

# NO. 1, SIWEI STREET

## 四維街一號

*Sparks are sure to fly when four master's students with wildly divergent personalities begin living together in a Japanese colonial-era boarding house run by a mysterious landlady. Yet, perhaps this is just what is needed to shake up the lives of these young women, and point them each in a better direction.*

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Built during the pre-war era of Japanese rule, the house at No. 1, Siwei Street in Taichung has lived many lives before its current incarnation as a small boarding house for female graduate students from the local university. The residents include socially awkward first-year history student Nai-Yun, the optimistic but always broke Cha-Cha, the sensitive and aloof Feng, and puritanical star-student Chih-Yi, who is working on a novel even as she finishes her thesis. This uneasy mix of personalities is further complicated by the presence of their bizarre and inscrutable landlady, Hsiu-Yi.

After Nai-Yun discovers a century-old cookbook, she tries out a recipe and musters the courage to invite Cha-Cha to eat with her, but is met with rejection. Feng and Chih-Yi appear affectionate with one another at the dinner table, but seem determined to keep the exact nature of their relationship a secret. The truth is that each of these four young women have unspoken dilemmas weighing on them. Over the course of their days together, as they slowly delve into the secret history of the house they share, and enjoy daily meals of Taiwanese comfort food – medicinal chicken soup, eel with tamagoyaki, and sweet taro porridge – will the barriers between them gradually erode? How will their lives and relationships be changed by the days spent living at No. 1, Siwei Street?

Following on the success of *Taiwan Travelogue*, Yang Shuang-Zi returns with another novel based in meticulous historical research. With her characteristic warmth, she applies her refined prose to the subject of a historic building converted into a boarding house for female graduate students. The result is a moving narrative that



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blends architectural and culinary history into a tale of the evolving relationships between five women all at critical junctures in their lives.

## 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.

# NO. 1, SIWEI STREET

By Yang Shuang-Zi

Translated by Lin King

## Act 1: Hsiao Nai-Yun

Nai-Yun had missed mango season.

The mango tree in the yard had been planted before the war – about eighty years ago, according to the Landlady. The reliable old tree flowered punctually after every New Year, then bore fruit after every Plum Rain season. *Pop pop pop.*

*Why is “pop” the onomatopoeia for a mango tree?* Nai-Yun wanted to ask, but ultimately refrained.

“That’s so true! It really does go *pop pop pop!*” Cha-Cha of Room 201 chimed in.

At the opposite end of the dining table, Feng of Room 102 gave a “Mmm” of agreement. “Very true. *Pop pop pop.*”

Cha-Cha jumped in again. “We were eating mangoes every single day in July – my nails were, like, permanently yellow! Aigh, if only mango season lasted longer.”

What was the logic behind complaining about yellowed nails but still wishing the season were longer? Nai-Yun couldn’t think of anything to say in reply. She had stuck her fork into a piece of red bean yokan jelly that she’d brought from Yuli Township, but couldn’t find the right timing to put it in her mouth.

The square table was large enough to seat eight. The Landlady, who sat at the opposite corner to Nai-Yun, took a large bite of yokan and said, “It’s so nice and sweet.” Nai-Yun followed her lead and quickly ate a mouthful.

The jelly’s fragrance spread pleasantly in her mouth. Nai-Yun pretended to be too busy chewing to take part in the conversation. Listening to Feng and Cha-Cha’s chatter was like watching a game of table tennis – each ping was almost immediately followed by a pong.

“The mangoes were ripe as early as June, but Chih-Yi thought they were too messy to eat and couldn’t be bothered, so I made two batches of mango jam. You know, the tree we have here is indigenous mango, which is a bit sour, but that actually makes it better suited to jam-making than Irwin or Chin-Hwang mangoes, which are a bit too sweet. Chih-Yi had yogurt with mango jam every night for *weeks.*”

“Oh! You know the Dragon River Ice Shop in Zhonghua Road Night Market? I think they also put mango in the specialty jam they use on their toast.”

“I don’t know much about Dragon River’s jam, but it’s true that Chih-Yi and I also ate our mango jam with toast – for breakfast, you know.”

“Ooh, that sounds so nice! Wait, but how come I didn’t get to have any jam when I came in July?”

The Landlady almost spat out her yokan in laughter. “You ate so many of them, we couldn’t rescue enough from you to make jam!”

Cha-Cha threw back her head and guffawed without showing any signs of embarrassment.

Nai-Yun was surprised to find Feng’s eyes on her. “Nai-Yun didn’t have a chance to try our mangoes.”

“Oh... yeah, it’s – what a shame,” Nai-Yun stuttered, fumbling the ball of conversation that Feng had so kindly passed to her.

Feng smiled amiably and served her yet another ball. “That’s alright, these trusty old trees always bear fruit every June. You might have missed it this year, but now you have something new to look forward to next year. Do you like indigenous mangoes?”

“Ah, uh, yes. I do.”

A swing and a miss. The ball dropped limply to the floor with the end of her sentence.

The air stood still for a moment.

“Is that plate for Chih-Yi?” Cha-Cha asked, ping-pong another ball onto the table. “She probably doesn’t have time to eat yokan with all the work she has. I can help her polish it off, you know!”

A pong from Feng. “No need to trouble yourself, miss.”

“Why, it’s no trouble at all—”

Cha-Cha’s words were interrupted by the sound of feeble footsteps out in the corridor. It was the distinct tread of a petite person walking on wooden flooring.

Chih-Yi of Room 101 came into the dining room. She didn’t meet Nai-Yun’s eyes as she entered. More accurately, she didn’t look anybody in the eye except Feng.

“I feel like my brain’s burning to a crisp. I need something sweet.”

“There’s low-sugar yokan jelly, oolong tea flavor. Want some?”

“Yes.”

“Nai-Yun brought it for us.”

“Thank you.”

Still without looking at any of the others, Chih-Yi picked up the plate of yokan and walked out, only to return after three steps.

“Thank you, Nai-Yun. Did I say thanks earlier?”

Feng chuckled. “Yeah, you did. You’re working yourself too hard.”

Chih-Yi massaged her temple. “Could you make me some coffee?”

“I’ll bring it to your room later.”

“Okay.”

Again she left the dining room, and again the delicate footsteps halted.

“Feng, did I thank you earlier?”

“Nope.”

“Oops – thank you.”

Her unhurried steps trailed farther and farther away, back up the corridor. Feng seemed to be listening intently, and nobody at the table said a word. They heard the steps stop after turning a corner, followed by the creaking of old hinges – the wood-framed screen door to each of their bedrooms – and then the scraping of the shoji door sliding along its wooden tracks. Then the shoji door slid shut and the screen door swung back into place, clacking softly against the wooden frame.

Feng smiled, rose from her chair, circled around the table, put on wooden geta sandals, and stepped from the wooden-floored dining area down to the kitchen's stepping stone.

Traditional Japanese houses were built mostly from wood, and only the *"doma"* – literally "earthen area" – didn't have wooden flooring. This was usually reserved for the kitchen, since using stoves on wooden floors could easily lead to house fires. However, the doma of No. 1, Siwei Street had been modified. The original kitchen had been elevated and made into part of the dining area, while the current doma, which had cement rather than earthen flooring, was a later addition. Because of this change, the current kitchen didn't have the side door that was typical of traditional Japanese residences.

"Does anybody else want coffee?"

Cha-Cha's hand shot up immediately. "Me me me! I want a hot latte. I'll help froth the milk."

"I'm on a coffee ban," the Landlady said. She put a little cup of rice wine to her lips and took half a sip.

Nai-Yun was half a beat slow, but managed to swish around the words "I'd like some, too" in her mouth. Nobody heard her.

From the kitchen, Feng asked, "What about you, Nai-Yun?"

This made Nai-Yun blush, suddenly self-conscious. She got to her feet. "That's alright, thank you. I – I'll head back to my room."

"Feng makes really delicious coffee!" Cha-Cha said. "You should try some next time."

"Offering other people's services," the Landlady said good-humoredly.

Cha-Cha grinned, her eyes still on Nai-Yun. "If you're done with your yokan, I'll gladly take them off your hands!"

Everyone had received four pieces, but Nai-Yun had only managed to eat one. She clumsily rushed to set the plate in front of Cha-Cha.

"Stop it, Cha-Cha," Feng said. "You're scaring her."

"No, I'm not!"

Nai-Yun forced her lips into a smile and made sure she showed it to both of them. She then escaped from the dining room to the corridor, her every step making the aged wooden passage squeak. She squeaked her way up the staircase to the second floor.

"Nai-Yun!" The Landlady's slightly raised voice easily penetrated the flooring. "There's a bit of a situation with the second-floor bathroom in your wing, so you'll have to come down to the first floor to use the bathroom. It's just for a few days!"

Flustered, Nai-Yun pressed herself against the low railing of the second-floor corridor and said, "Okay, got it."

“What did you say?”

“She said she’s got it!” It was Chih-Yi’s voice, coming from the room directly below Nai-Yun’s.

This made Nai-Yun even more frazzled. She cried out a hasty “Thank you!” and half-ran, half-dived for her own room – Room 202.

The door was unlocked because there was no need to lock it. Once inside, Nai-Yun collapsed onto the tatami floor.

“I want coffee, too!” came Chih-Yi’s ringing voice below. “Did I say that already?”

“Feng is boiling the water!” Cha-Cha’s voice rang out brightly.

*Aaaaaaaaaaaaah...!*

Nai-Yun wailed from the bottom of her heart.

This was the onomatopoeic manifestation of her inner thoughts, which could also be articulated as: *Why on earth did I move into No. 1, Siwei Street?*

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The word “Siwei” referred to the “four cardinal principles” of ancient Chinese philosophy: propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame. The name of the street therefore had a very heavy Sun Yat-Sen, Republic of China, patriotic flavor, but the first building on said street was a Japanese house erected in 1938 that used to be an official guesthouse for Japan’s Imperial Government-General of Taiwan. After the Second World War, the house somehow ended up as the Landlady’s family’s private property, and was now registered as a historic building by the Taichung City Government.

Nai-Yun looked up the city’s Cultural Heritage Department website and found a page titled “Japanese Guesthouse, Siwei Street, West District”. On it was a short, disappointingly stoic description:

*This historic building is laid out in an upside-down U shape. On the first floor, there is an exterior “genkan” entryway, which opens into an open-air atrium surrounded by the building’s left, central, and right wings. The layouts of these wings are symmetrical, with a single U-shaped passageway connecting all of the rooms. The original layout has been preserved, and the majority of materials and structural components are likewise originals from the Japanese colonial period. Further, the Guesthouse is one of very few remaining two-story wooden houses with “shitamiita” clapboard siding. It is notable in both its rarity and reuse potential.*

The “Year Completed” column said, “1938 (Showa 13 in the Japanese calendar)”. When Nai-Yun had asked the Landlady about the year that No. 1 was built, the latter had cocked her head and said, “I asked my grandma that when I was little, and at the time she estimated that the house was about a century old.” It seemed that oral history could be inexact.

What exactly did the webpage mean by “reuse potential”? No. 1, Siwei Street was a private property that the Landlady’s family rented to female students at a nearby university. Was that not as “useful” and “potential-fulfilling” as signing a build-operate-transfer contract with some company that will turn it into an artsy café or an influencer hotspot?

At first, Nai-Yun had felt defensive of the building’s current usage. But when later she realized that the old house could only accommodate six tenants maximum, and that at the time of her moving in there were only five inhabitants including the Landlady and herself, she felt less certain in her defense.

But to go back to the “real” beginning: Nai-Yun’s story with No. 1 began in the spring of that year, when she’d gotten off the waitlist of the Master’s program in History at the public university two kilometers away from the house.

On New Students Day, she’d spent the morning taking care of administrative paperwork and arranged a short history-nerd tour for herself in the afternoon. Sticking to distances that she could cover on a rental bicycle, she visited the former Taichung Prison complex, the Taiwan Prefecture Confucian Scholar Examination Hall, and Chang Hwa Bank Guesthouse, which were all near each other. Afterward, she planned to swing by the founding flagship location of Chun Shui Tang, the now-famous restaurant franchise. She thought about ordering a glass of pearl milk tea along with a plate of oolong-braised dried tofu.

It was on her way to Chun Shui Tang, struggling to navigate the lattice of one-way streets, that she came across it: a two-story Japanese house at the corner of Siwei Street, with an old mango tree that towered over the building and bloomed with little confetti-like flowers.

*Love at first sight.*

The old house immediately embedded itself into her heart. After graduating from college, Nai-Yun did a lot of research on rentals in Taichung City, but couldn’t stop hemming and hawing despite visiting multiple studios and suites. Again and again, she cycled back to the old house.

No. 1 was surrounded by three streets: Shifu Road, Siwei Street, and Lane 3, Siwei Street. After illegally parking her bicycle on the sidewalk, Nai-Yun had walked along the property’s periphery, examining the structure as closely as she had the other historical sites. She’d studied the cement outer wall, the black terracotta roof tiles, and the wooden clapboard whose darkened color almost blended into the black roof. The second story had three bay windows, on each of the wings of the U shape. The sunlight made the window glass shimmer.

The little house was holistically preserved and evidently well-maintained. At only two stories, it somehow still looked lived-in and lively – bursting with life. Yet even after visiting three times, each time falling deeper in love, Nai-Yun still couldn’t muster up the courage to go past the outer wall.

Instead, somebody had come outside.

A little tank top and teeny shorts. Hair in a loose bun, as though she’d just climbed out of bed. A woman about thirty years old.

She’d said in a leisurely voice, “Hey there, are you here to see the house?”

The Landlady.

Decisiveness had always been the trait that Nai-Yun lacked most. But, for reasons unclear to her, that day she'd been different. She'd gone through the entryway, toured the first floor, and then the second. The Landlady had shown her an empty bedroom on the second floor, and when she'd opened the door, the clean and grassy scent of the tatami had engulfed her. Nai-Yun had signed the lease on the spot.

Graduate school began on September ninth. She moved in on September first.

And was met with a great hurdle.

The house, despite its two floors, was petite in reality. According to the the Cultural Heritage Department's website, "The area of the whole structure is approximately two-hundred-and-nine square meters." Considering the upside-down U shape, Nai-Yun deduced that each of the building's three wings must have been about seventy square meters each.

Each tenant's room was about the size of eight tatami, which was about thirteen square meters. Even with the addition of a traditional "*oshi-ire*" closet (think of the closet that Doraemon the robot cat sleeps in), which was about one tatami in size, there was only about fifteen square meters of personal space. If Nai-Yun somehow crammed all of her clothes and miscellaneous belongings inside the *oshi-ire*, just by adding a bed, desk, and chair, she barely had any room to move around. Naturally, the lavatory, bathroom, dining room, and kitchen were all communal spaces.

The atrium was lined on three sides by the corridor (the one referred to as the "U-shaped passageway" by the Cultural Heritage Department). On the one open side stood an old-fashioned, five-story office building, which effectively made the atrium a semi-enclosed space where every single sound echoed resoundingly. In order to have a conversation with someone across the atrium, one simply had to open one's bedroom door, step out into the corridor, and speak at a normal volume.

To indulge in a hyperbole: the whole house seemed to share one breath.

Even the two rooms physically farthest from each other – for instance, Nai-Yun's room on the west side of the second floor, and the doma kitchen on the east side of the first floor – had no secrets from each other. Nai-Yun, in her room, could hear water boiling in the kettle downstairs.

But what troubled her wasn't the noisiness, nor even the lack of privacy.

Was she an introvert? No. "Introverted" was too superficial a term – it barely scraped the surface. She was excruciatingly shy, painfully reserved around strangers, impossibly slow to pick up social cues, and endlessly indecisive. Even her innermost emotions seemed to lag behind those of others. Interpersonal relationships had therefore always been extremely difficult for her.

And No. 1, Siwei Street was a residence that required *much* social skill.

There were only four paying tenants in the six-room house: Chih-Yi in Room 101, Feng in Room 102, Cha-Cha in Room 201, Nai-Yun in 202. The Landlady lived in Room 203, the sole room in the long, eastern wing of the house. Room 205 – the numbering system skipped 204, because "four" was a homonym of "death" and therefore inauspicious – was empty at the time when Nai-Yun



moved in. The Landlady's room was directly across the atrium from Cha-Cha's room, and Nai-Yun's room was just to the left of it.

All of the current tenants were graduate students at the same university. The Landlady told Nai-Yun that she'd previously rented to vocational students, high school students, and undergraduates, but after some unpleasant experiences, she'd decided to select tenants based on their capacity to appreciate the old house. Using this criterion, she gradually found herself with a house full of graduate students from the university's School of Arts and Humanities.

Given this context, Nai-Yun had assumed that she, a history nerd, would be able to fit in.

And yet she had missed mango season. This fact alone seemed to make her a soldier that had fallen out of line and could no longer find a place in the troop.

Feng and Chih-Yi were both in their second year at school, as well as their second year living together on Siwei Street. Cha-Cha, like Nai-Yun, was in her first year, but had moved in back in July, and by September was so chummy with the two second-years that she may as well have lived there a whole year already.

The other women often cooked and ate together cheerfully, and could even be heard chatting with each other when washing and bathing on two sides of the bathroom wall. There was a television in the common area on the second floor, and the others would plug in their computers and stream shows on the big screen, lounging as though it were their own living room at home.

The crux of the problem was this: Nai-Yun still couldn't get herself to feel that this was *her* living room, *her* home.

All of this was deeply distressing to her. She was, after all, a social being living in a community-based society, anxious to blend in as soon as possible. To this end, she silently paced the kitchen, dining room, and common area like a cat meticulously and slowly marking its territory with its own scent. Yet after two weeks, she still felt like a soldier who didn't know to fall in line with the others.

It wasn't that she knew *nothing* about the others, however. She'd learned the sounds of their lives: the noises they made when getting out of bed, washing up, cooking, dining, working, entertaining themselves and each other. Their footsteps, their conversations, the shows they watched, the times of day when they turned on the air conditioner in their rooms. There was no privacy to speak of in No. 1, Siwei Street, and Nai-Yun could puzzle together the daily routines of her fellow tenants from the sounds alone.

Cha-Cha went to bed late and woke early; Feng went to bed early and woke late; Chih-Yi went to bed late and woke late. The Landlady's sleep habits, however, were unknown to Nai-Yun.

Cha-Cha worked two part-time jobs on top of school; Feng was a full-time student; Chih-Yi was a novelist who had a government grant to support her writing; the Landlady, who didn't have to worry about money, occasionally plucked away at her ukulele.

Cha-Cha either ate food that supermarkets deemed no longer "shelf-appropriate" or else cooked herself simple meals; Feng made two people's worth of breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day; Chih-Yi ate what Feng served her every day; the Landlady ate out as often as she pleased, and occasionally had a drink at home.

Cha-Cha washed every day before bed; Feng washed twice a day; Chih-Yi only washed when she had time; the Landlady, as usual, did whatever she pleased, whenever she pleased...

Surrounded by and having grown familiar with these sounds, Nai-Yun was sometimes under the mistaken impression that she already knew each of them well. In reality, whenever she actually came in contact with one of them, she reverted to her true form – a jumpy, easily frightened kitten that wanted nothing more than to hide in her room.

Forging ahead felt impossible. Retreating felt impossible. Adulthood was impossible.

Whenever Nai-Yun felt like crying but had no tears to shed, she would cry out inside her heart: *Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!* She clutched her head and asked herself: *Who am I, where am I, what am I doing here?*

\*

“What are you up to?”

It was Cha-Cha.

Nai-Yun looked up.

Cha-Cha was standing in the corridor, just outside the common area. It was three o'clock on a weekend afternoon, and Cha-Cha had evidently just returned from the library, shouldering a heavy-looking backpack that was deformed by bulging books. Cha-Cha's footsteps were always loud, so Nai-Yun had known it was her coming up the stairs, but she hadn't expected Cha-Cha to stop here instead of heading straight to her room. Their eyes met, and Cha-Cha began walking directly toward Nai-Yun.

“Uh...this...” Nai-Yun was a beat too slow as usual, but managed to hand over the book in her hand. “I found this over here,” she added for good measure.

“*Second Edition...Taiwanese Cuisine...* how do you pronounce this character?”

“*Kan*’. It's a Japanese kanji character, but it also exists in Chinese. It means something like ‘notes on’.”

“So: *Notes on Taiwanese Cuisine, Second Edition.*”