

## Cultural Landscapes Retraced

1st of a Series

# Forgotten Historical Treasures

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



Photos of former parish priests of Na-a-ka church (Yuan-lin). On top left is Fr. Giner, the founder of the mission.

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Central Taiwan is a reservoir of cultural elements and images of the “deep Taiwan”. Sometimes they are obvious, others need an intellectual construction in order to be visualized. This is the case of the mental map of the Catholic missions that were scattered over Central Taiwan during the Qing dynasty and that came to life, first, after piecing together some documents left by those bearded and white-attired Spanish Dominicans who landed in Kaohsiung in 1859, and, second, after two days wandering in the area.

After years of doing research into the history of the Spaniards in Taiwan during the 17th century, I recently shifted my interest to the Spanish missions in Taiwan in the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries, before the arrival in Taiwan of hundreds of priests and nuns escaping communism, an event that changed the whole situation of the Catholic Church in Taiwan. While reading some of the letters of the missionaries, the first difficulty that appeared was how to reconstruct the map of the mission. 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 Correo Sino-annanita, the missionaries transcribed from Minanhua the names of the mission stations they attended, but to identify them in modern maps is not an easy task. Nevertheless, they narrate interesting stories of their work in those places and they attach old pictures portraying churches, sometimes of elementary structures, but others of elegant neo-Gothic styles, which covered the simplicity of the inner building.

### The Changhua missions

Something striking is that this

mission area is quite well defined: three missions in Changhua, and six more in Yunlin (雲林), divided by the Zhuoshui River (濁水溪). Nowadays the area is quite accessible, because it is framed by the two north-south highways. But when they were founded—in the short period of 22 years (1873-1895)—the railway was not yet in existence, and the efforts to cross the wide river-bed of the Zhuoshui River must have been a real adventure at that time.

Without pretensions of evoking those adventures I went recently from Taipei twice to that area accompanied by some of my former students to see what were left of those old and venerable buildings whose pictures had left a deep impression on me. As I expected, nothing is left, swept away by the ravages of time and the weather, the typhoons, the humidity, the strong vegetation and especially the earthquakes.

The first church that we visited was the one in Lo-chhu-chug (羅厝村) (1875), a small village just after exiting down the Yunlin (員林) interchange from Highway No. 1. It has a small museum with pictures of its history, and one of the most striking ones shows the first building supported by two long bars from outside to prevent collapse. The pictures were taken after a strong earthquake in 1906 that heavily affected Central Taiwan.

This church in Lo-chhu (as spelled by the missionaries) was the best way to initiate our itinerary because it epitomized quite well the structure of a mission compound: wide space, with the chapel in the center, encircled by three wings, something not far from the design of some traditional Chinese temples, but at the same time, reflective of a practical architectural sense. One of the wings, usually that at the back of the chapel is the residence of the missionaries, while

the other two, flanking the chapel have different purposes, sometimes orphanages, classrooms, etc. In the case of Lo-chhu the government has declared these red-brick structures as cultural heritage of Taiwan, and they really shine in the middle of a small town surrounded by green rice fields.

### Two old missions

Continuing along the Changhua area we saw the two old missions of Na-a-ke (林仔街) (1892) and Chhangliiong (田中) (1895), which—differently from Lo-chhu—are currently located in the center of a big town. The first one was constrained in a small place, but the other one, which had moved from their original site, had wide spaces to facilitate the activities of their faithful, such as processions. This one of Chhangliiong still preserves a bell smelted in 1904 and dedicated to Saint Joseph, definitely an example of an artifact that these churches could display if they decided to establish an attached museum. At that point something was clear; the buildings that we were going to encounter in our visit were not the

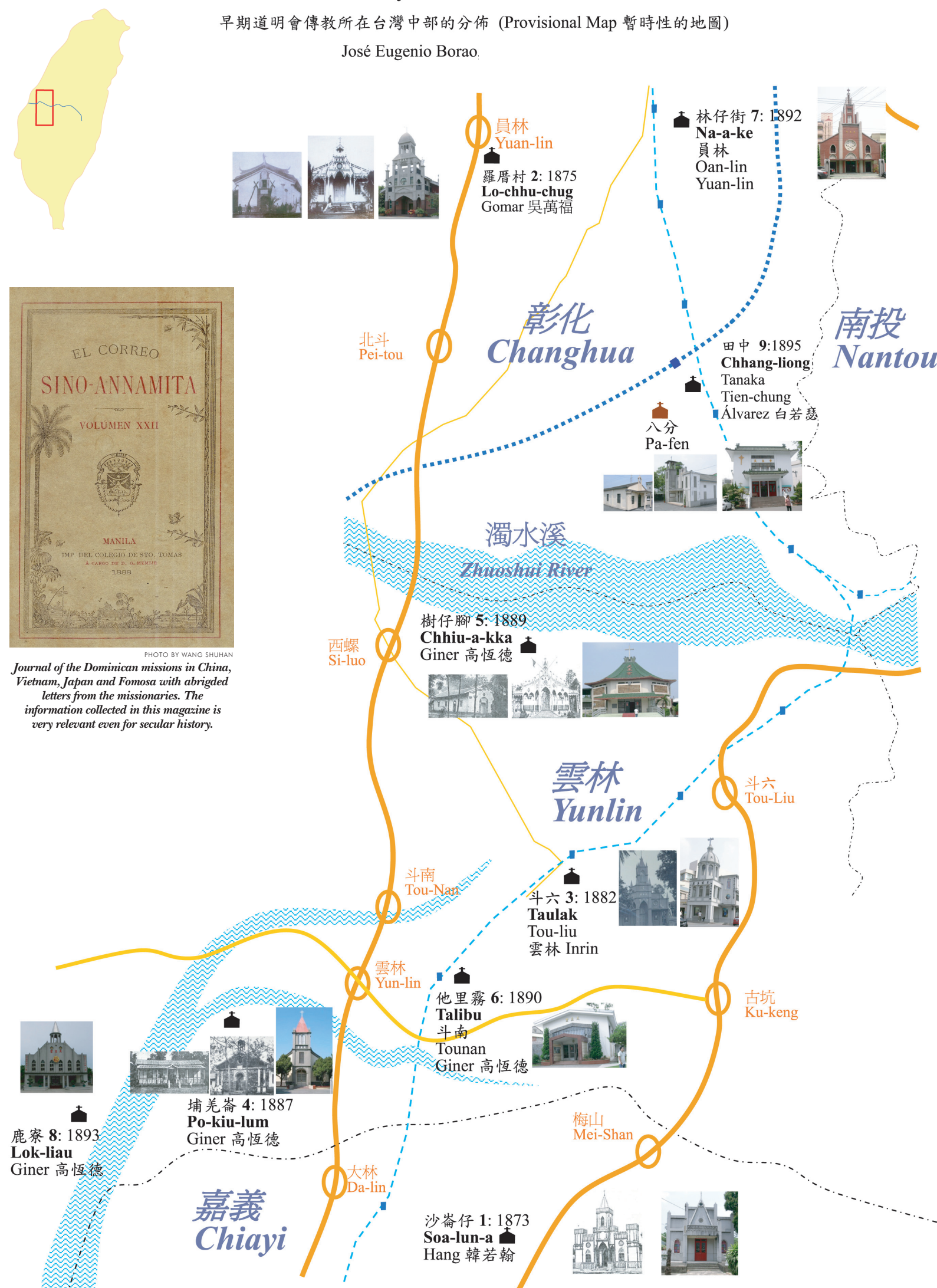


A most precious relic. The old bell in the church of Tienchung (Tanaka) given to the church by the Dominican vicar of that time, Fr. Francisco Giner.

### Distribution of the early Dominican missions in Central Taiwan

早期道明會傳教所在台灣中部的分佈 (Provisional Map 暫時性的地圖)

José Eugenio Borao



Grandma Liu, third from right front row, is the 101-year old matriarch of this Catholic family. The author stands behind second from left.

types with a charming old flavor and Gothic revival atmosphere, but modern ones built just a few decades ago. Of course, we would encounter the same church, but in its third or fourth “reincarnation”.

Moving towards the south we went to Chhiu-a-kka (樹仔腳) (1889), a church that, as it happened in the case of Luo-chhu is now easily accessible from the highway, but, in earlier times was at the edge of the Zhuoshui River, in the middle of nowhere. One might think that it had a strategic position for communications across the river, but probably not since this is the place where the river is widest. It narrows a little far towards the east, in the point where the counties of Nantou, Changhua and Yunlin meet, and where the railway passes, and also far towards the west, in the point chosen by the modern High Speed Rail to cross the river. This is the charm of Chhiu-a-kka, now in the middle of nowhere, but at that time an important missionary center, and according to old Christians living there now, its priests would cycle to other missions in a matter of one, two or a few hours.

### Network of relationships

This brings to mind another topic to consider — the network of relationships formed by these churches. As I mentioned earlier these missions were finished before the arrival of the Japanese, and thanks to missionaries like Giner, the area was speedily expanded. In other words, the missions suddenly became a part of the new cultural landscape of the area, and in moments of change and turmoil those areas were to suffer, the missions were the first target of the invading army, as it happened during the conquest of Taiwan by the Japanese. China peacefully gave Taiwan to Japan in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, but the Taiwanese did not agree, and put

up several focuses of resistance, one of the most prominent being Taulak (斗六), where one mission had existed since 1882.

Taulak was in the center of the main fights, with the advance and retreat of the Japanese troops, and in all the cases the mission and their faithful suffered a lot. Some local leaders erroneously considered that the priests were in connivance with the Japanese army, leading to vendettas and assaults when the Japanese had left the area. I do not know if an image of the Blessed Virgin that I saw in a special antique shop whose owner told me that he collected it in Central Taiwan, was a survivor of that period. During those persecutions, the stories told by Dominican priests in their letters show once again how the missions worked as a network. The priest and some persecuted faithful had to look for shelter in nearby missions not so affected by the attacks of looters.

On the second day we visited the rest of the missions, Talibu (他里霧) (1890), Soa-lun-a (沙崙仔) (1873), in the southernmost part (already within Chiayi County). This is the oldest in the area since the missionaries came from Takao (Kaohsiung). Finally we visited Lok-liau (鹿寮) (1893) and Po-kiu-lum (埔羌崙) (1887). These churches are no longer managed by Dominicans, but by Vietnamese priests who arrived in Taiwan a few years ago. They speak fluent Mandarin and Minanhua. One of the churches that especially impressed me was Po-kiu-lum because it reminded me very much of Chhiu-a-kka. Totally isolated, Po-kiu-lum reigned over the landscape. The modern building has a neo-Gothic bell-tower. Looking at its facade, the memory flies back to some previously seen pictures of its old barracks structure, or later neo-Gothic style. There we met the Liu family with several generations of Christians, and the matriarch is 101 years old,

probably the oldest Catholic in Taiwan. She came out dressed in an elegant way, surrounded by her loving children and grandchildren, and filled with the honor and pride of being the mother of all these Christians.

Central Taiwan, missions, supernatural word, extended families, ... all of these are concepts alien to a modern society but with an urgent need to preserve them, at least in our mental landscapes. Yes, all these things can be really experienced in the middle of fertile fields of rice, in one fresh Spring afternoon, in a natural environment, and far from the tensions and pressure of the people that travel along the nearby highway filled with speeding cars whose drivers simply rush to reach their next destination, after which they struggle to reach a goal, and then rush again to the next destination, and to the next, and to the next.

This year when the Catholic Church in Taiwan celebrates its 150 years of existence, the beginning of a letter “To Whom It May Concern” comes to my mind. You, the reader of this article, the government, the Catholic dioceses, the neighbors of these places, should cooperate and rescue these missions from oblivion. This not simply a matter of religious belief; it is a way to preserve culture, to rest one's eyes on wide open spaces, to foster peace of mind, to learn how to move around the island, and, why not?, to encourage domestic tourism. What to do? A Theme Park may be the best solution.

Dr. Jose Eugenio Borao teaches at the National Taiwan University. He has written two books on Spaniards in Taiwan. The English edition of his latest book “The Spanish Experience in Taiwan, 1626-1642: The Baroque Ending of a Renaissance Endeavor” (in Chinese, published by SMC Publishing) will be published by Hong Kong University Press at the end of this year.