Forgotten Historical Treasures

The Dominican Catholic missions in Central Taiwan from the late Qing period

By Jose Eugenio Borao

Central Taiwan is a reservoir of religious elements and images of the ‘deep Taiwan’. Sometimes they are obvious, others need an intellectual endeavor in order to be understood. This is the case of the mental map of the Catholic missions that were scattered over Central Taiwan during the Qing territory and that came to life, but after piecing together some documents left by those esteemed and white-suited Spanish Dominicans who landed in Taiwan in the mid-nineteenth century, and after two decades wandering in the area.

After years of doing research on the history of the Spanish missions in Taiwan during the 18th century, I recently rediscovered my interest in the Spanish missions in Taiwan in the late 19th and early 20th century, before the arrival in Taiwan of hundreds of priests and monks escaping communistism, an event that changed the whole situation of Christianity in Taiwan. While reading some of the letters of the missionaries, the first difficulty that appeared was how to reconstruct the map of the missions. This is something particularly difficult but absolutely necessary for the case of Central Taiwan. Reading the yearly published reports of their missionary work in the Carrosismo annuals, the missionaries transcribed from the Correo Sino-annanita, the reports of their missionary work in Taiwan during the 18th century, I recently became interested in the Spanish missions in Taiwan.

The Dominican missions

Something odd is that this mission area is quite well defined: the mission area in Changhua, and more in Yulin (1851), divided by the Zhuai River (1844). Nowadays the area is quite accessible, because it is bound by the two north-south highways. When they were founded—in the late 19th century (1882)—the mission area is not yet enormous, and the churchyards and the river bed of the Zhuai River must have been a real adventure at that time.

Without pretensions of evoking the archaic, I went recently to Taichung to visit one area accompanied by some of my former students to see what was left of those old vine buildings whose pictures had left a deep impression on me. Nothing is left, swept away by the passage of time and the weather, the typhoons, the humidity, the common vegetation and especially the earthquakes.

The first church that we visited was the one in Lo-chuu (1899) (1863), a small village just after exiting the Yulin (1858) insurrection from Highway No. 1. It has a small museum with pictures of the history, and one of the main goals of this church is the first building supported by two long columns on the side of the village. The pillars were taken away after a strong earthquake in 1999 that heavily affected Central Taiwan.

This church in Lo-chuu (as spotted by the missionaries) was the best way to initiate our itinerary because it epitomized quite well the structure of a mission compound: wide space, green trees, or later neo-Gothic style. The church of Lo-chuu, definitely an example of being the mother of all these historic churches. As I mentioned earlier the area has the role of being the mother of all these historic churches.