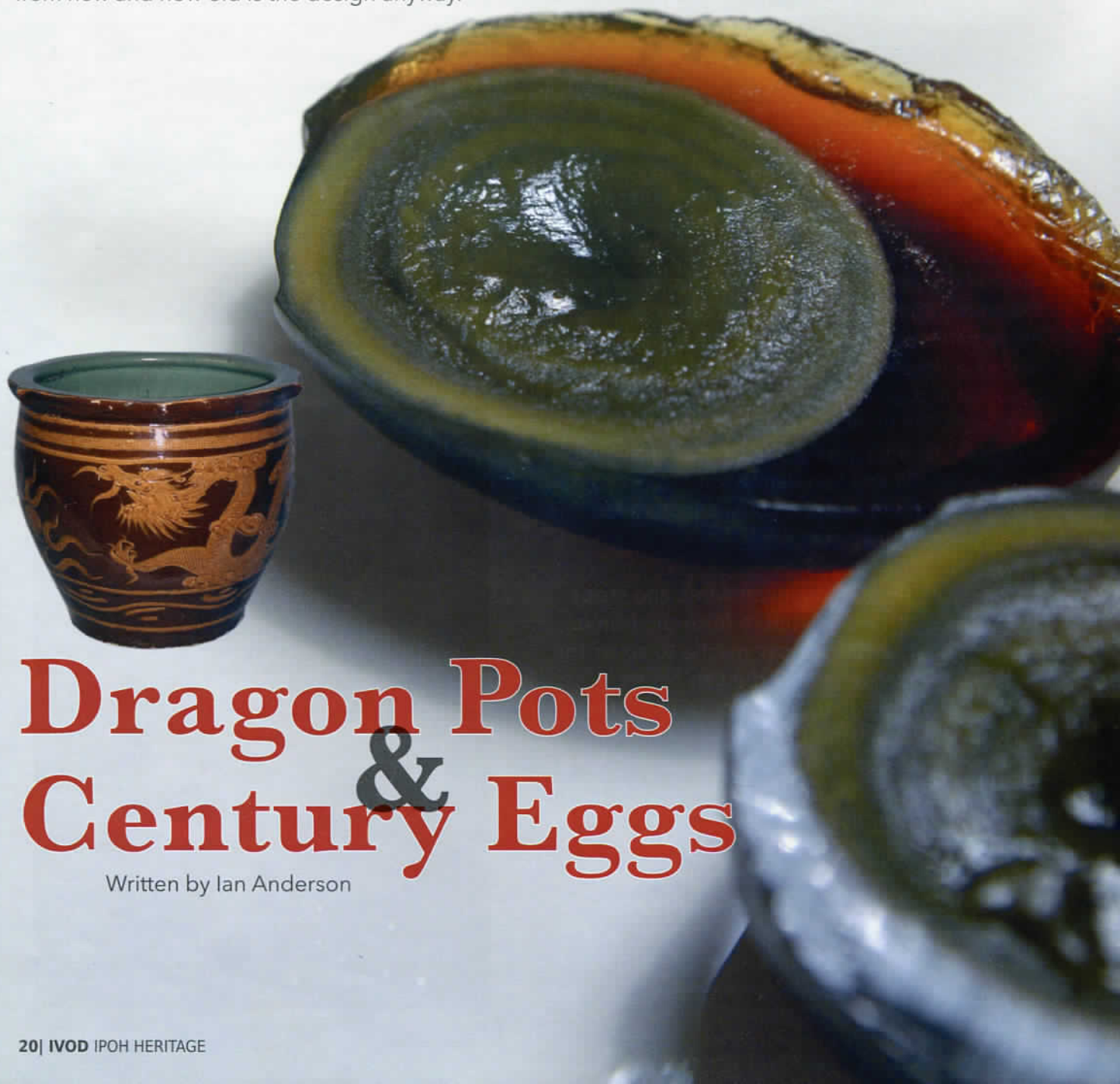


Anyone who has been in Malaysia for more than a few weeks will have noticed those brown pots from China, decorated with yellowish dragons or other designs. They come in a variety of sizes and shapes (some modern) and can readily be seen in Garden Centres, where they are called water urns, fish ponds or planters. They are often used to grow water plants. However some are also available from expensive antique shops, which begs the question, are they antique? Well, like everything else, the answer is that some are, but many are reproduction.

The next question must be, how do you tell old from new and how old is the design anyway.

Recognising old and new is actually very easy, for the really old ones usually have a pale green, or blue enamel-like glaze on the inside which often extends right up to and over the top of the rim as shown in the photograph. Modern reproductions rarely have anything more than a simple brown glaze on the inside and an unglazed rim. However, when it comes to deciding on the age of these old pots, this is more than difficult for the pattern has remained unchanged for a very long time. Some will tell you that these have been shipped over from Mainland China for some 300 years, but that is probably an exaggeration and 100 to 150 years might be nearer the truth.



# Dragon Pots & Century Eggs

Written by Ian Anderson

But why would the Chinese have shipped these very heavy pots to Malaysia at great expense when Malaysia itself was, and still is, a prolific manufacturer of quality pottery of all kinds? The solution lies, not in the pots themselves, but what was contained in them. The answer is simple. Eggs! Yes, specially preserved eggs (to an ancient recipe) prepared within the pots in China, then shipped here and sold to the Chinese immigrants as an enticing delicacy from home. However, this applies only to the pots like those pictured, the other original shapes are more likely to have been fish ponds or for storage of rice or water in the kitchen, the dragon and other designs bringing good luck and prosperity to the home.

Known as century eggs, Ming Dynasty eggs, fermented eggs, ancient eggs, thousand year-old eggs, or hundred year-old eggs, these are actually all the same, preserved eggs (mainly duck), which are really only about 50 to 100 days old. The eggs are covered with a coating of lime, ashes, salt and rice straw or chemical equivalents and buried in shallow holes, cases or pots for up to 100 days. The lime petrifies the egg making it look very old. The white turns to a translucent amber to dark grey with a gelatinous texture. The yolk, when sliced, is a greyish-green. Traditionally they are eaten uncooked with soy sauce and minced ginger or cut into wedges and served with bean curd (taufu) as an appetizer, or as a condiment for dishes such as rice porridge

### Old Century Eggs Recipe

Ingredients: 500 eggs, lime 500g, sodium hydroxide 500g, yellow soil 1000g (dry weight)

Caution: You must wear protective coating, such as goggles, mask, coat and gloves as you are handling chemicals that would produce strong chemical reaction when mixed together.

Production Procedure:

1. Put yellow soil into a deep bowl; pour water to cover the soil exactly. You would need approximately 800ml of water.
2. Put lime into another deep bowl, pour around 500ml of water, stir thoroughly, and put into a wok.
3. Heat the wok gently, and pour in the sodium hydroxide slowly until boil. Be cautious here as well.
4. Now pour in the bowl with yellow soil mixture into the wok, keep on stirring, and let the water evaporate

(congee).

Today, there are many Malaysian manufacturers who preserve these eggs in the traditional way and they are readily on sale in the local kopitiam or in boxes of four in the local supermarket. There are of course many variations on the recipe and like all other special foods, all manufacturers claim to have their own secret ingredients.

The oldest recipe I could find, translated from a classic formula, is believed to be at least 200 years old, but a word of warning, please DO NOT try this at home, even in small quantities. The mixture is dangerous to the skin and should the eggs crack, the resulting ammonia fumes can be noxious. Note the Caution notice contained in the recipe.

However, next time you see these eggs for sale, why not try them. Once you have got over the idea of eating petrified raw egg, you might even like it. I do.

Incidentally, the pots sell in Malaysia from about RM150 upwards, depending on age, size and condition. The pots pictured are likely to be to be 80 to 100 years old and much more expensive and typically described as "Antique Large Chinese Black Egg Pot with Luck Dragon", or more simply, "Antique Black Egg Pots".

until the whole mixture is reduced to around 3000g. Put it aside; let it cool to room temperature.

5. Pour half the mixture into a new bowl, dip the egg into the mixture, and let it coat the egg completely (the ideal thickness should be 2mm all round). Pack the prepared eggs in rice straw in a strong storage jar or case and seal when full.

6. Keep the jar/case for more than 30 days. By that time, the eggs should be preserved to become dark crystal.

Postscript: If the smell does not scare you, the century egg is a unique delicacy. The egg-white with its gelatin-like texture does not have a specific flavor, but the yolk is the real treat, with its creamy texture and pungent taste, reminiscent of aged cheeses like gorgonzola.