

UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities Podcast

Season 4 Episode 5: Dr. Margaret “Mom” Chung and Her “Fair-Haired Sons”

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TRANSCRIPT

Deb Fowler: Hello, and welcome to *UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities — A Podcast*. I’m Deb Fowler, co-founder of History UnErased.

Most likely, the name Margaret Chung is new to you - but you will be delighted to learn about her inspiring and extraordinary life. Margaret Chung was many things: the first known female American-born Chinese physician, a San Francisco celebrity, a queer woman, and an adoptive mother to hundreds of American soldiers during World War II. And so much more...

Take it away, Kathleen!

Kathleen Barker: Born in Santa Barbara, California in 1889 to Chinese immigrant parents, Margaret Chung lived an extraordinary life. Her accomplishments are even more amazing when you consider the race- and gender-based discrimination she faced throughout her life.

Chung’s ambition was apparent from an early age, and she was fortunate to have a family that fostered her talents. Chung’s parents were devout Presbyterians, who believed in the importance of education for young girls. Although she was often called upon to care for her younger siblings and work to help support the family, Chung excelled in school and in community service.

She first appeared in newspaper reports when she was just a teenager, in a story from January 1906 that highlighted her “American” spirit of ambition.

Danny Roberts: “Smart Chinese girl. Margaret Jesse Chung, a 16 year old girl of Chinese parentage living in Los Angeles, California, has become a newspaper reporter there. She is teaching English in the Chinese colony of that City and for a year past has been Secretary of a church memorial union. Miss Chung is thoroughly American in spirit, dress, and ambition.”

KB: In the fall of 1907, Chung enrolled in the Preparatory Academy at the University of Southern California, where she took courses in science, literature, Latin, and modern European languages. She also participated in the literary society, which gave her an opportunity to practice her public speaking skills. She appeared in the newspaper again in 1910, after being awarded a prize at the annual meeting of the Interscholastic Oratorical Association. The *Los Angeles Herald* reported:

DR: “Orators from four secondary schools spoke for the prizes. The second trophy, a silver medal, was won by Miss Margaret Chung, a Chinese girl from the Preparatory School of the University of Southern California, speaking upon ‘China, the Future Leader of the Nations.’”

KB: In her unpublished autobiography, Margaret Chung explained that she knew by the age of ten what she wanted to be when she grew up: a doctor—specifically, a medical missionary in China. In 1911, she was admitted to the USC College of Physicians and Surgeons. Unlike the USC Preparatory Academy, which was co-ed, the

medical school enrolled very few women. How few? Well, in her first year, there were only three other female students out of a total of 40. Throughout her entire medical school career, all of her professors – with one exception – were men. Chung was also the only non-white student in her class.

Medicine was a white man's world, and Chung worked hard to facilitate her entry into this space. Chung, like many other professional women, began adopting more masculine attire, for example, pairing a jacket and tie with a skirt. She was careful to appear in western attire, avoiding all hints of traditional Chinese dress. To further blend in, she occasionally went by the name 'Mike.' Early in her career, one of her favorite pictures showed her wearing a dark suit. She sent autographed versions of this photo to her friends and even signed them 'Mike.'

Chung graduated from USC College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1916. News of a female doctor of Chinese descent made the newspapers all over the country! Stories were reprinted for the next several years in papers from California to Maryland. This news clip was published in the *Americus Georgia Times-Recorder* in December 1923:

DR: Chinese woman doctor. San Francisco. Margaret Chung can sign MD after her name. She is the only Chinese woman doctor in the United States, insofar as the records show. And she has quite a practice, too, of course, it's chiefly in Chinatown.

KB: Unfortunately, having that M.D. degree didn't necessarily make it easy for Chung to realize her dream of becoming a doctor. Upon her graduation, Chung applied to serve as a medical missionary through the Presbyterian Church. She was rejected – three times! – not because she was unqualified, but because she was of Chinese descent. It was also difficult for Chung to find a medical internship that would accept her, thanks to the large number of hospitals that denied female (and non-white) doctors opportunities for postgraduate training. She would eventually secure a position at Mary Thompson Hospital in Chicago, where she trained in surgery, a traditionally male field. In her autobiography, Chung explained that her interest in surgery was piqued in childhood. She would pretend to operate on banana peels or cabbage stems, as well as the chickens, rabbits, and other animals that she and her family would prepare for dinner.

In February 1919, Chung applied for a license to practice medicine in the state of California. She opened a private practice in Los Angeles. Capitalizing on her gender and race, and the movie industry's fascination with Asian culture and people, Chung soon acquired many celebrity patients. Three years later, in 1922, Dr. Chung moved to San Francisco and opened a clinic in Chinatown. She was especially eager to help Chinese women patients. Chung, however, had her work cut out for her. Many of the neighborhood's residents were wary of Western medicine, and even more suspicious of a young, single woman doctor dressed in traditionally male clothing. She was also hampered by her limited Chinese language and social skills. She did eventually win over the female population of Chinatown, even helping to found a Chinese Hospital in 1925.

Margaret Chung tried to keep her personal life private, but that didn't stop rumors that she was a lesbian from circulating in Chinatown and beyond. One of Chung's most famous celebrity friendships was with Sophie Tucker, a popular entertainer with whom she developed a particularly intimate relationship. From her writings, we know that poet Elsa Gidlow chose Chung as her physician because she suspected Chung "might be a sister lesbian." While Chung never openly identified that way, we know that she often ventured outside Chinatown to visit the bars, speakeasies, and cafes in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood, which was home to a growing queer subculture. In the 1930s, Chung even bought a home in North Beach. The federal government certainly kept an eye on rumors about her sexuality, and a 1940 FBI report mentioned that agents had interviewed other doctors in Chinatown. Though the doctors didn't say much about her, they did share the gossip that she was a lesbian.

Chung remained unmarried throughout her life, and as her status as a physician grew, she was able to indulge in a variety of stereotypically masculine pursuits, all of which furthered these rumors. In addition to her masculine attire, Chung was also a fan of expensive sports cars and airplanes, which were still considered men's hobbies. She even collected aeronautical artifacts, as reported in newspapers in the 1930s:

DR: Dr Margaret Chung, of Chinatown, San Francisco, California, has covered the walls of her office with trophies representing more than 20 million dollars in aeronautical wreckage. These have been sent to her from all over the world by aviators whose ships have cracked up!

KB: In the 1930s, the Japanese invasion of China and the Sino-Japanese War sparked a renewed interest in China and sympathy for the people of China. In 1931, Steven G. Bancroft, an ensign in the U.S. Navy Reserves, reached out to Margaret Chung to ask if she could help him obtain a commission in the Chinese military. Although she had no connections to offer, she did invite Bancroft and some of his pilot friends to a dinner in her San Francisco home. In the midst of the Great Depression, Chung began to host meals for a growing number of young men. Her original "Seven Sons" recruited their friends and military colleagues, and by the start of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, Chung had adopted hundreds of sons. Her family swelled to approximately 1,500 sons (and even a few daughters) by the end of World War II.

Chung assigned each of her adopted children to one of three branches, and gave them each a number corresponding to the order of his or her entry into Chung's adoptive network. The oldest and largest group, comprising some 900 individuals, consisted of pilots who called themselves the "Fair-Haired Bastards." (Although almost all of Chung's adoptees were men, Amelia Earhart became one of Chung's few fair-haired daughters.) Another group of adoptees, those who were not pilots, became known as Kiwis, named after the flightless bird. Chung herself was Kiwi number one, although she did eventually learn to pilot a plane. Chung's 300 Kiwis included military personnel, but also entertainers and politicians. In 1943, she established the final branch of her family network: the Golden Dolphins. This group was composed of submariners who had sunk five enemy ships or at least 100,000 tons. These relationships were mutually beneficial. As a surrogate mother, Chung could safely fraternize with younger white men, and immerse herself in masculine pursuits like aviation, despite being a single woman in her 40s. During the 1930s, her network helped support young military men through the Great Depression, while forming connections that would prove advantageous in the military, in government, and in corporate America.

Evidence of the importance of Chung's network appears in newspapers in all sorts of ways. In 1943, for example, one of Chung's sons, Tex Mitchell, visited Detroit, and newspapers described him this way:

DR: "Detroit friends of Thomas "Tex" Mitchell, one of the world's foremost test pilots and the man with 1,000 lives, put down the welcome mat for him today as he returned to the city of his early triumphs in aviation.... From 1926 to 1929, he was Chief Test Pilot for Stinson Aircraft in Detroit. His wanderings later carried him over North and South America, and he landed in China as a member of Dr Margaret Chung's Fair-Haired Sons of the Air."

KB: In other cases, Chung was referenced in her Sons' obituaries, such as this one published on August 4, 1943. It's an obituary of naval officer Samuel Buttrick. In 1919, he was one of 10 officers sent to Honolulu to establish the Naval Air Station at Pearl Harbor. According to the paper:

DR: In the honored fraternity of aviators of Dr Margaret Chung, of San Francisco, he was son number 556.

KB: During World War II, Chung kept things lively for her sons whenever they visited home. She not only fed and entertained them but also made sure everyone stayed in touch. Chung put together care packages and wrote letters, even though she could only manage 14 a day! She was so well-known that letters addressed simply to "Doctor" or "Mom Chung, San Francisco, USA" would still find their way to her.

Chung *really* wanted to enlist during the war, and she first applied to join the Navy in March of 1942. She would eventually apply – and be rejected – at least three times. Ultimately, she would call on her network of sons and daughters to 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.

Chung had to pull a lot of strings to make her dream a reality. Son number 465, Rear Admiral Irving McQuiston, guided her through the lobbying maze. Minnesota Congressman Melvin Maas, a colonel in the Marine Air Corps and Son number 447, introduced House Bill 6807 to create a Women's Naval Reserve. Indiana Congressman Raymond Willis, Kiwi number 124, took charge of the Senate version, with his secretary, Ailene Loveland, Kiwi number 120, rallying support. Chung also enlisted influential women outside Congress to champion the bill. Her supporters included Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Kiwi number 49, who was the daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt and the widow of former House Speaker Nicholas Longworth. Another important ally was Mary Early Holmes, Kiwi number 130, and sister of Steve Early, President Franklin Roosevelt's executive secretary.

Well Margaret's efforts paid off. On July 30, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Public Law 689 formally establishing the Women's Naval Reserve. Despite the fact that the W.A.V.E.S would never have existed without Margaret's powerful influence, she herself was rejected from serving due to her Chinese ancestry (and probably because of rumors related to her sexuality). By July 1945, over 86,000 women were members of the WAVES, and almost all of them were white. Black women were not permitted to join the WAVES until late 1944, eventually comprising about 3% of the WAVES.

After the War, Chung continued to support her adopted sons and daughters. She offered her hospitality to returning service members and helped them transition back into post-war society. She also used her influence to help secure jobs for members of her extended kin network. She continued to appear in the press, for all sorts of interesting reasons. In 1947, gossip columnists had to retract a statement implying that Chung was entangled—even tangentially—with the Mafia.

DR: "Before I get away I want to correct something which may have done an injustice to a lady who has been working hard for this country - a Chinese physician, Dr Margaret Chung. Some weeks ago Federal authorities informed me that Dr. Chung had sailed for Europe with Virginia Hill, the girlfriend of the late Bugsy Siegel. I now find, however, that Dr. Chung sailed instead for Honolulu, where incidentally, she has done a fine job among men in the armed services."

KB: No matter where she went, Margaret Chung was surrounded by admirers, and her presence at parties and performances was duly noted in newspaper gossip columns. In 1949, Mrs. George Holmes gave a cocktail party in honor of the now Undersecretary of Defense, Stephen Early. Her spring parties were the social event of the season in Washington, D.C., and her yard was apparently well-known for its prize-winning rose gardens.

DR: "Two well-known out-of-owners drew their share of attention were the famous Madame "Mom" Chung, whose adopted sons were the first Flying Tigers, and writer Adela Rogers St John."

KB: St. John was known for her groundbreaking exploits as the so-called “World's Greatest Girl Reporter” during the 1920s and 1930s, as well as her celebrity interviews for *Photoplay* magazine. Margaret Chung was clearly in good company!

By 1951, Chung moved her practice out of Chinatown, although health problems forced her to curtail her professional activities in the late 1940s and 1950s. She remained interested in international politics, corresponding with China's Madame Chang Kai-shek. The two women most likely met in March 1943, when Chung served on the city's welcoming committee for the First Lady of China. She maintained her schedule of weekly parties, and she traveled frequently, attending concerts and plays, and enjoying the talents and the company of her celebrity sons and daughters.

Margaret Chung died on January 5, 1959, at the age of 69. In its front-page obituary, the *San Francisco Chronicle* described her as “‘Mom’ to thousands of veterans of World War II and show business celebrities,” as well as “an inveterate ‘first nighter,’ a charming figure in a white ermine coat” who “frequently carried a parakeet in a cage dangling from her wrist.” Hundreds of people attended her funeral, including Admiral Chester Nimitz, famed conductor Andre Kostelanetz, and San Francisco Mayor George Christopher, who served as pallbearers.

Margaret Chung's life and career were a testament to resilience, innovation, and dedication. As the first American-born Chinese female physician, she faced and overcame significant barriers, both cultural and professional. But her legacy extends well beyond her medical achievements. Chung's ability to navigate and bridge diverse worlds—East and West, traditional and modern, queer and straight—illustrates her remarkable nature. Her network of adopted sons and daughters are proof of her nurturing spirit but also her strategic influence. Through these relationships, Chung created a unique family bound by loyalty and mutual respect, transcending traditional family structures and leaving a lasting impact on those she took under her wing.

DF: Kathleen Barker is History UnErased's program director and is a library and information specialist and public historian with more than 20 years of experience as a museum and library educator.

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Our theme music is “1986” by BrothaD via Tribe of Noise.

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I'm Deb Fowler. Thanks for listening!

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