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In Memoriam: John T. Ma

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IN MEMORIAM

John T. Ma

Mr. John T. Ma 马大任, one of the earlier pioneers in East Asian librarianship in North America, passed away on April 9, 2021, in Alameda, California. He was asleep at home, surrounded by his beloved family. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a virtual celebration of Ma’s life was held in place of a public memorial service.

Ma was born in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, China on February 22, 1920. He was the second son of the well-known calligrapher Ma Gung-Yu 马公愚 and his wife, Huang Xiang-Zhuan 黄香篆. He led a long, challenging, varied, and rich life that stretched from the early Republican Period in China to his professional career as a librarian in the U.S.

In 1938, Ma interrupted his high school education for a year and joined the First Army War Area Service Corps (第一军随军服务团) led by General Hu Zongnan 胡宗南 (1896–1962). In 1941, while pursuing his B.A. degree in Foreign Language and Literature (graduated in 1944) at National Central University 国立中央大学 in Chongqing, he volunteered to serve as an interpreter/code man for General Claire Lee Chennault (1893–1958), a World War II leader of the famed Flying Tigers in China. Ma left China in the summer of 1947.

During the next ten years, he subsequently acquired advanced degrees from University of Wisconsin (M.A. in Journalism, 1948) and Columbia University (Certified Candidate for Ph.D. in International Relations and Law, 1948–56; and M.S. in Library Science, 1958).

Ma was genuinely respected by his peers in the community of East Asian libraries and librarians. His career as a librarian of Chinese Studies spanned over thirty-seven years from 1956 until his retirement in 1992, and he served at the following institutions: Missionary Research Library, Columbia University (Associate Librarian, 1956–61); Cornell University Libraries (Chinese Bibliographer/Cataloger, 1961–65); East Asian Collection, Hoover Institute, Stanford University (Curator, 1965–74); Sinologisch Instituut, University of Leiden (Librarian, 1976–85), and Oriental Division, New York Public Library (Chinese Studies Librarian, 1986–92). During this period, Ma was invited numerous times to serve in different capacities as consultant, advisor, and visiting professor in libraries and organizations in the U.S., Taiwan, and China. He contributed his expertise to help develop the modernization of libraries and enhance collection development for various libraries and institutes.

In 1981, Ma, then a librarian at the Sinologisch Instituut, convened a workshop on sinological libraries and library work in Leiden. This successful gathering of sinological
librarians from various European countries led to the founding of the European Association of Sinological Librarians (EASL), and Ma was elected first chairman of the association.¹

A prolific writer, Ma published articles and books in both Chinese and English. Some of his books include: *East Asia: A Survey of Holdings at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace* (1971); *The Economic Condition of Chinese Americans* (1980); 西歐中文圖書館調查報告 = *Chinese Collections in Western Europe* (1985); 边疆与民族 : 历史断面研究 (1993); and *Wo de zi zhuan 我的自传 = My Autobiography* (2017).

Ma remained remarkably active after retirement. In addition to his many dedicated professional achievements and contributions in the field of East Asian librarianship, in 2004, Ma initiated a project which would collect books in North America and donate them to university libraries in China. The project immediately received enthusiastic support, and a “Book-for-China Fund 赠书中国计划”² was established. Ma committed himself to this project tirelessly and persistently for more than a decade; and, against all odds, shipped over 400,000 volumes of books to libraries in need in China. With this monumental endeavor at his late age, Ma was able to, again, enrich the lives of many people he didn’t know and inspire many of his colleagues!

Submitted by Liu Wen-ling

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*Photo of Mr. John T. Ma*
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