

Urban Catholicism in China

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The rapid transformation of Chinese Catholicism and its adaptation to the new urban environment has been brought about by a wide range of participants and not just by the clergy. This article explores the motivations, organization and influences of one specific type of promotion of Chinese Catholicism: the entrepreneurial lay Catholics who have migrated from the rural countryside to the constantly growing Chinese cities.

The hundreds of thousands of Catholics who left their villages after the 1980s were in search of better opportunities. Today, many of them are well-established urban dwellers, translating their Catholic commitment into a new lifestyle. What some of them have built goes beyond traditional parish life and remains largely unknown to the broader audience interested in the Church in China. While these religious organizations do share similarities with some Protestant communities, they also have specific features and dynamics that those observing the Church in China may want to consider.

Therefore, this article sheds light on these migrant Catholics and their networks in order to show how they have decisively caused the Church to adjust itself to new social conditions. First, the article briefly revisits the recent social and economic changes in the People's Republic of China to present the broader social context that has guided rural Catholics to leave their hometowns. Then it explores how networks of workers who are Catholic have gradually taken shape in large cities: their actual organizations and the motivations of their lay leaders. Finally, the article compares and contrasts

these networks across the country in order to highlight their similarities and differences, but also the strengths and challenges that characterize this recent evolution of Chinese urban Catholicism.

The transformation of China

Since the late 1970s, the economic and political reforms of Deng Xiaoping have deeply renewed Chinese society. China has increasingly become an urban and wealthy society where the quality of life has constantly improved. Many parts of the country have no reason to envy developed nations. Although rural areas and social inequalities remain significant, huge urban hubs now host most of the population and have redefined life in China.

In the course of this broader evolution, almost two-thirds of the population left the countryside to take up new job opportunities available within urban areas. If these jobs were initially basic and industrial, they have since become extremely diverse, specialized and well-paid.

In order to guide this rapid and radical transformation and to prevent the creation of huge slums, the Chinese state has been carefully controlling the use of space and requiring residential permits of every single citizen.

In China, urban planning is closely watched by various state agencies and the use of every urban square meter is regulated. At the same time, Chinese citizens are registered from birth within a residential area, urban or rural, and have to apply for an expensive permit to permanently migrate within the country.

During the 1980s and 1990s, millions of citizens got around these regulations and became a cheap labor force across the growing suburbs of Chinese cities. They worked endless hours in dreary factories to produce basic goods that flooded the rest of the world. But as the Chinese economy became more sophisticated and diversified, this transitional social situation has evolved and migrant populations are now rapidly absorbed legally into the urban life of contemporary China.

The radical transformation of the country has also been driven by non-economic factors. One of the most significant

ones was the “one-child policy.” In the early 1980s, the central government decided to regulate so most Chinese citizens have only one child. Although the scope and the consequences of this policy are still difficult to evaluate, it has deeply shaped the actual reality of Chinese families.

After decades of civil war and major disruptions (political changes, starvation), Chinese society went through a unique collective and constraining social policy that has somehow standardized the ways in which Chinese families structure themselves today. Regional, ethnic and class-based variations in kinship structure and family size have decreased. Most families have now only one or two children, carefully supported by four grandparents. Recently, the “one-child policy” has been eased but most Chinese people refuse now to have more than one child. Consequently, the country is facing a rapid aging problem that will increase in the coming years.¹

The emergence of new solidarities among Chinese Catholics

It was during this broader socio-economic transformation in the 1980s and 1990s that many Catholics left the countryside. Like millions of others, they migrated to rapidly expanding cities and tried their luck in the new booming economy. These Catholics were usually young, single and marked by a rural piety. Their priority was to make money in order to support their relatives and survive within an increasingly competitive environment.

As time passed, these post-rural Catholics found themselves, like many other migrants, better established in their new urban environment, expanding their connections and increasing their savings. By the early 2000s, many migrant Catholics had partially regularized their residential status and had married partners from their hometown. Some even opened their own businesses and hired people from their part of the countryside, sponsoring them in their transition to urban life. Clearly, these new urban Catholics were able to simultaneously remain closely connected to their “old house,” sending back substantial

1.To further explore the question, cf. S. Chen – J. Powell (eds.), *Aging in China Implications to Social Policy of a Changing Economic State*, New York (NY), Springer, 2012.

financial support, while building a new life for themselves and their family and also contributing to their country. Meanwhile, Chinese cities kept evolving into gigantic and sophisticated networks where constantly improving transportation systems continue to integrate the whole country, connecting huge urban hubs with each other.

It should be kept in mind that most of these migrant Catholics initially belonged to what is improperly called “the Underground Church.” Many grew up in a rural environment where the Church evolved outside the tight regulation of the state and where leaders were committed to refusing any official control.² When migrants moved to larger cities, they soon experienced that the local Catholic Church was usually different from their own rural experience. Although it would be misleading to say that all urban dioceses had similar characteristics, substantially different from the ones in the countryside, the reality of urban Catholicism was always a surprising challenge for migrating Catholics. Local customs, dialects, rituals and power balance were often different.

Depending on each urban context, newcomers had to find their own way to maintain a Catholic identity and to redefine their personal relationship to their religious heritage. The intensity of their work, the uncertainty of their financial situation and the lack of urban churches caused many of them to simply stop going to church. Working almost every single day for countless hours, many decided just to pray the rosary on their own and to annually receive the sacraments while visiting their hometown during the Chinese New Year.

A few tried to join local urban churches but had to face a significant cultural gap. First, they had to evaluate the positioning of local Catholic communities in terms of state control and liturgical orthodoxy in order to determine whether or not it was appropriate to join them. But they also had to deal with the fact that urban communities (both official and unofficial if both were present) were already well-organized networks, with their

2. For more background on Chinese Catholicism in the 1990s, cf. R. Madsen, *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society*, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 1998.

own leaders, codes and requirements, and not always willing to leave room for the newcomers. For example, it was not always easy to join a community where the implicit common language was a Chinese dialect and not Mandarin. Also, the class difference between wealthier local Catholics and poorer rural migrants prevented many from further engaging with preexisting Catholic communities.

Clearly, migrant Catholics found themselves in constant need of discernment and decision. The ways in which they could keep their religious heritage alive were not self-evident. This became even more complicated with the arrival of their firstborn child. At first, many newly married migrants decided to send their child back to their hometown.

In the late 1990s, life in the countryside was cheaper and migrants' children legally belonged to the rural residence of their parents. It was only there that they could get access to school. It was also more convenient for hard-working parents to rely on rural grandparents and relatives to look after their child. In this context, marked by separation and distance, the broader rural family was in charge of transmitting the Catholic tradition to the new generation.

Soon enough, however, this situation became less satisfactory. The economic reality and social gap between urban and rural life kept increasing quickly. While migrants gained access to urban life, with its greater opportunities and advantages, they became more and more concerned with leaving their child behind in the countryside. The education received in a rural district was not as good as within the cities. Grandparents were often unequipped to prepare the new generation for hyper-modern and competitive China. The cultural and economic contrast between the two Chinas was becoming too important to not be addressed.

Also, the potential regularization of residential status and the increasing possibilities for bribery opened new schooling opportunities to new urban migrants. Therefore, in the course of the 2000s, more and more migrant families decided to keep their child with them and to invite one or more relatives to come and help with child care.

It was also in this context of the 2000s that better established migrant Catholics began to reframe their Catholic affiliation within their new economic and familial reality. At first, these Catholics began to gather at private houses to recite traditional prayers. By organizing their own activities, they did not have to deal with local communities or spend hours on public transport to reach churches in the downtown area.

At first, they simply recycled practices that they knew from their rural childhood without the help of any external agent (state approval, clerical supervision). But when the number of participants became too large for tiny apartments, migrant Catholics looked for other solutions. Some among those who had opened a factory offered to devote one small room of their building to prayer meetings. Catholic laborers from the factory and nearby neighborhoods could benefit from this space. In these relatively private places, it was easy to maintain confidentiality without disturbing the family life of anyone as was the case in the previous situation. Others who had more substantial income decided to turn one apartment they owned into an informal but permanent chapel. In both cases, the owner was often in communication with local police or other officials, benefiting from their implicit acknowledgment and their turning a blind eye.

Slowly, prayer spaces sprang up across the suburban sprawls of Chinese megacities. As long as they, to all appearances, remained impermanent and small, and no major crackdown was in the air, they could host prayer meetings. Initially, these places were rather modest with a non-permanent setting. Religious images and statues were all along a single wall that could be quickly covered by a large curtain. Seats were folding chairs moved away after each gathering. This rather simple organization allowed Catholic families to gather several evenings per week to say traditional prayers and help their children to embrace their Catholic heritage. Ritualized Catholicism, emerging from a rural background, slowly reemerged outside the familial circle.

Structuring new ways of being urban Catholic

Strengthened by their more regular meetings, migrant Catholics began to gather money in order to invite a priest from their part of the countryside to come and administer the sacraments once a year. Although most migrant Catholics preferred to receive the sacraments while visiting their hometown during the Chinese New Year (especially baptism and marriage), having the possibility of a priest blessing a union which had already been consummated and had borne fruit or to receive forgiveness for sinful behavior was priceless.

As the wealth of these new urban Catholics increased, and transportation improved, the visit of a priest was repeated more frequently. In a rapidly changing China, more priests looked at these developments as opportunities for allowing innovative pastoral activities and a source of potential income. Some of them even specialized in a new type of itinerant ministry and gradually built a reputation among urban Catholic patrons.

This gradual transformation also brought new opportunities for lay leaders. Better established Catholics began to compete in providing their patronage and local connections. By helping the emergence of Catholic networks, wealthier patrons asserted the collective prestige of their hometown in this emerging urban Catholicism and created new types of status within Chinese Catholicism. Catholics from Zhejiang, Fujian or Hebei became famous for their capacity to create efficient urban networks through which people could regularly meet and pray. Migrant leaders gained a reputation for piety and for efficiency, and for being able to effectively integrate Catholic practices within modern urban life.

In addition to redefining their relationship to space, migrant Catholics have also revised their own temporal framework. For many years, their most important gatherings were not on Sunday morning, as in most Catholic communities, but on weekly evenings when they were able to leave their work. It is only recently that the Sunday Mass has regained a new importance because working conditions have considerably improved.

Besides weekly meetings and annual visits to their hometown, migrant Catholics have also created annual events in their city of

adoption. For instance, the new popularity of Christmas in China gave them the opportunity to annually gather fellow Catholics, colleagues and acquaintances. On behalf of their network, Catholic patrons would book a large hotel to accommodate a few thousand of their local friends and co-workers, Catholics and non-Catholics, and joyfully celebrate together the birth of Jesus over two or more days. These private but large Christmas gatherings became extremely popular at the end of the 2000s when the religious policy of the state was rather lax.

Other annual moments include the youth summer camps. At first, youth camps occurred in the countryside where local parishes organized activities for kids over a week or two. Building on this experience, migrant Catholics have tried to develop their own summer camps in order to reach the growing number of children who no longer return to the countryside in the summer. Yet, these urban camps face all kinds of organizational difficulties and remain rather limited. The fact is that most migrant Catholics prefer a transmission of faith through the practice of rituals. Weekly practices are, therefore, far more important than annual summer camps.

Many migrant Catholics remain skeptical of Sunday school and modern catechisms that rely on a more rationalized approach toward religion. Similarly, priests associated with the migrants do not really believe in the benefits of summer camps. Although they entertain children, they do not help them in the growth of faith, they require significant resources, and they represent an important political risk. Over the last decades, migrant Catholics have instead shown a strong commitment to creating communities of practice where their children can learn rituals as they are enacted.

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the 2010s, migrant Catholics have structured their networks sufficiently to be able to hire itinerant priests more permanently. Under the leadership of some financially successful patrons, migrant Catholics gather and secure permanent funding to have a priest in residence. In response to this new religious demand, some unofficial congregations from northern China now provide priests to minister to this kind of community.

The priest is engaged by the network and lives in the city as long as no major political or pastoral tensions occur. Every week, the priest circulates among the various chapels of the network to hear confessions and preside at Mass. As soon as the network feels confident enough with the style of the priest, he usually receives a car and electronic devices to support his ministry and encourage his stay. In some large urban networks, the priest can even negotiate the hiring of assistant priests of his own choice.

Clearly, these new urban Catholic networks have gained a certain strength and constitute a significant but discreet contribution to the Church. With their mutual support and organizational skills, migrant Catholics are now able to reach a significant proportion of Catholics across urban China. For example, in a southern city of 15 million inhabitants, the local diocese owned only four historical churches, all located downtown. But unofficial migrant Catholics have already opened more than 10 chapels across the outlying suburbs. In these rather small chapels situated inside factories and residential towers, around a thousand people gather every weekend while the official diocese accommodates 5,000 to 6,000 local Catholics. Yet, many migrant Catholics insist that a vast majority of their fellow believers do not bother to go to church anymore.

Challenges and variations

The growth and semi-institutionalization of new Catholic networks do not, however, exist without internal and external tensions.

On the external side, the multiplication of unofficial urban networks with the establishment of a specialized clergy has raised political concerns here and there. During some moments of a more restrictive implementation of local religious policy in the early 2010s, migrant networks had to reduce the frequency of their gatherings, and priests had to be more discreet or even leave for a while.

On the internal side, the concomitant strengthening of Catholic employers and the exercise of priestly ministry created tensions within the networks. For example, in 2013,

when one Catholic employer was able to create a large chapel 10 times larger than any other unofficial chapels in his megacity, the priest involved was ambivalent in his response. The extremely well-furnished new chapel was a major development within the network. Supported by several patrons, it attracted a large number of migrant Catholics. Soon, it became the implicit center of the network, giving new status to the patrons behind it.

Not surprisingly, the size of the place caused the local police to request an official registration. Catholic leaders went to the local official bishop in order to have his support in this administrative process. This was a formality since the bishop had already done that for several other unofficial chapels. As expected, the local bishop gave his approval and blessing.

However, the priest involved argued against registering the site and even suggested its closure. In his eyes, such a large chapel would continue to attract too much attention and create trouble. According to him, it was better to relate to smaller but more numerous places that he and his assistants would regularly visit. In this context, patrons agreed to close the large chapel and preferred to avoid an open conflict between them and with the priest involved.

What was left unsaid was that this chapel gave too much weight to some patrons and indirectly reduced the pastoral leadership of the priest. Again, the rapid appearance and disappearance of this large chapel indicated how internal tensions between the clergy and lay patronage often shape the concrete expansion or contraction of Chinese Catholic networks.

Before concluding, it is important to note that the ways in which migrant Catholics structure their urban religious life greatly vary from place to place. In cities where an unofficial Church exists, migrant Catholics have been more inclined to connect to it and to eventually join in their activities. However, the socio-cultural gap between local and migrant Catholics has often pushed newcomers to organize their own independent activities.

In places without an unofficial Church, migrants have usually been willing to approach the official Church and to regularly

benefit from their sacraments. Still, the socio-cultural gap, the distance of travel and the demanding work hours of the migrants have brought them to again generate their own network in the suburbs. This reveals that the existence of alternative networks among migrant Catholics is first and foremost related to the socio-cultural gap between them and their host Church.

Besides the specificities of each urban ecclesial background that influence how migrants generate their own religious life, the local political context has also deeply impacted their capacity to create new ways of being urban Catholics. In certain cities where the pressure of the police is strong, migrants had to choose between joining the umbrella of local communities (official and unofficial) that are usually more connected with local officials or keeping their meetings very small and discreet. Where local control is less intense, migrant Catholics have been more inclined to develop their own activities independently of the preexisting official and unofficial Churches. Clearly, political forces are only one factor among several explaining how internal differences occur within Chinese Catholicism.

Finally, one must note that multiple networks of migrant Catholics can coexist within a single megacity. These networks usually emerge along lines of ethnic and regional origins. Migrant Catholics co-opt compatriots coming from the same region or sector of activity. The strength and autonomy of their network then depends on the number of participants and on the presence of wealthier and well-connected patrons. Still, various networks operating in one megacity can overlap and collaborate, especially when it comes to hiring a priest or to dealing with local authorities.

Migrant Catholics and their networking skills

In conclusion, migrant Catholics have brought about a rapid transition of Chinese Catholicism into urban China. Although there are no official statistics about their presence, although they remain in the shadow of most reports, they still actively participate in the current transformation of the Church in China.

Their main strength lies in the mutual support they find among migrant Catholics in transmitting the Catholic heritage to the next generation. Yet, the fact that these networks grow along ethnic, regional and corporatist lines limits their ability to attract non-Christians. Most of the time, their new converts are people who have married a migrant Catholic. Evangelization *ad extra* is not the priority of most migrants even though their large Christmas parties demonstrate a real awareness of this problem.

Nonetheless, migrant Catholics and their networking skills are making an important contribution by enacting effective solidarities between poorer and richer Catholics, between more successful patrons and young inexperienced migrants, and between urban Catholics and rural communities. Their Catholic faith becomes an important source of trust and support outside of their own family. In fact, the socio-economic transformations that migrant Catholics have been through equip them with skills and resources that allow them to stand as active leaders of the Church in 21st-century China.

In many ways, these Catholic networks could be compared to the Protestant Wenzhou model. Migrants from Wenzhou have also created important Christian networks across China and beyond. In a similar way, they operate under the leadership of Protestant patrons, they encourage mutual support, and they do not fit into the traditional binary opposition between official and unofficial Churches.³ Yet, these Wenzhou Churches are far more oriented toward sustaining their commercial enterprises and converting non-Christian co-workers. Unlike Catholic patrons, they do not focus so much on their members' children.

Finally, one must acknowledge how Catholic priests serving within new urban Catholic networks find themselves

3. For an introduction to the Wenzhou Protestant communities, cf. T. Meynard – M. Chambon, “*Ways for the Aggiornamento of the Chinese Catholic Church*,” in *La Civiltà Cattolica*; for more information, cf. N. Cao, “*Boss Christians: The Business of Religion in the ‘Wenzhou Model’ of Christian Revival*,” in *The China Journal*, 59: 63–87; B. Fulton 2015: *China’s Urban Christians: A Light That Cannot Be Hidden*, Eugene (OR), Pickwick Publications, 2015.

in a contractual position. Bishops play almost no role in their appointment process. While migrant Catholics enable new types of pastoral ministry and contribute substantial funding, they also challenge the effective leadership and responsibilities of the Catholic clergy. In many ways, priests are implicitly limited to the dispensing of the sacraments and have to constantly negotiate their pastoral function. Nonetheless, the creative, flexible and transregional networks that migrant Catholics produce offer a precious complement to traditional parishes and dioceses of the Church in China. Their ways of navigating across large cities help the Church to develop new forms of presence within urban China, providing new opportunities to lay people and ordained ministers.