Introduction

Rachel Laudan

When I taught at the University of Hawai‘i in the 1980s, I often wandered into the university bookstore during the lunch hour. Always on the shelf of local cookbooks was an unassuming volume with a bright yellow cover and a red spiral binder that bore the title, Mary Sia’s Chinese Cookbook. My copy appeared in 1984, the seventh reprint of the third edition (the first having come out in 1956). Clearly this was a book that people in Hawai‘i valued. Although I had been a keen cook for many years, I’d never before lived in a place where Chinese food was readily available. Mary Sia’s book, well thumbed now, became my go-to guide to Chinese dishes—such as soy sauce chicken and oxtail soup—I encountered in Hawai‘i; filled me in on the pig’s feet with ginger that my students told me was served to new mothers; and helped me understand the ingredients piled high in the grocery stores in Chinatown. So I was delighted when I was asked to write an introduction to yet another edition of this Hawai‘i classic.

Only as I began to dig a little deeper, though, did I realize that this was not just a finely crafted cookbook but also the entry point to the story of a fascinating woman whose life sheds light on the history of the Chinese in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Mary Sia’s Chinese Cookbook had its origin decades earlier in the 1930s. In 1935 the Peiping Chronicle, the English-language newspaper in what is now Beijing, published Mary Sia’s Chinese Chopsticks, a slim blue hardback cookbook and restaurant guide. That the book existed at all is extraordinary. English-language Chinese cookbooks were few and far between, only a dozen or so having been published in the United States. How and why had Mary Sia chosen to write such a book? And what was she doing in Beijing?

Mary Li Sia had arrived in Beijing in 1924 as a newlywed with her husband, Dr. Richard Sia. Raised in Fuxian, Richard Sia had studied medicine and completed his training at Western Reserve Medical School. He had returned to China under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation, then undertaking charitable work worldwide, to teach at Peking Union Medical College, a school founded by a consortium of missionary societies in 1906 and funded by the Foundation since 1915.

Mary Li Sia, pregnant with the first of the three children who arrived in the next few years, would have found Beijing’s medical school, missionaries, and expatriate community familiar. Her parents, Dr. Khai Fai Li and Dr. Tai Heong Kong, were from the south of China. They had studied Western medicine at the...
Canton Medical College, where they met. Upon graduating in 1896, the young couple married and immediately set sail for Hawai‘i against the wishes of Khai Fai Li’s family and the orphanage where Tai Heong Kong had been raised. Perhaps they had been influenced by Sun Yat-sen, another Western-trained doctor recently returned from Hawai‘i to embark on political activities that would culminate in the creation of the Republic of China in 1912. Within a few months, the young couple had petitioned Hawai‘i’s Governor Dole to take the medical examinations in Chinese and were granted permission to practice medicine. They set up a consultancy on Kukui Street, on the edge of Honolulu’s Chinatown, where they treated both Chinese and Hawaiian patients for the next fifty years. Mary was the third born of nine children and one of eight to survive.

Honolulu, then a small town of forty thousand people, had recently passed from being the capital of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i to the capital of a territory of the United States. It was a hierarchical society in which Hawaiian and missionary influence was shifting to plantation owners and the “Big Five,” the companies that ran the financial institutions of the Islands. The Hawaiian population had dwindled in the wake of contact, and the work on the sugar (and later pineapple) plantations was done by indentured laborers from Asia, including Canton, and elsewhere.

Compared to Chinese in the mainland U.S. and other parts of the Americas, the Chinese were well established in Hawai‘i. They tended to leave the plantations as soon as possible and move to farm rice or taro in abandoned taro fields or to settle in Chinatown. They also owned many of the small businesses in the Islands, even though the Big Five retained control of the major enterprises. The Sias were unusual in being professionals and there could be tensions between people like them and the local Chinese. The year Mary was born (1899), her father reported an outbreak of plague in Chinatown. In circumstances that are still debated, a fire lit for public health reasons flared out of control and caused heavy losses of life and property, creating resentment among Chinatown’s residents toward those who had reported the outbreak.

As Christians and doctors educated in Western medicine, Mary’s parents bridged the East-West divide and did not fit neatly into the hierarchy in Hawaii. From her early years, Mary followed the same pattern. At home she was in an educated, professional Chinese household with an independent working mother and, after the early hard years, a cook to prepare Cantonese food. At her school, the Episcopalian St. Andrew’s Priory, she met girls from very different cultural backgrounds. As well as studying the usual subjects, she became a good tennis player and skilled musician. She attended the land grant college, the University of Hawai‘i, founded in 1907 in the green quiet of Mānoa Valley, a mile or so from her home. In one of the neo-classical buildings going up around the central campus, she studied home economics. It was a discipline led by idealistic, reform-minded women bent on finding the best ways to organize domestic work,
to turn home management into a science, and to create professions for women. For years, the university’s department was headed by Carey Dunlap Miller. Miller arrived in Honolulu in 1922 with a master’s degree from Columbia, one of the leading universities in home economics, and a cage of eight rats for her experiments. The department was to pour out an astonishing amount of research. The faculty established the nutritive values of Hawaiian and other locally grown tropical foods. They recorded the local Japanese diet. They established basal metabolic rates for Pacific Island peoples. They analyzed the vitamin content of local fruits. They wrote the first books on the ethnic foods of the Islands. And their graduates staffed the school cafeterias, classrooms, extension services, and the outreach wing of the Hawaii Electric Company. Most of this was after Mary Sia’s time at the university, but it is an indication of the clear-headed, forward-thinking training she received. A couple of years later, while pursuing further education at Yale and Cornell, Mary met Richard. In 1924, as the U.S. Congress was passing the Oriental Exclusion Bill, the result of a series of policies that reduced Asian migration to the United States, the Sias honeymooned in Honolulu before sailing for China.

In Beijing Richard was busy, going off every day to the handsome Chinese-roofed building that housed Union Medical College and publishing medical research articles. Life in the city’s expatriate community was dominated by the Foreign Legation, a quarter just south of the imperial palace that had its own banks, post offices, and embassies. With the British in the lead, the group observed strict diplomatic protocol, with diplomats occupying the top tier, engineers the second, and missionaries and university staff on the fringes where social conventions were less rigidly observed. Chinese were encountered chiefly in formal diplomatic situations or as servants and were rarely admitted to the “inner circles” unless they had money.

With three small children and limited by the conventions of the expatriate community, there was little opportunity for Mary to work in home economics. With her mother’s work as an example, however, she was unlikely to be idle or marginalized in the community. Her command of English, Episcopalian schooling, time in East Coast elite colleges, and ability to play the piano and hold her own on the tennis court opened doors that would otherwise have been closed to a Chinese woman. Mary Sia’s decision to educate herself and other expatriates in the cuisines of China turned the disadvantage of being Chinese in an expatriate community into a way of bridging two cultures.

She took the Restaurant Study Group of the Peiping International Women’s Club (which I suspect she created) to restaurants in the city, leading the group of tall foreigners along the major thoroughfares. One such was Hataman Street, which contemporary photographs show as bordered by open land on one side and dominated by an elaborate triple gate into the city, crowded with horse drawn carts, rickshaws and pedestrians, with telegraph poles on either side. Mary Sia’s
first book, *Chinese Chopsticks*, would cover food from different regions of China and give addresses for Beijing restaurants that offered regional cuisines, including the Cantonese she had grown up with in Hawai‘i, as well as the cuisines of Fukien, Hunan, Kiangsu, Shantung, and Sichuan. She included restaurants specializing in duck, mutton, and vegetarian dishes. For each she gave menus in English and Chinese with prices and helpful hints on their specialties and extra charges for rice and tea. Doubtless she also led her study group into shops piled high with dried foodstuffs, explaining what to purchase to replicate the dishes she demonstrated in her cooking classes and identifying the Chinese characters for each ingredient.

*Chinese Chopsticks* appeared in 1935, followed by a second edition in 1938. It was dedicated to Mary Sia’s “beloved mother, Mrs. K. F. Li.” The hundred or so recipes, which she had taught in classes, do not conform to the stereotypes of early Chinese cooking in the United States, where dishes were adapted to American tastes. In addition, she follows the Chinese order of a meal rather than the American, beginning with cold dishes then poultry (chicken, duck, and pigeon, pigeon being the main ingredient for the only chop suey recipe in the book), meats (pork, beef, and livers), sea foods (prawn, shrimp, and fish), vegetables, desserts, special dishes, and soups. She concludes with instructions on rice and tea.

She gives the Chinese names of ingredients, tells readers the specific shops—many of them on Hataman or Morrison Street—that are best for meats, preserved foods, Cantonese ingredients, and tea. She recommends they use a good grade of soy sauce and suggests that they can substitute bean starch for cornstarch and that chopped ginger may be added to all the recipes. A few recipes show Hawai‘i influence, in the form of canned pineapple. She firmly suggests Dole as the best.

With cookbooks now so common, it is easy to underestimate what an achievement *Chinese Chopsticks* was. Nowadays most cookbook authors can (and do) draw on earlier cookbooks as a starting point for their recipes. They can assume that they and their readers share a common vocabulary of cooking techniques and ingredients. None of this was true for Mary Sia. Her readers were not familiar with the Job’s tears and dried lotus seeds necessary for the stuffed chicken. They did not cook with woks and steamers. Taking as her model the recipe formats common at the time—a short list of ingredients and a brief paragraph of instructions—Mary Sia developed the quantities and instructions for her recipes from scratch.

Most are for simple, home-style Cantonese dishes: chicken with sliced vegetables, bean curd and prawns, bitter gourd and beef. My copy of the book is annotated by its original owner: “good” is awarded to cauliflower and ham, lion’s head, and spare ribs with sweet and sour sauce; “easy” to celery and pork and cucumber and pork, while the recipe for pork, eggs, and fungus gets “good and easy” and string beans with beef “very good.” At a time when it is often thought
that Europeans and Americans found Chinese food unappealing, Mary Sia clearly had enthusiastic followers.5

In 1937 the Japanese invaded China. Life became tense. Photographs of the period show the shops on Hataman Street boarded up, the vendors selling their goods through peepholes. In 1939 the Sias packed up and with their three children went back to Honolulu, where Richard Sia took a job at the University of Hawai‘i.

In 1941 the Chinese Committee of the International Institute of the YWCA organized cooking classes in which each member shared recipes with the group. Lunch followed the meeting with general good humor all round. The result was Chinese Home Cooking: Recipes of Chinese Dishes, with all proceeds going “to relieve suffering in China and other war torn countries.” It is hard to believe that Mary Sia did not have a hand in it. The recipes, like Mary Sia’s, are simple: five or six ingredients and a paragraph or two of instructions. Some, such as the long rice (bean thread noodle) dishes, never appeared in Mary Sia’s own cookbooks, though they did enter luau cuisine in Hawaii. On December 7, 1941, the year Chinese Home Cooking was published, the Islands woke to the sounds of fighter planes and bombs.

By the mid-1950s both Hawai‘i and the United States were changing. Although the plantations were still in full swing, many of those who had once worked as field laborers were moving to Honolulu, which was now approaching half a million in population. On its outskirts were large military bases, Schofield Barracks for light infantry and Kaneohe for the marines. A mile or so from downtown Honolulu, hotels were going up along Waikiki Beach. In 1959 Hawai‘i acquired statehood and Pam Am began jet service to the Islands with Boeing 707 jets, the beginning of tourism as a major driver of the state economy. Not so long after, in 1965, the U.S. Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act, and Asian migration to Hawai‘i and the mainland U.S. picked up again.

Chinese cookbooks reflected these changes. In Hawai‘i Mei-Mei Ling published Chop Suey: A Collection of Simple Chinese Recipes Adapted for the American Home in 1953. The work parallels the many luau cookbooks that appeared at the time.6 It includes instructions on “how to give a Chinese party” The suggested invitation reads: “Join us for an evening in old Cathay. Come in pants, pajamas, or what have you.”7 On the Mainland, Chinese cookbooks were multiplying as interest in foreign cuisines grew, many of them written by well-educated, upper-class women like Mary Sia herself.8 Many tried to invent new terminology to describe Chinese cooking techniques. Others went into great detail about cutting and multi-stage cooking techniques and special cooking equipment—important for those who wanted to delve into the cuisines of China in depth but a bit daunting for the cook who simply wanted to widen her repertoire and make dishes for the family.9

Meanwhile Mary Sia cooked for her adult sisters, cooked with her daug-
ter when she and her husband entertained, and cooked for her grandchildren, fishcake with sweet sour sauce being a particular favorite, steamed sponge cake less so. So that her grandchildren and friends could learn to cook their favorite dishes, she gave a special class for them one summer.

Full of energy, Mary Sia also taught Chinese cookery at the University of Hawai‘i, at McKinley High School (then Honolulu’s premier public school), and at the YWCA on Richards Street, about a mile from where she had grown up. She entertained her students, many of them officers’ wives and new to Hawai‘i, with stories of living in Beijing while explaining Chinese culinary philosophy. All the students had to chop and sauté their way through her recipes before sitting down to lunch together.

One of those students, Arthur J. Marder, a distinguished American historian specializing in British naval history, recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, took Mrs. Sia’s classes not just once, but twice—the lone man among two dozen women. Twenty years after *Chinese Chopsticks* appeared, he urged Mary to publish an updated version, suggesting the book to the University of Hawai‘i Press, which had been established a few years earlier in 1947. Clemente Lagundimao, a well-known artist and professor in the university’s art department, supplied the illustrations, and Robert S. Milne and Aldyth V. Morris, soon to write *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture* (1967), supplied background material.

Mary Sia’s *Chinese Cookbook* is recognizably based on *Chinese Chopsticks* and is likewise dedicated to her “beloved mother, Dr. Tai Heong Kong Li.” Not surprisingly the restaurant suggestions were dropped and, perhaps more surprisingly, so was the shopping guide. The new book was much expanded, now including about five hundred recipes, and more background on the culture of Chinese cooking. The table of contents of the new book reflected American rather than Chinese meal patterns: appetizers, soups, eggs, sea food, fowl (still with pigeon), meat, vegetables, rice, noodles and buns, and desserts.

The Cantonese sausage, celery and shrimp eggs, and sliced ham found in the cold dishes section of the earlier book appear as appetizers and are joined by won tons. The chow mein is now topped with a cornstarch-thickened “gravy” that remains a favorite to this day in Hawai‘i. Novel ingredients, such as canned abalone, are there too, as well as ingredients probably adapted from Hawai‘i, such as green papaya soup. Pineapple appears as pineapple chicken and pineapple spare ribs but there are none of the bean thread noodles (long rice) so popular in luaus and that appeared in the YWCA cookbook. Noodles and buns from her Beijing days are there too. After years of teaching, she knew just how much she had to explain to her readers and she took it for granted that the cuisine commanded respect and did not have to be presented as exotic. As a result, most of the book, though, remains dedicated to the refined, unfussy Cantonese dishes that were her specialty.
By now Mary Sia was much in demand for her cooking expertise. She prepared later editions of her cookbook with the help of her daughter-in-law, who came from Hong Kong and knew some Mandarin as well as Cantonese. She appeared on television. She gave demonstrations at the annual Hawai‘i Chinese Chamber of Commerce Narcissus Festival, and on a couple of occasions teamed up with Danny Kaye and Julia Child. And, last but not least, the United Chinese Society of Hawai‘i named her “Model Mother of the Year” in 1964.

Mary Sia died in 1971. In her life, she had made moving back and forth between cultures look easy, though it never is. She had made combining raising a family with a productive professional life look easy, though that never is either. Through an elegantly simple introduction to Cantonese cookery, she had enhanced the enjoyment of family, friends, and students and, perhaps, this would have been important to her too, helped them achieve a healthful and balanced diet.

Her granddaughter, Laura Ing Baker, is just one member of the family who still begins Chinese dishes by consulting her recipes, albeit reducing the salt.

The YWCA where she had taught for so many years named its kitchen after her. Her cookbooks sold steadily: some twenty thousand copies having left the shelves by the 1980s and doubtless many more by now. Jacqueline Newman, founder and editor of Flavor and Fortune (a magazine dedicated to Chinese cooking) who assembled the premier collection of English-language Chinese cookbooks, commented that Mary Sia’s Chinese Cookbook remains one of the finest introductions to home-style Cantonese cooking all these years after Mary Sia first created the recipes. Dr. Newman commented to me, “She was years ahead of her time, a better cook with a better set of taste buds than most folk I know, as well as a better writer.” Perhaps, though, what would most have satisfied Mary Sia was that not only her children and grandchildren, but also her mother, to whom her books are dedicated, would be proud of such an accomplished life.

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