

BOOK REVIEW

Chop Fry Watch Learn: Fu Pei-mei and the Making of Modern Chinese Food

Michelle T. King. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2024. 336 pp. \$29.99 (hbk). ISBN 9781324021285

Heather Ruth Lee

NYU Shanghai, Shanghai, China

Email: hrl3@nyu.edu

I wept while reading Michelle T. King's book on the Chinese cooking celebrity Fu Pei-mei. Over her 40-year career, the mainland refugee to Taiwan authored over 30 cookbooks, launched a cooking school and hosted a series of cooking programmes that transformed how the Cold-War generation of diasporic Chinese women cooked at home. In this first sustained study of Fu, Michelle King provides a story of satisfying depth, casting doubt on some of the beloved legends about Fu along the way. However, *Chop Fry Watch Learn* is more than a beautifully written tribute to a culinary icon. It skilfully uses the milestones in Fu's life and career to ask probing questions about gender, identity and foreign policy in post-1949 Taiwan.

Trained as a gender historian of China, King offers an analysis of gender that is breathtaking in scope and nuanced in detail. Fu recounts that as a newlywed with no prior cooking experience, she was motivated to seek cooking lessons by her husband's angry displeasure. King complicates this story by situating Fu's journey into professional cooking within a historical context shaped by gendered conceptions of culinary taste. Introducing readers to the ideas of gentlemen epicureans like Yuan Mei, King explains how traditional Chinese culture often attributed the capacity for culinary discernment specifically to men. In other words, Fu only gained confidence as a cook because she could satisfy the exacting demands of her husband and his male guests – a reminder that expectations for women's servitude to men came from many (male) springs.

Some of the most accomplished chapters interpret Fu against the backdrop of shifting gender norms. Among them, chapter five on the 1970s' feminist movement stands out as particularly memorable. It opens with a description of Fu's favourite apron – a sturdy, blue cotton piece handsewn by her mother – which King uses as a framing metaphor for the practical implications of feminism for traditional family life and women's opportunities outside the home. On this second point, King revisits the improbable story of Fu using her dowry, the only assets to her name, to pay astronomical fees for cooking lessons. King concludes that, while not consciously seeking feminist independence, Fu managed to achieve it by literally investing in a traditionally women's domain, illustrating that feminist outcomes do not necessarily require explicit feminist politics (Fu never identified as feminist). What I appreciated most in this chapter was King's focus on the quotidian, how feminist thought had filtered into the practical questions facing families. Mining the public record of three feminist-inflected public events, King gives us a glimpse of the hopes, struggles and compromises in the homes of male and female attendees. In this, she aligns herself with feminist scholars who want to reconcile feminism with women's culinary labour – something that she herself is trying to work out in her personal life.

I was moved by how King's book connected me to the experiences of my own mother, a Chinese immigrant by way of Taiwan who strove to feed a family with minimal ingredients, tools and social support. King's history is as much about how Chinese women cooked in Taiwan as it is about how

the Chinese diaspora renewed the connection to China through food. King interviewed diasporic Chinese women in the United States, Southeast Asia and Taiwan, presenting their experiences in short transcriptions called “Kitchen Conversations.” These snippets of dialogue compellingly illustrate the tangible impact of Fu’s work on women’s life and the private home world. Similar to the annotations in the copy of Fu’s cookbook used by King’s mother, which inspired King to write this book, these conversations stand on their own, like primary sources beckoning future researchers. Through this multilayered presentation of cooking practices, King argues that the definition of China was being shaped in the home as much as through politics. In Taiwan, post-1949 refugees were relearning what it meant to be Chinese among refugees from across China, forging a national identity that attempted to challenge the authority of a much larger neighbour claiming the same title.

Here, King offers a definition of “Chineseness” as a cultural identity that both advances and transcends the political agenda of Taiwan. In fact, it is precisely the sustained conflict over what constitutes “real” China that has made food a vital shared inheritance among Chinese-identifying peoples. In the introduction, King provocatively asserts that food is the only cultural inheritance that could be easily passed between generations by displaced and mobile persons – no one takes furniture on the run! Towards the end of the book, she elaborates on this idea: “Above all else, more than land (too many scattered diasporas), more than language (too many dialects), more than history (too much Civil war), what connects us all is food” (p. 195). As a historian who has also written on food in the Chinese diaspora, I find her proposition compelling because it can account for a diversity of peoples and experiences. A definition that centres connections rather than exclusions, while remaining specific to the Chinese experience, is a refreshing addition to the robust theorization of Chineseness in Sinophone studies. However, I also find it reductive, as it oversimplifies the complex political and social processes by which “Chinese food” was constructed – a transformation this book tackles through the history of Fu Pei-mei’s culinary labours. Ultimately, this definition seems at odds with the historical complexities detailed in the book.

I want to acknowledge King’s important contribution to the study of the Cold War with an anecdote on how conflict between China and Taiwan continues to haunt Fu’s legacy. I am based at NYU Shanghai, in mainland China. King’s publisher, Norton, dispatched two review copies, neither of which arrived. I can only assume that censors deemed the content too politically sensitive. King’s work has shown that culinary labour can be political, capable of both supporting nationalist agendas and existing in tension with them. However, it rarely acts directly upon politics – underscoring the limited feminist impact that can be achieved through the domestic realm that Fu helped shape.