

OBITUARY

JEAN ALMIRE LEFEUVRE (1912–2010)

The Thunder God, 雷公 *Lei Gong*: The Story of Fr. Jean Lefevre SJ

Jean Almire Lefevre (Lei Huanzhang 雷煥章) died in Taipei on 24 September 2010 at the age of 88, having dedicated much of his life to the study of Chinese oracle bones and bronze inscriptions. Among his published works, special attention must go to the catalogues of oracle bones in French (1985) and in other continental European collections (1997). At his death he left behind a completed catalogue of bronze inscriptions, but the real fruit of his painstaking scholarship is to be found in the volumes of the *Grand Ricci Dictionary* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), for which he provided a detailed description of the uses of Chinese characters in the earliest sources.

In many ways Lefevre was a larger than life figure. In a meeting or discussion, one might ask him for his opinion about some topic and be rather perplexed when he seemed to ignore the question completely. Then, once the conversation had drifted on to other topics, he would suddenly break in, oblivious to all else and too deaf to notice, with a ringing answer to the question and his view on the matter. His style of delivery consistently left those around him convinced that here indeed spoke an oracle of truth. He often recalled how, while doing forced labor service in Germany, he had deliberately drilled the holes for the screws of the wing of an aircraft incorrectly, with the result that he was hauled before the commander with all his fellow workers in attendance and he gave such a vigorous denunciation of the German treatment of French civilians that they just had to let him off. It was a style he never forgot.

Jean Almire Lefevre was born in 1922 in the little village of Chemiré-le-Gaudin in the west of France not far from Le Mans, where he went to secondary school. He claimed descent from the Gaulish tribe of the Cenomans and his family had been active in local village life for generations. His father kept a farm and also served as village mayor. As a young boy Jean drove cattle to market and rode his horse through the forest in the early mornings. His father's family had a good revolutionary past; his mother came from an aristocratic family and exercised a restraining hand on the wild exploits of her eldest son.

At the age of 18 Jean entered the Jesuit novitiate and began his period of formation as a Catholic priest. This was interrupted in 1943 when he, with many other young Frenchmen, had to do the compulsory service in Germany mentioned above. Given the poor living conditions and the realization that the war would not end soon, he managed to get himself back to France under the guise of ill health and, after a period in semi-concealment, was finally able to return to the Jesuits. He asked to go to China and soothed the pill for his father by making friends with a certain François Huang (Huang Jiacheng 黃家城), who replaced him as adopted son, fulfilling all the family tasks that Jean himself should have performed.

After a short stop in Shanghai, Lefevre went to Beijing to begin his language studies. His progress was so rapid that he asked for permission to study philosophy at Peking University, where he made many good friends, even among the Communist students. He considered his best friend to have been Wang Taiqing 王太慶 (1922–1999), the translator of Descartes and Plato into Chinese. In 1949, he went to Shanghai for theological studies, but spent most of the time during lectures practicing Chinese calligraphy. While roaming the streets, he was able to pick up Shanghaiese. Ordained a priest in 1951, he had to leave the following year along with all other foreign Jesuit students. This time in Shanghai is recalled in his book *Les enfants dans la ville* (1956) which he wrote while finishing his studies in the Philippines.

By 1955 he was ready for work and was sent to Taichong 台中 in Taiwan to help with the massive five-language dictionary then in course of preparation. During his fifteen years in central Taiwan, he was involved in a range of activities: student chaplain, co-founder of the Kuangchi Press and, of course, the study of oracle bones. Never one for strict orthodoxy, he spent a year working as chaplain to the Presbyterian students allowing for their pastor to take a year's sabbatical. In 1971, he moved to the Aurora Centre in Taipei where he remained until the end of his life. Here, in a tiny office, he somehow managed to build up his library of books, continue his research, receive guests, and present his monthly talks on the arts.

By his colleagues in sinology, Lefevre will be remembered not only for his meticulous and thorough scholarship, but also for his genuine friendliness and openness to all kinds of persons. Yet for others, he will be remembered for his work in the Catholic Church, bringing many people to the faith and encouraging others to develop their own way of life. To sinologists in China he was known as Lei Huanzhang, but to the students and others who gathered around the Aurora Centre in Taipei, he was known as Lei Gong 雷公. His colleagues in the Society of Jesus knew him as “the old Devil” (Lao Mogui 老魔鬼), a name he particularly

enjoyed because like his second name, 'Almire,' it reminded him of his sorcerer ancestors. (In his biography he pointed out that they were folk healers and not involved in black magic). Then for many years he wrote articles on Western art under the nom de plume, Lei Wenbing 雷文炳.

There was nonetheless a remarkable consistency through all these personae. Although he had not originally intended to study oracle bones—the study was imposed on him when the American engaged on the job died on a Hong Kong beach from sunstroke while searching for fossils in the cliffs—it fit well with his whole conception of life. To understand China one had not only to integrate with contemporary Chinese society, but it was also necessary to know one's ancestors. In order to know Lefevre, one had to know that he was descended from a tribe described by Julius Caesar as warlike and courageous. The ancestors meant a lot to him. When presiding at a wedding, he took great delight in observing the couple kowtow to heaven and then to their parents after they had pronounced their marriage vows. The marriage would be inscribed within the line of the ancestors; in this act, Catholic ceremony and Chinese ritual embraced each other.

In many ways he retained the joyful boyishness of his youth which explains the infectious enthusiasm he could inspire. After ploughing through his dictionaries and catalogues with the aid of a magnifying glass, he would suddenly discover something that no one else had seen, for example, that the supposed rhinoceroses in the inscriptions were in fact buffalos. It was the same in his teaching catechism. When a young Chinese person explained the difficulty she experienced in trying to incorporate Catholic faith with the family's worship of the Holy Mother Mazu (*tian shang shengmu Mazu* 天上聖馬祖) or with prayers to the god of the soil (*tudigong* 土地公), he would immediately relieve their anxiety by assuring them that the *tudigong* were guardian angels and fully orthodox, while Mazu was a great saint who sacrificed her life for others. Before his eyes the problems disappeared and the pieces fit together in a jigsaw that was larger than expected.

Lefevre suggested the topic for my dissertation and when I completed my Ph.D., I went back to live with him in Taipei. The place was a rubbish tip. A former resident had decided that he had had enough when a rat ran over his bed just as he was about to get up, and I had to call for help to remove a vast termite nest in the ceiling. Yet, what mattered, was that here was someone with whom one could hold an intelligent conversation on many topics of interest and someone who was open to people of all types. One had only to see the way he celebrated mass. Far from the rules of Rome, he allowed the people to speak, encouraged them to lead, and was content to sit in the background and deliver some final words. When a Protestant monastery in France, Taizé, was looking for

contacts to get young people from Taiwan to go and join the popular youth camps there, it was only Fr. Lefevre who made them welcome and arranged for the first group to go. He was unofficial chaplain to the students of the medical and law faculties of National Taiwan University and in this capacity gathered students and lived among them. On Sunday evenings we would go out to eat *jiaozi* 餃子 together in the tiny little cafés around an old Japanese temple in Taipei. Among one of the students of his catechism classes was a man who went on to become the Anglican bishop of Taipei. Meeting him years later, Lefevre commented to him: you did well to become an Anglican, if you had become a Catholic you would never have been made a bishop!

Yet it was not only students who found a home under his wing. The head of the Carnegie Foundation in Taiwan traces his work for business people back to Lefevre's encouragement. And then there is a contemplative Carmelite sister, daughter of a Chinese admiral, who used to often come to the Aurora Centre, where she found a place of quiet in the midst of the city before she joined the convent. Then, I remember bringing Chen Guying 陳鼓應 for a visit soon after he had been permitted to return to Taiwan. Professor Chen was deeply impressed and came away with great admiration for Lefevre's wholehearted dedication to Chinese culture. Lefevre had a way of making people feel valuable that transcended any religious affiliation or lack thereof. The human contact always had pride of place.

During the last year or so, there were several alarms when Lefevre was admitted to hospital. This usually meant the university hospital down the road where he knew many of the doctors because they had been at the Aurora Centre during their student days. In the month before he died, his health declined, and he was taken to the infirmary. When he finally died, he was surrounded by his friends, conscious to the end, and in great peace, ready to go and join those ancestors he seemed to have known so well. I imagine they will get a little surprise as he is probably waiting to spring the odd trick on them in heaven with that malicious twinkle in his eye as he thinks up some excuse to get into the pearly gates at double-quick speed.

For a short biography of Lefevre, to which the present account is heavily indebted, see: Thierry Meynard, *Jean Lefevre: jésuite et Sinologue*. Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007. And the website of the Taipei Ricci Institute: www.riccibase.com.

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