

Wixted, Tim, “A Memoir of William Hung,” *Fellowship in Prayer* (Princeton) 32.5 (Aug. 1981), pp. 10-12. [William Hung = Hong Ye 洪業]

# A Memoir of William Hung

by TIM WIXTED

WHILE I was a graduate student in Cambridge in the early 1970's, it came to the attention of Professor Cleaves that I was working on the thirteenth-century poet-critic Yuan Hao-wen—an author Dr Hung had long admired and one he felt had not received the attention he deserved. Professor Cleaves, aware of Dr Hung's then-recent loss of his wife, felt it would be good to have me meet with this great scholar so as to try to get his mind off his loss and to focus his unparalleled talents on a subject dear to his heart.

Dr Hung and I met weekly. Our sessions over the kitchen table in his house on Gray Street became a ritual: first, there would be some short general conversation, then over tea and *pao-tzu*, we would have an intensive one- or two- and sometimes even three-hour session going over material I had left with him at the previous session. He would lead me off on all kinds of sinological byways, the cumulative effect of which forms the lion's share of whatever education I have in the field. We would unwind with low-key discussions about current politics, mutual Cambridge friends, a TV program or newspaper article one of us had seen. We would then often traipse off together to Chinatown. We became a familiar pair at one or two of the shops where Dr Hung was a respected customer, even if no one knew quite to make of him (or us), and even though generally in Chinatown he was treated with surprising indifference by most of the shopkeepers. He always bought me a package of *pao-tzu* to take home.

In introducing us, Professor Cleaves may have wanted to get his friend's mind onto other matters. Little did he know what peace and consolation he had brought me. It is hard to communicate how quieting and soothing the atmosphere was with Dr Hung in his kitchen. The feeling was that we could get on there with affairs that really mattered, while our private cares receded. An interesting process developed: at first, this kind but tough-willed man in his eighties transmitted youth and energy and vitality to someone fifty years his junior; and then, as the months passed, an oscillation of energy evolved between two people who in different ways charged each other's psyche.

Although I had but limited experience in this regard, I found Dr Hung exceptional among Chinese men of learning. Unlike many lesser scholars, and in spite of his having quite definite views on many matters and exceptional self-confidence in a wide range of scholarly areas, he was surprisingly willing to consider alternative views, differing interpretations, and other perspectives on a subject. He would mull over such suggestions for minutes at a time in silence, eyes closed, and mental computers racing, like Nero Wolfe. Then came full and open discussion. The measure of his greatness as a scholar was his willingness to give full consideration to such other possibilities, to talk out their

pros and cons, and finally to modify his own view if necessary. He was a living embodiment of what scholarship is all about.

Dr Hung had many endearing personal qualities. One was epitomized by the many junkets he enjoyed taking to Pepperell, Mass., with friends and relatives to picnic at the Crawford family grave in the beautiful New England cemetery there—which, as he would matter-of-factly point out, was to be his own gravesite. Over the years, we made trips in spring, summer, and fall, and he would always stop along the way to buy a potted plant to leave behind. Once there, the blankets having been spread next to a tombstone, and after a delicious picnic lunch, we would get him to talk about a wide range of matters. One disquisition I remember, around the time of Mao Tse-tung's death, concerned how certain he was that Chou En-lai's place in history would far eclipse that of Chairman Mao. A perennial theme at these gatherings was the generosity of the Crawford family, the kindness of their daughters (his American sisters), and the story of how this God-fearing and -loving family had "discovered" a precocious boy in Fukien early in the twentieth century. The last trip to Pepperell, of course, was last winter—on a cold clear bright day in December, with snow on the ground—which seemed a fitting metaphor for the steadfastness and illumination Dr Hung always bore.

At the graveside service last December, a prayer was read that had been specially written for Dr Hung by a friend of his in Fellowship in Prayer. A string of properly complimentary descriptive words about our deceased friend was read, and in their midst was one that struck me—the word "saintly." Doubtless this was an appropriate epithet (who am I to judge?), but I loved the man because of, or at least in spite of, his minor weaknesses.

Dr Hung did confess to me once that he had been pretty fierce in his younger days as an examiner and critic. And I suspect it was partly to make amends for this that over the years I knew him (and probably for decades earlier) he strove to give others their due.

One subject about which I found him a bit exasperating had to do with health. He knew far more about vitamins, disease, and body chemistry than any layman should. He could—and, in fact, once did—talk for two hours straight at a dinner party about yogurt: its history, culturation, chemistry, and so on and on. And if the truth be known, Dr Hung was usually in sinfully good spirits when visiting other people in the hospital. He was quite chipper, I remember, when we dropped in the hospital room of my father-in-law, a man a good twenty years younger than himself, who had just had a coronary by-pass. On one visit to Mount Auburn Hospital to see a member of the Harvard community who had just had an operation on his prostate, Dr Hung gave the poor soul a cheery ten-minute talk about how he had foreseen such a problem years ahead himself and had successfully taken zinc tablets as a preventative. To be fair to my dear old professor, however, I should add that even his bright mood was dampened when he went to the V.A. Hospital to see one of his long-term boarders who was dying of cancer.

There are so many stories one could tell. One time Dr Hung saw an ad for clothes on sale at a warehouse near Chinatown. We decided to go on over after

one of our shopping expeditions. He picked out a fancy sportcoat for fifteen dollars, I got a ten-dollar polyester special. We strutted around for a while, obviously nattily dressed, admiring our good taste and sharp business sense.

Those who did not know Dr Hung well would usually outdo themselves trying to open doors for him, lead him by the hand, and the like. It took me some time myself to realize that he stayed healthy largely because he did so many such things for himself. His determination was awesome.

As with many if not most of us, there was a bittersweet quality to Dr Hung's life: the heady draughts of activity in the 20's and 30's as a fund-raiser, speechgiver, and dean; the pain of humiliation in World War II; the special gratification that comes to an outstanding and loving teacher; the crushing loss of two daughters, and the joys and consolations of scholarship. It is a saga—the story of this young man from Fukien, borne across the sea, like a latter-day clipper ship.

What is some future historian to make of this generation of old-school Chinese, traditionally and Western-trained, who understood themselves and the culture from which they came too well to want to spend the rest of their lives there? Surely, they are not to be dismissed as Westernized Chinese intellectuals who became disaffected and/or deracinated. True, Dr Hung was unique. But, like many others of his generation, he was a dedicated teacher and pursuer of knowledge—one who had the courage of his convictions and was not afraid to speak the truth according to his own best lights. What distinguishes him, however, is that he was indifferent to differences in creed and nationality. He had a mind of his own and was more open and flexible in its use than most men a third his age. Truth was too important to him to be concerned with accidentals. We can all learn from this warm and giving man.