

SIŮ-MOI

秀梅

Born into an impoverished family, Siŭ-Moi interprets her fate through the lens of a lifetime spent in different kitchens and, in twenty-one dishes, shares stories of her misfortunes, attachments, affections, and notable life experiences.

Regret over her disinterest as a young girl in her grandmother Siŭ-Moi's tales of her own difficult and capricious life inspires Chang Chih-Hsin three decades later to sift through and revisit her remembrances of these stories and then weave them into an "inspired by true events" novel. *Siŭ-Moi*, a loving tribute and belated "sorry" to her grandmother, opens an emotion-filled window into the world experienced by many women born into poverty and hardship in early twentieth-century Taiwan.

Centered around the various kitchens she'd worked in, the narrative shares important memories and relationships in the life of protagonist Siŭ-Moi in parallel with twenty-one meaningful dishes. The first of these, delicious chicken soup made in her adoptive family's threadbare kitchen, frames memories of her ill mum and wartime scarcity and marks the start of a lifetime of cooking.

To escape a marriage arranged by her adoptive father, Siŭ-Moi returns to her birth family at sixteen and learns to pickle vegetables and prepare complicated dishes. Two years later, she is married and responsible to care for her parents-in-law and her husband's siblings as well. Then, after her husband takes work overseas, she continues cooking three daily meals for her extended family while caring for her young children. Even after her kids marry and she has daughters-in-law to make her meals, she continues to cook as an expression of love.

This saga spotlights the unjust treatment of women in traditional society. Siŭ-Moi, unschooled and constrained by contemporary social mores, can only select from the choices given her. While imperfect, her



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determination and goodness bring wisdom. Her loving devotion to home and family mirrors the experience of many women in real life. Siŭ-Moi's path in life helped create what we are today and help frame tomorrow's possibilities.

Chang Chih-Hsin 張鄧忻

Born in 1982 and currently residing in Taoyuan in northern Taiwan, Chang Chih-Hsin is a seasoned writer of narrative reportage, reflective essays, and stories couched in family history. She has published several essay collections, including *Away from Home and Back: My United Family*, *The Ocean I Carry*, and *The Child in Me*, and four novels, two of which, *Weave* and *Siŭ-Moi*, were Taiwan Literature Award (TLA) for Books finalists and one of which, *Mountain Mirrors*, is a 2024 TLA for Books award-winner.

SIŮ-MOI

By Chang Chih-Hsin

Translated by Jenna Tang

Kitchen at the Hilltop

“Hurry up! Boil some water!” A-Ba bellowed.

The hen, splayed on the ground, struggled for its last bit of life, and Siŭ-Moi finally loosened her grip. Blood continued streaming out from the hen’s neck into a bowl on the floor.

Siŭ-Moi, her hands splattered with feathers and bloodstains, ran to the kitchen to fetch a wooden ladle behind the brick stove and scooped water to rinse her hands. The main brick stove with a long chimney attached to its top stood at the center of the kitchen. With a thin, long wooden stick, Siŭ-Moi stirred the cluster of ashes in the stove, letting the wood chips rekindle the remaining sparks before throwing a few new pieces of firewood in.

Gripping the wooden ladle with both hands, she scooped up water and poured it into the iron pot on the stove until it was three-quarters full, then squatted in front of the burning firewood. The smog that came to her nose made her cough.

“Are you done?” A-Ba’s voice echoed from outside the house.

“Almost!” Siŭ-Moi immediately responded.

The iron pot began to bubble up – it was finally boiling. A-Ba, noticeably impatient, gripped the hen’s neck and dashed into the kitchen, tossing the hen directly into the boiling water. The once puffy, beautiful feathers became a mess in the hot water, emitting a horrible smell. Siŭ-Moi almost retched.

She wasn’t sure whether A-Ba was right about chicken-slaughtering. The kitchen had been A-Mei’s territory, and Siŭ-Moi had just been the one helping with trivial tasks, washing vegetables, picking out stems, and tending the fire in the stove. Her A-Mei would hum and sing while cooking, and then set aside a small portion of freshly made food for Siŭ-Moi to taste.

They waited for the water to cool down, then A-Ba pulled the chicken out from the pot and placed it in an iron basin, starting to pluck the feathers. Holding back her discomfort, Siŭ-Moi joined him. Feathers began to pile up on the floor like a spread of dirty, tawny tablecloth. It was hard to imagine that pile had been a hopping, energetic hen not so long ago.

The naked hen was splayed across a heavy, wooden cutting board. Raising a kitchen knife, A-Ba split its belly, took out its organs, and chopped off its head, wings, and legs. He then sliced the belly into halves and then chopped those into chunks. Swiftly, A-Ba placed the soup pot on the stove and tossed the chicken chunks in, boiled it for a few minutes, scooped up the floating foam, tossed a few slices of aged ginger into the soup, and then sprinkled the broth with salt. The

pungent smell was immediately covered by the scent of ginger. A-Ba poured some of the chicken soup into a bowl, blew across its surface a few times and took it into the bedroom.

The sun began to set, making the dark room even darker.

A-Mei was lying face-up on the bed. Strands of gray hair splayed on her pillow. Since Siŭ-Moi's first days in this house, A-Mei had asked her to pluck her gray hairs. Back then, those strands were well hidden under her dark hair, and it would always take Siŭ-Moi quite a while to find a few. But after a year or two, gray began covering her dark hair in increasingly large patches, and A-Mei's face toughened up like a tree bark, which made strangers mistakenly think that they were looking at an elderly A-Pó rather than a woman in middle-age.

A-Ba approached A-Mei's bed and called her in a tone of gentleness rare for him: "Gŭi-Mŏi! Have some chicken soup." A-Mei didn't budge, so A-Ba called her again, yet A-Mei's eyes remained tightly shut. A-Ba sat by the edge of the bed and caressed A-Mei's face. Getting no reaction, he tremblingly placed his hand under A-Mei's nose, the bowl of chicken soup spilled over. Just as Siŭ-Moi was about to take the bowl from him, the bowl slipped from A-Ba's hand, fell to the ground, and shattered on the floor, leaving pieces of chicken scattered everywhere. A-Ba covered his face with his hands and began to whimper.

Siŭ-Moi spaced out for a few seconds, then came up close, reached out her tiny hand and placed it on her A-Mei's hand, which had the feel of a hollow branch. It was cold, without a sliver of warmth left.

A-Ba wiped away his tears and tucked A-Mei properly into the quilt. Slowly, he ran his hand over her face, combing away the strands of hair that had fallen over her forehead. He turned to Siŭ-Moi: "Your Mei's gone. She's not having chicken soup. It's going to waste." A-Ba stepped over the splinters and left the room, leaving the space looking ever more shattered.

Siŭ-Moi stepped closer to her A-Mei. As always, she once again placed her head against A-Mei's chest, listening for a heartbeat that was no longer. *A-Mei just couldn't bear to let Ren-Chih go*, Siŭ-Moi thought to herself. *She has left so quickly to see him on the other side of the world.* Siŭ-Moi's tears began to stream down her face but wasn't sure if it was because she was sad to let her A-Mei go or because she resented how her A-Mei had abandoned her, her A-Ba, her second brother, and her third brother.

"Siŭ-Moi!" A-Ba was calling her again. She had to leave her A-Mei and head to the living room. She watched A-Ba take the pot of chicken soup, place it on a square table, and scoop two fresh bowls – one for Siŭ-Moi, and one for himself.

Siŭ-Moi lowered her head, unsure if she should start eating. She looked at her A-Ba, who proceeded to take a chicken leg from his bowl and take a huge bite. He saw Siŭ-Moi in a daze and said: "Quick, dig in. It's getting cold." Siŭ-Moi finally picked up a piece of breast meat and shoved it to her mouth. As she chewed, a strange feeling began to take over – she could still feel the hen's vigorous struggles in her hands during its last moment of life.

She emptied her bowl and, this time, her A-Ba scooped another bowl for her, surprisingly adding a chicken leg. That was the first time she'd ever eaten a chicken leg, which she found, different from dry breast meat and bony chicken wings, to be juicy and full of texture.

After downing around bowls in a row, Siŭ-Moi couldn't eat anymore. She was covered in sweat. A-Ba had made this pot of chicken soup for A-Mei but, when it was ready, A-Mei wasn't able to eat it.

A-Ba spread out a straw mat in the living room and then changed A-Mei into a set of fresh clothes. He carried A-Mei in his arms and placed her gently on the mat. It was surrounded by a mosquito net, and incense was burning in the pot.

Then, both went to sit outside the house, and A-Ba lit a cigarette. Incense wafting from inside the house intermingled with the acrid smell of the cigarette burning between A-Ba's fingers. Siŭ-Moi looked up at the moon goddess. It loomed big and round under the darkness of night, just like it was on that day.

Chapter 1: Snowflake Rice

Back in that day, Siŭ-Moi was sitting on the threshold, gazing at the moon above head. She clasped her hands, and sent up a small prayer: "Please protect my A-Mei and let her recover soon." A-Mei wasn't her biological mother. When she was five, Siŭ-Moi had left her real parents and was taken into her current family by her A-Ba.

"Gŭi-Mŏi, I just took the little kid back home."

Siŭ-Moi stepped into a house completely foreign to her. She traversed the living room and larder before finally reaching the kitchen. There was a woman standing in front of a large brick stove. Steam and smoke hung in the air, and a distinct fragrance tickled her olfactories. After half a day of walking mountainous roads, Siŭ-Moi's stomach began to growl.

"Come here!"

Siŭ-Moi approached the skinny woman. Her face was thin and long, and her body was skinny as a bamboo pole. Her face blossomed into a smile as she asked, "How old are you?"

"Five!" Siŭ-Moi stretched out her five short fingers.

"What would you like to eat?"

"*Anything!*" Siŭ-Moi liked everything. She felt lucky whenever she had a chance to eat.

The woman slid a pan-fried egg into a pottery bowl with a hot spatula and sprinkled soy sauce on top of it. She brought the bowl to Siŭ-Moi and reminded her: "Be careful, it's hot."

Siŭ-Moi lifted the bowl with her two little hands and gazed hungrily upon the slightly singed, crispy edges of the egg white and half-cooked egg yolk. She took a pair of chopsticks and poked them into the yolk, sending it streaming out from the center. Siŭ-Moi took a bite. The burnt fragrance from the edge of the egg and the yolk-slathered egg white, coalesced into a crispy, savory treat on the palate.

"Is it good?"

"So delicious. Thank you, Auntie."

"What Auntie? You should call me your A-Mei."

Siŭ-Moi lifted her head and stared at the skinny woman, then quietly called: "A-Mei."

"I don't have any daughters, and now you're going to be mine!"

From that day forward, Siŭ-Moi constantly followed her A-Mei, like a chick following a hen. When A-Mei headed to the creek to wash clothes, Siŭ-Moi would carry the basket and follow her; in the family garden, Siŭ-Moi would help with the weeding; when A-Mei started cooking, Siŭ-Moi would instinctively begin washing the vegetables and picking out stems.

Siŭ-Moi's favorite time of the day was after dinner, when she would chill on a little stool outside the house with her A-Mei.

"Come over here." A-Mei commanded.

Obediently, Siŭ-Moi climbed onto her A-Mei's lap. A-Mei was awfully skinny. The bones on her lap felt like bamboo joints and were uncomfortable to sit on. Even so, Siŭ-Moi loved being hugged by her A-Mei, albeit briefly out of a fear she'd crush those brittle joints.

A-Mei's health was deteriorating. Sometimes, after cooking for a while, she had to sit down and pause for some time before standing up again. A-Ba asked a doctor from down in the valley to make a house call, but the doctor just shook his head, saying, "Liver disease...we can't do much about it." Siŭ-Moi's tears streamed down from her face as she eavesdropped. Even though A-Mei was not her real mother, she treated her like she was her real daughter. Every time the brothers mistreated her, her A-Mei would appear immediately and punish them. Like a hen protecting her little chick, she'd let Siŭ-Moi hide behind her. It was hard for Siŭ-Moi to imagine a world without her A-Mei. All she could do was to pray in earnest to the moon goddess.

Siŭ-Moi suddenly became aware of lights glowing and flickering on the opposite side of the mountain.

Those flickering flames couldn't be the beginnings of wildfire, as they were moving in a seemingly purposeful manner, inching their way toward her side of the mountain. *Is that ghost fire?* Siŭ-Moi was terrified, suddenly remembering a ghost story Ren-Chih, the eldest brother, had told her.

"Siŭ-Moi, do you know about Tiger Aunt?" She shook her head, only to see Ren-Chih sneering: "Then you'll hear the story from me. There's a tiger monster living higher up these mountains called Tiger Aunt." Seeing fear grow on Siŭ-Moi's face, he raised his hands in imitation of a tiger stretching out its claws and howled: "The Tiger Aunt would turn herself into a human, and she looooooves eating children like you."

Siŭ-Moi's round little face immediately turned pale, and was so scared that she even peed a bit into her trousers. After shooting her a glare of disgust, Ren-Chih cheerfully whistled and departed in self-satisfied triumph. Looking at the back of her eldest brother, Siŭ-Moi clenched her fists, grit her teeth, and thought: *Oh yeah?? ... Being swallowed by Tiger Aunt is still better than marrying someone like you.*

Was Tiger Aunt really coming to get her?

Those faraway flames had now grown to the size of a round plate. Siŭ-Moi was so terrified that she started trembling. She didn't want to be eaten. Scrambling and rolling back into the house, she yelled out: "A-Ba, A-Mei! Tiger Aunt is here!" A-Ba, barefoot and drowsy, emerged from his

room almost immediately and launched into a scathing scolding: “Screw your Mei! What’s all this fuss about?”

Siŭ-Moi, scared speechless, pulled at her A-Ba’s shirt and pointed outside. His anger still at full boil, A-Ba walked to the side of the gate and looked out. The flames were still on their slow approach. Initially sparkling like stars in the sky, they were now the size of half-moons. Their light lit up Siŭ-Moi’s frightened pupils. A-Ba rubbed his eyes to confirm he wasn’t still dreaming. The flames were moving further up toward their house from halfway up the mountainside. Very quickly, A-Ba woke Ren-Chih and then grabbed an iron rake and bamboo broom from the storage room. Father and son, now each with a weapon in hand, took up defensive positions astride their home’s main door like a pair of Door Gods. Siŭ-Moi hid inside the doorway, her tiny body overcast by the shadow of her A-Ba. She felt reassured – *Even if Tiger Aunt shows up, she may be scared away by A-Ba’s iron rake.*

After another half hour, what ultimately emerged from the trail wasn’t Tiger Aunt and her bloody mouth but, instead, was a solitary soldier in Japanese military uniform. A-Ba dropped his iron rake and ran toward the man. Ren-Chih and Siŭ-Moi followed closely behind.

The soldier, wearing a pair of round, dark-framed glasses, straightened his back. Behind the clear lenses, his eyes were sharply defined in black and white. Although he looked to be about Ren-Chih’s age, his eyes reflected a distinct hint of world-weariness. He looked haggard and exhausted. If it were not for his military uniform, the soldier, already shorter than A-Ba, might have looked tinier still. His appearance was nothing in comparison to their expected Tiger Aunt.

Half a head taller than the soldier, A-Ba bent down at his waist and listened to what the young soldier had to say. He spoke Japanese and Siŭ-Moi did her best to catch what he was saying. She knew that 寝る meant sleeping; ご飯 meant snowflake rice. *What’s this about sleeping and snowflake rice?* Siŭ-Moi didn’t understand a thing. She had never attended school and spoke only Hakka. When she had the chance to go to school, she would finally be able to learn more Japanese. Siŭ-Moi looked expectantly at her A-Ba, hoping to get answers from him. However, all her A-Ba did was keep bowing, pointing at the storage room where they stored tea leaves, and repeated over and over again: “はい！はい！” The soldier nodded and returned to his troop. A-Ba bent over to Siŭ-Moi and said: “Go clean the floor in the storage room. They will spend the night here.”

Siŭ-Moi finally understood that these Japanese soldiers were looking for a place to stay for the night. 寝る was the word referring to their request, but what about ご飯? They hadn’t had a full tank of rice for half a month, and most of their money was spent treating A-Mei’s illness. Every day, they ate sweet potatoes from their farm. *Do these Japanese soldiers also eat sweet potato strips?* Siŭ-Moi didn’t ask any further questions. She grabbed a broom and headed to the storage room.

With only the palest of moonlight illuminating the night sky, the storage room was engulfed in impenetrable darkness.

Fumbling about, Siŭ-Moi found the switch and turned on the light – just a single, bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Its light brightened the space, and it swayed a little in the night breeze. Spotted a spider on the upper edge of the lightbulb, Siŭ-Moi raised her bamboo broom high and disentangled the spiderweb gently from the bulb’s electrical wire. The illuminated

storage room was a patchwork of light of shadow, with the swaying bulb only adding to the overall rather spooky ambiance of the space. Siŭ-Moi holding tightly to the broom, swept the dust and shreds of tea leaves into a pile.

During tea harvesting season, which was just a few months away, tea leaves would fill this room, leaving nowhere for Japanese soldiers to overnight. There were four bedrooms inside their tiny mud house. The largest was occupied by A-Ba and A-Mei, another was Ren-Chih's, and still another was shared by Yi-Chih and Li-Chih, although that room was currently unoccupied while they were living elsewhere to study. The smallest room next to the kitchen, originally used for storage, was cleaned out and given to Siŭ-Moi when she moved in. Even though they didn't have a lot of space, the moment the soldiers made the request, A-Ba did his best to free up space for them.

After pushing the door open against the wall and holding it in place with a large stone, A-Ba led the group of seven or eight soldiers in. Siŭ-Moi quickly swept the last pile of dust into the dustpan. After all, in the darkness, it would be hard to tell if the room was fully clean anyway. The soldier who had spoken earlier with A-Ba came in first. Bumping into Siŭ-Moi, who was still holding the broom in her hand, he smiled and whispered, “ありがとう！” The young face that had so frightened A-Ba had now blossomed into a friendly smile, which puzzled Siŭ-Moi. She took a few steps back.

“Child! Don't get in the way there. Come back home now,” A-Ba bellowed while pulling her aside. Siŭ-Moi nodded sheepishly, took the broom, and ran out.

Although Siŭ-Moi had washed herself earlier, her feet were again dirty. She headed to the bathroom next to the kitchen, scooped up water from the tank and poured it down her legs. The freezing water once again shook her wide awake. *This isn't a dream...all of the soldiers out there are real.*

After cleaning her arms and legs, she walked lightly back to her room. She lay down, but found herself unable to drift off. She reviewed what had happened that evening and thought about that friendly Japanese soldier. Ren-Chih was bossy and, whenever he was in a bad mood, would bully her. No matter how many things Siŭ-Moi did for the house, Ren-Chih was never appreciative. The sentence blurted out by that Japanese soldier: “ありがとう” blew through the side of her ear and made her blush. She hugged her patched blanket tightly and whispered: “ありがとう。”

The rooster in the backyard began crowing at the crack of dawn, sending Siŭ-Moi hopping out of bed. The fragrance of food steaming in the kitchen drifted to her nose. Siŭ-Moi, barefoot, rubbed her face with the side of her sleeve and walked into the kitchen. She saw her A-Ba standing in front of the huge brick stove. White steam was rising from a steel pot – *We're probably having some sweet potato strips again*, she thought sullenly. They ate sweet potato strips, cooked into a congee along with a few grains of rice, for most meals. Although tired of it, she'd starve if she didn't eat. Back then, all kitchen tasks were done by A-Mei. But since she started feeling unwell, A-Ba began taking over kitchen duties. A-Ba's cooking was not comparable to A-Mei's, but Siŭ-Moi was smart enough to say nothing. However, the smells emanating from the pot today were quite different from what she was used to – sweet potato aromas were curiously missing, and the distinct, sweet smell of snowflake rice had taken their place. *I must really have slept poorly last*

night! My nose clearly isn't working today. There's no rice in the tank, and what was left was enough only to make a watery congee. But...snowflake rice? That's a miracle possible only through the deities themselves raining grains from the sky. Nevertheless, it was true the air wafted with the thick fragrance of cooked rice.

"Siŭ-Moi!" A-Ba called her. Siŭ-Moi rushed over, watching A-Ba open the lid on the steel pot, inside of which was a sea of sparkling snowflake rice. Noting her ravenous reaction, A-Ba patted the back of her head: "Greedy girl! Have you not seen snowflake rice before? Now go check and see if the soldiers are up."

Siŭ-Moi had actually never seen a pot of snowflake rice in her life. *Just one bite would be so delicious!* She took another glance at the rice pot then ran to the storage room. She thought to herself: *The soldiers must have brought the snowflake rice with them.* The smile of the Japanese soldier she met yesterday evening resurfaced in her head, making her blush again. She sped up, looking forward to seeing him again.

Arrived at the storage room, that same Japanese soldier was sitting by the door, gazing at the faraway mountains, a cigarette pinched gently between his fingers. Siŭ-Moi followed his gaze to find he was just staring at a normal, everyday tea farm.

When she turned, her eyes met his. He smiled at her again, which made Siŭ-Moi fluster and take a few steps back. The Japanese soldier didn't mind and simply waved at Siŭ-Moi, as though he was asking her to join him. Siŭ-Moi stood there, motionless as the Japanese soldier slid his left hand into his pocket, taking out a drawstring bag. It was light yellow, dotted with a few little pink flowers. It was also roughly sewn with inconsistent sidelines that were wide on one side and narrow on the other. The Japanese soldier loosened the bag and poured out a few sparkling pieces into his palm. Out of curiosity, Siŭ-Moi leaned in for a closer look. A few pink candies, each with tiny antennae, glimmered like stars against the sky. He tossed one into his mouth, and a sweet smile spread across his face. Siŭ-Moi was deeply attracted by this smile and, in a daze, she stared at the remaining star candies in his palm.

The family had very little money, so whenever Siŭ-Moi felt like having sweets, she would go out and pick hibiscus flower nectar glands, purplish berries of black nightshades, which were sour-sweet with a hint of bitterness, and other wild plants. The first time A-Mei started feeling sick, A-Ba made red bean soup sweetened with a few spoons of raw sugar. Siŭ-Moi had a bowl, too. The sour and bitter fruits she picked along the road paled in comparison to a bowl of this pure, sweet delicacy.

The soldier took Siŭ-Moi's hand and placed a few of the star candies in her little palm. He pointed at her mouth and gestured that she should give them a try. Siŭ-Moi gingerly took one of them and put it into her mouth, cautious not to bite down and extinguish its brilliance too quickly. *How sweet! Not sour at all. This is sweeter than red bean soup. So delicious!*

For the first time in a while, Siŭ-Moi's face blossomed with a smile.