

Reflections on Contemporary China Based on *Fratelli Tutti*

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Abstract: *Fratelli Tutti* provides long and critical analyzes of economic liberalism and of political populism, but communism never appears. Does it mean that *Fratelli Tutti* has no relevance for Communist China? In fact, our reading of the encyclical will show important points of convergence, but also serious points of divergence in building a society of universal fraternity. The Chinese model today enhances the collective dimension, providing a safety net for most people, but the individual dimension is often underdeveloped, preventing the flourishing of a richer brotherhood. Also, *Fratelli Tutti* pays a great deal of attention to the notion of conflict, also a key notion in communism, and we shall see how conflicts can possibly be overcome into an authentic harmony.

Keywords: *Fratelli Tutti*, communism, harmony, China

[摘要] 《眾位弟兄》對經濟自由主義和民粹主義，均作出了詳細及具批判性的分析，但對共產主義卻隻字不提。這是否意味着《眾位弟兄》與奉行共產主義的中國

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毫無關聯？但事實上，通諭內所提倡的建立一個富普世弟兄情誼的社會，與當代中國的情況，既有重大的滙聚點，也存有嚴重的分歧。現今中國的模式着重集體幅度，旨為大部分民眾提供一個安全網，但個人幅度往往未被充分發展，致令具豐富內涵的兄弟情誼之成長受到窒礙。此外，《眾位弟兄》非常重視衝突的概念，而此亦為共產主義之關鍵概念，我們從中體會如何能克服衝突，使之轉化為真正的和諧。

關鍵詞：《眾位弟兄》、共產主義、和諧、中國

1 Introduction

Universal fraternity is clearly the horizon of Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. Since China represents 18% of the world's population, the Chinese brothers and sisters should play an important role in the constitution of this universal fraternity. This encyclical begins with an evocation of Francis of Assisi, emphasizing the significance of his meeting with the Sultan Malik-el-Kamil. As the Pope explains, St. Francis "urged that all forms of hostility or conflict be avoided" (*FT* 3); he warned not to engage in arguments or disputes, but only wished to communicate God's love, without seeking to dominate. He dreamed of harmony among all men and women, of whom he gladly made himself the servant. At the time of Francis of Assisi, the West was facing the Muslim world. Today, the West is first of all facing China. The daily news informs us about the tensions, the oppositions, the conflicts in the domains of diplomacy, economics, and military, often portraying China and the West as mutual enemies.

The encyclical emphasizes that the world has an urgent need to disarm violence and to calm fear; the wisdom of St. Francis of Assisi, putting forward the vision of a common fraternity linking all human beings, precisely proposes a salvific orientation (*FT* 6). Conflict and harmony, two themes weaving the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, are widely discussed in China. The ways and means to avoid the former and establish the latter vary greatly. It would be even more accurate to say

that conflict management can produce various outcomes, because sometimes conflicts may serve to make progress towards the harmony so desired. In 2022, China presents a case in point of this dilemma: no harmony without a fruitful use of certain conflicts.

2 The Chinese Proposal between Economic Liberalism and Political Populism

The Pope vigorously rejects economic liberalism (the law of the market) and political liberalism (populist democracy), which appear to him to be driven mainly by the logic of financial interests for the former, and the preservation of power for the latter. The encyclical calls for a different type of political reflection, which is concerned with the protection of the weakest and the respect for the deepest aspirations of the peoples.

If communism does not appear anywhere in the encyclical, perhaps due to the reflux of communism at the world level, it is possible to identify commonalities between the papal text and the Chinese discourse. Indeed, the Pope in no way denies the need for strong national states taking responsibility for their government. The Communist Party acts resolutely, with consistency and authority, claiming to be responsible for the management of the country. It does not deny using certain strong ways, necessary in its own opinion. Unlike populism, often tempted by popular but superficial social measures, the Chinese state is capable of

taking long-term measures for the country's interest. Unlike liberal democracies that are tossed around and torn apart by endless political struggles, the Communist Party has a long-term vision and the means to impose it. China's authoritarian regime provides a great stability to see the long term while other regimes often have a vision limited to the next election.

Another point of convergence is the priority of politics over the economy. The stability of a country is based, says the encyclical (e.g. *FT* 177, 179), on a sound political vision which commands and orders the economic practices. Thus, the Pope devotes important paragraphs to remind that private property cannot ignore its social function (*FT* 118-120). This was already the position of scholastic theology, later recalled in the texts of the Catholic magisterium, and reaffirmed once again in *Laudato Si'*, which stated that "the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable" (*LS* 94).

This insistence on the common good resonates strongly with the communist ideal of a society oriented towards the benefit of the entire population. From 1980 to 2015, despite hesitations and contradictory measures, the Chinese government had favored private enterprises and tried to separate economic management from the Party. This allowed in 2001 the entry of China into the World Trade Organization. It was then largely believed that the country was making great strides towards a liberal market economy. Since 2012, Xi Jinping has gradually reinforced

the legislative and political control over the private sector, so that no company in China can exclusively pursue economic profits without assuming its due share towards society. In brief, the economy should be at the service of the people.

The Chinese model also echoes the importance that the Pope attaches to international institutions and multilateral agreements that better guarantee the protection of weak states than bilateral agreements (see *FT* 174). Indeed, liberalism is mainly concerned with the free movement of capital and goods in a purely economic logic, and as for populism, it tends to defend national interests without worrying about the major global issues. On the contrary, China can rely on its long civilization, demographics, political and economic clout, to rise above its own national interests and embrace the broader view of the community of nations.

Therefore, it seems that China presents an alternative model to liberalism and populism, which echoes important points of the encyclical such as the need for a strong state with long-term policies, the importance of the common good, etc. But let us see more precisely how the official discourse deals with our theme of harmony.

3 The Harmony Promoted by China Today

At its 16th Congress in 2006, the Chinese Communist Party had raised the notion of harmony to the same level of importance as the establishment of socialism. The former does not go without the latter, but with a strong emphasis

on the ambition that China will become a harmonious society. This is a rather vague doctrine, and it is vain to seek precise explanations in the immense number of articles and speeches, but this is an ambition which was intended as a response to the moral problems resulting from economic liberalization.¹

Xi Jinping, who came to power in 2012, is directly promoting his own thinking, as Mao Zedong had done before. “Xi Jinping Thought” consists of “socialism with Chinese characteristic of the new era” (新時代中國特色社會主義思想). This definition does not mention the concept of harmony, but the first of the eight “clarifications” (*mingque* 明確) includes a reference to the “beautiful and harmonious socialism” (和諧美麗的社會主義). Moreover, the ninth of the fourteen “firm resolutions” (*jianchi* 堅持) makes an interesting reference to the quest for a vital harmony between man and nature (堅持人與自然和諧共生).²

The harmony under construction is very clearly a political responsibility which requires, in order to be realized, an acceptance without hesitation of the leadership

1 “The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Building a Harmonious Socialist Society” (中共中央關於構建社會主義和諧社會), Sixteenth Congress, Document no. 19, 2016; http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content_453176.htm

2 Xi Jinping, “Socialism with Chinese Characteristic of the New Era” (習近平新時代中國特色社會主義思想), <https://www.12371.cn/2019/10/06/VIDE1570293730029129.shtml> [accessed 6 August 2022].

of the Communist Party, itself unified under the banner of the thought of Xi Jinping. The separation of responsibilities between the Party and governing bodies is no longer appropriate. On the contrary, the Party assumes the leadership in all aspects, and the Party is the only authorized guide and the guarantor of a harmonious life in Chinese society. In universities, for example, the party secretary has once again become the first authority, before the president of the university, and Xi Jinping had justified the new shift of power by declaring on 19 April 2021, at Tsinghua University that the university's mission is to train people who can contribute to the development of socialism.³

To this end, harmony is forged by means of countless procedures that trace the path to be followed. The campaign against corruption, launched in 2012 and still active today, shows its effectiveness through the considerable work of the Central Commission of Disciplinary Inspection during its inspections in provincial government agencies, companies, or universities. In 2018, the number of civil servants punished peaked at 621,000.⁴ According to the non-governmental organization Transparency International, a global coalition

3 Xinhuashe, "Xi Jinping visits Tsinghua University", *New China News Agency*, 19 April 2021, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1697483135743446848&wfr=spider&for=pc> [accessed 6 August 2022].

4 Shi Yu, "In data: China's Fight Against Corruption in Poverty Alleviation", *China Global Television Network*, 9 August 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-08-09/In-data-China-s-fight-against-corruption-in-poverty-alleviation-SO8OgC70Q0/index.html> [accessed 21 April 2021].

against corruption, China has made swift progress, being ranked in 2021 number 66 out of 180 countries.⁵ Admittedly, these data are, according to other sources, questionable; they at least indicate that the harsh campaign of the Chinese government against corruption obtained some unquestionable results.

4 China's Social and Cultural Conflicts

The preceding paragraphs show the advantages of an authoritarian regime, in this case called communist, to work for the good of the population of a country. China's successes in many fields, scientific, economic, cultural, or even in sports with the grandiose opening ceremonies of the Olympic Summer Games in Beijing in 2008 and of the Winter Games in 2022, rightly fill with pride the Chinese supporters. There is no reason to doubt that a majority of Chinese silently support their government, even though the confidence was probably eroded with the management of the Covid epidemic in the last two years, especially with the three months of confinement of Shanghai in 2022.

But cracks appear in a harmony always pursued but fragile, if not threatened. The inequalities between city and countryside, between different groups within the urban population, have not been solved. This classic phenomenon observed elsewhere could be explained by the relative

5 "Corruption Perception Index", *Transparency International*, <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/china> [accessed 6 August 2022].

poverty of some serving as a stimulus to work more; with hope and patience, everyone would benefit, even if the perfect egalitarianism envisioned in 1949 no longer enters, conceptually and practically, into the considerations of today.

In 2013, the Party launched under Xi Jinping's leadership a massive program called *fu pin* (扶貧) to eradicate absolute poverty. Seven years after, 70 million Chinese had risen above the level of US\$1.10 a day, the absolute poverty line by international standard. The program is not about giving money to poor areas, which would mean reducing them to assisted status.⁶ Financial support seeks to accompany initiatives, for example by promoting the purchase of agricultural products from these regions by urban populations. The poor become the actors of their development, and this joins the Pope's advice, insisting that the poor be recognized not as passive recipients of assistance but as responsible persons (*FT* 187-189).

Even though extreme poverty has disappeared to a considerable extent (though not yet eradicated), social inequalities have constantly increased in the areas of health, housing, and education. Migrants leaving their countryside to seek employment and other opportunities in cities do not

6 See government website on China's poverty reduction: China's Rural Vitalization, <http://p.china.org.cn/index.htm> [accessed 21 April 2021]. Also see "Poverty Alleviation: China's Experience and Contribution", *Xinhuanet*, 6 April 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/06/c_139860414.htm [accessed 21 April 2021].

have the same access to medical care and schools. Buying an apartment leaves young households trapped in heavy debts. As for the competition to enter good universities, it remains fierce and often requires serious financial efforts from the family. In 2020, the GINI, a coefficient measuring income inequality, is at 0.468, making China more unequal than USA (0.49).⁷ The new direction undertaken under Xi Jinping tends precisely to address the problem of inequalities, but without returning to egalitarianism.

At the cultural level, China has a great wealth of languages, scripts, customs, and religions. Ethnic minorities make up only 8 percent of the population, and the Chinese government has promoted this diversity by recognizing 56 ethnic groups. In a modern state, this diversity is framed and managed by numerous policies, and a fair balance must be found between the promotion of local cultures and their integration into a unified state. This balance in China varies from time to time and according to region, but it should be noted that tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang have led the government to take administrative and economic measures to strengthen national identity, particularly in education by promoting the use of the national language, and in religious life by applying stricter measures for the management of religious sites, etc. While in the 1980s many mosques were

7 “Gini Index: Inequality of Income Distribution in China From 2004 to 2020”, *Statista*, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250400/inequality-of-income-distribution-in-china-based-on-the-gini-index/> [accessed 21 April 2021].

built on the architectural model of Saudi Arabia, sometimes with Arab funding, the government is now promoting a more Chinese architectural style. The expression of cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity in the public space is increasingly controlled. When tensions are low, the government can show great flexibility, but when conflicts arise and are perceived as threats to social harmony and stability, the control by the administration and the police intensify drastically. The government is well aware that a policy based simply on repression does not resolve conflicts in depth, and it relies on a policy of accompaniment based on economic development and investments in public infrastructure that serve the general good, but which sometimes do not fully reflect local cultural and religious aspirations.

Those worries underline the fragility of harmony if it is not attentive to the different voices in the people. “Disagreements may well give rise to conflicts”, says the Pope in a paragraph castigating fundamentalist intolerances, and adding “uniformity proves stifling and leads to cultural decay” (*FT* 191). Perhaps the Pope is thinking in particular of phenomena that are too present in the West and manifest themselves in a morbid demonization of the adversary. Extremists in the major religions unfortunately fall into this dramatic trap. The cultural pride that crushes the other becomes murderous, of the other and in the final of oneself.

5 Harmony with Mutual Respect: the Concept of Person

The so-called Western democracies do not emerge unscathed from investigations of their own human rights. Hate crimes in the United States tragically illustrate the discrepancy between lofty ideals and violent reality. Therefore, the Pope dedicates chapter 2 of his encyclical to remind evangelical truths: the love of the neighbor, and more concretely social friendship. He does this with the well-known example of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), calling him “The Stranger on the Road”. Stranger means that the man is apparently placed out of his familiar context; he could even come from an enemy territory. But he crosses a new region and finds on his way a seriously injured man who is precisely a stranger to him. Two strangers but two human persons, whom the common humanity binds to each other beyond all other considerations.

Friendship between people of the same society is not enough; well understood friendship actually tends towards universal love because geographical, political, and cultural boundaries do not enclose human beings into rigid categories. It would be difficult to affirm the humanity to some, while denying to others. The genocides of the twentieth century are enough to prove it; they remain unjustifiable everywhere and at all times. The Pope calls for a considerable effort of moral honesty to repel the practical contempt of the other suffering from poverty, hunger, or other miseries. He does not stand

as a politician, but recalls the demands imposed on all those who claim to serve humanity.

It is often said that China traditionally thinks about the whole before considering the parts. This would explain why the Chinese easily admit that the good of the group and of the nation comes before that of individuals. This cliché ignores many facets of the rich Chinese culture. For example, one of Matteo Ricci's first books, written and published in Chinese in 1598, was a *Treatise on Friendship*, which was a great success among the Chinese literati of his time, and friendship precisely shows the capacity of two individuals to create a bond beyond the limits of a family or a country.⁸ Similarly, a cultural history of China cannot ignore philosophers like Li Zhi (李贄) at the beginning of the seventeenth century who insisted on the intrinsic value of the person and who placed the relationship of friend to friend in the first position, as foundation for the relationships towards the family and towards the state.⁹

The encyclical, in promoting respect for the person, for every person, repeats an evangelical truth which lies at the heart of humanity, otherwise the Christian faith cannot claim universality. The expressions of this truth vary because the truth is never enclosed into a single

8 English version: Matteo Ricci, *On Friendship*, trans. Timothy Billings (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

9 See Anne Cheng, *History of Chinese Philosophy* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), pp. 254-275.

formulation, but overflows all formulations. Chinese culture seeks also authentic expressions of the truth of the person. Even the current regime in Beijing when it insists on the common good does not forsake the quest for the person. It is regrettable that it does not do so more explicitly since this would counterbalance its authoritarianism and make it more sensitive to the hidden injustices that risk ruining its efforts for social stability and global security. For example, the media would arguably be more useful if they enjoyed more freedom. The ethics of respect for the person requires a broad vision, which is too often lacking in China as elsewhere.

China can find inspiration from its rich philosophical tradition. The *Yijing* explains in detail the two notions of *yin* and *yang*, which are neither substances, nor static essences enclosed on themselves. On the contrary, *yin* and *yang* manifest reality always in transformation, *yin* tending towards *yang*, and *yang* towards *yin*, in a circular motion and in constant flow, without the linearity between a start and an end. The double notion of *yin* and *yang* eliminates all rigidity, authoritarian rigor, ideological control, and makes it possible to grasp the present moment, evolving towards what would seem its opposite, but which represents a continual and dynamic adjustment of life, without end.

Relativism, it may be objected. No; rather realistic acceptance that perfection is never completely realized but always desired. The official thought in China, to avoid becoming deadly, must, according to the doctrine of *yin*

and *yang*, pay attention to mutations. The changes are colored with characteristics specific to the conditions of the country and its society which manifest in its particularities the dynamics of life animated by the supreme value of the person. Without naming China, the encyclical recommends it for all countries, their governments, their peoples. The Pope does not interfere in internal affairs, and only emphasizes universal orientations at the heart of the Gospel.

6 Conclusion

Communism as practised today in China seems a very efficient system with astonishing results at the macro-social and macro-economic levels. Chinese communism seems to show the effectiveness of a good dose of authoritarianism to ensure social harmony, if we are to believe the surveys measuring the degree of satisfaction among the people. Regimes that claim to be democratic, according to the Western model, have difficulties in achieving such high scores of satisfaction.

But what about the tensions leading to conflict in society? It is doubtful that China today has found a satisfactory method in dealing with tensions and in resolving them with due respect to all participants. Yet the Chinese cultural tradition had talked about this for a long time, placing personal and collective identities within the perspective of a dynamic vision of reality. Harmony should not be conceived as a lake with smooth waters and without

turmoil. For the water would then be dead, and the lake would face siltation, which would be its own death. On the contrary, it is proposed a management of movement, without perhaps having found the miracle formula, but certainly an attention to reality, always animated by the vital force of the continuous exchange of *yin* and *yang*. Middle-aged Chinese today have experienced changes that have transformed their country and society. Economic development, so appreciated, is not enough, however, to animate sufficiently the vitality of civil society. China lacks social spaces that give citizens the opportunity to dialogue freely with each other. Pope Francis' encyclical recalls this necessity for a holistic development of each person and for the benefit of all.

Since its introduction in China, Christianity has promoted an authentic personalism that has allowed many Chinese to find their deep identity in their relationship to Christ through the mediation of Christian communities. The attraction of Christianity among young people does not slow down, as evidenced by the considerable rise of the “family church”, a growth that the current ideological tightening paradoxically favors.¹⁰ Same as the consumer society in the West, communist ideology cannot satisfy the spiritual quests of Chinese youth, and in the West as in China, the Christian message retains all its strength.

10 Voir Thierry Meynard and Michel Chambon, “Ways to Update the Chinese Catholic Church”, in *The Church in China: A Future to be written* (Rome: Civiltà Cattolica, 2019), pp. 75-86.

“China obscures, but there is clarity to be found; seek it”, wrote the seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal.¹¹ That is still true today. This does not mean turning a blind eye to limits, even possible dangers, but no more than rejecting everything Chinese without appeal. In the social conversation, of all with all for the good of all, the Chinese have their place in the common march towards a fraternity that is both universal and plural.

11 Blaise Pascal, “Vraie religion”, *Discours sur la Religion et sur quelques autres sujets qui ont été trouvés après sa mort parmi ses papiers*, ed. Emmanuel Martineau (Paris : Fayard/Armand Colin, 1992), p. 89.