Overlooked No More: Yamei Kin, the Chinese Doctor Who Introduced Tofu to the West

Long before veggie burgers and soy lattes were fashionable, Kin was sent on a mission by the United States government to uncover the benefits of the soybean for Americans.

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Since 1851, obituaries in The New York Times have been dominated by white men. With Overlooked, we're adding the stories of remarkable people whose deaths went unreported in The Times.

By Mike Ives

In 1917 Yamei Kin, a Chinese-born doctor then living in New York, visited her homeland to study a crop that was virtually unknown to Americans: the soybean.

By that point she had become something of a celebrity dietitian. For years before the mission to China she had been telling women's clubs that tofu and other soy products were nutritious alternatives to meat, and that they required fewer resources to produce. She liked to say that they tasted "a little like brains and a little like sweetbreads."

"She was many decades ahead of her time in terms of promoting tofu to a wider American audience," said Matthew Roth, the author of the book "Magic Bean: The Rise of Soy in America" (2018).

It was the United States Department of Agriculture that approached Kin about going to China to study how the soybean could be used in America. The government saw her research as part of a wider effort to develop new sources of protein for American soldiers during World War I.

Kin had a laboratory at the U.S.D.A., where she tested what the department called "Chinese soybean cheese," and she presented soybean seeds to the department's Bureau of Plant Industry. In addition, Roth said, some of her recipes were very likely included in "The Soybean," a landmark study published in 1910 by William J. Morse and Charles V. Piper, officials at the Agriculture Department.

"Americans do not know how to use the soybean," Kin, then in her early 50s, told The New York Times Magazine in 1917, as she set out for China on her mission. "It must be made attractive or they will not take to it. It must taste good. That can be done."

An article in 1918 in The San Antonio Light offered this description of her lab:

"On a long table was a row of glass jars filled with what looked like slices of white cheese. It was soy bean cheese. A jar was filled with a brownish paste. It was soy beans. There were bottles filled with the condiment we get with chop suey. That, too, was made from soy beans. Talk about dual personalities! The soy bean has so many aliases that if you shouldn't like it in one form you would be pretty sure to like it in another."

In essays and correspondence at the time, U.S.D.A. colleagues expressed glowing praise for Kin's work.

"Very interesting," Frank N. Meyer, a department botanist, wrote in 1911 in response to one of her letters. "There probably will come a time that soy beans are also given a nobler use in the United States than mere forage or green manure."

Woman Off to China as Government Agent to Study Soy Bean

Dr. Kin Will Make Report for United States on the Most Useful Food of Her Native Land

Dr. Yamei Kin, the Only Chinese Woman with a Physician's Diploma from an American College.

NO less a personage than Browning sang of the bean, and Dr. Yamei Kin, the only Chinese woman graduate of an American medical college, made it the burden of her good-bye song on the

human being. Roughly speaking, the process is not unlike the loss of heat units in coal burned in a locomotive before the wheels go round.

"All grains contain a certain percentage of protein, but all beans contain a very great proportion of protein. The statement is frequently made that the

served with cream mushroom sauce or a hot Spanish tomato sauce. A salad of bean sprouts, accompanied by cheese—the cheese a cross between Camembert and Roquefort, and made from the soy bean—is very nutritious and palatable. Americans do not know how to use the soy bean. It must be made attractive or they will not take to it. It must taste good. That can be done. We make from it a delightful chocolate pudding. A black soy bean sauce we use as a foundation for sweetmeats in China. The soy bean contains practically no starch, which means that it is a most desirable food for diabetics, and also, of course, for vegetarians. Buddhists kill no animals—they thrive by making a specialty of the soy bean, which, by the way, is already being used in the French Army. They find there that soy bean mixed with flour makes a good cracker, more nourishing than any other cracker.

"In some things we Chinese have far outstripped you. We have vast areas of swamps, and we have made them wonderful in their productive power. The first requisite of life is food, which, throughout the same zone all over the world, is practically the same. You have vast areas of swamp lands and permit them to lie waste." We are showing the United States, right now, how it can make semi-arid regions yield. I came here once for the particular purpose of getting American corn with which I hoped we might improve the Chinese corn. I found it not much better than

that other industries so intimately depend upon them, make it difficult to conceive of overproduction on the American farm.

"America can help China in teaching her the use of machinery, and we can help America by teaching her the value of the ground that your splendidly efficient farming implements cultivate. Many persons here think chiefly of coolies when they think at all of the Chinese people. It would not be fair for intelligent persons in China to believe that America's bill of fare was made up exclusively of the dishes set before the mountaineers of Eastern Kentucky. Chinese are fond of eating, and devote much attention to doing it well.

"All the cereal and vegetable productions known in Canada, the United States, or Mexico, and many that these countries do not know, are found in China. Barley, wheat, buckwheat, and maize are cultivated in the northern part. Every variety of soil and climate, in every degree of altitude, are to be found within the boundaries of China—from the heated swamps below the sea level to the regions of everlasting frosts beyond the snow line; and in these varied climates everything for the comfort of man can be produced.

"The Chinese do not know what worn-out soil is. Some places are so fertile and are cultivated with so much care and skill that three or four crops a year are regularly gathered. When the first crop is well along, the second is sowed or

"Americans do not know how to use the soybean," Kin told The New York Times Magazine in 1917 as she set out for China on her mission. "It must be made attractive or they will not take to it. It must taste good. That can be done." The New York Times

The Times Magazine noted that Kin's research mission was the first time the United States had "given so much authority to a Chinese."

Kin did not live to see the soybean become popular in American society, and historians say the precise impact of her tofu advocacy in the United States is hard to measure. But she was apparently the first person in the federal government to promote the bean outside Asian immigrant communities — cultural eons before veggie burgers and soy lattes were fashionable.

Kin's U.S.D.A. assignment was just one chapter in a lifetime of professional trailblazing. Historians say she was among the first female students in China's modern history to study overseas and earn a medical degree in the United States.

Later, when she moved back to China, she ran a women's hospital, founded a nursing school and reportedly served as the family physician to a president of the young republic.

Kin's career is remarkable partly because it unfolded against the backdrop of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which had effectively banned any immigration from China, and of the political turmoil in China surrounding the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912.

"That she shows up in so many places doing so many different things is very resonant," said Madeline Y. Hsu, a historian at the University of Texas at Austin who studies migration between China and the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "It's a really, really transnational story," she added.

Yamei Kin was born in 1864 in the eastern Chinese city of Ningpo, now called Ningbo, to a Chinese pastor and his wife, according to the SoyInfo Center in California.

When Kin was 2, her parents died of cholera during an epidemic, and she was adopted by an American missionary couple, Divie Bethune and Juana McCartee. She was raised in China and Japan, where her adoptive father worked for the Education Ministry.

After her parents moved to New York, Kin went to high school for a year in Rye, N.Y. At 16, she enrolled in the Women's Medical College of New York under the name Y. May King, according to Roth's book.

Researchers believe she had altered her name to hide her ethnicity; she had been frequently reminded that she was one of few Chinese women studying in the United States at the time.

"Workmen in the street would often hurl abuse at me, and even my fellow woman students were not particularly enthusiastic about me," she was quoted as saying in "My Sister China" (2002), a memoir by Jaroslav Prusek, a Czech Sinologist who knew Kin in the 1930s.

She graduated from the medical college in 1885 at the top of her class and published an article two years later in The New York Medical Journal that extolled the virtues of "photomicrography," or photography through microscopes, for medical research.

During the 1880s and '90s Kin worked as a medical missionary in China and Japan. She married Hippolytus Laesola Amador Eça da Silva, a Macau-born musician of Portuguese and Spanish descent, in 1894.

The couple settled in Hawaii, where Kin gave birth to a son. She later moved to California and separated from her husband.

By 1903, Kin was traveling across the United States to lecture to women's clubs about Chinese nutrition and other "things oriental," including the opium crisis in China and the role of women there.

Her profile was growing in the United States even as Chinese immigrants there were protesting the Chinese Exclusion Act, the country's first anti-immigrant law directed at a specific nationality.

She was part of a "transnational elite" and would have been exempt from the law, which targeted laborers, said Mae M. Ngai, a history professor at Columbia University and the author of "The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America."

In one sign of her elite status, President Theodore Roosevelt wrote to Kin in 1904 to express regret that he did not have the power to make her an American citizen. She was permitted to stay nonetheless.

In 1907, Kin began running the Imperial Peiyang Women's Medical School and Hospital in the northern Chinese city Tientsin, now called Tianjin.

She later founded a nursing school in the city with funding from Yuan Shikai, a Qing dynasty official who would become president of the new Chinese republic after the 1911 revolution, said Zhou Zhuitian, a historian in Tianjin. Prusek wrote in his book that she also served as the physician for Yuan's family.

“She is the founder of nursing education in China — the pioneer, the trailblazer,” said Qian Gang, a Hong Kong-based historian.

Kin returned to China for good in 1920, two years after her son, Alexander, died while fighting for the United States in France in the waning weeks of World War I.

She died in 1934 at the age of 70, leaving no survivors. The cause was pneumonia.

At her request, she was buried on a farm outside Beijing.

“Here my dust will blend with soil,” she told Prusek, “and after the pile of clay they will place upon my grave has crumbled as well, I will become a field, a fertile field.”

The land has since been swallowed by the city’s urban sprawl.

Echo Hui contributed research from Beijing.

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