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PREFACE TO A.R. DAVIS REPRINTS

✪ Benjamin Penny

As this issue of *East Asian History* goes to press, it is almost exactly 30 years since A.R. Davis, Professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Sydney, died. Today Davis is perhaps best known for his monumental *Tao Yuan-ming: His Works and their Meaning* published by Cambridge University Press in 1983. However, among his works on Chinese poetry, his earlier *Tu Fu* in the Twayne's World Authors series from 1971 and his edited anthology *The Penguin Book of Chinese Verse* from 1962 deserve more recognition than they receive in the present. Throughout his scholarly career, Davis was also fascinated with the work of Su Shi 蘇軾, or Su Dongpo 蘇東坡, and was planning a major work on his poetry before he became ill with the lymphoma that was to kill him.

In this issue of *East Asian History*, we begin a regular section of the journal where we will republish work that has not perhaps been as available as it might have been. Here we present three of Davis's essays on the poetry of Su Shi from the late 1970s and early 1980s. Appropriately one concentrates on the influence of Tao Yuanming 陶淵明 on Su's writing, the other on Su Shi and Du Fu 杜甫. In addition, we present translations of 23 of Su's poems that Davis made, and which were in the possession of Dr Agnieszka Syrokomla-Stefanowska, his literary executor, who herself died in 2008. These poems must be regarded as drafts, and are not annotated, but they are still beautiful and deeply scholarly renderings, full of Davis's characteristic elegance, intelligence, erudition and invention, and certainly deserve a readership. We also reprint the tribute to Professor Davis originally published in the *University of Sydney News* of 24 January 1984. We would like to thank our fellow editors from the *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* for their co-operation in this project.



*A Tribute by John M. Ward, Vice-Chancellor,
University of Sydney*

Professor Davis had planned to retire on his 60th birthday on 3 February, 1984 and Senate had accepted his retirement with regret. Unfortunately, the illness that forced him to consider retirement at the age of 60 led to his death before he could return to England. His wife died two years ago and he had wished to be with his son, Philip, and to continue his scholarly researches near Cambridge from where he had come to Australia.

Davis was the sort of man of whom we can truly say that we shall not see his like again. A gentle, retiring person, he was also an impressive scholar and a steadfast friend.

Davis entered Peterhouse, Cambridge, in 1942 with an Open Scholarship in Classics. In May of that year he gained First Class Honours at the Preliminary Examination in Classics. After Japan entered the Second World War the British Government was desperately looking for men with talents for languages and in July, 1942, at the age of 18 Davis began war service of a secret nature with the rank of Temporary Junior Administrative Officer. First, he worked under the War Office. Most of his assignment, however, was to the Foreign Office at Bletchley Park, where he worked in intelligence.

Davis returned to Cambridge in 1946 and stayed with Oriental rather than the Classical languages. In 1948 he gained his Bachelor's Degree with First Class Honours in Part II of the Oriental Language Tripos. He was immediately appointed Assistant Lecturer in Oriental Languages. He was made Lecturer in that subject in 1949 and held that post until he was appointed to the Chair of Oriental Studies at the University of Sydney.

The Chair itself had been vacant since the resignation of J.K. Rideout at the end of 1949. Rideout had held the Chair for only one year before deciding that he could not, with the resources allowed him, maintain the high standards that had been set by Murdoch and Sadler in the Chair. The Vice-Chancellor of the time, Professor S.H. Roberts, quite understandably concluded from Rideout's experiences that there was no place for Oriental Studies in Sydney, at least for the time being. Roberts expected for the immediate future that the languages and literature of East Asia would be studied at the Australian National University by only a small handful of special students. In 1955, while Roberts was away on leave, a group of scholars in the Faculty of Arts persuaded our Chancellor, then Mr H.D. Black, a Fellow of Senate, to ask the governing body to fill the Chair. After consulting the Professorial Board, Senate agreed to do so. A selection committee, meeting under the Deputy Vice Chancellor, the late Professor C.R. McRae, decided to risk everything with the appointment of A.R. Davis of Cambridge, who was described by his principal referees, A.C. Maule and A.D. Waley, as one of the most brilliant and promising men of his generation in the field of Oriental Studies. The risk was abundantly justified.

Davis found the Department of Oriental Studies virtually non-existent. At the time of his death, it was a flourishing institution with high standing in both Chinese and Japanese, and the beginnings of interest in Korean.

Before coming here, Davis had some interesting correspondence with the Registrar, Margaret Telfer, about the range of his work. He was asked, in effect, whether a scholar in Classical Chinese would really be capable of developing the kind of Department that the University wished to see. His answer is itself a classic:

There is no question that a university course in Chinese requires a substantial amount of teaching in Classical Chinese even though the emphasis of that course is primarily directed towards modern China and modern Chinese. Teaching solely in Modern Chinese could only produce a practical training, not properly consistent with University standards. This is the general view in European universities and one to which, I believe, the Faculty of Arts would subscribe.

He went on to give scholarly reasons for this judgment and to request that a pure Mandarin speaker be appointed as Lecturer to teach spoken Chinese.

It was to the immense benefit of the University that Davis was firm in his devotion to scholarship. As his Department expanded, he never relaxed his devotion. Indeed, scholarship and love of literature, were the mainsprings of his academic career. He was not a battler in the familiar sense of the Professor, who sways committees and delights in winning for his Department. Rather, Bertie, as we called him, was a shy man of great integrity, the sort of person who would live on bread and cheese in order to build up his library. He earned the respect of colleagues in other Departments, who may have had small Chinese and less Japanese, but recognised high standards when they saw them.

Davis probably over-worked his own Department, but there was never a complaint from them. Affection for the Professor and respect for his learning and sensitivity as a critic of literature, united the Department under his quiet leadership. At the time of his death the Department had scholarly interests in the language, literature and history of both Chinese and Japan, and, as I have said, was becoming active in Korean.

As a scholar, Davis's interests were wide and his knowledge has been described by a colleague as encyclopaedic. His abiding interests were in the poets and poetry of both ancient and modern China and of modern Japan. His most widely known publication may be *The Penguin Book of Chinese Verse*, that he edited with an introduction in 1962. Among scholars his best respected work will probably be *Tao Yuan-ming: His Works and Their Meaning* published this year by Hong Kong University Press and Cambridge University Press. Davis had an impressive list of publications during the last thirty years and was often in service also as a scholarly editor. He was Founder and President for many years of the Oriental Society of Australia.

Davis had that rare combination of personal qualities on which universities depend for their excellence. He was a fine scholar, sensitive, imaginative and exceptionally learned. He was also in his quiet and friendly way a builder, whose achievements are bequeathed to the world of scholarship, to his colleagues and to the reputation of his Department and adopted University.



A.R. Davis at the University of Sydney.

