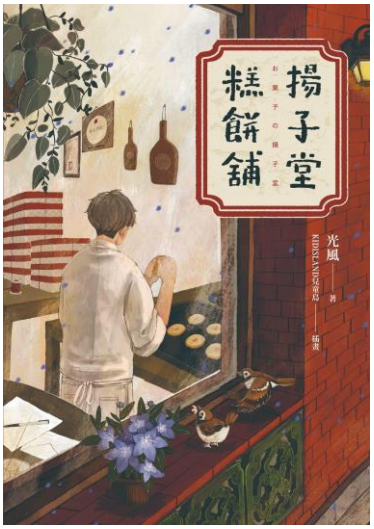
THE SUNCAKE PASTRY SHOP
揚子堂糕餅舖



After returning home from Japan heartbroken, a young man becomes an apprentice baker at his great-uncle's traditional pastry shop. As he struggles to master the art of baking he reflects on his experiences in Japan, which may, in fact, hold the key to reversing the declining fortunes of the family pastry business.

Hsu An-chun, a young Taiwanese man, struggles to get back on his feet after returning home broken-hearted from his working holiday in Japan. Sick of seeing him loafing around the house all day, his mother arranges for him to begin work as an apprentice in his great-uncle's pastry shop.

Specializing in traditional Taiwanese treats, the shop has hardly changed in the decades since it first opened, even as the tastes of Taiwanese consumers have gradually moved on. His competitors have all closed up shop, but Hsu An-chun's great-uncle keeps his pastry kitchen going through sheer persistence, and the patronage of a dwindling number of old customers.

As he learns the ropes of the trade, Hsu An-chun wracks his brain for marketing ideas that might improve business. At the same time, his thoughts turn to the contrast between the humble status of Taiwanese pastries like suncakes, and the cultured elegance of those served at the patisserie where he worked in Kyoto. As different as the two might seem at first glance, Hsu An-chun soon discovers they actually have a great deal in common. But will this be enough to bring about a change in fortune for the family business? And will his stubborn great-uncle ever take his ideas seriously?

Navigating between the cultures of Japan and Taiwan, tradition and innovation, and heartache and the promise of new love, Hsu An-chun slowly learns the exacting art of baking and the importance of duty,

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persistence, and professional pride. This tale of a young man finding his way in the world will delight readers as much with the warmth and levity of its narrative voice as it does with the enticing sights and scents of the pastry kitchen.

L.W. 光風

Born in 1989, full-time creative L.W. enjoys drawing, travel, and petting cats. Her novel *The Suncake Pastry Shop* was selected to receive support from the Ministry of Culture's fund for young writers. She has also published a picture book, *Purple in Flight*, which addresses conservation efforts to protect the double-branded crow butterfly in Taiwan. Her works have been awarded numerous local literary awards, and her latest title is *Island of a Thousand Deities*.

THE SUNCAKE PASTRY SHOP

By L.W.
Translated by Lin King

1

I think often of the days that I spent strolling along Kyoto's Kamo River with Emiko by my side.

The first walk that we went on together took place shortly after I arrived in Kyoto, when the autumn trees were a blazing red. The river's surface shone with undulating reflections of blue skies and soft clouds; the gentle breeze rustled the maple leaves, revealing shades of orange and yellow underneath the red. It was a sight that filled the heart with joy and tenderness. Emiko, who walked a little ahead of me, light on her feet, spun around all of a sudden. The sakura-colored ribbon at her collar rose fluttered in the wind as she smiled and said, "In the spring, this whole place will be covered in sakura – it's so beautiful that it literally takes your breath away! You'll have to come see them!"

From her clear eyes alone, I could already see Kyoto swirling with pink petals.

Later, Kamo River became our designated spot for long walks and heartfelt conversations. It was where we went after work at the confectionery shop, and also when Emiko was feeling down, and really whenever we, for any reason, wished to talk to each other shoulder-to-shoulder. Kamo River's waters were forever unclouded, forever unfurling into the far-off distance, as if reminding us to always be honest with ourselves.

During those months, I was too focused on watching the changes in Emiko's expressions to notice the changes on the riverside. On the day that she said, "I'm sorry, An-chun," I was shocked to see that all the trees and shrubs around us had yellowed and wilted. The new view was so desolate that it seemed as though the sakura had given up all idea of ever blooming there again. Endless winter was approaching.

I chose to leave Kyoto before my heart could break completely and headed for Tokyo. In the end, it was in bustling and lonely Tokyo where I saw the sakura blossoms that Emiko had wanted me to see. The flowers opened on every street and every corner in a way that made them seem eternal, but in the blink of an eye, at the touch of a breeze, they vanished like a dream.

The omnipresent pink across Tokyo kept reminding me of the ribbon at Emiko's throat, making it impossible to work, impossible to go outside, impossible even to breathe.

All thoughts deserted me except one: *I want to go where I can't see any sakura at all.*

That was how I ended up returning to Taiwan earlier than planned. Arriving at home, I saw that Ma had kept everything unchanged during my absence. If anything, she seemed to have made it even tidier. When I entered my room, I found her in the middle of recycling my entire collection of *One Piece* manga. She was surprised to see me. Then, perhaps to conceal her embarrassment at

being caught red-handed, she demanded whether I had been sent home because I was too incompetent. In the following days, she continued eyeing me with probing suspicion, but I would only pretend to sneeze and say, "I couldn't help it. I was too allergic to the pollen."

Everything had returned to square one – the aimless, bewildering starting point.

The sense of aimless bewilderment had dwelled within me since the day I was born, blurring my view of the path forward like congenital nearsightedness. In elementary school, the assignment that plagued me the most was always the one titled "My Future Goals". I would always procrastinate until the final moment before scribbling down, per Ma's "recommendation", that my goal was to "be a safe, healthy, and kind person". Ma had misunderstood the assignment, of course. What she recommended was every parent's wish for their child, but it was hardly a life goal.

I maintained this ambivalent attitude through junior high and high school. In Taiwan's test-based educational system, people went to whatever school their scores got them into, and I managed to get by for five years while putting in minimal effort. By senior year, my peers were each battling invisible foes, which included their own laziness; they slept while bearing the weight of uncertainty about the future and studied while bearing the terror of counting down to exam day. I, meanwhile, passed the time by packing a sandwich and a carton of milk before school each morning, sometimes going to a bookstore to rent *shonen* action manga after school, hiding behind the books' rigid spines like a freeloader of other people's imaginations.

Eventually, I tested into the Japanese department of an average university, where I began a long string of wide-ranging part-time jobs: a buffet cashier, a pool cleaner, an administrative aid for my department, a teaching assistant at a Japanese language school. I cycled through these jobs as though I was searching for something, but in reality I had no idea what it was that I was meant to be searching for. After graduating, I decided to apply for a working holiday visa to Japan, which felt like indulging in wanderlust, but also a self-imposed exile.

And then I met Emiko.

And then I was crushed by her lethal remark: "I'm sorry, An-chun."

The end.

Up until that point in my life, I had never faced any major dilemmas or difficult choices, which also meant that I'd never had any reason or need to work hard. Human life takes countless forms, and a life of never giving anything one's all is but one of these forms – not striving, not struggling, just going with the flow. Just as I am doing now, sitting cross-legged in the corner of my bedroom untouched by sunlight, snacking on some nuts while scrolling through the dozens of unanswered comments on my blog.

The comments are for the blog I started back in college called "A Wanderer's Diary". My initial thought was that there were perhaps other people out there who also felt as though the future was but a muddle. If that was case, then I thought it only natural that those of us who are lost should help each other find the way. I started writing about my experiences working the dozen or so jobs that I'd held, which attracted quite a lot of readers who asked questions and sought advice: What does this job entail? Can you make money quick? What should I do if my boss

is cheating me? My readership only multiplied after I went to Japan, with people wondering: How did you go about applying for a working holiday visa? What are the dos and don'ts of job interviews in Japan? How should I use *keigo* honorifics in Japanese so that I don't come off as rude? Do Japanese women like Taiwanese guys?

People have many, many worries. But seeing their worries relieves some of my own. *I'm not the only one* – there are thousands and thousands of people who are also full of questions about life. The thought makes me feel less alone.

Most of the recent comments are asking about whether I'm still working at Han Shun Do, whether they can stop by to see me while visiting Japan.

"Hey, I'm back in Taiwan now." I copy and paste this on all of the similar comments in one go.

Others asked why there haven't been any recent updates, adding that they looked forward to new content.

"Thank you." I type slowly, reading the words out loud as I go. "I'm taking a break for now."

"An, who are you talking to?" Ma comes in holding a basket of clean laundry and snatches away the jar of nuts that I've nearly finished.

"No one," I mumble, "nothing."

"You've been back for a while and all you've done is hole up in your room. Aren't you going to look for a job?"

"Yes." To avoid looking idle, I begin to help her fold the clothes. In the minutes of silence that follow, I think about Emiko's face as she hung up the storefront curtains after washing them – I think about her smile as she told me that the clean curtains smelled of the sun. I sniff the clothes in my hand. Does the sun smell the same here as it does in Kyoto?

"You always say yes, but you haven't even started looking," Ma says. "I already spoke to your great-uncle. You're going to go help out in his shop starting tomorrow."

I stop folding. "You mean Great-Uncle on Pastry Street? Famously grumpy and stubborn Great-Uncle?"

"He kicked out another apprentice just last week. It's not easy finding young people who are willing to apprentice in this day and age, but he – anyway, don't worry, he'll probably show a little more restraint since you're my son. Remember how much you loved his suncakes when you were little?"

"What does that have to do with this? I majored in Japanese, Ma. How am I supposed to make pastries?"

"Well, you picked up whatever job you could get when you were in Japan, didn't you?"

"But – but it's *that* great-uncle we're talking about."

That great-uncle is, to be exact, my maternal grandfather's younger brother. From what I've heard, he started helping with the family's pastry business at the age of fourteen because he didn't want to study. Every morning, while Grandpa rode his bicycle to school, Great-Uncle rode his bicycle through the city streets selling baked goods. Later, Grandpa became a civil servant while Great-Uncle became a professional pastry chef, taking over the family business.

Grandpa, before he passed, used to say, “That great-uncle of yours just can’t let go of the past, and he’s too hard on himself. That’s why his temper has gotten so bad.”

How bad can a person’s temper get? If someone asked Great-Uncle to repeat himself even once, he’d be on the verge of losing it completely; dozens of apprentices have had dough thrown at them on their first day of work, and then been told that they wouldn’t be allowed to go home until their work met Great-Uncle’s standards. Even veteran chefs have been shouted at so viciously over trivial matters that they quit in a rage. At his “record high”, Great-Uncle was the only one left in the shop after all the other chefs and apprentices walked out. Even then, he remained unfazed, continuing to work day and night, keeping up the business all by himself for a full fifteen days before collapsing from exhaustion.

As a child, I gathered from adults’ conversations that Great-Uncle must be harboring some specific source of fury that made him extremely, extremely angry, and consequently he sought out every opportunity to vent. I’ve asked my mother what exactly Grandpa meant by Great-Uncle’s “past”, but she never once gave me a straight answer – perhaps she doesn’t know herself. Considering that Great-Uncle is silent as a boulder most of the time, everyone can only guess, never striking the core of the matter.

Little did I know that his fiery rage was still burning decades later.

“Maybe I’ll try looking for another job first and save the Great-Uncle thing for later?”

“Well, what type of job are you looking for?”

I have no answer for her.

“Just go, An.” Before leaving, she tosses out a final quip that pierces my Achilles’ heel: “You don’t know what you want to do with your future anyway.”

2

“Future” is too distant a word – so distant that I couldn’t reach it even after traveling over two thousand kilometers to Japan. I could only keep walking; I could only wait and see.

My plan for my working holiday went like this: I would start in Osaka for the summer, then move to Kyoto for the fall, then to Hokkaido for the winter, then to my final stop, Japan’s City of Dreams – Tokyo.

I stuck to the plan and first found a job at a *takoyaki* street stall in Osaka for three months. The owner, Koike, was around the same age as me. With his bleach blonde hair and his sunny Osaka-style grin, he was dazzlingly handsome even when sweating profusely at the grill. He would say to me, “You can’t go on like this, An-chun. Young people should have a bit more oomph, you know what I mean?”

And so my so-called training involved shouting “Welcome!” while giving ninety-degree bows to passersby. Koike went out of his way to call out, “Louder! Louder!” That first night, I shouted “Welcome!” a total of three-hundred-and-seventy-five times, and I needed pain relief patches for my lower back from all the bowing.

Even so, Koike was less like a boss to me and more like a friend from high school – we joked around and laughed together, but we could also work together seamlessly when we got serious. Each day that I spent with him was like one of those summer *matsuri* festivals you see in Japanese movies: a whirlwind of fun that nevertheless left behind long-lasting and brilliant memories.

The autumn air in Kyoto tasted completely different from the summer air in Osaka. Kyoto possessed a certain unhurried tranquility. When I encountered geisha whom I'd only ever read about in books, I could not help but follow them into the Gion District and down Hanamikoji Street, where I took in the traditional Japanese architecture and flagstone footpaths, ever so different from Osaka's cityscape. The winding alleys made me forget the passage of time, and walking down one path only gave me the urge to go down another, and before I knew it I had arrived at Kyoto's oldest temple, Kiyomizu-dera. There I saw a large maple, lush and green except for a spot of reddened leaves at the tree's very top, the lone patch of crimson gleaming brightly under the sun. In that moment, I felt all at once that I was truly in the land where *The Tale of Genji* is set.

Filled with a sense of wonder, I wove through the alleyways, turning at various corners as I pleased until, as if by fate, I noticed the vermilion curtains of a storefront billowing in the wind. Approaching, I saw it was a traditional Kyoto *machiya* house, a two-story structure made primarily of wood, with dark roof tiles and intricately patterned lattice windows that evoked the steadiness and simplicity of time itself. A sign overhead read, in three golden characters, "Han Shun Do" –"abundant", "spring", "hall". The vermilion curtains, which covered nearly two-thirds of the entrance, had a row of small text indicating that the store was founded in the early 1860s. Also printed on the curtains was the store's white emblem: a camelia blossom with a circle at its core. But why would a store with "spring" in its name choose for its symbol a flower that blooms in the winter?

I lingered outside, pondering this mystery, only to discover that I'd been standing in front of a job advertisement all along. That was when I learned that Han Shun Do is a traditional Japanese confectionery store.

Perhaps the romantic sentiment of living alone in this foreign land had clouded my judgment, for I decided to overlook all the elements of the job advertisement that could politely be described as "extremely nitpicky" and called to schedule an interview. The lady who answered the phone spoke with the elegant tones unique to Kyoto women. She asked me to please come to the store the following morning.

"This way, please." The next day, back at Han Shun Do, I immediately recognized the woman by her voice. She wore a purple kimono the color of Tartarian aster flowers. I followed her through the shop to an inner room, where a man who seemed to be the owner sat cross-legged on the tatami floor, apparently waiting for me. Short in stature, he wore a set of traditional blue work clothes, and sported white-tinged hair and an expression as stiff as steel. As he read my résumé, he frowned so deeply that his eyebrows seemed ready to fight one another.

He asked only one question: "Taiwanese?"

"Yes, Taiwanese."

The awkward tension made me adjust my suit in spite of myself.

"That won't do. If you'll excuse me." He rose and made to leave, but the woman rushed over to intervene. She pulled him into the room next door, where they had a hushed but heated conversation. A little while later, she emerged alone, looking apologetic.

"I understand," I said. "Thank you." Getting to my feet, I found that my legs had fallen asleep from kneeling on the tatami, making my exit all the more pathetic. But, seeing as I'd come all this way, I decided to at least resolve one question in my mind. "May I inquire about something?"

She nodded.

"Why is Han Shun Do's emblem a camelia? I mean – why is it a winter flower when 'spring' is in the store's name?"

She looked surprised. "You're very observant. It's true that the camelia is usually known as a winter flower, but there are actually many varieties of camelia that bloom in the spring. Our founder had a special fondness for springtime camelias. He believed that the camelia, which could blossom resolutely whether in winter or in spring, is the most exceptional of flowers."

I hadn't been expecting such a poetic explanation and was deeply moved, yet found myself unable to respond. We retraced our steps in silence back to the storefront, where we came upon a group of Chinese customers gesturing animatedly with the only staff member. The woman in the purple kimono asked the staff what was the matter. At the same time, a Western couple entered the store, adding yet another language barrier that left the staff at even more of a loss. I bid farewell to the lady and slipped away from the chaos.

I strode out of Han Shun Do into the brilliant sun and refreshing breeze. *Have autumn days here been like this for hundreds of years?* I craned my neck and looked back at the vermilion curtains, staring at the camelia blossom that embodied the soul of Han Shun Do. I thought about the camelia flower itself, which year after year goes from bud to blossom and back to bud, a cycle that seems to promise eternal spring.

I reentered Han Shun Do and spoke in fluent Mandarin, proficient Japanese, and awkward English that was nevertheless better than the Japanese staff's. After their business was settled, I, along with the staff, sent off the two groups of customers with ninety-degree bows. The woman in the purple kimono couldn't appear more visibly pleased. She looked me in the eye and said, gently, "We'll be troubling you again for your assistance tomorrow."

Only afterward did I learn that the man who interviewed me was the current head of Han Shun Do, Mr. Imanishi Sakae, and the woman was Mrs. Imanishi. It was thanks to her that I was allowed to work at the hallowed Han Shun Do, a privilege which even many Japanese never have the chance to enjoy.

3

Thinking back to my first day at Han Shun Do, I find that I am equally nervous today as I head to my uncle's shop. My memories of the patisserie end with elementary school; I can only recall that it is somewhere on Pastry Street, close to Taichung Station. When I was little, Ma and I would take the train and then walk hand-in-hand past what used to be the most fashionable department store in town, occasionally stopping at a fabric store. Sometimes she bought me a cup of bitter but sweet *qing-cao-cha* herb tea.

These memories feel so distant that, pulling into Taichung Station on my moped, it seems to me that all the intervening years are rushing toward me, and all I can do is to stand there, immobile and dumbfounded. The once familiar train station is now defunct, and a new station has materialized on the empty plot to the old station's left. Ah, yes, I remember now – I'd seen the new station's opening ceremony in the news. It was Emiko, of all people, who'd shown it to me.

"An-chun, is this your hometown?" She held up her phone, and on the small screen was the old station that the Japanese had built in Taichung a century ago. The video was only a few seconds long, but as we watched the crowds bidding farewell to the old station on the plaza, it felt as though Emiko and I were standing at the crossroads of history, wedged between the fissure that separates one generation from the next. Together, we partook in the ending of an era and the beginning of a new one.

Alright, stop thinking about it. I refocus my thoughts, ask a few passersby for directions, and finally locate Pastry Street. I recognize Great-Uncle's store at a glance. The sun-bleached sign, as ever, announces in large characters: Yang Tze Tang.

Are Great-Uncle's suncakes still as delicious as they were in my childhood?

*

Time seems to have frozen in Yang Tze Tang. The shop's layout remains the same as ever. Passing through the front door, there is an ink-wash painting of orchids hanging on the wall to the right, its purple blossoms like lithe dancers and its ink-green leaves like flowing water. To the left is a traditional L-shaped glass display case containing gift boxes of all kinds of pastries: suncakes filled with condensed malt sugar; wife cakes that mix malt sugar with winter melon paste; pineapple cakes; pine seed cakes; salted egg yolk puffs; mung bean pies. There are more gift boxes stacked inside an open cabinet in the back of the room, their color schemes never deviating from brown, red, orange, and yellow. In the far corner of the room, there are a number of government certificates for public service hanging on the wall – seven or eight in total.

"Welcome, young man. Why don't you give our suncakes a try?"

An older woman offers me a small wedge of suncake for sampling. The outer layer is crisp and flaky, the inner filling sweet and spongy – it is at once both like and unlike the taste from my childhood.

"It's good, right? Our chefs make everything by hand, you know. Would you like a large or small gift box? The small box is 180 NTD for six pieces, the large box is 300 NTD for ten pieces."

"Auntie, I'm here to see the owner. I'm Lin Ai-hui's son."

"Oh, you're his niece's kid? Here, go up to the second floor. He's working."

I walk to the far end of the store and climb the narrow staircase on the left hand side. Instantly I find myself enveloped in the thick aroma of pastries and the whirring of busy machines. There are several chefs bustling about, making adjustments to the equipment and pouring dough onto worktables.

It's been many years, but I recognize Great-Uncle straight away. He stands at the innermost worktable with his head lowered, rolling out dough with a pin, the sunlight setting his gray-white hair aglow.

"Who are *you*?" a short, dark man demands. He is carrying a bucket of eggs and looks downright unfriendly.

"I – I'm here to see my great-uncle."

"You're Big Bro's great-nephew? Go on, then. Don't get in the way."

I step aside and let the man pass before making my way past white buckets of ingredients, sacks of flour, various work stations, and numerous busy chefs. At last, I am standing directly in front of Great-Uncle. The little finger missing from his left hand assures me that it really is him.

"Uh – Great-Uncle. It's me – An."

He slowly looks up and stares into my face for a long while, as if trying to determine whether I really am the little boy he remembers. He then lowers his head and continues flattening the dough. Afterward, he rolls up the kneaded dough, slices it into two chunks, and in the blink of an eye pinches them into dozens of little nuggets. At this point, the stern-faced man who had referred to Great-Uncle as "Big Bro" comes over with a large metal basin filled with a sticky brown filling, which he begins wrapping into the nuggets of dough.

"Go wash your hands and get changed," the man growls, "then come help."

As Great-Uncle offers no reaction to this, I have no choice but to go off in search of the handwashing sink and a set of work clothes.

"Hey. Over there." Another chef taps me on the shoulder and points me in the right direction. I notice that he has a rabbit embroidered into his work shirt.

In the time that it takes me to change clothes, the stern-faced man has already finished wrapping all of the filling.

"You're too slow, kid! Here, roll this out." He gently presses on the filled nugget of dough, and then in one motion rolls the nugget out into a flattened circle the size of a fist. The actions seems simple enough, but when I try, I find it impossible to apply even pressure to the rolling pin and the flattened dough nugget comes out looking as though it's been run over by a truck.

"Don't you know how to use your hands? The pressure needs to be consistent! Don't waste ingredients! Try again!" The man tosses aside my failed attempt. He begins to skillfully roll out perfect circles of dough while simultaneously scolding me to high heaven. Before I can register what's happening, the pastry shop has transformed into a military boot camp. I find myself caught in an endless loop of commands and actions. The merciless scolding only starts to ease when I

begin to get a marginally better handle of the technique. Before I know it, I've filled four large baking trays with cakes, and Great-Uncle is nowhere to be seen.

"Alright, you can go now. We still have a ton of other cakes to get through. You've put us way behind schedule." The gruff man pushes the baking trays into the industrial oven. The bang of the oven door as he slams it shut sounds to me like an eviction order.