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# The Many Lives of Stephen Pan

Stephen S.T. Pan '55 survived years of war and many brushes with death before starting a new life at IWU. At age 93, he looks back on his journey with both gratitude and amazement.

By PAM WINDSOR & TIM OBERMILLER

Over the decades, students have come to study at Illinois Wesleyan from all over the world and from every walk of life. But few have enrolled with a background as unusual as Stephen S.T. Pan's. Before he was an IWU freshman, he was an officer in the American-trained Chinese Army and an eyewitness to some of his homeland's most significant historic events.

For Pan, who graduated in 1956, coming to Illinois Wesleyan fulfilled a long-cherished dream. Based on his musical and academic achievements, the Methodist Church of New York gave him a Crusade Scholarship that allowed him to pursue a college education he had begun many times back in China, only to be thwarted by war or the threat of invasion. Pan felt at home in the friendly campus community and challenged by the demanding curriculum. But his thoughts were never far from the family and friends he had left behind in China, or the many traumatic events he had witnessed and survived there.

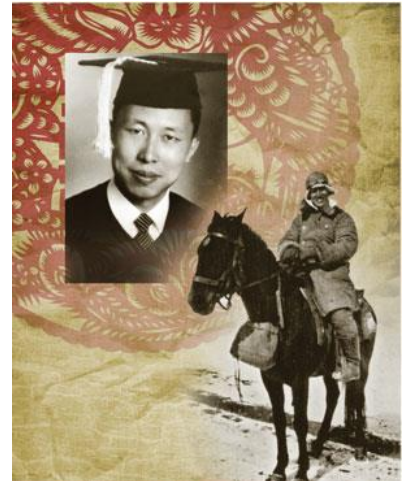
At age 93, Pan recently took time out to look back on his remarkable life — of which his time at Illinois Wesleyan was a relatively brief but crucial part.

Stephen Shih-Tung Pan was born to a Christian family in 1923 in the southeastern Chinese province of Fujian, known for its mountains and coastal cities. Some of his earliest memories involve music. He recalls an incident soon after his mother began taking lessons to learn to play the organ. "One day her teacher, walking into our house, said to my mother, 'When did you learn to play that tune?' 'It wasn't me,' said my mother. 'It was my 5-year-old son.'"

Despite that early inkling of a musical gift, it would be years before Pan could take lessons of his own. In fact, it wasn't until he attended a university in China as a young adult that he first began formal piano instruction. Less than three months later, Pan recalls, he could play Mozart's "The Turkish March" from memory.

He experienced his first of many brushes with death at age 12 when he received an overdose of anesthesia during surgery for an extreme leg infection. When he woke up 20 hours later, "I found a crowd of family members, relatives and friends in a large room. They were watching me die!" The wound took a long time to heal, and Pan relied on his one good leg as he rode his bike for miles to and from his school.

After his father, a naval officer, moved the family to the British colony of Hong Kong to escape the Sino-Japanese War, Pan attended St. Paul's Boys School, a 20-minute walk away from his home that he made four times daily. At the British school he excelled in English and was the only student to pass the matriculation examination in his class, making him eligible to enroll at either Hong Kong University or Cambridge University in England. He decided instead to take time out to help support his parents and five younger siblings and begin college later. But the complications ahead in realizing that dream were more than he could have ever imagined.



Before he graduated from IWU, Pan (above) served with the American-trained Chinese Army during World War II and later traveled by horseback (right) with troops fighting Chinese communist armies in Manchuria.

## A gift for survival



Pan's family celebrates his birthday in New Jersey. Now retired as a court interpreter, Pan enjoys writing, including memoranda to U.S. congressmen as well as accounts of life in China and the U.S.

On Dec. 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Less than eight hours later they attacked Hong Kong. A few days after the first wave of Japanese bombings, Pan was at his job, working for the British government at a compound called the Indian Recreation Club. The club faced Kowloon Peninsula, which had been taken by the Japanese, and Pan suggested to the British officer in charge that it would be less conspicuous if vehicles arrived and left the compound from the back. "They could see us by binoculars, I was sure." The officer ignored his advice. Later that afternoon, the compound came under attack. There was a soccer field in front of the building, and he and another boy ran for one of the dugouts as a shell exploded nearby.

"I told the other boy that the opening of the dugout was facing Kowloon, and we should run for the other dugout with the back facing Kowloon. As soon as the next explosion hit, I pulled his arm shouting, 'Run!' He was too scared to move. I ran."

When the shelling stopped and they began trying to account for everyone, there was no sign of the young man. "At the dugout, I found him dead, with shell pieces around him."

That same month, the British surrendered, leaving Hong Kong under Japanese control for the remainder of World War II.

Despite the Japanese occupation, Pan began his college studies in 1942 at Lingnan University, which relocated after the fall of Hong Kong to a small village in northern Guangdong Province. His dormitory was a hut, there was little food to eat and he was allowed to shower (in cold water) once a month.

On a dairy farm in Canton owned by the university and controlled by a Japanese Army unit, Pan worked as a technician, testing milk fat. "One day," he recalls, "a Korean corporal walked into the lab." He pulled a pistol from its holster. Pan jumped away from his chair where he was sitting and the gun went off. "The bullet pierced through my chair and stuck on the wooden door about 10 feet away. I grabbed his hand and shouted, 'No!'" Pan still wonders if it was an accident or if the man intended to kill him, but believes "God saved my life one more time."

In 1943, the Chinese government began recruiting college seniors to train as interpreters to help with communications between the Chinese, the Americans, and the British, all of whom were allies during World War II. Although he was only a freshman, Pan was chosen to attend the Interpreters Training Center located at the first U.S. base established in the Chinese theatre in Kunming, Yunnan Province.

"After a few months, I was among the selected group of 40 to be sent to CBI (China Burma India Theatre) to join the Chinese troops to fight the Japanese invaders who had taken Burma."

Pan became chief interpreter for the 14th Division of the New 6th Army under the command of General Albert Wedemeyer, a noted American military planner and commander in World War II. Pan was given the rank of major and put in charge of some 40 interpreters. The 14th Division fought the Japanese in Burma, then returned to China to protect Chungking, China's provisional capital city, from advancing Japanese forces during the Sino-Japanese War. During his service, Pan had daily contact with American liaison officers — and the honor of meeting General Wedemeyer.

"I met him in 1945 at his headquarters [in Kunming,



(Above left) Chinese soldiers receive bayonet training as part of the Burma campaign in World War II. Pan (bottom right) became chief interpreter for an Army division led by General Albert Wedemeyer (above right).

China],” says Pan. “When he was shaking my hand he said, ‘Major, you’re the best interpreter I’ve met!’”

After the Japanese surrender following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, China rejoiced. But its future was clouded by looming civil war between the Nationalist Kuomintang-led government and the Communist Party of China. Pan rejoined his family in Hong Kong, where he found they had endured “great hardships under the Japanese occupation.” However, his military service wasn’t over. Major General Lung Tien Wu, in command of the 14th Division of the New 6th Army, sent him a telegram requesting he join his troops’ efforts to fight Communist military forces occupying northeast provinces that the Russian Army had turned over. Pan served as Secretary of the Commanding General and the Executive Officer of the Information Office.

He was on horseback during a northward march when, “upon a roaring gunshot, I felt hit and was thrown off my horse,” Pan recalls. “I found that I had been hit by dirt, *not* the shell, which was a dud the size of watermelon I found a few feet from me!” Once again, he had narrowly escaped death and could not help but wonder, “How often could this happen?”

### A college dream fulfilled



Returning to Hong Kong, Pan led an ambitious production of Haydn’s *The Creation*.

Pan was honorably discharged with the rank of lieutenant colonel in late 1947 to resume his education at the prestigious National Cheng Chi University in Nanking, the capitol of Nationalist China. Pan planned to major in diplomacy, but left before the Communists took over the city. He then entered Fujian Christian University in Fujian Province, but left after a semester, again due to the advancing Communist threat.

Returning to his family in Hong Kong, Pan was a senior interpreter for a British law firm while resuming his passion for his music. “I had a reputation of being a bass baritone soloist in local music circles,” says Pan, who also volunteered to serve as choir director of the Baptist church his mother attended.

In 1951, when the church needed money to buy an adjacent building for expansion, Pan suggested a concert to raise funds. He wanted to do something besides Handel’s *Messiah*, which at the time was the common oratorio performed by large choirs.

Pan’s longtime friend Harrington “Kit” Crissey, Jr., notes that the choice of Franz Joseph Haydn’s *The Creation* was “extremely ambitious” and the first performance of the oratorio ever given in Hong Kong.

Pan says he “fell in love at first sight” with Haydn’s oratorio, depicting the Biblical creation of the world, when he discovered a copy at a local music store. Taking on the demanding role of conductor, Pan also managed the concert’s complex logistics, including recruitment of some 100 vocalists from area churches as well as “a pianist, an organist and a few professional singers.” With three sold-out performances, the church raised enough money for its expansion.

While serving as a choir director for a Baptist church across the harbor in Kowloon City, Pan received news that he had been awarded a Crusade Scholarship by the Methodist Church of New York to continue his higher education in America.

At Illinois Wesleyan, Pan was impressed by “the high level of music studies” and the friendliness shown to him by the University’s administration and his classmates. He majored in sacred music, tackling a demanding curriculum that included courses in performance, conducting, orchestration, hymnology and music theory taught by esteemed music faculty such as Lloyd Pfautsch, Henry Charles and Lillian McCord.



A photo from the Wesleyana shows Pan, left, sharing his vocal talents with other international students. He was a member of IWU’s Collegiate Choir, led by Lloyd Pfautsch.



“I have considered IWU as the best university I had attended,” says Pan, who was a member of the Collegiate Choir and Phi Mu Alpha fraternity.

Pan took time out from his busy college life to address local groups. For the Kiwanis Club, he was asked to reflect on the current “Chinese situation,” as reported in the March 21, 1955, Bloomington *Pantagraph*. “[Pan] thinks the present situation was brought on by the failure of the United States to act in time to prevent the Reds from taking China, plus our continued reluctance to block Communist expansion. In that, we believe he is correct.”



Pan continued his education at the Eastman School of Music, earning a master's in music. He later earned degrees in mathematics and industrial statistics from the University of Rochester.

The *Pantagraph* had earlier noted a 1954 invitation by the El Paso, Ill., Methodist Church for Pan to speak at a fellowship dinner, while the same paper reported his upcoming senior recital at IWU's Presser Hall in April 1956, in which his performance would include “two numbers by Haydn and a selection from the ‘Messiah,’” as well as Brahms and Wagner.

After he had earned his bachelor's degree from IWU, Pan's Crusade Scholarship was extended a year — time he used to earn a master's degree from the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y. The woman he had fallen in love with back in Hong Kong joined him there to complete her nursing education. They wed and began a family that grew to include four children. Pan began work for a chemical engineering company while attending evening classes at the University of Rochester, where he earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics and a master's in industrial statistics.

For nearly three decades he was a computer programmer for several large companies, but became discouraged, believing he was both “underpaid and treated with racial discrimination.” Pan returned to his roots as a translator, becoming a highly regarded court interpreter. Familiar with many dialects — including Foo Chow, Mandarin and Cantonese — he assisted communication between court officials and Chinese people with limited English-speaking skills. He retired after serving some 2,000 cases for state, district and federal courts and now lives in Marlton, N.J.

For many years he continued to share his musical talent in his church and was often asked to perform “The Lord's Prayer” at weddings. Later, he was invited to be part of a program set up by fellow Eastman School of Music alumnus Crissey to reunite music majors from their era as students for a special alumni performance. Pan's song tape and several musical compositions were also donated to the school's archives by Crissey on Pan's behalf.

Today, Pan's memory remains sharp, and he can still paint a vivid picture of a time in history many know little about. “He's a direct link, when you talk to him,” explains Crissey, “to the Chinese effort, or lack of effort, depending on how you look at it, against the Japanese in World War II. And also the Chinese Civil War, the Nationalists against the Communists. He's very important for that reason.”

Although Pan never returned to Hong Kong, he did succeed in bringing all his family members to the United States, which he considers “the greatest democratic country in the world.”

In retirement, Pan stays busy. He especially enjoys writing, including memoranda to U.S. congressmen as well as portions of his memoirs. In one piece, he recounts how the performances he led of Haydn's *Creation* in Hong Kong came about. In another, he looks on the numerous times that he was nearly killed but miraculously saved. The title of this essay, expressing both Pan's sense of awe and gratitude, is simply: “How God Has Saved My Life.”