

## Percy Chu (朱博泉)

### the Shanghai Rotarian behind the Bamboo Curtain

By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian) 1 September 2014

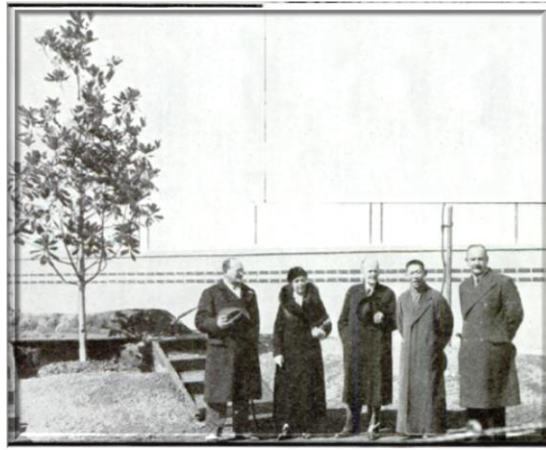
*Assistant Sergeant-at-Arms, Rotary International Convention 1994 Taipei*



Rotary held its 85th International Convention in Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China (中華民國臺北), from 12 to 15 June 1994. In addition to the 11,000-plus local Rotarians, the Convention Committee host, fed, befriend, entertained, transported, instructed, and safely delivered back to their homes an international group of 20,000 visitors.

One of the most heartwarming episodes of the entire Convention was provided by the ceremonies highlighting “Rotary’s 75 Years of Service in Asia”. As Rotary International Past President Rajendra K. Saboo (薩寶), of India, concluded a review of the organization’s decades of work in Asia, an elderly, fragile but still vigorous Chinese gentleman walked across the stage, waved, and greeted the audience. His dark sharp eyes locked on the Rotary gear-wheel emblem for a moment, before proceeding to carefully scrutinize the plenary hall. He then gave his Chinese as well as English-language name, stopped for a few seconds, and using a clear and resounding voice, proceeded to declare in impeccable English: “I am now 97 years of age. I have been a Rotarian since 1926, and I was a member and a past president of the former Rotary Club of Shanghai, in China. I have continued to consider myself a Rotarian for all these years. I will remain a Rotarian for the rest of my life.”

The amazing story of Percy Chu (朱博泉), who greeted Rotary founder Paul P. Harris in Shanghai (上海) in February 1935 when the 30th birthday of Rotary was celebrated, survived the Cultural Revolution (無產階級文化大革命) of the 1967-1977, and kept the ideal of *Service Above Self* alive in his Shanghai home, brought the audience to their feet. For a long while, after Percy Chu concluded his presentation, no one dared break the silence that descended on the hall. When an explosive ovation finally broke among those present.



*February 1935 in Shanghai -- Group photo after the Friendship Tree Planting by Paul Harris  
(L-R) Harry Edward Arnhold, Chairman of the Shanghai Municipal Council; Mrs. Jean T. Harris;  
Rotary's Founder Paul P. Harris; Percy Chu (Shanghai Rotary Club President 1934-1935); Ernest F. Harris  
(R.I. Honorary Special Commissioner to China 1933-1935; Shanghai Rotary Club President 1932-1933)*

Excerpt below was the recording of the scene and Percy Chu's full speech:

**Chairman Rajendra K. Saboo:** This is the legacy of our past. It is also the torch we carry into the '90s and beyond. What a prospect the future holds for all of us! In fact, we can think of better tie between the past and the future than the gentleman whom we welcome next. He is past president of the Shanghai Rotary Club, and he is equally a link to tomorrow because one day, perhaps, Rotary will return to Shanghai. Ladies and gentlemen, please acknowledge the president of the Shanghai Rotary Club in 1934-35, a great man of 97 years, Percy Chu! *(Applause)*

**Percy Chu:** I came from China mainland—the great city of Shanghai. I was a member of the Rotary Club of Shanghai. The Shanghai Club was organized under the charter of Rotary International dated October 1st, 1919. I only know from yesterday that the Shanghai Club was not the first in Asia, really it was the second, a few months after Manila. *(Applause)* I was elected a member of the Rotary Club of Shanghai in 1926 and in 1934-35 I was elected as the president of the Rotary Club of Shanghai. During my presidency, I had a unique honor to have welcomed Paul Harris, the Founder of Rotary, when he visited Shanghai in February 1935, together with Bill Hill, President of Rotary International. Their first visit was to Shanghai and the next stay was Manila. *(Applause)* Perhaps I am the only living one who had met Paul Harris in China. *(Applause)* Coincidentally, 1935 was the 30th anniversary of the birth of the first Rotary club in the world in 1905. I took the opportunity to honor Paul Harris together with the celebration of the 30th anniversary. I gave him a reception and a dinner. During the dinner, he made a speech. I remember the subject was strength and principles of Rotary---its future, its past and its tomorrow. It was a very impressive address and beneficial to the members. I like Rotary because it promotes acquaintance, good fellowship and lastly, education. Especially I love Rotary because it makes no political, religious or racial distinctions. I shall be a Rotarian, I think, for the rest of my life. Thank you! *(Applause)*

**Chairman Rajendra K. Saboo:** Thank you, Percy! The Rotary world salutes you. By your appearance here today, you have shown the power and the spirit of Rotary – at the age of those great 97 years, you can walk upright and straight. Yes, I salute you, because you are the president in 1934, the year I was born! *(Laughter)*



*At the end of the Session 《75 Years of Rotary in Asia》, joining hands with children and symbolically uniting Rotary generations: Percy Chu (2nd right) and Past R.I. President Rajendra K. Saboo (4th right).*



*Percy Chu viewed the exhibit of 《75 Years of Rotary in Asia》 in the 1994 Taipei Convention House of Friendship. On the wall was the Shanghai Rotary Club's 《扶輪社道德信條》 Chinese version of 《The Rotary Code of Ethics 1915》 --- for businessmen of all lines.*



*June 1994 – The Rotary Club of Taipei (臺北扶輪社) was the host to arrange Percy Chu (center) to be invited by the 1994 Rotary International Convention as a special speaker. In addition, Percy was named a Paul Harris Fellow by the Club.*



*June 1994 – Percy Chu (center) was greeted by Gary C. K. Huang (黃其光) (left) (Rotary International District 345 Governor 1986-1987) at the 1994 Rotary International Convention held in Taipei.*

After the Plenary Session, staff writer Joaquin Mejia interviewed Percy Chu, and wrote a report 《Confucian philosopher, faithful Rotarian – Percy Chu, the Rotarian behind the Bamboo Curtain》 published on the February 1995 Issue of 《The Rotarian》 magazine (*Read the full text on Pages 7-8*).

## About Percy Chu

Percy Chu (1898-2001) first joined Shanghai Rotary Club (上海扶輪社) on 24 August 1926 with “Classification: Finance – Reserve Banking” when he was the manager of the Joint Reserve Board, Shanghai Bankers’ Association (上海銀行業同業公會聯合準備會). He was elected a director of the Rotary Club in 1928, then served as the Club’s treasurer in 1928-1933. In 1934-1935, Chu served the Club as President. The next year on 13-15 April 1936, Chu served as Chairman of the Conference Committee, the 81st District of Rotary International---the first ever Rotary district conference in the Rotary China History---which was held in the Shanghai International Settlement, the Republic of China (中華民國上海公共租界).

Chu served as the President of the Rotary Club of Shanghai at the age of 36. He became the youngest Club President in the then Rotary China History. Under his able leadership, Chu fully promoted the Rotary Club to carry out the 4 Avenues of Services. By holding weekly gatherings and charity speeches, he organized extensive public welfare services (mainly in three aspects: children support, refugee relief, and medical assistance), such as regular visits to schools for blind children; organized outdoor parties and outings for blind children; improved the recreation facilities and kitchen for schools for the blind; provided trachoma prevention knowledge and medicines; provided funds for hospitals and relief organizations; provided food and shelter for thousands of refugees, and distributed gifts to 2,700 refugee children at Christmas. The Rotary Club built a platform to enhance personal friendship, accumulate contacts, improve personal cultivation, and promote career development. Shanghai Rotary Club provided a good opportunity, through dinners, speeches, cultural and entertainment activities, and mutual assistance among members, it also effectively facilitated the exchange and development of the Chinese and the foreign charity and public welfare undertakings, and won international reputation for the Rotary Club and its business elite members.



Percy Chu, son of a banker, was born into a business family. Chu was educated at a western-style middle school in Shanghai and attended the University of Shanghai (滬江大學), then a Baptist college. In 1920, he left for the United States and attended Columbia University, studying banking as part of an economics course; but he stayed on campus for only a year because his father insisted Percy gained practical experience in the trade by interning at Citibank’s New York City headquarters. At age

24, he was appointed deputy manager of Chekiang Industrial Bank's (浙江實業銀行) foreign exchange department and its U.S. business representative. By 1928, at the young age of 30, he was named general manager of the Central Bank (中央銀行總稽核及業務局總經理).

Outside of the office, Chu's accumulation of titles, positions and duties was as never-ending and impressive as those he gained at work. He was Deputy Chief of the Shanghai Foreign Trade of Commerce & Industrial Union, Senior Consultant of the Shanghai Trade Union, President of the Shanghai Bankers Professional Association (上海銀行業同業公會) and President of the Rotary Club of Shanghai.

But it was Chu's integration of western financial methods into Shanghai's financial system for which he was most venerated. In 1933, Chu founded the Shanghai Clearing House (上海票據交換所), the first clearing house in the Far East. Having found the clearing and settlement system among local banks inefficient, Chu borrowed from the western model and coordinated among local banks to set up a communal fund reserve and clearing house. The Shanghai Clearing House was a symbol of the modernization of China's financial practices.

Chu was also inspired by the American system of higher education. With the support of another Shanghai Rotarian, President Herman Liu (劉湛恩) of the University of Shanghai, Chu co-founded the business school of the University of Shanghai in 1932. The school ran China's first successful evening college program that allowed financially underprivileged students to participate in work study programs in order to finance their studies. He also served as the School Dean (滬江大學商學院院長).



*A family photo taken on 8 October 1943 -- Mr. & Mrs. Percy Chu and 14 children*

# Confucian philosopher, faithful Rotarian

*Percy Chu, the Rotarian  
behind the Bamboo Curtain*

by Joaquín Mejía

The speaker's announcement seemed surrealistic. Rotary's 1994 Taipei convention emphasized the organization's roots and early achievements, but . . . were participants really about to meet the 1935 president of the Rotary Club of Shanghai?

Many Rotarians knew about the Chinese gentleman who, as the president of the Rotary club of Shanghai, had met Paul Harris in 1935, leaving an indelible impression of kindness and wisdom. For five decades, nobody outside China had heard from him. Apparently, one or another of the country's tumultuous commotions had swallowed him.

An awed silence gripped the audience at the huge Convention Center of Taipei when 97-year-old Percy Chu walked to the podium. "I come from China's mainland," he started, in impeccable English. "I was a member of the Rotary Club of Shanghai. The Shanghai club was organized under the charter of Rotary International dated October 1st, 1919. I only know from yesterday that the Shanghai Club was not the first in Asia, really it was the second, a few months after Manila."

The Cultural Revolution reached its chaotic climax in China during the late 1960s. Angry mobs of zealots crisscrossed the country, noisily proclaiming their adherence to Maoist principles. Not content to chant slogans ad nauseam, the crowds were also eager to exercise their violent and summary brand of justice.

The city of Shanghai was a seat of extremist Cultural Revolution thinking and unmitigated chaos. It was here, in 1967, that for the first time the Red Guards overthrew a provincial committee of the Communist Party, accusing its members of "bourgeois leanings." Shanghai, China's main Pacific port, was also the birthplace of some of the first Mao-inspired revolutionary committees.

In one of the city's huge industrial compounds, an elderly but vigorous man was in charge of sweeping a large area. He displayed the courteous, genteel manners of prerevolutionary days, and was fond of using an English first name he had chosen for himself.

Percy's assigned area in the industrial compound was always immaculate, but the factory's Maoist zealots threatened to give him a "test of adherence": a gruesome experience that included a public inquisition by "people's representatives." Slaps on the face were the customary response for unsatisfactory answers. Much rougher physical punishment often followed. Fortunately, Percy's test never took place.

Percy thinks he was spared because of his usefulness to high-level Party cadres, who often sought his advice on complex matters of international trade and banking. Some of these consultations, Percy recalls, took place while he swept an imaginary speck of dust on the floor. As he offered suggestions on how to proceed in an intricate international banking operation, the Party officials took careful notes.

Born to a prominent Shanghai family in 1897, in the twilight of China's final dynasty, Percy Chu became one of China's top financial experts while still a young man.

In the 1920s and 1930s, he displayed his remarkable intelligence and expertise in key positions in banking and import-export operations. But deeper in his heart than his Western education (Percy graduated from New York's Columbia University in 1919) lived the Confucian gentleman, with the ability to meditate philosophically in times of political violence and social disintegration, always aiming at the restoration of order and harmony in the world. Percy attributes his resilience and his very survival to the basic teachings of Confucianism.

"Throughout my life, I was simply loyal to my true nature," explains Percy. "When you despair and give up, life loses its meaning. However, if you firmly believe that everything and everyone is perfectible, you always have a reason to persevere in your fights."

Percy was forced to serve in different capacities under the nationalist government of the 1930s, the Japanese occupation administration lasting from 1937 to 1945, the nationalists again until 1949, and then under Chairman Mao's experiments in socialism. He went from being a director of the National City Bank to administrator of the city of Shanghai, and from head of a complex import-export operation to floor sweeper. In the intervals, four different regimes imprisoned him, for ideological reasons. Eventually, each regime came to appreciate Percy's moral stature and intellectual prowess.



For decades after the proclamation of the People's Republic in 1949, the Rotary clubs of Taiwan could not maintain any links with the mainland. The 1948-chartered Rotary Club of Taipei, however, counted among its first members several former mainland Rotarians. Taiwan Rotarians never stopped thinking about other club members left behind and now forced to live under the new regime. Had most, or some, or any of them survived the civil war? Nobody knew for sure exactly what was going on behind the Bamboo Curtain. Like the medieval European legends about Prester John, the mythical Christian monarch, tales about informal meetings of the members of the vanished Rotary Club of Shanghai surfaced in Taipei for years. Wishful thinkers even added that they might still be carrying on some of their favorite service projects, which they probably discussed weekly, as they shared a meal.

The People's Republic became more flexible by the mid 1980s, and a modicum of indirect communication with Taiwan was gradually restored. In 1991, the announcement that Rotary International would hold its 1994 convention in Taipei galvanized the local clubs. In 1993, the Rotary Club of Taiwan decided to send an expedition to the mainland, to determine whether any of the members of the old Shanghai club or any other club were still alive.

The Taipei team included Club President Richard Shu and International Service Chairman Jackson Cheng. After lengthy inquiries, they made contact with Dr. C. T. Wang, a former member of the Rotary Club of Wusih, some 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of Shanghai. A distinguished mathematician and an expert in Chinese traditional literature, Dr. Wang had seen his Wusih club dissolve in 1937 as a result of the Sino-Japanese conflict. Dr. Wang was one of the legendary Rotarians behind the Bamboo Curtain. As legend had it for years, the pre-war Chinese Rotarians had maintained their links. And, yes, he kept in touch with Percy Chu.

In November 1993, a group of awed members of the Rotary Club of Taipei arranged a meeting at the Peace Hotel of Shanghai. The historical significance of the event was clear. Accompanied by his daughter (his only living immediate relative), a circumspect but smiling Percy Chu gravely nodded to the group, shook hands with each man, and calmly proceeded to answer the questions raining upon him. Yes, he had been retired for years, but still had his health. Yes,



RICHARD FRANCO

*Confucian philosopher, man of principles, Rotarian: Percy Chu at the R.I. 1994 Convention in Taipei.*

unfortunately, the Shanghai club records were destroyed. Yes, he was eager to come to Taipei and speak to the convention. And yes, he would look forward to greeting visitors in a newly chartered Rotary Club of Shanghai.

In 1935, as Paul Harris prepared to board the *President Coolidge* and leave China, Percy told the Rotary founder he would take good care of the Shanghai club. As a Confucian gentleman and as a Rotarian, he still considers himself very much bound by his word. ☸

• Joaquín Mejía is an assistant editor of *THE ROTARIAN*.





*September 1994 – Percy Chu (far right), was reunited with “Paul Harris” (Past District Governor Jim Young) during his appearance at the USCB Zones 1 & 7 Institute in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. With them was R.I. President-Elect Herbert A. Brown (center).*

Rotarians at the September 1994 USCB Zones 1 & 7 Institute in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A., were thrilled to shake hands with 97-year-old Percy Chu, the past president of the former Rotary Club of Shanghai, China, whom Rotary founder Paul P. Harris visited in 1935. Percy stole the show just as he did at the 1994 Taipei Convention.

“He speaks brilliantly without notes, reads without glasses, and goes up and down the stairs unaided,” noted R.I. Director C. Grant Wilkins of Englewood, Colorado, U.S.A. The highlight of the event, Grant said, came when Percy met “Paul Harris” (Jim Young, past governor of R.I. District 5320 in California, U.S.A.). “We coached Percy to act surprised ... however, [he] showed such genuine emotion that we wondered if Percy thought he was really seeing Paul Harris again.”

Grant said a quick wink by Percy eased their worries. “He was just enjoying his duties as club president once again.”

Afterwards, Percy told his fellow Rotarians, “I aspire to live all way to the 21st Century. I want to live in three different centuries, or even a bit more.”

(USCB = U.S.A., Canada, Bermuda, and Puerto Rico)