

# FUCHSIA DUNLOP

'Destined to  
become  
a classic of  
travel writing.'  
PAUL LEVY,  
*Observer*



'As exciting as  
Elizabeth David...  
Outstandingly good.'  
JOHN LANCHESTER,  
*Daily Telegraph*

## Shark's Fin & Sichuan Pepper

A sweet-sour memoir of eating in China



'I, for one, am grateful to be living in an era when I can read  
Fuchsia Dunlop's erudite writing.' KEN HOM

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***Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper* won the Guild of Food Writers Kate Whiteman Award for Food and Travel and the IACP Jane Grigson Award in 2009. It was also shortlisted for the James Beard Foundation's Writing and Literature Award in the United States.**

***Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper:***

'Destined, I think, to become a classic of travel writing' - Paul

Levy in *The Observer*

'Marvellous and mesmerising' - Val Hennessy in *The Daily Mail*

'Insightful, entertaining, scrupulously reported ... and a swashbuckling memoir studded with recipes ... a distinguished contribution to the literature of gastronomy' - Dawn Drzal, *New York Times*

'An absorbing adventure' - Matt Rudd in *The Sunday Times*

'I, for one, am grateful to be living in an era when I can read Fuchsia Dunlop's erudite writing. Her latest, *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper*, is filled with personal and humorous observations that make for fascinating reading. It is not only a memoir about food but also of culture from one of the world's oldest civilisations' - Ken Hom

A 'lively new memoir' - Andrea Thompson, [newyorker.com](http://www.newyorker.com)

'Much more than just a book that helps explain Chinese food (which it does *par excellence*), this is also a brilliant travelogue' - Guy Dimond in *Time Out* (London)

'Compelling ... it is testament to how well she writes that ... she manages to make caterpillars sound distinctly

underrated as a snack. She makes you hungry for more' - Robert Douglas-Fairhurst in *The Telegraph*

'An autobiographical food-and-travel classic' - *Publisher's Weekly*

'Not just a smart memoir about cross-cultural eating but one of the most engaging books of any kind I've read in years' - Celia Barbour, *O Magazine*

'As much a memoir and a superlative example of travel writing as it is a book about food ... a funny honest and illuminating account of her education in Chinese food and Chinese mores ... should be mandatory reading for anyone who considers themselves a fan [of Chinese food]' - Jacqueline O'Mahony, *London Lite*

'[Dunlop] writes ... with an outsider's eye, an insider's palate, and a lover's affection. The best food book I've read so far this year' - Chris Tan, *Straits Times*, Singapore

'Delightful' - Jeffrey Steingarten, *American Vogue*

'Painstakingly researched, beautifully written and impossible to put down, Dunlop takes us on a tantalizing tour through China in what's sure to be the gastronomic book of the year' - *Inside Toronto*

'The enthusiasm that award-winning Fuchsia Dunlop brings to her memories of eating in China is infectious ... impossible to put down ... a fascinating, informative and very honest book' - *Oxford Times*

'More than just a memoir: it is a fascinating piece of travel writing in its fullest sense, not simply a record of sights, sounds and tastes, but a sympathetic and passionate attempt to explain another people's way of seeing the world' - UK Press Association

'From one of the leading experts in the West, this is a fascinating account of Fuchsia's love of the food and

culture of China' - *Sainsbury's Magazine* (Book of the Month, March 2008)

'Literary, entertaining and almost anthropological ... illuminating even for those who would touch neither shark's fin nor Sichuan pepper' - Rebekah Denn, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

'An inspiring read' - Michelle Stanistreet in the *Sunday Express*

# Shark's Fin & Sichuan Pepper

*A sweet-sour memoir of  
eating in China*



FUCHSIA DUNLOP



*To my father, Bede*



Note from the author: Some names and details in this book have been changed to protect the identities of various people. I have also played fast and loose with chronology in a few places, for the sake of narrative structure.



## PROLOGUE

### *The Chinese Eat Everything*



The preserved duck eggs were served as an hors d'oeuvre in a fashionable Hong Kong restaurant, sliced in half, with a ginger-and-vinegar dip. It was my first trip to Asia, and I had rarely seen anything so revolting on a dinner table. They leered up at me like the eyeballs of some nightmarish monster, dark and threatening. Their albumens were a filthy, translucent brown, their yolks an oozy black, ringed with a layer of greenish, mouldy grey. About them hung a faintly sulphurous haze. I tried one, just to be polite, but its noxious aroma made me feel nauseous and I found it hard to swallow. Afterwards, a slick of toxic black slime from the yolk clung to my chopsticks, threatening to pollute everything else I ate. Surreptitiously, I tried to wipe them on the tablecloth.

My cousin Sebastian, who was having me to stay for a few days before I left for Mainland China, had ordered the eggs, and he, along with his Eurasian friends, was eating pieces of them with gay abandon. I couldn't let any of them see my own discomfort. It was a matter of pride. After all, I was supposed to be an adventurous eater.

My food explorations had begun at an early age. I was brought up in a household that was always filled with exotic

flavours. My mother taught English as a foreign language in Oxford, and when I was small, her students – among them Turks, Sudanese, Iranians, Sicilians, Colombians, Libyans and Japanese – often took over our kitchen to cook up feasts that reminded them of home. Our Japanese au pair girl made riceballs for my sister and me for breakfast, and our Spanish au pair boy telephoned his mother for the details of her famous paella. As for my mother, she cooked curries she'd been taught by my unofficial Hindu godfather, Vijay, while my father experimented with surrealist dishes like purple mashed potatoes with green scrambled eggs. When my Austrian grandfather visited, he prepared recipes he'd learned during his time as a wartime commando in Burma and Ceylon. At a time when most English people were living on toad in the hole, corned-beef hash and macaroni cheese, we were eating hummus, lentil curry, cacik and caponata. I certainly wasn't the kind of girl who would blanch at the sight of a snail or a kidney.

Yet Chinese food was something different. Of course I'd had the occasional Chinese takeaway as a child, deep-fried pork balls served with a bright-red sweet-and-sour sauce, chicken with bamboo shoots and egg-fried rice. Later, I had visited a few Chinese restaurants in London. But nothing had prepared me for the gastronomic assaults of that first trip to Hong Kong and China in the autumn of 1992.

I went there because of my job. I was working in the Monitoring department of the BBC, sub-editing news reports from the Asia-Pacific region. After a few months of immersion in the strange, twilight world of Chinese politics, I had decided I wanted to see the country for myself, and Hong Kong, where I had a few friends, was my first port of call. I was immediately drawn to the food. Sebastian, who was working in the territory as a graphic designer, showed me around the wet markets of Wanchai on Hong Kong Island. Other expatriate friends took me out to restaurants and ordered their favourite dishes. There were many

delightful surprises: exquisite roast goose, sparkingly fresh seafood and myriad delicate *dim sum* dumplings. Even the cheapest and most nondescript restaurants served stir-fries and soups more delicious than any I had tasted in England, and the sheer variety of the food on offer was dazzling. But I was also faced with many new ingredients that I found disconcerting - or disgusting.

Soon after that dinner with Sebastian and his friends, I crossed the border into Mainland China and took the slow train to Guangzhou. There I visited the notorious Qingping market, where badgers, cats and tapirs languished in cages in the meat section, and the medicine stalls displayed sacks filled with dried snakes and lizards, scorpions and flies. For dinner, I was offered 'roasted piggy', frog casserole and stir-fried snake, its flesh still edged in reptilian skin. Some of these things - such as that stir-fried snake - turned out to be unexpectedly palatable. Others, like the loathsome preserved duck eggs (or 'thousand-year-old eggs' as they are called in the West), had tastes or textures that made my flesh crawl.

But I have never been one to turn down a taste of something new. Although in some ways I'm a cautious person, I have a streak of recklessness that tends to land me regularly in situations outside my zone of comfort. By the time I reached China, I had travelled widely in Europe and Turkey, and I was used to being shocked and challenged. My parents had also brought me up to eat whatever I was offered, in that polite English way, and it would have seemed unforgiveably rude to leave anything in my ricebowl in China, even if it had six legs or a sulphurous aroma. So from the beginning of that first trip, almost without thinking about it, I braced myself to eat whatever the Chinese might put in front of me.

Since the first European merchants and missionaries began recording their impressions of life in China, foreigners have

been astounded by the Chinese diet. In the late thirteenth century, Marco Polo noted with distaste that Chinese people liked eating snakes and dogs and even, in some places, he claimed, human flesh. The French Jesuit historian Jean-Baptiste du Halde adopted a tone of wonder in his description of the exotic Chinese diet in 1736: 'Stags-Pizzles ... Bears-Paws ... nay they do not scruple eating Cats, Rats, and such like animals.' Chinese banquets have always been a cause for trepidation for outsiders because of the use of shark's fin, sea cucumbers and other rubbery delicacies, and because so many of the ingredients are simply unrecognisable. The British surgeon C. Toogood Downing, writing in the nineteenth century, described British sailors in the trading port of Guangzhou picking carefully at their food, 'lest they should detect themselves in the act of devouring an earthworm, or picking the delicate bones of a cat.'

Nearly two centuries later, in the early twenty-first century, Chinese food has become part of the fabric of British and American life. In Britain, even the smallest towns have Chinese restaurants; supermarket shelves are lined with Chinese ready meals and stir-fry sauces; and 65 per cent of British households now own a wok. In 2002, Chinese food even overtook Indian as the country's favourite 'ethnic' cuisine. Yet still a dark, muscular fear of the unknown lurks beneath the surface. In a notorious article published in 2002 under the headline 'Chop Phooey!', the *Daily Mail* denounced Chinese food as 'the dodgiest in the world, created by a nation that eats bats, snakes, monkeys, bears' paws, birds' nests, sharks' fins, ducks' tongues and chickens' feet.' Echoing the fears of the early European travellers, it said you could never be sure what the 'oozing Day-Glo foodstuff balanced between your chopsticks' actually was.

There is nothing the British press prefers to publish or, apparently, the public to read, than a juicy story about a

Chinese restaurant serving dog hotpot or penis stew. These disgusting delicacies seem to exert an irresistible pull. A story about a penis restaurant in Beijing was one of the most popular on the BBC news website for a long period in 2006. The following year, British television broadcast a four-part series about the comedian Paul Merton's travels in China. One of the aspects of Chinese culture the series covered was food, and what delicacies did they feature? Dog meat and penises! Seven centuries after Marco Polo wrote about the Chinese penchant for dog, nearly three centuries after Du Halde exclaimed at stags' pizzles, Westerners remain fixated, obsessed even, with the weird fringes of Chinese gastronomy.

Chinese communities have, on the whole, been strangely silent in the face of these disparaging stereotypes. Perhaps it's because they see 'eating everything' as unremarkable. Although a typical Chinese meal consists largely of grains, pork and vegetables, with a bit of fish or seafood thrown in, depending on the region, there is little that can't be considered a *potential* ingredient. Most people eat dog meat and donkey penis rarely, if at all, but there is no taboo in China about the *idea* of eating them.

The Chinese don't generally divide the animal world into the separate realms of pets and edible creatures: unless you are a strict Buddhist (and bearing in mind certain regional preferences), you might as well eat them all. Likewise, there is no conceptual divide between 'meat' and 'inedible rubbery bits' when butchering an animal carcass: in China they traditionally favour the kind of nose-to-tail eating of which restaurateur Fergus Henderson, the notorious English purveyor of offal, could only dream. As the poet Christopher Isherwood memorably wrote during his travels in China in the late 1930s: 'Nothing is specifically either eatable or uneatable. You could begin munching a hat, or bite a mouthful out of a wall; equally you could build a hut with the food provided at lunch.'



For me, the height of Chinese omnivorousness is to be found in a cookery book written by a chef and restaurateur I know from Hunan Province. It is a nice-looking, full-colour book that cheerfully enacts the worst nightmares of every foreigner who might be squeamish about Chinese food. The heads and feet of various fowl loll over the rims of soup tureens and serving dishes. Ten fishheads peer up out of a 'sea' of mashed beancurd and eggwhite, their open mouths stuffed with fishballs made from their own cooked flesh. Eleven lizards have been partially skinned and then deep-fried, so their bodies, golden and crisp like chicken nuggets, are sandwiched between scaly tails and heads in which the ruined eyeballs have been replaced by fresh green peas. One grand platter holds ten whole turtles which look as though they might wake up and shuffle away at any moment.

My favourite photograph in the book depicts a whippy egg-white pudding decorated with maraschino cherries and chocolate sprinkles. How unfortunate, I thought, that it has been photographed in such a way that the sprinkles look like ants - until I peered at the small print and discovered the 'pudding' was in fact sprinkled with ants, which, the notes say, are good for dispelling rheumatism. And then, on page forty-five, the *pièce de résistance*, a whole puppy, roasted crisp, splayed out on a plate after having been attacked with a cleaver, so its skull is split in half, an eye and a nostril on each side, served with an elegant garnish of coriander, and flowers made from pink radish. Could any racist cartoonist have created a better stereotype of the disgustingly omnivorous Chinese?

That first visit of mine to China in 1992 was a revelation. The country was so vibrant and disorganised, so unlike the monochrome, totalitarian place I'd been expecting - those indelible images of crowds in Mao suits brandishing Little Red Books. Through train windows I gazed out at vivid

landscapes of rice paddies and fish ponds, where farmers worked and water buffalo grazed. I visited an incredible circus in Guangzhou where people put snakes up their noses and danced barefoot on broken glass. I cycled along the beautiful Li River near Guilin; and discussed the Cultural Revolution with a group of elderly political delegates on a passenger ship sailing through the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River. I was charmed and enthralled by almost everything I saw. Back in London, I enrolled in evening classes in Mandarin and started writing quarterly round-ups of Chinese news for the magazine *China Now*. I even began to experiment with a few Chinese recipes, from Yan-Kit So's *Classic Chinese Cookbook*. All this was just the beginning of a fascination with China that would take over my life. And as my involvement with China gained pace, so did my explorations of Chinese food.

It is not an easy thing for a traveller to go completely native in her tastes. What we eat is an essential part of who we are and how we define ourselves. Keeping up cultural traditions when abroad is no trivial matter; it is a deeply felt way of protecting ourselves from the threat of the unknown. We take holiday vaccinations to shield our bodies from the risk of invasion by foreign diseases; similarly, we may eat familiar foods while abroad to shield ourselves from the threat of exposure to different cultures. It wasn't just for their amusement that the British colonialists who lived in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dressed for dinner and drank cocktails every evening. They knew that if they didn't, they risked losing themselves, like those English eccentrics in India who threw themselves so wholeheartedly into the local culture that they forgot where they really belonged.

In the nineteenth century, many of the British residents in Shanghai and the other treaty ports avoided Chinese food as far as possible, living on 'metallic' meals of tinned and bottled foods imported from home. *The Anglo-Chinese*

*Cookbook*, published in the 1920s (in two volumes, one in English for the mistress, one in Chinese for the cook), lists classic recipes for lobster bisque and pigeon pie, and though it includes some exotic dishes such as 'Hungarian Goulasch' and 'Indian Curry', it makes no mention whatsoever of Chinese cuisine. The authors' fear of the omnivorous Chinese, hovering in the shadows, waiting to pounce, is almost palpable.

Somehow, it seems that the more foreign a country, and the more alien the diet of its natives, the more rigidly expatriates living there want to adhere to the rituals of their homelands. It's safer that way. Even now, many of my expatriate European friends in China live largely on European food at home. You take on the food of another country at your peril. Do it, and you inevitably loosen your own cultural moorings, and destabilise your fundamental sense of identity. It's a risky business.

So this is a book about the unexpected wonders of Chinese cuisine. It is also the tale of an English girl who went to China, ate everything, and was sometimes surprised at the consequences.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Mouths That Love Eating*



Crawling out of bed on a damp October morning, in my small shared room in the Foreign Students' Building of Sichuan University. My Italian roommate, Filomena, is already up and out. Sleepily, I pull on a padded jacket and look out of the window. As usual, the sky is a muffled grey ('Sichuanese dogs bark' - in surprise - 'at the sun', goes the old saying). Over the wall that is supposed to keep foreign students in and curious Chinese people out, I can see a row of wutong trees and, beyond them, the Brocade River, where a cormorant fisherman is trying his luck in the murky water. His birds, their great black wings flapping, have rings around their necks. When they catch a fish too big to slide down their constricted throats, they offer it to the fisherman, who drops it into his basket, and gives them a smaller fish in exchange. I watch, captivated by yet another of the endlessly fascinating little events that mark my daily life in Chengdu.

When the cormorant fisherman has drifted past and I can no longer see his birds at work, I shower, dress, and go off in search of breakfast. I say good morning to the elderly watchman at the gate of the Foreign Students' Building, and wander out past a row of plantain trees. Students and

lecturers on bicycles ride past me, ringing their bells. Laundry and birdcages hang on the balconies of the low-rise apartment blocks. Everything is softened slightly by the gentle touch of the Sichuan mist. The campus is a quiet, leafy place, an oasis of tranquillity in a city where the taxis honk their horns incessantly and the street vendors shout and clatter.

Not far away, just behind the university offices, there's a snack stall, which I can find just by following my nostrils. The heavenly scent of *guo kui*, twirly flatbreads stuffed with minced pork, spring onion and Sichuan pepper, drifts out across the campus. They are made by an elderly couple who don't speak much as they go about their business. The woman kneads her dough and rolls it into balls on an oiled wooden board. With the heel of her hand, she smears each ball into a long tongue of pastry which she rubs with lard and a smattering of spicily seasoned pork. Then she rolls it up, flattens it into a round and passes it to her husband. After frying them golden in oil, he tucks the *guo kui* under the griddle, where they bake crisp at the side of the charcoal brazier. Eaten hot, they are crunchy and chewy and savoury, and the Sichuan pepper makes your lips dance and tingle. Could there be anything more delicious for breakfast on a damp autumn day?

It wasn't food that originally lured me to go and live in China, or at least that's what I told myself. I was supposed to be researching Chinese policy on ethnic minorities. A year after my first visit to China in 1992, I had flown to Taipei for a two-month summer course in the Chinese language, and then spent a month travelling around Mainland China and Tibet. On my way home from Lhasa, I called in on the Sichuanese capital, Chengdu, arriving on one of those rare, balmy days when the sun shines brightly, only slightly blurred by the perennial Sichuan haze. With me I had the crumpled namecard of a Sichuanese *er hu*

(Chinese two-stringed violin) player called Zhou Yu, whom I had met on the streets of my hometown, Oxford, spellbinding a crowd with his melodies. 'Look me up if you ever visit Chengdu,' he had told me. So I checked into the Traffic Hotel, hired a bicycle, and went off in search of him at the Sichuan Conservatory of Music.

Zhou Yu was as warm and engaging as I had remembered. He and his exuberant wife Tao Ping, another musician, welcomed me as an old friend, and took me on a bicycle tour of the sights of the city. We went for a walk in the grounds of the poet Du Fu's 'thatched cottage', and then they invited me for lunch at a modest restaurant near the bus station. It was a single room on the ground floor of a timber-framed cottage, tiled in white like a bathroom, with a few tables and chairs and nothing to adorn the walls. Zhou Yu ordered some food, and we waited for the dishes to emerge from the tiny kitchen at the back, amid the sounds of furious sizzling. The room filled up with the most marvellous aromas.

I can still remember every detail of that delicious meal. The cold chicken tossed in a piquant dressing of soy sauce, chilli oil, and Sichuan pepper; a whole carp, braised in chilli-bean paste laced with ginger, garlic, and spring onions; pig's kidneys cut into frilly, dainty morsels and stir-fried, fast, with celery and pickled chillies. And so-called 'fish-fragrant' aubergines, one of the most scrumptious dishes I'd ever tasted: the golden, buttery fried aubergines cooked in a deep-red, spicy sauce, with no actual fish but seductive hints of sweet and sour. This was Chinese food as I had never known it before. It was a revelation.

A few months later, a colleague at the BBC suggested I apply for a British Council scholarship to study in China. She helped me devise a worthy plan to investigate Chinese policy on ethnic minorities, a subject that had interested me for some time. Filling in the scholarship form, I came up with various academically convincing reasons for basing my

research in Chengdu. I wanted to avoid the expatriate centres of Beijing and Shanghai, so that I had a chance to immerse myself in Chinese life and the Chinese language – never mind that Sichuan dialect is a notoriously distorted version of Mandarin. Then there was Sichuan’s location on the fringes of Han Chinese China, near the borderlands inhabited by Tibetans, Yi, Qiang, and countless other minorities. It all sounded quite plausible. But as I filled in the boxes on the form and composed my personal declaration, I must confess that I was thinking also about sweet and spicy aubergines, of a fish lazing in chilli-bean sauce, of frilly pig’s kidneys and Sichuan pepper. Fortunately, the British Council and the Chinese government agreed that Chengdu was a suitable place for me to study, and they gave me my grant, a golden ticket to explore China for a year, with no strings attached.

In the autumn of 1994, the foreign affairs office of Sichuan University held a meeting to welcome the new cohort of foreign students to Chengdu. We gathered in the main hall of the Foreign Students’ Building, where a stern member of the local Public Security Bureau read us the national regulations on ‘aliens’, with a teacher translating into stilted English. We were told that ‘subversive activities’ would get us into trouble, and that if our offences were serious enough, we might be expelled from the country. When the policeman had finished, the teacher added that medical staff would soon be coming to the university to draw our blood, which would be tested for HIV. Given that we had all been required to have exhaustive physical examinations before entering China, including HIV tests, we were indignant (my own doctor had laughed heartily at the Chinese state’s medical demands of a healthy young woman, especially the electrocardiogram). It was a reminder that, however nervous we might feel about going



to live in China, China - opening up gradually after decades of Maoist introversion - was equally nervous about us.

In the mid-nineties, the expatriate community in Chengdu was tiny. We foreign students numbered about 120 in all. Besides us, there were just a few American consulate workers, foreign teachers and aid workers, and a mysterious businessman from Peru. The forty or so Japanese students at the university were cliquy and exclusive. The rest of us, Italian, French, Mongolian, Russian, Ethiopian, Polish, Jordanian, Laotian, Ghanaian, German, Danish, Canadian and American, lived sociably together.

The protected enclave of the campus we inhabited was known by the Chinese students as the Panda Building, because it seemed to them that we were treated like some rare and endangered species. Our Chinese counterparts lived in concrete dormitories where they were crammed together, eight to a room, with no heating in winter and no air-conditioning in summer, and distant communal showers that were available only at certain hours of the day. We lived in carpeted twin rooms with heaters and air-conditioners, and every floor of our building had its own kitchens, washing machines and bathrooms. Our dining room offered à la carte Sichuanese food much better (and much more expensive) than that served in the Chinese students' canteen. There was a watchman at the gate of our compound, and an office from which the sinister staff of the foreign affairs office kept an eye on our activities.

But if we lived in luxurious isolation, we had only to step outside the dormitory to be overwhelmed by the hubbub of Sichuanese life. Just around the corner from the side gate of the university was a market overflowing with fresh and seasonal produce. Fish leapt and eels wriggled in tanks of water, ducks and chickens squawked in their pens. Vegetables and fruits were piled up in great bamboo trays: water spinach and bamboo shoots, garlic stems and bitter

melons, seasonal treats like three-coloured amaranth, loquats, and 'spring shoots', the tender leaves of the Chinese toon tree. One stall sold a dozen different types of beancurd. Farmers sat on tiny stools behind woven bamboo baskets heavy with produce, ready to weigh them out by the *jin* or the *liang* with their old-fashioned, hand-held balances, and tot up the bill on an abacus.

Everyone in Chengdu shopped in markets like this on a daily basis. There were no real supermarkets, yet. From time to time I would run into one of my teachers from the university, struggling through the crowd, bicycle basket overflowing with green onions, beansprouts, spinach and ginger, a recently killed fish hanging from the handlebars in a plastic bag, still twitching.

Very quickly, the stallholders became familiar to me. The squint-eyed old woman in white overalls who sat before her bags and jars of spices: blood-red dried chillies, whole and ground; dusky-pink Sichuan pepper. The handsome flower-seller, smart in a dark business suit, slumped in his tiny bamboo chair, leaning back against the brick wall in a peaceful sleep, surrounded by a sea of brilliant roses and carnations. When a customer appeared and roused him with a gentle word, his eyes would blink open, and he would smile good-naturedly, light a cigarette and take money for one of his rainbow bouquets.

Although the market was busy in the mornings and the late afternoons, there was a period after lunch when the *xiu xi*, or siesta, took over, especially when the weather was warm. Then, not only the flower-seller, but everyone else too, seemed to be asleep. Rural women snoozed over their squashes and aubergines, cradling their heads in circled arms. Tomato and bean sellers drooped over crouched-up knees. The fishmonger lay back against the wall, snoring gently. And beyond the market, the entire city appeared also to be suffused with drowsiness. Rickshaw drivers lounged in their empty passenger seats, feet up on the

saddles of their tricycles. Office workers lay down on fake leather sofas, sprawled like cats.

Despite the immediate charms of Chengdu, I spent my first weeks there in a state of misery and confusion. I didn't really have a clue what I was doing in China. My life until then had been like a conveyor belt that had carried me, almost unthinking, from my academic hothouse of a high school to Cambridge University, and then to the BBC. For a long time I had nurtured the idea of becoming a professional cook, but I left university with debts, and the short-term BBC contract I took to pay them off led to the offer of a permanent post, which I lacked the courage to refuse. By my early twenties, I was stuck in a dry, academic job that didn't suit me at all, and exhausted by a daily commute from London to Reading. So when my colleague brought up the idea of a British Council China scholarship, I seized the chance to escape.

Now that the world is besotted with China, it is hard to remember how marginal it seemed in the early nineties. No one, then, would have considered going to Shanghai for a glamorous holiday or *shopping*. Few British universities offered Chinese courses; the idea of Mandarin being taught in schools would have seemed laughable. In London, my friends saw my Chinese studies as eccentric, if not hilarious. Even to me, Mandarin seemed a fairly irrelevant language.

From the moment I arrived in China, I was almost completely cut off from the rest of the world. Email and the Internet were, for the majority of people, no more than unlikely rumours; an exchange of letters with a friend in England could take several weeks. There were only three places in Chengdu where cross-continental telephone calls were possible, and, if you found one, the cost of a call was astronomical (you could host a dinner party in a restaurant for the price of three minutes' conversation with Europe).

Outside the glitzy sophistication of the city's two international hotels, Western food hardly existed, and the only foreign cultural activity available was watching pirated videos in a row of illegal cinema shacks near the university. Even news was hard to access, and censored when it came from official sources. My classmates and I were stranded in China, like it or not, and outside the cocoon of the Foreign Students' Building we had little choice but to throw ourselves into Sichuanese life.

My own supposed studies offered me little sense of direction. My Chinese was too poor for any serious academic research, and, besides, I had chosen a research subject fraught with political sensitivities. The books and journals in the university library were filled with propaganda - fairy stories about ethnic harmony and the gratitude of the Tibetans for the benevolent overlordship of the Chinese state. University lecturers became twitchy when the conversation veered towards uncomfortable subjects, and tried to steer it back to the safety of platitudes. I didn't know how to begin my work. China was not the totalitarian state of my London friends' imagination, but neither was it open, and for a newcomer it was impossible to gauge the boundaries. Even the locals found it confusing. The juddering old framework of the state economy was falling apart, along with the political controls of the Maoist era. No one really knew the rules. The whole country, waking up after the nightmare of Maoism, was making it up as it went along.

Socially and culturally, China was challenging, too. As outsiders, my fellow students and I were still unusual enough to be treated as freaks or celebrities. We were interviewed by journalists, and invited to give speeches about nothing in particular at prestigious events. Crowds gathered to scrutinise our most trivial actions, even buying a bus ticket. A simple bicycle ride across town would provoke a Mexican wave of attention, as passers-by

dropped what they were doing to watch us, and shout out 'Hello!' or '*Lao wai!*' (foreigner). People were almost unfailingly nice to us, but it was difficult living under a microscope, and it took months to begin to understand what was really going on. You couldn't just parachute into China and start achieving - after half a year, perhaps, you might be able to start fumbling your way through the political and social system.

And then there was the slow, insinuating lethargy of the place itself. Chengdu was a city where it was virtually impossible to have any plans, let alone fulfil them. Since the Tang Dynasty it had been renowned for its easy life, the fruit of a gentle climate and soil of legendary fecundity. The inhabitants of Chengdu didn't have to work particularly hard to eat well and enjoy themselves. Their city had a southern, almost Mediterranean feel about it. People there moved more slowly than they did in Beijing or Shanghai. They sat in teahouses all afternoon and evening, playing Mah Jong or cards, exchanging banter in the honeyed cadences of Sichuan dialect, with its long, drawn-out vowels and burred 'r's. '*Bai long men zhen*' they called it, this leisurely Sichuanese habit of conversation. And the most expressive word in Sichuanese must be '*hao suanr*' (good fun), said lazily, with a broad grin, the creak of a bamboo chair in the background. 'Those coastal people,' one taxi driver told me, speaking of the Cantonese and Fujianese, 'they are ambitious and hardworking; that's why they've been the first to get rich. We Sichuanese just want to earn enough to fill our bellies with good food.'

I wasn't the only foreign student finding it hard to concentrate. My classmates and I heard from friends in Beijing and Shanghai about tough attendance regulations at other universities; miss a few lessons in those places and you might lose your scholarship. But in Sichuan, nobody cared. A few of us, mostly those with prior experience of China, settled down to some serious study. Otherwise, one

by one, gradually and inexorably, we all dropped out of our official classes. My roommate Filomena spent most of her time playing Mah Jong. A young Danish student, Sören, hung around in the park, learning martial arts from a frail, elderly master. Volker, a German who was taking a break from his successful career as a film production manager in Los Angeles, idled away his days and weeks in conversation. The rest played rugby, fell in love, got drunk, and went travelling, here and there.

As for me, I spent the first month trying to be a conscientious student, and beating myself up about my lack of academic progress. But I found myself caring less and less about my scholarship, and my career. And so, after a few dark weeks of depression, I decided, like most of my classmates, to abandon my preconceptions, simply to be in Sichuan, and to let the place take me as it would. Loosed of my disabling mental moorings and opening my eyes, finally, to the enchanting city around me, I allowed Sichuan to work its slow, sweet magic on me. And that was the beginning of the most wonderful period of my life.

Mention Chengdu to any Chinese person and the first thing they will say in response is almost certainly that the food is very spicy: 'Are you afraid of chilli heat?' (*Ni pa bu pa la?*) is the customary warning for travellers on their way to Sichuan. But give them a moment more and they are likely to smile with remembered pleasure, and murmur something about the magnificence of the local cuisine. 'I never raise my chopsticks without remembering my dear Sichuan,' sighed the Song Dynasty poet Lu You. 'Go to China for food, but for flavour, you must go to Sichuan,' is the mantra of modern gourmets.

Convention carves China into four great regional cuisines. In the north there is the grand, stately culinary school of Beijing and Shandong Province (*lu cai*). This is the food of emperors and courtiers, famed for its roast meats,

unbelievably rich soups, and expensive delicacies like shark's fin and sea cucumber. In the east, you have the refined and subtle cooking of the literati, who mused about the pleasures of eating in cultural centres like Yangzhou and Hangzhou (it is known as *huai yang cai*). Think, here, of sweet, soy-dark braises; 'drunken' shrimps steeped in old Shaoxing wine; fresh aquatic vegetables like water chestnuts and lotus; and steamed freshwater crabs dipped in fragrant Zhenjiang vinegar.

In the south, there is the notoriously fresh food of the Cantonese (*yue cai*), so fresh it is almost alive. In this region, chefs apply seasonings with a gentle touch – just a little salt, sugar, wine and ginger to enhance the natural flavours of their raw ingredients. Cooking is precise, intervention minimal: a steamed fish, treated lightly with ginger, green onion and soy; translucent shrimp dumplings; a stir-fry of slivered ingredients in which everything is perfectly crunchy or tender, according to its own particular nature. And they adore to eat wild things here, too: snakes and frogs, civet cats and yellow-breasted buntings.

Sichuanese food (*chuan cai*) is the spice girl among Chinese cuisines, bold and lipstickied, with a witty tongue and a thousand lively moods. 'Each dish has its own style,' they say, 'and a hundred dishes have a hundred different flavours.' Sichuanese cooking doesn't require extravagant raw ingredients like Cantonese or Shandong. Yes, you can fashion a Sichuanese banquet out of such things if you must; but you can, equally, work wonders with the most humble ingredients, dazzle the tastebuds with a simple repast of pork and aubergines. This is the greatness of Sichuanese cuisine, to make the ordinary extraordinary.

They were eating spicy food in the Sichuan region at least as far back as sixteen hundred years ago, when the historian Chang Qu remarked on local people's liking for bold and interesting flavours. Go to Sichuan and you realise that this isn't so much a matter of choice as of



environmental determinism. The Sichuan basin has a humid climate: in winter, a creeping dampness penetrates every layer of clothing; summers are insufferably hot and sultry, with the sun hidden behind a haze of mist. In terms of Chinese medicine, the body is an energetic system, in which damp and dry, cold and hot, yin and yang, must be balanced; if they are not, illness is sure to follow. And although the moist Sichuan air keeps the skin of the women soft and youthful, it can destabilise the body as a whole. Therefore the people of this region have, for as long as anyone can remember, felt obliged to doctor their diets with dry, warming foods to counter the unhealthy humours of the climate. Until the first chillies arrived from the Americas, however, the only warming ingredients they had at their disposal were a few ancient imports from Central Asia, and native spices like Sichuan pepper.

Sichuan pepper is the original Chinese pepper, used long before the more familiar black or white pepper stole in over the tortuous land routes of the old Silk Road. It is not hot to taste, like the chilli, but makes your lips cool and tingly. In Chinese they call it *ma*, this sensation; the same word is used for pins-and-needles and anaesthesia. The strange, fizzing effect of Sichuan pepper, paired with the heat of chillies, is one of the hallmarks of modern Sichuanese cookery.

The first chillies were seen in China in the sixteenth century, when Portuguese traders, newly returned from South America, sailed their galleons into the eastern ports. The Chinese of the coastal regions admired the chilli plant first as an ornament, with its delicate white flowers and vibrant scarlet fruits. It was only later that they began to use the piquant fruits as a seasoning. Merchants took the chilli up the waterways of the Yangtze Delta to the central province of Hunan, and from there to Sichuan, a little further westwards along the river. It was in these two warm, humid provinces that the chilli found its spiritual