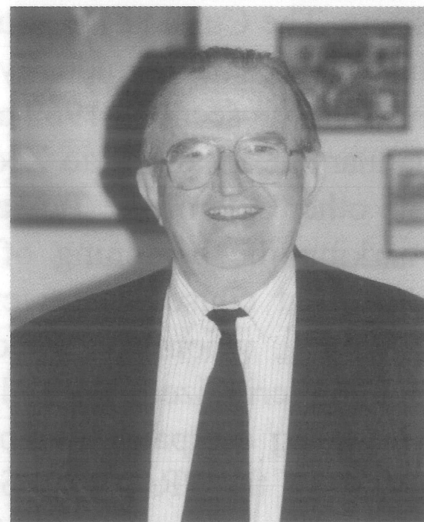


From China-watchers to Partners in China Mission—Reflections at the Silver Jubilee of Holy Spirit Study Centre

Jerome Heyndrickx, CICM

A look at the past to better understand the future

The Holy Spirit Study Centre has existed for 25 years. This silver jubilee offers us an occasion to celebrate the progress made by the China Mission during the past quarter century. Up to the time when Holy Spirit Study Centre started in October 1980, we were merely *China-watchers*, unable to visit China and trying to understand it only from the outside. Today, 25 years later, we have become *Partners in China Mission*, involved in concrete programs of cooperation, helping to rebuild the local Chinese Church. We have covered a considerable distance. In this article I do not intend to describe the whole history of the evolution that took place. I only want to remind ourselves of the reflections and discussions that went on when Holy Spirit Study Centre was born. This jubilee invites us to evoke the situation of the PRC and our relationship with China 25 years ago, compare it with where we stand now, and realize the great distance the China Mission has covered during this time. In other words, we want to look at the past in order to better understand our missionary task towards China in the years ahead.



Historic changes in the PRC and on the world scene during the 1970's

1980 was the end of an era for *China-watchers*. Missionaries who had been expelled from China during the fifties could only "watch" China from a distance, read newspapers, listen to the radio and then guess what really went on in China, especially during the Cultural Revolution. In the 1970's *China-watching* became a common practice because everybody sensed that changes were about to happen. It was a time of dramatic changes on the China scene. The Cultural Revolution came to an end. The leading figures in the PRC were gradually disappearing. Liu Shaoqi and Lin Biao had left the scene in 1969 and 1971 respectively. Zhou Enlai died in January 1976 and Mao Zedong in September of the same year. On the other side of the Taiwan Strait, Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975, marking the beginning of a historical new era for Taiwan with important consequences even for today. After Zhou died, Deng Xiaoping, whom everybody expected to take Zhou's place, was publicly criticized. But only months later, soon after Mao died, the anti-Deng campaign stopped, and Deng rose to become the new leader of the PRC. The Gang of Four—Jiang, Wang, Zhang, and Yao—was blamed for all the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. No blame came to Mao himself. While the big pictures of Marx and Lenin disappeared from Tiananmen, the one of Mao remains to this day. An imposing Mao mausoleum opened on Tiananmen Square in 1977. Millions of volumes of Mao's *Selected Works* were sold. But while all this went on, each of us could read the signs of the times, namely that China was opening up to an orchestrated new future, where the Maoism of the past would be replaced by a new set of values. After the PRC became a member of the UN, the scene was set for historic developments during the decades to come.

Parallel with the changes inside the PRC, sudden changes happened in other countries as well. Some important evolutions took place in China's relations with foreign countries too. In 1971, Pope Paul VI made a stopover in Hong Kong during a visit to Asia, accompanied by Cardinal Cassaroli. The Holy Father had prepared a speech in which he planned to address some words to the PRC. However, neighboring governments were apparently not ready for this, and they convinced the pope to omit the most important parts

of his speech. President Nixon went to China in 1972, but the Watergate scandal later forced him out of office. Around the same time in Japan, Premier Tanaka was also accused of wrongdoing and forced out of office. In Russia Leonid Brezhnev took power, while in India Premier Ghandi lost her majority in Parliament.

Breakthrough for *China Study*

How did ordinary Church people get information about the PRC during the decades before Holy Spirit Study Centre and its journal, *Tripod*, started? Ever since the missionaries were expelled from the PRC during the 1950's, it was difficult to obtain information about China. Beginning in 1947 the National Council of Churches of the USA in New York published the *China Bulletin/China Notes*.¹ The *China Missionary* published in Shanghai in 1948 appeared in Hong Kong in 1949 as the *China Missionary Bulletin*. It changed its title again in 1953 to *Mission Bulletin*. Also in 1953 the Jesuit Laszlo Ladany began publishing the famous *China News Analysis*, which did not exclusively focus on Church news, but provided information on a broad spectrum of subjects within Communist China. In 1957 Tao Feng Shan in Hong Kong began publishing *Ching Feng*. A number of other publications also appeared, which would provide occasional information on religion in the PRC. Examples of these were: *Echange France-Asie* published by the MEP in Paris beginning in 1949, and *Religion in Communist Dominated Areas* published in New York beginning in 1961. Pro Mundi Vita (Brussels) published monographs on China beginning in 1968, and the Lutheran World Federation's Marxism & China Study group published its *Information Letter* beginning 1972.

The growing interest in the PRC worldwide during that time is further illustrated by the growing number of new publications that appeared in the course of the 1970's: *China Talk* (Methodists), *China and Ourselves* (Canadian Council of Churches), *China Study Project Bulletin* (British ecumenical China study group), *Religion*

¹ Data that follow are taken from "The Christian China-Watchers," by Parig Digan, Brussels, Pro Mundi Vita, 1978.

in *Communist Lands* (Keston College), and the many publications from the Chinese Church Research Center, Hong Kong, by Jonathan Chao. Much information could also be gleaned from other monthlies and weeklies, such as *Fides* (Rome), *Sunday Examiner* and *Kung Kao Po* (Hong Kong), *Herder Korrespondenz* (Freiburg), *Informations Catholiques Internationales* (Paris), and *International Review of Mission* (Geneva).

Christian China-watchers offered contradictory readings of the China situation

It is interesting and important to note that all these publications represented a broad spectrum of understanding and interpretations about the situation in the PRC: from the far right to the far left. In Father Ladany's *China News Analysis* one would generally find factual and objective information on the PRC. One could also read Father Ladany's personal observations on the extermination of Christianity in China. On the other hand Ray Whitehead, then director of The China Program of the Canadian Council of Churches, looked at the PRC through quite different glasses. He wrote in his 1977 paper on "*Christ, Salvation and Maoism*" that in China one found salvation, faith, hope, love, struggle, sacrifice and spirituality. His paper questioned whether Christians have any advantage over Maoists in terms of theism versus atheism.² These different views emerged later at international conferences on Christianity in China.

China study circles set up by Catholic missionary congregations

A new interest in China had started in Protestant circles as early as the 1960's. From 1966 to 1970 conferences were held in Geneva, Hong Kong, Montreal, and Hayward's Heath (England). In the USA the National Council of Churches and the United Presbyterian Church sponsored conferences. They took a rather positive view of the PRC. During the early seventies some attempts were made by Catholics and Protestants together to set up a

² Ibid., p. 19.

“Christian China Institute” in cooperation with Sedos, but it never materialized. Instead several independent initiatives to set up China study circles emerged in the Catholic Church, mostly within missionary congregations. Examples of these were the MEP (Leon Triviere and J. Charbonnier), PIME (A. Lazzarotto), OFM (B. Willeke), SAM (Van Campenhout), CICM (Dries Van Coillie and J. Spae), and the Columbans (Parig Digan). Contacts developed among those in charge of Catholic and Protestant study centers. In Hong Kong, during that time, the Chung Chi College Seminar took place (1975), Jonathan Chao planned his ambitious “Chinese Church (and Culture) Research Centre” (1977) and Catholics exchanged views on the PRC in the first Ricci Study Team Meetings. That was the background to the start of the Holy Spirit Study Centre on October 1, 1980.

The *China Study Project*, which was set up in London in 1972, not only had links with Scotland and Ireland, but also with Pro Mundi Vita (Brussels) and other European centers. On the European continent the *China Study Project* of the Lutheran World Federation developed in cooperation with Pro Mundi Vita (Brussels). This LWF-PMV link became a liaison channel for all Christians concerned with China and for those who wished to exchange new visions on the China Mission.

The Bastad and Louvain Conferences (1974)

Out of this LWF-PMV liaison developed two important China conferences, both held in 1974: the Bastad and Louvain China Conferences. From the words of Jan Kerkhofs, SJ, one of the organizers of the conferences, one understands a great deal of the spirit in which the events in the PRC were observed overseas at that time: *In this colloquium what we are seeking after is somehow or other to “read” the works of God accomplished through the Chinese people...and we admit quite explicitly that our Christian faith is really being challenged by the Chinese experience, not only as regards its commitment but also as regards its content.*³

³ Cf. back cover of *Christianity and the New China*, by LWF-PMV, South Pasadena, California: Ecclesia Publications.

Donald Macinnis of the Midwest China Study Resource Center added: *The published papers and reports, representing the work of nearly 100 Protestant and Catholic scholars, reflect an attitude of self-appraisal and a common search for theological understanding in a situation so profoundly changed that few of the old landmarks are recognizable.*⁴ The Louvain China Conference was exceptional, not only for the content of the papers but also because it was *the only single conference that combined representation from all six continents, and from the three main divisions of Christendom.*⁵ Opposing viewpoints, such as those represented by Ladany and Whitehead, were expressed at these conferences. Divergent viewpoints were represented by such speakers as Julia Ching, Joseph Spae, Richard Madsen, Rhea Whitehead, Gustavo Gutierrez, Louis Wei Tsing-sing, Jerome Ch'en and others. Everyone was struggling with the question on how to understand the PRC. Each speaker represented, in the words of Parig Digan, only his or her own ideas. All this happened while the Cultural Revolution was still raging in the PRC, and the Chinese people were criticizing Lin Biao and Confucius (*pi Lin, pi Kong*). The Louvain Conference should therefore not be seen as the expression of a new Christian vision of the PRC. Participants were feeling their way through a wide variety of viewpoints on the PRC. At best they felt that they were in the first phase of a long quest. In the course of the 25 years that followed one can find these different viewpoints still reflected in Holy Spirit Study Centre's *Tripod*. There have been significant developments, but the two diverging viewpoints are still there.

During the second half of the seventies, Arne Sovik organized separate LWF conferences in Arnoldshain (1976), London (1977), and Bruges (1979). At the same time Jan Kerkhofs initiated "Catholics in Europe Concerned with China (CECC)" which met in Munich (1975), Paris (1975), Bruges (1976), Paris (1977), and Rome (1978). Towards the end of the seventies everybody felt that momentous changes were about to take place in the PRC.

⁴ Cf. back cover of *ibid.*

⁵ Cf. Parig Digan, *ibid.*, p. 24.

The 80's and 90's: a time of dialogue and *partnership in China Mission*

When Deng Xiaoping came to power, the PRC opened up for cooperation with the outside world. Joint ventures were initiated, and programs of cultural and scientific exchange were launched with foreign universities and agencies. Chinese students went to study in the USA and in Europe. Freedom of religious belief was reintroduced in China, and foreign tourists could more easily obtain visas to visit China. It was the beginning of a new era in the life of Chinese citizens. The new openness was felt also in the field of religion: priests were released from prison and labor camps, church buildings were reopened and Catholics were allowed to attend Mass. Some major seminaries even reopened. Some bishops and priests, who were released from prison, declined the offer to cooperate with the civil authorities to rebuild the Church because they were asked to join the Catholic Patriotic Association, and be independent of the Holy See. It was in this context that Cardinal J.B. Wu of Hong Kong saw the signs of the times and established the Holy Spirit Study Centre. It received the support of several missionary congregations, including PIME, MEP, CICM and Maryknoll. The journal *Tripod* became its channel for sharing information to all those concerned with the Church in China.

Parallel with this, other initiatives developed elsewhere. In Singapore the China Catholic Communication (Zhonglian Centre) started; at Louvain University the Verbiest Foundation started; in Rome Tianxia Yijia; in Sankt Augustin (Germany) China Zentrum; in the USA the Catholic China Bureau. Each center also published its own journal: *Zhonglian*, *Verbiest Courier*, *China Heute*. In the course of the eighties and nineties the LWF-PMV encounters developed into the triennial *European Ecumenical China Conference* and the triennial *European Catholic China Colloquium*. The Catholic China Bureau in the USA has for the last 21 years held a yearly Catholic China Conference. Colleagues of the above mentioned centers periodically gather informally at the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong. These centers and conferences became channels of dialogue with China. They tried to re-establish the link between the local Chinese Church and the Universal Church. They also foster better relations between the Chinese Church and Chinese

society. In the course of the eighties more and more Chinese colleagues have participated in these meetings, and have published articles in the various journals. A new type of relationship of foreign missionaries with China has developed. Missionaries do not live and work in China, except for a limited time and for a well-defined work. They have gradually become involved in missionary activities of cooperation and exchange to build up the local Chinese Church. They have become *Partners in the China Mission*.

Some historical missionary challenges faced by the Chinese Church today

A quarter of a century ago, we could only “watch” China from the outside. Today, after 25 years of dialogue, we join our Chinese Christian brothers and sisters as they reflect on the missionary challenges they face. It appears that these are historical challenges, which, if we are able to deal with them, could offer the Chinese Church a unique chance to pass beyond many of the past misunderstandings of its history.

How does the Church in China relate to the majority of Chinese, who are atheists? Some are atheist by conviction; others became prejudiced against Christianity under the influence of historic events from past centuries, or as the result of the propaganda of the past fifty years. First there was the Rites Controversy in the 17th to 18th century; then the unequal treaties and Boxer Uprising of the 19th century; and finally the Cultural Revolution of the 20th century. The result of all this is that Christianity in China remains quite isolated. Its adherents make up only a tiny minority of the population, and they are frequently looked down upon. If the Chinese Church could reconcile with society, and be accepted as a Chinese religion—not a foreign element—and be given space to be fully part of Chinese society, would that not be a tremendous step forward? This is perhaps the primary challenge faced by the Chinese Church today.

We observe that over the past fifty years the Universal Church has been trying to dialogue with society. Pope John Paul II was a pioneer in dialogue with China. In 2001, he went as far as to apologize for the misunderstandings of the past. Even though the

PRC ignored his apology at the time he made it, it expressed its appreciation for it two days after Pope John Paul's death. The PRC has dropped its previous policy of seeking to destroy religion. It does not consider religion as "the opium for the people" any more. In fact, it has given it the special task of fighting the moral decline in society. Is dialogue possible? Apparently, yes. The necessary structures for dialogue exist in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. However, it seems that attempts to dialogue have not been successful so far. Part of the Church has agreed to cooperate with the government (the "official community"). But the other part (the "underground") has refused. This is because the government still obliges Christians to establish a Church that is independent from Rome. Some bishops and priests are still subject to arrest because of that obligation. This attitude of the government contradicts its official policy, which Jiang Zemin stated in December 2002, namely to treat religions with respect for their beliefs. As a result of this failure to dialogue, the Church became internally divided. Yet, in spite of this, one cannot deny that dialogue remains the direction for both the Chinese government and the Church to take in order to pass beyond the dramas of the past.

Chinese society seems to be much in favor of dialogue with Christianity. Today there are more than 35 centers in Chinese universities for the study of Christianity. Even though they limit their study to academic research, one must still regard these centers as invitations to dialogue. The "Holy Spirit Study Centre Jubilee" reminds us that we should do more creative missionary planning with these centers. We should enter into programs of cooperation and exchange with them, discussing such common issues as ethics and social concerns. Christianity has a positive message in these areas, which can help society deal with some of the most complex issues facing it today. Missionaries may not be officially invited to play a direct role in building up the local Church, but they can be allowed to participate directly in such exchange programs. In this way, even if they remain at a distance, they are truly *Partners in China Mission*.

Recreating internal unity and updating the Church community: two main challenges

Today thousands of Chinese citizens are moved by the message of the gospel, and are interested in entering the Church. How does the Church welcome them? What kind of faith does the Chinese Church introduce to them? It is encouraging that RCIA (Rites for the Initiation of Adults) programs are being introduced in several dioceses in China. But here we are confronted with our main problem: the internal division of the Church. Christians celebrate their unity in the one Love of the same Father. But they celebrate separately in two communities—official and non-official, which do not communicate with each other. The Church is thus in danger of losing its credibility. Moreover, there is a Church document (the '8 points,' issued in 1988) that discourages the Christians of the two communities from celebrating the Eucharist together. When will a high Church official take away this ambiguity, and openly encourage Christians in China to celebrate Mass together? Holy Spirit Study Centre's *Tripod* has played a role in promoting reconciliation in the past, and it will have to continue to play this role in the future.

Is a breakthrough in normalizing Sino-Vatican relations near?

The ordination of Father Xing Wenzhi as Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai has been announced by some in the media as a kind of breakthrough towards normalization of Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations. It was said that both the Chinese government and the Vatican agreed on the appointment of the new Auxiliary Bishop. But then some local civil authorities said that they did not even know about the appointment of Xing by the Vatican. The voice of an unidentified authority of the Chinese Patriotic Association repeated on TV in Beijing that *the PRC has no diplomatic relations with the Vatican*, implying that in the absence of such relations, the PRC could not possibly have agreed with the Vatican. People are confused. Most likely there was no agreement. Rather, both entities, China and the Vatican, recognize Bishop Xing separately.

Since the death of Pope John Paul II, both the PRC and the Vatican have given clear signs that they are willing to normalize

relations. That in itself, and the manner by which both sides announced it, is new, but it means only that both sides are ready to negotiate, not that there is already an agreement. Perhaps some of us have been a bit too anxious to hear that the final breakthrough has happened. That would have been wishful thinking. Some Church bodies created the impression that a breakthrough was about to be announced. However, the problems to be solved are many and complex, and are not limited to just "foreign relations." Only Vatican and Chinese diplomats, versed in both foreign relations and Church law, are capable of dealing with them. This kind of negotiations takes time. To announce a breakthrough when it is not mature does not help. It may even harm the cause of reconciliation.

Regarding this question of Sino-Vatican relations, we have seen slow but steady progress ever since the 1980's. In the eighties when some official bishops started to apply to the Holy See to have their government appointments legitimized by the Holy See, they did so secretly, for fear of an adverse reaction by the government. The government obviously disagreed with these applications. But when the authorities learned about the bishops contacting Rome, there was not much of a reaction. And so, over the years, the "secret" that some official bishops were recognized and appointed by the Pope became a *de facto* situation, known by many both inside and outside the Church. This was an important positive development, and it seems to have gone peacefully.

Since the 1990's, some younger Chinese priests have been appointed bishops. It was clear to all, including the government, that the Chinese Catholics want their bishops to be appointed by the Pope. All the Chinese candidates selected by the government to become "official bishops" (even those who were forced to be ordained on Epiphany 2000) found a way to apply to have their ordinations approved by Rome. Some of them succeeded, some not. The government knew this, but in this case they also let it happen. And so, several young bishops were ordained with a public and official appointment by the Chinese government, and a separate appointment by the Holy Father. I see this as a peaceful evolution towards a solution of the question of Sino-Vatican relations, that is, negotiating without words, or *closing one eye and while keeping*

one eye open. The Shanghai appointment and ordination is another natural fruit of this *negotiation without words.*

Today, twenty years after the beginning of this evolution, we note that there has already been great progress. Both Beijing and Rome were even able to pass beyond the critical impasses of the “Epiphany event” and the “canonization event.” The recent China visits of some cardinals have undoubtedly contributed to reintroducing the correct, friendly atmosphere that opens the door for starting the negotiations. We must now let these negotiations take their course.

Challenges for the future: the internal unity of the Chinese Church and unity with Rome

The jubilee of the Holy Spirit Study Centre augurs the beginning of a new phase for the Chinese Church. However, normalizing Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations is a rather complex and delicate process, which is to be conducted by diplomats only. They do not work in the limelight of the media. Only a mature agreement will benefit both the PRC and the Vatican. The agreement must also include normalization of the life of the Catholic Church in China. This means that Catholics be allowed to express their unity with the Pope. Catholics must also rebuild unity among themselves. On the day this breakthrough happens, the old Chinese bishops will be most delighted. They are now, one by one leaving us to meet the Lord, after they prayed, hoped, and struggled for several decades to bring this about. The new phase that now begins will see a young generation of Chinese bishops take over direction of the Chinese Church. The challenges they face are many. Christians have high expectations of them. First of all they want their shepherds to have a true concern for reconciliation and unity among the flock. Secondly, shepherds must be open for dialogue with society and with the government. It looks indeed as if this jubilee of Holy Spirit Study Centre will be the beginning of yet another phase in the history of the Chinese Church, bringing with it new challenges, but hopefully also new achievements.