

**RECOLLECTIONS OF MY MEETINGS WITH LEADING WORLD FIGURES
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[33] QIAN WEICHANG— CHANCELLOR OF SHANGHAI UNIVERSITY**

A big country produces big people.

No one who hears the life story of Chancellor Qian Weichang of Shanghai University can fail to admire the man. Regarding such a wonderful life is like viewing an impressive work of architecture. Starting as a youth so poor that he could not afford to attend school regularly, he went on to become a physicist of world renown. When he returned from several years of study and work in Canada and the United States to devote himself to the development of his homeland, he was labeled a rightist and subsequently endured twenty-six years of insidious persecution. Only after the age of seventy was his good name finally restored, leaving him free again at last to pursue his research openly. He published one paper after another, producing original scholarship of the highest level. Today, at eighty-four, he never misses a day of either research or teaching. He travels frequently both inside and outside China, fulfilling his duties in such crucial posts as vice chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, and president of the China Overseas Exchanges Association.

On my visit to Shanghai in May of this year [1997] for the conferral of the title of honorary professor from the Chinese university which Dr. Qian heads, I asked him the secret of his remarkable energy. Each day during that short stay, I met with him and his wife, Madame Kong Xiangying—not only at Shanghai University, but also at the several official banquets I attended. Dr. Qian even accompanied me on a courtesy visit to the Shanghai Municipal Government Office.

“My secret to health,” he confided, “is to be without selfishness. As Confucius taught, ‘Exercise patience and forbearance. A great person is tolerant and accepting of others.’ I am an optimist. I have no self-interested desires, and I have no interest in living in a shrewd, self-serving way. I do what I believe is right.” Chancellor Qian’s wife, Madame Kong, is a seventy-fifth-generation descendant of Confucius. She told me that both she and her husband are avid readers, and she agreed with her husband. “I have no personal ambitions, either. The more people desire, the unhappier they become. Some people in high positions forget their true mission and think only of making money. My husband and I have never done that. We live with peace of mind and have nothing on our conscience.”

Both husband and wife spoke cheerfully and calmly, but their words resonated deeply—all the more so if one knew the story of their life together. The start of the persecution against Dr. Qian can be traced back to the summer of his forty-fourth year. It was eleven years since his hopeful return from abroad. He had submitted an educational reform proposal to the administration of Qinghua University, where he was then teaching. The repercussions were such that he was eventually relieved of all his official duties and prohibited from engaging in any professional activities.

“Students of the sciences,” he had written, “will face many new problems and novel situations after graduation. Merely mastering the information that they are presented with in their university classes will not sufficiently equip them to solve those problems. We must, accordingly, place major emphasis on nurturing within them the ability to analyze and solve problems on their own. Their professors must not limit themselves to reading aloud from the textbooks. Unless the professors are actively engaged in progressing in their

own research, the quality of education will not improve.”

These words were a direct reflection of the lesson that Chancellor Qian’s beloved mentor, Dr. Wu Youxun, had instilled in him. But true as these words were, they caused a great uproar at the university. One of the reasons was envy of Chancellor Qian’s success. Just before he offered his proposal, he had participated in drafting Premier Zhou Enlai’s “Twelve-Year Plan for the Development of the Natural Sciences in China.” He also played a major role in the government’s plan for automating Chinese industry, and he had been publicly praised for his efforts by Premier Zhou.

What should have been an educational issue became a political struggle. Chancellor Qian was classed a rightist—or, in the Chinese political terms of the time, a counterrevolutionary. The authorities canceled the publication of one of his books just before it was to go to press, and Dr. Qian was even forced to pay compensation to the publisher for the financial loss incurred as a result of the cancellation! His eldest son had scored well on the university entrance examinations, but his college acceptance was revoked, robbing him of the chance of pursuing higher education. Later his eldest daughter was also refused university entrance and had to earn her living working in factories or in remote areas of the country.

After this came the Cultural Revolution, a storm that literally raged across the land, wreaking havoc and destruction on all in its path. Chancellor Qian’s children were cursed as “dogs,” his wife was interrogated repeatedly, and their home was searched time and time again. Chancellor Qian’s head was shaved, he was forced to wear a sign around his neck branding him a criminal and he was beaten with a leather belt. He was made to perform manual labor, such as weeding, cleaning, building platforms for “criticism” sessions, sanding and straightening rusty nails and digging latrines.

Before he left the United States, people had warned him against returning to China. Though still a young man, he was one of the world’s leading rocket scientists. In 1940, when he was only twenty-seven years old, he went to Canada to study on a scholarship from the Chinese government. He left his new wife and his just-born eldest son at home. Altogether, he spent six years in Canada and the United States, where he produced original and innovative work in applied mathematics that is still considered required reading in the field today.

He made great strides in rocket engineering at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory of the California Institute of Technology. He is considered to be one of those who built the basis for the Apollo space program. “Why return to China?” people would ask him. In the West he had the most advanced research facilities in the world at his disposal, and he worked with the best minds in his field. It was an ideal situation for a dedicated scientist. “But I had made up my mind,” he relates. “I wanted to share the joys and sufferings of the Chinese people. No matter what I achieved in the West, it would be meaningless unless I could make a contribution to my own country.” Personal fame and ambition meant nothing to him.

Why had he chosen to study science, after all? To save his homeland.

Shortly after he entered Qinghua University, the Manchurian Incident took place (in September 1931). Enraged at the arrogance of the invading Japanese, the young Dr. Qian changed his course from Humanities to Science, because he believed his country’s most urgent requirement was scientific development. He was taking a great risk changing his field of specialization mid-course, but his mentor Dr. Wu, no doubt moved by the young man’s altruistic motivation, agreed to let him do so on the condition that he obtain a grade

of more than seventy percent in each of his science subjects by the following year.

A person with such dedication to his country could never be satisfied with fame and fortune abroad. After several years in America, the passionate young Dr. Qian received a telegram announcing China's victory in the war against the Japanese. He knew it was the moment to return. His beleaguered homeland, torn apart by war, needed to be rebuilt. Now was the time for him to go back and make his contribution!

"It was just at that time," he remarked, "that the United States government began to involve itself in rocket engineering, with the aim of adapting the research for military purposes, and I was personally very much against this move. I have worked together with your friend Linus Pauling, who also opposed military use of our research. He was subjected to fierce persecution as a result, as was I."

On his return to China, Dr. Qian cried out in his heart: "I am back! I have given up everything. But material comfort is a fleeting and impermanent thing. My only wish is to offer my knowledge to my homeland and to benefit the Chinese people. This is where I belong—in this great land of China!"

But, as he was to learn to his despair, his homeland was eventually to veer far off the course of productive development.

"Qian Weichang! Come out in five minutes!" It was the Cultural Revolution, and a loudspeaker suddenly blared under his window. He was forced to dash immediately to a criticism session, where he was made to kneel on stage before a hostile audience for hours, enduring the vilest insults and attacks. It is incredible that such a "treasure of the nation," a world-renowned man of learning, should be so badly mistreated. But Chinese society during the Cultural Revolution was itself incredible, and in incredible times, people can no longer distinguish good from evil.

The truly amazing thing about Dr. Qian is that he continued his research in spite of the deplorable circumstances he found himself in. After returning from his manual labor or criticism sessions, he would straighten up his room, turned upside down by constant searches, and begin his study. He pasted paper over his windows so that no light could be seen from the street. If the "revolutionaries" had seen a light burning in his window, they would have descended upon him, demanding to know what he was doing and threatening him with death.

Even in the wee hours of the night, the sound of bullets whizzing by, shots fired by rival military groups, rang out, and curses blaring from loudspeakers bounced over the rooftops. Yet Dr. Qian carried on, pushing his tired body to stay awake, and sat diligently at his desk. As a result, he produced mathematical research that earned him international acclaim.

When Chancellor Qian speaks to young people, his encouragement rings with the truth of his own life experience: "No matter what the circumstances, no matter what the situation I found myself in, I always worked my hardest. All people, no matter how naturally gifted they may be or what great achievements they have made so far, stop progressing the moment they stop making efforts. If you stop making efforts today, you will be left behind tomorrow; if you neglect making efforts for an extended period of time, you will be a failure.

"That is why for more than twenty years, and in spite of every kind of suffering conceivable, I have never stopped exerting myself. I have confidence that in my area of specialization I will always be able to remain at the cutting edge.

“I have never believed in genius. I believe that the only thing that extends our abilities is painful, hard labor. Any genius that exists is the product of hard work.”

Chancellor Qian has always been determined to move forward, ever forward, to keep challenging new horizons, whether in his area of study or day-to-day existence. I see this as the creative spirit that has underpinned his entire life.

“When I was young, my family was poor,” says Dr. Qian. “I studied at four or five different elementary schools. I only attended junior high school for two years, and high school for just a short time.” When he graduated from elementary school, his mother and grandmother begged him to work to help support the family. It was a difficult request for them to make, but they believed it a necessity. He had little sisters and brothers who needed the money that he could bring in. The boy had dreams of continuing his studies, but he also knew how poor his family was. With tears of regret falling down his cheeks, he could do little but agree.

But his father would not hear of it. He insisted that his son continue his studies—an insistence that changed Dr. Qian’s life. An uncle was the principal of a secondary school in Suzhou, and agreed to look after the boy. This uncle, Qian Mu, was later to be recognized as a great master of the Chinese Classics.

On the day that the young Dr. Qian was to start at the school, a soft rain fell. He shared a broken umbrella with his father as he boarded the boat that would take him to Suzhou. His father’s health was very poor, and he spoke haltingly to the boy, striving to suppress his cough: “However hard our circumstances, whatever I have to do, I want you to have the opportunity to study . . . Now you must do your best. Don’t waste your time . . . Only by weathering trials and hardships can you achieve anything of worth. Don’t forget that.” Though the young Dr. Qian was not aware of it at the time, these were to be his father’s last words to him. His father died at the age of thirty-nine, and Dr. Qian’s farewell to him that day was an eternal parting.

Madame Kong, who is a scholar of classical Chinese literature, told me that even though the Cultural Revolution had come to an end (around 1976) and most of the persecutions had stopped, it was not until 1983 that Dr. Qian was finally completely rehabilitated—twenty-six years after he had first been denounced.

“Over those years,” she said, “many around us in similar circumstances experienced great personal tragedies. There were suicides and divorces. Fortunately, we were both scholars, and we had studies which we could concentrate on and an intellectual realm in which we could find refuge. We were also lucky to have close and sustaining relationships as a couple and also with our children. No matter how harshly we were persecuted, we survived by encouraging and helping each other.” All of their children have in fact pursued their studies under difficult circumstances and now have excellent careers.

In Shanghai, Chancellor Qian and I talked of many things. About Premier Zhou Enlai’s efforts to know and understand people’s hearts. About the great Chinese writer Jin Yong. About mutual friends such as Norman Cousins. About Asian civilization. And about many topics of Chinese history, from ancient times to the present. Time always seemed to run out before we even had time to warm to our subject. And the longer we spoke, the more I became aware of Dr. Qian’s wide knowledge and profound spirit, deep as the sea.

“I don’t want to hurt the feelings of the Japanese people,” he said with great force and fervor, “but I have to say this. The Japanese educational system must teach the youth of Japan the truth about history. China and Japan should join forces and cooperate to build

a great and strong East Asia. The only obstacle to this is, unfortunately, Japanese nationalism.” He said this to me on the main campus of Shanghai University, a site that had been devastated by the Japanese army in the past.

Since becoming the chancellor, Dr. Qian has reformed the university with great success—in just the pioneering manner he proposed so many years ago. Today, China flourishes like a dragon ascending high into the sky. The new century that Dr. Qian has spent his life in quest of is now visible on the horizon. He is determined to continue to play his part in its arrival. “As long as I live, I will work day and night! Paltry as it might be, I want the sweat of my brow to be part of the great river of development that will carry my nation forward on its mighty flow!” A life that cannot be stopped, that conquers every obstacle in its path, is a great life.

Chancellor Qian titled a brief personal history, “*Galloping Advance*.” □