In memoriam

Sister Agnes Lee SMIC (1941–2025)

Katharina Feith

Translated by Anna Clart

Sister Agnes Lee SMIC.
Photo: SMIC.

On January 7, 2025, Sister Agnes Lee of the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God, resident in Taiwan, passed away. She was in lively exchange with the China-Zentrum for many years, especially in connection with the training program for Chinese sisters in Germany.

Lee Chwen Jiuan (Li Chunjuan 李純娟) was born on August 8, 1941, in Kaohsiung, southern Taiwan. Her parents were from Tainan County. Alongside nine half-siblings, she had one older sister, a younger sister – Sr. Veronica, who entered the same order – and a younger brother from the same mother. Their mother died when Agnes Lee was in the third year of junior high school.

One of her half-sisters put her into contact with the Catholic Church and the SMIC sisters, who ultimately prepared her and her two full sisters for baptism. All three were baptised on Easter 1958, and received the sacrament of confirmation the following September. After completing senior high school, Agnes Lee joined the international missionary order. She began her novitiate in May 1961, and was sent to the United States in late 1962 to continue it. She took her first vows on May 21, 1963, in Wes Paterson, New Jersey. In June 1967, she completed her studies with a major in philosophy and a minor in English literature at New York's St. Bonaventure University. In February 1968, Sister Agnes returned to Taiwan and was assigned to the provincial convent in Tainan, where she immediately began teaching at the Catholic Sheng Kung Girls' High School and took on the role of a formation directress. On August 2, 1968, she took her perpetual vows.

In the 1970s, living through the Catholic Church's continuing development in Asia, Sister Agnes advocated for the localisation of churches. In 1975, she participated in a spiritual retreat in Bangkok, Thailand, where she became deeply conscious of the importance of a lively, contemplative life for Asian sisters. In 1976, at the suggestion of theologian Fr. Aloysius Chang Ch'un-shen SJ (1929–2015), she used her role as formation directress to lead discussion circles and exercises on the inculturation of spirituality. She organised retreats on Far Eastern spirituality, practiced Tai Chi, visited pioneers who in Japan had concerned themselves with the inculturation of spirituality, founded the Center of Eastern Spirituality within her order's province, published on Chinese spirituality, participated in daily exercises in local Buddhist monasteries, studied with a Zen master (Chen Sheng-Hua) in Kaohsiung, and spent three months practicing Zen in Japan.

From 1983 to 1987, Sister Agnes continued her studies in the USA and earned a Master's at UCA Santa Barbara and a doctorate in religious philosophy at the University of Hawaii. In California, she made the acquaintance of Fr. Thomas G. Hand SJ, who had lived and practiced Zen in Japan for many years. Together, they led meditation classes in Far Eastern spirituality at the Mercy Center of Burlingame, California. In 1990, they also co-published the book *A Taste of Water: Christianity Through Taoist-Buddhist Eyes*.

After returning once more to Taiwan, Sister Agnes served two terms as provincial superior, then as a novice directress at the missionary sisters' training house in Manila, the Institute of Theology and Spirituality, which also taught sisters from the People's Republic of China. In early 1999, after completing her term as provincial coordinator, the novitiate moved from Tainan to Daxi, Taoyuan, where Sister Agnes founded a retreat center offering spiritual exercises for laypeople in northern Taiwan.

The late 1990s and 2000s were also when she had close contacts with the China-Zentrum. In 1998, Sister Agnes was invited to France for a summer course with retreat aimed at priests, seminarians, and sisters from the Peoples' Republic of China who were studying in Europe. Such courses took place in various European countries. On the course, she gave insights into Far Eastern spirituality with accompanying meditation exercises. In September 1999, at the Third European Catholic China Conference in Krynica Morska, Poland, Sister Agnes held an English lecture on "Paths to a Christian Identity from a Chinese Perspective" ("Wege zu einer christlichen Identität aus chinesischer Sicht," published in *China heute* 2000, no. 1–2, pp. 22–27).

In the 2000s, the China-Zentrum spearheaded the establishment of a small training program for Chinese sisters, one in which numerous religious orders in Germany participated. Sankt Augustin saw the construction of the St. Clara Convent. For several years, the sisters lived together in their own house, accompanied by Sister Gudula Thimm SMIC from Münster, a fellow sister of St. Agnes's. Sister Agnes herself served as consultant for the program and would reside at the convent alongside the Chinese sisters for several days at a time. Most recently, in 2018, she and her biological sister Veronica visited Münster's community of SMIC sisters, with which they had been closely connected for so many years.

In 2000, Sister Agnes and Sister Veronica used their inheritance to establish a foundation offering long-term financial support for the educational expenses of the missionary sisters in Taiwan and the teaching staff at the Catholic Sheng Kung Girls' High School. In late 2015, a spiritual center was also built on the school grounds; it has been offering a regular retreat day once a month since 2016. In 2014, Sister Agnes gave up her offices as novice directress and formation director. She subsequently dedicated most of her time to translations and to composing books on Far Eastern spirituality. Various groups also invited her to lead retreats, one-day contemplative prayer meetings and workshops. She traveled frequently to Manila and Vietnam to lead retreats or courses for the sisters of her congregation. Barely two months before her death, she was attending a conference at the Fu Jen Catholic University of Taipei to give a lecture on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's spirituality.

Sister Agnes had a calm and empathetic nature. At the same time, she was a uniquely charismatic person, very engaged and driven to fulfil her tasks. To spend time with her was a joy. Her cheerful laughter has imprinted itself upon our memories. Thank you, Sister Agnes! R.i.P.

Sources: Obituary of the SMIC sisters; archive of the China-Zentrum.