

The MAN who Knew PAUL HARRIS

by Joseph Parkes

Percy Chu - at 100 remarkable years old - may be the only person alive today who has actually met Paul Harris, the founder of Rotary International.

If that was the extent of Percy's involvement with Rotary it would make him notable. But there is a lot more to the Percy Chu story than a brief encounter in Shanghai in 1935 when Harris was passing through on his way to Manila and Percy was president of the city's Rotary club.

Spend a few hours with Percy in the modest room he shares with his eldest daughter in a Shanghai housing estate and it becomes startlingly clear that this is a man who has seen Rotary International play a substantial - even pivotal - role in the unfolding history of both Shanghai and China.

To understand how it all came about, it is important to understand who Percy Chu is:

He was born on October 2, 1897, in the beautiful city of Hangzhou at the time of the Empress Dowager and the Boy Emperor Pu Chi.

At his father's urging, he decided, at the age of 10 in 1908, to cut off his queue (a sign of subservience to the Qing Dynasty) so he could be educated at a foreign boys' school in Shanghai.

He sailed to America in 1919 to study economics in New York and returned home a year later set to become one of China's most powerful bankers, establishing the first Chinese Foreign Exchange operation, China's first Federal Reserve Board and the nation's first bankers' clearing house. Percy was also a dedicated educationist, establishing the first night college for professional workers in China and later becoming president of the University of Shanghai.

Percy makes it clear he loved his work and that he equally loved his involvement in the Rotary Club of Shanghai, of which he was President - the youngest Rotary President ever elected to that point - in 1934/35.

"Rotary was my most enjoyable pastime," he said. "I was very popular among the members and I eventually became the youngest president of a Rotary club ever elected up to that time. I remember receiving a letter from an Englishman who was then the oldest president ever elected by a Rotary club, congratulating me on becoming the youngest president."

It was Rotary that indirectly led Percy to take on the role of protector, and supremo, of Shanghai's banking industry during the Japanese occupation of the city. At first, Percy was jailed by China's pro-Japanese Won Nationalist Government when he refused to cooperate with them.

"Shanghai was a very international city and we had a very active club."

"We had three Japanese members in Rotary. One of them was the Japanese vice-consul, another the commercial attache and the third a member of Mitsui and Company," said Percy. "They were quite friendly with me."

When the Japanese Army arrived in Shanghai, a meeting was called with representatives of the pro-Japanese Won Nationalist Government and I was called in and again told I had to help maintain business activity in the city. This time I agreed. They handed whatever was left

of the Shanghai banking establishment over to my clearing house to manage and it stayed that way during the period of the Japanese occupation."

"A meeting was held at the Park Hotel where they asked all the bankers to carry on as usual and told me that I must form a General Committee of Chinese Commercial Banks and Chinese Native Banks. I was told I had to be included on that committee as a result of my Rotary connections."

After World War II he was kidnapped, tried and imprisoned by Chiang Kai Shek's Kuomintang Nationalist regime and was forced out of the beautiful mansion he owned on Shanghai's elegant Avenue Joffre to provide an official residence for Madame Sun Yat-sen.

His entire estate, including all his money, was confiscated by the KMT.

"They even took all the children's clothing," he remembers. It was a harsh blow but not the last period of pain and hardship he and his two daughters would be forced to face. The arrival of Chairman Mao's Liberation forces in Shanghai led Percy to open a new career in management in a cotton spinning mill but when the Cultural Revolution broke out in the 1960s, he was condemned by the Red Guards to 18 years of manual labour as an 'anti-revolutionary' and a 'rightist'.

For 40 years, from the arrival of the Red Army in Shanghai after WWII to the mid-1980s, he had been forbidden to speak a single word of English.

But, in truth, he clung to one word: the name he had chosen for himself in his youth: Percy.

Decades later, Rotarians in Taipei began hearing stories of a 'survivor' of the Shanghai Rotary Club from the 1930s. With China beginning to open its doors to international trade and travel, a delegation from the Taipei club visited Shanghai and eventually 'rediscovered' Percy Chu. He was reintroduced to the international society he had relished during his career as one of the highest of high flyers on the Shanghai Bund.

Percy travelled to Taipei to join in the 75th anniversary celebrations for the club there and was later feted by Rotarians in Beijing at a party for his 100th birthday last year.

The Rotarians wanted to know what Percy had thought of Paul Harris.

"He was a visitor to Shanghai in 1935 on his way to Manila, I think," Percy recalled. "He passed through Shanghai and stayed here three days while I was president in 1934 and 1935. He was a very good speaker and his subject, I remember, was: Rotary - Past Present and Future. I don't quite remember what he said - just I can recall the title of his speech."

He was a very happy chap." Percy says that one-third of the 120 members of the old Rotary club in Shanghai were Chinese and the remainder represented 27 other nationalities who lived in the city at that time.

"Shanghai was a very international city and we had a very active club. One of our special initiatives was to invite all the commercial attaches of the foreign consulates in Shanghai to become associate members," he explained. "This interested the members a great deal."

Percy has a scroll on the wall of his room which was presented to him by the Rotarians in Beijing. It carries a reproduction of a cartoon image of Percy originally published in the Shanghai club magazine, showing him dressed up in a make-believe military uniform. It was a gesture of appreciation of what he had achieved during his presidency.

Today, Percy has been recognised with two Paul Harris Fellowships - one from an R.I. president and the other was from the Rotary Club of Taipei. He is keen to see Rotary officially re-established in China. Nevertheless, Rotary Taipei continues to sponsor a Rotary group in Shanghai which meets regularly at the Hilton Hotel and Rotary Hong Kong

sponsors a similar group in Beijing which meets every Tuesday at the China World Hotel in Beijing.

Peter L. J. Finamore, general manager of Beijing's sumptuous Palace Hotel (86-10 6512 8899) has more details about Beijing.

Frank Yih, Managing Director of Asionics Shanghai Limited (86-21 6219 1718), is working to "revive Rotary spirits in Shanghai" - a task made difficult by the fact that Rotary has no official recognition in China.

A member of Taipei Rotary since the early 1970s, Frank - his Rotary name 'Semi' represents the semiconductor industry - is an investor in Shanghai's current building boom with developments such as a new 14-storey high-tech building.

His company is also licensed to undertake microchip assembly in Shanghai.

"I keep telling people there is more to Shanghai than just making money," Frank said.

"One gets satisfaction from undertaking social work and helping the less fortunate."

Source: <http://rotarnet.com.au/Magazine/articles/July98/PercyChu.html>

Photos



Percy Chu at the building which once housed Bankers Reserve Board



Percy Chu with Shanghai Rotarians



Percy Chu in the garden of his former home