

LABOUR of LOVE

Food writer and author CANDICE CHUNG's treatise on the POWER of FOOD – whether that's PREPARING, sharing or EATING it – QUESTIONS why WORDS should be considered the ULTIMATE way to EXPRESS love

words TESS DE VIVIE DE RÉGIE



Photography: supplied.

Although she has made a career writing about it, food wasn't really a preoccupation for Candice Chung when she was younger. "I didn't cook as a child," she acknowledges. "The only thing that I could make was those Kraft squares of cheese on sliced white bread with some ketchup – microwave pizza!"

But when she moved to Sydney from Hong Kong, aged 12, the importance of food – and familiar dishes and ingredients, in particular – came into sharper focus. "In life, when everything else seems upside down or upended, just having that tiny bit of constancy [via food] really comforted us," recalls Chung.

Chung embarked on her career in journalism writing for *Choice Magazine*, *Cleo* and in the newsroom of *The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, where she sat across from the *Good Food Guide* team. "One of the editors got a sense that I am quite obsessed with food," she recalls. "They needed a reviewer for cafes, so I started doing that. There's always this feeling of glamour with reviewing. It's one of those very few sections where you own the reporting and it's through your lens that you tell the story."

Her writing has also appeared in *The Guardian*, *The Australian Gourmet Traveller* and Sydney's *The Sun-Herald*. In 2014, the *SMH* published her essay 'Why Chinese Parents Don't Say I Love You', on how the expression of parental love differs vastly between countries and cultures. The piece earned some two-million-page impressions and whipped up fevered discussion online. It came about when Chung spotted a viral video of Chinese students being tasked with saying "I love you" to their parents for the first time.

"You might imagine the parents being a bit shy about it or just awkward or giving [their children] a shoulder squeeze," she reflects. "But what actually happened was this utter shock. The parents had no idea how to respond and, in some cases, they yelled at their kids – they were like, 'Are you drunk?'"

The video resonated with Chung as she could imagine her own parents reacting with similar confusion. "But the deeper part of that story is, and we mustn't forget this, that parents anywhere adore their children," she says. "And the way that affection, loyalty [and] love are expressed isn't necessarily verbal, and when it is, it isn't necessarily in the way that Western societies do it – which is, saying the three words."

Half a decade after her essay went viral, Chung dreamt up her book proposal. "When I pitched the book, I dropped the 'Why' [from the title]," she says. "It seems like a very small adjustment but it is, in fact, very significant to me because it wasn't until then that I understood there isn't a gold standard to expressing love."

A 'why' demands justification – an explanation for veering from the status quo. But who gets to decide what's the default? "To ask *why* Chinese parents don't say 'I love you' is almost to [imply that] saying 'I love you' is the norm," Chung says. "When it is a wiser and more compassionate thing to understand how we try to express affection to each other."

Her memoir, the now-entitled *Chinese Parents Don't Say I Love You*, published by Allen & Unwin, is a love letter to Chung's Hong Kong roots, Cantonese culture and cuisine, her parents and falling for her now-husband, referred to throughout only as "the Geographer". Both mouthwatering and deeply meaningful, the book likewise serves as a dissertation on the art of restaurant reviews, chaptered by recollections of meals: eaten in company or alone, on the Upper West Side of New York City or in suburban food courts. Author Benjamin Law described it as "a comforting hotpot of a book".

The anchoring and reassuring power of familiar cuisine was made all the clearer when, in 2021, Chung moved to Glasgow – a relocation documented in the book – because of her husband's job. "I realised that one of the gifts that my parents gave me is this love of food," she reflects. "Instantly, without

having to say anything, you are experiencing the same feeling. And so it becomes a really powerful bridge to intimacy."

Chung has played a role in founding Diversity in Food Media Australia, an organisation that

strives to make the Australia's food-journalism landscape more inclusive. "[We realised] that we needed more diverse voices in food writing, but also to spotlight and platform people who work in the food industry across the full spectrum: photographers, illustrators [and] people who make podcasts."

More recently, she has started teaching a creative writing program at the University of Glasgow and is part of the panel judging this year's Kavya Prize, an award for emerging writers of colour organised by the Scottish Book Trust.

Much of *Chinese Parents Don't Say I Love You* follows a traditional narrative structure, but it's interspersed with unexpected, experimental interludes. "One [chapter], for instance, is a menu," explains Chung. "Another is a choose-your-own-adventure-style chapter. Yet another is a dos-and-don'ts list. I wanted the form itself to tell a story."

It's an approach that mirrors Chung's firsthand knowledge of relocating and setting down roots somewhere new. "Where there's migration involved, a lot of things can feel like you might be experiencing several timelines all at once," she offers. "When you are in the present moment, you are feeling the pull of a kind of nostalgia. Your mind is sometimes fragmented. I wanted to create the kind of texture of thought that's true to how I experience the world." HB

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