

Year 2000: the End of an Era in Chinese Studies

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The year 2000 marks the end of an era in Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney with the retirements of Agnieszka Stefanowska (1996), Tony Prince (1999), and myself (January 2000).¹ All three are former students (undergraduate through to PhD) of A. R. Davis, late Professor of Oriental Studies, and had been members of the academic staff for several decades. The year 2000 also saw Lily Lee's partial retirement to a part time contract. Although Lily Lee was not a Sydney undergraduate and was not appointed until after Davis' death, she had studied with him for her PhD while in charge of the Oriental Collection (later renamed the East Asian Collection) in Fisher Library. As retirements can be said to fall within the natural order of things, why the claim that these constitute the end of an era in Chinese Studies? This is not an exaggeration for they effectively terminate the A. R. Davis legacy in Chinese Studies at the University of Sydney.

Davis had not sought to establish a tradition, nor did his students consciously seek to uphold or promote a Davis tradition, but this is clearly the perception of colleagues from other campuses. I have in fact borrowed 'the end of an era in Chinese Studies' from a remark by Daniel Kane, Professor of Chinese at Macquarie University, made when I announced my retirement. I am not one given to ruminating about the past (especially my own) but, acknowledging the importance of such a record for future researchers of the history of Chinese Studies at Sydney and aware of the reticence of my colleagues, I have accepted the

* *Mabel Lee taught in Chinese Studies from 1966, retiring as Associate Professor at the beginning of this year.*

challenge. In searching long forgotten memories, I found Kane's 'end of an era' resurfacing in my mind. These pages are dedicated to my teachers, Davis and Liu Wei-ping, and to my colleagues of several decades.

In his lifetime Davis was criticised for appointing his own students as members of staff. This probably explains the outside perception of a so-called Davis tradition, whatever that might mean, at Sydney. But his having appointed his own students did not mean that Davis had surrounded himself with lackeys. His staff, apart from being outstanding scholars in their fields, were intensely individualistic in a distinctly Chinese sense. All shared a sense of agreement on basic principles and, in their own ways, were strongly committed to holistic approaches and to fostering in students a general curiosity about the subject. On smaller matters there could be considerable differences of opinion. In my own case, I recall disagreeing with Davis on a number of issues that eventually were resolved amicably. For example, I had refused to 'team teach', and almost resigned within weeks of being appointed. My requests for a departmental photocopier were met with the comment that it meant the destruction of trees. Davis was an environmentalist and a frugal departmental manager. I was encouraged not to throw away the string and wrapping from parcels of books.

The impact of the Cultural Revolution in China had reverberations in Chinese teaching in Australia. Our militant Red Guard look-alike student leaders, now decades later established academics, filled the middle pages of *Honi Soit* (the undergraduate newspaper) with their denunciations of the curriculum. Following Australia's establishment of diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China came various cultural exchanges. The exchange teachers sent from China were of significance for language programmes. The University of Sydney was the only major Australian university to decline the offer of such a teacher. One incident will show Davis' clarity of mind and the strength of his convictions. An exchange teacher on his way back to China via Sydney asked to meet members of

staff. To an inquiry about which modern authors were being studied, Davis replied 'Lao She, amongst others'. The visitor disapprovingly hectored Davis, telling him that there were much better writers; whereupon Davis ended the meeting and dismissed him. Lao She, like many other writers, had been hounded during the Cultural Revolution and had committed suicide. The exchange teacher would have been a party member and was simply voicing the party line at the time. Davis refused to have such a person on his staff. To do so infringed his sense of academic freedom and of the idea of a university.

Davis must also be admired for the strength of his conviction that the type of training he offered and the courses he designed would produce Australian scholars of an international calibre. In the period from 1960 to 2000, the University of Sydney had to its credit a total of 93 BA Honours, 16 Masters, and 20 PhD theses awarded in Chinese Studies.² This is a record unmatched by any other university in Australia. Numerous graduates from the University of Sydney hold (or have retired from) academic positions at various universities. Graduates hold chairs at Edinburgh (Bonnie McDougall), Hong Kong (Chiu Ling-Yeong), Queensland (Kam Louie), La Trobe (John Fitzgerald); and chairs of Japanese are held at Sydney (Hugh Clarke) and Newcastle (Leith Morton). Davis's evaluation of his own work cannot have been far off the mark. Further, although there was never an explosion in student numbers as in Japanese, Chinese Studies at Sydney has always enjoyed strong and steady growth. Sydney was the only Australian Chinese department not to suffer a decline in enrolments after the June 1989 events in Beijing.

When Davis died, on 28 November 1983, he had just finished assessing an honours thesis so that results could be finalised. A few months earlier he had sensed he lacked the strength to complete editing the manuscript he had been working on, and entrusted it to his colleague Agnieszka Stefanowska. During the many months of his illness and hospitalisation Stefanowska had quietly shouldered the bulk of his work. Now the weight of being Head of Department and editor of the *Journal of the*

Oriental Society of Australia was put upon her. (Volume 21 of *JOSA* has been published recently.) She duly edited the manuscript and sent it to the publishers in England, only to be informed that a £5,000 subsidy would have to be found.

Stefanowska was faced with another problem, the vast collection of original Chinese and Japanese books which, because of inadequate library allocations, Davis had bought from his own funds to complement the collection in Fisher Library. Originally he had bequeathed the collection to the library, and had he not quarrelled with the Librarian of the time on the importance of the research library and changed his will, Fisher today would boast an East Asian collection of international significance. In the world of Sinology, the fate of the Davis collection is considered a tragedy. Peterhouse College, Cambridge, had agreed to take the collection but finally decided there was no space to house it. Davis's son, Philip, had the books shipped to England. In more recent times the previous Librarian, Dr Neil Radford, tried to initiate negotiations for the purchase of the collection but, unfortunately, there was no response from Philip Davis.

As it turned out, I had started a small publishing company in 1984 and had published two Chinese language textbooks and a reader compiled by various members of the Department.³ These replaced the outdated language of books such as that of John DeFrancis (revised edition 1963) and the inappropriate contexts of books from the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. They were aimed at intelligent readers; a creative teacher could induce fast-track learning and encourage better students to move ahead with little help. Together with Stefanowska's *Classical Chinese Reader*, they provide the main revenue for the company. I offered therefore to try to raise funds towards publishing Davis' manuscript. I organised two intensive summer courses in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, using the proceeds to establish the A. R. Davis Memorial Scholarship and the *University of Sydney East Asian Series*. Davis' work, *Shijin: Autobiography of the Poet Kaneko Mitsuharu, 1895-1975*, 1988,

was the first volume in the Series.⁴

Davis was strongly committed to his subject, both domestically and internationally. He successfully nurtured students who would become academics and teachers in Australia. He aligned himself with community leaders with interests in China and Japan, and established the Oriental Society of Australia. The Society held monthly evening lectures and began the publication of *JOSA*. The aim of the journal is to foster a research culture among young Australian scholars. This may seem logical and worthwhile, but the few China or Asia related scholarly journals in Australia today seem to have moved in favour of publishing (sometimes almost exclusively) the work of overseas scholars.

A Cambridge graduate in Classics, Davis first studied Japanese to assist in the war effort and later turned to Chinese, specialising in classical Chinese poetry. He was a rare scholar, with expertise in both Eastern and Western classical and modern literature, the written records of history and thought. His passion was for literary expression of the soul, which he found in the poetry of both East and West. Although he did not articulate it, he saw his role as that of a mediator between cultures, bringing knowledge of the similarities between human beings all over the world. Presumably this was what had drawn him to the East. He was a literary man, a poet, a gentle sensitive soul with a penchant for poetry in times when poetry had already begun to decline in the world. For Davis the education of the total person, the nurturing of young scholars who would be committed to the pursuit of academic excellence, particularly in literature, was a vocation and not a job. His graduates who went on to academic posts have characteristically regarded them as privileged positions, with significant responsibilities.

When Davis was appointed in 1955 he established the first Chinese programme proceeding to the PhD at any university in Australia. He was joined by Liu Wei-ping, whose family had been scholars for generations and who had a traditional Chinese education in classical literature as well as Western-style training

at St. John's College in Shanghai. Liu had impeccable English as well as an encyclopaedic knowledge of Chinese literature, history and philosophy. The Japanese invasion of China had seen him work as a truck driver on the Burma Road. He said there was nothing to read so he spent his time studying maps, and at the end of the war easily passed the examinations for the diplomatic services. He was posted to the Chinese Consulate in Perth, and after resigning relocated to Sydney, where he enrolled in History and obtained his Master's degree. Liu Wei-ping often speaks affectionately of the period when he and Davis were the total staff of Oriental Studies: he answered the telephone, made the coffee, ordered books for the library, and taught classes. In later years Bruce McKillop and then John Frodsham joined the teaching staff.

Davis designed a Chinese curriculum that sought to maximise results within the restrictions of staff allocations and time limitations for subjects in the Faculty of Arts. All beginners to the language were enrolled in one year of Elementary Chinese and were taught six hours each week (classical texts, modern language, and Chinese history). In the following year they would join with students who had received various levels of secondary school education in Chinese. The course was meaningful and challenging for these advanced language students, for it emphasised the critical study of Chinese literature and history predominantly using primary source materials. This was gruelling for those in their second year, but Davis refused to see any watering down of the curriculum, which included the study of all major works of literary significance, spanning over two thousand years of Chinese history.

The first intake of students in 1956 comprised one class of predominantly Hong Kong students (who after graduation returned and entered various high level careers in the public and private sector) and an Elementary class of several 'non-background' students. From that year Winnie Tsang from Hong Kong was later awarded the first PhD in Chinese from Sydney. Three of the 'non-background' students graduated with honours

in Chinese, completed postgraduate degrees, and subsequently distinguished themselves in careers related to their specialisation. Winston Lewis (MA Hong Kong) taught Chinese history at Macquarie University until his death a few years ago; an alumni connection remains with the generous endowment of the Winston G. W. Lewis Prize for Chinese History. Margaret South (PhD Australian National University) taught classical Chinese literature and was Head of Chinese at Auckland University until her retirement some years ago. Jocelyn Milner (later Chey; MA Hong Kong, PhD Sydney) taught Chinese language for a short time at Sydney before being seconded by Foreign Affairs to be Cultural Attaché in the first Australian Embassy to the People's Republic of China. She retired as High Commissioner in Hong Kong after a long diplomatic career to serve her alma mater as Honorary Professor in Chinese Studies.

The following year, 1957, saw a second intake (day and evening) of beginners in Chinese. Agnieszka Stefanowska enrolled as an evening student and on graduation won the first University Medal for the subject.⁵ Stefanowska and I were the first of Davis's beginner-student intake to continue from BA Honours directly to the doctorate; we both joined the department in 1966. Stefanowska's teaching and research specialisation was classical literature and mine was late nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual history and literature. In following years other PhD students joined the department for various periods, including Bonnie McDougall and Chiu Ling-Yeong. Tony Prince, whose research specialisation is Chinese Buddhism and classical literature, joined in 1975. Lily Lee, whose specialisation is early vernacular fiction, joined the staff in 1990 and currently directs a major international project, the *Biography of Chinese Women*. Magdalene Lee, also a Sydney graduate, replaced Lily Lee as librarian for the East Asian Collection.

Students of Davis have thus played different but crucial roles in promoting Chinese Studies at Sydney. Davis had laid the groundwork but it was Stefanowska whose strong academic and managerial acumen as Head enabled consolidation and strong

growth. Within the limits of Faculty guidelines and a declining budget, she developed a full range of options to address student demands for greater emphasis on modern Chinese. When she retired, the Sydney programme was the best in Australia.

Afterword

When, just turned seventeen, I enrolled at Sydney, I knew no one who had attended university (or even completed high school). I was born in Warialda in northern New South Wales and at Parramatta High School I learned a little of China's history and related this to my having been called 'Ching Chong Chinaman' at primary school and later being stoned as I was waiting for a bus. The stone throwers were decidedly unfriendly, and the name callers were certainly not paying me a compliment. From the age of five I was quick and capable of defending myself, and later on I also defended my good natured Greek and Italian classmates as well. I had enrolled in Chinese to learn about 'my' history.

At the welcome gathering for new students Davis came in with a necktie around his waist to tuck up his trousers: he hadn't been able to find his belt in the morning. That was the age of absent-minded professors. (Geoffrey Sargent, a specialist in Japanese literature, was also a character. During a class in the Main Quadrangle I recall seeing him put a lighted match into a pocket full of tissues and then wonder about the smell of smoke.) Davis' students were inspired by his dedication, his modesty, charm, and infectious joy in what he was doing. I started to learn about 'my' history as an undergraduate but I wanted to learn more. For my PhD, I told Davis, I wanted to work on late nineteenth-century economic thought. He did not understand why I did not want to study classical Chinese literature instead. But I was adamant, for I still had to understand more fully why I had been called 'Ching Chong Chinaman' with malicious intent. Nevertheless, later I found myself gravitating towards literature and appreciating the beauty and worth of what I had learned as

an undergraduate, and keen to pass on this knowledge to my own students.

Notes

- 1 All three now hold honorary appointments and continue to supervise postgraduate students.
- 2 Departmental records.
- 3 *Putonghua: a Spoken Course in Practical Chinese*, 1984; *Basic Chinese Grammar & Sentence Patterns*, 1986; *A Modern Chinese Reader*, 1988. These texts, no longer used at Sydney, continue to be marketed in America and Europe.
- 4 Stefanowska and I are co-editors of the Series, the brief of which is the introduction of the literatures, histories, thought, art, and religions of East Asia to the English-speaking world. Volume 13, Tong Shijun's *The Dialectics of Modernization: Habermas and the Chinese Discourse of Modernization*, was published in early 2000. In 1996 we began a second venture, *The University of Sydney World Literature Series*, which has now published three volumes.
- 5 Bonnie McDougall and Ben Penny also won the Medal at graduation.