



Liu Ts'un-yan
(1917–2009)

Liu Ts'un-yan
(1917–2009)



Liu Ts'un-yan was one of the finest representatives of a very special group of Chinese scholars, superbly trained and skilled in Classical scholarship but with an equal command of modern literature, and with great ability in Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist philosophy and religion. At the same time, he belonged to the generation of the early twentieth century which received Western ideas and blended them to create a new approach to the study of China.

Originally from Shandong province, during the time of the Manchu Qing, the last imperial dynasty, Liu Ts'un-yan's family had been Chinese Bannermen, honoured for their loyalty. His father Liu Tsung-ch'uan was one of the last graduates of the old examination system in Classical Chinese, and though the new *Baihua* movement of colloquial literature became increasingly influential after the fall of the empire in 1911, Liu Tsung-ch'uan trained his son in the old tradition – reading the Confucian classics from the age of three, and composing formal pieces of prose and poetry.

As a child, however, Liu Ts'un-yan suffered from poor health, and his family eventually entrusted him to the care of a Taoist monastery, where he was taught breathing and other techniques, and where he gained an appreciation of the Taoist approach to philosophy and to life. A sensible proponent of traditional Chinese medicine, he later studied the history of alchemy and the search for the Golden Pill and the elixir of life. His scholarship in that field was always informed by Western science, but he believed nonetheless that Taoist learning, once removed from exaggeration and excessive ambition, had done a great deal of good to people and had a great deal to offer.

Liu Ts'un-yan grew up in one of the most turbulent periods of Chinese history, for the new Republic was fragmented by warlord rivalries, and even after a notional unification by the Nationalist regime the 1930s saw continuing civil war and a steady and growing threat from Japan, with attacks on Shanghai, the occupation of Manchuria, and a final full-scale offensive and conquest in 1937. Against this

background of political stress, Liu Ts'un-yan would later compose a novel, *Qing chun*, and in his preface he explained that:

This novel depicts the changes in the lives of several characters from old traditional family backgrounds, covering a period of approximately thirty years from the last years of the Manchu dynasty to the mid-twenties. It also reflects from one specific angle the complicated changes that took place in various sectors of society at that time. It treats as its theme, if it can so be called, the solitary, silent suffering of a number of women, and the miserable childhood of a number of children ... Although there are a number of adult characters in the book, my sympathy and my hopes clearly lie with the women and children.¹

Liu Ts'un-yan's first book, a history of Chinese literature, was published at Suzhou in 1935, when he was just eighteen.² He went on to study at Beijing University in the late 1930s, and then worked in the Education Department of Hong Kong. Besides his native Mandarin, he knew the dialects of Shandong, where his family had come from, and those of Canton and Shanghai. He also became fluent in English, and during the 1950s he completed degrees at Hong Kong University and then at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. His thesis on the authorship of the *Fengshen yanyi* earned him a doctorate from London and was published by Harrassowitz in 1962.³ It combined the elements which would be mainstays of his scholarship: intense attention to bibliographical detail and textual history as a means to identify authors and their various contributions to different manuscripts and editions; a concern for the Ming dynasty novel and its antecedents; and a remarkable understanding of Buddhist and Taoist contributions to literature and philosophy.

In 1967, Liu Ts'un-yan published *Chinese Popular Fiction in Two London Libraries*, a study of the editions – many extremely rare – in the collections of the British Museum and the Royal Asiatic Society. Again, this is painstaking bibliography, but it was work done for a generous purpose: to introduce the works concerned to a wider audience, with the view that they should be regarded as the common heritage of mankind, and that:

To promote real understanding between nations we must be capable of a proper appraisal of one another's virtues as well as weaknesses, particularly as reflected in everyday life. Thus, the study of popular fiction is not necessarily of less significance than classical Chinese studies ... In fact this very branch of learning ... has stemmed from an appreciation of genuinely popular literature and the human feelings it registers.⁴

And at the same time as he worked in meticulous fashion on text history, he sought also to communicate with a wider Chinese audience: besides his novel *Qing chun* and the study of literature, he composed four one-act historical plays, which were

performed in Hong Kong and later published with an essay on production and an introduction to Western pieces.⁵

In 1962, at the age of forty-five, Liu Ts'un-yan came to the Australian National University. Encouraged by the great bibliographer Fang Chao-ying, who had a visiting appointment in Canberra at the time, he was appointed Senior Lecturer and then Reader, and in 1966 he succeeded Gören Malmqvist as Professor of Chinese. He was a Foundation Fellow of the Academy in 1969, was a member of Council, and served two terms as Dean of the Faculty of Asian Studies during the 1970s.

As a university administrator, Professor Liu was always concerned that matters should run smoothly, and he showed remarkable skill in dealing with sometimes fractious colleagues in the Faculty. His Department of Chinese included two major scholars, John Frodsham and Pierre Ryckmans, both Fellows of the Academy, and Liu's own work was an example to all of us. For teaching Chinese, he insisted upon a firm grounding in Classical language and literature, but he also sponsored courses on contemporary China, and he introduced a specialist Master's degree by coursework in modern Chinese, taught and examined entirely in that language. Even as other universities were reducing their teaching of languages and moving more and more into general cultural studies, Professor Liu maintained the highest expectations for his students' control of spoken and written Chinese. His graduates now hold senior posts in universities and the general community; one of them is Prime Minister.

From 1972 until his retirement Professor Liu represented the academic staff on the ANU Council, a remarkable term of eleven years. He seldom involved himself in active discussion, but Chancellor Sir John Crawford remarked that in any debate he kept an eye on Professor Liu's reactions, as a guide to the decision which should be made. When he formally retired in 1983 he was awarded the unusual distinction of a University Fellowship, and received an honorary doctorate.

Though Liu Ts'un-yan thus played an active role in the administration and teaching of ANU, his real achievements lay in research; and in this regard the university proved an ideal setting and opportunity for him to make use of his previous years in scholarship. A man of utmost dedication, giving attention to most meticulous detail, he published many articles in Chinese, English and French on Taoist and Buddhist studies and on general history. Among his works were discussions of the ancient philosopher Mozi and of the introduction of Zoroastrianism and Manicheism into China during Tang; studies on early Chinese knowledge of tuberculosis and on the philosophy of the Ming period; and his 1974 Morrison lecture *On the Art of Ruling a Big Country: views of three Chinese emperors*. He contributed to the *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, and I well recall his prompt and effective response when he was asked to prepare a series of articles to fill important gaps in *A Song Biography*, edited in France and published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong. In his introduction to a collection of Liu Ts'un-yan's articles in French and English, the celebrated Professor Paul Demiéville recorded how

Professor Liu wrote to me about ten years ago that he was about to finish reading through the entire Taoist canon (... 1,120 volumes in the 1926 edition); it had taken him two years to do so, and the reading notes he had accumulated filled fifty notebooks. That is how a Chinese scholar gathers material for his research!⁶

At the same time, Liu Ts'un-yan was a devotee of Chinese opera and chess, and he always maintained his interest and concern for the modern Chinese novel, with articles on Luo Guanzhong the putative author of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, on Wu Cheng'en the composer of *Xiyou ji* 'Monkey', and an elegant essay on the 'Social and Moral Limitations of Chinese Fiction before the Republic'.⁷ In 1984 he edited and compiled a major introduction for *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction from the Ch'ing and early Republican periods*.⁸

From such published work one may gauge the breadth and depth of Liu Ts'un-yan's command of Chinese civilisation and culture, from the earliest times to the present day, and his commitment to sharing that knowledge. Still more remarkable, however, is the assistance he gave to colleagues. No question was too small, no problem too esoteric, but he would immediately give it his utmost attention and would invariably produce an excellent answer. For my own work in Han history, very marginal to his immediate interests, I could always count on his advice and help: on one occasion just a year or so ago he sorted out and explained a corrupt and very uncertain text from a stele of the late second century AD. And at the time of his death he was working, with another colleague, on the text of the ancient Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi.

It was not only a matter of knowledge, however, for Liu Ts'un-yan himself expressed the best of the teachings of China in his own conduct, invariably courteous, always patient and consistently generous. His youthful training as a Taoist gave him an inner calm and confidence, and in the sometimes difficult atmosphere of university rivalries and notably in public debate about the nature of China and its political tensions, he was remarkable for his consistent balance and his lack of animosity; he was never unkind.

Far beyond Canberra and the ANU, Liu Ts'un-yan's reputation and influence were spread throughout the world of Chinese scholarship. He held honorary or visiting fellowships in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Tokyo, Paris, Columbia and Harvard, he was a regular guest and leading speaker at conferences in Taiwan and the People's Republic of China, while beside his honorary degree from ANU he held similar awards from Hong Kong, Korea and Murdoch in Western Australia. In 1992 his service to his adopted country was recognised by appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO).

In 1940 Liu Ts'un-yan married Chiang Szu-yung, and they spent more than sixty years together until her death a few years before his own. Their two children Selina

and Frank came also to Australia, and Ts'un-yan was justifiably proud of them and of his grandchildren. He continued working until the last evening, and during his final hours in hospital he spoke contentedly to his family before remarking that he was 'a little tired', and went to sleep for the last time.

Rafe de Crespigny

1 Translated by Pang Bingjun and John Minford in 'Preface to The Grand Capital: a novel by Liu Ts'un-yan first published as *Qing chun* "Youth", in *Sino-Asiatica: papers dedicated to Professor Liu Tsun-yan on the occasion of his eighty-fifth birthday*, edited by Wang Gungwu, Rafe de Crespigny and Igor de Rachewiltz, Canberra [Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU] 2002, 154–168 at 167.

Sino-Asiatica contains a bibliography of Liu Ts'un-yan's works in Western languages. Another festschrift, *A Daoist Florilegium*, edited by Lee Cheuk Yin and Chan Man Sing, was published by the Commercial Press of Hong Kong also in 2002, and lists many of his works in Chinese.

2 A second edition was published in Hong Kong in 1956.

3 *Buddhist and Taoist Influences on Chinese Novels*, Wiesbaden.

4 *Chinese Popular Fiction in Two London Libraries* (Hong Kong: Long Men, 1967), 163.

5 *Zai wushang di bianyuan shang* (Hong Kong: Ling Kee, 1959).

6 *Selected Papers from the Hall of Harmonious Wind* (Leiden: E J Brill, 1976), ix. Hall of Harmonious Wind was the title Liu Ts'un-yan gave, in traditional style, to his personal studio. A further volume, *New Excursions*, was published in 1984.

7 *Selected Papers from the Hall of Harmonious Wind*, 356–70; originally published in *AUMLA: Journal of the Australian Universities Language and Literature Association* 34 (1970).

8 A *Renditions* book, compiled with the assistance of John Minford and published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong.