

INTRODUCTION

Chinese Catholic priests, sisters, and lay persons imprisoned after 1949 have produced a number of memoirs and autobiographical accounts in which they reflected on their experiences in prisons and labor camps. Some of them have been published in English in recent years, for example Jin Luxian's memoirs,¹ and the autobiography of Sr. Ying Mulan.² Other accounts have been published in Taiwan in Chinese, such as Hu Meiyu's *Le zai ku zhong*³ and Zhou Bangjiu's *Dongfang liming zai wang*.⁴ Many other materials have been divulged in an unofficial way in China or abroad, for example Fr. Guo Fude's *Bai sui laoren huiyilu*,⁵ printed in Shandong in 2019.

Among these documents the memoirs written by Yang Libo, bishop of the archdiocese of Lanzhou, occupy a special position, since they tell about the developments of the local church of Gansu from the 1940s to the 1980s. Bishop Yang's memoirs are written from the perspective of a priest, and he paid special attention to the matters concerning the diocese and the fate of the other priests and religious brothers. Also, the present investigation centers on the priests, especially on the Chinese priests of Gansu, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, with the focus on Lanzhou Diocese. When were the first native priests of Gansu ordained? How and where did they receive their theological education? What kind of work did they do, and how did they suffer for their religious convictions? How did their education and training help them in the prison years? The memoirs of Bp. Yang Libo give many first-hand answers for some of the questions. However, other questions remain: What were the achievements and what were the shortcomings of the theological education of the 1920s to the 1950s? Why did many of the seminarians drop out and why were only few ordained priests? Would a shorter and less

¹ Jin Luxian 金鲁贤, *The Memoirs of Jin Luxian. Volume One: Learning and Relearning 1916–1982*. Translated by W. Hanbury-Tenison, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012.

² Ying Mulan, *Confessions of a Chinese Heroine. The Labor Camp Memoirs of Sr. Ying Mulan*, Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2021.

³ Hu Meiyu 胡美玉, *Le zai ku zhong 乐在苦中 (Joys in Sorrow)*, Taipei: Kuangchi Press, 2001.

⁴ Zhou Bangjiu 周邦旧, *Dongfang liming zai wang 东方黎明在望 (The Dawn of the East is Near)*, Valyermo, St. Andrew's Abbey: printed in Taiwan, 2005.

⁵ Guo Fude 郭福德, *Bai nian laoren huiyilu 百年老人回忆录 (Memoirs of a Centenarian)*, Shandong 2019 (unofficial publication).

theoretical theological education have been better? All these questions cannot be treated in a comprehensive way in this study, they will remain the concern of future historians.

In a special way, Bishop Yang's memoirs also show his own spiritual journey from the years at the minor seminary in dire poverty through his uplift by the solemn priestly ordination in Lanzhou in 1949, his pastoral work and his long years of lonely suffering in the different labor camps. Like many other Catholics and priests from Gansu he loyally kept the faith and was ready to suffer for it, and after his release his only concern was not personal well-being but the needs of the Catholics in his diocese. After 1980 he fearlessly dedicated himself to the revival of pastoral life in Lanzhou Diocese, and in 1981 he was appointed administrator of the diocese and finally secretly consecrated Bishop on 12 April 1988.⁶ He was made Archbishop of Lanzhou by Pope John Paul II in 1989, but at the same time his last term of imprisonment (1989–1992) hampered his efforts to rebuild the diocese. Certainly the fact that he could ordain several young priests in 1992, 1994, and 1995 gave him great consolation, since he somehow saw that the diocese which he had helped to rebuild from the ruins had hope again for a brighter future.

In the first part of this book, I will try to contextualize the life story of Bp. Yang by looking back at the beginnings of Catholicism in Gansu, starting with the Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century. More systematic mission activities began with the arrival of the CICM fathers in 1878, who served in Gansu until 1922 when the area was handed over to the German SVD missionaries and Capuchins. The period from 1922 to 1951 was marked by growth in many areas, including the development of faster transportation tools which improved the connections to other parts of China and of the world.

The next part of this study is dedicated to the education and the fate of priests from Gansu. The first priests from Gansu were educated in Naples, where a group of seminarians traveled in 1773. Among them were Xu Geda and Li Zibiao. The first returned after a decade of studies in Italy, only to become a victim of the nationwide persecution of 1785 and to be exiled to Xinjiang. Rev. Li Zibiao (1760–1828) was to become one of the most prominent Catholic priests of the eighteenth century, since he accompanied Lord Macartney on his journey to China and relatively successfully interpreted for the British. Not only that, Li Zibiao also managed to secretly stay in China and served as priest and teacher at the seminary in Shanxi Province from 1795 to his death in 1828. The

⁶ Some sources give the date “12 August 1988.”

recent study by Henrietta Harrison⁷ has made Li Zibiao by far the most well researched Chinese priest of the eighteenth century. For the life of the Catholics of Gansu, however, the presence of Rev. Li Zibiao could hardly have any direct impact.

A century later several outstanding priests from Gansu made their appearance, most notably Rev. Han Jisheng (1872–1953), Rev. Zhang Yagebo (or Zhang Yi, 1873–1950), Rev. Wang Yuanzhi (1873–1940), and Rev. Chen Xuegu (1879–1952). All of these underwent a long seminary education and were respected as authorities in the local churches. Rev. Han Jisheng was made “Monsignor,” and Rev. Wang Yuanzhi even had the opportunity to study in Europe and to teach Chinese there in the early twentieth century.

After the First World War the German missionaries continued to work for the education of native priests. They sent at least eleven seminarians from Gansu to the seminary in Yanzhou, well-known for its good standards of teaching and for the many publications produced partly by Chinese seminarians. The first to return from Shandong was Fr. Duan Wenhui, ordained priest in 1935. After 1939 the emphasis shifted to Lanzhou, where a seminary for northwest China was established, due to the urgings of Archbishop Zanin, the representative of the Holy See in China. Therefore, Yang Libo studied theology in Lanzhou, and he was ordained there in 1949, the year of the communist takeover. The atheist regime meant a prolonged suppression of religion. Foreign missionaries were expelled, and most Chinese priests were imprisoned or sent to labor camps. In Lanzhou Diocese fifteen native seminarians had been ordained priests between 1924 and 1955, but only two of them were not imprisoned. Ecclesiastical life was practically altogether stopped, and only very fervent Catholics dared to continue their prayers in their homes in the years between 1958 and 1980.

The revival of Christian life in China after 1980 when the first priests returned to their homes and began to say Masses again formed the last two decades of Bishop Yang’s life, but the active mission work he conducted after his release in 1980 only led to further imprisonments (1983–1987 and 1989–1992). Among the few elderly priests from Lanzhou Diocese who had been released from labor camps around 1980 Rev. Yang Libo was the most energetic and eloquent, and thus he was made administrator of the Diocese after the death of Rev. Han Peiyou who held this office before him. An adequate account of the restoration of churches and the revival of Catholicism in Lanzhou would fill many more books and exceeds the scope of this study. As to the new genera-

⁷ Harrison, Henrietta, *The Perils of Interpreting*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2021.

tion of priests educated or ordained by Bp. Yang Libo since the late 1980s and early 1990s, it may be said that they enjoyed the prestige and authority of the older priests who had enjoyed a thorough theological education and suffered long years in labor camps. The younger generation of priests mainly contributed by building projects and by pastoral work in a new era. Future studies may evaluate their own struggles and their merits. In a sense it can be said that Bp. Yang Libo led the Diocese of Gansu into a new time, passing on the faith which he had acquired in the 1930s and 1940s to the younger generation of the revival of Christianity in the 1980s, using Chinese instead of Latin and relying more on native sources than on foreign help.