



Chiu-An Wang



Chiu-An Wang died on October 24, 1996, bringing his remarkable career to a muted close. He had just turned 82.

Chiu-An was born and raised near Canton, the eldest son in a family of nine children, his father a minister in the Rhenish Lutheran church. After graduating from the Pui Ying Middle School, Chiu-An earned both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Parasitology at Lignan University in Canton before attending Peking Union Medical College for a year. Then, with the support and advice of a paternal aunt who was not only a gynecologist and obstetrician, but notably one of the first women in China educated in western medicine, he transferred to Harvard Medical School in the war-time Class of 1943B. Following graduation from medical school

he went on to a surgical appointment at The Massachusetts General Hospital, three nine-month tours of duty as surgical assistant resident – a “Nine Month Wonder” – giving place in 1946 to returning veterans who had pre-War residency commitments.

In the fall of 1946, Chiu-An, or C-A, as he was generally known by his colleagues, returned to Canton with Alice, his Wellesley bride, daughter of the former Chinese Ambassador to the United States. Their transition back to a politically turbulent, postwar China was not without hazard. C-A was promptly appointed Chief of Surgery at the 150-year-old Canton Hospital, and two years later, became Chief of Surgery and Assistant Director of the Hackett Medical Center, then supported by the American Presbyterian Mission, now Canton Number 2 People's Hospital. Growing concern for the safety of his family as the Communist forces spread southward, prompted him to visit Canada and secure his “Empire Boards” which would qualify him to practice surgery in the Crown colony, Hong Kong. In 1950, while it was still possible for a doctor to leave China, after sending Alice and the children on ahead, he emigrated to Hong Kong. He was promptly appointed to the surgical staff of the Hong Kong Central Hospital where

over the ensuing ten years he developed a substantial practice of general surgery.

With Hong Kong on the flyway of Harvard and MGH travelers to the Orient, the Wang household, now increased by two daughters eventually to become five, entertained a constant stream of visitors en passant, allowing C-A to keep in close touch with the Boston scene. By the late fifties, he again became sufficiently uneasy about the political future for his family and his own professional development to be ready, at the age of nearly fifty, to give up his well-established practice and embark upon a new career. In 1961 his close friend of medical school and residency days, Grant Rodkey, was able to arrange a clinical fellowship for C-A at the MGH with Dr. Arthur Allen's former surgical team, Claude Welch and Gordon Donaldson. With this opportunity, the on-going support of Oliver Cope and the approval of Paul Russell, Chiu-An returned to the MGH and the Harvard Medical School.

The years that followed were most productive. Working closely with Oliver Cope in his laboratory and as his clinical associate, he eventually succeeded him as surgical "curator" of the parathyroid and thyroid glands at the MGH. As Cope had done many years before, he spent many hours in the pathology laboratory meticulously dissecting parathyroid glands, systematically charting their normal and abnormal locations with the simple premise that success in parathyroid surgery depends on the ability of the surgeon to recognize parathyroids when he sees them, knowing their anatomic distribution and where they may hide. His publications in this regard are classics in the surgical literature. In the course of his anatomic studies he learned to recognize the inferior cornu of the thyroid cartilage as a surgical guide to the recurrent laryngeal nerve. This simple anatomic observation, of practical importance in total thyroidectomy, can be of enormous help in reexploration for persistent hyperparathyroidism. C-A was nationally recognized for his expertise in reexploration as he adapted and developed Cope's operative style – meticulous dissection, careful hemostasis, and tenacity in finding what he knew must be there.

Clearly a basic conservatism lay behind C-A's approach to surgical problems. He was an early supporter of Cope's advocacy of breast-sparing operations and radiation for cancer of the breast. He became a leading proponent of needle biopsy of the thyroid, a procedure pioneered at the MGH by Ed Hamlin. C-A advocated large needle biopsy to provide histologic evidence on which conservative management of thyroid nodules could be based. In his parathyroid operations, he took great delight in a simple Density Test – floating small samples of tissue in Mannitol solutions – to help exclude hyperplasia of the parathyroids and thus permit unilateral neck exploration. In his later years, C-A joined Austin Vickery and Alexander Walker in a detailed post-operative analysis of 237 patients with intrathyroidal papillary carcinoma and a median follow-up of 14 years. This study provided strong support for the concept that this most common type of thyroid cancer can be successfully treated by conservative surgery.

At surgical Grand Rounds Chiu-An's discussions never failed to enliven that traditional scene with his superb sense of humor and timing, and a scattering of Oliver Cope's mannerisms. He enjoyed working with the resident staff and referred many patients to the ward service where he could share responsibility

for their care. To all patients C-A remained a sensitive and considerate physician, cheerful, unhurried, and when the circumstances called for it, almost courtly.

His services were widely sought. A recognized authority in the endocrine field, he was elected President of the American Association of Endocrine Surgeons in 1986 as he reluctantly approached the age of retirement. His presidential address to that society is a charming account of his return with Alice to the China of his childhood and the pleasure of teaching in his native land.

C-A always played an enthusiastic role in teaching the third and fourth-year clinical clerks at the MGH, sharing knowledge with the students, treating them with respect and understanding. For better than ten years as each new cohort of students arrived, we had an afternoon session with C-A on “Thyroid/Parathyroid.” The discussion might be wide-ranging but invariably centered on the patient as an individual. He would gladly teach and the student gladly learn.

His was a cheerful presence, a gentle humor, an elfin charm. With mock dignity we addressed each other as “honored colleague”. Universally liked and respected, he never spoke unkindly of others. He delighted in his family, Alice and five married daughters whose wedding celebrations were legendary among the surgical and medical staff. His gastronomic authority was immense. A colleague recalls that travel to meetings with the Wangs was always a pleasant social experience, even the vexing decision about choice of restaurant for dinner. C-A was masterful in this situation, managing quietly to slip away, canvas the area, and return with a slight smile that he had found a good place to eat. Of course, it was invariably a Chinese restaurant whether in Austria, Wales, Switzerland or Australia.

He and Alice lived comfortably in Cambridge. Each summer the extended family gathered at the family place in Martha’s Vineyard, seventeen acres back from water, a place of renewal and peace. It remains the family’s home.

One of Chiu-An’s retirement hopes, often expressed but unfortunately unfulfilled, was time to teach in China beyond what had been possible during his extended trip with Alice to the People’s Republic at the invitation of Peking Union Medical College. On that occasion, his China revisited 40 years after he had left home, he was struck by the great number of happy children he saw. They reminded him of an ancient poem from the Tang Dynasty:

I was young when I went away and am old as I return.
My accent has not changed, but my hair has grown
white. Smiling children greet me, but do not know me.
“Stranger”, they ask, “Where do you come from?”

Respectfully submitted,

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