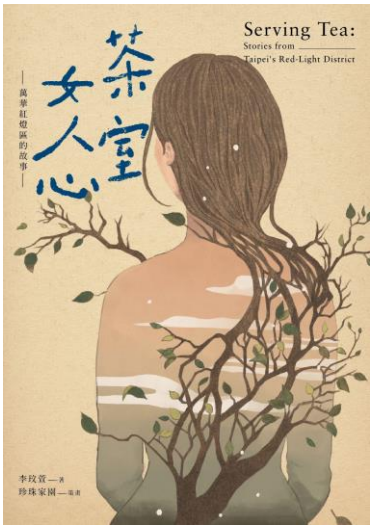
TEAHOUSE LADIES: STORIES FROM TAIPEI'S RED LIGHT DISTRICT

茶室女人心：萬華紅燈區的故事



During an era of rising economic fortunes and seeming prosperity, women from Taiwan's lower classes were often sacrificed at the altar of progress. In order to survive, many had no choice but to seek work in the sex-industry. Long viewed as disgraced women, now, it is finally time to hear their stories.

During the post-war baby boom, many Taiwanese households lacked the economic means to give all of their children a proper upbringing. In a society that valued boys over girls, daughters were often forced to leave school and join the workforce so that economic resources could be focused on educating sons. Struggling to survive alone in the city, and lacking in education, these young women were at high risk of slipping into an endless cycle of poverty and abuse. In moving and readable prose, *Teahouse Ladies* tells the life stories of the women who were sacrificed at the twin altars of patriarchy and progress.

To gather these stories, writer Lee Win-Shine interviewed twelve long-term residents of Taipei's Wanhua District. Most were not born locally. Rather, in an era that gave them few choices, they found their way to Wanhua, a place synonymous with Taipei's lower classes, and a notorious red-light district due to the "teahouses" hidden away in its alleys. More than just venues for enjoying tea, alcohol, and conversation, the Wanhua teahouses provided pretty girls who were paid to drink with the clientele, *nakasi* bands led by sultry songstresses, and prostitution.

Chapter by chapter, these teahouse girls relate their stories. Some were sold into prostitution to pay family debts. Some had stable lives

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that were destroyed by a partner's gambling addiction. Some were forced by their own families into marriages with abusive husbands, and, from there, they slipped ever deeper into the abyss of domestic violence. Yet, with assistance from a variety of non-profit organizations, including the sponsors of this book project, these women were eventually able to rebuild their trust in others, and regain their sense of personal value.

Author Lee Win-Shine is a recipient of the Taipei International Book Exhibition non-fiction prize. With assistance from the Pearl Family Garden Women's Center, she was able to conduct in-person interviews with these former teahouse ladies, finally giving a voice to the women who survived the poverty of Wanhua, the disdain of society, and even the prejudice of close family and friends.

Lee Win-Shine 李玟萱

Born in Kaohsiung in 1977, Lee Win-Shine holds a master's degree in continuing education from National Chi Nan University, and is a recipient of the Taipei International Book Exhibition prize for non-fiction. Her writing spans essays, interviews, song lyrics, and film reviews.

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By Lee Win-Shine
Translated by Laura Buice

Part 1: Where There's a Will, There's a Way

Bus Stewardess

Born in 1956, Tsai-Ni worked as a bus stewardess in the era before buses used automatic doors. Back then, when she was not using her skillful hands to tailor clothes, she dressed in the white shirt and blue pencil skirt to sell bus tickets. A full ticket cost two and a half *kuai*, a student ticket was discounted at five *mao*, and a senior discount was one and a half kuai. In a time when few Taiwanese people could afford to travel internationally and the words "flight attendant" were unfamiliar to most, the bus stewardess' stylish uniform was a favorite for girls playing dress up.

Underground Rules of Wan Hua District Tea Houses

As a child, Tsai-Ni loved watching Jimmy Wang and Cheng Pei-Pei's martial arts movies. She also loved Ni Kuang's sci-fi novels. However, she wasn't interested in the romance novels that most girls projected their desires onto: "When I read books, I didn't like Chiung Yao. And I didn't watch the movies of those double Chin, double Lin acting types- Brigitte Lin, Joan Lin, Charlie Chin, or Chin Han."

She went on a date with a man her friend had introduced her to, and felt like they had nothing to talk about. After a second date, she refused to meet with him again. But suddenly one day, he brought a matchmaker with him and proposed. Tsai-Ni wanted to decline, but her father believed that "being bad with words is a form of sincerity; unless you only want smooth talkers, that kind of man?" Even today, Tsai-Ni still remembers the inexplicable feeling that welled up inside her the first time he put the ring on her finger.

After the wedding, the man she called "The Slob" brought his brother and nephews to live with them. Tsai-Ni had not yet given birth, and now she had to help raise three children. Afterwards, when she was pregnant and had a big belly, the whole house waited for her to get off work at eight p.m. or later and cook dinner. She finally got a divorce after their second child started elementary school. The children lived with their father while Tsai-Ni worked in a Wan

Hua district tea house as a janitor. Her plan was to deliver lunch to her kids every day, since she did not start work until two in the afternoon.

When the author interviewed other women from the tea houses, they would often keep their heads down, eyes glued to the tabletop, or they would only respond to the caseworker from Pearl Family Garden Women's Center. Only Tsai-Ni, a janitor, made direct eye contact without any evasion. It was as if she was still a bus stewardess pointing out the window at passing tea houses, allowing us to observe the varied scenes of life within.

Tsai-Ni said the first tea houses in Wan Hua district started in a small alley in the vicinity of Yen Chai Hospital on Guang Zhou Road. You could sit in the main hall and pay five kuai for a 17 oz. cup of tea. The tea houses later grew to include separate private rooms. This gradually developed into Wan Hua District's specialty industry.

Tsai-Ni mentioned the earliest tea house sex workers had permits, though on the government application they listed their profession as "waitress". Whenever there was a surprise inspection, they would leap up, wipe everything down, and quickly pour tea. After the police left, they would sit back down with their patrons, and resume serving alcohol.

Back then, the owner of the tea house had to be quite skilled. Beyond managing money, he had to maintain good relationships with the police and even local gangs. According to custom, "contributions" were made to the local gang bosses and the police chief during each of the three major holidays: Dragon Boat Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, and Spring Festival.

Tea house owners had a tacit agreement: if a waitress quit, she could not go work for another tea house in Wan Hua. "You had to leave for six months before you could come back and work again."

For five to ten thousand Taiwan Dollars every month, a man would sit at the mouth of the alley and keep watch for nearby tea houses. He was responsible for reporting when the police came to the area. "They just reached the entrance to the alley; the whole street needs to take precautions!" Ordinary patrons did not need to run; they could sit and wait as the police inspected everyone's papers. But any wanted criminals, or anyone who had left home without their papers, or girls who had been reported missing from work, would have to escape quickly out the back.

Sometimes the warning came too late. The employee at the front desk would have to press an emergency button connected to the private rooms. A red light would flash, and anyone who needed to run knew they would have to figure out their own means of escape.

Tsai-Ni revealed that every tea house had a back door to escape through. "When it was time for an inspection, you could run to a room without any guests, turn the lights off, and hide under the table where the gas stove (for cooking hot pot) was kept."

Whenever there were issues, or the police were impossible to avoid, the scout would assume responsibility. The police knew he was just a scapegoat, but they would turn a blind eye to the real culprits, and lock up the scout for a day or two.

Tsai-Ni's features took on a smug and self-deprecating look as she described the survival games she played for a time in Wan Hua district. "Ah, I guess I've got a lot of inside knowledge."

A Woman Can Be a Host Too

From 2000 to 2010, Tsai-Ni worked as a janitor in four tea houses. Business was good. In an effort to reduce their taxes, the tea houses would register as "restaurants" or "snack bars".

Some of the tea houses genuinely had a specialized kitchen. Tsai-Ni worked for one with a head chef. If the patrons at other tea houses wanted food that paired well with alcohol, they would order from the head chef: deep-fried cloves, deep-fried burdock, hot pot… Although Tsai-Ni worked as a janitor, if the kitchen was short-staffed, she would help deliver food. She could deliver to fifteen tea houses in one day.

Tsai-Ni did not want to get too deeply involved in this industry. Otherwise, when a local gang boss or local government official visited, she could have filled the position of a "host", despite it typically being a man's role. A host escorted guests to the private rooms, delivered fruit, served dishes, or handed out hot towels for patrons to wipe their hands and faces on when they were drinking.

On the books, tea houses employed two hosts in every private room and each one was paid two hundred Taiwan Dollars. Tips were the real income for the hosts. Every time a host opened the door to provide a service, the patron would tip based on their mood or how good they wanted to look in front of the waitress. Tips ranged anywhere from one to five hundred Taiwan Dollars.

In a two-story tea house with twenty-five private rooms, Tsai-Ni noticed that a host's tips could total more than ten thousand Taiwan Dollars a day. If business was slow, it might be only two thousand. Every month they averaged one hundred and fifty thousand Taiwan Dollars, or more.

Hosting was not dangerous; however, if patrons got upset with a waitress, it was the host's job to pacify them. For safety purposes, the doors to the private rooms did not lock from the inside. If a waitress was only drinking with a patron – no physical contact – the door could be cracked open.

What if a guest got drunk and caused a scene? "You found a gangster, of course. You didn't call the police."

In order to keep peace both outside and in, Wan Hua district tea houses gave the gang boss a cut. On the occasions where they had trouble, they placed a phone call and someone would immediately show up. "There were sub-sections; for example, one from Guang Zhou Street to San Shui Street and one at Hsi Yuan Road."

Did they fight over the best territory? Tsai-Ni thinks we have watched too many movies. "The leader of the gang was the 'head' of whatever district he lived in, if he went anywhere, it was probably the wealthiest side of his district."

Some of the tea houses did not hire janitors. The host was responsible for cleaning melon rinds off the floor and greasy dishes from the table after clients left. Occasionally, the client and

waitress would rinse off with tea after a one-on-one sexual service, soaking the whole room. The host's swearing could be heard by people walking on the street outside when this happened.

The tea houses where Tsai-Ni worked were sizeable. Direct sexual service in a private room was not common. It was more common for patrons to fondle the tea house women, a service commonly known as "Sexy Tea". If they just wanted a woman's company for a few hours, older men might only spend three hundred Taiwan Dollars for a waitress, plus another two hundred for a pot of tea with tea leaves that could be re-brewed. But for this flat-rate price you could only enjoy the company of Taiwanese waitresses. "If you wanted a foreign waitress, you wouldn't leave until you were stripped clean (of your money). They would eat you alive."

Foreign Waitresses Changed the Environment of the Tea House

The Chinese and Southeast Asian waitresses started to overtake the Taiwanese ones after Tsai-Ni stopped working at the tea house. She secretly counted the names in the sign-in book; visits from foreign patrons numbered almost two and a half times those of local clients.

In the past, the front desk served patrons without preference. They assisted in selecting a waitress and escorted patrons to their private rooms. If the patrons were happy, they would stay. If they were unhappy, they would swap waitresses until they were satisfied. Whether a patron selected one-on-one or multiple waitresses in the room, someone always stayed to pour alcohol, regardless of how frequently a waitress swapped rooms.

After waitresses from China and Southeast Asia entered the houses, they created a "benefit-exchange" model. Popular waitresses would incessantly promote a close "sister" to the guests. Afterward, the front desk would roll call the promoted sisters and the polite ones would say hello to everyone in the room, even those who were not visible. By saying hello to everyone, it was possible to get an additional three hundred Taiwan Dollars in tips. On subsequent days, when a different waitress was favored, she recommended someone else and everyone took turns making money.

Waitresses frowned at patrons who were uncooperative with their bill or indifferent in choosing their waitress. They would swap to another private room and would not come back until the guest paid in full.

If you paid your bill but did not want anyone to serve you alcohol? Tsai-Ni laughed, "They would sit there like idiots!" She once saw several men sit in a private room without a waitress; they poured alcohol for each other.

What discouraged clients from selecting a Taiwanese waitress? Chinese waitresses took initiative and stood at the mouth of the alley. Avoiding them was a challenge; people called them the "solicitor corps". Southeast Asian waitresses were incredibly shameless with clients. They got to work as soon as the music began playing. Some were in charge of closing the door, some took off their clothes and danced on the tabletop, and others would sit beside clients and start groping them.

Foreign waitresses were willing to sleep with a client for free as long as the client was a regular who was guaranteed to return. Taiwanese clients were often comparatively guileless; if they slept with one waitress, they would not sit in a private room with another, despite the lack of a written agreement. This averted internal conflict between the waitresses. Consequently, business for local waitresses was relatively bleak.

Those Repugnant but Pitiful Men

The tea house owners made money from the food and alcohol served in the rooms. They did not interfere with or charge the waitresses. After Chinese waitresses started working in the tea houses, they negotiated with the owners to be allowed twenty percent of room revenue, sometimes as much as thirty or forty percent, after the costs were deducted.

The most popular waitresses were allowed to buy stock in the tea house as an incentive to stay. If they choose to go to another tea house, the waitresses could only take seventy percent of their shares back. Recently, foreign waitresses have been taking over tea houses by buying enough stock.

Because of the yellowed walls and the lingering odors of cigarette smoke, the private rooms were renovated every few years. The owners in Wan Hua usually withheld a portion of the contractor's wages for the tea house renovations. To offset the loss, they asked the contractors in charge of the renovations to come inside and drink. In the end, one contractor was, without a doubt, in over his head and ensnared by the women's warmth and charms. Every time the waitress sitting with him left the private room, her folded stack of thousand-dollar bills was a little thicker. She laughed and told the accountant at the desk to list the names of twenty-five women and so he could settle their tabs.

In Tsai-Ni's position as a janitor, she also had to assist the waitresses with alterations and perform other odd jobs. Tea house waitresses made a generous income. Did she ever want to join them in earning that kind of money? "But I had seen all of those awful men, so why would I?"

She once saw a client "adopt" a waitress. For weeks, he supported her and her twenty "sisters". While he was very generous with the waitresses, he was heartless and stingy towards his struggling wife. Later, this client committed suicide because of a large gambling debt he owed to a loan shark.

Did the waitresses disgust Tsai-Ni? "It was their job; I don't blame them… I blame the men. If not for them, those women from other countries wouldn't be able to come here and make that kind of money, would they?"

Some of the waitresses were forced into this job. There was a thirty-something-year-old waitress, with an innocent look the patrons loved, who was dragged to San Shui Road every day by her husband. She had to turn over her earnings to him when she got off work. Sometimes, she wouldn't show up for two or three days. When she did come into work, she would have two black

eyes. It was clear her husband abused her. The tea house sisters couldn't stand it and secretly taught her how to hide some of her money, so she could figure out how to escape.

Tsai-Ni was only resentful of a few of the waitresses. For example, one fat, pale Taiwanese waitress was especially accommodating with older men. She often grabbed the keys from the owner in order to open early by herself and treat all the early-rising older men to one-on-one sexual services in a private room. She claimed to have made enough money to buy ten apartments, shops, and suites, and would ask guests to buy her rings as gifts. Tsai-Ni commented in a disapproving tone of voice, "her rings weren't bought one by one, it was box by box (each box has several rings in it)! What was she doing? She was making way too much money."

But when she recalled how coquettish the waitresses acted in front of the men, even as they planned to milk them dry behind their backs, she said, "I think those men… They might have been repugnant, but they were also pitiful."

Take the Wheel

Tsai-Ni would get fed up with this type of work environment. She would find work in a food factory or tailor to calm down. However, at the factory, she was not able to take breaks. So, she would return to the tea houses. The salary was also significantly higher. Over, ten years, her daily wage went from 800 Taiwan Dollars to 1,200 Taiwan Dollars, always in cash. She never thought she would find a new lifestyle while working in Wan Hua district.

One of Pearl Family Garden's caseworker's brought biblical tracts to San Shui Road for Christmas in 2010. Some of the store owners thought the caseworker was looking for donations and wanted to decline, but Tsai-Ni had a good impression of Christianity because her middle school teacher had been Christian. She told the owners, "They're free!" And it was agreed the biblical tracts could sit on the front counter.

Tsai-Ni was not big on religion. She once had a Buddha fixed to her wall that she was supposed to pray to at the beginning and middle of the month. "I forgot every time. I've forgotten so many times, that Buddha has cobwebs now." A friend introduced her to a well-known fortune teller in the area, but she never went. However, one summer, Tsai-Ni picked up one of the ignored biblical tracts. Her eyes were drawn to the words "Women's Center" printed on the card, and she took her scooter to Pearl Family Garden. It was not far. She believed she would meet new types of people and have new discussions. "Because at the tea house, if it's not alcohol, it's men, women, or sex."

The women she met there had all previously worked at tea houses, so was it really a different group of people? "They were not the same. I think the women here had found redemption. They had been saved, just like me."

A few days after Tsai-Ni went to Pearl Family Garden Women's Center, she completely left her job at the tea house, and found an opportunity to apply for a position in a Japanese electronics factory.

While she rode to her interview, she sang hymns and prayed non-stop that she would get the job.

The factory executive introduced the job and gave a tour of the facility to the applicants. When he learned Tsai-Ni had a heart condition, he dismissed her before the interview.

Tsai-Ni was seething. She fumed silently on the not-so-short trip from the factory to the gate. But as she approached the gate, she had second thoughts. The women in the factory work on their feet and behind barbed-wire fences. It felt like a jail. “Did I really tell them I would work eight hours a day plus three hours of overtime? I must not care about my own life. I didn’t even consider what that would do to my back.”

Tsai-Ni thought to herself that God must have listened to her prayers and hymns on the road. “Was God helping guide me to the right job? If not for Him, I would’ve worked for two days only to find out I couldn’t do it. I would have wasted two days with no pay.”

When she arrived at the guard room to turn in her visitor I.D., the corners of Tsai-Ni's mouth began to curl up; by the time she had made it back to her scooter, she could not help but laugh loudly and sing. “It really was! It really was God!”

Now at Pearl Family Garden, Tsai-Ni serves as a teacher and helps with a sewing program that sells handbags for charity, “They (the employees) are all very kind, exactly like I described. They are angels who have saved my life, otherwise, I would’ve gone down a different path, one where I wouldn’t have been able to solve problems by myself.”

Tsai-Ni has let Jesus take the wheel. She is focused on serving others. At the same time, she is at peace with her position as a bus stewardess and is moving toward a new place in her life.

Empty Boxes

Chuan knew I was here for her story. As soon as she opened her mouth, tears fell from her eyes but no sound came out.

She wiped her eyes dry and held up her thumb: “I was the favorite in their family.”

“Their family” referred to her adoptive parents, who had already had two consecutive miscarriages. They adopted Chuan from a friend when she was four months old in order to become parents without further issues. In folklore, this is known as a “Pressed Flower”. A tree that is not expected to flower will have a flowering branch grafted, or “pressed”, to it. This will cause the whole tree to flower. It was believed that a childless mother would become pregnant after adopting a child.

Born in the year of 1954, Chuan lived up to her mission. Her adoptive mother gave birth to three more children, but her status did not change in the slightest. She would always be the most important and loved eldest-daughter of her parents.

Chuan had an energetic personality. She was described as “a mule”, full of energy. When her father sold all his fields to pay for her mother’s liver cancer treatment, she frequently rode her bike to her aunt’s house to borrow money for her mother’s visits to the doctor.

Chuan kept in touch with her birth mother. After her birth mother found out about her adoptive mother's condition, and after Chuan graduated from elementary school, Chuan moved back in with her birth mother so her birth mother could take care of her. Any money Chuan made in town working in a shoe factory was given to her adoptive mother in a display of filial piety, but she still passed away when Chuan was fourteen.

At that time, her mother's body was placed on the bed at home. Her sister was innocently playing jump rope in the yard not knowing she would never again have a mother. However, no one had told Chuan that her sister still didn't know. When Chuan reached the door of the home, she dropped to her knees and crawled inside, crying out, "Mother!" as tears streamed down her face.