

## **Paul and Marian Chen: Pioneers of the National Library of Australia's Asian Collections**

At the beginning of the 1960s the National Librarian, Mr (later Sir Harold) White recruited Mr Paul Chen and his wife Mrs Marian Chen from Taiwan, to manage the Library's East Asian language collections. Their son, Peter Chen, then a young boy, recalls the whole family, including his parents, his brother John and himself, meeting and being interviewed by Mr and Mrs White in a hotel room.

After the Second World War, as Australia became more aware of the importance of understanding its Asian neighbours, the National Library began serious collecting of East Asian language publications in the 1950s. Finding staff with the necessary linguistic and library skills to acquire, catalogue and provide reference services for these collections was a major problem. Canberra, though the national capital, was still small, and not the multicultural city it is today. One partial solution was to hire overseas students who were at the Australian National University, but this was no substitute for long-term professional staff.

Paul and Marian Chen were highly qualified and experienced when they came to Canberra. They had completed university degrees in China. Paul had a masters in library science and another masters in theology, while Marian also completed a masters in librarianship. They were also both fluent in Chinese and English, and were sufficiently proficient in Japanese to catalogue Japanese books. In 1960 Paul Chen was Director of Readers' Services at the National Central Library, Taiwan and Marian Chen was a specialist in original cataloguing at the same library.

In the early 1960s the National Library's East Asian language collections were housed at the Australian National University, a few years later shifting to an annexe in the suburb of Kingston. With the opening of the new National Library building in August 1968 they moved to their permanent home on the Third Floor, where they have remained ever since.

In April 1962 the Library's Orientalia Section was formally established, with Paul Chen as its first head. Under his direction by April 1963 the East Asian language holdings had grown to 35,331 physical volumes. Including 25,503 Chinese, 7,233 Japanese and 773 Korean language monographs (1). Paul and Marian Chen were also heavily involved in bibliographic control of the Chinese and Japanese monographs, including both descriptive and subject cataloguing.

During this period the Library acquired two of its most significant formed collections about China. The London Missionary Society sold its Chinese language books and manuscripts to the National Library in 1961. Its rich holdings included extensive early materials on Christianity in China and extremely rare original works from the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1961-1962 the Library received a large Chinese and Western language collection from the scholar-librarian Fang Zhaoying (Fang Chaoying), who was then head of the Asian collection at the Australian National University Library. This covered Chinese history and biography, especially of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and a wide range of works on Chinese culture.

During his time in Canberra Paul Chen contributed a piece about his former workplace, the National Central Library, Taiwan to Nexus, which was the National Library of Australia's staff bulletin, running from 1959 to 1966 (2). In his article he outlined the history, structure and functions of the National Central Library.

The Chen family spent most of their stay in Canberra in the suburb of Campbell, not far from the Australian War Memorial. A photograph taken in about 1961 shows them all in front of the War Memorial, the two boys with their bicycles:



*Left to right: Marian, Peter, John and Paul Chen at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, around 1961. Photograph courtesy of Peter Chen.*

In April 1963 the Canberra Times reported, “Mr and Mrs Paul T.H. Chen, who for the past two years have been working in the National Library of Australia, where Mr Chen was in charge of the Oriental collection, have left Canberra with their two sons, John and Peter, to return to Taipei, Formosa. Mr Chen is to resume duty as Director of Readers’ Services, National Central Library”(3). Marian Chen took on a position of librarian undertaking collection development at the U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit in Taipei. Their departure was also recorded in the National Library’s staff magazine (4).

The Chens later moved to Vancouver in Canada. Paul Chen’s final position before retirement was as a reference librarian at the Social Sciences Department at the University of British Columbia. Marian Chen was a cataloguer in the Asian Studies Division of the same university. Paul Chen retired in the late 1960s and Marian Chen about five years later. Both are now deceased. John and Peter are now retired and living in Canada.

After the Chens left Canberra, Harold White recruited another librarian from Taiwan, Mr Sing-wu (Sidney) Wang, who headed *Orientalia* from 1964 to his retirement in 1985. He was succeeded by

Andrew Gosling. In 1987 a section called Asian Collections was established. It included the East Asian language collections, from that time on no longer referred to as Orientalia.

It is important to honour the pioneers of Asian librarianship in Australia. Paul and Marian Chen played a significant role in laying the foundations of the National Library's research resources on Asia, today the most extensive in the Southern Hemisphere. This article is also intended to supplement my short history of the National Library's collections on Asia (5), written many years ago, by filling in gaps for the early period.

*Andrew Gosling, author of this article, wishes to thank Peter Chen, son of Paul and Marian Chen, for his efforts to make the work of his parents at the National Library better known and for his detailed emails providing valuable information about their lives and careers. Peter is a retired senior meteorologist and director, whose career was spent with the Meteorological Service of Canada and the UN's World Meteorological Organization in Geneva, Switzerland. He is undertaking a much more detailed study of his family, including the unforgettable time they spent in Australia in the 1960s.*

#### REFERENCES

1. Collection of Oriental Material [report including on assessment of the Chinese, Japanese and Korean language collections by Paul Chen]. I. Raymond, Chief Cataloguer [National Library of Australia] 24.4.1963.
2. "A glimpse of the National Central Library of the Republic of China, Taipei, Taiwan", in Nexus : Commonwealth National Library staff bulletin, no.13, 22 February 1962 p.2-3. The author is grateful to Erica Ryan of the National Library for suggesting Nexus as a possible source.
3. Canberra Times, 22 May 1963.
4. Nexus : Commonwealth National Library staff bulletin, no. 21 [1963?] p. 10.
5. Andrew Gosling, "Asian collections at the National Library of Australia : forty years of history," in National Library of Australia News, vol. 3 (11), August 1993 pp.19-21  
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