

## **Yao Chen Rides to the Rescue.**

*Dik Leatherdale.*

As I may have hinted elsewhere, the London Atlas was never the most reliable of machines, even by the standards of the time. It was rare to get through a week without some hardware problem or another though, to be fair we did have an excellent team of maintenance engineers who were on top of their jobs and could generally fix things within an hour or so.

It must have been in the very early 1970s when a fault cropped up which looked a bit more intractable. As the hours went by, and the hours turned into a day and then into two days, people started to look worried. We had applications to run for customers. They had bills to send out to their customers. We didn't know the term "time-critical" and if we had, it would have been measured in days rather than seconds, but time-criticality was obviously going to be a problem.

Our engineers were in need of help. And help was not far away. By this time Yao Chen had left Manchester University and returned to his former employer, no longer Ferranti, or ICT, but, ICL. And, as luck would have it, he had become a person of some importance based just down the road in ICL's High Holborn office. So it was that around six o'clock, after a distressingly pointless day in the office I was sitting in reception "enjoying" a cup of machine-made coffee when in walked Yao Chen. He was I think, as surprised to see me as I was to see him, but he had been my tutor at Manchester and we exchanged a few friendly words before he disappeared into the machine room and down the spiral staircase, in the manner of the White Rabbit in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland.

I was not a witness to what happened next, but I was given an account the next day. Yao sat down in front of the engineers' control panel and flicked various switches, pushed a few buttons and looked at the indicator lights. This process was repeated several times before Yao finally announced which one of the 9000 or so circuit boards needed to be changed.

And with that he got up and left. Back up the spiral staircase, through reception with a friendly wave and out into the night. The whole exercise had taken less than half an hour. Twenty minutes later Atlas was back and processing our most time-critical jobs. But for me, the most impressive thing was that he didn't wait to see if he was correct in his diagnosis. He knew he was right. There was no point in hanging around. He had more important things to do.

What a guy!

*For those who've never met Yao Chen, you can get to know how passionate he was about the Atlas hardware by reading the transcript of a recent interview with him here:*

<http://elearn.cs.man.ac.uk/~atlas/docs/Audio%20Interview%20-%20hardware.pdf>

[Ed.]

