

5

Food and Dignity

The approach of Chinese New Year's Eve on 2 February 1973, a week-long celebration that revolved around food, reminded me that my cooking skills were in great need of help. Although this would be my first New Year without my mother, my focus was solely on my discomfort in the kitchen rather than on missing her.

After my return to school I had been buying lunch at the school canteen and regarded this as my main meal of the day. Dinner had been make-do: usually a cold leftover bun with pickles or, if the stove was alive, a bowl of soup – a bunch of dried noodles or a cup of rice thrown into boiling water with salt and chopped cabbage leaves for flavour. Not at all satisfying.

I rarely accepted neighbours' offers of food except for the occasional bowl of leftovers from Aunt Li or Third Daughter because I trusted them. I would wolf down the warm food they offered me. Aunt Li would always say to me, "Slow down! Don't act like you've never tasted good food, knowing the family you come from!" But these two were the poorest neighbours and their food was the most ordinary.

Indeed, at one time no family in our yard ate better than mine. While others focused on meals that were warm and filling, ours were gourmet tastes.

My father was a connoisseur when it came to food. He was from a village in Henan province which, he said, possessed a secret recipe that had been famous since the Song dynasty, twelve hundred years ago. Called the "Three-Eights Banquet", its eight cold dishes, eight hot

dishes and eight desserts had graced weddings, funerals and celebrations in the region for generations. In his village, my father claimed, the first criterion of a prospective wife was how good a cook she was, from daily snacks to banquets. When the matchmaker had presented his prospective wife, Old Mushroom, to my father's parents, my grandfather doubted that a girl from a wealthy landlord family would be able to cook and knocked back the proposal, but Old Mushroom was stubborn. She had the matchmaker deliver to my grandfather a basket of steamed buns, a sheet of handmade uncooked noodles and a container of finely shredded carrot salad.

The buns were as white and shining as babies' faces, the noodles fine as hair, and the shredded carrots like long, soft thread. Every time my father mentioned this – which was quite often – my mother would storm out of the house, bringing Father's reminiscences to an end. Initially, I enjoyed hearing him talk about those fine foods but then I felt guilty for showing interest in his story when I saw how my mother reacted. His praise of Old Mushroom was an insult to my mother, so I too walked away when my father began to talk in this vein. Years later, I wondered if my father had never been able to make a clean break with Old Mushroom because of my mother's lack of interest or expertise in the kitchen.

Although my mother believed that a woman must be independent and self-sufficient, and educated me accordingly, she was never much of a cook. For most of her life, she had no need to be. Born into a bourgeois family, married to a high-achieving engineer, and a career woman herself, she had always had helpers in her house. I always admired the 1950s photograph of her that was in our living room. In it, she looked anything but a housewife: she was wearing a fashionable jacket, double-buttoned with a slim waistline and big folded collars, and her long hair was stylishly permed. This life of hers had not helped her become a good cook, but it had acquainted her with good food. From an early age, my brothers and I learnt about many famous Chinese dishes from our parents' dinner-table talk: Beijing

roast duck, Shandong smoked chicken, Shanghai stir-fry soft-shell crab, Sichuan chilli fish, and so on.

We also had Fourth Grandma living with us, and she could turn ordinary ingredients into mouth-watering dishes. For example, during the famine years of the early 1960s, cornmeal became the staple food. While the children of other families moaned about eating rough and dry steamed corn bread and pickled radish day after day, from time to time we could feast on her crispy corn pancakes, stuffed with fine shredded radish, cabbage and clear noodles, mixed with salt, pepper, a tiny bit of chilli and a few drops of sesame oil.

Fourth Grandma's skills really shone during the New Year celebrations when there were good ingredients to cook with. In the old days in a typical Beijing residential compound, New Year feasts were an undeclared competition. Fourth Grandma would spend days and nights preparing exquisite dishes. As a child, I took all of this for granted and was only interested in the snacks she made for us – deep-fried gold and silver butterfly-shaped dim sums, crunchy shallot rings, crystalline frozen gravy, and twisted osmanthus biscuits – and so I have forgotten many of her true masterpieces.

After my father was labelled a Rightist and had his salary halved, Fourth Grandma went to work for other families in the neighbourhood to help our family out with money. So my mother, having been forced to quit work, had to take on cooking for the family. What a shock that was! To our refined palates, it was like moving from a Michelin-starred restaurant to a canteen. Whenever Fourth Grandma snatched a little time from her other work and returned home to cook for us, I felt that we were celebrating a festival.

Nonetheless, my mother never failed to put a warm meal on the table, especially in the last few months of her life. She had learnt to make steamed buns, crispy pancakes, noodles with tasty sauces and many stir-fried dishes. She even learnt to make some poor people's dishes – from the outer leaves of cabbage or ageing vegetables – things she would normally have thrown in the bin.

Two such dishes often found their way to our table: dried eggplant pickles and steamed celery leaves in a dough mix. Overripe eggplants, full of seeds and inedible, were sold for next to nothing. My mother would bring a bundle home, slice them thinly at different angles to make them coil, salt them thoroughly, then hang them from a rope to dry. Then she would shake the seeds off and steam one or two with garlic as a dish. This dish cost very little, used no oil and gave us a bit of variety.

Celery leaves were considered too bitter to eat, but my mother would wash them well, mix them with flour and salt, and steam them. A few drops of sesame oil on both dishes made them more appealing.

There were two enamel food containers in our family's kitchen cabinet. The thick base of these containers was designed to keep cooked dishes warm and fresh for a long time. One of my happiest memories is coming home from school at lunchtime to see the containers on the stove waiting for me. If I didn't see them on the stove I would call out, "Where's my lunch?! I'm hungry!" After my mother died, the two containers were kept inside the cabinet and were hardly touched. Whenever I saw them, I missed the food my mother had cooked that seemed very appealing.

Chinese New Year was the festival of food. The number one delicacy was dumplings, because it was the tradition to eat dumplings when the midnight bell rang. The Chinese word for dumplings, 饺子 (jiāozi), is pronounced the same as the word for a smooth passage from the old year to the new, 交子 (jiāozi). Dumplings were also the biggest sore point in my independent life.

None of my neighbours had ever offered me dumplings because they were not daily fare. Dumplings were small so the filling had to be fine and sticky. To achieve this, it was essential to have more meat, eggs and oil. In other words, they were expensive to make. During the last years of my mother's life we could only afford dumplings on Chinese New Year's Eve. The image of steaming hot roly-poly dumplings being dropped onto my plate along with my mother's

command – “Eat them while they’re hot” – has stayed with me.

I had made one attempt at dumplings back in early January but it had been a total disaster and had completely cured me of any ambition to become a cook.

It was 5 January 1973, Xiaohan 小寒, the day of the Little Cold, which marked the advent of winter’s coldest days. Traditionally, every household was supposed to eat dumplings to show their readiness for the coming long winter. After school, I joined the queue in the co-op and bought fifty grams of mince. Returning home, I brought a cabbage inside, chopped it finely, mixed it with shallots, ginger and the mince, and began to make dumplings.

I did not know how much filling I should prepare for one person. I had also failed to squeeze the chopped cabbage dry. I kept rolling out wrapper after wrapper and in the end I made more than a hundred dumplings, most of them not properly sealed because of the watery filling. When I boiled them, the filling leaked into the water and they ended up shapeless and tasteless.

I ate the terrible dumplings for breakfast, lunch and dinner for two days until I was really sick of them. I wanted to throw the rest in the toilet, not the one in our yard but the one outside on the street. During that tightly rationed period, waste was a crime and anyone who wasted “staple food” could be labelled as sabotaging the revolution. I wrapped the leftovers in newspaper, hid them behind a trunk under the bed and decided to wait until nightfall when no one was around to take them out. But by night-time I had forgotten all about them. When a strange smell appeared a week later, first in my bedroom and then right through the house, I washed everything but the smell only got worse. Finally, I cleaned the house from top to bottom and it was then that I discovered the paper parcel, green with mildew. Cursing myself for being so useless, I threw the parcel into the public toilet out in the street after midnight.

I had been aching to eat dumplings to the point of losing my dignity. The evening after I realised that my new curtains did not cover the windows, I went to ask Third Daughter for help. As soon

as I entered her house, I was overwhelmed by the smell of meat, fresh chives (part of the New Year's special ration), ginger, shallot and sesame oil. She was making dumplings! Her sister, Second Daughter, was back from her re-education site in the far northeast and together they were making a special dinner of welcome.

Third Daughter stopped the dumpling making and came over to see if anything could be done about my curtains. It was her idea to use thumbtacks to stretch the material. I thanked her and she left. Instead of feeling happy that my problem was solved, I was upset because I had been hoping to be invited to taste her dumplings. I tried to focus on my reading but failed. Half an hour later, I was at her door again, this time without a pretext. She was just scooping the cooked dumplings out of the pot while her sister was setting the table.

Third Daughter hesitated but then invited me in. From her reaction I knew I should leave straight away, but I didn't. She asked her sister to put another plate out. Second Daughter did so, placing it on the table with a loud thump. My face was burning with shame, but I simply took the plate and ate the five dumplings on it. Quietly uttering some words of thanks, I left. On my way out, I heard Second Daughter say, "A beggar! Her mother would have died of shame." I ran back home, disgusted with myself.

Years earlier – I would have been about four or five at the time – my third-oldest brother, Ning, had been reprimanded for stealing a meatball from the canteen counter at school without paying for it. My mother had been so ashamed that she had gathered Ning, Dong, Jing and me together and given us a lecture. I was very alarmed at how angry she looked and ended up sobbing loudly. After she had calmed down a little, she told us a story from the Chinese philosopher Mencius, about a dying beggar who refused food because it had been given to him with contempt. "That's called dignity. The beggar had a backbone. Without a backbone, life is worthless," she said.

I had lost my backbone over five dumplings. What would my mother have said, knowing her daughter had become a "beggar"? And what would my father, Old Mushroom, and my brothers think? I

could not sleep, going over and over these questions. The darker the night grew, the more distressed I became.

In those days, public denunciation was routine. Prearranged or spontaneous, on-the-spot denunciations would take place in a residential compound, at school, on a bus, almost anywhere. Every week at school assembly at least one student would be denounced for either fighting in public or flirting with a member of the opposite sex. The unfortunate targets would be encircled by the whole school and their wrongdoings exposed and criticised. Seeing the unlucky ones shamed filled us all with fear.

My imagination ran wild in the dark of the night. I saw Second Daughter standing in the middle of the yard, loudly broadcasting my shameless behaviour even as she humiliated my dead mother. I saw myself standing in the school grounds being vilified for wheedling treats out of the canteen staff and my classmates. I saw the angry face of my second-oldest brother as he screamed, "You let our mother down!" Of course he would be angry. He had risked being seen as an unloving son so that I wouldn't fall into Old Mushroom's hands. And I saw Old Mushroom holding the 30 yuan that should have been my allowance as she ordered me to move into her house or, worse, as she moved into our home and my mother's room. I saw myself being abused by Old Mushroom's younger son, my half-brother, just like Jane Eyre was by her cousin John in the book I'd been reading that day. A sense of doom overwhelmed me, and I lay in bed sweating and shivering.

Looking back, I probably suffered a panic attack that night. But in those days in China, nobody knew or cared about mental health. My lifelong insomnia and nightmares started that night, as did my paranoid initial reaction to any unpleasantness in my life.

With the light of day my wild imaginings retreated and my mother's advice came back to me: "When an unfortunate thing happens, nothing can undo it. You have to face it with a cool head and a practical attitude." I got up with a decision to atone for my behaviour by buying the two sisters two fried pancakes with a pot of

hot soy milk. This cost much more than their five dumplings would have cost, but it was necessary. I had to do something to forestall the ghastly consequences I had imagined; I had to put up a fight.

This decision sprang from another of my mother's dictionary stories, "Fold One's Hands and Await Destruction", about a battle that took place during the Three Kingdoms period (220–65 CE). The inhabitants of a besieged city were facing slaughter. Their leader asked them: "Should we simply fold our hands in our laps and await destruction? Or should we put up a fight?" Everybody, soldiers and civilians alike, put up such a ferocious and spirited fight that they overwhelmed the enemy and the city was relieved. My mother had commented at the end: "You know what? This kind of resistance still often ends in destruction, but if you fight, at least you have a chance of winning."

When I presented the pancakes and soy milk to the stunned Second Daughter and heard her murmur, "Oh, there's no need, you're too generous," I knew that doom had been averted. I had gained the upper hand and was safe.

Back home, instead of pleasure I felt only disgrace and falsehood because I had achieved the upper hand through bribery. I gazed up at my mother's photo and swore I'd learn to cook and never again lose face for the sake of good food. My spirits lifted after this declaration and I was able to hold my head up the next time I faced Second Daughter.

To my delight, my fourth-oldest brother, Dong, returned home to celebrate New Year with me. To welcome him, I had made an effort to clean the house and stock up on supplies for the festival.

Giving the house a good clean on New Year's Eve is a tradition going back thousands of years. It is meant to stop any bad luck the family has from continuing into the future. Although not a traditional woman, my mother observed this old custom religiously, perhaps because our household had had more than its share of bad luck. While Fourth Grandma and Dong would be preparing the feast, my mother

would lead our cleaning team. Windows and doors were opened for hours to let any bad air out; ceilings and walls were dusted, book shelves wiped, floors mopped, bedding changed and the water pot filled to the brim. When everything was done, we were ordered to wash and change into new (or clean) clothes. Celebrating Chinese New Year in a spotless house was a family ritual.

When he arrived, Dong was very happy to see the house clean and me surviving well. I was happy too, not just for his company or the chance of being looked after for a few days, but because Dong was an excellent cook who would be able to give me cooking lessons during his break and, in particular, teach me how to make dumplings.

My mother had often praised Dong as “every parent’s dream child”: good-looking, intelligent, considerate and diligent. When I was little, Dong had been my favourite brother. He had often given me gifts – a colourful ribbon, a shiny hair-pin, a bead bracelet – and he had taught me calligraphy and drawing, and helped me win second prize in our primary school art competition. Fourth Grandma also loved him because from a young age he had been a great help to her. Dong never left the kitchen when she was preparing the New Year feasts. He was the only person in our family who could serve the Three-Eights Banquet. He even bested Fourth Grandma by learning other regional cuisines. Our father would sometimes take Dong along when he went to a restaurant. Dong would examine the various dishes, their look, smell and taste. Afterwards, if we had the ingredients, he would reproduce them in our kitchen.

In March 1969, when Jing and six other teenage neighbours were sent to the far northeast or southwest to be re-educated, our compound leader Aunt Li (two of whose daughters were among the group) suggested the families involved pool some money for a farewell banquet for the “poor kids”. Dong was appointed chef and cooked for more than thirty people. Everyone said that the food was better than in the restaurants. In later years, Dong was often called upon to produce family banquets for weddings, birth ceremonies or funerals.

My cooking lessons with Dong started with making dough.

Chinese dough is just flour and water – no salt, butter, eggs or any extras – so it is much harder to make the perfect dough for different purposes. Noodles need stiff dough, pancakes soft dough, dumplings neither stiff nor soft. Other recipes require steamed dough or baked dough, unleavened dough or leavened dough. In addition, the water temperature, the kneading method and the right length of time for the dough to develop tenacity and elasticity are all crucial.

Dong explained that well-made dough should be smooth and shiny, and so should the dough maker's hands and utensils. He was a patient teacher, and I was a determined student. During his two-week holiday he taught me to make steamed buns, white, shiny and sweet; noodles, thin, tough and long; and pancakes, crispy on the outside but soft and moist inside.

Dong only made dumplings once on New Year's Eve. In addition to mince, eggs, cabbage, chives, shallots and ginger – the usual mix everybody used – he added a handful of small dried shrimps. When the New Year firecrackers began to explode outside, Dong took the cooked dumplings out of the pot and put them on our plates – twenty each! We ate them slowly in order to savour the divine taste fully. Dong was in tears. When I asked why, he said evasively, “The dumplings are too hot.”

I woke up in the night hearing Dong sobbing in the back room. When I went in, he told me that he missed our mother. I felt bad because I didn't. I wished that I could cry with him but my eyes were dry. While Dong was caught up in his grief, I was totally absorbed in dumplings. For Dong, the pain over our mother's loss was still raw after three months. But I, preoccupied with survival since day one, had had no chance to process my grief. Dong finally fell asleep but I stayed awake till dawn. I began to believe that I was truly a cold, unfeeling person. It worried me then and has ever since.

Dong did not teach me how to make dumplings. “It's too expensive. For a big family it may be affordable but it's too much for one or two people.” Seeing my disappointment, he said, “I can teach you lots of cheap dishes that are easy to make and delicious.”

So I learnt to make steamed lazy dragons and its finer versions: butterflies or twisters. I flattened the leavened dough, spread the mixture on it – similar to the one for dumplings but much rougher – rolled it up into a roll as thick as my arm and steamed it. Then I cut it into many pieces so I could eat it over several days. Or I cut the cylinder into pieces before steaming them and pressed down in the middle of each piece with a chopstick so that both open sides turned up and it looked like a butterfly. I then twisted the butterfly into a lovely twister. This recipe combined the staple and non-staple foods most economically.

I ate well during that New Year period and felt contented. It gave me a great feeling of pride and achievement when I delivered my steamed butterflies or twisters to Aunt Li and Third Daughter. I was finally interacting with my neighbours as an equal. To add to my delight, my February expenses came in well below budget.

From that New Year on, I began to pay attention to good food, as my parents had. Even in the books I read, any description of food would attract my special interest. One of my classmates lent me Guy de Maupassant's *Collected Short Stories* for the New Year break. His "Ball of Fat" made the most vivid impression on me because of the account of the food the protagonist shared with her fellow passengers in the fleeing carriage: roasted chicken on a bed of its own jelly, pâtés, fruits, sweetmeats and wine. I dreamed that one day I would be able to sample those exotic dishes and develop tastes as particular as my mother's, who said it was better to eat a single mouthful of fresh peach than devour a basketful of old apricots.