

Asian American-Pacific Islander Heritage Month: Sau Yee Chang, DDS

Sau Yee Chang, DDS, 1896-1990

By Emma Florio, Archives & Research Specialist

Sau Yee Chang was born in 1896 in Hanapepe, a small town on the island of Kauai in what was then known as the Republic of Hawaii.¹ His father, a rice planter and merchant, had come to Hawaii from China in 1886 and his mother followed in 1895. Chang attended school in Honolulu, on the neighboring island of Oahu, before heading to Chicago in 1915 to study at Northwestern University Dental School. He earned his DDS in 1918 and practiced in Chicago for a short time before returning to Hawaii, where he enlisted in the United States Army in the waning days of the First World War.

After the war, Chang settled in Hawaii and set up a dental practice in Honolulu. Within a year, he had been appointed resident government dentist on his home island of Kauai, in charge of all dental work required for schoolchildren; all previous dental work on Kauai had been done by visiting dentists from Honolulu. Chang also set up offices in the neighboring towns of Kapaa and Lihue. In this practice, he brought the first air-driven high speed dental drill to Hawaii—one of the many firsts in his life. During this time, he married schoolteacher Dorothy Chock. They would go on to have a son, who also became a dentist, and three daughters, two of whom married dentists.

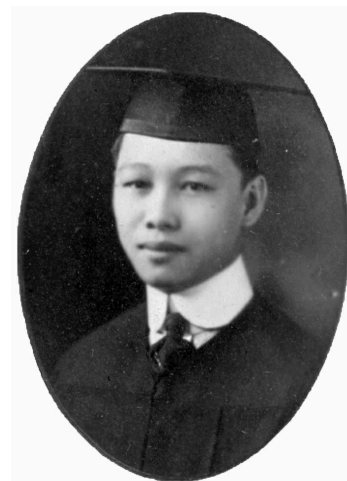
In 1922, Chang made his first foray into politics, running as a Republican for the Kauai County Board of Supervisors; this made him the first person of Chinese ancestry to run for public office on the island. He lost by a small margin and ten years later ran again, this time successfully. He served two terms, beginning a long association with the Republican Party in Hawaii—he acted as chairman of the Kauai Republican County Committee in the 1940s and served as a delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1960. According to obituaries, he was known as “Mr. Republican” on Kauai and was remembered for helping the 1959 campaigns of Governor William F. Quinn—the first governor of the state of Hawaii—and Senator Hiram Fong—one of Hawaii’s first two US Senators and the first Senator of Asian descent (and Chang’s brother-in-law).



Portrait of Chang from the *Journal of the American Dental Association*, August 1962.

Chang distinguished himself in the field of dentistry as well. He was elected President of the Hawaii Territorial Dental Society in 1947, when he was one of the few dentists in Hawaii doing cleft palate and root canal work. In 1955 he became one of the first two Hawaiians elected as Fellows of the American College of Dentists and in 1961 he became the first Chinese American vice president of the American Dental Association—and the first Hawaiian to achieve such a high office in the ADA. These accolades continued throughout the rest of his life: in 1973 he was honored by the Hawaii Dental Association for “outstanding service and dedication to the advancement of science and the art of dentistry” and in 1984 the ADA presented him with the Distinguished Service Member Award. Chang maintained ties with Northwestern throughout his career; he returned to the Dental School three times for postgraduate training and in 1956 became the first Hawaiian recipient of the school’s Alumni Merit Award.

Sau Yee Chang died on September 13, 1990, at age 93. In recognition of his military service, he was buried in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. Former Governor William F. Quinn remembered him as a “great and strong and true friend.” Chang’s legacy in dentistry continued in his son Thomas, who became a dentist, as well as his grandson Russell Chang, who completed a residency in orthodontics and received a master’s degree from Northwestern University Dental School.



Chang’s dental school class of 1918 portrait. From Galter Special Collections.

Endnotes

1. Hawaii was annexed by the United States in 1898, becoming the Territory of Hawaii. It was admitted as a state in 1959.

Selected References

- Engle, Murry. “Dr. S.Y. Chang was a pioneer Asian in Kauai political races.” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, Sept. 19, 1990.
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