

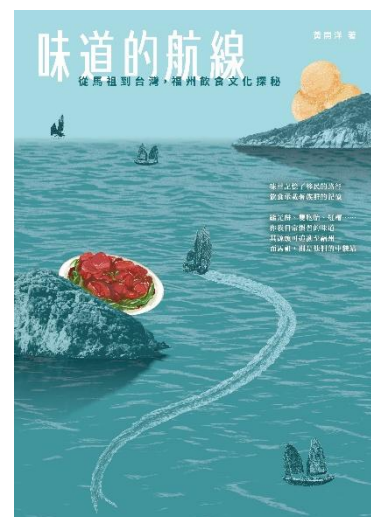
SAILING WITH FLAVORS

味道的航線：從馬祖到台灣，福州飲食文化探秘

Author Huang Kai-Yang follows the threads of the Fuzhou cultural diaspora from China to the Matsu Islands, Taiwan, Malaysia and beyond through its lasting influence on language, culture and, of course, classic Fuzhounese dishes such as scallion pancakes, fish balls, “Buddha’s temptation”, and meats marinated in red vinasse.

Sailing with Flavors brings together Huang Kai-Yang’s historical research and personal observations related to the Fuzhou diaspora. Centered on Fuzhounese food culture in Taiwan, he frames his retelling of this diaspora’s living legacy around the four culinary pillars of scallion pancakes, fish balls, “Buddha’s temptation”, and red-vinasse-marinated meats. The story opens on a scallion-pancake vendor in Taipei whose Fuzhounese-tinged Mandarin and Fuzhou-inspired snack offering quickly catches the author’s attention. Not only did Huang finish his military service on Matsu, his maternal grandparents were also native Fuzhounese speakers. Entranced by the personal and cultural memories evoked by the vendor’s simple menu, the humble scallion pancake becomes his doorway into a deeper exploration of the paths taken by and the enduring imprint of Fuzhou immigrant communities.

Fish balls, a central fixture of Fuzhounese festivals and everyday meals, are an indispensable reminder to diasporic communities of their ancestral ties to Fuzhou whether boiled in soups served during festivals on Matsu or served mixed with noodles on family tables in Sibui, Malaysia. As for the quintessentially Fuzhounese dish “Buddha’s temptation”, Huang synthesizes his field and archival research findings to tell the story of this dish’s transmission to Taiwan and the “marriage” of local ingredients and traditional techniques that created today’s must-have wedding banquet and festival staple. In telling the story of red vinasse, Huang returns his narrative lens again to the family table to discuss the nationwide popularity of red vinasse chicken soup, stir-



Category: Food, History

Publisher: Avanguard

Date: 2/2025

Pages: 384

Length: 147,810 characters
(approx. 96,000 words in English)

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fried pork, and other dishes.

Following threads of history, language and lifestyle, Huang shows how the far-flung sons and daughters of Fuzhou have used food and flavor to sustain familial ties with their homeland, helping give readers new insights into culinary culture, language and diasporic pathways. More than the story of culinary heritage, *Sailing with Flavors* explores issues of identity and belonging in transnational diaspora communities.

Huang Kai-Yang 黃開洋

Cultural Researcher Huang Kai-Yang developed his deep interest in Fuzhounese culture while completing his mandatory military service on Taiwan's Matsu Islands. He is a long-time, hands-on investigator of the linguistic and culinary landscapes of Fuzhounese cultural sphere and actively engages in related activities such as language revitalization, folk culture interpretation, and community development. Huang's published works include articles, essays and commentaries.

SAILING WITH FLAVORS

By Huang Kai-Yang

Translated by Beverly Liu

Chapter One – Scallion Pancake

With others I labor, yet hone my own art;
I knead this dough, leaven it with my heart.
Circle by circle, the dough turns –
every round quietly yearns.

The Street Cart in the Corner

“How long till the shuangbaotai¹ are ready?”

“Not yet.”

“How much longer?”

“Hmm... could be up to twenty minutes! Why don’t you come back a bit later? I haven’t even started frying the shuangbaotai yet. I can’t anyway, the oil’s not hot enough.”

For Big Sis Chen, who pushes her food cart through Taipei’s bustling streets, opening her stall each morning is a battle.

Taipei’s traffic is heavy, and pedestrians walk at a hectic pace. In the span of a single 136-second red light, Big Sis Chen maneuvers her food cart into place, races to fire up the stove, unloads eggs along with crates of dough and fillings from her family’s truck, and gets to work frying an array of snacks – all within just thirty minutes. Soon the stall is lined with neat rows of sesame balls, shuangbaotai, fried dough twists, and doughnuts, ready just in time for opening. Next, she unloads the rest of the supplies from the truck within five minutes. Only then does she pull from the cooler a scallion-flecked piece of dough and work it with her well-seasoned rolling pin, its wood stained a deep brown after years of soaking up dough and oil. By now customers are already calling out for scallion pancakes and, for each order, Chen rolls out huge sheets of dough, each bigger than an average person’s face, and tosses them carefully one after another onto the sizzling pan.

“Sorry, há, can we talk later? I’ve got to hurry and fry up some shuangbaotai for the customers

¹ Translator’s note: “Shuangbaotai”, literally “twins” in Mandarin, is a fried dough snack made by braiding two pieces of rolled-out soft dough. It is also sometimes referred to as “horse hooves” and “twin crullers”.

now, and after that, I have scallion pancake orders waiting. Take these sesame balls home to your mom first! Come back later when you've got time, há! Otherwise they'll get cold! ... (turns head) Hello there! One sheet of scallion pancake?"

"Half sheet."

"Okay!"

This is what my daily conversations with Big Sis Chen are like: she chats casually with me while selling scallion pancakes, pausing now and then to confirm customers' orders.

Before nine in the morning, with Big Sis Chen riding her scooter and her family driving the truck, they make the long trip through rush-hour traffic from Xindian to meet at a corner on Anju Street in Taipei. From there, she pushes her cart out from where it is parked overnight, beside the tower garage in a nearby alley. After locking the cart in place, setting up the iron stove stand, and securing the propane tanks, she still has to unload the impressive stash of ingredients she needs for the day from the truck.

Only then can Big Sis Chen finally turn her focus to frying. She fixes her gaze straight ahead. Her expression is no different from the morning commuters anxiously waiting on their scooters for the light to turn green at the corner. She keeps a close watch on the bubbles rising in the hot oil, counts out portions of dough, and then launches into a multitasking frenzy of greeting customers, grabbing dough, and monitoring the temperature in the pan.

When she starts flipping scallion pancakes on the griddle with her spatula like frisbees, you know the heat in the griddle has reached just the right point. She rolls out the dough – flecked with scallions and oil – presses it flat with her rolling pin, and slips it into the pan. One after another, the pancakes come out perfectly cooked, turning golden brown in the pan. Only then is her daily round of preparations complete, meaning she is ready to welcome the steady stream of customers from the traditional market just down the street.

Pushing her cart through busy streets crowded with scooters and brushing past schoolkids hurrying to class and office workers rushing to work before finally arriving at the alley corner beside Taipei's traditional morning market has been Big Sis Chen's daily routine for the past thirty years. An offspring of Dongyin on Matsu, one of Taiwan's outlying islands, she has quietly held her place at this unassuming street corner, serving scallion pancakes made with a recipe from her hometown and offering Taipei generations a unique taste of Matsu.

"Eh, did I give you your change yet?"

"Yes, yes, you did."

"Alright then, the money's all settled, há!"

Conversations with Big Sis Chen are always brief and to the point. Yet for those who linger long enough to talk with her beyond quick exchanges, a small but notable detail emerges: a soft há slips onto the end of her Mandarin sentences. It's a subtle tag, almost an afterthought, but one that quietly hints at the uncommon story behind this modest scallion pancake stall.

Every sheet of scallion pancake tells a story. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think of eating one? Is it the crispy, layered crust? The option to customize the order by skipping the scallions? Or is it the nostalgic, traditional flavor of caramelized aromatics? Amid the endless variety of street snacks and dishes, eating a simple scallion pancake can be experienced on multiple levels: enjoying its visual appeal, savoring its flavors on the palate, or seeking a taste that awakens a specific memory from the past. The simpler a dish seems, the more intricate the craft, the more particular the ingredients, and the more elaborate the conversations about it tend to be.

From here, let us treat food as a “voice” that guides us through every corner of Taiwan, tells stories of Taiwan's Fuzhou community, and carries us across time and space to the islands of the Matsu archipelago and to Fuzhou in Fujian Province. Here, we explore a distinctive culinary culture shaped by lives lived among scattered islands, and listen to how people have found meaning and purpose in food. Its flavors carry stories of migration and of lives spent braving roiling ocean waves. Imprinted with oil and glimmers of tears, these flavors warm not just the stomach but the heart.

Food also takes on different roles and meanings based on historical and cultural contexts. In doing so, it reveals the place, values, actions, and connections – the very nexus – of both individuals and communities in society. This book embarks on a culinary journey across the East China Sea and even out into the Pacific in search of hidden ties joining Taipei and Matsu together.

Along the way, we also stop to savor the influence of Fuzhou food culture on the culinary landscape of Fuzhou itself as well as those of Malaysia, Japan, Toronto, and New York. Behind both humble street food and lavish banquet dishes are stories of countless individuals who crossed oceans and built new lives on distant shores carrying Fuzhou cuisine with them.

Anju Scallion Pancake

Each day I fall asleep to the sound of the waves and wake to their roar. The waters surrounding this little island are deep and swift, encircled by reefs. [...] The sea supports life and survival! To the ocean, I feel both reverence and fear – reverence for nourishing my family and fear for its unfathomable depths. These sorrowful waters are almost certainly mingled with human tears.

— Chen Tsui-ling, excerpt from “Father Went Crabbing, and Mother Made the Soy-Marinated Raw Crab,” in *My Dongyin, Your Little Island*, p. 41

Big Sis Chen is originally from Dongyin, one of the islands in the Matsu archipelago. Like the writer Chen Tsui-ling, she grew up in a family that made its living from the sea. But, by the time she was old enough to remember, the once-rich fisheries around Matsu had already run dry. The salty sea air and fishy scent that should have filled their home were little more than a distant memory. To support the family, the Chens made the big decision to leave behind their wave-battered home

island of Toèyng-īng (Dongyin in Matsu Language) and move to Taiwan's main island in search of work. Her father and uncle went first and, like many other families from Dongyin, they first purchased a place in Keelung. But, after weighing the drawbacks of Keelung's year-round drizzle, they ultimately chose Xindian instead, where housing was also more affordable. Two months later, Big Sis Chen and her younger brother followed and settled in Xindian with the family.

The stall began with only four items on the menu: scallion pancakes, fried sesame balls, shuangbaotai, and fried dough twists. When Western-style breads and pastries grew popular around the 2000s, Big Sis Chen added doughnuts to the lineup, where they have stayed ever since.

The scallion pancake stall not only reflected social trends of the time but also charted the Chen family's path in building a life in northern Taiwan. Her father initially ran their stall for a short while before handing over operations to Big Sis Chen, who has remained in charge ever since. Because making scallion pancakes is labor-intensive, her father sometimes still helps out by prepping the ingredients ready. Apart from the flour-and-water dough, which is machine-mixed, every other step, from rolling to kneading, is done by Big Sis Chen by hand. The other snacks, including shuangbaotai, fried sesame balls, and fried dough twists, are prepared by her uncle and delivered to the stall by her older sister using the family's small delivery truck.

This division of labor was well organized and ran like clockwork for many years. However, more recently, the family has lightened their workload by ordering certain staple supplies from fellow Matsu migrants living in Xindian. "I want others to earn a living too," Chen explained. By sharing business opportunities, she is strengthening the Matsu community network in Xindian and, in turn, supporting the further growth of her own business.

After settling in the Greater Taipei suburb of Xindian and into her daily routine, Big Sis Chen formally transferred her household registration to her adopted city. She hasn't been back to Dongyin, not even for a visit.

"Why are so many of the scallion pancake vendors in Taiwan from Matsu?" I asked.

"Because it's grueling work no one else will do!" Big Sis Chen replied. "Running a food stall is backbreaking – most of the work is manual labor, and there's always the risk of being fined or shut down by the police. Only those with no property and no specialized skills end up doing this. That's the fate of people from Matsu."

Many Matsu residents as well as people from Fuzhou with family here who've migrated to Taiwan over the years for work quickly came to see scallion pancakes as a means of survival – a way to set down roots in Taiwan. They avoided setting up along public roads to avoid costly fines for the "illegal use of public land".

During the pandemic, Big Sis Chen added a new step to her pre-opening routine. She installed a protective clear plastic cover, similar to the desk mats once common in classrooms, between the stall's posts and the fryer. This makeshift screen helped protect both her and her customers. Compared to the pressure of tight profit margins and the physical strain of prep work, installing plastic sheeting was the easiest change the stall could make when the pandemic hit without warning.

Every morning, loyal customers lining up for scallion pancakes hear the steady,

rhythmically comforting thud-thud-thud of her rolling pin pressing out sheet after sheet of dough. For Big Sis Chen, this is the sound of sheer focus, as only through physical strength and concentration can she roll flawlessly round scallion pancakes out time after time.

There was a time when Tianjin-style scallion pancakes were all the rage on the streets of Taipei. This palm-sized treat, priced at only twenty five NT dollars, was an inexpensive and convenient snack for one. Its crisp and flaky crust was achieved by chopping the pastry surface with a metal spatula.

It wasn't until participating in a cultural exchange program at Tianjin University that I discovered Tianjin City's Ancient Culture Street (Guwenhua Jie) and its delectable medley of vendors selling tanghulu (candied fruit), jianbing guozi (savory crepes), and so many other snacks. However, I couldn't find a single stall that sold Tianjin scallion pancakes.

Ironically, it was in street-food-loving Taipei, a city forever in pursuit of novelty and creativity, where Tianjin-style scallion pancake shops had taken off. These stalls often set up right beside traditional scallion pancake vendors, and each drew long lines of eager customers.

At the height of the craze, I remember two Tianjin-style flaky scallion pancake stalls operating next to traditional scallion pancake vendors. One of these was Big Sis Chen's stall and the other was a Shandong-style scallion pancake stall at the far end of the street. The elderly overseas Chinese couple had run the latter for more than a decade but fell ill around that time and sold the business to a young man.

Unfortunately, the new owner never quite mastered the craft of Shandong-style scallion pancakes and, with the Tianjin-style flaky scallion pancake craze in full swing, his business quickly declined. In the end, he had no choice but to close shop for good.

The Tianjin-style flaky scallion pancake stall located diagonally across from Big Sis Chen's stall at the market entrance had clear plastic panels separating customers from the cooking area and bright incandescent lights shining on the stainless-steel counter, making the frying wok gleam like new. Naturally, the line for the new stall was longer than that in front of Big Sis Chen's scallion pancake stall.

But, much like the Portuguese egg tart boom of the 1990s, the Tianjin-style craze proved to be just a flash in the pan in Taiwan's fad-crazed street food economy and, before long, the sound of spatula chopping disappeared completely from Anju Street.

Later, as online shopping became popular and easier for everyone to access, the children's clothing and hardware shops located diagonally behind the scallion pancake stall both closed due to lack of business. Even the FamilyMart² behind Big Sis Chen's cart gave way to a cellphone shop under pressure from too much competition in the area. Only Big Sis Chen's scallion pancake cart – once dismissed by most as just another “mobile vendor” – managed to weather wave after wave of commercial upheaval.

While prices everywhere else skyrocketed, the price of her scallion pancakes rose only modestly - from fifty to seventy NT dollars. Each day, Big Sis Chen still sells her pancakes on the

² Translator's note: FamilyMart is a Japanese franchised convenience store found all over Taiwan.

same corner of Anju Street, waiting for her loyal customers to line up – not just to buy a pancake, but also to share a bit of small talk.

On Anju Street, which literally means “a peaceful place to live”, the food stall and snack shop landscape has changed little over the decades despite its setting within a bustling and fiercely competitive traditional market. Across from Big Sis Chen’s and next to an old-clothes recycling bin is a cold noodle stall that’s been in business for nearly thirty years. Next to that is a sweet tofu (douhua) stall. When the shop first opened, loyal patrons called the female proprietor “Thâu-ke-niú” (Miss in Taiwan Taigi). These days, neighborhood kids stopping by affectionately call her “Grandma Douhua”.

For local students, the food stalls have long been natural timekeepers. Spotting Big Sis Chen and the cold noodles vendor pushing their carts into place means it’s already past eight a.m. and, if they don’t hurry, they’ll be late for the bus. Conversely, when they see the carts being pushed back down the street at day’s end, they know it is close to six p.m. That’s when Big Sis Chen “clocks out”, wrapping up yet another busy day of selling scallion pancakes on Anju Street.

“One, two, three, four... I have to keep count! If I talk while I’m counting, I’ll lose track!”

Life on night market streets lined with food stalls is still full of this kind of back-and-forth chatter. During the pandemic, people got used to speaking through thin, protective plastic sheets, continuing their animated conversations as usual. Big Sis Chen usually opens her scallion pancake stall between 8:00 and 8:30 in the morning and closes between 5:30 and 6:00 in the evening. As more and more office workers have moved into the Anju Street area, weekends – once a time of leisure – have become her busiest days. Ironically, it is now only weekday afternoons that permit her brief moments to herself.

When chatting with Big Sis Chen, I sometimes unintentionally interrupt the rhythm of her work. She might be in the midst of silently counting how many sesame balls she’s dropped into the skimmer prior to lowering them into the hot oil. These fried snacks – like siblings to the scallion pancakes – bring together all the indulgence of fried dough, starch, and sugar. They may not fit into the younger generation’s on-the-go lifestyle, but they suit the older generation, who still enjoy a light fried treat now and then. As for me, I’ve been eating these since childhood and have never grown tired of them.

One time, I arrived at her stall to buy scallion pancakes as Big Sis Chen was seeing off her last customer. She tilted her head, caught my eye with a sideways glance, and greeted me first, “Just back from Matsu?” she asked.

“No, I am actually getting ready to go to Matsu.” I replied through the plastic sheets.

“Ah! Matsu must be cold right now, no?” She casually asked.

I glanced a little uneasily at Big Sis Chen behind the newly installed plastic sheet, although she herself seemed unfazed by this new addition. “Yeah, it’s below ten degrees,” I replied.

Big Sis Chen and I often chat and, ever since she found out I work in Matsu, she’s counted me among the few younger customers she remembers. But I’m not the only member of my family she recalls. Another regular who left a strong impression on her was my grandfather. From the time I could walk, he would often take my hand and walk with me here to buy scallion pancakes.

Big Sis Chen has never forgotten the old gentleman who could converse with her fluently in the Fuzhou dialect.

Big Sis Chen speaks the local Fuzhou dialect of Dongyin. She migrated to Taiwan with her father and uncle at an early age. In the 1990s, Taipei saw a surge of food stalls selling made-to-order scallion pancakes, shuangbaotai, and fried sesame balls.

“At first we only sold those few items,” she explained. “But later, in the late 1990s, when Western-style pastries were all the rage in Taipei’s bakeries and night markets, doughnuts became hugely popular, so we started offering them too.” In other words, scallion pancakes, shuangbaotai, and fried sesame balls were the original staple offerings at these stalls, while doughnuts were a bonus added later on.

Today, Dongyin is part of the Matsu Islands, officially known as Lienchiang County. In Taiwan, most Matsu migrants have settled in areas stretching from Keelung City down through Zhonghe, Yonghe, Xindian, Banqiao, Dingpu, and Bade in Taoyuan County. Many began by working in labor-intensive jobs such as cargo handling at the docks, garment manufacturing in factories, and as fleet taxi drivers. Later on, some struck out on their own to start business of their own, with some even becoming CEOs. Still others took a different path and set up small street food stalls selling scallion pancakes and shuangbaotai.

Scallion pancakes themselves have an interesting history. They were originally regarded as an exclusively northern Chinese snack. During World War II, reports published in the Shanghai press on the “wheat food campaign,” a public effort to educate those in southern China on new ways to use flour as an alternative to rice (which was in short supply due to the war), noted: “When eaten for long periods, plain noodles quickly become monotonous and unpalatable. Increasing variety in flour-based foods can help overcome this issue.” Scallion pancakes were one among a number of “new” options suggested.

During the 1960s, with U.S. aid programs supplying flour through the China Relief Association and the Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction, wheat flour became widely available and used in the Matsu archipelago. On the frontline of the new Cold War, Matsu hosted many soldiers from northern China, and island residents began learning their way of cooking and eating. Using locally grown scallions, they adapted original recipes to make the soon-to-be iconic Matsu scallion pancake.

The snack gradually made its way across the Taiwan Strait. Around 1976, a Matsu native from Beigan set up a scallion pancake stall in Zhonghe’s traditional market. Scallion pancake vending quickly became the way many Matsu migrants made a living in Taiwan. That Beigan vendor was generous in passing on his skills to fellow Matsu émigrés to Taiwan. From their Zhonghe beachhead, scallion pancake carts spread to other Matsu immigrant neighborhoods in Tucheng, Banqiao, Tamsui, Guandu, and Taipei City.

Because the technique was relatively easy to learn, scallion pancake stalls soon spread to street corners all over Taiwan. Today however, few people realize this common street food is part of the cultural footprint of the Matsu community in Taiwan. Fortunately, the sesame balls and

shuangbaotai often sold alongside them still preserve a recognizable mark of Matsu's traditional food culture.

In Fuzhou and Matsu alike, fried sesame balls and shuangbaotai are beloved staples of local snack culture. On Taiwan's main island, carts like Big Sis Chen's can be found everywhere – tucked beside markets, sheltered under arcade walkways, and parked at the entrances of open-air parking lots. For many Matsu families, simple food carts like these were once a way to put food on the table. For countless others, they are an easy way to savor the nostalgic flavors of home.

According to CNN, Taiwan's local food culture ranks among Taiwan's "top-ten" defining attractions. Moreover, a feature article in the Japanese magazine BRUTUS lists 101 things to enjoy while in Taiwan, with street food items alone accounting for a tenth of these. Among the street delicacies cited were favorites like Tianjin-style flaky scallion pancakes, Taiwanese doughnuts, Fuzhou pepper buns, and Fuzhou-style yi noodles – all of which are featured in this book.

The pepper bun, also an iconic Taiwanese street food, even appears in the Japanese anime *Food Wars!*, which is set in a culinary school where students face off in cooking competitions. In one episode, the protagonist prepares to take on a rival specializing in Sichuan cuisine at the school festival. To make his case, he borrows a specially designed oven cart from a classmate to showcase his version of "alternative Chinese cuisine." His chosen dish? None other than Taiwan's beloved pepper bun!