

Anderson Chen

Class of 2020

“For Whom the Taiwanese Cook”

Advisor: Karen Stabiner

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Inside a cavernous industrial kitchen in Long Island City, a crew of cooks worked away, slowly filling metallic tubs full of prepped ingredients like onions, pineapples, and avocados, set on island tables and towering carts. Boisterous laughter echoed around the insides of the low-ceilinged space, set to the rhythmic beats of pop music. Across the room, two Asian American men worked in relative quiet; both were absorbed in their own tasks, silent except for the occasional answer to a cook's question. This was a shared space, people working for Layla's Delicacies, Milène Chocolates, an unnamed Mexican restaurant, and others.

Jeffrey Fann, one-third owner of the almost three-year-old Yumpling Taiwanese food truck, the only one of its kind, stood over an Amazon shipment: new LED lights for the operation, yet another chunk taken out of already slim profit margins. The 35-year-old New York native has been in the industry for almost four years now.

While much of Yumpling's menu – which emphasizes rice bowls topped with crispy chicken or fried pork chop – can be prepped and constructed in the truck, the more labor intensive and time-consuming dishes, like slow-braised beef, have to be made in advance. Typically, he and another partner, Christopher Yu, reserve eight-hour blocks at the rental kitchen, which allows them to complete bulk menu items to be stored in the spacious walk-in refrigerators available onsite.

Yu, like Fann, is Taiwanese American, born in the United States (the third co-founder, Howard Jeon, is Korean); he watched over a simmering pot of *lu rou*, Taiwanese braised pork belly normally served over rice. The bubbling vat - a bath of spices, meat, and herbs - was so tall Yu that was forced to use a short step stool for an elevated view. He occasionally dipped an arms-length ladle into the steel drum for a quick peek and a taste. At the back of the four-burner stove were three more cauldrons of meat and herbs bathed in their own juices. Familiar names dotted the relatively sparse cooking stations, including Kikkoman soy sauce, Morton's salt, Shaoxing cooking wine, huge bags of Sichuan huajiao, a pile of garlic cloves, and a vacuum-puffed bag of mushrooms.

Placing a lid on top of the braise, Yu set out an array of identical steel containers. He then lifted the stock pot close to his body and slowly poured its steaming contents into each tub. Plastic wrap sealed each one in its place and the finished products were loaded onto a single shopping cart for transport.

The process, from fresh ingredients to fridge, takes around five hours; each batch requires four hours to cook – and one batch lasts a week.

In recent years, there has been a spotlight on Taiwanese restaurants operating in New York City. Increased press coverage from the restaurants' websites, along with my own analysis of Yelp's restaurant data in the city, have highlighted at least 58 distinctly Taiwanese eateries that have sprouted across the boroughs, a stark contrast to the past.

In the 1970s, Taiwanese immigrants established an entrenched community in Flushing, Queens, hoping to avoid the poor housing market and language barrier of Manhattan's Cantonese Chinatown. With the diaspora came establishments born out of necessity, helmed by older restaurateurs. Little Taipei, as it was called, appealed to well-educated, Mandarin-speaking Taiwanese people, and by 2010 to 2015, around 58 percent of Taiwanese New Yorkers lived in Queens, according to a report by the Asian American Federation.

During this time, there was a growing sense of identity in the Taiwanese community. Up until now, they have always been labeled a branch of Chinese culture, especially with food. But Andrew (who did not want his last name known), a global database analyst and former State Department employee, noticed in his research that this idea of being exclusively Taiwanese began to emerge as more of them put down roots abroad.

As a child, he always had positive affirmations of his Taiwanese origins at home. Noting the distinction of his own culture in college, he went on to explore how Taiwanese identity differed from other immigrant groups. He attributes the new trend of career change for Taiwanese American chefs to a newly forged cultural pride.

"Ever since democracy bloomed [in Taiwan], it's given Taiwan a voice, and part of having a voice is making our own food," he said.

Today, this new wave of Taiwanese chefs is indeed different – many of them have abandoned successful careers in law, finance and business to embrace cultural heritage in a far riskier, and less profitable business.

Some of the biggest players in the field, like 886's Eric Sze, a business major, and Win Son's Josh Ku, a real estate manager, had no restaurant experience before making the leap. Both went on to open full sit-down restaurants. Others, like Edward Huang of Zai Lai, a former lawyer, ran fast-casual counters to save on property costs.

Wendy Cheng, Associate Professor of American Studies at Scripps College, ascribed this to a difference in the types of obstacles first-generation immigrants faced upon arrival. For them, racial discrimination largely colored their societal views – and their ideas of success. But many second-generation children grew up molded by a multiracial society. Identity, and its implications, were different for them.

"It gives younger generations space to explore who they want to be that's much freer than earlier generations that were constantly shaping their identity against whiteness," said Cheng.

They had no experience. From the start, this went against what was expected of the first generation of kids to go to college - a move down from a stable career to a riskier line of work. What all of them had in common, however, was the struggle of inexperience in a tough industry; a desire to please the community for which they owe their cultural pride; and friction with parental disapproval and disappointment.

According to the US Department of Labor, 48 percent of Asian Americans worked in “management, professional, and related” occupations from 2008 to 2010. About 10 percent in that group worked management jobs, 9.1 percent were healthcare practitioners and technical; and another 8.5 percent were in computers and mathematics. The numbers for Taiwanese Americans are essentially the same. The Migration Policy Institute estimated that more than fifty percent of Taiwanese men work in finance, information technology, or some kind of science profession; for women, the number is almost forty percent.

A study in the Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies showed that Asian American fields of study overwhelmingly concentrate around STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) oriented careers, a way of life defined by economic pragmatism. First-generation Taiwanese Americans like Yu and Fann never entertained the viability of non-STEM jobs growing up.

“That’s true for pretty much every single one of my friends that I grew up with as foreign immigrants,” said Fann.

Yu, the 28-year-old former food business recruiter, moved from Maryland to Taiwan when he was one, and did not return until the age of 12. Fann, a former intellectual property lawyer, is a born-and-raised New Yorker. They are second cousins who only knew one another through tangential family gatherings. Drawn to the prospect of cooking the food they grew up eating, and burned out at their old jobs, they decided to take a chance.

Both of Yu’s parents were entrepreneurs, so while they weren’t thrilled about the transition, they supported his decision. His mom, a politician, recognized the drive to pursue individualistic goals. But he felt constant pressure; the need for stability, to make a lot of money, in a business whose worth his parents did not understand.

“Their initial reaction was obviously leaning towards, why are you doing this?” Yu said.

Fann still recalls vividly the day he broke the news, twice, since his parents are separated. Though it wasn’t a heated argument by any means, the dispassionate conversations were somehow worse. His parents had almost the same reactions, though his mom was slightly more supportive. Ultimately, they tried to reason with him – using his established law career and lack of experience to reverse his decision. “I almost wish that I got yelled at. It almost puts you on the defensive; you feel more comfortable defending yourself,” Fann explained. Ambitious and eager as he was, the former lawyer understood very well that success was neither guaranteed nor immediate. Sitting in his mom’s house, then his dad’s, he needed encouragement and affirmation, and got neither.

“They just talked to me, and it was so clear that they were scared for me and disappointed,” he said.

The meeting he then had with his wife's parents was even harder. Fann quit his job a couple months after the marriage. He's known his in-laws for years now, which added to the guilt and sense of burden he felt in making them worry about their daughter's financial stability. They too, had the same reactions to his own parents. He understood though, painful as it was. If it were him, if it were his son, he likely would have had the same response.

Fann met a different kind of resistance, because the truck clashed with conservative ideas about restaurants that older Taiwanese people had – the dim sum parlors and the dilapidated take-out joints; family and banquet-style eateries for special occasions; sit-down spots with an array of roasted fowls trussed up as window display; and of course, a great chef.

In the beginning, Fann's parents thought they could talk him out of it, not realizing he had already planned it all out. There was nothing they could say or do to change his mind.

So, armed with very little experience beyond Fann's year-long stint cooking at the Long Island City Flea Market and the occasional dinner party for friends, the duo opted for a truck – hardly easier, as it turned out.

A day spent at the commissary rental kitchen merely accounted for a sliver of the work. Though the Yumpling menu consisted of a few core items (rice bowls, pan-fried dumpling, and a fried chicken sandwich) and some sides, new dishes required bulk testing at their respective homes. Work began at midnight or one a.m. for the next day's lunch service, when the partners looked for a place to park. City law required that an operator be present in the vehicle at all times, so until the morning prep team arrived around eight in the morning, the truck served as a makeshift bed, curbside. Most days it's either next to Rockefeller Center or Bryant Park.

Three hours of prep ensured that vegetables, meat, and other ingredients would be fresh for lunch service, which ran from 11:30 to 2 or 2:30. Then, it's an hour back to the garage, where a laundry list of jobs awaited: the truck and dishes were both cleaned; business logistics had to be dealt with; and any end-of-the-day administrative duties were addressed at seven o'clock – only a few hours before they began again.

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Four miles away, underneath Columbus Circle, Chef Edward Huang swung by his shop Zai Lai to check up on progress. The fast-casual counter, serving homestyle Taiwanese food such as pork belly over rice and chicken ginger soup, is in the Turnstyle Underground Market, a long stretch of diverse shops and services housed within the 59th Street subway station.

From the counter of Zai Lai, customers can observe the cooking operations directly behind, a compact and open kitchen, a matter of necessity, not design. No more than four employees can comfortably work in the space at once: two manning the front, two cooks in the back. These days, Huang is more often in front of a computer handling business logistics than behind the stove. But it took a while before the kitchen could run without his presence. The 26-year-old Southern California native spent two of his post-collegiate years teaching English at a Taipei school before moving to New York for law school. After three years, he went into the corporate law world only to burn out after two more. From there he set out as a part-time solo practitioner, helping small businesses deal with legal issues.

He'd always envisioned playing a part in the food world. Those two years he spent reconnecting with his cultural roots in Taiwan – interacting with relatives, learning about his parents' past, exploring the depths of the cuisine – instilled in him a drive to open his own place. With no culinary experience, he did his time at a few kitchens before ending up at New York City icon Mission Chinese Food, a full-service restaurant with a modern spin on Chinatown classics. After working his way up to supervisor and head of brunch service, he felt credible enough to train his own staff. And in November of 2017, Zai Lai opened for service, funded partially by his part-time legal work.

Like the others, Huang's passion project was met with resistance.

"What? That's stupid!" he recalls his parents saying. They couldn't fathom his reasons for abandoning the American Dream, especially since he'd achieved so much.

One of the hardest conversations he had was with his father-in-law. At the time, Huang was engaged to his now-wife, which made the decision to quit his law firm more difficult. Much like Yu's experience, he would be marrying her during economic uncertainty, in an industry that her father abhorred. Huang was told bluntly that he was making a horrible mistake. And there was nothing he could say back, as his father-in-law only understood the food industry as one of hardship and toil.

"I get it, the way my parents grew up, and what they had to go through," said Huang. "The sort of challenges they took and overcame to make it here in the US and make a life for my brother and I."

Huang understood that his parents' unwavering demands for his own economic security were born from love. They wanted him to have a future without the financial hardships they had experienced as immigrants.

As a young father, Huang saw his parents' point.

"When I first started out, I was a single guy," explained Huang. "I can eat ramen, I can survive on peanut butter. But in the process of going through different life stages – getting married, having children – the economic part of it is important, right?"

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Huang's philosophical response was not unusual. A study in the Asian American Journal of Psychology has shown that second generation Taiwanese Americans at a younger age are less receptive to the more authoritarian parenting style of their elders than older adults are.

Researchers Jessica Liu and Christopher Liang found an acculturation gap between immigrants and their adolescent and young adult children, who grew up accustomed to a Western emphasis on individual expression. But adults have demonstrated more empathetic recognition of their parents' perspectives. Like Huang, second generation Taiwanese Americans exposed to life beyond their immediate community were better equipped for interpersonal understanding.

In the late 1960s and early 70s, the influx of Taiwanese immigrants that came to the United States were highly educational, professional workers, different from other immigrant groups at the time. Doctors, engineers, graduate students, and scientists arrived in waves to the Southern Californian suburb of Monterey Park. Early second-generation children were naturally biased towards these role models, but with time, a diverse variety of Taiwanese immigrants have shown that success can be defined in different ways.

"I think that Taiwanese Americans in general, they do feel like they have a wider choice than in earlier generations," said Dr. Ho Chie Tsai, the founder of TaiwaneseAmerican.org, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping the eponymous community. Tsai, noticing these diverging patterns among different generations, spends much of his free time hosting seminars and talks for Taiwanese college students that may be paralyzed at a crossroads in life. Now in his 50s, the pediatrician and president of the Taiwanese American Foundation has witnessed the transformation of priorities across generations firsthand.

"Parents wanting their kids to pursue safe, well-paying fields, I think that still exists today. That will never change, as it's really essentially a part of Taiwanese American family culture," Tsai said.

But with more diverse options now, and examples such as celebrity chef Eddie Huang and NBA star Jeremy Lin paving the way, Tsai believes parents and community members are more receptive these days.

As one of the only remaining old-guard Taiwanese chefs left in Manhattan's Chinatown, Chef Andy Wang shared the same sentiment.

"If young people are interested in food, I think they should experience it," he said, taking a break at one of his restaurant's dine-in tables.

After twenty years as the chef-owner of Taiwan Pork Chop House has given Wang a more progressive view regarding young entrepreneurs. It's all about adapting to a

youth-dominated market these days: Yelp, Facebook, online delivery platforms, among others, according to the 45-year-old proprietor; it now takes young people to run these restaurants. There is a future in this line of work – same as any other career.

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Fann and Yu never forgot their first day. The truck was barely out of the garage when their inadvertently unlocked refrigerator opened and much of the food spilled across the floor of the truck. Worse, within hours of their initial prep, the horror stories they'd heard of food truck culture – the physical altercations and threats over turf priority – proved true.

The crew of another food truck parked just a couple spots down demanded that they move and threatened force. Fann managed to de-escalate the situation with reason: he promised to avoid such schedule conflicts in the future, but the food was already prepped.

For a while after, Fann and Yu pondered the future with unease. “I don't know if this is right anymore,” the former recalled thinking. But cooking proved to be enough motivation. That day, they sold 40 servings. While not much, it was thrilling to the pair fresh off a rocky start to their new path.

Fann admitted that he misses the stability of his old life, sometimes. Equipment breakdowns and logistical roadblocks have to be handled personally, a far cry from the bureaucratic desk job where the stress of decision-making always fell on someone else. But he would never, ever go back.

This dedication to food - the intrinsic thrill of having people taste, and appreciate, one's cooking, is common, according to Pin-Chia Feng, an associate professor of Foreign Languages and Literatures at National Chiao-Tung University in Taiwan.

“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,’” she wrote. Mannur is an associate professor of Asian American studies at Miami University who wrote a book on culinary identity for South Asians.

The reasons for pursuing a life in the kitchen are largely born of familiarity and a shared love of both eating and cooking, often developed at a young age as parents cooked for their children. Feng's discourse on this so-called “gastronomic kinship” – the connection between food; the memories of it since infancy; and certain preferences developed along the way – is one described by most Asian Americans, like Fann, Yu, and especially Huang.

As a child, Huang remembered always wandering into the kitchen to get a quick culinary lesson. With a wok in the backyard and a love for different types of Taiwanese vegetables, his mom would often share the foundations of health-oriented cooking.

“So much of my childhood experience, and time specifically, with my mom was spent in the kitchen watching her figuring out the flavors,” said Huang. In turn, much of Zai Lai’s menu was inspired by the recipes of his childhood from his mom and maternal grandmother.

Initially, Huang had planned to serve more generic, but healthier Chinese cuisine. But upon hearing New Yorkers ask about the region where the food came from, he decided to pivot to a more specialized menu. Drawing from his own experiences – his time in Taiwan, his family and background – gave more soul to his restaurant; it allowed him to share his heritage with those who might not have eaten Taiwanese food before.

Huang’s grandmother passed away a week before his restaurant’s grand opening, but he believes she would have been proud. After all, one of his shop’s signature dishes – five-spice pork over rice – is a recipe from *ah ma* herself, an homage from more than 6,000 miles away.

“Early experiences, or memories of those experiences, can influence the decision-making process because that’s something they are familiar, or available to them,” said Qi Wang, the Professor and Chair of Human Development at Cornell University.

She believes that nostalgia could have played a role in inspiring these Taiwanese chefs; food was often the backdrop for many social developments, which eventually translated to a desirable career.

If they succeed, chefs face a new level of responsibility, toward accurate ethnic representation. Bearing the standard of a nation’s cuisine comes with its own immense pressure. And Eric Sze, the head chef and owner of East Village’s 886, is no stranger to such cultural obligation.

Even though his restaurant has only been operating since July of 2018, food has been the consistent theme of his life. He’s always been an amateur home cook. He dabbled in entrepreneurship involving pre-packaged, direct-to-consumer beef noodle soup. He held a minority stake in The Tang, a Chinese restaurant started by his college roommate, working as a cook there.

Despite all that, he still feels uncomfortable with the label of chef, the highest authority in the kitchen.

Taiwanese cuisine is considered a subgenre of Chinese gastronomy, drawing inspiration from a variety of foreigners such as the Dutch and the Japanese, reflected in the vibrancy of its diverse and iconic dishes. That’s the problem.

“Name me one dish that is distinctly Taiwanese,” Sze said. “That I can describe to someone who’s never had Taiwanese food.”

He believes that Taiwan has rightfully labeled certain dishes as its own – beef noodle soup, scallion pancakes, soup dumplings – though it can never claim to have originated them; the country’s short history all but ensures that its food came from somewhere else. For the young chef suddenly thrust into the discourse of immigrant food culture, the name of his restaurant - 886, the country code for Taiwan – is all the more profound. He’s had to represent his culture in many interviews, and fend off Yelp reviews disparaging him for setting higher prices for its food.

Josh Ku, the co-owner of the four-year-old Win Son and a close friend of Sze’s, found similar community-driven pressure in the reactions to their Brooklyn-based restaurant. The 32-year-old Queens local’s résumé read like most of his cohort’s: a degree in Sociology at Baruch College, with a seven-year stretch working at his father’s real-estate company as a property manager, but no real culinary training. When a cheap storefront opened up among the properties, he seized the chance with his current chef and business partner, Trigg Brown.

Before opening, Ku had expected the support of fellow Taiwanese Americans, who would likely recognize the value in putting their cultural cuisine onto a modern stage. Instead, it was the Taiwanese immigrants, still longing for the old-school culinary traditions of the past, who embraced his restaurant. His peers were more skeptical; they worried about authenticity when faced with Win Son’s more modern take on Taiwanese cuisine, which translated to negative reviews. One such dish is the “bk egg bomb”, consisting of a standard Taiwanese scallion pancake and egg, but served with wagyu beef tartare.

“As much as we feel emotionally tied to it [identity],” Ku said. “That level of emotion doesn’t necessarily reflect our ability to understand our identity.” These native-born Taiwanese Americans were, as he put it, “proud for the sake of being proud”, though he sees that in himself as well.

They’re not trying to be authentic: there’s no free tea here, and the chef is white, not Taiwanese. By appealing to a broader base, Ku hopes to promote the relatively new cuisine to people that otherwise wouldn’t have tried it. Perhaps even reintroducing it in a different way for those that have, to drive the conversation of what Taiwanese food can be.

“A lot of ABCs [American-Born Chinese] don’t actually know the political and cultural history of Taiwan. And I think once they learn the basics of the fundamentals, their ideas will change,” said Ku.

The duality of being both Taiwanese and American, and the implications of what it means to balance the two, lends itself to what Dun-Ying Yu, a graduate of Boston

University's Gastronomy Program, describes as the "expectations of ethnic performance".

In her study, she examines the formation of Taiwanese American cultural identity through the lens of food. Ying Yu posits that there may be an inherent conflict in being raised with such a fractured sense of self: to embrace their food culture, expected by society and family, is to be labeled with a sense of ethnic "otherness"; but to abandon it, is to reject their parents' culture, and by extension, their parents as well. While this may not be exclusive to the Taiwanese, it holds especially true for a group that has long struggled with being a subculture.

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Every year, the team at Zai Lai puts on a spectacle for Lunar New Year, and this year was no exception. To symbolize good fortunes, the store was dressed in crimson paper decorations accentuated by Chinese idioms for the new year, with employees dressed to match – red uniforms with black slacks. Outside the stall, Huang blocked out a space among the public dining tables for Chinese calligrapher Andrew Chong to hand out inscribed bookmarks while Emmy Wang and Yingzhi Hao, two amateur Chinese yo-yo artists, spun hourglass-shaped contraptions on a string.

This year, however, drew much smaller crowds than the last. Turnstyle, the company behind the underground food hall, refused to dedicate the whole space for the festival. The torrential rain that day certainly did not help bring people out either. Huang's own wife and parents were back in Taiwan to celebrate with his more than 26 aunts and uncles, leaving him and his own 18-month-old daughter to ring in the new year. Usually, he hosts a hot pot party with friends; but this year, he was burnt out from work.

While it was a holiday in Taiwanese culture, here, restaurant duty called. Huang was everywhere at once, from managing the cramped counter to working the pots and pans; packing the deliveries to keeping tabs on the performers. But despite the "flop" of the event this year, as well as a new Taiwanese place just a couple of stalls down, Huang believes he's doing well for the most part. Zai Lai now runs as a "well-oiled machine", and profits have been favorable. More importantly, his parents have since accepted his choice - eaten his food and recognized the convictions behind his mission statement. Huang's father-in-law, seeing that he does have time to be with his family, no longer shackled to the kitchen, has also come around to his culinary career.

"That was a powerful moment for us as a family," he said. "They might not have the language for it, because how emotionally attached are Taiwanese parents? But I could tell they were proud of me, and proud of the fact that this restaurant is representing Taiwanese food and people."

Four miles away across the East River, the Yumpling brick-and-mortar restaurant was once again delayed. Once set to open January of 2020, it faced problems getting

utilities running in the Long Island City space. Though the balance between running the truck and setting up the future sit-down restaurant heaped additional stress on the stretched-thin duo, Fann and Yu longed to finally open the restaurant they've dreamt of since 2018.

Fann, in turn, has come to terms with his parents' polarized reception. His mom has sampled his food in passive support, and had even helped out once at the flea market. She'd been pleasantly surprised at the positive public response to her son's food, unaware that he even cooked much. But she's never visited the truck, as her only experience with his food was when Fann sent some to her office. He thinks she's afraid to witness firsthand the hard labor involved with his work.

His dad, however, has never tried his cooking.

"I don't think he will," Fann laughed. "To him, it's like a business decision. And I think to this day, he still doesn't understand that what we're trying to do is a little bit different from just a typical Chinese restaurant."

Fann's dad never eats at quick-serve or fast-casual restaurants. It's not a format he understands. The food truck also isn't a traditional take-out place, so now he's given up trying to understand his son's business.

But it didn't matter. Fann says he has incredible support from his wife, who has helped out since his flea market days despite holding a full-time job as a jewelry designer, and his in-laws, who have since given their blessings – and eaten his food proudly while telling friends about it – for their son-in-law's tentative future. And when the restaurant finally opens, both Fann and Yu will have set their dreams, literally, in stone. Fann's parents are now used to it; the fear and shock had largely subsided after a few years. While he still doesn't think this is what they want for him, he hopes that his success will quell much of their concern.

"The better I do, the less afraid they are. And so, the second time around when I told them about the restaurant, they were not as upset," said Fann.

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Postscript

The idea for this project came from a New York Times article published back in June of 2019 titled, “A New Generation of Chefs Reframes Taiwanese Cuisine in America”. Written by Julia Moskin, the article describes a new wave of Taiwanese chefs that have come to define their culture’s cuisine in recent years, from New York to California. The article does a great job highlighting key figures of the movement and introducing a broad overview of Taiwanese food culture in general.

But given its scope, it didn’t really dive deep into why all of these young career-changing chefs decided to quit their established careers, or the potential conflicts they had with their families and communities. So, narrowing the field to just New York City where a lot of these restaurants have now popped up, I decided to pursue this angle. First, per my adviser’s instructions, I had to find my characters. This proved to be quite difficult at first, given these were busy chefs that were now used to national media coverage.

I initially tried to go for the three most well-known chefs based on press coverage: Richard Ho of Ho Foods, Eric Sze of 886, and Josh Ku of Win Son. Sze responded immediately, and I had my first interview with him early on. However, I couldn’t use him as a central narrative, as he told me he would be taking a trip back to Taiwan to do a collaboration with Vice. I couldn’t compete with a national publication, so I settled with him being a background source. Ho proved to be a struggle as I couldn’t get a reply despite multiple tries.

I also tried to get in touch with Kris Kuo, one of the owners of Taiwan Bear House and Braised Shop, to get a female perspective on being a chef. Despite notes left with employees and camping around the restaurants during multiple trips, I couldn’t get a reply. I finally caught up with her right before first semester ended, but she told me she wouldn’t have time for an interview until close to Christmas. I was also out of time, so I gave up on this front.

It was around this time I watched a Taiwanese video online covering a specific food truck in New York City. I reached out to Yumpling soon after, and secured an interview with them at their commissary kitchen; I watched them work in order to get my observational reporting done. Through them, I found another cohort of theirs, Edward Huang of Zai Lai, who ran a small stall in Turnstyle Underground Market. He became my last character.

To get a broader sense of Taiwanese restaurants and chefs, I went to Taiwan Pork Chop House, one of Chinatown’s oldest remaining Taiwanese restaurants. There, I got an older chef’s perspective on this ongoing movement in the city. Josh Ku of Win Son also got back to me after winter break. While he wasn’t a chef, he was the business end of the company as a former real estate manager, and his chef, Trigg Brown, wasn’t Taiwanese, which I felt made a compelling perspective.

From there, I needed backup sources to support my narratives. I sent out a lot of emails and made many phone calls to academic sources and community leaders that could give deeper insight into the psychology; social aspects; history of Taiwanese immigration; and observable trends in recent generations of Taiwanese Americans. Among a lengthy list of rejections, I managed to get phone interviews with Professors Qi Wang and Wendy Cheng as academic sources.

It would have strengthened my project to have voices from an older generation. After all, much of the article had to do with intergenerational conflict. However, it was difficult to find these, especially with the terrible timing of the coronavirus ravaging Asian communities. Two major Chinese American business leaders in New York City I was hoping to talk to fell through. One went out of town, the other was aggressive after hearing I was a reporter – perhaps his relationship with them soured as a result of the outbreak.

Fortunately, the feelers I sent out online paid off. Ho Chie Tsai, founder of TaiwaneseAmerican.org and someone deeply involved in the community, agreed to talk. And Andrew, a database analyst and former State department employee, had personal experiences in this topic that he shared with me.

Throughout the process, I returned to my characters for additional interviews, just to get more narrative details and emotional content necessary for the piece. Edward Huang's restaurant held a Lunar New Year celebration that I felt was perfect as an ending. I also interviewed Jeffrey Fann again to get more details regarding his conversations with his parents, as well as a couple more biographical facts from Christopher Yu.