



Culture Notes

Lost in Taiwan

by Marc Crilley

LB Ink/Little, Brown & Company, 2023

Fiction, set in Taiwan

2023 of Honorable Mention, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult/High School Literature

Lost in Taiwan by Mark Crilley is a graphic novel set in Taiwan, an island nation located about eighty miles off the southeast coast of the People's Republic of China. Over the course of the novel, the protagonist, a college student named Paul, shifts from being a cranky, unwilling visitor to Taiwan to becoming a huge fan. Before looking at Paul and his conversion, it is first helpful to learn a bit about the island where Paul becomes lost.

Taiwan is a largely tropical island about 230 miles long, from north to south, and about 100 miles across. Its land area is slightly greater than the state of Maryland. Most of Taiwan is mountainous, and most of the population lives on its relatively flat west coast.

Historically, it has tended to serve as a frontier of Chinese civilization—for example, when a rebel plotting against the Qing (pronounced: ching) dynasty set up operations there in the seventeenth century. Much later, Taiwan formed an integral part of the Japanese empire as a colony for fifty years (1895–1945). Japan surrendered to the Republic of China at the end of the Second World War. But in the struggle for power in China in the years after the war, Nationalist (ROC) forces lost to Communist forces, retreating to Taiwan in 1949.

Today, the “Republic of China, Taiwan,” as it calls itself, consists of Taiwan and several small outlying islands. It is a democracy with two major parties: the Democratic Progressive Party and the Nationalist Party. The former supports formal independence





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for Taiwan, while the latter seeks autonomy from mainland China at the very least. Mainland China (People's Republic of China) holds that the territory of Taiwan belongs to China and continually presses for reunification. Meanwhile, the official position of the U.S. government is that Taiwan's status remains unresolved.

These issues are nowhere in the consciousness of Paul, the protagonist, and are not referred to by other characters in *Lost in Taiwan* because the book's aim is, instead, to provide the reader with a taste of Taiwan's everyday life. Paul is visiting his brother Theo and, at first, is unconcerned with Taiwan's everyday life: He spends his days on the couch in his brother's apartment, eating McDonald's and playing video games. He is self-absorbed and resentful of his brother, who has been living in Taiwan, studying Mandarin Chinese, and dating a Taiwanese woman.

When Theo leaves for an overnight trip, Paul decides to venture out to buy a special video console, sold in a local store in the city of Changbei. As he starts walking back from the store, he accidentally drops his phone into a sewer, ruining it. At this point, he meets Peijing, who shows him around the city, introducing him to its food, drink, scenery, and customs. Peijing's cousin, Wallace (Chinese name: Zhiqiang), helps introduce Paul to places and situations he had not imagined.

While the city of Changbei appears to be fictional, *Lost in Taiwan's* visual depictions of moped-filled streets, small shops, covered arcades, picturesque country fields, gentry-style traditional rural compounds, and so on, accurately reflect the outskirts of one of Taiwan's cities.

The story's pivotal moment occurs when Peijing introduces herself to help Paul find his way back to his brother's apartment. This may seem far-fetched, but Taiwan is especially friendly, a quality that not only Westerners but also visitors from around the



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Chinese-speaking world have noted. Indeed, the behavior of many Taiwanese expresses both the classic ideal of the Confucian gentleman and the contemporary Western ideal of civic-mindedness. If an individual appears lost in one of Taiwan's cities, it is likely that someone will do their best to provide assistance.

Despite her clear friendliness—and undertones of a possible budding romance—Peijing is critical of Paul. At one point, she takes part in a divination ritual at a Chinese folk temple. Watching, Paul tells her that it feels like he's entered "*The Wizard of Oz* or something"; whereas people in the U.S. simply do "ordinary, everyday stuff," everything in Taiwan seems "super exotic." She is angered by this, pointing out that his culture is not the "normal" one, nor hers the "weird" one (pp. 116–117).

Later, he will tell Peijing that he lacks friends (beyond online friends) because he tends to leave friendships when problems arise rather than trying to resolve them. Peijing maintains that this is a fear-based approach and that he ought to reconsider. Regarding both criticisms, Paul shows a willingness to reassess his attitude, making this graphic novel a bit of a coming-of-age story with relevance beyond its explicit focus on Taiwan.

The divination ritual that Peijing participated in involves throwing a pair of moon-shaped blocks (*jiaobei*) on the floor and watching to see how they land: both face up, both face down, or one facing up and one facing down. The last option suggests that the god being addressed will grant the supplicant's wish, though for a major request, it is best if this positive answer occurs three times in a row.

Cranes appear at several points in *Lost in Taiwan*. First, when Paul and Peijing visit Peijing's grandfather's house in the countryside, Paul admires a depiction of a crane that her grandfather had painted. Later in the story, Paul buys a cork carving of a



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crane for Peijing as a thank-you gift. After he wakes up the following morning (having spent the night at Wallace's apartment), he sees an actual crane standing in a nearby rice field. In Chinese tradition, cranes have a range of auspicious meanings, such as longevity, nobility, purity, and good fortune.

At a few points in the book, Paul's brother speaks with his girlfriend in Chinese, and these lines of dialogue appear in Chinese characters. Specifically, these are the traditional characters used in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as opposed to the simplified characters used in mainland China.

In the text, Chinese words sometimes appear in the newer romanization system, called *pinyin*, which is standard in mainland China. For example, Wallace's Chinese name, Zhiqiang (pronounced: JER-chyang), uses the pinyin system. Since 2009, *pinyin* has served as the official system of romanization for Taiwan. However, other terms like "Kaohsiung"—the name of a major city in southern Taiwan—are spelled using an older system, called Wade-Giles. In Taiwan itself, as in *Lost in Taiwan*, the two systems of transliteration exist side by side.

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