

Yen, Nathaniel

(1932–2017)

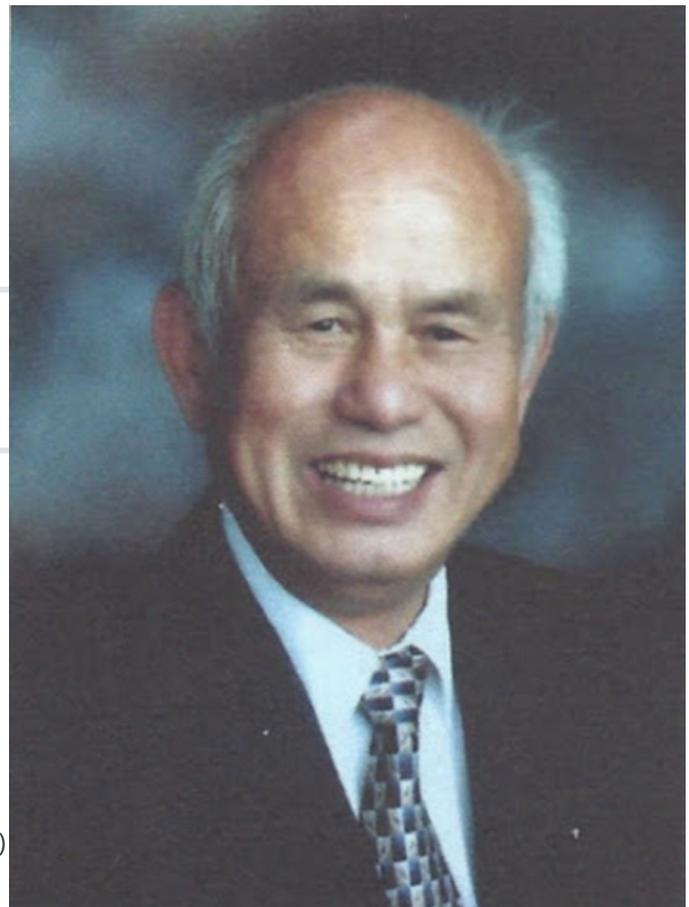
BRUCE W. LO

Bruce W. Lo is the ESDA assistant editor for the Chinese Union Mission.

Nathaniel Yen was among the group of about a dozen Taiwanese young people who became the first-generation ministers and church leaders in the Taiwan Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He served as the president of the South China Island Union Mission from 1991 to 1998.

Nathaniel Yen (Chinese name: 嚴榮哲, pinyin Yan, Rongzhe) was born on February 23, 1932, in Tainan, Taiwan. His family was deep in Buddhist and Taoist tradition, so Yen was familiar with the rituals and ceremonies associated with these religious forms.¹ When he entered high school, he began to read the writings of world-renowned authors from France, Germany, Britain, and Russia as well as the new generation of Chinese writers: Ba Jin, Lu Xun, Bing Xin, and others (巴金, 魯迅, 冰心). From these writings, he recognized that “the most beautiful thing in life is to have love,” which became his first introduction to the central concept of Christianity. He also enjoyed listening to Western classical music, which was greatly influenced by Western Christian tradition. To understand the music better, he found himself learning more about Christianity.²

His first contact with Adventism came when one of his Presbyterian high-school classmates introduced him to the free lessons from the Signs of the Times Bible Correspondence School, which was administered at that time from Ning Guo Road, Shanghai. Together with his high-school friends, John Lu, Richard Hsiao, James Su, Robert Tseng, and scores of others, they attended the evangelistic meetings conducted by Pastors Milton Lee and Carl Currie in Tainan. Responding to the message, this group of students decided to be baptized and joined the Seventh-day Adventist faith. Many of them later became church leaders in the Adventist church in Taiwan and the South China Island Union Mission. In those days, their decision to keep the Sabbath created challenges for



Pastor Nathaniel Yen, taken 2007 in Loma Linda, California, USA.

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Yen and the group of young people because most government schools had classes on Saturday. But Yen remained faithful to his baptism pledge to honor the Sabbath.³ During his compulsory military service, his refusal to bear arms and his insistence on Sabbath-keeping often led him to confinement.⁴ After his discharge, Yen answered the call to begin his ministerial training. He was then sent to Cheng Shan Zhou () to open new work. His classmates James Su and Robert Tseng also were sent to nearby mountain districts to open new work. In those days, there was no tap water or electricity in these remote villages. After taking the public bus, they needed to walk three to eight hours to reach their destinations. Having grown up in Tainan city, this group of young ministers found it a challenge to adjust to the primitive living environment. But they did not utter a word of complaint as their youthful hearts were on fire with the gospel of Christ.⁵

Around 1953/54, Yen met up with Lorraine Shum, a young woman from Hong Kong who worked at the Bible Correspondence School in Tai Chung. They fell in love and got married in 1955. Encouraged by his wife, Yen went to Japan to further his education, graduating from Saniku Gakuin College. In 1969, he went to the United States and completed his graduate degree in theology from the seminary at Andrews University. He was then awarded a scholarship for doctoral study in ancient theology at Drew University in New Jersey, and during this study, he spent many months on archaeological excavations in the Middle East. After completing his doctoral studies in New Jersey in 1977, he returned to Taiwan. He was immediately recruited to teach at one of the public universities in Taichung, which he declined. Instead, Yen joined the teaching staff at Taiwan Adventist College. During the next few years, his scholarship was noted by many of the Adventist higher institutions of learning in Asia, and he was invited to give guest lectures at Seventh-day Adventist seminaries in Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Hong Kong.⁶

In 1981, he accepted a call to pastor the Chinese/Japanese Seventh-day Adventist Church at Central Honolulu, Hawaii, United States. In 1985, he was invited to start a new church in Silicon Valley and established the South Bay Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church in Northern California, United States. In 1991, he returned to the Far East and became the president of South China Island Union Mission until his retirement in 1998.

After retirement, the Yens returned to California to live, where he continued his ministry, serving as the pastor of San Gabriel Valley Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church and, later, as the interim pastor at Loma Linda Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church. Even during his many years of pastoral duties and retirement, he never neglected his devotion to scholarship. In addition to conducting many archaeological trips to the Middle East, Yen also engaged in scholarly writing. His 350-page book, entitled (From Chang-An to Jerusalem), went through two editions and was sold in Chinese book stores in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States, and Canada.

After his wife Lorraine passed away in 2013, Yen was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and his health deteriorated rather rapidly. Nathaniel Yen passed away in his sleep on January 12, 2017. Nathaniel and Lorraine had two children: a son, Nathan, and a daughter, Lorna. His pastoral service, his scholarship, and his administrative ability will always be remembered, not only by the church members in Taiwan and Hong Kong

but also by many whose lives he had touched in North America.⁷

SOURCES

“Nathaniel Yen.” In *25th Anniversary Commemoration Booklet*. Loma Linda: Loma Linda Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2008.

Shum, Gilbert. “Life Sketch of Pastor Nathaniel Yen.” *North America San Yu Alumni Association (NASYAA) Newsletter*, vol. 28, no. 1, Spring 2017.

Yen, Nathaniel, “Autobiography.” In *Zhong Hua Sheng Gong Shi* (Chinese SDA history), vol. 2, edited by Samuel Young. Hong Kong: Chinese Union Mission, November 2002.

NOTES

1. Gilbert Shum, “Life Sketch of Pastor Nathaniel Yen,” *North America San Yu Alumni Association Newsletter*, vol. 28, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 5–6.
2. Nathaniel Yen, “Autobiography,” in *Zhong Hua Sheng Gong Shi* (Chinese SDA history), ed. Samuel Young, vol. 2 (Hong Kong: Chinese Union Mission, 2012), 686.
3. Ibid.
4. Shum, “Life Sketch,” 5.
5. Yen, “Autobiography.”
6. Shum, “Life Sketch,” 5.
7. Ibid.

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