

BARNABÁS CSONGOR IS EIGHTY YEARS OLD

Teacher of many Hungarian students of China and East Asian cultures, Barnabás Csongor was born into the family of a lawyer on September 20, two days before the autumnal equinox, in 1923, year of the Black Boar, in the city of Miskolc in north-eastern Hungary where he spent his childhood. In 1939 the family moved to Beregszász in Subcarpathia, then a part, again and for a short while, of the Hungarian Kingdom (now Berehovo in the Transcarpathian Ukraine), where the head of the family worked as judge. They lived there until 1941, and it was in that year when, and that city where, the future Orientalist was graduated from the local secondary or high school (*gimnázium*). In the same year the family left Subcarpathia for Budapest, and since then Barnabás Csongor has been living in the Hungarian capital.

At his father's request he enrolled in the Palatine Joseph Technological University of Budapest and studied two semesters in the academic year of 1941–1942 in the Department of Economics and Trade of the Faculty of Economics, but the beginning of the next academic year found him at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Péter Pázmány University of Budapest where he became a high school teacher student of Hungarian and Italian philology. Beside these normal school studies, his interest led him to the Chinese, Mongolian and Turkish courses taught by such professors as Louis Ligeti and Julius Németh. In 1947 he graduated as a high school teacher of Hungarian and Italian, but took his doctoral degree in Chinese and Altaic studies. During his university years he became a member of the Baron József Eötvös College, an elite school and fraternity of the university.

From 1948 he began to work at the Institute of East Asiatic Studies of his old *alma mater*, now renamed Loránd Eötvös University. First he served there as an assistant without payment, then in June 1950 he was appointed Assistant Professor. (From the autumn of 1948 till June of 1950 he also worked in the Ferenc Hopp Museum of East Asian Art, first as voluntary worker, later as assistant.) He was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor (or Reader, *docens*) in 1962 and served as chairman in the Department (then Chair, *tanszék*) of Chinese and East Asiatic Studies from 1963 to 1983. With Louis Ligeti he established a twofold (academic and popular) system of Hungarian transliteration of Chinese names and words. It was he who elaborated the

first full-range curriculum of Chinese studies, introduced a number of new courses, and together with his teacher, he taught several generations of excellent students, among them Ferenc Tőkei, Ildikó Ecsedy and Ferenc Mártonfi. He retired in 1990, but continues teaching, always ready to share his vast knowledge with students and colleagues.

His research in Sinology began with a work on Chinese phonetic history, the phonology of Middle Chinese as it is reflected in a particular group of sources, the Chinese elements in Ancient Turkic texts in Uigur script. Later he extended the scope of his sources to Chinese texts in Brāhmī and Tibetan script. He summed up his results in his dissertation “Chinese Texts and Glosses in Alien Scripts” written for the candidate of linguistic sciences degree (obtained in 1960). He published a number of important papers on Middle Chinese that are still quoted. As a visiting scholar invited by Mantaro Hashimoto he worked again on Chinese in Brāhmī script at Princeton between November 1971 and January 1973.

After having translated numerous fine works of Chinese literature into his native tongue of which he is a most skillful master, he started to deal with problems of Chinese literary tradition, investigating the birth, structure and social background of the great *baihua* narratives, first of all in the case of Shi Nai-an’s and Luo Guangzhong’s monumental novel, the *Shuihuzhuan*, that he made accessible for the Hungarian readers. Following his accurate and lucid translations in prose, celebrated Hungarian poets, among them the brilliant Sándor Weöres, put many gems of classical Chinese poetry written by Bai Ju-yi, Li Bai, Du Fu and others into mellifluous Hungarian verses. He also translated Wu Cheng-en’s *Xiyouji*, and revised his younger colleagues’ Hungarian translations of classical Chinese verse and prose and philosophical literature (for instance, Ferenc Tőkei’s three-volume edition of ancient Chinese philosophy) as well as their monographs (including “The Dragon’s Eye”, an essay on the history of Chinese painting by Pál Miklós). He published entries on Chinese language and culture in Hungarian encyclopaedias (for instance, in the eighteen volumes of the *Világirodalmi Lexikon* [Encyclopaedia of world literature]), articles in various newspapers and journals popularizing Chinese issues.

He visited China several times, spent several months in the Beijing Institute of Linguistics of the Chinese Academy of Sciences under Luo Changpei’s guidance (April–December 1957), in October 1967 he was the guest of the Second Institute of History of the Chinese Academy and studied the sources on Ruanruan or Rouran history; he had the three autumn months with the problems of the *Shuihu* and the classical novel at Beijing Daxue in 1984, then in the autumn of 1988 a three-week trip in the Beijing Institute of the Literatures of National Minorities of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

Member of the European Association of Chinese Studies, he took part in numerous international conferences. He is the vice-president of the Hungarian–Chinese Friendship Society, member and sometimes vice-president of the Csoma de Kőrös Society of Hungarian Orientalists. For many years he has been a member of the editorial board of our journal, in which we hope to greet him again as an author of wise writings. We hope to see him healthy and vigorous.

G. Kara