

## YAN-KIT SO

July 13, 1933, died December 22, 2001

Yan-kit So (her original Chinese name) or Yan-kit Martin (the surname of her second husband) wrote two really important books on Chinese food and cookery. Reviewing the second of these, *Classic Food of China* (Macmillan, 1992), Jane Davidson wrote: 'There are cooks and there are historians and there are writers and there are linguists. To be all four must be an unusual combination. Dr So wields her pen and her chopsticks with deftness, displaying her academic powers and her practical skills with charm and modesty.'

Other writers, in Britain and the USA, had and have produced excellent works in this field, but Yan-kit's contributions stand apart; they are brilliant examples of cross-cultural communication. I myself, although I had enjoyed eating Chinese food, used to regard the whole subject as somewhat impenetrable. But not any more, once I and my wife had begun to have advance tastes both of Yan-kit's first book, in the early stages of its preparation, and of the dishes which she was testing for it. This book was Yan-kit's *Classic Chinese Cookbook* (known as *Chinese Cooking – Step by Step Techniques* in the American edition). Its publication in 1984 was accompanied by a sunburst of critical acclaim and important prizes. A new star had been born.

Yan-kit was exceptional among food writers in many ways, notably the luminous clarity of her expositions, but I recall particularly the zeal and enthusiasm with which she would tackle problems which arose in identifying certain Chinese ingredients. She had to have the scientific names of, say, rare edible fungi absolutely right. I had my own reasons for being interested in this, but when we both went to visit the chief mycologist at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, I found that her spade was digging deeper than mine and that the knowledge she already had of these fungi and their use in cookery was of real interest to the mycologists.

Yan-kit was born in her ancestral village, Zhongshan in Guangdong, in 1933, but was brought up in Hong Kong, where she had both her school and her university education. Her degree at Hong Kong was a starred-first in history. The D. Phil which she later gained at the University of London was also on a historical subject (Sino-Burmese border issues of the 19th century); and her deep interest in the historical aspects of food, and indeed of everything, reflected these university experiences.

Her first marriage, to a Chinese surgeon, ended in divorce. Her second marriage, in 1962, was to the great love of her life, Briton Martin

Jr, an American historian. Their son Hugo was born in 1965, when they were at Syracuse University NY. The family later went to Poona in India, where Brit was taking up an academic post. Tragically, however, he had developed a brain tumour and died of this in 1967, still only in his thirties. This sad event was a watershed in Yan-kit's life, and for several years her efforts to pull herself out of the consequent slough of grief had only limited success. Indeed in 1976 she suffered a breakdown.

As things turned out, her subsequent salvation lay in taking up food studies and cookery, of which she proved to be a brilliant teacher. Her two principal books have been mentioned above, but there were others such as the *Wok Cookbook* (1985) and *Party Eats* (with Paul Bloomfield, 1988). Parties: she loved them and those she gave were wonderful, not least because of the radiant beauty and exquisite clothes which always distinguished her. I remember how, on the numerous occasions when she attended the Oxford Symposia on food history, her arrival among the other 150 participants created the sort of effect which would be achieved by a brightly coloured humming bird zooming into a solemn conclave of blackbirds, brown thrushes and grey pigeons.

Towards the end of her life, Yan-kit knew that she was suffering from an incurable cancer. This knowledge, far from diminishing her social, cultural and gastronomic activities, appeared to intensify them. Already a valued collaborator (and Patron) of the British Museum and a connoisseur of music and opera, she gave the impression of wishing to open new doors on the aesthetic or intellectual planes, for example learning French and taking up ballroom dancing, and loved to communicate her enthusiasms to others. On our last visit to her, for fragrant cups of a special tea, we noticed in her drawing-room three beautiful orchids, each arranged in exactly the right position and posture to accentuate the harmony and serenity of the room. It emerged that she had a special source of supply, details of which she gladly gave us. Now, a beautiful pale yellow orchid displays its velvety petals in a corner of our kitchen, a touching reminder of the extent to which Yan-kit sought always to increase the happiness of her friends.

She is, and will remain, greatly missed by very many people in at least three continents and in many different walks of life. She is survived by her son Hugo, two sisters and two brothers.

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