

The historical significance of Thomas Tien Keng-hsin SVD – the first Cardinal of China

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Fifty years ago this year, Thomas Cardinal Tien Keng-hsin¹ died, the first cardinal of China and of the Far East as well as the only cardinal of the Society of the Divine Word. This study, based both on publications and archival sources, research into cardinal's historical importance within the Universal Church, the Society of the Divine Word and the Catholic Church in China, and his dealing with extremely difficult historical circumstances.

1. Universal Church Last shall be the first

It was a great surprise when, on February 18, 1946, the name of the obscure Chinese Bishop Thomas Tien Keng-hsin, SVD, appeared on the list of 32 new cardinals created by Pope Pius XII. It was first red hat for China and for the Far East. The American SVD magazine "Christian Family" ran the headline: "Pagan Orphan becomes China's first

¹ Tien Keng-hsin in pinyin would be written Tian Gengxin. Tien himself always wrote his name as Tien Keng-hsin and for this reason I retain this spelling.

Cardinal”². There was amazement that this *homo simplex et rusticus*³, largely unknown to the great of the world and even to Chinese Catholics, the most humble of the native bishops of China, could rise to such dignity? As the news arrived from New York, Tien himself couldn’t believe in his appointment as cardinal. He only said “I am not worthy, it must be mistake (...) such a position belongs only to the learned, to men of culture and dignity”⁴.

In fact, some Church authorities were rather critical about Tien’s elevation to the dignity of the cardinalate. They thought that he did not have sufficient qualities – was not intellectual enough. He didn’t possess a higher degree, hadn’t write anything – finishing only the ordinary courses of the major seminary. However, cardinal Paul Yü Pin, Archbishop of Nanking, described him as a diligent missionary with a broad apostolic view, an advocate of a well-educated and pious clergy, and a humble and good-hearted person”⁵.

² The SVD magazine, “The Christian Family and Our Missions”, January 1946, p. 46. Thomas Tien born on 24 October 1890 (then, Tung Lai) was only nine years old (baptized at the age of 11 by Fr. Rudolf Pieper) when his devout and humble father, Peter Tien, a teacher in the SVD Mission school in Puoli, died of exhaustion at the age of 47 (1899). Thomas had three sisters. One died in young age. His two remaining sisters and his mother, Mary, embraced the Catholic faith. His mother had been baptized in 1915 and lived a zealous Christian life until her death in 1922. Thomas’ only brother also died young. E. Brandewie, *The Last Shall be First: The Life of Thomas Tien Keng-hsin, China’s First Cardinal*, Studia Instituti Missiologici Societatis Verbi Divini, vol. 89, Nettetal 2007, p. 29.

³ J. Kraus, *Zur Geschichte von St. Michael in Steyl*, Analecta SVD, vol. 51, Roma 1980, p. 14.

⁴ Tien’s reaction was reported by an eye-witness, Louis Maloof, an American Sergeant and former newspaperman for the New Orleans “Times-Picayune”, who served in a liaison capacity in the bishop Tien’s residence in Qingdao. He heard about his appointment by 8:00 A.M. on 29 Dec. 1945, when Spellman’s cablegram arrived from New York: “I congratulate you fraternally. I embrace you”. Francis Spellman had also been appointed cardinal and was clearly addressing someone of equal rank. In the evening of that day another telegram from Rome resolved all doubts. Maloof immediately arranged Tien’s trip to Rome. Full of admiration for first cardinal of China, he reports on the fact in his biography: *Adveniat Regnum Tuum: The History of China’s First Cardinal*, Techny 1946, p. 11-12.

⁵ J. Kuepers, *The 50th Anniversary of the Death of Cardinal Thomas Tien Keng-Hsin SVD*, “Arnoldus Nota”, Sept. 2017, p. 11.

Clear option in favor of internationalization of the Church

Unlike some of his critics, the Vatican had quite a different opinion of Bishop Tien. For the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide he was the right person for that point in time, harmonizing well with the Vatican's long desire to reform its mission strategy. In naming him a cardinal, the Holy See expressed first of all its high esteem for the Chinese people but also its recognition for the missionary work done in the Middle Kingdom until then⁶.

Pope Pius XII, in his first consistory, held seven years into his long pontificate (1939-1958), took a historic step toward internationalizing the central government of the Church. With one stroke, he almost doubled the number of cardinals without exceeding the sixteenth century limit of 70 cardinals in the college. Though there were only four Italians among the new cardinals, there was one Armenian, Agagianian; one Chinese, Tien; three Germans, Frings, von Gallen, von Preysing; one Hungarian, Mindszenty; one Pole, Sapieha as well as several Americans from the USA. In an unprecedented move, the pope named so many cardinals that Rome appeared as the Universal City – *Caput Mundi*, par excellence – with the gaze of the whole Catholic world turned toward it⁷. Pius XII shook the traditional Catholic bastion of Europe in a move to underscore the supranational character and universal unity of the Catholic Church. In this context, Tien's elevation acquired iconic significance as he highlighted the universality of the Church in which the Chinese nation found visible representation at the highest level of the Catholic Church's government.

⁶ The Catholic mission in China experienced a steady growth in the numbers of Catholics, about 2 million in 1918 and mission territories: 1923: 66, 1926: 76, 1932: 118 and 1948: 146. The National Council in Shanghai (1924) encouraged the creation of native bishops and regional seminaries, which increased from 12 in 1933 to 22 in 1939. Also, the Catholic laity gave their best – mainly in the areas of charity, education and medical care. They were drawn to the Catholic Action movement and to the *Legio Mariae*. The Legion of Mary, in particular, was treasured very much by Cardinal Tien in Peking. See: A. Miotk, *Das Missionsverständnis im historischen Wandel am Beispiel der Enzyklika «Maximum Illud»*, Veröffentlichungen des Missionspriesterseminars St. Augustin, vol. 51, Nettelal 1999, p. 189-195.

⁷ F. Traniello, *Pio XII, la seconda Guerra mondiale e l'ordine postbellico*, [in:] M. Gresschat, E. Guerriero (eds.), *Il Grande Libro dei Papi*, vol. II: *Da Leone X a Giovanni Paolo II*, Milano 2000, p. 807.

Recognition of missionary Church in China

Nearly a half century into the twentieth century, the Catholic presence in China had increased dramatically. Between 1900 and 1946, the number of Catholics had grown from 741,562 to 4 million. Tien's elevation was the fruit of concentrated efforts aimed at reforming earlier mission practices in China. In compliance with the guidelines of apostolic letter *Maximum illud* (1919) and later of the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926), the Holy See strongly supported the struggle against the plague of nationalism and promoted native priests and bishops without exercising any colonial style control. Archbishop Celso Costantini⁸, the new Apostolic Delegate for China (1922), aimed at establishing a self-governing and self-reliant local Chinese Church with its own well-trained clergy, sisters and laity⁹. These directives met significant resistance from some religious orders but also found courageous protagonists, like Fr. Frédéric-Vincent Lebbe (1879-1940), who didn't hesitate to leave the Lazarists, to structurally confirm his prophetic vision of an entirely Chinese Church. The Apostolic Delegate encouraged the major orders of the urgent need to give more space to the local bishops in the management of the Chinese Church. Costantini presided over the first council of the Catholic Church in Shanghai (1924) and championed the consecration of six Chinese bishops in Rome (1926). Attempts were made to unify mission methods and to adapt the Christian message to the Chinese context with a decree that allowed Chinese Catholics to observe their ancestral rites and to participate in ceremonies honoring Confucius (1939). Cardinal Tien fully supported the new attempts.

After World War II, the prospects for the Catholic Church in China were very promising. Despite material losses, the Church emerged spiritually stronger, especially through the services it had rendered to the country. Christians across China showed their

⁸ Celso Costantini, born in Zoppola in northern Italy in 1876 and ordained a priest in 1899, had enormous impact on the Catholic Church's attitude toward mission. He was appointed by Pius XI as Apostolic Delegate to China (1922-1933) and afterwards served as Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith in Rome (1935-1953). He was elevated to the college of cardinals in 1953 and died on Oct. 17, 1958 on the eve of the election of his friend, Angelo Roncalli, as Pope John XXIII. A. Camps, *Celso Costantini, Apostolic Delegate in China (1922-1933). The Changing Role of a Foreign Missionary*, [in:] A. Camps (ed.), *Studies in Asian Mission History 1956-1998*, Studies in Christian Mission, vol. 25, Leiden 2000, p. 170.

⁹ S.B. Bevans, R.P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context. A Theology of Mission for Today*, New York, 2004, p. 246.

patriotism by sheltering refugees in their buildings and caring for the wounded in their hospitals¹⁰. The creation of Bishop Tien¹¹ as a cardinal and the institution of a Chinese hierarchy drew greater attention of educated people to the presence of the Catholic Church in China.

At the suggestion of Pope Pius XII, China's new cardinal presented to Rome a memorandum on the state and the problems of the Church in China. His positive assessments led to the establishment of the Chinese Hierarchy with the decree *Quotidie Nos* on 11 April 1946 and Tien's appointment as Archbishop of Peking¹². Now, all three of China's metropolitan areas: Nanking (Yü Pin), Peking (Tien) and Nanchang (Zhou Jishi) were in Chinese hands (*e gremio suae gentis*) and Tien was to assume the leadership of the Catholic Church of China.

Self-actualization of the Catholic World Church

In 1950, Thomas Tien, as the first Chinese cardinal and a great promoter of the devotion to Our Lady of China, was present in Rome for the proclamation of the Dogma of the Assumption of Mary. Thus, in cardinal Tien, Chinese Catholics made their presence felt for the first time at the highest levels of the Church's doctrinal authority and governance.

¹⁰ Additionally, the positive role of the Church was enhanced in 1947 by the screening in many Chinese cities of a documentary on the commitment of Catholic missionaries during the Japanese invasion. F. Bornemann (ed.), *A History of Our Society, "Analecta SVD"*, vol. 54, no. 1, Roma 1981, p. 285.

¹¹ Tien was among 12 missionary bishops from different nationalities consecrated personally by pope Pius XII in Peter's Basilica on the feast of Christ the King, Oct. 29, 1939. His appointment was influenced by Fr. Superior General Grendel, SVD. During the papal audience, Pius XII encouraged the bishops to encourage the growth of the native church. J. Fleckner, *Thomas Kardinal Tien Erzbischof von Peking 1890-1967*, [in:] J. Fleckner (ed.), *So Waren Sie*, vol. 1, St. Augustin 1991, p. 49-50.

¹² Thomas Tien was appointed archbishop of Peking on May 11, 1946 and took possession of his see on June 29. The Chinese Church was made up of 20 ecclesiastical provinces, 137 vicariates and prefectures apostolic with over 4 million Chinese Catholics. 28 of these 137 ecclesiastical circumscriptions were led by Chinese, of whom 21 were bishops. Among the native clergy there were 28 Chinese ordinaries, including 21 bishops, as well as 2.008 priests (out of a total of 5.005), 4.405 nuns and sisters and 735 brothers. The Chinese hierarchy was just emerging from its infant stages and the following years would decimate these numbers. L. Maloof, *Adveniat Regnum Tuum*, op. cit., p. 13; F. Chong, *Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church, "Tripod"*, vol. 28, no. 148, Spring 2008 [on-line], https://journals.muni.cz/anthropologia_integra/article/view-File/2397/1965 [accessed: 14.11.2017].

Later, Cardinal Tien was in Rome for the two conclaves of 1958 and 1963 which gave to the church two great popes of the Catholic "Aggiornamento": John XXIII and Paul VI. He was the first Chinese ever to participate in the election of a new pope in 1958 just two months after his tragic automobile accident in Germany in which he almost died.

Cardinal Tien also attracted attention at the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council where he participated in two sessions. He was named one of the 36 cardinal members of the Council's Central Preparatory Commission (1960) and was also appointed to the Commission on Missions (1962). Although he participated in two of that commission's general sessions, he had little if any influence on the final document *Ad gentes*. He chaired the 59 Chinese voting members at the council. By his mere presence he promoted mission interest for China and advertised the great needs of the Church of China through press conferences, numberless receptions and talks in many countries. After the election of Giovanni Battista Montini as Paul VI, Tien addressed the pope in the name of all Asian bishops (June 1963) asking for the creation of a Secretariat for Non-Christians, which became a reality on 19 May 1964. Tien personally visualized the first official self-actualization of Catholicism as a World Church as claimed later by Karl Rahner¹³. But his real influence on Vatican II was limited since Tien was above all a praxis-oriented man, with little aptitude for theological or sociological analysis¹⁴. Cardinal Tien fully supported the liturgical reform with the liturgy in Chinese vesture.

¹³ The Council "admitted the vernacular into the liturgy, provided for the establishment of the international Synod of Bishops, gave new status to regional and national bishops' conferences, and endorsed the principle of missionary accommodation. Since the council the trend has been carried further by the trend away from the Latin liturgy, the increased vitality of the Church in the Third World, and the global travels of Paul VI and John Paul II". A. Dulles, *The Emerging World Church: A Theological Reflection*, "Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America", vol. 38, no. 1-2, 1984, p. 2.

¹⁴ J. Fleckner, *Thomas Kardinal Tien...*, op. cit., p. 119. The China missionary, Fr. Johannes Fleckner SVD (1911-2003), embarked on the difficult task of writing the first major biography of the Cardinal. He was privileged to know him personally for many years but restricted by his inability to access the bishops' archives of Kangku, Qingdao and Peking due to the political situation. His substantial biography was based mainly on reports and interviews of eye-witnesses and on accessible publications. He visited Taiwan and consulted the SVD generalate archives in Rome. This basic biography is fact oriented without taking the larger context into consideration. K.J. Rivinius, *In Memoriam P. Johannes Fleckner SVD (1911-2003)*, "Verbum SVD", vol. 45, 2004, fasc. 1, p. 7-14.

2. Divine Word Missionaries Tien as keystone of the SVD China-Mission

For the Society of the Divine Word, mission work in China was of the utmost importance. It was the first mission of the Society and one of the missionaries, Fr. Johann Schütte, SVD, largely responsible for the Council Decree "Ad gentes", was elected Superior General of the Society (1958-1967). The European missionaries also made a visible contribution for the establishment of native Church with some 150 Chinese priests, of whom four became bishops¹⁵. Of all the SVDs missioned to China, about 120 were buried in Chinese soil. Ten died for the faith and many others eventually spent months and years in communist prisons. Their total dedication is beyond question and Chinese Catholics today display a heroic spirit inherited from them. Tens of thousands of Chinese Catholics persevered for dozens of years without priests and sacraments, carried solely by their unquenchable faith, hope and love. Over the years, many of them endured forced labor, imprisonment and even martyrdom. Tien's appointment as Cardinal was a great tribute to the work accomplished by the Society of the Divine Word in China, especially within the areas of the formation of the native Church and local clergy. Archbishop Paul Yü Pin¹⁶ sincerely admitted late that "He would not be a cardinal were it not for the SVD"¹⁷. Tien's promotion was a token of things to come, of the changing times where the missionaries were to give way and take on more of an auxiliary role as the love of the SVDs for China would become "less self-centered"¹⁸.

¹⁵ F. Bornemann (ed.), *A History of Our Society*, op. cit., p. 279.

¹⁶ Like Tien, Paul Yü Pin (1901-1978) from Manchuria was orphaned age seven. He was baptized in 1914 after getting to know missionary priests near Lansì, where he lived with his grandfather. After studies at the Jesuit Aurora University in Shanghai, Yü Pin continued his education in Rome at the Urbanianum and S. Apollinare (doctorate in Theology) as well in Perugia's Royal University, where he earned doctorate in political science. After his 1928 ordination in Rome, he taught at the Urbanianum. At age 35, he was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Nanking (1936). With the entry of Japanese in 1937 he left China, went to USA and returned in 1946 to be Archbishop of Nanking - but only for three years. After Chiang Kai-shek, he was the second most wanted "war criminal". After a stay in the USA, by the order of the pope he moved in Taiwan (1960), where he became the Rector of Fu Jen Catholic University. In Taiwan, Yü Pin supported Cardinal Tien in his activities. R. De Jaegher, *Vie de Mgr. Paul Yu Pin*, Cholon 1959.

¹⁷ E. Brandewie, *The Last Shall be First...*, op. cit., p. 159.

¹⁸ F. Bornemann (ed.), *A History of Our Society*, op. cit., p. 320.

Tien's elevation crowned the many efforts and sacrifices of the Divine Word Missionaries during the almost 70 years of their presence in China. In him "a humble outgrowth of the Divine Word, catechetical schools and seminaries testified before the world to the maturity of faith of the Chinese Catholics"¹⁹.

Tien's work was in line with the Society's great contribution in the field of education, especially after taking over the direction of Fu Jen Catholic University in Peking in 1933. By 1949, Fu Jen had more than 16,000 students. In connection with the University, the Society opened the *Collegium Sinicum Ecclesiasticum* (1938), meant for the formation of local clergy, which offered to young, gifted Chinese priests the possibility of a good preparation for special tasks through higher studies²⁰. These priests and Fu Jen's catholic students had access to what was best in the Chinese cultural heritage. The university published three reviews of Chinese studies (*Fu Jen University Studies, Monumenta Serica, Folklore*) and opened an ethnological museum. A Department of Chinese Art was also created, which produced some valuable pieces of Christian Art: *Ars Sacra Pekinensis*²¹. Cardinal Tien continued as a keystone of the Society's missionary and educational work in China when it was later transferred to the island of Taiwan.

Finally, Cardinal Tien developed out of the Society of the Divine Word's pedagogical and spiritual legacy incarnated in his missionary work. He matured in the apostolic school of Bishop Augustin Henninghaus, SVD, (1862-1939) of Southern Shantung, an excellent administrator who favored Chinese bishops and was deeply involved in the formation of catechists. His true spiritual master was Fr. Joseph Freinedemetz, SVD, who personally instructed him in the faith. They conversed often at Puoli. Tien admired Freinademetz for his open-mindedness, understanding and personal warmth and was deeply

¹⁹ B. Schmitz, *China's Prince of the Church*, "The Word in the World", Techny 1967, p. 51; Bartley Schmitz, Cardinal's Tien's secretary published his biography based on his personal experiences of the Cardinal: *His Eminence Thomas Cardinal Tien (1890-1967) = Tian Gengxin Shuji* [Bilingual: Chinese and English], Taipei 1990, 102 p. Schmitz, a former China missionary, was asked by the Cardinal in 1959 to be his English secretary. Following the cardinal's death, Fr. Schmitz promoted his cause for canonization.

²⁰ During World War II some 40-50 priests studied at the Collegium Sinicum, two thirds of them were studying Chinese Language and Literature. A few also went to Europe for higher studies. J. Beckmann, *Die China-Mission*, Freiburg 1959, p. 12.

²¹J.-P. Charbonnier, *Christians in China: A.D. 600 to 2000*, San Francisco 2007, p. 408.

impressed by his eloquence, naturalness, simplicity and humility: "Among the missionaries in China I know of no one more holy than Fr. Freinademetz, who was all to all", said the Cardinal in Sankt Gabriel during celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of Freinademetz' death²².

3. Catholic Church in China

Government recognition for first Catholic Cardinal of China

Cardinal Tien's return to China from the 1946 consistory at which he had received his "red hat", was a great triumph. He was welcomed everywhere with great applause²³. His appointment met with enthusiastic reactions on the part of the Chinese authorities, proud to host the first cardinal of China. He became like a popular icon in which all of China felt honored. During his numerous meetings Cardinal Tien was able to personally encounter many government officials. Both in Nanking and in Qingdao these meetings were considered not only as a Church event but also as a national issue. Chinese newspapers regularly reported on all the festivities and celebrations related to his elevation.

On June 29, 1946, Cardinal Tien entered the ancient city of Peking, a great center of Chinese art, culture and learning. It was the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, when Cardinal Tien took canonical possession as Archbishop of the famous cathedral of Peking in the "kingdom of the Lazarists" or the Congregation of the Mission, (CM) known more commonly today as *Vincentians*²⁴. His arrival was the occasion of a major crisis between the Lazarists and the newly arrived Archbishop of Peking²⁵. Archbishop Tien aimed at continuing the

²² The celebration took place on 28 January 1958. *The Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Death of Fr. Joseph Freinademetz*, "Arnoldus Nota", 1958, p. 14.

²³ For Archbishop Celso Costantini, Secretary of Propaganda Fide, it was a special joy and honor to address his Eminence, cardinal Tien in Chinese and to pay an ardent homage of the Congregation in its Spanish palace. S. Delacroix (ed.), *Histoire Universelle des Missions Catholiques*, vol. III: *Les missions contemporaines (1800-1957)*, Paris 1957, p. 154.

²⁴ The archdiocese of Peking had 250,000 Catholics served by 120 priests. Among them were 30 Lazarists to whom the mission had been entrusted for almost 150 years.

²⁵ For the moment, all seemed to unfold for the best. The Lazarists transferred the property of the mission to the Chinese clergy. In the meantime, they withdrew to the French Concession "Caserne Voyron" in order to have a certain independence. However, shortly afterward they unleashed the crisis that forced

reform agenda of Archbishop Celso Costantini with the goal of ending the system of feudalism in mission territories²⁶. He arrived from Tsinan by plane and was met by the outgoing Vicar Apostolic, Monsignor Paul Montaigne, CM, together with six bishops, the political authorities, the mayor of Peking, Generals Li Zongjen and Sun, together with numerous personalities of the Kuomintang and of the Administration²⁷. That evening a banquet was served for 150 people in the courtyard of the Beitang Minor Seminary. Tien preached a not very “diplomatic” sermon about collaboration between the missionaries and the local clergy. He pledged to do away with the division by nationality of the congregations and vicariates at the level of proselytism by the foreign missionaries and Lazarists.

The background of Thomas Tien’s elevation to cardinal

Tien’s biographer, Fr. Johannes Fleckner, SVD, tried to figure out why an unknown SVD Bishop of Qingdao was elevated to the Sacred College of Cardinals. His conclusion: we may never know. In fact, until the relative Vatican archives are accessible, we can’t identify with any certainty the composition of behind-the-scenes forces that eventually led to the appointment of Tien as China’s first cardinal.

There was a rumor in Rome that the then Secretary of Propaganda Fide, Archbishop Celso Costantini, former Apostolic Delegate for China (1922-1933), had declined his own elevation and suggested that the pope appoint one of the Chinese bishops instead. The most prominent among them was without any doubt the bishop of Nanking, Archbishop Paul Yü Pin, who had extraordinary linguistic skills and the best overall formation. He was in fact China’s most prominent

the State Secretary to intervene with the internuncio to put in practice the earlier compromise between Lazarists and the Cardinal. O. Sibire, *Le Saint-Siège et l’Extrême-Orient (Chine, Corée, Japon) de Léon XIII à Pie XII (1880-1952)*, Collection de L’École Française de Rome, vol. 459, Roma 2012, p. 497.

²⁶ In fact, the Holy See was very sad about the way the Lazarists managed Peking creating some sort of private *feudum* to the exclusion of other congregations. The Cardinal’s new determination to open the doors for other congregations was bound to cause some troubles.

²⁷ “The streets in the vicinity of Beitang and the approaches to the cathedral were lined with schoolchildren carrying banners and marshaled by teachers and boy scouts. A great throng of Christians and pagans waited for hours, eager for their first glimpse of China’s most-talked-of Churchman”. AG SVD (Archivio Generale SVD, Rome), sign. 641, 1940-1949, Università di Peking, Lumen 25 August 1946.

spokesman in both Europe and America. However, his patriotic activity was not very favorably regarded in the Vatican²⁸. To begin with, Rome was reluctant to support his conception of a nationalist Catholicism.

For Rome, the Nationalist Government was far from having all the votes and the Catholics who actively supported Chiang Kai-shek did cause Rome some worries. This explains the exclusion of Dom Pierre Celestin, OSB, (Lou Tseng-Tsiang 陸徵祥), Abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of Sint Andries in Bruges, Belgium from the cardinal's hat. Fr. Fleckner mentioned that Tien saw in Lou Tseng-Tsiang a good candidate for cardinal. He was a Chinese convert with political and diplomatic experience²⁹ and after his conversion, he became a Catholic monk in Belgium, recognizing in the Catholic Church and in its life the only moral force capable of helping China to its rebirth. But, there were fears that those in Rome did not understand the Chinese context well enough. In Rome, it was Eugène Cardinal Tisserant, who supported the removal of Archbishop Yü Pin's candidacy in favor of Bishop Tien. Archbishop Celso Costantini shared later on that Tien's designation as cardinal had warmed his heart even more than if he himself had been appointed?³⁰.

Between the two choices represented by Lou Tseng-Tsiang – too isolated and too aged – and Paul Yü Pin – too engaged in politics – Tien was surely the best compromise³¹. He was more conciliatory and politically neutral³², known for his diplomatic abilities in resolving tensions

²⁸ During the World War II, he was elected as a delegate to the National Assembly. He frequently travelled between Europe and the United States to seek international support for the war of resistance against Japan. He deemed himself to be the most worthy candidate to be cardinal. In fact, he was created cardinal in 1969 and died in Rome just before the conclave.

²⁹ J. Fleckner, *Thomas Kardinal Tien...*, op. cit., p. 65, footnote: 2. Lou Tseng-Tsiang (1871-1949) before embracing monastic vocation was twice Premier of the Republic of China and led his country's delegation at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. From 1922 to 1927 Lou was China's envoy to the League of Nations in Geneva.

³⁰ J. Fleckner, *Thomas Kardinal Tien...*, op. cit., p. 65.

³¹ Olivier Sibire argues that Thomas Tien was a compromise candidate since Propaganda Fide was reluctant to gamble on the much more outspoken and politically controversial Paul Yü Pin. Instead, in the relatively obscure Tien, it found a more "neutral candidate". O. Sibire, *Le Saint-Siège et l'Extrême-Orient...*, op. cit., p. 187-189.

³² Wherever, the cardinal was asked on political matters, he used to say simply: "No politics!". H. Rigney, *China Welcomes Native Son*, "The Christian Family and Our Missions", Sept. 1946, p. 338.

between the Japanese and the Chinese (1937-1945). Certainly, he was noted in Rome due to his prudent direction of the Yanggu mission³³ and to his neutral attitude during the war, aligned as he was with the directives of Apostolic Delegate Zanin and the Holy See. Tien's ability to reconcile differences, to keep his own temper³⁴ along with his friendly approach to people and his gentle yet circumspect style in dealing with others gave him a natural authority.

There was also another important factor in his favor. He belonged to the Society of the Divine Word, which deserved credit for running Fu Jen Catholic University in Peking, and which was responsible for Christianizing the Chinese elites. The Secretary of Propaganda Fide, Archbishop Celso Costantini, was grateful for this and entrusted to this Society the running of Propaganda Fide's newly established College of St. Peter the Apostle (*Collegio San Pietro Apostolo*) in Rome in June of 1946. The Society's Superior General, Fr. Joseph Grendel, SVD, gave a reassuring opinion about Bishop Tien as a man who, since his priestly ordination and episcopal consecration, had dedicated himself exclusively to the mission cause as a zealous shepherd. He worked successfully and never played any role in the larger sphere of politics. Fr. Grendel supported Tien as the most capable among the SVD native priests.

Tien's dilemma of the abandoned Apostolic See of Peking: an attempt of evaluation

The year of 1948 was a seminal point in life of Cardinal Tien. The German newspaper "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung" put it briefly:

"In 1949 Tien fled Mainland China before the communist advance, never again to return there. Instead, he went to America. Pope Pius XII, who had appointed him in a cardinal in 1946, never approved of that move. He firmly believed that it was the duty of each pastor to persevere in his place. Nor did the Pope agree with the Polish Cardinal Hlond, when he left Poland before the arrival of the approaching German army and chose to go into exile"³⁵.

³³ He took financial and spiritual responsibility for his 13 priests and more than 20 churches, 6 SSpS sisters, 39 teachers and 205 catechists in the prefecture of over 10.000 Catholics (1937: 17.600). His priority was on catechists and teacher training in Jining. E. Brandewie, *The Last Shall be First...*, op. cit., p. 56-57.

³⁴ E. Brandewie, *The Last Shall be First...*, op. cit., p. 29. Many had never seen him get angry but Brandewie adds on page 49 that Cardinal Tien was able to have righteous anger when pastoral practice required it.

³⁵ "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", no. 170, Wednesday, 26 July 1967, p. 4.

It was Archbishop Domenico Tardini³⁶ who made this unflattering comparison between Tien and Polish August Cardinal Hlond³⁷: Tardini considered Cardinal Tien physically unable to leave the United States, where he was undergoing medical treatment. It seemed that he would need to have an operation on his eyes the following September. Having asked my interlocutor whether, as a hypothesis, the return of Cardinal Tien to his residence in Peking should prove to be possible, would it seem him to be opportune. Tardini replied:

“This return to safeguard his rights and those of the Church – whatever the outcome and even at the peril of his life – would certainly be opportune were the Cardinal a man of sturdy and determined character. When, added Tardini, on the next day the question of Cardinal Hlond’s return to Poland arose, I myself asked him to go back. But in that case I knew who I was dealing with. The case of Cardinal Tien is quite different. His temperament would not qualify him to play such a difficult and dangerous role [...]”³⁸.

The period of Tien’s dilemma can be situated between his departure from Peking on 10 June 1948 and his arrival in New York on 2 February 1951, when the issue of his return essentially became a moot point. For two and half years he struggled with the thought, which Tardini had stated concisely in his letter to Tien on 12 January 1949: “Pastors should remain at their posts, since the good shepherd gives his life for the sheep”. For Tien the principle was clear but its application to the Chinese situation was extremely complex, as he was plunged into the maelstrom at this time of his nation’s history. Tien was under pressure by many forces: division in his archdiocese of Peking; the poor state of his health; the steady advance of the communists; the withdrawal of Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists to Taiwan; miscommunication on the policies of the Nuncio Archbishop Riberi and the

³⁶ After the death of the Secretary of State, Luigi Maglione in 1944, Pius XII left the position vacant and named Domenico Tardini (1888-1961) head of its foreign section and Giovanni Battista Montini head of the internal section until 1953. Both declined to be cardinals. Later, John XXIII named Tardini Cardinal Secretary of State (1958). C.F. Casula, *Domenico Tardini 1888-1961*, Roma 1988.

³⁷ August Hlond (1881-1948) during the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, the Polish Government asked him leave Poland and he did with part of the Army on Sept. 18, 1939, in order to reach Rome and report on the actions of the Nazis in Poland. Then, he moved to France in March 1940 and freed by Americans soldiers, he finally returned to war ravaged Poland on July 20, 1945.

³⁸ O. Sibre, *Le Saint-Siège et l’Extrême-Orient...*, op. cit., p. 498.

inconsistencies of the Vatican as well as of his own Society of the Divine Word. It's necessary to examine all the forces in play within the chronological unfolding of events to be able to see and assess Cardinal Tien's attitude.

Professor Claude Soetens, a prominent Church historian at the Louvain, claims that Cardinal Tien was left with almost with no choice and had to leave his archdiocese on June 10, 1948 because of the opposition of the Lazarists and in order to seek medical help³⁹. Although, Tien's appointment as Archbishop of Peking was connected with the transfer of the archdiocese from the French Lazarists to the diocesan clergy⁴⁰, in reality all the temporal possessions of the archdiocese were diverted and became the property of the Lazarists, including the famous Beitang Cathedral (i.e., currently Peking's "North Church"). The Lazarists even wanted the cardinal to pay them for the house in which he lived. It was no secret that the relations in the cardinal's residence were very difficult and there was talk of four parties: the French, Chinese, the Lazarists and the diocesan priests. All were split pro- and con- regarding Cardinal Tien⁴¹. The Cardinal finally decided to go into exile in protest against the Lazarists, who declined to transfer the property of their important institutions in Peking⁴².

This evaluation of the cardinal's departure seems to overlook the fact that he quickly grew into his new position and in a very brief time carried out astonishing reforms. But under immense pressures, the strain of work (only 5 hours of sleep), he felt the urgent need to take time for rest and medical care with the intention of returning as soon as possible. Yielding to the repeated insistence of his doctors, he left Peking for health reasons⁴³ and arrived in Shanghai to seek treatment from Dr. Schwarzenburg, a noted specialist, for a painful affliction of the eyes. The archbishop hoped to be back with his flock before Peking would be totally locked in by the revolutionary troops. He asked Fr.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 498.

⁴⁰ It was formerly apostolic vicariate entrusted to the French Lazarists of the Province of Paris.

⁴¹ AG SVD 29: 1942-50/Sta-Tie: R. Rahmann to Superior General, Peiping 1 June 1948. See also: L. Wei Tsing-Sing, *Le Saint-Siège et la Chine, de Pie XI à nos jours*, Rouen 1971, p. 301.

⁴² J.M. Mayeur, *Storia del Cristianesimo*, vol. 12: *Guerre Mondiali e totalitarismo (1914-1958)*, Roma 1997, p. 1074.

⁴³ On 8 August 1948, from Shangha, Kululu 709, Cardinal Tien informed the Superior General: "Die 10 Junii Shanghai perveni ad quiescendum, quia cor meum es valde debile. His diebus lunbus meus etiam passus est frigus. Quade causa hanc brevem epistolam scibo". AG SVD, sign. 27, 1942-1950.

Matthias Schneider, SVD, the procurator of the Divine Word Procure in Shanghai, to confirm an air passage for him to Peking, since he belonged in Peking. He was no hireling, but a good shepherd⁴⁴.

Meanwhile, Tien knew that Peking was doomed to fall under communist control and therefore wanted at least to get his seminarians out of the city. According to the Nuncio, Riberi, the Chinese communists were not *really* communists but only agrarian reformers⁴⁵. He ordered the priests and bishops to stay at their posts and to “wait and see”⁴⁶. Tien accused the Nuncio of interference into his affairs since only the bishop had the authority to decide such an issue.

When the National Government heard of Tien’s intention to return to the Mainland, it strongly advised him against the journey. But Nuncio Riberi, after meeting with 14 bishops in Hong Kong on Oct. 20, 1948, send a letter to Cardinal Tien categorically demanding his return to Peking. Tien, visibly depressed, secretly consulted his friends to ask what they thought he should do. They all advised him not to return. In a letter to the Superior General on Nov. 2, 1948, Cardinal Tien wrote: “I am prepared to return to Peking to remain with the people in their difficulties. I ask that you pray that God may give me patience and, if possible, even martyrdom”⁴⁷. Tien was determined to return to Peking despite much contrary advice and under great stress. Therefore, on Dec. 8, 1948, he flew to Shanghai with the intention of getting a ticket to Peking. Also the National Government was determined to make clear to him that his return would be regarded as an unpatriotic act and hostile to national interests⁴⁸. Worse still, he would fall into the hands of the communists and would be regarded by them as an asset. To “save face” Cardinal Tien attempted to react with counter-order of the highest

⁴⁴ J. Fleckner, *Thomas Kardinal Tien...*, op. cit., p. 170-171.

⁴⁵ Interestingly, speaking of World War II, Cardinal Tien saw that the only salvation lay in the intervention from the outside (by America and Britain) which at the very least would lead to the division of China into a Communist North and a Nationalist South. But the Communists of Mao Zedong acted very cleverly and managed to dissimulate their real intentions.

⁴⁶ J. Fleckner, *Thomas Kardinal Tien...*, op. cit., p. 82.

⁴⁷ E. Brandewie, *The Last Shall be First...*, op. cit., p. 113.

⁴⁸ Chiang Kai-shek wrote him a letter telling him not to return to Peking since this would be construed as a hostile act against the National Government. Therefore Tien demanded of Riberi a letter with reasons for which he should return to Peking. But the Cardinal did not get any response to his letter. And his secretary Fr. Bartley Schmitz reported on strange rumors that someone would kill the Cardinal if he tried to board ship to return to Peking. *The Last Shall be First...*, op. cit., p. 115-123.

authority of the Church in China. On Dec. 20, 1948, in a letter to Riberi he included the text of Chiang's telegram, which said: "Your Eminence bears the responsibility for the whole Church of China... I ask you not to return at this time to North China"⁴⁹. He included also the request to be presented to Chiang Kai-shek with the reasons for return. But there was no response. In the meantime, communication with Peking was severed and on Jan. 31, 1949, Peking surrendered unconditionally.

To be sure what the Holy Father really wanted, he wrote directly Pius XII on Dec. 28, 1948, and two days later, he also wrote to Pietro Cardinal Fumasoni Biondi, Prefect of Propaganda Fide. He complained that Riberi was behaving as if all the authority over the Church in China was in his hands, without consultation with the bishops, at a time when there was urgent need for unity of action¹²². On Jan. 12, 1949, the response arrived from Rome. The Secretary of State Msgr. Tardini made a distinction: the pastors should stay but the seminarians can move out of Peking. As the situation in Shanghai worsened day by day, Tien flew to Hong Kong in mid-February of 1949. He chose silence and let the situation follow its own course: "I am no longer my own master. I have to, and will, obey"⁵⁰. Tien had no illusions whatsoever about the communists and saw clearly what would await him should he return to Peking. He would be tortured and killed. Even being thrown into prison would be a death sentence due to his weak health. More probable than a high ransom would be an enticement to be the "Pope of China" (i.e. founder of the patriotic church).

When Nationalists were already in Taiwan, they put pressure on him to move to Taiwan (even sending him a ticket). It is suspected that behind the pressure stood Yü Pin and his Secretary General Niu⁵¹. Then the messenger from Rome, Martin Gilligan⁵², jumped in. He talked Cardinal Tien out of going to Taiwan. He showed him a letter from Rome; the Vatican's position was clear, the Cardinal must return to Peking even if it meant martyrdom⁵³. Tien decided to stay in Hong

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 115.

⁵⁰ J. Fleckner, *Thomas Kardinal Tien...*, op. cit., p. 90.

⁵¹ AG SVD, sign. 27, 1950-1953/Tab-Ver: Grössl to Superior General Kappenberg, Dec. 1, 1949.

⁵² Martin Gilligan (1914-1993) the young American priest from Cincinnati, assigned to work in the Vatican's Secretariat of State 1946, was sent to Hong Kong as secretary of Internuncio Riberi. After the Communist takeover of China, Monsignor Gilligan moved from Nanking to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

⁵³ E. Brandewie, *The Last Shall be First...*, op. cit., p. 123. On Oct. 20, 1949, Cardinal Tien met the representative of the internuntiate, Fr. Gilligan, who decisively

Kong in the Kowloon hospital of St. Theresia and tried to get ticket to Peking. During this time he would not receive visitors.

On Nov. 17, 1949, Cardinal Tien wrote to Fr. Superior General Grosse-Kappenberg to explain that it was difficult, if not impossible, to return to Peking. Nevertheless, following Propaganda's directives, he had bought ticket to return to Peking by boat. But then he reported that he had received assurances from two sources that the Pope was leaving it up to him when to return "si res permitteret"⁵⁴. In a letter to Fr. Superior General, Fr. Grosse-Kappenberg, Grendel wrote: His Eminence is surely much to be regretted. Due to the whole chain of circumstances, he finds himself in a situation that is absolutely beyond him. All the more, however, it is necessary to advise him and prevent him from doing anything against the directives and wishes of the Roman authorities⁵⁵. Rome seemed to have up its mind made about Cardinal Tien and was unlikely to change it. On Sep. 27, 1950, Fr. General answered Tien's letter of Sept. 4 and congratulated him on the permission he had received from the Holy See to go abroad to the U.S.A. to have his eyes treated⁵⁶.

Eventually the communists came out into the open with attempts to convince Tien to accept the leadership of the Independent National Catholic Church. A Chinese businessman in Hong Kong claimed that he had been allowed to leave the Mainland only on the condition that he get in touch with Cardinal Tien, then living in the U.S., to seek his agreement to lead China's Independent Church. Tien even wrote to Zhou Enlai but never received an answer⁵⁷. Trapped as

insisted on not going to Taiwan. Such move would affect both the whole hierarchy and all faithful in Peking. The Communist would claim to have proof that the entire Catholic Church of China and its members are on the side of Chiang Kai-shek as traitors, devoid of patriotism and untrue to their Chinese roots.

⁵⁴ AG SVD, sign. 27, 1950-1953/Tab-Ver: Superior: Tien to Kappenberg, Nov. 17, 1949.

⁵⁵ AG SVD, sign. 27, 1950-1953/Tab-Ver: Grendel to Superior General, Dec. 17, 1949.

⁵⁶ E. Brandewie, *The Last Shall be First...*, op. cit., p. 128. In December he was already in the USA for eye surgery. The large SVD community in Techny became his place of exile for almost nine years. There, he learned English and waited for another opportunity to serve his people. This period was for him a kind of desert experience - not only in the sense of having much time for living alone with God in prayer, but also through his high position in the Church as a cardinal and the lack of well-mastered English.

⁵⁷ Zhou Enlai (1898-1976) was after Mao Zedong the second leading figure of the Communist revolution in China. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949 he assumed the post of prime minister in the government until 1958 which

he was in this dilemma, Tien answered only with silence throughout his long exile, an exile marked by misunderstanding and probably also by self-reproach⁵⁸. He wrote to his friend in Hong Kong:

“I am dying with sorrow and shame. A soldier who deserts the field of battle will be court-martialed. A man who is fearful of opposition and difficulties is not very noble. I ran away. As a result, I cannot share the fate of my priests. My faithful people are a flock without a shepherd. I deserve a thousand deaths. Don’t make excuses for me. The Vatican did not punish me as I deserve. But I suffer tormenting pangs of conscience. Would that I were in Beijing to shed my blood for my faith”⁵⁹.

Ambassador of the persecuted Church in China

After Cardinal Tien left China in 1948, he never again saw his beloved country. But during his exile abroad, whether during his nine years in the U.S. and then during his seven years in Taiwan, he lived only for China. Wherever he stayed, he did everything possible for his Chinese fellow-countrymen, calling for prayer and sacrifices for the Church in China. He himself set the best example, always enduring his sufferings with the greatest patience – and God sent him many sufferings. In his letter of condolence at the news of Cardinal Tien’s death, Cardinal Agagianian highlighted the unique character of Cardinal Tien’s mission during his years in exile:

“He, as the first Asian and Chinese cardinal, knew how to use the splendor of his rank to display with dignity, serenity, and goodness those moral and spiritual values which are characteristic of the great Chinese people and are rooted in millennia of glorious civilization: fertile and congenial soil indeed for the message of the Gospel to be planted and to grow”⁶⁰.

he held along with the portfolio of Minister of Foreign Affairs. Cardinal Tien never received any response asking for certain warranties related to his return to Beijing and the future situation of the Church in China.

⁵⁸ B. Schmitz, *China’s Prince of the Church*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁵⁹ Tien’s letter to Chu Cheng-ying (Hongkong) from 11 July 1954, published for the first time in one of many obituaries of cardinal in the Catholic Newspaper “Shantao chowkan” (August 1967). This and other private letters of cardinal, Chu has handed over to the Missiological Institute in Sankt Augustin.

⁶⁰ Cardinal Gregorio Pietro Agagianian, Prefect of Propaganda Fide addressed to Superior General on July 28, 1967 commented on the cardinals exile, “Nun-

Conclusion

This study on the only cardinal of the SVD explores his historical importance within Universal Church, the Society of the Divine Word and local Church in China. These areas give us some insight into his iconic figure for the historical developments in the Chinese Church. Although, cardinal Tien was carried on the back of forces over which he himself had little or no control, but he was also an active promoter of mission reform and had a broad apostolic view centered on the adaptation of the Gospel message to Chinese culture. His appointment was both the outcome of the mission reform in 1922 initiated by the Apostolic Delegate for China, Archbishop Celso Costantini, and also the keystone of SVD mission work in China, especially in the areas of higher education and formation. For the universal Church, Tien represents an important link in the process of internationalization and subsequent self-actualization as a World Church at Vatican II.

The appointment as cardinal of an unpretentious, simple bishop of Qingdao with a smiling face may have come as a surprise, because Thomas Keng-hsin was a flesh-and-blood pastor, a humble and good-hearted servant and a talented organizer, who in a short time accomplished much in Yanggu, Qingdao and in Peking. His friendliness, simplicity, closeness to the people and communication skills made him a good peacemaker and mediator. Unfortunately, the cruelty of the sweeping changes in China presented Cardinal Tien with the most difficult test of his life as he was ordered by Internuncio Riberi and the Vatican to return to his See in Peking which he had left for health reasons. The highpoint of his great dilemma between 1948-1950 shows the inner struggle, reluctance between his steady commitment to return and his waiting for the situation to develop. This attitude was ascribed to his soft character or being not up to the situation. This study shows that Cardinal Tien was not so overwhelmed by the situation but rather learned to approach it with humility waiting for the development of the events. Cardinal Tien wrestling continually with his poor health spent rest of his life in exile: Hong Kong, USA and Taiwan. These years marked by his suffering reveal also his total dedication in favor of the Church in China. This study shows Cardinal Tien in his historical greatness but also in his human weakness.



ANDRZEJ MIOTK SVD

**The historical significance of Thomas Tien Keng-hsin SVD
- the first cardinal from China****Abstract**

The aim of this research is to determine the importance of the life and work of Thomas Tien (1890-1967), the first cardinal from China and Far East (the only one to date coming from the ranks of the Divine Word Missionaries) for the universal church, the local church and his religious congregation. Cardinal Tien left his archiepiscopal see in Beijing in 1948, never to return. He remained in exile, first in Hong Kong, then the United States and finally, as the apostolic administrator, in Taiwan. He was made cardinal in 1946, in an important Vatican move to internationalize the Church. It was the crowning achievement for the Divine Word Missionaries in their contribution to the missions in China, especially in the field of education. The central part of this article concerns the cardinal's response to the pressure from the Vatican to return to Beijing. Complex political situation, pressure from the Chiang Kai-shek's government and, most of all, communists' victory in China, thwarted his efforts to return. Tien remained in exile, giving all he could for the church in China.

Cardinal's life was marked with great pastoral concern and warm-heartedness. He was always close to people. He cared for the good formation of the local clergy and laymen, and the accommodation of the Good News to Chinese culture.

Keywords: Church in China, cardinal Thomas Tien Keng-hsin, Divine Word Missionaries in China, Vatican Council II.

ANDRZEJ MIOTK SVD

**Historyczna wielkość Tomasza Tien Keng-hsin SVD
- pierwszego kardynała Chin****Streszczenie**

Studium historyczne o Tomaszu Tien (1890-1967) - pierwszym kardynale Chin i Dalekiego Wschodu oraz jedynym kardynale werbistów - zamierza określić jego znaczenie w kontekście Kościoła Powszechnego, Zgromadzenia Słowa Bożego i Kościoła lokalnego w Chinach. Jako arcybiskup Pekinu, kardynał Tien opuścił swoją

stolicę w 1948 roku i już nigdy do niej nie wrócił, pozostając na wygnaniu w Hongkongu, Stanach Zjednoczonych oraz – jako Administrator Apostolski – na Tajwanie. Tien został kardynałem w roku 1946, co było ważnym krokiem Stolicy Apostolskiej na rzecz umiędzynarodowienia Kościoła. Fakt ten był ukoronowaniem wielkiego wkładu werbistów w dzieło misyjne w Chinach, zwłaszcza w dziedzinie edukacji. Centralnym zagadnieniem artykułu jest analiza postawy kardynała wobec nacisków ze strony Watykanu, aby Ten wrócił do Pekinu. Jednakże złożona sytuacja polityczna, nacisk rządu emigracyjnego Czang Kaj-szeka, a zwłaszcza zwycięstwo komunistów w Chinach przekreśliły wysiłki powrotu. Tien pozostał na wygnaniu, oddając wszystkie swoje siły na służbę Kościoła chińskiego. Życie kardynała było naznaczone wielką troską pasterską, serdecznością i bliskością wobec ludzi. Tien był duszpasterzem skupionym na formacji kleru rodzimego i świeckich w duchu dostosowania przesłania ewangelicznego do kultur Chin.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół w Chinach, kardynał Thomas Tien Keng-hsin, werbiści w Chinach, Sobór Watykański II.