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Trailblazers In Nursing History: Chinese-American Nurse Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo, RN (Part One)

By: Phoebe Ann Pollitt, RN

Abstract

When Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo was born on September 14, 1918, in Stockton, California, no one could imagine that by the time she was 30 she would work in a hospital under attack by the Japanese Army; escape occupied Hong Kong disguised as a Chinese servant; travel by boat, truck and foot across 700 miles of war-torn China; become the first Chinese-American nurse to join the US Army Nurse Corps; and then graduate from Women's College in Greensboro, North Carolina, with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. Her unique and harrowing tale begins decades before her birth.

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Trailblazers in Nursing History: Chinese-American Nurse Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo, RN (Part One)

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When Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo was born on September 14, 1918, in Stockton, California, no one could imagine that by the time she was 30 she would work in a hospital under attack by the Japanese Army; escape occupied Hong Kong disguised as a Chinese servant; travel by boat, truck and foot across 700 miles of war-torn China; become the first Chinese-American nurse to join the US Army Nurse Corps; and then graduate from Women's College in Greensboro, North Carolina, with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing degree. Her unique and harrowing tale begins decades before her birth.

Early Life

Seetoo's father, along with thousands of other Chinese men, came to California seeking jobs and opportunities unavailable to them in their homeland. When he arrived, Mr. Chin first worked as a laborer and then as a cook for a private family. He saved enough money to open an import-export grocery store business in Stockton. He became a merchant because it provided the legal status he needed in order to bring his Chinese wife and son to the United States. After settling in Stockton as a family, the Chins had two daughters. Although she was the only Chinese student in her public-school classroom, she remembers her childhood fondly. The Chin children attended Chinese school from 5-9 pm, in Stockton's small Chinatown, here they learned to read and write Chinese characters. In addition to her schooling, she was an active Camp Fire Girl (Lee, 2019).

In 1930 the United States was in the middle of the Great Depression. The family business was failing, so the Chins decided to return to China. Because Seetoo and her younger sister were born in [California](#), they were United States citizens. After completing high school in China, she wanted to further her education. However, in the 1930s, Japan invaded China and controlled most of coastal and eastern China where the major cities and universities were located. Many Chinese universities closed during the Japanese invasion and occupation. In any event, the Chin family did not have enough money to help Seetoo with college expenses. So, in October 1938 she began her studies at the English language Queen Mary Hospital School of Nursing in the British Colony of Hong Kong (Moy, 2014).

Student Nurse Days

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, bringing the United States into World War II. That same day Japan also attacked the Philippines, Hong Kong, Burma and other Asian countries. Seetoo recalled:

“... it was the morning of December the eighth, when we were greeted by Japanese bombs and shelling. Of course, we were placed on a wartime footing right away ... All patients that could go home were sent home, and then we were taking in battle casualties that very first morning ... after two weeks Hong Kong surrendered ... we knew after that the Japanese are going to want the hospitals ... the British sisters [nursing faculty] had the foresight to know that they were going to be interned, so they gave us our temporary certificates, RN certificates. (Trojanowski, 2005).”

On December 10, 1941 during the Battle of Hong Kong, nursing school administrators issued each third-year student a Certificate of Training from the Medical Department of the Government of Hong Kong. These certificates were on par with diplomas and conferred the title Registered Nurse (Chung, Ching & Wong, 2011). Chinese, British, Indian and Canadian forces defended Hong Kong during two weeks of fierce fighting. Facing overwhelming Japanese forces, the allies surrendered on Christmas Day, 1941. By then, Queen Mary Hospital was full of casualties. Seetoo, alongside hospital staff and fellow student nurses, worked tirelessly caring for the wounded soldiers. On December 26, 1941, Japanese Army troops entered the hospital, interned the foreign patients and staff, and turned the hospital into a Japanese Military Hospital (Copp, 2001). Seetoo was 23 years old, a Registered Nurse and living under Japanese rule in occupied Hong Kong. In an oral history interview she remembered:

“A few days after the surrender we saw some Japanese officers come to inspect the hospital ... as soon as we saw them, we were kind of on edge, because you’d hear all these stories about rape, and rape of Nanking, and the Japanese had been very bad about commandeering women to be part of their—they called it comfort women, which is actually making sex slaves of them. Anyway, we had heard stories of that, so naturally we were very, very concerned.” (Trojanowski, 2005).

Rita Wong, one of Seetoo’s classmates, remembered the early days after the Japanese invasion,

“All foreigners working at the hospital were sent to a concentration camp, and the Chinese were gathered at a hospital where they had nothing to do but wait for their meager food rations. The Japanese made it a rule that no doctors or nurses were to leave Hong Kong, and those who were caught doing so would be killed.” (Macfie, 2007, p.1)

Escaping Hong Kong

Despite this Japanese edict, Seetoo and several of her Chinese classmates, including Rita Wong, Rebecca Chan Chung, Daisy Pui-Ying Chan, Cynthia Chan and Irene Yu, were determined to help their country and its American and British allies. They knew they had to make their way to Free China, which was in southwestern China and unoccupied by the Japanese. Individually and in small groups, these nurses disguised themselves as peasants and slipped past Japanese guards as they escaped from Hong Kong, making the 700-mile journey inland towards Kunming, the capital of Free China (Chung, Chung & Wong, 2012).

Seetoo, her brother and three of her classmates began the journey together. They traveled to Macao by boat, then hitched a ride with a truck driver to the Chin family home in Xinhui. After a short visit, the group walked four hours to Shuiko where they boarded a ferry. On the ferry was a classmate of Seetoo's brother, Mr. Liao. She recalled their encounter:

“[Mr. Liao said] I'm going to write a letter to the pastor of the Baptist Church at your next stop, Gaoyao, and ask him to let you folks sleep in the church sanctuary – and to provide whatever assistance you need. And when you leave for the next stop, ask him to write a letter to the Baptist preacher there in Wuzhou asking for the same favor ... That was how we finally got to Guiyang – by stopping at various churches along the way.” (Trojanowski, 2005).

In April 1942 they reached Guiyang, headquarters of the Chinese Red Cross Medical Relief Corps (CRCMRC). There she met Dr. Robert Lim, the director of the organization, who offered her a position in the operating room of the Red Cross sponsored hospital in the city. Seetoo accepted the offer and went to work.

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Dr. Phoebe Ann Pollitt, RN, practiced public health nursing in the mountains of NC for over 30 years. She taught nursing at Appalachian State University 2007-2019. After her retirement she returned to the local health department as part of the OVID prevention team in 2021-2022. Her writings and presentations honor the lives and work of many unrecognized nurses who founded and grew our profession.



Elsie Chin Yuen Seetoo, RN