

## MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

### JAMES J. Y. LIU (1926 – 1986)

James J.Y. Liu, Professor of Chinese and, by courtesy, of Comparative Literature, chairman of the Department of Asian Languages, 1969-75, died on May 26, 1986, at the age of 60, a victim of cancer of the esophagus. He is survived by his daughter, Sarah, of Stanford, and two brothers and two sisters, all of China.

Born April 14, 1926 in Peking, he grew up in a typical Chinese intellectual family of that time. Although the curriculum of the primary school that he attended in Peking was not much different from that of its American counterpart, during his spare time at home he was made to memorize the Confucian classics and Tang poetry. Such training proved quite useful, as he found out later, even though at that time he did not always understand what he was reading. He enjoyed reciting classical poetry, however, and, by his own account, wrote his first poem, a pentasyllabic Quatrain (jueju) when he was only seven.

His formal training in English began in the first year of junior middle school, and he became so interested in the literature written in the language that when he enrolled as an undergraduate at Fu Jen University of Peking, he chose to major in Western languages and literature. A Catholic university, Fu Jen was noted for its cosmopolitan faculty. "To give just a few examples," as he recalled later, "I studied English and American literature with Chinese and American professors.. ., Latin with a German priest who conducted his classes in English and taught us the pronunciation of Church Latin with its Italian propensities, so that we pronounced 'Caesar' more like 'Chase-her' than 'Seize-her,' French literature with a French Sinologist, and Greek and Roman literature in English translation with a German professor, Gustav Ecke, who was well known in the West as an authority on Chinese art."

Upon graduating from Fu Jen with a B.A. thesis on Virginia Woolf, he entered the graduate school of National Tsing Hua University, also in Peking, to continue his study in English and French literature. It was when Sir William Empson was teaching at both Tsing Hua and Peking University. He attended his classes on Shakespeare and modern poetry at both places. He also struggled through his Seven Types of Ambiguity," said Liu, "even though he had warned us to keep off it."

His graduate tenure at Tsing Hua was cut short when he was awarded a British Council Scholarship and left for the University of Bristol, where he eventually obtained his M.A. degree in 1952 with a thesis on Marlowe. While at Bristol, he was given the special privilege of enrolling at Wadham College of Oxford University. The Warden of Wadham at that time was Sir Maurice Bowra who, being a comparativist himself, greatly encouraged the young graduate student from China to undertake comparative studies of Chinese and Western literature.

One year before he finished his M.A. degree, he was appointed Lecturer in Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Thus began a long and distinguished career of teaching and research that subsequently took him to the University of

Hong Kong, New Asia College, which later became part of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the universities of Hawaii, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, and finally Stanford, where he was appointed a full professor in 1967 and remained in that capacity until his death.

James Liu was a person of many talents and accomplishments. He was a poet (writing in both modern and classical Chinese), a translator, and a conversationalist. But above all he was a scholar. He authored altogether eight books, including Paradox - Language - Poetics, accepted for publication by Princeton University Press just before his death, and numerous articles and reviews. A measure of the high esteem in which he was held by his academic peers can be seen in the fact that he was a Guggenheim fellow in 1971, a National Endowment for the Humanities fellow in 1978-79, and the recipient of grants from the American Council of Learned Societies in 1972 and 1982. He was a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Rutgers University during the fall semester in 1984.

As a scholar, he was remarkable for his great boldness and enterprise. Whereas most scholars, if they pioneer a new field, will often spend the rest of their career developing it, he would regularly after completing one pioneering work, promptly move on to something quite new. His first book, The Art of Chinese Poetry, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1962 and translated into Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, was epoch-making in its organization and methods of analysis. After it he turned to a study of The Chinese Knight-errant, a pioneering attempt, still unmatched, to write the history of a literary theme. Next he moved to an analysis of The Poetry of Li Shang-yin, a notoriously difficult shi poet of the 9th century, then to a great period of ci poetry (Major Lyricists of the Northern Sung), then to a broad study of traditional Chinese critical theory (Chinese Theories of Literature), and so forth. The other two books in his corpus are Essentials of Chinese Art and The Interlingual Critic. Each work was not only new in subject matter, but new in kind. He confided to one of us once, after completing his book on Li Shang-yin, that while he could well have gone on to do parallel studies of other poets, he felt it more important to do something of a kind that had not been attempted before. As a result of his enterprise, the work he left behind is of extraordinary range as well as quality.

Another distinguishing characteristic of his as a scholar was his comparative approach in the study of Chinese literature. Being well acquainted with literary study in the European tradition, above all within the English-speaking domain, he worked assiduously to apply to Chinese literature recent methods of study that had been developed within the West. At the same time he remained keenly aware of the historical and cultural differences between Chinese and Western literature, and he warned continually against an indiscriminate grafting of Western methods onto Chinese texts. In fact, one of his life-long ambitions was to come up with a theoretical framework that would be comprehensive and sound enough to encompass not only Chinese literature, but literature of other countries as well. As he put it at the end of his Chinese Theories of Literature:

Having made due allowances for differences in beliefs, assumptions, prejudices, and ways of thinking, between different cultures and different ages, we must aspire to be transhistorical and transcultural, searching for literary features and qualities and critical concepts and standards that transcend historical and cultural differences. Otherwise we should no longer speak of

"literature" but only of discrete "literatures," nor of "criticism" but only of "criticisms."

While carrying on a highly productive career as a scholar, he did not neglect his duties as a teacher. In classrooms, as in his writings, he impressed his students with a keen and incisive intellect that cut through a complex literary problem to its core. He also had a knack for introducing Western readers without any knowledge of the Chinese language to the intricacies of Chinese poetry. But what really set him apart as a teacher was his ability to inspire. As a former student recalls with affection and awe:

My classmates and I were dazzled by this young man who was so completely at ease in Chinese and English literature that he could quote freely and copiously from either to illuminate the other. He quickly turned the classwork from a dreary exercise in what was then called Sinology into a rare literary pleasure. The experience might have been daunting, even intimidating -- how were we students, after all, ever going to acquire the abilities he possessed? -- but James had the gift of not merely dazzling his students but also of inspiring them to persevere.

In recognition of his outstanding performance as a teacher, he was given a dean's award for distinguished teaching at Stanford in 1978-79.

James Liu was undoubtedly one of the most distinguished appointments ever made, not only in the Department of Asian Languages, but also in the humanities at Stanford as a whole. His untimely passing has left a void that will be very difficult, if not impossible, to fill.

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