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A PIONEERING AND INSPIRING SPIRIT:

IN MEMORY OF KARL LO ¹

Jim Cheng

University of California, San Diego

After a short and brave fight with cancer, Karl Lo, retired Director of the IR/PS (International Relations and Pacific Studies) Library and East Asia Collection at the University of California, San Diego, passed away on February 21, 2007 in San Diego.

Karl's professional career was marked by distinction with a pioneering and inspiring spirit. In the field of East Asian librarianship, his broad interests in technologies and their application to information processing were the hallmarks of his approach to solving the problems of multilingual, multimedia information transfer and storage.

Karl was born on April 28, 1935, in Zhong Shan, Guangdong, China. He graduated from the secondary school of St. Paul's Co-educational College in Hong Kong. The school's emphasis on academic and moral excellence, lifelong learning, and respect for others surely encouraged the spirit of sharing and ability to think creatively and critically that Karl displayed so abundantly all his life. He later received his Bachelors degree in Chemistry from Chung Chi (崇基) College, one of the constituent colleges of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, in 1958. He earned his Masters degree in Library Service at Atlanta University in 1960. After briefly serving as a bibliographer, he became the head of the East Asia Library at the University of Kansas from 1959-1968. He later served as the head of the East Asia Library at the University of Washington from 1968-1990.

It was while at Washington that he started his pioneering work on the application of information technology to the transfer and storage of Chinese scripts and the conversion of different Romanization systems. As a self-taught computer programmer, between 1983-1985 he wrote a Pascal Program for the IBM PC system that could print dozens of Chinese characters, which was used for designing and printing many master copies of business cards before similar commercial products were available. During almost the same period (1984-1987), he wrote a multi-function Rbase program for the acquisition of CJK monographs that handled as many as 10,000 CJK records. He also worked with Academia Sinica on Chinese full-text databases from 1986-1987 and installed the first Chinese full-text database outside of Asia in Seattle in 1989.

As the Director of the IR/PS Library and East Asia Collection at UCSD from 1990 until his retirement in 2002, Karl did his most prolific work in the field of multilingual information processing. He promoted international technical and political cooperation to bring about shared information and materials among the libraries of the Pacific Rim. He made active forays to meet with key international players in US, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, Mexico, Canada, and South Korea and to bring these leaders to San Diego to bridge legal, technical and cultural gaps that were hindering the open sharing of digitized and non-digitized materials. This activity contributed a great deal to the establishment of the foundation of what is now taken for granted as part of global information sharing.

Karl was one of the founders of the Pacific Rim Digital Library Alliance, a highlight of the many "firsts" in his career as librarian. The PRDLA now has a membership of 31 academic libraries across the Pacific Rim

¹ My thanks to Phyllis Mirsky (retired Deputy University Librarian at the University of California, San Diego), Elise Chin (retired Acting Head of the East Asia Library at the University of Washington), and Reiney Adams (Administrative Assistant at the International Relations and Pacific Studies Library at the University of California, San Diego) for verifying the related dates and events, proofreading, and editing the article.

region. He won a competitive National Security Education Program grant in 1995 for developing a multilingual computer server to provide ready international access via the Internet to online information in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean scripts. Some of these materials utilized the resources of the San Diego Supercomputer Center. In 1990, he wrote a TurboBasic program to convert Chinese Romanization systems, which became an open online conversion tool: ROMAX <http://prl.sdsc.edu/romax/romax.html>. ROMAX can convert three kinds of Chinese Romanization systems: Pinyin, Wade Giles, and MPSII (Mandarin Phonetic Symbols II), and has been used by many institutions and librarians since its inception. He helped build the first CJK OPAC in the world at the UCSD Libraries in 1991. In 1993, he rewrote the TurboBasic program into C for OCLC-CJK Plus to be used internationally. In 1996, Karl was invited to the Australian National Library to help convert their Wade-Giles Romanization records into Pinyin.

His reputation for being a progressive leader in the field of East Asian librarianship made him Acting Chief of the Asian Division of the Library of Congress from March through September 2002.

He served as Chair of CEAL from 1985-1988, Chair of the CEAL Committee on Chinese Materials, Chair of the OCLC-CJK Users Group, Vice President of Chinese Historical Society (Seattle, WA), President of the Association of Librarians at the University of Washington, President of the Friends of the Kingsgate Library (Kirkland, WA), and Board Member of the San Diego Chinese Historical Society.

The honors and awards Karl received include: Fellow, Council on Library Resources, 1972; Minority Fellowship, Library Administrators Development Program VIII, University of Maryland, 1974; Extramural Advisor, Chinese, Japanese and Korean Task Force, RLG, 1980-1982; Honorary Professor, Northwest Normal University, Xian, China, 1982- ; Library Advisor, Chengdu University of Sciences and Technology, Chengdu, China, 1986- ; Consultant, Academia Sinica, Taipei, Taiwan, 1987- ; Director, East Asian Librarians Workshop (DOE grant project), in Seattle, July 1988; Director, International Relations Librarians Workshop (for librarians from China) in Seattle, 1991; Member, National Construction Seminar, Republic of China, 1992; Leader, Library Delegation to China, National Academy of Sciences, 1992; CALA/ALA (Chinese American Librarians Association/American Librarians Association) Distinguished Service Award in 1998;² and, member of the Board of Trustees of the Lingnan Foundation from 1994-2007, because of his earlier experience as a young student in Macau's Lingnan schools.

Right before Christmas 2006, Karl and I went out for our regular lunch gathering. We had this kind of gathering every once in a while after his retirement, driving together in his Mercedes SUV to the restaurant and eating Vietnamese soup noodle. He was vital, energetic, and inspiring as usual. He told me about his new project of establishing a web depository site called "Great Chinatown," which would collect all kinds of digital resources about overseas Chinese around the world, and a new Microsoft product that enables every one to build a web page. As he specifically pointed out, every librarian could have his or her own web page. I never thought that would be our last such gathering or that I would no longer benefit from these inspiring conversations with him.

We lost a friend, colleague, pioneer, mentor, and a dedicated librarian. However, Karl's vision, dedication, professional integrity, innovative and inspiring spirit, motivational talents, and, above all, disarming modesty, will forever be remembered.

² Sally Tseng, CALA Executive Director, provided the information about Karl as the recipient of the CALA/ALA Distinguished Service Award in 1998 in her email dated 2/27/2007.

Shared Memories

Upon reading the announcement of Karl's passing that I sent out through the EASTLIB and CALA email list servers, many people responded to this sad news and shared their feelings, memories and comments about Karl through emails. Following are excerpts from some of these emails:³

"..... You think that someone like Karl with his drive and joy of new ideas will go on forever. He was a very special person - one of the most fascinating and nice librarians I've had the opportunity to work with. You are correct - he is gone, but his contributions and accomplishments will be with us for a long, long time."

Charles Chamberlin
Deputy University Librarian
University of Washington Libraries 2/22/2007

"..... Karl and I worked together on the conversion of Australia's romanised cataloguing from Wade-Giles to Pinyin in the 1990s. He was the epitome of the professional librarian and it was a huge honor, and a delight, to work with him. He was amazing in his intellectual curiosity and in his ability to make strangers feel comfortable with him, and he personified the spirit of international co-operation in librarianship....."

Linda Groom
Curator of Pictures
National Library of Australia 2/22/2007

"..... I knew him less well than so many but was deeply impressed with his insightful involvement with the NCC both as an interim member of our Council during the year he was at LC and through his role on other NCC Committees and as an informal advisor. Karl possessed one of the greatest spirits/energies I have known in our field. He knew no boundaries and crossed over any that seemed to exist. I hope we will all try as best we can to follow his examples....."

Victoria Lyon Bestor
Executive Director
North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources 2/22/2007

"..... This is extremely sad. I didn't know he was ill. Karl made an enormous contribution not just to the library but to the whole intellectual life of the Asian studies community here at UCSD....."

Dick (Richard) Madsen
Chair, Sociology Department
University of California, San Diego 2/22/2007

"..... I have known him for 20 years and held him in the highest esteem. Few people in our field have his energy, intellect, and capacity for leadership and fresh ideas. He was always friendly and considerate. We have all lost a great friend and exemplar....."

Fred Brady
Marriott Library
University of Utah 2/23/2007

"..... Karl was so energetic and kept in such a good shape, it's hard to believe that the disease has taken him away. As you said in your message, among his other accomplishments, Karl left a legacy as a leader with a great vision for East Asian libraries in the field of technological applications. We will definitely miss him....."

Yuan Zhou, Curator
East Asian Library, University of Chicago 2/23/2007

³ Permission to publish these e-mails was received from the original authors.

“..... A very thoughtful obituary. I grieve with others, having personally known Karl since the late 1960s. ”
Frank Joseph Shulman
Bibliographer, Editor and Consultant for Reference Publications in Asian Studies 2/23/2007

“..... Certainly my image of him is as clear in my mind as when I first met him almost twenty years ago at the University of Washington, and although I hadn't seen him in the last year or so, he seemed just as vibrant as he did back then. I loved the twinkle in his eye and his quick mind. I appreciated the way he could make things happen and always looked at the broader picture - whether I agreed with him or not. Karl was always kind and supportive, and I remember thinking that particularly when I first became a librarian. He treated all of us with respect and enjoyed reaching out to exchange viewpoints. These days when I go to CEAL I always wonder who will be the next Karl Lo.

Who will lead the way to keep us ahead of the wave? While we can never replace him, certainly we should all strive to emulate the way he worked to remove barriers and break new ground in providing access to resources. In deep appreciation for all of Karl's contributions,”

Sharon Domier
East Asian Studies Librarian
University of Massachusetts, Amherst, W.E.B. Du Bois Library, East Asian Collection 2/23/2007

“..... I knew Carl slightly from 17 years ago and talked with him a few times at conferences and CALA programs. I had great respect for him and fond memories of him. He was such an energetic and lively person that I was quite shocked to learn his passing ... It is a great loss for the library community..... ”

Ying Xu
California State University, Los Angeles 2/23/2007

“..... Before the change in romanization systems from Wade-Giles to Pinyin, Karl developed an easier conversion system to help those of us who didn't know the Pinyin system well. He demonstrated during the CEAL Conference and answered many questions. His professional attitude and his enthusiastic assistance to many of us will be remembered always.....”

Jane Cheng
Senior Asian Catalog Librarian
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kenneth & Helen Spencer Art Reference Library 2/23/2007

“..... His vision and leadership inspired and encouraged likely a whole generation of East Asian librarians. I had the fortune to work with him in several occasions. His enthusiasm and passion for achieving the common good is infectious. I often wanted to be a better person in his presence. Karl was by no means about all work and no play. He was a lot of fun. He had many hobbies. One of them was good food. No mistake, he could tell where the best food in any given place. Somehow his charm could turn any cook into magic, especially when he started to talk to them in Cantonese. They would bring out these heavenly dishes you could not even find on the menu.....”

Cathy Chiu, Head,
Area Studies Department / Head, East Asian Library
Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara 2/22/2007

“..... It is indeed very sad news to hear of the passing of Karl Lo. I still can not believe that this has happened to our good friend, Karl Lo, a true library leader and pioneer in East Asian librarianship, because I have been in frequent contact with him after he left the Library of Congress in September 2002 after serving as the Acting Chief of the Asian Division for six months. I know for certain that Karl will be deeply missed by all his colleagues in the Library of Congress where he did a remarkable job in a short period of time.....”

Hwa-Wei Lee
Chief, Asian Division, Library of Congress
Dean Emeritus, Ohio University Libraries 2/24/2007

“Karl also sang with a rich beautiful voice.”

Mary Lin
CTS, General Library System
University of Wisconsin-Madison 2/24/2007

“This is indeed very very sad news, being that Karl is so young and he has worked so hard during his long career life, but passed away almost at the beginning of his retirement life..... He helped and touched so many people, especially friends in the library field.

Only last month at Seattle during the Mid-winter I had the first opportunity to visit the East Asian collection at the UW thanks to the invitation by Shen Zhijia. I have witnessed an excellent East Asian collection there and Zhijia has contributed the entire endeavor to Karl's initiative and leadership for building such an excellent and huge collection of East Asian materials..... I haven't seen Karl for many years, but he was a dear friend. I know we all will miss him.”

Harriet Yin
2/26/2007

“..... 今天是上班第一天，便得知Dr. Karl Lo 去世的噩耗，我感到无比的难过，我们大家都为失去这样一个杰出的馆长而痛心。与 Karl 相交很久，我深深地被他饱满的工作热情和不断进取的精神所打动。他在图书馆事业中所发挥的作用值得我们深深地赞叹，他不断进取的精神也时时激励我们不断进步。

Karl先生一直对超星数字图书馆的建设与发展给予了热情的支持与帮助，在他的帮助和建议之下，超星公司的产品在国外不断的完善。超星公司不断成长的过程中，凝聚了 Karl 先生全部的心血。我谨代表超星公司全体员工向 Karl 先生表示深深地感谢，并向其家人表示沉痛的哀悼。我们失去了一位朋友，同事、导师。故人已逝，其精神长存。Karl 先生为专业奉献的精神、诚信、创新精神、以及他谦虚的品格永远激励我们朝着他奋斗的方向努力.....”

史超 Shi Chao, Chairman
Superstar Digital Library 2/26/2007

“A view from the student side—

I was in my senior year at the University of Washington when Karl became the East Asia Librarian. I remember the warmth of his smile and the friendly look in his eyes with which he greeted us every day in the Library in the basement of Thomson Hall. He treated we students with respect and kindness. The friendship formed never diminished over the decades. What a great man he was!”

Mel Thatcher
2/27/2007

“..... I met Karl and another librarian in 1980 or 1981 at ALA annual conference during lunch break. After that, we met almost every year at the CEAL meetings. Of course I watched him to become a leader and mentor in the library field, especially in Asian librarianship. He will be missed by us all.”

Lena Yang
3/1/2007

“..... I am sorry to hear the sad news of Karl Lo's passing away from Eugene Wu. I retired from the National Central Library, Taipei. I knew Karl Lo more than 30 years. I plan to write a remembrance article of Mr. Lo for the news bulletin of the Library Association of the Republic of China (LAROC)..... “

Teresa Wang Chang
Former director of the Bureau of International Exchange of Publications
National Central Library 3/1/2007

"..... Your e-mail message on Karl's passing came to me as a total shock. What a tremendous loss to all of us! In 1964 I took a position at the University of Kansas working under Karl. He taught me from A through Z in East Asian Librarianship until I moved to Northwestern University in Illinois in 1967.

Karl had the respect and admiration of his colleagues and friends. His achievements and professional contributions should be an inspiration to us all. He will be greatly missed."

Bill Wong
Retired East Asian Librarian
University of California, Irvine 3/13/2007

"..... I hope you don't mind my writing you about Karl Lo, who was a very dear friend from our days together at Kansas. In the early 1960s Karl Lo built the KU East Asian collection from scratch. He had been a graduate student in Chemistry at KU, but made himself into an Asian Librarian. I was probably the most active of the faculty members in recommending, and (when in the field) purchasing books for that collection. Karl wrote the characters for the glossary and bibliography of my first book, *THE CHINESE IN PHILIPPINE LIFE*. Karl and I saw a great deal of one another and I greatly admired him. I supported his application for citizenship and stood as a witness when he was sworn in. Karl and Jenny became friends of my family....."

Edgar Wickberg
Emeritus Professor of
Modern Chinese History, UBC 4/3/2007

A Bibliography of Karl Lo's Publications⁴

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