

Flexible Culinary Citizenship and Gastronomic Kinship in *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family*

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Abstract

This article analyzes Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's Chinese American food memoir, *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family*, to investigate how food, as one of the fundamental material substances of human survival, is linked with illusive memories, and how such a linkage in turn drives the creative energy of the memoirist to record her search for cultural identity and roots while unearthing family secrets. The first part of this article sketches an outline of the emergence of the genre of food memoir in the late twentieth century and then moves on to define the term flexible culinary citizenship to position Tan's text within the tradition of diasporic food writing; the second part presents a reading of Tan's epicurean journeys as an act of reconstructing kinship within a transnational context; it concludes with a critique of the possible practice of self-orientalization in Tan's food memoir.

Keywords: Food memoir, Food, Memory, Asian American literature, Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan, *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family*

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It is probably in tastes in *food* that one would find the strongest and most indelible mark of infant learning, the lessons which longest withstand the distancing or collapse of the native world and most durably maintain nostalgia for it. The native world is, above all, the maternal world, the world of primordial tastes and basic foods, of the archetypal relation to the archetypal cultural good, in which pleasure-giving is an integral part of pleasure and of the selective disposition towards pleasure which is acquired through pleasure.

Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of culinary experience links the gastronomic pleasure of native food, and the nostalgia for such pleasure, with the realm of the maternal. We accumulate food memories starting from infancy and acquire alimentary preferences along the way. People in the diaspora who are separated from their native land perhaps feel most strongly the tenacious grip of what Anita Mannur terms "culinary nostalgia." In the prologue to her memoir, *Climbing the Mango Trees* (2005), Indian American food guru Madhur Jaffrey offers the term "taste memory" (5) to describe affective connections between food and memory. When she left India for college in England, Jaffrey recalls, she "could not cook at all" but her "palate had already recorded millions of flavors" (6). "From cumin to ginger," Jaffrey claims, these flavors stayed with her, "waiting to be called into service" (6). Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan's *A Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family* (2011), on the other hand, opens with kitchen disaster scenarios from the time when she had secured a journalist career and decided to teach herself to cook. In the prologue, Tan describes her initial resistance to, and eventual embrace of, gastronomic education and the socially prescribed gender role. In her youth, Tan refuses "to learn the wifely skills" encouraged by Singaporean patriarchal ideology (1); but after spending sixteen years in the United States she takes "a leap" by returning "home to Singapore, finally ready after all these years to learn to cook, to learn from my family, to learn to be a woman—but intent on doing it on my own terms" (6). What Tan has recorded in *A Tiger in the Kitchen* are her multiple transpacific journeys and her efforts to (re)collect family recipes, especially those of her paternal grandmother, or her Tanglin ah-ma, "a true legend in the kitchen" (3). Tanglin ah-ma passed away when Tan was eleven, and before she could pass on any culinary skills to her resisting granddaughter. To recreate her grandmother's legendary dishes and finish her "learning to be a Tan woman' quest" (82), Tan relies on Tanglin ah-ma's proxies, her aunts and other female relatives as sources of transmission. By reaching out to them, Tan starts to reconnect with her extended family.

Both Jaffrey's near miraculous possession of Indian food knowledge and Tan's apprenticeship in different kitchens across the Pacific are suggestive of a kind of

cosmopolitan “flexible culinary citizenship” earned through gastronomic practices in transnational migrations. By analyzing Tan’s Chinese Singaporean American food memoir, this article investigates how food, as one of the fundamental material substances of human survival, is linked with illusive memories, and how such a linkage in turn drives the creative energy of the memoirist to record her search for cultural identity and roots while unearthing family secrets. The first part of this article sketches an outline of the emergence of the genre of food memoir in the late twentieth century and then moves on to define the term flexible culinary citizenship to position Tan’s text within the tradition of diasporic food writing; the second part presents a reading of Tan’s epicurean journeys as an act of reconstructing kinship within a transnational context; finally it concludes with a critique of the possible practice of self-orientalization in Tan’s food memoir.

Diasporic Food Memoirs and Flexible Culinary Citizenship

The writing of food memoirs in the West comes out of a long tradition of food writing. The first European cookery book, entitled *Kuchenmeistrery*, appeared as early as 1485 in Nuremberg (Ashley *et al.* 153). The publication of commercial cookbooks began in the nineteenth century and became popular in the twentieth century, when an “incredible array of different particular kinds of cookbooks has been published and gained wide circulation in the United States” (Bardenstein 356-57). Among these variegated gastronomic writings, the food memoir surfaces as an important subgenre.¹ In retrospect, Arlene Avakian believes that the reasons why food memoirs have gained popularity over the last decades are first of all because of “a growing interest in food” triggered by the publication of the 1961 *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and the influence of Julia Child; the rapid development of food studies as an academic field counts as the second factor; and in the new millennium feminist food scholars and writers make significant contributions to this field “that once ignored gender and race”

¹ According to Avakian, “the genre of gastronomic writing began in 1825 with the publication of *The Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendent Gastronomy* by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a French lawyer, politician, and epicure. Approaching cooking and eating as arts, Brillat-Savarin’s twenty-eight meditations cover a wide range of topics and are laced with autobiographical anecdotes . . . Its most notable translation into English was in 1949 by the North American food writer Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher. Fisher is the author of many books about food, including a number of what might now be called food memoirs. Her five most famous books were published in one volume in 1954 with the title *The Art of Eating*. Her books can be viewed as twentieth-century versions of Brillat-Savarin’s *The Physiology of Taste*” (277).

(279).²

Based on the developmental plot embedded in the act of remembering, Barbara Frey Waxman argues that there are two kinds of culinary memoir, one that “chronicles the growth and development of the memoirist through the lens of food memories,” which for her constitutes “the true food memoir” and a kind of autobiographical food writing that records the memoirist’s experiences with food in adulthood or as a professional (364). By Waxman’s definition, Tan’s *A Tiger in the Kitchen* apparently falls in the latter category. For Carol Bardenstein, however, “the cookbook-memoir, a ‘memoir with recipes’” (357), actually includes multiple genres or “differently inflected subgenres”:

They vary in terms of the degree to which they foreground individual memory, collective memory, or both. They differ considerably in terms of the relative proportion of recipes to narrative text and in the particular way the relationship between the two is developed and emplotted. As a corollary of this, they also vary in terms of the ways they lend themselves to being read: as “how-to” recipe books, as memoirs, or, in most instances, as a combination of both. Aspects of authorship also distinguish them (those produced by food professionals, such as food critics, chefs, etc., and those produced by nonprofessionals). Furthermore, they are differently inflected in terms of the particular tone and balance they strike between foregrounding (or submerging) “loss” or “recuperation.” (357-58)

The affective interaction between a sense of loss and a desire for recuperation identified by Bardenstein is the reason why cultural anthropologist David E. Sutton refers to food memoirs as “nostalgia cookbooks” (142).

Bardenstein’s delineation shows that there are different ways to compose and read food memoirs. When it comes to the diasporic context, the affective linkage between alimentary matters and mental recollections becomes even stronger and more tangible. In *The Migrant’s Table*, Krishnendu Ray envisions a sustaining power of culinary practices and regards “food as a place-making practice and feeding as one of the processes by which we structure time and space” (10). For Jennifer 8. Lee, food, as “the primary ambassador of first contact between cultures,” speaks “an intimate language” that connects people of different generations and transcends cultural barriers (258). Wenying Xu, in her monograph on food and identities in Asian American literature, observes that “food operates as one of the key cultural signs that structure people’s identities and their concepts of others” (2). Paula Terreiro Pazo contends that “the trope of food” is intrinsic to the formation of in-

² Avakian states that there were only about twenty monographs focusing on gender and food published in the 1990s when she and Barbara Haber were coediting *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women and Food* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2005). Yet in the new millennium it is hard to keep up with the influx of new books on gender, race, class, and food (279).

dividual and communal identity as well as to “the preservation of collective memory” (209). For Pazo, “it is particularly in the pages of multi-ethnic literatures of the United States where food acquires a greater significance, due to intimate connection between food and both ethnicity and place of origin” (209). She also points out that the convention of including recipes in food memoirs, which is “a double exercise of memory” on the author’s part “to emphasize and fossilize a particular moment in time” (212), actually reveals the impossibility of reproducing memorable food items upon which the memoirists have invested so much affective energy. The desire to reproduce a dish with precision via the help of a recipe with exact measurement is as illusive and “unrepeatable” as human memory. “It is precisely this ephemeral quality of food,” Pazo observes, “and the irremediable transformation of actions into memories, impossible to reproduce and relive, that gives food memoirs a marked nostalgic taste” (212).

Numerous factors may contribute to the affective gap between remembered taste and the actual intake of desired entrées. Some of the key ingredients may be hard to find and designated substitutions fail to work the magic; special cooking techniques are oftentimes hard to learn, let alone duplicate. As Anita Mannur stresses in her reading of South Asian diasporic writing about food, “nostalgia is always already predetermined, indeed overdetermined, in scripting immigrant attachment to the past” (28). Interestingly, in his study of nostalgia cookbooks Sutton suggests that such alienating nostalgia might result from commodifying family recipes in the written form: “it is writing that leaves the realm of family possession and becomes one more anonymous commodity in a sea of alienated products that threatens to remove cooking from the context of embodied knowledge and local transmission” (156). While it is important to practice what Sutton terms “an embodied apprenticeship in cooking” (x) in which culinary knowledge is transmitted orally and bodily, food writers may have to face the dilemma of either losing treasured family food traditions due to the passing away of older generations, or being accused of engaging in capitalist commodification by circulating the recipes in writing.

While this article does not intend to delve into the issue of authenticity, the problems of authenticity inevitably surface in the issue of diasporic culinary nostalgia. In fact, Sonia Ryang starts her monograph on Korean American food with the question: “Can food still bear a national identity even after it has traveled beyond the boundaries of the nation in which it originated?” (1). She concludes her multisited ethnographic research on the diasporization of Korean food with the remark that culinary authenticity is constantly being readjusted at different locations and that “its potential to be reproduced” is intensified in this time of global capitalism (120). At issue here is whether the affective tie and intimacy between food

and one's ethnic origin can really be sustained in the process of migrations. Madhur Jaffrey's use of "taste memory" mentioned at the beginning of this article presents an unquestioning coupling of gustatory sensation and the mental practice of retrieving the past. The genre of food memoir, in a way, offers an embodied textual elaboration of the ways in which the memoirist processes his or her "taste memory." The ways in which "taste memory" is treated as a portable, and potable, memory of the homeland in many food memoirs written by diasporic authors suggest a subject position of what I would like to call "flexible culinary citizenship." Mannur offers the term "culinary citizenship"—"that which grants subjects the ability to claim and inhabit certain identitarian positions via their relationship to food"—to explain the relation between food and identity in the diaspora (29). As Mannur succinctly explicates the meaning of culinary citizenship,

The desire to remember home by fondly recreating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as reflectively nostalgic gestures; rather, such nostalgically framed narratives must also be read as a metacritique of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland through one's relationship to seemingly intractable culinary practices which unflinchingly yoke national identity with culinary taste and practices. (29)

Taste memory and the imagined homeland are intricately linked in Mannur's theoretical framing of diasporic cultural citizenship.

I would like to complicate the concept of "culinary citizenship" by taking into consideration the potential cosmopolitan flexibility in diasporic migrations. "Transnational mobility and maneuvers mean that there is a new mode of constructing identity," anthropologist Aihwa Ong points out, "as well as new modes of subjectification that cut across political borders" (18). Hence, in *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Ong theorizes a new form of citizenship in the age of late capitalism and globalization in which people, particularly those from the Asia Pacific, frequently move and migrate across borders. Ong opens her monograph with the story of a multiple passport-holder from pre-1997 Hong Kong as an exemplary contemporary figure who "embodies the split between state-imposed identity and personal identity caused by political upheavals, migration, and changing global markets" (2). As a Chinese Malaysian expat, Ong repeatedly emphasizes the fact that overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia are "the forerunners of today's multiply displaced subjects, who are always on the move both mentally and physically" (2). It is to further explore the connection between food and memory that I would like to borrow Ong's concept of the formation and reconstruction of cultural identity within the migratory and displaced context.

By presenting the term flexible culinary citizenship, I want to acknowledge the constant negotiations between roots and routes for diasporic people, and the persistent attachment to gastronomic preferences connected with the imagination

of a homeland as well as the inevitable complications of food practices in the diasporic context. As Avakian insightfully reminds us, despite the fact that “[f]ood carries culture both pre-verbally and bodily,” however, “neither the food we eat and the meaning it conveys nor the identities food practices help to construct are fixed; like cultures, they change over time and space” (280). Furthermore, my conceptualization of flexible culinary citizenship also pays attention to the kind of cosmopolitan mobility that is potentially linked with privileged class and economic status while recognizing the stabilizing and sustaining power of gastronomic practices and memories amidst the constant fluctuations across national and geographical boundaries.

Cheryl Tan’s lived experience presented in her autobiographical food writing is a case in point. In *A Tiger in the Kitchen*, she presents an excellent example of the exercise of a flexible culinary citizenship cultivated in transnational migrations. While the food memoir mainly focuses on Tan’s quest to master the dishes of her Chinese family, non-Chinese cuisines also feature prominently in the memoir. Tan’s initial “urge to cook,” for instance, is kindled by her fascination with American meat loaf (20). Cooking has always been therapeutic in her professional life. When she was a fashion writer in New York, the kitchen, where she could practice the “cinnamon-scented zen” of a dessert bakery, was her “sanctuary” against the “great fashion-world-inflicted stress” (26). While learning how to make *bak-zhang* [肉粽], or rice dumpling with meat fillings, in Singapore, Tan was pining after her American oven and immediately plunged into “the Bread Baker’s Apprentice challenge” once she got back to New York (147). She also brings back Euro-American dietary items to her Asian hometown. One time she even made loaves of *panmarino*, or garlicky Italian rosemary bread, in New York and flew with one to Singapore to share with her mother (246). When one of her friends from high school was throwing a pizza party in Singapore, Tan offered to make one with a clam topping, imitating “the famous clam pizza at Frank Pepe Pizzeria in New Haven, Connecticut,” a local delicacy which itself was an invention of the Italian diaspora (174). By transporting the clam pizza to Singapore, Tan not only could share her beloved gourmet food with her friends but also could make a new home for this invented dish. For Thanksgiving that particular year, Tan decided to include “Asian elements” by “adding miso-rubbed turkey and persimmon-cranberry sauce” to the standard American menu (221). It appears that cosmopolitan mobility offers her the ease to travel between Western and Asian culinary traditions and to facilitate dietary exchanges among different cultures.

An important variation of flexible culinary citizenship involves Tan’s Korean mother-in-law, Ai-Kyung, who had a Chinese grandfather and lived in Shanghai as a child during the Second World War. When Tan visited Ai-Kyung in Honolulu

to learn how to make her husband's favorite Korean dishes, "*kalbi*, grilled beef short ribs, and *mando*, pork and cabbage dumplings" (217), she was told that Ai-Kyung marinated her beef with guava juice (218), which was of course related to her Hawaiian residency, and that the older woman actually learned the *mando* recipe from her Chinese housemaid in Shanghai (219). On the last day of her trip Tan made her "very first home-cooked Korean meal" together with her mother-in-law to feed her husband Mike (220). This "Korean meal," nevertheless, has multiple origins corresponding to Ai-Kyung's diasporic migrations. Her recipes are therefore a culinary mixing of variegated elements. Bringing Ai-Kyung's family recipes back to New York has added another distinctive layer to Tan's experience of flexible culinary citizenship.

It is of great importance to note that the people and capital flows in Ong's theorization of flexible citizenship are substantiated through economic and material bases. Tan is able to enjoy a kind of flexible culinary citizenship because of her bourgeois background. She left Asia for her college education, stayed on in the United States to develop a professional career, got married, and became a naturalized citizen of her adopted country. As an expat, Tan's transpacific mobility results from her privileged class status. Her father has a high-level managerial position; as Tan admits, at one point he was "the director of marketing for Vitasoy, one of the largest beverage companies in Asia" (14). Even after being laid off by *The New York Times* following the 2008 crash of the financial market, Tan could still afford to make multiple trips between Singapore and New York to complete her year-long project of taking cooking lessons in her Asian homeland. Undeniably, such an individualist choice is made possible by class privileges. And Tan was made to acknowledge these privileges when she was learning how to make chicken rice from Aunt Alice, her mother's eldest sister. Aunt Alice had to cook for her family in her teens while her own mother was running an illegal gambling den on weekends in order to feed her three daughters. Cooking and serving tea to the gambling guests were "something practical" that allowed the matriarch "to put food on the table" (184). Juxtaposed with Aunt Alice's obligatory kitchen duty and service, Tan realizes how she herself had "approached life with the view of the pampered—expecting the right to a myriad of choices" (184). As a globetrotter, Tan nonetheless opts for embracing her own taste memory to anchor her life on the move. At the same time, she needs to understand the difference between cooking for survival and that for pleasure.

Gastronomic Returns and Reclaiming Kinship

Despite the fact that in *A Tiger in the Kitchen* Tan records her culinary ex-

periences at multiple sites, the food memoir can also be read as a diasporic return narrative with the very strong emphasis on her learning trips to Singapore. As Martin F. Manalansan IV insightfully observes,

return is a complicated process with ambivalent and contradictory routes, meanings and practices that are embodied and enacted. When enacted through food, diasporic return is a performative arena in which the tensions and contradictions about space, nationhood, gender, sex, class, citizenship unfold and play out through tastes, smells, digestion, and commensality. (291)

Tan's return narrative in effect covers her bodily apprenticeship in the kitchens of her relatives and friends through which she is able to reconnect with estranged family members, get initiated into family secrets, and renegotiate a more flexible view of the gendered nature of culinary practices.

Whereas in the United States Tan tends to rely on the Internet for culinary lessons, in Singapore she learns how to cook through intimate interactions with her relatives. A nostalgic longing for familial intimacy is most likely one of the reasons why Tan chooses to record her diasporic return through culinary experiences. Tan specifically records different experiences of sharing foods with her extended family. Her first memory of these moments of sharing is with her father. As "the firstborn of the eldest son in a traditional Chinese family" (8), Tan was encouraged by her father to shirk her socially ascribed female role. Tan became an avid reader and outspoken person who would enjoy questioning authority because her father raised her in a non-traditional way. Yet he also wanted her to understand her Chinese heritage and roots, especially her ancestral land Teochew, "the Sicily of China" (9). To help his daughter understand her own family, the father would tell stories of how the family fortune was ruined during the Japanese occupation while the father and daughter enjoyed "late-night suppers of take-out noodles from Singapore's hawker stands" (9). Tan remembers these moments as at once intimate and liberating. Her first experience of ordering food by herself in a Western restaurant as a first-grader was also with her father, which was a memorable moment endowing her with "the feeling of being an adult" (11). While attending college in the United States, Tan would have beer with the visiting father, knowing that this kind of bonding was a privilege as well as transgression against the social norm since "[n]ice [Singaporean] girls didn't drink" (15). Tan also enjoys the company of the professionals—her "substitute" uncles (93), as Tan calls them—such as Simon Wong, a Malaysian chef in New York, with whom she practices Southeast Asian cooking, such as *poppiah* [薄餅], or summer roll, and Willin Low, a famous Singaporean chef of fusion cuisine and a fellow food lover, with whom she eats her way through Singapore.

It is in the kitchens of her female relatives, however, that Tan receives the

most important transmission of culinary skills and food knowledge that help her to re-root her cultural identity. For Barbara Frey Waxman, “[t]he whole issue of mentoring . . . is central to these food memoirists’ depictions of identity formation and food-assisted self-transformation, [which] helps to frame some worthy life lessons for readers” (379). Learning to cook from her aunts for Tan offers an opportunity to transform herself from an “almost-alien *ang moh* [紅毛]” (49) into a proper member of the familial circle. In her memoir, Tan more than once refers both to herself as an “*ang moh* (a Chinese term that means ‘red hair,’ implying Westernized)” (5) and to her linguistic ignorance of the Teochew dialect. She also repeatedly expresses an anxiety over not being able to learn how to cook Teochew food or even remember the taste of it. As Tan confesses, “[t]hese dishes had long ceased to be just food, having been wrapped up for years in the tangled mysticism of my family, of its history. After all I tended to eat Teochew food only at family gatherings, for which it had been painstakingly cooked by my aunties or late grandmother . . .” (97). Regarding her aunties as members of the “super-chef family” (155), Tan admires and learns from these “fearless” women in the kitchen about communal belonging (152). They not only feed their families with homemade food but also distribute festival specialties to friends and neighbors. The first time when Tan learned to make her grandmother’s famous pineapple tart from her Auntie Khar Imm, wife to her father’s younger brother, she had to work with seventy pineapples to make three thousand tarts. This preparation of a massive amount of food is reminiscent of the tradition of communal cooking in which food sharing is the center of a dynamic social life, a tradition obviously still honored by her aunt.

Furthermore, what Tan has taken away with her from Auntie Khar Imm’s kitchen is not simply the heirloom of her grandmother’s recipes but a different attitude toward cooking. While Tan was fixated on getting the precise measurement for each ingredient so that she could “replicate” Ah-ma’s cooking, the aunt’s instruction was to “[j]ust taste, taste, taste and then *agak-agak*,” the Malay term for guessing (45). Apparently Auntie Khar Imm’s way of cooking is significantly different from the Internet culinary lessons of downloadable recipes and kitchen tips that Tan has been relying on. For Tan, the most important lesson from her aunt during the tart-making session was not the recipes that she has long searched for, but the true meaning of cooking: “Cooking wasn’t a science; it wasn’t meant to be perfect. It was simply a way to feed the people you loved” (47). Auntie Khar Imm also taught Tan a different way to look at time when making another signature dish, Ah-ma’s *bak-zhang*. Faced with Tan’s query about the required time in making the rice dumplings, Auntie responded in her usual vague but commonsensical way, prompting Tan to reflect on how she has been conditioned by her busy life in New York:

Perhaps I needed to not focus so much on the specifics of time and quantities. Living in New York, in all the jobs that I had had, I had found it hard not to be consumed with minutiae. When exactly was something supposed to happen? What exactly was to happen? What exactly were the details of Every Single Thing? I always needed to know—for work and also for my own sanity—before embarking on anything. Perhaps this had been the wrong approach to cooking all along. Perhaps it was time to start letting go. (74-75)

Slowly she was initiated into the art of “*agak-agak*,” gradually freeing herself from her fear of failure in the kitchen. Auntie Khar Imm’s hands-on cooking lessons can be regarded as another example of culinary flexibility as using fixed measurements is not a standard practice in her kitchen. As Sutton claims, “[t]here may be general agreement that cooking is best learned through an embodied apprenticeship, in which what is remembered is not a set of rules, but images, tastes, smells and experiences, techniques that can only be partially articulated, or memory-jogged, through the medium of written recipes” (135). What Tan has taken away from her aunt’s spatial kitchen, “a kitchen for a serious cook” (73), are exactly “images, tastes, smells and experiences” of matrifocal cooking practices as well as an acute sense of community.

As her cooking lessons progressed, furthermore, Tan felt increasingly liberated: “My looser approach was freeing, and amid the lack of fretting, I discovered that I was truly starting to enjoy cooking” (147). In a sense, she is being inspired by the spontaneous practice of the aunt’s home cooking and gets liberated from the (Western) scientific approach to food preparation. She also receives a precious lesson from Aunt Alice about cooking: “If you do it with your whole heart, then it tastes good, you know. If you do it grudgingly, then better don’t do it at all” (185-86). Hence Tan’s year-long culinary education with her family not only taught her to slow down but also roped her in on how to cook with her heart.

Tan painstakingly shows that it is the cooking lessons from her relatives that help her to reconnect with Singapore and her families. She describes what she has gained from the trips: “Each time I went back to New York . . . I was returning with more and more of my true home. Bits of my family, dishes that I now knew how to make” (207). In the final chapter Tan prepared the reunion dinner on the eve of Chinese New Year for her mother’s family and another one on the third day of the New Year holiday for her father’s side of the family to showcase what she had learned in the various kitchens she had visited. While she had a panic attack over her final test, Tan “realized the point hadn’t truly ever been the food” but about reuniting the different family “branches that had been fractured over time” (267). Tan was thankful that her homecoming could bring the whole family together and acknowledged all the women who have supported her year of culinary

apprenticeship: “for one night, we were there, together, eating a meal culled from the women who had made me—my mother-in-law, my auntie Alice, my auntie Khar Imm, my mother, my ah-ma, my Tanglin ah-ma” (267). The long-term estrangement from her paternal uncles and aunts because of her mother’s refusal to give up the career as a flight attendant and the more recent fracture resulting from her parents’ divorce and her father’s second marriage to a much younger woman seem to have been reconciled, at least temporarily, in these reunion dinners that Tan had poured her heart into.

Moreover, Tan’s education in the kitchen not only allows her to fix familial relationships but also sheds light on various family secrets. For instance, Tan discovered how her maternal grandmother lied and developed “a selective memory” to cover up the hardships in her life that came from marrying a man who had another family in China (141). Tan also learned about the difficult life of her *kampong*-raised paternal grandmother after marrying into a city family—how she “turned to her cooking to win her new family over” (195), how she “had to pawn precious items to put food on the table for her children, then scrimping and saving in order to borrow back a few pieces of jewelry to have some face at Chinese New Year” (198-99), and how she hosted a gambling den and cooked “*pua kiao beng* [牌九飯],” or gambling rice, for the gamblers in order to feed her family (211). Tan was surprised by the information that her great-grandfather, whom she had been taught to venerate as a Horatio Alger-type of successful businessman from Shantou, was an opium eater and was once arrested for his narcotic addiction (196). What Tan has gotten out of the year-long apprenticeship is a much darker vision of her family, which paradoxically allows her to entertain a much more intimate relationship with her relatives than before.

Furthermore, Tan is able to reconfigure the prescribed gender role associated with food preparation. In *A Tiger in the Kitchen*, Cheryl Tan explicitly intends to recuperate a lost family heritage in the form of her grandmother’s recipes, a heritage of the maternal world, as Bourdieu would call it, and to establish a line of female transmission. The culinary experiences recorded in her chapters organized around different Chinese and American holidays have an interesting division in terms of gender line. As mentioned, first and foremost she treasures the moments of sharing foods with her father. Growing up with Tanglin ah-ma’s superb cooking, Tan’s father appeared more like a food critic and fellow food lover who was skeptical about the daughter’s voluntary involvement in culinary education. The only time when he did get involved in cooking took place in the final chapter when he and Mike both helped with the making of dumplings for the Chinese New Year feast. On the maternal side, Tan repeatedly emphasizes that her mother deliberately keeps herself away from the kitchen. However, the mother is shown to be a

nurturing mother who is interested in making healthy soups for her beloved ones and Tan includes her mother's green bean soup among the ten recipes that appear at the end of the memoir.³ In the epilogue, Tan also records how she has learned to make bird nest soup from her mother. In order to strengthen her daughter's physical system, or *bu shenti* [補身體], Tan's mother would take hours to clean the feathers and dirt from the bird's nest even though she does not enjoy cooking, precisely embodying what Aunt Alice calls cooking with one's whole heart.

Following the maternal examples, Tan is able to renegotiate with the gendered nature of what she calls "wifery," or cooking for the beloved one. The first time Tan refers to this somewhat archaic term that is closely connected with female domestication was the time when her husband's enthusiasm about her homemade bagels made her realize the significance of "this modern wifery in the kitchen" (87). In the middle of the memoir Tan recalls her attempt to bake ciabatta as part of the weekly Bread Baker's Apprentice challenge. Her grandmother came to her mind when she failed:

When I thought of what my Tanglin ah-ma would have done, however, I stopped feeling sorry for myself. Here was a woman who had never complained about cooking or having a fear of cooking . . . [I]f something didn't work out so well the first time around, she would have just gotten back on that horse and tried again. If you wanted to put food on the table for your family, you had to stop whining and worrying and get in the kitchen and do it. (125)

Somehow the granddaughter has managed to learn from her exemplary grandmother about gastronomic ethics coming out of the bond of love. Instead of indulging in self-pity, she started to make the cinnamon buns that Mike always has a craving for. Although Tan jokingly refers to this gesture of love as a way to compensate for her extravagant shopping spree in Paris, she nevertheless has learned an important lesson about culinary practices and marital relationships. In this process of trying to rectify the initial failure she managed to gain self-confidence while committing some "wickedly good wifery" (128). This is the way in which Tan has learned "the wifely skills" on her own terms, as she has claimed in the prologue.

Importantly, Tan ends her memoir by recording how she has transcended the patriarchal tradition and won a place for herself in the clan. Tan records the two trips to her grandfather's home village in Shantou at the end of the memoir. For the second trip, Tan and her father went with Singapore's Tan clan association;

³ In addition to the mung bean soup, the recipes included at the end of the food memoir present a combination of the signature dishes of her two grandmothers and Simon Wong's *popiah*. These recipes play a supporting role in recapturing Tan's descriptions of different dishes in the memoir proper.

at the group picture session, Tan, the only woman in the group, joined the all-male group re-gardless of the elders' visible disapproval. It was her moment of claiming ancestry by defying androcentric patriarchy: "I knew I really shouldn't have been in the picture, But I was my father's firstborn, after all. I had my great-grandfather's blood. Ignoring the stares, I stood unflinching as the camera flashes went off" (242). By ending her "return" trip to China with this moment of defiance, Tan has proven that what she has learned from her voluntary culinary education is a renegotiation with gender roles rather than being domesticated into accepting prescribed genderism.

Coda: Consuming Orientalism

Whereas Tan has successfully demonstrated a diasporic flexible culinary citizenship and completed her gastronomic apprenticeship in her food memoir, it is sad to say that she nonetheless appears to get entrapped in self-orientalism. Throughout the memoir Tan's diasporic experience is intricately interwoven with her taste memory. She recalls how her "fondest memories of growing up in Singapore all revolve around eating"—the family Sunday outings for Teochew *bak kut teh* [肉骨茶], or "peppery pork rib broth" (18), the afterschool dessert of ice *kacang* [豆沙冰]—and her longing for the signature national dish "*chili crab*" as well as the Malay dish *roti John*. At the same time, Tan is well aware of the fact that the Singapore cuisine that she is pining after results from colonial hybridization: during the period of British colonization "Chinese, Malay, Indian, and European cooks took cue from one another, stirring together methods and spices culled from distant homelands such as Gujarat, India, and Xiamen, China, while sprinkling in culinary touches brought over by British and Dutch traders and their families" (19). While introducing the various colonial infusions in the Singaporean cuisine, with all the cultural and postcolonial insights Tan somehow takes on the guise of a tourist guide or a native informant. It is because of these repeated gestures of informing and enlightening the (Western) readers regarding her hometown, I would argue, that *A Tiger in the Kitchen* is tinted with self-orientalism. Being entrapped by self-orientalist practices seems to be quite common among ethnic writers. In Tan's case, in particular, it can be interpreted as a direct result of the transnational cosmopolitanism that is deeply embedded in her food memoir.

Structurally, this autobiographical food writing covers Tan's one-year immersion in learning family recipes, linking specific foods with the various Chinese festivals—the Chinese Year, the Dumpling Festival, the Moon Festival, and the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts—and the American holidays of Thanksgiving

and Christmas. While it stands to reason to introduce the Chinese festivals through the lens of culinary specialties since her grandmother's food items are much sought after during those occasions, the ways in which Tan takes pain to introduce various Singaporean rituals and traditions appear to be filtered through a tourist gaze, in John Urry's term, and verge on Orientalist mystification.⁴ For instance, Tan presents details of the Singaporean ritual of *lo hei* [撈起] on the eve of the Chinese New Year, "in which the family gathers in a circle around a larger platter of raw fish salad, each person holding a pair of chopsticks in hand, picking up bits of the salad and tossing it high up in the air. The salad, called *yu sheng* [魚生/餘升], is made of ingredients that have lucky-sounding names or symbolic meanings . . ." (260). In the gesture of a cultural informant, Tan recalls for the readers how after her paternal grandmother passed away she and her cousins were in charge of "chasing away stray cats from the coffin" to prevent Ah-ma from becoming a zombie (36) and how the children escorted the spirit of the deceased to Heaven. The details regarding the grandmother's seven-day wake and funeral rituals in this food memoir read as almost ethnographical. Moreover, Tan includes three weddings in her memoir, including her own two weddings in Hawai'i and Singapore, and the wedding of a family member to showcase how in "Singaporean Chinese wedding tradition" the bridesmaids will feed the groom food items that taste "*suan, tian, ku, la* [酸甜苦辣] (sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy)" to alert the groom about "these phases with his bride in the years ahead" (105).

The title of Tan's memoir, which alludes to her birth sign and her personality while making an implicit reference to the (in)famous "tiger mother," can also be subject to critique of self-orientalization.⁵ Tan explains her rebellious spirit at the very beginning of the first chapter by writing that she was born in the Year of Tiger with a lucky star over her head and a knife in her hand, and thus became "a person who knew she would have to work doubly hard to compensate for her dead lucky star, often stubbornly wandering off, heeding no one, and charting a path of her own" (7). Like Amy Tan, Tan makes a mistake in misuse of transliteration by translating *dengsua* [唐山], the Teochew for Tang mountain, or China, into "long mountain" (242).⁶ In the Epilogue, Auntie Alice passed on a final mes-

⁴ For Urry, "the tourist gaze" is connected with "consuming foods and services which are in some sense unnecessary. They are consumed because they supposedly generate pleasure experiences which are different from those typically encountered in everyday life. And yet at least a part of that experience is to gaze upon or view a set of different scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary" (1). The different customs and rituals that Tan has recorded in her food memoir virtually provide experiences that her readers may not have "typically encountered in everyday life."

⁵ This is a reference to Amy Chua's *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011), which has been heavily criticized for reinforcing the prevailing stereotype of Chinese American parenting.

⁶ Kwan Li in Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* explains the name of her village Changmian as

sage in the form of a Chinese saying to congratulate Tan on finally being “grown up”: “*Jingde liao chu fang ye jingdeliao dating* [進得了廚房也進得了大廳],” referring to a woman who is both good at cooking and her career (272). Again Tan, or her aunt, is slightly off the mark since the last term in the saying should be *tingtang* [廳堂] instead of *dating*. Even though both terms refer to a great hall, the couplet-like rhyming effect is spoiled by the use of *dating*.

I feel obligated to identify these examples of possible Orientalist practices not merely as a critique but also as a reminder of the possible pitfalls involved in the representation of ethnic roots and culture. Krishnendu Ray insightfully observes the regulatory operation behind the representation of ethnicity: “There are innumerable explicit and implicit rules about how to play the role of an ‘ethnic’ among both insiders and outsiders. Among insiders, playing that role is a matter of ‘blood’ and ‘spirit’; to outsiders, playing the role is often a metonymic caricature where one aspect of an ethnic culture is exaggerated and made to represent all of it” (113). Ray also points out that this kind of inflated caricaturization is most likely to take place in food consumption. While Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan’s food memoir invitingly takes us down her sensory memory lane, it is nevertheless somehow entrapped by those “explicit and implicit rules” when Tan is performing her role as an ethnic insider. For all the celebratory note regarding her success in the family kitchen and in the cultivation of her flexible culinary citizenship across the Pacific, finally, the tiger daughter still has more to learn about how best to represent her own ethnic and cultural identity.

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such: “*Chang* mean ‘sing,’ *mian* mean ‘silk,’ something soft but go on forever like thread. Soft song, never ending. But some people pronounce ‘Changmian’ other way, rising tone change to falling, like this: *Chang*. This way *chang* mean ‘long,’ *mian* mean ‘sleep.’ Long sleep” (275). However, in Chinese “*mian*” [棉] actually means cotton, not silk. This is but one example in which Amy Tan shows her insufficient understanding of Mandarin while intending to use the linguistic pun as a marker of authenticity.

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《廚房虎女》中的 彈性飲食公民身分與家饌親緣

摘 要

本文藉由分析新加坡華裔美國作家陳露蓮（音譯）之飲食回憶錄《廚房虎女》探索食物與記憶的關係，以及回憶錄作家如何利用飲食與記憶的關聯，紀錄自身對於文化認同以及族裔根源的追尋與發掘家族秘密。論文第一部分簡述二十世紀後期飲食回憶錄之興起，並且定義筆者所謂的「彈性飲食公民身分」，為《廚房虎女》在離散飲食書寫的傳統中找到定位。第二部分閱讀陳露蓮的飲食之旅如何在跨國脈絡中重建親緣關係。結論部份對於《廚房虎女》潛在的自我東方主義操作做一批判，藉之反省離散族裔作家經常自設之陷阱。

關鍵字：飲食回憶錄、飲食、記憶、亞美文學、陳露蓮（音譯）、《廚房虎女》