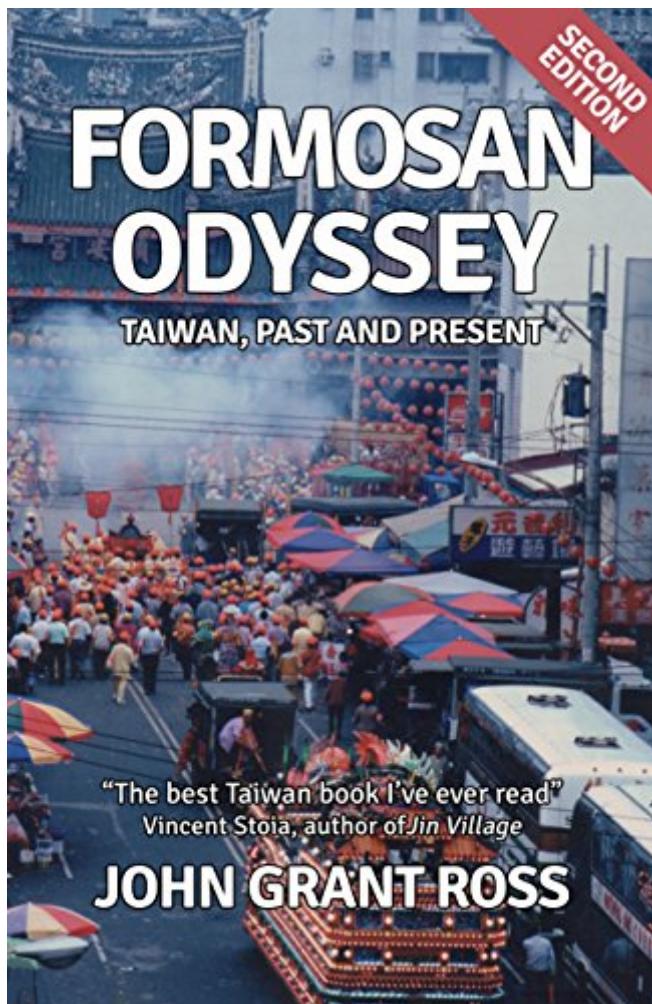


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# Formosan Odyssey: Taiwan, Past And Present



## **Synopsis**

Until the early twentieth century, Taiwan was one of the wildest places in Asia. Its coastline was known as a mariners' graveyard, the mountainous interior was the domain of headhunting tribes, while the lowlands were a frontier area where banditry, feuding, and revolts were a way of life. Formosan Odyssey captures the rich sweep of history through the eyes of Westerners who visited and lived on the island – from missionaries, adventurers, lighthouse keepers, and Second World War PoWs, to students coming to study martial arts. It finishes with the story of Taiwan's economic miracle, the political transition from police state to vibrant democracy, and its continuing stand-off with China. The author's travels, made around the island in the wake of the devastating 921 earthquake, and his experiences from five years of living in a small town, provide an intimate picture of modern Taiwan. The island is a storehouse of Chinese and indigenous cultures, a fascinating mix of the new and the traditional, and likewise Formosan Odyssey is a smorgasbord of delights that both the general reader and any old Asia hand will find informative and amusing. Out of print for nearly a decade, treasured copies of this book have been passed around the expat community in Taiwan. Camphor Press is delighted to now be able to offer this gem to a wider audience.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

I used to live in Taiwan for four years and this was like a revival of observations I had forgotten or wasn't eloquent enough to put into words. It is rather short but I really enjoyed the way the author weaved his own experience with that of the various missionaries and foreigners that had written about Taiwan in the past. It gives an interesting history of the island without being too scholarly and dry. Definitely recommended for the price.

A good introduction to Taiwan for a first time visitor. Contained a mixture of historical and personal information about Taiwan past and present. The author sprinkles references of other books about Taiwan throughout the book. I am looking forward to further readings about Taiwan. I hope to pass the electronic copy of the book to my Taiwan nephew. Even though he is well educated I think he will find the book interesting. Besides the English versions I hope to present him with a Mandarin version of the book.

John Ross skillfully relates his own experiences to the history of Taiwan. This book is both an easy and pleasant read as well as a good socio-economic overview. It is well documented and even contains photographs of people and places.

Good info about the island and its history and the writing is pretty solid. Overall pretty good - only slight downside is that the author seems weirdly cynical about Taiwan despite having lived there (voluntarily) as an expat for some time. I guess he's just really grumpy?

Great colorful insight into Taiwan--Both past and present. The author also does the reader a great service in listing a number of additional books that readers will want to pick up that delve into Taiwan's fascinating history.

In this book, a melange of personal anecdotes, historic stories, and contemporary conversations, New Zealander John Ross fuses his own journey with historic reflections. Ross had been living and teaching in Taiwan for 5 years when in 1999 he decides to get out and walk the mountainous backbone of the island. Alas, the devastating September 21 earthquake throws his plans for a loop.

Nevertheless, he makes a series of shorter excursions, including around Taipei in the north, down to the southern tip, Kenting, and the mountains of central Taiwan. Each of these trips are a jumping off into various historical digressions. Many delve into the storied history of Taiwan (although, we do get some high level histories of China to help understand the context). Some of the more interesting involve the attempts at European colonization - in the 1600s the Dutch had an outpost in the south of the island, and the British had commercial interests in the mid to late 19th century. There were a number of missionaries like George MacKay and William Campbell who wrote eloquently of their 19th and early 20th century experiences. Ross describes the aboriginal tribes and their often violent encounters with Chinese settlers in previous centuries. A number of tribes were headhunters and would even dispatch shipwreck survivors. However, the Chinese settlers were often as brutal or even more so on their conflicts with the aboriginal tribes. Travel outside the few cities up to the beginning of the 20th century was often quite hazardous. As with many aboriginal cultures, their modern condition is less than ideal. Ross packs a large amount of information in this modest volume. This is an excellent read for anyone traveling to Taiwan who wants to know more than brief histories in guidebooks, which are already a vast step up from normal Western exposure to Asian culture. This book gives a valuable insight into Taiwanese culture and history.

A trip around Taiwan is *impossible*, one of John Ross's local acquaintances tells him, but he sets out to explore the island-nation anyway, impeded (coincidentally) by the effects of a massive earthquake. Ross embarks on his *odyssey* (around a country about the size of the Netherlands) and conveys his findings through the venerable medium of travel literature (*odyssey* being the humourous clue). In the tradition, the author draws on interviews, observation, experience, and relevant literature to enlighten and shamelessly entertain. It's ethnography, basically; fairly casual ethnography. I particularly enjoyed the chapters about foot-binding and cannibalism, and an account of a trip through the Taiwan's Taroko Gorge had me laughing out loud. The author's tone is conversational and familiar, and subdued quips work to offset some of Taiwan's more, shall we say, unique features. There are plenty of long-terms Western-residents of Taiwan, many of whom are English teachers, but, oddly, few write about their adopted context. John Ross does with considerable effect.

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