

INTERVIEW

AN INTERVIEW WITH OLDŘICH KRÁL

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Oldřich Král (13 September 1930 – 21 June 2018) was a famous sinologist, translator and literary theorist. Although he started studying sinology by coincidence, he became one of the most productive translators of Chinese literature, poetry, philosophy and art theory in the Czech Republic. This interview, which I conducted with him in 2014, was originally prepared for his *Festschrift* in China¹. After I asked Oldřich Král, who used to be my Ph. D. supervisor, for the interview, he agreed, but suggested to not just answering the prepared questions, since he more preferred a relaxed conversation, in turn making it more authentic. Although it was meant for a Chinese scholar journal, I noticed that the content is much more appealing to Western readers, especially for people living in the region of former Czechoslovakia as it concerns our recent history, and he references many features typical of our cultural background. It has been approved by him in the Chinese version; the English published here has been shortened. I slightly changed a few of my questions. During the translation of the interview I realized on several occasions that I would like to ask him far more than I did, although this is no longer possible.

D. Z.: *You have translated a substantial amount of Chinese texts classical as well as modern, from novels to poems, the books of ancient philosophy, even a text of art theory and an erotic novel. The scale of classical and modern literature is over an admirable range of themes, so what led you to decide which works you would like to translate?*

O. K.: Maybe my motivation was partially to try to understand Chinese literature, and there are historical reasons, too. At the beginning of my career I started to translate modern Chinese literature, like all the students, as it was

¹ *Acta Linguistica et Literaria Sinica Occidentalia, Huaxi Yuwen Xuekan, Sinological Monograph for Oldřich Král on the Occasion of his 85th Birthday*, Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 2015.

described in Jaroslav Průšek's study program, which was specialized on Chinese literature of the 20th century, meaning all students who wanted to study literature entered that program. I chose Ba Jin's *Family*, maybe it was a kind of prevision, because this novel is considered to be a modern version of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*². Ba Jin was strongly influenced by European literature, especially French literature. His novel was written in the style of western novels, and the main hero was a boy confronted with the situation of the changing modern world. That was the beginning, since those times I had already started to understand translation as a means of understanding something. I started to work on translating that novel, although it was not with the intention of being my graduate thesis.

This also allowed me to question the Chinese novel itself. After graduating I was admitted to the postgraduate program, Průšek started working at the Academy of Sciences, Institute of Oriental Studies, and I naturally followed him. In that time we discussed the topic of my thesis, it was a three-year study program, and at the end I was supposed to write a thesis. But in that time it was classical Chinese literature which started to attract me more and more. In Ba Jin's novel there were reflections of classical Chinese literature, but it was written in the language of a Western translation.

D. Z.: *Did you perceive modern Chinese language as a very young and not really mature language at that time? I spoke with other sinologists and some of them presented the idea that modern Chinese was not mature enough in that period.*

O. K.: Of course, there is nothing negative in that consideration, but in that period of time, in the 20s and 30s of the twentieth century, it was a young language, just in the womb (so to speak). As it was a language strongly inspired by European literature, what he wrote was not that of a traditional Chinese novel, which was rejected by them, but he was writing a genre he had learned from the novels of the 19th century, Chinese language nowadays is completely different. And as to the writer and his style of writing: for me, Ba Jin is like his penname, which came from the names of two anarchists, Mikhail Bakunin and Pyotr Kropotkin³: it is a word game, and it is a European game. I read his short

² Cao Xueqing 曹雪芹. *Dream of the Red Chamber* 红楼梦, also called The Story of the Stone, translated by O. Král, Prague: Odeon, 1986 – 1988 (three volumes).

³ Ba Jin (25 November 1904 – 17 October 2005) is a Chinese writer, translator, and political activist. His original name is Li Yaotan. His penname Ba Jin is coming from the Chinese transcription of two names in Chinese, Ba is the first syllable of Mikhail

stories about life in quartier Latin in Paris. He got a scholarship to study abroad, chose Paris and he was sent there, and that decided his later life. The ideals of social justice strongly influenced him; these two names were the names of two anarchists. He became inspired by many different points of view. But I personally was influenced by Russian formalism and Prague structuralism, and for someone like me it was not that interesting what it was about, but the way how it was created. I chose *The Unofficial History of the Scholars* deliberately just to see how it was done; this is something I enjoy in Chinese literature! Průšek appreciated this point of view, he was a historian, but he was close to the Prague school, too, so he was looking at my work with a kind of admiration. The result was my thesis on the creative literary process in a classical Chinese novel shown here, and during that work I dealt with the idea of translation. At that time, it was the only classical Chinese novel that had not been translated yet. However, my translation was not the first one published, the first one was published in Russia; mine came a little later, but we were working on it at the same time. It attracted me just because it had never been translated into a European language before, and I would have explained it by the fact that all other classical Chinese novels had a major story that may not have been so important; but the Europeans were always fascinated by the story – classic European novels are always built on strong stories. So the Europeans did a terrible thing to most of the classical Chinese novels, as they did not translate those stories, they adapted them. The first translation of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* had 50 chapters only, the original had 250. *The Unofficial History of the Scholars* could not be adapted; it did not have a main storyline. Other novels, somehow, were presented in Europe.

D. Z.: *How did you feel when you came from a European cultural and literary background to a completely different cultural environment? Did you have the feeling that you were lost, or the opposite, that you had found yourself? All Westerners novels were built on strong and impressive stories, and suddenly the Chinese novel came with a number of characters and multiple episodes? Did you feel confused?*

O. K.: It was just all those episodes that were appealing to me. As I was interested in searching for patterns, the rules, it just attracted me. An examination of the Chinese novel, not in its adapted form, but in the original form, can be beneficial for comparative science. And I originally wanted to

Bakunin 巴枯宁 (Bakuning), and Jin is the last syllable of the name Pyotr Kropotkin 克鲁泡特金 (Kelupaotejin).

study comparative literature and English. But at that time comparative literature was proclaimed as a cosmopolitan ideology, its Prague representative was Václav Černý, who became a politically undesirable person. As a result, after my application to university studies, I was told by the director of the English Institute that they would have admitted me as a student of English, but comparative literature could not be taken into consideration in that political situation. And it was a historical coincidence that the head of the English department was Zdeněk Vančura who had translated a Chinese novel from English. It was a translation of *Water Margin*⁴, translated into English by Pearl S. Buck, that famous Pearl S. Buck, who gained spotlight. Vančura with his team translated it into Czech language and Jaroslav Průšek helped them with corrections. They became friends. So then he looked at me, a young man who did not know what he would do in his life, he said one sentence to me, which changed my whole life: “If you really want to compare (to), you would need something that would be worth it.” And then he sent me to Průšek, to the department of East Asian Studies. And he accepted me.

D. Z.: *That was a really life changing sentence.*

O. K.: Yes, it was a kind of British humour, which changed my life. If you want to compare, you should have something to compare (to). And I was attracted to the novels.

D. Z.: *Most translators used to choose only a certain area of literature, but it seems that you were translating almost everything. Art, philosophy, literature, poetry... How did you start to translate philosophical works? Did you feel some connection between philosophical texts and classical Chinese literature?*

O. K.: Yes, I had a concept what is called now wholesome translation, which means translation which can maintain most of the original, and it expects something which is called the imprinted reader in literary hermeneutics today. And that means that I need not only to understand something from the literary background, but also to translate it in a way the reader would be familiar with and would be able to understand at that time, too. This was the reason I started to deal with the world of Chinese novels, in the beginning for myself but later for readers as well. I began to work on that problem while I translated *The*

⁴ *Water Margin* 水滸傳, Shuihu Zhuan, also translated as Outlaws of the Marsh, Tale of the Marshes, All Men Are Brothers, Men of the Marshes or The Marshes of Mount Liang, Chinese novel attributed to Shi Nai'an 施耐庵.

*Unofficial History of the Scholars*⁵. That led me to compile an anthology, which introduced to my readers with selected examples the whole intellectual and spiritual world upon which Chinese literature was built.

D. Z.: *That is how your well-known Book of Silence*⁶ *was born.*

O. K.: Yes, that was the *Book of Silence*, where I explained what was hidden in the story, so I had to deal with some poems, and also philosophical texts, because that spiritual world cannot exist without philosophy. And it is significant that there is a translation of the Lao Zi, which I had not wanted to translate as a whole originally, I wanted to select a few samples of it, but then it did not work. I just was not able to do it without the whole translation.

D. Z.: *It completely trapped you in!*

O. K.: Yes, that's exactly what I was doing, I was unable to resist, I was able to do it with Zhuangzi's philosophy, I meant to give a few samples only, but Laozi's Dao De Jing is something so complex, I had to translate it all, which actually was against my wishes. In fact, there was a need to introduce something concerning Chinese poetry, so I translated a descriptive poem about poetry, and I added the text about a painting, because if anyone in China starts to deal with Chinese poetry, that person usually gets inspired by poetry, which is closely connected with painting. It's unavoidable.

D. Z.: *You started with a modern novel, continued with classical novels and then you started to translate multiple genres.*

O. K.: Yes, because everything was strongly connected with the novel, it was the background of the classical novel. Then, after 1968, I had to leave the university; maybe all I had done beforehand around art helped me, as Rudolf Hájek, the founder of the collection of Oriental art in the National Gallery, noticed my situation and offered me to work there. So I spent about twenty years at Zbraslav castle, where I started to be more and more attracted to Chinese painting, and I started to translate more texts on paintings which had not yet been published. The second thing which happened to me there was that I went on to translate the Dream of the Red Chamber, which I had wanted to do before, but I hadn't had enough time to. So I spent 15 years translating that

⁵ Wu Jingzi 吴敬梓. *Unofficial History of the Scholars* [Rulin waishi 儒林外史], written 1750 during the Qing dynasty. Czech translation by O. Král. *Wu Jing-c': Literáti a mandarini. Neoficiální kronika konfucianů*, Prague: SNKLU, 1962.

⁶ *Book of Silence*, a compilation of texts of Ancient Chinese literature, philosophy and art theory, first time published due censorship under the name *Tao – texty staré Číny* [Dao – Texts of Ancient China]. Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1971.

book; since I lived in the suburbs outside of Prague, I had a lot of time... I have to admit that it fulfilled me; I was totally immersed in that in the 70s – 80s. Translating the *Dream of the Red Chamber* was called by my wife “living with the novel”. I had my notes everywhere, my wife was an excellent editor, and she was reading it after me, correcting it... Actually, I did not know that in that time David Hawkes had started to do a translation of the novel as well, and he had to leave university to be able to work on it.

D. Z.: *He needed that immersion too, I guess.*

O. K.: Yes, I was forced to leave, but he left the school, he only dedicated a few hours per week, but the novel absorbed all of his attention. The same happened to me, then the situation in the 80s started to be better, Odeon somehow managed successfully, that it could be published, the first volume was published in 1986, the last of the trilogy came out in 1988.

D. Z.: *After that, you even won a prize for the translation.*

O. K.: Yeah, that happened at the conclusion, Odeon gave the novel a prestigious award. It was really kind of a beautiful ending.

D. Z.: *When you were working on it, you could not compare it with other translations, as they were not available here, and they were in the process of creation, too. After finishing, did you have any energy to read other translations and compare it with yours, in order to see the specifics of your work?*

O. K.: I did not compare it in this way. But I had access to the old German translation, better said adaptation, and the Russian translation, too. Before David Hawkes and I started to translate it, the Russian translation was the only one that was a full translation of the whole novel, but I did not like it. I heard that the Russians were considering translating it again; maybe they did not like it either. But I am not sure if that ever happened. And then, in the 80s, the Chinese translation to English was published in Beijing.

D. Z.: *Yes, it was Yang Xianyi's translation; it was published in Beijing in 1978.*

O. K.: After I saw, I do not remember exactly when, Hawkes's translation, I realized that the idea of a wholesome translation was possible, that the reader should not be underestimated.

D. Z.: *I personally enjoyed your translation; I felt the philosophical dimension of the novel very strongly there.*

O. K.: Thank you, maybe it was because I did a curve, as I had translated the *Book of Silence*, and other works before I started. When I did my doctoral studies, Průšek asked me to write about something else, while I wanted to

continue with *The Unofficial History of the Scholars*. Then I suggested that I could do research on *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*⁷, as I was interested in the literary aesthetics of it. This is the most systematic theoretical work, the Chinese are usually not very systematic, their studies on poetry are more similar to essays, but this one is a bit different. I started to be interested in cultural semiotics, and the idea that culture is a structure of characters is close to *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, because it came from the same idea – it is about the characters.

D. Z.: *In my opinion, it is difficult to translate, because if the translator does not have something that the Chinese call wenxue xiuyang 文学修养⁸, it can sound pretty flat and mentoring, like “you should do this, not that”, but you were able to avoid that. In your translation it was exactly how it was supposed to be.*

O. K.: As the Europeans were searching for the story, then they told it again, and in that process they changed the structure of sentences. The Chinese have a completely different form of expression, it is the structure of parallel prose, and if you destroy that structure, sometimes it does not make sense. Because it is a thought parallel too, so without that parallel it would become meaningless. That was the reason why I kept the character of free verses, because European prose cannot express it so clearly. I wrote a study on the terminology, in which I systematically discussed all the terminology of the book. My translation could not be published at that time, as you know, because of the political situation. It waited for about twenty years, and then my students published it in 2000. That was the translation which was read by Průšek.

D. Z.: *So your translation of The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons was waiting in the drawer for twenty years.*

O. K.: Not really, it was published as a small “samizdat”⁹.

D. Z.: *So did you publish it illegally?*

O. K.: No, that would not be an exact definition; it was published in a few copies, about ten, all my friends knew about it. We planned to publish it later, as

⁷ Liu Xie 劉勰. *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* [文心雕龍 Wen Xin Diao Long], translated by O. Král and published as Liou Sie, *Duch básnictví řezaný do draků. Teoretická báseň v próze*, Praha: Brody, 2000.

⁸ It can be translated as: his level of cultivate literary language is not high enough. (D. Z.)

⁹ It was a form of a dissident activity across the Eastern bloc in which individuals reproduced censored and underground publications by hand and passed the documents from a reader to a reader.

an appendix to my thesis. Odeon publishing house was considering translating *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Průšek was the head of the publishing house, so we agreed, and then I translated two chapters, and Průšek read them very carefully and very critically. Interestingly, he asked me to submit it as a project, as in his opinion it would be a good idea to translate it as a team, and he was right at that time, that I would have no time to do it alone. Průšek had always had a very high opinion of collective work, which I disagreed with, but we could come to a compromise on this one. Of course, we both had no idea how suddenly the situation could change.

And really, all the other things I did, the variability of my translations, were connected to each other. I translated Hui Neng¹⁰, and without that, the *Dream of the Red Chamber* would not have been able to succeed.

D. Z.: *Truly, this is what I felt from your translation of the Dream of the Red Chamber. Taoism and Buddhism resonate there. It is very philosophical.*

O. K.: Yes, it contained all of my experiences. It really is inside the book, when they were speaking on Baoyu's grandmother, that they all used words from the *Heart Sutra*¹¹. You cannot translate it without realising it, without knowing that Sutra. It is the same in the *A Supplement to the Journey to the West*¹². Other translators did not know how to translate it, so they all conveniently skipped it.

D. Z.: *I would like to ask you, as you originally wanted to study something else, Chinese just happened to you, then you started to devote yourself to Chinese literature. Did you ever feel that it has changed you a bit? Have you ever felt that your way of thinking, your perception, is no longer European; that you have become someone completely different?*

O. K.: True. It has changed my life; of course it changed me too. I knew different people, but in reality I am still doing what I have always wanted, and that is literature.

¹⁰ *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* [六祖壇經 Liuzu Tanjing], attributed to the sixth Chan patriarch Huineng 惠能, was composed in China during the 8th to 13th century.

¹¹ *Heart Sūtra* [Sanskrit Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya, Chinese 心經 Xīnjīng] is a popular sutra in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

¹² Dong Yue 董說. *A Supplement to the Journey to the West* [西游补 Xiyou pu]. Chinese Fantasy novel, 1640, translated by O. Král as Dong Yue [Všuvka do Putování na západ: román na přidanou], Lásenice: Maxima, 2009.

D. Z.: *So you are doing more or less what you always wanted, only in a slightly different way?*

O. K.: Later I realized that if you experience something totally different from your life so far, then you perceive your own experience in another light. You no longer take anything as something obvious. You start to feel like something you know might be very different. And that's what it is.

D. Z.: *I was asked you that question because I realized that China had changed me. When people ask me now, what I think about China, as a European, I am not sure anymore, if I am still that European, I feel that my opinion is no longer the opinion of someone who comes from Europe. It is the view of someone living in between two different cultures.*

O. K.: This is that confrontation. After all, I realised that I have led my dialogue not so much with sinology but more with literature. My friends were, for example, Červenka, people from the department of Russian culture; I was living in circles where I felt they had something to offer me, to give me another point of view.

D. Z.: *That means you never considered yourself as a sinologist, but as someone devoting himself to comparative literature.*

O. K.: Yes, more like a literary comparatist. I fulfilled my idea. Even, paradoxically, that I was not able to study comparative literature years ago, in 1949, it was me who helped to re-open the department of Comparatist studies at the Philosophical faculty of Charles University in Prague. I believe that Czech Comparatist studies need to be more in contact with non-European comparatist studies.

D. Z.: *I remember you in that time, being the head of the department of Eastern Asian Studies in the 90s, where you promoted the idea of having more connections with other fields, to open and connect to other departments, for example to literature from everywhere in the world.*

O. K.: Yes, as there is no field called Oriental studies in a number of countries anymore, nowadays it should not be people called sinologists devoted to Chinese literature, but literary scientists specialised in Chinese literature, and that is the same with comparative studies. So I strongly supported methodological interconnection, linking questions, so we have doctoral studies of literature focusing on the languages of Asia and Africa, as well as the linguistics of the languages of Asia and Africa.

D. Z.: Yes, and during my doctoral studies you urged me to have an attestation to theory of Fine arts, which was extremely important for my later research. If I had not studied fine arts, I would not have been able to comprehend it in such a complex way.

O. K.: Of course, I still respect Průšek a lot, he was writing texts about novels and linguistics, but his situation was completely different. And you just reminded me, he also wrote a catalogue of an art exhibition...

D. Z.: You wrote something like this, too. It was a catalogue to the exhibition of calligraphy, a tiny book. I would like to ask you about your translation of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*¹³. How did you get to translate erotic literature? I am not really sure what the Chinese opinion of this book is: on one hand it is erotic literature, on the other hand it is a part of the Chinese classics.

O. K.: As my work with the university is sufficient enough (without being overwhelming), I have time to translate, I am doing what I wanted as a young daring boy, when I wrote to Odeon after publishing *The Unofficial History of the Scholars* that I would like to translate *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. I felt that it was a kind of a trilogy.

D. Z.: So you have the feeling that these three novels are somehow connected to each other?

O. K.: Yes, all of them describe Chinese society, each from a different point of view. It is like an irregular triangle. Even Cao Xueqing had read *The Plum in the Golden Vase* in that period of time. These two great novels are all concerning everyday life in the house.

D. Z.: Yes, actually, they are all describing how life was in a big Chinese house.

O. K.: There are two metaphors of the universe. And me as a daring young man wanted to translate these two masterpieces.

D. Z.: And you succeeded.

O. K.: I had some problems with the translation. And I had a feeling that I needed to find the right language for translating *The Plum in the Golden Vase* and I was missing that kind of language. This was the reason why I translated

¹³ *The Plum in the Golden Vase* or *The Golden Lotus* [金瓶梅 *Jin Ping Mei*]. Chinese novel composed in China during the late Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644). The author used the pseudonym Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng [蘭陵笑笑生 *The Scoffing Scholar of Lanling*]. Translated by O. Král as *Jin Ping Mei aneb Slivoň ve zlaté váze*. Lásenice: Maxima, 2012 – 2017, the translation is unfinished.

the erotic novel *The Carnal Prayer Mat*¹⁴, because the volume of that novel is still short enough to find the right language, if I had started with *The Plum in the Golden Vase* I could have gotten lost easily. It became a platform where I tried new language, including punctuation, which is different too. That was one of my translator's interlineation; the second one was *Journey to the West*, which I translated mostly for sentimental reasons. I purchased it during my stay in China; it was the period of the *One Hundred Flowers* movement, when it was to possible publish the books which could not have been published before. So I bought *Journey to the West*. As to *The Carnal Prayer Mat*, this is another story, on end sent it to me from Macao after he got married as sarcastic greetings from Eastern Asia sometimes in the 60s – 70s, I read it and let it be. I used these short novels to train my language, to change it from the *Dream of the Red Chamber* to *The Plum in the Golden Vase*. I have the impression that our Chinese literature is not complete without having a wholesome translation of *The Plum in the Golden Vase*.

D. Z.: *That is right, if someone translates a novel, it means creating it again in a different language. And that language of translation should be found by the translator. If you are translating something from the 17th century you cannot use the language of that period, you need to conduct research for the right language carefully, to let your reader realise that it is an old book, but the language of translation cannot be too archaic.*

O. K.: Exactly, that is a metaphor of ancient language which should be used, you cannot translate *Dream of the Red Chamber* and pretend that you have never read Joyce. This will give you energy, the courage to be unrestrained, to avoid archaisms you can involuntarily absorb from the language of the original.

D. Z.: *I would like to ask, you spent a part of your life in seclusion. Since you are close to the ideal of the "hidden sage"*¹⁵, *have you ever felt secluded, have you ever thought of yourself in these categories coming from Chinese Taoism?*

O. K.: Maybe the fact that I knew the Taoist ideal, different possibilities of living were helpful for me in those times. I liked it, it inspired me, and it helped me to understand something.

¹⁴ *The Carnal Prayer Mat* [肉蒲团 Rouputuan] is a 17th-century Chinese erotic novel published under a pseudonym but usually attributed to Li Yu (李渔, 1611 – 1680). It was written in 1657 and published in 1693 during the Qing dynasty.

¹⁵ It is a Taoist, and Buddhist, ideal of living apart from the society, *chushi* 出世, which means exactly "leaving the world" as opposite to *rushi* 入世 "entering the world" which is parallel to Confucianist life in the society.

D. Z.: *Did you find yourself in that philosophy?*

O. K.: Taoists, the *Book of Silence*, were not only Taoist monks; they were inspired by that lifestyle as well. It was possible to accept it as an alternative. This was not purely an ascetic way of life.

D. Z.: *I never considered it in the way of ascetics, I meant it as it was an alternative way of life, being in seclusion far from the centre, far from the dusty world, that used to be very often the case of Chinese scholars.*

O. K.: Yes, it became familiar to me, thanks to the coincidence, thanks to the association with Hájek and the association with the castle; we actually enjoyed a happy life there.

D. Z.: *Happy life in the peace of the Taoist garden.*

O. K.: Yes, and we were not really isolated from the world, we were not lonely there, painters were coming, we made seminars, we played there... It's about accepting what comes in your life and making the most of it.

D. Z.: *Thank you.*