

Champion of Chinese Culture

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By Yu Ling



A cartoon done by Jack Chen in 1956. The words on top: "Egyptian Treasure Section, the British Museum." The Dialogue: "A pity the Canal can't be moved. Otherwise, it'll save us a lot of trouble."



Out of the oppressions and exploitations of militarism and imperialism is born the revolt of China's masses.

A cartoon by 19-year-old Jack Chen for the April 5, 1927, issue of the English-language People's Tribune Published in Wuhan. Chen was China's first editorial cartoonist.

By Yu Ling

JACK Chen, a man of high intellectual calibre, died a year ago today in Berkeley, California.

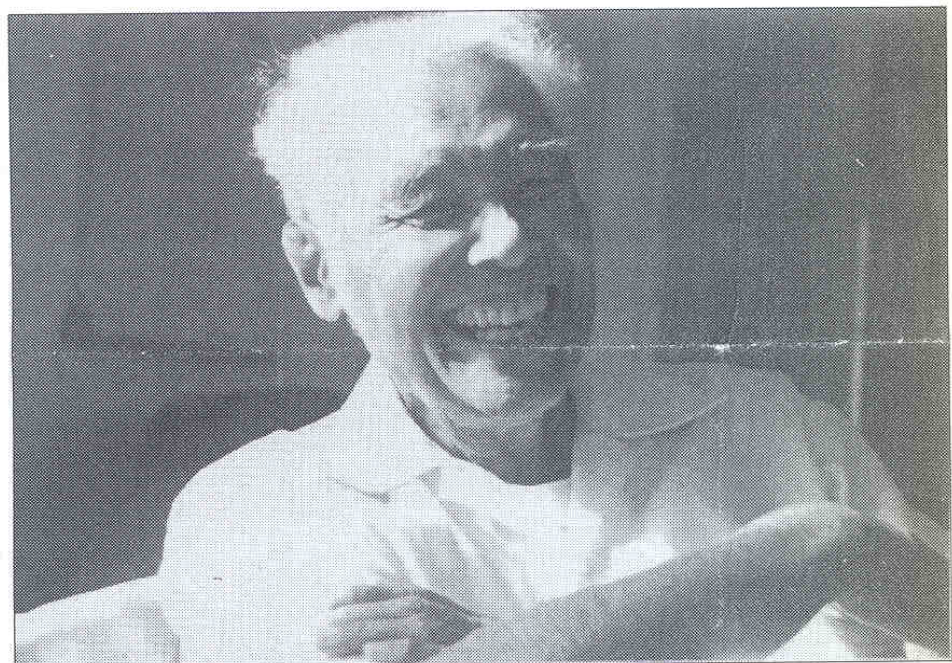
Few people this century have had a life as rich, if sometimes complicated, as Jack's.

A long-time colleague, friend, and mentor from whom I learned to write in English, Jack will never die in my memory.

Born in 1908 in Trinidad, he was from a family whose members have always been scattered across the world.

His father Eugene Chen, a prominent Chinese lawyer and close friend of Sun Yat-sen, twice served as foreign minister, first in the Wuhan Revolutionary Government and later with the Kuomintang in Nanjing.

Jack's mother, Agatha Ganteaume, had a French father and an African mother. Jack's brother Percy was a lawyer in Hong Kong.



Jack Chen in 1994

Zhang Yan

In the mid-1920s, Jack's father returned to China to help Sun Yat-sen realize his revolutionary ideals. That was Jack's first visit to China. The 17-year-old Jack — knowing no Chinese — became China's first political cartoonist with an English language newspaper, the People's Tribune, in Wuhan.

Soon the Wuhan government was overthrown by the right-wing Kuomintang militarist Chiang Kai-shek. A massacre of liberals and communists was imminent, so Jack and Percy were told to escort Borodin and other Soviet advisers to safety.

In 1988, encouraged by Jack, I went on a lecture tour to the United States. I stayed with Jack for over a month. On my second day there, Jack told me about his amazing adventure with Borodin.

The group travelled through the deserts of Mongolia, a tough undertaking by car. When they finally reached Moscow, Percy and Jack stayed with Borodin in one hotel, Sun Yat-sen's wife in another.

One night, the brothers came back late from a show. They knocked: no answer and no light. Then a silhouette appeared suddenly as the door was flung open.

"Instantly the muzzle of a revolver was pointed straight at me," Jack recalled, laughing.

Apparently Borodin was under great pressure because Stalin was very angry with him for the loss of China. For Borodin, terror was in the air, and he had become very nervous.

Jack graduated in 1930 from Moscow's Polygraphic Institute, where he learned about modern European artistic trends. His work on political cartoons was

influenced by David Low of London's Evening Standard.

Jack was a member of the Communist Youth League and, after graduation, joined the Moscow News headed by Borodin. The paper had a staff of half a dozen British, Chinese and American journalists including Anna Louise Strong.

In the mid-1930s, Jack was once again in China. Having made a reputation as a journalist, he then moved to London, working for several newspapers and magazines.

From 1937 to 1938, Jack exhibited his own and other Chinese artists' works worldwide — the first showing for China's revolutionary art. The works were eye-openers to many Europeans and Americans who were drawn to the "aid China" campaigns opposing Japanese aggression.

As a reporter, Jack visited Yan'an in 1938 for the Asian Magazine and Reynolds News. With a growing understanding of what the Communist Party was doing, Jack asked to stay but Mao Zedong and others stressed that he would be more valuable if he remained in the West and reported on China.

When war broke out in Europe, Jack, a British citizen, had to stay in England. He joined the British Communist Party and worked for the Daily Worker while remaining an activist in the "aid China" campaigns.

As World War II ended, the civil war in China was brewing. Jack returned again as a reporter for Reynolds News, first interviewing Chiang Kai-shek in Nanjing and then Mao Zedong in Yan'an. His drawing, sketches and reports on China aroused good responses abroad.

In a letter to Soong Ching Ling, wife of Sun Yat-sen, Zhou Enlai said, "The first-hand information from Jack Chen on the progress of democracy in Europe was most valuable to Yan'an," which had very little knowledge about the world situation.

Jack was keen to stay in liberated areas, so he could use his typewriter and paintbrushes. But Mao suggested "Why not help us set up an office of the Xinhua News Agency in London?" Xinhua's first overseas bureau appeared in 1948, and Jack not only had to work hard but sometimes had to spend his own money supporting it.

Once the New China was founded, Jack was invited to return in 1950. Zhou Enlai offered him a position as a senior adviser at the Foreign Ministry. But after much deliberation, Jack decided to remain in his own fields: writing, editing, painting and cartoons. He worked for 21 years with the English-language publications People's China and Beijing Review.

Jack was a first-class polisher of our Chinese English articles and a most efficient editor. He worked extremely hard but never neglected the lighter side of life.

His loud laugh was notorious and contagious. We all accepted him as a Chinese person: he could have enjoyed high pay and privileged status as a "foreign expert" on account of his British passport and expertise, but he rejected it. He was special.

One pet phrase of Jack's I still remember today was "Culture! Culture! We need culture stories!" To answer his clarion call,

I wrote my first feature story in English about a young actress which he "savagely" polished but retained my line of thought.

Jack was then a living encyclopaedia for us. He answered all kinds of questions on ballet, opera, painting and music — Western or Chinese.

One day, when Jack had no polishing to do, he walked over and said "Why not introduce your sister Mimi to me?" I was stunned. "But she's already got a boyfriend," I replied. With a faintly discernible bow, he walked off. "Aha," I thought, "now he's really ready to stick to this land of his roots."

Jack had divorced from his Russian first wife long ago. His English second wife died in the 1940s. Later he married Chen Yuanzhen.

Though Jack witnessed many Chinese political movements, the "cultural revolution" (1966-76) was too much for him. The one incident that made him determined to leave occurred while he was in a "cadres' school," a kind of farm where intellectuals were sent to get "re-educated" and "reformed through labour."

A Red Guard, supervising work in the fields, said: "We should plough that bourgeois Jack Chen into the soil!" Whether it was a joke or something said in earnest, it was hard for anybody in those circumstances to forget.

Zhou Enlai was still in office, and he too suffered from the "Gang of Four." But the premier did his best to ensure Jack and his family's quick and safe voyage to the United States via Hong Kong. Through the then Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, Zhou

sent Jack this message: "Jack Chen has served the cause of the Chinese people and never has sought fame or profit. We'll never forget that. Anytime he would like to come back, he's surely welcome."

"Folk Arts of New China" and "New Earth," about Chinese rural co-operatives, were published while Jack was in China. He also gathered material for two books later published in the US. The first, "Sinking Story," was about China's Central Asia, and the second, "A Year in Upper Felicity," was Jack's diary of a year on "re-education" in the "cadres' school." Typical of Jack, they were written with humour and wit.

Jack arrived in the US in 1971 at an opportune time to give first-hand information about China and the "cultural revolution." He gave countless lectures and attended seminars in universities and institutions.

Before Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972, his political consultants sought Jack's advice.

Although those were years of "ping-pong diplomacy," still rumours from right-wing circles in the United States branded Jack a Chinese spy. Typically, Jack laughed off the slurs, saying "The salaries I've got would be too low!"

From 1973 to 1978, Jack served

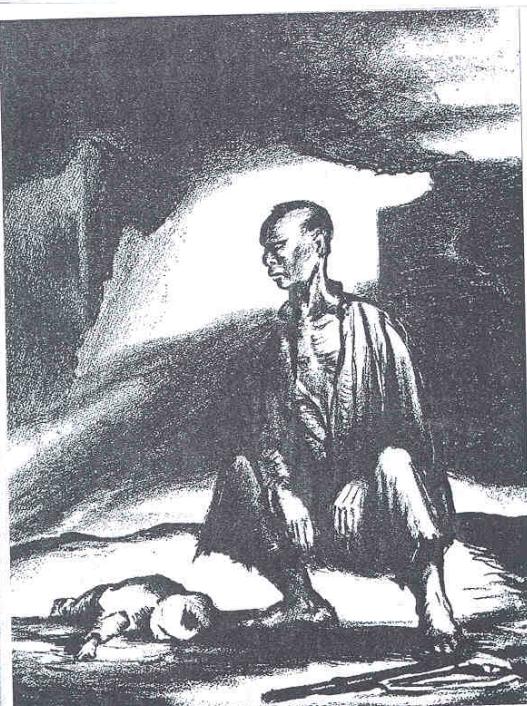
as a senior research associate in the China-Japan programme and peace studies programme at Cornell University, where he became writer-in-residence. Finally, Jack settled down in 1978 in Berkeley, California.

During 1978-81, as co-ordinator of the "Chinese of America 1785-1980" exhibition, Jack toured widely in the US and China. He complemented the exhibition with the writing of a critically acclaimed in-depth study, "The Chinese of America." It was rated "the best book on the subject" by New York Times' Book Review.

Radio speaker and TV documentary film script writer were Jack's next roles, in which he wrote about archaeological finds and city life in China.

In the 1980s, Jack devoted much of his time to his last, unfinished scholastic work, "The Pear Garden in the West," about Chinese theatre in the US. Since the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), the pear garden has symbolized the performing arts, especially theatre. Jack also set up a project integrating historical research, conservation and exhibitions, which produced several San Francisco Chinese-American Performing Arts Festivals.

His 87 years of creative life have sown seeds of understanding, love and harmony and of beauty. It is for these that he is best remembered.



This drawing, titled "The Will to Fight," by Jack Chen, appeared in Life magazine in the United States in 1938. Squatting beside his dead child, the peasant had to take up the gun and fight during the War of Resistance Against Japanese invasion (1937-45).