

Obituary

Yuen Ren Chao

Yuen Ren Chao was born on November 3 1892 in Tientsin, China. Raised in a multi-lingual and multi-dialectal environment, he very early developed a fascination for and facility with languages. He entered Cornell University in 1910 on a Tsing Hua scholarship, studying science and mathematics as well as languages and linguistics, receiving his A.B. in 1914. 'The most important course I took in linguistics at Cornell,' Chao (1976) reported, 'was one in phonetics. For the first time I learned to use the International Phonetic Alphabet . . .' He received his doctorate (in philosophy) from Harvard in 1918. In the seven years following his graduation he taught physics at Cornell, served as interpreter for Bertrand Russell and Dora Black during their visit to Peking University, married Buwei Yang (the first woman in China to become a licensed physician), taught philosophy and Chinese at Harvard, and went on a phonetics-linguistics study tour of Europe. Among those he met and studied with during this period, both at Harvard and in Europe, were Charles Hall Grandgent, Daniel Jones, Stephen Jones, Joseph Vendryes, Antoine Meillet, and Henri Maspero.

From 1925 to 1938 he was, at first, professor of Chinese at the National Tsing Hua University, teaching Chinese phonology and music, and then Research Fellow and Chief of the Linguistics Section of the Academia Sinica, which he helped to found. It was at this time that he conducted the first extensive dialect surveys of Chinese based on modern linguistic methods and that he published the still theoretically fresh paper 'The non-uniqueness of phonemic solutions of phonetic systems' (1934). He and his family emigrated to the United States in 1937 and took up teaching positions at University of Hawaii, Yale University, and Harvard University, finally settling at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1947 where he was appointed Professor of Oriental Languages and, in 1952, Agassiz Professor. He retired from teaching in 1960. Among the numerous awards he received were honorary degrees from Princeton, Ohio State University, and University of California, Berkeley, as well as two Guggenheim fellowships and a Fulbright fellowship.

In China, Chao is also well known for his lively Chinese translation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as composer of many popular songs, and for his lifelong service to the National Language Unification movement. His efforts in this last area included helping to define and promote *p'u t'ung hua* (the Standard Dialect) and the invention of *Gwoyen Romatzyh*, one of the official National Phonetic Alphabets. When Chao and his wife visited their

hometown in 1973 they were welcomed in person by the Chinese premier, Chou En Lai.

Members of the IPA will also remember Chao for his frequent contributions to *Le Maître Phonétique*, in particular his proposal for the system of tone letters which bears his name and which has been widely adopted (45.24–27, 1930). Within phonetics and phonology, Chao's contributions range from acoustic phonetics ('Experimental study of Chinese word tones,' 1924), to word games (and their value for validating phonological analyses), child phonology, the audio-lingual method of second language teaching, automatic speech recognition, and historical phonology.

His published works include numerous articles and over a score of books and monographs including *Cantonese primer* (1947), *Mandarin primer* (1948), *A grammar of spoken Chinese* (1968), *Language and symbolic systems* (1968), and *Aspects of Chinese sociolinguistics* (1976).

In his published works as well as his conversations, Y. R. Chao displayed an incredible breadth of knowledge and an ingenious and cultivated sense of humor. For the delight and edification of students of Chinese he constructed short stories in Mandarin using only repetitions of a single (segmental) syllable. A sample, making use of his tone letters, is appended.

Y. R. Chao died in Cambridge, Massachusetts on February 24 1982, almost one year after the death of his wife, Buwei Yang Chao, who died on March 2 1981.

Further biographical and bibliographical information on Chao may be found in the following references.

References

- CHAO, Y. R. (1976). My linguistic autobiography. In A. S. Dil (ed.), *Aspects of Chinese sociolinguistics: Essays by Yuen Ren Chao*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- GROOTAERS, W. A. (1954). Chao Yüan-jen (Yuen Ren Chao), China's leading dialectologist. *Orbis* 3.328–35.

Old Man Ch'i's Wives

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Translation. The old man of Ch'i had seven wives. His wives threw away his lacquer ware. The old man of Ch'i was angry and, abandoning his seven wives, rode away on a unicorn. The seven wives cried, begging him to remain in Ch'i. The old man of Ch'i sadly rested his anger and remained in Ch'i.