

Dr. Robert Yuan: Neurosurgeon and co-founder of GBCCA

By York Lo

In this unusual year of Covid pandemic, CHSNE would like to salute all medical professionals and we are honored to present Dr. Robert H.P. Yuan (阮郇標), a pioneering Chinese American neurosurgeon in the Boston area and co-founder of the Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association (GBCCA, 大波士頓區中華文化協會) with our Sojourner Award for his contributions to the field of neurosurgery, his decades of services to patients and mentorship to other doctors across the globe and his role in establishing one of the leading Chinese organizations in the Greater Boston area which continues to thrive to this day.



Robert Yuan with a jeep of St Luke's Hospital in Shanghai in the late 1940s

Robert Hsun-Piao Yuan was born in 1922 in Ningpo into a well-known Christian family, the grandson of Bishop Sung Tsae-seng (沈載琛, 1861-1940) who was the first Episcopalian bishop of Chinese descent.

Robert is the nephew of Bishop's Sung's son, William Z.L. Sung (沈嗣良, 1899-1967), president of St. John's University, the most prestigious Christian college in Shanghai sponsored by the American Episcopal Church. His brother-in-law, Chou Lien-hua (周聯華, 1920-2016), was the family pastor to President Chiang Kai-shek and his son President Chiang Ching-kuo in Taiwan.

Like many of his family members, Robert went to St John's and graduated from its Medical School in 1947 where he was the class president and one of the favorite students of its dean, Dr. Josiah McCracken (1874-1962). For decades, he was very active with the St. John's Alumni Association, particularly the Medical School, and served as a key liaison for St. John's Medical School graduates providing contacts for jobs and postgraduate training.

In 1952, Robert entered the neurosurgery residency program at Tufts-New England Medical Center in Boston under renowned surgeon Dr. Bertram Silverstone (president of Neurosurgical Society of

America). He joined the full-time staff as the junior neurosurgeon in a three-man department. His reputation grew within the institution to the point that doctors began to refer him cases over the senior neurosurgeons and was widely considered a “neurosurgeon’s neurosurgeon”.

Later, he left the full-time faculty at Tufts to enter private practice on Beacon Street in Brookline and subsequently became of chief of neurosurgery at Mount Auburn Hospital, Cambridge, Natick’s Leonard Morse Hospital, and Framingham Union Hospital.



Left: Robert and Grace Yuan with their children Robin, Fran and Annette; Right: Robert Yuan performing a surgery

The same year he started at Tufts, Robert married Dr. Grace I Chen (陳詒, 1923-2010), the daughter of the presiding bishop of the Anglican Church of Anking, Bishop Robin T.S. Chen. Grace was her class president at Ginling College in Nanking and the only female graduate of her class of 1952 at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. After graduation, she did medical research at Harvard, MIT and Dana-Farber. Together, they started a family in Newton which included a son, Robin (阮祖望), and two daughters, Frances (阮祖懷) and Annette (阮祖恩), and the couple became active at the local Episcopal Church.

As the number of Chinese families like his own living in the Boston suburb grew in the 1950s, Robert arranged for use of the Episcopal Church’s camp facilities to start the Chinese Family Summer Camp in Foxboro in 1960. Later he and my wife helped start the Chinese Language School (牛頓中文學校) held in Newton Highland’s Meadowbrook Junior High School. These two groups were later joined to create the GBCCA (see article by his son Dr. Robin Yuan for details about the genesis and early years of the group) and has served generations of Chinese American families living in the greater Boston area.

Following the opening of China in the early 1970s, Robert visited Shanghai with his family in 1975. He and his wife sponsored, hosted, and housed many early visitors and students from China including doctors, scientists, government officials, trade groups, college and graduate students, church representatives and bishops. He was the founder of the Chinese American Neurosurgical Society (since disbanded) to foster interaction between both countries very early on.



Dr Robert Yuan (second left) visiting China as part of the Neurosurgical Society of America delegation in the late 1970s

After his retirement from private practice at the age of 70 in 1992, he worked at the VA hospital in Jamaica Plain and went on several medical missions to Israel (Gaza and the West Bank) and Ghana. An avid tennis player in his younger days, Robert remains alert and active today despite of his advanced age and continues to attend meetings of his beloved Phi Lambda (PL) fraternity.



Robert and Grace Yuan with renowned AIDS researcher and virologist Dr. David Ho (classmate of Robert's son Robin) and his son in the 1980s.