

Obituaries

KNUD LUNDBÆK

(1912–1995)

“Last week I had an acute cerebral attack with left side hemiparesis . . . Actually I was sitting at my typewriter, writing the last page [of my paper “Joseph de Prémare and the Name of God in China”] when I was struck down . . . I was brought to the hospital (to “my” old department of medicine), and have stayed there now for a week, among friends. . . . I can walk now, though not elegantly. Mentally I am unaffected, so I feel myself, and so my doctors say. In all probability there will be recurrences with intervals of weeks, months, perhaps years. In my age these kinds of things are, of course, quite normal, even banal, at any rate not interesting.”*

With this objective, almost clinical description of his own stroke, Professor Dr. Knud Lundbæk began his three-year journey toward death on March 23, 1995. His work was notable for the unusual way in which he entered Sinology and for the creative way in which he applied numerous approaches from his medical research to Sinology. He is yet another example of the fascination which China has held for some of the brightest and deepest minds of Europe (and North America) since the sixteenth century. It was the work of these fascinated minds which created the foundations of the scholarly study of China in the West and it was these foundations which formed the object of his Sinological studies.

Knud Lundbæk was born on December 26, 1912 to a prosperous bourgeois family in Nykøbing, Denmark. In retrospect, he divided his life into three phases: that of a Surrealist poet in Paris in the 1930s, a physician and researcher in diabetes mellitus from 1943 to 1979, and finally a Sinologist from 1980 until 1995. As a diabetologist he came to head a medical division at the University of Aarhus and acquired a distinguished international reputation which culminated with the prestigious Anders Jahre Prize in Medicine, awarded by Oslo University in 1979. He travelled widely and spent 1946–47 at Yale University as a research fellow.

His interest in China began in the 1950s when he became involved in the Denmark–China Friendship Society. In the 1950s he met a cultural attaché at the Chinese embassy in Denmark named Chen Da Yuan. Their initial meeting was later described by Mr. Chen in a preface “Lunbeike Jiaoshou” (Professor Lundbæk) to the work *Antusheng de guxiang* (The homeland of Hans Christian Anderson) (Tianjin, 1960; second edition 1978). It is not coincidental that Lundbæk’s first published work in Chinese (1961) dealt with the occurrence of the Danish words for China and Chinese (*China, Chineser, chinesisk*) in the collected works of H. C. Anderson. As part of his activities with the Denmark–China Friendship Society, Lundbæk visited China in

*This and all other quotations in this obituary are from private letters written by Professor Lundbæk to the author.

1960, 1965, 1975, 1978, 1980, 1982 and 1986. However, early in 1980 he began to feel increasingly disillusioned with developments in contemporary China and as he did so, his interest in Sinological studies grew.

Lundbæk's Sinological career flies in the face of what is regarded as standard training for Chinese studies today. He did not formally study classical Chinese until he was over seventy years old, sitting in classical Chinese classes at the University of Aarhus with students forty or fifty years younger than himself. During his Sinological career he produced four books: *T. S. Bayer (1694–1738)—Pioneer Sinologist* (1986), a translation entitled *Shao Yong's Dialogue between a Fisherman and a Wood-cutter* (1986), *A traditional History of the Chinese Script, from a Seventeenth Century Jesuit Manuscript* (1988) and *Joseph de Prémare S.J. (1666–1736), Chinese Philology and Figurism* (1991). In addition, he published over twenty articles, some in Danish and French, but most in English. Five of these articles have been or are being published in the series *Acts du Colloque international Sinologie*, the proceedings of the triennial meetings at the Jesuit conference-research center in Chantilly, just outside of Paris. Lundbæk faithfully participated in these meetings in 1980, 1983, 1986, 1989 and 1992. His articles appeared regularly in the *Sino-Western Cultural Relations Journal* [formerly *China Mission Studies (1550–1800) Bulletin*] and elsewhere in journals such as the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. His last work, "The Establishment of European Sinology 1801–1815," appeared in *Cultural Encounters, China, Japan and the West* (1995).

Lundbæk's training in the natural sciences shaped his unique approach to Sinology. His research aimed at solving fairly focused problems. One of the most notable dealt with the first translation of the Confucian Four Books into a European language, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (Paris, 1687). He discovered that the Jesuit translators had relied upon the commentary of the well-known sixteenth-century figure and chief Grand Secretary, Zhang Juzheng (1525–82). This discovery came as a surprise to China historians who had studied Zhang. There were other discoveries, including Lundbæk's tracing of the source of the unusual characters found in the first detailed description of Chinese characters to be published in Europe. Lundbæk discovered that these characters printed in Athanasius Kircher's widely-read work, *China illustrata* (1667), were based not upon imaginative fancy, as was widely believed, but rather upon a popular type of Chinese work. He found an example of the latter entitled *Wan bao quanshu* (Encyclopedia of myriad treasures), preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Lundbæk's projects tended to be clearly defined and completed within two years, in part, because this was the time frame of research that had been used in his medical research. Early in his Sinological research, he decided that he would progress from the seventeenth to the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries and this is what he did, death taking him before he was able to complete his planned monograph of Abel Rémusat, the nineteenth-century French Sinologist.

Of course, Lundbæk's transition from the natural sciences to Sinology had eminent precedent in the work of Joseph Needham. The two were well acquainted; they shared certain outlooks, and their lives ended, ironically, almost simultaneously when Needham died the day after Lundbæk (March 23 and 24, 1995). Although neither were orthodox Christians, Lundbæk saw a spiritual affinity between them. He wrote: "JN is and always was a deeply religious man, a mystic, and in his own way a kind of Christian. He was drawn to Chinese matters in his youth for many reasons, but perhaps most of all because he felt the religious impact of early Chinese literature, the Yi Jing most of all, of course. I know him personally from many times here [in Denmark] and in England, and I am sure I have always been able to see this in his works, especially in volume 2 [of *Science and Civilisation in China*], but actually most

all over. He is a friend of mine, and I am a friend of his, but I always knew and he always knew that he is/was something high up, 10,000 li above me spiritually."

Lundbæk was a very charming personality, and part of that charm was his eccentricity. In his small apartment in Aarhus in the kitchen cabinets above the stove and sink, he kept books rather than dishes. He began each day reading a segment from the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and spent perhaps fifteen minutes with his favorite newspaper, *Le Monde*. His established research routine was gruelling: "from 9 A.M. to 11 P.M. with two breaks, (and sleep) at noon and between 19 and 20 [7–8] P.M.—an old peasant way." He cultivated a certain degree of isolation and loneliness; he had no television and he limited himself to ten minutes of radio news each day. He had a drink of whisky every afternoon, without fail. His life was not without sadness and when he was in Paris, he always visited the St. Sulpice Church in order to see Delacroix's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. The painting had a spiritual meaning for him. He explained his affinity for Paris by citing the famous line of verse: "*J'ai deux patries, mon pays et Paris.*"

During his first marriage (to Dorrit Lundbæk), he lived in a large seven-room flat in Aarhus with his wife, one daughter and 6,000 books. Then came an unhappy divorce and the tragic death of his wife by cancer. In 1972 Lundbæk moved into a small two-room studio apartment in Aarhus and reduced his books to 300 in number. He established a firm rule that when he acquired a new book, an old book had to be discarded. Most of his Sinological books, including some astute purchases in antiquariats over the years, were contributed to the East Asian Institute of the University of Aarhus. He remarried a younger woman (Tua Müller) who shared his interest in the Denmark–China Friendship Society. She lived in Birkerød, a new utopianlike, communal village thirty miles south of Copenhagen. They lived apart during the week, but would take turns on weekends, ferrying between Aarhus on Jutland and the island where Birkerød (and Copenhagen) are located. At his death, Lundbæk was survived by one daughter, three granddaughters, one grandson and a great-grandson.

Lundbæk was a forceful personality, at times almost domineering. He hated pomposity and had a fine sense of irony. In 1985 when the Scandinavian Society for the Study of Diabetes established an annual "Knud Lundbæk Lecture" and "Knud Lundbæk Award," he attended the first lecture in Malmö, Sweden and wrote "it was a strange feeling to sit there and it occurred to me that it would have been more proper for me to be dead than to be alive at such an occasion."

Lundbæk loved working with younger scholars and carried on an extensive correspondence with many, who were helped by his interest, insights and encouragement. He was very generous with sharing the results of his research with these scholars. After participating in his last Chantilly meeting in September 1992, he and his wife Tua visited his beloved Paris. He wrote: "the last day we pilgrimaged to the Père Lachaise cemetery and put some flowers on Marcel Proust's grave—he helped me the first days in the hospital [after the stroke in 1992]." After that, his life wound down slowly. He died peacefully in his sleep on March 23 at the home of his wife in Birkerød.

Knud Lundbæk, Surrealist poet, eminent diabetologist, Sinologist, colleague and friend, *requiescat in pace*.

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