

Translating at Its Best

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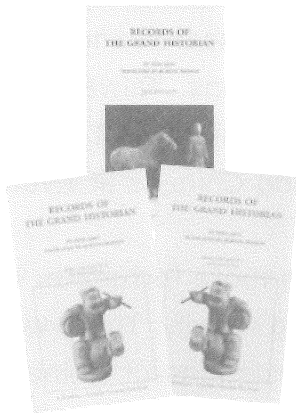
In 1946, a freshman in Columbia College, I began studying Chinese. As it turned out, my timing was not very good, because by 1951, when I had finished college, done some graduate study, and was ready to go to China for research and work on the spoken language, that country was closed to Americans. Taiwan and Hong Kong were in turmoil and I had no contacts in either of them. So I ended up going to Japan as a teacher of English and later studying Chinese at Kyoto University.

With regard to the situation in America my timing was more fortunate. In the postwar years Chinese studies in the US were expanding rapidly. There was a demand for textbooks on Chinese subjects and for translations of Chinese works not available in English or available only in outdated translations. With funding from the Columbia University Committee on Oriental Studies I was able

to devote a number of years to translating works of Chinese history, literature and thought. These included selections from the *Shiji* of Sima Qian, the subject of my Ph.D. dissertation, and from the writings of the philosophers Mozi, Xunzi, Zhuangzi and Han Feizi.

Though I taught for some years at Columbia, I preferred writing and translation as an occupation, and when funding at Columbia ran out I began casting around for other means of support. The foundations seemed to have lots of money for academic conferences of one kind or another, and I was in fact several times invited to attend conferences on the subject of translation. When I responded to one such invitation by stating that I could not attend the conference but was much interested in finding support for my translation work, however, the sponsors of the conference replied rather huffily that, though they were happy to support research on methods of translation, they had no funds for translation work itself. And the tone of their reply suggested that I had somehow overstepped the bounds of propriety by even inquiring about such a possibility.

How different was the atmosphere at the Research Centre for Translation of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where I was invited in 1990 to be a visiting translator! There translation was not only countenanced but actually encouraged. Provided with sumptuous housing on campus and an office at the Centre, I spent the first half of that year working on further translations from the *Shiji*, translating chapters pertaining to the state of Qin and the Qin dynasty to complement my previously published translations, which dealt with the Han period. While I was thus occupied, the staff of the Centre went over my earlier *Shiji* translations, converting the romanization from Wade-Giles to *pinyin* and in the process catching a number of small errors that could be thereby corrected. The three volumes, entitled *Records of the Grand Historian*, were published jointly by the Research Centre for Translation and Columbia University Press in 1993.



Burton Watson's translations of the *Shiji*.



Hikers Watson and Pollard roaming in Hong Kong's country parks.

Of those six months in Hong Kong I recall first of all the many friends I made among persons associated with the University, and the many fine Chinese meals we had together in Shatin, Tai Po or elsewhere. I remember how, when winter chill invaded my office, I would repair to the warmth of the main library to pore over back numbers of periodicals; how, listening to the warbling of the Chinese bulbuls, I strolled along the road to the University Station that parallels the railroad tracks, a pleasant walk at all times except when a freight train of pigs bound for the Hong Kong market had just passed by; how I could look out of my office window at the peak of Ma On Shan half hidden in mist. In sum, it was a most enjoyable period in my life—translating, you might say, at its very best. ☒

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