

DR. MARGARET “MOM” CHUNG

Chinese American Physician (1889-1959)



Born in Santa Barbara, California, Dr. Chung was the first known American-born Chinese woman to become a physician. After completing her internship and residency in Chicago and Kankakee, Illinois, she established one of the first Western medical clinics in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1920s. Chung achieved fame during the 1930s and 40s for her patriotic activities on behalf of China and the United States. Known as “Mom Chung,” she “adopted” over a thousand U.S. troops – dubbed the “Fair-Haired Bastards” – who pledged their fealty for her commitment to their well-being. Renowned for her hospitality and generosity, she sent care packages to the troops and hosted weekly Sunday suppers in her modestly-sized home in San Francisco where regular soldiers mingled with the likes of John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, Tennessee Williams, Helen Hayes, and Tallulah Bankhead, along with politicians, and the military’s top brass – all bound to each other through their mutual affection for Chung and their common dedication to the Allied Cause. Chung used her considerable war-time celebrity to lobby for the creation of the WAVES – the U.S. women's naval reserve – but was never given public credit for the achievement nor was she permitted to join the WAVES, due to age, race, and suspected lesbianism. Described as a serious, commanding, almost regal person, Chung nevertheless had a bawdy sense of humor. Reinventing herself at will, she routinely flouted convention by adopting both hyper-masculine and Hollywood glamour personas, while also managing to guard her privacy in spite of having intimate relationships with lesbian poetess Elsa Gidlow and entertainer Sophie Tucker. A larger-than-life personality to the end, when Margaret Chung died in 1959 her pallbearers included Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, famed conductor Andre Kostelanetz and San Francisco Mayor George Christopher. Few civilian patriots have ever again achieved the level of celebrity and influence that was accorded to Dr. Margaret Chung.

Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What heroes, like Dr. Chung, do you know about that made a difference during World War II?
2. Read the biographical information.
3. Group Discussion: Describe how she advanced recognition of Chinese Americans and women.
4. For further information view the documentary on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucNplzC8bnI>

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. How did Dr. Chung build relationships with soldiers, actors, politicians and others, and unite them in their dedication to the United States during WWII?
2. Website Investigation: Examine another inductee who exhibited strength and conviction in their political views at <http://legacyprojectchicago.org/Politics.html>
3. Describe how these inductees contributed to the history of our country.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Examine the history of resilience and resistance depicted by Chinese American women in <http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/chinese/40.html>
2. Why was Chung barred from joining the organization she lobbied to create, the U.S. Women’s Naval Reserves (WAVES)?
3. How did Chung overcome the scrutiny of her life?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. As a patriot, physician, and feminist, Dr. Chung has left her imprint on our society. How did her generous spirit and hospitality continue to make a change in all those she met?
2. If you use Dr. Chung as your role model, what social action would you advocate to make that contribution in our society for something you believe in?