

Case Study: How did the context of WWII provide Dr. Margaret Chung opportunities to create social and political power despite gender and race-based barriers?

I. Historical Background and Context

Dr. Margaret Jessie Chung (1889-1959) lived at the intersection of multiple transformational periods in American history. Born in Santa Barbara, California, during the height of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), she became the first known American-born Chinese female physician when she graduated from the University of Southern California (USC) Medical School in 1916.¹ Her life spanned the Progressive Era, both World Wars, the Great Depression, and the early Cold War—periods that dramatically reshaped concepts of citizenship, gender roles, and national belonging.

Chung's story reveals the complex strategies required for marginalized individuals to gain influence and acceptance in American society. Facing rejection from Presbyterian medical missionary work due to her Chinese ancestry and discrimination in medical training due to her gender, Chung created alternative pathways to professional success through practicing medicine, the creation of an unconventional family structure, and strategic networking.²

Beginning in 1931, Dr. Chung began hosting dinners for young Navy aviators in her home in San Francisco. What started as a small gathering of seven pilots evolved into a vast network of over 1,500 "adopted sons and daughters" by the end of World War II. Dr. Chung organized her adoptees into three groups:

- **"Fair-Haired Sons"** (approximately 900 members): Military aviators, including famous figures like actor and U.S. President Ronald Reagan
- **"Golden Dolphins"** (approximately 300 members): Submarine personnel
- **"Kiwis"** (approximately 300 members): Non-flying military personnel, politicians, and entertainers, including Alice Roosevelt Longworth and Amelia Earhart

Each adoptee received a number corresponding to their order of entry and a carved jade Buddha ring. Chung maintained correspondence with her "children," writing up to 14 letters daily and sending care packages during wartime deployments.³

Dr. Chung's network became a powerful tool for political advocacy. In her unpublished autobiography, and in her personal papers and letter exchanges with "sons" at UC Berkeley, Chung explains how she sought to serve in the Navy during World War II but faced rejection due to her race (and likely suspected

¹ ["First American-Born Chinese Woman Doctor."](#) *American Masters*, Public Broadcasting Service.

² Doughty, Sarah. ["Margaret Chung, an Overlooked Trailblazer Who Took in Thousands of Soldiers in Wartime, Dies at 91."](#) *The New York Times*, 18 Sept. 2023, p. A16. *The New York Times*.

³ Walker, Malea. ["Dr. Margaret Chung: First American Born Chinese Woman Physician."](#) *Headlines & Heroes*, Library of Congress, 31 May 2022.

sexual orientation), and how she mobilized her adoptive family to create the Women's Naval Reserve, the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service)⁴. Key figures in this campaign included:

- **Rear Admiral Irving McQuiston** (Son #465): Guided the lobbying strategy in Congress
- **Congressman Melvin Maas** (Son #447): Introduced House Bill 6807 for the creation of a Women's Naval Reserve
- **Congressman Raymond Willis** (Kiwi #124): Introduced the Women's Reserve Bill in the Senate
- **Congressman Albert Chandler** (Golden Dolphin #98): Negotiated the passage of the Senate Bill
- **Alice Roosevelt Longworth** (Kiwi #49): Daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt and widow of House Speaker Nicholas Longworth, who provided political connections

On July 30, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Public Law 689 establishing the WAVES⁵. Ironically, Chung was barred from service, while over 86,000 women—almost all white—eventually joined the organization Chung had inspired.

Throughout her career, Chung carefully maneuvered multiple aspects of her identity. During medical school, she adopted masculine clothing (suits and ties), occasionally used the name "Mike," and later engaged in what was perceived at the time as "masculine" pursuits, including her interests in airplanes and expensive sports cars. Her unmarried status and close relationships with women, particularly entertainer Sophie Tucker, generated persistent rumors about her sexual orientation that were documented in a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report in 1940.

Chung's home in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood, which was known for its subculture, allowed her and her network to cross racial, gender, and social boundaries that typically divided America during that time.

The following is a quote from Dr. Margaret Chung from the *Christian Science Monitor*, 1942:

"We, who are the beneficiaries of the American system, should defend it with our heads as well as our hearts. We must not be content with a passive patriotism. We must be active Americans... The seat of government may be in Washington, but the heart of government is in your township. And when that heart beats, Washington listens."

Dr. Margaret "Mom" Chung died of cancer on January 5th, 1959, at the age of 69.

Fitting Fun Fact: In 2013, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency named one of its Tunnel Boring Machines, which was part of its Central Subway Infrastructure Project, "Mom Chung".⁶

⁴ [Guide to the Margaret Chung Papers, 1880–1958 \(bulk 1942–1944\)](#). AAS ARC 2000/3, Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2002.

⁵ [An Act to Establish the Women's Reserve as a Part of the United States Naval Reserve and for Other Purposes](#). 30 July 1942. *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 56, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942, pp. 730–731. United States, Congress.

⁶ Nunez, Jenifer. ["Mom Chung and Big Alma to Bore SFMTA Central Subway Tunnels."](#) *Railway Track & Structures*, 11 Mar. 2013