

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN CHINA IN 1920-30 AND ITS EFFECTS ON SALESIANS

*Domingos Leong SDB**

This article would like to present a general view of the political situation of China in the period of 1920-30. Even though China has succeeded in establishing a republic through the revolution, she was still suffering from the civil wars and foreign powers invasion. It greatly affected the daily life of the people, and also, giving a great hindrance for Salesians, along with other missionaries, in their evangelization and educational endeavors.

1. Introduction

The Republic of China was born on 1 January 1912, the result of the 1911 Revolution. It brought to an end the 267 years reign of the Manchu dynasty and centuries of imperial rule in China.

The first attempt at forming a strong central government ended in failure because of the intervention of the new military and political strongmen which forced Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the revolutionary party and first President of the Republic, into exile. As Sun tried to establish a more effective political and military base in the South, China ended up having two national governments: one in Peking under the control of the northern warlords, the other in Canton with Dr. Sun at its head. Obviously the two only controlled limited areas and civil wars easily broke out. The 19th century Unequal Treaties, left over by the Manchu dynasty, allowed foreign powers to exercise control over certain areas of the country. These "Foreign Concessions" practically monopolized international trade for their own short-term benefit, totally ignoring the long-term development of the Chinese people. Internal weakness and foreign exploitation were the roots of the May 4th Movement born in 1919 by the will of China's outraged young intellectuals desirous to save their Motherland.

* Fr. Domingos Leong is professor of Liturgy at the Holy Spirit Seminary of the Diocese of Hong Kong.

2. Dr. Sun Yat-sen and the New Republic

2.1. *Setting up of the Canton Government*

Throughout the 1920s, China was in chaos, with regional military chiefs, known as warlords, holding sway. War easily broke out between North and South. It was one of these periodic clashes that Fr. Carlo Braga referred to in the May 1922 issue of the *Bolletino Salesiano*: fear of being forced to carry provisions for the army had induced all workers to abandon the construction site of St. Joseph's Institute in Hosai and flee to the mountains.¹

In the meantime Dr. Sun Yat-sen had proposed his Three Principles of the People to guide the revolution. To curb the excesses of the warlords and to unify the Country, he appointed Chiang Kai-shek, a young officer trained in Japan, as President of the Whampoa Military Academy in Canton.

By 1923, Sun had managed to form a viable government in Canton (today's Guangzhou) in alliance with the newly born Communist Party, whose links with peasants and workers he thought would strengthen the revolutionary cause, and the help of Soviet advisers. In October of that year he personally led the Revolutionary Army in the Northward Expedition to Shiu Chow.² As he was about to order his troops north, a coup in Peking overthrew Marshal Tsao-Kun, head of the Peking government. Among the insurgents there were some of Sun's Kuomintang Party members. This strengthened Sun's hand and forced Peking's weak new leadership to call on him and come to Peking to discuss plans for the peaceful unification of the Country. Dr. Sun's long and untiring journey, which he undertook to rally the people to the unification cause, led him to an untimely death on 12 March 1925. These events, and the May 30th incident (the killing of striking workers and students by British police in Shanghai on 30 May 1925) enormously increased the national revolutionary consciousness especially among the young.

¹ Guido BOSIO, *Martiri in Cina*. Torino 1977, p. 190. In July 1922 the city was caught in the middle of a furious armed conflict. The situation did not improve throughout the second half of 1922. *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235.

² Msgr. Versiglia refers to the depressing results of these wars in his 1923 report to Propaganda. *Ibid.*

3. Chiang Kai-sek at the head of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang leads the Northward Expedition in 1926-1927)

The Northward Expedition to curb the warlords was Dr. Sun's earnest wish and it was Chiang Kai-shek's major objective after he took over the responsibility of the national revolution. On 9 July 1926, Chiang officiated at the oath-taking ceremony for the Northward Expedition in Canton. Immediately after the ceremony, he led the army in the campaign against the northern warlords, the first leg being done by train to Shiu Chow, from where the troops began their slow trek on foot to Hunan. Fr. G. Guarona, the Pro-Vicar in Shiu Chow, in his 1926 annual report which he penned on behalf of an absent Msgr. Versiglia, wrote of the passage of thousands and thousands of troops who for months stationed in the city, stressing the discipline, respectful behaviour and smart new uniforms of a modernized army, almost unrecognizable and in sharp contrast with the troops he had seen one year before.³ The soldiers he saw were probably from Chiang's first army, the most disciplined and best equipped of the eight armies, which made up the expedition.

The National Revolutionary Army, after five months of bloody offensives and heavy casualties, secured the two provinces of Hunan and Hubei, moved in from the Yangtze River, and captured Nanking and Shanghai in March 1927, accomplishing the first stage of the Northward Expedition. The battle-weary troops, plagued by disease, that entered Shanghai were not the disciplined troops that had filed past Shiu Chow six-eight months earlier: they occupied the building that housed the St. Joseph Institute and turned it into a hospital for cholera stricken soldiers, leaving only a third floor dormitory for the pupils to stay. Leftist unions in Shanghai had organized strikes in an attempt to control the city and had turned against foreign interests. It was against them that Chiang, who had by then steered to the right, launched a ruthless purge.

4. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

After the establishment of the Republic of China, Socialism and Western ideology were introduced into China. As early as 1919, during the May 4th Movement, Peking University began to organize a Marxism study society. Communism was then only an object of academic study.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

That same year, Soviet Russia announced its decision to forego all the rights that the former Russian Monarchy had won in China through "Unequal Treaties". Some Chinese intellectuals admired communism and the newly formed Soviet regime. Chen Du-Xiu, Li Da-Zhao and others spread communist propaganda, inducing some Chinese youths to embrace communism and many more to abandon Christianity. In 1920, Lenin advocated international expansionism and sent agents from the Communist International in Moscow to China to assist Chen and followers. They were instrumental in the founding of the CCP in Shanghai in July 1921.

4.1. The Kuomintang's Alliance with Soviet Russia and Accommodation with Chinese Communists

Lenin held Dr. Sun Yat-sen in high regard for his revolutionary accomplishments. Soviet Russia repeatedly showed signs of friendship toward him. In 1922, following a series of foreign affairs setbacks and internal rebellion, Sun was persuaded by the Soviet agents that if his Kuomintang would ally with the communists, whose numbers were still small, they could tap into the enormous latent energies of China's peasants and industrial workers, who were just beginning to emerge on the political landscape. Apparently convinced that his organization could control the communists within its ranks, Sun agreed to a formula by which individual communists could enter the Kuomintang as members. In return, the Soviet Union provided Sun with military advisers, arms, ammunition and technical help in strengthening his political organization.

When Dr. Sun passed away in Peking in March 1925, the Soviet and Chinese Communists managed to split the KMT into "left" and "right" factions. The left opposed Chiang's plans for a Northward Expedition and only nominally gave in because the expedition was Dr. Sun's last wish, trying to boycott Chiang's victorious progress at every step for fear his prestige might grow unchallenged.

After communist activists had induced the workers to take control of Shanghai and turn against foreign interests, thereby putting Chiang in a difficult position, senior KMT members called for a campaign to save the party and demanded that all communist elements be expelled. Chiang, as the commander-in-chief of the National Revolutionary Army, on 12 April 1927 ordered the Red labour pickets disarmed. Local labour unions, actually gagster hands in disguise, moved in swiftly against the Commu-

nist-led strikers, leaving hundreds dead and arresting several hundred more. When two months later, Fr. Ricaldone visited Shanghai, he could move about without incidents, but it was clear that a war was going on: everywhere soldiers and barbed wire and the river teeming with warships.⁴

4.2. The Sha Meen Incident (23-6-1925) , the Hong Kong, Shanghai and Canton boycott and the Anti-Imperialist Movement

Boycott became an important weapon in the hands of anti-imperialist forces. In May 1925 the workers of Shanghai had launched a boycott and a protest against some Japanese employers for the exploitation, beating and maltreatment of Chinese workers, and demanded to take back all foreign concessions. More than 2,000 students marched through the International Concession in support of the striking workers. The British police fired at the protesters, killing and wounding many, in what was called the “May 30th Incident”.

National rage spread like wildfire in other foreign enclaves. In June, workers in Hong Kong and in the Sha Meen Concession of Canton walked out in support of their colleagues in Shanghai. Some 200,000 workers in Hong Kong and Canton joined the strike. On 23 June, the protesters were parading along the outer bank of the canal that marked the border of the Sha Meen Concession, shouting slogans against imperialism and the unequal treaties. Gunshots were fired at the Concession, at which the British returned fire, leaving almost a hundred dead and several hundred wounded, in what was known as the “Sha Meen Incident”. The Canton government strongly protested, while the KMT favoured the closure of all British and French interests, who responded by beefing up their defenses. As many British merchants moved back to Hong Kong, hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong workers deserted the colony and went back to Canton to support and unite with the strikers. A four months’ strike was waged in Shanghai. In Canton, a boycott of British goods would last for a year and a half completely paralyzed the port of Hong Kong.

It was at the height of these events, in June 1925, that Fr. I. Canazei had to pass through pickets of strikers in Canton and had no choice but trek on foot most of the 240km separating Canton from Shiu Chow. War

⁴ Ricaldone to Rinaldi, 6 June 1927, ASC F 158.

between the Yunnan army and the Guangdong army was raging: corpses were strewn everywhere. On his return trip he happened to be in Canton on 22 June precisely when the Sha Meen incident was starting to unfold. He prudently boarded the Macao bound ship, from where he observed events, and reached Macao the morning of 24 June. In July, he accompanied the students of Philosophy from Hosai (Shiu Chow) to Heung Shan and Macao for the holidays. In August it seemed as if war would break out anytime: as he reached Shiu Chow he listened to the advice of Msgr. Versiglia and moved all the novices to the safety of Macao in what turned out to be a difficult and expensive trip.⁵ The rest of the missionaries decided to remain at their posts.

As of July 1926, with the launching of the Northern Expedition and first victories gained by the National Revolutionary Army, the focus of revolution shifted away from the strike, which by September 1926 had effectively ended.

4.3. *The Soviets in Kwangtung*⁶

Chiang's April 1927 move to rid the KMT of Communists was carried out both in Shanghai and Canton. Troops began amassing again in Kwangtung and other southern provinces. When preparing to visit Shiu Chow in July 1927, Fr. Ricaldone reported 40,000 troops marching on Canton. At the end of September, his departure from Shiu Chow was held up by the southward journey to Canton of yet another 50,000 Bolshevik troops who "had switched allegiance".⁷ The south became the theatre of confused civil war battles, as alliances were made and broken. In November, war broke out between Kwangtung and Kwangsi. General Chang Fa-kwei withdrew his troops, thus opening the way to infiltration by communists among the military and strengthening their potential for revolt. Together with peasants, workers and military force, the CCP staged an uprising in Canton, hoping to capture the city, accelerate the uprising of the whole province, and seize political power.

On 11 December 1928, after more than ten hours of fighting, the Communists managed to control much of Canton. In the afternoon, "the

⁵ *Cronaca Ispettorale* 1923-1930, pp. 21-24.

⁶ Cf *GuangZhou Qi Yi* www.unitedcn.com/01ZGZZ/21DI2/new_page_1556.htm; and *GuangZhou Su Wei Ai Xuan Yan* www.gmw.cn/content/2005-02/19/content_182825.htm

⁷ Ricaldone to Rinaldi, 31.7.1927 and 25.9.1927, ASC F 158.

establishment of the Canton Soviet (Commune)” was announced: political power now belonged to the workers, peasants and soldiers; imperialism would be overthrown and the warlords suppressed.

The following day, Chang Fa-kwei recalled his forces and easily defeated the outnumbered Communists: the revolt had lasted three days. The Communist troops dispersed and one faction withdrew into the Shiu Chow area. All along, communist officers were holding sway in town: in August and October 1927, Msgr. Versiglia had to fend off attempts by troops to occupy the Don Bosco Institute and the Bishop’s House.⁸ An anti-christian demonstration prepared for Christmas day in 1927 failed. Leftist troops remained active throughout 1928 both in the city and in the countryside.

5. Christianity and Modern China, especially in the area of education

Christianity and China’s encounter in the 1920’s present both positive and negative aspects.

5.1. Positive aspects

In the history of republican China, there was a short “golden” period during which Christianity was popular. Many early revolutionists had embraced the christian faith: they had a strong sense of expectation of a “wealthy and strong nation”. They showed great interest in western ideas, including religious ones.

A great percentage of young people engaged in revolution were Christians. Just for example, 65% of the officers in the Kwangtung government were Christians. Because of the backwardness in China, the intellectuals thought they had to “wake-up” the people and release them from the burden of their traditions. They rejected traditional culture and opposed Confucianism, hungering for western ideas and hoping they would solve the problems, which China was facing. It aroused young people’s curiosity for Christianity and many expected it would lead the way to the nation’s salvation. This curiosity was really “pragmatically” and not “religiously” inspired!

⁸ G. Bosto, *Martiri in Cina*, p. 296.

5.2. *Negative aspects:*

5.2.1. Anti-Christianity Movement

This “golden” period for the evangelization in China did not last long. Nationalism was deeply rooted among the Chinese intellectuals, and some considered imported Christianity a cultural invasion.

From 1919 to 1927, there was strong hostility towards Christianity among students and government officials. They organized a series of anti-Christian movements, such as the “Anti-Religion Act” and “the Declaration of the Anti-Christian Alliance”, established in Peking in May 1922. This was a non-governmental organization linked to communism. It criticized Christianity as forerunner of capitalism and as anti-scientific, restricting the thought and poisoning the minds of young people.

In August 1924, the KMT and CCP jointly re-organized the “Anti-Christian Alliance”, and launched an “Anti-Christian Week” on 22 to 27 December.

5.2.2. Education Reform (1926-27) and its effects on Religious Education in China

Cai Yuan-Pei, a famous educator and President of Peking University, wrote that “Education should be independent from any influences of religion and political parties. It should not turn them into products of ideologies and tools for specific usages”. Cai believed that political parties and churches had hidden agendas and aims, hence he was against the presence of a theology faculty in universities. Only pure academic study and research, such as, history of religions and comparative study of religions, were allowed in the faculty of philosophy. He opposed Bible or catechism classes in schools and the involvement of missionaries in education, etc. Foreigners could be considered for the post of college or university heads under condition that they did not favour evangelization and that religion would not be included in the curriculum.⁹

At a national education council held in 1924, some participants suggested that foreigners be banned altogether from educational services,

⁹ PEI-QING, SUN (ed.), *Zhong Guo Jiao Yu Shi*, Hua Dong Shi Fan Da Xue Chu Ban She. Shanghai, 2000, pp. 398-399.

and that evangelization, the teaching of the Bible and all religious services be prohibited in schools. If christian schools accepted these conditions, they would totally lose their character as christian schools. Christians clarified their stance stating that “there is no contradiction between christian schools and patriotic education; teaching religion in schools does not hinder the educational objective and contributes to the construction of society and nation”.¹⁰

At the time of the May 30th incident in 1925, Anti-Christian and Anti-Imperialist ideologies went hand-in-hand. From 1926-1927, more than 3,000 missionaries, mainly protestant, left China and many schools and hospitals were forced to shut down or were confiscated. The Apostolic Delegate Celso Costantini appealed to Catholic missionaries to remain at their posts: the appeal gave Fr. Ricaldone sufficient ammunition to defend the decision of keeping his Salesians in Shanghai in 1927 notwithstanding the very dramatic situation. The Anti-Christian movement lasted until April 1927. From that time on Church and religion lost their appeal among the Chinese.

In the wake of these changes, in January 1927, Fr. G. Guarona, the Pro-Vicar of the Shiu Chow Vicariate Apostolic, wrote a letter to the missionaries explaining the new legislation.¹¹

The aim of the government is to abolish completely the control of schools by foreigners. A few days earlier it has published the following regulations:

- I. All schools, even private one, shall have a Chinese as Director.
- II. The word “private” shall appear in the name and on the stationary of the school.
- III. All teaching staff shall possess teaching diplomas.
- IV. The textbooks adopted shall be those approved by the Education Department.
- V. The teaching of religion is not allowed.¹²
- VI. Foreigners can be ‘advisers’.
- VII. All schools run by foreigners or foreign missions shall have a government commissar check the execution of the programs.

¹⁰ WEI-MIN, GU, *Ji Du Jiao Yu Jin Dai Zhongguo Shehui*. Shanghai Renmin Chu Ban She, 1996, pp. 420ff.

¹¹ ASC F 160.

¹² “Anti-foreigner and anti-Christian conference will be given” handwritten addition by Canazei.

At last in 1928, when the Nationalist Government gained control over the whole country, it announced the new policy of withdrawing educational rights from Christian churches. All Christian schools had to register and because of that, many missionaries who were involved in education had to leave China.

6. The effects on the Salesian Missions¹³

The history of the China Province is full of episodes that show the hard time our work had to face during this period. The following are mentioned as examples for you to read.

6.1. Student protests in Shiu Chow and new school legislation (1925)

Since there were Russian “counsellors” and “instructors” aiming at sovietizing China, they organized unions for workers, students and peasant farmers. They instilled hatred for the missionary, for religion, for the foreigner – for all foreigners except Russians! Foreigners were all inveterate imperialists – all, except the Russians. And all missionaries were the “running dogs of the imperialists”. With the intent of bringing China into conflict with the western nations they encouraged and instigated attacks on property belonging to foreigners, on missions and on the Concessions.

The “May 30th Incident” in Shanghai was the occasion for a big protest parade of students, soldiers and ordinary citizens, through the streets of the cities of China.

During this period, the students in Shiu Chow were allowed to join the Student League, although initially the Superiors had been reluctant to give permission. This Union was engaged in promoting propaganda against religion but the pupils of Don Bosco College and Help of Christians College, timely sensitized by Fr. Braga, were able to refute the specious arguments and crude accusations leveled by the students of other colleges. Appealing to the Constitution, which guaranteed freedom of conscience and reminding all that the Father of the Fatherland had been a Christian,

¹³ Mario RASSIGA, *A Short Historical Account of the Salesian Work in China (1906-1930)*, translated by BERNARD TOHILL. Hong Kong, 1973.

they succeeded in containing the struggle within the limits of patriotism, without it spilling over into the arena of religion.

The mission still had to face the thorny problem of the schools. Catholic schools barely managed to obtain accreditation, submitting to the new ordinance, which, not surprisingly, forbade the teaching of religion during school hours. The Salesians adapted to the situation, bowing to the pressure of the authorities. They held on to their schools, and the religious instruction that had been banned from the classroom made its way back in the guise of moral and civic instruction.

6.2. Occupation of Nantao by troops and pull out of Salesians (Shanghai 1927)

In March 1927, as the Revolutionary Army from the south was closing in on Shanghai, a general strike was declared. The strikers, who were armed, took over the administration of the city, intimidating many people in the process. On the 26th, the sad news was received of the deaths of two Jesuit priests, Frs. Vanara and Dugout, Italian and French respectively. They were killed by the revolutionaries in Nanking. The Japanese Consul was also murdered by the same people, in the same city, and some British and Americans were wounded.

In such a threatening situation the Salesians thought of taking refuge in the Concessions. To do so would have been relatively easy for the Superiors but none of them thought of abandoning their boys. It was at this juncture that the Italian Consul-General, wishing to assure himself of the safety of the confreres, promised to support the pupils who went with them to a place of safety. And so, the Superiors with their boys reached the Sacred Heart Hospital on the evening of 26th where the good Sisters hurriedly prepared for them a corner of the building. Afterwards, some of the boys went home. On 3 April, the Rector and cleric Nolan took some boys back to the school, and some more left in the evening. On the 7th, the school was occupied by over 1,000 soldiers, and on the 11th, the Salesians left the hospital for the M.E.P. Procure while the boys returned to Nantao. All this time a reaction in favor of the Nationalists was growing in strength, and there was fighting around our institute.

General Chiang Kai-shek had understood that the strikers were set on taking over the Concessions, a step that would have involved him in a struggle with the Western Powers, thereby hindering him in the pursuit of

his immediate objective, the one nearest his heart – namely, the reunification of all China. And this explains the change and the reaction. The strategy succeeded; the Concession was respected; order was restored in the city and the troops from the South resumed their march northwards.

The political instability in China, especially in Shanghai, pushed the Superiors to decide to move the Salesians, especially clerics to a place of safety. An agreement was reached and signed in September 1927 by Msgr. Valtorta, the Bishop of Hong Kong and Fr. Peter Ricaldone, the Extraordinary Visitor to the Province. It stipulated that St. Louis School was now entrusted to the Salesians. Immediately, the Superiors pulled out the Salesians in formation both from Shanghai and Macau and set up a formation house in St. Louis School in Hong Kong.

6.3. The capture of Fr. Umberto Dalmasso in Nam Hung, Shiu Chow (1929)

In 1929, the reaction to the communists in Nam Hung had been ferocious, much to the exasperation of the communists themselves who, being powerless in the urban areas, gave vent to their vengeance in the country side, sowing terror everywhere with their death squads. Moreover, armed bands of communists roamed the nearby Kiangsi Province, where the recall to the south of most of the regular troops left the area defenseless. On 1 June, Fr. Dalmasso and three other priests were preparing to celebrate the feast of Mary Help of Christians at nearby Li Hei Kiao. It was clear that something had happened in the town and Fr. Dalmasso rushed off towards the town on his bicycle. He met a long queue of people fleeing from the town and as he was approaching, he perceived the gates were closed and wanted to obtain information from the bystanders, but suddenly, about 50 communist soldiers, wearing armbands and carrying flags, appeared and, catching sight of the foreign missionary, surrounded him and took him under arrest. Fr. Dalmasso tried to explain to the junior officer in charge who he was, showing him his visiting card, and explaining why he was, at that time, in that particular place.

Actually, he was held up by the troops of General Pang Tak Wai, who was leading the guerilla warfare in Shiu Chow. The communists began their withdrawal over the mountain roads before dawn on 5th and Fr. Dalmasso was obliged to go with them. They were expecting a handsome ransom from the Bishop before he would be freed. The exhausting

marches were proving too much for him; he was utterly exhausted and, unaware of Monsignor's efforts to free him, he was also discouraged. After his unceasing pleading with the general for his release for almost two weeks, Fr. Dalmasso was finally set free. The general offered some advice about the dangers he might encounter on his way back to his mission, and reminded him not to combat communism. Fr. Dalmasso showed no great interest in what he was being told, and, instead, asked for a pass or safe-conduct he could show to sentinels when stopped by them. Pang wrote out the permit himself and gave it to him together with two dollars which Dalmasso refused but which Pang forced into his pocket.

After almost two weeks of captivity, Fr. Dalmasso was safely home and was warmly welcomed by his parishioners. Less than a year later, Msgr. Versiglia and Fr. Caravario were facing the same fate while on their way to Lin Chow. Unfortunately, they were murdered while trying to protect the girls whom they were accompanying.

Conclusions

As we have seen, in 1920-30, China was in a chaotic situation, politically, socially, financially and even in its attitude towards religion. Despite these difficulties, our pioneer Salesian missionaries bravely adapted themselves to the various situations.

They have to learn a new language, totally different from European languages, and even many dialects spoken in different areas. Fr. Caravario was in China for less than six years and had to learn Mandarin (the National Language) and Shanghaiese, Portuguese in Timor, Cantonese and Hakka when he was sent to Shiu Chow.

For most of the 1920s they lived in danger, or even in life-threatening situations. They were called to protect their flocks from the harassment by bandits and soldiers. Some gave their blood: Msgr. Versiglia and Fr. Caravario in 1930 and Frs. Bassano Lareno, Vincenzo Munda and John Matkowics during the Japanese occupation.

It is in difficult circumstances that ordinary people show outstanding qualities of courage, dedication and faith and even the ordinary things they accomplish acquire added value. Our generation enjoys the fruit of their efforts and sacrifices: we owe them respect and gratitude.