

## Interview with Elisabeth Rochat de la Vallée

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DM: Can you tell us something about yourself and how you came to study the Chinese classics?

ER: I was fortunate to be born into a family which allowed me to do all the study that I wanted to do. I think I was quite lucky because my parents loved each other and they loved their children, and that is a great basis. Because of that I did not have many of the problems that can occur at a very deep level. I was able to relax! I was also very lucky to be born in 1949, so I was 20 in 1969, which was a prosperous time and there were no fears for the future, everything was open, and there was no urgency to find a job, or to study for a job, because if you had a diploma, you could find a job. If you were a woman it was even more open. As a woman I was responsible only for myself - if I had a family I would have had to take care of a family - but I was free to do whatever I wanted to do. My parents were not very rich but they were able to help me to study, so I was not constrained to make money to help my family. So I feel that I was very lucky.

Of course at this age I was thinking about all the questions of life and death - the meaning of life - where are we coming from and going to etc. Because I was free to study whatever I liked I also questioned the purpose of all that. And the area of study that I chose was classics, literature and philosophy.

I was a bit afraid of the scientific approach - though I was very interested in biology, I was afraid that it would not have an overview - or to have an overview - but to be forced to spend all my life working on one leg of a spider - because although the situation was very open and free for me as a girl, the other side of that was that in the late 60' early 70s there was really no hope for a woman to become the boss! Not for another 20 or 30 years! I don't really enjoy being in command - but I really hate to be commanded! Especially by someone who is more stupid than me! So for all these kind of reasons I decided to follow the literary and philosophical side of things, and to study languages, Latin, Greek and a bit of ancient Hebrew. I studied for a masters degree in Etruscan history, so I was not interested in the study of language for its own sake, but in order to understanding the way of life and the vision of life. I also continued to study philosophy, which was interesting but did not give me a real idea of how to live.

I was brought up and educated as a catholic, but of course when I was a teenager this had no real meaning to me. There were many questions and I was really looking for something that touched the reality of life - to give some kind of meaning. I met Father Larre when I was just 20, at the time when I was questioning all this and through that meeting I was able to feel that there was some kind of reality in Christ. So I remained a catholic and I have always basically remained a catholic, though maybe not in the same way. I began to discover Chinese thinking through Father Larre, who was a Jesuit priest, although he never tried to tell me that I should be a good catholic! He was too clever to do that! And at that time I had some kind of contradiction in my mind.

DM: So how did you meet him? Did you have the intention of meeting him?

ER: No. It was by chance. I did not know who he was, and had no idea that he was a sinologist. Of course I knew a little bit about China - but I had no idea about Chinese philosophy at that time. I think that I liked about Father Larre was not that he was a sinologist, but that he was a real human being. Someone with a very deep sense of what it means to be human. He answered questions by really listening - and answering in an unexpected way - with life. He answered with the reality of life and not with concepts. I was completely fed up with concepts. It is very easy to play with concepts - but where does it take you? So I was really interested by that - and that was the reason why I continued to see him. He had spent more than 20 years in Asia, in China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines, Japan - so he was really impregnated by that experience. And he was working at that time on his PhD thesis on the Huainan zi, and also starting a translation of the Daode jing.

I started to see more of him and speak with him about China, Chinese, the philosophical texts - he was more interested in Daoism, but in the philosophical texts of the Daoists. So little by little I found myself completely immersed in Chinese - learning Chinese, writing Chinese, trying to translate Chinese, and I began with the classical texts. The first text I studied was the Laozi, which was Father Larre's speciality.

DM: So how did you learn Chinese? Did he teach you?

ER: At first I was interested by the way of thinking, because it was through this way of thinking, specially the thinking impregnated by Daoism, which was Father Larre's approach to China and Chinese, that there was a kind of reality of life. It was possible to grasp this kind of reality of life - real at each level - real in the thinking, real in the spirit and the way to go behind the formulation with something which is more powerful and sustaining, but also real in the way to act in daily life. In Western philosophy and spirituality - say when we look at Hegel or Kant - I always wanted to know how I can live according to that - and would want to discuss it with anyone I met - otherwise what is the point? That is why I stopped my studies of philosophy. But through Father Larre's presentation of Chinese thinking, I felt that I could find something that was possible as a way of life.

At around the same time, 1969 or 1970, Father Larre met Dr. Jean Schatz, who was a medical doctor and acupuncturist. So this brought the added dimension of medicine, which was interesting and important because I saw it as a kind of field of experiment with life - because we do something and we get a result. So I also began to study Chinese medicine, mainly the classical texts, and I continued to study classical Chinese in the Daoist texts with Father Larre. I also began to study modern Chinese, because it was a necessity - not at University, because I was still finishing my classical studies, and I also thought that if I wanted to study modern Chinese it was best to have a Chinese teacher and then go to China. In 1974 I spent one year in Taiwan. It was still difficult to visit mainland China at that time because of the Cultural Revolution.

I worked with Father Larre, on the Daoist texts and also some of the basic medical texts, and I also worked with Dr. Jean Schatz on Chinese medicine and how these medical texts are able to sustain modern medical practice. Of course - we were always making links between the two - because it is the same language, the same philosophical background, the same people, and of course there are deep links within these texts. Gradually I developed more knowledge of the texts throughout the years. In the late 70s, Father Larre

and Dr Schatz started a study and translation group in Paris, studying texts from mainly the BC era.

Dr Jean Schatz died prematurely in 1984, and Father Larre and I continued to work on all these aspects, trying to see the vision of life and the conduct of life through these texts - to see what kind of reality was lived by people at that time. Because to understand a text is not only to understand the grammar and the linguistics, but to understand what kind of meaning it had for the people who wrote it, the people who read it then and those who read it now. We know that we are no longer living in the same world as the one of our grandfathers - the vision of the world has definitely changed - we have a complete shift in our vision of the world and we cannot go back. Things have changed. How much more so for those who lived in the early centuries BC. We cannot speak, we cannot see, we cannot act in the same way, with the same pattern, because it is not the same thing. Nevertheless, reality has not changed, and the way we react, the way we look at and experiment with this reality we still share with any human being of any time.

So we wanted to attempt to present this to Westerners - acupuncturists and others interested in a kind of quest for a vision of the reality of life, and the quest for the reality of life is not different for me from the spiritual life. Spiritual life is not a dream - it is the deepest level of reality. We always have to go deeper into the reality of what we are and how we perceive reality. This is a kind of spiritual quest. After that, choice is possible and there may be a difference in the basic approach between Confucianism, Daoism and Christianity.

So if we find that in the quest into reality we use the knowledge of the order of the Universe, in order to model ourselves, little by little, our body, our mind, our reactions, this may reflect the Confucian vision. But if we were to model - not exactly model, but model in order to integrate, and perhaps disappear - to blend into this reality as the One, but with no real use of consciousness, which is strongly developed in Confucianism, and not from my own will, but from merely being human - this would be the Daoist way. A kind of merging into something greater than I am, but which at the same time makes me greater - but with the disappearance of consciousness. The Christian idea is more that reality is not consciousness, is not the merging of consciousness into something other, because it is most important to model myself my flesh and my mind on love. The love relationship is seen as the way to go deeper and deeper into reality.

This is very basic of course! But there is some difference. After that, what we have to do is to go deeper and deeper into the reality of the way that we have chosen. And that way will not show you the same landscape. We cannot say that the ways are the same. Perhaps they are of equal value, nobody knows, but we know that they are not exactly the same.

This is important because nowadays there are people who in the name of some kind of illusion of universality, say Oh yes, it is the same mountain you are climbing! Perhaps, but not by the same path. But there are also many things that we have in common and it is certainly through Daoism that I was able to be a Christian, and to remain a Christian. When you are in your own culture you see all the things that are wrong - and that is very difficult - but if you make a kind of detour and look directly to the essential through a different perspective - you are able to see more clearly, without being distracted by those pitiful, miserable little things - and after that you can come back, and see the way in your own culture.

So I am still, and will always be completely fascinated by the Chinese classical texts, the Daoists texts of Laozi, Zhuangzi, because they for me they fill this expectation I had over 30 years ago - this kind of grasp of something real at each level of the human dimension.

Father Larre was very eager to present this Chinese approach to Westerners - not to convert them to any kind of thing - but just to enrich and to enable them to deepen their own understanding by knowing another way to look at reality.

DM: Would you say that he was a contemplative? Because from what you say you both have a deeper view than just an academic study.

ER: I think this comes from a vital need for spirituality - for a reality which is not limited by what I see. And what is invisible? We don't know what it is. We don't know how this compares to the idea of a god in the sky. But what do you do when you are a contemplative in a monastery? What do you do when you are a Daoist in the mountains? You look at what? You look at the clouds, you look at the sky, you look at heaven, but you look at what? You look at nothing, but that nothing is not just nothingness, it is a kind of ultimate smallness where we can root something, where everything can be turned around - it is very delicate, impossible to explain - nearly impossible to live - and it is also the only option.

So I think that what I feel is close to what Father Larre might have felt - not that we spoke about this. We were always working together, but we also had a kind of silence between us which meant that we did not discuss everything, there was some kind of reserve.

DM: A kind of unspoken understanding between you.

ER: Yes, but of course, you never quite know whether it is an understanding or not! And sometimes it was a misunderstanding. Because that is the way that relationships work! We had some memorable fights! But I think that is quite normal. He had his temper and I have mine.

Father Larre was never just a scholar. First he was a priest. So he was also active as a priest. And he always remained a Jesuit priest. Some times there were things he had to do in his role as a priest. And it was his way to be within life and in relationship with others, not just enclosed in a solitary study of the texts. He was always relating to others because for him I think relationships were the foundation of humanity, certainly with a deep spirituality, and his own way to live. He also was someone who did many things - he founded the Ricci Institute in Paris, but also when Saigon fell to the Vietcong in 1975, he founded a shelter for people coming from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, he raised money, and it was a lot of work. Having spent ten years of his life in Vietnam, he wanted to do what he could to help people coming from Vietnam as refugees to France. So he founded a shelter, but he also took care of it and organised it, with a revolutionary idea that it should be governed by the Vietnamese themselves - the cook was Vietnamese - and the structure saved a lot of money, so he was also a good Jesuit!

When it was well established, with its own directors, he did not stop there but continued to help the people to re-establish themselves within the French community. So he used his vast network of friends to organise an association - which was quite new at the time. He

raised money in order to establish a kind of security fund. Refugees who wanted to create their own business would come to us, and we would be able to lend money from the fund - or stand as guarantor for a loan. Maybe one would be a medical doctor, but had to pass an exam in France to validate his license to practice. If he were to go to the bank - he would be seen as just a poor Vietnamese without resources, so the bank would refuse or ask for a guarantee, or a very high rate of interest. Or maybe they wanted to buy a restaurant - or found a small electronics firm. So we would research the ideas, and if we felt that it was sustainable, we would go to the bank, and stand as guarantors of the loans, and this worked for 10 years and we helped 3,000 people in 800 businesses. And each successful business would give just a little bit of money to maintain the security fund. That was Father Larre! He was able to do that - and to have the understanding that this was also part of his life. His life was not just to be a scholar, it was to be present where he needed to be present. He never hesitated to take his car when he was still driving and to drive several hundred kilometres to see someone if he felt that it was necessary. He was this kind of person.

DM: So you have studied the Laozi and the Zhuangzi and you teach from them. What do you see as the main differences in those texts?

ER: It is absolutely not the same kind of work. The Laozi has a kind of impact which is very broad because it is able to embrace so much in a small sentence - you are able to bring a lot of yourself to the text- so the richer you are the richer the Laozi is. You give the Laozi to someone with a narrow mind and they will see it as a collection of proverbs, or as just common sense, but if you give it to someone over 20, 30, 60 years, they will always add something. But add something to what? To the Laozi? Perhaps. To themselves? Perhaps. It will help an understanding. So the Laozi is quite unique from this perspective. And also you may embrace the Laozi in this way.

The Zhunagzi is of a different dimension. There is a kind of unity in the Laozi, even if it is not one text, but in Zhuangzi, the whole 33 chapters, we have more a feeling of a community of thinking than of one person's thought. I think that what is nice in the Zhaungzi is that you really feel a personal quality, more than with the Laozi. And it is interesting to figure out these feelings, what was this person thinking and feeling, what was the value of life - and this kind of experiment with the value of life. The state of consciousness that is described in the Zhuang zi had a real meaning for those writing and living it. We are able to understand that and to see this state of consciousness at each level of our daily life. For me the Zhuangzi is not a book that is for people in the mountains, it relates to daily life. As I said before, if a book has value it must relate to daily life. The state of consciousness is really what makes us human.

DM: And a sense of humour!

ER: Oh yes! It points things out which are part of our daily experience but which we may never notice. The Laozi is more an attempt to teach something.

DM: What are the main teachings that come through to you in the Zhuangzi?

ER: The main teaching is that we are all part of it - nothing is excluded! Nothing is excluded because the reality is that everything is together in time and space. There is this kind of unity. And that is not a concept, or a function or vision of the mind, it is what really makes sense of our life - because we are just a specific expression for a time of this reality - and so there is a joy to be really with that. And at the same time it is the best way to govern, the best way to have good health.

Living for myself is to impose limitation. Limitation to my body, to my consciousness, because I refuse to be what I really am - which is just a part of this reality - which is the unity of everything - the wholeness of everything. But as a potentiality, rather than something tangible. Everything that is tangible shows that it is not by itself. So if it is not by itself - I am not by myself. And to be myself - is not to be by myself! Not to be selfish. Not to be separate. This is something that we also find in Confucianism - to have no personal will. To have a personal will is in a way an aberration. In the name of what? If you say in the name of heaven, then it is better to have the will of heaven.

I think that it is this kind of basic vision leading to a way to conduct life - which is coming back to oneself by a kind of renunciation of the ego or all the personal manifestations of the self. I don't need self - because the best of life is what I share! The sign that this is correct is that I find some kind of deep joy even if it is borne out of hard times and difficulties.

But of course always and everywhere - in Christianity or any kind of spirituality or religion - there is this double aspect that it is also the manifestation of the fear of human beings, the feeling that we have to escape death in one way or another. But at the same time there is something that sustains people to live with that. If I escape life -by not considering what I experience between the moment I am born and the moment I die - in this case I escape death. So when it is said that to be dead or alive is the same thing - of course it is not - but also it is. Now this is very difficult, because we touch on something that can only be realised within the consciousness and the life of the individual. So it is not what is said - or what is believed - it is the way that any human individual is able to live it. But I am sure that there are real Daoists. Not so many - but that there are people who are living with that and with a cosmic mind.

DM: Can you tell us a little about your work on the Chinese/French Ricci dictionary?

ER: In the late 1940s there were some Jesuits living in China and just before the conquest by the communists they were expelled from China. There were some Hungarian Jesuits, and they had the idea to make a dictionary - you know - you are out of a job, you are Hungarian, and you are a linguist - so! And of course it is a Jesuit sport to make dictionaries! Father Yves Raguin had held this idea for a long time, to create a good Chinese/French dictionary, because there were none. They began in the late 1940s in Taiwan, with the idea of a multi-lingual dictionary. A dictionary from the Chinese into five languages. - French, English, Spanish, Hungarian and Latin. They worked together for several years in order to select the entries, but after a few years the English part stopped because Father Carrol who was in charge of it died accidentally in Hong Kong. The Latin was also abandoned as it was no longer fashionable.

Twenty years on the situation had changed completely and the Jesuits asked Father Yves Raguin, who was the head of the project, to finish it in one year. He had a kind of fit! He bargained and finally was given two years to complete something. So he decided not to attempt to finish the whole work, but to take the core of it - the most common characters - and to make a small dictionary. That was in 1972, Father Larre was already back in Paris, but he had worked on the dictionary in the 60s when he was in Vietnam, so he went each year to help. For example, in early 1970 - 71 we worked at the Ricci Institute on the definition of the 64 hexagrams. We spent one year on this, with a group of 8 people meeting just once a week!

Finally in the summer of 1975 I participated a little in the final editing of this dictionary. It was published in 1976. It is a good dictionary with 6,000 characters and 50,000 compounds. After that there was a bit of rest - there was no money, just a little in Taiwan - and there were 40 volumes that were typed, 18,000 single characters and 180,000 compounds. In 1987, the Taiwanese and French governments asked the Ricci Institute, both in Paris and Taiwan, to resume the work on the Great Ricci dictionary, and to review and publish the data that we had. It was decided to put it all on to computer - which in 1987 was quite difficult - as it was not in English but in French. At that time it was difficult to mix Chinese and English - but for other languages it was almost impossible. All the ASCII code not used by the English language was used to code Chinese characters - so if you wanted to write a language other than English with Chinese it was impossible. It is not easy even now, but at that time there were just no programs. But Father Caput in Taiwan found a way to mix French and Chinese in an acceptable way and they started to enter all the data on to the computer.

It was also decided that we should change the plan to include two new areas - the first was to look at the evolution of the language, because most of our references were from the dictionaries of the 30s and 40s, and since that time the Chinese language had completely changed. More than that - the language of science had completely developed and evolved. For example, all the new language of computer technology, and modern physics had completely changed over that time. So there was much to do in this area. We also wanted to be more systematic and exhaustive in the vocabulary of traditional Chinese. So we created specialised fields of knowledge - History, Geography, Historical Geography, Administration, Historical Administration, Literature, Chinese Medicine, Philosophy, the Vocabulary of Philosophy in Chinese - and the vocabulary of Chinese Philosophy! - because as in medicine there is the vocabulary of Chinese medicine and the vocabulary of Western medicine in Chinese! So the idea was to include both the modern and classical Chinese, and to work with Sinologists who were experts in each field of knowledge. With computer technology it was possible to do this.

We also decided to look back into the earliest meaning of the language, and using over 2,200 characters, starting with the very ancient oracular inscriptions of the 14th or 13th centuries BC - we looked at the evolution of the form of writing, and the evolution of the meaning of each term. So we used the inscriptions on tortoise shell, horse's scapula, bronze, and finally the classical texts - so that was a lot of work.

We started in Paris in 1989 - 1990 to contact French-speaking sinologists, and the Ricci Institutes in Paris and Taiwan worked for about ten years on this project. The last years of the project were in Paris as we had to gather everything together there, and it was also to be printed in France. Father Larre was involved at each level and managed each of the teams of sinologists, working in each specialist area - which in some cases involved the creation of a completely new field of study, as nothing yet existed. We also had to work

with the technical side, because of course there were a lot of problems with computer technology. We worked ourselves on the ancient part of the dictionary which was our own field of knowledge, as well as re-reading and proofing all the other areas, which included 200,000 basic characters. We also had to raise the money to continue, and to find printers and publishers etc!

We printed the first dictionary in 1999 with just the single characters, in two volumes plus and index, and this was really the last effort of Father Larre. After that he began to become weak and in beginning of 2001 he became really sick. He died in December 2001, almost at the same time as the Grand Ricci dictionary in seven volumes was published. So that included around 290,000 compounds.

DM: And are there plans to translate the dictionary into English?

ER: Well some of it already exists in English. The thing to do would be to work on the classical section, because there is nothing in English on classical Chinese. But apparently no-one is interested! What will probably happen is that someone will make a dictionary copying the Ricci. Because of course it is now published. And of course to make the Grand Ricci, we used a lot of dictionaries, but we also used experts, who understood the use of certain characters in certain specific contexts, and many Chinese checked it - so much of the work was new.

DM: In the work that you do - you travel a lot teaching - do you have any real feeling of direction or purpose that you want the work to follow?

ER: In the topics that I teach?

DM: Yes.

ER: What I am able to do is to teach from the Chinese classics. One way or another it is always teaching from the Chinese classics - whatever the topic. So I may be asked to do something - and I will say that I am unable to do it - I have to be free to teach what I know.

DM: So there is no direction that you would prefer to go in?

ER: I prefer not to think like that because it is dangerous. Of course there are things that I like to do, but if I do them too often I may just begin to lose the taste or just do it automatically. Doing different things - because there is always a kind of unity coming from the Chinese classical texts - allows me to have another perspective, and to come back with another kind of richness. So even if I think - Oh I don't like that! - if I spend time with it, finally I will grow to like it.

DM: So there is no text that you have not yet got around to but you would like to study?



ER: Oh sure! But at the same time if I do not read them that is also okay. It's not that I keep reading new texts or keep rereading and going deeper into the same texts. Sometimes I may suggest a topic because I would like to revisit something - not exactly as a challenge but that it is a good thing.

DM: Some of the teaching that you do is more a direct study of the text - is this something that you prefer?

ER: In a way it is easier to work directly from the text - especially if it is a rich text -it is a guideline - so you know where you are. The Chinese characters nourish me - and I really like that. And if I work with a text it is a sign that the people who are working with me have a certain level of understanding and of course that makes it easier. It is not only that I am working with the text, but that I am with people who want to work with the text too. That is quite different from standing in the front of a classroom, and half of the people are unsure of the meaning of yinyang!

Of course - in order to work with a text the students must be of a certain level, because there is direct exposure to the Chinese way of thinking - no filter. Of course there has to be a kind of synthesis in order to make it understandable - but at the same time not to reduce it to Western thinking. Though of course we always have to remember that we all share the experience of being human.

DM: You are known in the UK and in the US for your teaching within schools of Chinese medicine. What other teaching do you do?

ER: I always teach outside of Chinese medicine, for example in the Ricci Institute, and the Jesuit faculty where I teach philosophy from the texts. There is one text group here, others in the US and Israel. To make a living I teach Chinese medicine! But to study more philosophy we just need a group of people and a place to meet!

DM: Do you find the sharing of texts within your teaching to be enriching of your own understanding of the texts?

ER: Yes, because it is always interesting to try to translate and try to explain, and to be with different people, and not only different people but different civilisations. It is not the same perspective if I am in England, or France, or Italy or in Israel, the whole ambience is different, the questions are different, so I am never sure where my ideas are coming from, but they change. And this is affected by the different groups. I do not teach the same thing each time, because I am different and the people around me are different. I don't know how but I know that sometimes it is difficult, it may be tiring, but also I may discover something that has never occurred to me before. I may explain a certain chapter of the Laozi twenty times, and it will be the same but not the same - and certain texts are able to support that. And there are other texts that are too weak to do that. Sometimes it is difficult not to remain in the teaching - because you are interested in a small point but you cannot share it without explaining the whole basis of that. But generally it is good!

And of course - I love to speak - I love to teach.

DM: Spontaneous interaction seems to be very much a part of your teaching. So things may surprise you too.

ER: Yes sometimes there are questions which surprise you - sometimes there are questions which are very stupid! But even then I will really try to answer and sometimes it may happen that it is possible to make some kind of change. It does not happen often. But suddenly something can change. But I do try to answer the question if the question is coming from the person. Some people ask clever questions but it is not coming from their own selves. That I don't like. So I will try to encourage them to ask what is a real question for them. And of course I am speaking more about questions of philosophy than of medicine.

DM: So there is an intention of bringing out the living reality of the text?

ER: Well - why do I spend hours and hours on a text, trying to understand or translate or explain the text if it is not for the reality of life? Of course it is also to make a living, but it is not that! It would be dead. And of course Father Larre taught like that - and because I spent so much time around him, I picked up a lot of his way of seeing and doing, and incorporated that into my own way. But it was a huge influence.

DM: Have you met many people with a similar feel for the classics and the Daoist approach and this feel for the reality of life?

ER: I think that there are more people that you think. More scholars - because they are not only scholars or professors in a University, they are also human beings. But perhaps they are a bit too involved in the structure of the University. They have to be. It would be more difficult for me to do what I do if I were a teacher in a University. I decided to remain outside the structure of the University, so I am free to do what I want. I know one University professor, a sinologist, who is teaching from the texts - and certainly the texts speak to him at another level. So it is not everyone - but I think there are several. If you speak with them outside their official context - then it is certainly possible to have discussion on the meaning of this or that. It is within the life of everyone.

DM: What are you favourite texts?

ER: It depends - and has changed though the years. Perhaps I have a favourite prayer. And what is a favourite text? Maybe it has to be one that you can repeat and repeat.