lived on the island for tens of thousands of years. But identifying with scientific certainty who they were and how they came there is an ongoing process" (28). Scholar Robert Blust suggests that the indigenous population lived on the island since around 4000 B.C.E. Malayo-Polynesian peoples comprise Taiwan's Indigenous population. Portuguese sailors dubbed the island "Formosa" in the 1500's; during the first half of the seventeenth century, Dutch and Spanish traders established ports in southwestern and northern Taiwan, respectively. Although the Dutch dominated, they were driven out by the 1660's, when Ming Dynasty loyalists escaping Manchu rulers (who founded the Qing/Ching Dynasty in 1644) fled mainland China and set up base on Taiwan. In the subsequent two hundred-plus years, Taiwan remained an outlying, somewhat unruly, territory of the Qing empire. Most migrants from mainland China to Taiwan during this period were from the coastal Fujian province, and their mother tongue, Hokkien, gave rise to the local vernacular that became known as "Taiwanese." For cultural and historical context: the descendants of these early settlers became identified as *benshengren* 本省人 (natives; pronounced: "BEN-SHENG-ren"), differentiating them from the mid-twentieth century arrivals from China, and their descendants, commonly referred to as *waishengren* 外省人 (outsiders; pronounced: "WHY-sheng-ren"). In the twenty-first century however, many would consider these terms outdated or less relevant.

In 1895, Taiwan was ceded to Japan after China lost the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Japanese colonial rule lasted fifty years, until Allied forces defeated Japan in World War II. China's Nationalist Party (KMT) government then took possession of Taiwan, later imposing martial law that lasted for nearly four decades, during which all political dissent—perceived or proven—was systematically silenced through a campaign known as the White Terror.



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In the post-WWII years leading up to 1949, around two million Chinese from all over the mainland sought refuge in Taiwan as the KMT was losing the civil war to the Chinese Communist Party, which established the People's Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949. The KMT regime proclaimed Taiwan as the temporary headquarters of the Republic of China (ROC), continuing observance of National Day on October 10 (Double Ten) and retaining international diplomatic recognition as the legitimate government of China until 1971.

The PRC continues to claim sovereignty over Taiwan as part of its national territory. In Taiwan, with a popularly-elected president, sentiments remain divided as to whether Taiwan is—or ought to become—an independent nation state or still is a province of China. By the same token, the English term “Taiwanese” has different connotations and, depending on the context, it might be: a reference to a spoken language or one's personal identity, an indication of someone's ancestry or birthplace, an unequivocal declaration of political affiliation, or a hybrid of these identities.

#### **Chinese language, and some terms found in the book**

There are diverse spoken languages in China and throughout the diaspora. The written language, called “characters,” form basic units of written Chinese. Characters appear in two versions: **Simplified** (a modern format adopted in the mid-1900's in the PRC and subsequently in Singapore) or **Traditional** (retained in Taiwan and Hong Kong to this day). Chinese characters used in Japanese writing (*kanji* 漢字) are based on Traditional characters, with some modifications.

Over the years, a number of romanization systems evolved to notate pronunciation of Chinese characters, based on standardized spoken Mandarin/Putonghua. Currently, Pinyin (also known as Hanyu Pinyin) is the most common and is used in this book.

This book features a sample of Chinese writing in Traditional characters 最難風雨故人來 (pronounced: “ZWAY-nun-FENG-you-goo-ren-lie”) citing the last stanza of a poem by Qing Dynasty scholar Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753-1818). Chinese names begin with the family name followed by the given name, i.e., Sun was the poet's surname. The vertical



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layout in the book maintains the customary format of Chinese writing, with characters stacked in columns; multiple columns would be arranged from right to left.

最  
難  
風  
雨  
故  
人  
來

The in-text translation: “it’s an incredible blessing to be able to see your loved ones during the most difficult times.” (pg. 64 is where the line first appears; pgs. 431-2 details its explication) Leigh refers to Waipo 外婆 (pronounced: “WHY-pwuh”) and Waigong 外公 (pronounced: “WHY-gung”) —terms that specify maternal grandparents; paternal grandparents have altogether different titles. In the Chinese language, distinct forms of address exist to delineate relatives based on gender, birth order, generational rank, and manner of association—i.e., whether on the paternal or maternal side, if by marriage, familial friendships, etc. In addition, some forms of address vary according to regional customs and linguistic usage.

Two Chinese names in this book are noteworthy: **Yuanyang** (Waipo’s given name), and **Feng** (the “family friend” who arrives to help Leigh and is visible only to her—near the end of the story, Feng is revealed to be the spirit of Waipo’s older daughter who died before Leigh’s birth). Although the author does not provide the Chinese characters for either name, based on contextual evidence, they likely correlate to two birds with symbolic significance in Chinese culture: **Yuanyang** means mandarin duck 鴛鴦; **Feng** almost certainly refers to the mythical phoenix 鳳. This interpretation is plausible in reinforcing Leigh’s increasingly tenuous connection to her dead mother, because Leigh is convinced Mom became a red bird following her suicide. Throughout her journey to find that bird, Leigh comes across plenty of feathers as proof.



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### The jade cicada pendant necklace

Jade refers to ornamental minerals known as nephrite or jadeite and comes in a variety of colors—the most familiar of which range from white and pale grey, to mottled green, emerald, and spinach. For thousands of years in China, jades were prized as precious and powerful stones, and jade objects were designated for ritual ceremonies, including burials. To this day, jade remains popular as a distinctive material for decorations and personal accessories.

As cultural and literary motifs in China, cicadas long have been symbols of immortality and reincarnation. In this novel, not only does Mom's jade cicada pendant necklace find its way back to Leigh under incredible circumstances, but there is also a scene in which Waigong shows Leigh a molting cicada, echoing the theme of rebirth.

### Pre-reading activity related to Chinese language and civilization (10-15 minutes)

Step 1: Compare these two Chinese characters:

蟬

禪

Cicada

Zen

Step 2: Examine their component\* characters and respective definitions:

虫	+	單	示	+	單
<b>Bug/insect</b>		<b>Single/solitary</b>	<b>Spirit/veneration</b>		<b>Single/solitary</b>

**Question:** What are your observations, insights, questions, based on this exercise?

**Fact:** these two characters are homonyms (Pinyin: *chan*, 2<sup>nd</sup> tone). In Mandarin, both are pronounced "chun" and rhymes with "fun" using a tone that rises in pitch, as in: "Are we having FUN?"





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\*Each component character has its own definition, and the meaning can shift depending on other characters and words used in conjunction. Bear in mind that Chinese is a high-context language.

#### **Authors:**

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#### **Suggested Readings and Resources**

Manthorpe, Jonathan. *Forbidden Nation: A History of Taiwan*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005.