In Memory of Dr. Kao Yili, Ph. D 2005
Curator of memory
1974-2009

Dr. Yili Kao, one of our finest Ph. D graduates, passed away on March 10, 2009, in a hospital in Taiwan after fighting valiantly the lung cancer that plagued her for the last three years. She was a unique curator of memory, both as a literary scholar, as in her book-ready dissertation, *Chinese Poetry and Painting in Postwar Taiwan: Angst and Transformation in the Negotiation between Tradition and Modernity*, and in her capacity as Curatorial Research Assistant in the Asian Arts Wing of the San Diego Museum of Art.

Memory can break or make one’s spirit, but the memory that Yili curated will continue to contribute to the construction of the two histories she dedicated her life to making. Today, we will trace the trajectory of her memory-making by way of our memory-making as a form of celebration of her inspirting buoyant life, and the wonderful transformation and achievements in her academic pursuit.

It is very easy for her friends, classmates and teachers to like her. She seemed to have boundless warmth and a big heart, but to say that she was sweet, cordial, charming, engaging, loving, and caring is not adequate, because she was also quietly tenacious, gently persuasive, modest but kept forging ahead, and always fully in command of the quest of her heart’s desire. Like the dancing brush in her Chinese calligraphy, she was light-footed but always sure-footed in every stroke. She easily won the praise and love from her teachers, from my wife Tzu-mei and me, and, needless to say, from her most devoted husband Mark Wang.

Yili joined our MA program of the Literature Department in 1997. An achieved calligrapher and a BA in English literature, she came to see me with a respectable project. She wanted to pursue the career of a Chinese art historian. Within the framework of comparative literature in our Department, it would not be impossible for her to pursue her goal if we had a Chinese art historian in our Visual Arts Department then, but we didn’t. I suggested to her that, given the exceptional strength in literary and cultural theory of our Department, she should instead orient her creative intuition of calligraphy toward the construction of an aesthetic of the Chinese brush, such as the larger question of *qi*/*ch'i* and *mo* (energy and pulsation), terms central to the discourses on Chinese painting, calligraphy and poetry that speak to similar or contrasting theoretical issues in American poetry and painting. But this would mean that she would have to put aside her Chinese art history project for now and plunge into our rigorous training in theory. She took the challenge and started building up her theoretical strength, first, by taking our Theory Sequence, reading texts of New Criticism, Russian Formalism, Marxism, Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction, Reader Response, Feminism, The Canon and Multiculturalism, Race and Ethnicity, New Historicism, Cultural Criticism, including post-colonial Studies, and, second, by working with me on the question of *qi* in Chinese aesthetics and with Professor Michael Davidson on the increasingly important role of *energy* in modern American poetry and in Action Painters. In order to command the trajectory of this change in modern Euro-American artistic sites, she also took seminars with Professor Brahm Dijkstra in our Department, and with Paul Klee authority Professor Sheldon Nodelman in the Visual Arts Department. We were all greatly impressed by several important dimensions she had developed. Here are two typical impressions.
Professor Bram Dijkstra says in 1997 about her work in his Symbolism Seminar: “Yili Kao contributed quite substantially to our understanding of the processes involved in the socialization of preverbal symbolic form through her illuminating presentation of preverbal image construction of the development of Chinese calligraphy. [Her work] implicitly questions a central assumption underlying much of Western post-war abstraction in art, namely that what is ‘abstract’ can exist ‘in and for itself’. She pointed out that most abstract forms are based on pre-existing ideograms of a socially established ‘language’ of emotions—and that such a language can therefore never be ‘value-free’.” He further praises her for her contributions in his 2000 seminar on the politics of gender in mid-twentieth century culture that, “with her East-West comparative perspectives, her theories of calligraphy and the psycho-social significance of form, she has convincingly demonstrated the fetished concepts of masculinity and militarism in the post-WWII American art...She clearly has developed into not only a promising, but also a very adventurous scholar, and is one of the best students I have had the pleasure of working over the past few years.”

Professor Michael Davidson, commenting on her MA thesis project, echoes with very much the same excitement: “Yili develops a cross-cultural poetics between Chinese and American traditions, utilizing the philosophical idea of ch’i...as a bridge between Chinese poetry and the process-oriented elements of contemporary poets like Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. Since ch’i draws upon the gestural potential of drawing and painting, it has implications for contemporary artistic movements from Expressionism to Action painting...Her thesis re-directs attention away from the orientalist paradigm of Anglo-American modernism to an alternative modernism with historical sources in Chinese culture.”

Yili’s MA thesis “The Aesthetic Energy: The Chinese Concept of Ch’i and the Western Art” is indeed tantalizing. She brings together classical Chinese and Western poetics into engaging dialogues with substantial evidences, refined and sharpened arguments, cogent comparisons and contrasts, covering a vast space and time, classical Chinese aesthetics of qi, now reconnected with the discussion of Chinese medical mapping of the body in which the term was originally used, examples of Chinese calligraphy, western calligraphic attempts from Toulouse-Lautrec to Action Painting/Abstract Expressionism/Tachism, including such painters as Julius Bissier, Jean Degottex, Karel Appel, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey. In her section on the poetics of Energy, she traces a history of the shift of emphasis in Western aesthetics from Coleridge through Herder, Pound to Olson. In this section, she adds the new observations by Daniel Belgrad linking Olson to Einstein’s physics and Whitehead’s new metaphysical system based on new physics, thus opening up a possible re-examination of the Chinese theory of qi. Her work is best characterized as inter-disclosing between cultures. We can see here there was a wonderful transformation in her from an intuitive sense of qi at work in her practice of calligraphy to a critical-historical construction of the working dynamics of qi in a cross-cultural context.

In the meantime, she had not given up the pursuit of her goal of becoming also a Chinese art historian, she made every effort to master the discipline by self-study, taking classes from specialists like Peter Sturman in UC Santa Barbara and Judy Ho in UC Irvine, attending one summer session on the art of connoisseurship offered by Jason Kuo, which consists of (1) Training in the use of basic tools in connoisseurship: deciphering and transcribing seal legends, inscriptions, and colophons; (2) Training in the use of basic bibliographical tools, especially the most commonly used reference works in connoisseurship of Chinese calligraphy and painting; and (3) Training in authenticating and dating Chinese calligraphy and painting. Much of this knowledge became extremely productive, when she did
her research for her Ph. D. dissertation, *Chinese Poetry and Painting in Postwar Taiwan: Angst and Transformation in the Negotiation between Tradition and Modernity*, spending summers collecting data of all the literary debates and art debates during the formation of what is referred to as Taiwan Modernism in the 1960’s and 1970’s, meeting and interviewing poets and artists. Again in the fall of 2003, in a volunteer program of the San Diego Museum of Art, she further had on-hand experience doing museum research on Asian art and contemporary East Asian art under the supervision of Senior Art curator Caron Smith and Curator of Contemporary Art Betti-Sue Hertz. Her work apparently left a great impression on both the Asian Art Council as well as on the curators. She was asked to help arrange important visitors to give talks on related arts and to curate several smaller exhibitions from the Museum’s rich collections, many of which have been closeted until Yili’s meticulous effort to sort them out.

This double strength in Yili is well reflected in her dissertation. It is a work of wonderful marriage between history and aesthetics. It is the first and only work that brings together both the poetry and painting to examine the complex emergence of modernism in Taiwan under the political suppressive atmosphere of the time, to identify the issues and agenda by combing through thousands of pages of Chinese originals from essays in magazines and newspaper literary supplements where some of the fiercest literary and art debates took place—debates between Xian Dai (Modern) School and the Blue Stars poets, the heated arguments between Yu Guangzhong (Blue Stars) and Luo Fu (The Epoch Poetry), and the united front of poets and critics from all three schools against the attack by Yan Xi, one of the conservative attackers on Taiwan modernism in general and the ambiguity of modern Taiwan poetry in particular. There were also parallel debates between modern Painters from both the Dongfang and the Fifth Moon Groups (such as Liu Guosong) and government voices. The issues were extremely and treacherously complex, ranging from the questions of “horizontal transplantation (mostly French symbolists and post-symbolists like Eliot) vs vertical (read: tradition) inheritance” to a host of battles and negotiations between tradition and modernity as embedded in very specific politico-societal conditions in Taiwan. The issues were often crouched in language nebulous at best under political pressures of the time and must be unmasked as aesthetic strategies and counter-discourses learned from Western modernism and re-oriented from tradition to resist against and critique such conditions. Yili has substantially traced and articulated the trajectories of these phenomena in both the poetry and the painting of the time with historical-effective consciousness, opening up new ways to measure the actual aesthetic contributions of each of these players in their effort to transform both the traditional and adopted modes from the West. This exemplar work will be an inspiration for many scholars to come.

It is not an accident that soon after Yili was awarded her Ph. D degree, she was offered the job of Curatorial Research Assistant in the Asian Arts Wing of the San Diego Museum. She had plans to put her final touches to her dissertation for publication, as well as translate it into Chinese for readers in Chinese-speaking areas. Understandably, she must put it aside temporarily to fulfill her dream, first, of writing on some of the important Chinese artists that have been marginalized, such as the works of Jin Nong, one of the “Eight Eccentrics of the Yangzhou School”, and work on a few of the curatorial projects of her heart. But Time was not on her side, and the news that she was invaded by cancer at the prime of her life was a great shock to everybody. Her tenacity and her fighting spirit, punctuated with smiles even in the great throes of treatments, greatly moved us. Between treatments, she was working as hard as before and completed a long essay on Jin Nong, incorporating into her discussion the artist’s uncompromising calligraphy as well as the unusual poems that he wrote to accompany his paintings, which Yili took great
pains to translate. She also finished charting out a substantial plan for curating one of the biggest
exhibition of Chinese fan paintings. She was truly a poet in the original sense of the word, a maker, a
connoisseur of memory that will never be forgotten.

(Wai-lim Yip)