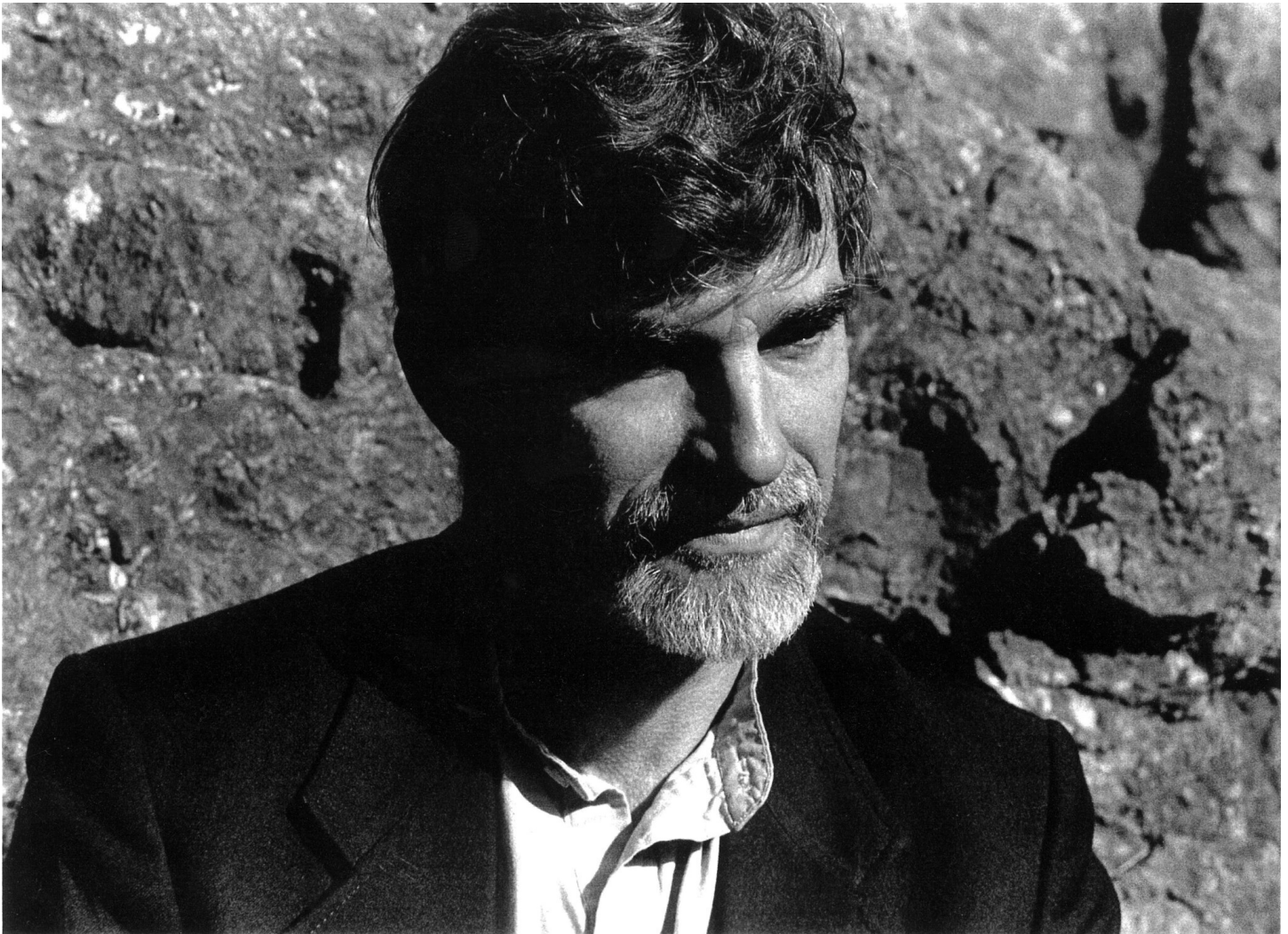


Thomas Cleary, Prolific Translator of Eastern Texts, Dies at 72

His renderings of classic works of Buddhism, Taoism and more brought them to a general Western readership.



The translator Thomas Cleary in an undated photo. He could, his longtime publisher said, render “multilayered concepts concisely but completely, in beautiful and clear prose and verse.” via Shambhala



By Neil Genzlinger

July 10, 2021

Thomas Cleary, who translated scores of Buddhist, Taoist, ancient Chinese and other texts into English, greatly broadening access to these works in the West, died on June 20 in Oakland, Calif. He was 72.

His brother J.C. Cleary, who is also a translator, said the cause was complications of heart and lung damage from previous illnesses.

Mr. Cleary, who lived in Oakland, published more than 80 works, which in turn have been translated into more than 20 other languages, his publisher, Shambhala Publications, said in a post on its website.

The breadth of his work, in terms of both linguistics and subject matter, was remarkable. He translated works from Arabic, Sanskrit, Japanese and a half-dozen other languages, and while his interest in ancient texts began with Buddhism, it grew to encompass Taoism, Islam, Greek writings, even Old Irish. He would invariably begin his books with detailed introductions that placed the text in historical context and explained unfamiliar concepts to Western readers.

“Translators who feel they are ensconced in a higher culture tend to look down on their sources,” Robert Thurman, a professor emeritus at Columbia University and an expert on Tibetan Buddhism, said by email. “Cleary looked up, with empathy and intelligence, and shared his joy in the process of opening our eyes to something new and previously unimagined.”

His skill went beyond merely rendering the words of one language in another.

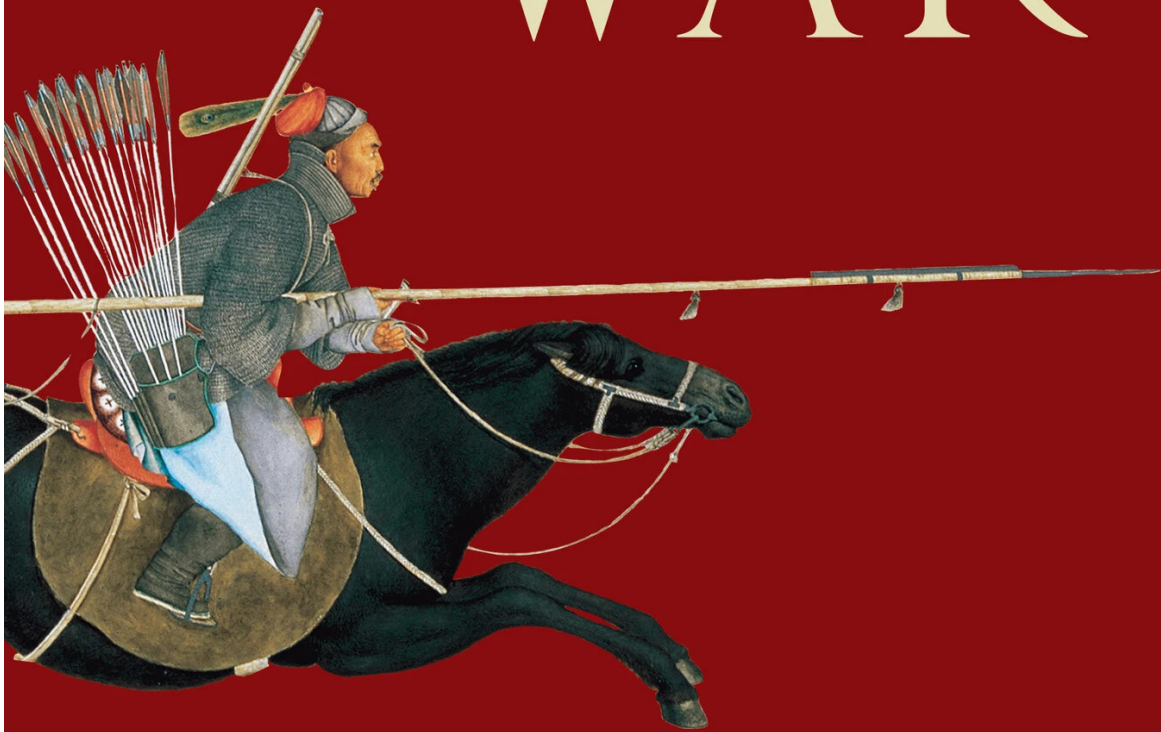
“There are two essential qualities of a great translator: a strong understanding of the source language and a fluidity of writing in the target language, which is equally — and arguably even more — important for readers,” Nikko Odiseos, president of Shambhala Publications, which issued more than 60 of Mr. Cleary’s works, said by email. “The languages and texts Cleary translated from are filled with terms and concepts for which there are simply no equivalents in English, and he was a master of presenting these multilayered concepts concisely but completely, in beautiful and clear prose and verse.”

His books included “The Inner Teachings of Taoism” (1986), “Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues” (1991), “The Essential Koran: The Heart of Islam” (1993) and “The Counsels of Cormac: The Ancient Irish Guide to Leadership” (2004). Among the most popular was his version of “The Art of War” (1988), written by the Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu more than 2,000 years ago.

“Absorb this book, and you can throw out all those contemporary books about management leadership.”—*Newsweek*

SUN TZU

The ART of
WAR



Translated by THOMAS CLEARY

Mr. Cleary's 1988 translation of "The Art of War," a book written more than 2,000 years ago, was among his most popular works.

Mr. Cleary, although well versed in many faiths and philosophies, did not profess allegiance to a particular one.

"I am not confined to any group," he said in a 2009 interview for the website Sonshi.com. "I want to stay independent and reach those who want to learn directly through my books."

Dr. Thurman said that Mr. Cleary's great contribution was "bringing insights and sensibilities achieved in Asia to luminous life in our culture, enriching our understanding and expanding our sensitivities."

Thomas Francis Cleary was born on April 24, 1949, in New Brunswick, N.J. His father, also named Thomas, and his mother, Shirley Jane (Klein) Cleary, were chemists.

He grew up in Summit, N.J., graduating from Summit High School in 1967. He received a bachelor's degree in East Asian languages, with a concentration in Japanese, at Harvard College in 1972, and then earned a Ph.D. in East Asian languages and civilizations in 1975 at Harvard University. Thirty years later he earned a law degree at the University of California, Berkeley.

The law degree, he said in the 2009 interview, grew out of his interest in exploring new solutions to systemic problems.

"The American system is in flux and needing new ideas," he said. "The current system is based on the power of precedent, so change is slow. By looking into other systems around the world we may be able to resolve issues, for example, in a more humanitarian way."

He became interested in Buddhism as a teenager and began translating when he was 18. J.C. Cleary, in an unpublished memoir about his brother, who was two years younger, said that their schooling had been heavy on science and math but that their discovering Buddhist writings had revealed a whole different reality.

"From our point of view at the time, our mental state as teenagers in the 1960s, I think we were drawn to Buddhism because it gave the first articulate statement of truth we ever encountered," he wrote. "Buddhist thought was just so *true*, so lucid, so all-encompassing, so refreshing, we had to stop and find out more."

His younger brother served as his mentor as they both improved their proficiency in various languages and grew more adept at translating.

“By 1975 we had crossed the language barrier to the Buddhist sources,” J.C. Cleary wrote. “Tom had done it on his own, and with his help and encouragement, I had done it too.

“We came face to face with the Buddhist classics. An indescribable feeling! There was a sense of peace, of being outside time, of entering a realm of beauty. A sense of wonderment at the brilliant intellectual creativity of whoever had originated this material.”

Thomas Cleary’s first book, a collaboration with his brother, was “The Blue Cliff Record” (1977), a collection of Zen koans (riddles or stories used to foster thought and meditation). Among his recent books were “Samurai Wisdom: Lessons From Japan’s Warrior Culture” (2009) and “The Secrets of Tantric Buddhism: Understanding the Ecstasy of Enlightenment” (2015).

The
BLUE
CLIFF
RECORD

碧巖叢書

Translated by THOMAS CLEARY & J. C. CLEARY

Foreword by TAIZAN MAEZUMI ROSHI

Mr. Cleary's first book, a collaboration with his brother that was published in 1977, was a collection of Zen koans.

In addition to his brother J.C., Mr. Cleary is survived by his wife, Kazuko Cleary, a pianist, and another brother, Brian.

In his introduction to "The Art of War," Mr. Cleary explained that works like the ones he translated required a different approach from the reader, one not expecting instant gratification.

"Classics may be interesting and even entertaining," he wrote, "but people always find they are not like books used for diversion, which give up all of their content at once; the classics seem to grow wiser as we grow wiser, more useful the more we use them." ■

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