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African Influences on Chinese Catholicism



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Over the last few decades China's growing involvement in Africa has led many observers to point out that Chinese Christianity could benefit from this new proximity. In fact, the growing number of citizens from the Middle Kingdom who move to Africa encounter vibrant Christian communities. It appears that some of those Chinese have also embraced Christianity and taken it home with them. So China is not only "importing" natural resources from Africa, but also Christians, as well as making the most of commercial opportunities. It seems that among them the largest Christian group is Evangelical. However, there is no lack of other Christian traditions.^[1]

Christians of all kinds are returning to the Middle Kingdom. But the Christian significance of the Afro-Chinese encounter is even more important, broader than the simple number of the newly baptized. Therefore, this article highlights a dimension that is rarely mentioned: it focuses on Africans who, as workers, students, diplomats or small businessmen, live in China and engage with local Catholics, in order to explore the implications for the Church in China.

Without ignoring the presence of other foreign Catholic communities, we maintain here that African lay people working in China make an original contribution to the Catholicity of the local Church. Without possessing either a thorough religious formation, or a religious calling, or even less formal consecration, Africans allow Chinese Catholics to observe and experience some alternative forms of Catholic religious practice. On an individual and collective level, they make diversity and universality tangible, helping to express the catholicity of the Church.



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Our reflections are based in particular on what happens in the city of Guangzhou (Canton).^[2] An increasing number of migrants have chosen this place to work and study in China. After a brief presentation of their religious life, we will focus on the Chinese faithful and the local clergy to examine how they perceive the presence of African Catholics and what their response is. Finally, to assess the extent of this African influence, we will compare the situation in Guangzhou with that in other major Chinese cities.

African presence in Guangzhou

Guangzhou has always been the main trading port in southern China. But with the end of the Maoist era the city once again began attracting foreigners, in ever greater numbers, searching for new opportunities. Among them, there are many Africans who came for reasons of study or trade. Certainly, the color of their skin, tall stature and body language do not go unnoticed by most Chinese. They stand out not only because of their economic and legal status, but also because of their physical appearance. In essence, although there are different linguistic, ethnic, national and economic specificities among black Africans, they all appear to the local population as a single community.

In fact, until the 2008 Olympics and the Global Financial Crisis, it was quite easy for Africans looking for opportunities to obtain a visa for China. The Nigerians were pioneers, but soon others joined them from Cameroon, Uganda and Kenya to seek their fortune in this capital of the South, a real megalopolis with its 13 million inhabitants. For the most part, they are unmarried males in their twenties; many of the Nigerians speak the Igbo language; some prefer English, others do not. Guangzhou is usually their first experience of Asia or another

country than their own. It is not easy for them to find jobs normally held by locals. For this reason some make a living teaching English; others join the established business of a member of their family, open barber shops or restaurants. Over the years, a northern district of the city, Xiaobei, has become the focus of this foreign presence. There, the number of black people on the street, in the restaurants and in the shopping malls is visible to everyone.

But this African presence has had its ups and downs. After the financial crisis of 2008, rumors and negative news multiplied about “the black men.” In the newspapers and in public opinion Africans were increasingly portrayed as illegal immigrants who had come to China to engage in crime, drug trafficking and other illegal activities. Around 2010, the people of Guangzhou commonly believed that Xiaobei was no longer “their China,” but a place of “crime and delinquency.” In fact, the government multiplied police checks and expulsions, so that the total number of Africans dropped significantly.

African Catholics and the diocese of Guangzhou

Despite these difficulties, Sundays still seem different in Xiaobei.^[3] Many Africans stop their activities to gather in the Catholic cathedral or a Protestant church. Muslims who cannot work without their trading partners spend the day in the Guang Ta mosque or elsewhere.

Guangzhou’s cathedral, also called “Seksat,” is an important historical site in the city. It is a neo-Gothic stone structure built in 1888; it is about a 20-minute walk from Xiaobei and attracts large crowds of visitors. Adjoining buildings are reserved for the activities of the clergy and pastoral work. Next to it there is also a large courtyard with a stylized grotto dedicated to Our Lady of Lourdes. In the cathedral complex, weekends are particularly busy. From mid-morning until late in the evening there is a constant flow of visitors. On Saturdays there are always activities and weddings attended by many people. The five Sunday Masses are attended by thousands of faithful. One is in Cantonese, two in Mandarin; in the afternoon, a Mass in English is followed immediately by another in Korean.

Although it is difficult to estimate the exact size of the local Catholic population, priests believe that there are between 30,000 and 50,000 Catholics in the urban area. 2,000 of them gather in chapels in the suburbs; another 4,000 attend the six diocese centers. The legal requirements make the construction of new churches very difficult, and the diocese has to make do with the five small parish centers it owns, in addition to the cathedral. Thus, each parish is home to about 100 members of the faithful, while Seksat welcomes more than 3,000 for Sunday worship. The cathedral is therefore the beating heart of the diocese.

In this context, between 500 and 800 Africans gather at the cathedral. They arrive there in the early afternoon and pray or converse with friends at the Grotto of Lourdes until Mass begins. Inside, some rehearse songs with the choir and others prepare to serve at the altar. In

response to the overwhelming flow of tourists, the Nigerians have organized a very strict and efficient stewarding service so as to preserve the prayerful atmosphere of the Mass in English.

In addition to Sunday afternoons, some also use Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings to participate in biblical catechesis, the Legion of Mary or charismatic prayer. In fact, at any time of the week, there are always a few Africans on their knees before the grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes. Some also pray in the nearby chapel of the Blessed Sacrament, on their knees, bent in adoration or with their hands outstretched in supplication to God. In many ways the young Africans are the most stable and visible praying presence in Seksat Cathedral.

In the eyes of local Chinese Catholics

This visible presence makes the existence of the African community known to many local members of the faithful. This in itself does not imply that there are particular relationships, but the Chinese are aware of them. Under the influence of the local media and public discourse, Chinese Catholics could take it for granted that the Africans are mostly traders, poor migrants or businessmen, but in the cathedral they rediscover them as friendly brothers and sisters dedicated to prayer.

The vast majority of local Catholics consider the African way of praying as “lively.” Out of curiosity, many of them have attended Mass at least once in English. They have seen Africans engaged in various aspects of the service and experienced a liturgical style animated by African sensibilities. Thus they recognize that Africans, while being very serious about liturgical matters, also enrich the celebration with dances and hymns of joy. Chinese liturgical sensibility, by comparison, tends to be more formal. People also note that Africans smile easily, say “good morning” and express joy in their social interactions. Both during Mass and in the activities that take place in the areas adjoining the cathedral, their behavior and cheerful spirit impress Chinese Catholics.

Xiaoli, a Catholic woman in her fifties, is a manager in a small company. In 2002, as she wanted to learn English, a friend took her to Mass celebrated in that language. At the end of the rite, several Filipino women gathered around her and laid their hands on her in prayer. Xiaoli was deeply moved. That day she decided to speak with a nun and accepted the proposal to begin the catechumenate. On Easter Day 2004 she was baptized.

Unlike Xiaoli, who has spent her whole life in Guangzhou and feels a certain uneasiness with Africans, Yuli is a 30-year-old woman who came to Guangzhou eight years ago. Growing up in a rural Catholic family, she had hurried to find a place to go to Mass and ended up choosing the cathedral. She usually goes to Sunday Mass at the end of the morning and always sees some Africans praying at the Grotto. What impressed her most was their strong sense of community. Once Yuli went to Mass in English in the early afternoon. At first the style of the

celebration left her very perplexed, but then she liked it. “Africans,” she said, “encourage people to express themselves with their bodies.” But the language barrier made her prefer to go to Mass in Chinese.

The contribution to the local Church

According to most Catholics in Guangzhou, zeal is a typical characteristic of the Africans. They do not simply join their community to stay together, but make creative contributions and provide effective solutions for the diocese. For example, they were the first to create the stewarding service at Seksat. It was done so effectively that the diocese has now organized other similar teams of volunteers.

Another example of this “African zeal” is in the Legion of Mary. In the Middle Kingdom this pious association, whose name has military echoes, was dissolved immediately after the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China. However, in 2006 the Africans in Guangzhou re-established it. With weekly prayer meetings and charitable works they quickly created three different groups and encouraged the local people to participate.

Another example of African religious zeal is evident in the Bible lessons. The Africans in Guangzhou have been very active in the creation of some Bible study groups, which meet weekly. For the most part they are autonomous, but invite local nuns and priests to share their experience. One of the groups is bilingual (English-Chinese) and participants can enter into a rather new and unusual relationship with Holy Scripture. By translating everything that is shared, the group shows how the study of the word of God is always an intercultural dialogue.

A further example of African zeal lies in its contribution to charismatic spirituality. In Guangzhou, it was the Africans who introduced it first. Since 1999 some young people have created and maintained a charismatic prayer group open to all. Several times the black community has invited priests from Africa to lead spiritual retreats and prayer sessions. Thus, in addition to allowing Catholics to discover this spirituality, Africans also show that Catholicism is open to multiple ways of praying.

These last two examples lead us to another quality that most Chinese Catholics in Guangzhou see in the Africans: being effective and versatile missionaries. For example, those of them who are engaged to a Chinese girl, usually take her to church; then she undertakes the catechumenate. In fact, in recent years, a significant number of women in this situation have received baptism.

Today in Guangzhou there are some Sino-African families, something unthinkable until a few years ago. In the course of 2019 alone, four Afro-Chinese couples were married in the cathedral. The growing number of such couples is significant. But, above all, what makes

Africans missionaries is the fact that they are not shy about their faith and ecclesial commitment; they share them not only with their girlfriends, but also with their business partners and local contacts.

Several priests stress that those Africans who came to China alone and without much support are much more flexible and adaptable than many missionary congregations and religious communities. Over the past decades, entire families and small groups have come from various parts of the worldwide Catholic Church to the Middle Kingdom. In integrating into local society, these faithful have opened local businesses or worked for international companies, hoping to create opportunities to establish relationships with the Chinese. In Guangzhou, for example, they rented apartments, sent their children to nearby schools, and tried to share the Gospel with all their Chinese acquaintances. But, faced with recurring economic difficulties, family tensions, administrative constraints, religious indifference and socio-political circumstances, their initiatives were largely unsuccessful.

African migrants, on the contrary, seem much more resilient. When they arrive in China, their financial and physical survival depends on their actual ability to connect with local society. They find their way in different districts of the city, in poor neighborhoods and bustling shopping malls. And they also carry with them their effusive faith, which they share with anyone who comes into contact with them. But because of their modest social and church status, they attract little attention. Yet they practice a Catholic presence in secular China.

Last but not least, Africans are known for their generosity. In the years between 2003 and 2005, when 2,000-2,500 of them attended Sunday Mass in English, they contributed more than half of the cathedral's income. Today this is no longer the case. But most of these relatively poor workers continue to give alms and pay 10% of their weekly income to the diocese. Unlike other migrants who send donations back to their home Church or reserve funds for their community, Africans give them to the local Church.

In summary, Africans contribute in many ways to the diocese of Guangzhou. In church they assume a series of characteristic emotional and physical behaviors and promote various religious groups and initiatives. In doing so, they show hundreds of Chinese Catholics an alternative way of being devout. Outside the church, they bring the Gospel into various social environments and embody a Catholic presence within non-religious contexts. As a result, they not only provide human and financial resources to the Church in the Middle Kingdom, but also expand the fundamental concept of Chinese Catholicism.

Good example to the local clergy

As well as challenging and stimulating the lay Chinese Christians and the non-Christians, Africans are also a challenge and an example for the local clergy. Given their church customs and cultural background, Africans do not hesitate to establish rather distinctive but effective

relationships with the local Chinese clergy. Unlike many Chinese, they are quick to communicate their needs. They are both newcomers and conscious members of the local Church. And they ask for access to the sacraments and meeting places, also offering assistance to the diocese.

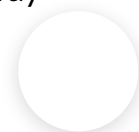
As we have already said, their donations to the cathedral have allowed the priests and the bishop to keep pace with the cost of modern life. Africans have also proved to be a reliable and efficient reservoir of volunteers to organize security services, disseminate information and manage equipment. They have learned to collaborate effectively with the clergy. Thus, the relationship between local priests and Africans has been mutually beneficial.

But relations between Africans and members of the clergy are not limited to an exchange of services. The laity say that some diocesan priests sometimes have a rather limited view of Catholic piety and ecclesial culture. For them, therefore, interacting with black Africans is a learning experience. These devout and daring migrants from countries with significant numbers of Catholics show that there are many ways of building the Church and collaborating with the clergy. At the same time, their generosity goes in the opposite direction to some filial duties and expectations found in the Chinese cultural context. Instead of saving money for future marriage, as a Chinese person would expect, these young people make contributions to a diocese that is not their native Church. In addition, they manifest liturgical practices and show themselves as autonomous moral subjects in ways that often leave the priests perplexed.

Consequently, some priests recognize that Africans are urging them to broaden their understanding of how they should act as pastors. One of them explains how, years ago, they realized that the local clergy were administering the sacraments to Africans, but offering no effective pastoral care. Apart from cultural differences, the main obstacle was the language barrier. In response, a priest who had spent some years studying in the Philippines and had learned a little English, offered to devote more time to the African community. In this way the number of young people who turned to him for confession or to ask him for pastoral advice and moral support grew rapidly. These relationships led him to realize how different their lives were and how he needed to grow in the ability to be a spiritual father. Although he currently serves elsewhere in the diocese, this priest still considers that “African encounter” a turning point in his ministry.

African ambiguities in Guangzhou

Yet this long list of positive contributions should not mislead us. We are not proposing to idealize the Africans in Guangzhou, let alone their situations. Like others, their lives are marked by ambiguities and moral dissonances. And Chinese Catholics do not in any way hesitate to point out questionable aspects of their way of life.



The fact that the majority of young African migrants are single, male, and self-confident is a concern for the Cantonese. There are also cases of families with abandoned young pregnant women who go to the cathedral to claim compensation. Such stories encourage Chinese Catholics to be circumspect.

Beyond Guangzhou

So far we have seen the concrete, and in part contradictory, contribution that the Africans make to the diocese of Guangzhou. But this great city of China is only one of the urban spaces of the country, so one can ask oneself what happens elsewhere. Do African workers and students also have an influence on other Chinese dioceses? What relations do they have with Catholics in the rest of the country? An answer to these questions requires further investigation.

In an area like Beijing, Africans tend to gather in various embassies. Some diplomatic offices are available to welcome expatriates of various nationalities.

The situation of a city like Shanghai is comparable to that of Beijing. In this metropolis, the most modern in eastern China, some consulates provide hospitality spaces that expatriates can occasionally use as meeting places. However, the financial situation and the range of origins of Africans here are more diverse than in Guangzhou. All sorts of entrepreneurs, diplomats and students live in Shanghai. Therefore, to create different networks, African expatriates use various places, such as consulates, large offices or hotel meeting rooms. Likewise, African Catholics have different alternatives for celebrating Mass with a foreign priest. Therefore, the diocese of Shanghai does not play an important role in the religious and community life of local Africans.

However, with the exception of a few municipalities such as Shanghai and Beijing, where the African population is more affluent and well-established, the situation in most Chinese cities is similar to that observed in Guangzhou. Poorer and hard-working African Catholics are found there. Looking for a place to worship and socialize, they often turn to the main local church. Since Catholic churches are rare in Chinese cities, Africans often use cathedrals as their main meeting place. For example, even in the municipality of Shenyang, a city with 8 million inhabitants that is the provincial capital in northern China, the diocese is structured around the cathedral complex, located in the historic center. Only a few members of the clergy live in the buildings, but thousands of faithful gather there for Mass or other diocesan activities.

Among the various buildings that surround the cathedral, there is a chapel that hosts Mass in English every Sunday afternoon. It attracts a varied crowd of foreigners and some local Chinese Catholics. Here, too, a good half of the visitors are Africans, all young, but with a more balanced gender relationship than in Guangzhou. Unlike in the southern city, Shenyang's local African community is mostly composed of university students.^[4] On

Sunday afternoons many go to the cathedral to pray. Some join in the rosary just before Mass, others take part in the choir, others welcome the faithful and circulate information. With their contribution, the international Mass is generally lively and well attended. Sometimes, at the end of the service, snacks and drinks are provided so that everyone can socialize for longer. So African Catholics contribute greatly to the dynamism of this liturgy and seem to be the main foreign population with whom the local faithful can establish relations.

Therefore, in Shenyang, as in many major cities in China, local Catholics find themselves sharing religious space with Africans. Through these exchanges, and without the need to travel, some Chinese priests have the opportunity to discover African Catholicism. Throughout the country they hear and observe, Sunday after Sunday, these devout parishioners. Some point out that Africans are passionate, generous and hard-working faithful who care about the precepts of the Church.

Rethinking the Catholicity of the Church in China

In conclusion, despite the various barriers that keep them apart, African Catholics constitute the clearest non-Chinese community of worship, making up a not inconsiderable percentage of Chinese Catholics worshippers. Often their presence is limited to the main cities, and yet they constitute, at the national level, the largest foreign presence within the Church in China. Although the country hosts many foreigners – some of them very religious, such as Korean Catholics – Africans are much more prominent for their visibility, ecclesial culture and style of worship. Their large numbers allow them to practice their faith collectively and to influence local customs.

Africans bring an irreducible diversity, which allows Chinese dioceses to experience the possible implications of Catholicity and the possible consequences of a search for universality. With regard to these black brothers and sisters, Chinese priests and lay people must question any possible racial prejudices, ecclesial rigidity or less positive local customs. Thus, like the silent yeast in the great mass of dough, the African laity can help the Church in China to grow.

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[1]. Cf. C. Rodhes, “How Africa is converting China?”, in *UnHerd* (unherd.com/2019/02/how-africa-is-converting-china/?=sideshare&fbclid=IwAR0-Gx7dAWfdlbsXuXO1v4sWj_GThYQTP0YIUGfMcfYocTK6O0KtFrVrNzs), February 13, 2019.

[2]. The article is the result of the reworking of a dialogue between the editor of our magazine and the researcher Michel Chambon.

- [3]. Cf. S. Lan, *Mapping the New African Diaspora in China*, London, Routledge, 2017, 168f.
- [4]. Cf. A. Li, "African Students in China: Research, Reality, and Reflection", in *African Studies Quarterly*, February, 2018.

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