

Q & A with translator Sean J. S. Chen and publisher Karen Christensen

***Recipes from the Garden of Contentment: Yuan Mei's Manual of Gastronomy* translated by Sean J. S. Chen**

Why *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment* is an important book

What do you think makes this work such an enduring classic?

S. C.: *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment* sets out the principles of Chinese gastronomy and culinary theory in the first two chapters. These in many ways define what makes Chinese cuisine unique while at the same time being quite cosmopolitan and timeless. The book is a window to the past and shows us some of the foods eaten by imperial officials as well as commoners. It also shows us that many Chinese dishes eaten today have deep roots going back centuries

Like all great works, one could read the book under different contexts and learn different things. A chef will be interested in the techniques and ingredients, while a scholar will find much about foodways and history.

The relevance of *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment* to today's chefs and home cooks

How has the book influenced modern Chinese cuisine and dining?

S. C.: Chefs from China and abroad have been inspired by reading about how someone as influential as Yuan Mei thought of cuisine and gastronomy, as well as his descriptions of the different cooking techniques. The book has also revived interest in the aesthetics of "scholar's/literati cuisine" where a component intellectual surprise and delight is valued, beyond just the price and quantity of the ingredients.

The first two chapters, with dos and don'ts of Chinese gastronomy and cuisine, actually shine light on what makes Chinese cuisine unique when you compare it with the gastronomical works of other cultures. It is the "must read" of this book. You'll see how applicable some of the ideas in these chapters are to modern cuisines of the West.

What parallels do you see between the way Yuan Mei approached food and the way we do now?

S. C.: The way Yuan Mei approached food was surprisingly modern. For example, the emphasis on bringing out natural flavors. The control or diversion of stronger flavors or odors. The emphasis on seasonality, as well as on certain animal right matters. One could argue too that some modern Western approaches were in some ways influenced by these earlier Eastern aesthetics.

What did you learn about Chinese cuisine while working on this book?

S. C.: A huge amount, actually, about the preferences of Yuan Mei and how he likes his food prepared. I also came to see that what was eaten and cooked in the past was very similar to what we eat today, and that there is something of an unbroken lineage between the two.

After learning more about the influences of other cultures on Chinese cuisine, from Central Asia and the Middle East all the way to Europe, I saw that fusion cuisine is not some new and modern thing, but has been continuously synthesizing and growing organically for centuries.

Is it possible to replicate the dishes mentioned in the book?

S. C.: Yes! While some of the dishes require a bit more imagination to fill in the blanks, on the whole they are quite easy to follow. Most of the dishes are actually quite delicious.

I have cooked several recipes, including Jianshilang tofu, Chicken “congee,” fake crab, and the chicken blood. I would highly recommend the congee for its surprisingly voluptuous texture. I would also suggest making the fake crab to experience the art of Chinese culinary abstraction. It is very much an impressionist’s version of stir-fried crabmeat, perhaps even a cubist’s take on it—given how surprising it is the first time one tastes it.

The challenges of translation

What inspired you to start translating *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment*? Have you always been interested in food?

S. C.: While working on my PhD and later while working in biomedical engineering, I found respite by reading about Chinese cuisines and the history of Chinese foods. One work, the *Suiyuan Shidan*, kept coming up time and again. What I discovered was that while there are many Chinese editions, there were no English translations. I saw this as an opportunity to improve my Chinese reading skills and also learn Classical Chinese. So I took the project on.

How did you come to learn Classical Chinese? What materials did you read to help you along the way?

S. C.: I learned Classical Chinese through a combination of the *Kangxi Dictionary* and several online textbooks on the subject. Of course, I started translating the *Suiyuan Shidan* text while I was still learning, so there were a lot of mistakes that later required redoing and retranslating. This was all part of the learning process.

Were the Chinese terms for ingredients and cooking methods difficult to translate?

S. C.: The Chinese cuisine terms were relatively easy to understand since many of the techniques and ingredients have retained the same or similar names over the course of 200 to 300 years. There are certain obscure terms that are either more colloquial or are no longer in use, which required more research to figure out.

What was the most difficult part of translating the book?

S. C.: At the beginning of the project, the most difficult part was understanding the Classical Chinese text and finding the right tone and methodology to translate it. As I became more proficient, I spent more time decoding the recipe, and figuring out obscure terms for such things as anatomy or time units.

There was this “white tendon” that had to be cleaned from fish, and it took a lot of research to determine what that was. Of course, tracking down two copies of the 1792 edition of the book

was also a challenge. One had many printing defects and damage, which made a second copy essential to correct the errors.

How do you balance your time between work and translating?

S. C.: The task of translating the book was naturally split into multiple chapters and sections, which made parceling out the work easier. For this reason, when I finished my “real-life” work and fulfilled family responsibilities for the night, I could more or less immediately pick up where I left off. I was also able to fit in translation and research work whenever I had idle time while commuting or during the day.

What Chinese books are you reading currently?

S. C.: Recently I’ve been reading another connoisseur of Chinese cuisine, the critic Liang Shiqiu. His reflections about food in the *Yashe tanchi* makes for a fantastic and intriguing read.

Do you have other plans for translating a new cuisine book?

S. C.: Yes, another translation is in the works. But in the long run, I plan to write something that helps children of Chinese ancestry to reconnect with their culture through food and cooking.

Bringing about the English translation of the *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment*

Karen, when and how did you learn about Sean Chen and his translation of *Suiyuan Shidan*?

K. C.: It was in 2014, when we began work on our huge academic *Encyclopedia of Chinese Cuisines*. I met a food blogger in New York through a friend, and she mentioned that an anonymous amateur translator was posting extracts from Yuan Mei’s famous food book. That was soon after we finished the *Dictionary of Chinese Biography*, from which I had first learned about the famous poet and gourmet Yuan Mei.

Why did you decide to publish this book? And why make it bilingual?

K. C.: I began to ask our colleagues, eminent scholars, about this book, and learned that it was a very important work, well-known to culinary experts, but never before translated into English. What a thrilling discovery for a publisher! And especially for me, as a publisher committed to introducing China to a global readership.

Our China projects editor Marjolijn Kaiser, who lives in Germany and did much of the editing of the book, told me that we needed to make the academic edition bilingual because that would be most valuable to students and scholars. We will be publishing a popular English-only version in 2019.

Who are the target readers of the book? What do you think the book will bring to them?

K. C.: China scholars will be happy to have this famous book available at last in English, but they are just one type of reader. *Recipes from the Garden of Contentment* is an amusing and enlightening book. Creative chefs will get unique and truly authentic insights into Chinese cuisine, and ideas for new dishes of their own creation. Readers interested in Chinese culture or simply in global cuisine will find Yuan Mei’s writing illuminating. Sean Chen’s wonderful and lively annotations put a new light on Chinese cuisine.