

YOUNG KITCHEN WARRIORS

少年廚俠 1：兩王的心結

The Stove Guild rules both the culinary industry and the kung fu underworld. Young Lin Chih-Ta dreams of rising to the top of both disciplines. But when his mother, the Guild's new leader, is poisoned, Lin must travel through time in search of a cure.

Lin Chih-Ta is the talented, ambitious son of the up-and-coming leader of the Stove Guild, a secret society that rules both the culinary industry and the kung fu underworld. His dream is to rise to the top of both disciplines and become a peerless kung fu chef. Yet on the day his mother is inaugurated leader of the Guild, someone slips a deadly poison into her food that paralyzes her completely.

Desperate to save his mother, Lin Chih-Ta learns that the only possible cure is a mystical practice called Full Channel kung fu, now more legend than fact. He must employ the magic of the Guild's most precious artifact to travel through time in search of a teacher, yet that is no easy solution. The artifact brings him back half a millennium to the time of the dying Southern Ming dynasty; the two kings whose help he needs are more concerned with undermining each other than reclaiming their country. To make things worse, the black-clad assassin who poisoned Lin Chih-Ta's mother has followed him through time, intent on taking Lin Chih-Ta's life.

Kevin Cheng's work of historical fantasy energizes elements of Chinese imperial history with its unique focus on food. Young readers can immerse themselves in the historical background of Chinese culinary tradition while still enjoying a riveting story.

Text by Kevin Cheng 鄭宗弦

Author Kevin Cheng has been writing stories for young readers for over two decades. His literary projects, which find inspiration in Taiwanese



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booksfromtaiwan.rights@gmail.com

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history and local ecology, have won him over ten different prizes for his children's titles, including the Chiu Ko Children's Literature Award and the Chen Kuo-Cheng Children's Literature Award.

Illustrated by Leo Tang 唐唐

A lover of anything creative, Leo Tang practices illustration as a way to return to the happiness of childhood. His illustrated titles have been licensed in Korea, Thailand, Turkey, Russia, and China. He has won several prizes, and his work has been included in the Catalonia Illustrator's Fair and bought by private collectors.

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By Kevin Cheng

Translated by Helen Wang

1. The Mysterious Initiation Ceremony

“Yay, here at last!” The instant the car stopped, Lin Chih-Ta opened the door and looked for their hotel. He couldn’t wait.

He had lain awake all night waiting for this day to come. Too excited to sleep, he rose before dawn to practice his kung fu moves as many times as he could, then chivvied everyone into the car. Fired with curiosity, he’d been asking questions and looking out of the window the whole journey, so restless and excited you’d think he’d drunk some kind of stimulant.

His mother Chen Shu-Mei got out of the car and caught hold of him. “Hey! Don’t run off, wait for everyone else!”

“Ow!” Chih-Ta scrutinized his mother. “Are you nervous, Mama?” he asked thoughtfully.

Before his mother could reply, a stern-faced Auntie replied: “Of course not! Don’t you go making a tense atmosphere on purpose.”

“I wasn’t,” said Chih-Ta, pressing his hand on his beating chest, “but I’m nervous.”

Grandpa parked the car, and straightened his clothes as he stepped out. “Calm down, calm down,” he chuckled.

Mama looked at everyone, then took a deep breath and stood up straight: “Let’s go!”

It was the 24th day of the twelfth month of the lunar calendar, the day when people give the Kitchen God a good send-off so that he will report well on them to the heavenly court. It was also the day the mysterious “Stove Guild” held their annual meeting.

Every year on this day, thirteen-year-old boys and girls must honor their founding father and go through the guild’s initiation ceremony. This year merited special attention, because it was also the occasion of the Martial Arts Meeting, which took place only once every twenty years, and they would be selecting a new Head of the Guild, who would be responsible for distributing power in the global food and beverage industry.

The initiation ceremony was to begin at ten-thirty, but by ten the car park was already full, as guild members from all over the world filed into the grand hotel and checked in at the registration desk.

As soon as he was inside the hotel, Chih-Ta made straight for the floor-to-ceiling windows. “Wow!” he shouted, excitedly, “Come and look at this, there’s the famous infinity pool!”

Mama gave him one of her looks, and said quietly, “You’re in middle school now. You need to behave more maturely.”

But Chih-Ta couldn't contain his excitement. He continued to jump about and cry out with delight. Mama and Auntie began mingling with other guests. Grandpa was in his element, greeting people left and right.

This year, twenty-five boys and girls were to join the Guild, and the initiation ceremony required that they perform the Guild's kung fu moves before the Kitchen God. Chih-Ta was one of the youngsters taking part, and his mother Chen Shu-Mei was one of the two most popular candidates for Head of the Guild.

To prepare for the big day, Chih-Ta got up early every morning to chop firewood and boil salt water on the range so that his mother could do her *qigong* in the salty air, while he worked on his lower-belly deep breathing, stood in horse stance, and repeatedly practiced the Gentleman's Fist and the Fruit Fist.

Mother and son were equally focused, each on their own goal.

Chen Shu-Mei was the daughter of the owner of a 100-year old restaurant in Tainan. Her father, Chen Chin-Tu, was born into a family known for its culinary skills passed down from the Ming dynasty, and had made sure to pass those skills on to his daughter. Chih-Ta's father, Lin Yao-Hsiung, had been the head of catering services in the Qingshui district of Taichung, and had learned his trade from the "The Catering Services Nest" in the Neimen district of Kaohsiung.

Chih-Ta's parents were well-matched and at the tops of their professions, in both the culinary and martial arts. They married and opened a restaurant in Taichung, and three years later Chih-Ta was born. They shared eight very happy years together.

Tragically, Lin Yao-Hsiung died in a car accident when Chih-Ta was five. Chen Shu-Mei had returned to her family in Tainan with the little boy and taken over her father's "Fucheng Catering Services Group". She ran it well, building a reputation for herself and earning acclaim throughout southern Taiwan.

Chen Shu-Mei always told her son, "Your father was a phenomenal kitchen warrior. He used his martial arts to help the weak and support the poor. He did a lot to relieve hardship. When you grow up you must follow in your father's footsteps." Chih-Ta had idolized his father since childhood and waited eagerly for the day when he could join the Guild and become a kitchen warrior like his father.

Action-loving Chih-Ta enjoyed kung fu and had a keen interest in the culinary practices that inspired it. He had already learned how to make many dishes. As he practiced his kung fu at the hotel, his nose caught a smell so delicious he couldn't help following it to its source.

He rushed from the big window to the kitchen to see what rare delicacies were cooking inside, but a man in his sixties in a snow-white apron stopped him at the door. The old man's face was pink and shiny, and his eyes stern but not angry. Extending his right arm, he brusquely informed Chih-Ta, "The kitchen is a sacred place. You have to be invited."

Chih-Ta stole a look inside the kitchen, and saw many chefs packed together, some chopping vegetables, some deep-frying, some stir-frying, some setting out plates, each of them skilled in his work, and not an inch of space unused.

The old man seemed to be idling, yet there were plenty of people wanting to come and talk to him, and two men, suited up, kept turning them away. When they spotted that Chih-Ta had slipped through the net, they quickly moved him on.

Chih-Ta wandered around the famous high-class hotel. He'd thought it would be magnificent, full of delightful surprises, and it was. At ten o'clock, a man announced in the registration area: "Would all the participants in the initiation ceremony please gather in the Great Hall."

Chih-Ta hurried off to the Great Hall, where he joined the other boys and girls his own age. They followed the man to the auditorium on the twelfth floor to learn their positions and rehearse.

The auditorium was like a theater, with twenty stepped rows rising from a stage. A portrait of the Kitchen God twice the height of a person hung in the middle of the stage behind an altar table, which held a celadon crackle-glaze incense burner. In front of the altar table stood a high-backed armchair made of rosewood and landscape-patterned marble.

Guild members started to take their seats, and the auditorium filled with noise. At half past ten, the master of ceremonies made an announcement: "Ladies and gentlemen, the 2,162nd meeting of the global Stove Guild is now open." The lights dimmed, a spotlight rose on the boys and girls in the middle of the stage, and the auditorium went quiet.

Bang bang! Bang bang! The brisk rhythm of martial art music rang out. The boys and girls sank into horse stance, focused their breathing, and moved through the forms.

The master of ceremonies, a celebrity host of a TV cooking show, took the microphone: "Watch our initiates demonstrate the Guild's basic kung fu forms – Plum, Orchid, Bamboo and Chrysanthemum make the Gentleman's Style. First is 'Plum Breaks the Ice'. The five fingers uncurl like the five petals of the plum blossom, channeling inner strength to the fingertips, scratching, scraping, twisting, turning, and winding. The fingers are like the gnarled winter plum breaking through ice and snow; the ancients say, 'the sword sharper after the whetstone, the plum blossom sweeter after a bitter winter.' This move comes from mixing the filling for ingot-shaped dumplings..."

"Ahhh..."

As the master of ceremonies said, this was a basic move, one that every child in every family would know. No one unable to do this move would dare go on stage, else they should lose face for their whole family. Keen to put on a good show, Chih-Ta gritted his teeth and raised his eyebrows as he performed the move. The other children performed confidently too, bending their arms like bows, moving their hands with purpose.

"And now, Orchid Spins the Cloud, a rapid movement of the wrists to channel inner strength to the palms, turning them quickly and loosely so that the enemy sees only a blur. This move comes from stripping bamboo shoots at high speed. Then, Bamboo Leaves in the Wind, derived from wrapping sticky rice dumplings, followed by Chrysanthemum Becomes the Moon, which comes from rolling lion-head meatballs in one's hands. Those who are skilled in the Stove Guild's moves and seventh *dan* will have these subtle smells in their nostrils by now..."

The audience was full of experts in channeling inner strength. They murmured appreciatively, "So fragrant...! The lone orchid in the empty valley...so fresh and new, so tall and elegant..."

"When gas stoves became popular in the 70s, members of the Stove Guild no longer had to chop firewood every day for their breathing practice, and they gradually abandoned kung fu. Now only a handful of people continue the practice. They are the young people here today. Everyone, please give them a round of applause." The master of ceremonies spoke solemnly and from the heart.

The audience clapped vigorously.

"We move on now to the Fruit Style." The master of ceremonies explained in detail, "first, we have the Majestic Pineapple, a tricky move in which the force of both fists smacks the enemy's face, a fight-for-your-life move; Thunderbolt Sugar Apple, a killing blow in which the middle finger is bent, and the knuckle is aimed at the blood vessels in the neck; then, the Hailstorm Pumpkin...as before, for seventh dans, it will be like entering a room filled with fruit and fragrance..."

Many in the audience lifted their noses and breathed deeply, as though slipping into a drunken stupor.

When the performance was over, the audience gave a hearty round of applause.

"Now, I'll invite Fan Wei-Hsiang, the current Head of the Guild, to lead us in honoring our founding father, the Kitchen God."

The Head of the Guild went on to the stage, clasped his hands before him, and bowed to the audience. Chih-Ta froze; it was none other than the old chef he had seen by the kitchen door, and the two kitchen guards were his protectors.

The boys and girls on the stage turned around to face their founding father. The Head of the Guild pulled a stone the size of a hen's egg from inside his jacket and placed it carefully in the middle of the altar table. Then he turned to receive an incense stick with a curl of white smoke rising from it.

Chih-Ta was mesmerized. Could this man be the top chef that Grandpa had talked about, the one people called the "Stove Medium"? Could he be the Head Chef of all the grand hotels, responsible for checking the dishes made by the kitchen chefs? The Head Chef who could tell at a glance, without tasting, whether the color, aroma, and taste were right?

"Let us bow three times to the Kitchen God," said the master of ceremony. The audience stood and bowed with the Head of the Guild.

It was time for the children's initiation ceremony.

The Head of the Guild sat in the high-backed chair facing the audience, as the master of ceremonies commanded the twenty-five children to kneel three times and kowtow nine times to the Kitchen God and the Head of the Guild.

"The ceremony is now complete..." said the master of ceremonies.

Parents in the audience wiped tears from their eyes. This ritual was not only a coming-of-age ceremony for their children, from now on they would follow in their forefathers' footsteps,

and their parents would also be their masters, responsible for passing on the glorious culinary and martial arts to their children.

Chen Shu-Mei heard the words *ceremony* and *complete* and smiled with relief.

On stage, the children were still kneeling before the altar, waiting for instructions.

The Head of the Guild took the microphone, and said sincerely, "Congratulations, everyone, on becoming the new disciples of the Stove Guild."

"Congratulations!" shouted the crowd amid another round of hearty applause.