

# OFF TOPIC: SUSAN SONTAG, ONE HUNDRED DAYS AFTER

BY BEI LING

An exiled poet reflects on an international friendship that deeply affected his life and work.

The day that Susan Sontag died, December 28, 2004, was my birthday. I was holed up in Taipei, alone and joyless in my room. My mind was on edge that day, perhaps touched by a presentiment. The weather was gloomy, and at nightfall I walked along the storm-obscured bank of the Tamsui River.

The next morning, when I turned on my computer, my e-mail inbox held a message from America: “Bei Ling, your friend Susan Sontag passed away on December 28th.”

The news cast a pall over me, bringing up a torrent of memories just days after a fatal tsunami had wrought devastation on Southeast Asia. Her life . . . the lives of so many others. Late that night I composed a eulogy for this tireless explorer of human experience and the human spirit, who had confronted the dark side of power, human nature and the state, beyond the boundaries of nations, regions, ethnic cultures and political ideologies:

She was truly my friend-in-adversity, my benefactress . . . she was my mentor who helped me along in literature and thought (years of unconditional help and guidance so I could survive and write in exile); she challenged me more than anyone with her motherly expectations (despite my frequent bouts of inertia, my dullness and lack of effort, the impurity of my life).

## A fated friendship

My life in exile began in 1992. Having received a grant of \$10,000 to establish a journal, with a stipend of \$200 per month and a flat that doubled as an editorial office, I made preparations with Meng Lang, Shi Tao<sup>1</sup> and others to publish a journal of literature and humanities called *Tendency*. Presumptuously, I wrote Susan Sontag a letter, attaching a prospectus for *Tendency* and telling her why I wanted to start this magazine. I asked her to support us by lending her name to our Board of Editorial Advisors. She quickly replied with her permission, but corrected our description of her as “writer and critic” to “fiction writer and essayist” instead.

That was how we got to know each other.

Not long afterward, we decided to include a special section on the German literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin in our first issue of *Tendency*. Benjamin’s works had had a strong influence on me, but were little known among Chinese intellectuals, so Shi Tao translated selections from Benjamin’s most important literary work, *One Way Street*, and with Susan’s approval, we translated and included the full text of her long 1980 essay, “Under the Sign of Saturn,” written in memory of Benjamin. In my many years of friendship with Susan, this essay was an enduring thread in our dialogue.

Although I kept Susan informed of *Tendency*’s contents with each new issue, it was not until 1996 that she invited me to her home for a chat, and I finally met her in person.

Fearing my English was not equal to dealing with this great master of English prose, I brought along the young scholar Tian Xiaofei (now teaching at Harvard) to translate and fortify my courage on that spring afternoon. We found our way from Lower Manhattan to Susan’s residence in a cliff-faced building on Chelsea’s 24th Street. After speaking to the guard by intercom, we gained admittance and rode a small elevator to the top, where Susan stood waiting in her door to welcome us — tall, dressed in a black shirt and slacks. I recognized her beautiful features from photographs I’d seen.

Was this to be my “pilgrimage”? She was 63 years old at the time.

Susan led us through her penthouse apartment, decorated with dozens of framed prints by the Italian artist and architect Piranesi, into the spacious kitchen where she received guests. A door from the kitchen opened onto the long curve of an imposing rooftop balcony with a spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline and the Hudson River gleaming in sunlight.

On that occasion we talked about her visit to China in 1973. She corrected my misconception that she was born in China, explaining that she was conceived by her parents in China (“Made in China”), but born in the United States. She spoke of China’s special significance to her, her deep-seated complex about China and her wishes to revisit there. She gave details of her father’s death in the city of Tianjin.

During our meeting Susan affirmed *Tendency*’s unique and important position as a Chinese journal of letters published in the English-speaking world. At the same time, she took great

interest in my obsessive efforts to move this journal back to my homeland in China.

Each time I returned from China, I always called her to report my safe arrival, as she always worried about me. Whenever I passed through New York, if she were there, we would find a way to meet. She always suggested having a meal in Chinatown, but I preferred going to her place, where I could drink coffee and converse with her, look at her collection of books and paintings, or gaze at the Hudson River from the balcony. As she sized up my bearing and facial color in that worried way of hers, I would always tell her that China was becoming more tolerant of alternative types like myself; China would tolerate our magazine of literature and ideas.

## I told Susan that China was becoming more tolerant of alternative types like myself.

She accepted *Tendency*'s plan to do a special section about her, and set up a time for me to interview her. To introduce her thought and works to the Chinese-speaking world would be a major event, and Susan helped me plan and choose material for the special section, including the first chapter from a work in progress—her novel *In America*.

### A memorable interview

Prior to my interview with Susan in August 1997, I faxed my interview questions to her. She read them and told me, "These questions are superficial. You need to go to a higher level." I had to go back and do my homework, so I asked Yang Xiaobin, a *Tendency* editor in a doctoral program at Yale, to help me brainstorm the interview questions.

On the day of the interview, Xiaobin and I drove straight from Yale to Susan's place in New York, where we talked while sitting as usual around her dinner table. The interview was carried forward by Susan's eloquence, and at times by her flair for debate. We ranged broadly, but focused on questions of common concern: the role of intellectuals in history; the question of the avant-garde versus non-avant-garde; the relation of tradition to innovation in literature; and the influence of various ideologies on European and Chinese thought: Communism, Nazism, Capitalism and post-modernism. Finally we returned to the familiar topics: her own writing, the works of Benjamin and Barthes and her highly visible, much-discussed activities some years before in Sarajevo. Her acuity and frankness were consistent throughout the interview, and she expressed herself with penetrating wit.

This interview with Susan appeared in the special section on Susan Sontag, in *Tendency*, Issue 10. At the same time, selections from the interview were published in Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese newspapers. The cultural magazine *Sky's Edge* in mainland China published the entire interview, except for the sensitive section on totalitarianism in China, so that this interview ultimately became an important vehicle for conveying the outlines of Susan Sontag's thought to China's intellectuals.

### A bond of words and friendship

Susan fit the classic type of an East Village or Chelsea resident—she had a bohemian's freedom from inhibition, and the directness of an activist-intellectual. When we had dinner together, she sometimes brought along one of her young friends. I found that the true life-force of New York lay in its artistic young people who had nothing to their name, yet felt the world was at their doorstep. In her company they were relaxed and unconstrained. They were not admirers she had met at a university or bookstore, but rather young artists and writers with remarkable personalities of their own. And I introduced my Chinese friends to Susan as well. Several times I brought Tian Xiaofei, Chen Jun, Yang Xiaobin, Meng Lang and Zhang Zhen<sup>2</sup> to meet her. I felt fortunate, for myself and for Susan, that I could let her meet my friends.

In the spring of 2000 I returned from China for a short stay in Boston. One evening on a stroll through Harvard Yard I stopped at the bulletin board and was surprised to see a notice of Susan's upcoming visit to Harvard as part of a reading tour for her new novel *In America*. I was delighted that she had finally finished her novel. An atmosphere of warm feeling surrounded the reading, which was hosted by the Graduate School. I sat hidden in a rear corner, intently hanging on her words. I felt embarrassed to have been such a bohemian these past years, wandering from Taipei, Boston and Prague to Bonn, Guangzhou, Paris, Hong Kong and Beijing. Perhaps I foresaw an end to my freedom, and I wanted to revel in it as much as possible.

### What would her eyes see?

During our interview, I asked Susan if she wished to visit China again. Her answer was an eye-opener for me: "Of course I hope to go to China again. But I wouldn't go if I didn't feel it would be useful: useful to me intellectually and humanly—for instance, that I would understand better something that I should understand—and useful to some people there and to Chinese in exile. I'm not prepared to be a tourist in China. That seems to me immoral."

Later I was to discover that Susan stood by her moral commitments in life: commitments to fellow human beings, to herself and to me.

From that point I urged her to let me arrange a trip to China according to her intentions, and I also suggested that she visit Taiwan again at the same time. She agreed with my suggestion that she visit China in the capacity of literary artist, without official itinerary. She also showed great enthusiasm for revisiting Taiwan. Susan hoped to teach for one semester as a visiting professor at Peking University, and take the opportunity to more deeply explore another side of life in China.

We talked over details of her route through China, and the people she would meet during her visit, which I suggested should last for at least a month. I looked forward to showing her an emergent new popular culture, exposing her to alternative voices and letting her bump against a vigorous arts culture. I wanted her to see the changes and distortions resulting from the influx of capitalism into China. What she cared about was what this trip could offer for the development of politics and

culture in China, and what help it could be for the intellectual projects I was engaged in.

The plan was for us to meet in Hong Kong to see the changes since the handover to China. The poet Huang Canran<sup>3</sup> had translated many of her works, and he could take her to meet some local literary figures. Then, we could cross the Lowu Bridge between Hong Kong and China as she did 20-some years before, stepping through the Lowu Checkpoint to the new city of Shenzhen and then taking a train to Guangzhou. After an introduction to the Guangzhou cultural scene, Susan could take the 30-plus-hour Guangzhou-Beijing Express and watch the countryside unfold from south to north. I was hoping the trip could take place in 2000 or October of 2001, for autumn is Beijing's best season. This was my city, Beijing, and I could arrange many unconventional activities. Susan listened to my wishful arrangements with tremendous interest, chiming in with her refrain: "Time . . . time . . . how can I set aside the time!"

My hope for Susan's visit was to let her make far-ranging observations on a society where totalitarianism was merging with capitalism. I even wanted to hear her constructive opinions on what courses were open to our dissident intellectuals. I also told Susan that a visit to Taiwan would be worthwhile, if only to grasp the mutual influence between Chinese culture and native Taiwan culture in recent history.

Later, after I was detained and deported, it was clear I would not be serving as her guide to China for the time being. Nevertheless, I still proposed that Susan go to China and follow the route I had arranged. I told her, "The planning has been done for your tour of China; there are friends all set to meet you along the way. I can help coordinate things from America. Don't let what happened to me deter you." But each time I said this, Susan countered with her firm refusal. She stressed that this was not a consideration of friendship, but based on moral reasons: "If the Chinese government won't let you return, then I won't go to China. When they let you go back, I'll go back with you."

Still I tried to persuade her, being firmly convinced that her personal encounter with China, and her resulting ideas, were necessary for China in its throes of social and cultural change. I hoped she would not stay away because of me, while intellectuals and artists and writers of conscience were anticipating her arrival. There were some important positions there that needed her support.

Only in light of the terrorist attack of September 11 did I redirect my focus and give up urging her for the time being.

### Long-distance rescue

Our connection was fated. Susan was fated to work for my release, and by grace of fortune her efforts succeeded.

In August 2000, Issue 13 of *Tendency* was printed and published in Beijing. People say that 13 is an unlucky number, and that proved true in this case. Not only did this number 13 land me in jail, it brought trouble to many tied to me by blood or friendship. My brother was held as my "accomplice" at the Haidian District Detention Center. All my friends and distributors who had accepted upwards of ten magazine copies from me had their premises ransacked by police. The gutsy ones

dealt with this calmly, but the timid ones scrambled in all directions or even went into hiding.

My friend Xiao Ai's design studio was upended because I had placed a box of magazines there without mentioning it. Her only son Xiao Qiang was in the studio working at the time, and could not explain what the magazines were doing there. The police charged into the studio and hauled him, along with the magazines, to the police station. The Beijing Public Security sent down an order: large numbers of "people's police" were mobilized to confiscate the entire print run of this "spiritual pollutant."

I had printed 2,000 copies of that 400+ page issue, which featured poems and essays by the Nobel Prize winning Irish poet Seamus Heaney, with a number of poets, cultural figures, bookstores, coffee shops and private creative studios receiving batches of the magazine as gifts or on consignment.

Early in the month I went to Shanghai; in midmonth I returned to Beijing. August 13—again that number—was the day of my undoing.

On a torrid afternoon I went downstairs in boxer shorts and T-shirt and walked into the guard's room of Beili apartment building on Heping Ave. "Hi, Old Buddy, I'm going to read the *Beijing Evening*."

I immersed myself in the newspaper, much to the delight of the old doorman, who dialed the local precinct and spoke an apparently agreed-upon code phrase: "The load you wanted is here. Come pick it up."

Before long the patrolmen arrived, checked the area for routes of egress, and called in on their walkie-talkies. Then they blocked the doorway and shouted at me, "Where do you live? Let's have a look at your I.D."

They held me in the lobby for awhile, grilling me with disconnected questions. I thought to myself: "The precinct chief must be after me for something. It's probably no big deal." But half an hour later there was a sound of brakes squealing at the front door, then a hubbub of voices and walkie-talkies. I could see that the guard's room was sealed off by a group of plainclothes police officers, and I knew the score. From now on my fate was in their hands.

"Can I go to my room and put on some clothes?" I asked a patrolman.

"No need. Come along with us," a plainclothes officer came in and answered for him.

"Can I ask who you all are?"

"Can't you tell? Let's go."

Without letting me get in another word, they frogmarched me into a jeep, in boxers and T-shirt, and escorted me to the Haidian dispatch station. The first interrogation took place in the garage of the dispatch station, where I was kept sitting in a chair through the night. During my second session the next day, the police accused me of having a bad attitude and covering up my criminal activities. That afternoon I was taken, in the same jeep as before, to the Beijing Public Security Bureau Detention Center at Qinghe Prison. The place had formidable walls, and concertinas of electrified barbed wire gave it the exaggerated grimness of an art installation. Even a mosquito would be unable to fly through.



**Bei Ling and Susan Sontag**

Inside the prison office, I was forced to take off my high-prescription glasses. I balked at that, saying, “Without my glasses I can’t . . .”

One of the guards interrupted me with a kick to the leg and barked, “You think this is a damned hotel? You came in here alive, but maybe you’ll go out dead! Squat your sorry ass down and clasp your hands behind your head.”

Peering about through bleary eyes, I heard the warden announce, “Suspect Huang Bei Ling, implicated in illegal publishing and dissemination of illegal foreign journals, will be held in criminal detention pending formal charges.” I was then escorted to Block 8, Cell 1.

For days I wore nothing but boxer shorts and a T-shirt, without so much as a change of underwear. I was utterly dependent on my cellmates for assistance. I lost all contact with the outside world, and had no idea who might be implicated in my case. I was not aware that my brother Huang Feng was locked up in the same jail. Did the outside world know of my imprisonment, and if so, could anyone secure my release?

I remained in the dark until 14 days later, when the prison office announced, “Charges will not be filed. To be released on parole to await further questioning. Return to your cell until you are escorted out.”

On the final morning, I filled out exit forms; in the lobby I ran into my brother Huang Feng, who was being released as well. We quickly acknowledged each other without even a chance for a hug. I was again led to a jeep, which took me through a labyrinth of lanes, but my familiarity with Beijing streets told me we were stopping at the Public Security Conva-

lescence Home. Behind the non-descript gate was a Shangri-La of two-story residences among the greenery.

I was led from the jeep to a suite of rooms, where a police officer awaited me. I asked him, “Is this going to be house arrest?”

The officer said, “You rest here for a few days. Take care of your health and unwind after your fright. We’ll clear things up for you.”

The convalescence home was located in Beijing’s Western Hills, and there was a hint of coolness in the early fall air. I could close the bathroom door and be alone; I could wash myself without stripping down in front of others. I took my first hot bath in two weeks and slept in a bed, not on the floor of a cell. I could gaze at the view through a window, not look upwards at a small square of light and long for freedom. But not all was to my liking, for the moment I left the bathroom, I faced long, intimate conversations with officers from various levels of the Public Security hierarchy.

That evening an officer from the Beijing Public Security Bureau suddenly declared to me, “According to an agreement between the Chinese and American governments, you will be deported to America . . .”

I was roused at 6 a.m. the next day and told to shave in order to “to project a good image for our country.” Then it was a breakfast of soybean milk, fritters and rice porridge, after which I was escorted back into the jeep to be driven through that labyrinth of turns.

Early morning in the just-waking suburbs of Beijing. Remembering familiar segments of the route, my eyes took in every street, every view, every tree, every shrub. The old codgers with their old wives, and the old spinsters; the boys and girls shouldering book bags on their way to school. This was my Beijing. Would it be the last of Beijing for me? I sobbed until I could no longer trust my voice. The security man riding along to “protect” me had nothing to say. I was taken to my parents’ house, where I said goodbye to my parents and younger brother. Then I quickly gathered up my luggage and was put under escort again, this time to the Beijing Airport, where I was placed aboard a plane bound for San Francisco.

**Would this be the last of Beijing for me? I sobbed until I could no longer trust my voice.**

And so I was “deported” back to America. As far as I knew, I had been freed through the insistent efforts of the State Department and the American Embassy. Aside from Meng Lang, I didn’t know who had worked to save me. It was only when I got news from my friend in San Francisco, when Meng Lang gave me a detailed account, when I read Susan Sontag’s Op-Ed piece for *The New York Times* calling for my rescue, when I learned from the American P.E.N. Center of the concerted response by the international literary community, when I called Susan and then went to New York to see her—only then did I know how much Susan had done for me during the whole process.

On my third day back in America I went to New York, where the American P.E.N. Center was to hold a small press conference for me at its headquarters. I called Susan from Boston, telling her I would be in New York the next day. There was happiness in her voice as she asked me, “May I get together with you? May I? I have an afternoon appointment, but I can call now and reschedule. Let’s go to Chinatown first for a meal, then I’ll go to the P.E.N. Center with you . . .”

We agreed to meet at an intersection in Chinatown, where Susan emerged from a taxi with her young friend in tow. We were moved at meeting again after so long. She looked me over from head to foot, remarking, “You look well, yes, fairly well. You haven’t lost weight, have you? You weren’t beaten, were you? It doesn’t look as if . . .”

While treating me to a welcome-home meal, Susan grilled me with rapid-fire questions about jail. She said, “I never expected they would let you out so soon.”

As Susan related how she had worked for my release, I listened with feelings of gratitude, embarrassment and even self-rebuke. Susan told me she was shocked to read the five-line notice of my imprisonment in *The New York Times*. After reading this news, she was unable to do any other work. The first few days, she contacted her Chinese friends, but none of them knew my situation. She got in touch with her American sinologist friends, but they had not heard anything, either.

I hadn’t given Susan my phone or address in China, nor had I contacted her from China. She did not know how to get in touch with my family, or even with my co-editor, Meng Lang. She eventually got a second-hand account of my detention through the American P.E.N. Center, who had learned of my situation from Meng Lang, the one who first put out an appeal on my behalf.

Battling what a sinologist friend had termed “Arrested Chinese Dissident Fatigue,” Susan wrote an essay entitled “The Crime of Carrying Ideas to China,” and sent it to newspapers everywhere; it was translated into seven languages and published simultaneously in more than ten countries. In her essay, Susan wondered, “Is it too much to hope that private citizens could be mobilized to speak out for this lone scholar and poet? To be sure, public outcry is only part of the story. In most cases where dissidents have been freed by their despotic governments, the key influence was behind-the-scene pressure by high-level government officials. But public outcry is a start.”

Well-versed in strategies for getting people out of prison, Susan knew the critical time to secure someone’s release is at the early stage, when a criminal label has not yet been attached. She told me that she immediately phoned Bill Clinton’s office, because they were acquainted. Although unable to speak to Clinton, she asked his secretary to tell him that the American government had a responsibility to get involved in this case. She also phoned Secretary of State Madeline Albright, who was a friend, and asked her to help get me out of jail. The State Department and the American Embassy made great efforts to negotiate with the Chinese government over the release of myself and my brother.

Susan told me that for over a week she had put all other work aside; every day, she did nothing from morning to night

but make phone calls, and notify everyone who had any kind of pull. She told them who I was, what I had been doing, why I was imprisoned in China. She let them feel they knew me, and asked them to join the efforts to save me. “It’s to be expected that the American government wouldn’t know about you. But most writers didn’t know about you. Arthur Miller and Gunter Grass and Salman Rushdie didn’t know about you. I had to keep explaining who you were, and why we had to save you.”

## Susan did nothing from morning to night but make phone calls, and notify everyone who had any kind of pull.

Around that time, the Chinese government was laying plans for a major exhibition that would tour America: “5000 Years of Chinese Civilization.” Observing that that my arrest in Beijing cast an ironic light on such a magnificent showcase for China’s history and civilization, Susan organized members of the American literary and cultural community to plan a protest outside of the exhibition when it opened in early September. Subsequent activities were in the works as well.

After lunch, Susan accompanied me to P.E.N.’s meeting center in lower Manhattan, where a press conference was held in the auditorium, moderated by P.E.N.’s acting director Michel Roberts, and with Susan sitting next to me at the front of the room. The questions touched on *Tendency*’s aims and content: Why should it be printed in Beijing? How did that lead to my arrest? What was the reaction of intellectuals and cultural figures in China? What was the system for controlling publications? As the questions became more specific, the holes in my English vocabulary began to show, and Susan offered to “interpret” for me. When I missed the point of a question, she clarified it for me. What she could not bear was to see a writer belittled or misunderstood when discourse in a non-native tongue deprived him of graceful expression.

Once the conference was over, Susan rose and said, “I must get back to work.” She asked me to call her in the evening, in case I needed a place to stay or anything else, then with a goodbye to all she quickly left the building.

The next day I visited Susan with Meng Lang and Zhang Zhen. Susan took us to her study and showed us two large folders of materials relating to me and to *Tendency* that she had used to inform newspaper editors and writer friends of my work.

She then gave the three of us a tutorial in using a computer, refusing to accept my objections that my previous efforts to learn editing on a computer had failed. “At my age I’m still learning about computers,” she said. “How can it be unlearnable?” She told us, “A writer has to face the challenge of using the Internet and writing on a computer. It helps the writing process, and it keeps you in touch with what’s happening in the world.” She showed us basic commands for going on line, searching for information, downloading files and copying texts. Being thick-headed in such matters, it all seemed hazy to me.

## Responsibility in action

Susan's crusading spirit and forthrightness could be seen in advice that (to me) seemed to come out of the blue. For instance, on my release from prison, the Beijing Public Security Bureau slapped me with an extortionate "administrative fine" of 200,000 yuan plus punitive daily interest of 8 percent. My parents were forced to pay 10,000 yuan up front, and I was deported to America dragging this burden of debt, which grew exponentially heavier each day. Having no resources to pay such a sum, I mentioned my difficulty to Susan, who was alarmed and worried for my sake. She suggested that we send a jointly signed letter to 200 wealthy Americans, asking each of them to contribute \$200 for this purpose. She believed I should deal with this soon, to avoid repercussions to my family.

After some consideration, I told Susan, "I am moved by your intention, but should I really pay that extortion money? I don't dare to accept contributions for such a thing." Perhaps Susan could not imagine the tortuous interpersonal dealings and fearsome rumors within the Chinese expatriate dissident community. And besides, how could I ever repay a debt of gratitude to 200 people?

I urged Susan to give up that idea.

## A caring hand

Each time I went to visit Susan in New York, the Boston-New

York bus let me off in the Fuzhou neighborhood of Manhattan's Chinatown. The streets were lined with Fujianese stores, Fujianese groceries, Fujianese accents, Fujianese smells. A new, richly textured life was unfolding for those recent Fujian immigrants who had struggled so hard to reach this place.

Why couldn't I be one of them?

After tasting the initial joys of freedom regained, I once again faced the American lifestyle of which I had grown thoroughly weary. I asked myself, "Must I go back to leading the exile's life? Will I go back to living as I did before?"

Owing to my blundering attempt at independent publishing, the new life I had begun in Beijing had been taken from me. My plans to buy a condominium in Badaling Township and live a semi-reclusive life in the northern countryside near the Great Wall had turned into an empty dream. The dreadful thing was that any return to the motherland was ruled out in the foreseeable future. I had difficulty adjusting, and fell into depression.

I once told Susan about my agony. She listened and understood what it meant to be an exiled writer. She considered my exile to be an act of fate, and said an exiled intellectual should not only show concern for his motherland, but also for politics in his land of residence; he should engage his thinking with its cultural and spiritual development. Susan and I talked about Joseph Brodsky, whom we both admired. Her eulogy for Brodsky includes a sentence I particularly relish: "His home was no longer Russia, it was the Russian language."

Is the Chinese language, not China, to be my home?

Susan's advice to me was this: "Face the reality that you can't return to China. You should treat this as your fate, as Brodsky did. You need to take time and master English." She also reproached me for not trying hard enough to have my translated works published in American and European periodicals. She felt an exiled writer ultimately had to do this to stay influential in his adopted country. She also kept reminding me, "Have you written new poems? Have you had your work translated into English? I can send recommendations to editors." In those years she worried about my livelihood, and in the autumn of 2000 she applied to the American P.E.N. Center on my behalf for a \$2,000 stipend.

She was a severe judge, but she vouched for the quality of my works. She wrote recommendations to get my works published in journals and newspapers. She urged her good friend Steve Wasserman to commission an article from me. She recommended my poems to the literary editor of *The New Republic*, then told me to send a submission quickly. She introduced me to the editors of intellectual journals, gave me their phone numbers and then asked if I had called them. She would always say, "Don't be embarrassed. Call them up directly and tell them that Susan Sontag told you to make the call."

One day she phoned and told me she was at the Columbia University Bookstore, managed by a friend of hers, after giving a lecture at Columbia. She had recommended the Chinese-language *Tendency* to the bookstore, and suggested that they display it for sale. She told me, "America has a long tradition of absorbing immigrant cultures. This bookstore should sell books and magazines in various languages." She said, "Hurry

## Life

BY BEI LING

Still  
that waiting  
those pleasures  
those endless activities and rushes

Still  
that misery  
those sorrows  
those different censures

Still  
that rhythm  
those madresses  
those obvious illusions

Still  
that effort  
those revolts  
those climbs without footholds

on roads where people crawl forward  
shoulders brush shoulders  
emitting sparks  
sleeping openly on this land night after night  
we drive the bleakness of fallen leaves from empty fields

Translated by Denis Mair

up and phone him. You can ask him how many copies of the magazine to deliver.” After she hung up, I received a call from the bookstore manager, saying he was honored that Susan Song had stopped by to recommend my journal. That was how *Tendency* magazine went on sale at Columbia University Bookstore.

In February 2002, I wrote Susan about the birth of the Independent Chinese PEN Center and invited her to become an honorary member. Graciously accepting, she said, “I know this means a sacrifice of your writing time, but what else can you do? Someday this will be seen as a pivotal point for independent Chinese literature. Now your arrest in August 2000 seems a gift from the Chinese government to the cause of independent Chinese literature.”

In 1993, when *Tendency* was first founded, its inaugural statement contained these words: “*Tendency* is not limited to a journal of literature; it extends its scope by means of literature, and through other modes of discourse, it stretches towards a broad vision of the problem of human existence . . . Furthermore, it draws on the authentic intellectual spirit which represents a call for responsibility and concern for social and cultural changes in our time.”

Later, certain overseas Chinese writers asserted that a literary journal-in-exile should stand for “pure literature.” Behind my back they assailed *Tendency* for having political backing and even made deliberate efforts to sabotage it in the American cultural community. It was easy to rebut their attacks. I needed only to point out the content of great journals such as *New York Review of Books*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, the *London Times Book Review*, and *Letter International*: don’t these admired journals engage with the politics and thought of our era, both in America and worldwide?

Susan was in total agreement on this. She said it was self-deceptive to argue that a journal for exiles should be “purely literary.” While I was in jail, she affirmed *Tendency*’s guiding principles and defended my role as its editor. She wrote: “I am not going to claim that Bei Ling has no political views. Of course he does. He is for freedom of speech and expression in China. He cares passionately about independent (or ‘underground’) culture in China. Neither will I argue that *Tendency* is an apolitical, purely literary enterprise. The people Bei Ling and his colleagues print in their magazine are hardly neutral on the subject of democracy or freedom of expression.”

I feel that I have let her down.

She expressed great regret when *Tendency* ceased publication. The most conscientious among *Tendency*’s advisory editors, she had assisted me in choosing topics and had recommended good writers and their works. She provided her own works without compensation, for us to publish in translation. Later, she kept hoping that *Tendency* could resume publication, and was even willing to help with fundraising. But I had suffered a debilitating blow, and my collaborators had gone on to new pursuits. The newly founded *Tendency* Press took up time as well, and though my heart was willing, I lacked the strength to keep the journal going.

To encourage me, she read aloud comments by a poet who had translated my poems. She kept urging me to give thought to writing new poems. But I failed to do so. She hoped I would write the book I had intended to write, and she agreed to write a preface for it. Yet up to the time of her passing, I still had not finished it.

In 2002 I was selected as a writer-in-residence at the New York Public Library, with a one-year stipend of \$50,000. Susan congratulated me warmly, having constantly worried over my finances. During that period I devoted my energies to editing and publishing Chinese versions of works entrusted to me by Vaclav Havel, which I felt were needed under the current climate in Taiwan and China. Susan was supportive, but worried that I would see no return on this risky outlay.

She knew how to listen, but she was a penetrating, spell-binding talker with a knack for deflating pomposities. She was a tireless teacher, and she was an elder. (She was my mother’s age, and sometimes spoke to me in the intonation of a mother teaching her child.) It was hardly avoidable that she would have a touch of arrogance. Sometimes she was tough on me (because I did not try hard enough), but I could take it.

As the political, cultural and spiritual atmosphere of our era worsened steadily, she grew more consumed by worry; she was even more committed to voicing concerns over current affairs, and to exposing the dark side of national policy. Our friendship shifted from her worrying about me to me worrying about her, as if our sympathies were balanced on an invisible pair of scales, a spiritual echo.

### Parting strains for a great soul

She left so suddenly, without leaving a will or wishes. Upon the decision of her son, David Rieff, and with the approval of the Mayor of Paris, Susan was buried at the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris on January 17, 2005, the day after what would have been her 72nd birthday. Her grave was heaped with flowers, and friends from around the world convened for the interment of her ashes in a grave adjacent to those of Baudelaire and Beckett. Paris was her final destination, her spiritual motherland, where she has joined the long procession of great departed writers. The world bereft of her is poorer as it faces more evils.

Translated by Denis Mair

### NOTES

1. Meng Leng, the co-editor of *Tendency*, now lives in Hong Kong. Shi Tao is a writer and editor now living in Beijing.
2. Chen Jun is a Chinese dissident now living in New Jersey. Zhang Zhen is a poet a assistant professor of cinema studies at New York University.
3. A poet, translator and literary critic, Huang Canran served as poetry editor for *Tendency* and was awarded First Prize for Poetry in the 1996 Hong Kong Urban Council Chinese Literary Awards.