

Article

# Chinese Catholic Nuns and the Organization of Religious Life in Contemporary China

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**Abstract:** This article explores the evolution of female religious life within the Catholic Church in China today. Through ethnographic observation, it establishes a spectrum of practices between two main traditions, namely the antique beatas and the modern missionary congregations. The article argues that Chinese nuns create forms of religious life that are quite distinct from more universal Catholic standards: their congregations are always diocesan and involved in multiple forms of apostolate. Despite the little attention they receive, Chinese nuns demonstrate how Chinese Catholics are creative in their appropriation of Christian traditions and their response to social and economic changes.

**Keywords:** christianity in China; catholicism; religious life; gender studies

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Surveys from 2015 suggest that in the People's Republic of China, there are 3170 Catholic religious women who belong to 87 registered religious congregations, while 1400 women belong to 37 unregistered ones.<sup>1</sup> Thus, there are approximately 4570 Catholics nuns in China, for a general Catholic population that fluctuates between eight to ten million. However, little is known about these women and their forms of religious life, the challenges of their lifestyle, and their current difficulties. Who are those women? How does their religious life manifest and evolve within a rapidly changing Chinese society? What do they tell us about the Catholic Church in China?

This paper explores the various forms of religious life in Catholic China to understand how Chinese women appropriate and translate Catholic religious ideals. The first part presents the most ancient and resilient form of Catholic religious life in China, the antique model of the consecrated virgins—also named beatas—that has a long history within worldwide Catholicism and is still present in China today. Then, elaborating on two case studies, the second part investigates the alternate but dominant form of Catholic religious life, the model of the missionary congregations. These two models provide the benchmarks from which Chinese nuns reflect on the ways in which they adjust their position and contribution to the contemporary Church in China.

Data were collected from March 2015 to July 2017. From February 2016, I conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nanping City with extensive participant observation among the local Catholic communities (Chambon 2018). In addition, I did several short visits to religious communities and nuns who live in other Chinese provinces, and when it was possible, I spent a few days within their convents. I also interviewed Chinese and non-Chinese nuns and clergy members in Hong Kong, Taiwan, France, and the USA. These places, and a few others, play an important role in providing support and training to Chinese Catholic nuns.<sup>2</sup> Based on this extensive data, this article elaborates on

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<sup>1</sup> See *Religions & Christianity in Today's China*, 2018, Vol. VIII, No. 2, pp. 26–51, ISSN: 2192–9289, [www.china-zentrum.de](http://www.china-zentrum.de).

<sup>2</sup> In more details, I have visited 12 relevant sites and collected information from more than 30 Catholic nuns and 10 priests and bishops. This research greatly benefited from the support and trust of sisters Janeth Carroll, Marinei Pessanha Alves,

three cases only, namely Fujianese beatas and two religious congregations, in order to map out the spectrum of situations and practices I encountered.

This article unveils deliberations and transformations that Chinese Catholic nuns have recently witnessed, embraced, or resisted.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the article also questions analytical assumptions about Catholic structures, gendered apostolate, and religious change in ways that nuance our perception of both female religious congregations and the Catholic Church in China. Our study suggests that despite a whole range of efforts and a strong desire to belong to the universal Catholic Church, Chinese nuns do not simply follow the standardized Catholic forms of religious life that encourages a collective pursuit of a unique ‘charism’<sup>4</sup> either within apostolic or contemplative congregations. Instead, Chinese nuns organize their religious commitment along a wide and evolving spectrum of practices that borrows from two traditional Catholic models, the beatas and the missionary congregations. Thus, their religious life fosters a multidimensional and changing apostolate combined with a search for autonomy from social and ecclesial institutions.

These findings speak to broader scholarly debates on Chinese Christianity. Researchers have long debated whether Chinese Christian communities tend to remain close to traditional Chinese forms of religious practices or to depart toward a more distinctively Christian religiosity (Gernet 1985; Harrison 2013; Lian 2010; Menegon 2009). For instance, while Menegon has explored how Chinese believers responded to new forms of Catholic practices and values introduced in seventeenth century Fujian (Menegon 2009), Harrison has highlighted how the Catholic piety introduced in a Chinese village was first perceived as similar to other Chinese religious practices and then evolved over time while taking distance from Chinese folk religion (Harrison 2013). At the core of these debates lays the question of how Chinese people respond and adapt to religious belief and practices that originate outside of the Chinese cultural sphere. Considering this conversation, Catholic nuns provide a vibrant case study through which one can observe how Chinese women appropriate Catholic religious institutions to shape and legitimize their own contribution to their contemporary Church and society. This article argues that the ways they cultivate a memory of these models that have shaped the history of their Church do not confine them into a mere mimesis but sustain their efforts in creating distinctive forms of religious life that can effectively face current challenges and difficulties.

## 1. Part I: Consecrating Oneself as a Beata

### 1.1. Historical Roots

The historical roots of female religious life in Catholic China have been the subject of recent studies and interpretations (Lutz 2010; Leung and Wittberg 2004; Menegon 2009; Entenmann 1996; Kang 2013). The earliest form was introduced by Spanish Dominican missionaries in seventeenth-century Fujian, and soon after, by French missionaries in Sichuan province (Leung and Wittberg 2004). Following the example of Petronilla Chen, a young Christian from Minding who pronounced vows in 1643, some Chinese women were invited by missionaries to embrace the ideal of consecrated life and celibacy in order to assist their Catholic community (Kang 2013, p. 31). They were becoming

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Theresa Shi Liwen, and many others who prefer to remain anonymous. Also, fruitful conversations with Pascale Sidi-Brette have been central in the elaboration of this paper. Finally, Francis Lim Khek Gee, the editor of this special series, and the anonymous reviewers must be thanked for the very helpful comments and suggestions they made.

<sup>3</sup> In Chinese, Catholic religious women are recognized and named *xiunü* (修女). This term which can be translated as “women of cultivation, repair and construction” is both a title and a function. Unlike in other social circles where kinship terms (Elder Brother, Younger Sister) can be used in a symbolic and religious way, Catholic nuns are usually not called “sister” but *xiunü*. Thus, this article favors the term nun alone. Furthermore, this English term recalls proximity with Buddhist nuns, a proximity that most Chinese people use to apprehend what Catholic religious life might be.

<sup>4</sup> I use here the term “Charism” as it is understood within the Catholic Church. It is different from the term “Charisma” as defined by Max Weber. In the Catholic Church, charism is usually applied to define the specific strength of a religious group, its unique and distinctive “gift” that unfolds through an apostolate and related spirituality. For example, see Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life 2018, p. 18.

part of what the Catholic Church recognizes as the *Ordo Virginum* (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life 2018). In a primarily rural Catholicism facing social and political suspicion, these pious women often lived with their family in their home village, taking care of worship places, organizing the religious education of women, delivering baptism, and visiting and praying for sick people. By pronouncing private vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, their religious lifestyle and function were not a physical departure from their community but a specific commitment to it. Yet, their chosen celibacy combined with their familial housing soon embedded an ethical and social challenge to the broader Confucian ideal (Menegon 2003; Harrison 2013, p. 63). Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Chinese Catholic women were often perceived as a social abnormality, and in repeated cases, they were falsely accused of atrocious abuse of children (Young 2013, p. 4). Within the Church, beatas appeared as an anomaly to the modern and gendered Catholic ideal of religious life brought by nineteenth-century European missionaries (Tiedemann 2010a; Entenmann 1996). Through various and consistent efforts, missionaries encouraged these women to form standardized religious congregations recognized under canon law (Tiedemann 2010b; Mariani 2011; Li 2015, p. 25; Cai 2012, p. 59).

Nonetheless, this peculiar model of religious commitment still exists in contemporary China. Most of them are in Fujian province, one of the two places where this model took root in China. Nuns Shi and other informants from Northern Fujian estimate that there are about ninety official nuns and several hundred unregistered nuns praying for and serving Fujianese Catholic communities. Many unregistered nuns are very advanced in age and it is difficult to precisely estimate the scope of their action. Yet, there is not a radical rupture of religious lifestyle and ideals between registered and unregistered nuns. By renouncing married life and motherhood, by standing where they identify an ecclesial need, they devote themselves to the service of a Catholic community.

Today there are various ways to name these specific nuns who embrace religious life and engage in full-time apostolate without forming a religious congregation. The most common Chinese term to designate their religious commitment is *zhennü* (贞女), a woman who is loyal, faithful, chaste, virgin, and virtuous. In contemporary Xiamen, lay Catholics call these nuns *gupo* (姑婆), old aunt; in Shanghai, *mumu* (姆姆), teaching nurse; and in Fuzhou, *yigu* (依姑), depending aunt. Non-Christians may name them *xiunü* (修女), nun, or simply add a *xiao* (小), little, prior to their family name. These variations suggest that while these nuns are identified within their local community, the broader Church still struggles to foster a standardized and national label to recognize them and their service. This difficulty to name their specific roles within an evolving and diverse Catholic Church remains for historians and anthropologists who intend to discuss their contribution to the Church in China. Following the general trend of the literature produced by French missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, today's scholars tend to uniformly name them virgin (Menegon 2003; Tiedemann 2010b; Harrison 2013; Li 2015; Cai 2012). Yet, the English term virgin tends to reduce these women and their current apostolate to what they do not do (marriage and sexual life), downplaying the broad reality of what they actually do and sidelining the fact that some of these women have been married at some point of their life.

To address this difficulty of naming and to echo contemporary practices and local traditions, the present article uses three terms to equally refer to this religious life: nuns, beatas, and consecrated virgins. The term nun—used in daily conversation—insists on their proximity with other Catholic nuns who belong to formal religious congregations. The Latin term *beata* follows the Spanish practice initiated in the seventeenth century by the Dominicans in Fujian and refers to consecrated women who intend to enact the Beatitudes.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the term consecrated virgin borrows from the canonical vocabulary of the Catholic Church and dominant trends in the academic literature. By maintaining

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<sup>5</sup> This female ideal of embracing evangelical values through the *Ordo Virginum* and generating a distinctive social organization has a rich history throughout medieval and early modern period. For instance, see (Simons 2001).

these three terms together, this article intends to further reflect on the rich reality of this Chinese religious lifestyle without limiting it to a single characteristic or to the past (Kang 2013).

The following section draws the portrait of one contemporary beata who lives and serves in Nanping City. Then, the article presents similarities and dissimilarities with other Fujianese consecrated virgins to better portray what entails this Chinese Catholic model of the beatas today.

### 1.2. *The life of service of Nun Shi*

Nun Theresa Shi Liwen is a beata who serves Catholic parishioners of Northern Fujian. Besides a small cross, she does not wear any distinctive religious clothing. With her cellphone, short hair, and neat outfit, she looks like many local women. Cheerful and strong-minded, most local parishioners and state officials know well who '*Shi Xiunü*' is.

Born in January 1968, she grew up in Fuzhou, the capital city of the province, within a rather modest Catholic family. Unlike many consecrated virgins of the past, contemporary Fujianese beatas do not come from well-to-do families (Tiedemann 2008). In 1988, Nun Shi manifested her interest in consecrated life and spent two years of service in an urban parish. In 1990, the archdiocese of Fuzhou organized for her and eleven other young postulants a two-and-half-year training. These young women started to live together under the supervision of an old beata who had known the Church before the communist period (pre-1949). The archdiocese invited various professors and educators to offer multiple one-week training sessions on biblical studies, catechism, Church history, music, mathematics, English, politic, and medical care. According to Nun Shi, six groups were similarly trained from 1990 to the early 2000s. Since then, the declining number of postulants did not allow the training to continue. The few candidates were initiated and formed by a senior consecrated virgin.

In March 1995, after her two-and-a-half-year of training and a few years of pastoral service within a local parish in Fuzhou, Nun Shi agreed to move to Nanping to serve the northern part of the province. Soon after, the Chinese administration established a Catholic diocese there which overlaps the territory of the Minbei Prefecture. This rural and mountainous territory did not have any official priest or nun to serve local Catholics who were willing to form a properly registered Catholic Church. Thus, civil authorities were recruiting clergy members willing to permanently relocate from coastal areas to inland territories. Indirectly, the local government was officially recognizing and extending the apostolate of Nun Shi to the diocese of Minbei.

In 2017, the Minbei Diocese counts only nine priests and three beatas. Its territory covers the prefecture of Minbei that hosts 3.7 million inhabitants and a few thousand Catholics (Charbonnier 2014) (see Figure 1). However, most of them have refused to join the registered side of the Catholic church and belong to 'underground' communities. Those communities are ministered by the underground clergy of either Fuzhou or Fu'an. Those cities are the most dynamic place of Northern Fujian Catholicism. Thus, there is no single underground ecclesial unity that covers the Minbei Diocese.

In practice, official priests and consecrated virgins of the Minbei Diocese work in pairs. One priest collaborates with one nun in the service of one or several parishes. Every five years, the pairs are redefined to prevent problematic attachment between the two. A few years ago, there were eight beatas in the diocese of Minbei. But since then, one has decided to return to her native diocese, one got married, and one left for spiritual training. In the face of such vulnerabilities, Nun Shi is skeptical and wonders about the future of the local Church.

Nun Shi is currently collaborating with the diocesan administrator of the diocese, Father Wu, an official priest who comes from Ningde. Together, they oversee two of the ten parishes of the diocese; Nanping and Wuyishan. While the Minbei prefecture is predominantly rural, Wuyishan is a famous touristic site attracting thousands of visitors, Nanping is a small but sophisticated city which fosters an unusual quality of living. The two parishes are two hours away from each other. Father Wu and Nun Shi usually spend half of their week in one, and the other half in the other. Each parish has one church recently rebuilt and a little more than one hundred Catholics. In both places, the underground community does not collaborate with the official Church.

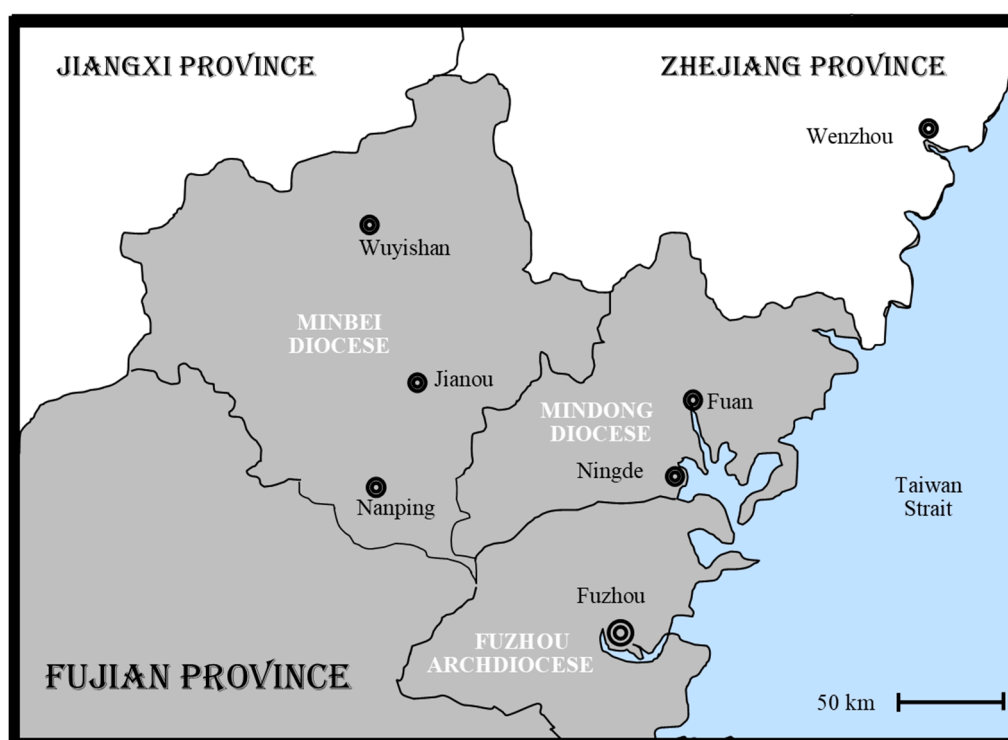


Figure 1. Simplified Map of Northern Fujian.

Since Father Wu is often called for meetings with state officials at local, prefectural, and provincial levels, Nun Shi is more present in the parish and oversees all practical matters and important decisions. Father Wu administers sacraments, takes formal decisions, and joins various meetings organized by state officials. When they are in the parish, Nun Shi makes sure that the church remains open and welcoming all day long. She schedules volunteer work for cleaning, decoration, and maintenance, as well as visits to elderly and sick Christians. During the recent reconstruction of one of the two churches, she supervised workers and made daily decisions such as defining the color of the new roof tiles. When the priest is present in the parish, she prepares the altar for the daily morning mass. She is also in charge of preparing families for baptism and marriage before they encounter the priest. When a Catholic passes away, she coordinates the traditional mortuary prayers that are said at home by other churchgoers and helps with organizing the rest of the funeral. In the summertime, she organizes camps for the few children and teenagers of the parishes but also monitors the seminarian who spends his summer for pastoral training in Minbei. Overall, nothing occurs in the parish out of her sight.

Since Nun Shi—like Father Wu—lives inside the dormitory of the church, she is close to parishioners and her real community of belonging is the local Catholic community. She shares the joy, routine, and concerns of the parishioners. Her apostolate supports and complements the pastoral action of the priest, and she also supplements for his recurrent absences. Through religious obedience and celibacy, Nun Shi and Father Wu share a common commitment to the well-being of their local Church. They both deploy complementary actions and efforts. In the eyes of their parishioners, Nun Shi is consequently not more ‘virgin’ and ‘unwedded’ than Father Wu, but both are similarly celibate and consecrated to the service of the Church.

In terms of financial sustainability, the beata and the priest both depend on parishioners’ donations. They do not have a formal wage or salary. Yet, in the Minbei diocese, all parishes share a portion of their income to secure medical insurance for every single priest and nun. As we will see later, this is rather uncommon and most of the time, Chinese nuns are unable to secure enough funding to afford medical insurance. Therefore, Nun Shi considers that she lives in a rather comfortable and blessed situation.

Three times a year, all the beatas of the Minbei Diocese gather for a few days. The location of these gatherings varies. When the diocese had more consecrated virgins, priests and nuns talked about building a small house where the beatas could gather and rest away from pastoral duties. This house would have been like a retreat center where each nun could come to relax and nourish her spiritual life. But since the nuns are scattered across the entire diocese, finding a proper location has remained under constant debate. Also, many local Catholics have argued that meager diocesan resources should be oriented toward the renovation or reconstruction of churches instead of the creation of a building that would remain empty most of the year. These lay Catholics also mentioned that this building might cut the beatas off their communities. Thus, they were reluctant to finance it and the project was finally abandoned.

Once every few years, Nun Shi joins relevant training elsewhere in mainland China and Hong Kong. In addition to the spiritual and practical formation, these meetings allow her to network with Chinese nuns who belong to various ecclesial structures elsewhere in China, and to appreciate the specificity of her religious service. Yet, Nun Shi considers that opportunities for local gatherings and outside training are enough to support her apostolate. For her, the first mission of a beata is to serve her local community—not to spend time in personal training.

### 1.3. Variations across Fujian

Beyond the specific case of Nun Shi, the concrete life of beatas varies slightly across Fujian. In the diocese of Mindong, which is also a quite rural area, most consecrated virgins belong to the ‘underground’ Church (see Figure 1). Even though relations between registered and unregistered communities may evolve after the recent provisional agreement signed between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China, most local Catholics belong to unregistered communities and operate separately but openly (Chan 2012).<sup>6</sup> In the recent past, the Mindong diocese counted a few hundred beatas. Most of them, especially the oldest ones, live within their family serving their community from their natal home. They have not formally studied, they have not moved out of their parents’ house, and they do not wear any specific uniform. Those usually aged nuns spend their time at church helping with daily prayers and rituals as well as with the various prayers surrounding funerals.

Besides these home-based beatas, the Mindong underground communities have now another form of consecrated virgins like Nun Shi lifestyle, the church-based ones. For many of the numerous rural churches of the underground diocese, there are one or two beatas living in the dormitory of the church. They maintain the building and keep it open; they organize daily prayers and schedule rosaries. Although they have not received formal religious training; they have made private vows and enact the permanent presence of an ecclesial care. The parish priest, who is usually in charge of multiple churches, passes by once or twice per week to give sacraments and oversee the community. If these Mindong underground beatas have a situation rather like the one of Nun Shi in Minbei, they travel less and their access to education is limited. Therefore, they depend more on their local community and on the priest’s leadership.

In the official part of the Mindong diocese, there are a few women who live and serve within the local communities. In the parish of Fu’an, there is a very active home-based beata who helps with parish affairs and the Catholic elderly home. But this parish also hosts two nuns who belong to a religious congregation elsewhere in China. Because of a well-documented conflict between their congregation and the local bishop who abusively deprived the congregation of its belongings, most of

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<sup>6</sup> On 22 September 2018, the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China announced that they have reached a provisional agreement on the appointment of Catholic bishops in China. Although the real significant of such announcement remains under debate, relations among Chinese Catholics may be impacted. For more information, see <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2018-09/china-holy-see-agreement-appointment-bishops.html> accessed on 1 May 2019.

the nuns left the diocese and two of them are now in Fu'an serving the parish and its elderly home.<sup>7</sup> In this specific case, the local beata and the two non-local nuns have a rather similar apostolate and enjoy smooth collaboration. Yet, in some places, the co-existence of congregational nuns and beatas can be both a blessing and a challenge. Their difference in autonomy, local connections, religious lifestyle, and resources can generate tensions among them as it did in the past when members of a religious order would for instance try to position themselves as the religious superiors of the beatas (Harrison 2013, p. 134).

#### 1.4. A Model under Change

Nun Shi, like most Chinese nuns, is aware that the Fujianese tradition of the beatas is losing ground. Today, most Chinese nuns prefer to belong to a religious congregation and have the support of a community. Yet, when Nun Shi joins workshops and retreats outside of her diocese, she notices how nuns belonging to a congregation constantly complain about community life and daily trivialities. Nun Shi insists that her religious life without its specific clothing, religious community, and formal vows may not be the most encouraged model of the contemporary Church. Still, it brings blessings to local communities. She remembers how the elderly nuns who trained her warned her against the community life that bishops promote. For these earlier generations of beatas, forming a community was the first step toward all sorts of power struggle. Nun Shi knows that her religious life does not really count as religious life in the eyes of most Church leaders. But she still values the model of the elderly nuns she grew up with and she continues to believe that their example can contribute to the Church today. Witnessing the various tensions and dilemmas that the Church is facing, Nun Shi likes to recall that “nuns are not here to rule but to serve”.

Still, over the past eight years, there was not a single Fujianese postulant.<sup>8</sup> Local beatas explain that the one-child-policy leads parents to discourage their daughter from embracing religious life. Also, with the rapid economic development of the country and the multiplication of life opportunities, young Catholic women are not attracted by this way of life. Nun Shi notes that even beatas who received formal training and have a highly visible action do not inspire more vocations. And the diocesan clergy is not really encouraging young women to pursue this type of religious commitment. Therefore, this model of religious life which was grounded in a rural life with large family clans is disappearing. While the majority of Fujianese consecrated virgins are in their forties and fifties, they know that their way of life might vanish soon.

Nevertheless, Chinese Catholic religious life is more than the beatas alone. In the next section, we introduce the main alternative model that shapes religious life in Catholic China. Unfolding its specificities and current challenges, this section also highlights how this other model share continuities and discontinuities with the beatas.

## 2. Part II: Community Life and Religious Congregations

In China like elsewhere, the Catholic Church counts numerous religious congregations<sup>9</sup> through which Catholic women can take vows, join a religious community, and serve the Church. Yet, Chinese

<sup>7</sup> This conflict was highly publicized through national and international media. And similar conflicts have occurred in other dioceses. Thus, these tensions reflect how Chinese nuns are less and less likely to silently accept what is perceived as an abusive and authoritarian policy of the clergy.

<sup>8</sup> Estimates of the total number of Catholics in Fujian vary between 200,000 and 400,000.

<sup>9</sup> The Catholic Church distinguishes between religious congregations and religious orders. Members of the first take simple vows that can be readily dispensed while members of the last take solemn vows that are rarely relaxed, almost indissoluble. In practice, the two organizations can be extremely similar. In this article, we favor the term congregation to describe the collective organization, but non-monastic way of life made by Chinese nuns. However, it might be loosely understood and does not imply any canonical statement. Some Chinese religious communities are technically a religious order while others are canonically a congregation.

religious congregations share specific features and challenges that a better understanding of the Church in China requires to acknowledge.

To explore what these congregations have in common, the various forms of religious life they promote, and the difficulties they face, the following section presents the concrete situation of two congregations from northern and eastern China. One is a very large congregation that has a long history and a broad social foundation while the other is a smaller underground community evolving toward a more 'spiritual' religious life. One is primarily based in a wealthy city of seven million inhabitants where there is not a sharp antagonism between official and unofficial Catholics while the other is based in a developing township where most Catholics are not registered. The two congregations together help to appreciate how Chinese Catholic nuns are incessantly adjusting their religious commitment and their role in the Catholic Church in China. If scholars have argued that their unique features are due to governmental opposition and cultural difficulties, and suggest a partial failure in meeting Catholic norms (Leung and Wittberg 2004), this research instead suggests that Chinese nuns value alternative Catholic models of religious life because they empower them in designing a lifestyle suitable to their socio-historical context.

### 2.1. A Congregations with Historical Roots: The Little Sisters of Mary

Many Chinese religious congregations who operate in contemporary China have in some extent been founded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when a large number of Western Catholic nuns came to China to support missionary work (Li 2015). Arriving mostly from France, but also from Italy, Germany, or the United States, these missionary nuns were committed to social services such as education of children, orphanage, and medical care (Young 2013). Wearing a distinct uniform indicating their religious status, these foreign nuns were in close collaboration with priests and bishops to support pre-established missions as well as to generate new missionary opportunities. Soon, they invited young Chinese women to join their apostolate and religious commitment. They opened their congregation to the natives or established new ones for them. Thus, this period witnessed a broad Catholic effort to generate numerous indigenous congregations across the Chinese world, such as the Chinese Sisters of the Precious Blood, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, The Providence Sister Catechists, The Society of Helpers, and so on (Bradshaw 1981; Tiedemann 2010b; Li 2015, p. 121; Chu 2016).

In northern China, the Little Sisters of Mary<sup>10</sup> traces their history back to the early twentieth century. In a Catholic territory overseen by French Bishops, young Chinese women interested in religious life were invited to become *zhennü* (beatas). From the early 1910s, they could pronounce their vows in the hands of the bishop and then be sent two by two to serve local communities. They would offer medical care for the sick, as well as education for children. Through countless and flexible involvements, these Chinese beatas were crucial in the development of the local Church and in implementing a holistic Christian care for the broader population. Besides serving within nascent missions and parishes, small groups of them opened asylums for deprived elderly people, others created an orphanage, and some ran a printing house. In a context of continuous civil war fueled by the successive disruptions of the Boxer rebellion, conflicts between warrior lords, and the Japanese invasion, the social welfare induced by these nuns answered to a political and social vacuum where most traditional well-fare institutions were under crisis. With an increasing number of young women joining them, the nuns were officially recognized by the Holy See in the early 1930s as a religious congregation. By the 1940s, the new congregation, the Little Sisters of Mary, counted over one hundred nuns.

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<sup>10</sup> I here use a pseudonym to respect the privacy of the congregation. Similarly, the article avoids giving some specific dates, names, and number that may jeopardize the anonymity of the congregation.



However, with the collapse of the Japanese Empire followed by the growing Communist power, these Catholic women decided that young members of their congregation should leave the city and migrate towards the South. At the end of the 1940s, about sixty of them left, and later, a few regathered abroad to recreate a congregation inspired by their experience in northern China. Meanwhile, nuns who have remained in Northern China soon had to leave their pastoral service and return to their family. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the congregation like every other constituted religious body disappeared and most nuns returned to the life of a home-based beata. Yet, today's nuns insist on how those nuns never stopped praying and serving, even during the Cultural Revolution. The Little Sisters of Mary explained that despite the political context, nuns continued to help and work generously, testifying wherever they were about the evangelical values. By doing so, each of them was maintaining the spirit of their congregation alive—a spirit that does not lay in any single way of life.

With Deng Xiaoping's reforms in 1978–1979, Catholic communities and institutions were gradually able to re-emerge. The Church could reappear in public. In 1989, the local bishop and a few lay people of the place where the Little Sisters of Mary are now based decided to support the visible recreation of the congregation. One dozen elderly nuns who were living in the region were helped to gather again and restart their public and collective service of the Church. Soon, more than 20 young women joined them to become the new generation of the Little Sisters of Mary. In 1992, a second group of 39 young postulants was accepted while only three elderly nuns were still alive. Three years later, twenty-four of these new postulants pronounced their vows. Today, the congregation counts about 94 nuns, three novices, and no postulant. New vocations are becoming rare, so the size of the congregation might soon decrease. Nonetheless, with their grey robe and white veil, the Little Sisters of Mary are well-known in the region. Their Mother House is constantly visited by all kinds of people from the city and surrounding Catholic communities.

With the constant growth of the congregation, the Little Sister of Mary had to provide training to new members and define their own requirements.<sup>11</sup> After a few months as a postulant and two years as a novice, a new member can take temporary vows. Between five and seven years later, she can take perpetual vows. During the early stage of this training, each candidate joins pastoral activities with an older nun to embrace the religious mission of the congregation. They also attend specific training programs in accounting, nursing, acupuncture, foot massage, etc. If a nun demonstrates specific abilities, the congregation might ask her to pursue additional training in theology, biblical studies, education, medical care, and so on. Thus, the congregation has mobilized national and international connections, such as Catholic priests and nuns who regularly circulate across China, in order to identify relevant schools and ways to afford tuitions (Leung and Wittberg 2004). Today, sixteen Little Sisters of Mary have been abroad for a Master or a Ph.D. program (France, Italy, Philippines, Taiwan, and the USA).<sup>12</sup> Those women have brought back their international experience that they continue to share with the rest of their community. In addition to enlarging the professional expertise of the congregation, their experience abroad also allows the nuns to question their local ecclesial culture. For instance, they do not hesitate to describe what some of the nuns did abroad during religious education courses, or what they saw during religious ceremonies, to suggest changes within the parish they serve.

By 2008, the growth of the congregation and the multiple commitments of the Little Sisters have allowed them to gather enough funding from China and abroad to rebuild a modern and large Mother

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<sup>11</sup> For larger congregations like the Little Sisters of Mary, which are financially independent from their local bishop, Chinese nuns enjoy much autonomy regarding internal governance and training. Whereas other smaller congregations, which financially depend on the local diocese, the bishop often intervenes with the internal governance of the congregation, including the training of the nuns.

<sup>12</sup> Two of those highly educated nuns left religious life to get married. Therefore, the current superior of the Little Sisters of Mary is skeptical toward this pursue of higher education that can become a distraction from missionary work and life of prayer.

House.<sup>13</sup> Since the Chinese law has allowed them to recover land properties owned before the Cultural Revolution, the nuns erected an impressive and well-maintained building in the center of the city, ten minutes away from the cathedral. At the entrance of this building, a large statue of the Virgin Mary welcomes the visitor, and boards on the walls explain the history of the congregation, the ancient role of the beatas, and the current services of the nuns.

The Mother House not only provides visibility and stability to the congregation; it also offers space for an elderly home ran by the nuns. The home welcomes more than fifty elderly people, Catholics and non-Catholics, accompanied by four nuns and five lay employees. This new apostolate is partially encouraged by the state which is outsourcing expensive social welfare to religious groups. Yet, if the Little Sisters of Mary like many other congregations have thrown themselves into this kind of social service, their involvement remains marked with parsimony and prudence. They do not want to monopolize all their human and financial resources for a single social priority that has been defined by others and that may jeopardize their religious commitment. As several of them told us: “A nun is more than a nurse or a care provider”. Nonetheless, some nuns discreetly provide medical care to people with HIV and to nearby homeless people. Although those two populations tend to be stigmatized by the state, local officials turn blind eyes on the support they receive from the nuns. By diversifying their social involvement and taking it out of their Mother House, nuns silently assert their own way to define and help people in need. This multidirectional social engagement illustrates once again what scholars have called the back-and-forth dynamic of cooperation and negotiation between Chinese Christians and state actors (Koesel et al. 2019; Madsen 2019a). Nuns do not simply respond to social needs defined by the state but carefully discern where and how to invest their energy without ignoring stigmatized populations.

In one aisle of the Mother House, there is also a spiritual center where the Little Sisters of Mary organize various retreats and training for lay Catholics. The facilities (dormitories, kitchen, classrooms) of the Mother House are large enough to accommodate a few dozen participants each time. The spiritual center offers courses in Holy Scriptures, human and spiritual development, but also formation about married life and parenting skills, as well as training programs for young Christians, spiritual counselors, and catechists. The nuns also offer a spiritual retreat to groups or individuals. It is worth noticing that participants of those formations and retreats also include people from Protestant Churches, and nuns sometimes invite Protestant ministers to contribute to their training programs. Consequently, their spiritual center is to some extent a site of ecumenical encounter. But the retreats and training it offers also contrast with the traditional Chinese Catholic piety that was primarily based on the daily repetition of prayers and on the regular attendance of mass and confession. Through their retreat center, nuns not only provide a new approach to spiritual life that echoes socio-religious transformations of their wealthy city but also becomes a resource of spiritual expertise. Becoming more than the servants of local parishes, the Little Sisters of Mary explain that through their retreat center, they continue the long-standing commitment to prayer that many home-based beatas have embraced. Today, nuns who live at the Mother House gather in the chapel several times per day for the mass and the Liturgies of the Hours. Visitors and retreatants are welcomed to join. Furthermore, every day and night, nuns take turns to maintain a perpetual adoration of the Holy Communion. This specific form of worship that implies human resources and stability was initiated in 2004 to respond to the demand of a generous benefactor. Fifteen years later, this perpetual adoration is the source of great pride for the entire community.

However, the Little Sisters of Mary consider evangelization as their priority and primary charism. Therefore, 46 nuns do not work and live within the Mother House but within a diocesan parish or in a nearby diocese. Alone or with other nuns, they oversee most parish' activities, teach catechism,

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<sup>13</sup> While the Little Sisters give us some information about the main origins of their donations, they explicitly requested to remain discreet about it. Officially, their building was made possible through local donations only.

schedule rosaries, and help the choir. During Chinese New Year, they can take up to fourteen days to visit their family and stay with relatives. Yet, spending most of the year with parishioners, Chinese nuns notice that it is often lay people who introduce non-believers to Christ. Increasingly educated and socially connected, lay people evangelize and indirectly remind the nuns how their specific contribution to the Church is nothing predetermined and self-evident.

To support their various commitments and their needs in adapting their evangelizing skills, the Little Sisters of Mary gather twice a year at the Mother House, once for a one-week spiritual retreat, and once for a one-week training. The content and organization of these meetings are supervised by the Superior and her Council members. Once every four years, the congregation also goes through a General Chapter. All the nuns elect 30 delegates who gather one entire week at the Mother House to discuss the congregation's orientations and to elect a Mother Superior and four council members. The five of them can be re-elected once. Then, they must return to regular religious life for at least one term.

For the Little Sisters of Mary, like for most Chinese congregations contacted during this research, the financial sustainability of the congregation is a matter of concern and recurrent debate. To what extent a nun can devote her time to non-profitable activities that may deploy evangelical values but threaten the financial viability of her congregation and its capacity to give on the long term? Nuns serving in a parish usually receive a stipend around 1000 RMB (US\$145).<sup>14</sup> But it can vary across the region. The amount is usually given by the parish to the congregation itself. Then, each nun can ask the Mother House for the money she personally needs. Nuns say that they almost always receive the amount for which they ask. The other major income of the congregation is from small shops built on the congregation property along the street and rented out.<sup>15</sup> Yet, in 2018, the city ordered an urban cleaning and street remodeling that destroyed half of them. Thus, the congregation is always looking for new donations and source of financial autonomy. Some nuns are studying accounting and may follow the example of other congregations where a significant proportion of the community works in accounting for secular corporations. Yet, the Little Sisters of Mary discuss whether this option that opens new economic, professional, and networking opportunities threaten the generous and disinterested dimension of their religious life. Nonetheless, nuns know that while the amount of money circulating within Chinese Catholic networks is constantly and significantly growing, lay people still prefer to donate for the construction of a new and visible building than for the functioning of a religious congregation. Chinese nuns cannot simply rely on the new wealth of lay Catholics, but they must be able to support themselves.

For most congregations, their major financial concern is to afford medical insurance for every single nun. The Little Sisters of Mary explain that it would cost them more than one million US\$ (seven million RMB) to cover arrears and pay annual fees for the whole community. Since all of them are still under 60-year-old, they are mostly healthy and 86 of them do not have any insurance. But they worry about their future. Amid this dilemma, the diocese has recently agreed to cover one-third of their retirement pension. Yet, the congregation would have to cover the rest, and the question of their medical insurance remains unsolved.

In conclusion, the Little Sisters of Mary give an opportunity to see how Chinese religious congregations are a specific kind of Catholic organization. They are diocesan entities which identify with and value the model of missionaries and beatas who generated them. They use their example to define and justify their current position in the Church and their broader society. Most of those diocesan

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<sup>14</sup> When a congregation is strong enough to negotiate with the diocese, this stipend is comparable to what priests receive. Otherwise, it is lower. Yet, priests are more likely to receive all sorts of donation from parishioners. And this creates a significant income gap between priests and nuns.

<sup>15</sup> According to the nuns, their elderly home and other social services do not generate any profit.

congregations are actually smaller<sup>16</sup>, less educated, and less resourceful than the Little Sisters of Mary. They do not belong to broader religious orders with a national or international network. Although Chinese nuns may cultivate informal relations among congregations and with non-Chinese religious orders, their congregations belong to and depend on their diocese only. It is in this territorial framework imposed by the state and not contested by ecclesial authorities that they have to define their religious identity and sustain their material life. If they are quite autonomous in defining their missions and priorities, the way to support and finance them remains a constant challenge. Therefore, reflecting on a history of change that combines the model of the consecrated virgins and the example of missionary congregations, Chinese nuns cultivate and justify a multidirectional apostolate. They do not simply reproduce what the beatas and early missionaries did but design their own type of social involvement and Church service. Unlike most worldwide Catholic congregations, Chinese congregations do not limit their spiritual and apostolic charism to a single function (parish service, medical care, prayer) but constantly diversify the scope of their action. Similarly, they do not impose a strict community life on each other. Many members live alone or with other nuns in a parish, an apartment, or another related site. Yet, contemporary Chinese nuns tend to gather more and more and live within a single place, a hive of activity, instead of being scattered across vast territories. This type of religious life with its on-going spatial and functional reconfiguration puzzles international observers. However, it allows Chinese nuns to interact with various people without critically depending on a single space, income, and authority.

Finally, it is worth noticing the increasing tensions between nuns and diocese priests. During the Maoist period, they both shared the same banishment and bitter life. However, with the reform period, the public return of Catholic institutions, and the gigantic socio-economic transformation of the country, priests and nuns have increasingly different opportunities and challenges. As we saw with the Little Sisters of Mary, nuns can access some higher education programs, and through community life, they share their professional and abroad experience. By contrast, the training of diocesan priests is usually focused on theological and liturgical issues while being closely monitored by the state. It is harder for them to go abroad. And once ordained, they little benefit from communal learning. Therefore, there is an increasing gap in education between Chinese nuns and diocesan priests. Then, in the parish life, priests have usually to spend a large portion of their time in meetings and training with state officials while nuns monitor daily issues and spend more time with parishioners. In the eyes of many parishioners, the priest remains a figure of authority, almost the incarnation of Jesus Christ, while the nun is supposedly uneducated and the servant of the community. Thus, their pastoral experience and vision tend to diverge, and tensions between priests and nuns multiple. Like elsewhere in the Catholic world, Chinese nuns tend to resist male institutional authority and imposed models of self-sacrifice (Brock 2010). Yet, if a disagreement between a Chinese priest and a nun becomes too important, the priest will usually request from the Superior of the congregation to transfer the sister elsewhere. Thus, Chinese nuns tend to avoid open conflicts and look for other means of action.

## 2.2. A Post-Maoist Congregation with Contemplative Efforts: The Sisters of the Immaculate Conception

To further unfold and nuance our understanding of Chinese religious congregations, it is worth exploring another community that has a shorter history and different priorities. On the Eastern coast of China, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception are a recent unregistered community which counts 42 nuns and four novices. They mostly operate in a large township located one hour away from the provincial capital. In this developing region, economical opportunities are fewer than in the wealthy city of the Little Sisters of Mary, and divisions between official and unofficial Catholics are sharper.

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<sup>16</sup> Based on the statistics given in the opening of this paper, the average numbers of nuns within a registered or unregistered congregation is about 37 individuals. The 94 Little Sisters of Mary are therefore far above this average.

This congregation came to life in the early 1980s. Responding to the interest of several young women, the local underground bishop invited two senior nuns from Shanghai to come and create a new local congregation. Soon, the relationship between the two nuns and the young postulants became complicated and the senior nuns left. Thus, the first postulants who pronounced their vows became also the founders of a new community. With a strong character and an extensive local network, the young nuns attracted new vocations. During the 1990s, regularly up-coming postulants allowed the community to grow slowly but steadily. After a short training within the apartment-convent, new postulants would be paired with a senior nun and go two by two to serve local communities. Together, they provided religious education to children, helped with the organization of the mass and other sacraments, and visited sick people to pray for them. Thus, helping local parishes has been their most consistent service. However, lay people are now better trained and often able to gather more funds and connections than underground nuns can. Therefore, their contribution to local parishes is losing ground and only a fourth of them are still serving them full-time.

In the early 2000s, local Catholics gave the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception a house in a large township and the nuns transformed it into their Mother House. Nearby, they opened a home to welcome individuals with a physical and/or mental disability. A few years later, they also established an old age home. In this coastal region marked by massive emigration, mutating society, and economic competition, traditional family and village structures are not a safety net anymore. Thus, vulnerable people find themselves left behind. Moved by these changing social conditions, the nuns have overcome their lack of training and resources and opened small structures that can provide support to people in need. Over the years, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception have partially reoriented their time and effort toward these new forms of social service.

In this changing context, the question of their formation has become increasingly central. How to support, orient, and shape the young women who want to join the congregation? What are the guiding principles to train them? Through a few international connections and the support of foreign missionaries, some Sisters of the Immaculate Conception went to study abroad. With the discovery of a foreign culture, the experience of another local Catholic Church, and a firm academic and theological training, the young congregation enlarges its practice and understanding of Christian spirituality and gradually reorients its priorities. Indeed, many of the young nuns demonstrate an interest for a more radical and intense contemplative life through which they can deepen their union with God. Consequently, the congregation has re-enforced the contemplative dimension of its community life by increasing the time spent together to pray, but also the number of spiritual retreats and training offered to lay people. As with the Little Sisters of Mary, the nuns of Eastern China take turns to perform perpetual adoration. Today, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception seek to reach out to students and young couples in search of a deeper spiritual training. Yet, they maintain their strong connections with the local Church and several nuns continue to serve the surrounding parishes.

Amid these transformations, the current novices shed light on the evolving identity of the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. Four novices may not seem much but compared to the rapid decline of religious vocations in China, and the total absence of vocation among the Fujianese beatas, the presence of four novices within a rather small congregation demonstrate its attractiveness. The four of them are between 26 and 32-year old. All but one of the four have a university diploma showing that they had a rather deep secular experience outside of Catholic circles before joining religious life. During individual interviews, they also explain that they have kept their Catholic identity secret—or at least private—for years. One even said that she lost it for a few years. And most of them had a romantic but not fulfilling experience before joining the congregation.

Indeed, these young women grew up in a developing China where starvation and the lack of economic opportunities did not exist. Instead, competition among numerous options and rapid social change have defined their coming of age. Today, novices intend to take distance from surrounding hyper-consumerism of their generation. They do not worry about their material needs and the

sustainability of their lifestyle. For them, “God will provide!”. Longing for poverty and dispossession, their motivations are in sharp contrast with the values of mainstream contemporary Chinese society.

When it comes to envisioning religious life, the four novices aspire for a balance between silent and individual adoration, community prayer, and personal growth through community life. What they are longing for is seen as emerging through prayer and community life rather than through parish life and worldly apostolate. Clearly, they differ from senior nuns who trained themselves in relation to local parishes. Even though they often demonstrate real affection and empathy for local Catholics and people in need, the young novices do not consider leaving their community and serving full-time surrounding parishes or Church services. Instead, the novices and their instructors perceive their religious vocation as becoming a praying and benevolent adviser of Catholic communities rooted in a contemplative relationship with God. Therefore, they study psychology to better answer the spiritual needs of those who come to them. But their effort to accommodate contemplative life with apostolate reveals that there is no contemplative community in mainland China today. All Chinese congregations are mainly oriented toward apostolic life (Charbonnier 2014). Like in many places across Asia where monasteries and contemplative communities are rare, Chinese Catholic women looking for contemplative life must negotiate their aspiration within the structures they find.<sup>17</sup>

If the older nuns strongly support the contemplative aspirations of the younger ones, the congregation continues to serve local parishes, elderly people, and disabled people. Like the nuns of northern China, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception cultivate a multidimensional involvement within their local Church and do not restrict themselves to a single charism, source of income, and identity. Ten of them, two by two, live in a nearby city and serve local parishes. The rest live at the Mother House from where a few sisters supervise the nearby home for disabled people and the old-age home. Interviews suggest that local underground Catholics appreciate their apostolate and respect their consecrated life. But when the bishop and his priests gather large funds for a new project, very little is left for the nuns. Often, new constructions do not even include an apartment for them, as a reminder that their position in the Church is nothing given and granted. And like the Little Sisters of Mary, the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception demonstrate anxiety about their future medical safety and some frustration with the lack of clerical support for their contemplative life.

### 3. Conclusions: Navigating Challenges to Translate a Religious Calling

The study of contemporary Chinese nuns reveals that their religious commitment evolves through various forms of apostolate inspired by distinctive Catholic models of religious life. Although Chinese nuns tend to more often belong to religious congregations, although religious congregations tend to increasingly favor community life, Chinese religious women continue to reflect on the examples of the beatas and missionaries to inspire the ways in which they shape their religious journey.

Thus, the construction of their religious identity does not simply follow the current Catholic framework for religious life (Wynne 1988; Wittberg 1994). In most countries, lay people with a religious calling are invited to permanently join either a contemplative or apostolic congregation that cultivates a specific charism inspired by the life of the founder. Each congregation is supposed to deploy a single and specific way of life through which their distinctive spirituality and their particular apostolate intersect (see *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life 2002*, especially pp. 20, 30). Benedictines dwell in monasteries, praying, studying, and working with their hands while welcoming those in search of a refuge. Members of apostolic congregations devoted themselves to a single social cause—education, medical care, and so on—living in a school, an orphanage or a nursery, working and praying together, while spending most of their time with lay

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<sup>17</sup> For example, in 1983, among the 96 female religious congregations of the Philippines, only 7 were contemplative (De Achútegui 1984).

people in need of knowledge or physical care. And most congregations operate within a national or international framework.

In this landscape of highly specialized Catholic religious congregations which work side by side across the world, Chinese nuns and their religious structures appear quite distinct. First, the antique ideal of the *beatas* continue to exist in China and to inspire those who join religious congregations. Second, Chinese Catholic congregations are all associations of diocesan right. This means they canonically depend on a single bishop, and not on the Pope, while operating alone within a limited territory. Each of these diocesan organizations is neither specialized nor stable but keeps evolving in multiple directions as they partially escape from clerical and state monitoring (Entenmann 1996). Despite all the efforts and frustrations of foreign actors who offer training and retreats to Chinese nuns in order to guide them into a predefined Catholic religious way of life (Leung and Wittberg 2004), Chinese Catholic nuns continue to carefully test the waters and determine how their religious calling can grow in the current reality of China. Thus, they continue a long Chinese Catholic tradition of adaptation (Bays 2012, p. 199). With a certain autonomy from social expectations, political demands, and ecclesial discourses, Chinese nuns patiently deploy all sorts of organizational tools to nourish their religious journey and speak to their society. Indeed, their creative efforts and commitment contrast with an image of Chinese Catholics often portrayed as defensive and relatively insular (Madsen 2019b).

Yet, Chinese nuns continue to wonder about their religious identity as they try to answer questions raised by the universal Church on their specific charism and spirituality. Chinese nuns do not really have a charismatic founder to rely on, a single proto-figure through which they could supposedly tell who they are.<sup>18</sup> Their congregations and lifestyle result from the encounter of various Church actors (European male and female missionaries, local Catholics) and socio-historical realities (persecutions, economic changes). Also, Chinese nuns know that if they want to financially support themselves and those who come to them, they cannot invest all their resources into a single activity that may disappear anytime. The unpredictable Chinese state—or an authoritarian bishop—could suddenly decide that nuns can no longer work within a kindergarten or an elderly home. Thus, they walk a fine line between opportunities and constraints to define what a Catholic nun is and do in contemporary China. In this journey, it is hard—and tormenting—for them to not fit in the expectations of the universal Church. Church leaders, like many scholars, continue to look at them through what they do not do. And yet, Chinese nuns continue to prove to be resilient, adaptive, and creative.

During our research, a nun playfully quoted the Maoist saying, “Women hold up half of the sky!” to describe the scope of women action within the Chinese society and Church. While Chinese nuns are numerically not half of the Church, they often tend to remain faceless, nameless, and voiceless in the study of Chinese Catholicism (Chu 2016). However, this article has intended to show that they are not countless, neither is what they build together shapeless. Indeed, they bring something specific and unique to the Church in China. Although Chinese nuns may not want to make a name for themselves, nor to speak up publicly, their efforts to shape their religious commitment continue and will continue to inform the reality of the Church in China.

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<sup>18</sup> Despite a certain public imaginary reinforced by some Church discourse which tend to homogenize Catholic religious congregations, counter examples are abundant. See for example the Sovereign Order of Malta and the Sisters of Saint Andrew.

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