

Ming-Ai (London) Institute “The British Chinese Food Culture”

Oral History Interview Transcription: Mr Ken Hom O. B. E.

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Interviewer: Yatwan Hui
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Mr Ken Hom O.B.E. (KH), Yatwan Hui (YH)

YH: Today is 29th September 2011, the time is 5.26pm. We're at the Dorchester Hotel in Mayfair, London. I'm Yatwan Hui interviewing on behalf of Ming-Ai Institute, umm for the British Chinese Food Culture Project, and today I am interviewing Mr. Ken Hom O.B.E. Would you mind spelling out your name for the purpose of the archive, please?

KH: Yes. Umm, actually my official name is Kenneth Jung Hom which in Cantonese is 譚榮輝. **[Laughs]**

YH: Would you mind spelling your full name for me, please?

KH: Yes, the full name is Kenneth Jung J-U-N-G, Hom H-O-M.

YH: Thank you. Could you tell us why and how did you enter the catering industry, please?

KH: It's a very long story, but umm, I began in my uncle's restaurant when I was eleven years old working in Chicago Chinatown in America. And umm it was a very popular, big restaurant, and that's where I learned how to cook.

YH: What did you, what was your first dish do you remember?

KH: Yes, my first dish that I ever did was actually fried rice. And it's because the cooks, one of the cooks was taking a nap, and err the orders was for fried rice, and he said: "Ken can you do it?" So I did it. **[Chuckles]**

YH: Excellent. Umm and what was the inspiration for you to start teaching cooking in Berkley?

KH: I think the inspiration to start teaching cooking was err a way of sharing my Chinese culture with people who actually was interested in Chinese food but they didn't understand it. And I think it's not just merely cooking Chinese dishes, but there's a whole history and culture behind it, **[background noise]** and I thought teaching was a fantastic way to actually show my culture through its food.

YH: Yeah. And how did you market yourself in your lessons then?

KH: Well, umm, I first began by forming a cooking school, and people could come and spend an evening where I showed them how to cook, and then I actually cooked for them. And later on I was hired by a culinary academy in San Francisco to actually teach professional chefs. And when I start doing that, I was able to put together a curriculum for one week showing them Chinese food not only of different regions but how Chinese food had evolved. In other words, why we stir-fry, why we steam, err, what was the historical roots behind it.

YH: Right. And so what kind of regional cuisines were you teaching at that time?

KH: I thought it was very important for them to know all the regions of China. Of course, I'm Cantonese so I was biased: I thought the South was always the best. **[Chuckles]** But I also want to show them... of course in the North, you know Beijing and umm Peking Duck etc., Sichuan which from the West, and of course the cooking of the east which is in Fukien, there Shanghai and those areas.

YH: *That's very impressive and quite a range! And who helped you publish your first cook book that became one of the turning points in your career?*

KH: I was asked, umm when I was teaching in the late 70s, actually a French chef said: "You should actually do for Chinese cooking what I did for French cooking, and that is to show Chinese cooking techniques." And his name was Jacques Pépin, and he inspired me to do my first book with a major New York publisher Simon & Schuster. And at that time there was not too many Chinese cookbooks being published.

YH: *And do you have some interesting stories of when you first presented cookery TV series on the BBC?*

KH: Err yes, when I first presented BBC cookery series, I was really terrified because I had been on television, but I had never done sort of... that type of television presenting. And I found it quite annoying because I had to remember every precise portion of one teaspoon, two teaspoon, and I've never cooked like that, so it drove me absolutely mad. **[Laughs]**

YH: *And there were different measurements in the US as well.*

KH: Yes, there were not only different, but the thing is I never really measured so umm I don't cook that way. And it was quite frightening for me to remember things, and umm I was just terrified about my thought process because in television presenting it has to be very logical. You have to say this, this and then this follows that. Umm and I had a tendency to ramble. **[Laughs]**

YH: *We will try to let you ramble as much as you like today. How would you compare your first experience of cooking on the BBC compared with the later TV shoots?*

KH: Well, I think my, it took me a long time after my first television series which was in the early 80s. I was actually quite traumatised, and it took me almost eight years before I could do another series. And by that time I had more experience which is what I needed. I was used to not only being in front of the camera, but I made many public appearances in the UK, so I was much more at ease. I think when I did my first series, people didn't really know me in this country, and so umm... and I didn't know them, and so I didn't have sort of a reference point on which to address people and to be at ease. And by the time I did my second series which was umm equally as successful as my first series, I got a whole new generation of young people interested in Chinese cooking.

YH: *That's great work. What was... Do you remember what was the general Chinese food like when you first visited the UK?*

KH: When I first visit the UK in 1971, I think like all food in this country was pretty dreadful. Chinese cooking was mainly chop suey, which I knew was... it didn't come from China. It was abysmal, and only if you spoke Chinese you could get something decent; there were not a lot of ingredients. I remember cooking for friends who were kind enough to lodge me in London, I'm trying to cook them a Chinese meal and I could barely find ginger, umm fresh vegetables... It was very, very poor as it was in the supermarkets for British people.

YH: *So you mentioned chop suey earlier. What do you think of it?*

KH: I think chop suey was something, err... we served to other people, not to us. **[Laughs]**

YH: *Was it... Did you find it easy to find ingredient for chop suey?*

KH: Well, I think chop suey is sort of, you know, **[laughs]** anything that's left over.

YH: *So thinking back to now, how has Chinese food changed in the UK?*

KH: Well, I think Chinese food in the UK has progressed like all food in the UK. It's like night and day, I think you can get incredibly good Chinese food, and that's because of all the Hong Kong Chinese that have come to this country. Umm, the Chinese that have come here are more demanding, and a lot of Chinese travel from Hong Kong, and I think they insist on something that they would get in Hong Kong. And the quality of Chinese food has generally gone up as potentially as food in the UK in general. I think it's followed the general trend of food in the UK.

YH: *And how do you think identity of Chinese food has changed?*

KH: Well, I think Chinese food identity has changed simply because people have travelled to China, and China has opened up since the 1970s. People's awareness of Chinese food has increased immensely. And the thing is if you think that three or four years ago, Chinese food has overtaken Indian food as sort of the favourite ethnic food in this country. Also shows you the trend toward lighter food, food that's not so heavy. We know that Chinese food is good for us umm in one point three billion people can't be wrong. **[Laughs]** And I think just the awareness of travellers, opening up of China has made people aware of what's going on.

YH: *I see. Umm so what... 'Cause you've had a quite big campaign to make Chinese... to improve the image of Chinese food and promoting of the healthy food, what do you think were the challenges to counter the stereotype of Chinese food being quite unhealthy, deep-fried dishes?*

KH: This is one of my biggest beef. When people who are not Chinese order Chinese food, they order everything fried. I mean you would never see Chinese doing that: you might have one dish fried, one dish steamed, one dish stir-fried, one dish braised, but you will never have everything fried. **[Background noise of clap]** And I think is that... I think it's the British... tendency how they love their Fish and Chips, how they want their Fish and Chips. And well, thank God now Chinese restaurants are not serving chips anymore **[laughs]** with Chinese food. But I remember in 1971 they were serving chips which I thought was so odd. **[Laughs]** Because Number One, Chinese don't eat a lot of potatoes in general, let alone fried. And I think the biggest challenge is getting the British public to see Chinese food as it really is, not as a stereotype of everything fried in oil. Now Chinese restaurants serve it because that's what the public wants. Umm I think when I do something like steamed fish for people, they can't believe it. It's such a wonderful thing especially when the fish is fresh, rather than put in batter and fried.

YH: *Where do you think the deep-fried trend came from, deep-fried Chinese food?*

KH: Well, the deep-fried trend in Chinese food has come from the British love of anything fried. They love fried things 'cause it's fat, it's crispy. Crispy is the golden word for any dish whether Chinese or not. If you say it's crispy, people will buy it. So they like it crunchy and crispy, and of course it's oily, it's... It feels good in the mouth, but of course if you eat food like that all the time, it's not healthy.

YH: **[Chuckles]** *So what did you find effective to educate the general public on cooking and eating more healthy Chinese food?*

KH: Well, I think to educate the general public on eating good Chinese food is to show them how... number one, how easy it is to make it. How quick, it's easy, how... colourful it could be. I think I am very proud when people say to me that "My husband or children never eat vegetables until I stir-fried them." And I think it's something I grew up with. I love vegetables, and my mother used to just do a simple stir-fry of Chinese choy sum with garlic and salt, that was it. I could have eaten just that. And how many sort of British children would eat that? It's because they never had a cook like that nicely. It's like Italians will cook... they have spinach stir-fried in olive oil with garlic; it's the same sort of thing.

YH: *Umm, that's interesting you mentioned about Italian food **[background noise]** because in some ways they are quite similar, but yet it's quite different.*

KH: I think of all the cuisines, the most similar to especially Cantonese food is Italian simply because it's lighter, it's very fresh, it's a very simple cuisine that relies solely on the ingredients. If the ingredients are not good, you can't make Italian food; and the same thing with Cantonese: you can't make good Cantonese food without good ingredients.

YH: *Yeah. I had an Italian housemate, and I found that the cooking techniques are quite similar; the bigger difference being that Chinese cooking is high heat, **[KH: Yes.]** and Italian does everything in lower heat.*

KH: That's right. **[YH chuckles]** The difference between Italian and Chinese is because that Italians use olive oil, and you cannot use high heat for olive oil because you'll destroy it. And so that's probably the only major difference, but then Italians got the pasta from us. **[Laughs]** So we're bonded in history.

YH: **[Chuckles]** *That's right. So umm did you find having DVDs an effective tool to help people to understand how easy it's to cook, and to demonstrate cooking techniques?*

KH: Well, I think certainly modern technology has helped people learn how to cook, for instance, Chinese stir-frying. Having things like DVDs is very, very helpful because when somebody sees something, they said: "Oh, I understand that. I can do it." And umm I found, for instance, making public appearances, doing sort of a physical demonstration, people are astonished how actually... what it means to stir-fry in a wok.

YH: *So when you were cooking for the head of states, were you cooking in front of them as well live?*

KH: No. **[Laughs]** Umm when I cook for the head of states, you stay in the back because they are all so busy trying to network and do business. **[Laughs]** The cooks should stay in the back. **[Laughs]** “Just give us the food.”

YH: *So you weren't able to pass on the wisdom of Chinese cooking to them then. **[Chuckles]***

KH: No.

YH: *Umm and how do you feel the British public has responded to your cooking programmes and books throughout the years?*

KH: Well, I think the British public has been quite enthusiastic about umm Chinese cooking. It was a huge success when it first came out, and it's endured all these years. It's interesting... My friend just gave me a statistic that said at least 19% of the British public has cooked one of my recipes, and 87% of the British public actually... know my name or somehow associate me with Chinese cooking, so that means the awareness, the impact is quite great.

YH: *I can vouch that 100% of my friends that I have mentioned you to, knew who you were. **[Chuckles]** How do you feel about the label of British Chinese food?*

KH: Huh? The...

YH: *How do you feel about the label of British Chinese food?*

KH: Well, I think British Chinese food is evolving into just, err, Chinese food in general. I think it used to be more British, and what I mean by that is when it had chips at take away shops, that is very British. **[Chuckles]** But it's becoming more and more authentic and more and more Chinese. Because the British public has moved on: they become more sophisticated, they travel, they're exposed to things, they watch television, they read books, they eat in good Chinese restaurants, and a lot of Brits have become very sophisticated about Chinese food now.

YH: *And you have also done a lot of travelling yourself...*

KH: Yes.

YH: *Err to tasted local food. What is the most inspiring trip you had regards with cooking?*

KH: Well, I think umm many of the trips I take have umm... have informed my cooking, and what I mean by that is I travel a lot because it's one of the best ways for me to learn about food everywhere; it's funny, I think. The most memorable trip I did was I... when I went to China for over three months travelling and eating actually fifteen hundred dishes which... none of whom I knew existed, and that was a real revelation to me. It showed me how much... how little I actually knew about Chinese cooking, and especially in areas of China which I only scratched the surface of. And it showed me how umm profound and deep the cuisine was, and how ancient it was.

YH: *And has that influenced your own cooking in return?*

KH: Oh, yes, it's influenced me a lot in cooking, made me more humble. **[Laughs]**

YH: *And how would you compare Chinese food in different countries?*

KH: Oh, that's interesting. Chinese food in different countries are... They're adapted to of course the country like... For instance, Chinese food in America tends to have a portion size three times what a Chinese would eat because Americans want big portions. Umm, in France, for example, Chinese food tend to have a Vietnamese or Cambodian tinge to it which is kind of strange. While in Holland, Chinese food tends to be more sort of Indonesian based, and umm they seem to throw curry in a lot of Chinese dishes which is interesting.

YH: *With chips?*

KH: Thankfully without chips. **[Laughs]**

YH: *And you have been working in many different countries as well, what... **[mute]** ...wide? **[The missing part is "what do you think of the Chinese food culture worldwide?"]***

KH: Well, umm... I've worked in many different countries, and it's interesting to see the, err, how the Chinese have adapted to wherever they are. In other words, I think if you go to a place like Sweden or Finland, they would do stir-fry reindeer **[YH: Oh?]** which is because people eat reindeer in those countries. Umm, I think the Chinese

catering industry is very adaptable, very flexible, and we take things that were not Chinese like asparagus, and made it into a Chinese dish very easily.

YH: So what do you think is the prospect of Chinese food umm worldwide?

KH: Well, I think the prospect of Chinese food is very, very bright as China now has emerged to take its rightful place in the world. I'm so proud to see Chinese food will definitely follow up.

YH: Yeah. And as an ambassador of Chinese food, how would you promote it?

KH: I would promote Chinese food by continuing to show people how to cook it, how to do it authentically and right. But umm you know Chinese food and cuisine is not dogmatic; it's all about our techniques. We don't... There are... It's not codified the way French cooking in the West has been; it's much more adaptable and flexible. And that is the great strength of Chinese food. We can adapt it to any place in the world.

YH: It's great prospect indeed. So umm going back to the things that you have established, what was the inspiration for establishing your own cooking range, and noodles and sauces?

KH: Well, I think umm over the years I always wanted to do things so that people can actually stir-fry the way I have shown them. And one of the ways to do that was to give them a wok they can use, and the problem is the wok... originally the idea is for a Chinese hob and Chinese fire which doesn't exist in this country. So I modified the wok so that we can still have the principle of high heat, and you can still serve... stir-fry and get the results, and that was the inspiration for my cookware. And for things like ready-to-cook meals and sauces when people ask me: "Can you create something that is authentic that has an authentic taste?" Well, that's good challenge. So that had inspired me to work with different companies to create authentic sauces.

YH: And how do you feel your range has developed throughout the years?

KH: I think my range has developed over the years by constantly tweaking things. In fact I notice something in this country that the palate is spicier now, and people love spicy food, and people... British people like food with flavour. And so I tend to add the amounts of ginger and garlic that the Chinese food use.

YH: I see. And more recently what was the inspiration for your green wok range?

KH: Err the inspiration for my green wok range was also to address people's concern about the environment err to... umm... I think one cannot live in a bubble. I think we become conscious of ecology and what we are doing, and these are things I believe in. I am part of that like for instance... I think a good example of that thinking is for instance shark fins. I know that shark fins are very controversial and Chinese... **[clap in background]** but I believe that well we don't need to eat shark fins simply because when you see how the sharks are treated, err their fins are cut and thrown back into the sea live and so they die, it's such a waste, and it doesn't follow the right ethics of how we should be. And I think umm as Chinese, I mean Chinese culture is... is about ethics as well. **[Background noise]**

YH: I think that's a great thought to be aware of for sure. I'm very pleased with it. Umm and your official website says that one in eight Briton own a Ken Hom wok. How did you achieve this?

KH: Umm, one in eight households in the UK own a Ken Hom wok, I think I achieved that simply because of longevity. **[Laughs]** I've been around a long time so we saturated the country so by... **[laughs]** by 30 years, I mean, each household will have at least one **[laughs]** Ken Hom wok. But I think it's also the public awareness of what I do, and that it's the good healthy cooking. And it's also very much part of today's lifestyle: stir-frying in a wok.

*YH: Well, you've had... you've made a great contribution **[background noise]** to Chinese food in Britain. Which role in the catering business do you enjoy the most? As a chef, a tutor, writer, consultant err and your own brand among other things and charity as well?*

KH: Well, I think of all the roles that I play... you know having my own cookware, being a consultant, err, TV presenter etc., I think the thing that is the most satisfying for me is my work on behalf of charities. I tell you why because I think it's the way my mum brought me up, is that when you are doing well and successful, it's important for you to give back to society. And it's all part of that karma which I seriously believe in.

*YH: On behalf of Ming-Ai **[background noise]** or charity we thank you for that. **[Chuckles]** Another tricky question for you: You've had a really remarkable career. What would you say you are most proud of?*

KH: Umm, yes, I believe I've had a remarkable career, but I think the thing I'm most proud of is my mother's pride. Umm, she... she grew up... it was very difficult for her 'cause she was a single parent: my father died when I was

very young. And being Chinese I really felt that it was important to make her proud. And until she passed away recently, I knew she had a quiet pride and that made me very happy.

YH: Good. **[Chuckles]** We hope more young boys **[KH laughs]** are watching this and make their mothers proud as well. So what other further challenges lay ahead for you?

KH: Well, I think the challenges that lay ahead for me are to continue what I do, to keep the public's interest in what I do. I think I want the public to feel that I am not just a passing fad, and that the Chinese cuisine is as long as our culture thousands of years, and we have a lot to give to the world. And as Chinese we have a lot to learn from the world, but the world can learn something from us. And if we can contribute to that by showing our cuisine, that will be fantastic.

YH: I can see that you will be keeping yourself quite busy in the near future then. Umm how do you feel about dealing with food as your career?

KH: How?

YH: How do you feel about dealing with food as your career?

KH: Well, I feel that food especially today is an incredible career opportunity. I do a lot of work with Oxford Brookes University and their department of hospitality and err food and tourism. And I think food is... has such a bright future; even in times of recession, the one area that holds up has been food. And so the prospects are very bright for people who are interested in getting into err this business.

YH: So speaking Oxford Brookes Library, what other... what can be found in there apart from your cookbook? 'Cause err...

KH: Yes, in Oxford Brookes you have my collection of not only cookery books but books about things I'm very interested in. For instance, umm, I have books... many books about China, books about Hong Kong, books about err Asian Americans, I have books about Chinese Britons. Err, it's about, I think, a whole culture not just, just about food, because our food is all about us, too.

YH: That's true. And do you know the late Mr. Ken Lo?

KH: Yes, I knew Ken Lo. He was err quite a gentleman... It... I have to tell you a very funny story because our names were so similar that people often confused us. And when umm Ken Lo passed away, there were some people that would call my producer and would say: "We are sorry about your presenter." **[YH chuckles]** And you know, they thought I **[laughs]** or... what's very funny is that often people come up to me and said "I've been to your restaurant" meaning Ken Lo's restaurant. And if that was true I would be 140. **[Laughs]**

YH: Congratulations. **[Chuckles]** Do you have any other funny stories you could share with us?

KH: Well, there is not many funny stories, **[laughs]** but I think it's... I mean at the beginning I used to have to correct people when they thought I was Ken Lo, and because we were so... I think implanted in people's mind about Chinese cooking 'cause he was the first one. And because there was so many... so much similarity between our names, **[background noise]** and they got confused. I stopped doing that now; what I do now is I say "Thank you for coming to my restaurant" **[laughs]** even though I have no profits from it. It makes life simpler.

YH: Well at least you were promoting similar message of Chinese food and not something too drastic.

KH: We're working on the same side anyway.

YH: Exactly, it could be worse. **[KH: Yes.]** Is there anything else you would like to add or share with us?

KH: Ah... Can't think of it at the moment. **[Chuckles]**

YH: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your time.

KH: Thank you very much. It's a great pleasure.

- The End -

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