

VASSAR COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

**Memorial Minute for
Professor Emeritus of History Donald G. Gillin**

**Presented to the Faculty of Vassar College
18 February 2009**

Professor Don Gillin maintained a deep, lifelong engagement with the history of modern East Asia. No one could meet Don for more than five minutes without feeling the passion and force he brought to the study of politics in twentieth-century China.

Donald G. Gillin was born on June 3, 1930 in San Francisco. He graduated from Stanford University in 1952 with a B.A. in History and then earned both the M.A. and Ph.D. from Stanford. He taught briefly at the University of Michigan before settling in for a decade at Duke University, beginning in 1959. By the time he arrived at Vassar in 1968 he was a scholar of rising fame. In addition to teaching history, Don for many years chaired Vassar's program in East Asian Studies, as it was then configured.

In many ways Don was an archetypical scholar of the Cold War era. He received numerous grants from the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, and other institutions that sought to help the United States better comprehend its communist adversaries. Don examined broad ideological struggles between Chinese nationalism and communism, becoming increasingly interested in how local interests shaped that conflict and were shaped by it, in turn. Don had a longstanding partnership with the Hoover Institution at Stanford, where he conducted research over many summers. His books included *Warlord: Yen Hsi-shan in Shansi Province, 1911-1950*, published in 1967 by Princeton University Press. He also published a noted bibliography of East Asian

Studies, designed for use in undergraduate libraries; an edition of the writings of Sun Yat-sen; and many articles and reviews. In 1986 he caused a scholarly sensation with his book *Falsifying China's History*, published by the Hoover Institution Press, in which he eviscerated Sterling Seagrave's historical exposé of the powerful Soong family, whose members included Madame Chiang Kai-shek.

At Vassar, also, Professor Gillin was no stranger to controversy. His presentations on American sexual stereotypes of Asians, which included images drawn from *Playboy* and *Hustler*, among other sources, precipitated fierce campus-wide debate. At its peak, however, his course "Hollywood on Asia" had extremely high enrollments, and some former students remembered Don as a "dynamic lecturer" who "wove the history into a story which makes it fascinating to listen to."

Upon Don's retirement in 1992, his colleague in History Hsi-Huey Liang described him as "a well-informed and politically savvy scholar ... [who] startled me with his intimate knowledge of the ins and outs of 20th-century Chinese affairs." Hsi-Huey vividly remembered joining Don at a 1987 conference in Taipei that marked the 100th birthday of Chiang Kai-shek. "On the last day of the conference, there was our colleague Don Gillin," wrote Hsi-Huey, "lecturing to a large hall full of aging Kuomintang politicians, military men, and party bosses on the reason why they had lost the civil war to the communists some forty years ago. It was a sight to remember."

Don Gillin retired from Vassar in 1992. He died in August 2005 after a long struggle with Alzheimer's disease. He was predeceased in 2000 by his wife, Rose Marie, and is survived by two children, Paul Gillin of Westboro, Massachusetts, and Presto Rubel of Brimfield, Massachusetts. We remember Don Gillin as a passionate scholar and

teacher, whose work as both a historian and a critic of communism touched on some of the most crucial questions of his era.

Respectfully submitted,

Rebecca Edwards

Chair, Department of History

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Edwards". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

18 Feb. 2009