

Ming-Ai (London) Institute “The British Chinese Food Culture”

Oral History Interview Transcription: Ms Ching-He Huang

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Ms Ching-He Huang (CH), Wilson Law (WL)

WL: *Today is the sixth of October two thousand and eleven. The time is half past ten and my name is Wilson Law. I'll be interviewing Ms Ching-He Huang on behalf of the Ming-Ai Institute for the British Chinese Food Culture Project. Please could you er spell out your name for us please.*

CH: My name is Ching-He Huang, that's C-H-I-N-G hyphen H-E and my surname is H-U-A-N-G.

WL: Thank you very much. So erm, thank you very much for coming out first of all, erm, we really appreciate you coming out, out of your busy schedule. So erm, what was your fondest memory of food?

CH: My fondest memory of food has to be sitting on my grandmother's knee watching her making hundreds and hundreds of dumplings; Chinese 'Zong-Zi' for the Dragon boat festival. Um, I stayed with my grandmother when I was very very young and we stayed in a court yard home, that's where our whole family was and um she was responsible the cooking for the whole family. There was about twenty five of us, so it's a large family and she was the head cook –head chef, so running around in the kitchen, you know I'd watch her gut fish, or kill live chicken or go to the vegetable garden, get some vegetables um and I mean my grandparents are farmers so we had an orangery, bamboo farm. Erm my grandfather would trade actually, he'd go to the local market, take his sack of goodies and go and trade and get lots of ingredients for my grandmother.

WL: *I see so you-your grandma is obviously a great inspiration to you and your cooking um, are there any dishes of hers particularly that you hold really dearly to your heart?*

CH: Um... There's so many dishes actually... Erm, 'cos every time -you know when I'm thinking about a recipe or write a book, I think about the memories from the dishes that she used to cook for me. So there's quite a few... Um, there's her famous erm, Pai Gu Tang which is pork rib soup but she would use fresh-the freshest, tenderest bamboo shoots um in-in the dish together with some white turnip and carrots and that-that's really simple but it was just really comforting um and really good. Uh, and then she'd make something like her Zong Zi, her famous Zong Zi with -you know the whole trimmings with the meat, the salted duck egg and um, belly pork, so yeah those two are my favourite dishes.

WL: *So when did you first find yourself interested in Chinese cuisine and cookery? And erm, what sort of inspired you to really start cooking for yourself?*

CH: To be honest, I just had to cook, it wasn't a choice that I had, um because when I was really young, when I was about eleven, my mum had to travel a lot and work overseas and my dad was a very bad cook so she used to tell me how to make like simple things like fired rice and congee and um just so that I could actually cook for my dad um so yeah, that's how I really learnt how to really cook, it was about eleven and um I just did it throughout my teenage years, I-you know, it was a chore having – its hard work trying to -you know think about what to eat and have to cook and it was kind of a responsibility um, but in the end I grew to love it.

WL: *So cooking on TV was a breakthrough point for you in your life, do you-did you have any aspirations to become a TV chef or was that just something that came along?*

CH: No, I didn't think I'd go down this road at all... Um, I basically cooked throughout my teens and then um –you know had a kind of tough childhood 'cos I had to go to work when I was 16 and still study and everything. Nothing really came easy, um but when I was twenty one.. Um, I thought –you know – I know–the only thing I know is food, um, and that's when I really thought I could change my life and my family's life around, and um, I started the catering business when I was graduating from university which was a little bit crazy of me because everybody was going into the city, um, and there was –you know, bankers, they went on to become bankers, accountants etc, and I ended up with a small kitchen, in North London making boxes of noodle salad. And that's how I actually started in the food industry – was-was making ready to eat, um sort of lunches and things for offices and then prepacked dishes and it-it was tough.

WL: When you started cooking on TV, did that change any aspects of your cooking?

CH: Erm... It did actually because I was working –you know within my own business, trying to make meals on a budget from anything from a pound to one pound fifty and I was really constrained by um what, um... I guess my customers wanted and what they thought would sell in their stores, so those kind of dishes are not terribly inspiring. They are –you know, really simple noodle dishes and I'd always go in with my bag of goodies and make fancy stuff and they'd be like, "Ching, we just can't afford it, I'm sorry...". So when –you know TV cooking came along it was really only to um, P.R. my noodles 'cos I thought I had the best noodles. I was importing the best, was making the best noodle concoctions and you know in London at the time, so I thought this was a great chance for me to try and share with people and try and sell some of my noodles, so I had this, this stint on 'Great Food Live' and it was just literally by chance. Um, a friend was helping me –you know develop my website and write a press release and she said, "You need to sell yourself" and I said "I don't know..." and so she very kindly introduced me to um someone at UK Food, um and I just met the commissioning editor and he said come -you know, "Why don't you come something on-on, on our show. Talk about your noodles etc." I got so excited I went and I cooked a dish they really enjoyed it - and I enjoyed it. I mean TV doesn't pay very well as all but um, it was just like "Wow", this is –you know, I could actually do lots of different things and come up with different things and there's an appreciation for it, whereas I felt –you know, in, sort of in the business arena in catering, I was just constrained by what other people wanted me to do. Whereas now, I really had the creative freedom to do what I wanted to do.

WL: *So what sort of led you onto writing recipe books, was that a-an immediate sort of thing leading up from TV?*

CH: Um, that-that came along after a year of going on this guest show um... With live cooking, you never knew what was going to happen, um it was very sort of challenging and a lot of fun and after that they -they said "look - you know, we like you [giggles], we want to give you a show on the channel um and it was the first time I ever did my show. It was a big big learning curve. It was really tough, we were working like from six till half twelve every day for non-stop for three weeks trying to get the show made. And after that I was pretty sure I never wanted to do cooking again (laughter). It was hard work but um anyway, that led me to, to be able to write a book, um about –you know, all my recipes. The collection of them and I really enjoyed that process. There's something very... It's hard writing, um -don't get me wrong 'cos sometimes you're like "people going to enjoy this?" or –you know, you have lots of moments but –you know its good, its good training and I really enjoyed it.

WL: *So when you're creating new recipes, where do you draw your erm, inspirations from?*

CH: Wow, this is er –yeah, it's a tough one (laughter). I-I sometimes think "How did I come up with that?" as well and sometime –you know I'd be –sometimes I'd dream about a dish and sometimes I'm just driving and I think, hang on, that would pair well with that... Or sometimes –you know I travel. I try and travel as much as I can because I learn a lot when I see other chefs create beautiful concoctions and then I get ideas and I think, "Oooh, that would taste nice with that..". And when I first started it was really trying to bring memories, food memories that I had and I'd call up my mum, or my grandmother and say "Does this work with this?", and "How do you make Taiwanese noodle soup?". Do you use Doubanjiang or can I use just a good chilli sauce? And so it's only really through my family and through friends and through other cooks, and just travelling.

WL: *So would they be your sort of testers of the food as well?*

CH: Definitely my family yeah, they test my food. And sometimes my mum says "What is that? That tastes awful!" (laughter). I think parents are your worst critics really...

WL: I see... So do you have any sort of writing plans for the immediate future or are you taking a break at the moment?

CH: Erm, I do, I'm working on another book, believe it or not, and it's good, I'm excited, um and lot-lots of things to look forward to. Still lots to share I think.

WL: *I see, so in your professional career, erm, have there been any like notable experiences on your travels?*

CH: Um, notable experiences? Do you mean like...

WL: ... As in, like things that have really hit you about the culture or types of food?

CH: Hmm... Plenty actually, when I travelled around um, China it really opened up um, my eyes because before that I was just in my own little world and what I thought was Chinese cuisine um but when I travelled from Beijing to Xi-An and all the different regions, um Hunan and Szechuan and Guangdong, I-I really really learnt a lot – a lot, and-and I learn how beautiful not only Chinese food is but also Chinese culture, and how it ties in. I think Chinese cooks are really imaginative, um its just how – how to promote them in the right way, and how to promote dishes in the right way so that our western friends can understand um Chinese food an-and that's it.

WL: So are there any sort of inspirational people on your travels that you've really sort of met?

CH: Ah plenty! Plenty! I met farmers who had nothing and they would just invite me into their home and even just to give their best dishes on the table um... The freshest ingredients and I just remember the in in Szechuan and I said to him on a whim, I don't want to look at all the touristy stuff, I want to experience the real China". And then he said "Ok, well come to my house and have a meal. You know - and that was fantastic -you know everything was just so really traditional, really rural. Um but just, just everything cooked with heart and soul – the simplest dishes but the most tastiest dishes.

WL: So healthy food is very, like very much integral to your cooking, um, do you have any ambitions to target childhood obesity in schools?

CH: You know, I think this is a big big subject and um, I – there's nothing more important that healthy eating. Traditional Chinese philosophy is about 'Yang shen' –you know, to promote good health and well being and that comes from diet. And it's no surprise that there is so many problems with childhood obesity um just by what is on the menu and what children eat these days. There's hardly any fresh food, and I mean, I'm not saying this 'cos I'm sure that there are some schools who are fantastic, who have the luxury of having um, a better budget, um, but even so – budget is not-is not an excuse because I know, I've made fresh food dishes before, ah, you know 6 days a week, three-six-five – almost a year, and you can create a healthy meal for less than one pound fifty for sure, even less than a pound per serving. So it's no excuse that actually budget is an issue. It's whether you want to do it or not and whether you have the skills and the knowledge to do it or not. So, it's a massive thing and I would love to get involved 'cos I think um, especially in America, I was just watching a film yesterday um you know, half the population is obese and half the population are on eight-nine medication or different types of drug and that's-that's scary. You know in one minute someone is dying of heart disease, in America. That's just America, that's not anywhere else in the world and cancer is just growing at such a fast rate. In China we've got problems as well, there's a big problem with childhood obesity under the age of five – we've got waddlers waddling around –you know, f-fo-for for, you know, for once in a whole sort of in the whole – history of history, you know, we may have a younger population that does not live longer that the older generation so that's quite scary.

WL: So are there any immediate plans to take action for instance?

CH: Definitely, whatever I can do, I try and do. You know, right now my career is-is so much- so far it's been about home cooking and home cooking and I've tried to put healthy eating in there, but I've tried to put something for everyone. At the end of the day, it's everyone's responsibility to look after their own health and wellbeing and you only put it out there. But I think what's great about Chinese cooking, 'cos we've always understood that actually balance, 'Yin and Yang' and just a little bit of meat – animal protein, goes a long way, in-to flavour a whole dish. It's not the whole dish – you don't eat like a whole big piece of steak you know (chuckles). A whole piece would – you could make you know, 10 different dishes out of a whole piece of steak. So um I think, I think there's beauty in that, in Chinese cooking and I think um if you go back to how, how our great grandparents lived and you know how they ate – mainly grains, vegetables, you know lots of simple stir fried dishes and very occasionally meat and protein and fish, then I think we're good.

WL: So compared to the first time when you arrived in the UK do you feel that British Chinese food has really changed?

CH: I think it has, um and it's fantastic to see the-the sort of change is slow and gradual but there is definitely a change, and I think that's because obviously China's opened up and of course there's the power of the media has been able to share more of sort of-there's more Chinese people coming here and um, and I think before, Chinese food kind of – it did reach a stagnation point you know where um a lot of the restaurants and takeaways just producing the same thing um and there's nothing wrong with that, it's just that it doesn't represent you know, 'Chinese food'. And unfortunately y-you've got two words that's supposed to describe you know thirty four different regions and different regional cuisine and I think that's very very difficult. So um regional cuisine is-is definitely on the rise – you have a lot of specialists you know, Szechuan style restaurants, Hunanese style restaurants - certainly in London it-it's growing and one has the opportunity in um you know seeing some amazing chefs in London create beautiful Chinese dishes – they're just pushing the boundaries – making it healthier, better – not just in terms of presentation but quality -you know without losing um the message and the essence and the techniques for Chinese cooking. So I find that very very exciting and I think that it'd be great if more and more of people just enter into this um, into this career path and yeah if we could all work together –you know it's a great thing. More, lots to share!

WL: *So where do you see the sort of Chinese food developing? As in do you think like there'll be new classics like 'Chop-suey' or 'Sweet and sour chicken', or do you think there'd be something new, th-that's still to be discovered?*

CH: Definitely, definitely! Um I just recently came back from San Francisco and um when I was there I had the pleasure of eating at this Chinese restaurant. And it was like a hole-in-the-wall... It wasn't beautiful or anything like that, it's just literally a space and a kitchen, and um, the chef there is actually Korean with a Chinese heritage and he was just making the most amazing Chinese dishes um, like using things like 'Pastrami- pastrami kung-po beef' for example – you know. And jus-just some really unusual um dishes. So he would use, like he would do 'lobster congee' for example -you know, using local – the best of local produce and actually -you know, adding some chevil in there, like different um western kind of herbs and fragrances to the dish and it was really good! So fusion can be amazing and right now if you look around the world, all the other chefs are working together um and all their food is just global. It-it's it is fusion and actually, a lot of dishes – classic dishes came about through -you know, history. Centuries of trade routes etc. so it is fusion. So I don't know when-when a chef says "Oh fusion is confusion", yeah sometimes you know if you're a chef and you get it work in terms of flavour, profile or matching, um it can be that way. But you've got to keep pushing the boundaries and evolving. And I think that Chinese food is really exciting in that way. We can involve-evolve in a healthier, even more healthier way than- than before for example. Um just because of so many different techniques, and um skills that we have.

WL: *So would you see yourself moving more into fusion food as well?*

CH: I celebrate fusion food. Um, for me; if fusion makes it healthy, yes – definitely.

WL: *So as you mentioned before, you've recently been recording in San Francisco, erm, how does the Chinese food actually compare over, say in America to the UK?*

CH: Um, you know, it's very polarised er like in the UK, so for example, here we have some of the best Chinese restaurants in London and of course in Manchester an-and it's the same over there, you have pockets of really great Chinese food and really traditional, um, mostly again Cantonese style, um but also, lots of little Taiwanese um eateries, that are really dedicated to you know, they just make noodles, noodle soups and that's what they're all about. So it-it's coming, it's become more what it is like – the experience of eating, in say China, Hong Kong or Taiwan where you have a passionate restaurant for example they're really fantastic at making dumplings – then, that's all they do. You just go there, the destination restaurant – have their famous 'Xiao long bao' or something or – you know 'pot sticker'.

WL: *So is the attitude to food different to the UK, sort of specifically regarding Chinese food?*

CH: Um, the attitude um, you know, they have a real – Americans have a real love of Chinese food, Chinese cuisine. Um and I think, it's the same here. They have a love for it but of course there's always a stigma attached to it and certainly um with Chinese cuisine you need to catch up with the rest of the world 'cos it-it's it still has in the West, this label that it's not as healthy as some of the other cuisines, but then again you know it's-it's all about what you order at the end of the day and sometimes, our western friends don't really get the opportunity to sample some of the more kind-of traditional classic style dishes. Ah-I am sometimes guilty of that as well in my books, they say "Oh you just put like a lot of anglicised dishes um, you know, but at the end of the day, those dishes can be beautiful as well if you cook it in a healthy way. If you use fresh ingredients, no MSG, um and you cook it fresh and you limit the amount of sugar, and salt um, and not too much sort of sauces – just a little bit for seasoning and that's it. And if you know how to create a menu of course as well, so you're not eating the same thing every day – fried food every day.

WL: *You just touched on MSG just then, wh-what do you think about MSG?*

CH: Oh, it's a Japanese invention...

WL: ... Do- do you actually use any of it in your cooking?

CH: ..No...

WL: ...Not at all...

CH: No, you do not need it at all. And also you do not need it in sauces at all either – I mean, if you look through centuries, you know our great grandparents didn't have MSG. Great-great-grea-great-great- you know if you look back in history they just had you know- you can do a lot with just salt, sugar, vinegar, and oil. And that's enough – and pepper, and some spices. You don't need MSG. Um MSG, it- of course in the press, they say that MSG is um, it's a naturally occurring a, sort of salt. It's um, made you know, but at the end of the day, it's still man made. It's not naturally occurring. So MSG or salt, sea salt... Choose sea salt! (Laughter)

WL: *So in your opinion, where do you think the future of Chinese food is, as in, what sort of direction do you see it taking?*

CH: Um, I think...

WL: ... *Going back to roots?*

CH: Going back to the roots, um, and the message that you know its all about balance – and health and well being, and you'd be surprised because I think Chinese food and Chinese cuisine can save a lot of people in the West. And I know that's a big statement coming from me but it's true, because if people eat more erm, how we used to eat, um, not now. I mean now, China's like there's so many KFC's and McDonalds and western foods and that's not the way to go. If anything, we'll be in big trouble. Erm, so I think, going back to culture, back to some classics and back to healthy eating.

WL: So where do you see yourself going in the next five years or so?

CH: Next five years or so? Uhhh, I dunno... Will I survive another five years?

(Laughter)

CH: Uhh, I don't know, I've, I'm just enjoying –you know, what I'm doing, and if I can just carry on um this path and just, I want –you know people to see the beauty in this cuisine. Um, it's not just about me, I'd love it if more people can come on board and share the passion and together we can um... Yeah, maybe change the world a little bit – for the better you know!

(Laughter).

WL: *Have you ever thought about starting up like a cookery school or something like that?*

CH: A cookery school... Um, I have, I'd love to do a cookery school, love to do a restaurant, um, but there's only so much time in the day... So we'll see. We'll see...

WL: *So have long have you been planning this sort of a restaurant for? (Laughter)*

CH: Yeah a long time!

WL: Long time, ahh...

CH: But the problem is, um, lots of things sometimes get in the way... You know, yeah lots of things. It's tricky to try and balance. I think with the restaurant I'm also a control freak as well so I think, um.. And a perfectionist, so if I had a restaurant I'd make sure that I'd have to be there all the time. Um just to kind-of make sure everyone's happy and everything's good. So because I'm travelling quite a bit with my work, if I can't give 100%, I'd rather not do it.

WL: *So you'd be going for the Michelin stars as well...?*

CH: Ah, I don't know about the stars! They're just stars! (Laughter) I think happy customers and a healthy cash flow is- is a good one.

WL: *Definitely, ok, is there anything else that you would like to add or share with us?*

CH: Erm, *no that's it. I just hope that people um eat well, live well and just be happy. That's it.*

WL: *Thank you very much for your time. Thank you very much.*

CH: Pleasure.

WL: *Thank you.*

- The End -

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