

SOMEWHERE IN TEA

憶，茶時

A multigenerational teashop in Taipei has teas able to evoke as well as bury memories. A university student's chance visit not only changes her life but also helps her realize the tea-drinking experience echoes the complexity of memories and that true understanding blooms only from experience.

Soon after remaking the acquaintance of Mr. Wu at her grandfather's funeral, still-grieving university student Cheng Ai finds her way to Mr. Wu's teashop in Taipei's old Dadaocheng Quarter. Not long after, she moves back to her family's old home in the district and begins helping out in Mr. Wu's shop.

The secret of memory manipulation, passed down through the Wu family for generations, allows Mr. Wu to preserve memories for his customers in his shop's tea leaves as well as wipe clean those they wish forgotten. When Cheng Ai drinks tea brewed by Mr. Wu, long-forgotten memories of her grandfather resurface in her mind. She also sometimes glimpses further back in time to "see" events from long before she was even born. The customers Cheng Ai meets while working in Wu's tea shop include both those with a passion for good tea and those wanting to tinker with remembrances in one way or another.

After the romance budding between Cheng Ai and her similarly aged colleague Shen Yi stumbles, she comes to realize that the fuzziness clouding her childhood memories has something to do with Shen Yi's own past. Should she try to get to the bottom of it all? And...if she does, how might what she finds affect their chances for a future together?

Author Xuan Jun thoroughly researched Taiwan's traditional tea industry before weaving this sumptuously imaginative tale of local tea culture, palpitating romance, and the estimable journey of individuals dedicated to their craft. Those who enjoy ducking into culture-steeped



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alleyways in search of quaint shops and memorable stories are sure to find comfort in Dadaocheng's tea-aroma-steeped embrace.

Xuan Jun 絢君

Web fiction author Xuan Jun has won a substantial popular following for her works in the young adult romance genre that tackle serious topics with an appropriate dose of humor and whimsy. Works in her recent literary catalogue include *Life is Like a Sunset after Rain*, *Somewhere in Tea*, and *Bloom in the Crack*.

SOMEWHERE IN TEA

By Xuan Jun

Translated by Sahana Narayan

Prologue

It was a busy morning in Dadaocheng. Sunlight swept through the mulberry trees and down the sidewalk. Teresa Teng's "All I Care About is You" was playing on an old radio as workers emerged from a tea shop with baskets of freshly roasted tea, setting them in the courtyard to cool. The smell of tea sauntered through the alleyways. Two old men with white hair entered the courtyard. One, standing stick-straight in a suit, smiled: "Now I remember where I put my old master's scissors! It's all thanks to your tea. Thank you so much, Wen-Kuei."

Wen-Kuei smiled at his friend and said, "It was nothing! You were just talking about your old master; of course you remembered where you put his gift. Anyways, how was the tea? Did you enjoy it?"

"The taste isn't important – you've even somehow managed to capture the way my old master used to chew me out! Were you trying to frighten me to death?"

The two men chuckled heartily. Suddenly, they heard a voice, singing along to that song on the radio. They listened in, their conversation forgotten. The man in the suit glowed with happiness as he recognized the singer. "That's my granddaughter! She's always singing. Maybe she'll be a singer when she grows up."

His granddaughter, sitting on the stone steps outside the door across the street, was singing with muddled words and unshakeable conviction. Though her tender singing was not as sweet as that of a songbird, it was enough to stir the curiosity of the tea shop workers nearby. They temporarily abandoned their baskets of cooling tea and circled around to the backyard to watch the young girl with pigtails sing, unable to contain their smiles. "Ai-iah! So young to be listening to such old songs! You sing so loudly, but do you know what the lyrics mean?"

The girl puffed up her cheeks and bobbed her head. She said solemnly: "It's about love, right? My A-Ma told me!"

The workers burst into laughter. They copied her tone, singing along with her. She broke out into a big smile too, revealing the big gap in her teeth. Wen-Kuei watched over them, a smile tugging at his lips. He told the girl: "Remember this happiness. One day, when you're all grown up, you might forget."

In that moment, time froze. The streets of Dadaocheng stayed busy, shopkeepers shouted along Chongqing North Road, and cars rumbled over Taipei Bridge in the distance. But the sunlight on the leaves, the laughter brushing her ear, and that soft scent of green tea in the air slipped quietly into memory.

She will never forget.

Part One: In This City I Found You, Lost

Chapter One: The Tea-Scented Alley

“Namo avalokiteshvara...”

“Our dearly beloved patriarch Cheng Chung-Wu departed this realm on the third of April, 2021. He spent his life dedicated to the humble profession of suit-making. With open arms, he always supported his children and his grandchildren...”

“A-Kong, safe travels!”

“A-Kong—!”

The funeral passed in flashes, like scenes from a film. The dead had passed; it was now up to the living to carry their memory forward. Cheng Ai was sitting on the rattan chair on the stoop, her mourning clothes removed, staring at the empty living room. The furniture had all been pushed into a pile next to the entrance, and no one had bothered to put it back. A-Kong’s photo was atop a cabinet, freshly placed. She’d been crying too long and had forgotten the meaning of grief. All she knew was that there was a hole in her heart that would never be filled.

“Cheng Ai, why are you sitting there?”

She looked up and saw an old man dressed in a sharp-looking suit. His cufflinks were polished and shiny and he was carrying a cane. He looked to be over eighty. A wrinkled face crinkled into a gentle smile. He asked: “Do you still remember me?”

Cheng Ai shook her head. She was never good at remembering family members or, for that matter, elders in general. She used to rely on A-Kong and A-Ma to remind her. But now, A-Kong had passed and A-Ma couldn’t remember much. Without them, she was lost. She could not place the old man in front of her at all. However, she knew he was important: her father and uncles cried when he showed up at the public memorial service, calling him “Uncle”. Even her A-Ma in her dementia recognized him in the blink of an eye, her eyes filling with tears. Cheng Ai had no choice but to come clean. She said, with some shame: “I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

“It’s been so many years, of course you’ve forgotten!” he said with an unbothered smile. “My name is Wu Wen-Kuei. Your A-Kong’s tailor shop was across from my tea shop, and you often played there as a child!”

“Really? I’m so sorry I forgot, how could I forget?...” she said over and over, unable to contain her embarrassment.

Wu Wen-Kuei nodded. “It’s fine.... It’s been so long. It’s inevitable that you’d forget.” Then, almost as if to himself, he added “I know your father and your uncles must be very upset, so I decided to spend some extra time with them. And I wanted to give my old friend a proper send-off. How about you? Why sit outside? Why don’t you go in?”

Cheng Ai gently smoothed the pockmarked rattan chair, lost in thought. "The same reason as you, I guess."

The chair was filled with holes, each a fragile memory; each leading to a distinct memory of her coming back from school and of her A-Kong chatting with the neighbors, waiting for her in that very chair, listening for her tiny footsteps and her cry of "A-Kong!" at which his eyes would invariably crinkle into a benevolent smile.

Now all that remained were holes.

Cheng Ai got up and pulled up a chair for herself, making space for Wu Wen-Kuei to sit. But he just stood there. His reddened eyes glistened with tears. He took a deep breath, pressed out a smile, and patted her lightly on her shoulders. His voice gentle, he said, "I'm so sorry to hear about your A-Kong. If you'd like, next time you come to Dadaocheng, I'll treat you to your A-Kong's favorite tea, and share some of his old stories with you."

Cheng Ai met his gaze. She had expected to find in his eyes the worldly tranquility of a life long-lived, but instead saw unwavering grief for the passing of a lifelong friend tinged with the same gentleness as she had known in her A-Kong.

She nodded, trying to raise the corners of her mouth. "Sure, I'll visit. Thank you."

Outside, the funeral company had started taking down their tent. A few scooters drove by on the road, which had been blocked all morning, their drivers passing by without a sideways glance. The service had ended, and the days would again return to their usual rhythm.

And yet, some things would never return.

*

"The plum rains are here! Today's stationary front is expected to bring strong rains nationwide. Remember to bring an umbrella with you..."

The local weather report blared from the noodle place on the corner. Cheng Ai checked her bag. Had she brought her umbrella? She looked out at the busy street, then turned her head toward the overcast sky. She should probably head home early to Taoyuan, before the rains trapped her in Dadaocheng.

"Mèi-mèi, how about a bowl of hot noodle soup?"

The owner, a middle-aged lady, beamed at her. She wore an apron over her clothes. Inside the stall, Cheng Ai could see customers blowing on the white mist rising from their thick spoons. She was sorely tempted, but decided to move on, speaking hurriedly: "Sorry, I have to go. Best of luck!"

"Thanks. Are you a tourist? Where are you off to?"

Cheng Ai glanced at her clothes and, with her phone out and on full "navigation mode", she was the very picture of a tourist. The only thing missing was a pamphlet from the visitor information center clutched in her hand. She smiled wryly. "I'm visiting my old home. It's near Chongqing North Road."

“Ahh, okay! Go straight until you hit Minsheng West Road. Turn right and keep walking until you see the road sign,” the owner replied enthusiastically. Cheng Ai thanked her, then stepped out from under the shop’s awning. She took notice of the aroma of incense pouring out from the Taipei Xia-Hai City God Temple sandwiched in amongst the complex of smells of dry goods and street food. *So this is Dadaocheng*, she thought to herself.

Outside of Yongle Market, she saw a busker playing the erhu. She didn’t know the name of the song, but it had a vibe that sent her thoughts drifting into the past. Exquisitely made-up girls sauntered by in Converse shoes and qipao, chattering excitedly to each other, wondering out loud what camera angle might make their legs look longer in photos.

The gaps in the stone brick road seemed to lead back in time. She started to wonder...*Had she been transported back to the Japanese Colonial Era?*

Finally, following the directions on her phone, she wound her way through the bustle of Dihua Street. As the blue dot on her phone showed her drawing closer and closer to her destination, she noticed the review at the top of her map: “Beautiful places like this seem to be found only when one is lost.”

Young shop attendants hawked wares along the old streets. She even saw an old man standing next to an electric pole, a cigarette dangling in his mouth, his polo shirt caked in sweat. Did he know his cigarette was unlit?

Her phone clutched tightly in her hand, Cheng Ai’s thoughts spread like smoke, trying to recall the warmth of her childhood memories. But no matter how she tried, she couldn’t remember a single thing.

She noticed the twisting alleyway ahead. On one side was a small park filled with children, playing and cutting in line for the swings, fighting without end; that is, until their parents, waiting in the wings, finally intervened and told their children to “go home already.”

When she was young, did her A-Kong and A-Ma do the same for her? She suddenly felt exposed. Why did she need a phone to find her childhood home? How pitiful was that? She hastened through the maze of alleys, her feet moving anxiously as if eager to escape her inner shame.

Soon, she made it to the road sign for Chongqing North Road, Section 2. The road was broad and teeming with cars. High-rises lined both sides. She suddenly felt like she’d lost her way but, according to her phone, she wasn’t far. She turned left, followed another covered sidewalk past many new buildings. It was then she saw the sign for “Wu Ji Tea Shop” glinting before her eyes.

She stopped and looked. The solemn, ancient-looking brick building stood out from the busy corner, its faded facade and peeling shop signs out of place amongst the fresh new buildings that surrounded it. As Cheng Ai entered, she noticed a phrase in small print on the tea shop’s signboard: “In the midst of this vast city, I came across you.”

Here she was. Why had she come again? For some reason, she felt it right to trust that old man, stranger though he was. Maybe hearing him say “A-Kong” had softened her heart. She wanted to remember her A-Kong as best she could, even if it was through a cup of tea. Perhaps its sweet scent might coax the return of years gone by.

She peered through the glass door like a lost traveler. It was a typical weekday: midday, no sign of customers. Wu Wen-Kuei sat at the counter, arms wrapped around his chest, taking a nap.

Should she enter? She didn't want to bother him. She wavered and then turned her head toward a metal door by the alleyway, shut tight – her old home. She tried to recall anything, any memory of the place. It was originally a tailor's shop, the domain of master tailor Cheng Chung-Wu, her A-Kong. What did it look like? All she knew was that she'd lived there once, together with her beloved grandparents.

"Mèi-mèi, what are you doing standing there?"

An old man's gravelly voice blared from behind, and Cheng Ai wrenched her head around to meet it. It was Wu Wen-Kuei, now freshly awake from his nap. "Cheng Ai? Why didn't you come in?"

"Sorry! I didn't want to bother you..." she murmured.

"Ai-iah! I invited you, how could you possibly be a bother?" He extended his hand out, motioning her in.

She walked in and closed the door behind her. There were metal bins of tea crowding the wooden shelves, their names written on red slips of paper, their scents wafting across the air. Cheng Ai didn't understand tea, yet it all felt familiar, and comforting.

"Where are your mom and dad? You came alone?" Wu Wen-Kuei asked suddenly.

"They're working today." She quickly added, "I don't have class."

"Án-ne--oh!"

Wu Wen-Kuei took her into the next room and plugged in an electric kettle. "Look! Boiling water is so convenient nowadays. I just plug in the kettle, and the water boils," he remarked.

Cheng Ai laughed awkwardly. She lowered her head and watched the steam rising from the kettle.

"Do you drink tea often?" he asked her.

She thought to herself, then offered a hesitant smile. "Bubble tea doesn't count, right? Or tea bags?"

Wu Wen-Kuei roared with laughter, and Cheng Ai felt even more out of place. As the kettle roiled to a boil, he took it off its seat. He poured the hot water into the teapot. "You'll see, in just a moment. Tell me: does it taste like bubble tea? ...or tea bags?"

Cheng Ai pressed her hands obediently to her legs, watching Wu Wen-Kuei's every action. He poured hot water over the teapot and cups, telling her this process was called "rinsing." He emptied the water, then took a canister of tea leaves from the table and passed them to her. "This is a Dongding oolong from Lugu. Smell it."

She took the canister and pressed it to her nose. "Wow!" she sighed contentedly.

"Right?" Wu Wen-Kuei beamed at her. He took the canister back, and put some leaves into the teapot. "So you're in college now?"

"Yeah, this is my first year at NCCU. I'm studying Japanese."

"Whoa! Time flies. Last time I saw you, you were shorter than this table! And now you're already a college freshman!" he gasped.

She laughed. “That was so long ago. How do you even remember that?”

The creases in his face hid a deep smile. “I’m very sentimental. I remember even the smallest details. Look here.” He wrapped his finger around the teapot. “This pot was my Tō-san’s. It’s decades old. I’m still using it today.”

“Tō-san?”

“My father was educated when Japan still ruled Taiwan, so he made me call him Tō-san. Speaking of which, it was my great-grandfather who started this tea shop. Maybe one day I can show you some stuff from that era.”

“Wow... amazing...” Cheng Ai was at a loss for words. She hung her head in shame. “A-Kong,¹ you remember so many things. I wish I could be like you, but I can’t even remember things that happened with my own A-Kong. I was trying to recall something on the way here, but couldn’t. I don’t know why.”

Her shame boiled again, like tea leaves dying hot water.

Wu Wen-Kuei chuckled softly. Wisps of his white hair shimmered against the weathered red brick wall, stained with decades of stories. “Don’t worry! You don’t have to try so hard. What makes memories so fascinating is they emerge when you least expect them.”

His smile grew brighter. “For example, I just recently remembered how, when your A-Kong was a young man, he’d always come over unannounced and demand a pot of tea. I forgot what I’d brew up for him – it might’ve even been leftover stems. Anyways, it wasn’t anything special, but I just suddenly remembered this snippet from our shared past.”

He poured the tea into the cups, the lamplight reflected in the amber liquid like a shining lake in miniature.

“Try it! Your A-Kong’s favorite tea.”

Cheng Ai gazed at the tea in her cup. It felt as if her A-Kong had steeped the tea himself, just for her. She lifted her warm cup, the heat of it filling her hand, its aroma like silk. She lightly quaffed the drink. Warmth traveled up her tongue and through her body, straight to her heart.

She was transported to a faraway past, her younger self bouncing up and down as her A-Kong held her hand. They were walking down the boulevard, the aroma of tea wafting through the air. “A-Kong,” she blurted out, “what tea is that?”

The setting sun bathed her A-Kong in red light, his cheeks suffused with happiness. He said hoarsely: “It’s probably Wen-Kuei’s tea shop! Would you like to visit?”

“Yay! I love Wen-Kuei A-Kong’s tea!”

“Then first, shall we stop by the convenience store to buy some candy? We can pair it with the tea. What do you say to that?”

“Yay! A-Kong, you’re the best!”

Cheng Ai’s eyes welled up.

¹ “A-Kong”, literally “paternal grandfather” in Taiwanese, is regularly used both as the term for “Grandfather” and as a term of familiarity / endearment for older-aged male adults in one’s social circle. Cheng Ai uses “A-Kong” in this instance to show the warm familiarity she feels toward her father’s close friend, Wen-Kuei.

She cradled the cup in her hands and took another sip, tasting the most normal of days. They felt precious and sweet on her tongue.

“How is it?” Wu Wen-Kuei asked quietly.

Nodding vigorously, she set the cup down. Her voice shook as she spoke. “It tastes like memories.” And as she spoke, her tears finally fell. She cried harder and harder, hastily wiping at her face. Her voice trembled as she stammered, words catching in her throat: “I’m s-sorry, I, it’s not – I just remembered something about my A-Kong, and, and I couldn’t stop myself from crying...”

Wu Wen-Kuei passed her a pack of tissues, and asked gently, “What did you remember? Are you sad?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine.” It was exactly the opposite. She felt so happy. “It’s so strange, I suddenly remembered living with A-Kong here in Dadaocheng. The memory was nothing special, but it means so much to me.”

She smiled. Wu Wen-Kuei looked at her, then gave a hearty chuckle. He filled the teapot with water once again, then refilled her cup. He told her solemnly: “Cheng Ai, remember this feeling. Memories never truly disappear. They lurk within our senses, bringing us back again and again to the past.”

And so the afternoon passed. Through multiple steepings of Dongding oolong, Cheng Ai and Wu Wen-Kuei talked about everything and more, from her career plans to the goings on in Dadaocheng, each topic flowing into the next.

“We actually make some set meals upstairs. Unfortunately you came at a bad time. Right now it’s just this old bag of bones in the shop, but normally I have some young helpers. And if one were here, I’d have him make you a bowl of noodles,” Wu Wen-Kuei told her.