

# ***Book Review: The Catholic Invasion of China: Remaking Chinese Christianity by D. E. Mungello***

---

*Patrick Taveirne*

Titles do matter, and the element calling for justification is thus the term "invasion." One may agree or disagree with the author's choice: *The Catholic Invasion of China*.<sup>1</sup> I am not so sure whether it was his choice or that of his publisher for marketing and sales purposes. Without doubt the title is arresting, as well as the sumptuous cover illustration that warrants purchase of the book on its own. The cover image is a painting of 120 Catholic martyrs in China, commissioned by Cardinal Paul Shan in 1996 and painted during an 18-month period by a Buddhist artist.

Representatives of authorized churches and government organs in the PRC still regularly associate Christianity with "foreign invasion" or "foreign aggression" (*waiguo qinlüe* 外國侵略). Curiously, Professor David Mungello never explicitly writes to what extent he agrees or disagrees with this official line of reasoning.

The American historian Luke Clossey suggests, "we might consider how Mungello's thinking itself fits into the historiography of the last century, which saw fundamental shifts in how historians conceptualize religious expansion. An older model sees missionaries in quasi-military terms, agents of the religion's invasion, occupation, and annexation of new territory, as in the titles of Robert Ricard's 1933's *La 'conquête spirituelle' du Mexique: Essai sur l'apostolat et les méthodes missionnaires des ordres mendiants en Nouvelle-Espagne de 1523–24 à 1572* and Erik Zürcher's 1959's *The Buddhist Conquest of China*. The more recent

---

<sup>1</sup> The book was published by Rowman and Littlefield (Lanham, 2015). Pp. xviii, 175. US\$ 40.00. ISBN 978-1-4422-5084-2

[post-colonial and post-modern] model does not see a homogeneous replication of the old religion in a new land: instead, missionaries and converts share agency to negotiate a complex outcome [...]. An exemplary title of the new outlook is Nalini Bhushan, Jay L. Garfield, and Abraham Zablocki's 2009's *TransBuddhism: Transmission, Translation, Transformation*, in which the repeated "trans" prefix emphasizes the distance between origin and destination." Nowadays historians and economists such as the Indian scholar Jasay Subrahmanyam emphasize connectedness and global history.

In his book Prof. Mungello highlights the agency of Chinese believers from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and shows how their initiative has been central to forging a truly Chinese Catholic church. The book is therefore a welcome contribution to scholarship in both China and the West over the last few decades that has emphasized the compatibility of Christianity with Chinese culture, while pursuing a deeper understanding of how that relationship has evolved. The contribution of some prominent modern Chinese Catholics like Ma Xiangbo and Ying Lianzhi are discussed in detail, while others like Lu Zhengxiang and Wu Jingxiong are completely left out. Regarding the presentation of the Belgian missionary Vincent Lebbe as "a quiet martyr," Prof Mungello's almost exclusive use of a controversial book, Jacques Leclercq's *Vie du Père Lebbe, le tonnerre qui chante au loin* [*Thunder in the distance: The Life of Père Lebbe*] needs to be more balanced with the archival findings and research by the Belgian Emeritus Professor Claude Soetens (UCLouvain) and others.

Some reviewers of the book consider the brief (seven pages) concluding chapter dwelling on the perceived failure ("débâcle") of the missionary enterprise in China, both Protestant and Catholic, to be a bonus. The organizing argument offered in the introductory and concluding chapters of the book is that the foreigners "generated consequences that helped to transform a mission church into an indigenous religion. In the process, the Catholic invasion has enriched Chinese culture, and Chinese Catholicism has, in turn, enriched Catholicism and made it more universal." (p. 116) These "consequences" and the mechanics of the transformation are not spelled out, but appear to feature Catholic martyrdom amidst

Communist campaigns (p. 113). Prof. Mungello asserts that “the positive long-term effects of an indigenous form of Catholicism ultimately outweigh the negative short-term effects of this invasion.” (p. 1) Emily Dunn of The University of Melbourne's Asia Institute concludes that the book provides insufficient evidence for this evaluation, since its discussion of Catholicism in contemporary China relates primarily to the canonization of 120 martyrs by Pope John Paul II in the year 2000, and in particular chapter five under the strange title “Sexual Domination by Catholic Priests in China.”

Moreover, according to Dunn, the strands of information are frequently not clearly linked to a larger argument or narrative, and so their significance is left to the reader to deduce (for example, the ends of chapters three and five). How do the various instances of missionary chauvinism and allegations of sexual abuse and child neglect dotted between 1842 and 2000 relate to each other? After all, authoritarianism and sexual abuse in children's homes (chapter four) and within the church hierarchy (chapter five) are not topics of exclusive relevance to China. These chapters seem not to be thematically related.

The book's treatment of allegations of sexual seduction and assault that have been made against foreign priests is not at all satisfying. At least, some reference to relevant Chinese primary and secondary sources is called for to substantiate these allegations.

More importantly, Professor Ku Weiying of National Taiwan University alerted me about Mungello's wrong interpretation or translation of the original Chinese texts, especially on pages 27-37 and 71-77:

On Christian Virgins Mungello notes “In Jiangnan, the Christian Virgins presented special difficulties for the Jesuits. Fr. Gotteland [the Jesuit vicar general] wanted very much to import a European order of nuns to organize the religious life of these young women, but he felt that circumstances did not permit it. Fr. Estève praised these Christian Virgins of the Jiangnan church effusively as ‘the flower of Christendom...[T]hey are a very great aid in instructing the ignorant, in baptizing and rearing abandoned infants, and in exhorting pagans in danger of dying.’ They appear to have been part of a sodality associated with the Virgin Mary, perhaps a

form of the Confraternity of the Holy Mother (*Shengmu hui*) founded in Jiangnan by Fr. Francesco Brancati. Gotteland referred to them as 'the Holy Mother and her religious group of holy women' (*Shengmu ji shengnü jiaozhong* 聖母及聖女,教眾). In 1856 in Jiangnan, Fr. Gonnet gathered nine Christian Virgins to live together as a family in order to train them as virgin-catechists who would serve in the formation of other virgins." (p. 35)

In fact, according to Ku, this sentence 聖母及聖女,教眾 meant that during Pentecost, the Holy Mother, holy women, together with other believers gathered in a hall, chanting prayers all together, waiting for the coming of the Holy Spirit. At this moment, males and females were praying and praising God all together. Was this not evidence of male and female chanting together? The original Chinese text reads:

再者, 吾主耶穌升天後, 宗徒預備聖神降臨, 與聖母及聖女、教眾, 共聚一堂, 誦經祈望。此時一堂之上, 同聲讚頌, 豈非男女念經之明証乎?

The text used by Fr. Gotteland is to show that in the early church, male and female prayed together. This practice was very common and therefore it should also be practiced in Shanghai. This paragraph was to rebut the local church leaders asking not to impose the rule of male and female chanting the prayers together. The local church leader thought this way might corrupt the mind of people. This sentence, not as Mungello interprets, has nothing to do whatsoever with the organization of the local Christian Virgins.

On foundlings, Mungello records: "The Jiangnan Christians' *Open Letter* of 1846 reacted defensively to the issue of infanticide in section nine, entitled 'Foundlings' (*yuying*) [育嬰, actually means raising infants]. Infanticide appears to have been widespread in the Jiangnan region during the mid-nineteenth century. [Bishop Louis-Marie] de Bési and the [vicar general Claude] Gotteland ordered that, in Christian families, when the infant of an unwed mother was discarded in a basket, it should not be suffocated."

Ku comments, what de Bési and Gotteland ordered was in fact that when a baby was born, he/she should be put in a different place from the mother to avoid being accidentally suffocated by the mother.

Mungello continues: “The *Open Letter* responded quite bluntly that few Chinese Christians would follow this command. Four thousand years of Chinese history had established and justified the practice of a mother smothering a (p. 75) newborn infant she was unable to rear. Not doing so would leave it to a worse fate, since no one would protect an abandoned baby.”

Ku notices that the latter sentence is Mungello’s own incorrect interpretation. The Chinese text simply meant that: Four thousand years of Chinese history had established and justified the practice of a mother putting her newborn baby at her side sharing the same bed in order to take care of the child in person. The case of a mother accidentally suffocating [literally, to press to death 壓死] the newborn was rare and hence there was no need to observe the order of the Bishop to keep the newborn in a different place from their mothers. If mothers had suffocated all their babies, human beings would have already been extinct. In short, those mothers who would suffocate their infants are unable to raise their babies to adulthood. 憶我中邦, 自有人類以來, 亦有四千餘年之久。使爲母者將子女一概壓死, 早絕人類。要之, 爲母者而壓死子女, 決不能撫育子女之長大。

Mungello writes: “Most of the *Open Letter*’s response to de Bési’s and Gotteland’s condemnation of suffocation of infants focused on the European priests’ failure to appreciate Chinese culture. They were unable to see that although China lacked knowledge of transcendental truths, it had developed a sophisticated understanding of human nature. As a result, the catechist wrote that the European priests failed to see that Christian scripture and Confucian texts were companion texts of equal validity.”

Ku observes that the original Chinese text reads: 主教代權常與不通聖教經書、中國儒書者同伴, 焉能識書中之奧旨哉? Actually meaning that: Bishop de Bési and his vicar, often had those Chinese assistants who did not know Holy books and Chinese Confucian classics as well as their companions. How could they know the profound meaning of these books? The key word here is 同伴 which Mungello misreads as equal validity.

Mungello asserts: “The *Open Letter* applied this same principle of human nature in defending Chinese culture in regard to

the propriety of separating the sexes. From seven years of age onward in China, males and females were not supposed to share a bed. The *Open Letter* referred to a passage in one of the Gospels where Jesus spoke of the nurturing of children as akin to the chicken sitting on an egg. (It appears that a Chinese proverb was used in translating this undetermined section of the Gospels.)” (p. 75)

Ku clarifies: 耶穌云, 如鷄覆子, 亦爲本性不能相離 meaning: Jesus said, just like a chicken would always protect its eggs. This is their nature and they are not to be separated. Just like a mother was not supposed to be separated from her newborn.

Mungello explains: “The point was that human nature, whether in the Christian scriptures or in Confucian texts, was not very different. The implied conclusion was that the Chinese understanding of human nature justified the mother’s suffocating an infant because one responsibility of motherhood was to know when one lacked the means to raise the child properly.” (p. 75)

Ku argues that this is an incorrect interpretation. The Bishop did not talk about the abandoned babies. The topic was just about how to raise an infant properly. Due to Mungello’s fixed opinion about the prevalence of the practice of drowning baby girls in the Jiangnan region, he tends to read all Chinese texts in that direction!

In short, following several paragraphs of Mungello’s own speculations about infanticide, he argues on the same page: “Gotteland showed no awareness of the gender imbalance in infanticide. Whereas the seventeenth-century Christian literatus Li Jiugong had used the term *ninü* (literally, to drown a girl) in condemning infanticide, Gotteland used the gender-inclusive phrase *yasi zinu, zaojue renlei* 壓死子女, 早絕人類 (to smother a child and cause premature death to a human life). Since Gotteland wrote his (p.76) response to the *Open Letter* in French, the translators probably rendered a gender-inclusive French meaning in the Chinese version.”

According to Prof. Ku, this is a wrong translation and argument. The original Chinese text reads: 如云中邦有人類以來, 歷四千餘年之久, 爲母而一概壓死子女, 早絕人類, 此等持論, 文理全無... The translation should be: Someone said there have been

more than 4000 years of history in China. If the mothers (accidentally) pressed all their newborn babies to death, then all human beings should have already been extinct. This line of argument is completely unreasonable and meaningless...Rather than “cause premature death to a human life” as in Mungello’s translation of “早絕人類,” it should be “all human beings should have already been extinct.”

In general, considering all these mistakes, Prof. Mungello has to reconsolidate his arguments in this book.