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Remaking the Church Catholic in Post-Maoist China

The Outward Movement of Chinese Catholics and Their Collaborations with the Paris Foreign Missions

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Abstract

After the political reforms that followed the death of Mao Zedong, Chinese Catholics were gradually allowed to reestablish their churches and resume public gatherings. Yet this opened serious challenges. After decades of persecution and isolation, which reshaped the ways Chinese Catholics worshipped and perceived themselves, they needed to redefine Chinese Catholicism. Is performing specific rituals in both Latin and a local dialect, at home and in secret, enough to be Catholic? Who holds the religious authority to effectively administer the sacraments? To what extent is a formal relationship with the Pope necessary to remain Catholic? This article explores how Chinese Catholics have searched for support from outside their family circles and the People's Republic of China to answer their questions. This paper argues that in a rapidly changing politico-economic context marked by strict administrative control, Chinese Catholics have reestablished contacts with Global Catholicism through networking with missionary societies. More specifically, I look at collaborations which Chinese Catholics have established with the Paris Foreign Missions (MEP) to reassess the missiology of Chinese Catholicism. Discussing the evolving nature of these relationships after 1978, I show that the reconstruction of Catholicism in China has been a multilateral enterprise in which local Catholics have had to navigate political adversity, socio-cultural changes, and the Post-Vatican II reformation of worldwide Catholicism. In so doing, Chinese Catholics gradually moved outside of the intimacy of kinship groups and pre-defined rituals to engage actively with modernizing Chinese society and transforming world Catholicism.

Keywords

Catholicism – China – missiology – Paris Foreign Missions (MEP)

1 Introduction

Since 1978, the number of Christians in China has grown rapidly, but the increase in Protestants has outstripped the growth of Catholics. Various international observers, missionaries, and scholars have characterized the Chinese Catholic Church as less missionary than Protestant churches (Madsen 1998; Chu 2012). This article questions that interpretation. By revisiting the major transformations within Chinese Catholicism after 1978, its collaboration with foreign actors, and its efforts to move outside of itself, this article seeks to spell out the particularities of the missionary identity of Chinese Catholics.

For this purpose, one must first question the very notion of mission that might be implicitly applied. In this article, I take the largest and most inclusive definition of mission: the outward movement of Christians. Mission is a movement to turn outside of Christian circles to share the gospel with those who do not feel, know, and benefit from it. With this definition in mind, let us turn to the following questions: after 1978, how have Chinese Catholics gone outside of their instinctive religious circles? Why? How do those movements characterize their missiology? This article seeks not to reduce missionary efforts to the number of converts made, to explicit preaching activities, or to proselytizing actions designed to change the mind of individual non-Christians. Instead, the purpose of this article is to explore what more is possible when the gospel is taken outside of one's usual social and religious circles.

Before going further, I must explain the catholicity considered in this paper. Our study explores the many actors who participate in the rebirth of Chinese Catholicism without assuming a binary or arbitrary opposition between Chinese and foreign Catholics. Indeed, our research reveals that Chinese Catholics and foreign visitors have actively collaborated to transform the Church in China. A wide range of mainlanders, Hong Kong residents, Taiwanese citizens, foreign citizens of Chinese descent, Westerners born in China, and Westerners committed to China have helped the Church in China to take the gospel outside of its own linguistic, regional, liturgical, factional, and political walls. Together, they create a more catholic Church: available to all. To highlight these transversal collaborations, I focus on the work and services of one Catholic missionary society: the Paris Foreign Missions (usually

known through their French acronym, the MEP). This society of French diocesan priests is the oldest Catholic institution of its kind (Guennou 1986). It is not a religious order but a missionary organization that has a long relationship with Christians in China (Charbonnier 2007). This paper focuses on interactions between Catholics in China and the French MEP society to identify how the Church in China has redefined its missiological identity.

In terms of data, this paper relies on several sources. First, I elaborate on observations collected during ethnographic fieldwork in Nanping, Fujian, between January 2015 and May 2016, completed with shorter visits in 2017 and 2019. Second, I rely on interviews with four Chinese priests and nuns who currently live abroad – like Antoine Ren – but who often desire to remain anonymous. Third, I also questioned five Catholics living in the mainland through the social platform WeChat. Fourth, I conducted long interviews with 15 MEP members, both priests and laywomen, who are actively engaged with the Church in China. Fifth, I consulted archival material and personal diaries that I am authorized to use for my reflection but not to quote. Last but not least, I also rely on three years of ecclesial service that I spent in Hong Kong among the French MEP (2003–2006), working and traveling with them in various locations in China (Chambon 2020:11–12).

2 The Internal Transformation of Chinese Catholicism

Before discussing the post-1978 period, we must summarize the situation of Chinese Catholic communities before that date. Over the centuries, Catholicism has developed a long and changing presence in mainland China (Charbonnier 2007). Yet, when the Chinese Communist Party seized control of the state, it gradually forbade all religious activities. By the 1960s, Chinese Catholicism was forced to disappear from the public sphere. Churchgoers had to stop public religious life and most of their clergy¹ members were condemned to labor camps. During the rest of the Maoist period, it was Catholic families and individuals who continued to pray secretly within the seclusion of their homes. Various nuns, who had been forced by the government to return to their relatives, helped local Catholics maintain a life of prayer and administered baptism (Chambon 2019b).

1 In this paper, the notion of ‘clergy’ is larger than the usual Catholic discourse. It includes nuns because in China they play a prominent role in shaping the daily life of the Church. See Chambon 2019b.

These underground Catholics used rituals and prayers that they remembered from the 1950s. Depending on the place, its local dialect, its missionary society (Spanish Dominicans, French MEP, Belgium Scheutists), the density of Catholics, and the presence of beatas (a specific kind of consecrated laywomen; see Chambon 2019b), the features of this underground Catholicism varied significantly. Some regions were left with almost no presence of the Catholic Church while others still had families who preserved the faith by gathering and praying at home (Madsen 1998). Where Catholics were scattered, they would typically pray the rosary and other prayers in their dialect at home. Parents and grandparents would still remember the importance of mass and reconciliation, and they would name their children with names with Christian connotations. When a beata was present, she would help with baptism, religious education, and funerals. Yet, the Church had no pastors, and all church facilities and their related medical and educational institutions were closed. In the 1960s–1970s, Chinese Catholicism was a home-based set of family rituals. Consequently, investigating the missionary identity of Chinese Catholics in the 1980s and 1990s must be done in relation to this reclusive, fragmented, and localized situation. Being missional necessarily created a move away from this underground reality of the Maoist Era.

The following sections focus on the four major transformations that Chinese Catholics have implemented after 1978 to underscore their missiological relevance.² Through the construction of churches, the reconnection with Rome, the transformation of communal life, and the training of clergy, I argue that Chinese Catholics have worked intensely at taking the gospel outside of its pre-1978 socio-religious niche.

2.1 *Rebuilding Churches*

After 1978, Chinese Catholics began to reopen the Catholic churches, their first long-term effort after being allowed once again to practice openly. Churches built before the communist takeover had been repurposed by the state as factories, storage, and so on. Many were in a poor condition. Often, they were hidden behind industrial buildings erected in the 1960s and 1970s, and Red Guards had destroyed their distinctive Christian silhouette. Either through reassignment, construction, or amputation, these buildings had lost their capacity to host and manifest the presence of Christ. Rooted in a Catholic theology that explicitly values the importance of material mediations, Chinese Catholics

2 Because of political concerns, my period of investigation remains largely between 1978 and 2008. This paper does not provide a systematic analysis of the post-2008 period (the Xi Jinping Era).

were eager to change this situation and to reestablish their public places of worship.

As soon as the government allowed the reopening of churches, local communities started to look for ways to recover and rebuild their public spaces of worship. By early 1981, thirty Chinese priests serving in Taiwan had already visited their families in mainland China and brought money for reconstruction. In May 1982, two hundred Catholic churches had been reopened across the country, but many were still occupied by factories. Relocating those factories was not always easy, neither was financing the repair of old buildings. Although the state called for more political flexibility with religious groups, some local administrators were reluctant. For instance, the MEP internally reported that in Sichuan, a province considered as “leftist,” officials from local prefectures were still blocking the reopening of convents as well as infant baptism, even though such practices were already common in coastal regions.

In 1982 and 1985, the central government promoted new guidelines to manage religious revival (Yang 2011; Clark 2020). To support the economic reform of the People’s Republic of China, religious bodies were now allowed to receive funds from abroad to erect churches, hospitals, clinics, and kindergartens. Since the late 1970s, foreign missionaries had started touring the country, under the cover of tourism and business, to reconnect with Catholic communities. They were not able to settle in mainland China, but they could visit where their society had historical roots to gather information and evaluate situations before sending funds. Indeed, local Catholics still remembered some of those foreign priests or the Chinese name of their related missionary society, and were eager to reconnect with them.

Among the supporters of the rebirth of the Church in China was Audrey Donnithorne. Born in Sichuan in 1922 to British Evangelical missionaries, she converted to Catholicism during World War II and studied economy at Oxford (Donnithorne 2019). She specialized in the study of the Chinese economy and spent most of her academic career in Australia. After her retirement in 1985, she relocated to Hong Kong and became an active ecclesial agent touring Catholic communities in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. Through her extended network among Catholic entities (Vatican offices, missionary societies, and German funding agencies), this unmarried laywoman member of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta was crucial in coordinating support for Chinese Catholics. In 1993, the Holy See awarded her the *Pro Ecclesia et Pro Pontifice* medal, and in 1995, she became an honorary member of the MEP.

Sister Monica Kwok was also part of the MEP network. Born in Shanghai in 1927, she joined the ME sisters in 1956. Despite her limited resources and education, between 1978 and 2008, she regularly circulated between Guangdong and Guangxi provinces to visit and support communities of nuns and elderly

people. As an elderly Chinese woman, she was able to travel without attracting attention and regularly communicated the conditions of the Catholics she attended to the MEP fathers. In addition to spiritual advice and fraternal proximity, she brought numerous gifts to people in need as well as messages to the clergy members of those regions.

Through these kinds of exchanges, the Paris Foreign Missions were able to better understand the local dynamics of their former missions. Based on the gathered information, they could reengage with Chinese Catholics and respond to some of their most pressing appeals for help in the reconstruction of churches. During the 1980s and 1990s, this was one of the most common requests coming out of Catholic China. During those two decades, financing church renovation or reconstruction was not a major burden for foreign donors. Even accounting for inflation, the favorable exchange rate allowed outsiders to make significant contributions. For instance, in 1985, the construction of a church building large enough to accommodate 600 people in a rural area cost approximately 30,000 RMB (10,714 USD). International agencies like the MEP helped with the main part of the building, but local Catholics were usually in charge of interior decoration and furnishings. For the MEP, the effort to erect churches – especially in rural or poorer areas – remained important until the mid-2000s.

Of course, the construction of a new place of worship contains a variety of meanings. It manifests the social and financial strength of its related group as well as its historical roots and socio-political legitimacy. However, in terms of missiology and Catholic theology, a church also participates in the proclamation of the kingdom (Chambon 2017). More than a meeting place or an inert object, it is where the holy presence of the Eucharist stands, a public location where everyone can openly gather to form the tangible Body of Christ. With its distinctive design, this building publicly recalls how God dwells among Chinese citizens regardless of their political, religious, and social status. Ultimately, the long-term effort to rebuild churches reveals how Chinese Catholics' missiology values the role of material objects and their capacity to manifest a stable, factual, non-idealistic, and non-privatized presence of God.

2.2 *Reconnecting with Rome*

Catholics in China, in another major effort to allow their Church to move outside of its political seclusion, reconnected with the Pope in Rome. After the establishment of the communist regime, all religious groups were gradually forced to cut relationships with foreign entities (Madsen 1998). Catholics were particularly targeted by the regime since their affiliation with the Pope was extremely suspicious. Thus, until the end of the Maoist era, Chinese Catholicism lost almost all connections with Rome.

In Catholic thinking, the affiliation with the papacy is not a mere organizational tool or a historical legacy. Rather, it manifests the unity of the Church. Furthermore, the communion of local communities with the bishop of Rome is a condition to remain firmly rooted in the Christian faith. Without this communion, there is a greater risk of departing from the teaching received from the apostles and to reduce the gospel to a particular socio-religious ideology. Thus, as soon as China reopened, Catholics were eager to reconnect with the pope (Clark 2020:63). The rebirth of local Churches also meant new bishops needed to be appointed, and therefore, Chinese Catholics sought the approval of Rome despite the opposition of Beijing (Charbonnier 2002:354).

Foreign and Chinese priests and laypeople who started to tour China from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, and the West did more than gather information, collect requests, and make donations. They also took an active role in facilitating communications between Rome and Chinese dioceses. By 1980, Chinese Catholics were more confident and began to contact the MEP and other foreign catholic entities directly. For instance, Mgr. Lemaire, the former MEP bishop of Jilin who was later based in Hong Kong, received letters from Chinese priests of his old diocese asking for new liturgical books so they need not continue to copy them by hand. He also received recently taken pictures of Chinese nuns in Jilin – a congregation he had helped to organize. Similarly, the diocese of Anhui asked for money to overcome the extreme poverty of its priests. To investigate this information, Fathers J. Charbonnier, G. Lajeune, J. A. Rollin, A. Trivière, and a few others started to regularly visit provinces like Liaoning, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Jilin.

In the late 1980s, observers noticed that Chinese priests and bishops who had an official document with a papal benediction would proudly display it on the wall of their main room (Clark 2020:59). Being in communion with Rome was becoming something more publicly visible. Father Charbonnier recounted an event from July 14, 1985, while he was accompanying a group of French pilgrims to Beijing:

We arrived at the church of the East for the benediction of the Holy Eucharist that followed the mass in Latin. The hymn *Tantum Ergo* did not fail to move our French Catholics who have not heard it for so long. At the end of the mass in front of the church's door, the faithful gathered and knelt in front of our bishop and priests to ask for a benediction. One [Chinese] said, "We hope that relations with Rome will be soon reestablished." One of us hears, "The Church is one. *Sumus cum summo Pontifice.*"

FATHER JEAN CHARBONNIER, unpublished personal diary, Chap. 25. Translation is my own.

While the Holy See knew that almost all Chinese bishops were seeking ways to contact Rome, including the illicit ones who had been appointed by the communist government without permission from the Vatican, political concerns kept interfering with their desire for ecclesial communion. Seeking legitimation by Rome was complicated. Most foreign visitors had limited access to local bishops. When they did see them, their interactions were often monitored over official dinners where other guests and cadres joined them.

To overcome these difficulties, Audrey Donnithorne records in her diary how she once brought a gospel of St John to an illicit bishop during an official dinner. She gave it to him with the invitation to write something on it. By the following day, the bishop had handwritten on it: "I recognize the Pope as the successor of St Peter and the vicar of Christ. I wish to be in communion with him" (from a non-published manuscript of Audrey Donnithorne). To bypass political control, the text was written in Latin, one word per page. During the farewell banquet, the illicit bishop returned the gospel book to Donnithorne in front of all the cadres. But the encoded Latin statement in it, the bishop's official recognition was approved by Rome soon after. During the following thirty years, the process to select and appoint new Catholic bishops in China remained unsettled. Tensions between Rome and Beijing regularly reemerged, and this tormented history is widely documented by ecclesial observers (Chu and Mariani 2020).

Nevertheless, besides the question of episcopal appointment, many Chinese Catholics, either in the mainland or abroad, were eager to rebuild communication between Rome and China. Bishops were only one aspect of this effort for ecclesial communion. For example, many faithful tried to go to Rome for pilgrimage and to manifest ecclesial communion.³ But in the 1980s and 1990s limited resources prevented most Chinese churchgoers from traveling abroad. Thus, missionary societies like the MEP acted as a mediator. They had the available personnel, the financial and linguistic resources, as well as cultural knowledge to visit Chinese Catholics and facilitate their reintegration into world Catholicism.

However, this intermediary work was often under question. Chinese authorities worried about the reemergence of colonial control and regularly banned foreign Catholics from entering China. For instance, Audrey Donnithorne was expelled in 1997, and several MEP priests in the following years. Within the Church, foreign missionaries themselves intensely debated the best way to help. In 1983, Father Charbonnier wrote during a meeting in Switzerland:

3 After 2000, the number of Chinese Catholics able to afford pilgrimage to Rome increased significantly. In the 2010s, many were able to afford pilgrimages to Europe, Hong Kong, Vietnam and other places and diversified their integration to and experience of world Catholicism.

They [missionaries caring for the Church in China] are suspected of restarting missionary work in China on the same principles as before the 'liberation.' We must clearly proclaim our current missiological theology: the Chinese Church is first responsible for the mission in China. Exchange and dialogue are not excluded because the Church is universal and must manifest her fraternity and solidarity. The current Catholic effort is to deepen the general motion of the 20th-century Chinese revolution in order to better understand its human implications.

FATHER JEAN CHARBONNIER, personal diary, Chap. 23. Translation is my own.

Reconnecting with Rome and establishing ecclesial communion were not pyramidal or vertical processes. The variety of people – laywomen, Chinese citizens and foreigners – involved in this reintegration of Chinese Catholicism shows how the link to Rome is a multilateral and circular dynamic. The MEP priests and associates who visited Chinese churchgoers and responded to their requests were not disconnected from other worldwide Catholic efforts. While the seven to nine MEP priests involved in this reconnection with China would meet once a year, they also reported to various bodies of the Holy See. Once a year, Father Charbonnier, who was in charge of the MEP China Service, met with a group of ten to twelve Chinese priests based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Philippines. During these meetings, members shared information and coordinated their actions to support the rebirth of the Church in China.

In conclusion, reconnecting with Rome was one of the most persistent efforts of Chinese Catholics. While the appointment of bishops was the most publicized aspect, the journey toward the Vatican happened at multiple levels and bears an important theological dimension. For Chinese Catholics, resuming relations with the successor of Peter was a necessary preliminary step to build the Church properly. Like a house which needs to be erected on a rock, they wanted to reconnect with the center of Catholicism.

2.3 *Catching up with Global Catholicism*

The Chinese movement toward the seat of Peter was not limited to formal relationships with the Vatican nor to spiritual proximity. Chinese Catholics were eager to renew and deepen their faith in dialogue with world Catholicism. In many ways, international communion was a means for spiritual renewal and ecclesial revival. During the Cultural Revolution, when Chinese Catholics were cut off from the rest of the world, the Second Vatican Council initiated a major reformation of global Catholicism. When Chinese Catholics re-emerged from their isolation in the late 1970s, they appeared like a relic from the past.

While they wanted to catch up with the rest of the Church, Chinese political authorities blocked the implementation of the liturgical reform because they perceived it as a surrender to the Vatican (Clark 2020:63). By the summer of 1987, Donnithorne reported that daily and Sunday Masses in Guizhou were still celebrated in Latin, accompanied by the traditional Chinese chants of the congregation. Although elderly priests heard about the new liturgical norms, they often preferred to continue with the pre-Vatican ritual delivered in Latin. For these aging men with declining sight and limited reading skills who had memorized the mass, it was easier to perform the ritual this way. But in the eyes of many observers, the use of Latin was a serious obstacle to renew religious practice and attract younger generations and converts. The more the interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese Catholics resumed, the more the liturgical, ecclesial, missiological, and clerical gaps between them became obvious.

In this changing context, the MEP created the China Service during the General Assembly of August 1980. Through this platform supervised by Father Jean Charbonnier – a missionary and sinologist based in Singapore – members of the society interested in helping Chinese Catholics exchanged information and coordinated their work. To concretely respond to the requests coming from China, he also gathered a group of young Chinese Singaporeans who desired to help the Church in China. Together, they created the China-Bridge, or Zhonglian (中华公教联络社). With the support of the archdiocese of Singapore, Zhonglian started to operate in early 1981 and soon became crucial to the operation of the MEP China Service.

On December 21, 1982, Zhonglian received a message from a beata from Fuzhou and decided to focus its efforts on the production and diffusion of new Missals and Bibles.⁴ Throughout the 1980s, Chinese Catholics had tremendous difficulties accessing Catholic literature. Producing and diffusing material written in simplified Chinese was highly complicated.⁵ The influential Jesuit, Father László Ladány, insisted on the importance of creating and massively distributing religious literature using simplified Chinese characters and introducing the Catholic faith and the Scriptures (Ladány 1987).

4 Later, this group became essential in the production and updating of the extremely precious “Guide to the Catholic Church in China.” Singapore: China Catholic Communication. Updated regularly until 2014, it compiles practical and historical information about every single Catholic parish, diocese, and congregation in China.

5 It was only in the early 1990s that the Beijing Bishops Conference was given governmental permission to print 200,000 copies of the *Studium Biblicum* translation of the Bible – which allowed the massive production of Catholic bibles until 2022.

This concern was also shared by Audrey Donnithorne. Thus, in September 1986, she established the SMYY Group (*Shengming Yiyi* – The Meaning of Life Publications). In coordination with religious orders (Jesuits, SVD, Salesians, OFM), missionary societies (MEP, Columbans, Maryknolls), and Church organizations (Congregation for the Evangelization of People, Germans Aid to the Church in Need, and Mission Aachen), as well as eight private donors, SMYY selected relevant books from various spiritual and theological schools. Then Donnithorne, in collaboration with a few volunteers, coordinated their translation, production, and dispersal across mainland China. In addition to providing financial support to SMYY, the MEP helped with storage issues in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, new liturgical books slowly began to be published by other Church bodies of mainland China with guidance from the Liturgical Commission of the Diocese of Hong Kong.

In China, SMYY materials were distributed free of charge. Sometimes, Chinese officials would intercept sent materials, but Church leaders knew they were not destroyed but sold at special libraries reserved for party cadres. By 1988, fourteen titles were already translated, and a total of 75,458 items produced. In 2002 at the official dissolution of SMYY, the group had published fifty-six titles – with a total of 450,000 copies – and around 20,000 leaflets.⁶

Through the distribution of printed material, but also by way of growing communication among different places and ecclesial bodies, Chinese Catholics were able to deepen their integration with world Catholicism and its ecclesial renewal. In 1990, Father Charbonnier noticed a text on a large board located at the entrance of the cathedral of Xi'an (Shaanxi). It was a set of answers to the question "Why am I Catholic?"

These texts [...] are extremely clear, appropriate, and convincing. They say that I am not Christian by individualism or superstition but by a spirit of charity and service and by an interior truth of the heart that does not contradict scientific knowledge.

FATHER JEAN CHARBONNIER, personal diary. Translation is my own.

Another example of ecclesial transformation and of the renewed importance given to the laity, is recorded by Donnithorne. In October 1995, the diocese of Leshan (Sichuan) held a lay training program over eleven days. Short courses covered Scriptures, church doctrine, liturgy, and practical matters of Church management. Thirty-nine men and women attended and those coming from outside the city were lodged in the quarters of the cathedral compound

⁶ Details provided by Audrey Donnithorne.

vacated by the religious women who recently moved into their new convent. Donnithorne noticed that more would have come if there had been room to host them.

In short, by the 1990s, Chinese Catholicism was adopting the new liturgical, ecclesial, and missiological norms of Vatican II. Largely with the support of Taiwan-based ecclesial entities, but also from Hong Kong, Manila and Shanghai, new liturgical books were more broadly dispersed throughout China. By 1993, the Latin Mass was no longer the default practice. Chinese ritual practices, the training of the laity, and theological discourse were conforming with the rest of the Church. Chinese Catholics were renewing how they prayed, gathered, and spoke about faith and, like elsewhere in the world, local dioceses were becoming responsible for the mission (Vettukallel 2018).

2.4 *Making the Clergy Pastoral*

A final long-term and internal transformation of Chinese Catholicism is the training of clergy members. While pooling resources to recruit and prepare priests and nuns may not immediately appear as a missionary effort, in the Chinese context it was. In the late 1970s, the Chinese Catholic clergy was in very poor condition. All foreigners had been expelled in the first few years of the communist regime; most Chinese priests, bishops, and seminarians had spent years in labor camps, and many died or abandoned their clerical status after being forced to marry. Religious orders were dissolved, and nuns were required to return to their families. Clergy members who survived were growing old and their roles were often limited to the sacraments. Thus, Chinese Catholics were left without pastors with the experience and authority to direct the Church.

Nonetheless, Chinese Catholics were eager to regenerate a clergy faithful to what they perceived as Catholic standards. On the one hand, lay people did everything to help the few surviving seminarians, priests, and bishops. On the other hand, they ostracized those who married or comprised too much with the regime. While some married priests publicly advocated against clerical celibacy, most lay people refused to join masses celebrated by ministers they considered to be unworthy. By the mid-1980s, one's marital situation became a red line used to define clerical status and loyalty to the Church. In the absence of conventional Catholic structures to select and discipline the clergy, churchgoers were the key regulators.

As soon as the country reopened, efforts were made to regenerate Catholic clergy according to Church tradition. Elderly clergymen started to gather younger men and women interested in serving the Church. Basic theological and pastoral training was organized and a few seminaries reopened across the

country. For instance, the diocesan seminary of Beijing and the major seminary of Shanghai were reestablished in 1981 and 1982, respectively.

In Beijing, Shanghai, and elsewhere, books and money sent by foreign visitors like the MEP helped the rebirth of the clergy. For example, in her field-notes, Donnithorne constantly noticed the poor quality of the food served to seminarians and nuns and asked for specific funds to solve this problem. From the late 1980s, Church visitors were also invited to teach at official and unofficial seminaries. Priests from Hong Kong like Joseph Zen Ze-kium – who later became, the vocal Cardinal Zen – and Thomas Luo started to teach in Chinese seminaries, including topics about the Vatican II liturgical reform (Clark 2020:72). Non-religious courses were also provided for those who desired professional training in psychology, computer science, medical care, and so on. Over the years, the number of the sessions supplied by external visitors increased.

Beyond the reopening of seminaries and convents, ecclesial visitors provided fraternal proximity and spiritual counseling. In the 1980s, the public return of Catholicism and the growing number of new converts brought constant challenges and questions. Visitors would play an important role in providing practical advice and spiritual support. They would circulate information among dioceses on how different clergy members had answered similar problems. Before WeChat, China's premier social media site, ecclesial visitors were essential in facilitating the transregional communication of Chinese clergy. In the 1990s, while standards of living were rising rapidly, tensions between older clergy members and younger ones became problematic. Older clergy members were inclined to disdain younger ones, who were portrayed as extravagant and wasteful. Once again, visitors stood as fraternal witnesses to listen to concerns, share stories from other parts of China, and mediate tensions.

As interconnections between China and the rest of the world multiplied, the number of Chinese clergy members able to travel abroad increased. During the 1990s, promising candidates were selected and sent for full-time training in various disciplines. The MEP, like many other missionary organizations, took an active role in these training programs. From 1994, they hosted numerous priests and nuns in several parts of France.⁷ They covered travel expenses, housing, and studies during their entire time in Europe. Between 1994 and 2009, coordination among various missionary organizations helped Chinese clergy members studying in Europe to meet. Every summer, a three-week

7 At least eight other French Catholic entities helped Chinese seminarians, priests, and nuns to come and study in France.

meeting was organized, free of charge, in one European country. In addition to an exploration of local and Church history, Chinese priests and nuns participated in training on liturgy, history, and theology. Despite the difficulties of bringing together students from different church factions and political obedience, the 1994 summer session welcomed thirty-five participants. Fourteen years later in 2008, there were 101.

These multilateral efforts helped Chinese clergy members regain pastoral confidence, theological competency, and ecclesial unity. While these efforts may not appear as strictly missionary, they were essential in reorienting the Chinese Catholic Church toward her mission. During the Maoist period, surviving clergy members were limited to providing rituals and sacraments to the faithful. They had lost their capacity to stand as pastors caring for all. But as Catholicism regained its public place in China, marital status was not enough to confirm the legitimacy of clergy members nor was delivering ritual services sufficient to shepherd Chinese communities properly. To truly allow the Church to assume her mission without losing her unity, it was vital that the clergy be better trained. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s a new generation of nuns and seminarians needed to be recruited, educated in dialogue with norms and guidelines of world Catholicism, and established in a position of authority. Despite all the difficulties and internal tensions, Chinese Catholics and foreign visitors agreed on the urgency of this task. Tremendous efforts were deployed to regenerate a truly pastoral clergy with the hope that it would allow the Church to better announce the gospel.

3 Encountering Non-Christians

The missionary efforts of Chinese Catholics cannot be reduced to their self-transformation. While reopening churches, reconnecting with Rome, reconnecting with world Catholicism, and reconstructing the clergy were necessary steps to allow the Church to make the gospel available to all, churchgoers engaged in two additional sets of actions to display the presence of Christ among their fellow citizens. First, they developed various social services to underscore how their benevolence and social commitment were not only filled by charitable and patriotic sentiments but also by missionary concerns. Second, they explicitly talked about their faith with non-Christians. While their ecclesiology may have not pushed them to engage with direct proselytism, they have often shared Christ's message with their family members, comrades, and neighbors. In this section, I demonstrate how Chinese Catholics have specifically engaged with non-Christians.

3.1 *Engaging with Social Needs*

As soon as Chinese Catholics were allowed to resume public religious life, they once again began to do various charitable works. The Church in China has long cared for abandoned children, sick people, and the fragile elderly (Young 2013). Since the later 1970s, when those actions may have first been limited to local and individual initiatives, they have slowly grown across the country and generated stable institutions. In 2017, the China Zentrum in Germany reported that the Catholic Church in China had “259 non-profit charity organizations, including 121 homes for the aged, 8 hospitals, 99 outpatient clinics, 10 orphanages, 13 nursery schools, 8 charitable foundations” (Wenzel-Teuber 2017:45). The most famous of these organizations is Jinde Charities Foundation in Hebei Province (Zhang 2020).

However, due to political concerns, many charitable institutions and social services prefer not to publicize their existence. And Chinese Catholic social involvement has not been regular or linear. Various financial, human, and political issues have impacted their scope and viability. In this essay, it is impossible to investigate all the medical, educational, and social initiatives that Chinese Catholics – either as individuals or communities – have supported at one point or another. Instead, our goal is to highlight the missiological dimensions of the church’s social services. From a secular perspective, Catholic social actions could appear as mere charitable actions and patriotism. Political cautiousness also often pushes Chinese Catholics to downplay the religious aspect of their social engagement. Still, by manifesting the concrete proximity and immediate support of the Church to those in need, these efforts hold a missionary dimension. Even without explicit discourse and claims, they manifest the unconditional and loving presence of Christ.

One example of these charitable actions is a home established by Mrs. Chan in 1993:

Mrs. Chan was living in a western city of China and married to a successful entrepreneur. At the age of 23, she asked for baptism. Three years later, after visiting a public children’s home, she set up a private home for abandoned children. She convinced the government to give her the youngest ones – those between one and three who were mostly abandoned girls because of the one-child policy – whom she would feed and entertain at her own cost. At the public hospital, they stayed on their bed most of the day with one nurse for 20 children. In April 1995, Mrs. Chan had recruited eight helpers and rented a place with a five-year contract. Although the home was officially under Mrs. Chan name and financial assistance, the new convert considered it as belonging to the Church. In the same city and within the same network of Mrs. Chan, another converted woman

had hired two teachers to train handicapped persons and children to repair watches.⁸

Many of these local initiatives have encountered serious difficulties to keep up with the socio-administrative changes of China, but one large-scale example illustrates how Catholic engagement with disabled people has continued until today. Huiling was established in Guangzhou in 1990. “It is one of the first charitable organizations in China to mainly cater to the needs of mentally disabled adults. [...] [Through Huiling, they] enjoy normal community life in more than 80 ‘homes/families,’ scattered in twelve cities in China. At the end of 2019, Huiling was serving more than 1,800 persons with mental disabilities”⁹ Officially, Huiling is not a confessional organization and avoids religious proselytism. It is registered as a charitable NGO helping disabled people. Yet, it was founded by female Catholics who could not remain passive in front of the injustice faced by disabled people. Later, these Catholics collaborated with Italian missionaries to access professional training, technical support, and financial resources. Until the revocation of their work visa, a few PIME priests worked for the organization in Guangdong province. Huiling has also welcomed international volunteers – like the author of this paper – to serve at their “homes” and “families.”

Chinese Catholics have also prioritized addressing medical needs, partnering with other groups to be able to bring the proper care to the right people. For instance, in the second half of the 1980s, a Chinese bishop was successful in approaching Italian missionaries to convince the Italian government to give over three million USD worth of equipment to establish a tumor center at the hospital of Wanzhou (Sichuan). Beyond this kind of medical collaboration, Chinese Catholics have creatively responded to the aging crisis in China. Over the years, they have created hundreds of homes for the elderly. Established and managed by exceptional individuals, religious orders, or local parishes, the number of these institutions is constantly evolving. Until the late 2010s, the Chinese state has encouraged Chinese Catholics to orient their human and financial resources toward this specific need. In answering this challenge, Catholics have creatively found ways to express that their faith is at the root of their charitable work with the elderly (Chambon 2020:131–196).

A final example of social engagement revolves around education. After the Cultural Revolution and its devastating impact on higher education, there was an urgent need for foreign native speakers to teach foreign languages at

8 This description comes from an interview seeking anonymity. Names of people and places have been changed.

9 See <http://en.hlcn.org/> consulted on August 19th, 2022. See ‘About Us’ Page.

Chinese universities. Since teaching salaries were low and working conditions difficult, Chinese authorities were not too inquisitive about the political and religious orientations of their foreign applicants. In other words, any interested and hard-working native speaker was welcomed. However, the study of Western languages and cultures brought up questions about Christianity. Sensitive to this new opportunity, Protestant churches started to send missionaries as language teachers. During the 1980s and 1990s Chinese universities did not object to hiring practicing Christians, as long as they were professionally competent and kept quiet about their faith. Donnithorne noticed that, in 1982, Chengdu's universities counted 21 foreign teachers of English. Among them, eight were practicing Christians and five were covert Protestant missionaries. Only one was Catholic. Five years later, Chengdu had 120 American teachers of English, followed by Canadians – the second-largest group – as well as six British citizens, two Germans, and one or two French nationals.

In June of 1987, when a handful of Catholic missionaries were already teaching foreign languages at Chinese universities, a Chinese faithful from Guiyang urged ecclesial visitors to set up an organization to provide more systematic educational assistance.¹⁰ In his mind, learning foreign languages was a way to open China to the world, heal colonial trauma, and present the faith to the new generation. He even suggested a name for the organization: Association for International, Technical, Educational, and Cultural Exchange, AITECE (Charbonnier 2002:359). Eager to support the rebirth of Chinese higher education and to improve relationships between foreign Catholics and Chinese youth, Donnithorne decided to commit herself to the project. She organized AITECE and registered it in Hong Kong on July 16, 1988. From its beginning, AITECE was not owned by any specific Catholic entity but was supported by several missionary societies. In September 1988, AITECE sent one American, from the Maryknoll society, and one Brit, from the Mill Hill Missionaries, as missionary to China; in early 1989, an Australian laywoman teaching in Hong Kong left for Western China. In the following years, AITECE created local offices in Ireland, Great Britain, the USA, France, and Australia to recruit laypeople. During the spring of 1990, fourteen teachers were sent, and during the 1993–1994 school year, the organization had thirty-seven teachers spread across China. In terms of financial resources, most of the budget of the organization was raised by a group of Chinese mothers related to the Hong Kong Marymount Secondary School for girls.

The first MEP priest sent by AITECE was Simon Tronel. He left Hong Kong for Beijing in the summer of 1989 and spent the following fifteen years at various Chinese universities teaching French language, literature, and translation.

10 The material of this section is from interviews with Audrey Donnithorne.

His goal was to understand the evolution of Chinese society and to share Christianity with younger generations. Constantly worried about political monitoring, he was extremely discrete about his clerical status. Yet, he was able to talk about Christianity during his courses and, with some students, to set up catechumenal groups. During his fifteen years in mainland China, he baptized twenty-one young adults. This number may appear extremely low considering the time and the effort involved, but it illustrates how MEP priests were approaching missionary work. They were willing to live under conditions detrimental to their physical and mental health to stay in China, help where they could, and manifest the love of God. Father Tronel did not convert masses and refused to quantify the impact of his stay because he believed in the humble and discrete work of God. He remained faithful to his commitment to Chinese society, helping many students and friends to understand the good, to learn how to pray, or to discern marriage. The number of baptized people cannot encapsulate his contribution to Chinese Catholicism.

In 1994, after the death of Father Ned Kelly, who was highly involved in the leadership of AITECE, and in response to the aging condition of Audrey Donnithorne, the missionary society of Saint Columban took responsibility for the organization. Meanwhile, the Maryknoll society created its own organization and the MEP were about to launch an agency sending French lay volunteers across Asia. After 2000, missionaries acting as language teachers in China started to become less numerous. The rapid sophistication of Chinese universities and their growing global interconnections reduced the need for foreign teachers. Furthermore, around that time, foreign missionaries found new opportunities to travel, study, or work in China without the professional burden of full-time teaching within a secular environment.

In conclusion, after 1978, Chinese and foreign Catholics constantly adjusted how they engaged social needs. In an era when social conditions changed drastically, the Church in China creatively responded to poverty, medical problems, and social exclusion – while finding ways to share her faith.

3.2 *Welcoming Those Interested in Jesus Christ*

The ways in which Chinese Catholics manifested the coming of the kingdom were not limited to charitable work and social engagement. Explicit evangelization was also a part of their efforts. With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the new era of reform, interest in religious questions increased and Chinese society went through an intense religious revival (Goossaert and Palmer, 2011). Soon, Catholic communities across the country started to witness people coming to church for the first time, curious to hear about Catholicism. In 1982, the diocese of Wuhan had seventy catechumens preparing for baptism. Church leaders, both clergy and laity, became more aware of their duty

to share the gospel beyond their family and village. On October 23, 1983, Father Charbonnier who was passing by Jinan Cathedral (Shandong) recorded the sermon of Father Wan: “As members of Christ, you share the mission of the Church: announce the gospel of salvation, sanctify yourself through the sacraments, observe God’s commands, be a witness through your good deeds, pray” (Father Jean Charbonnier, personal diary, chap. 23. Translation is my own). In 1985, 200 people were baptized in the city of Wanzhou (Hubei). Donnithorne reported that, in 1992, among the 200 Catholics of Leshan (Sichuan), 85% were new Christians and mass attendance had doubled since the early 1980s. During the religious revival that swept through Chinese society in the 1980s and 1990s Catholicism was a relatively attractive option in the broader religious market.

Yet, in most regions, religious initiation was rather basic. In 1990, a MEP missionary traveling to Handan (Hebei) encountered a young woman who was recently baptized and wanted to know whether it was bad to be a communist. The missionary noted:

She admires her Catholic friends and her conversion was a way to become a better communist since being communist meant being a good citizen, politically correct, and virtuous.... I ask her whether she reads the gospel. Her response is negative. Her instruction must have been very short. But, at least, I understand that Catholics can have a good reputation and it is well-perceived to convert.

FATHER JEAN CHARBONNIER, personal diary, chap. 23. Translation is my own.

Also, part of those new churchgoers were people of Catholic descent who did not receive religious initiation and baptism during the Maoist era. Based on local knowledge and interpersonal connections among rural families, pious Catholics remembered which families had Catholic roots. Thus, they actively invited people of Catholic descent to be faithful to their ancestors and to come back to church. In an age of rapid socio-cultural transformation generating various identity crises and inter-generational tensions, returning to church was a formal way to manifest familial piety and cohesion. In the 1980s and 1990s, it did not have the same socio-political cost as during the Cultural Revolution. Accepting baptism helped unify and pacify Chinese families even if younger generations would migrate to larger cities and only attend Church on Chinese New Year. This way of reclaiming a Catholic heritage illustrated how the faith was not perceived as an individual issue only. In China, religious identification is often a collective reality shared by entire families.

In the late 1990s, this return movement took a new shape. Many younger rural Catholics had migrated to new urban hubs, and although they did not necessarily identify deeply with the Catholic faith, having to raise their

children pushed them to revisit their religious commitment. In the early 1990s, children from migrant workers were sent back to their hometowns. However, as the gap between rural and urban China increased, migrants opted to keep their children with them and thus became responsible for their education. In the face of this new duty, many set up semi-official ecclesial structures across Chinese suburbs to allow their children to embrace Catholicism as well. But unlike in the West, where intergenerational religious transmission is shaped by Sunday schools and its related modern assumptions about knowledge, Chinese Catholics prioritized ritual practices such as rosaries, Eucharistic adoration, and communal prayers. For a long time, those practices were the framework to immerse oneself in the Catholic faith. As a result, urban migrants who were in charge of the religious education of their children created places of communal practice – informal chapels within a factory owned by a Catholic patron – where young children could be engaged in collective religious life (Chambon 2019a).

By the mid-2000s, these Catholic networks were looking for priests willing to shepherd them. Two missionary societies of diocesan priests were discreetly established in northern China and started to send missionaries to those urban and semi-recognized communities. Evolving in the grey zone of Chinese religious control, this new kind of urban Catholic community and their informal chapels did not only allow teenagers to encounter regular religious practices but also increased the presence of Catholicism across urbanizing China. As these communities grew stronger, those structures, distinct from formal and recognized dioceses and their registered parishes, allowed non-Christians curious about Catholicism to encounter the faith.

Just like the growing differences between urban and rural Chinese Catholicism, the missionary impulse of Chinese Catholicism was also unevenly distributed across the country. In 1990, Beijing witnessed the baptism of 230 adults only. Meanwhile, some rural parishes in Sichuan province hosted 1,000 churchgoers, mostly new converts, with an additional 1,000 catechumens. While the rural south successfully attracted new converts during the 1980s, twenty years later, missionary efforts were mostly coming from urban centers. Discussing Chinese missionary efforts after 2000, a nun studying abroad explained to me:

Missional identity in the 2000s is embodied in 'reaching out' to others. There are two aspects of this reaching out. One is in terms of missional activity: evangelizers no longer remain in their own city or province/diocese. They are setting out to other parts of China, especially, remote areas. This evangelization/ministerial service also goes beyond the border of China and extends to other countries. For instance, many dioceses

sent their priests to minister to the believers in other Chinese dioceses or other countries. Same as religious congregations, they also send out nuns to different parts of China and other countries to work in parishes. Another form of reaching out is expressed in social services. The Catholic Church, while working on its own development, also began to care and serve the people who were poor, powerless, and marginalized through social service agencies.

Anonymous interviewee

4 Toward a Chinese Catholic Missiology?

Since 1978, Chinese Catholics have deeply transformed the ways they practice and share their religion. They have gradually adjusted to global Catholicism as well as to Chinese socio-political changes. Reestablishing the Catholic Church in China – by constructing churches, identifying with Rome, interconnecting with world Catholicism, and training a pastoral clergy – they created the conditions to make the Catholic faith available to all. Furthermore, they actively addressed social needs and found ways to explicitly announce Christ to non-Christians. In brief, if the Catholic Church in China has grown numerically less quickly than Protestant and sectarian movements, she has not necessarily been less missionary. Catholics have carefully discerned where to orient their efforts and how to share their faith not only to attract more people but also to remain faithful to a Catholic understanding of the teaching of the apostles.

One important aspect of this missiological approach has been the fellowship with foreign Catholics. While the nationalist ideology of the Chinese Communist Party has repeatedly called Christians to cut ties with foreign entities perceived as infiltrating China with harmful agendas and ideas, Catholics have continued to seek friendship with foreign believers from Hong Kong, Taipei, Manila, Paris, Rome, and beyond. For them, the reconstruction of the Church could not be a national enterprise only. Their communal journey manifests how the whole Church is collectively responsible to protect the faith and preach the good news. While some individuals would play an important role in this reemergence of Chinese Catholicism, no single entity – either national, political, or religious – could entirely control the process. The return of Chinese Catholicism was a collaborative and polycentric process.

In many ways, this non-privatization of the gospel echoes the example of Christ sending disciples two by two (Mc 6:7). No one alone can fully manifest the presence of Christ. The Christian revelation is a dialogical process involving a communion of actors. In contrast to certain Pauline – and somewhat neo-liberal – models emphasizing individual responsibility, the Chinese Catholic

approach emphasizes collective testimony. While individual Catholics have actively shared the gospel among Chinese citizens, they do not represent the whole picture. Shared responsibility and trans-ethnic networks of mutual support have been essential to the Chinese Catholic missiological approach.

Furthermore, the nature of the Church mission cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional reality. Erecting public and distinct places of worship, reforming liturgical practices, and training pastoral leaders were all essential in the outward movement of the Church. While the mission implies the involvement of the whole Church – taken as the only actor able to truly share the mystery of the gospel – the conversion of individuals remains only one limited sign to evaluate the missionary effort and impact of Chinese Catholics.

This approach to the mission echoes examples from the gospel where Christ highlights the importance of feeding people (Jn 6:1–16), healing the sick (Lc 10:9), and welcoming strangers (Mt 15:21–28) to manifest the coming of the Kingdom. Unlike other missiological traditions which stress the importance of professed belief and proclaiming the gospel to encourage formal conversion, Chinese Catholics have given the priority to a more multidimensional, collective, and tangible approach to the mission. The kingdom of heaven is not a mere matter of individual conversion and cognitive change. This holistic approach may have attracted fewer converts and created frustrations, yet over the past forty years, it has been the missiology deployed by Chinese Catholics.

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Resumen

Tras las reformas políticas que siguieron a la muerte de Mao Zedong, a los católicos chinos paulatinamente se les permitió restablecer sus iglesias y reanudar las reuniones públicas. Sin embargo, esto presentó serios desafíos. Luego de décadas de persecución y aislamiento que modificaron la forma en que los católicos chinos adoraban y se percibían a sí mismos, tuvieron que redefinir el catolicismo chino. ¿Es suficiente realizar ciertos rituales en un dialecto local y en latín, en sus casas y en secreto? ¿Quién tiene la autoridad religiosa para administrar eficientemente los sacramentos? ¿Hasta qué punto se necesita una relación formal con el Papa para seguir siendo católico? Este artículo argumenta que en un contexto económico-político rápidamente cambiante y marcado por un control estricto administrativo, los católicos chinos han restablecido sus conexiones con el catolicismo mundial al forjar lazos con

las sociedades misioneras. En particular, el autor se fija en las alianzas que los católicos chinos han establecido con las Misiones Extranjeras de París (MEP) para reevaluar la misionología del catolicismo chino. Al analizar la naturaleza evolutiva de estas relaciones después de 1978, el autor muestra que la reconstrucción del catolicismo en China ha sido una iniciativa multilateral en la que los católicos locales han tenido que sortear la adversidad política, los cambios socioculturales y la reforma del catolicismo mundial post-Vaticano II. Al hacerlo, los católicos chinos paulatinamente salieron de la intimidad de los grupos de parentesco y de rituales predefinidos para comprometerse activamente con la sociedad china en proceso de modernización y con el catolicismo mundial.

摘要

在毛泽东逝世后的政治改革之后，中国天主教徒逐渐被允许重建教堂并恢复公众集会。然而，这带来了严峻的挑战。经过数十年的迫害和孤立，重塑了中国天主教徒的崇拜和自我认知方式，他们不得不重新定义中国天主教。在家里和秘密地用当地的方言和拉丁语进行特定的仪式就够了吗？谁拥有有效执行圣礼的宗教权威？与教皇建立正式关系在多大程度上是保持为天主教徒的必要条件？本文探讨了中国天主教徒如何寻求家庭圈和中华人民共和国以外的支持来回答他们的问题。本文认为，在以严控为标志的快速变化的政治经济背景下，中国天主教徒通过与传教团体建立联系，重新建立了与全球天主教的联系。更具体地说，我研究了中国天主教徒与巴黎外交使团（MEP）建立的合作，以重新评估中国天主教的宣教学。讨论 1978 年后这些关系的演变性质，我表明中国天主教的重建是一项多边事业，当地天主教徒必须在政治逆境、社会文化变革和梵蒂冈二世后世界天主教改革当中航行。在此过程中，中国天主教徒逐渐摆脱了亲缘关系的亲密和预定礼仪，积极参与到中国社会和世界天主教的现代化进程中。