YUEN REN CHAO

Yuen Ren Chao was born in Tianjin, China, on November 3, 1892. He died on February 24, 1982. His was a long, charmed life—brimming with joys and achievements.

He had a classical Chinese education at home, while the household moved around north China according to the requirements of the grandfather's job. His love of language came early—in large part, no doubt, because of his linguistic talents. In his linguistic autobiography, he recounts how, at age four, he already 'spoke an impure form of Peking Mandarin and a pure form of the Changshu dialect, and read only with the pronunciation of Changchow, Kiangsu'.

His considerable ability was recognized early. In 1910 a national scholarship sent him to study in America. After degrees from Cornell and Harvard, he taught at the best campuses: Qinghua, Harvard, and (from 1947) at the University of California, Berkeley. His distinguished career won him the highest honors. He was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was elected President of the Linguistic Society of America (1945) and the American Oriental Society (1960), and was awarded honorary degrees by Princeton (1946), Berkeley (1962), and Ohio State University (1970). In June, 1981, Beijing University appointed him Honorary Professor; this final accolade must have pleased him especially, coming from the city of his youth.

As a child, he received the gift of music from his parents. His mother sang *kun qu*, and his father taught him to play the Chinese flute. From this early start, he went on to write many dozens of musical compositions, including some pieces that whole generations of Chinese have sung and loved. This dual talent for language and music has been passed on to his daughter, Professor Iris Pian, who teaches both subjects at Harvard.

Life at home was a happy one. His marriage of some 60 years, to Dr. Buwei Yang, was a remarkable balance of complementary characteristics—her mercurial outgoingness with his quiet humor. They provided a warm social nucleus for their own extensive family, and for an international circle of friends and students. There was, of course, a secret to this long successful marriage. As Chao would explain, it is critical that an understanding be reached at the very outset: the man would make the major decisions in the family, while the woman would make the numerous minor ones. In their many decades together, he would add with a twinkle, there had never been any major decision to be made.

Chao had an incessantly active mind that produced pioneering work in many different directions. Scanning his long bibliography, as collected by Anwar Dil in *Aspects of Chinese sociolinguistics: Essays by Yuen Ren Chao* (Stanford, 1976), one is immediately struck by the extraordinary range of the man's interests. In 1915, he wrote on wireless telegraphy and the discovery of Neptune; in 1919 he published a note on continuous mathematical induction; in 1922, his much admired translation of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* appeared; in 1928, the Chinese government officially adopted his scheme for romanizing Chinese (Gwoyeu Romatzyh), which ingeniously spells the four tones with

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consonants and vowels, and hence uses no diacritics; in 1936, he published a booklet for the Chinese Ministry of Education on 'What a radio broadcaster should know'; and on and on. Intermingled with these are numerous scholarly contributions to linguistic and musical theory. Enough intellectual bounty to satisfy a dozen lesser men!

More than anyone else, Chao laid the foundation of linguistics in China. His monograph, *Studies in the modern Wu dialects* (1928), is the first detailed phonetic report on an important speech area of central China. In addition to the many reports which he wrote himself, he was primarily responsible for the basic design of dialect surveys which were to guide teams of investigators and cover large regions of China. He was interested in the Chinese language in all its aspects, from its dialects to its writing systems, its history and its ontogeny, the structure of its lexicon, and its relation to logic and other symbolic systems.

Chao was a leading scholar of structural linguistics. His article on the non-uniqueness of phonemic solutions of phonetic systems is a classic within that perspective, and was one of the most influential papers on theoretical phonology for many decades. The Chinese syllable, because of its isolability and symmetric structure, is an excellent site for understanding the principles of phonemics. In that 1934 paper, the intricate relations between the nuclear vowel and its neighboring glides and consonants were clearly revealed for the first time. An elegant vertical system of three vowels was extracted from a dozen or so phonetic qualities.

His study of the distinctions within Ancient Chinese (1941) is really an extension of the same theoretical considerations to the diachronic aspects of the Chinese syllable, showing especially the constraints that the phonological context exercises over the medial glide. But here, as in most aspects of his scholarship, he had a broad vision. Even though he helped to found structural phonemics, he was among the first to understand the deeper implications of distinctive features; his comments on this theory (in *Romance Philology* 1954) are still very cogent.
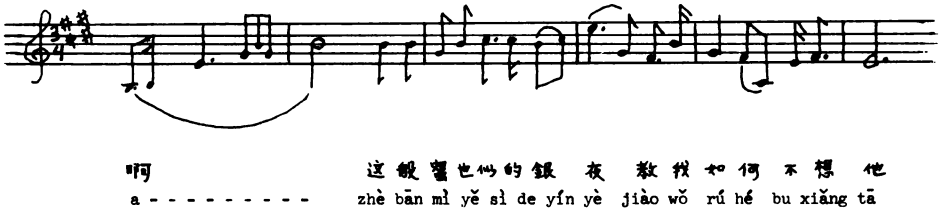
1968, an especially prolific year, saw the publication of four books, including *Language and symbolic systems* (Cambridge University Press) and *A grammar of spoken Chinese* (University of California Press). The former work deals with linguistics at large from Chao's unique interdisciplinary vantage point. It is probably the first general book by a linguist that includes intelligent discussions of such language technology topics as speech synthesis and machine translation, as well as the usual coverage of descriptive and historical linguistics. The book has reached a much wider audience than most linguistic essays (thanks in part to a warm review in *Scientific American*), and has been translated into several languages.

The *Grammar of spoken Chinese* is monumental in scope—some 800 pages of detailed description and careful analysis. It has deservedly been called 'structural linguistics at its best' (K. Chang, *Journal of Chinese Linguistics* 10.387, 1982). It is as good a reference grammar as can be found for any language, and as such will surely remain useful for years to come. Chao wrote his grammar in English, in order to reach an international readership; and now it has been

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twice translated into Chinese, for the people whose language he was describing. One translation is by the director of the Institute of Linguistics in Beijing; the other is by the director of the Institute of History and Philology in Taibei—an accidental commentary on the political reality of China today, to be sure. But, at the same time, there is no finer way of showing the affection and esteem that the field of Chinese linguistics holds for the man and his contributions.

His ashes were deposited in the Pacific ocean, according to his wishes—a fitting resting place for a man who claimed both worlds, and gave so much to each. When I was a schoolboy in China, one of my best-loved songs was one composed by Chao. Though I did not have the privilege of meeting him until a decade or so later, his friendship over many years (especially as a colleague at Berkeley) has deeply enriched my life, as it has countless others. One line of his melody is reproduced below. The song is entitled *Jiào wǒ rú hé bu xiǎng tā* 'How can I not miss him?'[1]



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[1] [For help in presenting this musical example, the Editor of *Language* is grateful to Mr. Tsun Y. Lui and Mr. Peng Chen, both of UCLA.]

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