

I cooked Chinese postpartum cuisine to hide the fact that I hate kids

One night when I stopped over one night to deliver a pot of sesame oil chicken, my brother asked if I wanted to hold the baby, my niece. As a knee jerk response, I declined.

The next morning, as I stir-fried the ginger for congee, my nose now trained to detect when the ginger had just the right amount of caramelization, I mulled over my split-second decision not to hold my niece. Did I actually resent her, this perfectly innocent little being? I mean, her very existence did highlight my childlessness, my failure as a good Taiwanese daughter.

It's 6 am and I'm enveloped in ginger fumes, peppery spiced and warm while I hover over a pot of chicken and ginger congee is bubbling fiercely on the stovetop. Some consider cooking to be meditative and I agree. Each morning I slowly awaken from a bleary-eyed slumber while blanketed in my favorite old white robe, splattered with cooking stains, as I slice into a fresh piece of ginger. It's sharp, deeply pungent scent brings the morning into focus instantly.

I'm cooking ancient Chinese postpartum confinement cuisine and In an hour, the long-simmered pot of comfort food will be delivered four doors down to my sister-in-law. My brother had just welcomed a newborn to the family, my niece. I was conflicted by my niece's arrival. I don't like babies, but I was excited for my family, who had been eagerly anticipating her arrival since long before she was born.

Known in Chinese as zuo yuezi or "sitting the month" (坐月), many consider the practice miserable, akin to going to prison. New mothers are not instructed to quarantine at home for 30 days and eat a regimented diet. Some Draconian old-school practices even forbid showering, shedding tears, having sex, reading, or even using the air conditioner. This practice is believed to help the mother recover from giving birth based on the belief that new mothers are susceptible to cold air. It also includes a specific diet filled with foods considered to be "warming": ginger, chicken, and lots of pig feet, liver, and more.

Yuezi isn't cheap. At Meal4Mom, a local Chinese meal service in Temple City, California, the pricing for prepared meals for the month starts at \$2,280 for 30 days.

I'm cooking my grandmother's recipe and her version of congee is packed with extra ginger, considered to be a warming ingredient, ideal for new mothers. Ginger is quite pungent when fresh, but when cooked, it becomes sweeter. My mother stressed that as the sole aunt, I must present an impressive baby gift for the new parents. Because I've never wanted kids myself it was hard to get inspired shopping by diaper cakes and strollers. It was only when I heard my brother intone about how frivolous it is to hire a Chinese postpartum cook that I knew it was the perfect gift idea.

Usually, the grandma or mother-in-law cooks the yuezi meals, always a former mother. I found it ironic that I was the one preparing these ancient dishes, I don't have a nurturing nature. My mother was the most excited about my yuezi project and I turned to her expertise at dish selection as she walked me through the obscure herbal Chinese ingredients. As the oldest of four siblings and the last one to become a grandparent, for her, my niece was long overdue. Most of my younger cousins were having their second kid already. Might a more dutiful daughter might feel guilty about not being the one to fulfill this dream for her?

Week one of yuezi is focused on detoxification. After birth, the Chinese believe that lochia (postpartum bleeding) and expulsion of toxins must be helped along with ingredients such as liver, wood ear mushrooms, and roasted licorice root. The very first dish that I made for yuezi was Sheng Hua soup, an herbal concoction consisting of Pao Jiang, Carthamus Tinctorius, Chinese angelica, Semen Persicae, lovage root, and roasted licorice root. The recipe is simple but requires attention. First, soak the herbs in 3 cups of water for 30 minutes then boil until it reduces to 1 cup of liquid. Repeat the process with a second set of herbs. Finally, mix the two

cups of liquid together to serve. Not tasty, it has a strong herbal flavor strangely sweet while bitter at the same time. My sister-in-law dutifully choked it down every morning but she definitely didn't enjoy it.

I've never told my family, but I had an abortion when I was 20. I distinctly remember my boyfriend at the time pressing: "aren't you sad, even a little bit? We could have had a baby together." In reality, I've never felt anything about it, except relief that I wasn't saddled with a baby at that young age.

My reaction was abnormal, as most women consider abortion to be incredibly traumatizing. Was the air of detachment I had crafted healthy?

My feelings towards pregnancy are clear, I'm horrified by the idea of breastfeeding (so animalistic), stretch marks, the idea of having your legs up in a stirrup as a team of doctors and nurses stare intensely at your nether regions. And having a baby is not like in the movies. When my niece was born, my sister-in-law wasn't handed a freshly washed, cherubic baby wrapped up nicely in a blanket. Instead, shortly upon exiting her womb, my niece was unceremoniously plopped on her chest, sans blanket, bloodied, and dripping with slime.

It makes sense that week two of yuezi is all about 'warming' and repairing the body. Giving birth is damn traumatic on the body.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, blood carries chi, your "life force," which fuels all the functions of the body. Since childbirth brings significant amounts of fluid and blood loss, you lose chi and this causes your body to go into a state of yin (cold). When yin (cold) and yang (hot) are out of balance, your body will suffer physical disorders.

As I recalled my tiny little niece all wrapped up like a burrito and the earnestness on my brother's face as he held her out towards me, I almost burst into tears.

Geung cho, pigs feet, and ginger stew, is one of the most well-known dishes of yuezi and is believed to increase the milk supply. To start, skin several pounds of ginger and dry-roast in the wok over several days. Next, add a couple of gallons of Chinese sweetened vinegar and keep simmering in a large clay pot for two weeks.

After that, you're ready for the trotters. When the pigs feet arrive from the grocer, they are rock hard, you can't imagine that they'll be transformed into something meltingly tender and unctuous. First, use a shaving blade to remove hairs from the pigs' feet. Next, forcefully halve the pieces lengthwise with a cleaver and then chop each of those pieces into 2 or 3 pieces. Last comes the hard-boiled eggs, symbolizing birth. The resulting stew spicy-sweet, with savory undertones and a tangy edge with the perfect balance of sweet and sour. The lowly pig's feet, now transformed into a succulent masterpiece, slip easily off the bone.

My brother remarked that it was the best geung cho he had ever tasted.

One of the most famous chefs in the world, Eric Ripert says "when food is prepared with love, the people who eat it can feel that.....you can feel the love in the food."

Zueyi is supposed to warm the new mother but it also melted this cook's icy heart