



Rites of Returning

A Full English translation is available.

神之鄉

Author: Zuo Hsuan **Illustrator:** Zuo Hsuan **Publisher:** Gaea Books

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212 pages | 14.8 x 21 cm **Volume:** 1 (Two-books series)

Adaptation: TV Drama

Award: 2017 Japan International Manga Award Bronze Award (Volume 1), 2025 Japan International Manga Award Silver Award (Volume 2)

Rights sold: French, Italian, Japanese, Vietnam, German

BFT2.0 Translator: Kevin Wang & Michelle Kuo

College student Nuan-Nuan Chen is thrilled when she's paired with her crush, the aloof Chih-Hsun Hsia, on a summer field project. Their assignment—to study religious practices in the Taiwanese town of Daxi—turns out to be more than research: for Chih-Hsun, it's a return to the hometown he left behind seven years ago.

As the community prepares for its grand temple fair, Chih-Hsun slowly reconnects with childhood memories, old friends, and his estranged father. Handmade moonlight cakes, spinning top contests, and urban legends all infuse this vibrant story by one of Taiwan's leading comic artists. Through festivals, rituals, and traditional games, *Rites of Returning* weaves a moving tale of reconciliation—between past and present, self and family, memory and home.



Author **Zuo Hsuan**

An award-winning comics artist and illustrator, Zuo Hsuan graduated from National Taiwan Normal University's Department of Fine Arts in Design. Her work *Rites of Returning* (2015) won the Japan International Manga Award Bronze Prize and was adapted into a 2021 TV drama. She also illustrated *What She Put On the Table* (2017) and published *The Banana Sprout* (2022). Her works have been published internationally, and she has represented Taiwan at various international book fairs.

Turning Around Is the Hardest Part: Revisiting Home in *Rites of Returning*

by Wen-Chien Hsu

Although the story begins from the perspective of Nuan-nuan Chen and her quiet crush on the male protagonist Chih-hsün Hsia, the heart of the narrative lies in Chih-hsün's inability to let go of a past he cannot fully understand. Raised in the small northern Taiwanese town of Daxi, Chih-hsün grew up spinning tops, watching temple processions, and never once imagining a life beyond it. But after his parents' divorce forced him to leave, he found himself on a long, winding path home—one that would take years to undergo.

What makes *Rites of Returning* such a rich and distinctive comic is how it embeds this journey of reconciliation—between son and father, self and origin—

within Taiwan's folk religious culture. Through traditional games, temple festivals, and the rituals of hometown life, the story layers personal memory over collective heritage. Like Chih-hsün himself, who uses a school project as an excuse to return to Daxi, the comic gently explores the longing to return through indirection and ritual.

The story cleverly sets its emotional turning point during one of Daxi's most important annual events: the birthday celebration of Holy Emperor Guan, held on the 24th day of the sixth lunar month. This becomes Chih-hsün's gateway to reentering his hometown—not just to attend the festival, but to fulfill a childhood promise by joining the local

parade group performing the Prince Nezha dance. It's also where he begins to reconnect with his estranged father—most powerfully through a shared moment during a traditional top-spinning performance at the Puji temple fair.

In a climactic moment, Chih-hsün's father—a master of the spinning top—says: “When I used to spin tops, I always told myself never to look back. Charging ahead was the easiest thing... But later I realized, turning around—that's the hardest part.” This line doesn't just encapsulate the comic's theme—it gently invites the reader, too, to look back. It speaks to anyone who has ever fled their past, avoided reconciliation, or missed a chance to heal. It reminds us that to turn around is painful, yes—but necessary, if we are to live without regret.

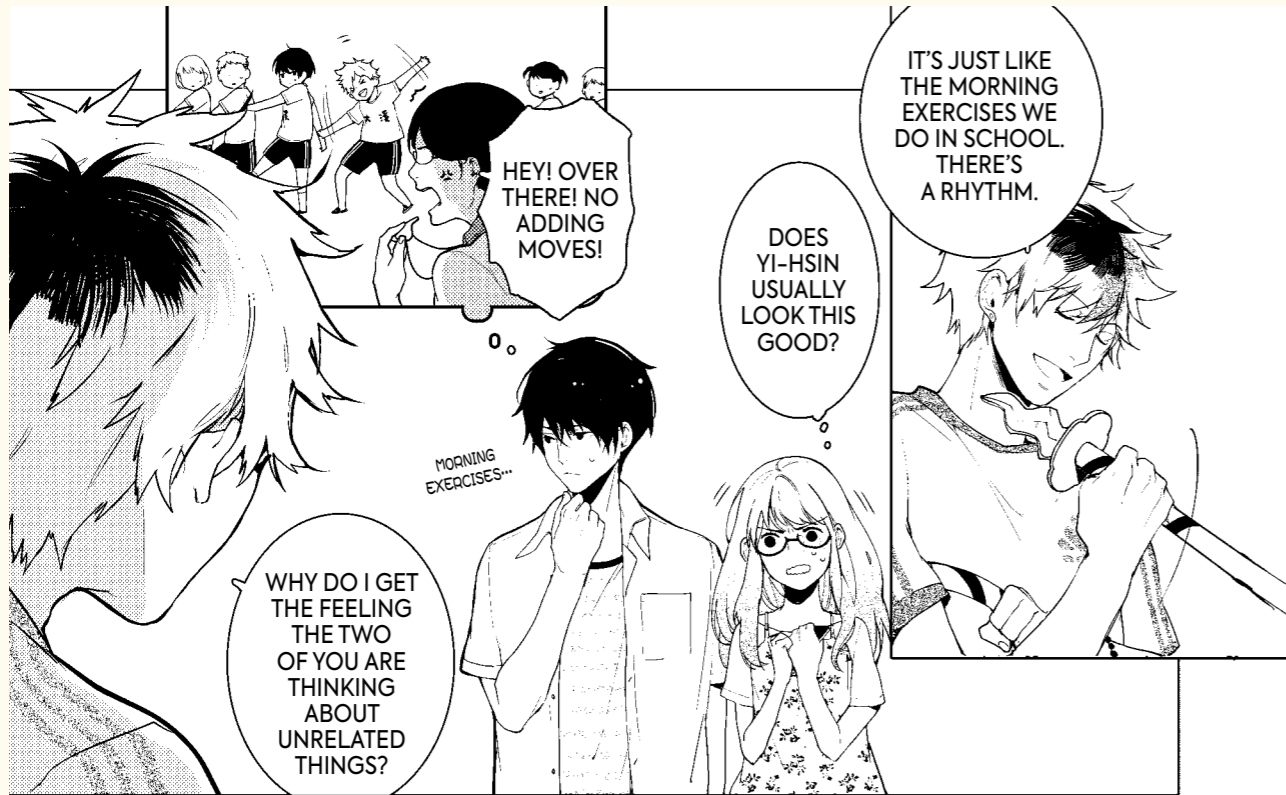
Author Zuo Hsuan renders the rhythms and textures of Daxi with quiet elegance. Unlike many comics about Taiwan that focus on cuisine or grand historical narratives, Zuo Hsuan avoids clichés and complex entry points. Instead, she centers everyday human interactions—between families, between memories and rituals—and in doing so, reveals a deep emotional resonance

grounded in place. The comic's charm lies not in exoticism, but in the quiet, universal truths tucked into the details: the weight of memory, the awkwardness of reunion, the sweetness of Moonlight cakes shared at dusk.

This is a comic that makes Taiwanese readers smile in recognition—and non-Taiwanese readers weep with understanding. It offers something rare: a vision of Taiwan that transcends politics and cuisine, reaching instead for something more intimate—belonging, reconciliation, and the roots of identity.

For foreign publishers seeking emotionally resonant, culturally grounded stories, *Rites of Returning* is a luminous example of how local specificity can unlock universal emotion. It is not simply about going home—it is about discovering what it truly means to return.

Wen-Chien Hsu possesses a free-spirited soul. She has worked at LGBTQ+ organizations, the 113 Domestic Violence Hotline, and works as an editor of Books from Taiwan 2.0. She is dedicated to bringing Taiwanese comics and picture books to a global audience.



WHY DO I GET THE FEELING THE TWO OF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT UNRELATED THINGS?

MORNING EXERCISES...

HEY! OVER THERE! NO ADDING MOVES!

DOES YI-HSIN USUALLY LOOK THIS GOOD?

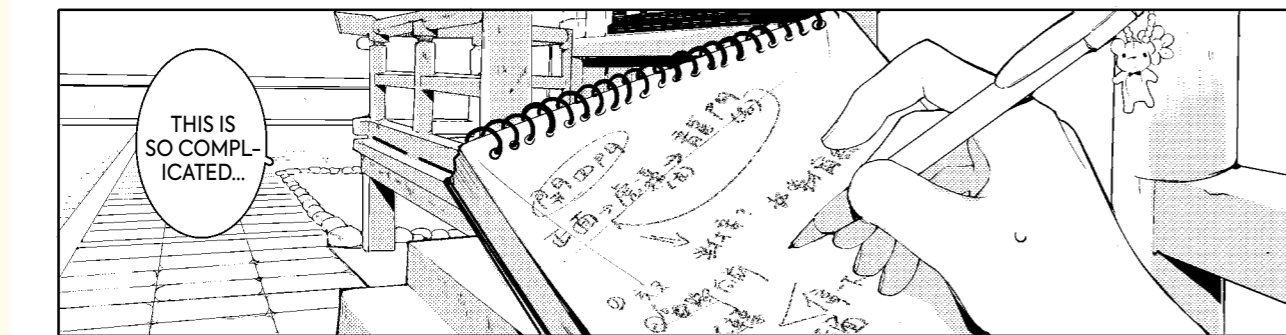


IT'S JUST LIKE THE MORNING EXERCISES WE DO IN SCHOOL. THERE'S A RHYTHM.



BRING YOUR FOOT UP LIKE THIS.

FIRST...



THIS IS SO COMPLICATED...



YOUR ARM GOES HERE.

AND THEN YOU BRING YOUR FOOT BACK TO ITS ORIGINAL POSITION.

JUST LIKE THAT. EASY, RIGHT?

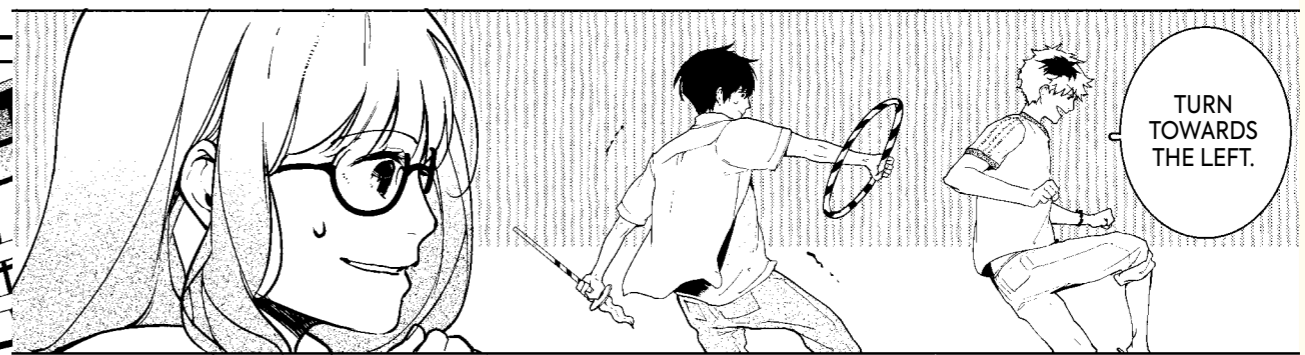
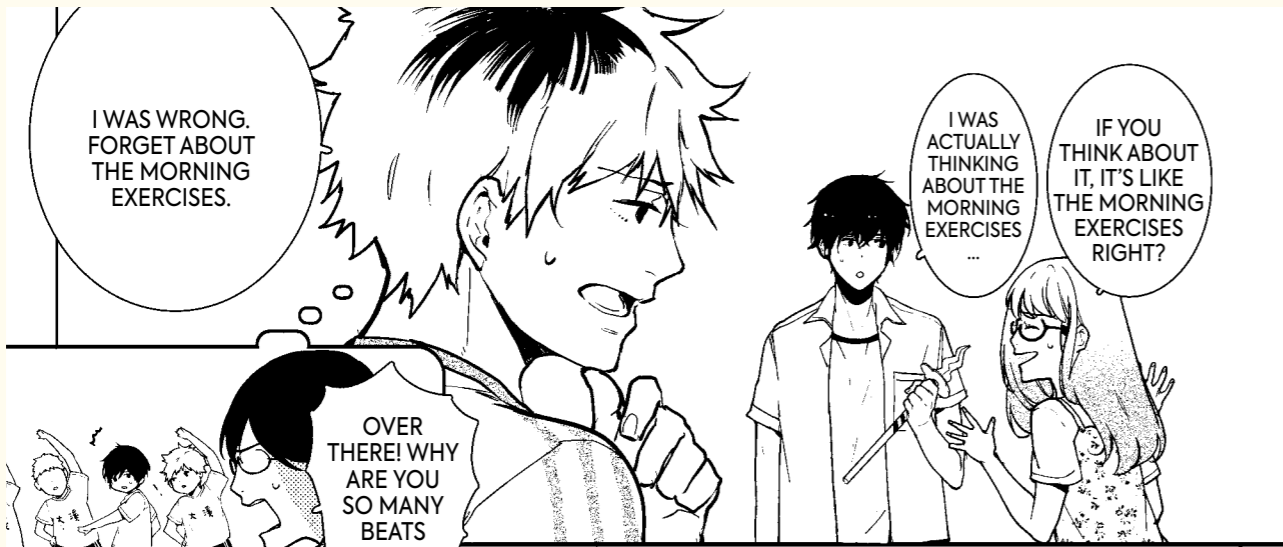


YOU'LL GET IT ONCE YOU TRY YOURSELF.



IT'S ALL ABOUT MUSCLE MEMORY.







YOU'LL BE ACTING AS THE GOD.

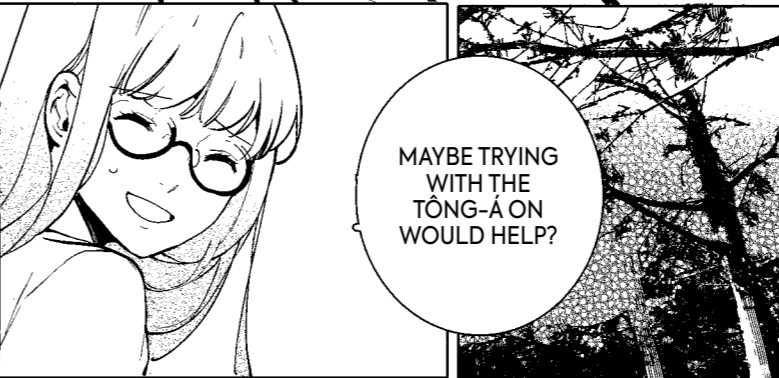
ONCE YOU PUT THE TÔNG-À ON, YOU'RE NO LONGER ACTING AS YOURSELF.



A FEW HOURS LATER



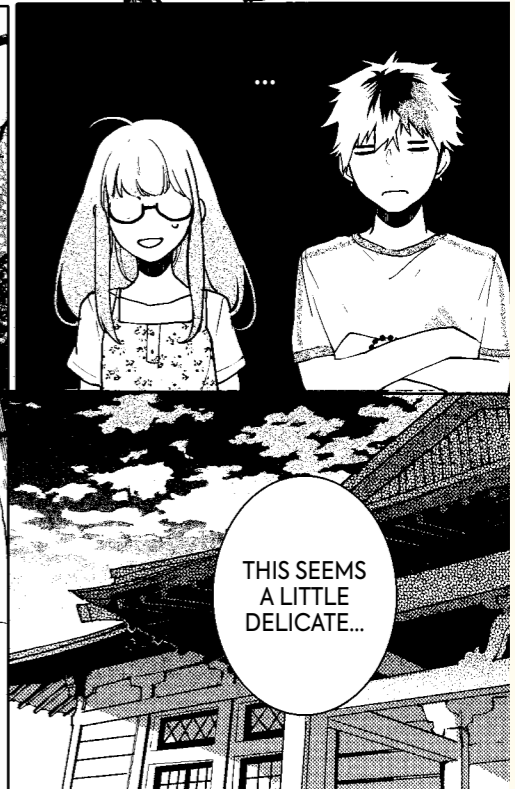
YOU'LL ALSO HAVE TO WALK LIKE ONE!



MAYBE TRYING WITH THE TÔNG-À ON WOULD HELP?



NO.



THIS SEEMS A LITTLE DELICATE...



AH-HSÜN.



YI-HSÜN SEEMS EXTRA STRICT TODAY...

MAKE SURE THE INSTRUMENTS DON'T FALL WHEN YOU TURN.