

Souvenirs of my friend Maurice Coyaud (1934-2015)

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I met Maurice soon after my arrival in France in 1968. At that time, I was attached to Professor Alexis Rygaloff's Chinese Linguistics Centre at Censier in the 5th arrondissement of Paris, where he and Claude Hagège often came to consult the vocabulary cards. He was working on classifiers, and Hagège on prepositions in Chinese.

Maurice was just back after touring several universities in the States. During his visit to Cornell University, he was invited to join their faculty. But Maurice preferred to work at the French National Scientific Research Center (CNRS) where he was free to do fieldwork whenever and wherever he liked.

He should have been the favorite candidate to succeed Professor Rygaloff as director of the Chinese Linguistics Centre. Early in the 70s, Mr. Rygaloff confided to me that he would like to extend the research areas of the Centre to cover Japan, Korea and Vietnam, all of them had once shared the use or still partially use the Chinese writing system. In view of Maurice's capacity, Mr. Rygaloff would like to have Maurice to direct the Centre while he himself remained *directeur d'étude* at the EHESS (School of Higher Studies in Social Sciences). At that time, Mr. Rygaloff probably knew that he would be nominated as Cultural Counsellor at the French Embassy in Tokyo for four years. Around that time, the Editions Larousse in Paris published Maurice's *Linguistics and documentation*. Unfortunately some treacherous things happened, and I regret that that project didn't come true.

Maurice often invited me to attend his talks. I still remember vividly their impact on me, revealing brutally my poverty in language studies. I retained nothing of his first talk's content. I only recalled that he made reference to several languages, including Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese, which I knew nothing about. On top of it, the medium of communication was French. The impact was so overwhelming that I doubted how I could find even a folding seat within his circle.

Maurice had a very keen sense about languages and an acute ambition to know as many of them as possible so as to enlarge his field of observation and strengthen his analysis, contrary to Chomsky who set up his theory based on only two tongues, English and Hebrew. Unexpectedly or expectedly, the more data he acquired, the stronger his hesitation to make any generalization.

I would say that he loved language more than linguistics theories. Learning languages one after the other was his lifelong passion, and this endeavour was confirmed by his wife Fiammetta. She told me that even before he passed away, he was learning a new language, Syriac, a Semitic language still spoken by some Christian communities in the Middle East.

Apart from inviting me to his linguistics talks, Maurice also invited me to have some holidays with his family. Sometime around 1970, I had the privilege to spend a week with them in Préfailles near Nantes, in Bretagne. Alas, I spoiled their fun on the first day of my arrival!

Knowing that I like seafood, he took me to a restaurant near the port for lunch. Before the main course was served, there was bread freshly from the oven and butter on the table. It was so tasty that I couldn't stop eating before the platter of seafood arrived. This was mainly composed of crabs. However, the family only ate the claws, and left all the rest on the table! When they noticed that I was crazy about the crab roe inside the top shells, they piled them all up in front of me. With already a good quantity of bread and butter in the stomach, it was really too much to digest, even though I was known to have an excellent appetite for seafood! Late at that evening they had to look for a doctor for me!

Maurice often invited me to spend a weekend afternoon at his home in Maisons-Laffitte, about 22 km North-West of Paris, where he was staying with his parents-in-law. The domain consists of a house plus several outbuildings, one of which served as his father-in-law's workshop. The old man was a handyman. Whenever I went there, I always found him busy in fabricating something. As soon as I rang, his son Laurent would run towards the gate to meet me (I still have a photo of him sitting on a big ball). Years later, Maurice told me that Laurent had entered Paris VII University. I asked him what subject Laurent had chosen. He said "ecology". By that time, I did not pay much attention to that discipline concerning a grave global problem. Laurent whom I knew as a boy was much ahead of me.

I also knew Cécile as a lovely little girl. Unlike Laurent, when I was there, she preferred to play with her playmates. I once overheard her saying to them: "He (Yau) doesn't know a word I say when I explain to him the rules how to play with us!". Nevertheless she was very friendly with me. Maurice once asked me whether I would like to join Cécile to learn Japanese because he was giving her private lessons. He was fluent in Japanese. I once attended a talk organized by another late friend, Professor Mantaro Hashimoto in Tokyo. His talk was given in Japanese.

There is another amusing episode about Hashimoto's visit to Maisons-Laffitte during his stay in Paris. One day, Maurice asked me to bring him along for lunch. When the main course was served, Hashimoto took out his camera and began to take pictures of the roasted meat from various angles! I understood immediately that he was signaling that he did not like that kind of meat. I whispered to Maurice to prepare some minor plates with fried eggs or dried meats.

Maurice was a discreetly generous and considerate person. He bought two little studios in Paris, not for renting but for helping newly arrived foreign students, offering them a temporary accommodation. He set up a rule: the studio was free but for only 6 months. He offered one to me but I declined politely because I had a French government scholarship that covered my rent. I knew

that our late Vietnamese linguist and colleague, Nguyen Phu Phong, had accepted his offer right after his arrival.

Maurice created his own edition PAF in the 80s, or perhaps slightly earlier. The name PAF was in fact a label to mock another current edition in Paris. Since I knew him, I noticed that he was a witty fellow. Another instance like PAF with its clear target was the nickname Atone he coined for a linguist incapable of pronouncing properly the tones in Mandarin Chinese.

He had given himself a name in Chinese, 郭幽 (pronounced as *guo you* in Mandarin), an approximate phonetic transcription of his family name. The choice of the second character 幽 is quite telling about the multiple facets of his personality. This Chinese character has a long range of semantic nuances, from “humble” to “profound”, or from “mediate” to “humorous”, and so forth.

Since the late 70s, we did not see each other often. I started my field research project on gestures created by isolated deaf adults among the Amerindians in Northern Canada and in rural China. Just as the project was over, I was overwhelmed by the democracy movement in China in 1989. The last time I saw him was 5 juin 2012 when he gave a talk on the expression of feelings in Japanese. He had the kindness to mention two articles of mine, one on 耻 *chi* “shame”, the other on “Gestures that touch the heart” (Des gestes qui touchent le cœur), written in honour of our friend Kawaguchi Junji’s retirement a few years ago.