

Obituary

In memoriam Franz Michael (1907–92)

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When I remember Franz Michael, his claim that he won all bets invariably comes to mind first. And then, with a certain trembling in his voice, I hear him exclaim: “The gentry, China’s history is the history of the gentry.”

Franz Michael passed away on 1 August 1992 in Carmel, California, where he had spent the last 15 years after retirement with his beloved wife Dolores in a beautiful villa overlooking a bird reservation. I had known him much earlier only from the frog’s perspective, so to speak, when I was struggling through the first lessons of modern Chinese in Taipei. His tall figure would rush through the corridors of the Institute of International Relations, at that time sited in the old Central Daily News building at Chung-hsiao East Road, and disappear behind the door of the director’s office to discuss and design projects and programmes in the field of contemporary China studies. After his retirement, however, and as a guest in his beautiful Carmel residence on a few occasions, I came to know the professor personally. It was, of course, the other way round. The professor then acknowledged me. After what appeared to me as a cross-examination very much like the old German *rigorosum*, where in the end of an allegedly relaxed conversation over a cup of coffee or even a full dinner the candidate learned that he had just received his doctorate, he accepted me as a reasonable person who, henceforth, should address him by his first name.

Franz was a person neither easy to handle nor easy to understand. Emotionally as well as intellectually, he was deeply rooted in his German fatherland, which he loved although it had not loved him. It is this aspect which may qualify me to a certain extent to write in memory of a grand old man in American China studies, although others in the field knew him for much longer and much more closely than I can honestly claim.

Franz was son of a German university professor and was born in 1907 in Freiburg im Breisgau, a place as famous for its lovely site at the western foothills of the Black Forest as for a great university tradition. However, he started his university education at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University in Berlin where he enrolled in the Law Faculty and simultaneously attended classes at the Seminar for Oriental Languages. After obtaining a sinological diploma in 1930, he moved to the University of Freiburg where, three years later, he completed with the highest honours the doctoral programme of the Law Faculty.

He had just accepted the position of an attaché in the German foreign service when the Nazis came to power and his career as a diplomat came to a sudden end. Franz Michael learned that through one of his parents he was a Jew, and, hence, sooner or later his position within the state apparatus under Nazi rule would become untenable.

It is precisely at this juncture that the master-key to Franz Michael’s personality is to be found. In his opinion the question of whether or not he

was a Jew, and, if so how Jewish he was, was irrelevant. He apparently realized that the label "Jewish" was merely a convenient marker to give the new ruling elite an effective measure of mass manipulation; any other heading which provided this would have been equally acceptable. The 26-year-old therefore resigned from his position in the Foreign Office in April 1933, and, as Frederick W. Mote has remarked so strikingly in his foreword to Franz Michael's last and perhaps finest monograph *China Through the Ages*, went into a "self-imposed" exile.

That he felt compelled to choose exile became more obvious as Franz grew older. People who emigrate voluntarily usually assimilate to the new society so perfectly that they lose their national accent. Franz's American English carried an unmistakable German accent all his life, and as an old man he really struggled with the language.

Jewish people in Germany started to be discriminated against in 1933. But the veritable holocaust that this led to by the late 1930s was not anticipated, in particular, by the majority of those who became its victims. There is nothing more compelling, therefore, which testifies to the extraordinary political intuition of Franz Michael than his dramatic decision to obtain a ticket on an ocean-going vessel and, without any further preparation, move to China. There it took him several months to find a position as German language teacher at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou. Here he was to participate, as briefly described in *China Through the Ages*, in the great migration of Chinese universities from the Japanese-occupied coastal areas to the far western interior of China in early 1938. In that same year the now 31-year-old went on a six-month transit visa to the United States. Two days before his visa expired he learned that he had been accepted as a research associate and Charles Lathrop Fellow at the Walter Hines Page School of the Johns Hopkins University, where he stayed from 1939 to 1942.

This marked another juncture in Franz Michael's life which has much to tell about the way he was. With the promise of his appointment at the Johns Hopkins University in his pocket, he went to England to reunite his family and bring them over to the United States. Never in his life would Franz forget that he had found asylum first in Chiang Kai-shek's China and then in the USA. With respect to the latter he could very well be impatient. But he would never say a word against America in the presence of a non-American nor tacitly allow a non-American to criticize the USA in his presence. With respect to China, things were, as far as Franz Michael was concerned, more intricate. Had Chiang Kai-shek's rule survived on mainland China, Franz would perhaps have become one of the sharpest critics of the Kuomintang and its supreme leader. However, as things developed after the end of the Second World War, he perceived politics in China from the vantage point of his experiences in Germany in the 1920s, according to which international socialism or Communism and national socialism or Hitlerism appeared as birds of the same feather. This view which, to date, is highly controversial in Germany, dominated all his criticism as well as his personal gratitude with respect to Kuomintang rule in China.

To say that Franz was an anti-Communist is only half the truth. He was

an *anti-totalitarian* and, hence, an uncompromising critic of totalitarian regimes of whatever ideological persuasion. With such beliefs he obviously came to the fore during the Second World War and long Cold War period. Incidentally, these were also the most prolific years in Michael's life.

In 1942, he was appointed chairman of an Army Specialized Training Programme at the University of Washington in Seattle. He had to design the programme by himself to produce a crew of knowledgeable East Asian specialists in the shortest possible time to serve the war effort. Simultaneously, he received a professor's chair of Chinese History and Government at that university which he held together with a number of other academic functions until 1964, when he accepted an invitation from the Institute for Sino-Soviet Studies at the George Washington University. There he remained until his retirement.

During his 35 years as a university professor, Franz Michael, together with George E. Taylor, helped to initiate interdisciplinary "Area studies" in the United States and, together with Richard L. Walker, Wu Chün-ts'ai and others, designed annual Sino-American conferences with mainland China specialists on Taiwan. He introduced more than 10,000 students intellectually to China and the East Asian area. His successful doctoral candidates include Frederick W. Mote, Lyman Miller, William Johnson, Richard C. Thornton, Philip Huang, James T. Myers, Harry Lamley, Hugh Kang, Harvey Nelson, Felix Moos and Chang Chung-li. Jürgen Domes submitted his habilitation thesis to him and with his consent received his *venia legendi* in political science and modern Chinese history at the Free University of Berlin. Furthermore, Franz Michael wrote a daunting number of articles and books, the most important of which were *The Origin of Manchu Rule in China* (1942), *The Far East in the Modern World* (together with George E. Taylor, 1955) and *The Taiping Rebellion*, history and documents in three volumes (1971).

After his retirement in 1977, he still maintained a busy scholarly life as Visiting Mellon Professor at the University of Pittsburgh, Research Associate at the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, Seminar Lecturer at the Smithsonian Institution, book author and convenor of a number of symposiums.

Although his life became somewhat quieter after he reached the age of eighty, he retained a certain bitterness which had characterized his state of mind ever since the second half of the 1960s when the Cultural Revolution unfolded in China, the Sino-Soviet conflict assumed an immediate explosiveness and social conflict over the war in Vietnam dragged the United States into a major psychological crisis. These times no longer welcomed voices like that of Franz Michael who advocated that the Chinese Communists should be taken for what they were and, actually, wanted to be, namely true Marxist-Leninists, and who insisted that the Sino-Soviet conflict needed to be analysed in other than the traditional terms of clashing nationalisms. In a number of articles published in such respected periodicals as *World Politics*, *Orbis* and *Problems of Communism*, he argued that the story of the Communist takeover in China was not that of a peasant revolution but of a movement organized and led by Communists. The

Kuomintang was overthrown on the mainland not by a popular uprising but by a "military defeat." Franz also vehemently contradicted the notion that the Chinese Communists had designed their own revolutionary strategies which differed from those of the Bolsheviks. However, all his arguments were set aside when after the crucial developments in the year 1968 it seemed that either the West had to accept the People's Republic of China with all its Communist myths and Western misconceptions, or the United States was going to lose the Cold War. Franz had to wait until the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 before all the positions advanced by him were confirmed by reality.

But what did he mean by asserting that China's history was the history of the gentry? When I heard this for the first time, I could only follow him in so far as I knew that he considered himself a Weberian. Within his studies on Chinese history, which, in comparison with his contributions to contemporary China studies, clearly formed the greater part of his work, he had spent a whole decade on research on the Chinese gentry, the results of which he left, however, to his student Chang Chung-li to publish. Against this background, his statement appeared as a typical Weberian generalization. Only recently have I started to think that the old man might have had much more in mind than simply to bring a complex social reality to its main denominator. From his insights into the state of the PRC, Franz Michael may have drawn the conclusion that without the force of the Confucianist educated man who at any given time and in all circumstances in his autonomous individuality defended a set of historical values and virtues and, thus, culture, China would have been nothing more than an archaic and, hence, rather inhumane episode in history. A growing number of indications seem to point to the possibility that the final balance sheet of Communist rule in China will confirm Franz Michael in this utterly pessimistic evaluation concerning the PRC, too.