

Obituary

Professor Shih-Chieh Shen, an Eminent Fish Taxonomist of Taiwan, Dies at 99

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Professor Shih-Chieh Shen was born on December 4, 1926 in Ye County, Shandong Province, China. When he was 13 years old, the Japanese army occupied Shandong and all primary and secondary schools in the province were temporarily closed. He had to travel between Northeast China and Qingdao to continue his education. With the help of his brother, he completed junior high school intermittently. During this period, he also worked in a tailor shop and was an apprentice in an auto parts dealer. After the victory of the Sino-Japanese War, he entered Qingdao Municipal Senior High School and skipped the freshman year and went directly to the junior year. But later he realized that he had suffered a loss: trigonometry and functions was a course in the freshman year of high school, and he skipped a grade and didn't learn about it! Later he joked that luckily his research career required no knowledge of advanced mathematics.

It was also during his high school days that Shih Chieh made up his mind to study medicine in order to save lives in the future, and decided to apply to Shenyang Medical College. The Manchuria Railway Company of Japan originally established this medical school. Because it adopted the Japanese academic system, the completion period only required five years. But when he arrived in Shenyang, he found that it was no longer a safe place to stay because at this time in 1948, the Chinese Communist Army had approached Shenyang and a war was imminent. Afterwards he fled back to Qingdao, but couldn't find a suitable job. What should he do? At this time, one of his classmates was going to seek refuge in Taiwan to develop his career, so he suggested to Shih Chieh: "Why don't we go to Taiwan together?" "Okay, let's go to Taiwan!", Shih Chieh replied. So they fled together to Taiwan in March 1948. This almost spur-of-the-moment decision changed the second half of his life.

After arriving in Taiwan, Shih Chieh first worked as a substitute teacher in a local school while preparing for further studies. Since it was difficult to get into the Medical School of National Taiwan University, he decided to first apply to Department of Zoology of NTU, and then transfer to the Medical School of NTU after admission. He was admitted to the Department of Zoology, but his plan to transfer to medical school department was dissuaded by the then-chairman of the Department of Zoology, Shi-Fang Chu: "You said you want to study medicine to save lives? I am a doctor of medicine. If you really want to do this, then stay and follow me to do basic medical research!"

It seemed to him that the field of basic medical research would be a better choice than practicing medicine to save lives. However, when Shih Chieh graduated in 1952 and returned to NTU after completing his compulsory military service, the research focus of the Department of Zoology at NTU had undergone a major reshuffle: professors such as Shi-Fang Chu, who focused on basic medical research, had gone abroad for further studies or some other faculty members were hired by some international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) to help fight parasitic diseases overseas. At the same time, the United States sent a fishery expert Dr. Willis H. Rich to Taiwan for an inspection and recommended that the Taiwanese government should establish a "Fisheries Biology Group" under the Department of Zoology at NTU and in collaboration with the Ministry of Economic Affairs to establish a "Fisheries Biology Laboratory", inside the campus to promote basic fishery studies.

Seeing that NTU no longer had any faculty in basic medical research, Shih Chieh switched his research direction and joined the Fisheries Biological Laboratory as a technician under Professor Fa-Hsien Liu, beginning the most important research mission of his life: fish taxonomy.

In 1959, Shih Chieh went to the Fisheries Research Institute of the University of Tokyo in Japan for further studies. During this period, he also spent time at the Chinese University of Hong Kong for fish taxonomy research. Finally, in 1966, he earned a Ph.D. degree from the University of Tokyo on the taxonomy of Hong Kong flounder fishes. The following year, he returned to National Taiwan University to teach. At the same time, he also served as an adjunct associate research fellow and later a research fellow at the Institute of Zoology, Academia Sinica until his retirement in 1999. Afterward he continued to serve as an adjunct professor at NTU.



For decades, Shih Chieh has focused on ichthyology research, especially the study of fish taxonomy. In order to collect fish specimens and study the characteristics of various fish, he has not only traveled all over Taiwan, but also visited Japan, Hong Kong, the United States and other countries. With his keen observation and memory, he discovered more than 500 new record species, more than 40 new species, and 3 new genera in Taiwan. At the same time, he also contributed to the "reduction" of fish species. In the 1970s, Shih Chieh confirmed that fish that were previously thought to be two different species were actually the same fish, the ribbon eel (*Rhinomuraena quaesita*) with three different color phases in its life cycle - black colored when they were juveniles, then grew into blue color males, and finally changed sex into yellow colored females! He later confirmed that a similar phenomenon also occurred in the Pomacanthidae family. What were originally thought to be two different fish species with different body coloration were actually the body colors of different sexes of the same fish species, *Genicanthus semifasciatus*. And unlike the ribbon eel, the female appeared first and the male later.

A major contribution of Shih Chieh is the editing of a fish taxonomy reference book with colored plates entitled: "Fishes of Taiwan" which was published in 1993 by the Department of Zoology, National Taiwan University. Shih Chieh served as the chief editor of the book with contributions from Kwang-Tsao Shao, Chen-Tsung Chen, Chung-Hui Chen, Sin-Chen Lee, Hin-Kiu Mok and Chyng-Shyan Tzeng. The book incorporated the latest findings of fish species, specimens with color plates as well as troves of relevant literatures. The book was lauded as the most comprehensive fish taxonomy book of Taiwan ever produced up to 1993.

An issue that raised the most concern of Shih Chieh is the survival of traditional taxonomy, i.e., classification based on the external characteristics of organisms. Traditional biological taxonomy study not only allows researchers to quickly classify biological specimens, but also to provide a basis for identifying new species based on known classification. However, under the influence of the booming development of molecular biology (identifying and studying biological species based solely on DNA), traditional taxonomical study in Taiwan is facing a crisis of no new successors. Therefore, Shih Chieh has been giving lectures in academic institutions in recent years, emphasizing to students that both new and old technologies should be equally weighted: "You must be able to do both! You can do molecular biology, and yet you also should be able to do traditional classification" - this is not just an empty talk, because as early as the 1980s, one of his former students, Chyng-Shyan Tzeng, in collaboration with Prof. Pien-Chien Huang, had already used molecular biology technology to establish fish DNA sequences for taxonomical study.

Shih Chieh prided himself "as a person who has dedicated most of his life to Taiwan." Professor Shen's achievements come from hard work and persistence. He describes himself this way, "To do this, you must first be patient. Second, you must not care about money, and third, you must be persistent. ... The greatest pleasure is to discover new genera or species, or new classification systems. Fish also have their own family tree. I have established a new fish family tree, and the whole world recognizes you. At least I have made some contribution to mankind, and I will be satisfied." As of 2008, Shih Chieh has published more than 100 academic papers and 10 books.

From aspiring to practice medicine, to studying parasites, and finally becoming a master of fish taxonomy, Shih Chieh, has not only experienced the turbulent twists and turns of the times, but can also be said to be a living witness to Taiwan's fish taxonomy research. Up to now, Shih Chieh's fish research results are still an important reference for Taiwan's fish taxonomical study. After his retirement, he still promoted his extensive fish knowledge to the public through popular science books and lectures, hoping to promote public awareness on the importance of fish taxonomical study and the conservation of fish diversity of Taiwan.

During his tenure at Department of Zoology, National Taiwan University, Shih Chieh's "Fish Taxonomy" course was a required class for students with a major in zoology and more than 1000+ NTU students were under his tutelage to know ichthyology. He also served as a major professor to a total of 11 graduate students. Therefore, for many contemporary Taiwanese biologists and in particular, the ichthyologists, all could trace their academic lineage to Shih Chieh. His legacy will live on for years to come in Taiwan.

Professor Shih-Chieh Shen passed away in Taipei, Taiwan on February 21, 2025 at the age of 99. He is sorely missed.



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