

Fu Jen University (The Catholic University of Peking) and the Society of the Divine Word in China, 1945-1950

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Furen University (Fu Jen; Catholic University of Peking) was among the youngest of the universities in China during the early 20th century. It was established in 1925 by the American Benedictines and Chinese intellectuals in Beiping (Peiping; later renamed Peking or Beijing). It was one of two Catholic universities in China, the other being Zhendan University (Aurora University) in Shanghai.

The position of the Roman Catholic Church had been to expand its mission worldwide. Pope Benedict XV (1854-1922, r. from 1914) emphasised Jesus's mandate to "Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15) in the apostolic letter *Maximum Illud* of 30 November, 1919.¹ Pope Pius XI, known as the "Pope of Missions" (1857-1939, r. from 1922), continued the missionary endeavors of his predecessor, Benedict XV, with an emphasis on China.

Furthermore, two events indicated the significance of the China mission to the Vatican. First, Pope Pius XI sent the first Apostolic Delegate, Celso Costantini, to China in 1922. Second, six Chinese bishops were consecrated in Rome in 1926. The global missionary movement changed over time, in accordance with the indigenisation of the Catholic Church in China.

Fu Jen University vigorously aspired to become a well-established and prestigious institute within the shortest possible time, and recognised that its status depended on the academic standing of its staff. Therefore, immediately after its establishment, it sought to build a strong faculty by hiring prominent professors

¹ Robert A. Hunt, *The Gospel among the Nations: A Documentary History of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), p. 107, citing "*Maximum Illud*—Apostolic Letter of Benedict XV, 1919."

and offering them the best employment, teaching, and promotion terms. From its beginnings, Fu Jen was an institute that valued its faculty and emphasised the development of both staff and students, and was thus person-oriented rather than institution-oriented. Fu Jen also represented the localisation through education of the Catholic Church.

The extensive expansion of Fu Jen University posed a severe financial burden to the American Benedictine founders, and in 1933 they transferred its governance to the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). In an undated document (1930s?), Fu Jen University pledged to solicit more professors of “high scholastic standing.”² With this background, Fu Jen was able to contribute to the higher education of Chinese youth under the management of the SVD, even during the turbulent times of the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), and it sustained this after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 until 1950. This paper sheds particular light as it makes use of the letters of Fr. Harold W. Rigney, SVD, who was Rector of the University, to his Superior General in Rome to portray the picture of Fu Jen University during the Civil War and up to 1950.

Beginning of the civil war

After the Soviets entered the war against Japan on 8 August, 1945, Mao Zedong believed that the Japanese defeat was imminent, and the Chinese Communists embarked on a full-scale attack in Northeast China. The Civil War began and by the time Emperor Hirohito announced the Japanese surrender on national radio on 15 August, 1945, the Communists had already secured tremendous territories in the region.³ In addition to initial military success, the Communists were “fully armed ideologically, politically, and

² “Suggestions for the Stability and Further Development of the Catholic University of Peking,” n.d. [1930s?], 4 pages, Fu Jen Catholic University Archives, Taipei (hereafter FJU Archives).

³ Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China*, 3rd Edition (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 620.

organisationally.”⁴ The hostilities grew and in 1945 no end to the Civil War was in sight. Despite the uncertainties, the SVD continued its education mission in China, and even planned for the further development of Fu Jen University.

In the Fall Semester of 1946-1947, there were altogether 2,595 students, both men and women, registered in the undergraduate and graduate divisions of Fu Jen University. The undergraduate division had 2,556 students, 1,523 men and 1,033 women, while the graduate division was in a minority with only 39 students, 28 men and 11 women.⁵ With the enrolment of students of both genders, Fu Jen also paid attention to the diversity of disciplines offered, and was rather successful in this. The undergraduate departments then consisted of art disciplines: Chinese, Western Literature, History, Philosophy, Fine Arts (one of Chinese Art and one of Western Art), and a German Section; social science disciplines: Sociology, Economics, Psychology, and Education; and science disciplines: Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology; and Agriculture, Premedical, and Home Economics. The graduate division was more focused, with departments of History, Ethnology, Physics, Chemistry, and Biology.⁶ It thus focused on the learning of Chinese and Western subject matters and the introduction of newer subjects such as Psychology, and practical disciplines such as Premedical.

The Rector of the University, Fr. Harold W. Rigney, SVD, wrote frequently to his Superior General in Rome. The reports from the Office of the Rector gave valuable insights into the situation of Fu Jen University and the challenges it encountered during the war years. In a letter of 30 November, 1946, Fr. Rigney elaborated on the conditions of the time. On 3 November, Cardinal Thomas Tian Gengxin, SVD, celebrated Mass for the faculty and the students of the University, followed by a talk by Fr. Rigney to the priests and

⁴ Alexander V. Pantsov with Steven I. Levine, *Mao: The Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2012), p. 342.

⁵ “Enrollment of Students Fall Semester 1946-47,” one page, FJU Archives.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the Catholic staff.⁷ During these difficult times, the Cardinal strongly supported Fu Jen and recommended many developments, which were crucial to the University. Fr. Rigney later explained that the educational policies of the SVD required closer consideration and restructuring.

The war situation affected everyone at all levels, including Fu Jen students. Inflation had increased the cost of coal and electricity, so the students had to pay higher dormitory fees, which was particularly hard on those from faraway places.⁸ The University was very aware of the students' difficulties and tried to alleviate their burden, but without significant success. There were disagreements among the students over the increase in dormitory fees. On 16 December, a strike broke out in the men's dormitory hall, and the students wanted to go to the Aurora Women's College and ask the women to join their action.⁹ Meetings were called to settle the issues, and eventually the matter appeared to be resolved.

Education endeavors in December 1946

At the end of December 1946, the SVD community met to discuss their plans for education in the future. The participants advocated the opinions of Monsignor Celso Costantini, the first Apostolic Delegate to China (1922-1933), with regard to Catholic education in China, considering his views to reflect the primary purpose of Fu Jen University. Monsignor Costantini had written that Fu Jen "was preparing to start a movement of Chinese thought towards Christ in the gigantic mission field of China."¹⁰ He regarded the University as an essential component of the China

⁷ Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend Joseph Grendel, S.V.D., Superior General, Collegio del Verbo Divino, Rome, Italy, dated 30 November, 1946, p. 1, FJU Archives.

⁸ "Announcement to the Students of Fu Jen University by the Executive Council," dated 31 December, 1946, 3 pages, FJU Archives.

⁹ "Strikes at the Catholic University Beginning Monday, 16 Dec, 1946—Report by Secretary to the Rector," one page, FJU Archives.

¹⁰ Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend Joseph Grendel, S.V.D., Superior General, Collegio del Verbo Divino, Rome, Italy, dated 31 December, 1946, p. 1, FJU Archives.

mission, and that it should move forward in becoming a center of “Catholic humanism, embracing theology, philosophy, the arts and the sciences,” while upholding Chinese cultural traditions.¹¹

Fr. Rigney made further attempts to discuss educational plans for Fu Jen University. He flew with another priest to Shanghai to meet with Archbishop Antonio Riberi, who had been appointed the Apostolic Internuncio to China in July 1946, and Dr. John Wu, who was the Chinese Minister to the Vatican, before his departure to Rome.¹² The SVD priests also met with renowned Catholic intellectuals to discuss the possibility of them joining the staff at Fu Jen. The priests also discussed educational problems and possible challenges with several Shanghai educators.

From his meeting with Dr. John Wu, Fr. Rigney formed a good impression of the Chinese minister. He wrote: “Dr. Wu is one of the great leaders in China. He is a noted lawyer and jurist, as well as an educator. Since his conversion to Catholicism, he has taken a leading position in Catholic lay activity. His book on the science of sanctity and his translation of the psalms are noteworthy. In private life, he is very devout.”¹³ In approaching Dr. Wu, Fr. Rigney had a certain matter in mind. A successor to President Chen Yuan was required, as he was approaching retirement. According to Rigney, “It would be a great step forward, if the Catholic University had as president a man like Dr. Wu: a devout and practical Catholic, a modern scholar recognised throughout China, and a man who has distinguished himself in public affairs.”¹⁴ Of course, the priest had to find a prominent Catholic scholar who was very much dedicated to his faith, with a pragmatic outlook, and who was renowned in local society. The image and networking of Fu Jen University needed to be promoted. Fr. Rigney asked Dr. Wu about the possibility of him becoming the University’s president. Wu responded that he would be glad to accept the post, but thought he

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Letter from Rigney to Grendel, 31 December, 1946, pp. 2-3.

¹³ Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁴ Ibid.

might be offered a position in the Chinese Supreme Court after his return from Rome. It was wise for Fr. Rigney to approach Dr. Wu, as the timing was good. Fr. Rigney immediately wrote to his Superior General, suggesting that he could meet with Dr. Wu in Rome. The Superior General could thus form his own impression of the Chinese minister and decide whether he was an appropriate future candidate for the presidency of the University.¹⁵

Fu Jen University was nonetheless eager to improve its Sinological studies and publications. Fu Jen continued to plan the publication of its *Monumenta Serica* and *Folklore Studies* in 1947.¹⁶ Chinese people demanded that Western missionaries appreciate Sinology, and Fr. Rigney made an interesting observation: “It is true that Chinese sometimes complain, and with good reason, that missionaries do not study the Chinese sufficiently and are too ignorant of Chinese culture. They want the missionaries to know the Chinese, but not to teach the Chinese things that the Chinese know much better. The Chinese are very proud of their knowledge of their own country, literature and culture to ever look up to a foreigner in this field of knowledge” (underlining in original).¹⁷

1947-1948

Fu Jen University expanded its teaching staff and was extremely particular in terms of the qualifications and characters of applicants. Efforts were made to employ English language professors. The University closely scrutinised the teaching abilities of the applicants, their work attitudes, and moral standards.¹⁸ A constant effort was made to maintain cordial relations between the SVD community and the lay academic staff. Even during the Civil War, Fu Jen insisted that its success depended on “the continued cooperation of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Letter from Rigney to Grendel, 31 December, 1946, pp. 8 & 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁸ Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend Joseph Grendel, S.V.D., Superior General, Collegio del Verbo Divino, Rome, Italy, dated 31 January, 1947, pp. 1-2, FJU Archives.

the university staff and the stability and generosity of the Society of the Divine Word.”¹⁹

The stability of the University was, however, still fragile. The SVD was prepared for worse things to come. There was the possibility of the Communists taking over Peiping, and thus the SVD community prepared by reserving money and storing up clothes in case they had to suddenly evacuate.²⁰

Fu Jen University continued to expand its campus despite the war. The SVD received a palace as a gift to the University.²¹ The palace was about a 20-minute walk or 2 kilometers from the University campus, and the houses in the palace were no different from other Chinese palaces in Beiping.

The SVD community was still able to travel fairly easily in Beiping. The SVD bishop was present at the consecration of a bishop in Qingdao,²² and the priests met with the commander of the U.S. Fleet in the Western Pacific, whose family was Catholic, also in Qingdao. The commander, known as Badger, was very concerned about the military situation in North China as two cities had fallen. He had already warned the government in Washington D.C. of the advances of the Communists. After their visit to Qingdao, the SVD priests traveled to Shandong, and then returned to Beiping by plane. As Fr. Rigney recalled leaving the plane, he was shocked to see the stunned faces of hundreds of people at Beiping airport.²³

In 1948, the war had caused a dramatic rise in inflation and consequently in the operation of the black market. The cost of flour doubled within one day in Beiping, and increased by almost four

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²¹ “Report on the Donation of a Chinese Palace in Peiping to the Catholic University in Peiping,” Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector, 5 May, 1948, FJU Archives.

²² Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend A. Grosse-Kappenberg S.V.D., Superior-General, Roma-Ostiense, Italy, dated 31 October, 1948, p. 1, FJU Archives.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

times in Qingdao.²⁴ The feeling was that Beiping's economy was paralysed. Fr. Rigney described the situation: "Other commodities rose proportionately since in North China flour is taken as a basis for all prices."²⁵ With the drastic rise in the price of flour, the cost of other goods increased correspondingly. Meat was difficult to buy and the price on the black market was prohibitive.

There were severe increases in the cost of living, which had an adverse impact on Fu Jen University. Fr. Rigney reported, "The position of the University also became difficult. Our money is acquired at four Yuan to one U.S. dollar; the official rate set in August [1948]. While there is no increase in the value of our dollars, the living index has risen from five million two hundred and eighty thousand in the middle of August to thirty-two million five hundred thousand for the first ten days of October."²⁶ Fu Jen had to increase the salaries of its staff four-fold in September, but could not afford to pay more in the following months. The staff was therefore extremely worried about the immediate future.²⁷

Indeed, it proved to be a desperate situation for everyone. On the last day of October 1948, the SVD received news that the Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) had surrendered 11 divisions in Manchuria (Northeast China). This was a major defeat in the Civil War.²⁸

1949

In December 1949, the SVD priests learnt that the Vatican was not anxious to establish diplomatic relations with the Communist PRC. In January 1950, there was a radio announcement that the U.S. had decided to close its consulates in China.²⁹ In March, there were intense attacks against the Catholic Church.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Letter from Rigney to Grosse-Kappenberg, 31 October, 1948, the second and third pages.

²⁸ Ibid., 31 October, 1948, the seventh and eighth pages.

²⁹ List of events in 1949 and 1950, pp. 16-17, FJU Archives.

In March 1949, the Communists had taken over Beiping. On 1 March, Fr. Rigney wrote, "The first Communist entered Peiping on 22 January, and since then the city has been more or less in suspense not knowing who was actually in control."³⁰ The Communists had moved to take over police duty. The Nationalists had refused to surrender, and the Communists had organised rallies of students and workers against the authorities. In February, Fr. Rigney said there was still no antagonism against the foreigners and priests of the SVD, but the foreigners were soon alienated from the Chinese in the University. The Chinese staff held a meeting in the University, but their foreign colleagues were not welcome.³¹ After February, if SVD priests wanted to leave Beiping, this required a military permit, and they did not have one.³²

The Communist educational authorities announced their policies. There would be no oppression of students. Matters of tuition were not yet decided, as the military would take care of foreign exchange. Only within church buildings was freedom of religion allowed, meaning that universities could not teach religion. Within universities, it was ruled that there should be no teachings against the Chinese Communist Party.³³

Such policies led to the SVD rethinking and adapting its administration of Fu Jen University. It appeared that the Communists did not want foreigners handling higher education, meaning that SVD priests had to give up some of their key posts in the administration of the University, or at least share some responsibilities with the Chinese staff. The situation was clearly serious. Even the University President advised the SVD Fathers to step down from their prominent positions. The SVD priests had already discussed the issue before the President approached them. Fr. Rigney wrote, "I told him in confidence that it seems that the

³⁰ Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend A. Grosse-Kappenberg S.V.D., Superior-General, Roma-Ostiense, Italy, dated 1 March, 1949, p.1, FJU Archives.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

Fathers, and the Sisters too, would have to adjust themselves by giving up some key positions, and by sharing with their Chinese colleagues the drawing up of budgets, and the disbursement of funds.”³⁴ The President was extremely surprised to hear this and appreciated the decision of the SVD.

The SVD had adopted *a policy of adaptation* based on Archbishop Riberi’s advice. It was a time of significant adjustment after the Communists’ takeover with their attitude toward the Catholic Church. The solution was to agree to a *modus vivendi* with the Communists. This was described as “a policy of adaptation to the new times, working out a *modus vivendi* with the communist requirements,” which would be in accordance with the plan of Archbishop Riberi.³⁵ The Archbishop told the SVD not to close Fu Jen and try to agree to a solution with the Communists. After seeking the guidance of the Archbishop, the SVD devised concrete resolutions—Fr. Goertz would resign from his post as the Director of Studies, Fr. Huengsborg from the Administrator General, Sister Otgerina from the Dean of the Women’s College, and Fr. Rigney from the office of Vice-President of the University. The SVD would also share the responsibilities of the governance of the University, the administration of funds, and the drawing up of budgets with their Chinese colleagues. Even the Missionary Sister Servants of the Holy Ghost agreed on these solutions.³⁶ February 1949 marked “dark days” with the removal of all SVD staff.

On 26 February, 1949, the “Memorandum of Proposals of Adjustment for Fu Jen” was issued. It noted:³⁷

The Very Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Ph.D., Rector, offers to resign his post as Vice-President. Since the office of Disciplinarian is abolished, Rev. Peter Sum, S.V.D., LL.D., no longer holds this position. Venerable Sister Otgerina, S.Sp.S., also relinquishes the post of Disciplinarian of the College of Women.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Letter from Rigney to Grosse-Kappenberg, 1 March, 1949, pp. 6-7.

³⁷ “Memorandum of Proposals of Adjustment for Fu Jen,” dated 26 February, 1949, two pages, FJU Archives.

She likewise offers to resign from the post of Dean of the Women's College. Rev. Joseph Geortz, S.V.D., Ph.D., offers to resign from the position of Director of Studies, as does Rev. Peter Huengsberg, S.V.D. from the post of Administrator.

Political campaigns began to appear on the Fu Jen campus. As Fr. Rigney reported on 28 February, 1949: "A People's Court, the first in Peiping [Beiping], was held today in our auditorium. A man student of the 1st year of History was tried. He had lived with a girl student of the 1st year of Economics in the men's dormitory for about a week after the liberation, when the dormitories were thrown open against my protest to both sexes."³⁸ The crowd accused the student of being an agent of the Nationalists, who were the enemies of the Communists. The crowd openly humiliated the student; his hands were tied and he was forced to kneel for five hours on stage. The crowd included the teaching staff and students, who denounced him as an enemy agent and threw him out of the university. The SVD priests were powerless to interfere or to speak on behalf of the student.

The SVD priests were in danger themselves. In a letter of 1 April, 1949, Fr. Rigney learnt about a student plot to have him captured and possibly tortured to reveal how much money the SVD priests possessed.³⁹ After this event, Fr. Rigney took extra precautions such as not cycling alone or being out after dark.

1950 and Beyond

On 30 June, 1950, the government of the PRC issued "Decisions Relating to the Question of the Government's Leadership Over Higher Schools."⁴⁰ The document stated that the government's objectives were to consolidate its leadership over the country's higher education, to serve the needs of national

³⁸ Letter from Rigney to Grosse-Kappenberg, 1 March, 1949, p. 11.

³⁹ Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend A. Grosse-Kappenberg S.V.D., Superior-General, Roma-Ostiense, Italy, dated 1 April, 1949, p. 4, FJU Archives.

⁴⁰ "Decisions Relating to the Problem of the Government's Leadership Over Higher Schools" dated 30 June, 1950, 5 pages, FJU Archives.

reconstruction, and to smooth executive procedures in the governance of educational institutions. Thus, the Central Ministry of Education had total leadership over the higher institutions, which had to follow all its directives. All universities and academic staff in the North China District would be under the direction of the Provincial Government and the Central Ministry of Education.⁴¹ Thus, “if necessarily there must be any alteration or change made concerning the leadership over higher schools, it must be done methodically with a well-arranged plan and good preparations, and one decided only after consultation with all concerned sides, and by order of the Central Ministry of Education.”⁴²

The document stated that it was necessary to upgrade the qualifications of the staff in universities and institutions of higher learning. It said that teachers in the higher institutions should make great efforts to bolster studies of politics,⁴³ and that textbooks and teaching materials should be changed for the purpose of rebuilding New China. The revisions should follow specific articles of the Common Program, which was the provisional constitution for the PRC.

Nine months after the establishment of the PRC, Fr. Rigney wrote back to Rome saying that times had been difficult for the SVD. On 1 July, 1950, he reported that discussions had taken place in community conferences on the continuity of Fu Jen University. In the midst of the Korean War, debates about cutting subsidies to the University took place, and some of its classes were closed and new curricula suspended.⁴⁴ He also alerted Rome to the anti-foreign and anti-Catholic sentiments among the students of the University, of which about 85% were non-Catholic.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend A. Grosse-Kappenberg S.V.D., Superior-General, Roma-Ostiense, Italy, dated 1 July, 1949, p. 1, FJU Archives.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Fr. Rigney reported that it was the silver jubilee of the founding of Fu Jen University on 1 October, 1950. He had hoped that there would be some celebration, but none took place.⁴⁶ On 12 October, 1950, President Chen Yuan announced the takeover of Fu Jen University by the Central People's Government.⁴⁷ He was obviously speaking under pressure as he said, "It is clear that over 3000 teachers, students, employees, and workmen would have remained without work, or study, during this time in which the Church had stopped giving subsidies, if our People's Government had not supported us. . . . it has also taught us to be closer united, to understand more clearly the nature of the imperialists and to struggle with greater energy."⁴⁸

Conclusion

The SVD had tried its best to expand and enhance the status of Fu Jen University despite the chaos, political uncertainties, and military challenges. Fu Jen was a development of Pope Benedict XV's *Maximum Illud*. The Church had hoped to establish Fu Jen as the most prominent university in China. As the letters of Fr. Rigney demonstrate, the SVD had formulated its educational policies, built concrete objectives, and hoped for greater achievements in the future. The SVD priests demonstrated their commitment to localisation through higher education in China. Unfortunately, however, circumstances did not allow them to advance in their dedication to the country. Fu Jen University ended its mission as a Catholic institute for higher education in China in 1950. The legacies of the University—and the whereabouts of its graduates—would be an important topic for further research.

⁴⁶ Letter from Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D., Rector to The Very Reverend A. Grosse-Kappenberg S.V.D., Superior-General, Roma-Ostiense, Italy, dated 1 November, 1950, p. 1, FJU Archives.

⁴⁷ "Speeches at the General Meeting of Fu Jen University on 12 October, 1950, on the Occasion of the Take-Over by the Government of the University," dated 18 October, 1950, 13 pages, FJU Archives.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.