Obituaries

ALBERT CHAN, SJ

(January 25, 1915–March 10, 2005)

Father Albert Chan, Jesuit scholar, eminent Ming historian, and founder and curator of the eighty-thousand-title Chinese collection of the Society of Jesus, died on March 10, 2005, at the Sacred Heart Jesuit Center in Los Gatos, California.

Born on January 25, 1915, in Pacasmayo, Peru of Chinese father and Peruvian mother, Chan received his elementary and secondary education near 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 Wah Yan College in Hong Kong, and finished two years' novitiate in Novaliches, Manila. From 1936 to 1941, he pursued philosophy at the Sacred Heart College in Manila, where he got his bachelor of arts and his master's degree. He studied theology in Shanghai and Dublin after World War II and was ordained in July 1947. He studied European history at Fordham University and Chinese history at Harvard University from 1950 to 1953, where he got his PhD, with Yang Liansheng directing his dissertation. Chan taught at Wah Yan College, on both the Hong Kong (1942–45, 1954–58) and Kowloon (1958–60) campuses. In 1978–79, he also lectured at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Chu Hai College.

Devoting himself to full-time research from 1960 on, Chan's earlier work focused on Ming secular history and regional factional strife in the bureaucracy in the Tianxun and Chenghua reigns. His publications included *The Glory and Fall of the Ming Dynasty* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), two separate studies of Beijing's socioeconomic and bureaucratic history in the late Ming dynasty, and four entries in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967). His research focus shifted to Chinese and European relations and Jesuit missionaries in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties after he spent seven years (1969–76) in archives and libraries in Portugal, Spain, Italy, France, and England, including three years at the Jesuit archive in Rome. This stint culminated in biographic entries on Fathers Cruz, Rodriquez, Pires, and Semedo in Goodrich's *Dictionary of Ming Biography* and a series of journal articles and book chapters on Chinese-Philippine relations in the late sixteenth century, late Ming society and the Jesuit missionaries, and the contributions of four Jesuit missionaries in China. His last published work is the monumental catalog *Chinese Books and Documents in the Jesuit Archive in Rome* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2002). He also left a book manuscript on Peking under the Ming dynasty and a translation of the account of Fathers Buglio and Magalhaes, who were captured by Zhang Xianzhong and spent over thirty months with the rebels and an additional year in the Manchu army that defeated Zhang.

The erudition of Chan can best be illustrated by his magisterial preface to *Chunming meng yulu*, a seventy-*juan* monograph on Beijing in the late Ming dynasty, 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), and reprinted by the Lung Men Book Store of Hong Kong in 1965. Instead of treating the preface as a perfunctory courteous note behind the front cover, Chan wrote an in-depth seven-thousand-word commentary based on original research. The perfectionism of Chan's scholarship can best be seen in his catalog of Jesuit archival materials on China. The end product is not an ordinary reference guide with single-paragraph annotations of contents or a more user-friendly catalog that provides summaries and cross-references, but nothing less than a research monograph produced from the best scholarship. Each entry describes the number and size of folios, lines per page, and words per line; notations on all prefaces; and a complete listing of author, censor, reviser, proofreaders, and preface writers; as well as 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. Chan provided analytical commentary on the probable dates and localities of publication when these were unspecified, drawing inferences from vernacular usage, dialectical transliteration, the avoidance of the name of the reigning emperor, and references to major contemporaneous events. This undertaking required proficiency in classical Chinese and Japanese as well as in major European languages in the late Renaissance and early modern periods. Only a handful of other scholars possessed either the language skills or the 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 would be equal to the task.

It is not surprising that 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; learned Chinese painting when he was in high school; and 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. Much of his daily routine was to take extensive notes from threadbare volumes that populated his room and set up colony under his bed.

As a mark of a true scholar, Chan has left a portfolio of Chinese calligraphy, paintings, around forty Chinese poems, and a library of over eighty thousand 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 type, 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.

In his review of several Ming-Qing scholarly works, Chan attributed the deficiency of their analytical rigor to the authors' lack of access to scholarly holdings—a problem that he endeavored to address, culminating in the Chinese Library of the China Province of the Society of Jesus. Chan scoured the old book stores in Hong Kong, sifting sand for gold, picking up rare titles overlooked by institutional buyers. For multivolume collectanea, he often had to resort to the salami tactics of purchase in a thousand installments. The cumulative result is one of the finest libraries of Chinese history, including the standard reference works, dynastic annals and collectanea, and

over one thousand dictionaries encompassing the four main divisions of a traditional Chinese library—classics, history, philosophies, and literature—rated among the top fifteen collections of Chinese history by the then University of Chicago librarian Ma Tai-loi. The collection, which 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 the academic attention that it deserves. Unskilled in academic savvy and loathing self-promotion, 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 in leading Ming-Qing academic journals, which seldom reviewed his publications. He never made presentations at the annual conferences of the Association for Asian Studies or the American Historical Association. Despite the importance of his research to Ming-Qing history, his publications are seldom required or suggested readings in Chinese history graduate courses in the United States, Europe, or China. His scholarly preface to *Chunming meng yulu* was published in a rare edition by an obscure publisher and cannot be found in most major Chinese history collections.

In this respect, his curriculum vitae resembles more the chronicles (*nianpu*) of traditional Chinese scholars than the résumé of a contemporary academic. Almost all Ming-Qing literati whom Chan studied were lone gardeners cultivating their private plots for self-consumption, not commercial farmers producing for the market. Maybe for Chan, historical research was primarily cloistered intellectual pursuit and spiritual cultivation, like the meditation of Buddhist priests, martial exercises of Xiaolin monks, Mendel's genetic experiments on peas, or Benedictine friars' copying of scriptures and incantations of Gregorian chants. It is an end unto itself, not a means to make a living or for professional advancement.

Chan could 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 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 have been few tributes to their contribution aside from those of Jonathan Spence. 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 of the fruit of labor of many of the best cultivators.

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