

## Memorial Minute for Hsi-Huey Liang

To be read at the Meeting of the Faculty of Vassar College,  
November 15, 2006

Hsi-Huey Liang, Professor Emeritus of History, an internationally-recognized specialist in European diplomatic, social, and urban history, died July 25, 2004, in Poughkeepsie after a brief illness. He was seventy-five. From 1948 to 1951 he read history at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and then came to Yale to work with Hajo Holborn, completing his Ph. D. in 1955.<sup>1</sup> Prior to joining the faculty permanently in 1970, he taught at Bard and UCLA and at Vassar as a visitor in 1965-66. He was an esteemed and respected colleague who devoted much energy to the College at large, serving as Chair of FPCC, on FASC, and as Chair of the Department of History.<sup>2</sup>

Those of us who had the privilege of working with Hsi-Huey before he retired in 1996 will remember an

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<sup>1</sup> "The Social Background of the Berlin Working Class Movement, 1890-1914." We do not know whether that brevity was record-breaking, but he certainly finished his Ph. D. with remarkable alacrity!

<sup>2</sup> Chair of FPCC from 1975-1977, on FASC from 1981-1984, and Department Chair from 1985-1988. From 1976-1981 he held the William R. Kenan, Jr., Chair.

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immensely cultivated, discreet, modest,<sup>3</sup> gracious gentleman of Sino-European culture, fluent in half a dozen languages, who brought, to quote one of his former students, now a professor at Ohio State University, "an extraordinary cosmopolitan, compassionate and witty sensibility to the craft of history."<sup>4</sup> That sensibility, along with a gift for theoretical analysis and beautifully crafted narrative, appears in such books as *The Rise of Modern Police and The European State System* (1992).

In the halls of Swift, Hsi-Huey was a gentle, unobtrusive presence, and in his quiet way mentored his junior colleagues in the department. A superb and beloved teacher of undergraduates, he dazzled not only his colleagues but also his students with his photographic memory. Hsi-Huey never took lecture notes to class, only an occasional artifact or primary source document. A few minutes before teaching he would pace around the back room of Swift, miraculously retrieving and organizing, in his head, whatever

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed so discreet and modest that we could not locate in the Departmental files a precise record of his many honors and awards, which we recall, includes a Guggenheim Fellowship.

<sup>4</sup> Carole Fink, "In Memoriam, Hsi-Huey Liang," *Perspectives* (February 2005), p. 30.

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subject he would be discussing that day. One of our brightest majors, chosen as the departmental intern, had her first serious conversation with Hsi-Huey after spending her junior year abroad. She remarked that it was "marvelous to see a true and pure intellect in action."

When Hsi-Huey was nearing retirement, Jim Merrell was teaching a student who had worked a lot with him. The student informed Jim during a conference that, "You're a good teacher, Mr. Merrell, but Mr. Liang is a GOD."<sup>5</sup> As an advisor, both of freshmen and declared majors, Hsi-Huey was legendary for his patience with less able students, and the infinite pains he took to assure that each student had the best possible selection of courses. One sophomore who had never taken a course with him asked that he be his major advisor, "because I have heard what a superb advisor he is."

Hsi-Huey Liang was also an accomplished artist. In Swift he routinely mystified his colleagues when he left on the blackboard after class one of his sketches of Europe with arrows pointing hither and yon, having somehow

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<sup>5</sup> Which would have much amused the completely secular Hsi-Huey Liang.

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captured the spirit of a historical moment for his students. He was doing intellectual flow charts well before the phrase had been coined! Nor were his talents confined to Swift blackboards. One of his books, *Berlin Before the Wall* (Routledge 1990), consists not only of his student journals from 1953-1954, when he was researching his Yale doctorate in that then-divided metropolis, but also of the sketches he made at the time.

Members of the Vassar Community who never knew Hsi-Huey may have had the pleasure of visiting the delightful memorial exhibit, "Houmptiphong: The Art and Life of Hsi-Huey Liang," at the Palmer Gallery at the College Center in October 2005. His highly original oil paintings recover the European past of his childhood in the 1930's, whereas the charming and whimsical marker and watercolor drawings were used to illustrate his last project, children's histories of modern Europe and modern China, which are in the course of publication.

Among his many pursuits during his retirement<sup>6</sup> is his extraordinary memoir, "Encounters in Berlin and Prague,"

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<sup>6</sup> It was hard for Hsi-Huey to abandon teaching completely, and after he retired in 1996 he accepted President Leon Botstein's invitation to return to Bard, where he

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which has already appeared in Czech and we hope will soon be available in English. One imagines that when this masterwork is published in its original English it will reach a wide audience and be reviewed in the *Sunday New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. The headline might be "A Wanderer in the Century," or, borrowing the title of André Malraux's 1927 novel, "The Temptation of the West."

This work is a true miracle, a marvelous hybrid residing somewhere between memoir and history, philosophical analysis and humor, pain and suffering, between past and present, truth and lies, memory and forgetting, East and West, childhood and old age, with the shadow of World War II and the Holocaust always in the background.

Hsi-Huey Liang, probably the only Vassar faculty member to have led "a cloak and dagger life" and to have "rescued his father from a carload of assassins,"<sup>7</sup> was born

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had begun his career, to offer a few more courses to select students. President Botstein observed "there are not many historians left who can teach about twentieth-century Europe from personal experience." Hsi-Huey's second retirement did not begin until 2001.

<sup>7</sup> This was in 1949, when Hsi-Huey was a student at Cambridge University and his father back in Prague as the Nationalist Chinese Ambassador. After the Communist victory and Czechoslovakia's recognition of Mao's government his father faced extradition and a possible treason trial. Since his father never learned

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in Berlin in 1929, where his father was the representative of the new Chinese Nationalist Government. In 1933 Lone Liang was transferred to Prague as the Chinese Minister, and his son saw the Nazi troops march into that city in 1939. One of the omnipresent themes in his memoir is the complex link between these so different European cities and the cultures and values and historical experiences they reflect in their physical structures.

These cityscapes are important and richly realized settings for the hilarious, sometimes unbearably painful stories Hsi-Huey Liang tells, yet at the heart of these encounters are not the streets he knows so well but the people he met. He retrieves from memory Uncle Wu, who was in Berlin in 1933, and who so despised the new Nazi regime that he arranged to be married flying above the capital. When word of this escapade reached Hitler, the Chinese legation (since China was relying on German arms and advisors in its ongoing struggle with Japan) fabricated a tale that Uncle Wu so loved Germany that he wanted to be able to see as much of it as possible while taking the step

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how to drive, Hsi-Huey was at the wheel when they fled Prague, with only 24 hours to escape, followed by assassins, who tracked them for two weeks as they criss-crossed Western Europe before Lone Liang safely made it to London. Taken from Jan Gehorsam, "Vassar Prof Led Cloak and Dagger Life," *Poughkeepsie Journal* (July 9, 1984), pp. 21, 24.

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into matrimony. One learns also of Ursula Urbach, a Jewish girl with whom Hsi-Huey went to grade school in Prague in 1937. Some sixty years later he searched for evidence of her fate during the Holocaust and found the report of her arrest and deportation to Lodz on 21st October 1941. He leaves these stark few lines in Czech in his manuscript.

Liang's life reminds one of Jacques Derrida, in that he belonged to no nation. He once said that while he loved teaching, his colleagues, and his students, he was often restless, seized by a "diplomat's sense of eternal rootlessness. ... I think of myself as a permanent stranger."<sup>8</sup> When he feared that his identity might be pinned down, he would suddenly become "Houmtiphong," a double or alter ego, a small personage wearing a long Chinese robe.

Hsi-Huey had a great zest for life and an infectious enthusiasm and curiosity, whether unraveling the incredibly complex and tangled diplomatic systems of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century European State System, or encountering strange washed-up marine life on the New England shore. He demonstrated a wonderful, boyish, exuberant pleasure in discovery. He reveled in both the complex and the simple.

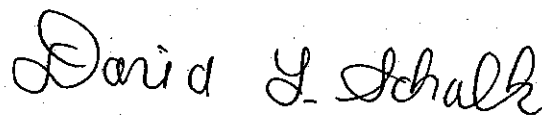
We speak for the History Department and for Vassar when we say that the Department, and the College, are very

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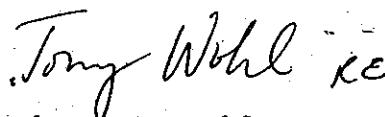
<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

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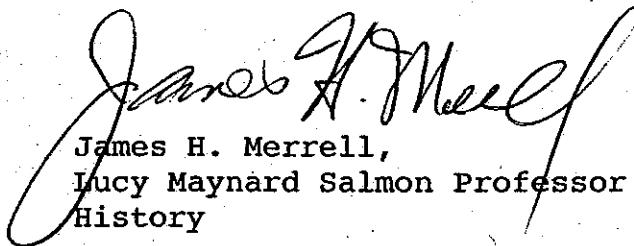
grateful that this Wanderer, this self-described Stranger,  
graced us with his wisdom, his humor, and his presence for  
so many years.



David L. Schalk,  
Professor Emeritus of History



Anthony S. Wohl,  
Professor Emeritus of History



James H. Merrell,  
Lucy Maynard Salmon Professor of  
History



Rebecca Edwards,  
Professor of History on the Eloise  
Ellery Chair, and Department Chair