

Eulogy for Fr. Albert Chan S.J. (1915-2005)

James Tong

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In the Jesuit Archive in Rome, in the Japan and Chinese Section II, document 159 reads “Itinerandum sinice factum (Travels sojourned in Chinese Style)”. The contents of the 11 folios were some 50 classical Chinese poems, both 5 words and 7 words in a line that were elegant, evocative, pensive, conforming to normative meter and rhyme, about sceneries and thoughts in journeys in five cities in China. I have been in academia in the last 30 years, and I know of no non-native Chinese professor in classical Chinese literature in any top university in U.S. or Europe who can write such classical Chinese poems. The note on the document adds, nullum nomen (no name), nullum datum (no date). Until Fr. Chan did the research and published it in *Monumenta Serica* in 1993, the world did not know that they were authored by Michele Ruggieri, the Italian Jesuit in China who lived and traveled with Mateo Ricci in China 400 years ago. What is even more remarkable is that Ruggieri was 41 years old when he began studying Chinese, at a time when there were no Chinese-Western dictionary, no Chinese language classes or language schools for non-native speakers.

The piece of research serves to illustrate two other characteristics that the life and work of the early Jesuits in China shared with those of Fr. Chan.

First, the accomplishments of both the early Jesuits and Fr. Chan were not fully recognized. As a group, the early China Jesuits were probably the best and brightest, most entrepreneurial and culturally sensitive of all missionaries in China, not only missionaries, but all foreigners ever set foot on China. Michele Ruggieri was a judge in Naples, had doctorates in both civil and ecclesiastical law, before he joined the Jesuit Order and was sent to China. Mateo Ricci studied with Clavius, the inventor of the Gregorian calendar used throughout the western world today. Giuseppi Castiglione was a celebrated artist at 26, and painted for the Queen of Portugal and Queen of Spain before he became a Jesuit and part of the Jesuit China missions. Jean Terrenz was a member of the Accademia dei Lincei, which was composed of the top scientists in Europe at the time. In its entire history, there were only 32 members. Terrenz was the 7th inductee, Galileo shortly before him. Galileo was very proud of his Lincei membership. He always signed Galileo, L., L for Lincei.

Such a collection of the best minds in Europe of course won the trust and respect of the Chinese court. Emperor Kang Xi, contemporary of Louis XIV, learnt logic and Euclidian geometry from French Jesuit Bouvet, and became the first monarch in the world to have worked out all the proofs of the theorems in Euclidean geometry. His

grandson, later Emperor Qianlong, used to go to Castiglione's studio and observed how the Italian Jesuit painted. Even when his mother died and he was supposed to be in mourning, he defied court rules and spent stolen moments in Castiglione's studio. His association with the Jesuits did not stop when he became Emperor. Once he spent seven hours with Fr. Benoit, asking him questions on European history, Catholics missions, and philosophical questions including whether the chicken or the egg came first.

Like Ruggieri's poems, much of the accomplishments of the early Jesuits in China remain undiscovered. The written record is deposited in the Jesuit Archive in Rome, which has 300 bound volumes, and 4,000 spools of microfilm of documents. But the catalogue of the Japan and China collection, which is the most extensive and most used, has only a bibliography of 50 typed pages, listing only the author, title, and date of the document, in its original language. Using the collection to do research on the life and work of the early Jesuits in China becomes a task of going through an inventory without a check list, looking for hidden treasures without a map, navigating uncharted waters without compass and stars. The lack of catalogue for the collection is understandable. Ruggieri, Ricci, Castiglione were Italians, Benoit and Bouvet French, Adam Schall was German, Alfonso Spaniard, Pereira and Buglio Portuguese, and in addition to their own vernacular, they also wrote in Latin, and sometimes Chinese. There were few scholars, Jesuit or non-Jesuit, who can read all these languages. But Fr. Chan could. Until he spent three years cataloguing these archival materials, and published the 630 page *Chinese Books and Documents in the Jesuit Archives in Rome: A descriptive Catalogue* in 2002, many details of early Jesuit enterprise in China remained unknown, frozen in history and mothballed in folio holders on shelves of the Archive.

The second characteristic is the importance of library collections for both the early Jesuits in China and Fr. Chan. In the Rare Books Collection in the National Library in Beijing today, there are about 400 titles of European works, with the JHS logo, some with Papal seals, and the coat-of-arms of Hapsburgs, Bourbons, and Stewarts. Some were illustrated in gold, and when seen under florescent light, they are dazzling to the eye. These are part of the Trigault collection. Nicholas Trigault (1577-1628) was a Belgian Jesuit, who arrived in China three years after Ricci's death, and conceived of this enterprising project to bring 7,000 titles of the best works in European science and mathematics, history and geography, philosophy and theology, literature and art, medicine and law, for systematic translation in China. He solicited the support of Pope Clement V, who supported his project with 5,000 golden ducats. He went on his own to knock at doors of European palaces, and got either contribution in cash or kind, ending with 7,000 titles of the best European works at the time, and set sail from Lisbon in 1618 with 21 other young Jesuits. When they arrived at Macau 18 months later, only 5 of the 22 survived the trip. Trigault assembled a group of the best Chinese scholars and began translating these titles in Xian, China in 1620, but soon the late Ming rebellions broke out, and the project was suspended. The collection went to Beijing. Dynastic wars, the Japanese invasion, the civil war, and the Communist rule have all taken the toll on the collection. Of the original 7,000 titles, only around 400 remain extant today. After the Jesuit Order was suppressed by the Pope in 1773, it became the property of another

Catholic missionary order, and the Jesuits were not even allowed access to this skeletal collection.

Fr. Chan's collection is stamped "The China collection of the Society of Jesus". He intended the collection to be used for the training of young Jesuits in China. One may see the pathetic parallel between the Trigault and Fr. Chan's collections. The Trigault collection was never used for the lofty purpose it was intended. History and the death of its creator conspired to abort the impossible dream. Did the 17 Jesuits who accompanied Trigault's shipment perish in vain? Would the efforts of Trigault and Fr. Chan in building those two historic collections be for naught?

Maybe this comparison would answer the question. At the time of the death of Ricci's death in 1610, Catholicism in China consisted of four churches, 20 clergy, and 2,000 baptized Catholics. There were no China-born priests or nuns, no seminaries or seminarians. In 1997, according to China's official White Paper on Religious Freedom, even after close to 50 years of Communist rule, there were 4 million Catholics, 4,600 churches and religious venues, and 4,000 clergy. The Vatican estimates were even higher -- 12 million Catholics in 2000, including those in the underground church. There are 12 major Catholic seminaries in 100 dioceses, which have ordained 900 young priests from 1985-1997. Over 100 priests, nuns, and seminaries have been trained abroad in recent years, including over 20 studying in a theologate in New York today. In other words, there are more Catholic priests and nuns in China in 2005, than all the Catholics at the time of Ricci; and more Chinese Catholic priests and nuns studying in the U.S. today, than the total number of clergy in China at the time of Ricci's death.

There are more good news. Two weeks ago, on March 2, the New Religious Regulations took effect in China. The New Regulations confers more autonomy to religious organizations, including the Catholic Church. Religious organizations can now print their own bibles, hymnals, prayer books, and devotional manuals for internal use without government approval. They can construct large-scale, outdoor religious statues and icons. They can not only send religious students to foreign seminaries, but also accept religious students from outside China. They can appeal an administrative act and challenge it in court.

Death, be not proud. Four hundred years after Trigault collected and shipped the 7,000 titles to China, his dream is realized, even without his translations. The Chinese intelligentsia not only learnt European science and art, philosophy and literature, medicine and law, these have become standard curriculum in Chinese universities. The seeds sown by other Jesuits in China have multiplied a thousand fold. The single spark they lit is now enlightening a hundred dioceses. With the growth of the Church in China, the prospect that Catholic seminaries will enjoy greater autonomy in educating the next generation of religious leaders has become more likely. It is now even more probable with the promulgation of the new and more liberal religious regulations earlier this month. The day may not be far away when Fr. Chan's collection will be actually used for the training of young Jesuits in China. He will be both truly pleased and proud.