

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*  
A Citation



**Professor Ji Xianlin, PhD**

As one enters the campus of Peking University, through the green pasture and round the pond with lotus in full blossom, Lang Run House comes into view, surrounded by willows and shrouded in tranquility. Its nonagenarian resident is the eminent Professor Ji Xianlin, who despite his advanced years has to this day persisted in research and writing, committed as ever to enlightening the many generations to come.

Professor Ji is China's foremost linguist, orientalist, master of literature and translation. His scholarship stretches from antiquity to the present, spanning East and West. He reads English, German, Sanskrit, Pali and Tocharian, and is well versed in Indian culture, the history of Buddhism, Dunhuang studies, aesthetics, literary theories, comparative literature and studies of cultural interflows. His research in these fields has been extensive and his contributions enormous.

Professor Ji was born in 1911 in Qing Ping County, Shandong. At the age of six, he was sent to study in the provincial capital Jinan. In 1926, he was admitted to the senior middle school affiliated to Shandong University and began to learn English and German, in addition to Chinese classical literature. This laid the foundation for his proficiency not only in Chinese but also in diverse foreign languages. In 1929, he transferred to Jinan Provincial College and there, under the tutelage of the two outstanding scholars Hu Yepin and Dong Qiufang, he developed an enduring interest in literature and sealed his destiny as a writer. In 1930, the young Ji enrolled in Tsinghua University to major in western literature, specializing in German. During that period, he took many electives; in particular, he was most impressed and influenced by two courses: "The Psychology of Literature" taught by Zhu Guangxin and "Translation of Buddhist Literature" taught by Chen Yinke. Professor Ji's later pursuits in comparative literature and literary theories, and his dedicated research in the history of Buddhism, Sanskrit as well as other ancient languages of Central Asia owe much to the influence of these two mentors.

In 1935, Mr Ji left China for Germany, to study at Göttingen University, taking up a major in Indian literature, with English linguistics and Slavic linguistics as minors. He also took up Sanskrit, Pali, Russian, Yugoslavic and Arabic. He studied under the eminent Professors Waldschmidt and Sieg. But with the Second World War came the Allied blockade. Destitute and faced with a bleak future, Mr Ji never gave up his studies. His hard work paid off with a doctorate in philosophy in 1941. His thesis, entitled "Die Konjugation definiten Verbums in den Gat has des Mahavastu", was his first publication on primeval Indian languages and its impact on researchers in that field was to last over 50 years.

Because of the war, Mr Ji was forced to stay in Germany for some ten years; he did not return to China until the spring of 1946. In autumn the same year, he accepted an appointment at Peking University, and was recommended by the then President Hu Shizhi and former Acting President Fu Sinian to head the newly founded Department of Oriental Languages. He was also strongly



supported by the then Dean of Arts Tang Yongtong. Since that day, Professor Ji has remained an active member of Peking University. Through these years, the Professor lived the hard life of a pioneer, blazing the trail of Oriental language studies in China.

The Cultural Revolution brought great agony, yet Professor Ji's determination in educating the younger generation and pursuing language research never wavered. His perseverance and unrelenting effort have won him world-wide recognition as the most distinguished scholar in the practical learning of Oriental languages. The extent of his research is rare by any standard. Only a brief summary of his major achievements can be given.

Professor Ji Xianlin is first and foremost one of the world's leading experts in Tocharian. He was personally taught by Professor Sieg, one of the few authorities on fragments of Tocharian. The discovery and deciphering of Tocharian literature was an important milestone in twentieth century academia. Professor Ji could rightly be called "the protege of the first generation of Tocharian interpreters". His research on Tocharian can be divided into three phases. The first phase dates back to 1943, when Ji Xianlin, upon the recommendation of Professor Sieg, published an important paper in the *Journal of Oriental Studies Society in Germany*, raising many eyebrows in the international academic community. The second phase covers the period from 1946 (when Professor Ji returned to China from Germany) to 1978. During that period, Professor Ji only had access to scarce research resources and worked under circumstances that could only be described as extremely difficult for intellectuals; yet he managed to publish a myriad of papers, many on Tocharian. Among these was the article entitled *Fu Tu yu Fo* (《浮屠與佛》). "Fu Tu" and "Fo" are both Chinese translations of "Buddha" from Sanskrit. This article was actually inspired by the debate between the two scholars Hu Shizhi and Chen Yuan as to which of the two terms first appeared in Chinese writing. Fluent in Tocharian, Professor Ji was able to present fresh views on the subject. Subsequently, in 1989, after verifying these views using newly discovered documents, Professor Ji published *Zai tan Fu Tu yu Fo* (《再談“浮屠”與“佛”》), which came to be widely read. The third phase of Professor Ji's research on Tocharian began in the early 1980s. One day, the chief curator of Xinjiang Museum, Mr Li Yuchun, brought to Professor Ji 44 sheets of fragmented scrolls of *Maitreya-Samiti Nakata*, unearthed in 1975 in Yinqi, Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Mr Li implored Professor Ji to decipher the ancient writing. Though already in his eighties, Professor Ji did not hesitate. The end result was two voluminous works: *Introduction to Research on Tocharian*, published in Taiwan in 1993; and *Fragments of the Tocharian A Maitreya-Samiti Nakata of the Xinjiang Museum, China*, published in Germany in 1998. The latter is an unprecedented English translation of the original fragment, which took almost twenty years of painstaking research and compilation. The contribution of this work to the international research effort on Indian-European languages and the study of Tocharian is immeasurable. (The Chinese introduction of this publication is included in *Ji Xianlin wen ji* (《季羨林文集》)).

Professor Ji also has a deep interest in cultural interflows. By coincidence, he came to possess a fragment from Dunhuang depicting how sugar-making was first introduced from India into China. This prompted him to pursue the origin of sugar, its dissemination and the method of production. He subsequently wrote several papers on the subject, expounding the history of



cultural interchange between China and India over the past millennium. These papers formed an integral part of *Tang shi* (《糖史》). For two years from 1993 to 1994 during the compilation of this huge book, Professor Ji, already well into his eighties, would every day trudge from home to the Peking University Library in search of information. Come rain or wind, come heat or cold, he was always there, buried in books, ploughing through the endless pages of *Si Ku Quan Shu* (《四庫全書》) (Complete Collection of Chinese Books compiled by the imperial government of the Qing Dynasty). Every small discovery would bring immense joy, making all the toil and sweat worthwhile. The passion for exhaustive research and the great perseverance produced a work of 8 million characters, a true milestone in the history of Sino-foreign cultural exchanges. Professor Ji also undertook to proofread and annotate *Da Tang Xi Yu ji* (《大唐西域記》), which has had an enduring influence on Buddhist literature in East Asia. This is yet another significant contribution to the scholarship on China's cultural exchange with its neighbours.

As a serious student of Indian culture, Professor Ji is of course well read in Indian literature. Over half a century, he has translated a large number of literary works into Chinese. Apart from a few selected German works, such as *The Buddenbrooks* by Thomas Mann, Professor Ji's main interest has always been in Indian classics. Among his translated works in this arena are *Pancatantra*, *Vikramorvasiya*, *Ramayana* and *Abhijnansakuntala*. *Abhijnansakuntala*, together with *Mahabharata*, are regarded as the two greatest epics of India. The two classics were subsequently circulated to the West, bringing enormous impact on Europe's Enlightenment and Romantic movements. Professor Ji first embarked on the translation of *Abhijnansakuntala* when the Cultural Revolution was drawing to an end. In those very challenging times, the Professor spent hour after hour pondering the meaning of each and every line, each and every word. In ten years, from 1973 to 1983, he succeeded in completing the translation of a total of the 20,000 hymns which make up the original manuscript. The Chinese translation runs to 8 monumental volumes. Through the years, Professor Ji has translated a total of some 4.5 million words of Indian literary works. His dedication, meticulousness and painstaking effort is a living role model for translation professionals all over the world.

Professor Ji is a master in translation, and equally an earnest creative writer. His writing is always rich in ideas, presented in a most concise and yet all-embracing style. His prose writings invariably tell stories of the author's own life that often turn out to be reflections of the larger society. His reminiscence of by-gone days spent with precious mentors and friends are especially vivid and touching. He has published dozens of prose collections, among which the most popular are *Wo he shu* (《我和書》), *Lang run suo yan* (《朗潤瑣言》), *Chun gui yan yuan* (《春歸燕園》), *Ji Xianlin ren sheng man bi* (《季羨林人生漫筆》), *Qing tang he yun* (《清塘荷韻》), *Dong xi man bu* (《東西漫步》), *Liu De shi nian* (《留德十年》), *Xue hai fan cha* (《學海泛槎》), *Qian xi wen cun* (《千禧文存》), *Ji Xianlin zi xuan ji* (《季羨林自選集》) and *Niu Peng za yi* (《牛棚雜憶》). The last is an account of life during the Cultural Revolution, when he was sent away to work on labour farms. In this narration, he remained true to history, his sole intention being to help future generations to understand what actually happened during those tumultuous days. He carefully refrained from exaggerations and distortions, and foreswore pretensions. Such a pragmatic attitude may well be



rooted in his training as a conscientious researcher.

Though in his tenth decade, retirement is never on his mind. To this day, he still gets up every morning at four and spends long hours at the desk, reading and collating information. At present, he is compiling *Zhongguo Fo jiao shi* (《中國佛教史》), an opus of 14 volumes scheduled to be completed next year. In addition, he is supervising a group of students in the translation of *Mahabharata*, another Indian epic, whilst working on an addendum for *Tang shi*. Professor Ji also chairs the editorial committee for three national academic projects: *Dong fang wen hua ji cheng* (《東方文化集成》), *Si Ku quan shu cun mu cong shu* (《四庫全書存目叢書》) and *Zhuan shi cang shu* (《傳世藏書》). These publications on an unprecedented scale will bear testimony to the history of Chinese culture.

An advocate of pluralism, Professor Ji believes that every ethnic group, large or small, has made a unique contribution to the culture of mankind. He believes that ethnic groups are interdependent and must strive to live in harmony and peace. He also believes that the future of the 21st century lies with eastern culture, and promotes the concept of “Unity between Nature and Man”, in contrast to western philosophies that place man in opposition to Nature. To live a meaningful life, one must contribute to the community, and must always remain true to oneself.

Over the years, Professor Ji Xianlin has assumed a myriad of public posts; he has been the President of the Foreign Languages Research Society, a Vice Chairman of the China Society of Foreign Literatures, the President of the Association of Dunhuang and Turfan Studies of China, the President of the China Linguistics Association, an Executive Committee Member of Chinese Society of History Studies, an Executive Committee Member of the China Writers’ Association, a Member of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, a Member of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China and a Vice President of Peking University. Professor Ji has received a host of international honours. In 1952, he received an Honorary Medal from the Sanskrit University of India and was later elected as an Honorary Academician by the National Academy of Arts of India. These are the two most prestigious commendations. In 1998, Professor Ji was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University of Teheran.

Mr Chairman, Professor Ji Xianlin is a life-long scholar. For his prolific writings, for his immense contributions to international cultural exchange, for his tenacity in the face of adversity and upheavals, for his capacity for tolerance and his moral fortitude – Mr Chairman, I present Professor Ji Xianlin for the award of the degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.