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In Memoriam Michel Strickman (1942–1994)

Michel Strickman died unexpectedly on August 11, 1994 at Taussat, a small seaside resort on the French Atlantic coast, thirty miles from Bordeaux University—where he had been teaching since 1991. For his friends, the shock caused by this sudden loss is aggravated by the sadness of unfulfilled promise. Despite the old-fashioned charm of his last residence, and his attachment to the exotic garden he had so lovingly created around it, there is no denying that this was an exile. The forthcoming publication of his works would have at last brought him the recognition that he deserves, but he will have been denied this satisfaction.

The self-styled author of the “Strickwick Papers” and self-appointed head of the Ananda Panda Ashram was by all accounts an unusual, and at times controversial, scholar. His dismissal from Berkeley in 1991 became the talk of the provincial town we call “the field,” and it generated serious misperceptions. Although I believe that an injustice was committed then and that a rehabilitation is due, this is not the place and time to enter this debate. I simply want to share the little I knew about this person, who had been for many years one of the scholars I most respected, and who had more recently become a friend.

Michel was born on November 24, 1942 in Fall River Massachusetts. He followed a rather untypical scholarly path. He did not graduate from high school and left for Europe before completing his B. A., going to Bruges and then to Leiden, where he studied Tibetan Buddhism with Professor David Seyfort Ruegg. He was soon invited by Professor Kristofer Schipper to lecture at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, and eventually received his doctorate from this school for his work on Six Dynasties Taoism. During that time, he also studied with Professors Erik Zürcher, Rolf A. Stein, and Max Kaltenmark. Invited to Japan in 1972 for the Tateshina Conference on Taoist Studies, he was to stay there for five years. He came to live on the Kurodani Hill in Kyoto, where he became familiar with Shingon, the form of esoteric Buddhism practiced at Shinnyodō, the temple across the street. There also he became friends with another

much-missed Taoist scholar, Anna Seidel, co-editor with Hubert Durt of the Buddhist encyclopedia *Hōbōgin*, and founder of the *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*.

Michel's growing fame in the world of Buddhist and Taoist Studies led to an opportune appointment at Berkeley in 1977, where he was soon granted tenure. Despite some setbacks, his commitment to and popularity with students never diminished. A few days before his death, he was still expressing to me his concern for some of his graduate students at Bordeaux University. On the day of his cremation, several students came from Paris and Bordeaux to honor their teacher. A letter I received from one of his former students at Berkeley expresses sorrow at the loss of "the man who first got me interested in Chinese religion and taught the most uproariously funny, provocative course I've ever taken." Too provocative for his own good perhaps.

Among scholars too, Michel's work and personality had won him many friends and admirers. His first articles in English, soon followed by the publication of his French dissertation on the Maoshan school, had established him as a leading specialist on Taoism. He continued with a magisterial review article on Tibetan Buddhist Studies, and undertook the edition of three volumes of *Tantric and Taoist Studies* in honor of R. A. Stein. Then came several book-length manuscripts on Chinese and Japanese popular religion, which were circulating among scholars long before being published. Among those, his work on *The Consecration Sūtra*—a small part of which appeared in the book edited by Robert Buswell on Chinese apocrypha—is particularly significant. However, most of these manuscripts remain unpublished: the most important to my mind, "Mantras et mandarins," is scheduled to appear in the spring of 1995 in Gallimard's prestigious Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines. It is a ground-breaking study of Chinese tantric Buddhism, a *tour de force* of erudition that only Michel could achieve—navigating as it does between India, Tibet, China, and Japan, and showing the debt that Taoism owes to Tantrism. It also contains fascinating studies on animate icons, dreams, oracles, and possession, on tantric deities such as Vināyaka and rituals such as the Goma ritual (about which Michel had already published an article in Frits Staal's *Agni*). Another significant work, entitled "Divination and Prophecy," examines the oracular tradition in China and Japan. A third manuscript deals with "Magical Medicine," and it is a study of the

medical aspects of Taoism. It is to be hoped that they will be rapidly published.

Michel's work, ranging geographically from India to Japan, set up new standards of excellence in the field of Asian Religions. Following in the footsteps of European scholars like Paul Mus, Paul Demiéville and Rolf A. Stein, Michel was also conversant with other fields like classical studies, comparative literature, medieval history, and anthropology. I vividly recall one of our last discussions about a recent book, *La bête singulière* by Claudine Fabre-Vassas, a fascinating historical-anthropological study on the pig and its role in Christian antisemitism. He had incorporated some of Fabre-Vassas' insights in his discussion of Vināyaka, the elephant-headed—or sometimes pig-headed—god of obstacles, in "Mantras et mandarins." In return, his discussion of tantric materials sheds new light on Christian and Jewish imagery. This is comparativism at its best, of a scope reminiscent of the work of Georges Dumézil.

Michel's immense erudition, obvious at every page of his works, is also well reflected in his Borgesian library, which contains many rare books and covers practically every important publication in fields ranging from tantric rituals to Western philosophy, from medicine to botany. It is hoped that this library will find its way to a research institution that will make it available to scholars in all fields.

It will take us time to realize the extent of the loss we incurred. Michel was not only a colleague and a friend, but an incomparable guide. His death, following that of Anna Seidel in August 1991, leaves the field of Asian Religions orphaned, and the academic world a little more dull. May at least the spirit of these two scholars and individuals continue to inspire us.

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