

# DANIEL KANE FAHA

## 1948-2021



The world has lost an exceptional scholar of China, a central figure in the foreign analysis of the Democracy Wall movement, which galvanized Beijing youth from 1978 to 1979, and the foremost western authority on Kitan, the language of the Liao Dynasty (907–1125).

Danny Kane, Lecturer and later Senior Lecturer in Chinese at Melbourne University between 1981 and 1997 and Professor of Chinese at Macquarie University from 1997 to 2012, was born 25 January 1948 and died on 16 April 2021 after several years' struggle with Parkinson's disease. He was an astonishing linguist, an accomplished diplomat, an inspiring teacher and one of the few

Australian academics who was recognised as the world expert in his field. Danny was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2012.

He was able to communicate with varying degrees of competence in twenty or thirty languages. His linguistic career began in unusual circumstances. Born into extreme poverty, the obligation to support his widowed mother meant that he had to leave school at 16 and take a job as a bank teller in Carlton, Victoria. He found that school Latin and French allowed him rapidly to learn other languages spoken in the community. A university customer at the bank, struck by his fluency in Italian and Greek, encouraged him to apply for entry to Melbourne University. There, he majored in Chinese and Russian, finishing with first class honours in 1971. He took a PhD scholarship at the Australian National University, where he presented his thesis in 1975 on the decipherment of Jurchen, the forerunner of Manchu and the language of the founders of the twelfth-century Chinese Jin Dynasty. He was one of a select few with any knowledge of it. He blitzed the language aptitude test at the Department of Foreign Affairs where candidates were asked to decode a 'mystery language'; the language was Kurdish, which Danny had already encountered.

He had a successful diplomatic career with two postings to Beijing. His first, from 1976 to 1980, defined him. Determined to truly master the job, he rose early and read every

Chinese newspaper so as to be word-perfect by the time the Ambassador arrived for the morning briefing. The death of Chairman Mao Zedong in September 1976, the purge and return to power of Deng Xiaoping that same year, and the economic reforms Deng initiated galvanised the country. By November 1978, 'big character posters' calling for political reform were being pasted up on the Democracy Wall in the Xidan district of Beijing. Danny went there every day to read them, to chat with the students writing them and gain their confidence. Word spread amongst the foreign correspondents that 'there's this Australian fellow who translates the posters on the spot.' This was important because, each day, new posters were pasted over the previous ones. Most of what is known outside China about the content of the Democracy Wall derives from Danny's daily visits over that period. As in many cases during his diplomatic career, his fluency in Chinese, his ability to bridge cultures and his effervescence gave him an astonishing level of access. People with whom he regularly chatted included the last Emperor's brother-in-law, the English interpreter to Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, and the leader of the Democracy Wall movement, Wei Jingsheng. He was famed for once eliciting loud guffaws from Mao Zedong's notoriously stony-faced niece Wang Hairong as he regaled her with Chinese jokes at a formal dinner.

Danny's ability to bridge cultures was central to his academic career. He joined Melbourne University's Department of Asian Languages as a Lecturer in Chinese in 1981, where he came to be greatly loved by those who studied there – people who have gone on to distinguished careers in academia, the public service and the business world. He served as Head of the Department of Asian Languages for some years after Professor Harry Simon retired in 1988 and subsequently led the Chinese section of the Department. Between

1995 and 1997, Danny worked in Beijing again, this time as Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy. He was then appointed Professor of Chinese at Macquarie University, in Sydney, a post from which he retired in 2012. There, he taught Chinese and supervised post graduate theses while pursuing his interest in the Jurchen language and later, the still undeciphered Kitan language, on which he became one of a handful of specialists worldwide. His fascination with obscure languages led him to cast the net widely. His work mediated between Chinese linguists who had deciphered some Kitan inscriptions, European historians who had little knowledge of Chinese historical linguistics, and Chinese historians, who had limited knowledge of the Ural-Altaic languages of China's border regions; he integrated these perspectives with research published in Japanese, Russian, German and other European languages. Danny's reputation resulted in invitations to lecture all over the world including at Leuven, Leiden, in the USA, and at many Chinese universities. His work, bringing together all that is known about the Kitan language and script, was published in 2009. This, and the lectures he gave at Yale University in 2016, remain the standard work on Kitan in any western language.

His highly discursive teaching methods, his depth of knowledge of Chinese civilisation and his sheer enthusiasm made him legendary amongst his students at Melbourne, Macquarie and several Chinese universities, where he was visiting professor. His lectures at Macquarie on China – '5,000 Years and All That' – were famous for meandering through Chinese literature, history, politics, philosophy, modern and historical linguistics, folklore, mythology, religion and household customs. His teaching was 'old-school', designed to stimulate, intrigue and enthuse, to impart the magic and the passion he felt himself. His knowledge of ancient Chinese

phonology was particularly handy on one occasion. A Chinese university asked him to give a lecture on the eighth century Tang poet Li Bo. Somewhat concerned about fronting an audience of Chinese literature students, Danny recited Li Bo's poems in the reconstructed pronunciation of the Tang period, to great acclaim.

In addition to scholarly work on Jurchen and Kitan, Danny also translated texts that intrigued him. These included selections from the *Notes on Travels around Europe*, written in exile by the late nineteenth century political reformer Kang Youwei (1858-1927), and a play, *The Impostor* (Jiaru Wo Shi Zhende – 'If I Were Real') by the modern playwright Sha Yexin (1939–2018). He updated Timothy Richard's classic translation of the sixteenth-century popular novel by Wu Cheng'en (circa 1500–1580), *Journey to the West* (Xiyou Ji), adding a new introduction. And he wrote a commentary on the revival of irrational beliefs amongst the modern Chinese elite in an article on qigong that was published in a collection of essays – *The Modernization of the Chinese Past*. The story of his book on Chinese for general readers, *The Chinese Language – Its History and Current Usage*, is pure Danny: Sometime in the 1990s, a Hungarian publisher came upon the introductory materials he used at Macquarie University and wrote asking if he could turn these into a short book to be included in their series on languages of the world. After its appearance in Hungarian, it was then translated into several other European languages, eventually appearing in its present form in English. Sadly, Danny never got to work on his grand retirement project, developing this lucid introduction into a comprehensive scholarly history of the Chinese language. While his health held up, he travelled – to Silk Road cities in the far west of China, to the pilgrimage trail in Spain, to the Vatican's spoken 'Latin Camp' in Rome, to France, where he found to his amusement

that he spoke 'fluent 1950s French.' 'Hardly surprising,' he said, 'I used to read Maigret novels by the dozen.'

Danny was committed to a vision of the university and of language study which was broadly classicist in spirit; he lamented developments in Australian schools and universities which he felt had undermined the humanistic study of languages and cultures, particularly classical ones. But he also loved languages as modern living things: 'Each time I go to China, I buy new dictionaries,' he said, 'It's changing all the time.' He was well-known in the worldwide Esperanto community and was thrilled to relate how he had discovered a radio station in Finland that broadcast the news in Latin. Russian was another favourite. For many years, he kept a Russian dictionary by his bedside so he could quickly check as soon as he woke up words he feared he had forgotten. He chafed against the commoditisation and bureaucratisation of university education in Australia, and how Chinese studies in particular had been dumbed down. When he retired, the paperwork for applying for Emeritus status annoyed him, so he never completed it. But he was never elitist. Affability, good humour and a passion for engaging with anyone interested in languages were his hallmarks. He viewed the more pompous and oppressive aspects of the Australian and Chinese political systems with a critical amusement that was never cynical. Danny was companionable in the true sense of the word – a rigorous, inspiring scholar and a good friend.

Danny's friends in the world of Chinese studies remember his exceptional personal and scholarly partnership with Ye Xiaoqing, a brilliant historian of early modern and modern China whom Danny met when she was doing her PhD at the ANU in the 1980s. They enjoyed great happiness as a couple, cut tragically short by Ye Xiaoqing's death from

cancer in 2010 when she was only 58. Those who believe in an afterlife will draw comfort from the thought that Danny and Xiaoqing are now reunited.

Scholars in Danny's specialist fields will feel the loss of someone who made distinguished contributions in exceptionally difficult areas of academic research, fields so demanding that it was often hard to find reviewers who possessed the requisite knowledge to evaluate his work. For those of us for whom Danny was a friend, we feel the loss of someone whose prodigious gifts in the study of language and culture were matched, and even surpassed, by a remarkable capacity for engaging with people, for weaving delightful stories and enjoying life. Fun-loving but never frivolous, he delighted in sharing his enthusiasms with others.

In 2018, already diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, Danny joined a private colloquium in New Zealand where retired scholars trained in 'old-school' Sinology sought to pass on their passion for rigorous investigation to a new generation. There, he once more charmed and enthused the young scholars he engaged with. His legacy thus continues in the students he inspired, in the wide circle of friends he entertained with his letters and stories, in the historical record of the Democracy Wall, and in the enduring contributions he made to research on the languages and cultures of China's periphery. Interviewed in 2019, he quoted with understated pride a comment from one of his peers: "Kane's book brings an end to one era of Kitan studies and starts a new one."

He is survived by his first wife Anna, daughter Zya/Julia, sons Christopher and Ian, and grandchildren Lily, Logan and Roxane.

**By Ted Rule, Christopher Nailer, Edwin Lowe, Annie Luman Ren, and current and former members of the Chinese Program at the University of Melbourne.**