

Katherine Sui Fun Cheung: The First Asian American Female Aviator

By: Hannah Chan, FAA History Intern

Some pioneering aviators strived to break records, such as traveling the farthest or flying the fastest. Others worked to promote and introduce aviation to the public. But in a field dominated by White aviators, some worked to break barriers and spread the joy of flying among minorities. As the first Asian American female pilot, Katherine Cheung worked to publicize aviation to the Asian American communities. But her main focus was to break the tradition of quiet Asian girls and teach them to fly instead.



Katherine Sui Fun Cheung
Photo: Smithsonian Institution

Katherine Sui Fun Cheung was born in Enping, Guangdong (formerly Canton) on December 12, 1904. She graduated from Guangzhou City Peda Women's High School in 1921 before moving to the United States with her father at 17 years old. She and her father settled in the Los Angeles area. Her father worked as a grocer, and Cheung pursued a degree in music. She earned a piano degree at the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music and continued her education at Cal Poly Pomona and the University of Southern California. However, she did not finish her education at USC, dropping out after three years to marry her father's business partner.¹ Her non-traditional husband proved very supportive of her endeavors. So it did not faze him when she started wearing pants and an aviator helmet. He did not mind that she kept her family name and did not push her to be a traditional Chinese housewife.²

Cheung's introduction to flight started when her father took her to Dycer Airport in Los Angeles while teaching her to drive. Cheung would watch airplanes take off and land; she was enthralled. Once she saw those planes, there was no going back. Gone was her attention to driving. She had fallen in love with aviation. It was not until around 1932 that her cousin took her up on her first airplane ride.³ Afterward, she impulsively signed up for flight lessons at the Chinese Aeronautical Association for \$5 an hour. "There's no feeling like it in the world. Being up in the air, the wind blowing, the exhilaration that's my definition of joy. It's complete freedom. You haven't lived until you've truly felt that."⁴ She received her student pilot license on June 18, 1931.⁵

She learned to fly under flight instructor Bert Ekstein, and after only 12.5 hours of flight instruction, Cheung took her first solo flight.⁶ On March 29, 1932, Cheung earned her private pilot's license (#224717) after passing her flight test at Pasadena-Alhambra airdrome, becoming

the first Asian American female and Chinese to receive a federal pilot license.⁷ The license allowed her to carry non-paying passengers in her plane. When Cheung earned her license at the age of 26, only 1% of American pilots were female. Of that 1%, only 1% were minorities.⁸ “I don’t see any reason why a Chinese woman can’t be as good a pilot as anyone else. We drive automobiles. Why not fly planes?”⁹

One newspaper from 1936 commented how Cheung’s stature and size did not match her style of adventurous flying. One would expect a “great big fierce American ‘he-man’ left over from the war,” but Katherine was a small Asian woman who only weighed 105 pounds.¹⁰ Cheung became a stunt flyer after receiving her license, beginning her solo career in aerobatics. While society and Asian culture expected women to quietly stay at home and take care of kids, she was performing barrel rolls, loop-to-loop, and inverted flying for audiences all over the West Coast.¹¹



Cheung with Earhart and the Ninety-Nines

Photo: www.gocivilairpatrol.com

As a minority within a minority, Cheung connected with other pilots and the aviation community. In 1935, she joined Amelia Earhart’s Ninety-Nines club, a club opened to licensed female pilots.¹² In doing so, Cheung became close friends with Earhart, and Earhart’s disappearance in 1937 deeply affected her. She also joined the American Aviation Association in 1936.¹³ Cheung participated in multiple events in the aviation community. On July 4, 1935, she flew in a women’s air race from LA to Oxnard. All pilots in the race were members of the Ninety-Nines club. She also placed fourth in a Glendale-to-San Diego race against Earhart and a dozen other female pilots.¹⁴ In 1936, at the age of 27, she competed in the annual Ruth Chatterton Derby among 24 other pilots, ten of who were female. The race started on August 31, and pilots had to race from LA to Cleveland. Cheung was in the lead toward the beginning but ended up second to last after encountering technical difficulties.¹⁵

In 1936, Cheung stated “I know no other Chinese woman holds a license to fly in the United States. I understand there is a girl in China [Hazel Ying Lee, a second-generation Asian American who briefly returned to China] who holds a flying license.”¹⁶ As one of the two Asian female pilots and a rebel against the Asian female expectation, Cheung traveled across California, the West Coast, and possibly the US, visiting every Chinatown and promoting aviation, especially to girls. She observed: “Chinese girls in this country do not care for flying. They all want to stay on the ground.”¹⁷ Traveling to each community, she gave speeches to dissipate the fear of flying and integrate aviation into everyday life.¹⁸

The Chinese American communities received her well, and she became an icon. To show their admiration, in 1934, the communities and Chinese American actress Anna May Wong raised \$2,000 to buy her a 125-horsepower Fleet biplane.¹⁹ This was the same aircraft she used to compete in the Ruth Chatterton Derby. The airplane could not fly over 10,000 feet, so Cheung barely made it over the Rocky Mountains.²⁰ Additionally, during the race, her compass failed, but she made a smooth landing in Calexico, CA.²¹ In 1935, a group of LA Chinese merchants also gifted her a Kinner-powered Fleet low-wing monoplane, which she used to tour the US.²² It is unknown how much discrimination Cheung faced as one of the few Asian American female pilots, but it is safe to assume that she encountered a lot. One insistence happened when she ran out of gas and had to make an emergency landing at a military base. The authorities interrogated her, believing she was a spy. But in the end, it worked out, and the base “[gave] her dinner, [filled] up her tank, and [sent] her along.”²³



Cheung wearing her aviator clothes in between two Chinese women wearing qipaos.

Photo: <https://filmfreeway.com/Aviatrix>

From the first time Cheung took to the skies, her main goal was to return to China to open a girl's aviation school.²⁴ She stated: “I hope to interest other Chinese girls in getting up in the air when I go home. There is no reason why Chinese women can't fly as well as our men.”²⁵ However, at the time, girls in China were prohibited from flying. Cheung was aware of her privilege of being in the United States, which allowed women to fly. She was determined to let girls in China the same opportunity. “The Chinese government put a ban on women flying in China. That made me angry. I decided women had as much right to fly as men. Because I was in the United States I knew I could do as I pleased so started taking lessons. They let me solo after 12.5 hours in the air.”²⁶

When Japan invaded China in 1937, her goal shifted to training volunteers to fly.²⁷ Sadly, she never was able to accomplish that intention. She had all the preparations ready to travel abroad, Chinese American communities had raised more than \$7,000 to buy her a Ryan ST-A plane. Yet, just when a group of Chinese American women was presenting her the aircraft at Dycer airfield, the same cousin that introduced Cheung to aviation took the plane as a prank right under their noses. Moments later, Cheung and the women watched as he fatally crashed.²⁸ In fear for her safety, Cheung's father made her promise on his deathbed that she would give up flying. She continued to fly after his death, and received her commercial pilot license on April 17, 1943. She, however, stopped flying shortly after that. The combination of Earhart's disappearance or

death, her cousin's tragic accident, and her father's dying wish made Cheung hang up her wings after thirteen years as a pilot.²⁹



Cheung later in life

Photo:

<https://filmfreeway.com/Aviatrix>

After giving up her aviation career, Cheung considered becoming a flight instructor. However, she failed to get a flight instructor certificate twice in 1943 and 1944.³⁰ As a result, she opened and operated a flower shop until her retirement in 1970.³¹ She died on September 2, 2003, at the age of 98.³² She never set any records for speed or endurance, yet the aviation community honored her before and after her death. The National Air and Space Museum recognizes her as the first female Asian American aviatrix.³³ Even though Cheung never made it to China, the Beijing Air Force Museum calls her “China’s Amelia Earhart.”³⁴ On March 4, 2001, she was inducted into the Women in Aviation International Pioneer Hall of Fame.³⁵ She is also an inductee of the Aviation Hall of Fame.³⁶

Outside of the aviation community, the Asian American communities also honored her for her work. She was an Asian American icon that worked to further the Asian communities in a White dominated field. She was included in the 1992 art project “Passage: A Public Art Proposal for Chinatown” at Santa Monica’s Merging One Gallery.³⁷ Artist Carol Nye also installed her in the 1997 mural “Chinese American Women of Los Angeles.”³⁸ Furthermore, Cheung's story was included in the play, *The Chinese Chess Piece*.³⁹ In 2001, the Chinese Consul General of Los Angeles presented her with a medal on behalf of the Chinese government for her work as an aviation pioneer.⁴⁰ In 2004, Disney also honored Cheung by inducting her into their Legends of Flight, incorporating her into the foyer of the ride Soarin’ Over California in Disney’s California Adventure Park.⁴¹ Most recently, director Ed Moy directed a documentary called *Aviatrix: The Katherine Sui Fun Cheung Story*, covering Cheung’s fight against “racial and gender bias to become a daredevil stunt pilot during the Golden Age of Aviation in the 1930s.”⁴² Cheung died on September 2, 2003.

Endnotes

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- ² Cecilia Rasmussen, "'China's Amelia Earhart' Got Her Wings Here," *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-apr-12-me-38545-story.html>.
- ³ FAA records show that Cheung received her student pilot's license on June 18, 1931.
- ⁴ "Asian-Americans in Aviation," San Diego Air & Space Museum, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://sandiegoairandspace.org/exhibits/online-exhibit-page/asian-americans-in-aviation>.
- ⁵ FAA Airmen's Registry.
- ⁶ Rasmussen, "'China's Amelia Earhart' Got Her Wings Here."
- ⁷ At the time of her license, she was not yet an American citizen. She became a citizen in 1936. Private pilot's information from FAA Airman Registry.
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- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ "Spreckles in Lead in Race." *The Times-News*. August 31, 1936. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86063811/1936-08-31/ed-1/seq-5/#date1=1777&index=0&rows=20&words=Cheung+Fun+Katherine+Sui&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1963&proxtext=%22Katherine+Sui+Fun+Cheung&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.
- ¹⁶ "Chinese Girl Flies to E.P.," *El Paso Times*, August 16, 1936, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/433240112/?terms=%22Katherine%20Sui%20Fun%20Cheung%22&match=1>.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Rasmussen, "'China's Amelia Earhart' Got Her Wings Here."
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
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- ²¹ Gantt, Marlene. "An Unsung History of Female Fliers." *The Dispatch*. March 26, 1994. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/340563810/?terms=%22Katherine%20Cheung%22&match=1>.
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- ²⁷ Rasmussen, "'China's Amelia Earhart' Got Her Wings Here."
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- ³⁰ FAA Airmen's Registry.
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³³ “Asian-Americans in Aviation.”

³⁴ Dill, “Aviation Pioneer Honored: First Asian-American Female Pilot in Disney Hall of Fame.”

³⁵ “Events,” *The Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 2001,

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³⁷ Shauna Snow, “A Santa Monica Gallery Is the Site for Chinatown Project,” *The Los Angeles Times*, July 19, 1992,

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