

In memoriam

NINO FORTE

(6 Aug. 1940 – 22 July 2006)

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Antonino Forte, who passed away in his beloved Kyoto during the rainy season of 2006, was a pioneer in a new approach to Buddhist studies. This approach cannot be separated from the Sicilian background of this Sinologist and Historian born in Cefalù. Sicilian writers, and especially the novelist Leonardo Sciascia who in his essays tried to define the spirit of the island, were obsessed with the weight of the power of institutions, or pseudo-institutions, hanging over the shoulders of a population composed much more of country people than of seafarers. In the rather indolent world of studies on Chinese Buddhism the title of the first book of A. Forte, and in its revised version his last, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century*, sounded like a gun shot. “Propaganda” is a despised term, and so also, in a somewhat reduced measure, is the term “ideology.”

Opening the book, the reader is faced with a survey made with intense scrupulousness, but also with much clarity, which unravels a double machination whose effects have persisted for almost thirteen centuries. The first machination consisted in offering, by a group of eminent representatives of the Buddhist clergy at the end of the first Tang age, of a pseudo commentary on the well-known Great-Cloud Sutra (*Mahāmeghasūtra*, *Dayunjing*). This Indian Mahayanic sutra contains several prophetic elements, and the pseudo-commentary, found in the early twentieth century among Dunhuang manuscripts, was intended to support the founding of the Zhou dynasty (690–705) by Empress Wu. The commentary then disappeared with the collapse of the ephemeral Zhou era.

Forte’s outstanding annotated translation of the commentary forms the second part of the book. But there was a second machination. After the Zhou dynasty was abolished, the official (and sometimes Buddhist) historiography of the second Tang age and following periods darkened the memory of Empress Wu. This resulted in numerous misunderstandings which were renewed when modern historians, mostly Chinese and

Japanese, attempted a new evaluation of the troubled, but for many reasons brilliant, reign of Empress Wu.

Much of the scholarly production of Forte was devoted to that short but extremely important period of Chinese history, where we see a reigning woman topple several taboos and initiate what could be considered a Chinese enlightened policy. Forte's choice to concentrate on Chinese Buddhist "ecclesiastical" documents, and especially on epigraphy, has made his work extremely original and creative.

Following his seminal *Political Propaganda*, first published in Naples in 1976 and completely revised in the new edition of the Kyoto Italian School of East Asian Studies, another major contribution on the Empress Wu period was Forte's *Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock. The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu*, jointly published by the EFEO of Paris and by the IsMEO of Rome in 1988. In connection with these works, several of Forte's articles deal with religious figures contemporary to Empress Wu: Buddhist (including a monograph on Fazang's letter to Uisang) or non-Buddhist as the Persian Aluohan (616–710).

Another book, which was also co-produced, this time by the Italian School of East Asian Studies in Kyoto and the College de France in Paris, was the edition of an unfinished study of Paul Pelliot, *L'inscription nestorienne de Si-ngan-fou* in 1996. With the help of his indefatigable wife Lilla, Forte not only edited and completed Pelliot's work, but he also contributed no less than five appendices (pp. 349–495), which mark his foray into the post-Wu period of the Tang dynasty. Furthermore, he undertook some investigations on the Persian and Manichean relations of the Tang empire, some of which have deep roots in the past, as shown by his everlasting interest in the archaic translator An Shigao (fl. ca. A.D. 148–170).

The magisterial and very homogenous scholarly written heritage left by Antonino Forte is far from representative of the totality of his activities. His various undertakings at his Alma Mater, the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples, currently called Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale," and at the Institut du Hōbōgirin of Kyoto, where he was sent by the leader and inspirer of the Hōbōgirin Dictionary, Paul Demiéville, were the platform from which he later launched his major projects, when he started the Italian School of East Asian Studies in Kyoto, as its first and long-time director. His activities took, amongst others, three special directions: the study of Chinese religious epigraphy, the Italo-Chinese collaboration for the study of Longmen, and the Italo-

Japanese collaboration for the study of the Buddhist Canon kept at the Nanatsudera in Nagoya.

Having known Nino Forte since 1964 (in Bordeaux), I keep the fond memory of a friend with a warm smile, whose passion for research immediately attracted to him the support of a plead of eminent Masters: the already mentioned Paul Demiéville, Giuseppe Tucci, Tsukamoto Zenryū, and Makita Tairyō. Later (1976–1984), we became colleagues at the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient* in Kyoto. I benefited from his historical lucidity and also from his expertise in computers when this new technology was introduced into our studies. In the years that followed, I saw for myself the inspiration he gave to his own students in Naples and in Kyoto, where he spent close to twenty years, I witnessed his generosity to students of every nationality engaged in East Asian studies. It would be difficult not to find warm acknowledgment expressed to Nino Forte in any work prepared in the stimulating atmosphere of the Italian School of East Asian Studies during his directorship.

After having studiously spent every summer in Kyoto since his return to Italy after his first directorship, Nino Forte had just begun a second period as director in the Spring of 2006, when he sadly was defeated by cancer. It is Silvio Vita, his able predecessor, who will once again take up the direction of the School.

Although ultra-specialized in his field, Antonino Forte was not a man secluded from his time: he was deeply active in the struggle for the protection of Old Kyoto from financial conspiracies, megalomaniac tendencies, and the lack of consciousness accompanied by irreverence for the past. He was, moreover, engaged in activities to prevent war in Iraq. In him, in his wife Lilla, and in their daughter Erika, an archaeologist in the field of Chinese and Central Asian Studies, I could always see the sacred fire of devotion to Asia and to world peace.