CHOW Line

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The Cultural Revolution Cookbook

By Sasha Gong and Scott D. Seligman
Earnshaw Books $29.95 Launch date
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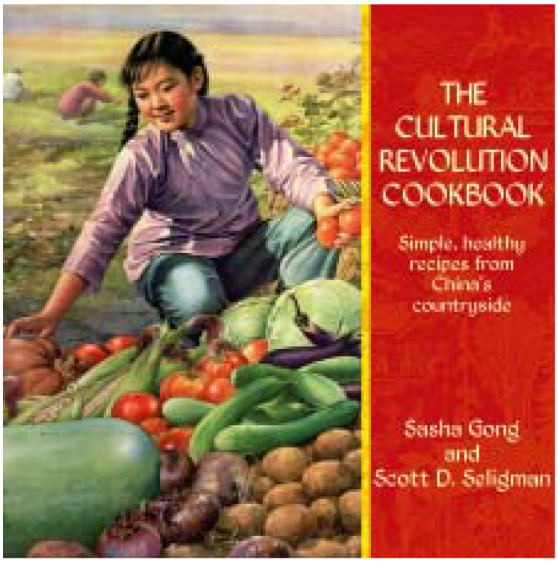

Reviewed By Claudia Kousoulas

It takes courage to write a cookbook from a time and place noted for famine. During China's Great Leap Forward in 1958 "tens of millions perished." Author Sasha Gong was one of the survivors and she has teamed with China expert Scott Seligman to write her memoirs and a cookbook of the time.

We spend a lot of time discussing the politics of food these days—genetically modified seeds, farm labor practices, and local foodsheds—but a political action like "sending down" 17 million young city dwellers to work on country farms for as long as a decade is inconceivable. In 1966, China's Cultural Revolution was an attempt to restructure society, and as an element of culture, food was part of the upheaval.

As schools and businesses shut down, food supplies quickly dried up and rationing was extended beyond grain to include salt, sugar, eggs, cooking oil, bean curd, soy sauce, and more. Market reforms in the 1970s would eventually ease rationing, but it was not completely eliminated until the 1990s.

With striking equanimity, Gong recalls cooking her own dinner as a six-year old while her parents were at work. In 1965, when she and her siblings were sent by her parents to live with her grandparents, the household moved to their home village when her grandfather was accused of being a counter-revolutionary.

In 1968, the children were back with their parents in Guanghzhou, but were shortly left to live on their own when their parents to were sent to camps for "re-education for labor." Again, Gong was cooking, this time from rationed ingredients for her siblings.

Gong's description of her kitchen will boggle the mind of any gadget-loving western cook—a wok, a water pot, a spatula, a ladle, and a "slice of tree trunk for a cutting board…" all shared in 200 square feet with another family. Meanwhile, Chinese city dwellers were raising chickens, rabbits, guinea pigs and ducks, and growing chives, squash, eggplant, cucumbers, and cabbages on their apartment balconies.

Between 1969 and 1971, Gong was sent to Guangdong and assigned to work rice fields and plant vegetables. The work teams ate with the peasant families and the food was strictly local. A can of Spam was valued at two month's worth of meat rations.

By 1972, she was back in the city and assigned to a candy factory, where she was surrounded by the luxury of sugar. Among the factory workers, cooking was one "of the relatively safe topics for group discussion," and Gong picked up many cooking techniques.

As political winds blew in different directions, Gong was eventually able to attend university and by 1986 she was at Harvard, pursuing a Ph.D. She continued to cook for homesick students and adapted quickly to western ingredients and techniques—using balsamic vinegar in sweet and sour dishes and microwaves to steam.

These recipes, from a "cheerless decade" are actually well suited to today's harried cooks who are looking for quick, healthy food. The limited ingredients and simple techniques make for easy cooking, and all of them have been tried and tempered to get the most flavor out of the least ingredients.

It is a Chinese proverb that notes, the only way to keep a family in existence for generations is to think cabbage stalks nice. Gong and Seligman have made these cabbage stalks seem very nice.

Claudia Kousoulas is an urban planner who also writes cookbook reviews.