



Dr. Margaret Chung (October 02, 1889-January 05, 1959) was the first American-born Chinese woman doctor.

"Women of every nation, every country, should learn medicine, so that they can teach the women of their countries and their races how to care for themselves and their children—how to improve the coming generation."

- Dr. Margaret Chung quote in a 1914 Los Angeles Herald profile

Margaret Jessie Chung was born in Santa Barbara, California on October 2, 1889. Her parents had immigrated from China as young children in the 1870s, a part of a large wave of Chinese immigration to the United States which began in 1840 and lasted until 1882 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act.

It was her mother, who herself was rescued around the age of 11 from a brothel in San Francisco by Presbyterian Missionaries and given a sound education, and who fueled her daughter's desire to study. When Margaret was about 10, she purportedly declared her goal of becoming a medical missionary and never lost sight of that vision. The family were devout Christians. Margaret was the oldest of eleven children and spent a lot of time raising her younger siblings when her parents got sick. Margaret was a 16-year-old, first-generation Chinese American who was teaching English in the "Chinese colony" of Los Angeles, California, while working to help support her large family.

Margaret Chung's journey led from the Southern California cabbage fields to USC Preparatory Academy, which she could only attend thanks to a scholarship she was awarded from the Los Angeles Times by selling the most subscriptions, and worked her way through college as a waitress, a seller of surgical instruments, and by winning cash prizes in several speech contests.

Intent on becoming a medical missionary to China, she worked her way through college and medical school at the University of Southern California. As a medical student, Chung wore masculine clothing and referred to herself as "Mike."

She went on to graduate from the University of Southern California's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1916 with an M.D., becoming the first known American born Chinese woman physician in the United States. At the time, she was 26 years old, and the only woman and only



person of color in her entire graduating class. Shortly after graduating, she applied to be a medical missionary, but was rejected due to her race.



After graduating with her M.D in 1916, Margaret was unable to find work locally. By November of that year Margaret moved to Chicago, where she had an internship at the Mary Thompson Hospital offered by Dr. Bertha Van Hoosen. Van Hoosen was a lifelong advocate for women doctors and the founder of the American Women's Medical Association. In Chicago, Margaret was supported by other women navigating discrimination in the medical field. May Michael, a Jewish doctor from England, supported Margaret's character in an application to the Illinois State Board of Health. Rachelle Yarros, a Jewish physician born in Russia, helped her obtain her medical residency.

In the early 1920's upon a visit to San Francisco, Chung fell in love with the city and soon moved there to open a private practice in Chinatown, aiming to bring "Western" medicine to the Chinese population. In 1925 she helped establish the first Western hospital there leading its OB/GYN and pediatric units.

While she was initially met with some resistance due several factors: she was a practitioner of Western medicine and single woman who dressed in masculine clothing; she eventually gained the trust of the local community.

A passionate patriot, Dr. Chung became dedicated to contributing to the U.S. war effort during World War II. Her work began in the 1930s, before the U.S. entered the war, when Japan invaded China. Chung organized "rice bowl parties," to fundraise for the war effort in over 700 U.S. cities. She also established a network of men in the military, whom she treated as a doctor, hosted at her home for large weekly dinners, and connected to jobs within the military. Chung recruited pilots as part of the famous "Flying Tigers," a unit of aviators that defended China during the war. The network grew to over one thousand men, who referred to her as "Mom Chung" and to themselves as her "fair-haired bastards." Chung became well known throughout the country; there was a comic book series and a Hollywood movie based on her.

Margaret had first applied to join the Navy in March 1942 but was denied. Never one to give up easily, Margaret called on a few of her sons to create and ultimately pass the legislation that would create the W.A.V.E.S. (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), the WWII women's branch of the United States Naval Reserve. The W.A.V.E.S. were established on July 21, 1942, by the U.S. Congress and signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on July 30. Even though the W.A.V.E.S would never have existed without Margaret's powerful influence, she was rejected from serving in WAVES herself, likely due to her race and rumors about her sexuality. In the 1940s, an FBI report was filed which cited rumors that Chung was a lesbian. Black women were also barred from serving in the W.A.V.E.S. until 1944. Although whiteness was not included in the written requirements as a qualifier for service, the recruitment policies



and enrollment statistics tell a different story. Of the estimated 90,000 W.A.V.E.S. who served, only 72 were Black women. This helped pave the way for women's integration into the U.S. armed forces.

After the war, Dr. Chung retired and lived in a home that her "adopted sons" bought for her. Dr. Chung died on January 5, 1959, at the age of 70 from ovarian cancer.

Rising from an impoverished childhood in Southern California to a prominent socialite who treated and befriended Hollywood celebrities, Dr. Margaret Chung cut across class boundaries. She transcended traditional gender and sexual norms, both by becoming a successful physician and surgeon in a male-dominated domain and by performing both, "motherly" as well as masculine roles in her romantic interests in other women. Despite the racial prejudices she had to endure, she fluidly maneuvered the cultural spheres of Chinese and American cultures.



Photographer Unknown / Chronicle File

Learn more here:

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/first-american-born-chinese-woman-doctor-ysk233/14464/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Chung

<https://blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2022/05/dr-margaret-chung/>

<https://exhibits.stanford.edu/riseup/feature/dr-margaret-chung>

<https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2021/5/25/dr-margaret-chung>

<https://awis.org/historical-women/dr-margaret-chung/>