

Nicholas Cleaveland Bodman

July 27, 1913 — June 29, 1997

Nicholas Cleaveland Bodman, known to his colleagues as Nick, came to Cornell in 1962 as a Professor of Chinese Linguistics in the then Division of Modern Languages. Even prior to that, he had enjoyed an active and varied career that had contributed to his stature as an eminent figure in his field.

Nick was born in Chicago in 1913. His father was a successful businessman and his mother wrote a series of romantic novels with titles like *Castle of Doubt*, *The Guttering Flame*, and *The Nymph was Mortal*. He was educated at the Middlesex School in Concord, Massachusetts, and entered Harvard as a member of the class of 1935. He left after only one year, however, and spent several years doing clerical work and vacationing in Europe, which further stimulated his curiosity about languages. He joined the navy in 1941, and in early 1942, he was posted to FRUPAC (Fleet Radio Unit Pacific Fleet) at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where he served in the group that deciphered the Japanese naval code. There also, two events crucial to his future life occurred: he met and married his wife, Frances Sorrel Wainwright, and he took his first formal lessons in Chinese. At the end of the war, he retired from active duty and while on terminal leave was promoted to Lieutenant Commander. In the fall of 1945, he entered Yale University as a junior, and by 1950 had completed his B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in Chinese and Linguistics. While at Yale, he studied with Leonard Bloomfield, George Kennedy, and Lo Ch'ang-P'ei, who subsequently returned to China to found the Institute of Linguistics in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. On completing his Ph.D. degree, he joined the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State (FSI) where he remained until joining the Cornell Faculty in 1962. All of that time was by no means spent in Washington, however. In 1951-52, on loan to the British Government, he was posted to Malaya during the emergency there to establish and run a language school for British police and civil servants, where he created a still unrivaled course in the Hokkien or Amoy dialect of Chinese. From 1955-57, he founded and ran the still existent Language and Area Training Center in Taiwan. He subsequently served as head of the FSI Department of Far Eastern languages. In 1961 and 1962, he was awarded Guggenheim and National Science Foundation fellowships for linguistic fieldwork in Darjeeling, India, where he collected first hand material on the Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the Himalayan region, including the little known Lepcha. In 1962, he joined the Division of Modern Languages at Cornell, where he remained until his retirement in 1979, primarily teaching courses in the Chinese language, Chinese dialects and the history of Chinese. In 1967, he was a visiting professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and in 1968-69, on sabbatical leave, he carried out research in Hongkong on the Min dialects and in Kathmandu,

Nepal on Tibeto-Burman languages. In 1972, he spent a semester at the University of Hawaii teaching and carrying out research on Chinese dialects.

After retiring from Cornell as Professor Emeritus, he continued his active scholarly career for more than a decade. He made trips to Mainland China in 1980 and 1983, at the invitation of the Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. While there, he gave talks, met with colleagues, and continued his work in Fujian and Guangdong provinces on five southern Min dialects. His son, Richard, also a scholar in Chinese, accompanied him on one of these trips and recounts Nick's lively engagement in these activities, including his joy in interacting with local farmers and others in their own dialect including, characteristically, at least one humorous story.

In 1986, he was presented with a festschrift, *Contributions to Sino-Tibetan Studies*, edited by two of his former students who had become active scholars in Chinese Studies.

In 1993, Nick and Sorrel celebrated both his eightieth birthday and their fiftieth wedding anniversary. In the following year, as his health was declining, they left Ithaca, and moved to Northfield, Minnesota, to be nearer their family.

Nick was a formidable scholar in Chinese linguistics, and a name to be reckoned with in that field. He was the author of magisterial and pioneering works, especially in his special field of Sino-Tibetan historical linguistics, including four books and numerous papers and reviews in learned journals. He was a pioneering figure in the description and analysis of Chinese dialects, starting with southern Min and the reconstruction of Proto-Min and extending this into the reconstruction of Old Chinese and still further into Sino-Tibetan. His work on this was widely recognized and a collection of his work was translated into Chinese and published in Beijing in 1996, which fortunately was in time to be a source of satisfaction to him before he passed away. As one prominent young scholar remarked to one of us admiringly, Nick was a walking encyclopedia on Chinese dialects without peer.

Nick was unsparing in his concern for his students and unselfish in sharing his work and insights with them on which they could build their own. He extended his seminars and classes by inviting them to his home for meals and discussion, and a significant number of the active and important scholars and teachers in Chinese language and linguistics were formed to a great extent under his tutelage. He was also supportive of younger colleagues, a characteristic that extended to those outside his own special field.

Nick was in love with and fascinated by language, its complexities, and the interplay of sound and symbol. This manifested itself in many ways in addition to his multiple language competence: in his attachment to ciphers,

puzzles and music, as well as in writing light verse and, perhaps all, in a marvelous capacity for puns (to the benefit of many an otherwise unmemorable meeting). Though he could sometimes appear to those not well acquainted with him to be aloof and even imperious, those of us who were his colleagues and who enjoyed the company of Nick and Sorrel along with their hospitality on so many gracious and often imaginatively conceived occasions (which continued after his retirement), knew him as a witty, thoughtful and generous companion, who loved conversation, entertaining, cruises, and cats. In particular, he possessed a puckish but non-destructive wit, which frequently expressed itself in outrageous but apt puns. With all of his knowledge and experience, he revealed on occasion an almost childlike and fetching curiosity and capacity for surprise about the new, and even the ordinary, that came to his attention. He also possessed a strong sense of order and propriety, and when confronted by meanness or unfairness, was sometimes not only disturbed, but even surprised by its very existence, since it was so far removed from his own outlook and code of conduct.

He was survived by his wife, Sorrel; his son, Richard; and daughter, Ann; and he survives as well in his work and in the memories of many of us who were his colleagues, friends, or students.

Richard L. Leed, Frans Van Coetsem, James W. Gair