



A missionary who found new faith

'NON-RELIGIOUS': Since Max Gufler came to Taiwan in 1967, he has gone from being a Jesuit missionary to an ambracer of Taoism, Buddhism and environmental protection

BY LOA IOK-SIN
STAFF REPORTER

It might be surprising enough for many Taiwanese to see a European praying to Tudigong (土地公, the God of the Land), but even more surprising is that he came to Taiwan more than 40 years ago as a Catholic missionary.

Austrian Max Gufler first came to Taiwan in 1967 as a Jesuit missionary. However, instead of spreading his religion, he gave it up in 1980.

"I was disappointed and disillusioned at the hierarchy in the Church," he said in an interview with the *Taipei Times* on Dec. 30 at his suburban home in Hsinchu City.

"Don't get me wrong — there are a lot of great nuns and priests around the world who are devoted to helping people. I respect them a lot, but I'm just disappointed at the hierarchy," he said.

Gufler is opposed to strict religious rules.

"I believe what really matters is how you act and what you do, not which god or which religion you believe in," he said.

While describing himself as a "non-religious" person, Gufler

stressed that he still believed in some kind of spirituality, and found Buddhism and local beliefs closer to his ideas.

His previous religion has left no trace in his life. Walking into his house, one finds a piece of red paper with the Buddhist chant *Namo Amitabhah* written in gold on the door. A wooden statue of Tudigong stands on a table. Above the statue a picture of the Taoist deity Lu Tung-pin (呂洞賓) hangs on the wall, with one of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara above it.

For Gufler, praying to Tudigong is more a gesture of showing respect to the spirituality in his own mind and to nature.

"I think Tudigong actually saved me a couple of times," he said.

He said that once when he was preparing to do pull-ups on the huge trunk of a tree in his front yard as usual, "a voice told me: 'Not today.'"

He heeded the voice and only stood around in the front yard.

"All of a sudden, the trunk fell off — if I were there, I could've been killed," he said.

Gufler's life in Taiwan is not

only about praying to Tudigong — he has been an environmental activist, an advocate for organic food and a social worker. He has also been teaching English, German, French and Russian in universities and private institutions around the country.

"I'm a jack of all trades, and actually a master of some," Gufler said, smiling. "In a way, I'm still a missionary, but I'm a missionary for environmental protection, a healthy lifestyle and concern for the underprivileged."

"The most spectacular thing I did was when I was teaching at National Chungshing University [in 1983]," he said.

One day that year, Gufler smelled a peculiar odor in class. He took five students with him and they marched to a nearby factory that was the source of the odor.

"I told the factory owner that his factory was producing pollution and damaging other people's health, and asked him to improve it or close his factory," he said. "The owner responded that he needed to survive as well, so I told him:



Max Gufler prays to Tudigong at his home in Hsinchu on Dec. 30. PHOTO: LOA IOK-SIN, TAIPEI TIMES

"If you don't do anything, I'll have your factory closed next time."

Although Gufler is not sure what exactly happened, the factory moved away the next year.

"Every mayor of Hsinchu knows me, because I always file complaints whenever I see pollution," Gufler said.

Once, he woke up at around 4am and rode around on his bicycle to locate the source of an odor. After locating the source, he wrote to the mayor.

He even chased a scooter producing a huge cloud of black smoke that drove past his home. When he caught up with the driver, he told him to send his scooter to a repair shop.

"Tolerance is a good thing, but I think the people in Taiwan are too tolerant," Gufler said. "When you tolerate injustice, you become an accomplice."

For Gufler, protecting the environment is a lifestyle.

"Can you believe that I haven't left Hsinchu — except for a few trips to Taipei to take care of some official business — for 10 years?" he said.

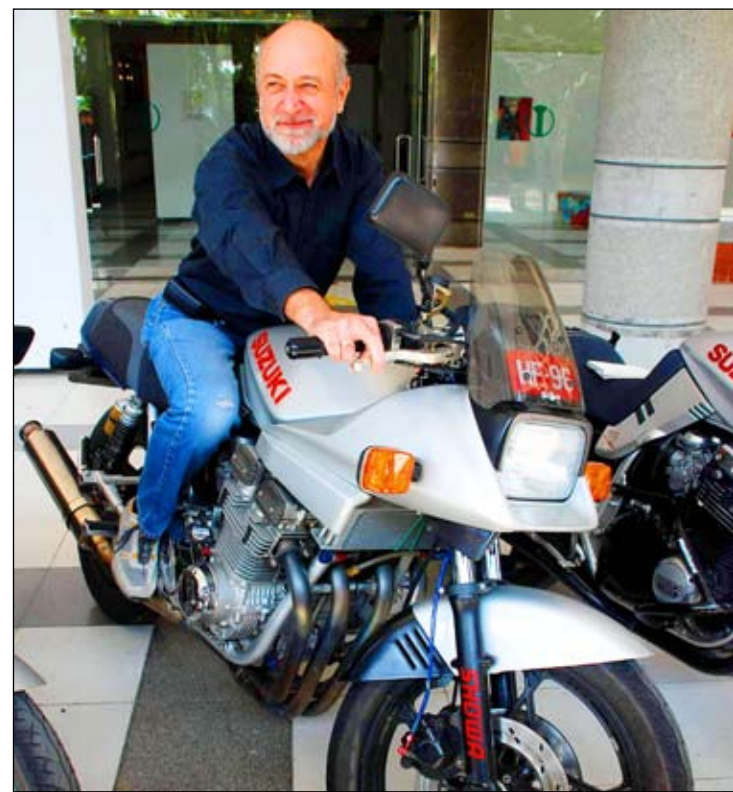
"I think all means of traveling produce pollution, and I want to minimize it," he said, adding that since he believed air travel to be the most polluting means of travel, he hasn't been back to Austria for more than a decade.

Gufler has been a vegetarian since 1978 and has been promoting vegetarianism because he believes it is a healthier, more environmentally friendly way of life.

"It's ridiculous that you have to waste so much food resources to feed animals just to eat them," he said, adding that food animals' gastric excretions "are actually big pollutants to the environment too."

Gufler has seemingly boundless energy. At the moment, he is making plans with some friends to improve education for Aboriginal children in nearby mountain regions.

"Why am I doing this? Well, I have no family of my own in Taiwan, so everyone in Taiwan is like my family," he said. "So this is my way of giving back to the society."



John Geiger, a member of the team that designed the Suzuki Katana, sits on a Katana outside Dayeh University in Changhua County on Dec. 20 last year. PHOTO: YEN HUNG-CHUN, TAIPEI TIMES

Father of Katana shines in Taiwan

BY YEN HUNG-CHUN
STAFF REPORTER

The Suzuki Katana motorcycle, which has gained vintage bike status since its creation in the early 1980s, was the result of the dreams of a German industrial designer. Although production ended seven years ago, fans in countries including Taiwan are still eager to add one to their collection.

The bike made headlines in Taiwan when it played a major part in apprehending the robbers involved in the hijacking of a money transport vehicle from Cathay United Bank in Taipei in 1982.

The first thing one of the robbers, Yu Jung-chia (游榮佳), did after the hijacking was to take NT\$600,000 out of the NT\$14 million (US\$424,400) loot to buy an 1,100cc Suzuki Katana. His inability to account for the source of the money became key to police cracking the case.

Taiwanese fans of the bike have organized a Katana Club, and a few days ago they made a surprising discovery: They found that John Geiger, a member of the original design team, is now a teacher at Dayeh University in Changhua County.

Geiger married a Taiwanese, Ke Chi-hui (柯啓慧), last year, and lives in Changhua. Geiger and his wife both teach in the industrial design department at Dayeh University.

When members of the club first requested a meeting, the couple thought they were dealing with a fraud ring, but as soon

as the word "Katana" was mentioned, they agreed to meet the club members.

On Dec. 20 last year, 12 fans, including one from as far away as Keelung, roared up to the university on their Katanas.

Liao Wen-cheng (廖文成), who has been driving big motorcycles for 20 years and has four of them in his collection, said the Katana would forever be his motorcycle of choice.

"It's as if I have seen God," Liao said after his meeting with Geiger.

Geiger said the Katana had been a result of Suzuki's wishes to make inroads into the European market.

To do so, Geiger said, the company contacted a team that specialized in design work for BMW and said they wanted a Japanese motorcycle that European bikers would find attractive. The result was the Katana, which maintained a clear Japanese style with its pointed body reminiscent of a Japanese samurai sword.

The first Katana, which also became popular in Japan, was produced in 1981, and production of the final model began in 1997. In response to demands from Katana lovers, however, Suzuki produced a final run of 1,100cc Katana motorcycles in 2000.

Geiger himself does not own a Katana, but at the sight of a row of them lined up he could not resist climbing on top of one while he answered questions and shared his experiences over the years in motorcycle and car design.

British exchange student expresses love for Taiwan

RESEARCHER: Nitesh Khilwani said Taiwanese students are very friendly and hospitable and have helped him overcome a wide variety of obstacles

STAFF WRITER, WITH CNA

Currently a student at I-shou University, British student Nitesh Khilwani said he has fallen in love with Taiwan after being here for two months.

In October last year, Khilwani, a student at Loughborough University in the UK, came to Kaohsiung County to conduct some short-term research in the field of international business cooperation in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management at I-shou University's College of Management.

Khilwani, who is studying for his doctoral degree at Loughborough University, said he received a grant to study outside the UK, and he chose Germany or Greece in Europe or Taiwan in Asia.

Khilwani said I-shou University was well known abroad and that many foreign students would be coming to study there. Taiwanese students are very welcoming and friendly, and they have provided him with a great deal of help, which has made it easier for him to overcome any difficulties, he said.

He said Taiwanese students' general English knowledge was quite good, although some students were afraid to speak it.

During his research in Taiwan, Khilwani said he traveled to Tainan with a group of Chinese exchange students, and the group spent their evenings at local night markets.

Taiwanese food is so delicious that he starts salivating every time he thinks of it, Khilwani said, adding that he would also be sure to find the time to visit the popular night markets in Kaohsiung.



Nitesh Khilwani, a British exchange student who has been staying in Kaohsiung County, sits at his computer on Dec. 29. PHOTO: FANG CHIH-HSEN, TAIPEI TIMES



VOICE OF THE EARTH

Canadian musician Matthew Lien sings during a concert marking the first day of the year at Alishan in Chiayi County on Jan. 1. Lien called on visitors to protect and cherish the Earth.

PHOTO: WANG SHAN-YEN, TAIPEI TIMES

The tears, joy and responsibility of learning Chinese

FROM CACOPHONY TO BEAUTY: After studying for several years, someone might say: 'You can communicate in Chinese.' But that is by far not the end of the road

BY DAVID PENDERY

Like most foreigners who live in Taipei, I have spent much time studying Chinese. However, I never counted myself among those who come here to study the language full time. I arrived in Taipei for different personal and professional reasons, and did not think about studying Chinese until I had been here a few months.

I then recognized the practical necessity, with the baffling cacophony of Chinese buzzing around me forcing me to acknowledge that I needed to better understand the language; and also for cultural reasons, with the growing desire to learn more about the new society I found myself in. I entered my first Chinese class in fall 2000. Little did I know I had embarked on an endeavor that would change my life.

I am of two minds about my Chinese skills. On the one hand, I often feel discouraged, far less than fluent, hardly even conversational. During my learning process, there have been the hurts of sharp rebukes when I mispronounced a word, using the second instead of the third tone. Or the frustration of navigating through the seemingly endless repetition and re-use of sounds in Chinese: 是·事·十·付·父·赴·吉·即·急. During my first frustrating years of study there were times

when I asked myself: How do they even understand each other?

On the other hand, I have experienced those joys that make one feel that one is crossing the Rubicon of second language acquisition. There was the time in Paris, eating at a Chinese restaurant, when I asked the waitress: 小姐, 請給我一碗飯? There was the time I briefly conversed with a Chinese-speaking neighbor during a visit to my home town, as my old friend gaped in amazement. And then there was perhaps my high point, when at a recent party a Taiwanese man who I have known since I moved here observed me speaking Chinese with another friend, and announced: "David, I admit it. You can communicate in Chinese."

My Chinese study can be divided into distinct phases. In the first phase, I gingerly began, studying as regularly as I could given that I had a full-time job. My problem during this period was that I spent most of my time silently learning new vocabulary and practicing writing Chinese characters, rather than actually speaking the language. My speaking ability stalled because of this method. This went on for about three years, and my progress was halting, but not unnoticeable.

I then took a big step and enrolled in a summer course at

National Taiwan Normal University. This propelled me forward — but only for a short time, for immediately after this I was consumed by a number of other events in my personal life and had to stop studying altogether.

This went on for three years. During this time I continued to observe, learn and practice the language, but I was not studying diligently — the *sine qua non* of serious language learning. Finally, after that third year, I returned to study on my own, for an hour or two every morning. But once again I focused on vocabulary and writing, which as noted is not a truly effective approach.

People began to notice that I was speaking more, but I still felt that I struggled. At the end of this year, I yet again had to put away my Chinese studies to focus on a doctoral program I had entered — though I continued with my endless observations, questions and on-again-off-again conversation with friends and family.

This brings me to the present, and my aim now is to, yet again, return to serious study this year — with those sweet words of my friend at the party inspiring me.

After all I have been through I am truly an old hand at Chinese study. It might be something of a love/hate relationship, but I soldier on.

Important, no doubt, is my desire to speak Chinese better in order to interact more comprehensively with Taiwanese people. There is even more at work, however, and Chinese has taken on yet more important roles in my life. For I have found that as I have tunneled deeper into the complexities of this puzzling, demanding, nettlesome language, it has impacted me in profound emotional, intellectual and philosophical ways.

Emotionally, the challenge of studying Chinese has had an impact on my self-esteem and conditioned my interaction with everyone I know. As noted, much of the time I have been a part-time student of the language, while always striving for full-time results. I have shed not a few tears because of these sometimes-irrational expectations. As well, as I have tried to practice Chinese with my friends and family members, something like a conflict has emerged, pitting Chinese and English (we almost always use a combination), and I have had the disconcerting feeling of both loving my native language and resenting it for intruding into and limiting my Chinese expression.

Intellectually, it is perhaps obvious how studying Chinese impacts a person. The fantastic intricacy and enthralling etymologies, orthography and semantics of the characters, the internal diversity of the

language, its long history and role in Chinese culture and the straightforward difficulty of trying to cage this dragon could provide a lifetime of intellectual challenge and stimulation, as well as a wonderful world of creative possibility and apperceptive pith.

Philosophically, Chinese has introduced to me a new world of communicative possibility, which contrasts intriguingly with my native tongue. The very difference of Chinese for Westerners sets up a matrix in which we find ourselves correlating, comparing and counterpoising the two languages and world views — one linear, lettered and Latinized-but-astonishingly-worldly; the other orthogonal, calligraphic and so-Chinese/Asian. In spite of what sometimes feels like a yawning gulf separating the two languages, I feel that, as they say of the world's religions, we are all treading paths leading up a mountain, detached and remote from one another as we work our ways up the foothills and middle altitudes, but coming together with the same goals and consequences as we reach the peak.

Studying Chinese has changed my life, and in spite of a few heartaches along the way, it has changed me for the better. I could hardly recommend it more highly to my friends and family — if my recommendation is accompanied

by a few warnings and provisos.

As for we foreigners studying Chinese in Taiwan, we find ourselves in deep, for although we have freighted ourselves with a heavy load, we in turn know there is something more at work, a significance that ripples through the personal, the national, to the universal. At the personal level, studying Chinese offers us an amazing challenge, with pragmatic rewards. We also find that studying the language takes us ever deeper into a new culture, people and nation — one that contrasts remarkably with our own homes and mother tongues.

And finally, studying this foreign language, any foreign language ultimately becomes an exceptional responsibility, as we slowly contribute to a greater comity, a greater apprehension, a greater existence for us all.

In conclusion, the words of Aldous Huxley seem apt:

*The choice is always ours.
Then, let me choose
The longest art, the hard Promethean way
Cherishingly to tend and feed and fan
That inward fire, whose small precarious flame,
Kindled or quenched creates
The noble and ignoble men we are,
The worlds we live in and the very fates,
Our bright or muddy star.*