

INTERVIEW WITH BROTHER ZHANG, PRINCIPAL OF XIANGBO SCHOOL, BEIJING

by Anthony Lam

(Brother Zhang Ruiting, a Marist brother in China, has been working as an educator for more than forty years. In 1984, Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan invited him to establish Xiangbo which is the first Catholic School to be established after the Cultural Revolution. Last summer Brother Zhang visited Hongkong at the invitation of the Marist brothers and Tripod took the opportunity to talk with him about recent developments in Catholic education in China.)

Brother Zhang spoke to us about the radical changes that have taken place in recent years. Shortly after assuming power, in 1949, the Communist government moved to gain full control over all educational institutions in most of the large cities. First they stipulated that all teachers be re-educated in accordance with communist ideological principles, then they converted all private primary and secondary educational facilities into government schools. This move brought all aspects of administration and teaching under direct and complete government control. After 1951, there were no more Catholic primary or secondary schools left operating in Beijing. At that time, Brother Zhang was working in Shangyi, a private Catholic secondary school in Beijing, which had been converted into the Beijing 38th Middle School. Brother Zhang was re-appointed as vice-principal, with a communist cadre serving as principal. Teachers and staff were paid by the government.

Formal education was greatly impeded by the Cultural Revolution. It was only in 1978 at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee that the Communist Party moved to implement its revised educational policies. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, modern education came to be seen as a vital means for China's modernization. Vocational training and adult education programs spread

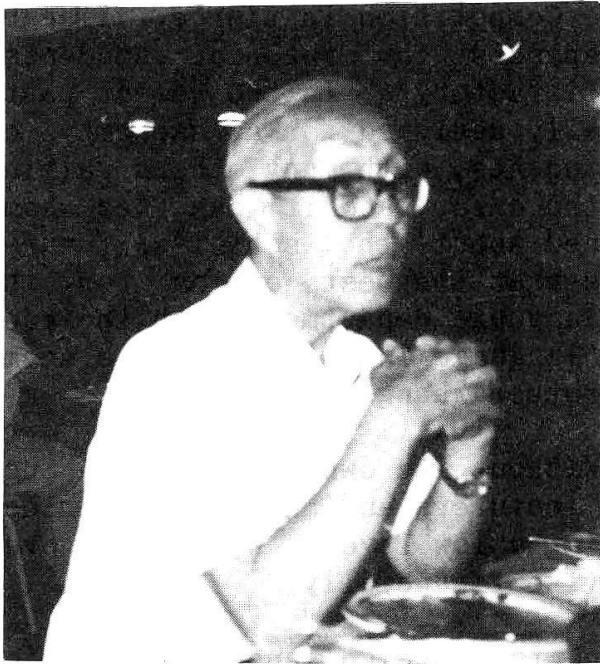
so rapidly that the government had to establish a separate department to keep pace with the demand. The Adult and Social Education Bureau was set up to oversee all post-secondary and adult education programs on a national level. It also was to work to encourage greater private participation in all areas of formal education. The Bureau was instrumental in setting up the Television College as well as the Workers Evening University. Another aspect of the Bureau's work is the establishment of standardized examinations throughout the country whereby students can qualify to obtain government certification and professional recognition.

In the summer of 1984, Bishop Michael Fu of Beijing asked Brother Zhang to establish and administer a vocational school as part of the Catholic Church's social service efforts. After a year of preparation and with the support of the Beijing Municipal Religious Affairs Bureau, the Beijing Catholic Patriotic Association Xiangbo School was opened in June of 1985. The school, which is named after the famous Chinese Catholic Ma Xiangbo, is located on Wangfujiang Street adjacent to St. Joseph's Church.

(An article about Mr. Ma Xiangbo's life and his contribution to China is presented in this issue of Tripod. Please refer to the article by Ruth Hayhoe: "A Chinese Catholic Philosophy of Higher Education in Republican China.")

Brother Zhang, who serves as principal, has enlisted the help of teachers, mostly Catholics, who also teach in Beijing's universities and other high schools. Brother tells us that among the non-Catholic teachers, many have come to appreciate the principles of Catholicism through their daily contact with the Church in the school. At first, Xiangbo offered only English, French, Japanese and Latin language courses. Latin classes were divided into two specific areas: medical and biological terminology. Later, English and mathematics were introduced as tutorial courses for secondary students during school vacations and on Sundays. The school also provides tutorial classes for students who have failed the university entrance examinations and are looking for another opportunity to qualify. During the past three years, Xiangbo has been offering thirty five language courses, each of five month duration, and over twenty secondary level tutorial classes. In all, the school has graduated over one thousand fully certified students.

Students of the foreign language department must fulfil third year university student standards in order to graduate. Most of them are



Brother Zhang Ruiting

qualified to do translation and interpretation work on a professional level. Xiangbo's demands are very strict and students are expected to work hard. Of the 70 students who had been accepted into the two-year English course in 1986, only 60 remained after one year, and of those, only 34 graduated this year. All the graduates gained immediate employment in companies doing foreign business. Among the school's previous graduates, about a hundred are now furthering their studies abroad.

In 1986, 32 percent of Xiangbo graduates qualified to enter universities. By 1987, the number had climbed to 50 percent, and this year it is over 60 percent. Most parents credit the school for this success, giving full marks to Catholic education in fulfilling its responsibility to provide excellence in teaching and high quality results. Parents are quite eager to send their children to the Catholic school. One sign of their approval may be found in the enthusiasm with which they participate in the annual parents' day activities.

At the present time, Xiangbo School has thirty-two teachers and 827 students. Since it's opening three years ago, over four thousand students have been served. Brother Zhang stressed that the school's aim has been to help serve the educational needs of society within the structure of the present government system. From this, he hopes that people will also gain a more positive attitude towards the Church.

Just as in other cities, the people of Beijing are seeking ways to broaden their knowledge and strengthen their educational base. In recent years, private tuition schools have sprung up all over the city. However, many of these new schools are concerned with little more than making money. They demand high fees but offer inferior education to their students. In response to this situation, a number of the more legitimate secondary schools have decided to add daytime tuition courses to their curricula. They provide classrooms, teaching facilities, and their own experienced teachers. It is no surprise, then, that they

enroll large numbers of such students. Competition is fierce. Xiangbo also advertised in most Beijing newspapers for tutorial students, however, the response was not very satisfactory. In the recent past, the school's four classes (each originally designed for a capacity of 60) were filled with over two hundred students, with many others waiting for a vacancy. This is no longer the case, and it has led some administrators to begin to be concerned about the school's future. Given the present situation, it seems that the best option for the future is to develop Xiangbo's foreign language department with the idea of establishing the school as a foreign language institute. This seems to be the best way to go according to Brother Zhang.

This approach, however, is not without its own problems. Such specialization demands more university lecturers and higher salaries. At the same time, class fees are fixed at a low level. With costs ever on the increase, how can the school survive financially?

At present, there is a great demand for foreign language education in Beijing. At the same time, most young men and women are seeking opportunities to study abroad. One response has come from a local vocational school which works in cooperation with a Japanese institute to provide courses in Japanese. Students who meet the requirements may upon graduation be sent to Japan for further study. This type of school has gained great popularity. Brother Zhang believes that the Xiangbo School should move in this direction. It should seek to ally itself in cooperation with overseas institutes and foreign foundations that can offer opportunities to study abroad to qualified graduates. This would attract a greater number of students to the school. One thing is certain; despite all the difficulties, Brother Zhang feels it is very important to the future of Catholic education in China that such schools as Xiangbo continue to make every effort to succeed.