

Confucian philosopher, faithful Rotarian

Percy Chu, the Rotarian behind the Bamboo Curtain

by Joaquín Mejía

The speaker's announcement seemed surrealistic. Rotary's 1994 Taipei convention emphasized the organization's roots and early achievements, but . . . were participants really about to meet the 1935 president of the Rotary Club of Shanghai?

Many Rotarians knew about the Chinese gentleman who, as the president of the Rotary club of Shanghai, had met Paul Harris in 1935, leaving an indelible impression of kindness and wisdom. For five decades, nobody outside China had heard from him. Apparently, one or another of the country's tumultuous commotions had swallowed him.

An awed silence gripped the audience at the huge Convention Center of Taipei when 97-year-old Percy Chu walked to the podium. "I come from China's mainland," he started, in impeccable English. "I was a member of the Rotary Club of Shanghai. The Shanghai club was organized under the charter of Rotary International dated October 1st, 1919. I only know from yesterday that the Shanghai Club was not the first in Asia, really it was the second, a few months after Manila."

The Cultural Revolution reached its chaotic climax in China during the late 1960s. Angry mobs of zealots crisscrossed the country, noisily proclaiming their adherence to Maoist principles. Not content to chant slogans ad nauseam, the crowds were also eager to exercise their violent and summary brand of justice.

The city of Shanghai was a seat of extremist Cultural Revolution thinking and unmitigated chaos. It was here, in 1967, that for the first time the Red Guards overthrew a provincial committee of the Communist Party, accusing its members of "bourgeois leanings." Shanghai, China's main Pacific port, was also the birthplace of some of the first Mao-inspired revolutionary committees.

In one of the city's huge industrial compounds, an elderly but vigorous man was in charge of sweeping a large area. He displayed the courteous, genteel manners of prerevolutionary days, and was fond of using an English first name he had chosen for himself.

Percy's assigned area in the industrial compound was always immaculate, but the factory's Maoist zealots threatened to give him a "test of adherence": a gruesome experience that included a public inquisition by "people's representatives." Slaps on the face were the customary response for unsatisfactory answers. Much rougher physical punishment often followed. Fortunately, Percy's test never took place.

Percy thinks he was spared because of his usefulness to high-level Party cadres, who often sought his advice on complex matters of international trade and banking. Some of these consultations, Percy recalls, took place while he swept an imaginary speck of dust on the floor. As he offered suggestions on how to proceed in an intricate international banking operation, the Party officials took careful notes.

Born to a prominent Shanghai family in 1897, in the twilight of China's final dynasty, Percy Chu became one of China's top financial experts while still a young man.

In the 1920s and 1930s, he displayed his remarkable intelligence and expertise in key positions in banking and import-export operations. But deeper in his heart than his Western education (Percy graduated from New York's Columbia University in 1919) lived the Confucian gentleman, with the ability to meditate philosophically in times of political violence and social disintegration, always aiming at the restoration of order and harmony in the world. Percy attributes his resilience and his very survival to the basic teachings of Confucianism.

"Throughout my life, I was simply loyal to my true nature," explains Percy. "When you despair and give up, life loses its meaning. However, if you firmly believe that everything and everyone is perfectible, you always have a reason to persevere in your fights."

Percy was forced to serve in different capacities under the nationalist government of the 1930s, the Japanese occupation administration lasting from 1937 to 1945, the nationalists again until 1949, and then under Chairman Mao's experiments in socialism. He went from being a director of the National City Bank to administrator of the city of Shanghai, and from head of a complex import-export operation to floor sweeper. In the intervals, four different regimes imprisoned him, for ideological reasons. Eventually, each regime came to appreciate Percy's moral stature and intellectual prowess.

1984-85: Rotary unveils its PolioPlus Program to immunize all the children of the world.

1985-86: Rotary's membership tops one million in February 1986. Jean Paul Moroval of Thionville, France, is chosen as the millionth member.

1986-87: Rotary abides by the U.S. Supreme Court decision and permits clubs in the U.S.A. to admit qualified women as members.

1987-88: Rotary dedicates its new World Headquarters building in downtown Evanston, Illinois, U.S.A. The PolioPlus Campaign exceeds expectations with more than \$220 million in contributions and pledges.

1984

1985

1986

1988

For decades after the proclamation of the People's Republic in 1949, the Rotary clubs of Taiwan could not maintain any links with the mainland. The 1948-chartered Rotary Club of Taipei, however, counted among its first members several former mainland Rotarians. Taiwan Rotarians never stopped thinking about other club members left behind and now forced to live under the new regime. Had most, or some, or any of them survived the civil war? Nobody knew for sure exactly what was going on behind the Bamboo Curtain. Like the medieval European legends about Prester John, the mythical Christian monarch, tales about informal meetings of the members of the vanished Rotary Club of Shanghai surfaced in Taipei for years. Wishful thinkers even added that they might still be carrying on some of their favorite service projects, which they probably discussed weekly, as they shared a meal.

The People's Republic became more flexible by the mid 1980s, and a modicum of indirect communication with Taiwan was gradually restored. In 1991, the announcement that Rotary International would hold its 1994 convention in Taipei galvanized the local clubs. In 1993, the Rotary Club of Taiwan decided to send an expedition to the mainland, to determine whether any of the members of the old Shanghai club or any other club were still alive.

The Taipei team included Club President Richard Shu and International Service Chairman Jackson Cheng. After lengthy inquiries, they made contact with Dr. C. T. Wang, a former member of the Rotary Club of Wusih, some 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of Shanghai. A distinguished mathematician and an expert in Chinese traditional literature, Dr. Wang had seen his Wusih club dissolve in 1937 as a result of the Sino-Japanese conflict. Dr. Wang was one of the legendary Rotarians behind the Bamboo Curtain. As legend had it for years, the pre-war Chinese Rotarians had maintained their links. And, yes, he kept in touch with Percy Chu.

In November 1993, a group of awed members of the Rotary Club of Taipei arranged a meeting at the Peace Hotel of Shanghai. The historical significance of the event was clear. Accompanied by his daughter (his only living immediate relative), a circumspect but smiling Percy Chu gravely nodded to the group, shook hands with each man, and calmly proceeded to answer the questions raining upon him. Yes, he had been retired for years, but still had his health. Yes,



RICHARD FRANCO

Confucian philosopher, man of principles, Rotarian: Percy Chu at the R.I. 1994 Convention in Taipei.

unfortunately, the Shanghai club records were destroyed. Yes, he was eager to come to Taipei and speak to the convention. And yes, he would look forward to greeting visitors in a newly chartered Rotary Club of Shanghai.

In 1935, as Paul Harris prepared to board the *President Coolidge* and leave China, Percy told the Rotary founder he would take good care of the Shanghai club. As a Confucian gentleman and as a Rotarian, he still considers himself very much bound by his word. ●

• Joaquín Mejía is an assistant editor of *THE ROTARIAN*.

1990-91: Rotary establishes its Preserve Planet Earth Program, with more than 2,000 Rotary clubs undertaking environmental projects.

1991-92: The Rotary Foundation of R.I. celebrates its 75th anniversary year of service.

1993-94: R.I. President Clifford L. Dochterman calls for relief for refugees fleeing the conflict in the former Yugoslav republics of Croatia and Bosnia; Rotarians respond with more than U.S. \$5 million in money and supplies.

1994-95: The Western Hemisphere is declared polio-free. Rotary celebrates its 90th anniversary; *THE ROTARIAN* publishes its 1,000th issue.

1990

1992

1994

1995