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# *Negotiations between Christian Communities and Authoritarian China: Some Comments on the Current State of Scholarship on Christianity in China*

MAGDALÉNA RYCHETSKÁ

“Religious organisations do not exist in a vacuum, and they cannot therefore be studied in isolation from their sociocultural environments.”<sup>1</sup> It is indeed a “truth universally acknowledged” that religious groups should be analysed within the context of the society of which they are a part. Academics researching Christianity in the Chinese context have increasingly emphasised the need to view religion from the perspective of its interaction with the state. The reason for this is that until the twentieth century, religion was closely connected with the political and social sphere, as the Chinese emperor held the power to allow or prohibit any religious group.<sup>2</sup> Following this principle, the communist government has pursued control of religious life in the People’s Republic of China.<sup>3</sup> It is, therefore, necessary to examine the dynamic processes of the various social, political and cultural negotiations that the representatives of Christian groups encounter within an authoritarian Chinese society, where Christianity is a “foreign” religious system brought to China by “colonial powers”. Even today, some Chinese refer to Christianity as *yangjiao*, a term meaning “foreign religion”.<sup>4</sup> Conversion to Christianity can still be

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

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

3 *Ibid.*, 317.

4 The character *yang* means “foreign” or “Western”; *jiao* means “teaching” or “religion”. While the term *yang* stands for Western things, it was often used as a pejorative label for Christian groups during the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). For instance, Christians (Catholics as well as Protestants) were called *yang guizi* – “foreign/Western devils”. The demonising discourse on Christians is further analysed in Thoralf Klain, “The Missionary as Devil: Anti-Missionary Demonology in China, 1860-1930”, in: Judith



highly problematic for many people in sinophone societies.<sup>5</sup> Acceptance of a foreign system can mean violation of the norms of family life and can harm relationships with other family members;<sup>6</sup> Christian priests and missionaries living in Chinese societies are well aware of this.

The issue of “China-isation” (*zhongguohua*)<sup>7</sup> is often highlighted within contemporary scholarship on Christian churches in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Many academics criticise Chinese governmental pressure on churches, and the focal point of their research is the resistance of selected churches. My concerns in this respect include the increasing focus of contemporary scholarship on the problem of church-state dominance – mainly promoting the issue of conflict between religious groups and the government. Several such studies are biased in favour of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> The most important problem I consider in this regard is the overlooking of various processes of negotiation between Christian churches and the government.

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Becker – Brian Stanley (eds.), *Europe as the Other: External Perspectives on European Christianity*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 2014, 119-148.

- 5 Here, I consider “sinophone societies” in broader terms as all populations under Chinese cultural influence, whether historical, ethnic, linguistic or geographical. The term therefore covers the People’s Republic of China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the global Chinese diaspora.
- 6 On issues of conversion to Christianity in sinophone societies, see Allen Swanson, *Mending the Nets: Taiwan Church Growth and Loss in the 1980s*, Pasadena: William Carey Library 1986, 140. However, since the 1990s, China has experienced rapid growth among Christians. Several Chinese scholars published articles about Christianity, and while not converting to Christianity, they proclaimed themselves to be cultural Christians (*wenhua jidutu*). Nevertheless, Christianity is still considered a foreign religion. For more information, see Joseph B. Tamney, “Introduction”, in: Fenggang Yang – Joseph B. Tamney (eds.), *State, Market, and Religions in Chinese Societies*, Leiden: Brill 2005, 1-17.
- 7 In this paper, I use the term China-isation (or PRC-isation) for the Chinese term *zhongguohua* in order to differentiate it from the English term sinicisation (*hanhua*), which refers to the cultural or ethnic context. The term *zhongguohua* was first used at the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republic era by Christian missionaries. It was initially applied to describe the process of making Christianity “more Chinese” and, therefore, more attractive to potential Chinese converts. However, in the present-day People’s Republic of China, it is the official religious policy enforced by the communist government on religious groups, which must adapt their doctrine and their practice to make each more suitable for the PRC, and in accordance with the official policy of the Communist Party of China. For more information about the issue of *zhongguohua*, see Benoît Vermander, “Sinicizing Religions, Sinicizing Religious Studies”, *Religions* 10/2, 2019, 137 (1-23).
- 8 For example, see Fenggang Yang, “From Cooperation to Resistance: Christian Responses to Intensified Suppression in China Today”, *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 15, 2017, 79-90; Li Ma – Jin Lin, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications 2018.

In this paper, I provide a reflective commentary on the current state of research into Protestant and Catholic churches in the Chinese context. Firstly, I introduce two main academic discourses on Christianity in China: one narrated within Chinese academic circles, and one proposed by prominent American scholars. The two discourses represent antipodes – while the academic discourse on Christianity in the PRC promotes an image of harmony in line with official state propaganda, the other dominant discourse describes Christians in the PRC as a marginalised group facing extreme persecution.<sup>9</sup> Several scholars based in the US now adopt the triple-market approach proposed by Yang Fenggang, characterising the Chinese religious scene under three categories: the “red market”, collaborating with the regime; the “black market”, opposing the regime; and the “grey market”, having an ambivalent character. Instead of employing a market approach, I insist on the need to confront the main discourses with empirical data. In this article, I use the example of the official Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which is categorised as a “red” religious market supporting communist rule. As such, the churches united under this body are often neglected by researchers as they are perceived as “unproblematic” and, therefore, do not correspond with the narrative of the victimization of Christian groups by Chinese state authorities. Nonetheless, such churches (or any religious groups within the “red” market) require our scholarly attention, as choosing cooperation instead of opposition is not unproblematic – and, thus, diverse processes of negotiation between religious groups and the government should be included in the research.

### Red, black, and grey markets

Early in the twentieth century, the Guangxu emperor (1871-1908) and the reformist Kang Youwei (1858-1927) proposed radical reform of Chinese society and culture that included sweeping changes to the education system, including the conversion of many old temples into modern schools and the establishment of a new national Chinese state.<sup>10</sup> Although many of the reforms were ultimately unsuccessful, they marked the

9 For instance, Jason Kindopp asks: “To what extent have China’s Catholics and Protestants adapted to, resisted, or rebelled against state demands?” The formulation indicates that the churches are exposed to the top-down influence of the government without any access to mutual negotiation. See Jason Kindopp, “Policy Dilemmas in China’s Church-State Relations: An Introduction”, in: Jason Kindopp – Carol Lee Hamrin (eds.), *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, Washington: Brookings Institution Press 2004, 1-22: 13.

10 For the influence of the Wuxu reforms on the development of Chinese religious landscape, see Vincent Goossaert, “1898: The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65/2, 2006, 307-336.

beginning of a new wave of revolutions which sought to reinvent and modernise traditional Chinese culture – religion included. The inspiration for several of these changes came from Western Christianity.<sup>11</sup> The whole process prompted a new discourse on religion, which led to the creation of three distinct categories: religion (*zongjiao*), superstition (*mixin*), and evil cults (*xiejiao*).<sup>12</sup> The groups labelled as religions were required to unite under hierarchical religious organisations and to be organised according to the patterns of the Christian churches, which included an organisational (hierarchical) structure, an educational structure, and the creation of a body of “educated professionals”. The establishment of a religious group in China required all these systems to be in place. The state recognised five religious groups: Buddhism, Taoism, the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, and Islam. This categorisation led to the creation of the contemporary PRC’s definition of religion. Religious practices labelled as superstitions or evil cults – such as ancestor worship or the burning of spiritual money – were strictly forbidden.

Thus, the Chinese government defined what, in political discourse, is accepted as an institutional religion and in this manner shaped religious orthodoxy. Nevertheless, various practices within the religious landscape have been excluded from this narrative and labelled as not being a part of officially sanctioned religions. Aiming to resolve the issue of the ambivalent category of religion within the Chinese framework, a new theoretical project has emerged among academics researching Christianity in China. Yang Fenggang<sup>13</sup> has proposed that religion in China should be studied within the theoretical framework of the economic approach to religion.<sup>14</sup>

11 Christianity was perceived as a means of modernising society, and missionaries became intermediaries between Western ideas and the new Chinese national state. See Daniel H. A. Bays, *New History of Christianity in China*, Chichester – West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell 2012.

12 David A. Palmer, “China’s Religious Danwei: Institutionalising Religion in the People’s Republic”, *China Perspectives* 9/4, 2009, 17-30: 21.

13 On the triple-market approach, see Fenggang Yang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China”, *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, 2006, 93-122; id., *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts*, Leiden – Boston: Brill 2018.

14 The economic approach to religion or the economy of religion traces its origins to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* of Adam Smith (1723-1790) and later to works of Max Weber (1864-1920), especially to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. However, the new paradigm shift to the economy of religion is connected to “an academic movement the economics of religion coalesced as something new beginning with the early works of American sociologists Peter Berger (1970s/1980s), Rodney Stark, Robert Finke, and many others (1980s/1990s) and economist Laurence Iannaccone (late 1980s)” (Lionel Obadia – Donald C. Wood, “Economics and Religion, Economics in Religion, Economics of Religion: Reopening the Grounds for Anthropology?”, in: iid. [eds.], *The Economics of Religion: Anthropological Approaches*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing 2011, xiii-xxxvii: xv).

The economic approach to religion emerged in the 1990s in the US context as a reaction to secularisation theories. Instead of seeing religious belief as declining as a result of advanced modernity or modernisation, the economic approach attempts to explain such changes by proposing a new paradigm using a market metaphor.<sup>15</sup> The approach proposes the idea that “religion comprises an economy much like commercial and other economies”.<sup>16</sup> Lionel Obadia and Donald C. Wood explained the main innovation of the approach:

Modernity and globalization are supposed to have dramatically changed the religious landscape of societies ... The shift from (Bourdieu’s) “religious field” to (contemporary, and especially, American sociology) “spiritual supermarket” is a major conceptual shift. ... in Bourdieu’s terms, people are passive agents, determined by processes of religious “capitalization”, while these new actor-figures rest upon another conception of social agency, in which the individual is a much more “free” and “active” actor in his/her relationship with religion ...<sup>17</sup>

In this way, a religious economy or spiritual market is created, where all religious activities and religious ideas are “goods” offered by religious organisations to potential adherents to attract their interest and to current ones to maintain their support.<sup>18</sup> The economic approach to religion is attempting to provide an explanation for religious change.<sup>19</sup> Rodney Stark and Roger Finke propose the following hypothesis:

To the extent that (religious) pluralism or (religious) regulation are adequate inferential measures of (religious) competition, the overall level of religiousness will be higher where pluralism is greater or where regulation is lower.<sup>20</sup>

Religious pluralism increases religious competition and creates a market with increased fluidity in which believers can more easily move between different religious denominations. One of the consequences of this is the new demand on Christian clergy to be more sensitive to the actual needs of church members – these including the need for indigenisation. In an authoritarian regime (such as communist China), this should, in theory, lead to resistance to the totalitarian state – as priests would be motivated to defend the interests of the church members injured by the oppressive

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15 Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, 12.

16 F. Yang, “The Red, Black, and Gray Markets...”, 94.

17 L. Obadia – D. C. Wood, “Economics and Religion...”, xviii.

18 R. Stark – R. Finke, *Acts of Faith...*, 193.

19 Paul Froese – Steven Pfaff, “Replete and Desolate Markets: Poland, East Germany, and the New Religious Paradigm”, *Social Forces* 80/2, 2001, 481-507: 481.

20 R. Stark – R. Finke, *Acts of Faith...*, 297.

regime. However, without any competition, the pressure for change might not be powerful enough for religious leaders to alienate themselves from governmental support.<sup>21</sup>

Yang Fenggang notes that the economic approach to religion has been mostly applied to the American<sup>22</sup> and European<sup>23</sup> cultural context, in which Christianity is predominant.<sup>24</sup> He also observes that the religious landscape of China is different from that of Europe and America. He therefore proposes a modification to the theoretical model of the religious market in China: "... a triple-market model: a red market (officially permitted religions), a black market (officially banned religions), and a gray market (religions with an ambiguous legal/illegal status)."<sup>25</sup>

The red market includes all religious organisations which have a legal status. Such organisations should comply with the strictures of the communist regime, and their religious narratives as well as practices should be, according to the approach, in line with the political discourse. The black market is an antipode to the red market – it includes all illegal religious groups which are underground and which often directly oppose the Chinese government. The grey market comprises activities and individuals, which are difficult to distinguish as legal or illegal, as well as the non-institutionalised religiosity. By this triple-market model, Yang tries to overcome the limitations resulting from the neglect of non-institutionalised religiosity.

Nevertheless, the approach advocated by Yang faces the same critique as the economic approach in general – for example, some advocates of the economic approach "conceive of the market in decidedly neo-liberal terms, and then naturalize this conception, denying that their conception is in any way metaphorical; they argue that the market is built into human nature",<sup>26</sup> however, this claim is problematic. Furthermore, as much as the approach tries to propose a new explanation of religious activity within the authoritarian setting of the PRC, it also leads to neglecting certain aspects

21 Anthony J. Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar: The Roman Catholic Church and the State in Latin America*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1998, 48-58.

22 For example, see R. Stark – R. Finke, *Acts of Faith...*; A. J. Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar...*; Rodney Stark – Robert Finke, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 1992.

23 For example, see P. Froese – S. Pfaff, "Replete and Desolate Markets..."; Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Risk, Rationality, and Religious Portfolios", *Economic Inquiry* 33/2, 1995, 285-295.

24 F. Yang, "The Red, Black, and Gray Market...", 94.

25 *Ibid.*, 93.

26 Andrew M. McKinnon, "Ideology and the Market Metaphor in Rational Choice Theory of Religion: A Rhetorical Critique of Religious Economies", *Critical Sociology* 39/4, 2011, 529-543: 530.

of church-state negotiations. Moreover, it leads to overlooking the religious organisations categorised within the red market, as they are seen as unproblematic, and therefore not supporting the narrative of church-state conflict.

### Contemporary scholarly discourse in China

Much has been written about the relationship between authoritarian regimes and Christian groups in Chinese societies, about their struggles in the modern-day People's Republic of China. These studies have largely focused on church-state relations from the perspective of social resistance to state domination.<sup>27</sup> Generally, these studies follow the triple-market model and focus on the black and grey markets. Cao Nanlai suggests that much of the research has narrated a simplified story of opposition between a totalitarian state and a resistant local society; in this context, between a party-state and Christianity.<sup>28</sup>

Research on Christianity in Chinese society, especially in the context of the People's Republic of China, has therefore been dominated by two main scholarly discourses. Academics (largely) from the United States have created a narrative that describes Christians in the PRC as a marginalised group facing extreme persecution – although their results and conclusions have been criticised.<sup>29</sup> The other prominent discourse is created by scholars based at Chinese universities and other academic institutions.

After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976),<sup>30</sup> along with the opening up of the Chinese economy, the religious market was also re-opened. At the Third Plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> Chinese Communist Party Central Committee in 1978, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the Party changed its official policy and started to be more focused on economic reforms. These reforms led to a gradual shift from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy. Hand in hand with the opening of the Chinese market, the Party

27 Proponents of this model are, for instance, F. Yang, "From Cooperation to Resistance..."; Li Ma – Jin Lin, *Surviving the State...*

28 Nanlai Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*, Redwood City: Stanford University Press 2010, 11.

29 For the whole critique of the approach, see Nanlai Cao, "Chinese Religions on the Edge: Shifting Religion-State Dynamics", *The China Review* 18/4, 2018, 1-10; id., "The Rise of Field Studies in Religious Research in the People's Republic of China", *The China Review* 18/1, 2018, 137-163.

30 Between 1966 and 1976, all religious buildings were closed, all religious associations were dissolved, religious affairs units were disbanded, and many religious clergymen were arrested or persecuted; see V. Goossaert – D. A. Palmer, *The Religious Question...*, 162-165.



implemented a relaxation of its policy on religion.<sup>31</sup> Over subsequent years, the Chinese government issued various documents and authorised more organisations for regulating religious groups. Thus, the formerly repressive policy towards religion was lifted by the government of Deng Xiaoping (1978), and the Chinese academic discourse moved away from its complete rejection of religion.

The Chinese government guides scholars to promote an image of China as a traditional yet modern country and to “demonstrate its excellence”.<sup>32</sup> For this reason, a significant number of Chinese research articles on religion repeat the same proclamations that we find in official state propaganda. They speak within the framework of the broader discourse created by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): “... the Chinese social sciences are more applied in the sense that they are primarily intended to help the state solve social problems.”<sup>33</sup> Scholars who observe religious life in China from their positions in Chinese departments or institutions are controlled by the government. One of their roles is therefore to assist the state supervision of religion and promote what the government considers to be “normal religious activities” (*zhengchang de zongjiao huodong*). The state even requests that Chinese scholars take part in the training of officially certified religious personnel:

For the Chinese state, such professional training aims to produce “politically reliable” (*zhengzhishang kaodezhu*) and “religiously literate” (*zongjiaoshang youzaoyi*) clergy who are expected to play leadership roles not only in the five official religious associations but also in China’s political consultation system.<sup>34</sup>

Researchers based at Chinese state institutions may be under closer scrutiny than Western scholars as, for the state, it is more important that their research is useful to the government and provides the most accurate data available about a particular issue; equally, they are unlikely to issue any severe criticism of the CCP. In the case of Christianity in China, their interpretations are very different from those of scholars based outside the PRC. Chinese scholars based at institutions in the PRC narrate a story of harmonious cooperation and coexistence between the Christian churches and the Chinese government (but generally ignore all the illegal under-

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31 Jack Barbalet, “Chinese Religion, Market Society and the State”, in: Jack Barbalet – Adam Possamai – Bryan S. Turner (eds.), *Religion and the State: A Comparative Sociology*, London: Anthem Press 2011, 185-206: 192.

32 Chloé Froissart, “Issues in Social Science Debate in Xi Jinping’s China”, *China Perspectives* 18/4, 2018, 3-9: 6.

33 *Ibid.*, 4.

34 N. Cao, “The Rise of Field Studies...”, 140.

ground and house churches).<sup>35</sup> However, their position is influenced by the fact that it is not really possible to freely publish critical research within mainland China.

Interestingly, the empirical data do not support either of the two dominant scholarly narratives. Instead of imagining Christianity as a monolithic group with a single set of unchanging goals and challenges, I propose that Christianity be perceived as a “glocal” phenomenon,<sup>36</sup> that is, a global phenomenon based on numerous local manifestations and particularities. The methodological shift to researching Christianity as a glocal phenomenon suggests there are many different “Christianities” (in this example ignoring denominational differences): there is not only one Chinese Christianity, but also Zhejiang Christianity, Wenzhou Christianity, and so on.<sup>37</sup> Christianity should not be researched as a single universal religion; local differences must be taken into account. The primary goal is not only

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35 The Communist Party of China tried to break all ties between Chinese Christians and Western powers and promoted the localisation and independence of its churches. One part of this drive towards independence was the removal of economic funding and organisational support from foreign Christian bodies, see F. Yang, “From Cooperation to Resistance...”, 80. The Vatican ordered all Chinese Catholics to boycott the new communist government under threat of losing their catholicity and excommunication. Therefore, many Chinese Catholics loyal to Rome refused to follow the government. As a reaction to this situation, in 1950, Chinese Catholics who supported the CCP proposed the creation of a new “patriotic organisation” independent of the Vatican and with exclusively Chinese leadership. The Vatican did not support such a decision, and a new group of Catholics loyal to the Vatican emerged – the so-called underground church (*dixia jiaohui*). This church represents Catholic groups which are not approved by the government and are therefore technically illegal. This does not mean they are necessarily “hidden”, however, as Catholics belonging to such groups can have their own building and do not necessarily hold their meetings in secret; see Peter R. Moody, “The Catholic Church in China Today: The Limitations of Autonomy and Enculturation”, *Journal of Church and State* 55, 2012, 403-431: 403. The term “house church” refers to the Protestant groups which refuse to register with the official state-run Protestant association as they want to remain independent of government influence.

36 On this score, see Dana Robert, “The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement between the World Wars”, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26/2, 2002, 50-67; Peter Beyer, “De-centring Religious Singularity: The Globalization of Christianity as a Case in Point”, *Numen* 50/4, 2003, 357-386.

37 In this example, Zhejiang is a province of China, while Wenzhou is one city in the province. However, not all Christian groups in Zhejiang share the exact same experience. They have a similar cultural and historical background, but the social and economic conditions are different. Furthermore, religious policies that apply to Zhejiang province in general do not necessarily apply to Wenzhou, as Wenzhou has a more prominent number of Protestant Christians than the rest of the cities in the province. Wenzhou is even called “Chinese Jerusalem”. For this reason, the local government is more strict towards the Christian groups in Wenzhou. For more information about the Wenzhou Christians, see N. Cao, *Constructing China’s Jerusalem...*

to distinguish different denominations, but also to observe different historical, political and social influences. To refer to Christianity as a global phenomenon attempts to indicate that various Christian groups in China each have their specificities; that is, the Christian message is being spread among people with a distinctively different cultural, historical and political heritages. Researchers should, therefore, focus less on identifying the specificities of Chinese Christianity as such, and spend more time observing the dilemmas various local churches have to face during the process of proselytization, and the strategies and means available to religious groups working within Chinese societies. I argue that the scholarship needs to go beyond the schematic dichotomy of church-state relations and to focus on the dynamic relationships between church, state and society instead.

### **A different model of cooperation? Catholic Christians in the People's Republic of China**

Let us take Catholics in China united under the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA, *Zhongguo tianzhujiao aiguohei*) as an example. In Yang's system of "red", "black", and "grey" markets with respect to religion, the parishes united under the CCPA are categorised as the red market, as they are legal religious organizations officially allowed by the PRC's government. However, the triple-market approach forces us to view the whole experience of Catholics in China through the lens of one-dimensional church-state relations based on legal status.<sup>38</sup> The category of the red market does not tell us much about church activities, problems, or strategies. First of all, in terms of everyday activities, church members and local leaders operating in the red market are much closer to those operating in the grey market; that is, they are sometimes involved in activities which are not officially allowed – for example, pilgrimages or the religious education of children.<sup>39</sup> But what is more important, even when official churches are part of the red market, their leaders must still overcome certain differences with the regime. To carry out (even officially allowed)

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38 I understand that one cannot avoid reductionism when proposing any explanation of meaning in scholarship – reductionism occurs as soon as a researcher chooses to analyse a particular part of the participants' reality. We reduce the experience of people under study by labelling and selecting certain practices or shared ideas we want to learn more about. For more information, see Magdaléna Masláková – Anežka Satorová, "The Catholic Church in Contemporary China: How Does the New Regulation on Religious Affairs Influence the Catholic Church?", *Religions* 10/7, 2019, 446, 1-17.

39 Such types of activities often remain unnoticed by the government as long as church leaders maintain good relations with the local authorities and church actions do not promote any direct opposition to governmental policies.

Christian missions in contemporary China means continual negotiation with the totalitarian regime – and this should be studied in detail.

Since the late 1950s, Chinese Catholics united under the CCPA have generally supported the totalitarian communist regime. However, ever since the establishment of the PRC, the Chinese government has perceived Catholics to be closely connected to the Vatican, which itself has been considered a foreign entity involved in the internal affairs of the PRC. Therefore, despite attempting to practise indigenisation,<sup>40</sup> the Catholic Church has been repeatedly criticised for not being “Chinese enough”; it has been called foreign (*yangjiao*), and has been accused of being more loyal to foreigners than to the PRC.<sup>41</sup> If the Catholic Church is to continue its mission in the contemporary PRC, it must adapt to the local environment, which means following the directives of the CCP.

If we develop Gill’s suggestion that “[o]ne of the primary goals of most religious organisations is the maximisation (or retention) of parishioners”,<sup>42</sup> we can indeed assume that “successful mission” is an essential part of Christianity. To fulfil this ambition (the maximisation of believers) in Chinese societies, the church has had to adapt to the local environment – that is, it has had to create local churches (whether large or small). We can further assume that to achieve its aim of establishing itself on a lasting basis, the official churches need to negotiate with the government. Religious specialists established in authoritative Chinese environments face two main pressures: the demands of authoritarian rule, and the social pressure requiring them to assimilate to the local culture. Indigenisation (*bentuhua/bendihua*) and sinicisation, or China-isation (*zhongguohua*), are still urgent issues for Christian groups if they are to move inwards from the margins and reach their intended audience.

The term *bentuhua* can be translated as “indigenisation”, “localisation”, “nativisation” or “culturing”.<sup>43</sup> It is the broader social process of intentionally transmitting a system of ideas and values from one culture to another. It represents a process of maintaining long-term influential contact between different cultures. Every culture is a system which contains elements that are transformed during such contact. In most circumstances, one culture “borrows” certain elements from the other and the relative

40 For instance, various churches use Chinese language and music during sermons, while several groups have built churches following traditional Chinese architecture, and so on.

41 Beatrice Leung, “China’s Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity”, *The China Quarterly* 184, 2005, 894-913: 897.

42 A. J. Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar...*, 66.

43 On the issue of translating the term *bentuhua*, see Sharon R. Wesoky, “Politics at the Local-Global Intersection: Meanings of *Bentuhua* and Transnational Feminism in China”, *Asian Studies Review* 40/1, 2016, 53-69: 55.

contributions of one culture to the other are not equal. In the special kind of communication in which ideas and values are transmitted, these ideas and values need to be changed and adapted in order to influence the other society or culture. Unlike the process of “acculturation”, which represents a spontaneous and unconscious process, indigenisation or localisation is an intentional process – that is, a strategy.<sup>44</sup> In this paper, the process is seen as initiated by the church – it is a strategy employed by the church to make Christianity more attractive to a local environment.

On the other hand, the term *zhongguohua* (China-isation) has a different connotation. This term was first used at the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republic era by Christian missionaries. It was initially applied in the same sense as indigenisation to describe the process of making Christianity “more Chinese” and, therefore, more attractive to potential Chinese converts. However, in recent years, the term has been used by political representatives in the context of official state policy. In the political context, to sinicise (China-cise) a church does not mean to localise it – to make it more appealing to the local environment. On the contrary, the term China-isation has political overtones relating to the following of state dictates. It is therefore not a sociological term, but a political one – it refers to a new political discourse initiated by the CCP. *Zongjiao zhongguohua* (the “China-isation of religion”) is a part of a doctrine and policy introduced by the PRC’s president Xi Jinping as part of his vision for a New China.<sup>45</sup> To “make religion more suitable for China” does not necessarily have cultural connotations (*hanhua*), but rather means that everyone should follow the leadership and the official narrative of the Chinese regime. China-isation becomes a feature of church-state relations according to which the church must react to the state’s official demand for the localisation of the faith and follow the state’s directive. Therefore, I suggest that the term *zhongguohua* is not interchangeable with indigenisation (*bentuhua*).

44 See Antonio Gallo, “Introduction: Hermeneutics and Inculturation”, in: George F. McLean – Antonio Gallo – Robert Magliola (eds.), *Hermeneutics and Inculturation*, Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy 2003, 1-16: 8-9.

45 For more information on the China-isation and sinicisation of religion, see B. Vermander, “Sinicizing Religions...”; Kuei-min Chang, “New Wine in Old Bottles: Sinicisation and State Regulation of Religion in China”, *China Perspectives* 2018/1-2, 2018, 37-44. The general issue of indigenisation or sinicisation has a different connotation in the Taiwanese context – in this regard, I recommend Allan Chun, “From Sinicization to Indigenization in the Social Sciences: Is That All There Is?”, in: Arif Dirlik – Guannan Li – Hsiao-pei Yen (eds.), *Sociology and Anthropology in Twentieth-Century China: Between Universalism and Indigenism*, Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong 2012, 255-282.

Since 2018, the new Regulations on Religious Affairs (*Zongjiao shiwu tiaoli*) have been implemented. These promote the tighter control of religions and a new policy of China-isation (*zhongguohua*). In many ways, the updating of the legislation on religion in China highlights the CCP's long-lasting fear of separatism, of the influence of foreign entities, and of possible challenges to the Party. The Party and officials within the leadership of the CCPA have continually sought to create a narrative that projects the creation of a legal system that protects religious beliefs. The main novelties of the Regulations are: (1) a shift in the primary policy of the CCP back to the direct promotion of socialism;<sup>46</sup> (2) a new role for local government institutions in controlling religious activity;<sup>47</sup> (3) the control of religious schools;<sup>48</sup> (4) new restrictions on the dissemination of information;<sup>49</sup> and (5) supervision of the finances of religious institutions.<sup>50</sup> The Regulations appear to bring in rule *by law* (*yifa zhiguo*): while the rule *of law* should support the creation of a democratic society, rule *by law* allows the state to use legal norms to enforce its own interests.<sup>51</sup> The new Regulations aim to create a legal platform that legitimises the state control of all religious life in China, including that of Chinese Catholics.

Rather than create any opposition, the official Catholic Church in China has decided to continue following the state's directives. The leaders of the CCPA often support the CPP's official policy and try to link core socialist values to Christian dogma.<sup>52</sup> In this way, they connect their continuous aspiration for the localisation of the Christian faith with the government's demands for China-isation. Furthermore, in recent decades, the Vatican, as the representative of all Catholics worldwide, has initiated negotiations with the Chinese government. One outcome of these negotiations was the

46 Article 4: "Religious bodies, religious schools, sites for religious activities and religious citizens shall practice the core values of socialism." The Regulations (in Chinese) are available online: "Zhongjiao shiwu tiaoli" [online], <[http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content\\_5223282.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm)>, 1 February 2018 [3 June 2020]; translations into English are my own.

47 Article 6: "The government at the county level should be responsible for the leadership of religious affairs within its responsibilities."

48 In the new version of Regulations, a whole new chapter is dedicated to the management of religious education.

49 Article 46: "Importing religious publications and prints exceeding a reasonable amount for personal use, or using different means to import religious materials, shall comply with the relevant state's regulations."

50 For more information about the Regulations on Religious Affairs and its influence on the Catholics in China, see M. Masláková – A. Satorová, "The Catholic Church...".

51 The idea of rule of law and rule by law in the Chinese context is further developed in Martin Slobodník, *Mao a Buddha: Náboženská politika voči tibetskému buddhizmu v Číně* [Mao and Buddha: Religious Policy on Tibetan Buddhism in China], Bratislava: Chronos 2007.

52 M. Masláková – A. Satorová, "The Catholic Church...", 7.

signing of a provisional agreement between the PRC and the Vatican on the election of bishops in September 2018.<sup>53</sup> Catholics are often considered to be less involved in the church-state struggle, as their theological orthodoxy promotes harmonious cooperation with the ruling communist regime of the PRC. Pope Francis even appealed to all Chinese Catholics to “be good citizens, loving their homeland and serving their country with diligence and honesty, to the best of their ability”.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the official leadership of the CCPA churches implement high-level indoctrination through a mandatory patriotic training programme in theological seminaries. This programme is designed to produce priests who will finish their training as loyal subjects of the CCP; if they are not overtly loyal to the Party, they must at least acknowledge its leadership.<sup>55</sup>

The main aim of Catholic priests in the “open church”<sup>56</sup> is to protect the interests of their parishes. It is the government which decides whether any given religious activity gains legal status. The Catholic clergy have repeatedly declared their need to maintain good relationships (*guanxi*) with the local government, as maintaining such relationships may be seen as a question of survival.<sup>57</sup> For example, one priest once explained the situation this way: “[Socialism and Catholicism] have a different position on the question of beliefs. ... But, anyway, we need to follow the Party’s directive.”<sup>58</sup> Or another priest told me: “The Party can decide to shut down

53 The agreement, which effectively reunites Chinese Catholics with the Holy See, should not be considered an initiative of Pope Francis alone, but rather the outcome of a series of changes that have taken place within the Catholic Church over several decades in the wake of Vatican II. For more information about the agreement, see Magdaléna MaslÁková, “The Role of Successive Popes in the Process of Unification of the Church in China”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 19/2-3, 2019, 133-148.

54 “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Catholics of China and to the Universal Church” [online], <[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180926\\_messaggio-cattolici-cinesi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180926_messaggio-cattolici-cinesi.html)>, 26 September 2018 [5 April 2019]. This does not necessarily mean to support the communist regime *per se*, but to be obedient to civil laws and state regulations.

55 V. Goossaert – D. A. Palmer, *The Religious Question...*, 331.

56 The term “open church” refers to all churches officially recognized and allowed by the communist regime. In the case of Catholics, in opposition to open churches, there are the underground churches.

57 Beatrice Leung – Marcus J. J. Wang, “Sino-Vatican Negotiations: Problems in Sovereign Right and National Security”, *Journal of Contemporary China* 25/99, 2016, 467-482.

58 Interview, June 2019. The fieldwork was conducted in Zhejiang Province in 2018 and 2019. Data were collected during two fieldwork studies: the first from March to June 2018, and the second in May and June 2019. Both pieces of fieldwork combined semi-structured interviews, narrative interviews, and participant observation. For the field research, small cities near Hangzhou were chosen. The selected cities had comparatively small groups of Catholic believers. During the first fieldtrip, 15 people were



a church. But in this area, our relations with the government are good, therefore we can manage our church freely, and they would not close us down.”<sup>59</sup>

If relations are good, the collaboration can be mutually beneficial – government officials might turn a blind eye to certain church activities and, in return, receive no resistance from the church.<sup>60</sup> To name one example of such cooperation, in churches visited during fieldtrips in 2018 and 2019, children regularly attended church even though the CCP do not support children participating in religious activities. This behaviour was not suppressed by the local government. Another example is a pilgrimage to Sheshan, which takes place in May. Officially, only Catholics from Shanghai are allowed to attend the pilgrimage; however, there are always hundreds of believers from various parts of China.<sup>61</sup> Even local religious bureaus from different locations organise tourist buses for pilgrimages. Furthermore, policemen as well as volunteers from the CCP help with organising such events – they are well aware of the real backgrounds of the attendees.<sup>62</sup> Such behaviour is tolerated by the government as long as it does not explicitly oppose governmental policies. Mutual cooperation, even if uneven, might be preferred by the government, as religious groups can offer the state ideological support; after all, “churches specialize in the production and dissemination of norms and values”.<sup>63</sup> Christian churches following the CCP’s leadership might be seen as promoters of state propaganda. We can observe this in the current program of the CCPA connecting socialist values with Christian dogma.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, local religious leaders are often most concerned about survival and tend to cooperate with the regime. It seems to be more advantageous

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interviewed (5 priests and 10 nuns); during the second fieldtrip, 10 people were interviewed (4 priests and 6 nuns). Some were the same people interviewed during the previous fieldwork. In the interviews, priests and nuns, as local representatives of religious specialists and church officials, described the current situation of the church, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the PRC, and relationships with the foreign Catholic community. They did not represent the leadership of the CCPA. They were rather leaders of the local Catholic communities.

59 Interview, May 2019. For more information, see M. Masláková – A. Satorová, “The Catholic Church...”.

60 For more information, see V. Goossaert – D. A. Palmer, *The Religious Question...*

61 Richard Madsen – Lizhu Fan, “The Catholic Pilgrimage to Sheshan”, in: Yoshiko Ashiwa – David L. Wank (eds.), *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2009, 74-95.

62 Field notes from 2018-2019, unpublished.

63 A. J. Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar...*, 52.

64 This is highly visible in the official Catholic press – for instance, Zhi Yi Li, “Tianzhujiao xinyang yu shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan de jian xing” [The Catholic Dogma and the Core Socialist Values], *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao* [Catholic Church in China] 2019/1, 18-19.



for them to follow the regulations and keep their official state recognition instead of revolting and being banned. It is, after all, the government which can provide the resources needed for the normal functioning of the parish. Also, we should not forget that churches that do not cooperate with the regime must face “the police detention and house arrests of Christian worshippers and pastors”.<sup>65</sup> Such churches are not recognised by the state and have no legal status.

Government edicts are unilaterally imposed by the decision makers, the political elites, without much consideration for those affected by them. The relationship between the authoritarian government as the holder of power and the Christian group affected by the government’s pronouncements is a complex one. Even under an authoritarian regime, a Christian group may see itself as needing to develop a mutually supportive relationship with the state. I argue that a Christian group can take at least one of two main paths. It can struggle against the government and even mobilise direct opposition to it: as a hierarchical social group, it may have sufficient resources to organise its members “to oppose this form of domination, [and] actively demonstrate their physical presence in order to gain visibility and recognition of their needs and wills, demanding to be taken into consideration”.<sup>66</sup> Alternatively, it can seek to cooperate with the government to secure economic, cultural and symbolic resources. As Karrie J. Koesel explains:

Although the interests of religious and political authority differ, each side has a set of resources at its disposal that can be offered to the other to minimize uncertainty and meet strategic needs. For instance, government officials may attempt to establish cooperative relations with religious communities as a means of preserving political power, governing more efficiently, and diffusing local conflicts. At the same time, religious leaders may seek vertical alliances with the regime to safeguard their survival, gain access to resources, and promote their spiritual agenda.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed, very often, a religious group chooses partnership over conflict even if the state has subjected religion to many restrictive regulations. The cooperation can be considered to be more advantageous if there is still a space for negotiation and mutual benefit.<sup>68</sup> In the case of only one actor in the negotiations (the authoritarian state) profiting at the cost of the other,

65 Carsten T. Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God above Party?*, London – New York: Routledge 2018, 198.

66 Lev Luis Grinberg, *Mo(ve)ments of Resistance: Politics, Economy and Society in Israel/Palestine 1931-2013*, Boston: Academic Studies Press 2014, 39.

67 Karrie J. Koesel, *Religion and Authoritarianism: Cooperation, Conflict, and the Consequences*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2014, 5.

68 *Ibid.*, 14-16.

the other actor (the Christian group) loses their motivation to participate in the exchange or may even oppose the first actor.<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article, my aim was not to criticise unreservedly current approaches to the study of Christianity in China. For example, I in fact consider the triple-market model a useful theoretical tool, and I acknowledge that reduction is needed at least to some extent when a broader theory is created. However, I wanted to point out some challenges connected to the current state of scholarship on the Protestant and Catholic churches in the PRC. Yang claims that applying the triple market approach should help “to make invisible religions visible”, as it brings attention to religious groups without official state recognition. I fear, however, that as a side effect, the approach renders invisible those religious groups categorised as “red” – or at least it has sometimes led to the overlooking of complex negotiations between those groups and the government. It is problematic to see the whole complex situation only through the lens of the model of church resistance to state dominance. An objective of the scientific study of religion should be to explain and/or interpret “social phenomena like religion – in terms of causes that are wholly in the natural world”.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, we should react to both main discourses on Christianity in China, and confront them with empirical results. We need to avoid challenges by continually reflecting on the way our own belief systems and ideas, as well as dominant discourses (whether within academia or discourses shared by believers in the field), influence the research and interpretation of data. It is necessary to question even the most basic assumptions about the issue, and carefully analyse our own process of analysis. This textual turn should allow us to constructively reflect on our own position during research.<sup>71</sup> Particularly with respect to “open” Christian churches in the PRC – in a word, the red religious market – we should not neglect this group just because it does not oppose communist rule. Indeed, religious groups

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69 A. J. Gill, *Rendering unto Caesar...*, 49.

70 Donald Wiebe, “Religious Biases in Funding Religious Studies Research?”, *Religio: Revue pro religionistiku* 17/2, 2009, 125-140: 135. Here, I have adopted a quotation from Wiebe’s critique of religious and theological agendas in the scientific research of religion. Even if his objection is aimed at one particular issue, I believe it can be applied to different areas of personal agenda within any research.

71 For the textual turn, see Zdeněk Konopásek, “Text a textualita v sociálních vědách (Část třetí: Reflexivní impuls)” [Text and Textuality in Social Science], *Biograf* 9, 1996, 7-15; Norman K. Denzin – Yvonna S. Lincoln, “Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research”, in: iid. (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* [e-book], Los Angeles: SAGE<sup>5</sup>2018, 31-76.



categorized as the red market need our attention precisely because choosing cooperation instead of opposition is not unproblematic. Religious leaders often make decisions about the most effective strategy for the group and its members. However, as interactions between religion and government are often obscure, it is always possible for conflict to occur under totalitarian rule. As shown in the case of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, cooperation between the government and a religious group is a complex issue that should be the subject of research.

## SUMMARY

**Negotiations between Christian Communities and Authoritarian China: Some Comments on the Current State of Scholarship on Christianity in China**

This article aims to critically evaluate the current state of research into the Protestant and Catholic Churches in the Chinese context. It introduces two main academic discourses on Christianity in China; it also mentions some challenges connected to the use of the triple-market approach proposed by Yang Fenggang, and extensively used by many scholars of Chinese religions today. Instead of employing the market approach, I believe in the need to confront the main discourses with empirical data. In the article, I use the example of the official Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which is categorised as a “red” religious market supporting communist rule. As such, the churches united under this body are often neglected by researchers, as they are perceived as “unproblematic” – and, therefore, do not support the narrative of Christian groups victimized by the Chinese government. Nonetheless, the Christian churches (or any religious groups within the “red” market) need our scholarly attention, as choosing cooperation instead of opposition is not unproblematic – and various processes of negotiation between a religious group and the government should be included in the research.

**Keywords:** Christianity in China; Religious Studies; the triple-market approach; religion and politics; church-state relations; Catholic Church; Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

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