FOREWORD

CHIANG YEE AS I KNEW HIM

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Chiang Yee—poet, painter, scholar, and exile—was a literary presence in the West during and after World War II, when, as “The Silent Traveller,” he wrote and illustrated a number of popular books, initially about picturesque sites in England, but ultimately about many of the great cities of the West as seen by a cultivated Chinese stranger, struck by objects and practices that the natives took for granted. The illustrations alone assured him a certain reputation—it was as though he painted western motifs without changing the style that identified the artist as Chinese. This even brought him to the attention of the great art historian Ernst Gombrich, who saw in these orientalesque sketches support for one of his major theses: that a painter “tends to see what he paints rather than to paint what he sees.” There was a similar charm in the prose in which he wrote his travel books, which were marked by a gentle curiosity and a wry humor; and he was pleased to describe, at his own expense, his struggles with the various cultures he encountered. One of his favorite anecdotes concerned seeing two newspapers, each describing an important fire on its front page. One said that a building had burned down, the other that the same building had burned up. How could it be both? How could one learn a language in which burning up and burning down meant the same thing? Or was there a difference between them? I can still hear him laughing at his own joke.

In addition to the Silent Traveller books, Chiang Yee published several books on aspects of Chinese culture, including some memoirs of his early life. On the jacket of one, he depicted three stages in his growing up, marked by differences in his haircut. The book described a form of life that was vanishing from the face of the earth. The China in which he came of age was kept alive only in the memoirs of an exile like himself. For reasons personal as well as political, however, he remained in exile more than forty years, during which time China itself changed, convulsively and profoundly, so the China he embodied and which he wrote and lectured about was becoming a very different country than the one he had left.

He had no illusions though, and when, at last, he was able to return, he greatly approved of the changes that had taken place. China was no longer exploited by “foreign devils,” for one thing. But the changes were such that he would have to learn about them as the Silent Traveller—as though his absence was like the long sleep of Rip Van Winkle. The China that welcomed him was one he would have to learn about, just as he had had to learn about London, Paris, or New York. In the end, one might say, he was a man whose books allowed others to learn who he was through the questions he asked; he was by nature a traveler whose character was made up of the places he had been. Through it all, he remained Chinese and would ultimately have to learn what that meant in both China and the West. The family compound he was born into, for example, in which men and women lived roles that seemed immemorial, feels closer to a fairyland than to real life as lived in China today. While he took notes, drew sketches, and made friends abroad, foreigners and *generalissimos* were tearing his native world to pieces yet were uncertain what political models to use; this eventually gave rise to something both capitalist and communist at the same time.

Thus, Chiang Yee became a unique subject for a major biography, since so large a part of the world he knew and wrote about has to be recovered and fitted together with a new China that he himself had to piece together when he returned to it as an honored son. The two stages of his life must be united into the single vivid person that Chiang Yee was—a man of many parts, including the character we know as The Silent Traveller, and whom the Chinese barely know at all (or are just beginning to know about). However, the Silent Traveller is a character he invented for himself. Chiang Yee was both more and less than the Silent Traveller. We all must remember that the Silent Traveller itself is a mask he wore that enabled him to survive under skies very different from those under which he was born.

I just referred to him as “Yee,” which was the name his friends knew and called him by. I got to know him sometime in the very early 1960s. He had attended a lecture I gave at Columbia, where we both taught, on what a philosophy of art might look like that would take account of what was happening in the most advanced artistic circles in New York. As it happened, I had developed a certain passion for Oriental thought, especially Zen Buddhism, as it was presented in a famous seminar by Dr. D. T. Suzuki, and attended by a number of avant-garde artists, such as John Cage, Philip Guston, Agnes Martin, and others, who were developing new ideas of “experimental composition”—to use the title of Cage’s course at the New School—though most of my work was based on analytical philosophy, and especially on the philosophy of science as it was being developed by N. R. Hanson, who was applying certain ideas of Wittgenstein’s to the understanding of scientific theory. I had developed a great taste for Chinese and Japanese drawing and painting, and I had been participating in the general education courses in Asiatic thought that were organized by Ted de Bary for Columbia College. The evening after my lecture, Yee expressed to my friend, Andre Racz, who chaired Columbia’s small department in painting and sculpture, his interest in meeting me. Andre immediately phoned to invite

me over. I of course knew about Yee, though the only book of his I had read was *Chinese Calligraphy*. We became instant friends. In a way, he became part of my family. I always explained that he was my children's Chinese uncle, since Yee attended Thanksgiving meals and many other family events with us. He had a great love for children. I cherish the memory of when he built snowmen with my girls in Riverside Park or of when he went with us to the Thanksgiving parade and we talked about which animals we would want to be reincarnated as. Yee wanted to be reborn as a horse, which I think tells a lot about him as a person. I think it demonstrates his simplicity of character. He once told me how he had been allowed to spend nights at the London Zoo drawing pandas. It is part of his simplicity that he prided himself on introducing the panda as a subject into Chinese painting.

Yee once made a scroll for me that consisted of the first fourteen chapters of the *Tao te Ching*. To me, it was an immense gift because it was an immense task. Once one embarks on such task, one has to finish it—it has to be done, as he used to say “in one go.” He sent it to Hong Kong to be mounted. In the inscription—or so he told me since I cannot read Chinese—he refers to us as brothers, I have several pieces of Yee's calligraphy, in which he transcribed poetry from the great tradition. What sort of painter he was is difficult to say, but I think I know what kind of painter he thought he was. I was a guest at one of Yee's Chinese dinner parties with James Johnson Sweeney, the first director of the Guggenheim Museum. Yee was, as always, a gracious and generous host, always on the lookout for new Chinese restaurants on the Upper West Side, and he loved to see his guests relish their food. He always warned us that the cook would come out with his knife if we failed to eat everything before us. Afterward, we went to Yee's apartment to see some paintings he owned by the irresistible Chinese artist, Qi Baishi, who painted insects, plants, small animals, and fish with great clarity and intensity. He lived to be ninety-six, and the Chinese greatly admired him because he married a very young woman late in life. There were a dozen paintings wrapped in a roll, and Yee had written “Ten paintings by Qi Baishi—never been seen by anyone.” They were characteristic of the artist and a treat to see—it was clear that unwrapping them was intended as a tribute to Sweeney. It was certainly a privilege for the rest of us as well. However, Yee stared and stared, kneeling over the paintings spread across the floor. Finally, he slapped his forehead in a gesture of self-punishment, and cried out, “I have a mediocre mind!” Qi Baishi was a far simpler person than Yee. It was not in any sense Yee's fault that he was not born a different artist; he was a cosmopolitan man—a man of the world. He was interested in politics and literature. He knew the history of art and had traveled widely. But that evening, seeing him perform that gesture of disgrace and regret, expressing without question that he saw himself a lesser artist than the artist we were studying together, I realized that I hardly knew him. I knew Yee as a civilized and cultivated man with a wonderful laugh and a pointed sense of humor. I knew him better than I knew either Chiang Yee or the Silent Traveller. His whole personage, though, was far more complex and darker than the person I knew.

Da Zheng has achieved a far fuller portrait of Chiang Yee than I would have believed possible. I think the sense of self-disappointment that Yee palpably felt that evening, looking at those paintings by Qi Baishi, expressed a larger dissatisfaction. As a family man, as a lover, and as a political functionary, Yee must have felt that his life fell short of the success his talents demanded. What I do know is that he found a sense of personal fulfillment in the new China, when he at last was able to return and realize his success as a cultural ambassador during very dark times. He kept alive the values of a great civilization. What he brought back to China was a reality easily enough lost, as the example of the Cultural Revolution demonstrates. Yet there was something more; he also brought back a sense that the turbulent history of his native land was in certain ways necessary.

One Sunday afternoon, after his return from his first visit to China, my wife and I arranged a gathering of some of Yee's friends in our apartment in New York. We wanted to hear from the Silent Traveller himself how he felt about the new China. We had heard—everybody had heard—alarming things. Tourism had not truly begun yet. What was it like? Yee walked back and forth. He looked triumphant. He leaned toward us and said, as though the “silence” in the name he gave himself had a meaning no one had guessed, “Nobody knows who I am!! Nobody!”. He then revealed his secret self. “I am a REVOLUTIONARY!!!!” he said, exultantly. He had lived to see things no one dared to hope for. He was one of the figures who kept a certain truth about China alive when neither it nor anyone else knew where it was headed.