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A turbulent story

The status of the Catholics
in the People's Republic of China

Magdaléna Rychetská

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The status of the Catholics
in the People's Republic of China

Magdaléna Rychetská

Department of Chinese Studies
Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University

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Reviewed by

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Vladimír Liščák (Oriental Institute Czech Academy of Sciences)

Translated by Mark Newkirk

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Religious organisations do not exist in a vacuum, and they cannot therefore be studied in isolation from their sociocultural environments.¹

That religious groups must be studied in the context of the society of which they are a part really is a “generally accepted truth”. Therefore, scholars studying Christianity in a Chinese context increasingly emphasise the need to view that religion from the perspective of its interaction with the state. In the context of China, religion and the state are, in fact, closely interconnected. Unlike in the West,² rulers in China once had “unipolar” authority, encompassing both civil and religious power. Until the 20th century, religion was linked to the sphere of politics and social life because the Chinese emperor had the power to permit or ban any religious group.³ The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has simply carried over this principle and strives to monitor the religious life of the People’s Republic of China (PRC).⁴ I therefore believe that Christianity must be examined within the context of dynamic processes of dialogue among the various social, political, and cultural forces within China’s authoritarian society.

Although the number of Christians in China has been undergoing rapid growth since the 1990s, and at present (2025) in the PRC there are approximately 10 million Catholics⁵ and 38 million Protestants,⁶ Christianity is viewed as an “alien” religious system brought in by “colonial powers”.⁷ In fact, even today some Chinese people

1 Stark, Rodney and Finke, Roger. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 35.

2 Here, “the West” is not a purely geographical designation. Instead, it refers to the geopolitical territory of Euro-American cultural influence.

3 Goossaert, Vincent and Palmer, David A. 2011. *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 27–33.

4 Ibid., 317.

5 Tripod 2024: Editorial Committee. 2024. Year 2023: Statistics and Major Events of the Catholic Church in China. *Tripod* 204, 143–191, here 143.

6 Wenzel-Teuber, Katharina. 2024. Statistics on Religions and Churches in the People’s Republic of China – Update for the Year 2023. *Religions & Christianity in Today’s China* 14(3), 35–56, here 47.

7 For more information, see Tamney, Joseph B. 2005. Introduction. In Yang, Fenggang and Tamney, Joseph B. (eds.). *State, Market, and Religions in Chinese Societies*. Leiden: Brill, 1–17.

speak of Christianity as *yangjiao* 洋教, a term meaning “foreign religion”.⁸ Therefore, for many people in Chinese-speaking societies,⁹ conversion to Christianity can still be highly problematic. The adopting of a foreign system can mean a violation of the norms of family life and can damage relations with other family members.¹⁰ Christian clergy and missionaries living in a Chinese context are well aware of these problems and must react to them.

We also should not forget that although Christianity is often seen as a religious tradition of the West,¹¹ it is a non-Western system both in terms of its origin and thanks to extensive evangelisation outside of Europe and North America.¹² Moreover, today we find more Christians in non-Western countries than in the West. Therefore, when studying Christianity, we should not take an ethnocentric view assuming Western hegemony, with ideas about the “true” and “correct” form of Christianity shaped on the basis of European experience.

In this book, I am dealing with the relationship between the Catholic Church and the totalitarian regime of the PRC. However, the story already begins before 1949, when the PRC was established. The historical development of Catholic missions within the territory of present-day China has also influenced the present situation of Catholics in the PRC. Therefore, the narrative begins with an overview of the initial missions. In the context of the historiography of Christian missions in Asia, current scholarship draws attention to problems associated with the first missionary efforts, and specifically the links between missionaries and efforts towards colonisation, for which the Catholic Church is still being criticised in China to this day (2025). Postcolonial criticism is very important because it shows that local non-European

⁸ The character *yang* 洋 stands for “foreign” or “Western”; *jiao* 教 means “teaching” or “religion”. Although the word *yang* simply means anything Western, already during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), it was often used in a pejorative sense as a derogatory designation for Christian groups. For example, Christians (Catholics and Protestants) were called *yang guizi* 洋鬼子—“foreign/Western devils”. For a detailed analysis of discourse demonising Christians, see Klain, Thoralf. 2014. *The Missionary as Devil: Anti-Missionary Demonology in China, 1860–1930*. In Becker, Judith and Stanley, Brian (eds.). *Europe as the Other: External Perspectives on European Christianity*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 119–148.

⁹ Here, I am referring to “Chinese-speaking society” in a broader sense, referring to the whole population under Chinese cultural influence, whether historical, ethnic, linguistic, or geographical. The term therefore refers both to the People’s Republic of China and to Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the global Chinese diaspora.

¹⁰ For discussion of issues of conversion to Christianity in Chinese-speaking societies, I recommend Swanson, Allen. 1986. *Mending the Nets: Taiwan Church Growth and Loss in the 1980s*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

¹¹ The most important monotheistic traditions of the West include not only Christianity, but also Judaism and Islam. Those traditions have strongly shaped Euro-American civilisation.

¹² Frykenberg, Robert E. 2003. Introduction. In Frykenberg, Robert E. and Low, Alain (eds.). *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500, with Special Reference to Caste, Conversion, and Colonialism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1.

histories have, in fact, often been reconstructed by the use of materials written by Western representatives of a dominant foreign culture, such as missionaries, for example. In this book, however, I reject an approach describing foreign missionaries in Asia as being merely a part of the dominant colonial culture. Instead, we should see them as an important part of local history, as some other scholars also propose.¹³ Rather than promoting a model depicting colonial history in terms of dominance and repression, we ought to study Christian missions with the use of a “conversational model”. Despite their links to colonial structures, missionaries were pursuing the communication of their own message to local populations. Communication is not a one-way process, so what was occurring was at least partially a bilateral exchange of ideas and values from one culture to another. The theological teachings of missionaries were constantly undergoing reconstruction and reshaping. Christian missionaries therefore were not just agents of a dominant foreign culture. They also provided their converts with access to prestigious circles of the colonial administration and of foreign trade. Often, they became intermediaries between foreign powers and local Christians who, in turn, gained a better negotiating position.¹⁴ We also should not forget that missionaries played many roles, and if some of them were tolerant and open towards the local population, many others were intolerant, ethnocentric, and often truly racist.¹⁵ The study of Christianity in Asia is unavoidably influenced by our present-day knowledge and ideas, but we should remember that the missionaries were the product of the society in which they were living, and their ideas and values were inseparable from their socio-political context.¹⁶

Many scholars criticise the pressure of the Chinese government on the church, and they focus their research mainly on the resistance of selected churches against the government. In this book, I would instead like to draw attention to the increasing orientation of current research on the unilateral relationship of church and state, and in particular the promoting of an image of the conflict between religious groups and the government. Moreover, quite a few of these studies tendentiously favour Christianity.¹⁷ In this respect, I regard the overlooking of various processes of negotiation between Christian groups and the government as constituting the most

13 Frykenberg, Introduction..., 8.

14 Robert, Dana. 2009. *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 49–50.

15 Young, Richard Fox. 2002. Some Hindu Perspectives on Christian Missionaries in the Indic World of the Mid Nineteenth Century. In Frykenberg, Robert E.; Brown, Judith and Low, Alaine (eds.). *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India's Religious Traditions*. London: Routledge Curzon, 37.

16 Van Die, Marguerite. 2012. Growing up Presbyterian in Victorian Canada: Childhood Influences and Faith Formation. In Forsberg, Clyde R. (ed.). *The Life and Legacy of George Leslie Mackay: An Interdisciplinary Study of Canada's First Presbyterian Missionary to Northern Taiwan (1872–1901)*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 21–42: here 41.

17 See e.g. Yang, Fenggang. 2017. From Cooperation to Resistance: Christian Responses to Intensified Suppression in China Today. *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 15, 79–90.

important problem. After all, conflict is far from the only aspect of the relationship arising between China's totalitarian government and Christian society in China. To the contrary, despite tighter control and increased persecution, many groups are attempting to cooperate with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or at least to survive under China's totalitarian regime. This publication's goal is therefore to show the complexity of relationships between churches and the Chinese government, covering both cases of persecution and various forms of coexistence or even cooperation.

The publication now before you not only attempts a concise description of events, but also aims to draw attention to the diverse resources and strategies available to the Catholic community for its mission activities. The book primarily answers the following questions: How has the relationship between the Catholic Church and the People's Republic China developed? How are various church representatives trying to protect and promote their interests in the totalitarian regime of the PRC? The main thrust of the argument is that representatives of the Catholic Church (officially permitted and underground) face at least two kinds of pressure in the authoritarian environment of present-day China, namely (1) the demands of the state regime and (2) societal or cultural pressure requiring an attempt at intentional assimilation to the given environment. One of the chief interest of Catholic Church representatives is to create a successful mission and a stable congregation. The subject matter of this book is how this is being attempted and with what success.

1.1 Sinicisation is not always sinicisation

Current research on Christian churches in the People's Republic of China (PRC) often emphasises the question of the "sinicisation" of religion. But what is "sinicisation", really?

If we take as our departure point the assertion of the American sociologist Anthony Gill that "[o]ne of the primary goals of most religious organisations is the maximisation (or retention) of parishioners",¹⁸ we may assume that successful missions are an important component of Christianity. In order to fulfil this ambition (maximising the number of believers) in Chinese society, the Catholic Church has also had to adapt to the local environment, meaning it has had to create a local community that is attractive for local believers. We may also assume that religious groups have to interact and negotiate with the government to achieve their goal of establishing themselves permanently in the given milieu. Religion specialists in China's authoritarian environment must face two main pressures: the demands of the authoritarian government and social pressure, which demands that they conform to the local culture. Today, the adapting of

¹⁸ Gill, Anthony J. 1998. *Rendering unto Caesar: The Roman Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 66.

religious ideas and activities to a local culture, or “inculturation” (*jiaohui bendihua* 教会本地化), remains a topic of urgency for Catholic society in China. The word *bendihua* (本地化) can be translated as “localisation”, “accommodation”, or “adaptation”.¹⁹ It involves the broader social process of the deliberate transfer of a system of ideas and values from one culture to another. It represents the process of maintaining long-term, influential contact between differing cultures. Every culture is a system containing elements that are transformed during such contact. During this process, one culture typically “borrows” certain elements from another, and culture transfers are not equal. With this kind of communication, during which ideas and values are deliberately transferred, the ideas and values have to be changed and adapted for them to influence the other society or culture. Unlike the broader process of acculturation, which is spontaneous and not conscious, “inculturation” is an intentional process, i.e., a strategy.²⁰ It is a process begun by the church, a strategy employed with the goal of making Christianity more attractive for the local environment.

In the context of China, another term in use is “sinicisation” (*zhongguohua* 中国化).²¹ It was Christian missionaries who first used the word *zhongguohua* at the end of the Qing dynasty and at the beginning of the period of the Republic of China. It was originally used with the same meaning as “inculturation”, i.e., as a description of the process of making Christianity “more Chinese”, and thereby more attractive for potential Chinese converts. However, in the present-day People’s Republic of China, the word has a different meaning. Since 2015, the government of the PRC has been emphasising the need for (political) sinicisation of religion²² (*zongjiao de zhongguohua* 中宗教的中国化). This is a component of the policy introduced by President Xi Jinping 习近平 (*1953) within the framework of his vision for a new China. It is the official policy on religion imposed by the communist government on religious groups, which must adapt their teachings and activities so as to be permitted by the government of

19 For discussion of the difficulty of translating the term *bendihua*, see Wesoky, Sharon R. 2016. Politics at the Local-Global Intersection: Meanings of Bentuhua and Transnational Feminism in China. *Asian Studies Review* 40(1), 53–69: here 55.

20 Gallo, Antonio. 2003. Introduction: Hermeneutics and Inculturation. In McLean, George F.; Gallo, Antonio, and Magliola, Robert (eds.). *Hermeneutics and Inculturation*. Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1–16: here 8–9.

21 Here, there is a reference to the Chinese expression *zhongguohua*, which is not identical to the Chinese word *hanhua* 汉化, also routinely translated as sinicisation. However, *hanhua* has a different meaning; it applies to a cultural or ethnic context, referring to the process of Chinese cultural assimilation of non-Chinese ethnicities under the direct influence of the Han ethnic group. The sinicisation of religion does not apply to ethnic groups that are not Han Chinese. In the context of religious policy, the sinicisation of religion is mainly focused on the Han population.

22 For references to sinicisation in the current political context, I always add the adjective “political” to the word “sinicisation”. Wherever the reference is not to the original Chinese term, I am adding this adjective to emphasise the political context, when the word sinicisation does not mean merely making something “more Chinese”, but instead means complete submission to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.

the PRC and to comply with the official policy of the Chinese Communist Party. In this context, the political sinicisation of the church does not mean its localisation or making it more attractive for the local environment. To the contrary, in the present context, the word sinicisation has a political subtext involving compliance with the state's dictates and the direct promotion of Chinese Communist Party ideology through religion. The term is therefore not sociological, but political, involving a new political discourse initiated by the Chinese Communist Party.²³ Political sinicisation is thus becoming an aspect of relations between the church and the state, according to which the church must react to the state's official demands for the localisation of belief and must obey the state's commands. Therefore, today the term *zongjiao de zhongguohua* is not, in fact, interchangeable with inculturation (*jiaohui bendihua* 教会本地化).

1.2 The problematic state of research on contemporary Christianity in the People's Republic of China²⁴

In the introduction to this book, I also reflect upon the current state of research on Christianity in a Chinese context in general. This reflection will subsequently become a stepping stone for understanding the situation faced by Catholics in China. Therefore, we will first familiarise ourselves with two opposing currents of academic opinion in relation to Christianity in China: (1) one that is widespread in Chinese academic circles, and (2) a second that is promoted by certain prominent scholars from the American academic milieu. These two lines of discourse represent opposites: while academic rhetoric in the PRC promotes an image of harmony with official state propaganda, the other dominant current of opinion depicts Christians in the PRC as a group facing extreme persecution.²⁵

23 For more information about the question of sinicisation, I recommend Vermander, Benoît. 2019. Sinicizing Religions, Sinicizing Religious Studies. *Religions* 10(2), 1–23; Chang, Kuei-min. 2018. New Wine in Old Bottles: Sinicisation and State Regulation of Religion in China. *China Perspectives* 2018(1–2), 37–44. The word *Bendihua* has a different connotation in the context of Taiwan, and along those lines I recommend Chun, Allan. 2012. From Sinicization to Indigenization in the Social Sciences: Is That All There Is? In Dirlík, Arif, Li, Guannan and Yen, Hsiao-pei (eds.). *Sociology and Anthropology in Twentieth-Century China: Between Universalism and Indigenism*. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, 255–282.

24 The following discussion draws in part from a text already published by this book's author. Cf. Rychetská, Magdaléna. 2020. Negotiations between Christian Communities and Authoritarian China: Some Comments on the Current State of Scholarship on Christianity in China. *Religio: revue pro religionistiku* 28(2), 165–183.

25 E.g. Jason Kindopp and Carol L. Hamrin raise the question in their book: "To what extent have China's Catholics and Protestants adapted to, resisted, or rebelled against state demands?" The formulation suggests that churches are being subjected to influence from above by the government without anything approaching mutual discussion. See Kindopp, Jason and Hamrin, Carol L. (eds.). 2004. *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church State Tensions*. Washington: Brookings Institution