

Fr. Albert Chan S.J. (1915 – 2005)

Fr. Albert Chan, Jesuit Scholar, eminent Ming historian, founder and curator of the 80,000 title Chinese collection of the Society of Jesus, died on March 10, 2005, at the Sacred Heart Jesuit Center in Los Gatos, California. He is buried in the Jesuit plot in Santa Clara Cemetery, in the company of many other China missionaries and scholars of the California Province of the Jesuit Order since 1849.

Born on January 25, 1915 in Pacasmayo, Peru of Chinese father and Peruvian mother, Fr. Chan received his elementary and secondary education near his native Panyu County in Guangzhou, where he graduated high school at the Sacred Heart School in 1932. He joined the Jesuit Order in 1934, after studying at the Wah Yan College in Hong Kong, and finished two years novitiate in Novaliches, Manila. From 1936-41 he studied philosophy at the Sacred Heart College in Manila, where he got his B.A. and M.A., returning to Hong Kong to teach at Wah Yan College during the Japanese occupation. He studied theology in Shanghai and Dublin after the war, and was ordained in July 1947. He spent the following year studying European history at Fordham, and Chinese History at Harvard from 1950-53, where he got his Ph.D., with Yang Liansheng directing his dissertation. Except for Harvard, all above-mentioned schools are Jesuit institutions.

Both before and after his ordination, Fr. Chan taught at the Wah Yan College, in both the Hong Kong (1942-45, 54-58) and Kowloon campuses (1958-60). During this period, both schools produced a cohort of students who later turned out to be Hong Kong's leading government officials (Donald Tsang), elected legislators (Martin Lee), business leaders (Gordon Wu), academics (Philip Huang), Nobel Prize nominee (Sunney Chan), musicologist (Bell Yung) and film director (Wayne Wang), although it is not clear whether Fr. Chan has taught any of these personally. In 1978-79, he also lectured at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Chu Hai College.

Devoting to full-time research since 1960, Fr. Chan's earlier publications focused on Ming secular history, on regional factional strife in the bureaucracy in the Tianxun and Chenhua reigns, his U. of Oklahoma book, *The Glory and Fall of the Ming Dynasty*, two separate studies of Beijing's socio-economic and bureaucratic history in late Ming, and four entries in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) on Chinese Literature, Chinese Missionary Art, and biographic sketches of Ma Liang and Wu Li.

His research focus was shifted to Chinese and European relations, and Jesuit missionaries in late Ming and early Qing, after spending seven years (1969-76) in archives and libraries in Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, and England, including three at the Jesuit Archive in Rome. The stint culminated in biographic entries on Fathers Cruz, Rodriquez, Pires, and Semedo, in Goodrich's *Dictionary of Ming Biography*, as well as a series of journal articles and book chapters on Chinese-Philippine Relations in late Sixteenth Century, late Ming society and the Jesuit missionaries, the respective contributions of four Jesuit missionaries in China – Philippe Couplet towards a Chinese Church, Adam Schall as perceived by Ming scholar Tan Qian, the scientific writings of Aleni, and the Chinese poems of Michele Ruggieri. His last published work is the monumental catalogue on Chinese books and documents in the Jesuit Archive in Rome

(2002). He has also left a book manuscript on Peking under the Ming Dynasty, a 200-page translation of the account of Frs. Buglio and Magalhaes, who were captured by Zhang Xianzhong, and spent over 30 months in the late Ming rebels' military conquests in Sichuan and Shaanxi, and an additional year in the Manchu army that defeated Zhang.

The erudition of Fr. Chan can best be illustrated by his magisterial Preface to *Chunming Meng yulu*, a 70-zhuan monograph on Beijing in late Ming, regarded as the most important source on institutional history of different departments of the Ming bureaucracy, written by official turned scholar Sun Chengze (1593-1675), reprinted by the Lung Men Book Store of Hong Kong (1965). Instead of treating it as a perfunctory courteous note behind the front cover, Fr. Chan wrote an in-depth, 7,000 word article-length commentary based on original research. In the best tradition of scriptural scholars, Fr. Chan cited eight Qing works, notes by Sun's students, and Sun's other works to conclude that the book was the posthumous publication of the final draft of Sun. It traces the sources of the study to two earlier published works by Sun, and to Shen Bang's *Wanshu Zazi*, listing the identical and different passages, as well as noting scribal errors in Sun's work. It underscores the historical information on Ming bureaucratic history that are only uniquely documented in Sun's work and in no other extant source, e.g., the content and procedure of emperor-minister conferences, regulations on evening gate-keeping in the Forbidden City, protocol on accidents and personal injuries in court sessions, maritime traffic between Fujian, Japan, and Ryuku; the products, name brands, and trading days of the commodity markets in late Ming Beijing. In all, the Preface cites 75 published titles, and quoted from 27, many are obscure monographs embedded in collected works of Ming-Qing scholars. Few Ming-Qing historians, in or outside China, could have written such an authoritative commentary on the *Chunming Meng yulu*.

The perfectionism of Fr. Chan's scholarship can best be seen in his Catalogue of Jesuit archival materials on China. He spent 1972 cataloguing and taking notes at the Archive, returning for another two years (1975, 76) doing supplementary research, and spent several additional years in libraries in Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong checking Chinese language sources not in the Archive. The end product is thus not an ordinary reference guide with single paragraph annotations of contents, or a more user-friendly catalogue that provides summaries and cross-references, but nothing less than a research monograph produced with the best scholarship. Excluding the 80-page front and end matter, the 451 entries of the Catalogue are described in 550 pages of single-space text, with many exceeding three pages, and the longest (Bouvet's letters) seven and a half pages. As some well-done catalogues compiled by librarians and archivists, each entry describes the number and size of folios, the number of lines per page and number of words per line, notations on all Prefaces, and complete listing of author, censor, reviser, proofreaders, and Preface writers. Rarely found in other catalogues are scholarly commentaries on the text and edition, with annotations on the cover, title and back pages, the type of case, binding, ink, paper, seal, and seal ink used, noting even the existence of misplaced folios, and those bound upside down. There are also references to other extant editions, and the differences among editions. On the text, Fr. Chan provides analytical commentary on the probable dates and localities of publication when these are unspecified, drawing inferences from vernacular usage, dialectical transliteration, the avoidance of the name of the reigning emperor, and references to major contemporaneous events. The task involves proficiency in classical Chinese and Japanese, as well as major European languages in the late Renaissance and early Modern period. It could only be written by a few linguists like Fr. Chan, who read Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German,

French, some Russian, aside from classical Chinese and Japanese. Only a handful of other scholars possessed either the language skills or historical knowledge required for the undertaking. No other scholar, living or deceased, in Europe, China, or anywhere, has acquired both sets of skills, plus the textual scholarship, that were equal to the task.

It is not surprising that Fr. Chan embodied an unusual set of skills rarely found in Chinese historians, since he was one of the last few survivors of the extinct species of the traditional Chinese scholar. He received the traditional classical instruction not from school but from a private tutor, learnt Chinese painting when he was in high school, adopted an academic name, Banxi (half stream), which he used in his carved seal. Fellow Jesuit scholastics recalled that he practiced Chinese calligraphy with ink and brush in the few minutes between philosophy classes while he attended college in Manila. He corresponded in classical Chinese with his Chinese friends. He frequented antique stores, and relished the small treasure chest of Ming paintings and Qing edicts signed in the emperors' handwriting, which he bought cheap from unsuspecting antique dealers, worn out by his haggle or overcome with pity by his vowed poverty. Much of his daily routine was to take extensive notes from thread-bound volumes that populated his restroom and set up colonies under his bed. His preferred beverage was Chinese tea, a special treat was Cantonese dim sum, an occasional indulgence was to prepare his native fengchen-style dishes in the Jesuit community kitchen for a small circle of visitors.

As a mark of a true scholar, Fr. Chan has left a portfolio of Chinese calligraphy, paintings, around 40 Chinese poetry and a library of over 80,000 volumes. His calligraphy is cursive, the most difficult and aesthetic of the five styles. The paintings are the serene and rich "blue-and-green" landscape, not the intense and flamboyant "ink-and-wash" style. His poems are both classical poems that are five and seven words to a line, and also *ci*, the specialized poetry genre prevalent in the Song Dynasty with strict tonal patterns and rhyme schemes. Most of these are retrieved from his friends who received them, and he must have composed more. His earliest extant work was one he wrote at age 20, when he received word of the death of Fr. Finn, his Jesuit mentor. His later poems also mourned the decease of colleagues, the passage of the Lunar Year, the retreat of Spring, the departure of his youth. His inspiration came in spurts, he almost never composed single poems, but in sets of eight or more. The longest was a set of twenty poems of four lines each and seven words to a line, composed in a rainy night in late Fall in 1984 when he left Hong Kong for good. Echoing the theme and style of the Song patriotic poet Lu You who spent the last twenty years of his retirement in reading and writing, the twenty poems were a rhymed soliloquy on unfulfilled dreams in solitary country living. A second was a poem of 34 lines of five words each, composed at sunset in early fall in 1985, in a small town Chantilly north of Paris, when he was touched by the sight of a family of seven swans gliding in a lake. Expressing envy for their unfettered wandering, autonomy from worldly engagements and detachment from mundane preoccupations, it is a self-affirmation of his choice of a solitary, scholarly and spiritual life.

In his review of several Ming-Qing scholarly works, Fr. Chan attributes the deficiency of their analytical rigor to the authors' lack of access to scholarly holdings, a project to which he has devoted to build. His first two efforts ended in theft or the rubbles of war, and it was the third attempt that has culminated in the Chinese Library of the China Province of the Society of Jesus, that took two standard-size containers to be shipped from Hong Kong. Acquired with a meager monthly stipend of HK\$10 (US\$1.60), later increased to HK\$20, Fr. Chan scoured the old book

stores in Hong Kong, sifting sand for gold, picking up rare titles overlooked by institutional buyers. For multi-volume collectanea, he often had to resort to the salami tactics of purchase by a thousand installments. The cumulative result is one of the finest libraries of Chinese history, including the standard reference works, dynastic annals and collectanea, over 1,000 dictionaries, encompassing the four main divisions of a traditional Chinese library – classics, history, philosophies, and literature, that was rated as a top 15 collection of Chinese History by then University of Chicago librarian Ma Tai-loi. The collection, which Fr. Chan intended to be used for the training of Jesuits in the China apostolate, is on loan to the Ricci Institute at the University of San Francisco.

Those who are awed by his scholarship have wondered why his research has not attracted more academic attention that it deserves. Unskilled in academic savvy and loathing self-promotion, the reason could be that Fr. Chan considered himself a scholar rather than an academic. He never held, and probably never sought full-time, permanent positions in any university in Hong Kong or elsewhere, although he was clearly many more times qualified than most in his field in those institutions. None of his publications were in the major university presses, or leading Ming-Qing academic journals, which seldom reviewed his publications. He never made presentations in the annual conferences of the Association of Asian Studies or the American Historical Association. Despite the importance of his research for Ming-Qing history, his publications were seldom, if at all, required or suggested readings in Chinese history graduate courses in U.S., Europe, or China. His scholarly Preface to *Chunming mengyulu* was published in a rare edition of Sun Chengze's book by an obscure publisher, that cannot be found in most major Chinese history collections inside or outside China, Europe, and the U.S., and probably never cited in any publication.

In this respect, his *curriculum vitae* resembles more the chronicles (*nianpu*) of traditional Chinese scholars rather than the resumes of contemporary academic. Like almost all Ming Qing literati Fr. Chan studied, they were lone gardeners cultivating their private plots for self consumption, and not commercial farmers producing for the market. As noted by Fr. Chan, Sun Chengze did the research for his own entertainment (*zhushu ziyu*), never seeking validation or recognition among his peers, or even bothered to publish the 70-zhuan *magna opus* in his lifetime. His works were personal notes from daily reading, publishing only an afterthought, or the commemorative act of friends and disciples. Ruggieri never published his Chinese poems, unmatched by most among those ever penned by a non-native Chinese speaker. Wu Li, the early Qing Chinese Jesuit artist, never exhibited his paintings, much less sold them. Maybe for Fr. Chan, historical research is primarily cloistered intellectual pursuit and spiritual cultivation, like the meditation of Buddhist priests, martial exercises of Xiaolin monks, Mendel's genetic experiments of peas, or Benedictine friars copying the scriptures and incanting Gregorian chants. It is an end unto itself, not a means to make a living or for professional advancement.

Fr. Chan can take consolation in the fact that he is in the company of the early China Jesuits who were also not given full credit for their contribution in creating sinology in Europe. The Jesuits compiled the first Chinese-Western dictionary, the first Chinese language and grammar text, the first general history and encyclopedic description of China, the first multi-sector economic work, the most complete set of translations of Confucian classics, the first set of national and provincial atlases drawn to modern cartographic standards in China. In all, the 531 titles of published works on China by the Jesuits in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

constituted the curricular and intellectual foundation of sinology of the western world. Yet, despite the accolades of Leibniz and those of the French Enlightenment (Voltaire, Rousseau), there were few tributes to their contribution aside from Spence. Fr. Chan and the early Jesuits can of course take refuge in the spirituality of St. Francis Xavier, who prayed for deliverance from the worldly desire of being honored and praised. But for the Sinology community, the issue is not to confer honor where honor is clearly deserved. Ignorance of their contribution would deprive the field the fruit of labor of many of the best cultivators.

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499th Anniversary of Birth of St. Francis Xavier, S.J.