

# 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.

# TEAHOUSE LADIES: STORIES FROM TAIPEI'S RED LIGHT DISTRICT

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.

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Translated excerpt provided by Guerrilla

## Foreword

### The Secret that Cannot be Told

Teo Sin Ee

In 2007, while I was doing an internship with OMF Taiwan, I met Dutch missionary Tera van Twillert. She had started a new ministry, visiting the women who worked in the tea houses and on the streets of Wanhua, Taipei's old red-light district. Two years later, I answered God's call to missions and started serving at the Pearl Family Garden Women's Center.

Our mission is to bring the gospel to women in the red-light district. To build relationships, we visit women where they work to initiate contact and get to know them. We invite them to our meetings. Although some people may not be interested in the Christian faith, they enjoy the friendly and warm atmosphere. Our center serves a wide variety of women, from tea house hostesses to sex workers, from low-wage workers to the elderly poor and homeless.

### The stories of women in Wanhua District

Several years ago, I read a book written by Shine Lee about the homeless people in Wanhua. I wondered, "If these are the stories of men in Wanhua, where are the stories of women?"

When I introduce our ministry to churches in Taipei, most Christians have not heard of tea houses or sex workers in Wanhua District. They are surprised. "Are there such places in Taipei?" These middle-class folks have lived in this city for decades but they have no idea that just a stone's throw from the shopping district in Ximending, the Presidential Office and Taipei Main Station, there is a different world.

Here, hostesses ply men with tea or alcoholic drinks, entertaining them with small talk. They sing karaoke in smoke-filled rooms. Some of these women are paid to have sex with men in dark, narrow rooms. When my audience hears that most of these women are in their fifties or even older, they are incredulous.

This book contains the life stories of twelve women. I have known them for many years and asked if they would like to be included in our book. Shine Lee conducted the interviews, usually two to three hours long, and attempted to condense the details of a lifetime into a few thousand words. Out of the twelve women, six worked in tea houses. The other six were involved in the sex trade. They have since retired or found other jobs. To protect their privacy, we have

changed their names and minor details.

Although they work in the same neighborhood, tea house hostesses and sex workers form two distinct groups. Hostesses may engage in prostitution but do not see themselves as sex workers. Sex workers are not interested in frivolous conversation or selling the fantasy of romantic love.

Nevertheless, these two groups of women share some common ground. Most of them were born in the fifties or sixties to poor families. Their parents, often involved in agricultural or blue-collar jobs, favored sons over daughters. The women gave up schooling in order to support their families and send their brothers to school. They worked hard to provide for their parents and siblings. Their burdens did not lessen after marriage, most of time things got worse with more mouths to feed.

### **The secret that cannot be told**

Lacking education and skills, these women stayed in the sex trade after marriage. They lied to their children about their jobs, claiming to be cleaners, factory workers or hawkers in the night market. Their children grew up without knowing the truth and sometimes, resentment would rear its ugly head. “Why did other kids grow up with their mothers around? Where were you when I needed you?”

They think that their self-worth depends on their financial contribution to the family. Their adult children are emotionally distant but still expect Mum to cough up money when they need it. Some women take on responsibilities that exceed what is reasonable for a daughter or mother, to the extent of buying properties for their parents and children. When they are short of money, they turn to loansharks or gambling instead of asking family for help.

The subject of tea house hostesses and sex workers is a taboo one in Taiwan. The prevalent attitude is, “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” This is not something that “good” or “moral” people talk about. If we do not speak about it, then we can pretend that it does not exist and carry on with our lives.

According to the results from a 2004 survey done by the Academia Sinica, it is estimated that 1.75 million Taiwanese men have paid for sex at least once. On average, 270,000 men a year (or three percent of the male population) pay for sex. Imagine the number of marriages and families that have been affected by the buying and selling of sex.

In 2019, the Collective for Sex Workers and Supporters (COSWAS), an advocacy group for sex workers, estimated that there were 100,000 sex workers, with 30 million transactions a year, generating NT\$60 billion (US\$2 billion) in revenue. This does not include the economic output of businesses that depend directly or indirectly on the sex trade (e.g. restaurants, massage parlors, liquor stores). This vast eco-system also supports the employment across a wide cross-section of the service sector (e.g. security guards, taxi drivers, deliverymen).

How does a son or daughter respond to the knowledge that his/her mother is a sex worker? When COVID broke out in 2020, Ching contracted COVID in a tea house. When her daughter found out that Ching was working in a tea house, she called the money that Ching earned “dirty” and

demanded that her mother move out. Ching felt so ashamed, she left the home that she had bought with her own money.

### **Leaving a record**

Taiwanese society is generally accepting of former addicts and inmates who have made good. We hear stories of these prodigal sons and daughters in the media. But it is almost impossible for sex workers—at least those belonging to the post-war generation—to talk about their experiences. That is how much they have internalized the stigma and shame.

I got to know Autumn when I first started working at Pearl Family Garden. She had turned to sex work many years ago to support her drug habit. She was in and out of prison a lot. After she served her last sentence, she decided not to return to the red-light district. She lived with Tera and got baptized at a local church. At her baptism, she shared honestly about her addiction and incarceration, and testified to the way God changed her life. However, she did not utter a single word about her old job. Later, Autumn had cancer and passed away. During her memorial service, I was struck by the thought, “What if I forget her story?”

The importance of recording these life stories was brought home with another unfortunate incident. Snow was a sex worker in her 60s, she was fair and her hair was always perfectly coiffed. She styled her hair at the salon every other day.

After several operations, Snow could not walk very well. She needed a Zimmer frame but feared that it would make her look old and decrepit, scaring off the customers. Despite her age, she waited for customers on a corridor facing the street. One day, she fell down and could not get up. There was no way she could live independently. The social worker managed to place Snow in a nursing home. When we visited her, she complained of constant pain. Sadly, she passed away after only two weeks.

After the police informed Snow’s family of her death, her youngest son showed up and he wanted to know more about her life in Wanhua. He got in touch with her social worker, who referred him to me. I met up with him and heard his story.

After suffering years of abuse by her husband, Snow left home when her youngest son was ten years old. He recalled riding his bicycle, chasing the bus that carried her away. Later, he decided to become a hairdresser because of Snow’s penchant for frequenting hair salons. He thought this would improve his chances of finding his mother.

Snow’s son went to see the room where she used to live. It was at the end of a long corridor. With its wooden partitions, it was more like a cubicle than a room. There was a stool, a small desk and mirror. The wooden bed was piled high with pillows, blankets and clothes. I had visited her room once, it was so small that I could not stretch out my arms. Sleeping on the bed must have felt like lying in a coffin, it was so claustrophobic.

In tears, he said, “It was such a small room, old and musty. Even the apprentice at my salon has better living conditions.”

“What did my mother do for a living?”

I was not sure how to answer him. Would Snow have wanted me to tell him the truth?

Was I at liberty to divulge her secret? I said vaguely, "It's what you see."

The only photo of Snow in her son's possession was on her ID card. Usually, we did not take photos to protect the privacy of the women who came to our center. But the year before, I had wanted to document the living conditions in Wanhua. Snow agreed to allow a volunteer photographer into her room. This was how I had a portrait of Snow with her perfectly coiffed hair, smiling, her eyes gazing into the distance. I showed her son the picture and assured him.

"Your mother is now with God. You don't have to worry about her. She has not been forgotten."

The women from the Pearl Family Garden have finally told their secrets. With the passing of time, the task becomes more urgent. By leaving a record of their stories, I hope that they will not be forgotten.

Jade is one of the women featured in this book is Jade. When she was interviewed, she lamented, "It will take more than three days and nights to tell my story." How can a few thousand words adequately describe a life of suffering? She was sold into prostitution by her father. After enduring a violent marriage, she was left to her disabled grandsons on her own.

When Shine finished writing Jade's story, I read it to Jade. She was reluctant to hear what had been written. "Can we not talk about these things? It's so shameful. Who would want to hear my story?" I assured her repeatedly, "It's not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. You don't have to be ashamed."

Almost every woman featured in the book has experienced sexual exploitation and violence. It is a story shared by many working-class women in Taiwan.

### **Giving new meaning to old stories**

You might ask, "So what if Jade and others tell their secrets? So what if they speak the truth that cannot be named? Aren't they reliving the traumatic experiences as they tell their stories?"

Re-telling the traumatic past may not bring healing but giving new meaning to the past will. When a survivor is able to view her experience in a new light, it's the first step on the road to recovery.

Ah Kuan shared about her childhood during a workshop to make her "life storybook". When her adoptive mother died of cancer, she was only fourteen. The loss of her mother made her look for love in other places. She said, "I lost my way and became a bad girl." When she got pregnant, she was forced to marry a man—not the father of her child—but one old enough to be her father. Fifty years later, Ah Kuan still felt keenly the loss of her mother. If her mother had been alive, would her life have turned out differently?

Realizing that Ah Kuan needed a different perspective on her loss, the leader of the workshop told her, "Do you know that your mother's love has remained in your heart all this time? Even now you talk about how much she loved you. Her love did not vanish with her passing." As Ah Kuan grappled with this message, her eyes lit up.

There is a story in the Bible (Luke 8:43-48) about a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years but no one could heal her. Jewish society would have treated this woman as an

outcast, she was considered unclean and shameful.

When she touched Jesus' cloak, her bleeding stopped.

"Who touched me?" Jesus asked. No one came forward. "Someone touched me; I know that power has gone out from me."

The woman, realizing that she could not go unnoticed, came trembling and fell at his feet. In the presence of all the people, she told Jesus why she had touched him and how she had been instantly healed.

Then he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace."

Why did Jesus want the woman to confess in public? Why did he embarrass her? Why did he not allow her to sneak away?

Jesus wanted to remove the "unclean" label from this woman. He wanted everyone to know that she was healed and ceremonially clean. She could now rejoin the community.

I explained one of the purposes of this book to the women. "Whatever happened in the past cannot be changed. But as we become stronger, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, we can accept the past and accept ourselves. The past will no longer be able to hurt us."

The stories collected in this book are based on interviews with these twelve women. Shine Lee has tried, as much as possible, to tell the story from their perspective, in their own words. These are not sensational stories that appear in the media about tea house hostesses and sex workers but stories from the heart.

When I asked the women for permission to include their photos in this book, those who were most closely associated with the Pearl Family Garden had the least qualms. They felt accepted by our team and the other women at the center. They were not so worried about the negative judgment of the outside world.

## **Stories of resilience**

I pray that this book will enable more people to hear the stories of these women, to understand why they entered the sex trade. Faced with setbacks, mishaps and suffering, they tried their best to survive. Although I do not agree with all their choices, I admire their resilience. No matter how hard life was, they persevered and survived. I do not want to pretend that everything is bright and beautiful. There are still many grey areas, temptations and struggles in their lives.

Shine and I have tried our best to ensure that these stories do not portray our friends as sad or pitiful victims. Instead, I hope that you will see their resilience. Perhaps you have similar life experiences. Perhaps you see that their identities are not defined by their work, they are also daughters, mothers, grandmothers and wives, individuals with their own unique personalities and preferences. Perhaps these stories will cause you to ponder the problems of our society. Why do some women still feel that they have no choice but to enter the sex trade? To what extent is this choice forced or voluntary? How is it that we can so easily turn God-given desires for love and intimacy to selfish carnal lust? Why is our society no longer shocked by the objectification of women and physical intimacy?

May these stories show you that with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26), that he

always provides a way out. There is hope, even for seemingly hopeless people and situations. If these stories give you the strength to name your own unspeakable secrets and to find compassion for those at the margins of society, then our efforts have been worth it.

The stories of three Pearl Family Garden staff are also included in this book. We have ten full-time and part-time staff from five countries – Taiwan, the Netherlands, Singapore, Australia and Switzerland. We come from diverse cultures. We have very different family backgrounds and personalities. I believe that God has put us together so that we may complement each other with different strengths and perspectives. In the face of external challenges and internal struggles, we are not especially self-sacrificial or loving. There are times when we feel helpless, angry or depressed. In the words of the apostle Paul, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9)

I, too, have been inspired as I read these stories. Life may be full of ups and downs but we can always carry on because of our loving Father and the fellowship of our sisters. Though the night may be dark, his light still shines – and we carry on.

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#### About The Pearl Family Garden Women’s Center

The Pearl Family Garden Women’s Center is located in Taipei’s red-light district. We have a holistic ministry reaching out to sexually exploited women.

This book provides a rare glimpse into Taipei’s tea houses—a euphemism for establishments where women do more than serve tea. Shine Lee interviewed twelve women who worked as tea house hostesses or sex workers. Now in their 60s and 70s, they’ve found hope in Jesus but still face many temptations and struggles.



## **My Theme Song**

When Taiwan was still under martial law, artistes had to apply for a permit to perform on stage. Some auditioned many times but failed to get the permit. In contrast, Rose got the permit the first time she auditioned at the age of 16. Fifty years later, she recalled the event with obvious pride, "I received my permit at the same time as Teresa Teng (famous Taiwanese singer)." Rose spoke at a rapid clip. Although we were speaking face-to-face, her voice was loud enough for others in the room to hear.

Rose's father did not receive much of an education but he was an excellent mechanic. He worked for the government-owned oil company and was based in Hsinchu County. During the Japanese colonial era, her father's skill in repairing machines was recognized with the title "most holy teacher". He also ran a camphor factory at home but his business partner ran away and left him a debt of more than 300,000NT. Rose exclaimed, "Think about it, the value of 300,000NT more than sixty years ago! How could our family carry on?"

The oil company provided Rose's family with a large house. They were able to grow vegetables and raise chickens. Rose was the youngest of twelve children. When she was old enough to go to school, her family's financial situation had recovered enough for her to own a new pair of shoes. Rose was good with languages, she won prizes in recitation competitions but dropped out after seventh grade.

"I used to go to school with bruises on my hands and legs, it was too embarrassing!" Rose's mother favored sons over daughters. Even if it was her brothers who did something wrong, her mother would vent her anger on Rose. She was afraid to bathe. Whenever she took off her clothes, her mother would land blows with a bamboo cane.

Rose's classmates had a suggestion. "You have such a lovely voice. Why don't you become a singer?"

Indeed, Rose loved to sing. When she was free, she would run to the dam and practice. Rose's Third Sister brought her to Taipei to look for a teacher. They found a dance troupe but Rose did not dare to bare her legs and dance on stage. They heard about a talent agency on Nanjing East Road, that turned out to be a scam. Finally, Rose enrolled in a class for aspiring singers at a radio station and embarked on the road to stardom.

## **Traumatic turning point**

At the urging of her older brothers, Rose's Third Sister met a man from the US. He was back in Taiwan to celebrate the birthday of General Chiang Kai-shek. Although he was a widower with a son who was older than Third Sister, his nephew was a member of the National Assembly. Third Sister thought his background might help Rose in her singing career and agreed to marry the man.

Rose performed in cabarets, hotels and other venues all over Taiwan. With the help of the assemblyman, she even sang on national television. But when she returned to Hsinchu City, her life took a turn for the worse.

Rose became the resident singer at a cabaret. One day, she was waiting for her colleague at the entrance of the cabaret. A man came out of a nearby restaurant. When he saw Rose, he shouted to one of the cabaret owners, "Ah Lu, Ah Lu, Rose is inside!" Rose did not recognize the men who rushed out. She was scared and ran into the ticket office and locked herself inside. But the men kicked the door open and dragged her out. After much struggling, Ah Lu raped Rose in the changing room.

Rose was imprisoned in a motel room near Hsinchu train station. The men left a sidekick to keep watch. Rose was desperate and wanted to hang herself. Her manager realized that she had been kidnapped and came to the motel to look for her. Afraid of crossing Ah Lu and his gang members, he left without calling the police. Fortunately, one of the cabaret dancers staying in the motel contacted Rose's father, who came to rescue her.

Upon returning home, Rose could not eat. She was sleepy all the time. When her family realized something was wrong, they took her to the doctor. That was when Rose found out that she was three months pregnant.

"My father was the head foreman at the oil company, with more than two thousand workers working under him. He couldn't lose face," said Rose.

Rose's father found Ah Lu and promised not to press charges if Ah Lu was willing to marry Rose. To avoid bringing shame to the family, Rose left her family home through the back door, in the middle of the night. She stayed in a hotel until the wedding took place.

Once married, Rose had to wake up at five o'clock in the morning to make breakfast for the family. Ah Lu was a butcher but spent most of his time gambling. Not only did he pawn Rose's gold jewelry, he beat her up and forced her to work in a "restaurant", where she drank alcohol with male customers.

After Rose gave birth to her second child at the age of 19, she thought of a way to escape from her marriage. She asked Ah Lu for a divorce so that his creditors couldn't demand money from her. They would only be divorced in name but she gave him custody of her two sons. "I didn't want to separate the two boys. I told Ah Lu, either both of them leave with me or they stay here with you."

Rose moved to a nearby apartment. Ah Lu dropped by frequently, helping himself to the electrical appliances and money given by Rose's adoring customers. One of these customers promised to take care of Rose and brought her to Taipei.

Rose recalled, "I thought that leaving my husband would put me out of my misery. But I didn't realize that I was jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Who knew that this guy was already married? Why is Fate so cruel to me?"

### **If you're not afraid to die, why are you afraid of pain?**

When she was pregnant, Rose's mother had brought her to the fortune teller. He had bad news for her, "You are ruined." Another fortune teller said, "She should only get married at the age of 26." But by the time she was 26, Rose had already left her husband. Rose was resigned to her fate, "What can I do? I'm destined for a life of suffering."

When Rose found out that her lover was a married man, she got drunk and took a taxi to Yehliu, a seaside town on the northeastern coast. She wanted to kill herself by jumping into the ocean. Local residents noticed that she was barefoot, disheveled, and acting suspiciously. They followed her and called the police. Unable to commit suicide, Rose took a taxi home and tried again. She climbed to the top floor of her apartment.

As she shouted, "Father, mother, I'm so sorry," Rose fell from the sixth floor, hitting a canopy before landing on the ground. A policeman who was patrolling in the vicinity heard the noise. He called an ambulance to send Rose to the hospital.

Rose fractured her thigh and pelvis. Two broken ribs pierced her lungs. When the doctor wanted to insert a tube to drain the blood from her lungs, Rose was conscious and tried to stop him. He scolded, "You're not afraid to die but you're afraid of pain?"

After a month in hospital, Rose was discharged. Often feverish and delirious, she was laid on a cot next to the family altar. Rose confessed to her mother, "Thank you for taking care of me. This is the first time I've experienced motherly love." Upon hearing this, Rose's mother cried. Nevertheless, their relationship did not improve with her recovery.

With a sigh, Rose recalled, "I know my fate, I have a home but I cannot return to it."

When she could walk again, Rose returned to Taipei. She had a few relationships but never thought of getting married again. "I'm a Virgo, I'm picky about the men that I date." She was also worried that after shattering her pelvis, she could not give birth again.

### **Is America far enough?**

When Rose turned thirty, Third Sister came back to Taiwan for a visit. As they were shopping, they passed by a fortune teller. The man pointed at Rose and warned her sister, "Take this woman away. The further the better. Don't let her stay in Taiwan or she'll go crazy."

Third Sister believed the fortune teller. After returning to the US, she called Rose several times, "Why don't you move to the US and live with me?" Rose wanted to see for herself how her sister was doing. She explained, "My sister only tells me the good news, never the bad."

Third Sister lived in Queens, New York. She knitted sweaters for a living. Her husband was a cook in a Chinese restaurant. He was from Guangzhou, China and often scolded his wife in Cantonese. Upset with her brother-in-law's chauvinistic behavior, Rose decided to learn Cantonese so she could swear at him. To learn this Chinese dialect, Rose rented video tapes of Hong Kong drama serials and watched them diligently.

Rose's gift for languages was put to good use. She learnt to speak Cantonese and English, dabbling in a wide range of jobs, from selling mobile phones to working as a housekeeper in a hotel. Her favorite job was filling jars with caviar for a seafood supplier. Rose acquired a taste for the expensive delicacy. "Beluga, Oscietra, Sevruga ... I loved them all."

Rose lived in the US for more than ten years. She returned once to visit her elderly mother and once for her son.

"Not only did my bad luck affect my parents, it also cut short the life of my son."

A high school student, Rose's elder son was stabbed to death by a juvenile gang member. Since her ex-husband was incarcerated at the time, Rose returned to Taiwan and made the arrangements for her son's funeral. After that ordeal, she collapsed into bed for three months.

Rose has an explanation for her bad luck. "My father married into my mother's family and took on her surname. Perhaps we offended a dead ancestor. We're kind people but our luck is terrible."

Not long after Rose returned to the US, she was involved in a serious car accident. A truck crashed into the car that she was traveling in. Her scalp was torn off and even today, the scar is visible.

To pay her medical bills and other debts, Rose joined a human smuggling ring. She flew to China and accompanied clients, who had paid for fake passports, to Canada. Upon arrival in Vancouver, she received US\$2500 for each client she delivered to the handler.

Once, when US custom officials searched Rose's luggage, they found a pipe for smoking weed. While waiting to be interrogated, she saw people of all colors, speaking different languages, detained for illegally entering the country. The thought that she might be sucked into this vast system and not make it out scared Rose. She never worked for a smuggler again. Shuddering, she muttered, "Once was more than enough."

Rose returned to Taiwan when she was fifty years old. A friend introduced her to the hostess bars in Taipei's Linsen North Road. Compared to Wanhua, this red-light district catered to younger, wealthier customers with more money. She recalled, "When I came home, I was already in debt. After a couple of months, I owed more money. If my customers did not pay their bills, the boss came after me."

After some time, Rose decided to try her luck in Wanhua. Her first week at a tea house, most of her colleagues took a holiday together. Without any regular customers, Rose was left high and dry. She complained, "Bad luck follows me wherever I go."

The practice of allowing customers to postpone payment was also common in Wanhua. "If you're lucky, he'll pay. If not, there goes your money." Why did she allow her customers to postpone payment? "It's a way of showing that you trust your regular customers, you want to win them over." In return, when the customers have winnings from gambling, they give the ladies generous tips.

Rose was a bold operator. She would ask many ladies to serve her customers. This way, her customers gained "face" and her colleagues could earn money. By doing her colleagues a favor, she expected them to reciprocate when they had customers. But if the customer put the bill on credit, Rose would have to pay the other ladies out of her own pocket first. It was a gamble because some customers may never pay up and Rose would end up footing the bill. Rose had many bad experiences with money. Her boyfriend of eight years ran away after using her name to borrow a large sum of money from the loanshark. Rose lost everything trying to pay that debt.

At one point, our writer, Shine, asked Rose, "It would seem that you are easily tricked?"

Rose sighed, "When I returned from the US, a fortune teller warned me to be careful or I would owe someone a lot of money. How could I have known he was referring to my boyfriend? I couldn't escape the bad luck."

## **The TV is my husband**

Rose continued to work in the tea house but she was keen to find another job. She heard about training courses for people who wanted to work as home health aides. Unfortunately, she could not afford the 5000NT registration fee. "Perhaps our Heavenly Father was already working in my life. That's when I thought of calling Tera."

Rose had met Tera when Tera was giving out Christian magazines in the tea houses. Rose knew that the Pearl Family Garden was a Christian organization. She said, "I'd heard about our Heavenly Father in my twenties. I remember watching movies about Jesus, the Ten Commandments, that sort of thing." In the US, she had been approached by door-knocking Christians. Now, the Pearl Family Garden was her only lifeline.

Rose contacted Tera, who made a bunch of phone calls on her behalf. The next day, Rose was in a training course. Tera had called a social worker, who got a waiver for the course fees. After attending the course, Rose found a job in a nursing home for the elderly.

Rose's fussy personality was put to good use. She did a good job organizing her clients' belongings, cleaning their rooms, feeding and bathing them. Her supervisor was pleased with her work. But Rose was a smoker, giving her supervisor's boss a bad impression. Rose was only allowed to work as a substitute, which meant that she could only get work when the full-time workers took time off. The cellphone reception where she lived was poor and she often missed the calls informing her to turn up for work. Soon, Rose stopped getting the calls altogether.

Even by Wanhua standards, Rose had a very cheap room. It had no windows, there were rats everywhere, and the landlord tried to coerce Rose to sleep with him in exchange for the rent. But the biggest advantage was that Rose had cable TV. "The TV is my husband." She always left the TV on so that there was something to distract her from bad memories. "To survive, I'm more or less numb, to survive, I can't think about the past."

In particular, Rose enjoyed watching TV shopping channels and buying things for her friends at the Pearl Family Garden. Shine asked, "Where do you get the money?" Rose gave a vague reply, "Sometimes I make a cameo at the tea house." Gambling is still one of her hobbies. "I do my research, I study the lottery numbers. I don't spend a lot, I try my luck with 100-200NT each time."

Five years after meeting Tera, Rose was baptized. To deal with the baggage from a lifetime of idol worship, she had a healing prayer and deliverance session with the pastor of a local church. Rose said, "All the [expletive] disappeared. I felt so light, so carefree and happy."

Tera encouraged Rose not to work in the tea house. She taught Rose to make coasters from plastic beads and paid her 50NT for each piece. Rose was proud that she was the only one at the Pearl Family Garden who could make these coasters. Nobody else had enough strength in their hands to string the beads together.

Now that she has some income, Rose no longer borrows money from her siblings. In fact, Third Sister gives her some money every year. Rose said, "I gave Tera two hundred US dollars for safekeeping. They're all new dollar bills!" Why doesn't she keep the money herself? "I don't want to use it, in case there's an emergency. I want to keep the bills as souvenirs."

With the help of the Pearl Family Garden ministry, Rose applied for social welfare and receives more than 15,000NT a month. Thanks to an offering from Singapore, Rose was able to pay 60,000NT in arrears to the national pension scheme. In return, she receives a small monthly sum every month. One of the staff at Pearl Family Garden joked with Rose, "Now that someone has invested in you, you have to live for a long time." Over time, Rose returned 60,000NT to the ministry so that other women can benefit from the same financial assistance.

God has done many miracles for Rose. Rose loved to play the lottery, it was her way of "buying hope". When I encouraged her to ask God for money, Rose scoffed, "That's like expecting a present to fall down from heaven." Then one day, Rose received a letter from the lottery company, she had been chosen as one of the beneficiaries of a program to help low-income individuals pay National Health Insurance arrears. When she received the good news, Rose had to admit that it was indeed a gift from heaven. Indeed, God has a sense of humor.

Rose still owes some people money, "About a million NT (US\$30,000), not much." It is such a large sum for her that she assumes that she will not be able to pay it off in her lifetime. Perhaps this is why she does not even bother to keep records. She just pays them whenever she can.

Shine asked, "Do you feel that your difficult life has finally taken a turn for the better?"

Rose replied, "Huh, if I'd know how much God loves me, I would have let him love me sooner. He places me in his heart, I place him in my heart, this is the happiest time of my life."

Rose still loves to sing. Occasionally, for fun and relaxation, she goes to one of the tea houses to sing karaoke. Does she have a theme song? Rose said, "Nah, but all the songs I sing, I sing with feeling." She reveals that every morning, she recites Psalm 23 as a prayer.

*"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.  
He restores my soul.  
He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,[\[c\]](#)  
I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me..."*

The girl with the dreams of becoming a star has grown old and her voice is hoarse but she still sings with feeling. Everyday, Rose prays to the Lord with all her heart, embodying the faith and thanksgiving of Psalm 23.