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Lien Shih Sheng: A Close Friend

There was a time when my friends wanted to organise a “Love Thy Wife Association.” Details concerning the organisation and its responsibilities were roughly outlined, and all that remained was for someone respectable to step forward and helm it, to realise our ideals. It was unanimously felt that old Lien (close friends refer to him as this) was most suitable as the first president of this association. However, for reasons unknown this was not followed through, to the regret of the enthusiastic among us. Yet, the image of the outstanding leader of that “shadow cabinet” lingered in our minds.

Objectively speaking, Shih Sheng (连士升) is meticulous in the way he expresses his love for his wife. He would secretly examine his wife’s handbag and, when finding it to be less than full, would secretly stuff it with a stack of notes so that she would not have to worry when she went shopping. He often brings his wife to the refreshing and open marina to watch the sky and listen to the roaring waves, or to a quiet and quaint café for a spot of afternoon tea and people-watching, thus dissolving a day’s tiredness. If Shih Sheng goes on trips, he would write home frequently. While his words are simple, they abound in rich sentiment, causing the reader to constantly revisit them, not wanting to let go.

Shih Sheng was already addicted to drinking and smoking when he was young. He smoked cigars and drank Huadiao rice wine (花雕). One can imagine how free-spirited he must have been. However, when he got married, Shih Sheng’s wife hinted that she did not like the weird odour in his breath, and he kicked the habit immediately. Look! If such forthcoming compliance with his wife’s wishes is not love, then what is?

The biggest regret in Shih Sheng’s life was not being able to join the anti-Japanese resistance movement but living a life of escaping, again and again. Hence, he deeply admires Guo Moruo (郭沫若), who left his family behind in Japan and returned to his motherland to participate in the sacred resistance. Shih Sheng wrote that he did not do the same because he could not bear to see his wife and children suffer. This was, argu-ably, an expression of love.

In the epilogue of his every publication, Shih Sheng would extol his wife, Madam Lo Mui (罗梅), for how she managed his diet, health and spirit so that he had abundant energy to study and write. His gratitude was richly expressed in his words.

Shih Sheng’s love is not just lavished on his wife, but on his children as well. He is frequently seen with his children, whether chatting after a meal or strolling in the mornings and evenings, expounding on the philosophies of life and theories of learning while doing so. A large part of Shih Sheng’s *Letters from the Seaside* was written for his children. It examines the meaning of life and perspectives in society and proffers inspiring methods for making life interesting and amusing. Shih Sheng’s fatherly sternness and motherly way of educating his children reflect the lofty ideals of his love.

Shih Sheng grew up in an isolated village, with abundant opportunities to interact with workers and farmers. When he was older, he went north to the capital and studied hard for ten years. His mind was filled with theories and he interacted daily with intellectuals. When he entered society, he mingled with officials and businessmen. Shih Sheng has never belonged to any religion, though he has read the Bible thoroughly, and is also accomplished in his understanding of Buddhism and the Koran. Hence, he is able to converse well with followers of any religion. As he is in frequent contact with people of different classes and types, Shih Sheng’s social net spreads far and wide. Moreover, his friendships always mature and strengthen with time; undoubtedly, love is again taking the lead. Shih Sheng is by nature humble, reliable, honest, and passionate. He would never treat anyone sternly or greet anyone coldly. When entrusted with a favour, he would put in his greatest effort — usually at his own expense — until the matter is resolved. On all occasions, whether spoken or written, he would always speak only of the positive. Sometimes, he might exaggerate when giving praise, but this is to encourage. He would never divulge another person’s private matters to wreck precious friendships. In summary, Shih Sheng regards love as the foundation of interaction among people and a means to harmony in the world.

Shih Sheng generously gives his love not just to others, but also to himself. Because he treasures his reputation, he cultivates the habits of frugality, industry, and kindness.
LIEN SHIH SHENG: A CLOSE FRIEND

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centering his social commentaries on economic matters, he often expressed his unique views on cultural art, effectively promoting the subject. His various other essays, such as travelogues and letters, were all well received.

As a learned person, Shih Sheng is open-minded and has a broad vision, and is not limited by racial or national boundaries. Being in Nanyang, he had observed the outstanding achievements of India’s ancient culture and noted its potential in modern times. Hence, he decided to study Indian affairs. He spent 16 years compiling the biographies of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Rabindranath Tagore, the works of which are comparable to Romain Rolland’s three masterpieces: *The Life of Beethoven*, *The Life of Michelangelo*, and *The Life of Tolstoy*.

To enable Shih Sheng to gain a broad and deep understanding of various situations in India, Air India specially invited him to tour the subcontinent. Shih Sheng benefited significantly and gained a completely new perspective. Unfortunately, he contracted jaundice, which robbed him of much of his vitality. This was an inauspicious beginning which marked a gradual wane in physical strength. Shih Sheng could no longer maintain busy work schedules or travel long distances. Subsequently, after returning from England and Australia, he paid the heavy price of undergoing surgery and resigning from the Civil Service Commission Committee and the South Seas Society (南洋学会) where he had served for many years.

Whenever the South Seas Society invited famous scholars to give talks, Shih Sheng, as president of the society, would always introduce the speaker and the subject. After the talk, he would give an analysis and summation. People found the content of his speech and the poise of his delivery extremely appealing.

Shih Sheng served at Nanyang Siang Pau for more than 20 years. He maintained friendly relations with everybody, from bosses to colleagues, from the editorial department to the print-setting room. He juggles these myriad relationships harmoniously, just like the symphonies of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The tempo of the printing machines pulsed in his veins, while the characters inked on the page fused with the music in
Because he loves his work, he engages in broad study and deep contemplation, and nurtures great self-discipline. These two concurrent tracks have helped to sculpt Shih Sheng’s perfect character.

When Shih Sheng was in primary school, his father helped him lay a good foundation in the Chinese language. For his secondary education, he enrolled in a mission school to study English. Thus, he built up the requisites for the pursuit of an academic life. Shih Sheng easily entered Yanjing University (燕京大学) where he read economics, specializing in economic history. Owing to his subjective inclination and the influence of his environment, Shih Sheng was particularly interested in socialism. His mind was full of the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The most efficient and satisfying time during Shih Sheng’s student days was the time he spent in the libraries of Yanjing University, Beijing University (北京大学), and the organisation for political studies. Arriving early and leaving late, he almost completely buried himself in books.

At the time that China’s New Culture Movement reached a feverish pitch, Shih Sheng was equally active. His essays, published in the weekly commentary of Shanghai Shengpao (上海申报) and the new year edition of Oriental Magazine, took on the pressing matters of the day with a sharp and fair assessment, earning praise from various circles of debate. From then on, Shih Sheng embarked on a literary career.

During the Sino-Japanese War, newspapers in Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing and Hong Kong frequently published Shih Sheng’s commentaries. His patriotism was evident in his writings. When the Japanese invaded from the south, he escaped with his family to a secluded village in Vietnam. In name, he was the principal of a primary school. In fact, during this period he translated the famous publication History of Economics, which is more than two million words long. Regrettably, printing costs were too high, and thus such publications did not hold popular appeal. The most laborious and significant contribution Shih Sheng made in his lifetime was never published!

After the war, Shih Sheng accepted a job in Singapore to manage editorial matters for Zhong Xin Daily News (中兴日报) and later, Nanyang Siang Pau (南洋商报). Besides centering his social commentaries on economic matters, he often expressed his unique views on cultural art, effectively promoting the subject. His various other essays, such as travelogues and letters, were all well received.

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I met Shih Sheng when he came to Singapore to work at the newspaper agency. While we cannot be said to be old friends, we can be described as confidantes because we could talk endlessly about anything and edified each other. As we were neighbours, our conversations usually took place while we were strolling near Seaview Park after dinner, both of us wearing singlets and shorts. The only difference was that he wore Chinese cloth shoes while I wore Nanyang wooden clogs. Our conversation topics were not strictly defined, and we chatted about everything under the sun, not restricted by time. When we were in a good mood, we would talk until nightfall before having to say a dispirited goodbye and returning to our homes to sleep.

When I was studying in France, I came to know Fu Lei (傅雷), and we lived in the same apartment for many years. Thereafter, we became colleagues at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts (上海美术专科学校). He taught art theory while I taught Western painting. We became close friends because we shared similar interests. Apart from merrymaking, the most important criterion for our friendship was the ability to converse: whether it was about art or the relationships between man and woman. When our opinions coincided, we were in harmony. When our opinions differed, we argued until we were red in our faces. However, we were friends again after a handshake. Since I came to Nanyang, I have felt a sense of emptiness. I did not know when this emptiness could be filled — little was I to know that the bad news of Fu Lei and his wife’s demise would soon arrive. There is no greater sadness in the world than this! Shih Sheng’s personality and ambitions were in many ways different from Fu Lei. The former was mild-mannered and soft-spoken; the latter was strong and rash. However, each had his specific strengths. Both were also similar in their ability to write and debate. To me, all differences are acceptable as long as we treat each other with sincerity and warmth, and be each other’s confidante. For many years, I rejoiced at the thought that I had recovered, in another form, what I had lost. I did not expect that Shih Sheng would also follow in the steps of Fu Lei, never to return. What else can I say!

One month later, in the arrival hall of Paya Lebar Airport, Mrs Lien and the children waited among a noisy crowd to welcome Shih Sheng’s return. When he appeared, there was a marvellous electrifying feeling and tears flowed immediately. By the time husband and wife were close enough to comfort each other, they were already in a tearful embrace.

I made a brief visit on the night of Shih Sheng’s return. Although he looked tired, he laughed and spoke calmly, and said that he would try to quickly pen his impressions of the trip for everyone’s benefit. Little did I expect that when I came by the next day, he had already been admitted to the hospital for a physical examination. When I went to the Singapore General Hospital to visit him, he was groaning in bed, his condition gradually worsening. Although his condition fluctuated over the next few days, sometimes giving us a glimmer of hope, heaven ultimately did not favour the wishes of men. Two weeks later, at the age of 69, Shih Sheng was called home.
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