

"He Did It His Way"

A Tribute to Patrick Yang



Patrick Yang was my best friend and closest confidante for nearly forty years, ever since I landed in Monterey, California, in June 1971, directly from a year of wandering around India, to learn Chinese at the Monterey Institute. He was also my Chinese language teacher, and my guide to the highly refined world of traditional Chinese culture. From beginning to end, it was impossible to separate these two aspects of our relationship—friendship and culture, leisure and study. After awhile, it seemed as though we were two close-knit literati living in one of those colorful *fin de siècle* periods of Chinese history, and we often debated whether it was the late Tang or the late Ming that best defined the flavor of the literary license we shared. Even his Chinese name reverberated with the elegance of Chinese literary life: "Willow Moon-Grass" (*Yang Yue-sun*).

Anyone who ever studied Chinese language and literature under Patrick's tutelage knows what a truly great teacher he was, not only in terms of his own mastery of the subjects he taught, but more importantly in the sincerity and dedication he felt towards his vocation as teacher. Nothing pleased him more than to discover a few bright minds standing out like "cranes among chickens" in his flock of students, and he knew exactly how to bring out their best performance, always tailoring his teaching to suit the individual interests and capacities of those he taught.

Right from the start, Patrick took me under his wing and decided to transform me into a bona-fide Chinese *wen ren* ("man of letters") like himself. That's because he was the first to recognize in me a condition that I call "sinopathology," long before I even knew it myself, and he knew how fast this seed, no doubt sown in previous lives in China, could be cultivated to full fruition. A "sinopath" is not the same creature as a "sinophile" or "sinologist." The latter refer only to those with an intellectual interest in China, but a sinopath is someone with a pathological devotion to all things Chinese, a fanatic, especially when it comes to traditional arts, philosophy and classical Chinese forms. A sinopath is never satisfied with mere intellectual pursuits contained within the covers of textbooks. A

sinopath insists on full immersion in the culture, bringing the old culture back to life at home, and emulating precisely every aspect of the lifestyle cultivated by Chinese poets.

One of the first lessons Patrick taught me about Chinese is that the essence of the language, and the code to the way it works, lies in Chinese poetry, and he was right: without this early introduction to Chinese poetry and poets, I would not have progressed so swiftly and delved so deeply into the Chinese language, particularly the written language, nor would I ever have attained the degree of proficiency I have today. Patrick introduced me to my first Chinese literary hero, the brilliant 10th century poet-king Lee Hou-chu, whose life and lyrics formed the substance of my Masters Thesis at Monterey, and to my first female literary hero, the Sung poet Lee Ching-chao, whose verse echoed the same bittersweet feelings towards life from a woman's point of view, like yin mirrors yang. Patrick and I memorized many beautiful lines and couplets from the work of these two romantic, ill-fated poets, and we often used them to drive home a point in conversation or, in my case, to impress pretty young women in Taipei.

Over the years, in his conversation and his writing, Patrick demonstrated, time and time again, the core truth in that stern Chinese lesson taught by Confucius: *bu shueh shi, wu yi yen.* "Those who don't learn poetry cannot communicate in words."

Despite his unconventional modern lifestyle, Patrick Yang was in fact a very classical Chinese character, and like most well cultivated Chinese gentlemen, his life embodied a well balanced blend of all the "Three Great Teachings" (*san da jiao*) that define the intricate tapestry of Chinese civilization. The strong Confucian thread, no doubt instilled by his classical scholar father, showed clearly in his choice of professions—teaching and writing, the two most honored careers in traditional China---and in the continued interest he took in his students' lives long after they left his classroom. The Confucian focus on restraint and refinement in human relationships manifested in his personal and social life as well. One of Patrick's favorite Chinese sayings, which he said often, was *jyun-dze jih jiao dan ru shui*, "Friendship among gentlemen is plain as water." Patrick never honeyed his friendship with sweet talk and flattery. As a friend, you could always count on him to "tell it like it is," and to always speak from his heart, not his head.

The Taoist streak that ran like a river through his heart accounts for some of his most memorable traits: his irreverant attitude towards social conventions; his staunchly independent lifestyle; his wild sense of humor; and the many delightful surprises and charming eccentricities he displayed in his interface with the world. One of his favorite songs, which he often sang for friends late at night in smokey bars, was Frank Sinatra's signature song, "I Did It My Way." By the end of the song, you knew that Patrick meant every word of it, and that he would always and only do things his own way...

He was also a Buddhist. During the last years of his life, while living in retirement in northern Thailand, Patrick developed a strong interest in Buddhism, not just from intellectual curiosity, but as a whole way of life. In Buddhist metaphysics he found peaceful resolution to some of his life's most challenging riddles, and he applied what he learned from all three of the great teachings to the practical affairs of his own daily life. Patrick always "walked his talk," and nothing annoyed him more than hypocrisy.



Patrick was born in the Year of the Rat (1936)--a full 12-year cycle before my own birth in the Year of the Rat (1948)--and he chose the Year of the Rat (2008), the year I turned 60, to bail out of this world. Our common roots as Rats formed one of our strongest bonds, and many of the hard-core members of our old "Rat Pack" gang were also born Rats. Rats like to do things their own way, and prefer to run in packs of their own kind, and they usually get their way with the other, less scheming animals in the Chinese zodiac.

Patrick was usually at his best late at night, after sharing a few drinks with dear friends in a cosy nightclub, and if there happened to be a good player at the piano, he loved to serenade us with some of his favorite old songs, classics like "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" and "Moon River." Perched casually at a piano bar around midnight, microphone in one hand, drink in the other, he could really sing your heart out. Had he not chosen to become a teacher, he would surely have become a professional singer--that's how good his voice was--and an actor too, for no one could hold an audience or a classroom spellbound with his performance like Patrick

Patrick never changed, not from the first day I met him in Monterey, California, in 1971, until the last time I saw him in Kunming, China, in July, 2008. His quick wit, daring sense of humor, and razor-sharp tongue never flagged for a moment. At our last banquet together in Kunming, attended by several other old students as well as a bunch of new friends, Patrick was, as always, the focal point of attention at the table. His nonstop fusillade of witty observations, naughty remarks, hilarious sarcasm, and bold commentary on the state of the world formed the hub around which all conversation revolved, start to finish. I'm really going to miss those banquets, those remarks, that sarcasm, and that unique attitude of critical tolerance that defined Patrick. His bemused attitude towards the world in which he found himself living was that of a traditional Chinese scholar who suddenly finds himself transported by a time machine from the refined elegance and serene calm of his studio in 16th century China into the constant noise, vulgar taste, and nervous tension of modern life in the contemporary world. He took it all in stride, and handled it all with humor, but never did he compromise his traditional Chinese values, nor did he ever forfeit his refined Chinese taste. It's that attitude, which I learned from him and quickly adopted as my own, that has sustained me through four decades of life as a "stranger in a strange land," a visitor from another world.

A good teacher wants to be remembered for his teaching, and a good writer for his writing, not his quirks. The world will always remember the excellence of Patrick's teaching by the excellence of the students he turned out, students who are now passing the precious heritage he taught on to the next generation. And we'll all remember him well by the excellence of his writing, especially his long ongoing commentaries on the current state of Chinese society in the popular columns he wrote for Chinese newspapers in Taiwan, his incisive critiques of films, books, plays, and other arts in Chinese magazines, and his award-winning translations of great works of Western literature. Patrick was definitely a winner.

Nevertheless, for all his outstanding credentials as teacher and writer, what I miss most and remember best about him are his quirks, and his mercurial presence.

Patrick was one of a kind.



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