

In Remembrance of Gian-Carlo

On this sad occasion, I would like to share with you some superstitious stories about Professor Gian-Carlo Rota. He told me that he had always been a little superstitious.

I was so fortunate to be one of his students. A few years ago, he said that he would stop when he had fifty students. If we count the number of his students as of today, I would bet that 50 is a very good guess.

Probably two years ago, he recommended that I read a mystery book entitled "The Big Sleep" by Raymond Chandler, and surprisingly, I received a hardcover copy of the collected works by the author, sent by Gian-Carlo. After I read some of the chapters, I could never imagine that he himself could fall into "The Big Sleep".

I remember so many lessons that he taught me; among them was his hardest lesson in life: certain things come only once. You should not miss the opportunities. What he really taught me over the years was how to be open minded.

For those who may think that Gian-Carlo may have been too critical, I would like to share a discussion I had with him. When an American colleague went to China, he realized that the Chinese did not like to say that someone is wrong. I explained to him that a Chinese would only say you are probably right and by this mean that you may be completely wrong. Gian-Carlo replied, I say that's very interesting.

Gian-Carlo was never in Asia and clearly indicated that he would not like to go. Professor S. S. Chern gave me the assignment to talk him into a visit to China. Recently, Nankai University awarded him an honorary doctorate upon the final approval of the state department of the Chinese government. I would add that there are only a few such honorary degrees awarded each year in China. Although we made the arrangements for his public speech and found the budget for first class tickets, he finally declined the invitation with the highest level of courtesy.

I called him probably a week before he passed away, and informed him about the honorary degree from Nankai University. He showed his generosity on the phone. "Give me your phone number so that I can call you, it costs me nothing". I gave him my cellular phone number in China, and waited for the call that could never come.

Bill Chen

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