



BOOK LIST

Books to Better Understand Taiwan

Five recent titles show there is more to the island than just politics, from historical profiles to a cookbook that sets Taiwanese and Chinese cuisine apart.

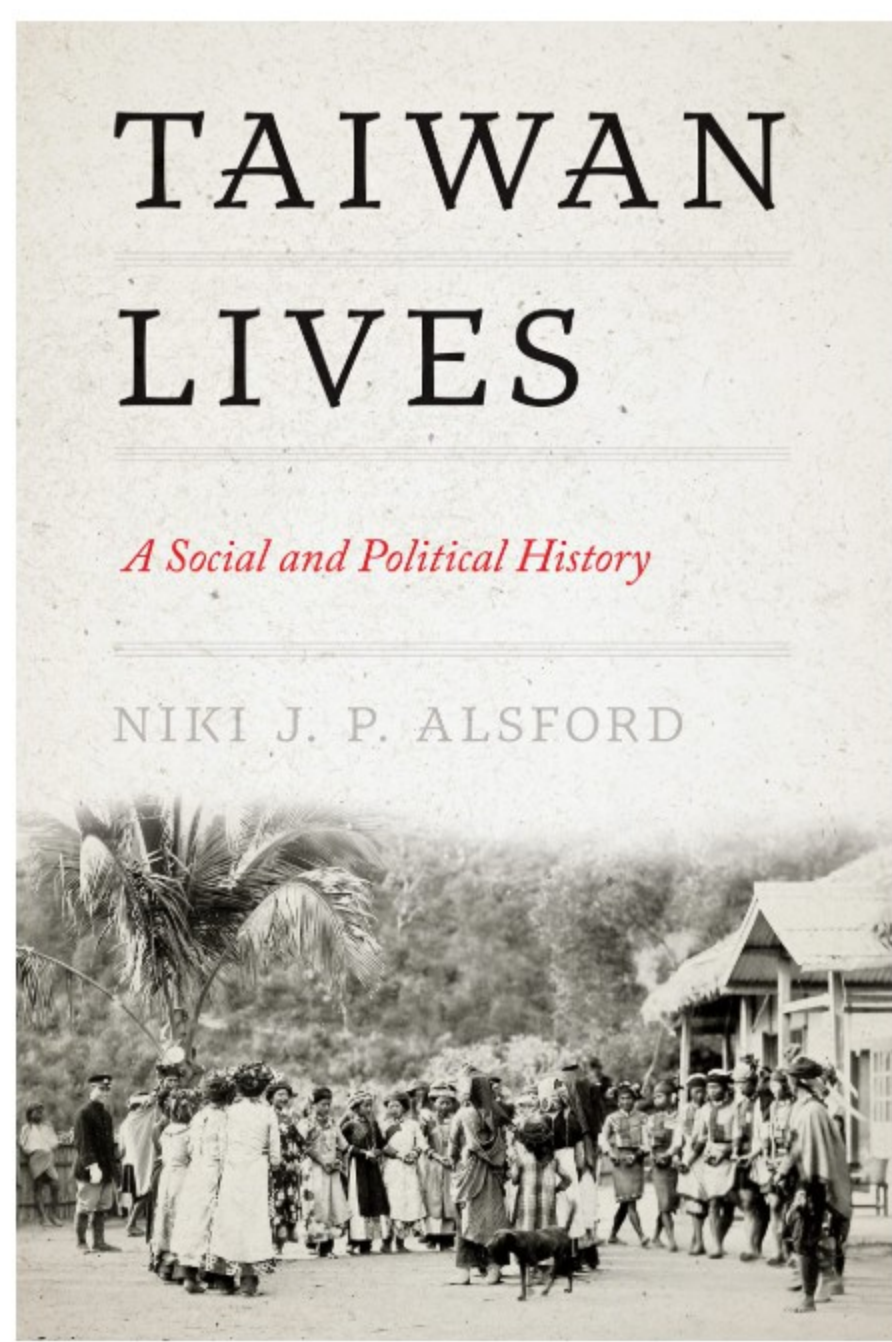
TAILI NI — FEBRUARY 11, 2025

TAIWAN



Taiwan is an island with a long history, diverse influences and distinct culture. Yet, Taiwan is most often discussed outside its borders as a current or future casualty of China's rise. To the 23 million people living there — and to those of us who have had a chance to visit — the island is much more than that. It is a place with a storied history, subject to numerous foreign influences; an indigenous population that has had to adapt to political and cultural changes; and a diverse topography of mountains and gorges, with unique wildlife. It is also the birthplace of bubble tea, perhaps Taiwan's most widely-known export to the world. Yet international focus is fixed on the Republic of China's existence in the shadow of the People's Republic, with many seeing it as a pawn in U.S.-China competition. The West holds Taiwan up as a beacon of Asian democracy, but its value to the world is discussed in terms of its semiconductor industry.

We've selected five recent titles that paint a fuller picture of Taiwan (while a sixth tops a previous list [here](#)), showing the island as more than just the geopolitical threat under which it lives. From a history told in 24 profiles to a cookbook of Taiwanese recipes, investigative reportage on Taiwan's precarious diplomatic relations to two historical novels, these are books to expand the reader's Formosan horizon.



[Buy the book >](#)

1. Taiwan Lives

A Social and Political History

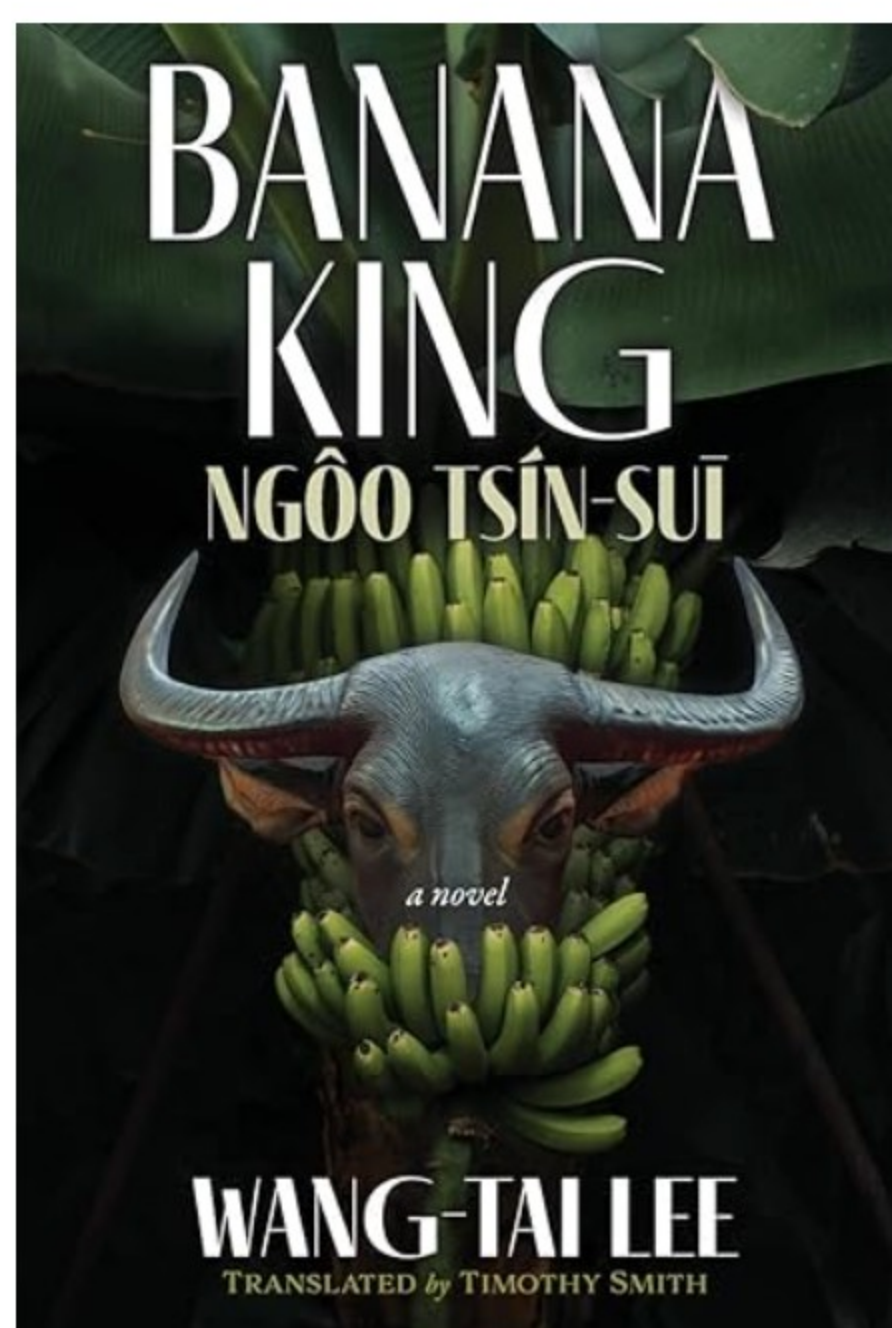
NIKI J. P. ALSFORD | FEBRUARY 1, 2024 | UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON PRESS

This title aims to tell a history of Taiwan from the late 19th century to today through the lives of 24 individuals.

Highlights include the stories of Ro'eng, a member of the Amis indigenous group drafted into the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II; Sanmao, the iconic author renowned for her writings on Taiwan, Germany, Madrid and most famously the Moroccan Sahara; John Dodd, a British tea merchant; and former Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen.

Throughout, the book creates a lasting impression of Taiwan's people being at the center of Taiwan's history and identity.

While the book's three sections' (organized loosely by topic) lack of chronological flow makes the collection as a whole a bit hard to follow, the stories provide perspectives from all walks of life.



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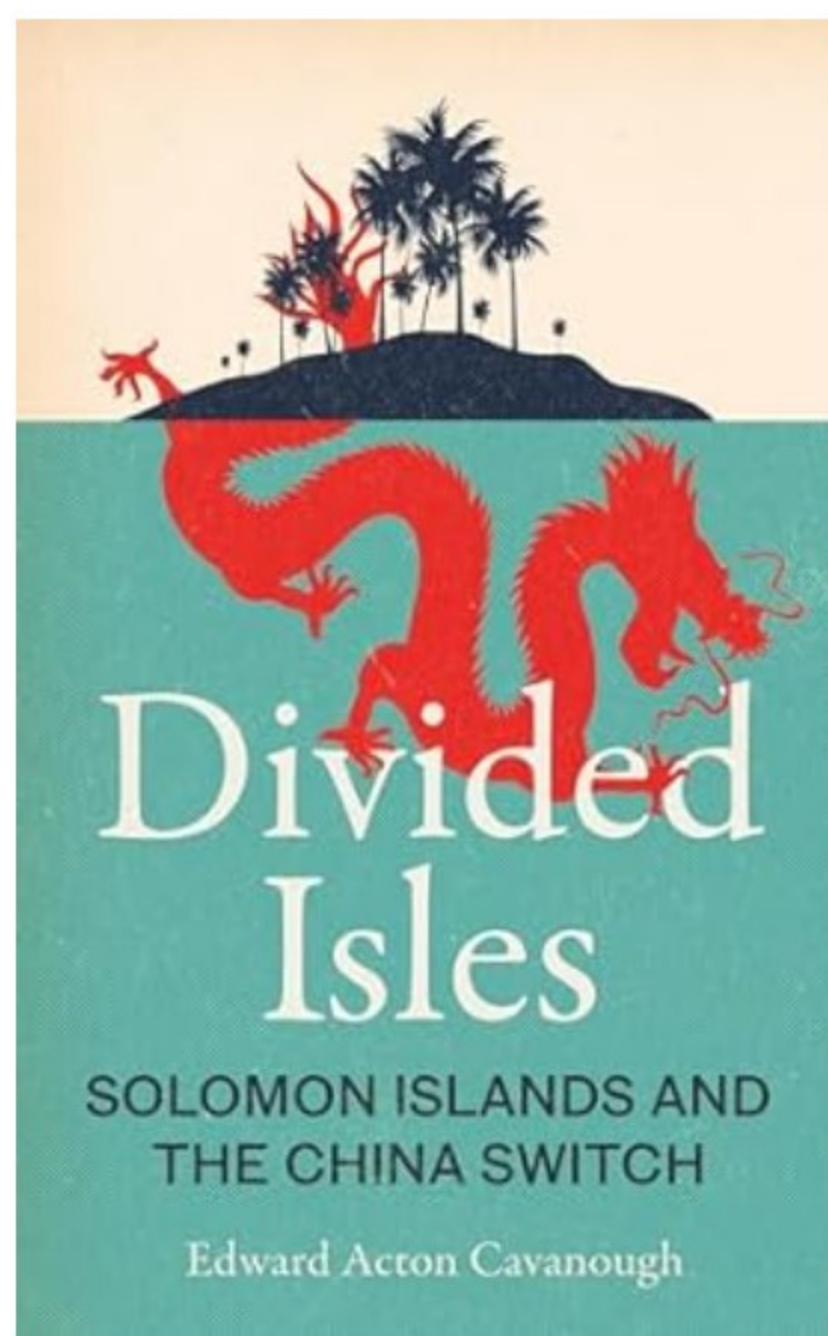
2. Banana King Ngô Tsín-suī

WANG-TAI LEE (TR. TIMOTHY SMITH)

MAY 30, 2024

SHADELANDHOUSE MODERN PRESS, LLC

Set in early 20th century Taiwan, this novel follows the story of Ngô Tsín-suī, a young man whose dreams of pursuing higher education are dashed by an obligation to work on the family farm. His life is disrupted further still by the start of World War II, Japan's surrender in 1945 and the subsequent withdrawal of the colonial administration, the arrival of the Kuomintang in 1949, and Chiang Kai-shek's authoritarian regime. Through the turmoil, Ngô builds Taiwan's largest banana exports cooperative, temporarily finding success before events take a turn. Though a work of fiction, *Banana King* shines a light on the country's indigenous population's many adaptations to a long line of colonial powers and political regimes. Timothy Smith's adept translation from not one but three languages — Mandarin, Hoklo Taiwanese and Japanese — underscores the turbulent history of Taiwan's 20th century and the lives of those who survived it.



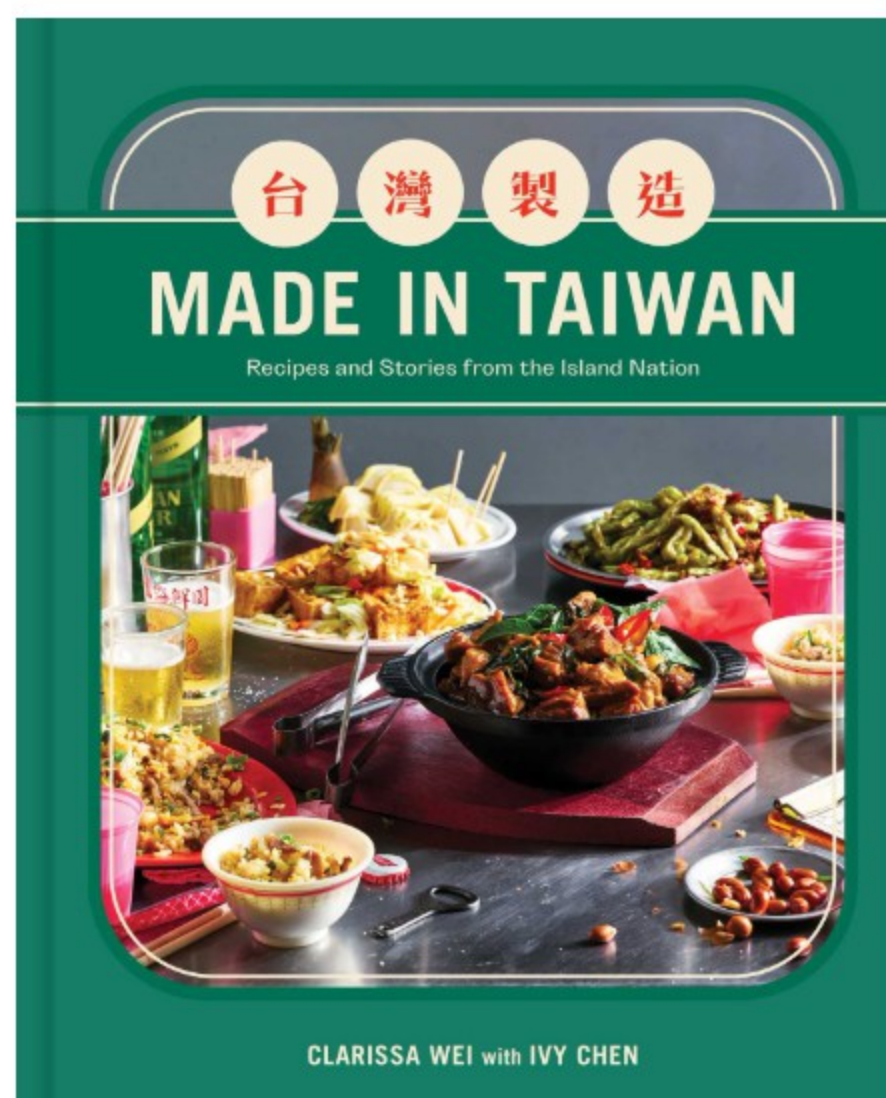
[Buy the book >](#)

3. Divided Isles

Solomon Islands and the China Switch

EDWARD ACTON CAVANOUGH | APRIL 9, 2024 | MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

In 2019 the Solomon Islands (an island nation off the northwest coast of Australia) ceased diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in favor of a closer relationship with China. Many narratives swirled at the time of this switch, with most framing it in terms of the competition for influence between the U.S. and China. In *Divided Isles*, Australian journalist Edward Cavanaugh goes on the ground in the Solomon Islands to get beyond the narratives. Through in-depth interviews and research, Cavanaugh dives into Solomon Islands' politics and history to explain how the switch happened and what its consequences are and may be. The book is an excellent case study of the precarious geopolitical position in which Taiwan finds itself, where its diplomatic allies are ever-dwindling (there are [only 12](#) remaining today) in the face of pressure from China.



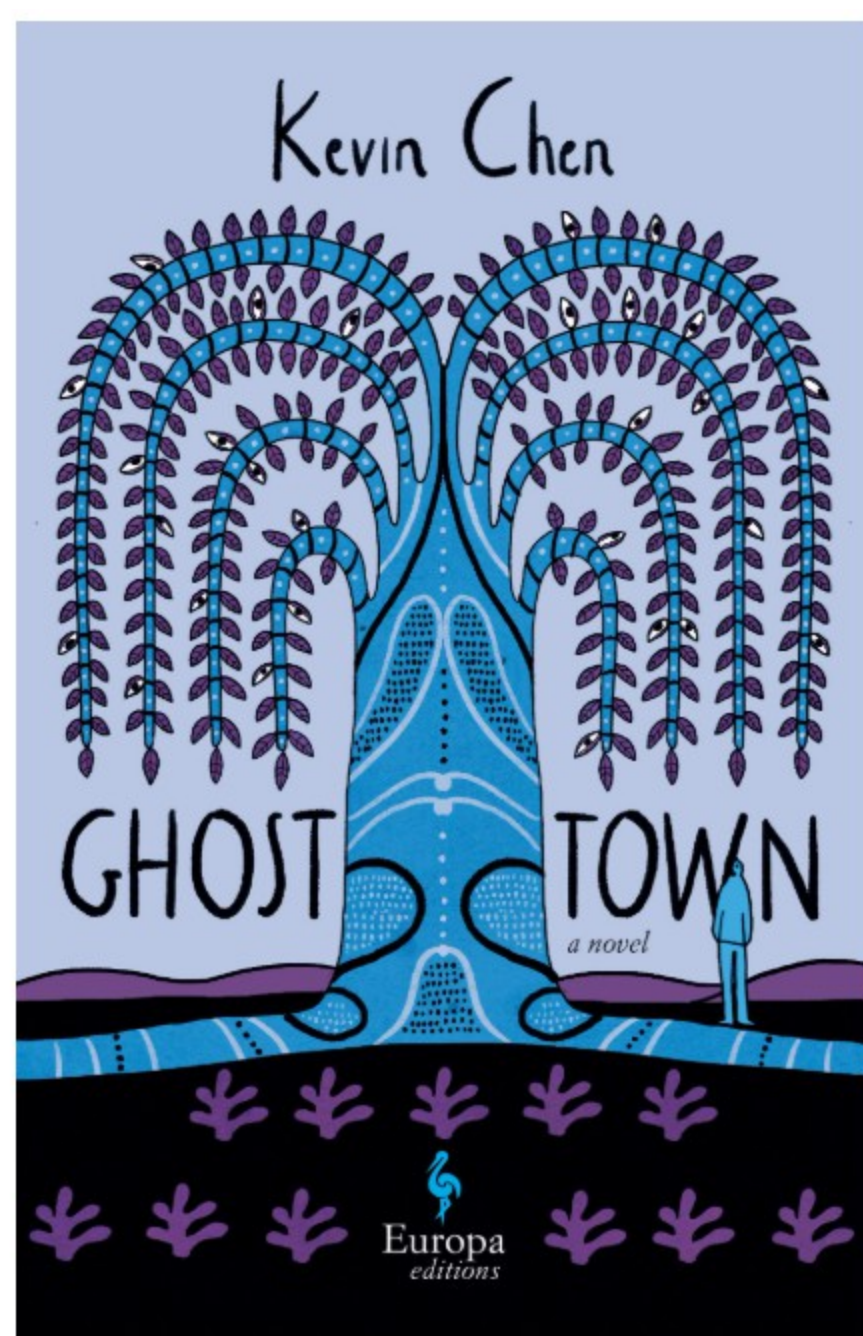
[Buy the book >](#)

4. Made in Taiwan

Recipes and Stories from the Island Nation

CLARISSA WEI | SEPTEMBER 19, 2023 | SIMON & SCHUSTER

In the introduction to this cookbook, Taiwanese-American journalist Clarissa Wei makes it clear that Taiwan and Taiwanese food both stand on their own, independent of China and Chinese cuisine. Disappointed that Taiwan is rarely mentioned in the media outside of a potential conflict with China, she sets out to showcase a Taiwanese identity defined by a diversity of personal stories, a colorful and complicated history, and, of course, a delicious and unique cuisine. The recipes in the book are mouth-watering, covering everything from night market favorites like stinky tofu and popcorn chicken, to popular sweets such as tapioca pearl milk tea and shaved ice, as well as classic dishes including Three Cup Chicken and seafood congee. Yet it is the vivid descriptions of Taiwan itself, from historical tidbits to musings on Taiwanese identity, that give the book its flavor.



[Buy the book >](#)

5. Ghost Town

KEVIN CHEN, TRANS. DARRYL STERK | NOVEMBER 1, 2022 | EUROPA EDITIONS

This novel by Taiwanese author Kevin Chen, translated by Darryl Sterk, takes place in Yongjing, western Taiwan — the titular “ghost town” left behind by the country’s rapid economic development in the 1970s. The original book, published in Chinese in 2019, won the 2020 Taiwan Literature Awards Annual [Golden Grand Laurel Award](#). The story follows Chen Tien-Hong, a young gay man from Yongjing who, having run away to Berlin, returns home a decade later after spending time in prison for murder. He returns during the Ghost Festival — a time to honor ancestors and the departed — to a broken home and a village stuck in the past. Told from the perspectives of multiple family members, the novel gradually reveals what happened to the Chen family, the details of Chen’s crime, and the different ways in which people and places can become ghosts. ■



Taili Ni is Senior Program Officer at the Asia Society Center on U.S.-China Relations, and Assistant Editor of the *China Books Review*. She holds a master’s degree from National Chengchi University in Taipei, a bachelor’s degree from the University of Puget Sound, and is a Fulbright Taiwan alumna. She grew up in California, and lives in New York.