

Concerning the common nature of all

A book saved from a library in Seoul during the Korean War has finally returned home, bringing with it a life and story of its own

By Alan Garner

In September 1955 I was a subaltern, aged 20, stationed in London, a fortnight from the end of National Service. A sergeant-major, going through to his next posting, came to me with a story.

He told me how, in the first days of January 1951, he and his men were trying to retreat from Seoul and were under attack by Chinese forces. They had taken cover in a library, without food or water. The temperature was 40 degrees, and the only fuel for a fire to keep them alive was the furniture; and the books.

A chance came to break out, and they made a dash for it. In the chaos of gunfire and darkness the sergeant-major thought he was not going to survive; but if he did, he wanted to have something to show for the experience. He snatched up a book as he ran.

He did survive. And he had the book. But, four years later, it was a memory he wanted to forget.

He handed me the book and I opened the cover. The title page read: *De Ratione communi linguarum & literaru commentarius Theodori Bibliandri* ("Theodore Buchmann's Commentary Concerning the Common Nature of All Languages and Letters"). It had been published in Zurich in 1548, and there was an inscription dated 1709 showing that it had once belonged to a Doctor Du Doüet. On the other side of the title page was a library stamp in Korean, which I could not decipher, and an accession number, 50690.

I said to the sergeant-major that he should have the book valued, because it could be worth a considerable sum of money, but he said he was not interested in the money. He wanted to be rid of the book, and if I would not take it he was going to throw it away. So I took it. He went. I did not know his name. I did not see him again.

Can we ever claim to possess cultural objects?

A month later, free of the army, I began my studies of Latin, Greek, philosophy and ancient history at Oxford.

I showed the book to my tutor. He was interested; and he told me that Theodore Buchmann was a Swiss scholar of linguistics who had edited the first printed translation of the Quran into Latin. He added that *De Ratione* must be a rare book and I should care for it. So I did.

The years passed. I became a writer. And one day in 1974 my editor visited me. With her was a Korean academic, then living in America. I showed him the book and asked how I could get it back to Seoul. He said that it would be safer with me, because he was not confident that Korea was stable enough to guarantee the book's survival. It had been lucky once, and he did not want it to be put at risk twice. He told me to hold on to it. So I did.

I am 85, and still writing. But though words may endure, flesh does not. I have to secure the future of a book that I caught in a moment, a moment when it could have been destroyed by the hand that had saved it. I sought advice from Rupert Powell, of Forum Auctions. He said that the book is indeed valuable, but 1974 is long in the past, and it should go home now.

It was as simple as that. A courier collected *De Ratione communi linguarum & literaru commentarius Theodori Bibliandri* from my remote house in a field in Cheshire, and 32 hours later it was in Seoul, in time to take its place, along with its story, in the National University Library's exhibition marking the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War.

Faith has been kept. Right has been done. I am content. But is this alone how we should see it? Can we ever claim to possess cultural objects? Or is it more that we are merely stewards passing through the lives and the stories of such things?

For example, what of Doctor Du Doüet in 1709? Who and where was he? How did *De Ratione* first come to Korea? Why did the sergeant-major pluck it in the dark? I have been its guardian for 65 years. What next?

While we admire and wonder, the book goes its way. ●
Alan Garner is the author of many books including the classic children's novels "The Weirdstone of Brisingamen" and "The Owl Service"