

Rosalyn Koo, 94, Dies; Fund-Raising Powerhouse for Chinese Communities

A scion of a wealthy Shanghai family, Ms. Koo helped older people in California and organized a program to educate girls in rural China.



By Penelope Green

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Rosalyn Koo, a powerful fund-raiser for the Chinese community in the San Francisco area and for schoolgirls in China, died on Jan. 30 at her home in San Mateo, Calif. She was 94.

The cause was chronic kidney failure, her daughter Debbie Soon said.

Ms. Koo had led a successful career as the chief financial officer and a partner of MBT Associates, a large architectural firm based in San Francisco, when, in 1988, she retired at age 62 to devote herself to good works. She became the kind of funding angel of whom nonprofits dream.

She was a force behind the 70-unit Lady Shaw Senior Center, serving the Chinatown and North Beach neighborhoods, which faced considerable community opposition and took seven years to build.

“She knew who to ask, how much to ask for and when to ask,” said Anni Chung, the president and chief executive of Self-Help for the Elderly, a nonprofit of which Ms. Koo was a board member.

At one community hearing, Ms. Koo often recalled, a prominent resident challenged her by saying, “Why don’t you go back to Chinatown?” Ms. Koo stared her down and replied: “You know what? I’m going to outlast you.”

Among other civic endeavors, she oversaw and helped fund the expansion of the Chinatown branch of the San Francisco Public Library and was a founder of the 1990 Institute, which supports, through educational programming and other efforts, “a constructive environment for both U.S.-China relations and for Asian-Americans,” according to its website.

But the project dearest to her heart was the Spring Bud Program, an offshoot of the 1990 Institute, which, beginning in 2001, educated 1,000 girls in central China’s rural Shaanxi Province.

Partnering with the All China Women’s Federation, which helped find the girls, Spring Bud took children who were living in poverty and would not have been educated past the third grade and paid for their education through college — often through graduate degrees or certificate training as well. After an earthquake, the program built a school to replace the ones that had been destroyed.

Drawing on her network of friends and collaborators — her soldiers, as Ms. Chung, who counted herself among them, put it — Ms. Koo not only funded the girls’ schooling; she also purchased laptops and other necessary equipment once they got to universities, and identified mentors to nurture and guide them in the big cities they landed in.

All 1,000 girls completed middle school; 275 graduated from high school and 200 from vocational schools; and 170 went on to college.

It was a deeply intimate project for all the contributors, as Ms. Chung noted. They stayed with it for 15 or more years and attended all the girls’ graduations. The girls called Ms. Koo “Grandma Koo.”

When Spring Bud began, thousands of girls in Shaanxi Province were not attending school, in part because the culture’s gender bias favored boys. For her own part, Ms. Koo remembered wanting to be a boy from a young age, cutting her hair short and wearing boys’ clothes over her school uniform. When her brothers brought home C grades, they were punished. When she brought home an A, she was told not to study so hard.

Rosalyn Chin-Ming Chen was born on Nov. 11, 1926, in Shanghai. Her father, K.F. Chen, was a senior executive at the Bank of China; her mother, Margaret (Sang) Chen, was a homemaker, though she was college educated, which was unusual for her generation. (Margaret’s father was a minister who educated all 10 of his children.)

During the horrors of the Second Sino-Japanese War, when the Japanese bombed her city, Rosalyn became attuned to classism and injustice. When she was 7, she announced to her mother that she would dedicate her life to helping the poor. Her mother responded by suggesting that she learn to clean her room first.

Rosalyn was sent to the prestigious McTyeire School, an all-girls boarding school in Shanghai, which she adored even though she was suspended twice. Hers was the last class to graduate, in 1947, before the Communists took over.

The school deteriorated under party rule, and when Ms. Koo returned in the 1970s and saw its run-down condition, she raised funds for its rehabilitation — stipulating in exchange that the school, which had become coeducational, revert to educating only girls.

After boarding school, her parents picked out a nice suitor for her, but she declared that she would not marry and that she wanted to be educated abroad. Her parents had their own fears that she would be radicalized by the Communists if she attended a university in Beijing, so they sent her to Mills, a women's college in Oakland, Calif. After two years, she transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned a degree in economics in 1953. In 1950 she married Karlson Koo, a chemist. He died in 2000.

In addition to her daughter Ms. Soon, Ms. Koo is survived by another daughter, Jackie Hackett, and a granddaughter.

In 1995, when Ms. Koo was honored by The San Francisco Examiner and a local radio station for her service, she told the paper: "The community is as strong as your own participation in it. Some things you have to have a passion for, a cause to sustain you. Otherwise, you might as well go home and read a good book."