

RECOLLECTION

Detour and return—Chenfu Wu’s interdisciplinary research journey

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Chenfu F. Wu (胡经甫) is best known as the founder of modern entomotaxonomy of China, and famous for his monumental work—*Catalogus Insectorum Sinensium (Catalogue of Chinese insects)*. However, his contribution to biology in China is beyond entomotaxonomy. Only few know that Chenfu Wu also held an M.D. degree and had been practicing medicine for years, and this experience led to his later interdisciplinary work on medical entomology.

Born in 1896 in a teacher’s family, Chenfu Wu was home-schooled until 15 years old. After spending two years in high school, he enrolled in the Department of Biology in Soochow University, a missionary school where most teachers came from the United States. He did so well at school that he was chosen as a teaching assistant in his senior year

by his biology teacher, American biologist N. Gist Gee. The TA experience gave him more opportunities to work side by side with Gist Gee and deepened his interests in taxonomy. He continued his study (and the job as a TA) with Gist Gee after getting his B.S. degree in 1917, and received his master degree in 1919. As a matter of fact, he was the first one to receive a M.S. degree in Biology in China. Chenfu Wu later went to Cornell University to study with entomologist J. G. Needham and got his Ph.D. degree in 1922. His thesis work “Morphology, anatomy and ethology of *Nemoura*” was published later and received wide acclaim.

As most of the young American-trained Chinese biologists, Chenfu Wu returned to China after graduation. He took on a teaching position in Nanjing University for a year, then So-



Figure 1. Chenfu F. Wu (1896–1972).



Figure 2. Chenfu Wu (left) and Gist Gee (front) in 1915.

ochow University for two years, before he moved to Beijing and started his 23-years of teaching at Yanjing University. He had always had broad interests and a wide spectrum of knowledge, thus in addition to entomology, he also taught pre-med courses in Soochow and Yanjing universities. Many of his students later became the backbone of Chinese biology and medicine, including entomologists Yinqi Xu (徐荫祺), Jinren Lu (陆近仁), Changshan Lin (林昌善) and medical scientists Jiadong Deng (邓家栋), Guang Wu (吴光), Hairu Zhu (祝海如).

Teaching aside, Chenfu Wu spent most of his time on research and had published more than 80 articles/books from 1916 to 1949. His most famous work is "*Catalogus Insectorum Sinensium (Catalogue of Chinese insects)*" Vol. I–VI, which has recorded over twenty thousands of species of insects in China. It took him twelve years (1929–1941) to write, revise and publish the book. The manuscript was finished by 1933, when he was invited to work in Cornell University as a visiting scholar. This gave him opportunities to meet peer entomologists and visit museums in US, then in UK, France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy, to double-check their specimens and records about Chinese insects. During and after his long travel, he meticulously revised the book before sending it for print. The book later became a milestone in China's entomological research.

In 1941, Chenfu Wu was once again invited by American universities to work there as a visiting professor. Unfortunately the Pacific War broke out while he was en route to the US, and he ended up stranded in Manila, Philippines. Lucky enough, he was always interested in medicine and a local Chinese offered to sponsor him for medical school. Thus, at the age of 45, he became a medical student at the Medical School of University of Philippines. It took him four years to finish the medical courses and even some internship, before the war ended and he was able to go home. Back to China, he completed his medical training and obtained the M.D. degree in Hsiang-Ya Medical College in Changsha City. When he eventually returned to Beijing and resumed his professor position in Yanjing University, he also served as school doctor in both Yanjing University and Tsinghua University.

After 1949, he resigned from Yanjing University and opened his own clinic and started to practice medicine. Even as a physician, he was still known for his entomological work,



Figure 3. Chenfu Wu with his wife and daughter in 1936.

and his dual background in both entomology and medicine made him even more valuable. He had been offered jobs from various institutions, and in 1953, he accepted the offer from the Academy of Military Medical Sciences (AMMS) and became a professor at the Department of Parasitology of AMMS, working specifically on medical entomology. From then on, medical insects, especially Ceratopogonidae and Tabanidae, became the focus of the second half of his academic career. Many of his students later became the experts of medical research and epidemic prevention. Looking back to his experience in Philippines, what started out as a series of detours in his career has turned out to be a new main route toward success.

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