

Pioneering female doctors of The University of Hong Kong

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The first female doctor of Hong Kong was Dr Alice Hickling (nee Sibree) who arrived in 1904 to work at the Alice Memorial Maternity Hospital. She was a pioneer in the training of local midwives with modern Western methods of childbirth.¹ It would take another two decades for the emergence of local female doctors.

When The University of Hong Kong (HKU) was established in 1911, the Hong Kong College of Medicine was merged with HKU and became the Medical Faculty. During the next decade, no female students were admitted to HKU. In 1921, Rachel Irving—daughter of the Director of Education, Edward Irving—applied for admission and was refused. When Mr Irving sought legal advice, HKU backed down as there was no legal basis for barring female students. In that year, three female students—Rachel Irving, Irene Hotung, and Po-chuen Lai—were granted admission. Lai became the very first female medical student of the Medical Faculty. In 1927, Eva Hotung, elder sister of Irene, who was admitted in the spring term of 1922, became the

first female graduate of the Medical Faculty.² This photograph was taken in 1926 during their surgical clerkship at the Government Civil Hospital in Sai Ying Pun (Fig).

Dr Eva Hotung (何綺華) was the daughter of Sir Robert Hotung, a successful businessman and philanthropist. She attended Diocesan Girls' School and passed the Senior Local Examination (matriculation examination at HKU) in 1918, but had to wait for 4 years for her chance to study medicine in HKU. She proved to be a bright student and was awarded both the Ng Li Hing and Chan Kai Ming scholarships for the subjects of anatomy and physiology during the third-year examinations. She was also the only candidate who passed all the subjects in one sitting at her final MBBS examination in December 1926.³ After graduation she moved to Europe for further studies and earned diplomas in Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in London, and in Gynaecology and Obstetrics in Dublin. She was also the first Chinese to obtain the MRCP (Ireland) qualification, demonstrating again her

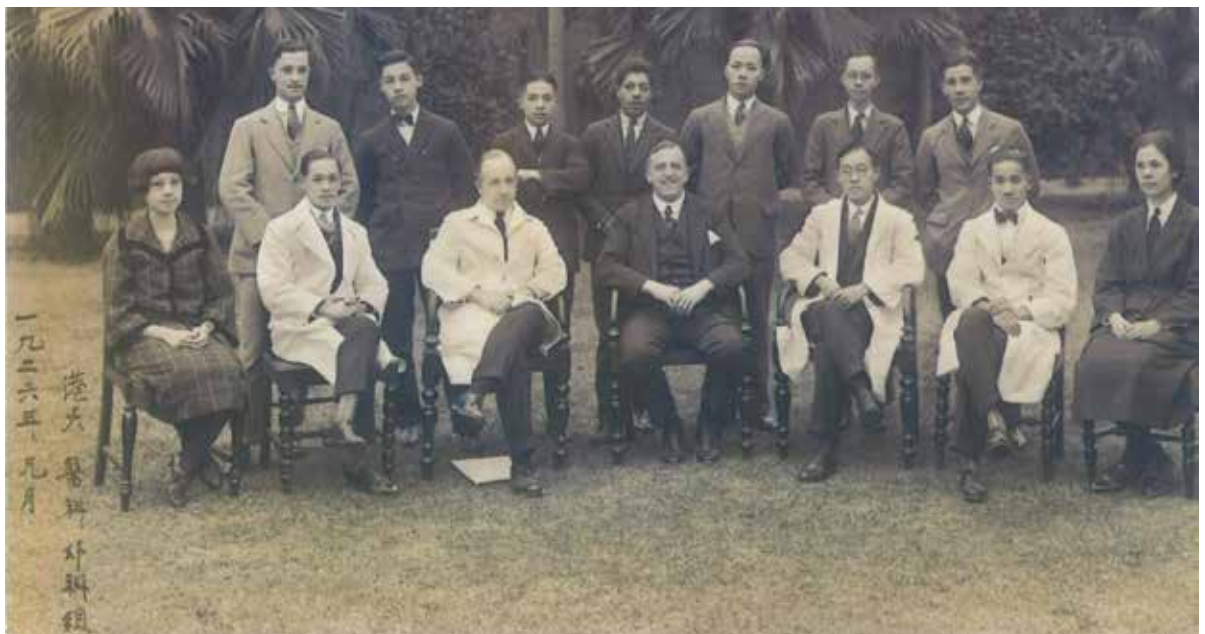


FIG. Group photograph of surgical clerks with their teachers taken in 1926. The photograph was kindly donated to the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences by relatives of Dr King-fun Ko (高景芬; standing, far right). Also featured in the photograph are Dr Eva Hotung (何綺華; seated, far right), Professor Kenelm Digby (seated, centre), and Po-chuen Lai (賴寶川, seated, far left)

academic prowess. She returned to Hong Kong in the early 1930s and joined the HKU Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department. Eventually, she was promoted to First Assistant to the Professor of the Department in 1937. This was probably the highest rank a local Chinese doctor could achieve in those days. At this juncture, the Sino-Japanese war steered her path away from Hong Kong. In 1938, she joined the Medical Relief Corps of the Chinese Red Cross and commanded a field unit to provide medical care and to perform anti-epidemic work.⁴ After the war, she started her own practice in obstetrics and gynaecology in the Central district of Hong Kong. Her practice was highly successful but the years of hard work took a toll on her health. She decided to close her practice and move to New York in 1960. She died in New York in 1993 at age 90 years.

Dr Po-chuen Lai (賴寶川) came from an ordinary family, her father being a storekeeper of the public works department. After graduating from the Italian Convent School (Sacred Heart Canossa College today), she made history as the first female medical student of HKU. Lai was not as brilliant as Hotung, and graduated 1 year after her in 1928.⁵ She joined the civil service as Chinese Medical Officer on 1 June 1928 and worked in Tsan Yuk Hospital until 1933. She was assistant to Dr Alice Hickling, who was then Assistant Medical Officer in charge of Chinese Hospitals and Chinese Public Dispensaries. In 1939, after a decade in the civil service, Lai was appointed Secretary to the Midwives Board and Supervisor of Midwives and simultaneously Health Officer and Inspector of Schools. During the Japanese occupation, Lai remained in Hong Kong to help the humanitarian work of Dr Selwyn-Clarke. Dr Selwyn-Clarke, who was Director of the Medical Department, was organising a network to help the dependents of internees or servicemen who died during the war and supplying necessary drugs and food items to the camps. He was arrested in 1943 by the Japanese Kempeitai for espionage and Lai continued the work in his absence. For her invaluable work during the war time, she was awarded OBE in 1946. Lai resumed duty immediately after the war and was put in charge of both the Infant Welfare

Centres and the School Health Program. In 1947, Lai was promoted to Lady Medical Officer, a post previously only for “Europeans” but opened by then to local Chinese. In 1949, Lai left government service for private practice.⁶

Also in the photograph are Professor Kenelm Digby, founding chair of the Department of Surgery, and Dr King-fun Ko (高景芬), owner of the photograph. Digby joined the infant Medical Faculty in 1913 as Professor of Anatomy and became its Dean in 1915. At that time there was no full-time professors in the clinical departments. Professors in Medicine, Surgery and Obstetrics and Gynaecology were created in the early 1920s with endowment from the Rockefeller Foundation. He laid the foundation of surgical education in Hong Kong during his long reign before the War. He was held in Stanley Internment Camp during Japanese Occupation where he continued to operate in the Tweed Bay Hospital inside the camp. He resigned from HKU soon after liberation due to ill health. The Department of Surgery of HKU has created the Digby Memorial Lecture in his honour.⁷ Ko did not enter HKU after graduating from Queens College. He went to Tianjin to study medicine at the Pei Yang Medical College, which was established by Li Hong Zhang during the Qing Dynasty. He came back to Hong Kong after 1925 to enrol into the Medical Faculty. Ko graduated in 1928 and joined Tung Wah Hospital as a resident doctor for 3 years. He then went into private practice and joined the group practice of Dr Mak Luk.

Hotung, Lai, and other early female doctors trod a more difficult path than their male counterparts. For example, within the civil service, woman medical officers' salaries were only about 75% that of men until the 1970s. They were also more likely to be posted in traditional “female” disciplines (eg, obstetrics or child health) and were less likely to gain promotion. In the colonial days, racial discrimination was also reflected in differences in pay between local and European staff. Fortunately, these days the sexes are equally represented at the medical schools in Hong Kong and there are equal opportunities in the choice of specialties.

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