Reflections Based on a Recent Visit to Northern China: Urbanization and How the Local Church Responds

Cynthia Pon

> *It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but "by attraction"* (The Joy of the Gospel, 15; *in Latin* Evangelii Gaudium, *henceforth* EG).
>
> *Cities are multicultural ... Various subcultures exist side by side, and often practise segregation and violence. The Church is called to be at the service of a difficult dialogue. On the one hand, there are people who have the means needed to develop their personal and family lives, but there are also many "non-citizens", "half citizens" and "urban remnants" ... with any number of obstacles to the full development of their lives* (EG 74).

Some friends and I visited the Church in northern China in 2014. One of the things that struck us during our visit to rural dioceses was the sprouting of high-rise buildings next to corn fields and in some cases just around the corner from convents or seminaries.

In this reflection, I wish to focus on the issue of urbanization, by taking into account new government policies, and reflecting on its impact on the developments of the local Church.

Let There Be Towns and Cities

In March 2014, the Chinese government issued a *National New Urbanization Plan 2014-2020*, following the 18th Party

Congress and the country's 12th Five-Year Plan (see http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2014-03/16/content_2640075.htm).

China has had an astounding economic transformation. Over the last two decades, many agricultural workers have already left their home in villages to seek a better life in towns and coastal cities. The government now wants to speed up urbanization—but in a strategic manner—to increase wealth, and to fix a host of social and environmental problems created by unruly and unplanned urbanization.

One of the chief objectives is to create **a new urban class that will boost domestic consumption**. This will spur, in addition, new infrastructures, social services and housing construction. All this will be the engine of economic growth.

46.1% of China's GDP now comes from service industries, compared with an average of 74% in developed countries. With urbanization comes the aggregation of people, lifestyle changes, and increase in living standards that should drive innovation and improvement in industries.

Average land-holding per family farm in China is 0.6 hectares (= 9 mu 畝). China has been plagued by the "three agricultural problems" (the backwardness of agricultural industries, the poverty of villages and of farmers). Excess agricultural labour and the lack of land and water resources impede economies of scale. Urbanization can free up land to enable scaled-up and mechanized farming. (A cautionary note: in developed countries which practise industrial agriculture that favours monoculture and depends heavily on chemical fertilizers and insecticides, high yield is accompanied by ecological damage. Another by-product, "fast-food nations," incurs high healthcare and social costs.)

The government admits development has been lopsided. In the three big-city-clusters (Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei, the Yangtze river delta, and the Pearl River delta), 18% of the country's population live on 2.8% of the land, and produce 36% of GDP. On average, 62.2% of residents in eastern areas are urban-dwellers, while the rates in western and central regions lag behind. Through central planning, the idea is to coordinate regional development, with new growth poles so economic output and markets can expand from east to west, and from the south to the north.

The new "one belt one road" strategy that is modeled upon the ancient land-based and maritime "silk road" has a similar goal of revving up provinces as far away as Xinjiang, Tibet, Heilongjiang and Yunnan.

Nationally, between 1978 and 2013, the rate of urbanization rose from 17.9 % to 53.7%. Urban residents grew from 170 to 730 million. The number of cities multiplied from 193 to 658. Towns (建制鎮, technically towns that have been approved by the State Department) grew from 2173 to 20113. The latter was what we observed during our visit—the transformation of rural areas into towns below the county-level.

Urbanization and Its Discontents: How the Church Responds

The government is aware of the social contradictions spawned by rapid urbanization. 234 million migrant agricultural workers now make up the bulk of Chinese industrial labour. They live and work in the cities. But they and their accompanying dependents do not enjoy the public service that urban residents enjoy, such as education, health care, social security and housing. New problems also arise when very young children and the elderly are left behind in villages while young men and women work away from home.

This relates to the ministries we observed as the Church, and women religious congregations in particular, adapt their services to meet the needs of the community. Catechism and confirmation training are often run during the summer and winter vacation in rural parishes to take advantage of the time when students are home from school. The training is necessarily conducted in a condensed version. We visited some homes for the elderly that are expanding (or in need of expansion), because no one is home to take care of the old and the sick. In some cases, parents send children as young as three- or four-years old to live as boarders in nurseries and kindergartens run by trusted Catholic Sisters.

Urbanization presents challenges as well as opportunities for the Church. The kind of close-knit, pious religious upbringing that characterizes traditional Catholic villages, and that has helped to

guard the faith despite centuries of state suppression, is being replaced by fast-paced, secular, and often anonymous city-living.

We ran into an elderly priest one morning on a country road. He was riding home on his bike after visiting parishioners in the village. When villagers move into individual flats in high-rise buildings, will he still be able to drop in for a pastoral visit?

Sisters who minister in rural villages report on the deep grief felt by young children left behind by their parents. A priest who runs an active formation centre commented on the "three lost generations": the grandparents came of age before and during the Cultural Revolution when no one got to study; then the parents were not properly taught, often without ethical training; and now young children in villages grow up with absent parents; they are fostered by grandparents with whom they cannot communicate.

The Church is trying to find ways to reach the young. This is **a generation raised on mobile phones and the internet**. In an age increasingly dominated by consumption (as a matter of government priority), and people take comfort in virtual reality and virtual relationships, how does the Church teach about transcendence, dignity and love?

Many of China's clergy and religious, including those who are young, hail from rural backgrounds. As more parishioners are/become urban residents, **how is the Church preparing seminarians, sisters, the clergy and the laity for urban ministries?**

In the dioceses we visited, a corps of middle-aged priests and religious form the backbone of the Chinese Church. But the number of incoming novices and seminarians is declining. It is a pattern that has been observed for decades in churches in developed countries. We need to ask ourselves: Is the Church preaching a Gospel that is vital and relevant to a fast-changing and globalized society? **Does the Church identify with "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" of the young?**

The *China State of Urban Youth Report 2014-2015*, published by UN Habitat, shows growing inequity in education and employment, especially between urban and rural youth, between those who attend key universities and those who go to local colleges, and between those who hold professional, high-skilled

jobs and those in low-skilled categories. As China's economy slows down, income and opportunity are likely to become more polarized between those who have and those who have not.

The Good News of Christ is by no means incompatible with the city. When Paul brought the Gospel to the Gentiles, he went from city to city, and made creative use of the language, cultures, political institutions and legal codes of the Roman Empire. His theology and early Church teaching grew from response to problems confronting local communities.

N.T. Wright, reading Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, identifies three aspects of **the divine word** and its impact on the early Church: "it **comes upon people in power through the preaching of the gospel, it is received with both suffering and joy, and it resonates outwards from the newly formed communities**." (See "Paul and the Powerful Word: Gospel, Community, Mission.")

Today as villages become towns, and as farmers are recast as urban residents in China, is the word of God experienced as a **transforming energy**? Does it change lives? Does the Church—the people of God—live the Gospel, freed from greed, fear, machismo, and violence that drive contemporary society?

How does the Church communicate? How can traditional media, the internet and social media be used effectively to share the good news? Can humour, interactivity, dialogue (versus monologue), mission, a sense of belonging to the worldwide church be ways to attract the young?

The Chinese turn out to be avid online shoppers. That number has leaped from 33.5 million in 2006 to 361.4 million in 2014 (statista.com). According to *China Internet Watch*, apparel and packaged food are the top two purchase items.[1] Are all of the internet users and e-shoppers satisfied by clothing and food alone?

In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis points to the need to "evangelize culture." An "evangelized popular culture contains values of faith and solidarity capable of encouraging the development of a more just and believing society" (EG 68-69).

---

[1] http://www.chinainternetwatch.com/12540/online-shopping-categories-2015/

Does the word of God reach out? Or does the Church in China stay within boundaries? What Good News does the Church bring to

- students, workers, professionals and families who seek a better life in the city?
- those who are forced to give up their land?
- those who remain in villages?

Pope Francis encourages empowerment of the laity, but cautions: "Even if many are now involved in the lay ministries, this involvement is not reflected in a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political and economic sectors. It often remains tied to tasks within the Church, without a real commitment to **applying the Gospel to the transformation of society**. The formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life represent a significant pastoral challenge" (EG 102).

The Gap Between Abstract and On the Ground

In 2013, the *New York Times* published a series of articles, *Leaving the Land*, which examined China's latest effort at "social engineering"—to "move 250 million rural residents into newly constructed towns and cities over the next dozen years."[2] What is not documented in national blueprints are the personal stories of dispossession, dislocation and despair.

When local economic growth was measured solely by county-level gross domestic product (GDP), it was urban development at all costs.

In a 2011 survey by Landesa, an international NGO that works on rural land reform, 43 percent of Chinese villagers said government officials had taken, or tried to take their land. That is up from 29 percent in a 2008 survey."[3] Often with inadequate

---

[2] Ian Johnson, "China's Great Uprooting: Moving 250 Million Into Cities," *New York Times*, 15 June, 2013. (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/world/asia/chinas-great-uprooting-moving-250-million-into-cities.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

[3] *Insecure Land Rights: the Single Greatest Challenge Facing China's Sustainable Development and Continued Stability* (http://www.landesa.org/china-survey-6/)

compensation to farmers, urbanization is a pretext for land-grab by government officials in collusion with developers. To push people off the land, some local officials and governments have torn up roads, cut electricity and water. Farmers and local small-business owners often put up fierce struggle. Some have resorted to self-immolation.

The government has come to know that the prevailing model of high-input, high-consumption and high-emissions industrial production is not sustainable. China's labour force is aging. Soil, water, and air pollution have reached alarming levels. China's Gini coefficient (a measure of income inequality) stood at 0.469 in 2014, a relatively high figure. Whereas huge social disparities had helped to keep costs down, making Chinese products competitive in the world market, the government can no longer keep the lid on social tensions.

New urbanization calls for reform of the hukou (residency) system to allow 100 million migrant agricultural workers to be registered as urban residents. The plan is to ease the transferral of residence to towns with population under one million. However, there will be strict regulation of migrants into super-cities over five million.

The government envisions a self-sustaining loop of "people moving into towns, finding jobs, becoming taxpayers and replenishing government coffers." But farmers cannot always find jobs. "We know how to farm, but not how to work in an office," said one who had been lured by modern, subsidized housing. Lin Jiaqing, a farmer who moved to a model township explained their consumption choice: "Back when we lived in the mountains we had monthly electric bills of 10 yuan....But [now] one month we had to pay 670 yuan;…so from now on we don't heat or even use the washing machine."[4]

Chapter 12, section 3 of the New Urbanization Plan envisions the development of small towns:

---

[4] Ian Johnson , "Chinese Hit Pitfalls Pushing Millions Off Farm," *New York Times*, 13 July, 2013. (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/14/world/asia/pitfalls-abound-in-chinas-push-from-farm-to-city.html?_r=0)

> *With planning and through market operations, small towns with distinctive resources, and regional advantage can become niche towns with specialties in cultural tourism, trade and logistics, processing, transportation hubs, etc. Towns that are away from the city-centers need to improve infrastructure and public services, so they can provide services to rural areas and be an integrated leader in the local area.*

Planning is in the DNA of every level of government in China. But without popular consensus, bureaucratic zeal only produces a master plan. For instance, scholars compare the urban slums built by earlier waves of migrant workers with some new settlement projects. The slums are makeshift. They are full of life and ambition. People work hard to get out of them. But in some model towns built next to empty industrial parks, young people spend hours in game parlours and internet cafes. Few of them have jobs. Cut off from the land and traditional livelihood, many elderly lose their bearings and dignity. There is concern that government and market incentives to move to town could result in "a permanent underclass in the city, without the support of family, rural community and religion."[5]

Pope Francis reminds us: "We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares" (EG 71). What do we find in "the inmost soul of our cities" (EG 74)?

Wounded Healers: Systematic Formation and Long-Term Planning

As the government steps up urbanization, the projection is for greater social needs both in cities and villages. It is important to give support to ministers and healers who serve on the frontlines, helping them to maintain the health of their person and the community.

---

[5] Ian Johnson, "New China Cities: Shoddy Homes, Broken Hope," *New York Times*, 9 November, 2013. (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/world/asia/new-china-cities-shoddy-homes-broken-hope.html)

For decades the Church in China has been waging a battle against persecution, and against corruption. Those who persevere in faith are nothing less than heroes. During our visit with congregations, we met sisters who have given their all to minister to people's corporal and spiritual needs. As they expand ministries and facilities (e.g., caring for disabled children whose family could not support them, running a nursing home with a working farm, building extensive retreat centres that offer spiritual formation), the fund-raising, finances and administration can become a heavy burden. One of the words we heard often during our visit was "fatigue." There was an explicit need for **systematic formation** at different stages of religious life, in critical areas such as leadership, finances, spirituality, (re)discovery of congregational charism, and community.

Many of the congregations we visited are at their peak strength. But few have devoted resources to long-term planning, such as healthcare and retirement. Greater attention needs to be paid to training new generations of leaders, anticipating retirement (en masse) in about 25 years, and planning continuity of the apostolate. The Church (outside China) may be able to share valuable learning experience. (See, for example, CARA 2014 Special Report: "Population Trends Among Religious Institutes of Women"[6]; and the final report on the Apostolic Visitation of Institutes of Women Religious in the United States of America[7].)

There was one exception to the expanding Church social services in the dioceses we visited. Catholic hospitals and clinics seemed to be shrinking. Due to insurance-reforms, patients who go to public healthcare providers are covered. Church-run facilities are considered private. In general, government institutions have more resources to hire and train staff, and upgrade equipment. Catholic hospitals and clinics are losing patients. We met Sisters who had practiced medicine for many years and who are now taking up

---

[6] http://cara.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/services/religious-institutes/women-religious.pdf

[7] http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2014/12/16/0963/02078.html

parish ministries. This is an instance in which church social services can be vulnerable to changes in government policies.

We saw a number of church-construction projects (some brand new; some awaiting funds to complete). I read in one report (not of the dioceses we visited), that by the time the village church is built, most of the parishioners have already moved to new urban centres. Project planning (including fiscal and demographic projection) needs to be carefully implemented at the parish and diocesan levels.

While relaying the Church's growing pains, this account does not underestimate the brave leadership and vibrant faith we encountered in many places we visited. For example, the smallest congregation which we visited, took on one of the biggest jobs, ministering to AIDS patients who are among the least visible poor in China.

Pastoral workers report with optimism about urban Church communities. More young people are inspired by the dynamism and good works of Christians to inquire about the faith. Some clergy from home parishes/dioceses travel back and forth to tend to their flock away from home, and build them into sustainable communities.

Urban Christian communities also foster lay leadership. We met a young woman who began as a student leader. The diocese enabled her to study overseas in pastoral ministry. She now plays an active role in formation and youth ministries in the diocese.

To Acquire a Civic Mind

Finally I wish to point out an irony. There are multiple references in the New Urbanization Plan to "becoming a citizen" (市民化): meaning to develop the ethos and etiquette of urban residents. Words like "civil," "civic" and "citizen" derive from the Latin root civis, meaning "townsman." From living in town, one can acquire the virtues of politeness, mutual help, belonging, participation, etc.

But the new party leadership under President Xi Jinping has been sensitive to anything with "civil" and "civic" associations. Since the third plenum of the 18th Party Congress that declared "rule by law," "govern by law" and "administer by law", a flurry of

market and legal reforms, and the current campaign against corruption, risk weakening the party's control. A secret "Document 9" began circulating among Communist party members in Spring 2013. It has since been widely publicized. The Document warns that the party faces other existential threats besides corruption.[8] It proscribes seven issues that are "not to be discussed" (七不講):

1. Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy: An attempt to undermine the current leadership and the socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance.
2. Promoting "universal values" in an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of the Party's leadership.
3. Promoting civil society in an attempt to dismantle the ruling party's social foundation.
4. Promoting Neoliberalism, attempting to change China's Basic Economic System.
5. Promoting the West's idea of journalism, challenging China's principle that the media and publishing system should be subject to Party discipline.
6. Promoting historical nihilism, trying to undermine the history of the CCP and of New China.
7. Questioning Reform and Opening and the socialist nature of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Party members are urged to pay close attention to ideological work:

1. Strengthen leadership in the ideological sphere.
2. Guide our party member and leaders to distinguish between true and false theories.
3. Unwavering adherence to the principle of the Party's control of media.
4. Conscientiously strengthen management of the ideological battlefield.

New laws are being written to increase oversight of non-government organizations (NGOs). According to the "Procedures

[8] A translation of Document 9 is available at http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation.

for the Abrogation of Illegal Social Organizations in Guangzhou City," for example, the municipal registration bureau will, through investigation or acting on report, decide within seven days whether or not to close the "illegal organization." Organizations are deemed illegal if they have not been registered, or if they carry out activities in the name of a social organization without government approval, or continue to carry out activities in the name of a social organization after the registration has been revoked.[9]

Mainline religions are not among the seven "speak-not." But Christians had a difficult year in 2014.[10] More prominently, in Wenzhou (Zhejiang province), crosses were removed from the top of some registered churches. Some church buildings and properties were destroyed. The authorities just released the "Zhejiang Province Religious Building Specifications," and are asking for feedback. The Specifications appear to micro-manage facilities and functions (but without giving explanations), including the height and location of crosses on a church. And among the five main religions, only Buddhism is exempt from having to set up specific finance and archival offices in religious buildings.[11]

Curiously, the latest research shows that as urban areas expand, the population in more than 30% of towns has declined.[12] People are continuing to migrate, but not necessarily to new planned towns. Rather, they are moving from the peripheries of less prosperous towns to the centre of more developed towns.

---

[9] "Yishi xingtai 'fazhi hua' jiaqiang qianzhi; yijian shengyin jiang 'yifa' zhili" [《意識形態「法制化」加強箝制 異見聲音將「依法」治理》]. *Mingpao* [明報], 23 October, 2014

[10] Dan Long, "China sees worst persecution of Christians in years," *UCANEWS.COM*, 5 January, 2015. (http://www.ucanews.com/news/2014-saw-worst-persecution-of-chinese-christians-in-a-generation/72705)

[11] Weidedong, "Zhejiang sheng zongjiao jian zhu guifan" yijian [魏德東: 《浙江省宗教建築規範》意見] *UCAN China* [天亞社中文網], 15 May, 2015. (http://tinyurl.com/lq9oym7).

[12] Chen ZhongXiaolu, "Jiema renkou m?du de shikong bianqian - kuozhang de chengsh?, shousuo de renkou" [《解碼人口密度的时空变迁 -扩张的城市，收缩的人口》], *Nanfang Zhoumo* [南方周末], 4 December, 2014. (http://www.infzm.com/content/106082)

People will congregate where they can make a better living. The Church can help ask the question: What counts for a better life?

Christianity in China has been through many trials. In some areas, seeds have been planted deep, and we see them bear good fruit. But many have not heard the Gospel of Christ. Their lives and cultures have not been made new. Sometimes when the work and conditions seem too hard, and we are tempted to despair, let these wise words inspire us:

> *The sower, when he sees weeds sprouting among the grain does not grumble or overreact. He or she finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear. The disciple is ready to put his or her whole life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, yet the goal is not to make enemies but to see God's word accepted and its capacity for liberation and renewal revealed* (EG, 24).

> *Let us believe the Gospel when it tells us that the kingdom of God is already present in this world and is growing, here and there, and in different ways: like the small seed which grows into a great tree (cf. Mt 13:31-32), ... and like the good seed that grows amid the weeds (cf. Mt 13, 24-30) and can always pleasantly surprise us* (EG, 278).