

Book Review of:

Bibiana Yee-ying Wong, *The Short-lived Catholic Central Bureau: National Catalyst for Cultural Apostolate in China (1947–1951)*, Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute 2021. xxxii, 303 pp., Prefaces, Introduction, Map, Tables, Photographs, Bibliography, Index. ISBN 978-957-29848-7-1 (HB)

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In December 1947, Mgr. Antonio Riberi, Apostolic Internuncio to China, inaugurated and took over the direction of the Catholic Central Bureau (CCB), based in Shanghai. This was the birth of a new national body which, according to the intentions of its founders, was mostly aimed at a cultural function which was undoubtedly ambitious and strategic: to spread knowledge and sympathy for Catholicism among the educated and wealthy social classes of Chinese cities. A more active and deeper involvement of the Catholic Church in the social context of the country was in fact perceived as an urgent and necessary task, first of all by strengthening the role of the local clergy and laity with an adequate training, as the Holy See had long recommended. It was therefore necessary to finally remove the infamous label of “foreign religion” from Catholicism and try to attract, dialogue with and eventually influence Chinese intellectuals in their troubled search for a new and modern identity. The widespread perception the Chinese people had of the Catholic Church in the 1940s was generally negative due to the well-known consequences of the French protectorate on the missions and to the identification of Christian missionaries with European and American imperialism, but at the same time Western cultural models were as important in China’s transformation as ever before. It was thus an epochal challenge before which the Catholic Church resorted to the idea – definitely not new – of a “cultural apostolate.” The CCB aimed to evangelize the educated classes through partly new missionary methods that made extensive use of publications, news service, newspapers and magazines, cinema, theatre, radio and all kinds of modern media. It was not by chance that the headquarters were located in Shanghai, a cosmopolitan and economically developed city, with the presence of wealthy Catholic families but also a diocese where the Catholic laity was active and where the Jesuits in Zikawei had the previous experience of animating an extremely lively Catholic centre of cultural and editorial development in the early decades of the 20th century.

The history, the functioning, the purposes of the CCB and the articulation of its structure are reconstructed and described in detail in the book by Bibiana Wong. Incidentally,

it should be noted that the Chinese name Tianzhujiao jiaowu xiejin weiyuanhui 天主教教務協進委員會 chosen for the Catholic Central Bureau differs from the English name and suggests the idea of a body to coordinate the educational activities of the Catholic Church. The book has without doubt the merit of shedding light on a significant but hitherto little studied experience, drawing extensively on sources from various missionary archives, among which the Maryknoll Mission Archives (USA) and the Columban Fathers Central Archive (Ireland) stand out for the interest and originality of the documents cited. As the author herself acknowledges, the missing piece is the documentation on the pontificate of Pius XII, kept in the Vatican Archives and now available for consultation, which would contribute to complete the examination of the sources on the CCB's history.

The volume *The Short-lived Catholic Central Bureau* also makes extensive and interesting use of Chinese-language sources which, in addition to the official press and the collection of the CCB's numerous publications, systematically include the CCP Central Committee's directives on religious policy in the early years of the People's Republic of China, collected in *Jian guo yilai zhongyao wenxian xuanbian* 建國以來重要文獻選編 (Selected Important Historical Documents since the Founding of the PRC) and in *Tongzhan zhengce wenjian huibian* 統戰政策文件彙編 (A Collection of United Front Policy Documents).

As the author points out, the CCB was entirely financed by Propaganda Fide and divided into departments and sections in which missionaries of different nationalities, belonging to different congregations and religious orders, as well as Chinese priests who had studied abroad and were particularly qualified, were called to work. The different origin of foreign missionaries prevented the CCB from being identified with the country they came from. Despite the fact that only men and no women worked there, it was an entity where a plural environment was established, with different sensitivities and a good presence of Chinese priests. It was also a transversal environment with respect to the different missionary orders – a fact that is not secondary given the strongly negative impact of the so-called “congregationalism” in the history of missions in China.

The almost four years of activity of the CCB (December 1947 – September 1951) coincided to a large extent with the terrible civil war between Nationalists and Communists that followed the dramatic years of another war, what in China is called the War of Resistance against Japan, and then with the birth of the People's Republic of China. Beyond the intentions of its founders, who had probably initially imagined developing this project in a China governed by the Guomindang, it was precisely this general historical-political framework, in which the CCB's experience was set, that heavily influenced its subsequent developments, transforming it from an institution for cultural promotion into a centre for the defence of Catholic doctrine against Communism.

The book brings us to consider the complexity of this history, striving to reconstruct in a multifaceted way the non-obvious logics and points of view that oriented the reactions of Catholics to the rise of Communism and, on the other hand, the positions that Chinese Communists developed in those years towards Catholics. At the heart of this study is in fact the description of the activities of the CCB in response to the launching of the Three Self Movement and the experience of the Legion of Mary.

At the end of 1950, when the Three Self Movement was launched through the Guangyuan Manifesto, the CCB published some documents first of all to explain the positions of the Church on the three proposed autonomies (self-financing, self-government, self-propagation of the faith), to indicate what could be acceptable and, at the same time, to warn Catholics about the risks of the feared creation of a Church independent from Rome. Faced with the confusion that was being generated, the CCB first felt the need to clarify and, based on the decree of the Holy Office of 1949, condemn any form of collaboration of Catholics with Communists. The anti-Communism expressed in the documents signed in the same months by Mgr. Riberi and the identification of the CCB with the Internuncio quickly shifted the confrontation from a cultural to a political-diplomatic level; and this brought about the end of the CCB which was closed and whose staff was arrested, in conjunction with the campaign for the expulsion of the Internuncio.

On closer inspection, however, the CCB, from the very beginning and by its very nature, was in competition and conflict with the Chinese Communist Party because the field within which it moved belonged to moral values, culture, education and conscience of the population, a field on which the Party was determined to have a monopoly in order to guide the construction of the new socialist society to which all Chinese citizens were to adhere. Chinese Communists were well aware of the intentions of the CCB and added to this was the climate of confrontation between opposing blocs fed by the Cold War (the Catholic Church was then irremediably identified with the Western side) as well as the closeness of the Catholics and the trust – perhaps excessive, as Bibiana Wong points out – they placed in the Guomindang, a party that was actually corrupt and weak.

The substantial failure of the Three Self Movement, which Catholics did not join, shows that the Chinese clergy and faithful remained united, with very few exceptions. This reaction later forced the party to change strategy and launch another movement, the Anti-imperialist Movement of Love for the Country and for Religion. It was only in the years of the Great Leap Forward that some priests who had previously been arrested and had resisted heavy pressure chose to join the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics and accept illegitimate episcopal consecrations (despite this, they would later become victims of the Cultural Revolution).

All this confirms that the complicated events of the Catholic Church in Mao's China cannot be understood by simply referring to abstract ideological schemes. Explanations of the incompatibility between Catholic doctrine and the Church's anti-Communism on the one hand and the ideology of militant atheism professed by Chinese Communists on the other are not fully convincing.

In between these two poles, in fact, there are those people who have given voice to the different positions and there is the concrete life of missionaries and Chinese Catholics who have been able to withstand very strong pressures and find unexpected spaces for survival.

The experience of the Legion of Mary, promoted in China, at the explicit request of Mgr. Riberi, by one of the most active priests in the CCB, the Irish Columban missionary Aedean William McGrath, also fits into this framework. The story of this lay organization is partly known and the book presents it as an effective but excessively late attempt to

form a laity that could support the resistance of Catholic communities after the expulsion of foreign missionaries. This experience is to some extent dramatic because – due to the dedication and loyalty of its members – it represents a clear example of how the Catholic Church could compete in the mobilization of consciences that the Party wanted to achieve among the population in those years.

Two texts are worth mentioning for their originality and interest: the unpublished interview with Zhou Enlai by Father Patrick O'Connor, a missionary and journalist who was also active in the CCB, on his concept of freedom of religious belief and the CCP's religious policy, and the speech by Xi Zhongxun (President Xi Jinping's father), then Secretary-General of the State Council, who in May 1955, in his concluding report at the Third National Conference of Religious Work, declared that the Legion of Mary had been completely eradicated.

Much attention is given in the book to the biographies of the clergymen, five foreign missionaries and five Chinese priests, who were called by Mgr. Riberi to animate the activities of the CCB, with different tasks and competences. Especially with regard to the figures of the Chinese priests, this is an appreciable effort as they are very little known, even though they were people who – as in the case of Father Chen Zhemin, secretary of the Internuncio, with two doctoral degrees obtained abroad – were able to make a significant cultural contribution, despite the short time in which they could serve.

Among these protagonists in the work of the CCB, special mention should be made of the personal story of Bishop James E. Walsh, CCB's General Secretary; he came from the United States and was one of the very few missionaries who managed to stay in the People's Republic of China for a long time, avoiding expulsion, probably because of the embarrassment caused by the international resonance of the case of the death of his confrere, Mgr. Ford, and the consequent desire of the Chinese Communists not to create other "martyrs." Arrested in 1958 on charges of being a spy in the service of American imperialism, after long years of detention, Mgr. Walsh was freed in 1970, in the thaw between the PRC and the USA which preceded Nixon's historic visit to Beijing two years later.

The last part of the volume is dedicated to the pursuit of the CCB's activities after the closure imposed by the Chinese government in Shanghai, first in Taipei, where it was reestablished by Mgr. Riberi continuing its activities until 1970, and then in Singapore, where it served especially for the evangelization of the Chinese in diaspora.

Overall, this book, that is the result of extensive research, provides a great deal of information and, although it focuses on an object of study which is limited in time, it is useful for those who wish to understand the history of the Catholic Church in today's China. The roots of a unique, contradictory and painful historical situation the Catholic Church has fallen heir to in the PRC are to be sought precisely in the early 1950s.