

Urbanization: Challenges for the Church in China

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General Data on Urbanization in China

The purpose of this paper focuses directly on the practical challenges, which the ongoing process of urbanization is raising for the Church in China. It is not concerned about the social problems that urbanization creates, such as traffic and living congestion, air pollution, poor architectural planning and quality of housing, etc. Even for the statistical data and the history of the process, the article just provides the minimum information, which can be useful to draw out and to understand the reasons for the challenges, which are facing the Church.

Let us start with the basic statistics. China is in the midst of an incredibly rapid process of urbanization. According to the official estimate, by the end of 2012, mainland China had an urban population of 712 million persons or 52.6% of the total population, thus overtaking its rural counterpart. According to predictions, nearly 70% of the population will live in urban areas by 2035.

However, China's statistics regarding the urban population can be misleading due to the various criteria used to calculate the urban population. Comparing the data year by year of the official statistics, many contradictions appear. For instance, comparing the data of the official statistics of *A statistical Survey of China* (中国统计摘要) issued by the State Statistics Bureau (中国统计部) for the years 1990 and 1991, the contradiction is evident: the 1990 book for cities and towns gives a population of 574,940,000, surpassing the rural population of 536,970,000, while the 1991 book gives 301,910,000 for the former and 841,420,000 for the latter and adjusts the percentages for the previous years. What was the reason? There are indeed real difficulties to get correct demographic data on the population, and to define what is meant by the 'urban area.'

Consequently, it is hard to gather objective data in a country as vast as China. Moreover, strong political concerns might prevent the authorities from admitting an increase in the percentage of urban citizens, since that would require giving them more privileges and advantages compared to the rural population. Only when the residence identity (hukou 戶口) will be totally abolished and people can freely move their residence with the expectation of equal treatment, then more objective statistics will be assured.

But, no matter what the statistics are, the history of the urbanization process is more objective. The Chinese authorities have been always aware of the danger of sharp differences between the urban and rural areas, which can be a cause of antagonism within the country. But their practical concern was to keep the agricultural foundation of the nation's economy as a support for its industrialization. China has always been an agricultural and pastoral country. Migration to urban areas had been restricted since the late 1950s. The urban population, however, grew steadily from 1950 to 1965, registering a significant jump in the period 1958-1961, during the *Great Leap Forward* (大躍進). This was due to the great efforts put into industrialization. During the Cultural Revolution years, 1965-1975, urban population growth dropped as a result of the *Down to the Countryside Campaign* (下放). However, after the reform and opening up policy launched at the end of 1978, urban population growth began to accelerate at a fast pace, due to the economic emphasis and foreign investments, especially in the large cities.

Faced with this phenomenon of increased migration from the countryside to the large cities, the Chinese authorities made use of two measures to deal with it: regulating the flow of the migration and reducing it by developing cities in the rural areas. The idea was to provide jobs and urban residence to rural people, without having them move to the already overcrowded cities.

Concerning migration, the migrant workers increased to more than 200 millions early this century. They suffered flagrant abuses and violations, including hard and long hours of work with low pay, job instability, wage defaults, unsafe working and living conditions, lack of social insurance benefits and assistance, denial of contracts, exclusion from public health, few educational chances for their children, exorbitant fees and fines, and discrimination from urban

residents and officials. The authorities issued some regulations, extending some rights to the migrants, following the Laws related to Labor Contracts (2007), and Mediation and Arbitration of Employment Disputes (2007). But in fact, abuses and consequently complaints persisted. Moreover, with the world financial crisis in 2008, 20 million migrant workers were said to have lost their jobs, forcing them to return home. Consequently the Chinese authorities became worried about finding jobs for returnees, for fear of a possible increase in crime, social disorder and collective protests.¹

From 1982 to 1986, the urban population increased dramatically. The jump resulted from a combination of factors. One was the migration of large numbers of surplus agricultural workers from rural to urban areas. Another was a 1984 decision to broaden the criteria for classifying an area as 'urban.' The development of new cities in rural area was going on, and people moved from villages to them. There they were provided with residences, jobs and other conveniences. Consequently, the urban town population increased greatly. In the mid-1980s, demographers expected the proportion of the population living in cities to equal that of the rural areas. This would come about primarily as a result of an increase in the number of small- and medium-sized cities, rather than from an expansion of existing large cities. In fact, in 1985, with the mega-cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin and Shenyang, the 22 most populous cities in China had a total population of 47.5 million, or about 12 percent of China's total urban population. The number of cities with populations of at least 100,000 increased from 200 in 1976 to 342 in 1986. In 2005, China had 286 cities, most of which had a population of about one million, with Shanghai and Beijing topping the list.

A McKinsey study reports: *"If current trends hold, China's urban population will hit the one billion mark by 2030. In 20 years, China's cities will have added 350 million people more than the entire population of the United States today. By 2025, China will have 221 cities with one million-plus inhabitants — compared with*

¹ Linda WONG, "Chinese Migrant Workers: Rights Attainment Deficits, Rights Consciousness and Personal Strategies", in *The China Quarterly*, December 2011, 208, 870-892, p. 871.

35 cities of this size in Europe today — and 23 cities with more than five million. Yet the expansion of China's cities will represent a huge challenge for local and national leaders. Of the slightly more than 350 million people that China will add to its urban population by 2025, more than 240 million will be migrants. This growth will imply major pressure points.”²

Challenges for the Church

From the present situation of the urbanization process in China, the main challenges confronting the Church seem to be the following.

First, considering the situation of the migrant workers, due to their large numbers and the percentage of their occupational backgrounds, which, according to recent surveys,³ are 34.2 % farmers and 36.7% students, with married persons outnumbering single persons (52.7% versus 46.2%), they certainly include Catholic believers among them. Therefore, the challenge for the urban churches is how to look for and make contact with them, in order to introduce them into the local church communities, and prevent them from losing their faith. Then, after finding them, it is necessary to provide them with a solid Christian instruction, through catechesis, religious literature and the administration of sacraments.

Through contact with these Catholics, the entire migrant group could become a proper target for the evangelization efforts of the local church. The local church community could assist them in their difficulties adjusting to a new life, support them in receiving just treatment against abuses (though this is a quite sensitive issue!), and provide their children with possibilities to obtain proper schooling. Contacts with university students, coming from other places, should receive special attention because of their open attitude.

² http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/urbanization/preparing_for_urban_billion_in_china.

³ Linda WONG, “Chinese Migrant Workers: Rights Attainment Deficits, Rights Consciousness and Personal Strategies”, in *The China Quarterly*, December 2011, 208, 870-892, p. 877.

Among the migrants to the large cities, like Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou, are Catholics from places with a long and strong Catholic tradition (such as areas in Hebei, Fujian, and Zhejiang [Wenzhou in particular]). They flock together and live in close, tight-knit communities (based upon clan relationships, acquaintance and common interests). They tend to help one another in all aspects of life, including religion. They even invite priests from their places of origin to assist and minister to them. The challenge for these communities is to overcome the temptation to keep a closed 'ghetto' mentality and behavior, taking care only of themselves, without any contact with, and service to, the local Catholic community.

Secondly, challenges arise from the development of the new cities themselves. The challenges are not only to help migrant Catholics adjust to a new way of life, but also to build new structures such as meeting places, chapels or mass centers, and to keep them united in a more cosmopolitan environment. The new cities should be favored as sites for constructing new churches and centers, overcoming the emotional trend to build a church back in the old village, as was the tendency in the past, since there is the danger that these villages will, sooner or later, be deserted. Moreover, the church in the city should set up information centers and meeting places, where migrants could get information and meet people.

The general challenge of the urbanization process for the Church, both in the old and new Chinese cities, is to find new evangelization methods, more suitable and effective to the urban environment. Since the evangelization methods in China are traditional and related to the rural context, this challenge becomes quite urgent and meaningful. First of all, life in the city requires a change of mentality, especially among the clergy, that is to overcome the 'parochial attitude', of working autonomously as 'king in one's own parish or district.' Priests need to learn to adopt a new way of exercising authority, to closely cooperate and plan with the bishop, with other priests, sisters and lay leaders, dividing not geographical areas, but services and functions among themselves. Common services, such as the training of leaders, teaching catechumens, student and youth formation programs, pre-matrimonial courses, etc. should preferably be carried out on the

urban level. The day to day pastoral duties, like the administration of the sacraments and social concerns, especially for families, the sick and poor people, should be left to the Mass centers or churches.

The needs of people should challenge Catholics to make every effort to meet them. Solidarity, sharing, the diligent performance of one's duties and humble charitable services are an effective means of Christian witness. Personal outreach should be a priority, since it is through these contacts by Catholics, which in the city become easier due to the reduced distance, that many people will be attracted to the Catholic faith. Small communities are to be preferred to larger ones, except for special celebrations, but communities should keep contact and cooperation among themselves.

Cities create individualistic attitudes and isolation. Therefore, another challenge for the Church is to increase cultural communication both among Catholics and with other people, not only through personal contacts, but also through publications, literature and the mass media. The internet is especially useful here. Since the education level of the urban population is generally higher than that in the countryside, efforts should be made to prepare and publish more suitable literature (Church news and information periodicals, books, audio-visual aids, videos, movies, etc.), aimed at presenting the Christian faith to non-Christians and particularly to intellectuals. In urban settings and in mobile societies, it seems quite necessary to have more Church clubs and associations, as well as activity centers, where Catholics and friends can spend their free time in a suitable environment.

Urbanization can indeed have a negative effect on Religion, since large cities make people more self-centered and anonymous, as well as provide more numerous materialistic temptations for enjoying comforts and pleasure. However, at the same time, it can become a better environment for communicating the Gospel, spreading the Christian faith and building up witnessing communities. We must remember that the early Church was mainly formed in urban communities, while the "*pagans*" were people who lived in the "*pagi*" (Latin for 'villages'). Thus, urban settings need not be detrimental to the growth of the Church, but can be fertile ground in which good seeds will grow.