

# **My mother by Mary Yao**

March 16, 2015

My mother, June Chien-yu Tsao, was born in 1902 in a very humble family in Jiangsu province in China. She lost her father at an early age and, thus, life was very tough for her and her family. Given the circumstances and the environments, she could have never gone to school and never received any formal education at all at that time.

And yet through her determination, her vision, and encouragements of her mother (my maternal grandmother), she went to Suzhou Normal School and later she went to Ta Tung University in Shanghai. In her sophomore year, she won a prestigious scholarship established by the Boxer War Compensation Act and administered by Tsinghua University, which enabled her to continue her college education in the United States in 1927. She entered Cornell University as a junior and received a B. A. and M. S. degrees in Plant Physiology (1929 and 1930). Then she transferred to the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign, studying Chemistry under the direction of Professor Carl S. Marvel and was awarded a Ph. D. in 1933.

She was the first Chinese woman ever to earn a Ph. D. in Chemistry in America.

She started her academic career first in Shanghai, Sichun, Nanjing, and later at Cheng Kung University in Taiwan. She also taught at the University of Illinois, Purdue University, Wisconsin State University--Stevens Point. During her long academic career, she published two books and many scientific research papers which she presented at many international scientific conferences in the US, UK, South America,.....etc. She also won many honors and awards, and she was proud of receiving the Gold Medal for the Best Woman Professor.

Today there are hundreds of thousands of Chinese men and women-- young and old -- doing what she did. What was unique and impressive about her was she had the vision and dedication of doing and achieving it nearly 90 years ago.

My mother was a scholar, a professor, and a determined woman; and, at the same time, she was a sweet, loving, caring wife and mother. She often inspired all who met her.

We lost her 20+ years ago in LA and we still missed her dearly.

Many years ago, my brothers and I, in loving memory of her, established two scholarships and one grant to the needy undergraduate students at Chemistry and Chemical Engineering Departments at:

1. Tsinghua University, Beijing, where she received the scholarship and she was forever grateful.
2. National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan, where she had taught for 30 years.
3. The University of Illinois, where she received her Ph. D., a travel grant for Chemistry graduate students to attend conferences.

## What is her legacy?

She often said that you should always continue learning and thinking of new things and absorbing new knowledge regardless how old you are; that is, do not ever stop thinking and learning even you are 50, 60, 80, 90, and beyond.

Young men and women should always think it big, aim it high, and plan it ahead.

You will never lose it out in life if you do a little more for yourself, for your friends and relatives, that she often reminded us.

Life is a continuous learning process that you can learn anything, anywhere, and any time. She also said that do not ever say bad words on anyone because it only showed the bad taste on your part.

You should always think nobly and behave respectfully. You will always be a happier person in the end.

These are all simple and obvious, but for an 113 years old Chinese lady who had such concepts, it is grand and unusual. What an amazing lady of our time!

PS: In a few weeks, one of her grandsons will get married in LA. All her sons, in-laws, grand children and great grandchildren will all be in LA. Another grandson organized a gathering at the gravesite in Forest Lawn to pay our respects to her and my father.

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