

**David Hawkes (1923-2009)
and *The Story of the Stone***

**John Minford
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If I can convey to the reader even a fraction of the pleasure this Chinese novel has given me, I shall not have lived in vain.

— David Hawkes, Introduction *The Story of the Stone, The Golden Days*

Brief Chronology

1923: born in East London

1944: Oxford University

1948-1951: Peking University

1951-1971: Oxford academic, translated *Songs of the South* 楚辭

1970-1980: translated *The Story of the Stone* 紅樓夢, chapters 1-80

1975: retired to a small-holding in Mid-Wales

1997: returned to Oxford

31 July 2009: died in Oxford

David Hawkes: scholar and translator

David Hawkes was one of the greatest translators from the Chinese of his time. He will be best and longest remembered for two highly important works: the first and earliest, his superb version of the hauntingly lyrical (and extremely difficult) early anthology of shamanistic poetry, *The Songs of the South*; the second, his extraordinarily rich, versatile and loving re-creation of the first three volumes of the great 18th-century novel *The Story of the Stone*.

This, a supreme example of the translator's art, was, when it first appeared, hailed in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* as "one of the best translations into English of our time", and has since been the subject of numerous critical studies. It set entirely new standards for the translation of Chinese fiction. "David of all people", wrote his contemporary and friend Cyril Birch, "had the learning, the wit, and the command of the aristocratic culture to meet the challenge."

The Stone was his crowning achievement, his own favourite project. Into it he poured all of his scholarship and creative passion and invention. He had dreamt of working on it

ever since his student days in Peking in the 1940s. His identification with the work and its author was so complete that when, in 1970, he finally decided to translate it in full, he resigned from his chair at Oxford to dedicate himself totally to the task. As he wrote, this was a novel “written and rewritten by a great artist with his very lifeblood”.

The same can be said of the translation itself. Hawkes brought to bear such a wide range of rhetorical skills, such penetrating insight into character, such finely honed dialogue, such superbly crafted versification; but more than anything, such a profound sense of humanity, such fun and exhilaration, such melancholy and wisdom. In it he succeeds in grasping to the full, and yet at the same time transcending, the sheer Chineseness of the work, making it into a real novel for reading, revealing it as a true masterpiece of world literature. He did this out of sheer love of the book. “If I can convey to the reader even a fraction of the pleasure this Chinese novel has given me,” he wrote in 1973, “I shall not have lived in vain.”

Many years later it was — to his pleasure and amusement — this very translation that the new Chinese Ambassador to the Court of St James, Mme Fu Ying, chose to present to the Queen on a recent official visit to the Palace.

David Hawkes was born in 1923, and grew up in East London. In 1942 he went up to Christ Church, Oxford, for a year, to study the abbreviated classical mods, and then spent the remaining war years teaching Japanese to codebreakers. After the war he returned to Oxford, transferring to the new Honours School of Chinese, under the former missionary E. R. Hughes. In 1948 there began what was certainly the most influential period in his life, when he travelled to Peking (then in the last throes of the civil war) and began to study at the Peking university, attending classes by such legendary older scholars as Yu Pingbo, Luo Changpei, Tang Lan and Lin Geng. In Peking he also joined the circle of William Empson and his wife Hetta.

Empson’s intellectual and poetic genius made a lasting impression, and the couple’s bohemian lifestyle attracted him. Throughout his career he was always more comfortable among creative people, than with academic pedants. In the newly liberated Peking he married his wife Jean. They finally left the city in 1951. Hawkes never went back to Peking, or to China. But he remembered every detail of the old city, and could find his way around the alleys, or hutongs, in his dreams. Today nearly all of that is gone. The new “Olympic” Beijing of multiple ring roads would have shocked him.

Back in Oxford Hawkes completed his doctoral dissertation on *The Songs of the South*. His work attracted the attention of the pre-eminent Chinese scholar and translator, Arthur Waley, who became his mentor and friend, and named him as his literary executor.

Elected to the chair of Chinese in 1959, he spent a dozen years building up a fine department, where literary and classical studies flourished, but where modern China

was by no means ignored. He rapidly acquired an enormous international reputation as a scholar who was rigorous in his methods, encyclopaedic in his reading and humane in his mode of expression. He was an inspiring teacher, giving scholarly but entertaining lectures that betrayed his early love of the theatre. He resigned from the chair in 1971, and after a brief interval, was made a research Fellow of All Souls, a position which enabled him to complete his three volumes of the *Stone* (1973-80). He was always grateful to the Warden of the college, John Sparrow, for his support at this time.

Hawkes and his wife Jean retired to the Welsh hills in 1984. He thought he would give up Chinese altogether, and donated his fine collection of Chinese books to the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth. He concentrated instead on the study of the Welsh language, and read widely in the history of religion, on which he wrote a brilliant series of essays in the form of letters to a grandchild, *Letters from a Godless Grandfather*, which was published privately in Hong Kong in 2004. He was a biting (and often hilariously funny) critic of the sheer nonsense that so often passes for religion. He was also a passionate opponent of US and British military involvement in the Middle East, raging against Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians and joining protest marches.

Hawkes's life and work were both inspired and overshadowed by a strongly melancholic streak. He was a genius, a towering figure in his profession. What he himself wrote in 1966 of Arthur Waley is equally true of him: "Greatness in men is a rare but unmistakable quality. In our small profession it is unlikely we shall see a man of such magnitude again."

Hawkes is survived by his wife, Jean, three daughters and a son.

— John Minford, obituary from *The Times*, 28 August 2009, reprinted in *China Heritage Quarterly* at:
http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/features.php?searchterm=019_vale_hawkes.inc&issue=019

Extracts from Connie Chan's 1990s' taped Oxford interview

1. On Peking University

I don't know if you know about the old Peking University? Have you ever been to Peking? Of course, I wouldn't know it now. I can go around it in my dreams — I mean, as it was fifty years ago. Then of course it was a walled city. [Draws a map.] In the old days the north part was just like a box...

The old Peking University was in Shata'r... . If you talk about Peking University nowadays, Beida, they think of it being outside the walls... . All these places around here were to do with *qiren* [Manchu Bannermen] or the palace. In fact the oldest part of *Beiping daxue* was the old *Guozi Jian* [Imperial Hall of Classics]. All the other parts

were very seedy new buildings. There was a *Hong Lou*, funnily enough! [Laughs.] It was where the Japanese used to torture people in the basement during the war. It's said that Mao Tse-tung was librarian there once, but I don't know if he really was. There was *Hong Lou* [Red Building], and *Hui Lou* [Grey Building], and *Bai Lou* [White Building]... . And a very very big dusty campus in the middle called *Minzhu Guangchang* [Democracy Square]. The hostels were all over the place. The Empsons were living quite near the university. It was quite an old place, probably a Manchu's residence at one time. Everywhere was *pingfang* [one-storey buildings] of course, this whole part. The only tall buildings were down in the consular area, the banks and so on. When you went through the hutongs it was very dusty. And there were just grey walls on either side. Off the big roads, that is. You don't see anything, just walls and gates... If you went up on top of Coal Hill and looked down, it looked like a forest, because you could see all the trees in the courtyards... . The hostel I stayed in, after staying with the Empsons for about three weeks, was in Dongchang hutong... It wasn't an old building, it wasn't a pingfang. It was called the *yanjiusheng sushe* [post-graduate students hostel or dormitory]... . It was actually a two-storey prison, that had been built by the Japanese for Chinese officers. It was like a prison inside. You know what prisons are like, upstairs they have a sort of gallery all round that you can look through, with a rail all round. You can look right down from top to bottom, and you see the cells all round. They were little cells, about from there to here [gestures], just big enough for a bed, and a table and a little chair. Barred windows and everything. So that was the hostel, and there were about — well, half of them were Chinese, and then there were these Indians. The Indians included Amit Tagore, who was the great-nephew of Rabindranath Tagore... . And there were a whole lot of other Indians from Santiniketan studying Buddhism... . Anyway, I went and lived in this hostel... .

2. On First Reading *The Story of the Stone*

Anyway, I went and lived in this hostel [the Peking University student hostel]. You were asking about *Honglouloumeng*, when did I first start learning it and so on. I'd heard about *Honglouloumeng* from students in Oxford; I think a friend, maybe Qiu Ke'an, showed me a copy of this great novel, so I'd heard about it. I think I tried to read the first chapter, and it was very difficult. Actually the beginning of *Honglouloumeng*, if you're not familiar with either *baihua* or modern *wenyan*, is quite difficult, because it's written in a very strange style, to start with. That first chapter. I don't think I got very far. I struggled through about a page, I think! [Laughs.] But anyway, people talked a lot about *Honglouloumeng*, Chinese students, and I thought well, I'll try and read it. So what I did, through a Chinese friend of the Empsons [William Empson, the British poet and critic, was a Visiting Professor of English at Peking University when Hawkes arrived in Beijing], a lady the Empsons knew, they found an unemployed gentleman. I don't know what he was, I think he'd been a government clerk in Hebei. He wasn't from Beijing, he came from outside, somewhere in Hebei. He hadn't got a job, he was living on his wife; they were very, very poor. He was a sort of *lao xiansheng*, a very old-fashioned man. He always wore a *changpao* all through the year. Everyone used to wear a *changpao* in the winter, you

wore a *mian'ao*, everyone did, just to keep warm; but you never did in the summer, unless you were a shop-keeper or something like that. But he was very old-fashioned. He used to come round, every day I think, I spent quite a lot of money on having lessons. What he did — he didn't speak a word of English, and I don't think he'd taught language before either; but with the help of some Chinese friend, I bought a copy of *Honglouloumeng*, and we used to sit side by side, and we'd read it — he'd read it — read it out loud — and then start explaining it; and I didn't understand what he said, but I could see what he was talking about. So it was a sort of direct method gone mad, if you like! I wouldn't suggest it as an ideal way of learning, but it's the way I chose. I thought of it as a way of learning. I wanted to read the novel, having heard about it, I mean I didn't know much about it, and I thought I'd like to read it... . But gradually I found it did work, actually. I didn't understand a lot of what he said first of all. He was just talking away all the time. He didn't speak real *Beijing hua*, he probably spoke with rather a funny sort of accent. I expect I never learnt proper Pekinese. Anyway, none of the teachers at Beida, well very few, spoke anything like even Putonghua; they were practically all Southerners. I went to some classes by Yu Pingbo, and I could hardly understand a word he said! He was from Zhejiang, I think. There were one or two who spoke very, very good — Luo Changpei, I went to Luo Changpei's class, he was a *qiren*, he was a friend of Lao She.

3. Scholarship and the translator

You asked about Redology 紅學 and Redologists 紅學家. I went to a conference — when was it? — 1980 I think. It was a conference organised by Chow Tse-tsung, in Wisconsin University. A lot of people went. It was very interesting to meet the people. An enormous number of people went. I don't know whether it was a very successful conference in terms of the papers read, because there were so many papers, and I rather think we hoped that a lot of them could be read, and it meant there was only about 10 minutes for a 40-minute paper. It was rather a disaster from that point of view, but it was very, very interesting to meet all the people. People from Taiwan and Beijing were both there. And Ito Sohei, the one who did the Japanese translation of *Honglouloumeng*, *Koromu* こうろうむ, came from Japan. Zhou Ruchang, Feng Qiyong were there. Pan Chonggui, and a whole lot of very interesting people. Anthony Yu and Joseph Lau. People I'd heard about but never met. People I had met but hadn't seen for a very long time. So it was a really interesting conference. But I felt by the end of it that I'd really had enough of *hongxue* to last me for two lives. It's very interesting. But a lot of it *isn't very relevant to translating* ... An awful lot of it is just historical research, really. I'm sure it's very important. I don't think I should want to go to another *hongxue* conference. And Lin Yiliang — you know who Lin Yiliang is don't you? — Song Qi, Stephen Soong. I corresponded with him a bit ... I thought some of the things he said were a bit too generous, really. It wasn't exactly *pai mapi*, but it gets pretty close to it at times! [laughs] I found his book very interesting. Some of the things he says — obviously he'd given a lifetime almost to thinking about the novel. Some of the things he said I felt very bad about having missed. There were several things that he pointed out

that I'd missed altogether. I haven't read a great many reviews. I think you asked about Chinese reviews. I read quite a few.

4. Principles

You ask questions about principles of translation and things like that. I don't know whether I've got any principles. I suppose I have got some sort of vague principles. But so much of what I did, in so far as I had any rules, they were rules I made for translating that specific novel, because of its problems, the problems it presented.

The David Hawkes Papers

In the library of the Chinese University of Hong Kong 香港中文大學圖書館.