

The Julia Child of Chinese Cooking, or the Fu Pei-mei of French Food?

Comparative Contexts of Female Culinary Celebrity

Abstract: Fu Pei-mei (1931–2004), cookbook author and television personality in postwar Taiwan, was often called the “Julia Child of Chinese Cooking.” While Child sought to introduce American audiences to the unfamiliar tastes and traditions of French cuisine, Fu was demonstrating Chinese cooking to a new generation of postwar housewives in Taiwan, who needed her expertise and guidance in the kitchen. Fu authored more than thirty cookbooks, many of which were bilingual Chinese-English, and hosted Taiwan television’s first instructional program on Chinese cooking for almost four decades, beginning in 1962. From a political vantage point, Fu’s culinary talent, linguistic skills, and gracious demeanor perfectly filled the existing needs of the ruling Nationalist Party on Taiwan. Fu’s comprehensive survey of Chinese regional cuisines united an otherwise fractious and fragile

postwar nation. Yet Fu would not have attained the level of popularity that she did, had she not also connected deeply with her female audience. Over decades of dramatic social change for women in Taiwan, Fu embraced both the practical and emotional needs of ordinary housewives and career women alike, who sought out her expert guidance in the onerous daily task of feeding their families. This article compares the political, gender, and media contexts of Child’s and Fu’s culinary careers, in order to highlight the distinctive impact each had on millions of television viewers and would-be home cooks.

Keywords: Fu Pei-mei, Julia Child, Taiwan, Chinese cuisine, cookbooks, television, culinary celebrity

SHE IS PERHAPS THE MOST iconic figure of food television in her country, beloved by millions of viewers who grew up watching her prepare delectable dishes with skill and verve. During the four decades of her long career, her cookbooks were bestsellers, and she helped countless numbers of home cooks and restaurant professionals alike get their start in the kitchen. It seems no exaggeration to say, as at least one author has done, that “of anyone in the last century, she influenced the most family dinner tables” and was a “paragon in passing on the culinary arts” (Wu 2013: 12).

This biographical sketch may make most Americans think immediately of Julia Child (1912–2004), but the description actually lauds Fu Pei-mei (1931–2004), the pioneering culinary celebrity of Taiwan. Without a doubt, Child and Fu occupy similar positions in culinary and television history in their respective countries. The parallels were apparent even in their own day; Fu was dubbed the “Julia Child of Chinese cooking” by *New York Times* food critic Raymond Sokolov in 1971. The title made sense when introducing Fu to American readers. But for audiences in Taiwan, it was Fu who served as the ultimate culinary touchstone, the figure against whom all other cooking authorities were measured:

there, British television host Delia Smith was introduced to Chinese readers as the “Fu Pei-mei of England,” while cookbook author Elinor Schildt was called the “Fu Pei-mei of Finland” (Huang 1996; Shen 1996).

While Child’s rise to fame has been explored in great detail (Fitch 1997; Child 2006; Shapiro 2007; Reardon 2010; Polan 2011; Spitz 2013), Fu Pei-mei’s postwar culinary career will be less familiar to many readers. Fu’s career closely paralleled Child’s; they spanned the same decades of postwar economic growth, borne along by the rising tide of the new medium of television. Fu is best known to foreign audiences for her bilingual introduction to Chinese cooking, *Pei Mei’s Chinese Cookbook*, published in three volumes from 1969–79. Yet to home audiences in Taiwan, she is even better known for her television cooking shows, which she hosted continuously for forty years, beginning in 1962. Fu also led a flourishing cooking school in Taipei and traveled around the world, demonstrating Chinese cooking to eager overseas audiences.

Tracing the trajectory of Fu’s postwar career highlights critical differences between the two women and the political, social, and cultural contexts they each inhabited. Julia Child was quite unlike anyone Americans had ever previously

imagined in their kitchens. She was less interested in giving practical help to housewives than she was in introducing the time-honored traditions, tastes, and techniques of French cuisine. With her towering size, fluty voice, and animated personality, she shared with Americans the sophisticated joys of a cuisine that they did not yet even know they were missing.

Meanwhile, Fu's success in Taiwan centered on how well she fit the existing expectations and needs of her various audiences. Fu's career got its start because her combination of culinary talent, linguistic competence, and gracious demeanor fulfilled a clear need for the state-sponsored Taiwan Television network (and by extension, the ruling Nationalist Party). Fu's comprehensive survey of Chinese regional cuisines united an otherwise fractious and fragile postwar nation, brought together by the universal Chinese appreciation for good food. But Fu endured as a television icon because she filled a practical and emotional need for her legions of female fans, for whom she represented the consummate housewife and caring mother, cooking to feed and nurture her whole family. Over decades of dramatic social change for women in Taiwan, Fu found an audience among ordinary housewives and career women alike, who sought out her expert guidance in the onerous daily task of feeding their families.

Culinary Contexts

The publication of Julia Child's monumental *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961) and the debut of her groundbreaking television program, *The French Chef* (1963–73), came at just the right cultural moment in America. Curiosity about continental cuisine blossomed as middle-class American travelers, such as Child herself, returned home from stints abroad with a hunger for the elevated tastes of foie gras and pan-roasted duck. French cuisine in America, long the purview of specialized gastronomic societies, became synonymous with fine dining itself (Strauss 2011). Politics offered another source of inspiration: Americans not only fell in love with their chic, new First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy, they also followed her *affaire de coeur* with all things French. The Kennedys installed Rene Verdon as the White House chef, while Child made it possible for ordinary Americans to put *boeuf bourguignon* on their dinner tables.

Child's approach to cooking served as a refreshing remedy to an industrialized American foodscape at the time. "American" (white, middle-class, mainstream) cooking of the 1950s meant embracing industrial, processed foods, marketed as time-saving shortcuts for harried housewives (Shapiro 2004). As Child later recalled, a "typical dessert" of the time was a "jellied molded object somewhat in the shape of an upright banana ... Imbedded

in this structure were cubes of banana, peeled white grapes, and diced marshmallows, the whole garnished by canned whipped cream generously squirted into mounds about its base" (Child 1999). As a result of her two years of training in classical French cuisine at Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris from 1949 to 1951, Child did not shrink from spending time in the kitchen or money on quality, fresh ingredients.

While postwar Americans may have been unfamiliar with the techniques and principles of French cuisine, why would audiences in Taiwan hunger to learn more about how to cook *Chinese* food at this very same mid-century moment?

To answer this question requires some familiarity with Taiwan's distinctive history. The island of Taiwan lies a little more than a hundred miles off of China's southeastern coast, and Han Chinese migrants from coastal provinces began arriving in the seventeenth century, joining a small population of indigenous natives. During its early history, Taiwan was alternately a site for European trading posts, a pirate enclave, and a remote outpost of the Chinese empire until finally, by the end of the nineteenth century, it became a Japanese colony, which it remained until the end of World War II (Andrade 2008; Liao and Wang 2006).

Yet the greatest shift in Taiwan's modern political fortunes and demographic composition came as a result of China's long-simmering civil war between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. The Communists emerged victorious in 1949, under the leadership of Mao Zedong. The Nationalists, under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, retreated en masse to Taiwan, with the gradually diminishing hope of someday reconquering the mainland. As a result, a massive wave of approximately one million refugees fled to Taiwan, including Fu herself. Fu had grown up in the northern Chinese city of Dalian while it was a Japanese-occupied territory and left for Taiwan in 1949, when she was eighteen years old. These wartime refugees, who came to be known as "mainlanders" (*waishengren*, lit. "people from outside provinces"), joined an already existing island population of six million, who by contrast were known as "native provincials" (*benshengren*, lit. "people from this province") (Rigger 2011; Yang 2012).

Although both groups were of Han ethnicity and all had migrated to the island, just at different points in centuries past, tensions flared. Mainlanders by and large supported and constituted the dominant Nationalist Party, while many native Taiwanese chafed at the restrictions placed on political dissent. The imposition of martial law by the Nationalists in 1949 meant the prohibition of rights of assembly, a ban on new political parties, and government control of the news media. Social, economic, and cultural distinctions also divided the populations: mainlanders occupied positions of economic

prominence, spoke different dialects, and had endured a very different recent history. Eliminating political dissent also meant controlling cultural capital: Taiwanese (a dialect of Hokkien from southern Fujian Province) and other dialects were banned from schools, while Mandarin (originally a northern dialect but for centuries the standard for Chinese government officials) was imposed as the official language (Rigger 2011).

While the differences between mainlanders and native Taiwanese served as a point of friction and stress in political and social terms, they became a point of curiosity with regard to the culinary. The huge influx of mainland migrants in the postwar period dramatically altered Taiwan's foodways. Mainlanders hailed from all parts of China: Zhejiang and Jiangsu Provinces in the east, Guangdong and Fujian Provinces in the south, Sichuan and Hunan Provinces in the west, Shandong and Hebei Provinces in the north, and all points in between. Mainlanders, unfamiliar with traditional Taiwanese dishes, hankered for a taste of home—and brought with them the cooking techniques and food traditions of their native regions.

Likewise, native Taiwanese who had grown up on the island found themselves curious about the great variety of regional Chinese dishes their new neighbors ate. Mainlanders and native Taiwanese alike could sample this extraordinary variety at mainland restaurants that were both tasty and cheap (Tseng

2015). Arjun Appadurai has described a similar dynamic occurring in India, in the postwar fluorescence of regional and ethnic cookbooks written by and for urban, middle-class housewives. These cookbooks represented the “emerging culinary cosmopolitanism” of the growing urban middle classes, interested in moving beyond traditional “caste, language and ethnic boundaries” (Appadurai 1988: 7).

Thus in spite of the fact that civil war had torn families and the country itself apart, those same circumstances greatly enhanced Taiwan's culinary diversity. In the 1979 introduction to the third volume of her best-selling cookbook series, Fu Pei-mei extolled Taiwan as a gourmet China in miniature: “At present, it is only in Taiwan that the pleasure of eating authentic Chinese food from all parts of China can be experienced... In Taiwan, there are people from every part of China, and thus there are restaurants representing each province” (Fu 1979: 3). Fu introduced her audience to the distinctions of these regional specialties by arranging the first volume of her cookbook series by geographical region, including recipes from eastern, southern, western, and northern China. This was a departure from other Chinese cookbooks published in Taiwan at the time, which were arranged by cooking method, main ingredient, and even season.

A large part of Fu's appeal as an instructor and general cooking authority was precisely her familiarity with the whole



FIGURE 1: Fu Pei-mei's best-selling three-volume cookbook series, published from 1969–79.

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canon of Chinese regional cuisines. Chen Yingzhou, a native Taiwanese woman who began working in 1971 as Fu's assistant in her cooking classes, described her introduction to the range of Chinese regional cuisines in this way:

I was from the countryside, and back then, we just ate small, local dishes [*jixiangcai*, i.e., local home-cooking]. As for banquet dishes from the eight great Chinese regional cuisines, such as Shanghai, Fujian, Guangdong, Sichuan, etc., we rarely saw them in the countryside, because I was a native provincial [*bensheng*, i.e., Taiwanese] kid. Teacher Fu taught famous dishes from each of China's major culinary regions. So at the time, I really had my eyes opened—I thought, wow, these dishes are so unique and special. (Y. Chen 2014)

Fu's Chinese cookbooks underscored the popular notion that Taiwan had preserved the traditional foodways of China, all but destroyed on the mainland in the wake of the Communist takeover. As Tom Gold (1993: 171–72) has described, the Nationalists “assiduously promoted the idea that the island was the repository and guarantor of Chinese tradition as well as the mainland's rich diversity...Taiwan became a microcosm of pre-1949 mainland China as interpreted by the [Nationalist Party].” With regard to Chinese foodways, Nationalist claims were not entirely unreasonable: during the same years that Fu Pei-mei established her cooking school and launched her career on Taiwan television, mainland China was plunged into the devastating man-made famine of Mao's Great Leap Forward (1958–61), followed by the unremitting political chaos of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Few during the Maoist period would have admitted a bourgeois concern over the pleasures of cuisine, and most would have been preoccupied with food as basic, daily sustenance.¹ But the comforting idea of preserving “authentic” Chinese food traditions on Taiwan was also a Nationalist fantasy. Chinese cuisines and tastes have never stopped evolving, whether in China, Taiwan, or beyond.²

Gender and Family

Besides rising to prominence within distinct social and political contexts, Julia Child and Fu Pei-mei also envisioned different target audiences for their cookbooks and television programs. Importantly, they had diametrically opposed attitudes toward the archetypal figure of the housewife.

Julia Child took a dim view of American housewives: she bemoaned their preference for ease and convenience in the kitchen, and lamented the demands of family upon their time. She imagined as her ideal audience the meticulous home cook, unburdened by the responsibilities of child-rearing. In the introduction to her classic *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961), Child baldly wrote, “This is a book for the servantless

American cook who can be unconcerned on occasion with budgets, waistlines, time schedules, children's meals, the parent-chauffeur-den mother syndrome or anything else which might interfere with the enjoyment of producing something wonderful to eat” (Beck et al. 1961: vii).

Child herself fit this description precisely: she had an extraordinarily supportive husband with a fine-tuned palate and did not have any children. Married at advanced ages for the day (Julia was already thirty-four and her husband, Paul, forty-four), neither seemed to consider childlessness too great a loss. As Child explained, “It was sad, but we didn't spend too much time thinking about it and never considered adoption. It was just one of those things.” Indeed, having children and a career seemed antithetical in Child's mind: “We were living very full lives. I was cooking all the time and making plans for a career in gastronomy. Paul—after all his years as a tutor and schoolteacher—said that he'd already spent enough time with adolescents to last him a lifetime” (Child 2006: 94).

In contrast to Child, for Fu families were not an impediment to cooking, but the ultimate impetus for it. Fu once told a radio interviewer that most of her students wanted to learn how to cook *because* of their families, not in spite of them. Preparing good food was an act of energetic devotion to the family:

Cooking has to have some love in it... Everyone who comes to learn how to cook has their own motives, but most of the women ...want to make good dishes for their husbands and children to eat, so as to make their homes happier and cozier. I don't think there is anyone who doesn't have a family or doesn't have a sweetheart, whether a young lady or an older woman, who would think to learn how to cook just for herself to eat. That is a very unlikely situation. (Fu 1983)

While cooking for the family has been commonly regarded as a central role for women around the world and across centuries, Fu's comments had specific antecedents within Chinese cultural soil. Chinese male literati in imperial times had long praised virtuous wives and honorable mothers, but the linked four-character phrase indicating a “good wife / wise mother” (Jp: *ryōsai kenbo*) or a “wise wife / good mother” (Ch: *xianqi liangmu*) was a more recent, modern invention, borrowed from Japan at the turn of the twentieth century. There, male leaders tasked women with the domestic responsibility of creating and raising new citizens to serve the state. In early twentieth-century China, discussions of the figure of the wise wife / good mother and her responsibility in creating the “happy family” intertwined the exercise of a woman's “private virtue” in the domestic realm with the display of her “public talent” (Schneider 2011; Judge 2001). Cooking as a way of caring for the family was a natural extension of the wise wife / good mother role.

Fu herself was a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law.³ She married Cheng Shaoqing when she was twenty years old and soon after they had three children. Several years later, her parents-in-law came from mainland China to live with them. Fu was able to combine motherhood and career almost seamlessly because of the coincidentally early timing of marriage and motherhood: by the time she started teaching cooking in a tent in her backyard, her children were already in grade school, allowing her to offer classes during school hours (Cheng 2014). Fu's awareness of the particular demands placed on both housewives and working mothers in the kitchen was borne not out of empathy alone, but out of personal experience.

Fu Pei-mei's status as a wife and mother within an intergenerational family was not incidental or an obstacle to her career, but rather the cornerstone of her professional and personal identity. Indeed, the postwar Taiwan press consistently praised Fu for having achieved fulfillment in *both* her career and her family life. Not only had Fu "received the respect and love of countless people" through her work, but she had also demonstrated "filial devotion to her in-laws at home," "love and respect" with her husband, and a maternal love toward her children (Da Fang 1978).

Fu's traditional relationship with her husband, Cheng Shaoqing, is worth addressing here, particularly in contrast to the unwavering support that Paul Child provided for Julia Child over the course of her career, from designing her kitchen and hauling equipment, to chopping vegetables and washing dishes (Reichl 2012). Fu explained that she had been trained to be obedient during her early years in a Japanese school and at the hands of her conservative mother, but over the course of her lifetime she began to reevaluate the submissive role she had been assigned in her marriage. Toward the end, she mused, "I never thought about it back then, but times are different now, and lots of things were actually unreasonable" (Fu 2000: 60).

Cheng never seriously obstructed Fu's career, but Fu also took care never to challenge his sense of control. She deferred to him in decision-making regarding her career, asked his permission before going on any overseas cooking trips, and turned over all the money she earned to his safekeeping. It was this last point that was especially vexing for Fu. At the start of her marriage, she had agreed that he should control their joint assets, given that he was better with numbers. Later, particularly as her career developed, friends urged her to keep at least some of her own earnings, but she never managed to do so and always had to ask Cheng for money when she needed it. Still, the relationship was loving overall, and Fu had fond memories of her husband and their forty-eight-year marriage.

In a way, Cheng Shaoqing was actually responsible for getting Fu's career started, even though he probably never envisioned his wife working outside the home. Many times over the years Fu told the origin story about how she had learned to cook, emphasizing the negative encouragement her husband had inadvertently given her. Like Child, Fu hardly knew how to cook when she married her husband in 1951. Fu started to learn in earnest only a few years later, after her husband complained about her bad cooking. Cheng liked to invite friends over to play mahjong, and he was acutely embarrassed by the possibility of appearing to be a cheap host, since all the players put in a bit of cash each week to pay for food and cigarettes. He would grumble to Fu, "Can't you change it up a little, and make something tasty?" "What on earth have you cooked?" "Anyone could do better than you!" (Fu 2000: 88).

At the time, there were not many systematic ways for a grown woman without nearby friends and family to learn how to cook, since there were virtually no cooking schools or cookbooks readily available. Fu made some attempts to watch street vendors cook or learn from an older neighbor, but these were largely unsuccessful. Instead, according to the oft-repeated story of her self-fashioning, she eventually paid a handful of local restaurant cooks to come to her home to teach her how to cook some of their specialties. Over the course of two years, Fu cycled through the cuisines of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Sichuan, Hunan, and Guangdong provinces. Gradually, Fu, a northerner, developed enough skill to recreate elegant dishes of the southern Jiang-Zhe region (as this was the geographic origin of most of the mahjong players), such as braised eel with chestnuts, pork with fermented tofu, and braised pork chin. In a delicious twist, the mahjong players were soon asking Fu to teach their wives how to cook, which started her on the path to establishing herself as a cooking instructor in the late 1950s (Fu 2000: 89–90).

Beyond its particular details, however, Fu's life story traverses a much broader shift in social roles for women in Taiwan during the postwar decades. Fu reached the level of fame she did because she was embraced by a generation of mainlander women who both wanted and needed to learn how to cook. In the immediate postwar years, the dislocations of civil war meant that traditional, multigenerational families found themselves divided, with younger members moving to Taiwan, while older members stayed on the mainland. Fu's own situation represented this example: she had arrived in Taiwan as a teenager while her mother had remained in China. Her mother only managed to come to Taiwan in 1962, well after Fu had married and established a family. As a result of this

wartime migration, many young women lost opportunities to learn how to cook from older women in the family.

Postwar changes in educational and occupational opportunities for women also affected the traditional management of household duties. In the 1950s and '60s, the Nationalist government made elementary school compulsory for both boys and girls, a requirement extended to middle school in 1968. Educated daughters might be more inclined to focus on their formal studies rather than learning how to cook. Moreover, increasing industrialization meant additional avenues for women to find work outside the home, particularly in Taiwan's new factories. While only 35.8 percent of women in Taiwan worked outside the home in 1961, this had risen to almost 45 percent by 1990 (Shaw 2000: 151). As young, lower-class women increasingly found work in Taiwan's factories, this had the knock-on effect of reducing the number of young women available to work as housemaids. Writing in 1973, American anthropologist Norma Diamond reported that even a decade earlier many middle-class households in Taiwan could afford full-time servants, but now finding such help was difficult, to say nothing of being able to offer attractive wages (Diamond 1973: 220–21). Thus mainlander, middle-class women might find themselves without their mothers and without household help in the kitchen; armed with her relative personal experience and hard-won culinary skills, Fu was perfectly placed to come to their rescue.

Cooking on Television

The seeds of success could already be detected in Julia Child's first television appearance. Child had spent years meticulously perfecting the recipes for her cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (1961). Originally, Child had appeared on another local television talk show just to promote it, but viewer response to her enthusiastic egg-white-beating demonstration was such that the station gave her the chance to host her own half-hour cooking program, *The French Chef*, which debuted on Boston's WGBH in 1963.

Child's inimitable manner and culinary confidence endeared her to countless generations of American television audiences, more than any specific culinary skills or French techniques. She shared her pleasure in food with such genuine enthusiasm that even her occasional gaffes, such as the time she tried to flip a potato pancake only to have it land on the stove, just made her seem more like a real person and home cook, not a manicured, Betty Crocker mannequin. Part of what made Dan Akroyd's later spoofs of Child so memorable was precisely that her voice and mannerisms were so easily recognizable, so unmistakably Julia.

The circumstances of Fu Pei-mei's television debut were far more deliberate and far less spontaneous. Taiwan Television Enterprise (TTV), Taiwan's first television broadcast station, went on the air in 1962, subsidized heavily with state support. TTV offered five hours of programming per day (with one hour at lunch and four hours in the evening) and only reached viewers within a hundred-mile radius of Taipei (*Dianshizhoukan* 1962a). Penetration into average households was extremely low; the island as a whole had only three thousand television sets at the time and a total population of over nine million (*Dianshizhoukan* 1962b). Fu, who by then had been teaching her own cooking classes for a few years, was asked to appear on an evening program specifically designed for female viewers, entitled *Happy Family* (*Xingfu jiating*). Each weekday, it featured a different domestic skill meant to appeal to housewives: flower arranging, fashion, beauty, child-rearing, and cooking (Fu 2000: 106).

In its first eight months on the air, the cooking portion of the women's program was hosted by at least six female instructors besides Fu.⁴ Several of Fu's co-hosts were older and likely more experienced, having led their own Chinese cooking classes in various parts of Taiwan. Other co-hosts specialized in specific types of cooking, such as Western dessert baking—early demonstrations in the first few months of the program included lemon meringue pie, coconut layer cake, and raisin pudding.⁵ Remarkably, three short years later, it was Fu and Fu alone who was credited as the producer and host of two of TTV's cooking programs. She also edited the first *Television Cookbook* (*Dianshi shipu*) (1965), a collection of recipes aired in previous broadcasts.



FIGURE 2: Fu Pei-mei's debut on Taiwan Television, 1962.
FROM THE PERSONAL COLLECTION OF ANCHI CHENG

On one level, Fu's success was a testament to her tremendous culinary skill: she could cut anything into a thousand different shapes with a fast and furious flash of her cleaver, or wrap dumplings lightning quick with the precision of a military drill sergeant. From the start, Fu was always consciously demonstrating to viewers the two cornerstones of Chinese culinary technique, knifing skills (*daogong*) and precise control of heat and timing (*huohou*, lit., fire-time), without which one could hardly be considered a competent cook. But these skills alone would never have been enough to ensure her success on Taiwan television. After all, there were other Chinese cooking instructors who could match or surpass her culinary skills.

Instead, Fu's on-air appeal was based less on what she was able to do with her hands than what came out of her mouth. Fu's most essential skill was that she could simultaneously talk and cook, explaining in a clear, methodical fashion how to achieve success with complex Chinese dishes. The distinction is most apparent when watching episodes of Fu's cooking show from later decades, when she often invited different guests onto her program to demonstrate their specialties. More than a few guests remain silent or utter only a few monosyllables while their hands move dexterously to finesse a complex technique. Only Fu's persistent questions and commentary fill the air, prompting the pros to stop and explain what they are doing.

Essayist Ai-ya (b. 1945), who worked as a voice-over actor for another TTV program in the early years of Fu's career, describes watching Fu at work in the studio:

When the host was cooking live, she would at one and the same time chop and explain, cook and explain, all the while paying attention to the oil in the pot, the movement of her knife, the actions of her assistants, the location of the camera, the allocation of time, as well as the instructions of the director.... Every time I saw this, I was totally nervous for the host.... What if the spatula fell on the ground, or the lid of the pot clanked, or the match didn't light the gas stove, or her knife cut her hand? What then? (Ai-ya 2009)

In an era of live broadcasts, without rehearsal or pre-recording, Fu's ability to keep up the continuous patter and stay on top of the action was essential.

Critically, Fu's linguistic skills go one step further: in the context of postwar Taiwan, it was also important that Fu, born in the northern province of Shandong, could speak in clear, unaccented Mandarin, the official language chosen by the Nationalist Party. Fu herself saw it as a pity that so many talented local or regional cooks were sidelined for this very reason, recognizing that culinary skill and linguistic aptitude did not always find a home in the same body. In her introduction to the first *Television Cookbook*, Fu wrote about

the experienced men and women, "cooking instructors, famous chefs and housewives alike," who had appeared on the show as special guests:

Among them are some who are not so good at speaking standard Mandarin due to their advanced age, or who have stronger local accents and can't quite grasp the right expression when trying to explain something. This is but a small blemish in something otherwise perfect. Many famous dishes have a pronounced local flavor, so the producer [Fu herself] has made every effort to try and invite those men and women whose native places correspond to those dishes to demonstrate them, in order to preserve their unique flavor and true essence. (Fu 1965: 3)

While Fu welcomed regional culinary experts on the program for their specialized skills, not all viewers were willing to sacrifice linguistic clarity for authenticity. From a practical perspective, with so many mainlander migrants arriving on Taiwan speaking a vast range of mutually unintelligible dialects, having Fu as a television host speak standard Mandarin meant that she could reach a much wider range of viewers.

A third pillar of Fu's television persona was the visual impression she made on the screen. Fu could not only cook with skill and explain things clearly while doing it, she also took great care in her appearance, looking every inch a gracious hostess. Fu had a self-imposed "uniform" of a form-fitting *qipao* (mandarin collar dress), apron, and coiffed hair, particularly for her overseas appearances. She was very proud of her extensive apron collection, which included three hundred examples, and always chose a different one to wear on the air. So many viewers wrote to her to ask about her aprons, hoping to copy the designs, that she eventually put on an exhibition of her entire collection in 1977. In an interview, Fu said she wanted to encourage the use of aprons among women in Taiwan, noting that "Aprons are symbols of industriousness and competence" (Huang 1977).

Fu's appearance and bearing as a kind of übercompetent housewife, always remaining calm and in control, despite the nonstop activity of her hands, made a deep impression on viewers—particularly when contrasted with real women they observed cooking at home. As one viewer recalled in 2011, "Teacher Fu Pei-mei always wore a *qipao*, matched with a white ruffled apron, and her hair was either blow-dried into a bouffant, or it was wound up into an elegant bun. She completely fit the fashion trends of that era. She was certainly quite distinct from the figure of my own mother in the kitchen, with her messy hair and grubby face, battling against the oil and smoke" (Mi-guo 2011). On television screens, Fu appeared to be the complete wise wife / good mother package: tidy, attractive, knowledgeable, caring, and also one helluva cook.

Connecting with Female Fans

Julia Child's shadow falls long over the table of postwar American gastronomy. *Time* magazine had already dubbed her "our lady of the ladle" in 1966, and today fans can visit her Cambridge kitchen in person, enshrined as an exhibit at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Besides her own autobiography, cookbooks, and letters, numerous books, interviews, profiles and blogged homages round out the bibliography of all things Julia.

Perhaps no single work has done more to heighten America's current adoration of Child than the movie *Julie & Julia* (2009). Based on a blog and book of the same name by aspiring writer Julie Powell, the movie juxtaposed Powell's attempt to cook her way through the entirety of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* in a single year, alongside flashbacks to the formative period of Child's own career. (Child herself disliked the idea of Powell's blog, dismissing it as "unserious" stunt cooking.) Powell's story in its various forms has an important insight into Child's appeal—as delicious as the food appears, it plays second fiddle to the lessons imparted by Child's own irrepressible personality. What shines through for Powell, rather than any particular dish or devotion to French cuisine, is Child's feminist message of personal fulfillment: regardless of the outcome, one should live, love, and cook without regret.

Fu Pei-mei's legacy in Taiwan, while no less significant, has not yet been dissected to quite the same degree. Fu posthumously won a Golden Bell Award (*Jinzhong jiang*) for

individual achievement in 2012, the highest award of Taiwan's television industry, but she always felt somewhat neglected by her network during her own lifetime. It was not until 1986, after more than twenty years of service to Taiwan Television, that she actually was given a cooking program bearing her own name, the five-minute, daily *Fu Pei-mei Time* (*Fu Peimei shijian*). Fu continued to travel and promote Chinese cuisine, ending her run on Taiwan Television only in 2002, after having demonstrated some four thousand dishes over the course of her forty-year career. Two years later, she passed away from liver cancer, having never really had a chance to enjoy retirement.

The tenth anniversary of Fu's death in 2014 did give audiences a chance to revisit what Fu had meant to them. Not surprisingly, many fans moved to commemorate her were women. What is so striking about these fan responses is the way they uniformly characterize Fu as a patient, encouraging model teacher, who addressed the very real needs of so many women of that period. Their own mothers were either absent at work or unskilled in the kitchen, so these women needed Fu's expert instruction to guide and reassure them in the everyday art of cooking. To this day, Fu Pei-mei is still referred to by her students with the Chinese honorific title of "Teacher Fu" (*Fu laoshi*), not the intimate familiarity of her first name.

Ai-ya recalls the way in which Fu Pei-mei stood out to her as a continued source of inspiration, particularly after starting her own family. She describes how she lacked any other culinary models in her life, clinging not only to Fu's



FIGURES 3–5: In Taiwan, Fu Pei-mei is best known for her television cooking shows, which she hosted continuously for forty years, from 1962–2002.

FROM THE PERSONAL COLLECTION OF ANCHI CHENG

cookbook as her guide to the preparation of food, but also to her personal example of cooking as an act of caring. Here, Ai-ya invokes Fu as a kind of kitchen goddess—not in the contemporary vein of a Nigella Lawson, but rather in a much older, Chinese way—Fu as a kind of Kuan-Yin of the Kitchen, if you will, embodying the spirit of the bodhisattva of compassion and mercy:

In the past, when I was at a difficult time in my life, I bought deluxe color editions of *Pei-Mei's Cookbooks*, none of which were inexpensive. My mother was no good at cooking, and in the early days of my marriage, I often stood in front of the stove, holding up a copy of my beautifully illustrated and written *Pei-mei Cookbook*, in order to take care of my husband, children and guests. Sometimes after I'd cooked a whole table full of dishes, I would quietly ask under my breath, "Teacher Fu, did I do OK?" (Ai-ya 2009)

In a Facebook post from the tenth anniversary of Fu's death, blogger Sara Chen brings together all the various aspects of Fu's appeal, from her reliably constant televisual self, to the sense of vicarious nurturing that the food offered, to her presentation of new, mainlander, regional specialties not often seen in Taiwan. Meanwhile, Chen reminds us that Fu's ascendancy took place during the very decades in which women entered the workforce in ever larger numbers in Taiwan, when alternatives to home-cooking became readily available. Strikingly, Chen's sister becomes a kind of surrogate mother, and Fu's cookbook serves as a template of culinary nurturing between sisters.

Coming home after school, the thing I used to do the most was to sit in front of the television to watch *Fu Pei-mei Time*. She was never late and never failed to show up. It was as if she was your own mother, cooking for you live. The ingredients would at the end be turned into a tasty-looking dish, and it was as if you yourself had eaten a plateful. You could then happily turn off the television, and walk quickly into the street to eat some noodles.

In college, my older sister suddenly played the part of wise wife / good mother, and after returning home from school, I got to eat the wonderful smelling dishes she made. One day on the table there was a dish I'd never seen before. My sister said it was "Beiping [Beijing] egg dumplings," which tasted neither of mom's style nor of our own province [i.e., Taiwan] and was instead a mainlander dish. "I made it from *Pei Mei's Cookbook*," she said.

For daughters to learn how to cook from their mothers is perfectly proper, but because our mother had to work, she wasn't often by our sides ever since we were little, and my sister could only read a cookbook to learn how to cook. My sister let me read the cookbook and order dishes from it. As if going into battle, she would meet each challenge, and those tastes that were strange and distant, gradually became part of our lives. (S. Chen 2014)⁶

Chen's nostalgia represents not only a vivid bodily hunger, but more crucially, an emotional one. For Chen, the primary significance of Fu Pei-mei's recipes is less the actual taste of the dishes and more the memory evoked of her sister's nurturing in the role of substitute mother. It is not that egg dumplings are a

natural comfort food, but rather that her sister's loving effort transforms this strange, Northern mainlander dish into a familiar favorite for two native Taiwanese girls. As the idealized role of the housewife became harder and harder to sustain in women's everyday lives in postwar Taiwan, Fu Pei-mei connected many viewers to the way they wished they or their mothers could or would cook, to create a sense of comfort and belonging at the dinner table. Cooking itself still remained a valued act of loving intimacy within a family, even as women's social roles were rapidly evolving.

These reactions of Fu's female fans help to recalibrate our present-day interpretations of Fu's social impact and culinary legacy. Given the enduring trope of the wise wife / good mother figure in Chinese culture and Fu's launch on a television program designed explicitly to educate and interest housewives in their domestic duties, along with Fu's own tidy, aproned appearance and comments on family as a woman's ultimate motivation for learning how to cook, it seems reasonable to cast Fu as the anti-Julia. After all, she seems to embody traditional Chinese values, with woman as wife and mother dutifully cooking for the entire family. Yet, as these female fan tributes attest, Fu was not just a fantasy creation of the male, patriarchal, political establishment—saddled with the daily burden of cooking for their families, real women turned to her for practical and emotional help, and found it.

Fu Pei-mei and Julia Child were both beloved television cooking celebrities and cookbook authors in their respective countries, memorable and significant pioneers of the form.⁷ Having learned to cook in the course of their adult lives only after marriage, they each held out the promise of achieving mastery of culinary skills, with enough time, practice, and attention. But each woman also had a different kind of viewer appeal. Julia Child seemed more like your favorite dotty aunt or eccentric neighbor, who also happened to be an excellent cook. She relished the rich tastes and precise technique of French cuisine, and held out a tantalizing vision of European culinary sophistication, made in your own home. Fu Pei-mei, on the other hand, really did seem to be the consummate housewife, a neatly coiffed and aproned representative of the Chinese mother or grandmother you always wished you had, cooking up delicious dishes to not only feed you but also nurture you.

Although Child undoubtedly changed the face of food television in the United States, one could easily argue that she did more to shape the landscape of American dining than American cooking, contributing to the expansion of gourmet tastes and cooking as a vicarious pleasure rather than as an activity to be emulated in the home (Pollan 2009). In other words, it is not Child as the French Chef, but Child as the Television Chef that endures in American cultural memory. For all that her fans enjoyed watching Child's *joie de vivre*



FIGURE 6: Fu Pei-mei at an exhibition of her apron collection, 1977.

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onscreen, how many viewers actually proceeded then to recreate the recipes she presented, or took the time to incorporate her recipes as a real part of their daily lives? At least one food writer has provocatively asserted, “Don’t buy Julia Child’s *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*: you will never cook from it” (Schrambling 2009).

Much more than Child, Fu was a representative product of her time, not its outsized exception. In both her central task and her person, Fu implicitly upheld the unified vision of the country promoted by the Nationalist Party, by transforming local, regional culinary secrets into a standardized, national idiom. Culinary China, as an imagined community, could be presented and seized through a commanding survey of all of its regional cuisines, if not occupied in fact through

territorial possession of the mainland. Indeed, Fu made every effort to promote the larger political interests of the Republic of China as its oft-described “culinary ambassador” (*meishi dashi*) during her numerous overseas cooking demonstrations, which took her all over the world.

Yet Fu also had a much more intimate and personal appeal to her legions of female fans. While her pleasant voice and manner were not memorably idiosyncratic, this comforting warmth and familiarity was precisely the source of her appeal: she might not be anything like your own mother or grandmother, but for many viewers she easily represented the mother or grandmother they wished they had. This projected intimacy served Fu’s career well, especially during decades of dramatic social change, when many women were leaving



FIGURE 7: Taiwan Television created a dramatic mini-series based on Fu Pei-mei's life in 2017, adding a fictional Taiwanese maid to Fu's life story. Fu's autobiography was reissued to capitalize on the publicity, with a cover photo of the leading actresses (left), along with a manga for the series (right).

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE KING © 2017

traditional roles as housewives to work outside the home. Fu's programs and recipes were meant to serve this female audience, presented and written in a simple and direct manner, for use in the daily act of cooking.

It remains to be seen whether a new appreciation for Fu Pei-mei's contributions to Chinese cuisine might be rekindled for younger generations in Taiwan, in the manner of America's post-*Julie & Julia* infatuation with Child. In the summer of 2017, Taiwan Television aired a new, seven-part dramatic series based on Fu Pei-mei's life. The title of the series in Chinese was the same as that of Fu's autobiography, *Years of Five Flavors and Eight Treasures* (*Wuwei bazhen de suiyue*), numbered terms that allude to historical Chinese culinary concepts. Interestingly, while the English version of the series title, *What She Put on the Table*, would seem to emphasize Fu Pei-mei's own unique contributions to postwar culinary culture in Taiwan, the ambiguity of its subject opens space for a very different interpretation. In its move to the small screen, Fu's autobiography has been altered through the prominent addition of an entirely fictional, native Taiwanese female main character, Ah Chun, an uneducated village girl who serves as Fu's kitchen help. Promotional materials for the series prominently feature both actresses, suggesting that what "she" put on nation's table in the postwar period was a joint enterprise between Fu, a mainland, and Ah Chun, a native Taiwanese. Once again, Fu's culinary story offers a potentially unifying vision of the nation—but this time according to the needs of the present-day political

moment, with a much more prominent space given to native Taiwanese voices. ㊦

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NOTES

1. Chinese cuisine did not die on the mainland, of course, it just took on a distinct political flavor. See Lu (1987); Gong and Seligman (2011).
2. The creation of the popular Chinese-American takeout dish, General Tso's Chicken, vividly illustrates both the inevitability of Chinese culinary innovation and the embedded histories of displacement and migration. The dish was the invention of Peng Chang-kuei, a Hunanese chef who emigrated with the Nationalists to Taiwan in 1949, before opening a popular Hunanese restaurant in New York City in the 1970s. See Dunlop (2006); Cheney (2014).

3. Details of Fu's life are drawn from her 2000 autobiography, *Years of Five Flavors and Eight Treasures* (*Wuwei bazhen de suiye*).
4. In 1962-3, the following women appeared as cooking program hosts on TTV besides Fu, according to *TTV Weekly* (*Dianshi zhokan*): Pan Peizhi (mentioned in issues 6-7); Hu Peiqiang (8); Ma Junquan (11); Tao Liangyu (23); Wei Zhenmi (24); Chen Mingjie (27).
5. Lemon meringue pie (mentioned in *TTV Weekly*, issue 8); coconut layer cake (11), raisin pudding (14).
6. My thanks to Fang Ling (Cybie) of Shin Yeh Restaurants, Taipei, for sharing this Facebook post by email.
7. The list of postwar female culinary celebrities popular on television in their home countries is extensive, including at least the following: Doña Petrona (Argentina), Ofélia Anunciato (Brazil), Nitza Vallapol (Cuba), Salme Masso (Estonia), Vefa Alexiadou (Greece), Tarla Dalal (India), Monica Sheridan (Ireland), Ruth Sirkis (Israel), Chépina Peralta (Mexico), Ingrid Espelid Hovig (Norway), Nora Daza (Philippines), Elena Santonja (Spain), and Nguyen Dzoan Cam Van (Vietnam). My thanks to Rachel Laudan for sharing the blog post that generated this list.

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