



Name in English: Ruby Chow
Name in Chinese: 周马金 [周馬金]
Name in Pinyin: Zhōu Mǎ Jīn
Gender: Female
Birth Year: 1920-2008
Birth Place: Seattle, WA
Philanthropy: Y

Profession (s): Community advocate, councilwoman, restaurateur

Award(s): 1956, Matrix Table Award; 1997, Living Pioneer Award from Northwest Asian Weekly; 2006, Golden Circle Award from the Organization of Chinese Americans-Greater Seattle Chapter

Contribution(s): Considered the matriarch of Seattle's Chinese community Ruby Chow was born on a fish dock assisted by a midwife as in those days hospital births were rare. Her father, Jim Sing Mar, had immigrated to work on the railroads, before becoming a manager of a cannery on the Seattle docks. Jim Mar died in 1932 when Ruby was just 12. At 16 she dropped out of high school to help her impoverished family during the Great Depression as a waitress and as a salesgirl. In 1937, at just 17 years old, she moved to New York City and worked as a waitress in a gay bar, an experience that gave her great sympathy for the plight of gays in America. She also met the man who would become her second husband, Ping Chow, a member of a Cantonese Opera troupe that had become stranded while on tour in 1941 when the Japanese occupied Hong Kong then ended up in the US Army. They married in 1943 and moved back to Seattle after Ping Chow had received a US Army honorable discharge. His one year of service had proved that his English was inadequate for further military training. The couple then worked in a Chinese restaurant and built up a loyal clientele.

In 1948, they opened Ruby Chow's restaurant, the first Chinese restaurant in Seattle outside of Chinatown, albeit only a few blocks outside. When the restaurant closed at 2 in the morning, it became a Cantonese opera where her husband, now the restaurant's cook, performed. Among those to work in the restaurant was a young [Bruce Lee](#) whose father in Hong Kong was a personal friend of Chow's husband because they'd performed in the same Cantonese Opera troupe. [Bruce Lee](#) lived and worked there starting in 1959 while studying at Edison Technical School (now known as Seattle Community College) before leaving for the University of Washington and future fame as a movie star and martial artist. Ruby Chow was a very strict taskmaster and put up with no nonsense from Mr. Lee during the time he worked for her.

The restaurant became a very popular hangout for Seattle's upper class, business leaders, politicians, and journalists mainly due to relentless self-promotion by Mrs. Chow and her gregarious nature. She used the opportunity to demystify Chinese culture for these local movers and shakers, serving as an informal ambassador. The need for this became especially clear in 1949 as mainland China fell to the communists and suddenly white Americans perceived the Chinese as the enemy. Ruby had an idea to combat these dangerous ideas, "She went to the board of the Chong Wa Benevolent Association and said, 'We need a PR committee to help people understand what Chinese culture is all about, that all Asians are not the same, that Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos have separate and distinct cultures -- to not be afraid.' The Chong Wa board said, 'Fine. You be the chairman.'"

To acquaint a predominantly white Seattle with the growing Chinese American community, Ruby Chow invited the public to Chinese New Year Celebrations and other community events. With her husband alongside her she promoted Chinese cooking on local channels, and even created their own TV cooking show. They also published a cookbook of their favorite restaurant recipes.

She also lobbied local businesses, schools, and government organizations to break the color barrier to hire and appoint more racial minorities. She also did what she could to help gays. "When the Dorian Group, a gay organization, asked Ruby if she had a problem with hosting a gay banquet, she disarmingly asked: 'Do you use American money?'" She showed through her words and actions that she would treat gays as equals to any other group that came to her restaurant.

She was instrumental in electing [Wing Luke](#), the first Chinese American to the Seattle City Council and indeed one of the first Asian Americans to be elected to such a high local office anywhere in the United States in 1962. She not only raised money for his campaign but insured that fortune cookies highlighting his candidacy were printed and distributed in Chinese restaurants all over Seattle. In 1997, her efforts helped elect [Gary Locke](#) as the first Chinese American state governor. Locke went on to become Secretary of Commerce in 2009 and the American ambassador to the People's Republic of China in 2011. She also inspired and helped a host of other Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese American politicians to be elected.

Her first political post came in 1971 when she was appointed to the King County Board of Equalization and Appeals. She became the first Chinese and Asian American to win a seat on the King County Council in 1973. She was so apolitical that she chose her party affiliation as Democrat based simply upon the socio-political demographics of the district she wanted to represent. She would go on to win reelection in 1977 and 1981. During her tenure she lobbied for more bus shelters for South End riders. When a tennis court was scheduled to be built in the North End (which already had a tennis court) she was able to convince local government to have it built in the South End instead, which had none. Using "roast duck diplomacy," Mrs. Chow kept a federal prison out of Chinatown. Her husband cooked one of the restaurant's famous roast ducks, which she carried on a plane to Washington D.C., and served it to Senator Warren Magnuson. Mrs. Chow was able to convince him that the prison was a bad idea.

"She was an incredible trailblazer and advocate on behalf of Asian Americans, the Asian America community in politics, and a trailblazer for women," said former Gov. Gary Locke, the nation's first Chinese-American Governor. "She helped shatter the glass ceiling on so many different fronts."

Philanthropy: Ruby Chow was a tireless advocate for her community. In 1952, she founded the Chinese Community Girls Drill Team, as an effort to get young girls involved in the community. The team has since been in the Rose Parade in Pasadena, CA and countless Seattle events. She also helped found the Chinese Parents Service Organization (CPSO), to raise funds for the drill team and other public services for the Seattle Chinese American community. She also volunteered her time as a translator for the Seattle police, hospitals, and businesses dealing with Chinese immigrants. For her civic efforts, Ruby received a Matrix Table Award in 1956.

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