From Oracle Bones to DVD—
Jean Lefeuvre (1922-2010):
Jesuit, Lexicographer, Sinologist

The many fields of Chinese studies as developed in the world and in China proper have recently been the object of important gatherings. At these conferences, mention was made of the birth of Chinese studies during the lengthy revival of cultural encounter between China and the West since the time of the European Renaissance. This was done at the level of an always deeper exploration and search for mutual understanding thanks to the development of necessary tools, first of all the compilation of dictionaries and the publication of many translations of classical texts. But as far as linguistic studies are concerned, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that a new field of research on the origins of the Chinese script was open. The discovery of oracle bones inscriptions as old as the Shang dynasty offered new data for the interpretation of the inscriptions on bronze. These studies developed as an important new field and yet an ancient source for seminal interpretation of Chinese cultural notions and concepts.

Among the few western scholars involved in these studies was Jean Lefeuvre (1922-1910), a Jesuit Catholic priest born in France who recently passed away in Taipei on 24 September 2010. For sixty years, besides other duties, he dedicated himself to the interpretation of oracular bones and bronze inscriptions and related topics. These pages would like to celebrate his memory.

Such a dedication had been the result of the twists of history.

Jean Lefeuvre was born on 5 July 1922 the first child of a fervent Catholic family living in a small village of 800 inhabitants in Western France. Ancestral and more or less secret traditions (the pride of the region where Catholic faith blended harmoniously with local customs or medical practices) had been preciously kept as a treasure that formed his infancy’s influential background. Aged 11, he started his secondary education at the Jesuit run school of Our Lady of the Holy Cross in the city of Le Mans where he graduated in 1940, aged 18, right at the beginning of the Second World War. In September that year, he joined the Society of Jesus (the Jesuit Catholic religious order) and began two years of novitiate in Laval followed by literary studies nearby Lyon, the French second largest city. But the authorities of the German army that in 1943 had invaded the whole of the country imposed on every young man of at least 20 years of age the so-called “Obligatory Labour Service”. The purpose was to send into German factories many young French workers in order to supplement the dwindling German labour force decimated by the war. Sent to Germany as many other ones but faithful to his ancestry’s traditional bravura, Jean Lefeuvre one day decided to sabotage his own work and for that was apprehended and would have been shot on the spot had he not in a forceful and clear German language protested against the poor working, eating and sleeping conditions of the place. Admired for his courage by the German officers, his anger saved his life.

After escaping from Germany towards the end of the war, Jean Lefeuvre resumed his Jesuit formation in philosophy, then in 1947 applied to be sent to China. Two young Jesuit friends and himself boarded a liner that sailed through the Panama Canal and reached Shanghai three months

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1 Two international conferences on Chinese Studies have been hosted by the People’s University of China, Beijing, the first “World Conference on Sinology 2007”, March 26-28 2007, and the “Second World Conference of Sinology”, October 30th–November 1st 2009.

later. The first two years in China were passed in Beijing at the Jesuit run Chinese language school, and, beginning in 1948. Jean Lefeuvre studied also Chinese philosophy at the Beijing University. To achieve his Jesuit training, he went back to Shanghai to study Catholic theology (1949-1952) at the Bellarmine College, where he was ordained a priest. But like all foreign missionaries, Jean Lefeuvre had to leave China in 1952, first to Hong Kong, then to the Philippines, where he completed his Jesuit formation. He was finally sent to Taiwan, Taizhong, where he lived from 1955 till 1970. Then began what was to be his lexicographer and sinological career.

All exiled missionaries were of course first employed in various apostolic tasks, and Jean Lefeuvre was no exception. His life at the Beijing University had already introduced him to Chinese youth needs, that is why he served for many years in a student centre and helped also in establishing a publishing house known by the name of Xu Guangqi, Guangqi Press.

But in the community where he lived, some Jesuits worked as writers, translators or editors of books, and a decision was reached to resume a project initiated earlier in Shanghai by an Hungarian Jesuit, Eugene Zsamar, who died later in 1967. Zsamar had proposed to undertake "the most daring enterprise in Chinese lexicography attempted by foreigners during this century — an enterprise that started officially in Macao in 1949 and reached its fulfilment fifty two years later." The project was to gather a team capable of compiling an encyclopaedic polyglot Chinese dictionary in five languages: Hungarian, English, French, Spanish and Latin. Although Jesuits had compiled numberless dictionaries during their 400 year presence in China, there was a need for a systematic work on every aspect of Chinese language and culture. But when political events rendered difficult the immediate preparation for the work, Eugene Zsamar took refuge in Macao and some time later moved to Taizhong. Several teams of Jesuits were formed according to their mother tongues — Hungarians and French first, followed by Spaniards, Italians and some other English speaking members. This collective lexicographic enterprise was based on more than 200 Chinese dictionaries of various languages, including the most authoritative ones like the 國語辭典 Guoyu Cidian, the 辭海 Cihai and the 辭源 Ciyuan, already collected in China and carried to Taiwan.

Since Jean Lefeuvre as student at the Beijing University had done longer studies of the Chinese language, philosophy and history, he was entrusted in the French team with the translation of classical Chinese entries. A member of the English speaking group, Tomas Caroll (賀之緘 1909-1964) from the U.S., had also a deep interest in Chinese archeology, ancient Chinese astronomy, mathematics and music. He was in charge of studying and compiling the entries dealing with the ancient Chinese caracters. But unfortunately, on an archaeological research outing on 南吖島 Lamma Island nearby Hong Kong, Tom Carroll died from sunstroke in 1964. His contribution had been deemed very important for the scholarly value of the whole enterprise, so it was necessary to find a successor: Jean Lefeuvre was selected to take over Tom Caroll’s task as a runner do in a relay competition… He was then 42 years old.

It was a daunting task for some one who previously had no archaeological nor epigraphic training and who was, as his life style had proven, very influential among young college students of the time. Notwithstanding these educational and spiritual duties, Lefeuvre initiated himself in the “arcanum” of Scapulomancy and continued on the path already trodden by Tom Carroll. For the following three decades or so, he dedicated the greater part of his time to the compilation of the Chinese polyglot dictionary project to which he was to have three main contributions.

The first was to compile the entries related to the meanings of the characters as used in the Chinese ancient texts or Classics. The second was to investigate the collections, private or public, of oracle bones and bronze inscriptions already existing in various places in the world, and to select

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4 Ibid.
around 2000 ancient written forms present in these collections as relevant to the entries where ancient texts could be quoted.

The third contribution started when, under the direction of Yves Raguin (甘一鳯, 1912-1998) who succeeded Eugene Zsamar in 1956 as the head of the project, a strategic decision was taken. In order to show to the Jesuit authorities that the project was feasible and would have some encyclopaedic cultural content, the French team would prepare for early publication a shorter Chinese-French version of the dictionary. It would comprise around 6 000 characters and 50 000 or so entries. Yves Raguin and Jean Lefeuvre were together to be the main architects of the selection to be made out of the whole already gathered corpus of 180 000 entries, and their 16 000 or so characters, and of the lay-out of this shorter dictionary. Following five revisions that lasted three years, the single volume was finally published in 1976, more than twenty years after the start of the project and under the title *Dictionnaire Français de la Langue Chinoise* [French dictionary of the Chinese language, popularly known as the “Petit Ricci”]—see the sample page of the entry 道 tao ⁵.

As an indication that Jean Lefeuvre had meanwhile advanced in his studies of oracular inscriptions on turtle carapaces or bovine shoulder blades (scapulas) is the fact that one year before the publication of the shorter dictionary he had published in 1975 a long article in which he presented ‘a historical and bibliographical general survey of the discovery and the first studies’ on these inscriptions. ⁶ The survey is profusely documented and could be considered as a remote preface to three other volumes that would appear one by one during the following three decades.

In 1985, 《法國所藏甲骨錄》 *Collections or Oracular Inscriptions in France*, Collection Variétés Sinologiques New Series 70, Ricci Institute, Taipei-Paris-Hong Kong, 402 pp., comprising Part One: Catalogue (with reproductions and translations), Part Two: Commentary, plus Appendix, all in Chinese, French and English.

In 1997, 《徳瑞荷比所藏一些甲骨錄》 *Several Collections of Oracular Inscriptions in Germany, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Belgium*, Collection Variétés Sinologiques New Series 77, Ricci Institute, Taipei-Paris-San Francisco, 509 pp., built on the same structure of Catalogue and Commentary, all in Chinese and English.

In 2008, 《甲骨文集書林》 *Collections of Oracular Bones Inscriptions*, Collection Variétés Sinologiques New Series 97, Taipei Ricci Institute, Taipei, Taiwan, 592 pp. — a volume which is the largest catalogue up to now of small or large 412 collections, chronologically ordered, and giving data on the authors, dates and contents of each.

By engaging himself in this systematic research, Jean Lefeuvre had a the same time prepared the tool that had helped him to insert in the complete French version of the dictionary project the selection he had made of 2 000 or so most ancient written forms of important and culturally meaningful Chinese characters. That final version was to be published in two stages:

In 1999, the 《利氏漢法大字典》 *Dictionnaire Ricci de caractères chinois* [Ricci dictionary of Chinese characters], Instituts Ricci (Paris-Taipei) et Desclée de Brouwer, Association Ricci—Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2 volumes, 1164 pp., plus Index and supplements, 469 pp., comprising 13,390 entries of single characters.

In 2001, the 《利氏漢法辭典》 *Grand dictionnaire Ricci de la langue chinoise* [Great Ricci dictionary of the Chinese language, popularly known as the “Grand Ricci”], in 6 volumes and one of Indexes and Concordances, Institut Ricci de Paris and Institut Ricci de Taipei, Desclée de Brouwer. The dictionary includes all single characters and around 300,000 entries of vocabulary, expressions and locutions, a great number of them indexed into 200 or so fields of knowledge—see the sample page of the entry 道 tao.

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⁵ When the project was initiated in Macau and organised in Taizhong in the early 1950s, the now official romanisation scheme 拼音 pinyin was not followed in Taiwan. Hence the dictionary had to follow the Wade-Giles system commonly used at that time overseas.

**Petit Ricci** – Sample Page
Such a huge lexicographic compilation would not have been achieved without the collaboration of many sinologists specialists of various fields of knowledge and related aspects of Chinese history and culture. But the contributions of Jean Lefeuvre gave to the Grand Ricci a feature that does not exist in any other western dictionary of the Chinese language.
In a latest development, the editors of the large dictionary, helped by the outstanding expertise of a highly qualified team of informaticians sinologists, have also offered Jean Lefeuvre’s research on the Chinese oracle bones and bronze inscriptions to the lovers of the Chinese language and of its script in the form of the digital edition of the Grand Ricci (seven volumes, around 9,000 pages) on one single DVD !

That edition was officially launched in 2010 in Shanghai on May 11, exactly four hundred years after the death of Matteo Ricci in Beijing. As a sinologist, Jean Lefeuvre occupies an important place among not a few Jesuit scholars who had lived in China. Their attempts at deciphering the Chinese script and language had started very soon after their arrival on their land of adoption. Matteo Ricci (利瑪竇, 1552-1610) himself had compiled two short “vocabularys”, Portuguese-Chinese (1588) and Chinese-Portuguese (1598), for which he later devised with the help of Lazzaro Cattaneo (郭居靜, 1560-1640) the first transcription scheme in roman letters with diacritical marks indicating the five tones. That scheme was improved by Nicolas Trigault (金尼各, 1577-1628) in his larger dictionary curiously named 《西儒耳目資》 Xi Ru Er Mu Zi [an aid for the ears and eyes of western scholars], Hangzhou, 1626. Several other dictionaries and grammars of the Chinese language have appeared in the following centuries, in particular the works of Léon Wieger (戴蓮良, 1856-1933) on the Chinese characters and of François-Séraphin Couvreur (顧賽芬, 1835-1919) who published the Dictionnaire Classique de la Langue Chinoise [Classical dictionary of the Chinese language], a one man work remarkable “first by the number of entries, about 21,400 single characters, including some corrupted graphies (perhaps the greatest number of single characters entries contained in any Chinese dictionary published in the West); secondly, the entries explain the meanings of each character by quoting the Chinese Classics and texts of various origins […]”

Jean Lefeuvre takes his place in the ranks of these explorers who have gone beyond the boundaries of their cultures and crossed over unmapped territories. But there, they have had access into a new world, a new way of perceiving the world and human life. Let Jean Lefeuvre himself explain his discovery:

“As far as I am concerned, ever since I have begun thirty years ago to study the oracular inscriptions, I have a very affective relation with the Chinese characters. Because I am familiar with the ancient written forms, I can still better feel the soul of a character. This same experience, most of the Chinese people have it with the most current characters.” […] “In fact, the script not only register the thought, but conversely the script informs the thought. Chinese people for more than three thousand years have used ideograms. […] The Chinese way of thinking and the Chinese characters maintain between themselves a very intimate link. For a Chinese, any concept of the thought is linked to such and such a character. By figuring out even mentally the drawn character, it is a whole symbolic world that opens up which the alphabetic transcription would not be able to express in the same way. For instance, the central concept of the Way in Daoism is written 道. Every Chinese people reads in this character a path and a head, expressing the idea of principle.”

When the Grand Ricci was published in 2001, not a few media reported the news with praise for the achievement. One of the articles in its title said briefly about Jean Lefeuvre: “A Defining Dedication”. Obviously, it was more than that!

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Jean Lefeuvre, S.J. Scholarly Articles


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