

James Cahill: Gombrich remembered

Sir Ernst Gombrich as a Good Person

It is pretty much a truism that good people can be recognized and defined by their response to hearing about the misfortunes of others: they want to be actively engaged, not just through conventional philanthropy, in helping to alleviate their afflictions. I have known a number of people who qualify as good by this definition. My daughter Sarah is one; I myself am not—and this is not just modesty, it's fact. And Sir Ernst Gombrich (1909-2001) was, by this definition, a good person, as I can document, and will, in what follows.

In my old house in Berkeley last week (10/09) I came upon an old file folder labeled "Fan Jingzhong." Fan, as many of you know, is arguably the best art historian in China; in addition to his own contributions, he is the most open to new and sometimes foreign ideas and approaches, and has translated, or sponsored translations and publication of, writings by such notables as Gombrich, Baxandall, and Wollheim. Beginning in 1989, I began an effort, helped by my wife Hsingyuan (whom I had married only a year earlier), to bring him to Berkeley for a year as a Visiting Scholar, as I had already done for several other notable Chinese art history specialists and museum people. The effort was unsuccessful, for reasons that will appear in the year-by-year account below, which is derived from documents in the thick folder. But this is nonetheless a story with a happy ending, as will also become apparent. (I mean to make pdf copies of Gombrich's letters to me--two of them, handwritten in the originals, in typed transcriptions by myself--available on my website so they can be read in their entirety.)

April 23, 1989. I write Fan thanking him for sending me a set of his journal *Xin Meishu* (*New Arts*) for our library, and telling him that Hsingyuan and I will be coming to Hangzhou in the summer, and that I look forward to meeting him then.

October-November, 1989. I apply to the Young Chinese Scholars Fellowships program under the National Academy of Sciences (letter of Nov. 7) for funding to bring Fan to Berkeley for the 1990-91 academic year. This is done through Professor David Keightley, then Chairman of our Center for Chinese Studies.

October 20, 1989. Letter from Gombrich (responding to one from me, of which I haven't a copy) supporting our application for Fan, whom he has never met but with whom he "has been in contact for many years." He suggests, since Fan's own statement of his research project is "much too vast," that he might "attempt a study of the reaction to Chinese art in the West for a given period." [This is exactly the long term project that Fan's student and disciple Hong Zaixin has undertaken.] Gombrich's letter ends: "Perhaps I might add that I owe so much to Prof. Fan that I'd gladly make a contribution to his journey or upkeep if that would help his obtaining a grant."

October 23, 1989. Letter from Fan to myself, expressing gratitude for Hsingyuan's and my own special relationship with his department, thanking me for essays contributed to *New Arts*, and enclosing his resumé and publication list to accompany our application. Another note from him dated November 17, 1989 about my essays and their translation.

Feb. 26, 1990. Letter from David Keightley informs me that "your nominee Fan Jingzhong has been selected by the Committee on Advanced Study in China as one of the finalists," and suggesting that we negotiate with Fan's unit in China about the possibility of his going abroad. I reply to David (letter of March 20, 1990) that "There will be, we are assured, no problem getting the approval of his unit for his coming here. The Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts is especially open to exchanges with foreign institutions, especially the U.S."

[March 23, 1990: long letter in Chinese from Hsingyuan to Fan, which I can only partially read, about our hope for his coming to Berkeley. Other correspondence between Fan and Hsingyuan also in the folder, left out of the present account. It may well contain material and information pertinent to this narrative, but I do not feel authorized to release it without Hsingyuan's permission.]

May 2, 1990. I write to Gombrich, thanking him for his support and restating our intention to bring Fan to Berkeley "so that he could work with Svetlana, Michael Baxandall, myself and my specialist students, and deepen his already-remarkable grasp of Western methodology. This, we felt, could have important benefits for the development of art history in China." But I continue:

"I write in the past tense because the outcome is tragic. We were informed by the funding agency . . . that he would very probably be chosen... When we wrote him, excitedly, we received a letter from him—which was later confirmed by letters from others—saying that he has an incurable cancer, and cannot travel abroad. (His own letter was not quite so pessimistic, but it is clear from others that he has only months to live.) The tragedy is deepened by personal circumstance: he had recently escaped at last from an unhappy marriage and married the woman he loved, who is reportedly now pregnant with his child; he was moving into a better life in all ways. And now it is to be cut short. . ."

May 9, 1990. Letter from Gombrich, thanking me for my letter, and saying that he had heard from various sources including Fan himself about Fan's affliction, but was "deeply shocked by your opinion that he has only a few more months to live. I have heard of similar cases which seem to have been successfully treated, but maybe there are . . . (illegible) . . . and in any case I don't know how far these specialists are advanced in China. May I ask you whether you think financial help might secure for him some effective treatment? He has done so much for me that I would not want to neglect anything I might do to help."

May 15, 1990. I write Gombrich: "The bleak report I sent you about Fan Jingzhong was based on letters we had from people in his Academy, who said the operation had revealed that the cancer had gone too far to be stopped. But a later letter is a bit more optimistic. Let's pray that this is the right version. Anyway, we'll be in Hangzhou around the 10th of June, and will presumably be able to see him and get the latest reports. . . Your generous suggestion that you would be willing to give him some financial help is one we will keep very much in mind, and make some discreet inquiries about this matter, and let you know what we find out." I add that Hsingyuan and I would possibly be coming to London "in the summer of next year," and if so, ". . . look forward to meeting and talking with you."

July 5, 1990. Beijing, China. Long letter (2-1/2 closely-typed pages) to Gombrich, "written on a borrowed, unfamiliar typewriter," beginning with this: "Let me say right off that the dismal report we had before, which I passed on to you, was apparently too negative: his chances are better than that . . ." We had heard in Hangzhou that an operation there had gone well, and that "there is a pretty good chance of recovery—insofar as one can ever really recover from cancer. He has come to Tianjin, [his own birthplace and] where his new wife's family is, and they will stay there until she bears their child. Also, it turns out that he hopes to have treatment in Beijing." I go on to report that Fan and a friend had come to our room the previous evening, where we had a long talk. "I told him about your letters, your concern over his health, what you might do to help him. He was moved. We asked point-blank: what do you need? Can monetary assistance better your situation significantly?" . . . "He was equally straightforward in his response: we had come at just the right point. The doctors who have examined him here recommend radiation treatments followed by chemotherapy. They can't tell him exactly when they could begin, but it should be soon. And they require a deposit of 5,000 yuan—which he doesn't have." I go on to explain that this is somewhat less than US\$1,000 by black-market exchange, and that the next morning Hsingyuan and I had gone ahead and done "the only sensible thing," gone to the bank and withdrawn \$1,000 on my AmEx card—using up our allowance—and changed it and given it to him. This was on the assumption that this would eventually be reimbursed by Gombrich—but we didn't have time to check this with him, much less to get the money from him. [It's true, and I hope goes without saying, that without Gombrich we would ourselves have given Fan this money; but it was still Gombrich's money that went to Fan, and the credit is all his.]

My letter goes on to complain about the messy situation of art history in China, and other matters.

July 22, 1990. Letter from Gombrich, handwritten, which I have transcribed (all I can read). He thanks me for going ahead with getting the money to Fan, says he will ask his bank to reimburse me, and asks whether I had other expenses that he can reimburse. He also writes that he recently met "a Chinese lady who was going to Shanghai and was willing to take another sum of money to Prof. Fan." And he responds to my comments about art history in China, adding that he finds "our

colleagues in many countries are a quarrelsome lot. . . Maybe Leonardo was right: Where there is no proof, there is shouting."

August 3, 1990, note from me to Gombrich saying that I have received his check, and that there were no additional expenses; also giving him Fan's mailing address in Tianjin.

(January-March 1992: correspondence with our Berkeley doctor, Morton Meyer, and with Fan about getting certain medication, unavailable in China, for his further treatment.)

Happy ending: the radiation treatments and chemotherapy were effective: Fan Jingzhong, largely cured, has continued to teach and work in Hangzhou and elsewhere. How much additional money Gombrich sent to him through the "Chinese lady" I don't know, but we can assume that it was used for his further treatments. He and his colleague Cao Yiqiang finally came to Berkeley in June, 1996, but stayed only about two weeks, June 15-29, their time cut short by a mis-handling of their application and by their own other commitments. Further happy ending: Hsingyuan and I were indeed able to spend some time in England, it must have been in 1992 or 1993? for a symposium in Norwich, attended by Gombrich, that went on for several days, so that I had lots of time to talk with him. About, among other things, how he had saved the life of China's best art historian and the leading force for the opening-up of art history in China, Fan Jingzhong.