

Mary Clabaugh Wright, 1917–1970

A life lived with passion, honesty, and intelligence is over. Mary Wright always thought, talked and worked with a terrific intensity, so that she burned herself into the consciousness of those who encountered her. She was not a taker of short-cuts and she was not a dodger of issues. She asked the hard questions about history, as she did about life, and she expected her students and her friends to do the same. For her, there was no answer that did not lead to a fresh set of questions, and no data that was above scrutiny.

Her lecture course on modern Chinese history was dazzling, and I could have asked for no other introduction to this field: her sense of urgency caught us up, her range of knowledge stretched us, her sudden pauses in mid-flight as a new idea occurred to her gave us, too, pause. She made us look steadily at China and its people. She made us realize that decisions must always be made afresh, that man is free to choose his course of action and is therefore to be held responsible for the effects of that action.

In graduate school we learned how strongly she disliked the shoddy, and how strongly she despised the dishonest; we learned also that she cared how we did, for she had the extraordinary gift of giving each of us and our problems her concentrated attention. And gradually we began to understand the full extent of her professional achievements: of the imaginative and energetic way she had roamed China after World War II to gather materials for the Hoover Institution, which she was largely responsible for making the first great archive on modern Chinese history; and how brilliant a book *The Last Stand of Chinese Conservatism* was, a book which drew on a vast range of Chinese and Japanese materials to support a series of major historical hypotheses, and helped convince Western historians that Chinese history should be taken as seriously as the more familiar Western historiographical fields.

It is impossible for those who knew her not to feel a terrible sorrow at her death, which came so harshly after so many other battles with illness had been won. It is in our very gratitude to her for the gifts she gave us that our regret is lodged: for she gave so much of her time, so much of the time, to so many others that she did not have enough time for herself.

But enough of that, as Mary would say, there's work to be done. She showed where we might start in the preface to *China in Revolution*: "Historians of modern China . . . found that the picture of China in the early twentieth century, which we all lectured on and included in textbooks, was almost completely wrong." That is a very typical sentence for her to have written. For the "historians" is Mary; but she has so phrased it that the benediction and the injunction is on us all.

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