Biography of Joseph J. Jen



Breaking the Glass Ceiling

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Chapter 1
Born Amid the Flames of War (1939–1949)



On 8 May 1939, Joseph J. Jen was born in a rural area called Bishan, on the outskirts of Chongqing. His childhood nickname was “Little Bishan,” a simple name commemorating his birthplace that would, unintentionally, foreshadow his lifelong connection with the land.

It was an era ravaged by war. Japanese bombers repeatedly flew over Chinese cities, dropping countless bombs. Jen's father was then serving as a government official. Although he was not a military officer, his position was equivalent in rank to that of a lieutenant general. To escape the bombing, the family moved repeatedly from one place to another. According to his mother, she had conceived him in Guiyang, but by the time his

birth approached, the family had relocated to Chongqing. Japanese aircraft were bombing Chongqing almost daily, forcing her to move to the countryside in Bishan to give birth.

Jen's ancestral family came from Yixing, Jiangsu Province, a town renowned throughout China for its purple clay pottery. The Jen family was among the largest and wealthiest families in Yixing, possessing its own ancestral temple, Qingchuan Hall, and more than a thousand mu of land. As the eldest male of the twenty-ninth generation of the Yixing Jen lineage, he would traditionally have been expected to assume leadership of the clan in due course.

In 1945, China emerged victorious from the War of Resistance Against Japan. Jen moved with his family to Shanghai and subsequently to Hangzhou. At the age of ten, he relocated with his entire family to Taiwan, where he grew up and continued his education. From Chongqing to Shanghai, from Hangzhou to Taiwan, a child born beneath the shadow of wartime bombers had already begun the first great journey of his life.

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Chapter 2
The Taiwan Years: From School Dropout to National Taiwan University Scholar (1949–1962)

In Taiwan, Joseph J. Jen completed his education from primary school through university. His educational journey, however, was not entirely smooth. One chapter of his autobiography bears the striking title “School Dropout.” It reveals that the man who would eventually become a United States Under Secretary of Agriculture and Dean of the College of Agriculture at California Polytechnic State University had once experienced a period away from formal schooling.

He subsequently gained admission to the Department of Agricultural Chemistry at National Taiwan University, graduating in 1960. The department was an important centre for agricultural science research in Taiwan, and Jen acquired a strong foundation in chemistry and biology during his studies. After graduation, he briefly served as a lecturer in the department.

During his years at National Taiwan University, his father was Jen Hsien-chun, who had previously served as Director of Transportation under the Taiwan Provincial Administrative Executive Office and Commissioner of Finance of the Taiwan Provincial Government. Yet Jen did not rely upon his father's resources. When he decided to pursue studies in the United

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States, his mother encouraged him to ask his father for the cost of an airline ticket. Carrying US$500 provided by his mother, he boarded a flight to America alone. A twenty-five-year-old young man from Taiwan, with just US$500 in his pocket, began his pursuit of the American Dream.

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Chapter 3
Higher Education in America: Three Universities, Three Degrees (1962–1969)

In 1962, Joseph J. Jen arrived in the United States and enrolled at Washington State University to study Food Science. He obtained his master's degree in Food Science in 1964. He subsequently entered the University of California, Berkeley, where he pursued doctoral studies in Comparative Biochemistry, receiving his PhD in 1969.

From food science to biochemistry, and from master's studies to doctoral research, Jen progressively deepened his scientific expertise. Yet his intellectual ambitions did not end there. Between 1985 and 1986, he also pursued a Master of Business Administration (MBA) at Southern Illinois University. For a scientist who had already secured a tenured academic position to return to university in his forties for business training was an unusual decision. His determination to combine management expertise with scientific knowledge would become a defining feature of his subsequent professional career.

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Chapter 4
From Clemson to Campbell Soup: Forging Experience in Academia and Industry (1969–1992)

In 1969, after completing his doctorate, Joseph J. Jen joined Clemson University as an Assistant Professor and subsequently advanced to the rank of Professor, engaging in teaching, research and extension activities in Food Science and Biochemistry. Located in South Carolina, Clemson University is an important public research institution in the southern United States. Jen spent the first decade of his academic career there.

In the early 1980s, he made an unexpected decision to leave academia and enter the private sector. He joined Campbell Soup Company as Director of Research, remaining with the company for six years. Campbell Soup was one of the world's major food companies, and his experience there taught him how to translate laboratory research into products suitable for large-scale production. It also provided him with a deeper understanding of the commercial principles governing the food industry.

In 1986, Jen returned to academia as Head of the Department of Food Science and Technology at the University of Georgia, a position he held for another six years. His transition from corporate research director to university department head

demonstrated his ability to move effectively between industry and academic leadership. One chapter of his autobiography is entitled “Learning by Doing,” a phrase that perhaps offers the most accurate summary of his professional philosophy.

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Chapter 5
Cal Poly: The First Chinese-American Dean of an Agricultural College (1992–2001)

In 1992, Joseph J. Jen achieved the first historic breakthrough of his professional career when he was appointed Dean of the College of Agriculture at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly). He became the first Chinese American to serve as dean of an agricultural college at an American university.

Cal Poly is renowned for its educational philosophy of “Learn by Doing,” and its agricultural college enjoys a strong reputation throughout California and the United States. Jen served as dean for nine years, from 1992 to 2001, promoting educational reforms and international cooperation. His work received widespread recognition both within and beyond the university. Cal Poly President Warren J. Baker later remarked: “Joe Jen is a true champion of Cal Poly agriculture and its Learn by Doing tradition. He played a key role in developing the college's programmes and strengthening Cal Poly's reputation as a leader in this field.”

During his years at Cal Poly, Jen also served as an adviser to the California Department of Food and Agriculture and as a member of the California State Board of Food and Agriculture. He additionally worked as a consultant to the United Nations,

providing advice to American food companies and foreign governments.

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Chapter 6
A Telephone Call from Washington (2001)

In 2001, Joseph J. Jen experienced the most important turning point of his life. One chapter of his autobiography is aptly entitled “A Telephone Call from Washington.”

The call came from the White House. President George W. Bush nominated him to serve as Under Secretary of Agriculture for Research, Education and Economics, and his appointment was subsequently confirmed by the United States Senate. Jen formally assumed office in July 2001 and served until May 2005.

He became the highest-ranking Asian American born in mainland China to serve in the United States federal government. The Research, Education and Economics (REE) mission area of the United States Department of Agriculture was one of the department's largest scientific and educational divisions, overseeing billions of dollars in research funding, statistical services and economic analysis. Jen's five years of service there can be characterised by two principal priorities: genomics and obesity.

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Chapter 7
Genomics and Obesity: Two Major Initiatives at the Department of Agriculture

Among the achievements Joseph J. Jen valued most during his tenure at the Department of Agriculture was his promotion of animal genome sequencing. As the sequencing of the human genome and rice genome approached completion, leaders in animal science visited his office to ask whether funding could be provided for animal DNA sequencing. Jen approached the Director of the National Human Genome Research Institute at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) with an ambitious proposal: “How about helping to sequence a cow, representing mammals; a chicken, representing birds; and a honeybee, representing insects?”

He strongly advocated genomic research. During his tenure, the United States took a leading international role in completing genome sequencing projects involving animals such as cattle, chickens, pigs and honeybees. Researchers working in the field of genetically related food science expressed considerable appreciation for his contributions. His efforts also helped strengthen America's leadership in agricultural genomics and contributed to the country's broader position in agricultural research. Jen chaired the federal interagency working groups on livestock genomics and plant

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genomics, and initiated interagency scientific working groups on obesity prevention and prion diseases.

Obesity was another major focus of his work. He regarded it as one of the central challenges confronting the American agricultural and food system, although he candidly acknowledged that “the obesity programme was not as successful as genomics.”

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Chapter 8
A Diplomat: Signing Five U.S.-China Cooperation Agreements in a Single Meeting

As Under Secretary of Agriculture, Joseph J. Jen also played a distinctive diplomatic role. During his tenure, the United States Department of Agriculture developed close relationships with China's Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Science and Technology, and numerous other government agencies. Representing the United States, he signed a substantial number of bilateral cooperation agreements with China.

One of the most remarkable occasions occurred during a meeting with Li Xueyong, China's Vice Minister of Science and Technology, when Jen signed five bilateral research cooperation agreements in a single session, an exceptional achievement that significantly advanced communication and collaboration between China and the United States in agricultural and food science. His autobiography recorded the moment: “This was a historic event, with the largest number of agreements signed during a single meeting.”

Over the following four years, the United States Department of Agriculture maintained extensive interactions with China's Ministry of Science and Technology, Ministry of Agriculture and other government departments. The department dispatched several teams of American scientists to northwestern China to

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assist with soil erosion prevention and grassland restoration projects.

Jen was also instructed by the United States Department of State to travel to India and meet the Indian Minister of Agriculture to promote the importation of Bt cotton seeds. Through his negotiations, the Indian government agreed within less than a week to permit imports of Bt cotton seeds from the United States.

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Chapter 9
After Retirement: A Second Career in Food Safety (2006–Present)

In 2005, Joseph J. Jen stepped down from his position at the Department of Agriculture. In 2006, he returned to Cal Poly as Special Adviser to the President, remaining in that role until his retirement in 2009.

Yet the second half of his professional life was only beginning. From 2006 onward, he devoted his energy to food safety. He served as Chairman of the Advisory Board of the Bor S. Luh Food Safety Research Center at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Co-Chair of the Global Food Safety Expert Committee of the International Union of Food Science and Technology (IUFoST), and Regional Editor for North America and Asia of the international journal Food Control.

In 2010, he was elected a Fellow of the International Union of Food Science and Technology. In 2012, he co-edited the book Food Safety: Past Experiences and Future Challenges.

Jen used his professional influence to promote the international development of China's food safety research. He observed that Chinese researchers submitted the largest number of manuscripts to Food Control, nearly 500, yet fewer than one in ten were accepted. In his assessment, many

studies lacked sufficient overall quality and originality. Whenever he visited Chinese universities, he delivered lectures on “How to Publish Papers in International Scientific Journals,” urging researchers not to rush into writing manuscripts but instead to concentrate their energy on conducting meaningful scientific research.

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Chapter 10
Concluding Reflections: A Scientist-Administrator Who Broke the Glass Ceiling

Joseph J. Jen's life can be described through the title of his autobiography, The Stories of My Life. Yet the central theme of that story can be expressed through another word: breaking barriers.

Born in wartime Chongqing, educated in Taiwan and scientifically trained in the United States, Jen ultimately became the highest-ranking Asian American born in mainland China to serve in the United States federal government. He became the first Chinese-American dean of an agricultural college at an American university. At the Department of Agriculture, he promoted animal genome sequencing, helping the United States strengthen its international leadership in agricultural genomics. Even after retirement, he continued his professional work, devoting the later stages of his life to food safety.

He often said, “I have always been a scientist.” What distinguished him from many other scientists, however, was his background in management and business. From Clemson University to Campbell Soup, from the University of Georgia to Cal Poly, and from the United States Department of Agriculture to Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Jen moved confidently

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among academia, industry and government. This combined identity as a scientist and administrator enabled him to make contributions in each position that extended well beyond purely technical matters.

In 2011, Jen returned to National Taiwan University to deliver a lecture entitled “NTU Graduates Breaking the Glass Ceiling.” Drawing upon his personal experiences, he demonstrated to younger generations that a child born in rural Chongqing and raised in Taiwan could rise to the senior levels of the American federal government, establish bridges for agricultural cooperation between China and the United States, and become one of the influential figures in international food safety after retirement.

From “Little Bishan” to Under Secretary, and from the eldest male of the twenty-ninth generation of the Yixing Jen family to a senior official of the United States Department of Agriculture, Joseph J. Jen has devoted more than eight decades of life to demonstrating how science can transcend boundaries. His legacy is a remarkable narrative of scientific inquiry, institutional leadership and humanitarian commitment.

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