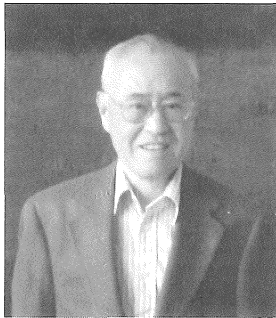


## Remembering Stephen Soong

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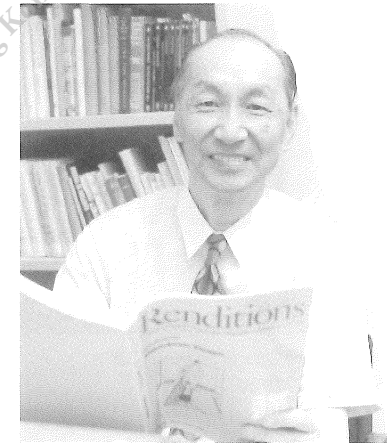


Over the years I have written only two pieces about my dear friend George Kao: an essay on his translation of *The Great Gatsby* (Taipei, 1971) and a review of the *New Dictionary of Idiomatic American English* (Reader's Digest, 1994), now appearing as two articles in George Kao's essay collection *More Than Words Can Tell* 一言難盡 (Taipei, 2001). Of the other Founding Editor Stephen C. Soong, though I had known him since the early forties, I have written just one preface to his book entitled *Lin Yiliang on Poetry* 林以亮詩話 (Taipei, 1976). We had corresponded regularly and often by long letters since my Yale days (1948-54). But at the time of Stephen's passing, I was not equal to the task of writing a commemorative essay because of my heart condition. I am redressing the situation by writing this essay, though I am mainly recalling a time before he had assumed editorial responsibilities at *Renditions*.

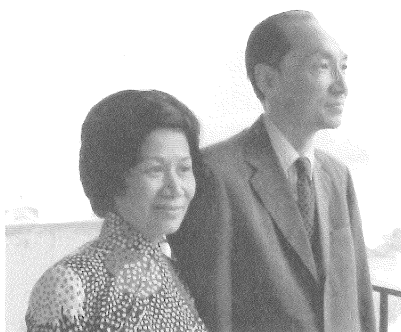
In July 1937, before leaving for the interior himself on account of the impending

invasion of China by Japan, my father moved the family from Nanjing to Shanghai, to live in a residential lane on Rue Mercier in the French Concession. In the fall I began the third year of my high school at the Middle School of Great China University. My brother Tsi-an, newly recovering from TB, was admitted to Kuang Hua University as an external student. Other external students there included Stephen Soong from Yenching University, Liu Ts'un-yan from National Peking University, and Chang Chih-lien 張芝聯 from Tsing Hua University. All of them were active contributors to the school journal *Wen-zhe* 文哲. It was therefore no surprise that Stephen would years later ask Professor Liu T'sun-yan to serve as guest editor of a special issue of *Renditions* on Chinese Fiction: *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction* (1984).

My brother Tsi-an was a sonorous reader of prose. He and Stephen also exchanged novels to read, such as those by J.B. Priestley and even lesser works by Francis Brett Young. I was less adventurous, and preferred the certified classics of fiction. To both my brother and myself Stephen appeared a convincing spokesman for modern British literature. Certainly no one else among our friends was as passionate and knowledgeable about Aldous Huxley, T.S. Eliot, and the Bloomsbury group. Though I may have read André Maurois's *Poets and Prophets* with its seductive chapters on Lawrence and Huxley, it was Stephen's example of personal enthusiasm that has made me a lifelong student and admirer of Huxley. Stephen may have lost interest in Huxley after he embraced the perennial philosophy



Stephen Soong with a copy of *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction* just off the press.



Mr and Mrs Soong at their CUHK residence, 1980.

and turned to mysticism, but I am with him all the way, believing that, of all the British writers receiving high acclaim in the twenties and thirties, Huxley alone remains highly relevant today as a sage and prophet who has so much to teach us about our civilization and its future.

I believe it is following my graduation from college in June 1942 that Stephen had chances to speak with me alone and became my friend as well. In Shanghai then, friends didn't call you beforehand when making an informal visit. I had no job in 1942-43, and no friends other than a handful of college classmates. Tsi-an had far more social engagements than I, and when some of his friends paid a social visit and found me studying alone in the living room, they were usually impressed, especially Stephen, who could comment on whatever I was reading at the moment. On my part, I was happy to talk books with him, knowing that he had inherited a fine library of Western-language books from his father Song Ch'un-fang 宋春舫 (1891-1938), a European-educated scholar and playwright, and that he had annually enlarged it with fine acquisitions in English literature and criticism.

A few instances of Stephen's book-lending would also indicate how remarkable his personal library really was. I was reading Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) soon after graduation, and came across a reference to A.E. Housman's lecture of the same year entitled *The Name and Nature of Poetry*. Knowing that Stephen was fond of Housman's lyrical poetry, I asked him if he had the booklet. Lectures containing fewer

than thirty pages were very hard to get once they were sold or given away. But to my amazement Stephen did have the booklet. In 1943, I was reading all of Keats's letters, and wanted to read J. Middleton Murry's acclaimed book *Keats and Shakespeare* (1925). In my Shanghai years I had borrowed seven or eight books by Murry from the Municipal Library, but *Keats and Shakespeare* I had to borrow from Stephen. Similarly, I read the library copy of F.R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), but the even more important *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936) I obtained from Stephen.

Stephen was very loyal to his friends, and inclined to see in each the concrete signs of future achievement. As his new friend in Shanghai, I would hear him sing the praises of his Yenching classmates, especially the poet Wu Xinghua 吳興華 and the actor and man of theatre Huang Zongjiang 黃宗江. Thanks to Stephen's efforts to publish his poems under the name of Liang Wenxing 梁文星, Wu Xinghua has remained today an important name in modern Chinese poetry even though he had died as an early victim of the Cultural Revolution. I don't know in what ways Stephen helped Huang Zongjiang, but he did write a play for his younger sister Huang Zongying 黃宗英, eventually an actress of far greater fame.

With all our devotion to Western literature, Stephen and I were eventually distinguished for what we did on behalf of Chinese Literature. I finally achieved a measure of fame with the publication of *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* in 1961, and for its intended readers in the West the most sensational chapters must have been the ones on Eileen Chang and Qian Zhongshu. Even Chinese readers who had in the forties read their works of fiction must have been surprised because no earlier literary historian or critic had registered their importance in this fashion, and no one had written about these works for years. On my part, I must thank Stephen Soong for stressing their importance in his letters and conversations with me. With my primary training in Western literature, without the friendship of Stephen Soong, I could have missed the opportunity to read them, since they were not at all mentioned in earlier histories of modern Chinese literature.

Qian Zhongshu and his wife Yang Jiang had returned to Shanghai in July 1941, and stayed there until 1949. Stephen must have soon made their acquaintance in 1941, if they had not met earlier. From then on, my brother and I began to receive Qian's publications in both Chinese and English. It was not easy to make photocopies of printed materials in the forties; Stephen must have got enough copies of offprints from Qian himself to send to deserving friends capable of genuinely enjoying Qian's wit and erudition.

In the fall of 1943, after my brother had gone to the interior, Stephen invited me to a party in his home at 1002 Edinburgh Road. Qian and Yang along with select members of the literary elite were also invited. Stephen must have said good things about me to the Qians so that they were well disposed toward me. Also present was Yang Jiang's sister Yang Bi 楊璧, who had just graduated as an English major from Aurora College for Women where Qian himself was teaching. Stephen must have thought she and I would get along well as friends. But it was an enchanting evening for me mainly because I had never before met a man of such dazzling wit and charm even though I preferred to stick to my own plan of studies rather than submit to his influence right away. I did see Yang Bi two or three times, but without the leisure or financial resources at my disposal, I was not in a position to be a suitor. In the fall of 1947, when I was about to leave for America, Qian's novel *Fortress Besieged* came out. I read it eagerly and with huge enjoyment, not knowing that in a few years I would be lavishing praise on the novel and its author in a book of my own.

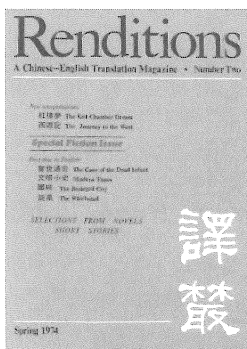
Except for Qian, Stephen and I didn't ever discuss modern Chinese writers in our Shanghai years. I was so intent on mastering the Western tradition that, even though I did reread the *Four Books* and *Dream of the Red Chamber* upon graduation, I couldn't spare any time for contemporary Chinese literature. In the summer of 1944, I finally met Eileen Chang at a party given by a more recent graduate of my university. The meeting was memorable, but she didn't excite me the way Qian Zhongshu did. Whereas Qian was handsome, witty and eloquent, Eileen was gawky, diffident, and so myopic that she had to wear very thick glasses. But from 1943 to 1945, she was the hottest writer in Shanghai, and her two books, *Romances* 傳奇 and *Gossip* 流言

were huge sellers. A few years earlier, I had been highly impressed by her essay 'The Dream of a Genius' 天才夢 when it first appeared in the monthly *West Wind* 西風, but I remained an obdurate reader unpersuaded by her high reputation and popularity because of my rigid adherence to a course of reading in Western literature.

After I completed my Ph.D. at Yale, with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation (1952-1955) I devoted myself to writing a history of modern Chinese fiction, and I wrote to Stephen for advice.

Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate his letters sent from Hong Kong during the fifties. The Soongs had presumably moved to Hong Kong in 1948. Both Stephen and his wife Mae were Eileen's faithful readers even in Shanghai, but once she arrived in Hong Kong in 1952, they became her best friends—in fact her only confidants. And once Stephen knew that I was writing a history of modern Chinese fiction, he sent me a letter right away urging me to read Eileen Chang for her intrinsic importance as a writer of stories and essays (I still remember the sensation of reading that letter). He also sent along the undated editions of Eileen Chang's two books published without her knowledge by a Hong Kong Press: ten stories from the original edition of *Romances* in three volumes, each featuring on its cover a pouting woman, presumably the heroine of 'The Golden Cangue' 金鎖記, in identical clothes but coloured differently, and the same publisher's *Gossip*, with its original cover and illustrations intact, but some of the author's portraits missing.

The pirated editions of Chang's two books were what I used to form my initial but unchanged view of her originality and greatness. Earlier in Shanghai, I had read only one short essay of hers; all the commentaries by critics hostile or friendly written during the middle forties I didn't read until after they were reprinted in Taipei when she had become a legendary figure. In New Haven, confronted with the overwhelming evidence of Eileen Chang's originality and greatness, I had to form a judgment, and I decided that she was, as I later wrote in my *History*, 'the best and most important writer in Chinese today'. Having read so many modern Chinese writers of acknowledged importance, I found her to be altogether new, a new sensibility, a new way



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Special Issue: EILEEN CHANG

of looking at the world, and a new beginning for modern Chinese literature.

In the Conclusion to the First Edition of my *History*, I singled out five writers of fiction—Eileen Chang, Zhang Tianyi, Qian Zhongshu, Shen Congwen, and Jiang Kui—for high praise because they 'have created worlds stamped with their distinctive personality and moral passion' (p. 506). I have now made explicit my special debt to Stephen Soong for having introduced me to two of these writers. As a member of its Advisory Board, I have of course contributed articles and translations to *Renditions*, but I feel especially gratified that my influence should have been so pervasive in No. 2 of Spring 1974, a Special Fiction Issue edited by George Kao and containing among other things translations from the works of Zhang Tianyi, Jiang Kui, and Qian Zhongshu. I am also very pleased that Editors Eva Hung and D.E. Pollard could have produced such a rich Special Issue on Eileen Chang (No. 45, Spring 1996) so soon after her death in September 1995, using among others the contributions of Janet Ng and Karen Kingsbury, who had started studying and translating her works in my classes at Columbia University. ☒

C. T. Hsia