# A true trailblazer

## Victoria Chung broke the mould for women and Chinese Canadians


### By John Price and Ningping Yu,

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She was one of the longest-serving medical missionaries in Canada's history.

When she died, thousands lined the route of her funeral in China and 3,000 flower wreaths adorned her casket as she lay in state. A statue of her adorns a hospital in Jiangmen, China.

But even though Toy Mea (Victoria) Chung was born and raised in Victoria, she's virtually unknown in this city. The only trace of the family is the lonely grave of three of her siblings at Ross Bay Cemetery.

Her father had worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway in the 1880s before settling in Victoria. Her mother was one of the few Chinese women who came to the city at the time - educated in a Christian school in Guangzhou, she had advanced medical training and was a midwife for much of her life.

When baby Toy Mea was born in 1897, they called her Victoria as a tribute to both the city of her birth and the queen who celebrated her Diamond Jubilee that year.

Young Victoria would go on to become a true pioneer, a trailblazer for women and for Canadians of Chinese descent.

Yet she remained a modest figure all her life.

Toronto newspapers covered Chung's arrival in the city in 1929 during her first furlough to Canada after six years in China, but found her a challenging interview. An article in the Toronto Star reported that "Dr. Chung had little time or inclination to talk to the Star." Her only remark, the Star reported, was: "There isn't anything to say about me."

The Star was nothing if not persistent, however, and sent another reporter to track her down at the United Church Deaconess training school, where she was staying.

Asked if China had lived up to her expectations, she said, "I never imagined anything. I just took it as it came."

Chung was a good student who was active, along with her parents, in the Chinese Methodist Church, then on Fisgard Street in Chinatown. After she graduated from Vic High in 1916, she was awarded a medical scholarship by the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Society. Because Asian students weren't allowed to enter professional schools in B.C., Chung travelled east, where she became one of the first B.C. women to study at the University of Toronto's medical school. Years later, she met with United Church officials to pay back the money they had spent on her education. The funds were used to start a scholarship in her name that ended up helping 163 students.

After finishing medical school, she left Victoria in 1923 to take up her chosen vocation as a medical missionary at the Marion Barclay hospital in southern China, sponsored by the Women's Missionary Society. The hospital had been opened in Jiangmen city, about 100 kilometres from Guangzhou, a decade earlier.

Just before Chung departed, the Canadian government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. It would have a profound effect on her and her family.

Chung's mother, father and younger brother joined her in China a year after she arrived, leaving only her elder brother, Herbert, in Victoria. Chung left China twice in the next 13 years to visit Victoria and continue her medical training in New York and at the London School of Tropical Medicine, but when the Second World War broke out, she was faced with a dilemma. Most missionaries left China or were interned during the war. Chung, a Canadian with a British passport, could have returned to Canada - but because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, her parents could not, even though they had lived in Canada most of their lives.

In the end, she decided not to leave. Refusing to collaborate with the Japanese occupiers, however, Chung left the hospital and moved into a small house in Jiangmen. She and her colleagues quietly set up community clinics that provided essential health services for the local people.

She faced another crisis when Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, not long after Chung returned from a long leave in Canada. Shortly afterward, the Korean War began, and by 1951, most missionaries had left the country. Again, Chung elected to stay.

She had developed close ties to the local community. At the Marion Barclay hospital, which she had helped re-establish after the Second World War and took over as director - a position she retained until her death - she was part of a tightknit group of women that included her mother, her cousin and her companion of many years, Shuxian Wang.

She was able to save much of her modest salary and used the funds to help the hospital in times of emergency. Her savings also helped get her out of trouble. According to the hospital accountant at the time, she was accused of stealing hospital funds during the Korean War, when

many overseas Chinese were suspected of being spies. Although she had done no wrong, she "confessed" rather than face further persecution, paying a huge fine as a consequence. A few years later, she was exonerated and the state gave her back her money, which she donated to the hospital for new radiation equipment.

As director of the renamed Beijie hospital - also called Jiangmen Central Hospital - Chung became one of the most influential people in the Guangdong region.

Known in China as Zhang Xiaobai, she was designated a "model worker" by the Chinese government in the 1950s and later a "national hero of culture," an award she travelled to Beijing to receive.

At the same time, she studied basic Chinese writing, since her spoken Chinese was good but her written Chinese was very weak. She would practise writing her Chinese characters late into the night, writing her clinical notes in English during the day.

When it became clear she was not going to marry or have children, she adopted a son in the 1950s, to keep the family line going in China.

She was devout, reading the Bible regularly and going to church every Sunday, a practice she continued even after the 1949 revolution. She was devastated when her longtime colleague and friend Dr. Annie Wong abandoned the church to join the Communist Party.

Until her death from cancer in 1966, Chung continued to practise clinically, travelling to the countryside to bring health care to the people.

She never returned to Victoria.

A few days after her funeral, the Cultural Revolution began. Even though Chung had died, the Red Guards raided her home, likely because of her influence in the area and the fact she was overseas Chinese. She remained persona non grata for a generation.

Her memory was kept alive, however, by her adopted son and her niece's family. They, with Jiangmen Central Hospital's president, Bojin Liang, worked to revive her memory as a dedicated health professional who put serving the people before anything else.

Today, a bronze bust of Chung adorns the hospital's main reception area and thousands learn about Victoria - the physician, and the city of her birth.

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Together they are writing the biography of Victoria Chung. Any information on the family may be sent to joprice@uvic.ca.

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