

In recognition of Professor Birch's extraordinary career as a scholar and translator of Chinese literature, we are very happy to announce the plans to establish the Cyril Birch Award for graduate students in Chinese Literature.

Professor Birch was born in Lancashire, England in 1925, and attended the Bolton School, one of the leading schools of northwest England. He was 16 years old when Britain devised a program to recruit boys of extraordinary linguistic aptitude to learn Chinese, Japanese, Turkish and Persian in order to serve the war effort. Birch travelled to London to sit for the interview, intending to study Persian if he were chosen. After a thirty-minute conversation, his interviewer pronounced that he had just demonstrated such aptitude that he would not study Persian, but Chinese, the most difficult language of all.

Professor Birch took an eighteenth-month crash course in Chinese devised by London's School of Oriental and African Studies, and was then sent to Calcutta, where he worked for the remainder of the war years in Intelligence. When the war ended, he returned to London to study Chinese in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He received his BA (Honours, First Class) in Modern Chinese in 1948, and his Ph.D. in Chinese Literature in 1954, studying under the eminent German linguist and bibliographer Sir Walter Simon.

Professor Birch was asked to stay at the School of Oriental and African Studies to teach Chinese language and literature from 1948 to 1960. He spent a sabbatical in Hong Kong in the 1950s, and later astonished native speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese by his ability to translate from Mandarin to Cantonese and vice versa.

Professor Birch joined the Department of Oriental Languages at Berkeley in 1960, bringing with him his wife Dorothy Nuttall Birch and young children Catherine and David. He served as Chair of the department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, then called Oriental Languages, or OL for short, for many years.

Throughout his career, Professor Birch devoted himself to the study of Chinese vernacular literature. His dissertation examined Feng Menglong's early seventeenth-century collection of stories *Stories Old and New* (Gujin xiaoshuo), and was the first systematic attempt in the western world to use a formalist approach to the study of Chinese vernacular short fiction, or *huaben*. In 1958, Professor Birch published his first translations of Ming fiction, *Stories from a Ming Collection*. His subsequent two-volume *Anthology of Chinese Literature* spanned the entirety of Chinese literature from the *Book of Songs* of the sixth century BCE to the spoken drama of the twentieth century, and was the standard teaching anthology for decades, and made it possible for a generation of students, including the faculty at the front of the room, to be introduced to Chinese literature in translation.

In the late 1960s, Professor Birch began the translations of pre-modern Chinese drama that are now legendary. The translations of such plays as *The Peach Blossom Fan* (Taohua shan) and *The Peony Pavilion* (Mudan ting) were magnanimous and heroic acts of scholarship. Professor Birch's colleague Chen Shih-hsiang had begun a translation of *The Peach Blossom Fan*, and upon Chen's death, his widow asked Professor Birch to finish it for him. From there, Professor Birch went on to translate Tang Xianzu's *The Peony Pavilion*, considered the apex of Chinese dramatic lyricism. Professor Birch's translations are works of literature in their own right, and made it possible to teach courses on Chinese drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the United States and Europe. The translations generated a wealth of scholarship on the two plays.

Professor Birch continued to be active as a translator of Ming drama in his retirement, publishing *Scenes for Mandarins: the Elite Theater of the Ming* in 1995, and *Mistress and Maid: Jiaohongji*. 2000. His translations of Chinese drama themselves have now become the subject of scholarship in China: last year, a

graduate student from Tsinghua University spent a year at Berkeley in preparation for writing his dissertation on Professor Birch's translations.

Very unusually for a scholar who has made such tremendous contributions to the study of pre-modern Chinese literature, Professor Birch spent most of his career as a scholar of modern Chinese literature, and the bulk of his articles are in fact in that field. He wrote on the authors Chao Shuli, Lao She, and Lu Xun, as well as Xu Zhimo, in venues as diverse as the *Times Literary Supplement* and *Asia Major*. He also translated poems by Mao Zedong and short stories by Wu Zuxiang. He was deeply interested in the political and social pressures faced by twentieth-century writers, and investigated these concerns in his book *Chinese Communist Literature*. When Professor Birch was informed that he had been awarded Berkeley's Louis B. Agassiz Chair in Chinese, he said with characteristic modesty that it was not a recognition of himself but of his field -- that the university had finally decided to grant recognition to the study of Chinese vernacular literature. With hindsight, we can say quite decidedly that Professor Birch's pioneering efforts in the study of Chinese vernacular literature made it a field one could no longer ignore.

We would like also to remember the contributions of Cyril's wife Dorothy to his research and translations and to our department. Professor and Mrs. Birch met at the age of 17, and were married for 61 years. Having worked as a secretary to a Member of Parliament in London, she assisted Professor Birch after the family's move to California in all his research and publications, typing every one of his manuscripts. Since he published ten books, nearly three dozen articles, and many reviews, this was no mean feat. Mrs. Birch also contributed enormously to the culture of the department, hosting spaghetti dinners at the Birch home in North Berkeley for the faculty and graduate students, and baking cookies for the department meetings when

Professor Birch was chair -- as he joked at the time, the faculty would not come without her cookies.

After he came to Berkeley, Birch was recruited to join the department of Comparative Literature. Lydia Liu, the Tam professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, notes that it was Professor Birch, along with Stephen Owen at Harvard, whose joint appointments in Chinese and Comparative Literature made Chinese literature a legitimate field of graduate studies in a discipline dominated by European languages and literatures. His former colleague in Comparative Literature Robert Alter observes, "Cyril was always a quiet, steady presence in our department. Students held him in high regard. He was clearly one of those people for whom the rubric "a gentleman and a scholar" seemed exactly right." As one of his former students in Oriental Languages remarked, in a department of titans who could be very removed, Professor Birch was a warm and encouraging presence, who at times offered much-welcome fatherly advice.

Professor Birch's students in Oriental Languages and Comparative Literature at U.C. Berkeley went on to make signal contributions to the field, teaching at the University of London, Yale University, Berkeley, Dartmouth College; University of New South Wales, Australia; Chinese University of Hong Kong, University of British Columbia; Columbia University, University of Colorado, University of Texas, and Stanford University.

On his retirement in 1990, Professor Birch was awarded the Berkeley Citation by Chancellor Tien Chang-lin. The Berkeley Citation is the highest honor conferred by the University of California at Berkeley on its faculty, awarded in recognition of scholarly achievement in excess of the standards of excellence and extraordinary service to Berkeley. We are privileged, 27 years later, to announce the establishment of the Cyril Birch Award for graduate students in Chinese literature.

