

Cooking Culture With Eddie Huang

by Maria Lagasca

Double Cup Love: On the Trail of Family, Food, and Broken Hearts in China
By Eddie Huang
256 pp. Spiegel & Grau. \$17.

After allowing the world a glimpse of his upbringing and the trials and humor of growing up as a first generation Asian-American to traditional Taiwanese parents, Eddie Huang – part-time chef, entrepreneur, and host of the acclaimed show *Huang’s World* – has again given society another glimpse of his complex life in his second memoir, *Double Cup Love: On the Trail of Family, Food, and Broken Hearts in China*. This time, he focuses on his adult life and the confusion that often comes when one leaves the comforts of home and ventures out into the world to get a slice, or in this case, a double cup of that “American Dream” his parents instilled in him. With his spirited and influential parents absent, Huang’s second book tackles love, Asian identity, Asian culture, and how Americans view Asian culture, alone and artlessly. Taking society on an unstructured journey on backroads to hooker hotels, hole-in-the-wall restaurants, shady markets, and dodgy clubs in China, Huang reveals necessities one must accomplish before reciprocating love. This essential, yet basic plan, which is often muddled by the “American Dream,” is to first love oneself. However, before doing that, one must first know oneself; thus, one must always go back home.

Home for Huang is several places. In his first memoir, home was Washington D.C and Orlando. Now home is New York City and China. New York City is where

Huang first settles and where he opens his first restaurant with his younger brother, Evan. Together they establish an eatery built from recipes of home. What encourages and holds up brotherhood, a theme running throughout the book, are values from home. In the course of *Double Cup Love*, home temporarily becomes China. Huang, along with both his brothers, Emery and Evan, travel back to their homeland and attempt to walk the same densely populated streets where their parents worked selling buns, eat the same food that barely nourished their bodies, and breathe the air their ancestors once inhaled. In the midst of occasionally cooking for a small crowd of locals, in a closet of a hooker hostel, and routinely getting lost and confused between Taiwanese, Hunan, Chengdu, Shanghai, and Schezuan clay pots and roasted chicken and what ingredients exactly makes someone Taiwanese, Huang finally comes to realize the restrictions of race and culture. Every race, according to Huang, has not only their own roasted chicken, bone infused soup, and chili peppers, but every culture has its own mirage, which unfortunately makes up society's perception of that culture.

American culture has ideas of "freedom" and the "American Dream" and China has "communism," which like the former two concepts is also a mirage. *Double Cup Love* portrays this realization slowly, yet intensely. It occurs only *after* one has become entwined with not only the people of a certain nation, but also its food, values, language, humorous ways of seeing the world, and culturally specific struggles. After spending several months in China, for Huang, the communist view of China, along with his preconception for the rest of the world, gently steams away. Whereas the beginning of the book focuses and praises the complexity of culture, the end of his memoir emphasizes the absence of race. Instead, what matters in this world is "place," which for Huang comes to represent the root of culture and the basis for individual and collective identity.

This connection people have to a place is the only belief that exists which is irrefutable. For the things we previously thought to be definite such as the food, the values, the reactions, and the passions are in the end all questionable. What is not questionable is the “power of place” and how that power entices one to head off, investigate, and let experience peel stale layers of oneself, one never thought to exist, to bare a skin more raw and uncooked by the blaze of speculations.

In fact, *Double Cup Love*, though undeniably intricate, is rather straightforward and flawless in reminding us how preconceptions define how we view the world and how we will continue to see the universe. Though the frequent and lengthy descriptions of dishes and recipes sometimes muddle the overall flavor of the memoir, its organic discussion of identity and race coats one’s mentality and forever lingers in one’s heart. By ultimately reminding us how we mistakenly judge cultures, due in part to how our communities market the customs of these cultures, we cease for a moment, taking in all the flavors, and are eventually choked, like when we first taste a soup with a cornucopia of flavors, by our own arrogance and inability to let our own experience shape our beliefs. Unfortunately, by letting others and their experiences mold our beliefs, we consequently also allow others the power to shape our own beliefs of ourselves. What *Double Cup Love* continues to recognize is how we purposely remain unaffected by the world’s tendency to characterize, categorize, and standardize ideas concerning our own selves.

Eddie Huang includes countless incidents in his memoir of Big Brother, the privilege, and the typical telling many how to eat, sleep, walk, breathe, and think without never really discussing why. To figure out why Americans condemn communism, without ever traveling, is part of

Huang's quest. Part of Huang's quest is also to discover how Taiwanese define Taiwanese, who are in the end, the only ones with the authority to perform such a feat. Unlike Americans or even Europeans who publicize guidelines for culture, the people Huang meets never have to reveal how to be Taiwanese simply because they are Taiwanese. Instead, while in China, Huang is able to absorb the truth of his past and his identity without ever asking how. This is also true for the memoir; without ever asking how or getting an assessment, readers are able to still grasp the truth.