

# A FOODIE'S GUIDE TO OLD TAICHUNG

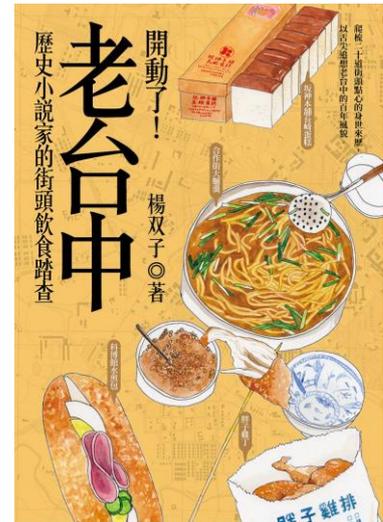
## 開動了！老台中：歷史小說 家的街頭飲食踏查

*Join historical fiction novelist Yang Shuang-Zi on an in-depth exploration of Taichung Old Town – birthplace of the global bubble tea phenomenon. This work leads readers on a journey that tempts the palate while unlocking the stories and history behind some of Taichung's most-beloved multigenerational snack food vendors.*

In the early 1900s, the growing colonial city of Taichung (then known as Taichū) centered on the bustling commercial district surrounding the city's new train station, where a plethora of food vendors and restaurants could be found. Taichung's modern food culture has been shaped and reshaped by the flow of economic migrants to and through this city. Yang Shuang-Zi weaves into this engaging work an intimate familiarity with modern Taichung's "old town" and her discerning palate, spotlighting twenty vendors that capture the unique snack food culture of her city. Readers not only receive a grand tour of the many made-to-order treats on offer but also learn the stories of these vendors and their place in the fabric of Taichung history.

The featured vendors were selected for the emotive quality of both their stories and flavors. These are the local foodie "experiences" that visitors to the city are sure to remember long after they return home. Delve into Taichung-exclusives like savory-sour Taichung thick noodles as well as Taiwan street-food standards such as braised pork rice, crisp-fried chicken, castella cake, and shaved ice. Learn the stories of how each vendor won over the hearts and taste buds of their customers.

Yang Shuang-Zi also explores in this work questions that pique her historical novelist curiosities. What would a hungry high school girl in



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colonial-era Taichung have eaten on her way home from school? When did the now-iconic street-food standard papaya milk first appear on the streets of Taichung? What fueled the almost overnight success of bubble tea shops in the city? The answers to these and other questions are deftly woven into the narrative, leaving the reader with a much better taste for Taichung's snack foods and culinary proclivities.

## Yang Shuang-Zi 楊双子

Born in Taichung in 1984, Yang Shuang-Zi is a novelist and researcher of genre fiction and youth subcultures. The pen name Shuang-Zi is taken from the Japanese kanji for “twins”. Originally sharing this pen name with her twin sister, she has continued using it since her sister's passing in 2015. Her novels focus on female relationships and often incorporate elements of Taichung's history under Japanese colonial rule. Her best-known work, *Taiwan Travelogue: A Novel*, was published in English translation in 2024.

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By Yang Shuang-Zi

Translated by Timothy Smith

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## **Preface | An Invitation for Foodies: Old Taichung**

Please feel free to carry this book with you as you walk along Taichung's streets, snacking away.

This book is a slow-paced, meandering journey through the eats and drinks sold along the streets of Taichung Old Town. Just before ordering one of these snacks or treats, it's only natural for the thought "I'm ready to dig in!" to exert its grip over the imagination. Just like back then, "dig in" has two layers of meaning. The "Old Town" area of the city today is the part of town that "took off" the very moment trains and locomotives arrived on the scene. That was on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1908, when the island's main railway line finally connected the port city of Keelung in Taiwan's north with the port city of Kaohsiung in its south. Taichung hosted the Taiwan Trunk Railway Full Line Opening Ceremony on October 24<sup>th</sup> of the same year. Later, Taichung itself would center on and expand out from its train station, with the city undergoing three major renovations in the 1900s, during the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa eras, respectively. Today, the area within the boundaries of Taichung at that time is what we now call Taichung's Old Town district.

“Study up on food and drink; eat your history” was my personal motto when I first began thinking about writing this book. I read as I went along, taking bites here and there as I went. In this book, I comb through the history of twenty street snacks, sometimes walking unknown roads and trying as best I can to jot down the routes I took. Most of the time, I am just munching and sipping, stepping into different spaces in search of answers, all while being taken aback in complete surprise. “Oh, wow! I had no idea this is where ‘thick-cut *ta-mien-keng* noodles’ started.” “I thought iced taro was from *there*, not *here*.” “So, that’s the key element separating regular boba tea and old-fashioned black tea!” “Huh, so *sha-kua* noodles are like...the ultimate food for those with street smarts.” ... Even for me, the journey made for this book was filled with thrills and surprises. I wrote down all I could from my explorations of food and drink sold on the streets and corners around Old Town, and I think I was able to recapture a fairly vivid impression of this city’s century-old visage.

The framework for my exploration across the streets of this old city followed routes I had taken a long time ago. The scope of the area centers on the train station at the center of Taichung. This part of the city extends as far east as the Han River and as far west as Mayuantou Creek. It’s as wide as the city’s extent from north to south. When it comes to snack sets, I focused on writing about variations on this culinary category that people don’t often hear about or that reflect authentically “Taichung” characteristics. With regard to the stores and shops visited in this book, none are chains and most are well-established, multigenerational operations, meaning that a number of them preserve the historic site character of the Old Town.

However, the scopes and writing angles I originally set for myself gradually faded from importance during the writing process, and I just couldn’t maintain them throughout the course of the whole book. For example, when it came to choosing the area I wanted to focus in on, Taichung’s Old Town is truly a district that developed around the main entrance to the Taichung train station. Only one of my twenty chapters covers a call on a place south of the station area. Taichung sits smack dab in the middle of Taiwan’s western coast. It’s a city with a swelling and fluid population, which has led to an extremely high rate of cultural exchange. When it comes to snacks and desserts, the “Taichung-ness” of the dishes may not be entirely apparent. As for independent retail shops, they take up seventeen chapters in this book, with the remaining three covering non-franchised stores.

The explorations allowed within the limited confines of this book’s twenty chapters have told me the population of Taichung’s Old Town is made up of several groups that originally emigrated into the city from central and southern Taiwan. This invested the city with its unique blend of northern and southern Taiwanese cuisine. The elements that have molded the face of the district cluster into several facets: (1) From a geographic perspective, many Taichung residents have roots in small towns or rural areas north of Tainan. This highlights Taichung’s magnetism as an important, modernized city in central Taiwan. (2) From cultural and ethnic perspectives, Taichung has welcomed an influx of Han Hoklo from Quanzhou and Zhangzhou in China’s Fujian province during China’s last imperial dynasty, internal migrants as well as Japanese during the Japanese colonial era, mainlander immigrants from various Chinese provinces during and soon

after the end of the Chinese Civil War, more recent internal migrants from central-southern Taiwan, and American military personnel stationed in the area during a unique period in the mid-twentieth century. (3) From a class perspective, blue-collar classes make up the majority of the city's population. All of these different groups and strata and what they contributed to kitchen larders in the city helped Taichung's Old Town adapt and refine its taste buds through new ties and new blood. Since the old and new have been blended pretty well, nowadays we get to see, taste, smell and enjoy the wonderful curbside snacks and drinks that are indeed the fruit of these cultural exchanges.

Although Taichung's Old Town is known today as the "old town district", considering the span of Taiwan's history, the town is relatively new. In the Japanese colonial era, city areas were carved up and delineated into districts, each dominated by a distinct regional or ethnic group of Taiwanese recruited from other parts of the island to work in the city. And so, the city became a sea fed by rivers arising elsewhere and flowing into it and filled with people seeking novelty and change. Comparatively, the city itself had relatively little continuity and even less of the trappings that marked Taiwan's older cities like Tainan, Lukang, and Wanhua and underlined their political, cultural and economic prominence. The array of flavors and textures regularly found in the old part of the city gradually grew with its burgeoning population of "outsiders". A century of culinary collection and gathering has led to the build-up of Taichung's gourmet universe. The taste buds of Old Town residents also evolved with the times, adjusting and multiplying through the introduction of a myriad of different tastes. Today, this includes the culinary culture introduced through the shops inside ASEAN Square. The beautiful flowers of Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia bloomed and then floated to the ground, spreading seeds that would take root and further blossom. Fifty years on, foods and beverages derived from these once-exotic cuisines have become indelible threads in the tapestry of sights, tastes, and smells that defines the streets of the Old Town.

The starting point for this book came from my bi-weekly food column for the *Tai Sounds* news website. From May 2020 until January 2021, I wrote approximately sixteen articles of around 1,600 characters each. When I anthologized my articles into this book, I took the first drafts of my columns and embellished and fleshed them out more. I went further and wrote about four additional dishes. So, how was I certain that each chapter was representative of old Taichung? I made "snack sets" my top priority. After I was certain of which dishes I wanted to write about, I sifted through all my thoughts about potentially suitable shops. As I wrote my draft, I would switch out shops and adjust rankings based on my evolving thoughts. I ultimately ended up with several unrecognized champions.

I wanted to write about snack dishes like *muâ-ínn* soup (a slightly starchy soup made from jute leaves), but I dropped it because this homestyle summer staple wasn't something I ever ran across on my excursions. Even though Match Café is filled to the brim with innovative spirit as they attempt to revolutionize food with drinks like with *muâ-ínn* milk tea, its location was unfortunately outside the area I wanted to write about. Another issue was the plethora of dessert shop lists already published. Shops and stands I ultimately decided to cut from my wish included

Xingzhong Street Soy Milk Tea, Yuanzi Street A-Ming's Black Tea, Twin Rivers Tea House, Dr. Jam's Smoothies, Ichihuku, Chung-hua Mochi, and MaLuLian Taiwan Herb Jelly with Milk Cream, and Namakashi Japanese Sweets across from the Taiwan Cooperative Bank, among others. Some places, like the stone hot pot and shabu-shabu joints, were already stretching the limits of what could be considered a snack set. Also, in some cases, the food on offer seemed only barely to qualify as snacks or snack sets at all. This was the basis for me eliminating a large number of potential candidates by the end of my research. Among these were Kao Lin Teppanyaki, Barbecue and Salads, Chin-Ta-Yuan Bento, Siaoyu'er Wine-Cooked Chicken Soup, Taiwan Chen Hot Pot, Huang-Chi Goose, and Lao-Mei's Steaks. My decisions regarding close ties still sometimes vex me. Those not making the shortlist for this reason include otherwise fine candidates like Yang-ching-hua Lumpia, Jin-Ri Mimahua's House, Shanghai Dim Sum on Ziyou Road, Hualien-Ruisui Stinky Tofu also on Ziyou Road, Linchia BBQ at the Duxing Road intersection, the food stall selling stinky tofu and oyster omelets on the Chunghua Night Market intersection, the Pork Eggs Toast shop on Jianxing Road, and the Eight Tael Fried Chicken on Yizhong Street....The choices were so great that I could've easily turned this book into a two-volume set.

This book doesn't consider future trends and is meant to be just a starting point for its readers' own culinary explorations. Honestly, I'm less than the least knowledgeable researcher when it comes to understanding Taichung history, and I'm certainly not the most capable epicurean with a perfect sense of taste or anything. However, I *am* certain that where history and food meet is where a foodie like me from Old Town, who loves history, walking, and exploring, holds a distinct advantage. Simply said, I am an Old Town foodie. This book wasn't written just to serve as a food-street guidebook for Taichung newbies. I also wanted this book to be for people from this area wanting to renew their fascination with the historical tastes of their city.

So, to sum things up, I hope you bring this book with you as your walk around Taichung's streets, snacking and slurping away the whole time.

I need to give a shoutout to new foodie friends reading my book. Please enjoy it! The same thing goes for my friends and family. Of course, I extend my gratitude to the following individuals for their friendship, input and insights: Wang Yun-Chen, Wang Hsiu-Chen, Wang Yang Yueh-Ying, *Tai Sounds*, Taiwan Interminds Publishing, Chu Chen, Chu Yu-hsun, Lin Fanyu, Shu Wen-chuang, Paperbooks, Guo Ru-Mei, Kuo Yu-tung, Mo Yu-ching, Chen Yu-hui, Chen Yen-han, Chen Kuo-wei, Tsai Cheng-yun, Lai Ting-ho, Lai Su-ching, Kingyo Hsieh, and Xiao Xiang Shen.

### **The Best Nagasaki Castella Cakes in All of Taiwan: Banshin's Specialty Nagasaki Castella**

Whenever coming across discussions of Nagasaki castella cakes on social network sites, I add my two cents and cut to the heart of the conversation by leaving the comment: "The best Nagasaki castella in all of Taiwan is Banshin's Specialty across from the Taichung Second Market!" Someone studying Japanese once posted the reply: "Do you mean the 'Banshin's' with the 'ban' character (阪) used to write the name 'Osaka' (大阪)?" I replied: "No, it's the one written with an earth

radical, ‘坂.’” Occasionally, Old Taichungers chime in with comments like: “The one in front of the Taichung Second Market is the main store, the one out on Suiyuan Road is their branch!” I invariably try to set the record straight, writing “Suiyuan Road says it’s a branch, but the Banshin’s across from the Second Market has a clear trademark on their boxes that includes the statement ‘This is the only Banshin’s in Taiwan. We operate no branch outlets!’” Whenever someone posts something along the lines of “Tasty is as tasty does, but you can only keep it out for three days. Can you ever finish it in time?” I immediately post a reply, saying “That’s nonsense. I can easily eat an entire cake in one sitting.”

Lifting the cover off the dazzling, long golden box, you find the cake is still just a tad bit on the warm side having been freshly pulled out of the oven and set out to rest and cool off. After taking a bite while still warm, the browned top layer of the cake has a bit of a caramel hint that rushes forth. As I sink my teeth again into the golden-yellow body of the cake, immediately, a *mélange* of rich and fragrant honey flavor, maltose and egg fills my mouth. As I chew, each soft morsel brings with it a subtle springy texture. Once the cake is fully cooled on a countertop, it’s put in the fridge to chill. Nagasaki castella condenses just a little bit and the sugars become concentrated and sharper. After it’s been taken out from the fridge after chilling, a tiny bit of the flavor is lost, yet the chewability factor seems to undergo an upgrade.

When I posted on social media that I put my cake in my fridge, I got a lot of responses from foodie friends living in the Old Town telling me that doing so makes the surface of the cake too moist, and causes it to lose flavor. If you take the cake out of the box and let it cool, they said, and keep it away from moisture to keep the ants at bay, it will keep for about three days and two nights. I couldn’t agree more. After all, most of the time, I store this cake at room temperature. If you’re worried it might spoil from the heat, you could finish it off by the next night...Well, in any case, for those who are massive fans of this cake, do you really think any pieces would be left uneaten after two days?

Nagasaki castella cakes can be found all over, but Banshin’s Specialty is a champion, particularly in terms of texture. Attempting to describe it, I would say it’s like taking the softness of sponge cake and mixing it with the chewy, bouncy texture of a steamed brown-sugar cake. The more you chew, the greater the ebb and flow of yolkiness and the sweet aromas of sugar and honey that come together in the space between your tongue and lips; your entire mouth fills with a robustly sweet fragrance and flavor with nary a hint of any oiliness or that dried-out feeling from being set out for too long. Just eat one bite, and your nostrils and tastebuds on the tip of your tongue will revel in that delectable aftertaste for a long, long while. It’s such a tempting snack, it’s no wonder people go for a second slice.

Banshin’s has several different box options. All their boxes are 27 cm in length and 6 cm tall. The options come in the width. The smallest box set is a hand-cut cake of eight slices. Oftentimes, they are used as gift boxes for guests or to share with coworkers. One slice per person is just polite, but two slices are enough to show how sumptuous this cake is. As for eating one entire box on my own, if it weren’t for nagging considerations of nutritional balance and calorie control, I could easily just eat an entire column of these cakes alone in place of a regular full meal.

Most residents in Old Town know about Banshin's. However, the shop is low-key to the extreme, and there's hardly been any published news articles or stories about them. Even with the rise of smartphones and throngs of people taking pictures or film, the only fleshed-out record of the store online are food blogs and a handful of photos of the inside and outside of the shop taken by hardcore foodies, yet the shop owners have gone as far as flat out refusing any filming or photography on the premises. As soon as they see someone whipping out a camera or lining up a shot with their phone, they admonish the would-be customers not to take pictures. The shop – inside and out – is invariably like this. Even more so, the contact phone number on their business cards never seems to be in service, and there's no realistic way to phone them. The store has no website either for fellow foodies to peruse. And still, area locals all know about it. This store, having already been in business for half a century, seems a bastion of Western-style confections in Taichung's old city district.

Banshin's Specialty Nagasaki Cakes uses a white and red color scheme on its signage. The old-timey advertising designs have been the same for decades. Further, in the shop's interior, there's a great big white paper sign with black lettering. It says:

Attention: There is only one Banshin's Specialty Nagasaki Cakes in the whole province. We operate no franchise operations.

It's hard to tell the exact age of the sign, but the "whole province" part shows it must have been made before the country's outdated provincial system was abolished in 1998. The paper has long turned from an aged yellow of earlier years to a coffee brown with the passage of even further time. When was it established? I don't have a clue. Even the owner has never mentioned it.

Using a similar name, the shop and its logo on the Suiyuan street store says "Banshin's Specialty Nagasaki Cakes". Its official web launch set an all-time record. In 2004, the website explained that the owner and her sons had set up the original shop in front of the Taichung Second Market forty years earlier. It was only in 2004 that the second son decided to forge his own path and set up his own shop on Suiyuan Road, using the same name to "re-establish the stronghold", using the reputation of the original store, and although they didn't make a clear case for how long they've been in business, you can still see that the original Banshin's was established no later than the 1970s.

This is the real shop in the hearts and minds of residents of Taichung Old Town. Truly, it's possibly the oldest Nagasaki castella joint in all of Old Town. When people talk about castella in the city, even if Taichungers don't remember the name, they rattle off, "The one across from the Second Market." Most listeners will understand which store they mean.

On occasion someone might say, "the place that sells honey cakes opposite from the Second Market." I can't stand it and end up going on a tangent explaining, "they aren't honey cakes, they're 'Nagasaki castella'."

"Isn't castella made with honey?"

"You're not supposed to put any honey in castella!"

Each time I tell someone this, a look of shock spreads across their face.

Either way, the ingredients are written plainly for all to see: “Eggs, sugar, wheat flour, and malt (no chemical preservatives)”. What Taiwanese generally know about the origins of Nagasaki castella is that it was introduced to Taiwan during the Japanese colonial era. The Japanese wrote the name using *katakana* lettering, revealing the dessert’s foreign roots, at least from the perspective of Japanese, of Nagasaki castella. A common explanation says that castella was introduced to the Nagasaki area by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, and later developed into what would become a special Western dessert. Before the Second World War, Taiwanese knew the cake as “castella”, but after the war, it was reintroduced to Taiwan as “Nagasaki cake”, and that’s the popular name it’s gone by ever since.

So, what’s the reason for this cake being mistaken for “honey cake”? One explanation is that E.G. Sain Bakery, a shop established in 1975, wanted to intentionally create a “honey cake” specialty product market. They intentionally added honey to their “castella” to boost the fragrance. Then, they tacked on the name “honey cake” to increase sales. And so, “honey cake” is the real name of that particular product, but it falls short of being a true “Nagasaki castella”.

The interesting thing is that this old-fashioned Taiwanese cake has popped up recently throughout Northeast Asia. In Japan, they are actually called “Taiwan castella”. Castella, oh, castella, what exactly is castella? Hopefully this might keep this war of the castellas raging on.

It’s just that...to me, the difference between castella and honey cake is like the difference between Banshin’s and Taichung’s other Nagasaki castella sellers. With this in mind, whenever I see any conversation about this cake, I just have to butt in and say, “The best Nagasaki castella cake is Banshin’s across from Taichung’s Second Market!”

And yet, getting a cake from Banshin’s is no easy task. The store relies on direct foot traffic for its sales, and there’s often a snaking line of customers outside its doors waiting patiently to buy cakes or pick up pre-ordered boxes. These days, we need a bit of a laid-back attitude, since ordering in advance could mean being asked to wait for two hours; it’s not unheard of to wait for four. You could use this time to walk around the Second Market, or drive over to a movie theater to catch a movie. Also, the Yizhong Street business area and Taichung Park aren’t far from the shop. There’s plenty of walking you can do in the area to burn off a few of those calories you’ll likely be consuming.

If you were to ask me how to order a cake, the best suggestion I could give would be to head over before noon to place your order. You could while away your waiting time by grabbing lunch nearby. There are plenty of stalls and stands to choose from at the nearby Second Market. You could go for pork ribs or a chicken cutlet set from Chin-ta-yuan Bento or from its earlier, more famous predecessor, Fanchi Chinchihyüan. Of course, there’s also the set meal served with a cup of signature brew from Hua-Tai Coffee and the standing-only Lò Bánh Mì Pasteur for Vietnamese. If you’re in the mood for snack set treats, you could go to the main MaLuLien store to enjoy a bowl of sweet and soft grass jelly or stop by Four Springs Dessert Shop for a cup of Four Gods shaved ice. If you still have time to spare, you could head over to Weng-Chi’s Boba Tea Plaza and New Oasis on Yizhong Street for some drinks to cool off, as Taichungers do.

Sometimes, if you're lucky and you buy the smallest quantity...one row of cakes, you won't have to wait for long to get your hands on your order. After you get back home, you don't need to arrange on a plate or anything special. You don't even need to pair these cakes with a mug of tea or coffee. Just pinch off a piece and savor it as you chew. Well...maybe you can tear off another piece. Just enjoy its honey-like sweetness to your heart's content. Sometimes, what you need in this world is to just indulge yourself a little.

What's that? You want to know how many calories are in a piece? Maybe now's not the time to burden your mind with a pesky question like that! Some questions just aren't meant to be asked!