

**She reached for the sky to become America's first Chinese-American female pilot**



By Jennifer Burstein

Katherine Sui Fun Cheung was born on December 12, 1904 in Canton,

China. When she was 17, Katherine moved to California. She came to the United States to study music. Her father took her to an airfield for driving lessons. That was when Katherine discovered a love of airplanes. At that time many women did not drive cars. It was unusual that a woman would fly an airplane!

She had to wait before she was able to take her first flight. Katherine was already a wife and mother when her cousin took her flying for the first time. After completing flight school, she became a licensed pilot in 1932. She was the first Asian

American woman to become a licensed pilot. In 1932, only one percent of American pilots were women.

Katherine was asked to join The Ninety-Nines Club in 1935. The Ninety-Nines Club was a group of women pilots. During her membership, she became friends with the president of the club, Amelia Earhart.

Katherine enjoyed performing stunts at air shows and county fairs. She also participated in competitions. Flying home from a competition in

Cleveland, the compass in her airplane broke. Her quick thinking and skilled flying allowed her to land safely.

Katherine never forgot China. She raised money to start a flight school for women in China. However, the death of her cousin stopped her from making the trip. Although she did not reach her goal to start a school in China, she never stopped inspiring women to fly.

She has been honored in both the United States and China. Her accomplishments have been displayed at the Beijing Air Force Museum. Also, she has been included in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. In 2001, she was included in the International Women in Aviation Pioneer Hall of Fame. Her photo can be found in the Soaring' Over California Exhibit at Disney's California Adventure amusement park.

Later in her life, Katherine traveled to China with her daughters, Doris and Dorothy. She was able to visit her childhood village where they

celebrated her accomplishments. Katherine died in 2003.

Her daughter, Doris, remembered her as a very "positive" person. "She was very outgoing," according to her younger daughter, Dorothy. Dorothy also explained that her mother was "daring" just like her grandpa. Katherine's Chinese name means "courage" and "long life". She had the courage to fill her long life with many adventures. She followed her passion to achieve what most people thought was an unreachable goal.

Resources: Ching, Livia L., "To Take Flight," December 2005, <http://www.audreymagazine.com/dec2005/Living01.asp> (March 13, 2008).  
Dill, Kitty, "Aviation Pioneer Honored," Ventura County Star, April 17, 2004, section B8.  
Photos Courtesy of Dorothy Leschenko



Katherine Cheung with Amelia Earhart.

Katherine Cheung and the Ninety-Nines Club.



Amelia Earhart



Katherine Cheung as a young woman.



**MEI'S ROLE MODEL: KATHERINE CHEUNG**

