

An unusual graduation certificate

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This graduation certificate (Figure 1) earns a place in the history of medicine in Hong Kong as it sheds a little light on a period with scant written records. It is also unique as it was ranked number one among a dozen or so certificates awarded to the only graduating class of nurses by the occupying Japanese administration in Hong Kong.

Japan invaded Hong Kong on 8 December 1941, the same day Pearl Harbour was attacked. During the defensive battle that lasted till Christmas day, all hospitals were mobilised to care for war casualties which kept all staff busy well after hostilities ended with Hong Kong's surrender on 25 December 1941. The Japanese occupying forces took over the two large hospitals, Queen Mary Hospital on the island and Kowloon Hospital on the peninsula, for military use. The Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital and the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals were available to serve civilians. Nethersole was renamed Civic Hospital under a Japanese medical superintendent, while the medical and nursing duties continued to be provided by the local Chinese. Despite, or perhaps because of, the harsh and difficult conditions in the territory at the time when malnutrition and infectious diseases were rampant, the need was felt to continue the training of nurses, and Nethersole was possibly the only hospital at that time where formal training for nurse probationers was provided. The first class was recruited in 1942 and included 12 trainees for the 3-year course. Except for a Japanese doctor teaching materia medica, all instructors were Chinese doctors who were Hong Kong University graduates. However, all trainees were also required to study the Japanese language as part of the course. Ward staff worked

under the watchful eye of Japanese supervisors, one appointed for each ward. Food was scarce, and rice rationing for both staff and patients was strictly enforced. All the hardships notwithstanding, training and clinical work went apace smoothly without much interference from the Japanese administration, though not without some sense of apprehension. All probationers of the first class graduated in August 1945. Ironically, the graduation celebrations took place on 15 August, the day that Japan surrendered and, consequently, the celebration took on an added and increased significance.

The author is grateful to the recipient of the certificate, Ms Chan Wing Han (Figure 2), for much of the information. Ms Chan, whose father was one of first class of graduates from the medical school of the University of Hong Kong, intended to study medicine at the Peking Union Medical College but her pursuit was thwarted by the Sino-Japanese war that broke out in 1937. She graduated from the first nurse probationers' course under the Japanese administration and her certificate was marked number one, likely reflecting her standing in the examination. After the resumption of British administration in Hong Kong, her training was recognised and she was allowed to sit the Hong Kong Nursing Board examination to qualify as a registered nurse without further training. She continued to work in the Nethersole after the war and was appointed Matron in 1961. She served as Chief Nursing Administrator of Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole and United Christian hospitals from 1974 till her retirement in 1980. She now resides in Toronto, Canada.

Sources:

1. Paterson EH. A Hospital for Hong Kong—The Centenary History of the Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital. Hong Kong: Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital; 1987.
2. Ho FC, Tso SC. Chan Wing Han Grace—Biographical notes. Archives of Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences.

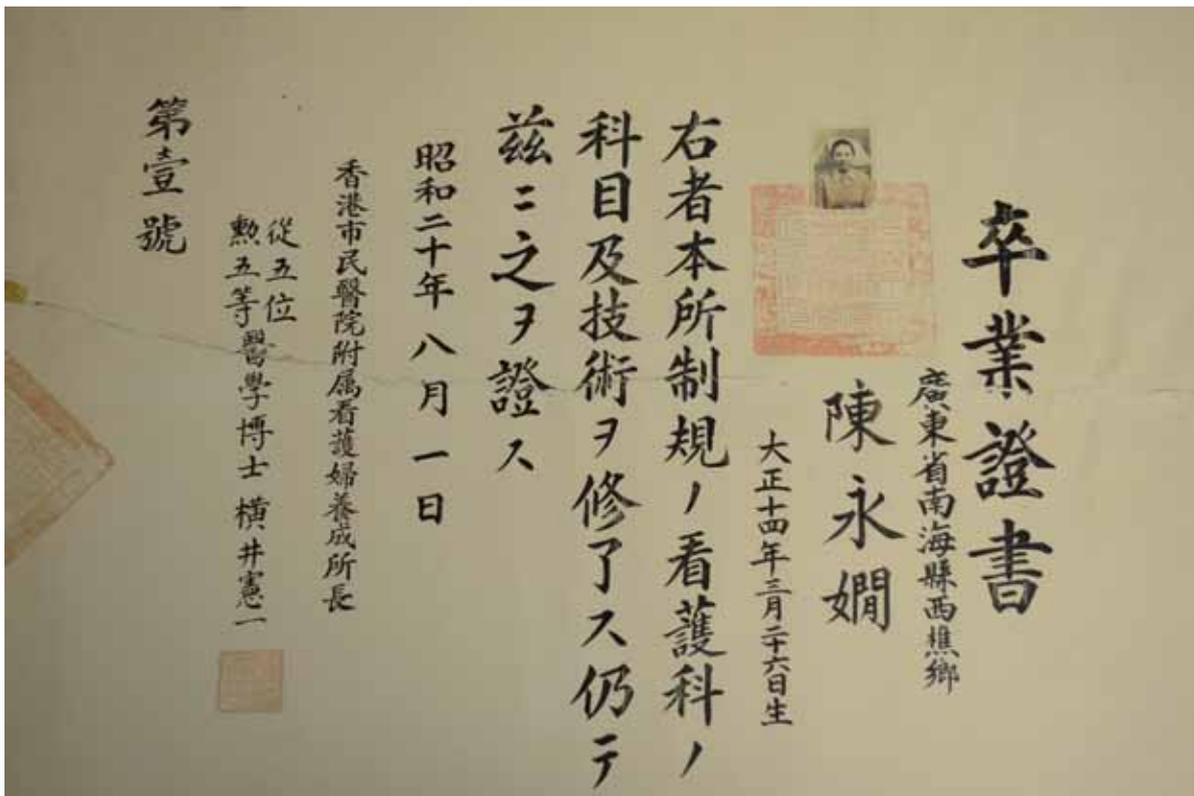


FIG 1. Certificate of Graduation from Nursing School of the Civil Hospital during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, kindly donated to the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences by the awardee in 2000.



FIG 2. Picture taken in December 2007 of the awardee, Ms Grace Chan Wing Han, beside the certificate, in front of Museum exhibits on the Alice Ho Miu Ling Nethersole Hospital.