

Ten Years of Change: The End of Another Missionary Era

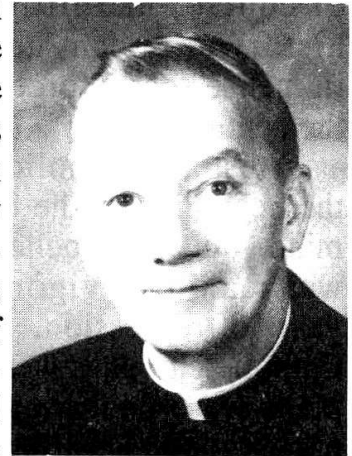
by Laurence T. Murphy, M.M.

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In this article, I will walk down the years of the 1980's, and watch the ebb and flow of changes in the ways that China and the United States perceived each other and related to each other. They have been an extraordinary ten years. It was in 1980 that the governments and peoples of the two nations began to develop in earnest the opening up initiated by Nixon and Mao in 1971. After that first "Nixon Shock," it took some time to prepare for the cultural, educational, trade, political and even military exchanges that would follow. No doubt domestic politics in both countries led to this delay. In China, the Cultural Revolution came to its end, followed by the decline of Mao and the rise of Deng Xiaoping; in the United States, Nixon endured his Watergate and Carter was overwhelmed by the Iranian Revolution. Nevertheless, progress was made in the 70's and when a more quiet decade began, things started to happen.

The prevailing American attitude toward China in 1980 was friendly. The Cold War with China was over and a new

era of cooperation was at hand. Some of this was naive optimism, visions of developing an immense new market for American consumer goods and expectations of building relationships of trust and the free exchange of ideas between artists, educators and intellectuals. The age of the China junket began. It was a heady experience to fly off to China and be received with great hospitality, toasted at numerous banquets, while seeing first-hand the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, and the Yangtze Gorges. Of course, after the opening pleasantries a gradual realization followed that a great deal of very hard work mixed with patience would be necessary to make real progress. The early visitors generally were impressed by what they saw as the success of the Communist Revolution. For Americans the "Standing Up" of the Chinese in 1949 proclaimed the end of colonialism promised by Mao and his colleagues, and had a ring to it of a proud, self-sufficient people ready to take their rightful place in the world. Some thought the missionary appeal of international



Marxist socialism to China was even understandable. Westerners admired what they saw as the asceticism of a classless society and service of the people, respected the improvement in the standard of living, and thought that the horrors of the Cultural Revolution were a never to be repeated aberration. Most Westerners, of course, had little grasp of China's history and scant understanding of the immense social forces at work all during the century.

Western Catholics visiting China at the beginning of the 80's were not of one mind, but many believed that the Church was making a vigorous recovery after years of repression. In 1980 at least 40 Catholic churches were open for worship, plans were underway to open two seminaries, and the atmosphere was one of euphoria and emotional release after the Cultural Revolution. One group of American Catholics spent four hours over lunch in the Beijing Hotel with Xiao Xianfa, Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau at that time. At the end they were thanked for their good will and encouraged to let bygones be bygones, referring to the strains between the Vatican and China. The future of the Church seemed full of promise.

It was generally agreed that both the Chinese Church and the Universal Church would profit from the development of contacts, exchange visits, and meetings. The goal was mutual understanding and respect, and full communion with the Universal Church. The first major opportunity came when a delegation of Chinese Catholics was permitted to participate in an international ecumenical meeting in

Montreal in October 1981. This was a breakthrough, and was followed in the next years by many other trips abroad. By the middle of the decade a number of seminaries had opened and many more churches returned for worship. In July of 1985 the Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai, Jin Luxian, went to Hong Kong with a group of Shanghai Catholics and was hosted at a dinner by Hong Kong's Bishop Wu. He brought with him one of his seminarians, a practice he would repeat in subsequent trips abroad. Also in July of 1985 Bishop Gong Pingmei of Shanghai was released after 30 years in prison and allowed to live at the Cathedral under the custody of Bishop Zhang Jiashu. In October 1985 the first foreign Catholics were invited to meet Bishop Gong at lunch. During these years the number of visits by Catholic "China Watchers" increased, and as contacts multiplied the understanding of the religious situation improved. Clearly the government monitored these contacts with foreigners, wanted all religious activity firmly controlled and carried out in line with policies developed by the United Front Department and supervised by the Religious Affairs Bureau. The Catholic Patriotic Association was the instrument for this.

The situation varied considerably from province to province and from city to city, often depending upon the character of the local authorities and church people. Many Catholics wanted nothing to do with the Patriotic Association, refused to worship in the churches, or in some places would only attend Masses celebrated by priests known to be celibate and

faithful to the Holy See. It was a confused picture, full of currents and cross-currents. From time to time bishops, priests and lay Catholics were arrested again. However, during all of the decade visits and conversations continued. There was great hope that despite sometimes serious disagreements, the scriptural teaching "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" would provide a solid foundation on which to build. There were also a number of contacts between the Holy See and the Chinese government, generally unofficial and through third parties.

In 1986 a group of Chinese Catholics was invited by the United States Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities to visit the United States, to see how the Catholic Church functions in that country. They were cordially received by church hierarchy and college presidents alike, and the conversations continued. There seemed to be many reasons for hope that normalization of relations between China and the Holy See would be achieved, resulting in full communion of the Chinese Church with the Universal Church. The United States Church was happy to have a role in trying to bring this about.

Then came 1989, the year of a sea-change in the geopolitics of our times. In China, the events of April and May in Beijing led to the June 4th incident that shocked the world. In the year and a half since, Westerners are still uneasy. Former Ambassador to China, Winston Lord, summed it up:

American perspectives toward (China) have swung between romance and hostility. We have held wildly fluctuating images--the evil of Fu Manchu, the

noble peasant of Pearl Buck . . . in recent years Americans were becoming more clear-eyed, discarding both red herrings and rose-colored glasses. Now in recent months we have seen the two faces of China.

Other analysts noted how China's history in this century has been marked by discontinuities, and how hard it has been for both China and the West to understand each other. It has been difficult for China to shape a persisting self-image and to keep its cohesion, and it has swung between an opening to the West and xenophobia. The present Chinese government seems still divided as to how to move forward, and sends out diverse political and economic signals.

1989 saw the astounding collapse of the Soviet Union's hegemony over Eastern Europe, the movement toward a united Germany and an awareness of the state of near collapse of the Soviet economy. After 70 years the communist parties of Europe have been rejected by the people. Even Albania and North Korea are not unmoved by these events. Western observers wonder how China can succeed in its four modernizations effort to enter the contemporary world as a strong and united nation, if it continues to pursue both economic liberalization and political repression at one and the same time. The evidence of recent history indicates that it will not work.

It has been said that while people have friends, nations have interests. This is true of institutions as well. It is surely in the best interests of China and the West to expand their shared common interests and to restore mutual trust. The many friend-

of the Chinese people hope this will happen. Every nation needs an ideology, a guiding vision. With the failure of the Marxist promise, its international effort has collapsed. What China will find to fill the vacuum remains to be seen. Perhaps some form of democratic socialism will succeed in the years ahead.

We enter these years on the threshold of a new century, just as the dawn of a universal civilization, respectful of cultural differences and the autonomy of individual nations appears. V.S. Naipul wrote recently in the *New York Times* that this civilization has been a long time in the making. For three centuries the expansion of Europe gave it a racial taint. But the power of this civilization is provided by the idea of the pursuit of happiness, which includes the idea of the individual, responsibility, choice, the life of the intellect, the idea of vocation and achievement. This idea cannot be reduced to a

fixed system, nor can it generate fanaticism. Because of it, other more rigid systems will in the end be blown away.

Western Catholics enter this future well aware that they *share* responsibility for misunderstandings and the absence of trust that are legacies of the sins of the past. They know, however, that trust is an essential ingredient of faith, and that faith has no national boundaries. They fully respect the maturity of the local church of China, but they also want it to be in full communion with all other local churches and in union with the Holy See. The 80's have passed into history: we move on in the always challenging effort to practice the truth in love, continuing to reach out to each other as brothers and sisters. It is hoped that the tentative reaching out of the 1980's will result in the achievement of full communion in the 1990's.

A Word of Thanks

We at Holy Spirit Study Centre wish to thank Cardinal Wu and all who contributed so generously to our 10th Anniversary issue. Lack of space has made it impossible for us to include all articles submitted but they will be included in a second Anniversary issue in February 1991.