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Eugene W. Wu

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A Tribute to John Yung-Hsiang Lai

Eugene W. Wu

John Lai and I met in 1960 in Taipei on my first trip to Taiwan. He was then the head of reader service at the National Taiwan University Library, and I was in Taipei for the Hoover Institution to microfilm the “Chen Cheng Collection,” an archive of some 1,500 documents of the Kiangsi Soviet Republic, 1931-1934. He had just returned to Taiwan the year before from the United States where he earned his MA degree in Library Science at the Peabody Library School, and was involved at that time in planning a library science department for the National Taiwan University. After the Department was established the following year, he was appointed assistant professor at the new department, then promoted to full professor in 1964, and became its chair in 1965. He held that position until 1972 when accepting an invitation from Harvard University to become the head of the newly established Cataloging Department of the Harvard-Yenching Library. He began the second phase of his career in the United States. He was appointed Associate Director of the Harvard-Yenching Library in 1978 and served in that capacity until his retirement in 1996. He served with great distinction at the Harvard-Yenching Library for a total of twenty-four years.

Mr. Lai, as we affectionately and respectfully called him, stands tall in the East Asian library community. He was born and raised in Taiwan and, like many of contemporaries, finished his college education in Japan, where he attended the Tokyo Imperial University. Prior to coming to Harvard, he was already an established library educator and an authority in cataloging and classification. He was best known for the 賴永祥中國圖書分類法 (based on the work by Liu Kuo-chun 劉國均 decades earlier), the standard classification system used by libraries in Taiwan and widely adopted for use by libraries in Hong Kong, Macau and Singapore). The classification system went through eight revisions by Mr. Lai, from 1964 to 2002, after which he generously donated the copyright to the National Library in Taipei. The National Library published a further revision in 2007 under a changed title: 中文圖書分類法, and the classification system remains the system of choice today at libraries in Taiwan. His appointment at the Harvard-Yenching Library was therefore a perfect fit.

For decades prior to the establishment of the Cataloging Department, cataloging in the Harvard-Yenching Library was carried out separately under the direction of the heads of the language sections, using the 漢和圖書分類法, commonly known as the Harvard-Yenching Classification System, devised by Dr. A. Kaiming Chiu 裘開明, the founding librarian of Harvard-Yenching Library. This arrangement worked well for many years, but with the expansion of the Library’s collection scope, resulting in the ever increasing volume and

variety of books and non-book material that were coming to the Library, a decision was made to bring all cataloging work into one independent office in order to provide more unity in practice and also to relieve the language section heads of their supervisory responsibilities over cataloging, so they could devote full time to collection development. But finding someone to head up this new department was much harder than making the decision. Having been a cataloger myself for almost a decade at the Hoover Institution, I knew it would require a person not only of superior technical skills, but also managerial ability, a good grounding in East Asian civilization, fluency in the major East Asian languages, as well as ability to communicate and inspire. It was a worldwide search, and we found in Mr. Lai the perfect candidate. However we were not at all sure he would be interested, for he was then at the summit of the field in Taiwan and leading a good and comfortable life there. So I made a special trip to Taiwan to sound him out. I briefed him on our plan for the new Cataloging Department and told him we would be honored to have him join us at this crucial moment in the development of the Harvard-Yenching Library. He was courteous but noncommittal, saying he would think about it, consult his family and then let me know. It was sometime later that we received the good news. I and my colleagues at the Harvard-Yenching Library were absolutely elated, and we made plans to welcome him and Mrs. Lai to Cambridge. They arrived in Boston on a bitterly cold day toward the end of January in 1972, and Mr. Lai began his tenure at the Library the following month.

With energy and a knack for organization, he hit the ground running. Being cordial and approachable and with a strong work ethic, he quickly earned the support and respect not only from those working under him, but also from his other colleagues in the Library. The Cataloging Department got off to a flying start and ushered in an important phase in the development of the Harvard-Yenching Library.

One of the first tasks he faced was the revision of the Harvard-Yenching Classification System. The system was quite adequate for pre-modern East Asian publications, but somewhat deficient for the modern period. Mr. Lai undertook to do the revision and completed the work shortly, bringing to bear his experience of revising his own classification scheme. These revisions were shared with other East Asian libraries using the Harvard Classification System at that time. In addition to his supervisory responsibilities over cataloging, Mr. Lai also took up the task of cataloging the Library's large collection of Bibles and Protestant missionaries' writings, and a catalog of this collection, comprising 786 items, was published in 1980 by G. K. Hall in Boston under the title: *Catalog of Protestant Missionaries' Works in Chinese*. Two years later, in 1982, a microfiche edition in 1,750 sheets comprising the content of the entire collection was issued by Inter Documentation Center (IDC) in Leiden, The Netherlands, thus making available this collection of unique materials for the study of the history of Christianity in China. Mr. Lai's interest in bibliographical research and publication also led him to another major accomplishment at the Harvard-

Yenching Library: the publication in 1985-86 of the Library's entire Chinese and Japanese catalogs in 72 volumes.

In the late 1930's, Dr. A. Kaiming Chiu had contracted with the Harvard-Yenching Index Press in Peking to have the Library's Chinese catalog printed in book form, and also to have individual cards printed for use by other East Asian libraries in the United States. The latter was 30 years before the concept of cooperative cataloging came into vogue among East Asian libraries during the 1970's. The first three volumes of the catalog were published by 1940, and the rest set in type. Several thousands of individual cards were also printed and distributed to other East Asian libraries for use. Following Pearl Harbor, however, the Japanese troops went about destroying everything in Peking having to do with the United States, and the Harvard-Yenching Index Press located at the Yenching University campus literally went up in flames, and with it, the types that had already been set for the remaining volumes of the catalog. Dr. Chiu's dream that the Library's Chinese catalog would be published in its entirety was never realized in his life time. In the early 1980's we finally made plans to have the Harvard-Yenching Library's Chinese and Japanese card catalogs published through photo-duplication (The Library's Korean catalog had already been published earlier). Put in charge of the project, Mr. Lai did all the preparatory work, including reviewing a very large portion of the catalog cards as well as adding a number of "see also" reference entries, and worked closely with G. K. Hall, the publisher, from start to finish. The 72-volume Chinese and Japanese book catalog, dedicated to the memory of Dr. Chiu, not only brought his dream to realization, it also stands as a testimony to Mr. Lai's achievement.

Library automation came to East Asian libraries in the 1980's. While moving gradually into an automated mode of operation, East Asian libraries had to grapple with the problem of how to integrate the manual catalog. We at the Harvard-Yenching Library explored the possibility of converting our card catalogs into machine-readable form, but found the cost prohibitive. Subsequently a \$1.5 million grant from Harvard-Yenching Institute and a matching grant from Harvard University allowed us to contract out the conversion work to OCLC, a project which Mr. Lai oversaw. The retrospective conversion began in 1993 and was completed in 2000, four years after Mr. Lai retired. The total number of cards converted was some 360,000, the single largest database contributed to OCLC's WorldCat at that time, undeniably a boon to the copy cataloging work of other East Asian libraries.

No tribute to Mr. Lai would be complete without mentioning his religious faith. Born into a Christian family, he has been a devout Christian all his life. It's safe to assume that all the personal qualities he possesses are rooted in his Christian belief. Daisy Hu, a former colleague at the Harvard-Yenching Library, describes these qualities, quoting Confucius, as 溫良恭謙讓 ("gentle, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous"). This explains why Mr.

Lai is liked and respected so much by his library colleagues and friends. His Christian faith also led him to write profusely about the history of Christianity in Taiwan, particularly the Presbyterian Church in which he has served as an elder both in Taiwan and the United States. He also wrote a great deal of the history of Taiwan and is regarded as a leader in that field. There is a wealth of information about him on the internet. Two of the most informative sites are 賴永祥教授的學術生涯 (<http://www.laijohn.com/life/Ng.IC%27view.htm>) and 賴永祥長老史料庫 (<http://www.laijohn.com>).

As Mr. Lai is considering whether to return to live in Taiwan, I would like to pay this tribute to him that he richly deserves. I would also like to add a personal word: "Thank you, Mr. Lai, for your years of dedicated service at the Harvard-Yenching Library. Because of you, Harvard-Yenching became an even better library."

August 2017