

Connie Chung launched a generation of Asian American girls named Connie. She had no idea.

By David Bauder
AP Media Writer

NEW YORK — Some public figures are honored with namesake buildings or monuments. Veteran broadcaster Connie Chung has a strain of marijuana and hundreds of Asian American women as legacies.

Chung was contacted five years ago by a fellow journalist, Connie Wang, whose Chinese immigrant parents gave her the chance as a preschooler to pick an Americanized first name. She thought of Connie, after the pretty woman she saw on TV, and also suggested some random cartoon characters. Her parents chose wisely.

After reaching college, Wang learned she was part of a special sorority. There were all sorts of Asian AmericanConnies around her, many given the name by parents who saw Chung as a smart, accomplished woman whose professional success their daughters could aspire to.

Until Wang told her this, Chung had no idea.

"I was flabbergasted," she said. "I'm not a crybaby, and I really bawled."

Clearly, a career in television news had a greater impact than she knew. Chung, now 78, tells stories about her life in a new memoir 10 years in the writing titled — what else? — *Connie*.

She dishes and names names

Chung's career took her from Washington reporting for a fabled CBS News bureau in the 1970s through anchor jobs in Los Angeles and at NBC News and an ill-fated partnership with Dan Rather at the "CBS Evening News" in the 1990s to dodging the Barbara Walters-Diane Sawyer rivalry at ABC News.

She dishes and, yes, names names. The presidential candidate who made a pass at her. The actor who gravitated to Asian women. The male anchor (not Rather) who long held a grudge against her.

Off the air for several years now, she lives a comfortable retired life with her husband, television personality Maury Povich. Between her absence, the Rather episode, and a tarring with more of a reputation as a celebrity journalist than she ever wanted, Chung is often overlooked.

Not by Wang and otherConnies. Few Asian Americans had the name before Chung and few since, but "from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, that's the Connie generation," she said. A frequent argument for diversity in the workplace is so young people can see themselves in prominent roles; rarely do you come across such a tangible example of its effect.



Shortly after writing about the phenomenon, Wang said she personally heard from at least 100Connies with similar stories, likely a small sample of what's out there.

"There was quite literally no one else like her," Wang said. "She was very professional, she was tough but also beautiful. What drew my mother to her was also her style. She cared so much about her appearance."

She always had to prove herself

Chung was the 10th child — the only one born in the United States — of Chinese parents whose marriage had been arranged when they were 12 and 14 and met five years later on their wedding day. No son survived past infancy, so her father beseeched her to bring honor to the family name when she began her career. Instead it turned out to be Connie — shortened from Constance — that became inspirational.

Quickly out of college and two years in local news, Chung earned a job at CBS, in part because there was pressure in the late 1960s and early 1970s to make television a little less of a white man's world.

"I always had to prove myself," Chung recalled. "Every day was a test, because I was a woman and because I was a minority, but more because I was a woman. There were no skirts in my business."

Her hustle earned respect, with her willingness to stay up virtually all night covering George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign resulting in a scoop on his vice presidential choice. She had to prove herself to older men and dodge predators, once publicly rejecting a sodden suitor with a sly nod to an old cliché about Chinese food not keeping one sated for long: "You don't want to go to bed with me,"

she said. "You'll just be horny an hour later."

She feels that young people need to hear stories about the sexism and racism she encountered.

"We've come a long way, but the thing that is disturbing to me is that we really haven't come that long a way," she said. "The sexism still exists. The racism for Asians has reared its ugly head in a most depressing way. Looking back, it's important to me that women and minorities know that things have changed, but not enough."

"I cooperated a lot"

From the memoir, it's clear that she remembers most fondly those days of covering hard news, from Watergate to Nelson Rockefeller's brief tenure as vice president.

BELOVED BROADCASTER. Connie Chung, right, works with Jane Pauley, left, as she prepares to take over as host of NBC television's "Today Show" in New York, as Pauley was about to take maternity leave, in this November 11, 1983 file photo. Some public figures are honored with namesake buildings or monuments. Veteran broadcaster Chung has a strain of marijuana and hundreds of Asian American women as legacies. (AP Photo/David Pickoff, File)

Chung became a news anchor locally in Los Angeles and, in the 1980s, at NBC News. Yet she said she was saddled too often with what were considered "women's stories," about miniskirts at the beginning of her career to celebrity profiles and tabloid fodder like "Scared Sexless," about AIDS, at NBC.

Too often, she says, she accepted assignments that she really didn't want to cover. Her reputation suffered. Secretly she agreed with some of the criticism, but it wasn't easy seeing influential critic Tom Shales call her "Connie Fun."

"I never wanted to be called the 'b-word,'" she said. "I never wanted to be called a diva. So I cooperated a lot. I think that's a Chinese thing and a woman thing. I was a double dose of dutiful, so it was as much my own doing by agreeing to do things that my higher-ups wanted me to do."

She moved back to CBS News and, with Dan Rather struggling in the ratings as the "CBS Evening News" anchor in 1993, was named his co-anchor. It seemed like a career peak, but Chung wrote that she had an inkling of what was to come in her first meeting with Rather, when he said, "now you are going to have to start reading the newspaper."

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