LANGUAGE

A Defining Dedication

Many of his co-authors are dead, but Jean Lefeuvre has lived to see the launch of a book that's 9,000 pages long, took decades to compile and is commercially 'totally stupid'

By Jason Dean/TAIPEI

FATHER JEAN LEFEUVRE WAS still a young Jesuit priest when he first began sifting through the scraps of paper covered with scribbled definitions of Chinese characters. The notes were being used as the basis of a new Chinese dictionary that Lefeuvre's Catholic religious order hoped to complete in a few years, maybe a decade or so.

"They expected it to take 15 years at the very most," says the 79-year-old, who joined the project five years after it began.

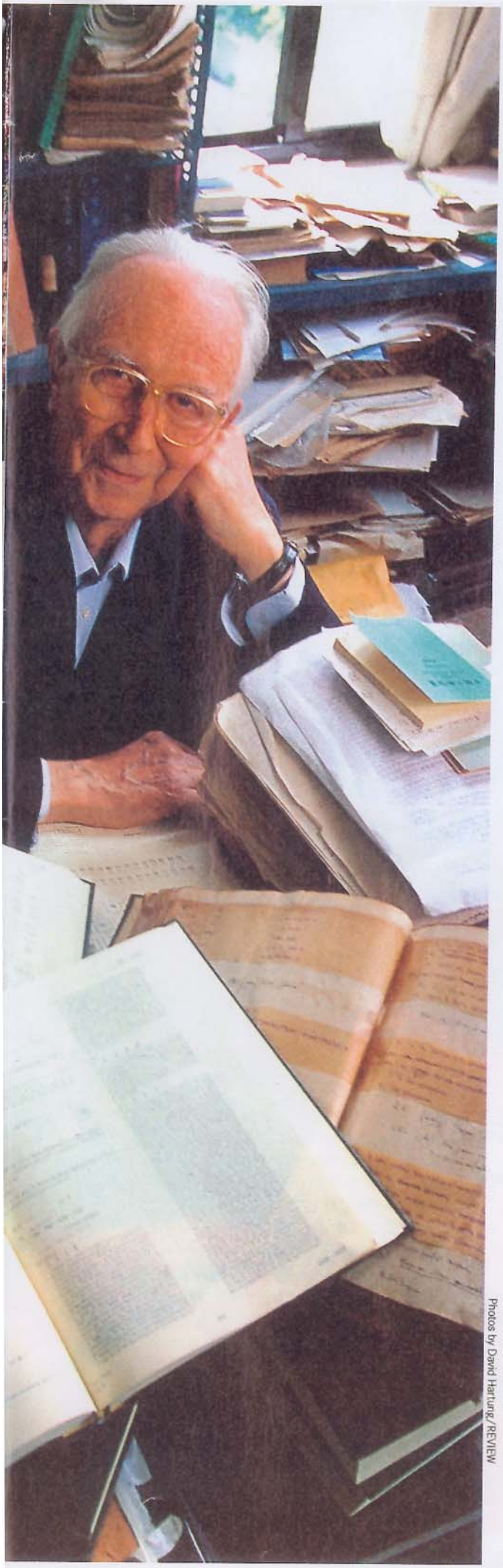
That was in 1955.

The *Grand Ricci*, a 9,000-page Chinese-French dictionary in seven volumes, was finally published last December, and released in Taiwan in April. For French Sinophiles and language-lovers of every nationality, it has been worth the wait. With expressions in French for 13,500 individual Chinese characters and 300,000 phrases, it is easily the most comprehensive source of definitions for Chinese words ever created in any Western language (it's more than twice the size of the biggest Chinese-English dictionary).

The dictionary covers everything from the arcane argot of imperial administration to phrases from communist propaganda, taking in "Elvis Presley" and "Aids" along the way. And with individual word biographies that stretch back to the origins of written Chinese 3,500 years ago, it is also one of the most comprehensive etymological sources on Chinese ever compiled.

The *Grand Ricci*'s deep roots in history are fitting, for the dictionary itself is something of an anachronism. In an era of instant returns, this great work may never make money. Neither an act of charity nor a ploy for profit, it is the product of five decades of scholarship by some 300 people, many of whom, like Lefeuvre, have devoted much of their lives to this one book. Many others never lived to see its completion.

"I think it's very significant," says Vincent Shen, a leading Taiwan scholar of philosophy who teaches at the University of Toronto. "Not only because of its usefulness for scholars, but because it's a continuation of the Jesuit function of serving as a cultural



Photos by David Hartung/REVIEW

A MISSION: Father Jean Lefeuvre has spent much of his life working on the *Grand Ricci* Chinese-French dictionary

mediator, and an example of their intellectual generosity."

The dictionary, and the Ricci Institutes in Taipei and Paris that created it, are named after Matteo Ricci, a 16th-century Jesuit who was perhaps the first Western missionary to successfully bridge the cultural divide between Europe and China. In 1583, the Italian-born Ricci entered China from Macau, then a Portuguese settlement, and from there worked his way around the country spreading Western thinking and amassing an unprecedented understanding of China.

Despite a deep Chinese suspicion of foreigners, Ricci endeared himself to his hosts by sharing with them his polymath's knowledge of Western science. They were particularly impressed with a memory technique that Ricci taught them in which you build a mental structure—an ornate palace, for example—and then fill it with visual representations of the ideas you want to remember.

By the time he died in 1610 in Beijing, the Italian Jesuit had converted some of the country's highest-ranking intellectuals to Catholicism, written several books in Chinese, and established an office in the capital under imperial patronage.

That early success laid the foundation for a Jesuit presence in China that lasted, on and off, for centuries. But after the communist revolution in 1949, religion was quickly brought under tighter government control, and foreign missionary groups were expelled. By the early 1950s, the Jesuits were effectively gone, dispersed to Macau, Taiwan and the Philippines.

"From a market point of view, it's totally stupid to do this in French"

Father Benoit Vermander, Ricci Institute, Taipei

It was against this background that the *Grand Ricci* was born. After a brief start in Shanghai in 1949, the project quickly moved, along with the Jesuits, to Macau. Led by a Hungarian priest, Father Eugene Zsamar, the dictionary was intended initially as an even more ambitious project, encompassing translations of Chinese into not only French, but also Hungarian, English, Spanish and Latin. Zsamar optimistically estimated that each Jesuit could translate 300 items a day, and believed it could all be done in just a few years. "They didn't realize the amplitude of their task," says Father Benoit Vermander, the current head of the Ricci Institute in Taiwan, who helped oversee the final years of the project.

The French-born Lefeuvre's involvement with the project began a few years after he first arrived in China as a trainee priest in 1947. An unruly young man, he had earlier escaped from a Nazi labour camp and, after World War II, set his mind on being assigned by his order to China, against the wishes of his superiors.

His fascination with the Far East had begun at the age of 18, when he first discovered Chinese painting, in particular a work called *The Fisherman*. Its depiction of a tiny inked figure dwarfed by the surrounding countryside gave the nature-loving young man a new perspective on his environment: "They didn't see nature the way I saw it," he says now, his oversized glasses perched professorially ▶▶

on the tip of his nose. "When I discovered those paintings, I was seduced."

After several increasingly uncomfortable years under the new communist regime, Lefeuvre was forced to leave China in 1952. By the mid-1950s, when he joined the dictionary project, the Jesuits had followed the Chinese Nationalists to Taiwan. Work on the English part of the dictionary was then being led by Father Thomas Carroll, an energetic American with whom Lefeuvre quickly developed a close, if occasionally combative, friendship. In August 1964, while on a solo archaeological expedition on an island near Hong Kong, Carroll collapsed under the intense summer sun and fell off a cliff. His body was found the next day. "He died a martyr of science," Lefeuvre recalls, sitting now in his small Taipei office, surrounded by teetering piles of books and papers.

That accident was to have a profound effect on Lefeuvre's life. Carroll had been the dictionary project's chief expert on the obscure subject of oracle bones—sets of turtle shells and ox scapulae that were inscribed with writing in divination ceremonies during the Shang dynasty in the 2nd millennium B.C. These artefacts, first discovered in 1899, are the earliest-known evidence of written Chinese. Despite knowing almost nothing about them, Lefeuvre was given the job of studying the fragments to discern the first meanings of Chinese characters.

The ascetic dedication needed to study such a topic might seem at odds with the more light-hearted side of Lefeuvre, who

ON THE CARDS: Father Benoit Vermander *(left)* runs the Ricci institute in Taipei, which houses the millions of file cards that have been used over the past five decades to compile the dictionary

takes a mischievous pride in the nickname given him by his Chinese friends—*lao mogui*, or "old devil." But the oracle bones became a passion, and the priest today is a leading expert on the subject. "When you study oracle-bone inscriptions, it's just like drinking wine or whiskey," he says. "The more you drink, the more you want to drink."

FINANCIAL HELP

For all the countless hours of dedication from unpaid Jesuit scholars like Lefeuvre, the *Grand Ricci* hasn't come cheap. The project's expenses included creating versions of characters that had never before been printed electronically.

Claude Haberer, chairman of the Paris-based Association for the Grand Ricci Dictionary, which helps administer the rights to the work, estimates the cost of the project at between $5 million and $10 million. Fund-raising was a constant battle, and non-French portions of the project had to be abandoned. Subsidies from the governments of France and Taiwan helped, but by 1999 funding had dried up and work almost stopped. To keep it going, Haberer and others won grants from a number of French companies, including the bank BNP Paribas, where Haberer is a senior executive.

That money may well never be recouped. The Ricci Institutes have printed 3,000 copies of the dictionary, which sells for $699. They are also hoping to issue some spin-off publications, including lexicons for specialized subjects like medicine and Taoism, and are close to finalizing a deal with The Commercial Press, one of China's biggest publishers, for a mainland edition. An electronic version on CD-ROM may be ready in three years. But any sizeable sales would only come with an English edition, which would take even longer to develop.

"From a market point of view, it's totally stupid to do this in French," Vermander concedes. But even Haberer, the banker, is unconcerned about the *Grand Ricci*'s poor business prospects. "This is to China studies what *haute couture* is to *prêt à porter*," he says, referring to the notoriously unprofitable high-end fashion lines produced each year by big fashion designers.

As for Lefeuvre, he is the last of the old Jesuits who dedicated their lives to the *Grand Ricci*. At a ceremony to mark the publication of the dictionary in the Paris headquarters of BNP Paribas, the nearly deaf Lefeuvre shouted a spontaneous eulogy to his departed colleagues that, say those present, moved everyone to tears. But Lefeuvre isn't stuck in the past—at least not exactly. He is planning a new book project, a study of civilization in China at the time of the Shang dynasty, which he sees as a gift to his Chinese friends.

"I'm going to arrive in the Shang and use the oracle bones to describe life in China at that time," he exclaims, before sinking back into his chair. "And then I'm going to stop, because after that, everything is known." ≡