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In Memoriam: Yong Kyu Choo, 1927-2015

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IN MEMORIAM

Yong Kyu Choo 1927-2015

Yong Kyu Choo, former Librarian for the Korean Collection at the East Asiatic (later “East Asian”) Library, University of California, Berkeley, passed away after a long illness, at his home in Lafayette, California, on November 25, 2015.

Yong Kyu Choo was born in Chongsŏng-gun, Hamgyŏng-pukto, in what is now North Korea, in April 24, 1927 and graduated from Kyŏngsin High School, in Seoul, in 1945. He received his bachelor’s (1952) and master’s (1955) degrees from the College of Law, Korea University. He subsequently taught English at Chemulp’o High School, Inch’ŏn-si, for eleven years. In 1963 he crossed the Pacific to pursue an advanced degree at his father’s alma mater, the University of Michigan, and eventually obtained a second master’s from Michigan’s Department of Library Science in 1964. His first professional position as a librarian was at Berkeley’s East Asiatic Library, where he would remain for more than three decades. He retired from the full-time position in June 1998, and retired altogether in June 2001.

Up to the mid-1960s, only the Library of Congress and Harvard University had Korean specialists on their staffs. Yong Kyu Choo’s arrival in Berkeley therefore marked a change in the direction of Korean studies in North America. Not only was he proficient in Chinese and Japanese as well as Korean, and in possession of a wealth of knowledge of all three countries and their respective cultures; he assumed his position at a time when research and teaching in Korean studies was expanding, both on campus and across the country. With his arrival, the Library accordingly initiated an ambitious and systematic expansion of its Korean language collection. One of Yong Kyu Choo’s outstanding accomplishments in this regard was the acquisition of approximately 2,300 rare and antiquarian volumes from antique dealers in Seoul during the 1960s, including 1,500 volumes of the Korean Tripitaka, *P’alman Taejanggyŏng* printed in the ’60s from blocks originally carved at Kanghwa Island in the thirteenth century and housed at Haeinsa since the late fourteenth century. Berkeley’s is one of only twelve sets reprinted, and the only set in North America.

In 1967–68, Yong Kyu Choo took leave from Berkeley for ten months to help the University of Hawaii build its Korean collection. (He returned in spite of Hawaii’s efforts to retain him.) With the creation of the Asian Branch of the Oakland Public Library, in the 1970s, he began to serve as a member of its Advisory Committee. In that capacity, he established the Korean section and for ten years provided instruction to staff on acquisitions and technical processing of Korean language materials.

As Head of the East Asian Library’s Technical Services unit, Yong Kyu Choo was engaged in the effort to develop automated solutions to cataloging problems in East Asian collections, even going to the length of studying computer science. As a leader in the profession, he was also involved in implementation of retrospective conversion of the catalog to machine-readable format, revision of Korean romanization and word division, and installation of bibliographical utilities such as RLIN and OCLC, and local systems like GLADIS and INNOPAC.

From 1989 to 1993, he served as Chair of the Subcommittee on Korean Materials within the Committee on East Asian Libraries. During his service, he played a critical role in establishing the Korean Collection Consortium of North America. The consortium represented the first systematic attempt at cooperative acquisitions on a nationwide basis. From an original membership of six university libraries, the Consortium now encompasses fourteen libraries and is widely considered a successful model for developing and sharing collections. During the 1990s, Yong Kyu Choo also sat on the Subcommittee on Technical Processing, the Research Library Group's Committee on East Asian Libraries, and the East Asian Academic Librarians of California's Committee on Collaborative Acquisitions.

In 1994, Yong Kyu Choo completed his *Union List of Korean Serials in East Asian Libraries in the United States* (Ann Arbor, 1994), which he had been working on over a period of ten years. The work included 1,575 titles and presented a comprehensive inventory of Korean serials issued since 1945. It was the first reference work devoted to Korean collections to be published in North America.

His death is a loss for all colleagues, but especially for junior librarians in the field of Korean studies in North America. Yong Kyu Choo was born during the Japanese colonial period, grew up during a time of hardship, and experienced the Korean War. And yet he was able to complete his education in Korea, further it in the United States, and lay a firm foundation for the future of Korean studies and Korean collections in North America. As a member of the succeeding generation of Korean studies librarians, I have benefitted from his work, as future generations of students and scholars will benefit. I have also been inspired by his dedication and accomplishments.

Jae Yong Chang, Librarian for the Korean Collection, C. V. Starr East Asian Library, University of California, Berkeley



Yong Kyu Choo at his desk in the East Asian Library (then in Durant Hall) in 1966.