GO TO SCHOOL
SF Unified cracks down on truancy

JESSICA HAGEDORN
After 'Dogeaters' comes 'Dream Jungle'

EMIL AMOK
Time for Kobe to claim lynching

CLUCK CLUCK CLUCK!
Picky Eater honors National Chicken Month

The Father of All Chinese Doctors

OOH-RAH!
Plaque becomes rallying point

DIMPLED CHAD
Court recalls the recall election
The Father of All Chinese Doctors

Holt A. Cheng was a trailblazer

BY JULIE SOO | Special to AsianWeek

Recognition came nearly a century after Holt A. Cheng graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons in San Francisco in 1894 and handily passed the California Medical Board examination to become the first Chinese American licensed physician in California.

Surrounded by three generations of Cheng at a formal San Francisco Medical Society ceremony on July 26, Dr. Homer Cheng, Holt’s 78-year-old son, said tears came to his eyes when he received a copy of a November 2002 letter.

The correspondence from Dr. Robert Lall, then president of the 135-year-old San Francisco Medical Society, written to Dean Ling of Guang Hua College (part of the medical school Holt Cheng founded) announced that the San Francisco Medical Society would honor Cheng. Even though he never practiced as a doctor in San Francisco, he would retroactively become a member of the society.

“This has to be the greatest honor my father could receive in the United States,” says Homer Cheng. “Although he may not have accomplished all he set out to do in his relatively short life, I believe he accomplished quite a bit. In fact, I am sure my father is smiling down on us today, here in San Francisco as well as the Guang Hua campus in Guangzhou, China.”

“Enterprising Chinaman with No Queue”

Dr. Holt Cheng first made news headlines on Aug. 5, 1904, in The San Francisco Call newspaper. Although his picture was prominent, the compliments were back-handed and even his name was butchered. The newspaper described “Chang A. Holt” of 804 Stockton St. as an “enterprising Chinaman” who “enjoys the distinction of being the first Chinaman admitted to practice by the Board of Medical Examiners of California. ... He has been Christianized and wears no queue.”

The article told of Cheng’s journey as an 8-year-old sent to the Hawaiian Islands in 1866 to work for an uncle, who was a grocer in Hilo, and his subsequent desire to become a medical doctor. “With much money in his pocket, the slant-eyed boy then sailed to America. He commenced upon his studies immediately and applied himself as busily as ever to the fulfillment of his purpose.”

Cheng indicated his desire to bring his Western medical training to the people of his birthplace in Guangdong Province. The San Francisco Call wrote: “He will cure their bodies of physical ills, teach them the advantages of civilization and instruct them spiritually.”

Upon his return to China, Cheng was invited to the Imperial Palace in Peking and was awarded the special degree of Medical Ju Ren, the fourth highest scholarly degree given by the palace. He was appointed as the expectant secretary of the Grand Secretariat and head master of the Imperial Army Medical College in Canton. In June 1905, Cheng represented the Imperial Chinese government at the International Leprosy Conference in Bergen, Norway.

Marriage on the Front Page

Nearly six years after his California medical induction, Cheng again made Bay Area news headlines. On the front page of the March 23, 1910, Oakland Tribune, it announced Cheng and Edna Lee as a “prominent Chinese couple who will be married March 29th in the First Baptist Church, according to American customs.”

This time, the coverage was more accepting, even if a cartooned character of Cupid

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uniting the bride and groom’s photos was shown with a queue, a Chinese cap and slanted eyes. The Oakland Tribune described Edna, the daughter of Rev. and Mrs. Teai Leong Lee, not only as a “pretty and winsome girl” but also commended her scholarly accomplishments. Edna was a student at San Francisco’s Lowell High School until the 1906 earthquake and subsequently graduated from Oakland High School in 1908. At the time of their marriage, the newspaper said, “Miss Lee is one of the most brilliant students in the University of California, which she entered with the class of 1912.” The college coed sacrificed her education and career for her husband and kinfolk by making the family home in Canton, where son Homer and six other children were born. Well beyond the role of wife and mother, she took an active part in her community and taught English to the Guang Han medical students.

China’s Western Medical School
Cheng’s story first came back to San Francisco attention in 2002. The Chinese State University Asian American Studies professor Lorraine Dong learned of him after offering a letter of congratulations to the Guangdong Guang Hua Medical College in Guangzhou, in honor of its 90th anniversary.

Cheng founded the Guang Hua Medical Society in 1908, which became the Guangdong Guang Hua Medical School in 1909 (and the Guangdong Guang Hua Medical College in 1929). At the time, there were very few medical doctors in Imperial China trained in Western medicine. Living under Manchurian control and colonialism, Cheng fought for the right to medical care for all citizens.

Run by a Chinese staff, Guangdong Guang Hua employed all Chinese professors and was the first Chinese medical school to admit women students. Cheng served as the medical school’s first president, never accepting compensation, except from his private practice patients, during his 23-year tenure.

Not only had Cheng been a successful doctor, he was an ardent businessman. He was one of the founders of the Hong Nian (Healthy Life) Life Insurance Company, one of the largest and oldest insurance companies in Hong Kong. According to son Homer, the executives of the company gave the family tremendous financial help during the first part of the war before the Japanese occupied Hong Kong. Cheng retired in 1931 due to health problems. After the Japanese bombed his son Homer’s elementary school, the family relocated to a friend’s home in the Guangzhou Province, deep within the mountains. The temporary village refuge became their home for an eight-year ordeal.

Cheng died there in 1942 with Edna and Homer at his side. No medical care was available and his physician son opined that his father died of cancer or liver disease.

Training a Doctor in Exclusionary America
“What if America was more welcoming? What could Holt Cheng have accomplished?” pondered professor Lorraine Dong. “Those of us in Asian American studies always wonder: ‘What if we did not have this cloud over us — racism and discrimination? How successful might we really be or how much might we really contribute?’

Dong said that even today, many U.S.-born Chinese find great success in China or Asia that they can’t seem to attain here. Still an open question in the Cheng story is how he was able to enter a medical school in San Francisco, given the growing anti-Chinese sentiment. Dong believes that religion may have been at play.

‘Holt Cheng was Christian. Students then, especially international students, were usually sponsored by the church.’

In that regard, San Francisco’s Chinese Hospital, still a thriving institute today, was chartered in 1899, the year before Cheng’s admission to medical school.

Homer Cheng also points out that his father’s Affidavit of Travel stated, ‘Never been a laborer’, indicating an educated or mercantile class outside of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 restrictions. Ironically, the act was extended indefinitely in 1904, the year of Holt Cheng’s graduation, before its repeal in 1943.

History of Going Back to China
San Francisco native Dr. Rolland Lowe says his father dreamed that when he finished medical school, he would go to China to teach medicine and serve the people there. Was it a similar philosophy that took Holt Cheng back to China?

‘Back then, immigrants were committed to a cause,’ Lowe says. ‘They vowed to serve their community back in China.

Lowe ultimately did not serve a community in China, but has been serving the San Francisco Chinese community professionally and socially for over four decades.

‘At the time I finished medical school in 1953 and finished training in 1963, the environment in China had changed, so I didn’t follow my father’s wishes,’ Lowe says. ‘I realized that I could still help the Chinese community, but in San Francisco.

Lowe went on to become the first Chinese American elected president of the San Francisco Medical Society and the only Chinese American to be elected president of the California Medical Association.

Lowe says not so long ago, discrimination was so severe that Chinese Americans could not find jobs despite their professional training. ‘During Above left (inset): Holt A. Cheng yearbook photo from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of San Francisco, class of 1904. Below: Holt Cheng’s photo in the registrar’s office.

World War II, UC Berkeley-trained engineers were left to open grocery stores,’ Lowe says. He noted that some Chinese found success in the “melting pot,” but that often meant becoming part of the “old boys network.”

Back in his day, Lowe says that only five Asian Pacific Americans were admitted to a medical school’s class of 75 students. Today, 25 percent of medical school students nationally are APIs — a percentage, Lowe says, that many people think would only apply to a state like California.

‘What is the legacy of someone like Holt Cheng?’ Lowe asks. “It was the first Francisco Chinese had attended.”

‘Frankly, I was rearing in Ohio, when near, and then seeing and how friendly it Shot in the Dark

By mere chance, der Joyce Chan and I drank the same dinner. Move father “MIH” sheid “This is it,” who will our 71 A

A says. “In my book, MIH, missing in h each new detail, I lighted, excited me formation that I ha fore, about my hist culture. I learn American should ple do.”

Homer’s son, Le Rex Lee Cheng, a father’s continuing family, including

Homer H. Cheng, M.D. (right), son of Holt Cheng and Helen Cheng, M.D. (right), flank a replica of the bust of Holt C the Guangdong Guang Hua Medical College of Stomach and (dentistry), Sun Yat Sen University.
UNTANGING CHINESE FAMILY ROOTS

A genealogist offers some tips

BY JULIE D. SOO
Special to AsianWeek

Juni Low, a San Francisco-based genealogist and lecturer for the National Genealogical Society, specializes in Chinese American history and offers tips on how to begin a search for family history. Additional help can be gleaned from her book, *China Connections: Finding Ancestral Roots for Chinese in America*. Much of Chinese American history for families whose ancestors came through San Francisco, particularly during the Chinese Exclusion Act era (1882-1943) and earlier, and up to pre-1965 immigration, is housed at the U.S. National Archives & Records Administration (NARA), Pacific Sierra Region offices in San Bruno, Calif.

- Talk to relatives. If the first-generation immigrant entered before 1965, find out what port that ancestor entered, the name at entry and the year. If the person left and returned to the United States, find out the latest year of entry.
- If the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) investigated the subject person sometime between the 1910s and the 1970s concerning resident status, naturalization or confession and amnesty, an Alien File or "A File," was created. These documents are not open to the public and a Freedom of Information Act records request must be made to the INS (now the Department of Justice's Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services). Be able to provide the naturalized name or any other name used, the port of entry and the naturalization year.
- If the subject person is still alive, that person must execute a notarized document giving the researcher permission to access the documents. If the subject person is deceased, a copy of the death certificate or signature of the executor giving permission to access the documents is required.
- The U.S. government began keeping A-Files in 1944 under the authority of the Alien Registration Act of 1940.
  - If the subject person entered the United States before 1965 and was not investigated, the immigration documents are most likely at NARA and can be located through a name index database. Researchers may call ahead and make an appointment with NARA staff. The staff may conduct a search, pull files and have documents available prior to arrival at the NARA offices.
  - As with the Holt A. Cheng case, variations of his name have come into play. If a name does not appear, try flipping the name around. (Many Chinese surnames were mistakenly documented as first names and many given names were used as last names by immigration officials.) Try variations in spelling. Also keep in mind the "piper sons" issue. After records were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906, many Chinese used false documents and adopted a U.S. "spooner's surname to immigrate under the guise of being a son, a "piper son" or son in name only. Talking to relatives will reveal whether the current surname is the original family name or a "piper name." The Chinese character surname is usually the true family name. Many families with paper names revert back to the true family name upon naturalization.
  - Often, a search at NARA returns a number of people by the same name. Have other identifying information available, such as other individuals who may have immigrated at the same time or photos of the subject person at the age of entry. Researchers may want to copy photos from NARA's photo archive for positive identification.
  - Other places to search include:
    - U.S. census records from 1790-1930. Note that the 1890 census records were lost in a fire.
    - Look to immigrate to the INS (now the Department of Justice's Department of Homeland Security, Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services). Be able to provide the naturalized name or any other name used, the port of entry and the naturalization year.
    - If the subject person came through San Francisco from 1892 to the 1930s, look to the Chinese Business Partnership registry. Immigrants during those years were required to register with the INS through this registry so that the INS could enforce the Chinese Exclusion Act, albeit with rather loose criteria: "working with hands" meant a laborer subject to the act as compared to a "business partner.
    - If the subject person died between 1970 and 1993 in California, the INS compiled a list to compare with any entering immigrants allegedly using false identification. Low adds that placing family history within the larger historical context will aid in successful searches.