In Memory of Hal Kahn

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These remarks will be brief, because I’ve been unable to find words to express how fortunate I feel and how grateful I am to have worked for more than 30 years in tandem with Hal, and with a procession of outstanding graduate students. Hal and I were not without our differences, but there was far more agreement and overlap than there was divergence.

One of these differences had to do with baseball. Both Hal and I were fans, but I never really understood how Hal could be far more interested in the Oakland A’s than the San Francisco Giants. Perhaps he felt, in his Hal-ian way, that the typical Giants fan patronized and condescended to the more blue-collar following of the A’s, and this was a subtle form of social criticism. Often, Hal would listen to the radio broadcasts, without TV, recreating the game in his mind as it entered his ears.

Lately, I’ve been pondering how one of the sweetest rewards a teacher can have is the feeling that something that he or she may have said or done has been found useful to another human being. And by that measure, Hal’s rewards are clearly to be reckoned in very large numbers, as evidenced by this turnout here today. And I think in some sense, he felt these rewards, implicitly or explicitly, during his long retirement.

I’m also savoring the memory of 30 years of reading Hal’s prose, remembering his stylistic care and eloquence in written and often in verbal forms as well. Indeed, there are moments in reading Hal’s letters of recommendation and readers’ reports that remind me of my own mentor, Joseph Levenson, with their combination of wit, wisdom and sometimes sly humor.

Working with you who are here today, over these many years, as well as with others who are unable to be present in person, was a gift that you gave to the two of us. For you not only exhibited a rare collegiality and genuine collaboration, but instructed us as well, as you explored your research specialties, knowing much more of them than we, your so-called mentors. It was as though you were part of an ongoing seminar in constructive scholarship. And always, as I have said elsewhere, you were OUR students—not Hal’s students or MY students. Probably neither of us could remember (or cared to remember) whose name appeared first on the thesis title page.

Hal was able to communicate his confidence that you had within you all the resources that you needed for success in the academic life, which he viewed with simultaneous seriousness and ironic detachment. I am keenly aware, as I hope these remarks suggest, of how much I owe to him for my own development.

Well, I could go on, but I promised to be brief, and I should stop before I belie my opening words. You are much in my thoughts, Hal, and will remain so forever.
Albert Dien

The news that Hal passed away is very sad, he was my closest friend and colleague, one whom I looked up to for so much. I think sadness expresses best my feelings, rather than grief, because at our ages, we have only a limited number of years left, that end is to be expected. At the same time I think it does allow perhaps a more clear-headed perspective of what we have lost. Our relationship moved, I think, from being colleagues to friendship when Hal asked me to team-teach with him a course in the History Department on the middle period of Chinese history, which we did for a number of years. Our interests dovetailed nicely for I specialized in the early years while Hal’s specialty was the study of the later period. We sort of divided up the Song dynasty in the middle. But I soon realized that our approaches also differed, what it called to my mind was a kind of parallel to Isaiah Berlin’s "The Hedgehog and the Fox," for while I focused on the dates and events, Hal’s presentations, as Berlin would have it, drew on “a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world could not be boiled down to a single idea.” His lectures were inspiring, for not only did he have an exceptional command of language but he also drew on such a wide range of intellectual concepts. That ability to excite the imagination of his classes extended further to the many graduate students whom he mentored and who saw him as their life-long laoshi.

Hal was always a serious and dedicated reader, not just of scholarly research on Chinese history, but over the widest range of literature, fiction and non-fiction. He not only kept abreast of the latest of what met his highly developed critical standards but he often went back in time to reread favorite works. He generously shared favorite items, not just books but also articles in the New York Review of Books and other publications. He was a savant in the best sense of the word. This may seem to make him out too much a barren intellectual. Not at all. He had always been a keen adventurer in cooking; he loved to experiment and to exchange recipes. But over the years there was also a change in his interests, and here I think Maureen had a great deal to do with it. The interest in cooking expanded to an appreciation of fine dining. His reports on visits to New York came to include recommendations of favorite restaurants. Art came to play an important part in his life, and given Hal’s propensity to master all aspects of a new venue, he made it his own. He was happy to share his knowledge of the field from the Old Masters to the latest development in the art scene in New York. In all of this he displayed that fine sense of judgment that he applied to all aspects of his life.

In all of this, his sense of responsibility toward the welfare of others stood out. Letters of recommendation for students is to be expected but those that I was privileged to have seen were exceptional, to say the least. The detail of their presentation, and the elegance and style of their composition gave ample evidence of the care and effort with which they were prepared. The only others that I know of to have reached this level of excellence were those by Joseph Levenson; was that both he and Hal were Qing dynasty specialists have something to do with it? One has only to read Hal’s review in the New York Review of Books of Jonathan Spence’s Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K’ang-hsi, to have a sense of Hal’s remarkable literary skill, sense of humor, all combined with a precise and incisive analysis of the merits and faults of the subject at hand.
Those to whom Hal extended his extraordinary talents and deep, heartfelt concerns ranged, of course, beyond his students, and included as we have heard today, a wide range of friends and colleagues. I was one of those lucky ones.

Let me give you an example. A few years ago Hal suffered from a fall, I believe it had something to do with his trying to intervene in a quarrel between his cherished dog and another, the result being that Hal was housebound while he recovered. It seemed to me to be an opportunity to repay Hal for all the kindnesses he had shown me, so I called and we agreed on a day I would bring food for us to have lunch together. This was not a slight undertaking. Hal was a certified gourmet (he had even published a book on epicurean picnic foods to take on hikes in the wilderness). So I made careful selections of potable delicacies and desserts from the shops along University Avenue, and took the train to San Francisco. There I transferred to a bus that ran a very circuitous route that would take me near to his home. It was all planned out, I had maps and bus schedules. Unfortunately I misread the bus schedule, missed the right stop, and had a long walk to reach his house. I finally got to 25th Street and started down, I had been there a number of times before, I would recognize it, I remember passing a place where a portion of the sidewalk was being repaired, but when I reached a particularly steep section, I realized I must have missed his house. No problem, I had a cell phone, I would call Hal and get directions, but it turned out to have no juice, so I stopped a young couple, explained my predicament, they lent me a phone, and I made my call, but it turned out that the number I had was that for a cousin who lived in New York. The young couple wished me luck and moved on. Another passerby told me where I might find a telephone book some blocks away, but as I turned to go off, the young man came rushing back and told me that up around the corner an elderly man was asking if anyone had seen an elderly man wandering around. He led me back and sure enough, there was Hal who had gotten worried by then, I was an hour late, and had climbed down the steep flight of stairs to look for me. By the way, the sidewalk being repaired was in front of his house, my taking care to walk around the spot had caused me to miss his house. We climbed back up to his house, ate lunch and had time to talk. It did not escape me that my concern for Hal’s health was far exceeded by Hal’s concern for what may have happened to cause me to be so late. According to the bus schedule it came time for me to retrace my route, but Hal would not hear of it. He insisted on getting his car out of the garage and driving me to the train depot, and not driving off until he saw me safely on the platform.

As was usual, Hal’s concern for others and what he did for them far outweighed whatever one could do in return, no matter how one tried. So what does one take away from this and other such incidents? As I hear from Hal’s students, colleagues, friends, it becomes clear to me that all who came within Hal’s orbit were included in his concern for their well-being and success. And for us, it was a rare privilege indeed to have been associated with such a rare spirit.
Estelle Freedman

Matt asked me to speak about Hal Kahn as a colleague, but I have thought of him as a friend and neighbor for even longer than we were colleagues in the history department – in adjacent offices on a basement corridor we called the shtetl.

Hal made my life richer, saner, and more intellectually engaged. He created a welcoming space for me in a department where the gender, ethnic, and political complexion during my early years could (indeed did) feel alienating. He was on sabbatical driving a cab in Brooklyn when I arrived in 1976, but Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter assured me that when he returned I’d find a kindred spirit. They were so right. Politically and culturally, we spoke a similar language.

Joining his carpool from Noe Valley in S.F. provided an immersion course in Hal’s wit, knowledge, tolerance, critical insights, and passion for both ideas and worldly pleasures. Sometimes we shared what we were going to lecture about that day. I loved getting him going on his expertise (maven of all things) and he made me feel intellectually valued. He also kept me on my toes, whether talking about politics or playing the word game Boticelli to pass the time in traffic. Some of my favorite rides included stories from his family background – alas, we never got around to the oral history of his life I proposed (he dodged me on that), which I so regret.

Over the decades I felt honored to be included in Hal’s tribe of younger and devoted longtime friends, who, along with varied colleagues, graduate students, and family, gathered for Thanksgiving all day feasts featuring his exquisite cooking. Other times I visited for a schmooze or a rant.

During the hardest years of my career, Hal offered the gift of his irreverence for academia, despite his formidable talents as an historian, teacher, and mentor. His way of life helped remind me of the larger picture -- of nature, of generous and loyal friendships, of writing about what matters most to you. For Hal, that meant reaching far beyond the university to the hikers and cooks and hedonists, his reading audience. In the inscriptions to my copies of his co-authored books (on display today), he consciously addressed his choices:

*The Campers Companion*, 1991:
“Dear Estelle and Susan – This sure beats the archives!, Love Hal”

*The Leave-No Crumbs* camping cookbook, 2004:
“Once again the joys of scholarship!”

After he retired, Hal’s house became a destination for walks, canine play dates, and book discussions. He would almost always be sitting in the window reading, graciously welcoming expected or unexpected company, ready to recommend or dish his current book, from the nineteenth century novels he adored (I’m eternally grateful that he got me to read Middlemarch) to the latest by Ali Smith. In the past few years, Susan and I would come over to see Hal and Maureen to bemoan national politics and share resistance strategies, and I’d get reading recommendations from both of them. We were overdue for a date when Hal died. It is still hard to pass 25th street without thinking of stopping by for a visit.
When I think of Hal’s legacy, I think of his multiple gifts of nurture – for one, the way he raised Annika and Stanya to become independent, determined women. I admired the mutual caring of Hal and Maureen in their loving relationship. The way he mentored his graduate students provided a model for me – how he labored over those dissertation chapter drafts and the recommendation letters, how beautifully he trained them to go out and transform the field of Chinese history. We are all better historians, and better people, for knowing Hal Kahn.

I miss him and I thank him for his deep humanity.

Olav ha’shalom. Peace be upon him.
Gordon Chang

I had the honor and good fortune to know Hal as a mentor and as a colleague. He was a special friend through the years and his passing saddens me.

I first met Hal in 1970 when I arrived for the doctoral program in Chinese history, but I was conflicted and ambivalent about my decision to pursue a degree. I was a social and political activist and found the rare atmosphere of graduate study uncomfortable. I had an unsettled soul and found in Hal a kindred spirit. He was a brilliant scholar and teacher but also very much a rebel, a “lefty” very much a part of the radical movement in the Bay Area at the time.

I believed I caused Van, who was my principal adviser, and Hal grief and apologized to them for not being the student they hoped to have. Hal was understanding and supportive and when I took leave from the program after just two years, he wished me well.

I saw Hal occasionally at demonstrations or at art museums over the subsequent years, but in 1982 I returned to Stanford to complete my doctoral degree. To Van and Hal’s probable relief, I moved from Chinese history, which I continued to love, to U.S. history.

In 1990, when I was fortunate to have the chance to join the Stanford History Department as a faculty member, the campus conservatives published a frontpage article on its newspaper that declared that “Red Guard Gordy,” which they called me, had to go, or something to that effect. They called on the Stanford administration to withdraw the offer of employment.

I was hurt, scared, and angry and feared that if I came back to Stanford, I would encounter harassment or worse. Hal and Van each reached me and basically said: “Ignore them. Take the position.” I have never forgotten their support and encouragement.

Hal was a model and supportive colleague. He marched to his own drummer and was always a consummate teacher and mentor. I learned from him as a historian, intellectual, and political activist, in so very many ways.

When I saw the dates of Hal’s life and passing, I could not believe my eyes: I could not comprehend that he had had a long life of eighty-eight years. He had a young spirit and that is how I will always remember him and cherish his legacy.
When I first arrived at Stanford in the fall of 1976, Hal had just returned from a sabbatical spent driving a taxi in New York. I wasn’t sure I wanted to stay in graduate school at all, and thought that if the first quarter was anything like the previous year I had spent at Princeton, I was going to leave and become a labor organizer. But that first quarter I took a seminar with Hal, and discovered the joys of high-octane intellectual and political discussion, led by someone with such obvious energy and engagement that he drew in everyone in the room. And then I read his book Monarchy in the Emperor’s Eyes, and although my own interests ran more to Mao Zedong than to the Qianlong emperor, the combination of massive erudition, elegant prose, and sly humor hooked me. I learned very early on with Hal that he could be both ambivalent about academia—and in those very politically active times, he was—but also all in, fully committed to his teaching and his students.

Every class with him felt like a treasure hunt. During one quarter, a number of us, interested in why China had not developed capitalism in the way that the west did, decided to read the untranslated works of the Chinese scholar Fu Yiling. Every week a small group of us huddled around the table in Hal’s attic office, surrounded by dictionaries and books explaining classical references, and painstakingly worked our way through a text about the so-called “sprouts of capitalism” in late imperial China. It was delicious, a type of focused pleasure that also felt connected to big questions about our world.

One of Hal’s major talents as a teacher was to meet each of us where we were, and to extend enthusiasm, kindness, and rigor to each of us.

Here’s a glimpse of that from Halsey Beemer:

May 1970. The Kent State shootings had just shocked the country. Stanford students struck the school, and classes ceased. The History Corner was closed, but learning continued. Those of us graduate students in East Asian studies, many of whom were members of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), took the opportunity to speak out about the aggression of the United States in Vietnam. This was also when I took my Chinese History PhD orals. Allowed to take them during the student strike, an accommodation necessitated my imminent departure for Taiwan and language study. Up in Hal Kahn’s office on the fourth floor of the otherwise empty History Corner. Led by Van and including Hal, Mark Mancall, Bill Skinner and I am not sure now who else, I was grilled on all manner of important issues in Modern Chinese History. Which I dealt with adequately. But the most striking set of questions came from Hal Kahn. All of his questions were centered on China’s long and tortured relationship with Vietnam. I would guess that for thirty minutes Hal and I talked about Vietnam and China and the Trung Sisters and the Confucian influences in Vietnamese historiography and their bureaucracy and other China/Vietnam subjects.

Hal had known that I had spent the weeks before my orals in teach-ins and rallies and organized demonstrations centered on Vietnam, time I should have been expected to
better prepare for the orals. Perhaps I had participated in some of the activities with Hal, I
don’t really remember at this point, but he knew what I had been up to. And so he
steered his set of questions during the orals to an area where I had been most recently
actively involved. Hal molded the discussion around topics that I had not prepared for but
that had only recently become more intimately familiar. Hal was ever the scholar, the
teacher but always on the most human and personal scale. Taking into consideration the
individual student in front of him at the time and sculpting the interaction around that
student. The consummate teacher, the brilliant intellectual, and a mensch.

Hal and Van were both willing to support their students in almost any idea we had, no matter
how nonstandard. When Emily Honig and I decided that we wanted to spend parts of several
summers in El Paso, Texas, interviewing women factory workers who had been on strike at a
trousers factory in the 1970s, neither Hal nor Van raised their eyebrows and asked us to explain
what this had to do with Chinese history. They just let us go, giving us permission to fashion our
own intellectual agendas. It was in El Paso that I learned how to learn a strange city, street by
street, and how to collect oral narratives from people who are not in the habit of writing things
down. Both of these skills turned out to be crucial to the PhD work I did several years later in
China, and to many projects after that. Less imaginative advisers and teachers would not have
permitted any such thing.

Vera Schwarcz writes about how her friendship with Hal unfolded in the 1970s:

I came to treasure his gracious
self-effacing Jewish humor later,
when our heritage mattered more;
later, after he gave me the keys
to this office the first month
I arrived in Stanford: “Make yourself
at home here, take any book,
just put it back in its place;”
later, after being overwhelmed
by the dense lexicon of Qing documents
he knew and taught so well;
later, after sharing a joint or two
and giggling at far left politics;
later, after hiking the hills of Sausalito
with Kind Dog named simply
because naming matters;
later, after sharing tales of divorce
and watching Hal put his kids first,
because family is more important
than the books we write—

Hal not only wrote about a princely monarch,
he was a princely man,
a mensch.
Hal also knew how to offer help in indirect ways when one of us ran into trouble. 

*Poshek Fu* writes,

> Back in the early 1980s, I was in Shanghai deep in personal and political troubles, not sure what to do next. Then, one late afternoon, I received a package from the USA. It was from Hal. When I opened it, I saw a book inside—J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*. A Japanese-occupied Shanghai story. I started reading it and found it hard to contain my emotion. The book—or the act of sending the book—gave me the strength to hope for a better tomorrow. I determined to go back to the US to complete my degree. What a simple act? Thank you!"

And Hal knew how to make a celebration. One week in December 1978, Emily and Randy Stross and I took our oral exams, three days in a row. Hal offered to make each of us whatever kind of cheesecake we wanted for the post-exam festivities. Emily’s was strawberry; Randy’s was chocolate; mine must have been chocolate too, though I confess that I am an unreliable narrator. Each one was ceremonially presented.

In 1981, when five of us were on the job market at once, Hal and Van steadfastly refused to rank us or tell potential employers what to do; they just described each of us in, apparently, unforgettable terms. I know I am not the only person among Hal’s students to arrive at a job interview and have the interviewer ask, “Who is this guy Harold Kahn? We had half a mind to hire him.” But after weeks spent on the endless grind of churning out letters of recommendation, Hal had had enough. On November 11, he presented the five of us with an omnibus letter of recommendation that he threatened to use henceforth. He had the chutzpah to sign Van’s name to it too. I will read it in full, with thanks to Randy Stross for digging it out of his files.
November 11, 1981

To Whom It May Concern:

During the next fortnight you will be receiving meowing requests by a mess of pottage collectively known to us as the Five Stooges that they be considered for the positions that you are so courageously if indiscreetly advertising. Don't.

A more motley gang of layabouts we have not had on our decks in over a generation. "Shiftless" describes them nicely. And, like sake, alas, they don't travel well. They exude a certain distorted charm, not unlike the effect of a carnival hall of mirrors, and if that is what you want for your senior common room by all means take them. Take all of them.

You will no doubt require something along the line of individuation, and in that respect, we can offer you the following, strictly in alphabetical order and focussed exclusively on their strong points:

- Chauncey: Crispness. A will-o'-the-wisp quality that seems to whisper, "How you see me, now you don't". Has been with us only 17 years. A record.
- Hershatter: Stone tongue. Tendency to quietude. Cannot be heard on any subject in a gale. She attributes this to modesty. We refuse to attribute it....
- Honig: Elegance in speech and dress. A tendency to arabesques and rhetorical devices last used by the Cro Magnon librarians.
- Paulson: Loquacity. An inability to shut up which makes him all too often the life of parties long since over.
- Stross: Sloth. Constitutionally incapable of work or, it is rumored, play. Spends much of our time (and, we suppose, his) erecting elaborate schemes to stay forever a graduate student. He seems to like the food.

If there is anything else that you might remotely require in the way of information that could assist you in reaching sober decisions, please get in touch. Not with us, however.

Yours, etc.

H. L., and L.P. K and V.S., respectively.
And so all of us went forth and started our adult lives. But Hal remained a touchstone, someone with whom I always checked in. From a distance, I saw his daughters Annika and Stanya grow up and heard about his grandsons Kourosh and Lenny. For years, Hal met me each December on the Pacific coast to pick kiwis with my children. I got to see how happy he became in his life with his partner of several decades, Maureen McClain.

The last time I saw him, in October, Hal greeted me by announcing, “I have long outlived my shelf life,” then burst out laughing. We drove across town, ate astonishing quantities of jiaozi, and he lobbed one reading suggestion after another at me, ranging across the full spectrum of his interests—except maybe baseball, which would have been lost on me. I’ll be doing that reading for years. Then I dropped him off at 25th St. and he moved, pretty fast, up those steep stairs.

Yung-fa Chen writes of seeing Hal at that house in the summer of 2017:

> With no aid of map and address, my fading memory guided us to find Hal’s Mission District house in San Francisco after two decades’ return to Taiwan across the Pacific. My wife, whom he had never met, could not believe how excitedly we embraced each other like kids. More slender but seemingly taller, with his silver mustache and shining forehead, he listened tolerantly to the English I still spoke as if with a mouthful of marbles and we enjoyed talking about our separate retirement life and mutual acquaintances. In hearing of his painless departure in sleep, I felt some comfort, but could not but feel saddened by not being able to see him again in his house unless in memory and dream.

Many of my own students, too, are grown and gone. When they heard about Hal’s death, some of them sent me condolence notes, as if a relative had passed away. And that is when it dawned on me: we students are, in fact, Hal’s kin, not by blood but by shared curiosity, enthusiasm, trust, and love. I feel very blessed to have Hal in my life—then, and now, and for as long as all of us have memory and dream.
Tobie Meyer-Fong (and other former graduate students)

It is difficult to quantify the scale of the impact that Hal Kahn had on his students, the volume of gratitude we collectively feel, the magnitude of our loss at his passing. There is no sufficient metric. There are no mentors comparable. He broke the mold, exceeded expectations—and thus defined ours. He was above and beyond. We who teach can only aspire to emulate and (speaking for myself at least) forever fall short of his extraordinary example.

The Southern Song Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi wrote that to teach is to be like a physician—to prescribe learning like medicine: both individualized to the needs of the particular student and universally efficacious. Hal inhabited that role, lived that kind of teaching. To each of us he gave the learning we most needed in the form we could best hear it—but he did so with such uniform a generosity of spirit that we somehow felt similarly—and singularly—favored.

Hal mentored before it became fashionable to mentor—long before the institutional “thought leaders” bureaucratized what for Hal was an organic practice. He nurtured us as scholars and as professionals and he connected us to each other and to others in the field. Even as he proudly declared that he had not been the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting since 1968, he nudged us all to participate and deliver papers and network—and made sure we knew who it might be good to look for if we went.

He took on the persona of intellectual yenta—making matches based on academic affinities with characteristic insight. He invited former students back for talks and made sure they had coffee or lunch with his current students. He arranged for us to look out for each other—reminded current students to seek translation and proofreading help from classmates—and sent us out in the world clutching email addresses and phone numbers. Sometimes it seemed as though he thought of all of us synchronically—as if we had all been his students at the same time. And he thought we knew everything about him and professed surprise when he realized that we didn’t.

Hal taught a most diverse bunch of students and yet—we all describe him similarly. We remember surprise at his informality of manner and attire—the flannel shirts, Birkenstocks, and Panama hat, the shock of being on a first name basis, the twinkle in his eye as he dispensed rigorous guidance with a sly dose of ironic humor from behind his desk. The manual typewriter belatedly replaced by a computer; the precariously stacked file cabinets and the books arranged alphabetically on shelves with excess piled on the floor and filling the windows. The keys to his office generously handed out to graduate students. The archaic card box documenting books casually lent. The delight of his letters of recommendation, the generous sharing of a great novel or exhibit or recipe or meal, the bridges he built across generations of students. The way he greeted visitors to the office with a cheery “Hang your hips” (translating literally from Japanese); the warmth of his interaction with beloved canines, Deli and later Shasta. His inimitable way with words. The Chartres of Bathrooms. The perfect comfort of his kitchen. The Thanksgiving dinners at his house in which graduate students were included. The pies. The Chanukah party he and Al Dien threw for students who stayed on over a winter break—Hal put beer in the latke batter—a secret ingredient to improve flavor or make them crispy. How he welcomed new students to San Francisco with a driving tour—and terrified us by gleefully rolling down the highest hill in neutral; he took a posse of students on a hike to Pigeon Point light house modeling
an appreciation of nature as we trooped down the beach—a merry band more typically locked in
the library.

We think of Hal’s generous and timely comments on our work—rigorous but supportive—
perceptive to the point that he often knew what we were doing before we did. I found these
comments on an old paper—they seem somehow typical in the firm but humorous insistence on
good writing: "A keen intelligent reading; always interesting, sometimes challenging (on the
other hand, we must strive for precision, ne?). Did you decide at the end to give up English as a
primary language?" Jiang Jin recalls that “Hal once told me that I was there to learn about what
was academic excellence, not necessarily anything particular from him. He was able to see what
my dissertation was all about much clearer than I myself could when I was struggling with my
materials. One of his famous comments on my draft was: “Life imitates arts imitating life.”
Another comment: “Yours should be a tightly controlled narrative about the struggles of the
actresses.”

Wang Juan especially remembers Hal’s honesty and support: “What I valued the most was Hal’s
unfailing encouragement and his genuine care as a teacher. He was always honest about what he
thought about my work. His criticisms were sharp, but he did not make me feel bad. He gave the
impression that he believed in me, and that he knew that I could do better the next time. This
trust sustained many of his graduate students who like me were unsure of ourselves.”

Jiang Jin observes “in many ways I find myself copying Hal’s manner in directing my graduate
students; they love my stories about Stanford, about Hal’s Thanksgiving pies, and his book-
stuffed office open to all his students. They make use of my office and check out books from
there using the same card system Hal developed for us years ago.” Max Huang also models his
interactions with graduate students after Hall—and I too, like Jin and Max, strive to emulate my
teacher—and my students, like Jin’s and Max’s—and surely others—also have heard many
stories about Hal and Van and the Stanford 驮—usually administered in the context of advice
and encouragement.

Many of us treasure especially the extraordinary extended warranty on all of our educations—
whether or not we completed the course. Surely no car company would dare offer such terms.
Hal continued to engage with his former students—even decades after we moved on. As Wang
Juan recalls, “He was always there when you needed him. Over the years, he always replied to
my emails within a few hours after I sent them, with understanding, encouragement, and
support.”

Maybe eight years out of graduate school, I sent Hal a finished but utterly unsatisfactory draft of
an article that I had been wrestling with for weeks. He wrote back and told me to throw it all
away and start over—that it seemed to him that I was trying to write like someone else—in the
voice of someone (and he was quite specific!) more impressively theoretical than me and that it
would never work. I should start over and write as myself. The advice was painful to hear—but
the diagnosis spot on.

In the same vein, Jim Millward sent the following: “Hal sent me a brief email last spring with a
few well-chosen words praising something I’d published. They were no less meaningful to me
now than they would have been in 1986, when I started the Ph.D. program at Stanford. As someone with Ph.D. students of my own (and, for that matter, as a parent), Hal's example of providing continued support for students, even just a sentence or two, well after the direct mentorship ended, is one of the most important lessons I've learned from him. He never overdid it, of course--so you know he meant it.”

Hal stayed in touch; former students were always welcome. A bunch of us slept on his living room floor when the AAS came to San Francisco ages ago. Siyen and her family vacationed on occasion at his place. He took visitors to lunch; excellent conversations ensued. Photographs seldom happened; there was always too much to say.

Angus Lockyer recalls, “The last time I saw Hal was over food, of course, in Dogpatch, of course, with some decent pizza as the necessary prelude to a perfect ice cream ... of course. But, as ever, with Hal, food, however important, was the sideshow to companionship. Talking about books, chuckling at foibles, looking forward to the next wonder that the world would bring forth -- and realising, by doing things like this, that the arc of history does bend towards justice, if we help it, however inadvertently, however imperceptibly.”

Hal taught us by example that the best teachers give their students the space to be their most authentic selves. He taught us the importance of forming communities while hearing a different drummer. He inspired us to cultivate interests, cherish good conversations—and to love our canine companions; from him we learned to cook good slow food and to share meals and recipes—and always to search for that perfect ice cream--with friends, and especially to do our own thing even in a world ruled by conformists. He was a rebel and an aesthete, a surrogate parent and a friend. His passing has left a gaping hole in all of our lives; we fill that space by striving to be ourselves—and by continuing to be together.
On behalf of the current graduate students in East Asian History, I would like to extend our condolences to Maureen, and to all of Professor Kahn’s family, friends, colleagues, and former students. Professor Kahn has been a wonderful force for good in the lives of current and former graduate students. And one of his greatest gifts to the graduate students in East Asian History was unbelievably generous access to his office and personal library in the department.

Professor Kahn always told me to call him Hal, so I will respect his wishes and do so here. When I first began my PhD, I was astonished by Hal’s office. The Wuwei Shuzhai, also known as the Hal Kahn Reading Room, or HKRR, is overflowing with East Asian history books from floor to ceiling on all four walls. All of the East Asian History graduate students are given keys to it. Not every field has a reading room and private library, and graduate students working on East Asian History know how incredibly lucky we are to have benefited from Hal’s generosity.

In addition to Hal’s vast and continuously updated library, he also provided a computer, a printer, and even a tea kettle for us to use freely. Whenever we were teaching, he allowed us to use the HKRR for our office hours. I am sure there is not a single former East Asian History TA who does not remember having at least one awestruck undergraduate walk in and say: “WOW. This is YOUR OFFICE?” And for ABD graduate students on the academic job market, the intimidating wall of books in Hal’s office has been the professional backdrop for successful Skype interviews with universities around the world. Compact as it is, it has also been a social space for the East Asian History graduate students. I have discussed potential research projects, proofread grant applications, team-graded student papers, and exchanged gossip there. There was even a time I walked into the room and nearly tripped over a jet-lagged colleague who had just returned from Beijing taking a short nap on the floor. But the occasion when I was most grateful for Hal’s generosity came during my oral exam preparations. Every book in nearly all of my fields could be found and read in one meticulously-catalogued eight-by-twelve-foot space. Not having to hunt down hundreds of books in the vastness of the Stanford libraries gave me extra time to digest and write summaries of 2 to 3 books a day over a seven-month period. I know all of my fellow East Asian history graduate students have used or will use the reading room for the same purpose and are immensely grateful for Hal’s generosity.

I got to know Hal by running into him periodically in his office, usually prior to or after his weekly lunches with Professor Albert Dien. He was always welcoming, friendly, happy to chat, and had a bit of a proverbial twinkle in his eye. I was flattered that he invariably remembered my research interests and would point out new and old books that he thought might be helpful for me. I and my fellow graduate students marveled over how he seemed to have read everything. Not just every book in the HKRR. Everything.

Beyond Chinese history, Hal and I shared interests in the music of the Chinese-speaking bluegrass banjo player Abigail Washburn, and in dogs. I always loved it when he arrived accompanied by his beautiful black Labrador retriever, Shasta Pasta, who would occasionally stick her head in the paper recycling under the desk and pull out old photocopied articles from the Journal of Asian Studies to chew. Hal was inevitably gentle, patient, and good-humored with
her, as he was with all of us. From what I observed of him, he was a person with an abundance of compassion, humility, and curiosity.

Once, when I hadn’t seen Hal in a couple of months, I sent him an email and asked after Shasta. I thought I might finish by reading you his reply:

Andrew,
Thanks for the note. Shasta's asleep on the couch after an afternoon swim in the pond. She still hasn't figured out that ducks swim faster. There are a lot of other things she hasn't figured out, but of course the same can be said of me.
All best,
Hal

Graduate school can be intimidating. This little note gave me immense comfort, probably more than Hal intended. Professor Harold Kahn, a brilliant scholar who seemed to have read every book in that reading room and the world beyond, said he still had a lot of things he hadn’t figured out. As a graduate student, this made me feel like I did not have to pretend that I had everything figured out. For that lesson, I am immensely grateful to Hal. Thank you all for listening.
Annika Kahn

I thought I would start with some of my father’s favorite phrases:

El Camino…meaning, “good job and right on”, “Huggies all around”, offered to anyone and everyone knocking on the 25th street door, sometimes even the FBI got a hug, “One Step at a time”, maybe referencing Confucius, Hal’s track club, or maybe just a 12-step program, and, “easy does it,” often said to dogs, humans, cars, and doctors.

Our father was the one to read poetic and beautiful humorous pieces at memorials….so….. I will leave that great talent to his legacy and offer a few fond memories.

First,

Thank you all for being here. I really thought by my dad was just a dad- a fabulous one at that, and a really cool grandpa to Lenny and Kourosh and boy did he love these two boys.

But with you all here and listening to the outpouring of scholarly love, I am realizing that my dad was a rockstar. Maybe like the equivalent of Mick Jagger if Jagger had taken up Asian Studies and if the Chinese History department had decided the Rolling Stone Magazine were a thesis to be reckoned with. (My father would say that this metaphor just made was absolutely terrible) - this is true.

I would like to read the next part as a recent love letter to my dad: (What follows is a fairly common visit between Hal’s age of 83-88):

Dad, my favorite memory is coming over the day after recycling was supposed to be put out, of which I said I would do and of which you had already done yourself, and seeing you reading a book on the couch, Kourosh taking his seat in the rocking chair that Terry gave you, and Shasta getting comfy in the middle of the two humans. I would ask you what you had done today and you would have said, “Well Ol bean, I’ve started this new book about the last emperor under some dynasty”, and then would turn to Kourosh and casually ask him if he’s also read the same book. He would reply, “no not yet grandpa but it sounds interesting.”

You pops just naturally read. There is a picture of you reading at Bud lake where I learned to fish and throw them all back and where Stanya was prancing around the forest like a fairy princess. I admire this natural pull in your spirit to find and read whatever you could as though you knew keeping your brain sharp would help ease the realization that at some point our bodies just do stop.

In fact you found someone in your life who wanted to do the same thing, read and read and read. In this day and age many of us (non-scholars) have to set a timer to remind ourselves to read a book. At least I do. It’s not something that just jumps out at me, “oh look! A new book has just come out.” No no, I set a timer as I do with meditation, hoping the end of the 10 minutes will come soon. You dad happened to knock off two tasks in one setting: you would read for hours
and then confess that 60% of the time you were re-reading the same page, over and over again, tossing in a little nap here and there, which does all in fact count as meditation.

I also admired your unending love for Maureen, how you would stop our visits at exactly 5:45pm to feed Shasta at exactly 6:00 pm to drive over to Maureen's, make dinner, drive back again in the morning, plopping down on the couch with the pooch, smoothy in hand, perhaps receiving a visit from Steve or Estelle, Rick or Gail, Terry, Stanya and Lenny, and then do it all over again, for nearly 30 years. This is love.

I wonder what our couch conversation would have been about the recent 2019 January National Geographic release and the article found on page 68 (a title distasteful even for this strong hearted crowd). You would have had it open for me to read and I'm certain our conversation would have been lively just as were our feverish debates about topics on dreams, shooting stars, and consciousness, subjects neither of us knew anything about (and somehow you would win). In fact, dad, you were so convincing in knowledge of this and that that I came to secretly believe, and still do, that you also held a degree in Cosmology. Your depth of dialogue on planets, aliens, and life after the 3rd dimension were clearly signs that you had been at it.

On December 9th, 2019, the last night of Chanukah, Hal Kahn brought over a beautiful bouquet of flowers and an article entitled, “Why you must walk your Cat.” I thoroughly disagree with this one part of the Times but, in honor of Hal and out of great respect and unworldly love for or my father, I will give it a shot and walk my cats. I will deeply miss the articles, the couch conversations, and you dad.
“On Easter Sunday, April 16th 1245, a very fat, very old Franciscan friar set out from the city of Lyon to ride his ass to Asia.” So starts a lecture Hal wrote called “The Mongol Moment.” In “Monasteries and Mosques on the Frontier,” he began: “You may well ask—and ask legitimately—where the hell are we?” Delivering a talk about Huashan Mountain and the Daoists, he opened with: “Chinese mountains seem to do strange things to people.” And at the Society for Asian Art in 1990, he took the mic and said: “To set the tone for this evening, I want to begin by telling you about two gruesome murders.” And that was a lecture on lithography and gossip.

As I struggle to find words here for an ending, it’s a comfort to linger in Hal’s openers. In fact, with some you’d think he was working rooms on the borscht belt. But in all of them is a perfect reflection of Hal: his wit and charm, erudition and self-deprecation, an attuned balance of levity and gravity, a bit of poetry with polemic, and above all, an endless marveling at humanity and its stories.

What a gift to learn wonderment, to learn to take pleasure in so much language. As a parent, he also covered the basics: he taught us to fish and to make paper-thin crepes, to heckle a lousy pitcher and pick up an oiled pea with chopsticks. He taught us to stand up for our beliefs, to sit out the anthem at ballgames, march against wars, write letters against abusive authority, and exchange jaunty remarks about mediocrities like most heads of state and sub-par burritos.

Teaching isn’t easy. As a parent and a teacher myself now, I stretch to reach the high bar he set. Hindsight is a funny thing, (I say to a room full of historians) and can play tricks on the mind, so it is with a fully sober glance at the rear view mirror that I say, Dad, I think it was unreasonable to try and have me master MLA formatting in 5th grade. And also, thank you for having me audit your discussion of the shovel-shaped incisor for my 7th grade paper on evolution.

Thank you for taking such good care of us. Thank you for demanding rigor and expecting greatness, for accepting less than greatness, and still asking us to consider our fallibilities, to see the big picture and also revel in the details. Thank you for showing us how to be makers and doers and to give this monstrous world our tenderest and most thoughtful attention. I had your nurturing mentorship and care for fifty years. I could go on here fifty hours.

Luckily, as it turns out, Hal was also good at endings. He closed “A Historian Looks at China” with a ghost story and a curt “All’s well that ends well.” He tied up “News Aspects of Popular Culture in China” with “And now, back to you Susan.” But let’s return to Huashan Mountain now, with which he concluded:

“Getting down the mountain is another thing altogether, but the recharged faith which we attained on the way up ought to see us safely down. And if it doesn’t, we may stay on the mountain as hermits or immortals forever”
我的爷爷是我最敬佩的人，他也是生活中对我影响最大的人。跟很多人一样，我从幼儿园到小学一年级一直学西班牙语。有一天爷爷跟我说，他希望我在中美国际学校学中文，因为现在美国跟中国的交流越来越多，中文也越来越流行，而且学中文也可以增加以后的工作机会。爷爷是中国历史专家，所以我开始学中文完全是受爷爷的影响。我可以用中文跟他交谈，他的中文说得非常好，他也常常教我新的词语。爷爷告诉我，他三十岁的时候住在中国，在那里学了中文。他喜欢去好多不一样的地方，学不一样的文化和语言，这样他可以用很多不一样的眼光看待这个世界。我学习中文历史和中国文化，我希望也跟爷爷一样，去不同的地方，了解不同的文化。我九岁的时候开始打篮球。我爷爷非常喜欢看我打篮球。从九岁到现在，我每天都训练，现在是学校篮球队的队员。虽然现在爷爷不能去看我的比赛了，但是我知道每场比赛他都会继续为我加油！

很多人都告诉我爷爷是一位了不起的学者，是斯坦福大学的中国历史教授。一生‘桃李遍天下’（tiáolǐ biàntiān xià，Chinese idiom, meaning a great teacher has many students）。但是在我眼里，他总是那么慈爱，对人非常慷慨。爷爷去世前，我刚刚在旧金山大学完成了一个学期的中文课。我的中文教授听到爷爷去世的消息之后，对他在中国历史研究方面的学术成就也充满敬意。

(Translation)

Grandpa was someone that I admire the most and he also influenced me the most in my life. Like many people, I studied Spanish from Kindergarten to first grade. One day my grandpa told me mom that maybe I should consider learning Chinese at Chinese American International School (CAIS) because the exchanges between US and China have been increasing tremendously, and more people are learning Chinese nowadays. Learning Chinese could broaden job opportunities in the future as well. Grandpa is an expert in Chinese history, so it was because of him
that I started to learn Chinese. I could talk to him in Chinese because he spoke Chinese very well. He also taught me new words and expressions. Grandpa told me, he lived in Chinese at 50 and studied the language there. He enjoyed visiting different places, learning different languages and cultures so that he could look at this world from different perspectives. I’m studying Chinese language and Chinese culture now. I hope one day I will follow his footsteps and visit different places and learn about different cultures. I started playing basketball at the age of 9. Grandpa liked watching me play. I have been practicing for two hours almost every day since 9 and I’m now on the school’s basketball team. Although grandpa couldn’t watch me play anymore, I know he would continue to cheer for me in every game.

People told me how great my grandpa was a scholar and as a professor of Chinese history at Stanford, who has taught many students in his long career, but for me, grandma was always kind to me and generous to people around him. I had just completed a semester of Chinese class at the University of San Francisco when Grandpa passed away. After learning about Grandpa’s academic career in Chinese history, my Chinese professor said he had nothing but the utmost respect.

Grandpa you taught me many things. You are the such a role model for my life and I will never forget you. I hope to follow in your footsteps and be able to read all of your wonderful books in the library at Stanford University some day.

I love you Grandpa.
For Grandpa from Lenny Feb 9, 2019

You Were and Always Will Be
Ingenuous
Raucously funny
A chess aficionado
An avid reader
Brilliant
Witty
A bountiful cook
Playful
Lover of animals
The owner of an array of funny looking brushes that I never saw you use
Someone I can fall asleep in a book with,
Or send awfully funny letters to.
You were my secret admirer,
My personal comedian and teacher alike.
You helped and loved those who needed it, and I never once saw you act with anger
unless against some other injustice.
You lit up a room, so everyone could look on as you told clever sayings and taught
sophisticated matters in the most humorously educational manner, snacking on McVities
chocolate biscuits all the while.
Phil Ethington

Hal Kahn was a mentor, friend, and lifelong inspiration: the funniest and yet also the most serious intellectual I’ve ever known. But he was not my adviser: I came to Stanford to study US history. I found him simply because I lived in San Francisco and learned that he ran “The Carpool,” a shared-ride club shuttling a handful of lucky grad students and faculty taking turns driving our rickety Toyotas and VWs between San Francisco and Stanford. The Carpool was a rolling, rollicking informal seminar. In my time (1982-89) it included, among others, Estelle Freedman, Valerie Kivelson, Mike Kazin, John Smail, Martha Newman, Patty Seleski. Hal’s lightning wit and acerbic humor set the tone and also the intellectual bar. We played word games, discussed the latest essays in the New York Review, debated the Culture Wars of the Reagan years, and experienced the Tiananmen Square Protests in April-June of 1989, all while driving through the breathtaking Coastal Range along the San Andreas Fault. I got my best Stanford education in that carpool, and also made a lifelong friend, who always seemed my own age, or ageless, although I’m almost three decades younger. His perceived youthfulness owed a great deal to his antics, especially around the Brownstone gravity of the Stanford History Department. In the 1980s he was at the height of his game as a teacher and graduate adviser, but he had the most fun backpacking, and had just published, with his backcountry pal Rick Greenspan, Backpacking: A Hedonist’s Guide. So of course, as though he had just published a new history of China, he insisted on having it displayed in the front-lobby glass display case, along with the Pulitzer-prize-winning historical tomes. That simple, but brave and public act of defiance has always been emblematic to me, of Hal, and I’ve tried all my life to mimic his serious irreverence. But Hal was a great man in myriad of ways, that have shaped mine and many lives. With others waiting to speak, I’ll wrap this with a Big Farewell at drop-off, from The Carpool Gang, Class of 1989.

Valerie Kivelson

This is devastating news. Nancy Kollmann passed the department's announcement on to me, so I have been sadly, anxiously, sleeplessly processing.

The sorrow is deep and the memories bright. I can hear his voice, his laugh, the way he answered the phone with a rhymed couplet about our rhyming names. Over the past year, I have thought often about his ability to level the sharpest critiques, whether academic or political, without demonizing, always maintaining a humane attitude. This is something sorely needed right now.

I guess it is good to hear that this was completely unanticipated. That suggests that he didn't suffer and that he didn't have to experience the kind of decline that he would have hated. But such a terrible, terrible loss. Tim and I went for beautiful hike with him last spring and he hiked circles around us, all the while recommending books to read and ideas to consider. With that kind of physical and intellectual vitality, by rights he should have stayed with us for many years to come.
Hal was coming to Taipei for the summer of 1991. Somehow it was arranged that he would sublet a room that had emptied out in my apartment. I did not recall anyone ever recommending that a PhD student be landlord for someone on his dissertation committee, so I was nervous. At first I did what I thought my history advisor would want me to be doing: drive myself crazy at my desk and be a total insomniac. Hal was so sweet. “If you can’t sleep and want to talk, just wake me up. I won’t mind,” he would say, with the greatest kindness. And then, something I expected even less. After watching me for a couple of weeks, he said, “I think maybe you’ve done what you’re going to do this year. We should do something else.” This was the man who threw my first bibliography for my qualifying exam out the window as too incoherent? And there followed a joyous month and a half of hiking to temples and eating at all manner of sidewalk seafood restaurants (“I’ll pay—you don’t have a job”) and book shopping (“Buy this, and this, and these, and those…”). Every evening Hal would disappear and return with bags and bags of all manner of fruits (“I can’t help it—I’m a fruit bat!”) and an hour later the kitchen counter—and we—would be awash in fruit juice, and we and our third roommate Kachi-san would talk about everything that is. And by all of that, Hal let me know that life was never, ever, to be put on hold. I don’t always remember that, but I always know who will remind me.

Hal’s students were beneficiaries of a unique partnership, the Kahn and Van Show, collaborating so seamlessly and with such obvious respect for each other and genuine comradery. It was an example of how talented people could work together, push the boundaries, but without a sense of one-upmanship. We remember both the lectures and the seminars in History Corner, spending afternoons ensconced Hal’s office in the attic, surrounding a table groaning with books and papers, engaged in discussion and debate, excited at times but devoid of rancor, because our two mentors never displayed such sentiment and would never condone it.

Hal Kahn was an outstanding scholar, a scintillating lecturer, a powerful mentor. His support for his students who pursued academic careers has been related by many today. Hal was also a mentor and supporter for students who did not follow the academic route. Whatever profession a former student was engaged in, Hal had time to meet and chat. Even with the passage of decades, he had a special openness. Two years ago as a group of Asian studies students from the 1970s planned a gathering, I made a call to Hal, the first time we had spoken in perhaps 30 years. He did not miss a beat, his warm response exuding friendship, with his sense of humor lurking just below the surface. I came away from the conversation with a sense of importance that a man of such stature would remember me and take the time to catch up.

So there is much to remember of Hal, his scholarly prowess, his talent at teaching, his loyalty and morality, his enormous range of interests. But one image remains most vivid in my memory: the twinkle that was always in his eyes.