

# Remembering Chen Wen-chen



“I have been inspired by some of the brilliant ideas and approaches in his papers”

*By Anne Chao, Tsing-Hua distinguished chair professor at the Institute of Statistics, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan.*

I first met Wen-chen in September 1977 while visiting the University of Michigan, and subsequently had the honour of befriending him and following his research for a few short years. At that time, in addition to our common enthusiasm/concern about Taiwan’s political status, Chen and I also shared a similar research topic (relationships between genera and species) and analysed the same types of taxonomic data. Although we did not collaborate on any research papers, I have been inspired by and benefited from some of the brilliant ideas and approaches in his papers during my 40-year biodiversity research.

In late June 1981, at my invitation, Chen came to give a talk at National Tsing Hua University, where I was employed. In that talk, he reviewed his principal research and mentioned some ongoing and future research topics. He seemed to be brimming with confidence and promise in his blossoming academic career at Carnegie Mellon University. After his talk, I remember debating in my mind whether or not to tell him about an ominous phone call that I had received prior to his talk. I did not. As he was leaving, I only told him to “please stay alert and be careful”.

**In 1981, Chen seemed to be brimming with confidence and promise in his blossoming career**

One day before his talk, someone called me (speaking in Mandarin) and asked, “What will Chen talk about in his seminar?” Thinking that he was interested in the talk, I replied, “Probability models and limiting theorems related to Zipf’s law.” Then, when he asked, “Why did you invite him and who will attend?” I suddenly sensed something was amiss, as that was a natural and instinctual reaction to have during the martial law period. I asked him, “Who are you? Why don’t you identify yourself?” Then he shouted, “That’s none of your business!” and hung up. The phone call clearly signified that Chen had been monitored by secret agents since returning to Taiwan in May 1981.

On the morning of 4 July, I was shocked and horrified by the TV news report of Chen’s death. At that moment I also felt painful regret for not having told him about the phone call. Had I done so, he would have had one week to try to form a strategic plan or ask for help from some “influential” people. Perhaps he could have escaped or survived the horrifying interrogation in the notorious Taiwan Garrison Command. But all was too late... this has become the deepest regret of my life.

Forty years have elapsed since that tragic day. I believe that Wen-chen has never rested in peace – he will not rest in peace until the truth of his death is revealed.



“He was truly extraordinary”  
*By Liza Levina, Vijay Nair Collegiate Professor and Chair of Statistics at the University of Michigan.*

Chen Wen-chen arrived as a new PhD student in statistics at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor in 1975. The department had been created just six years before, and was still small, with just two or three PhD students admitted each year. Professor

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emeritus Edward Rothman, who was Chen’s first-year adviser and later one of his doctoral committee members, remembers Chen as an extraordinarily brilliant student who stood out to all the faculty from the start, as well as a wonderfully warm person. Chen passed our qualifying review examinations before he even began the programme, and it was not easy for the department to find courses that would challenge him, as he already knew the contents of traditional first-year probability and statistics courses. One topic new to him, however, was Bayesian analysis, taught in a year-long course by Professor Bruce Hill. Chen became very interested in Bayesian statistics as a result, and went on to work with Hill as his PhD student. Chen’s thesis, “On Zipf’s law”, a thorough treatment of the problem, was based on work done in just one year. He graduated in 1978, completing his PhD programme in three years. To this day, we do not know of any other PhD student at Michigan to have ever done that.

His death was a shock to everyone who knew him at Michigan. Nobody in the statistics department was aware of any political activity he might have been involved in, and they found it hard to believe he would have had time to be a major player, given how incredibly productive his research career had been. Our student newspaper, the *Michigan Daily*, ran a full-page story about a week after his death, headlined “Taiwanese here fear murder”; it was clear to everyone at Michigan, just like it was at CMU, what the circumstances of Chen’s death pointed to. The story quoted Hill, who called Chen the best student he had ever seen at Michigan in his 21 years on the faculty; 40 years later, Rothman wrote the same thing to me – the best student we have ever had. It is clear that Chen Wen-chen was truly extraordinary, and the University of Michigan is proud to count him among our alumni and to join CMU in honouring his memory.