



Dr. Matthias Eder S.V.D.

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Founder and editor of *Asian Folklore Studies*
Member of the Anthropos Institute

About two years ago Dr. Eder went to his office on the campus of Nanzan University, but suddenly he felt that he could not climb the stairs anymore. He thought everything would be well again after a short rest, but he was not to climb those steps anymore for some time. Instead, he was hospitalized and had to be treated for an acute heart failure. For some time it was uncertain whether he would overcome the crisis and nobody would have imagined that he would be back to work about two months later.

This crisis was not Dr. Eder's first brush with death. But from that time on he increasingly felt that his years claimed their tribute and that he had to slow down in his work schedule. Nevertheless, almost daily he kept going to his office dividing his time between work for his journal and his most beloved pastime: painting.

It is not too much to say that these two things were the pillars that sustained his life to the very last day. He loved to paint. There he could find relief and alleviation from the tensions and anxieties his daily work held in stock for him through many years. The relaxed and comforting atmosphere of friendship was not unknown to him, but at least in his last years he did not have many friends. In a sense, however, for all his scholarly life he was what the Japanese call an *ippiki ōkami*, a "lonely wolf". He started his career in difficult times, but neither then nor in later times did he let the events take hold of him or let them disturb his determination. He makes a remark somewhere that external circumstances managed to change the course of his life only once—when he had to leave Peking without wishing to do so. For many years, pressing financial and other difficulties made him almost continuously worry about the future of his journal. Repeatedly he did not know whether the next issue could be published or whether the journal's last

day had finally arrived. It was almost like a chain of rebirths, one after another, through a period of time close to half of a century.

Nanzan University finally gave a definite helping hand and agreed to finance the journal as its own publication. The Nanzan Anthropological Institute was to take care of the journal's future. Personally Dr. Eder had always understood his work for the journal as his particular contribution to the missionary efforts of the religious order whose member he was. Therefore, the idea that all should be transferred to a secular institution was rather hard for him to take, but on the other side, he felt assured and relieved, because the journal would be carried on as a platform for scientific exchange to the benefit of Asian and non-Asian countries and the study of their cultures.

Matthias Eder was born into a farmer's family in a small alpine market town, Abtenau, south of the city of Salzburg in Austria. During the years he studied at the Borromäum in Salzburg, his interest in foreign peoples and cultures arose, something rather extraordinary for a boy from a village of farmers and lumber workers, as he sometimes said. Upon graduation he decided to join the missionary Society of the Divine Word. In 1930 he was ordained a priest and shortly afterwards in the same year he embarked for the Far East, where he was to spend fifty years of his life with only few interruptions.

After language study in Japan he taught for about a year at a High School in Kanazawa, but quite soon he felt that the work of an ordinary missionary did not suit him. He was much more inclined to study the language, history, religion and customs of the country where he was living than to spend his days in direct missionary work. Finally he gained the approval of his superiors to study ethnology in Europe. He pursued his studies at Vienna, Paris and Berlin in the last years before World War II, in a Europe of growing turmoil. In 1938, almost immediately after he had received his doctor's degree from the University of Berlin, he left again for the Far East, but this time for Peking, where he took up a professorship at the Catholic Fu-jen University.

He was convinced that it was unsound to neglect the lower cultural strata in a highly sophisticated and advanced civilization. He always took a special interest in the life and customs of the common people, but he tried to see them in their wider cultural and historical context. When Fu-jen University founded the Museum of Oriental Ethnology, he found there a field of activity much to his liking. It is there that in 1942 he started the journal *Folklore Studies*¹ as the official organ of the

1. The journal appeared under this name until 1962. From 1963 it is published as *Asian Folklore Studies* under the sponsorship of various institutions, presently by the Nanzan Anthropological Institute.

Museum.

Seven volumes of *Folklore Studies* appeared in Peking before the threat of invasion by Mao's forces made the foreign missionary professors leave Peking and abandon the University. Not much more than what everybody could carry as hand luggage could be taken along. Dr. Eder went to Japan and it seems a small miracle that he was able to publish the next volume of the journal almost with no delay in 1949. Since he still hoped that one day he could go back to Peking, he kept Peking's name on the coversheet, but these hopes had finally to be abandoned. Work in an economically and also spiritually exhausted Japan was not easy, but with the help of the Society of the Divine Word in the first place, and later of Indiana University, Bloomington, and the Divine Word Universities in Asia the work with the journal was continued. At times Dr. Eder taught courses for the personnel of the American Armed Forces and later also at the *American School in Japan* to help guarantee the continued publication of the journal. In his free time he engaged in his own particular type of field work. Soon after his arrival in Japan he acquired a motorcycle. With this motorcycle and a tent he visited the countryside whenever possible. Yet he was not a fieldworker in the strict sense. He preferred to work at his desk. He certainly was convinced that field work was important, but he saw it more as a kind of illustration of what one has learned from the study of documents, than as a scientific method in its own right. He was always deeply interested in the history of phenomena, be they religious beliefs or forms of material culture. Therefore, however interesting present forms may be, in his eyes they present but the surface of the matter. To understand them appropriately and within their own context one must study their history at least as far as it is possible.

It is no exaggeration to say that the journal Dr. Eder edited for close to forty years was his life. It consumed his energy, being at the same time a fountain of energy and determination. It shaped the course of his life to a very large extent. Even when he went abroad for some length of time, it followed him: when he taught at the Folklore Institute of Indiana University in 1966, or when he went on a homeleave and then spent a year in Taiwan from 1974 to 1975.

Dr. Eder understood his work first of all as a service to the community of scholars of folklore in general and of Asian folklore in particular. He had spent fifty years in the Far East for this purpose and he loved the Far East and its continually intriguing cultures, but he also loved his far-away home country, Austria, and especially her mountains. That is why he liked to spend many days in summer in the cool of Karuizawa, Tokyo's mountain resort. He also used to take active

part, as long as he was in Tokyo, in the life of the Austrian community. And he was most pleased when the President of the Austrian Republic decorated him with the "Honorary Cross for Sciences and Arts, First Class" in March 1968.

One of the motifs Dr. Eder liked most for his paintings was the five-storied pagoda of Kōshōji, an old temple in the vicinity of the Piokan. On the fair days, the *ennichi*, of this temple old people come to visit and pray there for the grace of a smooth death so that family members will not be unduly inconvenienced by the strain of a long illness. Dr. Eder certainly did not like to have to depend on others. And in his last moments he did not. He passed away peacefully and unnoticed by anybody during the night of April 27th, 1980. He was 78.

PETER KNECHT

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