# *TO START FROM DESSERT*

**Ailyn Song**

*Song's Family Secret Recipe of Homemade Tofu Pudding (or Douhua),*
*A Traditional Chinese Dish:*

*Step 1: Process 100g soaked soybeans into soymilk by a grinding machine.*
*Step 2: Filter out the soymilk residue (to make tofu with a better mouthfeel). Boil.*
*Step 3: Add 200ml water and 30g of tofu coagulant. Stir.*
*Step 4 (We call it the most challenging step, it usually involves lively debates and sometimes, loving arguments): Decide on the seasoning.*
*A: SALT, chili oil, cilantro, vinegar, peanuts. (You have angered the people of southern China.)*
*B: SUGAR, honey, red dates, wolfberry, fruit. (Now it's northern China's turn to be annoyed.)*

A distance of 5,500 kilometers burdens us Chinese with thousands of ways to draw a distinct line between North and South. From the Internet to reality, people bicker over everything from precipitation to traditional customs to defend their southern or northern position, and often go nowhere. But I, inspired by the weekends' breakfast arguments between my northern father and southern mother, have discovered a unique thing that creates a clear, perfect separation of northern and southern cultural identities: Tofu.

My father is a typical tall, strong, aggressive northern authority figure with gravitas. Being stubborn about food choices, he insists that only adding salt to Douhua acknowledges tofu's value as a meal. On the other hand, my mother's hometown is on the south bank of the Yangtze River, whose culinary creations include various traditional Chinese desserts represented by sweet tofu pudding and glutinous rice cake. In any case, the only thing my parents have in common is their enthusiasm for food, but even that usually goes in different directions. The majority rule for a family of three relies on my swing vote most of the time.

For a long time, I thought my father, with my secret support, had won the war of Douhua. A little chauvinistic, my father doesn't often cook, but I enjoy his strong-taste, salty, tangy Douhua. Sometimes I suspect that his obsession with intense taste is just an extension of his personality. He was born with a sense of heroism, which forced him to come out of a poverty-stricken village through hard study, and also forced him to quit a well-paying and stable job in order to pursue his capitalistic ambition in the free market. During most of my adolescence, I strived to be more like him, to do something bold. Whether I was creating a new media platform with my peers at my own expense or signing up for my first marathon, I always found the love of spice and salt in me, peppering myself to conquer the unknown and difficulties full of zeal. My father's extreme rationality was another thing I inherited, as he always described society's development objectively in economic and political terms. When my interest in law and social sciences prompted me to buy a large number of books on criminology, the ethics of euthanasia, and the history of capital punishment, my father, unlike my mother, didn't forbid me to talk about death and blood. On the contrary, he enjoyed discussing the very different views between China and the West on how "the death penalty violates the right to life," or teaching me to look at the advantages and disadvantages of the legalization of positive euthanasia from an economics point of view. My father supported me and left me free to explore my academic interests, whether that included self-studying criminal law, Russian, or organizing

fellow linguistics enthusiasts to interpret Tibetan codes in China.

"If you cook a lot——I don't, but——you know that people add salt to almost every dish, right? That's why sweet Douhua doesn't count as a dish. Because salt is the base for all flavors. Life is the same. Eighteen. Be salty. Be bold. Be wild. Be yourself, my daughter." A bowl of salty tofu was placed on my 18th birthday table. It was the last dish my father cooked for me before I left home for college. He put so much chili on it that I couldn't stop sobbing.

"Your father's only half right since he's totally wrong about the Douhua's thing," my southern mom cut in, "Salt makes people SURVIVE, but sugar and honey give people LIVES. Don't forget that you're also mother's girl, especially in college."

I laughed. How could I forget? As more people started to describe me as an emotionally sensitive person, I became fully aware of how my mother's sweet tofu pudding had shaped the other side of me. This soft-spoken southern woman, who asked me to do nothing more than being kind, filled my childhood with sweet songs and touching stories. On weekends, I usually worked with her to make honeyed bean curd jelly or sweet mung bean soup to give away to the community, as well as to the orphanage and nursing home where I volunteered. Encouraged by my mother, I taught myself simple psychology and worked as a school psychological counselor and peer tutor. I wiped away the tears of one of my LGBT schoolmates when she told me that in the past 17 years, she had never shared her pain so sincerely with anyone else. It was the moment I prided myself on having learned my mother's exceptional soothing and comforting skills. "Reason and power made Homo sapiens strong. But it's emotions and morality that ultimately make us become human beings." My mother's indignation at social inequality led me—who had been a staunch supporter of the school of empirical analysis—gradually to the school of natural law, which advocated idealistic humanity and absolute justice. She gave me, as a social journalist and legal lover, another perspective to interpret social issues and a new meaning to my hobbies, transforming them from mere academic interests into dreams, passions, and beliefs that I can and must do something to change my community.

Fish Wearing Camouflage Courtesy of Patricia Romero

My family is full of debates, often pitting sweetness and salt, sensibility, and reason. Together with my dad, I told my mother from a more objective perspective why legal reforms that impose the death penalty on all traffickers will further harm the interests of

victims; When father coldly pointed out that it was in the long-term interest of the company to give priority to male employees who did not have to take maternity leave, I always stand with mom to analyze the social benefits of gender equality and positive impacts of social progress in the long run. It's mathematically correct that the opposite ends always cancel each other out. It's also true that adding salted chili and honey to a tofu pudding at the same time might be gross (or not? I haven't had the guts to try this. But use common sense). Yet in my family, you can always enjoy the two extreme tastes, sweet and salty, in a perfect combination.

So, what kind of tofu am I? As a child, I liked to take sides in my parents' arguments (whether about tofu's flavors or something else) until time taught me the complexities of life. I may be able to divide Chinese into two groups by the taste of Douhua, but there are people like me with their self-identities that are not always at the north or south pole. Am I sweet or salty? I'm neither, or both. I'm a mixed child with a sweet and salty taste. Not more, not less. Because that's exactly who I am——

In where I'm from, southerners who prefer sweet Douhua and northerners of salty Douhua always quarrel. The same thing happens to cat people and dog owners, coffee drinkers and boba lovers, and also various groups with distinct political and social views. But no matter how much people curse their adversary in a fight, at the end of the day they still need to admit that the existence of their opponents is important. Confrontation and coexistence create harmony, just like what the Yin and Yang of tai chi in our traditional Chinese culture have suggested.

In where I'm from, every Saturday, my parents still engage in their ritual battle of sweet and salty. Here, I learned two kinds of ways, both sweet and salty, to cook Douhua, zongzi, tangyuan, and all other cuisines that have disputes between North and South. Our family is used to having briny, spicy Douhua with deep-fried dough sticks in the morning and enjoys honeyed tofu pudding at teatime. When my father's standard Mandarin casually takes on my mom's southern accent, or when my mother inadvertently hums the northern folk song she has learned from her husband's family, I know our home is just a bowl of salty, sweetish, messy, often quarrelsome, but always contented Douhua.


Rainbow City Courtesy of Patricia Romero