

## Remembering Burton Watson

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I first knew Burton Watson in 1965–66, as an M.A. student at Stanford when he was a visiting professor. He taught a Chinese poetry course which started with the “Nineteen Old Poems” of the Han. Another graduate student and I, unbidden, would bring available translations to class and read them aloud at the end of the discussion of each poem. We students would pounce on errors in translation. Watson’s approach was different. He listened intently to the rhythms and turns of phrase that a Kenneth Rexroth or Witter Bynner might use rather than gloat on their mistakes. For him, infelicity of expression was a far greater sin than inaccuracy in translation. Gradually it dawned on me, having a good understanding of a poem is quite a different kettle of fish from re-creating it in another language. Watson took for granted that specialists, including graduate students, understood the texts being studied. That wasn’t the problem, he said: “Lots know Chinese or Japanese well; few know English.”

Once we suggested that the class meet at an inn in the countryside a few miles from Palo Alto. It had a patio, a large tree, and a surprisingly green (for California) rolling lawn that dipped into a hollow. The class (what? maybe six of us) sat on chairs under the tree and discussed the day’s readings. A cat jumped on Watson’s lap, making itself at home. Now, I have seen dozens of people interact with cats, but never someone with such naturalness, such utter quiet; he was at one with the animal.

Watson was the kind of person students felt comfortable inviting to student gatherings. A group came to my place once, where the conversation was relaxed. A few days later, something from the evening came up and he made a comment that struck me by its perceptiveness. I couldn’t help asking myself: “How had I missed that? I’d been there, too, and heard the exact same words. He had no special entrée.” Then it occurred to me. He was a better listener. He was attuned not only to the words, but also especially to tone and gesture; he was more interested in absorbing – while participating and enjoying – than in impressing.

As a New Yorker in Palo Alto, Watson got around on a bicycle or walked. Going home from a gathering one night, he was stopped by the police. Clearly, no one should be on the streets of Palo Alto at such an hour.

His colleagues at Stanford – the McCulloughs, Ed Seidensticker, Bob Brower, and the department chair Pat Hanan – all wanted him to stay. But he was a New Yorker, one who lived much in Kyoto and Tokyo. While in California, the temporary transplant found respite in San Francisco, where he spent weekends. The mecca was post-Beat, but still thriving, and a wonderful place to walk – also, it was more congenial to his elusive personal lifestyle.

Already when I first knew him, Watson had published much. I commented on the royalties he must be taking in. He patiently explained that the volumes for the “Translations of the Asian Classics” series by Columbia University Press were royalty-free; any profits were plowed back into the series. Of course, he did freelance work for pay. And he was to be reimbursed by Kodansha and the Soka Gakkai for translations. (But his name does not appear on Hisamatsu Sen’ichi, *Biographical Dictionary of Japanese Literature*, which, he later confirmed for me, he had translated.) He received a subvention for his Yoshikawa Kōjirō book-translation. But as a *deshi* of the great scholar, whenever English was needed at Kyōdai or the Jinbun in Kyoto, they sent him the material, often with a tight deadline: for example, for English-language summaries of *Chūgoku bungaku hō* articles.

That Watson was so prolific aroused the suspicion, and envy, of colleagues. To translate huge chunks of the *Shiji* with little or no annotation was unheard of at the time. It was supposed to take decades. Immediately, errors were found. (Surprise! In more than one thousand pages of text there actually were errors.) They would be pointed out, with glee or contempt. And if any alternative rendering was offered (most criticized, but did not expose themselves by offering an alternative rendering), more often than not it galumphed along as prose. I personally heard Achilles Fang exclaim, “There should be an Act of Congress to stop Burton Watson.” Fang was a great scholar; but unfortunately, he published little.

The rap on Watson was that he used Japanese renditions of difficult Chinese texts as a crib, translating from them. This overlooked several things. For one, the Japanese (as I was to learn myself over the years) is often harder to understand than the Chinese. Second, Japanese scholars usually do their homework well, citing and drawing upon vast amounts of earlier scholarship in Chinese and Japanese that other scholars (not infrequently, the very Chinese or Westerners who criticize them) have not taken into account. Third,

Watson engaged with Chinese scholarship, but his use of Japanese provided a convenient stick to beat him with. Worse, it pointed up the weakness (and incompetence) of those unable and unwilling to learn from it themselves. Fourth and most revealing, most of Watson's critics were deaf and blind to the aptness of the English of his renderings. In my experience, the patronizing attitude and backhanded compliments towards him (that one still occasionally encounters, but less frequently than thirty years ago) invariably tell more about those making them than the supposed subject of attention.

One disadvantage of Watson's skill at writing so well is that his own essays read so smoothly, so naturally, that it is easy to miss how much is being communicated. I came to realize this when assigning students his introductions to texts and his *Chinese Lyricism* book. Students would sail right through. But they had to be quizzed (and encouraged to reread the material) to realize just how much was embedded there.

Watson avoided conferences. The annual meeting of the American Oriental Society, Western Branch – a small group – was held in Palo Alto the year we were there, but he did not attend. I can only guess why: scholars' masks, the tone of some exchanges, the careerism of many, the phony bonhomie of a few.

I visited and stayed briefly at the house Burt rented in Kyoto and the apartment he had in Wakayama for a year. His routine was to work a few hours every day, take walks, and go to a bar at night. Going with him two or three times, I noted he was treated as a regular. His natural disposition to meld into his surroundings worked to his advantage. He was the opposite of the *gaijin* showing off his/her Japanese. My memorable first ride on a Kyoto streetcar was heading back from a bar with him.

Watson helped those who sent him material by reading it and sending along comments. He was surprised to find that, after writing and sending along several pages, some never wrote back even to say thank you. With a translation of mine, he cautioned me not to stay too wedded to the original; and one locution I used, he said, made him "cringe." His comments were invariably helpful, but too pointed for the faint-hearted.

When I last saw Burt in 2009, we met for coffee near the Akamon (Red Gate) in front of Tōdai. First thing he said, he wanted "to hear all the gossip." I told him I'm poorly connected for that; but we knew enough people in common to make it interesting. As always, he was busy with a book project. By that time, with considerable reluctance he had gotten a computer; there was no place to get his typewriter fixed. He suggested meeting again, so we did, and that too was pleasant. I asked him about Jacques Barzun at Colum-

bia (then already more than a hundred years old), since I was reading his huge history of Western civilization; he told me the good experience he had had with Barzun as one of the members of his doctoral committee. The few asides he made about other people at Columbia were also interesting and revealing.

Years earlier I had wanted to recommend Burt for an honorary doctorate at my university: a way to honor him and to give our East Asia program some publicity. He would have none of it! But in 2006 I dedicated a book to him. He told me it was the first, but he didn't recall that Bill Nienhauser had dedicated one to him in 2002. In any case, I had the publisher airmail a copy to him. I didn't want him, already eighty, to die on me without ever having known about or seen it. It is good to see he was to live another eleven years.



Burton Watson, Tokyo, 2000, at lunch with Tim Wixted (the photographer), Ana Vincenti Wixted, and Rosa Wunner