

BOOK REVIEW

Sasha Gong and Scott D. Seligman, *The Cultural Revolution Cookbook: Simple, Healthy Recipes from China's Countryside*. Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books, 2011. 157 pp. ISBN 978-988-19984-6-0.

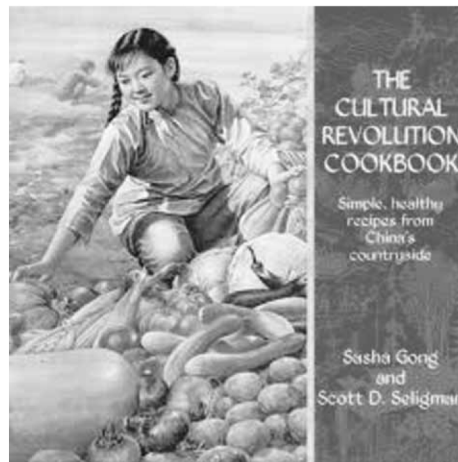
Reviewed by Raymond Lum

Chinese cooking might be even more enigmatic than the Chinese language. Learning the latter requires a brain, but learning the former requires a soul.

When the Chinese refer to the Gang of Four who guided the Cultural Revolution from its inception in 1966 until its demise with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, they hold up of all five fingers of one hand to indicate that Mao himself was behind the whole decade-long disaster. A popular topic among people who lived through that madness is “What did you do during the Cultural Revolution?” Few think back fondly of the time and many mock it. At a party in Shanghai I met a solitary photographer named Gang whose business card read “Gang of One.”

Starting on 1 October 1949, when Mao and his cohorts mounted the gate of Tiananmen and proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chairman set out to remake Chinese society, a process that in fact had preceded the 1911 revolution that ended some three millennia of imperial rule. Most of what Mao accomplished turned out to be disastrous, such as the “Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) when China was told to be self-sufficient in its “leap” towards socialism. Laborers in rural areas as well as cities were communalized, inferior iron was made in backyards by melting down cooking pots, literature was produced by untutored citizens, and millions died of starvation.

Determining that China could develop only by eliminating the “Four Olds” (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits) Mao and his wife, Jiang Qing, set in motion the destruction of traditional Chinese values through the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Young people were recruited as Red Guards and were turned loose to rid China of the “Four Olds” and in the process



destroyed much of the cultural heritage and art in China and Tibet, and went on to destroy lives. The intervention of Zhou Enlai prevented the destruction of the Forbidden City in Beijing. The loss of traditional values (along with my grandmother's “Western” sewing machine and my great-grandfather's antique porcelain) combined with Deng Xiaoping's proclamation after the death of Mao that “To get rich is glorious” led to the current Communism with a capitalist face and the degradation of the environment and numerous other ills that are well-chronicled in the Western press.

Part of Mao's efforts to level society involved sending city youth, intellectuals, and cadre to the countryside to learn from the peasants, who had little to teach them but had to house and feed them. The “sent down” youth were motivated by a nationalistic but ill-advised fervor, and many were never able to recover educational opportunities after their return to the cities following Mao's death.

Sasha Gong, co-author of *The Cultural Revolution Cookbook*, was one of those sent-downs who was able to rebuild her life after returning to Guangzhou to work in a candy factory and then enduring a year in prison for her protest activities. She earned

a doctorate from Harvard and is currently chief of the China branch of the Voice of America. Her co-author, Scott Seligman, is a retired corporate executive, writer, and historian with a deep knowledge of China and fluency in the language, along with an abiding interest in the Chinese in the United States. (see seligmanonline.com/)

This is a colorful, informative, soft-cover, and easy-to-use book. Each easy recipe is accompanied by a large illustrated cartouche that provides historical context to the recipe and each recipe uses readily available ingredients. The facing page of each recipe features a full-page photograph of the recipe's presentation. The book's cover and the lead page for each section (“vegetables and tofu,” “eggs,” “seafood,” “poultry,” etc.) are illustrated with selections of Cultural Revolution-era posters that were designed and used for didactic purposes. The posters also appear in numerous other places in the book. Happiness and abundance appear to be the main themes of the deceptive posters.

Prefatory material puts the whole book into a context that might otherwise be elusive. A three-page chronology of the Cultural Revolution is particularly helpful; Sasha Gong's personal history is that of a sent-down youth (I am told that her name was devised by a Russian friend of her father's); a culinary history of the Cultural Revolution explains the origin of the recipes, touching on food rationing, shortages, and inventiveness. The recipes in the book have been adapted to modern, Western kitchens and include instructions on microwave cooking.

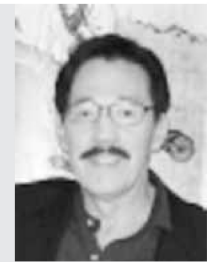
Even the cooking-impaired will enjoy this book because it puts a personal face on the experiences of the “sent down” youth that is largely lacking in academic histories of the Cultural Revolution and because the book is visually enthralling. It is also a significant addition to our understanding and appreciation of China's culinary legacy,

which is always in a stage of development and discovery.

We have come a long way since Chinese food meant Chun King's canned bean spouts, chow mein noodles brown sauce, and Chun King's cookbook that featured chop suey for 50 people. Who eats chop suey? ■

The authors were featured on National Public Radio's “On Air” program with Terry Gross (www.npr.org/2012/01/22/145468366/cultural-revolution-cookbook-a-taste-of-humanity).

Raymond Lum



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