

Fr. Albert Chan passed away this morning, 2005 March 10, at the O'Connor Hospital in San Jose, California at 6:30 a.m. He celebrated his 90th birthday in January, and had been suffering from stomach cancer.

A Harvard PhD, Fr. Chan was in the best tradition of Jesuit scholarship, and was probably the foremost credentialed historian in Hong Kong, and one of the foremost Ming historians in the western world. He read Latin, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, German, French, and some German, and spoke Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian.

When almost all the History faculty of University of Hong Kong and those of New Asia and Chung Chi Colleges had only B.A. degrees from second or third rate institutions, Fr. Chan's Harvard PhD did not get him a faculty appointment at those colonial schools in the 1950's. Instead, he taught Chinese in WYHK from 1953-59 and WYK from 1961-62, just before we entered our school.

For most of us, he was the Chinese priest who preached homilies periodically on Sundays in the Wah Yan chapel, and occasionally mentioned by Mr. Lau Kai-yip as a specialist on various editions of Chinese rare publications.

It was only in 1972-73 when I taught at WYHK that I came to know Fr. Chan well. When the Wah Yan kitchen staff were on holiday during the Chinese New Year, Fr. Chan was the stand-in chef and prepared authentic Shun-de and Daliang fish dishes for us.

I was privileged to listen to his lecture on sources of Chinese history, and I still remember the socio-economic data in Chinese prefecture, and county gazetteers, which I used in my own research. Books filled his entire room, shower, washing basin, under the bed. Collected with HK\$10 a month allowance from old book stores in Tung Choi St. and Hollywood Road, they were later to become a 70,000 volume library, most of which now held at the University of San Francisco Ricci Institute, and rated by Harvard Yenching librarian James Cheng as a top 20 Chinese history collections in the U.S.

Among his many scholarly publications, I remembered three the best.

The first is his Preface to the early Qing Beijing street gazetteer *Chun Ming Meng Yu Lu* (A Treatise on Remnants of Memories of the Ming in Spring), the Lung Men Book Store (in Mongkok, Kowloon) edition. His Preface is actually an annotated commentary, highlighting the historical events that took place in specific urban wards and streets of the imperial capital. Readers were ushered through the time-tunnel, to behold Wang Fuming, the Forbidden City, the burial site of Ricci in their full, historic splendor. Published in the 1960's and written in flowing classical prose, then there were fewer than a handful of scholars who could have authored that erudite Preface.

The second is his analysis of over 50 Chinese classical poetry by the late Ming Jesuit Michele Ruggieri (1543-1607), which was deposited in the Jesuit archive in Rome, but incorrectly attributed to have written by an Indian monk. Ruggieri, a contemporary and companion of Ricci, had doctorates in both civil and ecclesiastic law, served as a judge in Naples, before joining the Jesuit order and sent to China. He started to study Chinese at the age of 40 in Macau, and learnt 12,000 characters. The over 50 Chinese classical poems, in both 5-word, and 7-words, were written in his itineraries in Zhaoqing, and Meiling (in Guangdong), Hangzhou, Guangxi, and Huguang. These must be among the best classical Chinese poems written by a non-native speaker of Chinese, ever. They could easily pass as poems written by the Chinese literati. In my entire professional career in Chinese studies, I know of no non-

native born professor in classical Chinese literature in premier U.S. or European universities, who can write such poetry.

The third is his bibliography of documents on China and Japan in the Jesuit Archive in Rome. The China and Japan sections (I-IV) is the most used part of the Jesuit Archive in Rome, being the depository of not only publications, but personal diaries, letters, travelogue, and paraphernalia of Ricci, Schall, Verbiest, Trigault and other giants in the history of Catholic Missions, as well as Asian-European contact.

Fr. Chan spent three years cataloguing those items in Rome. With a glitter in his eyes, he relished to tell me his encounter with history, as he sort through the Ming coins, local maps, personal correspondence sent back by the Jesuit missionaries four hundred years ago. The task is nothing less than monumental, as the documents and objects were in over a dozen classical European and Oriental languages. The 600-page volume is thus not only a magisterial monograph with scholarly annotations of each publication, document, and object, but a catalogue of the finest hours of East-West cultural contact. There is no one else who is equal to the task.

I have two regrets. Four years ago, I wanted to invite him to preview the Getty's Research Institute's exhibition on the Yuanmingyuan and the Jesuit Missionary Enterprise in China, the first Asian exhibition at the Getty's, and which I helped to put together. Then he was too weak to travel and moved to the nursing home. Two weeks ago, I called Rm. 5412B at the O'Connor's Hospital, and promised to visit him. Of course he said there was no need to do so. Then this morning I realized that I had missed the appointment.

I have never taken any classes with Fr. Chan, but I was flattered when he recently referred to me as his student. Indeed, I have learnt more from him than many of my teachers in college or in graduate school.

When I first left Hong Kong for college, he picked the books I should bring with me to Manila. One was a set of Chinese Dictionary (Cihai) by Zhonghua Book Co., in large font. The other is the six volume History of Chinese Political Thought by Hsiao Kung-ch'uan. They are still on my book shelf and have guided my academic career since then.

In his last letter to me, he began by saying that his earlier conversation with me on Chinese history and Jesuit missions was impassioned and vivid [linli jin zhi], one he did not have for years. He ended with the phrase "the note is brief but sentiments full, the feelings are beyond words" (zhi duan qing chang, yi zai yan wai).

That is how I should end this note as well.

Wai-keung (as Fr. Chan called me),

March 10, 2005.