

Mae Yih (1928–)

By Kerry Tymchuk

Upon her election to the Oregon House of Representatives in 1976, Mae Yih became the first Chinese-born woman in the United States elected to a state legislative chamber. Mid-Willamette Valley voters re-elected Yih to two additional terms in the House and five terms in the Oregon Senate. In 1993, she became the first woman to serve as president pro tem of the Oregon Senate. She retired from office in 2003.

Yih was born Chih Feng Dunn in Shanghai, China, on May 24, 1928, the second of three children of Chun Woo Dunn and Fung Wen Feng Dunn. Her father was the sole owner of a number of businesses, including three fabric mills, an automobile and motorcycle dealership, and a two-hundred-room hotel and nightclub. Raised in wealth, she attended private schools in Shanghai, where her education included nine years of English. After graduation from high school, she attended St. John's University in Shanghai.

Chih Feng Dunn accompanied her mother on a trip to New York City in January 1948 for an extended visit with Dunn's two brothers, who had been sent to the United States six months earlier to complete an internship in the rayon manufacturing business. She remained in New York, where she enrolled in economics and typing classes at Hunter College. Later that year, she transferred to Barnard College, where she majored in economics. She credited Barnard President Millicent McIntosh, who urged students to devote themselves to community service, for motivating her to run for public office. Dunn had planned to return to China to work as her father's personal accountant, but the forces of Mao Ze Dong took control of Shanghai in 1949, and her father was one of many businessmen who were arrested and jailed. He was held in prison for five years, and she would not see him again until 1974.

While attending Barnard College, Dunn met Stephen "Steve" Yih, a Chinese-born engineering student who later received degrees from Brooklyn Polytechnical Institute and New York University. They were married from June 1953 until his death in 2009; the couple had two children.

The Yihs moved to Albany, Oregon, in 1956, where Steve Yih's employer, Wah Chang Corporation, operated a zirconium manufacturing facility. Mae Yih's public service began as a classroom volunteer at Clover Ridge Elementary, her sons' school. When the local school board did not renew the contract of a teacher who Yih thought was effective, she organized parents to sign a petition asking that the decision be reconsidered. When the board refused, Yih filed for an open seat on the board and was elected. She served a second term before being elected to a seat on the Albany High School Board of Directors.

In 1976, the local Democratic Party recruited Yih to run for the State House of Representatives against Bill Gwinn, a Republican and seven-term incumbent. She campaigned door-to-door, promising that she would work hard, be honest, and use common sense. She upset Gwinn by 593 votes, the closest election in her political career. During her twenty-six years in the Oregon Legislative Assembly, she received landslide victories in all of her elections.

Yih earned a reputation as a tireless, effective advocate for her constituents. She opposed higher taxes and supported the timber and agricultural industries, the major employers in her legislative district. She also served on the Joint Ways and Means Committee and helped pass laws establishing enterprise zones to promote job creation, authorizing a study to analyze the contamination level of the Willamette River, and obtaining annual funding for the repair and preservation of Oregon's covered bridges. Yih was instrumental in strengthening and increasing trade between Oregon agricultural and business interests and China. Using her extensive connections there, she planned and organized friendship and trade delegations in 1992, 1997, 2000, and 2002, when Oregon legislators and business leaders traveled to China to meet with government officials and advocate for the export of products such as grass seed and wheat.

Since her retirement from elective office in 2003, Yih has maintained her interest in public policy. To honor her husband, Yih funds college scholarships for students in Albany and China who need financial assistance to pursue a degree in chemistry, math, physics, or engineering. In 2017, she

published a memoir, *East Meets West: A Bridge to Understanding, Friendship, Trust, Peace and Prosperity between My Mother and Adopted Countries*. Yih received the Legacy Award from the Museum of Chinese in America in New York City in 2019.

Sources

Chisholm, Jamiyla. "One for the History Books." *Barnard Magazine* (Fall 2018).

Hong Xiao. "Mae Yih: A life devoted to building trust." *China Daily*, July 14, 2017.

Mae Yih. *East Meets West: A Bridge to Understanding, Friendship, Trust, Peace and Prosperity between My Mother and Adopted Countries*, 2017.

Mae Yih on Youtube:

An interview that Museum of Chinese in America did with Mae about her life.

A presentation that Mae made to Oregon Capitol Foundation about her life.

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https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/yih_mae/