

## The Remarkable Scholarship of Professor D. C. Lau (1921–2010)

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休重省，百年短景，容易風吹醒。  
Do not wake up any more,  
The short dream of a life of a hundred years  
Is too easy to be blown awake by the wind.

From *Dianjiangchun* 點絳脣  
by Lau King Tong 劉景堂  
translated by Katherine Whitaker

On 8 March 1921 Professor Lau was born into the family of Lau King Tong, a scholar and poet who had fled from the chaotic civil wars raging on the mainland to settle under the more peaceful conditions of the British colony of Hong Kong. Attending school at King's College, he later graduated from the Chinese Department at the University of Hong Kong. He fled to mainland China in 1941 as, after a fierce battle, the Japanese moved in to occupy Hong Kong, and there he was to suffer greatly but survived. In 1946 Lau won a Victory Scholarship to become one of the first Hong Kong students to sail to Britain in the post-war era. Reading and winning a First in moral philosophy at Glasgow in the last years of that distinguished University's half-millennium, he continued his studies in ordinary language philosophy and came under the influence of the "Oxford" philosophy of Gilbert Ryle. Ryle's work is distinguished by the pursuit of philosophical clarity through the application of subtle linguistic and conceptual distinctions, an identifiable and even signatory feature of Lau's scholarly papers, and of his popular translations of the early Chinese canonical texts. But there is perhaps more to the Ryle connection than the lucidity and rigour with which Lau moves between the Chinese and English languages. We might speculate that Lau's attraction to Ryle is as much philosophical as it is linguistic. His

lifelong interest in learning languages did not seem to have been so much driven by the successful acquisition of the languages as it was, in the process of learning them, of gaining some insight into the way languages work. The interest in how languages work is connected to two problems that have occupied Lau and the best minds of philosophy for the better part of a century: (1) in what way does language furnish clues into the nature of the world? And (2) in so far as we cannot think without language, what limitations does a given language impose on thinking, and how can we discover and articulate them?

Following his studies in philosophy at Glasgow, in 1950 Lau accepted a lectureship at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Recognized for the many scholarly articles and translations that made the name of D. C. Lau ubiquitous in the Western sinological literature, he quickly rose to become the Professor of Chinese at the University of London and Head of the Chinese section at SOAS. In this post at SOAS, his international reputation as a scholar and teacher enabled him to establish and invigilate a standard of scholarship that contributed measurably to the reputation of that institution, and where together with A. C. Graham, Paul Thompson, and Sarah Allan, he made SOAS a world centre for the study of Chinese philosophy.

I arrived at SOAS in 1975 to study for the PhD under Professor Lau's supervision. At our first meeting we discussed the difficult yet philosophically exciting text I had selected for my research project, the Han dynasty *Huainanzi*. In an attempt to impress Lau with my thoughtful reading of the contemporary scholarly literature, I ventured to ask him what he thought of the Herrlee Creel distinction between "contemplative" and "purposive" Daoism. He politely allowed that he did not have an opinion on this matter and was glad to have the distinction brought to his attention. Encouraged by his response, and continuing with renewed enthusiasm, I asked him if he thought that Tom Metzger's characterization of neo-Confucian sagehood as an "escape from predicament" was useful. His reply was again polite, but made all the more severe because of it. After deflecting my question again, he asked me "By the way, how many times have you read through the *Huainanzi*?" My unconsidered response was "ALL of it?" "Wrong answer" was his curt reply, and he pointed me to the reference room in the SOAS library where I lived for the next two years reading painstakingly through the text and its commentaries. What I had learned from Professor Lau was that real scholarship can only proceed from a diligent and comprehensive reading of the original texts, and that secondary literature is precisely that—at its best, of very secondary importance.

After nearly thirty years of teaching at the University of London, in 1978 Professor Lau was persuaded to return home to Hong Kong as the University Professor of Chinese Language and Literature at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. In many ways he flourished in this second career at CUHK, an institution with a distinctly different set of demands and expectations from those he knew at London.

He became Dean of Arts (1980–1983), Chief Editor of the *Journal of Chinese Studies* (1978–1995), and Director of the T. T. Ng Chinese Language Research Centre (1979–2007). A singular contribution that he made over this latter part of his career has been his leadership in the CUHK Institute of Chinese Studies Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series that has become a standard reference resource on the shelves of sinologists around the world. That Lau was able to achieve such stature within the academies of two disparate cultures speaks both of the quality and the depth of his understanding of these two different worlds, and the magnanimity of his person.

Among the published works of Lau, the authoritative Penguin translations of the core Chinese classics—the *Lao Tzu*, the *Mencius*, and the *Analects of Confucius*—are unequalled in their sales and popularity, and have done much over these past generations to foster Western literacy in the Chinese philosophical literature. Given his fascination with the way that culture is sedimented into language, it is not surprising that his scholarship begins from a penetrating sensitivity to the Chinese language where he was a “*boshi* 博士” or literatus in the traditional understanding of that term. Having assimilated the classical corpus through a lifetime of careful study and reflection, Lau took the comparison and analysis of the ancient documents as a methodology for textual reconstruction. Juxtaposing related passages from contemporaneous sources he was able to draw upon the intertextuality of texts belonging to a shared historical epoch, and to find clues to restore the integrity to passages and unravel textual knots along the way. Relying as much upon his memory as his library, Lau had a panoramic view of the entire corpus, and treated it as his text.

Professor Lau’s extraordinary facility with the Chinese language was legendary, and we his students benefited enormously from it. But what is more difficult to admit is how much better his proficiency in English was than that of his Western students and colleagues. His disciplined study of the many classical and modern languages that had converged over the millennia to produce the English language—German, Greek, Latin—enabled him to appreciate the historical and literary nuances that are beyond the grasp of even the most schooled of native speakers. For many summers after I had finished my PhD on the *Huainanzi* under his supervision at SOAS, I would return to his personal study on the CUHK campus to continue to read and to translate this difficult text. We would begin from my draft translations, and with piles of books all around us, he would proceed to demonstrate all too clearly who was the joyful master and who was the uncertain novice. He would ask: “Roger, do you mean ‘careful’ or ‘cautious’ here? Shouldn’t this be ‘dexterity’ rather than ‘agility’? Surely this should be ‘insidious’ rather than ‘sinister’?” And yes, he could explain the difference.

In reading and watching and listening as Professor Lau would craft his translations of the canonical texts, I became aware of a persistent feature of his choice of language that made his versions of these works remarkable when compared with those of other scholars. A pervasive characteristic of Lau’s translations is his

uncommon preference for the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary of English—a concrete and powerfully imagistic “language within a language” of a pre-Latinized and pre-Christianized Britain. This interpretive strategy of preferring the Anglo-Saxon language for his translations goes far beyond a general stylistic contrast between the clarity and sensibleness of British academic prose and its more free-wheeling, sometimes bold and sometime obtuse North American counterpart. At the end of the sixth century, Augustine and a wave of Rome-sponsored monks, scholars, and teachers brought Greek and Hellenistic learning to Britain to change the philosophy of a nation and to establish this world as a major seat of scholastic learning. One of the virtues of Anglo-Saxon words—“grasp” rather than “comprehend,” “cow” rather than “bovine,” “see” rather than “perceive”—is that they have by and large remained ordinary expressions in use in everyday communication and have escaped being drafted into the technical vocabulary that defines the discipline of philosophy. Being unencumbered by explicit philosophical content, Anglo-Saxon words are available to express the very different philosophical sensibilities of classical Chinese philosophy that stand in rather stark contrast to the classical Greek metaphysical tradition.

In addition to Lau’s appeal to Anglo-Saxon language, another distinctive feature of his contribution is his profile as a broadly read sinologist rather than as a narrowly defined technical philosopher. He was an interdisciplinary scholar whose tool box of different kinds of philological, historical, and literary skills were most effective for reporting on the intellectual tradition of ancient China that is in its character biographical, literary, situational, and resolutely historical.

He was an exceedingly private man yet relished his personal relationships; he was a bit of a recluse but enjoyed the happy company and the devotion of his many students and colleagues. The life of Professor D. C. Lau as a scholar and as a person was exemplary. And his passing is mourned by many of us in both of his worlds who have learned so much from him. In saying goodbye we must allow that without his warm and generous mentorship, our lives would have amounted to much less.