

Lavička, Martin

[Rychetská, Magdaléna. Uneasy encounters: Christian churches in Greater China]

Religio. 2023, vol. 31, iss. 1, pp. [181]-184

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-1-17>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.78403>

License: [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Access Date: 01. 12. 2024

Version: 20230713

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Magdaléna Rychetská, Uneasy Encounters: Christian Churches in Greater China,

Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan,
2022, 198 s.

ISBN 978-981-19-1889-6.

The Peoples Republic of China's (PRC) human rights record is among the worst in the world. Analogically, religious freedoms are also extremely limited, if we can talk about freedoms at all. Although guaranteed by the Constitution and other legal documents, the actual protection of religious rights and freedoms in the PRC is only on paper. Taiwan (the Republic of China) is positioned quite differently on the human rights protection scale. It has been long considered an island of democracy, with actual human rights protection and religious freedoms. This has not always, however, been the case. Under the dictatorship of the Chiang family, during the so-called White Terror, thousands of innocent people were imprisoned or executed, the opposition suppressed, and people's basic human rights breached. The situation began to change by the end of the 1980s, when the calls for democracy and human rights were finally heard by the Guomindang (GMD) leadership, unlike on the other side of the Taiwan Strait, where calls for democracy ended up in bloody suppression on 4 June 1989.

Magdaléna Rychetská, assistant professor at Masaryk University in Brno, Czechia, recently published a book entitled *Uneasy Encounters: Christian Churches in Greater China*. This book combines two of her studies, one on the Presbyterian Church in pre-democratic Taiwan and the other on the Catholic Church in mainland China. The book is therefore divided into two parts and consists of eight chapters in all.

In the introductory Chapter One, Rychetská explains her main rationale for her

book and her interest in the topic of Christianity in Taiwan and China, dating back to 2015. The book is based on extensive research including fieldwork in Taiwan and the PRC, in Zhejiang province in particular. The main research question of the book is how the two examined churches promote their interests in authoritarian societies. Rychetská is further interested in whether the churches tend to cooperate with the regime or oppose it, and how they adapt to local conditions and link 'foreign' teachings with local cultural particularities.

Throughout the book, Rychetská uses the term Chinafication, instead of Sinicization, as the translation of *Zhongguohua*, as it refers to the political meaning of the term (p. 17), which has been favoured by some scholars in earlier studies, e.g., by Fenggang Yang.¹

The first part of the book on the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) starts in Chapter two with a description of the church's history in Taiwan, its localisation process, and the gradual shift towards activism. The current PCT is an amalgamation of British and Canadian Presbyterian missions. The British mission in Taiwan dates back to 1865, when Dr James L. Maxwell arrived in Tainan in southern Taiwan. In 1872, Canadian Rev. Dr George L. Mackay established a mission in Danshui (a present-day district of New Taipei). From the beginning, Christianity was spread through education in newly-established schools as well as hospitals introducing Western medicine to the Taiwanese people. Western medicine was more effective and therefore the Christian God was considered stronger compared to the local deities (p. 35). Each of the missions targeted different audiences: while the British in the southern part of Taiwan focused on the ethnic Hoklo population, the Canadians in the north focused on Taiwan's indigenous peoples. Rychetská points out that the big-

¹ Yang Fenggang, "Sinicization or Chinafication? Cultural Assimilation vs. Political Domestication of Christianity in China and Beyond", in: Richard Madsen (ed.), *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below*, Leiden: Brill 2021, 16-43.

gest difference between the two missions was that the Canadian one, led by Mackay, started very early to support the localization of the mission (pp. 37-38) including the promotion of local leadership, which was very exceptional for nineteenth century missions in Asia. When the Qing Empire lost in the First Sino-Japanese war, Taiwan became a colony of the Japanese Empire. Under the Japanese colonial rule of Taiwan, the Presbyterian church's leaders promoted cooperation with the regime; however, after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, all foreign missionaries were evicted from Taiwan and all missionary schools and hospitals came under strict Japanese control. This, in the end, had an immense impact on the church in the coming decades, because from that time the church was run by native Taiwan pastors and disconnected from foreign support (p. 40).

After WWII, the situation did not return to that of the pre-war period and although foreign missionaries were allowed to return, they no longer ran the church. Two years after Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan, the two missions were united and PCT established. Chiang himself was a Christian and therefore his regime was not anti-religious as was the case in mainland China under Mao. Having said that, all the religious groups on the island were strictly controlled by the government. The situation for the PCT under the GMD regime was problematic. According to Rychetská, the main concern was the PCT's "prophetic appeal for political change" (p. 42). PCT members were therefore among the victims of the White Terror under Martial Law. Despite this reality, church membership more than doubled in the 1960s as well as the number of churches (p. 43). The contextualization of the theology which began in the 1970s justified links between political issues and Christian doctrine. God in the eyes of PCT members became a guardian of human rights and church members had a duty to protect them in God's name. In their understanding, Christian doctrine was no longer Christian-centred, but concerned about the whole of society (p. 44-45). The PCT began to publish statements creating links between Christian doctrine and politi-

cal activism, enraging the GMT government.

Chapter Three discusses the so-called re-Chinafication of Taiwan and Taiwanese national identity. After Taiwan's retrocession in 1945, the Taiwanese were not treated equally by the Chinese government. Instead, the government considered them untrustworthy because of the half-century of Japanese rule. According to the GMD leadership, the Taiwanese had to be re-sinicized. One of the means implemented was a strict national language policy, permitting only Chinese as the only official language. In this chapter, Rychetská shows how the PCT was pragmatic in promoting local languages, because it perceived language as one of the most fundamental tools for spreading the Christian Gospel to local communities. She divides the PCT's language strategy into three periods. The first lasted from 1865 to 1971, during which the Taiwanese were discriminated against with respect to language, first by the Japanese colonizers and later by the GMD government. The second stage began in 1971 with the PCT's publication *On Our National Fate* and lasted until 1985, when two other public statements were published. This period can be characterised by the church's open criticisms of the government. The third stage began in 1985 and is characterized by a change in the PCT's tactics. Language was no longer used as a missionary tool, but began to be associated with the civilization of society (p. 68). Rychetská explains that the PCT has been promoting civic nationalism as part of religious localization, and therefore encompassing people of various ethnic backgrounds and cultural heritage (p. 76).

Chapter four is the last one in the book focusing on the PCT. It discusses the church's stance towards the protection of human rights. According to Rychetská's research, the PCT not only spreads the Christian Gospel but also promotes human rights and dignity, as human rights are understood as a gift from God (p. 87). During the White Terror under the Chiang family dictatorship, the PCT general secretary, Reverend Kao Chun-ming, was among those arrested during the so-called Kaohsiung Incident in

1979, in which there had been a call for human rights protection. Due to this kind of activism, the GMD government considered the PCT more political than religious, resulting in even more arrests of PCT members (p. 94). Calls for democracy and human rights reappeared, however, after the 1987 lifting of martial law. According to Rychetská, the PCT has, since that time, been a significant protagonist in Taiwan's democratization and in improving the protection of human rights.

The second part of the book shifts attention across the Taiwan strait to the PRC. Chapter five therefore briefly introduces the history of the Catholic mission in China and the peculiar relationship China has with the Holy See. After the Opium Wars, "Western" religion began to be associated with imperialist Europeans, and missionaries were often the first to experience anti-foreign sentiments among the local population. Linking religion with foreign imperialism is still vital among the Chinese leadership, which has been continuously warning about possible foreign infiltration by means of religion.²

Under PRC law, freedom of belief is guaranteed by the constitution; however, this declared freedom of religion in China allows the party-state to closely monitor and control all religions. Beginning in 1951, foreign Catholic missionaries began to be expelled from China due to their problematic allegiance to the Vatican as potential spies. The same year, the Vatican's inter-nuncio to China was expelled by the Chinese government (pp. 110-111). In 1957, the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) was established with no foreign influence, including the Vatican. The Vatican did not, however, recognize the bishops elected by the Association. This caused the emergence of the so-called underground Catholic Church opposing the centralized "puppet" church (p. 112).

Adventuristic political campaigns between the 1950s and 1970s further worsened the situation for religious believers in China. Up until 1987, there was no official dialogue between the Holy See and the PRC. After the death of Mao and the unprecedented turn in Chinese internal and external affairs led by Deng Xiaoping, a door for dialogue between the Vatican and the PRC opened. The main obstacle remained the same, however: the consecration of Chinese bishops with papal approval – something the Chinese would see as meddling in its internal affairs by another state (p. 121). The situation has now changed under the current pope, Pope Francis. The Holy See and the PRC concluded a provisional agreement in 2018, with undisclosed content, but in all probability resolving the disagreement by allowing the consecration of Chinese bishops who are nominated locally by the CPA but giving the Vatican the power of veto. Moreover, the de facto excommunication of the previously appointed Chinese bishops was revoked (p. 124). For some observers, this pragmatic move by the Vatican will lead to improvements in the religious lives of Chinese Catholics, but for others it is a betrayal and a concession to Communist China.³ Critical voices became even stronger when the Pope remained silent during the Hong Kong protests of 2019 and 2020. As Rychetská points out, Vatican approval further legitimizes the state-run Catholic organization (p. 131) as well as control over the 'underground' church.

Chapter six looks at some of the important policy and legislative documents regarding religion in China. Here, Rychetská focuses on changes in the revised Regulation on Religious Affairs (RRA) from 2018 to identify effects on the Catholic Church in China. The most significant change in the government's policy towards religion, in her view, is the increased control and supervision of religious organizations, schools and personnel – this regarding both teach-

2 "Xuexishibao", 2017. "王作安：宗教工作关键词“导” (Wang Zuohan: The Key to Religious Work is "Guiding")" [online], in: Xuexishibao, <http://www.swtzb.yn.gov.cn/rwzt/rw/201705/t20170505_509625.html>, 5. 5. 2017 [10. 1. 2023].

3 Didi Tang, "Cardinal attacks Vatican 'betrayal' over China accord" [online], in: *The Times*, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cardinal-attacks-vatican-betrayal-over-china-accord-jk7nkm50z>>, 24. 9. 2018 [11. 1. 2023].

ing content and finance, as well as the requirement for the promotion of socialism (p. 152). The PRC government's authority over religiosity continues to tighten through institutionalization and Chinafication, and many of the articles in the RRA can be utilized to crack down on religious groups in the 'grey' area (pp. 161-162).

In chapter seven, Rychetská discusses the Chinafication of the Catholic faith in contemporary China. This chapter is particularly valuable as it includes information collected through interviews the author conducted during her fieldwork in Zhejiang province in China. As mentioned earlier, the Catholic faith in China is still perceived and officially presented as a by-product of imperialist endeavours. Rychetská calls the localization of the Catholic Church in China Chinafication, as it is implemented by the Communist government so that religion is merged with state ideology. As the author points out, the enforcement of the state's policy varies depending on the region, and some local government leaders may be more benevolent than others (p. 181), which in many ways corresponds to the so-called fragmented authoritarianism proposed by Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg.⁴ At the end of this chapter, Rychetská cites Michel Chambon, stating that Christians can exist openly if they implicitly respect the Party (p. 183). In light of recent developments, this might not be the best citation to conclude the chapter.

The last chapter of the book is the conclusion, entitled Christian Churches in the Authoritarian Regimes. According to Rychetská, religious groups in a totalitarian regime can collaborate with the government instead of opposing it if there exists a space for bargaining and mutual empowerment. Moreover, if the religious market is controlled by the government, cooperation with the totalitarian government can be beneficial (p. 192). As was shown with the case of the PCT, the church can also serve as a force to promote change, such as de-

mocratization and the better protection of human rights, if it seeks "to win believers not only through spiritual teaching but also through adapting to local society both culturally and politically" (p. 190).

On a critical note, though the two parts of the book work well separately, the linkage between them, based on the notion of there being totalitarian regimes in China and Taiwan, is problematic. This is particularly the case because the author uses the term totalitarian according to Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski's analysis, while omitting other scholarship on totalitarian states (e.g., Arendt, Linz, Sartori, Voegelin). Therefore, placing together "Taiwan under White Terror" and "China under Xi" might not be entirely convincing. Similarly, the two parts of the book would work better as a whole if they both looked at either Catholic or Protestant churches in Taiwan and China. This criticism should not, however, overshadow the positive aspects of the book and its contribution to existing scholarship. Rychetská's work provides a brief historical overview of, and valuable insights into, the situation of Christians both in Taiwan and mainland China; it is also clearly written and very readable, and, therefore, should be of interest to both students of Asian studies and religious studies in particular, as well as general readers interested in the topic.⁵

MARTIN LAVIČKA



Religio: Revue pro religionistiku

31/1, 2023, 181-184.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2023-1-17>

This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

⁴ Kenneth Lieberthal – Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes*, Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press 1988.

⁵ Department of Asian Studies, Palacký University Olomouc. This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund [Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges], project number: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.