

# MARGARET CHUNG

b. October 2, 1889

d. January 5, 1959

## FIRST FEMALE CHINESE AMERICAN DOCTOR

*“I used to be ladylike and deferential but found it didn’t pay.”*

**She was the first  
female Chinese  
American physician in  
the United States.**

Margaret “Mom” Chung, M.D., was the first female Chinese American medical doctor in the United States. She is best known for the care she gave to scores of World War II servicemen whom she called her “adopted sons.”

The eldest of 11 children born to Chinese immigrant parents in Santa Barbara, California, Chung cultivated her nurturing skills caring for her siblings. When she was 13, the family moved to Los Angeles.

Chung worked her way through both college and medical school at the University of Southern California (USC). At USC she dressed in men’s clothing and called herself “Mike.” She dropped the name when she graduated in 1916.

Hindered by her race and gender, Chung struggled to find work as a physician. She obtained a position as a surgical nurse at the Santa Fe Railroad Hospital in Los Angeles. After a few months, she managed to secure an internship and then a medical residency in Chicago. She subsequently served as the resident assistant in psychiatry at the Juvenile Psychopathic Institute of the State of Illinois at Cook County Hospital.

Around 1919 Chung moved back to California, returning to the Santa Fe Railroad Hospital as a surgeon. In the early 1920s, she opened one of the first Western medicine practices in San Francisco’s Chinatown, where she hoped to treat Chinese women. Suspecting her of being a lesbian, the community largely shunned her. Celebrities embraced her and soon flocked to Chung’s clinic seeking “Oriental” medicine. Many, including well-known lesbians, befriended her.

In 1937 Japan invaded China. Chung wanted to volunteer as a battlefield surgeon. Denied the opportunity, she was assigned instead to secretly recruit volunteer U.S. pilots (popularly known as the Flying Tigers) to assist the Chinese.

Throughout World War II, Chung earned considerable accolades for her patriotism. She “adopted” well over a thousand troops, including the entire VF-2 squadron. She sent letters, gifts, and care packages to the front and held Sunday dinners at her home where servicemen mingled with celebrities and politicians. She leveraged her powerful connections to advocate for creation of the WAVES, the U.S. women’s Navy Reserves, established in 1942.

Chung never received credit for the WAVES and was denied acceptance to the corps herself, due to her race and rumored sexuality.

Chung is believed to have had romantic relationships with the poet Elsa Gidlow and the famous performer Sophie Tucker. When Chung retired in 1947, her “adopted sons” bought her a home in Marin County, California. She died 12 years later.



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