

Book Review

By William C. Miller III—Bethesda, Maryland

Azaleas by Shen Yin-chun. Published by China Forestry Press, Beijing (2016) in Hardcover. ISBN-10: 7503881402, ISBN-12: 978-7503881404. Book dimensions and weight: 12.2 x 9.4 x 1.7 inches and 7 pounds, 570 pages, generously illustrated. At the time of this review, the cost of the book is stated as \$360 US, but its availability is in question as it is reported by Amazon to be “Currently unavailable.” AbeBook.



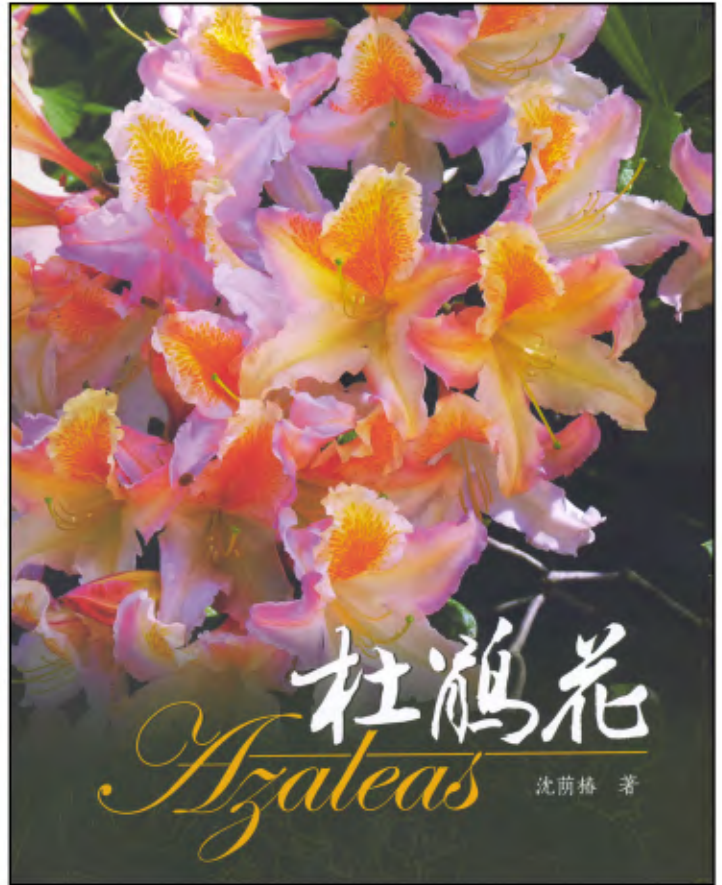
▲ Y.C. Shen,
from *Azaleas* dust cover.

com, however, shows that they have five copies available at \$511.67. My theory is that AbeBook’s price is incorrectly shown in dollars since the dustcover of the book indicates that the price of the book is 520 Chinese Yuan. The current (2-28-18) exchange rate is 6.33 Chinese Yuan to \$1.00 US.

Y. C. Shen’s *Azaleas* reflects an investment of many years and Herculean effort. Written primarily in Chinese characters, it is not intended for western readers. However, larger, heavier, and more colorful than Galle’s book by the same name, the forward by Robert Edward (Buddy) Lee appears in English and provides insight into Shen’s life and credentials. The acknowledgments page, also in English, reveals the impressive list of world class azalea and rhododendron experts, representing five continents and 19 countries, who participated in the book’s development. Despite my inability to read Chinese characters, the beauty of the book for my purposes is in the vivid photographs (as many as 12 images per page) and the azalea cultivar index beginning on page 565, which is also in English. The scope of the book includes Asian, European, and American azalea developments.

Born in Wuxi, Jiangsu province, China in 1934, Y.C. came by his love of horticulture through his late father, Shen Juan-ru, who was a well known and respected horticultural authority on numerous plants including orchids, azaleas, and “pot culture” (bonsai and penjing). In the 1920s, Shen’s father was involved in hybridizing azaleas and was one of the first people to import Japanese and Belgian Indian hybrids into China. Y.C.’s interest in plants began at a very early age. In an Amazon editorial review of his new book, Y.C. tells how, in the late 1940s after school, he would regularly join his father in their back yard to study plants.

While azaleas were one of the famous traditional decorative flowers in China as far back as the Tang dynasty (618-907), Chairman Mao’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the sociopolitical movement in China from 1966



▲ Cover image from *Azaleas* dust cover.

to 1976, called for the destruction of the “Four Olds”: old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas. During this period, traditional education and scholarship were viewed as contrary to true Communist ideology; and flowers were deemed “capitalist class playthings” (Y.C. Shen, personal communication, undated letter). It is difficult to imagine how the Shen family managed under what must have been the most difficult of circumstances. Somehow, they succeeded in salvaging some of their books and notes from the book burnings that destroyed so much of China’s heritage.

Y. C.’s publication record is remarkable. He published articles on bonsai and various flowers in Chinese magazines and newspapers and a number of books: *Cultivation: Arts in Miniature Pots* (1981), *Orchids* (1984), *Azaleas* (1985, a more modest softcover not to be confused with the book being reviewed here), and *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of the World Famous Azaleas* (2004) which I suspect was a precursor to his current book. Immigrating to the US in 1984, he calls South San Francisco his home. He has continued his study of plants, and he has published several articles on camellias and a book entitled *Camellias* (2009).

Y. C. Shen’s latest book on azaleas can indeed be judged by its beautiful cover.