On shifting your energy

Cookbook author and journalist Clarissa Wei discusses the pain of the writing process, maintaining integrity, and making work that's supposed to outlive her.

November 7, 2025 -

As told to Jun Chou, 2411 words.

Tags: Food, Writing, Money, Beginnings, Process, Mentorship.

What is your journey from journalist to recipe developer to soy sauce mogul?

I've been writing about food for 15 years now. For a long time my beat was Chinese food in Los Angeles. I was very aware of how limited my perspective was. So I was like, "You know what? I'm in my early twenties…" I had this dream of backpacking to every province in China, and I didn't actually go to all of them, but I did cover a lot of it. I was filing stories for Vice and writing about niche things, like the Sichuan peppercorn harvest. I went to Ningxia and found goji berry farms. I went to remote villages where they've never seen outsiders before and they still were recycling their poop into the fields. Essentially, off-the-grid, gritty things I was writing about. It was such an exciting time. In 2018, I got a job offer to move to Hong Kong and became a food journalist for the *South China Morning Post*.

I did that for two and a half years, and then the pandemic hit and the whole political situation in Hong Kong went south. At this time, I also got married and was thinking of starting a family. So my husband and I decided, "Let's move back to Taiwan." I'm a citizen here and life in Taiwan is a little bit easier for me than in Hong Kong or China. That was kind of a turning point for me because that's when I decided I want to pitch a cookbook about the food of Taiwan, but frame it in a way where there's a sense of urgency to it.

When I was in Hong Kong, I saw how quickly things can change politically overnight and how people's sense of identity can shift at any big news event. This was around the time of Stop Asian Hate as well, so a lot of people in the States were talking more about frontlining Asian stories. So the timing worked well to pitch this cookbook about Taiwan. I sold it to Simon & Schuster, then I spent two years nitty-gritty developing recipes, traveling with my team. I remember waking up every day at 8, and I would work from 9 A.M. to 11 P.M. at night for nine months straight, testing and developing recipes and interviewing people.

As a freelancer for over a decade, the cookbook has been the most rewarding project I've ever done. I decided to work smarter, not harder, and focus my attention on producing longer form projects that make a bigger impact [rather] than filing short, 500-word pieces that maybe land in a big publication and it buzzes on social media for two seconds. That type of endorphin rush is quick, cheap, and it goes away. And honestly, it doesn't pay well enough for it to be worth it. I think when I was young, I was like, "I'm just going to work hard and it doesn't matter how much I'll get paid because eventually someone will notice and it will pay off." Some people, their writing gets noticed and they get a fancy staff job at a big publication and they're set for the rest of their lives. But for me, it never happened that way. I found myself not wanting to move back to the States anyways.

Do you have the same process for writing both short-form and long-form?

I don't. For a short piece, you're on a deadline, you need to file within two weeks. With everything, I approach

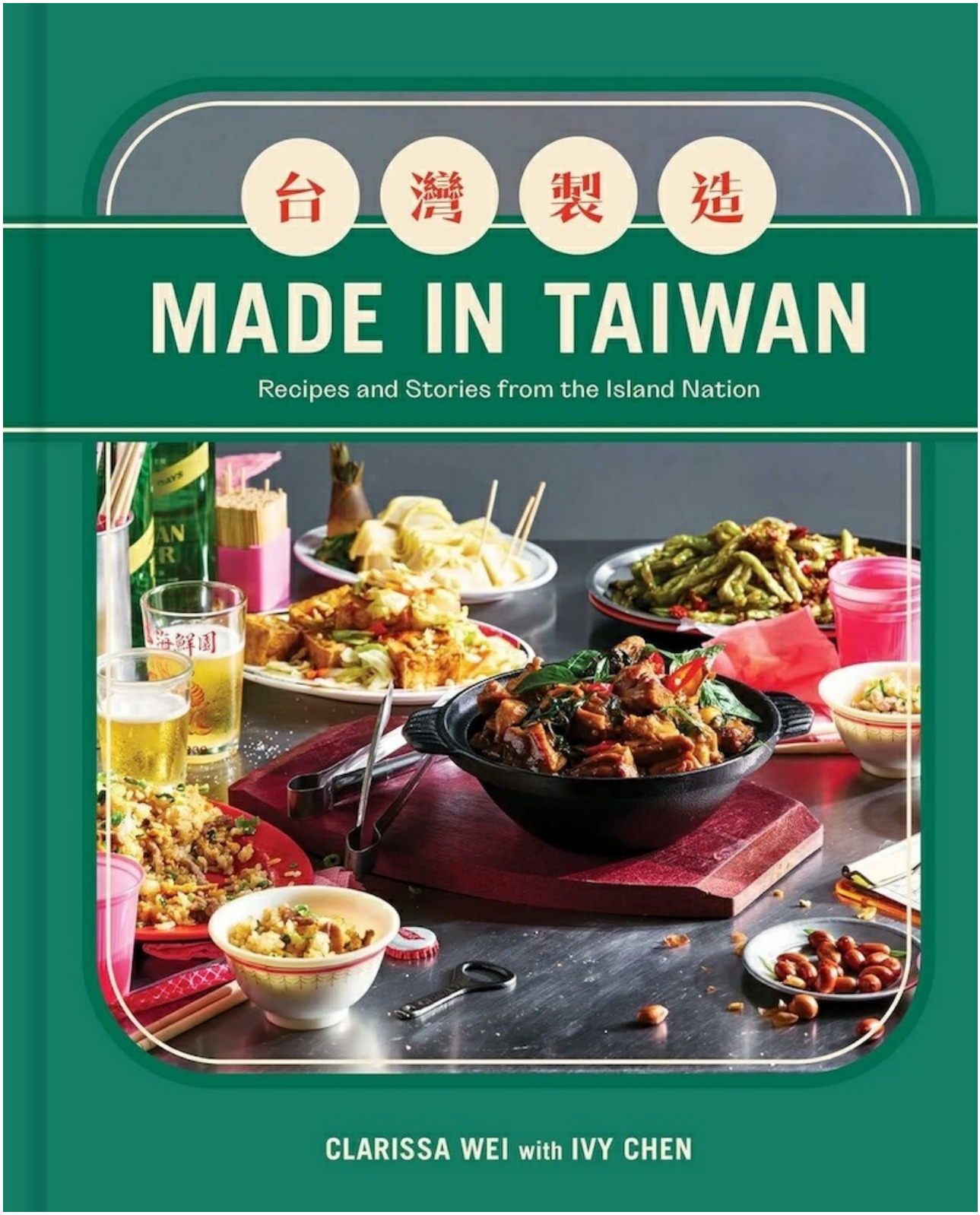
my projects with integrity. I try to do as much first-person interviews as I can, and research—which, in this day and age, people don't know how to do anymore. They Google something or plug it into AI and take that as fact, which I find very, very dangerous. For all of the projects, that's the common thread: I do my own research. But for the long-form project, because I had so much space to work with, I could take my time digesting the information and figuring out how I want to present it. That time is not something I have the luxury of having for a short-form piece. I realized how much more I enjoyed that… With *Made in Taiwan*, I digested and collected so much information and came up with these new connections, theses, and essays that I had never thought of before and, quite frankly, wouldn't do well in a publication online or print because it's not trendy, it's not tied to a news hook. But these were topics and angles that I felt were important in telling the broader story of Taiwan.

I started off doing short pieces for *The Village Voice*, being paid $15 a blog post. They wanted me to turn out five a day, and I thought it was the coolest thing that I got a regular gig with *The Village Voice*. But in retrospect, I don't remember any of those clips. They probably have disappeared from the internet. Quantity does not matter in the long run. It's way better to spend a lot of time producing something that is of quality. Granted, for people who are getting into this industry, you need to get your foot into the door, and that's when people write whatever they can for whatever rate. But it can get really toxic really fast. Being a freelancer—especially a freelance writer—there's no transparency, the rates aren't good, and you're constantly clawing your way up. I've been in this industry for 15 years and I've seen how it's been getting worse with AI and social media. That's why I've shifted my focus to selling a physical product and channeling all of my creative energy or my love for writing into the physical book.

If an editor slides into my inbox, I'll never say no. But what I want to get rid of in my own life is that constant pitch cycle of trying to comb through a publication, see what's trendy, see what might sell, spend a day on a really good pitch, and send it to five people and get absolutely no response. I'm completely emotionally over that cycle.

Do you feel like the cookbook rejuvenated you and made you love writing again, in a way where the long-form project becomes healing?

That's a really great perspective. I think every time I write, whether it's a short piece or a cookbook, it feels like nails on a chalkboard. It's a painful process. It's not fun for me. What's fun is when I've had something on paper and I read through it and I'm editing it. That's when I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I wrote something."



Have you heard of this notion of Type Two fun?

No.

Type Two fun is the fun where afterwards you're like, "That was fun." But in the moment you're like, "That was awful. I hated that."

Exactly. That's how I feel about it, the whole process. But that endorphin rush at the end, or that feeling of satisfaction, lasts so much longer than a short-form article, at least for me. Because I hear from people like yourself who've read the book, and they're like, "Oh, wow. That changed my perspective on how Taiwanese food is sold." In this social media-centric world, there's people who want to be known for themselves and their personalities and their perspectives, but there's also people who want to be known for their work and let their work speak for themselves. I've always been the latter.

What was it like working with your team?

My main collaborator is a woman named Ivy A. Chen. She's a wonderful cooking teacher here in Taiwan. When I was putting together the team, I felt this imposter syndrome: I am writing about a cuisine that, while it is mine, it is so broad and it did not feel right trying to own it, especially since I didn't grow up here. I wanted someone to challenge me and give me a perspective that I do not possess or cannot possess by virtue of who I am.

Ivy's from an older generation; she's never lived outside of Taiwan. And what she did was basically made sure all of those recipes are true to how it's cooked in Taiwan and gave little tidbits and hints on, like, "We wouldn't use this condiment here because we don't use that in Taiwan," or "This is the technique that they do in the south." And obviously, food is very arbitrary and how dishes are made differs from family to family, but she did help ground me into how Taiwanese people cook. With a lot of those complicated recipes, there was no way I would be able to figure out myself—like how to make Taiwanese sausages from scratch or Taiwanese moon cakes.

A lot of these things are really technical and there are no recipes for it online. And if they are, they're by Western recipe bloggers who do their own technique and spin to it, but it's not necessarily true to how people actually make it here. So Ivy didn't know the answers to everything, but what she would do is she would go to some of these vendors and watch them and ask a bunch of questions. And because she has so much experience cooking, she was able to figure it out. With that said, I did have to make sure all of this worked for the Western audience. So it was a pretty even collaboration.

I [asked] a historian friend, "Hey, can I pay you $500 to read over these essays and make sure I'm not saying anything that's stupid?" I certainly did not have a proper fact-checking budget, but I did want to make sure the essays in the front of the book about the political and historical context of Taiwan were correct. So I spent a lot of money of my advance on making sure things were correct, and I'm glad I did because, again, I want this project to outlive me and make an impact beyond my immediate self.

What is your current opinion about the status of social media and AI, and the way that the media landscape is changing?

Unfortunately, it's inescapable. I thought starting a soy sauce company would take me away from it, but then I realized, in order to sell soy sauce, you have to make [Instagram] Reels, be on camera, talk about yourself and make content all the time. At the end of the day, no matter what industry you are [in], whether it's writing cookbooks, selling articles, or selling soy sauce, it all boils down to sales and how you sell yourself—which is a realization that has been hard for me, because when I got into journalism and writing, I wanted it because I didn't want to be in business. I come from a family of business people, and I did not like that culture, where you're constantly having to sell and sell, and quantity over quality. But I realized that's inescapable unless you are part of an organization or a company and you don't have to deal with that. But I'm someone who has never liked being within the corporate structure or having a proper 9 to 5.

What is it like owning a soy sauce company now?

That has been an interesting journey, where I'm still using similar skills but marketing it and packaging it in a completely different way. We've only been around for a month, but the reception has been really great. I feel much happier in this industry. It's less toxic than freelance writing… It feels so much healthier, and I'm glad I'm

diversifying my portfolio, if you will. So I'll always have the cookbooks that I will always try to continue doing, but I'm glad I'm moving away from that cheap freelance writing endorphin hamster wheel.

It seems like you're using a lot of the same skills, so everything connects. Your background in writing helped with this as well.

I do struggle with it morally or ethically, if you will. As a journalism major, we're taught that, "Oh, you don't want to sell out." It has always felt weird. Even as a freelance writer, I think I only took one press trip in my entire life. I never took PR packages. I have a filter in my inbox where I actively delete all PR people. You want to stay independent; you want to maintain integrity. Now I feel like a saleswoman, where I'm like, "Buy my soy sauce!" There's no impartiality to it because, literally, my job is to sell the soy sauce. I do struggle with that on an ethical and personal basis because I've spent so long trying to stay objective. At the same time, I feel like that's why I had to find a product that I actually believed in. You can delude yourself into thinking that you're an impartial person and that you're not selling anything and you're trying to be an objective voice, but there's no such thing as that in this world we live in, especially now.

Is there any part of you that's like, "Damn, my parents were right. Everything is business, everything is money"?

Yeah. It's a weird, full circle thing. And it honestly started when I became a mom. Before I had a kid, I didn't feel this pressure to make a better salary. I live in Taiwan. The standard cost of living here is affordable and cheap. But when I had my kid, when I saw the state of food media and journalism, I was like, "The writing is on the wall. It's time to get out now."

How else has being a mom impacted your creativity and your working life?

I mean, I just don't have as much time as before. Hence, that forced me to be like, "Okay, what's actually important to me?"

Clarissa Wei recommends:

Any novel by Ann Patchett

Proof, the podcast by America's Test Kitchen

The film *Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom*

The cookbook *Start Here* by Sohla El-Waylly

For a newborn: Konny Baby bibs

Name
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Vocation
journalist, cookbook author, founder (HEYDOH)